

# Karma and Rebirth in the Teaching of the Buddhas and Ancestors

*Anguttara Nikaya 6.63, Nibbedhika Sutta, "Penetrative Discourse" (all suttas translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu)*

..."Kamma (Sanskrit *karma*: action) should be known. The condition by which kamma comes into play should be known. The diversity in kamma should be known. The result of kamma should be known. The cessation of kamma should be known. The path of practice for the cessation of kamma should be known.' Thus it has been said. In reference to what was it said?

"Intention (*cetana*: volition, will), I tell you, is kamma. Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, and mind.

"And what is the condition by which kamma comes into play? Contact is the cause by which kamma comes into play.

"And what is the diversity in kamma? There is kamma to be experienced in hell, kamma to be experienced in the realm of animals, kamma to be experienced in the realm of the hungry ghosts, kamma to be experienced in the human world, kamma to be experienced in the heavenly worlds. This is called the diversity in kamma.

"And what is the result of kamma? The result of kamma is of three sorts, I tell you: that which arises right here and now, that which arises later, and that which arises following that (in this life, in the next life, or in subsequent future lives). This is called the result of kamma.

"And what is the cessation of kamma? From the cessation of contact is the cessation of kamma; and just this noble eightfold path — right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration — is the path of practice leading to the cessation of kamma.

"Now when a disciple of the noble ones discerns kamma in this way, the condition by which kamma comes into play in this way, the diversity of kamma in this way, the result of kamma in this way, the cessation of kamma in this way, and the path of practice leading to the cessation of kamma in this way, then he discerns this penetrative holy life as the cessation of kamma."

*Anguttara Nikaya 3.33, Nidana Sutta, "Causes Discourse"*

"Monks, these three are causes for the origination of actions. Which three? Greed, hate, and delusion.

"Any action performed with greed — born of greed, caused by greed, originating from greed: wherever one's selfhood turns up (wherever one is reborn), there that action will ripen. Where that action ripens, there one will experience its fruit, either in this very life that has arisen or in the next life, or in subsequent future lives.

"Any action performed with hate...

"Any action performed with delusion ...

"Just as when seeds are not broken, not rotten, not damaged by wind and heat, capable of sprouting, well-buried, planted in well-prepared soil, and rained upon. Those seeds would thus come to growth, increase, and abundance. In the same way, any action performed with greed... performed with hate... performed with delusion — born of delusion, caused by delusion, originating from delusion: wherever one's selfhood turns up, there that action will ripen...

"These are three causes for the origination of actions.

"Now, these three are [further] causes for the origination of actions. Which three? Non-greed (generosity) is a cause for the origination of actions. Non-hate (loving-kindness) is a cause for the origination of actions. Non-delusion (wisdom) is a cause for the origination of actions.

"Any action performed with non-greed — born of non-greed, caused by non-greed, originating from non-greed: When greed is gone, that action is thus abandoned, its root destroyed, like an uprooted palm tree, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising.

"Any action performed with non-hate...

"Any action performed with non-delusion...

"Just as when seeds are not broken, not rotten, not damaged by wind and heat, capable of sprouting, well-buried, planted in well-prepared soil, and a man would burn them with fire and, burning them with fire, would make them into fine ashes. Having made them into fine ashes, he would winnow them before a high wind or wash them away in a swift-flowing stream. Those seeds would thus be destroyed at the root, like an uprooted palm tree, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising.

"In the same way, any action performed with non-greed... performed with non-hate... performed with non-delusion — born of non-delusion, caused by non-delusion, originating from non-delusion: When delusion is gone, that action is thus abandoned, its root destroyed, like an uprooted palm tree, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising.

"These, monks, are three causes for the origination of action.

"A person unknowing: the actions performed by him, born of greed, born of hate, and born of delusion, whether many or few, are experienced right here: no other ground is found. So a monk, knowing, sheds greed, hate, and delusion; giving rise to clear knowledge, he sheds all bad destinations."

*Anguttara Nikaya 5.86*

"With the discarding of craving, kamma is discarded. With the discarding of kamma, suffering is discarded. Thus, with the ending of craving, there is the ending of kamma; with the ending of kamma, there is the ending of suffering."

"Monks, these four types of kamma have been directly realized, verified, and made known by me. Which four? There is kamma that is dark with dark result. There is kamma that is bright with bright result. There is kamma that is dark and bright with dark and bright result. There is kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the ending of kamma.

"And what is kamma that is dark with dark result? There is the case where a certain person fabricates an injurious bodily fabrication, fabricates an injurious verbal fabrication, fabricates an injurious mental fabrication. Having fabricated an injurious bodily fabrication, having fabricated an injurious verbal fabrication, having fabricated an injurious mental fabrication, he re-arises in an injurious world. On re-arising in an injurious world, he is there touched by injurious contacts. Touched by injurious contacts, he experiences feelings that are exclusively painful, like those of the beings in hell. This is called kamma that is dark with dark result.

"And what is kamma that is bright with bright result? There is the case where a certain person fabricates a non-injurious bodily fabrication ... a non-injurious verbal fabrication ... a non-injurious mental fabrication ... He re-arises in a non-injurious world ... There he is touched by non-injurious contacts ... He experiences feelings that are exclusively pleasant, like those of the Beautiful Black Devas. This is called kamma that is bright with bright result.

"And what is kamma that is dark and bright with dark and bright result? There is the case where a certain person fabricates a bodily fabrication that is injurious and non-injurious ... a verbal fabrication that is injurious and non-injurious ... a mental fabrication that is injurious and non-injurious ... He re-arises in an injurious and non-injurious world ... There he is touched by injurious and non-injurious contacts ... He experiences injurious and non-injurious feelings, pleasure mingled with pain, like those of human beings, some devas, and some beings in the lower realms. This is called kamma that is dark and bright with dark and bright result.

"And what is kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the ending of kamma? Right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is called kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the ending of kamma.

"These, monks, are the four types of kamma directly realized, verified, and made known by me."

*Majjhima Nikaya 135, Cula-kammavibhanga Sutta, "The Shorter Analysis of Action Discourse"*

..."Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions, born of their actions, related through their actions, and have their actions as their arbitrator. Action is what differentiates beings in terms of baseness and excellence."

*Majjhima Nikaya 136, Maha-kammavibhanga Sutta, "The Great Analysis of Action Discourse"*

..."Ananda, there are four kinds of persons existing in the world. What four?

(i) "Here some person kills living beings, takes what is not given, misconducts himself in sexual desires, speaks falsehood, speaks maliciously, speaks harshly, gossips, is covetous, is ill-willed, and has wrong view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell.

(ii) "But here some person kills living beings... and has wrong view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, in the heavenly world.

(iii) "Here some person abstains from killing living beings, from taking what is not given, from misconduct in sexual desires, from false speech, from malicious speech, from harsh speech, from gossip, he is not covetous, is not ill-willed, and has right view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, in the heavenly world.

(iv) "But here some person abstains from killing living beings... and has right view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell.

..."Now, Ananda, there is the person who has killed living beings here... has had wrong view. And on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell. But (perhaps) the evil kamma producing his suffering was done by him earlier, or the evil kamma producing his suffering was done by him later, or wrong view was undertaken and completed by him at the time of his death. And that was why, on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappeared in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell. But since he has killed living beings here... has had wrong view, he will feel the result of that here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.

"Now there is the person who has killed living beings here... has had wrong view. And on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, in the heavenly world. But (perhaps) the good kamma producing his happiness was done by him earlier, or the good kamma producing his happiness was done by him later, or right view was undertaken and completed by him at the time of his death. And that was why, on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappeared in a happy destination, in the heavenly world. But since he has killed living beings here... has had wrong view, he will feel the result of that here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.

*Samyutta Nikaya 12.46, Aññatra Sutta, "A Certain Brahman Discourse"*

...A certain brahman went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings and courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: "What now, Master Gotama: Is the one who acts the same one who experiences [the results of the act]?"

[The Buddha:] "[To say,] 'The one who acts is the same one who experiences,' is one extreme."

[The brahman:] "Then, Master Gotama, is the one who acts someone other than the one who experiences?"

[The Buddha:] "[To say,] 'The one who acts is someone other than the one who experiences,' is the second extreme. Avoiding both of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma by means of the middle: From ignorance as a requisite condition come formations (etc.)..."

*Anguttara Nikaya 3.99, Lonaphala Sutta, "The Salt Crystal Discourse"*

"Monks, for anyone who says, 'In whatever way a person makes kamma, that is how it is experienced,' there is no living of the holy life, there is no opportunity for the right ending of stress. But for anyone who says, 'When a person makes kamma to be felt in such and such a way, that is how its result is experienced,' there is the living of the holy life, there is the opportunity for the right ending of stress.

"There is the case where a trifling evil deed done by a certain individual takes him to hell. There is the case where the very same sort of trifling deed done by another individual is experienced in the here and now, and for the most part barely appears for a moment.

"Now, a trifling evil deed done by what sort of individual takes him to hell? There is the case where a certain individual is undeveloped in [contemplating] the body, undeveloped in virtue, undeveloped in mind, undeveloped in discernment: restricted, small-hearted, dwelling with suffering. A trifling evil deed done by this sort of individual takes him to hell.

"Now, a trifling evil deed done by what sort of individual is experienced in the here and now, and for the most part barely appears for a moment? There is the case where a certain individual is developed in [contemplating] the body, developed in virtue, developed in mind, developed in discernment: unrestricted, large-hearted, dwelling with the immeasurable [concentration]. A trifling evil deed done by this sort of individual is experienced in the here and now, and for the most part barely appears for a moment.

"Suppose that a man were to drop a salt crystal into a small amount of water in a cup. What do you think? Would the water in the cup become salty because of the salt crystal, and unfit to drink?"

"Yes, lord. Why is that? There being only a small amount of water in the cup, it would become salty because of the salt crystal, and unfit to drink."

"Now suppose that a man were to drop a salt crystal into the River Ganges. What do you think? Would the water in the River Ganges become salty because of the salt crystal, and unfit to drink?"

"No, lord. Why is that? There being a great mass of water in the River Ganges, it would not become salty because of the salt crystal or unfit to drink."

*Majjhima Nikaya 38, Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta, "The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving"*

(the monk Sati said) "As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of rebirths, not another."

(the Buddha said) "What is that consciousness, Sati?"

"Venerable sir, it is that which speaks and feels and experiences here and there the results of good and bad actions (karma)."

"Misguided man, to whom have you ever known me to teach the Dhamma in that way? Misguided man, in many discourses have I not stated consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness? But you, misguided man, have misrepresented us by your wrong grasp and injured yourself and stored up much demerit; for this will lead your harm and suffering for a long time.

"... With ignorance as condition, (karmic) formations come to be; with formations as condition, consciousness; with consciousness as condition, mentality-materiality (five aggregates); with mentality-materiality as condition, the sixfold (sense) base; with the sixfold base as condition, contact; with contact as condition, feeling; with feeling as condition, craving; with craving as condition, clinging; with clinging as condition, being; with being as condition, birth; with birth as condition, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

"... When there is the union of mother and father, and it is the mother's season, and the being to be born (*gandhabba*, a being after death who is driven by kamma to a new birth) is present, through the union of these three things, the conception of an embryo in a womb takes place."

*Visuddhimagga, "Path of Purification" by Acharya Buddhaghosa*

"No doer of deeds is found, no one who ever reaps their fruits; empty phenomena roll on: this view alone is right and true. While the deeds and results roll on, all based on conditions, there no beginning can be seen, just as it is with seed and tree."

"Who created the variety of the world of living beings and the physical world? It was not a god who intelligently created it. The variety of the world arises from actions (karma) of living beings... What is action? It is volition (cetana) and that which is produced through volition (action of body and speech, after having been willed by mind)."

*Shobogenzo Chapter 85 (Sanjigo), "Karma in the Three Periods" by Eihei Dogen Zenji (translated by Kazuaki Tanahashi)*

What Kumarata meant by *the results from our wholesome and unwholesome actions take effect in the three periods* is: One: the result received in this lifetime. Two: the result received in the next lifetime. Three: the result received in a lifetime after the next. These are called the three periods. From the beginning of learning the way of Buddha ancestors, we study and clarify the principle of the effects of karma in the three periods. If we don't, many of us will make a mistake and fall into crooked views. Not only do we fall into crooked views, we get into unwholesome realms and experience suffering for a long time. When we do not maintain wholesome roots, we lose a great deal of merit and are obstructed for a long time from the path of enlightenment. Would this not be regrettable?

...The World-honored One said, "Effects of an action will never perish, even after one hundred and one thousand eons. One receives the results when the causes and conditions meet. Know that dark actions bring forth dark results, bright actions bring forth bright results, and mixed actions bring forth varied results. So, refrain from taking dark and mixed actions, and endeavor to take bright actions."

*Shobogenzo Chapter 90 (Jinshin Inga), "Identifying with Cause and Effect" by Eihei Dogen Zenji*

The most serious mistake made by those who study Zen in China is to believe that a person who practices completely does not fall into cause and effect. What a pity! There have been an increasing number of those who deny cause and effect, even though they witness the Tathagata's true Dharma being transmitted from ancestor to ancestor. Therefore, those who study the way should urgently clarify this teaching. The point of Baizhang's words *Do not ignore cause and effect* is that we should not be ignorant of causation. Thus, the significance of practicing cause and realizing effect is clear. This is the way of Buddhas and ancestors. Those who themselves have not yet clarified Buddha Dharma should not superficially explain it to humans and devas.

Ancestor Nagarjuna said, "If you deny cause and effect in the worldly realm, as some people outside the way do, you negate this present life as well as future lives. If you deny cause and effect in the realm of practice, you reject the three treasures, the four noble truths, and the four fruits of shravakas."

Clearly know that those who deny cause and effect are outside the way, whether they are living a worldly or a renunciate life. They say that the present life is unreal and that their transient body is in this world, but that their true nature abides in enlightenment. They believe that their true nature is mind, and that mind and body are separate. There are also those who say that people return to the ocean of true nature when they die. Without having studied Buddha Dharma, they say that transmigration through birth and death ends and there are no future births after they return to the ocean of enlightenment. Those who hold this view of annihilation are outside the way. They are not Buddha's disciples even if they look like monks. They are indeed outside the Buddha Dharma. Because they deny cause and effect they deny present and future lives. They deny causation because they have not studied with true teachers. Those who have studied deeply with true teachers should abandon mistaken views which deny causation. Have faith in and pay respect to the compassionate teaching of Ancestor Nagarjuna.

*Shobogenzo Chapter 94 (Doshin), "Heart of the Way" by Eihei Dogen Zenji*

...When you leave this life, and before you enter the next life, there is a place called an intermediary realm. You stay there for seven days. You should resolve to keep chanting the names of the three treasures without ceasing while you are there. After seven days you die in the intermediary realm and remain there for no more than seven days. At this time you can see and hear without hindrance, like having a celestial eye. Resolve to encourage yourself to keep chanting the names of the three treasures without ceasing: "I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha."

After passing through the intermediary realm, when you approach your parents to be conceived, resolve to maintain authentic wisdom. Keep chanting refuge in the three treasures in your mother's womb. Do not neglect chanting while you are given birth. Resolve deeply to dedicate yourself to chant and take refuge in the three treasures through the six sense roots.

When your life ends, your eye sight will suddenly become dark. Know that this is the end of your life and be determined to chant, "I take refuge in the Buddha." Then, all Buddhas in the ten directions will show compassion to you. Even if due to conditions you are bound to an unwholesome realm, you will be able to be born in the deva realm or in the presence of the Buddha. Bow and listen to the Buddha. After darkness arises in your eyes, continue to chant refuge in the three treasures until you enter the intermediary realm and further.

Thus, keep chanting birth after birth, world after world until you reach enlightenment, the Buddha fruit. This is the way all buddhas and bodhisattvas have practiced. It is the way to deeply realize dharma. It is an embodiment of the Buddha way. Resolve not to involve yourself with thoughts other than this.