

The Great Explanation about Karma

Theme: the principle of karma- that our good and bad actions always have good and bad consequences

This is what we have been told. Once, when the Buddha was living in the Bamboo Grove near Rajagaha, the following incident took place. A wandering philosopher, Potaliputta by name, approached Samiddhi, one of the Buddha's followers, greeted him, sat down, and began to question what the Buddha meant when he talked of karma.

'According to what I have heard, from the Buddha himself,' said Potaliputta, 'a person's words and actions don't affect how they feel, and don't have any consequences at all.'

Samiddhi was shocked. 'Don't say that,' he said, 'I'm sure the Buddha would never have said such a thing.'

'How long have you been a Buddhist?' asked Potaliputta.

'Three years,' replied Samiddhi.

'Well then' laughed Potaliputta, 'How would a youngster like you explain the Buddha's teaching on karma?'

Samiddhi, although he didn't feel very sure of himself, tried to explain: 'The Buddha's teaching about karma is this. If ever you do an action, on purpose, that harms another creature, you yourself will always suffer pain as a result.' Potaliputta raised his eyebrows but said nothing, got up and walked away.

Samiddhi, feeling worried about his conversation with Potalipattu and wondering if he had said the right thing or not, went to Ananda, one of the Buddha's most experienced followers, and told him about it. Ananda said, 'Let's go and see what the Buddha thinks about all this.'

After listening to what had been said, the Buddha said, 'Well, it is clear that this fellow Potaliputta doesn't know what he is talking about, but I'm afraid, Samiddhi, that what you said to him isn't quite right either. So let me try to explain how karma works.

'The first thing is this. Sometimes, when you think about how you have acted towards someone, you will feel sorry, and sometimes you will feel pleased. And sometimes you

won't feel either. So, to understand karma is to understand how different sorts of actions either cause us pain and or make us feel good.

'The second point is that it is often very difficult to see or feel the results of what we do. So we need to think about four different types of person, as follows. The first two are easy to understand.

First, there are people who have behaved in a way that is harmful to others, and in general when you consider their lives they seem to be unhappy and not very well off. That is what we might expect.

And then there are people who have behaved in a way that is kind and helpful to others, and in general when you consider their lives they seem to be happy and successful. That also is what we might expect.

But the other two types of people are more difficult.

First, there are people who have behaved in a way that is harmful to others, and yet, in general when you consider their lives they seem, as far as we can tell, to be quite happy and successful. Here you might think, "That seems surprising: perhaps those who say our actions don't have consequences are right, after all."

And, in the same way, there are people who have regularly behaved in a way that is kind and helpful to others, and yet in general, when you consider their lives, they seem to be unhappy and not very well off. And here you might think, "That also seems surprising: perhaps those who say our actions don't have consequences are right, after all."

So, here is the second point: sometimes it is quite difficult to see, if you are considering a particular person, how karma actually works out.

'And here is the reason why. Take people who have done harmful things but still seem to be quite happy and well off. In such cases it is quite possible that either earlier or later, before or after they did their harmful things, they did some really helpful things. Or perhaps they had a sudden flash of insight about the nature of reality, the causes of suffering and the importance of impermanence and kindness. Any of these things would be just as important as their harmful acts. Or, the other way around. Take people who have done kind and helpful things but still seem to be unhappy. In such cases it is quite possible that either earlier or later, before or after they did their kind and helpful things, they did something really harmful to someone. Or perhaps they were suddenly tempted by something, forgot their understanding that they were

connected to other people, and suddenly found themselves full of greed, hatred and confusion. Any of these things would be just as important as their kind and helpful acts.

'So the important thing about karma,' said the Buddha, 'is not simply that each single act has an immediate result. What is more important is that karma depends on continual effort, on *all* the things we do and have done. So just because you have done some kindly acts, don't think you can relax and think, 'I'm all right now, I can never be unhappy again.' You have to keep making the effort. And just because you have done some harmful acts, don't despair, thinking, 'That's it, there's no way I can ever be happy now.' It is always worth continuing to make the effort.'

So that was the Buddha's Great Explanation of karma. And Ananda and Samiddhi rejoiced that at last they understood. But Potaliputta, of course, never did understand.

Questions

1. Do you think that being happy depends on whether you do kindly actions?
2. When you do something kind to others, does it mean that you are certainly going to be happy?
3. When you do something harmful to others, does it mean that you are certainly going to be unhappy?
4. What are some of the ways that karma works in a more complicated way than Samiddhi thought?

Dharma Issues:

- *How the teaching of karma works. In other words:
The relationship between our present actions and future happiness / suffering
The process that makes this relationship occur*

Based on 'Maha-kammvibhanga' (The Great Exposition of Kamma) in Majjhima Nikaya (The Buddha's Middle Length Discourses), Wisdom Books, 1995, pp. 1058-65