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KARMA AND REBIRTH

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KARMA in Sanskrit and Kamma in Pāli is the principle that all good and bad action have consequences that will affect one throughout life, and even in future lives. By extension, kamma is sometimes loosely used to mean fate or destiny. Man is the architect of his own fate and he will reap what he sows.

Thus the material and mental forces combine and recombine with no underlying substance or soul to make them permanent and this process of becoming, the wheel of life, continues indefinitely unless its cause, craving or selfish desire for existence is totally extinguished. It is this desire which sets the wheel of life in motion and it is manifested in action which is in reality volition or will-power. Volitional action is responsible for the creation of a being.

Every action produces an effect; cause comes first and effect afterwards. We therefore may say that kamma is the 'law of cause and effect' and the man because of his action is the master of his own destiny, child of his past and present of his future.

The law of kamma explains why each individual has a unique mental disposition, a unique physical appearance and unique response to experience. These are the various effects of the countless actions that each individual had performed in the past and which are stored as mental habits.

At the root of man's trouble in his primal state of ignorance, and from ignorance arises desire which sets the karmic force in motion. According to the law of kamma, the tragedy of inequality in creation itself, falls short of any reasonableness. For instance the sadness of the spastic child and the sadness of the deaf and dumb cannot easily be accommodated in the concept of a compassionate creator.

The Law of Cause and Effect is a logical and reasonable explanation of the tragedy that is creation itself. The universal Law of Kamma throws a challenge and helps one to become the means to control one's own fate.

Just as the law of this country make exceptions for certain categories of people so the law of kamma does not exclude people on account of their intellect or other characteristics.

KARAMA AND REBIRTH ACCOUNT FOR THE SUFFERING FOR MANY OF OUR EXISTING PROBLEMS

1. They account for the suffering for which we ourselves are responsible.
2. They explain the inequality of mankind.
3. They account for the arising of geniuses and child prodigies.
4. They explain why identical twins who are physically alike, enjoying equal privileges, exhibit totally different characteristics mentally, intellectually and morally.
5. They account for the dissimilarities amongst children of the same family although heredity may account for the similarities.
6. They account for special abilities of men by their parental tendencies.
7. They account for the normal and intellectual differences between parents and children.
8. They explain how infants spontaneously develop such passion as greed, anger and jealousy.
9. They account for instinctive like and dislikes at first sight.
10. They explain how in us is found 'a rubbish heap of evil and treasure of good'.
11. They account for the unexpected outbursts of passion in a highly civilized person, and for the sudden transformation of a criminal into a saint.
12. They explain how profligates are born to saintly parents and saintly children to profligates.
13. They explain how we are the result of what we were, we will be the result of what we are; in other words, we are not absolutely what we are.
14. They explain the causes of untimely deaths and unexpected changes in fortune.
15. Above all, they account for the arising of omniscient, perfect spiritual teachers like the Buddhas who possess incomparable physical, mental and intellectual characteristics which can be explained only by karma and rebirth.

CAUSE AND EFFECT INSTEAD OF REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS

Buddhists believe in a just rationale of karma that operates automatically and speaks in terms of cause and effect instead of rewards and punishments.

THE PURPOSE OF EXPLAINING KARMA

The Buddhist doctrine of karma did not expound fatalistic views. Nor did it vindicate a post-mortem justice.

The Buddha, who had no selfish motives, did not teach this law of karma to protect the rich and comfort the poor by promising illusory happiness in an after-life.

WE HAVE TO FACE THE CONSEQUENCES OF WHAT WE HAVE DONE

If you fear pain, if you dislike pain, do not do bad deed openly or in secret. If you have done a bad deed or do one now, you will not escape pain, though you try to flee.

A single life is not enough to prepare for one's salvation.

“If a single life here decides the whole course of the future, then why does one life last only for a few weeks, and another for 70 or 80 years?”

For one thing, the person who lives only a few weeks, risks less chance of eternal damnation than does the person who lives up to 80 years. The person who lives only a few weeks cannot fully develop and mature his intelligence and understanding. He does not encounter all the pitfalls and the temptations that life abounds with.

KARMA AND ELECTRIC LIGHT

Just as an electric light is the outward manifestation of invisible electric energy, even so are living beings the outward manifestation of invisible karmic energy. The bulb may break and the light may be extinguished, but the current remains and the light may be reproduced in another bulb. The bulb can be compared to the potential cell of the body and the electric energy to the karmic energy.

In the same way, the karmic force remains undisturbed by the disintegration of the physical body, and the passing away of present consciousness leads to the arising of a fresh one in another birth.

KARMA HAS NEITHER BEGINNING NOR END

If we understand karma as a force or a form of energy, then we can discern no beginning. To ask where the beginning of karma is like asking where the beginning of electricity is. Karma like electricity does not ‘begin’. It ‘comes into being’ under certain conditions.

Conventionally we say that the origin of karma is volition but this is as much conventional as saying that the origin of a river is a mountain top. But when you attain enlightenment, your karma exhausts (*kammakkhaya*). Therefore an individual's karma has no beginning but it has an end.

THREE PREMONITORY VISIONS OF THE DYING MAN

Suppose a person is about to die. This critical stage may be compared to the flickering of a lamp just before it is extinguished. To this dying man, the present karma or some good or bad actions committed either during his lifetime or immediately before his dying moment may cause a *karma nimitta* or *gatinimitta* to appear in the mind of the dying man.

Karma nimitta is a symbol or a mental reproduction of any sight, sound, and smell, taste, touch or idea, which dominated his activity during his lifetime. Thus a butcher may see a

vision of knives or dying animals. A kind physician may see his patients coming to him. A devotee may see an object worship etc.

Gatinimitta is a 'symbol of destiny' or a sign of the place where the rebirth is to occur. Such a symbol frequently presents itself to the dying person. Such premonitory visions of destiny may take various forms such as fire, forests, mountainous regions, a mother's womb, celestial mansions etc. when these indications of the future birth occur, and if they are bad, they might at times be remedied.

Rebirth takes place immediately irrespective of the place of birth, just as an electromagnetic wave that is projected into space is immediately reproduced in a receiving radio set. Rebirth of the mental flux is also instantaneous and leaves no room whatever for any intermediate state (*antarabhava*).

The Buddha-word does not support the belief that a spirit of the deceased person takes lodgment in some temporary state until it finds a suitable place for its birth. According to certain beliefs there is an intermediate state where beings remain for one or seven weeks until the forty-ninth day. This view is contrary to the teachings of the Buddha.

Sabhe Satta Sukhita huntu!

May all beings be happy!

Yours in the Dharma!

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