

The Great Exposition of Kamma

Introduction

This celebrated sutta shows some of the complexities of kamma and its results. Beginning with a strange view expressed by a confused wanderer and a confused answer given by a bhikkhu, the Buddha then gives his Great Exposition of Kamma which is based upon four "types" of people:

I. Bad Deeds and Bad Outcomes

15. (i) "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**.¹ 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.

II. Bad Deeds but Good Outcomes

16. (ii) "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**.

III. Good Deeds and Good Outcomes

¹ This series of three phrases appears to mean: earlier, either earlier in life before he undertook either the wholesome or unwholesome courses of kamma, or in some previous life; later, later in that very life, for even if a person does much evil kamma, usually he will also make some good kamma occasionally; wrong view...time of his death, this kind of wrong view will be of the type, "there is no kamma, no results of kamma, no evil, no results of evil," and so on. The next birth actually depends on the object of the last moments of a dying person's consciousness. At that time one should recollect all one's good kamma: generosity, loving-kindness, compassion, pure precepts and so on. Evil should not be thought of then though heavy evil kamma done previously may force itself into the mind and make recollection of one's generosity and virtue in keeping the precepts difficult or impossible.

17. (iii) "Now there is the person who **has abstained from killing living beings here**...has had right 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 abstained from killing living beings here...has had right view, he will feel the result of that here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.**

IV. Good Deeds but Bad Outcomes

18. (iv) "Now there is the person **who has abstained from killing living beings here**...has had right 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 abstained from killing living beings here...has had right view, he will feel the result of that here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.**

19. "So, Ananda, there is kamma that is incapable (of good result) and appears incapable (of good result); there is kamma that is incapable (of good result) and appears capable (of good result); there is kamma that is capable (of good result) and appears capable (of good result); there is kamma that is capable (of good result) and appears incapable (of good result)."

This is what the Blessed One said. The venerable Ananda was satisfied and he rejoiced in the Blessed One's words.

Majjhima Nikaya 136
Mahakammavibhanga Sutta
Translated from the Pali by Ñanamoli Thera

There Is a Way Out of It All

The Salt Crystal

"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 & 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 & 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 & 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*. A *trifling evil deed* done by this sort of individual is experienced in the here & 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."

"In the same way, there is the case where a trifling evil deed done by one individual [the first] takes him to hell; and there is the case where the very same sort of trifling deed done by the other individual is experienced in the here & now, and for the most part *barely appears for a moment*.