



Nalanda

Kamma in Buddhism

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Kamma in Buddhism

by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Cover Page

*From an original portrait of Ajahn Buddhadāsa
kept at the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok, Thailand.*

Kamma in Buddhism

by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Translated from Thai by Santikaro

กรรมในพระพุทธศาสนา

This article was prepared in 1988 by Ajahn Buddhadāsa as part of a series of pamphlets to be distributed at a major exhibition on his life and work organized by Ajahn Runjuan Indarakamhaeng and other students at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

Another English translation was published in 1990. This translation first appeared online in 1996 and then in slightly revised pamphlets. This new electronic edition has been revised by Santikaro in collaboration with a network of volunteers.

© Liberation Park, 2017.

Any reproduction, in whole or part, in any form, for sale, profit, or material gain, is prohibited, except for quotations in reviews or articles. Permission to reprint for free distribution may be obtained from:

Liberation Park

PO Box 205, Norwalk, WI 54648, USA

books@liberationpark.org

www.liberationpark.org

Published by

Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives

Vachirabenjatas Park (Rot Fai Park) Nikom Rot Fai Sai 2 Rd.,

Chatuchak, Bangkok, 10900 Thailand.

Tel. +66 2936 2800 Fax. +66 2936 2900

www.bia.or.th

Printed in Malaysia by Nalanda for free distribution.

First edition printed on 1 May 2017 – 4,000 copies

Second edition printed on 1 July 2017 – 4,000 copies



Nalanda



Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives

Established in 2010, the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives collect, maintain, and present the original works of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu. Also known as Suan Mokkh Bangkok, it is an innovative place for fostering mutual understanding between traditions, studying, and practising Dhamma.



Liberation Park

Liberation Park is a Dhamma refuge in the USA's Midwest inspired by Suan Mokkh. Here, Santikaro and friends work to nurture a garden of liberation along the lines taught by Ajahn Buddhadāsa, where followers of the Buddha-Dhamma Way can explore Dhamma as Nature and in the Pāli suttas.

Nalanda

Nalanda Buddhist Society Malaysia

Established in 2003, Nalanda focuses on providing holistic education, facilitating spiritual development, and the joyful propagation of Buddha-Dhamma. Nalanda is one of several acknowledged centres of Buddhist education in Malaysia through its successful Dhamma courses, camps, meditation retreats, conferences, and seminars.

Kamma in Buddhism

An article written on 7 April 2531 (1988)
at Suan Mokkhabalārāma, Chaiya.

As Buddhists, we must understand *kamma* (action and the result of action) as it is explained in Buddhism. We should not follow blindly the *kamma* teachings of other religions; if we do, we will spin around pitifully according to *kamma* without being able to get beyond its power or realize its end.¹

Why do we need to know the essence of *kamma*? Because our lives are inseparable from it and happen according to it. To be more precise, we can say that life is actually a stream of *kamma*. Wanting to do something (*kamma*, action) causes one to perform actions and receive the results of those actions; then, desires to do other actions arise again and again incessantly. Therefore, life is merely patterns of *kamma*. If we rightly understand *kamma*, we can live our lives at peace, without any problems or suffering.

There are two primary *kamma* doctrines. One has been taught since before the Buddha's time and is still taught outside Buddhism; the other is the Buddhist principle of *kamma*. The first doctrine presents only half of the story. In that doctrine, one cannot conquer *kamma* and remains always

¹ *Kamma* (Pāli) and *karma* (Sanskrit) are equivalent in meaning and usage. The Tipiṭaka of Theravāda Buddhism uses the Pāli language.

under its domination. One actually desires to be under its power and asks for its help, without ever trying to fight for one's own liberation. One thus performs *kamma* as if accumulating assets for more satisfactory rebirth. One never thinks of ending *kamma*. One expects to rely on it instead of trying to end it. In Buddhism, we can understand *kamma* more fully so that we can conquer it and be liberated from it, that is, not carry the burden of *kamma* anymore. We neither sit waiting for things to happen, nor leave our fate in the hands of gods, nor follow superstitions like purifying our *kamma* in sacred rivers.

To be beyond *kamma* seems incredible to most people; they may consider it a deception or a huckster's trick. Nonetheless, it really is possible if we take the Buddha as our True and Noble Friend. This will help us in practising the complete set of ten aspects of rightness (*sammatta*)²: the noble eightfold path plus right insight knowledge and right liberation in accordance with the law of specific conditionality (*idappaccayatā*). In such practice, there is no foolish feeling that leads to desire for the various results of *kamma* (actions).

A doctrine master from Southern India and contemporary of the Buddha heard that the Buddha taught the cessation of *kamma*. He then sent his disciples to ask the Buddha questions and to ask for his instructions. This well-known story is told in the *Soḷasapañhā* (Sixteen Questions), the last chapter of the Sutta-Nipāta. Traditionally, many people have memorized the Buddha's answers to these questions and take them for guidance in their study and practice.

² Sutta on the Great Forty (Majjhima Nikāya 117).

Nowadays, wrong teachings concerning *kamma* are publicized in books and articles by various Indian and Western writers with titles such as “*Kamma* and Rebirth”. Although they are presented in the name of Buddhism, these teachings are actually about *kamma* and rebirth as understood in other religions. So the right teaching of Buddhism is misrepresented. This should be recognized and corrected so that the Buddhist *kamma* principle can be preserved in its undistorted essence.

The Buddha accepted as correct — that is, as not a wrong understanding of *kamma* — the half-formed teaching concerning good and evil deeds and their results that was presented before his time and outside his teaching. However, he added to it a final aspect, namely, the end of *kamma*, which is the essential Buddhist principle that completes the teaching on *kamma*. This cessation of *kamma* goes by two names. It can be called ‘the third kind of *kamma*’ because there are good deeds, evil deeds, and the *kamma* leading to the end of both good and evil deeds.

Sometimes four kinds of *kamma* are distinguished: good deeds, evil deeds, mixed deeds, and the *kamma* that is the end of all *kamma*. When enumerated in this fourfold way, the additional *kamma* taught in Buddhism becomes the fourth kind of *kamma*. However, if we consider mixed *kamma* as made up of good actions and evil actions, there are basically three kinds of *kamma*, again with the *kamma* that ends all *kamma* as the third kind. This three-fold formulation is easy, convenient, and concise. If this third kind of *kamma* is left out, the teaching misses the essence of *kamma* in the true Buddhist sense.

***Kamma* and Rebirth:** Rebirth occurs every time one does a deed, and that rebirth occurs spontaneously at the moment of action. We need not wait for rebirth to happen after death, according to the usual worldly understanding. When one thinks and acts, the mind changes spontaneously through the power of desire and clinging, which immediately lead to becoming and birth in accordance with the law of dependent co-origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). There is no need to wait for physical death in order for rebirth to occur. This truth should be realized as the true teaching of Buddhism, as a core principle of the original, pristine Buddhism that states there is no self (*attā*) to be reborn. How the concept of rebirth after death crept into Buddhism is difficult to explain, and we need not concern ourselves with it here. Simply preventing rebirth within the stream of dependent co-origination is enough for us to be free.

Stopping egoistic rebirth is truly in accordance with Buddhism, and such action will be the kind of *kamma* that can be taken as refuge. When a good deed is done, goodness spontaneously arises; when an evil deed is done, evilness spontaneously arises. There is no need to wait for any further results. If there will be any birth after death, that rebirth only occurs through the *kamma* one has done in this very life and the results of which have already occurred here. We need not worry about rebirth such that it obstructs our practice.

Receiving the Fruits of *Kamma*: We should see the truth that the mind that performs a deed is *kamma* itself and the subsequent mind is the result (*vipāka*) of that *kamma*. Other results that follow it are only uncertain by-products, since they may or may not occur, or do not keep up with our expectations



“ The actions or movements of sentient beings that are done with volition, particularly with craving, and that arise through defilements, are called ‘*kamma*.’ ”

~ Ajahn Buddhadasa

due to other interfering factors. That the results of actions occur to the minds performing them is most certainly in line with the Buddhist principle that there is no 'self' or 'soul' to be reborn, as stated by the Buddha on numerous occasions. To hold the view that a soul or somebody is reborn deviates from the truth of not-self (*anattā*). Whenever a good or evil deed is done, goodness or evilness spontaneously arises accordingly without having to wait for later results. Nonetheless, most people expect certain results according to their wishes; then, they are disappointed when other factors interfere. Such intervening circumstances may lead one to hold a wrong view that good actions brings bad results and bad actions brings good results. We should be careful of this wrong view, and should develop right understanding concerning the fruits of *kamma*.

Our understanding of how the results of *kamma* are received or experienced must always be self-apparent, immediate, and inviting of inquiry, and should never contradict the truth that the five aggregates of human life are not-self. Mind is merely a phenomenon pushed this way and that by conditions, stimulated to do things by environmental factors. The resulting reactions are unescapable, and are regarded as good or evil according to one's feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Either kind pushes us into suffering; thus we should aim at ending *kamma* and getting beyond it. Then we will have realized true insight, awakened, and fully blossomed, which is genuine Buddhahood.

There is a moralistic teaching of *kamma* that retains an illusion of self that owns this and that. This version contradicts the principle of not-self stressed by the Buddha. We should correctly understand this perspective; otherwise, we will not benefit from practising *kamma* teachings, since we will not be able

to go beyond *kamma*. Endlessly remaining under the power of *kamma* is not the *kamma* teaching of Buddhism. Instead, wholeheartedly practice the *kamma* that ends all *kamma*. This will prevent us from unwittingly going astray.

Activity and Response: The actions or movements of sentient beings that are done with volition, particularly with craving, and that arise through defilements, are called ‘*kamma*’. An activity that is not caused by defilement, for example, one with an *Arahant*’s intention, intention free of greed, hatred, and delusion, is not called ‘*kamma*’; it is called ‘*kiriya*’ (activity). The result of *kiriya* is called ‘*paṭikiriya*’ (reaction), the natural consequence of the activity, while the result of *kamma* is called ‘*vipāka*’ (fruit of action). These results occur justly in accordance with the law of nature. Ordinary people have ordinary volitions (*cetanā*) as the causes of their actions, which are consequently *kamma*. Good volition leads to good action; evil volition leads to evil action. Through moral and cultural training, everybody is taught to do good deeds that do not cause trouble to others and bring good results to everyone. Therefore, *kamma* concerns the law of nature and can be investigated scientifically.

Types of *Kamma*: There are many types of *kamma* depending on the characteristics of the deeds and their doers. Some act with selfishness concerning the selves they desire to be. Some perform actions that lead to the ending of the self-illusion and the realization of *Nibbāna*. Some people are pleased with worldly prosperity, others with heavenly prosperity, and some with the realization of *Nibbāna*, aims that seem to be in perpetual contradiction. Some like to show off their good deeds, while others perform their good deeds secretly. Some proclaim their meritorious deeds with fanfare, while others do not need such

fanfare. Some do their deeds with excessive ritual, while others do theirs without any ceremony at all. Some do theirs out of magical or superstitious fear, while others do theirs properly as Buddhist practice. Obviously, there are many types of *kamma*. Nevertheless, they all can be classified into two categories: those with self and for the sake of self, and those that aim for the ending of self-clinging and selfishness. Some do deeds in a business-like manner, expecting excessive profits. Ordinary people do good deeds merely for the sake of inordinate gains. Others wish for the end of the vicious circle of life and death.

***Kamma* and Not-Self:** The question of *kamma* and not-self is confusing and difficult to understand for various reasons. A monk once asked the Buddha, “How does *kamma* done by *not-self* give results for *self*?” This question arose because of the teaching on not-self that points out how the ‘actor’ is merely a mind-body process devoid of self. After an action (*kamma*) is done by a ‘selfless’ mind-body, how could it have any results for a ‘self’, who is the ‘doer’ who intentionally acted? The new concept of not-self contradicts the old concept of self. There is a self-consciousness that claims to be not-self and does things in the name of not-self, but the sense of self still exists to receive the results of the deeds. Hence, this monk’s question.

If we see it rightly, we will understand that when the mind-body is not-self, the results of its actions will happen to a selfless mind-body, also. However, if that mind-body is full of a sense of self, the results of its actions will always happen to this apparent self. If *kamma* is not-self, its result will be not-self, and what occurs in accordance with *kamma* will be not-self. The things, whether human or animal, that we conventionally speak of as ‘actors’ or



“ In Buddhism, we can understand *kamma* more fully so that we can conquer it and be liberated from it, that is, not carry the burden of *kamma* anymore. We neither sit waiting for things to happen, nor leave our fate in the hands of gods, nor follow superstitions like purifying our *kamma* in sacred rivers. ”

~ Ajahn Buddhadasa

‘doers of *kamma*’ will also be not-self. The facts of *kamma* and not-self are never separate and never oppose each other.

The ending of *kamma* is the same thing as *Nibbāna*; in other words, it is synonymous with *Nibbāna*. From where then do the teachers come who teach people that death is the end of *kamma*? When someone dies, people murmur, ‘Oh well, his *kamma* is finished’. Moreover, they often say that one dies according to one’s merits and *kamma*, without realizing that what is happening to them as they speak is also according to their good and bad *kamma*, and this will continue until they really reach the end of *kamma*, namely, *Nibbāna*.

***Nibbāna* is freedom from *kamma* and its results.** Further, *Nibbāna* is freedom from the vicious cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*) that keeps spinning according to *kamma*. *Nibbāna*, therefore, is lovely and loveable, not frightening in the least. Even so, people prefer being trapped within the vicious cycles of birth and death according to their *kamma*, particularly the *kamma* they desire as a result of their defilements, although they never really get what they wish. People with big egos usually fear and hate the end of *kamma* because egoism seeks *kamma*-results that seem pleasing to it.

***Kamma* is burden (*upadhi*).** When one performs *kamma*, life happens according to *kamma*, that is, one is bound by *kamma* no matter whether it is good or evil *kamma*. Good *kamma* makes one laugh and bad *kamma* makes one cry, but both weary us almost to death. Even so, people still like to laugh, since they mistakenly believe that good *kamma* is great virtue. When *kamma* does not bind our lives, it is as if there are no chains on our legs, whether iron chains or diamond-studded golden

chains. Life becomes a burden when it is weighed down by *kamma* and we have to carry and support it. The end of *kamma* makes our lives light and free, but only a few people appreciate this as it is obscured by the veils of *attā* (self).

In conclusion, as Buddhists, let's try to do only the *kamma* that leads to the end of *kamma*. When we see that *kamma* has occupied and ruled our lives, we will strive to practice, improve ourselves, and fight in every possible way to triumph over both good and evil *kamma*, so that none of them will oppress our minds. Let's develop minds that are clean, clear, and calm because they are no longer disturbed by *kamma* and its results. Nowadays, most people understand *kamma* as something bad and undesirable. This is correct because both good and evil *kamma* are despicable in that they cause the vicious cycles of birth and death to go on without cessation.

***Kamma* in Buddhism** is that *kamma*, action, which leads to the end of all *kamma* so that life is above and beyond *kamma*. Far from despicable, it is something to be understood and fully integrated into our lives. 'Living beyond *kamma*' is something to be realized and attained.



About the Author

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu was born in 1906, the son of a southern Thai mother and an ethnic Chinese father. He followed Thai custom by entering a local monastery in 1926, studied for a couple years in Bangkok, and then founded his own refuge for study and practice in 1932. Since then, he has had a profound influence on not only Thai Buddhism but other religions in Siam, and Buddhism in the West. Among his more important accomplishments, he:

- Challenged the hegemony of later commentarial texts with the primacy of the Buddha's original discourses.
- Integrated serious Dhamma study, intellectual creativity, and rigorous practice.
- Explained Buddha-Dhamma with an emphasis on this life, including the possibility of experiencing *Nibbāna* ourselves.
- Softened the dichotomy between householder and monastic practice, stressing that the noble eightfold path is available to everyone.
- Offered doctrinal support for addressing social and environmental issues, helping to foster socially engaged Buddhism in Siam.
- Shaped his forest monastery as an innovative teaching environment and *Garden of Liberation*.

After a series of illnesses, including strokes, he died in 1993. He was cremated without the usual pomp and expense.



Commemorating the late
Ajahn Buddhādāsa Indapañño
Phra Dharmakosacarya
1906 – 1993

About the Translator

Santikaro went to Thailand with the *Peace Corps* in 1980, was ordained as a Theravāda monk in 1985, trained at Suan Mokkh under Ajahn Buddhādāsa, and became his primary English translator.

Santikaro led meditation retreats at Suan Mokkh for many years, and was the unofficial abbot of nearby Dawn Kiam. He is a founding member of *Think Sangha*, a community of socially engaged Buddhist thinker-activists that gives special attention to the ethical and spiritual impact of consumerism and other modern developments.

Santikaro returned to the USA's Midwest in 2001 and retired from formal monastic life in 2004. He continues to teach in the Buddhist tradition with an emphasis on the early Pāli sources and the insights of Ajahn Buddhādāsa.

Santikaro is the founder of *Liberation Park*, a modern American expression of Buddhist practice, study, and social responsibility in rural Wisconsin. There he continues to study, practice, translate the work of his teacher, teach, and imagine the future of *Buddha-Dhamma* in the West.

Anumodana

We would like to acknowledge the kind permission granted by the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives and the original publishers in the United States of America for reprinting this book for free distribution to benefit the Malaysian community of Dhamma practitioners.

We also express deep gratitude to all sponsors for your generous donations toward this publication. *Sadhu anumodana* to everyone involved. Thank you.



Nalanda

Nalanda Buddhist Society Malaysia

3357, Jalan 18/31, Taman Sri Serdang,
43300 Seri Kembangan, Selangor.

Tel. no. : +603-8938 1500 / 1501

E-mail : info@nalanda.org.my

Webpage : www.nalanda.org.my

Facebook : www.facebook.com/nalanda.org.my



Printed for free distribution by Nalanda Buddhist Society Malaysia
with kind permission from Buddhadasa Indapañño Archives,
to commemorate the 111th birth anniversary of the late Ajahn
Buddhadāsa Indapañño (1906 – 1993) in 2017.

Printed in Malaysia for free distribution
by Nalanda Buddhist Society

First edition - 1 May 2017
Second edition - 1 July 2017

Nalanda

www.nalanda.org.my
www.facebook.com/nalanda.org.my

Copyright © 2017. NBS 1739 B