

## Karma/Kamma as Intention and Volition

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Published by Callistro Green.

## Karma/Kamma as Intention and Volition

*"Intention I tell you, is kamma.*

*Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, & mind."*

A N 6.621

*'It is choice that I call action; it is in choosing that a man acts by body, speech and mind....Actions ripen in three ways: they can ripen here and now, on reappearance or in some life-process beyond that.'* AN 6:63

In Buddhist texts, the term *kamma* or *karma*, is used to indicate volition (an action that occurs because of intention- the mind is bent towards that action) created through one's perceptions and cognitive processes and then acted on by certain behaviors. Kamma has also been defined as purposive or willed striving. An important point to remember is that the teaching on kamma isn't about predestination or divining about the future. Also, how we proceed on the path to awakening isn't influenced by previous lives ( you can't practise with that). Instead, the psychologically based workings of kamma equate to the cognitive processes by which we consciously choose actions. The actions we choose leave results of memories and eventually habits. That is, our thoughts >intentions>actions have a psychological, emotional and physiological result that shapes our minds. Therefore, the moral or ethical nature of people's kamma can vary greatly, depending on an individual's learning, habits of thought and clarity of mind. The moral nature of one's conscious actions determines the quality of life for an individual as well as for others. As one proceeds in bhavana-citta, or mind development, the mind is conditioned and purified through the cognitions that establish wholesome ethical choices. If we are consciously motivated by wholesome (compassion) or unwholesome (aversion, fear) those qualities get established in our cognitive apparatus. As you act, so you become. The term *vipaka* (literally meaning *fruit*) refers to the outcomes of those cognitions, particularly their psychological and emotional consequences- 'the fruit of our kamma'. Wise or skillful thoughts create beneficial kamma, characterized by good will and wholesome cognitive as well as external outcomes. Conversely, unwise or unskillful thoughts leading to actions create harmful kamma, characterized by unwholesome emotions and cognitive as well as external outcomes. Thus, *"If one speaks or acts with a wicked mind, pain follows one as the wheel, the hoof of draught-ox. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows one as the shadow that never*

*departs.*” (Dhammapada, V. 1). There is also neutral kamma, or volition strictly tied to the autopoietic or maintaining the functions of the living system such as eating when hungry or sleeping when tired. This type of volition does not have any kammic influence.

The Buddha’s teaching of kamma is a doctrine emphasizing the conscious application of will to initiate personal psychological transformation and is fundamental to his prescription of psychological purification. The nature of an individual’s kamma has its origins in the learned, conditioned and habituated thought patterns with accompanying behavioral tendencies applied over time. A key aspect of these teachings is that, although our interaction with environments do influence us, through proper mental training and effort, using the Buddha’s Eightfold Path, we are ultimately responsible for the content and expression of our cognitive apparatus. The transformation of raw sensations into a world of representations imbued with salience, meaning, and value only occurs through the filtering and sense-making activities of our cognitive apparatus, and our choices of what we attend to and encourage significantly influences the outcomes of these processes, as stated by Thompson & Stapleton<sup>7</sup>. So, instead of promoting a strict determinism with resigned powerlessness and resignation, the early Buddhist notion of kamma focused on the importance of monitoring and being aware of what the conscious mind is doing in every moment (mindfulness) with the necessity of directing and maintaining our thoughts and reactions to the ethically beneficial and away from the harmful. The shift created by such possibility is evident: the aware subject stops being confused and starts being the organizer of their own thoughts. Thus the cultivation of metacognition capabilities develops the governing skills which makes cognitive transformation possible. This perspective of the ability to have a freedom of thinking to develop desired mindsets is well known to modern psychologists/psychotherapists who also advocate and observe the possibility of beneficial strategic cognitive structural change among their clients.

The conscious cognitive choices we make can lead to either greater psychic happiness or greater misery according to their kammic roots. We can cultivate beneficial kamma by practicing mindfulness and benevolence until it becomes an ego-syntonic habitual characteristic of our cognition and behavior. The performance of morally or ethically ‘beneficial’ or ‘harmful’ actions can also be taken as external indicators of one’s progress (or lack thereof) toward enlightenment. However, while for the develop of purified mental states wholesome kamma is necessary vs unwholesome kamma, the Buddha taught that, ultimately, all intentional perspectives and actions, even relatively benign ones, are misguided as they contribute to a false dualistic view of the universe: *“For the final cessation of suffering, all Kamma, wholesome and unwholesome, must be transcended, must be abandoned. Putting aside good and evil, one attains Nibbana. There is no other way”* (Dhammapada, V. 1).

According to Buddhist teachings, enlightenment brings an end to intentionally self-based views hence volitions, and instead, confers lasting liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. An *Awakened One*, or person who has reached enlightenment, lacks volitions based on the ignorance of dualistic concepts, such as ‘I want’. Instead, the actions of an arahant are pragmatic and neutral, meaning that he or she has gone beyond thinking in

terms of good and evil, and beyond actions rooted in selfish desire and grasping: all duality is overcome. Enlightenment can be described as a deeply felt realization of the essential unity and impermanence of all reality, which by its nature transcends the distinction between the controller and the world that he or she is attempting to control. This is accomplished by entering a state of pure experience, a kind of non-conceptual sensory awareness devoid of the usual labels and judgments which motivates so much of our goal-directed behavior. With enlightenment, one transcends the illusionary perspective of dualism that asserts a meaningful separation between thou and that, self and other, and ceases to strive for the desired objects found in the pre-enlightened experience. '*Destroyed are their (germinal) seeds (khina-bija); selfish desires no longer grow*', as it is stated in the Ratana Sutta. By letting go of the convictions and dogma that drive our usual egotistical and self-serving actions, one is finally freed from the futile circularity of pursuing selfish desires and suffering that follows.

However, the liberation of enlightenment does not imply the destruction of one's personality or cognitive apparatus. The earlier unwholesome schemas and habits have been abandoned, while the new insight-based cognitive processes are retained. Furthermore, during moments of meditation, one may experience a complete transformation of the boundaries normally defining the individual self which leads to the insight of Non-self or Emptiness. However, the previously developed purified thought patterns and memories that led up to the realization or insight of pure experience are the platform and support for all future perceptions, thoughts, judgments and actions. The arahant still tastes sweet with sugar, comprehends house as structure for living and a gong makes a particular sound. The point is they are no longer attached to these objects in an enduring way. When a person achieves nibbana (enlightenment) she is no longer deceived by the seemingly true nature of representation dualistic thinking. Instead, whereas the unenlightened person normally believes they have self-agency, 'I make a decision', in more lucid meditative states, it's possible instead to observe how the different actions and reactions which we usually assigned to 'the self' are precipitated only when certain conditions are present; how ego-syntonic habituated responses create actions to those conditions, and how, even in moments of choice, our thought processes are caused by the mix of our cognitive history and present environment. There is no inherent immanent self as a conductor controlling the orchestra – instead the improvisational orchestra is the experience we label the 'self'. It's an emergent phenomenon of the vast number of causes and conditions that are happening all the time, continually interacting and influencing each other. While some may mistakenly understand this state of coherence as an example of determinism, it isn't. Instead, it is the seamless coherent response of the whole person organism to the environment. Therefore, the intention expressed is without conflict or hesitation which normally creates the illusion of free will as choice.

Understanding this the Buddha emphasized the transformation of the dispositions, rather than their elimination, through the persevering psychological effort of cultivation refinement and purification. The transformation is created through personal verification not

supposition as was the Buddha's method of instruction. In the sutta, the Buddha instructed it this way:

Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias toward a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, "The monk is our teacher." Kalamas, when you yourselves know: "These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness," enter on and abide in them.' Kalama Sutta

Work out your own path,  
through diligence.

Therefore, the method of personal verification of the teachings creates the ego-syntonic incorporation of the doctrine. Step by step through the learning and verification of the Eightfold Path, the student comes to clearly see and accept and, therefore, incorporate the doctrine points into their schemas or worldview. As we saw in the memory section, it is always easier to learn a new habit than to unlearn an old one. So the process of metamorphosis is completed when the mind state of 'emptiness' is finally created showing the 'original mind'. In the arahant's case, the basis of ignorance is completely eliminated, yet the fully discriminating cognitive apparatus still remains. One does not lose one's self-sufficient state of mind. Thus, even in the case of complete liberation, existence continues with existential goals until one dies, but for the enlightened one, there is no longer a mind affected with ignorance. Therefore, there is no longer *papañca* or 'diffusion' of egoistically based intentionality of one's experience with its tendency to grow and expand. The arahant is *nippapañca*—without diversifications, free from any attachments, free from habitual burdens accumulated in the past.

A good example of *nippapañca* is a Zen Buddhist quote: "*Before enlightenment chop wood, carry water...after enlightenment chop wood, carry water*" and "*when hungry eat, when tired sleep*". The essence of these quotes is that living with an enlightened mind, the most important thing is not to be dualistic, leaving biased (like/dislike) intentionally based actions behind and instead stay with ease and equanimity in the non-volitional (neutral) simplicity of the present moment. Unenlightened human beings do not psychologically live in the present moment with bare attention, instead, they remain attached to their past based biases, see the present through the darkened lenses of unwholesome mindsets and crave for preferential ideals in the future. All self-centered thoughts limit our 'original mind'. Focusing unbiasedly, simply and openly on the present moment, removes and trains the mind from constantly drifting to wants, desires, avoidances...all driven by the mind obsessed with seeking attachments to lasting pleasures and avoiding anything deemed unpleasant.

As the Buddha taught, with craving, clinging attachment and perseverative obsession comes suffering. Instead, in the mind-set of "*when hungry eat, when tired sleep*," one is totally present to life as it is unfolding, fully present to the simple necessities one's organism needs

to survive: in few words, there is no abstracted separation or alienation to the process of living. The difference between before and after Awakening is the perspective hence insight created through experiencing the 'pure awareness' of non-separateness and non-duality. So, as Kalupahana stated, enlightenment is not the destruction of the mind, for "*the elimination of dispositions is epistemological suicide*,"<sup>8</sup> as dispositions determine our perspectives. The importance is the development of one's mind-sets in the direction of transformation to purity which rests with the very dispositions we can improve and purify. Along these lines, each individual's journey will be unique.