

Happy About Kamma

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The various levels of right view are assumptions we have to make, working hypotheses we have to hold to if we want to follow a path that leads to true happiness.

Someone asked me one time, “How do the teachings on kamma and rebirth make me happy? And how do the teachings on spontaneously appearing beings make me happy?” Well, it’s not that the teachings themselves are supposed to make you glad, but when you take them as working hypotheses, you realize that they do open the way to the end of suffering, a path that you can follow to the end of suffering.

But it’s important that you understand what the Buddha meant by kamma. One of the beliefs that’s often attributed him is that everything that happens is determined by past actions. But he himself said that that kind of teaching leaves you bewildered. It means that if you’re someone who steals and has illicit sex and kills animals, well, it’s because of past kamma. You’re not responsible. That leaves you with no idea of what should be done and what shouldn’t be done—or that those concepts would even make any sense.

You have to realize that past kamma leads to tendencies, opens possibilities, closes possibilities, depending on the action. But it’s not mechanical, and there’s no tit-for-tat. That’s another one of the teachings: The Buddha said that if, say, you killed five people and then you’d have to be killed five times before you could gain awakening, nobody would ever be able to gain awakening. But that’s not how it works.

Your actions from the past determine what kind of pleasures and pains you’re going to be susceptible to, what openings there will be. The Buddha’s image is of a hand that does or does not have a wound. If the hand doesn’t have a wound, it can hold poison, and the poison won’t seep in. If it does have a wound, then if you ever decide to hold poison in that hand, the poison can seep in.

The wound stands for the possibilities coming from past kamma. Your choice to hold or not to hold poison is something you do in the present moment. But just because you have some bad kamma in the past doesn’t dictate precisely how it’s going to work out.

He says if you make kamma of a certain kind, it will lead to a certain kind of result, but the strength of that result and the time at which it will appear depend a lot on your present kamma.

This is why the teaching is one that gives you hope.

The fact that we're born means that we're going to have to die, and there's going to be aging and illness in the meantime. But whether we're going to suffer from those things—that's optional, and that's where we can make a difference. This is why we practice. This is why we train the mind. This is why training the mind involves sitting here with your eyes closed, watching the movements of the mind. It's so that you can understand what you're doing—first by seeing clearly what you're doing.

If you see that you're making some unskillful choices, you can unmake them, because there is that element of free choice in the present moment. The alternatives you have to choose among may be limited by past kamma, but there always is the choice to do something skillful. That option is always there.

This means is that if you meet up with the results of some past bad kamma—suppose somebody does something bad to you—it doesn't mean that your past kamma compelled them to do something bad. It's simply that your past kamma left the opening. They saw the opening and they took it. And of course, that becomes their kamma now.

The fact that you had that past bad kamma: There are unskillful ways and skillful ways that you can think about it. The unskillful way would be to think, "Well, this person was simply carrying out the dictates of kamma. So the person's not responsible or is actually doing something good." That's unskillful. There's no excuse for that person's behavior, because the person did choose to take that opening.

The skillful way is to say, "Well, I must have some past bad kamma, so I'll learn how to take it in stride and not get too worked up about it. And I'll take it as an incentive to try to be more skillful in the future."

As for times when someone does something really nice to you, again, there are skillful and unskillful ways of thinking about the kamma involved in that. The unskillful way would be to think, "Well, I deserved that good thing. That person had nothing to do with that. I don't have to be grateful to that person because, after all, it was my own kamma that opened the possibility." But that's an unskillful way of thinking.

The skillful way would be to think, "Okay, I had that past good kamma, and here it's coming around, so now what am I going to do with it? I worked so hard to do that good deed in the past. Am I just going to sit here and enjoy the results, or am I going to invest them further? Am I going to take advantage of the opportunity that this good fortune has brought

my way?”

As for the person who chose to do something good for you, have a sense of gratitude, because they were free to choose not to do that. That opening could have been just left there. Maybe someday something would have come in and filled it up, but that person chose to take advantage of that opening at that point. That was that person's goodness.

This is why gratitude is real, why gratitude is one of the things that the Buddha pointed out as part of teaching on mundane right view. When you understand kamma from his point of view, gratitude makes sense, generosity makes sense. So, if you learn how to think about kamma in the right way, you find that it is a good working hypothesis.

Remember how the Buddha explained causality: Some causes give their effects immediately; other causes give them over time. Which means that what you're experiencing right now is a combination of things coming from the past and choices made in the present moment. As the causal factors are ordered in dependent co-arising, your present acts of attention and acts of intention actually come prior to your experience of whatever the results of past kamma may be coming in.

Intention and attention come under name and form. Based on name and form, there are the six senses, and with the six senses there's contact. And it's contact at the six senses, in your experience of the six senses, the Buddha said: That should be seen as past kamma. So actually your present intentions come first.

This, too, is an important principle. If there are no present intentions, then there would be no experience of the results of past kamma. This is why it is possible, at the moment of the noble paths and their fruitions, for there to be no experience of the six senses. It's because you've stopped having intentions right now—that's why there's an escape.

Of course, you can't simply tell yourself, "Well, don't have any intentions," because that becomes an intention. This is why the path requires skill. It requires actually, many skills.

As you get really good at bringing the mind to a state of equipoise here in the present moment, where you see everything that's going on in the mind really clearly, all the levels of intention begin to open up. You see that if you act on any of them either way—either staying or moving to something new—it's going to entail more stress, more impermanence, more inconstancy. So you look for an alternative. When the alternative opens up, that's where there's an experience of the deathless.

So the way the Buddha explains kamma and causality is precisely the explanation we need

for there to be that possibility—the possibility to find an escape from kamma. It’s in this way that the principle of kamma should make you happy, because it opens possibilities, good possibilities.

Of course, it also means that you have to learn how to take the results of past bad actions with good grace, realizing that they don’t justify anybody who mistreats you, but they do mean that you learn to take things in stride and do your best with the good kamma that comes your way.

Again, be grateful for the people who help you, and grateful to yourself for having done something good in the past that allowed that help to come your way. Part of that gratitude means you’re not going to let the opportunity to go to waste.

Ajaan Lee has a nice comment, he says, “Think about the fact you have a human mouth. It took a lot to merit a human rebirth. We have a mouth that can say things, send messages—so *bow down* to your mouth.” In other words, appreciate the fact that you worked hard to get this mouth. You worked hard to get this human birth, so put it to good use. Otherwise, all that work is going to go to waste.

So when you think about kamma in the right way, it really does make you happy. It does lift your spirits.

That principle explains one of the strange passages in the Canon. There’s a sutta where King Ajātasattu comes to see the Buddha. The Buddha gives him a really long, long, long Dhamma talk. Ajātasattu, who had his father killed, could think of only one thing, “If only I hadn’t killed my father...” So that’s what he tells the Buddha at the end. After the Buddha finished the talk, Ajātasattu confesses the fact that he killed his father and sees that it was a mistake. The Buddha says, “It’s a good thing you see it’s a mistake, because that’s how there’s progress in the Dhamma and the Vinaya of the noble ones.”

Ajātasattu leaves, and the Buddha says to the monks, “If he hadn’t killed his father, he would have become a stream-enterer listening to that Dhamma talk. But the fact that he’d killed his father cut him off at the root.” The sutta ends by saying: “Gratified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One’s words.” It’s not that they were delighting in Ajātasattu’s bad fortune or his bad choices. They were delighting in the fact that kamma works regardless of what power you have.

It may explain a lot of suffering, but it doesn’t justify the suffering. It just simply says that this is why it’s there, but the way kamma works also offers the way out. So even though we’ve

done bad things in the past, we don't have to suffer for them.

Think of that image of the salt crystal: You put it into a cup of water and you can't drink the water. You put it into a river of clean water and you can still drink the water—because there so much more water than there is salt.

The water stands for the state of mind in the present moment. The salt stands for your past bad kamma. How expansive the water of your mind is going to be is your choice right now. So take advantage of the freedom of choice that you've got right here, right now. That can make you happy.