

Karma & Causality

§ 1. “This is the way leading to discernment: when visiting a contemplative or brahman, to ask: ‘What is skillful, venerable sir? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is blameless? What should be cultivated? What should not be cultivated? What, when I do it, will be for my long-term harm & suffering? Or what, when I do it, will be for my long-term welfare & happiness?’”

—MN 135

§ 2. “As for the course of action that is unpleasant to do but that, when done, leads to what is profitable, it’s in light of this course of action that one may be known... as a fool or a wise person. For a fool doesn’t reflect, ‘Even though this course of action is unpleasant to do, still when it is done it leads to what is profitable.’ So he doesn’t do it, and thus the non-doing of that course of action leads to what is unprofitable for him. But a wise person reflects, ‘Even though this course of action is unpleasant to do, still when it is done it leads to what is profitable.’ So he does it, and thus the doing of that course of action leads to what is profitable for him.

“As for the course of action that is pleasant to do but that, when done, leads to what is unprofitable, it’s in light of this course of action that one may be known... as a fool or a wise person. For a fool doesn’t reflect, ‘Even though this course of action is pleasant to do, still when it is done it leads to what is unprofitable.’ So he does it, and thus the doing of that course of action leads to what is unprofitable for him. But a wise person reflects, ‘Even though this course of action is pleasant to do, still when it is done it leads to what is unprofitable.’ So he doesn’t do it, and thus the non-doing of that course of action leads to what is profitable for him.”

—AN 4:115

§ 3. The Buddha: “What do you think, Rahula: What is a mirror for?”

Rahula [his son, who was seven at the time]: “For reflection, sir.”

The Buddha: “In the same way, Rahula, bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions are to be done with repeated reflection.

“Whenever you want to perform a bodily action, you should reflect on it: ‘This bodily action I want to perform—would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?’ If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then any bodily action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful bodily action with happy consequences, happy results, then any bodily action of that sort is fit for you to do. [Similarly with verbal actions & mental actions.]

“While you are performing a bodily action, you should reflect on it: ‘This bodily action I am doing—is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful

results? If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to affliction of others, or both... you should give it up. But if on reflection you know that it is not... you may continue with it. [Similarly with verbal actions & mental actions.]

“Having performed a bodily action, you should reflect on it... If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should confess it, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to a knowledgeable companion in the holy life. Having confessed it... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful bodily action with happy consequences, happy results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful mental qualities. [Similarly with verbal actions.]

“Having performed a mental action, you should reflect on it... If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful mental action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should feel horrified, humiliated, & disgusted with it. Feeling horrified... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful mental action with happy consequences, happy results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful mental qualities.

“Rahula, all the contemplatives & brahmans in the course of the past who purified their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions, did it through repeated reflection on their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions in just this way.

“All the contemplatives & brahmans in the course of the future... All the contemplatives & brahmans at present who purify their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions, do it through repeated reflection on their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions in just this way.

“So, Rahula, you should train yourself: ‘I will purify my bodily actions... verbal actions... my mental actions through repeated reflection.’ That’s how you should train yourself.”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Ven. Rahula delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

—MN 61

§ 4. “Monks, there are these three sectarian guilds that — when cross-examined, pressed for reasons, & rebuked by wise people — even though they may explain otherwise, remain stuck in [a doctrine of] inactivity. Which three?

“There are contemplatives & brahmans who hold this teaching, hold this view: ‘Whatever a person experiences — pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful — that is all caused by what was done in the past.’ There are contemplatives & brahmans who hold this teaching, hold this view: ‘Whatever a person experiences — pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful — that is all caused by a supreme being’s act of creation.’ There are contemplatives & brahmans who hold this teaching, hold this view: ‘Whatever a person experiences — pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful — that is all without cause & without condition.’

“Having approached the contemplatives & brahmans who hold that... whatever a person experiences... is all caused by what was done in the past, I

said to them: 'Is it true that you hold that... whatever a person experiences... is all caused by what was done in the past?' Thus asked by me, they admitted, 'Yes.' Then I said to them, 'Then in that case, a person is a killer of living beings because of what was done in the past. A person is a thief... unchaste... a liar... a divisive speaker... an abusive speaker... an idle chatterer... covetous... malevolent... a holder of wrong views because of what was done in the past.' When one falls back on what was done in the past as being essential, monks, there is no desire, no effort [at the thought], 'This should be done. This shouldn't be done.' When one can't pin down as a truth or reality what should & shouldn't be done, one dwells bewildered & unprotected. One cannot righteously refer to oneself as a contemplative....

"Having approached the contemplatives & brahmans who hold that... whatever a person experiences... is all caused by a supreme being's act of creation, I said to them: 'Is it true that you hold that... whatever a person experiences... is all caused by a supreme being's act of creation?' Thus asked by me, they admitted, 'Yes.' Then I said to them, 'Then in that case, a person is a killer of living beings... a holder of wrong views because of a supreme being's act of creation.' When one falls back on a supreme being's act of creation as being essential, monks, there is no desire, no effort [at the thought], 'This should be done. This shouldn't be done.' When one can't pin down as a truth or reality what should & shouldn't be done, one dwells bewildered & unprotected. One cannot righteously refer to oneself as a contemplative...

"Having approached the contemplatives & brahmans who hold that... whatever a person experiences... is all without cause, without condition, I said to them: 'Is it true that you hold that... whatever a person experiences... is all without cause, without condition?' Thus asked by me, they admitted, 'Yes.' Then I said to them, 'Then in that case, a person is a killer of living beings without cause, without condition. A person is a thief... unchaste... a liar... a divisive speaker... an abusive speaker... an idle chatterer... covetous... malevolent... a holder of wrong views without cause, without condition.' When one falls back on lack of cause and lack of condition as being essential, monks, there is no desire, no effort [at the thought], 'This should be done. This shouldn't be done.' When one can't pin down as a truth or reality what should & shouldn't be done, one dwells bewildered & unprotected. One cannot righteously refer to oneself as a contemplative."

— AN 3:61

§ 5. "When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn't, that isn't. From the stopping of this comes the stopping of that."

— AN 10:92

§ 6. "From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.

"From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness.

"From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form.

"From name-&-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media.

"From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact.

"From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling.

"From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving.

“From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging/sustenance.

“From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming.

“From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth.

“From birth as a requisite condition, then aging & death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering....

“And what is *name-&-form*? Feeling, perception, intention, contact, & attention: This is called name. The four great elements & the form dependent on the four great elements: This is called form. This name & this form are called name-&-form....

“And what are *fabrications*? These three are fabrications: bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications, mental fabrications. These are called fabrications.

“And what is *ignorance*? Not knowing stress, not knowing the origination of stress, not knowing the cessation of stress, not knowing the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: This is called ignorance.”

—SN 12:2

§ 7. “Intention, I tell you, is kamma. Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, & intellect.

“And what is the cause by which kamma comes into play? Contact....

“And what is the diversity in kamma? There is kamma to be experienced in hell, kamma to be experienced in the realm of common animals, kamma to be experienced in the realm of the hungry shades, kamma to be experienced in the human world, kamma to be experienced in the heavenly worlds. [In the Buddhist cosmology, sojourns in hell or in heaven, as in the other realms, are not eternal. After the force of one’s kamma leading to rebirth in those levels has worn out, one is reborn elsewhere.]....

“And what is the result of kamma? The result of kamma is of three sorts, I tell you: that which arises right here & now, that which arises later [in this lifetime], and that which arises following that....

“And what is the cessation of kamma? From the cessation of contact is the cessation of kamma; and just this noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration—is the path of practice leading to the cessation of kamma.

“Now when a disciple of the noble ones discerns kamma in this way, the cause by which kamma comes into play in this way, the diversity of kamma in this way, the result of kamma in this way, the cessation of kamma in this way, & the path of practice leading to the cessation of kamma in this way, then he discerns this penetrative holy life as the cessation of kamma.

—AN 6:63

§ 8. “What is old kamma? The eye is to be seen as old kamma, fabricated & willed, capable of being felt. The ear... The nose... The tongue... The body... The intellect is to be seen as old kamma, fabricated & willed, capable of being felt. This is called old kamma.

“And what is new kamma? Whatever kamma one does now with the body, with speech, or with the intellect. This is called new kamma.

“And what is the cessation of kamma? Whoever touches the release that comes from the cessation of bodily kamma, verbal kamma, & mental kamma. That is called the cessation of kamma.

“And what is the path of practice leading to the cessation of kamma? Just this noble eightfold path.... This is called the path of practice leading to the cessation of kamma.”

— SN 35:145

§ 9. “Unflagging persistence was aroused in me, and unmuddled mindfulness established. My body was calm & unaroused, my mind concentrated & single. Quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, I entered & remained in the first jhana: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, I entered & remained in the second jhana: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance. With the fading of rapture I remained equanimous, mindful, & alert, and sensed pleasure with the body. I entered & remained in the third jhana, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’ With the abandoning of pleasure & pain — as with the earlier disappearance of joy & distress — I entered & remained in the fourth jhana: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain.

“When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, & attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the *knowledge of recollecting my past lives*. I recollected my manifold past lives, i.e., one birth, two... five, ten... fifty, a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand, many eons of cosmic contraction, many eons of cosmic expansion, many eons of cosmic contraction & expansion: ‘There I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure & pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-rose there. There too I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure & pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-rose here.’ Thus I remembered my manifold past lives in their modes & details.

“This was the first knowledge I attained in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed; knowledge arose; darkness was destroyed; light arose — as happens in one who is heedful, ardent, & resolute.

“When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, & attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the *knowledge of the passing away & reappearance of beings*. I saw — by means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human — beings passing away & re-appearing and I discerned how they are inferior & superior, beautiful & ugly, fortunate & unfortunate in accordance with their kamma: ‘These beings — who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech, & mind, who reviled noble ones, held wrong views, and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views — with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the lower realms, in hell. But these beings — who were endowed with good conduct of body, speech, & mind, who did not revile noble ones, who held right views and undertook actions under the influence of right views — with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-

appeared in the good destinations, in the heavenly world.’ Thus — by means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human — I saw beings passing away & re-appearing, and I discerned how they are inferior & superior, beautiful & ugly, fortunate & unfortunate in accordance with their kamma.

“This was the second knowledge I attained in the second watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed; knowledge arose; darkness was destroyed; light arose — as happens in one who is heedful, ardent, & resolute.

“When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, & attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the *knowledge of the ending of the mental fermentations*. I discerned, as it had come to be, that ‘This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the way leading to the cessation of stress... These are fermentations... This is the origination of fermentations... This is the cessation of fermentations... This is the way leading to the cessation of fermentations.’ My heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, was released from the fermentation of sensuality, released from the fermentation of becoming, released from the fermentation of ignorance. With release, there was the knowledge, ‘Released.’ I discerned that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’

“This was the third knowledge I attained in the third watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed; knowledge arose; darkness was destroyed; light arose — as happens in one who is heedful, ardent, & resolute.”

—MN 4

§ 10. “These four types of kamma have been understood, realized, & made known by me. Which four? There is kamma that is dark with dark result; kamma that is bright with bright result; kamma that is dark & bright with dark & bright result; and kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the ending of kamma.

“And what is kamma that is dark with dark result? There is the case where a certain person fabricates an injurious bodily fabrication... an injurious verbal fabrication... an injurious mental fabrication... He rearises in an injurious world where he is touched by injurious contacts... He experiences feelings that are exclusively painful, like those of the beings in hell....

“And what is kamma that is bright with bright result? There is the case where a certain person fabricates an uninjurious bodily fabrication... an uninjurious verbal fabrication... an uninjurious mental fabrication... He rearises in an uninjurious world where he is touched by uninjurious contacts... He experiences feelings that are exclusively pleasant, like those of the Ever-radiant Devas....

“And what is kamma that is dark & bright with dark & bright result? There is the case where a certain person fabricates a bodily fabrication that is injurious & uninjurious... a verbal fabrication that is injurious & uninjurious... a mental fabrication that is injurious & uninjurious... He rearises in an injurious & uninjurious world where he is touched by injurious & uninjurious contacts... He experiences injurious & uninjurious feelings, pleasure mingled with pain, like those of human beings, some devas, and some beings in the lower realms....

“And what is kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the ending of kamma? The intention right there to

abandon this kamma that is dark with dark result... this kamma that is bright with bright result... this kamma that is dark & bright with dark & bright result.”

— AN 4:232

§11. AN 4:234 repeats most of the above, defining dark kamma with dark result with the following example: “There is the case of a certain person who kills living beings, steals what is not given, engages in illicit sex, tells lies, and drinks fermented & distilled liquors that are the basis for heedlessness,” and bright kamma with bright result with the following example: “There is the case of a certain person who abstains from killing living beings, abstains from stealing what is not given, abstains from engaging in illicit sex, abstains from telling lies, and abstains from drinking fermented & distilled liquors that are the basis for heedlessness.”

AN 4:237 equates kamma that is neither dark nor bright with the factors of the noble eightfold path. AN 4:238 equates it with the seven factors for Awakening.

§ 12. “Now, based on what line of reasoning should one often reflect... that ‘I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir’? There are beings who conduct themselves in a bad way in body... in speech... and in mind. But when they often reflect on that fact, that bad conduct in body, speech, & mind will either be entirely abandoned or grow weaker....

“A disciple of the noble ones considers this: ‘I am not the only one who is the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator; who—whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir. To the extent that there are beings—past & future, passing away & re-arising—all beings are the owners of their actions, heir to their actions, born of their actions, related through their actions, and have their actions as their arbitrator. Whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir.’ When he/she often reflects on this, the [factors of the] path take birth. He/she sticks with that path, develops it, cultivates it. As he/she sticks with that path, develops it, & cultivates it, the fetters are abandoned, the obsessions destroyed.”

— AN 5:57

§ 13. *Mundane right view*: “There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits & results of good & bad actions. There is this world & the next world. There is mother & father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are contemplatives & brahmans who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves.”—MN 117

Transcendent right view: “Knowledge with reference to stress, knowledge with reference to the origination of stress, knowledge with reference to the cessation of stress, knowledge with reference to the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress.”—MN 141

§ 14. I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying at Savatthi in the Eastern Monastery, the palace of Migara’s mother. Then in the

evening, Ven. Ananda, coming out of seclusion, went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One: “On one occasion, when the Blessed One was staying among the Sakyans in a Sakyan town named Nagaraka, there—face-to-face with the Blessed One—I heard this, face-to-face I learned this: ‘I now remain fully in a dwelling of emptiness.’ Did I hear that correctly, learn it correctly, attend to it correctly, remember it correctly?”

[The Buddha:] “Yes, Ananda, you heard that correctly, learned it correctly, attended to it correctly, remembered it correctly. Now, as well as before, I remain fully in a dwelling of emptiness. Just as this palace of Migara’s mother is empty of elephants, cattle, & mares, empty of gold & silver, empty of assemblies of women & men, and there is only this non-emptiness—the singleness based on the community of monks; even so, Ananda, a monk—not attending to the perception (mental note) of village, not attending to the perception of human being—attends to the singleness based on the perception of *wilderness*. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, & indulges in its perception of wilderness.

“He discerns that ‘Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of village are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of human being are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the perception of wilderness.’ He discerns that ‘This mode of perception is empty of the perception of village. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of human being. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the perception of wilderness.’ Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: ‘There is this.’ And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, & pure.

“Further, Ananda, the monk—not attending to the perception of human being, not attending to the perception of wilderness—attends to the singleness based on the perception of *earth*. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, & indulges in its perception of earth. Just as a bull’s hide is stretched free from wrinkles with a hundred stakes, even so—without attending to all the ridges & hollows, the river ravines, the tracts of stumps & thorns, the craggy irregularities of this earth—he attends to the singleness based on the perception of earth. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, & indulges in its perception of earth.

“He discerns that ‘Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of human being... on the perception of wilderness are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the perception of earth.’ He discerns that ‘This mode of perception is empty of the perception of human being. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of wilderness. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the perception of earth.’ Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: ‘There is this.’ And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, & pure.

“Further, Ananda, the monk—not attending to the perception of wilderness, not attending to the perception of earth—attends to the singleness based on the perception of *the dimension of the infinitude of space*.... not attending to the

perception of earth, not attending to the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of space—he attends to the singleness based on the perception of *the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness*.... not attending to the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of space, not attending to the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness—he attends to the singleness based on the perception of *the dimension of nothingness*.... not attending to the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, not attending to the perception of the dimension of nothingness—attends to the singleness based on *the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception*.... not attending to the perception of the dimension of nothingness, not attending to the perception of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception—attends to the singleness based on *the theme-less concentration of awareness*. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, & indulges in its theme-less concentration of awareness.

“He discerns that ‘Whatever disturbances would exist based on the perception of the dimension of nothingness... on the perception of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception are not present. And there is only this modicum of disturbance: that connected with the six sensory spheres, dependent on this very body with life as its condition.’ He discerns that ‘This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of nothingness. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. There is only this non-emptiness: that connected with the six sensory spheres, dependent on this very body with life as its condition.’ Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: ‘There is this.’ And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, & pure.

“Further, Ananda, the monk—not attending to the perception of the dimension of nothingness, not attending to the perception of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception—attends to the singleness based on the theme-less concentration of awareness. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, & indulges in its theme-less concentration of awareness.

“He discerns that ‘This theme-less concentration of awareness is fabricated & mentally fashioned.’ And he discerns that ‘Whatever is fabricated & mentally fashioned is inconstant & subject to cessation.’ For him—thus knowing, thus seeing—the mind is released from the fermentation of sensuality, the fermentation of becoming, the fermentation of ignorance. With release, there is the knowledge, ‘Released.’ He discerns that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’

“He discerns that ‘Whatever disturbances would exist based on the fermentation of sensuality... the fermentation of becoming... the fermentation of ignorance, are not present. And there is only this modicum of disturbance: that connected with the six sensory spheres, dependent on this very body with life as its condition.’ He discerns that ‘This mode of perception is empty of the fermentation of sensuality... becoming... ignorance. And there is just this non-emptiness: that connected with the six sensory spheres, dependent on this very body with life as its condition.’ Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: ‘There is this.’ And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, pure—superior & unsurpassed.”

§ 15. “There is the case where an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person... assumes form to be the self. That assumption is a fabrication. Now what is the cause, what is the origination, what is the birth, what is the coming-into-existence of that fabrication? To an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person, touched by that which is felt born of contact with ignorance, craving arises. That fabrication is born of that. And that fabrication is inconstant, fabricated, dependently co-arisen. That craving... That feeling... That contact... That ignorance is inconstant, fabricated, dependently co-arisen. It is by knowing & seeing in this way that one without delay puts an end to the (mental) fermentations.

“Or he doesn’t assume form to be the self, but he assumes the self as possessing form... form as in the self... self as in form.

“Now that assumption is a fabrication. What is the cause... of that fabrication? To an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person, touched by the feeling born of contact with ignorance, craving arises. That fabrication is born of that. And that fabrication is inconstant, fabricated, dependently co-arisen. That craving... That feeling... That contact... That ignorance is inconstant, fabricated, dependently co-arisen. It is by knowing & seeing in this way that one without delay puts an end to the (mental) fermentations.

[Similarly with feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness.]

“Or... he may have a view such as this: “This self is the same as the cosmos. This I will be after death, constant, lasting, eternal, not subject to change.” This eternalist view is a fabrication.... Or... he may have a view such as this: “I would not be, neither would there be what is mine. I will not be, neither will there be what is mine.” This annihilationist view is a fabrication.... Or... he may be doubtful & uncertain, having come to no conclusion with regard to the true Dhamma. That doubt, uncertainty, & coming-to-no-conclusion is a fabrication.

“What is the cause... of that fabrication? To an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person, touched by what is felt born of contact with ignorance, craving arises. That fabrication is born of that. And that fabrication is inconstant, fabricated, dependently co-arisen. That craving... That feeling... That contact... That ignorance is inconstant, fabricated, dependently co-arisen. It is by knowing & seeing in this way that one without delay puts an end to the (mental) fermentations.”

—SN 22:81

§ 16. “This, monks, the Tathagata discerns. And he discerns that these standpoints, thus seized, thus held to, lead to such & such a destination, to such & such a state in the world beyond. And he discerns what surpasses this. And yet discerning that, he does not hold to that act of discernment. And as he is not holding to it, Unbinding (*nibbuti*) is experienced right within. Knowing, for what they are, the origin, ending, allure, & drawbacks of feelings, along with the emancipation from feelings, the Tathagata, monks—through lack of sustenance/ clinging—is released.”

—DN 1

§ 17. “Monks, the taking of life — when indulged in, developed, & pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to

the realm of the hungry shades. The slightest of all the results coming from the taking of life is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to a short life span.

“Stealing — when indulged in, developed, & pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry shades. The slightest of all the results coming from stealing is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to the loss of one's wealth.

“Illicit sexual behavior — when indulged in, developed, & pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry shades. The slightest of all the results coming from illicit sexual behavior is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to rivalry & revenge.

“Telling falsehoods — when indulged in, developed, & pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry shades. The slightest of all the results coming from telling falsehoods is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to being falsely accused.

“Divisive tale-bearing — when indulged in, developed, & pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry shades. The slightest of all the results coming from divisive tale-bearing is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to the breaking of one's friendships.

“Abusive speech — when indulged in, developed, & pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry shades. The slightest of all the results coming from abusive speech is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to unappealing sounds.

“Frivolous chattering — when indulged in, developed, & pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry shades. The slightest of all the results coming from frivolous chattering is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to words that aren't worth taking to heart.

“The drinking of fermented & distilled liquors — when indulged in, developed, & pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry shades. The slightest of all the results coming from drinking fermented & distilled liquors is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to mental derangement.”

— AN 8:40

§ 18. “Monks, there are these three roots of what is unskillful. Which three? Greed is a root of what is unskillful, aversion is a root of what is unskillful, delusion is a root of what is unskillful.

“Greed itself is unskillful. Whatever a greedy person fabricates by means of body, speech, or intellect, that too is unskillful. Whatever suffering a greedy person — his mind overcome with greed, his mind consumed — wrongly inflicts on another person through beating or imprisonment or confiscation or placing blame or banishment, [with the thought,] “I have power. I want power,” that too is unskillful. Thus it is that many evil, unskillful qualities/events /actions —

born of greed, caused by greed, originated through greed, conditioned by greed — come into play.

[Similarly with aversion and delusion.]

“And a person like this is called one who speaks at the wrong time, speaks what is unfactual, speaks what is irrelevant, speaks contrary to the Dhamma, speaks contrary to the Vinaya. Why...? Because of having wrongly inflicted suffering on another person through beating or imprisonment or confiscation or placing blame or banishment, [with the thought,] ‘I have power. I want power.’ When told what is factual, he denies it and doesn't acknowledge it. When told what is unfactual, he doesn't make an ardent effort to untangle it [to see], ‘This is unfactual. This is ungrounded.’ That's why a person like this is called one who speaks at the wrong time, speaks what is unfactual, speaks what is irrelevant, speaks contrary to the Dhamma, speaks contrary to the Vinaya.

“A person like this — his mind overcome with evil, unskillful qualities born of greed... born of aversion... born of delusion, his mind consumed — dwells in suffering right in the here-&-now — feeling threatened, turbulent, feverish — and at the break-up of the body, after death, can expect a bad destination.”

— AN 3:69

§ 19. “There are, headman, some contemplatives & brahmans who hold a doctrine & view like this: ‘All those who kill living beings experience pain & distress in the here & now. All those who take what is not given... who engage in illicit sex... who tell lies experience pain & distress in the here & now.’

“Now there is the case where a certain person is seen garlanded & adorned, freshly bathed & groomed, with hair & beard trimmed, enjoying the sensualities of women as if he were a king. They ask about him: ‘My good man, what has this man done that he has been garlanded & adorned... as if he were a king?’ They answer: ‘My good man, this man attacked the king's enemy and took his life. The king, gratified with him, rewarded him. That is why he is garlanded & adorned... as if he were a king.’

“Then there is the case where a certain person is seen bound with a stout rope with his arms pinned tightly against his back, his head shaved bald, marched to a harsh-sounding drum from street to street, crossroads to crossroads, evicted through the south gate, and beheaded to the south of the city. They ask about him: ‘My good man, what has this man done that he is bound with a stout rope... and beheaded to the south of the city?’ They answer: ‘My good man, this man, an enemy of the king, has taken the life of a man or a woman. That is why the rulers, having had him seized, inflicted such a punishment upon him.’

“Now, what do you think, headman: have you ever seen or heard of such a case?”

“I have seen this, lord, have heard of it, and will hear of it [again in the future].”

“So, headman, when those contemplatives & brahmans who hold a doctrine and view like this say: ‘All those who kill living beings experience pain & distress in the here & now,’ do they speak truthfully or falsely?” — “Falsely, lord.”

“And those who babble empty falsehood: are they moral or immoral?”

“Immoral, lord.”

“And those who are immoral and of evil character: are they practicing wrongly or rightly?” — “Wrongly, lord.”

“And those who are practicing wrongly: do they hold wrong view or right view?” — “Wrong view, lord.”

“And is it proper to place confidence in those who hold wrong view?”

“No, lord.”

“Then, headman, there is the case where a certain person is seen garlanded & adorned... as if he were a king. They ask about him: ‘My good man, what has this man done that he has been garlanded & adorned... as if he were a king?’ They answer: ‘My good man, this man attacked the king’s enemy and stole a treasure. The king, gratified with him, rewarded him....’

“Then there is the case where a certain person is seen bound with a stout rope... and beheaded to the south of the city. They ask about him: ‘My good man, what has this man done that he is bound with a stout rope... and beheaded to the south of the city?’ They answer: ‘My good man, this man, an enemy of the king, has committed a theft, stealing something from a village or a wilderness....’

“Then there is the case where a certain person is seen garlanded & adorned... as if he were a king. They ask about him: ‘My good man, what has this man done that he has been garlanded & adorned... as if he were a king?’ They answer: ‘My good man, this man seduced the wives of the king’s enemy....’

“Then there is the case where a certain person is seen bound with a stout rope... and beheaded to the south of the city. They ask about him: ‘My good man, what has this man done that he is bound with a stout rope... and beheaded to the south of the city?’ They answer: ‘My good man, this man seduced women & girls of good families....’

“Then there is the case where a certain person is seen garlanded & adorned... as if he were a king. They ask about him: ‘My good man, what has this man done that he has been garlanded & adorned... as if he were a king?’ They answer: ‘My good man, this man made the king laugh with a lie....’

“Then there is the case where a certain person is seen bound with a stout rope... and beheaded to the south of the city. They ask about him: ‘My good man, what has this man done that he is bound with a stout rope... and beheaded to the south of the city?’ They answer: ‘My good man, this man has brought the aims of a householder or a householder’s son to ruin with a lie. That is why the rulers, having had him seized, inflicted such a punishment upon him.’

“Now what do you think, headman: have you ever seen or heard of such a case?”

“I have seen this, lord, have heard of it, and will hear of it [again in the future].”

“So, headman, when those contemplatives & brahmans who hold a doctrine & view like this, say: ‘All those who tell lies experience pain & distress in the here & now,’ do they speak truthfully or falsely?... Is it proper to place confidence in those who hold wrong view?” — “No, lord.”

§ 20. “There are four kinds of person to be found in the world. Which four? There is the case where a certain person takes life, takes what is not given [steals], engages in illicit sex, lies, speaks divisively, speaks abusively, engages in idle chatter; is covetous, malevolent, & holds wrong views. On the break-up of the body, after death, he reappears in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the lower realms, in hell.

“But there is also the case where a certain person takes life... holds wrong views [yet], on the break-up of the body, after death, he reappears in the good destinations, in the heavenly world.

“And there is the case where a certain person abstains from taking life, abstains from taking what is not given... is not covetous, not malevolent, & holds right views. On the break-up of the body, after death, he reappears in the good destinations, in the heavenly world.

“But there is also the case where a certain person abstains from taking life, abstains from taking what is not given... is not covetous, not malevolent, & holds right views [yet], on the break-up of the body, after death, he reappears in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the lower realms, in hell....

“In the case of the person who takes life... [yet] on the break-up of the body, after death, reappears in the good destinations, in the heavenly world: either earlier he performed fine kamma that is to be felt as pleasant, or later he performed fine kamma that is to be felt as pleasant, or at the time of death he adopted & carried out right views. Because of that, on the break-up of the body, after death, he reappears in the good destinations, in the heavenly world. But as for the results of taking life... holding wrong views, he will feel them either right here & now, or later [in this lifetime], or following that....

“In the case of the person who abstains from taking life... [yet] on the break-up of the body, after death, reappears in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the lower realms, in hell: either earlier he performed evil kamma that is to be felt as painful, or later he performed evil kamma that is to be felt as painful, or at the time of death he adopted & carried out wrong views. Because of that, on the break-up of the body, after death, he reappears in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the lower realms, in hell. But as for the results of abstaining from taking life... holding right views, he will feel them either right here & now, or later [in this lifetime], or following that....

—MN 136

§ 21. “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 unlimited. 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 lump of salt into a small amount of water in a cup. What do you think? Would the water in the cup become salty because of the lump of salt, and unfit to drink?”

“Yes, lord....”

“Now suppose that a man were to drop a lump of salt into the River Ganges. What do you think? Would the water in the River Ganges become salty because of the lump of salt, and unfit to drink?”

“No, lord....”

“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.”

—AN 3:101

§ 22. “There’s the case, headman, where a certain teacher holds this doctrine, holds this view: ‘All those who take life are destined for the plane of deprivation, are destined for hell. All those who steal.... All those who indulge in illicit sex.... All those who tell lies are destined for the plane of deprivation, are destined for hell.’ A disciple has faith in that teacher, and the thought occurs to him, ‘Our teacher holds this doctrine, holds this view: “All those who take life are destined for the plane of deprivation, are destined for hell.” There are living beings that I have killed. I, too, am destined for the plane of deprivation, am destined for hell.’ He fastens onto that view. If he doesn’t abandon that doctrine, doesn’t abandon that state of mind, doesn’t relinquish that view, then as if he were to be carried off, he would thus be placed in hell.

“[The thought occurs to him,] ‘Our teacher holds this doctrine, holds this view: ‘All those who steal.... All those who indulge in illicit sex.... All those who tell lies are destined for the plane of deprivation, are destined for hell.’ There are lies that I have told. I, too, am destined for the plane of deprivation, am destined for hell.’ He fastens onto that view. If he doesn’t abandon that doctrine, doesn’t abandon that state of mind, doesn’t relinquish that view, then as if he were to be carried off, he would thus be placed in hell.

“There is the case, headman, where a Tathagata appears in the world, worthy & rightly self-awakened, consummate in clear knowing & conduct, well-gone, a knower of the cosmos, unexcelled trainer of those to be tamed, teacher of human & divine beings, awakened, blessed. He, in various ways, criticizes & censures

the taking of life, and says, 'Abstain from taking life.' He criticizes & censures stealing, and says, 'Abstain from stealing.' He criticizes & censures indulging in illicit sex, and says, 'Abstain from indulging in illicit sex.' He criticizes & censures the telling of lies, and says, 'Abstain from the telling of lies.'

"A disciple has faith in that teacher and reflects: 'The Blessed One in a variety of ways criticizes & censures the taking of life, and says, "Abstain from taking life."' There are living beings that I have killed, to a greater or lesser extent. That was not right. That was not good. But if I become remorseful for that reason, that evil deed of mine will not be undone.' So, reflecting thus, he abandons right then the taking of life, and in the future refrains from taking life. This is how there comes to be the abandoning of that evil deed. This is how there comes to be the transcending of that evil deed.

"[He reflects:] 'The Blessed One in a variety of ways criticizes & censures stealing... indulging in illicit sex... the telling of lies, and says, "Abstain from the telling of lies."' There are lies I have told, to a greater or lesser extent. That was not right. That was not good. But if I become remorseful for that reason, that evil deed of mine will not be undone.' So, reflecting thus, he abandons right then the telling of lies, and in the future refrains from telling lies. This is how there comes to be the abandoning of that evil deed. This is how there comes to be the transcending of that evil deed.

"Having abandoned the taking of life, he refrains from taking life... he refrains from stealing... he refrains from illicit sex... he refrains from lies... he refrains from divisive speech... he refrains from abusive speech... he refrains from idle chatter. Having abandoned covetousness, he becomes uncovetous. Having abandoned malevolence & anger, he becomes one with a mind of no malevolence. Having abandoned wrong views, he becomes one who has right views.

"That disciple of the noble ones, headman—thus devoid of covetousness, devoid of malevolence, unbewildered, alert, mindful—keeps pervading the first direction [the east] with an awareness imbued with good will, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. Thus above, below, & all around, everywhere, in its entirety, he keeps pervading the all-encompassing cosmos with an awareness imbued with good will—abundant, expansive, immeasurable, without hostility, without malevolence. Just as a strong conch-trumpet blower can notify the four directions without any difficulty, in the same way, when the release of awareness through good will is thus developed, thus pursued, any deed done to a limited extent no longer remains there, no longer stays there.

"That disciple of the noble ones... keeps pervading the first direction with an awareness imbued with compassion... empathetic joy... equanimity, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. Thus above, below, & all around, everywhere, in its entirety, he keeps pervading the all-encompassing cosmos with an awareness imbued with equanimity—abundant, expansive, immeasurable, without hostility, without malevolence. Just as a strong conch-trumpet blower can notify the four directions without any difficulty, in the same way, when the release of awareness through equanimity is thus developed, thus pursued, any deed done to a limited extent no longer remains there, no longer stays there."

Outline

- I. Misunderstandings about karma
- II. The Buddha's actual teaching on karma: psychology & metaphysics
- III. Where the Buddha arrived at his knowledge of karma
- IV. The uses of this knowledge: how & why to meditate
 - A. Lessons from karma as explained on the micro-level
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