MN 136 — Maha Kammavibhanga Sutta: The Great Exposition of Kamma

English translation by Ñanamoli Thera.

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Text

Introduction

by Bhikkhu Khantipalo

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

the evil-doer who goes to hell (or some other low state of birth), the evil-doer who goes to heaven, the good man who goes to heaven, and the good man who goes to hell (or other low birth).

The Buddha then shows how wrong views can arise from only partial understanding of truth. One can see the stages of this: (1) a mystic "sees" in vision an evil-doer suffering in hell, (2) this confirms what he had heard about moral causality, (3) so he says, "evil-doers always go to hell," and (4) dogma hardens and becomes rigid when he says (with the dogmatists of all ages and places), "Only this is true; anything else is wrong." The stages of this process are repeated for each of the four "persons," after which the Buddha proceeds to analyze these views grounded in partial experience and points out which portions are true (because verifiable by trial and experience) and which are dogmatic superstructure which is unjustified. Finally, the Buddha explains his Great Exposition of Kamma in which he shows that notions of invariability like "the evildoer goes to hell" are much too simple. The minds of people are complex and they make many different kinds of kamma even in one lifetime, some of which may influence the last moment when kamma is made before death, which in turn is the basis for the next life.

1. Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Rajagaha, in the Bamboo Grove, the Squirrels' Feeding Place. Now on that occasion the venerable Samiddhi was living in a forest hut.

Then the wanderer Potaliputta, walking and wandering for exercise, came to the venerable Samiddhi and exchanged greetings with him, and when the courteous and amiable talk was finished, he sat down at one side. When he had done so, he said to the venerable Samiddhi:

2. "I heard and learned this, friend Samiddhi, from the monk Gotama's lips: 'Bodily kammas are vain, verbal kammas are vain, only mental kammas are true.' But there is actually that attainment having entered upon which nothing (of result of kammas) is felt at all."

"Not so, friend Potaliputta, do not say thus, do not misrepresent the Blessed One; it is not good to misrepresent the Blessed One; the Blessed One would not say so: 'Bodily kammas are vain, verbal kammas are vain, only mental kammas are true.' And there is actually that attainment having entered upon which nothing (of result of kammas) is felt at all."

"How long is it since you went forth, friend Samiddhi?"

"Not long, friend, three years."

"There now, what shall we say to the elder bhikkhus, when the young bhikkhu fancies the Master is to be defended thus? After doing intentional kamma, friend Samiddhi, by way of body, speech or mind, what does one feel (of its result)?"

"After doing an intentional kamma, friend Potaliputta, by way of body, speech or mind, one feels suffering (as its result)."

Then neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the words of the venerable Samiddhi, the wanderer Potaliputta got up from his seat and went away.

3. Soon after the wanderer Potaliputta had gone, the venerable Samiddhi went to the venerable Ananda and exchanged greetings with him, and when the courteous and amiable talk was finished, he sat down at one side. When he had done so, he told the venerable Ananda all his conversation with the wanderer Potaliputta.

When this was said, the venerable Ananda told him: "Friend Samiddhi, this conversation should be told to the Blessed One. Come, let us go to the Blessed One, and having done so, let us tell him about this. As he answers, so we shall bear it in mind."

"Even so, friend," the venerable Samiddhi replied.

Then they went together to the Blessed One, and after paying homage to him, they sat down at one side. When they had done so, the venerable Ananda told the Blessed One all the venerable Samiddhi's conversation with the wanderer Potaliputta.

4. When this was said, the Blessed One told the venerable Ananda:

"I do not even know the wanderer by sight, Ananda. How could there have been such a conversation? The wanderer Potaliputta's question ought to have been answered after analyzing it, but this misguided man Samiddhi answered it without qualification.[1]

When this was said, the venerable Udayin said to the Blessed One: "'But, venerable sir, supposing when the venerable Samiddhi spoke, he was referring to this, namely, 'Whatever is felt is suffering.'"[2]

5. Then the Blessed One addressed the venerable Ananda: "See, Ananda, how this misguided man Udayin interferes. I knew, Ananda, that this misguided man Udayin would unreasonably interfere now. To begin with it was the three kinds of feeling that were asked about by the wanderer Potaliputta. If, when this misguided man Samiddhi was asked, he had answered the wanderer Potaliputta thus: 'After doing an intentional kamma by way of body, speech and mind (whose result is) to be felt as pleasure, he feels pleasure; after doing an intentional kamma by way of body, speech and mind (whose result is) to be felt as pain, he feels pain; after doing an intentional kamma by way of body, speech and mind (whose result is) to be felt as neither-pain-nor-pleasure, he feels neither-pain-nor-pleasure' — by answering him thus, Ananda, the misguided man Samiddhi would have given the wanderer Potaliputta the right answer. Besides, Ananda, who are the foolish thoughtless wanderers of other sects that they will understand the Tathagata's Great Exposition of Kamma? (But) if you, Ananda, would listen to the Tathagata expounding the Great Exposition of Kamma (you might understand it).[3]

"This is the time, Blessed One, this is the time, Sublime One, for the Blessed One to expound the Great Exposition of Kamma. Having heard it from the Blessed One, the bhikkhus will bear it in mind."

"Then listen, Ananda, and heed well what I shall say."

"Even so, venerable sir," the venerable Ananda replied. The Blessed One said this:

6. "Ananda, there are four kinds of persons existing in the world. What four?

(i) "Here some person kills living beings, takes what is not given, misconducts himself in sexual desires, speaks falsehood, speaks maliciously, speaks harshly, gossips, is covetous, is ill-willed, and has wrong view.[4] On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell.

(ii) "But here some person kills living beings... and has wrong view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, in the heavenly world.

(iii) "Here some person abstains from killing living beings, from taking what is not given, from misconduct in sexual desires, from false speech, from malicious speech, from harsh speech, from gossip, he is not covetous, is not ill-willed, and has right view.[5] On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, in the heavenly world.

(iv) "But here some person abstains from killing living beings... and has right view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell.

7. (i) "Here, Ananda, in consequence of ardor, endeavor, devotion, diligence, and right attention, some monk or brahman attains such concentration of mind that, when his mind is concentrated, he sees with the heavenly eyesight, which is purified and surpasses the human, that some person kills living beings here, takes what is not given, misconducts himself in sexual desires, speaks falsehood, speaks maliciously, speaks harshly, gossips, is covetous, is ill-willed, has wrong view. He sees that on the dissolution of the body, after death, he has reappeared in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell. He says: 'It seems that there are evil kammas and that there is the result of misconduct; for I have seen that a person killed living beings here... had wrong view. I have seen that on the dissolution of the body, after death, he had reappeared in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell.' He says: 'It seems that one who kills living beings... has wrong view, will always, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell. Those who know thus know rightly; those who know otherwise are mistaken in their knowledge.' So he obstinately misapprehends what he himself has known, seen and felt; insisting on that alone, he says: 'Only this is true, anything else is wrong.'

8. (ii) "But here in consequence of ardor, endeavor, devotion, diligence and right attention, some monk or brahman attains such concentration of mind that, when his mind is concentrated, he sees with the heavenly eyesight, which is purified and surpasses the human, that some person kills living beings here... has wrong view. He sees that on the dissolution of the body, after death, he has reappeared in a happy destination, in the heavenly world. He says: 'It seems there are no evil kammas, there is no result of misconduct. For I have seen that a person killed living beings here... had wrong view. I

have seen that on the dissolution of the body, after death, he has reappeared in a happy destination, in the heavenly world.' He says: 'It seems that one who kills living beings... has wrong view will always, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in a happy destination, in the heavenly world. Those who know thus know rightly; those who know otherwise are mistaken in their knowledge.' So he obstinately misapprehends what he himself has known, seen and felt; insisting on that alone, he says: 'Only this is true, anything else is wrong.'

9. (iii) "Here in consequence of ardor, endeavor, devotion, diligence and right attention, some monk or brahman attains such concentration of mind that, when his mind is concentrated, he sees with the heavenly eyesight, which is purified and surpasses the human, that some person abstains from killing living beings here... has right view. He sees that, on the dissolution of the body, after death, he has reappeared in a happy destination, in the heavenly world. He says: 'It seems that there are good kammas, there is result of good conduct. For I have seen that a person abstained from killing living beings here... had right view. I saw that on the dissolution of the body, after death, he had reappeared in a happy destination, in the heavenly world.' He says: 'It seems that one who abstains from killing living beings... has right view will always, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in a happy destination, in the heavenly world. Those who know thus know rightly; those who know otherwise are mistaken in their knowledge.' So he obstinately misapprehends what he himself has known, seen and felt; insisting on that alone, he says: 'Only this is true; anything else is wrong.'

10. (iv) "But here in consequence of ardor, endeavor, devotion, diligence and right attention, some monk or brahman attains such concentration of mind that, when his mind is concentrated, he sees with the heavenly eyesight, which is purified and surpasses the human, that some person abstains from killing living beings here... has right view. He sees that on the dissolution of the body, after death, he has reappeared in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell. He says: 'It seems that there are no good kammas, there is no result of good conduct. For I have seen that a person abstained from killing here... had right view. I saw that on the dissolution of the body, after death, he had reappeared in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell.' He says: 'It seems that one who abstains from killing living beings... has right view, will always, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell. Those who know thus know rightly; those who know otherwise are mistaken in their knowledge.' So he obstinately misapprehends what he himself has known, seen and felt; insisting on that alone, he says: 'Only this is true; anything else is wrong.'

11. (i) "Now, Ananda, when a monk or brahman says thus: 'It seems that there are evil kammas, there is the result of misconduct,' I concede that to him.

"When he says thus: 'For I have seen that some person killed living beings... had wrong view. I saw that on the dissolution of the body, after death, he had reappeared in states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell,' I concede that to him.

"When he says thus: 'It seems that one who kills living beings... has wrong view, will always, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell,' I do not concede that to him.

"When he says thus: 'Those who know thus know rightly; those who know otherwise are mistaken in their knowledge,' I do not concede that to him.

"When he obstinately misapprehends what he himself has known, seen and felt; and insisting on that alone, he says: 'Only this is true; anything else is wrong,' I do not concede that to him.

"Why is that? The Tathagata's knowledge of the Great Exposition of Kamma is different.

12. (ii) "Now when a monk or brahman says thus: 'It seems that there are no evil kammas, there is no result of misconduct,' I do not concede that to him.

"When he says thus: 'For I have seen that a person killed living beings... had wrong view. I saw that on the dissolution of the body, after death, he had reappeared in a happy destination, in the heavenly world,' I concede that to him.

"When he says thus: 'It seems that one who kills living beings... has wrong view, will always, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in a happy destination, in the heavenly world,' I do not concede that to him.

"When he says thus: 'Those who know thus know rightly; those who know otherwise are mistaken in their knowledge,' I do not concede that to him.

"When he obstinately misapprehends what he himself has known, seen and felt; and insisting on that alone, he says: 'Only this is true; anything else is wrong,' I do not concede that to him.

"Why is that? The Tathagata's knowledge of the Great Exposition of Kamma is different.

13. (iii) "Now when a monk or brahman says thus: 'It seems that there are good kammas, there is a result of good conduct,' I concede that to him.

"When he says thus: 'For I have seen that a person abstained from killing living beings here... had right view. I saw that on the dissolution of the body after death, he had reappeared in a happy destination, in the heavenly world,' I concede that to him.

"When he says: 'It seems that one who abstains from killing living beings... has right view will always, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in a happy destination, in the heavenly world,'[6] I do not concede that to him.

"When he says: 'Those who know thus know rightly; those who know otherwise are mistaken in their knowledge,' I do not concede that to him.

"When he obstinately misapprehends what he himself has known, seen, and felt; and insisting on that alone he says: 'Only this is true: anything else is wrong,' I do not concede that to him.

"Why is that? The Tathagata's knowledge of the Great Exposition of Kamma is different.

14. (iv) "Now when a monk or brahman says thus: 'It seems that there are no good kammas, there is no result of good conduct,' I do not concede that to him.

"When he says thus: "For I have seen that a person abstained from killing living beings here... had right view. I saw that on the dissolution of the body, after death, he had reappeared in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell," I concede that to him.

"When he says thus: 'One who abstains from killing living beings... has right view will always, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell,' I do not concede that to him.

"When he says thus: 'Those who know thus know rightly; those who know otherwise are mistaken in their knowledge,' I do not concede that to him.

"When he obstinately misapprehends what he himself has known, seen and felt; and insisting on that alone, he says: 'Only this is true; anything else is wrong,' I do not concede that to him.

"Why is that? The Tathagata's knowledge of the Great Exposition of Kamma is different.

The Great Exposition of Kamma

15. (i) "Now, Ananda, there is the person who has killed living beings here... has had wrong view. And on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell.[7] But (perhaps) the evil kamma producing his suffering was done by him earlier, or the evil kamma producing his suffering was done by him later, or wrong view was undertaken and completed by him at the time of his death.[8] And that was why, on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappeared in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell. But since he has killed living beings here... has had wrong view, he will feel the result of that here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.

16. (ii) "Now there is the person who has killed living beings here... has had wrong view. And on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, in the heavenly world.[9] But (perhaps) the good kamma producing his happiness was done by him earlier, or the good kamma producing his happiness was done by him later, or right view was undertaken and completed by him at the time of his death. And that was why, on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappeared in a happy destination, in the heavenly world. But since he has killed living beings here... has had wrong view, he will feel

the result of that here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.[10]

17. (iii) "Now there is the person who has abstained from killing living beings here... has had right view. And on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, in the heavenly world.[11] But (perhaps) the good kamma producing his happiness was done by him earlier, or the good kamma producing his happiness was done by him later, or right view was undertaken and completed by him at the time of his death. And that was why, on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappeared in a happy destination, in the heavenly world. But since he has abstained from killing living beings here... has had right view, he will feel the result of that here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.

18. (iv) "Now there is the person who has abstained from killing living beings here... has had right view. And on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell.[12] But (perhaps) the evil kamma producing his suffering was done by him earlier, or the evil kamma producing his suffering was done by him later, or wrong view was undertaken and completed by him at the time of his death. And that was why, on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappeared in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell. But since he has abstained from killing living beings here... has had right view, he will feel the result of that here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.[13]

19. "So, Ananda, there is kamma that is incapable (of good result) and appears incapable (of good result); there is kamma that is incapable (of good result) and appears capable (of good result); there is kamma that is capable (of good result) and appears capable (of good result); there is kamma that is capable (of good result) and appears incapable (of good result)."[14]

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

Notes

1.

These are two of the four ways of answering a question, the other two being: replying with a counter-question, and "setting aside" the question, i.e., replying with silence.

2.

This is a quotation from the Buddha's words: see Samyutta Nikaya, Vedana Samyutta, Rahogata-vagga Sutta 1.

3.

This is an addition necessary for understanding this sentence.

4.

These are the ten unwholesome courses of kamma.

5.

These are the ten wholesome courses of kamma.

6.

This amounts to the belief in theistic religions where virtue and faith (=whatever is held to be right view) are supposed to guarantee salvation.

7.

Devadatta, for instance, who persuaded prince Ajatasattu to murder his father (who was a stream-winner), three times attempted to murder the Buddha and once succeeded in wounding him, and caused a schism in the Sangha; the last two actions are certain to lead to birth in hell.

8.

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

9.

A good example of this is the story of "Coppertooth," the public executioner who, after a career of murder as a bandit, then as the killer of his own bandit comrades and subsequently executioner of all criminals for fifty years, was taught by venerable Sariputta Thera and his mind eased of the heavy weight of evil kamma so that he attained heavenly rebirth. See Dhammapada Commentary, ii, 203-209.

10.

Though such a person attained a heavenly rebirth the evil kamma made will still mature sooner or later; he has not escaped its results.

11.

King Pasenadi of Kosala, for instance.

12.

This was what happened to Queen Mallika, wife of King Pasenadi, who had led a good life, generous, keeping the Five Precepts, and the Eight Precepts on Uposatha days and so on, but once she did evil, having sexual relations with a dog. This unconfessed evil weighed heavily on her mind and she remembered it when dying. As a result she spent seven days in hell. Her power of goodness from the doing of many good kammas then gave her rebirth in a heavenly world. See Dhammapada Commentary, iii, 119-123.

13.

Though this virtuous and good person has obtained a low rebirth through the power of previously done evil kamma, still the good kamma made by him will mature sooner or later, when it gets a chance.

14.

This final terse paragraph may have been clear to the venerable Ananda Thera, or he may have asked for an explanation, as we require and find in the Commentary, which says:

i. A strong unwholesome kamma (incapable of good result), the result of which will come before the results of weaker unwholesome kammas.

ii. Wholesome kamma (which appears capable of good result) is followed by unwholesome death-proximate kamma which makes the former incapable of good result immediately.

iii. A strong wholesome kamma will mature even before much accumulated unwholesome kamma.

iv. Unwholesome kamma (which appears incapable of good result) is followed by wholesome death-proximate kamma which will mature first and is capable of good results.