

VEDANĀNUPASSANĀ: ON THE MANAGEMENT
OF KAMMA*

The Āṅguttaranikāya¹ defines kamma as intention (cetanāham bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi), as it is intention that is translated into action through body, speech and mind (cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti kāyena vācāya manasā). Saṅkappa is another word for intention, and it is noteworthy that intentions and thoughts are said to converge in sensations/feelings saṅkappavitakkā vedanāsamōsaranā². The commentary explains: Saṅkappavitakkā ti saṅkappābhūtā vitakkā, that is, saṅkappavitakkā means thoughts which have become intentions. In fact all mental phenomena are said to get translated into sensations: sabbe dhammā vedanāsamōsaranā³. The commentary explains sabbe dhammā as pañcakkhandhā, the five⁵ aggregates, namely the psycho-physical unit that forms man. Then it comes to mean that the five aggregates converge in sensations. The entire human personality is alive with sensations; without them man would be a mere vegetable. Hence the vital importance of sensations for understanding the nature of human life.

* All references to Pali texts in this article are to the Pali Text Society, London, editions thereof, and are abbreviated as follows:

<u>A</u>	-	<u>Āṅguttaranikāya</u>
<u>AA</u>	-	<u>Āṅguttaranikāya Atthakathā</u>
<u>M</u>	-	<u>Majjhimanikāya</u>
<u>S</u>	-	<u>Samyuttanikāya</u>
<u>Sn</u>	-	<u>Suttanipāta</u>
<u>Sn A</u>	-	<u>Suttanipāta Atthakathā</u>

¹ A. iv. 415.

² A. iv. 385.

³ AA. iv. 175.

⁴ A. iv. 339.

⁵ AA. iv. 158.

According to the Nidānasamyutta the entire body is a physical manifestation of ancient kamma.⁶ It says: The body is neither yours nor anybody else's; it is the appearance of former kamma, compounded, willed and made sensitive (nāyaṃ kāyo tumhākaṃ na pi aññesaṃ, purāṇaṃ idaṃ kammaṃ, abhisankhataṃ abhisañcetaṃ vedaniyaṃ datthabbaṃ). The Salāyatanasamyutta maintains that the sense faculties are fabricated by ancient kamma (cakkhūṃ purāṇakammaṃ abhisankhataṃ abhisañcetaṃ vedaniyaṃ datthabbaṃ etc.).⁷ We get a body with its particular strengths, weaknesses and predispositions because it is so fabricated by our past kammic energies, which gave it conception. Similarly the sensitivity and the potentialities of our sense faculties are determined by our previous kamma. It appears that we receive a genetic heritage which is consonant with our kammic heritage. It is repeatedly said in the canon that beings own their kamma, they are heirs to their kamma, kamma is their matrix, kamma is their relation, kamma is their refuge, kamma divides beings into high and low (kamassakā sattā kammaḍāyādā kammayonī kammabandhū kammaṇṇasāraṇā kammaṃ satte vibhajati yad idaṃ hinappanitatāyāti). Kamma seems to choose, out of millions of possibilities, a particular genetic pattern through which it could best express its energies. Therefore it is possible to conclude that kammic energy is transformed into sentient matter which gives rise to appropriate sensations.

Just as there are ancient (purāṇa) kamma, there are new (nava) kamma as well.¹⁰ The new kammas are the intentional physical, verbal and mental actions that we perform at

⁶ S. ii. 65.

⁷ loc.cit.

⁸ S. iv. 132.

⁹ For example M. iii. 203; A. iii. 72 = 186 = v. 88.

¹⁰ S. loc.cit.

present, here and now. It is important to note the saying that kamma does not get destroyed na hi nassati kassaci kammam).¹¹ This is because kamma builds up sentient matter continuously. The process of building sentient matter, started at conception by ancient kamma, is kept up by new kamma. This, in other words, is the conversion of mental energy into physical sentient matter.

kamma gets expiated by giving rise to vipāka: so ... na tāva kālaṃ karoti yāva na taṃ pāpakammam vyanti hoti).¹² Vipāka is but the experience of appropriate pleasant or painful sensations (so tattha dukkhā tippā kaṭukā vedanā vedeti etc). There are different types of kamma, which have to be experienced in different spheres.¹³ There are kammās which have to be experienced in a state of woe (nirayavedaniyam), in the animal kingdom (tiracchāṇayonivedaniyam)¹ in the peta world (pittivisayavedaniyam), in the human world (manussalokavedaniyam), and in the celestial world (devalokavedaniyam). But if in the process of experiencing vipāka, i.e. resultant pleasant or painful sensations, one reacts with greed, hatred or delusion, one produces more and more kamma, which gets transformed into sentient matter, which in turn generates more and more resultant sensations. Thus a vicious circle is established. This is the cyclic process of samsāra.

If one wishes to break through this cyclic process, one has to bring about the destruction of kamma (kammakkhaya). This can be done by destroying greed, hatred and delusion, as they are said to be the origins of kamma (lobho/doso/moho karmanidānasambhavo). Lobhakkhayā/dosakkhayā/mohokkhayā kamma-

¹¹ Sn. 666.

¹² A. i. 141; see also M. iii. 183.

¹³ A. iii. 415.

nidānasāṅkhayo).¹⁴ According to the Kukkuravatikasutta there are kammas which are neither black nor white, and which produce results which are neither black nor white.¹⁵ Such kamma is said to be conducive to the elimination of kamma (atthi kammaṃ akanhaṃ asukkaṃ akanha-m-asukkavipakaṃ kammaṃ kammakkhayaṃ samvattati). These are the kammas which are neither evil nor meritorious. This type of kamma is explained as the intention (cetanā) one has to eliminate evil, meritorious and mixed kamma, which give respective results.

Now, the question that arises is how this intention can be translated into effective action. According to the Āṅguttaranikāya¹⁶ one should observe moral habits (silavā hoti pātimokkha saṅvarasamvuto....), not accumulate new kamma and expel old kamma by experiencing them. This is annihilation of kamma here and now, immediately verifiable and leading to higher spirituality; this has to be individually realised by the wise (navañ ca kammaṃ na karoti purāṇañ ca kammaṃ phussa phussa vyantikaroti sanditthikā nijjarā akālikā ehipassikā opanayikā paccattaṃ veditabbā viññūhi). The most important phrase here which has need to be clarified is phussa phussa vyantikaroti, i.e. "one destroys (old kamma) by experiencing (them)."

The process of destroying kamma is explained more lucidly in the following verses of the Dvayatānupassanāsutta:¹⁷

Sukhaṃ vā yadi vā dukkhaṃ adukka-m-asukhaṃ sahā
ajjhattañ ca bahiddhā ca yaṃ kiñci atthi veditaṃ
Etaṃ dukkhaṃ ti ñatvāna mosaddhammaṃ palokinaṃ
phussa phussa vayaṃ passaṃ evaṃ tattha virajjati
vedanānaṃ khayā bhikkhu nicchāto parinibbuto ti.

¹⁴ A. v. 262.

¹⁵ M. 1. 391 and A. 11. 232

¹⁶ 1. 221.

¹⁷ Sn. 738-739.

(Whatever sensations one has, pleasant, painful or neutral, internal or external, one should know all that to be full of suffering, deceitful and disintegrating. Continuously experience them, seeing them passing away. Thus one gets detached, with reference to them. With the destruction of sensations a monk becomes hungerless (greedless) and attains the peace of nibbāna.)

The commentary on this verse¹⁸ sheds much light on the practical aspect of the exercise when it says: phussa phussāti udayavyayanānaena phusitvā, i.e. "phussa phussa means repeatedly experiencing with the knowledge of the arising and passing away (of sensations)"; Vayaṃ passaṃ ti ante bhāṅgaṃ eva passanto, i.e. "vayaṃ passaṃ means seeing the disintegration at the end;" and Vedanānaṃ khayā ti tato paraṃ maggañānaena kammaṣaṃpayuttānaṃ vedanānaṃ khayā, i.e. "Vedanānaṃ khayā means by the destruction of sensations which are connected with kamma, with the help of path-knowledge thereafter."

When we consider the practical aspect of phussa phussa vayaṃ passaṃ we cannot help but notice that the phrase refers to vedanānupassanā. According to the Satipaṭṭhānasutta¹⁹ one has to be aware of the various sensations as they arise in the body. One has to observe the arising of the sensations (samudayaḍhamānupassī), and their passing away (vayaḍhamānupassī). This is what is called being aware of sensations without reacting to them.

Generally we revel in pleasant sensations as lust underlies pleasant sensations (sukkhāya vedanāya rāgaṇusayo anuseti).²⁰ We revolt against painful sensations as aversion underlies unpleasant sensations (dukkhāya vedanāya paṭighāṇusayo anuseti).²¹ We are unaware of neutral

¹⁸ In Sn.A. 416.

¹⁹ M. 1. 59.

²⁰ M. 1. 303.

²¹ M. loc.cit.

sensations as ignorance underlies neutral sensations (adukkham-asukhāya vedānāya avijjānusayo ānuseti).²²

Thus our normal habit is to react to the various sensations with greed, hatred and delusion. When we so react kamma is built up, as discussed above. But if with vedānānupassanā we observe the arising and passing away of sensations without reacting to them, then old kamma is destroyed, and new kamma does not accumulate.

We saw above that kamma is translated into sentient matter, which in turn gives rise to appropriate sensations. This is bhava-cakka at work, the wheel of becoming. Vedānānupassanā is the reverse process, the Dhammacakka set in motion within the framework of the individual. When one sees sensations with mindfulness (sati) as they come up, they get destroyed without giving rise to kamma. This is what is meant by phussa phussa vyatikaroti. This is how mindfulness acts as a psychological laser beam, as it were, to destroy kamma which do not otherwise get destroyed without giving rise to vipāka; for, it is said that kamma does not get destroyed na hi nassati kassaci kammam).²³ This is the art of experiencing sensations without being attached (so sukham/dukkham/adukkham-asukham ce vedanam vediyati visannutto nam vediyati).²⁴ A monk who destroys sensations thus attains the peace of nibbāna (vedanānam khayā bhikkhu nicchāto parinibbuto).²⁵

It has to be emphasised that vedanānam khayā does not mean the destruction of all sensations. According to the Vedanāsam-yutta²⁶ there are eight types of sensations. Four types are due to disturbances caused by bodily humours such as bile (pitta), phlegm (semha), wind (vāta) and a combination of

22 M. loc.cit.

23 Sn. 666.

24 S. iv. 209.

25 Sn. 739.

26 S. iv. 230.

them (ṣannipātika). The fifth type is caused by climatic changes (utuparināmaja). The sixth type is caused by using disagreeable things together (visamaparihāraja), such as combinations of foods which may prove to be poisonous. The seventh type is caused by injuries and attacks from outside (opakkamika). The eighth type is generated by kamma as retribution (kammavipākajāni vedayitāni). Of these eight types it is only the last named that is destroyed by vedanānupassanā. The other seven types of sensations continue to function.

It does not seem to be required that all kamma should be eradicated completely for the attainment of arahantship. That there may remain a certain fraction of kamma can be assumed from the canonical episode of Aṅgulimāla. Aṅgulimāla, who committed many a murder, during that same lifetime is said to have suffered being accidentally hit by stones and sticks, though they were not aimed at him, even after he became an arahant. Sometimes he used to come from his alms-round with head-injuries and torn robes. The Buddha admonished him to bear with these sufferings as this is the present experience of evil done, for which he may have had to suffer long in a state of woe, had he not attained arahantship.

It may be presumed that when kammic energy is sufficiently destroyed with vedanānupassanā so that it cannot give rise to another birth, the knowledge must be arising that there is no more birth (...ayam antimā jāti, natthi 'dāni punabbhavo ti;²⁸ Khīṇā jāti ... nāparaṃ itthattāyāti).²⁹ This is the most important assurance of the liberative experience. There is no reference to kammakkhaya in any of the formulae expressing arahantship. But it is noteworthy that even elsewhere there is very little reference to kammakkhaya,³⁰

²⁷ M. 1. 104.

²⁸ M. 1. 167.

²⁹ M. i. 23; also i. 38.

³⁰ See for example A. ii. 232 and M. 1. 391.

whereas rāgakkhaya/lobhakkhaya, dosakkhaya and mohakkhaya find frequent mention in the texts. The few instances where kammakkhaya does occur it mostly describes the doctrine of Nigantha Nātaputta, who attempted to make an end of suffering (dukkhakkhaya)³¹ through the destruction of kamma (kammakkhaya). But kamma cannot be recognised or verified, therefore the Buddha asks Jaina disciples whether they know that they have done evil kamma in the past, and whether they know that so much suffering has been eliminated by their practice of penance and so much suffering has yet to be eliminated. They know none of these. Therefore the Buddha admonishes his disciples to eliminate, not kamma, but evil mental states such as greed, hatred and delusion, which are observable and verifiable, as they give rise to kamma.

One very effective method of doing so is the exercise of vedanānupassanā. When this exercise is practised for some time, the disciple himself begins to notice that his negative mental states are on the wane. This has a debilitating effect on kamma, and it can be concluded that vedanānupassanā is an extremely effective method of bringing about the destruction of kamma.

As there is a close relationship between kamma and saṅkhāra, the latter being used as a more precise technical term having psychological connotations, the living vipassanā tradition maintains that deep-seated saṅkhāras come to the surface and are eliminated when one continues to practise vedanānupassanā. The Dvayatānupassanā sutta³² expresses the same idea when it says saṅkhāraṇaṃ nirodhena natthi dukkhassa sambhavo, i.e. "With the cessation of volitional activities there is no arising of suffering".

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³¹ M. 1. 93.

³² Sn. 731.