

## V

## LAW OF KAMMA

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## 1. The Five Universal Laws

In Buddhism, there are 5 universal orders or laws (*Niyamas*) that operate in the physical and mental realms. They are:

- a) **Utu Niyama:** the **caloric** or physical inorganic order, e.g., seasonal changes of weather, nature of heat, energy, chemical reactions, etc.
- b) **Bija Niyama:** **germinal** or physical organic order, e.g., rice from rice seeds, sweet taste of sugar, different ways of plant propagation, etc.
- c) **Kamma Niyama:** **moral** or cause and effect order. Moral and immoral acts produce desirable and undesirable results.
- d) **Citta Niyama:** order of mind or **psychic** law, e.g., processes of consciousness, power of mind, telepathy, mind reading, recollection of past lives, divine eye, psychic power, etc.
- e) **Dhamma Niyama:** order of the **norm**, e.g., the natural phenomena occurring at the advent of a *Bodhisatta* in his last birth, gravitation and other similar laws of nature.

Every mental and physical phenomenon can be explained by these all-embracing 5 orders that are laws in themselves. *Kamma* as such is only one of these 5 orders that demand no giver, nor enforcer, as is the case with all natural laws.

2. The Importance of Understanding the Law of *Kamma*

The **Law of *Kamma*** is a fundamental doctrine in Buddhism. Although this belief was prevalent in India before the advent of the Buddha, it was the Buddha who explained and formulated this doctrine in its complete form, which we have today.

Puzzled by the seemingly inexplicable, apparent disparity that existed among humanity, the young **Brahmin Subha** approached the Buddha and asked him to explain the reason for the **cause of inequality**: "What is the cause and condition why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior? For people are seen to be short-lived and long-lived, sickly and healthy, ugly and beautiful, influential and influential, poor and wealthy, lowborn and highborn, stupid and wise."

#### The Buddha's reply was:

"All living beings are **owners** of their actions (*kammasaka*), **heirs** of their actions (*kammadayada*); they **originate** from their actions (*kammayoni*), are **related** to their actions (*kammabandhu*), have their actions as their **refuge** (*kammapatisarana*). It is action (*kamma*) that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior." (*Majjhima Nikaya Sutta* No. 135, *Culakammavibhanga Sutta*)

The **Expositor** (p 87), a commentary of the *Abhidhamma* elaborates: "Depending on the **difference in kamma** appear the differences in the destiny of being without legs, with two legs, four legs, many legs, with perception, without perception, with neither perception nor non-perception. Depending on the difference in *kamma* appear the differences in the **birth** of beings, high and low, base and exalted, happy and miserable. Depending on the difference in *kamma* appears the difference in the **individual features** of beings as beautiful and ugly, highborn or lowborn, well built or deformed. Depending on the difference in *kamma* appears the difference in **worldly conditions** of beings, such as gain and loss, fame and disgrace, blame and praise, happiness and misery."

Thus, from the Buddhist standpoint, our present mental, moral intellectual and temperamental differences are, for the most part, due to our own actions and tendencies, both **past and present**. Although Buddhism attributes this variation to *kamma*, as being the chief cause among a variety, it does not, however, assert that everything is due to *kamma*. The Law of *Kamma*, important as it is, is only one of the twenty-four conditions described in the *Pathhana* or Conditional Relations, one of the treatises in the *Abhidhamma*.

### 3. What is Kamma?

The Pali term *kamma* (Sanskrit: *karma*) literally means action or doing. Any kind of **volitional or intentional action** whether mental, verbal or physical is regarded as *kamma*. It covers all that is included in the phrase: '**thought, word or deed**'. Generally speaking, all good and bad actions constitute *kamma*. In its ultimate sense, *kamma* means all **moral and immoral volition** (*kusala- akusala cetana*).

In *Anguttara iii, 415*, the Buddha says: "I declare, O Bhikkhus, that *cetana* (volition) is *kamma*. Having willed one acts by body, speech, and thought." (Refer to **Note 1** for an explanation of *cetana*).

Involuntary, unintentional or unconscious actions, though technically deeds, do not constitute *kamma*, because volition, the most important factor in determining *kamma*, is absent. Without volition, a **deed is sterile**; it produces no reaction of moral significance. *Kamma* is not fate nor is it predestination, imposed on us by some mysterious unknown power controlling our lives. It is one's own doing that reacts on one's own self, and so it is possible to divert the course of our *kamma* to some extent. How far one diverts it will depend on one-self. So we have a certain amount of free will. The past influences the present but does not dominate it for *kamma* is both **past and present deeds**.

### 4. How does the Law of Kamma Operate?

*Kamma* is action and *vipaka*, fruit or result is its reaction. *Kamma* is the cause and *vipaka* is the effect. According to the Law of *Kamma*, every volitional activity is accompanied by its due effect.

The *Samyutta Nikaya I, 227* states:

*According to the seed that's sown, so is the fruit ye reap therefrom. Doer of good will gather good, Doer of evil, evil reaps. Sown is the seed, and thou shall taste the fruit thereof.*

*Kamma* is a law in itself that operates in its own field without the intervention of an external independent ruling agency. The Law of *Kamma* acts in the following manner.

- a) All immoral actions give immoral resultants. There are ten immoral actions, namely: bodily action of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct; verbal action of lying, slandering, harsh speech, frivolous chatter; mental action of greed, ill-will and delusion.
- b) All moral actions give moral resultants. Abstention of the ten immoral actions listed above, constitute moral action. In addition there are also ten bases of meritorious action, namely: charity, morality, mind culture, reverence, service, transference of merits, rejoicing in others' merits, teaching the *Dhamma*, listening to the *Dhamma* and forming right views. (Chapter XI)
- c) A person does moral/immoral actions and he gets moral/immoral resultants. It is not possible for one person to perform moral/immoral actions and another person to receive the moral/immoral results.
- d) In judging each moral or immoral action, we consider these four 'fields of *kamma*', namely: 1) as one's own act, 2) as instigating another, 3) as consenting to another's instigation, and 4) as commending the act.

### 5. What is the Cause of *Kamma*?

Ignorance (*avijja*) or 'not knowing things as they truly are' is the chief cause of *kamma*. "Dependent on Ignorance arise Volitional Activities (*sankhara*)" states the Buddha in *Paticca Samuppada* or Dependent Origination. Associated with ignorance is its ally **craving** (*tanha*), another root cause of *kamma*. Unwholesome actions are conditioned by these two causes.

All good deeds of a world-ling, though associated with the three wholesome roots of generosity, loving-kindness and knowledge are nevertheless regarded as *kamma* because the two unwholesome roots of ignorance and craving are dormant in them. No *kamma* is accumulated by one who has eradicated craving and has understood 'things as they truly are'.

Buddhas and *Arahants* do not accumulate fresh *kamma* as they have eradicated ignorance and craving, the root causes of *kamma*. "They have destroyed the germ, their desires no longer grow." (*Te khina bija, avirulhicchanda*. – Stanza 14, *Ratana Sutta*). Although volition is present whenever there is bodily, verbal or mental action, in the case of an *Arahant*, that volition is not accompanied by craving at the end of each impulsive moment, and it completely disappears without leaving any trace and without transforming it into *kamma*. Hence there is no rebirth for the *Arahant*. However, they will still receive the results of their past *kamma*.

### 6. Who is the Doer of *Kamma*? Who Reaps the *Vipaka*?

The answer is given in the *Visuddhi Magga* (Path of Purification).

"No doer is there who does the deed.  
Nor is there one who feels the fruit."

According to Buddhism, there are two types of truth – conventional truth and absolute truth. For conventional purposes, we use such terms as man, woman, animal, being, self and so forth. In reality, there is no unchanging entity or any being in the form of a man, woman, animal or anything permanent that can be called a self. The so-called fleeting form consists only of **mental and material processes** that are **constantly changing**, not remaining the same for two consecutive moments. This so-called being is a combination of five Aggregates (*khandas*) that are the aggregates of Matter, Feeling, Perception, Mental Formations and Consciousness. There is no doer apart from the action, no thinker apart from the thought. Who then is the doer of *kamma*? Who feels the effect?

*Volition or intention (cetana) is itself the doer.  
Feeling (vedana) feels the fruit or effect.*

Apart from these mental processes, there is none to sow and none to reap. So *kamma* is not an accretion of the self or soul since there is no permanent self or soul to begin with.

### 7. Where is all the Kamma Stored?

An action (*kamma*) once performed, is finished as far as its performance is concerned. It is also irreversible. What remains of the action is its **potential**, the inevitability of its result (*vipaka*). Even within a lifetime, a person has performed a lot of actions, either moral or immoral. So he must have accumulated a lot *kamma*. Where is all this *kamma* stored? In answer to this question by King Milinda, the Ven. Nagasena replied:

*"Kamma is not stored somewhere in this fleeting consciousness nor in any part of the body. But dependent on mind and body, it rests, manifesting itself at the opportune moment, just as mangoes are not said to be stored somewhere in the mango tree, but dependent on the mango tree they lie, springing up in due season".*

In the same way, fire is not stored in a match but under the right conditions of friction, the match will produce fire. *Kamma* is an individual potential that is transmitted from one existence to another.

### 8. Classification of Kamma

*Kamma* is classified four-fold according to its function, priority of effect, time of taking effect and the plane where the effects take place.

#### a) **Function**

There are four classes of *kamma* according to function. Every birth is conditioned by past good or bad *kamma*, which predominates at the moment of death. The *kamma* that conditions future birth is called **Reproductive kamma**. Now another *kamma* may intervene to assist and maintain or to weaken and obstruct the fruition of the Reproductive *kamma*. Such actions are called **Supportive or Obstructive kamma** respectively.

According to the Law of *Kamma*, the potential energy of the Reproductive *kamma* may be totally annulled by a more powerful opposing past *kamma*, which seeking an opportunity may quite unexpectedly operate, just as a counteractive force can obstruct the path of a flying arrow and bring it to the ground. Such an action is called **Destructive kamma**, which is more powerful than the other two in that it not only obstructs but also destroys the whole force.

#### b) **Priority of Effect**

First is **Garuka or Weighty kamma**, which produces its effect in this life or the next for certain. Among the weighty or serious actions, the moral ones are the *Jhanas* or Mental Absorptions while the immoral ones are the five immediately effective heinous crimes, namely: matricide, patricide, murder of an *Arahant*, wounding of a Buddha and creating a schism in the *Sangha* or Monastic Order.

In the absence of a Weighty *kamma* to condition the next birth, a **Death Proximate kamma** may operate. This is the action one does or recollects immediately before the dying moment. Owing to its significance in determining the future birth, the custom of reminding the dying person of his good deeds and making him perform wholesome actions still prevails in Buddhist countries.

**Habitual kamma** is next in priority of effect. It is the action one constantly performs and recollects and which one has great liking.

The last is Cumulative kamma that embraces all that cannot be included in the above three. This is, as it were, the reserve fund of a particular being.

c) Time of Taking Effect

There are moral and immoral actions that produce their effects in this very life or in a subsequent life or in any life in the course of one's wandering in *Samsara*. These actions are Immediately Effective, Subsequently Effective and Indefinitely Effective kamma. When such actions that should produce their effects in this life or subsequent lives do not operate, they are termed Ineffective.

d) Plane where Effects Take Place

The last classification is according to the plane in which the effects take place, namely:

- i) Immoral actions that ripen in the Sensual Plane (*Kamaloka*) of misery, namely: hell, animal, ghost and demon realms.
- ii) Moral actions that ripen in the Sensual Plane (*Kamaloka*) of happiness, namely the human and the six celestial realms. In *Abhidhamma*, they are the eight types of wholesome consciousness (*sobhana citta*) pertaining to the Sensual Sphere. (Refer to Chapter XI, 2)
- iii) Moral actions that ripen in the Form Plane (*Rupaloka*) of *Brahmas* with form. They are the *rupa-jhanas*, namely: the first, second, third and fourth *jhana*.
- iv) Moral actions that ripen in the Formless Plane (*Arupaloka*) of *Brahmas* possessing mind only but without form. They are the *arupa-jhanas*, namely: Realm of Infinite Space, Realm of Infinite Consciousness, Realm of Nothingness, and Realm of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception.

## 9. Is One Bound to Reap All That One Has Sown in Just Proportion?

While the Law of *Kamma* states that we reap what we sow, there is another aspect of *kamma* that is also very important, namely, that *kamma*-results can be modified. This means that the Law of *Kamma* does not operate with mechanical rigidity but allows for modifications in the ripening of the fruit. It is this dynamic aspect of *kamma* that the Buddha declared in *Anguttarra I*, 249 as follows:

*"If anyone says that a man must reap everything according to his deeds, in this case there is no religious life, nor is there an opportunity afforded for the entire extinction of sorrow"*.

*"But if anyone says that what a man reaps accords with his deeds, in that case there is a religious life, and an opportunity is afforded for the entire extinction of sorrow"*.

These statements by the Buddha tell us that *kamma* is not fate or predestination. Nor is one bound to reap all that one has sown in just proportion. We can explain this by the simile of the billiard ball, whose direction can be changed or even stopped by sending another billiard ball to hit it at an appropriate angle. Like any physical event, the mental process constituting a *kammic* action does not exist in isolation. Thus its efficacy in producing a result depends not only on its own potential but also upon the potential of other *kammās*. We see for example, that a particular *kamma* either moral, or immoral, may sometimes have its result strengthened by supportive *kamma*, weakened by obstructive *kamma*, or even annulled by destructive *kamma*. The occurrence of the result can also be delayed if the condition for ripening is not complete; and that delay may again give chance for obstructive or destructive *kamma* to operate.

Besides external conditions, the spiritual quality of the mind from which the volition arises can affect the results. To one rich in moral or spiritual qualities, a single offence may not entail the weighty results the same offence will have for one who is poor in such protective virtues. The Buddha compares this with the taste of water

from a cup wherein a lump of salt has been added against the taste of water from the Ganges River in which the same lump of salt has been thrown in. Thus although Angulimala killed many people before he met the Buddha, and his action would have landed him in the woeful states in future existences, his attainment of *Arahantship* effectively closed the door to future rebirth and suffering, although he would still have to bear the dire consequences while he lived.

So complicated is the web of *kammic* conditioning that the Buddha declared *kamma*-result to be one of the “**four unthinkables**”, that are beyond the range of thought and should not be speculated upon. But though the working of *kamma* is beyond our intellect, the important practical message is clear: the fact that ***kamma*-results are modifiable** frees man from the shackles of predestination and fatalism and keeps the road to liberation constantly open before him. Everyone has a certain amount of **free will** to mould one’s life or modify one’s actions. Even the most vicious person can become a virtuous person if he wants to change his life and makes the effort to do so. However, everything in this world, including man himself is subject to conditions and without the necessary conditions, nothing can arise.

## 10. Lessons Learnt from Kamma

The *kamma* doctrine of the Buddha is a teaching of moral and spiritual responsibility for oneself and others. The more we understand the Law of *Kamma*, the more we realize how careful we must act in thought, speech and deeds if we wish to accumulate wholesome *kamma*. For when a certain thought, speech or deed is performed regularly, there is a definite tendency to repeat the act. Thus each act, mental or physical tends to produce its like and be in turn produced, a condition called ***asevana* or habitual recurrence**. Wholesome actions performed regularly tend to increase the tendencies to goodness while unwholesome actions performed regularly tend to do the opposite. The advice given by the Buddha in the *Dhammapada* sums up the lessons to learnt from *kamma*.

Do not disregard evil lightly, saying: “It will not come nigh unto me”; by the falling of drops even a water jar is filled; likewise the fool, gathering little by little, fills himself with evil. (Verse 121)

Do not disregard merit, saying: “It will not come nigh unto me”; by the falling of drops even a water jar is filled; likewise the wise man, gathering little by little, fills himself with good. (Verse 122)

According to Venerable Ledi Sayadaw, by the declaration: “All living beings are **owners** of their actions, **heirs** of their actions; they **originate** from their actions, are **related** to their actions, have their actions as their **refuge**”, the Buddha also meant that the wholesome and unwholesome actions performed once by a being during his lifetime, may ripen even after a lapse of thousands of existences or world cycles. The wholesome *kammās* that yield good results and unwholesome *kammās* that yield bad results always **accompany** the life-continuum of a being. Therefore one should always love and **esteem good conduct** more than one’s own life by performing meritorious actions. On the other hand one should always **shun evil conduct** more than the danger of death and refrain from evil deeds.

## 11. References

- 1) The Buddhist Doctrine of *Kamma* and Rebirth by Venerable Narada Maha Thera. Reprinted by Selangor Buddhist Vipassana Meditation Society, Petaling Jaya Malaysia, 1994.
- 2) What *Kamma* Is. Sayadaw U Thittila, Department of Religious Affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1992.
- 3) The Expositor (*Attihasalini*) – Buddhaghosa’s Commentary on the *Dhammasangani*. Translated by Pe Maung Tin and Mrs. Rhys Davids, Pali Texts Society, London 1976.
- 4) The Manual of Right Views in the Manuals of Buddhism by Mahathera Ledi Sayadaw, *Aggamahapandita*, D. Litt. Translated into English by the Editors of the Light of the Dhamma, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Yangon, Myanmar.

## 12. Explanatory Notes

**Note 1:** There are fifty kinds of concomitants in *Sankharakkhandha* (Group of mental formations), and the relation between *cetana* and the remaining forty-nine concomitants may be explained by the following example: Suppose in a harbour there are forty-nine barges fully loaded with goods, and there is only one big steamer, which has to tow these forty-nine barges from one riverine port to another. Now the spectators on the bank of the river may say: "This steamer has towed such and such a barge and gone to the mid-stream and will call at such and such a port." Similarly, *cetana* sometimes drags *lobha* out and unflinching drives it towards the object of greed. Sometimes it drags *dosa* out and unflinching drives it towards the object of hatred. The cases of the remaining forty-nine concomitants of *Sankharakkhandha* may be considered likewise."

*Cetana* is also compared to a class monitor or a general. A class monitor prepares and studies his lessons and at the same time causes the junior pupils to prepare their lessons and study them. A general also fights the battle himself and causes his soldiers to fight simultaneously.

In his *Ahara Dipani* (Manual of Nutriment) Venerable Mahathera Ledi Sayadaw elaborately expounded the **immense power of *cetana*** as follows: "The *dhamma* which **incessantly urges or causes** the mind and its associate concomitants to become restless and chase various kinds of objects is called *cetana*. Try to discern that mind is restless and ever fleeting. When one encounters an object of *lobha* (greed), it is *cetana*, which drags that *lobha* out and invariably directs it towards the object of greed. It also urges or causes one to enjoy sensuous pleasures. Similar processes take place in the cases of *dosa* (hatred) and *moha* (delusion)."

"Worldlings naturally possess very little *cetana* in respect of *saddha* (faith), *panna* (wisdom), *dana* (alms-giving), *sila* (morality), and *bhavana* (mental concentration). As regards them it urges, drives or causes the mind in a weak manner and not very quickly. There has to be a lot of external means or support, such as reflecting on the dangers of arising in hells to arouse urgency or *samvega*, and of the advantages of performing wholesome volitional actions for *cetana* to urge or drive the mind towards them, because mind delights in evil (*Dhammapada* 116). When *cetana* has to cause a person to go to a place where he desires to go very much, it acts very quickly; but if it has to cause him to go to a place where he does not like to go, it acts very slowly."

## VI

# DEATH AND REBIRTH

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### 1. Difference between Rebirth and Reincarnation

All religions believe in an after-life. However the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth should be differentiated from the transmigrating and reincarnation of other systems, because Buddhism denies the existence of a transmigrating permanent soul, created by a God or emanating from a *Paramatma* (Supreme or Universal Soul).

Buddhism does not believe in any sort of transmigration. There is nothing that comes out of one body and enters another. Events take place according to the Law of Dependent Origination or *Paticca Samuppada*. Everything comes into existence depending on an instance previous to it and everything must also give rise to an instance, depending on itself.

In the *Paticca Samuppada*, the Buddha mentioned that Craving gives rise to Clinging, that to Becoming (or the continuity of the life-process actuated by *Kamma*) and that to Birth. The Craving of the dying man must give rise to Clinging, that to the continuity of the life-process of Becoming through *Kamma* (*Kammabhava*), and that to Birth. This is in line with the Second Noble Truth whereby craving gives rise to a new being consisting of the five aggregates of clinging which are suffering.

### 2. How Rebirth Takes Place

Starting with the conception of a human, the Buddha said that a germ of life is planted only when three conditions are met. Mother and father must unite, it is the mother's period (ovum is ripe) and "the being to be born" is present. For a being to be born here, a being with craving for Becoming must die somewhere. It should not be taken to mean that "a being to be born or soul is waiting for the egg and sperm to unite and then enter it." Parents only provide us with the cellular material in the rebirth process. This does not mean that all beings require parents for their birth because there are beings that are reborn spontaneously, depending on their *Kamma*.

Death according to Buddhism is the cessation of the psycho-physical life of any one individual existence. It takes place by the passing away of the life faculty (*jivitindriya*), heat and consciousness. Death is not the complete annihilation of a being, for though that life-span ended, the force that hitherto actuated it is not destroyed.

The instant death occurs, a new mental process called the Rebirth Consciousness (*patisandhi citta*) conditioned by the Reproductive *Kamma* (or *kamma-bhava*, the *kamma* process of becoming) arises together with three *kamma*-produced material groups, constituting the body, sex and base (seat of consciousness). They condition the arising of mental & material processes of the embryo, now called a being in the conventional sense. The Rebirth Consciousness and the 3 *kamma*-produced material groups are collectively termed "the being to be born." This term is used only in this particular connection, and must not be mistaken for a permanent soul waiting to enter a suitable womb to be reborn.

### 3. The Re-linking or Rebirth Consciousness

According to the Buddha's teaching of Dependent Origination, "Through the Process of Becoming (*kamma-bhava*), conditioned is Rebirth." To understand this relationship, we need to realize that in reality, there is no such thing called a being, only mental & material processes called *nama-rupa*. Even during one's lifetime, these *nama-rupas* arise and pass away continuously.

Death is the extinction of the last consciousness on dissolution of the old *nama-rupa*. Rebirth is the immediate arising of a new consciousness called the rebirth or re-linking consciousness, together with the new *nama-rupa*. It is called re-linking consciousness because it joins the new existence with the old one. The arising of the rebirth consciousness is conditioned by the last *kamma* before death. If this *kamma* is wholesome, rebirth will take place in a happy existence. If unwholesome, rebirth will take place in an unhappy existence. This is what the Buddha meant when He said that 'all beings are born of their *Kamma* (*Kammayoni*)'.



**It is very important to realize that:**

- (a) There is no soul or permanent entity that leaves the old body and enters another new body. Lack of this understanding usually leads to the belief in the transmigration of souls or reincarnation, namely: the **wrong view of eternity**.
- (b) As Volitional Activities or Kamma depend on Ignorance and Craving, beings that have not completely eradicated these defilements will still accumulate Kamma and undergo rebirth after death. Lack of this understanding usually leads to the **wrong belief in annihilation** after death, which is held by modern materialists.

**4. Modes of Death**

Death can occur due to the following **four causes**.

- (a) Exhaustion of the force of the **Reproductive Kamma** that gave rise to the birth in question.
- (b) Expiration of the **lifespan**.
- (c) Simultaneous exhaustion of **both** Reproductive Kamma and expiration of lifespan.
- (d) Action of a **stronger Kamma** that suddenly cuts off the power of the Reproductive Kamma before expiry of the life-term.

The first three types of death are called **Timely Death** while the last one is called **Untimely Death**. An oil lamp, for instance, may get extinguished owing to any one of the following 4 causes:

- (i) The exhaustion of the wick,
- (ii) The exhaustion of oil,
- (iii) Simultaneous exhaustion of both wick and oil, and
- (iv) Some extraneous cause like a gust of wind.

The death of a person may similarly be caused by the above-mentioned four ways.

**5. Objects Presented to the Mind before Death**

To the dying man is presented a Kamma, Kamma Nimitta or Gati Nimitta. By Kamma is meant some action of his, whether good or bad. The most powerful are **Weighty Kamma**. If this is absent, he may recollect the action done immediately before death called **Death Proximate Kamma**. If this is also absent, a **Habitual Kamma** is presented to him, such as stealing in the case of a thief or healing the sick in the case of a good physician. Failing all these, some casual act, one of the cumulative reserves of the endless past or **Cumulative Kamma** becomes the object of the dying thought. Among the skillful actions lay Buddhists are taught to do at their last moments are the performance of the ten meritorious actions such as chanting the Three Refuges and Five Precepts mentally, recalling one's pilgrimage to the holy places to arouse faith, listening to the Dhamma, recollections of the Virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, recollections of one's Virtues or Generosity, practicing mental culture such as Loving Kindness or the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. Such wholesome actions will condition the arising of wholesome mental states to determine the last Kamma process before death and lead to rebirth in happy realms. As death can strike at any moment, one should be prepared to face this eventuality.

<sup>Station Sign of</sup>  
Kamma Nimitta is any sight, sound, smell, taste, touch or idea which was obtained at the time of commission of the Kamma, such as knives in the case of a butcher, patients in the case of a doctor, an object of worship such as the Buddha image in the case of a devotee. Because of Kamma Nimitta, engaging in **wrong livelihood** tends to produce unwholesome nimittas because of their habitual perception in the course of one's job and this will lead to unfavorable rebirth.

<sup>At death Sign of</sup>  
Gati Nimitta is some sign of the place where one is destined to be reborn, an event that invariably happens to dying persons. If these indications of future birth are bad, they could be turned into good by influencing the thoughts of the dying man, so that his good thoughts may now act as the Proximate Kamma and influence the type of Reproductive Kamma to condition his rebirth. These symbols of one's destiny may be hellish fires, mountainous regions, mother's womb, celestial mansions, etc.

## 6. Five Visions of a Dying Person

According to Venerable Dr. Rastrapal Mahathera, the five visions of a dying person may be **hellish fires** for those who are bound for rebirth in hell, **animals and forests** for those bound for rebirth as animals, **dark apparitions** for those bound for rebirth as ghosts, **deceased parents and relatives** for those bound for rebirth as humans and **celestial mansions and chariots** for those bound for rebirth in the celestial realms. Chinese folk-lore, too, abound with stories about dying people who claim to hear the sound of chains or see visions of King Yama's guards with hideous faces resembling horses or bulls coming with chains to take them to the underworld for judgment. *Gati-nimitta*, being always a physical sight, is presented to the mind-door as a dream. Psychologically these mental stages may be termed as **illusion, hallucination or delusion**. Therefore people whose minds are lucid and unconfused at their dying moments may not experience any death-bed vision at all.

Readers who wish to know more about death-bed visions of a dying man should read the booklet by Venerable Dr. Rastrapal Mahathera (Ref. No. 3) in which the author narrated his personal experience with a dying layman who underwent various death-bed visions and how the author helped to allay his fears, leading to a happy ending.

## 7. The Dying Consciousness

Taking for the object an action (*kamma*) or sign of action (*kamma nimitta*) or sign of destiny (*gati nimitta*), the dying consciousness runs its course even if the death is an instantaneous one. In *Abhidhamma*, a normal thought process runs for seventeen thought-moments (*citta*), in which the **Javana process** lasts for seven thought-moments. Commentators say that within the brief duration of a flash of lightning, there may be **billions of *cittas*** or thought-moments. Now this *Javana* stage is the most important from an ethical standpoint. It is at this psychological stage that good or evil is

actually done i.e. *kamma* is performed. In the thought process before death, the *Javana* process is weak and runs for only five thought-moments. This last *Javana*-process is very important as it determines the **reproductive *kamma*** of the next life. Next the registering consciousness which identifies the object may or may not follow. After this, occurs the death-consciousness (*cuticitta*), the last thought-moment to be experienced in the present life.

On death the last consciousness passes away conditioning the arising of a new consciousness called **Rebirth Consciousness (*Patisandhi*)** in a new body or form of birth. And that new consciousness, too, immediately passes away and subsequent consciousness arise one after another in a stream, like a flux, like the flow of a river. This renewed life-flux inherits all past experiences. This new being is **neither absolutely the same** as the past one owing to its different composition, **nor totally different**, being the identical stream of *Kammic* energy.

The transition of the flux is instantaneous. There is no room for an **intermediate state** or *antarabhava*. According to the ***Kathavatthu*** (Points of Controversy) certain sects such as Pubbaseliya and Sammatiya held that there is an interim stage where a being awaits re-conception for a week or longer. The counter argument is based on the **Buddha's dictum** that there are three states of becoming (*bhava*) only — the Sensual, the Form and the Formless Worlds. Hence Buddhists do not believe that the spirit of the deceased person takes lodgment in a certain intermediate state until it finds a suitable place or womb for its reincarnation. **Rebirth takes place immediately**, and there is no difference in time whether one is born in a heaven or in a state of misery, as an animal or as a human. What actually conditions rebirth is not the death consciousness (*cuticitta*) but the last *Javana* process described earlier. If it is wholesome, rebirth takes place in a happy realm; if unwholesome, rebirth takes place in a woeful state of existence. Understanding this and the fact that death can strike at any moment in one's life, one should always be **heedful** and practise as many skillful actions as possible to face this eventuality before it is too late.

### 8. Modes of Birth

There are four modes of birth, namely:

- (a) **Egg-born** creatures such as birds, reptiles and fish.
- (b) **Womb-born** creatures such as humans, mammals and some earth-bound deities.
- (c) **Moisture-born** creatures such as certain insects that take moisture as material for their growth.
- (d) Creatures having **spontaneous births**. They are generally invisible to the human eye. Conditioned by past *Kamma*, they appear suddenly, independently of parents. *Brahmas*, *devas*, *petas*, *asuras* and hell-beings belong to this class.

There are **nine material groups** that are produced by *Kamma*, namely: base or seat of consciousness, life principle, male sex, female sex and five sensitive material qualities of eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. They are **fully developed** in beings that are **born spontaneously**. As such, beings of spontaneous birth do not need parents to provide the material layer or cells for their birth.

### 9. Four Planes of Existence

The four planes of existence are:

- a) Sensual plane of misery (*apaya* or *kamaduggati bhumi*)
  - b) Sensual plane of bliss (*kamasugati bhumi*)
  - c) Fine material or form plane (*rupa bhumi*)
  - d) Non-material or formless plane (*arupa bhumi*)
- The sensual plane of misery comprises **four states**, namely: *niraya* or hell, animal kingdom, *peta* or ghost world and the host of *asuras* or demons. Rebirth in any of these four woeful states is conditioned by **unwholesome reproductive kamma** that predominates at the moment of death.

- In all **seven sensual states of bliss** comprising the human world and the six heavenly realms, rebirth as a normal human being or *deva*, is conditioned by **superior wholesome reproductive kamma**. However, rebirth as a degraded human being who is blind, deaf, dumb, retarded or deformed by birth, or as an earth-bound degraded *asura* of the lower realm of Four Great Kings, is conditioned by **inferior wholesome reproductive kamma**. (Refer to Chapter XI, Types of Wholesome *Kamma*).
- In the form or *rupa* plane, rebirth in one of the **sixteen states of Brahma gods** that possess form is conditioned by the type of mental absorption of the form plane (*rupa jhana*) that one has attained to.
- In the formless or *arupa* plane, rebirth in one of the **four states of Formless Brahma gods** is conditioned by the type of mental absorption of the formless plane (*arupa jhana*) that one has attained to.
- In total, the four planes comprise **thirty-one** states of existence, details of which are provided in the next chapter.

### 10. References

- 1) The Buddhist Doctrine of *Kamma* and Rebirth by Venerable Narada Maha Thera
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- 3) Five Visions of a Dying Man by Ven. Rastrapal Mahathera Bodhi Leaves No. 150 Published in 2000. Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka.
- 4) Points of Controversy – A Translation of the Katha-Vatthu by Shwe Zan Aung and Mrs. Rhys Davids. Published by the Pali Texts Society, London, 1979.