

# Dhamma as Skillful Kamma

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There is a rather humorous text in the Middle Length Discourses called the *Kukkuravatika Sutta*, or The Dog-duty Ascetic (M 57). In the Buddha's time, the so-called spiritual scene was full of people who did extreme ascetic practices. In this text, we're told of an ascetic who likes to practice like he's a dog. He walks around on all fours, traipsing in and out of puddles, and will only eat food that is thrown on the ground. And he has an ascetic friend who likes to practice like he's an ox. This one stands around and lies down in straw. They both have been doing their ascetic practice for many years.

They come across the Buddha and the dog-duty ascetic asks him something like, "What is the result of my practice as a dog ascetic? Have I burned off a lot of bad *kamma* [action]?" And the Buddha says "Don't ask me." The dog ascetic says, "No, tell me." And the Buddha says, "Don't ask me." This goes on for three times, until the Buddha finally says, "Okay, you've asked me three times. Having been asked three times, I cannot refuse, so I'll tell you. Since you've been practicing like a dog, and have developed the dog-mind fully and without interruption, your

destiny is to be either reborn as a dog if you've done it well, or to be reborn in hell if you have messed up." Maybe the Buddha is being slightly humorous here, but he says that rather than do all these silly things and think you're wearing out kamma, there's a better way to do it.

## Four Kinds of Kamma

At this point the Buddha goes into a brief exposition on four kinds of kamma. The first of these kamma is called "dark action with dark result," which is to say it is negative action producing negative results. Here one takes life, abuses living beings, takes intoxicants, and so forth. The results of those actions are dark and negative—one is heir to one's actions. It seems appropriate to call it "dark" rather than bad, because it is more like a feeling tone. The mind feels dark when it does these things, and it leads to darker feelings in the future.

The language of the *sutta* may seem unnecessarily cluttered here but it says, "one generates an afflictive bodily formation." What it means is that in any action you're creating a *sankhāra*, an intention, volition, or formation. It may seem like just one moment's blip—you've had a naughty thought and it is gone—but there's actually more to it than that.

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These formations add up over time and create a kammic tendency, a kind of habitual track down which one's mind will run. This will determine the sort of person you become. If you keep doing the same thing over and over again, then you are creating a current or a kammic pathway. Every time you go down that track you generate an afflictive formation, an afflictive *sankhāra*. This kamma then comes back to you because you have created a channel through bodily action for certain actions to lead to certain results. The same thing happens with actions of speech and with actions of the mind. If you think in certain ways, you foster particular emotions, and you then get programmed into particular habits and tendencies, like jealousies or grudges or things of this nature.

The second kind of kamma is called "bright action with bright result." Here one generates an unafflictive bodily *sankhāra* through a skillful action, such as abstaining from taking life, generosity, harmlessness, or an unafflictive verbal or mental *sankhāra*. This leads to a bright destination or result, in the sense that wholesome things will result from wholesome actions.

The third kind of kamma is when it is mixed. There's a bit of a muddle here: a bit of dark and a bit of bright. Perhaps you're running out in order to do someone a favor but kick the dog that's getting in your way—some good, some bad.

The last kind of kamma is neither dark nor bright action, with neither dark nor bright result, and this is the idea the Buddha is introducing to the dog ascetic. It is a kind of action that leads to the destruction of action, because it is the action undertaken with an attitude of letting go, of detachment, of dispassion. When one abandons the volition of acting to obtain particular kammic results, there is no habitual track, no program to follow, no becoming a being, no constructing a self.

Action to End Action

The actions that lead to further kamma proceed from an inherent experience of "me," a being, an identity. And these actions give results in another me, another identity. The action that leads to the end of action does not proceed from a sense of me, and it doesn't give rise to the sense of me. This is the action of insight, if you will. It is this movement of insight that allows you to come out of the program, to come out of the conditioning, to come out of being a self. This is the movement of the *dhamma*.

In this movement, there is no "I." It is not "I" who am concentrating, for example, during a meditation session. Rather, concentration comes because it is dependent on the causal condition of rapture and ease; rapture depends on the causal conditions of joy, gladness, and freedom from remorse. So it is not me that's doing it; I am not producing a result. It is just that certain causes and conditions fill up and flood the system, and they generate other causes and conditions. The process of dhamma involves a transpersonal causality of conditions. It is not me doing it. There may well be a sense of me doing it, or of claiming ownership of what is happening, but this is not the same thing.

So the dhamma that leads to the end of kamma is not me getting rid of my kamma because that intention and action to get rid of kamma would be kamma! Let's say there is some negativity in me, and I think, "I've got to get rid of my bad habits." That's not going to do it. It might be a nice idea from which to start, but it is not going to do it, because that would be *me* trying to do it. All that happens is we get a sense of negativity toward ourselves to "Stop being this way, stop being that way." This does not take us very far.

A more effective approach involves touching into the good, attuning to the good, letting



the good swell up and move. That's the process of dhamma, which has two aspects: calming (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*). Calming the mind and body gives rise to a good feeling. It is a good feeling not just because it feels good, but because it makes the mind expansive, steady, intelligent, and intuitive. And then there is insight, looking into causes and conditions and understanding the nature of what is happening. From these two working together, the process of liberation unfolds. When one sees, "Well, that's not necessary, that's just painful," one stops doing it. This is the abandonment of action.

The ceasing of kamma, of habitual action and reaction, always depends upon a skillful basis. We work on two fronts. One is in setting up the programs, the conditions, the *sankhāras* that will keep the relative sense of me in touch with what is healthy and in a good place. That can be maybe 80% of our practice, and it is a wide practice, not based just in meditation. From that basis we can begin to look into how it can all be abandoned, how the sense of me that is so often generated can be seen through and even relinquished.

### Calming

The first aspect of this process of dhamma, the calming aspect, is perhaps the most easy to talk about. Recollecting the ten *pāramīs* is one of the easiest things we can do to get on the calming track: **generosity** (*dāna*), of body, speech and mind; **virtue** (*sīla*), or being aware of behavior through body, speech and mind; **renunciation** (*nekkhamma*), attuning to needs rather than wants in body, speech and mind; **discernment** (*paññā*) or wisdom; **persistence** (*virīya*) or energy; **patience** (*khanti*); **truthfulness** (*sacca*); **determination** (*adhiṭṭhāna*) or resolution; **loving kindness** (*mettā*); and **equanimity** (*upekkhā*). These are ways in which the good can be classified or broken up into ten pieces. This means that throughout a day you've got something you can bear in mind: "I can be more patient, I can develop this quality; I can do it." We do a little bit each time. It gives you something to tune in to and recollect. And at the end of the day, for example, when you get into your meditation, you feel it from where the goodness is, which is where we should ideally begin our practice in the causal process of dhamma.

### Turning Toward Insight

The primary obstacle to insight is deep ignorance, in which are rooted all sorts of tainted emotions, mistaken views, and habitual actions. The second sutta of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (the *Sabbāsava Sutta*) outlines a number of strategies for stemming the outflow (*āsava*) of these taints. You tackle the whole lot of it by stemming the flow—putting out a block here, an obstacle here—so that it doesn't flow out so freely and you have less stuff to have to repair. The Buddha presents seven avenues for attending to the outflow of unhealthy states in this text, and they offer an accessible way to move from calming into insight.

1. **Seeing.** The first approach is called seeing, and has to do with learning appropriate attention (*yoniso manasikāra*). This is a *sankhāra*, a formation, and it refers to the skill of the defining mind, the thinking mind, or the mind that can conceive. It is not the feeling mind, but the mind that defines “What is this? What is a skillful way to look at it?” It determines what to give attention to and what not to attend to. There's a broad range here. If you give a lot of attention to where greed, hatred and delusion arise, that's called inappropriate. If you give attention to where they subside, that's appropriate, that's skillful.

So you might examine how you look at television. What do you watch? How much do you watch? How good is it? Is it skillful? Is it useful? Is it appropriate, and when is it appropriate? When is it not appropriate? These are not hard-line judgments but just a way of knowing your own mind, to know what's happening for you: what you look at, what you give ear to, what you attend to.

The Buddha talks in some detail about this. If you keep attending in terms of “Was I? What was I? How was I? What will I be? Having been, what will I be? Am I? Am I not? What am I?

How am I?” and so forth, then this kind of attending to those ideas is food for the outflow of becoming. “Becoming” is that which always forms an identity. So if you keep saying “Who, who, who,” you're actually stimulating that tendency to become or be someone. You will strengthen the tendency to create light and dark actions that lead to light and dark results.

Thus, various kinds of views can arise. “I have a self. I have no-self. My Big Self perceives my small self. My not-self perceives my self,” and so forth. This is called a thicket of views, and we can go round and round and get really caught up in all that. It is quite a ride, and it can be interesting at times. But this is not conducive to insight. Instead, you can attend to experience in less personal terms, such as “Where is the stress, where is the suffering now? What does it originate from? Where does it stop? What helps it to stop?” That is wise attention.

2. **Restraining.** Restraint involves guarding or checking the senses. It means that we have some responsibility for our eyes, our ears, and our other senses. Don't just let any old thing grab your eyes or ears. This could be very helpful, I guess, when you're going shopping because everything is out to grab your paycheck. Then you get home and think, “What did I buy this for?” We need to look at what's helpful and not at the things that are going to strengthen the outflow of greed, for example. When you attend to guarding the senses, the outflows don't have so much free rein.

3. **Using.** A monk can reflect appropriately on the four requisites of the monastic life, but even if you're not a monk it is a good thing to reflect upon. These four requisites are the things you need: clothing, food, shelter, and medicine. If you are getting these, you can use them without obsessing over them. They are there to serve a particular purpose. For lay life, there are probably a few other requisites. A car is probably a requisite; wages are a requisite; insurance

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policies may be a requisite. But just how much and what standard do you really need?

It can be seen that needs tend to stabilize, whereas wants do not. Wants only get bigger. And there is a lot of encouragement to foster more wants and call them needs. They are really just wants, which are really kind of fairy dust stuff. If you get a clear indication of what you need and why you need it, then what you get serves what you need. This helps to stop the outflow into sense forms, where you identify with your car, your house, or your paycheck.

4. **Enduring.** The next strategy is tolerating: patient enduring or the ability to endure painful feeling. This is something to develop. Painful feelings will inevitably come to us, and it is good practice to learn to bear them, to develop that capacity to tolerate, since there is only so much you can ameliorate. Someone was saying yesterday that as you get older you pretty much get more disagreeable feelings. Maybe you can't do much about that; it is something you have to bear with and not get depressed about.

Don't let the physical feeling translate into an emotional feeling: that's the point of tolerating. It doesn't mean being super-brave, but just pragmatic. You don't want this stuff that gets into the body to get into the heart and take over. I know people who suffered extreme, long-term chronic pain. They have become extremely serene and cheerful because they don't let their minds go into complaining and struggling, because they understand that doing that just makes it so much worse. If you reinforce the approach of "Well, that's that; don't go there," the mind eventually learns to not make a whole

mental reaction to the inevitable discomforts we must all face.

5. **Avoiding.** Avoiding dangerous things is also a useful practice. The text gives all sorts of analogies about a wild bull, a stump, a bramble patch, poison ivy and darts and mosquitoes, an open sewer. Then it goes into associating with bad friends. Just as you would avoid a garbage pit, avoid people who would tend to draw you into unskillful ways. We are flocking creatures, so we tend to want to flock and associate with others. This is natural, but it takes a little bit of awareness and resilience to learn whom to flock with. As the Buddha said, if you can't find suitable friends, better to be alone.

6. **Removing.** Sometimes something is just so unhealthy it has to be removed or even destroyed. This can be a difficult topic, discussed in some detail in the *Vitakka-santhāna Sutta* (M 20) which deals with how you abandon, dispel and wipe out unskillful thoughts. It doesn't mean necessarily using a sledgehammer. There is a whole range of ways—from the subtle to the insightful to the patient—for not allowing negative moods to take over and dwell in the mind. If you do dwell, the moods will create programs such that your habit of repeatedly thinking in certain ways creates a channel down which your thinking moves. You can be acting in certain ways and not even be aware that a channel is being created.

A common example of this is gossiping. Because our flocking habit is so strong, we get together and talk about, you know, so and so and so and so. "What she's like" and "Have you



heard about this one?” And this can get pretty unskillful. It is better to have a program where we don’t do that. If something really needs to be said, or if your opinion is asked for, you say it, but you don’t go bad mouthing other people for the sake of fun, for the sake of social contact. Sometimes gossip contains nuances of psychological abuse. Thus, gossip is something we can refrain from.

7. **Developing.** Development is a topic in its own right, but can be taken here to refer to the gradual cultivation of the seven factors of awakening. Developing mindfulness (*sati*) leads to interest in the investigation of phenomena (*dhamma-vicaya*); which gives rise to energy (*viriya*); leading to joy (*pīti*); which settles into tranquility (*pasaddhi*); manifesting as concentration (*samādhi*); and culminating in equanimity (*upekkhā*). The cultivation and development of each of these qualities leads naturally to the next, and a natural course of progress unfolds.



So this is the insight process. It begins with establishing or allowing skillful qualities to grow and develop by turning toward the good and creating a ground of well-being and balance. The ten *pāramīs* (perfections), used as skillful kamma, set up the causal conditions for this. Then through the cultivation of letting go, we gradually abandon the project of becoming the self who creates actions and experiences their results. All this perhaps gives you a sense of the breadth of Dhamma training. It is all conducive to liberation. It is all skillful kamma that will lead to the end of kamma.

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