

Relating to Kamma

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Kamma is one of those teaching that's sometimes hard to relate to, both intellectually and emotionally: intellectually because it's related to the issue of conviction, or *saddha*. We hear the word conviction—or even worse, *saddha* is often translated as faith—and we think that we're being asked to commit to something that we're not really sure about, that we don't have any means of knowing. But that's not what conviction means in the Buddha's teachings. It means you're going to take something on as a working hypothesis.

You're committed to the sense that you're really going to really try to test it, but no, you're not being forced to give your emotional assent to say, "Yes, despite my lack of evidence I'm being forced to say this must be true." Instead, you're advised to say, "I'm going to try it out. It makes sense. It's asking me to believe that my actions matter and that I have a choice in my actions that'll give results. But I'm free enough to learn from past mistakes so I don't have to keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again."

Part of the emotional problem around kamma is that it seems to be aimed at explaining why people are miserable and blaming them for their misery. But that's never how the Buddha taught kamma, though. When he first introduced the topic of kamma, he talked about generosity and gratitude, the good things in life. Our ability to share makes sense and is valuable because of the teaching on kamma: the part that says we have free will, that our intentions matter, that actions bear results, and that it's important to think about the results.

Back in the time of the Buddha, there was an issue around whether generosity really was worthwhile. It came from those many, many centuries of the brahmins' saying that generosity is good—when given to the brahmins. People would react. Part of the reaction came in the form of a teaching that said that people didn't have any free will, so when someone gave something to someone else, it didn't really mean anything. The other part of the reaction took the form of a teaching on annihilation, that when you die, *pfffft*, you just go out and that's it. This would mean that what we do for one another really doesn't really matter because we're all going to die in the end—which is a miserable way of looking at life. So when the Buddha's saying that generosity is worthwhile, that's it's real, he's saying, one, that we have freedom of choice to be generous. In fact, it's our first experience of free will.

As little children, we have something in our hands and we could use it for ourselves, but then we decide, “No, give it to somebody else.” There’s a pleasure in giving to somebody else. The Buddha wants you to encourage that habit, encourage that thought.

The second point the Buddha is making when he says that helping other people is really worthwhile is that people don’t just end with death. There’s something that goes on, a process that goes on, and if you can help that process, you’re helping something that could have long-term benefits. And your process will receive long-term benefits as well.

So the teaching on kamma is not so much about punishments. It’s more about opportunities. Try to learn to relate to it in that way: that we have the opportunity with our actions to create a much better life for ourselves now and on into future lifetimes. The sacrifices we do for other people don’t go to waste. The goodness that other people have done for us is something really worthy of gratitude because, after all, they had freedom of choice. And all the good qualities of character that we’ve developed through the practice will bear fruit. This doesn’t apply only to concentration and discernment. We practice endurance, renunciation, equanimity, determination: all of which are qualities of the will, in which we make up our minds that there’s something we really want and we try to get all our random desires in line.

The Thai image is of trying to catch crabs and put them in a basket. You get one crab in the basket and by the time you’ve got the second crab, the first crab is beginning to crawl out. That’s the way our minds normally are. Try to bring some order to that. We have to develop qualities of character in order to keep our random desires from running away from us, or running away with us. And there’s a sense of well-being that comes with that development of character, a sense of our own worth.

Now this is a healthy sense of ego.

We see so many people talking about how little children need to develop a sense of self-esteem, and they try to encourage their self-esteem by giving them rewards and over-praising them for every little thing they do. But that’s not what self-esteem comes from. It comes, on the one hand, from knowing that you can be helpful and, on the other, that you can say No to certain things that you know are beneath you. There’s a sense of happiness that comes from this, a sense of well-being.

All too often in modern society, we’re taught to look for happiness in sensory experiences, to be on the consuming end of things. More and more we get defined as consumers. Even discussions of global warming come down to “What are you

consuming?”—as if people were measured by their consumption. But when you consume pleasures, where are they? They’re gone. Ajaan Suwat would often say, “Those sensual pleasures you had last week: Where are they now?” They’re just a memory, and not necessarily a good memory at that.

Sometimes you might be thinking about how much you miss that particular pleasure or you begin to realize you did certain unskillful things in order to get it, or you did unskillful things under the influence of the pleasure. Those kinds of pleasures are not always happy in retrospect. Whatever happiness they offer is not a very satisfying kind of happiness. The happiness that comes, however, from knowing that you’ve developed a skill and you’ve benefitted from yourself in a way that doesn’t harm anybody, and sometimes in ways that benefit other people: A really solid sense of self-worth and happiness go with that.

One thing to realize about happiness in light of the teaching on kamma is that we have to learn how to think strategically about what will make us truly happy, and how to go about finding it. We can’t simply go by “I want this, and I want it right now,” thinking that it’ll have to be good for us. We know that people who simply follow their whims are psychologically not very happy. The people who can channel their desires in a direction that they find worthwhile: those are the ones who are really happy. And the teaching on kamma encourages that. You focus on the practice. You may not be able to get all the way to nibbana in this lifetime, but your efforts are not wasted. You can pick up in the practice again; you can create the conditions for being able to pick it up again after you die. So there are lots of ways you can learn how to get a better emotional relationship to the teaching on kamma, a relationship that will really sustain you.

Ajaan Suwat would comment on how people who follow a life of sensual pleasures, when the time comes when they’re about to leave this life of sensual pleasures, look back and all they can have is regret and fear and grasping, because there’s nothing of any substance there in the memories of past pleasures. And of course, you know what happens to people’s memories as they get older. If all you’ve got is memories, it’s a pretty shifty treasure. But if you know that you’ve done good in this lifetime, the sense of self-esteem, the sense of self-worth that comes with that keeps the mind from falling down.

So it’s good to take kamma as a working hypothesis because it helps you create the conditions for living well and dying well with a sense of your own worth, a sense of well-being, a sense of solidity inside, which is a kind of pleasure or happiness that’s very different from the happiness that comes simply from consuming things, consuming experiences, consuming feelings.

So learn to use the teaching on kamma, develop a good relationship to it so that you can use it wisely, thinking about the long term, not just what immediate emotion is coming up inside.

You have to learn to look at your emotions in the light of kamma. Indulging in a particular emotion has karmic effects. When you act on this kind of emotion, where does it lead you? When you act on that one, where does it lead you? Do they lead you to where you want to go?

So we're not just sitting here in the present moment. The present moment is moving toward the future, so you want to move in a good direction—and you have it within your power to do that. That's what the doctrine of kamma teaches. Learn how to relate to it well.