

Dedicated Practitioner's Program Homework
Reading and Homework January 2004
Karma and Rebirth

Readings

The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Introduction, "Kamma and Rebirth," pp. 45 – 48.

Majjhima Nikaya 135, "The Shorter Exposition of Action"; also found on the web at <http://www.accesstinsight.org/canon/sutta/majjhima/mn135.html>

Majjhima Nikaya 60, "The Incontrovertible Teaching," sections 1 – 12 (and n. 621 in *MLDB*).

Please review: *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, Joseph Goldstein & Jack Kornfield, Ch. 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and Effect," available on the DPP website.

Optional readings: Samyutta Nikaya 36:21, MN 4.27-30; MN 57, "The Dog-Duty Ascetic"; MN 117.5 (These suttas can all be found on the Access to Insight website.)

P.A. Payutto, *Good, Evil, and Beyond: Kamma in the Buddha's Teaching*, found at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Academy/9280/kamma.htm>

Reflections

1. The Buddha's teaching of karma is sometimes described as the law of cause and effect. There are at least five ways we might experience the effects of an action based on a wholesome or unwholesome intention. We might notice how we feel (a) as we are considering taking the action, (b) as we commit the act, or (c) as we remember an act we have done. Then (d) we might notice that a volitional action can strengthen our habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting again. Finally (e) we might notice unexpected results coming into our lives at some future time that we intuit are related to the past action.

Can you recall times in your life that you have experienced any or all of these kinds of effects? Do your experiences seem to follow the law that wholesome intentions lead to wholesome results, unwholesome intentions to unwholesome results? Please be prepared to discuss them with your dharma buddy or in the group.

2. Do you have any doubts about the general teaching of karma, that actions from wholesome intentions lead to wholesome results, and actions from unwholesome intentions to unwholesome results? How do you feel about the teaching on the effects of specific actions described in MN 135? Do you believe these, disbelieve them, or hold them agnostically? Why? If you disbelieve the connections drawn in MN 135, do you have another explanation for the great variety of mind states and circumstances that people and animals seem to be born with?

3. The teaching on rebirth is a frequent theme in the Pali suttas. For example, in MN 4, the Buddha describes two insights related to rebirth immediately prior to his awakening (recollection of his past lives and seeing beings reappearing according to their actions). Do you believe in the general principle of rebirth as described in the suttas? Why or why not? If you don't believe in rebirth, what do you think happens after death?

4. Views on rebirth can be held purely at a conceptual level, in which case they won't deeply affect us. Or we can take the implications of these views into the marrow of our practice. MN 60 explores some of the implications of different views. Please continue this exploration. (a) Imagine for a few minutes that the Buddha's teachings on rebirth are true, and that you will wander through an endless round of births and deaths with varying samsaric pleasures and pains until you awaken. What shifts do you notice in how you view your life, your practice, and this world? (b) Imagine for a few minutes that you hold what the Buddha called a nihilistic view, that there is no future birth and no result of karma beyond this life. What shifts do you notice in how you view life, practice, and the world? (c) Imagine for a few minutes that you rest in the mystery of truly not knowing what happens after death. What shifts do you notice in relation to life, practice, and the world?

5. It seems at first paradoxical that the Buddha taught that all aspects of our experience are not self, and yet that both karma and rebirth happen to the person who initiated the actions, not someone else. This conundrum pops up in MN 109.14, when a bhikkhu asks the Buddha, "If all five aggregates are not-self, then what self will actions done by the not-self affect?" How in your understanding do you resolve this seeming paradox? That is, how does the understanding of selflessness (*anatt*) mesh with the teachings on karma and rebirth?

6. We can sometimes feel guilt, shame, regret, or remorse when we consider unskillful past actions, or we might judge ourselves harshly for our past karma. How can the understanding of *anatt* help to soften such judgments? Are there other practices, such as the brahma viharas, that you find helpful?

7. Sometimes we evaluate our past karma based on the adverse circumstances of our lives (past abuse, current physical or emotional pain). But we seldom stop to reflect on the many favorable conditions of our lives. All of us in this group are richly blessed in many ways: we have enough to eat, we can stay warm in winter, we have a precious human birth, we are relatively sound in body and mind, we have encountered the Dharma, we are motivated to practice the Dharma, and we have the leisure time to be able to practice the Dharma. It's said that such conditions are the result of a tremendous amount of past wholesome karma. When you reflect on this, does it change how you evaluate your past actions?

8. Ajahn Amaro made a comment at the last DPP retreat something like, “The process of consciousness going from one birth to the next is hardly different from the process of its going from one moment to the next in this life.” Do you agree? How do you understand this?

9. (Optional) Do you understand the Buddha’s teachings on karma to say that everything that happens to us is the result of some past action of ours? Please read SN 36:21. Does the sutta answer this question positively, negatively, or ambiguously?

Daily Practices

Week 1	Intention is the heart of karma. Begin this week by noticing any intention to move the body voluntarily during a sitting. Note it as “intending.” Also look to see if you can identify what is motivating the intention to move. Is it desire to find more comfort? Or aversion to some discomfort? Or restlessness? Or wisdom in returning to an upright posture to restore mindfulness?
Week 2	Intention behind actions in the world. During your sitting, notice any intentions that arise around actions of body or speech you are considering taking in your daily life. For each one you notice, look to see what your motivation is to do that action. Is it wholesome? Unwholesome? A mix of both? (There can be several motives at work.) What kind of sensations do you notice in the body when the intention is wholesome? When it’s unwholesome? Try to extend this awareness of intentions into your daily life off the cushion as well.
Week 3	Intentions behind thoughts. Notice every time you have a thought while sitting. Note it as “thinking.” Look at the content of the thought. Does it express a wholesome intention such as letting go, metta, or compassion? Or an unwholesome intention such as greed, ill will or cruelty? Or a mix of both? Does every thought seem to come from or express some prior intention?
Week 4	Rebirth is sometimes presented by contemporary teachers as a moment-to-moment process (though the term is not used this way in the suttas). Given what you know of becoming (<i>bhava</i>) as a link in dependent origination, try to observe in a sitting the genesis of the sense of “I” or self on a moment-to-moment basis. You might notice any time a thought of “I” arises with some stickiness and then see if you can feel the self that has come into being, the new birth. Can you then identify the prior moments of contact, feeling, craving and clinging?

Please schedule a time to connect with your dharma buddy for a discussion of this month’s reflections and practices, and for an interview with your mentor if you are receiving monthly interviews.