

On the Uposatha, Tahn Pamutto reflects on the wide and impactful subject of kamma or Action. The three types (Mental, Verbal, and Physical) break down into ten skillful and ten unskillful types of activity. We cultivate the wholesome as a vehicle to our end destination – the kamma leading to the end of kamma and the cessation of suffering in the world.

Kamma is a huge and important aspect of Buddhist practice. In fact, it is the definition of practice, what is practiced. The Buddha said, this is a *kammavāda*. It is a path of doing. And this is to distance itself from the various kinds of philosophies that existed in the time of the Buddha, where there were various ways of coming to the conclusion that nothing needs to be done, that actions don't have impact, they don't have consequence, that you'll get enlightened anyway, that you'll never get enlightened, that you're just a body, you only live once.

All of these various philosophies say you're good, just be a person, and there's no problem here. Whereas the Buddha was putting forth a philosophy, well, if you don't suffer, then truly there is no problem. But if you are like so many of us and you experience suffering from time to time, then that is the problem. Yeah. It is not a theoretical problem.

It is not a cosmological problem. It is not something you read about in the newspaper. It is your problem and your kamma. Your action is the solution to reach the end of your problem. And once you've reached the end of your problem, as the Buddha says, there is a solution, there is an end to that problem of suffering, then there's no more need for any more kamma.

And so we find that sometimes the Buddha refers to this as the kamma that leads to the end of kamma, namely, you have to undertake action, you have to undertake activities to propel yourself in the direction of no longer needing action, no longer needing kamma or activity in the world in order to be free of suffering. And that takes work because the starting point is not there yet. And this is what we recognize and why we are called *sekha*, or trainees, those in training. We are being trained by the Buddha, we are being trained by the Dhamma, we are being trained by our fellow members of the Sangha. We are our own coach with this training regimen to try to overcome suffering.

So, kamma, action, what is it and why is it? The question arose in my mind, what is the difference between a human body and a watermelon in a field somewhere? The nutrition label would be different, obviously. One would have more sugar and one would have more protein.

But otherwise, a human body and a watermelon in a field are basically the same thing. They are a package of mostly water and some living cells that are responding to their environment to try to keep living. That's what a watermelon is, and that's what a human body is. No different. But now, what is the difference between a human being and a watermelon?

The answer to that would be kamma. And so we find that everything that is happening, of any note, that extends beyond simple material processes happening in the world based on simple causes and conditions, kamma is the answer for that. So whereas a watermelon will just sit in the field, it'll grow towards the sunlight. It'll soak up water. It'll do its living thing only in response to its environment.

A human being, a human body endowed with volitional kamma, will walk into that field, say, "Oh, that looks pretty good." He'll go up to that watermelon, he'll pluck it. He'll take it back home, he'll chop it

up into little bits. He'll eat it and savor that watermelon. And then he'll put it in his refrigerator. He'll come back to it the next day. He'll decide he doesn't feel like watermelon anymore. It'll sit in there for a week, and then he'll throw it out. All of these things are kamma, activity, action. And the difference between that and the watermelon is that the human being did more than just respond to their environment.

They formed associations. They formed opinions about something. They formed craving. They did activity. They said different things, and they planned and they schemed, and they got their thing, and they enjoyed it. And then they held onto it as long as they could until it became repulsive, and then they threw it out. All of this is activity. And this gives us an example of why the idea of, "Well, okay, if kamma is the problem, kamma is the source of greed, hatred, and delusion, why don't I just stop doing?" Well, there was a lot of doing there, and that was just one thing. How many activities in our day play out like this? We have a thought. We form an opinion. We say some things, we do some things, we get some results, and we keep moving through the world, intentionally taking the next step, always trying to get something.

Kamma breaks down in three ways as the Buddha lays it out. There is mental kamma, there is verbal kamma, and there is bodily kamma, or action, physical, kamma.

And so, say you're sitting there as you are, and in front of you on the table is a pen.

Now, you perceive this with your sense organs, and as of yet, the pen is a dhamma. Dhamma is a multifaceted word, which means phenomena. It's a thing. It's there. So the pen has no kamma. The pen is not doing anything. It's not even imbued with a minor kind of consciousness like the watermelon, to respond to its environment. It's simply a thing. It's there.

But we see it, and we think, that is my pen. Yeah. So we haven't done anything. We haven't said anything, but we have formed an idea, an opinion about it. This is my pen. And we think it's a good pen, and then we think it's a little low on ink, but it's the only one I've got...I'd like to hang on to it...

All of this is mental kamma. We are not altering the world. We are not commenting on the world or forming perceptions, but we are making volitional activity. We are deciding a bunch of things that will influence how we go forward. So even though we haven't moved or disposed our body in any particular way, still we've generated kamma.

And this is why the concept of underlying tendencies is so important in Buddhism, because it's easy to overlook that. But everything that happens from this point on started with the mental kamma. So this is why the Buddha puts it first.

He says, mind precedes phenomena. Mind precedes activity and dhammas. It is the mind that is leading the show.

But now somebody comes into the room and they see the pen, and they want to do a crossword puzzle. And so they go and they reach for the pen, and we say, "Whoa, that's my pen. And it's low on ink. Please don't waste it on frivolous pursuits like crossword puzzles." And the person walks away. Now, we engaged in the second kind of kamma, verbal kamma. We didn't get up. We didn't move our body. We didn't push the person out of the way. We didn't snatch up the pen, but we said something.

And we put forth a variety of perceptions or perspectives or viewpoints into the world that are a reflection of our mind. So it's more than just thinking something. We were trying to alter the world based on our thoughts. And verbal kamma has a lot of power. It has a lot of influence, and therefore, it has a lot of impact.

If it's particularly good, then it can influence people in a good direction. If it's particularly harmful, then a person may just walk away. "Your hobbies are stupid," and they walk off. This is not particularly skillful kamma. It's going to get us in trouble.

But now the dog comes into the room, and there's no way of dissuading the dog from picking up the pen, which it sees as just a nice, crunchy little toy. We reach over and we snatch up the pen because it's our pen and it's not a dog toy. So, unlike the watermelon, we have made a decision and we've gone out and we've done something and we were forming ideas and reacting to our environment, but we were going a step further. We were altering our environment. Yeah. To get a particular end result. Why did we do it?

Well, if we trace the lines back, we find that we did it because of craving. We did it because of the idea of mine, me, mine, my thing. Once you trace the action back, you always find kamma goes back to the source of ignorance, the idea of I, me, and mine.

And that ignorance begets craving, which begets attachment, which begets something that you see in this particular scenario, "becoming". There are three kinds of becoming...and this one is "sense sphere" becoming. So you have this body that's really not much different than a watermelon. But when your mental kamma has you really want to do something in the world, you don't want the body to just sit there and watch your pen get taken away. You get up and you move the body, or you use it to speak.

You're using it as your vehicle. This is sense sphere becoming. And you can only do this kind of becoming with a body. Yeah. If your body was paralyzed, immobilized, you would just have to watch as the dog ran off with your pen. You couldn't do anything about it, but you'd probably be thinking really hard, "Oh, bad dog, bad dog, bad dog." But it wouldn't get you much. So all of that mental activity, all of the verbal activity, all of the physical activity creates you in the world. And because you have this idea of you in the world, your kamma, your action, leads to more action.

Yeah. You've already got the ball rolling. You're already influencing the world. And sometimes it makes you feel good. Sometimes you get to keep your pen, and sometimes you get to tell someone that crosswords are stupid. And sometimes you just get to be right and important and, you know, wealthy in all the various ways. And so that kamma has a "resultant." Usually the resultant is it encourages you to make more kamma. And so the chain keeps going. And in this way we have what the Buddha describes as dependent origination.

One thing leads to the next thing, leads to the next thing, is the next thing. Then you get to the point where you're becoming in the world. Yeah, you've taken a human birth, you've got a human body, you move the human body in the world. The cycle repeats itself. Because you have a body in the world, you think that you are a person in the world. Therefore you generate the next mental moment of, well, what do I do next?

So all, all of our problems, all of our suffering, all of our greed, hatred and delusion comes from kamma. But how do we stop this process? Well, because of the way that it plays out, we have our mental kamma, leads to verbal kamma, leads to physical kamma. It's not as simple as just not doing anything, because all of our becoming and all of our existing and just the fact that we have a body already kind of leaves us in the state where we want to do something about it. But say, for the sake of speaking to my audience, we're meditators. Right? So what do we do in meditation? Well, we practice mindfulness. And what is mindfulness but a particular kind of kamma that is non resultant?

And this is the case with all of our various aspects of the Eightfold Path. The path that the Buddha points out is all of these activities which, unlike thinking of "my pen" or "juicy watermelon", the kamma of the Eightfold path involves renunciation, it involves not having strong opinions, it involves letting things go, it involves non becoming. So with our meditation, we practice mindfulness, we experience what is happening in the body and we decide we don't need to react, we don't need to do anything. The body is safe, the body is calm, actually, the body is breathing. It's more healthy than when I'm doing stuff.

How is that? When I get up and I go to the fridge and I get what I want and I eat something, it's less healthy than when I'm just sitting here breathing. Isn't that amazing? So this kamma, this non-resultant kamma, leads to the cessation of becoming.

Because we are not practicing any mental kamma, which leads to any verbal kamma, which leads to any physical kamma, the becoming stops. So our sense sphere becoming, our idea of being in this body ceases and we might enter samadhi. And in samadhi we don't need that sense sphere becoming. And so our mind suddenly becomes bright, and we start to realize that there's whole other realms of becoming that we can engage in. So, say, in our mind, we close our eyes and we imagine some scenario.

There's a table, but now there's a ball on the table. And this ball that we are imagining is *rūpa*. It is "fine material form." And those people who don't believe in the other world, who don't believe in other forms of existence, are basically not believing in their imagination. They're not believing in dreams.

In terms of the cosmology, other worlds, other realms of being, other kinds of beings that we can't see in the physical world are made up of rupa, the same thing as this ball in our imagination. And when we have an experience in the mind, this is a particular kind of experience.

So we imagine a ball, and then we think, well, okay, that's nice. Now imagine the ball just kind of rolling off the table, landing on the floor and kind of bouncing. There's no kamma there. It's just a dhamma. So we can see there's a realm of possibilities in the subtle form realm. All kinds of things can happen. And because we don't have a stake in it, because it's so easy, I mean, if the ball rolls down the hall, the imaginary hall, into another imaginary room, it doesn't matter. We'll just imagine another one. We have a lot more power in this realm of existence, and so we suffer a lot less.

But nevertheless, we imagine somebody coming in and picking up the ball and throwing it against the wall. Now, this is actually "fine material form" kamma, and what we might find if we picture this person angrily coming in and throwing the ball against the wall, we might hear a voice say, "Stop. What are you doing? That's my ball. I made that. Cut it out."

Even though we made the person and we made the ball, we can make another person. We can make another ball. Nothing was harmed. Still, we might feel something from this mental picture. And herein we begin to understand that even in the fine material form, there is all kinds of becoming and there is all kinds of kamma. And even though it's very easy to generate a mental image, eventually, somewhere along the line, we start to be uneasy about our ability to keep it going. We get a little fatigued or we get a little spun out, and we're like, "Oh, I got it just right....And then he threw it against the wall and it deflated." And we still cling to things in our mind, in the mental sphere. And because we cling to them, we say, "Okay, nobody mess with the ball." And then if we're dreaming, that doesn't last very long, does it? A whole parade will come in and they'll kick the ball down the street. And we're like, "stop, stop, stop, stop." We can't do anything because we're dreaming and our imagination is just going wild, right? We're suffering. And so we create a body that chases the parade and the ball down the street. This is fine material for becoming.

Now, say, through meditation, we get into a nice ethereal space and we're not even thinking. We're not even imagining scenarios like this. We might find that we're still forming plenty of opinions about things. And this is where we get a peek into the deepest level of the mind and we realize why kamma leads to something we call *vipāka* kamma, or the result of kamma. When we formed that opinion about that person, it's like, why did that person throw the ball at the wall? That was no good. We formed an opinion. Why did the person storm off when we said crossword puzzles are stupid and don't use my pen? We find that built into our mind and the way that our mind relates to beings, to the idea of a person and owning things and things needing to be stable and protected and being good or bad is that kamma has a flavor right built into it.

The moment we create the idea that I'm going to be, I'm going to exist, I'm going to influence my world...we've realized we can take two different tracks with this. We can do something good, something generous. Oh, yeah, you take the ball, do whatever you want with it, or, oh, yeah, you can use my pen. You know, it's fine, I'll find another if I need it. I'm not using it right now. We do something very generous, and when we do something very generous, maybe we get a good result. We feel good, like, oh, that's good. They really like crossword puzzles. They'll have fun doing it.

Or we think, "You know, I didn't even need that pen. It was just clutter. And now the desk is all clear." I would think, wow, it's just how many states of suffering the Buddha has protected us from. Yeah, I would have got in trouble had I opened my mouth, and instead I just get to let it go. Ah. And I get to sit here calmly and quietly, not experiencing the results of bad kamma.

The Buddha says there are ten kinds of unwholesome kamma, and he breaks this down into three categories. So we have three kinds of unwholesome mental kamma, four kinds of unwholesome verbal kamma, and three kinds of unwholesome physical kamma. And you might recognize these because we just chanted seven of them. The three kinds of physical kamma are to kill, to injure, maim, to take life, to steal, to take the possessions that are not ours, to damage them, do what we want with them, run off of them, or to commit misconduct in relationships, specifically misconduct in regards to sensuality, to have our way with things in the various ways as this deals with people, but just misconduct and sensuality in general.

Four kinds of bad verbal kamma... falsehood, malicious or insulting verbal kamma. we have gossip or divisive kamma, saying things to divide people, or we have just idle chatter, pointless talk. We're just talking to talk. It feels good sometimes to vent, except for the other person who is being vented to, in which case they're trying to find the exit.

And then we have three kinds of bad mental kamma, and this is the precursor to all of the bad stuff that we find ourselves doing in the world that gets us in trouble. And this is coveting or possessing, being attached to conduct of ill will, disliking, wishing harm, or cruelty, specifically causing harm to others, or being indifferent to the harm caused to others. These are bad intentions. So when we form the idea around these things, this is a precursor to doing these bad things.

To mirror this, the Buddha says there are ten kinds of wholesome kamma, and no need to go back through that list, because it's just not doing those ten things. And notice how the wholesome isn't its own category. Like, we don't say that that wholesome kamma is you've got to go out and give things, and you've got to spread metta to people, and you've got to be compassionate and, you know, be a doctor. You have to go around saying, you're so nice and, you know, only speak really important things about the dhamma. We don't go that far.

Yeah. Simply not doing the unwholesome kamma provides benefit to the world. "Being" without altering the world is wholesome. It requires a fair amount of wisdom in letting go, to not alter the world, to not get involved, to not try to get our way.

Most people, most beings are programmed to expect that, and they tend to be quite responsive and happy when we just let things be, when we don't impose ourselves on the environment. Either we're doing something to try to change the world and get something and from an idea of we want it to be a certain way and we're attached to it, or we're not.

It's not very complicated. But wholesome and unwholesome kamma create what are called two kinds of resultant. We do the good one and we get good results. And everybody already comes into the world programmed to expect this. We see something good and we think, "That'll probably have a good result". We see something bad and we think, "They're going to get theirs."

Well, this kind of judgment, as we were talking about last night in the tea time, is irrespective of self. So we have the idea of us, we have the idea of other, and we have the idea of groups of people or society in general. These are the three directions that kamma can take place. It can be us to ourselves or another person to ourselves. It could be us towards another person, or it can be other people towards other people. Or us towards groups of people. It can go in any of these directions, but it's all the same thing.

We form a judgment about our self. It's the same kamma. When we form a judgment about other people, it's just as a different object. We form judgments about groups of people. It's the same kamma.

And so we find that if we form a lot of judgments about other people, then we go doing those things that we were judging those other people so harshly about, and suddenly we are judging ourselves like, "Ah, there it goes. I'm doing it too." And it really doesn't matter who the target is.

And so this creates the vipāka kamma, the fruits of kamma. This is what we find playing out in the world. And this is often the hardest part about walking the Eightfold Path...even once we set the determination. "I am going to practice the Eightfold Path. I'm going to work on this project. I've got a problem. It's called suffering. But I see the solution. I'd like to get over it. I'm going to cultivate the Eightfold Path and get over it." Things don't get better immediately. Stuff keeps happening to us. And why? Well, we've already seen the process happening in our mind as we do in action, we expect there to be a result. And the interesting thing about the mind is because the mind precedes phenomena even before we do the physical action, we have already the mechanism of kamma, the mechanism of getting a result from it is already in place.

It happens before we even do the action. We've set the intention. If the intention is wholesome and letting go, then we already know that anything that comes from that is going to have a good result. And so the mind already starts, kind of creates these little intentions for a good result to come about through it. It's irrespective of self or other or society, it's built in.

But if we are acting on an unwholesome intention, then it's already built in. There is going to be a bad result. And you could say that the bad result happens out there, but really you could die and you could be reborn in a whole other phase of existence. Or suddenly you get in a car accident and you're like, why did this happen to me? It's entirely possible that it's some resultant for some bad thing that "you" did in the past, it wasn't even you, it wasn't this body, but it's something.

And the thing is, because of the way kamma works and the way that we imagine that "there's a being," there is a "self" that needs to get the result of that bad thing that "they" did. Down the line, this stream of kamma results in somebody getting their comeuppance and it's not even the same somebody, but that's the way kamma works. Somebody had to pay for it, you get the result. So we find that even if we stop doing stuff, we're still getting the resultant of many, many unwholesome things and wholesome things that we did in the past.

And this is why it can be a bit mysterious for people that even the Buddha, even the enlightened disciples, even us as practitioners, once we decide to do good, bad stuff still happens to us. But this is built into samsara and this is a great reason to check out, because if there is a self, there is a possibility for suffering. And if you are making kamma, you're going to get results in the future. And the Buddha talks about, you know, there is dark kamma, there is light kamma, there's dark and light kamma, there's neither dark nor light kamma. And he's really talking about this mix we've got.

Yeah. It's really hard to do just wholesome kamma, in the world. It's really hard. And even if we did, it doesn't mean we're going to get all good results. We've done a lot of bad stuff in the past that we can't erase, and some of that stuff is going to happen in the world.

As we're moving through the world, we see that we've got both of these things happening at the same time. We're getting the results of past actions, but it's up to us to decide how we're going to respond to it. How we respond to it can help us either continue down the path of eliminating suffering or it can compound our suffering.

We can get in a car accident, we can blame the other person, say, why did this happen to me? We can say, "Oops, that's a shame," and let it go. I'm not saying you shouldn't call your insurance and try to

work out who's at fault and try to get your car repaired. I'm just saying that not all the time should we default to who's at fault here. Because probably, you know, to some degree, we might have deserved a part of it, and that's a hard pill to swallow at times. But we find that when we do, all of this really starts to make sense. Yeah. How do we exist in the world without making new kamma? Well, even if we stop, all of our becoming stuff is going to keep happening.

Things are going to play out. The sun is going to rise and it's going to set, there's going to be weather. We're going to get hungry. We have all of these things in motion just like our little watermelon in the field growing towards the sun and putting down its roots, we're going to keep living. We're going to keep responding to our environment. And none of that needs to take kamma, none of that needs to take us altering-the-world. We really can kind of go with the flow, even with the harsh ups and downs, we can say to ourselves that there's nothing out of place here. Even something big and dramatic, just like, oh, I just found out I've got this disease, or I just got in a car accident, or the air conditioner just broke.

'Why is this happening to me?' Well, something's going to happen. This is samsara. Samsara already knows it's not going to be perfect all of the time. And this allows us to cultivate this non-resultant kamma. More and more we start to say, "Do I even need to do stuff? Do I need to alter my environment? Do I need to force myself?" We stop doing that and gradually sense sphere becoming stops, gradually fine material form becoming stops, suddenly, even mental becoming, even the idea I am, I need, I want, I should be, it should be, this is the way things should be....All of these ideas stop, and even formless becoming stops, all becoming stops. And when there's no self, there is no suffering. Lo and behold, we arrive at a state where it's just a bunch of dhammas and we realize they come and go. There doesn't need to be any suffering there. And when we arrive at that point, there really isn't.

And so what happens when a being who is no longer generating kamma, is no longer creating that active becoming, passes away? Well, this is what we would call *parinibbāna*. And the Buddha likened this to a flame of a candle. The flame is burning based on the wick, the fuel and oxygen and heat. It's got all of these conditions that are allowing it to burn. But say a wind comes, blows it out. We wouldn't say, what direction did the flame go? Is the flame up in the north or is it in the south? Is it in the east or west? Where is the flame right now? Is it in the land of flames, waiting to return when we flick the lighter? No, it just went out.

It was existing based on the meeting point of those conditions, and with the separation of those conditions, it no longer needs to exist. And so the Buddha would often be asked, "Like, so, what's up with the Tathāgata and the Buddha" (the Tathāgata being another name for the Buddha) "Like, so, after death, does he exist? Does he not exist? Does he both exist and not exist at the same time? Or does he neither exist nor not exist?" And there is an inherent assumption here that there is nothing beyond kamma.

But we've already established there are dhammas. Yeah, there are things, and you don't need kamma to have things, you don't need to change the world for the world to be. And so the assumption that there needs to be kamma, that there needs to be somebody who goes to the north or east or south or west, who goes to that realm or that realm, is an assumption that is false. It is trying to assume that there's something in these dhammas that there really isn't. And so the Buddha wouldn't answer the question,

“What happens to the arahant? What happens to the Tathāgata? What happens to an enlightened being at death?”

Because all of the assumptions we make based on kamma are wrong assumptions. Kamma is not necessary. And once we realize that, we start to see why nibbāna is such a potent goal to reach this extinguishing of making more kamma in the world.

And also why parinibbāna is so amazing, because it's literally the going out of a burning flame of suffering, a big mass of perpetual suffering that just keeps burning and spreading and making things hot and painful and worse. When that goes out, you have nibbana coolness, the cessation of suffering. All that has gone out was the suffering with the end of the kamma. What has gone out is all of the resultant. All the “somebody-has-to-pay-for-this.” Well, there's nobody there, so there's nobody that needs to pay for it anymore. All of that vipāka from innumerable births no longer has anywhere to land, and the whole mass of suffering has now been extinguished.

So a very big subject. And the Buddha, again, as I said many times, the Buddha cautions us not to try to figure out the bits and bobs of kamma. like, why did this thing lead to that result? And when did I do something that caused this thing to happen? He says, you'll make your head explode. It's not good. Don't do that. It'll lead to confusion, it'll lead to doubt, it'll lead to a migraine.

But nevertheless, we can explore this. We can explore, like, why do I need to do something? What is motivating me? What would it be like to relinquish that motivation, to relinquish that activity? And what would the experience be if I was not becoming, I was not doing so much, I was not trying to alter my world, but was experiencing it?