Kamma (conditioning)

Siddhātta's examination of his mind and his experience eventually revealed to him the process by which suffering arose, which immediately suggested a way of going beyond it. Tradition describes these insights as taking place over the course of one night, although this may be a dramatic fiction. India being a very hot country, it was common practice for contemplatives to meditate through the relative cool of the night instead of by day. The night was divided into three watches and Gotama is described as having three great insights, one in each watch of the night. It is only after this that we can properly call him the Buddha, a title which means 'awakened'.

The insights of the first two watches of the night relate to our third word: *kamma* or conditioning. This word is much more familiar in the West in its Sanskrit form: *karma*. This makes it easily the hardest of our words to explain, since everyone already has an idea about what it means! Since the word is also used in Hinduism, New Age thought and popular culture, some of these meanings are very different from what the Buddha meant when he used the word.

Kamma literally means 'action', but the English word that probably best captures the idea of it is 'conditioning'. The scientist Ivan Pavlov became famous for his demonstration of conditioning in dogs. He trained them to associate being the sound of a bell with being fed, simply by always ringing a bell and feeding them at the same time. After a while, he only needed to ring a bell and the dogs would start to salivate. The action that triggers a behaviour (the food or the bell), is known as a stimulus. The behaviour that results (salivating) is known as the response.

Humans are maybe more complex than dogs, but one very important feature of our mental and emotional lives is still that they are conditioned by past actions and experiences. These past actions affect our habitual reactions to things and the thoughts and feelings that arise within us, often at an unconscious level. To give a practical example, imagine meeting a person that you previously had a confrontation with. Your new meeting with them is not a blank slate, but is coloured by your past interactions – it has a kammic past. As soon as you see them, your body will produce a little shot of adrenaline. Your hackles will rise. You might have gone over the previous argument in your mind and the comebacks that you thought of too late will crowd to the front of your mind and the tip of your tongue. Before a word is exchanged, you are primed to repeat the previous experience.

Kamma takes many forms, including bodily patterns, thoughts, feelings and patterns of belief. If we don't pay attention to them, our habits of body and mind are liable to reinforce themselves, trapping us into predictable patterns of action. Stimulus leads directly to response and our conscious minds trail along behind, justifying the responses rather than choosing them.

Meditation is used in Buddhism both to give insight into our patterns of conditioning and to free us from them. If you sit down quietly and try to keep your attention focussed on one thing, such as your breath, you will notice that the mind has a strong tendency to wander off. If this isn't checked, it will continue with one thought setting off another in seemingly random patterns of association. If we pay attention to this mental chatter, we will notice two things. The first is that the associations are not really random, but have themes and predictable patterns – they are conditioned. The second is that we have a strong tendency to tell ourselves stories. These barely-conscious narratives form a large part of our conditioning.

Once aware of this, we can deal with it in several ways. One is to examine and challenge our conditioning. We may have picked up our responses and the stories we tell ourselves from various places: from our family, from our culture, from significant events in our lives. They are not always good for us. We can apply the Buddha's basic test: do our responses and narratives lead to long-

term welfare and happiness or do they lead to harm and suffering? If the answer is the latter, maybe we need to change them.

Secondly, we can become less driven by habit overall. In meditation, once you notice that the mind has wandered, you note where it has gone, and then bring it back to the chosen object of attention. You do this as many times as you need to, and slowly you become better at noticing what the mind is doing and at interrupting its chains of association. In other words, you open up a little space between stimulus and response, a little freedom to choose whether to allow the conditioned response to turn into action or whether to do something new. You move from being reactive, to being a little more creative.

Finally, we can be more careful about what habits we create. A key part of the Buddha's insight was that, in general, ethically negative actions, motivated by greed, hatred and ignorance, tend to condition negative, unpleasant states of mind, while ethically positive actions, based on generosity, goodwill and insight, tend to condition positive states of mind. This is perhaps the single most misunderstood aspect of the Buddha's teaching on conditioning, because it appeals to our desire to see justice done and crimes punished, but kamma in Buddhism is not meant as a cosmic system of reward and punishment. If it was that, it would be an untestable speculative belief on a par with the existence of heaven and hell. Instead, it is simply an observation about the way that human minds work. It is neither fair nor unfair – it just is. It also offers an obvious route to improving your life, which you can test for validity in your own experience and put into practice if you find it to work.

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The Buddha's insight into how thoughts and actions arise gives us a useful way of thinking about our responsibility for our actions. In Western thought, it is often held that bad thoughts make us bad people. In Buddhism, since conditioning can come about in many ways, we should not be surprised or too hard on ourselves if we find some of the conditioned impulses that arise in us are ones that we might not like to admit to. We are not necessarily responsible for the existence of the impulse. The moment of responsibility comes at the moment of choice, when we decide whether or not to translate that impulse into action. It is these choices that affect our future kamma. Bear in mind though, that actions are not limited to physical actions. The Buddha speaks of actions of body, speech and mind. So, for instance, if we manage to avoid taking a vengeful action but instead indulge in thoughts and fantasies of revenge, we are still creating conditioning, if in a less immediately harmful way.

Of course, since our moment of choice then affects our future conditioning, over time we can affect our conditioning and we do become responsible for it. Therefore engaging with our kamma is a path of increasing responsibility and integration.

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There is one further reason why it might be worth taking hold of the kammic levers in your mind, your behaviour and your life. It is that if you don't, someone else might. Advertisers, populist politicians, cult gurus and manipulative people in general all know, either by instinct or increasingly by science, how your mind works and are skilled at implanting narratives in it that work to their benefit rather than yours. As the tools available to such people become ever more sophisticated, learning ways to avoid being manipulated by them becomes ever more important.

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You might have noticed that I have said quite a lot about kamma by now, without once mentioning rebirth or reincarnation, which is what most people first think of when they hear the word *karma*. What is the relationship between kamma and reincarnation, and is a belief in reincarnation necessary or justifiable?

There is no doubt that Gotama saw kamma in the context of rebirth, which was already a well established belief about the afterlife when he was teaching, but he reinterpreted it to fit his observations about the human mind in this observable life. People of his time believed that we could be reborn not only as humans but as animals, gods, lost souls in hell realms and a variety of other types of being from Indian folk belief and mythology. However, no matter how exotic the details of this belief appear, the process driving it is simply the process of conditioning that we experience in this life, extended into another one.

The Buddha believed that, although our bodies and minds perished at death, the kammic patterns that we have created live on and attach to a new birth. The realm in which this rebirth occurs depends on the nature of those patterns. The karma of people with a predominantly blissful state of mind will be attracted to a rebirth in the god realm, while those who cultivated jealous states will be attracted to a rebirth as a kind of titan called an *asura*. Hateful people will be attracted to hell realms and ignorant ones to animal rebirths.

Again, this isn't meant as a system of reward and punishment, but more a picture of how the process of kamma observed in this life would play out projected onto the world of traditional Indian mythology. At the same time as being a grand cosmic vision, it is rather parochial. Although the Buddhist texts can imagine countless realms rising and falling over periods of time that make the billions of years since the Big Bang look like an instant, they are unable to picture the human world being dominated by anything but the existing clans of the Ganges Valley.

The Buddha's reimagining of the process of rebirth is similar to the way he put a new spin on many aspects of traditional Indian belief, usually giving them a more psychological and ethical meaning. He almost certainly believed it to be literally true, not just a teaching method. However, he didn't require this belief of others. Recognising that the idea of rebirth is by definition something that we cannot test in our own lives, he said that to practice his teachings required a belief in kamma[1], but not in rebirth.

The Buddha ended his discourse to the Kālāmas of Kesaputta with what are known as the four assurances. The first two assurances are that if rebirth exists then the creation of good kamma will lead to a happy rebirth, but if it doesn't then it will at least lead to happiness in this life. The last two are that if rebirth exists then the creation of bad kamma will lead to an unhappy rebirth, but if it doesn't then it will still lead to problems worth avoiding in this life. These assurances are good news for modern Buddhists, since it is difficult for us to see what mechanism the transfer of kamma could take place by, given all that we have learned about the relationship between the brain and the mind since Gotama's day.

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Since there are so many ideas about kamma, both inside Buddhism and outside it, it is worth spending a little more time to identify some misconceptions about it that the Buddha identified.

[1] The need to believe in kamma is not a sort of catechism, but a recognition of the fact that if you don't believe it to be true, you are unlikely to see any reason to practice Buddhism.

The first is that everything that happens is due to kamma, an idea sometimes expressed as "everything happens for a reason" or "bad things only happen to bad people". This is so often presented as a Buddhist teaching that it may come as a surprise that the Buddha specifically denied it. He said instead that things happen for many reasons, including blind luck. Karma is only one of them.

Another misconception, related to this one, is that kamma means that people deserve everything that happens to them. The Buddha warned against thinking this way, both because not everything that happens is down to kamma and because, even when something is kammically caused, we have no way of knowing whether someone's current fortune or misfortune reflects the majority of their past actions or an isolated event that happens to be bearing fruit at this moment. Despite the Buddha's words, some Buddhist countries have a popular belief that people suffering disabilities or other misfortunes shouldn't be given any help or sympathy because they are being punished for something they have done in a past life. It is harder to imagine a greater perversion of the Buddha's teaching on how beings experiencing conditioned existence should treat each other – with solidarity and compassion.

Finally, kamma is sometimes misunderstood as being fate or destiny, but if kamma was inescapable fate then there would be no point to Buddhist practice. Old conditioning would ripen into action and become new conditioning in an unbreakable chain. Indeed, some other wanderers at the time of the Buddha took exactly this view and argued that all we could do was wait stoically for fate to play itself out over countless rebirths. What made the Buddha distinctive was precisely his insight that kamma is not fate, that there is a point in the cycle at which we can choose whether or not an impulse becomes an action.

One important aspect of the Buddha's idea of conditioning is that it is forward-looking, not backward-looking. It asks how we can affect our future: it is not meant for digging into our past to explain every aspect of our present. The Buddha said that anyone trying to trace all the roots of kamma would 'go mad and be vexed'!

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Not all kamma is individual kamma. We can be conditioned by our biology, by our culture, or by our family, as well as by our own actions. The Buddha concentrated on individual kamma because it is the one that we can do something about, but it can be worth thinking about the other levels too. As well as receiving conditioning from others, we can also pass it on this way. Thus whole societies can evolve positively or negatively. If we break a negative kammic chain, we are not only benefitting ourselves but also those who come after us in our families and our cultures.

Part 3

Coming soon!