

Excerpt from The Manual of Buddhism

Five Questions on Kamma



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Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambudhassa.

Question 1:

Do the Kammas of parents determine or affect the kammas of their children?

(Note:-Physiologically, children inherit the physical characteristics of their parents).

ANSWER: Physically, the kammas of children are generally determined by the kammas of their parents. Thus, healthy parents usually beget healthy offspring, and unhealthy parents cannot but beget unhealthy children

On the other hand, morally, the kamma of a father or mother does not in any way affect or determine the kamma of their child. The child's kamma is a thing apart of itself—it forms the child's individuality, the sum-total of its merits and demerits accumulated in its innumerable past existences. For example, the kamma of the Buddha to be, Prince Siddattha, was certainly not influenced by the joint kammas of his parents, King Suddhodana and his Spouse, Queen Maya. The glorious and powerful kamma of our Buddha-to-be transcended the kammas of his parents which jointly were less potent than his own.

Question 2:

If the kammās of parents do not influence those of their children, how would the fact be explained that parents who suffer from certain virulent diseases are apt to transmit these evils to their offspring?

ANSWER: Where a child inherits such a disease it is due to the force of the parent's characteristics because of the force of the latter's *utu* (conditions favorable to germination). Take, for example, two seeds from a sapling plant one in inferior, dry soil; and the other in rich, moist soil. The result, we will find, is that the first seed will sprout into a sickly sapling and soon show symptoms of disease and decay while the other seed will thrive and flourish, and grow up to be a tall, healthy tree

It will be observed that the pair of seeds taken from the same stock grows up differently according to the soil into which they are put. A child's past kamma (to take the case of human beings) may be compared to the seed; the physical disposition of the mother to the soil; and that of the father to the moisture which fertilizes the soil.

It will be seen that, although a child's kamma be very powerful in itself, it cannot remain wholly uninfluenced by those of its parents. It is apt to inherit the physical characteristics of its parents yet, it may occur that the child's kamma, being superlatively powerful, the influence of the parent's joint kammās cannot overshadow it.

All beings born of sexual cohabitation are the resultant effects of three forces—one, the old kamma of past existences. The next is the characteristic of the mother, and the third, the characteristic of the father. The physical dispositions of the parents may or may not be equal in force. One may counteract the other to a lesser or greater extent. The child's kamma and physical characteristics such as race, color, etc., will be the product of the three forces

Question 3:

On the death of a sentient being, is there a 'soul' that wanders about at will?

ANSWER: When a sentient being leaves one existence, it is reborn either as a human being, a Deva, a Brahma, an inferior animal, or as a denizen of one of the regions of hell. The skeptics and the ignorant people hold that there are intermediate stages--- Antarabhava--- between these; and that there are beings who are neither of the human, the Deva or the Brahma worlds, nor of any one of the states of existences recognized in the Scriptures,--- but are in an intermediate stage. Some assert that these transitional beings are possessed of the five *khandhas*:

Some assert that these beings are detached 'souls' or spirits with no material envelopes and some said that they are possessed of the faculty of seeing like Devas.

This belief in intermediate stages between existences is false, and is condemned in the Buddhist teachings. A human being in this life who by his Kamma is destined to be a human being in the next will be re-born as such; one who by his Kamma is destined to be a deva in the next will appear in the land of devas , and one whose future life is to be in hell, will be found in one of the regions of hell in the next existence.

For example, a human being dies and is reborn in the land of devas. Though these two existences are different, yet the link or continuity between the two at death is unbroken in point of time. So in the case of a man whose future existence is to be the hell, the distance between hell and the abode of man appears to be great. Yet, in point of time, the continuity of "passage " from the one existence to the other is unbroken, and no intervening matter or space can interrupt the trend of this man's kamma from the world of human beings to the regions of hell. The "passage" from one existence to another is instantaneous, and the transition is infinitely quicker than the blink of an eyelid or a lightning-flash.

Kamma determines the realm of rebirth and the state of existence in such realm of all transient beings (in the cycle of existences which have to be traversed till the attainment at last of Nibbana)

Kammas in their results are manifold, and may be affected in many ways. Religious offerings (Dana) may obtain for a man the privilege of rebirth as a human being, or as a deva, in one of the six deva-worlds according to the degree of the merit of the deeds performed and with the observance of religious duties (sila).

For those who practice the five jhanas or states of enlightenment will go to the Brahma worlds or Brahma-lokas up to the summit, the twentieth Brahma world.

Those with bad deeds are to be found in the lowest depths of the hell. Thus, our kammass, past, present and future, were, are, and will ever be the sum-total of our deeds, good, indifferent or bad, according as our actions are good, indifferent or bad, as will be seen from the foregoing, our kammass determine the changes in our existences.

"Evil spirits" are therefore not beings in an intermediate or transitional stage of existence, but are really very inferior beings, and they belong to the world of Petas.

They are very near the world of human beings. As their condition is unhappy, they are popularly considered as evil spirits. It is not true that all who die in this world are reborn as evil spirits, though human beings who die sudden or violent deaths are reborn in these lowest worlds as terrestrial spirit.

Question 4:

Is there such a thing as a human being who is reborn and who is able to speak accurately of his or her past existence?

ANSWER: Certainly, this is not an uncommon occurrence, and is in accordance with the tenets of Buddhism in respect to kamma. Such a person is called a jatisara puggalo from jati, existence, sara, remembering and puggalo, rational being.

The followings (who form an overwhelming majority of human beings) are unable to remember their past existences if, and when reborn as human beings.

1. Children who die young.
2. Those who die old and senile.
3. Those who are strongly addicted to the drug or drink habit.
4. Those whose mothers, during their conception, have been sickly or have had to toil laboriously, or have been reckless or imprudent during pregnancy. The children in the womb being stunned and startled lose all knowledge of their past existences.

The following are possessed of knowledge of their past existences. *viz:*—

1. Those who are not re-born (in the human world) but proceed to the world of devas, of Brahmas, or to the regions of hell, remember their past existences.
2. Those who die sudden deaths from accidents, while in sound health may also be possessed of this faculty in the next existence, provided that the mothers, in whose wombs they are conceived, are healthy, clean-lived and quiet women.
3. Again, those who live steady, meritorious lives and who (in their past existences) have striven to attain, and have prayed for this faculty often attains it.

Lastly, the Buddha, the Arahants and Ariyas attain this gift which is known as pubbenivasa-abhinnana.

Question 5:

Which are the five Abbhinnana? Are they attainable only by the Buddha?

ANSWER: The five Abhinnana (Psychic powers) (Pali Abhi=excelling; nana=wisdom) are:

1. Iddhividha, **Creative power,**
2. Dibbasota, **Divine Ear;**
3. Cittapariya-nana, **Knowledge of others' thoughts,**
4. Pubbenivasanussati; **Knowledge of one's past existences;** and

Dibbacakkhu, [The Divine eye](#).

The five Abhinnana are attainable also by Arahants and Ariyas and not only the above, but by ordinary mortals who practice according to the Scriptures; as was the case with the hermits, etc., who flourished before the time of the Buddha and who were able to fly through the air and traverse different worlds.

In the Buddhist Scriptures we find, clearly shown, the means of attaining the five abhinnana ; and even now-a-days, if these means are carefully and perseveringly pursued, it would be possible to attain these. That we do not see any person endowed with the five abhinna today, is due to the lack of strenuous physical and mental exertion towards their attainment.

