



KAMMA

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*Before beginning and without an end,
As space eternal, and as surety sure,
Is fixed a power divine which moves to good;
Only Its laws endure.*

ONE of the most important of the doctrines of the Buddhist religion is that which relates to the Law of Karma; the teaching, namely, that the lives and destinies of men, and of all living creatures, are fashioned in accordance with a definite law of Nature, and are the outcome only of causes set in motion in the past by the being who experiences these effects. It is a doctrine of especial importance for us to consider, first, because the purport of this doctrine of Karma is largely misunderstood here in Burma - a misapprehension which has given rise to many a weakness in the national character; and secondly, because the right comprehension of that Law is one of the keys to all success in life.

The misapprehension to which I have referred, lies in the wholly incorrect assumption that a man's life on earth is as it were predetermined for him by the Karma which he inherits from his bygone lives; and that no man has the power to depart, even by a hair's breadth, from the path in life which his past has prepared for him. It is owing to it also, and to the wrong view of life that results from it, that so much of Burmese energy is frittered away in the foolishness of astrology and of magic, in attempts to lift the veil of futurity, to change one's luck by spells, or to discover hidden treasure by similar means. So it is that when some sudden misfortune falls upon a Burman, he, deeming that he is now reaping the inevitable penalty of bygone misdeeds, abandons at once that vigorous effort, which alone could save him; and thereafter, instead of setting to work to build again his

Fallen fortunes, lives idly hoping that his destiny may change again, for the good this time. So also is it with many a noble movement set on foot in Burma, as the hundreds of ephemeral Societies founded for this or that good purpose, and collapsing ere a year has passed, bear witness. At first, vast interest and excitement: strenuous effort on the part of the promoters to carry out their objects; and then so soon as those obstacles which exist in every walk in life appear, that good work is abandoned by the very promoters themselves. The times do not appear to them to be ripe for the movement; and all these obstacles, instead of spurring them to new and greater efforts, seem to your countrymen clearly to demonstrate that Fate itself is opposing their endeavors; and so they abandon that good work,

even though it be on the very threshold of success. It is the chief difficulty that you will find here in this work to which you have set yourselves, the chief obstacle in the way of every conceivable reform in Burma. And yet it is not only a belief altogether at variance with the Buddhist doctrine of Kamma, but one specially pointed out in the Buddhist Scriptures as a false belief.

For Kamma is indeed the power which makes or mars the life, the works, the destinies of man. It is true that every living being save the Arahant himself lives as the Law of Kamma shall determine; and in each moment of his life he follows the good or evil way, works or is idle, lives happily or in sorrow, as his destiny determines. But this necessitarian view is only half the truth; and as we all know, a half-truth is often more powerful for evil than deliberate falsehood, for the half-truth lives by virtue of the truth it contains, while falsehood is by its very nature destined to a speedy end.

It is, then, to the Complementary part of this half-truth that we need specially to devote attention; and to do this, we need only consider the very derivation of the word itself. For this Kamma, looked upon in Burma as Nemesis, as an inevitable necessity from which no man may escape, comes from the Pāli root *kara*, the Sanskrit *kri*, both meaning action, work; and as it is used in Buddhist technicology, the word means at once Doing and the Thing Done, and thence, the power whereby an action is performed. And this Doing is to be regarded, not as the physical function which may accompany or result from a mental act, but as the mental act itself.

Kamma in Buddhist philosophy therefore means three things, according to the moment at which we regard it. It means, first, the performance of a mental action, whether that gives rise to external movement or to speech, or not. Secondly, it is applied to the *effects* of past action, as, in producing a definite mental state or environment. And thirdly, it means that force whereby the past action, regarded as a cause, gives rise to the state in question, which is its effect. To make this clear by the common analogy of the physical textbooks exhibiting the transmission of energy, in which a number of billiard balls are placed in a groove, touching one another: A light blow on a ball at the end of the line, after a definite short period of time, results in the motion of one at the other end, whilst the intervening balls do not perceptibly move. The blow is comparable to the mental act. The resultant movement of the terminal ball corresponds to the effect of this act in producing a definite change in the position of that ball. And the energy transmitted without apparent effect on the intervening balls,

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corresponds to Kamma regarded as the force whereby the ultimate effect is produced.

It must here be borne in mind that the whole sequence covered by the term Kamma is purely a sequence of mental functionings; or, in other words, this doctrine of Kamma is the application to the mental and moral worlds of the Law of the Conservation of Energy. At the same time, however, it must be remembered that, from the Buddhist point of view, all that we are and know and perceive is also only the outcome of our mental state. If a man, after partaking of indigestible food, goes to sleep, he will in the majority of cases be afflicted with terrible dreams; that is to say, by reason of the wrong action of overeating, his mind will create about him a horrible environment, so that in his dream he may imagine himself to be pursued by some fearful spectre, or to be falling from a precipice, or some similar unpleasant thing. So long as the nightmare lasts, it will appear to him that the world he is in -that is to say, the state of his environment- is a thing apart from him, a world external over which he has no control. But, as soon as he is awakened, he sees clearly that the whole of his dream, spectre or precipice, and the time and spatial extension of his universe, the fear he suffered, the attempts he made to escape from whatever terrified him- he sees that all these things, once he is wakened out of his dream, then fall into their right perspective as merely functionings of his own mind.

And the Buddhist teaching, the Buddhist view of this Universe wherein we live our waking lives, is that this also is a dream; that this also is the outcome of our past action, even as the nightmare is understood by the awakened man to be but the natural effect of the food he has taken. All life is but a dream -a dream more intense, more seeming-lasting, if you will, than any vision of the night; but still a dreaming, an illusion, wherein all that appears, this wide space and the duration of time, and sun and moon and star and all the manifold conditionings of life, are outcome of our character, the total of the outcome of our bygone thoughts, words, deeds; a Universe builded by ourselves and for ourselves alone, fruit of the heritage of immemorial lives.

It is indeed the aim and hope of every Buddhist to a waken out of all this dream of life, to enter into that state which, The Master (He whom we call The Buddha, the Awakened) has taught us, lives and reigns beyond this ever-changing and conditioned life. That last awakening, the attainment of Nibbana, is, as it were, the very reason of our Buddhist faith. For the present, in following out the operations of Kamma, we must turn to the life we have and live, remembering always that if in the highest philosophy it is but a dream, it is the dream wherein just now our lives are cast. And the

great question now before us is: Can we mould the life we have so as to make tomorrow's vision nobler, greater, and truer than the life we lead today?

It is in the answer to this question that the complement to the half-truth of which I have spoken appears -the understanding so lacking in this Buddhist land, which changes this fatality of Kamma into a power whereby each man may change, not his own destiny alone, but even, in less degree, that of all the world. For that answer is in the affirmative. We may, the Dhamma tells us, so far modify the cause of this our life, the power of Kamma itself, that even in this existence our destiny, our environment may all be changed. "It is," The Master tells us in the Pitaka, "it is through *not knowing and not understanding* that we have lived so long in this great ocean of existence, both you and I." And if "not knowing and not understanding" be indeed the source of all this suffering life, then, by Right Knowledge and Right Understanding we may in all things change the life we live. The change is, not only substituting a brighter, nobler, grander life for the petty path we tread, but even passing beyond the veil which hides from us the Light Eternal, and entering into the Truth which reigns beyond all life.

Only by knowing and by understanding! In all our life we see how true it is, this Teaching of The Master; by knowing and by understanding, if but rightly we apply our knowledge, we may command whatever power we in ignorance obeyed; we may turn every force of Nature to our service; and we may find in each universal law the means to escape from its domination. Men of all ages knew that all things unsupported fell upon the earth, but of the How or Why of this phenomenon they knew naught at all. Then, with Newton's great discovery of universal gravitation came not indeed the understanding, the knowledge of the Why of gravitation, but somewhat at least of the knowledge of the How. For long, even after Newton's discovery of the nature of this law, it still seemed an impossibility for man to rise above the surface of the earth; until at last it was discovered that gravitation acted also on the air about us, and that it acted less on hydrogen and other gaseous bodies. Once that knowledge was arrived at, it soon was possible to apply it; so that now, by making use of this one piece of knowledge, we can rise by virtue of that very Law of Gravitation as far as there is air enough to balance our apparatus and to sustain our life. For it is the same force of gravitation which pulls the stone towards the earth, that, when directed by right understanding, pushes the balloon away from it. And, as it is in this simple instance, so is it with all right comprehension of each universal law. By knowing and by understanding we may use the

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very powers of Nature to produce results seemingly opposite to those they commonly effect.

So is it also with this Law of Kamma which directs our lives. We may employ the very power which conditions us to free ourselves; from these conditionings, if we but rightly understand how to apply our knowledge. We know that the chief outcome of that law is that as a man sows, even so shall he reap that good thoughts and words and deeds bring forth conditions of happiness, and evil ones the reverse. Whilst it is true that at any given moment a man is bound to act only as his character dictates-to choose either good or evil according as the total of the myriad forces of his lives shall compel -it is equally true that he is able, even now and in this life, profoundly to modify by the production of new *Kamma* and its right application, that very character itself. So that, if we but will and understand, we may alter the very destiny wherewith we are born-alter and change it, whether for better or for worse, at every moment of our lives.

This, then, is the other half of the Teaching about Kamma which is so neglected in Burma at the present day. True, a man's destiny is the inevitable outcome of his bygone action. But even here and now we may alter the very nature of that destiny itself, by hard work, by diligence, by application; we may alter it by applying the knowledge that we have gathered from the Teaching of The Buddha He whose last words were: *Appamādena Sampādettha*. Sometimes you see two men on whom a similar calamity -say, the loss of all their wealth- falls, and one of them sits down saying: "This is Kamma, my destiny has altered for the bad, it is of no use to strive or work to overcome it"; and the other when that trouble comes, sets once again to work, and by earnest effort builds up a greater fortune than he had before. Know then that of these two, the former has completely missed the meaning of the Law of Kamma; while the latter has understood it, and knowing thus that Kamma. is the fruit of work and of work alone, has made that very affliction the source of new and greater wealth.

And understand full well that this is no unusual case, no special application of the knowledge of what Kamma means. If you are in college, you are even now carrying out this principle into effect; for, as you well know, on your present diligence depends the whole course of your future lives. It is by virtue of the knowledge that you now are gaining that later on you will be able to enter the professions; and if, for any one of you the future shall bring success, that success will be the outcome mainly of your present work. You, even now, are making the destiny of your lives; and as you now sow, so shall you later reap.

You know how, when a new subject of study comes before you, how hard it is at first to apply your minds to it, how great is the effort needed to understand it. It is as though each novel matter needed the making of a new pathway in the brain; and all the difficulty of study, all the difficulty of every function of our lives, depends only on what one may term the inertia of the brain, its opposition to this making of new paths. But if at first you make clear, by hard and careful application, the pathways of a given sort of thought, later it will be always easy for your mind to follow that path; so that at last a given mental process, full at first of all manner of difficulties, becomes so easy that one is scarcely aware of any effort in the doing.

Now in this making of the mental pathways, one thing is noticeable above all others, namely, that the more difficult the process is at first -or, in other words, the more effort you have to employ at first in clearing away the obstacles-the easier it is later to repeat the process; or, as we say, the better one has learned the thing. So it is also in life. The greater the obstacle to any given thing, as, for example, to such a movement as that to which you have set yourselves, the greater effort, it is true, is needed at first to do it. But if you can but bring yourselves to make that effort, to overcome those obstacles, the success of your work in later life when, leaving this: college you go forth into the world to put your principles into action; will be the greater in exact proportion to the very strength of the difficulties you have overcome.

There is a word that is used in medical science which very aptly applies to the two great classes of Kamma -the Kamma coming from our past lives, and the Kamma that we even now are making -whereby, as we have seen, the old time Kamma may, if we hut work hard enough, be altogether changed. That word is diathesis. Suppose a man is born of consumptive parents. That man may be said to have the consumptive diathesis. He has not the disease itself, but some condition of his physical structure predisposes him to contract that disease. Take the man with the consumptive diathesis, and another, born of non-consumptive parents; expose both to the same chance of infection by the bacteria of that disease; and the man with the consumptive diathesis will most likely get consumption and die of it; whilst the other, equally invaded by the same bacteria, will have sufficient resistance to their invasion not even to get ill at all. But on the other hand, if the man with the consumptive diathesis, knowing his heritage, takes great care to avoid all those causes (supposing he knew them?) whereby he may be exposed to the invasion of the bacteria, then he may pass through his whole life without any sign of that disease.

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Now, as those of you will know who may have studied the valuable article on the Forces of Character by Maung Shwe Zan Aung in *Buddhism*, there are two very important divisions of Kamma, in respect of the way in which it operates, which are respectively termed Reproductive and Supportive. Reproductive Kamma may be roughly described as that wherewith a man is born, his destiny or fate. This it is which in accordance with his bygone mental action, determines whether he is born rich or poor, noble or base, of great mental capacity or weak of wit; and this Reproductive Kamma corresponds exactly to our medical term diathesis. Setting aside the Supportive Kamma of the past life, and considering only that Supportive Kamma, which is built up in the present existence, this latter will correspond to the circumstances under which the actual contagion of the disease may enter the man. Then, as we have seen, if there is already the diathesis, Reproductive Kamma of the right sort, the result will be that, just as the man in the illustration would have his consumptive diathesis developed into actual disease, so do we, by the Supportive Kamma we now are forming, develop those characteristics whether good or bad, with which we are born. Take a child with the most magnificent brain-development possible; place him on an island attended only by savages; and the great possibilities latent in him will remain latent; he will grow up into a savage but little more advanced than those who have nurtured him. Here we have Reproductive Kamma strong for good; but there is no Supportive Kamma present, and thereby the great possibilities are never realised. On the other hand, place the same child at school, and in the learning he there acquires, he will form Supportive Kamma whereby his birthright may be developed into being; and thus it is always with operations of Kamma in general. Now, in the period of youth, you are making the Supportive Kamma which alone can nurture into life the dormant mental powers wherewith you were born. To the measure that you can by dint of application and hard work bring to fruition the dormant powers of your Kammic heredity, to that measure your lives on earth will be great or petty, rich or poor, powerful or weak. Your success will be only according as you yourselves -in this period when the powers of your several minds are being ripened by the sun of knowledge to the harvest time of life -shall work well in the fallow fields of your own hearts and minds, tending the growing seed with diligence, and uprooting the weeds of idleness, of passion, and of sin.

So lies before each human heart in this life's springtide, the potentiality of all that is to come. Kamma is not your ruler, or the blind arbiter of your destinies or ways; it is your very selves; it is the force which even now you are applying to the making or the marring of a human life. Bow down to it, and you will fall to the state of slavery, slavery to your own ignorance,

your own idleness, your folly and despair. You will fall to the living of ignoble lives -lives lived as the life of the brutes -unlit by the privilege of reason whereby comes power to win to all things high. So long as you wrongly think: "Fate is greater than my will," so long shall you remain in servitude to fate, weak, helpless, useless to your fellows, the prey of all those follies of astrology and magic which at this day are one of the most fruitful sources of the lack of stamina and stability of the Burmese race.

But say, but realise in your hearts the Truth. Say: "I am the maker of my life, and builder of my destiny. It is my will to live greatly and nobly in this world of men; to bring forth happiness where now is suffering; to help the fallen and support the weak. I am lord of this my life, the arbiter of all that life shall bring to me"; and saying thus, work hard to make it true. And so you shall win throughout in the hard battlefield of being. So you shall overcome all obstacles, gaining new strength from each fond weakness set aside. So, most of all, as nearest to your hearts and to the welfare of your race, you shall win the power from Fate to mould the destinies of Burma, to bring new strength to this your nation; the power to carry out the multitudinous reforms among your countrymen which may yet be the salvation of Burma; whereof the foremost in importance stands the right apprehension of all that is involved in the meaning and the application of this Buddhist doctrine of Kamma.