

Loṇa,phala Sutta

The Discourse on the Salt Crystal
 [How lovingkindness can limit bad karma]
 (Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.99)
 Translated by Piya Tan ©2003

Does one reap what one has sown?

A popular definition of karma is found in **the Samuddaka Sutta**¹ (S 11.10):

Just as the seeds are sown, so shall the harvest be;
 Good comes to the doer of good; evil to the evil-doer—
 As one has planted the seed, so shall one feel the fruit. (S v903/1:227)

This verse or part of it has often been quoted in popular Buddhism as an article of faith. The interesting point here is that this stanza (*gāthā*), included in the Sa,gāthā Vagga (the first chapter) of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, actually belongs to the free floating ancient **gnomic poetry** of India which the Buddhists have preserved (Winternitz 1933 2:57 f.).² In other words, this is not exactly “Buddha Word” (*Buddha, vacana*) but a popular saying.

The Samuddaka Sutta records an interesting Buddhist myth of an impending battle between the gods and the asuras (“titans”),³ the latter said to dwell in the great ocean. Some virtuous seers who dwelled by the ocean, fearing that the asuras would destroy their hermitage as had occurred before, requested “a guarantee of safety” (*abhaya, dakkhiṇa*) from Sambara, the asura leader. However, Sambara, who detested the seers for being “hated devotees of Sakka [the lord of the devas]” (*duṭṭhānam sakka, sevinam*), replied, “I will give you only fear!” The terrified seers then put a curse on Sambara:

Though we have asked for safety, you give us but fear.
 Having received this from you, may fear without end be yours!

Just as the seeds are sown, so shall the harvest be;
 Good comes to the doer of good; evil to the evil-doer—
 As one has planted the seed, so shall one feel its fruit. (S vv902 f/1:227)

It is said that as soon as Sambara fell asleep, he woke up howling as if struck from all sides by a hundred spears. The other asuras rushed to comfort him until the break of dawn. Henceforth, his sickened mind trembled; hence his other name, Vepa,citti (*cittam vepati*) (SA 1:347).

The Saṃyutta statement on karma, as such, should be understood in its context as a folk saying, not completely reflective of the Buddhist doctrine of karma, especially since such a folk notion encourages a **fatalistic view of karma**. The Buddhist conception of karma is much more complicated as would be apparent from our study of the Loṇa,phala Sutta.

¹ Also called Isayo Samuddaka S or Sambara Samuddaka S.

² Another example of the ancient Indian gnomic tradition is Āḷavaka S (Sn 1.10), which is a riddle in the ballad (*ākhyāna*) form, given by the yaksha Āḷavaka to the Buddha who answers them, Sn 181-192. “Too many cooks spoil the broth” and “Good wine needs no bush” are English gnomes.

³ “Asuras,” (*asura*), lit “anti-god”, variously tr as “titan”, “demon”. There were once gods in Tāvātimsa but fell from their state through being intoxicated with drinks. Their attempted return to Tāvātimsa resulted in protracted battles with the gods led by Sakka (S 1:216 ff; J 1:202-204; DhA 1:272-280; SnA 484 f).

[Set: “Karma & rebirth”]

On the conventions (abbreviations, bibliography, etc) used here, please refer to www.dharma.per.sg under /Buddhist Articles /Buddhism, A Virtual History /Technical Conventions or “Sutta Discovery” bound vol 2.

The “great self”

The idea of a “great self” mentioned in **the Loṇa,phala Sutta** (A 3.99). The doer of a minor evil deed might experience karmic pains in hell for it, but the same minor evil deed done by another might only bear its fruit in this life and not beyond.

The first kind of person is “of undeveloped body,⁴ undeveloped virtue, undeveloped mind, undeveloped wisdom: he is (mentally) limited (*paritta*), he has a **small self** (*app’ātuma*)⁵—he dwells with a little suffering.” [2a]

The second kind of person is “of developed body, developed virtue, developed mind, developed wisdom, he is (mentally) unlimited (*aparitta*), he has a **great self** (*mah’attā*)—he dwells immeasurable (*appamāṇa*).” [2b] (A 3.99/1:249)

The contrast between the two is given by **the parable of the salt crystal**. A salt crystal put into a cup of water makes it salty and undrinkable, but the salt crystal when thrown into the Ganges river does not make it salty nor undrinkable.

A person with a “great self” might still do a small evil action that brings karmic result but he does not experience its karmic fruits in hell (nor any of the lower states). In other words, this refers to either a Stream-winner, Once-returned or Non-returned: an Arhant has already transcended rebirth.

One can transform one’s “small” self into a “great” self through such practices as the cultivation of **lovingkindness** (*mettā*) or of **mindfulness** (*sati*). The importance of the cultivation of lovingkindness is attested by **the Brahma,vihāra Sutta** (A 10.208),⁶ where a meditator whose mind has “grown great” and “immeasurable” through lovingkindness knows:

Formerly my mind was limited (*paritta*) and undeveloped, but now my mind is boundless and well developed. Any limited karma⁷ that was done neither remains nor persists there.
(A 10.208/5:299)

Instructions in the practice of mindfulness with an immeasurable mind is given in the Mahā Taṇha,saṅkhaya Sutta (M 38), where it is stated that one who feels neither attraction nor repulsion for any of the six sense-objects, and who has mindfulness of the body, lives “with a mind that is immeasurable (*appamāṇa,cetaso*)”, in contrast to someone with the opposite qualities who dwells “with a mind that is limited (*paritta,cetaso*)” (M 38.40/1:270).

⁴ “Of undeveloped body”, *abhavita, kāya*. The explanation to this term and *bhavita, kāya* (“developed body”) are found in Mahā Saccaka S (M 36) where Saccaka initially identifies *kāya, bhāvanā* (“development of body”) as “self-mortification” (M 36.4/1:237). Comy explains that the Buddha takes “development of body” to mean “cultivation of insight” (*vipassanā bhāvanā*) and “development of mind” to be “cultivation of calmness” (*samatha bhāvanā*) (MA 2:285). Considering the bifurcation of meditation into “insight” and “calmness” is not canonical, we might take the term *abhavita, kāya* to simply mean “torturing the body” or “not taking proper care of one’s health” and that *bhavita, kāya* to mean “keeping oneself physically healthy”.

⁵ “Small self” (*app’ātumā*) or “insignificant self” (Harvey 1995:56; 2000:25).

⁶ See Brahma,vihāra S in Sutta Discovery, 2003.

⁷ “Limited karma”, *pamāṇa, kataṃ kammaṃ*, as in Tevijja S (D 1:251/13.77) & Saṅkha(dhama) S (S 4:322/42.8). AA here says that “limited karma” refers to sense-sphere karma (*kāmmāvacara, kamma*), and “unlimited karma” (*appamāṇa, kataṃ kammaṃ*) refers to form-sphere karma. It is called ‘unlimited’ because it is done by transcending the limit, for it is developed by way of specified, unspecified and directional pervasion.” SA on Saṅkha S explains that “When (simple) lovingkindness is said, this can be interpreted either as access concentration or absorption, but when it is qualified as ‘liberation of mind’ (*ceto, vimutti*) it definitely means absorption (*jhāna*).” The point is that if a person masters the “liberation of mind by lovingkindness” at the level of absorption, the karmic potential of this absorption attainment will take precedence over sense-sphere karma and will generate rebirth into the form realm. See Vism 309-311/9.49-58. (S:B 1149 n346; A:B 315 n73)

The Discourse on the Salt Crystal

The great self

1 (a) “Monks, for one who says thus: ‘Whatever karma a person⁸ does, he would experience⁹ that karma *in the same way*,’¹⁰ there is no living of the holy life, no opportunity for the right ending of suffering.

But, monks, for one who says thus: ‘**Whatever karma that a person does, he would feel its result that should be felt**,’¹¹ there is the living of the holy life, the opportunity for the right ending of suffering.

(b) Here, monks, for a certain person who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell. Again, monks, for another¹² person that same slight evil karma is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all.¹³

2 (a) Monks, **what sort of person who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell?**

Here, monks, a certain person is of undeveloped body,¹⁴ undeveloped moral virtue, undeveloped mind, undeveloped wisdom: he is (mentally) limited (*paritta*), he has a **small**¹⁵ **self** (*app’ātuma*)—he dwells small and suffering.¹⁶

Such a person, monks, is one who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell.

(b) Monks, **what sort of person is one who has done that same slight evil karma that is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all?**

Here, monks, a certain person is of developed body, developed moral virtue, developed mind, developed wisdom: he is (mentally) unlimited (*aparitta*), he has a **great self** (*mah’attā*)¹⁷—he dwells immeasurable (*appamāṇa*).

Such a person, monks, is one who has done that same slight evil karma that is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all.

The simile of the salt crystal

[250]

3 (a) Monks, suppose a person were to drop a salt crystal in a small cup of water. What do you think, monks? Would the water in that small cup of water become undrinkable on account of that¹⁸ salt crystal?”

“Yes, venerable sir.”

⁸ “A person,” *ayaṃ puriso*, lit “this person”.

⁹ “Would experience,” *paṭisaṃvediyati*. Elsewhere I have rendered it simply as “feel”, “felt”, etc.

¹⁰ *Yathā yathāyaṃ puriso kammaṃ karoti tathā tathā taṃ paṭisaṃvediyati*.

¹¹ *Yathā vedanīyaṃ ayaṃ puriso kammaṃ karoti tathā tathāssa vipakaṃ paṭisaṃvediyati*. “That should be experienced,” *vedanīyaṃ*, or “that which should be felt or known”.

¹² “For another,” *ekaccassa*, lit “for a certain (person)”.

¹³ Be *Nāṇupī khāyati kiṃ bahu-d-eva*. Cf *n’atthi aṇū pi saññā*, “not even a minute perception; not the least” (Sn 802).

¹⁴ “Undeveloped in body,” *abhāvita,kāya*, here meaning “resorting to self-torture, not taking care of one’s body or health”. See Introd above.

¹⁵ “Small self” (*app’ātumā*) or “insignificant self” (Harvey 1995:25, 56).

¹⁶ *Appa,dukkha,vihārī*. Comy: *Appakena pi pāpena dukkha,vihārī*, “he dwells in suffering because of the little evil” (AA 2:361). This phrase is clearly to be contrasted with *appamāṇa,vihārī* below.

¹⁷ On the “great self”, see Introd above.

¹⁸ “On account of that,” *amunā*, instr of *amu* or *asu*.

“Why is that?”

“That¹⁹ cup of water, venerable sir, has only a little water, on account of which, it becomes salty because of the salt crystal, and would be unfit to drink.”

(b) Monks, suppose a person were to drop a salt crystal in the Ganges river. What do you think, monks? Would the water in the Ganges river become undrinkable on account of that salt crystal?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Why is that?”

“That²⁰ Ganges river, venerable sir, is a great body of water, on account of which, it does not become salty because of the salt crystal, and would not be unfit to drink.

(c) In the same way, monks, here a certain person who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell. But, here, again for another person that same slight evil karma is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all.

4 ²¹(a) Monks, what sort of person who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell?

Here, monks, a certain person is of undeveloped body, undeveloped moral virtue, undeveloped mind, undeveloped wisdom: he is (mentally) limited, he has a small self—he dwells small and suffering.

Such a person, monks, is one who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell.

(b) Monks, what sort of person is one who has done that same slight evil karma that is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all?

Here, monks, a certain person is of developed body, developed moral virtue, developed mind, developed wisdom: he is (mentally) unlimited, he has a great self—he dwells immeasurable.

Such a person, monks, is one who has done that same slight evil karma that is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all.

The simile of wealth

5 (a) Here, monks, a certain person might be thrown into prison on account [of a debt or theft] of half a gold coin,²² or on account of a gold coin, or on account of a hundred [251] gold coin.

Again, monks, another person might not be thrown into prison on account of half a gold coin, or on account of a gold coin, or on account of a hundred gold coins.

(b) Monks, what sort of person might be thrown into prison on account [of a debt or theft] of half a gold coin, or on account of a gold coin, or on account of a hundred gold coins?

Here, monks, a certain person is poor, having little possession or means. As such, he is thrown into prison on account [of a debt or theft]²³ of half a gold coin, or on account of a gold coin, or on account of a hundred gold coins.

(c) Monks, what sort of person might not be thrown into prison on account of half a gold coin, or on account of a gold coin, or on account of a hundred gold coins?

¹⁹ “That,” *adum*, mfn demon pron = *adum*.

²⁰ “That,” *asu*. See prev 2 nn.

²¹ These two sections are a repeat of §2.

²² “A gold coin,” *kahapāna*. A *kahapāna* was probably a small gold coin. See V:H 1:29n, 71 n2, 2:100 n1-2, 102 n1. See also Introd to “Money and Monastics” by Piya Tan (Sutta Discovery series, 2003).

²³ His imprisonment is due to the fact that either he is unable to return the money or he is unable buy his freedom.

Here, monks, a certain person is wealthy, having great wealth and means. As such, he is not thrown into prison on account of half a gold coin, or on account of a gold coin, or on account of a hundred gold coins.

(d) In the same way, monks, here a certain person who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell. But, here, again for another person that same slight evil karma is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all.

6 ²⁴(a) Monks, what sort of person who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell? Here, monks, a certain person is of undeveloped body, undeveloped moral virtue, undeveloped mind, undeveloped wisdom: he is (mentally) limited, he has a small self—he dwells small and suffering. Such a person, monks, is one who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell.

(b) Monks, what sort of person is one who has done that same slight evil karma that is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all?

Here, monks, a certain person is of developed body, developed moral virtue, developed mind, developed wisdom: he is (mentally) unlimited, he has a great self—he dwells immeasurable.

Such a person, monks, is one who has done that same slight evil karma that is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all.

The simile of the butcher and the thief

7 (a) Monks, suppose a butcher or a goat slaughterer [**252**] is able to strike, or bind, or dispossess, or do as he likes to someone who without permission has taken away²⁵ (his) goat, but is unable to strike, or bind, or dispossess, or do as he likes to another who without permission has taken away (his) goat.

(b) What sort of person is a butcher or a goat slaughterer able to strike, or bind, or dispossess, or do as he likes, that is, to someone who without permission has taken away (his) goat?

Here, monks, a certain person is poor, having little possession or means. As such, a butcher or a goat slaughterer is able to strike, or bind, or dispossess, or do as he likes to him who without permission has taken away (his) goat

(c) What sort of person is a butcher or a goat slaughterer unable to strike, or bind, or dispossess, or do as he likes, that is, to someone who without permission has taken away (his) goat?

Here, monks, a certain person is wealthy, having great wealth and means, a rajah or a rajah's minister. As such, a butcher or a goat slaughterer is unable to strike, or bind, or dispossess, or do as he likes to him who without permission has taken away (his) goat. There is nothing else that he could do but with palms together, beg him thus: 'Sir, please give me my goat or its price!'

(d) In the same way, monks, here a certain person who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell. But, here, again for another person that same slight evil karma is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all.

8 ²⁶(a) Monks, what sort of person who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell? Here, monks, a certain person is of undeveloped body, undeveloped moral virtue, undeveloped mind, undeveloped wisdom: he is (mentally) limited, he has a small self—he dwells small and suffering.

²⁴ These two sections are a repeat of §2.

²⁵ "Without permission takes away," *adinnam ādiyati*, lit "takes the not-given" or "steals", but I wish here to maintain a correlated tr between here and (c). Alt tr "takes the ungiven (goat) away".

²⁶ These two sections (a)-(b) are a repeat of §2.

Such a person, monks, [253] is one who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell.

(b) Monks, what sort of person is one who has done that same slight evil karma that is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all?

Here, monks, a certain person is of developed body, developed moral virtue, developed mind, developed wisdom: he is (mentally) unlimited, he has a great self—he dwells immeasurable.

Such a person, monks, is one who has done that same slight evil karma that is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all.

(c) Monks, for one who says thus: ‘Whatever karma a person does, he would experience that karma *in the same way*,’ there is no living of the holy life, no opportunity for the right ending of suffering.

But, monks, for one who says thus: ‘**Whatever karma that a person does, he would experience its result that should be experienced,**’ there is the living of the holy life, the opportunity for the right ending of suffering.

—evaṃ—

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