

Loṇa,phala Sutta

The Discourse on the Salt Crystal

[How lovingkindness can limit bad karma]

(Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.99/1:249-253)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

1 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.² (S 903/11.10/1:227)

This verse or its popular version—“as one sow, so one shall reap”—has often been quoted as a Buddhist 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.³ In other words, this is technically not “Buddha Word” (*Buddha, vacana*) but a popular saying. Only what is truly “well-said” (*subhāsita*)—that which lessens or removes greed, hate and delusion—is regarded as Buddha Word.

The background of this popular “sower’s karma” saying is found in **the Samuddaka Sutta** (S 1:227), where a Buddhist myth relates an impending battle between the gods and the asuras (“titans”),⁴ the latter (according to the account) dwelled in the great ocean. Some virtuous seers who dwelled on the ocean shore, 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 “the hated devotees of Sakra [the lord of the devas]” (*duṭṭhānaṃ sakka, sevināṃ*), replied, “I will give you only fear!” The terrified seers resorted to putting 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 902 f/11.10/1:227)

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 (*cittāṃ vepati*) (SA 1:347).

Another popular notion of karma is found in **the Ayyakā Sutta** (S 3.22), where the Buddha consoles Pasenadi, the rajah of Kosala, on account of the loss of his beloved grandmother:

¹ Also called **Isayo Samuddaka S** or **Sambara Samuddaka S**. An almost identical saying, “By good works a man becomes good (*puṇya*), by evil works evil (*pāpa*),” attributed to the Vedic sage Yajñavalkya and secretly transmitted to another sage, Jāratkāra (Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.2). See Basham 1989:43 f.

² *Yadisāṃ vappate bījāṃ , tādisāṃ harate phalaṃ | kalyāṇa, kārī kalyāṇāṃ, pāpa, kārī ca pāpakāṃ | pavuttāṃ vappate bījāṃ, phalaṃ paccanubhossasī ti.*

³ Winternitz 1933 2:57 f. Another example of the ancient Indian gnomic tradition is **Ālavaka S** (Sn 1.10), which is a riddle in the ballad (*ākhyāna*) form, given by the yaksha Ālavaka to the Buddha who answers them, Sn 181-192. “Too many cooks spoil the broth” and “Good wine needs no bush” are English gnomes.

⁴ “Asuras,” (*asurā*), lit “anti-god”, variously tr as “titan,” “demon”. They 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 Sakra (S 1:216 ff; J 1:202-204; DhA 1:272-280; SnA 484 f).

- 431 All beings will die,
 For life ends in death.
They will fare according to their karma,
Following the fruits of good and evil—
 Evil deeds are hell.
 And good deeds heaven [happy destinies].
- 432 Therefore one should do what is good
 To pile it up for the future life.
 Merits support the living beings
 In the other world. (S 3.22/1:97)

Here we see the Buddha consoling the grieving rajah with a simple popular truth without going into deep teachings which the rajah was not ready for anyway. Understandably this is only a “provisional” teaching without any mention of the way of the samsara that karma supports.

The Sāmyutta statements on karma, as such, should be understood in its context as a folk saying, are not fully reflective of the Buddhist doctrine of karma, especially since such a folk notion may encourage a determinist or fatalist view of karma. The Buddhist conception of karma is much more complicated as would be apparent from our study of the *Loṇa,phala Sutta*.

In the *Loṇa,phala Sutta*, the sentence ‘Whatever experienceable karma [that do entail a consequence] that a person does, he would experience *the result of that karma*’ [1a] means that a man must reap what he has sown.⁵ In fact, HC Warren, despite rendering *bhikkhū* as “priests,” gives an insightful translation of the sentence as:

O priests, if any one were to say that a man must reap according to his deeds, in that case, O priests, there is no religious life, nor is any opportunity afforded for the entire extinction of misery. (*Buddhism in Translations*, 1896:221; emphasis added)

And Warren similarly renders well the closing sentence:

But if anyone says, O priests, that the reward a man reaps accords with his deeds, in that case, O priests, there is religious life, and opportunity is afforded for the entire extinction of misery.” (*Buddhism in Translations*, 1896:221; emphasis added)

Luis Gomez, on the other hand, renders the clause (*vedanīyaṃ kammaṃ*) as that there are “acts that do entail a consequence,” explaining that there are also “those (acts) that do not entail a fruit,” adding,

Moreover, the nature of consequence does not necessarily correspond or is not directly proportional to the nature or intensity of the act, for the final result depends on the maturation of the fruit, the *vipāka*, and this maturation depends on the soil in which the act is, so to speak, planted.⁶ (Gomez 1975:83)

If we take “experienceable” (*vedanīyaṃ*) here as qualifying “karma” (*kammaṃ*), then we can also take it as distinguishing “experientable karma” (one’s personal action) from the Vedic *karma* or ritual. In that case, the Buddha here is simply rejecting the efficacy of the brahminical sacrifices and ritual (*karma*), for example, whatever one offers one would receive the same in due course or in future lives, or that such rituals do not bring one any spiritual liberation.

⁵ Compare this to the seers’ curse (and gnome) mentioned earlier here: “Just as the seeds are sown, so shall the harvest be.”

⁶ On a plant imagery—karma as seeds—see (**Kamma**) *Nidāna Sutta* (A 3.33/1:134-136).

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,⁷ undeveloped virtue, undeveloped mind, undeveloped wisdom: he is (mentally) limited (*paritta*), he has a **small self** (*app’ātuma*)⁸—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 a stream-winner, a once-returned or a non-returned (but not an arhat, since he 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),⁹ 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 karma¹⁰ 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).

The Loṇa,phala Sutta should also be studied with **the Mahā Kamma Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 136), which discusses the complex working of karma and not merely that “good begets good, evil begets evil.”

⁷ “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”.

⁸ “Small self” (*app’ātumā*) or “insignificant self” (Harvey 1995:56; 2000:25).

⁹ A 10.208/5:299 = SD 2.10.

¹⁰ “Limited karma,” *pamāṇa,katam 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,katam 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

(A 3.99/1:249-253)

The great self

1 [249] (a) “Bhikshus, for one who says thus: ‘Whatever karma a person¹¹ performs, he would experience *that same karma*,’¹² there is no living of the holy life, no opportunity for the right ending of suffering.

But, bhikshus, for one who says thus: ‘Whatever experienceable karma [that do entail a consequence] that a person does, he would experience the result of that karma [that is, whatever fruits he reaps, they would accord with his karma],’¹³ there is the living of the holy life, the opportunity for the right ending of suffering.¹⁴

(b) Here, bhikshus, for a certain person who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell. Again, bhikshus, for another¹⁵ person that same slight evil karma is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all.¹⁶

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

Here, bhikshus, a certain person is of undeveloped body,¹⁷ undeveloped moral virtue, undeveloped mind, undeveloped wisdom: he is (mentally) limited (*paritta*), with a **small**¹⁸ self (*app’ātuma*), dwelling with little suffering.¹⁹

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

(b) Bhikshus, 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, bhikshus, a certain person who is developed body,²⁰ developed moral virtue, developed mind, developed wisdom: he is mentally unlimited (*aparitta*), with a **great self** (*mah’attā*),²¹ dwelling immeasurable (*appamāṇa*).

¹¹ “A person,” *ayaṃ puriso*, lit “this person”.

¹² *Yathā yathāyaṃ puriso kammaṃ karoti tathā tathā taṃ patisaṃvediyati*. It is possible here that “karma” (*kammaṃ*) also refers to the Vedic sacrifice. In that case, the Buddha is saying that there is no wholesome efficacy in such rituals.

¹³ *Yathā vedanīyaṃ ayaṃ puriso kammaṃ karoti tathā tathāssa vipakaṃ patisaṃvediyati*. “That should be experienced,” *vedanīyaṃ*, or “that which should be felt or known”. A:ÑB has “But if one says that a person who performs a kammic action (with a result) that is variably experienceable, will reap its result accordingly—in that there will be (a possibility for) the holy life...” (A:ÑB 315 n70). If we take “experienceable” (*vedanīyaṃ*) here as qualifying “karma” (*kammaṃ*), then we can also take it as distinguishing “experienceable karma” (one’s personal action) from the Vedic *karma* or ritual. Gomez, however, renders *vedanīyaṃ* here as those which “do entail a consequence” (1975:83). See Introd (2) above.

¹⁴ Henry Clarke Warren, in the early years of western Buddhist scholarship, gives a very insightful, if somewhat free, tr of this passage [1a]: “O priests, if any one were to say that a man must reap according to his deeds, in that case, O priests, there is no religious life, nor is any opportunity afforded for the entire extinction of misery. But if anyone says, O priests, that the reward a man reaps accords with his deeds, in that case, O priests, there is religious life, and opportunity is afforded for the entire extinction of misery.” (*Buddhism in Translations*, 1896:221)

¹⁵ “For another,” *ekaccassa*, lit “for a certain (person)”.

¹⁶ Be *Nānupi khāyati kiṃ bahu-d-eva*. Cf *n’atthi añū pi saññā*, “not even a minute perception; not the least” (Sn 802).

¹⁷ “Undeveloped in body,” *abhāvita, kāya*, here meaning “resorting to self-torture, not taking care of one’s body or health”. See Introd above.

¹⁸ “Small self” (*app’ātumā*) or “insignificant self” (Harvey 1995:25, 56).

¹⁹ *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.

²⁰ “Undeveloped body,” *abhāvita, kāyo*. Comy to **Piṇḍola Bhāra, dvāja S** (S 35.127/4:111) glosses it as *abhāvita, pañca, dvārika, kāyā*, “undeveloped in the body that are the five (sense-)doors,” ie lacking in sense-restraint (SA 2:395).

Such a person, bhikshus, 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) Bhikshus, suppose a person were to drop a salt crystal in a small cup of water. What do you think, bhikshus? Would the water in that small cup of water become undrinkable on account of that²² salt crystal?”

“Yes, venerable sir.”

“Why is that?”

“That²³ 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) Bhikshus, suppose a person were to drop a salt crystal in the Ganges river. What do you think, bhikshus? Would the water in the Ganges river become undrinkable on account of that salt crystal?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Why is that?”

“That²⁴ 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, bhikshus, 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 ²⁵(a) Bhikshus, what sort of person who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell?

Here, bhikshus, 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, bhikshus, is one who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell.

(b) Bhikshus, 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, bhikshus, 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, bhikshus, 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, bhikshus, a certain person might be thrown into prison on account [of a debt or theft] of half a gold coin,²⁶ or on account of a gold coin, or on account of a hundred [251] gold coins.

Again, bhikshus, 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) Bhikshus, 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, bhikshus, a certain person is poor, having little possession or means. As such, he is thrown into prison on account [of a debt or theft]²⁷ of half a gold coin, or on account of a gold coin, or on account of a hundred gold coins.

²¹ On the “great self,” see Introd above.

²² “On account of that,” *amunā*, instr of *amu* or *asu*.

²³ “That,” *adunī*, mfn demon pron = *adunī*.

²⁴ “That,” *asu*. See prev 2 nn.

²⁵ These two sections are a repeat of §2.

²⁶ “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 Intro to **Money and Monastics** = SD 4.19.

(c) Bhikshus, 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?

Here, bhikshus, 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, bhikshus, 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 ²⁸(a) Bhikshus, what sort of person who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell?

Here, bhikshus, 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, bhikshus, is one who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell.

(b) Bhikshus, 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, bhikshus, 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, bhikshus, 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) Bhikshus, suppose a butcher or a sheep slaughterer [252] is able to strike, or bind, or dispossess, or do as he likes to someone who without permission has taken away²⁹ a ram, but is unable to strike, or bind, or dispossess, or do as he likes to another who without permission has taken away a ram.

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

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

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

Here, bhikshus, a certain person is wealthy, having great wealth and means, a rajah or a rajah's minister. As such, a butcher or a sheep slaughterer is unable to strike, or bind, or dispossess, or do as he likes to him who without permission has taken away a ram. There is nothing else that he could do but with palms together, beg him thus: 'Sir, please give me a ram or give the cost of a ram!'

(d) In the same way, bhikshus, 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 ³⁰(a) Bhikshus, what sort of person who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell?

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

²⁷ His imprisonment is due to the fact that either he is unable to return the money or he is unable buy his freedom.

²⁸ These two sections are a repeat of §2.

²⁹ "Without permission takes away," *adinnaṃ 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 (ram) away".

³⁰ These two sections (a)-(b) are a repeat of §2.

(b) Bhikshus, 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, bhikshus, 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, bhikshus, 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) Bhikshus, 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, bhikshus, 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.

—evam—

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