

Kamma – is there still free will?

Dhamma talk on the 21st of June 2016

Someone asked me an interesting question recently about free will and how it interacts with the concept of *kamma* which has such a prominent place in the Thai Forest Tradition. There is free will, of course, since otherwise no-one would be able to break out of the cycle of birth and death. If there were no free will, we would only be able to increase our *kamma* or move it in another direction, but we would not be able to end the cycle of becoming which is driven by *kamma*.

One of the disciples of Acharn Mun had very strong, solid *samādhi* and a lot of experience with *jhanas*, and he was able to observe that within one mind-moment there are seventeen instants at which ‘choices’ can be made. Sixteen of them are determined by *kamma*, but one is completely free of *kamma* and allows us to choose to go in a new direction. Of course, if we are unable to ‘catch’ these seventeen instants, we are most likely to follow the path determined by our strongest *kamma*. Please understand that we have to be aware of every moment and aware that we can choose one way or another or neither. The most important part of the Lord Buddha’s teaching concerns this awareness, *sati* in Pāli language. If we are not aware of what is going on, we can only follow our *kamma*, increase it or change it from one lane to another; we can turn right or left if there’s a path going right or left, but we cannot create a new path. With free will, however, we can decide not to go right or left but to walk straight on and create a new lane of *kamma*. *Sati* is the key; the Lord Buddha told us to always have *sati, sati, sati*, and Acharn Mun stressed the same thing. *Sati* is the awareness of what is going on, not within the world but within ourselves. When we close our eyes in meditation, there may be feelings, thoughts or memories, and we need to be aware of them, seeing how they interact and how they build up the world that we call self. If we are really aware, we can observe how we constantly build up our self-view. In particular, we can notice how we repair it when someone says negative things about us or bolster it when someone says positive things. After negative comments, we repair the damaged wall of the castle of self-view, and after positive comments we add another tower to the castle to make it more impressive.

Sati is crucial. It’s also an important part of the fourth noble truth, the path that leads to the end of *dukkha*. To make progress on the path, we need to develop *samādhi*, and with *samādhi* comes *sati*. For instance, when we meditate on the breath (or on the word *buddho*), at first we are aware only of the breath going in or coming out, and we feel the breath as it does this. Later, when the mind gets calm and there is no more thinking, we find ourselves moving slowly into the heart. It’s usually said that the concentration drops into the heart, but that’s not really what happens. Actually, the concentration stays at the tip of the nose, but we suddenly feel our *sati*, the knowingness of the breath, coming out of the heart. We get so calm, so concentrated that we feel that concentration and *sati* have parted company and that *sati* has gone back to where it came from. This is how we follow the track of the ox: the track is the breath and it leads us to the ox, the heart. This is the way we get to our heart; please understand this. So, in the second phase of *samādhi* there will be two things: the point of concentration on the breath at the tip of the nose and the knowingness that comes from the heart. In the last phase of *samādhi*, everything drops into the heart. We just have to follow the *sati*, the knowingness that comes from the heart, and become one with this knowingness. At that moment the whole world disappears. It has to disappear because we are one-pointed; there is no longer a subject and object because they have merged into one thing, into the knowingness which is the true

nature of our *citta*. We can call this knowingness a preview of *nibbāna*. It can also be called our true essence. We can reach it for a while, but the moment we come out again we find that the world is unchanged. We know, however, that we have been in a very special place, and most of us want to go back there immediately.

It's important to be clear about *kamma* and free will. At the time of the Lord Buddha the dominant religion was an early form of Hinduism which had a caste system and saw *kamma* as unchangeable. However, the Lord Buddha denied this view of *kamma* since, if it were true, there would be no way out of the cycle of birth and death. He realised that without free will we would be unable to alter our *kamma*; to change lanes whenever we like or create new paths. The ability to do this is the only hope we have of becoming free. At any particular moment there is *kamma*, but we can decide how to deal with it. We can make a decision, and this relates to the knowingness. We can call this ability free will; we can decide to go this or that way, or in neither direction, and so we can control our *kamma*. Normally, everyone is controlled by their *kamma* unless they fight for their freedom, and free will is part of that freedom. In the end, an *arahant* is a free person able to do whatever he wants. He can follow this or follow that, and the results of his past *kamma* still come to fruition, but there is no reaction in his heart. He neither likes the results nor dislikes them. Our problem is that we either like or dislike *kamma* from the past when we receive it, and new *kamma* is made depending on our reaction to it. For instance, if we are cold, we react negatively and look for a blanket or a coat to put on or for a way to make a fire. An *arahant* does not react like that because he is free. If he is living in the forest and it is cold, but there is no fire or firewood, he will just accept the situation. If there is firewood he can light a fire to make a hot drink, but not to warm himself as *bhikkhus* are forbidden by their monastic rules (*vinaya*) to do that. The whole purpose of training as a *bhikkhu* is to learn to be content with the way things are. People in the world are not content, of course; they are not happy when it rains for seven days or when it is too cold or too hot, but *bhikkhus* have to learn to accept whatever situation they are in. They have to learn not to view things as either good or bad but rather to distance themselves from these things. It's good for laypeople to train themselves in this way too, to be content and see that whatever happens is *anattā* – not me, not mine and not my self. The body, feelings, memories and associations, thoughts and consciousness are all not me, not mine and not my self. They are just phenomena that arise, stay for a moment, change and then disappear. They have nothing to do with us; we just observe these things. As a *bhikkhu* or a lay practitioner, you have to realise that you have no control over these things and learn to be content with whatever comes along. This is our training – contentment and peacefulness. We should aim to live with whatever is given and with the situation as it is, without asking other people for things or trying to make changes. Some people find the training tough, both *bhikkhus* and the laypeople who live in monasteries. Some can bear the conditions for two or three days, others for a few weeks. Some that say they like life in the monastery and want to come back but never do, probably because they found the training too harsh.

So, *sati* is the most important thing. It is the only way we can free ourselves by being aware of this very moment and seeing what is happening. We need to be aware that there is a sensation, that one of the senses has been triggered, whether hearing, seeing, smelling, touching or tasting. In our practice, we try to follow up the sensation to observe what happens next. For instance, if we are really aware, really concentrated, we can see that each thought has a little feeling attached to it. This feeling can be positive, negative or neutral. As we continue to observe, we see that the feeling attached to the thought triggers another feeling or a memory depending on the situation. The memory that it triggers also has a

feeling attached to it, and this adds to the previous feeling. Then, another memory brings another feeling, which adds to the growing ‘snowball’ or avalanche of feeling. In the blink of an eye there are several thousand mind-moments and with each moment this avalanche can build up, so within no time we find that a really strong emotion has come up. We all know, for example, the emotion that arises if a person we dislike comes around the corner. We don’t even have to have a conscious thought about it, do we? Whoops – it just comes up as if out of nowhere. This is why I say that emotion is not something real. It’s just like candy floss; you heat up a little bit of sugar and add some air, and it inflates into fine insubstantial floss. This is what happens with emotions – they blow up out of all proportion and are not real. This is why I ask you to get down to what is real in your practice. When you start to experience an emotion (fear or hatred, for instance) roll back the avalanche, seeing what came before, and what came before that, and what came before that, until you come to the source. This kind of avalanche starts with dropping a stone into the snow, or in our case the first sense input. As it falls, it picks up more and more snow. Similarly, each thought, each memory, each feeling adds up, rolling and rolling. Given the number of mind-moments in the blink of an eye, you can imagine how fast the process is, and how acute and keen your *sati* has to be to catch what is going on. We have to train *sati* to be up to the speed of light to catch these things as they happen, and once we can do that, we can stop the process anytime.

None of this is written in any book, but in my own practice I observed what was going on and saw how all of these things are created. However, your *sati* has to be up to speed; otherwise you won’t be able to understand. You’ll continue to think that emotions like greed or hatred are natural, but they are not. If they were natural, the Lord Buddha would have said so, and would have pointed out that there was a sixth *khandha* called fear or greed or hate. In fact, he said there are only five *khandhas* : body, feeling (bodily or mental; pleasant, unpleasant or neutral), memory and association, thought and consciousness. The *kilesas*, which consist of greed, hatred and delusion, use the *khandhas* as their tools. When we mix together these five *khandhas*, we get everything that exists in the world. We can have some inkling of how this works by considering a computer. A computer’s operations are based on two information states, two *khandhas*, namely, 0 and 1. Look at the amazing things computers can do using just these two *khandhas*; they can play music, act as work-stations, play movies, and do a plethora of other complicated tasks, even though there are only two *khandhas* operating. Imagine what can be done with five *khandhas* if they are combined together properly. Our five *khandhas* have created the world that we see, the world that we all live in.

Our task is to understand what is real and what is not real. We have to accomplish this if we are to free ourselves from the cycle of birth and death, from the roller-coaster of ups and downs that we find ourselves on. This is why the Lord Buddha appeared and told us, “Dear friends, there is a way out, a way to be free from *dukkha*, to stop the wheel of *samsāra*, the endless round of birth and death”. The way of escape involves the development of morality as a first step, then *sammā samādhi* and *sati*, and then wisdom. Wisdom involves observing everything that is not me and not mine. If things were us, we would not be able to observe them. That is why we can’t observe the *citta*; we can’t observe something that is us, the one who knows, the one who observes all these things. *Samādhi* leads us to this knowingness, and when you fall into one-pointedness, into the knowingness, you experience a preview of *nibbāna*. That is the reason for practicing *samādhi* – to get a preview of *nibbāna*. We simply have to concentrate long enough until we get one-pointed, until subject and object merge into one point. This is where we experience what Acharn Mahā Bua called the *nibbāna* of the little man, the preview of *nibbāna*. Of course, a preview is not the real thing, and the moment we come out of *samādhi* the world is just as it was before. Nothing has changed except for one thing: we are sure

of what we have experienced. Buddhist practice is based on experiencing, observing and understanding, but not in the way that we usually understand. We understood things in school or at university, but the understanding that comes from meditation practice is quite different. It comes from observing what is going on. The Lord Buddha's advice was to begin by observing the breath at the tip of the nose. When there are no more thoughts, you will reach a state of calm and, as you go deeper, it will become quieter and more peaceful and then utterly still and finally you will drop into one-pointedness. This was how he described it, but he also made clear that the practice should then continue with the development of wisdom.

Developing wisdom involves investigating the five *khandhas*, and we start with the body. What is this body we identify with so much? What are these bodily or mental feelings we so cherish? We need to investigate them until we understand their true nature; when that has been achieved, birth and death are at an end. It's that simple. When we have removed the greed and hate that are rooted in the body, we will never be reborn into the world; we will have attained the state of *Anagami*. However, at this point only half of our work has been completed because we have investigated only the first *khandha* (the body) and a little of the second (bodily feeling). The rest of the work concerns the mental (*nāma*) *khandhas*. We have eliminated greed and hate that are rooted in the body, but now we need to investigate delusion (*moha*), which is rooted in two *khandhas*, memory and thought. They are so intertwined that they seem like the Gordian knot, and it is extremely difficult to rip them apart to see each *khandha* for itself and to see how they interact and create the delusion or illusion that we live in. Investigating them thoroughly takes a long time. Acharn Mahā Bua's practice is a good example, and he often spoke about it. Early in his practice, he became stuck in *samādhi* for five years, but then he started investigating the body and completed the task in eight months. However, investigating the two *khandhas* of memory and thought to overcome delusion took him a further two and a half years. And even then his work was not finished. He still had to confront the master, *avijjā* itself, the master of ignorance, the master of wanting to know and understand but not being able to. *Avijjā* is the master that maintains the whole universe – *avijjā paccaya sankhāra* (*avijjā* is the condition for all phenomena to arise) – and investigating it took Acharn Mahā Bua another three months. It took three full months to get down to the source, the very focal point of fundamental ignorance. Everyone can read about this: his talks describing his practice have all been transcribed into English and German, and are on the Luangta.eu website.

The ability to practice successfully depends on being able to observe using the power of *sati*. Wisdom involves knowing which questions to ask and devising tricks to overcome the *kilesas*, and for this *sati* is crucial. You can think of practice as going into a dark cellar with lots of different paths; *sati* is the torchlight – the brighter the light, the clearer we see. Wisdom is the ability to select the correct path to get to the centre of the maze. But without the strong bright light of *sati*, we will not be able to see the path. In our lives we usually go round and round and round in circles as if on a roundabout or on a roller-coaster going up and down. In fact, when you look at a roller-coaster, it has no starting point and no endpoint; it goes round and round and up and down, and it's a good metaphor for spiritual development. There is no spiritual development that only goes up. If it advances, it can retreat again, and whether you progress or regress is entirely in your own hands. If you develop yourself spiritually in this life but simply enjoy the fruits of your spiritual development in the next, you will decline spiritually. We have the choice whether to progress or decline. If we are clear about our present situation, and we are free of greed or aversion in this moment, we have the opportunity to choose what is best for us. However, if there

is even a little greed or aversion involved, we most likely make the wrong decision. If we are attached to the body, we are usually disinclined to do body contemplation, even though it's a practice we ought to do. We love the body, and even if it is old we dream about the body we had when we were younger, going back into memory to create the illusion that our body is always young. The *citta* is always young, of course; it doesn't know any age, but the body begins to feel old so people retreat into their memories. Old people love playing with memory, looking at photo albums all day, creating the opportunity to be born again, trying to forget the feelings they have in the present. But we have to understand what old age is. The first noble truth is the *dukkha* that comes with birth, old age, sickness and death. Think about how we handle a situation when we are ill. We think, "I am sick" or "I am dying", but in a few days once the sickness has passed the thoughts of sickness and death are all forgotten. This is how we fool ourselves all the time. We don't want to accept the reality of being sick, and we don't want to accept the reality of being old.

Actually, when I come back to visit Germany and look at some of my audiences, I get the feeling that I am spiritual director of an old-folks home! Most of us here are old, but we have to realise what old age is, and reflect that we will have to go through old age in the next life and the next and the next. Each time you are reborn, you go through birth, old age, sickness and death, and birth and death are extremely painful. Birth involves being squeezed through a narrow tube and is traumatic for a short time, and death is also painful and often more long-lasting. Most people are not particularly afraid of going to another realm of existence (unless they know they are destined for hell), but they are really afraid of the pain of death, particularly if it lasts a long time and is combined with sickness. At death, all the elements that have come together are ripped apart. In meditation practice during the investigation of *dukkha-vedanā* (painful feelings), we can go through the three stages of death and free ourselves from the fear of death. Thereafter, when the moment of death actually comes, we can decide for ourselves where we would like to go. We have paths to choose from, the paths opened up by the *kamma* we have created, and can decide which we would like to take. Normally, at the moment of death, we are driven by pain and are looking for a way out of it, so we take the first exit that comes our way, and this is the exit associated with our strongest *kamma*. Everyone takes the first exit, except for the person who understands what pain is; that person has the freedom to choose, to look at all the possible exits and choose the most appropriate one. This is why we have to investigate painful feelings, so that at the moment of death we are able to decide where to go. Under normal circumstances, we cannot be sure which realm of existence we will go to next. Even if we made lots of good *kamma* in the last ten years, the memory of an unwholesome deed that we committed fifty years ago can come up and drive us to take the first exit.

Please understand the importance of using wisdom in your meditation practice to develop understanding of *dukkha*, of old age, sickness and death, and of pain. Investigate *dukkha-vedanā* so that at the moment of death you are free to choose which way to go. If you don't understand what pain really is, you are not free, and you will just take the first exit, normally the path of your strongest *kamma*. It's similar to life, actually; we usually go the path of our strongest *kamma*, though some of us (including those gathered here today) can decide in a mid-life crisis or a late-life crisis to go another path. In fact, we have these choices around us all the time but most of the time, driven by our strongest or fastest *kamma*, we miss the proper exits.

So, now that you know the dangers and are aware of helpful methods of overcoming them, please strive to have *sati* even during the most intense pain. You have to strive to understand pain and what its nature really is. Once you understand pain, you need not be afraid of it and

will not be driven by intense pain to take the nearest exit. You will have developed the ability to choose any exit at the moment of death.

Please take this to heart.