

# THE PROBLEM OF INCOMPREHENSIBILITY OF VIPĀKA: A SOLUTION\*

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## **Abstract**

Kammavipāka or vipāka is the effect of kamma. It is unthinkable or incomprehensible (acinteyya) because the precise working out of the effects of kamma is imponderable or incomprehensible. Moreover, it cannot be shown where it is when it hasn't yet been produced and another related problem is that kammic effects are usually referred to nāmarūpa (corporeality and mentality) but what is the kammic effect which hasn't yet been produced but cannot be known where it is. However, the problem of the incomprehensibility of vipāka can be partly solved by explaining its nature and classification, i.e. there are 2 main kinds of vipāka, immediate and subsequent, of which the latter is further classified into primary and secondary vipāka. It is this primary vipāka that plays an important role in the working out of the vipāka of kamma, i.e. the secondary vipāka in the future. This primary vipāka is like a kammic seed, i.e. potential energy or unseen power that cannot be shown where it is and will bring about the secondary vipāka, i.e. body and mind including experience or happiness and unhappiness in the future in this life or next life.

**Keywords:** kammavipāka, vipāka, acinteyya, unthinkable, incomprehensibility

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## Introduction

Kammavipāka or vipāka is said to be unthinkable or incomprehensible. This article is an attempt to explain why it is unthinkable and how it can be understood at least in an academic way. Kammavipāka or kammaphala or simply vipāka literally means the effect or result of kamma (karma or karman in Sanskrit) or action. According to the law or doctrine of kamma, the action that one intentionally does will produce vipāka, i.e. its effect either in this life or next life or both. However, Kammavipāka or vipāka is said to be one of the four of the unthinkables or incomprehensible (acinteyya) or what should not be thought of (A.C. 21/77/104).

Generally speaking, Kammavipāka or vipāka is said to be unthinkable because the precise working out of the results of kamma is imponderable or incomprehensible. According to Buddhist Scholars, e.g. Phra Brahmaganabhorn (P.A. Payutto), the process of the working out of the results of kamma is so exceedingly subtle and complicated that it is beyond capacity of thinking and thus cannot be clearly understood (Phra Brahmaganabhorn P.A. Payutto), 2012).

According to the Buddhist scholars, the problem is how the process of the production of vipāka works, in other words, what is the mechanism of the production of vipāka. We cannot see or understand clearly the mechanism or process in which kamma works out its vipāka, for example, the mechanism or process in which a man meets a girl and falls in love with her by the engine of kamma or vipāka. As a result, Kammavipāka or vipāka becomes unthinkable for all sentient beings except the Buddha because it cannot be clearly understood.

However, apart from the problem of such mechanism or process, another related important question that should be considered is how kamma as a cause gives rise to vipāka which is its effect because kamma cannot cause any effect that has not been produced immediately at the time of the action; this is due to

the fact that, according to the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness (khanikabha=khavāda), kamma is an intention (cetanā) or intentional action that ceased to exist since everything is momentary; it disintegrate or perishes a moment after it comes into existence; consequently, it cannot wait until it can produce its vipāka in the future. Therefore, if kamma that is the cause of that vipāka cannot produce such vipāka, then what produces it?

Therefore, though such incomprehensibility of the process of the working out of the effect of kamma may be the most important reason for explanation of the incomprehensibility of vipāka, there are other reasons that should be taken into account.

In Milindapañha, according to Kammaphalaatthibhāvapañha (the question on the existence of the effect of kamma), (Milinda.62) in order to answer King Milinda's question 'where does kamma exist?', Nāgasena explains that kamma follows like shadow but it cannot be shown where it exists just as the fruits of a tree cannot be shown where they exist in the tree when they have not been produced.

In the commentary of Milindapañha, this conversation has been explained that the explanation of kamma here is equivalent to that of vipāka of kamma, i.e. to say that good and bad actions follow that person is to say that the effects of good and bad actions which are nāmarūpa follow that person and that kamma cannot be shown to exist anywhere, i.e. in this or that nāmarūpa until the time of production of the effect. (Milinda.A.158-160)

Consequently, according to the commentary, the term 'kamma' here can refer to vipāka and the simile as well as the title of this conversation, i.e. 'the question on the existence of *the effect of kamma*', in Milindapañha imply that 'kamma' here means vipāka and thus this explanation shows that when vipāka has not been produced, we cannot know where it exists.

At any rate, this explanation gives rise to some problems, i.e. it is difficult to understand the real nature or status of this vipāka because it exists but does not exist in any definite or specific place which is absolutely different from other things or phenomena in our experience and there is a puzzle how this vipāka which is said in the commentary to be nāmarūpa differs from vipāka that has been already produced, i.e. nāmarūpa including objects and events or experiences; what is this nāmarūpa that cannot be shown where it exists? and what is the vipāka? if the vipāka that has not been produced is something which is not our body and mind including objects and events or experiences that one encounters when the effect has been produced which is also regarded as vipāka. These problems are also the reasons for the incomprehensibility of vipāka.

Again, there is an explanation or belief that kammavipāka is incomprehensible because we cannot know that what is the kamma of which the experience that we encounter now is the effect since it may be the kamma in the past life. This explanation is not a good reason for the incomprehensibility of vipāka because it is not incomprehensible for the person who knows the past life with pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa (the recollection of former lives) and for some experience we can know its cause or kamma because it is the obvious and immediate effect of kamma, e.g. the mental phenomena like mental happiness caused by making merit and some punishments caused by wrong actions currently done. In many cases, we clearly know or understand the relationship between the moral cause, i.e. kamma, and its effect, i.e. vipāka and thus ignorance of the kamma which is the cause of the effect, i.e. vipāka is not the real reason why vipāka is incomprehensible.

However, even though vipāka is unthinkable or incomprehensible, the Buddha does not prohibit us from thinking or an attempt to understand vipāka; he only warns us that it ‘should not be thought of’ because it cannot be clearly

understood by using reasoning (Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P.A. Payutto), 2012, 276). It is possible to understand something about this vipāka and its process or mechanism of the working out of vipāka and this understanding of vipāka, especially its nature, can, to the author, help solve the problem of vipāka or make us understand it more.

### **Nature and classification of vipāka**

According to the Abhidhamma doctrine, vipāka is used to refer to vipākacitta (resultant consciousness) only whereas rūpa (corporeality or body and its properties as well as movements) is called ‘**kammaja**’ (caused by kamma). However, broadly speaking, according to the Tipitaka and its commentary, vipāka refers to everything caused by kamma or it means every kind of the effects or results of kamma, i.e. nāmarūpa including all objects and events or experiences that the doer gets or encounters as the effects of his actions in this life or next life.

On the basis of this explanation, the meaning of vipāka is the effect or result of kamma and its nature is concerned with nāmarūpa including all objects and events or experiences that the doer gets or encounters as the effects of his actions in this life or next life. However, these effects or vipāka should be the vipāka that have already been produced. It means that there is another kind of vipāka, i.e. vipāka that has not been produced. The vipāka of this kind can be interpreted as the primary vipāka that causes the other secondary vipāka.

In some sutta in the Tipitaka, nāmarūpa or some objects and events or experiences are said to be caused by vipāka or kammavipāka, for example, in Mahāpadānasutta it is said that Vipassī boy’s divine eye caused by vipāka of kamma appeared (Vipississa kumārassa kammavipākaja dibbacakkhu-pāturahosi) (D.M. 10/31/23). This term “caused by vipāka of kamma”

(**kammavipākaja**·) shows that this divine eye which is vipāka is caused by another kind of vipāka. So it may be interpreted that the vipāka that causes the divine eye is the primary vipāka and the divine eye is the secondary vipāka. Another example is the statement in Khuddakanikāya Udāna that a monk bears the serious painful feeling caused by the effect of past kamma (Bhikkhu...purā)akammvipākaja· dukkha· tippa· katuka· vedana· adhvāsento) (Kh.U. 25/66/102). This statement shows that this painful feeling which is usually regarded as vipāka is caused by the vipāka of kamma.

This term ‘**kammavipākaja**·’ and ‘**kammavipākajā**’ as well as ‘**kammavipākajāni**’ which have the same meaning occur in many places in the Tipiṭaka in such a way that they imply that nāmarūpa or happiness and suffering that are regarded as the effects of kamma are caused by the effect of kamma. Therefore, these are the evidences that give a strong support to this interpretation or the classification of vipāka into primary and secondary vipāka.

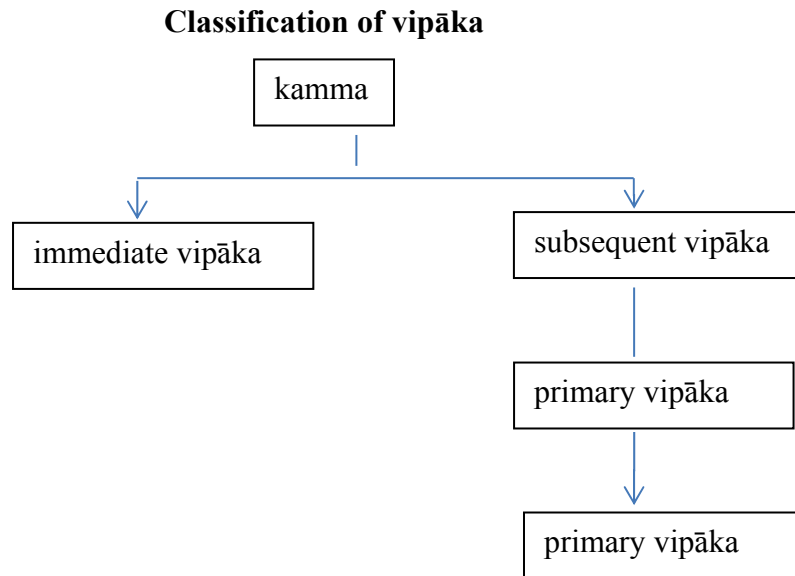
This primary vipāka is possibly the vipāka that is the first effect caused by kamma before the kamma ceases to exist. This vipāka is not nāmarūpa including all objects and events or experiences that the doer gets or encounters as the effects of his actions in this life or next life. It is the vipāka that has not been produced and thus cannot be shown where it exists because it is not physical object or any kind of ordinary experience that can be shown where it exists. It may be compared to the seed that will later become a tree. It may be interpreted as a certain mental impression or a kind of the potential and kinetic energy that can carry out the process of the working out of the effect of kamma. As Buswell and Lopez put it: ‘*The term karman describes both the potential and kinetic energy necessary to sustain a process; and, just as energy is not lost in a physical process, neither is it lost in the process of moral cause and effect*’ (Buswell and Lopez, 2014).

This karman is a special or mysterious energy or power that act as a law of kamma to carry out the process of moral cause and effect. This karman or kamma can be used to mean vipāka according to the above mentioned interpretation and thus it is a special kind of energy or power that can be compared to potentiality and **actuality** in Aristotelian metaphysics according to which the vipāka is at first a potential energy and later become an actual energy that can bring about nāmarūpa or happiness and unhappiness when the appropriate causes and conditions are present. In this case, we may say either that kamma or vipāka bears its retributive fruit or that primary vipāka produced by kamma bears its retributive fruit-in other words, kamma bears its retributive fruit through its primary vipāka.

Moreover, it is similar to the **Unseen Power** (adr̥ṣṭa) which acts as a law of karma in Nyāya, a Hindu philosophical school, bringing about the happiness and unhappiness of human beings according to their past actions (Puligandla, 1975) and this power does not contradict the Buddhist doctrines because it is similar to the supernatural power of iddhividhi (psychic power) that is concerned with another kind of the unthinkables, i.e. the jhāna-range of one absorbed in jhāna (jhāyissa jhānavisayo).

Once this primary kind of vipāka is accepted, the classification of the vipāka of kamma may be explained in a new way. Vipāka is of 2 main kinds, i.e. the immediate or direct vipāka and subsequent or indirect vipāka which classified further into 2 kinds, namely primary and secondary vipāka. The first is the effect that occurs simultaneously and immediately after kamma has been done; it is the mentality or mental phenomena occurring at the same time as kamma and the immediately occurring mental dispositions that form the habit or personality of the doer while the latter is the effect that has not appeared yet but exists at first as a karmic seed or potential energy and later comes to fruition, i.e. produce another vipāka that is nāmarūpa including objects and events or

experiences when the appropriate causes and conditions are present in the future in this life or next life. This may be summed up in the following chart:



Additionally, this proposed interpretation of the nature and classification of vipāka may be objected that the future vipāka or effect like happiness and suffering in the next life should be produced by kamma not by the special kind of vipāka because the statements or sayings with this content appear in many passages in the Buddhist scriptures. This objection may be answered that such statements can be interpreted in 2 ways as follows:

First, they explain the doctrine of kamma in the broad or inclusive and easy way in order to cover the entire process of the workings of kamma including every kind of vipāka and thus such a special kind of vipāka can be included in this explanation.

Second, they may mean that there are 2 kinds of kamma, i.e. kamma that is an intention or action that disintegrates or perishes a moment after it comes into existence and kamma that exists until the time when it can produce its vipāka in the future; however, these statements in this interpretation encounter



some problems. The special kind of kamma is also required some evidences to support it but it is more difficult to get such evidence than the special kind of vipāka because some statements in the Tipiṭaka tend to support such vipāka as shown above.

Therefore, the interpretation about the nature and classification of vipāka which is proposed here is more tenable or has much more possibility.

### **A solution to the problem of the incomprehensibility of kammavipāka**

On the basis of the above mentioned nature and classification of vipāka, the problem of the incomprehensibility of kammavipāka may be solved or it can be partly understood. The process of the working out of the effect of kamma can be explained that, in the case of the subsequent vipāka, after kamma caused its vipāka, i.e. primary vipāka which cannot be shown where it exists owing to its unseen or mysterious nature, this vipāka will follow or wait until it can bring about the secondary vipāka, namely nāmarūpa or happiness and suffering in accordance with the primary vipāka and its kamma.

Therefore, when vipāka, i.e. primary vipāka has not been produced it cannot be shown where it exists as if the fruits of a tree that have not been produced, and when the appropriate causes and conditions are present, it will produce secondary vipāka that can be seen.

Besides, though kamma ceases to exist a moment after it comes into existence, it can be said to produce vipāka in the future because its seed or the primary vipāka still exists and will produce its effect in the future.

However, the primary vipāka should not be understood as a permanent entity because according to the doctrine of Threefold Characteristic (Tilakkhana), nothing can be permanent and thus this primary vipāka is impermanent but continues to exist according to its causes and conditions in line with the law of Dependent Origination.

In addition, many Buddhist scholars on the Abhidhamma doctrine in Thailand believe that kamma or vipāka has been kept or stored in the bhaṅgacitta (life-continuum consciousness or unconscious mind). But this belief encounters some problems, e.g. it seems to contradict the explanation given in Milindapañha. So it is not taken into account here.

### **Conclusion**

The solution proposed here is just a rational explanation so as to bring about reasonable understanding of the incomprehensibility or inconceivability of vipāka in an academic way. It cannot absolutely be confirmed that it is completely correct because the information or evidences concerning the doctrine of kamma and vipāka are not clear enough to make a final and complete decision and interpretation, and so can be variously interpreted. Other solutions or interpretation are possible. However, we are in a position to claim that vipāka can be partly understood.

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