

# The Cessation of Kamma and the Path to Liberation\*

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## Abstract

This study examines the Buddhist teaching on the cessation of *kamma* and the path leading to liberation, with emphasis on the teaching of ignorance (*avijjā*), craving (*taṇhā*), and the Noble Eightfold Path. It explains that *kamma* arises through intentional actions rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion, and continues to produce as long as these defilements remain. Through an analysis of teachings such as *kammasakatā-ñāṇa*, *Paṭṭiccasamuppāda*, and related suttas, the study clarifies that *kamma* cannot be erased directly, but becomes ineffective when its supporting conditions are removed. The paper highlights that the true extinguishment of *kamma* is achieved not by rituals or ascetic practices, but by uprooting the mental defilements that generate volitional action. Moreover, the Noble Eightfold Path gradually purifies moral conduct, concentration, and wisdom, leading to the destruction of ignorance and craving. The practice of meditation such as mindfulness and insight (*vipassanā*) is shown to be a crucial method in realizing the impermanent, suffering, and non-self of phenomena. Ultimately, the study concludes that the cessation of *kamma* culminates in *Nibbāna*, where both wholesome and unwholesome *kamma* are transcended and the cycle of *samsāra* comes to a final end.

**Keywords:** Kamma; Cessation; Noble Eightfold Path; Dependent Origination; Nibbāna

## Introduction

In the cycle of rebirth, a person who has not abandoned ignorance continues to perform *kamma* caused by unwholesome roots such as *lobha* (greed), *dosa* (hatred),

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and *moha* (delusion) and wholesome roots such as *alobha* (non-greed), *adosa* (non-hatred), and *amoha* (non-delusion). Because he does not truly know suffering, its origin, the past, or the nature of the world, he mistakenly believes that the suffering of *saṃsāra* is pleasant. This lack of right understanding becomes the basic condition for the production of new *kamma*. Influenced by craving, he performs actions believing that they will bring happiness, while in reality they only create more causes for future suffering. In this way, ignorance and craving keep the process of *kamma* active, and the cycle of rebirth continues without end. Furthermore, one who does not know the cessation of suffering or the path leading to cessation imagines that the end of suffering can be found in some heavenly existence such as the Brahmā world which is not true cessation. However, these states are still within *saṃsāra* and do not represent true freedom. In the same way, the person who lacks wisdom may believe that rituals, sacrifices, or extreme ascetic practices are the correct path to liberation. But these practices do not uproot defilements and therefore cannot bring an end to *kamma* or suffering. Thinking they are the true path, he performs these actions with hope for release, but instead generates more *kamma* that leads to continued wandering in *saṃsāra*.

### The Realization of *Kamma*

In the Buddha's teaching, the realization of *kamma* is fundamental to leading a wise, ethical, and meaningful life. One important form of this realization is *kammasakatā-ñāṇa*, the realizing *kamma* and its results. This involves understanding two aspects: how intentional actions are performed and how they produce corresponding results, whether in this life or in future existences. *Kammasakatā-ñāṇa* provides the foundational insight that beings are the owners of their actions, and that their wholesome and unwholesome deeds will give result. When one realizes *kamma*, one clearly sees how wholesome intentions lead to happiness and unwholesome intentions lead to suffering, both in this life and in future lives. This realization helps a person understand why happiness and suffering arise, and why people experience life differently. It shows that one's present circumstances are shaped by his past actions, and his future will be shaped by what he performs now. This understanding encourages

him to avoid unwholesome deeds and cultivate wholesome ones, because he clearly sees their consequences.

To realize *kamma* properly, one must recognize that all beings possess *kamma* as their own property. Each individual inherits the results of their own actions; *kamma* is their true origin, their closest companion, and their ultimate refuge. In the *Abhiñhapaccavekkhitabbaṭṭhāna Sutta* of *Pañcakanipāta Pāḷi*, the Buddha urged to reflect on *kamma* and emphasizes the importance of frequently reflecting on it as fundamental practice for both laypeople and renunciants. He instructs that one should often contemplate: “I am the owner of my *kamma*. I am the heir of my *kamma*. *Kamma* is my origin, my relative, and my refuge. Whatever *kamma* I do, whether good or bad, I will inherit its result.” It means that all beings experience happiness or suffering according to their own intentional actions. Every action which a person performs produces a corresponding effect; it begins as a cause and later becomes an effect. This natural process is known as the law of cause and effect. When a person performs wholesome actions with a pure mind, they create good *kamma*, which leads to pleasant results. When a person performs unwholesome actions with a defiled mind, they create bad *kamma*, which leads to unpleasant results. Actually, beings commonly engage in misconduct by body, speech, and mind due to ignorance, craving, and carelessness. To realize *kamma*, a person should also extend this reflection beyond oneself to all beings. He understands that not only he, but all beings who are born, die, and are reborn are owners and heirs of their *kamma*. In this way, one can realize the *kamma*.

Moreover, one must also understand which bodily, verbal, and mental actions are unwholesome, that such actions produce harmful results in future lives, and that they can lead beings to rebirth in the four lower realms. Likewise, one must understand which actions are wholesome, that they bring pleasant results in future lives, and that they lead to rebirth in fortunate realms such as the human world or the deva worlds. However, when a person repeatedly reflects on the truth of *kamma*, a strong sense of moral responsibility arises. One becomes mindful of one’s actions and restrained in bodily, verbal, and mental conduct. As a result, unwholesome actions are gradually weakened, and in many cases completely abandoned. Actually, *kamma* is generated through the unwholesome roots and it ceases when these roots are completely

eliminated. Moreover, when this reflection is practiced repeatedly and deeply, the supramundane path (*lokuttara magga*) leading to liberation is generated. One does not merely understand *kamma* intellectually, but lives in accordance with this understanding. As a result, by cultivating the path through moral conduct, meditation, and wisdom, the ten kinds of fetters (*dasa saṁyojana*) that bind beings to *saṁsāra* are gradually destroyed. Ultimately, the seven kinds of latent tendencies (*satta anusaya*) are uprooted.

Therefore, understanding the process of ending *kamma* requires understanding both the abandonment of unwholesome and the growth of the wholesome roots. Even wholesome *kamma* cannot remove the cycle of rebirth because it still arises from intention. As long as *kamma* continues, rebirth also continues. The cessation of *kamma* (*kammanirodha*) leads to *Nibbāna*, the end of suffering through the cessation of bodily action, verbal action, and mental action. The extinguishing of *kamma* occurs only when one sees the true nature of phenomena: *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta* and no longer clings to actions or their results. When all defilements are eradicated, intention no longer produces new *kamma*.

### How to Extinguish *Kamma*

In the cycle of *saṁsāra*, many kinds of *kamma* such as wholesome *kamma* and unwholesome *kamma* have been accumulated within beings throughout countless lifetimes. However, the functioning of *kamma* is not as simple as it may appear. Not every *kamma* one has performed will actually produce a result. Only some *kamm*s find the right conditions to give results; others lose their force or remain without opportunity. If every *kamma* were guaranteed to give results, liberation would be impossible. Therefore, it is essential to understand that *kamma* cannot be erased directly. Understanding why only certain *kamm*s operate leads directly to understanding how *kamma* itself can finally be extinguished. The first essential point is that *kamma* cannot be erased directly. Once an action has been done, it cannot be undone or cancelled. The Buddha emphasized that *kamma* and its results operate according to natural law, and the past cannot be changed. Thus, the problem is not how to destroy the *kamma* of the past, but how to remove the conditions that allow *kamma* to keep functioning. In the Buddha's teaching, *kamma* is always linked to *kilesa*, the mental defilements such

as greed, hatred, and delusion and so on. *Kamma* and *kilesa* are inseparable: *kamma* arises because of *kilesa*, and *kamma* produces results only as long as *kilesa* remains. When there are no defilements, *kamma* becomes powerless. Therefore, the true method to extinguish *kamma* is to extinguish the *kilesas* that support it. Just as a fire goes out when its fuel is removed, the fuel for *kamma* ceases when the fire of defilements is extinguished.

In *Paṭiccasamuppāda* (Dependent Origination), which describes how the entire cycle of *saṃsāra* continues, the Buddha identified *avijjā* (ignorance) as the fundamental *kilesa* at the beginning of the process. Ignorance is a deep misunderstanding of reality - failing to see the Four Noble Truths and the nature of the impermanent, suffering, and non-self of all phenomena. Because of ignorance, volitional formations arise. This is expressed thus: “*avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā*” meaning dependent on ignorance, volitional activities arise. Driven by this ignorance, beings act under the influence of craving and wrong view, creating new *kamma*, the action one performs now through body, speech, or mind. It has the power to produce future rebirths. These volitional actions give effect to *viññāṇa*, the rebirth consciousness in the next life: “*saṅkhāra paccayā viññāṇam*”. This consciousness conditions the arising of *nāma* and *rūpa* (*Viññāṇa paccayā nāmarūpam*). This consciousness supports *nāma-rūpa* (mind and matter), which forms the basis for a new existence. With *nāma-rūpa*, the six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*) arise (*Nāmarūpapaccayā saḷāyatanaṃ*); these lead to contact (*Saḷāyatanapaccayā phasso*) and feeling (*Phassapaccayā vedanā*). Feeling then conditions craving (*Vedanāpaccayā taṇhā*). Craving leads to clinging (*Taṇhāpaccayā upādānaṃ*), and clinging leads to renewed existence (*Upādānapaccayā bhavo*). Thus, the entire chain creates repeated birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, and despair (*Bhavapaccayā jāti* etc.). What continues from one life to the next is not a permanent self, but a stream of conditioned phenomena driven by delusion. As long as *avijjā* and *taṇhā* remain, new *kammās* keep accumulating like a tree that produces flowers, fruits, and seeds in an endless cycle.

To extinguish *kamma*, the cycle must be broken at its root. If one tries only to suppress actions without uprooting inner defilements, it is like cutting the branches of a

tree while leaving its roots intact in the ground. It is also described in the *Dhammapada*, even if a tree is cut down, it will grow back again as long as its roots remain. Similarly, if the kilesas are not uprooted completely, they continue to produce new *kamma*, allowing the cycle of *samsāra* to arise again and again. Only when the roots of greed, hatred, and delusion are fully destroyed does the round of rebirth come to an end. Therefore, the true method to extinguish *kamma* is to uproot the defilements, especially *avijjā* and *taṇhā*. When these roots are destroyed, the *kamma* that depends on them become powerless, and no new seeds of existence are produced. Old *kamma* that have not yet ripened also lose the ability to bring results because the mental conditions that support them have disappeared. Therefore, the Buddha taught that with the complete destruction of the defilements: the accumulation of new *kamma* ends, and past *kamma* is not working. The fire of *kamma* is extinguished because there is no longer any fuel.

1. In *Nibbedhika Sutta*, The Buddha taught that the only way to extinguish the cycle of *kamma* and attain ultimate liberation (*Nibbāna*) is by following the Noble Eightfold Path. This path is not just about performing good deeds but about a complete transformation of the mind, speech, and actions. It leads to the gradual purification of *kamma*, ultimately resulting in its complete cessation. As regards the connection between the cessation of *kamma* and the attainment of *Nibbāna*, the Buddha explains the Noble Eightfold Path as the way leading to the cessation of *kamma* and realize liberation. By that path the Buddhas and their disciples go in a direction not gone in before, namely, *Nibbāna*, thus the path is eightfold: Right View (*Sammādiṭṭhi*), Right Intention (*Sammāsaṅkappa*), Right Speech (*Sammāvācā*), Right Action (*Sammākammanta*), Right Livelihood (*Sammāājīva*), Right Effort (*Sammāvāyāma*), Right Mindfulness (*Sammāsati*), and Right Concentration (*Sammāsamādhi*).

The first factor, Right View (*Sammādiṭṭhi*), is the understanding of *kamma*, its results, and the Four Noble Truths. By seeing the nature of suffering and the cause of rebirth, one develops wisdom, which weakens ignorance (*avijjā*), the root of *kamma*. This leads to Right Intention (*Sammāsaṅkappa*), which involves renunciation, non-ill will, and non-cruelty. By cultivating wholesome thoughts, one prevents the formation of unwholesome *kamma*. Next is Right Speech (*Sammāvācā*), which means speaking truthfully, harmoniously, kindly, and meaningfully while avoiding false, harsh, or divisive

speech. Right Action (*Sammākamanta*) requires abstaining from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct, ensuring that physical actions do not create negative consequences. Right Livelihood (*Sammājīva*) involves earning a living ethically, avoiding professions that harm others, and supporting a wholesome way of life. These three factors form the foundation of moral discipline (*sīla*), which prevents new unwholesome *kamma* from arising.

Right Effort (*Sammāvāyāma*) is the persistent cultivation of wholesome states and abandonment of unwholesome states. This effort strengthens mental discipline and supports Right Mindfulness (*Sammāsati*), the practice of continuous awareness of the body, feelings, mind, and dhammas. Mindfulness prevents the arising of defilements, ensuring that *kamma* is not generated through habitual reactions. Right Concentration (*Sammāsamādhi*) develops deep meditative absorption (*jhāna*), calming the mind and leading to insight into impermanence, suffering, and non-self. Through *Vipassanā*, wisdom arises, ultimately eliminating ignorance – the source of *kamma*. By following the Noble Eightfold Path, one progressively weakens defilements, ceases creating new *kamma*, and ultimately attains liberation. This path is the only way to end the cycle of birth and death, leading to the ultimate peace of *Nibbāna*.

Through practicing the Noble Eightfold Path, old unwholesome tendencies fade away, new unwholesome *kamma* ends forming, and the conditions that allow *kamma* to bear fruit are gradually extinguished. In this way, the path leads step by step toward the complete ending of *kamma*. Therefore, one must cultivate the path, develop mindfulness and wisdom, and see directly the nature of body and mind. The extinction of *kamma* is possible not by erasing the past, but by transforming the present. What is needed is not the cancellation of old actions but the destruction of the defilements that create new ones. When ignorance, craving, and attachment are uprooted through the Noble Eightfold Path, the engine of *samsāra* stops. Old *kamma* becomes ineffective, new *kamma* no longer arises, and the cycle of birth and death comes to an end.

## The Extinguishment of *Kamma*; *Nibbāna*

2. The ultimate goal in Buddhist practice is the extinguishment of *kamma* and the attainment of liberation. the extinguishment of *kamma* signifies the end of all volitional actions that lead to rebirth, while *Nibbāna* is the supreme state of liberation beyond suffering. As long as one generates *kamma*, the cycle of birth and death (*samsāra*) continues. the extinguishment of *kamma* is the complete cessation of *kamma*, which is only possible through the eradication of its root causes- *lobha* (greed), *dosa* (hatred), and *moha* (delusion). The Buddha teaches that *kamma* ceases through the realization of the Four Noble Truths and the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. By following these paths step by step one can stage on the ways to Enlightened and liberate from the circle of life. The eight steps can be subsumed under the three heads: Morality (*Sila*), Concentration (*Samadhi*) and Wisdom (*Pañña*).

Meditation will help to keep one's consciousness steady without leakage and meditation fills it with clear vision and wisdom. By meditation on a chosen object, he will observe that object clearly and understand the function of it in conjunction with other things. By meditation, therefore, we enlarge his knowledge and wisdom. The practice of concentration on breathing (*anapanassati*) is one of the well-known exercises, connected with the body, for mental development. There are several other ways of developing attentiveness in relation to the body – as modes of meditation. With regard to sensations and feelings, one should be clearly aware of all forms of feelings and sensations, pleasant and neutral, of how they appear and disappear within oneself. Concerning the activities of mind, one should be aware whether one's mind is lustful or not, hatred or not, deluded or not, distracted or concentrated, etc. In the *Mahāsatiṭṭhāna*, it is mentioned thus: Here, bhikkhus, when a mind with greed (*raga*) arises, a bhikkhu knows, “This is a mind with greed”; or when a mind without greed note arises, he knows, “This is a mind without greed”; when a mind with anger (*dosa*) arises, he knows, “This is a mind with anger”; or when a mind without anger arises, he knows, “This is a mind without anger”; when a mind with delusion (*moha*) arises, he knows, “This is a mind with delusion”; or when a mind without delusion arises, he knows, “This is a mind without delusion”. In this way one should be aware of all movements of mind, how they arise and disappear. As regards ideas,

thoughts, conceptions and things, one should know their nature, how they appear and disappear, how they developed, how they are suppressed, and destroyed, and so on. Then one reflects on the three characteristics of formations in many special ways as described in *Visuddhimagga* to develop insight knowledge (*Vipassanañāṇa*) one by one correctly so that the ultimate goal of *vipassana* – the realization of *Nibbana* – can be attained.

3. Moreover, based on the eight steps purification (*Visuddhi*) can be gained. The ways how to purify one's inner impurity mind can have been explained in the well-known *Pali* text in *Visuddhimagga*. The path was classified into Seven Stages: (1) *sila-visuddhi*– purification of morality, (2) *citta-visuddhi* – purification of the mind by concentration, (3) *diṭṭhi-visuddhi* – purification of views , (4) *kankhāvitaraṇa-visuddhi* – purification by overcoming doubt , (5) *maggāmaggañāṇadassana-visuddhi* – purification by knowledge and vision of what is the path and what is not the path, (6) *paṭipadāñāṇadassana-visuddhi* – purification by knowledge and vision of the way, and (7) *ñāṇadassana-visuddhi* – purification by knowledge and vision. The Seven Stages are the ways to Enlightenment and Liberation taught by the Buddha. By stepping on these stages step by step strictly one can be free from suffering, the circle of Samsara. When one develops right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*), one no longer clings to the idea of self, which is the foundation of *kamma* formation. Without craving (*taṇhā*) and ignorance (*avijjā*), new *kamma* is not generated, and past *kamma* loses its binding force. The extinguishment of *kamma* is achieved by eliminating the root causes of unwholesome actions: ignorance (*avijjā*) and craving (*taṇhā*). The Buddha stated that when ignorance is abandoned and true knowledge arises, one no longer generates *kamma* leading to future birth, aging, and death.

*Nibbāna* is the supramundane state of liberation achieved through the knowledge of the four paths, marking the complete departure from craving and the end of suffering. The Buddha described *Nibbāna* as the ultimate goal, the cessation of suffering, and the end of the cycle of rebirth and as the highest happiness. To attain *Nibbāna*, one must eliminate all defilements (*kilesa*) through the practice of *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom). In *Visuddhimagga*, in the

defilements, false view and uncertainty are eliminated by the first knowledge. Hate is eliminated by the third knowledge. Greed, delusion, conceit (pride), mental stiffness, agitation, consciencelessness, and shamelessness are eliminated by the fourth knowledge. The Noble Eightfold Path serves as the direct path leading to the realization of *Nibbāna*. As stated in the *Dhammapada*, "All conditioned things are impermanent; all conditioned things are suffering; all things are without self. When one realizes this through wisdom, one attains *Nibbāna*." Therefore, when an arahant (fully enlightened being) reaches final *Nibbāna* (*parinibbāna*), all remaining conditioned aggregates (*khandhās*) dissolve, and there is no further rebirth.

4. The extinguishment of *kamma* is essential for the attainment of *Nibbāna* because as long as *kamma* exists, rebirth continues. The Buddha emphasized that *Nibbāna* is the only state where *kamma* has no influence. When a being attains *Nibbāna*, both wholesome and unwholesome *kamma* are transcended, and the cycle of suffering ends completely. Therefore, the Buddha described that *Nibbāna* is the cessation of craving (*taṇhānirodha*), and with the cessation of craving, there is no cause for new *kamma*, and is free from all conditioned phenomena, making it the ultimate peace. The extinguishment of *kamma* and the attainment of *Nibbāna* are the highest goal in Buddhism. By following the Noble Eightfold Path, one can transcend *kamma* and achieve the ultimate goal of liberation and bring an end to the cycle of suffering.

#### 5. Abbreviations

- A.I. *Ekaka Duka Tika Catukka Nipāta Pāḷi*  
 A.II. *Pañcaka Chakka Sattaka Nipāta Pāḷi*  
 A.III. *Aṭṭhaka Navaka Dasaka Ekādasaka Nipāta Pāḷi*  
 A-a. III. *Pañcakādi Nipāta Aṅguttara Aṭṭhakathā*  
 S. I. *Sagāthāvagga Nidānavagga Saṃyutta Pāḷi*  
 S. II. *Khandhavagga Saḷāyatanavagga Saṃyutta Pāḷi*  
 M. I. *Mūlapaṇṇāsa Pāḷi*  
 M. II. *Majjimapapaṇṇāsa Pāḷi*  
 Dhp. *Dhammapada Pāḷi*  
 Dhp-a. II. *Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā*. Vol. II

Psm.	<i>Patisambhidāmagga Pāḷi</i>
D. II.	<i>Mahāvagga Pāḷi</i>
Abhs.	<i>Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha</i>
Ud.	<i>Udāna Pāḷi</i>
It.	<i>Itivuttaka Pāḷi</i>
Vsm. II.	<i>Visuddhimagga Vol. II</i>

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