

Dhamma, Kamma and Natural Disasters



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Essays on Buddhist Doctrines

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Buddhism teaches causation, that the whole universe is a web of interrelated causes and effects. There are two types of causation – natural causation and moral causation. Natural causation has nothing to do with people being good or bad, it is simply a matter of the various forces in the universe acting on each other. A rainstorm or crops ripening would be examples of natural causation. Natural causes can of course have an effect on us – being caught in a rainstorm can give us a bad cold. But suffering from a cold has nothing to do with moral or immoral past actions – it would be a natural effect of a natural cause. Moral causation is about how people think, speak and act and how they feel as a result. The Buddha's teaching of kamma is only concerned with moral causation. Being helpful to someone, having them thank you and feeling happiness because of that; stealing something, getting caught and then experiencing embarrassment or shame, would be examples of moral causation. The person's happiness or discomfort are a direct result of how they have acted. The person is not being 'rewarded' or 'punished' for their actions, their happiness or discomfort is simply a result of their actions. Now let us have a look at the recent tsunami in the light of the doctrine of kamma.

A tsunami is an example of an event caused by natural causation. The tectonic plates on the earth's surface move causing an earthquake, the energy released creates huge waves which, if they hit the coast, cause devastation. The people in the area where the recent tsunami hit are experiencing two types of suffering – suffering caused by natural causation and suffering caused by moral causation, i.e., kamma. During the deluge a person might have been hit by a falling tree, cut by a piece of metal or smashed against a wall. These would be examples of the painful effects of natural causes and would have nothing to do with past moral or immoral actions.

Kamma concerns peoples' intentional thoughts, speech and actions (*kamma*) and the effects of those reactions (*vipaka*). I will give examples of different ways people could react to the tsunami and the effects they could have. Let's say there are two people – a man and a woman – both are injured in the tsunami and lose their home and means of livelihood. The man falls into despair: "Why me?" he cries. "If only I had been out of town today" he said in anger and regret. By thinking like this he compounds his suffering. But soon his thoughts change. He notices that his neighbour's home is little damaged and he thinks: "That dog, I never liked him, it's a pity his house wasn't destroyed." He is further compounding his suffering and as well as reinforcing ugly and negative states of mind. Later he thinks: "Well, it's every man for himself" and he starts walking around seeing if he can steal anything from abandoned houses. Now the man's negative thoughts and feelings are leading to negative actions.

Now let us have a look at the woman's reactions. After she recovers from the initial trauma her first thought is: "How fortunate I am to have survived." She has suffered but she has not added to her suffering by being regretful, despairing or angry. Then she thinks: "There must be others much worse off than me. I must see what I can do to help" and she starts looking around for injured people. Thinking of others gives her a degree of detachment from her own circumstances and thus, once again, this does not add to her suffering. The next day she manages to get some food which is being distributed by the government and as she walks away she notices a child who did not get any. She comforts the child and shares her food with him. Seeing that the child is all by himself she decides to look after him. After a few days the child's father sees him and is tremendously grateful to the woman for having looked after him. The father is now living with his sister in a nearby town unaffected by the tsunami and invites the woman to come and stay with him where she gets food and shelter. The woman's positive thoughts and actions have now had a concrete positive effect on her life.

Now why did the man react in one way and the woman in another? Because of how they have reacted to their various experiences in the past, i.e. because of their past kamma. The man's negative mental habits in the past (*kamma*) have meant that he has negative mental habits now and these in turn make it

more likely that he will have negative mental habits in the future. These mental habits make him suffer more than he would have otherwise (*vipaka*). The woman (she might be a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Christian or of no religion) has been taught and has always believed that it is important to have a good thoughts and actions and has always tried to cultivate them. Her positive mental habits in the past (*kamma*) have meant that she has positive mental habits now and these in turn make it more likely that she will have positive mental habits in the future. These mental habits minimized her suffering and led to her being looked after by the father of the child. In other words, her positive past actions (*kamma*) have had a positive effect (*vipaka*) now.

So according to Buddhism, the physical pain that the victims of the tsunami experienced is the outcome of various natural causes. How they are reacting to these natural causes is their kamma, the results of their negative or positive reactions in the future (tomorrow, next month, next year, perhaps next life), will be their *vipaka*. As human beings of finite knowledge and power we have only limited influence over natural causes. We do, however, have the ability to mould and influence our reactions to situations. If we make no effort to develop our minds in positive ways we might, in the future, find ourselves overwhelmed by unexpected and unwelcomed circumstances. If we do make the effort to develop our minds, particularly through meditation, we may be better prepared to endure and even triumph over future adversity.

The news is full of examples of both. People ask: “How is it possible to remain free from grief, anxiety and fear under such terrible circumstances?” But some people do. A man in Sri Lanka lost his wife and two children and of course was devastated. However, being a practicing Buddhist, he recovered from his grief about two days later when he found two children, starving, crying, with their dead parents nearby, and decided to adopt them. Apparently, other people had seen the children but had done nothing to help. When the man was interviewed he said that his two adopted children have given his life new meaning and the strength to go on despite the difficulties. We read other stories of people taking advantage of the disruption to loot, rob and steal. Each of us chooses to act the way we do and we will experience the results accordingly. When a Singaporean man heard of the disaster he loaded up his van and drove to Thailand with the intention of distributing food and water to the victims. Sadly, on the way his van skidded and he was killed. People ask: “Why did he suffer despite his good deeds?” But such a question shows a confusion between natural causation and moral causation. This man’s swift and practical response to the suffering of others shows a great deal of compassion and will have very positive results in his next life. His accident had nothing to do with his good or bad deeds – it was a result of natural causation – a momentary lack of attention, faulty brakes, a slippery road due to rain, etc. Being good does not mean that we will never suffer due to natural causes, it means that when we do suffer due to natural causes we will be less likely to react in negative ways that increase our suffering.

Some uninformed Buddhist might say that the death and injury caused by the tsunami are the result of peoples’ past bad kamma. It need hardly be stated here that this is contrary to what the Buddha taught. In the Devadaha Sutta (M.II,214, also A.I,173) the Buddha says that the belief that every experience we have is due to past kamma (*sabbam tam pubbe katahetu*) is a wrong and false view (*miccha ditthi*). In the Sivaka Sutta (S. IV,228) he says that the suffering we sometimes experience can be due to kamma but it could also be due to sickness, to weather, to carelessness or to external agents (*opakkamikani*). The tsunami would be a good example of the third and the last of these causes. All kamma, whether positive or negative, certainly has an effect, but not all effects are due to kamma.

But what of us who have been fortunate enough not to be involved in this disaster? How can the Buddha’s teaching of kamma be relevant to us? Like the man and women mentioned above, our reactions to the tsunami could be either negative or positive. A person might read about the tragedy, shrug his shoulders and then turn to the sports page. When asked for a donation for the victims he might refuse to give anything, saying that he is short of cash this week. Or he might make a donation but then go around telling everyone hoping to get their praise or approval. He has been presented with an opportunity to react

differently from how he has always done but he has failed to take advantage of it. He has failed to grow or change, he has simply allowed himself to be carried along by his old habits of thoughtlessness, greed, pride and lack of compassion. But let's say a person has always been rather uncaring and self-absorbed but when he sees the victims of the tsunami on the television he feels a twinge of compassion. Then, rather than ignoring this flicker of compassion as he has always done in the past, he decides to act upon it. He goes to Red Cross and makes a really generous donation. While there he sees a sign asking for volunteers and on the spur of the moment he signs up and for the next few weeks spends all his free time collecting donations and helping out in other ways. As a result of this he would have weakened his selfish mental habits and strengthened positive ones, he would have grown and changed to some degree. If in the future he continued to act in such positive ways whenever he had the opportunity, he would gradually become a much more pleasant person and probably a much happier one too.

Thus even a tragedy like the tsunami can actually have a positive side. Firstly, it can be an opportunity to develop generosity, care and compassion. Secondly it can be an opportunity for us to contemplate the truth of *dukkha*, the Buddha's teaching that life in the conditioned world is unsatisfactory. Such contemplation can wake us from our complacency, remind us that no matter how comfortable our life might be, it can change at any time. This can help turn us from frivolous worldly pursuits to meaningful spiritual goals.