

VIPĀKA literally means "fruit" or "product", derived from *vi + pac*. The verb *vipaccati* means "to be cooked" or "to bear fruit", hence in a figurative sense *vipāka* stands for that which has become ready through cooking or ripening.¹ In its early Buddhist usage, *vipāka* represents in particular the "result" or "consequence" of a deed, more specifically called *kamma-vipāka* (see also KAMMA). It is this sense of *kammavipāka* that will be examined in the present entry.

The perspective afforded by *vipāka* on human behaviour is of central importance to early Buddhist ethics. The early Buddhist "ethical system was ... emphatically a study of *consequences* - of karma and *vipāka* (effect of karma) - of seeing in every phenomenon a *reaping* of some previous sowing".² The notion that any action will have its results is at the same time also an expression of the early Buddhist teachings on causality. Thus a verse in the *Sutta Nipāta* indicates that the wise ones who see action as it really is will have a direct vision of dependent arising and knowledge of the fruit of action, *yathābhūtaṃ kammaṃ passanti paññitā paṭiccasamuppādadassā kammavipākakovidā* (*Sn.* 653).

Vipāka and Determinism

In the causal network responsible for an event, *kammavipāka* is not the only possible cause. Hence from an early Buddhist perspective it would not be correct to assume that everything is the result of previous action. Instead, causes responsible for the nature of present experience could also be bodily disorders, climate, carelessness etc. (*S.* IV, 230; cf. also *A.* II, 87; *A.* III, 131; *A.* V, 110).

The belief in *kammavipāka* as the only determinant of experience was, according to the *Devadaha Sutta*, held by the Jains, who considered all experiences to be the outcome of former deeds, *sabbaṃ taṃ pubbekatahetu*, assuming that through self-mortification the karmic retribution of former deeds could be exhausted (*M.* II, 214). According to the same *Devadaha Sutta*, the Buddha humorously commented that, as a logical consequence of this belief, the Jain practice of self-mortification should be regarded as the result of evil deeds done by the Jains in the past (*M.* II, 222). A discourse in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* clarifies that to consider all experiences as the result of former deeds would result in determinism, since

evil deeds like killing etc. would simply be the result of former deeds (*A.* I, 173).

Vipāka and the Denial of Causality

Though the *vipāka* of former deeds is not the only determinant for experience, former deeds will, however, certainly have a result. That is, while the conditionality of present experience involves various causes and conditions in addition to karmic retribution, this does not mean that deeds have no result at all. It only means that in addition to the results of former deeds, other causes are also operative. To assume that deeds do not have a result would amount to what from an early Buddhist perspective constitutes another mistaken view. According to the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, such a view was held by Ajita Kesakambalī, who proclaimed that good or bad conduct has no results, *n'atthi sukaṭa-dukkatānaṃ kammānaṃ phalaṃ vipāko* (*D.* I, 55). From the early Buddhist perspective, however, intentionally undertaken deeds will inevitably have a result, which will be experienced either now or later (*A.* V, 292; *A.* V, 297; *A.* V, 299).

The *Mahāpuṇṇama Sutta* reports an occasion when a monk was puzzled by this teaching, since he wondered how to understand the operation of karmic retribution in the light of the teachings on the absence of a self. The line of thought of this monk was that, given that there was no self, who would be affected by the results of deeds, *anattakatāni kammāni kamattānaṃ phusissanti* (*M.* III, 19). In reply, the Buddha delivered a standard catechism on the true nature of the five aggregates. The intention of this reply seems to be to highlight that the absence of a substantial self does not deny the existence of those causally arisen processes, the five aggregates, that make up the individual. Thus the deeds undertaken by the conditioned process of the five aggregates of an individual at a particular point of time will eventually give fruits that are to be experienced by the continuity of these five aggregates, be this within the same lifetime or in a subsequent one.

The Ripening of *Vipāka*

According to a discourse in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the ripening of the fruits of former deeds could take place in a hell realm, as an animal, as a ghost, as a human being, or in a heavenly realm. The possible time periods for the ripening of the *vipāka* of a deed are either here and now, or on being reborn, or at a still

later time, *diṭṭh'eva dhamme, upapajje vā, apare vā pariyāye* (A. III, 415).³ This basic presentation of the relation between deed and result receives a more detailed treatment in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*. To the three time periods mentioned in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* adds the possibility of *ahosikamma*, when the results of a particular deed become defunct.⁴ This refers to deeds whose effect was to ripen in the present or the next existence, but which did not meet with the appropriate conditions for ripening.

The interrelation between the *vipāka* of different deeds is taken up for examination in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* by way of distinguishing four functions. These cover deeds whose function is productive, supportive, obstructive, and destructive. The first of these has its own direct result, whereas the second only supports the result produced by another deed. The third has an obstructive influence on the ripening of another deed. The final category, a deed whose function is destructive, completely eliminates the results of another deed.

The same work also distinguishes between the fruition of four types of deeds, listed in the order in which they take precedence at the time of rebirth. These four are deeds whose effect is weighty; deeds performed just before death; deeds performed habitually; and other types of deeds. Here weighty deeds are outstanding enough to determine the next rebirth. These could be particularly unwholesome deeds, such as killing one's parent etc., or particularly wholesome deeds, such as attainment of a eṇṇ *jhāna* etc. The next class highlights the importance of a deed performed just before death, indicating that its *vipāka* has a greater chance of influencing the conditions of the next life than a similar deed undertaken at some earlier time. The third class, then, draws attention to the fact that deeds done habitually, even if in themselves of minor importance, can exert considerable influence. This principle could also underlie a verse couplet in the *Dhammapada*, which compares the fruition of deeds that might seem negligible to a water bucket that is filled drop by drop (*Dhp.* 121-122). The fourth class covers any other deed that may exert its influence at the time of rebirth.

The emphasis on *vipāka* in early Buddhism finds its expression in the injunction to adopt wholesome conduct and avoid any action that will have detrimental

results. The underlying principle here is that a deed performed under the influence of greed, hatred or delusion will have *dukkha* as its *vipāka* (A. I, 263). Especially the ten unwholesome courses of conduct, *kammaṭṭhāna*, will have evil results here and now as well as in the future (A. V, 250). Wholesome conduct will instead have positive results. A case in point is described in a discourse in the *Itivuttaka*, which reports that due to giving, self-control, restraint, and by undertaking the practice of loving kindness, the bodhisattva was reborn for several aeons in the Brahmā worlds, followed by a series of rebirths as Sakka and as a wheel-turning king (*It.* 15). At times quite colourful stories illustrating the various *vipākas* of deeds can be found in the *Petavatthu* and the *Vimānavatthu*.

A detailed survey of the results of different types of unwholesome deeds is offered in the *Cūḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta*. This discourse explains that killing will lead to being oneself short-lived in future lives; harming others will result in becoming diseased and sick; irritability causes ugliness; stinginess leads to poverty; and arrogance to rebirth in lowly conditions (*M.* III, 203). The same deeds also have a considerable propensity of leading to rebirth in hell. The *Devadūta Sutta* takes up retribution in hell for a more detailed examination. It indicates that just as a robber has to face the king's punishment, so too an evildoer will have to face the retribution for his or her former deeds (aṇṇ *M.* III, 181). In this discourse, King Yama, who personifies the inevitability of karmic retribution (see also MĀRA), makes it clear to the culprit that these deeds have not been undertaken by the evildoer's parents or friends, but by the culprit alone, hence he or she will have to suffer their *vipāka*.

A direct insight into the relation of deeds to their *vipāka* can according to early Buddhism be developed with the help of recollection of past lives and with the help of the divine eye. The first of these two higher knowledges involves recollecting one's own past lives, and therewith the degree to which one's experiences were and are the result of one's earlier deeds. The other higher knowledge, the divine eye, involves a direct vision of how other beings, on passing away, are reborn in accordance with their deeds.

Yet, as the *Mahākammavibhaṅga Sutta* makes clear, the exercise of the divine eye can also lead to wrong conclusions on the retribution for deeds. This discourse describes how someone might witness how a person

performs an evil deed and later is reborn in a heavenly realm, and hence come to the conclusion that there is no retribution for evil deeds (*M. III*, 211). The Buddha points out that this conclusion is mistaken, as it involves drawing a general conclusion based on a single and somewhat exceptional case. He explains that someone who has performed an evil deed may nevertheless be reborn in a heavenly realm if, and only if this same person has usually performed good deeds. The particular evil deed witnessed will still have its result, but due to the considerable amount of wholesome deeds performed at other times the evil deed will not affect the nature of the rebirth taken in the next life.

The diversity in the fruition of deeds is illustrated in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* with the help of a simile. According to this simile, the same piece of salt will have quite a different effect when thrown into a small cup of water or when thrown into the river Ganges (*A. I*, 250). While the water in the cup will become entirely salty, the water of the Ganges will be hardly affected. Similarly, in the case of someone who usually observes wholesome conduct, a particular bad deed will have less consequences than in the case of someone who habitually acts in unwholesome ways.

In regard to the consequences of deeds, early Buddhism does not set itself the task of in some way influencing or altering karmic retribution (*A. IV*, 382). Instead, it takes the forward view, in the sense of emphasizing restraint in the present. Such restraint of unwholesome deeds avoids the accumulation of karmic retribution for unwholesome deeds and at the same time acts as the ethical foundation for progress on the path to liberation. With liberation attained, the *arahant* goes beyond karmic retribution in a future life (*Th.* 81). As the case of the former brigand *Aṅgulimāla* illustrates, the *vipāka* of former evil deeds will only have scope to affect the *arahant* during the remainder of that same life time (*kṛ* *M. II*, 104). Thus by becoming a monk and eventually an *arahant*, *Aṅgulimāla* had gone beyond karmic retribution in any future life.

In addition to the twofold distinction between wholesome deeds that have positive results and unwholesome deeds that have negative results, a fourfold perspective on the nature of karma is given in the *Kukkuravatika Sutta*. This discourse sets off on an examination of the *vipāka* to be expected by those who undertake the ascetic practice of behaving like a

cow or like a dog. The Buddha points out that for one who imitates the behaviour of an animal, it is to be expected that in the next life this person will be reborn in the animal realm (*M. I*, 388). The discourse then continues by enumerating four types of action, which are introduced as dark action, bright action, dark-and-bright action, and neither-dark-nor-bright action. Each of these will have the corresponding result. While the first two reflect the above distinction between wholesome and unwholesome deeds, action that is dark-and-bright refers to a mixture between these two, in the sense of a medley of wholesome and unwholesome intentions behind a particular deed. The fourth type, neither-dark-nor-bright action, stands for the type of conduct that leads beyond the sphere of action. According to the commentarial explanation, this intends in particular the attainment of the supramundane paths (*MA. III*, 105).

Though the basic principle of karmic retribution is quite straightforward, in that deeds of a wholesome or unwholesome nature inevitably will lead to a corresponding *vipāka*, the exact workings of karma can be rather subtle. To try to simply think one's way into a comprehensive understanding of this topic is not advisable (*A. II*, 80), in fact full insight into karma and its fruit is a specific power of a *Tathāgata* (*M. I*, 70; see also TATHĀGATA).

*Na antalikkhe na samuddamajjhe,
na pabbatānaṃ vivaraṃ pavissa,
na vijjati so jagatippadeso,
yattha tthito muñceyya pāpakammā.*

Neither in the sky, nor in the depths of the ocean,
Nor by entering a mountain cave,
Nor [anywhere else] in the world can a place be
found,

Where one could escape [the results] of evil deeds
(*Dhp.* 127).

Anālayo

References

- 1 Cf. also *Dhp.* 69: *yadā ca paccatīpāpaṃ, atha bālo dukkhaṃ nigacchati.*
- 2 Rhys Davids: *A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics*, Oxford 1922: XCIII.
- 3 Cf. also *Vism.* 601; *AbhKbh.* 4.50 and *Mhvyut.* no. 2308-2310.
- 4 Bodhi: *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, Kandy 1993: 205 (5.20).

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