

Preparing the Mind for Death

The Theravāda Approach

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Introduction

I think most Buddhists, of whatever school they belong to, will find many common elements in the rationale behind the Theravāda approach I now attempt to posit, with regard to preparing the mind for death.

What happens to the mind just prior to death will determine the quality of rebirth. How the mind responds to the six sense objects at any time depends on conditioning. Any intentional response constitutes *kamma*, which is directly responsible for generating rebirth. Since we are intentionally responding to the senses practically every wakeful moment, good and bad *kamma* is continuously being created. So, what can we do to ensure, when we are on the threshold of death, we will respond in a wholesome way to whatever appears in our awareness, and therefore create good *kamma*, so that we can be assured of a favourable rebirth?

The Theravādin answer to this question is based on its doctrine of four-fold *kamma*, explicitly stated in *AbhidhammatthaSaṅgaha*.¹ Although this compendium of higher Dhamma is attributed to a monk named Ven Anuruddha in the 10th century, this four-fold classification of *kamma* is by no means a baseless invention, but a neat and structured summary of the Buddha's teachings on *kamma* found scattered throughout the Tipiṭaka.

Complexity of Kamma

One such example is found in the Discourse on the Greater Exposition of Kamma (*Mahākammavibhaṅga Sutta*, MN 136) where the Buddha explained that the workings of *kamma* are so sophisticated as to deny the simplistic axiom that one who generally leads a morally upright life will definitely be reborn in a fortunate existence; and that one who does a lot of evil deeds must take rebirth in the lower realms. Four scenarios were given by the Buddha in that *sutta*, hinting at the complexity of possibilities and probabilities that surround the ripening of *kamma*: A person performs a good act and subsequently has a good rebirth; another also performs a good act but has a bad rebirth. The same two outcomes can follow a bad act. Why and how does that happen? Answer: Because before or after that particular act, something else is done that has the opposite effect and it is this other act that results in the subsequent rebirth; *or* a certain view is undertaken and completed at the time of death, and this determines the resultant rebirth.

Elaborating on this explanation, *AbhidhammatthaSaṅgaha* postulates four quartets of *kamma*, probably based on the above scenarios and that in *Cūlakammavibhaṅga Sutta* (MN 135), and on other discourses pertaining to the mechanism of *kamma*.²

1 5:18-21 (reference number according to that found in *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi).

2 E.g. *Nibbedhika Sutta* (AN 6:63), *Loṇaphala Sutta* (AN 3:99), *Saṅkha Sutta* (SN 42:8), *Nidāna Sutta* (AN 3.33), *DuccaritaVipāka Sutta* (AN 8:40), *Parikuppa Sutta* (AN 5:129).

Fourfold Kamma at a Glance

1. By way of function	1.1 Productive kamma 1.2 Supportive kamma 1.3 Obstructive kamma 1.4 Destructive kamma
2. By order of ripening	2.1 Weighty kamma 2.2 Near-death kamma 2.3 Habitual kamma 2.4 Reserve kamma
3. By time of ripening	3.1 Immediately effective kamma 3.2 Subsequently effective kamma 3.3 Indefinitely effective kamma 3.4 Defunct kamma
4. By place of ripening	4.1 Unwholesome kamma 4.2 Sense-sphere wholesome kamma 4.3 Fine-material-sphere wholesome kamma 4.4 Immaterial-sphere wholesome kamma

To appreciate the Theravādin perspective we must first understand this quartet. Kamma is defined as any volitional action done through thought, word or deed. “Volitional” means “intentional, premeditated, deliberate, conscious”. In other words, it stems from the mind. Any such action carries the potential energy to execute any of the four-fold functions in a realm of existence where and when circumstances permit, i.e. in this life, in the immediate next life or in other future lives until the attainment of *parinibbāna* (the final death of an *arahant*³). However, the ability of kamma to execute certain functions can become defunct under special circumstances—such as the attainment of various stages of enlightenment.

When one is dying, one's past and present kamma will greatly influence one's rebirth. As the kamma we have created in the course of life is extremely varied, which particular type of kamma takes priority over others in determining rebirth? According to the second quartet, this kammic influence is not random but follows a certain order.

Ripening Order of Kamma When Dying

Weighty kamma gets foremost priority in producing rebirth, followed by near-death kamma, habitual kamma and reserve kamma.

Weighty Kamma

Weighty kamma is that of such powerful moral weight that it cannot be replaced by any other kamma as the determinant of rebirth.⁴ On the unwholesome side, weighty kamma means the kammic potential generated by any one of the following:

1. maliciously creating a schism in the Saṅgha
2. the wounding of a Buddha

³ A worthy one who has attained liberation from the influence of defilement and from rebirth.

⁴ This is a Theravādin doctrine for which I have yet to find, in the Pāli Canon, any verification that explicitly states so.

- 3.the murder of an arahant
- 4.matricide
- 5.parricide
- 6.a fixed wrong view that denies the basis for morality.

On the wholesome side, weighty kamma means the attainment of the *jhānas* and maintaining the *jhāna* attainment until death, after which it will generate rebirth in a brahma world appropriate to the *jhāna* attainment. If one were to develop the *jhāna* and later to commit one of the heinous crimes mentioned above, the good kamma would be obliterated by the evil deed, and the latter would generate rebirth in a woeful state.

But if someone were first to commit one of the heinous crimes, he would not be able later to attain *jhāna* or enlightenment because the evil kamma would have created an insurmountable obstruction.

Near-death Kamma

The next priority is taken by near-death kamma, a potent kamma remembered or performed shortly before death. If a person of bad character remembers a good deed he has done, or performs a good deed just before dying, he may receive a fortunate rebirth; and vice versa for the good person. This does not mean that the person will escape the fruits of the other bad and good deeds he has performed during his life. When they meet with suitable conditions, these acts of kamma too will produce their due results.

Habitual Kamma

In the absence of weighty kamma and near-death kamma, habitual kamma generally assumes the rebirth-generating function. Habitual kamma refers to deeds that one habitually performs.

Reserve Kamma

Finally, in the absence of weighty kamma, near-death kamma and habitual kamma, reserve kamma plays the role of generating rebirth. The word “reserve” here is a contextual rendering of the Pāli word *kaṭattā*, which literally means “because it was or has been done.” This type of kamma refers to all deeds that have been done in the present lifetime which are not included in weighty, near-death or habitual kammas, as well as other deeds that were done in past lifetimes.

Live Well to Die Well

Putting aside weighty kamma, the predominance of any of the other three types of kamma at the proximity of death depends very much on chance. We can take steps to increase the chances of a favourable type of kamma prevailing just before death, but there can be no certainty that our efforts will bring the desired result.

If we deeply appreciate and internalise the understanding that our conduct at any time is the product of continuous conditioning through time, the physical environment, culture, religious beliefs, ethics, social relationships, etc. we can take the right steps more often. Practically, this simply means: try to live a morally upright and spiritually fulfilling life as

much as possible while engaged in the pursuit of material gain and intellectual advancement.

A Life of Rectitude

Most Buddhists are quite familiar with the five, eight and ten precepts, which are formulated in a passive or negative context, e.g. "I undertake the training precept to *refrain/abstain* from doing something." Full stop. It appears as though abstaining from doing unwholesome actions is good enough; and that nothing further needs to be done.

However, there is another list of ten types of conduct that is more comprehensive. Not only does the Buddha mention it repeatedly in many suttas,⁵ but he also presents both the passive and active aspects in several suttas.⁶ The Buddha calls the list *kusalakammāpathā* (courses of wholesome action), or in short, "good conduct". The reverse of good conduct is bad conduct. Like breaking the five precepts, these ten types of bad conduct create the kammic potential for rebirth in the lower realms. Likewise, the ten types of good conduct can lead to a fortunate rebirth. Let's take a look at how the Buddha phrases the passive and active aspects of good conduct.⁷ The italicised text within square brackets are my glosses to supplement some descriptions that are not stated but which seem to be implied.

Courses of Wholesome Action (Good Conduct)	
Passive	Active
One abstains from taking life. [<i>One is not a hunter, bloody-handed, devoted to killing and slaying, showing no mercy to living beings.</i>] ⁸	One dwells with the rod laid down, the knife laid down, scrupulous, merciful, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings.
One abstains from taking things that belong to others that have not been given by them.	[<i>One takes only things belonging to others that have been given by them, openly, righteously and lawfully. One freely gives away one's rightful possessions to the needy, within one's means.</i>] ⁹
One abstains from sensual misconduct. One does not get sexually involved with those who are dependants; those with spouses, those with whom association would entail punishment, or those who are betrothed.	[<i>One is satisfied/contented with one's own partner.</i>] ¹⁰
One abstains from false speech.	If one doesn't know, one says, 'I don't know.' If one does know, one says, 'I

5 E.g. Saṅgīti Sutta (DN 33), Asibandhakaputta (or Pacchābhūmika) Sutta (SN 42.6), Saṅkha Sutta (SN 42:8).

6 E.g. CundaKammāraputta Sutta (AN 10:176), Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta (MN 27), Sāleyyaka Sutta (MN 41), Devadaha Sutta (MN 101).

7 Abridged and based on Thānissaro Bhikkhu's translation of CundaKammāraputta Sutta (AN 10:176) <<http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/an/an10/an10.176.than.html> >

8 Italicised text in square brackets are extracts from the details of bad conduct, rephrased in the negative.

9 Underlined text in italics within square brackets are my glosses.

10 An attribute of a lay stream-enterer as can be inferred from Thapati Sutta (SN 55:6), Migasālā Sutta (AN 6:44; 10:75).

Courses of Wholesome Action (Good Conduct)	
Passive	Active
	know.' If one hasn't seen, one says, 'I haven't seen.' If one has seen, one says, 'I have seen.' Thus one doesn't consciously tell a lie for one's own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of any reward. One speaks the truth, holds to the truth, is firm, reliable, no deceiver of the world.
One abstains from divisive speech. What one has heard here one does not tell there to break those people apart from these people here. What one has heard there one does not tell here to break these people apart from those people there. Thus, <i>[instead of breaking apart those who are united and stirring up strife between those who have broken apart; instead of loving factionalism, delighting in factionalism, enjoying factionalism, speaking things that create factionalism;]</i>	one loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord, speaks things that create concord, reconciling those who have broken apart or cementing those who are united.
One abstains from abusive speech. <i>[One does not speak words that are harsh, cutting, bitter to others, abusive of others, provoking anger and destroying concentration.]</i>	One speaks words that are soothing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing and pleasing to people at large.
One abstains from idle chatter. <i>[One does not speak out of season, speak what isn't factual, what isn't in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, and the Vinaya, words that are not worth treasuring.]</i>	One speaks in season, speaks what is factual, what is in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, and the Vinaya. one speaks words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal.
One does not covet the belongings of others, thinking, 'O, that what belongs to others would be mine!'	<u><i>[One is content to live within one's means. One endeavours to realise one's ambitions righteously and lawfully.]</i></u>
One bears no ill will and is not corrupt in the resolves of his heart. <i>[One does not think: 'May these beings be killed or cut apart or crushed or destroyed, or may they not exist at all!']</i>	<i>[One thinks,] 'May these beings be free from animosity, free from oppression, free from trouble, and may they look after themselves with ease!'</i>
One does not have wrong view, is not warped in the way one sees things: 'There is nothing given'	One has right view and is not warped in the way one sees things: 'There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits and results of good and bad actions. There is this world and the next world. There is mother and father. There are spontaneously reborn beings;

Courses of Wholesome Action (Good Conduct)	
Passive	Active
	there are priests and contemplatives who, faring rightly and practising rightly, proclaim this world and the next after having directly known and realised it for themselves.'

Endeavouring to practise both the passive and active aspects of good conduct as much as possible in one's daily life constitutes habitual kamma that will certainly increase the possibility and probability of a good death—in terms of painless, peaceful dying in a wholesome state of mind, leading to a fortunate rebirth.

Spirituality in the World

One of the most important starters on the path to spirituality is association with good people. Their very presence turns on your 'good vibes' by giving you inspiration. Listening to them speaking on spiritual development begins the process of conditioning (or 're-conditioning') your mind-set and consequently your actions. One should not underestimate the impact of an intellectual understanding of the spiritual practice because even that can serve as a powerful factor in conditioning the mind. The next step is to put the theory into practice.

Spiritual values such as compassion, loving-kindness, consideration, patience, truthfulness, generosity and contentment are being cultivated when one is trying to practise the ten types of good conduct, particularly the positive aspects. In addition to these, one should also learn and practise the four establishments of mindfulness¹¹ in order to gain a direct experiential understanding of oneself according to reality, in preparation for death.

Mindfulness (*sati*), or its synonym 'non-negligence' (*appamāda*), is praised by the Buddha in many ways in many suttas, e.g. it is the chief of all wholesome states;¹² it is the one thing that can bring about benefits now and hereafter;¹³ it is beneficial under all circumstances.¹⁴ The primary function of mindfulness is remembrance, e.g. remembering instructions on how to practise; reminding oneself to restart or continue the practice; remembering to do what you are supposed to do and not do what you are not supposed (thus 'non-negligence'); continuously recalling an object of mental focus; recalling an immediate past sensory experience to understand its true nature—what is now popularly called “being in the present”.

How can mindfulness practice help to prepare the mind for death? Because the practice of mindfulness requires attentional training of the mind, it provides the infrastructure for re-conditioning one's mundane mind-set to a more spiritual one that is based on impersonal, objective observation and letting go. The ability to be totally objective in observing worldly thoughts when one is dying can be an effective tool to identify and let go of attachments that may prevent a smooth transition for a favourable rebirth.

11 Found in various suttas, chiefly Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10).

12 Appamāda Sutta (AN 10:15).

13 Appamāda Sutta (SN 3:17).

14 Aggi Sutta (SN 46:53).

Observation of painful feelings and the mind's reactions to them can also help to alleviate the sufferings experienced in the process of dying. Moreover, mindfulness can remind oneself of the different techniques that can be used to cope with the various types of suffering, as well as of the right attitude towards life and death.

Die Well to Live Well

A morally upright and spiritually fulfilling life will certainly increase the chances of a good death because it can constitute habitual kamma or reserve kamma. However, these two types of kamma are the third and fourth priorities respectively. The second priority, near-death kamma, if it is unwholesome, could intervene and render a whole life's endeavour ineffectual. Likewise, even if there was hardly any place for ethics and spirituality in one's life, a wholesome near-death kamma could generate a favourable rebirth, as evidenced in numerous claims of death-bed conversions.

So, to further increase the chances of a good death, family members or close friends could make preparations to create circumstances conducive to arousing wholesome near-death kamma. Some suggestions follow.

- Impress on the dying person that death is a natural phenomenon that everyone has to go through and that it can be accepted without fear or resistance.
- Persuade and help the dying person to let go of all attachments to her beloved ones and possessions, grudges against anyone, and remorse over anything that has or has not been done. To this end, the dying person's beloved ones should be told not to wail and lament at her deathbed, for this may consolidate her attachments or grief.
- Provide the dying person with the opportunity to perform a good deed, e.g. listening to Pāli chanting if he understands or appreciates it, listening to Dhamma talks, making a donation on his behalf, encouraging him to mentally recite the Three Refuges continuously as a mantra, or to engage in any wholesome meditation practice he is most familiar with.
- Remind the dying person of her past meritorious deeds. One could keep a special notebook where the dates and nature of significant meritorious deeds one has performed are recorded. Someone could read the list to the dying one.
- Gather Dhamma friends around the dying person and radiate loving-kindness to him, thinking: "May you be free from animosity, free from oppression, free from trouble, and may you look after yourself with ease."

Despite having lived an unethical and irreligious life, one could also die well and live well in the next life if such fortuitous circumstances bring about a wholesome near-death kamma. But of course, if you want the best assurance for a favourable hereafter, try to do the utmost: live a morally upright and spiritually fulfilling life and associate with good Dhamma friends who will be able to help create conditions conducive to a good death.

Abbreviations

- DN Dīgha Nikāya
- MN Majjhima Nikāya
- SN Saṃyutta Nikāya (reference numbering as in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi)
- AN Aṅguttara Nikāya (reference numbering as in Pāli Text Society's *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*)