

The Mahākammavibhaṅgasutta: An Analysis

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The Mahākammavibhaṅgasutta¹ can be seen to consist of two not altogether related parts. The opening section deals with what appears to be a rather garbled account of some half-forgotten incident involving the venerable Samiddhi's misrepresentation of the Dhamma to a wanderer named Potaliputta. Its import, if any, remains obscure and, as it would appear to have nothing material to contribute to the difficulties that arise from its sequel, it may safely be omitted from the present discussion.

The second part of the sutta may be summarised as follows :

“Some individual here is one who makes onslaught on creatures, takes what has not been given, wrongly enjoys pleasures of the senses, is a liar, is of slanderous speech, of harsh speech, a gossip, covetous, malevolent in mind and of false view.² Now some recluse or brahmin as a result of ardour, striving, application, diligence, right mental work, attains such concentration of mind that, whilst the mind is concentrated, he sees with the purified *dibbacakkhu* surpassing that of men some individual here who has broken the precepts and sees that at the breaking up of the body after death he has arisen in an *apāya-duggati-vinipātaniraya*.³

He speaks thus: ‘Indeed there are evil deeds, there is fruition of wrong faring.....indeed everyone who breaks the precepts arises in an ADVN’,

Either this same recluse or brahmin or some other (we are not told which) is then reported to see some individual who has similarly broken the precepts arise in a *sugati-sagga-loka*⁴. In this case he says: ‘indeed there are no evil deeds, there is no fruition of wrong-faring... indeed everyone who breaks the precepts arises in a SSL’. A third instance is then reported of some recluse

1. M-136.

2. To avoid the cumbersome repetition of the text I shall hereafter abbreviate this to “breaks the precepts”.

3. Hereafter “ADVN”.

4. Hereafter “SSL”.

or brahmin seeing someone who has refrained from breaking the precepts arising in a SSL and concluding that: 'indeed there are lovely deeds, there is fruition of right-faring... indeed every one who refrains from breaking the precepts arises in a SSL', and finally, to complete the possible permutations, a fourth instance in which someone similarly refraining from breaking the precepts arises in an ADVN—In this case the recluse or brahmin infers: 'Indeed there are no lovely deeds, there is no fruition of right faring... indeed everyone who refrains from breaking the precepts arises in an ADVN'.

Now the Buddha does not agree with these conclusions, for whilst it may be a correct inference in the case of the occurrence witnessed, it need not be so for all such cases and the recluses's generalisation is invalid. The real situation, he argues, is rather that in the case of the first individual witnessed then either (a) an evil deed to be experienced as anguish was done by him earlier; or (b) was done by him later; or (c) that at the time of dying a false view was adopted and firmly held by him. Because of this, at the breaking up of the body after death, he arises in an ADVN. And he who broke the precepts undergoes its fruition which arises here and now or in another mode.⁵ A similar pronouncement is made in each of the other three cases viz: where the person who has similarly broken the precepts arises in a SSL, then either (a) a lovely deed to be experienced as pleasure was done by him earlier; or (b) was done by him later; or (c) that at the time of dying a right view was adopted and firmly held by him. Because of this at the breaking up of the body after death, he arises in a SSL (and so on with appropriate changes).

Finally the sutta concludes with the following: "So, Ānanda, there is the deed that is inoperative, apparently inoperative; the deed which is inoperative, apparently operative; the deed that is operative, apparently operative; and the deed that is operative, apparently inoperative". As this would appear to be intended to summarise the whole sutta, we may illustrate this with the aid of a diagram. See TABLE (1) below.

Seen thus it is little short of nonsense. It is quite inconceivable how someone who has been seen to have broken the precepts and later to arise in an ADVN could be said to be an example of a deed that is both inoperative and apparently inoperative. Why this is not, as we might have expected, a case of a deed which is operative and apparently operative is far from clear. Indeed it appears a paradigm example of this as does (3) where we are told that this is indeed the case. At this stage it might be objected that (1) can be a case of a deed that is inoperative for has not the Buddha declared that such a man arises in an ADVN due to some earlier or later deed or to some dying thought. But this of course implies that in none of the four cases the actual instance

5. *Tassa diṭṭhe va dhamme vipākam paṭisamvedeti uppajjam vā apare vā pariyāye*—Miss Horner seems to omit "the next life" in her translation. This is discussed more fully below.

of precept breaking or keeping had any part to play in the subsequent rebirth, yet this appears to be contradicted by (3) which is given as an example of a deed which is both operative and apparently so. In other words we can rescue (1) only at the expense of (3) and vice versa.

A little thought, however, shows that the E-F-G-H combinations in Table (I) do not fully exhaust all the possible permutations. An act which is apparently operative could in fact be a case of either an operative or an inoperative deed, and vice versa. See TABLE (II) below.

Hence for any deed we have four distinct possibilities and when these are combined with the four individuals of the sutta we arrive at a total of sixteen alternatives. See TABLE (III) below.

It must of course be granted that we, not only not Buddhas but also denied possession of the *dibbacakkhu*, are hardly in a position to make any pronouncement as to whether an act is one which is operative or inoperative. Because someone who has broken the precepts arises in an ADVN, we ought not, we are warned, assume that he is hellbound for *this* occurrence of precept breaking, for no doubt some equally grave offence may have been committed either before or after the deed in question, or a false view may have been adopted when dying. What we can claim for ourselves is whether a deed *appears* to be operative or inoperative and we have no need of a *dibbacakkhu* to determine this. And here we can say quite definitely that (1) *appears* to be an instance of an operative deed as does (3), whilst (2) and (4) do not. This means that of the sixteen alternatives of Table (III) we lose in all eight possibilities, viz. (1a), (1b), (3a) and (3b) as these cannot be construed as examples of a deed which is *apparently* inoperative; and (2c), (2d), (4c) and (4d) as these similarly cannot be taken as instances of a deed which is *apparently* operative.⁶

What can be said of the remaining alternatives? We have already had cause to note that both (1) and (2) appear to be examples of deeds which are both operative and apparently so and this is well represented by (1c) and (3c) of Table (III). Similarly (2a) and (4a) seem in order for they certainly appear to be instances of an inoperative deed and may well be. (1d) and (3d), we might agree, are examples of what appears to be an operative deed; yet here they are put as also inoperative. In order that these may be allowed to stand, we must have recourse to the explanation that though they appear to be operative,

6. We may note in passing that on this revised understanding, we seem to lose alternatives (1) and (2) of our sutta: i.e. (1a) and (2d). The only solution that might rescue this situation would be to suppose that due to some editorial oversight (1) and (2) of Table (I) had somehow got interchanged. The symmetry of groups ABCD and EFGH argues against this, yet if we overlook this objection, then (1) would become an instance of an operative deed (i.e. (1d)) and (2) an instance of an inoperative and apparently inoperative deed (i.e. (2a)). Such a reading would well accord with both the facts and what appears to be the case.

they are not operative for such rebirth is here due to some earlier or later deed or some view adopted whilst dying. The most troublesome pair are those remaining, (2b) and (4b), which we are told are operative yet apparently inoperative deeds and it is difficult to see, at first glance, what this might entail. Now the expression *tassa ditthe va dhamme vipākaṃ paṭisāvedeti uppajjam vā apare vā pariyāye* seems to have been taken by most as referring to the later Abhidhammic classification in terms of the *javanas*-the seven impulsive moments of consciousness. According to the *Visuddhimagga*⁷, the first *Kamma-javana* is considered to be *dittha-dhamma-vedanīya-kamma*, the seventh *upapajja-vedanīya kamma*, all those in between being *aparāpariya vedanīya kamma*. Hence the occasion on which the result of a deed was to be experienced came to be seen to be dependent upon which particular *Kamma-javana* was present when the act was performed, *javana* (1) requiring explanation in this life, *javana* (7) in the next life, whilst *javanas* (2) to (6) in more remote future births.⁸ This may illustrate the danger of relying too much on the Abhidhamma literature for an understanding of ideas current in the period of the Four Nikayas, for whilst some difficulty may surround translation of the expression *dittha-dhamma*, it must be reasonably clear that the whole clause cited above means something like; 'he experiences the fruits that arise in this life, or in the future or in some *pariyāye*', 'future' here being not restricted to the subsequent birth but referring to a more or less indefinite period. What then can be said of this troublesome '*pariyāye*'? It cannot here be equivalent to *aparāpariya-vedanīya kamma* for this would render it redundant. As with so many Pali terms, it seems to have a variety of meaning which, though to some extent connected, have considerably divergent ramification and implication. Sometimes it is found rendered by 'course' in this sort of context but this has the danger of being taken for the course of rebirth and this, as we have seen, will not do here. Probably Miss Horner's 'some other mode' comes nearest for this allows the distinction between *pariyāye* and *ditthe va dhamme vā apare* to be one of method of experience than of time. That is, it is not so much a question of when the result is to be experienced but of how it will be felt. What exactly this manner is remains rather obscure. However there are many passages in the Nikāyas which suggest that various deeds can combine and either cancel each other out or, if not, then at least modify each other's effects⁹. This must, I think, be the most intelligible explanation of a deed which though appearing to be inoperative is in fact still operative. Hence in the case of (2b) we could say though his breaking the precepts appeared to have nothing to do with his being reborn in a SSL, such transgressions might considerably lessen his stay there; whilst in (4b) his having refrained

7. Vam XIX (Cp. Nyanatiloka's *Buddhist Dictionary* p. 78 Frenwin & Co. Ltd., Colombo, 1972).

8. The process is of course complicated by the fact that one never knows which particular *javana* is present at a given moment.

9. See e.g. Aiii; Dhp. 72; Av 271; Siii 241; Mi 389 = Aii 230, 234, 235, 236; Ai 122; A ii 202 etc.

from breaking the precepts would reduce his time in an ADVN. Of course it has to be borne in mind here that he does not get reborn where he does because of these deeds - the cause for this must be thought to lie in some earlier or later deed or some view adopted whilst dying. All they can do is to modify the effects of these other deeds and this is sufficient for them to remain operative whilst not appearing so.

The recluse's inferences are also in need of closer scrutiny. In the case of individuals (1) and (3) there would appear to be no problem, though there may be, as we have seen, subtleties which he has overlooked. In the case of individuals (2) and (4), however we may agree with the Buddha in his criticism we cannot agree with his reasons. When someone who has broken the precepts arises in a SSL the recluse has no right to infer that there are no evil deeds, no fruition of wrong-faring and that everyone so doing arises thus. Rather he should infer that either; (a) there are evil deeds but people have been mistaken in supposing that they lead to punishment in an ADVN for their real reward is a SSL; or (b) that again there are evil deeds but that these would appear to have no bearing on one's next rebirth, thereby being forced into the conclusion that either they may have effect in later lives or that some sort of Ājīvika predestination theory ought to be adopted. Such conclusion, with the appropriate changes, ought also to follow from (4).

The Buddha's condemnation of these inferences was based in part on his claim that a subsequent rebirth may be due not to the deed witnessed but to some earlier or later deed to some view adopted whilst dying. This must raise the question of what the recluse has actually seen, for whatever this may be, it does not appear to include these other events. Now the device which the recluse is said to employ in witnessing these events is the *dibbacakkhu*, a power occurring relatively frequently in the Four Nikāyas, usually as one of the six *abhiññā* or the *tevijjā*. Translations of the stock passages describing the *dibbacakkhu* of course vary to some extent but sufficiently to affect the following discussion. I therefore quote Miss Horner's translation which appears at several places in the Majjhima Nikāya:

“Thus with the mind composed, quite purified, quite clarified, without blemish, without defilement, grown soft and workable, fixed, immovable, he directs his mind to the knowledge of the passing hence and arising of beings. With the purified *dibbacakkhu* surpassing that of men, he sees beings as they pass hence or come to be; he comprehends that beings are mean, excellent, comely, ugly, well-going, ill-going¹⁰ according to the consequences of their deeds and he thinks: ‘Indeed these worthy beings, who were possessed of wrong conduct of body, who were possessed of wrong conduct of speech, who were possessed of wrong

10. See n. 14 below.

conduct of thought, scoffers at the Aryans, holding a wrong view, incurring deeds consequent on a wrong view - these at the breaking up of the body after dying have arisen in ADVN. But these worthy beings who were possessed of good conduct of body . . . speech . . . thought, who did not scoff at the Aryans, holding a right view, incurring deeds consequent on a right view - these at the breaking up of the body after dying have arisen in a SSL. Thus with the purified *dibbacakkhu* surpassing that of men does he see beings as they pass hence or come to be, he comprehends that beings are mean, excellent, foul, fair, in a good bourn¹⁰, in a bad bourn, according to the consequences of their deeds".¹¹

Further two similes are often appended which, it may be supposed, were intended to make the matter a little clearer:

- (a) "Just as if there were a house with an upper terrace on it in the midst of a place where four roads meet, and a man standing thereon, and with eyes to see, should watch men entering a house, and coming forth out of it, and walking hither and thither along the street, and seated in the square in the midst",¹²
- (b) "It is as if there were two houses with doors and a man with vision standing between them might see people entering a house and leaving and going back and forth and walking across".¹³

The differences between these similes are significant, though we should never press a simile too far. The stock passage describing the *dibbacakkhu* as, incidentally, the Buddha's and the recluse's accounts in the Mahākamma vibhaṅgasutta, seems unaware of the *pañcagati*, having only ADVN and SSL as alternative fates.¹⁴ Simile (b) has only two houses, presumably ADVN and SSL respectively. Simile (a) on the other hand does have four roads on which men are walking but only one house. We might be excused for asking what has happened to the possibility of human birth. Further, who are these curious individuals seated at the crossroads, reminding us of the man who tells the father in the Burning House Parable of the Lotus Sutra that his house is on fire. They cannot be the recluse with the *dibbacakkhu* for he, we have already been told, is standing on the upper terrace of the house. Might they be, for instance, arahants, not being reborn anywhere? If so, then this could provide a clue to the post-mortem existence of a Thathāgata, usually left

11. MLS.

12. e.g. D i 82.

13. e.g. M iii 178.

14. It could perhaps be argued that *sugati* and *duggati* include all the alternative births of the *pañcagati*. Though this often seems to be the case it is rather more doubtful that this is so when they are combined with '*sagga loka*' and '*apāya*' - *vinipāta niraya*' which seem to be used more exclusively to denote 'heaven' and 'hell' respectively.

avyākata. Or are they *antarābhava*? Indeed just how long do these journeys between existences last?

What at least must be clear is that the men possessed of the *dibbacakkhu* is portrayed as seeing the rebirth process. What he does not witness, at least as far as can be gleaned from the above passages, is the act which necessitated that particular rebirth. Here we should note that in our sutta also we are introduced to some individual who has either kept or broken the precepts before we meet the recluse who witnesses his rebirth, suggesting perhaps that the deed and the subsequent rebirth are not both seen with the aid of the *dibbacakkhu*. Certainly, as we have already had cause to note, the *dibbacakkhu* does not allow a glimpse of these acts performed both before or after the act in question, nor presumably does it allow one to witness the mental disposition of the dying individual. The *dibbacakkhu* at most would appear to pick up the story only after the death itself has occurred. How then does the recluse know that the man is one who has kept or broken the precept? All we are told is that he "comprehends" that they are mean, excellent, comely, ugly, well going, ill going according to the consequences of their deeds. There seems no reason, given the information we are, why he should assume that such a rebirth is due to former acts rather than to some form of predestination. These acts, presumably not seen, could well be irrelevant to the rebirth process as far as the *dibbacakkhu's* scope is concerned. Further just what is it that leads to his 'comprehending' the ethical status of the individuals reborn? We cannot here have recourse to a soul showing visible accretions or something akin to the Jain notion of *leśyas* from which he might infer the kammic status of the individuals. Similarly we may ponder who these 'beings' are - they cannot be bundles of *khandhas* for these must be 'breaking up after dying'.¹⁵ All it seems can be said is that witnesses the movements between death and subsequent rebirth of beings the existence of which, most would have us believe, Buddhism emphatically denies. How he arrives at his opinion of their kammic status reminds as much a mystery as does how the Buddha, usually depicted in the Nikayas as no more suitably endowed (at least as regards the *dibbacakkhu*, knows the recluse's inferences to be wrong. It could be that the Buddha has indulged in this pastime rather more often and is aware that those of good deeds do not always gain a SSL. Though many have been at pains to show

15. Further it should be noted that it is often said that most beings pass from one *amanussa* realm to another with only an infrequent re-appearance in the *manussaloka*. Devas are sooner reborn in hell or as animals etc. than as men. If there be no generating of new kamma in the *amanussa* realms, then the deva's rebirth in hell must somehow be due to an act performed prior to his becoming a deva, just as certain consequences of the Savatthi burgess (S i 91 ff.) took up to fourteen births before they were experienced. That this must be frequently the case makes it all the less likely that the *dibbacakkhu* allows one to witness the events that led to a certain rebirth and that the resultant inference must depend entirely on some visible aspect of the being who is being and reborn. even if this be granted, that the recluse by means of his *dibbacakkhu* does see the kammic status of the individual at rebirth, then we are thrown into yet another problem as to how he could ever be mistaken, in his inferences.

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that not only did the Buddha put forth a doctrine of kamma and rebirth but that he also claimed to have empirical grounds for his claim, it is only with a considerable stretch of the imagination that we should wish to count any knowledge gained by means of the *dibbacakkhu* as a form of empirical knowledge for rebirth. It is asking too much for us also to concede that his knowledge of kammically conditioned rebirth is also empirical: at best this remains in the realms of inference drawn upon none too reliable evidence.

TABLE I

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	★	★			★	★		
2	★			★	★			★
3			★	★			★	★
4		★	★			★	★	

A: breaks precepts; B: ADVN; C: keeps precepts; D: SSL;
 E: inoperative; F: apparently inoperative; G: operative;
 H: apparently operative.

TABLE II

H	G	E	F	G	E
★	★				
★		★			
			★	★	
			★		★

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TABLE III

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	Table (I)
1a	★	★			★	★			= (1)
1b	★	★				★	★		
1c	★	★					★	★	
1d	★	★			★			★	
2a	★			★	★	★			
2b	★			★		★	★		
2c	★			★			★	★	
2d	★			★	★			★	= (2)
3a			★	★	★	★			
3b			★	★		★	★		
3c			★	★			★	★	= (3)
3d			★	★	★			★	
4a		★	★		★	★			
4b		★	★			★	★		= (4)
4c		★	★				★	★	
4d		★	★		★			★	