

Itivuttaka: This Was Said by the Buddha

The Itivuttaka, a collection of 112 short discourses, takes its name from the statement at the beginning of each of its discourses: this (*iti*) was said (*vuttam*) by the Blessed One. The collection as a whole is attributed to a laywoman named Khujjuttara, who worked in the palace of King Udena of Kosambi as a servant to one of his queens, Samavati. Because the Queen could not leave the palace to hear the Buddha's discourses, Khujjuttara went in her place, memorized what the Buddha said, and then returned to the palace to teach the Queen and her 500 ladies-in-waiting. For her efforts, the Buddha cited Khujjuttara as the foremost of his laywomen disciples in terms of her learning. She was also an effective teacher: when the inner apartments of the palace later burned down, killing the Queen and her entourage, the Buddha commented (in *Udana* VII.10) that all of the women had reached at least the first stage of Awakening.

The name of the Itivuttaka is included in the standard early list of the nine divisions of the Buddha's teachings — a list that predates the organization of the Pali canon as we now know it. It's impossible to determine, though, the extent to which the extant Pali Itivuttaka corresponds to the Itivuttaka mentioned in that list. . . .

The early history of the Itivuttaka is made even more complex by the fact that it was originally an oral tradition first written down several centuries after the Buddha's passing away. . . . Whatever the history of the text, though, it has long been one of the favorite collections in the Pali canon, for it covers a wide range of the Buddha's teachings — from the simplest to the most profound — in a form that is accessible, appealing, and to the point.

However, although the discourses in the Itivuttaka cover many topics, they all relate to a common theme: the consequences of one's actions, or *kamma*. Because this theme is so central to these discourses, and because it is so commonly misunderstood, I would like briefly to explain it here.

The Buddha's teachings on action, or *kamma*, and his accompanying teachings on rebirth, are often dismissed as unessential to his teaching, something he simply picked up from his Indian environment. Actually, they are central to his teaching, and form one of his most original insights. Although many people assume that the Buddha derived his teachings on *kamma* from a view of the cosmos as a whole, the line of experiential proof was actually the other way around.

After directly observing and analyzing the role of action in shaping his experience of time, he then followed the implications of his observations to confirm his vision of the process of rebirth and the structure of the cosmos that lies under the sway of time.

In the course of his Awakening, the Buddha discovered that the experience of the present moment consists of three factors: (1) results from past actions, (2) present actions, and the (3) results of present actions. This means that kamma acts in feedback loops, with the present moment being shaped both by past and by present actions; while present actions shape not only the present but also the future. This constant opening for present input into the causal processes shaping one's life makes free will possible. In fact, will — or intention — forms the essence of action.

Furthermore, the quality of the intention determines the quality of the act and of its results. On the mundane level there are three types of intentions: (1) skillful, leading to pleasant results; (2) unskillful, leading to painful results; and (3) mixed, leading to mixed results, all these results being experienced within the realm of space and time.

However, the fact that the experience of space and time requires not only the results of past actions but also the input of present actions means that it is possible to unravel the experience of space and time by bringing the mind to a point of equilibrium where it contributes no intentions or actions to the present moment. The intentions that converge at this equilibrium are thus a fourth type of intention — transcendent skillful intentions — which lead to release from the results of mundane intentions, and ultimately to the ending of all action.

The Buddha's direct perception of the power of intention confirmed for him the process of rebirth: if experience of the present moment requires the influence of past intentions, then there is no way to account for experience at the beginning of life other than through the intentions of a previous lifetime. At the same time, the power of the *quality* of intention provided the framework for Buddha's vision of the cosmos in which the process of rebirth takes place: (1) there are pleasant levels of rebirth — the worlds of the Brahmās and the higher devas; (2) unpleasant levels — hell, the realms of the hungry shades, common animals, and the angry demons; and (3) mixed levels — the human realm and some of the lower deva realms.

Even in the pleasant levels of rebirth, however, the pleasure is unstable and impermanent, giving no sure release from suffering and pain.

The only secure release comes through transcendent skillful intentions, leading to the experience of *nibbana*, totally beyond the process of rebirth and the constraints of space and time.

Nibbana itself is totally unconditioned and so cannot be analyzed, apart from a distinction in how it is experienced before and after death. However, the path of practice leading to nibbana can be analyzed. It has eight factors — right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration — and goes through four levels of Awakening.

The early texts say very little about the content of these Awakening experiences, but are very specific about how these experiences function in effecting lasting changes in the mind.

(1) Stream-entry — in which one enters the "stream" to nibbana, gaining one's first glimpse of the deathless and cutting through the mental fetters of self-identity views, uncertainty, and grasping at precepts and practices — ensures that one will be reborn at most only seven more times.

(2) Once-returning ensures that one will be reborn only once more on the human level.

(3) Non-returning — which cuts through the mental fetters of sensual passion and resistance — ensures that one will never be reborn on the human level. If one goes no further in this life, one will be reborn in one of the five Brahma realms called the Pure Abodes and attain full Awakening there.

(4) Arahantship — which cuts through the mental fetters of passion for form, passion for formlessness, restlessness, conceit, and ignorance — frees one entirely from the suffering caused by craving, and from the cycle of rebirth as a whole.

This, then, is the picture of the cosmos that derives from the Buddha's insight into the power of intention. And what shapes skillful intention? Two connected qualities: (1) appropriate attention and (2) right view.

Appropriate attention focuses on questions that help foster skillfulness in one's actions, and avoids questions that get in the way of developing that skill. On the mundane level, right view provides a proper understanding of action and its potential for producing mundane pleasure and pain.

On the transcendent level, it reduces experience simply to cause and effect, skillful and unskillful — expressed in terms of the four noble truths — without focusing on whether there is anyone performing the action or experiencing the result. This untangles the mind from issues of space and time, and allows it to act in a way that opens to transcendent release.

Simply put, appropriate attention asks the right questions; right view provides the right answers. The interplay between these two mental qualities explains the question-and-answer format used in many of the discourses in the Itivuttaka. And, given the role of right view in skillful action, the fact that all of the discourses deal with right view means that they are all aimed — directly or indirectly — at helping the reader reach true happiness by using those views to foster skillful intentions in his or her own life.

Source: "Itivuttaka: This Was Said by the Buddha", translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013,
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/iti/iti.intro.than.html> .

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