

The Kamma of Arahants

Should an Arahant's Actions Be Called Kamma, Kiriya, both, or neither?



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Abstract

While actions of worldlings (puthujjana) and trainees (sekha) produce future effects to be experienced in this, the next, or a subsequent life, the actions of Arahants do not. In order to distinguish between kammically productive actions that yield future results for the doer, versus actions that do not, the term “kamma” is commonly used to describe the former and the term “kiriya(-citta)” (functional mind) is commonly used to describe the latter. In order not to muddle the waters, I will leave the terms kamma and kiriya mostly untranslated throughout this paper, whereas the contexts in which they are used will highlight their differences and similarities.

This paper is meant to investigate the usage of these two terms within the context of the law of kamma, and thereby sets out to explore, from the perspective of the discourses, whether an Arahant’s actions should best be called

- a) kamma
- b) kiriya
- c) both
- d) neither.

Arahants and Kamma

Can an Arahant's actions be classified as rooted in non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion?

Do Arahants accumulate kamma through body, speech and mind?

Who experiences the fruits of kamma?

*„There are three (further) causes for the origination of kamma. What three? Non-greed is a cause for the origination of kamma; non-hatred is a cause for the origination of kamma; non-delusion is a cause for the origination of kamma. (1) “Any kamma, bhikkhus, fashioned through **non-greed**, born of non-greed, caused by non-greed, originated by non-greed, is abandoned when greed has vanished; it is cut off at the root, made like a palm stump, obliterated so that it is no more subject to future arising. (The same is then repeated for non-hatred and non-delusion.)” (AN 3.34)*

While the term “Arahant” is not directly mentioned in the above passage, the reference to a person in whom **“greed (hatred and delusion) has vanished”** certainly points to an Arahant. This means that an Arahant cannot fashion kamma through non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion. This is not to say that he can instead create kamma through greed, hatred and delusion, but simply that the concept and classification of the wholesome and unwholesome roots (mūla) does not apply to him anymore. For the root (mūla) of alobha, adosa, amoha to arise, at least the **possibility** for lobha, dosa and moha must still exist, which is not the case for Arahants.

In other contexts too, Arahants are depicted as being beyond certain designations. The suggestion that an Arahant is beyond even the wholesome roots would be consistent with the way Arahants are described (or are beyond description) elsewhere in the discourses.

“And if anyone were to say to a monk whose mind was thus freed: ‘The Tathāgata exists after death’, that would be [seen by him as] a wrong opinion and unfitting, likewise: ‘The Tathāgata does not exist..., both exists and does not exist..., neither exists nor does not exist after death.’ Why so? As far, Ananda, as designation and the range of designation reaches, as far as language and the range of language reaches, as far as concepts and the range of concepts reaches, as far as understanding and the range of understanding reaches, as far as the cycle reaches and revolves — that monk is liberated from all that...” (DN 15)

However, it is not said in AN 3.34 that an Arahant's deeds cannot be called “actions” (lit. kamma) anymore in a conventional sense. Otherwise, how else should one call them? The Theravāda tradition has chosen to use “kiriya” instead. The next chapter sets out to explain how “kiriya” is used in the Theravāda Abhidhammic tradition. This will then be compared with the discourses, in order to find out whether “kiriya” can rightly be contrasted with “kamma”.

Before that, let us have a look at another interesting discourse in relation to “kamma”:

*“Bhikkhus, I will teach you new and old kamma, the cessation of kamma, and the way leading to the cessation of kamma. Listen to that and attend closely, I will speak.... “And what, bhikkhus, is **old kamma**? The eye is old kamma, to be seen as generated and fashioned by volition, as something to be felt. The ear is old kamma ... The mind is old kamma, to be seen as generated and fashioned by volition, as something to be felt. This is called old kamma.*

*“And what, bhikkhus is **new kamma**? Whatever action one does now by body, speech, or mind. This is called new kamma.*

*“And what, bhikkhus, is the **cessation of kamma**? When one reaches liberation through the cessation of bodily action, verbal action, and mental action, this is called the cessation of kamma.*

*“And what, bhikkhus, is the **way leading to the cessation of kamma**? It is this Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.” (SN 35.146)*

As I understand it, when the Buddha says that the eye, ear etc. are **old kamma**, this means that the six sense-bases are **the result** (vipāka) of old kamma.

When he says *“Whatever action one does now by body, speech, or mind. This is called **new kamma**.”*, this refers to **kamma in its active/productive form**, as the action that leads to results (vipāka) for the doer in the future.

When he says *“When one reaches liberation through the cessation of bodily action, verbal action, and mental action, this is called the **cessation of kamma**”*, the question arises whether the living arahant has already achieved the cessation of bodily, verbal and mental action, or whether this refers to an Arahant after his final passing away, when no more kamma can be created as rebirth has ceased.

I take it as the former meaning, applying the principle that was stated in the previous discourses (AN 3.34 and SN 35.146), indicating that an Arahant’s deeds are beyond designation in terms of kamma, or more precisely speaking, having fully developed the Noble Eightfold Path, Arahants are beyond the accumulation of kamma that can produce kammic effects for them in the future.

*“And what is kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result (vipāka), **leading to the ending of kamma**? Right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is called kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the ending of kamma.” (AN 4.235)*

This of course is not to say that an Arahant cannot act physically, verbally or mentally; far from that. The above discourses only mean to indicate that an Arahant’s actions are not governed by the law of kamma; they don’t produce kammic effects. A clear distinction must be drawn between kammic effects (kammavipāka) and other effects.

The actions of Arahants certainly bring effects on them, as well as on others, but these effects are not the kammic results of the arahant’s actions in a technical sense. These effects are not determined by the law of kammavipāka and its three times of ripening (during the present, next or future life). To give some examples:

Person A wants to save person B’s life, but B dies on account of A’s unskilful first-aid practices. B’s death is not the fruit (vipāka) of A’s wholesome kamma of trying to save B’s life, because Dhṛ.2 states that if one acts with a pure mind, (only) happiness follows; not suffering. The intention to save B’s life certainly qualifies as a pure and wholesome intention, which will therefore give pleasant results for A at some time in the future.

However, there is also a cause-effect between A’s unskilful use of first-aid and B’s death, but this type of cause-effect relationship is not governed by the law of kamma & its fruit (vipāka).

Likewise, the buying of meat increases the demand for dead animals, causing butchers to kill more animals in the future. But since the intention of the buyer in the supermarket is not to *kill* animals, but simply to *buy* meat (of already dead animals), such a purchase does not constitute unwholesome kamma on the part of the buyer, even though the buyer’s action may have an effect on the future killing of animals. Yet this cause-effect relationship lies outside of what is meant by the law of kamma & its fruit.

At this point it may also be relevant to investigate *who* the recipient of the kammic fruits of one's wholesome and unwholesome deeds of body, speech or mind, is. The doer himself, or others? The answer is found in the following stock-phrases in the discourses:

"I am the owner of my kamma, the heir of my kamma; I have kamma as my origin, kamma as my relative, kamma as my resort; I will be the heir of whatever kamma, good or bad, that I do." (AN 10.48)

"Beings are owners of their actions, student, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior." (MN 135)

We can conclude from AN 3.34 that actions of Arahants are not rooted in greed, hatred and delusion, nor in non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion (mūlas). We can also deduce from SN 35.146 and AN 4.2355 that Arahants have reached the cessation of kamma through the perfection of the Noble Eightfold Path and are therefore beyond the *accumulation* of bodily, verbal and mental kamma that can produce results for them in the future. For the remainder of their lifetime, they only reap the fruits of their past kamma.

Nonetheless we know that an Arahant's mind is non-greedy (alobha), non-hating (adosa) and undeluded (amoha) by nature. It is also apparent that Arahants act physically, verbally and mentally. The difference lies only in that their actions don't qualify as rooted in the *six roots* (AN 3.34) and therefore don't *accumulate new* physical, verbal or mental kamma capable of producing kammic fruits (kammavipāka) in the future.

Usage of “kiriya” in the Abhidhamma and the Discourses

Is “kiriya” a fitting term to describe an Arahant’s actions?

Let us first look at how “kiriya” is explained in the Abhidhamma:

“The fourth type of consciousness is called kiriya which, for want of a better term, is rendered by ‘karmically ineffective’, ‘inoperative’ or ‘functional’. ...

Here Kiriya is used in the sense of ineffective action. Kamma is causally effective. Kiriya is causally ineffective. Good deeds of Buddhas and Arahats are called kiriya because kamma is not accumulated by them as they have gone beyond both good and evil.

In Abhidhamma vipāka and kiriya are collectively called avyākata (Indeterminate), that which does not manifest itself in the way of an effect. The former is avyākata, because it is an effect in itself, the latter, because it does not produce an effect. (A manual of Abhidhamma, Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha; p.30, 37, 38)

Now let’s see how “kiriya” is used in the discourses:

*Then the Blessed One asked him: “Tapassī, how many kinds of action does the Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta describe for the performance of evil action, for the **perpetration of evil action**?” “kati pana, tapassi, nigaṇṭho nātaputto daṇḍāni paññapeti pāpassa kammaṣṣa **kiriya**ya pāpassa kammaṣṣa pavattiyā”ti? (MN 56)*

In the above passage “kiriya” is used with reference to **unwholesome** actions.

*“Then the Nigaṇṭha Dīgha Tapassī asked the Blessed One: ‘And you, friend Gotama, how many kinds of rod do you describe for the performance of evil action, for the perpetration of evil action?’ ‘Tapassī, the Tathāgata is not accustomed to use the description ‘rod, rod’; the Tathāgata is accustomed to use the description ‘action, action.’ ‘But, friend Gotama, how many kinds of action do you describe for the performance of evil action, for the perpetration of evil action?’ ‘Tapassī, I describe three kinds of action for the performance of evil action, for the **perpetration of evil action**: that is, bodily action, verbal action, and mental action.’ evaṃ vutte, dīghatapassī nigaṇṭho bhagavantaṃ etadavoca — “tvaṃ panāvuso gotama, kati daṇḍāni paññapesi pāpassa kammaṣṣa kiriya ya pāpassa kammaṣṣa pavattiyā”ti? “na kho, tapassi, āciṇṇaṃ tathāgatassa ‘daṇḍaṃ, daṇḍaṃ’ti paññapetuṃ; ‘kammaṃ, kamman’ti kho, tapassi, āciṇṇaṃ tathāgatassa paññapetuṃ”ti? “tvaṃ panāvuso gotama, kati kammāni paññapesi pāpassa kammaṣṣa kiriya ya pāpassa kammaṣṣa pavattiyā”ti? “tīṇi kho ahaṃ, tapassi, kammāni paññapemi pāpassa kammaṣṣa **kiriya ya pāpassa kammaṣṣa pavattiyā**, seyyathidaṃ — kāyakammaṃ, vacīkammaṃ, manokammaṃ”ti. (MN 56)*

While it was initially Nigaṇṭha Dīgha Tapassī who used “kiriya” with reference to unwholesome actions, here the Buddha uses it in exactly the same way. This shows that “kiriya” is used in reference to **kammically effective actions**. The above example refers specifically to actions of non-arahants, since Arahants are not able to perform “evil (pāpa) actions”. This is contrary to the common usage of the term “kiriya” these days.

“Since there actually is doing (atthi kiriya), one who holds the view ‘there is no doing’ has wrong view. Since there actually is doing, one who intends ‘there is no doing’ has wrong intention. Since there actually is doing, one who makes the statement ‘there is no doing’ has wrong speech. Since there actually is doing, one who says ‘there is no doing’ is opposed to those arahants who hold the doctrine that there is doing. Since there actually is doing, one who convinces another ‘there is no doing’ convinces him to accept an untrue Dhamma; and

because he convinces another to accept an untrue Dhamma, he praises himself...

“About this a wise man considers thus: ‘If there is doing (atthi kiriya), then on the dissolution of the body, after death, this good person will reappear in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world.’

“tatra, gahapatayo, viññū puriso iti paṭisañcikkhati — ‘sace kho atthi kiriya, evamayam bhavam purisapuggalo kāyassa bheda param maraṇā sugatim saggam lokam upapajjissati.’ (MN 60)

This discourse uses “kiriya” to refer to kammically effective actions, leading to rebirth in a happy destination, even in a heavenly world. Again, this is the opposite of the commentarial usage of “kiriya”, to describe the actions of Arahants which are unable to produce kammic effects (vipāka) for them in the future.

“Bhikkhus, the Blessed Ones, Arahants, Perfectly Enlightened Ones of the past taught a doctrine of kamma, a doctrine of deeds (kiriya), a doctrine of energy. Yet the hollow man Makkhali contradicts them [with his claim]: ‘There is no kamma, no deed, no energy.’”
“makkhali, bhikkhave, moghapuriso evaṃvādī evaṃdiṭṭhi — ‘natthi kammaṃ, natthi kiriyaṃ, natthi vīriyaṃ’ti.’ (AN 3.138)

The above and a number of other discourses (e.g. MN 56; see above) use the terms “kamma” and “kiriya” alongside each other, not indicating any significant difference between them and even more importantly, with no indication that “kiriya” applies only to actions of Arahants.

This is also a noteworthy example of a lack of specialised usage of terminology in the discourses, whereas later Buddhist tradition has a tendency to (over?)analyse and draw sharp lines between terms.

Study & Conclusions

Should an Arahant's actions be called kamma, kiriya, both, or neither?

“Kamma” literally means “action”.

Aj. Buddhadatta's Pāli-English dictionary translates “kamma” as: deed, action, job, work.

It is the volition (cetanā) associated with bodily, verbal and mental action that is called kamma. Since it is apparent from the discourses that Arahants can indeed move, speak and think, their actions indeed can be called “kamma” in the above sense. However, there is also a special meaning of the word “kamma” that goes beyond the ordinary meaning of “action”. This second usage of “kamma” signifies actions within the context of the law of cause and effect, whereby skilful actions lead to pleasant results and unskilful actions lead to unpleasant results for the doer in the future. This second usage of “kamma”, does not apply to Arahants. It is in this sense that Arahants are beyond kamma. Nonetheless even Arahants perform actions (kamma), even though these actions do not produce kammic results (kammavipāka) for them in the future.

It is therefore correct to say that even Arahants perform kamma through body, speech or mind, as long as it is clear that these actions don't produce future kammic results (kammavipāka) for them; neither in the present, the next or a subsequent life.

In the Dhammacakkappavattanasutta (SN 56.11) the Buddha explains to the five ascetics thus:

*“This noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering **is to be developed**: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light. “This noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering **has been developed**: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.*

So long, bhikkhus, as my knowledge and vision of these Four Noble Truths as they really are in their three phases and twelve aspects was not thoroughly purified in this way, I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world with its devas, Māra, and Brahmā, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, its devas and humans. But when my knowledge and vision of these Four Noble Truths as they really are in their three phases and twelve aspects was thoroughly purified in this way, then I claimed to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world with its devas, Māra, and Brahmā, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, its devas and humans. The knowledge and vision arose in me: ‘Unshakable is the liberation of my mind. This is my last birth. Now there is no more renewed existence.’” (SN 56.11)

From this we can understand that knowledge of the Four Noble Truths was essential to the Buddha's own awakening. Prior to such knowledge, he never claimed to have reached awakening.

“Bhikkhus, if anyone should speak thus: ‘Without having made the breakthrough to the noble truth of suffering as it really is, without having made the breakthrough to the noble truth of the origin of suffering as it really is, without having made the breakthrough to the noble truth of the cessation of suffering as it really is, without having made the breakthrough to the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering as it really is, I will completely make an end to suffering’—this is impossible.” (SN 56.44)

In other words: There is no liberation for one who does not know and has not fully penetrated the Four Noble Truths. This applies to the Buddha himself, his disciples, future Buddhas, Paccekabuddhas, or whoever else wishing to attain awakening.

The earlier quote from SN 56.11 explains that the Noble Eightfold Path **has been developed** by the Buddha. One of the path-factors is right action/doing (sammā kammanta), which is elsewhere defined as abstaining from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct. It is to be expected that even after awakening, the living Arahant still possesses all path-factors, starting with right view, and also including **right action**. This is explicitly stated in AN 10.112:

*“Bhikkhus, there are these ten qualities of **one beyond training**. What ten? The right view of one beyond training; the right intention ... the right speech ... **the right action** ... the right livelihood ... the right effort ... the right mindfulness ... the right concentration ... the right knowledge ... the right liberation of one beyond training. These are the ten qualities of one beyond training.” (AN 10.112)*

From this we can see that the kamma of right action (sammā kammanta) applies even to the actions of Arahants (one beyond training).

Let us now research the usage of the term “kiriya” as found in the discourses.

Aj. Buddhadatta’s Pāli-English Dictionary translates “kiriya” as: action, deed, performance. This is very similar to how “kamma” is translated (see above).

Research of all the contexts in which “kiriya” is used in the discourses, has brought to light that “kiriya” is never specifically mentioned for an Arahant’s actions. In MN 56 (see previous chapter), however, “kiriya” is used for evil (unwholesome) actions and in MN 60 “kiriya” is used in reference to wholesome actions on account of which one may be reborn in a heavenly world.

AN 3.138 and MN 56 use “kamma” and “kiriya” alongside each other, treating them as synonyms. Considering all the above, it follows that “kiriya” can be used interchangeably with “kamma” and both of them qualify equally well to describe the actions of worldlings, lower Ariyas, as well as of Arahants. Oddly, contrary to current usage, there is no sutta reference that specifically uses “kiriya” to refer to an Arahant’s action. However, given the proximity in meaning of “kamma” and “kiriya”, I would agree that “kiriya” can be applied to Arahants as well.

Related terms are kicca (duty; work; service; function), payoga (means; undertaking; action; practice; business) and carita (going; moving; conduct; action; behaviour), but none of them are used in the discourses exclusively for Arahants either. This makes them equally suitable/unsuitable to refer to an Arahant’s actions as “kamma” and “kiriya”.

I would therefore suggest that the actions of Arahants can be called “kamma” or “kiriya” (which are synonyms), without implying that Arahants accumulate kammic potential that leads to kammic results (kammavipāka) in the future. All six roots (mūla) are gone, yet their actions (kamma/kiriya) are free from greed (lobha), hatred (dosa) and delusion (moha) and therefore non-greedy (alobha), non-hating (adosa) and undeluded (amoha).

Their actions certainly have effects on themselves and others, but these effects are not governed by the law of kammavipāka and its three times of ripening (during present, next or a future life).

Their actions (kamma/kiriya) are performed through body, speech or mind, yet they don’t accumulate kamma that can produce results (vipāka) in the future.

Let us now revisit the original question of whether an Arahant's actions should be called

- a) kamma
- b) kiriya
- c) both
- d) or neither?

While the commentarial and abhidhammic tradition of the Theravāda school of Buddhism have opted for "kiriya", this study suggests that according to the discourses, both terms can be used for Arahants and non-Arahants alike.