

Buddhahood and the Buddha's Bad Kamma: A Theravāda Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the contentious relationship between the absoluteness of kamma and the perfection of Buddhahood in the case of Gotama Buddha. It seeks to determine whether, and to what extent, the residue of unwholesome past actions could compromise his state of enlightenment. Following an analysis of early Theravāda interpretations, three interconnected hypotheses are proposed: first, that Buddhahood constitutes a universal truth realized by the Buddha rather than an intrinsic source of his qualities; second, that kamma is defined psychologically as a sequence of volitional impulses governed by intention; and third, that Buddhahood is the ontological result of causal processes occurring mechanically, independent of the Buddha's immediate volition. The findings based on these three hypotheses indicate that: first, Buddhahood did not imply absolute perfection in a metaphysical sense, but rather a profound accessibility to the Dhamma; second, the absoluteness of kamma signifies the definiteness of the intentional cluster, which is the consistency of the intentional process within the stream of consciousness; and third, Buddhahood is the natural effect of profound wholesome actions, not a dispositional fruit derived from intention. It is the culminating effect of the law of causation, representing a mechanical consequence of proper actions rather than a kammic residue. Buddhahood is thus a natural effect (*phala*), not a kammic fruit (*vipāka*). These findings lead to the conclusion that the Buddha's past unwholesome kamma, while manifesting as physical suffering in his final life, does not blemish or render his attained Buddhahood incomplete.

Keywords

Buddhahood, Gotama Buddha, Bad Kamma, Kammic Residue,
Theravada Buddhism

Received: 2026-05-09 | Revised: 2026-06-12 | Accepted: 2026-06-15 | Published online: 2026-08-08

In many Buddhist communities and among conservative Theravādins, discussion regarding Gotama (Skt: Gautama) Buddha's unwholesome kamma in previous incarnations—which subsequently manifested as physical suffering post-enlightenment—is rare and often lacks critical analysis. It is frequently deemed improper, if not transgressive, for a practitioner to highlight the Buddha's past immoral behaviors, despite the Buddha himself voluntarily disclosing several instances within the Pāli Canon.

This study acknowledges Western scholars, such as Jonathan S. Walters, who have raised contentious questions regarding the intersection of the Buddha's past kamma and his Buddhahood. It is pertinent to investigate whether acknowledging these past transgressions negatively impacts the Buddhist belief in the “perfection” of Buddhahood. Furthermore, from an ontological perspective, do the unwholesome fruits (*vipāka*) derived from the Buddha's past defiled actions and manifesting as illness and slander in his final life diminish the integrity of his Buddhahood? Did these kammic residues taint, impede, or render his state of enlightenment incomplete? Although Walters primarily observes the incompatibility between these two concepts from a Buddhological perspective, his analysis nevertheless paves the way for clarifying them within a broader framework of Buddhist philosophy.

This article aims to explore the implications of “Buddhahood” in the post-Parinibbāna period (after the Buddha's death) and track its evolution into a unified concept of absolute perfection. Additionally, it examines the causal relationship between the Buddha's kamma and Buddhahood as an ultimate consequence. While unwholesome kamma yielded undesirable physical fruits, did it negatively affect his spiritual status while he endured these results? This inquiry weighs the absoluteness of the law of kamma against the perceived perfection of Buddhahood.

Before proceeding, it should be noted that within Buddhist cosmology, time is viewed as cyclical; the self is none but the stream of consciousness undergoes successive birth-and-death cycle. Within this framework, all traditions generally accept the doctrine of kamma to explain the repetitive cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*), driven by the force of intentional action (*cetanā*). In the case of Gotama Buddha, his previous lives fully reflected this doctrine.

The Buddha's Past Transgressions

In Book 24 of the Thai-edition Suttantapiṭaka, titled *Pubbakammapiṭikabuddhaapadāna* (Ap 390–392), the Buddha recounts fourteen past deeds to his disciples. Of these, only one was meritorious; the remaining thirteen were defective. These accounts illustrate how unwholesome past actions yielded adverse fruits in his final life:

1. Obstruction of resources: As a cowherd, he prevented a cow from drinking muddy water and torture it in thirst; consequently, as the Buddha, he encountered situations where he was unable to quench his thirst.
2. Slander: As a scoundrel named Munāli, he defamed the Paccekabuddha Surabhi (or Sarabhu in English version); in his final life, he faced the malicious slanders of the maiden Sundarī.
3. Defamation of a monk: Having once defamed the venerable monk Nanda, the Buddha was later confronted by the false accusations of Ciñcā Māṇavikā and her supporters.
4. Maligning a seer: As the erudite brahmin named Sutavā, he falsely accused a holy rishi named Gīma of sensuality. Being faithful to their teacher, his five-hundred students kept on

disparaging the rishi in public. Consequently, the Buddha and his disciples were collectively slandered by Sundarī.

5. Fratricide/Violence: Having murdered his cousin over property, the Buddha later suffered a foot injury from a boulder splinter thrown by Devadatta.

6. Childhood pranks: As a boy, he threw pebbles/dirt at a Paccekabuddha; this resulted in the assassination attempts orchestrated by Devadatta.

7. Abuse of animals: As a mahout, he instigated an elephant to attack a Paccekabuddha, perhaps unintentionally or his elephant was out of control; later, he faced the elephant Nālāgiri rushing toward him in Rājgir.

8. Regicide/Warfare: As a king or marshal who utilized spears to kill, the Buddha suffered from cracked, burnt or painful skin on his feet.

9. Unwholesome delight: As a fisherman's son who took delight in watching fish being killed, the Buddha suffered headaches, particularly during the massacre of the Śākya clan.

10. Verbal abuse: Having reviled the followers of Phussa Buddha, suggesting they eat only coarse grain, the Buddha was forced to subsist on inferior and sticky barley for an entire rainy season.

11. Physical assault: As a wrestler who broke an opponent's back, the Buddha sometimes suffered from backaches in his final years.

12. Medical malpractice: As a physician who administered a fatal purge to a merchant's son, the Buddha suffered repeatedly from dysentery.

13. Insulting a Buddha: As the youth Jotipāla, he insulted Kassapa Buddha regarding the difficulty of enlightenment; consequently, prince Siddhattha underwent six years of fruitless, grueling austerities.

These narratives demonstrate that even supreme enlightenment does not provide immunity from kammic residues. Recent commentators, such as Ānandajoti Bhikkhu (2012), suggest that kammic forces remain functional even for the fully enlightened; thus, the "Lord of the Three Worlds" could not escape the repercussions of his past.

However, some scholars note that not all readers accept these biographical "blemishes" as direct results of past kamma, as evidence is sparse in the earliest strata of the Pāli Canon (Xing 2002, 21). Also, Walters (1990, 79) questions the authenticity of these texts, suggesting they may be later interpolations from non-Theravāda schools. Conversely, the *Milindapañhā* offers an alternative view, attributing the Buddha's suffering to natural or external causes (non-kammic factors) rather than personal past deeds.

For instance, Nāgasena argues that the Buddha's backaches resulted from his rigorous physical experiments, and his dysentery was caused by digestive irregularity, not moral retribution. Thai Buddhist literature, such as the *Paṭhomsombodhikāthā*, similarly seeks to defend the Buddha's image from the taint of past kamma. If bad results could not be viewed otherwise than from the Buddha's own actions, such results would be far less powerful than good effects derived from his wholesome actions (*Mil 7 Pāpapunyapahutarapañhā*).

The reluctance of commentators to accept the Buddha's past wrongdoings may stem from a soteriological dilemma: if the law of kamma is absolute, then Buddhahood appears relative and mechanically determined rather than unconditionally perfect. Walters establishes a tenuous connection between the function of kamma and the perfection of Buddhahood. If the law of kamma were absolute and governed the perfection of Buddhahood, the Buddha's full enlightenment would be contingent upon his own kammic force, thereby rendering it illusory at the ultimate level. In other words, if the attainment of Buddhahood followed kammic force mechanically, how could Buddhahood be defined as perfect in the unconditional sense?

Accepting the absoluteness of kamma implies that the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and Buddhahood originate from kammic force. This suggests that the Buddha's existence and passing are dependent on the power of kamma. If the life of the Buddha is a result of kamma, can his final state of enlightenment truly be exempt from kammic influence? If all phenomena operate under the power of kamma, how can Buddhahood be characterized as a state of completion or perfection? Consequently, kammic absoluteness appears to render the perfection of Buddhahood seemingly impossible. The more absolute the power of kamma is perceived to be, the more effective the Buddhist teaching of causality may appear; however, this simultaneously invites more profound questions regarding the perfection of Buddhahood.

Although Buddhist scholars, such as Walters and Xing, have raised insightful questions regarding the correlation between the cause of Buddhahood and the law of kamma—points that could easily give rise to conceptual conflicts and misunderstandings regarding core Buddhist doctrines—these inquiries remain unresolved. Consequently, this article seeks to demonstrate that the concept of Buddhahood and the law of kamma are not contradictory. Instead, both teachings fully elucidate the core Buddhist doctrines of non-substantiality (*anattā*) and interdependence (*paṭicca-samuppāda*).

To address this tension between kammic determinism and the perfection of Buddhahood—an issue that may not be central from a Theravāda perspective—this article proposes three interrelated solutions. First, it will clarify the term “Buddhahood” by demonstrating that in early Buddhism, Buddhahood did not necessarily imply an “absolute perfection” in a metaphysical sense, but rather a profound accessibility to the Dhamma. Second, it will reinterpret “volition” by arguing that the absoluteness of kamma is synonymous with the volitional force of mind-flows. Thus, Buddhahood is a natural effect of pure mental states, not a moral-based fruit of action. Third, it will distinguish two types of “result” by categorizing the consequences of action into kammic/karmic fruit (*vipāka*) and natural effect (*phala*). This article hypothesizes that while the Buddha's body remained subject to *vipāka*, his Buddhahood—as a *phala* of his long-term cultivation—remained uncompromised and complete.

The Perfection of “Buddhahood”: Conceptual Clarification

“Buddhahood,” or “Buddhabhāva,” denotes the state attained by the Buddha through personal exertion following emancipation. It is fundamentally understood as a state of perfect enlightenment liberated from all existential bonds. Kammic residues are often characterized as such bonds, as they are perceived to obstruct spiritual freedom and induce physical suffering. Consequently, attaining Buddhahood is often interpreted as achieving total transcendence from the kammic mechanism. This state is regarded as unconditioned, signifying an independent existence devoid of worldly engagement and causal determination.

While the aforementioned assumption appears logical, it may not represent the most accurate Buddhist interpretation. Parallel to scholastic debates contrasting free will with determinism, one might conceptualize the perfection of Buddhahood as a boundless state existing in distinction and opposition to the mechanical processes of kamma. This interpretation is very controversial.

By definition, every Buddha discovers the Dhamma and realizes the path through transcendental wisdom, independent of any guiding teacher. The Buddhahood thus attained represents the pinnacle of spiritual fulfillment achievable by a human being. In contrast, an enlightened disciple (*arhant* or *arhat*) achieves liberation by following the Buddha's teachings. While an arhant attains a state of release from the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*), this state is often distinguished from the complete and perfect enlightenment (*Sammā-sambodhi*) that transcends all actual and potential phenomena.

In Theravāda tradition, reaching the state of liberation represents sainthood (*arhantship*), which is considered a primary spiritual objective, yet it is qualitatively distinguished from the ultimate goal of universal Buddhahood. Because Buddhahood encompasses the soteriological dimensions of a *Sammā-Sambuddha*¹—where wisdom, compassion, and skillful means are fully realized—it is universally regarded by Buddhist traditions as possessing a superior inner quality compared to both arhantship and independent Buddhahood (*Pacceka-bodhi*).

In monastic cultures where arhantship is the primary focus, Theravādins may exhibit less emphasis on the attainment of Buddhahood compared to various Mahāyāna traditions. Within the early scriptures, the term closest to defining Buddhahood as a perfect state is “Dhammakāya.” The “remains” of the Buddha are closely identified with the Dhamma, which the Buddha discovered and subsequently propagated.

The Buddha's discovery encompasses the four noble truths (*ariyasacca*), perceived through the three marks of existence (*tilakkhaṇa*) and grounded in the principle of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). The Buddha is one who has realized this integral Dhamma and what remains after his Parinibbāna has become “homogenous” with this interrelating principle. In the *Aggaññasutta* (D 27), the Buddha employs specific terms to identify himself as the “Realized One.” The embodiment of truth, or Dhammakāya, is explicitly used to bridge the identity of the Buddha with the Dhamma. This identity is further reinforced in the *Vakkalisutta* (S 22).

When examining the essence of Buddhahood, many Theravāda scholars assert that it is the body of Dhamma—the truth or principle—that constitutes its core doctrines. Thus, Buddhahood in Theravāda tradition signifies the Dhammakāya realized by the Buddha. In the *Atthasandassakatthera-apadāna* (Ap 139), the *Sammā-Sambuddha* Padumuttara is extolled for his boundless knowledge and unconquered power. His “Dhammakāya” is constituted by the

¹ There are three vehicles leading to enlightenment: the Arhant-vehicle leading to liberation, the Paccekabuddha-vehicle leading to independent Buddhahood, and the Bodhisattva-vehicle leading to universal Buddhahood. *Sammā-Sambuddhas* (commonly referred to as Sambodhi Buddhas or Sambuddhas) are those who follow the practices of the Bodhisattva-vehicle, which is regarded as the most difficult and time-consuming path toward achieving Buddhahood and transcending the cycle of birth and death.

threefold knowledge², cultivated through the four analytical modes³, the eight deliverances⁴, and the six super-knowledges⁵. These practices form the body of truth characterizing the Buddha's omniscience. Importantly, since these practices can be fulfilled by followers, Dhammakāya is interpreted not as the physical body of a specific Buddha, but as the body of truth attained by all Buddhas and arhants. However, the overall truth realized by the Buddhas is intrinsically linked to certain mental capacities uniquely possessed and exercised by them.

Buddhahood is further distinguished from the cult of Buddhakāya, which involves the veneration of the Buddha's physical relics in stupas popularly held by disciples after his Parinibbāna. While Buddhakāya refers to the historical form of Gotama Buddha, Buddhahood signifies a trans-historical dimension identified with the Dhamma. In the Theravāda context, *Dhammakāya* denotes the embodiment of truth in a broad sense, signifying the comprehensive knowledge accomplished by the Buddha. It can also imply a supra-normal dimension associated with the attainment of the supra-worldly path (*lokuttara-magga*) and the realization of liberation. Therefore, Buddhahood, in the sense of *Dhammakāya*, cannot be merely personified as *Buddhakāya*. This supra-normal or trans-historical dimension of the Buddha pertains exclusively to the epistemic and spiritual faculties of a Fully Enlightened Buddha (*Sammā-sambuddha*). This is implicitly indicated in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, *Mahāvagga Mātikā* (Paṭis.), a canonical text traditionally attributed to Sāriputta, the chief disciple of Gotama Buddha. According to this text, a Fully Enlightened Buddha possesses six unique types of intuitive knowledge (*ñāṇa*) that are inaccessible to enlightened disciples (*arhant-sāvaka*)⁶. These intuitive faculties enable the Buddha to discern various phenomena through the most refined and expansive mental power,

² The threefold knowledge (*Vijjā* 3) comprises: (1) the reminiscence of past lives, (2) the divine eye (or the knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings), and (3) the knowledge of the destruction of mental fermentations (or intoxicants).

³ The four analytical modes (*Paṭisambhidā* 4) These signify analytical insights categorized into four areas: the analytical insight of meaning (*attha*), causal process (*dhamma*), etymology (*nirutti*), and sagacity (*paṭibhāṇa*).

⁴ The eight deliverances (*Vimokkha* 8) constitute the stages of liberation, each representing a level of release—whether temporary or permanent—wherein the mind absorbs its object through firm concentration. Mental power is derived from these respective subtle achievements. First, while remaining in the fine-material sphere (*rūpa*), one perceives corporeal forms. Second, by not perceiving internal corporeal forms within oneself, one perceives corporeal forms externally. Third, by focusing on beauty, one becomes filled with confidence. Fourth, through the total transcendence of corporeality-perceptions, the vanishing of reflex-perceptions, and non-attention to uniformity-perceptions, one reaches and abides in the sphere of unbounded space (*ākāśānañcāyatana*) with the realization that “space is infinite.” Fifth, by entirely transcending the sphere of unbounded space, one reaches and abides in the sphere of unbounded consciousness (*viññāṇañcāyatana*) with the realization that “consciousness is infinite.” Sixth, by entirely transcending the sphere of unbounded consciousness, one reaches and abides in the sphere of nothingness (*ākāśaññāyatana*) with the realization that “nothing exists.” Seventh, by entirely transcending the sphere of nothingness, one reaches and abides in the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*). Eighth, by entirely transcending the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, one attains the cessation of perception and feeling (*nirodha-samāpatti*) (Dhammapitaka 1995; Wisdom Library 2020).

⁵ The six types of super-knowledge (*Abhiññā* 6) imply six ultra-conscious insights: magical powers, divine ear, divine eye, telepathy, recollection of former existences, and knowledge of the exhaustion of mental intoxicants (*āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa*).

⁶ The six unique knowledges comprise: (1) *Indriyaparopariyaṭṭa-ñāṇa* (knowledge of the varying degrees of beings' spiritual faculties); (2) *Āsayānusaya-ñāṇa* (knowledge of the inclinations, latent tendencies, mental dispositions, and temperaments of beings); (3) *Yamakapaṭihāriya-ñāṇa* (knowledge of performing the “Twin Miracle” appropriate to the context); (4) *Mahākaruṇāsamāpatti-ñāṇa* (knowledge of reviewing beings with profound compassion); (5) *Sabbaññuta-ñāṇa* (omniscience regarding all things); and (6) *Anāvaraṇa-ñāṇa* (unobstructed and immeasurable insight of a Buddha).

performing actions that transcend ordinary human capabilities. This is due to the Buddha's rigorous and prolonged mental cultivation⁷ as a Bodhisattva throughout *Saṃsāra*.

Some Mahāyāna commentaries, such as the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, revere the Dhammakāya as the embodiment of wisdom that transcends the subject-object polarity. Here, Buddhahood is reinterpreted as the unconditioned "root" of all Buddhas—a primal cosmic principle where the Buddha's body and mind are completely unified and absorbed upon enlightenment.

Buddhahood is considered "perfect" because it is understood as the original nature or the essential ground of truth. The essence of Buddhahood is the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) working in tandem with compassion (*karuṇā*) and great skillful means (*mahā-upāya*) to alleviate suffering. It is further viewed as an all-immanent and all-encompassing absolute potential within all sentient beings. In this framework, "attainment" is simply the activation of this original nature. In other words, Buddhahood represents a return to an immaculate primordial state rather than a progression toward a future goal. Perfection in these later developments is defined as the untainted state of the absolute essence. This Mahāyāna version of Buddhahood is entirely independent and unconditioned, transcending the kammic mechanism.

In short, Buddhahood in the later Mahāyāna tradition carries a more absolutist meaning than in early Theravāda. The *Ratnagotravibhāga* describes Dhammakāya as beginningless, uncreated, permanent, and intrinsically pure. When obscured by defilements, it is referred to as the Buddha-womb (*Tathāgata-garbha*) dwelling within sentient beings (Williams and Tribe 2000, 165-166). Such an expansive, ontological interpretation is generally not available within the Theravāda tradition.

Theravādins interpret Dhammakāya strictly as the body of truth accessible to sentient beings. As evidenced in four primary locations in the Pāli Canon⁸, the Theravāda explanation of Dhammakāya remains centered on the embodiment of truth realized by the Buddha or evoked within his followers. For Theravādins, Dhammakāya is not "the Absolute" in the metaphysical sense, but a state of boundless knowledge attainable by anyone capable of realizing the all-round truth.

The Absoluteness of Kamma: Conceptual Elucidation

Following early interpretations, most Thai Theravādins explain Buddhahood through the concept of Dhammakāya, the attainment of which is viewed as an effect of actions governed by a

⁷ In Theravāda Buddhism, the cultivation of rigorous effort is actualized through *Tri-Sikkha* (the threefold training). This system constitutes the core practice for training and cultivating bodily actions, speech, and the mind. It aims to develop wisdom that ultimately leads to the final goal: the attainment of nibbāna and arhantship. The threefold training comprises *Adhisīla-sikkhā* (training in higher morality), *Adhicitta-sikkhā* (training in higher mentality), and *Adhipaññā-sikkhā* (training in higher wisdom). In the case of achieving supreme enlightenment (*Bodhi*) to become a Fully Enlightened Buddha (*Sammā-Sambuddha*), the cultivation of intense effort must also encompass the specific conditions and practices required across various stages of a Bodhisattva.

⁸ According to the investigation by Ven. P. A. Payutto, a highly revered Thai scholar-monk, the term Dhammakāya" appears in four distinct locations within the Pāli Canon: the *Aggañña Sutta* (D 27), the *Paccekabuddhaapadāna* (Th Ap 2), the *Atthasandassakatthera-apadāna* (Th Ap 139), and the *Mahāpajāpatigotamūtherīapadāna* (Thī Ap 17). This scholarly inquiry was conducted as part of an extensive analysis regarding the Dhammakāya controversy in Thailand (Dhammapitaka 1999).

kammic trajectory. In this view, Buddhahood is not a primordial absolute ground but the culmination of rigorous effort. As a final result, such attainment is causally explainable and may not be considered “perfect” in an absolute, non-causal sense. Similarly, although the law of kamma is a cornerstone of Theravāda Buddhism, the nature and extent of its “absoluteness” remain controversial. It appears that if Buddhahood itself is not absolute in a transcendental sense, the scholastic interpretation of kamma might likewise lack absolute rigidity.

While a person performs innumerable actions daily, only specific ones qualify as kamma. An action is categorized as kamma—carrying moral consequences—only when it arises from a sequence of volitional activity (*saṅkhāra*) led by intention (*cetanā*). Without this intentional force to direct the action toward a purpose, the act remains a mere “non-moral deed” (*kriyā*), such as sleeping, eating, or walking, for which moral consequences cannot be assigned. Thus, the prerequisite for kamma is the underlying series of intentional forces. As the Buddha stated in the *Nibbedhika Sutta* (A 6.63), intention signifies action (*cetanā ahaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi*); kamma occurs when one acts intentionally through body, speech, or mind.

Nevertheless, according to later Abhidhammic commentaries, including the *Atthasālinī*, intention alone is insufficient to constitute kamma. Intention (*cetanā*) is a universal mental factor (*sabbacittasādhāraṇa-cetasika*) that arises with every state of consciousness. While it drives action, the moral direction (wholesome or unwholesome) is determined by some co-arising mental factors (*cetasikas*). As noted by Blackburn (2006, 188), intention in this context is a state of mind directed toward bringing about a specific state of affairs, rather than mere desire. In Buddhist psychology, intention implies a form of “aboutness” or “directedness” of consciousness. However, it does not become “volition” with kammic weight until it interlocks with specific wholesome or unwholesome mental factors to form a kammic cluster.

This transformation occurs when intention aligns with a group of mental factors to create the twenty-nine mental patterns laden with kammic value⁹. These factors operate together during the *javana* stage—the ninth to fifteenth moments of a cognitive process (*citta-vīthi*)—where an object is fully perceived and processed as wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral (Gorkom 1990, 137-138). In the deepest Abhidhammic elaboration, kamma is identified specifically within these seven *javana* moments (Saddhammajotika Dhammacariya 2010). Since kamma is contingent upon manifold conditions, it cannot be deemed “absolute” in a strict, independent sense.

The *Atthasālinī* (As 5 [Thai]) describes intention as having the characteristic of intending (*cetayikalakkhaṇā*) an object shared with the mind and associated mental factors through a mutually conditioned process. As a chief mental factor, intention coordinates and activates (*saṃvidahanapaccupaṭṭhānā*) these associated factors (*sampayuttadhammā*). This process determines the moral quality of the act and initiates the kammic function (*āyūhanarasā*).

⁹ In the case of mundane beings, twenty-nine distinct consciousnesses (*cittas*)—characterized by their moral or immoral volitional quality—possess sufficient karmic potency to be classified as *kamma*. These mental patterns are categorized into the following six functional groups: (1) eight greed-rooted consciousnesses, which incite unwholesome acts of attachment such as theft, sexual misconduct, and intoxicant consumption; (2) two hatred-rooted consciousnesses, which drive malevolent actions including killing, harassment, and various forms of verbal aggression such as vituperation or backbiting; (3) two delusion-rooted consciousnesses, which manifest as cognitive obscuration leading to frivolous speech (*samphappalāpa*), restlessness (*uddhacca*), and remorse (*kukkucca*); (4) eight sensuous-sphere wholesome consciousnesses, which motivate meritorious deeds such as philanthropy, ethical conduct, altruistic service, and mental cultivation; (5) five fine-material-sphere wholesome consciousnesses, associated with the attainment of meditative absorptions (*jhāna*); and (6) four immaterial-sphere wholesome consciousnesses (Gorkom 1990, 140; U Hla Myint n.d.).

Metaphorically, intention is like a landowner who directs fifty guests and workers to harvest crops; they reap the fruits of their labor collectively (Pe Maung Tin 1976, 147-148). This metaphor illustrates that intention as a neutral mental factor never functions in isolation. As the chief mental factor, it coordinates some “visiting” mental factors to shape a flow of “volition” ready for kammic determination. Therefore, the criterion for evaluating kamma is the interconnection between intention and its concomitant mental factors. Kamma is thus neither absolute in a monistic nor a purely scholastic way; it is intelligible only through the synchronous operation of conscious mind-flows and cognitive processes.

Consequently, if kamma possesses any form of “absoluteness,” it lies in the consistency of the intentional process within the stream of consciousness. The absoluteness of kamma in Theravāda interpretation does not involve an external, transcendent force; rather, it is the “definiteness” (*niyata*) of each intentional cluster yielding a result consistent with its cause. A wholesome volition yields a wholesome result, and vice versa. Although wholesome results may not manifest in a tangible form, kamma immediately yields its wholesome or unwholesome effects as pleasant or unpleasant feeling within the present state of consciousness.

Buddhahood is thus seen as the ultimate consequence of the Buddha's vast accumulation of merit through long-cultivated wholesome volition. However, this raises a crucial question. If Buddhahood is a result of merit-doing cultivation, will it be subject to the residual fruits of the Buddha's past unwholesome kamma? Do those bad fruits of previous kamma taint or render his Buddhahood incomplete?

The Buddha's Bad Kamma and the Attainment of Buddhahood: Reinterpretation

The preceding sections of this article have clarified the Theravāda conceptions of Buddhahood and kamma. It is established that Buddhahood signifies the “Body of Truth” (*Dhammakāya*)—a universal reality attainable by any potential individual. Meanwhile, kamma represents an intentional cluster comprising mind-units (*citta*) and some particular wholesome or unwholesome mental factors (*kusala or akusala cetasika*) led by intention functioning within the stream of consciousness.

Since kamma is an expression of intentional will, its basis is psychological rather than ontological (*Nibbedhika Sutta*, A 6.63 ; *Kammanirodha Sutta*, SN 35.146). As Gombrich (1975, 215) perceptively observes, the doctrine of kamma did not initially occupy a central position in early Buddhist core tenets. Its significance intensified later, as the monastic community required a profane doctrine to address social purposes and compete with rival ascetic groups—notably the Jains, who interpreted kamma as a form of subtle atomic substance. According to Gombrich, kamma is treated within early Buddhism as a conventional and social teaching. If kamma were to refer to something absolute, that ‘something’ would not be the supreme law of kamma itself; rather, the ultimate realities of kamma would reside in the existence of minds and mental factors. In this ultimate sense (*paramattha*), and in stark contrast to the Jains' absolute, substance-based ontology, kamma in early Buddhism lacks ontological absoluteness.

Despite the plausibility of Gombrich's reasoning, kamma is not simply a conventional or social doctrine within Theravāda Buddhism. There exists a Buddhist teaching that specifies five absolute orders of nature called the fivefold "*niyāmas*." These fivefold *niyāmas*¹⁰ are natural laws that function independently of social conventions. Interestingly, *kamma-niyāma* (the law of kamma) is a natural law concerning the process of the fruition of actions, whereas *citta-niyāma* (psychic law) is another natural law pertaining to the workings of the mind. If kamma is a matter of intentional process, why does the Theravāda Buddhist teaching separate *kamma-niyāma* from *citta-niyāma* and render them two distinct natural laws? Here, the author suggests that this separation is related to understanding the two forms of kammic fruition, as will be elaborated below.

If the ultimate realities of kamma are confined to mental processes, any kammic fruits—whether wholesome or unwholesome—experienced by the Buddha must stem from his past intentional dispositions. While Buddhahood is perceived as a profound wholesome result of great wholesome causes, a conceptual dilemma arises. On the one hand, if Buddhahood denotes a "Body of Truth" that exists independently of each Buddha's mind—based on the understanding that *kamma-niyāma* is a natural law distinct from *citta-niyāma*—it cannot be a direct product of individual volition. One must then question how Buddhahood can be defined as the ultimate result of intentional will, given that it is a universal Truth (Dhamma). On the other hand, if Buddhahood signifies kammic fruits inseparable from the Buddha's mental processes, how can one distinguish the law of kamma from the psychic law?

In Theravāda Buddhism, the Buddha does not "possess" the Dhammakāya in the same manner he possesses his physical form (*Buddhakāya*). Although the Dhammakāya is the Buddha's embodiment of truth and is inseparable from him, it is not synonymous with his individual person. Since Buddhahood transcends individuality, it is too universal to be a mere mental product of personal volition. Thus, by distinguishing Buddhahood as the "Body of Truth" and kamma as a dynamic intentional process, we may posit that Buddhahood arises from a definite causal mechanism rather than from a personal Buddha's intention. It is the eventual consequence of the universal law of causation which encompasses, but is not limited to, the law of action.

Following Reichenbach's (1988, 400-401) interpretation, there are two types of consequences associated with action: the effect (*phala*) and the fruit (*vipāka*). The effect (*phala*) is a causal result of an action governed by the universal law of causation. It is thus mechanical and lacks inherent moral quality. Meanwhile, the fruit (*vipāka*) is a kammic result of a volitional action governed by the law of action. Unlike the effect, the fruit carries a moral quality that produces a disposition or tendency within the agent.

While the law of action is an extension of the law of causation, it is a restrictive subset that accounts for the moral quality of intention. Every act produces a result (*phala*), but only kammic acts produce a wholesome or unwholesome dispositional fruit (*vipāka*) in the doer.

¹⁰ The *Pañca-niyāma* (the Fivefold Natural Law) comprises: *Utu-niyāma* (the natural law governing temperature, physical phenomena, and seasonal changes that constitute the human environment); *Bīja-niyāma* (the natural law pertaining to heredity and biological growth); *Citta-niyāma* (the natural law concerning the functions and processes of the mind); *Kamma-niyāma* (the natural law regarding human actions and intentionality); and *Dhamma-niyāma* (the natural law governing the causal relationships and interdependent conditions of all phenomena).

Within this framework, Buddhahood is the natural effect of profound wholesome actions rather than a dispositional fruit derived from intention. It is the culminating effect of the law of causation—a mechanical consequence of proper actions—rather than a kammic residue¹¹

This point can be further elucidated by Theravāda textual evidence. The distinction between the two aforementioned types of consequences may provide a clearer understanding of the difference between *kamma-niyāma* and *citta-niyāma*. Experiencing the results of action as *phala* primarily reflects the mechanistic operation of *kamma-niyāma* as the law of causation. Conversely, experiencing the fruits of action as *vipāka* mirrors the functioning of the mind within the cycle of defilement, action, and retribution (*kilesa-kamma-vipāka*). So, *kamma-niyāma* cannot be understood in isolation from *citta-niyāma*. *Kamma-niyāma*, therefore, operates on two distinct levels: as the law of causation in a broader sense, and as a moral law in a narrower sense.

The life of Gautama Buddha exemplifies both modes of experiencing the consequences of actions; while the Buddha endured *vipāka* through the intertwined operations of *citta-niyāma* and *kamma-niyāma*, Buddhahood itself is purely the natural, mechanistic outcome of *kamma-niyāma* in a broader sense. Ultimately, regardless of the nature of these consequences, both the concept of kamma and the notion of Buddhahood reinforce the doctrine of dependent origination and refute the existence of any inherent or substantial entity (DN 15).

Conclusion

Our investigation of these three interrelated Theravāda teachings leads to three primary conclusions. First, insofar as Buddhahood is equated with the Dhammakāya in early Theravāda interpretation, it is not the “root source” of the Bodhisattva but the universal truth he attains. Second, insofar as kamma is defined as a process of intentional will, the law of kamma lacks the ontological status required to produce Buddhahood. Third, insofar as the causal law of nature allows for different forms of results or consequences, Buddhahood is a natural effect (*phala*), not a kammic fruit (*vipāka*).

Ultimately, Buddhahood is a mechanical result of specific wholesome actions that leaves no kammic disposition on the agent. While the Buddha may experience the fruits of his kammic residues (*kammavipāka*), neither those residues nor his prior intentions can taint or render his Buddhahood incomplete. The process of kamma remains operative in both sense: broader and narrower, yet it does not hold absolute dominion over Buddhahood.

Abbreviations

A	Aṅguttaranikāya
Ap	Apadāna
As	Aṭṭhasālinī

¹¹ In Theravāda tradition, an arhant is one who has attained the fruition of Arhantship (*Arhatta-phala*), which can be explained as receiving the “result” of kamma in a broad sense. Similarly, Buddhahood is the “result” that all Buddhas attain through the natural mechanism of cause and effect. This paradigm supports the concept of kamma in the sense of the law of causation, rather than merely as a moral law of action.

D	Dīghanikāya
Dhs	Dhammasaṅgani
Mil	Milindapañhā
S	Saṃyuttanikāya
Th	Theragāthā
Thī	Therīgāthā

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