

Good Karma! Bad Karma!

What Exactly Is Karma?

by Shravasti Dhammika

© S Dhammika 2015

Budblooms edition 2023

All rights reserved Contents



Good Karma, Bad Karma! What Exactly is Karma?

Good Karma! Bad Karma! What Exactly Is Karma?

..... 1

Preface

.....
..... 4

Karma and Rebirth in Buddhism

..... 6

Karma is one of the central concepts of Buddhism. Despite this, it is also one of the most misunderstood by both Buddhists themselves and consequently by non-Buddhists as well. These misunderstandings usually become apparent at the very beginning of any discourse on karma. 6

Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism

..... 6

The common assertion is that karma and rebirth were universally believed in ancient India and that the Buddha simply took them for granted and incorporated them into his Dhamma. The evidence shows otherwise. The

Vedas, the oldest Hindu scriptures, show no knowledge of kamma or of rebirth. In Vedic thought, the individual's destiny was determined by certain rituals and by the gods, not by kamma. And at death the individual was not reborn, he or she went to the world of the fathers (*pitrloka*), i.e. heaven. Other early Hindu scriptures, such as the *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*, uses the word kamma but only in the sense of performing Vedic sacrifices and related rituals. 6

How Does Kamma Work? 12

So how does kamma work? Many, probably most, of our intentions are scattered and feeble, and their corresponding *vipāka* will be weak. Some are focused and purposeful and their *vipāka* will be strong. An occasional outburst of temper or an act of generosity is unlikely to have a noticeable kammic effect. The Buddha talked about being “addicted” to (*anuytta*) certain types of behaviour, of the individual who “often thinks about and ruminates over” (*anuvittaka, anuvicāra*) certain things, and of particular thoughts or actions being “pursued...persistently done, made a foundation, carried out, consolidated” (e.g. A.I,29; M.I,116; A.V,342). When some behaviours start to become character traits then their *vipāka* manifests noticeably and impacts more dramatically on a person's life. [17a,b] An action such as violent assault or murder although taking only a brief period of time would probably have a very strong and noticeable *vipāka* because of the passions provoking them would likewise have to be very strong. It is also the case that the *vipāka* of some intentions can be modified even perhaps to the degree of being almost cancelled out by a series of stronger contrasting intentions. One often hears statements such as: “If you murder you will be reborn in purgatory.” Interestingly, the Buddha said that he would disagree with such an assertion. [18] 13

Kamma and Rebirth. A Miscellany 38

Appendix: The Tsunami, A Buddhist View 60



Preface

If you go to Amazon Books on the internet and put in the word karma, the result will demonstrate beyond all doubt that karma is a hot topic. There are well over 100 books with the word karma in their titles, most of them purporting to explain what karma is. And judging from these titles kamma fits comfortably with astrology, God-consciousness, good sex, tarot reading, the evolving soul and much else besides, and it is an ancient wisdom, a power, a science, a cosmic force and a way of healing your past and your future. Two titles that caught my attention were *The Good Karma Divorce: Avoid Litigation, Turn Negative Emotions into Positive Actions, and Get On with the Rest of Your Life*, and *The Lightworker's Guide to Everyday Karma: A Karmic Savings and Loan Series Book*. Buddhist authors too have produced many books on kamma, one of the most recent being Pa-auk Sayadaw's *The Workings of Kamma*. Towards the beginning of his book, the author states: "The workings of kamma and kamma's result is (sic) so profound and difficult to see that only a Buddha's Knowledge of Kamma & Results can see it (sic) clearly: His disciples do not possess this knowledge, not even Arahats." Apparently undeterred by this, the author proceeds to explain kamma in 362 pages replete with over 30 charts and diagrams, nearly a thousand notes and 46 pages of endnotes. He draws on the Tipiṭaka, but far more so on the commentaries, sub-commentaries and works such as the *Visudhimagga* and the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*.

The book you now hold in your hand takes a different approach. It deals with kamma and its related doctrine of rebirth exclusively as they were explained by the Buddha, the founder of the religion called Buddhism. In the centuries after the Buddha, his teachings were subject to exegesis by various thinkers and scholars; they were interpreted and expanded, annotated and developed. In the process deeper meanings were sometimes drawn out of them and obscure points clarified. But just as often, this exegesis obscured or distorted the Buddha's original teachings and sometimes led to unjustified conclusions. This was particularly true of kamma and rebirth.

Today, the information in most books on kamma and rebirth by Buddhist writers are actually an amalgam of ideas the Buddha taught together with ones that developed sometimes centuries after his passing. And it is all presented as if it were the words and ideas of the Buddha himself. This would be equivalent to quoting Aquinas or Kierkegaard and attributing it to Jesus. Often, what is presented as the Buddha's teaching of kamma and rebirth is actually the ideas from the *Milindapañha* written perhaps 400 or 500 years after the Buddha, of Buddhaghosa, who lived some 900 after him, or Anuruddha, the author of the 4

Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha who was writing about 1400 years after him. This is not to say that these later ideas are necessarily wrong. Some of them help to clarify things the Buddha said or take them to their logical conclusions. But they are all the product of scholarly speculation and hypothesizing, while what the Buddha taught was the outcome of his awakening experience. Thus this book will look at kamma and rebirth based on how these doctrines are presented in the Pāli Tipiṭaka, the oldest and most authentic record we have of the Buddha's teaching.

The small numbers in the text refer to the notes at the bottom of each page.

The larger numbers in bold and square brackets refer to discourses of the Buddha at the end of the book which further explain the text. The Appendix is an article written shortly after the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami trying to explain that tragedy from a Buddhist perspective. This article attracted a good deal of attention at the time and was widely reproduced or referred to on the internet and so I have thought it worthwhile to reproduce it here.

I would like to thank Anandajoti Bhikkhu who read through the manuscript and made many corrections and useful suggestions. As always, he had been generous with his time, editing know-how and knowledge, without necessarily agreeing with everything I have written. I would also like to thank Jeffrey Kotya for sharing his knowledge of the Śūraṅgama Sūtra with me.

Kamma is one of the central concepts of Buddhism. Despite this, it is also one of the most misunderstood by both Buddhists themselves and consequently by non-Buddhists as well. These misunderstandings usually become apparent at the very beginning of any discourse on kamma.

Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism

The common assertion is that kamma and rebirth were universally believed in ancient India and that the Buddha simply took them for granted and incorporated them into his Dhamma. The evidence shows otherwise. The Vedas, the oldest Hindu scriptures, show no knowledge of kamma or of rebirth. In Vedic thought, the individual's destiny was determined by certain rituals and by the gods, not by kamma. And at death the individual was not reborn, he or she went to the world of the fathers (*pitṛloka*), i.e. heaven. Other early Hindu scriptures, such as the *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*, uses the word kamma but only in the sense of performing Vedic sacrifices and related rituals.

The first non-Jain non-Buddhist text to mention kamma and rebirth or something like it, are the early *Upaniṣad* s; the *Brhadāraṇyaka*, the *Chāndogya* and the *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad*. But their versions of these doctrines differs dramatically from the Jain and Buddhist ones. For example, the *Kauṣītaki* says that when people die they all go to the moon which is the gateway to heaven. There they are asked a question in order to pass. Those who cannot answer this question become rain which then falls to earth, then they become worms, insects, fish, birds, lions or humans according to their kamma. Those who can answer the question enter heaven and go into the presence of Brahma (Kau.1.2). Whether kamma here means moral causation or the proper performance of Vedic rituals is unclear; but it very likely means the latter. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* teaches something similar but when the dead fall to the earth as rain they become plants which when a man eats them pass with his semen into his wife's womb and become a new being. Interestingly, the *Chāndogya* also says that "this [teaching] has not been known to Brahmins before", in other words, it was something new to the Vedic tradition. In the *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*

Yājñavalkya makes it clear that kamma in the sense of moral causation is a secret teaching only to be revealed to the initiated (Br.3.2). But why should

such an idea be kept secret? Probably because it was not part of original Vedic thought and Yājñavalkya wanted to avoid accusations of unorthodoxy. Other *Upaniṣad* s do not mention kamma or rebirth and the *Kāṭha Upaniṣad* actually says that no one knows what happens to people after they die (Kath.1.20).

It is also necessary to consider the age of the *Upaniṣad* s. Many scholars consider the *Brhadāraṇyaka* to date around the 800 or 700 BCE, although this dating is very uncertain. Equally uncertain are the dates of the Buddha, although most scholars consider him to have lived sometime during the 5th or 4th centuries BCE. But although the earliest reference to some form of repeated birth and death conditioned by some form of kamma may predate the Buddha, the evidence that 6

these ideas were universally or even widely accepted around the time of the Buddha is, as was see above, not compelling. The Buddhist scriptures themselves offer further evidence of this. *Samaññaphala Sutta* gives an overview of the doctrines preached by six of the most prominent teachers during the Buddha's time and only one of them taught a form of kamma (D.I,52-59). Likewise, there are frequent criticisms in both the Buddhist and Jain scriptures of those who denied kamma and rebirth. For example, a popular teacher of the time Makkhali Gosala taught: "There is no kamma, no deed, no (point in making an) effort" (A.I,286). While some rejected kamma and rebirth as relatively new and non-traditional ideas others such as Prince Pāyāsi dismissed them on rational grounds. Seeing no empirical evidence for them this educated sceptic came to the conclusion that: "There is no other world, there are no spontaneously born beings, nor is there any fruit or result of good or evil deeds" (D.II,316). Prince Pāyāsi must have been fairly well-known as he is also mentioned in the Jain scriptures.

The earliest unambiguous and detailed mention of kamma is in the Jain scriptures. Jainism pre-dates Buddhism by perhaps a decade or more and its founder, Mahāvīra, and his teachings, are frequently referred to in the Buddhist scriptures. However, the Jain doctrine of kamma is markedly different from the Buddhist one. For example, according to Jainism, every action, intentional or not, creates kamma, and kamma is believed to be a kind of material substance than adheres to the soul and weigh it down.

Jainism also posits a soul passing from one life to the next, something that Buddhism rejects.¹ It is certainly possible that the Buddha was influenced by the Jain doctrines of kamma and rebirth but clearly he did not simply take them for granted and unthinkingly and uncritically adopt them.

It is much more likely that Mahāvīra had partial glimpses of kamma and rebirth while the Buddha's awakening gave him a complete understanding.

By about the turn of the first millennium diverse ideas about kamma and rebirth were on the way to being integrated into Hinduism. But even then and later, these ideas were by no means universally accepted. Hinduism generally evolved or absorbed new concepts without abandoning earlier ones, meaning that it presents a wide range of sometimes contrasting or even contradictory doctrines. Even when kamma and rebirth became widely accepted in Hinduism they fitted into it somewhat awkwardly. The belief that the gods can and do intervene in human affairs, that devotion (*bhakti*) to a particular god leads to salvation, that evil can be washed away by bathing in sacred rivers, that performing certain rituals, visiting certain holy shrines or passing away in Varanasi guarantees salvation, seems to cancel out the idea of kamma. Some schools of Hinduism rejected kamma in favour of fate (*daiva*) while others maintained that the individual's destiny was determined by time (*kāla*), inherent nature (*svabhāva*), chance (*yadr̥ccha*) or that it is predetermined (*bhāvivaśāt*). The *Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad* rejects a variety of 1 See 'Karma and the Problem of Rebirth' in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, edited by W. D.

O'Flaherty, 1983, pp.217ff

7

explanations including kamma, saying that ultimately everything is controlled by God (Ss.v.2-3). Many passages in the *Dharmaśāstras* mention kamma while at the same time recommending all the various ways it can be circumvented.

The Meaning of Kamma

Before looking at the Buddha's doctrine of kamma it will be helpful to look at the word itself. The Pāli word *kamma* like its Sanskrit equivalent *karma*, is derived from the root *kr* and means to work, act, do, carry out or perform. In pre-Buddhist Brahmanical literature it meant doing or performing the various Vedic rites and rituals correctly, their efficacy relying on their proper performance. In Buddhism and Jainism in normal parlance, it means to work, act or do in the usual sense of these words. Thus a livelihood or profession is *kammanta*, farming, i.e. doing agriculture, is *kasakamma*, *añjalikamma* is the act of showing respect towards someone, and a *kammakara* is a workman or labourer. But as a technical term in Buddhism, kamma refers to the idea that intentional mental, verbal and bodily actions have an ethical significance and consequence. Correctly speaking, kamma is a morally significant intentional action, and *vipāka* is the consequence or result of such an action. When something unwelcomed happens to someone nowadays they may say: "It's my bad kamma." More correctly they should say: "I'm experiencing bad *vipāka*." or "I'm experiencing the results of bad kamma."

The importance of intention, volition or will in kamma can be understood by asking whether plunging a knife into someone would be a good or a bad act. Most people would say it would be bad. In fact, they would probably consider it to be criminal. But an informed Buddhist would answer: "It depends." The person wielding the knife could be a surgeon performing a life-saving operation on a patient, or a gangster attacking a hapless victim in a dark alley. It is the intention behind an act that gives it its ethical quality.

Kammic Determinism

Before explaining how the Buddha explained kamma, let us have a look at what kamma is not. The most widespread misunderstanding about kamma is the idea that everything that happens to the individual is due to ethical or unethical deeds they did in the past. Breaking a leg, being cheated on by one's spouse or being poor are, it is asserted, are all due to having done morally bad things in the past. On the other hand, having an attractive face, winning the lottery or getting a raise are supposedly due to having done something good. Everything from one's social status, to the country one is

born into, to the state of one's health, etc, are all due to past kamma. Such claims directly contradict the Buddha's Dhamma.

According to the Buddha, there are three false and pernicious views – the belief that everything is due to the will of a supreme God (*issaranimmānahetu*), the belief that everything that happens is without a cause (*ahetu-appaccayā*), and the belief that everything that happens is due to past kamma (*pubbekatahetu*). [1]

There are sound reasons for rejecting each of these beliefs, but we will focus on the one about past kamma. If everything that happens to an individual is due to something they did in the past, then logically, their whole life must be pre-

determined. They would not be able to do or refrain from doing anything because the course of their whole life would be fixed beforehand. If they were good it would not be due to any choice or effort on their part, but because of things done in an earlier life, and so on *ad infinitum*. If this were true, there would have been no need for the Buddha to teach the Noble Eightfold Path, especially its sixth step Right Effort (*sammā vāyāma*), because it would be impossible to practice any of its steps unless past kamma made it possible.

An example of the kammic determinism misunderstanding relates to good and bad health. One often hears people, including monks who should know better, explain that the various illnesses and bodily afflictions people suffer from are due to having done some evil in a past life. I have heard cancer of the larynx described as a kammic consequence of habitual lying, of deafness being caused by a refusal to listen to Dhamma sermons, and leg problems the result of eating chicken drumsticks (I'm not joking! I have actually heard senior monks quite seriously make each of these claims). Several years ago a senior Thai prelate was reported in the media as saying that HIV and AIDS are a kammic consequence of perverted sexual behavior.

Given how widespread such ideas are, it is interesting to see how they compare with the Buddha's statements about sickness and health. He said that disease and physical afflictions can have a variety of causes, of which

kamma is only one. According to him, some sickness is caused by an imbalance in the bodily humours, some by carelessness, some by accidents, and some are caused by climatic changes. [2] In several other discourses he identified poor diet and overeating as causes of physical afflictions (A.III,144; Vin.I,199). On one occasion he mentioned that the reason he enjoyed good health was because he ate moderately (M.I,473), again confirming that sickness or health need not automatically be attributed to past kamma. Interestingly, the Buddha even said that believing that all sicknesses are due to kamma “goes beyond personal experience and what the world generally holds to be true” (*yam ca samam nhatam tam ca atidhāvanti yam ca loke saccasammataṃ tam*

ca atidāvanti), that it is the result of “muddled awareness” (*mutṭhassati*), and that to refute those who asserted such a false notion would be fully justified (*sahadhammika niggaha*, A.I,173-174; S.IV,230). Nāgasena summed up the Buddha’s position on kamma well when he said: “What happens as a result of kamma is much less than what happens as a result of other causes. The fool goes too far in saying that everything that happens is a result of kamma. Without the knowledge of an awakened one it is not possible to say what is and what is not kamma” (*iti kho mahārāja appaṃ kamma vipākajam, bahutaram avasesam. Tattha bālā sabbam kamma vipākajam yevati atidhāvanti, tam kammaṃ na sakkā vinā*

buddhañānena vavathānaṃ kātum, Mil.135-136).

Kammic Inevitability

Another popular misunderstanding, related to the first one, is that kammic consequences must play themselves out. According to this notion, we are fated to experience the *vipāka* of whatever kamma we have done. For example, if someone commits murder it is inevitable that they will be murdered in the next life. We can 9

call this notion kammic inevitability. The adherents of some theistic religions compare this notion unfavourably with their doctrine of divine forgiveness, saying that God will forgive sins but “you can never escape from your kamma”. And like kammic determinism, this notion is often

taught by Buddhist teachers. Let us examine what the Buddha has to say about this.

In one terse verse from the Dhammapada, the Buddha seems to subscribe to the idea of kammic inevitability. [3] But in more detailed discourses it is clear that he does not. In one of these he said that an immoral or negative deed done by someone whose character is predominantly virtuous would have a much weaker effect than it would have otherwise. Conversely, a few virtuous deeds done by someone whose character was predominantly immoral and negative would make little difference. [4] Clearly, a kammic deed does not necessarily have a *vipāka* of identical strength, but rather can be modified or “diluted” by the general quality of the mind or by subsequent actions.

In another discourse, the Buddha said that someone born into very disadvantaged circumstances (because of negative past kamma?) could, because of the good they did subsequently, even attain awakening. [5] Again this confirms that negative kamma from the past can be covered, checked or dissipated (*pithīyati*) by positive actions in the present.[6]

Kammic Parallelism

One misunderstanding about kamma that always attracts attention, usually quite sceptical attention, and a good deal of jocular comment as well, is the claim that a kammic consequence, i.e. *vipāka*, always exactly parallels the deed that caused it, or at least is very similar to it. It is supposedly quite literally a case of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” or “He who lives by the sword dies by the sword.” Several examples of such a notion have been given above but here are a few more culled from contemporary Buddhist literature. If you swear in this life you will have bad breath in your next life; if you are mean with your money in this life you will be in financial straits in your next life; and a person who donates medicine to monks in this life will have good health in the next life. There are several discourses of the Buddha that could be interpreted as suggesting this sort of parallelism.

However, later we will see that this may not be the case.

Cosmic Karma

Recently, John Horgan wrote an article for *Scientific American* called ‘Why I Don’t Dig Buddhism.’² in which he made an interesting observation about the religion, although with the qualification “at least in its traditional forms”. Horgan wrote:

“One of Buddhism’s biggest selling points for lapsed Catholics like me is that it supposedly dispenses with God and other supernatural claptrap. This claim is disingenuous. Buddhism, at least in its traditional forms, is functionally theistic, ² <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/2011/12/02/why-i-dont-dig-buddhism/>

10

even if it doesn’t invoke a supreme deity. The doctrines of karma and reincarnation imply the existence of some sort of cosmic moral judge who, like Santa Claus, tallies up our naughtiness and niceness before rewarding us with nirvana or rebirth as a cockroach.”

Horgan’s observations are quite justified. Many Buddhist explanations of karma give the impression that it is some kind of universal force or influence capable of keeping a record of everyone’s actions and arranging for each to have an appropriate *vipāka*. One Buddhist scholar recently described it as an “inexorable moral law built into the cosmos”. The well-known Buddhist scholar Garma C. C. Chang has written:

“In many ways, karma in the Buddhist tradition, is almost equivalent to what general expression calls the Will of God.”³

Karma is presented as something like gravity, momentum or electromagnetism; an ethereal cosmic energy outside the individual and as intelligent as any supernatural being, only without most of the usual divine attributes: e.g. human-like form; personality; the ability to hear and answer prayers; etc. This mysterious force, so the claim goes, is apparently able to know and tabulate every thought, word and deed of the world’s six billion people and then adjust the material environment so that each of them receives their just deserts. In this notion of karma, it is a supreme deity in

everything but name. But as we shall see, nothing like this is suggested in any of the Buddha's discourses.

Always The Negative, Always Somewhere Else

For reasons that are not clear, the majority view of kamma seems to be that it is all about either past lives or future lives and primarily concerned with the negative. The refrain is usually something like: "If you are born poor it is because you were mean *in your last life*", or: "If you are mean in this life you will be poor *in your next life*." Only occasionally is it suggested that kamma might have its effect soon after being done or at least at some point in the present life. Equally rare is discourse discussing positive kammic consequences.

This partial, one-sided emphasis gives the impression that the doctrine of kamma is concerned with either the past or the future lives and with evil and its negative consequences. Comments such as: "You can never escape from your kamma" imply the same thing. And even when positive kamma is mentioned, the discussions rarely go beyond an either/or, good/bad polarity. In contrast to this, the Buddha's explanation of kamma was more nuanced, realistic and experiential. He taught that *vipāka* can manifest in the present life, the next life or in subsequent lives.[7] He spoke of certain kamma having an immediate result (*ānantarika kamma*, A.III,439). Presumably this refers to deeds the effect of which are experienced immediately or shortly after having been done. When you reach out and help a stranger you do not have to wait for the next life to experience the result of such a good deed. Usually the stranger's expressions of thanks makes you feel good.

And even if you receive no thanks or gratitude you feel good knowing that you have 3 3 *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality*, Garma C. C. Chang 1971, p.xxv.

11

done the right thing. The Buddha sometimes spoke of kammic consequences that are

“neither unpleasant or pleasant” (*adukkham-asukkhāṃ*), that is to say, which are the effect of actions that are ethical indeterminate. At other times he mentioned actions that are “ethically mixed” (*vītimissa dhamma*, M.I,318). He was an insightful enough psychologist to know that we are sometimes “in two minds” about the choices we are about to make, the things we are doing or we have done. [8] Some, perhaps many, of the things we do are motivated by a mixture of positive and negative intentions and thus will have mixed *vipāka*. [9] Such subtle distinctions and their implications rarely get a mention in discussions on kamma.

So What is Kamma?

Having examined what kamma is not, we will now look at what it is. Firstly, the Buddha said his idea of kamma was not derived from hearing about it from someone else, thinking it a good idea and then accepting it. Rather, it was the result of a direct personal experience on his part. Like the other truths he realized at his awakening, it was “something not heard before” (*pubbe-ananussutesu*, S.V,422). In the hours leading up to his awakening he had three profound insights which he later called the Threefold Knowledge (*tevijja*). These are the knowledge of former existences (*pubbe-nivāsānussati-ñāṇa*), the knowledge of the passing away and arising of beings (*cutūpapāta-ñāṇa*), and the knowledge of the destruction of the mental defilements (*āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa*). [10] In the first of these three he saw with startling vividness and in great detail the long parade of his former lives. [11] In the second he saw beings dying and being reborn according to their kamma. [12] It was these first two of the Threefold Knowledge that gave the Buddha his distinct understanding of kamma and rebirth. It is interesting to note that the Buddha conceded that some of the other ascetics of his time were capable of having at least to some degree these same experiences. However, he claimed that they usually drew wrong conclusions from them (D.I,13). [13] This would explain why teachers such as Mahāvīra taught versions of kamma and rebirth before the Buddha.

As mentioned before, kamma is not some force or energy in the universe separate from the individual but exerting its influence on him or her. Rather, it is an aspect of consciousness, a psychological mechanism, a way consciousness works.

The Buddha underlined this point several times but particularly when he said that intention (*cetanā*) is kamma, [14] and of course intention is a mental phenomenon.

It should be pointed out however, that *cetanā* is more than just a consideration to act; it implies drive, impulse and volitional force as well (*cetanā, patthanā, paṇidhi,*

sankhāra, A.V,213). The results of our actions, good or bad, are dependent on our mind, not on any mystical external force. [15] Nowhere did the Buddha say or even imply that kamma is an “inexorable moral law built into the cosmos”. In its simplest terms, intention or volition modifies consciousness, this moulds our character, which in turn influences how we impact on and relate to the world and consequently it to us. [16]

How Does Kamma Work?

12

So how does kamma work? Many, probably most, of our intentions are scattered and feeble, and their corresponding *vipāka* will be weak. Some are focused and purposeful and their *vipāka* will be strong. An occasionally outburst of temper or an act of generosity is unlikely to have a noticeable kammic effect. The Buddha talked about being “addicted” to (*anuytta*) certain types of behaviour, of the individual who “often thinks about and ruminates over” (*anuvittaka, anuvicāra*) certain things, and of particular thoughts or actions being “pursued...persistently done, made a foundation, carried out, consolidated” (e.g. A.I,29; M.I,116; A.V,342). When some behaviours start to become character traits then their *vipāka* manifests noticeably and impacts more dramatically on a person’s life. [17a,b] An action such as violent assault or murder although taking only a brief period of time would probably have a very strong and noticeable *vipāka* because of the passions provoking them would likewise have to be very strong. It is also the case that the *vipāka* of some intentions can be modified even perhaps to the degree of being almost cancelled out by a series of stronger contrasting intentions. One often hears statements such as: “If you murder you will be reborn in purgatory.” Interestingly, the Buddha said that he would disagree with such an assertion. [18]

Consider it. Let's say a twenty-year-old youth commits a murder, gets a 20 year sentence, and lives for another 30 years after his release. In the two decades prior to his crime he was an average child and young man with no criminal record.

The murder was an example of a minor argument that got out-of-hand leading to tragedy. In the period leading up to his trial and the first few years after his sentence, the young man suffered from anxiety and fear, separation from his family, endured deep remorse and shame for what he had done and the rigors of imprisonment. But gradually he became a model prisoner. After his release he founded an organization helping troubled youths which turned many of them away from crime. The problem with assertions such as: "Murderers are reborn in purgatory", is that they are simplistic, sweeping generalizations that fail to take into account the rich and varied landscape of the human mind. In the case of the hypothetical murderer just mentioned, the *vipāka* of his heavy kamma - and murder is a very heavy kamma (*garuka kamma*) - would be lessened by his years of fear, remorse, sorrow, regret and physical hardship, all of which would be the *vipāka* of his actions, while what remained may be further diluted or perhaps even cancelled out completely by the subsequent many years of good kamma he did.

Let us look at a case from real life, that of Oskar Schindler, the subject of the book *Schindler's Ark* and the film *Schindler's List*. By any standards Schindler had been a disreputable character. He was a member of the Nazi Party when it illegal to do so, a traitor spying for German Intelligence against his own country Austria, a habitual adulterer, a sleazy businessman and black-marketer, and something of a drunkard. But witnessing Nazi crimes in 1943 changed him. With great courage and at very real peril to himself and his family, he saved some 1200 people, all of them complete strangers, from certain death. Paradoxically, the very vices Schindler had perfected in his dishonest business deals: bribery; lying; blackmail; and flattery, 13

helped him save these people. He had committed a great deal of negative kamma but overwhelming more positive kamma. Another example of this would be Father Damian, a Catholic priest in 19th century Hawaii. By some

accounts he was a rather unpleasant man: crude; dirty; often drunk; and not faithful to his vow of celibacy.

Hawaiian natives were particularly susceptible to leprosy and when someone was found to have the disease they were shipped to an isolated island, literally dumped there and left to fend for themselves. The stronger patients preyed on and bullied the weaker ones and newcomers, and the authorities provided only the most basic help and only irregularly. When Father Damian heard of this he volunteered to go to the island and help the people there, despite knowing that he had a good chance of contracting the hideously deforming disease himself. During the next sixteen years he built a school, orphanage, hospital and a church, and gave the people back both hope and dignity, eventually dying of leprosy in 1889.

Stories such as this should make us very cautious of the usual simplistic black and white, good and bad approach to kamma. And not surprisingly, the Buddha warned against making just such sweeping generalizations. [19]

Vipāka

Now let us look at *vipāka*, the results of kamma. In its simplest terms intentional morally positive actions have a positive effect on the actor and intentional morally negative actions have a negative effect. What constitutes morally positive and negative actions in Buddhism is very similar to what is generally recognised as being good and bad by most other religions and by most ethicists. [20] But while intention is important, there is of course a difference between intending to do something and actually doing it. Thinking of sharing something with someone would be good kamma having positive *vipāka*, but going beyond the thought to actually share would have stronger positive *vipāka*. The results of some deeds can be fixed and unalterable (*micchatta-niyata rāsi*,

sammatta-niyata rāsi). These would be exceptionally positive or exceptionally negative deeds.⁴ But there are other deeds for which the *vipāka* can be uncertain (*aniyata*) because they would be susceptible to being diluted or cancelled out according to circumstances. [21]

Many expositions of kamma include what was previously called kammic parallelism, the idea that the *vipāka* of a kammic deed will be identical to or very similar to that deed. Thus we are told that if you are mean with your money you will be reborn poor and if you are generous you will be reborn rich. There are several discourses where the Buddha seems to endorse the idea of kammic parallelism. It would be worthwhile to examine these discourses a little closer to see if this is really the case. The most well-known such discourse on kamma is the Cūḷa Kammavibhaṅga Sutta. [22] In this discourse the Buddha said, in effect, that 4 Although killing one's parents or an arahat, injuring a Buddha or causing a schism in the Sangha, are mentioned in the Nikāyas as very negative kamma, they are nowhere specifically said to be deeds of immediate and fixed consequence (*ānantariya*). See A.I,27; III,438-9 and Sn.231.

14

showing deference and reverence towards those worthy of it leads to rebirth into a high class family, killing results in having a short life expectancy, being free from jealousy and envy will result in being reborn with attractive facial features, generosity towards others causes one to be rich in the next life, etc. Let us examine this last claim.

Being rich means having access to large amounts of money, money being material objects. But exactly how does a psychological state like generosity attract to the individual who has it material objects such as paper bank notes and metal coins? No explanation is ever given. There is another thing that needs to be examined. Is being rich necessarily a blessed and enviable condition and thus a suitable "reward" for being good? Is it possible for a rich person to be unfulfilled, depressed, miserable or chronically ill? Most people would probably agree that it is possible. This being so, why should a virtue such as generosity lead to wealth, which may or may not go together with happiness? Would it not be more desirable to be poor or at least of modest means and be happy and fulfilled? Again, most people would probably agree that it would. For these and other reasons it is difficult to see a connection between generosity and wealth, or any of the other kammic correlations mentioned in the Cūḷa Kammavibhaṅga Sutta for that matter. If we look at all the positive *vipākas* mentioned in the discourse

we notice that one thing they have in common is that they are all associated, at least in popular imagination, with happiness. Everyone dreams of having longevity, wealth, fame, talent and beauty, because superficial consideration associates such states with happiness. Deeper and more realistic consideration will cast serious doubt on this idea, although it is a widespread assumption.

Because kamma is a psychological phenomenon, logically its results must be psychological too.⁵ Thus the *vipāka* of positive kamma must be positive mental states: happiness; contentment; ease; self-appreciation; sanguinity; peace; joy; a clear conscious; good cheer; delight; and so on. The *vipāka* of negative kamma is negative mental states: unhappiness; guilt, shame; depression; self-loathing; despair; morbid brooding; dread; fear and so on. Ultimately, what allows us to say a person is happy and content is not the extent of their possessions, their facial features, their immediate environment, their lifespan or whether or not they have a physical deformity, but their attitude towards these things.

So why in the Cūḷa Kammavibhaṅga Sutta did the Buddha say that killing leads to being short-lived, generosity to wealth, etc? It seems likely that he was using long and short life, beauty and ugliness, wealth and poverty, etc., as tropes or metaphors for happiness and unhappiness. The person who the Buddha was addressing in the Cūḷa Kammavibhaṅga Sutta may also help explain why he said such things. His interlocutor was a person named Subha and throughout the 5 The five causes of things; seasonal causes (*utu-niyāma*), biological causes (*bīja-niyāma*), kammic causes (*kamma-*

niyāma), psychological causes (*citta-niyāma*) and (*dhamma-niyāma*); is a commentarial idea first mentioned in the Atthasālinī, 5th century CE. In reality, kammic causes and psychological causes are the same.

15

discourse the Buddha addressed him as “student” (*māṇava*). This indicates that Subha was young, perhaps quite young. Given this, it makes sense that the Buddha would explain his ideas in simple terms that took into account common perceptions and his interlocutor’s lack of sophistication. If this interpretation is correct, it means that we will be misled if we take the

Buddha's words in the Cūla Kammavibhaṅga Sutta literally. It is interesting to note that the Buddha said his discourses were of two types, those of indirect meaning (*neyyattha*) requiring interpretation and not to be taken literally, and those of direct meaning (*nītattha*) that mean exactly what they say. I suggest that the Cūla Kammavibhaṅga Sutta is an example of the first and was not meant to be taken literally. [23]

Kamma and Physical Form

When the Buddha spoke of the deed-born body (*karajakāya*, A.V,300), and of the body being the result of “old kamma” (*purāṇa-kamma*, S.IV,132) he did not mean physical appearances or attributes are the *vipāka* of past actions good or bad.

[24] Rather, he meant that when we are reborn it is usually into a physical body and thus it is legitimate to say that the body is caused by kamma.

Another place in the Tipiṭaka where the idea that *vipāka* can manifest itself in the physical domain is in Lakkhaṇa Sutta which deals with the signs of a great man (*mahā-purisa-lakkhaṇa*). According to this concept, the body of all fully awakened Buddhas exhibit 32 special signs. Some of these signs are very curious, even grotesque, to the modern mind, although apparently they were associated with auspiciousness by the ancient Indians. According to this discourse, the Buddha had these 32 signs and each was the result of him “doing mighty deeds of great benefit, of being unwavering in good conduct of body, speech and mind” throughout many of his past lives. Thus for example, he had legs like the swift-running antelope because as a teacher in past lives he has helped his students quickly master their lessons. He had webbed fingers and toes as a result of acting kindly towards others.

Because he spoke to others in a gentle and considerate manner his tongue was long enough to lick his forehead. His deep blue eyes were the result of his kindly and benign gaze, and his arms were long enough to touch his knees without bending, the result of reaching out to help others, etc. (D.III,142). This clearly links physical attributes to past kamma. It will also be noticed that some of these *vipākas* would be examples of kammic parallelism. How can this be explained given the earlier assertion that

kamma consequences have mainly a psychological affect and that kammic parallelism is a naive idea?

All scholars agree that the doctrine of the 32 special signs belongs to a late, probably the latest, strata of the Tipiṭaka, the Buddhist scriptures. It should also be pointed out that this doctrine contradicts numerous statements in the Tipiṭaka where the Buddha is depicted as being physically no different from other humans. When King Ajātasattu went to meet the Buddha he was unable to distinguish him from the surrounding monks (D.I,50) and Pukkusāti sat talking to the Buddha for hours before realizing who he was (M.III,238). If the Buddha really had any of the signs, Ajātasattu and Pukkusāti would have noticed it and immediately known that they 16

were in the presence of a physically unusual individual. When Upaka encountered the Buddha walking along the road to Gayā, the thing he noticed most about him was his “clear faculties and radiant complexion” (M.I,170). He did not mention seeing any of the special signs, which if the Buddha really had, would have been glaringly noticeable. So we have numerous texts depicting the Buddha as physically normal or assuming his physical normality, and a small number claiming that he had the 32 signs. Given this it is reasonable to assume that passages mentioning the 32

signs are interpolations.

But the doctrine of the 32 signs raises other problems for the idea that kammaic consequences can manifest themselves in the body. As we saw previously, the Cūḷa Kammavibhaṅga Sutta could be interpreted as saying that past good deeds can manifest themselves as physical beauty, i.e. that beauty is a “reward” for having done good. However, notions of what is and is not beautiful differs in both time and place, sometimes quite dramatically. The Kayan people of northern Burma and Thailand for example, consider abnormally long necks to be beautiful, while only a century ago Chinese men found tiny female feet to be extremely alluring. Most people nowadays are revolted by such deformities. The 17th century European ideal woman was pale and pudgy, characteristics now associated with poor health. Today the ideal is to be slim and tanned. Closer to home, the 32 signs were apparently considered auspicious and desirable in ancient India while today they are thought of as freakish, as anything but beautiful. So the question is

this - how does kamma predetermine what will be considered beautiful in the future so that a good person is reborn with physical features in a culture and at a time when such features are perceived as attractive? No explanations are forthcoming. Indeed, such implications never seem to be considered. Once again we have the problem of kamma being thought of as an omniscient intelligence in all but name.

Having said all this, there may be a few areas where *vipāka* could manifest itself in the physical domain. It is generally accepted that the state of a person's mind can have some effect on their health; aggravating certain illnesses, helping to heal others, or even actually causing some illnesses. This is consistent with the Buddha's comment that some physical afflictions may have a kammic cause. [2]

Some research suggests that certain mental activities can have an effect on the brain.

There is evidence that children who have musical training can develop a higher IQ

than those who do not, and preliminary research suggests that keeping "mentally active" can stave off dementia which is caused by brain deterioration due to ageing.

However, there is a big difference between all this and the idea that if you kick a monk in this life you will be reborn with a club foot in the next life.

Another example of kamma influencing the physical might be where certain mental states influence the countenance. The Buddha said that a loving disposition or profound inner peace can give the face a radiant complexion (S.I,5; III,236; V,301). However, as such physical attributes may change when the mental states change, it is not certain whether they can be considered *vipāka*.

Burning Buildings

Two examples from possible real-life events may help clarify the working of kamma. A man drives home one evening to find his house on fire. The fire brigade has already arrived and is attempting to put out the blaze and the neighbours are standing around watching. The man is horrified by the sight and spends the next two hours in intense anxiety hoping that at least some of his home and possessions will be saved. When it becomes clear that the fire is going to destroy everything he falls into despair. A sympathetic neighbour takes him to her home so he can sit for a while and plan what he is going to do over the next few days. Trying to cheer him up she says: "Well, at least you have insurance." Suddenly a look of horror passes the man's face, he lets out a groan and hangs his head in his hands. He has just remembered that only last month he allowed his insurance policy to lapse due to being busy. Over the next few months the man suffers depression and anxiety, anger and regret as he struggles to come to terms with the disaster. Eventually he gets over it but still occasionally angrily reproaches himself when he remembers the fire and his failure to keep his insurance policy up-to-date.

Now let's say that on the other side of the same city, at about the same time, there was another fire in which a woman's business went up in flames. She too reacted with dismay and anxiety but within a few hours she got over it, almost returned to her usual sanguine state and set about trying to deal with her immediate problem. Her reaction would certainly be untypical in such circumstances but by no means be impossible. Why did the man react so differently from the woman? Why did he experience such prolonged suffering and distress and the woman so little?

The answer is because of their respective kamma, i.e. because of their different past intentional actions. In the case of the man, for much of his life he has reacted negatively every time he experienced a setback or when something went wrong. He would get exasperated, annoyed and petulant, cursing under his breath, angrily blaming either himself or others, and experiencing all the consequent negative feelings. His reactions to the fire and the accompanying suffering are the *vipāka* for this previous kamma. And how he has reacted to the fire now will reinforce and makes it much more likely that he will react similarly in the future. No one of his negative outbursts had much of an effect, but one following another, a previous one

reinforcing a present one, gradually built up so that eventually it has become part of his character. Now it is almost inevitable that he will react negatively to reverses. His present reactions are literally determined by his past actions. The burning house had nothing to do with his or anyone else's kamma. It was simply an event taking place in the world. It had a cause or causes, but not a kammic one. It could have been caused by an electrical fault, being struck by lightning, perhaps even arson. How he reacted to, how he felt about the burning house is the *vipāka* of his previous kamma.

Why did the woman react to an almost identical event, the destruction of her business, so differently? It could have been because she was always naturally sanguine and easygoing, something carried over from her past life, a Buddhist might say. But in this case, when she was young she used to react negatively when things 18

went wrong, but over time she came to realize how counter-productive this was. She learned various relaxation techniques and eventually took up meditation. The meditation taught her to watch her various reactions and to try to be detached from them. This gradually allowed her to be much more balanced in the face of the various ups and downs in her life and maintain a sense of equanimity. She still reacted negatively to various reversals but a little less each time. Her ability to keep relatively calm, i.e. her *vipāka*, when her business was destroyed was a direct result of her past actions, i.e. her past positive kamma. Again, the burning of her business had nothing to do with her or anyone else's kamma. It was just "one of those things".

Natural Causation, Kammic Causation

These two examples will probably make sense to most people. Some however, might ask: "But why do good people sometimes suffer while the bad sometimes get off scot-free?" Buddhist philosophy teaches causation, the idea that events have a cause or causes. But it makes a distinction between natural causation and moral or kammic causation. A rain storm is a natural event with a natural cause or series of causes. Getting angry because the rain has spoiled my weekend plans and spending Saturday and Sunday cursing the weather and sulking, is a kammic event which will have negative *vipāka*, in fact the unpleasant feeling of anger and annoyance *is* the

vipāka. I have no control over the rain but I do have, or can have, some control over my reactions to and attitude towards the rain.

Buddhist psychology makes a distinction between pain (*dukkha*) and suffering (*domanassa*). [25] Pain is physiological, while suffering is psychological.

If I drop a heavy object on my foot, I will experience physical pain. I may also get angry at myself for being careless, curse and swear and fly into a rage. This second reaction compounds the unpleasantness I am experiencing. I have no control over my pain, unless I take a painkiller, it has a natural cause or causes. But I do have, or can have, some control over my reaction to the pain. Concerning the rain, I could cheerfully accept that outdoor activities are not possible this weekend, find something else to do and enjoy myself doing it. There is a mass of complex reasons why people experience pain or pleasure: being in the wrong or the right place at the wrong or right time; or because it is “just one of those things”. The universe and every force and object within it is in a constantly dynamic state. Sometimes things and events move in ways that are to our benefit and sometimes they move in ways that are to our detriment. Our ability to control or predict what the universe does or will do is limited.

So why do good people sometimes have to endure pain and bad people sometimes enjoy pleasure? Because they, like everyone else, exist in a dynamic universe. Why people experience happiness or suffering is another matter altogether. That has a lot to do with their kamma. If we are able to understand, learn to modify and gradually change how our minds work we will suffer much less, we may even be able to get to the stage where we are free from suffering and are able to abide in a state of continual peace and happiness.

19

Speculating about Kamma

It is correct to say that we are conditioned by our kamma rather than determined by it. And as we have seen, *vipāka* is conditioned too; by our kammic background, by the intensity of our intentions, by acting with

mixed motives, by what we do subsequent to any particular action, etc. The idea that a single act inevitably leads to a single effect of exact strength or proportion simplifies the multifaceted phenomena that is kamma. The *Sammohavinodanī* correctly says:

“From one reason there is not one or many results, nor through many reasons is there only one result; but rather from many reasons there are many results.”⁶

Consequently, the Buddha said that it is impossible and even unwise to speculate about what the *vipāka* of any particular kamma will be.[26] By this he did not mean that we should not bother about trying to understand the general principles of kamma. But pontificating about what kamma caused one person to have a certain experience, or what will be the *vipāka* of something another person is doing, or what kind of rebirth a third person will have because of what they have done, is unlikely to be accurate. It is difficult enough knowing our own kammic background, desires, motives and reactions, let alone those of others. Only an awakened person has the wisdom and insight to do this with any degree of accuracy. [27]

Having said this, it is at the same time true that understanding the basic concept of kamma and contemplating it can be helpful for the spiritual life.

Considering that one’s actions may sooner or later have an effect is a strong inducement to do good and avoid evil.[28a,b] When we see others behaving badly or when we become a victim of their bad behaviour, contemplating that they, like us, will be affected by what they are doing can help free us from being judgemental, self-righteousness, angry or vengeful.[29a,b] When we see others acting with virtue, heroism or unselfishness and benefiting from it, this can encourage us to try to emulate their behaviour.

Kamma and Rebirth

According to the Buddha, the continual process of being born, dying and being born again, which he called *saṃsāra*, is fraught with pain and suffering. Even if in this life we were able to avoid all the pain and distress that embodied existence is susceptible to, there is no guarantee that we will be able to avoid it in the next.

Thus the ultimate goal of the Buddha's teaching is to stop being reborn.

There are three possible ideas about what happens after death. Materialism say that we cease to exist. The major theistic religions maintain that we go to either everlasting paradise or damnation according to our beliefs and/or our actions.

Buddhism, Jainism, some versions of Hinduism and several minor religions and spiritual movements say that at death we reincarnate, or to use Buddhist lingo, we are reborn. The terms the Buddha used for rebirth are "re-becoming" (*punabbhava*),

"moving from womb to womb" (*gabbhā gabbhaṃ*), "future birth" (*āyatimjāti*) or 6 *Ekato hi kāraṇato na idha kiñci ekaṃ phalam-atthi, na anekaṃ; nāpi anekehi kāraṇehi ekaṃ; anekehi pana kāraṇehi anekam-eva hoti*, p.147.

20

sometimes "existence after existence" (*bhavābhavaṃ*, D.II,15; Sn.278; A.III,69; Sn.1060).

Like kamma, the idea of rebirth or reincarnation was not a widespread one at the time of the Buddha. The Vedas do not mention it nor do most of the early *Upaniṣad* s. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* for example, teaches that "after departing from this world his self becomes food, the life-principle... the mind, understanding or bliss" (Tai.3.10.5). The idea of some kind of rebirth may to have been current mainly amongst some of the non-Vedic teachers of the Buddha's time, although others rejected the idea in favour of either materialism or heaven.

As well as imparting moral value to our actions and conditioning the quality of our experience, the other important effect of kamma is causing us to be reborn.

From one point of view it could be said that kamma is of two types – positive or negative. From another point of view all kamma is negative in that it causes us to be reborn. At the deepest level, all our intentional actions

are rooted in clinging and craving (*upādāna* and *taṇhā*) and so kamma is equivalent to craving. [30a,b]

Craving creates the energy that both compels and propels us into a new life. Kamma keeps us going through a succession of lives just as material food keeps us going through the present life. [31]

How does rebirth take place? According to the Buddha, death can be said to have occurred when vitality (*āyu*), heat (*usmā*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) leave the body.[32] The conditions necessary for rebirth to take place are the parent’s coitus (*sannipatita*), the mother’s fertility, (*utunī*) and the presence of the consciousness to be reborn (*gandhabba*).[33] This consciousness “moves upwards”

(*uddhagāmi*), then “descends” (*avakkanti*) unconsciously (*asampajāṇa*) into the mother’s newly fertilized egg (D.III,103; S.V,370), and “settles down (*okkamissathā*, D.II,63) in the womb. These spatial descriptions are probably metaphorical. The detailed and complicated descriptions of how rebirth takes place evolved in the centuries after the Buddha and are to be found mainly in the commentaries.

The In-between State

Some schools of Buddhism teach that after death, consciousness hovers or pauses in an in-between state (*antarabhava*) for a certain period before being reborn. Others assert that rebirth takes place the instant consciousness disengages from the body. The Buddha’s words suggest that there is an interval between death and rebirth. He spoke of the situation “when one has laid down the body (i.e. died) but has not yet been reborn” (S.IV,400). On several other occasions he said that for one who has attained Nirvana there is “no here, no there, no in-between” (e.g.

S.IV,73; Ud.8), referring to this life, the next life and presumably, the in-between state. While the *gandhabba* is in this in-between state apparently the thing that sustains it is the latent craving (*taṇhā*), which is described as its fuel (*upādāna*). [34]

Stopping Kamma, Ending Rebirth

As a person's practice of the Dhamma matures they gradually learn to become more detached from contact (*phassa*), i.e. the various pleasant and
21

unpleasant experiences that impinge on them in the normal process of living. [35] In the early stages of spiritual practice, guarding the sense doors (*indriya-saṁvara*), moral restraint (*sīla*) and mindful attention (*sati*) are useful for enhancing detachment. But even if a person is serene at the time they die and apparently without any anxiety, fear, clinging or craving, they will still be reborn. This is because at the deepest level, we might say at the unconscious level, residual craving and the propensity for craving are still present. The Buddha described craving as manifesting itself sometimes as craving for sensual experiences (*kāmāsava*), for becoming (*bhavāsana*) and for wilful ignorance (*avijjāsava*). Sometimes he also mentioned craving for non-existence (*vibhavāsava*), i.e. annihilation. Ultimately, it is seeing the futility of continually being pushed by this desirable experience, recoiling from that undesirable one, constantly hankering for ever more intense and novel contact and its subsequent feelings, that results in complete detachment. It is only when one attains awakening or freedom (*bodhi* or *vimutti*) that one sees and is able to neutralise the propensity for craving. [36] Sometimes the Buddha likened craving to seeds (*bīja*) that may lie dormant for an extended period but germinate and spring into life given the right conditions. [37a,b] An awakened person's insight has destroyed even the tiniest seeds of this craving and thus is no longer reborn.

They no longer react, they just act - without desire, ego or self interest.
They have

“done what had to be done”. Being without desire they no longer create kamma and thus when their life-span finishes they are no longer reborn, they attain Nirvana. The obvious next question is: “What or where is Nirvana?” To answer this would require another book. In the meantime, it will be sufficient to quote the Buddha: “Nirvana is the highest happiness” (Dhp.203).

It is interesting to note that while the awakened person does not make any new kamma, either positive or negative, they may still experience the *vipāka* of any kamma they made earlier; what might be called residual

vipāka. However, in the lead up to their awakening experience it is unlikely that they would have done much kamma the *vipāka* of which would be unpleasant, because while they had been developing wisdom and detachment they would have also at the same time been developing the positive states, particularly gentleness and kindness, fellow-feeling and compassion. [38]

Rebirth and Special Attainments

An individual who has developed meditation and purified their mind to a very high level can apparently have a degree of control over the process of rebirth.

Although such abilities are rare and not accessible to the vast majority of people, they are still worth mentioning. Rebirth is a process that usually takes place unconsciously and apart from the individual's will. However, some individuals are apparently able to be conscious and fully aware (*sampajañña*) during the whole process.[39] Some are even able to attain awakening while suspended in the in-between state. The Buddha called such a person “a Nirvanaized in-between type”

(*antarāparinibbāyī*, S.V,69). Although no details are given, it is clear that only someone who was already very close to awakening at the time of their death would

have such an ability.

Last Thought Moment

Let us now examine some developments of the Buddha's doctrine of kamma and rebirth that may well distort them rather than be in harmony with them. While the Buddha understood the mind to be a “flow” or “stream” of mental events (*viññāṇasota*), later thinkers speculated that it was actually a string of individual and separate thought moments (*cittavīthi*) arising and passing away with great rapidity.

Later still, the theory developed that the last of these thought moments (*cuticitta*) before a person dies will, not condition, but determine their next

life. The theory of the importance of the last thought moment is not mentioned in any of the Buddha's discourses or even in the later Abhidhamma Piṭaka. The Tipiṭaka records many occasions where the Buddha counselled people who were either dying or critically ill and yet he never bought up the idea of the last thought moment, the most appropriate time to do so one would think. Mahānāma once confided to the Buddha his anxiety about dying at a time when his mind was confused and bewildered (*musati*), thinking it might result in him having a negative rebirth. The Buddha reassured him that because he had developed various spiritual qualities for a long time, he had nothing to fear if such a thing should happen. [40]

Two brief and similar discourses of the Buddha have been translated in such a way and interpreted to mean that one's post-mortem state is determined by the last thought moment (It.12-14). The relevant texts say:

“Here monks, some person has a pure mind (*pasanna-cittaṃ*) and knowing his mind with my own, I know that if he were to come to the end of his time at that time (*imamhi cāyaṃ samaye puggalo kālaṃ*) he would be reborn in a heaven realm. And why? Because of his pure mind.”

The subsequent verses reiterate the point:

“A person who would come to the end of his time at that time, (*Imamhi cāyaṃ samaye kālaṃ kayirātha puggalo*) would be reborn in a heaven realm, because of his pure mind” (*sugatiṃ upapajjeyya, cittañ-hissa pasādikaṃ*).”

The passages are a bit vague and open to several different interpretations, including one supporting the crucial role of the last thought moment. However, the line “because of his pure mind” tips the balance away from this interpretation. An impure mind cannot be made pure by a few positive thoughts just prior to death, or vice versa. It would take many and persistent thoughts, words and deeds over an extended period to do that.

The theory of the importance of the supposed last thought moment first appears in an undeveloped form in the *Milindapañha* (circa 1st century BCE - 2nd century CE) which says: “If someone did unskilful things for a

hundred years but at the time of death was mindful of the Buddha for one moment, he would be reborn amongst the gods” (Mil.80). By the time the *Visuddhimagga* was composed (5th century CE), this idea had been worked out in detail and had come to be considered 23

orthodox in Theravada (Vism.458-60). Apart from not having been taught by the Buddha, there are several philosophical, ethical and logical problems with the theory that the last thought moment is the determining factor in one’s circumstances in the next life.

If a person had lived a relatively good life but in the anxiety and confusion just preceding their death they had some negative thoughts they would, according to this theory, have a negative rebirth. Likewise, one could have lived an immoral and dissolute life but pass away with ease and in peace and therefore have an advantageous rebirth. This negates the whole idea of kamma, the teaching that the sum total of our intentional thoughts, speech and actions conditions our future, both in this life and possibly the next. Further, it is very difficult to understand how just one or two thought moments, each of them supposedly a millisecond long (*khaṇa*), can cancel out perhaps many years of good or evil thoughts, speech and actions.

This theory also fails to take into account causation. If everything is conditioned, and the Buddha taught that it is, then the last thought moment must be conditioned by the second last thought moment which in turn must be conditioned by the third last thought moment, etc. This means what we are thinking, saying and doing right now will have an impact on what is in our minds at the time we die.

Therefore, to emphasise the last thought moment, even if there is such a thing, is to give exaggerated significance to the effect and neglect the cause or causes, i.e. how one is living here and now.

Collective Kamma

In recent decades something referred to as collective kamma or group kamma has been posited and discussed amongst Buddhists. According to this theory, groups of people or even a whole nation, can supposedly suffer the results of evil they have done (positive collective kamma never seems to

be discussed, it's always negative kamma). The revered Tibetan master Lati Rimpoche recently claimed that the suffering of the Jewish people during the Holocaust was the result of great wickedness they had all committed in previous lives. Others have claimed that the murderous rule of the Khmer Rouge was likewise kammic retribution for past evil done by the Cambodian people.

Nothing explicitly mentioning the idea of collective kamma is found in the Buddha's teachings and there is no Pāli or Sanskrit terms for collective kamma in the traditional lexicons. The idea also seems to be absent from later Buddhist texts.

However, in his *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, Vasubandhu has a comment that could be, and has been, interpreted as suggesting collective kamma. He said:

“When many persons are united with the intention to kill, either in war, or in the hunt, or in banditry, who is guilty of murder, if only one of them kills? As soldiers, etc., concur in the realization of the same effect, all are as guilty as is the one who kills. Having a common goal, all are guilty just as he who among them kills, for all mutually incite one another, not through speech, but by the very fact that they are united together in order to kill. But is the person who has been constrained through force to join the army also guilty? Evidently so, 24

unless he has formed the resolution: ‘Even in order to save my life, I shall not kill a living being’.”⁷

A word for word breakdown of the crucial part of this passage is: (*senādiṣu*, loc.pl.): in armies et cetera (*eka-kārya-tvāt*, abl. sg.): because of the one-task-ness (*sarve*, nom. pl. m.): all (*katṛvad-anvitāḥ*, nom.pl. m.): gone along with the one who did it (*kṛtavat*, (perf.p.p.√kr) one who has done or made anything (*anv-ita*): gone along with, possessed of. This could be better translated as; “In armies et cetera, because of all being in it together, all have gone along with the one who did it.”

If Vasabandhu was positing collective kamma, the example he gave for it is not a very convincing one. Let us consider it carefully. All the persons

mentioned in this example would have come together with a common negative purpose and thus would have all committed some negative kamma, as Vasubandhu correctly says.

However, the nature and intensity of their individual intentions may well have varied. Some might have been enthusiastic about what was planned, others less so, one or two may have had serious reservations. Further, the kammic background of each person would have been different. One could have been a hardened criminal who had committed many crimes before, another might have been a novice in crime, while a third might have been basically good but weak, and easily led by his friends.

With such a variety of motives and backgrounds how each member of the gang would have felt and acted subsequent to their crime is likely to have been just as diverse, ranging all the way from cruel satisfaction, to cold indifference, to hesitation, to regret. Taking all these quite plausible and even quite likely differences into consideration, it is only realistic to imagine that the *vipāka* of each person in the group would be of very different strength and that it would manifest at different times and in very different ways. Thus a second look at this passage will show that it is not a convincing argument for collective kamma, if indeed that is what it is meant to be.

One incident from the Buddhist tradition that could be suggesting something like collective kamma is a story about the Sakyans, the Buddha's kinsmen.

Viḍūḍabha, the king of Kosala, massacred "all the Sakyans" including even "the suckling babes", and they suffered this fate supposedly because "the Sakyans" had sometime previously poisoned a river in a dispute over its water. In reality, only a few Sakyans would have committed this evil deed, and although the Sakyan chiefs probably authorized it and a number of others may have approved of it, the majority, particularly the women, children and babies, would have had nothing at to do with it. Thus the idea of collective kamma idea is implicit in this story. How are we to explain this? Firstly, the story is not in the Tipiṭaka but comes from the of the Jātaka commentary, a text of uncertain but very late date (Ja.IV,152). Some scholars consider it to have been composed in Sri Lanka rather than India.

But whoever the author was, it seems likely that he was just storytelling, rather than positing the idea 7 *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*. Vol.1, translated into French by Louis de La Vallee Poussin, and from French into English by Leo M. Pruden 1991, p. 649.

25

of collective kamma as a specific doctrine. The fact that no later commentators took the story as a cue to develop the idea of collective kamma strengthens this assumption. Also, another version of the story, from the *Mahāvārṇsa Tīkā*, says that there were survivors of the massacre, thus undermining that claim that “all Sakyans”

suffered the negative *vipāka* of the kamma created by others.

The version of collective kamma which maintains that the consequences of deeds done by some within a group can be experienced by others within the same group, contradicts one of the most basic and fundamental Buddhist concepts; that each individual is responsible for themselves.

The earliest unambiguous mention of collective kamma that I have been able to find anywhere is in the writings of the 19th century occultist Helena Blavatsky. In her *The Key to Theosophy*, 1889, p.202, Blavatsky made reference to what she called “National Karma” or sometimes “Distributive Karma”. The idea seems to have subsequently been taken up by various believers in the occult, then absorbed into New Age thinking, from where it has spread to Buddhism.

In 1916 the dilettante exponent of Buddhism and so-called “perennial philosophy”, Ananda Coomaraswamy, wrote that he was unable to understand how kamma could be transmitted through a series of lives without a soul and so he read into Buddhism a kind of universal heredity kamma.

“No man lives alone, but we may regard the whole creation...as one life and therefore as sharing a common karma, to which every individual contributes for good or ill... [T]he great difficulty of imagining a particular karma passing from individual to individual, without the persistence of even

a subtle body, is avoided by the conception of human beings, or indeed of the whole universe, as constituting one life or self. Thus it is from our ancestors that we receive our karma, and not merely from ‘our own’ past experience; and whatsoever karma we create will be inherited by humanity for ever.”⁸

Some decades later the English monk Sīlācāra theorized that there might be something he called an ‘kammic overflow’. By this, he meant that the potent kamma of an exceptionally virtuous or exceptionally immoral leader – a king, an officer in charge of a platoon, an employer, the head of an extended family, etc., might

‘overflow’ from them to their underlings.⁹ Sīlācāra knew the Tipitaka well enough to know that this contradicted the idea of individual responsibility and he was only suggesting this as a possibility. Nonetheless, his comments represent the slow contamination of Buddhism by the idea of collective kamma in one or another of its forms.

More recently the Buddhist scholar Garma C. C. Chang had this to say about collective kamma.

“The evidence of collective karma is not lacking in our own world. For instance, the history and fate of the American Indians, of Aztecs, of Mayans, 8 *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, 1916, p.233-4.

⁹ *Kamma (Karma)*, 1956.

26

and to a certain extent, of Negroes and Jews and all those other sufferers of mankind's inhumanity cannot be regarded as having been planned or caused even indirectly by God... With the doctrine of karma, however, the problem of evil or moral justice seems to be comparatively easier to explain in the Buddhist tradition.”¹⁰

Evidence for collective kamma may not be lacking in the world but it is lacking in the Buddhist scriptures, and Chang was unable to marshal a

single quotation from them to corroborate his other highly dubious “evidence” for it.

Charles Luk’s *The Śūraṅgama Sūtra* published in 1966 and several times since, purports to be a translation of this discourse from the Chinese Tipitaka. Pages 49 to 51 discuss what Luk calls individual and collective karma and explains the differences between them. But the term he translates as individual karma is 別業妄見, which the authoritative *Foguang Dictionary* defines as: “Refers to beings being confused about the true nature [of dharmas], giving rise to deluded views, perceiving all states of delusion, be they painful or pleasurable...” What Luk calls collective karma is 同分妄見, the same dictionary defines as: “Refers to all beings confused about the true nature, together perceiving all states of delusion, together experiencing pain and pleasure, together prompted [to arise] by karma. It is like the people of one country together seeing noxious vapours and inauspicious things.” It would seem therefore that the original text makes no mention of collective karma and that Luk has read the idea into it.¹¹

The Tibetan teacher Anam Thubten recently came up with yet another version of this notion – that everyone shares everyone else’s kamma.

“From the point of view of collective karma, everything that is happening in the world is no longer someone else’s karma. It’s our karma. In the end your karma is my karma, and my karma is your karma. We all share the same fate.”¹²

It is surprising how many Buddhist teachers, learned and otherwise, speak of collective kamma as if it were a part of authentic Dhamma, despite its recent origin and it having no precedence in traditional Buddhism.

Nonetheless, it could be argued that just because collective kamma is not mentioned in any Buddhist scriptures does not mean that it is false. After all, Buddhism does not have an exclusive claim to all truth. Perhaps Madam Blavatsky and others had insights that the Buddha or later Buddhist masters lacked, although I seriously doubt it. So it will be worthwhile to examine the idea of collective kamma more carefully to see if it has any validity.

There are various versions of the collective kamma idea. One maintains that large numbers of people can be reborn into a particular group which then suffers 10 *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality*, pp.xxiii-xxiv.

11 The Śūraṅgama Sūtra is an 8th century Chinese forgery and should not be confused with the Śūraṅgamasamādhi Sūtra.

See Etienne Lamotte's *Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra*, 1998, p.98.

12 'Karma: Not Just Action' *Tricycle* March 2020.

27

together because of their shared negative kamma. Another version maintains that a small number of innocent individuals belonging to a group can suffer the negative *vipāka* made by a larger number of individuals within that group. In these two versions the suffering supposedly comes in the form of war, famine, plague, earthquakes or other natural disasters. Another version of this second theory is that individuals can suffer for evil they have done by having something horrible happen to someone related to them; for example, my whole family is killed in a car accident because of some evil I did and my grief at the loss of my loved ones is the *vipāka* for that evil.

The most recent mass tragedy to be dubbed an example of collective kamma was the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. In the days immediately after this disaster a prominent Singaporean monk was reported in the local newspaper as saying that most of the tsunami victims were fishermen suffering the kammic consequences of decades of killing fish.

There are numerous doctrinal, logical, evidential, moral and even common sense problems with the collective kamma idea in any of its forms. Let us examine some of them. Proponents of collective kamma are long on generalizations but noticeably short on details. How, for example, does kamma organize all its mass causes and effects? How and in what form does it store and process all the data needed so that one individual in their next life experiences this kammic consequence and another one experiences that? How do the logistics work that would be needed to guarantee that a

large number of individuals are reborn at this time, within that group and at a certain location so as to experience the required suffering? And what is the force or energy by which kamma makes all these extraordinarily complex arrangements? As usual, no explanations are forthcoming.

If we explore specific examples of what is claimed to be collective kamma we will see just how problematic the idea is. Let us look at the monstrous crimes the Nazis committed against European Jewry during the Second World War. If some form of collective kamma really operates something like this would have be necessary. Kamma would have had to somehow construct things so that six million evil-doers were reborn in what was to become Nazi occupied Europe and be living there between 1939 and 1945. It would have had to pre-plan decades ahead to arrange the social and political situation in Germany so that a fanatical anti-Semite came to power. Concordant to this, it would have been necessary to select millions of other people to be reborn in Germany with attitudes and outlooks that either supported Nazism, or were too apathetic or too timid to oppose it. Then it would have nurtured Adolf Hitler go grow up and mature with anti-Semitic ideas, arrange for him to come to power so that he could be an instrument of kamma and punish all the evil doers. Further, when the required six million evildoers had suffered sufficiently for their past deeds by either being murdered, tortured, starved, or traumatized (kammic parallelism is of course operating), kamma would then have had to arrange and manipulate innumerable complex causes and effects in such ways that the war ended when everyone had got their just deserts.

28

Now let us examine the 2004 tsunami, another event often cited as an example of collective kamma. The tsunami killed some 200,000 people, injured another million and left hundreds of thousands of others homeless. Even the most ill-informed person knows that the directly observable cause of the tsunami was an earthquake that shifted the tectonic plates on the floor of the ocean off the coast of Sumatra. This released a vast amount of energy which in turn caused huge waves to form. For the tsunami to be collective kamma it would require several things. As with the Holocaust, kamma would have had to pre-plan things so that vast numbers of people were in

the affected area, either because they had been reborn there, lived there, relocated there or were visiting the area at the required time, i.e. in the late morning of the 26th December. Extraordinarily, amidst the chaos of the deluge, the panic, the collapsing buildings and the debris being swept along, kamma would have had to arrange things so that the thousands of victims involved got their exact kammic retribution, no more and no less; so that those whose kamma required them to be killed were killed, that those whose kamma required them to be seriously injured were so injured, that those who only had to sustain minor injuries did so, and those whose kamma required only that their houses be destroyed suffered only that loss, and so on. But even more extraordinary, for the tsunami to be an example of collective kamma would require accepting that kamma is able to influence, not just humans, but even the Earth's tectonic plates, making them move to just the right extent and at just the right time so that the resulting waves were able to play out on thousands of people's *vipāka*. There seems to be no end to the extraordinary abilities that speculation is able to attribute to kamma. And of course all this may well be true. Just let it be known that nothing even remotely like collective kamma was taught by the Buddha.

The Realms of Existence

When a person who has not yet attained awakening dies, they are reborn and they have to be reborn somewhere. According to the Buddha, there are various states one can be reborn into: the heavenly realm, the human realm, the animal realm, the realm of deprived spirits, the realm of jealous spirits, and purgatory. [41]

Before proceeding further let us briefly explain some of these terms. Here the word purgatory is used instead of hell, and with good reason. The word hell is inextricably linked in the Western mind to the Christian concept of a place of eternal punishment. At death one is judged and if found wanting is cast into everlasting hell. The Buddhist state in some ways equivalent to hell is not the result of a decision by or the judgment of an agent external to the individual, i.e. a god, but one created by the individual's own mind, the contours of which have been shaped by their intentional thoughts, speech and actions throughout their life, i.e. their kamma.

More importantly, because this state is not eternal but only lasts as long as the kamma that created it has not played itself out, it is more appropriately called purgatory rather than hell. The most common Pāli words for purgatory are (*apāya*)

‘loss’ (*apāya*), ‘the difficult road’ (*duggati*), ‘to descend’ (*niraya*) and ‘ruin’ (*vinipāta*).

29

Nowadays words such as heaven and hell (or purgatory) often raise a sceptical smile on many people’s faces, and perhaps with good reason. So what are we to make of the Buddha’s teachings about the realms of existence, particularly of purgatory? Many ‘modern’ Buddhists brush the concept aside and focus on teaching ethics and meditation, much as liberal Christians try to avoid any mention of hell.

But the realms of existence are an integral part of the Buddha’s teaching and to pretend they are not there is disingenuous. In his discourses the Buddha’s usually described heaven, purgatory and the other non-human, non-animal realms much as they were understood by people in his day; lovely palaces in the case of heaven and cauldrons of boiling pus in the case of purgatory. But not always. One ancient Indian idea of purgatory, in this case *pātāla*, the abyss, was that it was at the bottom of the ocean and concerning this the Buddha commented: “When the ordinary uninstructed person says: ‘Purgatory is under the great ocean’ he says something that is not true or real. Purgatory is actually a name for painful feeling” (S.IV,206) This comment deserves more attention. In it the Buddha was saying that purgatory is not a location in space but an experience. If this is so then presumably heaven, the realm of afflicted spirits, etc, are not necessarily always places either but can sometimes be experiences. This model fits much better and is more consistent with the primacy the Buddha gives to the mind. “Mind precedes mental states, mind is their chief, they are all mind-made”, “By mind the world is made” (Dhp.1; S.I,39).

Thus heaven can be conceived of as a human existence that is predominantly one of ease, comfort, pleasure and delight; purgatory as one characterized as distressful and unfulfilled, and so on.

Why So Much Misunderstanding?

It may well be asked why it is that if kamma is such an important and central doctrine in Buddhism it been so widely and so badly misunderstood, a claim of this book? There are probably several reasons for this. The first would be because kamma is a complex concept. Human consciousness, of which kamma is an aspect, is an intricate and multifarious phenomenon with subtle crosscurrents of thoughts and feelings, intentions, emotions and other experiences coursing through it. For most people, the false but simple idea that if you are generous you will be reborn rich, and similar notions, is so much easier to grasp. Perhaps it also appeals to people's "let the punishment fit the crime" notion of justice. Because of this, from an early period in the history of Buddhism, texts were written presenting kamma in just such simple and simplistic terms. The Pāli *Vimānavatthu*, *Petavatthu* (circa 3rd or 2nd century BCE), and the *Dhammapada Atthakathā* (4th or 5th century CE) and Sanskrit works such as the *Kammavibhaṅga* would be examples of this. Another work in a similar vein to these is the *Buddha Teaches the Sutra Cause and Effect in the Three Times* (*Fo Shuo San-shi Yinguo Jing*). This text was supposedly spoken by the Buddha and translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva (344-413). In fact, all the evidence points to it being composed in China many centuries after Kumārajīva. Its apocryphal origins did not prevent it being enormously popular in China and even today it is often printed and distributed for free in Chinese Buddhists temples. Its 30

role in distorting the Buddha's teaching of kamma and perpetuating ignorance about it amongst Chinese Buddhists has been profound.

According to this text, if you have fine clothes to wear this is because you donated robes to monks in past life. If you are constantly hungry this is because you were gluttonous in the past life. Those who have many children and grandchildren released captive birds and animals in their former lives. Barren women are so because they were sexually promiscuous in former lives. Offering lamps in front of Buddha statues leads to having good eyesight, refusing to show travellers the way results in being born blind, and to laugh at those who bow before Buddha statues is to be reborn with kyphosis, i.e. hunchbacked. The *Fo Shuo San-shi Yinguo Jing* and

similar texts may have encouraged simple illiterate peasants to live kinder and more ethical lives. On the other hand, their distorted version of kamma was and still is accepted and cited even by learned monks, nuns and lay people.

Another reason why kamma is so widely misunderstood may be the traditional approach to religious education in Buddhist cultures. It is not uncommon to encounter Christians or Muslims who are familiar with their respective scriptures.

In traditional Buddhist countries a familiarity with the sacred texts is not common.

There are understandable reasons for this. Until recently, the majority of lay Buddhists were either illiterate or only marginally literate. Further, unlike the Bible or the Koran, the Pāli Buddhist scriptures are huge, over 50 volumes in the English translation, and their contents are not in an easy-to-read style. Added to this is the fact that few scriptures were translated into Asian vernaculars until well into the 20th century, and even now are not widely available in that form. Even monks and nuns, some of whom were and are very learned, tend to read the scriptures through the ancient commentaries, rather than allowing them to speak for themselves, and some of these commentaries lack the wisdom of the Buddha's words. The upshot of all this is that the majority of Buddhists rely more on hearsay or popular secondary writings for their knowledge of Dhamma than on the actual words of the Buddha, much of which embodies the misunderstandings highlighted above.

In the west, the concept of kamma became familiar to the general public piecemeal and from a variety of sources: from an early amateur knowledge of Hinduism; from Theosophy; from so-called "esoteric wisdom" and more recently from New Age literature. While these sources agree about kamma in the broadest and most general sense, they are very diverse and even contradictory as far as details are concerned. Thus kamma has become a catch-all word for a jumble of vague, poorly thought-out and incoherent notions, some of which get attributed to the Buddha.

Common ways of talking about kamma in the west have also reinforced confusion about it. Some early western Buddhists referred to what they called “the iron Law of Kamma”. Even today the word ‘law’ almost always precedes the word kamma. Other words widely used together with kamma are ‘retribution’, ‘reward’,

‘punishment’ and ‘inescapable’. It is worth noting that there is no equivalent to the term ‘law of kamma’ in the Pāli Buddhist scriptures. So how did kamma go from 31

being whatever it is to becoming a law? And how did an impersonal process of psychological causes and effects become a system of rewards and punishments dispensed by a vaguely suggested rewarder and punisher? The first western scholars of Buddhism, like the first western Buddhists, usually came from Christian backgrounds and not surprisingly this influenced their understanding of Buddhism.

God’s commandments are known as ‘the Law’; precise, unalterable and compulsory rules the flouting of which brings forth ‘retribution’. This divine retribution is inescapable and so is kamma. The pioneering western Buddhist Christmas Humphreys’ comments on kamma are typical of this kind of thinking.

“This law of merit and demerit, Karma in the sense of the reign of moral law, is neither particularly Hindu, Buddhist nor Theosophical. It is fundamental to all Oriental philosophy and was preached by St. Paul. ‘Brethren, be not deceived. God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap’.”¹³

Humphreys was in fact much more a Theosophist than he was a Buddhist.

Underlying this sort of terminology and the thinking stemming from it, is the notion of a rewarding and punishing deity. And as mentioned above, kamma is typically conceived as a supreme being in everything but name. It may also be that the idea of collective kamma reminded western Buddhists of the idea of a God who punishes the children of sinners up to three or four generations (e.g. Numbers 14,18; Exodus 20,5; Deuteronomy 5,9, etc.).

The Results of Misunderstanding

What has been the results of misunderstanding the doctrine of kamma as detailed above? Observers have long pointed out what they see as significant differences in attitudes to social problems between traditional Buddhist cultures and the Western/Christian world; the former being more passive, the latter more proactive. Having lived in Buddhist Asia for more than four decades I would have to agree with this observation. Traditional Buddhists are for the most part a kindly, generous and gracious people. But this kindness only sometimes manifests as a concern for and sense of urgency towards social problems and concrete sustained actions to deal with them. One hears time and time again that those disadvantaged in one way or another are suffering the consequences of their kamma.

Mahasi Sayadaw, probably modern Burma's most revered Buddhist scholar and meditation master, summed up this attitude well when he wrote: "In this world nothing happens to a person that he does not for some reason or other deserve."¹⁴

As shown above, this claim is directly contrary to what the Buddha taught. In her novel *Fruit of Karma* the Thai authoress Sudassa Onkom has a dialogue between a novice and the protagonist of the story, the wise old monk Phra Khru, who the author uses to elucidate Buddhist doctrine. In one dialogue, Phra Khru mentions the problem of corruption within the Saṅgha and the novice asks: ¹³ *Karma and Rebirth*, 1994, p.16.

¹⁴ *The Theory of Karma*, p.3.

32

“ ‘How can we help to improve the situation?’ ‘Pardon me. Did you say we?

No, we cannot do anything. We are only a drop in the ocean. Neither can those with political power, who are many thousands of times more mighty than we are. We have to leave it to the process of karma,’ said Ven. Phra Khru sorrowfully.”¹⁵

Given the almost universal belief that everything which happens to persons, institutions and societies is due to past kamma, a misunderstanding repeated endlessly in sermons, tracts and books, Phru Khru's fatalism comes as no surprise.

Prof. Dale S. Wright, a scholar of Buddhism, writes: "Karma may be socially and politically disempowering in its cultural effect, that without intending to do this, karma may in fact support social passivity or acquiescence in the face of oppression of various kinds."¹⁶

Prof. David Loy, both a Buddhist and a scholar of Buddhism, writes:

"Karma has been used to rationalize sexism, racism, caste, economic oppression, birth handicaps, and almost everything else. Taken literally, karma justifies the authority of political elites, who therefore deserve their wealth and power, and the subordination of those without them, who are also experiencing the results of their behaviour in previous lifetimes."¹⁷

The sad reality is that some of the misunderstandings about kamma have led to or been used as an excuse for social passivity and indifference. But while they have been used to retard some actions they have also been used to justify others. An example of this is found in the *Milindapañha*. In a dialogue with the monk Nāgasena, King Milinda quoted two passages from the scriptures: "By harming none in the world you will be loved and cherished," and "Punish that which deserves punishment and encourage that which is good" (Ja.IV,71 and Ja.V,116).

The king then pointed out that just punishment might require harming, even to the extent of amputating limbs of or executing wrongdoers, and that this would contradict the Buddha's praise of not harming anyone. Nāgasena, supposedly an arahat, replied that someone who inflicts punishment on a wrongdoer is not responsible for the harm they do. Rather, the wrongdoer would be suffering because of their own evil kamma and the person administering the punishment would incur no blame (Mil.185-6). This spurious argument could be used to justify any action and indeed history is full of examples of this being done. The Tibetan King Langdarma who persecuted Buddhism was assassinated by a monk in 842. The traditional justification of this act is that the monk was actually acting out of

compassion in that he was saving the king from making even more negative kamma for himself. This political murder is celebrated every year in Tibet, Bhutan and 15 *Fruit of Karma*, 1994, p.113.

16 ‘Critical Questions Towards a Naturalized Concept of Karma in Buddhism’, *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Volume 11, 2004.

17 *Money Sex War Karma*, 2008, p.55.

33

Ladakh with the famous Black Hat Dance. During his career as a judge the pioneering western Buddhist Christmas Humphreys passed down numerous death sentences and in his autobiography he justified this by saying that the judge is only

“an instrument for the law for kamma.”¹⁸ One of the people Humphreys sentenced to hang was Timothy Evans who was later proved to be innocent, although in his autobiography Humphreys carefully avoided mentioning this tragic miscarriage of justice or how it fitted into his view of kamma. Perhaps he would have explained it as *vipāka* for a murder Evans had committed in previous life.

Of course people have always distorted religious beliefs to suit their own ends, justify their actions and put a pious gloss on them. But doing this is one thing; incorporating such distortions into the sacred literature is another. The *Milindapañha* and the Pāli commentaries, which both contain spurious interpretations of kamma, are considered authoritative texts in the Theravada tradition, almost on a par with the Tipiṭaka. In fact, as mentioned in the Introduction, few expositions of kamma and rebirth ever make a distinction between the two. Was the *Milindapañha*’s misuse of the doctrine of kamma to justify judicial torture, amputation and capital punishment one of the reasons why all Buddhist countries continue to maintain capital punishment and why there has rarely been agitation from within legal profession and certainly not from the Saṅgha to abolish it? I doubt it. But common misunderstandings of kamma that prevail throughout the Buddhist world most certainly would have had.

On a personal level, false views about kamma can have and do have an immediate and extremely negative effect. Two examples from my own experience will suffice to illustrate this. A man and his wife once came to see me, both of them looking noticeably depressed. They told me that their joyful expectations at having an addition to their family turned to dismay and sadness when their first child was born with Down's Syndrome. Is it true, they asked, that this was really the result of both of them having done something evil in an earlier life? I did my best to try to explain the subtleties of kamma to them but with only limited success. The monk who had told them that they were responsible for their child's condition was not only many years senior to me but had recently been awarded some mark of esteem by the Thai king. My explanations of the Dhamma counted for little besides his.

Later I came to know that this couple abandoned Buddhism and became Christians.

One could hardly blame them.

On another occasion, I was conversing with a man who had a real interest in 18 *Both Sides of the Circle*, 1978, p.48. It is interesting that Christmas Humphreys and Nāgasena were closer to Martin Luther's conception of God than they were to the Buddha's teaching of kamma. According to Luther: "The small lack of peace called war or the sword must set a limit to this universal, worldwide lack of peace which would destroy everyone.

This is why God honors the sword so highly that he says that he himself has instituted it (Rom.13:1) and does not want men to say or think that they have invented it or instituted it. For the hand that wields this sword and kills with it is not man's hand, but God's; and it is not man, but God, who hangs, tortures, beheads, kills, and fights. All these are God's works and judgments." *Soldiers Too Can Be Saved*,1526.

34

the Dhamma and a fairly good knowledge of it as well. As we spoke I noticed a swelling on the side of his neck and asked him about it. He told me that he had cancer of the thyroid which was now in its terminal stage.

He said that his regular practice of meditation was helping him to have a degree of acceptance and that he was reconciled to dying. Then he added: “And besides, it’s my fault for having done something wrong in my last life.” All this was said with forced cheerfulness but it was not difficult to detect the fear and sadness behind his words. The natural feelings of fear and anxiety he was having about his approaching demise was almost certainly compounded by believing that he was responsible for his illness. So misunderstanding kamma is not just a doctrinal or theoretical matter, it can affect people’s lives. It can burden them with guilt, regret and self-reproach.

The coming of the Dhamma to the west has heightened the need to revisit the Buddha’s concept of kamma, become familiar with it and make a distinction between it and how later commentators and many modern expositions interpret it.

Buddhism generally has “a good press” in popular western perceptions. But as soon as the subject of kamma comes up this perception changes. Amongst thoughtful people at least, kamma sounds like a form of crude determinism leading to shrugged shoulders in the face of suffering and blaming victims for their personal tragedies.

This makes the precious Dhamma look less attractive and convincing than it would otherwise be. It even opens it to justified criticism.

One of but many examples of such criticism appears in Dr. Richard Dawkins’

book *The God Delusion*, a trenchant critique of religion. Dawkins makes only one reference to Buddhism in his book and predictably it is about kamma. He writes:

“Julia Sweeney is also right on target when she briefly mentions Buddhism...

Buddhism is often cracked up to be the nicest of all [religions]. But the doctrine of demotion on the reincarnation ladder because of sins in a past life is pretty unpleasant. Julia Sweeney went to Thailand and happened to

visit a woman who was taking care of a terribly deformed boy. ‘I said to his caretaker, It’s good of you to be taking care of this poor boy. She said, ‘Don’t say poor boy. He must have done something terrible in his past life to be born this way’.”¹⁹

Judging Buddhism by the comments of a single individual who almost certainly knows little or nothing of Buddhist philosophy and psychology is as unfair as it would be to judge biology or evolution entirely on the comments of someone who was ignorant of those sciences. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that Julia Sweeney’s informant derived her misunderstanding of kamma from sermons or tracts by Buddhist clergy.

Some Buddhists have even suggested that we should scrap the doctrine of kamma altogether. David Loy again:

19 The God Delusion, 2006 p.394.

35

“What are we going to do about karma? There’s no point in pretending that karma hasn’t become a problem for contemporary Buddhism. Buddhism can fit quite nicely into modern ways of understanding. But not traditional views of karma.”²⁰

The western teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, Shenpen Hookham, writes that she is uncomfortable with the idea that millions in the Third World are starving because of their past kamma and think that the best way to sidestep this embarrassing ideas is to deny the reality of kamma. She writes: “...the idea of karma is untrue, it is just ‘a provisional truth’ that is only helpful when we are caught up in confusion. It is not ultimately true...”²¹ Once again we have the problem of the inability to distinguishing between what the Buddha taught in the Pāli Tipitaka, the earliest evidence of Buddhism, and later versions of it. Nothing in the Buddha’s Dhamma need imply that people suffer starvation, sickness, social oppression, etc., because of their past kamma. Even the influential Thai monk Buddhadasa ‘reinterpreted’ kamma and rebirth to the degree that they are hardly recognizable as anything the Buddha taught.²²

Transferring Merit

An issue related to the doctrine of kamma is that of transference of merit.

This is the idea that it is possible to do good and then ‘transfer’ the *vipāka* of that good to a person who has passed away. The possibility of transferring merit is now almost universally accepted by Buddhists despite not having been taught by the Buddha and, it would seem, being contradictory to some of the things he did teach.

The idea of transferring merit was probably adapted from the Brahmanical *śaddha* ritual in which small balls of rice or barley were believed to be transmitted to departed loved ones so as to satisfy their hunger by means of chanting certain formula. Apparently at an early period some Buddhists adopted this idea and applied it to merit. The materialist Carvaka school quite rightly poked fun at the *śaddha* ritual saying:

“If the *śaddha* can really satisfy beings who are dead, then in this world when travellers embark on a journey it would not be necessary to provide them with provisions because their relatives back home could eat for them.”²³

Anyone with a good grasp of the Buddha’s teaching could think of quite a few more serious problems with the idea of transferring merit. For example, if it were possible to transfer merit to someone, logically it should also be possible to transfer demerit or evil to them too. This would mean that one could benefit from the good kamma one never did and avoid evil kamma one did do. This would 20 *Idib.* p.55.

²¹ *There is more to Dying than Death*, 2006, p.62.

²² Peter Jackson, *Buddhadasa: A Buddhist Thinker for the Modern World*, 1988, ²³ Sarvadarśanasamgraha, *Bibliotheca Indica*, 1858, p.10.

undermine the whole notion of kamma. The Buddha made it clear that: “By oneself is evil done, by oneself is evil shunned, by oneself is one purified.

Purity and impurity depend on oneself. No one can purify another” (Dhp.165). In the Sutta Nipāta he said: “When they are overcome by death and are going from here to the next world, the father cannot assist the son, any more than other relatives can”

(Sn.579). Even the denizens of Purgatory have a better understanding of kamma than those who believe they can transfer their merit to someone else. The Buddha said that a person who dies and finds himself in Purgatory will be reproached by Yama like this:

“This evil deed was not done by your mother or father, by your brother or sister, by your friends and companions, by your kinsmen and relatives, by ascetics and brahmins, or by the gods. It was done by you yourself, and you yourself will feel its result” (M.I,179-180).

The Jātakas seem to represent a period when the early Buddhism was being influenced by the *śaddha* notion. True to the original Dhamma, one Jātaka says:

“One makes one’s own good fortune. One makes one’s own misfortune. For good fortune or lack of it cannot be made for another by another” (Ja.III,263). But in another story a virtuous man says he will give all the merit he has accumulated to a man lacking virtue (Ja.II,112). By the time of the *Dhammapada Atthakathā* the notion had come to be believed that it was actually possible to *buy* someone’s merit from them or sell your own (Dhp-a.III,12a). But even after the transferring of merit had become widely accepted, there were voices still holding out against this popular superstition. In the 2nd century CE Aśvaghōṣa wrote:

“It is impossible for one to do good and then give it to another, even if one wants to the other cannot receive it. The result of one’s own acts are not destroyed, they are experienced by oneself, but that the effect of what one had not done can be experienced is not factual” (*Buddhacarita* XX,28).

It is not uncommon for religions to present believers with what is at first said to be an insurmountable problem and then offer them an easy way to avoid it. The Brahmanism of the Buddha’s time taught numerous ways to avoid the consequences of evil one may have done: reciting special

mantras; praying to certain deities; bathing in sacred rivers; visiting certain sacred places; and so on. Unfortunately, some sects of Buddhism have not been immune to this sort of thing either. The well-known Tibetan teacher Lama Zopa has written: “Even the heaviest [karmas], the uninterrupted negative karmas, get purified through turning a prayer wheel.

Even a fully ordained person [i.e. monk or nun] who has broken all four root vows will get purified. Negative karmas are completely purified, one collects merit like the sky, and one especially develops compassion.”²⁴ The belief that performing 24 *Wheel of Great Compassion: The Practice of the Prayer Wheel in Tibetan Buddhism*, Lorna Ladner, 2000, p.ix.

Breaking the four root vows (*pārājika*) involves committing murder, sexual intercourse, theft and creating a schism in the Sangha.

37

some ritual can make a fundamental difference to a person’s life, especially by benefiting them spiritually, is completely contrary to the Buddha’s teaching.

Then why, it could be asked, do so many Buddhists accept the idea of transferring merit? I have asked a number of senior and learned Sri Lankan monks whether transferring merit is really possible and the responses have generally been the same: slight embarrassment; equivocation; and finally a reluctant admission that it is not possible. When I have further asked: “Then why do you do it and teach it?”

The answer is usually this, that people feel the need to do something for the benefit of their deceased loved ones, that the Buddhist understanding of reality does not allow for that, and so out of compassion monks perform the merit transferring ceremony during funerals and on the successive death anniversaries. Doing things out of sensitivity for peoples’ feelings, particularly when they are grieving, is commendable. But explaining the Dhamma is even more commendable. Ultimately, the best consolation, the strongest armour against the vicissitudes of life, is the truth.

While it is not possible to transfer merit to another it is possible to give them the opportunity to rejoice in good and virtuous actions done on their behalf, a practice called *puñña anumodana* (Sinhala, *pin anumodanaya*). The two words in this term are *puñña* = merit and *anumodana* = to rejoice in or to feel joyful about, although Sri Lankan monks always say it means to transfer merit. Although such a thing is not directly mentioned by the Buddha it appeared in Buddhism at a very early stage and does not contradict the Dhamma. In this practice the family and friends of a recently deceased person do some generous or virtuous deed and then in a simple ceremony announce that what they did was done on behalf of the deceased person. If the deceased is still in the in-between state (*antarabhava*) they can sense or otherwise come to know of this and it can give them joy and comfort.

Traditionally, the good deed was usually to provide a meal for a group of monks in the name of the deceased. But I know of cases in Sri Lanka where people have undertaken to provide meals for patients in one ward of a hospital or a home for the aged, have made a donation to a charity that was of interest to the deceased, or bought a set of encyclopaedias and donated it to the local school library. *Puñña anumodana* has a variety of benefits. It can uplift the deceased, gives consolation to the grieving, the recipients of the good deed benefit from it, and of course it is in harmony with the Dhamma.

Kamma and Rebirth. A Miscellany

We will finish this exploration of the Buddha's doctrine of kamma and rebirth by looking at some of implications of them and attempting to answer some of the questions often raised about them.

(A) Since the idea of rebirth has become well-known in the West and to some degree acceptable, there has been a plethora of books by people claiming that they can remember their former lives. For a while in the 1970s and 80s something called Past Life Therapy became popular in the more 'experimental' corners of the counselling and psychiatric professions. The little acceptance it had even then has 38

now disappeared. There are even guidebooks explaining how to recover supposed past life memories. Few of these claims stand up to careful or sometimes even casual scrutiny. A friend of mine tells me that he knows at least four people who can vividly remember being Cleopatra. Most so-called past life memories are probably a result of suggestion, confabulation, an overly-vivid imagination, the desire to be appear more interesting than one really is, or crypto-amnesia.²⁵ But certainly not all. The late parapsychologist Prof. Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia School of Medicine has published a series of studies of children who appear to have been able to remember a past life. Stevenson's findings have earned him at least some attention from the scientific community. Others who have followed in his footsteps are Dr. B. Jim Tucker and Prof. Erlendur Haraldsson.

So if we really are reborn, some people ask, why cannot most people remember their former lives? But perhaps they can, at least while they are infants.

Children not uncommonly say things that could well be examples of past life memories but because rebirth is not widely accepted beyond the Buddhist world, their parents disregard such things and dismiss them as just childish prattle. As the child grows, the impact of all the new sensory impressions in his or her present life simply smother the past life memories, or past life memories get confused with memories from the present life. For the majority however, it seems likely the nine months in the womb, which could be considered a natural sensory-deprivation tank, erases all but just a few fragmentary and disconnected past life memories.

Apparently such memories usually only become accessible again in the period just prior to awakening, when the mind is, as the Buddha described it, "focused and purified, cleansed and unblemished, pliant and free of defilements, malleable, stable, firm and imperturbable" (D.I,76).

(B) Throughout the Buddhist world rebirth is taken for granted. In the west however, many people find it curious and improbable. The idea of eternal heaven or hell still has some acceptance, at least in a vague sense. But objectively speaking, rebirth is no more or less improbable. The main problem with rebirth in for many Westerners is its unfamiliarity. And no

doubt many intelligent people dismiss it as unworthy of consideration when they are presented with half baked “esoteric” and New Age versions of it in circulation. But rebirth has won at least some acceptance from certain intellectuals and serious thinkers. Philosopher Paul Edwards has highlighted what he believes to be serious evidential and logical problems with rebirth/reincarnation. But others like philosophers C. J. Ducasse and J. M. E.

McTaggart and academics such as Susan Blackmore consider rebirth to be a plausible post-mortem explanation.²⁶

(C) According to the Buddha, the three characteristics of existence are 25
On crypto-amnesia see Ian Wilson’s *Mind Out of Time: Reincarnation Investigated*, 1981.

²⁶ Paul Edwards, *Reincarnation: A Critical Examination*, 1996; C. J. Ducasse, *A Critical Examination of the Belief in a Life after Death*, 1961; John McTaggart, *Human Immortality and Pre-existence*, 1916; Susan Blackmore, *Dying to Live: Science and the Near-death Experience*, 1993.

39

suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*) and not-self (*anatta*). Not-self asserts that the idea of an eternal, unchanging self, soul or essence in things is an illusion.

When some people hear this they ask, perhaps understandably: “If there is no self, soul or spirit, what passes from one life to the next?” The problem is more apparent than real. The Buddha did not teach that there is no self as such; he taught that there is no *permanent, unchanging, metaphysical* self. In Buddhism as in contemporary psychology, the self is understood to be the constantly evolving cluster of impressions and memories, traits and dispositions that together form consciousness.

When one identifies with this it gives the feeling of being autonomous and separate from others and of persisting through time. This empirical self clearly exists in that it is a real experience, although it is in a constant state of flux. It is this “self” that passes from one life to the next.

Imagine three billiard balls in a line, each touching the other and a fourth billiard ball some distance from the three and aligned to them. Now imagine that a man hits the fourth ball with his cue and it speeds across the table and hits the first ball in the line. The moving ball will come to an immediate halt, it and second balls will remain stationary while the third ball, the last in the row, will speed across the table and into the pocket. What has happened? The energy in the fourth ball has passed through the first and second balls in the row, then into the third ball, activating it so that it moves across the table. In a similar way, the mental energy that makes up what we can conveniently call the self, moves from one body to another. Indeed, the very thing that allows it to pass through a medium and animate another object is its changeability (*anicca*). It is not this, but the idea that a soul or spirit can go from one location or dimension to another *without changing* that is difficult to explain.

(D) Following from this is the question of identity. If the consciousness that makes up the self is indeed constantly changing, is it legitimate to consider the individual who is reborn the same as the one who died? And if the individual who is reborn is different from the one who died, is it legitimate to say that one can experience the results of kamma done in the former life in the present life?

Interestingly, the Buddha addressed these very questions. He said that to say that the one who acts is the same as the one who experiences its result would be extreme, but to say that they were entirely different would be extreme too. He then proceeded to reiterate his position that the individual is a conditioned, constantly evolving flow of interconnected psycho-physical factors giving the “impression” of a self. **(42)** Using an analogy might help clarify what the Buddha meant. Think of a football team which has been going for 60 years. During that time scores of players have joined the team, played with it for five or ten years, left and been replaced by other players. Even though not one of the original players is still in the team and the earliest ones are not even alive, it is still valid to say that “the team” exists. Its identity is recognizable despite the continual change. The players are hard, solid entities but what is the team identity made up of? In part of the players, but also its 40

name, memories of its past achievements, the feelings that the players and the supporters have towards it, its *esprit de corps*, etc.

Similarly, a mother might take out the family photo album and show her children photos of herself when she was a child. Science tells us that not one molecule in her body is the same as when she was young. Her thoughts, ideas and beliefs are all different from when she was a child. Even her facial features when young, although vaguely similar, are hardly recognisable to her children. Even so, when the curious children ask their mother: “Is that you mummy?”, and she answers

“Yes”, no one would accuse her of lying. Despite the fact that both body and mind are continually changing, it is still valid to say that the person who is reborn is a continuation of the person who died – not because any unchanging self has passed from one to another, but because identity persists in memories, dispositions, traits, mental habits and psychological tendencies. Thus it is valid to say that an individual passes from one life to another and that one can experience in this life the *vipāka* of kamma done in the previous life.

(E) One of the arguments posited in favour of belief in a supreme deity is that ethics only become meaningful when there is a god, an eternal arbiter of values.

People supposedly have a clear idea of right and wrong because it is dictated by the deity’s commandments. They adhere to these moral commandments, so the argument goes, either out of love of the deity or because they fear his punishment here or hereafter if they do not. Thus without a god there would be no motivation to do good and avoid evil. Indeed, we would not know what was good and evil were without God. Dostoyevsky famously summed up this argument when he wrote:

“Without God everything is permitted.” There are major problems with this argument, not the least being that almost every conceivable wickedness has been committed with a god, even sometimes by people who had a deep faith in a god.

But is it really the case that the only two choices available are monotheism and moral nihilism? Although kamma is never included in the debate between those who believe in a supreme being and those who do not, kamma offers a third alternative worthy of consideration. The Buddhist doctrine of kamma provides a basis for a moral universe, it justifies and encourages sound ethical precepts and it provides the motivation to do good and avoid evil, without having to posit the notion of a divine being. Although Buddhist philosophy does not include the concept of a supreme being, it has arrived at moral principles for the most part the same as those taught by the major theistic faiths, and often earlier than they did. The reality is that there can be morality without a god. The Buddha said we should adhere to the good because it leads to “love, respect, kind regard, harmony and peace” (A.III,289), and we should shun evil out of compassion for others and because its kammic consequences can be very unpleasant.

(F) Those who believe that life ceases at death sometimes maintain that all theories of post-mortem existence, rebirth included, are just examples of wish-fulfilment. Because humans have a natural fear of death and desire to live forever, they create in their imagination some form of happy afterlife. The belief in post-41

mortem existence is, so the argument goes, just a consolation. It would be difficult to argue with this claim. However, such a claim could hardly apply to the Buddhist idea of rebirth. Whereas almost all religions consider eternal life in one form or another to be a desirable thing, a reward for having done good or having faith in the true god, something to be hoped for, Buddhism by contrast, regards it as a problem to be solved. According to the Buddha, continual rebirth into the world exposes one to all the problems ordinary embodied existence entails: sickness; accidents; loss of loved ones; social upheavals; decrepitude; and eventually death. The Buddha said that one should be “turned off, repelled and disgusted” by the idea of eternal life in heaven (A.I,115), a goal he considered decidedly inferior to Nirvana. Even eternal life in heaven, if such a thing were possible, must, sooner or later, entail boredom and a sense of meaninglessness. The *raison d’etre* of Buddhism is to end *samsāra*, the process of birth, death and being reborn. So however much the wish-

fulfilment theory may apply to other post-mortem theories it could not apply to Buddhism.

(G) One of the strong points of the Buddha's doctrine of kamma is that it fits well into most peoples' idea of fairness and justice. Eternal hell seems to be a disproportionate punishment for acts of evil, even a lifetime of evil or of worshipping a false deity. And even 50, 80 or 100 years of virtuous living is, some would say, a very modest outlay for eternity in paradise. The *vipāka* we experience for the kamma we do is, by contrast, approximately proportionate. The picture on the cover of this book is of a relief from the great Borobudur temple in Java depicting a scene from the *Karmavibhaṅga*. On the right people are cooking fish and tortoises and on the left, as a result of this, they are reborn in purgatory where they are boiled alive. While such a cause-and-effect scenario is simplistic and naive in the extreme, it does convey the idea that the strength and duration of *vipāka* reflects the kamma that caused it, all things being equal. A man like Hitler deserves to go to hell, but does he deserve to go to hell forever? That would seem to be an act more terrible than the atrocities he had committed. And what of those who were basically good and decent people but who believed in the wrong god? Is it fair and just that their fate should be eternal punishment? Kamma is equitable in that the good experience good and the bad bad whatever religion they belong to or whatever deity they worship. Kamma can also be seen as embodying a form of restorative justice. The *vipāka* of even the evillest people: Jeffrey Dahmer; Idi Amin; Pol Pot; Himmler; Beria and others, will eventually peter out and they will have another chance to redeem themselves. In every sense the doctrine of kamma is equitable, fair and just.

Pāli Text on Kamma

[1] There are these three sectarian views which, when considered, examined and thought about carefully by the wise, and taken to their logical conclusion, must lead to doing nothing. What three? (a) There are some ascetics and brahmins who teach that whatever pleasant, painful or neutral experiences a person has is all due to past kamma. (b) There are other who teach that whatever pleasant, painful or neutral experiences a person has is all due to God's will. (c) And there are still other 42

ascetics and brahmins who teach that whatever pleasant, painful or neutral experiences a person has is without cause. Now I went to these ascetics and brahmins and asked them if indeed they did teach this. When they confirmed that they did I said to them: “If this is so then if you kill, steal, sexually misbehave, lie, speak unskillfully and are full of craving and deluded views, then that must be due to your past kamma.” Those who fall back on past deeds as the cause of everything should have no desire to do good or avoid evil and in fact they should not even be able to make the effort. Because they do not know the real cause of good or evil actions they are muddle minded, they do not guard themselves, and thus even the term ‘ascetic’ could not be legitimately applied to them. This was my first legitimate refutation of those ascetics and brahmins who hold such a doctrine and view. AN

3.62

[2] Moliyasīvaka said to the Lord: “Good Gotama, there are some ascetics and brahmins who teach that whatever pleasant, painful or neutral experiences a person has all that is all due to past kamma. What do you have to say about that?”

The Lord said: “Sīvaka, some feelings arise from disorders of the bile, and that this is so can be known by oneself, and it is a fact generally acknowledged by the world.

Now when those ascetics and brahmins hold such a doctrine they go beyond what one can know by oneself and what is generally acknowledged by the world. Therefore, I say that they are wrong. Some feelings arise from disorders of phlegm, from disorders of wind, or from disorders in all three humors combined. Some are due to climatic changes, others are due to accidents and yet others are due to kamma. And that some feelings have such causes can be known by oneself and it is a fact generally acknowledged by the world. Therefore, I say that those ascetics and brahmins are wrong.” S.IV,229

[3] Not in the sky, not in the middle of the sea, not by entering mountain clefts is there that place on earth where standing one might be freed from evil kamma. Dhp.127

[4] “If one were to say: ‘A person experiences kamma in precisely the same way that he created it’ and if this were so, then logically one could not live the spiritual life and there would be no way to make an end of suffering. But if one were to say: ‘When a person creates kamma that is to be experienced in a particular way, he experiences its result precisely in that,’ then living of the spiritual life would be possible and there would be a way to make an end of suffering.

For example, some person creates minor bad kamma and as a result he goes to purgatory, while some other person does exactly the same minor bad kamma and yet he experiences it in this life, leaving not even the slightest, let alone abundant residue.

Why is it that this first person goes to purgatory? Because this person is undeveloped in body, virtuous behaviour, mind, and wisdom; he is limited and has a mean character, and he dwells in suffering. When such a person creates trifling bad kamma, it leads him to purgatory.

43

And what kind of person creates exactly the same minor bad kamma and yet it is to be experienced in this very life, without even a slightest let alone abundant residue? Here, some person is developed in body, virtuous behaviour, mind, and wisdom. He is unlimited and has a lofty character, and he dwells without measure. When such a person creates exactly the same minor bad kamma, it is to be experienced in this very life, without even the slightest residue let alone abundant residue. Suppose a man would drop a lump of salt into a small bowl of water. What do you think? Would that lump of salt make the small amount of water in the bowl salty and undrinkable?”

“Yes, Bhante, it would. And why? Because the water in the bowl is limited, thus that lump of salt would make it salty and undrinkable.”

“Now suppose a man were to drop a lump of salt into the Ganges River. What do you think? Would that lump of salt make the Ganges salty and undrinkable?”

“No, Bhante it would not. And why? Because the Ganges contains much water and thus that lump of salt would not make it salty and undrinkable.”
A.I,249

[5] There are these four kinds of persons found existing in the world. What four? One heading from darkness to darkness, one heading from darkness to light, one heading from light to darkness, and one heading from light to light.

(a) And how is a person one heading from darkness to darkness? Let's say some person has been reborn in a low family, a family of outcastes, hunters, bamboo workers, cartwrights, or flower scavengers; a poor family where there is meagre food and drink and where even mere subsistence is a struggle, plus he is ugly, misshapen, constantly ill, short sighted, crippled, lame or paralyzed. He does not acquire the pleasant things of life easily. And further, he does wrong with body, speech, and mind.

Having done so, with the breakup of the body after death, he is reborn into deprivation, a rough place, a bleak destination, even in purgatory.

(b) And how is a person one heading from darkness to light? Let's say some person has been reborn in a low family with all the same disabilities and difficulties mentioned before. But he does good with body, speech, and mind. Having done so, with the breakup of the body after death, he is reborn in a good destination, even in a heavenly world.

(c) And how is a person one heading from light to darkness? Let's say some person has been reborn in a high family, an affluent, noble, brahmin or householder family, one that is rich, with great wealth and property, plenty of gold, silver, treasures and other commodities, plus he is handsome, attractive, with an exceptionally beautiful complexion. He is one who gains the good things of life easily. But he does wrong with body, speech, and mind. Having done so, with the breakup of the body after death he is reborn into deprivation, a rough place, a bleak destination, even in purgatory.

(d) And finally, how is a person one heading from light to light? Let's say some person has been reborn in a high family with all the same benefits and advantages. And he does good conduct of body, speech, and mind. Having

done so, with the breakup of the body after death he is reborn in a good destination, even in a heavenly world. These are the four kinds of persons found existing in the world. S.I,93

44

[6a] Whoever covers the evil kamma he has done with good kamma illuminates this world like the moon when freed from a cloud. Dhp.173

[6b] There are six classes. What six? Here, someone of the dark (*kaṇha*) class produces a dark state. Someone of the dark class produces a light (*sukka*) state.

Someone of the dark class produces Nirvana, which is neither dark nor light. Someone of the light class produces a dark state. Someone of the light class produces a light state. And finally, someone of the light class produces Nirvana, which is neither dark nor light.

(a) And how is it that someone of the dark class produces a dark state? Let's say some person has been reborn in a low family, a family of outcastes, hunters, bamboo workers, cartwrights, or flower scavengers; a poor family where there is meagre food and drink and mere existence is a struggle, plus he is ugly, misshapen, constantly ill, short sighted, crippled, lame or paralyzed. He does not acquire the pleasant things of life easily. He cannot get decent food, drink, clothing, vehicles, garlands, scents, and unguents, bedding, housing, and lighting. He does wrong with body, speech, and mind.

Because of this at the breakup of the body after death he is reborn in the state of misery, in a bad destination, a lower world, perhaps even in hell. This is an example of someone of a dark class producing a dark state.

(b) And how is it that someone of the dark class produces a light state? Here some person has been reborn in a low family, with all the same disabilities and difficulties mentioned before. But he does good with body, speech, and mind. Having done so, with the breakup of the body after death, he is reborn in a good destination, even in a heavenly world. This is an example of someone of a dark class producing a light state.

(c) And how is it that someone of the dark class produces Nirvana which is neither dark nor light? Here, someone has been reborn in a low family... But then having shaved off his hair and beard, he puts on yellow robes and goes forth from the household life into homelessness. Having done this, he abandons the five hindrances, defilements of the mind, things that weaken wisdom; and with his mind well established in the four foundations of mindfulness, he correctly develops the seven factors of enlightenment and produces Nirvana which is neither dark nor light. This is an example of someone of the dark class produces Nirvana, which is neither dark nor light.

(d) And how is it that someone of the light class produces a dark state? Here some person has been reborn in a high family... But he does wrong with body, speech, and mind. Having done so, with the breakup of the body after death he is reborn in the state of misery, in a bad destination, a lower world, perhaps even in hell.

(e) And how is it that someone of the light class produces a light state? Here some person has been reborn in a high family... And he does good conduct of body, speech, and mind. Having done so, with the breakup of the body after death, he is reborn in a good destination, even in a heavenly world.

45

(f) And finally, how does someone of a light class produces Nirvana, which is neither dark nor light? Here some person has been reborn in a high family... Then having become a monk he abandons the five hindrances, and with his mind well established in the four foundations of mindfulness, he correctly develops the seven factors of enlightenment and produces Nirvana which is neither dark nor light. This is an example of someone of the dark class producing Nirvana, which is neither dark nor light. A.III,384-87.

[7] And what is the result of kamma? I say that the result of kamma is threefold: that to be experienced in this life; that to be experienced in the next life; and that to be experienced on some subsequent occasion. This is called the result of kamma. A.III, 415

[8] There are these four kinds of persons found existing in the world. What four? The blameworthy, the mainly blameworthy, the slightly blameworthy

and the blameless.

(a) And how is a person blameworthy? Here, a person engages in blameworthy bodily, verbal and mental kamma. (b) And how is a person mostly blameworthy? Here, a person engages in bodily, verbal and mental kamma that is mainly blameworthy. (c) And how is a person slightly blameworthy? Here, a person engages in bodily verbal and mental kamma that is slightly blameworthy. (d) And how is a person blameless?

Here, a person engages in blameless bodily, blameless verbal and blameless mental action. These are the four kinds of persons found existing in the world. A.II,136.

[9] There are these four kinds of kamma proclaimed by me after having realized them for myself with direct knowledge. What four? There is dark kamma with dark result; bright kamma with bright result; both dark-and-bright kamma with both dark-and-bright result; kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, and there is kamma that leads to the destruction of kamma. These are the four kinds of kamma proclaimed by me after I realized them for myself with direct knowledge.

A.II,2130.

[10] One who realizes the Threefold Knowledge is at peace, with renewed existence destroyed. Those with understanding know that such a one is comparable to Brahmā

or Sakra. Sn.656.

[11] With mind focused and purified, cleansed and unblemished, pliant and free of defilements, malleable, stable, firm and imperturbable, one directs and inclines the mind towards the knowledge of previous existence. One remembers numerous previous lives; one, two, five ten, a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand... One recalls: 'This was my name, that was my clan, my caste was this, my food was that. I experienced these pleasant and painful situations and I lived for that long. Having passed away from there, I was reborn in another place where my name was this, my clan was that, and so on.' Like this one remembers various past births, their

conditions and details. It is just as if a man were to go from his village to another one, from that to yet another, and then return to his village. He might recall: ‘I came from my village to 46

that other one where I did this, that and the other, and from there he went to another one, from there to yet another and then returned to my village.’ This is a fruit of the meditative life.

[12] Then with mind focused and purified... firm and imperturbable one directs and inclines it to the knowledge of the passing away and arising of beings. With the divine eye, purified and surpassing that of ordinary humans, one sees beings passing away and arising: low and high, advantaged and disadvantaged, to happy and unhappy destinations according to their kamma, and he knows: “Because of misconduct of body, speech or mind, or disparaging the Noble Ones, or having wrong view, these beings will suffer the kammic result of wrong view. At the breaking-up of the body after death they are reborn in a lower world, a bad destination, a state of suffering, even in purgatory. But those others because of good conduct of body, speech or mind, of praising the Noble Ones, and having right view and will reap the kammic result of right view. At the breaking-up of the body after death they are reborn in a good destination even in a heavenly world.” It is just as if there were a tall building overlooking a crossroads, and a man with good eyesight standing there might see people entering or leaving a house, walking down the street, or sitting at the crossroads. And he might think: “These people are entering a house, walking down the street and sitting at the crossroad.” This is a fruit of the meditative life. D.I,82

[13] There are some ascetics and brahmins are eternalists maintaining that the self and the world are eternal. On what grounds do they claim this? Sometimes, a certain ascetic or brahmin has by means of effort and exertion, application, earnestness and right attention, attained such a state of concentration that he can recall many of his... past lives, in all their conditions and details. And then he says: ‘The self and the world (must be) eternal, like a mountain peak, as firm as a post. Beings rush around, circulate, pass away and are reborn, and this continues eternally. And why do I say this? Because by means of my meditation I have recalled numerous

former lives. That is how I know the self and the world are eternal’ D.I,13-14.

[14] It is intention (*cetanā*) that I call kamma. For having intended, one acts by body, speech, or mind. A.III, 415

[15] Mind precedes mental states, mind is their chief, they are all mind-made. If one speaks or acts with an evil mind, suffering follows that one as the wheel follows the ox. Mind precedes mental states, mind is their chief, they are all mind-made. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind happiness follows one like a shadow. Dhp.1,2

[16] It is to be expected that beings gravitate towards and unite (with those like themselves). Those who kill gravitate towards and unite with those who kill. Those who steal, who sexually misconduct themselves, lie, speak divisively, harshly, and indulge in idle chatter, gravitate towards and unite with those who act likewise. Those who abstain from killing, stealing, from sexual misconduct, from lying, from divisive speech, from harsh speech, and from idle chatter gravitate towards and unite with those who abstain likewise. S.II,167

47

[17a] Do not think lightly of evil, saying: ‘It will not come to me.’ A drop at a time is the water pot filled. Likewise, is the fool filled with evil. Do not think lightly of good, saying: ‘It will not come to me’. A drop at a time is the water pot filled. Likewise, is the wise one filled with good. Dhp.121

[17b] Whatever one thinks about and ruminates over often the mind gets a leaning in that way. If one frequently thinks about and ruminates over desire, ill-will or cruelty, thoughts of without desire, ill will and cruelty will be abandoned and the mind will lean towards desire, ill-will and cruelty. If one does not frequently think about and ruminates over thoughts of desire, ill will and cruelty, such thoughts will be abandoned and the mind will lean towards thoughts without desire, ill will and cruelty. M.I,115-16

[18] “There are some ascetics and brahmins who hold such a doctrine and view as this: ‘Anyone at all who kills, steals, sexually misconducts

themselves or lies experiences pain and grief in this very life.’ But sometimes we see someone garlanded and adorned, bathed and groomed, with hair and beard trimmed, enjoying himself with women almost as if he were royalty. On asking: ‘What has this man done that he is enjoying such luxury and pleasure?’ the answer is given: ‘This man attacked the king’s enemy and killed him. The king was pleased with him and bestowed a reward upon him. That is why he is enjoying all these luxuries and pleasures.’ Then sometimes we see someone with his arms tightly bound behind his back with a strong rope and his head shaved, being paraded from street to street, from one square to another to the ominous sound of a drum, and then taken out through the south gate of the town and beheaded. On asking: ‘What has this man done?’ the answer is given: ‘This man is an enemy of the king and he killed a man or a woman. That is why the king, having had him arrested, imposed such a punishment upon him.’ What do you think, headman, have you ever seen or heard of such things?”

“I have Lord, and I will probably will hear of it again.”

“Therefore, headman, when those ascetics and brahmins say that whoever kills experiences pain and grief here and now, are they speaking accurately or falsely?”

“Falsely Lord.”

“And are those who prattle empty falsehood virtuous or immoral?”

“Immoral.”

“Are those who are immoral and of bad character practicing wrongly or rightly?”

“They are practicing wrongly.”

“Do those who are practising wrongly hold wrong view or right view?”

“Wrong view.”

“Is it wise to place confidence in those who hold wrong view?”

“No Lord, it is not.” S.IV,343

[19] When some ascetic or brahmin says: (a) ‘Indeed, there are evil actions and misconduct has a result,’ I agree with him. When he says: “I saw a person who killed, stole, misbehaved sexually, lied, used bad language, and who was greedy, full of ill-will and deluded views. And I saw that on the dissolution of the body after death, he 48

was reborn into deprivation, a rough place, a bleak destination, even in purgatory.’ I also agree with him. But when he says: “Everyone who does such evil will have a bad rebirth” then I do not agree with him.

(b) When some ascetic or brahmin says: ‘Indeed, there is no such thing as evil and misconduct has no result,’ I do not agree with him. When he says: ‘I saw a person here who killed and did other evil and I saw that when he died he was reborn in a happy state, even in a heaven realm.’ I agree with him. But when he says: ‘Everyone who does such evil is reborn will have a good rebirth’ I do not agree with him.

(c) When some ascetic or brahmin says: ‘Indeed, there are good actions and good conduct has a result,’ I agree with him. When he says: ‘I saw a person who abstained from killing and other evil and I saw that when he died he was reborn in a happy state,’

I agree with him. But when he says: ‘Everyone who does good will have a good rebirth’ I do not agree with him.

(d) When some ascetic or brahmin says: ‘Indeed, there is no such thing as evil, and misconduct has no result’ I do not agree with him. When he says: ‘I saw a person here who abstained from killing and other evil and I saw that when he died he was reborn in a bad state’ I agree with him. But when he says: ‘Everyone who abstains from evil is reborn in a bad state’ I do not agree with him.

(e) Why is this? Concerning the person who kills and does those other evils things and after death has a bad rebirth; either earlier he did an evil action to be felt as painful, or later he did an evil action to be felt as painful, or before he died he had deluded views.

Because of that, when he dies he will have a bad rebirth. And since he killed and did those other evils things he will experience their result either here, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.

(f) Concerning the person who kills and does those other evil things and after death has a good rebirth; either earlier he did a good action to be felt as pleasant, or later he did a good action to be felt as pleasant, or before he died he had clear views. But since he killed and did those other evil things he will experience their result either here, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.

(g) Concerning the person who abstains from killing and those other evil things and after death has a good rebirth; either earlier he did a good action to be felt as pleasant, or later he did a good action to be felt as pleasant, or before he dies he had clear views.

Because of that when he dies he will have a good rebirth. And since he abstained from killing and those other evil things he will experience their result either here, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.

(h) Concerning the person who abstains from killing and those other evil things and after death has a bad rebirth; either earlier he did an evil action to be felt as unpleasant, or later he did an evil action to be felt as unpleasant, or at the time of death he had deluded views. Because of that when he dies he will have an unhappy rebirth. But since he abstained from killing and those other evils he will experience their result either here, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.

(i) So, there is kamma that is incapable of good result and appears incapable; there is kamma that is incapable of good result but appears capable; there is kamma that is 49

capable of good result and appears capable; and there is kamma that is capable of good result but appears incapable. M.III,214

[20a] Mahāli the Licchavi asked the Lord: “Sir, what is the cause, what is the reason for doing bad kamma?”

“Mahāli, greed, hatred and delusion, careless attention and a wrongly directed mind are the cause and reason for doing bad kamma.”

“Then what is the cause and reason for doing of good kamma?”

“Non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion, careful attention (*yoniso-manasikāra*) and a rightly directed mind (*sammāpanihita-citta*) are the causes and conditions for the doing of beautiful kamma. If these ten qualities did not exist in the world, unrighteous conduct, conduct contrary to Dhamma, and righteous conduct, conduct in harmony or in accordance with Dhamma, would not be seen. But because these ten qualities do exist in the world, unrighteous conduct, conduct contrary to the Dhamma, and righteous conduct, conduct in accordance or in harmony? with the Dhamma, are seen.”

A.V,87

[20b] The Lord asked Cunda: “Whose purification rituals do you prefer?”

“Lord, I prefer the purification rituals taught by those brahmins from the west who carry water pots, wear garlands of water lilies, worship the sacred fire, and immerse themselves in water.”

“And how Cunda, do those brahmins teach their purification rituals?”

“They say: ‘Do this, good man. Wake up early and while still in bed touch the ground.

If you can’t do that then touch fresh cow dung. If you can’t do that touch green grass.

And if you can’t do that then worship fire or the sun or immerse yourself in water three times, including in the evening.’ These are the purification rituals they teach and these are the ones I prefer.”

“Well, the purification rituals of the Noble One’s training are quite different from the ones taught by those brahmins of the west.”

“And how Lord, is one purified according to Noble One’s training? “

“Cunda, impurity by body is threefold, and so is impurity by speech and impurity by mind.

(a) And how is impurity by body threefold? Concerning this, let’s say someone kills, is murderous, bloody-handed, given to blows and violence, merciless to living beings. He steals the possessions and the property of others in the village or the forest. He misbehaves sexually, having sex with women protected by their parents, siblings or relations, protected by the Dhamma, with one already engaged, with married women, with women whose violation entails a penalty; or with those already pledged to another. In this way that impurity by body is threefold.

(b) And how is impurity by speech fourfold? Concerning this, let’s say someone lies.

If he is summoned to a council or an assembly, a family meeting, a guild or to the court, and questioned as a witness and he is asked: ‘Tell what you know.’ Then, although not knowing he says he knows, or knowing he says he does not know.

50

Although not seeing he says he saw and seeing he says he did not see. He deliberately lies for his own or for another’s advantage, or for some small gain. Let’s say he speaks divisively. Having heard something here, he repeats it there or having heard something there he repeats it here in order to create divisions between people. He is one who divides those who are united, a creator of divisions, one who likes making factions. He speaks harshly, uttering words that are rough, hard and hurtful, offensive, bordering on anger, unhelpful to concentration. He indulges in idle chatter, speaking at the wrong time, falsely, about useless matters, contrary to the Dhamma and training. In this way that impurity by speech is fourfold.

(c) And how is impurity by mind threefold? In this case, let’s say someone is full of longing for the wealth and property of others, always thinking: ‘If only what belongs to them belonged to me.’ He has a mind full of ill-will and hatred, always thinking:

‘May these beings be slain, slaughtered, cut off, destroyed, annihilated!’ He holds wrong view and has an incorrect perspective such as this: ‘Giving is useless, so is making offerings, there is no result of good and bad actions, this world does not exist nor is there a world beyond death. There is no mother, no father, there are no beings spontaneously born, in the whole world there are no genuine ascetics or brahmins conducting themselves properly or practicing properly, or who, having realized this world and the world beyond by their own direct knowledge, make them known to others.’ It is in this way that impurity by mind is threefold. These are the ten courses of negative kamma. If one engages in these ten, then despite waking up early and touching the ground from one’s bed, or performing any of those other purification rituals, one is nonetheless impure. And why? Because these ten courses of negative kamma are themselves impure and defiling. It is because people engage in these ten courses of unwholesome kamma that purgatory, the animal realm, the sphere of afflicted spirits, and other bad destinations are seen. A.V,263

[21] There are three accumulations: wrong with fixed result; good with fixed result; and (those which are) indeterminate. D.III,217

[22] The brahmin student Subha said to the Lord: “Master Gotama, what is the cause, what is the reason why some human beings are inferior and others superior? For people can be seen to be short-lived and long-lived, sickly and healthy, ugly and beautiful, weak and strong, poor and wealthy, low-born and high-born, stupid and intelligent. What is the cause and condition of this?”

Then the Lord said: “Student, beings are owners of their kamma, heirs of their kamma; they originate from their kamma, are bound to their kamma, have their kamma as their refuge. It is kamma that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior.”

“I do not understand the meaning of your answer, it is too brief and without detail. It would be good if you would teach me the Dhamma in detail so that I can understand your answer.”

“Then listen carefully student, pay attention and I shall speak. (a) Let’s say a man or woman kills, is murderous, bloody-handed, given to blows and

violence and is 51

merciless. Because of doing such action, on the breakup of the body after death, they are reborn in to deprivation, a rough place, a bleak destination, even in purgatory. And if he is not reborn in such a place but comes back as a human instead, then wherever he is reborn he will short-lived. This is the way that leads to short life, namely, killing, being murderous, bloody-handed, given to blows and violence and merciless.

(b) Say a man or woman abstains from killing, lays the stick and sword aside and acts with care, kindness and compassion to all beings. Because of such actions, on the dissolution of the body after death they are reborn in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world. And if he is not reborn in such a place but comes back as a human instead, then wherever he is reborn he is long-lived. This is the way that leads to long-life, namely, abstaining from killing, laying aside the stick and sword and acting with care, kindness and compassion towards all living beings.

[The discourse continues in the same manner. Injuring living beings leads either to a bad destination or rebirth as a chronically ill human; abstaining from injuring leads either to a good destination or rebirth as a healthy human; being angry and short-tempered leads either to a bad destination or rebirth as an ugly human; abstaining from anger and short-temperedness leads either to a good destination or rebirth as a physically attractive human; being envious and begrudging leads either to a bad destination or rebirth as a human without influence or significance; abstaining from envy and not being begrudging leads to rebirth as a human with influence; being mean and sharing nothing leads either to a bad destination or rebirth as a poor and deprived human; being generous leads either to a good destination or rebirth as a rich human; being proud and arrogant leads either to a bad destination or rebirth as a low caste or low class human; not being proud and arrogant leads either to a good destination or rebirth as a high caste or high class human; etc). M.III,202-06

[23] These two misrepresent the Tathāgata. Which two? One who takes a discourse of indirect meaning as one having direct meaning, and one who takes a discourse of direct meaning as one having indirect meaning. These are the two who misrepresent the Tathāgata. A.I,60

[24] This body is old kamma, to be seen as generated and fashioned by volition, as something to be felt. S.IV,132.

[25] The Lord said: “The uninstructed ordinary person feels pleasant, painful and neutral feelings and so does an instructed noble disciple. So what is the difference between them?” The monks replied: “Our Dhamma has its foundation in you Lord.

Please explain this matter to us and having heard it we will remember it.”

“Monks, when an uninstructed ordinary person feels pain he weeps and wails, cries, beats his breast and becomes distraught. He feels two feelings, a physical one and a psychological one. He is like a man who is shot with one arrow who is then shot with a second arrow. But when an instructed noble disciple feels pain he does not weep and wail, cry, beat his breast and become distraught. He feels only one feeling, a physical 52

one. He is like a man who is shot with one arrow but avoids being shot with a second arrow.” S.IV,208.

[26] There are four things that are imponderable. What four? The domain of the Buddhas, the domain of the *jhānas*,²⁷ the result of kamma, and the origin of the world.

One should not ponder over these four things, for trying to do so will result in either madness or frustration. A.II,80

[27] The lay woman Migasālā said to Ananda: “Ānanda, exactly how should this teaching of the Lord be understood where one who is celibate and one who is not celibate could both have exactly the same destination in their next life? My father Purāṇa was celibate, living apart from his wife, abstaining from sex, the village practice. When he died, the Lord said that he has attained the first stage of awakening, having become a once-²⁸returner and was reborn in a heaven realm. My paternal uncle Isidatta was not celibate and lived a happy married life. And yet when he died, the Lord said that he too had attained to the first stage of awakening and had been reborn in a heaven realm. How is it possible that one who is celibate should have the same rebirth as one who is not?”

“Sister, it is just as the Lord said.”

Later, Ānanda met the Lord and told him what Migasālā had asked. Then the Lord said: “Who is this lay woman Migasālā! Just a foolish, silly woman with a foolish woman’s intelligence! And who are they who claim to know who is superior and who inferior? There are these six types of persons in the world. What six?”

(a) Let’s say there is a person who is mild, a good companion, one liked by his fellows. But he is not learned in the teachings, he has no understanding of them and no meditation attainment. Therefore, with the breakup of the body at death he goes to an unfavourable and undesirable place.

(b) Then let’s say there is a person who is mild, a good companion, one liked by his fellows. He is learned in the teachings, he has some understanding of them and has occasional meditation attainment.²⁹ Therefore, with the breakup of the body at death he goes to a favourable, a desirable place. Now those who are judgmental will say: “This one has the same qualities as the other so why should one be superior and the other inferior?” Such a judgment will surely lead to their harm and suffering for a long time.

Between these two persons the second surpasses and excels the other person. And why? Because the stream of the Dhamma carries him along (*imarāṇ, hānanda, puggalaṇṇ dhammasotam nibbahatī*). But who can know this difference except the Tathāgata? Therefore, Ānanda, do not [try to] assess people or make an assessment of ²⁷ A profound spiritual state experienced through intensive meditation. The Buddha divided it into four stages, each one more refined than the one before it.

²⁸ The second of the four stages leading to awakening.

²⁹ *Samaya vimutti*. This refers to states of mind sometimes attained during meditation, which have many of the characteristics of awakening but which soon fade.

them. Those who do this only harm only themselves. I alone, or one like me, may do this about people.

(c) Then let's say there is the person who is angry, conceited and occasionally greedy too. He is not learned in the teachings, he has no understanding of them and no meditation attainment. Therefore, with the breakup of the body at death he goes to an unfavourable, an undesirable place.

(d) Then there is the person who is angry, conceited and occasionally greedy too. But he is learned in the teachings, he has some understanding of them and occasional meditation attainment. Therefore, with the breakup of the body at death he goes to a favourable, a desirable place. Between these two the second surpasses and excels the other person. And why? Because the stream of the Dhamma carries him along. But who can know this difference except the Tathāgata? Therefore, Ānanda, do not [try to]

assess people or make an assessment of them. Those who do this only harm only themselves. I alone, or one like me, may do this about people.

(e) Now let's take the case of the person who is angry, conceited and now and then speaks roughly. He is not learned in the teachings, he has not understood them and he has no some meditation attainment. With the breakup of the body at death he is reborn in the state of misery, in a bad destination, a lower world, perhaps even in purgatory.

(f) And finally let's consider the person who is angry, conceited and now and then speaks roughly. But he has learned in the teachings, he has understood them and he has some meditation attainment. With the breakup of the body at death he goes to a favourable, a desirable place. Ānanda, those given to assessing will [try to] assess them: "This one has the same qualities as the other. Why should one be inferior and the other superior?" That judgment will certainly lead to their harm and suffering for a long time. Between these two, the second surpasses and excels the other person. And why? Because the stream of the Dhamma carries him along. But no one can know this difference except the Tathāgata. Therefore, Ānanda, do not [try to] assess people or make an assessment of them. Those who do this only harm only themselves. I alone, or one like me, may do this about

people. Between them, Ānanda, the person in whom anger and conceit are found, and who from time to time engages in exchanges of words, but who has listened [to the teachings], become learned [in them], and penetrated [them] by view, and who attains temporary liberation, surpasses and excels the other person. For what reason? Because the stream of Dhamma carries him along.

But who can know this difference except the Tathāgata? Therefore, Ānanda, do not

[try to] assess people or make an assessment of them. Those who do this only harm only themselves. I alone, or one like me, may do this about people. Who, indeed, is the female lay follower Migasālā! Just a foolish, silly woman with a foolish woman's intelligence! And who are they who claim to know who is superior and who inferior?

A.III,347 ff

[28a] And for the sake of what benefit should a woman or a man, a householder or monk, often reflect like this: 'I am the owner of my kamma, heirs of my kamma; I originate from my kamma, are bound to my kamma, have my kamma as my refuge. I 54

will be the inheritor of whatever kamma, good or bad, that I do. People engage in misconduct by body, speech, and mind. But when one often reflects upon this theme such misconduct is either completely given up or at least diminished. A.II,73

[28b] (a) When intending to do an act with body, speech or mind, you should reflect like this: 'Will this act disadvantage me, the other person, or both of us? Is it an unwholesome act likely to result in suffering?' If you conclude that it is then you should definitely not do it. But if on reflection you think: 'This act I am about to do will not disadvantage me, the other, or both of us. It is a wholesome act likely to have a pleasant result' then you should do it.

(b) While doing an act with body, speech or mind, you should reflect like this: 'Will this act I am doing disadvantage me, the other, or both of us? Is it

an unwholesome act having resulting in suffering?’ If you conclude that it is then you should definitely stop doing it. But if on reflection you think: ‘This act I am doing is not disadvantaging me, the others, or both of us. It is a wholesome act likely to have a pleasant result’ then you should keep doing it.

(c) After you have done an act with body, speech or mind, you should reflect like this:

‘Has this act I have done disadvantaged me, the other person, or of both of us? Is it an unwholesome act resulting in suffering?’ If you conclude that it is then you should confess it, acknowledge it, admit it to the Teacher or to a wise companion in the spiritual life. And having done this you should resolve to restrain yourself in the future. But if on reflection you think: ‘This act I have done did not disadvantage me, the other person or both of us. It is a wholesome act with a pleasant result’ then you should be happy and glad and continuing training in wholesome actions both day and night. M.I,415-8

[29a] A noble disciple reflects like this: ‘I am not the only one who is owner of my kamma, an heir of my kamma; who originates from his kamma, are bound to my kamma, has my kamma as my refuge, whose kamma is distinguished as inferior and superior.’ All beings are the same concerning kamma. As he often reflects on this theme, the path is generated. He pursues this path, develops it, and cultivates it. As he does so, the fetters are entirely abandoned and the underlying tendencies³⁰ are uprooted. A.III,74

[29b] There are these five ways of removing any resentment that might arise towards someone. What five? One should develop loving-kindness for the person one resents.

One should develop compassion towards them. One should develop equanimity toward them. One should just ignore the person and pay no attention to them. One should consider that beings own their kamma and think: ‘This person is the owner of his kamma, an heir of his kamma; who originates from his kamma, is bound to his ³⁰ These underlying tendencies

(*anusaya*) can be seen as a reformulation of the *āsavas*. Seven of them are mentioned at A.IV,9.

55

kamma, has his kamma as his refuge, whose kamma distinguishes him as inferior and superior.' A.III,185

[30a] The origin of suffering is this: it is the craving that leads to renewed existence (*taṇhā ponobbhavikā*); accompanied by delight and lust; seeking delight here and there; that is to say; the craving for sensual pleasures the craving for existence and the craving for non-existence. S.V,421

[30b] By kamma the world goes on, by kamma people go on. Beings have kamma as their bond, as the linch-pin that keeps the turning wheel in place. Sn.654

[30c] There are these three causes for the origination of kamma. What three? Desire arises for things which in the past gave rise to desire and lust; desire arises for things which in the future might give rise to desire and lust; and desire arises for things which in the present give rise to desire and lust.

(a) And how does desire arise for things which in the past gave rise to desire and lust?

One thinks about and ruminates over things in the past that gave rise to desire and lust.

As one does so, more desire arises and when this desire springs up, one is fettered by those things. This mental infatuation is what I call the fetter. It is in this way that desire arises for things which in the past gave rise to desire and lust.

(b & c) And it is the same with things in the future might give rise to desire and lust and which in the present are giving rise to desire and lust. Then there are these three other causes for the origination of kamma. What three? Desire does not arise for things which in the past gave rise to desire and lust. Desire does not arise for things which in the future might give rise to

desire and lust. Desire does not arise for things which in the present give rise to desire and lust. (d) And how does desire not arise for things which in the past gave rise to desire and lust? One understands what the result will be of having desire for things that in the past gave rise to desire and lust. Understanding this one does not do it. Not doing it the mind becomes dispassionate and seeing it with wisdom one sees that this is the way to avoid desire for things which in the past gave rise to desire and lust.

(e & f) And one does the same with things which in the future might give rise to desire and lust and things which in the present are giving rise to desire and lust. A.I,265

[31] There are four kinds of nutriment for the maintenance of beings that have come to be (i.e. already born), and the moving forward beings that are to be (i.e. about to be reborn). What four? Edible food both coarse and fine, contact, mental intention (*mano sañcetanā*) and consciousness. These four types of nutriment have craving as their source, craving as their origin, they are born of and produced by craving. M.I,261

[32] When the body is bereft of three things: vitality; heat; and consciousness; it is then thrown aside, discarded and left lying senseless like a log. Concerning one who is dead, having come to the end of his time, his bodily, verbal and mental activities have ceased and stopped, his vitality is exhausted, his heat has dissipated and his facilities have completely broken up. M.I,296

56

[33] When there is a coming together of three things the conception of the embryo in the womb takes place: the union of the mother and father; the mother's fertility; and the presence of the being to be born. M.I,266

[34] "Just as a fire burns with fuel, cannot burn without fuel, so too, I say that rebirth happens for one who has fuel, not for one without fuel."

"But good Gotama, when a flame is flung some distance by the wind, what do you say is its fuel then?"

“When a flame is flung some distance by the wind I say that it is fuelled by the wind, the wind is its fuel.”

“Well good Gotama, when a being has laid down the body but has not yet been reborn, what do you say is its fuel then?”

“When a being has laid down the body but not yet been reborn I say that it is fuelled by craving, craving is its fuel.” S.IV,399-400

[35] When it was said: “Kamma should be understood, the way leading to the cessation of kamma should be understood,” for what reason was this said?

(a) It is intention (*cetanā*) that I call kamma. For having intended, one acts by body, speech, or mind. (b) And what is the source and origin of kamma? Contact (*phassa*) is its source and origin. (c) And what is the diversity of kamma? There is kamma to be experienced in purgatory; there is kamma to be experienced in the animal realm; there is kamma to be experienced in the realm of afflicted spirits; there is kamma to be experienced in the human world; and there is kamma to be experienced in a heaven world. This is called the diversity of kamma. (d) And what is the result of kamma? I say that result of kamma is threefold, that to be experienced in this life, or in the next life, or on some subsequent occasion. This is called the result of kamma. (e) And what is the cessation of kamma? With the cessation of contact there is cessation of kamma.

(f) This Noble Eightfold Path is the way leading to the cessation of kamma, that is to say, Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. When a noble disciple thus understands kamma, its source, origin and diversity, its result, cessation and the way leading to its cessation, then he understands this penetrative spiritual life (*nibbedhika-brahmacariya*) is said to be the cessation of kamma. A.III, 415

[36] With clinging as the cause there is becoming, with becoming as the cause there is birth, with birth as the cause there is suffering, with suffering as the cause there is faith, with faith as the cause there is gladness, with gladness as the cause there is joy, with joy as the cause there is happiness,

with happiness as the cause there is concentration, with concentration as the cause there is knowledge and vision of things as they are, with knowledge and vision of things as they are there is relinquishing, with relinquishing as the cause there is a fading of passions and with the fading of passions there is freedom. S.II,31-2

57

[37a] The old is destroyed and the new does not arise for those whose minds are disinterested in future existence, their seeds destroyed and with no more desire for growth. The wise are quenched like a lamp. Sn.235

[37b] There are these three causes for the origination of kamma. What three? Greed, hatred and delusion. Any kamma fashioned through, born of, caused by or originating in greed, hatred or delusion, ripens wherever the individual is reborn. Wherever that kamma ripens, it is there that one experiences its result, either in this life, in the next rebirth, or on some subsequent occasion. Suppose good seeds were planted in properly prepared ground in a good field and received sufficient rainfall. Because of all this those seeds would germinate, grow and mature. And it is the same for any kamma fashioned by either greed, hatred or delusion. There are these three other causes for the origination of kamma. What three? Non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion. Any such kamma is abandoned, when greed, hatred and delusion have vanished; it is cut off at the root, made like a palm tree stump, obliterated so that it is no more subject to future arising. Suppose a man were to take good seeds and burn them, reduce them to ashes, and winnow the ashes in the wind or tip them in a swift running river. In this way, those seeds would be cut off at the root, made like a palm tree stump, obliterated so that they are no more subject to future arising. These are the three causes for the origination of kamma. A.I,135

[38] “That noble disciple who is without longing or hatred, who is unconfused, with all-around awareness (*sampajāno*) and constant mindfulness (*patissato*), dwells pervading the four directions with a mind filled with love and compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Above, below, across and everywhere, to all as to himself, he dwells pervading the whole world with a mind filled with that love and compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity that is expansive, pervasive, immeasurable and utterly

devoid of hatred or enmity. And he knows: ‘Previously, my mind was narrow and undeveloped but now it is immeasurable and well developed. No measurable kamma remains or lingers in it.’ Now what do you think monks? If from his childhood a young man were to develop freedom of the mind by either love or compassion, sympathetic joy or equanimity would he do any bad kamma?”

“No Lord.”

“And could suffering affect him if he did no bad kamma?”

“No Lord. For how could one who does no bad kamma suffer?”

“Therefore, a man or a woman should develop this liberation of the mind by love and compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. No man or woman can take their body with them when they die. The core of beings is the mind. The noble disciple knows:

‘Whatever bad kamma I did in the past with this deed-born body will have its results here.’ When the liberation of the mind by love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity has been developed in this way, it leads a wise person to non-returning,³¹

should he not reach a higher attainment.” A,V,299-300

31 The third of the four states leading to awakening.

58

[39] Unsurpassed is the Lord’s way of teaching the Dhamma concerning the four modes of rebirth. One descends into the mother’s womb unconsciously, stays there unconsciously, and leaves it unconsciously. Or one descends into the womb consciously, but stays there unconsciously, and leaves it unconsciously. Or one enters the womb consciously, stays there consciously but leaves it unconsciously. Or one enters the womb, stays there and leaves it consciously. D.III,103

[40] Mahānāma the Sakyan came to see the Lord and said: “Lord, this Kapilavatthu is rich and prosperous, crowded and congested, its highways and byways busy. In the evening when I enter the town after having visited you and the respected monks, I sometimes encounter an elephant or a horse, a chariot, a cart or a man, and my mindfulness which was focused on you, the Dhamma and the Sangha, becomes completely bewildered. And I think: ‘If I were to die at that time, where would I be reborn? What would be my rebirth?’”

The Lord replied: “Have no fear Mahānāma! Have no fear! Your death, your passing, will not be a bad one because your mind has been firmly established for a long time in faith and virtue, learning, generosity and wisdom. The body, which has form and is made of the four great elements, derived from one’s parents, sustained on rice and gruel and subject to change, will be worn away, disintegrate, fall apart and eaten by crows and vultures, hawks and dogs, jackals and other animals. But the mind which is firmly established for a long time in faith and virtue, learning, generosity and wisdom, will go upwards and to distinction S.V,369.

[41] And what is the diversity of kamma? There is kamma to be experienced in purgatory; there is kamma to be experienced in the animal realm; there is kamma to be experienced in the realm of afflicted spirits; there is kamma to be experienced in the human world; and there is kamma to be experienced in a heaven world. This is called the diversity of kamma. A.III, 415

[42] “How is it good Gotama; is the one who acts the same as the one who experiences the result of the act?”

“That is one extreme.”

“Then is the one who acts different from the one who experiences the result of the act?”

“That is another extreme. Without adhering to either of these extremes the Tathāgata teaches Dhamma by the middle.” S.I,7-6.

Appendix: The Tsunami, A Buddhist View

Buddhism teaches causation, that the whole universe is a web of interrelated causes and effects. There are two types of causation – natural causation and moral causation. Natural causation has nothing to do with people being good or bad, it is simply a matter of the various forces in the universe acting on each other. A rainstorm or crops ripening would be examples of natural causation. Natural causes can of course have an effect on us – being caught in a rainstorm can give us a bad cold. But suffering from a cold has nothing to do with moral or immoral past actions – it would be a natural effect of a natural cause. Moral causation is about how people think, speak and act and how they feel as a result. The Buddha’s teaching of kamma is only concerned with moral causation. Being helpful to someone, having them thank you and feeling happy because of that; stealing something, getting caught and then experiencing embarrassment or shame, would be examples of moral causation. The person’s happiness or discomfort are a direct result of how they have acted. The person is not being “rewarded” or “punished” for their actions, their happiness or discomfort is simply a result of their actions. Now let us have a look at the recent tsunami in the light of the doctrine of kamma.

A tsunami is an example of an event that occurred by natural causation. The tectonic plates on the earth’s surface move causing an earthquake, the energy released creates huge waves which, if they hit a coastline, can cause devastation. The people in the area where the recent tsunami hit are experiencing two types of suffering – pain caused by natural causation and suffering caused by moral causation, i.e, kamma.

During the deluge, a person might have been hit by a falling tree, cut by a piece of metal or smashed against a wall. These would be examples of natural causes having painful effects and would have nothing to do with past moral or immoral actions.

Kamma concerns peoples’ intentional thoughts, speech and actions (*kamma*) and the effects of those reactions (*vipāka*). I will give examples of different ways people could react to the tsunami and the effects they could have. Let’s say there are two people – a man and women – both are injured in the tsunami and lose their home and means of livelihood. The man falls

into despair, “Why me?” he cries. “If only I had been out of town today”, he says in anger and regret. By thinking like this he compounds his suffering. But soon his thoughts change. He notices that his neighbour’s home is little damaged and he thinks: “That dog! I never liked him. It’s a pity his house wasn’t destroyed.” He is further compounding his suffering as well as reinforcing ugly and negative states of mind. Later he thinks: “Well, it’s every man for himself”, and he starts walking around to see if he can loot anything from abandoned houses. Now the man’s negative thoughts and feelings are leading to negative actions. His looting and other despicable behaviour in the weeks after the tsunami became widely known to his neighbours and the townsfolk and ever after he was shunned and treated him coolly by them; and became constant and painful reminder to him of what he had done.

Now let us have a look at the woman’s reactions. After she recovers from the initial trauma her first thought is: “How fortunate I am to have survived.” She has suffered 60

but she has not added to her suffering by being regretful, despairing or angry. Then she thinks: “There must be others much worse off than me. I’ll see what I can do to help,”

and she starts looking around for injured people. Thinking of others gives her a degree of detachment from her own circumstances and thus, once again, this does not add to her suffering. The next day she manages to get some food which is being distributed by the government and as she walks away she notices a child who did not get any. She comforts the child and shares her food with him. Seeing that the child is all by himself she decides to look after him. After a few days the child’s father sees him and is tremendously grateful to the woman for having looked his son. The father is now living with his sister in a nearby town unaffected by the tsunami and invites the woman to come and stay with him where she gets food and shelter. The woman’s positive thoughts and actions have now had a concrete positive effect on her life.

Now why did the man react in one way and the woman in another? Because of how they have reacted to their various experiences in the past, i.e. because of their past kamma. The man’s negative mental habits in the past (

kamma) have meant that he has negative mental habits now and these in turn make it more likely that he will have negative mental habits in the future. These mental habits make him suffer more than he would have otherwise (*vipāka*). The woman (she might be a Buddhist, a Christian, or of no religion) has been taught and has always believed that it is important to have a good thoughts and actions and has always tried to cultivate them. Her positive mental habits in the past (*kamma*) have meant that she has positive mental habits now, and these in turn make it more likely that she will have positive mental habits in the future.

These mental habits minimized her suffering and led to her being looked after by the father of the child. In other words, her positive past actions (*kamma*) have had a positive effect (*vipāka*) now.

So according to Buddhism, the physical pain that the victims of the tsunami experienced was the outcome of various natural causes. How individuals are reacting to these natural causes is their *kamma*, the results of their negative or positive reactions in the future (tomorrow, next month, next year, perhaps next life), will be their *vipāka*.

As human beings of finite knowledge and power, we have only limited influence over natural causes. We do, however, have the ability to mould and influence our reactions to situations. If we make no effort to develop our minds in positive ways we might, in the future, find ourselves overwhelmed by unexpected and unwelcomed circumstances. If we do make the effort to develop our minds, particularly through meditation, we may be better prepared to endure and even triumph over future adversity.

The news is full of examples of both. People ask: “How is it possible to remain free from grief, anxiety and fear under such terrible circumstances?” But some people do. A man in Sri Lanka lost his wife and two children and of course must have been devastated. However, being a practicing Buddhist, he recovered somewhat from his grief about two days later when he found two children, hungry, crying, with their dead parents nearby, and decided to adopt them. Apparently, other people had seen the children but had done nothing to help. When the man was interviewed he said that his 61

two adopted children have given his life new meaning and the strength to go on despite the difficulties he now faces. We read other stories of people taking advantage of the disruption to loot, rob and steal. Each of us chooses to act the way we do and we will experience the results accordingly. The Singaporean press has reported on man who, when he heard of the disaster, loaded up his van and drove to Thailand with the intention of distributing food and water to the victims. Sadly, on the way his van skidded and he was killed. People ask: “Why did he suffer despite his good deeds?”

But such a question shows a confusion between natural causation and moral causation.

This man’s swift and practical response to the suffering of others shows a great deal of compassion and will have very positive results in his next life. His accident had nothing to do with his good or bad deeds – it was a result of natural causation – a momentary lack of attention, faulty brakes, a slippery road due to rain, etc. Being good does not mean that we will never suffer due to natural causes, it means that when we do suffer due to natural causes we will be less likely to react in negative ways that compound our suffering. Some uninformed Buddhist might say that the death and injury caused by the tsunami are the result of peoples’ past bad kamma. It need hardly be stated here that this is contrary to what the Buddha taught. In the Devadaha Sutta (M.II,214, also A.I,173) the Buddha says that the belief that every experience we have is due to past kamma (*sabbaṃ taṃ pubbe katahetu*) is a wrong and false view. In the Sivaka Sutta (S. IV,228) he says that the suffering we sometimes experience can be due to kamma but it could also be due to sickness, to weather, to carelessness or to external agents. The tsunami would be a good example of the third and the last of these causes. All kamma, whether positive or negative, certainly has an effect, but not all effects are due to kamma.

But what of us who have been fortunate enough not to be involved in this disaster? How can the Buddha’s teaching of kamma be relevant to us? Like the man and women mentioned above, our reactions to the tsunami could be either positive, negative or neutral. A person might read about the tragedy in the paper, shrug their shoulders and then turn to the sports page. When asked for a donation for the victims he might refuse to give anything,

saying that he is short of cash this week. Or he might make a small donation but then go around telling everyone hoping to get their praise or approval. He has been presented with an opportunity to react differently from how he has always done but has failed to take advantage of it. He has failed to grow or change, he has simply allowed himself to be carried along by his old habits (past kamma) of thoughtlessness, greed, pride and indifference. But let's say a person has always been rather uncaring and self-absorbed but when she sees the victims of the tsunami on the television she feels a twinge of compassion. Then, rather than ignoring this flicker of compassion as she has often done in the past, she decides to act upon it. She goes to the Red Cross and makes a really generous donation. While there she sees a sign asking for volunteers and on the spur of the moment signs up and for the next few weeks spends all she free time collecting donations and helping out in other ways. As a result of this she would have weakened her selfish mental habits and strengthened positive ones, she would have grown and changed to some degree. If in the future she 62

continued to act in such positive ways whenever she had the opportunity, she would gradually become a much more pleasant person and probably a much happier one too.

Thus even a tragedy like the tsunami can actually have a positive side. Firstly, it can be an opportunity to develop generosity, care and compassion. Secondly it can be an opportunity for us to contemplate the truth of *dukkha*, the Buddha's teaching that life in the conditioned world is unsatisfactory. Such contemplation can wake us from our complacency, remind us that no matter how comfortable our life might be, it can change at any time. This can help turn us from frivolous worldly pursuits to meaningful spiritual goals.

Abbreviations and Sources

A Aṅguttara Nikāya, ed. R. Morris, E. Hardy, PTS London 1885-1900

D Dīgha Nikāya, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids, J. E. Carpenter, PTS London 1890-1911

Dhp Dhammapada, ed. O. Von Hinuber, K. R. Norman, PTS Oxford 1994

Ja Jātaka with commentary, ed. V. Fausboll, London PTS 1877-96

M Majjhima Nikāya, ed. V. Trenchner, R. Chalmers, PTS London 1887-1902

Mil Milindapañha, ed. V. Trenchner, PTS London 1880

S Saṃyutta Nikāya, ed. L. Feer, PTS London 1884-98

Sn Sutta Nipāta, ed. D. Andersen, H. Smith, PTS London 1913

Ud Udanā, ed. P. Steinthal, PTS London 1885

Vin Vinaya Piṭaka, ed. H. Oldenberg, PTS London 1879-83

Vis Visuddhimagga, ed. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, PTS London 1920-21