Can Karma Cause Suffering?

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Abstract—Needless to say, the Buddhist doctrine of karma is one of the central tenets of the faith. In his book *What the Buddha Thought*, Richard Gombrich describes karma as "a kind of lynchpin which holds the rest of the basic tenets together by providing the perfect example of what they mean". Gombrich explains this is because the Buddha taught that all thoughts, words and deeds derive their moral value, both positive or negative, from the intention behind them, making intention the basic criterion for morality. As positive and attractive as this understanding appears on the surface, this article raises the question of what this understanding of karma has led to when put into practice in various Buddhist-influenced countries in Asia over the centuries and continuing to the present.

On the one hand, there can be no doubt that a belief in karma, in combination with compassion, has led socially engaged Buddhist groups like Tzu Chi, based in Taiwan, to engage in a wide range of charitable activities throughout the world. Followers believe the world can be made a better place by planting good karmic seeds. They view these "seeds" as the prerequisite for flowers to bloom and bear fruit. In other words, they believe the workings of karma lead to the creation of a better society as a result of good actions and pure thoughts.

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While this article is not meant to denigrate, much less ignore, the wonderful work of karma-inspired Buddhist charitable organizations like Tzu Chi, there is another side to karma, one to which little attention has been paid, i.e. the negative effects that alternative interpretations of karma have produced, especially in Japan but also in other Buddhist-influenced Asian countries. Inasmuch as Buddhism is a religion dedicated to the removal of suffering, it is deeply ironic, if not contradictory, that these alternative, and widespread, interpretations of karma have been the cause of so much suffering, both past and present. How is this possible?

Keywords: karma, suffering, fate, intention, socialism, capitalism, rebirth, killing, Zen

Introduction

"Karma" (Pali: *kamma*) is one of the relatively few words of Buddhist/Hindu origin, like the word "Buddha" (lit. "awakened person") itself, to have become so anglicized that it no longer needs to be italicized when written. Thus, when discussing what happened to a particular person, typically something negative in character, it is unsurprising to hear someone say, "It was his karma." In this case, karma becomes very close to meaning "fate," suggesting a power outside of one's control that determines what happens to a person. Karma thus becomes a synonym for an "act of God" in which the person acted upon has almost no control, including no responsibility, for what occurs.

"Karma" (*kárman*) is a Sanskrit word that originally simply meant "action." This early understanding of karma can be traced back to the Vedas, a large body of religious texts in ancient India predating Buddhism. From the early Vedic period, the term karma appears in the *Ṛgveda* (c.1500–1000 BCE) about forty times where it only means work or deeds, although embodying a degree of moral significance connected to the proper performance of purification rituals and sacrifices. In this extended meaning of karma we can see the seeds of the belief that actions have consequences.

The doctrine of karma was further developed in the Upaniṣads, a series of philosophical texts composed from the 6th to 4th centuries BCE. In the Upaniṣads we find, albeit briefly, the introduction of the idea that karma

refers not just to ritual acts but ethical acts as well, including the teaching that every person will eventually reap the rewards of their good deeds and the consequences of their bad deeds. Yet, at the same time, primary emphasis remained on karma-producing actions that are *ritually* correct.[1]

While, on the one hand, the historical Buddha incorporated the concept of karma into his teachings, he stressed that karma is most definitely not a power outside of one's control. He asserted that every intentional action we undertake, whether mental, verbal, or physical, creates an imprint that influences our future experiences. The quality and intention behind these actions shapes the nature and intensity of their outcomes. In short, positive actions generate positive karma (aka spiritual merit), leading to favorable consequences, while negative actions result in negative karma (aka demerit, or evil: *pāpa*) and unfavorable outcomes.

The key contribution the Buddha made to an understanding of karma is the central role played by intention, thereby turning karma into an ethical concept. The Buddha is recorded as having taught:

> I say that intention, *bhikkhu*s, is kamma. Having intended, one does kamma by way of body, speech, & intellect.[2]

Note, however, that in addition to "intention" Sanskrit/Pāli *cetanā* can also be translated as "volition," or "directionality," i.e. a mental factor that moves or urges the mind in a particular direction, toward a specific object or goal.[3]

Thus, when the Buddha sought to explain the workings of karma, he emphasized that the quality of an action is determined by the intention or volition behind it, with special reference to its influence on the development of moral character. As recorded in the *Dhammapada*, he said:

> Phenomena are preceded by mind, superseded by mind, consist of mind. If with a corrupt mind one speaks or acts, then unhappiness will follow them like the (wagon) wheel follows the foot of the (animal) that pulls it.[4]

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[1] Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p. 46.

[2] The classical definition of *kamma* is at AN III.415 (*Nibbedhika Sutta*, AN 6.63): *cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi, cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti kāyena vācāya manasā.*

[3] See: https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Cetan%C4%81 (accessed April 17, 2024).

[4] Dhp 1: *manopubbaṅgamā dhammā manoseṭṭhā manomayā, manasā ce paduṭṭhena bhāsati vā karoti vā, tato naṃ dukkham anveti cakkaṃ va vahato padaṃ.*

Therefore, while two individuals may engage in what appears to be the same outward action, their karma will differ based on the intentions behind their behavior. If one seeks to generate positive karma, cultivating wholesome intentions is of crucial importance. As Richard Gombrich has noted, "the Buddha took the extremely bold step of claiming that we are the masters of our own destinies, each responsible for our fates."[5]

Origins of thecontroversy

To some extent the origins of the controversy can be traced to a statement attributed to the Buddha himself:

> I am the owner of my actions [karma], heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir ...[6]

The controversial aspect of these words lies when they are combined with the commonly accepted Buddhist belief that the effects of karma, good or bad, extend beyond a single lifetime. This is reflected in the allied concept of rebirth which maintains that there is a continuous cycle of birth and death. That is to say, the actions we perform in our current lifetime create the karmic conditions that shape our circumstances in future lives.

On the one hand, this cyclical nature of existence encourages individuals to be mindful of their actions, for they can exert a positive or negative influence on future rebirths and experiences. Buddhist scholar Stephen Jenkins notes: "Karma is often used in classical narrative to tell the wealthy that, if they are not generous in uplifting the poor, they will find themselves impoverished in this life and the next. In this way kindness and generosity are seen as protective, even as a kind of armor."[7]

On the other hand, karmic reward and punishment resulting from actions in past lives can be, and frequently has been, used to explain if not justify the

[5] Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, p. 195.

[6] *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, (*Upajjhaṭṭhana Sutta* (AN 5. 57): *kammassako 'mhi kammadāyādo kammayoni kammabandhu kammapaṭisaraṇo. yaṃ kammaṃ karissāmi kalyāṇaṃ vā pāpakaṃ vā, tassa dāyādo bhavissāmī ti.* For the translation see: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/AN/AN5_57.html (accessed April 17, 2024).

[7] Jenkin's comments were included in an e-mail sent to the author on January 14, 2024.

situation one finds oneself in one's current life. In so doing karma comes close to becoming a sociological if not political doctrine or ideology. In short, it has been used as an instrument to justify the status quo, no matter how unjust or unfair to those involved.

One of the best examples of this latter usage occurred at the time Japanese Buddhist leaders faced the need to clarify the workings of karma in the face of Christianity and Western thought. For example, in September 1893, in an address entitled, "The Law of Cause and Effect, As Taught by the Buddha," Shaku Sōen addressed the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago, Illinois as follows:

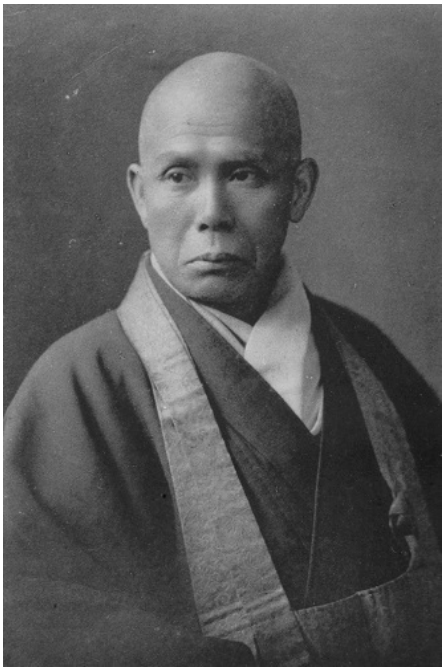
> We are here enjoying or suffering the effect of what we have done in our past lives ... We are born in a world of variety; some are poor and unfortunate, others are wealthy and happy. This state of variety will be repeated again and again in our future lives. But to whom shall we complain of our misery? To none but ourselves![8]

On the one hand, Sōen was clearly attempting to refute God as the determinative factor in events in this world, including the fates of individuals. Yet at the same time, he was also asserting that something as abstract as "social injustice" let alone the class-based, capitalist society of his day could be the cause of one's poverty and low social status. Equally, those who were wealthy and of high status were so as a reward for their previous good deeds, i.e. good karma, accrued over previous lifetimes.

Interestingly, it was D.T. Suzuki, Sōen's lay disciple, who would later refute Sōen's understanding of karma. In *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*, published in 1907, Suzuki first dismissed advocates of the traditional understanding of karma as no more than "pseudo-Buddhists" (p. 187) before claiming:

> No, the doctrine of karma certainly must not be understood to explain the cause of our social and economical [sic] imperfections. The region where the law of karma is made to work supreme is our moral world, and cannot be made to extend also over our economic field. Poverty is not necessarily the consequence of evil deeds, nor is plenitude that of good acts. Whether a person is affluent or needy is mostly determined by the principle of economy as far as our present social system is concerned.[9]

[8] Quoted in Victoria, *Zen War Stories, 2nd ed.*, pp. 81–82.
[9] Suzuki, *Outlines of Mahayana*, p. 189.



D.T. Suzuki as a young man

A further quotation from the same book makes clear that Suzuki's criticism of Sōen was derived from the former's embrace of socialism:

> As long as we live under the present state of things, it is impossible to escape the curse of social injustice and economic inequality. Some people must be born rich and noble and enjoying a superabundance of material wealth, while others must be groaning under the unbearable burden imposed upon them by cruel society. Unless we make a radical change in our present social organization, we cannot expect every one of us to enjoy an equal opportunity and a fair chance. Unless we have *a certain form of socialism* installed that is liberal and rational and systematic, there must be some who are economically more favored than others. [Italics mine][10]

[10] *ibid.*, p. 191.

Although Suzuki, following his return to Japan in 1909, never again wrote about the need for a socialist society in his voluminous writings in Japanese, he had previously shared his interest in socialism while still in the U.S. in private letters written to his good friend, Yamamoto Ryōkichi. On January 6, 1901 Suzuki wrote:

> Recently I have had a desire to study socialism, for I am sympathetic to its views on social justice and equality of opportunity. Present-day society (including Japan, of course) must be reformed from the ground up. I'll share more of my thoughts in future letters.[11]

True to his word, on January 14, 1901 Suzuki wrote Yamamoto:

> In recent days I have become a socialist sympathizer to an extreme degree. However, my socialism is not based on economics but religion. This said, I am unable to publicly advocate this doctrine to the common people because they are so universally querulous and illiterate and therefore unprepared to listen to what I have to say. However, basing myself on socialism, I intend to gradually incline people to my way of thinking though I also believe I need to study some sociology.[12]

In addition to introducing us to an almost completely unknown side of Suzuki, i.e. as a left-wing radical, the above quotes raise the even more intriguing question of whether it was possible to oppose the prevalent understanding of karma in Japan without having first embraced socialism, with its understanding of social injustice as the product of a class-based society in which the ruling classes ensure their ongoing wealth and power through the creation and maintenance of unjust social structures rather than the karmic consequences of actions, wholesome or unwholesome, undertaken by members of the working class. Unfortunately, for reasons of space, this is a question that cannot be addressed in this article.

It should also be noted that Suzuki was not the only Japanese Buddhist to criticize what was then a widely accepted understanding of karma as it related to social inequality. A Sōtō Zen priest and self-identified anarcho-communist

[11] Quoted in Victoria, *The "Negative Side" of D.T. Suzuki's Relationship to War*, p. 106.
[12] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 106.

by the name of Uchiyama Gudō wrote the following in a 1909 pamphlet he addressed to tenant farmers:

> Is this [your poverty] the result, as Buddhists maintain, of the retribution due you because of your evil deeds in the past? Listen friends, if, having now entered the twentieth century, you were to be deceived by superstitions like this, you would still be [no better than] oxen or horses. Would this please you?[13]

Uchiyama Gudō

In 1911 Gudō was executed for his alleged participation in a plot to assassinate the emperor, not to mention his radical writings. At his trial, Chief Prosecutor Hiranuma Kiichirō identified Gudō's writing, including a scathing denunciation of the imperial system, as "the most heinous pamphlet ever written since the beginning of Japanese history."14 Further, Gudō's status as a Zen priest served as the pretext for Toyota Dokutan,

[13] Quoted in Victoria, *Zen at War, 2nd ed.*, p. 43.
[14] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 46.

administrative head of the Myōshinji branch of the Rinzai Zen sect, to condemn Japanese socialists and anarchists as follows:

> The essence of the Rinzai sect since its founding in this country has been to protect the nation through the spread of Zen. It is for this reason that in front of the central Buddha image in our sect's temples we have reverently placed a memorial tablet inscribed with the words, 'May the current emperor live for ten thousand years', thereby making our temples training centers for pacifying and preserving our country ...
>
> We make certain that adherents of our sect always keep in mind love of country and absolute loyalty [to the emperor] ... that they don't ignore the doctrine of karma or fall into the trap of believing in the heretical idea of 'evil equality' [as advocated by socialists, et al.][15]

The designation of socialism as promoting the heretical idea of "evil equality" was a common criticism made by Buddhist leaders up through the end of the Asia-Pacific War (1937–45). As early as 1879, for example, the noted Shin sect priest and scholar Shimaji Mokurai wrote an essay entitled "Differentiation [Is] Equality" (*Sabetsu Byōdō*). Shimaji asserted that distinctions in social standing and wealth were as permanent as differences in age, sex, and language. Thus, those struggling for social equality, most especially socialists and the like, were fatally flawed because they failed to understand that differences in social and economic status were not the result of either social injustice or economic exploitation but were, instead, solely the reward (or punishment) for an individual's actions in past lives. That is to say, without going into detail, Shimaji maintained that socialists failed to understand what these Buddhist leaders claimed was the basic Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching that "differentiation is identical with equality" (*sabetsu soku byōdō*).[16]

While the teaching that "differentiation is identical with equality" may seem puzzling, even contradictory on its surface, it encapsulates the belief that on a moral plane, differences in one's station in life, or physical condition, etc., are the result of one's past karma. Therefore, inasmuch as the law of karma applies equally to everyone, it becomes possible to equate "differentiation" in status with "equality."

[15] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 50.
[16] See discussion and quotation in *ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

Doctrinal justification

As demonstrated above, it is relatively simple to demonstrate that by ethicizing the concept of karma, focusing on the intention behind the act, the historical Buddha's formulation of karma was meant to encourage a moral life, not serve as a justification for social injustice and economic exploitation. Nevertheless, there are Buddhist sutras, claiming to contain the Buddha's teachings, that suggest persons beset by one or more physical ailments are experiencing the just desserts of their unwholesome actions in past lives. One of the clearest examples of this interpretation of karma is found in what is perhaps the most famous and influential of Mahāyāna scriptures, the Lotus Sutra. In Chapter 28 of this Sutra, we learn:

> "O Samantabhadra! Those who preserve and recite this Sutra in the future world will not be greedy for clothes, bedding, food and drink, and the necessities for life. Their aspirations will not be unrewarded, and their happy reward will be attained in this world. If there is anyone who despises them, saying: 'You are mad. This practice of yours is in vain and will attain nothing at the end,' *they will have no eyes in life after life as a reward for this wrongdoing.* If there is anyone who pays homage and praises them, he will attain tangible rewards in this world. *If anyone sees those who preserve this Sutra and speaks maliciously about their faults, whether true or not, such a person will suffer from leprosy in this life. If anyone scorns them, that person's teeth will be either loose or missing; their lips will be ugly, their nose will be flat, their limbs will be crooked; they will squint; their body will stink and be dirty, suffering from evil tumors, oozing pus; their belly will swell with water; and they will have tuberculosis and other evil and serious illnesses.*" [Italics mine][17]

Such is the karmic fate of those who dare to criticize followers of the Lotus Sutra. And since they will be born eyeless, etc., "in existence after existence," it is clear that the blind, lepers and the physically deformed of this world are themselves at fault for their afflictions. In short, they had it coming. Or as Shaku Sōen expressed it: "But to whom shall we complain of our misery? To none but ourselves!"

[17] *The Lotus Sutra*. Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1993, p. 339.

In light of this understanding of karma, it is no wonder that when wedded to the strong, Confucian-influenced familialism of East Asian countries, physical or mental impairment as well as serious disease has long been a source of great shame for not only the affected individuals themselves but for their entire family. Over the centuries many thousands of such individuals and their families have had to endure discrimination, blame, ridicule, isolation, harsh treatment and worse because of the alleged "evil" they were believed to have committed in past lives. For example, Susan Burns of the University of Chicago, wrote about the connection between karma and leprosy in premodern Japan:

> For one, leprosy – long endemic to Japan – was the object of particular stigma from the medieval period onward. As Buddhism became an object of popular faith, leprosy became known as the "karmic retribution disease" (J. *gōbyō*). As this term suggests, it was regarded as divine punishment for evil acts committed in the present or former incarnations. As a result, according to Kuroda Hideo, by the eleventh century, sufferers of 'leprosy,' a term which undoubtedly encompassed a wide range of skin diseases in addition to true leprosy, were already among those categorized as *hinin* (non-people) who congregated on the road that led to the Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto ... Sufferers were often forced from their homes by family members to become itinerant beggars, while some came together to form so-called 'leper villages,' organized communities of sufferers.[18]

Note, however, that according to Burns, even during the medieval period, leprosy sufferers were somewhat ambivalent figures in that even while discriminated against as the physical manifestations of past bad karma, they were potentially capable of providing a chance for salvation to those who showed compassion toward them. It was the latter attribute that led priests such as Ninshō, Eizon, and others to create shelters for leprosy victims in the thirteenth century.

[18] Burns, Susan L. "Making Illness into Identity: Writing 'Leprosy Literature' in Modern Japan," *Japan Review*, p. 16.

Contemporary manifestations of karmic punishment

No doubt some readers will attribute the above interpretation to a uniquely Mahāyāna aberration or misunderstanding of karma that can be safely dismissed as a relic of Buddhism's feudal past, an understanding that may have crept into the Mahāyāna sutras themselves. In this regard, however, I recall a conversation I had with a senior Thai monk while participating in the 13th Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies held at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok in 2002. Having long been aware of, and concerned about, the plight of child prostitutes in Bangkok, I asked the Venerable, "Why doesn't the Thai Sangha speak out against the rampant sexual slavery imposed on children in Bangkok and other Thai cities?" He immediately replied, "Oh, you must understand, these girls did something evil in their past lives, perhaps they committed adultery. That is why they are being punished as prostitutes in this life. Of course, there is hope for them in their future lives if they act properly in this life."

I responded to the Venerable, saying, "Do you really believe these children are being punished for their evil deeds in past lives?" The Venerable took my hands in his own, looked me in the eyes and replied, "You must be a bodhisattva!" With that our conversation ended.

However, my concern about the exploited and sexually abused children did not end there, for in 2012 I was invited to make a presentation at the annual conference of the World Federation of Buddhists (WFB) held in Yeosu, South Korea. In my address I recounted my earlier experience in Bangkok and asked the assembled delegates if they thought the senior Thai monk I had talked to accurately explained the Buddhist understanding of karma. Before I could elicit a response from members of the audience I was abruptly interrupted by the senior Sri Lankan monk serving as the conference's moderator. In a loud and irritated voice, he informed me and the assembled delegates that "the WFB does not tolerate criticisms of any of its members. Your comments are unacceptable."

WFB Conference (author seated third from left)

However, that evening, when conference delegates lined up for a buffet-style meal, I was approached by a group of young Thai monks who, somewhat to my surprise, thanked me for having brought up the issue of child prostitutes in my earlier presentation. "We needed to hear that," said one of them while the others nodded in assent. While I was gratified to learn that at least some young Thai monks shared by concerns, I could not help asking myself why these monks had chosen to remain silent when I had been so severely criticized earlier. Yet I also knew the answer to my question, i.e. in the rigidly hierarchical communities of Buddhist clerics in Asia, no junior monks would dare to speak out against their monastic superiors. This, too, is a topic worthy of further discussion but lies beyond the scope of this article.

With regard to this episode, it might be comforting to supporters of Theravada Buddhism to identify the senior Thai monk's understanding of karma as uniquely his own distortion, unsupported by anything written in the Pali canon upon which this Buddhist tradition is based. Alas, that is not the case, as demonstrated by 'The Shorter Exposition of Action Sutra' (Pali: *Cūḷa-kammavibhaṅga-sutta*). Its opening paragraphs contain the following:

> Then the brahmin student Subha, Todeyya's son, went to the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and amiable talk was finished, he sat down at one side and asked the Blessed One:
>
> "Master Gotama, what is the cause and condition why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior? For people are seen to be short-lived and long-lived, sickly and healthy, ugly and beautiful, uninfluential and influential, poor and wealthy, low-born and high-born, stupid and wise. What is the cause and condition, Master Gotama, why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior?"
>
> "Student, beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior."[19]

On the one hand it is true that the Buddha only addressed how actions determine one's position as either an inferior or superior being. On the other hand, the Buddha didn't dispute that the characteristics of such beings are manifested in their wealth or poverty, health, intelligence, etc. These attributes were assumed to be an integral, if not determinative, part of inferiority and superiority, the differences in which were all determined by "the owners of their actions," i.e. their positions were due either to their credit or to their fault. Thus, the senior Thai Buddhist monk who determined that the actions of child prostitutes in their past lives were responsible for their sexual exploitation did indeed have a canonical basis for his position.

Returning to Japan, we find yet another example of finding fault with the victim(s) in connection with the massive earthquake and tsunami that struck the Fukushima area of northern Japan on March 11th, 2011. On March 14th, 2011 Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō held a press conference at which he stated:

[19] This sutta is contained in the *Majjhima Nikāya* 135. Available on the Web at: https://suttacentral.net/mn135/en/bodhi?reference=none&highlight=false (accessed April 17, 2024).

> The identity of the Japanese people is greed. This tsunami represents a good opportunity to cleanse this greed (J. *gayoku*), and one we must avail ourselves of. Indeed, I think this is divine punishment ... though I do feel sorry for the disaster victims.[20]

Ishihara Shintarō

It should be noted that in making this claim, Ishihara was following a well-established Buddhist precedent in Japan, one that can be traced at least as far back as priest Nichiren in the thirteenth century. In 1260, with Japan facing a series of calamities at home and the threat of Mongol invasion from abroad, Nichiren submitted his famous *Risshō-ankoku-ron* ('Treatise on Pacifying the Country through the Establishment of True [Buddhism]') to Japan's warrior rulers in Kamakura. The first dialogue contained the following passage:

[20] *Risshō-ankoku-ron.* Available on the Web at: https://nichiren.info/gosho/RisshoAnkokuRon.htm (accessed April 17, 2024).

> The people of today all turn their backs upon what is right; they give their allegiance to evil. That is the reason why the benevolent deities have abandoned the nation, why sages leave and do not return, and in their stead come devils and demons, disasters and calamities that arise one after another.[21]

Depiction of Nichiren

Although Ishihara spoke of divine punishment and Nichiren to the abandonment of Japan, their references to "greed" (one of the three Buddhist poisons) and failure to do "what is right" are clear reflections of the doctrine of karma. Interestingly, while Nichiren never renounced his views, Ishihara's attempt to fault the victims for their victimization created such an uproar that he was almost immediately forced to apologize. His apology took the form of a second press conference on the following day, March 15th, at which he took back his remarks and offered "a deep apology" for having made them.

[21] *ibid.*

Like the young Thai monks who approached me in South Korea, this episode reveals, I believe, the need, even the necessity, to change the long established, karmically justified, practice of finding the victim(s) of misfortune at fault for what has befallen them.

Can karma kill?

While the questions raised above are in serious need of addressing, there is yet one more topic, perhaps the most controversial of them all, that needs to be addressed, i.e. can karma kill? If, as was made clear at the beginning of this article, the historical Buddha's formulation of karma was meant to encourage wholesome acts leading to a moral life, then the very idea that karma could in any way be connected to, let alone excuse, killing would appear to be an oxymoron of the first order. Could killing ever be considered to be a moral act? Isn't the first precept undertaken by all Buddhists, lay and cleric, of whatever tradition, school or sect, to abstain from taking life?

Unfortunately for those who believe it to be a religion of peace, Buddhism has, over the centuries, developed sutras that muddy the waters concerning the act of killing. Perhaps the best known of these is the "Skill in Means Sutra" (Skt. *Upāyakauśalya Sūtra*). This Mahāyāna Buddhist sutra aims to show that the life of a Buddha is not determined by karma, but rather that his deeds depend on the needs of the present and are inspired by the skill in means he demonstrates. Specifically, the sutra includes a story about Śākyamuni Buddha when he was still a Bodhisattva. On board a ship he captained, Śākyamuni discovers that there is a robber intent on killing all passengers and, after debating with himself about what to do, decides to kill the robber, not only for the sake of the passengers but also to save the robber himself from the karmic consequences of his horrendous act.

According to traditional karmic doctrine, the negative karma from killing the robber should have accrued to Śākyamuni, consigning him to a long period of punishment in the future. However, according to the sutra, Śākyamuni explained: "Good man, because I used ingenuity out of great compassion at that time, I was able to avoid the suffering of one hundred thousand *kalpas* of *samsāra* [the ordinary world of form and desire] and that wicked man was reborn in heaven, a good plane of existence, after death."[22] In short, the

[22] Quoted in Victoria, *Zen Terror in Prewar Japan*, p. 206.

Buddha's compassionate intent saved not only the ship's passengers but even the robber himself, and, still further, had the effect of eliminating the negative karmic consequences of his murderous act.

Given its date of composition, the content of the Skill in Means Sutra can safely be dismissed as containing, at most, a semi-fictional account of the Buddha's life. Nevertheless, it can be shown to have played a significant role in the ethical history of East Asian Buddhism up to the modern era, for it provided the basis for the belief that selfless, compassionate intent had the power to overcome or erase any negative karma that might result from the normally proscribed act of killing. In fact, in prewar, 1930s Japan this sutra even formed the ethical basis for acts of domestic assassination directed against Japan's business, political and military leaders. This in turn led to the end of democratic governance, known as Taishō democracy, and the assumption of total political power in the hands of Emperor Hirohito and his advisors.[23] Note that, as Herbert Bix shows, the postwar assertion by US military occupation authorities that Emperor Hirohito was a peace-loving monarch controlled by the Japanese military was a falsehood created for the preservation of an anti-communist, capitalist regime in Japan.

While an extended discussion of this period is beyond the scope of this article, interested readers are invited to read my book, *Zen Terror in Prewar Japan: Portrait of an Assassin*. Inoue Nisshō was the Zen-trained layman who headed a band of Buddhist assassins described in this book. As revealed by the photograph Inoue included of himself in his autobiography, he included an inscription of four Chinese characters, i.e. *issatsu tashō* (Kill One [in order to] Save Many, 一殺多生) that drew its ethical justification from the Skill in Means Sutra.

[23] For further details, see Herbert Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan.* pp. 533–646.

Inoue Nisshō

Inoue and his fellow assassins believed that by killing a small number of corrupt business, political and military leaders, they would be able to save the many, i.e. the Japanese masses, especially tenant farmers and factory workers, from the dire economic straits they faced in depression-era Japan. Inoue and his band fervently believed in something they called the "Shōwa Restoration" (J. *Shōwa Ishin*) in which complete political power would be restored to Emperor Hirohito who, as the alleged benevolent 'father' of the Japanese people, would act to save his children, the Japanese people, from the severe economic hardships they were undergoing.

While the doctrine of karma cannot be held directly responsible for the emergence of Buddhist terrorists like Inoue and his band, the Skill in Means Sutra propagated the belief that the purity of one's intention, i.e. being completely and self-sacrificially compassionate, meant that the perpetrator(s) would be free of karmic punishment in future lives. This belief further allowed

the perpetrators to believe that acts of killing, so long as they were grounded in genuine compassion, were fully compatible with the teachings of the Buddha. In short, the message of this sutra served as a "get out of jail free card" with no need to fear karmic punishment.

For adherents of Theravāda Buddhism, however, this is one instance where the responsibility for this understanding of karma can be fairly placed on the Mahāyāna tradition, for the Skill in Means Sutra is clearly a product of that tradition.

Seeking venues to address the nature of karma

Let us next turn to the question of how, exactly, karma influences an individual's rebirth. In doing so, the first question to be asked is how and where such a resolution could be reached. In other words, the question is what venues exist in the Buddhist world to address a controversial topic like this one, for there can be no doubt that this topic needs to be addressed in light of Buddhism's commitment to reduce suffering in its myriad forms. Rightly or wrongly, the understanding of karma expressed above clearly serves to *increase* suffering rather than reduce it. Further, it is equally clear that this a *pan*-Buddhist topic that needs to be addressed by all traditions of Buddhism, Mahāyāna and Theravāda alike.

But where to address this topic? In the Japanese Zen school, a cleric, prior to formal Dharma transmission, is required to engage in a ceremony literally known as "Dharma combat" (J. *hōssen*) in order to demonstrate that s/he has mastered the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. At least in theory this might be a place, or an opportunity, to address controversial topics. Unfortunately, "Dharma combat" in today's Japan is no more than a mere ritual in which questions related to the nature of the Dharma, and the answers given are memorized in advance. Thus, it is unthinkable that controversial questions like the workings of karma could be discussed in this venue.

In Tibetan Buddhism there remains to this day a strong emphasis on monastic debates. At least in theory, these debates could serve as a venue to explore the negative social effects of karma. Unfortunately, similar to its present-day Zen counterpart in Japan, contemporary monastic debates have also been criticized for, among other things, their emphasis on a rigid and dogmatic understanding of Buddhist philosophy; the focus is on formalism, logic, and memorization leading to a lack of effective application to real-life situations, not to mention an ossification of certain dogmas and practices inhibiting adaptation to contemporary challenges and cultural shifts.

Despite these criticisms, Tibetan Buddhism does have one additional authoritative resource, i.e. the Dalai Lama, who might, again at least in theory, address the problematic application of karma. However, as the following quotation makes clear, the Dalai Lama's explication of karma reveals that he, too, finds nothing problematic about the manner in which karma is popularly understood:

> As an adult, when either good or bad things happen to us, it is quite common for we Tibetans to think of karma as the fruition of actions we committed in the past.
>
> "This year has been full of tragedy and misfortune. This is my bad karma." We believe that the seed for this current tragedy was planted at some time in our past, and is now bearing fruit.
>
> Even when bad things happen to good people, we think of the misfortune as consequences of past bad actions. We believe that somewhere in his or her past, perhaps even in a long-ago lifetime, she or he performed some bad actions and *now must face the consequences.* [Italics mine][24]

Thus, the question remains – how and where can Buddhists, especially in an international context, address an understanding of karma which, at least in part, can be seen as increasing rather than eliminating suffering? It is here that scholars of Buddhism may be able to offer assistance, for it is generally recognized that the Lotus Sutra was composed in stages over time. Earlier versions were possibly written in Prakrit or other early Indic languages with the final version only emerging sometime between the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. Eventually, the Lotus Sutra was translated into Chinese, with the most famous and best-known translation by Kumārajīva in the early 5th century CE. Kumārajīva's translation went on to become the standard version in East Asia and significantly influenced the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism in East Asia as a whole.

[24] Quoted in "What is Karma and How Does it Work?" Available on the Web at: https://www.yowangdu.com/tibetan-buddhism/karma.html (accessed September 16, 2023).

In terms of karma, the question scholars may help answer is at what point in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism did diseases like leprosy, tuberculosis, blindness, etc., become identified as forms of karmic retribution? Was this karma-linked identification present in the earliest stages of this sutra, or Buddhist sutras as a whole at that time? Was the section in question part of the earliest formulations of this sutra or was it a later accretion? Was the attribution to religion of illnesses whose causes were unknown at the time part of a general societal trend or was it unique to Buddhism? The exploration of these and related questions are well suited to the expertise of not only scholars of Buddhism but of the history of religions in general.

That said, it is too often the case that sophisticated Buddhist scholarship, and the conclusions arrived at, remains in the hands of scholars themselves, confined to the scholarly journals in which they publish. This is compounded by the fact that there are today few venues available in the Buddhist world for actively debating questions like the nature of karma, especially at the international level, i.e. debating questions related to Buddhist praxis as it exists in a country (or even a sect) other than one's own.

While it is true that there are online publications such as the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* or the *Journal* of *Global Buddhism* that do allow for robust debate, this debate seldom reaches the broader Buddhist community. Additionally, as these journals demonstrate, English has come to serve as a common means of communication among Buddhists internationally. This means that their discussions remain limited to a small portion of the broader Buddhist community, i.e. those who are fluent in English.

Scholars speak

Walpola Rahula's stance

In his discussion of karma, the distinguished Buddhist monk and scholar, Walpola Rahula, pointed out that karma should not be confused with either moral justice or reward and punishment. He noted that the idea of moral justice or reward and punishment stems from the belief in a supreme being, e.g., God, who acts as both a law-giver and judge of what is right and wrong. These insights led him to conclude: "Every volitional action produces its effects or results. If a good action produces good effects and a bad action bad effects, it is not justice, or reward, or punishment meted out by anybody or any power sitting in judgement on your action, but this is in virtue of its own nature, its own law."[25]

Inasmuch as Buddhism does not assert the existence of a supreme being, Rahula is certainly correct in rejecting an understanding of karma based on rewards or punishment meted out by a God-like being. But the question must be asked, does this rejection address, let alone alleviate, the plight of child prostitutes in Bangkok? Inasmuch as Rahula's explanation still allows for the possibility that the destiny of child prostitutes is the result, or fruit, of their own past actions, we are still left with the possibility that the Buddhist interpretation of karma presented in this article can serve to enhance suffering by blaming the victims for what has befallen them.

Peter Harvey's stance

In his discussion of karma in *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, Peter Harvey, focused on a lengthy description of the series of rebirths that are ordered and governed by the law of karma, i.e. beings are reborn according to the nature and quality of their actions in this and past lives. Thus, acts of hatred and violence lead to rebirth in a hell while acts of greed lead to rebirth as a ghost or an animal. On the other hand, abstaining from evil actions and encouraging others to do so leads to a heavenly rebirth.

Harvey notes, however, that while none of these realms lasts forever, they all end in death and then (for the unenlightened), another rebirth. Thus, even life in the hells, though long lasting, is not eternal. To illustrate his point Harvey goes so far as to point out: "This means that there is hope even for

[25] Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, p. 32.

Adolf Hitler: at some time in the far, far distant future, he might even become enlightened! – *if* he were to strive to develop moral and spiritual perfection."[26]

More importantly, at least in terms of this article, Harvey claimed: "Poor, ill or ugly people are not to be presently blamed for their condition, however, for the actions of a past life are behind them, and the important thing is how they behave in the present and how others act towards them."[27] However, in claiming this, Harvey is not necessarily denying the understanding of someone like Shaku Sōen who, it will be recalled, simply said, "We are here enjoying or suffering the effect of what we have done in our past lives ... But to whom shall we complain of our misery? To none but ourselves!"

In saying this, Sōen was not attempting to blame others for their condition, however miserable, but, instead, sought to explain why they, and they alone, were reaping, as a result of their past actions, whatever ills had befallen them. It was they who were at fault. Given this, one would like to ask Harvey, just how child prostitutes in Bangkok should "behave in the present" as they ply their 'trade'?

A further point Harvey made is one that the Buddha himself made in the Sīvaka Sutta (SN 36.21). In this sutra the Buddha emphasized that while karma plays a role in the experiences we undergo, it is not the only factor, for other natural, physical, and mental causes can also lead to various outcomes in life. Thus, the Buddha did not teach everything that happens to a person is due to their past karma. Harvey summarized the Buddha's teaching as follows; "any unpleasant feelings or illnesses that one has can arise from a variety of causes: 'originating from bile, phlegm, or wind, from union (of bodily humours), born from seasonal changes, born from disruptive circumstances, arriving suddenly [due to the action of another person], or born of the fruition of karma'."[28]

Nevertheless, Harvey goes on to claim that "aspects of life which are seen as the result of past karma include one's form of rebirth, social class at birth, general character, crucial good and bad things which happen to one, and even the way one experiences the world."[29]

While the preceding quotations make it appear that Harvey was himself unaware, or at least uncritical, of the harmful aspects of the popular Buddhist

[26] Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, p. 14.
[27] *ibid.*, p. 16.
[28] *ibid.*, p. 23.
[29] *ibid.*

understanding of karma, this was not the case. While not criticizing this understanding of karma, he did comment:

> As an aid to planning courses of action in a karma-influenced world, many traditionalist Buddhists use divination methods such as astrology at certain points in their lives, so as to try to gauge what their karma has in store for them. The idea of the influence of karma, while not fatalistic, does encourage a person to live patiently with a situation. Rather than making new bad karma by getting angry with society, family, or other people, blaming them for his or her lot, he or she can view the situation as the result of his or her own past actions ... Like people of other religions, however, Buddhists sometimes have an idea of fate, in parallel with their idea of karma, or they may even use past karma as an excuse for continuing with present bad karma.[30]

Harvey is not alone in pointing out the historical fatalistic understanding of karma in Asian societies. For example, Buddhist scholar Marte Nilsen wrote:

> Regardless of its philosophical basis, the concept of karma has been used to cement social hierarchies and, ultimately, evaluate people's worth. These hierarchies are often pivotal in the justification of violence in Buddhist societies.[31]

Despite the earlier section on the relationship of karma to killing, readers may be surprised to learn of the connection between karma and war. However, inasmuch as it is axiomatic that war involves killing on a massive scale, one question that inevitably arises is who is responsible for the killing. During the Asia-Pacific War there was only one acceptable answer to this question in Japan, for under no circumstances could a soldier's death on the battlefield be associated in any way with the Imperial military's supreme commander, i.e. Emperor Hirohito. Instead, Satō Gan'ei, a military chaplain with the True Pure Land sect (J. Jōdo Shinshū), explained the situation as follows, to family members worried that their loved ones might die on the battlefield:

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[30] *ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

[31] Nilsen, reviewer. "Buddhist Violence and Religious Authority: A Tribute to the Work of Michael Jerryson". *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Volume 30 2023. Available at: https://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2023/09/Nilsen_Review_of_Kitts_Juergensmeyer_Buddhist_Violence_and_Religious_Authority.pdf (accessed April 17, 2024).

> Everything depends on karma. There are those who, victorious in battle, return home strong and fit only to die soon afterwards. On the other hand, there are those who are scheduled to enter the military yet die before they do so. If it is their karmic destiny, bullets will not strike them, and they will not die. Conversely, should it be their karmic destiny, then even if they are not in the military, they may still die from gunfire. Therefore, there is definitely no point in worrying about this. Or expressed differently, even if you do worry about it, nothing will change.[32]

On the one hand, it can be said that Satō Gan'ei invoked karma in this manner in an attempt to reduce the suffering caused by the death of a loved one on the battlefield, i.e. reduce the suffering experienced by those close to the deceased. Viewed objectively, however, it also served once again as a mechanism to find the victim at fault for his own death rather than finding fault with a dictatorial, militarist and aggressive government, headed by an allegedly divine emperor whose orders could not be questioned. In so doing it contributed to the ongoing willingness of the decease's loved ones to continue their support of, and participation in, the war effort, no matter how many of their fellow Japanese, let alone the 'enemy,' died in the process. Can the increased suffering that came about as a result be denied?

Satō Gan'ei's understanding of karma was by no means limited to priests of the True Pure Land sect. Yet another example is provided by the wartime writings of Sōtō Zen scholar-priest, Yamada Reirin. In a 1942 book entitled, *Evening Talks on Zen Studies (Zengaku Yawa),* he wrote:

> The true form of the heroic spirits [of the dead] is the good karmic power that has resulted from their loyalty, bravery, and nobility of character. This will never perish ... The body and mind produced by this karmic power cannot be other than what has existed up to the present ... The loyal, brave, noble, and heroic spirits of those officers and men who have died shouting, 'May the emperor live for ten thousand years!' will be reborn right here in this country. It is only natural that this should occur.[33]

[32] Quoted in *Zen War Stories*, p. 153.
[33] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 156.

By claiming that those Japanese soldiers who died on the battlefield would be reborn "right here in this country" Yamada was making quite a surprising assertion. Surprising in that, as Harvey has pointed out: "The full details of [the fruits of the volition associated with actions], in specific instances, are said to be 'unthinkable' (Skt. *acinteyya*) to all but a Buddha."[34]

Perhaps this assertion is not so surprising to adherents of the Sōtō Zen sect, for in postwar years Yamada was never criticized for his wartime writings. Instead, he rose steadily through the ranks until becoming the seventy-fifth head of Eiheiji, the monastery established by Zen Master Dōgen, the 13th century, founder of Sōtō Zen in Japan. At least for Sōtō Zen adherents, Yamada remains a worthy successor to Dōgen and, as such, a "Buddha" to this day.

Richard Gombrich's positive evaluation

In his book, *What the Buddha Thought*, Richard Gombrich of Oxford University provided a highly positive view of karma: "I believe that it [karma] is not only fundamental to the Buddha's whole view of life, but also a kind of lynchpin which holds the rest of the basic tenets [of Buddhism] together ..."[35] Like previous commentators, Gombrich pointed out that, in accordance with karmic doctrine, humans have free will and are wholly responsible for their own actions. Gombrich was, however, not unaware of what may be called the 'dark side' of karma. He wrote:

> This picture of a universe under control [due to one's own actions] is from one angle reassuring; but in its belief that there is really no undeserved suffering it can also be harsh. Logically it solves the problem of theodicy, but at a price.[36] Many have found this solution as unbearable as the situation it resolves, and it is hardly surprising that Buddhism as it developed after the Buddha's death became rich in ways of obscuring or escaping such an intransigent law of the universe, often at the cost of logical consistency.[37]

[34] Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, p. 24.

[35] Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, p. 11.

[36] Theodicy is defined as "the vindication of divine goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil."

[37] Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, p. 26.

Nevertheless, Gombrich remained firmly convinced in the importance of karmic retribution on the part, not of a god-like figure, but what he identified as a "law of nature" stemming from a belief in karma. He wrote:

> Making the individual conscience the ultimate authority is both a liberating and a dangerous move. What if someone acts on wrong moral reasoning? Society needs a sanction. That is why it was immensely important for the Buddha, and indeed for the whole tradition that followed him, to keep stressing that the law of moral reckoning worked throughout the universe: that good would be rewarded and evil punished in the end.[38]

However, Gombrich was aware that belief in karmic justice occurring in some future life is beyond empirical proof. He attempted to solve this problem by introducing what he called a necessary "leap of faith" on the part of Buddhist adherents, something he described as follows:

> When one introduces the Buddha's teaching to a modern audience, one very often stresses at the outset – as indeed I have done – that he asked people to use their own judgement, to go by their own experience and take nothing on trust. One soon has to qualify this, however, by saying that there was one belief which he held himself and relied on in his teaching, the belief in the law of karma; and if that was not to be obviously falsified by every cot death, it had to entail belief in rebirth. One tends to add, perhaps in an apologetic tone, that these were beliefs that the Buddha inherited and simply could not shake off ... The Buddha's version of the law of karma was entirely his own; but to accept it was the leap of faith he demanded of every follower.[39]

Note that even prior to Gombrich, modern scholars of Buddhism were aware of the need for faith over reason when it came to the acceptance of various beliefs, e.g. the existence of heaven and hell, related to the law of karma. For example, in his 1886 book, *Shinri kinshin* (Golden Compass of Truth), Inoue Enryō, a Japanese scholar-priest active during the second half of the Meiji

[38] *ibid.*, p. 27.
[39] *ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

era (1868-1912) who was affiliated with the True Pure Land sect of Buddhism, championed the law of karmic retribution as follows:

> Upon teaching the cause and effect of good and evil [i.e. karmic retribution], the need to suppose heaven and hell follows a natural course of thinking. It is not necessarily irrational or illogical. The stories of devils and [boiling] kettles in hell or lotus flowers and music in heaven are simply beyond reason. Seen from a nonreligious standpoint, they are nothing but illustrations of happy or painful conditions. In other words, these are questions of faith, not of reason.[40]

Based on Gombrich and Inoue's viewpoints, it is clear that the need for faith in various aspects of karma is beyond empirical proof. Thus, one question to be asked is what happens to those who otherwise accept the Buddha's teachings but are unwilling to accept the need for faith in some kind of karmically-influenced afterlife? Is their unwillingness sufficient reason to be expelled from the community of Buddhists?

In addition, what if there were those who accepted the concept of "rebirth" but interpreted it to mean rebirth, or continuation, of "life" writ large. That is to say, for example, in the form of life-producing rain resulting from the evaporation of the approximately 60% of the decease's body composed of water, plus the "recycling" of the remaining 40% carbon and other chemicals comprising the decease's body that, once returned to the earth, also serves as the basis for new life forms. This understanding of rebirth would, needless to say, be readily empirically verifiable, thereby satisfying the need for a scientifically grounded explanation of its meaning.

The problem is that a cyclical, life-producing rebirth would take place without the need for a karmically-determined entity continuing in one of the traditional six realms of existence, i.e. the realms of gods, pugnacious demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and numerous hells. These realms would be seen to be no more than a form of Buddhist "expedient/skillful means" (Skt. *upāya-kauśalya*) created to convince/frighten otherwise recalcitrant Buddhist clerics and laity into living moral and wholesome lives.

[40] Schulzer, Rainer. Quoted in "Religion as Political Postulate in the Writings of the Modern Buddhist Philosopher Inoue Enryō"; *The Eastern Buddhist* 3/2: pp. 21–42.

Nevertheless, even while refusing belief in the traditional six realms of existence, it would still be possible to accept, from an empirical viewpoint, not simply rebirth as life writ large, but also the fact that life, even in the midst of repetition, is a continuously evolving process. In the human species, for example, if the past did not influence the future we would still be moving about on all four limbs rather than walking upright on two. That is to say, it would be possible to understand rebirth as synonymous with, or occurring together with, evolution. It would not, however, be a rebirth in one of the six realms dependent on the moral quality of one's acts in previous lifetimes.

In short, it would be an understanding of rebirth differing substantially with the traditional view of karma, something that many, if not most, Buddhists would likely be unwilling to accept. This leads to the question of whether belief in rebirth based on the continuous, unending, yet everchanging evolution of life, albeit lacking a karmically determined rebirth in one of the six realms, should be considered a form of litmus test, used to determine who is, and is not, a Buddhist.

As important as these questions are, they lie beyond the scope of this article and must await future exploration. Here, the key question to be answered is whether the acceptance of the prerequisite "[leap of] faith" would do anything to extricate child prostitutes in Bangkok, dead soldiers on the battlefield, people with physical or mental impairments, et al. from their karmic fates due to the unwholesome acts they had allegedly committed in their past lives?

Conclusion

In light of the many negative examples presented above, one is forced to ask, how did it come to pass that so many millions of Japanese Buddhists, like many others in Asian Buddhist countries, have remained uninformed of how karma actually functions? How did all of these Buddhists 'get it so wrong'? Or, alternatively, can this be explained as one of the 'subtleties' of this Buddhist doctrine that somehow 'got lost along the way'?

By now the answer to the title of this article should be clear. As demonstrated above, a popular and widespread interpretation of karma can be, and definitely has been, the cause of suffering (and continues to be so). This is amply illustrated by statements made by leading clerics in all of Buddhism's major traditions, past and present. While scholars like Rahula and Harvey are correct, at least doctrinally, in their exposition of the workings of karma, they

both fail to acknowledge just how harmful some aspects of the actual historical practice have been. In particular, the fatalism stemming from the "victim is at fault" is, and remains, as widespread in Buddhism as it is harmful, having been incorporated even into major Buddhist writings like the Lotus Sutra.

Given this, has not the time come for both scholars and practitioners alike to reexamine the doctrine of karma, purging it of its socially reactionary uses? Fortunately, I am not alone in calling for this reexamination. In an article entitled "Buddhism and Disability" Stephen Harris of Leiden University first noted: "Negative effects of karmic action include not only rebirth in a negative realm, a short life, or poverty but also a number of conditions that overlap with certain kinds of disability."[41] This led Harris to conclude: "The traditional view that disabilities are negative results of past karmic action can be rethought."[42]

Isn't it time for Buddhists to examine, if not revise, an understanding of karma that has been used to increase, rather than decrease, suffering? Isn't it time for Buddhists to have a serious debate concerning the implications of D.T. Suzuki's comments as introduced at the beginning of this article? Note, too, that Suzuki further asserted the traditional understanding of karma was closely linked to social injustice. He wrote: "Do we not thus see many good, conscientious people around us who are wretchedly poverty-stricken? Shall we take them as suffering the curse of evil karma in their previous lives, when we can understand the fact perfectly well as a case of social injustice?"[43]

The reader will recall that in *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*, Suzuki made it clear that socialist teachings lay at the heart of his criticism of the popular understanding of karma. At the same time, Suzuki revealed his criticism of Shaku Sōen, his own Zen master, was derived from the former's embrace of socialism:

> As long as we live under the present state of things, it is impossible to escape the curse of social injustice and economic inequality. Some people must be born rich and noble and enjoying a superabundance of material wealth, while others must be groaning under the unbearable burden imposed upon them by cruel society. Unless we make a radical change in our present

[41] Harris, "Buddhism and Disability," in *Disability and World Religions: An Introduction*, p. 37.
[42] *ibid.*, p. 45.
[43] Suzuki, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*, p. 189.

> social organization, we cannot expect every one of us to enjoy an equal opportunity and a fair chance. Unless we have *a certain form of socialism* installed that is liberal and rational and systematic, there must be some who are economically more favored than others.[44] [Italics mine]

As previously noted, following his return to Japan in 1909, Suzuki never again wrote about the need for a socialist transformation of society in his numerous Japanese language writings. On the one hand, it is understandable that Suzuki never put at risk his increasingly prestigious teaching positions in Japan to engage in the very risky political actions that would have been necessary to reform Japanese society in line with socialist ideals "from the ground up." Even then, i.e. the early years of the twentieth century, socialism and socialists were the enemy of the state, for Japan was well on its way to embracing imperialism based on capitalist expansion. How many of us would have risked our livelihoods, let alone the danger of incarceration, or even death, to act differently than Suzuki did?

Even while recognizing that wealth and social status, etc., have been explicitly identified as the result of good karma from Buddhism's earliest teachings, isn't it time for contemporary Buddhists to become aware of, if not welcome, the insights provided into the structural origins of poverty and exploitation by the social sciences, including socialism and similar ideologies? Isn't it far more likely that child prostitutes in Bangkok are the victimized offspring of poverty-stricken tenant farmers in rural Thai society (and those of neighboring countries) than they are of transgressions allegedly committed in their past lives?

Failure to investigate, or be concerned about, the suffering caused by structural inequality within society suggests a bleak future for Buddhism in an increasingly globalized world. People of good will can hardly be blamed for rejecting a religious faith in which some adherents have engaged over the centuries in one of the classic rationalizations for justifying oppression and social discrimination: "the victim is at fault."

As for those readers who state that, for better or worse, there is ample evidence in the sutras that the historical Buddha himself embraced an understanding of karma that, at least in effect, allowed victims to be faulted

[44] *ibid.*, p. 191.

for whatever befell them, it is important to recall what the Buddha taught in the well-known Kālāma Sutta. That is to say, he advised the Kālāma people not to accept teachings simply through tradition, speculative reasoning, personal preferences, what one thinks should be true, or respect for a particular teacher. Rather, he taught:

> When you, O Kālāmas, know for yourselves: 'these states are unwholesome and blameworthy, they are condemned by the wise; these states, when accomplished and undertaken, conduce to harm and suffering', then indeed you should reject them.[45]

Even if it could be demonstrated that the Buddha failed to recognize the many expressions of economic and social discrimination caused by a class-based social structure, he can hardly be faulted for having failed to anticipate the emergence of a capitalist society in future millennia. However, what he did anticipate, and quite correctly, was that any teaching conducive to harm and suffering was to be rejected.

Given this, it can be assumed that even a presumed teaching of the Buddha himself that can be shown to result in harm and suffering should be rejected. This suggests that the Buddha Dharma is not a 'closed book,' impervious to change. Instead, as new insights into the causes of suffering are discovered, or at least better understood, Buddhism can *and should* change accordingly.

In the case of karma, when there is a clear need, new understandings or interpretations are required that do not serve to find victims at fault (nor excuse the larger Buddhist community from striving to ameliorate social or structural injustice when it plays a role). Contemporary Buddhist charitable organizations like Tzu Chi exemplify the promise that a positive understanding of karma can offer Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike.

As we survey the world around us today, it could not be clearer that whole groups or classes of human beings are being made to suffer not because of their individual acts, whether wholesome or unwholesome, whether done with good intent or ill, but simply because they were born as members of a particular group or class. Would any Buddhist claim, for example, that the thousands of children killed in Gaza had, on an individual basis, done something so horrendous in their past lives as to deserve their present fate?

[45] Quoted in Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, p. 10.

If not, then it is clear there exists something called "collective punishment", i.e. punishment based on membership in an ethnic, national, economic, racial group, etc., that plays a decisive role in the fate of each member of the group irrespective of the actions of individual group members. About this possibility, traditional Buddhism appears to have said relatively little. Once again, this silence can only serve to provide those responsible for collective punishment with a mechanism to deny or at least evade their responsibility. This question, too, must be addressed in any reformulation of the doctrine of karma.

Should Buddhists fail to seriously address the issues raised in this article they will be left to answer the question that Uchiyama Gudō so insightfully and presciently raised more than a century ago:

> Listen friends, if, having now entered the twentieth century, you were to be deceived by superstitions like this, you would still be [no better than] oxen or horses. Would this please you?

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