

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>

Volume 21, 2014

## Escaping the Inescapable: Changes in Buddhist Karma

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# Escaping the Inescapable: Changes in Buddhist Karma

Jayarava Attwood<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Early Buddhist karma is an impersonal moral force that impartially and inevitably causes the consequences of actions to be visited upon the actor, especially determining their afterlife destination. The story of King Ajātasattu in the Pāli *Samaññaphala Sutta*, where not even the Buddha can intervene to save him, epitomizes the criterion of inescapability. Zoroastrian ethical thought runs along similar lines and may have influenced the early development of Buddhism. However, in the Mahāyāna version of the *Samaññaphala Sutta*, the simple act of meeting the Buddha reduces or eliminates the consequences of the King's patricide. In other Mahāyāna texts, the results of actions are routinely avoidable through the performance of religious

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practices. Ultimately, Buddhists seem to abandon the idea of the inescapability of the results of actions.

## Introduction

This article presents a study of the way the doctrine of karma changes over time. The particular feature of the karma doctrine that is explored is the inevitability of experiencing the consequences of actions. Part I of this article recaps some points from “Did King Ajātasattu Confess to the Buddha, and did the Buddha Forgive Him?” (Attwood *Ajātasattu*) and establishes that karma was *absolutely* inescapable during the period represented in the Pāli *Nikāyas*, which I take to cover the last half millennium B.C.E., and perhaps a century into the Common Era. Inescapability of karma remained a feature of Theravāda thought through at least to Buddhaghosa in the Fifth century C.E.

Part II deals with the period from about 1000 B.C.E. to 500 B.C.E. and looks at the precedents of Buddhist karma, particularly the changes to Brahmanical eschatology that emerge in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. Drawing on “Possible Iranian Origins of Śākyas and Aspects of Buddhism” (Attwood), Part II will outline a possible prehistory for karma and will explore the conjecture that Zoroastrian ideas influenced the development of the Buddhist theory of karma. Part II will also try to show why karma had to be inevitable to have moral force.

Part III will look at how karma changed in India during the first millennia C.E.. Developments in karma theory can be seen in the *Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra*, the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* of Śāntideva, and in the *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha* (STTS). The *Śrāmaṇyaphala* is an early Buddhist text that has been edited by and/or for a Mahāyāna milieu. The *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, on the other hand, is firmly rooted in the Mahāyāna and

does not cite Early Buddhist sources, though it does show some possible hints of tantric influence. STTS represents a mature Tantric Buddhist attitude to karma. The neutralizing of bad karma, that is, the sidestepping of inevitability, becomes an increasingly important theme. The nature and role of ethics in this changed worldview is different from the ethos of the early texts.

Over the course of this survey of Buddhist ideas, a major change in the conception of karma is seen. This article suggests that a perennial problem for Buddhists may have been influential in bringing about the change: the problem of how the unawakened can escape their own negative conditioning.

### **Part I: The Inevitability of Karma**

In the *Samaññaphala Sutta* King Ajātasattu is troubled by his conscience and goes to meet the Buddha. After hearing a Dharma discourse, he confesses that he killed his father, King Bimbisāra, who was also the Buddha's patron.<sup>2</sup> The Buddha accepts this news, and acknowledges that the King intends to return to lawfulness (*yathādhammaṃ paṭikaroti*). However, when Ajātasattu leaves, the Buddha says to the bhikkhus, "the king is wounded (*khata*), and done for (*upahata*)" (D i.86). Had Ajātasattu not killed his father, the text tells us, he would have attained the eye of wisdom (*dhammacakkhu*) after hearing the discourse. Patricide is one the five actions which result in immediate rebirth in hell after death. The committer of patricide is said to be *atekiccha* ("incurable" or "unpardonable") and the discourse could have no effect on him (C.f. A

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<sup>2</sup> There is no suggestion of Ajātasattu's collusion with Devadatta in this story.

iii.146). Buddhaghosa's commentary records that after his death, Ajātasattu goes to the Hell of Copper Kettles (DA 1.237).

It is a central feature of karma in the Pāli texts that the consequences of actions manifest as rebirth in one or other of the realms in which one can be reborn. In the *Cūlakammavibhaṅga Sutta*, for instance, using a stock phrase, the fruits of actions are experienced “with the breaking up of the body after death” (*kāyassa bhedaṃ paraṃ maraṇā* M iii.203) as a happy or miserable destination (*sugati/duggati*). However, the moral force of karma would be weakened if it did not allow for actions to ripen in this life as well. The technical term for this is: “actions to be experienced in this life” (*kammaṃ diṭṭhadhammavedaniyaṃ*).<sup>3</sup>

The phrase *yathādhammā paṭīkaroti* “returning to lawfulness” had previously been misinterpreted (Attwood *Ajātasattu* 298f). When Ajātasattu told the Buddha of having killed his own father he cannot be considered to be “making amends” (as some translators suggest), nor does the Buddha “forgive” him since such a thing is not in his power. Ajātasattu confesses and makes a resolution to return to moral behavior, nothing more. The Buddha acknowledges the confession and resolution, but does not intervene in any way, because in the worldview of that text there is no conceivable intervention. This is why the Buddha says the King is “wounded and done for.” It is simply not possible for him to intervene between a person and the consequences of their actions. This is borne out by comparing all the uses of *yathādhamma-paṭī-kṛ* in the *Nikāyas*.

In the early Buddhist texts the results of actions are inescapable; there is nothing that stands between us and the consequences of our ac-

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<sup>3</sup> *diṭṭhi-dhamma* is a Pāli idiom which more literally means “whose nature is visible,” but is understood to mean “here and now,” or “in this life.”



tions. The Theravāda tradition came to see this belief as epitomized in a verse from the *Dhammapada* (Dhp 127):

Not in the sky, nor the middle of the ocean,  
Nor in a mountain cave;  
Though terrified, there is nowhere on earth  
Where one might escape from an evil action.<sup>4</sup>

Buddhaghosa, for example, cites this verse while explaining the term *dhammatā*, “naturalness,” in his commentary on the *Mahāpadāna Sutta*. He uses it to demonstrate the inevitability of karma (*kamma-niyāma*), which is one of the five kinds of inevitability (*pañcavidhaṃ niyāma*).<sup>5</sup> To illustrate the principle, he tells the story of a woman who quarrels with her husband and murders him. She is about to hang herself when a man with a knife comes to rescue her. But in order to ensure that the consequences of the woman’s action manifest, the rope she is hanging herself with turns into a snake and frightens the man off. The woman dies a short time later (*Itarā tattheva mari* DA 2.431), though we are not told how.<sup>6</sup> In the *Atthasālinī* (272-274) Buddhaghosa uses the commentarial back-story for Dhp 127 to illustrate the inevitability of karma at

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<sup>4</sup> All translations are my own unless stated.

<sup>5</sup> The inevitability of actions (*kammaniyāma*); of seasonal change (*utuniyāma*); of seeds (*bhijaniyāma*); of thoughts (*cittaniyāma*); and of natures (*dhammaniyāma*). The last describes the inevitability of the miracles accompanying the birth of a Buddha. This list occurs in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* (DA 2.431); *Atthasālinī* (272-274); *Abhidhammāvatāra* (VRI 66; vs. 468-473; PTS 54); *Abhidhamma-mātikā* (VRI 58); and *Abhidhammāvatāra-purāṇa tikā* (VRI 1.68). See also Jones.

<sup>6</sup> The morality in this episode is perhaps a little strange from a standard Buddhist point of view. The story seems to suggest that death by suicide is a fitting result for a murderer, and that nature would miraculously intervene to make sure that it occurred. It emphasises the heterogeneity of Buddhist morality.

greater length. For Buddhaghosa, the results of actions are absolutely inescapable.

The *Nikāyas* do suggest ways in which one might lessen the impact of the consequences of our previous actions. For instance, the *Lona-phala Sutta* (AN 3.99) tells us that “When someone practices awareness, ethics, and dwells in the immeasurable . . . then they are less bothered by the consequences of small evils” (Attwood *Ajātasattu* 296). However there is no way to avoid the consequences entirely. This is a distinctive moral teaching of the Early Buddhists, and it is precisely this aspect of Buddhist morality that changes.

Before looking at how this distinctive teaching changes, and why, we need to consider why karma had to be inevitable in the first place. In order to discover this, we must look at its precedents.

## Part II: Precedents

### *Brahmanical*

It is common to see Buddhist eschatology as reliant on Upaniṣadic eschatology. Thus, it is worthwhile to survey briefly the eschatological theories found in the early Upaniṣads. In these texts, the word karma had ritual rather than ethical significance. In the late Vedic literature, dating roughly from a few centuries before the Buddha, we begin to find references to one’s afterlife destination being dependent on one’s actions (karma) in life. In fact, in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BU), we find a number of different action-based eschatologies. BU 4.4.5 states:

However he acts or behaves, he becomes that. Acting right (*sādhu*) he is right, acting harmfully (*pāpa*) he is harmful.

He is good (*puṇya*) by doing good actions, and evil by doing evil actions.<sup>7</sup>

Action here is indicated by the action nouns *kārin*, “one who acts” (from the same root,  $\sqrt{kr}$ , as karma), and *cārin*, “one who behaves [in a particular way].” The terms *sādhu* and *puṇya* seem not to be ethical terms, but are more likely to refer to satisfactory participation in ritual life. This suggests that the opposite, *pāpa*, might also not be an ethical term in this context. With reference mainly to ethical distinctions, Gananath Obeyesekere says:

There can no longer be a single place for those who have done good and those who have done bad. The otherworld [i.e., the afterlife] must minimally split into two, a world of retribution (‘hell’) and a world of reward (‘heaven’).  
(79)

So, even in this ritual context, the very fact of there being a right way to behave and a wrong way results in different afterlife destinations. This traditional Vedic eschatology is contrasted in BU with one in which a man’s actions based on desire (*kāma*) cause him to cycle between this world and the next world (BU 4.4.6). In the next world, the results of actions are exhausted, and it is only in this world that consequential actions are performed. However, a man free from desire has a different fate: *brahmaiva sanbrahmāpyeti*, “he is only brahman, he goes to brahman.”<sup>8</sup> The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (CU) 8.1-2 also appears to list a number of

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<sup>7</sup> *yathākārī yathācārī tathā bhavati | sādhuḥkārī sādhuḥ bhavati | pāpakārī pāpo bhavati | puṇyaḥ puṇyena karmaṇā pāpaḥ pāpena ||* The Vedic texts, including the Upaniṣads, discuss this process in masculine terms, and it is uncertain as to whether women were included.

<sup>8</sup> Following Olivelle. A literal reading would be “only brahman goes to brahman,” which seems to rely on the notion that “I am brahman” (*ahaṃ brahmāsmi*). Again, it is doubtful

alternative post-mortem destinations based on desires. Giving up desire is part of a renunciate lifestyle in this context, and again this is not quite ethics. This would appear to be a development of the earlier Vedic eschatology of cycling between this world and the next world, but has introduced the notion of escaping from this cycle. References to this kind of eschatology are perhaps discerned in Pāli in the pair “this world” (*ayaṃ loko*) and “the other world” (*paro loko*) at D i.55, D iii.264, M i.227 etc.

Finally both BU and CU propose different post-mortem destinations for those who know about the Five Fires (*pañcāgni-vidyā*), those who only practice the ordinary Brahmanical rituals, and those who do neither (BU 6.2, CU 5.2-10). Richard Gombrich has suggested that certain Pāli texts, particularly the *Tevijja Sutta*, make allusions to the Five Fires. According to Gombrich this can be interpreted as the Buddha having had knowledge of the Upaniṣads (Gombrich 80-84).

Here, then, are three distinct versions of how one’s afterlife destination might be affected by this life: good [ritual] actions (*sādhukārin*), actions free from desire (*niṣkāma*),<sup>9</sup> and actions based on special knowledge (*vidyā*). There are some similarities with Buddhist karma and rebirth here, and we should not be surprised to find that Brahmanism might have influenced Buddhism because the Buddhist texts feature Brahmins and their beliefs quite prominently and record many Brahmin converts. However, it is worth noting that there seems to be no equivalent of karma ripening in this life, no sense that an action in this life will have ethical consequences in this life. Brahmanical karma appears to in-

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whether women were included in this scheme, so I have not corrected the gender specific language of the texts in my translations.

<sup>9</sup> BU 4.4.7: “without desire, free of desire, satisfied, whose [only] desire is *ātman*” (*akāma niṣkāma āptakāma ātmakāma*).

volve only rituals concerned with the afterlife and not ethical considerations.

Obeyesekere shows that all rebirth eschatologies are broadly similar and thus we should expect similarities between the rebirth eschatologies of Vedic and Buddhist cultures that are independent of any interactions between them. Indeed, as Wendy Doniger points out, “It is clear from Obeyesekere’s presentation that the karma theory of rebirth is not a linear development from Vedic and Upaniṣadic religion, but a composite structure” (xiii). One important question that remains unanswered, as far as I’m aware, is why the Brahmins came to see their traditional eschatology as unsatisfactory. Why did cycling between this world and the next cease to comfort Brahmins? A possible answer to this question is discussed below.

Another possible source for Buddhist karma is Jainism. Richard Gombrich, citing work by Will Johnson, has explored this connection (45–59). The Jain version of karma does not distinguish between good and bad actions, but says that *all* action is harmful. This may suggest that Jainism influenced Buddhism, though Jainism per se is only likely to have been a generation or two earlier. One possible influence is the use of the word *āśava*, literally influxes, which may be a reference to the weighing down of the *jīva* or soul by the “dust” caused by action.

However, we need to be cautious about opinions on ancient Jainism. The Jains, according to their own traditions, which are confirmed by modern scholarship, lost the texts that might parallel the Pāli suttas. Our ideas about early Jainism are reconstructions, partly based on the Pāli suttas, which contain glimpses of the Jains. We know that the early Buddhist portrayals of Brahmins are often parodies and caricatures for the purposes of polemic, so we need to take the Buddhist view of Jains with a grain of salt. The history of early Jainism is far more uncertain than the history of early Buddhism. Even if we accept the reconstructed versions

of Jainism, this only tells us about the situation contemporary with the Buddha or perhaps a generation earlier—at something like 100 generations removed. It is more likely that the comparisons only become coherent many centuries later. Broadly speaking, the two traditions emerged from the same culture at the same time and developed alongside each other.

Based on an original observation by Michael Witzel, I have suggested that both Jainism and Buddhism have roots that go considerably deeper than previously thought, and that the emergence of both, along with other groups like the Ājivakas, represents the *culmination* of a process rather than the *genesis* of one (Attwood “Origins”). This process is one of assimilation of ideas associated with Zoroastrianism and Iranian culture.

#### *The Iranian connection*

For some time, Michael Witzel has been suggesting a connection between the Śākya tribe, of which the Buddha was a member, and Iran. The connecting factor is a migrating branch of the Śaka people of North-western Iran, one group of whom became the Śākya tribe. Having investigated Witzel’s suggestion, I found it to be plausible, if not definite, because it seems to provide explanations for some observations about Buddhist ideas and practices that are otherwise difficult to explain.

One of the conjectures in this Iranian connection thesis is that ethical eschatology, i.e., judgment after death based upon how one had lived, was introduced into North-eastern India by the migration of tribes originating from Iran that had been exposed to Zoroastrian ethics and eschatology. In Iran, the idea of post-mortem judgment is associated with Zoroastrianism, though it in turn it appears to borrow from Egyptian religious ideas. If this conjecture is correct, these ideas, once inject-

ed into Indian culture in the central Ganges plains, would have spread both east and west, influencing the development of both the *brāhmaṇa* and *śrāmaṇa* cultures.

Buddhism and Zoroastrianism both analyze the actions of a person in terms of body, speech and mind. In Vedic literature, this triad is found only in *Manusmṛti* (12.10f), which is much later than the period being considered. Amongst all the Indo-European speakers, and all the peoples of South Asia, only Zoroastrians and Buddhists appear to be concerned with the morality of body, speech and mind. Explaining this similarity is difficult. A migration that skirted the powerful Kuru kingdom and settled on the margins of the emerging kingdoms of Kosala and Magadha is a way of explaining the known facts. And there is some sparse evidence that such a migration may have taken place.

As described above, karma is most importantly a post-mortem judgment on the ethicality of this life. In the case of Ajātasattu, his fate was rebirth in hell. The concept of hell as an afterlife destination is well developed in Zoroastrianism, where it may have been influenced by Egyptian eschatology. However, Hell emerged as if from nowhere in the Late Vedic period and its ruler, Yama, had previously dwelt in the sky (with the ancestors) rather than in the underworld.<sup>10</sup> Buddhist descriptions of the tortures of hell are detailed and graphic. One text in particular, the *Devadūta Sutta* (MN 130), stands out as being similar in some ways to a scene in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* where the scribe Ani's soul is weighed against the law and his fate decided. The main difference is that in the *Devadūta Sutta*, one's fate is decided by one's own behavior. The main character in the text arrives in hell, and Yama only reminds him of why he is there. Similarly, in Zoroastrianism "the soul's fate depends

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<sup>10</sup> The development of the idea of Hell in India requires more study. It is touched on by Stausberg and Jurewicz.

solely on the sum of the individual's thoughts, words, and acts, the good being weighed against the bad, so that no observances should avail it in any way" (Boyce *Death*).

Returning to the idea of inescapability, another similarity between Buddhist and Zoroastrian eschatologies is that nothing can intervene in the process of judgment. For Zoroastrians, as noted above, only one's thoughts, words and deeds can affect one's afterlife. Mary Boyce adds that Zoroaster insisted " . . . on the unwavering impartiality of divine justice. According to him . . . there could be no intervention, whether compassionate or capricious, by any divine Being to alter this" (*Zoroastrians* 29). Likewise, in early Buddhism the outcome of karma is fixed only by the action itself. Nothing can be done to avoid the outcome. Over time, as we will see below, this limitation is gradually removed by Buddhists, but initially Zoroastrians and Buddhists agree that the judging is inevitable, impartial (even impersonal), and inescapable.

My suggestion is that we could see various doctrines of karma as part of the culmination of a process of assimilation of Iranian and/or Zoroastrian ideas by the various tribes in the central Ganges Plain region, introduced by the Śākyas (and others). The process of assimilation probably started soon after 850 B.C.E. when climate change affected the environment and set in process a series of migrations across Eurasia and the sub-continent. The emergence in the Fifth or Fourth centuries B.C.E. of Buddhism, Jainism and Ājivakāism as organized religious movements marks a mature phase of this process. In particular, the Buddhist theory of karma may well emerge from the application of the Zoroastrian ideas of a single afterlife destination (Heaven or Hell) to a belief system incorporating cyclic rebirth.



I suppose cyclic rebirth to be an Indian regional belief, since it is almost unknown amongst Indo-European speakers outside India.<sup>11</sup> The simple cycle between this world and the next becomes differentiated first into good and bad destinations because of ideas of right and wrong, and later into more possibilities depending on how one lived. However, it is still cyclic. BU and CU record a transitional period in Vedic thought when new eschatological ideas associated with escaping from the cycle of birth and death were being assimilated by Brahmins. The newness is marked in the text by being associated with kings who are *kṣatriyas*. A great deal of ink has been spilled trying to explain the role of the *kṣatriya*/king in introducing these new ideas with no real consensus except that the ideas were novel and had no Vedic precedent.

Buddhist texts, as well as the early Upaniṣads, consider escaping from the rounds of rebirth to be the point of religious practices. If the idea of a single destination after death was introduced into the central Ganges valley by the Śākyas, then it may help to explain why escaping the rounds of rebirth first appears as an idea in BU, which was composed in that region (Cohen; Witzel). Cohen has also perceived in BU a challenge to the authority of the *Ṛgveda* from a sect taking the *Yajurveda* as their authority. The Brahmins of the newly colonized Kosala-Videha region were less conservative those in the Kuru-Pañcala heartland and in a position to interact with the incomers who brought new ideas with them.

The Iranian connection thesis leaves intact the current consensus regarding the chronology of texts, or at least does not demand a change in that chronology such as the one proposed by Johannes Bronkhorst in

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<sup>11</sup> Compare regional linguistic features such as the retroflexion of consonants. Some ancient Greeks also believed in reincarnation; see Obeyesekere (190ff) for a detailed description of this eschatology.

*Greater Magadha*. Bronkhorst’s argument, in part, depends on rearranging the texts in time to make it seem that ideas flowed in the opposite direction from what is the current consensus. But because that rearrangement is co-dependent on the revised reading, his main argument is circular. I’m also persuaded by the argument that internal textual evidence argues for the current chronology. If we view the idea of escaping from cyclic rebirth as already developing in the Kosala-Videha region when the Upaniṣads were being composed, we could see the emergence of the idea in Śramaṇa and Brāhmaṇa culture as a *parallel* development. It only requires that Brahmins began to discuss it in their texts before Buddhists, and in the Vedic milieu described by Cohen and Witzel, this is quite conceivable.

Having explored the early Buddhist position on the inevitability of karma, and some possible reasons why the idea was framed as it was, we can now go on to look at how the theory of karma developed in the Common Era, beginning with developments in the *Samaññaphala Sutta* or as we will now refer to it, the *Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra*.

### Part III: *Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra* and Ajātaśatru’s Redemption

The *Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra* (ŚPS) is the focal point of this study of changes in the doctrine of karma. The various versions nicely illustrate the change that is the main concern of this article. Our exploration of ŚPS is facilitated by the study published by MacQueen which included seven versions of the text: one in Pāli (-P), one fragment in Sanskrit (-S)<sup>12</sup>, one

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<sup>12</sup> When I wrote Attwood (“Ajātasattu”) I did not have access to the Sanskrit text. I can now point out that the Sanskrit text lacks a proper parallel to the phrase *yathā-dhammaṃ paṭikarosi*. Instead we find the verb *paṭikarosi* replaced by the causative verb *deśayasi* with no adverb, viz. “*yataś ca tvaṃ mahārāja atyayaṃ jānāsi atyayaṃ paśyasi ca*

in Tibetan (-T)<sup>13</sup> and four in Chinese (-C1, -C2, -C3, -C4).<sup>14</sup> A Gāndhārī version has subsequently come to light and is discussed in Allon (2007); however, it is incomplete and does not contain the part of the text that interests us here.<sup>15</sup> The much broader study of the Ajātaśatru story, especially in Chinese texts, by Michael Radich (2011) offers some useful insights into the development of the story and its place in Chinese and Japanese history.

Regarding the episode involving Ajātaśatru's confession and the Buddha's response, ŚPS-S, ŚPS-T and ŚPS-C3 agree with the Pāli version and see the king as irreparably damaged by the act of patricide. As King Ajātaśatru walks away from his encounter with the Buddha, ŚPS-S says: *evaṃ kṣato bhikṣavo rājā māgadho 'jātaśatrur vaidehīputraḥ evam upahataḥ*;<sup>16</sup> while the ŚPS-P has *khatāyaṃ, bhikkhave, rājā. Upahatāyaṃ, bhikkhave, rājā*. So, both agree that the king is, in MacQueen's translation "injured and stricken" (101), or as I put it "wounded and done for" (S. *kṣata* and *upahata*; P. *khata* and *upahata*). Both of these texts nicely illustrate the early Buddhist attitude to karma as inescapable. Repenting has no power

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*dr̥ṣṭvādeśayasi āyatyāṃ cā saṃvaram āpadyase. . .*" which MacQueen translates "because, Great King, you recognize and see your transgression, and seeing it confess it [*deśayasi*] and attain to control in the future . . ." (100). Clearly the intent of this passage is the same as the Pāli. Unfortunately, the Gāndhārī version stops well short of this episode and can shed no light on the phrasing (Allon).

<sup>13</sup> MacQueen consulted only the Otani reprint of the Peking Kanjur. There is considerable variation between editions of the Tibetan Canon, so it is not always realistic to take one edition as representative. For example, Jonathan Silk compares versions found in fourteen editions of the Tibetan Kanjur, no two of which are identical.

<sup>14</sup> The alphanumeric labels are those used by MacQueen. Full details of these texts are found in the Bibliography and in MacQueen.

<sup>15</sup> My thanks to Mark Allon for supplying me with a copy of his article.

<sup>16</sup> "Thus monks, Ajātaśatru, Son of Vaidehī, King of Māgadha is wounded, thus he is done for."

to change the outcome, and nor does a meeting with the Buddha. However compare ŚPS-C1:

If the king Ajātaśatru had not killed his father he would have on this very spot obtained the purity of the *dharm*-eye; nevertheless, in as much as the king Ajātaśatru has now repented his error, *his transgression is diminished and he has removed a weighty offence.* (49. Emphasis added.)

Here the transgression is diminished precisely because it was repented. Between the composition of ŚPS-S and ŚPS-C1 a major shift has taken place. The two phrases are not quite in agreement; “diminished” and “removed” are not the same thing at all. However, it is at least clear that the redactor of -C1 felt that Ajātaśatru deserved a break for having confessed. ŚPS-C2 goes even further:

When the king had left and while he was yet not far from the Buddha, he addressed Jīvaka Kumāra: ‘You have done me much profit and benefit by having me go to the Buddha to receive his instruction on the Law; having had an audience with the World Honoured One I have been released from my sinful transgression and have had a *weighty fault made light.*’

The Buddha addressed the *bhikṣus*: ‘The king Ajātaśatru has already attained the receptivity of ordinary beings. Although he has killed a law-king (法王), *he has completely done away with the imperfections and impurities and is free from the Outflows* [i.e., *āsavas*]. He is established in the Law and will not regress. On this very seat the eye for *dharmas*, which is far from dust and free of impurity, has arisen [in him].’ (69. Emphasis added.)

Here, C2 perceives Ajātaśatru's meeting with the Buddha and receiving the teaching as the key ingredient in avoiding the consequences of the action of patricide. However, there is again some ambiguity in the way the let-off is phrased. MacQueen sees three not entirely consistent statements:

1. The king is said to obtain the “receptivity of ordinary beings” (已得生忍);
2. He is said to have “completely done away with the imperfections and impurities” (了除瑕穢) and to be “free from the Outflows” (無有諸漏)<sup>17</sup>;
3. He is said “to have attained the *dharmacakṣu*” (諸法眼生).

Regarding the first statement, MacQueen relates 已得生忍 to *pothujjanikā saddhā* (the faith of ordinary beings) in Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Pāli text (225). ŚPS-P leaves the king “wounded and done for,” causing Buddhaghosa to ask, “What benefit did the king get from hearing the sutta?”<sup>18</sup> His first answer is that Ajātaśatru gained a good night's sleep for the first time since killing his father. Then: “He paid great reverence to the three jewels. The one endowed with ordinary faith was not equal to the king.”<sup>19</sup> He goes on to say that in the future

<sup>17</sup> That is free from *saṃrāga* (瑕穢) and *āsrava* (諸漏).

<sup>18</sup> *Idaṃ pana suttaṃ sutvā raññā koci ānisaṃso laddhoti?* (DA i.237).

<sup>19</sup> *Tiṇṇaṃ ratanānaṃ mahāsakkāraṃ akāsi. Pothujjanikāya saddhāya samannāgato nāma iminā raññā sadiso nāhosi.* (DA i.237). MacQueen (232) translates: “He went on to pay great honour to the Three Treasures. There was no one endowed with the faith of ordinary people as he was.” I read *samannāgato* (nominative: “the one endowed [with the faith of a pothujjana]”) as the subject of this sentence, and the passage as saying that the *samannāgato* is not equal with the king (*iminā raññā* in the instrumental case), that is, that the king's faith is superior to that of ordinary folk.

(that is, in a future life) the king will become a *paccekabuddha* and attain *parinibbāna* (after his spell in hell) (DA i.237). However, 忍 is not usually interpreted as translating *saddhā*. Typically it translates words from the root  $\sqrt{kṣam}$  “to forbear,” such as *kṣānti* “forbearance.” Even if the equation of 已得生忍 and *pothujjanikā saddhā* is doubtful, the fact that Buddhaghosa was concerned to know what benefit had accrued from the meeting suggests that MacQueen is correct to highlight the progression of Buddhist thought from the Buddha being unable to help Ajātaśatru to his being “saved” by meeting the Buddha.

For MacQueen, there is a contradiction in the three statements about Ajātaśatru’s attainment. The first statement is a relatively low level of spiritual attainment; the second is consistent with Arhatship; the third is associated with becoming a stream entrant (*srotāpanna*). He concludes, “Obviously the three statements do not fit, but betray a process of awkward change and development in the textual tradition” (226).

Thus, in the various versions of this text we see the change in the theory of karma in the process of happening. Interestingly, ŚPS-C2 (381-395 C.E.) was translated into Chinese before ŚPS-C1 (413 C.E.).

MacQueen points out that in the texts that allow for the redemption of Ajātaśatru, the form of the text has changed. In ŚPS-P, the story of the king is a framing story for a lengthy discourse on the benefits of the renunciate lifestyle (*samaññaphala*). However, in those versions that redeem Ajātasattu, the text is turned inside out; the framing story becomes more important than the content. As MacQueen says, this suggests that for the composer(s) of ŚPS-P the renunciate lifestyle was more important, but for the composer(s) of ŚPS-C1 & C2 the meeting with the Buddha was more important. Accordingly, MacQueen sees the change in terms of the increasing prestige of the Buddha, although he also sees a role for the natural elaboration of story telling (214-5; 220ff). Radich shows this process continuing in the retelling of the story in the

*Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* “so that the story is entirely about Ajātaśatru’s repentance and exculpation; and it depicts the Buddha as saving Ajātaśatru in much more elaborate and glorious terms” (22).

This change is all the more marked in the light of stories in the Pāli suttas in which the Buddha’s meeting with people fails to have a positive impact. Examples include his meeting with Upaka the Ājivaka during his journey to meet his five former companions at Isipatana (MN i.170-1), or his meeting with a man whose son has died (MN ii.106-7). For later Buddhists, a meeting with the Buddha becomes the turning point in the lives of disciples. Even before the close of the Canon, the practice of recollecting the Buddha (*buddhānusmṛti*) has become one of the main forms of practice. And for Buddhaghosa, one who is engaged in recollecting the Buddha is to be venerated like a *chaitya* (Vism vii.67).

Radich discusses the increasing emphasis on confession in China (53-54), but as the next section will show, it is a major concern in Indian Buddhist texts as well. So, although the Chinese encounter with rebirth may have led to adoption of Ajātaśatru as an exemplary beneficiary of Buddha’s power to save beings, the possibility of escaping from the consequences of actions was growing in India as well.

The *Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra* is not an isolated case. There is a parallel in the *Āṅgulimāla Sutta* (MN ii.97ff.). In the case of the conversion of the mass murderer Āṅgulimāla, however, the power of the Buddha has clear limits. After his awakening, while begging for alms, the former mass murderer is pelted with missiles by the townspeople. The Buddha tells Āṅgulimāla that this is old karma ripening and that he must simply bear it (MN ii.104). This story demonstrates the inevitability of karma, even while it equivocates in demonstrating the salvific power of the Buddha by allowing a mass murderer to become an arahant. Bhikkhu Anālayo’s study of the Chinese versions of the *Āṅgulimāla* story reveals that this text undergoes a transformation similar to that of the *Śrāmaṇyaphala*

*Sūtra*. The conversion is highlighted, and exists in increasingly elaborate versions. Anālayo reads this elaboration of the conversion as an aspect of the fascination with conversion per se (145) and notes that other events, particularly the lingering resentment of the townspeople, are relegated to the background (146). Indeed, in the *Samyuktāgama* version that Anālayo translates, there is no mention of the attack on Aṅgulimāla. The translated text is slightly ambiguous. It has Aṅgulimāla say:

A man who earlier performed evil deeds,  
 Who with right wholesomeness can cause them to cease,  
 With right mindfulness he goes beyond  
 The current craving and affection in this world.”  
 Previously I did such evil deeds,  
 Which certainly would have led me to an evil borne,  
 “[But now] I have experienced the fruit of evil,  
 Already [free of] former debts I eat [my] food.” (139)<sup>20</sup>

The quoted passage begins by intimating that Aṅgulimāla has overcome his evil deeds but ends by suggesting that he has not side-stepped his karma. In any case, he is liberated because he has already experienced the results of his actions. The inevitability of karma is stretched but not broken. Although the Chinese text notes the resentment that people feel towards him, their attack on him is left out of this account, which has the effect of playing down his own residual karma and leaving the lingering resentment people feel towards him on the doorstep of the resentful.

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<sup>20</sup> This verse section parallels the verse section at the end of the Pāli. These Pāli verses are not explicit about the attack on Aṅgulimāla, but they do refer to his enemies and their wish to harm him, where the Chinese seems not to. The attack may have been added to the Pāli text as an after-thought.



The story of Ajātaśatru goes on to inspire further doctrinal developments, particularly in Japan, where Shinran used the idea of 無根信 *mukonshin* or “rootless faith” (Skt. \**amūlikā śaddhā*) in the development of his ideas of faith (Radich 78ff). The term is found in title of the C3 (T 2.125) version of the *Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra*. The story also forms the basis of the “Ajase Complex,” a modern Japanese that Radich calls a “psychoanalytic theory of religion, intended to challenge or supplement that of Sigmund Freud” (17).

Having explored the transition in the theory of karma from inescapable to at least potentially escapable on the basis of meeting the Buddha, we now turn to a collection of texts that represent the mature Mahāyāna outlook.

### *Śikṣāsamuccaya*

The *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (ŚSm) is anthology of passages from Mahāyāna texts compiled in the Eighth century by Śāntideva that outlines the *bodhisattva* path to liberation. In the section on purification of evil (*pāpaśodhana*), Śāntideva includes several extracts that point to a more mature version of escaping karma. These are presented as four successive practices for the aspiring Bodhisattva as found in the *Caturdharmaka Sūtra* (ŚSm 160): confession (*vidūṣanā*); opposition (*pratipakṣa*); restoration (*patyāpatti*); and seeking refuge (*āśraya*). Śāntideva also mentions the purifying power of *bodhicitta* in this respect.

Each of the four practices is described as having a power (*bala*), and that power, inevitably, is the overcoming of evil (*pāpa*), or more specifically is the overcoming of the consequences (*vipakṣa*) of evil actions. Confession is typified by the *Suvarṇaprabhāsottama Sūtra*, which includes the phrase:

May the Tathāgatas carry away the fruits of defiled actions for me;  
 And may the Buddhas wash me in the flowing waters of their compassion.<sup>21</sup>

Later, the *bodhisattva* is said to be purified of evil (*pāpaśuddhiḥ kāryā*) by confession, calling the names of the *buddhas*, reciting the *Triskandhadharma*,<sup>22</sup> and meditation. (ŚSm 171).

The next section, on “opposition,” opens with the idea that “there is destruction of evil from knowledge of the profound texts.”<sup>23</sup> Śāntideva then contrasts various kinds of practices with various kinds of “evil” actions. The practices include book worship, recollection of the name of the Buddha (*nāmānusmṛti*)<sup>24</sup>, and *dhāraṇī* or mantra repetition. The gist is that one does these activities to counteract evil actions. This section includes the practice of reciting the hundred syllables eight thousand times, which comes from the *Trisamayārāja*. This text is treated as a *kriya tantra* by Tibetan Buddhists. I have not been able to identify the one hundred syllable mantra, but in the Chinese version it is referred to as the “vajra one hundred syllable mantra” (金剛百字真言 T. 21.1201, p19c). It is possible that the *Hundred Syllable Vajrasattva Mantra* is intended.

The subject of restoration is treated more briefly. It mainly consists in performing the ten good paths of action (*daśakuśalāḥ karmaṣāḥ*).

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<sup>21</sup> *kleśakarmaphalaṃ mahyaṃ pravāhayantu tathāgatāḥ |  
 snāpayantu ca māṃ buddhāḥ kārūṇyasaritôdakaiḥ ||* (ŚSm 163)

<sup>22</sup> Another text that includes sections on obeisance and confession.

<sup>23</sup> *tatra gambhīrasūtrāntaparicayāt pāpakṣayo bhavati ||*

<sup>24</sup> For a description of *nāmānusmṛti* see Studholm.

Thus the ten paths of good actions are spoken of as the destroyers of the fruits of one's own unskillfulness.<sup>25</sup>

Again, we see a sea change. In Pāli texts, the ten paths of good action cannot destroy the fruit of actions. They can only set up the conditions for positive experiences in the future.

The last of the four practices, seeking refuge (*āśraya*), is given only brief treatment. The essence of this practice comes from the *Sūkarikāvadānam*:

Those who go to the Buddha refuge do not go to a bad re-birth;

Removed from their human bodies, they receive divine bodies.

So also for the Dharma and Sangha refuges, thus evil is ended.<sup>26</sup>

However, there is also the purifying power of *bodhicitta*, as mentioned in the *Āryamaitreyavimokṣa*. The *Upālipariṣṭha* makes a distinction between the bodhisattva and *śrāvaka*: in possession of *bodhicitta* the bodhisattva need not be overly concerned with transgressions, but the *śrāvaka* must beware of destroying their virtue (*śīlaskandha*). It seems here that attaining *bodhicitta* has a function similar to that of meeting the Buddha in the *Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra*—it purifies one's karma.

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<sup>25</sup> *evaṃ daśāpi kuśalāḥ karmaṭhāḥ svavipakṣākuśalaghātakās tatra paṭhyante || (ŚSm 177)*

<sup>26</sup> *ye buddhaṃ śaraṇaṃ yānti na te gacchanti durgatiṃ |  
prahāya mānuṣān kāyān divyān kāyāṃl labhanti te ||  
ity evaṃ dharmāṃ saṃghaṃ cādhiḥṛtya pāpakṣayaḥ || (ŚSm 177).*

Thus, in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* the escapability of karma is normalized. The next stage in the development of this idea is hinted at in *ŚSm* and can be seen in the *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha* (STTS) and the mantra of Vajrasattva.<sup>27</sup>

### *The hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra*

The Vajrasattva mantra is included in a collection of miscellaneous practices in the STTS. It takes the form of a series of requests for Vajrasattva's indulgence and assistance, punctuated by seed syllables. For the mantra itself, see Jayarava ("Hundred"). What interests us here is the framing narrative for the mantra that explains when it is used and for what purpose. The whole passage amounts to just two paragraphs, written in nearly impenetrable Buddhist Sanskrit jargon. We are fortunate to have Todaro's translation of the Sanskrit and Geibel's translation of the Chinese parallel, though sometimes the text remains obscure to the uninitiated (including the present author).

The mantra is used if one's seal empowerment becomes lax (*mudrādiṣṭhānaṃ śithilībhavati*) or if there is a selfish desire for liberation (*svayaṃ vā muktukāmo bhavati*).<sup>28</sup> The benefit of reciting the mantra is more difficult to render into English and the two translations differ in their wording.

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<sup>27</sup> The identification of STTS as the earliest source text for the Vajrasattva Mantra was part of a joint project between the present author and Maitiu O'Ceileachair, which remains unfinished. Our notes to date are available on the author's blog, along with comments on the Chinese and Tibetan Canonical versions of the mantra: <http://jayarava.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/canonical-sources-for-vajrasattva.html>. See also Jayarava ("Hundred").

<sup>28</sup> Geibel has "... or if one's mind should wish to release the seal."

Notwithstanding continuous killing, the slander of all the Tathāgatas, the repudiation of the true teaching and even all evil and injury, (by this) the perfection of all the Tathāgata's mudrās from the strengthening of Vajrasattva, in the present life as you desire, and all accomplishments, the supreme accomplishment, the thunderbolt accomplishment or the accomplishment of Vajrasattva, up to the accomplishment of the Tathāgata, will be attained quickly. (Todaro 322)

The English is not elegant, but having studied the Sanskrit text I can do no better. Geibel's translation from the Chinese confirms that what is intended is a list of the worse actions that one can perform, actions that would normally result in long stays in hell. All of them are nullified by chanting this mantra.

In all of our examples so far, we have simply taken the texts on face value, with the initial caveat that they represent normative ideals. Here we must pause to consider whether this is intended literally or merely represents piety. From the text itself we cannot tell. Popular presentations of the practice suggest that some Buddhists believe that chanting this mantra can eliminate all evil karma. If this is so, we could say that in this mantra the process of releasing people from the consequences of their actions reaches its apotheosis. It represents a very different worldview, a different ethos, from the theory of karma found in the Pāli suttas.

## **Conclusion**

The Buddhist theory of karma begins as a narrative about the absolutely inescapable consequences of actions that produce a moral imperative to

act in accordance with Buddhist norms. Early Buddhist ethics are rooted in the idea that no matter what happens, and death notwithstanding, the consequences of our actions must be lived. The consequences of our actions can ripen in this life for good or ill, but more importantly they collectively determine whether we are liberated from rebirth (and therefore from suffering) or, if not liberated, into which realm we are reborn. This, in turn, determines the extent of suffering we are likely to experience in life, from minimal amounts in the god realms to maximal amounts in the hells. This is a potent ethical theme that, if believed wholeheartedly, would no doubt motivate the individual to conform to ethical norms.

Based on Michael Witzel's theory that the Śākya tribe, along with other tribes from the same region, originated in Iran, this article has suggested that we might look beyond India to Iran and Zoroastrianism in order to fully understand why Buddhist ethics took this initial shape. In this view, Buddhism emerges as the culmination of a process of assimilation of ideas from many sources.

Like Zoroastrians, the early Buddhists were concerned with how actions of body, speech, and mind determined one's afterlife destination, and saw this as an impersonal, impartial, and inevitable process. This idea is embodied in a number of early Buddhist texts, but the frame story of the Pāli *Samaññaphala Sutta* emphasizes that not even a Buddha may intervene in this process. The best an early Buddhist could hope for was to mitigate the impact of karma on themselves through religious practices that improved their resilience in the face of suffering.

As illustrated in the various versions of the *Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra* and in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, this important criterion of Buddhist ethics was deprecated by Mahāyāna Buddhists. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, as we see it outlined in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, the practitioner was able to dodge the bullet of karma by doing religious practices such as confession that

neutralize *vipāka*. The Chinese versions of the *Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra* were altered so that meeting the Buddha at the very least reduced the weight of karma for King Ajātaśatru and at best eliminated it completely. The *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha* takes this even further. There, chanting the Vajrasattva mantra provided a way forward even for those who commit “unforgiveable” acts (if we take the text on face value).

This change in the metaphysics of karma has some major implications for Buddhist ethics. Buddhists are no longer constrained to avoid evil actions at all costs. They can afford to slip as long as they are prepared to undertake religious practices. Perhaps this change was just an accommodation to human nature; since the unawakened are bound to act unskillfully at some point, Mahāyāna Buddhists reshaped karma to be more tolerant of imperfection, provided that it was contained by piety.

The change might also have been linked to a perennial problem in Buddhism. I.e., how can the ordinary person, whose response to sense experience is attraction and aversion, attain liberation? If karma is inescapable, and, as ordinary people, we keep on creating negative karma, how could we realistically expect to be liberated from suffering? The new answer is that we can be liberated through doing the newly prescribed practices that negate karma.

Similar questions arise when *nirvāṇa* is conceived of as absolutely transcendent or as impossibly far off (as when it is said to require incalculable numbers of lifetimes to achieve). The extreme difficulty of attaining *nirvāṇa* raises its value and status amongst Buddhists, but at the same time makes it virtually unattainable. Because practitioners cannot be motivated unless the goal is attainable, transcendence is countered with a narrative of immanence. However, immanence leads to reification and devaluing. We can see such swings across the history of Buddhist ideas.

MacQueen notes that in the introductory material added to the *Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra* by -C1, Ajātaśatru comes to represent a kind of everyman: “The plight of this specific king becomes the plight of everyone; the modes of action open to him become those open to everyone; the final solution to his problem . . . becomes the solution that ought to be adopted by everyone” (222). In other words, assuming that the audience for the text consisted of Buddhists, the text to some extent becomes a justification for Buddhist beliefs. The same tendency can be seen in the *Pāli Kālāma Sutta* (Jayarava *Kālāmas* 30).

Added to this is the increasing prestige or the “divinization” of the Buddha noted by MacQueen (215). We could compare this to the valorization of *nirvāṇa* already mentioned. The higher the value of the Three Jewels, the higher the prestige of Buddhists themselves, and the higher the charisma of those who claim to have experienced *nirvāṇa*. As Buddhism developed, and particularly where the bodhisattva path became a central feature of Buddhism, it became inconceivable to Buddhists that the Buddha could not intervene to help someone to overcome their karma and to be liberated. As MacQueen puts it, “The successful conversion of this depraved individual demonstrates clearly the power of the Buddha’s ‘divine’ salvific action” (225). Meeting the Buddha in imagination (*buddhānusmṛti*) became an increasingly important practice, since even this virtual meeting was considered to be purifying.

However it came about, and whatever the details now obscured by time, the broad outlines of a major change in the way Buddhists thought about karma is evident. Karma is important in each of the broad time periods identified, but important in different ways. The way karma developed sheds some light on how the priorities of Buddhists changed over time. In particular, absolutist moral imperatives gave way to other considerations, especially the prestige of the Buddha, and perhaps the prestige of Buddhists themselves. Pragmatic concerns regarding human



failings and the achievability of the Buddhist goal probably also played a part.

### **Abbreviations**

BU	<i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad</i>
CU	<i>Chāndogya Upaniṣad</i>
DA	<i>Dīgha Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
MP	<i>Milindapañha</i>
ŚPS	<i>Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra</i> —general references to the text.
ŚPS-P	<i>Samaññaphala Sutta</i> —Pāli
ŚPS-S	<i>Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra</i> —Sanskrit fragment
ŚPS-T	<i>Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra</i> —Tibetan
ŚPS-C1	<i>Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra</i> —Chinese. 沙門果經. T 1.1
ŚPS-C2	<i>Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra</i> —Chinese. 寂志果經. T 1.22
ŚPS-C3	<i>Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra</i> —Chinese. 無根信. T 2.125
ŚPS-C4	<i>Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra</i> —Chinese. [untitled]. T24.1450
ŚSm	<i>Śikṣāsamuccaya</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

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