

Group Karma?

An early Buddhist perspective

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1 Collective action

1.1 INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS. For those who we live in a society—and most of us do—our actions somehow affect others and often instigate more actions. As a rule, we are concerned with the quality of such actions, especially those of others. However, for a healthy society to be sustainable, both self and others have to be able to *respond* to one another in a positive way: this is moral responsibility.¹ When we speak of *moral responsibility*, whether as a social practice or as philosophical analysis, we refer to actions in terms of interpersonal relationships, such as between family members, friends, neighbours, co-workers, clients and even strangers.

In such cases, whatever harm or problem incurred by one individual upon another individual is generally a private affair. There is a growing concern in modern societies that moral responsibility should cover a larger population, even the whole of society, indeed the planet itself. A corrupt government agency, poor service in a health emergency, an oil spill, or even a defective product, can bring harm upon a large number of people. Although it is not always easy to identify the perpetrator or source of such problems, education in moral responsibility is a significant step in at least preventing or lessening them.

The theory of karman [karma] is the first significant attempt in the history of human speculation to explain a man's destiny in terms of his own personal endeavours. The stress on one's own efforts as the sure path to moral purification and personal illumination is the first significant protest against the tribal notions of collective responsibility. Karman heralds the theory of individualism, and, if at the religious level it is opposed to divine predestination and to despotism of God at the social level, it is opposed to the tribal notion of morality which emphasizes the gens (the *communitas*) as the unit and which does not concern itself with the apportionment of justice according to one's deserts. Thus it could be said that the theory of karman is a great individualistic protest against the tribal canons of morality. (Varma 1963:35 f)

Anyone familiar with the early Buddhist texts, would have noticed that any reference to karma is generally made in terms of the individual. Karma, for example, is defined as *volition* (A 6.63),² which is clearly a personal mental state. As such, karma is often understood as *personal responsibility*.³ In **the Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130) and **the (Deva,dūta) Yama Sutta** (A 3.35), we find this refrain after each judgement pronounced by Yama, the lord of the underworld, to the evil dead brought before him:

This evil deed was not done by your mother or your father, or by your brother or your sister, or by your friends and companions, or by your kinsmen and relatives, or by recluses and brahmins, or by gods—this evil deed was done by you yourself, and you yourself will feel its result.⁴ (M 130.4/3:179 f etc) = SD 2.23; (A 3.35/1:138-142)

On a broader social perspective, karma is also seen as *one's occupation*,⁵ and more technically, on a psychological level, it amounts to *one's preoccupation*, that is, habitual tendencies.⁶

¹ See eg Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* [1956] NY: Harper, 1975:26.

² **Nibbedhika S** (A 6.63/3:415) = SD 18.1.

³ See SD 18.1 (4.2).

⁴ See Dh 161, 165.

⁵ See SD 18.1 (4.3).

⁶ See **Saṅkhāra** = SD 17.6.

1.2 THE GROUP ASPECT OF KARMA. Theoretically speaking, you have much less problem with karma if you were the only being on a planet or in the universe. The reality is that we live in a society, and even if we choose to live outside of it, our decision is still rooted in it. Moreover, there are a number of early teachings that allude to the group aspect of karma, and which may be construed by some to be allusions to group karma.

In the **Dakkhīṇa, vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 142), the Buddha is recorded as making this curious prophetic statement:

In the future, Ānanda, there will be members of the religious lineage who are “yellow-necks.” immoral, of evil nature.⁷ People will give them gifts for the sake of the Sangha. Even then, I say, an offering made to the Sangha is immeasurable.⁸ And I say that in no way is a gift to a person individually ever more fruitful than an offering made to the Sangha. (M 142.8/3:256) = SD 1.9.3

The Majjhima Commentary says that a gift offered to immoral monks taken to represent the whole Sangha is more fruitful than a personal gift offered to an arhat. However, this comment should be examined in the light of the Buddha’s statement in **the (Dāna) Vaccha, gotta Sutta** (A 3.57), where he declares:

Vaccha, this I say: even if one throws away the washings from a pot or bowl into a village pool or pond, wishing that beings there may feed on them—even this, Vaccha, would be a source of merit, not to speak of making a gift to human beings.

However, I declare that offerings made to the morally virtuous is of great fruit, and not so of those made to the immoral.⁹ (A 3.57/1:150-162) = SD 22.12

As such, for the gift to be properly given to the Sangha, the donor must consider the personal qualities of the recipient and must see him only as representing the Sangha as a whole (MA 5:74).¹⁰ However, the motivation behind the giving here would probably be *utilitarian*, in which case there would also be *eco-*

⁷ “Members of the religious lineage...of evil nature,” *gotrabhuno kāsāva, kaṅṭhā dussīlā pāpa, dhammā*. MA says that “members of the religious lineage” (*gotra, bhuno*) are those who are monks only in name. They will go about with only a piece of yellow cloth around their necks or arms, and will support their wives and children by engaging in trade and farming, etc.

⁸ Bodhi: “The gift is incalculable and immeasurable in value because it is offered, by way of intention of the donor, not to the ‘yellow-necks’ as individuals but to the Sangha as a corporate whole. Thus the recipient body includes all the virtuous bhikkhus of the past, even those who have long passed away.” (M:B n1301)

⁹ Furthermore, **Ādiya S** (A 5.41) states that a householder should donate a part of his income to as “offerings to all those recluses and brahmins who abstain from intoxication and heedlessness, who bear all things with patience and restraint, each taming himself, each calming himself, each cooling himself” (A 3:45 f). (**Sāriputta) Dāna S** (A 7.49) gives six reasons for giving and the best is to make a gift thinking, “This is an adornment for the mind, a support for the mind,” by which one is reborn in the Brahma world to become a non-returner in due course (A 4:62 f).

It is likely that *Dakkhīṇa, vibhaṅga S* or such passages were interpolated after the Buddha’s time (but before the 3rd Council during Asoka’s time). Nevertheless, the basic point is clear: giving to the group is karmically more wholesome than giving to an individual. **Velāma S** (A 9.20) gives a similar list of meritorious giving, but then says that the best giving is “to cultivate the perception of impermanence for even the moment of a finger-snap” (A 9.20.4-5/4:393-396) = SD 16.6. Also in **Cūl’accharā S** (A 1.6.3-5/A 1:10), in the same context of lovingkindness. On the significance of this practice in terms of stream-winning, see SD 16.6 Intro (2-4).

¹⁰ For this reason, the next section of the Sutta deals with the conditions for the purity of proper giving. On the benefits of offering to the Sangha, see also Miln 240.

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onomic or personal considerations (such as the desire for greater wealth, success, or power). The basis of Buddhist teachings, however, is clearly *ethical*, that is, charity (giving, etc) and moral virtue are bases for spiritual development.¹¹ On the ethical level, it is the quality of the thought behind the giving that counts, not the quantity given.

1.3 THE COMMON GOOD. There are numerous references in the Suttas regarding how one should conduct oneself in regards to one's actions, that is, in whatever considerations, one should not hurt oneself, others, or "both" (this last reference evidently is to society as a whole). The stock passages for this notion appear as follows:

- "he will know his own good, the good of others, or the good of both";¹²
- "as one's own good, the good of others, or the good of both";¹³
- "one's own good, the good of others, or the good of both."¹⁴

The point here is that there is always a consideration for "the good of the many" (*bahu.jana hitāya*).¹⁵ There is even **the Bahu.jana,hita Sutta** (It 84) which states that these three individuals who arise in the world "for the good of the many," that is, the Buddha, the arhats, and the learners (the saint, short of the arhat).¹⁶ The same expression, given in full (underscored), is also found in the Great Commission, thus:

Go forth, O monks, on a mission¹⁷ for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many,
out of compassion for the world, for the good and happiness of the gods and humans.
 (Mv 11.1/V 1:19 f) = SD 11.3¹⁸

Understandably, those who have benefitted from such teachings have done good karma in the past so that they are not only born during the Buddha's life-time, but are able to meet him and awaken through his teaching. Very often the early disciples join the order or gain liberation in pairs or in groups, for example:

- The five monks (S 22.59/3:66-68) SD 1.2
- Yasa and his 54 friends (V 1:15-21, 1:18 f, 1:20) SD 11.3.
- The Kassapa brothers (V 1:33 f)
- Sāriputta and Moggallāna (M 74.14/1:501; A 4.168/2:155) SD 16.1, see Intro (3).
 (A 7.58/4:85-91; A 4:167/2:154 f) SD 4.11, see Intro (3).
- Ānanda, Bhaddiya, Anuruddha,¹⁹
 Kimbila, Devadatta. (V 1:202, 4:86; DA 2:418 ff; ThaA 1:68)

Not all such cases of group renunciation or collective awakening may be explained as being coincidental. It is more likely that the candidates themselves had together created karmic links through common spiritual endeavours in past lives. In other words, these are example of group karma.

¹¹ See SD 18.11a(6).

¹² *Att'attham vā ñassati par'attham va ñassati vā ubhay'attham vā ñassati*, A 1:9 x2 = 3:64 x4.

¹³ *Att'attham pi...par'attham pi...ubhay'attham pi*, S 5:122 x4 = 123 x3 = 124 x2 = 125 x5 = A 1:157 x2 = 158 x4 = 216 x3 = 217 = 3:231 x3 = 232 x3 = 233 x3 = 236.

¹⁴ *Att'attho vā par'attho vā ubhay'attho vā*, Nm 168 = 178 = 357 = Nc 82, 136 = Pm 2:194.

¹⁵ **D** 2:45 = 46 = 47 x2 = 48, 103 = 104 = 115 x5 = 117 x2 = 118, 119 = 120 x2, 212, 222 x2, 224 x3 = 225, 228 x2, 332, 3:127 x2 = 128, 211 x3 = 212 x2, 214, 271; **M** 1:21 x2, 83, 211; **S** 1:105, 2:203, 274, 5:259, 260; **A** 1:19 x2 = 20, 21 x3, 22 x2, 33 x2, 106 x2, 2:36 x2 = 37, 147 x2, 3:115 = 116, 355 x2 = 356 x2, 4:309, 310, 5:66 x2; **U** 62 = 63; **It** 11, 78 = 79 x4.

¹⁶ It 3.4.5/78-80.

¹⁷ "Mission," *cārikam*, usu tr as "moving or walking about, wandering, roaming; pilgrimage; journey" (DPL).

¹⁸ See also D 2:45 = 46 = 47 = 48.

¹⁹ On Anuruddha & Kimbila, see **Upakkilesa S** (M 3:155 ff; ThaA 2:30 f) = SD 5.18

Table 1.4 The 7 stations for consciousness and the 2 spheres²⁰**FORMLESS REALM (*arūpāvacara*)²¹**

Sphere only	Sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception
7 th station for consciousness	Sphere of nothingness
6 th station for consciousness	Sphere of the infinity of consciousness
5 th station for consciousness	Sphere of the infinity of space

FORM REALM (*rūpāvacara*)

[<i>Not stations:</i>	The Pure Abodes	(<i>Suddh'āvāsa</i>) ²²
Sphere only	Sphere of non-percipient beings	(<i>Asañña,sattā</i>)
4 th station for consciousness: <i>beings same in body, same in perception</i>	Gods of Abundant Fruit Gods of Radiant Glory Gods of Boundless Glory Gods of Limited Glory	(<i>Vehapphala</i>) (<i>Subha.kiṇṇa</i>) (<i>Appamāṇa,subha</i>) (<i>Paritta,subha</i>)
3 rd station for consciousness: <i>beings same in body, different in perception</i>	Gods of Streaming Radiance Gods of Boundless Radiance Gods of Limited Radiance	(<i>Ābhassara</i>) (<i>Appamāṇ'ābha</i>) (<i>Paritta,subha</i>)
2 nd station for consciousness: <i>beings different in body, same in perception</i>	Great Brahmā Gods of Brahmā's Ministers Gods of Brahmā's Host	(<i>Mahā Brahmā</i>) (<i>Brahmā,purohitā</i>) (<i>Brahmā,parisajjā</i>)

SENSE REALM (*kāmāvacara*)

1 st station for consciousness: ²³ <i>beings different in body, different in perception</i>	Gods who lord over others' creations Gods who delight in creating The contented gods The Yāma gods The gods of the Thirty-three The gods of the Four Great Kings Human beings Some beings in the lower worlds	(<i>Para,nimmita,vasavattī</i>) (<i>Nimmāṇa,ratī</i>) (<i>Tusita</i>) (<i>Yāma</i>) (<i>Tāvatiṃsa</i>) (<i>Cātum,mahārājika</i>) (<i>Manussa,loka</i>) (<i>Āpaya,bhūmi</i>)
2 nd station for consciousness: <i>beings different in body, same in perception (lower realms)</i>	The host of titans The realm of ghosts [the departed] The animal kingdom The hells	(<i>Asura,kāya</i>) (<i>Pitti,visaya</i>) (<i>Tiracchāna,yonī</i>) (<i>Niraya</i>)

²⁰ For a schema of the 31 realms of existence, see R Gethin 1998:116 f.

²¹ Also called *rūpāyatana*; in Pali, respectively: *n'eva,saññā,nāsaññ'āyatana, ākiñcaññāyatana, viññāṇaṇcāyatana*, and *ākāsānañcāyatana*.

²² It is interesting to note that the Pure Abodes (*suddh'āvāsa*), the 5 highest heavens of the form world (*rūpa-loka*), are not listed as "stations for consciousness." The Pure Abodes are inhabited only by non-returners who assume their last birth to become arhats and attain Nirvana. These worlds are Āviha ("Non-declining"), Ātappa ("Unworried"), Sudassā ("Clearly Visible"), Sudassī ("Clear-visioned") and Akañiṭṭhā ("Highest") (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46).

²³ The first 6 are the sense-sphere deva realms, the lowest of the celestial realms.

1.4 STATIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS. According to Buddhist psychology, consciousness can exist as a personal mental process, or as a realm of being, that is, an actual world inhabited by those whose consciousness conduces (*samvattanika*) to that realm.²⁴ There are seven stations of consciousness (*viññāṇa-t,thiti*)²⁵ are the actual states of rebirth as envisaged by the early Buddhists in terms of body (*kāya*) and consciousness (*saññā*).²⁶

From Table 1.4, starting from the bottom, we can see that in **the sense realm**, where beings depend on their physical senses and the mind, the four lowest realms exist on the 2nd station for consciousness, that is, they each have their own bodies (“different bodies”), but they experience the same consciousness (or perception). These are **the hells beings, the animals, ghosts, and the titans (asuras)**, who basically share the same emotions of their particular realm. They all experience profound sufferings. The hell beings all feel suffering. The animals’ life-cycle are all characterized by ignorance, instinct and fear. The pretas or ghosts all suffer from insatiable hunger. The titans or asuras are all dominated by jealousy, exploitation and violence. In short, *their lives and nature are all very predictable*: they all share basically the same karmic fruit.

The brahmas of the form realm, too, exist on the 2nd station of consciousness. They each have their own bodies, but they experience the same consciousness, that of *profound joy*. They are the brahmas of the first dhyana, all experiencing dhyanic zest and happiness.

The beings who exist on the 1st station of consciousness—different in body and in perception—are those of the *āpaya* realm (that is, **some kinds of lower-realm beings**), **human beings**, and **the gods of the sense world**. Even in each realm, each individual being have their own form and experience different kinds of level of bliss.

The gods existing on the 4th station of consciousness have same kind in body (great radiance), but have different consciousness. The gods of abundant fruit, for example, experience the equanimous bliss of the 4th dhyana. All the other 4th-station gods live in the bliss of the 3rd dhyana. They all share the same group karmic fruit of great dhyanic bliss. They are of fine radiant form and as such can easily meld into one another, as it were.

The classification of beings according to the four stations of consciousness is in terms of their “form” or body, and by the quality or blissfulness of their respective consciousnesses. The other celestial realms—**the pure abodes, the sphere of non-percipient beings and the four formless spheres**—all experience the same kind of consciousness found on their plane of existence. The pure abodes are special in that they are inhabited only by non-returners. Even the Bodhisattva is not ever reborn here (as he is not yet a non-returner!) The non-p beings are those meditators who had cultivated dispassion towards “perception,” that is, consciousness. The moment their thought-processes resume, they fall from that state. As such, even in the Suttas, although there are no direct references to group karma, we have allusions to the experience of *group karmic fruit*, either by way of the beings’ form or their affective state.

2 Buddhist stories illustrating group karma

The Commentaries, especially **the Dhammapada Commentary**, have a number of stories that may be construed as cases of group karma.

2.1 SĀMĀVATĪ AND HER 500 MAIDENS. Once long ago, the Dhammapada story says, eight Pratyeka Buddhas regularly received almsfood from the royal palace, attended by 500 women. Then, seven of them retired to the Himalayas, but one sat on tangle of grass on a river bank and went into dhyanic meditation. One day, the king took the five hundred women to sport in the river-water. Having sported all day, the women came out of the water stung with cold. Wishing to warm themselves, they looked around for some

²⁴ See *Viññāṇa* = SD 17.8a (11.2).

²⁵ **Mahā,nidāna S** (D 15.33-34/2:68-70) = SD 5.17. Elsewhere these are called “the nine abodes of beings” (*nava,satt’āvāsa*) (D 33.3.2(3)/3:263, 33.2.2(3)/3:288; A 9.24/4:401). Here *āyatana* is rendered as “sphere,” referring to a realm or level of meditation; where it refers to the senses, it is tr as “base.” *Avacara* (lit “down-wandering”) is tr as “realm,” but “sphere” is often used here, too. See SD 17.8a (5.2) & (11.2).

²⁶ On the use of *saññā* for consciousness, see SD 18.8a (8.1).

fuel, and thinking that the tangle of grass, not noticing the Pratyeka Buddha inside. Heaping up more grass on it, they set it alight.

When the grass had burned down, they saw the Pratyeka Buddha. Terrified that the king would find out what they had done, they panicked and decided to make a clean job of it. They brought firewood from all around and piled them on the Pratyeka Buddha until they had erected a great pyre, and poured oil on it. Then, hoping to burn him to ashes, they lit the pyre and went away.

The point is that the Pratyeka Buddha was in dhyanic meditation and even if they had brought a hundred thousand cartloads of firewood and poured oil over it, *he would not feel the heat*. On the seventh day, the Pratyeka Buddha emerged from his dhyana and went away unscathed. Now *at first, their act was without intention*, but later, they consciously committed an evil act, for which they suffered many hundreds of thousands of years in hell, and because the karmic fruit was not yet exhausted, in the Buddha's time, they were every time burnt alive in their own house. (DhA 2.1/1:224 f)

COMMENTS. A person in dhyana is said to be invulnerable, so the women should have realized they could not have harmed the Pratyeka Buddha in the first place. Perhaps they were ignorant of the fact. Up to the point that just before the women realized whom they were burning, they had committed bad karma. Even at the moment of realizing who it was, they have not yet done any evil. However, *fearing that they would be punished by the king*, they decided to exterminate him. From that moment on, bad karma was generated. Since the women shared the same apprehension and fear, and due to their close connection, they were reborn together in many successive births to suffer the same fate together.

When these 500 women were reborn as into Udena's harem with Sāmāvātī as their leader during our Buddha's time, Māgandiyā, nursing an old grudge against the Buddha (for jilting her), had all of them burnt alive. The only reason that drove Māgandiyā to murder Sāmāvātī and her 500 maidens was as a revenge against the Buddha for jilting her! As such, Sāmāvātī and the women were all innocent: their only "crime" was their faith in the Buddha, and they died for it. The Buddha declared that all the women who died in the fire in Udena's palace had attained some level of sainthood; so do they had not died in vain. Furthermore, Māgandiyā and her relatives died horrible deaths. (DhA 2.1/1:222)

2.2 HOW MAGHA BECAME SAKRA. **The Mahāli Sutta** (S 11.13), one of the Suttas that mention Magha's seven vows,²⁷ is found almost verbatim in the introduction of his story in the Dhammapada Commentary (DhA 2.7.7a). It is on account of these vows that he is reborn as Sakra in the heaven of the 33 (*Tāvatisa*). The Saṃyutta and the Dhammapada Commentaries apparently expanded on this Sutta account and related his meritorious deeds as the wise brahmin youth **Magha** in the village of Macalagāma, Magadha. It is said that he began by making comfortable spots on which people could sit in the business area of the village. Then he went on to make a clearing for others, and in cold weather, built a fire there to warm them. Then levelled the road, and removed obstructing tree branches.

In due course, a total of thirty-three other youths decided to join him in his meritorious deeds. They continued with the leveling and clearing of the road. When a jealous headman tried to undermine them by making a false accusation so that the king tried to punish them, Magha and his 33 friends merely responded with lovingkindness. When the truth was out, the king instead richly rewarded them, and they went on to build a huge public hall. Magha himself planted a tree near the great hall and built a stone seat. In due course, when they died, they were reborn in the heaven of the 33 with Sakra as the leader. (SA 1:348; DhA 2.7.7b)²⁸

COMMENTS. This is a clear example of how collective good karma brings like result: Magha and his 33 friends did many excellent good deeds, and as a result were reborn as Sakra and the 33 gods. Of course, this is more mythology than history. Mythology has great value in preserving the psyche of the society or religion that invented it. As we know, Indian society of the Buddha's time was rapidly urbaniz-

²⁷ "As long as I live may I": (1) "...support my parents"; (2) "...respect my family elders"; (3) "...speak gently"; (4) "...not speak divisively"; (5) "...dwell at home with a mind free from the stain of miserliness..."; (6) "...speak the truth"; (7) "...be free from anger, and if anger should arise, may I dispel it quickly." (S 11.11/1:228 etc)

²⁸ DhA 2.7.7b/1:265-280.

ing and reached a very high level of economic development. Understandably, Magha and his friends would represent a sort of new economic order that would bring happiness here and now.

The story is also ethicized. For, we are told that Asuras were already dwelling there when Sakra and his band were reborn there. The Asuras drank heavily and were intoxicated, and Sakra, unhappy with such misconduct, instructed his followers to remove the drunken Asuras by flinging them down into the great ocean.²⁹ The moral of the story is clear: the old gods had poor moral virtue, and a new moral gods deserved the glory of the new heaven.³⁰ Indeed, whatever good works that Magha had done on earth, manifested themselves in his heaven: as on earth, so in heaven!

2.3 VIDŪDABHA'S VENGEANCE. Rajah Pasenadi of Kosala died a tragic death at the betrayal of Dīgha, kārāyaṇa,³¹ and Viḍūḍabha³² became king. He remembered his grudge against the Sākya that began when he discovered that his mother, the Sākya, Vāsabha, khattiyā, was actually of low birth and that his late father, Pasenadi, was unaware of this fact when he married her. Viḍūḍabha then marched out to Kapilavatthu with a large army to exterminate the Sākya.

The Buddha perceiving Viḍūḍabha's plan and the impending doom of the Sākya, appeared under a tree with poor shade just within the Sākya border. Just on the other side was a large banyan tree with cool shade. When Viḍūḍabha invited the Buddha over to the banyan's shade, the Buddha replied:

"Be not concerned, maharajah, *the shade of my kinsmen keeps me cool!*"

Viḍūḍabha took the broad hint, but returned three times, each time meeting the Buddha in the same manner. On the fourth occasion, the Buddha knew that the Sākya had to face the fruition of old karma. In a past life, they had poisoned the river.³³ It is said that the Buddha's exposure to the sun on these occasions caused him headaches (*sisa, dukkha*) that lasted for the rest of his life.³⁴

Viḍūḍabha was said to have massacred 77,000 Sākya and enslaved 8,000 children.³⁵ The Chinese records say that he took 500 Sākya maidens into his harem, but had them killed when they disparaged him.³⁶ He however spared the family and followers of his grandfather Mahānāma. Viḍūḍabha's easy but bloody victory was possible mainly because the Sākya, probably out of remorse and guilt, did not give a fierce fight. He then set up camp on the dry bed of the river Aciravati. However, during the night, a sudden swelling of the waters drowned him and a large part of his army, washing them out to sea. (DhA 4.3/1:337-361)

²⁹ This story reminds one of a similar episode in Greek mythology where Zeus overpowered the old Olympian god led by Saturn-Chronos. Interestingly, the village headman, jealous of Magha and his friend, is like Saturn-Chronos, and Vissakamma, the builder of the great hall, is like Hephaestus of Greek mythology (Roman, "Vulcan").

³⁰ The Saṃyutta Comy also says that as a wise brahmin youth of Magadha, Magha's conduct was like that of the Bodhisattva (that is, the Buddha before his awakening) (*bodhisatta, cariyā viya ca tassa cariyā ahosi*, SA 1:348). **Kulāvaka J** (J 31) tells a story of our Bodhisattva (the future Gotama Buddha) in the role of Magha who is then reborn as Sakra,³⁰ as recounted almost verbatim in Dh Comy (DhA 2.7/1:263-281). Cf Yasa's story: SD 11.2.

³¹ While the 80-year-old Pasenadi was conversing with the Buddha (as reported in **Dhamma, cetiya S**, M 89/2:118-125) [17], Dīgha Kārāyaṇa (Skt Dīrgha Cārāyaṇa) thought, "Previously, after conferring in private with the recluse Gotama, the king arrested my uncle and his 32 sons. Perhaps this time he will arrest me." Dīgha, who was in secret collusion with Pasenadi's son, Viḍūḍabha, then absconded with the retinue and the royal insignia entrusted to him. The royal insignia, which included the fan, parasol and sandals, were rushed to the capital, Sāvattī, where Viḍūḍabha was enthroned (MA 3:352; J 4:151; DhA 4.3/1:349-356).

Meanwhile, the forlorn Pasenadi, left only with a horse and a female servant, rushed to Rājagaha to seek the help of his nephew, Ajātasattu. It was rather late when he arrived at Rājagaha and the city gates were closed. Exhausted, he lay down in a hall outside the city, and died of exhaustion and exposure in the night. Ajātasattu arranged for him a grand funeral but did nothing to Viḍūḍabha who had just ascended the throne. (MA 2:753 f; J 4:131).

³² See **Kaṇṇaka-t, thala S** (M 90.6, 14, 16/2:126, 130f, 131) = SD 10.8.

³³ U 265; Ap 1:300; DhA 1:346-349, 357-361; cf J 1:133, 4:146 f, 151 f.

³⁴ Ap 387,24/1:300; UA 265.

³⁵ See *Avadāna Kalpalatā*, 11th pallava.

³⁶ S Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, 1884 2:11 f.

Viḍḍabha was succeeded by his son, **Uttara,sena**, who claimed a part of the Buddha's relics along with other claimants. Later legends say that those who escaped Viḍḍabha's massacre founded towns and kingdoms in the Himalayas, on the banks of the Ganges, or in Northwest India. According to Xuanzang, four Śākya fled into the "Snowy Mountains": one became king of Bamiyan, one of Udyāna, one of Himatala, and one of Śāmbi (Kauśambī?).³⁷ In the 6th century, the monk Vimokṣa,prajñā or Vimokṣa,sena claimed to be a descendent of a Śākya who had been saved from the massacre.³⁸

COMMENTS. This is the first of two Dhammapada stories³⁹ that **Egerton Baptist** cites to support his notion of "national karma," since the group had to pay for their past communal misdeed. This story however, is commentarial, and is problematic, as it gives the impression that the Sakya massacre was fated or unavoidable. That the Buddha is said to have ended his intercession on the third occasion makes the event somewhat deterministic: there is nothing to stop a great compassionate and influential person like the Buddha to intercede a *fourth* time, or even as many time as he wishes! This is only occasion I know of which, as it were, puts the Buddha at a disadvantage. There is no such a record in the Suttas, where, on the contrary, we usually see the "third time" (*yāva,tatiya*) to the Buddha's advantage in the sense that the Dharma comes through to the intended audience.⁴⁰

In an ironic turn of events occurred almost immediately after the massacre in a *deus ex machina*.⁴¹ After the massacre, the soldiers were rested, some on the dry river banks, some down in the dry river-bed. But ants bit those who had past evil karma, so that those guilty ones on the higher banks moved down to the river-bed, and those innocent ones on the river-bed moved up to the higher dry banks! Viḍḍabha himself and much of his army were washed by the river currents and drowned.

2.4 SĀRIPUTTA AND THE BATS. [SD 26.1(7.2)] The Dhammapada Commentary⁴² tells us that while the Buddha is teaching the Abhidhamma in Tāvatiṃsa, Sāriputta visits him during his teaching-break and attends to him.⁴³ The Buddha tells him the progress of the Abhidhamma teaching and to relay the teaching thus far to the five hundred monks under Sāriputta's tutelage. Then the Buddha returns to the heavens to resume his Abhidhamma teaching personally.

These 500 monks have left home out of faith from seeing the Buddha perform the twin wonder at Gaṇḍa's mango tree. Listening to Sāriputta (relayed teachings from the Buddha), they in due course

³⁷ S Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, 1884 2:21.

³⁸ McDermott says that this famous story is found in four recensions: (1) Pali: in the story of the present of **Bhadda,sāla J** (J 465), **Viḍḍabha Vatthu** (DhA 4.3/1:337-361); (2) Sanskrit: **Virūdhaka** story in the Avadāna, kalpalatā; (3) Chinese, recorded by Xuanzang; and (4) Tibetan. The story is also depicted on one of the carvings at Bharhut. See Benimadhab Barua, *Barhut: Book 1—Stone as story-teller*, Calcutta: Indian Research Institute, 1934: 50 f.

³⁹ The second Dhammapada story that Baptist cites is that of Bandhula: see (4.4).

⁴⁰ Examples: the thunderbolt-wielding Vajira,pāṇī threatens to split the heads of those who fail to answer the Buddha's question asked up to three times, namely: Ambaṭṭha in **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3.20-21/1:95), & Saccaka in **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 35.14/1:231); cf J 3:146, 5:92, 6:155. Dūgha Tapassī thrice repeats the Buddha's statement in excitement (M 56.3/1:372). The Buddha does not answer even asked up to a third time: Mogha,rāja (Sn 1116/216). Cf Sāriputta's silence after Udāyī thrice disagrees with him (A 5.161/3:193 f); the Buddha does not answer Vaccha,gotta's question twice (S 44.10/4:400 f). Cf Bharaṇḍu Kālāma's triple remark (A 3.124/1:278). Negative examples of *yāva,tatiya* are found in several places in **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16) 2:115

⁴¹ "Deus ex machine" (a calque from Gk 'ἄπὸ μηχανῆς θεός') lit "a god from a machine," or better "a god on a machine." A *mechane* is, in Greek and Roman theatres, a device that lowered actors playing a god or gods on stage to resolve a hopeless situation, an unexpected, artificial, or improbable character, device, or event introduced suddenly in a work of fiction or drama to resolve a situation or untangle a plot. A common example is where the character in an impossible situation finally wakes up from a dream (as in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*).

⁴² DhA 3:222 f.

⁴³ Just before meal-time, the Buddha leaves behind his hologram form (*nimitta,buddha*) to continue teaching, while he goes down to the northern continent, Uttara,kuru, to collect alms, then to the shores of Lake Anotattā deep in the Himalayas, and there in a rich man's pavilion, have his meal. This section is mistranslated in DhA:B, which says that Sāriputta went to Tusita heaven.

mastered all the Seven Books (*satta-p, pakaraṇa*) of the Abhidhamma.⁴⁴ It is said that in the time of Kassapa Buddha (the previous dispensation) they were small bats (*khuddaka, vagguli*).

Once, as they hung from the ceiling of a mountain-cave (*pabbhāre*), they heard two monks reciting the Abhidhamma as they walked up and down in meditation, and held to the sound of their voices as a mental sign (*sare nimittam aggahesum*), that is, they were entranced by the chanting voices. The bats, of course, could not understand what they were hearing, but were simply captivated by the voices. When they passed away, they were reborn in the heavens, enjoying divine bliss for two Buddha periods.

Then they are reborn into distinguished families in Sāvattḥī in our Buddha's time. There, seeing the Buddha perform the twin wonder, their faith ripens and they leave home. During the three months of the rains, as the Buddha teaches the Abhidhamma in the heavens, and receiving the same teachings through Sāriputta in due course, they master the Seven Books. At the end of the Buddha's discourse, eight hundred thousand million devas penetrate the truth (*dhammābhisamayo ahoṣi*),⁴⁵ and Māyā devaputra himself becomes a stream-winner.

COMMENTS. Two points are especially interesting here. First, we have a group of **bats** who are reborn as a group of 500 monks who are disciples of the Buddha—which is an example of wholesome group karma. The second interesting point is that even animals can benefit from mental peace, or dying in peace. This is not an isolated episode. There are a number of stories of animals who benefit from their association with the Buddha. The Bodhisattva's horse, **Kaṇṭhaka**, seeing his master renouncing the world, sensing he would never see his master again, dies of a broken heart, but is reborn as a deva in Tāvātimsa (J 1:65). The **monkey** (DhA 1:60) and the **elephant** (DhA 1:63) that ministered to the Buddha while he was on solitary rains retreat in the Pārileyya forest, too, are reborn as devas in Tāvātimsa. There is also the case of a **frog**, who, captivated by voice of the Buddha teaching, dies when a farmer accidentally kills him with a stick, and is reborn in Tāvātimsa (Vv 5.1; VvA 216-219). Even if we take these as fables or fairy tales, their import is clear: love animals. Who knows they could be your future guardian angels!⁴⁶

2.4 COLLECTIVE GIVING. The Dhammapada Commentary⁴⁷ records this short but very significant discourse by Sāriputta at Rājagaha, which may throw some light on group karma.⁴⁸

Laymen, if one were to give, but does not encourage others to give, wherever one is reborn, one receives the blessing of wealth, but not the blessing of a following [a retinue].

If one were not to give, but encourages others to give, wherever one is reborn, one receives the blessing of a following, but not the blessing of wealth.

If one were not to give, and also does not encourage others to give, wherever one is reborn, one receives not so much as a bellyful of sour porridge, but is without refuge, without support.

If one were to give, and also encourages others to give, wherever one is reborn, in a hundred births, a thousand births, a hundred thousand births, one receives both the blessing of wealth and the blessing of a following.
(Sāriputta, DhA 1.7/1:78)

⁴⁴ See SD Epilegomena II(b) B(3).

⁴⁵ This probably means that they become lesser stream-winners (*cūla sotāpanna*), MA 2:120; cf Vism 605/-29.27. For further discussion on “lesser stream-winner,” see “Laymen Saints” = SD 8.6(14b).

⁴⁶ The real point is that we do have some moral capacity for bettering the lives of others, even if they are animals. For a discussion on doing good without selfish or ulterior motives, see **Virtue ethics** = SD 18.11.

⁴⁷ **Deva, datta Vatthu** (DhA 1.7/1:78)

⁴⁸ *Upāsakā eko sayam dānaṃ deti, paraṃ na samādapeti, so nibbatta, nibbatta-ṭ, thāne bhoga, sampadaṃ labhati, no parivāra, sampadaṃ. | Eko sayam dānaṃ na deti, paraṃ samādapeti, so nibbatta, nibbatta-ṭ, thāne parivāra, - sampadaṃ no bhoga, sampadaṃ. | Eko sayam pi na dānaṃ deti, paraṃ pi na samādapeti, so nibbatta, nibbatta-ṭ, thāne kañjika, mattam pi kucchi, pūraṃ na labhati, anātho hoti nippaccayo. | Eko sayam pi dānaṃ deti, paraṃ pi samādapeti, so nibbatta, nibbatta-ṭ, thāne atta, bhāva, sate pi atta, bhāva, sahasse pi atta, bhāva, sata, sahasse bhoga, - sampadaṃ c'eva labhati parivāra, sampadaṃ ca labhati.*

The story continues that a certain wise layman, inspired by this talk and wishing to win both these blessings of wealth and a great following, went through the city streets and announced if anyone else would like to join him in offering almsfood on the next day. They were to gather in a certain place for a food preparation for a thousand monks (500 following Sāriputta and 500 Moggallāna).⁴⁹

This is a commentarial tale, with no canonical counterpart or parallel, but clearly a pious tale to inspire fellowship amongst the lay donors and be more fervent in their support of the growing sangha. The karmic message here is clear: if you work together to give offerings to the sangha (or do any other common wholesome deed of charity), your future lives will be blessed with wealth and a good following (family members, friends, workers, clients, etc).

How does this work? By working together in a common enterprise, the co-workers forge a karmic link with one another that will last for many lives. Since the enterprise is a wholesome one, the common bond is also wholesome. For giving and causing to give in abundance, one receives abundance in return for countless lives to come. For bringing together so many people in such a worthy enterprise, one wins a large and happy following. This is clearly how a work of merit (*puñña*) works.

3 Common karmic links

3.1 EARLIEST MENTION. One of the earliest records we have of a discussion in recent times on group karma is perhaps an article by **Sheo Narain** entitled “Karmic Law” (1925), published in *the Mahā Bodhi*, an Indian Buddhist magazine.⁵⁰ Narain invites Buddhist scholars to throw light on a number of questions, including whether a person is “responsible not only for his individual actions in his past life but also for past communal deeds ...” (1925). A number of writers responded to Narain’s challenge, but, as McDermott notes, “there is little agreement among them over the answers, or even over the precise definition of the concepts involved” (1975:67).

3.2 KARMA AND GENETICS. A clear affirmation of group karma is found in an article by the Thai Buddhist doctor, **Luang Suriyabongs**, who writes:

Although man creates his own individual Karma, whatever he does will have its effect on his environment, too. Thus, he at the same time has a common family-Karma, a racial, or national Karma or a group-Karma. The good he does will not only benefit himself but all others who live with and around him, that is, all sentient beings. And vice versa, evil will not be suffered by him alone.
(Luang Suriyabongs 1954:72)

Here we see that Suriyabongs has broadened the conception of karma to include society in its effect. He concludes that several individuals may have such similar karma that, if they were to die about the same time, and if a womb containing enough ova is available, these individuals would be reborn as twins, triplets, etc. The fact that people are born into the same family shows that they possess a similar store of accumulated karma (1960:304-206). Suriyabongs therefore says that it is possible to speak of “family karma,” such as the Kennedy family charisma.⁵¹

On this point, McDermott notes that “the analogy is valid only so long as the ‘Kennedy charisma’ is not considered to be genetically inherited” (1975:68 n5). Actually I think that Suriyabongs is still right all the same, even if the Kennedy charisma is genetically inherited, that is, the working of the “law of seeds”

⁴⁹ For the rest of the story, see DhA:B 1:189-193.

⁵⁰ This is according to JP McDermott 1976:67.

⁵¹ The Kennedy family is a prominent Irish-American family in US politics and government, the best known of whom is John F Kennedy, the 35th US president, who was assassinated in 1963. Earlier on, during World War 2, his elder brother, Joseph P Kennedy, was killed in a plane explosion as the mission approach occupied Europe (1944). His sister Kathleen too was killed in a plane crash in 1948. His brother, senator Robert F Kennedy, was also assassinated, while campaigning for presidential nomination in 1968. In 1980s and 1990s, two of Robert Kennedy’s 11 children, Michael and David, as well as John’s only surviving son, JFK Jr, each passed away at relatively young ages.

(*bīja,niyāma*).⁵² The Kennedy charisma is simply a non-karmic trait of the family members, or more correctly, of most of the family members. Those beings to be born who have the propensity for such charisma would naturally be attracted to the family and be reborn there. In fact, even if the Kennedy charisma is genetically inherited, not all members would inherit them all the time. The “charisma gene” (if there is one) could like dormant in some members.

In 1918, for example, the Sangharaja of Thailand, Prince Patriarch **Vajirañāṇa**, in his discourse to the king, declared that “the king’s acts of piety merit not only himself but the people and the guardian spirits of the kingdom as well.”⁵³ The king’s charisma allows him to reach out and affect the lives of a large number of people, if not everyone, in the country. In this way, his good deeds would, not only benefit them directly, but also induce them to create new good karma. In that way, the country’s “karmic store” is increased.

4 Karmic “overflow”

4.1 HOW OUR DEEDS AFFECT OTHERS. Let us first consider two Jātaka stories showing how the bad karma of great people affects those under their power. **The Kuru,dhamma Jātaka** (J 276) is about a kingdom facing a drought, that resulted in a famine, and an impending plague. According to the story, the unfortunate situation had arisen because the king had not observed the “Kuru code” (*Kuru,dhamma*), that is, *the five precepts* (against killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and taking intoxicants). Once the kings began to observe these precepts, however, the rain fell and the land became fertile and prosperous again.⁵⁴

Similarly, in **the Mañi,cora Jātaka** (J 194), Sakra, the king of the gods, is made to declare: “If indeed a king is unrighteous, the rains fall out of season, they do not come in time. The fear of famine, of disease, of the sword—these three fears—prevail.”⁵⁵

A similar theme is found behind **the origin story of the Ratana Sutta**, where during a famine and plague in Vesālī, the populace investigated whether the king (Bimbisāra) had done any bad karma. When the king was found innocent, the people approached the Buddha for help. The Buddha instructed Ānanda to recite the Ratana Sutta, and sprinkling holy water all over the city.⁵⁶ This is a commentarial story, full of legendary material, that is, one of the sources of post-Buddha Buddhist tradition of apotropaic chanting, popular in Sri Lanka and south-east Asia. The interesting point here is that the populace found that it was not the king’s fault that the famine and plague occurred!

In **the Tissa-t,thera Vatthu** of the Dhammapada Commentary, a certain powerful ascetic used his magic and prevented the sun from rising. The panicked populace went to the palace and asked if the king had done any bad karma. The king, having known that he was free from any bad karma, sent a search party to see if any ascetic was up to some mischief, and uncovered the real cause of the natural mishap.⁵⁷ This is another commentarial legend of pre-biblical proportion. Here again we see that a king was not the culprit, but two ascetics cursing one another!

The point of such stories is that the immorality of human conduct does adversely affect the world itself. Famines could arise as a result of human immorality, aggravating into plague and other misfortunes. Or the sun and moon, indeed the whole universe could stop moving as a result of the evil of a powerful human. In the ancient stories, this powerful human was always the king. Understandably, this could be a way of the populace or a religion in ensuring that the ruler ruled wisely and justly, free from moral impropriety.

⁵² This is the second of the 5 cosmic laws (*pañca,niyāma*), namely: the law of heat (*utu niyāma*) (physics), of seeds (*bīja niyāma*) (genetics), of karma (*kamma niyāma*), of mental processes (*citta niyāma*), and of nature (*dhamma niyāma*): see SD 5.7 Intro (2).

⁵³ RC Lester (1973:77) citing Vajirañāṇa, *Right is right*, Bangkok: Bangkok Daily Mail, 1918.

⁵⁴ J 276/2:356-381.

⁵⁵ J 194/2:121-124.

⁵⁶ KhpA 6.10-16/160-165; DhA 21.1/3:436-449.

⁵⁷ DhA 1.3/1:37-45. Tr as “Tissa the Fat” = DhA:B 1:166-170.

E Washburn Hopkins has observed that a similar view is found in the Mahābhārata, where it is said that the king determines the character of the age, that drought, flood, and plague arise through the misdeeds of the king (1906:586 f). **McDermott** notes the similarity between this ancient idea and Silacara's concept of "overflow karma" [4.2]. "In both instances the people must suffer for the misdeeds of their rule and, in turn, benefit from his morality" (1976:77).

4.2 HOW OUR DEEDS AFFECT OURSELVES. McDermott further points out that **the Sappurisa Dāna Sutta** (A 5.148) "is most suggestive in its discussion of the results which accrue out of a good man's gifts. The Sutta may be summarized as follows:

The true individual's giving is endowed with five qualities and their attending benefits, thus:

- (1) Because he gives in faith, he becomes very wealthy and is of great beauty.
- (2) Because he gives with respect, he becomes very wealthy and his family and workers listen well to him.
- (3) Because he gives at the right time, he becomes very wealthy and benefits come to him at the right time, and in abundance.
- (4) Because he gives with a hospitable heart, he becomes very wealthy and he is able to truly enjoy sense-pleasures.
- (5) Because he gives without belittling anyone, he becomes very wealthy and suffers no loss of his wealth in any way on account of fire, water, the king [the authorities], thieves, or unloving heirs. (A 5.148/3:172 f) = SD 22.15

The implication seems to be that apart from the effects of counter evil karma, the rewards resulting from one's good works cannot be taken away. Even the power of a king cannot avail to this end. This suggests the recognition that no samsāric stream of existence is completely independent. Although each individual is heir to his deeds alone, the ripening of his karma has consequences that reach beyond himself. It is not necessary, nor even very likely that this notion implies a concept of overflow karma, however. Rather, the point may be simply that in any given situation the karma of each individual must be in confluence with that of every other participant in that situation. (McDermott 1976:77)⁵⁸

The story of **Ajāta,sattu**, the parricide king of Magadha, is a case in point. Ajātasattu, on the instigation of Devadatta (who himself planned to usurp the Buddha's position over the Sangha), attempted to kill the Buddha (by sending out archers) and left his own father, Bimbisāra,⁵⁹ to die in prison, in around 493 BCE. His own son, Udāyi,bhadda (Skt Udāyi,bhadra) in due course killed him and usurped the throne in 461 BCE. Udāyi,bhadda was in turn murdered by *his* own son. He was succeeded by four kings and tradition has it that they were all parricides. The dynasty ended when the people of Magadha became disgusted with this destructive tendency, deposed the last king, and appointed a viceroy, Śīsunāga, as king.⁶⁰

In this case, we could say that the potential parricide, Ajāta,sattu, was born as Bimbisāra's son, only to be killed by him, because Bimbisāra had the karmic potential (he could have murdered his own father in a past life). Just as divorces tend to recur in afflicted families, parricides too seem to recur in pathological royal families. In the end, the whole line is destroyed: a good example, it seems, of *negative family karma!* Here, however, it is important to understand that only the parricidal tendency in these kings (that

⁵⁸ McDermott goes on to the account of **Moggallāna's death** at the hands of paid assassins (DhA) "provides a good illustration of this principle." However, he says that Moggallāna's "powers fail him" and moreover the story, on the contrary, does *not* fit here. See SD 18.1 (5.3.1).

⁵⁹ On Bimbisāra, see Peter Skilling, *Mahāsūtras. Great Discourses of the Buddha*, vol 2, 1997:316-327.

⁶⁰ See Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India*, 2003:154 f.

is, due to greed, hate and delusion) that is the karmic factor, but the destruction of the dynasty was a result of social conditions.

On a more positive note, we have **the five great investigations** (*pañca, mahā, vilokana*) of the Bodhisattva. Just before the Conception, it is said that the Bodhisattva looked for the right conditions for his last birth, which are, namely: the time, the place, the continent, the family, and the mother. In the case of time, that is, the general lifespan of beings, it should not be too long (more than 100,000 years), that is, when the birth, decay and dying of beings are not so easily seen, and as such, it is difficult for them to appreciate the truth of impermanence. If the life-span is too short (less than a hundred years), they would abound in defilements and as such would quickly forget the teaching. About a 100 years should be the right lifespan of beings for the Buddha to be born amongst.

In the case of the continent, the Buddhas are born only in the sub-continent of Jambudīpa [India]. The region chosen by Gotama was Kapilavastu, where the kshatriya nobles were dominant, and the family was that of Sudhodana's. Very significantly, the mother, Mahā Māyā, was a morally virtuous woman since birth, and would pass away in ten lunar months and a week.⁶¹

All this is commentarial and grew to become important aspects of the Buddha legend. In a way, we can take the five investigations as a kind of illustration of how karma works, except *without* anyone doing the investigation, but by *natural selection*. Of course, we might say that Mahā Māyā had accumulated abundant good karma in her past and last lives to become the Buddha's mother, in which case, it would not be right to say that it was her bad karma to die a week after the Nativity. For it is *because* of her lifespan that the Bodhisattva had chosen her as his mother. Then we have another problem: how does the Bodhisattva's karma fit into all this dramatic moments just before the Conception? We need not answer this question if we regard this episode as legendary, as a good story for the edification of the spiritually young.

4.3 KARMIC "OVERFLOW"? Bhikkhu Silacara, in his booklet on *Kamma (Karma)* (1956), speaks of an "overflow" of karma, seeing the world as a fabric interwoven with the threads of individual karma, that is, of his family, race, or nation.⁶² The power of a good great person or a powerful evil person overflows, so that their deeds affect countless others in various ways, that is to say,

countless millions of beings born in the lands of the East, in India and Ceylon [Sri Lanka], in China and Japan, in Burma [Myanmar] and in Siam [Thailand], in the far-spreading plains of Mongolia, have had their Kamma completely changed for the good through the "overflow Kamma" of Gotama, the Buddha. And that Kamma has not yet exhausted itself. It is still flowing on; and in its flow fertilizing the minds and enriching the hearts of many even today in the spiritually dullard West, who happily are open to receive this influence. (Silacara 1956:20 f)

The overflow of karma also occurs on a simpler level, amongst every one of us: every deed we do affects the world around us in some way. Since ultimately there is no "us," argues Silacara, how can "our" karma be exclusively ours,

but in its course through the fabric of our national, and our world-Kamma, imparts something of its colouring to its neighbouring threads; and if its colours are strong and full, even to many threads far removed from it in the fabric... We do not live, and cannot live, to ourselves, even if we want to. The many living threads of the so-called individual's Kamma twine and intertwine with other threads, and change the course and colouring of these other threads for the good or ill, according as our own particular thread is a good or an ill one. (Silacara 1956:21)

Hence, according to Silacara, whether we intend it or not, our karma overflows onto others, influencing them. Following this line of reasoning, he goes on to assert a rather curious idea: that, since our actions

⁶¹ BA 273 f; J 1:48-50; DhA 1.8/1:851 Miln 193.

⁶² Silacara 1956:19-21.

affect others whether we intend them or not, it is possible to speak of *the unintentional transfer of merit and of demerit* (1956:19). Such ideas, however, are nowhere found in the early texts, which only speaks of a *conscious* dedication of merit,⁶³ and even then, only the pretas (departed) are those who can benefit from it.⁶⁴

The position of **the Milinda,pañha** is very clear on the matter of “merit transfer,” that is, while a wholesome deed can be shared (*sakkā kusalam saṁvibhajitum*), an unwholesome one cannot be shared with one who has neither done it nor consented to it,⁶⁵ in other words, evil karma cannot be shared. The reason Nāgasena gives is that a wholesome deed is “abundant” (*bahuka*) while an unwholesome deed is “small” (*thoka*). This is of course a novel idea, one that is not found in the early Suttas. Nevertheless, we see here that Silacara’s notion of merit overflow clearly contradicts the Milinda,pañha, at least, not in the case of the overflow of unwholesome deeds.

If we take Silacara’s notion of karmic overflow as meaning that our actions somehow affect others—that is, without talking of “merit transfer”—it is close to Suriyabongs’ idea, too. As **McDermott** notes:

Synthesizing the views of these two men, then, it would seem that group karma can be categorized as either overflow karma on the one hand, or as the karma of family—or group—resemblance, on the other. In either case, it is to be noted, neither the principle of individual responsibility nor of karmic justice is necessarily negated. In case of the overflow karma, the individual does a deed, the reward for which he experiences, while at the same time the deed has its effects on others, each of whom is influenced by it as a result of his own individual karmic past. With respect to the karma of family—or other communal—resemblance, it is simply the common aspects in the action of certain individuals which lead them into membership in a group, the communal experiences of which are due to each individual member as a result of his own individual past. To adapt another of Bhikkhu Silacara’s images, each individual karmic thread is woven into the fabric of existence so as to make a meaningful pattern of the whole. (McDermott 1976:70 f)

4.4 COLLECTIVE ACTION. However, this is not what **Sheo Narain** is referring to in his article (1925). When Narain speaks of “communal deeds,” he is referring to *collective karma*, that is, deeds undertaken by a group, “rather than of the communal pattern of results accruing because of the interaction of the action of individuals” (McDermott 1976:71). Apparently, Narain is referring to what has been called “state-aided *kamma*” (King 1964:245) or “a type of National *karma*” (Baptist 1972).

Egerton Baptist cites the Dhammapada story of Viḍūḍabha and his massacre of the Sakyas to support his case for “national karma” [2.3]. The second story cited by Baptist is that of **Bandhula**, the commander-in-chief of Pasenadi’s army, and his 32 sons. Listening to false charges against Bandhula, Pasenadi had them secretly killed. Bandhula’s wife, Mallikā,⁶⁶ on learning of terrible news, admonished her 32 daughters-in-law, thus: “Your husbands were without guilt, and have merely reaped the fruit of past bad karma. Grieve not, lament not! Bear no hate against the king!”⁶⁷ As **McDermott** has noted: we can only take this story as showing that Bandhula and his 32 sons suffered the same end together because of the past karma, “but there is nothing in the passage to suggest that this is anything other than the fruition of personal misdeeds of each individual member of the group.” (1976:80). We can however take the Bandhula massacre as a case of collective karmic *fruition*

In the mid-1950s and early 1970s, the government of Burma (modern Myanmar) participated in various religious activities that led **Donald Eugene Smith** to interpret these activities as unmistakably an attempt to manipulate karma, as “[t]he official performance of meritorious deeds as a means of improving

⁶³ See **Jāpussonī** (A 10.177/5:269-273) = SD 2.6.

⁶⁴ See **Tiro,kuḍḍa S** (Kh 7/6) = SD 2.7.

⁶⁵ *Na sakkā mahārāja saha akatena ananumatena saha pāpaṁ kammaṁ saṁvibhajitum*. It is interesting that Miln uses both *pāpa* and *akusala* interchangeably in these passages. On *puñña*, *pāpa*, *kusala* and *akusala*, see **Beyond Good and Evil** = SD 18.7.

⁶⁶ Also called Bandhula Mallikā to distinguish her from her namesake who was Pasenadi’s queen.

⁶⁷ DhA 4.3/1:355.

conditions in the country was a common device” (1965:168). The most dramatic of these karmic manipulations was clearly the convening of the Sixth Buddhist Council in Rangoon (modern Yangon) in May 1954:

The council’s greatest significance was symbolic: it dramatized in unforgettable fashion the government’s commitment to the promotion of Buddhism, which was regarded as an essential component of the Burmese national identity. The council was a supreme act of religious merit from which U Nu, members of the government, the Sangha, and ultimately every Burmese Buddhist derived personal *karmic* benefit. (Smith 1965:165)

On the other hand, the Sinhala lay Buddhist, **Egerton C Baptist**, has written on the issue of the collective transfer of evil:

[I]f a body of people or a group of people—the largeness of this group may even constitute the inhabitants of a single country or many countries—get together and perpetrate a wrong, will they as a group, suffer for their evil deed? Though *Kamma* is individual to each being, we cannot overlook the fact that in such circumstances, all the beings involved in the perpetration of the evil deed, have, with common consent, done so of their own freely expressed “volition.” Accordingly, they may at some future time, by a conspiracy of circumstances, as it were, be drawn into a pool of anguish and bitterness together, all at once. (Baptist 1972:32 f)

This is in fact a concept of *national karma*, albeit one of bad karma. This is where the collective karma of a community or country affects it as a whole.

Winston L King, in his study of Burmese Buddhism, *In the Hope of Nibbana* (1964), refers to a statement of a prominent Burmese layman, U Tun Hla Oung, calling for an economic system midway between capitalism and communism, suggested that the concept of karma needed a state-initiated move for the desired effect in such times. In an address before the International Association for Religious Freedom in Chicago, in August 1958, he proposed the just distribution of tax money to aid the poor:⁶⁸

There will be no need to pull the rich down to the level of the poor; his *Kamma* will bring him down to the correct level. But the poor must be helped up and whether he stays put on the higher level or not, despite the fair and just laws, is after all his *Kamma*. (U Tun Hla Oung 1958:6)⁶⁹

U Tun’s suggestion is based either on the notion that the poor are *unjustly* handicapped by poverty and social circumstances, or on the notion of *compassion*, that people should be helped whether they are deserving of it or not. However, the bottom line is that, there are occasions when one’s karma can be so strong as to be unaffected by any such positive actions.

5 Contra group karma

Debates on the nature of karma go back to very ancient times, and are found, for example, in Moggalliputta Tissa’s **Kathā,vatthu** (3rd cent BCE) of the Pali Canon⁷⁰ and in Vasubandhu’s **Abhidharma-kośa** (4th-5th cent) of the Sarvāstivāda (an early non-Mahāyāna Indian school).⁷¹ In the mid-20th century, a German Theravada monk, **Nyanatiloka**, regarded group, joint or national karma as misconceived, a wrong application of the term *karma*. According to such a wrong view, he argues, a nation or any group of people, for that matter,

⁶⁸ Here one is reminded of Mahā Vijita J in **Kūṭa,danta S** (D 5.10-11/1:134-136) = SD 22.8. However, on the negative aspects of such measures, see **Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda S** (D 26.10-18/3:65-71) = SD 22.9.

⁶⁹ Quoted by King 1964:245. See McDermott 1976:73 n20.

⁷⁰ See esp Kvu 7.7-10/349-358 & McDermott 1971:139-168.

⁷¹ See esp Abhk ch 4 & McDermott 1971:201-224.

should be responsible for the deeds formerly done by this so-called “same” people. In reality, however, this present people may not consist at all of the karmic heirs of the same individuals who did these bad deeds. According to Buddhism it is of course quite true that anybody who suffer bodily, suffers for his past or present bad deeds. Thus also each of those individuals born within that suffering nation, must, if actually suffering bodily, have done evil somewhere, here or in one of the innumerable spheres of existence; but he may not have had anything to do with the bad deeds of the so-called nation. We might say that through his evil Karma he was attracted to the miserable condition befitting to him. In short, the term Karma applies, in each instance, only to wholesome and unwholesome volitional activity of the single individual.

(Nyanatiloka 1959:17)

However, as **McDermott** notes, Nyanatiloka’s usage of the term “group karma” seems to be based on a different set of assumptions than those of Suriyabongs and of Silacara. McDermott explains:

Unlike these opponents, he [Nyanatiloka] believes any notion of group karma to imply a certain continuity of membership within the group. This being the case, individuals who participate in any group activity must also later participate in the experience of the fruits of that activity as members of the very same group. Since the canonical interpretation of the principle of *kamma* clearly recognizes that an individual’s family membership, citizenship, and even his membership in the human race are likely to change from rebirth to rebirth, such a continuity cannot be maintained with consistency. On this basis, then, Nyanatiloka Mahathera is forced to deny the possibility of any form of group karma.

(McDermott 1976:74)

The American scholar and philosopher, **Karl Potter**, too, is against the notion of group karma. He argues that “it produces more confusion than clarity to allow notions such as ‘group karma,’ ‘transfer of merit,’ etc to constitute variations on a common theme. I prefer now to view such ‘variations’ as in fact departures from *the* theory of karma.”⁷² Despite Potter’s stand, most scholars agree that the prevalence of these concepts require that they be considered in at least a philosophical treatment of karma or as part of a broader explanation of the complex notion of karma.

6 Karmic groups

6.1 GROUP AND AGENT. **Bruce R Reichenbach**, in his study of *The Law of Karma* (1990) raises an interesting point in regards to our perception of group karma. He notes that when we speak of group karma, for example, in the case of Suriyabongs’ remark [3.2], we are often subject to conceptual confusion, *as we should distinguish between group and agent.*

It is important to distinguish group karma from what might be termed *conjunctive karma*, that is, the karmic residues which we experience as the result of the actions of everyone or everything operating causally in the situation, but which are justified by our own accumulated karma. In many instances, the pleasure or pain which we experience is caused or occasioned by our environment ...

[O]ur dispositions and/or invisible moral qualities manifest themselves in actions in the appropriate circumstances. These acts affect the environment, which in turn mediates the appropriate and just karmic consequences to us.

Since we are not alone in the world, the experiences we have are the product of the confluence of the acts of others, many of which arise from those persons’ own dispositions and/or invisible moral qualities. That is, the actions of many persons, caused by karmic residues, cause our experiences and mediate our karma to us.

⁷² In “Critical response,” in Neufeldt 1986:110.

But this is not group karma, for the effect which we experience is justified by our own particular acts or pool of karma, and not by the karmic acts or pool of the group, even though it is mediated by the action of others. (Reichenbach 1990:142; reparagraphed & emphasis added)

Group karma, on the other hand, comprises the experience of karma resulting from the action of the group. Reichenbach gives a simile: the karmic effects are not merely the ripples on the water that toss my boat, but they convey responsibility to me as a member of a group (id).

I am held accountable for the group's efforts and experience the just deserts of its actions, to some extent irrespective of my part. This is not to say that all the members are rewarded or punished equally. But it is to say that the karmic residues they accumulate from the group action are not simply the just deserts of their own part in it. They are also deserts received because they are members of the family, political body, group or organization. (Reichenbach 1990:142)

This means that as a member of a group, your actions contribute to the group karma, which in turn bring group-justified karmic effects for you and other group members. As a family member, what you do contribute directly or indirectly to your family karma. National karma works on a broader scale, where the actions of the nation or ruling elite have consequence that affect the nation in a karmic way.

As we have already seen, **McDermott** (1976), on the basis of early Buddhist literature, discerns three kinds of group karma, with Reichenbach's comments within parentheses:

- (1) The karma of a nation or group where all act in concert or are participants in the action, and thus partake of its karmic effects. [This would be an instance of *group karma* because each individual justifiably experiences the results of the group's combined action, not simply the karma resulting from his own action.]
- (2) The karma that results when the king or other persons in authority act on behalf of the people. [If the king or prime minister acts well, the karmic residues of such actions fall on the whole nation and it experiences peace, prosperity and security. If the ruler does evil, then the whole nation suffers.]
- (3) The karma created by the rulers that allows the karma of the individual to work itself out. [The rulers, by their own actions, make it possible for us to develop our own abilities or talents to improve our own existence. This seems to be less of a case of group karma than a confluence of individual karma (conjunctive karma).] (McDermott 1976:756; Reichenbach 1990:142 f)

6.2 "AGGREGATE" AND "CONGLOMERATE." Peter French, a US scholar specializing in ethics, distinguishes between "aggregates" (or aggregate collection) and "conglomerates" (1982:70). An aggregate is simply the sum total of the individual members at any time, for example, the monks of a monastery, a group in meditation, students in a class, or a crowd on the beach. Since the identity of such a group is defined in terms of its members at any given time, whenever the membership changes, a new group is created. Hence, for such a group, there is *no collective goal formation, decision-making or corporate action*. For example, an audience claps at the end of a performance, or says "sadhu!" at the end of a puja, that common response is merely the sum result of individual actions. The crowd is not an agent, for does not act beyond the intentions of each individual comprising it. As such, there is no accountability other than the individual's accountability.

A conglomerate, on the other hand, does not consist entirely in or is not exhausted by the identities of the persons that are associated with it.⁷³ The conglomerate's membership can change without effecting its identity. Like the aggregate, the actions of the conglomerate are the result of the actions of all or certain of its members. A conglomerate differs from the aggregate in that the former has reasons for doing things beyond those of its individual members. *It incorporates the actions of the individuals, but its actions are not reducible to those of all its individual members.*

⁷³ P French 1982:72.

A conglomerate has *an internal structure for goal-setting, decision-making and implementation*. As such, it can have intentions, do things, and be accountable for its actions. The monastery is lauded for instituting an order of nuns and building a nunnery for them. The business is praised for its corporate concern for the environment. The government is responsible for invading and occupying another country.

7 PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS

The notion of group karma raises some interesting philosophical problems. **Reichenbach** [6] discusses four such philosophical problems regarding group karma, the main points of which are summarized here, along with my own comments.

7.1 CAN A GROUP BE HELD MORALLY ACCOUNTABLE FOR WHAT IT DOES? We usually and rightly attribute moral accountability to the individual, but groups are not individuals. As such, groups cannot act of their own, except by way of the individual members' actions. How then can a group be praiseworthy or blameworthy, that is, how can they be intentional agents?

Those who advocate group karma must maintain that the concept of *an agent* need not be restricted to individuals. Groups or organizations can act intentionally because they too are agents with beliefs, desires and goals, who consider alternative courses of actions and act to realize them. A common example of this is the concept of a "legal person."

7.1.1 Group purpose or personal responsibility? Now the question is how can a group have desires or purposes or perform acts? Very much in the same way as individuals do. Not every part of an individual is involved in goal-setting or decision-making. The digestive system, argues **Reichenbach**, plays no direct role in such acts, though their activities may influence the process, and are certainly necessary for the existence of the person. Rather, the person has an appropriate psychophysical structure that enables him to engage in intentional actions.

Just as the individual includes the physical bodily processes into its actions, in the same way, the group's actions incorporate the individual's actions into its total system. Just as an individual may act morally or immorally, a corporation too may act responsibly or irresponsibly. Corporations may have to pay for the consequences of their wrong actions by way of a fine or may even face termination. Even in our conventional language, we praise a surgical team because of its efforts to save a human life, or that a certain corporation lacks a conscience when it overrides the interests of the consumer or rapes the environment.

As Reichenbach has pointed out, *responsibility can also fall upon certain individual members of the group*; for example, on the chief executive whose embezzlement of funds caused the investors to lose their money, or on the US President for ordering the occupation of Iraq in 2003. But since there is a close interconnectedness of the administrative structure, *the responsibility is corporate as well*. "It is not the case that the hand is held accountable for the murder while the heart is not," argues Reichenbach, and he concludes:

In sum, the concept of moral agent can, without violence, be broadened to include groups or organizations (conglomerates) which are capable of intentional action. Consequently, it makes sense to claim that conglomerates are capable of karmic action and of experiencing karmic effects.
(Reichenbach 1990:145)

7.1.2 Tibet's national karma? Tibet that was "liberated" by the Chinese in 1950 provides an interesting case of group karma. If we take the country as a whole, however, it would be difficult to explain what a nation could have done that it should deserve losing the independence it once enjoyed, except of course by way of history and politics. However, if we look at *the Tibetan sangha or sanghas as a conglomerate*, it could be explained karma-wise why Tibet fell to the Chinese and that *they* felt the brunt of the political change. Could it be that conglomerate negative karma began accumulating since the 11th century with the instituting of "rule by incarnation" (unprecedented in Buddhist history)?

This ingenious innovation of religious politics, as noted by **Franz Michael**, begun with Düsüm Khyenpa (1110-1193), the first Gyalwa Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu sect, and was quickly adopted by all the other major Tibetan Buddhist sects, as it "took authority away from the leading families and

turned it over to the monks of the various sects... [and] that created the unique religiopolitical order of Tibet, rule by incarnation.” (1982:22).⁷⁴ The sect itself soon became the power base of a family that proclaimed its own teachings were superior to those of all the other sects, although in reality there was no doctrinal division amongst the sects.⁷⁵ Occasionally, we still get reports of rival claims and power struggle within the tulku system.⁷⁶

The point here is a clear one: *whenever religion and politics mix, power struggle and worldliness are the rule*. Throughout the world’s religious history, we see this recurrent pattern of domination of one group over another and of destruction of differences, so that “peace” could prevail. The rise and fall of Buddhism as a state religion in China, in Korea and in Japan clearly follow the fortunes of those dynasties and elites who patronize Buddhism. When the wheel of Dharma (*dharma, cakra*) is turned into a wheel of power (*āṇā, cakra*), the consequences are always dire.⁷⁷

7.2 IS GROUP KARMA CONSISTENT WITH JUSTICE? Can a member of the group be held accountable for the action of the group? Following French’s categories [6.2], in the case of *an aggregate*, whose identity is defined in terms of the individual members, they would each only be accountable for their own actions. In the case of *a conglomerate*, which does not consist entirely in or is not exhausted by the identities of the persons that are associated with it, the answer is less clear.

In some cases, *some level of praise or blame beyond what a person’s act entails can fall on the individual*, although he has only a minor role in the group action. For example, if a gang of robbers held up a bank, and one of them kills someone, all the gang members may be guilty of the murder. Now, what if a certain member has been an unwilling accessory all along, and he is caught with the rest of the gang? In this case, we must be careful not to mix *legal liabilities* with karmic consequences. The law may or may not let off the unwilling accessory. This person’s karmic consequences would depend to a large extent on how he psychologically responds to the situation.

Or, if a surgery team saved the life of a child, the victim of a life-threatening accident, all the team members would share the praise, or at least, all of them would feel a sense of relief and achievement, even if they did not hold the scalpel. In karmic terms, we could say that most of the good karma would go to the surgeon as the main actor, but there is really no way of measuring his level his credit. Or, the quick and proper response of a certain assistant was actually a key factor in saving the patient’s life. But again, he could not have done it alone, or his actions would be meaningless without the rest of the group. (Or, worse, what if the patient dies, who would be accountable? The group or the individuals?)

The case of family members can be quite complicated. Sometimes they may participate in an act only in the sense that they are family members. For example, a family member is charged in court for embezzlement, the other family members are also somehow affected, even though none of them contributed to that unfortunate individual’s situation. This is also true in corporations and businesses. Most workers know very little about such corporate activities. And this is even truer in most cases of national action: we rarely know what the authorities or the government are doing, nor do we usually participate in such actions.

As such, in a group action, it is difficult to hold the individual accountable for more than what he knew or did. *The degree of merit or demerit often depends both on the action of the group, as well as the action of individual participants*. The best we can say is that the individual (in a conglomerate) can be

⁷⁴ The best known of the tulkus form the lineage of the Dalai Lama, beginning with Gedun Drub (1391-1474). On his own website, the Dalai Lama says: “Personally, I feel the institution of the Dalai Lama has served its purpose.” <http://dalailama.com/page.54.htm>.

⁷⁵ For a better understanding of Tibetan “rule by incarnation,” see Franz Michael 1982: Introd esp pp 22-50. For a brief discussion, see SD 36.2.

⁷⁶ In the 1990s, eg, the Karma Kagyu sect was split between the Tai Situ Pa party and the Samar Rinpoche over the identification of the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa. See Julian Gearing, “The Tale of Two Karmapas,” *Asian Times* 23 Dec 2003. http://www.tibet.ca/en/wtnarchive/2003/12/24_3.html.

⁷⁷ For a longer study, see Piya Tan, **History of Buddhism: A brief strategic survey**, 2005: download or read files at <http://pali.house.googlepages.com/historyofbuddhism>.

held accountable when he either did or did not act, or had no intention or knowledge of the action. It is never a simple matter this kind of group karma.

Philosophical discussions on karma tend to speak of “just deserts” rather than “latent tendencies,” this latter of which more correctly describes how karma operates. Justice is often a social perception or sentiment, and a legal concept. While it is true that karmic actions bring painful or pleasant results, the following should be noted of the characteristics of karmic results:

- Such results can only be said to be relatively “commensurate” with the action but there is really no way of measuring them.
- Karmic causes and effects do not occur singly or in a linear manner, but as a network of coefficient causes and effects.
- Karmic results will persist as long as the conditions that feed them persist, and often in turn become the conditions for more karma.
- Karmic results are not merely “just deserts,” but more often arise by way of creating and reinforcing one’s latent tendencies of lust (like), aversion (dislike) and ignorance (biased neutrality).⁷⁸
- Karmic results do not always have the same effect on the same person all the time: with spiritual training, for example, we will be able to allow the fruition to pass without being adversely affected by it.

7.3 IF ONE LACKED KNOWLEDGE OF THE ACT OR THE INTENTION TO ACT, CAN ONE BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR IT? We may concede that individuals who willingly and knowingly contributed to a conglomerate’s actions can be held accountable to some degree beyond their particular contributions. *But what if they lacked the knowledge or intention for doing so?* It is generally held that blame arises only when a person can be held morally accountable for the action, but there is no moral accountability without any knowledge of the deed, or intent to do it, or a part in the performance.⁷⁹ The crucial point here is that if the individual had no intention to perform the deed, he cannot be held culpable.

For example, if a foreign religious mission has been regularly collecting donations from the public (especially during festivals or ritual events), but unknown to the mission committee (comprising locals), the foreign missionaries have been siphoning millions of dollars back to their home country, would the mission committee be blameworthy? Here, the committee members are innocent as long as they lack knowledge of the illegal transfer of funds. However, from the moment they know about it and fail to do anything about it, they are morally accountable and can be implicated in the misdeed.

What about the “monk-beggars” that are often seen the market-places of the Singapore heartland and Malaysian towns, who go around, not collecting almsfood, but actually approaching individuals for cash donations? I have no knowledge whether these people are bona fide monks or not, but I am moved as a practising Buddhist *not* to patronize them. Of course, technically, we can answer that they are clearly *not* bona fide monks because (1) they actually go up to a person asking for donations, whereas bona fide monks on alms-round would either wait at a suitable location or respond to an invitation to receive almsfood; (2) they ask for or accept cash donations, which again are against the monastic rules.⁸⁰

Anyway, these monk-beggars persist and flourish for a few reasons:

- (1) Due to our ignorance of the Dharma-Vinaya, soft-heartedness, superstition, or gullibility, we feel compelled to give to them.
- (2) More importantly, we are not certain which Buddhist authority or organization should deal with this on-going embarrassing and attritional phenomenon that gives Buddhism very bad publicity.
- (3) These monk-beggars and their like are aware of the wealth and worldliness of Buddhist monastics and the pious generosity of the devotees, and feel that they would have a share of our charity.

⁷⁸ On latent tendencies (*anusaya*), see **Mādhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18.8/1:109 f) = SD 6.14 Intro (5).

⁷⁹ “Performance” here should be understood in a broad sense to include any contributing act, from planning or ordering the deed to actually carrying it out. (Reichenbach’s fn)

⁸⁰ See **Money & monastics** = SD 4.19.

It is important to note here I am *not* saying that it is wrong to donate charitably, but the giving is wrong when it is done to those who either break the monastic rules or are simply conmen in the guise of Buddhist monks. In giving to them, we are therefore encouraging such karmically unwholesome activities.

One good way to solve or lessen this problem would be to educate ourselves and the public regarding why they should not patronize such monk-beggars. But whose task is this? And, more importantly, who is ultimately karmically accountable for the persistence of monk-beggars in Singapore and Malaysia?

Now, are knowledge and intention always necessary conditions for deciding moral accountability? Advocates of group accountability claim that a person can be held accountable simply by virtue of being a member of the group, whether or not they know of or participate in the action. He goes on to suggest a solution to this moral dilemma:

Perhaps one way is by making accountability and deserts in regard to group actions depend upon something other than or in addition to individual intentional acts, namely, upon group membership itself. I am accountable and must experience just deserts simply because I am a member of a particular group. Membership means that I share in some measure in every aspect of the group, including its experiences, decisions, actions, accountability and deserts. As such, my accountability extends beyond (or possibly at time is less than)⁸¹ what I had individually merit. As *an individual* I might not be accountable for a group's action where I had no intention regarding its performance, but as *a group member* I am accountable for and merit the effects of its actions. (Reichenbach 1990:148; italics added)

In other words, *knowledge and intention* are necessary conditions for moral accountability in an individual's action, but they are not so in the cases of group acts of conglomerates, due to the dynamics of conglomerates. For example, when I have a terrible headache, it is not just my head that is in pain, but it affects my whole body and even how I relate to others. The rest of my body suffers because my head is an integral part of my body.

I can, however, argue that if I have a headache, I could simply disregard it (let's say I have learned some meditation skills), and go on as usual. Or, I could get a bad cut on my foot while walking in the sea by the shore, and did not realize it until much later, so that the rest of my body is unaffected. The point is that although the body analogy helps us to understand how consequences can affect the entire body, it is not entirely applicable here, for we are not dealing only with the effects experienced by one member of the group, but also with *just* deserts. The analogy cannot show whether the effects are just, and this is the key factor here. At best, this group argument would only hold if I am morally accountable for joining the group and remaining in it.

If I am a member only by virtue of circumstances, if I were compelled to join, if there is no escape from the membership, or if I joined or continue to participate not knowing the full scope of the group's activities or under significant delusion, then my membership is such that it would be unjust to say that I am accountable for and deserve the consequences of all the group's acts. (Reichenbach 1990:149)

Furthermore, we apparently have no choice as to the family we are born into, or the society or nation in which we live. As such, in summary, justice in group karma would be possible if the person is *a knowing and intentional participant to some degree in the group's decisions and actions*; or, he is actively and willingly a member of a group about whose activities *he has significant and accurate knowledge*.

7.4 IS GROUP KARMA POSSIBLE? Reichenbach says that the answer to this question depends upon: (a) being able to give an account of how group karma works, and (b) showing that transfer of merit from

⁸¹ "This would occur, for example, when my intentional decisions for the group to do wrong are mitigated by the group's action, such that the consequences I derive from the group's action are better than what I would have merited had I experienced the results of my own intentions." (Reichenbach's fn)

one person to another is possible. With respect to **(a)** we can say that karma works *in a causal manner*; but how is karma causally transmitted to the individual group members? Even if we know how this occurs, the proponents of group karma still cannot use it to explain on how karmic residues are transmitted to the group members. Firstly, the effects of group karma amount to more than the intention with which I was involved in the given action. Secondly, the group to which I consciously and willingly belonged could act without my knowledge, consent or involvement.

For example, when the Muslim terrorists bombed the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001,⁸² let us say, I were only a terrorist cell member who drove a band of them to the airport, but I had no idea whatsoever that they would use the plane they have boarded to bomb one of the WTC towers. Although I am an accountable member of the terrorist group, how could the karmic residues become part of my dispositions? How about if I did not rejoice upon hearing the news of the devastation? Indeed, it is difficult to see how the evil karma done by the terrorist bombers could filter down into me through a causal process.

Reichenbach, in fact, remarks that “group karma would work best in a theistic system” (1990:151) and he explains why:

If group karma is to be rescued, a causal account in terms of dispositions must be supplemented by an account which includes a conscious agent [such as a God] who both knows the merit of the acts performed by the individual and the group, and who has the power and wisdom to bring about consequences which accord with that merit. (Reichenbach 1990:150 f)

According to Reichenbach’s point **(b)**, what needs to be demonstrated to support the notion of group karma is that *transfer of merit* is possible, and he devotes a whole chapter to it (1990: ch 10).⁸³ As this is purely a philosophical discussion, and is not related to the outcome of this study, we shall not delve into it here.

Group karma is possible in the sense that an individual in a group can bring a karmic condition that, due to personal *affinity* (mental connection) and *propinquity* (social connection), brings about results that affect all or most of the group in a similar manner. However, although the overall karmic result may seem almost uniform, the exact reactions of each individual of the group are rarely the same at any one time. As the force behind karmic results are purely *mental* and personal, we can hardly expect such results to manifest themselves in the same manner in everyone, even in the same group. But karmic results when they occur in a group, often profoundly affect it.

8 The social implications of karma

8.1 EXTERNAL INFLUENCE AND INTERNAL CONSIDERATION. Phra Prayudh Payutto, Thailand’s leading philosopher monk, in his own way, addresses the issue of group karma, or moral exactly, the social implications of karma, in his book, *Good, Evil and Beyond: Kamma in the Buddha’s Teaching* (1993, especially ch 4). Much of the materials in this section have been summarized from this work along with my comments.

Payutto begins by applying, or contextualizing, the early Buddhist conception of “the supports for right view” (*sammā,diṭṭhi paccaya*)—another’s voice (*parato,ghosa*) and wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*)⁸⁴—to social realities. Payutto, in his *Dictionary of Buddhism*, defines these terms as follows:

- *parato,ghosa* as “another’s utterance; inducement by others; hearing or learning from others”;
- *yoniso manasikāra* as “reasoned attention; systematic attention; genetical reflection; analytical reflection.” (Dictionary of Buddhism §34 = 1985:80)

Parato,ghosa, in other words, refers to our social ambience, or external factors that influence or shape our lives. They can be wholesome or unwholesome. On the wholesome side, ideally there is spiritual

⁸² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11%2C_2001_attacks#Collapse_of_the_World_Trade_Center.

⁸³ See Jāpussonī (A 10.177/5:269-273) = SD 2.6.

⁸⁴ Mahā Vedalla S (M 43.13-14/1:294); A 2.11.10(8)/1:87.

friendship (*kalyāṇa, mittatā*). The true-hearted friend (*suhada, mitta*) and the spiritual friend (*kalyāṇa mitta*) are the body, voice and heart of the spiritual community, and is the essence of the spiritual life.⁸⁵

Strictly speaking, spiritual friendship is the sacred link amongst those walking the noble eightfold path. It is the friendship shared by saints, but it is an unconditional relationship that is open to all. Even if we may not have the time or spiritual stamina for such a friendship, we can still learn from the examples of such spiritual friends, as they exude radiant peace and healing wisdom.

Even if spiritual friends are hard to come by, we can still and should cultivate “true-hearted friendship.” The “true-hearted friend” (*suhada, mitta*) is clearly defined in the **Sigālovāda Sutta** (D 31). He is said to be a helper (*upakāra*), same in joy and in pain (*samāna, sukha, dukkha*), gives good counsel (*atth’akkhāyī*), and compassionate (*anukampaka*).⁸⁶ The true-hearted friend is one wholesomely restrained in body and speech, and he similarly inspires you towards the cultivation of your mental and spiritual faculties.

As human beings, we are born into a family or society and an environment that are not of our choice. Yet, to a large extent, we are influenced by our family, society and environment. We are automatically exposed and influenced by such family and social values, often without knowing any other. Often this is because our family or society, often both, severely limits the range of our choices of values, beliefs, knowledge and friends, and hence limit our development and destiny.

Occasionally there arise in society exceptional individuals who know how to think for themselves. They have great insight into society’s problems, the causes of such problems, and how these problems can be truly solved. Such an exceptional individual is one who applies *yoniso, manasikāra*, wise attention or skillful consideration, that is, the ability to recognize the mistaken practices within society and look for ways to improve them, as the Buddha has done with the false practices of his times.

The Buddha is one who points out your real worth, that it is not to be decided by your birth, wealth, social status, or even religion, but by what good you do and the potential you have for greater good. This is the true spirit of early Buddhism. Indeed, when no Buddha arises in this world, it becomes a wilderness of ignorance, superstition, materialism and violence.

Every once in a while there will be one who, gauging the social conventions and institutions of the time with reasoned reflection, will instigate efforts to correct mistaken or detrimental beliefs and traditions. These means for dealing with problems will become new systems of thought, new social values and ways of life, which in turn become social currents with their own impetus. In fact, social currents are originated by individuals, and from there the masses follow. Thus we can say that society leads the individual, but at the same time, the individual is the originator of social values and conventions. Thus, in the final analysis, the individual is the important factor.

(Payutto 1993:75 f)

8.2 PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SOCIAL KARMA. Without *wise attention*, human beings are easily swamped by the negative influences of external factors, such as those of religious beliefs, traditions and social values. We could say that religions, traditions and customs are *social karma* accumulated through the ages, and they in turn mould the thoughts and beliefs of individuals of the society. Payutto asks: How does a socially accepted view become personal karma? Personal karma arises at the point where the individual agrees to the values of that society or its leaders.

Take the example of an power-driven politician who perseveres to extend his political domination over other nations, even to the extent of unilaterally bombing, invading and occupying it, killing its leaders, and bringing untold suffering to its inhabitants, and who claims that God is on his side, and supports a fundamentalist religious sector of his country that surreptitiously tries to evangelize other religions and countries, too.

⁸⁵ See **Upaḍḍha S** (S 45.2/5:2 f), also S 3.18/1:87 f; cf S 5:4. See Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, 2004 ch 5.3.

⁸⁶ D 31.21-25/3:187 f = SD 4.1.

We may think that all these problems and sufferings are the work of one person, but it is not so. A great many others are involved, especially those who voted for him, and those who did not vote at all. In this sense, we get the kind of leader we deserve. We are to some degree karmically responsible on what transpires as a result of this leader's actions or inaction. When the ruler's advisers support his wishes, and when the people allow themselves to be caught up in the lust for power and greatness, this becomes karma for those people, too: it becomes *social karma*. If such a leader's supporter thinks that he will himself enjoy such power and greatness, that delusion worsens his unwholesome karma. **The Mūla Sutta** (A 3.69), on the roots of evil, warns us:

⟨**Greed...hate...delusion**⟩ is unwholesome, bhikshus.

Whatever ⟨the greedy (*luddha*)... the hateful (*duṭṭha*)... the deluded (*mulha*)⟩ constructs⁸⁷ through the body, through speech, through the mind, that, too, is unwholesome.

The greedy person—*his mind overcome and consumed by greed*—

The hateful person—*his mind overcome and consumed by hate*—

The deluded person—*his mind overcome and consumed by delusion*—
wrongly inflicts suffering on another by killing, or by holding [binding and confining], or by incurring losses, or by blaming, or by banishing, thinking, "I'm powerful! This is for the sake of power!"—that, too, is unwholesome.

Thus, these many evil, unwholesome states,

born of *greed*, caused by greed, arising from greed, conditioned by greed, are born.

...born of *hate*, caused by hate, arising from hate, conditioned by hate, are born.

...born of *delusion*, caused by delusion, arising from delusion, conditioned by delusion, are born. (A 3.69/1:201-205, abridged) = SD 18.2

We are often open to other social and religious values, some of which appear desirable or fashionable, but the bottom line is that they ultimately break up one's family, and subdue or even destroy what are good in our own society and culture. When we adopt such values, our whole lives are affected, and if this occurs on a significantly large scale, our social karma becomes more negative than ever before. The main reason for this is because we begin to depend for security and answers outside of ourselves, on some greater or higher power, instead of looking into our own potential for self-development, self-fulfillment and self-liberation.

8.3 THE KARMA OF RELIGIONS. All the incidents of global terrorist violence we see today—the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York (2001), the unilateral occupation of Iraq (2003), the train bombing in Madrid, Spain (2004), and many others—are perpetrated by those who believe in a supreme God idea. Another interesting feature of the God-religions is that they are closely connected with power and politics in some way. The Roman Catholic church has been using religious and political power throughout its history and will certainly continue to do so as long as it has any influence on its followers. Smaller churches and individuals that believe in the God-idea similarly tend to think and work along the *power mode*, clearly expressed in their fervour of evangelizing others. The worst aspects of God-centred power can be seen in the spread of Christianity and Islam beyond their homelands.⁸⁸

The great humanist thinker of the 20th century, **Eric Fromm** (1900-1980), points out in his study of humanistic ethics, *Man for Himself* (1947), that neurosis is actually *a personal effort to seem worthwhile without doing it through God or religion*. Neurosis is a kind of personal religion, a personalized God, that gives the individual personal worth and purpose. The neurotic lives in a fantasy of worth, and a belief in personal importance. And *religion often serves a person's fantasy of worth and purpose*.

⁸⁷ *Abhisankharoti*.

⁸⁸ On how Christianity grew into a world religion and its effect on the religion, see eg Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. On Buddhist presence in the Middle East in ancient times, see Fowden 1993:84 (incl refs).

One of the most profoundly revealing and liberating statements in human history is the Buddha's declaration that "all conditioned things are suffering" (*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*) (Dh 278): things of the world cannot bring full satisfaction. Or, in Fromm's vocabulary, the way of the group or society is often *pathological*. The family and society are where we emotionally gestate, the womb in which we live and grow. However, if we do not outgrow them, we can never become emotionally independent individuals.

The schizophrenic, for example, tries to retreat into a womb-like existence of a very private limited reality. Then there is *the neurotic* who is afraid to leave his home, even to get the mail. *The immature person* would rather cling to his self-assuring, almost narcissistic, notions of self-love and self-promotion, rather than venture beyond to seek a bigger and more generous self. And *the fanatic or terrorist* who sees his tribe, his church, or his country, as the only good one, but everyone else as a dangerous outsider to be avoided, even destroyed.

All these people share one pathological side: their umbilical cord is still uncut. Fromm's warning against religious violence is prophetic and still rings true:

The situation of mankind is too serious to permit us to listen to the demagogues—least of all demagogues who are attracted to destruction—or even to the leaders who use only their brains and whose hearts have hardened. Critical and radical thought will only bear fruit when it is blended with the most precious quality man is endowed with—the love of life.

(Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, 1973:438)

8.3.1 Disappearance of Buddhism from central Asia. During Asoka's time (3rd century BCE), through his support, numerous Buddhist missions spread the religion throughout the ancient west, and south and south-east Asia. By the 1st century CE, Buddhism was well established in Bactria and Gandhara (both in modern Afghanistan), patronized by the Kushan empire. Around this time, Kucha on the midpoint of **the Silk Road** (between Rome and China) was an important Buddhist centre.⁸⁹ In northwest India, Buddhism thrived in Khotan for several centuries. In these early centuries Kucheans and Sogdians helped to bring Buddhism to China.

In the 7th century, Buddhism arrived in Tibet, and by the end of the 1st millennium, the Uighur Turks moved into Kucha and converted to Buddhism. In the 10th century the empire of the Tanguts (Xixia, originally from the northeast of the Taklamakan Desert) expanded into the eastern end of the Silk Road and they became the last of the Buddhists of the Silk Road. Gradually, towards the end of the 1st millennium, Chinese power in Central Asia declined, and the Mongol and Turk influences increased.

This interlude allowed the spread of Islam and the decline of Buddhism, which led to its eventual disappearance from Central Asia. With the fall of the Tangut empire to Genghis Khan in 1227, Buddhism all but disappeared from the Silk Road. As if all this was not enough, the Pashtun-dominated Taliban, after almost a month of intensive bombardment, finally destroyed the Bamiyan Buddha (already defaced centuries earlier) in March 2001.

The rise and fall of religions clearly have to do with history and politics. That is a round-about way of saying it really has to do with people, individually and socially. The point is that the Muslim armies swept across the Silk Road in central Asia, and there was much bloodshed. And with that, much suffering was incurred upon the local inhabitants, especially the Buddhists who lost their religion and culture. We also lost untold number of valuable ancient Buddhist texts, not to mention other artifacts of aesthetic value.

Can we say then that such widespread destruction and uprooting of Buddhism by the Muslim armies brought upon them untold bad karma so that today much of their communities still live in backward conditions, abject poverty and social injustices? But social karma is not that simple. For example, Syed Rahmatullah Hashemi, a senior representative of the Taliban who visited the US in March, 2001, claimed that the Taliban's action of destroying the Bamiyan Buddha was not an act of irrationality, but an act of rage over UNESCO and some western governments' denying the Taliban use of the funds intended for the

⁸⁹ On Buddhism on the Silk Road, see LIU Xinru 1988 & RC Foltz1991; also <http://idp.bl.uk/education/buddhism/index.html>.

reparation of the war-damaged statues of the Buddha. The Taliban intended to use the money for drought relief. Perhaps if there is more international and intercommunal cooperation and assistance, and soft politics amongst the world's bigger nations towards the less developed ones, especially by way of providing the basic supports of life and of modern education (like the Peace Corps), such negative social karma could be averted.

8.3.2 Disappearance of Buddhism from India. By the time the Muslim armies devastated India,⁹⁰ Buddhism as an entity was found primarily in its great monasteries (mahā, vihāra) and universities. Once these were destroyed and the students and scholars killed or driven away, Indian Buddhism lost the core of its identity. Hinduism, on the other hand, had no identifiable core at which to strike. Moreover, the Buddhist establishments were mostly in the urban areas which became easy targets for the enemies.

The destruction of Nālandā in 1197 and of Vikramaśilā in 1203 by Muḥammad Ghūrī marked the effective end of Buddhism in India. The Ghurid invaders saw themselves as wielding the sword of Muhammad destroying the idolatrous Hindus and Buddhists. The Muslim invaders looted the temples and enslaved thousands.

Like most military campaigns, they used religious indoctrination to fire up their troops. Their main objective, however, was territory, wealth and power. The temples and monasteries that were looted and destroyed were wealthy centres.⁹¹ The Ghurids did not pay their generals or governors, or provide them with supplies. They were expected to support themselves and their troops from local gains. Understandably, they did not seek to conquer Kashmir or convert the Buddhists there, since Kashmir was impoverished then, and the monasteries had little or no wealth worth plundering.⁹²

The disappearance of Buddhism from India is another interesting case study in group karma. By the 11th century, Hinduism was beginning to become very influential in India, especially through royal patronage. The Buddhist monasteries, however, had become centres of wealth and worldliness.⁹³ Buddhist doctrine had mostly degenerated into speculative philosophy, and into tantric magic with promises of power, pleasure and sudden awakening.⁹⁴ Under such circumstances, the socio-religious karma of the Buddhists was not very wholesome. The Muslim hordes simply knocked the last nails into the Buddhist coffin. So both sides generated their own store of negative socio-religious karma. But, as the Buddha declares: *Buddhism is not destroyed by the four elements nor by others, but by hollow men within our own ranks* (S 2:224).⁹⁵

8.3.3 Christian colonialism. Christian colonialism haunts some of the darkest chapters of human history, the after-effects of which we can still feel today, although their roots, buried deep in the soil of history are often forgotten or played down. European colonialism began in the 15th century, with Portugal's conquest of Ceuta⁹⁶ in 1415. The dissolute Alexander VI,⁹⁷ in his Bull of 1493 gave Spain and

⁹⁰ For details of the Muslim destruction of Buddhism, see, for example, A.K. Warder, 1970: 502-513; also N.R. Reat 1994:75-77. See Berzin, "Historical Sketch of Buddhism and Islam in Afghanistan," 2001. For a Muslim's response to Buddhism here, see S.M. Yusuf, 1955:1-28.

⁹¹ On the wealth of the Buddhist monasteries around this time, see §22 above & Schopen 1994 & 1997:3-5.

⁹² As a rule, the invading Muslims did not forcefully convert everyone under their power to Islam. For if they did so, they could not exploit large portions of the population for additional taxes. As such, as in Afghanistan, the Ghurids continued the traditional custom of granting dhimmi status to non-Muslims in India and exacting the jizya poll tax. See Berzin 1955:10 online ed.

⁹³ The monks had great wealth and property; some of them even were probably involved in money counterfeiting: see eg Schopen, 1994 & 1997a:3-5. See also Piya Tan, *History of Buddhism*, 2005: ch 1.5.

⁹⁴ See Piya Tan, *History of Buddhism*, 2005: ch 1.29-31.

⁹⁵ **Saddhamma Paṭirūpaka S** (S 16.13/2:223-225) = SD 1.10.5c.

⁹⁶ Located south of Gibraltar, on the north coast of Africa.

⁹⁷ The most notorious of the corrupt and secular popes of the Renaissance, and was regarded by Machiavelli as a master of the art of political deception.

Portugal the right for “*barbarous nations (to) be invaded and brought to the faith.*”⁹⁸ To the church, the peoples of these lands seemed no better than animals.

Alexander VI divided the New World between Spain and Portugal. After Portugal had discovered the Spice Islands⁹⁹ in 1512, the Spanish proposed, in 1518, that Pope Alexander divided the world into two halves, and which was confirmed by the Treaty of Saragossa (1529), turning the globe into a duopoly shared by Portugal and Spain!

“Bound by papal edicts, bishops and missionaries found themselves to be an integral part of a political project of conquest and exploitation.”¹⁰⁰ Christian colonialism was led by Portuguese and Spanish explorations of the Americas, and the coasts of Africa, the Middle East, India, and south, southeast and east Asia. Despite some earlier attempts, it was not until the 17th century that England, France and the Netherlands successfully established their own overseas empires, in direct competition with each other and those of Spain and Portugal.

Looking back on such religious atrocities one just wonders how profoundly pathological the colonial church was. Understandably, such dark memories weigh heavily on the more right-thinking church members today. In a very dramatic response to this huge accumulation of very dark karma, Pope John Paul II (reigned 1978-2005) made several apologies to various peoples that had been wronged by the Catholic Church through the centuries. As Pope, he publicly made apologies for over a hundred of these wrongdoings, including the following:¹⁰¹

- The persecution of the Italian scientist and philosopher Galileo Galilei in the trial of 1633. (31 October 1992).
- Catholic involvement in the African slave trade. (August 9 1993).
- The Church hierarchy’s role in the burnings at the stake of dissidents, and the religious wars that followed the Protestant Reformation. (May 1995, in the Czech Republic).
- The injustices committed against women in the name of Christ, the violation of women’s rights and for the historical denigration of women. (10 July 1995, in a letter to “every woman”).
- Inactivity and silence of some Catholics during the Holocaust. (16 March 1998).
- The execution of the Czech reformer, Jan Hus, in 1415. He had questioned the infallibility of the Pope and anticipated the Reformation. (18 December 1999 in Prague).
- The sins of Catholics throughout the ages for violating “the rights of ethnic groups and peoples, and [for showing] contempt for their cultures and religious traditions.” (12 March 2000, during a public Mass of Pardons).
- The sins of the Crusader attack on Constantinople in 1204. (4 May 2001, to the Patriarch of Constantinople).
- Missionary abuses in the past against indigenous peoples of the South Pacific. (22 November 2001, via the Internet).
- The massacre of Aztecs and other Mesoamericans by the Spanish in the name of the Church.

Speaking in 2000 after the ceremony to the crowd in St Peter’s Square, somewhat as an afterthought, the Pope stressed *he was seeking forgiveness not from those who had been wronged, but from God*. “Only he can do that.” Does this effectively nullify all those apologies? NBC News put it very well: “The Church ... is not admitting guilt—the sweeping apology is for human sins by the Church’s sons and daughters, not by the Church itself.” Why not just say God willed it all, and so avoid such massive accumulation of dark karma? The point is that if the church had had nothing to do with politics, not lived by the sword, all this surely would not have happened.

⁹⁸ The Catholic Encyclopedia says: “To Alexander, we owe the decoration of the beautiful ceiling of Santa Maria Maggiore (a basilica in Rome), for which tradition says he used the first gold brought from America by Columbus.” The 16th coffered ceiling of the basilica is said to be gilded with Inca gold presented by Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain to Alexander, but this is clearly erroneous as the Inca empire was conquered during the reign of Charles V.

⁹⁹ Modern Maluku Islands (formerly the Moluccas), Indonesia.

¹⁰⁰ P Maxwell-Stuart, *Chronicles of the Popes*, London: Thomas & Hudson, 1997.

¹⁰¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_John_Paul_II.

Jesus's admonition, "For all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matthew 26:52), is often explained by believers in terms that would familiarly sound like karma. The way you live often shapes the way you will die. Sadly, even in the most carefully preserved and well-edited book religion, perhaps more so in such a case, believers tend to quote what serves their purposes and conveniently omits what do not. As the erstwhile most *powerful* religion in western history, Christianity is still reaping what it has sown. The most apparent aspects of Christianity's karma are as follows:

- Rapidly dwindling church-going population worldwide, especially in the west. [People are better informed of church history (much tainted by intolerance, blood and violence), and they tire of its paternalism and downplay of personal responsibility.]¹⁰²
- Growing number of Christian sects and churches. [When a system is word-based, instead of being wisdom-based, it depends on how you interpret the words: understandably here the letter of the truth is destroying its spirit.]¹⁰³
- Widespread exploitation, abuse and perversion of the minds and bodies of believers. [Belief in Satan and demons are often the bases for psychosis and various psychological problems. Celibate monasticism—an idea not found in the Bible—puts a heavy toll on those of the cloth who have unresolved personal issues, so that the abuse of children and sexual misconduct are more widespread and serious than the church would dare admit.]¹⁰⁴

Sadly, we do have worrying parallels in Buddhism, too. The population of practitioners in traditionally Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka and Thailand are declining and superstition is rife amongst them.¹⁰⁵ Religious materialism, simony and power-politicking are the rule rather than the exception amongst Buddhist monastics. We too need to work hard in brightening our own Buddhist karma.

8.4 THE KARMA OF BUDDHIST IDENTITY. For over two decades (1970-1990), the reformist monk Piyasilo,¹⁰⁶ working as a Theravada monk, often addressed the issue of a national Buddhist identity. The inspiration behind this notion is that of *a common national fellowship of indigenous Buddhist monastics, thinkers and workers sharing their best thoughts and abilities in how to effectively plant Buddhism as a truly local and personal spiritual and social experience*. It is heartening to see today local monks like **Bhante Aggacitta**¹⁰⁷ of the Sasanarakkha Buddhist Sanctuary, Malaysia, working towards a Malaysian Buddhist identity.¹⁰⁸

Like Malaysia, Buddhism in Singapore, too, began with foreign missions, and many such missions are still thriving in Singapore almost unchanged in basic policy since their inception. There are in fact a

¹⁰² See on US teenagers: <http://timschmoyer.com/2006/10/11/why-students-are-dropping-out-of-church/>; drop in church going in UK: <http://www.pcusa.org/pnews/2007/07211.htm>.

¹⁰³ The 2002 ed of *World Christian Encyclopedia* (ed David B Barrett; Oxford Univ Press) [1st ed, 1983] identifies 10,000 distinct religions, of which 150 have 1 million or more followers, and gives a total of 33,830 Christian denominations. It reports immense global shifts between 1900 and 2000 in various faiths' shares of the global population. Though Christianity became the first truly universal religion in terms of geography and remained the biggest, it lost much of its market share. Second-ranking Islam expanded considerably, Hinduism somewhat, but Buddhism declined. Judaism, Chinese and other folk faiths dropped very badly. Christianity started out the past century with 81 % white and is now only 45 %, and still dropping. Todd M Johnson, the *Encyclopedia's* co-editor, notes that "This is a huge change, not just ethnically but in what Christianity is all about. Christianity is steadily moving from this Caucasian, European-dominated, modern way of life, even beyond Christianity as an institution," he says. "There's no central, unifying narrative." In short, Christianity has literally become "all things to all men."

¹⁰⁴ Church abuses in Philippines: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/2116154.stm>; Bishops, arch-bishops, cardinals in sex scandals: http://www.boston.com/globe/spotlight/abuse/extras/bishops_map2.htm; some positive efforts: <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0701978.htm>.

¹⁰⁵ Popular "Buddhist" practices in such traditionally Buddhist countries, with their beliefs, rituals, magic and superstitions, reminds us that they have generally retrogressed to a pre-Buddhistic "Brahminical Buddhism."

¹⁰⁶ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piya_Tan.

¹⁰⁷ Aggacitta had trained as a forest monk in Myanmar and Thailand for 15 years before returning to Malaysia to work there.

¹⁰⁸ See <http://sasanarakkha.org/>.

growing number of Buddhist missions from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar and Japan. Many of the newer ones are small house temples and run on a mostly independent and parochial basis by foreign individuals.

In Malaysia, since the time of Piyasilo who introduced very successful national Dharma courses, similar courses such as the INCOVAR (a platform of fellowship and training courses)¹⁰⁹ have been run by local Buddhists since then. Although Piyasilo has initiated similar courses, especially the SINDI (Singapore Dharma Interaction) series in Singapore in the 1980s, there has been no follow up since then. In fact, from the 1990s the Singapore Buddhist youth community is generally fragmented with only occasional spurts of youth activity.

Except for the Chinese Mahayana community of Singapore, which are predominantly well run by local monks, the English-speaking Singapore Buddhists are, as a rule, affiliated to one or other foreign mission, especially the Sinhalese, the Thai, the Myanmar, Tibetan and Japanese missions. Interestingly, such an approach is somewhat reminiscent of the government policy of welcoming “foreign talents” to keep the local economy vibrant.

However, unlike the national economy, Buddhism is essentially a spiritual enterprise, comprising personal training in social and moral virtues, mental cultivation and spiritual wisdom. Sadly, no foreign Buddhist mission in Singapore to date has made any significant effort to nurture a Singapore Buddhist identity. Understandably, this has to be a task for the Singaporean Buddhists themselves to initiate and nurture.

The karma of Singapore Buddhism (especially the English-speaking sector), in other words, is closely linked to and generally shaped by those of the foreign Buddhist missions there. In a real sense, such Buddhist centres are generally little more than embassies, cultural promotion bureaus and financial tributaries for these foreign missions in their mother countries. The logic of the local Buddhist identity is very simple: if there are Sinhalese Buddhists, Thai Buddhists, Myanmar Buddhists, Tibetan Buddhists and Japanese Buddhists, it is meaningful (even more so) to have *Singaporean* Buddhists in Singapore. The second rationale is that local Buddhists would be ideal for the local Buddhist ministry since they would best understand the local situation.

8.5 RESPONSIBLE SOCIAL ACTION. If a religion claims to care for anyone at all, it should show responsible social action. We should be able to work for a healthy local Buddhist community, and so contribute to the success and health of global Buddhism. Buddhism has numerous teachings for encouraging a healthy society, such as **the four conditions for social welfare** (*saṅgha, vatthu*):

- (1) generosity (*dāna*), that is, giving for the present and spiritual benefit of the recipient;
- (2) pleasant speech (*piya, vācā*), that is, a positive communicability;
- (3) beneficent conduct (*attha, cariyā*), that is, the giving of one’s self; and
- (4) impartiality (*samānattatā*), that is, seeing others for their true potential.¹¹⁰

These are the basic qualities of a good leader whose aim is to promote social welfare and solidarity.

Buddhism, however, upholds that all action should ideally arise from wholesome mental qualities. A seemingly well-intentioned action can be ruined by the influence of unwholesome mental states, such as anger or fear, or it can be tainted by ulterior motives. On the other hand, to simply cultivate wholesome mental states without resultant social action is not very productive.

These four conditions of welfare are the external expression of one’s wholesome mind. But how does one cultivate a wholesome mind to this effect? That wholesome mind is cultivated through **the four divine abodes** (*brahma, vihāra*), that is,

- (1) lovingkindness (*mettā*), goodwill, friendliness;
- (2) compassion (*karuṇā*), the desire to help others, human and non-human;
- (3) altruistic joy (*muditā*), rejoicing in the good fortune of others; and
- (4) equanimity (*upekkhā*) or even-mindedness.

¹⁰⁹ This is the youth wing of the Buddhist Gem Fellowship (orig Buddhist Graduates Fellowship): see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incovar>.

¹¹⁰ D 3:152, 232; A 2:248, 4:214, 363.

Lovingkindness is the unconditional acceptance of those in normal circumstances, same as ourselves. Compassion is a responsive concern toward those who are less fortunate. Altruistic joy is an appreciative mind rejoicing in the goodness and success of others; equanimity is the even-mindedness toward the uncertainty of situations: this is the on-looking wisdom that despite our best efforts, there will still be some good that remains to be done, that failure will not daunt us.

On a more mundane level, *the four mental qualities express themselves as the four conditions of welfare* (although not exactly in the same order). Lovingkindness as the unconditional acceptance of others allows one to be giving and forgiving. This generosity (*dāna*) is not just by way of material benefits, but which become the basis for spiritual growth. One gives respecting the dignity of the person. One gives happily, generously, at the proper time and keeps to one's word. And one does not give alone, but encourage others to give in fellowship, too. [2.4]

Compassion as the watchfulness over others that is quick in responding to others in need and wise in giving them the right kind of help. This beneficial attitude (*attha, cariyā*) is an attitude of total giving. You do not just point the way to the lost, but you give him a clear map so that he is never lost again. You do not just feed the hungry, but teach them how to find and prepare their own meals so that they are never hungry again. This is the kind of help one gives so that the needy become self-dependent and liberated.

Altruistic joy is the joy in the goodness and success of others. Instead of envy or disregard, you show your joy and appreciation by way of pleasant speech (*piya, vācā*). In fact, pleasant speech should be the prevalent manner of communication, whether you greeting another, appreciating his actions, admonishing him, or simply speaking with him.

While equanimity is the state of an even mind, unshaken by happiness or sorrow, by gain or loss, by praise or blame, by fame or ill-fame. Your friendship and kindness are constant, so that you are accessible to all and sundry who are in need to help and guidance. Your mind is like a mirror that reflects the true reality in others in a manner that benefits them. In this sense, you are a true listener and spiritual friend, providing the conducive ambience for realizing one's true potential. In this sense, everyone is treated with impartiality (*samānattatā*).

The four conditions of welfare and the four divine abodes, in short, are the twin pillars of a healthy society. While the conditions of welfare conduce to the creating of wholesome physical and verbal karma, the divine abodes are the bases for wholesome mental karma. Even one individual with such qualities can encourage others to respond in like manner, and so wholesome social karma is generated, accumulated and commonly experienced, so that it is a community healthy both in body and mind in the true sense of the words.

9 Canonical notions of karma

9.1 THE FIVE AGGREGATES AND KARMA. An understanding of the five aggregates helps in understanding how karma works. A human being is made up of form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. Form (*rūpa*) is his *conscious body*, physically comprised of the four elements (earth, water, fire and wind), and functioning through the five physical sense-faculties and the mind (the sixth sense-faculty). Since we have a body, we have feelings (*vedanā*) of things as *pleasant, painful and neutral*. Such feelings are subjectively dependent on how we *recognize* them as pleasant, painful or neutral (physically or mentally), which occurs in relation to how we recognize these feelings by way of perception (*saññā*). The way we perceive things leads us to form ideas that proliferate in our minds so that we create *private realities* by way of formations (*saṅkhāra*). All these processes work in unison as an aggregate (*khandha*), functioning as the home (*oka*) of consciousness (*viññāṇa*), that is, consciousness underlies them all.¹¹¹

Technically, in the aggregates model, karma arises as “formations” or “karma-formations,” and it is “stored” there as latent tendencies (*anusaya*).¹¹² The perceived identity or acquired self (*atta, bhāva*) arises

¹¹¹ On the aggregates see foll: form (SD 17. 1-2), feeling (SD 17.3), perception (SD 17.4-5), formations (SD 17.6-7), and consciousness (SD 17.8).

¹¹² See **The Unconscious** = SD 17.8b.

as a result of the continuity of the conscious process, which continues into future lives, supported by the karmic force, shaping your psychophysical self and your environment. There is no real identity or abiding entity in this mind-body continuity.

In the same way, group membership is subject to change as radical as that which characterizes the individual's aggregates in this life (synchronic), and from life to life (diachronically). Persons born into a family (such as the Kennedy family) may be blessed by family ambience (for example, the family's history and its member's charisma) and yet suffer from personal physical, psychological or other disadvantages. [3.2]

A human family as a group provides only the physical and environmental support (that is, nurture), and to some extent, the psychological support (nature), for the formation of its members. The actual individual, or your dominant personality, would be moulded by your own responses to the external conditions (nurture) and your own mental setup (nature). You can to *some extent* equate "nurture" here with your past karma and "nature" as your present karma.

"To some extent" here means that *other non-karmic factors* also play a significant part in your life. For example, you could often fall sick because of the local cold weather, or you have a constant fear of animals after being badly scratched by one as a child. The sickness or the fear does not simply arise on their own, but through external conditions, and since you have the karmic propensities, you fall sick or feel fear. However, if you are well cared for or in due course you go through therapy to overcome your fears, you would become a healthy individual and member of society.

As such, **Nyanatiloka** (as he argues above) has a case against group karma, that one who is newly born in the group is a *different* person from the previous reborn who has committed some evil karma. The arguments of **Suriyabongs** and of **Silacara** are also right, insofar as the previous agent and the present person who experiences the karmic fruit are part of the *same* continuity of consciousness.

In fact, we can never really know how the karmic processes work. **The Acintita Sutta** (A 4.77) says that *if we were to try to fathom the workings of karma, we would go mad or at least be vexed by it.*¹¹³ The point is that the karmic processes are simply too complex for the human mind to fathom, or we would not be able to withstand the terrifying impact of the karmic revelations of the foolishness and sufferings of beings. How can we understand the workings of karma, when we do not even know how our own minds really work because we are often hindered by a lack of wisdom, and what more if we hold wrong views? However, as long as we know that *the present moment* is within our control, and we seize the moment by living now, we are in a good position to better our karma.

9.2 KARMA AND CONSCIOUSNESS. The early Buddhist teachings are very clear about the nature of karma. **The (Kamma,vāda) Bhūmija Sutta** (S 12.25)¹¹⁴ and **the Sañcetanā Sutta** (A 4.171)¹¹⁵ give this instructive summary on how karma is generated:

- (1) Pleasure and pain arise through the volitions of the body, speech and the mind, on account of *ignorance*.
- (2) Karma of body, speech and mind are generated either by oneself [on one's own initiative] (*sāmaṇi*), or, on account of others [prompted by others] (*pare*), conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise for oneself.
- (3) Karma of body, speech and mind are generated either knowingly [deliberately] (*sampajano*), or, unknowingly [undeliberately] (*asampajano*), conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise for oneself.
- (4) All this arise on account of *ignorance*.

(S 12.25.13-19/2:39 f) = SD 31.2 = (A 4.171/2:157-159)

¹¹³ A 4.77/2:80.

¹¹⁴ S 12.25.13-19/2:39 f = SD 31.2.

¹¹⁵ A 4.171/2:157-159 = SD 18.6.

Karma, in other words, arises on account of ignorance (*avijjā*), which in turn motivates us, by way of our volition (*cetanā*), to perform karma through the three doors of body, speech and mind, which could arise *on our own account or induced by others*, and such actions can occur *consciously or unconsciously*. They all bring about pleasure and pain for us. In short, our actions are interlinked with those of others.

We need here to understand the basic workings of two key concepts in connection with karma, namely, volition (*cetanā*) and latent tendency (*anusaya*). **Volition** refers to the *drive* with which we do things, and we could be driven to act on our own initiative or that of others, and we do this knowingly or unknowingly. They are all karmic actions just the same.

Their karmic potential comes from **the latent tendencies** that lie deep into our minds by way of lust, aversion and ignorance, and they pervade our *consciousness* on a subliminal level (we can call this the subconscious, as a matter of convenience). The connection between consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and karma is clear from **the Bhava Sutta** (A 3.76):

Even so, Ānanda, karma is the field, consciousness is the seed, craving is the moisture, for the consciousness of beings, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, to be established in (a *low, middling or subtle*) realm.¹¹⁶ Thus, Ānanda, there is further rebirth. Thus, Ānanda, there is existence (*bhava*).
(A 3.76/1:223 f) = SD 23.13

A philosophical discussion of karma is incomplete, even unsatisfactory, if it fails to take into account the Buddhist conception of consciousness (*viññāṇa*).¹¹⁷ If consciousness (that is, the latent tendencies) is the seed of karma (the field), then, karma is a very personal phenomenon. Whether we act through our own initiative or being induced by others, knowingly or unknowingly, that karma is generated within ourselves. This is what we are karmically accountable for.

9.3 THE KARMA OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY. Modern technology and the Internet have given a new dimension, indeed a global one, to the notion of group karma. Thanks to the telephone, the handphone, TV, and the Internet (especially websites and blogs, like YouTube), the Cho killing spree (2007) is not only the biggest shooting spree in the US to date, but “will also go down as a case study of how the rise and spread of technology has enabled the media, for better or for worse, to invade almost every aspect of almost everyone’s life.”¹¹⁸

On Monday, 16th April 2007, Korean American student Cho Seung-hui shot dead 32 faculty members and students of his Virginia Tech University, in Blacksburg, Virginia. On Wednesday, the NBC opened its national Nightly News with a clip from Cho’s multimedia package of 28 videos, 43 photos and a rambling 23-page rant. “In it,” reports Paul Zach,

the obviously deranged Cho portrayed himself as a veritable martyr of the poor and oppressed, and blamed everyone except himself for the massacre.

Almost immediately, angry calls and e-mail messages—including those from experts—bombarded local and national TV stations, websites and blogs. *Many said that the airing of the footage had made the media complicit in the massacre.*

(Paul Zach, The Sunday Times, 22 Apr 2007: Think 27)

The biggest fear of experts like psychiatrist Phil McGraw, is that the media publicity of the shooting would make Cho an international celebrity “and that would spark other troubled people to try emulating his bloody road to infamy” (id). True enough, within hours of the media report of the extent of the shooting, reports Zach, “Television alerts lit up TV screens across the US and parents and students were warned by cellphones as schools and other buildings received threats by phone and email of more bloodshed.” (id)

¹¹⁶ Here, “low” refers to the sense world, “middling” to the form world, and “subtle” to the formless world.

¹¹⁷ See *Viññāṇa* = SD 18.8a.

¹¹⁸ Paul Zach (Cleveland, OH), “Murder, they Googled,” The Sunday Times, 22 Apr 2007 (Think 23).

In the end though, what has become increasingly evident is that a disturbingly dark side to technology went on display last week—that it offered the English major an easy way out of his problems, and his lonely life.

All he did was push the buttons of digital cameras and computer keyboards, well aware he would be able to rail at the word on international television, after pulling the triggers of guns instead of reaching out to people who might have been able to help him help himself, and prevented his crime.
(Paul Zach, op cit)

Two pages later in the Sunday Times (22 April 2007), Lianghe Zaobao cartoonist Heng Kim Song’s “Worldview” ominously appears in two panels: the upper panel depicts the Cho killings with the caption, “In Virginia: a day of horror,” and in the lower panel shows more dead bodies, with the caption: “In Baghdad: just another day.”

We often live with delusions of self-importance, superiority, specialness, or of God looking after our interests. Those who reject religious delusions, neurosis or psychosis—left to themselves without any refuge—may turn to suicide. If life fails, perhaps death would succeed. At least, they must have thought, their death would bring them the glory that life did not.

We can see that the media plays a significant role in our social karma, and in even our personal karma. With further and rapid developments in the mass media, computers and the Internet, mass communication will only get “worse.” If we cannot change our external environment, we can still train and restrain our internal ambience, that is, through sense-restraint, wise consideration and spiritual friendship. They are the best ways for building a wholesome community.

Table 9.2 Well known mass killings in the US

Date	Location	Targets	Attack types	D	Inj	Attacker	Motive (?)
1 Aug 1966	U of Texas, Austin, TX	Passersby in the city	Sniper shooting	15	31	Charles Joseph Whitman 25	Abuses by father; brain tumour
18 July 1984	McDonald’s, San Ysidro, San Diego, CA	Mostly Mexicans & Mexican Americans	Rifles (257 rounds)	21	19	James Oliver Huberty, 41	Lost his job a week before; schizophrrenia?
20 Aug 1986	Edmond, Oklahoma	Post office employees	Shooting; suicide	14	6	Patrick Sherrill, 44	Unknown
Oct 1991	Luby’s Cafeteria, Killeen, TX	Café workers & customers	2 pistols; suicide	23	—	George Hennard, 35	Lost his job as merchant marine
20 Apr 1999	Columbine High School, Coluimbine, CO	Students and faculty at the school	Mass murder, massacre, suicide attack, explosive (failed)	13	24	Eric Harris, 18 & Dylan Klebold, 18	Unclear
16 Apr 2007	Virginia Tech U, Blacksburg, VA	Campus students and faculty on campus	Campus shooting, mass murder, murder-suicide, spree killing	32	—	Cho Seung-hui, 23	Schizophre-nic? Alienation, delusions of violence

D = Deaths; Inj = Injuries.

9.4 CRIME AND KARMA. Let us see how karma can explain one of the most troubling aspects of our times: **mass murder**. About 20 mass killings occur in the US every year. A mass murder is where four or more people are killed in the same episode. Each generation apparently has more men (the killers are mostly men) who are more familiar with and have better training in using firearms. And the weapons are also getting more deadly and more easily available. Before 1966, the best weapons available to most would-be killers were pistols, rifles, maybe a shotgun. That is no longer the case; today, in the US, semi-automatics are all too easily available. And what next?

Then there are the weapon manufacturers, the gun dealers, and the legislators who allow easy access to the firearms. Besides wrong livelihood—which is natural morality [9.5.2]—these people are not *directly* responsible for the killings, although they are in a good position to mitigate such crimes and sufferings. However, the fact that *there is foresight that such an action will provide greater opportunities for killing, even if this is not the intent, would certainly make such an action wrong.*¹¹⁹

If negative emotions are potentially explosive aspects of our darker side, then we (as unawakened beings) carry a number of such bombs with us. Many of them get defused over time, but some get bigger in aggravating situations. In a society where firearms are easily available and the laws are lax, these bombs understandably explode as mass-killing devices. The karmic seeds of greed, hate and delusion, quickly germinate in the soil of social pressure, stress, and sense of lack, and explode into gun violence.

Perhaps these killers have cried out for help, but no one was willing or able to help. The most pathological problem that characterizes such killers is probably that *they blame the group or society*. But the group does not think. Thinking in dualistic terms, the killer blames “others,” that is, society, when the real problem lies within. An important way of preventing such violence and their roots is to go beyond the notion of dualism.¹²⁰

This preventive as well as healing process, however, only works when we are motivated to see beyond dualism, and to work at the roots of the notion of success and failure within ourselves. And our task is help others see beyond this dualism, and help them work at the roots of their difficulties. This is called *compassion*, that is, to help them understand their minds and thereby begin building the foundations of true happiness. To do this we have to understand our own minds first, and have some level of happiness ourselves.

Even if others around us share the same thoughts or do the same action, none of us (as human beings at least) share the same consciousness in terms of karma. The Buddhist conception of karma is that it comprises our intents rooted in greed, hate and delusion, or their wholesome counterparts, which have the potential in turn of generating similar fruits for the doer. Other beings and the environment are at best the conditions (*paccaya*) that may have started, worsened, lessened, promoted or hindered the karma that has arisen in us.

9.5 THE VINAYA. Although there is no clear reference to group karma in the Suttas, we have many commentarial stories based on this notion [2]. Group karma, however, is a common feature of the Vinaya or monastic discipline. The Vinaya has records of many ecclesiastical acts (*saṅgha, kamma*) which are examples of group karma, although they are also legal acts. The Vinaya, as such, is a legal code, and it contains numerous legal cases, or “case studies” as we call them today. When, for example, a group of monks, decides to steal something, even though only one of them actually does the theft, the whole group is liable (V 3:64).

9.5.1 Vinaya and the sanghakarma. McDermott thinks that the sanghakarma is “the closest canonical equivalent to ‘group karma’ or ‘communal action,’” and, I might add, which is remarkably similar to the legislative procedure of parliament, that is, **the saṅgha, kamma**, variously translated as “monastic act,

¹¹⁹ Here I follow **Peter Harvey** comment regarding the Vinaya: “...suspicion that an action may kill something means that it is blamable to a degree. Thus foresight that an action will kill something, even if this is not the intent, would certainly make such an action a wrongdoing, at least for monks and nuns. This would imply, I suggest, that one reason a monk should not drive a car is that insects will be inadvertently killed, a very predictable result, at least in hot climates or on hot days.” (1999:278)

¹²⁰ On the notion of dualism as the root of global violence, see **Beyond good and evil** = SD 18.7(4).

ecclesiastical act, formal act.” This is a formal proceeding, ceremony or transaction that can only be legally constituted by a properly convened chapter of monastics in conclave.¹²¹

The Buddhist sangha, especially one in conclave would be, by French’s definition, a *conglomerate*. But when the same group of monks gather together, say, to do puja, or to watch a football tournament or a wrestling match on TV (which are against monastic rules!), they are merely an *aggregate*. However, in this latter case, each of them would be generating personal karma depending on their respective mental states as they respond to those actions.

The monks as a conglomerate are able to perform a sanghakarma (such as ordaining monks, or suspending a monk), and the act is binding on the monastics of the four quarters. What is interesting about such an act is that it is *democratic* throughout: all the assembled monks or proxies have equal votes regardless of their seniority or status.¹²² As noted by the Indian scholar of Buddhism, **Sukumar Dutt**, the sanghakarma is characterized by formalism:

In fact, Formalism is the most striking feature of a saṅghakamma, as appears clearly enough from the ninth section of the *Mahāvagga* on the “Validity and Invalidity of a Saṅghakamma.”¹²³ The meticulous observances of forms and punctilios of procedure is of the essence of its validity. Disregard, omission or dislocation of even an iota lays the act open to impugment by any number of the Saṅgha and necessitates fresh proceedings *ab initio*. It is well-known to students of jurisprudence that formalism is a feature of all archaic law. As we have pointed out before, the lawfully made decision of a Saṅgha were recognized by the State and held to be binding on its members as *Samaya* (Conventional Law).¹²⁴ The Vinaya in its operation and effect was the positive law of the monk-communities and its administration through Saṅghakamma partakes necessarily of the formalistic character of all archaic law. (Dutt 1962:91)

9.5.2 Natural morality and prescribed morality. What are the karmic implications of a **sangha-karma**? The sanghakarma, in terms of the Vinaya,¹²⁵ is primarily an ecclesiastical act, rather than an ethical or doctrinal concept. As **McDermott** notes, “The concern is with the institutional validity and, hence, irreproachability of such transactions, and not with the moral consequences (*kammavipāka*) for the participants.” (1976:76). McDermott’s discussion of sanghakarma actually ends here.

To appreciate the broader implications of the sanghakarma, or more importantly, of the Vinaya and moral ethics, one has to understand the difference between natural morality (*pakati, sīla*) and prescribed morality (*paññatti, sīla*).¹²⁶ **Natural morality** refers to the ethical training (*sīla-k, khandha*) of the noble eightfold path, namely, right speech, right action and right livelihood, as distinguished from the external rules for monastics (and, to a certain extent, the lay precepts), the so called **prescribed morality**. While

¹²¹ See McDermott 1976:75 f.

¹²² See Dutt 1962:87.

¹²³ Mv 9 = V 1:312-333.

¹²⁴ See Dutt 1962:80.

¹²⁵ For a general discussion on monastic discipline, see Charles Prebish, “Vinaya and Pratimoksa: The foundations of Buddhist ethics,” in AK Narain (ed), *Studies in the History of Buddhism*, 1980. On the Theravada monastic rules, see Khantipalo, *Banner of the Arahants: Buddhist Monks and Nuns from the Buddha’s Time till Now*, 1979; M Wijayaratna, *Buddhist Monastic Life: According to the texts of the Theravāda Tradition*, 1990; Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *The Buddhist Monastic Code: The Patimokkha training rules translated and explained*, 1994; Harvey 1999; Otto Von Hinuber, “Buddhist law according to the Theravāda-Vinaya: A survey of theory and practice,” *JIAS* 18,1 1995:7-45. For other monastic codes, see Prebish, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline: The Sanskrit Prātimokṣa Sūtras of the Mahāsaṅghikas and Mūlasarvāstivādins*, 1975.

¹²⁶ This latter is also called “prescribed training-rules” (*paññatta, sikkhāpada*) (Vism 1:41/15): see Harvey 1999: 282-284; Tatz 1986:295 n374. On the similarity of the monastic code (*pañimokkha*) to a legal code, see Huxley 1995b.

natural morality is karmically significant, prescribed morality, being external or special rules, is karmically neutral.¹²⁷

However, as British scholar, **Peter Harvey**, has instructively noted, “Yet it [the monastic code] supports natural virtue (2000:78) as it trains the mind in dealing with the roots of immoral behavior.” (2000: 93). The rule of thumb is that a monastic rule that goes against *the five precepts* would go against natural morality, and hence is karmically negative, besides being legally culpable, too.¹²⁸ *Killing a human, stealing, sexual intercourse of any kind, and claiming falsely to a superhuman state*, are all offences that are both karmically negative and legally culpable; in fact, they entail “defeat,” that is, the offender falls from monkhood. Those rules that deal with external decorum (such as the way the robe should be worn, behaviour in public, and toilet rules) concern prescribed morality. Breaching them entails some sort of rehabilitation procedure prescribed by the sangha. As such, both the sanghakarma and monastic rules have a direct relationship with karmic consequences.

9.6 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GROUP KARMA. According to Buddhism, karma works on an individual basis, since it is after all a mental event (volition, *cetanā*) that underlies our actions. However, like notes of a harmonious piece of music, they tend to interconnect with the karma of others on account of external conditions. The concept of group karma is useful as a social discourse, as it facilitates a sense of common responsibility and concerted effort. Such a conception, to extend the music simile mentioned, is like an orchestra: each instrument has its score to play and produces a unique range of beautiful sounds. But together, the sounds create beautiful music (or conversely, badly conducted, it could produce bad music).

In other words, the notion of group karma is a useful social means of facilitating more people to generate wholesome karma, or create an environment conducive for wholesome karma. In fact, this is the line taken by the various concerned and engaged Buddhist individuals and groups. Another word for this positive interaction, as we have noted, is *true-hearted friendship*, a friendly and fruitful fellowship of pilgrims journeying towards awakening [8.1]. The point is that a healthy group or society begins with healthy individuals.

We are like billions of marbles thrown about on the plane of karma, hitting one another, often forming interesting patterns, but still each marble is different from the rest. Or we are like stars in the dark sky of samsara; our constellations guide others on the right path, while we too are spiralling towards awakening. Or we are each a jewel in Indra’s divine net, each reflecting the light of all the other jewels, but we are each a separate jewel all the same. Karma, as such, is more than moral virtue, or even virtue ethics, and covers the whole gamut of life, short of arhathood.

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¹²⁷ See *Buddhist Dictionary*: Sila.

¹²⁸ However, on the 5th precept as “only reprehensible by precept, but not by nature,” see Harvey 2000:78 f.

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