

KARMIC RETRIBUTION IN THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM: A WAY TO SALVATION?

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Introduction

The Buddhist process, or law of retribution (Sanskrit: *vipākadharmā*) is understood in terms of ‘karmic’ retribution, and based on the concept of *karma*, literally “deed”, or “activity” (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 258). The basic idea behind it is that any action done by an agent produce a fruit (Sanskrit: *phala*), which ripening (Sanskrit: *vipāka*) is gradual, and will fall back on the agent once achieved (A. Bareau, Schubring, et von Fürer-Haimendorf 1966, 49). Wholesome actions (Sanskrit: *kuśalakarman*) produce agreeable results (Sanskrit: *sukhavipāka*), and unwholesome actions (Sanskrit: *akuśalakarman*) produce painful results (Sanskrit: *duḥkhavipāka*) (Krishan 1997, 173).

Karmic retribution is closely linked to the notion of, or belief in, rebirth (Sanskrit: *Punarbhava*¹), and thus to the notion of *samsāra*², or succession of existence, where beings take birth and die endlessly (J. Bronkhorst 2011, 3□4). Buddhism acknowledges different realms, or states of existence where a being can be reborn: hell realm, ghosts’ realm, animals’ realm, humans’ realm and gods’ realm³. Actions do not only determine in which realms a being will reborn, but also his status, body, and environment within these realms (Krishan 1997, 172□73). Actions performed in this life will determine rebirth in the next. Basically, good actions will lead to a better rebirth, such as human and god realms, and bad actions will lead to lower rebirth, such as hell, ghost or animal realms. All these realms are parts of the ‘circle of existence’, or *samsāra*, where beings reborn and experience suffering. Buddhism considers the gods themselves as being subject to this law of retribution. Therefore, their realm is then not considered as the *summum bonum* of

¹ *Punarbhava* is a Sanskrit compound of *bhava*: “coming into existence, birth, production”, or: “becoming, turning into”, but also: “being, state of being, existence, life” (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 748); and *punar*: “again” (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 638).

² *Samsāra* is a Sanskrit terms meaning: “Going, wandering through; passing through a succession of states; circuit of mundane existence”; but also: “the world, secular life” (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 1119).

³ Some (later) version add a sixth realm, that of semi-gods, or asura. This might be an adaptation to Brahmanical cosmology.

spiritual life.⁴ As Bronkhorst notes, this notion of rebirth and karmic retribution could have attracted some by the prospect of a better life and saw considered this belief as a source of hope (J. Bronkhorst 2011, 3). But Buddhism, like some other traditions of India, sees this endless succession of rebirths as a source of distress, and the ultimate goal of Buddhism is liberation of *samsāra*, or more precisely the extinction of suffering, or *nirvāṇa*.⁵

The Theravāda tradition is present mainly in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, and is based on a corpus of texts written in Pāli language⁶. Buddhist studies in the West started during the first half of the nineteenth century, and until the second half of the twentieth century, were essentially based on texts⁷. The notion of karmic retribution, and of Buddhist practice, that has been shaped by Western Buddhist studies find his expression with James McDermott who considers karmic retribution, in canonical Theravāda Buddhism, as antithetic to liberation, since karmic retribution is responsible for future rebirth. Then, for him, the only way to enter *nirvāṇa* would be through meditation and avoidance of new actions (McDermott 1973). In the same line we find Richard Gombrich who notes that karma is not a concept that takes lots of place in the *suttapiṭaka* of the Theravāda Buddhist canon, and the reason he gives is that karma is a philosophy explaining the world, while the Buddha was preaching a soteriology. For Gombrich, karma is intimately linked with the theory of rebirth, and since Buddhist salvation is a salvation from rebirth, the aspirant is directed to the physically inactive occupation of meditation (R. Gombrich 1975, 214–16). When the first anthropologists went in Southeast Asia to study Theravāda Buddhist societies, or Theravāda Buddhism in practice, what they observed there was

⁴ The same is true for the formless and senseless realms, where some kinds of gods such as Brahma reside, but are more ethereal than the gods of sense realm.

⁵ *Nirvāṇa* is a Sanskrit term, which literally means: “Extinction, cessation”; but also: “bliss, beatitude” (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 557). In Buddhist context, it is the extinction, or cessation of suffering, but also of all passions (Sanskrit: *kleśa*; Pāli: *kilesa*), or defilement (Sanskrit: *āsrava*; Pāli: *āsava*).

⁶ Pāli is the name given by western scholar to the middle Indo-Aryan language we find in the texts of the Theravādin tradition. Nevertheless, this language is never called Pāli in these texts, and this word refers to ‘canonical’ texts, in opposition to commentaries. To that, Norman adds: “It would seem that the name ‘Pāli’ is based upon a misunderstanding of the compound *pāli-bhāsā* ‘language of the canon,’ where the word *pāli* was taken to stand for the name of a particular *bhāsā*, as a result of which the word was applied to the language of both canon and commentaries. There is evidence that this misunderstanding occurred several centuries ago” (Norman 1983, 3). The language of this canon is identified more precisely to Magadhi (Sinha et Sinha 2013).

⁷ On the history of Buddhist studies, see for example : (Almond 2007).

very different from that picture. They observed that the practice of the huge majority of lay Buddhists consists in making offering and follow moral precepts (Sanskrit: *sīla*) in order to accumulate good karma for better rebirth. Even monks practice consists mainly in following their moral precepts and not so much meditating.⁸ Following this observation, the anthropologist Melford Spiro identifies two kinds of Buddhism: one ‘nibbanic’ Buddhism - from the word *nibbāna* that is the Pāli for *nirvāṇa* - and one ‘kammatic’ Buddhism, from the word *kamma* that is the Pāli for *karma*.⁹ For Spiro, ‘nibbanic’ Buddhism has for aim to free oneself from *saṃsāra* and enter *nirvāṇa*, and the practice for that is meditation, while ‘kammatic’ Buddhism has for aim to reborn in a higher state of existence, and the practice for that is to perform good actions or practice morality in order to accumulate merits. Spiro notes that even some monks practice meditation in order to accumulate merits, and conclude that the difference between ‘kammatic’ and ‘nibbanic’ Buddhism cannot be made in terms of practice, but in terms of the goal the practitioners want to attain (Spiro 1971). For Spiro, ‘nibbanic’ Buddhism is the normative Buddhism, or canonical Buddhism, while ‘kammatic’ Buddhism is an alteration of normative Buddhism. This alteration is due to the transformation, by the practitioners, of the meaning of nirvana from extinction into that of a heavenly state, similar to the blissful abodes of gods (Spiro 1971, 69–70). McDermott disagree with Spiro’s statement that the alteration of normative Buddhism toward a doctrine of salvation through karmic retribution is a relatively recent invention. For McDermott, this alteration is found in post-canonical literature, and is then much more ancient (McDermott 1973, 344–45).

Spiro reduce the idea of merit making only to the idea to be reborn in a higher state of existence, but never take into consideration that it could be done in order to progress on the path toward liberation. James Egge notes that giving can be seen as an act of devotion leading to good rebirth, or as an act of detachment leading to *nirvāṇa*. Thus, Egge make a distinction between sacrificial and purificatory soteriologies, and considers them as complementary (Egge 2002, 3). Then, Egge uses P. D.

⁸ See for example: (Spiro 1971; Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah 1970; McDaniel 2011; Southwold 1982; Obeyesekere 1963; R. F. Gombrich 1971; Keyes et Daniel 1983; S. J. Tambiah 1973; Stanley J. Tambiah 1968)

⁹ Spiro identified a third kind of Buddhism, which he called apotropaic Buddhism and which had to do with the protection and purification rituals performed by monks. We will not take this aspect into consideration in this article.

Premasiri's distinction between merit (Pāli: *puñña*¹⁰) and wholesome (Pāli: *kusala*¹¹). For Premasiri, the first one signifies actions leading to a happy consequence for the agent in the future, while the second signifies actions that lead to *nirvāṇa* (Premasiri 1976). Spiro's distinction is based on emic terms, but is never made by any indigenous Buddhist practitioners. Egge and Premasiri's distinctions seem to be more instructive. They do not exactly reflect Spiro's distinction since they do not fit with the idea that karma has nothing to do with liberation.

This raises three questions: First, is the notion of karmic retribution in Theravāda Buddhism really antagonistic to liberation, or is it a general theory that can legitimate both action leading to better rebirth, and action leading to liberation? Second, do the Pāli canon acknowledge both actions leading to better rebirth, and action leading to liberation, or the first one is an alteration of the last one? Third, Can we consider both these actions as part of Buddhist practice, or should Buddhism be defined more specifically as a practice that leads to liberation, rather than as a moral or an ethics?

To proceed, I will first look at what canonical Theravāda Buddhism consider as the cause of rebirth and suffering in the Pāli canon,¹² and how it claim to be possible to put an end to it. I will then show how karmic retribution is understood in the *suttapiṭaka* of the Pāli canon. Pāli literature is huge and the notion of karmic retribution appears in different *sūtra*¹³ and commentaries. The choice to limit my research to the *suttapiṭaka* of Pāli canon is not motivated by the assumption that this corpus is more genuine than other or that it contains the pure teachings of the Buddha, as it claims. It is motivated by the fact that the *suttapiṭaka* is *considered* by the Theravāda tradition as containing the words of the Buddha, it thus is the basis on which treatises and commentaries of that tradition are elaborated. Moreover, as McDermott states, the link be-

¹⁰ In Sanskrit : *puṇya*: 'auspicious, propitious, fair, pleasant, good, right, virtuous, meritorious, pure, holy, sacred' (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 632).

¹¹ In Sanskrit : *kuśala* : 'right, proper, suitable, good, well, healthy, prosperous (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 297).

¹² Theravada Buddhist canonical scriptures are classified in three sections, or basket (*piṭaka*). The *suttapiṭaka* (Sanskrit: *sūtrapiṭaka*) is considered as containing the words of the Buddha concerning his teaching. The other two baskets are the *vinayapiṭaka*, which concerns Buddhist discipline, and the *abhidharmapiṭaka*, which contains commentary about the doctrine. The Theravada tradition considers its canon to be more ancient and authentic. This can hardly be true, since this canon was written down and compiled between the first century BC, and the fifth century CE.

¹³ Literally: Thread, line, or wire. In the Buddhist context, the term is applied to original text books as opposed to explanatory works (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 1241).

tween karmic retribution and practice toward liberation seems to have been more clearly made in later Pāli literature. Therefore, I will try to show that this link is also present in canonical Pāli literature, and that all Buddhist practice toward liberation can be understood in terms of actions. But before that, I will briefly sketch what was the notion of karmic retribution among other traditions against which Buddhism reacted. This will help us to understand the specificity of Buddhist understanding, or use, or karmic retribution. For this argument, I will follow Johannes Bronkhorst's thesis of a Buddhist development embedded in an older regional tradition, which sheds new light on these debates.

The different notions of karmic retribution in Greater Magadha

Johannes Bronkhorst argues in his book *Greater Magadha* that the concept of karma belongs to an Indian culture distinct from the Vedic one, and clearly anterior to Buddhism.¹⁴ He called this culture 'Greater Magadha', from the name of the region where Buddhism arose, which is situated to the West of the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna River (J. Bronkhorst 2007, 13–72). Following Bronkhorst, the Vedic civilization, situated between the Ganga and the Yamuna, did not merge with the eastern one of Greater Magadha before the end of the IVth century B.C., so after the rise of Buddhism. The two cultures may have had some contacts before, but it is only with the westward expansion of the kingdom of Magadha, during the third century BCE, that they start to merge (J. Bronkhorst 2007, 1–9).¹⁵ Moreover, the notion of karmic retribution was not easily accepted by the Vedic culture (J. Bronkhorst 2007, 75–159). This means that the Buddhist notion of karmic retribution is not a reaction of the Brahmanical theory of sacrifice, as Egge argues

¹⁴ "The notion of karmic retribution pops up, so to say, in the literature of a region distinct from the homeland of Vedic literature: the earliest literature of Jainism and Buddhism" (J. Bronkhorst 2011, 3).

¹⁵ Bronkhorst's thesis has many consequences for the understanding of early Indian history, and especially for its chronology. It is relatively recent, and differs widely with the previous conception of early history of Buddhism that presents it as a reaction to Brahmanism. For a history of Buddhism as a reaction to Brahmanism, see (R. F. Gombrich 1988). I have chosen to follow Bronkhorst point of view not only because it makes more sense in the context of early Indian history, but also because it helps to understand better how the notion of karmic retribution is explained in Buddhism, and then how it was diffused outside India, among cultures that did not have any notion of karmic retribution prior to the diffusion of Buddhism. It should be said that Bronkhorst theory is correlated by another work published almost at the same time, but based on different sources (Samuel 2008).

(Egge 2002)¹⁶, but is a reaction to previous notion of karmic retribution that were present in Greater Magadha.

From its study of Jain and Buddhist sources, Bronkhorst identifies three different theories about karma in the culture of Greater Magadha. Each one of them is linked with a theory and ascetic practices about how to escape from *samsāra*, bring suffering to an end, and attain liberation. I will briefly sketch these three theories, according to Bronkhorst. It is impossible to precisely date these theories or even know which one is the more ancient. What we can say is that they were already present in Greater Magadha at the time of the historical Buddha, so before the fifth century BCE¹⁷.

The first theory belongs to the Jain tradition. It claimed that every action generates future rebirth and suffering. Then, the corresponding ascetic practice consisted of avoiding any actions (good or bad), including, ultimately, eating, drinking, and breathing.¹⁸ This ascetic practice aimed, on the one hand, to exhaust previously accumulated karma through the suffering endured by immobility; and on the other hand, it intended to prevent the accumulation of new karma. Karma, however, was not considered only as a physical activity, but also as a mental one. The ascetic was therefore also supposed to stop his mental activity in order to avoid any retribution and rebirth. At the end of the process, when the ascetic stopped breathing and died, he was considered having obtained liberation (J. Bronkhorst 2011, 9–14).

The second theory belongs to the Ājīvika who shared the same idea that physical and mental activities are the cause of rebirth and suffering, and that only immobility could lead to liberation. However, the idea that suffering could exhaust the traces of previous deeds was not accepted¹⁹. For this ascetic tradition, it was impossible to escape from karmic retribution and, consequently, from rebirth in *samsāra*. Or more precisely, there was no possible means to liberate oneself, since liberation was

¹⁶ This point of view is shared by many scholars, such as (A. Bareau, Schubring, et von Furer-Haimendorf 1966, 15; R. F. Gombrich 1988, 66). Bronkhorst already goes against this point of view in *The Two Sources of Indian Asceticism* (J. Bronkhorst 1998).

¹⁷ The Buddha's life cannot be precisely dated. Theravāda tradition gives 544BCE, or 483BCE for the Buddha's death. Nowadays, a scholars' consensus date the Buddha's death around 400BCE. On this issue, see (Andre Bareau 1991; Bechert 1989; GOMBRICH 1994; Cousins 1996).

¹⁸ On Jainism see (Balcerowicz et Warszawski 2003).

¹⁹ On this point, see (Johannes Bronkhorst 2003). On the relation between Jaina and Ājīvika, see (Balcerowicz 2015).

considered to occur ‘naturally’ after a very long time²⁰. At the end of that long period, the being would practice immobility, not in order to reach liberation, but because he was *about* to reach liberation. In other words, liberation was not considered to be something that one could decide to obtain. Moreover, since previous deeds was considered determining future deeds, this tradition considered impossible to resist karmic pressure and modify one’s fate. In that way, this tradition was deterministic and fatalistic (J. Bronkhorst 2011, 15–18).

The two previous theories considered actions as the cause of rebirth and suffering. The third theory came from an erudite tradition claiming the existence of a self, different from body and mind, which was considered eternal and inactive by its very nature, so not affected by deeds performed by body or mind. Then, it was not actions that were considered as the cause of rebirth and suffering, but the non-knowledge of this self.²¹ Therefore, this theory did not imply any renunciation to action, but practices aiming at knowing that self. This notion inspired most of the later Brahmanical philosophies²², which developed different theories around it (J. Bronkhorst 2011, 18–20).²³

The notion of karmic retribution was not specific to Buddhism, but was shared by different traditions belonging to the same cultural heritage of Greater Magadha. This means that Buddhism arose in a culture where the notion of rebirth and karmic retribution was taken for granted, which is not true for the cultures where Buddhism later spread, like in Southeast Asia, China, Tibet, or Japan. Moreover, the cause of rebirth and suffering was not always identified as being actions, since the last of this theory considered the cause for rebirth and suffering to be the non-knowledge of the self. Buddhism reacted to both ideas of non-knowledge of a self and actions as a cause of rebirth and suffering. It’s reaction against the idea of an eternal and non-active self is more noticeable since

²⁰ That time was of 84'000 *kalpa*. A *kalpa* is sometimes estimated at 4320 millions years (J. Bronkhorst 2011, 17).

²¹ The Sanskrit word translated by self is *ātman*, which is sometimes translated as ‘soul’. The Sanskrit notion is, however, different from that of ‘self’ or ‘soul’, since it is thought of as an inactive entity (J. Bronkhorst 2011, 19).

²² These philosophies started to be elaborated in texts called *Upaniṣad*. For a comparison of the theory of karma in Buddhism and the *Upaniṣad*, see: (Reat 1977).

²³ It is here that Bronkhorst is innovative. The notion of self was usually thought to be a Vedic Brahmanical one, against which Buddhism reacted (R. F. Gombrich 1988, 65–72). Bronkhorst argue that Brahmanism borrowed the notion of self from Greater Magadha, and that Buddhism reacted to that notion before it was integrated in Brahmanical Philosophies. The consequences would be that all Brahmanical text were written later than the fourth century BCE.

Buddhism is well known for its doctrine of non-self, or *anātta* (Sanskrit: *anātman*), which is considered as the identity marker for Theravāda Buddhism (R. F. Gombrich 1988, 63). But Buddhism also reacted to the idea of actions as the cause for rebirth and suffering. This is less obvious, because Buddhism did not reject the idea of karmic retribution as a whole, and also because Buddhism was only considered as a reaction against Brahmanism by western scholars who neglected this point. By looking at what Buddhism considered as the cause of rebirth and suffering, we could better understand the specificity of its practice toward liberation, and of its theory of karmic retribution.

Causes of rebirth and suffering in Buddhism

The basic teaching of Buddhism is generally considered condensed in the sutra of ‘Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma’ (*Dhammacakappavattana Sutta* in the Pāli canon).²⁴ The tradition records it as the first teaching of the Buddha, just after his enlightenment (A. Bareau, Schubring, et von Fürer-Haimendorf 1966, 41). This sutra is well known for its exposition of the ‘Four Noble Truths’. These Four Noble Truths are: the Truth of Suffering, the Truth of Origin, the Truth of Cessation and the Truth of the Path (*The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya* 2000, 1843–47). The Truth of Suffering presents life in *samsāra* in a negative way, saying that everything in life is suffering:

[B]irth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering, union with what is displeasing is suffering, separation from what is pleasing is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering (*The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya* 2000, 1844).

²⁴ Samyutta Nikaya, Mahāvagga, Saccasamyutta, section 11, SN V. 56, 11 (1).

For Buddhism, *samsāra* is not just filled with suffering, but it is suffering. This has to do with the idea that all phenomena are impermanent. Even if there are some moments of happiness in life, these moments do not last, and ultimately generate suffering. It should be noted here that the Pāli word for suffering: *dukkha* (Sanskrit: *duḥkha*), as John Powers notes, «refers not only to physical pain, but also emotional turmoil, discomfort, dissatisfaction, and sorrow» (Powers 2007, 65–66).²⁵

The Truth of Origin said that suffering has a cause, and this cause is craving (Pāli: *taṇhā*, Sanskrit: *trṣṇā*), often translated as desire²⁶, as the sutra states:

It is craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasure, craving for existence, craving for extermination (*The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya* 2000, 1844).

Here, it is not action that is identified as the main cause for rebirth and suffering, but craving. The Truth of Cessation means that by the cessation of craving, suffering is eradicated. The sutra goes:

It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it (*The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya* 2000, 1844).

The Truth of the Path summarizes the method that leads to the cessation of craving, which consist of practicing the Noble Eightfold Path, in which all Buddhist practices are included. This eightfold path consists of: right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct²⁷, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

In this sutra, we do not see any mention of karma as a cause of rebirth and suffering. It is craving, or desire, which is identified as their cause. For that reason, the path toward the end of rebirth and suffering does not mention any idea of inaction. On the contrary, it promotes an idea of *right* action, which will lead to the cessation of suffering through the cessation of its cause: craving. I will come back to that issue later, but I can already argue that through its eightfold path, Buddhism appears not so much as an orthodoxy – even if right view implies a kind of ortho-

²⁵ It is also what we find in the Monier-Williams dictionary (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 483).

²⁶ Literally: thirst (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 454).

²⁷ Sanskrit: *samyakkarmānta*. It can be translated by: right action (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 1181).

doxy – but rather as an orthopraxy, a doctrine teaching how to act, behave and even think in the right way, in order to destroy suffering and its causes.

The second most important teaching of canonical Theravāda Buddhism is that on dependant origination (Sanskrit: *Pratītyasamutpāda*, Pāli: *paṭiccasamuppāda*). It is said to be a more detailed exposition of the second Noble Truth, the Truth of Origin (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* 1995, 30). Indeed, the sutra exposes a chain of causation that ends with rebirth²⁸, death and suffering, and starts with ignorance (Pāli: *avijjā*, Sanskrit: *avidyā*). In the Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta we find this statement:

[W]ith ignorance as condition, formation [come to be] ; with formation as condition, consciousness ; with consciousness as condition, mentality-materiality ; with mentality-materiality as condition, the sixfold bases ; with the sixfold bases as condition, contact ; with contact as condition, feeling ; with feeling as condition, craving ; with craving as condition, clinging ; with clinging as condition, being ; with being as condition, birth ; with birth as condition, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come to be (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* 1995, 353□54)²⁹.

Here craving is only the eighth link of that dependant origination, and the very first cause of rebirth and suffering is ignorance. By identifying ignorance as a cause of rebirth and suffering, Buddhism recognizes the idea of certain knowledge that lead to liberation. But this knowledge is not about an eternal self. It is sometimes considered as the knowledge of the four Noble Truths, but it should more precisely be considered as the understanding of dependant origination. As a sutra puts it in the Buddha's mouth:

This dependant origination is profound and appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this doctrine that this generation has be-

²⁸ Result (*vipāka*) is expressed here in term of rebirth (Pāli: *punabbhava*, Sanskrit: *Punarbhava*). In the introduction of his translation of the Majjhima Nikaya, Bhikkhu Bodhi notes that the notion of rebirth is not the same as the notion of reincarnation, since there is no individual entity that transmigrates from a body to another. Rebirth implies the idea of a continuum of consciousness (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* 1995, 45). While this process is better understandable as conditioning rebirth after death, it should also be understood as occurring at every moment of life, when a state of consciousness succeeds the previous one. As AN 34.4 states, volitional actions can bear results of three kinds: in this life, during the next life, or in subsequent lives (Bodhi 2012, 230).

²⁹ The third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering, consists of reversing the order of this dependent origination, as it is explain in the *sammādhīṭṭi sutta* (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* 1995, 135-43).

come like a tangled ball of string, covered as with a blight, tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass beyond states of woe, the ill destiny, ruin and the round of birth-and-death (Walshe 2005, 223).

In the Mahāhattipadopama Sutta, the Buddha is considered having said: “One who sees the dependant origination sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependant origination”³⁰ (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* 1995, 284). Dhamma is the Pāli for Dharma, and in this context means the Buddhist teaching. Thus, we see that to the idea of knowledge of an inactive and eternal self, Buddhism opposes the idea of knowledge of the process that generates rebirth and suffering. As the Sammādhitti Sutta states, the basic understanding of this process is the ‘right view’, the first step on the path to liberation, since it gives the opportunity to reverse it (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* 1995, 135□44).

In other sutra and in all Buddhist treatises, ignorance, together with desire and hatred – or aversion, that is to say the opposite feeling to desire – are called the three poisons, and are identified as the root causes for rebirth and suffering.³¹ Ignorance is also understood as the wrong belief in an eternal self.³² And it is this wrong view that generates desire and hatred. Ignorance can then be seen as the very first cause of rebirth and suffering. But whether the cause is identified as ignorance, desire or hatred, the important point to underline here is that it is never identified as karma *per se*. So then, what karma has to do with Buddhism?

Karma and the process of dependant origination

In this process of dependant origination that start with ignorance, we do not see any mention of the word action or karma, but it is the second link, that of ‘formation’ (Pāli: *saṅkhāra*³³), which can be understood in terms of karmic retribution. In his introduction of his translation of the

³⁰ In: MN 28.38

³¹ Such as: AN III.34(4); AN VI.38(8); AN X.174(8); MN 9 5; MN 14.2; MN 45.6

³² in: MN 2.6; MN 8.3; MN 22.15-25; MN 44.7; MN 109.10; MN 131.8 ;

³³ In sanskrit *saṃskāra*. Monier-Williams dictionary give a translation as: “mental impression or recollection, impression on the mind of acts done in a former state of existence”. And also: “a mental conformation of the mind (such as that of the external world, regarded by it as real, though actually non-existent, and forming the second link in the twelvefold chain of causation, or the fourth of the 5 Skandhas” (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 1120).

Majjhima Nikāya, Bhikkhu Bodhi notes that « Because of ignorance³⁴ a person engages in volitional actions or *kamma*, which may be bodily, verbal, or mental, wholesome or unwholesome». He adds, « These karmic actions are the formations (*saṅkhāra*), and they ripen in states of consciousness (Pāli: *viññāna*) [...]» (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* 1995, 30). *Saṅkhāra*, which is the Pāli for the Sanskrit *saṃskāra*, is defined by Reichenbach as « invisible dispositions or tendencies to act, think, experience, or interpret experiences in ways which are conducive to one’s happiness or unhappiness, produced in the agent as a result of the action» (Reichenbach 1988, 400)³⁵. In his introduction to his translation of the Dīgha Nikāya, Maurice Walshe wrote:

As the second factor in the formula of dependant origination, *saṅkhāras* are the kammically active volition responsible, in conjunction with ignorance and craving, for generating rebirth and sustaining the forward movement of *samsāra* from one life to the next. *Saṅkhāra* is synonymous with *kamma*, to which it is etymologically related, both being derived from *karoti*” (Walshe 2005, 45).

Like actions, *saṅkhāra* are considered of three kinds: bodily (Pāli: *kāyasaṅkhāra*), verbal (Pāli: *vacīsaṅkhāra*), and mental (Pāli: *manosaṅkhāra*). The following passage from the Kukkuravatika Sutta illustrates the link between *saṅkhāra* and *karma*, and how they lead to suffering. The example here is with ‘dark’, or negative actions:

And what *Puṇṇa* is dark action with dark result? Here someone generate an afflictive bodily formation, an afflictive verbal formation, an afflictive mental formation, he appears in an afflictive world. When he has reappeared in an afflictive world, afflictive contact touch him. Being touched by afflictive contacts, he feels afflictive feelings, exclusively painful, as in the case of the beings in hell. Thus a being’s appearance is due to a being: one reappears through the actions one has performed. When one has reappeared, contacts touch one. Thus I say beings are the heirs of their actions (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* 1995, 495).

³⁴ Ignorance is defined by Bhikkhu Bodhi as non knowledge of the Four Noble Truths (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* 1995, 30). Johannes Bronkhorst reject the idea that the understanding of the Four Noble Truth consisted of the liberating insight of early Buddhism (J. Bronkhorst 1993, 81-83). Ignorance can also be defined as a failure to see that every phenomenon (including the self) is a product of dependant origination.

³⁵ John Powers directly translates *saṃskāra* by ‘action’ (Powers 2007, 76).

The idea behind this concept of *saṅkhāra* is that every action will leave an imprint in the mind, which will reinforce a karmic tendency, or slightly modifies it. More an action is repeated, more the karmic tendency will be strong, and more the agent will be moved to act in the same way. Through action, we can say that the agent develops a ‘habitus’ to act in a specific way. For example, if one agent lies, this will leave an imprint in his mind, a tendency to lie again, more easily, in the future. He will be then conditioned to lie. On the contrary, if one acts in a good way, for example through generosity, one will develop a karmic tendency; will be conditioned to act generously. Karmic retribution is then understood as a conditioning process, and action is the creative factor that shape future experience. Only actions conditioned by ignorance, desire or hatred lead to karmic retribution understood as rebirth and suffering. This idea is expressed in AN X.174(8):

Thus Bhikkhus, greed is a source and origin of kamma; hatred is a source and origin of kamma; delusion is a source and origin of kamma. With the destruction of greed, a source of kamma is extinguished. With the destruction of hatred, a source of kamma is extinguished. With the destruction of delusion, a source of kamma is extinguished (Bodhi 2012, 1517).

Karma, here, is understood as synonymous to *saṅkhāra*, as actions that leave an imprint in the mind and shape future experience. That’s why it is said that with the destruction of hatred, desire, or delusion, a source of karma is extinguished. This does not mean that one cannot act when he has destroyed greed, hatred, or delusion. It just means that the action of someone who has destroyed these three poisons will not leave any imprint, or *saṅkhāra* in his mind. His actions will not generate rebirth and suffering.

There is another notion linked to karmic retribution in canonical Theravāda Buddhism. For an action to bear result, it should be done intentionally, and it is the intention, or volition (Sanskrit: *cetanā*³⁶) that determines the retribution of an action. Volition is even considered as similar to karma, as AN 63 (9) (5) states: “*It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call kamma*” (Bodhi 2012, 963). For that reason, Bhikkhu Bodhi translates karma by ‘volitional actions’. The Theravada Buddhist tradition clearly stresses the centrality of intention in karmic retribution, notably

³⁶ *Cetanā* means literally: “consciousness”, “understanding”, “sense”, “intelligence” (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 397). Nalini Devdas who wrote a thesis on this subject translates it by “intentional impetus”, “purposive impulse”, or “volition” (Devdas 2008).

in the Kathāvatthu, a text refuting doctrinal position belonging to the eighteen sects of ancient Buddhism.³⁷ Bronkhorst notes that Buddhism psychologized the notion of karmic retribution by explaining action through intention (J. Bronkhorst 2011, 21). This psychologization is even more obvious with the concept of *saṅkhāra*. We have seen that *saṅkhāra* is similar to karma, and in the above sutra we see that volition is also considered similar to karma. Then, *saṅkhāra*, volition, and karma seem to be the same thing. In the sutra of dependant origination, *saṅkhāra* condition consciousness, and then, through the other links, condition physical rebirth. And SN II, 37, (7) express this in terms of intention:

What one intends, and what one plans, and whatever one has a tendency towards: this becomes a basis for the maintenance of consciousness. When there is a basis there is a support for establishing consciousness. When consciousness is established and has come to growth, there is a production of future renewed existence, future birth, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering (*The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya* 2000, 576).

Morality and karmic retribution

Actions are sometimes classified into three kinds: wholesome (Sanskrit: *kuśala*), unwholesome (Sanskrit: *akuśala*), and morally indeterminate (Sanskrit: *avyakta*³⁸). The last one is indeterminate, or neutral, because they are not shaped by volition, and then do not bear any result. Volition determines if an action is good or bad. In AN X.104(4), volition is compared to a seed. If the seed is bad the fruit is bad, but if the seed is good, the fruit is good (Bodhi 2012, 1485). This explain why some actions, even done out of ignorance, can lead to higher realms such as human or god realms. Sutras sum up the unwholesome actions into ten: taking life, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, lying, sowing discord, harsh speech, idle gossip, covetousness, ill will, and wrong views³⁹. These are considered to lead to lower states of existence, such as hell, ghost realm,

³⁷ See in particular (McDermott 1975; McDermott 1977; McDermott 1980; Ghosh et McDermott 2003).

³⁸ *Avyakta* literally means: “undeveloped”, “not manifest”, “unapparent”, “indistinct”, “invisible”, “imperceptible” (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 111).

³⁹ For example: AN III.171(5); MN 9.3

and animal realm⁴⁰. The three first unwholesome actions are done by body, the four next by speech, and the last three by the mind. Wholesome actions are the exact opposite of the unwholesome one. That is, instead of killing, protecting life. Instead of stealing, giving, etc. But again, it is not the action *per se* that determines the retribution, but the volition. AN X.217(7) clearly states that wholesome acts, arisen from wholesome volition, lead to higher states of existence:

It is, Bhikkhus, because of the threefold success of bodily kamma, arisen from wholesome volition, that with the breakup of the body, after death, beings are reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world; or it is because of the fourfold success of verbal kamma, arisen from wholesome volition, that with the breakup of the body, after death, beings are reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world; or it is because of the threefold success of mental kamma, arisen from wholesome volition, that with the breakup of the body, after death, beings are reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world (Bodhi 2012, 1539□40).

Similarly, unwholesome actions lead to be reborn in “the plane of misery, in a bad destination, in the lower world, in hell” (Bodhi 2012, 1537). Thus, even if one performs a good action, this will not free himself from *samsāra*, but merely improve his well being inside *samsāra*. So wholesome volition, here, does not mean that it is an action free of ignorance, or that this action is completely disinterested and free of ego clinging. These actions are not negative since their intention is not to harm anyone, but they are a ‘source of karma’ if they are done out of ignorance.

From this, we can say that canonical Theravada Buddhism acknowledge that there are good and bad actions, and by doing so recognize that good action are qualitatively better than the bad one. So canonical Theravada Buddhism conveys a morality, an ethic, and we can hardly claim with Spiro that ‘kammatic’ Buddhism, which consists of the practice of such good actions, is an alteration of a ‘normative’ Buddhism. But on the other hand, we can neither claim that performing such good actions is a Buddhist practice, since it does not lead toward liberation, but toward rebirth, and ultimately toward suffering. Karma understood as a process of retribution that implies ethics and morality can be considered, with Gombrich, as a worldly philosophy that serve social life. But does necessarily means that karma has nothing to do with liberation? As we will see, the answer is more complex than that.

⁴⁰ See for example: AN III.34(4)

Karmic retribution and liberation

We have seen that it is ignorance that is identified as the main cause of rebirth and suffering. Since Buddhism's aim is to put an end to suffering, the practices aim at uprooting ignorance, and generating its opposite: wisdom. The sutra in AN III.74(4) presents three steps for acquiring wisdom. The first step is to enter the monastic order and to follow the monastic rules. The monk trains himself in virtuous behaviour that is not performing unwholesome acts. This step corresponds to the practice of morality (Pāli: *sīla*), and consists of the seven first branch of the Noble Eightfold Path (right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness). The second step, after mastering virtuous behaviour, is the practice meditation until the monk has experienced the four states, or *jhāna*⁴¹:

When this bhikkhu is thus accomplished in virtuous behaviour and concentration, secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, he enters and dwells in the first *jhāna*, which consists of rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by thought and examination, he enters and dwells in the second *jhāna*. Which has internal placidity and unification of mind and consists of rapture and pleasure born of concentration, without thought and examination. With the fading away as well of rapture, he dwells equanimous and, mindful and clearly comprehending, he experiences pleasure with the body, he enters and dwells in the third *jhāna* of which the nobles ones declare: 'He is equanimous, mindful, one who dwells happily'. With abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous passing away of joy and dejection, he enters and dwells in the fourth *jhāna*, neither painful nor pleasant, which has purification of mindfulness by equanimity (Bodhi 2012, 308).

This sutra talks about the meditation practice that elevates the mind through different stages, or states of consciousness. Meditations practices in Buddhism are classified into two: first, *śamatha*, or 'pacification, aim at calming the mind and its formations (Pāli: *saṅkhāra*), and which is a preparation for the second one: *vipāśyanā*, or insight. In the sutra, *jhāna* meditations are also a preparation for the last stage:

When this bhikkhu is thus accomplished in virtuous behaviour and concentration, then, with the destruction of the taints, he realizes for himself with direct knowledge, in this very life, the taintless liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom, and having entered upon it, he dwells in it. He does not create any new kamma, and he terminates the old kamma having contacted

⁴¹ *jhāna*, in Sanskrit: *dhyāna*, means: "meditation", "thought", "reflection" (Monier-Williams, Leumann, et Cappeller 2002, 521).

it again and again. The wearing away is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise (Bodhi 2012, 308).

This last stage leads to the destruction of ignorance, and by consequence, the destruction of karma. This practice is not only considered as destroying future karma, but also past karma that will bear a result in the future. It is an important difference with the Jaina tradition that considers karma as the primary cause of rebirth and suffering. As we have seen above, for these traditions, karmic result is unavoidable, and should be experienced prior to reach liberation (J. Bronkhorst 2011, 9□18).

The possibility Buddhism claims to destroy past karma has to do with the conditioning aspect of karma, and its assimilation with volition. Since volitional actions leave an imprint that will produce a tendency for the agent to act in the future, the only way to avoid new volitional action is by destroying these mental imprints. Buddhist meditation is not without effect like the practice of immobility, it has the effect of destroying mental imprint. Thus, Buddhist meditation practice is not similar to inaction, but is a practice of counteraction. However, this destruction of imprint is only possible for the practitioner who has obtained wisdom, and then liberation. For common practitioners, the result will be felt as long as they are not liberated. But in AN III.100(9), states that they can diminish the intensity of the result:

Bhikkhus, if one were to say thus: ‘A person experiences kamma in precisely the same way that he created it’, in such a case there could be no living of the spiritual life and no opportunity would be seen for completely making an end of suffering. But if one were to say thus: ‘When a person creates kamma that is to be experienced in a particular way, he experiences its result precisely in that way’, in such a case the living of the spiritual life is possible and an opportunity is seen for completely making an end of suffering (Bodhi 2012, 331□32).

In a note on his translation of this sutra, Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote that in any case the result will be experienced, but with the living of spiritual life, that is Buddhist practice, the result can be attenuated. Thus, the intensity of the result cannot be rigidly correlated with the severity of the original action. He adds: “It is this variability that allows a person, through the development of the path, to overcome the consequences of grave unwholesome kamma and thereby attain the end of suffering in *samsāra*” (Bodhi 2012, 1666). This implies that the Buddhist conception of karma

is not deterministic or fatalistic⁴². There is a way to attenuate the result of past action even if one is not liberated, and then make the practitioner progress toward liberation. Buddhist practice aim at acquiring wisdom, and it seems that this acquisition is gradual, and is correlated to a gradual attenuation of karmic imprint.

As we see with the three steps for acquiring wisdom, the first step does not include meditation, but some kind of right actions, whether they are mental, verbal or physical. Could these right actions develop wisdom and, then, destroy karmic imprint? In some sutras, actions are said to be of four kinds: bright actions producing bright results, dark actions producing dark results, bright-and-dark actions producing bright-and-dark results, and neither bright nor dark actions producing neither dark or bright result, that leads to the destruction of action.⁴³ It is said that dark actions are afflictive bodily, verbal or mental activities. Bright actions are non-afflictive bodily, verbal, or mental volitional activities. Dark and bright actions mean actions that are a mix of afflictive and non-afflictive volitional activities. Actions that are neither dark nor bright are actions with the volition for abandoning the kind of kamma that is dark, bright, or dark and bright (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* 1995, 496). Here, too, volition takes an important place. Actions can lead to the destruction of action if the volition behind is to acquire wisdom and destroy karma. Even if these actions are not done out of complete wisdom, the intention to overcome ignorance is considered helping to progress toward this goal. Action leading to liberation, like other actions, can be understood as conditioning, or more precisely deconditioning. It is here that we can see that Theravada Buddhism acknowledge some specific kind of actions that lead toward liberation. Spiro even quote a monk who made the distinction to him:

Even dana⁴⁴ is no good if it is motivated by a desire to be reborn into a higher abode. The only motivation for any religious act must be the desire to attain nirvana. Otherwise it is not good” (Spiro 1971, 78).

Unfortunately, Spiro considered that such statement had to do with the fact that practitioners altered the meaning of *nirvāṇa* into a heaven-like realm. But giving with the motivation to attain *nirvāṇa* can be con-

⁴² It has sometimes been postulated a notion of “free will” in Buddhism (Repetti 2014).

⁴³ For example: MN 57.7-11 ; DN 33.1.11 (29) ; An IV.232-233.

⁴⁴ Dana is the Pāli word for offering.

sidered as an action “neither dark nor bright, that leads to the destruction of actions”. What the monk told Spiro is similar to what I heard from Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche (Tibetan: *chos kyi nyi ma rin po che*), the abbot lama of the Ka-Nying Shedrub ling monastery in Kathmandu, during one of its Saturday talk in autumn 2006. The subject was about how accumulate merit through offering. Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche said that the act of giving, like any other act, is divided into three spheres (Tibetan: *kham*s). These three are the giver, the act of giving and the receiver. To make the act of giving meritorious, he said that there should be no conceptualisation of these three spheres in the giver’s mind. That is to say, the giver should not think in term of an ego, neither in terms of an action. There should be no attachment to an ego and then no expectation of a reward. The act of giving should only be made with the intention to gain wisdom and to eradicate suffering. Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche even says to his audience that if they are not able to give in this way, it is better not to give, otherwise giving might inflate the ego or be done in order to expect something, and generate suffering.

Buddhist Meditation cannot be understood as inaction, but rather as a purifying action that leads toward liberation. But seated meditation is not the only possible way canonical Theravāda Buddhism present to progress toward liberation. The Noble eightfold Path express this precisely in terms of right action. To be right, an action should come out of right view, which is the Buddhist view of dependant origination, then out of right intention. It is in that sense Buddhism is an orthopraxy, and not a morality or an ethics. But the notions of moral actions and liberating actions, as we will see, are sometimes confused in the *suttapiṭaka* of the Pāli canon.

Two kinds of good actions

The *suttapiṭaka* of the Pāli canon usually talk about wholesome (Pāli: *kusala*) action to name both moral action that lead to better rebirth, and purifying action that lead to liberation. The first ones are wholesome actions with *good* intention that lead to higher states of existence. The second ones are wholesome actions with what I will call ‘pure intention’ that lead to the destruction of karma, and to liberation. Both are volitional actions, but the second one implies a specific volition, the volition to destroy karma and attain liberation. Here I chose to distinguish these two

intentions in terms of good intention, and pure intention, but this distinction is not made in the sutra. In AN X.217(7) the sutra states that wholesome acts, arisen from wholesome volition, lead to higher states of existence:

It is, Bhikkhus, because of the threefold success of bodily kamma, arisen from wholesome volition, that with the breakup of the body, after death, beings are reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world; or it is because of the fourfold success of verbal kamma, arisen from wholesome volition, that with the breakup of the body, after death, beings are reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world; or it is because of the threefold success of mental kamma, arisen from wholesome volition, that with the breakup of the body, after death, beings are reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world (Bodhi 2012, 1539□40).

Similarly, unwholesome actions lead to be reborn in “the plane of misery, in a bad destination, in the lower world, in hell” (Bodhi 2012, 1537). Then, to summarise, greed, hatred, and delusion give rise to wholesome and unwholesome volitional actions, which bear the result to be reborn in higher, or lower states of existence.

in AN III.111(9), the sutra distinguishes between a *kamma* that lead to the origination of *kamma*, and a *kamma* that leads to the cessation of *kamma*:

Any kamma fashioned by greed, born of greed, caused by greed, originating from greed, is unwholesome and blameworthy and results in suffering. That kamma leads to the origination of kamma, not to the cessation of kamma (Bodhi 2012, 343).

The same is stated for *kamma* fashioned by hatred, and by delusion (or ignorance). Further, the sutra states:

Any kamma fashioned by non-greed, born of non-greed, caused by non-greed, originating from non-greed, is wholesome and blameless and results in happiness. That kamma leads to the cessation of kamma, not to the origination of kamma (Bodhi 2012, 344).

Again, it is the same for non-hatred, and non-delusion.⁴⁵

This sutra is in contradiction with another one we find in AN VI.39(9), which states that karma done out of greed, hatred, and delusion leads to lower realm, while *kamma* done without greed, hatred, or delusion leads to higher realms:

⁴⁵ AN, III, 34 (4) states the same (Bodhi 2012, 230□32), as well as AN, X, 174 (8) (Bodhi 2012, 1517)

It is not hell, the animal realm, and the sphere of afflicted spirits – or any other bad destination – that are seen because of kamma born of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion; rather, it is [the realms] of devas and humans – as well as other good destination – that are seen because of kamma born of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. These are three [other] causes for the origination of kamma (Bodhi 2012, 902-3).

In the first sutra, wholesome action arose from wholesome volition, and lead to rebirth in higher realms. In the second sutra, wholesome actions are defined as actions done out of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion leads to the destruction of karma, and then toward liberation. Both are called wholesome actions, but each of them has a different result. The third sutra is even more confusing since it states that actions done out of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion do not lead to the destruction of action, but to higher realms. This would mean that every action would generate rebirth and suffering, and that the only way to attain liberation would be through inaction. Bronkhorst argues that practice and ideas related to the other concept of karma keep on popping up within the Buddhist tradition (J. Bronkhorst 1998, 14). I would argue that this last sutra conveys such notion of karma that does not belong to Buddhism. It is also Gombrich's argument against Spiro's dichotomy between 'nibbanic' and 'kammatic' Buddhism, as we have seen in introduction.

We are still left with two kinds of wholesome actions, which have different outcome. These two kinds of merit correspond with the two kinds of wholesome actions we find in the Pāli canon, which I distinguish between action with good intention, and action with pure intention. The "wisdom of realizing the nonexistence of the personal self" is precisely the opposite of ignorance. Then, this kind of merits can be identified with the fourth kind of action we find in the Pāli canon that is neither dark nor bright actions, which leads to the destruction of karma. In his book *The Working of kamma*, the Burmese Theravada monk Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw wrote that action leading to higher states of existence are double rooted (Pāli: *dvi-hetuka*), since they are done out of non-greed and non-hatred, but are knowledge dissociated (Pāli: *ñāṇa-vipayutta*), since they are not done out of non-delusion. On the contrary, he states that actions leading to the destruction of karma are triple-rooted (Pāli: *ti-hetuka*), since they are rooted in non-greed, non-hatred, as well as non-delusion, and are therefore knowledge-associated (Pāli: *ñāṇa-sampayutta*) (Sayadaw 2012, 55□67). He defines this last kind of actions

as merit, since they are necessary to put an end to karma and rebirth. He says that merit are made through offering (Pāli: *dāna*), morality (Pāli: *sīla*), and meditation (Pāli: *bhāvanā*), but in each case these practices should be ‘triple-rooted’ to make one progress on the path toward liberation (Sayadaw 2012, 67–89). This distinction is a later elaboration of commentaries from the Theravada tradition. But as we have seen, it is an attempt to clarify a distinction we can find in the Pāli canon. It also stresses the primacy of ignorance as a cause for rebirth and suffering, while greed and hatred are merely considered causes for rebirth in lower realms. Through that, it stresses the idea that liberation is obtained through wisdom.

The problem of these two kinds of merits is also identified in Tibetan Buddhism, which distinguishes virtuous actions tending to happiness (Tibetan: *bsod nams cha mthun*) that consists of virtuous actions performed in conjunction with a belief in the real existence of the self, and lead to happiness within *samsāra*; and virtuous actions tending to liberation (Tibetan: *thar pa cha mthun*), which

brings about a state of nirvana free from all trace of obscuring karma and defilements. “Virtue tending to liberation” means the ten virtues practiced in conjunction with the wisdom of realizing the nonexistence of the personal self (Dorje et al. 2010).

Both Theravādin and Tibetan Mahayana traditions distinguish these two kinds of good actions and this distinction can be found, however less clearly, in the *suttapiṭaka* of the Pāli canon. By doing this distinction, Buddhist traditions clearly state that the right practice toward liberation is not merely performing good actions, but performing purifying actions in order to attain liberation. Performing action for better rebirth is not an alteration of a ‘normative’ Buddhism, since this kind of actions are considered better than the bad one, but it cannot be considered be part of a Buddhist practice.

Conclusion

In this article I tried to show what is the notion of karmic retribution in the *suttapiṭaka* of the Pāli canon. I tried to show its specific logic, but also how it is articulated with Buddhist values, and applied to Buddhist practice.

Buddhism reacted to both main ascetic traditions of Greater Magadha that focused on action, and knowledge of the self as the cause of rebirth and suffering. It rejected the idea that actions are the cause of rebirth and suffering, and instead identified ignorance of the process of dependant origination as such cause. Through that, it reacted also the idea of an inactive and eternal self.

For Buddhism, karma is the driving force that project beings in future states of existence, or toward future experiences. It is a conditioning process where previous action shape volition, and volition shape future actions. For that reason, Buddhism does not teach to avoid action, it teaches how this conditioning process works, and proposes a set of techniques to reverse it. Since the process of karmic retribution is not the cause, but the instrument that lead to rebirth and suffering, it is also used as an instrument to gain wisdom and attain liberation from this process. Complete wisdom is not the prerequisite for liberation, but it is corollary. What is needed is right view, that is the superficial understanding of the Buddhist teaching on dependant origination to practice Buddhism in order to develop wisdom and attenuate karmic imprint gradually. The notion of karmic retribution is not antagonistic in Buddhism, as it is in Jainism. For Buddhism, the notion of karmic retribution is a general one, which is valid for Buddhist practitioners as well as for those who do not follow the Buddhist path.

Buddhism is not a mere orthodoxy where practitioners should understand it's teaching to be liberated. It is an orthopraxy where practitioners are told to act in a *right way*, in order to acquire wisdom, and to destroy karmic imprint. Then, Buddhist meditation is not a way to *avoid* action; it is a way to *destroy* it. In that sense it can be understood as a counteraction. But meditation is not the only Buddhist practice; it is just a part of it. Buddhist practice can take different forms, such as the act of offering (*dāna*), or morality (*sīla*), as long as they match with the orthopraxy of counteract defined by Buddhism. This counteract generates a new kind of action, properly Buddhist, through which the practitioner do not look for a retribution in the world, but a liberation from the world. This action was defined as good action, and by doing so, creates confusion

with what was considered good action prior, or outside Buddhism. Notions of good or bad are relative and depend on a system of values. In the Buddhist system of values, any rebirth is considered negatively, since it is considered as suffering. Then Buddhism identified as good actions, the ones that stop rebirth. Thus, performing actions in order to obtain a better rebirth is not an alteration of Buddhism, it is only a practice related to another system of values.

Burmese and Tibetan societies, and other societies where Buddhism spread, did not know the notion of karmic retribution and rebirth before the diffusion of Buddhism, respectively between the third and fifth centuries, and between the eighth and eleventh centuries. The idea of positive actions that lead to heavenly realms was as new as the idea of liberation for these cultures. In such contexts, the notion of wholesome actions as a means to progress on the path towards liberation, as well as wholesome action leading to higher states of existence were considered Buddhist because they were spread by Buddhism. These societies also adopted the idea that an end could be put to rebirth, and that those who wanted to reach this goal had to enter monastic institution. Buddhism, with its set of value and its logic, became a part of these societies, but these societies did not adopt the whole set of Buddhist values. This is the reason why Spiro met so many Burmese who did not accept the idea of nirvana as extinction, and accumulated merit in order to improve their present or next life. Then, instead of Spiro's distinction between two kind of Buddhism, 'kammatic' and 'nibbanic', I would prefer to make a distinction between two kinds of action, a Buddhist otherworldly oriented action, and a Burmese, Tibetan, or 'social' worldly oriented action. Only the first one is part of Buddhist practice, and fit with Buddhist values.

The same remark can be made to Gombrich view of karma as a worldly theory connected only with social control. There is indeed a social or moral application of the theory of karma. But there is also a Buddhist one, which is asocial and therefore not compatible with a civil society. Both these applications are different, because both use the driving force of actions in a different way, and for a different purpose.

Silvia Mancini proposes that religion should be understood in terms of technics (Mancini 2006). Religion like Buddhism is not only about what to believe but mainly about what to do, how to do, and why to do it. The distinction I made between Buddhist karma and 'social' karma is not made in terms of belief. The notion of karma is the same in both cases.

The distinction I made between ‘Buddhist’ and ‘social’ karma (whether it is Burmese, Tibetan, Thai, or else) is made in terms of practice. Both good actions are not done in the same way. And since Buddhism teaches a right way to do it, practices that do not follow Buddhist orthopraxy cannot be considered as Buddhist.

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