

# KARMA AND THE POSSIBILITY OF PURIFICATION

## An Ethical and Psychological Analysis of the Doctrine of *Karma* in Buddhism

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### ABSTRACT

This article attempts to define *karma* as both action and the effects of action. In terms of the effects or fruits of action, the effect of action upon the mind is the focus; thus, the idea of “effect” is primarily defined as psychic residue and is compared to Freud’s notion of memory traces. In addition, action that produces *karma* is said to be accompanied by the “pulling” feeling of volition (*cetanā*). Some comparisons are then made between *cetanā* and the theories of Karen Horney in Western psychology vis à vis her view of the neurotic’s compulsive, driven feelings. The article also has a more ethically oriented side. Often, the *karma* doctrine is believed to be the only causal factor responsible for one’s present condition, and thus, a person’s unfortunate circumstances: sometimes this notion leads to blaming a person for his or her misfortune. This article seeks to discover whether or not this idea truly has scriptural backing. Lastly, the article explores the issue of whether or not one must always live out the entirety of the effects of one’s actions or if it is possible to purify or eliminate actions’ effects before they come to fruition. For this question in particular, the article examines both *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* thinking.

KEY WORDS: *Buddha nature, Buddhism, cetanā, Karen Horney, karma, Pali canon, psychic trace, Freud*

### 1. Introduction

THIS STUDY IS NOT MEANT TO PROVIDE AN OVERVIEW of the entire theory of *karma* in Buddhism; rather, it seeks to answer three specific questions in relation to this foundational theory. These questions have been taken up by previous interpreters of Buddhism, both in the scholarly world and in the world of the practitioner, but judging from my conversations with Buddhist practitioners and my research within the scholarly works of Buddhist studies, all three issues are still in need of additional focus and clarification. The majority of my research has centered around textual analyses of the ancient scriptural texts and their commentaries; in

addition, I have discussed my findings with Buddhist monks in Thailand and lay *Mahāyāna* practitioners in the U.S., in an informal fashion, in order to ground my ideas in the living tradition. Most of the textual work here has been conducted within the *Theravāda* tradition, although there is still a significant amount of material from *Mahāyāna* Buddhism.

The three central questions of this article are—first of all, is one’s *karma* from previous actions the sole causal factor responsible for one’s present mindset, physical make-up, and material conditions or state of wealth (McDermott 1984, 12; see also MN iii.202–3);<sup>1</sup> second, if a self-centered action has been performed, or if an action that would necessarily yield a *karmic* fruit or result in the mind has been performed, can this result be purified or eliminated, or is one completely locked into living out the result in its entirety; and third, are there certain types of actions that do not lead to the accumulation of a fruit or result at all? All three of these questions are quite significant for Buddhist practice, and also have a number of ethical ramifications above and beyond Buddhism, in that they address issues of moral responsibility and the very nature of action itself, as well as what would constitute the proper mindset behind moral action.

Before we undertake an investigation of these three central questions of the article, the notion of *karma* in the two most common senses of the word—action and action’s effects—must be analyzed at least in a preliminary way. Some would argue that terms like *kamma-vipāka* and *kamma-phala* might be more exact renderings of “the effects of action” (Rahula 1959, 32; see also Harvey 2000, 18). There is some truth in this contention, but, nevertheless, it is also quite clear that some passages from the Pali canon imply both action and its effects when they use the word *kamma*. (I would like to make one point of clarification here for those who are not specialists in this field: *kamma* is the Pali word and *karma* is its Sanskrit equivalent; these two words will be used interchangeably.)

Since much of the material here has been translated into English from various Buddhist scriptural languages, a medium within the English language had to be chosen, and Western psychology was my choice. Clinical Western psychology, like Buddhism, often has a focus on mind and mental healing. In addition, Buddhist scriptures, commentaries, and even modern interpreters do not always explain Buddhist doctrines completely; so, in places, I have attempted to interpret from the original scriptures on my own, and, in other places, I have used the allied field of Western psychology to come up with clues or hints as to the complete meaning.

<sup>1</sup> I use the 1995 Ñānamoli and Bodhi translation of *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN) for this essay. See also Payutto 1993, 12.

In using Western psychology as my medium of interpretation, I ran into some difficulties in interpretation. In many clinical schools of Western psychology, the understanding of oneself is still the primary focus. Some clinical schools, such as the psychoanalytic and the humanistic, even have rather detailed theories about the nature of self. How closely can we relate such theories to the Buddhist ideas concerning our basic nature or self/soul? *Theravāda* Buddhism preaches the well-known “no-self” (*anāṭṭa*) doctrine, which clearly states that there is no permanent or independent self/soul.<sup>2</sup> To my knowledge, there is no equivalent to this idea in Western psychology, although in Western philosophy, the ideas of David Hume may be comparable. *Mahāyāna* Buddhism elucidates two major doctrines on this issue: Buddha nature and emptiness (*sūnyatā*). The doctrine of emptiness seems to be merely restating the *Theravāda* doctrine of *anāṭṭa* or “no-self” in a different way, in that we are all said to be “empty” of a permanent, independently existing self; it also offers a critique of the *Theravāda* notion of the five aggregates, as it warns against seeing these aggregates as representing or possessing a self/soul.

The doctrine of Buddha nature is intimately connected to the doctrine of original mind: in fact, perhaps the doctrine of original mind is best seen as a concrete description of Buddha nature. The doctrine of original mind states that each of us has a deeper portion of the mind beneath the part of the mind that we are most familiar with: namely, surface disturbances such as fleeting emotions, random thoughts, and so forth. The majority of the descriptions of this original mind appear to come from meditative experiences. *Mahāyāna* Buddhism often states that, when one meditates on the breath or any other object, the surface of the mind is stilled and then one can get in touch with the actual deeper nature of the mind itself. If we are able to get in touch with this deeper, more fundamental part of the mind in a consistent way, then we can find ultimate peace. Now, is this Buddha nature just another idea of a permanent soul or self, as some have stated, or, is it, in fact, in line with the original *anāṭṭa* doctrine of *Theravāda*?

Although this question is not answered in an entirely clear way in the tradition, it seems that Buddha nature is not posited as an independent entity, as it is not portrayed as something separate or distinct from the rest of the world. This conclusion can also be drawn from the fact that all sentient beings are said to have the same Buddha nature—distinct

<sup>2</sup> Many have questioned how Buddhism could have the notion that there is no permanent, independent self, and still believe in rebirth. The best explanation that I have heard is the following—only energy passes from one life to the next. Buddhist literature expresses this idea in the example of the two candles. The lit candle represents this life; the unlit candle represents the next life. The lit flame lights the unlit candle and is extinguished. Analogously, *karma* is passed along in this stream of energy from life to life.

individual variations are not postulated. Also, the “stuff” of Buddha nature is not stated to be immaterial or of another nature than the rest of reality. If one looks at the idea of Buddha nature in this light, then it may be slightly different from Western psychological ideas of self as well. For example, ideas like the real self from Karen Horney’s thinking (to be explored later) within the psychoanalytic school tend to see everyone’s self as distinct and unique.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in another way, Buddha nature may be comparable to ideas such as the Real Self in Horney’s work, as both concepts speak of a deeper aspect of one’s being below the surface of fleeting emotions and thoughts. Also, both theories advocate greater awareness as the tool by which one can reach this deeper aspect of “self.”

The Buddhist theory of *karma* is vast, and there are a number of allied words/concepts that should be explored in any thorough overview of this subject; however, as was previously mentioned, this article does not seek to be an overview of the entire *karmic* theory, but rather one with a much more narrow focus on three primary questions. Thus, an analysis of related words, such as *anuśaya*, *saṃskāra* (Bodhi and Dhamma 1993, 294),<sup>4</sup> *vāsanā*, and *kleśa*, will not be included.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, terms such as *viññapti* (patent) and *avijñapti* (latent) *karma*, as explicated in the *Abhidharmakośa* of Vasubandhu, will not be included even though *avijñapti karma* does contain some interesting ideas such as the notion that one’s inner disposition can produce *karma* (McDermott 1980, 182–84). In addition, this study will not include the idea of *avyākata* action. *Avyākata* actions are thought of as undefined or nonintentional, in that they refer to actions such as accidentally stepping on an insect as opposed to purposefully doing so, and therefore, they supposedly do not result in *karmic* effects.<sup>6</sup> However, although this theory speaks of actions, which do not bear fruit, the actions referred to are not

<sup>3</sup> Karen Horney was a disciple of Freud originally, but she later branched off from his thinking and developed her own theories concerning the self. Nevertheless, her theories clearly have some relation to Freud’s understanding of the ego, id, and superego. For example, Horney’s idea of the ideal self is very similar to Freud’s idea of the superego; however, her idea of the real self does not have an exact equivalent in Freud’s work. A closer equivalent might be Aristotle’s understanding of the self/soul concept, in that Aristotle saw people’s essences as not being discrete from their physical bodies. In other words, both Aristotle and Horney do not see the self/soul idea as an actual, separate entity within a human being, but rather as a symbol of self actualization.

<sup>4</sup> *Saṅkhāra* is translated as “*kammic* formations.” A similar rendering is offered in Bhikkhu Ñānamoli’s translation of the *Visuddhimagga*, 530.

<sup>5</sup> One of the clearest expositions of the interrelation of these terms comes from the Hindu yoga school. See Potter 1980, 241–67.

<sup>6</sup> In spite of the work of previous scholars on this (McDermott 1980, 184; Harvey 2000, 17; Mitchell 2002, 43; and Kashyap 1960, xi–xiv), I am still skeptical; that is, I believe that certain passages within Buddhist scripture can be interpreted as stating that non-intentional acts can also accrue results.

necessarily those of an enlightened person, and the different felt quality of an enlightened person's actions versus a non-enlightened person's is one of the focal points here.

## 2. *Karma* as "Action"

One meaning of *karma* is "action," yet what exactly is meant by the idea of "action" in Buddhism? Of course, there is the well-known theory that actions can be verbal, physical, or mental (i.e., thoughts), but what is action itself? In a number of the principal Buddhist texts, such as the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, *Abhidharmakośa*, *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikās*, and *Visuddhimagga*, *karma* as "action" is defined by the word *cetanā*, so this may be a good starting point for our discussion:

Bhikkhus, volition (*cetanā*), I say, is *kamma*. Having willed, we create *kamma*, through body, speech, and mind [P AN iii.415].<sup>7</sup>

The variety of the world is born of *karma* (action); *karma* is volition (*cetanā*) and (also) that which follows from action (i.e., effect or result). Volition is mental, verbal, or bodily action [*Abhidharmakośa* 4.1].<sup>8</sup>

It wills (*cetayati*), thus it is volition (*cetanā*); it collects, is the meaning. Its characteristic is the state of willing. Its function is to accumulate. It is manifested as coordinating. It accomplishes its own and others' functions, as a senior pupil, a head carpenter, etc. But it is evident when it occurs in marshalling (driving) of associated states in connection with urgent work, remembering and so on [*Visuddhimagga* 463].<sup>9</sup>

In the third passage, from the *Visuddhimagga*, *cetanā* is described as a "state of willing," a state of "coordinating," or as a state of directing things towards a particular course of action. Herbert Guenther, in his *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidhamma*, argues that *cetanā* corresponds to "our idea of stimulus, motive or drive"; yet, he is against translating *cetanā* as "volition" (Guenther 1976, 41–44). James P. McDermott sees *cetanā* as a kind of "intentional impulse" (McDermott 1980, 182); similarly, Peter Harvey thinks that *karma* or *cetanā* is the overall "psychological impulse behind an action, that which sets going a chain of causes culminating in a *karmic* fruit" (Harvey 2000, 17). Damien Keown states that "*cetanā* is often regarded as a purely cognitive function, as the

<sup>7</sup> I use the 1993 Payutto translation and the 1982 Woodward translation of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (AN) for this essay. Where Payutto is used a "P" will precede the citation and where Woodward is used a "W" will precede the citation.

<sup>8</sup> I use the edited version of the *Abhidharmakośa* by Sastri (1998).

<sup>9</sup> The Ñānamoli (1991) translation of the *Visuddhimagga* is used in this essay. There is also an elucidating passage in the *Atthasālinī* (iii.190) by Buddhaghosa 1979 (Müller 1979). See also Guenther 1957/1976, 42 for a translation of this passage.

translation of it by ‘intention’ and ‘volition’ indicate.” Instead, he says, “*cetanā* is best pictured as a matrix in which the push and pull of the rational and emotional aspects of the psyche are funneled in the direction of moral choice”; in this way, *cetanā* can be seen as “not distinct from thought and feeling” (Keown 1992, 213).

Thus, in understanding *cetanā*, there are a number of important facets to consider. First of all, there is the aspect of intention. What is an intention? If one thinks of intention in the context of ethical theory, it is usually positive or negative and is thought of as a product of intellectual analysis or as an idea abstracted from the felt aspect of life: that is, it is usually thought of as something purely cognitive. Yet, positive and negative intentions also have feelings attached to them, and hence, an intention is not purely an idea or a cognition entirely devoid of feeling. This is the first major point to consider. Secondly, all of the scholars and ancient Buddhist commentators quoted here seem to think of *cetanā* as having a volitional aspect to it. Guenther argues that “volition” is not a proper translation but “stimulus,” “motive,” or “drive” might be; however, the semantic differences between such terms as “drive” and “volition” are not significant. In Western psychological literature, terms such as “desire,” “motivation,” “volition,” and “drive” are sometimes distinguished, but sometimes not.

If one really ponders upon the meaning of these words and attempts to reduce them to the actual level of bare feeling, all of them connote a feeling of being moved in a certain direction toward a particular course of action. Some Western psychological theorists center their understanding of motivation/volition around the ideas of “changes in an organism’s internal states” and “motives evoked by environmental stimuli” (Keown 1992, 213). When a motivation is caused by a change in one’s internal state, the term “push” is used to define it; when a motivation is caused by an external environmental influence, the term “pull” is used to define it (Keown 1992, 213). The terms “pull” and “push” imply motion towards the object of the drive. This makes some sense, for, if one contrasts the nature of action to the nature of nonaction, action would always be defined by mental or physical movement. Even thought seems to be like this. When a thought comes into the mind, it is marked by a certain amount of mental movement. Now, it is probable that the aspect of thought which is in motion comes from the emotions and motivations associated with thought, as thought itself (for example, images, words) does not seem to have a felt aspect. Here, we should also keep in mind that emotions, motivation, and thought may not be separate entities, although thinking of them as separate may still be useful as a paradigm of analysis.

Regardless of the nature of the action, be it mental, physical, or verbal, there is always some sort of psychic impulse or movement involved towards an internal or external object. Perhaps this impulse is what

is meant by *cetanā* when it is used to define *karma*, meaning “action.” Therefore, for the purposes of this essay, *cetanā* will be defined as *the psychic or mental feeling of being pulled in a particular direction which underlies any action, be it a mental action, such as a thought, or a physical one, such as speaking or acting.*

In my definition, I have made the idea of “mental” or “psychic” feeling primary. According to Buddhist thinking as evinced in the *Visuddhimagga* and *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, mind and body are completely interconnected but each retains a certain force of its own (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī* 245; *Visuddhimagga* 595–96). However, in general, even though both body and mind are seen as legitimate forces for the originating point of disease and of healing in Buddhism, mind is seen first and foremost as a locus of power. Tulku Thondop, a modern Tibetan Buddhist interpreter, quotes the *Shedgyud*, one of the Tantras of Tibetan medicine, as saying: “the specific causes of sickness are that unenlightenment produces desire, hatred and ignorance, and they produce the ills of air, bile, and phlegm as a result” (Thondop 1996, 86). The *Shedgyud* clearly states that the “psychological” ills of hatred, ignorance, and desire are responsible for the “physiological” ills of the three humors, thus making the mental primary and the physical secondary.

This idea of the mind as primary and the physical as secondary is also frequently articulated in the Pali canon. For example, the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* states: “Well, monk, the world is led by mind. By mind it is drawn along. When mind has arisen, it goes under its sway” (W AN ii.177).<sup>10</sup> This is perhaps stated most directly in the following passage from the *Majjhima Nikāya*: “Of these three kinds of action, Tapassi, thus analysed and distinguished, I describe mental action as the most reprehensible for the performance of evil action, for the perpetration of evil action, and not so much bodily and verbal action” (MN i.373). This kind of analysis is also present in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. For example, in the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikās*, Nāgārjuna states: “The Supreme Sage declared *karma* to be volition (*cetanā*) and volition-based; many different kinds of *karma* are known. *Karma* which is called *cetanā* is known as mental and that which is called volition-based is verbal and physical.” Candrakīrti, in his commentary on Nāgārjuna, interprets this passage as indicating the dependence of verbal and physical action upon thought or mental action (*Prasannapadā* 17.2–17.3).

All of these passages seem to be implying that there is a psychic feeling component underlying all physical, mental, and verbal action and that this psychic feeling is the primary defining characteristic of *cetanā*. That is why I have made the mental aspect of *cetanā* primary in my definition.

<sup>10</sup> Here, Woodward translates *citta* as *thought*, but I have changed this translation to *mind*.

Hence, a shorter definition of *cetanā* might be: a *psychic volitional impulse* or a *psychic feeling of being pulled in one direction or the other*. This being said, it is important to keep in mind that, in modern Western psychological thinking, many question the notion of “mind” as a separate entity from the physiological, thus calling into question Buddhism’s conception of mind as primary in force.

### 3. The Purification of *Karmic* Effects

Here, it may be useful to skip ahead and address the second and the third questions of the article, as both relate intimately to the idea of *cetanā*. If *cetanā* in Buddhism is defined as a volitional impulse or feeling, and if it primarily implies a psychic feeling, which pulls one in a particular direction, even when the action is verbal or physical, then would every action of every person always be accompanied by *cetanā*? Also, would this type of “pulling” feeling be present even in the mind of a *buddha*, an *arhat*, or a *bodhisattva*, and thus, constitute the way in which enlightened people are motivated towards certain types of compassionate actions? We can find a possible response to questions like these in Bhikkhu Bodhi’s and Bhikkhu U Rewata Dhamma’s guide to the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*: “All volitional action, except that of a *buddha* or *arahant*, constitutes *kamma*. *Buddhas* and *arahants* do not accumulate *kamma*, since they have eradicated ignorance and craving, its roots” (Bodhi and Dhamma, 200).<sup>11</sup> Therefore, actions that are completely devoid of ignorance (*avijjā*) and craving (*taṇhā*) do not leave any residual effect, trace, or result, and they are contrasted to normal “volitional” actions or actions accompanied by *cetanā*.

The notion that there are certain kinds of actions, which leave no *karmic* traces in the mind, is reiterated in the *Majjhima Nikāya*’s commentary, the *Aṭṭhakathā*, in relation to the following verse from the *Majjhima Nikāya*. The type of action that is referred to here in this passage is often called the fourth type of action in the Pali canon. “This is called action that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, action that leads to the destruction of action” (MN i.391).<sup>12</sup> Since the last occurrence of the term “action” seems to be implying actions’ effects and not action itself, this passage is asserting that there is a particular type of action, “action that is neither bright nor dark,” which leads to the destruction of action’s effects. Considering the central place given to the mind in Buddhism, action’s effect probably refers primarily to psychic

<sup>11</sup> This idea is also stated in the *Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā*. See Nānamoli’s and Bodhi’s notes at the end of his translation of the *Majjhima Nikāya* 1258, MN.

<sup>12</sup> See also the SN iii.132 where it speaks of “cessations of *karma*.” See also Payutto 1993, 79.

residue left over from action, although it could also refer to effects felt in the body or in the external environment.

Buddhadāsa, a modern Thai Theravada Buddhist interpreter, comments on this idea from the *Majjhima Nikāya* in a similar fashion, although he calls this type of *kamma* “neither black nor white” rather than “neither dark nor bright”: “And there is a remarkable kind of *kamma* that is neither black nor white, a *kamma* that serves to neutralize the other two kinds. It consists in coming to perceive nonselfhood (*anātta*), emptiness . . . This kind of action is what we may call Buddhist *kamma*, the real *kamma*, the kind of *kamma* the Buddha taught—indeed transcending of all *kamma* . . . it wipes out every kind of bad and good *kamma*” (Buddhadāsa and Swearer 1989, 137). When Buddhadāsa states—“indeed transcending of all *kamma* . . . it wipes out every kind of bad and good *kamma*”—it seems quite definite that one could interpret *kamma* as “action’s effects” and not action itself. Also, when he says that there is a way of acting that destroys all of the residue or effects left over from one’s previous actions thus purifying oneself, Buddhadāsa is reiterating the point made in the *Majjhima Nikāya*. This way of acting, for Buddhadāsa, is linked to the perception of non-self (*anātta*), but, in Buddhism, this vision of non-self is also the key to eliminating the very root of our problem: selfishness and ignorance.

In *Theravāda* Buddhism it seems quite clear that the second and third questions of my article are intricately linked, as the answer for both questions lies with the type of action that is neither “black (dark) nor white (bright),” or what is sometimes called the “fourth type” of action. This type of action is the action of the *arhat* or the *buddha*, and, as was stated previously, if one acts in this entirely non-selfish manner, not only does one not accumulate future *karmic* effects, but one also eliminates or purifies the psychic residues that have built up in one’s current state of mind from previous selfish actions. Therefore, *Theravāda’s* answer to these two questions is, as Japanese Buddhism might express it, self-power-oriented (*jiriki*). Through one’s willpower, one deepens one’s meditation practice and refines one’s morality, and hence reaches a certain level of profundity that allows one to act in an entirely non-selfish way.

The answer in *Mahāyāna*, however, seems to be somewhat different, and it also differs from sect to sect. Japanese Pure Land Buddhism stands at the other extreme from *Theravāda’s* purely self-power orientation, particularly if one examines Shinran’s interpretation of Pure Land doctrine. One must keep in mind that Shinran is somewhat revolutionary even within Pure Land Buddhism. For example, most previous Pure Land teachers felt that the attainment of the Pure Land marked the point of nonretrogression. Retrogression refers to the idea that one can still regress back into *saṃsāra* and unenlightened ways of thinking and fall away from the religious path completely. This idea has been a significant point of contention for most Buddhist schools, as it is important for spiritual growth if one can reach a point in which regression back

into selfishness and delusion will not happen. Shinran felt this point could happen immediately upon the realization of true or real mind (*shinjin*); one did not have to wait for birth into the Pure Land. The realization of *shinjin* happens when one truly takes refuge in Amida Buddha's vow. When this happens, Shinran states that "without his calculating (*hakarai*) in any way, all his past, present, and future *karma* is transformed into good" (Hirota and Ueda 1989, 153, 157). By calculation, Shinran is referring to the kind of scheming, planning, and weighing of concepts in which the egocentric mind tends to engage. Once one takes refuge in Amida's vow and gives up all self-power (*jiriki*), then all *karmic* residue will be purified, yet this purification is completely up to Amida's grace (*tariki*); it has no relationship to one's own machinations. Unlike *Theravāda*, Pure Land Buddhism does not concern itself with how enlightened people act or with striving to emulate their actions, but rather it is more concerned with the acceptance of Amida's grace. Pure Land is quite different from *Theravāda*, and most schools of Buddhism, in that enlightened ways of acting are said to be impossible to bring about through one's own self power. Therefore, the whole idea of transforming the nature of one's volitions or basic mental state through the Buddhist path, which was discussed earlier in the article, would not apply to Pure Land Buddhism.

In Nichiren Buddhism, the chanting of the *Lotus Sūtra* or just the title itself has the capacity to destroy *karmic* effects. This power comes from the purity of the *Lotus Sūtra* itself and from one's own self power, as each person has the inherent capacity to be in touch with their own Buddha nature during the chanting process (Nichiren 1999, 199, 632). Furthermore, Nichiren states that sincere repentance eradicates both fixed and unfixed *karma*.<sup>13</sup> (In the *Dīgha Nikāya*, fixed or *niyata karma* refers to actions that already have a predetermined result; unfixed or *aniyata karma* refers to actions, which do not have a predetermined result; Nichiren 1999, 954).<sup>14</sup> Thus, Nichiren Buddhism, which would include modern Soka Gakkai, lies somewhere in between the extreme higher-power orientation of Pure Land and extreme self-power orientation of *Theravāda*, as some of the power to eliminate *karmic* effects comes from the *Lotus Sūtra* and some of it comes from one's own will power to practice.

Like Nichiren, the famous Tibetan teacher, Tsongkhapa, seems to combine self-power ideology with an other power or higher-power orientation. The following passage is taken from his devotional work, *The Splendor of an Autumn Moon*:

<sup>13</sup> Dōgen also states that sincere repentance can eradicate *karmic* effects.

<sup>14</sup> Nichiren does not entirely explain "fixed" and "unfixed" *karma*. See McDermott 1984, 25–26 for an explanation of fixed (*niyata*) and unfixed (*aniyata*) *karma*.

[L]ying trussed by the ropes of desire in the prison of *saṃsāra*, I am carried helplessly to the oceans of existence by rivers of *karma*, tossed by endless waves of aging, sickness, and other suffering, thrown to the jaws of that savage monster the lord of death, to languish under the weight of unwanted suffering. Without protector and with anguished cries I ask with devotion, as witnesses to the yearnings of my mind, Amitābha, guide and sole friend to the deprived . . . [Tsongkhapa 2001, 83–85].

Hence, in the previous passage, Tsongkhapa devotes an entire chapter to his prayers to Amitābha and fervently expresses his yearning for the aid of Amitābha in leading him through the tribulations of *saṃsāra* to the Pure Land. Yet, there are other verses in which he does not have the extreme higher-power orientation of Shinran, in that Tsongkhapa does not state that every human effort is entirely vain, nor does he say that the only true force behind self development is the grace of Amida or Amitābha Buddha: “Having developed, in every life, belief in cause and effect, renunciation, the bodhi mind, and the pure view, may I embark upon effortless experience. In every life may every virtuous act gathered by way of body, speech, and mind be causes solely for the welfare of others and for the purest and highest enlightenment” (Tsongkhapa 2001, 95).

In this second passage Tsongkhapa states clearly that he believes in cause and effect. Also, he views his own virtuous acts as being “causes” for the “welfare of others”; he does not specifically mention Amitābha Buddha as the ultimate cause of all sentient beings’ welfare. In addition, there is no mention of Amida’s (Amitābha’s) grace being able to transcend or eliminate the laws of cause and effect, and thus, we can only assume that Tsongkhapa’s belief is not exactly equivalent to Shinran’s on this matter as well.

Most of the material from *Mahāyāna* relates to whether or not previously produced *karmic* effects can be purified and hence seems to address the second question of this article more directly. There is less focus on the third question—that is, the question of whether or not there are certain types of actions that do not accumulate *karmic* effects at all. The third question is a direct examination of the actions of the enlightened versus the unenlightened. If we return to my definition of volition/motivation as *the psychic feeling of being pulled, which underlies any action, be it a mental action, such as a thought, or a physical one, such as speaking or acting*, how can we examine this notion further so that the idea of motivation in Buddhism for those who are enlightened becomes clearer? Do enlightened people also experience the same feeling of being “pulled” in a particular direction just as an ordinary person would, or are their motivations felt by them in a different way? Here, again, Western psychological theory, particularly the thinking of Karen Horney, a disciple and reformer of Sigmund Freud, may provide us with some useful clues

vis à vis basic human nature, and, in this way, provide us a hint as to how one could answer this question. Horney's thinking was explored earlier in this article, especially with regard to her ideas concerning the real or true self, and some tentative observations were offered comparing her theories concerning the self to Buddhist theories about the self/soul.

In the following passages, Horney provides us with a description that is quite significant for this study; she depicts two possible ways that volition or motivational drives can be experienced, and this is at the crux of the issue:

And that is why I speak now and throughout this book of the real self as that central inner force, common to all human beings, and yet unique in each, which is the deep source of growth . . . Under inner stress, however, a person may become alienated from his real self [Horney 1950, 17, 13].

When we call a drive compulsive we mean the opposite of spontaneous wishes or strivings. The latter are an expression of the real self; the former are determined by the inner necessities of the neurotic structure [29].

According to Horney, when one experiences drives or motivations that are unhealthy or neurotic, one feels pulled towards a course of action in a "compulsive," anxious way, whereas drives or motivations which are healthy and originating from the real self have the felt quality of being spontaneous, free, and non-compulsive. In Horney's understanding, unhealthy motivations within a person are due to the fact that she is striving to actualize an "ideal self." This "ideal self," as Horney calls it, is a false self that has been created out of one's interpretation of authority figures' admonitions, beliefs, and so forth. Usually, the voices of these authority figures are still circulating around in one's head, exerting too much power and influence over one's decisions and thought patterns. Through listening to these figures' voices, one loses touch with one's real self, or what is unique about one's own particular character, including one's special gifts: this is the most tragic part of one's alienation from the real self. Compulsive types of motivations, or the motivations of the neurotic, are also accompanied by a "should" phrase such as "I should go to church" rather than "I am going to church because I truly want to go, not because I feel that my parents want me to go." Thus, there is a cognitive aspect to this drive as well. In contrast, someone who is in touch with her real self is in touch with her true feelings about an issue or a person, and therefore, never feels driven or compulsive about her motivations. In other words, there is a freer, less anxious quality to her motivations.

Could this theory help us to interpret the Buddhist understanding of *karma* and perhaps fill some of the gaps that are left unexplained in the ancient texts and commentaries, in spite of some of the ideological

differences between the psychoanalytic stream of Western psychology and Buddhist philosophy? Since one of the main qualities mentioned by Horney in relation to the actualized person or the person who understands his real self was the quality of spontaneity or freedom in his actions, we must seek to compare this particular notion to passages in Buddhism. In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, one of the qualities spoken of vis à vis the untainted mind of the sage is, in fact, that of flexibility and softness of mind (*mudutā*) (Thera 1949, 73). Furthermore, the term *kleśa/kilesa* or “mental affliction” signifies the opposite of mental dexterity, and, in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, one of the *kilesas* mentioned is mental rigidity, thus implying that mental suppleness is an attribute to be sought after. Could this flexibility or softness of mind be similar to Horney’s idea of an actualized person’s spontaneous, anxiety-free actions? Could *cetanā*, when it is used within the context of defining *karma*, be referring to a more driven kind of motivating feeling, in other words, a compulsive, rigid, and anxiety-ridden one, similar to the idealized feelings of the neurotic in Horney’s schema? Could it be that an *arhat*, *bodhisattva*, or *buddha* would still possess certain motivations or volitions (or, one could even say “desires”), yet their motivations would be completely free of certain types of feelings, especially those tainted with a rigid, pulling feeling of compulsiveness or anxiety? We may not be able to answer these questions in a definitive way here, but, nevertheless, they can still serve as central points for reflection.

The following passage from the *Majjhima Nikāya* provides us with an example of an entirely altruistic action that would be indicative of the types of motivations that an enlightened person might have: “When a passionless person to a passionless person gives with trusting heart a gift righteously obtained, placing faith that the fruit of the action is great, that gift, I say, is the best of worldly gifts” (MN iii.257).<sup>15</sup> In regard to the preceding quote, the *Majjhima Nikāya’s Aṭṭhakathā* says that last part refers to the gift of an *arhat*, which has no fruit or leaves no effect. The *arhat’s* actions leave “no traces behind” because an *arhat* is without “desire and lust” (MN iii.257). This idea of being without desire and lust is different from Horney’s vision of the actualized person, but the lack of drivenness that is implied is not. The modern Japanese Zen Buddhist, Shunryu Suzuki, seemed to be expressing a similar idea when he stated: “our mind should be free of traces from the past, just like the flowers of spring” (quoted in Chadwick 1999, 3). In other words, each moment should be completely free of any psychic constriction or predisposition towards a particular course of action, which is based or founded upon some sort of residue leftover from past experience. When one is free of

<sup>15</sup> See also the related endnote in Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation of the MN, 1351.

these psychic constrictions or rigid predispositions, one has true freedom of mind. True freedom of mind is *nirvāṇa*. Freedom of action is the focal point for both Horney's theory of the real self and Buddhist theories of enlightenment.

In the Pali canon, selfish motives are often described as being based upon the three poisons: greed, hatred, and delusion (Thera 1949, 69). This gives us a further clue as to the nature of an enlightened one's motivation, as it would have to be free of the three poisons. In this regard, the following passage from the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* states:

Whatever *kamma* (action) is performed out of non-greed . . . non-hatred . . . non-delusion, is born of non-greed . . . non-hatred . . . non-delusion, has non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion as its root and its cause, that *kamma* is skillful, that *kamma* is not harmful, that *kamma* has happiness as a result, that *kamma* brings about the cessation of *kamma*, not the creation of more *kamma* [W AN i.263].

In the last two usages of the term *kamma*, the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* is clearly indicating the meaning of actions' effects. Based on this passage from the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* and other related passages, Bhikkhu Payutto, a modern Thai interpreter of Buddhism, asserts the following concerning the non-accumulation of *karmic* effects: "With no desire, greed, hatred or delusion, there is not *kamma*. With no *kamma* there are no *kamma* results to bind the mind. With no *kamma* to bind the mind, there emerges a state of clarity which transcends suffering. The mind which was once a slave of desire becomes one that is guided by wisdom, directing actions independently of desire's influence" (Payutto 1993, 32, 78). Thus, according to Payutto, *karma* has a kind of "binding" or limiting effect, and, without this effect, one is no longer a "slave of desire," nor is one forced into a certain avenue of action; one is free to make a choice.

#### 4. Different Types of "Action"

We have already shown that the second and the third questions are linked to what is often called a "fourth type" of action, or the type of action that is "neither bright nor dark." This is also the type of action, which symbolizes the freedom to which all of our interpreters are pointing. However, not all Buddhist writers acknowledge this fourth type of action. For example, well-known interpreters such as Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and Walpola Rahula only explicate two types of *karma*: good/wholesome (*kusala*) and bad/unwholesome (*akusala*):

Wholesome actions bring only happiness and never suffering. From the greatest king to the most insignificant animal, all the happiness sentient beings know is a result of their wholesome actions. Buddhists believe that

if someone has a pleasant or happy life now, this is because of pleasant actions he or she has committed in past lives . . . . According to Buddhism, our physical and mental well being and happiness result from our accumulated positive actions or *positive karma* . . . . All the different forms of anxiety, dissatisfaction and suffering result from our *negative karma*—our negative actions of body, speech and mind [Gyatso 1984, 32–33].<sup>16</sup>

Volition may be good or bad, just as desire may be good or bad. So *karma* may be good or bad relatively. Good *karma* (*kusala*) produces good effects, and bad *karma* (*akusala*) produces bad effects [Rahula 1959, 32].

In his book, *Development in the Early Buddhist Concept of Kamma/Karma*, James McDermott analyzes these two *karmic* categories and comments upon a possible third category: “Earlier still in our discussion reference was made to the early division of acts into good (*kusala*) and bad (*akusala*) and the consequent development of a third category, that of undefined, indeterminate or neutral (*avyākata*) acts” (McDermott 1984, 25, 79–81, 91, 137, 150; see also Harvey 2000, 17; *The Dhammasaṅgaṇī* 1999, xiv–xv). This third category is outlined in *Abhidhamma* works such as the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*. *Avyākata* acts are thought to be those with neither good nor bad intention, and thus that do not produce a *karmic* result. However, as previously mentioned, this category of action has not been a focus here, as this article has sought to distinguish unenlightened from enlightened action, and *avyākata* is merely a neutral or undefined act with no power to wipe out previous *karma*.

In contrast, in the quote below from the *Kukkuravatika Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, action is divided into four categories: bright action, dark action, a mixed type of action, and a type of action called “neither dark nor bright” (MN i.390–91).<sup>17</sup> The last type of action has already been discussed at length, and has been explicated here as the action of the enlightened sage and the destroyer of actions’ effects. Vasubandhu also agrees with these four categories of action, and they are discussed in the *yoga* school of Hinduism as well. In addition, these four types are delineated in other places in the Pali canon, such as in the *Dīgha Nikāya*:<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See also Payutto 1993, 11–12, where he tries to elaborate on this doctrine with regard to four types outlined later in this article.

<sup>17</sup> Bhikkhu Payutto attempts to reconcile these two theories: one which states that there are two types of actions (*kusala* and *akusala*); and the other which states that there are four types (1993, 11–12).

<sup>18</sup> This categorization appears in *Dīgha Nikāya*, iii. 229 as well. According to McDermott 1980, 181, Vasubandhu agrees with this classification.

Punna, there are four kinds of action proclaimed by me after realizing them for myself with direct knowledge. What are the four? There is dark action with dark result; there is bright action with bright result; there is dark and bright action with dark-and-bright result; and there is action that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, action that leads to the destruction of action [MN i.390].

The *Kukkuravatika Sutta* continues by explaining each of these types of actions. A dark action with dark result is based upon afflictive or extremely painful feelings, as in the case of hell beings; a bright action with bright result is based upon nonafflictive, or extremely pleasant feelings, as in the case of the gods; a dark-and-bright action with dark-and-bright result is based upon both painful and pleasant feelings (that one has at the same time), as is the case with some gods, some human beings, and some beings in lower realms (MN i.389-91). And finally, the fourth type of action is the type of action that leads to the destruction of action's effects.

What is the difference between the second and the fourth type of action? Both sound positive in nature. Judging from this passage and various others throughout the canon, it appears that the difference between the second and fourth type of action is that the second type of action still involves a certain amount of attachment, and, considering the nature of the god realm, it could also be based on fleeting pleasant feelings versus the permanent ones that one experiences in *nirvāṇa*. The third type of feeling is also a little puzzling. Although this is not explicitly clear, perhaps the idea of "inferior wholesome *kamma*," as discussed in the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*, is a possible equivalent to the third type of *kamma* mentioned in the Pali canon. Bhikkhu Bodhi and U Rewata Dhamma, in their guide to the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*, describe "inferior" wholesome *kamma*: "The inferior grade (*omaka*) is that done with a mind that before and after the performance of the wholesome deed is tainted by such defiled states as self-exaltation, the disparagement of others and self regret" (Bodhi and Dhamma 1993, 214–15). Therefore, the third type of action may be referring to a basically good deed that is performed without an entirely pure motivation, and thus, one tends to feel some regret or mixed feelings before and afterwards. Now, what about the fourth type of action? The previous passage from the *Majjhima Nikāya* gave us some clues as to its nature, but the following passage provides us with a little more detail:

And what, Punna, is action that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, action that leads to the destruction of action? Therein, the volition in abandoning the kind of action that is dark with dark result, and the volition in abandoning the kind of action that is bright with bright result, and the volition in abandoning the kind of action that

is dark and bright with dark-and-bright result: this is called action that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, action that leads to the destruction of action [MN i.391].

So, in addition, to what we have previously stated about the fourth kind of action, it also consists in abandoning all other types of actions which are of a lesser quality. This could imply that, once one is able to act in this way, one never regresses back into any lesser, more egocentric ways of acting, but, what are the other implications here? Does this also mean that an ordinary person can never engage in this liberating, fourth kind of action, since acting in this way necessarily implies *arhathood* or *buddhahood*? If not, then how can the ordinary person progress in the Buddhist path? The ancient texts are not entirely clear on these points.

There is one additional idea to consider here. As we have seen, there does seem to be a belief that this fourth type of action will both prevent the accumulation of future *karmic* effects and destroy or purify past (and present) *karmic* effects; however, this feature should not be taken as a “green light” to commit negative actions, as the purification process is usually deemed to be quite arduous. For example, in the story of Milarepa in Tibetan Buddhism, Marpa, his teacher, subjected Milarepa to extraordinary acts of cruelty in order to purify the killings that he had committed.<sup>19</sup> This story could be read both literally and symbolically. If one takes it in a symbolic sense, then it demonstrates the extraordinary lengths one must go to in order to rid oneself of *karma*'s effects. Even in the previous lifetimes of Śakyamuni Buddha, Śakyamuni is said to have killed out of greed; yet, it took many lifetimes in hell realms in order to purge him of these evil deeds (Strong 2001, 31–34).

In other scriptures there is no mention of this fourth type of action and no allowance for the possibility of purging or purifying previous *karma*. In the *Jātakas*, it is stated that “All *kamma* (action), whether good or evil, bears fruit. There is no *kamma* (action), no matter how small, which is void of fruit.”<sup>20</sup> In the *Sutta Nipāta*, all actions are said to reap results, even those of a *Māra* or a *Brahma*, and a person's *karma* is never destroyed or lost (*Sutta Nipāta*, 666). And, in numerous other places in the Pali canon, it is clearly stated that one will experience the results of his actions, without any chance of wiping out the results of the action. For example, verse 292 of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* clearly denies that the results of an action can be eliminated or “wiped out” when the deed is intentional (*sañcetanika*) (McDermott 1984, 17; 1980, 176). “I declare, monks, that of the intentional deeds done and accumulated there can be no wiping out without experiencing the result thereof . . . I declare,

<sup>19</sup> See also *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen* 1991, 144.

<sup>20</sup> *Jātakas*, iv.390. See Payutto 1993, 8.

monks that there is no ending of Ill as regards intentional deeds done and accumulated without experiencing the results thereof" (W AN v.292).

The *Majjhima Nikāya* also states that we are the "heirs" of our actions, or, entirely a product of past action. There is no mention of the possibility of destroying actions' effects in the following passage, nor is there a category of actions mentioned which do not produce a residue or result at all: "Students, beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions; are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge" (MN iii.202).

The Dalai Lama also comments on these issues, in his book, *Transformed Mind*: "Generally speaking, according to Buddhist teaching, you will not encounter the results of an action that you have not committed, and once you have committed an action, the result will never get lost, and you have to experience it" (Dalai Lama 2000, 72). In this passage, the Dalai Lama does use the words "generally speaking" which seem to imply the possibility for dissent; however, he does make the case that the results of action will inevitably be lived out.

Thus, the response from Buddhism to the second and third questions seems to be quite mixed. Some interpreters are set on the idea that one always experiences the fruits of one's self-centered actions—this can never be changed. Some interpreters state that there is a fourth kind of action that can eliminate previously formed *karmic* effects and prevent any accumulation of future effects; others do not even mention this type of action. Pure Land Buddhism states that *karmic* effects can only be eliminated or purified by a higher power, such as the grace of Amida Buddha; *Theravāda* says that *karmic* effects can only be eliminated by bringing one's own willpower to bear on the problem and by beginning to practice entirely selfless action.

## 5. Analyzing the Meaning of "Action's" Effects

Before we can entirely resolve all of the issues brought up by the second and third questions, another aspect of this problem must be addressed: namely, to what phenomenon is Buddhism referring to when it discusses the idea of the "effect" or "fruit" of an action? Are Buddhist texts alluding primarily to a residue within the external world, such as the obvious effects of littering on a college campus; or, are they referring to a residue left over in the body, such as a headache every time one thinks about the misplaced comment one has just made to one's wife; or, are they referring primarily to a residue left in the mind?

Bruce Reichenbach, in his book, *The Law of Karma*, states that "*phalas* include all immediate effects, visible and invisible which actions produce or bring about"; he also suggests that *karmic* consequences are of two kinds: subjective and objective (quoted in Keown 1996, 336–37). This

claim implies that *karma* could be both mental or psychic (“subjective”) or something which affects the “objective” world (e.g., body, external environment). In fact, certain canonical passages do analyze the effects of *karma* as possibly being psychic, bodily, or environmental (MN iii.202–3). The term “environmental” refers to such things as one’s state of poverty, or the condition of one’s neighborhood or country. Nevertheless, in spite of the various possibilities here, I will focus upon the psychic or mental effects and attempt to put forth the notion of “psychic residue” as the primary meaning of *karmic* effects. As was mentioned previously, most Buddhist interpreters, be they *Theravāda* or *Mahāyāna*, tend to see the mind as primary.

This idea of a psychic residue is present in modern Western psychology, although the view is somewhat different than in Buddhism. Buddhism tends to see the cause for this residue as immorality rooted in selfishness and ignorance. Selfishness and ignorance are based upon the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion. In contrast, many Western psychological works do not tend to see one’s immorality as being the cause; instead, they state that repeated memories of past occurrences are due to unresolved feelings associated with memories of certain powerful incidents. The presence of a repetitive memory and residual feelings merely demonstrates the mind’s natural tendency to attempt to resolve or come to peace with past experience; they do not have immorality as their basis. Dreams may also be of the same ilk in that they are attempts to resolve the unresolved (Pine 1990, 34–35, 58, 60; Freud 1957/1964, 288–305). This type of interpretation is present both within the early psychoanalytic writings of Freud as well as in modern psychoanalytic and humanistic thinkers.

In the works of Freud, we find an illuminating and useful parallel to the Buddhist doctrine of *karma*, especially concerning the idea of *karma* as a psychic residue or trace. There is a particularly telling description of psychic traces in Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” In this essay, Freud calls these psychic traces “memory-traces”:

On the basis of impressions derived from our psychoanalytic experience, we assume that all excitatory processes that occur in the other systems leave permanent traces behind in them, which form the foundations of memory. Such memory-traces, then, have nothing to do with the fact of becoming conscious; indeed they are often most powerful and most enduring when the process which left them behind was one which never entered the consciousness [Freud 1957/1964, 295–96].

In order to understand Freud’s observations vis à vis Buddhism’s outlook, a few ideas must be explained. “Excitatory processes” refer primarily to emotional reactions to stimuli, such as powerful incidents in one’s life. If one’s reaction is commensurate to the strength of the incident,

then there will not be a trace or residue left in the unconscious; if one's reaction is not commensurate, a residue will be left over. Also, the more conscious or aware one is, the more appropriate one's reaction will be and the strength of the memory trace will be less. This is why Freud states that the "most powerful and most enduring" memory traces are those that stem from reactions that never entered the conscious mind. For Freud, a memory trace is primarily an emotional residue attached to a memory of a certain incident; thus, leftover thoughts are less important than leftover emotions, as repressed emotions are the primary motor behind mental suffering. *Karmic* residue in its psychic aspect may mean something similar, as it could be a residue of an emotion (and its accompanying thoughts) attached to the memory of an action. However, judging from some of the scriptural and commentarial passages examined here, it looks like this idea of psychic residue in Buddhism does not really pinpoint emotions as primary. Also, in Buddhism, this trace or residue is ultimately caused by selfishness. In addition, Buddhism does not require that one's verbal or physical reaction to a traumatic event or particularly powerful experience be commensurate with the strength of the experience. In fact, in order to purge one's mind of the effects of trauma, a "reaction" is not required at all: one need only experience the event in one's mind without recoiling in aversion, in the case of something painful, or clinging to it, in the case of something pleasant.

I had a personal experience in which the contrast between Freudian psychoanalysis and Buddhist meditative theory was clearly brought to light. I was traveling in Italy with a friend of mine who is both a psychiatrist and a psychoanalyst. A traumatic incident happened to us when we were attending a wedding in Tuscany. Since the incident bothered both of us, we ended up having a philosophical discussion about how to resolve the leftover feelings after the incident and also how to prevent such leftover feelings from happening again. My friend insisted that the only way that we could possibly have a clear, untroubled mind after such a powerful incident would be either to have expressed ourselves very powerfully, either verbally or physically, right at the moment that the event was happening, or go into psychotherapy and bring up the incident again, so that the entirety of the emotional reaction could be expressed after the fact. In response, I told her that there might be another way: I mentioned that, in a sense, Buddhist meditation advocates "expressing oneself mentally" by accepting whatever powerful emotion that occurs completely in the very moment that it occurs; this is supposed to eliminate any detrimental future effect. In the Buddhist understanding, expressing oneself verbally or physically in that very moment is not the only way to prevent a traumatic incident from affecting one's mental health. One can subsequently use awareness or mindfulness (*sati*). This latter point

regarding awareness is not far from Freud's comments concerning bringing something into the conscious mind. "Though his consideration is not absolutely conclusive, it nevertheless leads us to suspect that becoming conscious and leaving behind a memory-trace are processes incompatible with each other within one and the same system....Excitatory processes expire in phenomenon of becoming conscious" (Freud 1957/1964, 295–97).

For Freud, the state of being fully conscious also implies a certain amount of clarity of thought. In addition, he states that memory traces expire and no longer have an effect on the psyche when the incident is brought to light in the conscious mind either in psychotherapy or in the moment that the incident occurs. This idea is much like the notion of the enlightened person in Buddhism. Because a *buddha* is entirely free from greed, hatred, delusion, and therefore completely aware, a *buddha's* actions are performed without leaving a trace on his psyche. Neither Freud nor Buddhism seem to be implying that the memory of the incident itself would be erased, but rather that any power of the past incident over one's present life would be dissipated.

## 6. Is *Karma* the Sole Causal Factor for our Condition?

With regard to the first question of this article, different scholarly works discuss this issue, particularly Harvey (2000, 23), Keown (1996), and McDermott (1984, 16–17). Keown nicely summarizes the scholarly point of view on this issue: "Since the Buddhist theory of *karma* does not rule out the possibility of accidents and adventitious misfortune, there is no justification for the demand that a *karmic* account be supplied in every case of good and bad fortune" (Keown 1996, 340). However, in spite of the evident knowledge in a certain small number of scholarly works within Buddhist studies, or, more particularly, the study of Buddhist ethics, if one goes through different works on Buddhism, one finds that this idea is not widely discussed. For example, to my knowledge, it is not mentioned in such popular books as: Rinpoche (1993), Buddhadasa and Swearer (1989) or Thondop (1996), nor is it mentioned in more scholarly works such as Rahula (1959), Robinson et al. (2005), Mizuno (1996) and Mitchell (2002). I have not mentioned these works to critique the above authors; rather, my hope here is that the present article will motivate future authors of introductory texts to look more carefully into this nuance of Buddhist causality.

If we say that *karma* is the sole factor behind one's current state of being, then this gives the morality of one's previous actions the entire responsibility for such conditions as poverty, cancer, bipolar depression, schizophrenia, and AIDS. Millions of children have died of starvation in

Africa over the last 100 years, and over a million children died in the Holocaust; also, millions of people suffer from mental illnesses across the globe. Are all of these things truly due to their previous actions? Is someone's genetic predisposition towards bipolar depression caused by the moral character of their previous actions? Such interpretations could easily lead to either an attitude of self-blame or a blaming of others for their unfortunate circumstances. After all, could there not be other causal factors involved, such as God, as is often stated in Christianity, Islam, or Judaism, or, perhaps even factors above and beyond the doctrine of *karma* and the idea of divine control, such as just plain bad or good luck and coincidences? Furthermore, with regard to physical diseases, could not one have an ailment, which is so deeply embedded in one's physiology that it becomes a disease process completely outside of one's control?

These types of questions bring up the following additional question: is the morality of our actions the sole cause for all of our present psychological, physical, and material conditions? Some Buddhist interpreters see our previous actions as entirely the cause. This idea is positive in the sense that it makes us responsible for our actions, yet it is negative in the sense that it assigns blame to the person for some things in life which may be out of one's control. Geshe Gyatso's ensuing comments bear directly upon this issue. He tends to take the side of *karma* being the sole causal factor for our present condition, with a particular focus on our mental condition:

Wholesome actions bring only happiness and never suffering. From the greatest king to the most insignificant animal, all the happiness sentient beings know is a result of their wholesome actions. Buddhists believe that if someone has a pleasant or happy life now, this is because of pleasant actions he or she has committed in past lives . . . . According to Buddhism, our physical and mental well being and happiness result from our accumulated positive actions or positive *karma* . . . . All the different forms of anxiety, dissatisfaction and suffering result from our negative *karma*—our negative actions of body, speech and mind . . . . According to Buddhism, all happiness derives from positive causes and conditions, from our wholesome actions of body speech and mind. All the different forms of anxiety, dissatisfaction and suffering result from our negative *karma*—our negative actions of body, speech and mind" [Gyatso 1984, 32–33].

In this passage, Geshe Gyatso mentions that "all the different forms of anxiety, dissatisfaction and suffering" are a result of our negative *karma*. In other words, we have acted in an unwholesome way and are now reaping the negative effects of our actions. Yet, how far would Geshe Gyatso take this? Would clinical levels of anxiety and depression then be caused by one's previous actions? Would he then extend this idea to include

schizophrenia, as anxiety and dissatisfaction are major components of this disorder as well? The passage below from the *Majjhima Nikāya* agrees with Geshe Gyatso's basic position, and also provides some further elaboration on his stance:

Master Gotama, what is the cause and condition why human beings are seen as superior and inferior? For people are seen to be short-lived and long-lived, sickly and healthy, ugly and beautiful, uninfluential and influential, poor and wealthy, low-born and high-born, stupid and wise. What is the cause and condition, Master Gotama, why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior? Student, beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior [MN iii.202-3].<sup>21</sup>

Here, the *Majjhima Nikāya* addresses mental qualities, such as stupid and wise; physical qualities, such as short-lived, sickly, and beautiful; and environmental qualities, such as poverty and wealth, as being a result of past actions. As in Geshe Gyatso's writings, there does not seem to be a place given to the possibility of the purification of action's effects or to other causal factors outside of action or *karma*. However, the following passage from the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* presents us with a very different picture:

There are some recluses and Brahmins, master Gotama, who say thus, who hold this view: Whatsoever pleasure or pain or neutral state a human being experiences, all that is due to a previous act. Now what says master Gotama about this?

Now, Sīvaka, in this connection there are some sufferings originating from bile. You ought to know by experience, Sīvaka, that this is so. And this fact that sufferings originate from bile, is generally acknowledged, Sīvaka, by the world as true . . . .

Also, Sīvaka, in this connexion, (there are some sufferings) originating from phlegm, from wind, from the union of bodily humours, from changes of the seasons, from stress of untoward happenings . . . [Sāmyutta Nikāya iv. 230].<sup>22</sup>

This passage from the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* clearly delineates other causal possibilities besides *karma*. One of these possibilities is physiological, particularly disturbances within the bodily humors. The idea

<sup>21</sup> A similar view is mentioned in MN i.23. Also, in MN ii.104, Aṅgulimāla is hit with a stick and the Buddha states that it is because of his past evil deeds.

<sup>22</sup> According to the Pali dictionary, *visama-parihāra* means "being attacked by adversities." The various ills of the body, such as asthma, scabies, diseases of humours, are mentioned in AN v.110.

of bodily humors refers to *Āyurvedic* theory, which was already accepted by the time of the Pali canon. In fact, there is an entire chapter in the *Mahāvagga* portion of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* devoted to medicines and the treatment of various physical ailments of monks in the community, and physical disease is defined, in *Āyurvedic* fashion, as being due to a disorder within the humors (*doṅas*). In one place in the *Mahāvagga*, the Buddha is even said to be suffering from “a disturbance in the humours of his body” (*Vinaya Piṭaka, Mahāvagga*, 278–79).<sup>23</sup> Consequently, Ānanda seeks out Jīvaka Komārabhacca, who applies *Āyurvedic* means of healing such as purges (*virecana*). Hence, one can also safely assert that more physical, *Āyurvedic* notions of disease existed alongside more psychologically oriented Buddhist ones in the early Buddhist communities (Zysk 1991, 41).

The central relevant point is that, according to the *Samyutta Nikāya*, Buddhism does seem to allow for causal factors outside of one’s control; the moral nature of one’s actions is not the sole causal factor. To put this in practical terms, severe illnesses, such as cancer and AIDS, could be a result of one’s past actions, but they could also be due to factors outside of one’s control, such as physiological imbalances, or perhaps even unpleasant accidents (*visama*). A similar idea occurs in *Milindapañha*. In this passage, King Milinda asks Reverend Nāgasena why, if the Buddha had been purified of all unwholesome *karma* upon attaining enlightenment, was his foot wounded by a stone, and why was he afflicted by dysentery and a disease of the humors (Mendis 1993, 82)? Nāgasena then proceeds to tell Milinda that *karma* is not the only causal factor and that these mishaps were due to other causal factors:

It is not the case, sire, that all that is felt is rooted in *kamma*. Feelings arise, sire, through eight causes, and many beings experience feelings by reason of these eight causes. What are the eight? Some feelings arise here on account of wind; some on account of bile; some on account of phlegm; some through a combination of these three; some through a change in the weather; some through reckless conduct; some through external agency; and some feelings are born as the result of *kamma* [Mendis 1993, 82].

Again, in *Milindapañha*, we see the acceptance of physiological causal factors, such as the *Āyurvedic* humors (bile, phlegm, and wind), as well as the notion of an external agency as being at the cause, such as the weather. This latter comment about an external agency implies that internal moral causes are not always the reason for one’s present physical, psychological state or poverty level. This is important for religious thinking in general. In most religions, the idea of external agency would refer to the notion of a transcendent God as first cause; however, it is doubtful

<sup>23</sup> Horner (1962) translation.

that this passage from the *Milindapañha* is referring to God. Rather, the idea of external agency could just allow for the fact that luck, coincidence, the will of others, or a change in the seasons, may be the cause for one's present condition.

Along similar lines, Nichiren states that in the *nirvāṇa Sutra*, there are six causes of illness: "(1) disharmony of the four elements; (2) improper eating and drinking; (3) inappropriate practice of seated meditation; (4) attack of demons; (5) the work of devils; (6) the effects of *karma*" (1999, 631). *Karma* is thus only one of six causal factors, and, as in *Milindapañha* and the *Samyutta Nikaya*, Nichiren allows for causal factors, which are outside one's control, such as the "attack of demons" and "the work of devils." In addition, he allows for nutritional factors as causes, and, interestingly enough, pinpoints "improper meditation" as a cause for illness. This last point is also mentioned in the writings of certain Zen masters, such as Hakuin. Hakuin's illness was brought on by excessive striving in meditation, and, in English descriptions, this illness is often termed "Zen sickness."

In Hinduism as well, *karma* was not always accepted as the sole causal factor. The *Mahābhārata* recognizes different causal factors in addition to *karma*, such as God, fate, and time (Long 1980, 40–41). And, in *Āyurvedic* thinking, there are different etiological factors considered in understanding disease. For example, the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* does not even include *karma* as a causal factor of disease and instead talking about curses, spells, demonic wrath, natural disasters and the like (Weiss 1980, 92–93).

It seems that, in ancient Indian literature, there was quite a bit of opposition to *karma* being seen as the sole causal factor responsible for one's current condition. There seems to have been some allowance for the possibility of accidents, changes in the season, nutritional factors, and physiological imbalances as causal factors as well. Yet, in my informal discussions with contemporary Buddhists, both lay practitioners of Nichiren Buddhism in the U.S. and *Theravāda* monks in Thailand, the idea that *karma* may not be the sole conditioning or causal factor behind one's condition was not in circulation at all. There was little awareness of the scriptural passages quoted here, and consequently, practitioners often used the doctrine of *karma* in a self-castigating way. Thus, one of my motivations for writing this article was based on the hope that, by presenting a wider scope of the *karma* doctrine, scholars and practitioners alike would begin to get a clearer picture of the entire doctrine, rather than making judgments based merely on small, fragmented pieces.

## 7. Conclusion

In summary, *karma* was defined as connoting both “action” and its “effects” and was taken as a kind of umbrella term for the entire causal theory of Buddhism. Thus, fine distinctions between *anuśaya*, *vāsanā*, and *karma* were not investigated. The “effect” part of the definition was seen as primarily indicating psychic residue and secondarily referring to the ideas of a physical residue in the body and effects in the environment at large. Effects in the environment were defined as things such as litter left over from a Saturday night party or pollution from a chemical plant. Similarly, the idea of action was defined as psychic volitional impulse or feeling, or a subjective feeling of “pulling” underlying all mental, physical, and verbal actions. In addition, it was asserted that, while enlightened beings may have motivations, the felt quality of these motivations is probably not the same as an ordinary person’s. This felt quality would probably not comprise a compulsive, rigid type of “pulling” feeling, but rather would probably have the felt quality of spontaneity, calm, and non-rigidity. It is in this way that enlightened beings do not create future *karmic* effects and also purify past and present ones, as they possess an entirely different type of motivation than ordinary beings.

Now, for the answers to our three original questions. The three central questions of this article were—first of all, is one’s *karma* from previous actions the sole causal factor responsible for one’s present mindset, physical make-up, and material conditions or state of wealth; second, if a self-centered action has been performed, or if an action that would necessarily yield a *karmic* fruit or result in the mind has been performed, can this result be purified or eliminated, or is one completely locked into living out the result in its entirety; thirdly, are there certain types of actions which do not lead to the accumulation of a fruit or result at all?

It seems as if there was not a complete agreement within Buddhism on any of these three questions. Some interpreters asserted that there were ways to eliminate the experience of *karmic* effects/residue even though the action(s) may have already taken place; others seemed to imply that one absolutely has to live out the effect in its entirety, as in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*’s idea: we are merely “heirs to our actions.” Some interpreters put forth the possibility that enlightened beings do not produce *karmic* fruits because their actions are completely non-egocentric and void of greed, hatred, and delusion. This type of enlightened action was labeled the “fourth kind” of action in certain passages from the canonical texts and, according to *Theravāda* Buddhism, it is only this kind of action that leads to both the elimination or purification of *karmic* effects from the past and also to the non-accumulation of future *karmic* effects. Yet, other passages from the canonical texts and modern interpretative works do not even mention this fourth kind of action. There was also a disagreement among those thinkers who allowed for the possibility of the purification

of *karmic* effects. Pure Land Buddhism and *Theravāda* were at opposite ends of the spectrum on this point, and Nichiren and Tsongkhapa were somewhere in the middle. Shinran clearly states that this purificatory process can only take place through Amida Buddha's grace, whereas *Theravāda* clearly states that the destruction or purification of karmic effects can be brought about solely through one's own will power. In addition, in regard to the very first question articulated at the beginning of this article, namely—Is *karma* or the moral nature of one's actions solely responsible for one's mental, physical, and material condition?—there was some disagreement as well. Some interpreters appeared to see *karma* as the sole causal factor responsible for one's present condition; others seemed to assert that physiological factors, accidents, and changes of the season could also be responsible for one's present condition.

Perhaps, one of the more interesting and practical questions in relation to the doctrine of *karma* comes with the following notion: what exactly would be the kind of motivation that would be acceptable in Buddhism? In other words, what would be a type of motivation that would not cause an accumulation of psychic residues and how exactly would this type of motivation feel? This idea is also important because psychic residues tend to bias us by preventing us from seeing things as they are (*yathābhūtam*), thereby hindering us from acting with a clear conscience. This could also be an interesting way of investigating the psychological processes behind such ethical issues as racial prejudice. Racial prejudice could be analyzed as a product of psychic residues left over from past negative experiences with "rival" ethnic groups. In fact, modern cognitive psychologists such as Aaron Beck, in his work *Prisoners of Hate* (1999), have undertaken investigations along these lines.

Some interpreters within Buddhism might question the fact as to whether an enlightened being even has motivations, at least as we understand them, for this would imply that they have "desires." However, that being said, enlightened beings are depicted as motivated towards benevolent action and true insight, so they must have some sort of drive towards action. Perhaps this drive could be called "a desire," although if this were the case then it would certainly be a desire of a different ilk than the ordinary person's. This kind of speculation may be useful, for, if we interpret Buddhism as being entirely anti-desire, then that puts a *buddha* or an *arhat* in a realm that is difficult to imagine for any average human being: after all, who could imagine having no desires at all? (This interpretation may also lend some credence to scholars who tend to translate *taṇhā* as "craving" rather than as "desire.")

The idea of *cetanā* relates intricately to the idea of movement. It brings to mind the question as to whether or not the enlightened mind be something entirely still, without movement, and thus without emotions, desires, and so forth. Classic examples of stillness as the goal of practice can be seen in the *Yoga Sūtras* of Hinduism with the expression

*cittavṛttinirodha* (*Yoga Sūtras* 1.2, 6) and in Buddhism with the idea of *samatha*, the four *dhyanas*, and related notions. One very useful aspect of *Tantric* thought is that it brings into question the nature of the enlightened mind and the often standard representation of the enlightened mind as still and completely void of desires and feelings. *Tantrism* asks a very important question—would the mind of an enlightened being truly be entirely still, or would it be much like our own, constantly in motion only with the additional enlightened element of serenity always present? Perhaps the truth is somewhere in between the *Tantric* and the mainstream position. Could it be that the enlightened mind would possess thoughts and feelings only at a slower pace, so that the usual racing nature of thoughts and feelings would not be experienced? Hence, perhaps the enlightened mind would be something like the “slower” mind described in the following story from the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*:

Apa Pant kept pestering him, asking him again and again how to meditate, so this time, when my master replied, it was in such a way as to let him know that he was telling him once and for all—“Look, it’s like this: When the past thought has ceased, and the future thought has not yet risen, isn’t there a gap?”

“Yes,” said Apa Pant.

“Well, prolong it: That is meditation” [Rinpoche 1993, 75].

*Theravāda* Buddhism also addresses this question. In the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa attempts to distinguish a dead person from an enlightened one, thus explicating the nature of the enlightened mind. In the following passage, Buddhaghosa is expressing a non-*Tantric* position—that the mind of an enlightened or “spiritually advanced” person should be still, without movement:

What is the difference between one who has attained and one who is dead? When a *bhikkhu* is dead, friend, has completed his term, his bodily formations have ceased and are quite still, his verbal formations have ceased and are quite still, his mental formations have ceased and are quite still, his life is exhausted, his heat has subsided, and his faculties are broken up. When a *bhikkhu* has entered upon the cessation of perception and feeling, his bodily formations have ceased and are quite still, his verbal formations have ceased and are quite still, his mental formations have ceased and are quite still, his life is unexhausted, his heat has not subsided, and his faculties are quite whole [*Visuddhimagga* 709].

In conclusion, the workings of *karma* are said to be *acinteyya* or “not imaginable,” and thus there is always going to be a certain portion of the doctrine, which is left unexplained (Harvey 2000, 24). This is another reason for questioning any neat causal relation between one’s present condition and one’s past actions, as any relation we conjure may not take into account the intricate web of relations in the world. The idea of *karma* being *acinteyya* in its workings may have been put forth in order to teach us a kind of humility when approaching these questions. I hope that I

have taken this bit of advice here in this article, although, of course, it is my hope that I have indeed elucidated at least some things that might be of use.<sup>24</sup>

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