

SD 61.5b**The Buddha's Karma**

A study of the Pubba,kamma,piloti and buddhodicity

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1 The Buddha in early Buddhism

1.0 THE BUDDHA'S KARMA

1.0.1 The Devadatta stories in karmic perspective

1.0.1.1 We have made a brief “practical”¹ study of the Devadatta story in early Buddhism [SD 61.5a], mostly based on **the Cullavagga** (the minor chapter), that is, the 7th Khandhaka (group) of the Vinaya Piṭaka.² We have also relied on related suttas and the Commentaries to give us a clearer and fuller picture of Devadatta's character and role in early Buddhist history. More importantly, such accounts are valuable to us as practising Buddhists to gain inspiration and insight into the Buddha's life and wisdom from the earliest Buddhist texts to expedite our journey to reach the path of awakening.

In this first part of my essay on “The Buddha's karma” we will briefly examine Devadatta's behaviour towards the Buddha and the sangha as **a psychology of religion**. Basically, we will look at Devadatta and Siddhattha in their youth, and, most interestingly, in their mature years, what drove Devadatta to want to lead the sangha. Clearly, all this has to do with the way that Devadatta thinks.

1.0.1.2 Both Siddhattha (the Buddha) and Devadatta were born into an elite kshatriya (warrior or noble) class. Siddhattha was of the Sakya clan of Kapilavastu,³ the capital of the Sakya republic (*gaṇa,-saṅgha*), an oligarchy, and Devadatta was of the Koliya clan of Devadaha.⁴ Although they both came from elite kshatriya clans, their personalities were diametrically opposed. Devadatta was outgoing, athletic and loved hunting and archery—as a youth he shot down a goose flying in the sky.⁵ Siddhattha was by nature compassionate, restrained and contemplative—a spiritual prodigy who attained dhyana at just 7 years old.⁶

1.0.1.3 A number of individuals are said to be the Buddha's “foremost disciples” (*agga,sāvaka*) in certain wholesome qualities, such as Sāriputta **the foremost** of monks with wisdom, Paṭācārā the foremost of nuns in terms of upholding the Vinaya, Citta the foremost of laymen who are Dharma speakers, and Nakula,mātā the foremost of loving wives.⁷ These individuals may be regarded as being the archetype of those special qualities: it is in their nature to be so even in previous lives.

In the same spirit of individuals as **archetypes**, but in the negative sense, we may consider **Devadatta** as the “anti-Buddha,” one who is not only opposed to the Buddha, but who wishes to annihilate him and take his place. The idea of archetype here is helpful in reminding us that, for example, Devadatta has been jealous and malicious towards Siddhattha even in their younger days [1.0.1.2].

¹ By “practical” I mean as a study “of Buddhists, for Buddhists, by Buddhists,” a full commitment to the Buddha Dharma.

² According to Ee (PTS ed), this is Cv 7.1.1-7.5.6 (khandhaka.chapter.section) (V 2:180-206).

³ Skt *kapila,vastu*. It was located either in Tilaurakot, about 10 km west of Lumbini, southern Nepal, or Piprawah, Uttar Pradesh, India (both are near the India-Nepal border). K M Sristava, “Kapilavastu and its precise location,” *East and West* 29 (1/4) 1979:61-74 [jstor]; C Hellier, “Competing claims on Buddha's hometown,” [Newsbrief](#), Archaeology.org, 54,2 Mar/Apr 2001; S D Tuladhar, “The ancient city of Kapilavastu—revisited,” [Ancient Nepal](#) 151, Nov 2022:1-7. See C Violatti, “[Kapilavastu](#),” *Ancient History Encyclopedia* 2013. All refs 17 June 2024.

⁴ Devadaha was located NE of Kapilavastu, 7 km east of Lumbini, and east of Butwal, and is today a municipality in Rupandehi Dist of Nepal.

⁵ See **Devadatta**, SD 61.5a (1.1).

⁶ On Upāḷi, see SD 30.9 (2.3.1).

⁷ See respectively A 1.189 + 238 + 250 + 267 (A 1:23-26).

The Jātaka relates a number of stories depicting Devadatta as bearing malice against the Buddha, even killing him, in past lives, too. Devadatta is thus the archetype of a person who habitually works against the Buddha, even to the effect of becoming the Buddha's **foil**, projecting the Buddha's wholesome qualities into clear relief.

Here are a few Jātaka stories relating Devadatta's animosity towards the Bodhisattva in many past lives (B = the Bodhisattva; D = Devadatta):⁸

Vanarinda Jātaka (J 57)	A monkey (B) outwits a crocodile (D) into helping monkeys cross the river.
Kuruṅga,miga J (J 21)	A hunter (D) tries to trap and kill an antelope (B).
Kuruṅga,miga J (J 206)	An antelope (B) tricks a hunter (D) and frees a tortoise he has caught.
Canda,kumāra J (544)	A purohit ⁹ (D) entices a king to sacrifice the prince (B) so that the king could go to heaven.
Mahā,kapi J (J 407)	A monkey (B), leader of his tribe, clinging to trees on opposite banks of a river let the monkeys cross over to safety. The last monkey (D) jumps on B and breaks his back; the monkey later dies. ¹⁰

1.0.1.4 A significant factor for Devadatta's violent reactions against the Buddha and the sangha was surely rooted in the fact that he became a monk in the Buddha's sangha. It is likely that Devadatta was a crowd-follower, and was drawn to the prestige and mystique of renouncing as a monastic, something which was new to the northern Indian culture.

In the Vinaya account of **the group of 7**—Bhaddiya, Anuruddha, Ānanda, Bhagu, Kimbila, Devadatta and Upāli—the first 5 were Sakya nobles (*sakya,rājā*) who became great arhats. **Upāli** was merely a barber who was serving the group. The 5 Sakya nobles and probably Devadatta (a Koliya), having taken off all their ornaments and finery, tied them up in their upper robe, and asked their barber Upāli to bring them back to their homes. Upāli, fearing violent repercussions from being blamed as being the one who caused them to renounce (thinking, "The Sakyas are fierce," *caṅḍā kho sākiyā*, V 2:182,35), decided to renounce with them. Upāli went on to become the foremost of the monks well-versed in the Vinaya.

Devadatta probably joined the group in renouncing, but we have no details. There is at least one textual source from the Chinese translations informing us that Devadatta was actually not accepted into the sangha, that he had ordained himself, and then went to the monk Surādha as teacher.¹¹ The general impression is that Devadatta was not ready to join the sangha and that he lacked the good karmic roots to support his monastic life like the other renunciants.

1.0.1.5 The rest of this study are mostly reviews and reflections¹² inspired by **Jonathan S Walters'** insightful and comprehensive paper on "The Buddha's bad karma: a problem in the history of Theravāda Buddhism."¹³ He opens his paper by saying that a study of the Buddha's life in the suttas and the Vinaya give us the impression that:

⁸ For more J stories, see [DPPN](#): Devadatta. 18 June 2024.

⁹ "Purohit," anglicization of *purohita*, a palace brahmin priest.

¹⁰ See **Mahā,kapi J** (J 516) intro + SD 54.7 (2.3) n.

¹¹ According to Ekottara Āgama, 增一阿含經 *zēng yī āhán jīng* (T125.2.802b26), the Buddha advised Devadatta to remain a householder but he nevertheless tonsured himself and went to a monk named 修羅陀 *xiū luó tuó*, Surādha, as teacher; see also T1465.24.902c14-24.

¹² I have also mentioned or linked additional nn and refs related to these studies that I have done earlier.

¹³ *Numen* 37,1 1990:70-95.

Gotama led a charmed life: endowed with physical and spiritual perfection, he transcended the attitudes and attachments that are so often the source of human suffering. The Jātaka literature explains the perfection (in this life) of Gotama Buddha by describing its karmic roots over aeons of previous lives, during which the Bodhisatta produced unimaginable quantities of good karma. Despite its vastness, the Buddha biography preserved and developed in the Theravada tradition up to the present contains not the slightest hint that Gotama did anything productive of bad karma; his *parinibbāna* was the extinction of all karma, good and bad. (1990:70)

Later tradition culled a total of 12 incidents in the Buddha's life that are unpleasant. Even during the canonical period, some Buddhists interpreted these events as the effects of the Buddha's own previous bad karma—which had important implications for both karmic “absoluteness or absolutism” [Walters uses “absolutivity”]¹⁴ and the nature of buddhahood. These implications proved so problematic that some later authorities denied them altogether, giving alternative-cause arguments to explain them. Others affirmed that these events were the results of the Buddha's own past bad karma, but with some modifications to the teachings of karma and of buddhahood.

1.0.2 The Buddha's “bad karma”

1.0.2.1 Walters' essay traces “the history of the complex problems surrounding the unpleasant events in the Buddha's life as they developed in Theravāda tradition” [1990:70 f] in the following 4 parts. We will examine them as follows:

- Part 1 1.1 the original accounts of these unpleasant events as preserved in the early Buddhist texts;
- Part 2 1.2 the Pubba,kamma,piloti, a late canonical text on the Buddha's past bad karma;
- Part 3 1.3 the texts that reject this karmic explanation and the reasons for doing so;
- Part 4 1.4 the rebuttal of these rejections, affirming the karmic explanation by answering their objections.

You are encouraged here to read Walters' original paper, and then return to read this study. You may still continue with this reading since I constantly refer to his article, especially by way of summarizing or paraphrasing it, along with my own responses to his ideas.

1.0.2.2 A note on our usage of the Pali word ***dukkha***, which is polysemic, meaning that it has a range of meanings that apply at the same time, but which may not be reflected in its English translations. Hence, it is useful to be aware and understand the denotation (“meaning”) and the connotation(s) (implication(s)) of the different words we use to translate *dukkha*.

The English translations for ***dukkha*** include the following (U = uncountable; C = countable):

- pain (1) (U, C) the feeling in our body when we are hurt (physically or mentally) or when we are ill.
- pain (2) (U, C) mental or emotional suffering.

¹⁴ “Absolutivity” is not found in any large English dictionaries (eg OED). If we are referring to something as being “fixed and total,” especially how karma works—such as stated in (**Kara,ja,kāya**) **Brahma.vihāra S** (A 10.208), SD 2.10—we may use “absoluteness” or “absolutism.” Strictly, the -tivity suffix refers to some *activity*; the -ness suffix to some *state*; the suffix -ism here denotes some kind of systematic view. But then we have “captivity,” a state of being a captive, “negativity” and so on. In this case, either term may be used, so long as we remember the usage.

- suffer (1) (verb, usually with “from”) to experience feelings arising from a disease, pain, a lack, a loss, or even an emotion (but unaffected or not badly affected by it mentally): *He suffers from a cold. How can you suffer selfish people?*
- suffer (2) (verb) to experience something as unpleasant, especially in a troubling manner, such as an injury, defeat, loss, sadness, etc: *He is suffering from the loss of a loved one. She suffers when she thinks about it.*
- suffering (C) physical or mental pain (that affects us negatively).
- sufferings (U) feelings pain and unhappiness.

This explanation is to help you follow how the early texts generally refer to the Buddha in terms of *dukkha*. The Buddha feels pain (1) but not *pain* (2). Either sense of “suffer” here do not reflect how the Buddha *feels* pain and unpleasant situations; thus, they should not be used for the Buddha.

We can say that when the Buddha **suffers** (1), he feels the discomfort or pain from a natural source, such as from a back-ache or dysentery. The pain affects the body, but not the mind. In other words, he is not badly affected by it.

It is also much less confusing not to use *suffering* in connection with the Buddha. Hence, I have generally used “pain(s)” for what the Buddha “feels” regarding his various pains and unpleasant situations.

In short, the Buddha and the arhats do not feel *dukkha* in the broad sense of the 1st noble truth, since they have fully understood it; they have removed it at the root, craving, by cultivating the path, and attaining the quenching (nirvana) of the 3 unwholesome roots, *greed, hatred and delusion*.¹⁵

In the above connection, we should understand that the meaning(s) of *dukkha* as translated into English is not so much in the word itself as our thought (understanding) when we use that word. The dictionary meanings may not reflect how the English words reflect their Pali usage. Our thought behind the word helps to “experience” the Pali sense, that is, the word as implied (denoted and connoted) in the Pali usage.

1.1 DOES THE BUDDHA SUFFER PAIN AND UNPLEASANTNESS?

This section surveys the accounts of unpleasant events befalling the Buddha as preserved in the early Buddhist texts, especially in terms of:

<u>slander</u> by others,	[1.1.1]
<u>assaults</u> by others, and	[1.1.2]
<u>physical illness or deprivation</u> .	[1.1.3]

1.1.1 Others slandering the Buddha

1.1.1.1 In this category, there are only **2 cases of slander**, that is, by two female wanderers (*paribbā-jaka*) named Sundarī and Ciñcā Māṇavikā, both affiliated with “heretics” (*titthiya*), that is, wanderers jealous of the Buddha’s success and desirous of discrediting him. Both the female wanderers were young and beautiful, and deeply devoted to their respective sects.

Sundarī¹⁶ pretended to have intimate relations with the Buddha by visiting Jetavana in the evening, hiding herself there, and then made sure to be seen leaving early in the morning. She “explained” to curious townfolks she met on the road that she had been spending the night in the Buddha’s fragrant cell.

¹⁵ See Dhamma,cakka-p,pavattana S (S 56.11), SD 1.1.

¹⁶ The story of Sundarī’s slander is related in **Sundarī S** (U 4.8/43-45), SD 49.13, + **UA** 1:256-264 [SD 49.12 (2.3.1)]; **DhA** 22.1/3:474-478 (Sundarī Paribbājikā V) ≈ **J** 285/2:415-417 (Maṇi,sūkara J) [SD 49.12(3.2)]; **SnA** 518 f (Dutṭh’atṭhaka S) [SD 49.12(3.1)].

Once the rumour had spread, she was murdered by her own sectarians who then dumped her body in a pit beside a monsoon moat near the Buddha's fragrant cell in Jetavana. After a few days, the sectarians made a fuss regarding her disappearance. King Pasenadi ordered a search, and her body was found. People criticized the Buddha and the monks, and the monks had difficulty collecting alms following that incident.

The Buddha remained calm, only saying that the truth will out in 7 days, and instructing the monks to reprove those who slander against them by saying that both the liars and the actual perpetrators will go to hell.¹⁷ Soon the king's spies identified hired murderers, who in a drunken quarrel in a public house, divulged the killer. They were arrested and confessed before the king, who then summoned the heretics. They were ordered to parade the city streets, confessing their crime and vindicating the Buddha and the monks of all implications. While the wanderers' reputation and support declined, those of the Buddha and the sangha increased.¹⁸ [4.1.2]

1.1.1.2 The story of Ciñcā Māṇavikā's slander against the Buddha often overlaps with that of Sundarī [1.1.1.1].¹⁹ Ciñcā's story is, however, not spelled out explicitly in the canon. It was clearly part of the early oral tradition, since the core verses of the Jātaka alluded to it. The full story exists only in the Jātaka Commentary and other commentarial sources.²⁰

Ciñcā was a beautiful young female wanderer, employed (as was Sundarī) by the heretics, concerned over their lessening popularity and support from the public, to slander the Buddha. Like Sundarī, she told inquisitive townsfolk that she had been sleeping with the Buddha. Then, at a public gathering, she feigned pregnancy and accused Gotama both of being the father of her child and of neglecting his parental duties and financial support.

At once, Sakra causes a mouse to go into Ciñcā's clothing and gnaw away the cords holding a wooden disk that feigns her pregnancy. The disc then falls and severs her toes. The congregation chases her out of the hall. Then, the ground opens under her and swallows her up. Again, the Buddha's reputation continues to grow.

1.1.1.3 Despite the slanders of Sundarī and of Ciñcā against the Buddha, we saw, in the end, it is the Buddha and the sangha who were vindicated from the false accusations. The sangha grew in its prestige and support by the public. The fact is that the Buddha was calm throughout and in no way affected by the slander. He might be said to be confident that the whole affair would turn out in their favour, and it well did.

The real victims in both the sordid affairs were the two young female wanderers, Sundarī and Ciñcā, who were deeply devoted to their faith and used by their leaders. Clearly Sundarī and Ciñcā were naïve believers who paid with their lives for promoting their own luckless faith. The slanders actually benefitted the Buddha, and the real sad victims were the female wanderers themselves. As for the worldly heretics, they received their well deserved public humiliation and a greater store of bad karma.

¹⁷ Dh 306 = It 42 = Sn 661

¹⁸ SD 49.12 (2); SD 49.23 (1.1.1.3); UA 1:261 f; DhA 3:478 [SD 49.12 (2.3.2)]; J 2:417.

¹⁹ For a comparative study of the stories of Sundarī and Ciñcā, see Feer, *Journal Asiatique* 1987:288-317.

²⁰ Mahā Paduma J (J 472/4:187-189) (story of present almost identical to J 472 intro); Ciñcā is also the protagonist in Bandhana,mokkha J (J 120/1:437); Ciñcā Māṇavikā V (DhA 13.9/3:178-182); ItA 1:86 f (Musāvāda S, It 1.3.5); ApA 118 f. See SD 49.12 (2.1.2). For Chin parallels, see Analayo, *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-nikāya*, 2011: 507 n321.

1.1.2 Devadatta's assaults on the Buddha

1.1.2.1 The stories in this 2nd category—assaults from others—illustrate neither the Buddha's social deficiency nor bad karma, but rather his fortitude and fame. These incidents were all initiated, even executed, by his own jealous and malicious cousin, **Devadatta**. We have already made a good background study of these incidents;²¹ we now only summarize them and study their significance in the life and nature of the Buddha.

From the start with Devadatta, there were grim forebodings. Even as young cousins, Siddhattha (the Buddha) and Devadatta were not close. Siddhattha was compassionate and introspective, while Devadatta was outgoing and ruthless. By way of clan (*gotra*), Siddhattha was a Sakya, Devadatta a Koliya. The Sakyas were known to be a proud and fierce warrior race. Devadatta, too, was a kshatriya (the warrior class). [1]

During the Buddha's first visit to Kapilavatthu, when Sakya youths, Ānanda, Bhagu, Kimbila, Bhaddia, and Anuruddha joined the sangha with their barber, Upāli, Devadatta, too, decided to join the crowd. There was a possibility that the Buddha did not accept him, but he managed to join the sangha through his own wiles [2.1.1.1].

1.1.2.2 During the early monastic years of Devadatta, he seemed to have fared well; he was a famed monastic and had worldly psychic powers, meaning that he was able to attain the 4th dhyana and was able to impress others with Dharma talks [2.1.1.2 f]. Somehow, we must imagine that he was merely going through the motions, and was disciplined enough to train himself to excel in the demands of monastic life. Yet neither his heart nor mind was in it like his Sakya colleagues.

Devadatta must have felt profoundly disadvantaged in not being a Sakya and embittered that he was not well treated like them even though he was now a "Sakya,putta." Perhaps, he never regarded himself as being subjected to another gotra. The point is, it seemed that, even as a monk, he never really looked up to the Buddha.

Keen to rise out of his lowly social perception, he decided to exploit his psychic powers and favoured position to recruit the young naïve prince Ajātasattu [2.1.2]. By then, Devadatta was infatuated with his own gains, honour and fame. He fired Ajātasattu up with royal ambitions, upon which he rode his own political ambitions to take the Buddha's place. He saw the sangha as what we would today think of a Church glorified with wealth, prestige and power, and with himself on the top of all this. While Ajātasattu lorded over the State, Devadatta hoped to lord over the Sangha.

1.1.2.3 Devadatta's malicious plots against the Buddha started when the Buddha turned down his request to take over the sangha [3.1.1.1]. Devadatta initiated the following attempts on the Buddha's life and in breaking up the sangha:

- (1) He had Ajātasattu send out archers to assassinate the Buddha, but they were all converted by the Buddha [SD 61.5a (3.2.2.3 f)].
- (2) He pushed **a boulder** down Mount Vulture Peak to crush the Buddha below, walking in meditation; a flying splinter struck the Buddha's foot, causing it to bleed [SD 61.5a (4.1.1)].
- (3) He had the drunken man-killing elephant Nāḷāgiri let loose down a narrow street on which the Buddha was walking on almsround; but the Buddha tamed Nāḷāgiri with his lovingkindness [SD 61.5a (4.1.2)].
- (4) Using subterfuge, he had the Buddha reject his proposal of the 5 strict rules [SD 61.5a (4.2.2.1 f)]; then, he charged the Buddha as being prone to luxury and abundance.

²¹ On Devadatta's personal attempts on the Buddha's life, see SD 61.5a (4).

(5) He succeeded in luring 500 newly ordained monks to join his sangha; he performed an uposatha (precept-day conclave) by himself (his own sangha), thus committing the “immediate karma” (*ānantarika kamma*)²² of **schism** that had its long-lasting effects beginning in this life itself. (SD 61.5a (4.2.2.3 f)) All these unpleasant incidents are detailed in **the Vinaya** (the Culla,vagga 7) [3.2.2.4, 5]. They only highlight the Buddha's fortitude in the face of all these unpleasant events. Even in the face of mortal danger, he is calm; even against the most terrifying of adversaries his calmness prevails.

1.1.3 The Buddha's physical illnesses

1.1.3.1 The final category of the Buddha's unpleasant experiences is that of illness and physical deprivation. We have at least half a dozen references²³ to the Buddha suffering from a debilitating back-ache, where he is recorded as saying, “My back aches. I will stretch myself.” (*Piṭṭhi me āgilāyati. Tam ahaṃ āyamissāmī ti* (or *āyameyyāmī ti*)).²⁴

The Saṃyutta Commentary on the Avassuta Pariyāya Sutta (S 31.243) explains that during the 6 years of the Bodhisattva's ascetic practice, he experienced great bodily pain. Therefore, in his old age, he suffered from “back winds” (*piṭṭhi,vāta*), an Indian term for rheumatism. Or else, he lay down because he wanted to use the council hall in all 4 postures, having already used it by way of walking, standing and sitting. (SA 3:52,9-24)

It should be recalled that the ascetic practices the Bodhisattva went through were no ordinary exercises but yogic postures and practices by someone very familiar with those practices. We must consider thus a third factor, old age. As the Buddha aged, his body (being physical) would naturally feel the rigours of a person who spends much of the waking hours either teaching, walking (and exercising) or attending to bodily needs—almost all such activities were done in the upright posture. It was thus natural or only human that the Buddha's back would ache.

1.1.3.2 The majestic **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) mentions 2 occasions of physical illness, that is, symptoms of dysentery, during the last few months of the 80-year-old Buddha. While Buddha was staying at Beḷuva for his last rains retreat, the Sutta reports thus:

Now when the Blessed One had entered the rains retreat, **a serious illness**²⁵ arose in him, with severe pains, as if he were about to die. But he endured all this mindfully and fully aware, and without complaining. ...

Then, the Blessed One made an effort to ward off the illness and dwelled, having determined the life-force. Then, the Blessed One's illness abated.²⁶ (D 16,2.23/2:99), SD 9

²² There are 5 *ānantarika kamma*, viz (1) killing one's mother, (2) killing one's father, (3) killing an arhat, (4) drawing blood from a Buddha, (5) causing a schism in the sangha. They are mentioned in **Parikuppa S** (A 5.129/3:146), SD 40b.2 (2.8.3.2), **M 115**,13/3:64 + SD 29.1a (2.2)' V 2:193,37; 5:128,25. The tt is first used in Dhs 1028/225,2; Pug 13,20; see also Vbh 378,11-15); MA 2:351; AA 2:5,7 = VbhA 427; UA 243; PmA 402 ad Pm 1:124; KvuA 141-143; PugA 185 ad Pug 13; Abhs 5.19 where the unwholesome *garuka,kamma* (Abhs:BRS 203 f). Cf **Abhabba-ṭṭhāna S 3** (A 6.94/3:439), SD 97.5. See SD 46.19 (3.1).

²³ At least 2 of the refs refer to the same occasion.

²⁴ **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,1.5/3:209); **Sekha S** (M 53,5/1:354), SD 21.14; **Avassuta Pariyāya S** (S 35.243/4:184), SD 60.6; **Nandaka S** (A 9.4/4:359); **Naḷakapana S 1** (A 10.67/5:123); **Naḷakapana S 2** (A 10.68/5:126); **Cv 7.4.3** (V 2:200), **Cv 7.4.4** (V 2:201).

²⁵ The “severe illness” here [as at D 16,4.20] shows symptoms of dysentery.

²⁶ **Sakka Vatthu** (DhA 25.8) relates how Sakka, assuming human form, personally attends to the Buddha with devotion (SD 54.20).

The Sutta goes on to recount that the Buddha, having eaten truffles or pork given to him as alms by Cunda the smith, suffered a similar attack:

Then, the Blessed One, having eaten the *sūkara,maddava* [truffles or pork] from Cunda the smith,²⁷ a serious illness arose in him, **severe pains with bloody diarrhoea**, with sharp pains as if he were about to die.²⁸ But he endured all this mindfully and fully aware, and without complaint.

(D 16,4.20/2:128), SD 9

1.1.3.3 Besides these 2 episodes of dysentery, we may include a 3rd one. **The wound on Buddha's foot** caused by the splinter from the boulder hurled by Devadatta down Mount Vulture Peak also overlaps with this category of physical illness. Two early texts, both called "Sakalika Sutta" (the discourse on the stone splinter"), relate the Buddha recovering from the wound on his foot caused by the stone splinter that flew off the boulder pushed down by Devadatta from the top of Mount Vulture Peak.

The first text, **the (Devatā) Sakalika Sutta** (S 1.38), tells us that the Buddha's foot has been cut by a stone splinter. "Severe pains assailed the Blessed One—bodily feelings that were painful, racking, sharp, piercing, harrowing, disagreeable. But the Blessed One endured them, mindful and clearly aware, without becoming distressed." Then, 700 devatas of the Satullapa host appeared; each of them praises the Buddha for his fortitude.²⁹

The second text, **the (Māra) Sakalika Sutta** (S 4.13) records the Buddha as resting because his foot has been badly cut by a splinter that flew from a boulder hurled down from the top of Mount Vulture Peak by Devadatta. While he is mindfully resting in a reclining posture, Māra appears to mock him for "lazing around" like an intoxicated poet. The Buddha at once identifies the voice as being that of Māra, and Māra vanishes.³⁰

1.1.4 The Buddha's physical deprivation

1.1.4.1 The remaining 2 unpleasant events in the canonical Buddha biography also fall into the general category of "physical illness and deprivation," although they concern **physical deprivation** rather than illness. The 1st of them is well-known: for 6 years before gaining awakening, the Bodhisattva underwent severe self-denying austerities as an ascetic.³¹

The 2nd case concerns deprivation of proper food. According to **the Vinaya**, during one rains retreat, the Buddha and the monks resided at **Verañja**, honouring the request of the brahmin Verañja from that town. It was a time of famine, and the monks, being unable to obtain almsfood, were forced to scavenge the earth for bulbous roots. Even the Buddha had to eat this inferior food (which later tradition calls *yava*

²⁷ *Atho kho bhagavato cundassa kammāra,puttassa bhattam bhuttavissa ...* . Comy explains carefully the phrase "having eaten the *sūkara,maddava*": "It arose *when* he had eaten, but not *because* he had eaten. If it had happened when he had not eaten it, it (the hunger) would have been extremely painful; but because he ate it, he was able to walk on his own (*bhuttassa udapādi, na pana bhutta,paccayena, yadi na abhuttassa uppajjissatha atikharo ahoṣi, ten'eva padasā gantum asakkhi*, D 2:568,25-27).

²⁸ This is the 2nd attack of dysentery. The first attack mentioned at §2.23. On whether the Buddha was *poisoned*, see SD 9 (13.1).

²⁹ S 1.38/1:27 (SD 61.4).

³⁰ S 4.13/1:110-112 (SD 61.7).

³¹ Refs to these austerities and their debilitating effects upon the Bodhisattva's body are scattered throughout the canon. See esp **Mahā Sīha,nāda S** (M 12,44-56/1:77-81), SD 49.1, & **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,20-30/1:244-246), SD 49.4.

or crude grain, as opposed to rice); Ānanda carefully prepared it by pounding it before offering it to the Buddha.³²

1.1.4.2 Slander, assault, physical illness and poor food (as a regular diet) are undeniably unpleasant. But when we consider the sufferings which most human beings undergo in old age, especially in an 80-year life, we must admit that the Buddha's life was comparatively, even effectively, free of suffering. Moreover, in every one of the canonical accounts of the unpleasant events confronting the Buddha, we are assured that he did not suffer anxiety, sorrow or even distraction in the face of such ordinarily discomfiting adversities as hunger, pain, slander and danger. Nevertheless, some degree of unpleasantness did befall even the Buddha; at the very least, he does *feel* the unpleasantness as we would, but he does *not react* to it as we would normally do.

³² Pār 1.1 ff (V 3:1-11).

2 Bad karma as the cause of the Buddha's pains: Buddhodicity³³

This section discusses the late canonical text, the Pubba,kamma,piloti, on the Buddha's past bad karma.

2.1 THE PUBBA,KAMMA,PILOTI(KA)

2.1.1 The incidents of the Buddha's sufferings—in the sense of his experiencing unpleasant states—are as old as the Buddha himself. We have studied these incidents and the Buddha's response to them from the earliest strata of the Buddhist canon. None of these texts show that any of these events is the result of bad karma, nor that any of these texts even consider the fact of the Buddha suffering such unpleasantness to be in any way problematic.

Indeed such events and the Buddha's response to them are in themselves vital as lessons for us to learn in the face of worldly vicissitudes. We may neither face any of the unpleasant circumstances that confronted the Buddha nor are likely to fall under the powers of any of the 8 conditions that burdened Devadatta, but such stories are meant to give us great human strength, even spiritual insights, into the vicissitudes of our lives: gain and loss, fame and obscurity, blame and praise, and joy and pain. [4.2.2.4].

2.1.2 There is also no evidence in these early texts [2.1.1] that these disparate unpleasant events were considered together, as a category, much less as a tradition. By the late canonical period, however, a text was produced which highlights the fact that at least some Buddhist authorities thought about these unpleasant aspects of the Buddha biography categorically, and explained them as the effects of Buddha's own bad karma.

This unique text is called **Pubba,kamma,piloti(ka)**,³⁴ "the rags (or strands) of past karma," preserved as no. 387 of the Therâpadâna, the inordinately long chapter 3 of **the Apadâna**³⁵ (the 13th book of the Khuddaka Nikâya).³⁶ Like the rest of the Apadâna (except for the Paccekabuddhâpadâna), the 33 verses of the Pubbakammapiḷoti³⁷ are in the popular śloka metre³⁸ (like the Dhammapada). Oddly,³⁹ it is placed in

³³ "Buddhodicity" is a portmanteau word, combining parts of 2 words: Buddha + theodicy, meaning "an attempt to resolve the philosophical problem of evil or apparent contradictions apparently ascribed to the Buddha."

³⁴ On **Pubba,kamma,piloti(kā)** (Ap 387/1:299-301), see Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, Singapore, 2002b, 2013 ch 23. On Pubbakammapiḷoti & Anavataptaḡāthā, see K R Norman, *Pali Literature*, 1983b:91 f. On Anavataptaḡāthā, see H Bechert, "Bruchstücke buddhistischer Versammlungen: I. Die Anavataptaḡāthā und die Sthaviragāthā," Berlin 1961 (STT VI).

³⁵ *Apadâna* (BHS *avadâna*) derives from *apa* + *vb*Â³ [CPD], prob also *vdo*, "to cut off, divide (esp the sacrificial cake and other objects offered in a sacrifice) (SED: *ava* + *vdo*); hence: (1) cutting; reaping; harvest (D 3:90,14); (2) a person's "reaping," (the result of) one's actions (M 1:96,6; A 1:102,3, Tha 47); (3) the story of a person's actions and their result (Ap 241,21) (DP).

³⁶ There are 2 important reasons for the lateness of **Apadâna**: (1) while *Dīgha* gives 6 buddhas *before* Gotama, and *Buddhavaṃsa* 24, Ap adds another 11 (each of which were prob from a different date), thus totalling 35 past buddhas. Scholars noted that as *Apadâna* is not included as a text of *Khuddaka Nikâya* in the list of the *Dīghabhāṇakas*, it appears that when that list was finalized, *Apadâna* was not considered as a text of the *Khuddaka Nikâya*. It was almost certainly the last book added to the Pāli Tipiṭaka and prob younger than *Buddhavaṃsa* but much older than the commentaries. (K T S Sarao, "Apadâna," in *Buddhism and Jainism*, Springer, 2017:137 f).

³⁷ This unique *Apadâna* ch (Ap 387), the **Pubba,kamma,piloti** ("rags of past karma"), explains that all these plans of Devadatta to harm the Buddha were the result of the Buddha's previous karma (Ap 387,18-20/2:300 f). On **Pubba,kamma,piloti(kā)** (Ap 387/1:299-301), see Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, Singapore, 2002b, 2013 ch 23.

³⁸ P *śloka*; a quatrain with each line of 8 syllables: SD 49.13 (2.2); SD 54.11 (1.1) n.

³⁹ Heinz Bechert has suggested a novel hypothesis to explain this displacement, that the *Apadâna* collator tried to fill out the number of Thera-biographies to 550, in order to parallel the *Jātaka*. See H Bechert, "Über das *Apadâna*-

the section of the Apadāna devoted to biographies of arhat monks. But in the rubric, it is called "Buddhā-padāna,"⁴⁰ the text which, as its name implies, contains a cosmic biography of the Buddha spanning countless aeons of self-perfection (and thus paralleling the Jātaka collection, but in a greatly abbreviated form). Its latter part is also given and commented upon by the Commentary at the end of the Buddhāpadāna.⁴¹

2.1.3 The subject of the text is clearly the Buddha himself. The text comprises verses spoken by the Buddha to the sangha at Lake Anotatta⁴² (Skt: *anavatapta*): "Near the Anotatta Lake, on the delightful rocky ground, where various gems were sparkling and various sweet scents [exuded] in the forest, the Lord of the World, surrounded by a huge community of monks, sitting down, then explained his own previous karma: 'Hear me, bhikshus, the karma produced by me [and] the ripening of strands of karma in the Buddha himself.'"⁴³

Here are 3 verses on the karmic roots behind two of Devadatta's attempts on the Buddha's life mentioned in the Pubba,kamma,piloti (Ap 1:300):⁴⁴

<i>Tena kamma,vipākena idha pacchimake bhava vadhattham mam devadatto abhimāre payojayi</i>	As a result of that karma, here in [my] final existence, Devadatta hired killers for the sake of murdering me.	Ap 387.18 , 2308 [3358] ⁴⁵
<i>hatth'āroho pure āsim pacceka,munim uttamam piṇḍāya vicarantam tam āsādesim gajen'aham</i>	Once, while I was on a tusker, I saw a supreme lone sage, wandering about for alms food— with the elephant I attacked him.	Ap 387.19 [3359]
<i>tena kamma,vipākena bhanto nālā,girī gajo giri-b,baje pura,vare dāruṇo mam upāgami</i>	As a result of that karma, the elephant Nālāgiri, violently approached me in the noble town of Giribbaja.	Ap 387.20 , 2309 [3360] c

2.2 A BRIEF EXPLANATION OF THE PUBBA,KAMMA,PILOTI VERSES

The **Pubba,kamma,piloti** presents the Buddha in a somewhat laconic manner, describing 12 previous lives in which he performed evil deeds, and stating that these deeds resulted in great suffering through-

buch," in E Frauwallner, hrsg, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Sud- Und Ostasiens und Archiv für Indische Philosophie* Band II, Wien: Verlag Brüder Hollinek, 1958:11-14. Walters think it equally possible that the final editors of the Apadāna were of the party which denied that Buddha had bad karma, and that the text was made to be a monk's biography to undermine its association with the Buddha himself.

⁴⁰ Ap 301,18-20.

⁴¹ ApA 120-127.

⁴² One of the 7 mythical lakes of the Himavā (Himalayas) (J 4:497,31): CPD: Anotatta.

⁴³ For text, see Mary E Lilley (ed), *The Apadāna of the Khuddaka Nikāya* vol 1, London: PTS, 1925:299-301 vv 1-2. According to Walters, Lilley's ed "is highly flawed and in great need of re-editing. I have relied in my translations herein on two editions in Sinhala script: Ven Pandit Walagedara Somaloka Tissa Niyaka Thero (ed) Apadānapāli of Suttanta Piṭaka (Colombo: Hewawitarne Bequest, 1957) and Ven Pandita Talalle Dhammananda Thera, ed, Apadāna-pāli (Govt of Ceylon, 1961) (Buddha Jayanti Tripitaka Series vol 36). C E Godakumbura (ed), *Visuddha,jana,vilāsini nāma Apadān'aṭṭhakathā* (London: PTS, 1954) has also been used in Walters' emending of Lilley's text.

⁴⁴ Based on Jonathan S Walters (tr), *Legends or the Buddhist Saints*, PDF, 2018:315, 2022:515; revised.

⁴⁵ Qu at Miln 26,21 f.

out aeons of rebirths, and finally brought about the unpleasant situations on account of Devadatta's efforts discussed earlier [1.1.2.3]. Each of these 12 summaries of the Buddha's past karma is headed by the **Apadāna** chapter.verses (with volume:page given at the end):

(1) **Ap 387.4-6**. In a straightforward manner, the text connects past evil cause with present unpleasant effect and later suffering. Thus the Buddha begins by relating that in a former life he was a scoundrel named **Munali**, who slandered an innocent Pacceka,buddha named Surabhi. As a result of that deed (*tena kamma,vipākena*), he arose in hell, experiencing thousands of years of suffering. As the remaining effect of that deed (*tena kammāvasesena*), he suffered the slanderous accusations of Sundarī.⁴⁶ (Ap 387.4-6/1:299)

(2) **Ap 7-9**. Similarly, in a previous existence the Buddha slandered **Nanda**, a disciple of the Buddha Sabbābhibhu. As a result, he arose in hell for 10,000 years, and upon obtaining a human body suffered much slander. The final result of this karma was the slander by Ciñcā Māṇavikā.⁴⁷ (Ap 387.7-9/1:299)

(3) **Ap 10-14**. Previously, the Buddha was a learned brahmin, teaching mantras to 500 brahmin youths in a great forest. Then, he accused a sage named **Isi,gaṇa** of unchastity. His pupils heard him and repeated his accusation as they begged for food from the villagers. As a result, they all suffered slander when Sundarī was murdered.⁴⁸ (Ap 387.10-14/1:299 f)

(4) **Ap 15 f**. In a previous life, greedy for wealth, the Buddha murdered his own **half-brother** by crushing him with a rock. As a result, his cousin Devadatta pushed a boulder down at him and a splinter wounded his foot.⁴⁹ (Ap 387.15 f/1:230)

(5) **Ap 17 f**. As a boy playing on the road, he threw a shard at a passing Pacceka,buddha. As a result, Devadatta employed thugs to kill him.⁵⁰ (Ap 387.17 f/1:300)

(6) **Ap 19 f**. Mounted on **an elephant**, he attacked a Pacceka,buddha going for alms. As a result, the intoxicated Nālā,giri the fierce tusker tried to attack him in Rājagaha.⁵¹ (Ap 387.19 f/1:300)

(7) **Ap 21 f**. Born as the unrighteous king **Patthiva**, the Buddha killed a man with a knife. After "roasting in hell," he suffered the remaining bad karma when the splinter from Devadatta's boulder caused his foot to become infected.⁵² (Ap 387.21 f/1:300)

(8) **Ap 23 f**. As a **fisherman's son**, he felt delight upon seeing the dead fish brought in by the fishermen. As a result, he got a headache in this life, and his Sakya clansmen (who had formerly been the fishermen) were killed in Viḍuḍabha's attack on the Sakyas.⁵³ (Ap 387.23 f/1:300)

⁴⁶ Ap 4-6/299 (verse/page).

⁴⁷ Ap 7-9/299.

⁴⁸ Ap 10-14/299 f.

⁴⁹ Ap 15 f/300.

⁵⁰ Ap 17 f/300.

⁵¹ Ap 19 f/300.

⁵² Ap 21 f/300.

⁵³ Ap 23 f/300. For the historical story behind Viḍuḍabha's attempt to massacre the Sakyas, see DhA 4.3/1:337-361, esp 357-362 (DhA:B 2:30-46).

(9) **Ap 25 f.** In another life he **cursed** the disciples of the Buddha Phussa saying, “No rice for you—chew and eat inferior grain!” As a result, the Buddha himself ate inferior food during his sojourn in Verñjā.⁵⁴ (Ap 387.25 f/1:300 f)

(10) **Ap 27.** Formerly born as **the son of a wrestler**, he interrupted a wrestling match (and, according to the Commentary, broke the back of one of the wrestlers in the process). As a result, he suffered back-ache even in his last life.⁵⁵ (Ap 387.27/1:301)

(11) **Ap 28.** As a **physician** he vindictively administered a purge to the son of a millionaire. As a result, in this life he suffered from dysentery and diarrhoea.⁵⁶ (Ap 387.28/1:301)

(12) **Ap 29-32.** Finally, born as the brahmin youth **Jotipāla**, he reviled the Buddha Kassapa: “Whence the awakening of this baldy, the awakening so difficult to obtain?” As a result, he performed severe austerities for 6 years before gaining his own awakening.⁵⁷ (Ap 387.29-32/1:301)

2.3 POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF THE PUBBAKAMMAPILOTI

2.3.1 The Pubbakammapiloti is unique in many ways. To begin, **the Apadāna** genre, as a rule comprises only stories of good karma of the arhats bringing them the pleasant fruits in their last life. The Pubbakammapiloti is the only text in the Apadāna which focuses only on bad karma and its unpleasant fruits. However, its Sanskrit parallel, the Avadāna, presents *both* bad karma bringing bad results and good karma bringing good results.

Even more interestingly, the Pubbakammapiloti is the *only* text of the Pali canon which explains the Buddha's sufferings as the result of his own bad karma and which provides the related accounts of his previous bad deeds and their resultant sufferings. Although we have quite a range of Pali canonical literature (especially the canonical Jātakas) devoting itself to previous bright karma of the Buddha, only here do we have glimpses of the apparent dark side.

2.3.2 Various scholars have noted the uncharacteristic nature of the Pubbakammapiloti as a Pali text.⁵⁸ A portion of the Avadāna corresponding to the Pubbakammapiloti has been discovered in Turkestan. Its existence in Chinese and Tibetan versions indicates that the Apadāna was the common heritage of both the Theravadins and the Sarvāstivādins, which accounts for its early appearance.⁵⁹ According to Walters, there are good reasons to suspect that the Pubbakammapiloti goes back to an early “**Hīnayāna**” tradition other than the Theravada, probably the Sarvāstivāda, or the Mahāsaṅghika, the precursor to the Mahāyāna schools. (1990: 77 f)

The Divyāvadāna of the Sarvāstivādins, for example, often uses the Sanskrit equivalent *karmaploti*, usually in a stock phrase by which hungry ghosts (*preta*) inquire of the Buddha the cause of their fates,

⁵⁴ Ap 25 f/301.

⁵⁵ Ap 27/301. Cp Godakumbura (ed) of Ap 126.

⁵⁶ Ap 28/301.

⁵⁷ Ap 29-32/301.

⁵⁸ On the problems of origin and date of the Pubba,kamma,piloti, see Norman, *Pali Literature*, 1983b:92.

⁵⁹ See Norman 1983b:92.

asking “what is this strand of karma?”⁶⁰ It is likely that the Sarvastivadins knew about the prototype of the Pali Pubbakammapiḷoti.

The Divyâvadāna, in the midst of a catalogue of the important places described by the Buddha, states that “the previous strands of karma have been disclosed at the Great Lake Anavatapta [by the Buddha who was] with the disciples.”⁶¹

Another important clue points to the **Mahāsaṅghikas** as the provenance of the Pubbakammapiḷoti. Note that all of the this-life events discussed in the Pubbakammapiḷoti have *no* direct root-events in the texts of the Pali canon. Only one of the stories of previous lives has an antecedent in the Pali texts, namely the story of **Jotipāla** and the Buddha Kassapa, in a telling which does not suggest that the Bodhisattva “slandered” that Buddha or produced bad karma thereby.⁶²

2.3.3 The later commentaries that discuss the Buddha's previous evil deeds always do so by quoting the **Apadāna**. The karmic explanation of Buddha's suffering, and the majority of the stories about the Buddha's evil deeds in earlier lives, are unique to the Pubbakammapiḷoti. But the Mahāsaṅghika **Mahāvastu-avadāna** records only one of these “unknown” stories, namely, the slander by the Bodhisattva of a disciple of the Buddha Sarvābhibhu (Pāli *sabbābhibhu*).⁶³

This description is considerably more detailed than the mere reference to this event in the Pali Pubbakammapiḷoti. This is especially significant since it also parallels the Pali text in describing the Buddha's slander by a woman (whose name is lost in a textual lacuna) as a karmic effect of the Buddha's earlier evil deed.⁶⁴ That is, it not only tells the tale to which our text alludes, but does so in order to make precisely the same connection: the Buddha suffered slander because in a former life he was himself a slanderer.

It is probable that the lacuna in the Mahāvastu was once filled by the name of Ciñcā Māṇavikā, whose slander of the Buddha was, according to the Pubbakammapiḷoti, the result of his having insulted a disciple of Sabbābhibhu (Sarvābhibhu). It is at any rate certain that the Mahāsaṅghikas preserved traditions paralleling the Pubbakammapiḷoti. More in-depth comparative study of these karmic texts belonging to the early Hīnayāna (especially the Sarvāstivāda and the Mahāsaṅghika) would surely reveal a fuller and clearer picture of the provenance of the Pubbakammapiḷoti.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ See E B Cowell & R A Neil (eds), *The Divyâvadāna, A collection of early Buddhist legends*, Cambridge, 1886: 87,8, 150,24, 241,26. This term is also used often in J S Speyer (ed), *Avadānaśataka* vol 1, Tokyo: Meicho-Funyū-Kay, [1902-1906], 1977:242,9, 246,9, 249,13, 253,6, 257,8, 267,14, 275,12.

⁶¹ *Divyâvadāna*, 1886:150: *Anavatapte mahāsarasi srāvakaiḥ sārđham pūrvikā karmaplotir vyākṛitā bhavati*. Anavatapta is, of course, the Skt equivalent of Anotatta, where the Pali text is said to have been disclosed to the monks.

⁶² This story is found in **Ghaṭikāra S** (M 81/2:45-54), SD 49.3, which relates that the brahmin youth Jotipāla (the Bodhisattva) is a close friend of the potter Ghaṭikāra who is devoted to Kassapa Buddha. Ghaṭikāra coaxes Jotipāla to visit that Buddha, but the Bodhisattva refuses with the words which the Pubbakammapiḷoti calls “slandorous.” In the Sutta, however, there is not even a hint of this. Instead, Ghaṭikāra convinces Jotipāla to visit the Buddha, from whom he hears the Dharma and is inspired by it, thus laying the foundation for his own future buddhahood. A very similar recension of the story is also found in the Skt **Mahāvastu**: Mvst 1:319-323 (Mvst:J 1:267-271).

⁶³ Mvst 1:34-45 (Mvst:J 1:29 -39).

⁶⁴ The karmic connection in Skt version is not as direct as in the Pali. The woman slandered as Sarvābhibhu's disciple's lover vows at that time to slander the Bodhisattva in return, repeatedly, until he reaches final awakening. See Mvst 1:45 f (Mvst:J 1:38).

⁶⁵ Bechert 1958:10-11 (esp n34) discusses another Skt parallel, Anavataptagāthā, which he says is part of the Lhasa-Kanjur Vinaya. This further supports the point that Pubbakammapiḷoti prob comes from a non-Theravadin Hīnayāna tradition. See Walters 1990:78 f.

3 Rejection of the Buddha's bad karma: Buddhology

This section explores the texts that reject this karmic explanation and the reasons for doing so.

3.1 REJECTING THE KARMIC EXPLANATION

3.1.1 Once the Pubbakammapiḷoti was included in the Pali canon, the karmic explanation of the Buddha's suffering became a subject for debate which raged throughout the commentarial period. The specific formulations and solutions to the problem are as numerous as the texts in which they are recorded. For an overview, we will discuss these sources as falling into 2 main groups:

- (1) those that **support** and elaborate the Apadāna (Pubbakammapiḷoti) position and
- (2) those that **reject the karmic explanation** of the Buddha's suffering by providing alternative causes.

While **the Pubbakammapiḷoti** represents position (1), the Dilemmas (*meṇḍaka,pañha*)⁶⁶ of **the Milinda,-pañha** (Miln; 100 BCE-200 CE) are the earliest sources we know that present alternative causes. [3.5.4 n]

Let us first look at the Milinda,pañha and other sources that reject the karmic explanation, and examine their reasons. Most Theravāda Buddhists, especially the traditional ones, would try to avoid the suggestion that the Buddha ever had bad karma, and how they attempted different ways for doing so. It makes good sense to first examine these denials of the karmic explanation before we go on to look at the objections to them. [4]

3.1.2 The Miln Dilemmas generally affirm the Apadāna position that even spiritually advanced people might suffer because of bad karma. The antagonist king Milinda asks the protagonist monk, **Nāgasena**,⁶⁷ how Moggallāna, if he were truly an arhat and foremost among those monks with psychic powers (*iddhi*), could have been murdered so brutally as recorded in early Buddhist hagiography. (Dilemma 4/1:188)

The dilemma is this: if Moggallāna was foremost of those monks with psychic powers, it must be false that he died in such a terrible way. Or, if it be true that he was clubbed to death, then the Buddha was mistaken in declaring him the foremost of monks with psychic powers.

Nāgasena answers the dilemma by referring to an "unthinkable"⁶⁸ stating that the effects of karma are greater than even arhathood itself:

Of the unthinkables, the fruiting of karma is more efficacious, more powerful (than arhathood itself); the fruiting of karma lords over it all, wields authority; and the remaining actions of one who under the power of karma has no leeway.⁶⁹

(Miln Dilemma 4.1/189,9-12 + 17-20 + 24-26)

⁶⁶ *Meṇḍaka* (lit, "belonging to a ram"), esp in *meṇḍaka,pañha*, "questions like the horns (of a ram), a double-horned question" (Miln 2, 89, 94 f), alluding to the story of a ram in **Ummagga J** (J 546/6:353-355)—also a story excerpt by itself, **Meṇḍaka,pañha J** (J 471/4:186, vv 94-105)—which is told in the form of a question so difficult and puzzling that nobody "from hell to heaven" (J 6:354) can answer except the Bodhisattva (Miln:Ee 422 f, Trenckner, 1880). On the double-horned question, see SD 7.12 (2).

⁶⁷ See SD 61.4 (5.2.1.4). On Nāgasena, see I B Horner, *Milinda's Questions* (Miln tr), London, 1969:xxvi-xxviii.

⁶⁸ There are 4 unthinkables (*acinteyya* or *acintiya*), viz: (1) the range of the Buddha's knowledge, (2) the range of a meditator's dhyana, (3) the result of karma, and (4) thinking about the world (*loka*), ie, the universe. **Acinteyya S** (A 4.77), SD 27.5a(5.5.2).

⁶⁹ *Tesaṃ acintiyānaṃ kamma,vipākāṃ yeva adhimattāṃ balava,taraṃ, kamma,vipakāṃ yeva sabbe abhibhaviya āṇaṃ pavatteti, kammādhiggahitassa avasesā kiriyā okāsaṃ na labhanti.*

3.2 MOGGALLĀNA'S MANNER OF DYING

3.2.1 According to the Commentaries,⁷⁰ the arhat **Moggallāna** was murdered by a contract put on him by the Nirgrāṇṭhas. Moggallāna used to visit various worlds and return with his report that those who followed the Buddha's teaching reached happy worlds, while the followers of the heretics were reborn in woeful conditions. These statements diminished the number of heretics and their followers. In retaliation, they bribed brigands to kill Moggallāna.

The Dhammapada Commentary tells us that the brigands surrounded the elder's cell in Kāḷasīlā, but he, aware of their intentions, escaped through the keyhole. For 2 months he eluded the brigands with his psychic powers. In the 3rd month, "the elder, understanding the compelling force of his karma, made no attempt to escape."⁷¹ The brigands then beat him up, crushing his bones and leaving him for dead. Having regained consciousness, with a great effort of will, he teleported himself to the Buddha to take his leave.

This tragic death is said to have been the result of Moggallāna's past bad karma. In a previous birth, on the instigation of his wife, he took his blind parents into a forest, where, pretending that they were attacked by thieves, he had beaten them to death. For this deed he suffered in hell for a long period, and in his last birth lost his life by violence.

3.2.2 The terrible manner of the arhat **Moggallāna's** death—that he was violently clubbed and quartered—is an important karmic puzzle that actually explicates the nature both of karma and of arhatness. An arhat may not create any new karma but any bad karma may continue to fruit whenever the conditions are right. Apparently, the 5 heinous karma with "immediate" (that is, this-life) effect): matricide, patricide, arhaticide, drawing blood from the Buddha, and causing a schism in the sangha [5.1.2.3 (5)]—take effect in this life itself, and also in one's last life—as evident from Moggallāna's death.

The dramatic account of Moggallāna's death has a powerful message for us. Our parents gave us life, and then enriched that life, so that we may be free beings on our own. To that extent, they are the living Brahmā (God) to us.⁷² To kill either of them is a karma we can never redeem ourselves from, not even as arhats. The bottom line is we should never kill either of our parents; the karma will haunt us to the very last day of our lives, literally.

Conversely, **parents** are also reminded by the story of Moggallāna's death that we should be worthy of the respect and love due to us by such teachings. It would be tragic if we, as parents, demand deference from our children merely because of our status. Rather, through our natural and diligent acts of love, care and good example, we should untiringly labour to raise our children and wards just as the Buddha educates his disciples in the Dharma. It is because of our parents' karmic role in bringing us into the world, and their human roles in raising us to be better individuals that parents' lives are precious and sacred to us.

3.2.3 The most vital lesson for us from **Moggallāna's death** is how Moggallāna himself views his death—just as any other arhat would view their own life. Significantly, he had a choice: he could have chosen to go on living for a life-time (*kappa*), perhaps little more; but he freely *chose death*. Theoretically,

⁷⁰ J 522/5:125-127; DhA 10.7/3:65-71. The 2 accounts differ in several details. DhA says that the thieves tried for 2 months before succeeding with Moggallāna who allowed this dreadful karma to be resolved. In the story of the past, when the blind parents were being beaten, they cried out to the supposed thieves to spare their son. Touched by this, Moggallāna did not kill them. Before passing away, he taught Dharma to the Buddha at his request, and performed various psychic wonders. Then, he teleported to Kāḷasīlā to pass away. The J account adds that he was cremated with much honour, and the Buddha had his relics collected and a stupa erected in Veluvana.

⁷¹ Thero attanā kata,kamassa ākaḍḍhana,bhāvaṃ ṇātvā na apagañchi, DhA 3:66,3-6.

⁷² This is based on the sutta quote, *brahmā'ti mātā,pitaro* – "Parents are God": **Sa,brahmaka S** (A 3.31), SD 90.2; SD 3.1 (1.4.4.2) n; SD 38.2 (4.4.1.2).

Moggallāna, with all his psychic powers, could have *indefinitely* prevented the brigands from murdering him. Surely Moggallāna could have resorted to a number of other ways to get out of his predicament.

Even without using his psychic powers, Moggallāna could have turned to the king for help; after all, it was the king's duty to protect all good citizens in his kingdom. Surely this was what a worldly person would have done. But Moggallāna was not a man of the world; he was an arhat: both his life and his death are meant to be *lessons* and *inspirations* for us. The most meaningful lesson is that we can never get away with murder—especially of our own parents—not even as an arhat.

The most purposeful lesson is a better understanding of how **karma** works. Karma is not about lessening suffering, unpleasantness and deprivation, and maximizing comfort, pleasure and acquisitions. It is about how our thoughts, speech and actions are beneficial in parenting others, not just biologically, but spiritually. We must, of course, begin with our duties as *biological* parents when that time comes.

However, as Buddhists, we have an on-going task of being **spiritual parents** to everyone and anyone we meet, especially those near or dear to us. We simply must accept the death of the young and the old—people grow up, grow old and die—and the past—people change, they have their own emotions and episodes to deal with, they are unpredictable, and they have their own lives. The past should stay where it is, or serve to brighten the present; the present should not be displaced by a future that never comes. The past is dead, we should leave it behind, the future is unborn, we should not live in it; thus, we fully and joyfully live in the present—just as Moggallāna accepted his own death.⁷³

3.3 THE MIXED NATURE OF KARMA

3.3.1 Another Miln Dilemma is whether good and bad really have different effects if the evil Devadatta could have been equal or superior to the Buddha during his previous lives (ie, in the Jātaka stories). The text affirms **the mixed nature of karma**:

Maharajah, just as water that is being carried along by the streams meets with the pure and the impure, with the good and the bad; even so, maharajah, everything included in the class of beings that has come into the stream of samsara and is being carried along by the stream of samsara meets both the unpleasant and the pleasant.⁷⁴ (Miln Dilemma 4.7/204,24-28)

Miln points out that in the Jātaka, the Bodhisattva, though sometimes inferior, acquired much merit while Devadatta, sometimes superior, attained much demerit. It also points out that Devadatta had good karma, too, even though he suffered greatly in the end. Again, good and bad karma arise together in a person.

The text, however, makes a curious omission from the standpoint of the Pubbakammapiḷoti: it does *not* affirm that the Bodhisattva had some bad karma, too. In this same way, **Dilemmas 5.5 and 5.6** (Miln 219-223) deny that the Bodhisattva accumulated bad karma when he slaughtered animals for sacrifice and when he reviled the Buddha Kassapa, respectively.

Although the demerit gained from slaughtering animals (**Dilemma 5.5**) is not included in the Pubba-kammapiḷoti account of Buddha's past bad karma, it clearly represents the same kind of troublesome ascription of bad karma to the Buddha. But Miln is able to avoid saying that the Bodhisattva created bad karma by explaining the animal sacrifice as the act of a man *temporarily insane*:

⁷³ On Moggallāna's death, further see SD 18.1 (5.3.1).

⁷⁴ *Yathā mahārāja udakaṃ sotena vuyhamānaṃ suci,asuci,kalyāṇa,pāpakena samāgacchati, evam eva kho mahārāja sabbe pi satta,nikāya,pariyāpannā saṃsāra,sotam anugatā saṃsāra,sotena vuyhantā appiyehi pi piyehi pi samagacchanti.*

Evil done by one who is unhinged, maharajah, is not of great blame here and now, nor is it so in respect of its ripening in a future state. (Miln 5.5/221)

3.3.2 Giving this non-karmic explanation for the Bodhisattva's activities saves Miln from admitting that the Bodhisattva had bad karma when he did the act and, more important, it saves it from admitting that the Bodhisattva acted to create bad karma.

In **Dilemma 5.6**, the same problem is avoided by saying that the Bodhisattva's "slander" of the Buddha Kassapa " ... was due to his birth (as a brahmin), due to his family ... of little faith, not believing."⁷⁵ This is, however, clearly casuistry since being born as a brahmin is the very reason for the Bodhisattva's arrogance towards the Buddha Kassapa!

Even if **Dilemma 5.5** is not specifically responsive to issues raised in Pubbakammapiḷoti, **Dilemma 5.6** clearly is. Only in the Apadāna is this story told to exemplify Buddha's bad karma. Miln admits the story, but denies that it was a karma-creating event.

3.4 GIVING NON-KARMIC EXPLANATIONS

3.4.1 Miln clearly lays out its disagreement with the Pubbakammapiḷoti. In 2 Dilemmas, Miln explains exactly why it disagrees. In **Dilemma 1.8** king Milinda asks Nāgasena,

"Bhante Nāgasena, did the Tathagata attain omniscience when he burnt up all unwholesomeness (*akusala*)⁷⁶ in himself, or had he still some unwholesomeness remaining?"⁷⁷

Nāgasena answers:

"He had burnt out all unwholesomeness. There was none left."⁷⁸ (Miln 1.8/134)

Just as **Dilemmas 5.5 and 5.6** express disagreement with the position that in *previous lives* the Buddha accumulated bad karma, **Dilemma 1.8** denies that in this life the Buddha suffered the effects of bad karma.

3.4.2 Miln then records Milinda as asking whether the Buddha suffered bodily pains, and Nāgasena replies that indeed he did, mentioning a number of traditional difficulties as regards **the Buddha's sufferings**, such as:

- (1) at Rājagaha a rock splinter of rock hurt his foot, causing it to bleed;⁷⁹
- (2) at Beḷuva he suffered from dysentery [1.1.3.2];
- (3) once when his bodily humours were disturbed, he was given a purge;⁸⁰ and
- (4) once when he was troubled with winds, the elder (Ānanda) served him warm water.⁸¹

(Miln 1.8/134 f)

⁷⁵ *Jāti,vasena kula,vasena ... assaddhe appasanne kule paccā,jāto.*

⁷⁶ The suttas use both *akusala* and *pāpa* to denote the "bad" in Buddha's karma. In ApA, it seems, *akusala,kamma* refers to not-so-grave offences (like when, as a fisherman's son, the Bodhisattva delighted at the fishermen's catch), reserving *pāpa,kamma* for the truly grave acts like when the Bodhisattva, greedy for his inheritance, murdered his own half-brother by crushing him with a rock.

⁷⁷ *Bhante nāgasena tathāgato sabbam akusalam jhāpetvā sabbaññutam patto, udāhu sāvasese akusale sabbaññutam patto ti.*

⁷⁸ *Sabbam mahārāja akusalam jhāpetvā bhāgavā sabbaññutam patto, n'atthi bhagavato sesakam akusalan ti.*

⁷⁹ SD 61.5a (4.1.1).

⁸⁰ Mv 8.1.30-33 (V 1:279).

⁸¹ **Deva,hita S** (S 7.13/1:174) records Upavāna as the Buddha's attendant, who gets some hot water for him from the brahmin Deva,hita, and thus his illness subsides. See also ThaA 2:57 on Upavāna's verses (Tha 185 f). At **Cv 6.17.1** (V 1:210) Ānanda gives the Buddha some conje (no mention of hot water), recalling that he was eased by this "on a former occasion."

Miln rebuts that since all pain (feeling) is the result of karma, the Buddha must have had residual bad karma. This is a notion that Miln is unwilling to accept. Nāgasena cites **the Sīvaka Sutta** (S 36.21), in which the Buddha says that not all bodily pain is caused by karma. It is only one (the last) of 8 causes of feelings (*aṭṭha kāraṇa vedayita*); that is, feelings could arise due to:

- | | |
|--|----------------------------|
| (1) bile disorders; | <i>pitta,samuṭṭhānāni</i> |
| (2) phlegm disorders; | <i>semha samuṭṭhānāni</i> |
| (3) wind disorders; | <i>vāta samuṭṭhānāni</i> |
| (4) a combination [imbalance of the 3]; | <i>sannipātikāni</i> |
| (5) weather changes; | <i>utu pariṇāmajāni</i> |
| (6) improper care; | <i>visama,parihārajāni</i> |
| (7) assaults [trauma from outside agencies]; | <i>opakkamikāni</i> |
| (8) the results of one's karma. | <i>kamma,vipākajāni</i> |

(S 36.21/4:230 f), SD 5.6; {Miln 134 f}

3.4.3 Based on this Sutta, Nāgasena asserts that the Buddha's pain arose from natural causes, thereby removing any doubt regarding the fact that the Buddha was *free of bad karma*.

Secondly, Nāgasena argues that the Buddha felt pain as the result of another of the causes mentioned in **the Sīvaka Sutta** [4.3.2], namely, "assault" (*opakkamika*), that is, an external human agency (that is, Devadatta).

Both these explanations contradict the statement in the Pubbakammapiḷoti that these pains were the direct result of bad karma. Similarly, **Dilemma 3.8** concerns the rock hurled by Devadatta which splintered and injured the Buddha's foot (Miln 179-181). According to the Pubbakammapiḷoti, this was the remaining effect of the Buddha having crushed his half-brother to death with a rock in some previous existence. (Ap 15 f/1:300) [2.2 (4)]

Miln thus treats the incident purely as the result of external causes. Its proximate cause was a freak of nature: the boulder pushed down Mount Vulture Peak was abruptly lodged in between two boulders, causing a shard to splinter off and hit the Buddha's foot hurting it (Miln 1:180). Nāgasena explains, "Moreover, maharajah, that fragment fell on the Lord's foot causing pain was on account of the ungrateful selfish Devadatta."⁸² (Miln 181,19-21).

3.5 CRITICISM OF THE MILINDA,PAÑHA

3.5.1 When we examine all the Miln **Dilemmas** quoted above, we see that these questions show uncertainty about whether the Bodhisattva or the Buddha had bad karma, and they relate to a larger group of questions regarding the nature of Buddhahood. Simply put, we can imagine the questioner asking questions about the Buddha such as these:

How could an all-knowing Buddha have admitted the schismatic Devadatta into the sangha, or did he examine the situation before him and then decide what to do depending on the new knowledge?

Did he ever doubt; was he ever angry; or show immodesty? Was he really awakened if he needed to meditate?

The rejection of the karmic explanation of the Buddha's suffering as resulting from bad karma may be regarded as an attempt to answer such questions. After all, if the Buddha had bad karma, how can we be

⁸² *Api ca mahārāja akataññussa kadariyassa devadattassa dukkhānubhavanāya sā papaṭikā bhagavato pāde patitā ti.*

sure that the Buddha can overcome them? If bad karma is sure to bear fruit, is it possible that his attaining nirvana might have been illusory? So long as we are unawakened, such questions may arise in us.

3.5.2 In denying that the Buddha had bad karma, Miln seems to have a lot at stake. The Dilemmas, as we notice, give answers to questions about the Buddha's bad karma in keeping with dogmatic positions regarding the nature of Buddhahood and traditional hagiography. Although many of the answers are convincing, there are just as many that resort to **casuistry**, a way of solving religious, moral and legal problem that sounds clever but is really false.

Walters, in his paper on "The Buddha's bad karma," notes that most of the Milinda,pañha Dilemmas affirm both the hagiographical tradition or canonical text and the position about buddhahood which is held up as contradictory, often arriving at "solutions" with some casuistry. In the Dilemmas concerned with Buddha's bad karma, however, Miln does more than provide fanciful evasions. In at least Dilemmas 1.8 [3.4.1 f] and 3.8 [3.4.3], the objection which Nāgasena rejects is itself *the traditional position*, the position which, according to the Pubbakammapiḷoti, is stated by the Buddha himself. (1990:83)

3.5.3 In a practical sense, **casuistry** may be unintentional or unconscious lying or falsehood, especially when used as "skillful means." This form of casuistry is very common in later Buddhism and modern Buddhism, especially where the teacher or speaker is not well versed in early Buddhism and the basic rules of logic, and promoting his personal views (that differ from, even contradict, the Dharma). For this reason, careful teachers and writers make it a rule to inform others that their views regarding Buddhist matters, or even Buddhism as a whole, is merely "provisional."

This means that what I have written here, for example, is what I think is right and true as far as I have understood Buddhism at this point in my life. Even good scholars are likely to change their opinions over what they have published before. The same holds true for our understanding of Buddhism: our current understanding of Buddhism is merely a small step in our attempt to advance towards the path.

For this reason, the Buddha keeps reminding us that there is "something more to do" (*uttariṃ karaṇīyaṃ*); fully, "but there is more to be done here" (*atthi c'ev'ettha uttariṃ karaṇīyaṃ*).⁸³ We can only be clear and certain that we understand what is taught, which we use to connect with greater insight into the Dharma. To remain stuck with our wrong views is to be blinded by them; we are buried in the past, dead (*chava*) to the living present.

3.5.4 The author of **the Milinda,pañha**⁸⁴ [3.1.1] may have been the first Buddhist to deny that Gotama had any bad karma, either as Bodhisattva or as Buddha, but he was certainly not the last. **Buddhaghosa** (fl c 370-459 CE),⁸⁵ in his commentaries on the Buddha's backache, explains the Buddha's remark on it by providing a *non-karmic* causal explanation for it, thus:

Buddhaghosa's Saṃyutta Commentary

Kasmā āgilāyati? Bhagavato hi chab,bassāni mahā,padhānaṃ padahantassa mahantaṃ kāya,dukkhaṃ ahoṣi. Ath'assa apara,bhāge mahallaka,kale piṭṭhi,vāto uppajjā ti. Akaraṇaṃ vā etaṃ. [Ee 3:52,12 omits vā.]

⁸³ (**Ānanda**) **Subha S** (D 10,1.31 + passim), SD 40a.13; **Assa,pura S** (M 39,3.5/1:271), SD 10.13; (**Gaha,pati**) **Potaliya S** (M 54,14), SD 43.8; **Sevitabbāsevitabba S** (M 114), SD 39.8 (1.1.1.8); SD 51.17 (3.4.2.5).

⁸⁴ Miln is an extracanonical (outside the Tipiṭaka) or paracanonical (a work compiled soon after the canonical period that supports the canon), dating prior to the 4th cent CE. It was prob based on a Prakrit or Sanskrit original (or possibly in Greek), and has a Chin tr. The work seems to have Sarvāstivāda influence in holding that both nirvana and space are without cause, whereas for the Theravāda only nirvana is unconditioned.

⁸⁵ See Princeton Dict of Buddhism 2014:152; M Franceschini, "Buddhaghosa," *Ency of Buddhism Online*, 2019.

Why did [the Buddha's back] ache? The Blessed One, who had devoted himself to great exertion for 6 years [as an ascetic], had much bodily suffering. Later on, during his old age, back winds arose in him. It had no (karmic) cause (*akaraṇam [vā] etaṃ*).⁸⁶ (SA:Ee 3:52,9-12)

Buddhaghosa's Majjhima Commentary

Kasmā āgilāyati? Bhagavato hi chab,bassāni padhānaṃ padahantassa mahantaṃ kāya,dukkhaṃ ahoṣi. Ath'assa apara,bhāge mahallaka,kale piṭṭhi,vāto uppajj. Akaraṇam vā etaṃ.

Why did [the Buddha's back] ache? The Blessed One, who had devoted himself to great exertion for 6 years [as an ascetic], had much bodily suffering. Later on, during his old age, back winds arose in him. **Or**, it had no (karmic) cause (*akaraṇam etaṃ*). (MA 3:28,8-11)

It should also be noted that the Dīgha and the Aṅguttara Commentaries (DA 3:974,16-19 = AA 5:44,15-17) on the Buddha's back ache omit the phrase *akaraṇam vā etaṃ* altogether.

In the 1st version of the Commentarial passage (on the Saṃyutta) beginning *kasmā āgilāyati?* only Ee (the PTS edition) omits the particle *vā* (probably by mistake); the other versions (Be Ce Se) all have *vā*.

In the 2nd version of the same passage—found in the Dīgha and the Aṅguttara Commentaries—Buddhaghosa omits the phrase *akaraṇam vā eva* altogether. I will briefly discuss what I think is the significance of this next.

3.5.5 According to Walters,

The addition of “or” (*vā*) in the final line gives the passage a different thrust: either the cause of this backache was asceticism in early life or else there was no cause at all Of course in terms of the topic at hand, this textual variation is insignificant. Whichever reading we take to be Buddhaghosa's own, it is clear that he did not accept the karmic explanation of Buddha's sufferings; if the Majjhima commentary reading is uncorrupted, Buddhaghosa went beyond even the alternate causality position in allowing the possibility that Buddha suffered for no reason at all!

(Walters 1990:94 n46; emphases added)

Perhaps, we could expand Walters' conclusion a bit with the qualifier “karmic,” thus: “Buddhaghosa went beyond even the alternate-cause position in allowing the possibility that Buddha suffered for no karmic reason at all.” In the same passage in his Dīgha and his Aṅguttara Commentaries, Buddhaghosa omits the whole phrase, *akaraṇam vā etaṃ*. Either he did not think much about this matter or it did not apply to the contexts of these 2 Nikāyas. Surely, Buddhaghosa was also familiar with the 8 conditions of **the Sīvaka Sutta**, and any of them could apply to the Buddha's pains, except the 8th condition [3.4.2].

This physiological explanation for the Buddha's backache and the statement that it had nothing to do with the Bodhisattva's self-mortification before the great awakening also directly contradicts the Pubba-kammapiṭi attributing the Buddha's backache to bad karma from his former existence as a wrestler's son (Ap 27/301) [2.2 (10)].

3.6 COMMENTARIAL REJECTION OF KARMIC EXPLANATION

3.6.1 The Dhammapada Commentary (*dhammapad'aṭṭhakathā*, DhA)⁸⁷ retells several of the stories of unpleasant events in the Buddha's life without any hint of their having to do with bad karma. Thus, **the**

⁸⁶ In his M comy, Buddhaghosa repeats this same passage with a few variations.

⁸⁷ DhA in attr to “Buddhaghosa,” prob a namesake, “Culla Buddhaghosa.” See E W Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends*. Harvard, 1921:59 f; Malalasekera, *Pāli Literature of Ceylon*, Colombo, 1928:96 f; M Winternitz, *History of Buddhist Literature*, Calcutta, 1933, rev 1972:192-197.

Sundarī Paribbājakā Vatthu relates that her slander of the Buddha was caused by the jealousy of the heretics. (DhA 22.1) [5.1.1.1].

The Ciñcā Māṇavikā Vatthu depicts her slander, too, as having arisen from the heretics' jealousy. Here the Buddha explains that in a previous life, too, Ciñcā had slandered him, thus shifting the story focus from Buddha's bad karma to Ciñcā's bad karma. (DhA 13.9/3:178-183) [5.1.1.2].

In this same way, DhA relates **the Devadatta Vatthu** (DhA 1.12), the Devadatta cycle of stories, depicting him as an agent of the Buddha's suffering, shifting the focus to Devadatta's bad karma. (DhA 1.12/-1:133-150)

Finally, DhA retells the time that the Buddha and the monks were forced to eat inferior food in **Verañjā**, explaining this as the result of bad karma which the monks accumulated during one of the Buddha's previous lives, when, according to **the Pañca,sata,bhikkhu Vatthu** ("the story of 500 monks," DhA 6.8),⁸⁸ born as 500 asses, they served inferior food to 500 thoroughbred horses." (DhA 6.8/2:153-157)

Although DhA contains stories of the bad karma of evil doers, or those of the monks, throughout the Commentary, we see not even a hint that any of the Buddha's sufferings (when mentioned) were the result of his own bad karma.

3.6.2 The Jātaka Commentary (*jātak'aṭṭhakathā*, J) also retells the stories of the various occasions when the Buddha suffered, as if to refute the karmic explanation. **The Mahā,paḍuma Jātaka** introduction, like DhA, gives a past-karma explanation for **Ciñcā Māṇavikā's** slandering the Buddha but without mentioning any bad karma on the Buddha's part. (J 472/4:187-189). [5.1.1.2]

The Maṇi,sūkara Jātaka introduction recalls **Sundarī's** story, again without any hint that it has to do with the Buddha's past bad karma. (J 285/:415-417) [5.1.1.1]

The drama of the fierce elephant **Nāḷāgiri's** attack on the Buddha, retold in **the Cūḷa,haṃsa Jātaka** introduction, shifts the focus from the Buddha being the victim to Ānanda's selfless and heroic response to save the Buddha's life. (J 533/5:333-337).

Similarly, **the Culla,suka Jātaka** introduction alludes to the Verañjā story but focuses upon the equanimity of the Buddha, giving a previous-karma reason for that, but not for his past bad karma regarding almsfood. (J 430/3:494 f)

All the Jātaka stories employ various literary devices to refute any idea relating to the stories they are telling that the Buddha ever suffered as a result of bad karma. Whether the explanation be non-karmic or the karma of others, the effect is the same: that the Buddha did not suffer because of bad karma.

⁸⁸ DhA 6.8 is derived from **Vālodaka S** (J 183/2:95-97), which is, in turn, derived from **Pār 1.1-1.4** (V 3:1-11).

4 Explaining the Buddha's bad karma: Apologetics

This section examines the commentarial rebuttal of the rejections of the karmic explanation [3] of the Buddha's bad karma, affirming their karmic explanation.

4.1 IS KARMA ABSOLUTE?

4.1.1 Not all Theravada Buddhists, it seems, accepted the denials of the Buddha's bad karma, which they regarded as being fundamental to the development of the Theravada tradition, indeed, of Buddhism itself. Some commentators and later editors were unwilling to ignore **the Pubba,kamma,piloti**, which was included in the Pali canon as being expounded by the Buddha himself. In other words, they were of the view that the Buddha himself accepted the karmic explanation of the unpleasant things that happened to him.

Now, the texts which deny the karmic explanation never mention the Pubbakammapiḷoti, as though it did not exist, even though their arguments clearly address the problems it raises. Similarly, those who rejected those denials never mentioned them specifically, but the way they elaborated the simple Pubba-kammapiḷoti ideas made it clear that they had those very denials in mind. In true Buddhist spirit, each side was rejecting the views of the other without rejecting those who held those views.

4.1.2 The Udāna Commentary of Dhammapāla

4.1.2.1 The earliest extant text we know of that rejects the rejection of the karmic explanation of the Buddha's bad karma is Dhammapāla's Udāna Commentary, Paramattha,dīpanī (the lamp of ultimate meaning), UA for short. As we should recall, this is the earliest post-canonical text telling the story of **Sundarī the slanderer**. From his UA, it is clear that Dhammapāla supported the karmic explanation:

Yathā c'etaṃ evaṃ ciñcā,māṇavikādinam vikāraḥ'itthīnam bhagavato abbhakkhān'ādāni dukkhaṃ nipphannāni sabbāni pubbe katassa kammaṣṣa vipāk'āvasesāni, yāni kammāni pilotikānī ti vuccanti.

As with this (case of Sundarī), so were the (other) sufferings that were brought about in the form of accusations and so on against the Lord on the part of women who were trouble-makers, such as Ciñcā Māṇavikā and so forth. They are all the remaining effects of deeds done in the past, which are called "karmic strands" (*kammāni pilotikāni*). (UA 263,23-26)

4.1.2.2 Dhammapāla then cites **the Apadāna** by name and quotes the entire Pubbakammapiḷoti. Dhammapāla however does not merely affirm an old position, but he affirms it in terms of the denials of the karmic explanations which have been made:

[Regarding **Sundarī's** slanders,] it is here asked, "But what was that karma?" The Teacher, who for an immeasurable period of time carefully heaped up a vast accumulation of merit, received harsh and false slander. It is said that this very Lord, being a bodhisattva in a previous birth, was a scoundrel named **Munāli**. He associated with evil people, roaming about with an abundance of unwise attention.

One day he saw a self-awakened lone buddha (*pacceka,sambuddha*) named **Surabhi** adjusting his robe to enter the city for alms. At that time, a certain woman was walking not far from him. [Munāli] slandered, "This recluse is a scoundrel, no celibate!"

[Munāli/Buddha,] because of that karma, burned in hell for many thousands of years. As the remaining effect of that karma, now, even though he was the Buddha, he received slander on account of Sundarī. (UA 263,12-23)

4.1.3 Dhammapāla then refers to a debate over the cause of Sundarī's slander, and states that even for the Buddha, with all the merit described by the Jātaka, he was still subject to the effects of his past bad karma. Dhammapāla affirms **the absoluteness of karma**—karma works without any exception—even in the case of the Buddha; thus affirming the Pubbakammapiḷoti's position against the denials of the Buddha's past bad karma. Dhammapāla denies any alternative cause; his language clarifies this point even more unequivocally than the Pubbakammapiḷoti itself.

Some later authorities recorded in **the Dhammapada Commentary** (DhA) noted its silence on the Buddha's bad karma, and expressed their concern by mentioning this silence. The Pali Text Society editor appended a 20-line textual reading in the DhA transmission—labelled “Kambodian” (K¹)—by way of a Khmer DhA passage on the Ciñcā Māṇavikā incident, beginning: “Because of what did the Blessed One receive the slander of heretics? This is the past karma done by the Lord” (DhA 3:183, 512)

The text gives the account of Buddha's birth as **Munāli**, apparently quoting from the Apadāna Commentary (ApA 119),⁸⁹ then quotes the verses of the Pubbakammapiḷoti concerning Ciñcā Māṇavikā concluding: “This is the past karma of the Teacher.” (*idaṃ pubba,kammam satthuno*) (DhA 3:512)⁹⁰

4.2 THE PUBBA,KAMMA,PILOTI COMMENTARY

4.2.0 Jonathan S Walters specializes in **the Apadāna** (Ap), which he has fully re-edited, and then translated and annotated in a revised edition, the first complete Apadāna translation ever done.⁹¹ He has also offered his translation freely online and for download, “motivated by a sense that scholars, students, Buddhists and even the general public might enjoy and benefit from access to this beautiful collection of ancient poetry.”⁹²

We have already noted that **the Pubba,kamma,piloti** (“Piloti” for short) forms **ch 368** of the Apadāna (Ap 1:229-301), and it has only a brief “official” commentary of 23 lines (ApA 479 f). A longer “detailed” commentary on the 12 occasions of the Buddha's bad karma is a much longer work found in the Buddh-āpadāna Commentary (ApA 114-127) totalling some 13 pages. [2.1.2]

The detailed Piloti Commentary gives “the quintessential rebuttal to the denials that Buddha had bad karma ... ,” notes Walters, and he adds that:

Pubbakammapiḷoti receives more attention from the commentator than any other text of the large Apadāna collection. The commentary contains lengthy descriptions of the previous life stories, the intermediate sufferings in hell and low states, and the stories of Buddha's sufferings in this life. In the process of this elaboration, the commentator is able to undercut the denials of the karmic explanation at the same time that he generates out of this debate some startlingly new Buddhological perspectives. (1990:86)

Although Walters does not relate the details of the Pubbakammapiḷoti commentary in his 1990 article, he has there insightfully shown in 5 interesting points how the Pubbakammapiḷoti commentary “**modifies the Apadāna telling in order to affirm the karmic position despite the denials of it**” (1990:86). These 5 points have been reproduced here, summarized or paraphrased in parts, with some of my comments, as part of our study.

⁸⁹ The Apadāna Commentary (*apadān'aṭṭhakathā*) is titled *Visuddha,jana,vilāsinī*, “the splendour of the well-purified”; abbreviated as ApA.

⁹⁰ (Ed) H C Norman, *The Commentary on the Dhammapada*, London: Pali Text Soc, 1906 3:51.

⁹¹ (Tr) Jonathan S Walters, *Legends of the Buddhist Saints, Apadānapāli*, Whitman College, 2017, ©2018, published by Walters & Whitman College. <http://www.apadanatranslation.com>.

⁹² [Legends of the Buddhist Saints \(apadanatranslation.com\)](http://www.apadanatranslation.com) 22 June 2024.

4.2.1 First, notes Walters, the story order has been changed in the commentary, where it is **chronological** in relation to the Buddha's present life. Thus, it starts with **the 6 years' asceticism** (not end with it, as in the Pubbakammapiḷoti), "because it preceded all the other unpleasant events chronologically." With this chronological retelling, the unknown commentator demonstrates that as the Bodhisattva neared his goal, and even after the great events in his life as Buddha, he continued to suffer bad karma.

The juxtaposition of the Buddha's progress on the path with the effects of his past bad karma drives home Dhammapāla's position that the Buddha suffered *even though he was the Buddha*. Thus, the story points out that the Bodhisattva slandered **Kassapa Buddha** "even though it was in the time of that very Buddha that he received his prediction [of future buddhahood]." (ApA 115,3; DhA 3:512)

Then, the ApA commentator continues, even after the Bodhisattva had perfected himself in the last Jātaka as king Vessantara (J 547), had been born in his last life as Siddhattha, renounced the world, cut off his hair and engaged into austerities, he still suffered the bad karma of having slandered that same past Buddha whose prediction was about to come true.

The story continues to remind us that he gave up asceticism after 6 years, sat beneath the Bodhi Tree, and became **Buddha**. It was after this that he was slandered because of **Sundarī**.

Even as he prepared to die, ready to attain **parinirvana**, the Buddha suffered dysentery and diarrhoea.

By describing famous events in the Buddha's life, repeatedly juxtaposing them with his sufferings, the commentary highlights the problem which had so bothered the authors of Milinda,pañha and related texts. [3.5]

4.2.2 Second, **the Piloti commentary** is the first and probably the only text which addresses the nature of the "badness" of the Buddha's karma. *Kamma,piloti*, "the strands of karma," is a euphemism; it always refers to bad karma without saying it. The Pubbakammapiḷoti itself uses no adjective for the karma that results in the Buddha's suffering.

But in the Piloti commentary, less significant deeds (like the **fisherboy's** delight) are categorized as "unwholesome karma" (*akusala,kamma*) whereas the major offences (like murdering his own **younger half-brother** out of greed) are described as "bad or evil karma" (*papa,kamma*).⁹³

4.2.3 Third, the Commentator sometimes deepens the karmic connection by providing previous karma explanations for the past evil deeds. Thus, when **Jotipāla** slandered Kassapa Buddha, the primary karmic force which brought it about was Kassapa's own previous bad karma (*tassa (kassapassa) bhagavato piloti,kamma,nissandena*).

It was thus karmically determined not only that our Buddha would perform painful austerities but also that in a previous life he would slander the Buddha of that age! Moreover, the fact of buddhas suffering bad karma becomes universalized: not only our Buddha but past buddhas, too, created bad karma and suffered on account of their effects.

4.2.4 Fourth, the commentator provides past bad karma explanations for the alternative causes presented in the texts described in [3], that is, the Milinda,pañha, the Dhammapada Commentary and the Jātaka Commentary. Thus, Devadatta's enmity, which Miln and other texts state to be the real cause of the Buddha's suffering at his own hand is, in the Piloti commentary explained to be *itself* the result of the Buddha's action, as related in **the Seriva,vañija Jātaka** (J 3/1:110-113) and retold in the Piloti commentary (ApA 121 f). [1.2]

⁹³ This hierarchy of badness seems unique to the Piloti and its comy. In the suttas they are usually synonyms but *puñña* ("merit" or "acts of merit") often incl the pre-Buddhist idea of "good" karmic fruits, even worldly ones, whereas *kusala* always refers to skillful actions (in body, speech and mind), including meditation, that bring us closer to the path and out of samsara. See SD 54.2c (2.1).

Similarly, the hatred and jealousy of the heretics are explained as a response to monks showing off their miraculous powers (before the Buddha had established the rule forbidding such displays). (ApA 115-119)

4.2.5 Fifth and finally, the commentator develops out of this debate **a new buddhology**. He treats the Pubbakammapiḷoti at the beginning of the Apadāna, as part of the Buddh'apadāna section of that text. For him, the stories about bad karma and bad effects are part of the same story which tells of good karma and good effects; his is a new conception of the Buddha biography:

Travellers who, having been shown the right way, following it, get their tasks done at their destination. But those who have gone the wrong way, then learn of the right way; taking it, they, too would get their tasks done.

In the same way, the Buddhâpadāna is taught because it exemplifies the wholesome Apadāna ["harvest"]. The troublesome karma (*pañha,kamma*) [those described in Pubbakammapiḷoti] are exemplified in the unwholesome (*akusala*) *apadana* (which should be avoided).

(ApA 114,17-23; paraphrased)

For the commentator, the Buddha biography is the pattern for the pleasant and ultimately liberating effects or "harvest" (*apadāna*) of good karma [2.1.2 n]. It is also the habitual pattern of every person's ability to get onto the right road, even if they have created bad karma. Like the travellers who, failing to heed the warnings of those who know the way, must waste time on the wrong road before realizing their mistake and then getting back on course, so the person who acts evilly, not heeding the Buddha's warnings, will waste time, suffering in hell and on earth, but in the end even that evil-doer can also get on the right road.

4.2.6 In simple terms, then, the 12 stories of the Pubba,kamma,piloti—and what we have discussed in their connection—boils down to a "**trial and error**" method of learning. This is, in fact, the most fundamental principle of practical Buddhism, to "*avoid evil, do good and purify the mind*—this is the teaching of all the buddhas" (Dh 183).⁹⁴ The first statement, "avoid evil," is not merely an apophatic moral non-action; it is to acknowledge that bad and evil exist. The Piloti, as it were, "proves" it. The Buddha, in each, case, "avoided it," showed his unshakable equanimity and boundless compassion.

The Sukhumāla Sutta (A 3.38) records the Buddha as recollecting how, in his youth, he dwelled in the luxury and sensuality of the 3 mansions. Even as an unawakened Bodhisattva—as an intelligent, spiritually precocious youth—he knew that:

"... an untutored worldling, by nature ages ... suffers disease ... dies.

Now, I, too, by nature, will age ... will suffer disease ... will die, and cannot escape it.

When seeing an aged person ... a sick person ... a corpse,

if I were to feel distressed, ashamed, disgusted, that would not be proper for one like myself."

When I reflected thus ... all my **intoxication** (*mada*) with youth ... health ... life vanished.

(A 3.38/1:145 f), SD 63.7⁹⁵

When Siddhattha saw the 4th sight—that of a joyful renunciant—he was convinced that the first 3 joys (of youth, health and life) were the wrong paths, and his intoxication with youth, with health and with life vanished. He saw the right path, that of the joy of renunciation, and he took that path.

⁹⁴ SD 56.1 (4.2.1.2).

⁹⁵ For an abbrev study: SD 5.16(19.4.2).

4.2.7 The idea of the Buddha's exemplary life as the recommended pattern of life or path of practice is not unique to the Piloti. Buddhaghosa sees much of the Buddha's life in **the Ariya Pariyesana Sutta** (M 26)⁹⁶ as such a negative example, the Buddha teaching it in order to show first-hand what we should not do, that is, we should avoid as the "ignoble quest" (*anariya pariyesanā*). The "quest" (*pariyesanā*) is another name for the "path." Hence, Buddhaghosa uses the same metaphor of the traveller asking directions (MA 2:169 f). But here the Buddha describes only his unproductive strivings in *the present life*, not those in past lives, as in Piloti.

As our insight into the Dharma deepens, we will be able to see beyond the words of the text or hear beyond the sound of the teaching; we will see its beauty and truth; we will feel and live its peace and freedom. Such insight comes with experience, knowing what's wrong, what's right, rejecting the unwholesome and choosing the wholesome. We become better with the good that we do with mindfulness and diligence.

Then, when we look, for example, at **the Dvedha Vitakka Sutta** (M 19) or **the Sevittabbāsevitabba Sutta** (M 114),⁹⁷ we know the wrong way and the right way; we know how to choose rightly; we learn to leave the past where it belongs, let the future be where it will: we wisely live the present, refining our karma and its fruits until the path is clear, until there is no more path since we have reached our goal, karma-free nirvana.

4.2.8 The Piloti stories of the Buddha's 12 past bad karma, in a way, are to help us understand why sometimes our present efforts do not seem to work. They could be due to some past causes. The Piloti also serves as a simple "reality check": no one is exempt from the effects of past karma. When the present conditions are right, these past bad karma will not fruit. When they do fruit, their effects on us depend on how spiritually developed we are. The more spiritually advanced we are, the less troubled we would be by their effects. It's like little children, they naturally and at once respond to pain, bodily and mental, by crying or showing emotions, and just as quickly, they seem to forget it all.

As we mature, we are able to deal with such negative feelings. We know they are just feelings, and leave them at that. The scale of our suffering is commensurate with how big we imagine these feelings seem to be. Indeed, when we are joyful or loving (helped by the cultivation of lovingkindness), we feel less of the negative impact of our dark past. Since the Buddha has attained time-free nirvana, what is *time-bound* does not trouble him at all.

4.2.9 The "new buddhology" [6.2.5] is not new in the sense that it was not there before. It is not even a "new" way of looking at the Buddha. Rather, it is a *better* understanding of how we should see the Buddha as the pattern for our own lives. The teachings (*dhamma*) are neither more different nor more similar: the new Buddhology is our *renewed* effort at a *renewing* look at the Buddha and his teachings, so that we, like lost travellers, find and take the right way.

Yes, there is neither the right way nor the wrong way, so to speak—it is how we act. The path *is* when we take it; it is *not* when we don't. So long as we know it is the right path, we keep *moving on*. Hence, the Buddha reminds us to do just that: keep moving because "There is more to be done here" (*atthi c'ev'ettha uttarim karaṇīyam*) [3.5.3].

In this way, not only the Buddha's teachings but his own life, too, are the examples for us to follow for our own happiness and liberation—even when, especially when, we have gone the wrong way. While the teaching may be seen as the "path of wisdom," the Buddha's own examples are the "**path of compassion**." That is, so long as we are willing to learn.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ M 26/1:160-175 (SD 1.11).

⁹⁷ M 19/1:115-118 (SD 61.1); M 114/3:45-61 (SD 39.8).

⁹⁸ On being desirous of learning, see SD 3.10 (1.4.1).

4.3 THE MILINDA TĪKĀ

4.3.1 Just as the commentary on Piloti seeks to resolve the difficulties surrounding the karmic explanation of the Buddha's unpleasant experiences with an innovative notion of buddhahood, we will now examine a final text, one that has an apparently innovative twist on the theory of karma. This is the subcommentary (*tīkā*) on the Milinda,panha, a small book titled Madhur'attha,pakāsinī, "the clarifier of sweet meaning," or simply **Milinda Tīkā** (MilnṬ). It is probably a late mediaeval text which originated in a Sri Lankan Mahāvihāra monastery in northern Thailand (perhaps Chiangmai).

In the Miln's explicit denial of the Buddha's bad karma mentioned above (Dilemma 1.8) [3.4.1 f], Nāgasena states rhetorically that the Buddha's pain must have been the result of "the fruit of karma or the deed [of Devadatta]" (*kamma,vipākato vā kiriyato vā ti*) and then proceeds to defend the latter position. The Tīkā simply explains "because of the deed" (*kiriyato*) as *the deed of Devadatta*, which is obvious from the context.

4.3.2 MilnṬ then glosses "because of the fruit of karma" (*kamma,vipākato*) by quoting the Piloti verse 16 (Ap 300) in which the Buddha states that the rock splinter injured him as the remaining effect of having murdered his half-brother (MilnṬ 26). The subcommentator, however, does not agree with the Miln stand in this case:

The elder [Nāgasena] does not have an unequivocal answer for this problem. Therefore, having examined it, one should accept that which is the more appropriate. In that connection, (this) investigation is made. The killing on the road [by the Buddha in a previous life] produced defilements which were not resolved in the past, future and present.

The talk about [the Buddha having experienced] the ending of that [karma] is spoken with reference to (only) future existence. These (painful) feelings arose in the Lord in this present existence.

Karma, which is to be experienced in some future life (*aparāpara,vedaniya,kamma*)⁹⁹ cannot be stopped even in Buddhas and Pacceka Buddhas.

We should therefore see which view of the elder is the more appropriate, thus "Did these feelings arise as karmic fruit (*kamma,vipākato*) or were they (merely) feelings that have arisen (*vedanā nibbattā*)?" (MilnṬ 26,32-27,23)

The subcommentator upholds the Piloti's position that even Buddhas must experience the effects of karmic roots. But he answers the objection of the Milindapañha as regards that doctrine's implications for buddhology by affirming that with regard to future existence all bad karma had been exhausted: "The ending of that [karma] is spoken with reference to (only) future existence." Such karma is technically said to be "ineffectual" (*ahosi*). [4.3.3]

4.3.3 The Buddha and arhats have uprooted the present roots of karma, that is, greed, hatred and delusion. Without these unwholesome roots, too, neither past karma have the conditions for refruiting nor will future karma be created. In other words, the Buddha and the arhats have no more karmic residue for rebirth. Thus, the Tīka author alludes to a kind of **ineffectual karma** (*ahosi kamma*).

The suttas, such as **the Sāleyyaka Sutta** (M 41)¹⁰⁰ and **the Sañcetanika Sutta** (A 10.206)¹⁰¹ mention 3 kinds of karma: those that are felt in this life itself, in the next life, and in some future life [4.4.1]. **The**

⁹⁹ This is a wrong reading (CPD, DP: sv); it should read *apara,pariya*: SD 3.9 (2.2.1).

¹⁰⁰ M 41,7-10, 11-14/1:285-291 (SD 5.7).

¹⁰¹ A 10.206/5:292-297 (SD 3.9): *akusala kamma* §§1-6; *kusala kamma* §§7.2-11.

Visuddhi,magga lists these 3 kinds of karma but adds a 4th kind, “ineffectual karma” (*ahosi kamma*) (Vism 19.14/601).¹⁰²

4.4 INEFFECTUAL KARMA (*AHOSI KAMMA*) (BUDDHAGHOSA)

4.4.1 Visuddhi,magga definition of *ahosi kamma*

Ineffectual karma or “karma-that-was” (*ahosi kamma*) is defined by Buddhaghosa in his *Visuddhi,magga* as follows:

Herein, karma is **fourfold**:¹⁰³

- | | |
|---|--|
| (1) to be experienced in this life (here and now), | <i>diṭṭha,dhamma,vedanīya kamma</i> |
| (2) to be experienced on being reborn, | <i>upapajja.vedanīya kamma</i> |
| (3) to be experienced in some subsequent existence, and | <i>apara,pariya,vedanīya kamma</i> |
| (4) ineffectual karma. [4.4.2] | <i>ahosi,kamma</i> (lit, “was-karma”) ¹⁰⁴ |

Of these,

(1) the volition, either wholesome or unwholesome, of the first of the 7 impulsion consciousnesses in a single cognitive series of impulsions (*jāvana*)¹⁰⁵ is called “**karma to be experienced in this life**”: it gives its result in the same individual being (*attabhāva*, “self-state”).

(4) If it cannot do so, it is called **ineffectual karma (*ahosi kamma*)**, according to the triad described thus, “There was (*ahosi*) karma, there was no karma-result, there will be no karma-result” (Pm 2:78).

(2) The volition of the 7th impulsion that accomplishes its purpose is called “**karma to be experienced on being reborn**”: it gives its result in the next individual being.

(3) If it cannot do so, it is called ineffectual karma in the way already described. The volition of the 5 impulsions between these two is called **karma to be experienced in some subsequent existence**: it gives its result in the future when it gets the opportunity, and however long the round of rebirths continues it never becomes ineffectual karma. (Vism 19.14/601)

4.4.2 Commentary on *ahosi kamma*

The South Indian commentator, Dhammapāla (post 5th century) of Badaratiṭṭha (in modern Tamil Nadu), explains *ahosa kamma* in his Vism Commentary, *Param’attha,mañjūsā* (“The Casket of Perfect Meaning,” called the *mahā,ṭīkā*), as follows:

“**To be experienced here and now**” means karma whose fruit is to be experienced in this present individual being.

“**To be experienced on being reborn**” means karma whose fruit is to be experienced [in the rebirth] following the present life.

¹⁰² See Vism:Ñ 19.14/696 n2. Cf **Loṇa,phala S** (A 3.99/1:249-253), SD 3.5. [6.1.4.3]

¹⁰³ On types of karma, see SD 3.9 (2.1).

¹⁰⁴ On the term “was-karma,” see Walters 1990:90.

¹⁰⁵ “**Impulsion**” (*javana*), as part of the cognitive process—*citta,vīthi*, for the mind, and *viññāṇa,kicca*, for the 5 senses—is the phase of full cognition, climaxing with it, if the object is large or distinct. It is also at this stage that karma, unwholesome or wholesome, is produced. See SD 19.14 (2), esp (2.4.9); SD 8.3 (11); SD 47.19 (3.2.2.3); SD 19.14 (2.4.9); SD 47.19 (3.2.2.3); SD 49.5b (1.0.4.6).

“**To be experienced in some subsequent existence**” means karma whose fruit is to be experienced in some successive individual being other than either that in this life (here and now) or the next life (the one following this one).

“**Ineffectual karma**” is karma of which it has to be said, “There *was* karma, but there was *not*, is not, and *will* not be karma-result.”

“The volition of the first impulsion, which has efficient power by not being prevented by opposition and by having acquired the distinction of a condition, and which has definitely occurred as a prior karma-formation of the appropriate kind, giving its fruit in this same individual being, is called ‘**to be experienced in this life.**’

For while that “first impulsion volition,” being effective in the way stated, is helpful to what is associated with its special qualities in the impulsion continuity, yet because it wields little power over aspects and because it has little result owing to lack of repetition, it is not, like the other two kinds, karma that looks beyond the occurring continuity and looks to obtain an opportunity. It gives its fruit *here only* as mere result during the course of existence, just like a flower.

“**If it cannot do so**”: the karma’s giving of result comes about only through the due concurrence of conditions consisting of (suitable) essentials of existence, means, etc, failing which it is unable to give its result in that individual being.

“**That accomplishes its purpose**”: that fulfils its purpose consisting in giving, etc, and in killing, etc. For the 7th impulsion to which this refers is the final impulsion in the series, and when it has acquired distinction in the way already stated and has acquired the service of repetition by the previous impulsions, it gives its result in the next individual being and is called “**to be experienced on being reborn.**”¹⁰⁶

(VismṬ 769; VismṬ:Be 2:376,15-377,5)

¹⁰⁶ *Diṭṭha,dhammo vuccati paccakkha,bhūto paccuppanno attabhāvo, tattha veditabba,phalaṃ kammaṃ diṭṭha,-dhamma,vedaniyaṃ. Paccuppanna,bhavato anantaraṃ veditabba,phalaṃ kammaṃ upapajja,vedaniyaṃ. Aparā-pariyāye ti diṭṭha,dhammānantarānāgatato aññasmim attabhāva,pariyāye attabhāva,parivatte. Ahoṣi,kammaṃ ti ahoṣi eva kammaṃ, na tassa vipāko ahoṣi, “atthi, bhavissati vā ti evaṃ vattabba,kammaṃ. Paṭipakkhehi anabhibhūtātāya, paccaya,visesena paṭiladdha,visesatāya ca balava,bhāvaṃ pattā tādis’assa pubbābhisaṅkhārassa vasena sātisayā hutvā pavattā paṭhama,javana,cetanā tasmim yeva atta,bhāve phala,dāyini diṭṭha,dhamma,vedaniyā nāma. Sā hi vutt’ākārena balavati javana,santāne guṇa,visesa,yuttesu upakārāpakāra,vasa-p,pavattiyā, āsevanā,-lābhena appa,vipākatāya ca paṭhama,javana,cetanā itara,dvayaṃ viya pavatta,santān,uparamāpekkhaṃ, okāsa,-lābhā,pekkhaṃ ca kammaṃ na hoti ti ime’va puppha,mattaṃ viya pavatti,vipāka,mattaṃ phalaṃ deti. Tathā asak-kontan ti kammaṃ vipāka,dānaṃ nāma upadhi,payogādipaccay’antara,samavāyen’eva hoti ti tad-abhāvato tasmim yeva atta,bhāve vipākaṃ dātuṃ asakkontan. Attha,sādhikā ti dān’ādi,pāṇātipātādi-atthassa nipphādikā. Kā pana sātī āha “sattama,javana,cetanā ti. Sā hi sannitṭhāpaka,cetanā vutta,nayena paṭiladdha,visesā, purima,javana,cetanāhi laddh’āsevanā ca samānā anantar’attabhāve vipāka,dāyini upapajja.vedaniya.kammaṃ nāma.*

5 Significance of this study: Kinds of karma

5.1 THE PURPOSE OF KARMA AS DHARMA

5.1.1 A seminal form of the *ahosi kamma* idea is found in a short section in **the Patisambhidā,magga** entitled "Karma Talk" (*kamma,kathā*) (Pm 2:78 f). It states that "karma-that-was" (*ahosi kamma*) might or might not have borne fruit previously, might or might not be bearing fruit presently, and might or might not bear fruit in the future. The same is true of karma-that-is (*atthi,kamma*) and karma-that-will-be (*bhavissati,kamma*).

The text then repeats its terse description of the various types of karma: wholesome, unwholesome, blameworthy, not blameworthy, etc. Theoretically, karma of the past, present and future, and all types of karma, will bear fruit under the right conditions somehow over time. If karma could speak, it may declare: "God may forgive you, but I never will." But karma neither speaks nor acts; we do. The absoluteness of karma depends on our habituality (*nati*); our bad habits keep us in the karma prison. Hence, the purpose of Buddhism is for us to break out of the karmic habit, thus ending the reign of karma.

5.1.2 In early Buddhism, the term *ahosi* is not used in a technical sense, but simply as a verb. It was ossified into a technical term (with a fixed sense) thanks to Buddhaghosa (Vism 19/14). The point here is that there is really no "fixed" karma that always acts in a certain way, even for the 5 kinds of grave or "this-life" karma: matricide, patricide, arhaticide, drawing blood from the Buddha, and causing a schism in the sangha [5.1.2.3 (5)].

These technical terms are useful when describing the karma of those who are habitually bad or evil. However, when we cultivate habitual goodness and wholesomeness through *moral conduct, mental cultivation and insight wisdom*, the potential of these karma are, in significant ways, mollified, even negated, especially upon attaining the path and upon awakening.

The questions of karmic absolutivity or absoluteness is alluded to in **the (Kara,ja,kāya) Brahma,vihāra Sutta** (A 10.209). The Buddha states that **boundless love** or lovingkindness (*mettā*), properly cultivated, is able to limit the effects of karma, even to the extent of preventing us from falling into the suffering states, and conducing to our attaining heavenly lives in the form realm and formless realm. And when this love is wedded with wisdom, it can even bring us to the path and on to awakening. If karma is absolute—an eye for an eye blinds us spiritually [6.1.5.1]—there is neither spiritual life nor liberation!¹⁰⁷ [5.2.1.4]

5.1.3 Technically, we can speak of the Buddha's suffering as the result of a past-life act fruiting in some future life, that is, in his last life as Buddha: this is karma of the 3rd type [4.4.1]. However, since the Buddha and arhats would not be reborn, these very same karma become, technically, ineffective or *ahosi kamma* (karma of the 4th type).

The purpose of such a classification has less to do with "finding fault" with the Buddha or arhats than to serve as a guideline and warning for the unawakened, especially those who are habitually bad or evil. When we act in immoral ways are understandably the ideal candidates for such bad karma. We are "ideal" karmic victims because our ideas and views are what create the classes of karma so that we can see our own enemies and deal with them directly; for only we can end our own karma. (Dh 165).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ **A 10.209/5:299-301** (SD 2.10). This contrasts with the Jain view that we must experience the effects of all our bad karma or deal with them through asceticism before we can be liberated: SD 2.10 (2.2.1, 3.2.2).

¹⁰⁸ "By oneself alone is bad [evil] done, by the self is one defiled; by oneself is bad not done, by the self is one purified. Purity and impurity are within oneself. No one may purify another." (Dh 165): SD 36.1 (3.4.1); SD 38.4 (3.3.3.4); SD 49.10 (1.2.2); SD 60.1d (2.1.2.4).

5.2 KARMA AS LIVING AND GROWING

5.2.1 Consequentialism: As we sow, so we shall reap

5.2.1.1 We can see 2 major trends in our study of the Buddha's karma thus far. The first is a close study of the following:

- 1.1.1 slanders by the 2 women, that is, by Sundarī and by Ciñcā,
- 1.1.2 various assaults on the Buddha initiated by Devadatta, [SD 61.5a (4)]
- 1.1.3 the Buddha's physical pains and illnesses, and
- 1.1.4 the Buddha's deprivation of proper food at Verañja.

The second is a survey of efforts by various people or texts either to accept [2] or to reject the Buddha's bad karma [3], or to explain them in some way [4].

We have also noted that the early Buddhist texts regarded these occasions as merely disparate incidents occurring in the Buddha's life, and that he was naturally untroubled by any of them. In fact, the Buddha was always vindicated when the truth was known or was made public. The respect and support for the Buddha and the sangha increased each time, with the perpetrators tasting the bitter fruits of their own misdeeds.

However, late in the canonical period, we see the inclusion of a unique text, **the Pubba,kamma,piloti**, "the rags of past karma," into the Pali canon. This text, unlike the other early Buddhist texts, puts together in 33 terse verses of unpleasant events to highlight common karmic narratives that link together, purportedly, the Buddha's past "bad karma."

5.2.1.2 The Pubba,kamma,piloti claims that all **the Buddha's pains and unpleasant experiences** were the direct results of his own past karma. Thus, for each negative past action there is its unpleasant or painful reaction for the Buddha. However, none of these stories or the Pubba,kamma,piloti itself claims that the Buddha was in any way mentally troubled or distracted by any of them. In fact, we should see these stories as an attempt at showing that the Buddha was **human** like any of us, and often enough making similar mistakes (bad karma) as any of us. In fact, in some of the past stories, the bad karmic acts were of such a violent immoral nature as to be against the precepts.

Yet, by meeting a living Buddha, making the aspiration for buddhahood, and cultivating the necessary qualities (*pāramī*, "perfections"), the aspirant is able to attain Buddhahood. Understandably, this is the most difficult of the spiritual paths. Theoretically, the Buddha is one who has experienced all possible scenarios of existential states, bad and good, so that he knows what they really are, having "avoided the evil, cultivated the good and purified the mind" (Dh 183).

Other easier-to-attain paths are those of *streamwinning*, *once-returning*, *non-returning* and *arhat-hood*.¹⁰⁹ However, for us to attain any of these **noble paths** or "path of the noble ones" (*ariya,magga*), we must live in a world-cycle in which the Buddha has arisen and has taught the Dharma, thus opening the noble eightfold path. Hence, upon attaining arhat-hood, these saints are called "the Buddha's followers" (*anubuddha*, literally, "after the Buddha") [4.2.6].

5.2.1.3 In modern academic or philosophical terms, the notion that the Buddha or anyone else will or must face the fruits of their karmic deeds accordingly is called **consequentialism**. Such an idea of karma

¹⁰⁹ On the 4 noble paths, see SD 10.16 (11-14); (**Catukka**) **Samaṇa S** (A 4.239), SD 49.14; **Alagaddûpama S** (M 22,-42-47), SD 3.13; **Ānâpâna,sati S** (M 118,9-12), SD 7.13; **Samaṇa-m-acala S 1** (A 4.87), SD 20.13 + **S 2** (A 4.88), SD 20.14.

has been described in, for example, **the Isayo Samuddaka Sutta** (S 11.10). The Sutta relates a story of the asuras led by Sambara battling the devas led by Sakra. The ocean-dwelling asuras invariably caused “col-lateral damage” to the morally virtuous seers’ dwellings on the adjacent seashore.

Despite repeated pleas from the seers for “a guarantee of safety” (*abhaya,dakkhiṇa*), the asuras rejected them, since they knew that the seers sympathized with the devas. As a last resort, the seers, who were accomplished in some psychic powers, approached the asura leader, Sambara, with an “act of truth” (*sacca,kiriya*)¹¹⁰ that works like a curse, incanting thus:

<i>abhayaṃ yācamānānaṃ bhayaṃ eva dadāsi no paṭiggaṇhāma te etaṃ akkhayaṃ hotu te bhayaṃ</i>	Asking for safety, you give us but danger: we receive this from you— may danger without end be yours! (S 902)
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<i>yādisaṃ vapate bījaṃ tādisaṃ harate phalaṃ kalyāṇa,kārī kalyāṇaṃ pāpa,kārī ca pāpakaṃ pavuttaṃ tāta te bījaṃ phalaṃ paccanubhossasī ti.</i>	Whatever the seed that is sown, that’s the fruit reaped from it; good be to the good-doer, and bad to the bad-doer! [and evil to the evil-doer!] By you, dear, the seed is sown, so, too, the fruit you will taste! (S 903) ¹¹¹
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It is said that, as a result of the curse, Sambara abruptly awoke terrified from a troubled sleep thrice throughout the night. Henceforth, he was called **Vepa,citi** (“one whose mind is troubled,” *cittaṃ vepatī*).¹¹²

5.2.1.4 The “karmic explanation” we have been discussing here, especially in connection with the Pubba,kamma,piloti, is based on what we today understand as “karmic consequentialism” or simply **con-sequentialism**. This is, in fact, the popular pre-Buddhist notion of karma, going back to even the *lex tali-onis* of early Mesopotamian law, as recorded in the famous Code of Hammurabi. This idea predated the Hebrew Bible notion of “an eye for an eye,”¹¹³ expressing the principle of reciprocal justice measure for measure.¹¹⁴

A possible serious disadvantage with this kind of legal view is where it tends to uphold the “**objective**” measures (such as things and costs) while not properly addressing the “**subjective**” measures (various resultant disadvantages) upon the victim. A poor thief who is imposed a fine of, say, \$1000 would suffer even more than a wealthy criminal levied the same amount of fine.¹¹⁵

Then, there is the “**ritual penalty**” demanded by the ancient brahmins of India, that certain rituals (Skt *karma*) or sacrifices (Skt *yajña*) need to meet prescribed costs, amount, quality and performed for such and such a duration by their believers. This was the old exploitative brahminical view of karma that the Buddha strongly rejected as being false, exploitative and thus karmically unwholesome.

Of special significance is the Buddha’s teaching—such as in **the (Kara,ja,kāya) Brahma,vihāra S** (A 10.209) [5.1.2]—where the cultivation of boundless love (*mettā*) is an efficacious way of helping us to keep the precepts, correct our bad karmic habits, and even diminish or prevent the fruits of some bad karma.

¹¹⁰ On the “act of truth,” see SD 39.2 (2).

¹¹¹ S 11.10,9.1 f/ (SD 39.2). Cf **J v3.16** (J 353,12/3:158,27-20), uttered the Bodhisattva to prince Brahma,datta (prince Bodhi in his past life), a similar verse with a few lines differently arranged (SD 55.5).

¹¹² S 11.10/1:227 f + SD 39.2 (2); SA 1:347; SD 3.4 (1); SD 4.16 (2.5).

¹¹³ Exodus 21:23-27.

¹¹⁴ Further on karmic consequentialism, see SD 3.5 (1.2.1).

¹¹⁵ On “subjective” and “objective” results of karma, see SD 18.1 (5.2).

Once we see karma in this loving and joyful light, we will be able to cultivate our intentions (karma) in a more wholesome (*kusala*) and Dharma-spirited manner by way of virtue ethics [5.2.2].¹¹⁶

5.2.2 Virtue ethics: Avoid evil, do good, purify the mind

5.2.2.1 Philosophically, virtue ethics,¹¹⁷ especially in early Buddhism, is about the transformation of oneself through the cultivation of correct and good habits over time so that unwholesome (*akusala*) patterns of behaviour are gradually replaced with wholesome ones. The way to act wholesomely, according to virtue ethics, is not simply to follow certain kinds of rules (deontology), nor seek pleasant consequences (utilitarianism), but to become one who is “**bodily cultivated**” (*bhāvita,kāya*).¹¹⁸ “Bodily” here means by way of actions and speech.

Over time, the morally virtuous person will find their conduct spontaneously falls increasingly into line with moral norms (*sīla*). In virtue ethics, however, in contrast to deontology, these norms are internalized rather than externally imposed. On account of the consequences of one's moral conduct, the person often turns out to have a consistently wholesome purpose in life, and lives according to a consciously chosen and integrated set of wholesome **values**.

5.2.2.2 Here, virtue ethics is similar to utilitarianism,¹¹⁹ which sees the moral life as directed to the joy of happiness or “flourishing” (*eudaimonia*, to use Aristotle's term). Virtue ethics thus comprises a path of self-transformation in which a person progressively emulates certain ideal standards of conduct (body and speech) inspired by that of the Buddha, his disciples or living teachers or sages who have progressed further towards the path of personal fulfilment or even on the path of awakening. The behaviour of these role models serve as a template for their habitual **intention** [5.2.2.1] to shape their conduct.

Such intentions are inspired and guided by a set of **values** [5.2.2.3], that is, the truth, goodness and beauty that they see in situations, things and people. By this value-inspired intentionality, they consistently and systematically avoid unwholesome situations in the form of **training** in the moral precepts [5.2.2.5]. Such a moral training disciplines the body and speech to be a helpful vessel for mental training (for mental calm and clarity) for the sake of seeing into true reality that is liberating.¹²⁰

5.2.2.3 Whether an act is good or bad, wholesome or unwholesome, is determined by motive, that is, **intention** (*cetanā*). The Buddha declares,

Bhikshus, whatever qualities are unwholesome, partake of the unwholesome, and pertain to the unwholesome, all have *the mind* as their forerunner.” (A 1.56/1:11)

Bhikshus, whatever qualities are wholesome, partake of the wholesome, and pertain to the wholesome, all have *the mind* as their forerunner.” (A 1.57/1:11)¹²¹

¹¹⁶ On the nature of consequentialism and virtue ethics, see Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*. London: Macmillan, 1992; “Karma, character, and consequentialism,” *J of Buddhist Ethics* 12, 2005a. 26 June 2024.

¹¹⁷ For a philosophical intro into virtue ethics, see eg R Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, NY: Oxford Univ Press, 1999. On Buddhist virtue ethics as *kusala*, see D Keown 1992:116-123; “Karma, character and consequentialism,” *J of Religious Ethics* 24 1996b:329; *Buddhist Ethics: A very short introduction*, Oxford, 2005b:13, 22 f, 25, 32, 37.

¹¹⁸ See **Pinḍola Bhāra,dvāja S** (S 35.127,7), SD 27.6a.

¹¹⁹ However, while utilitarianism assesses actions *relatively* (an act is moral if it merely maximises happiness) whereas Buddhism assesses them *absolutely* (our actions have the end goal of the total cessation of suffering for all sentient beings). The former allows harm, the latter precludes it. (Thanks Matt Jenkins for this note, 29 Sept 2024.)

¹²⁰ See **Virtue ethics**, SD 18.11; (**Vitthāra**) **Kamma S** (A 4.232) SD 4.13.

¹²¹ The same is said in verse in Dh 1 f.

In other words, our acts are rooted in the mind, coloured by our intention, and are expressed as speech or as bodily action. When the act (by body or speech) is rooted in *greed, hatred or delusion*, it is defined as being “unwholesome” (*akusala*). It will re-arise whenever the conditions are right or similar, resulting in painful feelings that characterize the “root” karma. This fact itself means that each time we feel such an experience, we can *worsen* or we can *lessen* its pain, or in special circumstances (especially with boundless love) [5.1.2], even *negate* it; that is, by creating a new wholesome karma.

For many thoughtful people this is the core beauty of Buddhism: the understanding that suffering is something we are doing to ourselves and all we need to do is stop. We don't need to wait for something external to save us; there are no rituals we need to perform or vows to make to propitiate some external force: we can just stop. There's no sin, original or historic, holding us back—we have *this* moment, and we can stop *now*. This is obviously the hard part.

5.2.3 Value the moment

5.2.3.1 When we fail to see this present moment as an opening (*okāsa*) to let go of the past, we are thus experiencing an “old” karma. We are “**renewing**” our karma; by “doing nothing,” we are simply allowing the old karma to replay itself. On the other hand, by simply “doing something,” we could worsen that karma. While we may do nothing out of *ignorance*, we may do something from delusion; either way, the karmic effect is unwholesome.

To avoid these karmic extremes, we must learn to **value** ourself; we have this creative power but we have created bad or evil with that power. By that same reasoning, even if we cannot undo or “uncreate” that evil, we can create good. We can reshape our karma. Our power to reshape ourself comes from valuing ourself: valuing ourself means loving ourself, that is, self-love.

Self-love means that we are willing and able to see the value, that is, the benefits, of self-effort. For, who else do we “have” but ourself; who can help us if we do not help ourself? When we understand and accept that good and bad are self-created, and that the effects of good or bad are self-created, we can shape or re-shape good and bad or their effects for our benefit. We do this by loving ourself, forgiving ourself, accepting ourself—this is the beginning of self-healing and self-transformation.

5.2.3.2 How karma affects us depends on the level of the unwholesome roots (greed, hate or delusion) present in us, or of the wholesome roots (charity, love or wisdom) present in us. The gravity and quality of the root present again depends on our current set of **values** (*dhamma*). The stronger our values, the less grave the effect of the negative karma, and the stronger the effect of our positive karma.

What are these values?

In philosophy, **value theory** is concerned with theoretical questions about the value and goodness of things that matter to us. “Things” here is a broad term for our current mental state and how we relate to others; that is, how and why we value something, be it a person, idea, or object. In early Buddhism, these values arise from how we uphold the natural good that comprises these values.

Our most vital values work directly with our understanding and practice of the 5 precepts, which are the bases for all morality in Buddhism, whether monastic or lay. In the monastic rules, the precepts are elaborated in greater detail so that the renunciant is able to fully discipline their body and speech for the cultivation of a mind of calm and clarity.

For both the monastic following the Vinaya and the laity keeping to the 5 precepts are the very foundation of a natural moral life. By “**natural**” (*pakati*) is meant that these precepts are *karmically potent and significant*. Anyone (monastic, lay, Buddhist or non-Buddhist) who breaks any of the 5 precepts—who *kills, steals, commits sexual misconduct, lies or takes intoxicants*—creates bad karma for themself.

5.2.3.3 The **values** here refer to what the precepts protect or uphold as *morally meaningful* (they are what we *are*) and spiritually *purposeful* (our task is to protect or uphold them for our own good and growth). An easy way to understand the nature of these **5 values** is to ask ourselves some very basic questions, as follows:

(1) What is the most precious thing we can ever have or be?

Life; for without life we do not exist.

Hence, the 1st precept is against **kill**ing,

which is wrong because it deprives the being from fulfilling the other values.

(2) What makes our life purposeful?

Happiness, from having basic needs for our life-support and growth.

Hence, the 2nd precept is against **steal**ing,

which is wrong because it deprives another of the zest for life and the other values.

(3) What allows our happiness to be meaningful?

Freedom, the ability to say “no” or refuse something.

Hence, the 3rd precept is against violating another person, especially in a **sexual** manner.

Respecting when someone says “no,” no one should force themselves on that other, especially violating that one's person.

(4) What makes all this right and good?

Truth is reflected in these values and the precepts they embody.

Hence, the 4th precept is against **ly**ing.

Since these values are good and true, we should practise and preserve them.

(5) What is the higher purpose to all this?

Wisdom allows us to understand and uphold these values, and to benefit from them.

Wisdom is rooted in mindfulness, by which we are able to keep our mind calm and clear.

Hence, the 5th precept is against **taking intoxicants** that cloud up our minds.

This moment is all we have; live it; love it; live it truly; live it well.

5.2.3.4 In early Buddhism, morality (*sīla*) is its foundation practice. The foundation of our being is our body and speech: our body is physically *what* we are; our speech is *who* we are. Our body is *morally* significant since the first 3 precepts—those against **kill**ing, against **steal**ing and against **sexual misconduct**—are broken through the body; but speech is more broadly significant in the sense that we communicate with others through speech. When we **lie** we break the precept. Properly speaking, the precept against lying also includes slandering, harsh speech and frivolous talk; these 4 kinds of negative speech constitute wrong speech; while **right speech** is *true, unifying, pleasant and beneficial*.

The 5th precept is broken through our taking drinks and being **intoxicated**. The intoxicated mind is likely to break all the other precepts. Intoxication clouds up the mind, preventing it from being calm and clear; hence, it will lack mindfulness and wisdom. The 5th precept, in fact, straddles between body and mind; hence, it is vital to guard oneself from breaking the 5th precept, since it is unwholesome for both body and mind.

5.2.3.5 The way we have talked about the precepts is philosophically called **deontology**, which is “the ethical theory that takes duty as the basis of morality; the view that some acts are morally obligatory regardless of their consequences.”¹²² The Pali word for “duty” is *karaṇīya* or *katabba*, “that which should be done.” It is actually an adjective but may be used as a noun as in the opening line of **the Karaṇīya Metta Sutta** (Sn 143): “What should be done by one skilled in good,” that is, one's duty with wholesome purpose.

¹²² A Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, London: Macmillan, 1979: deontology.

Two important points must be noted regarding moral conduct (especially in keeping with the precepts). First, our moral conduct is **meaningful** in that we understand that the 5 values apply to us just as they apply to others. This is the “golden rule.” Second, this entails that our moral conduct should thus include or reflect our wholesome attitude (especially by way of *love, compassion, joy and peace*) towards others in terms of the 5 values [5.2.2.3].

5.2.3.6 Modern ethics speaks of “right” and “wrong,” which in Pali are, respectively, **dhamma** and **adhamma**. The word **dhamma** is, however, famously polysemous,¹²³ and for very good reasons. Basically, **dhamma** encompasses a range of related senses:

<u>dhamma</u>	<u>adhamma</u>	<u>meaning and significance</u> of the positive terms
(1) right	(wrong)	true or correct as a fact, as applicable to a particular situation, thing or person; this helps us understand the 4 th precept (against lying).
(2) just	(unjust)	morally fair and reasonable, considering one's mental state, especially engaged with love and compassion, and thus benefits “the many” (that is, the greatest number of people).
(3) good	(bad)	(<i>puñña</i>) karmically beneficial, promoting any or all of the 5 values [5.2.2.4];
(4) wholesome	(unwholesome)	conducive to making one a better person, overcoming defilements, so that one is closer to the path of awakening.

Early Buddhist morality (*sīla*) is action and speech characterized by the right, the just, the good and the wholesome, which overlap with one another and work together. Hence, in Buddhist terms, no killing is **right** because it is against the 1st precept. Non-killing and nonviolence are **just** because they benefit the greatest number of people (and living beings). This is good because it promotes *life, happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom* (the 5 values). This is **wholesome** because it brings us closer to realizing the full potential of our humanity (the sense world) evolving into divinity (the form and formless worlds), which are, in turn, liberated from karma by awakening.

5.2.3.7 One last point in our discussion concerning moral virtue in the light of spiritual development is about who decides the “right” and the “just” regarding **dhamma**? The answer is “**the wise**” (*viññū*).¹²⁴ **The Karaṇīya Metta Sutta** (Khp 9 = Sn 1.8) records the Buddha as stating:

*na ca khuddaṃ samācare kiñci
yena viññū pare upavadeyyurū*

And let one not do even a small wrong
for which others who are **wise** might censure.

(Khp 9 = Sn 1.8)

The Subhāsita Sutta (S 8.5) defines right speech as being “well-spoken, not badly spoken, and it is blameless, not blameworthy among the wise (*ananuvajjā ca viññūnam*)” (S 8.5/1:188). Furthermore, the Buddha would often remind us not to do or say things for which we will be “blamed by the wise” (*viññū, garahitā*);¹²⁵ even something “ancient” (that hinders or violates any of the 5 values) can be seen as being blameworthy by the wise (*porāṇo viññū, garahito*, Sn 313b)

¹²³ On polysemy in Pali words and usage, see SD 1.1 (4.4.5); SD 10.16 (1.3.1-1.3.2; 2.2); SD 54.3b (2.1.1.4).

¹²⁴ **Viññū**: D 8,8/1:163; S 1.20/1:9, 12.67/1:335, 35.70/4:41 f, 42.12/4:339; A 2.18/1:57, 5.217/3:225; It 3..5.9/98; Sn 39, 294, 313, 396, 403; Pm 2:19, 21.

¹²⁵ **Viññū, garahita**: D 27,5/3:82; A 3.65/1:189 + 190 *passim*, A 3.66/1:194 *passim* + 195 + 196.

The “wise” in the Buddha’s time have been defined by the commentators as “those accomplished in intelligence” (*buddhi,sampannāṃ*, Pm 2:21) and are wise “on account of being accomplished in wisdom, morality and concentration” (*samannāgatattā paññā,sīla,samāhitam*, DhA 3:329). We can safely apply this commentarial gloss to apply to our own time to wise elders, teachers, scholars and writers, especially scholars who specialize in Buddhism, who are today amongst its most vocal promoters and interpreters. [6]

5.3 OLD KARMA MAY FRUIT, BUT NO NEW KARMA IS SOWED

5.3.1 We have here discussed a wide range of arguments and views related to the question of the Buddha's “bad karma.” Many Theravada Buddhists have, in various ways, denied the notion that the Buddha had any bad karma. Others have argued in various ways to affirm that the Buddha had bad karma. This is a **philosophical problem** and it is a complex one—such a problem is never resolved, and never meant to be resolved. Such problems are the reflection of our own needs, that is, when we lack the wisdom and the means for living. Knowing how such problems arise and working on their solutions are thus wholesomely purposeful for us, making us wiser and, more importantly, relevant as teachers, scholars, writers, speakers, students and observers.

5.3.2 Walters, in the conclusion to his insightful essay, writes:

The denials of the karmic explanation not only contradict canonical statements by the Buddha himself; they also fail to explain why, even if some alternate agency caused the Buddha to suffer, the Buddha fell into those circumstances in the first place. Dhammapāla's rebuttal does not answer the concern which we have suggested motivated these denials, namely the worry that, since karma is sure to bear fruit, the Buddha's bad karma would necessitate a conclusion that his Buddhahood was somehow incomplete.

The commentary on Pubbakammapiḷoti answers this worry, but its innovative Buddhology causes new kinds of problems still. For example, if the Buddha biography shows that bad karma is ultimately no hindrance to Buddhahood, then the Buddhist ethical system is to some degree undermined.

Similarly, the Milinda-ṭīkā answers the Milindapañha's concern over the implications of bad karma for Buddhology, but in modifying the theory of karmic absolutivity it too leaves us in a congeries of theoretical contradictions.¹²⁶ (Walters 1990:90 f)

Clearly, Theravada Buddhism is not the only religious tradition having to deal with *why and how the good suffer*; *theodicy* arises from such difficulties. Whenever there are views of the supremacy of God, Buddhas or any kind of superhuman agent, there will be some kind of theodicy, the problem of the good suffering for that very reason, or for keeping to the will of that supreme being.

A careful examination of the early Buddhist texts and teachings is very likely to show that it never has any issue of “**buddhody**” [2]—why the Buddha suffers from “bad karma”—perhaps from the effects of some unpleasantness from other beings (like Devadatta, Sundarī, Ciñcā, or Māra) or from nature (like a headache). The occasions of such unpleasantness towards the Buddha, as we have seen, always turn out to be a foil for the Buddha: they only reveal his love, fortitude, equanimity and wisdom.

¹²⁶ For a recent discussion on some of the theoretical problems raised by *ahosi,kamma*, see R Gombrich, *Precept and Practice*, Oxford, 1971:214-217. (Walters' fn)

5.3.3 One of the very significant points of Walters' essay is that it highlights the probability of the Pubba,-kamma,piloti being borrowed from **the Sarvāstivāda** or **the Mahāsaṅghika** (1990:77 f) [2.3.2]. These were very influential schools in their own times, and it was natural that some of their challenges would rub off onto the early textual tradition, with the Theravāda accepting the Pubba,kamma,piloti.

The idea of the Buddha's having "bad karma" is never an issue, much less a problem, in early Buddhism. It was an imported notion, and once interpolated into the early texts, those who preserved or used these texts had to stand up to such perceived problems. At worst, we can conclude with the comforting notion that even those who had been "bad guys" can become buddhas, pratyekabuddhas and arhats.

Surely, there are good reasons why such apparently vital ideas were not promoted by the early Buddhist texts. These very same stories of the Buddha's past "bad karma" could also work to turn the early teachings on their heads. There are those who may claim that it's all right then to create bad karma since they are no barrier to buddhahood!

It is natural that the Buddha, while he lives with his human body (the 5 aggregates without clinging)—*form, feeling, perception, formations* and *consciousness*—will experience past karmic conditions. His body is the 5 elements: only the body feels pain, but not the mind. The Buddha is not yoked to suffering. [6.1.4.2]

The Buddha feels the *resistance* of the earth element, the *cohesiveness* of the water element, the *heat* of the fire element, the *motion* of the wind element, and the *emptiness* of the space element. The consciousness element, too, arises and falls in him, and he notices them just as they are, letting them come, letting them go.¹²⁷ The Buddha's mind happily flows with true reality.

¹²⁷ On the arhat's mind and karma, see Analayo, *The Signless and the Deathless*, NY: Wisdom, 2023:116 f.

6 Learning, living and loving the Dharma

6.1 HOW TO LEARN FROM KARMA

6.1.1 Karma as teacher

6.1.1.1 The Buddha is our teacher; he teaches the truth that is **suffering**; understanding this truth, and following the path of training, we end suffering, that is, we attain **nirvana**. The Buddha is the peerless teacher because he has experienced suffering to the very limits of the body; he has also fully understood the true nature of suffering; that it arises from craving; he has found the path to the ending of that craving and suffering; he is thus fully awakened. He teaches us how to reach the path and its goal, that is, awakening and freedom from suffering.

6.1.1.2 Unlike other teachers, the Buddha teaches **self-reliance**, that we can and must know suffering, and so end it. While other teachers preach, even demand, faith as dependence, the Buddha teaches **faith** as belief through understanding, leading to self-liberation. The Buddha shows us the path, but we must walk it ourselves. For, *the path is our journey*, the course of inner change, spiritual transformation, awakening and **liberation**.

6.1.2 Karma as teaching

6.1.2.1 To the **foolish**, driven by their unconscious tendencies of *lust, aversion and ignorance*, suffering is simply the pain they must replace with pleasure, but this only brings on greater suffering and a greater variety of suffering. Out of ignorance, we crave to end suffering by seeking pleasures; but we only create **karma**, which is action, conscious but mostly habitual, driving us to project images of what we desire. These images shape our world, a complex of mirages of cool oases appearing to lost and parched travellers.

6.1.2.2 The **wise**, unbiased by liking or disliking, look on at pain as arising from certain conditions. They investigate those conditions, and understanding those conditions—avoid the bad, promote the good: they are then able to minimize bad karma and maximize good karma. Even as the wise watch the conditions bringing suffering, they also notice themselves what **pain** really is; how it is relative to **pleasure and joy**; how one really is is the absence of the other.

Understanding this duality of pain and pleasure, they rise above the trap, the extremes, of liking and disliking. They learn to see things just as they are, rising and ending, becoming other, impermanent. This is the nature of suffering. They understand that suffering arises from the *liking* of pleasure and the *disliking* of pain; and *wanting* to have that pleasure, that pleasant thing.

That desire to **own** what they desire creates a sense of **self**. When they renounce that desire, there is no more "self," that something that *wants*, something that is *wanted*. "Why must there be *something*?" they ask. When they realize that a wrong question invites wrong answers, they learn to ask the right questions. *How does the idea of this "something" arise?* It arises from our own wanting, seeking, finding, grasping, clinging. And then seeing that there is really *nothing* that we can want, seek, find, grasp or cling to.

It's like **breathing**: we are conscious of it; we breathe *in*, we breathe *out*. What we take in, we must give it back. There is nothing to make of it. When we make nothing of it, there is an inner peace of calm and clarity. This helps us to learn better and rightly: we begin to see things as they are.

6.1.3 Karma as learning

6.1.3.1 Everything is teaching us; that “everything” is how we think, how we speak, how we act, and how we sense things; how we live and experience the world. Every action (*karma*) we do is a chance to learn. First, we notice that our action is either *conscious* or *unconscious*. Either way, we will notice that the roots of action drive us to act; we act out of greed, out of hatred, or out of delusion; these are **the unwholesome roots** of karma. We learn that this only brings pain and suffering. It has taught us something. This is because we are willing and ready to learn.

6.1.3.2 Then we notice that when we mindfully act with **charity, love and wisdom**—the opposite of the unwholesome roots—we tend to experience the sweet joyful fruits of peace, fulfilment and freedom. We learn that this is true pleasure and joy. When more people learn to do this, the pleasure and joy become more mutual and widespread. We have a family or partners, a community or a world, based on charity, love and wisdom.

We do not have such a world, yet; it is a goal, a vision, a dream we have; we must have. We then see that path, or create a path so that we can move towards that dream. We have been doing that, which brings us to this moment when we are able to live and learn charity, love and wisdom. That path we have today is called **learning**, and on a more systematic and wider scale, we call it **education**; it is learning to bring out the good and the best in all of us. For this reason, we are teachers, scholars, and students of Buddhism.

6.1.4 Karma as loving 1: 2 kinds of pain

6.1.4.1 **The Suddhodana Vatthu** (DhA 13.2) relates that the Buddha during his first visit to Kapilavatthu, went out for alms in the morning. His father rajah Suddhodana was shocked that his own son had shamed their royal lineage. The Buddha replied that his was the Buddha-lineage (*buddha, varṃsa*) and all buddhas go for almsround. Then, the Buddha gave his father and the gathering a discourse on **Dh 168-169**.

The 3rd line of both verses says:

<i>dhamma, cārī sukham seti</i>	One who lives Dharma lies happily [The Dharmafarer sleeps happily]
<i>asmim loke paramhi ca</i>	in this world and the hereafter” (Dh 168c = 169c) ¹²⁸

“Lies (down)” (*seti* or *sayati*) can mean either “lies asleep” or “lives one’s life.” The 2 verses actually refer to the Dharmafarer’s happiness in all 4 postures: whether standing, walking, sitting or reclining.

Why is one happy? The elder Dhammika explains it in his **Dhammika Thera, gāthā**:

dhammo have rakkhati dhamma, cārīm. The Dharma protects the Dharmafarer. (Tha 303)

6.1.4.2 How does the Dharma protect one who lives the Dharma, that is, *who keeps the precepts, trains his mind to be calm and clear, and cultivates insight wisdom*? So long as the Dharma is practised properly, the practitioner is likely to lighten the impact of the bad karmic fruits, and even prevent their fruiting. As in the Buddha’s case, we notice that (at worst) only his body is affected, but his mind remains calm, clear and undistracted. [1.1]

This is called the teachings of “the 2 kinds of pains,” that of the body and the mind, as taught in **the Sall’atthana Sutta** (S 36.6), which says that when those who are worldly are wounded by the dart of suffering by way of a painful physical feeling, they “sorrow, grieve, lament, beat their breast, become con-

¹²⁸ DhA 13.2/3:163-165. Dh 168c = 169c, Ap 400c = 401c, J 64c (**Dhamma, dhaja J**, J 384/3:267-270).

fused," so that they suffer both body and mind. Thus, they suffer 2 kinds of pain: the bodily and the mental. This is the work of their **delusion**, which continues to grow in them.¹²⁹

Furthermore, they show **aversion**, and so it grows and lies latent in them. When there is aversion, there arises **lust**, the desire to seek some kind of unwholesome pleasure, whether it is revenge on those whom they perceive as having caused them pain, or feel the desire to enjoy some kind of sensual pleasure or to collect things. Thus, the latent tendency of lust grows and lies latent in them.

Thus, foolish worldlings are thus hit by the 2 darts of suffering: one of the body, another of the mind.

One who is **wise**, who has learned and practised some Dharma, emulating the wise noble disciples of the Buddha, they "neither sorrow nor grieve nor lament nor beat their breast nor become confused," when their body feels pain. They calmly and mindfully manage the pain so that they feel only bodily pain, but their minds are calm, clear and undistracted by that pain.

They are neither yoked [attached] to a pleasant feeling, nor to an unpleasant feeling, nor to a neutral feeling. Hence, they do not feed the latent tendencies of lust, of aversion and of ignorance.¹³⁰ Hence, we can see how the wise manage the effects of pain, whether they arise from karmic causes or non-karmic sources. [3.4]

6.1.5 Karma as loving 2: When the good do bad

6.1.5.1 We have already referred to **the (Kara,ja,kāya) Brahma,vihāra Sutta** (A 10.209) which counters the notion of karmic absolutism, that is, how boundless love (*mettā*), properly cultivated, works to soften the impact of bad karma, even prevent its arising¹³¹ [5.1.2]. We will here mention a last important text in connection with preventing bad karma and its effects from arising and by lessening its effects on us, that is, **the Loṇa,phala Sutta** (A 3.99), which may be regarded as the classic Sutta against any notion of karmic absolutism.¹³²

The Sutta teaching starts with the Buddha stating that there are those who have this wrong view,

*Yathā yathā'yaṃ puriso kammaṃ karoti
tathā tathā taṃ patisaṃvediyati*

Whatever karma this person has done,
he would experience *that very same karma*,
(A 3.99,1)

meaning that whatever bad karma we have done before, we will experience (again) the bad effects of that very same karma (intentional action). One interpretation of this is that of *lex talionis* or "an eye for an eye" [5.2.1.4]. It may seem possible in a historical situation, where such a law was enforced by human agencies, but as a moral/ethical idea, it seems to be **fatalism**. This is, in fact, a classic definition of karmic absolutism: to every karmic action there is an equal and opposite reaction!

In that case, concludes the Buddha, "There is no living of the holy life," we will not be able to find any kind of freedom from karma; there will be no awakening.

6.1.5.2 The right way as to how karma acts, the Buddha continues, is as follows:

*Yathā vedanīyaṃ ayaṃ puriso kammaṃ karoti
tathā tathāssa vipākam patisaṃvediyati*

Whatever karma that a person does, he would
experience its fruit in just the way it was felt.
(A 3.99,1.2)

¹²⁹ See also **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,20/1:242-244), SD 1.12.

¹³⁰ S 36.6/4:207-210 (SD 5.5).

¹³¹ A 10.209/5:299-301 (SD 2.10).

¹³² A 3.99/1:249-253), SD 3.5.

This means that when A does a bad karma to B, and B feels its effect C; then, whenever the conditions are right, A will feel C. The “conditions” here are, of course, the mental state of the doer that triggered the first action. Only this time, A will feel the same effect as B felt the first time.

Let's say an angry child D breaks the favourite toy of child E who cries as she misses it. E then hits back at D by breaking D's favourite toy. Now, suppose D hits back again—and it becomes a seemingly endless tit-for-tat (a simple expression for “an eye for an eye”). Then a person lovingly explains to D and E that it is normal that they feel pain on losing their toy. “Normal” means both D and E feel the same about the loss of their toy. Once they understand this, it is easier for them to learn to share things.

One imagines karma to be a kind of internally constructed mental mechanism that will go off whenever the right buttons are pressed. We must also remember that it is rare that any karma will fruit all alone. It's more likely that a number of karmic mechanisms will be triggered at the same time (more or less), and it is difficult to imagine how their interaction and what their total effects will really be like. For bad karmas, their total effects will really be bad; for good karmas, one must imagine their overall effects may be even better. Hence, it's better to do good.

6.1.5.3 Next, the Loṇa,phala Sutta records the Buddha as speaking plain Pali but presenting very complex ideas about a person's karma and its effects on that person thus, followed by my own comments:

1 What sort of person **has done only a slight bad karma, but it takes him to hell?**

Here, bhikshus, a certain person is of

- 2 uncultivated body, uncultivated moral conduct; uncultivated mind, uncultivated wisdom:
- 3 he is mentally limited, with a small self, dwelling with (only a) little suffering.

1 The phrase “**only slight bad karma**” refers to when the bad-doer does not know or understand that he has done something evil, but it badly affects many others, or just one other person. The bad karma he creates now, although neither apparent nor numerous, is of such grave unwholesomeness that it takes him to a suffering state. That “grave unwholesomeness” is described as follows:

2 “**Uncultivated body**” refers to his body and speech being unrestrained and unwholesome (SA 2:395); hence, he is said to have “**uncultivated moral conduct.**” In other words, he is likely to have broken any number of the precepts.

“**Uncultivated mind**” means that their mind is ridden with unwholesome thoughts (lust, ill will, conceit, pride, etc). Without a cultivated mind, he naturally lacks wisdom, but has great cunning, pretence, casuistry, religiosity, and so on; hence, he has “**uncultivated wisdom.**”

3 “**Mentally limited**” means that he is lacking in various virtues, like being very self-centred, often craving for attention, generally of bad character. On account of this, he is “**with a small self,**” one that lacks lovingkindness. He dwells with “**little suffering**” since his present karmic conditions are good.

6.1.5.4 Then, the Buddha presents a person with a wholesome nature, thus:

1 What sort of person **has done such a slight bad karma experienceable right here and now** but which he does not experience in the least, how would it ever be abundant at all?

Here, bhikshus, a certain person is of

- 2 cultivated body, cultivated moral conduct; cultivated mind, cultivated wisdom:
- 3 he is mentally unlimited, with a great self, who dwells mentally immeasurable.

1 “**The slight bad karma experienceable right here and now**” refers to such actions as a good person criticizes or scolds an evil person. Although this is bad karma, the evil person experiences its effect only “slightly,” such as feeling annoyed and vowing revenge. The reason is quite simple: All those “bad

karma" did not affect him very much since he is callous and has no respect whatsoever for this good person.

2 "Cultivated body" refers to the body and speech of good person, that is, being restrained and wholesome; hence, they are said to be of "cultivated moral conduct," including keeping the precepts. "Cultivated mind" means that they are mentally cultivated, characterized by wholesome thoughts (generosity, love, honesty, humility, etc). On account of their love of learning and habitual mental cultivation, they have "cultivated wisdom."

3 The good is "mentally unlimited" in the sense of having various virtues which make them selfless, and generally of good character. On account of this they are said to be "with a great self." They are filled with boundless love, compassion, joy and peace; hence, they "dwell mentally immeasurable."

6.1.5.5 The theme of the **Loṇa,phala Sutta** centres on the Sutta title, the salt crystal of a sizeable lump. The parable has a pair of similes. In the 1st simile, a large crystal of salt is mixed with little water in a small bowl. The mixture will taste very salty and unfit to drink. This refers to how a person of little wholesome virtue committing a small bad karma and suffers much for it, even falling into a suffering state. It is not the act itself but the person's negative reaction that is of such badness that the karmic effect feels bigger.

In the 2nd simile, a salt crystal of the same size is thrown into Ganges River. This does not affect the river water in any way by way of making it salty and unfit to drink. (We assume here that at the time of the Buddha, the Ganges River had clean clear water so that it was suitable for drinking.) Anyway, the point is that a person with great wholesome qualities may commit a small bad karma, which normally fruits in this life itself.

However, the person, on account of their great goodness, does not feel the fruit at all. For example, the good person may be triggered by some odd remark to show anger, but this is quickly resolved, and the person may even realize they should not have reacted in that way.

This is like the Buddha who on account of scolding Devadatta, induces him to take revenge on the Buddha by way of trying to kill him, but the Buddha is in no way affected by such karma at all.¹³³

6.2 FOR THE LOVE OF LEARNING

This closing section is a short reflection on **the karma of learning**, inspired by Jonathan Walters' article, "The Buddha's bad karma" (1990) [1.0.1.5] and his dedicated work on the Apadāna [4.2.0]; and also to the growing trend among scholars of Buddhism today (especially since 2000)¹³⁴ to not only be scholars of Buddhism, but more so as *Buddhist* scholars and practitioners.

6.2.1 A scholar of Buddhism (or Buddhism scholar), as a rule, is a trained specialist or learned expert on the Buddhist texts and traditions. They study the texts and traditions available to them in accordance with the purview and conventions of their special field, such as *philosophy, psychology, religion, social science, philology, science, technology, the arts, literature, history* or *general knowledge*.¹³⁵

The better scholars are able to not only accurately and usefully quote other sources of information for a better understanding of Buddhism or to challenge it, but they also explain in some detail how this happens. On occasions, such a scholar may express their own views about such information and develop-

¹³³ See SD 61.5a (3.1.1).

¹³⁴ See esp Roger Jackson & John J Makransky (eds), *Buddhist Theology: Critical reflections by contemporary Buddhist scholars*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000.

¹³⁵ These are basically the 10 classes of knowledge according to the Dewey Decimal System of library science: 000 is general knowledge; 100 covers the first 2 fields (100 philosophy; 110 psychology); 200 religion; 300 social sciences; 400 languages; 500 science; 600 technology; 700 the arts; 800 literature; 900 history, geography, and biography.

ments. A scholar may be sympathetic to Buddhism—which would, of course, interest and benefit Buddhists—or they could take Buddhism simply as a specimen of study as if to show they know better than the Buddha, the arhats or Buddhist masters and scholars.

Professional scholars—those who put their scholarship above Buddhism—are, as a rule, only as good as the sources they use and the views they express. As a rule, they have a shelf life, very much like their sources, and are quickly forgotten upon their passing or even earlier, when they are proven wrong or outshone by other scholars. Hence, scholars are likely to see Buddhism from new angles, or find new controversies in Buddhism.

On the bright side there are the “**inspired**” scholars, those who regard Buddhism the way a musician masters and loves music. They feel the beauty and peace of it; they are driven by that beauty and peace. They want to create that beauty and peace so that others may feel them, too. They are growing in that beauty and peace: they are **inspiring** scholars.

6.2.2 The love of learning fires *the effort* of learning with joy, which keeps us learning, growing with a better sense of self and selflessness. Often such scholars are more right, more enriching and thus more interesting than the merely professional; they are scholars who love the Dharma, even practise it to understand it. In this way, they are better than the professionals and the “religious masters,” especially in terms of the mastering of language, learning and vision.

Traditional and ethnic writings on Buddhism, for example, often show a lack of skill, accuracy and beauty when compared to modern disciplined academic writing or discourse (that is, the works of properly trained scholars), whether they are “Buddhist” or not.¹³⁶ Either way, a Buddhist who loves learning (*sikkhā, kāma*) will find such reading helpful in some way for their own study, understanding and teaching of Buddhism. It’s like looking at broken or unclear signboards on a journey, but wise travellers have a good sense of direction and are clear of their goal.

The better scholars, because of their ability to read and reason out what they have read are surprised and excited by the truth and beauty of Buddhism. Those scholars who feel a deep love for learning (rather than taking scholarship as merely or mostly a livelihood) are thus drawn to Buddhism, and often happily accept themselves as Buddhists, even as practitioners. Since 2000, we see a rise in the population of scholars who spontaneously dedicate themselves to Buddhism as a field of study and field of merit.

6.2.3 Scholars who put scholarship first with the notion of being “unbiased” are often uncertain of themselves or, for various reasons, yearn the approval of the majority; or they claim to be “professional,” that is, they do it for the money and honour, turning to whomever pays them more with a better status or working conditions. This is not saying much since we rarely meet monastics who are not themselves worried about money, or seeking gain and titles, or having their own centres or retirement plans.

My point is that we all have our needs and biases, and Buddhism helps us see meaning, purpose and value *beyond* them. The learned who are guided by “**meaning**” (how Buddhism enriches their lives) tend to be Dharma-spirited scholars; those inspired by “**purpose**” (to be good humans or to strive for the path) tend to be Dharma-spirited Buddhists. Either way, they have “value-added” learned lives, and they tend to be better humans, more caring of others than mere scholars, secular or Buddhist. In this sense, all scholars and Buddhists are biased in some way; but it is good and proper to be “biased” towards the Buddha Dharma rather than to mere scholarship.

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¹³⁶ I’m thinking, for example, of the works of philologists like the British scholar K R Norman (1925-2020), who was not a Buddhist, but his works are very helpful in giving us a better understanding of the Pali of the early Buddhist texts.