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RESEARCH PAPER

A BUDDHIST ETHIC WITHOUT KARMIC REBIRTH?

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ABSTRACT

Is a viable and authentic Buddhist ethic possible without the prospect of rebirth governed by one's karmic past? This paper explores traditional and contemporary views on karma with a view to determining the importance of this doctrine for practical ethics in the West. The Theravaada emphasis on the personal nature of karma is discussed first, followed by a consideration of the evolution of a social dimension to the doctrine in the Mahaayaana. The latter development is attributed to the twin influences of the //Bodhisattva// ideal and the metaphysics of Naagaarjuna and Hua Yen. Following this survey of traditional perspectives, attention is turned for the greater part of the paper to a consideration of the relevance of the notion of karmic rebirth for Buddhist ethics in the West. The notion of "social //kamma//" advanced by Ken Jones in The Social Face of Buddhism is given critical consideration. The conclusion is that a doctrine of karmic rebirth is not essential to a viable and authentic Buddhist ethic in the West.

TEXT

Is a viable and authentic Buddhist ethic possible without the prospect of rebirth governed by one's karmic past?

Were one to take only the portrayal of the good Buddhist life presented by the Pali Canon and its Theravaadin interpretation, the answer would be negative. We shall begin by briefly reviewing that interpretation.

Karmic Rebirth in Pali Buddhism

In traditional Pali Canon/Theravaada Buddhism karma (//kamma//) plays out its decisive role on the field of the double-eternity of

every existent being, and even of the universe itself. That is, both the past and future of every existent being, human or other, are endless. Every presently existing being is but one link in a chain of continuing existences in various forms from a beginningless eternity in the past on into an endless future eternity, unless an existential breakthrough (enlightenment) can be achieved.

There is a second notable feature about any existence: the seeming arbitrariness of its form and fortunes. On the human level some are born healthy, handsome, into wealthy families and experience good fortune all their lives. Others are born ugly and diseased and into poverty and distress. But who on any level knows when illness, disaster, or death may strike? Existence, at least in the human form, seems to be totally arbitrary in its allocation of goods and ills. Why should this be so? This is the major problem that all religions have sought to solve.

For Theravaada Buddhism the answer is clear. Our lives are governed by karma. Wrote the late Venerable Nyanatiloka in his Buddhist Dictionary:

KARMA (Skt.), Pali: //kamma// "Action," correctly speaking denotes the wholesome and unwholesome volitions...and their concomitant mental factors, causing rebirth and shaping the destiny of beings.

And again, quoting from the Pali Canon:

There is Karma (action), O monks, that ripens in hell...Karma that ripens in the animal world...Karma that ripens in the heavenly world....Threefold...is the fruit of karma: ripening during the [human] lifetime...ripening in the next birth...ripening in later births.[1]

And what is the power of karma? It is but the continuing power of the deeds done by sentient beings when in their human form. The possible forms of rebirth from the human state include eons-long hells (purgatories), unhappy spirit-forms, animal existences, and ages-long celestial existences.

One can readily understand the attractiveness of this version of existence. It rationalizes and moralizes what seem to be the thrustings of a blind, random fate or a capricious deity. One no longer can reasonably feel aggrieved and wronged by one's present evil fortunes; they are the merited result of wrong dispositions and actions in some former human existence. And good fortune is the fruit of past ethically good deeds.

So too it teaches the human being to cherish his or her present human status as a priceless opportunity to create "good" karma, i.e. that leading to fortunate rebirths and offering a basis for eventual release from the rebirth cycle (//sa.msaara//). For all other than human states are but the reward or punishment--or better, the inevitable karmic ripening of deeds done as a human being. They are

but the spending of one's good or bad karmic capital, so to speak.

There is an important corollary to this version of the dynamics of reality: each chain of individualized existence is an almost single-line affair. Each individual's karma, in its creation and working out, remains almost entirely a single-channel, closed-circuit course. No one else can increase, or decrease, my individual stock of merit or demerit. Yes, there was (is) a tradition of sharing merit but it seems to apply to a kind of general fund of merit, not to other individual accounts. This has somewhat characteristically led to a blunting of charitable and socially reformatory activity in Theravaadin societies, for each individual is now in the state to which his/her past deeds have led. That is, each one gets what one deserves. And charity tends to be almost exclusively directed toward the //sangha//, where it produces superior merit-dividends compared to that directed toward lay persons or general community needs.

Yes, there are the higher sublime states of spirit which are praised in the Pali scriptures as the summit-attainments of the good life: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy in the joy of others, and equanimity, a state of unruffled benevolence toward all beings. But on the whole, rather than ameliorative or redemptive activity, these seem to be the marks of superior spiritual achievement on the part of those of great spiritual maturity, or occasionally by those of lesser attainments. In the main it is the merit-for-human-rebirth concern that wins out, given this context.

This basic belief in the perpetual rebirth of the individual as determined by past karmic merit/demerit, until and unless nirvanic salvation be achieved, seems to have remained firmly in place in most of Asian Buddhism, Theravaada or Mahaayaana. A few random examples scattered over the centuries of the existence of Buddhism will make this evident; it seems that one finds this belief wherever one touches down in Asian Buddhism.

For example, we may note the general ambience of the //Lotus Suutra//, so influential in Asia. The //Lotus Suutra// exudes the philosophy of karmic rebirth on almost every page; karmic-determined birth is taken for granted throughout: //arhats// are promised Buddhahood in some far-off but certain blessed future existence; many of the great saints of the past appear on stage. Indeed the whole //suutra// is a spectacle of glorious spiritual destinies being played out in future eons in a multitude of universes.

Then there are the Pure Land //Suutras//. Therein we read of Amitaabha Buddha who has become a Buddha by virtue of countless eons of virtuous deeds and can now offer sinful human beings, with much past "karmic indebtedness," the destruction of their past moral-spiritual liabilities out of his infinite store of merit. Saint Hoonen, founder of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism in the 12th-13th centuries gives expression to this prevailing sense of karma-bound rebirth as the lot of all men:

For the sin or merit of a former life, men may be born to good or

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evil in this fleeting world.[2]

Suzuki Shoosan, 16th-17th century samurai turned Zen master in mid-life, speaks of "the six forms of transmigration and the four types of birth," and sees himself striving for enlightenment "birth after birth." [3]

To come down to the present: The late Yasutani Roshi, using modern terms, spoke as follows:

Now in our subconscious are to be found the residual impressions of our life experiences including those of previous existences, going back to time immemorial.[4]

And in the present-present Abe Masao, likewise from a Zen perspective, speaks of acting in "wisdom and compassion...operating to emancipate innumerable sentient beings from transmigration."(5)

This is not the total account of the matter however. The development of Mahaayaana life and doctrine resulted in important modifications of the rebirth-karma complex of ideas and practice. Central to the change of their significance was the development of the bodhisattvic theme and ideal. Naagaarjuna's (circa 150-250) philosophy of emptiness (/"suunyataa/) contributed importantly to that development. He took as his Buddhist philosophic mission the destruction of the rigid fixities of Buddhist scholasticism. He maintained that rigidly held intellectual concepts are convenient linguistic devices but do not represent reality. Most opposites or contrasts, for example, are mutually interdependent. This is true even of those ultimate Buddhist opposites, //sa.msaara// and //nirvaa.na//. Thus as Frederick Streng has written:

The spiritual ideal is [for Naagaarjuna] not release (/"nirvaa.na/) from conditioned existence by an individual person, because that effort implies an essential distinction between //nirvaa.na// and conditioned existence (/"sa.msaara//). Rather the idea is of a //bodhisattva// ("enlightenment being") whose awareness of the nonsubstantiality.... of bodhisattvahood is expressed in a kind of wisdom that seeks the release of all beings.[6]

Thus Naagaarjuna moved Buddhist thought to a new fluidity of the concept of karmic destiny: no longer could, should, one look upon one's spiritual destiny as hermetically sealed off from another's. Indeed they intertwine; one cannot be rescued from one's own spiritual predicament without his/her fellow-creatures' rescue. This of course is the bodhisattvic ideal, now being broadened from the pre-enlightenment career of Gotama Buddha to apply to everyman!

Obviously this was a tremendously significant step for Buddhist ethics. Fully developed it linked all creatures indissolubly to each other for good or ill. In his pre-enlightenment career the Buddha-to-be (/"bodhisattva/) lived countless lives (as animal, spirit, human being) always in selfless service and even

life-sacrifice for others. Now this quality of life is to be that of //everyone//. In the //Vimalakiirti Suutra// the bodhisattvic quality of life is extended to, preeminently embodied in, the life of the layman Vimalakiirti, who, though a full-fledged active layman, has a more penetrating understanding of Buddhist truths than the great saints of early Buddhism!

This new //bodhisattva// ideal was given eloquent expression by "Saantideva (7th-8th centuries) in his //Path of Light// in these words.

By constant use the idea of "I" attaches itself to foreign drops of seed and blood, although the thing exists not [as a genuine entity]. Then why should I not conceive my fellow's body as my own self?...I will cease to live as self and will take as myself my fellow creatures ... why should not he [man] not conceive //his// self to lie in his fellows also? ...Make thine own self lose its pleasures and bear the sorrow of thy fellows. Cast upon its [one's own] head the guilt even of others' works.

Such a man would "be a protector of the unprotected, a guide to wayfarers, a ship, a dyke, and a bridge for them who seek the further Shore, a lamp for them who need a lamp, a bed for them who need a bed, a slave for them who need a slave." [7]

This new bodhisattvic Buddhist then vows that even when on the verge of final nirvanic enlightenment (release from samsaric rebirth) he/she will not enter into final release from the cycles of rebirth until all other beings have attained //their// release.

There is one further development to be noted before turning to the nature of Western Buddhism. Hua-yen Buddhism, developed in 7th century China, provided a cosmic philosophical model of organic interrelatedness that universalized and undergirded the bodhisattvic ideology. Its basic typology is contained in the concept of an organically integrated universe, using the model of Indra's Net.

Writes Robert Gimello:

This inspired trope [the net of Indra] pictures a universe in which each constituent of reality is like a multifaceted jewel placed at one of the knots of a vast net. There is such a jewel at each knot, and each jewel reflects not only the rest of the jeweled net in its entirety but also each and every other jewel in its individuality. Thus, each particular reflects the totality, the totality so reflected is both a unity and a multiplicity...All things and beings, Hua-yen teaches, are like this net.[8]

Obviously the Hua-yen philosophy fits hand in glove with the bodhisattvic ideal of human life. No one can gain spiritual freedom independently of others. The organically interconnected texture of the universe makes this impossible. Thus Hua-yen universalizes and firmly establishes the bodhisattvic vision of the truly good life.

Karmic Rebirth and Buddhist Ethics in the West

As Buddhism in its various forms has made its way into the Western world all of its doctrines, traditions, and practices have faced a challenging new cultural and social situation. The main Buddhist concern has been to maintain the basic Buddhist perspective on human life and conduct in a new and different context. Of course Buddhism in its two and one half millenium-long history in Asia has successfully established itself in several differing cultures due to its tremendous flexibility. But perhaps the West poses a greater challenge to it than any of the Asian traditionalist cultures it infiltrated.

The Western civilizational emphasis is upon frenetic activity.

Here history is not viewed as cyclically repetitive as in so many Asian cultures, but as a kind of ongoing torrent of change, which lurches, plunges, progresses forward to some new and unpredictable new state. These changes are perceived as due in great part to human intentions and actions; humans create history. And of special relevance to our immediate topic, in the West each human birth is an absolutely //de novo// affair, a totally new beginning without karmic past. Its individual qualities are explained in terms of physical, psychical inheritance through its parents; and its social environment will further shape its nature and career. Many in the West believe in a //future// eternity of existence for each of these new human beings (an immortal soul), its nature determined by the quality of life lived in this one-and-only human life, one-life karma so to speak. Others believe that this life is the totality of one's existence, and should be lived to its hedonic full.

The prevailing quality of Western life and culture, with its attendant idolization of "success," "achievement," "prosperity," and historical-social "progress" and "improvement" is perceived by Western Buddhists to be profoundly un- or even anti-Buddhist in spirit. Ken Jones, for example, in his The Social Face of Buddhism, [9] terms Western culture "egoic"; it magnifies and idealizes the very qualities of greed, violence (expressed hatred) and self-esteem (first-personalized delusion) that Buddhism considers its basic enemy.

How then can Buddhism, marching to a totally different drumbeat of ideas and goals in life, create meaningful Western forms? And in terms of our special interest, how does the Buddhist ethic of karmic rebirth fit in here, if at all?

We may note two general types of Buddhist reaction to this cultural situation. The first is what may be termed the "suppression" of the karmic-rebirth theme in the presentation of the Buddhist message. Karmically qualified rebirth may be the taken-for-granted belief in such meditation-centered groups as Insight Meditation and the U Ba Khin (Burmese) oriented movements, but such a belief is not urged upon beginners nor does it appear in their publications to any observable degree. At the very least it is not a talking-point. The same can be said of the other end of the Buddhist spectrum, the Zen

Buddhist publications and centers. No doubt enlightenment through //zazen// always has karmic and rebirth connotations, but they are made little of upon the American scene at least.

In all of these the emphasis is upon what one might call the rebirth-karma of personal transformation. The important "karma-force" and karmic-determination are that of the "karmic" influence of thoughts, aspirations, and emotions upon the character, attitudes, and consequent actions of a person. Here an emotion or thought is "reborn" as an attitude or character trait which irrevocably finds expression in one's actions. This might be called thought-character-action karma, or psychic karma.

There are those Western-born Buddhists--and their numbers and influence in the shaping of Western Buddhism will only increase through the years--who find some of the Asian Buddhist emphasis upon karmic rebirth unnecessary. As an example of this tendency, we may take the before-mentioned Ken Jones as the spokesman of a Westernized Buddhism. On the cover of his book we read that he "has been a social activist of one kind or another, for much of his life and a Buddhist

trainee for the last eight years" [in 1989]. His book therefore is a good example of what a Western-born person, reared and educated in a Christian-humanist-scientific and socially activist culture, finds of value in the Asian Buddhist tradition, how he interprets it, and what he considers authentically Buddhist attitudes and actions in a Western society. With respect to the Asian Buddhist doctrine of rebirth he writes:

None of the arguments advanced in this book require either rejection or acceptance of the notion of rebirth.[10].

What then of the doctrine of karma which historically has been so tightly tied to that of rebirth? He finds it in need of reinterpretation:

[T]he better known Sanskrit karma has acquired Hindu meanings of "fate" and "justice" which have nothing to do with [true] Buddhism.[11]

In place of "karma" he would use the Pali form "//kamma//" and would interpret it thus:

//Kamma//, however, seems to me to be both a logical element in fundamental Buddhist teaching and an interestingly suggestive idea in the discussion of Buddhist social theory.[12]

Thus with one fell stroke the strong Asian Buddhist concern about gaining merit for a "good" future rebirth by "good" actions is swept away. In fact Jones finds some of the motivations in the developed Theravaada tradition that speak of the "good" next life to be gained by "good" actions, to be totally anti-Buddhists because they pander to greed and pride. Thus to take as an example the following kind of statement by a prominent Buddhist layman in Burma:

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A person who steadfastly and continuously observes the Five Precepts can gain the following beneficial results: (1) he can gain great wealth and possessions; (2) he can gain great fame and reputation; (3) he can appear with confidence and courage in the midst of a public assembly; (4)...he can die with calmness and equanimity; (5) after his death he will be born into the world of Devas.[13]

In Jones' view all of the above fruits and rewards of living according to Buddhist ethical principles would represent the glorification of the very greed and delusion that Buddhists seek to escape! The first three rewards represent the essence of the "egoic" Western culture which Jones believes to be the spiritual antithesis of Buddhism and which Buddhist social action would seek to modify and transform. His purified (truly Buddhist) version of //kamma// is stated thus:

The theory of karma is the theory of cause and effect, of action and reaction. Every volitional action produces its effects or results. If a good action produces good effects and a bad action bad effects, it is not justice or reward...but this in virtue of its own nature, its own law.[14]

To this revision of the traditionally accepted version of //kamma// (karma), freed from its fateful connotations, Jones would add a

significant new meaning, that of "social //kamma//." He complains that much of traditional [Eastern] Buddhism has assumed that "Society is....no more than the aggregate of individuals composing it," [15] hence the mere sum of individual karmic strands. To put his statement into figurative language: A society in traditional Buddhist thought is a collection of parallel and intertwined channels of separate karmic destinies. But Jones rejects this version of social "structure" for one of societal //kamma//. Society as a super-individual entity has a moral-immoral character that affects all of its members for better or worse. It too must be modified Buddhistically for individuals to achieve their full spiritual destiny.

Therefore, writes Jones: "A socially engaged Buddhism needs no other rationale than that of being an amplification of traditional Buddhist morality [five precepts], a social ethic brought forth by the needs and potentialities of present-day society." [16]. (In a slightly different phrasing of the same motif we have the book edited by Thich Nhat Hahn the Vietnamese Zen monk, entitled suggestively For a Future to be Possible, subtitled Commentaries on the Five Wonderful Precepts).

Significantly for the future of Western Buddhism, and interestingly in terms of its historic past, two of the ideational patterns noted in the development of Mahaayaana Buddhism have been picked up as especially useful and ethically-socially significant: the bodhisattvic motif and the Hua-yen vision of an organically interconnected world.

Writes Jones in defense of a socially activist Buddhism:

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The great //bodhisattva// vow to "liberate all beings" now also implies a concern for changing the social conditions which in every way discomfit us...These are surely among the conditions which the Buddha declared "lead to passion, not release therefrom, to bondage, not release therefrom; and to the piling up of rebirths; these to wanting much, not wanting little; to discontent, not to contentment; these to sociability, not to solitude; these to indolence, not to exertion; these to luxury, not to frugality." [17]

It might be noted in passing that some of the items, e.g. those calling for solitude and frugality, speak more of monastic than ordinary living. However the main point is clear; Buddhists must work for a society that does not idolize individual acquisitiveness and purely personal satisfactions to the detriment of others.

The other integrative and social-action motif strongly supporting the bodhisattvic theme which Jones finds useful is that of Indra's net. To redescribe it in Jones' words:

At each intersection in Indra's net is a light reflecting jewel (that is, a phenomenon, entity, thing [person]) and each jewel contains another Net //ad infinitum//. The jewel at each intersection exists only as a reflection of all the others and hence has no [independent] self nature. Yet it also exists as a separate entity to sustain the others. [18]

This is to say, in the strengthening of the bodhisattvic motif that no one being, or small cluster of beings, actually exists independently,

or even semi-independently, of the others. Here is an organic vision of the universe that ties all mankind, all living creatures, and the very physical world together in one organic wholeness. No one can pursue private goals and goods without affecting others. Such a view of the world makes //every// action a "social action."

This viewpoint leads Jones to make a number of specific recommendations. He believes along with E. F. Schumacher that "small is beautiful" economically; that the ruling economic gigantism works against the true welfare of men, stimulates the fires of greed, and leads to the deprivation and oppression of the many. He would favor small businesses and speaks of the formation of "free autonomous cooperatives," as well as "right livelihood cooperatives." [19] He lauds the "creative non-violence" of Gandhi and Martin Luther King as "a natural and direct expression of Buddhadharma." [20] Environmentalist values are likewise to be promoted. He also favors "democratic and egalitarian values." [21] To sum it up Jones suggests that the proper mix of Buddhist values in the modern world can be summarized thus:

The psycho-social transformation suggested here is a continuously sustained metamorphosis, in which a significant number of people change the whole social climate by actualizing these [Buddhist humanist] social values in their social values in their own

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experience...and [do] the work needed to make them the norms of public behaviour.[22]

Not all Western Buddhists would agree with Jones in his delineation of a socially active Buddhism as its proper role. Many look upon Buddhism as a refuge //from// the wear and tear of daily life and from the frenetic pace of life in the West, not as a bugle call to action. What is more promising to the activity driven Westerner than the Buddhist emphasis upon inward purity of spirit and its cherishing in the meditative life in quiet retreats and peaceful isolation? Many perceive this as the main mission of Buddhism in the West: To offer centers where there are solitude and spiritual leaders and healers. To them it seems that social-reformism overlooks the //basic// problem of mankind, that it is ruled by greed, hatred, and delusions about life and self--the basic three evils as seen by Buddhism. As Kenneth Kraft, editor of Inner Peace, World Peace puts the view of many Buddhists about social reformism: "A reform that is pursued only from a socio-political standpoint they assert will at best provide [only] temporary solutions, and at the worst it will perpetuate the very ills it aims to cure." [23] Only the purifying of individual hearts and lives will effect genuine social change.

This of course is a very old and fundamental Buddhist view: The world will only be changed for the better by //individuals// who have been changed for the better through spiritual discipline. The fully stated form of this is that only when one is oneself fully enlightened can one "save" others.

The 11th-12th century Tibetan monk Milarepa put it thus:

One should not be over-anxious and hasty in setting out to serve others before one has oneself realized Truth in its fullness; to do so, would be like the blind leading the blind.[24]

He goes on to say that since there will "be no end of sentient beings for one to serve," a //bodhisattva// need be in no hurry to help them. Obviously Milarepa is more concerned for the would-be //bodhisattva's// spiritual progress than the alleviation of suffering or righting of wrongs in contemporary society. But most in the West, even Buddhists, do not have Milarepa's robust confidence in the perpetual rebirth of all beings or his almost callous unconcern for //present// sufferers.

To this approach Robert Aitken responds thus:

There is no end to the process of perfection, and so the perfectionist cannot begin //bodhisattva// work. [But] compassion and peace are a practice on cushions in the meditation hall, [//and also//] within the family, on the job, and at political forums. Do your best with what you have and you will mature in the process.[25]

Perhaps the right Buddhist attitude for modern Buddhists in the West is, as many Western-born Buddhists would see it, that of a watchful awareness of one's own inwardness, nourished by meditation, //and//

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appropriate outward activity according to Buddhist principles. These must be pursued jointly, not set against each other, in a pattern of social inaction.

Now we may return in the end to the initial question: Can there be a viable and authentic Buddhist ethic //without// a belief in perpetual rebirth governed by the karma of an infinite number of past existences? The answer, explicit or implicit, of many contemporary Buddhists in the West, and perhaps some in Asia, is a resounding yes! Even without those beliefs the central Buddhist ethical values can and, in the interest of all living creatures, //should// be vigorously followed. Indeed it is perhaps possible to say that both Buddhism and Buddhist ethics may be better off //without// the karmic-rebirth factor to deal with.

NOTES

[1] Nyanatiloka _Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines_, (Colombo: Frewin and Co., 1972). "Karma."

[2] _Hoonen the Buddhist Saint: His Life and Teaching_, Translated by Harper H. Coates and Ryugaku Ishizuka (Kyoto: Society for the Publication of Sacred Books of the World, 1949), p. 430.

[3] Winston L. King, _Death was his Kooan: The Samurai Zen of Suzuki Shoosan_ (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1986), pp. 195, 370.

[4] Philip Kapleau, _The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, Enlightenment_ (Tokyo: John Weatherhill, 1965), p. 101.

[5] Frederick J. Streng, "Naagaarjuna," _Encyclopedia of Religion_ (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1987), Vol. X, p. 293.

[6] Christopher Ives, _Zen Awakening and Society_ (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), p. 88.

[7] J. B. Pratt, _The Pilgrimage of Buddhism_ (New York: Macmillan, 1928), pp. 220, 219.

[8] Robert Gimello, "Hua-yen," Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol. VI, p. 488.

[9] Ken Jones, The Social Face of Buddhism: An Approach to Political and Social Activism (London: Wisdom Publications, 1989).

[10] Ibid., p. 68.

[11] Ibid., p. 63.

[12] Ibid., p. 68.

[13] Winston L. King, In the Hope of Nibbana: An Essay on Theravada Buddhist Ethics (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1964), p. 43.

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[14] Jones, p. 66.

[15] Ibid., p. 202

[16] Ibid., p. 194.

[17] Ibid., p. 194.

[18] Ibid., p. 137.

[19] Ibid., p. 330.

[20] Ibid., p. 302.

[21] Ibid., p. 325.

[22] Ibid., p. 325.

[23] Kenneth Kraft, ed., Inner Peace, World Peace (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1992), p. 12.

[24] Jones, p. 202.

[25] Ibid., p. 203.