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Did King Ajātasattu Confess to the Buddha, and did the Buddha Forgive Him?

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Did King Ajātasattu Confess to the Buddha, and did the Buddha Forgive Him?

Jayarava Michael Attwood*

Abstract

Is it possible to counteract the consequences of a moral transgression by publicly acknowledging it? When he reveals to the Buddha that he has killed his father, King Ajātasattu is said to “*yathādhammaṃ paṭikaroti*.” This has been interpreted as “making amends,” or as seeking (and receiving) “forgiveness” for his crime. Successfully translating this phrase into English requires that we reexamine etymology and dictionary definitions, question assumptions made by previous translators, and study the way that *yathādhammaṃ paṭikaroti* is used in context. We can better understand confession as a practice by locating it within the general Indian concern for ritual purity—ethicized by the Buddha—and showing that the early Buddhist doctrine of kamma allows for mitigation, though not eradication, of the consequences of actions under some circumstances.

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King Ajātasattu Meets the Buddha¹

The first meeting between the Buddha and the murderous King of Maghada provides the frame for the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (D 2). After a long *Dhamma* talk the king announces that he is going for refuge to the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Bhikkhu Sangha*. Then Ajātasattu tells the Buddha that he killed his father King Bimbisāra. The Buddha replies in Rhys Davids' translation:

Verily O King it was sin that overcame you while acting thus. But in as much as you look upon it as sin, and confess it according to what is right we accept your confession as to that. For that, O King, is the custom of the Noble Ones, that whosoever looks upon his faults as a fault and rightly confesses it, shall attain to self-restraint in the future. (94-95)

Coming across this quotation in another paper was the starting point for this article.² As sometimes happens with an early translation I was uncomfortable with the word “sin” and the quasi-biblical language, and so I turned to Walsh's translation to see what he made of it:

Indeed, King, transgression overcame you when you deprived your father, that good and just king, of his life. But since you have acknowledged the transgression and confessed it as is right, we will accept it. For he who acknowledges his transgression as such and confesses it for betterment in future, will grow in the noble discipline. (108)

These same words are put into many mouths throughout the Pāli Canon—it is a stock phrase or pericope. Both Rhys Davids and Walsh are translating as “confess-” the Pāli word “*paṭikaroti*.” This is at odds with the *Pali English Dictionary* (*PED*) definition of the word, which suggests

that it means “to redress, repair, make amends for a sin, expiate.” A further problem emerges from a translation of the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* by Piya Tan, and Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli’s translation of this pericope as it occurs in the *Bhaddāli Sutta* (M 65), both of whom have the Buddha say: “we forgive you.”

This article will seek to answer several questions:

- (1) Does Ajātasattu “confess” to the Buddha?
- (2) Does the word *paṭikaroti* mean “to make amends,” “confess,” or something else?
- (3) Does the Buddha forgive Ajātasattu?

In order to answer these questions my method will be to try to establish with the aid of dictionaries and commentaries what the text actually says, then to look at the way the words are used in context, and then to locate the issue in the wider context of Buddhist doctrine regarding actions and consequences. The result will be a reinterpretation of the passage. My interest is not simply philological, because I am also interested in the practical implications of this passage for Buddhists.

The Text

The pericope involves someone who confesses in the following terms:

*accayo maṃ, bhante, accagamā yathābālaṃ yathāmūḷhaṃ yathā-
akusalaṃ [I did some fault]. tassa me, bhante bhagavā accayaṃ ac-
cayato paṭiggaṇhātu āyatim saṃvarāya.*

The response, translated above as the Buddha’s response to Ajātasattu, is:

taggha tvam [person confessing] *accayo accagamā yathābālam yathāmūlham yathā-akusalam, yam tvam* [acted in that way]. *yato ca kho tvam*, [person confessing] *accayam accayato disvā yathādhammam paṭikarosi, tan te mayam paṭiggaṇhāma. vuddhi h'esā* [person confessing] *ariyassa vinaye, yo accayam accayato disvā yathādhammam paṭikaroti, āyatiṃ samvaram āpajjatī ti.* (c.f. D i.85)

According to *PED*, the word *accayo* means “going on, or beyond.” In the moral sphere, *accayo* is acting outside the established norms—so “transgression” is quite a good translation. The same root occurs in *accagamā* meaning “overcome.” The Pāli commentaries gloss *accayo* in this context as *aparādhō*: “fault, offence, guilt” (DA i.237 = AA iv.174 = AA ii.353).

For *paṭiggaṇhāti* *PED* gives: “to receive, accept, take (up).” DA glosses *paṭiggaṇhāti* as *khamatu*, “be patient,” “endure it,” “forgive” (DA i.237 c.f. *PED* s.v. *khamati*). The translation as “forgive” is problematic as will be discussed below.

Yathādhammam is an adverbial compound meaning “according to the law,” i.e. lawfully. In a Buddhist context we could say it means “Dhammicly.” *Yathādhammam* is glossed by the Commentator as: “*yathādhammanti idha āpattito vuṭṭāya suddhante paṭiṭṭhahanto yathādhammam karoti nāma*—‘lawfully’: it is called ‘lawfully’ because after abstaining from it and standing firm in purity he makes the offense lawful” (AA iii.216).³ Although the commentary appears to make the offence lawful, which would be a contradiction in terms, we can read this as making the offender lawful.

It is with the word *paṭikaroti* that questions begin to emerge. I noted briefly above that the *PED* defines the word one way, the translators use it another, and yet my reading of the text suggests that neither quite match the context of the sutta. *Paṭikaroti* means, according to the

PED: “1. to redress, repair, make amends for a sin, expiate; 2. to act against, provide for, beware, be cautious.” *Paṭikaroti* combines the prefix *paṭi* with the verbal root *karoti*, which allows for a broad range of possible interpretations. Under *paṭi* *PED* has “direction prefix in well-defined meaning of ‘back (to), against, towards, in opposition to, opposite.’” *PED* provides a large number of examples of words which use the *paṭi* prefix and follows it with several pages of stand-alone words, including *paṭikaroti*. *Karoti* comes from the same root as *karma* and has many shades of meaning including “to act, to perform, to make, do.” So the combined force of the parts is “to act against,” “to perform the opposite,” or “to produce the opposite.” A straightforward English equivalent would be “counteract.” I would suggest that “unmake,” “undo,” or “obstruct” also fit on purely etymological grounds. So, incidentally, would “counterfeit”: from *contre-* (against) + *facere* (to make). I did not find any occurrences of *paṭikaroti* where “provide for, beware, be cautious” seemed to fit the context, or were employed by other translators. Derret proposes, but does not justify, “render it up” as a translation of *paṭikaroti*. He says “*paṭikaroti* (*BHS pratikaroti*) means to work in accordance with what is expected, to redress, repair” (59). This definition is from Edgerton’s *Dictionary of Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit* (see s.v. *pratikaroti*). Derret does not appear to reference the *PED* or any other Pāli dictionary. I will adopt “counteract” as a working translation and discuss it below.

Paṭikaroti seldom appears without the adverb *yathādhammaṃ* and the Commentator frequently glosses the two together. For instance: “*Yathādhammaṃ paṭikarissatīti dhammānurūpaṃ paṭika-rissati, sāmaṇerabhūmiyaṃ ṭhassatīti attho*—‘he will Dhammicly counteract [it]’ means ‘he will counteract [it] conforming to the *Dhamma*, he will stay at the level of the *sāmaṇera*’” (AA.iii.216),⁴ that is to say that by counteracting a transgression he will not revert to being a layman. Similarly: “*yathādhammaṃ paṭikarotīti yathādhammo ṭhito, tathā karosi, khamāpesīti vuttaṃ hoti*—‘Dhammicly counteracting’ [means] you act so that the

Dhamma stands, that is to say ‘you have allayed it’” (AA iv.174 = AA ii.353 and MA iii.152 with *tatheva* for *tathā*). *Khamāpesi* is from *khamāpeti*, the causative of *khamati* meaning “patience, endurance, forgiveness” (*PED*). There seems to be a deliberate contrast between the offence carried out *yathābālaṃ yathāmūlhaṃ yathā-akusalaṃ*—foolishly, confusedly, unskillfully—and the action of the verb *paṭikaroti* that is *yathādhammaṃ*—lawfully or Dhammicly.⁵ Occurrences of our pericope, and commentary on it, make up the vast majority of uses of this sense of the word *paṭikaroti*.

Confessing

Even a superficial reading of the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* shows that Ajātasattu is *confessing* when he reveals that he has murdered his father. While there is a potential confusion with the way the word is used in other religious contexts, the parallel with a judicial sphere is obvious. However, Rhys Davids’ choice of “confess” to translate *paṭikaroti*, which is followed by Walsh, can hardly be correct if we accept the dictionary definition that Rhys Davids co-authored. Accordingly, several translators such as Bhikkhus Bodhi (56) and Thanissaro have followed *PED* and translated it as “made amends.” But it is not obvious that the king has done anything which we would recognize as “making amends.” He reveals his crime to the Buddha, but he does nothing about it. Indeed, he is in a hurry to get back to the business of ruling his kingdom and rushes off. “Amends,” according to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, means to “compensate or make up for,” comes from the Old French *amendes* “penalties, fine,” and is the plural of *amende* “reparation.” We find similar definitions for the other translations suggested by the *PED* for *paṭikaroti*. Anticipating the following section, I can say that in no occurrence of our pericope do any of the actors appear to make amends for their transgressions.

A further question arises here. What would it mean to *make amends* in a Buddhist context in any case? As Richard Gombrich says, “Theravāda Buddhism knows no penances. If you have done, said, or thought a wrong, doctrine says, nothing can simply cancel that out” (*Theravāda* 108). I will return to this question.

The first of my questions can be answered in the affirmative: yes, Ajātasattu does confess to the Buddha. However, having answered no to the question “does he makes amends” we have a supplementary question because he *does* something—*paṭikaroti* is a verb—but what does he do? Indeed, since the pericope occurs a number of times what do any of our actors do when they *paṭikaroti*?

Other Occurrences of the Pericope

I have found thirteen occurrences of the pericope quite evenly distributed through the Pāli *Nikāyas* and *Vinaya*.⁶ In addition, there are a number of commentarial passages that either gloss the pericope or terms from it, or use the pericope when commenting on some unrelated passage.

Of the people confessing there are a range of life styles represented. Ajātasattu is a king, of course, and three others are lay people: a woman, the Licchavi Vaḍḍha, and an assassin (Vin iv.18-19, Vin ii.124, Vin ii.192). Three are wanderers from other sects: Susīma (accompanied by his followers), Kassapa, and Nigrodha (Vin iv.18-19, Vin ii.124, Vin ii.192). One, Pukkusāti, is apparently a *sāmaṇera* since he professes to having gone forth under the Bhagavā, but at the end of the *Dhātuvibhanga Sutta* asks the Buddha for “full admission” (M iii.247). Four instances involve a *bhikkhu* or group of *bhikkhus*: Bhaṇḍa and Abhiñjika, “a *bhikkhu*,” Bhaddāli, and “some *bhikkhus*” (S ii.205, A iv.373, M i.440, Vin i.315). Finally, one is an unnamed *bhikkhunī* (A ii.146). These cover most

of the traditional lifestyles, a fact that will be important for a general discussion of confession that follows.

In all but two cases, the confession is delivered to the Buddha. A *bhikkhuni* confessed to Ānanda, and a laywoman confessed to Anuruddha (A ii.146, Vin iv.18-19).

The kinds of offences confessed to in these texts are equally broad. As well as Ajātasattu's familiar patricide, there is a would-be assassin, paid by Devadatta and the then-Prince Ajātasattu, to kill the Buddha. The assassin is unable to fulfill his commission once he is in the Buddha's presence. The Buddha refers to him as *āvuso*, friend, and after he confesses, sends him safely on his way (Vin ii.192). Note that this earlier crime is not confessed by Ajātasattu when he meets the Buddha. These are the most serious of the offences from our point of view. There are two rather stereotypical instances of attempted seduction of *bhikkhus*. "A *bhikkhuni*" pretends to be ill in order to get Ānanda to come and see her. However, after hearing the *Dhamma* talk that is traditionally given to the ill person, she realizes her error and confesses to Ānanda (A ii.146). Anuruddha is the target of an anonymous laywoman, but he proves impervious to her charms even though he sleeps in the same room as her. She realizes her error, confesses, and returns to her traditional role of serving him food, and he offers her a *Dhamma* talk (Vin iv.18-19). From a *Vinaya* point of view these were potentially serious situations for the *bhikkhus* as sexual intercourse is a *pārājika* offence entailing expulsion from the order.⁷

The wanderers who appear are also stereotypical. Susīma and his followers only go forth under the Buddha in order to get alms, robes, and shelter. It is only after realizing that the Buddha and his Arahant disciples really are Awakened that Susīma confesses to "going forth as a thief of the *Dhamma*" [*dhammatthenako pabbajito*] (SN ii.128). The wanderer Kassapa hears a *Dhamma* talk on ethics but thinks to himself "this

samaṇa is too scrupulous” [*adhisallikhatevāyaṃ samaṇo*]. However, he spontaneously realizes his error and seeks out the Buddha to confess it (A i.238). The wanderer Nigrodha, a practitioner of severe austerities, possibly a Jain, boasts to the householder Sandhāna “if the ascetic Gotama were to come to this assembly we would baffle him with a single question, we would knock him over like an empty pot” (Walsh 386). However, when they meet the Buddha exposes the weaknesses of severe asceticism and leaves Nigrodha silent and despondent. On further questioning Nigrodha confesses that he spoke badly of the Buddha (D iii.55), but (and this is a crucial point) he and his followers do not go for refuge to the Buddha. In fact, “they sat silent and upset, their shoulders drooped, they hung their heads and sat there downcast and bewildered, so possessed were their minds by Māra” (Walsh 394). Despite the failure to respond positively Walsh still translates *paṭikaroti* here as “make amends.”⁸ As this example alone makes clear, the pericope is applied with variable skill to these stories.

Two of the confessions involve a false accusation. Firstly, “a *bhikkhu*” falsely accuses Sāriputta of offending him and then setting out on a journey without apologizing first (A iv.377). The Sangha are called together and the charges made public. Sāriputta does not respond directly but gives a series of images of his moral perfection. Eventually, the accusing *bhikkhu* relents and confesses the false accusation. The Buddha then asks Sāriputta to “pardon” (*khama*) the man before his head splits into seven pieces, which Sāriputta does. The second false accusation occurs when the Licchavi Vaḍḍha is convinced by two wicked *bhikkhus* to accuse Dabba the Mallian of seducing his wife. When it is brought before the Buddha it is Dabba, proclaiming his innocence, who has more credibility, and Vaḍḍha confesses. His punishment is that his bowl is turned upside down and he cannot eat with the *bhikkhus* (A iv.377).

There are some interesting features in this last passage which deserve a brief digression. Firstly, the passage implies that Vaḍḍha, a layman, has a bowl and eats with the *bhikkhus*. Horner objects to this: “a layman certainly would have had no begging bowl that could have been, literally, turned upside down” (v.5, 173, n.1). Secondly, the Buddha addresses Vaḍḍha as *āvuso* and this causes Horner to observe that this is “odd for a layman” (however, c.f. the incident mentioned previously, where the Buddha addressed his would-be assassin as *āvuso*). Horner questions whether it is the Buddha speaking at all (v.5, 175, n.1). Regarding this objection we can say that inasmuch as Vaḍḍha confesses to “bhante,” and that just prior to the confession he and Sāriputta approached the Buddha, there appears to be no reason to doubt that Vaḍḍha is addressing the Buddha. These comments from Horner bring to mind some of Greg Schopen’s observations of Buddhologists who give precedence to received tradition over evidence. For instance, after highlighting the formal and literary nature of scriptural texts, whose purpose he says is almost never historical, he says that

scholars of Indian Buddhism have taken canonical monastic rules and formal literary descriptions of the monastic ideal preserved in very late manuscripts and treated them as if they were accurate reflections of the religious life and career of actual practicing Buddhist monks in India. (5-6)

It would be interesting to see whether other laymen are portrayed as having a begging bowl, but we might not look if we believed it to be impossible. In science, a single counter-example is enough to at least cast doubt on a hypothesis, if not render it invalid. Given that we know that the Pāli texts were edited by Theravādin *bhikkhus* to conform to their ideal, the survival of a reference such as this should be of some interest.

Returning to our survey of the use of the pericope, we come to two *bhikkhus* who are being competitive in regard to their learning and

oratory skill. The Buddha rebukes them for this and they immediately offer their confession (S ii.205).

The last three confessions all relate to aspects of monastic protocol. Pukkusāti is spending the night in a shelter with another *samaṇa*. After hearing a talk from this man he realizes it is none other than the Buddha himself, of whom he is a disciple, but whom he has never met before. He confesses to having called the Buddha *āvuso*—friend—when, according to protocol, he should have addressed him as *bhante*—sir (M iii.247). When the Buddha accepts his confession, Pukkusāti asks for the “full admission” or *upasampadā*, indicating that although he had gone forth he was still only a *sāmaṇera*. The *bhikkhu* Kassapagotta is in the habit of pampering *bhikkhus* when they first arrive at his hermitage. A group of *bhikkhus* arrives, and after they have settled in he ceases pampering them. They accuse him of not looking after them properly, and after he refuses to acknowledge this accusation they suspend him from the Sangha. He goes to the Buddha for advice and the Buddha tells him in no uncertain terms that his suspension was wrong. Later, the Buddha catches up with the *bhikkhus* who suspended Kassapagotta and rebukes them. They confess this as a transgression (Vin i.315).

The last confession has a very interesting feature. Bhaddāli is a rather reluctant and inattentive *bhikkhu*. The Buddha decrees that they will eat only one meal a day. Bhaddāli is not happy about this and even when the Buddha tells him he may eat half his meal at the time and half later on he still feels unable to comply. As a result, he avoids the Buddha for the entire three months of a rains retreat. At the end of the retreat, his companions encourage Bhaddāli to go and talk to the Buddha. He does this and confesses his public declaration of being unwilling to undertake the training (*sikkhaṃ samādiyamāne anussāhaṃ pavedesiṃ*) and asks the Buddha to accept (*paṭiggaṇhatu*) this confession (M i.440). However (and this is the only time this happens in the texts), the Buddha

does not immediately accept his confession, and spells out five ways in which Bhaddāli has failed to understand the importance of his teaching. Bhaddāli once again confesses his transgression, and asks for the Buddha's acceptance. This time the Buddha rebukes Bhaddāli by pointing out that his teachings do not ask unreasonable things of the *bhikkhus*. The Buddha is quite stern at this point. He says “*nanu tvaṃ, bhaddāli, tasmim̐ samaye ritto tuccho aparaddho*”^{ti?}—weren't you, Bhaddāli, at that time an empty, vain, failure?” (ibid.). Bhaddāli, forced to agree, confesses a third time. This time the Buddha accepts the confession, but gives Bhaddāli a talk about fulfilling the training, about how the Sangha deals with recidivists, and finally likens Bhaddāli to a young colt who needs gentle but firm handling. This last is somewhat ironic, as the Buddha says that he has known him for a long time and it is therefore unlikely that Bhaddāli is very young. This unwillingness to accept an insincere confession will be important when we consider confession more generally.

Making Amends

In all of these episodes, across social groups and classes, for a range of wrongs, and scattered throughout the canon, I can see no example of anyone making amends, redressing a wrong, or expiating a sin as I understand those words and concepts. In the Brahminical tradition, expiation was specific. The *Manusmṛti*, for instance, spells out in some detail the *prāyaścitti*,⁹ restoration or expiation for any number of ritually polluting transgressions. “These expiations consisted of acts of charity and purification, vows of fasting and continence, and performance of rituals and recitation with subsequent societal acceptance of such acts” (Beck 81).

Tellingly, the text itself does not seem to understand Ajātasattu as having made amends, at least not effectively. After Ajātasattu leaves, the Buddha says to the *bhikkhus* “the king is wounded (*khatāyaṃ*), and

done for (*upahatāyaṃ*)” (D i.86). Had Ajātasattu not killed his father he would have attained the *dhammacakkhu* after hearing the *Dhamma* discourse. What’s more, patricide is one the five actions which result in immediate rebirth in hell after death. The patricide is said to be *atekiccha*: “incurable” or “unpardonable” (see for example A iii.146).

A strong suspicion regarding Ajātasattu’s case has become a firm conviction: we cannot follow the *PED* in translating *paṭikaroti*. If it does not mean “make amends” and it does not mean “confess,” then what does it mean? I’ve suggested “counteract” as a provisional translation on etymological grounds, and perhaps the simplest approach is to retain this value-neutral term and see if it makes sense in the context. We must now attempt to answer two further questions: what would counteracting a transgression mean in a Buddhist context, and would confession accomplish this? Answering these questions will require us to broaden the discussion to take in Buddhist confession more generally. We will also need to consider the doctrine of *kamma* and whether any mitigation of it is possible.

Return to Ethical Purity

Previous studies of confession have tended to focus on monastic practice. This is perhaps not surprising given the prominence of the *pātimokkha* ceremony for monastics. Havens and Braun, for instance, both treat the cases they identify from our list as being special cases of the monastic confession, or subsidiary to it. However, in occurrences of the pericope I have found that many of the people confessing are not monastics, and in some cases are not even Buddhists. In the monastic context, prior to the recitation of the *pātimokkha* a *bhikkhu* having fallen into error (*āpattiṃ āpanno*) should approach another *bhikkhu* and say: “*ahaṃ āvuso itthannāmaṃ āpattiṃ āpanno, taṃ paṭidesemīti*—I, friend

[name], have fallen into an error and confess it.”¹⁰ The friend replies “*passasi?*—do you see it?” The wrong doer says “*āma passāmi*—yes I see it.” And the friend ends with “*āyatim saṃvareyyāsi*—you should restrain yourself in future” (Vin i.126). After this he is considered morally pure and able to participate in the reciting of the *pātimokkha*. Comparing this formula for confession, we can see that the feature that sets it apart from our pericope is just this phrase “*yathādhammaṃ paṭikaroti*” which is absent in the *pātimokkha* ceremony.

Pātimokkha is both the set of rules followed by *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* and the ceremony of reciting those rules after confessing any transgression of them. Gombrich argues that the original metaphor for the *pātimokkha* ceremony is a medical one that indicates the purging of impurities through confession producing a return to “health” (*Pātimokkha* 5).¹¹ Gombrich also briefly discusses the Jain practice of confession. The word for confession in Ardha-Magadhi is *paḍikkamaṇa*.¹² According to Gombrich, this means “retracing one’s steps,” and, “the idea is that by confessing the fault one goes back to where one was before one deviated; one gets back on track, so to speak” (*Pātimokkha* 5). This resonates with what we observe in Buddhist *suttas*. While they do not make amends it is clear that the people confessing are experiencing remorse and make a resolve not to repeat the same actions. In several cases, they explicitly return to the behavioral norm expected of them—for instance, offering food, rather than sex, to a *bhikkhu*. The request for acceptance is “*āyatim saṃvarāya*” for the purpose of future restraint.

There is a parallel here with the *Manusmṛti* and in the *Dharmasūtras*. In these texts the Brahminical focus has moved away from the correct performance of sacrificial rituals to a concern with ritual purity. The *Manusmṛti* says: “A man who fails to perform a prescribed act, or commits a disapproved act, or becomes addicted to sensory objects, should perform a restoration [*prāyaścitti*]” (Doniger and Smith 255 = *Ma-*

nuS 11.44.), i.e., perform a series of ritual actions designed to return him to a state of purity. Olivelle emphasizes that the concern of the *Dharmasūtras* is not purity per se, but with recovering lost purity, *returning* to purity. Although the dates of these texts are very uncertain, their beginnings seem to predate the Buddha. Olivelle gives 600 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. as a likely range for the date of their composition (214). Indeed, the Pāli canon portrays Brahmins as deeply concerned with ritual purity, suggesting that this development away from correctly performed rituals of the early Vedic period, was already well underway by the time the canon was closed.¹³

We might argue, as Tambiah does, that Buddhists made a “dramatic and forceful rejection of Brahminical ritual notions of purity and pollution” (96). The rejection of ritual purity was a common and perhaps defining characteristic of the *Samaṇa* movement in all its varieties and is not unique to Buddhism. Indeed, even when the renouncer tradition was reintegrated into the mainstream, ascetics still rejected “ridiculous conceptions and superficial deontological rules of defilement” such as impure food, touch, or caste, on the basis of disidentifying with the body as self (Vail 380).¹⁴ Renouncers, generally speaking, have completely opted out of the householder system of purity/impurity, but by doing so they serve to highlight the importance of purity in society, and religion, more generally. If ritual purity were not important, then rejecting it would be of no consequence. That said, although the Buddha did reject the literal interpretation of ritual purity, he does use purity as a metaphor for describing his *Dhamma*. Buddhaghosa sums up the entire Buddhist path as *visuddhimagga* or the path of purity. When there is not a quorum of four *bhikkhus* for reciting the *pātimokkha* the Buddha simply allows the *bhikkhus* to formally state their (moral) purity: “*parisuddho ahaṃ āvuso/bhante parisuddho ‘ti maṃ dhāretha*—I am pure, friend/sir, you should consider me pure” (Vin 1.124). Purity is redefined by the Buddha in ethical terms.

Transgression is metaphor of going beyond (*accayo*) the boundaries of ethical norms, and can also be seen as a loss of *ethical* purity.

Can Kamma Be Counteracted?

We can say then, that there was a general interest in the notions of “return to purity,” however “purity” is defined, and that the Buddha used this as metaphor with ethical implications. I propose to interpret “Dhammicly counteracting a transgression,” then, as making a return to *ethical* purity. But what does this mean in practice? I have already mentioned that the *Nikāyas* clearly state that the consequences of one’s actions cannot be escaped:

I declare monks, that actions willed performed and accumulated will not become extinct as long as their results have not been experienced, be it in this life , in the next life, or in subsequent future lives. And as long as these results of actions willed, performed and accumulated have not been experienced, there will be no making an end to suffering [dukkhassantakiriyaṃ]. (Nyanaponika and Bodhi 269, A v.292)

I believe that later traditions, including the Pāli commentarial tradition, allowed that kamma might be counteracted, as is evident in the term *upapīlaka-kamma* or counteracting kamma (Nyanatiloka 93). As far as I can see the canonical account of kamma does not support this. It does, however, allow for the effects of kamma to be mitigated. There are two main threads to this idea. In the first place, one reflects on the consequences of one’s actions, and this produces remorse (in the case of causing harm). Secondly, spiritual practices lessen the impact of painful *vedanas* on the practitioner.

Regarding mitigation of kamma by remorse, the idea is that by seeing (*passati*, or having seen *disvā*) the consequences of one's actions, one is motivated to restraint in the future, and by not doing actions with negative results, one eventually ceases to experience pain. This is more difficult than it sounds, if only because the workings of kamma are so complex that it is virtually impossible to know what all of the consequences of one's actions are. Unforeseen consequences, which may not become apparent in this life may lurk waiting to ripen. Another aspect of this is brought out in the first *sutta* in the chapter of tens in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* where it says that ethical behavior has freedom from remorse as its benefit and reward, freedom from remorse has gladness as its reward, and so on up to "the knowledge and vision of liberation" (A v.1, translated in Nyanatiloka and Bodhi 237-8). That is: ethical conduct and freedom from remorse are the beginning of a process that naturally culminates in liberation. The *Devadaha Sutta* (MN 101) looks at how suffering arises from attachment, using the image of a jealous man. By letting go of attachment, the jealous man is no longer made angry by the sight of his lover laughing and joking with another man. It is the mental act of attachment that is causing the pain of jealousy in the here and now. By letting go, one can stop the jealousy in the here and now; one can mitigate the effects of jealousy by removing the cause for its arising. This comes close to the idea of counter-acting kamma, but is still a version of not acting in a way that will cause future pain rather than a literal counteracting the effects of some previous action. Thus, it seems that at least as far as the *Nikāyas* are concerned there is some possibility of counteracting the effects of evil actions, although this is not a straightforward canceling out. There appears to be no way to avoid the effects of kamma completely.

Regarding mitigation of kamma by spiritual practice, in the *Lona-phala Sutta* (AN 3.99) the Buddha says that the same trifling misdemeanor can send one person to hell for lifetimes, whereas another may feel only

minor pain, and that in the here and now. Why the difference? It is because the effect is diminished by spiritual practice. When someone practices awareness, ethics, and dwells in the immeasurable (surely a reference to the *Brahmavihāras*) then they are less bothered by the consequences of small evils. Several images are offered, the first of which is a single grain of salt. Dropped into a small cup of water a single grain of salt can render it unfit to drink; dropped into the Ganges it makes no difference. Clearly this was written a long time before the Ganges reached its present state of pollution, but the image is still comprehensible. Similarly, at AN3.85 the Buddha dismisses minor transgressions for one who is training assiduously and is at least accomplished in virtue, if not meditation and wisdom. “He infringes some of the lesser training rules and rehabilitates himself. [so yāni tāni khuddānukhuddakāni sikkhāpadāni tāni āpajjatipi vuṭṭhātīpi]” (A i.231). Small infringements are not an impediment to spiritual progress if one is making an effort.

So, does confession constitute counteraction of kamma in these terms? First, to the extent that a person’s confession is really an acknowledgement of a transgression, he or she is able to experience remorse and return to ethical action, to ethical purity. Having returned to ethical purity, that person is once again set on the path that leads to liberation. Second, in the terms of the *Lonaphala Sutta*, admitting a transgression is putting awareness and ethics into action, which will reduce the subsequent effect of the transgression—counteracting not in the sense of completely wiping out, but as mitigating. And by confessing, a person may also be able to break an attachment (as we see in the two cases of attempted seduction) or give voice to an attachment broken. With the ceasing of conditions for its ripening, the fruit will be avoided (although this does not wipe the slate clean; it only prevents the generation of more fruits). The Buddha comments on accepting Ajātasattu’s confessions: “Vuddhi h’esā...ariyassa vinaye, yo accayaṃ accayato disvā yathādhammaṃ paṭikaroti, āyatīṃ saṃvaram āpajjatī ti—He will grow in the

discipline of the Noble Ones, who, having seen his transgression as a transgression, Dhammicly counteracting his transgression, exhibits restraint in the future” (D i.85). The Commentator simply paraphrases this passage without adding anything very substantial or illuminating (DA i.237). This would seem to confirm that the idea is a return to, even a re-commitment to, ethical purity. Hence, the answer seems to be: yes, a confession, offered honestly and with the necessary return to skillful actions, will counteract kamma to the extent that it *can* be counteracted.

This leaves the problem of how to render *yathādhammaṃ paṭikaroti* into English. This is not going to be easy because English moral terms are almost entirely derived from Judeo-Christian discourse where, for instance, punishment for wrong-doing is a requirement, and making amends involves specific kinds of public actions, often involving shaming the perpetrator. The Buddhist, however, is not required to undergo penance, nor apparently even to make amends, since kamma ripens without fail. Further punishment is not required because evil actions bring painful consequences for the doer.¹⁵ “Dhammicly counteract” is perhaps the closest we can come. It is not a particularly felicitous coinage even if it is useful. History shows that new coinages are often simply ignored, so I hesitate to suggest something awkward. Perhaps it is enough to spell out what it means, and not to insist on a signifier for that meaning? It will certainly be interesting see what the new PTS *Dictionary of Pāli* makes of this issue when it comes to this part of the lexicon.

Forgiveness

I must now see if I can answer my third question: does the Buddha forgive Ajātasattu? I have already said that the word *paṭiggaṇhāti* means “to receive, accept, take up,” and that the Commentator has glossed it with *khamatu* “be patient, endure it, forgive.” I think that “forgiveness” is un-

likely for several reasons. The syntax of the request for “forgiveness” indicates that it is the transgression which is the patient of the verb: if we used “forgive” it would have to refer to the *transgression* rather than the person. It is clear that Buddhist doctrine does not allow for absolution—Ajātasattu must bear the consequences of his action (albeit with a possibility of mitigation) and the Buddha has no influence over this.¹⁶ “Forgiveness” would be even more strange in light of the Buddha’s comments to the *bhikkhus* after the king has left: that he is “wounded” and “done for.” Recall that patricide is said in another *sutta* to be *unpardonable*. Moreover, since Ajātasattu has not directly injured the Buddha, it would be illogical for the Buddha to say that he forgives Ajātasattu.¹⁷ On the other hand, when Sāriputta was falsely accused it made sense for him to forgive his accuser. We must conclude that the Buddha does not forgive Ajātasattu, not because he will not or cannot, but because it does not fit the circumstances. The Buddha is simply accepting what Ajātasattu tells him, that he has erred but intends to be lawful in the future.

Conclusion

In light of the preceding, my fairly literal translation of the pericope involving Ajātasattu at D i.85 would be:

I transgressed, Bhante, when foolishly, in confusion, and unskillfully seeking to dominate I deprived my father, the good and just king, of his life. Sir, may the Blessed One, accept my transgression as a transgression, for future restraint.

You definitely, O King, fell into transgression when you foolishly, in confusion, and unskillfully deprived the good and just king of his life. Since, having seen your transgression as a transgression, you Dhammicly counteract it, we accept that. One who, having seen his transgression as a transgression, Dhammicly counteracts it, grows in the discipline of the Noble Ones, O King, and will restrain themselves in future.

In this article I have said that King Ajātasattu does “confess” his crime to the Buddha, although I have disagreed with previous translators on how to render the Pāli into English. I disagreed on several grounds with those who say that Ajātasattu “makes amends”: I pointed out that the narrative does not support it; that there is no occurrence of the pericope that makes reference to restorative actions; and that on Buddhist doctrinal grounds it would be inconsistent to say that by confessing Ajātasattu had “made amends” for his crime. The latter is reinforced in the commentary which records his destination, after being assassinated in turn by his own son, as the Hell of Copper Cauldrons (Bodhi 198) which accords with patricide being unpardonable.

I offered a detailed discussion of the word *paṭikaroti*, citing almost every occurrence of the word in the Canon and its commentaries in the process and argued that the *PED* definition, which in any case the *PED* author ignores in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, does not seem appropriate to how the word is used in the *Sutta* and *Vinaya Piṭakas*. Recently Margaret Cone has written: “It is no insult, it is no lèse-majesté . . . to disagree with the translations of T.W. Rhys Davids and Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli . . . On the contrary it is absolutely necessary if there is to be any progress in Pāli” (102). I hope I have demonstrated that “counteract” is not only a good translation on etymological grounds, but fits the doctrinal context of the Pāli *suttas*. Confession can be a way to *counteract* the effects of a transgression, and this highlights its usefulness as a spiritual practice. And

because many of our instances of confession occur outside the monastic context we can see that it has wider applications than simply the purity of monks reciting the *pātimokkha*. *Paṭikaroti* means “he counteracts” and this may be a useful translation which lacks Christian moral connotations and allows for a Buddhist interpretation. It may not be possible to find an exact English equivalent because the language lacks the concept of *kamma* which underlies Buddhist morality. Choosing a value neutral English term at least allows us to give it a Buddhist spin, and avoids having to explain that we don’t mean “make amends” in the Christian (or Brāhmaṇa or Jain or *Samaṇa*) sense.

I am somewhat surprised at the scarcity of research into this subject. It seems to me that a comparison of confession in Buddhism with Foucault’s ideas about confession might be interesting, as might a comparison with the relatively plentiful literature on the psychology of confession in other religious contexts. Certainly MacQueen’s study of other versions of the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* shows that attitudes went through major changes. We seem to have no account of confession in Buddhism which traces its development from the Pāli texts and into the Mahāyāna. It would be interesting to compare the *Sāmaññaphala*, especially the later versions of it, with the confession section, for instance, of the *Ugraparipṛcchā* which overlap in time and also allows for non-monastic confession.¹⁸

Abbreviations

A. *Āṅguttara Nikāya*

AA. *Āṅguttara-aṭṭhakathā*

D. *Dīgha Nikāya*

DA. *Sīlakkhandhavaggaṭṭhakathā*

M. *Majjhima Nikāya*

MA. *Majjhimapaṇṇāsa-aṭṭhakathā*

ManuS. *Manu Saṃhitā* a.k.a. *Manusmṛti*

PTS. Pali Text Society

S. *Saṃyutta Nikāya*

SA. *Saṃyuttanikāya-aṭṭhakathā*

SnA. *Suttanipāta-aṭṭhakathā*

Vin. *Vinaya*

Notes

1. I am grateful to Richard Gombrich for generously reading and commenting on a draft of this article. Dhīvan Thomas Jones disagreed with my initial conclusions, thereby forcing me to think more deeply about the implications of the text. Both Richard and Dhīvan made useful suggestions with regard to translating Pāli passages. Any remaining errors and infelicities are of course down to me.

2. It is quoted by Jaini, P.S., “A note on *micchādīṭṭhi* in *Mahāvamsa* 25.110,” *The Journal of the Pali Text Society*, v.29 (2007), p.155.

3. This and other unattributed translations are my own.

4. The verb is transitive, and the implied patient is presumably the transgression.

5. When *yathābālaṃ*, *yathāmūḷhaṃ*, and *yathā-akusalaṃ* are translated as adjectives—for example: “foolish, erring, wicked as I was . . .” (Walsh 108)—it moves the focus away from the action and onto the person, and the contrast between the transgression and the response to it is no longer so clear. This in turn obscures an important moral point: that in Buddhism it is actions or intentions, not people, that are skilful or unskillful,

6. These are D i.85, iii.55; M i.440, iii.247; S ii.28, ii.205; A i.238,ii.146, iv.377; Vin i.315, ii.124, ii.192, iv.18-19

7. The Buddha rebukes Anuruddha, and sleeping in the same place as a woman is made a *pācittiya* offence.

8. Compare this episode with MN35 where another Jain, Saccaka, thinks he can defeat the Buddha in debate but fails. His response is to admit defeat “we were bold [*dhaṃsī*] and impudent [*paḡabbha*] in thinking we could attack Gotama in debate,” and then offers to give the Buddha and the *bhikkhus* a meal (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 330, M i.236).

9. *PED* s.v. *pācittiya* notes that Geiger’s *Grammar* links the Pāli *pācittiya* with *prāyaścitti*, although *PED* itself derives it from *prāk + citta + ika*, “i.e., of the nature of directing one’s mind upon.”

10. *Paṭidesemi* is another word translated as “I confess.” The verb literally means something like “I point back to (from *deseti* “to indicate, show, teach”) and in this context the person is drawing the attention of another to some previous transgression; so, “confession” is fairly straightforward as a translation.

11. I am grateful to Professor Gombrich for supplying me with a copy of this difficult to obtain paper. The pagination may be different from the original.

12. Judging by contemporary Jain literature, they now appear to use the Sanskrit equivalent: *pratikramaṇa*.

13. A contemporaneous development which the Canon fails to note is the adoption of the *Atharvaveda* as the “Fourth Veda.” The Pāli texts, and indeed Buddhaghosa, continue to refer only to the Three Vedas, and when the *Atharva* is mentioned it is in disparaging terms.

14. Vail’s comments derive from Olivelle’s translations of the *Samnyāsin Upaniṣads*, which are from a later date but seem to sum up the attitude of many *samaṇas*, for example, the “dog-duty ascetics” (*kukkuravatiko*) in the Buddha’s time as well.

15. Braun argues that public confession in the *pātimokkha* ceremony is a form of punishment for monks via the threat of public shaming and loss of status, which he likens to physical punishment (103f). However, many of the confessions we are looking at in this article are personal and private.

16. Later versions of the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* turn this on its head. MacQueen shows that whereas in the Pāli version, the story of the meeting between the Buddha is simply the frame for an important discourse, and Ajātasattu does not escape his deeds, the versions preserved in the Chinese Canon, and a fragment in Sanskrit make the meeting of the Buddha and Ajātasattu the most important feature, relegate the discourse to second place. One Chinese version (C1 in MacQueen’s notation) says of Ajātasattu “his transgression is diminished; he has removed a weighty offence” (48-49). C2 has by contrast “he has completely done away with imperfections and impurities and is free from the Outflows [*āsravas*]” (69) which is tantamount to Awakening! MacQueen attributes the change to: “In the 5th century A.D. this religious event [Ajātasattu’s conversion] was of far more interest than the issue of whether or not there were immediate fruits to the life of a monk” and that “the more depraved the

person is who is saved, the more the Buddha's divine power is demonstrated" (215).

17. There are, I suppose, two hypothetical objections to this assertion: Bimbisāra was a friend and supporter of the Buddha; and Ajātasattu had previously commissioned an assassin to kill the Buddha. Even if these held in the case of Ajātasattu, they don't have general applicability.

18. See Nattier's study and translation of the *Ugraparipṛcchā*, especially 117 ff and 261 ff.

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