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Concept of Karma in Buddhism

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# Critical Questions Towards a Naturalized Concept of Karma in Buddhism

Dale S. Wright\*

Abstract: In an effort to articulate a naturalized concept of karma for the purposes of contemporary ethical reflection, this paper raises four critical questions about the Buddhist doctrine of karma. The paper asks (1) about the advisability of linking the concept of karma to assurance of ultimate cosmic justice through the doctrine of rebirth; (2) about the effects of this link on the quest for human justice in the social, economic, and political spheres of culture; (3) about the kinds of rewards that the doctrine of karma attaches to virtuous action, whether they tend to be necessary or contingent consequences; and (4) about the extent to which karma is best conceived individually or collectively. The paper ends with suggestions for how a non-metaphysical concept of karma might function and what role it might play in contemporary ethics.

The Buddha warned<sup>1</sup> that karma is so mysterious a process that it is essentially unfathomable, declaring it one of the four topics not suited to healthy philosophical meditation because it leads to “vexation and madness. Nevertheless, it is essential that we engage in the processes of critical thinking about the concept of karma, thereby taking the same risks that many Asian Buddhists have also taken. It is important for us to do so because Buddhist (and Hindu) teachings on karma and moral life have now entered contemporary currents of Western thought and culture, and deserve to be scrutinized for their potential value and weaknesses. The risk *is* serious, of course, because in Asia karma is the primary concept governing the moral sphere of culture. Westerners have faced doubts about critical thinking in this same sphere of culture, when early modern thinkers wondered whether

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moral conduct would survive critical reflection on the concepts of theistic judgment and heavenly reward. Most have concluded that the benefits of critical thinking about morality outweigh the risks, and that the possibility of further development and refinement in the sphere of human morality warrants energetic effort.

The primary reason that karma is a promising ethical concept for us today is that it appears to propose a natural connection between a human act and its appropriate consequence, or, in traditional terms, between sin and suffering, virtue and reward. The connection requires no supernatural intervention: we suffer or succeed because of the natural outcome of our actions themselves, rather than through the subsequent intervention of divine punishment or reward. Moral errors contain their own penalties as natural consequences, and every virtue encompasses its own reward. Although some dimensions of Western culture presuppose such an arrangement today, it is instructive to recall that this kind of understanding wasn't articulated in the West until Rousseau in the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout Asia, karma defines the ethical dimension of culture and remains the key to understanding Buddhist morality. Karma is the teaching that tells practitioners that it matters what they do throughout their lives, and how they do it. It articulates a close relationship between what one chooses to do and who or what that person becomes over time. The extraordinary sophistication of this early concept should, in fact, be counted as one of the most significant achievements of south Asian culture, and an impressive gift to contemporary ethical thinking globally.

A number of scholars<sup>3</sup> have claimed that one of the primary contributions of Buddhism to Indian culture was that it "ethicized" an earlier pre-ethical concept of karma in extending it beyond the sphere of religious ritual by applying it not just to ritual behaviors that pleased the gods but to all good acts.<sup>4</sup>

The domain of "all good acts" is, of course, the sphere of ethics as we know it today, and the applicability of the concept of karma to this sphere is the primary issue of this essay. The essay is based on the thesis that a naturalistic concept of karma, inherent in the concept as articulated in the many Buddhist versions of it, can and should be developed, and that with further cultivation for the emerging context of contemporary global culture, the concept of karma could constitute a major element in the ethical thinking of the future. Doing that, however, requires critical thinking. This essay, therefore, raises questions about four dimensions of the concept of karma as it has been understood in the history of Buddhism. Each area of questioning is offered as a way to begin to hone the concept, to separate it from elements

of supernatural thinking, and to work towards locating those elements that might be most effective today in the domain of ethics. Following these four exercises in critical thinking, a few suggestions are offered about the emergence of a naturalized concept of karma.

The first dimension of the Buddhist doctrine of karma that warrants reflective scrutiny is its assertion of ultimate cosmic justice. All of the world's major religions have longstanding traditions of promise that, at some point, good and evil lives will be rewarded with good and evil consequences, and that everyone will receive exactly what they deserve. But all of these religions are also forced to admit that this doctrine contradicts what we sometimes experience in our lives. Good people may just as readily be severely injured or die from an accident, or die early of disease, as anyone else, and people who have lived unjustly and unfairly will not necessarily experience any deprivation in their lives. Some people seem to receive rewards in proportion to the merit of their lives, while others do not. Among those who don't appear to get what they deserve, some seem to receive more than merit would dictate, and others, less.

That all of these outcomes are common and unsurprising to us should lead us to question the kind of relationship that exists between merit and reward. One way to face this realization is to conclude, at least provisionally, that the cosmos is largely indifferent to the sphere of human merit as well as to our expectations of justice. If a morally sound person is no more or no less likely to die early of a disease than anyone else, then maturity and honesty of vision on this matter may require that we question traditional assumptions that cosmic justice *must* prevail. Although *we* certainly care about matters of justice, it may be that beyond the human sphere we will not be able to find evidence of that kind of concern.

The religious claim that there is a supernatural connection between moral merit and ultimate destiny may derive from our intuitive sense that there *ought* to be such a connection. We all sense that there ought to be justice, even in settings where it seems to be lacking. That the corporate criminal ought to be punished, that the innocent child ought to live well rather than to suffer from a devastating disease, and that some things ought to be different from what they appear to be, are all manifestations of our deep seated sense of justice. Virtue and reward, vice and punishment, ought to be systematically related, and where they are not, we all feel a sense of impropriety. But whether that now intuitive internal sense is sufficient reason to postulate a supernatural scheme of cosmic justice beyond our understanding and experience is an open question that has remained as closed in Buddhism as it has in other religions. The form that this closure

takes in Buddhism is the doctrine of rebirth, which plays the same role that heaven does in theistic traditions as ultimate guarantor of justice. As it is traditionally conceived in Asia, karma requires the metaphysical doctrine of rebirth to support its often counter-experiential claims about the ultimate triumph of cosmic justice for the individual.

The second question about the doctrine of karma follows from the first, and is, in fact, the primary critique that has been leveled against the idea since it has been introduced to the West. This is that the idea of karma may be socially and politically disempowering in its cultural effect, that without intending to do this, karma may in fact support social passivity or acquiescence in the face of oppression of various kinds. This possible negative effect derives again from the link formed between karma and rebirth in order to posit large-scale cosmic justice over long and invisible stretches of time where other more immediate forms of justice appear not to exist. If one assumes that cosmic justice prevails over numerous lifetimes, and that therefore the situations of inequality that people find themselves in are essentially of their own making through moral effort or lack of it in previous lives, then it may not seem either necessary or even fair to attempt to equalize opportunities among people or to help those in desperate circumstances. For example, if you believe that a child being severely abused by his family is now receiving just reward for his past sins, you may find insufficient reason to intervene even when that abuse appears to be destructive to the individual child and to the society.

Now, of course, it is an open question, an historical and social-psychological question, whether or to what extent the doctrines of karma and rebirth have ever really had this effect. We know very well that Buddhist concepts of compassion have prominent places in the various traditions, and we can all point to Buddhist examples of compassionate social effort on behalf of the poor and the needy. Nevertheless, we can see where the logic of this belief easily leads, in the minds of some people at least, and we can suspect that it may have unjustifiably diminished or undermined concern for the poor and the suffering in all Buddhist cultures. The link between karma and rebirth can reasonably be taken to justify nonaction in the socio-economic and political spheres, and may help provide rational support for acquiescence to oppressive neighbors, laws, and regimes. If and when this does occur, then the Buddhist teaching of nonviolence can be distorted into a teaching of nonaction and passivity, and be subject to criticism as a failure of courage and justice.

If the truth is that the cosmos is simply indifferent to human questions of merit and justice, that truth makes it all the more important that human

beings attend to these matters themselves. If justice is a human concept, invented and evolving in human minds and culture, and no where else, then it is up to us alone to see that we follow through on it. If justice is not structured into the universe itself, then it will have been a substantial mistake to leave it up to the universe to see that justice is done. Although, given our finitude, human justice will always be imperfect, it may be all the justice we have. Moreover, the fact that religious traditions, including Buddhism, have claimed otherwise may be insufficient reason to accept the assertion of a cosmic justice beyond the human as the basis for our actions in the world.

A third area of inquiry in which to engage the concept of karma concerns the nature of the reward or consequence that might be expected to follow from morally relevant actions. In pursuing this line of questioning, I will be employing a distinction borrowed from Alasdair MacIntyre that is now common to contemporary ethics between goods that are externally or contingently related to a given practice, and goods that are internal to a practice and that cannot be acquired in any other way.<sup>5</sup> Because the practice under consideration here is any morally relevant action, we want to distinguish between goods or rewards that *may* accompany that moral act, but which are only contingently and externally related to it, and rewards that are directly linked to the practice, available through no other means, and therefore internal to that specific practice.

If we look at a single act, say an act of extraordinary generosity or kindness, such as when someone goes far out of her way to help someone else through a problem that he has brought upon himself, we can see many possibilities for rewards that might accrue through some contingency entailed in that relation. The person helped may in fact be wealthy, and offer a large sum of money in grateful reciprocity. Members of his family may honor the practitioner of kindness, and her reputation in the community for compassion and character might grow. She may become known as a citizen of extraordinary integrity, which could lead to all kinds of indirect rewards. These are all good consequences, and all deserved, but also all contingent outcomes, all goods that are external to the moral act itself. They may or may not be forthcoming. Indeed, on occasion contingent misunderstanding may give rise to exactly the opposite outcome — the same act of generosity may be misunderstood, resented, reviled, or lead to a denigrated reputation that the person never overcomes.

The rewards or goods internal to that act of kindness are directly related to the act, and aren't contingent on anything but the act. When we act generously, we do something incremental to our character — we shape ourselves slightly further into a person who understands how to act gener-

ously, is inclined to do so, and does so with increasing ease. We etch that way of behaving just a little more firmly into our character, into who we are. That is true whether the act is positive or negative in character.<sup>6</sup> Generosity, when it becomes an acquired feature of our character, becomes a virtue, in fact one of the central Buddhist virtues, the first of the six perfections, for example. “A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”<sup>7</sup> This is to say that acts of generosity may or may not give rise to external goods like rewards of money or prestige, but they do give rise to a transformation in character that makes us generous, kind, and concerned about the well-being of others. Internal goods derive naturally from the practice as cause.

Our question, then, is what kinds of rewards, or goods, does the doctrine of karma correlate to virtuous or nonvirtuous acts, and how should we assess that dimension of the doctrine? Familiarity with the tradition prevents us from giving a univocal answer to this question: different texts and different teachers promise many different kinds of rewards for karmically significant acts, depending on who they are and who they happen to be addressing. Both internal and external goods are commonly brought into play. From acts of generosity we get everything from the virtue of generosity as an internal good to great wealth, an external good, with a variety of specific alternatives in between. Teachers often lean heavily one way or the other, from emphasis on external goods such as health and wealth to a strict focus on the internal goods of character, the development of virtues like wisdom and compassion. Consider this example from the Dalai Lama, where he is primarily interested in external goods. “As a result of stealing,” he writes, “one will lack material wealth.”<sup>8</sup> Because we all know that successful thieves and corporate criminals may or may not live their lives lacking in material wealth, we can only agree with this claim insofar as we assume that the author is here referring to an afterlife, some life beyond the end of this one. That is to say that only the metaphysics of rebirth can make this statement plausible. Otherwise, the doctrine of karma cannot truthfully guarantee such an outcome of external rewards.

Had he been focused on internal goods, he might have said that, as a result of stealing, one will have deeply troubled relations to other people, as well as a distorted relation to material goods. As a result of stealing one will find compassion and intimacy more difficult, be further estranged from the society in which one lives, and feel isolated and unable to trust others. As a result of stealing, one will become even more likely to commit other

unhealthy acts, and may ultimately find oneself in an unfulfilled and diminished existence. These results of the act of stealing have a direct relation to the act; every act pushes one further in some direction of character formation or another, and further instantiates us in some particular relationship to the world. External goods, while certainly important, cannot be so easily guaranteed, except insofar as one offers that guarantee metaphysically by referring to lives beyond the current one.

Although, promises of personal rebirth aside, there would appear to be no *necessary* connection between moral achievement and external rewards, there is a sense in which moral achievement does often make external rewards more likely, even if this is never a relation of necessity. This is true because the more human beings enter the equation, the more likely it is that a human sense of justice will intervene, drawing some connection between virtue and reward, or sin and suffering. People who characteristically treat others with kindness and just consideration are often treated kindly themselves, although not always. Those who are frequently mean spirited and selfish are often treated with disdain. Honesty in business often pays off in the form of trusting, faithful customers, while the habit of cheating customers will often come back to haunt the merchant. These dimensions of karma and of ethical relations are clear to us, and we are thankful that they exist. But it would seem that their existence is human and social, rather than structured into the cosmos.

Therefore, all we can say is that things often work this way, not that they always do, or that they must. Sometimes unscrupulous businessmen thrive; on occasion, kindness and honesty go completely unrewarded. These occurrences make it impossible for us to claim a necessary relation between moral merit and external forms of reward. Although it is clearly true that to some extent virtue is its own reward, what we cannot claim is that other kinds of reward are meted out in the same way. Evidence shows us that they are not, even if the human exercise of justice often directs external rewards towards those who are deserving.

Let me summarize the forgoing by saying: how you comport yourself ethically has at least three ramifications: (1) it shapes your character and helps determine who or what you become; (2) it helps shape others and the society in which you live, now and into the future; and (3) it encourages others to treat you in ways that correspond to your character — they will often do unto you as you have done unto them, although not always. The first and second outcomes can be counted as goods internal to ethical action; our actions do shape us and they do have an effect on the world. The third is external, that is, contingent, in that it may or may not follow from the

ethical act. The more human justice there is, the more the distribution of external goods is likely to match the extent of our merit.

Thus, insofar as we can gather evidence on this matter, some dissociation between merit and external goods is important to maintain. Although good acts do lead to the development of good character, being good does not always or necessarily lead to a life of good fortune. Therefore, if there is a contingent relation between external goods as rewards and merit, it would be wise to articulate a system of ethics and a doctrine of karma that do not rely heavily on this relation in spite of the longstanding Buddhist tradition of doing so for purposes of moral motivation.

The fourth and final dimension of the concept of karma that I want to examine is the extent to which karma can be adequately conceived as a consequence or destiny that is individual, as opposed to one that is social or collective. Although there are a few interesting places in Buddhist philosophy where a collective dimension to karma is broached, in Asanga and Vasubandhu for example, I think that it is true to say that this concept has been overwhelmingly understood in individual terms, that is, that the karma produced by *my* acts is *mine* primarily, rather than ours collectively.<sup>9</sup> For the most part, references to karma in contemporary Buddhist literature follow the same individualized pattern. From my point of view, there are serious philosophical difficulties with this way of understanding the impact of our lives, however. Perhaps most strikingly, the view that my acts and their repercussions remain enclosed in a personal continuum that never dissipates into the larger society and continues to be forever “mine” reinforces a picture of the world as composed of a large number of discreet and isolated souls, a view that a great deal of Buddhist thought has sought to undermine. The articulation of this view among the Jains, in Samkhya, and others, however, clearly shows the powerful impact of the concern for ultimate individual destiny in the Indian intellectual/religious world around the time that Buddhism was developing its vision.

Although the primary direction of Buddhist thinking may have been to undercut the entire question of ultimate individual destiny through the alternative possibility of *no self*, the question has continued to surface and to demand an answer. It may very well be, however, that Buddhist attempts to satisfy the desire behind the question by offering the concept of rebirth to allay fears about the continuation of individual existence has the additional and unwanted effect of blocking further development along the alternative paths clearly laid out in the early teachings. It stands in the way of the achievement of a broader vision of the meanings of no self, and a more effective and mature understanding of the ways each of us continue to affect

the future beyond our personal lives. Personal anxieties about death are a powerful force in the mind, so strong that they can prevent other impersonal and trans-individual conceptions from rising to the cultural surface.

The line of thinking that began to develop most explicitly in early Mahayana texts, which imagined complex interrelations among individuals, recognized that the consequences of any act in the world could not be easily localized and isolated, and that effects radiate out from causes in an ultimately uncontainable fashion, rendering lines of partition between selves and between all entities in the world significantly more porous and malleable than we tend to assume. Expanding the image of the Bodhisattva, Buddhists began to see how lines of influence and outcome co-mingle, along family lines and among friends, co-workers, and co-citizens, such that the future for others arises dependent in part upon my acts, and I arise dependent in part upon the shaping powers of the accumulating culture around me. This type of thinking, based heavily on the expanding meaning of dependent origination, was forcefully present in several dimensions of Buddhist ethics. My suspicion, however, is that we have yet to see the development of this aspect of Buddhism to the extent of its potential, and that it has been continually redirected by what must have seemed more pressing questions about individual destiny.

As an example of a possible pattern of redirection, consider the development of merit transfer, the idea that one might give the rewards from one of your own good acts to another person whose karmic status might be in greater jeopardy. Mahayana Buddhists were, of course, particularly attracted to this idea; they sought ways to develop an unselfish concern for the spiritual welfare of all sentient beings, and focused intently on methods enabling them to get out from under the self-centered implications of a personal spiritual quest. The idea that they could pursue the good in their own quest, and then in a compassionate and unselfish meditative gesture, contemplate giving to others whatever good had resulted from that act, seemed an excellent middle path between selfish personal quests and compassion for others. But one effect of this teaching was that it tended to picture the karma or the goodness of an act as a self-enclosed package that was theirs alone, and that could be generously given away at some later point if circumstances warranted. As a meditative device used to prevent individuals from coveting and hoarding their own spiritual merit, this may on occasion have been effective. But a problem looms when a skillful meditative device is taken out of that contemplative setting of mental self-cultivation and treated as a picture of what really does happen when we do good things.

It is important to remember that many Buddhist moral teachings are not

first of all prescriptions about how to treat others, but rather prescriptions for how to treat your own mind in meditation so that you become the kind of moral person that the tradition envisioned. While it may be very good for you, having done a good deed, to humble yourself in meditation on it by picturing yourself giving the merit of that act to others, it is not good for you to misunderstand the moral enterprise by reifying the terms and processes operative within it. What kind of magical or supernatural entity would karma have to be to make such a gift of merit make sense? Focusing so intently on your own moral merit, it is also inevitable that you come to realize that donating your merit to another is itself a really good and generous act, one that can't help but win you lots of good merit.

What began as a way to drop the meritorious self from consideration, ends up slipping it in through the back door in such a way that the entire specter of merit transfer becomes yet another way to picture yourself as deserving of merit. When seen from the outside, this is doubly problematic, because the one to whom you are supposedly being generous, in fact, gets nothing because, after all, this is mental exercise, while you picture yourself doubling your own merit, thereby cultivating exactly the pride and self-satisfaction that you wanted to overcome. If the end pursued is understood in terms of humility and unselfishness, entangling yourself in a mental economy of merit calculation and exchange is not likely to be effective. The practices of merit transfer just fit too smoothly into old habits of self-concern, and all too readily block the development of kinds of selflessness envisioned in the bodhisattva ideal. The literal and highly reified conception of karma often presupposed in the practices of merit transfer are philosophically problematic, as well as counterproductive to the effort to understand karma as a viable possibility for contemporary ethics.

There are a variety of ways in which an individualized concept of karma continues to perpetuate itself in spite of a wealth of ideas in the Buddhist tradition that would mitigate against it. The basic ideas of impermanence, dependent origination, no self, and later extensions of these ideas such as emptiness are prominent among them. But all of these ideas run aground on the concept of rebirth, and it is there that karma is most problematic. All four critical questions raised in this paper about karma derive their impact from the association that karma has with rebirth.

The question of rebirth and afterlife is as complicated as it is interesting, and therefore not one that I'll take up in this setting. But let me simply indicate the direction philosophical questioning on this issue might take — just two points. First, if this really is an open question about what happens to people after they die, then we would expect that evidence will need to

play at least some role, and we would assume that scientific investigation is the best way to gather and assess it. But here we encounter an unsurprising division between pious Hindus and Buddhists who write books gathering what seems to them the incontrovertible evidence for reincarnation, and Western scientists who, seeing no evidence whatsoever, don't even raise the question. This is to say that, constrained by a variety of traditional and modern doctrines, this question hasn't been asked in a serious way, both out of deference to religious belief and because the question itself eludes conclusive response because what it pursues is by definition beyond the world in which we live, that is, fully metaphysical. That leaves most of us in the position of needing to sort out the possibilities ourselves, but in the meantime the most honest and therefore spiritually and intellectually compelling response is to admit that we simply don't know what happens to us after we die. Better, it would seem, to allow the mystery and gravity of human mortality to press upon us, and to stimulate our asking the kinds of questions that reflect our deepest human concerns, rather than to leap in one direction or the other on the question of afterlife.

The second point, however, is the difficulty that Buddhists have had historically in getting a doctrine of rebirth to cohere with their other central values. Those of us who have read through *Abhidharma* literature are familiar with the contortions that Buddhist intellectuals went through in the process of explaining what rebirth might mean in view of the Buddhist claim that there is no permanent or substantial self because all things are both impermanent and dependent on other impermanent conditions. Wherever in Buddhist thought rebirth is given a strong and substantial role, no self and other dimensions of the teachings are reduced in significance. Wherever the teaching of no self and related doctrinal elements are given strong and consistent application, very little is left that rebirth could mean. Philosophers in the future will continue to raise questions about the tension between these two early and important dimensions in Buddhist thought, and to examine what possibilities for thought were left unexplored in the Buddhist tradition due to logical difficulties on this one issue. For some, it has already been tempting to suspect that the idea of rebirth in Buddhism is an intellectual relapse, a place within the teachings where practitioners were simply unable or unwilling to consider the radical consequences of their teachings, and where they may have fallen prey to the dangers of grasping for the immortal self, or for the kinds of permanence and security that Buddhist psychology warned against so perceptively. These two areas, I suspect, will be the places where the debate about rebirth and its role in the workings of karma will tend to focus. But we'll see; these are questions that require

cautious, delicate treatment because they are located close to the life force that motivates human beings. But that's exactly why they need to be raised as real questions

In several respects, rebirth stands in the way of our understanding karma in purely ethical terms. Rebirth encourages us (1) to assume a concept of cosmic justice for which we have insufficient evidence; (2) to ignore issues of justice in this life on the grounds of speculation about future lives; (3) to focus our hopes on external rewards for our actions, like wealth and status in a future life rather than on the construction of character in this one; and (4) to conceive of our lives in strictly individual terms, as a personal continuum through many lives, rather than collectively, where individuals share in a communal destiny, contributing their lives and efforts to that collective destiny. Although at the time when Buddhism first emerged, karma and rebirth continued to be linked together in order to make the newly emerging domain of ethics viable, today, ironically, given the cultural evolution of ethical understanding, karma may need to be disconnected from the metaphysics of rebirth in order to continue the development of Buddhist ethics.<sup>10</sup> If the early Buddhists did ethicize the concept of karma by lifting it out of the sphere of religious ritual by applying it to all of our morally relevant actions, then carrying through on that ethicization will require that the link between karma and rebirth be questioned, perhaps altered. Among Buddhists today, educated in a world of science and favorably disposed to contemporary standards for the articulation of truth, a naturalized concept of karma without supernatural preconditions will more likely be both persuasive and motivationally functional.<sup>11</sup>

How would we develop such a concept? Here are just a few suggestions. A naturalistic theory of karma would treat choice and character as mutually determining — each arising dependent on the other. It would show how the choices you make, one by one, shape your character, and how the character that you have constructed, choice by choice, sets limits on the range of possibilities that you will be able to consider in each future decision. Karma implies that once you have made a choice and acted on it, it will always be with you, and you will always be the one who at that moment and under those conditions embraced that path of action. The past, on this view, is never something that once happened to you and is now over; instead, it is the network of causes and conditions that has already shaped you and that is right now setting conditions for every choice and move you make. From the very moment of an act on, you *are* that choice, which has been appropriated into your character along with countless others. In this light human freedom becomes highly visible, and awesome in its gravity, but is noticeable only to

one who has realized the far-reaching and irreversible impact on oneself and others of choices made, of karma.

The concept of karma brings this pattern of freedom in self-cultivation clearly to the fore, and does so with great insight and natural subtlety. It highlights a structure of personal accountability in which every act contains its own internal, natural rewards or consequences, even if Buddhists sometimes succumbed to the temptation to offer a variety of external rewards as well. Although money does talk, promising it when it may or may not be forthcoming is a questionable strategy of motivation. Better to teach, as Buddhists have, that the best things in life are free, and that the very best of these is the freedom to cultivate oneself into someone who is wise, insightful, compassionate, and magnanimous.<sup>12</sup> This freedom, however, operates under strict and always fluctuating conditions. A mature concept of karma would encourage people to recognize the finitude of freedom and choice, and all of the ways we are shaped by forces far beyond our control. Although always attempting to extend our ethical imaginations, and therefore our freedom, failure simultaneously to recognize the encompassing forces of nature, society, and history places us in a precarious position, and renders our choices naive. Our choices and our lives originate dependent on these larger forces, and in view of them, mindfulness and reverence are appropriate responses.

If the solitary ethical decisions we have been focusing on so far have the power to move us in the direction of greater forms of human excellence, then how much more so the unconscious “non-choices” that we make every day in the form of habits and customs that deepen over time and engrave their mark into our character. Some accounts of karma are exceptionally insightful in that their understanding of character development takes full account of the enormous importance of ordinary daily practice or customs of behavior, what we habitually do during the day often without reflection or choice — the ways we do our work and manage our time, the ways we daydream, or cultivate resentment, or lose ourselves in distractions, down to the very way we eat and breathe.

This is clearly a strong point in Buddhist ethics. On this understanding of karma, which was closely related to the development of meditation, ethics is largely a matter of daily practice, understood as the self-conscious cultivation of ordinary life and mentality towards the approximation of an ideal defined by images of human excellence, the awakened arhats and bodhisattvas.<sup>13</sup> To an extent not found in other religious and philosophical traditions, Buddhists saw that ethics is only rarely about difficult and monumental decisions, and that, in preparing yourself for life, it is much more important to focus on what you do with yourself moment by moment than

it is to attempt to imagine how you will solve the major moral crises when they arrive. They seem to have realized that it is only through disciplined practices of daily self-cultivation that you would be in a mental position to handle the big issues when they do come up. They also claimed, insightfully, that the self is malleable and open to this kind of ethical transformation, and here we see the impact of the concept of no-self as it was developed in various dimensions of the tradition.

Moreover, the Buddhist doctrine of no-self is one of the best among several places in the teachings where we can begin to see beyond the individual interpretation of karma that has dominated the tradition so far. If karma is to be a truly comprehensive teaching about human actions and their effects, extensive development of all of the ways in which the effects of our acts radiate into other selves and into social structures will need to be grafted onto the doctrine of karma as it currently stands. This extension of the doctrine has already begun, however, and will not be difficult to pursue because it can be grounded on the extraordinary Mahayana teaching of emptiness, the Buddhist vision of the interpenetration of all beings. Following this vision, we can imagine a collective understanding of karma that overcomes limitations deriving from the concept's original foundation in the individualized spirituality of early Buddhist monasticism.

A naturalized philosophical account of the Buddhist idea of karma can, it seems to me, insightfully reflect these and other dimensions of our human situation. Separated from elements of supernatural thinking that have been associated with karma since its inception, its basic tenets of freedom, decision, and accountability are impressive, and clearly show us something important about the human situation, including the project of self-construction, both individually and collectively conceived. I conclude, therefore, imagining elements in the doctrine of karma having the potential to be truly effective in the effort to design concepts of ethical education that are both honest to the requirements of thinking in our time, and profoundly enabling in the quest for human excellence.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Anguttara Nikaya*: iv, 77.

<sup>2</sup>See Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere among them.

<sup>4</sup>Although not a historian of early Indian culture, I suspect that the ethicization of the concept of karma was occurring not just in Buddhist monastic circles but more widely in other avant-garde segments of Indian culture at the same time.

<sup>5</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, p. 188.

<sup>6</sup>The first thing that accrues from an act of this sort is that someone is helped, something good has been done to the world out beyond the practitioner. But my focus here is on the rewards that come to the agent.

<sup>7</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 191.

<sup>8</sup>Dalai Lama, *The Way to Freedom: Core Teachings of Tibetan Buddhism*. San Francisco: Harper, 1994. p. 100.

<sup>9</sup>See William Waldron, *The Buddhist Unconscious*, London: Routledge/Curzon, 2003, pp. 160-169.

<sup>10</sup>In a book just released as this essay came to completion, Robert Thurman articulates exactly the opposite point on the concept of rebirth: that without a belief in individual immortality — a theory of the soul — a fully ethical life is not possible. While respecting the motivation and sincerity of those who do consider the idea of rebirth to be essential both to Buddhism and to enlightened life, I disagree with the arguments provided, and find adherence to contemporary standards of critical thinking the most compelling consideration. See *Infinite Life: Seven Virtues for Living Well*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2004.

<sup>11</sup>Winston L. King explores the question of the separability of karma and rebirth, concluding that “a doctrine of karmic rebirth is not essential to a

viable and authentic Buddhist ethic in the West,” in “A Buddhist Ethic Without Karmic Rebirth,” in the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Volume 1, 1994.

<sup>12</sup>The question of what to do about people who can only be motivated by promises of external rewards is an important social question, but not one within the scope of a philosophical effort to reflect on the truth of the matter or on what the rest of us should believe for motivational purposes.

<sup>13</sup>For the connection between meditation and Buddhist ethics, see Georges Dreyfus, “Meditation as Ethical Activity,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 2, 1995.