

VALUING KARMA: A CRITICAL CONCEPT FOR ORIENTING INTERDEPENDENCE TOWARD PERSONAL AND PUBLIC GOOD

Peter D. Hershock, East-West Center

Karma has not fared well in the course of Buddhism's transmission into the West. Or, perhaps more accurately stated, the concept of karma has not fared well in the translation of Buddhism into the social and cultural idioms of the late modern and early postmodern worlds. If anything, the fortunes of karma have fallen considerably even as general scholarly and public interests in Buddhist teachings have waxed steadily, and in some ways quite remarkably, over the past fifty years. Compared to other core Buddhist teachings and concepts like interdependence, impermanence, no-self, emptiness, and the need to alloy wisdom and compassion—all of which have found valid places within the dominant idioms of contemporary life—karma has been pressed by circumstance and by contemporary “common sense” to the margins of the Middle Way.¹

According to the canonical account of the Buddha's awakening, his realization of the Middle Way occurred with insight into the process of co-dependent origination. This was the third and culminating “super-knowledge” (*abhiññā*) he achieved during the night he became a fully enlightened being, and was directly preceded by knowledge of his own rebirth genealogy and of the process of sentient birth, life, death and rebirth as a function of karma. The penultimate position granted to understanding karma in the traditional account of the Buddha's enlightenment effectively depicts insight into the operation of karma as the gateway to liberation from all suffering and trouble. In doing so, it also suggests seeing insight into karma as dramatically coincident with the full ripening of *bodhicitta* or heartfelt commitment to enlightenment.

In effect, the Buddha's understanding of karma is the penultimate event in his infinitely deep rebirth genealogy—a genealogy throughout which he is clearly a bodhisattva or buddha-in-the-making, and which climaxes dramatically in a life that follows the pattern or rule exemplified in the culminating lives of all the other Buddhas in his own buddha lineage. As laid out in the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* (*DN 14*),² this pattern includes being born with the karma to become either a world-conquering, wheel-turning king (a paragon of socio-political authority) or a fully

enlightened being (a paragon of spiritual authority). That is, understanding the operation of karma can be seen as the final movement of transit into a life of peerless benefit to others.

The depreciation of karma as a core Buddhist teaching over the past fifty years would thus be striking in any case. But it is particularly so given that the same fifty-year period has seen the rise of a distinctive contemporary discourse about “socially engaged” Buddhism—an approach to practicing and theorizing about Buddhism that, in purportedly novel ways or degrees, emphasizes intentional action in the world of daily affairs for the express benefit of others. As developed in the early discourses collected in the Pali Canon, as well as in such seminal Mahayana scriptures as the Lotus Sutra, the concept of karma practically grounds insight into the interdependent origination of all things, focusing attention on the qualitative dynamics that characterize the relationship among actions undertaken with purpose, intention or motive (*cetanā*), and both their historical or dramatic precedents and experienced consequences. That is, the concept of karma expresses/yields insight into the ongoing and situationally specific correlation among values-intentions-actions and relational outcomes/opportunities. Not surprisingly, the most regular appeals to karma in the *Sutta Piṭaka* are in teachings concerned with what contributes to either “faring well” or “faring ill” in one’s life and circumstances—a faring that ranges across the full spectrum of relational domains from the bodily to the social, economic, political and spiritual.

There is thus considerable irony in the fact that the adaptive editing of Buddhism in and for the contemporary (especially Western) world has brought about lowering appreciation of the metaphysical-ethical force of karma and the centrality of such appreciation in Buddhist praxis, while at the same time promoting visions of a “new *yāna*” (or vehicle of Buddhist teachings) focused on engaging explicitly societal issues. A further irony is that these signs of resistance to the full critical force of karma—within the contemporary imaginaire—have emerged over an historical period when systems of global political, economic and social interdependence are crossing crucial thresholds of scale and complexity to begin exhibiting emergent dynamics recursively shaped by continuously and characteristically ramifying values. In short, the depreciation of karma as a critical concept has come at a time when accelerating change and globally deepening patterns of global interdependence commend—and, perhaps, even command—being understood in terms of karma.

My aim here is to begin redressing the depreciation of karma by restoring some of its conceptual richness, reflecting on a range of Buddhist concept constellations in which karma has traditionally figured, and making use of these constellations to shed light on the positive potential of karma for understanding and skillfully responding to distinctly contemporary patterns of interdependence. Far from having marginal importance, karma should be seen as crucial to faring well on the Middle Way, especially if faring well ultimately means equitably and sustainably furthering both personal and public good through orienting our interdependence toward enhancing conditions for relating freely. Full engagement with the teachings on karma is crucial for aptly expanding our capacities for and commitments to truly liberating relationships, both personally and communally.

The Concept of Karma in the Early Buddhist Canon

The concept of karma factors substantially in several distinct and yet overlapping or interpenetrating discourse domains within the early Buddhist canon. These domains focus on: rebirth destinies; differentiating between the virtuosic and non-virtuosic; and charting the dramatic interpersonal course from merely sentient to enlightened and enlightening being. Briefly discussing each of these domains and how they interrelate will serve to map the overall scope and pivotal role of karma in both Buddhist teaching and Buddhist practice, highlighting the distinctive way in which the concept of karma bridges the metaphysical or ontological and the ethical to induce seeing all experienced realities as implying responsibility—a “non-dual” responsibility, however, that is ultimately neither exclusively mine or yours, but ours.

Birth Destinies and the Extemporizing of Karma

As highlighted by traditional accounts of the Buddha’s awakening, the most central among the discourse domains informed by the concept of karma is that which encompasses narratives largely devoted to providing cosmological scaffolding for an expressly Buddhist rebirth escatology. These narratives develop an imaginaire of cyclically troubling existences or patterns of coming-into-being (*samsara*) and forward the possibility of exit or movement “perpendicular” to all such cycles (*nirvana*)—that is, release from revolving in and among five qualitatively distinct relational realms or birth destinies (*gati*): dwelling in hell, as a hungry ghost, an animal, a human, or a god.³ (See, e.g., MN 12.35-43)⁴ It is an imaginaire that remains powerful throughout Asia in the world of everyday Buddhist observances.⁵

In attempting to evince the meaning of karma in early Buddhism, either too much (a purely literal reading) or too little (a purely figurative reading) can easily be made of this cosmological scaffolding and its emblematic representation of sentient being as a “wheel of life/lives.” In his depictions of an expressly Buddhist, multi-tiered cosmos, the Buddha clearly built upon the general cosmic imaginaire of 5th century BCE north India. Yet, much as he did with the then dominant vernacular language in crafting an explicitly Buddhist teaching vocabulary, the Buddha also decisively and systematically revised the meaning of key elements within this imaginaire and established a distinctive, alternative context for its overall interpretation.⁶ What is most revealingly Buddhist in the rebirth eschatology forwarded in these canonical narratives are not the specific terms and images employed within them, but rather the overall strategy-for and orientation-of their use.

This general strategy of accepting, but then pointedly revising the meaning of things as-they-have-come-to-be (*yathābhūtam*) is one that plays a significant role throughout the discourse. In fact, it expresses the basic modality of the Buddha’s critical, and yet openly accommodating, pattern of engaging existing political, social and religious authorities—an approach to criticism that does not focus attention on determining what things really ‘are’ or ‘are-not’, or even on what they ‘should be’, but rather on how they might be skillfully *redirected*.⁷

A classic working out of the strategy is the critical re-interpretation of caste or the institution of *varna* that is undertaken in the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* (MN 98). Rather than contesting the applicability of caste categories as descriptors of actual states-of-affairs, the Buddha empties them of any independence essence or transcendent justification. Insisting on their conditionality and historicity, the Buddha then directs attention to how they are best understood by placing them in the context of a distinctly Buddhist pattern of valorizations—an evaluative framework that makes it possible to see how the dynamics of such states-of-affairs or patterns of interdependence can be oriented toward sustainably resolving conflict, trouble, or suffering.⁸ Key to this reorientation is seeing that one’s status in society is not a function of one’s inherent nature, but of the quality and direction of one’s values, intentions and actions—one’s karma. Those who work in the capacity of rulers are not, the Buddha insists, to be understood as *being* rulers, but simply as those whom we call or name “rulers.”⁹

This is the central logic of the Middle Way in action. It is a logic of emptiness gesturing beyond the gamut of permutations and possibilities involving claims about what things *are* or *are-not*—a logic that invites seeing all things as relationally constituted and as irreducibly open with respect to what they *mean*.¹⁰ The Middle Way is not a median or halfway point between diametrically opposing views—one contested perspective among others—but rather an explicitly strategic movement “perpendicular” to the entire manifest spectrum of opposition. In the case of the different birth realms, this strategy leads to treating these realms as dramatically interpenetrating domains populated by beings sharing common patterns of action and affiliation—porous domains of affinity through and among which it is possible to course ill or well. That is, as interpreted in Buddhist terms, the imaginaire of rebirth is employed as support for seeing *all* beings as part of a “moral economy” in which their individual and collective “fortunes”—not only within, but across lives—correspond with patterns of sustained values-intentions-actions. Although quite distinct factual and dramatic consequences attend being born into any given birth realm, the *meaning* being born therein is not determined. Rather, it is open to continuous and significant negotiation.

The process of mutual conditioning schematized in the 12-fold chain of interdependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) can be seen as mapping the factors determining movement into and within any one of the five birth domains. It can also be seen as the root context for the Buddha’s pointed insistence that karma be understood as a both a result and a function of *cetanā* or intentionality/commitment. Within the 12-fold chain of interdependent origination, *nāmarūpa* or mental/corporeal unity can be seen as referring to a specific nexus of embodied sentience—a specific *form* of sentient being—that arises as a function of particular kinds/qualities of consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Consciousness, in turn, arises conditioned by volitional formations or dispositional compounds (*sankhāra*) that arise with the sustained expression of particular patterns of ignorance or inattention (*avijjā*). The five birth destinies, in other words, can be seen as distinctive types or categories of embodied sentience associated with specific qualities of consciousness, dispositional complexes, and manners/ranges of attention and understanding.

Importantly, while being born into a particular realm conditions the quality of sentient being, it does not determine the meaning or outcomes/opportunities of exercising or embodying sentience therein. As indicated by the insistence that karma is irreducibly a function of *cetanā* or intention/commitment, there is always room for improvisation with respect to where and how

things are heading. Cognate with *citta* or “mind” in the sense of actively directed awareness, *cetanā* implies *live commitment*. Karma is not just the experienced result of prior purposeful actions. Karma is also the inflection of things as-they-are-coming-to-be.

Yet, these inflections of interdependence or patterns of acting-with-intention are not spontaneous occurrences. Seeing volitional/karmic formations (*sankhāra*) as conditioned by ignorance is to see that intentions arise within specific horizons of relevance—that is, within particular meant environments, the precise extent and topography of which are shaped by abiding sets of values. This is often overlooked in expositions of karma stressing its intentional character. But without such a qualification of the space within which purposeful action occurs, the dramatic axes of such explicitly karmic discourses as the *Cakkavatti Sīhanāda Sutta* (DN 26) lose both ethical focus and force. In this sutta, for instance, although the seventh heir of King Daḷhanemi reigns in a wheel-turning (*dhammic*) polity, he is confronted with needing to respond to an incidence of poverty-conditioned theft. His intention is clear and good: address the conditions that led to the advent of poverty and thence to a theft, and restore harmony to the realm. His strategy, however, backfires. His efforts to determine or control the conduct of the people—for their own good and the good of the realm—result in an increasingly intense series of ironic consequences. The king’s mistake is not one of intention, but rather of errant commitment to the strategic value of control.

Values, and not just intentions, play a crucial role in shaping sentient beings’ experienced patterns of outcomes/opportunities, as well as in the general strategic process of revision with which we began reflecting on the karmic significance of the rebirth imaginaire of Buddhism. This role is given particularly pointed expression in the *Lonaphala Sutta* (*Anguttara Nikāya* III.99). The sutta begins with the Buddha denying that there can be any living of the holy life or sustained resolution of suffering for those who assume that actions and consequences are simply and mechanically linked. But for those who affirm that, “when a person makes karma to be felt in such and such a way, that is how its result is experienced,” there is indeed the living of the holy life and opportunity for the right ending of suffering and trouble. A strictly deterministic understanding of karma focused simply on actions in and of themselves, apart from motivations and evaluative context; is not compatible with directing the dynamics of interdependence in a nirvanic (rather than samsaric) manner. The capacity for doing so rests on being keenly sensitive to the role played by desires, aims, and purpose in karma. That is, one must go beyond

experiencing things simply happening as a function of linear and mechanical causal chains, to experiencing things occurring as outcomes/opportunities—as fulfilling or not fulfilling one’s desires, as impeding or furthering one’s aims and interests.

The ostensible aim of the *Lonaphala Sutta* is to explain why relatively minor errancy on the part of some beings leads to rebirth in hellish conditions and yet for others has little if any effect on their prospects in rebirth. The stated difference is the background against which ill deeds occur in terms of a person’s overall habits of thought, speech and action—the abiding tenor of his or her commitments and qualities of attention. But the sutta also aims at clarifying the basis of living a life devoted to realizing what it means to undo the pattern of conditions that lead to suffering and trouble. The passage quoted above makes clear that living such a life involves understanding that karma is always *playing out live*, in ways that are open to significant improvisation, especially with respect to contexts of interpretation or meaning-making. While one cannot completely avert the experiential rebound of intentional activity, one can very significantly alter its meaning. Thus, even though he had realized the meaning of the holy life and liberation from compelled rebirth, the bandit murderer Angulimāla could not entirely avert the experienced consequences of his prior actions. Yet instead of suffering hundreds of thousands of years in hellishness, he needed only to endure beatings and abuse as a realized monk (MN 86). As Angulimāla himself affirms, the difference is made by abandoning his prior pattern of values, interests, and negligence and working wholeheartedly instead to conduct himself with an eye to what is wholesomely virtuosic (*kusala*).

Against the backdrop of the cosmology of rebirth, what these discourses drive home is the insistence of the early Buddhist tradition on the openness of karma to extemporaneous recontextualization and redirection—the plastic nature of its dynamics. Karma is not a record etched mechanically in stone, but is rather like a continually reverberating piece of improvised music that is always opening up for shaping and reshaping.

Karma, Relational Quality and Reorienting Interdependence

The plasticity of karma is implied in the common practice of referring to the experienced results of intentional action as *phala*—literally, “fruit that is ripe to the point of bursting.” Although paired in discussions of causality in early Buddhism with *hetu* (cause, reason, condition), *phala* is not an “effect” or “result” in the sense of something essentially independent of its antecedent conditions—for example, rubbing sticks as “cause” and flames as “result.”

Instead, *phala* refers to results that are substantially the “fruit” of prior conditions—consisting, indeed, of a concentrated expression of those conditions that conserves their possibilities for future instantiation and development. Mango fruit incorporates or enfolds the entirety of the mango tree and, under appropriate conditions, becomes a nexus of environmental exchanges entwining soil, rain, and sunshine in the situated realization of a new generation of mango. Importantly, in the context of an agrarian mode of life, the metaphor of fruit serves to highlight the generative nature of karma, but also its malleability. With sufficient attention and skill, one can develop families of mango that are almost syrupy sweet and yet firmly textured, or others that are citrus tart and yet silkily rich. Karmic results are inherently open to substantial and meaningful qualification.

Appealing to fruit as a metaphor for the result of intentional/committed activity serves, then, a dual purpose. First, it suggests that karma is a reiterative or recursive process—that is, a process that incorporates outcomes/results of activity into its own developmental dynamics. Karma is not just a function of “feedback” in the form of experienced results of prior actions; it is also a function of “feedforward” shaping future outcomes and opportunities by maintaining and/or revising courses of action in light of present eventualities.¹¹ Secondly, the metaphor draws attention to the role of situational or environmental factors in the realized quality of karmic outcomes/opportunities, and ultimately calls into question the apparent independence or ontological (rather than heuristic) distinctness of actions, situations, and experienced consequences.

The fruit metaphor draws attention to a peculiarity in the metaphysics of karma: purposeful activity and its dramatic consequences are phases of an ongoing, self-generating and self-modifying process. As in the cliché conundrum—“which came first, the chicken or the egg?”—there is a basic error in asking which among purposeful beings, their actions, their situations, and experienced consequences are ontologically more or most basic. In a sense—a point insisted upon especially in Mahayana texts announcing the collapse of the three times (past, present, and future) associated with realizing the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all things—they are equi-primordial aspects of a dramatic whole, arising in the enduring “simultaneity” of horizonless interdependence. What is most “basic” is value-shaped and value-shaping change—the dramatic or narrative reality of relational maturation and transformation.

Put somewhat differently, the metaphysics of karma is one of inflected relationality—a metaphysics of orientability. The Buddhist cosmos is an irreducibly dramatic one in which facticity is a derivation of value or meaning. This is pointedly driven home by the synoptic teaching of the “three marks”: for the purpose of realizing liberation from suffering and trouble, one should see all things as troubled (*dukkha*), impermanent (*anicca*), and without-self (*anattā*). In a thoroughly dramatic cosmos, there can be no question of whether or not change is possible, but only questions about the *direction* or *meaning* of change. It is in the context of a metaphysics of orientability that the full force becomes apparent of the Buddha’s claim that living the holy life depends upon understanding karma as a function of value-intention-action and not a simple mechanistic chain of causes and effects. Buddhist practice is, at bottom, a matter of taking to heart that reality implies responsibility, distinguishing samsara and nirvana as directions of ongoing interdependence, and orienting away from the former and toward the latter, actively, situationally, and experientially.

It is in connection with the metaphysical/ethical force of a Buddhist conception of karma that the implications of the fruit metaphor for recursive or reiterative dynamics come into sharpest focus. Karma is not only relevant to practice because it explains the complexion of present experience in terms of prior patterns of value-intention-action. It is also, and perhaps more importantly, crucial in understanding the means by which present and future actions, situations, and experiences can be oriented in a truly liberating fashion—that is, the means by which the ongoing dynamics of change can be qualitatively redirected. Karma manifests relevance to changing the way things are changing.

Given the overwhelming attention focused in Buddhism on discerning the patterns of conditions that lead to trouble and suffering (*dukkha*) in order to alter or undo them, it might be assumed that discussions of the fruit of karma would invoke the contrast of the *dukkha* and its experiential contrary, *sukha* or happiness. Significantly, however, this is not the case.¹² Instead, the predominant contrast is between that which is *kusala* (wholesome, skillful) and that which is *akusala* (unwholesome, unskillful)—a qualitative contrast that applies, not just to experienced consequences of intentional activity, but to the carrying out of such activity and to the situational transformations in which it results. That is, appeal is made to a qualitative distinction that is relevant across the full spectrum relational dynamics involved in karma.

The term *kusala* is most often translated as good, wholesome or skillful. Such translations imply that *kusala* serves as a standard ethical qualifier, denoting a kind of generic positive character. Yet, the term is actually a superlative. Far from denoting a static good or a generic wholesomeness or skill, it denotes acutely context sensitive movement in the direction of increasing good, greater wholesomeness and more refined skill. In short, *kusala* implies situationally apt, intensifying excellence. In a Buddhist context—especially as deployed in discussions of karma and the fruit of action—it can be seen as denoting virtuosity or an activated capacity for relating freely.¹³

The *Sakkapañha Sutta* (DN 21) aims at providing guidance in understanding the origins of conflict and the means of skillfully and purposefully transforming relational/situational quality, especially to dissolve the conditions of stress and conflict. The dramatic climax of the sutta consists of an encounter between Sakka, ruler of the gods, and the Buddha. After being invited by the Buddha to ask whatever he wishes, Sakka poses a question of considerable importance for understanding karma: by what are sentient beings bound that, although wishing to live peacefully, without hate, harming, hostility or malignity, they nevertheless end up living in enmity, harming one another, and so on. Why, in other words, is the *intention* of living in peace and harmony insufficient for doing so? In reply, the Buddha begins by identifying persistent greed and jealousy as the reason for ill consequences arising in spite of good intentions. Together, with Sakka probing and the Buddha responding, there is traced back a genealogy of conflict and enmity as emblematic forms of *dukkha* or trouble/suffering. This lineage stretches back through greed and jealousy to like and dislike, desire (*taṇhā*), dwelling on things or captured attention (*vitakka*), and finally *papañcā*—a term often translated as “obsession” or “mental proliferation,” but which is perhaps better rendered as “proliferating impediments.” If *papañcā* can be cut off, the Buddha claims, the roots of conflict, enmity and suffering are severed; liberation is attained.

Of course, Sakka wishes to know what method is effective in ending *papañcā*. Invoking the qualitative distinction between *kusala* and *akusala* as an evaluative framework, the Buddha recommends considering our actions or pursuits in terms of the eventualities or phenomena (*dhamma*) resulting from it. Should a course of action lead to increasing *kusala* eventualities and decreasing those that are *akusala*, then *papañcā* will cease; the roots of conflict and suffering will be cut through. This is not the case, however, if *akusala* eventualities persist in the same

degree or increase, even if there are also increasing *kusala* eventualities. The key to relating freely and peacefully is to promote situationally apt, intensifying excellence or virtuosity, while at the same time undermining the conditions for eventualities that are not headed in a virtuosic or wholesomely skillful direction.

Functionally, *papañcā* consists of proliferating impediments or blockages to movement or change in a liberating direction. As stressed in the dialogic set up between Sakka and the Buddha, these blockages—be they mental, physical or environmental—are not a direct function of one’s ongoing intentions. Indeed, the errancy they occasion can arise in spite of otherwise quite straightforwardly “good” intentions. That is, *papañcā* signals the presence of factors or conditions that render problematic otherwise positive motives or purposes—conditions that either delimit or entirely divest intention of real world traction. Crucially, then, their circumvention or dissolution cannot be accomplished by appeal to increased willpower or apt intention alone.

The strategy offered by the Buddha for bringing an end to proliferating impediments involves alloying generally “good” intentions with an appropriate pattern of valuation—specifically, a pattern of valuation involving sensitivities-to and sensibilities-for increasing or deepening virtuosity. This is, in effect, a strategy that rejects contentment with things turning out “well enough” or with thought, action or speech that qualifies somehow as “being good.” By invoking the *kusala/akusala* contrast, the Buddha subtly directs attention away from what is simply “good” or “bad” or even “better” and “worse” to the process of holistically *bettering* how things are coming to be. *Papañcā*—the root of conflict, trouble and suffering—is not eliminated by means of a shift from one state-of-affairs to another, but by unswerving commitment to *appreciating* or adding-value to whatever has come to be, as it has come to be (*yathābhūtam*). Ultimately, then, making “good karma” means enriching capacities and opportunities for relating freely, in the specific sense of cultivating values-intentions-actions oriented toward contributing to the increased value of being situated as we have come to be—a process of eliciting heightening expressions of both personal and situational resources for engaging in liberating relationships.

Bodhisattva Karma: Horizonless Contribution as Buddhist Ideal

The meaning of engaging in relationships expressing increasing capacities-for and deepening commitments-to liberation is well illustrated in both canonical and non-canonical

narratives focused on charting the prior life development of the Buddha and his key disciples and family members. These narratives collectively express a drama of insight and liberation that calls into question the tendency to see karma as fundamentally individual and to regard Buddhist practice as primarily a private matter of self-cultivation rather than a public or socially-embedded realization of virtuosity.¹⁴

In his lives prior to birth as Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha is referred to as the “Bodhisat” or “Bodhisattva”—that is, a being on the path of awakening. The grammatical ambiguity of the phrase “path of awakening” works well in qualifying the prior life development of the Buddha. It is at once a path of becoming a fully awakened one, a buddha, and a performative path of awakening that comes to fruition in the awakening, not of oneself, but of others. This path is fully manifested only as the Buddha, fully awakened, embarks on his teaching career—a life dedicated to guiding others to author their own liberation from trouble and suffering.

Significantly, this is not a path that the Buddha travels alone. On the contrary, the prior life narratives found in both the *Sutta Piṭaka* and in the *Jātaka* tales¹⁵ collectively demonstrate that it was a path traveled by the future Buddha in the company of a group of “karmic cohorts”—a dramatic ensemble coursing together through time in shared pursuit of truly liberating conduct and relationships.¹⁶ In the life and teaching career of the Buddha, members of this ensemble appear, for example, as: his chief disciples, Sariputta and Mahamoggallana; Mahakassapa, the de facto head of the Sangha after the Buddha’s death; Ananda, the Buddha’s cousin and guardian of the Dharma; his wife, Yasodhara; and his son, Rahula. All of these dramatic partners (and many others) are ultimately guided to full awakening by the Buddha’s teachings, presence and example. But the ensemble also includes the nefarious Devadatta, who commits the most heinous of karmic offenses—attempting to take the life of the Buddha, his own cousin.

It is not necessary to take these prior life narratives as factually accurate historical accounts. Their Buddhist force lies in what they say about the operation of karma. There are, indeed, patterns of value-intention-action that lead to entanglement, blockage, misery, and embittered ignorance. But there are also patterns of value-intention-action that bring about liberating outcomes and opportunities. The prior life narratives of the Buddha and his karmic cohorts recognize the positive potential of sustained, shared commitments—the possibility of improvising, over time, a common path of relational appreciation and eventual awakening. In the

case of the Buddha, the penultimate fruit of this path (*magga phala*) is birth with the dual karma of world ruler and enlightened one—karma for the superlative embodiment of either socio-political or spiritual authority. For most other members of the ensemble, this path comes to fruition in enjoying births and situational dynamics conducive to meeting the Buddha and responding with superlative readiness to his teaching.

The inclusion of Devadatta within this dramatic ensemble undoubtedly can be interpreted in different ways. But at the very least it must be seen as proof by exception that awakening—even when one clearly has karma that is consonant with it—is neither fated nor granted. Karma is not deterministic. Better to say, in a qualifiedly positive sense, that it is opportunistic—a cohering of actualities and potentialities that can never be fixed, in and of itself, as either opportune or inopportune. It is not just selves, or other relatively abiding patterns of dynamic interdependence, that are ultimately empty (*śūnya*). Karma, too, has the nature of emptiness (*śūnyatā*).

The Buddhist teaching of karma enjoins realizing that reality always implies responsibility. But it also enjoins realizing that responsibility always implies improvisational possibility—potentials not just for changes of direction, but also for genius in the original sense of generative brilliance or appreciative and contributory virtuosity.¹⁷ As expressed in the Mahayana Buddhist conception of the bodhisattva as a being capable of demonstrating unlimited skill-in-means (*upāya*), realizing virtuosic potential means engaging in liberating patterns of relationality and is closely correlated with the strength and depth of vows. Here, the recursive nature of karma becomes apparent and significant. Becoming a bodhisattva means sustaining profound heartfelt commitment to awakening (*bodhicitta*); but it also means establishing a profound intent to alleviate the trouble and suffering of others by guiding them toward awakening themselves—an intent that traditionally is represented as taking the form of a vow to exhibit particular superlative qualities of engagement or virtuosity.

Yet, when asked how bodhisattvas should keep their minds, the Buddha responds (in the Diamond Sutra, section 3) that they should determine to bring about the liberation of all sentient beings, while at the same time realizing that thereby no “beings” are liberated at all. The practice of bodhisattvas requires realizing the emptiness or non-duality of all things. From such a perspective, Buddhist practice is only conventionally a matter of awakening self or awakening

others; ultimately, it is the non-dual realization of enlightening situations—the realization of buddha realms in which all things share in doing the work of enlightenment.

Karmically, it is significant that bodhisattva vows are not obligations of omission—that is, obligations of restraint or forgoing. Rather, they are vows of commission—resolutions to remain on a chosen heading of consummate development in all circumstances. In the case of the Buddha, his prior life narratives document the course of consummate *bodhicitta* or superlative intent, an intent that ripens fully during his teaching career as the dramatic ensemble of his karmic cohorts gradually reassembles to demonstrate the meaning of entering into liberating relationships. In the Mahayana text that perhaps most fully develops the liberative concept of *upāya* as relational virtuosity—the Lotus Sutra—even Devadatta is accorded a finally enlightened and enlightening role in the ensemble, receiving a confirmation of future realization as a buddha. This announcement of an eventual triumphant reversal of his karma as would-be murderer of the Buddha is a dramatically powerful statement of the horizonless emptiness and non-duality of the Buddhist cosmos. The meaning of karma is never fixed, once-and-for-all, but is always and everywhere open to revision.

Karma as Buddhist Teaching; Buddhist Teaching as Karma

As a final “conceptual” or “theoretical” foray, I would like to explore the meaning of revising the meaning of karma—another level of recursion—by looking at the teaching of karma and the karma of teaching. I have already characterized the teaching career of the Buddha as a career dedicated to guiding others to author their own liberation from trouble and suffering. This characterization aims to stress the distinctive shift that must occur in understanding the nature and meaning of Buddhist “pedagogy” if we take seriously the relational ontology implied by the signal Buddhist insight into the interdependence of all things. As I have come to understand this shift, it involves (at the very least) seeing Buddhist teachings as scrupulously avoiding any objective declarations about *the true* nature of things and aiming instead only *to true* specific, situationally embedded patterns of value-intention-action—manifested primarily in thought, speech, and action—and their associated patterns of outcome/opportunity. It is shift, in other words toward seeing Buddhist teachings as offering direction, not doctrine.¹⁸

In their original relational context, the purpose of the Buddha’s teachings was not to state absolute truths, but rather to true (or reorient) ongoing processes of interdependence. Granted this task of truing relational dynamics, and granted as well that these dynamics emerge in the

context of an ever-changing present, against the background of an infinitely deep and dramatically constituted past, Buddhist teachings should not be seen as rehearsals of a transcendently originated body of knowledge and insight. Rather, they express the Buddha's live engagement of audiences receptive to redirecting their own patterns of energy, attention, and action. That is, the Buddhist Dharma originated in/as situation-sensitive, improvised responses to particular patterns of readiness for critically apt life-pattern recognition and life-pattern revision.

This overall relational context for the origination of distinctively Buddhist teachings is crucial to evaluating the place of karma within the practice of the Middle Way. Like metaphors, the Buddha's teachings built bridges out from the familiar into what was—for his audiences—the previously unknown, providing passage to new ways of conduct demonstrating the *meaning* of liberation. The Dharma thus constitutes an actively emergent and consummately transforming interface of fully enlightened and restrictively sentient ways of being. Put somewhat differently, the Three Jewels—Buddha-Dharma-Sangha—compose a relational whole of resolutely embodied *bodhicitta* or heartfelt commitment to liberation. As a manifestation of the sympathetic resonance of the Buddha and his ordained and lay students and disciples, the Dharma expresses—in ways skillfully attuned to things as-they-have-come-to-be (*yathābhūtam*)—a dramatically freeing mutuality of intent.

It is worthwhile pausing to consider more fully the implications of the Dharma as a shared, consummate performance of *bodhicitta*. Although it has often been rendered as “the thought of enlightenment” with the implication that it is “internal” or “subjective” in nature, *bodhicitta* is better seen as a situationally realized relational quality. *Citta* literally means “the heart” as a center of our emotional nature and cognitive capability, and might be properly translated (like the Chinese, *xin*) as “heart-mind.” Sharing the same etymological root as *cetanā* (i.e., intention, purpose, dramatic motivation), the emphasis on which sets apart the specifically Buddhist conception of karma from its Vedic precursors, *citta* is in Buddhist contexts associated with both the enacting and the enacted.¹⁹ Rather than referring to a subjective sense of agency, *citta* is an explicitly *interactive* nexus of meaning making. *Bodhicitta* marks the purposeful activation of heartfelt commitments to realizing liberating patterns of relationality.²⁰ As a consummately shared articulation of *bodhicitta*, the Dharma or teachings of the Buddha at once exemplify and direct action toward awakening.

It is of signal importance that the liberating resonance that developed between the Buddha and his students was not considered—at least in the natal traditions of Buddhist thought and practice—to be a necessary result of the Buddha’s own awakening. In the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (MN 26), where the Buddha recounts his own “noble search” for liberation from all trouble and suffering, he admits that, having with great difficulty accomplished for himself the dissolution of the pattern of conditions leading to trouble and suffering, he was not inclined to teach others, considering it too wearying and troublesome. The Buddha changes his mind only because Brahmā Sahampati intervenes, announcing that if the Buddha remains inclined to inaction it will mean the loss or perishing of the world. Only then does the Buddha attend closely enough to the qualitative differences among sentient beings to note that they possess multiple qualities and faculties, ranging from keen to dull, and that some may well be capable of receiving and practicing in accordance with the Buddha’s hard-earned insights and realization. Perceiving, in effect, that the karma of some beings is consistent with their successful pursuit of liberation, the Buddha is himself inclined toward undertaking liberative action or karma.

This story sheds considerable light on the Buddha’s dual description of himself as a *kammavadin* or teacher of action, and as a *viriyavadin* or one devoted to summoning up in others the energy or strength needed for conduct resulting both in increasing virtuosic and wholesome (*kusala*) eventualities and in decreasing (*akusala*) eventualities that do not enhance wholesome virtuosity. The *teaching activity* of the Buddha is not simply predicated upon the potential for sentient beings to perceive how it is ultimately their own actions (karma) that subject them to trouble and suffering, but also upon their capacity for generating decisively new ways of acting—distinctively energized and skilled ways of relating that will end their subjection to trouble and suffering. At bottom, this means shifting from karma or action motivated by greed, aversion, and delusion to action undertaken on the basis of non-greed, non-aversion and non-delusion. (AN III.33) Thus, having declared that one’s life status is determined by the specific patterns of one’s life practices, the Buddha characterizes the truly wise as perceiving karma as it has come to be (*yathābhūtam kammam*), “seers of interdependence, skilled in karma and its results.” (MN 98.13)

To summarize the preceding: Buddhist teachings can be seen as “recordings” of fully activated *bodhicitta*, each expressing a distinctive karmic nexus of enlightening intent and liberating receptivity. This understanding of the Dharma implicitly informs the emphasis of early

Buddhism on the critical role of *kusala* and *akusala* patterns of attention and action in faring well on the Middle Way; the emphasis of Mahayana traditions on the vows and activity of bodhisattvas and their demonstration of unlimited capacities for skilled and resolutely enlightening interaction (*upāya*); and the emphasis of canonical and *jātaka* narratives regarding the prior lives of the Buddha on charting the multi-life course of the Bodhisattva and his dramatic ensemble of “karmic cohorts” toward the shared realization of consummately liberating relationships.

As an activity, undertaken intentionally, with heartfelt purpose, teaching is karmic. When teaching focuses—as it does at one level or another throughout the Buddhist canon—on enhancing appreciation of the correspondence among sustained patterns of value-intention-action and experienced outcomes/opportunities, teaching exceeds the categories of transference or transmission. It becomes a fully recursive, generative activity that is both situation-specific and situation-transforming. Here it is relevant to think about the account given in the Diamond Sutra of the Buddha being asked what he attained when he realized unsurpassed, complete enlightenment. His answer: “not one single thing.” This attainment that is a non-attainment leaves nothing further to be done or give. It is the realized non-duality of a buddha-realm in which all things continuously do the great work of enlightenment. This is the ultimate aim of all Buddhist teaching.

Skillfully offered and richly appreciated, the teaching of karma is a teaching about changing karma. It comes to fruition in shared and heartfelt improvisations of the meaning of relating freely—engaging in liberating relationships—in the present situation, as it has come to be. It is not a teaching of escape from the circumstances of birth and dwelling in the five realms of sentient embodiment, but rather one of cultivating and expressing consummate virtuosity within such circumstances, whatever they might be.

This is perhaps surprising. It is not a conclusion typically espoused in traditional Buddhist commentaries; neither can it be seen as obviously informing day-to-day observances of Buddhists concerned about the state or quality of their karma or store of merit. Nevertheless, it seems to me to be an implication of the core teachings shared by all Buddhist traditions. Buddhist practice ostensibly is recommended as a means of inflecting interdependence away from samsara toward nirvana—a practice that involves entering into a critical relationship with the recursivity of karma: the feedback and feedforward obtaining among values-intentions-

actions and experienced outcomes/opportunities. Buddhist practice is embarked upon for the purpose of dissolving the patterns of conditions that mean being subject to this recursivity. Yet only if Buddhist practice is resolutely undertaken will it transform karma across the full spectrum from purpose or intent to experienced fruit. No longer being subject(ed) to the recursivity of values-intentions-actions and outcomes/opportunities means, finally, resolutely activating liberating resources in our present situation, as it has come to be.

As stressed throughout the Buddhist teachings, ending our *subjection* to the karma of continued enmeshment in samsara involves realizing the waning of conditions that occasion our *objecting* to outcomes/opportunities arising from past karma. In traditional terms, this means aligning our conduct with non-greed, non-delusion, and non-aversion. But, faring well on the Middle Way is not—contrary to some interpretations—a matter of world-withdrawal or aloofness. On the contrary, the Buddha describes those faring well on the Middle Way and fully embodying the Dharma as capable of suffusing their entire environment with four relational headings or modalities—the four *brahma-vihāra* (literally, divine abidings) of compassion, loving-kindness, equanimity, and joy in the good fortune of others. Progressing on the Middle Way means activating the emptiness of all things as intimate mutual relevance expressing both capabilities-for and commitments-to relating freely.²¹

Valuing Karma and Faring Well in a World of Complex, Global Interdependence

The preceding sections have hopefully served to make the point that there is no faring well in Buddhist practice without an appreciation of karma. This means developing on one hand a sympathetic understanding of karma as the dynamic correlativity of values-intentions-actions and experienced outcomes/opportunities: appreciation in the sense of enhanced intimacy with the dramatic dimensions of our lived experience. On the other hand, it means critically revising this correlativity in ways consonant with the sustained emergence of truly liberating patterns of relationality: appreciation as enhancing the value of things as-they-have-come-to-be through skillfully revising what they will mean. These two dimensions of appreciating karma correspond to the Buddha's characterization of himself as both a *kammavadin* and *viriyavadin*—as someone professing both intimacy with the workings of karma and the energetic activation of their liberating potential.

In this final section, I would like to return to the suggestion made in the introduction that the concept of karma is now of particular relevance in what we have come to know as the public

sphere. Briefly stated, we have arrived at a point in global history where the need for a robust ethics of interdependence is especially acute—an ethics of relational direction and quality suited to addressing the interplay of value-laden patterns local and global economic, social, political, technological and cultural change. Buddhist teachings on karma afford distinctive resources for developing such an ethics and for re-conceiving the meaning of public good in ways conducive to realizing a virtuosic or appreciative pluralism both within and among societies.²²

It is an implication of the relational metaphysics informing Buddhist teachings on karma that there is no ultimate warrant for regarding karma as strictly individual or personal in nature. While values, intentions, and the actions they animate certainly reflect personal history and quite individual sensibilities and sensitivities, they do not arise in a relational vacuum. Rather, even the most personal values and intentions always reflect (and, of course, sometimes distort) a specific socio-historical and cultural context—a materially grounding and dynamically coherent ecology of common experiences, interests and affinities. Embodying both ordinal and strategic values, social, economic, political, technological and cultural practices and institutions constitute a meaning-making infrastructure within a given intentional/experiential ecology.²³ Such practices and institutions are, in short, fruits (*phala*) of collaborative karma, but also fields of differentially germinating *kusala* and *akusala* aims and opportunities. Far from serving as dramatically neutral backdrops to individually articulated patterns of value-intention-action, social, economic, political, technological and cultural practices and institutions are themselves important sites for karmic critique.²⁴

This is perhaps not widely enough appreciated. Buddhist practice is traditionally depicted as centering on a systematic *critique of self* aimed at undermining errant patterns of conviction, attention and action, and culminating in the personal authoring of liberation from trouble and suffering. But given the interdependent origination of even the most personal values and intentions in value-laden social and cultural context, there is also strong warrant for affirming that Buddhist practice—and, hence, sustained liberation from trouble and suffering—also necessarily involves a systematic *critique of culture*.²⁵ In anachronistic terms, the critical edge of karma can and should be applied in cutting through the roots of *papañcā* in both private and public spheres.

While the teachings of karma have always been relevant across the full spectrum of relationships constitutive of human sentience, there are reasons for seeing their current

social/public relevance as particularly pronounced. There is every likelihood that the 21st century will come to be known as the “century of interdependence”—a century over which globalization processes pass decisive thresholds of scale and density to bring unprecedented integration across virtually every sector of human endeavor. This prospect is often celebrated, but it is already painfully apparent to many—especially those in the global South—that increasing global interdependence does not necessarily herald increasing good for all. Global developmental processes, as presently oriented, can be linked to such *kusala* eventualities as generally lengthening life-spans and improving gender equality; but they are also linked to such gallingly *akusala* eventualities as persistently mounting global hunger and expanding inequities in the distribution of new wealth. The conditions for thoroughly cutting through the global roots of conflict and suffering are *not* being established and maintained.²⁶ While doing so certainly cannot be sustained in the absence of lasting personal transformation, it ultimately also requires consolidating deep consensus regarding the revision of our collaborative karma. The institutionally constellated patterns of values-intentions-actions that now shape the dynamics of global integration and its experienced outcomes and opportunities must be critically assessed and reoriented.

In many ways, these dynamics are unprecedented. To begin with, a distinctive outcome of contemporary patterns, scales, and intensities of globalization is the emergence of truly complex (and not merely complicated) systems of economic, social, political and technological interdependence. Like other complex phenomena ranging from such inanimate occurrences as hurricanes to living organisms and natural ecologies—these emergent systems can be seen as expressing recursively-structured negotiations between relatively abiding value sets and relatively changeable factual conditions, and are themselves liable to exhibiting emergent properties.²⁷ That is, emerging systems of economic, social, political and technological interdependence are prone to significant non-linearity, changing in ways that in principle could *not* have been anticipated, but that in retrospect will prove consonant with their own abiding systemic values. Finally, because they develop via reiterative feedback and feedforward relationships with both their environments and their own constitutive sub-systems, such complex systems evidence both “upward” and “downward” causality,²⁸ and can be considered learning or meaning-making systems that continuously take their own histories into account in the patterns of their development. The systems of interdependence emerging with 21st century patterns of

globalization are, in other words, both autopoietic (self-creating or self-organizing) and novogenous (innovation-generating). In Buddhist terms, they are systems that ramify karmically.

The emergence of complexly interdependent global systems is bringing about: first, a qualitative shift in the kinds of difficulties, trouble and suffering arising in the public sphere; secondly, the emergence of impediments to scaling up previously effective responses to the outcomes of errant interdependence; and, third, the opening of decentralized opportunities for innovative reorientations or restructurings of change dynamics. In sum, we are living in times uncommonly ripe for changing the way things change, and to what ends. From a karmic perspective, emerging 21st century realities signal the parallel emergence of new ranges and depths of both personal and communal responsibility.

Globally, there is now lacking neither knowledge nor capacity for operationalizing *human rights* to basic welfare and dignity as *global human realities*. Adequate food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care *can* be guaranteed for all. And, indeed, there is significant public opinion that these *should* be guaranteed. Yet, global poverty continues increasing and dignity for all remains a celebrated, but unactualized ideal. The discomfiting fact is that there is no longer any real question of whether or not we can assure basic subsistence and human dignity for all; the only real questions are whether we deem it *worth* doing, and *how well* we follow through—questions, finally, of shared and fully coordinated values and commitments or karma.

Consider the concrete case of global hunger. In spite of rapidly increasing total global wealth and continued global food surpluses, global hunger is at an historical peak, with chronic hunger now affecting nearly one billion people. Although both complicated and complex, the causes of global hunger cannot be traced ultimately to food shortages, but to unresolved conflicts among values and interests that allow the continued suffering of the global hungry to be considered a lesser ‘cost’ than that of restructuring (differentially profitable) global regimes of food production and distribution. Global hunger is not a *problem*; it is a *predicament*.

Problems arise when existing practices become ineffective in meeting continuing needs and interests, signaling the failure of specific means, under particular factual conditions, for arriving at ends we intend to keep pursuing. Solving problems is thus a process of identifying and removing factual impediments to advancing a particular pattern of situational development or meaning—the realization of improved or novel means for arriving at abiding ends.

Contrastingly, predicaments signal the confluence of contrary patterns of development or

meaning—an incompatibility among values and interests eventuating manifest impasses regarding the *direction* of interdependence. Predicaments cannot be *solved*; they can only be *resolved* through sustained and detailed attention to factual dynamics and through negotiating clarity of commitment with respect to harmonizing situationally complex flows of meaning and valuation. Predicament resolution involves identifying and reconciling conflicts within and among ecologies of experiences, interests and affinities: a revision of karma.

Global hunger is a particularly clear and compelling example of the shift from the predominance of problems to predicaments. But the transition is quite general, affecting virtually every sector of human endeavor from economics to international relations, from health care to environmental protection. The *kusala* outcomes of remarkably increased abilities for problem-solution bring into the foreground the decidedly *akusala* lack of fully coordinated values both within and across sectors. Thus, the U.S. Center for Disease Control now acknowledges that the primary drivers of persistent ill health no longer lie within the health sector, but rather in the economic, social, political, and cultural spheres. Generally stated: under circumstances of globally complex interdependence, it is increasingly the case that solutions which are viable within one sector or at one scale are highly liable to inducing problems in other sectors and at other scales. This marks an epochal change in the overall dynamics of human sentience and sociality—a remarkable scaling up and intensification of collaborative karma that accentuates the critical centrality of commonalities and conflicts among sets of priorities and value systems.

Twenty-first century realities of complex interdependence are opening remarkable new opportunities for either enhancing or impeding potentials for liberating relationality. In doing so, they pose forceful imperatives for clarifying the meaning of public good. Contemporary patterns of globalization are undoubtedly homogenizing wide ranges of socio-economic, political and technological practices and institutions. At the same time, however, they are bringing about heightened disparities of interests and benefits—accentuating conditions under which issues of affiliation and disaffiliation come to the fore as critical matters of global concern. No ethics of interdependence committed to redressing global inequities can avoid grappling with the contrary facts of rapidly expanding global unities and intensifying (often explicitly exclusive) local identities. These realities are, in short, forcing global engagement with the *meaning* of faring well or faring ill—the meaning of the good and the errant—as well as with the meaning of *differences* with respect to such meanings.²⁹

We are entering an epoch in which unanimity cannot be assumed except at great risk, and in which the advantages of singular or unilateral orderings of situational dynamics based on fixed principles are being significantly eroded. Indeed, it is an epoch characterized by both abundant opportunities and forceful imperatives for jointly improvising highly differentiated arrays of strategic and ordinal values. Along with the rising prominence of differences with respect to the meaning of the good and the errant, the meaning of the public is itself becoming a site of intense (and often critically decisive) negotiation. Far from bringing about conditions in which a simple, universal notion of the public might prevail worldwide, 21st century patterns of globalization virtually command a complex, recursively structured conception of the public and, by extension, of public good.

The globally dominant approaches to conceiving public good, however, remain wedded to problem-solving methodologies and ontological commitments that are at significantly increasing odds with the emergent realities of complex interdependence. These approaches have their roots in modern distinctions first formally expressed in the 18th century by Adam Smith, who conceived public goods as things that are clearly beneficial to society, but that are not conducive to competitive production and delivery via market operations—e.g., education, health, roadways, and water. Essential to this conception of public goods is that their benefits are non-rival in the sense of being resistant to exclusive delivery or use: public goods are deliverables with generic utility that form a desirable background for competitive market operations centered on the values of choice, convenience and control. In the early- to mid-20th century, this conception of real public goods gave way for a variety of historical reasons to an explicitly ideal conception of *the* public good or the *common* good—the good of the public as a sphere of shared endeavor and welfare.

Neither of these conceptions of public good is adequate for developing an ethics of interdependence that has sufficient resolution with respect to complex global realities to effectively address the accelerating, *akusala* outcomes of global integration. Smith's conception of public goods as real deliverables errs in casting them as supporting elements for the free play of such key market values as competition and control—the karma of which is decidedly troubling when projected at global scale. The dramatic structure of control karma, for example, involves not only gaining abilities to determine situational *outcomes*: exerting power over situational dynamics. It also involves increasing opportunities to exercise such determinative

power: living in circumstances experienced as both in-need-of and open-to further control. Commitment-to and enhanced capacities-for control eventuate living in increasingly controlled environments that turn out to be always going out of control. Conceiving public goods as situational supports for market dynamics involves karma for instrumentalizing them as means to securing freedoms of choice that ironically work against relating freely.

Countermovements toward an ideal construction of public good as universal welfare do not, in karmic terms, fare much better. Such constructions assume an effectively homogenous public—a public composed of individuals who can, in all relevant respects, be considered to be “the same.” This seems innocuous enough. But conceiving the public in explicitly generic terms, even for the purpose of identifying and promoting a universal public good, amounts to *ignoring* practically important differences among the members of a shared public sphere—including (but not limited to) such differences as those marked by “gender,” “ethnicity,” “class,” and “religious affiliation.” In pluralistic societies—globally now more the norm than the exception—the overwriting of differences in pursuit of a common state of ideal public good easily devolves into majoritarian exercises of power. Projected at global scale, committing to a generically acceptable ideal conception of public good has the corollary liability of severely dulling the critical edge of public good. Unanimity of appeal almost invariably comes at the cost of leveling down evaluative potential. Thus pursued, the public good may prove to be “good enough” for most, under most circumstances, but also *only just* good enough. It will prove ineffective in consolidating the kinds and depths of shared commitment to *kusala* or virtuosic conduct and eventualities needed to cut fully through the roots of globally proliferating impediments to greater equity and truly liberating relationships.

Present day, complexly interdependent realities call for a resolutely pluralistic conception of public goods as relationally embodied values that are thicker—that is, express greater *resolution*—globally than they do locally. Yet most contemporary ethics that seek to address issues of global equity, sustainability and freedom rely on “universal” concepts and values—justice, perhaps, being foremost among them—that have the opposite character of being thicker locally than they are globally. That is, their “universality” is a result of being “thinned” enough in terms of explicit commitments and courses of action to filter through virtually all socio-political and cultural boundaries. As a result, they lack the kind of real world resolution needed for skillfully *redirecting* globalization processes. To the extent that efforts to evolve a global

ethics of interdependence rest on concepts that enjoy universal applicability at the cost of qualitative density at global scale, they may serve well enough as means to increased compatibility at the level of *actions* as such, but not as means to transformative convergence among distinctly differing *values* and *intentions*. They will remain relatively impotent with respect to enjoining and effecting sustained, shared revision of our collaborative karma and the *meaning* of change.

Buddhist teachings on interdependence, emptiness and karma together afford resources for marshaling the kind of resolution—that is, the kind of detailed insight and forceful commitment—needed to engender a globally relevant, explicitly pluralistic and relational conception of public good. More specifically, they open critically rich avenues for evolving a robust concept of *diversity* as the most basic public good, where diversity is understood as a function or measure of distinctive contributions to sustainably and meaningfully shared welfare.³⁰ Enhancing public good means enhancing capacities-for and commitments-to jointly elaborating values-intentions-actions (karma) attuned to the complex task of revising the meaning of local and global interdependence, directing it toward the coordinated emergence of *kusala* eventualities and the dissolution of *akusala* propensities across the full spectrum of human endeavor. Public good ultimately consists of aptly coevolving relationships that embody virtuosic sensitivities-to and sensibilities-for making a meaningful difference to/for others.

As a measure of distinctively differing and yet sustainably interrelated contributions to shared welfare, diversity is not only conceptually richer or thicker globally than locally, it is also capable of serving as a coordinative value relevant both within and across the complex social, economic, political, technological and cultural domains. Especially when informed by the insight that things *are* what they *mean* for one another,³¹ a robustly Buddhist conception of diversity as global public good affirms going beyond merely *tolerant pluralism* focused on enacting conflict-free co-existence toward realizing an *appreciative pluralism* intent upon enacting mutually liberating relationships through activating the contributory potentials of difference.

Enhancing public good cannot, in context of a fully appreciative pluralism, imply assuming or even negotiating any one “true” set of values. Indeed, given the non-linearity characteristic of complexly dynamic interdependence, public good is best enhanced by resolutely difference-conserving acts of shared improvisation. Truing our deepening global interdependence requires innovating innovatively, pursuing collaborative values-intentions-

actions that appreciatively harmonize situational differences, as they have come to be. This kind of recursively-structured improvisation can only be carried out live, in real time, in dramatically significant circumstances of shared meaning-making. Although it can be described in general terms, it cannot be specifically or unilaterally prescribed. The resolution needed to reorient our complex global interdependence can only—but also, can always—be homegrown.

Conclusion

Valuing karma opens improvisational space within present conditions, as they have come to be. By directing attention critically to the collaborative origins of experienced realities as topographies of convergent aims and affinities—among persons, communities, and cultures—valuing karma also consolidates distinctive resources for becoming attuned to and harmonizing differences that have the potential for making a meaningful difference. Finally, valuing karma invites and enables going beyond individual moral agency as the ultimate unit of ethical analysis to focusing on relational qualities as both most central and most basic. Yet, as evidenced by the centrality of the *kusala/akusala* distinction to the teaching of karma, the resulting ethic of interdependence does not aim at bringing about any particular fixed state-of-affairs, but rather at sustained and accelerating expressions of situationally responsive virtuosity.

Buddhist traditions center on unique constellations of teachings and concepts, each of which distinctively invite seeing our present situation as open to revision—that is, as a nexus of relational patterns from the midst of which we can commit skillfully and wholeheartedly to exercising liberating sensibilities and sensitivities. Granted, however, that the private and public spheres are not only interdependent, but also interpenetrating, revising the meaning of our present situation will be transformative personally, but it will also ultimately be socially, economically, politically and culturally transformative. The Buddhist valorization of karma—so powerfully evidenced in the Buddha’s description of himself as both *kammavadin* and *viriyavadin*—affirms a metaphysic of orientability committed to the continual arising of opportunities for relating freely and thus also the presence, here and now, of potentials for appreciative contribution. The responsibility for how global interdependence is oriented is, finally, ours—we myriad beings distinctively embodying sentience and coursing ill or well together in keeping with our heartfelt commitments.

¹ This change of fortunes interestingly contrasts with adoption of the word “karma” into vernacular English over the same period—one of the very few Buddhist terms to be brought into the language in its original form rather than via translation. Of course, this vernacular appropriation of “karma” may have done more harm than good with respect to karma’s philosophical reputation.

² Throughout, DN will be used to designate the Dīgha Nikāya, a reliable English translation of which is *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. by Maurice Walshe, Wisdom Publications, Boston: 1995.

³ Some early Buddhist traditions added the category of titans, a sixth destiny comprising beings engaged in continuous battle with the gods. East Asian forms of Buddhism have generally adopted the six-destiny model. Both the five-destiny and six-destiny models are mapped onto a tripartite cosmography comprising the realms of sense-desire, form, and no-form.

⁴ Throughout, MN will be used to designate the Majjhima Nikāya, a translation of which is *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, translated by Bhikku Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications, Boston: 1995.

⁵ In the Theravada Buddhist societies of Southeast Asia, from roughly the mid-19th century onward, self-conscious efforts to create “modern,” “scientific” forms of Buddhism have led to “protestant” or “reform” Buddhist orthodoxies—like that forwarded, for example, in the mid- to late-19th century by the King Mongkut of Thailand and his son the Prince Patriarch Wachirayan—that either dismiss or seriously diminish the importance of the classic cosmology of multiple birth realms. Recently, this process has been linked to the loss of a clear moral compass and to an erosion spiritual depth in contemporary Southeast Asian societies. See, e.g., Phra Paisan Visalo’s “Buddhism for the Next Century: Toward Renewing a Moral Thai Society” at: <http://www.bpf.org/tsangha/phaisan.htm>.

⁶ For example, in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN 1), the Buddha takes up a mythic Vedic account of world origins and, rather than contesting it directly, recontextualizes the narrative, explaining Brahma’s impression of being the origin of all existences as a function of ignorance regarding the conditional origins of all (even divine) coming-into-being.

⁷ While I will illustrate the use and importance of this strategy by way of texts from the early Buddhist tradition, the strategy is also at work in Mahayana texts—especially those focused on explicating the relationship among *upaya* (skillful means), vows, and bodhisattva-action.

⁸ This “soft” strategy has deflated the expectations of some contemporary social activists wishing to find in the early canon evidence of a truly iconoclastic, revolutionary social, economic or political agenda; oppositely, it has led others to the cynical conclusion that as a tradition advocating withdrawal from and yet material dependence upon society, Buddhism was from the start forced into the “hard” position of needing to be utterly pragmatic (if not exploitative) in its relations to existing and emerging powers and authority. A recent book seeking to shed explanatory light on the purchase achieved by the emerging, eremitically inclined Buddhist tradition in rapidly urbanizing, mid-first millennium BCE northeast India is Greg Bailey and Ian Mabbett, *The Sociology of Early Buddhism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁹ This same approach is taken up and extended in the Mahayana text, the Diamond Sutra or *Vajracchedikāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, but is—I would argue—more centrally focused on distinguishing among things as: expressions of emptiness; as presently conceived; and, as designated.

¹⁰ An early, succinct and yet thorough expression of this logic is developed in Nagarjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā*. But it is perhaps in Fazang’s linking of emptiness with both interdependence and interpenetration that the logic and its underlying relational ontology are most provocatively expressed.

¹¹ There is much in contemporary complexity theory, with its emphasis on systems that are at once autopoietic and novogenous, that can be quite effectively invoked in understanding the dynamics of karma. Conversely, the recognition that contemporary patterns of global interdependence are giving rise to complex systems can be used—as in the second half of this paper—to argue for the increased relevance of karma in thinking through and responding to contemporary global dynamics.

¹² Happiness or *sukha* does factor into the “itinerary” of coursing well on the Middle Way, but is situated as a link between bodily tranquility and attentive mastery (*samādhi*) and then the capacity for practicing the four *brahmvihāra*. For a discussion of this positioning of *sukha*, see Peter D. Hershock, “Trade, Development, and the Broken Promise of Interdependence: Buddhist Reflections on the Possibility of Post-Market Economics,” *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Vol. 9, Winter 2003, p. 54ff.

¹³ In the early Canon, the qualitative distinction between the *kusala* and the *akusala* is resorted to with remarkable frequency, perhaps most commonly in discussions of proper conduct or the realization of moral clarity (*sīla*). Not surprisingly, emphasis is often placed on evaluating thought, action, and speech—the classic modalities of “making karma.” But the distinction is also used with respect to situations, to experiences, to aspirations, aims, and interests.

¹⁴ The contrast of the public and the private must be appealed to with some qualification insofar as these concepts (at least as most typically used in contemporary discourse) originated and developed in a context of ontological and metaphysical commitments that contrast sharply with the Buddhist insistence on the interdependence and emptiness of all things. Nevertheless, the contrast seems useful in cautioning against a prejudice of those commitments: that spiritual growth is a matter of the heart or soul—an essentially internal and individual matter.

¹⁵ The Jataka tales are a collection of 547 didactic stories drawn from the Buddha's prior lives in both human and other forms. Generally ignored by the academic community, both in the West and in Asia, they constitute a repository of lessons about the meaning of diligently appreciating the quality of one's relationships in the pursuit of full awakening. A notable exception to this scholarly neglect is *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, edited by Juliane Schober, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu: 1997.

¹⁶ For fuller discussions of "karmic cohorts" or dramatic ensembles on the path of Buddhist liberation, see: John Strong, "A Family Quest: The Buddha, Yasodhara, and Rahula in the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya" (in Schober 1997, op.cit.) and Peter D. Herschok, "Family Matters: Dramatic Interdependence and the Intimate Realization of Buddhist Liberation," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Volume 7, 2000.

¹⁷ Interestingly, the English "genius" is a direct derivation of the Latin *genius*—the name of the deity of generation and birth—which is also the root both of the English "engineering" and "generosity." Here, too, creativity implies contributory excellence.

¹⁸ Indeed, when posed questions seeking objective statements about ultimate matters, the historical Buddha's renowned response was to remain silent. Pressed further, his standard verbal response was that pursuing such matters was not conducive to living the holy life, to undermining the conditions of trouble and suffering, and to faring well on the Middle way.

¹⁹ By contrast, terms like *manas* and *vinnana* explicitly refer to more strictly cognitive and rational capacities and can be seen as lacking strong implications of relational mutuality.

²⁰ I would argue that to avoid hypostatizing liberation as a kind of achieved state-of-affairs, Buddhist freedom should always be understood as "relating freely"—a dynamic relational quality. Freedom is not ultimately nominal, but rather adverbial.

²¹ It is not merely coincidental this understanding of emptiness and the sociality of enlightenment came to fruition under circumstances also roughly parallel to our own—a period of Chinese history characterized by phenomenal social, economic, and political change that reached a crisis pitch during the mid-8th century, resulting in the An Lushan rebellion and, eventually, the death or disappearance of fully two-thirds of China's population over a single decade. It was during this period of intense social upheaval that the Chan master Mazu apparently developed his confrontational style of teaching that led to the canonizing within the Chan tradition of improvisational virtuosity and the liberating redirection of situational dynamics.

²² The argument has been made that the traditional teachings on karma are freighted with cosmological and mythological elements that are not only at odds with modern scientific understandings of natural law and with contemporary commitments to historicity, but that also are not apparently and robustly aligned with the contemporary ethical quest for social, political, economic and cultural justice or with activist practicalities of responding to the complex realities of a world characterized by increasing globalization and accelerating change. I take this to be a rough summary of key points made by Dale Wright in his paper, "Critical Questions Towards a Naturalized Concept of Karma in Buddhism," but also as reflective of a more general conviction among practicing Buddhists and Buddhist scholars: the conviction that the metaphysical scaffolding supporting the traditional teaching of karma can be discarded without compromising the legitimate ethical purchase of the concept. I do not share this conviction, but this is not because I would insist that the rebirth escatology traditionally factoring into Buddhist metaphysics is literally true—a doctrine about the way the world really is. Indeed, I would insist that there are no such doctrines included anywhere in the Buddhist canon. Rather, my own conviction is that Buddhist practice as a whole is diminished in terms of its scope of effectiveness if *all things/all beings* are not seen *as* meaningfully interdependent. Whether they 'are' or 'are-not'—whether they "really" are or are-not part of a cosmic scale moral economy—is a theoretically relevant, but also potentially disabling question. A more relevant question is: what benefit accrues ethically and practically from seeing all things/all beings *as* meaningfully interdependent in a cosmos of distinctive and yet irreducibly open realms of birth and embodiment? This seems, after all, to be the only karmic way of phrasing the basic issue involved in questioning karma as an element of Buddhist practice.

²³ The contrast here is between (ordinal) values that pertain to a shared conception of ideal order or abstract meaning and (strategic) values that pertain to actualizing particular ordering regimes through concrete means.

²⁴ In contemporary Southeast Asia—especially in Thailand—there is growing readiness to affirm the analytic and critical applicability of karma in the public sphere. For example, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, P.A. Payutto, and Phra Phaisan Visalo all deploy a very broad construction of karma in their engagement with contemporary social and economic issues. Interested readers might consult the following site for an interesting and provocative collection of essays on karma: <http://www.bpf.org/tsangha/tsm03report/karmabook.html>. Readers interested in the sustained application of a karmic critique of technology might wish to have a look at Peter D. Hershock, *Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age*, SUNY Press, Albany: 1999.

²⁵ Recognizing this dual focus of Buddhist practice suggests reading the history of Buddhism as a process of responsively diversifying teachings and practices correlated with the transmission of Buddhism across cultural boundaries. The movement of Buddhism into new cultural spheres practically commands the emergence of new teachings. In keeping with the logic of Mahayana emphases on *upaya* or skillful means, what emerges over time are unique and yet interrelated *ecologies of enlightenment* in which individual Buddhist traditions signal the evolution of distinctive approaches to drawing forth local cultural resources for supporting and sustaining Buddhist practice—traditions that both shape and are shaped by their local, cultural contexts. I would also argue that the Buddha’s prediction of the eventual demise of the Dharma can be understood as a function of seeing that as Buddhism becomes institutionally fixed within a given cultural setting, there occurs a significant (if often gradual) erosion of Buddhism’s countercultural capacity—a loss of Buddhism’s critical edge with respect to prevailing structures of norms and interests.

²⁶ To put this in more striking terms, recent statistics on global poverty leave no doubt that global economic interdependence is disproportionately beneficial to an ever-shrinking set of global elites. Over the past 30 years of rapidly expanding global market operations, there has (according to such distinctly different sources as the U.N. and the World Bank) been a 50% increase in the global poor: Today 25% of the world population is only barely able to meet their most basic subsistence needs. *Another* 20% of the world’s men, women and children live in “absolute poverty”—that is, in circumstances affording no hope whatsoever of leading even minimally dignified lives or making any significant difference in their own fortunes.

²⁷ I am appealing here to a notion of complexity that is emerging out of interfaces among general systems theory, chaos theory, and theories of emergent dynamics. There are any number of good introductions to complexity theory, but a useful beginning point for the novice can be found at a site on complexity and education: <http://www.complexityandeducation.ualberta.ca/glossary.htm>. The web-glossary provides a succinct introduction to the varied disciplines feeding into complexity theory and is linked with short, annotated bibliography.

²⁸ Downward causation occurs when higher order systems condition the lower order systems they comprise, actively shaping those lower order systems to meet their own systemic needs/values. For an introduction to theories of downward causation and its application in a range of fields from cognitive science to social science, see *Downward Causation: Minds, Bodies, and Matter*, edited by P.B. Andersen et. al., Aarhus University Press, 2000.

²⁹ The past two decades have seen, for example, the consolidation of a “normative call” in international relations theory—an explicit engagement with issues of the meaning of good governance, global public good, and the good life. See, for example, Mervyn Frost, “A Turn Not Taken: Ethics in IR at the Millennium,” in *Review of International Studies* 24, December 1998.

³⁰ Such a conception of diversity, while sharing some common ground with the concept as currently used in ecological science, explicitly rejects seeing diversity as a function of a competitive order—an outcome of competition over scarce resources. As applied to natural ecologies, a Buddhist concept of diversity would involve seeing species as differentiating in order to make available to the ecosystem as a whole, resources within a given climactic/geographic zone that otherwise would have gone unexpressed and unused. Buddhist diversity sees differences as modalities of making a difference—as opportunities for offering.

³¹ This insight is at the core of Fazang’s Huayan Buddhist teachings regarding the interdependence and interpenetration of all things, and harks back to Nagarjuna’s insistence that fully appreciating the emptiness of all things is to appreciate their mutual relevance.