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Violent Karma Stories in Contemporary Sinhala Buddhism

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Abstract

Buddhism is a religion normally respected for its message of non-violence. In this article I will discuss how images of violence are used as a means to compel Buddhists to act in accordance with Buddhist ethical principles. This will be shown through the examination of a contemporary newspaper series from the popular Sinhala language *Lankādīpa Irida* periodical. In it, we find a series of karma stories that illustrate how examples of violence can be found in modern Buddhistic narratives, both in written and pictorial forms. In this article it will be argued that these modern narratives have a precedent in much earlier, and in some cases ancient, Buddhist writings and art. I will argue that these modern narratives deviate from canonical karma stories in that they focus on the maturation of karma in

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this life while the former focus on the afterlife. The purpose of these modern stories is to assure the reader of the reality of karma and to entertain the reader with gruesome stories that feature the death of moral transgressors.

Introduction

We do not normally think of Buddhism as a religion that concerns itself with violence. On the contrary, the canonical Pāli literature preaches a doctrine that is thought to preclude endorsement of violent acts. The Buddha repudiates negative feelings that give rise to violence saying "the noble disciple . . . is without ill will, undefiled and pure . . ." (AN 66 283). The Buddha frequently admonishes those who engage in violent acts, either mental or physical, and states that the good Buddhist should "[refrain] from taking life" and be "without stick or sword," acting thoughtfully and compassionately towards all living creatures (DN 1.8 68). The Buddha's rejection of violence has been widely recognised throughout the scholarly literature (Keown 2005; Harvey 2000; Gowans 2015). Yet despite this rejection of violence, in some contemporary iterations of Buddhism one may find a peculiar fascination with karma stories that revel in violent imagery. I suggest that the purpose of these stories is twofold: first, they are a means to entertain a largely Buddhist audience with B-grade horror stories; second, they assure the audience of the reality of karma and the possibility of immediate justice.

A karma story is defined as a narrative that develops over a period of time and chiefly concerns the actions of persons and the effects those actions have in the context of Buddhist moral theory (Appleton *Narrating* 191). James Egge has also commented on the importance narrative plays in the explication of Buddhist karma theory (Egge 2002). The

karma story tradition is ultimately rooted in its Pali canonical antecedents. One of the most classic examples are the Jātaka tales which revolve around the Buddha's past lives and are typically concerned with the good deeds he engaged in (Appleton, *Jātaka* 21). The Nikāya textual tradition also contains many examples of individuals engaged in good and bad deeds and the rewards and punishments they received as a result. The *Petavatthu* provides a particularly rich source for discussion around the effects karma has on those who uphold or violate the Buddha's dharma (Egge 71). As I will argue later, it is clear that these Pāli canonical sources heavily influence the development of the contemporary karma stories discussed below.

I would also like to distinguish the genre of karma stories from Sinhala ghost stories. While these two genres are related in that they both concern the supernatural, ghost stories are not explicitly Buddhist morality tales. They also typically concern hauntings conducted by an innocent victim subject to a tragic event (Perera 157). However, there is a thematic connection between these genres; as Perara points out, Sinhala ghost stories often concern the subject of vengeful spirits (190). As we will see in this article, the *Taksalāva* series certainly concerns justice being meted out, not by vengeful spirits as in ghost stories, but by the impartial operation of karma.

In this article I will be comparing these modern narratives with narratives in the commentarial and canonical texts. It is useful to observe that there are some fundamental differences in the style and purpose of these different narratives. While the canonical texts are intended to educate the laity of the dangers of immorality, these modern stories are both educational and entertaining (or "edutainment" in the popular vernacular). Another dissimilarity between the canonical texts and these modern iterations is that the latter are almost exclusively concerned with karmic effects that mature in this life from misdeeds that were also

performed in this life. These Sinhala karma stories therefore rather uniquely concern themselves with intra-life punishments rather than inter-life punishments. While the canon does allow for the immediate maturation of karma from actions undertaken in this life, we find that the canon tends to focus on karmic effects that bear fruit in a later life. The modern iterations, however, are concerned mainly with the immediate ripening of karma.

As Egge points out, karma is normally understood as an effect that occurs after maturation, usually in a future life, and instantaneous results are not usually expected (84). However, accounts of karma in the textual tradition do not always obey this structure and there are instances where some actions are understood to yield near immediate results (Appleton, *Narrating* 79). For some Buddhists it is crucial that karma be observable in the immediate future as effects in a future life are unobservable in the present. It also does not gratify the observers need to experience the punishment of moral wrongdoers. The contemporary accounts examined below address both these defects.

Methodological Considerations

The Sinhala folk literature discussed here is culled from a long series of newspaper submissions taken from the Sinhala language paper *Lankādīpa (Island of Lanka).* It is one of the most popular newspapers in the country. The paper runs a special Sunday only (*Lankādīpa Irida*) insert called *Taksalāva (Appraisal)* in which these karma stories appear. *Taksalāva* is edited by J. D. Elarasingha (at the time of writing) and is generally concerned with matters pertaining to modern life. In general, *Lankādīpa* is one of the most popular newspaper in Sri Lanka and is circulated throughout the nation. The newspaper began circulation in 1991. The Sunday edition is especially popular and reaches 350,000 people. Within

the context of *Taksalāva* these karma stories serve as a way to explain contemporary accounts of justice being served according to the Buddhist karma theory.

Within *Taksalāva,* the series of karma stories are more specifically titled *Mē jīvitayēdima kaḷa kam paḷa děna hæṭi (*"The nature of results of actions taken in this life"*).* I have examined a cross section of the literature covering 2013 through 2014 and there is an abundance of similar material available, some of which can now be accessed online (see link here). The stories discussed here are drawn from sixty-one articles, each article containing two to three individual stories. The fact that these stories are written in Sinhala,[2] and frequently refer to Buddhism, suggests that the intended audience is Sinhala Buddhists.

For a general overview of the different crimes, moral transgressions, and punishments inflicted upon perpetrators the reader should examine the appendix. These tables concern only the period discussed above. In only one case out of the sixty-one does the story describe the transgressor being reborn in hell. Normally, the punishment meted out to the transgressor is immediate or near immediate. This will be important when comparing these stories to the karmic tales in the Pāli literature which focus on karmic justice being experienced in the afterlife.

These stories tend to follow a particular formula. They are treated as letters to the editor (for example, "D. S. De Silva writes to us from the Colombo district . . ."). Sometimes the author's name is given, while

[2] The ethnic majority of Sri Lanka, the Sinhala people, overwhelmingly identify as Buddhist. The remaining minority are usually Christian. There is also a minority community of Tamils who are typically Hindu or Muslim. There is also a very small population of Muslims who are of Moor and Malay heritage. As far as I am aware, these kinds of karma stories are relevant only for Buddhist Sri Lankans.

at other times the author is anonymous and only the district is mentioned.

In any case, the formula that these stories follow can be described as follows: (1) the author defines the villain, their motives, and their evil behavior; (2) the text goes into graphic detail describing the horrible crimes the villain carries out against their victims; (3) the text proceeds to describe the fate that the villain is subjected to—no detail is spared in explaining the miseries the villain experiences; (4) the punishment typically (though not always) fits the crime in very specific and poetic ways. One example of this is a story in which a sadist gouges out the eyes of live cows—his punishment is that he is blinded by cancerous eye growths; and lastly, (5) on top of the physical trauma which constitutes the main form of the punishment, the villain is almost always described as dying in considerable pain. One example is a stock phrase such as this "*minisā duk vinda mærī giyē*" or "he suffered and went to his death." Variations on this type of phrase are extremely common.

There is no way to validate the authenticity of these stories. Internal to the newspaper they are treated as non-fiction though we should suppose that the articles may be heavily editorialized. Some of the more fantastical aspects of these stories certainly lend credence to the notion that they are fictional. However, I am hesitant to assume that every aspect of the stories is completely false. Sadistic violence does unfortunately exist everywhere in the world. Whether the cases are fictional or not, it does reflect an underlying narrative of violence that is developed out of genuine stories of grim horror that do exist in Sri Lanka and beyond. Regardless, many of the readers of these karma stories believe that they are true. This is significant because, for many, the karma stories discussed here provide *prima facie* evidence of the reality of Buddhist theory of karma and cosmic justice.

Violence in the *Taksalāva* Series

One of the characteristic aspects of these karma stories is the way the texts revel in graphic violence. This is a signature aspect of these stories and, as I mention above, this is a reason why we can understand these texts as primarily as a means to entertain. The graphic violence is demonstrated in two ways. First, the written text itself outlines the gritty details of the villain's crimes and their subsequent punishment. Second, this violence is further highlighted through illustration. Each article is accompanied by an artist's rendition of a scene in one of the stories. These caricatures range from the relatively bloodless—such as a drawing of a man holding a knife to a crying cow's neck—to the outright gory, such as a drawing that shows a soldier dismembering a supine woman. The drawings usually include one or more of the following motifs that are intended to symbolize the coming effects of karma: (1) a demonic figure hovering ethereally over the villain; (2) flames rising up from hell to consume the villain; (3) the image of a snake ready to strike the villain; and (4) a skeletal hand reaching up to grasp him. Table 1 provides a description of some images found in this periodical (see Appendix 2 for some examples of these illustrations).

Table 1

Examples of Violent Images from *Taksalāva* Series	
A	A bleeding man lies prone and injured in a pineapple grove as a cow gallops away.
B	A man is gleefully cutting the tongue off of a tethered cow; flames rise up from under him as a demonic head hovers above him.
C	A man yanks on the rope tethering a goat. The goat's head is on an already bloody execution platform. A skeletal hand reaches down to grab the man as flames rise up around him.

D	A crying elephant struggles with a man clutching a saw who has already fallen into the pit he has dug for the elephant.
E	A crying man clutches his genitals as flames from a burning torch consume his undergarments.
F	A man, clutching a pair of pliers, threatens to pull out a bound cat's eye. Meanwhile, a skeletal hand reaches down with its own set of pliers.
G	A grinning man pulls eyeball out of supine cow using pliers while his own eye is being pulled out by a skeleton standing behind him with its own set of pliers.
H	An evil looking man races after a fleeing pig with a knife in each hand. Another image shows him falling from a tree to his doom.
I	A man lies under a tractor which is crushing him to death. Deer look on with interest.
J	A man holding a hoe picks up a puppy by the scruff of the neck. In the background, flames are threatening to consume him while an enormous snake rises up over him.

As we can see from this list of descriptions, the images are indeed quite violent. These images appear in a daily newspaper that anyone can access regardless of age. This, first of all, suggests the normalization of violence within the culture, which is perhaps in part a consequence of the fact that Sri Lanka has been exposed to war and civil unrest for a number of decades. Violent images, including images of dead bodies, are not an infrequent sight on Sri Lankan broadcast television. When the leader of the LTTE, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, was killed by Sri Lankan security forces in 2009, images of his damaged corpse were broadcast extensively throughout Sri Lanka. This illustrates the normalization of the visual representation of violence in Sri Lankan media. As I will discuss later, images of violence are also a common feature of Buddhist art. The very fact of this violence is useful as a way to compel the Buddhist observer to act virtuously so as to avoid an unpleasant fate.

This hyper-violence is illustrated by the written text itself. The violent language can be sub-divided into two classifications: (1) the descriptions of the violence that the villain perpetrates against the victim; and (2) the description of the violence committed against the villain in cosmic retaliation.

Violence committed against the victim

Consider the following opening of one story concerning a soldier who commits sadistic violence against women: "During the war there was a soldier who really loved cutting women's breasts," the text reads, ". . . when his sergeant would imprison a woman [this soldier] would [take the opportunity] to cut off the breast. Because it was an era when terrorism prevailed he could carry out these activities under the cover (lit. cloud) that terrorism provided."[3] The text adds that the soldier would collect these body parts because of his "bizarre cravings" (*puduma āshāva*) and that his comrades were complicit in this terrible sadism. In response to this depravity they would, "simply laugh and do nothing" (*mē gæna dannā an aya sināsī nikam sitiyaha*). One notable aspect of these karma stories is that very often the accomplices of violent crimes seem to avoid punishment and the story only focuses on the primary transgressor. This seems consistent with the principle that some agents of violence are in fact instruments of karma and are not themselves blameworthy.

[3] The text reads: "*. . . ektharaa suda sĕbaḷĕk itā priya kaḷē strīngē piyayuru kæpīmaya. sājanṭvarayaku vū ohu kavara strīyat hira hārayaṭa gattat karannē piyayuru kæpīmaya. trastavādaya pætira pavatina kālayak nisā mahugē mē kriyāva trastavādayē naminma væsī giyēya. sivil samājaya ē gæna katābaha kaḷē næta. esē kata karannaṭa vuvamanāvak da sivil samājayaṭa nŏviṇi.*"

Regardless, this example of sadistic violence is not restricted only to human beings—though of the human victims a preponderance of them are women. This is relevant as a number of authors have observed that in a conflicted and post-conflict environment, it is mainly women who are the victims of violence be it violence perpetrated by agents of the state or non-state actors. Sarah Fisher (902) has discussed, for example, how in the chaos following the Boxing Day tsunami there was a spike in violence against women in Sri Lanka. More relevant still are the allegations that women were relatively more frequently subject to violence and sexual violence in Internal Displacement Camps in Northern Sri Lanka after the end of the war. It is possible to understand these karma stories concerning the mistreatment of women in this context.

Animals also fall victim to the horrible actions of these villainous humans. In fact, the vast majority of the victims described in these texts are animals as is clear from the table above. It may be that women and animals are the typical victims of these stories because they are stereotypically viewed as being "innocent" (*ahiṃsakayi*) and therefore transgressions against them are all the more severe. Despite this, there are comparatively few child victims in these tales even though children are also seen as paradigmatically innocent.

As mentioned, the violent language in the karma stories also extends especially towards animals. Consider the following karma story concerning a man who killed pigs. "He was a Sinhala man. He followed the Buddhist religion," the story begins. These biographical points, from the perspective of the author, only magnify the outrage since a Sinhala Buddhist should not, the view goes, be susceptible to evil conduct. The story continues by stating that the man kept pigs in his back yard and that "it was required [that he] kill the pigs." The story goes on to describe the execution method, which "was to bind them and put them in a sack. Then with the pigs in the sack he would strike the sack with a club

from a tree branch. Inside the sack the pigs would die. Having pounded them flat [he took the bodies] out, and if they still had more life he would normally stab them with a knife."[4] Rather than describe the events in a bland or uninteresting way, the author of the text has focused on the violence of the encounter in a particularly gratuitous manner. For example, rather than simply state that the pig was killed, the author has deliberately chosen to describe the manner and process by which they were killed. This draws the reader's attention to the brutality of the act which is intended to draw a heightened emotional response.

We are similarly treated to another example of brazen animal cruelty in another story, this time concerning the killing of a litter of puppies. The image associated with this story is described in Table 1 above (image J). The story starts, ". . . because (the man) would frequently cook meat and fish in his home, dogs and cats from nearby homes would congregate there."[5] This ultimately leads to the following situation: "Thus one day a dog gave birth to a litter of puppies at his home. Seeing this happen, in a flash (lit. "in a minute"), the man took the entire litter of puppies and buried them alive. Finding it convenient to kill them in this way, the man began to kill every puppy using this method. Because of that, not even one puppy survived in the entire area."[6]

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[4] Text reads: "*ūraku maranṭa vuvamanā vū viṭa ohu karannē ū gōniyakaṭa damā bænda gænīmayi. esē gōniyaka damā bænda gænīmayi. esē gōniyakaṭa damū ūrāṭa ohu pŏllakin gasayi. gōniya æthuḷē ūrā marahaḍa dĕyi. hondaṭama talā ū eḷiyaṭa gĕna tavat paṇa tibē nam pihiyĕn ænima sirinaya*"

[5] Text reads: "*ohugē nivasē nithara mas mḷu uyana bævin avaṭa nivĕsvala siṭa ballan hā baḷalūn mē nivasaṭa sēndu vannaṭa vūha.*"

[6] Text reads . . . *mĕsē pæmiṁi ek bæḷaliyak baṅḍāragē nivasē pæṭavun prasūt kaḷāya. Ebava dæka kōpayaṭa pat baṅḍāra pæṭav ipadhī minitthu kīpayak gatavanavāt samaga ekī siyalu pæṭav paṅapiṭin vaḷalā dæmuvēya. Husma gænīmē apahasutāva nisā ekī baḷal pæṭavun siyalla*

As we can see from the appendix, there are many stories similar to the two discussed above, almost all of which provide a similar level of detail in communicating the horrific crimes committed and their similarly gory punishments. The examples discussed above highlight the horrific sadism of these folk tales well. The narrative purpose of this sadism, in my view, is to increase the sense of drama, invite the reader to be truly outraged and disgusted, and thereby generate a sentiment in the reader of hatred for the villain. This desire to elicit disdain for the wrongdoer of course appears to contravene Buddhist ethical doctrine which preaches against harboring ill will (P: *vyāpadā*). On the other hand, the detailed description of the hapless victim's injuries and commensurate suffering cause the reader to sympathize with the victim. Compassion (P: *karuṇā*) is, of course, a core Buddhist virtue, the sympathetic reaction to the suffering of another. The text therefore encourages the cultivation of a Buddhist emotional hindrance by way of ill will but also encourages the positive feeling of compassion towards the victim.

In terms of the positive purpose of these texts, generating feelings of sympathy is important as it allows the reader to sympathize with the victim. It may even be the case that the reader becomes a kind of surrogate for the victim, putting oneself in the place of the victim—sympathetic to them as we imagine how we would feel in similar circumstances, and hoping the transgressor will be punished just as we hope those who hurt us will be punished. The negative aspect of the stories is that they encourage a sense of malice towards the perpetrator and a desire to see harm befall them. This and other peculiarities will be discussed later when contrasting these stories with the Pāli canon.

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miya giyaha. Īṭa tĕmasakaṭa pamaṅa pasu baṅḍāragēnivasa asala gæbasuṅa ayithikaruvĕku nŏmæti bællak ohugē nivasa asala siya pæṭavan prasūt kaḷāya."

Violence committed against the transgressor

We should now turn to the punishment the transgressor is set to receive for his immoral behavior. Let us consider another case study. The villain in this story is a disrespectful individual who drinks alcohol and consumes narcotics. He drunkenly abuses people including, as we find out, his own mother. For this moral transgression he receives a fitting punishment. The text reads, " . . . with disgracefully caustic words he berated his mother and from this sin he suffered from 'mouth cancer.' He could not take even a little food or drink or even a little water and, due to amnesia, he wandered aimlessly around. From his mouth an awful moaning was constantly emitted."[7] Despite this misfortune people were not sympathetic, and they "continually hurled awful slander at him" (*samājayē nirantara gærahumaṭat, piḷikulaṭat pat viya*). It is characteristic of these karma stories that the harm that is exacted upon the perpetrator mirrors the crime that they committed; since this villain committed these morally repugnant actions orally––drinking alcohol, inhaling drugs, yelling at his poor mother––his downfall therefore originated orally, hence he developed mouth cancer. Furthermore, the suffering he inflicted on others was returned to him many times over as the entire crowd of people (*samājaya,* lit. "the society") threw hateful barbs at him even in his crippled condition. Eventually, he would in due course die (*miyagŏs*, lit. "to go to one's death"), which in any of these stories is virtually mandatory regardless of the severity of the crime committed.

As another example, the villain of the next story is a matchmaker (*kapuwā*) who operates out of a Hindu temple. He swindles people out of

[7] Text reads: "*kalyāmēdī mahaḷu mavaṭa nigarukaḷa paruṣa vacaṇayĕn bæṅa vædunu mē pāpatara minisā "muḳa piḷikāvakin' pĕḷĕnnaṭa viya. Kisidu aharak gannaṭavat, diya pŏdak bŏnnaṭavat nŏhækiva avasihiyĕn ibāgātē ævida giya mŏhugē muḳayen mahā durgandayak vahanaya viya.*"

their money by completing phony horoscopes and running other similar scams. Apart from engaging in this type of financial impropriety he also becomes a sexual predator. The story continues that he uses a hypnotic device to incapacitate a woman where it is implied that he then sexually assaults her. We can observe again how common violence against women is in these tales. Matters proceed and he ultimately loses his possessions and land (in other words, a direct punishment for his financial crimes). As for paralyzing the woman with hypnosis and the associated sexual misconduct, the story informs us that, "[a]fter a short time had passed an illness began to appear. Not just any illness, it was an illness that caused paralysis. The illness was such that he could not move. He received medicine, however his day-to-day life continued to be a hardship. He was extremely defenseless and suffered greatly and then, one day, lying prostrate in the bed, his bed caught on fire. He received severe burns and he suffered for a number of days and, as a result of this misfortune, finally expired. "[8]

Similar themes repeat many times over, and I have selected these few cases to provide an idea of how these karma stories operate. We can see from these punishments that they are not only violent and graphic, but that they reflect the nature of the moral transgression in a precise and even poetic manner. This poetic nature of the punishments is nearly, but not always, universal.

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[8] Text reads: "*. . . mĕsē ṭika kalak gatavana viṭa hĕtĕma rōgiyaku bavaṭa patviya. nikaṃma rōgiyaku nova, anshabhāga rōgiyaku bavaṭa pat viya. rōgī tattvayĕn nidahas vīmaṭa nŏhæki viya. bĕhĕth hēth kĕsē vĕtat edinedā jivatvīmaṭa da apahasu tattvayak udā viya. Antha asaraṅa duk gŏḍaka siṭi hĕtĕma ekatarā dinaka tamat vætira siṭi ændaṭa taman visinma gini tabā gattēya. balavat piḷisima tuvāla læbū ohu dina kihipayak eyin da duk vinda avāsanāvanta lĕsa miya giyē taman kara taman kaḷakam mē taman kaḷakam mē ātmadī paḷadun bava pratayakṣa karamini.*"

There are a few unusual outliers, however. In one story, for example, it is not only the villain himself that is punished but also his wife who, it appears, is innocent of any crime. This is, in fact, the punishment for the sadistic soldier discussed earlier who attacked and mutilated women's breasts. His story concludes with his wife contracting breast cancer (*piyayuru piḷikāvak*) and the surgery thereafter required a mastectomy. Clearly, the author of this story struggled to address the fact that the soldier could not have his own breasts removed (as he did not have any) and hence the karmic harm was transferred to the wife who, in this story, is problematically treated as an extension of himself. This outcome seems entirely contrary to the very point of the karmic system which insists that only those who are guilty of a crime will be punished. In general, the treatment of the villain's associates is extremely inconsistent—in some stories the associates who are clearly party to a crime are unpunished while here an associate who is innocent is nonetheless subject to karmic repercussions.

To recover from this apparent narrative error, the author still reassures us that the sadistic soldier suffered in kind. The text reads, "Later he was killed from a terrorist bomb blast. The shrapnel struck him directly in the chest. He was in great pain in the hospital, he received several surgeries but eventually died."[9] It is curious here that the soldier's fate is sealed by the terrorists, the very people the soldier has sworn to protect against. Again, his comeuppance comes about in a paradigmatically poetic manner. It is also worth noting that his death is occasioned by an injury sustained to the chest––the same approximate area that he himself targeted in his own violent crimes.

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[9] Text reads: "*. . . āpasu ā ohuṭa trasvādīngē bŏmbayak vædī miya yannaṭa siduviya. Vĕdilla hariyaṭama væduṅē papuvaṭaya. Ohu bŏhō dukvinda ārōgayashālāvē shalayakrma kihipayakaṭa bhājanaya vī avasānayē miya giyē.*"

One problematic aspect of these karma stories is the way medical conditions are used as a form of punishment for moral wrongdoing. In the majority of the stories, the villain suffers, not due to mere accidental injury, but because they contract some general disease (*rōgiya/lēḍa)* or more specifically cancer (*piḷikāva*). This implies that the reason someone might contract a debilitating or even fatal illness is due to some past moral transgression and not merely due to random misfortune. This explanation for illness which has some precedence in prior Buddhist literature is already morally objectionable, but it is made all the worse in these folk stories because, unlike in the Pāli canon, it is due to a transgression perpetrated in *this* life—if some innocent person contracts an illness, the situation may be aggravated by unnecessary feelings of guilt. A second problem with the medicalization angle of these karma stories is that when the villains fall into a state of illness, they uniformly seek medical treatment which almost inevitably fails to be successful. In one story the villain is hospitalized but is such an annoyance to the staff that he is expelled from the hospital thus condemning him to certain death.[10]

The point of the above analysis is to show how both the descriptions of the violence committed against the victim as well as the punishments inflicted on the villain are described, both in word and in art, in graphic detail. It seems that the reason for this is to draw the reader into the story and commit the reader emotionally to the victim, invite

[10]All of this may lead the reader to distrust the medical establishment. This distrust of Western medicine is an ongoing problem in Sri Lanka (Nanayakkara and Ekanayake 2010). Finally, mental illness (*mānasika lēḍa*) constitutes one other punishment of these criminals. In at least two of these stories the villain is said to become mentally unstable as a result of their sin thus causing them considerable suffering. Once again, this only leads to further stigmatization of mental illness and the false view that the mentally unwell deserve to suffer. Stigma around mental illness even within the medical fraternity remains a serious issue in Sri Lanka (Fernando, Deane, and McLeod 2010).

them to hate the villain, and voyeuristically observe—perhaps with pleasure—the terrible fate that awaits the transgressor. The graphic descriptions may remind us of horror movies, in which the viewers are thrilled by the violence on screen—they are at once disgusted by it, but at the same time experience a perverse pleasure in watching the violence unfold. These stories have the same effect on the reader.

These stories not only assure the reader of the reality of karma, but also that the reader is able to discharge negative feelings in their own life in a safe context. It is plausible to see this body of literature as a Buddhist-sanctioned outlet for negative—or even violent—impulses, thoughts of anger and hatred, but exercised in a more socially acceptable way. Understanding these stories as a means to vicariously experience these emotions in a safe manner lies at the heart of my analysis here.

Comparing the Modern Karma Stories to the Canon

The contemporary narrative discussed above has its roots in the Pāli canonical tradition. Some Sinhala Buddhists that I have encountered have argued that these karma stories are not "true Buddhism" (*sataya buddhagama*) and therefore should not be considered examples of Buddhist thinking. However, a close examination of the canon, commentarial texts, and even Sri Lankan literature and arts, reveal that these stories are a continuation of existing traditions. Despite the fact that these stories do have a basis in Buddhist tradition, the focus of these stories is concerned with immediate karmic repercussions which I will discuss in detail below.

Images of violence in Theravāda Buddhism

It may initially seem unlikely that canonical texts would allow extreme images of violence given the Buddha's belief in non-violence (*ahiṃsa*). As a result, we may initially feel that the graphic violence described in these contemporary Buddhist karma stories is at odds with the ethical norms of the Pāli canon. When comparing karma theories, we might therefore say that the contemporary cases described here differ due to the graphic detail of the punishments. However, it is necessary to point out that in many respects the horrifying nature of these karma stories do not significantly differ from the hell tortures described in the canonical literature. As Jens Braarvig has argued, depictions of hell appear very early on in the development of the canonical literature (264).

Consider the warning given by Lord Yama, the ruler of hell (*niraya*), in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya (Numerical Discourses)*. In speaking to a moral transgressor, Lord Yama explains that, "[t]hrough heedlessness, good man, you failed to do good by body, speech, or mind. Surely, they will treat you in a way that fits your heedlessness. That bad kamma of yours was not done by your mother or father, nor by brother or sister, nor by your friends and companions (etc.) . . . Rather, you were the one who did that bad kamma, and you yourself will have to experience its result" (AN 1141 235). Yama describes in lurid detail the tortures this person faces after death, including, "the wardens of hell torture him with the fivefold transfixing. They drive a red-hot iron stake through one hand and another red-hot iron stake through the other hand; they drive a red-hot iron stake through one foot; they drive a red hot iron stake through the other foot; they drive a red hot iron stake through the middle of the chest. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings. Yet he does not die so long as that bad kamma is not exhausted" (AN 1141 236). Yama goes on to explain the many other horrific tortures the villain will experience in hell.

The utilization of images of hell as means to warn intemperate lay people is also a staple of later Sinhala Buddhist traditions. These descriptions are likely inspired by the canonical accounts discussed above. Deegalle points out, for example, that the development of narratives concerning hell punishments was an important part of medieval Buddhist sermons in Sri Lanka ("Popularizing Buddhism" 80). Gombrich notes that the medieval author Vīdāgama Thera wrote on the topic of hell punishments and his works have influenced the shape of Buddhist proselytizing (288). Vidyācakravārti also seems to be an important early Sinhala figure who uses the possibility of hell as a way to encourage virtue, though Deegalle notes that he was far gentler in his methods than other fire-brands ("Buddhist Preaching" 195). The *Upasakamanussavinaya* is a text directed at lay people that focuses on hell punishments for misdeeds (Crosby 182). This text seems to have existed at least from 1726 on the island (184). The document is part of a tradition of morality texts intended for lay consumption. Another example is Anagarika Dhammapala's *Gihi Vinaya* which has also had a significant impact on lay moral consciousness in Sri Lanka (Gombrich and Obeyesekere). The *Taksalāva* series may therefore be viewed through this lens of moral tales intended for laity.

The written description outlined above is just one such account of the punishments meted out to wrongdoers through karmic justice. These tortures also have a historical basis in the visual arts too. Visual depictions of hell are especially well known in the case of Mahayana Buddhism, where the hell realms are an important part of *bhāvacakra* art (McArthur, 2002). Illustrations of the hell realms are a popular subject for Buddhist artists in Theravādin countries. Anderson's study of Thai sculptures and artworks depicting the activities of hell denizens is a particularly useful example of this (2012). Illustrated manuscripts showing unpleasant hell scenes are also a part of Thai Buddhist traditions as discussed by Ginsberg (92). Yian has discussed the appearance of murals

depicting hell scenes in Myanmar, Thailand and throughout Southeast Asia (100). Likewise, demonic scenes also feature in Laotian Buddhist temples (Ladwig 90). There is therefore a rich pictorial tradition of hell scenes in Buddhist Theravādin communities.

This tradition continues in Sri Lanka, usually in the context of art that adorns temple and monasteries. For example, the Aluvihāra rock temple near Matale contains a number of murals showing hell demons torturing wrongdoers using various horrifying instruments (Sarananka-ra 20). These murals and frescoes in Aluvihāra are of some antiquity and the importance of the area as a Buddhist site dates from the First century CE (Bandaranayake and Jayasinghe 164-165). Writing around 1897, Henry Cave described his observations of the frescoes as follows: "Protected by the verandah and painted on the exterior of the rock are some interest-ing frescoes with a striking resemblance in idea as well as execution to the rude mediaeval illustrations of the punishments awaiting the impi-ous in a future state" (Cave 164). The author's own observations of these murals show that little has changed since the time Cave was writing. One particular striking image is of sinners being impaled on a tree covered in sharp spikes.

Other temples in Sri Lanka depict similar scenes, such as the Wewurukannala Vihāra at Dikwella where visitors pass through a hall depicting horrific images of hell before observing a large Buddha image. Another example here is Purvarama temple at Kataluwa, which also con-tains an image house with frescoes showing scenes of hell (Ban-daranyake & Jayasinghe 292). These cases demonstrate how the grue-some and violent images of karmic justice have historical roots in Sri Lanka and that the illustrations found in *Taksalāva* are a part of this artis-tic tradition.

The specificity of the tortures discussed in the *Taksalāva* series al-so have precedence in the Pāli literature. The case of Lord Yama consid-

ers non-specific tortures inflicted for unnamed crimes. Yet there are many stories in the canon of hunters, butchers and murderers being punished in a manner that fit the details of their individual crimes. In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, for example, we are told, "Here, friend, as I was coming down from Mount Vulture Peak, I saw a man with body-hairs of swords moving through the air. Those swords kept on rising up and striking his body while he uttered cries of pain . . . That being was a hog butcher in this same Rajagaha." (SN 19.2 701). We are also told, "I saw a man with head submerged in a pit of dung . . . That being was an adulterer in this same Rājagaha" (SN 19.11 703). In the case of the hog butcher he is tortured with the same type of instruments he used to kill pigs, while the adulterer is symbolically suffocated in dung which indicates the depravity of his crimes. The *Petavatthu* also provides a doctrinal basis for specific punishments that fit particular crimes. For example, consider the story of a monk who spoke harshly and abused other renunciates and his punishment: "After death he was reborn in hell. After he had roasted there for one Buddha-interval, he left and was reborn in this Buddha-period near Rājagaha, at the foot of Vulture's Peak (as a ghost). As a result of that very offence, he was afflicted with hunger and thirst. His body was gold-colored, but his mouth was like that of a boar. Venerable Narada . . . saw the peta on the road [and asked], 'What deed have you done in your previous existence?' In reply the peta said: 'In my body I was subdued; in my speech I was not restrained. Therefore, I have such an appearance as you see, Narada'" (PV 1.2 144). These canonical cases help establish a doctrinal foundation for the stories in *Taksalāva*.

The difference between the accounts of karma in the contemporary periodical and the Pāli canon lie in their respective purposes. In the Pāli canon, the Buddha soberly informs the audience of the fact of hell, an institution that exists beyond his control, but will impartially exercise justice should anyone stray from virtue. While the details of the tortures may be lurid, as with the contemporary karma stories above, the Pāli

stories are designed to illicit feelings of fear in the audience about what may happen after death. The modern accounts accelerate these feelings of fear by promising repercussions in this life. We should remember that the Buddha is not entirely averse to the cultivation of fear provided it is of the right type (Gowan 188). The Buddha believes that the good Buddhist should experience the fear of wrongdoing (P: *ottappa)*. A secondary effect of these modern karma stories is to assure the reader of the reality of karma by providing evidence of its effects that are observable in this life. Finally, these modern karma stories seem to focus to a large extent on revenge in a way that is far less apparent in the canonical accounts.

The mechanism of karma in the canon

In the modern stories discussed above, there is a disproportionate focus on the immediate effects of karma. Compare this with, for example, the *Cūḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya.* In this sutta, the Buddha discusses the reasons why people are born in deprived or privileged situations and there is no reference to any immediate effect arising from wrong action. The Buddha is asked by a follower, "Master Gotama, what is the cause and condition why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior? For people are seen to be short-lived and long-lived, sickly and healthy, ugly and beautiful, uninfluential and influential, poor and wealthy, low-born and high-born, stupid and wise. What is the cause and condition, Master Gotama, why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior?" (MN 135 1053). The follower here raises the question of why some people are born in better conditions than others. The Buddha answers by stating that the cause of deprivation and privilege in this life is due to actions in a previous life, "Because of performing and undertaking such action (e.g. killing another being), on the dissolution of the body, *after death*, he reappears in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell" (MN 135 1054). Throughout the rest of

the sutta the Buddha refers only to the effects of karma as having implications "after death" and we can see again an inordinate focus on the effects of karma on the afterlife. There are of course many other examples of the Buddha's concern of the effects of karma after death (e.g. AN 10.10 184).

The Pāli canonical texts tend to focus on actions that affect future lives, but it is also clear that karma can influence a person's present existence. In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha states: And what is the result of kamma? The result of kamma, I say, is threefold: [to be experienced] in this very life, or in the next rebirth, or in some subsequent occasion. This is called the result of kamma" (AN 63 963). The Buddha's meaning is somewhat unclear here. When he says karma can affect "this very life" he may mean that karmic effects from a previous life mature in our current existence or it may mean that actions undertaken now can also bear fruit in the same life. Buddhaghosa helpfully clarifies this matter. In the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*, Buddhaghosa provides an example of in-this-life effects of karma. The pig-butcher Cunda, having acted evilly throughout his life, underwent the following transformation:

> After a course of evil conduct lasting fifty-five years, he was attacked by a frightful disease, and while he yet lived, the Avici hell yawned before him. He went stark mad, and began to crawl about the house on his hands and knees, squealing and grunting like a pig. His kinsmen ran out of the house, barricaded the doors, and mounted guards. After he had raved for seven days he died, and was reborn in the Avici hells." (Burlingame 501)

This passage is remarkably similar to the stories in the *Taksalāva series.*

In the *Visuddhimagga,* Buddhaghosa further develops the possibility of this-life effects of karma: "Herein, kamma is fourfold: to be experi-

enced here and now, to be experienced on rebirth, to be experienced in some subsequent becoming, and lapsed kamma" (VS 14 624). However, even in the case of Buddhaghosa we do find a tendency to focus on after-life punishments such as in the *Sammohavinodanī,* where Buddhaghosa points out that breaking the precepts or even insulting a Buddha leads to an unpleasant rebirth, but there is no mention of in-this-life effects (SV 1922 121-122). So, while the canonical and commentarial literature does allow for the possibility of in-this-life karmic effects, these texts do pre-occupy themselves mainly with the afterlife. This is in contrast to the *Taksalāva* series which largely focus on the effects karmic justice has only in this life.

In the modern tales from *Taksalāva* series we therefore find an acceleration of the mechanism of karma so that there is a heightened concern with the immediate effects of karma. This distinction between these modern accounts of karma and the accounts found in the Pāli canon have been discussed already in other ethnographic studies; in particular, Melford Spiro's *Buddhism and Society* focuses on Burmese views on karma and the afterlife (114). Gombrich has also discussed Sri Lankan beliefs concerning the more immediate effects of karma—his informants cited conventional punishments such as going to prison, for example (Gombrich 288). The *Taksalāva* series is a continuation of this focus on immediate justice and it is likely that this departure from the canon is due to a need to reassure the reader that karmic justice operates without delay, and also is used as a means to provide evidence of the metaphysical reality of karma. It is possible that modern concerns around the need for evidence and proof have governed these changes.

The Pāli canon tells us that violence is thoroughly evil and even the thought of committing harm against another should be banished from the mind of the good Buddhist. However, as is often the case in Buddhism, the recommendations of the canon are imperfectly carried

out in practice. The *Taksalāva* series illustrates a peculiar revelry in gory violence both in written word and pictorially. As I have argued, there is a tendency to invite the reader to enjoy the retribution meted out against the moral transgressors described in the texts as a means to entertain. This characterization of these stories as a means of salacious entertainment is a deviation from the more sober approach of the canonical texts. Further, the focus on the immediate effects of karma is also a departure from the canon. It also departs from the Buddha's message of non-violence. However, these modern texts are an important example of how contemporary Buddhism reshapes and justifies itself to fit lay interests and needs. This justification is further warranted by canonical, literary and artistic tradition that similarly depict images of violence. Finally, these texts reassure the reader of the reality of karma and the immediacy of karmic justice. This is an especially important feature of these karma stories as we live in an era that is particularly concerned with proof and evidence, which The *Taksalāva* series purports to provide.

Abbreviations

AN *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Numerical Discourses)

DA *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* (Commentary on the Dhammapada)

MN *Majjhima Nikāya* (Middle Length Discourses)

PV *Petavatthu* (Ghost Stories)

SV *Sammohavinodanī* (Dispeller of Delusion)

VS *Visuddhimagga* (Path of Purification)

Appendix 1

Table 2

Victim type		
Victim	**Sub-type**	**Number of victims in literature.**
Children	Non-specific age Babies	1 2
Women	Mother Young women Non-specific female	1 5 4
Neighbor		2
Cow		8
Dog	Dog (non-specific) Puppies	1 2
Chickens		2
Animals (non-specific)		1
Monkeys		3
Monitor lizards		4
Pigs		2
Wedding party		1
Cat	Adult cat Kittens	2 1
Goats		2
Boar		1
Goose		1

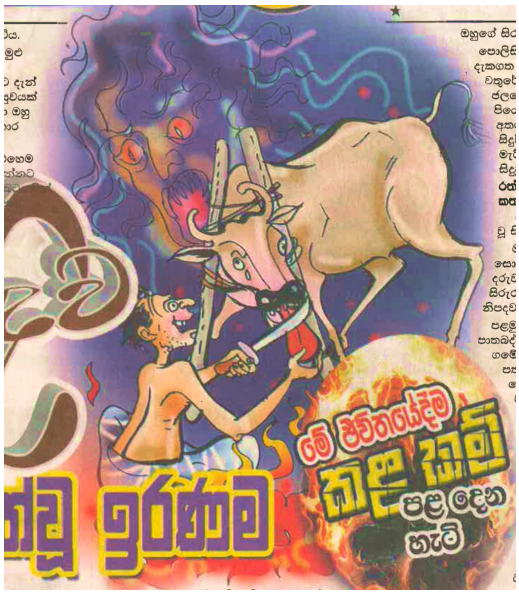
Table 3

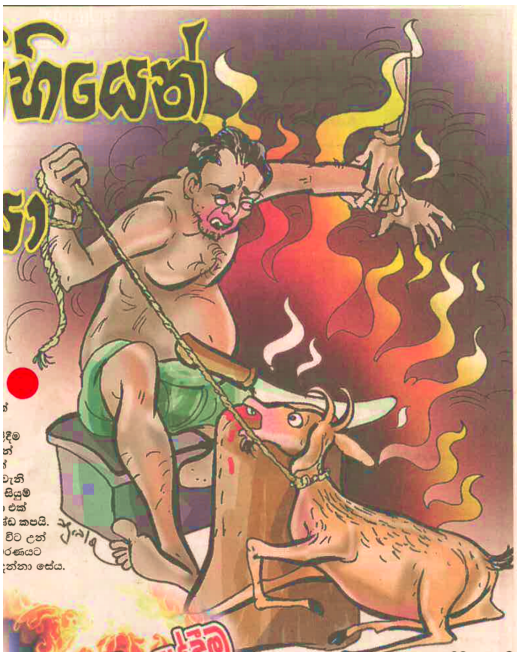
Crime type		
Crime	**Sub-type**	**Number of incidents in literature.**
Causes throat or neck injury		2
Causes eye injury		2
Causes injury to genitals		2
Causes non-specific gunshot injury		2
Commits theft		1
Spears victim with weapon		2
Commits cannibalism		1
Sexual assault	Rape Other sexual sadism	1 1
Takes drugs		1
Slanders victim		1
Suffocates victim	Non-specific Drowns victim Buried alive	1 1 1
Tortures victim		2
Commits financial crime		1
Poisons victim		1
Burns victim		2
Nonspecific method of injury		2
Victim is defrauded		1

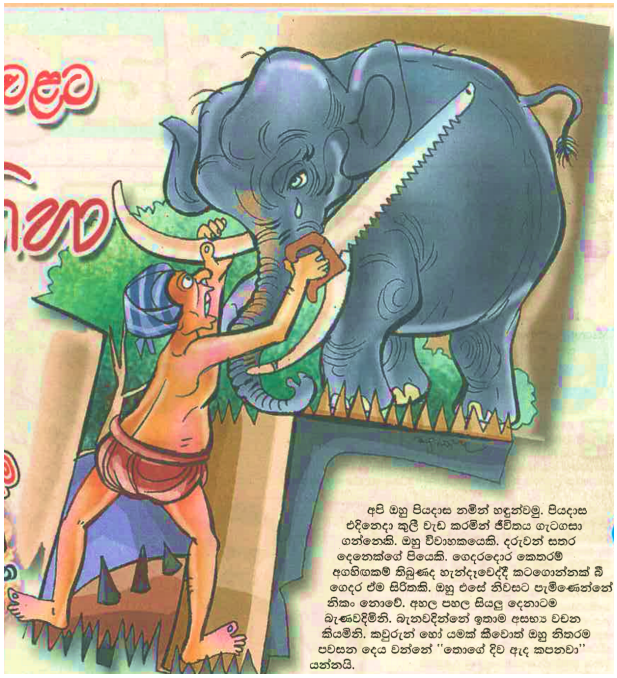
Table 4

Punishment type		
Punishment	**Sub-type**	**Number of incidents in literature.**
Contracts cancer	Throat Eye	2 1
Contracts non-specific disease	Tongue Skin Genitals	1 1 1
Suffers s physical injury	Throat Genitals Head	1 1 2
Suffers from medical misadventure		1
Suffers from mental illness		2
Suffers snake bite		1
Killed by own trap		1
Dragged to death		1
Suicide		1
Suffers a bad rebirth		1
Is injured by or dies from explosion.		2
Killed by falling tree		1
Crushed by tractor		1
The harm is inflicted on a third party		1
Dies in hospital from nonspecific illness		1

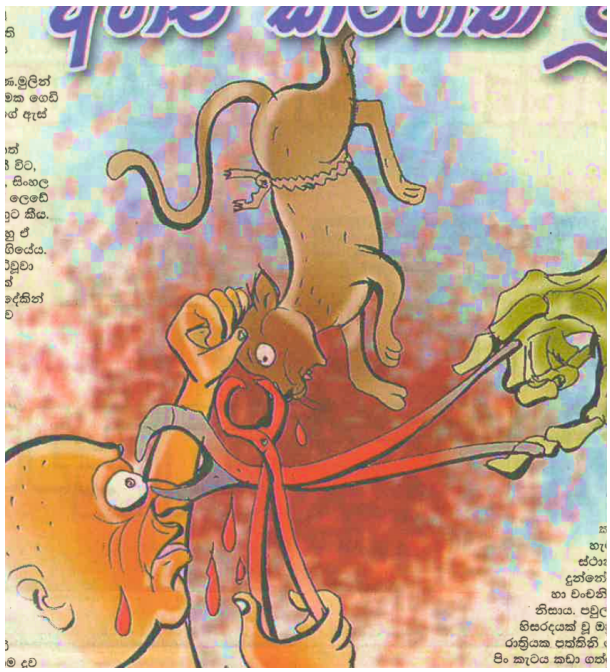
Appendix 2 – Example Images







අපි ඔහු පියදාස නමින් හඳුන්වමු. පියදාස එදිනෙදා කුලී වැඩ කරමින් ජීවිතය ගැටගසා ගන්නෙකි. ඔහු විවාහකයෙකි. දරුවන් සතර දෙනෙක්ගේ පියෙකි. ගෙදරදොර කෙතරම් අගහිඟකම් තිබුණද හැන්දෑවෙද්දී කටගොන්නක් බී ගෙදර ඒම සිරිතකි. ඔහු එසේ නිවසට පැමිණෙන්නේ නිකං නොවේ. අහල පහල සියලු දෙනාටම බැණවදිමිනි. බැනවදින්නේ ඉතාම අසභ්‍ය වචන කියමිනි. කවුරුන් හෝ යමක් කීවොත් ඔහු නිතරම පවසන දෙය වන්නේ "තොගේ දිව ඇද කපනවා" යන්නයි.



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