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THE BUDDHA'S BAD KARMA

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7

THE BUDDHA'S BAD KARMA

Aṅgulimāla & Devadatta

1. INTRODUCTION

Was **Aṅgulimāla** the brigand wearing a garland of human fingers who went around wantonly killing innocent people, or was he actually a religious cult member seeking victims for human sacrifices for his god?

According to the Buddhist texts, Aṅgulimāla was a serial killer whom the Buddha converted and reformed: what can we learn from his story that can inspire the powers that be to review our so called “modern” justice systems so that *restorative justice* takes precedence over *retributive justice*, where we heal criminals and delinquents rather than punish them?

Was **Devadatta** really the evil man that the Theravada Buddhists believe him to be, or was he more strict in his practice than the Buddha himself?

Besides these fascinating questions, we will also examine a very controversial text in the Apadāna that apparently managed to slip into the Pali Canon. It is the only text that deals with **the Buddha's past “bad karma”** and how it allegedly affects his last life. We will also examine the little known controversy whether Gautama is actually **the real founder of Buddhism** or if it is some other Buddha in our current history.

“The Buddha's bad karma” is a synecdoche, a contradiction in terms. We are told in Buddhist texts and stories that he is endowed with deep spirituality and various superhuman powers transcending even those of the highest god or gods. And yet we also read of **the Buddha's physical pains** like headaches, backaches and dysentery, and **personal problems** with people like Devadatta, other indisciplined monks and nuns, and members of other religions.

UNPLEASANT EVENTS IN THE BUDDHA'S LIFE

We shall first examine something close to the Buddha himself: the pains and problems he faced in his last life. I've based my study on a very interesting and rare paper written by **Jonathan S. Walters**¹ entitled “The Buddha's Bad Karma: A problem in the history of Theravada Buddhism”². Where relevant I will expand on Walter's ideas by following his own divisions of topics. In Part 1, we shall briefly survey **the original records** of these events, as preserved in the earliest texts of the Pali Canon. Part 2 discusses a late canonical text, **the Pubba,kamma,piloti**, which analyzes these events as a result of the Buddha's own previous bad karma. Part 3 examines **the texts that deny this karmic explanation** and the reasons for these denials. Part 4 will survey **the rebuttals to these denials**, which affirm the karmic explanation by answering the objections raised by other Buddhists.

The unpleasant events in the Buddha's life fall into three general categories: **slanders from enemies, assaults from enemies, and physical illnesses or deprivations**. These three categories will help us focus our study, but for a more beneficial approach, we have to examine the narrative details in the Buddha's life that are the grist for Buddhist apologetics and fuel for academic debates.

¹ Prof. Walters (PhD in History of Religions 1991, Univ. of Chicago) wrote this article when he was with the Divinity School, Univ. of Chicago. He is now teaching in the Department of Religion in Whitman College, Walla Walla, Washington, USA. His translation of the Mahā Pajāpatī Gotamī Therī Apadāna is found in *Buddhism in Practice*, 1995: ch. 9.

² *Numen* 37, 1990:70-95.

2. SUNDARĪ

The first category, **slanders from enemies**, is limited to only two incidents, that is, allegations against the Buddha by two female wanderers (*parivrājikā/paribbājikā*), **Sundarī** and **Ciñcā Māṇavikā**, both employed by non-Buddhist “heretics” (*tīrthya/titthiya*). The story of Sundarī has already been mentioned in Chapter 6. She was instructed by fellow wanderers to frequent Jetavana to give the public a false impression of “immoral activities” with the monks there, but she is then treacherously murdered by the wanderers themselves to complicate matters for the Buddhists [6:4].

When Sundarī's corpse is found, it is paraded around town to discredit the Buddhist monks. When the monks go on their almsround, they are scorned, but the Buddha remains calm. He instructs the monks to preach to their scorers regarding the evil of lying, and assures them that all the rumours will die down in seven days (U 45; J 2:415). The Commentary adds that the truth is out when the hired killers, drunkenly bragging and quarrelling, confessed to their crime and the heretics' collusion, and are brought to justice by king Prasenajit's men (UA 256 ff.; DhA 3:474 ff. SnA 2:528 ff.; J:415 f.).

3. CIÑCĀ MĀṆAVIKĀ

The case of **Ciñcā Māṇavikā** is alluded to in the core verses of the Jātaka (J 4:187 f.), but her full story is only found in the Commentaries (ApA 118 f.; DhA 3:178 ff.; ItA 1:69, 86). Her story is very similar to Sundarī's but suffer from some conflation. The epithet *māṇavikā* means that the female wanderer Ciñcā is a very young girl of great beauty in her early teens.

Like Sundarī, on the instructions of some jealous wanderers, she spreads rumours amongst the townsfolk that she has been sleeping with the Buddha. Feigning pregnancy before various assemblies and on public festivals, she in due course accuses Gautama of being the father and of neglecting his fiscal and social responsibilities.

This time, the Buddha does not keep his characteristic silence, but laconically addresses Ciñcā: “Sister, you and I know the truth or falsehood of what you said here.”

“Yes, great monk,” she cunningly replies, “but who are to decide between the truth and falsehood of what is only known to you and me?”

At that moment, Śākra's heavenly seat begins to heat up, reflecting that grave injustice is being machinated on earth. Realizing the cause of his discomfort, Śākra then summons four deities to set things right on earth. The deities turn themselves into little mice. With one bite of their teeth they sever the cords with which the disc of wood is fastened to Ciñcā's belly. At that moment, the wind blew up her cloak, and the disc of wood falls upon her feet, cutting off the toes of both her feet.

Thereupon the crowd cries out: “A hag is reviling the Perfect Self-enlightened One!” They spit on her head, and with clods of earth and sticks in their hands, drive her out of Jetavana. Tradition has it that as she passes out of the Buddha's sight, the great earth opens up under her feet and swallows her up, and flames shot up from the bowels of the earth, as she falls into Avīci hell. From that time, the gain and honour of the wanderers wane further but the fame and support for the Buddha increase even more.

4. CHARISMA

We can see thus far that the stories of slander far from showing the Buddha's weakness, but actually reveal his true strength and fame, that is, his own spirituality and the recognition by others. In fact, it is such events and social processes that contribute to the growing **charisma** of the Buddha. By charisma

here, is meant *the attraction to a person who is perceived to possess virtue or power as a leader or teacher*.

The Rūpa Sutta (A 4.65) gives a good idea of the Buddhist conception of charisma. It lists four personal sources or “measures” (*pramāṇa/pamāṇā*) of charisma, that is, how one “measures” (i.e. attribute charisma to) another and becomes satisfied or “inspired” (*prasanna/pasanna*) with the person. There are, says the sutra, four kinds of persons:

- (1) One who measures by appearance (*rūpa*) and is inspired thereby.
- (2) One who measures by voice (*ghoṣa.ghosa*) and is inspired thereby.
- (3) One who measures by outward austerity (*lūkha*) and is inspired thereby.
- (4) One who measures by truth and virtue [i.e. right teachings and practices] (*dharma/dhamma*) and is inspired thereby.

(A 2:71; cf. Pug 7, 53; Tha 469-472; DhA 114; SnA 242)

The first three are popular criteria but faulty and personal at best: only the fourth is the true standard for one's devotion to another. The Buddha, however, enjoys all four measures from the faithful who know him.

I have tried to explain this fascinating subject in some detail in *Charisma in Buddhism*³ so shall only briefly deal with it here. The most instructive section of the sutra are the verses that are identical to those of the elder **Lakuṇṭhaka Bhaddiya** (“the dwarf”):

469. Those people who have judged me by appearance and followed me for my voice,
Overcome by desire and passion, know me not.
470. The foolish one, surrounded by (mental) hindrances, neither knows the inside
Nor sees the outside—he is indeed misled by voice.

(Tha 469-472 ≠ A 2:71)

The elder Lakuṇṭhaka Bhaddiya, the sweet-voiced dwarf, who speaks these verses in the first person (for the most part, the same verses are reported in the 3rd person in the Rūpa Sutta), is concerned at being misjudged by his deformed looks, and at others' being captivated by his voice.

Anyway, as far as the unthinking mob is concerned—a crowd does not think—both looks and voices are good measures of virtue and power. Hence, the use of gossips and rumours by the wanderers who are jealous of the Buddha's success. The jealous and desperate wanderers are attempting to use gossips and rumours as **a means of social control** over the Buddha and his community.

DEVADATTA

5. FAME AND POWER

Knowledge is power, but charisma is greater power, especially when that power is perceived in one or attributed to one by the masses. Our second category of stories—**assault by enemies**—illustrate the great power of the Buddha. These stories centre around the Buddha's jealous cousin **Devadatta**. Here I shall try

³ Piyasilo 1992h:81 ff. = §6.722.

to synthesize and then analyze the findings of **John C. Meagher**⁴ in his article on “Devadatta and Buddhist Origins”⁵, and of Jonathan Walters in terms of the early Buddhist texts and current research.

The most complete source of the story of **Devadatta** is found in the 7th Khandhaka (“On Schism”) of **the Vinaya** (V 2:180-206), of which the salient points are given here. The Devadatta story opens with the Buddha staying in the Ghosit’ārāma in Kauśāmbī. During his retreat, Devadatta thinks, “Who now can I influence so that I can win great gain and honour?” It dawns on him that prince Ajātaśatru is young and impressionable.⁶

Having gone to Rājagṛha, Devadatta turns himself into a young boy with a girdle of snakes, sitting right on the prince’s lap. When the terrified prince realizes it is Devadatta, he is won over and becomes a wide-eyed devotee who waits on Devadatta “morning and evening with 500 chariots, and 500 offerings of rice cooked in milk”. (V 2:185; S 2:242; VA 1275; DhA 1:139). In his overconfidence and greed for gains, honours and fame, Devadatta now thinks: “It is I who will lead the Order of Monks!”⁷ [5:20]. With this thought, Devadatta’s psychic powers immediately weakens (V 2:185).

According to **the Devadatta Sutta I** (A 2:73) [9]⁸, preached to the monks at Vulture’s Peak, when the Buddha hears about Ajātaśatru’s support of Devadatta, he tells the monks not to be envious, for as long as Devadatta keeps on receiving Ajātaśatru’s sumptuous gifts, “only decline can be expected of Devadatta in regard to wholesome states, no growth, just as a wild dog become even wilder when they sprinkle bile over its nose.” (S 2:242; V 2:187). Using various similes, the Buddha shows how love of gains, favours and flattery will lead to Devadatta’s downfall, like the plantain tree that is destroyed because of its fruit, etc. (ib.)

6. LEADERSHIP OF THE SANGHA

When the Buddha arrives in Rājagṛha and stays there, Devadatta approaches him with a proposal: “Lord, the Lord is now old, worn, stricken in years, he has lived his span and is at the close of his life.⁹ Lord, let the Lord now be content to live devoted to abiding in ease here and now, let him hand over the Order of Monks to me. It is I who will lead the Order of Monks.” Thrice he proposes and thrice the Buddha turns him down. After the third time, the Buddha rebukes Devadatta,

Devadatta, I would not hand over the Order of Monks even to Sāriputta and Moggallāna. How then could I hand it over to you, a wretched one, to be rejected like spittle?
(V 2:188; quoted at DhA 1:139 f; cf. M 1:393)

The Buddha’s strong words (or the strength attributed by later Reciters or Redactors) is understandable from Devadatta’s track record so far, now that he has shown his true colours. As Devadatta’s proposal clearly portends a schism in the Sangha, the Buddha instructs the monks to carry out **a formal act of Proclamation** (*prakāśaniya, karma/pakāśaniya, kamma*), that is, to inform the Sangha and the public that Devadatta has changed his attitude towards the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha (V 2:189; cf. DhA 1:139 f.)

Śāriputra is at first uncertain if he should make the proclamation resolved by the Sangha because “Formerly, Lord, I spoke in praise of Devadatta in Rājagaha saying: ‘Godhi’s son is of great psychic power, Godhi’s son is of great majesty.’ How can I, Lord, now proclaim against Devadatta in Rājagaha?”

⁴ John C. Meagher, PhD (London), PhD (Princeton), PhD (McMaster), Prof. Emeritus, Historical Theology; New Testament; Christian Origins; Interdisciplinary Theology. He is currently on the Emeritus Faculty, Faculty of Theology, University of St. Michael’s College of the University of Toronto, Canada.

⁵ *Ohio Journal of Religious Studies* 3,1 Mar 1975:3-18)

⁶ Cf. Mahilā, mukha J no. 26 = 1:185 f.

⁷ Cf. D 2:100; DhA 1:139.

⁸ Cf. V 2:187 f. & S 2:242

⁹ V 3:2; M 1:82; Sn pp 50, 92.

(The fact that Śāriputra addresses Devadatta indirectly by the metronym also reflects his respect for him.) The Buddha replies that if what Śāriputra has said of Devadatta is true in the past, what he is going to proclaim now is just as true in the face of the new developments. Śāriputra then assents and makes the proclamation:

Formerly Devadatta's nature was of such a kind, now it is of another kind, and that whatever Devadatta should do by action or word, in that neither the Buddha nor the Dharma nor the Order should be seen, but in that only Devadatta should be seen.

(V 2:189)

In short, from now on, whatever Devadatta does or says are his personal opinions, having no bearing on the Three Jewels. This is the closest that Buddhism ever comes to the concept of **apostasy**!

The public response is mixed. Those with “little faith, not believing, of poor intelligence” think that “the Śākya are jealous” (Devadatta is a Krauḍya/Koliya). The faithful and wise think, “This must be an extraordinary matter in that the Lord has made a proclamation in Rājagṛha against Devadatta.” As for Devadatta, he goes on to the next stage of his ambitious plans. He persuades Ajātaśatru to kill his father, king Bimbisāra and take over the kingdom (but we shall examine at this further in Chapter 8).

7. ATTEMPTS ON THE BUDDHA'S LIFE

Meanwhile, Devadatta, frustrated in his efforts to take over the Buddha's place, intensifies his efforts. He sends **31 archers** to kill the Buddha, but as they approach the Buddha, whether alone or in a group, they are enthralled by the Buddha's charisma and are converted, the first even becoming a Stream-winner after the Buddha's exhortation (V 2:191 f.).

The desperate Devadatta now declares: “I myself will deprive the recluse Gotama of his life!” While the Buddha is pacing up and down in the shade of Vulture's Peak (*Gṛdhra, kūṭa/Gijjha, kūṭa*), Devadatta **hurls down a great rock**, but it lodges between two crags, a fragment of which hits the Buddha's foot causing it to bleed. Thus, Devadatta commits a karma whose fruit is immediate (*ānantarya, karma/ānantarika, kamma*), that is, whose fruit will arise in the very same lifetime.

With two major attempts on the Buddha's life, many monks in the monastery excitedly mobilized themselves to defend the Buddha's life. The Buddha calms them down, declaring: “It is impossible, monks, it cannot come to pass, that anyone could deprive a Tathāgata of life by aggression. Monks, Tathāgatas attain Nirvana not because of an attack.” (V 2:194)

When all human efforts fail, Devadatta now employs **animal strategy**. The Introduction to the Culla-haṃsa Jātaka (J 533 = 5:333) says that he gets the mahout to feed the bull elephant **Nālāgiri** with 16 pots of fiery toddy. The drunken elephant is then loosed on the street taken by the Buddha and his disciples on their almsround.

When Ānanda sees the impending threat to the Buddha's life, he rushes to stand between the Buddha and Nālāgiri despite protestations from the Buddha who then gently moves him aside with psychic power. Nālāgiri charges at the Buddha “with trunk uplifted, his ears and tail erect”. When Nālāgiri finally comes near the Buddha, he suffuses the elephant Nālāgiri with lovingkindness, immediately calming it down. It then kneels before the Buddha who strokes gently its forehead.

8. THE FIVE DEMANDS

Having exhausted all physical strategies to destroy the Buddha, Devadatta now turns to discredit the Buddha through **subterfuge**. Well knowing that the Buddha teaches the Middle Path, and recalling how the Five Monks have, before the Enlightenment, deserted the Bodhisattva after he decided to take food to

replenish his body to turn away from self-mortification [2:17], Devadatta, on the instigation of his pupil, **Kokālika**, submits these five proposals to the Buddha that monks should adopt all life long, that is:

- (1) to live as forest-dwellers, and prohibit living in or near any village (or built-up area);
- (2) to live on almsfood (collected from the almsround), and prohibit accepting any invitation;
- (3) to be rag-robe wearers, and prohibit accepting robes from a householder;
- (4) to live at the foot of a tree, and prohibit staying under artificial cover; and
- (5) not to eat fish and meat (i.e. to be vegetarians).

Predictably, and to the delight of Devadatta and his followers, the Buddha turns down all these proposals, saying that they are optional practices:

Whoever wishes, let him be a forest-dweller; whoever wishes, let him stay in the neighbourhood of a village; whoever wishes, let him be an alms-collector; whoever wishes let him accept an invitation; whoever wishes, let him be a rag-robe wearer; whoever wishes, let him accept a householder's robes. For eight months, Devadatta, lodging at the foot of a tree is permitted by me. Fish and meat are pure in respect of three points: if one has not seen, heard or suspected (that they have been killed on purpose for one).

(V 2:197; cf. V 1:238)

Now they put into action the next step in their subterfuge: they spread talk that the Buddha and his disciples lead luxurious lives, easily moving and attracting those “of little faith and intelligence”. But the wise remark: “How can this Devadatta go ahead with a schism in the Lord's Order!” When this matter is brought to the Buddha's attention, he admonishes Devadatta, telling him that it is a very serious matter to break up the Order, with very heavy karmic consequences. Devadatta, of course, is not impressed.

9. SCHISM

Devadatta next informs Ānanda that he will be performing his own Sangha Acts (*saṅgha, karma/saṅgha, kamma*), that is, ecclesiastical acts involving the whole Sangha, such as reciting the Prātimokṣa, ordination, deliberation over offences, etc. (V 2:197 f.; U 60 f.). Effectively, by doing so, Devadatta is forming his own Sangha apart from the Buddha's---this is **schism**. As many as 500 newly ordained Vṛjī monks of Vaiśālī, inspired by Devadatta's ascetic ideals, follow him to **Gayā, Śīrṣa** (Gayā, sīsa) (DhA 1:122). Amongst the nuns who follow him is Sthulā Nandā, who never tire of singing his praises (V 4:66, 335) [6:18b].

During the period following Devadatta's schism, the Buddha preaches three discourses, two Devadatta Suttas (A 7.7; S 17.35) and the Mahā Sārôpama Sutta (M 29). **The Devadatta Sutta II** (A 4:160 f.; cf. V 2:202) is preached under the same circumstances as the Devadatta Sutta I. It gives eight reasons for Devadatta's downfall, and the Buddha exhorts the monks to reflect on the good and bad fortune which overtake oneself and others from time to time. In **the Devadatta Sutta III** (also called the Ratha Sutta, S 1:153), Brahmā Sahampati visits the Buddha at Vulture's Peak, soon after Devadatta's schism, and utters the stanza of Devadatta Sutta I (A 2:73) [5]:

As the plaintain is destroyed by its fruit,
As their fruits destroy the bamboo and the rush,
As the mule is destroyed by its embryo,
So does homage destroy the fool,

(S 1:153; A 2:73)

In **the Mahā Sārôpama Sutta** (M 29), the Buddha, using the simile of a man going into the forest to look for heartwood, exhorts the monks, especially those newly gone forth, not to be lured by worldly gain, honour and fame, not even to be conceited about one's spiritual attainments:

So this holy life, monks, does not have gain, honour, and fame for its benefit, or the attainment of moral conduct, or knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is this unshakeable deliverance of mind [the fruit of Arhantship] that is the goal of the holy life, its heartwood and its end.

(M 1:197)

10. SANGHA REUNITED

Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana express their concern over the schism, and the Buddha instructs them to bring back the misguided monks. Seeing the two chief disciples of the Buddha approaching, many, including Devadatta, have the impression that they too are defecting to join the schismatics. Devadatta expresses his delight and invites them to preach Dharma to his monks, while Devadatta himself, complaining of a backache, decides to stretch his back, but falls asleep “tired, forgetful and inattentive”.

Śāriputra exhorts the monks with the wonders of his thought-reading and Maudgalyāyana instructs using the wonders of his psychic powers. Following their teachings, all the 500 schismatic monks realize the Dharma-eye that “whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease”. By the time Kokālika realizes what has happened and wakens Devadatta up by kicking him on the chest, the monks are well back in the Bamboo Grove with the Buddha. It is said that Devadatta, in his rage, spew forth hot blood and for nine months lie grievously ill (DhA 1:143; J 1:491).

When he knows that his end is drawing near, Devadatta expresses his wish to see the Buddha, who sends a reply that it is no more possible in this life. Devadatta, nevertheless, begins his journey on a litter towards Jetavana. On reaching the monastery, he stops at the monastery pond and steps out to wash. As soon as his feet touch the ground, it opens up and swallows him. Some Mahayana sources say that feeling his end approaching, Devadatta desperately makes a last-ditch effort to kill the Buddha by poison-coating his finger-nails to scratch the Buddha's feet (Lamotte 1988:658).

As he falls into the bowels of the earth, he declares that he has no other refuge than the Buddha. The Buddha declares that after spending 100,000 world-cycles in Avīci hell, Devadatta would become the Pratyeka Buddha (Pacceka Buddha) called Aṭṭhissara (or Devarāja, according to the Saddharma,puṇḍarīka Sūtra). It is said that it is in view of the last act of Devadatta (taking of refuge) that the Buddha has earlier consented to ordain him (DhA 1:147; Miln 101, 109).¹⁰

11. DEVADATTA AS A GOOD MONK

Although the Pali **Jātakas** are full of stories of how even in his past lives Devadatta commits evil deeds against the Bodhisattva, the Sanskrit **Jātaka, mālā** curiously makes no mention of him at all even when it repeats the Jātaka whose Pali versions explicitly name him as the villain. It is also notable that when **Faxian** mentions the story of the drunken elephant Nālāgiri in his memoirs, he blames the incident not on Devadatta, but on Ajāta,śatru.

Devadatta is Siddhārtha's cousin according to some sources (Mvst 2:22; DhA 3:44; Rockhill 13), but this is not his distinction. Despite stories of childhood rivalry [1:13a], Devadatta does not begin his life in the Sangha as a bad monk. In fact, for some 12 years he is an exemplary monk. **The Udāna** (U 1.5) records that once when the Buddha is residing in Jetavana, Devadatta is walking with a group of distinguished monks: Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, Mahā Kāśyapa, Mahā Kauṣṭilya, Mahā Kapphina, Mahā Cunda, Aniruddha, Revata and Ānanda. Seeing them from afar, the Buddha says: “Monks, these are brahmins coming, these are brahmins coming.” And when asked what he means by “brahmin”, he explains:

¹⁰ See Miln 200 ff. where Nāgasena cites another reason being that Devadatta has done many good deeds in the past.

Awakened ones with fetters gone,
With evil states discarded
And behaving ever mindfully—
They are the brahmins in the world.

(U 4)

In the **Devadatta Sutta II** (It 3.10), echoing the Vinaya account, there is a verse that actually mentions Devadatta's good qualities uttered by the Buddha himself, especially these lines:

I heard it said that Devadatta the sage, with mind developed (*bhavit'atta*),
Stood burning as it were with fame.

(It 85 f.; V 2:203)

Although the Sutta Nipāta Commentary glosses *bhavit'atta* as “of developed mind through developing the path” (*magga, bhāvanāya bhāvita, citto*, SnA 1:330), in the context of the **Devadatta Sutta II** in the Iti-vuttaka, it means “developed in the higher knowledge of the Absorptions” (*jhānābhiññāhi bhāvita, citto*, ItA 2:100) (pace Meagher who erroneously claims that “the expression [*bhāvita, citta*] is used only of Gotama and of the most advanced aspirants to full enlightenment”, 1975:5).

The **Silā, yūpa Sutta** (Discourse on the Stone Column, A ix,25) gives a rare mention of Devadatta's teachings. The monk Candimā,putra (Candimā,putta) misquotes Devadatta's teaching regarding meditation and Śāriputra actually quotes Devadatta correctly! (A 4:403 f.)

Although the **Milinda, pañha** says that Devadatta is “entirely of dark (*kr̥ṣṇa/kaṇha*) mental states [i.e. of totally evil mind]” and the Bodhisattva is “entirely of bright (*śukla/sukka*) mental states”¹¹, in many past lives, “Devadatta was exactly the same as the Bodhisattva in regard to renown and adherents, and was sometimes more eminent” and examples from the Jātakas follow (Miln 1:200 ff.). It is even said that

...when Devadatta was established in authority he gave protection to the country districts, had bridges built and rest-houses and halls for (making) merit, he gave gifts according to his desire to recluses and brahmins, beggars, tramps and wayfarers—those with protectors and those without.

(Miln 1:204)

12. DEVADATTA'S SECT?

John C. Meagher (now a professor emeritus in Christian theology), in his paper, “Devadatta and Buddhist Origins” (1975), is of the opinion that all the negative reports found in the Pali texts “is an indication the importance of Devadatta as an independent teacher”, supported by the “hidden tradition” about Devadatta

...preserved and made available both to Mahayanist elaboration and orthodox rebuff. At the juncture between the Theravadin tradition concerning the schism and the largely non-Theravadin tradition concerning Devadatta's dignity lies, I believe, an important crossroads in early Buddhist history.

(John C. Meagher 1975:9)

There should also be some significance to the fact that Devadatta received royal patronage from Ajātaśatru (1975:17), something meriting further investigation by scholars. The existence of a Devadatta Sangha is attested by the Chinese pilgrim **Faxian** at the beginning of the 5th century in the course of his survey of heterodoxy in India:

¹¹ Cf. M 1:389 ff; A 2:230 ff.; Dh 87.

In the Middle Kingdom there are ninety-six sorts of views, erroneous and different from our system, all of which recognize this world and the future world (and the connection between them). Each has its multitude of followers, and they all beg their food: only they do not carry the alms-bowl. They also, moreover, seek (to acquire) the blessings (of good deeds) on unfrequented ways, setting up on the road-side houses of charity, where rooms, couches, beds, and food and drink are supplied to travelers, and also to monks, coming and going as guests, the only difference being in the time (for which the parties remain). There are also companies of the followers of Devadatta still existing. They regularly make offerings to the three previous Buddhas, but not to Śākyamuni Buddha.

(Foguoji:B 62)

According to E.J. Thomas (whom Meagher mentions in his footnote), however, this only proves that Faxian knew of a group that “followed Devadatta’s rules”, and not that it establishes “the continued existence of Devadatta’s followers in complete obscurity for a thousand years” (1951:24). Meagher, however, proposes the possibility

...that a Devadattist version of Buddhism managed to endure in a small and localized form during that period [early 5th century]. That is, I dare say, a more credible hypothesis than the standard alternative that a Gotamist group at some late date rejected its founder, adopted the rules of his arch-enemy, and concentrated its reverence on obscure (and imaginary) predecessor-Buddhas.

(1975:10 n27)

Meagher does not think that Devadatta was a schismatic but that he had set up a rival *saṅgha* or order:

The account of the schism has little intrinsic plausibility, and neither of Devadatta’s takeover proposals has much of malice about it. To the extent that they represent a rivalry and a difference in ascetic principles, however, they have what is probably a core of historical truth.

(1975:10)

The ascetic Siddhārtha was criticized of being “too luxurious” by the Five Monk when he gave up self-mortification and turned to the Middle Way [2:17]. Similarly, the Jains and the Ājīvakas are more ascetic than the monastics of Gautama. As late as the early 7th century, Xuanzang notes the link between Devadatta and ascetic restraint, “albeit of a faded and refined sort”. At **Kaṇṇasuvāṇṇa**, he reports: “There are three saṅghārāmas [monasteries] in which they do not use thickened milk, following the directions of Devadatta.” (Xiyuji:B 2:201; Beal 1957 1:28 f., 4:408). Other Chinese pilgrims such as Hwui Li and Yen Tsung also make similar remarks about their not using “butter or milk” (Beal 1888:131). From such testimonies, we can deduce that Devadatta’s followers, following his teachings, were more ascetic and conservative than Gautama’s monastics.

13. PRĀTIMOKṢA AND PAST BUDDHAS

(a) Laity joining Prātimokṣa recitations

Going by the five ascetic rules that Devadatta presented to the Buddha, his sect would also have been vegetarian. The Vinaya also records an interesting incident where Devadatta allows laypeople to join the *upoṣadha* (*uposatha*) assembly for **the recitation of the Prātimokṣa** (V 2:115). Following the Buddha’s instructions of the Buddha, “following the practice of previous Buddhas”, the Prātimokṣa is recited in conclave in the absence of the laity and novices (i.e. those who have not attained the *upasampadā*) (V 1:115, 135). The “secrecy” of the Prātimokṣa recital is discussed in the Milinda,pañha, where Nāgasena explains that there is nothing secret about the Dharma (A 1:283):

O king, the reason for the *Pātimokkha* being open only to *bhikkhus* is that it is a custom of all previous Buddhas, secondly out of respect for the Vinaya and thirdly out of respect for the *bhikkhus*. Just,

O king, as the traditions of warriors are handed down among warriors so it is the tradition of Tathāgatas that the recitation of the *Pāṭimokkha* should take place only among *bhikkhus*.

(Miln 1:190-192; Bhikkhu Pesala's tr. Miln:P 54)

(b) Three Past Buddhas

The most interesting hypothesis that Meagher advances is Devadatta's association with **the three past Buddhas**. In his journals, Faxian notes that Devadatta's followers "regularly make offerings to the three previous Buddhas, but not to Śākyamuni Buddha" (Xiyuji:B 62; T 51,861a). The three Buddhas before Śākyamuni are **Krakucchanda** (Kakusandha), **Kanakamuni** (Konāgamana) and **Kāśyapa** (Kassapa). Meagher rightly notes that "none of the past Buddhas has received much scholarly notice. They are deemed too fanciful to reward investigation. But what...sponsored the fantasy in the first place?" (1975:12).

Meagher goes on to quote the Chinese pilgrims who tell us of cultic habits of late Buddhist India, and among the startling profusion of shrines, stupas and holy places they find several consecrated to earlier Buddhas—"not *all* the Tathāgatas on the eventually lengthy list of possible candidates, but the three which are common to all the lists and always given as the latest of the lot: Kakusandha, Konāgamana and Kassapa" (1975:12 quoting Beal 1869:201, 147). In 1885, an Aśokan inscription of the year 14 (255) was found at Nigālī Sāgar in Nepal, recording the enlargement of the stupa of Kanakamuni (Bloch 158). All these data, concludes Meagher, point to:

A "pre-Buddhist" Buddhism, which knew and revered Tathāgatas before Gotama appeared on the scene. It is to that tradition, and to that moment in history, that the story of Devadatta leads us, and it is from that tradition and that moment that it lead onward to the Chinese pilgrims who knew of Devadatta" stricter dietary rules.

(Meagher, 1975:13; my emphasis)

Meagher even hints that this "pre-Buddhist Buddhism" might go back to Indus Valley civilization or earlier. This is an interesting point, especially when we know that India is often referred to as **Jambudvīpa** (Jambu,dīpa, "Rose-apple Island-continent").¹² Geologists tell us that during the earth's Cenozoic era (the last 65,000,000 years), India was actually an island that, through tectonic movements (shifting of earth-plates) slowly broke off from the supercontinent Pangaea, migrated across the ancient Tethys Sea and crashed into the south Asian littoral resulting in the rise of the Himalayas.¹³ Could the three ancient Buddhas have arisen during these periods before our time? I have to leave this question to more expert minds.

But what happened to **the latter-day Devadatta followers** (after the 7th century)? Meagher speculates: "Confined to an arena that produced no texts, a Devadattist Buddhist could later be quietly absorbed into a Mahayana syncretism—or simply sink without a trace as Buddhism vanished from India". (1975:17 f.)

14. PROBLEM WITH ACADEMIC STUDY

In his article, "Devadatta and Buddhist Origins" (1975), Meagher quotes W.H.D. Rouse's translation of **the Daddara Jātaka** (J no. 172), where the translated introduction says that Kokālika's upper robe (*kāsāva*) is "blue as a bluebell; his outer robe was pure white" (J:C 2:46). The Pali for Rouse's "blue as a bluebell" is *kaṇṭakuraṇḍaka,vaṇṇa*, "the colour of the *kaṇṭakuraṇḍaka*". According to Cone's *A Dictionary of Pali*, *kaṇṭakuraṇḍa(ka)* is "a kind of (yellow) flower". Rouse's "pure white" is actually *kaṇikāra-puppha,vaṇṇa*, "the colour of the *kaṇikāra* flower". Cone (DP) says that the *kaṇikāra* is the plant *Premna*

¹² A 4:396; V 1:30; Kvu 99; Vism 1:205 f; Miln 27; VA 1:119; J 1:263; SnA 2:443; VvA 18.

¹³ However, in the Purāṇic cosmography and Aśokan inscriptions, the term *Jambudvīpa* refers to both India (greater India including parts of Central and West Asia) and the world. Bhattacharyya 1991:157.

spinosa, but which the PED says is *Pterospermum acerifolium*, whose flower is “taken metaphorically as typical emblem of yellow and of brightness” (D 2:iii; M 2:14 = A 5:61; DhA 1:388).

Meagher faithfully quotes Rouse's *Jātaka* translation, saying that “Kokālika...made a formal recitation clothed in blue and white” (1975:11). I raise this point because Meagher has based his paper totally on translated works (as in the biblical scholarly tradition). I do not think he has any scholar's knowledge of Pali or Sanskrit, in which case (in academic terms), his work is at best a “documented research” from a Christian theologian's viewpoint. Meagher however raises some very important issues in his paper, but he is clearly unfamiliar with the Buddhist texts which he quotes according to the translation pages rather than the original text pages that current scholars of Buddhism as a rule do. All this is understandable, perhaps, since Meagher has probably written this paper in his early years as an academic exercise to supplement the foundation of his vast biblical scholarship (which is his real forte).

ANĠULIMĀLA

15. AHIMSAKA

We have seen how Devadatta threatens the unity of the Sangha, the spiritual community and attempts to assassinate the Buddha. It is interesting to notice that in his dealings with Devadatta's offences and crimes, the Buddha never employs any violent means, but uses only religious exhortation and spiritual friendship. We now turn to another major character in the colourful drama of early Buddhism---one who threatens the whole of Kośala with his bloodthirsty violence---and the Buddha *goes* to him. In this case, the Buddha himself neutralizes this violence. This is the story of *Āṅgulimāla*.

This story of *Āṅgulimāla* is summarized from **the *Āṅgulimāla Sutta*** (M 86) and its Commentary, and the *Theragāthā* Commentary. *Āṅgulimāla* (“Finger Necklace”) is the sobriquet of the brigand that the Buddha converts in the 20th year of his Ministry, and who later becomes an Arhant. He is the son of the brahmin Bhārgava (Bhaggava) with the *gotra* name of Gārgya (Garga), a chaplain (*purohita*) to Prasenajit, the king of Kośala, and his mother is Maitrāyaṇī (Mantānī). He is born under the constellation of thieves, and on the night of his birth all the weapons and armour in the city glow brightly, including those of the king. Since the weapons and armour harm no one, he is called **Ahiṃsaka**, the Harmless.

At **Tarka,śilā** (Takka,śilā, modern Taxila in Gandhāra, Pakistan), Ahiṃsaka becomes a favourite at the teacher's house. His jealous fellow-students poison his teacher's mind about alleged improprieties he has committed with the teacher's wife. The unwise teacher falls for the talk but fearing that his reputation would suffer if he kills Ahiṃsaka, turns to a more subtle means of disposing him. He asks Ahiṃsaka for an honorarium of 1000 human fingers. By this the teacher hopes somehow Ahiṃsaka would get killed in process of killing.

After initial protests, Ahiṃsaka respects his teacher's wish. After killing his victims, he makes a garland or necklace of fingers, one from each victim. Hence his name of *Āṅgulimāla*. When people stop venturing into the forest he haunts, he goes into the villages to find victims. Village after village become deserted as a result. The populace appeals to the king to capture the brigand and stop the carnage. The king sends his soldiers out to find the brigand. However, no one knows his real name.

Āṅgulimāla's mother, however, guessing the truth and out of motherly love, starts out to warn him. By this time, he has collected 999 fingers and only needs one more to complete his quest. Through his divine eye, the Buddha sees *Āṅgulimāla*'s mother walking into the forest. *Āṅgulimāla* would have killed his own mother in a final frenzy to complete his deadly garland. Moreover, the Buddha knows that he is ready for conversion.

16. STANDING STILL

When Aṅgulimāla sees the Buddha walking alone in the forest, he is wickedly surprised: for, others, in their fear, have traveled in pairs or in groups. Moreover, this final “victim” is a harmless ascetic; so fate is smiling on him. But as he runs after the Buddha, he seems to be still the same distance ahead. Despite Aṅgulimāla’s swiftness that can outrun horses and chariots, he is unable to catch up with the Buddha walking at a normal pace! Finally, he shouts out in exhausted desperation:

Stop, recluse! Stop, recluse!

I have stopped, Aṅgulimāla. You stop, too.

Perplexed by the answer, Aṅgulimāla begs for an explanation: The Buddha replies:

Aṅgulimāla I have stopped forever,
I abstain from violence towards all living beings,
But you have no restraint towards things that live—
That is why I have stopped and you have not.

**Oh, at long last, a venerable sage
Has come to this great forest for my sake.
Having heard your stanza teaching me the Dharma,
I will indeed abandon a thousand crimes! [18]**

So saying, the brigand took his sword and weapons
And flung them down into a gaping chasm.
The brigand worshipped the Well-gone One’s feet,
And then and there asked for the going-forth.

The Enlightened One, the Sage of Great Compassion,
The Teacher of the world with its gods,
Addresses him with these words: “Come, O monk!”
And that was how he became a monk.

(M 2:99 f.; Tha 866-870)

Aṅgulimāla is converted by the Buddha through one of his most common skillful means: **word-play**.¹⁴ In this case, the Buddha plays on the word *tiṣṭhati* (*tiṭṭhati*), meaning to stand or to stop. Aṅgulimāla only knows the physical sense of the term when he demands that the Buddha “stop”. The Buddha answers giving the same word a spiritual dimension, meaning “liberation from violence and defilements”.

Back in Jetavana, the Buddha meets king Prasenajit with a large band of soldiers looking for Aṅgulimāla. The Buddha then asks,

Maharajah, suppose you were to see that Aṅgulimāla had shaved off his hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, renounced the world, and keeping the precepts—what would you do?

Venerable Sir, I would pay homage to him, show him respect, and invite him to accept the four requisites. But, Venerable Sir, he is an immoral man, one of evil character. How could he ever have such virtue and restraint?

¹⁴ See my lecture on “The Teaching Methods of the Buddha” (2001 esp. 22:3e). See www.dharma.per.sg for download.

Then extending his right arm, the Buddha announces: “Maharajah, this is Aṅgulimāla!” The king is understandably shocked and terrified, but the Buddha calms him down. The king then asks Aṅgulimāla his real name and is told that his father is Gārgya (Gagga) and his mother is Maitrāyaṇī (Mantāṇī), and so, out of respect, he is called **Gārgya Maitrāyaṇīputra** (Gagga Mantāṇīputta).

The relieved king offers the four requisites to Aṅgulimāla, but he turns them down as he is now a wandering forest monk living on almsfood, wearing dust-heap rag-robles and limiting himself to the triple robe [6:15].

17. AṅGULIMĀLA PARITTA

One morning, while the venerable Aṅgulimāla is on his almsround, he sees a woman having problems with her delivery (P. *mūḷha, gabbha vighāta, gabbha*).¹⁵ Moved by compassion, Aṅgulimāla returns to the Buddha and reports the incident. The Buddha teaches him how to heal her by an “act of truth” (*satya*, *-kriyā/sacchikiriya*). Aṅgulimāla goes back to the woman in pain and recites this asseveration, which came to be known as **the Aṅgulimāla paritta** (Aṅgulimāla’s protection):

*Yato ’haṃ bhagīni ariyāya jātiyā jāto
nābhijānāmi sañcicca paṇaṃ jīvita voropetā
tena saccena sotthi te hotu sotthi gabbhassa.*

Sister, since my birth as a Noble Lineage,
I have not willfully deprived any living being of life:
By this truth may you be well, may your unborn
child be well!

(M 2:102 f.)

Then the woman and the child become well. This *paritta* is still popular today amongst Theravada Buddhists (Gombrich 1971:224).

Aṅgulimāla’s compassion for the pregnant woman and her wellbeing thereafter, and many other such episodes of compassion involving the Buddha and his monks, testify that “other-power” (one’s compassion for others) does work (depending, of course, on the helper’s level of spirituality). To meet a person of great spirituality like the Buddha or an Arhant (or even a Stream-winner) clearly helps one in one spiritual development. Aṅgulimāla is a good case in point, as also is the case of **Milarepa**, said to be his Tibetan counterpart (Masfield 1986:92). Masfield’s *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism* (1986) is a groundbreaking study in the role of the Buddha’s “other-power” in the disciples’ attaining of spiritual liberation.

Past karma ripening

Aṅgulimāla then goes into spiritual retreat to intensify his practice and in due course gains Arhantship. One morning as he is on his almsround, some people attack him with clods of earth, sticks, and potsherds, leaving his head bleeding, his bowl broken and his robe torn. Seeing him coming in the distance, the Buddha consoles him, saying: “Bear it, brahmin! Bear it, brahmin! You are now experiencing here and now the result of deeds because of which you might have been tortured in hell for many years, for hundreds of years, for thousands of years.”

Aṅgulimāla’s encounter with the Buddha helps the latter turn his life around towards spiritual liberation. The sufferings that Aṅgulimāla suffers here are the last remnants of his past evil deeds. With the exhaustion of the effects of such karma, all his other karma, too, become “superseded” or “defunct” (P. *ahosi kamma*). We shall discuss this topic again in connection with the Buddha himself below [27-28].

Later, in his spiritual solitude, enjoying the bliss of his deliverance, make these utterances:

¹⁵ I.B. Horner renders this phrase as “in difficult and dangerous labour” (M:H 2:288), but Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli has “giving birth to a deformed child” (M:Ñ 714).

Let my enemies hear discourses on the Dharma,
Let them be devoted to the Buddha's Teaching,
Let my enemies wait on those people
Who lead others to accept the Dharma.

Let my enemies give ear from time to time
And hear the Dharma of those who preach forbearance,
Of those who speak as well in praise of kindness,
And let them follow up that Dharma with kind deeds.

For surely then they would not wish to harm me,
Nor would they think of harming other beings,
So those who would protect all, weak or strong,
Let them attain the all-surpassing peace.

(M 2:105; Tha 874-876)

18. WHO WAS AṅGULIMĀLA?

The last chapter of the remarkable book, *How Buddhism Began* (1996) by **Richard Gombrich**, is entitled “Who was Aṅgulimāla?” In his 1997 review of Gombrich, **Bhikkhu Bodhi** remarks that the background stories of Aṅgulimāla as given by the Commentators (Buddhaghosa and Dhammapāla) are so improbable “that any reflective reader has to conclude either that the story is sheer legend or that the original reason for Aṅgulimāla's life of crime has been irretrievably lost” (JBE 4 1997:296). Gombrich thinks that he has discovered the real story hidden behind the garbled text of one of Aṅgulimāla's verses, and proposes a few emendations to it (M 2:100 = Tha 868).

In his paper, Gombrich discusses some problems the Commentators face, and tries to conflate the accounts given in the Majjhima Commentary (MA 3:328-381) and the Theragāthā Commentary (ThaA 3:54-56) in an attempt to iron out their inconsistencies (1996:137-142). In this regard, Gombrich concludes:

According to Buddhaghosa, he [Aṅgulimāla] is explicitly ordered to kill a thousand people (though I do not understand why the text refers to them as a thousand legs [*jaṅghā*, MA]), and the fingers come in late as a mere counting device. Dhammapāla evidently found this too absurd and tried to make the teacher ask him directly for fingers. Even he, however, was not very successful in achieving coherence, if the text is to be trusted, because a thousand fingers from right hands could be supplied by two hundred people, and getting them would not necessarily involve killing. Both versions then resort to a ludicrous account of why the brigand decided to wear the fingers round his neck. No one considers how vast and bulky a necklace of a thousand fingers would be.

(Gombrich, 1996:142)

The most interesting and important point—a ground-breaking discovery—is found in his following proposal for the reconstruction of this verse of the Aṅgulimāla Theragāthā:

<i>cirassaṃ vata me mahito</i>	<i>mahesi mahāvanaṃ samano paccupādi</i>
<i>so 'ham cajissāmi sahassa, pāpaṃ</i>	<i>sutvāna gāthaṃ tava dhamma, yuttaṃ</i>

(Tha 868 PTS ed.)

Oh, at long last, a venerable sage | Has come to this great forest for my sake.
Having heard your stanza teaching me the Dharma, | I will indeed abandon a thousand evils!

Gombrich proposes the following emendations and translation:

*cirassaṃ vata me **maheso**
so 'ham cajissāmi sahassa, pāpaṃ*

***mahāvanaṃ pāpuṇi sacca, vāḍi**
sutvāna gāthaṃ tava dhamma, yuttaṃ*

For a long time to fulfil a vow **I have been honouring Śiva**. You have **arrived** in the forest, **speaking truth**. So I shall give up my thousand crimes, for I have heard your verse, which teaches what is right.

(Gombrich 1996:154; my emphases.)

“It only remains to point out,” concludes Gombrich, “that the first three verses would make sense as a summary account of Aṅgulimāla’s conversion without positing the miraculous element that he was running fast but could not catch the walking Buddha. That piece of the story could have arisen as a mere over-interpretation of the word play.” (id.)

19. RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

The story of Aṅgulimāla has inspired social workers and social thinkers. For example, the prison chaplaincy programme of the Forest Hermitage (Lower Fulbrook, Warwickshire, UK) is called **Aṅgulimāla** (www.angulimala.org.uk). **David Loy** (Faculty of International Studies, Bunkyo University, Japan) has published a thought-provoking socially-engaged article on “How to Reform a Serial Killer: The Buddhist approach to restorative justice” (JBE 7 2000:145-168).

In his article, Loy shows the disadvantages of **retributive justice**, where the offender is punished to “serve the purposes of the state better than the needs of offenders and their victims” (145). Why do we punish? Loy provides three types of justification: the harm of punishment is outweighed by some greater good (for example, it deters others); punishment does not really harm offenders (because it reforms them); and harming offenders is good in itself (because retribution “annuls the crime”). However, each of these arguments have their own problems.

The first argument (that the harm of punishment is outweighed by some greater good) is a **utilitarian** one, but it seems immoral to harm someone because we want to influence others’ behaviour—it could justify scapegoating innocents. The second argument (that punishment does not really harm offenders) may have some force but is not usually true today. The RAND Corporation report *Prisons versus Probation in California* found that recidivism is actually higher for offenders sent to prison than for similar offenders on probation. “This should not surprise us,” remarks Loy,

Śākyamuni emphasized the importance of good friends, but if we look at prisons from that perspective, the predatory societies that they encourage make most of them more like hell than places to repent and reform.

(Loy, 2000:146)

Buddhism stresses on **spiritual friendship** as the foundation of any healthy relationship: spiritual friendship is “the whole of the holy life” (S 1:87 ff., 5:2 f.,) [5:3-5]. In other words, what Buddha does for people like Aṅgulimāla is “to help reform his or her character” (Loy, 2000:150). For this reason, king Prasenajit marvels at the Buddha: “Venerable Sir, we ourselves could not tame him with force or weapons, yet **the Blessed One has tamed him without force or weapons**.” (M 2:102).

Aṅgulimāla becomes what he is—a bloodthirsty serial killer—not so much because of his past karma as it is due to present conditions. From an innocent, diligent and popular student he turns into a killing machine in deference to his foolish teacher’s demands, a guru who acts upon rumours. Aṅgulimāla becomes a serial killer, and in so doing he creates new unwholesome karmic tendencies. It is important to understand such **habitual tendencies** (an important aspect of karma)—also called *samskāra/saṅkhāra*—“not as tendencies we have, but as tendencies we *are*: instead of being ‘my’ habits, their interaction is what constitutes my sense of ‘me’.” (Loy, 2000:156 f.).

The point of this interpretation is that we are punished not for our sins, but by them. People suffer or benefit not for what they have done, but for what they have become, and what we intentionally do is what makes us what we are. This conflation makes little sense if *karma* is understood dualistically as a kind of moral “dirt” attached to me, but it makes great deal of sense if I am my habitual intentions, for then the important spiritual issue is the development of those intentions. In that case, my actions and my intentions build/rebuild my character just as food is assimilated to build/rebuild my physical body. If *karma* is this psychological truth about how we construct ourselves—about how my sense-of-self is constructed by “my” greed, ill-will, and delusion—then we can no longer accept the juridical presupposition of a completely self-determined subject wholly responsible for its own actions. Again, we can no longer justify punishment as retributive, but must shift the focus of criminal justice to education and reformation.

(Loy, 2000:157)

At best, we can say that secular justice deals mainly with crimes on a **symptomatic and punitive level**, whereas Buddhism tries to look at the individual from a **radical and restorative** perspective. This is clear from the Buddhist foundation of mind-training; for when we truly understand how the mind works, then we are on the way to root out the problem at the source. In short, it is not a case of social control, but rather one of personal control, the conquest of one's own mind.

THE BUDDHA'S KARMA

20. PHYSICAL DEPRIVATION AND ILLNESS

(a) Physical deprivation

In this final category of the Buddha's “bad karma”, we shall examine the physical deprivations and illnesses that plague the Buddha. There are only two accounts of **physical deprivation** recorded in the Pali texts: the Bodhisattva's six years of self-mortification (e.g. M 1:77 ff., 240 ff.) and the Verañjā famine (V 3:1 ff.). I have already mentioned **the Bodhisattva's self-mortification** [2:15].

The Verañjā famine incident, which occurs in the 12th year of the Ministry (AA 2:124; cf. BA 3), opens the Sutta Vibhaṅga of the Vinaya, where the Buddha and his monks reside in Verañjā for the rains, honouring the request of the brahmin Verañjā.

However, due to the famine, there is difficulty in getting almsfood. Moreover, the host, the brahmin Verañjā, and the inhabitants of the town, it is said, are overcome by a spiteful Māra so that they forget their obligation (VA 1:178 f; DhA 2:153; cf. J 3:494). Maudgalyāyana offers to use his psychic powers to obtain food, but the Buddha forbids it. So they are left with eating **crude grain** (*yava*) meant for the horses, which Ānanda carefully prepares by pounding it before giving it to the Buddha. (V 3:5-7)

(b) The Buddha's illnesses

There are, however, a number of occasions when the Buddha suffers from various ailments. Both the Majjhima Nikāya and the Saṃyutta Nikāya mention occasions when the Buddha suffers a debilitating **back-ache**. The first occasion is recorded in **the Sekha Sutta** (M 53) where the Buddha and the Order are residing in Nigrodha's Park in Kapilavastu. Before retiring to rest his back, the Buddha instructs Ānanda to teach the assembled Śākya on the Learner's training (*sekhā, paṭipadā*) (M 1:354).

The second occasion is recorded in **the Avassuta Sutta** (S 35.243) in the same location in Kapilavastu, and the Buddha instructs Maudgalyāyana to exhort the assembly while he rests (S 4:184). The Saṃyutta Commentary explains that during the six years of self-mortification, the Bodhisattva experiences

great bodily pain. In old age, for example, he suffers from **back winds** (*piṭṭhi, vāta*, rheumatism?) (SA 3:52).

Here also we might add **the bleeding wound on the Buddha's foot** caused by the splintering of the rock hurled by Devadatta [7]. There are two suttas, both entitled “Discourse on the Splinter”—Sakalikā Sutta I (S 1.38) and Sakalikā Sutta II (S 4.13)—dealing with this incident. In **the Sakalikā Sutta I** (S 1.38), the Buddha, after being hurt by the rock splinter, rests in the Madra, kukṣi (Maddakucchi) Deer Park at Rājagṛha, and

...severe pains assailed the Blessed One—bodily feelings that were painful, racking, sharp, piercing, harrowing, disagreeable. But the Blessed One endured them, mindful and fully aware, without becoming distressed. Then the Blessed One had his outer robe folded in four, and he lay down on his right side in the lion posture with one leg overlapping the other, mindful and circumspect.

(S 1:27)

Then late in the night, he is visited by numerous devas who sing their admiration and praises to him.

The setting of **the Sakalikā Sutta II** (S 4.13) is the same as the Sakalikā Sutta I, but the interlocutor this time is none other than Māra the Evil One himself. As the Buddha is resting in the lion posture, Māra addresses him:

Do you lie down in a daze or drunk on poetry?
Don't you have sufficient goals to meet?
Alone in a secluded lodging,
Why do you sleep with a drowsy face?

[The Blessed One:]

I do not lie in a daze or drunk on poetry;
Having reached the goal, I am rid of sorrow.
Alone in a secluded lodging
I lie down full of compassion for all beings.

Even those with a dart stuck in the breast
Piercing their heart moment by moment—
Even those here, stricken, get to sleep;
So why should I not get to sleep
When my dart has been drawn out?

I do not lie awake in dread,
Nor am I afraid to sleep,
The nights and days do not afflict me,
I see for myself no decline in the world.
Therefore I can sleep in peace,
Full of compassion for all beings.

(S 1:110 f.)

21. THE BUDDHA'S HEADACHES

Walters apparently only lists the physical deprivations and illnesses of the Buddha as recorded in the Canon. On the other hand, the Dhammapada Commentary, for example, records the Buddha suffering from headache. Walters could have omitted this story because it has to do with present causal condition rather than past karma, as we shall presently see in the story of **Virūḍhaka** (Viḍudabha) [Chapter 8].

When king Prasenajit asked for a Śākya maiden in marriage, he was deceitfully given Vṛṣabha, kṣatriyā (Vāsabhā Kṣatriyā), daughter of the Śākya Mahānāma by a slave woman named Nāgamuṇḍa (J 1:133). When the young Virūdhaka, the unfortunate child of Prasenajit and Vṛṣabha, kṣatriyā, discovered the intrigue, he vowed vengeance on the Śākyas for their deceit.

When Virūdhaka became rajah, he remembered his vow for vengeance and marched out with a large army for Kapilavastu. The Buddha, aware of the impending doom, appeared under a tree with poor shade just within the Śākya border. Just on the other side was a banyan tree with cool shade. When Virūdhaka invited the Buddha over to the banyan's shade, the Buddha replied: "Be not concerned, Maharajah, **the shade of my kinsmen keeps me cool!**"

Virūdhaka took the broad hint, but returned three times, each time meeting the Buddha in the same manner. On the fourth occasion, the Buddha knew that the Śākyas had to face the fruition of old karma. In a past life, they had poisoned the river.¹⁶ It is said that the Buddha's exposure to the sun on these occasions caused him **headaches** (*śīrṣa, duḥkha/sīsa, dukkha*) that lasted for the rest of his life (Ap 387,24 = 1:300; UA 265).

22. THE LAST DAYS

The Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta (D 16) mentions two occasions of physical illness of the 80-year-old Buddha during his last days. The first episode of illness occurs in **Bilva** (Beluva) [10:7a] during the rains:

...the Lord was attacked by a severe sickness, with sharp pains as if he were about to die. But he endured all this mindfully, clearly aware and without complaining. He thought: "It is not fitting that I should attain final Nirvana without addressing my followers and taking leave of the Order of Monks. I must hold this disease in check by energy and apply myself to the force of life." He did so and the disease abated.

(D 2:99)

The second episode, a more serious attack, occurs in **Pāpā** (Pāvā) [10:13], after the Buddha has consumed some "pig's delight" (*sūkara, mādava/sūkara, maddava*)¹⁷ offered by Cunda the smith. Apparently, the Buddha knows the nature of the "pig's delight", for when the meal is being served, he instructs that it only be served to him and the rest to be buried in a pit, because, "Cunda, I can see no one in the world with its devas, Māra and Brahmā, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, its princes and people who, if they were to eat it, could thoroughly digest it except, the Tathagata." (D 2:128).¹⁸ Later, after his meal that includes the "pig's delight",

...the Lord was attacked by a severe sickness with bloody diarrhoea, and with sharp pains as if he were about to die. But he endured all this mindfully and clearly aware, and without complaint.

(D 2:128)

The Buddha and the Order then head for Kuśinagarī, some 80 km southeast from Pāpā. As before, they all journey on foot.¹⁹

¹⁶ U 265; Ap 1:300; DhA 1:346-349, 357-361; cf. J 1:133, 4:146 f. 151 f. This could be construed as "group karma". But see James P. McDermott, "Is There Group Karma in Theravāda Buddhism?", *Numen* 23,1 1976:67-80.

¹⁷ Cf. D:W 571 n417.

¹⁸ Cf. Lamotte 1976:313 f.).

¹⁹ See Chapter 10: "Was the Buddha Poisoned?" for more details on the Buddha's last journey.

BAD KARMA AS REASON FOR THE BUDDHA'S SUFFERINGS

23. PUBBA,KAMMA,PILOTI

Almost all the texts we have discussed so far come from the earliest strata of the Buddhist Canon. As such, the problem of the Buddha's sufferings is as old as Buddhism itself. However, none of these texts even hint that the Buddha's sufferings are due to his past karma, "nor even that they considered the fact of the Buddha suffering to be in any way problematic. Moreover, there is no evidence in these texts that these disparate unpleasant events were contemplated together, as a category." (Walters 1990:75)

However, before the Pali Canon was closed at the Council of Pāṭaliputra, said to be held during Aśoka's time, there was at least one comprehensive effort at explaining the unpleasant aspects of the Buddha's life categorically, and explaining them as the effects of the Buddha's own bad karma. The result of this effort is called the **Pubba,kamma,piloti**, "The Strands (or Rags) of Previous Karma", included as no. 387 of the Thera Apadāna of the Khuddaka Nikāya.

Oddly enough, the Pubba,kamma,piloti is placed in the section of **the Apadāna** devoted, not to the Buddha, but to biographies of famous monks. The colophon, however, places it in the Buddhāpadāna section of the same text which, as its name implies, contains a cosmic biography of the Buddha spanning countless world-cycles of self-perfection, and thus paralleling the Jātaka collection, but in a greatly abbreviated form.²⁰

24. PAST BAD KARMA OF THE BUDDHA

The Piloti opens at Anavatapyya (Anotatta) Lake with the Buddha addressing the monks:

Near the Anotatta Lake, on the delightful rocky ground, where various gems were sparkling and various sweet scents [were exuded] in the forest, the Lord of the World, surrounded by a huge community of monks, sitting down, then explained his own previous karma: "Hear from me, O monks, the karma produced by me [and] the ripening of strands of karma in the Buddha himself."

(Walter's prose tr. of verses 1-3, 1990:76)

It is interesting to note here that this is the only sutra attributed to the Buddha himself that is located on the shore of Anavatapta Lake, located high up in the Himālayas.

The remaining 30 verses of the Piloti relate **the 12 previous lives of the Bodhisattva** in which he performed various evil deeds, described in the briefest manner. Here is a summary of the Bodhisattva's 12 evil deeds of the past (Ap 1:299-301):

- (1) The scoundrel Munāli who slandered an innocent Pratyeka Buddha named Surabhi. Past result (P. *tena kamma,vipākena*): he was reborn in hell (*niraye*) for a long time, experiencing thousands of years of pain. Present karmic remnants (P. *tena kammāvasena*): The female wanderer **Sundarī** slanders against him [2; 6:4].
- (2) He slandered against Nanda, a disciple of Sarvābhibhū (Sabbābhibhū) Buddha. Past result: Ten thousand years in hell, and after that as a human, continued to be plagued by slanders. Present remnants: The female wanderer **Ciñcā Mānavikā** slanders against him [3].
- (3) A learned brahmin, teaching mantras to 500 youths in a great forest: He slanders against a sage named Ṛṣi,gaṇa (Isigaṇa) of unchastity, and his pupils, hearing the slander, repeat it in the village as they went on their almsround. Result: They all suffer slander when **Sundarī** is murdered [2; 6:4].

²⁰ See Walters 1990:75 f & n13 on possible reasons for this placement

- (4) Greedy for wealth, the Bodhisattva murdered his own half-brother by crushing him with a rock. Result: His cousin, Devadatta, throws a boulder at him and **a splinter wounds his foot** [7].
- (5) As a boy playing on the road, he threw a shard at a passing Pratyeka Buddha. Result: Devadatta employs thugs to kill him [7].
- (6) Mounted on an elephant, he attacked a Pratyeka Buddha going for alms. Result: Nālāgiri rushes at him in Rājagṛha [7].
- (7) As the unrighteous king Pathiva, he killed a man with a knife. Past result: Suffers “roasting” in hell. Present karmic remnants: After the splint from Devadatta’s boulder hurts his foot, it becomes infected [7].
- (8) As the son of a fisherman, he felt happiness upon seeing the fishermen bring in dead fish. Result: Headaches, and his clansmen, the Śākya are massacred by Virūḍhaka (Viḍudabha) [21].
- (9) He cursed the disciples of Puṣya (Phussa) Buddha, saying: “No rice for you—chew and eat bad grain”. Result: At Verañjā, the Buddha has to live on coarse grain [20b].
- (10) As the son of a wrestler, he interrupted a wrestling match (and according to the Commentary, broke the back of one of the wrestlers in the process). Result: Backaches [20b].
- (11) As a physician, he (mistakenly) administered a purge on the son of a millionaire. Result: Diarrhoea [22].
- (12) As Jyotipāla (Jotipāla), he reviled Kāśyapa Buddha: “Where did this baldy get his enlightenment, the enlightenment so difficult to obtain?” Result: Performs 6 years of self-mortification before gaining his own enlightenment [2:15].

In many ways, the *Piloti* is unique. I have already mentioned that this is the only sutra attributed to the Buddha himself that is located on the shore of Anavatapta Lake in the Himālayas. It is the only *Apadāna* text that focuses on **bad karma and its unpleasant results**. (The Sanskrit *Avadāna*, however, have accounts of both types of karma.) More important, for our purposes here, the *Piloti* is the only text in the Pali Canon that explains the Buddha’s sufferings as a result of his bad karma and attributing past-life episodes to explain them.

Walters goes on to say that “[t]here are in fact good reasons to suspect that *Pubbakammapiḷoti* has its origins in a ‘Hīnayāna’ tradition other than the Theravāda (e.g., the Sarvāstivāda or Mahāsaṅghika).” (1990:77). In fact, the term *kamma,piḷoti* does not appear in the Pali Canon or Commentaries, except in reference to this text. The Sanskrit form, *karma,ploti*, however, is found in the *Divyāvadāna* of the Sarvāstivādins. A few of the past stories are found in the *Mahāvastu* of the Mahāsaṅghikas (Mvst 1:29 ff.). It is likely, concludes Walters, that the author of the *Piloti* “drew his account, and his position, from non-Theravādin schools of the ‘Hīnayāna’.” (1990:77-79).

DENIALS OF KARMIC EXPLANATION OF BUDDHA’S SUFFERINGS

25. MILINDA, PAÑHA & BUDDHAGHOSA

Once the *Pubba, kamma, piḷoti* came to be included in the Canon, it became the basis for debate that raged during the Commentarial Period and later. We shall summarize the opposing sides of the debate, that is, the *Milinda, pañha* and *Buddhaghosa* on the one side, and *Dhammapāla* on the other. The *Milinda, pañha*, however, generally affirms **the *Apadāna* position** that even spiritually advanced people might suffer because of bad karma.

The antagonist **king Milinda** asks how *Maudgalyāyana*, if truly an Arhant and chief among those skilled in psychic powers, could have been murdered so brutally as maintained by hagiographical tradition. The dilemma is this: *if Maudgalyāyana was chief amongst those possessing psychic powers, it must be false that he suffered so terribly. Or, if it be true that he was beaten to death with clubs, then the Buddha was mistaken in declaring him chief among those with psychic powers.*

Nāgāsena, the protagonist in the *Milinda,pañha*, explains the dilemma of Maudgalyāyana's tragic death by stating that the effects of karma are greater than anything, even Arhantship and its fruit:

That, O king, was because he was then overwhelmed by the greater power of *kamma*. Even among things which are beyond the scope of the imagination one may be more powerful than the others. Among things which are unimaginable *kamma* is the most powerful. It is precisely the effect of *kamma* which overcomes and rules the rest, for no other influence is of any avail to the man in whom *kamma* working out its inevitable result. Just as a man who has been found guilty of a crime will be punished and there is nothing his relatives may do to prevent it.

(Miln 1:189, Bhikkhu Pesala's tr. 1991:54)

The Jātakas show that, in the case of **Devadatta**, there is the common operation of both good and bad karma [11]. The *Milinda,pañha* similarly affirms this but give no hint whatsoever of the Piloti standpoint (that is, the evil result of bad karma):

...all beings who are carried along in the endless round of rebirths meet with pleasant and unpleasant companions just as water whirled along in a river meets with pure and impure things.

(Miln 1:204, Bhikkhu Pesala's tr. 1991:57 f)

The *Milinda,pañha* is quite clear about the Buddha's **overcoming his unwholesome karma**. When Milinda asks: "Did the Tathāgata attain omniscience when he had burnt up all his unwholesome karma, or did he attain while he had some unwholesome karma remaining?" Nāgāsena replies that "He had burned out all unwholesome karma." (Miln 1:134).

As regards **the Buddha's foot being hurt by the flying splinter**, Nāgāsena first explains that some bodily pain arises from external natural causes as well as karma. The Buddha's pain here, however, is caused only by external natural conditions and also by external human agency (Devadatta) (Miln 1:136), in other words, not because of bad karma.

The *Milinda,pañha* is the first Buddhist work to explicitly deny that Gautama has no bad karma, both as a Bodhisattva and as Buddha. Buddhaghosa, the 5th century Indian Commentator working in Sri Lanka, too, explains the Buddha's **backache** by providing non-karmic causes:

Why did it [his back] pain him? The Blessed One, who had devoted himself to the great exertion for six years [as an ascetic], had a great deal of bodily suffering. Later on, when he was very old, he had back trouble. That [backache] had no karmic cause (*akaraṇa*).

(SA 3:52)

The Dhammapada Commentary (by Buddhaghosa) retells several of the stories of unpleasant events in the Buddha's biography without the slightest hint that the Buddha's own bad karma was involved. For example, **Sundari's slander**, is caused by the jealousy of the wanderers (DhA 3:474 ff.). **Ciñcā Māṇava's slander**, too, is explained in the same manner (DhA 3:178ff.). Similarly, the **Devadatta cycle of stories** portrays him as the cause of the Buddha's suffering and not bad karma (DhA 1:133 ff.). Similarly, the deprivations the Buddha and the monks faced in **famine-struck Verañjā** is not caused by the Buddha's bad karma but those of the 500 monks themselves (DhA 6.8; J no. 183). In short, the Buddha's deprivations and pains are not caused by his bad karma. (But see DhA 3:512 which actually supports the "bad karma" explanation.)

REBUTTALS AFFIRMING KARMIC EXPLANATION OF BUDDHA'S SUFFERINGS

26. DHAMMAPĀLA

Some Commentators and later editors are less willing to ignore the Pubba,kamma,piloti that the early elders, after all, included in the Canon, and which they regarded as Buddha Word. Moreover, the Canon usually favours **the karmic explanation**, but the texts that rebut the denials of karmic explanations for the Buddha's sufferings never mention the Piloti. The manner in which they elaborate the simple Piloti references, however, "makes clear that they are writing with those denials in mind" (Walters, 1990:84).

In his Commentary to the Udāna, the earliest canonical text telling the Sundarī story, **Dhammapāla** clearly supports the karmic cause of the Buddha's problem:

All his sufferings, beginning with the slander of the Blessed One by deceitful women like Ciñcā Māṇavikā and so forth, are to this extent conditioned by the remaining effects of deeds done in past lives, by which are called "karmic strands" (P. *kammāni pilotikāni*). [The whole Pubba,kamma,piloti is then quoted.]

(UA 263)

Furthermore, Walters notes, Dhammapāla does not simply affirm an old position, but affirms it in the light of the denials which have been made:

[With regard to Sundarī's slanderous accusations,] it is asked: "What was that karma?" The Master, who for an immeasurable period of time carefully heaped up a wide accumulation of merit, received harsh and untrue slander. It is said that this very Blessed One, being a Bodhisatta in a previous birth, was a scoundrel named Munāli. He served evil people, intent on fixing his attention improperly, and roamed about. One day he saw a Pacceka-sambuddha named Surabhi adjusting his robe to enter the city for alms, "This renunciate is a scoundrel, no celibate he." [Munāli/Buddha], because of that karma, roasted in hell for many thousands of years. As the remaining effects of that karma, now, even though he was the Buddha, he received slander because of Sundarī.

(U 263; Walters' tr.)

Dhammapāla clearly supports the notions of the Piloti, referring his account to a debate over the cause of Sundarī's slander, and states that even though he is Buddha, with all the merit described by the Jātaka, still the Buddha is subject to the effects of his previous bad karma.

27. VISUDDHA,JANA,VILĀSINĪ

The most important rebuttal to the denials of the Buddha's past bad karma is the Commentary on the Piloti itself, that is, the **Visuddha,jana,vilāsinī**, which gives the Piloti more attention than any of text of the Apadāna collection (Walters 1990:86-88). In doing so, Dhammapāla develops a new Buddhology (conception of the Buddha) and he treats the Pubba,kamma,piloti as part of the Buddhāpadāna section of the text.

For him, the stories about the bad karma and bad effects are part of the same story which tells of good karma and bad effects are part of the same story which tells of good karma and good effects; his is a new conception of the Buddha biography.

(Walters 1990:88)

For Dhammapāla, the life of the Buddha is not only a happy account of "ultimately liberating effects of good karma; it is also paradigmatic of every person's ability to get onto the right road, even if he or she be the doer of bad karma" (Walters, id.):

After asking which road to take, when “avoid the left and take the right” is said, travelers, having gone by that [right] road accomplish their duties in villages, towns and royal cities; but those gone just as far in the same manner on the other, avoided, left road, also [eventually] accomplish their duties in villages, towns, etc. [once they have realized their mistake and returned to the correct road]. In just this way, the *Buddhâpadâna* was set forth because [it exemplified] the wholesome (*kusala*) *apadâna*; there is this problem karma (*pañhakamma*) [i.e. the problems described in *Pubbakammapiṭṭi*] to detail that [analogous to the left road] because [it exemplifies] the unwholesome (*akusala*) *apadâna*.

(ApA 114, Walters' tr. 1990:88)

Like the travelers who, failing to heed the warning of those who know the way, must waste time on the wrong road before realizing their mistake and then get back on the right track, so that the person who acts in an evil manner, not heeding the warning of the Buddha, will, like the Bodhisattva himself, waste time suffering in hell and on earth, but in the end even that evil-doer can also get back on the right road.²¹

The Milinda,pañha clearly denies the Buddha's bad karma, saying that the Buddha's pain must have been the result of “the fruit of karma or the deed [of Devadatta]” (*kamma,vipākato vā kiriyato vā*) and then proceeds to defend the position (Miln 1:136). Its sub-commentary, **the Milinda Ṭīkā**, a late mediaeval text from Siam, however, takes the opposite stand by simply explaining that it is “because of the deed” (*kiriyato*) of Devadatta (which is obvious from the context), and glosses: “because of the fruit of karma” (*kamma,vipākato*) by quoting the Pubba,kamma,piloti verse in which the Buddha states that the splinter of rock injured him as the remnant effect of having murdered his half-brother, and continues:

The Thera [Nāgasena] does not have a certain explanation for this problem. Therefore having thought it out, one should accept [whichever answer] is the most appropriate. In that regard [I] am making this investigation. The killing on the road [by the Buddha in a previous life] produced defilements which were not laid hold of in the past, future and present. The talk about [the Buddha having experienced] the cessation of that [karma] which is laid hold of is spoken with reference to future existence. The [painful] feelings were born to the Lord in this present existence. Karma which is to be experienced again and again [*aparâpara,vedaniya,kamma*], cannot be turned back even in Buddhas and Paccekabuddhas. We should therefore take [this as] the most appropriate theory as regards the Thera's [question], “were these pains [of the Buddha's] because of the fruit of the deed or were they reborn [effects of karma]?”

(MT 26 f. Walters' tr. 1990:89)

However, it should be noted that although the commentator upholds the Piloti's position that even Buddhas must experience the effects of past root-karma, he affirms that “with regard to future existence” all bad karma have been exhausted. Even the Buddha (as Buddha) has to finish burning up his karma; but being Buddha, this leaves no residue for rebirth. As such, the Milinda Ṭīkā author postulates a kind of karma which is only experienced without any further karma. Such a karma is technically known as “**defunct karma**” (P. *ahosi,kamma*).²²

28. CONCLUSION

The problem with the Pubba,kamma,piloti is that it seems to show that even though the Bodhisattva committed various bad karma in the past, they were no hindrance to his attaining Buddhahood. If this were the case then the Buddhist ethical system would be undermined to a serious extent. This apparent dilemma, however, is resolved by the stories of the Buddha's biography itself. The sufferings of the Buddha and the Arhants show that when the conditions are right, some past bad karma ripen, but they do not adversely affect the enlightened mind as they do the unenlightened.

²¹ Cf. Walters 1990:95 n66.

²² Vism 601; Abhs:SR 144 ff.; Abhs:NB 200 ff. For a discussion on some problems of *ahosi,kamma*, see Gombrich, *Precept and Practice*, 1971: ch 5.

The lives of the Buddha and his disciples serve as spiritual teachings for us. The life of the Buddha is a cosmos of various spiritual experiences that we must personally face. The lives of the disciples give us a good idea of various personal weaknesses and social realities that we currently experience or are capable of experiencing under the right conditions. This is Indra's Jewel Net of being and interbeing and of ultimate liberation.



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