

## Understanding Karma and Buddhist Ethics by Nagapriya

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### Introduction

Actually, I'm not going to say that much about ethics very specifically. I am going to talk in a more general way about the principle that underlies Buddhist ethics, which is *karma*. So I am going to begin by saying something about what *karma* is *not*. Sometimes it helps to define things in terms of what they're not, because there are often a lot of misconceptions, and I think in particular there are often a lot of misconceptions about what karma is within Buddhism.

So I'll go into that, and then I'll talk a bit more positively and say something about what *karma* is; and under that heading I'm going to talk about *karma* in terms of the most general and fundamental Buddhist philosophical idea, or principle, of 'dependent origination' (I'll say a bit about that later).

I will also go into describing the Buddhist analysis of the human being in terms of *anatta*; in terms of no-self, no fixed self. After that I'm going to say a bit about rebirth and how that connects to the idea of *karma*, and this will mean going into the idea of different realms; the so-called 'six realms'. Just for a bit of visual interest I've put a picture here of the Tibetan Wheel of Life, and the six realms are here — yeah?

And then to finish off I'll say a bit about how all this relates more specifically to the practice of ethics and morality.

In the course of doing this, I hope to answer, or at least address, a few questions. First of all there's the 'Glen Hoddle' question, which you may be familiar with: 'Is everything that happens to us a result of our previous action (our *karma*)?' So I'm going to go into that.

Secondly, the question: 'If there is no soul, what is reborn?'

Thirdly: 'Is rebirth true? And is it to be taken literally or metaphorically?'

And finally: 'In what ways is *karma* a useful concept or idea?'

Actually, I think I probably won't fully address *all* these questions, but if I don't you can ask me at the end — or you can put forward a question for the question-and-answer this afternoon — but I will certainly address some of them at least to some degree.

I am going to base my presentation on sources from the Pali Canon and from a post-canonical text called 'Milinda's Questions', or 'The Questions of King Milinda'. I do want

to say that I am going to try and present a traditional Buddhist view of karma, but I don't necessarily *agree* with all of it, and I may in some places say where I don't agree with it, or where I think it's rather crude and needs to be refined.

### **The principle of karma; what karma is not; pre-Buddhist Vedic tradition on karma; karma is not reincarnation**

Ok — so, 'what *karma* is not'.... well, I've already said that the word karma means 'action'; that's what it literally means. Just to clarify something which may be confusing you: *karma* is a Sanskrit word, but the word is also known in another form, in a language called Pali, as *kamma*. The scriptures that I'm talking from were written down in this language of Pali, but because the Sanskrit form of the word is so well-known I'm just going to stick to that.

So... karma. Action.

I think there's a popular idea of *karma* that it means something like 'fate' or 'pre-destination', so when something bad happens to you, somebody comes along and says, 'Ah — that's the result of your *karma*! You had that coming to you. That was inevitable.' So the implication is that things that happen to you — particularly bad things, I think, that happen to one — are some sort of retribution for the bad conduct that you have performed in the past.

I think this is quite a popular idea — even the idea that there is no escape, you know, there was no escape from these consequences; they were bound to happen — this is the way that people sometimes talk. And [they have the idea that] the best that you can do is to accept your punishment or retribution and in this way be purified by doing so.

So there is this kind of idea that the universe is there waiting to give you what you deserve. This is to see the universe as some kind of rewarder and punisher — a rewarder for good conduct and a punisher for bad — almost as though it was some kind of god, or power, of that kind.

And so *karma* is seen as some sort of inescapable, inevitable law, perhaps not dissimilar from, say, the law of gravity. You throw a body in the air, and it falls. That always happens (unless you're in space or whatever...) and I think sometimes people see *karma* in this way — you know — you act badly, and you're going to get punished for it. You act well, and you're going to get rewarded.

This is an extremely crude model of *karma*, and in some ways quite mistaken. But where does it come from, this idea? Why do people think this way? To understand this, I think it is useful to go into a little bit of history, because actually Buddhism isn't the only tradition that has a notion of *karma*. It is a kind of pan-Indian idea, and we find it in what we call Hinduism, and in Jainism too — two of the other Indian religions. And actually at the time of the advent of the Buddha there were ideas of *karma* and rebirth already in

circulation in what is called the Vedic tradition; the Vedic Brahminical tradition.

The Vedic tradition comes from the Vedas, some of the sacred texts of what we now call the Hindus. According to this Vedic notion, one is born into a particular station in life — even a particular caste — due to one's previous *karma*. It is all determined by one's actions in one's past life. So, given that that is the case, in this life one's duty is to perform one's caste functions.

So if one was born into the lowest pile, if you like — the lowest strata of the pile — you should just simply get on with that, live out your allotted function, and in doing that you can look forward to a better rebirth next time round. So, importantly, you shouldn't try to change your social status. You should just accept it, get on with it, and if you do that fully you will get a better rebirth next time.

Again this is quite crude, but it is not completely too far from the truth. I mean, I don't think it's quite like that really. I think rather than seeing it as this sort of inevitable law — that if you act this way you'll get this kind of rebirth, etc. — I would rather see it more as an organic principle, or as a general rule, if you like, that admits of quite a bit of variation and flexibility.

So as a general rule one will reap the consequences of one's past actions. But we need to understand fully how this works. It doesn't mean that every individual little wrong that you do, every little lie that you tell, every time you swear or whatever, the universe is going to find some way to pay you back — you know — suddenly someone else is going to come along and swear at *you*, or lie to *you*. It's not quite as crude and simple as that. Although, actually, some of the Buddhist texts present it in that way.

Some of the consequences of one's actions may be so minor as to be invisible or negligible; you may not be able to see the consequences. At the same time, as well, two people might actually commit the same act, or what appears to be the same act, with very different consequences. And the difference in these consequences can be explained through *karma*. I am going to go into that in a bit more detail shortly.

I just want to say one more thing about what *karma* is *not* — or what rebirth is not — and what it is *not*, is it is not reincarnation. The idea of reincarnation is that we have this fixed identity, this soul, this kind of essence, that is us — our core — that transmigrates from life to life, as though we transplant it from one body to the next body in the new life. This is *not* the Buddhist idea of rebirth. So, how does Buddhism see it? How does Buddhism see the self? Well, I'm just going to come onto that.

### **What karma is; dependent origination; continuity and permanence; the 5 skandhas; Manchester Utd analogy for samskara**

So — what *karma* is.

Well, as I said earlier, the Buddhist notion of *karma* has got to be understood in the light

of the most general, fundamental and comprehensive Buddhist doctrine, which is the doctrine of dependent origination. I haven't got that much time to go into this doctrine in a lot of detail but I am just going to go into it briefly.

So according to this doctrine — the fundamental 'metaphysical' idea, or doctrine, of Buddhism — all things, *everything*, arises in dependence on conditions. And when those conditions cease, the thing itself ceases.

So just for example, this event that we are participating in arises in dependence on conditions. 'Clear Vision' have organized this event: they sent out publicity. You came here. I've come here. And we are here, and we have an event. Later on, maybe about four o'clock, we will all have gone and the event will be over. So it has come about in dependence on conditions, and will cease again when the conditions cease.

In some ways this seems trivially true; it seems very obvious and straightforward. I'm sure all of you could understand what I just said about this event arising in dependence on conditions. But we tend to look at other things — perhaps not events, but objects — in isolation. We see them as having some identity, some independent nature, that is independent of their surroundings; an identity that persists through time.

And I think part of the reason why we do that is that we can name things. So I'm named Nagapriya, and one attaches to this name various qualities, traits, etc., that maybe one sees persisting through time. And one then moves from that to think, 'Aha — yes — there is something that defines this person that is Nagapriya. There is some essence there.'

But from the Buddhist point of view, this is a mistake. Continuity does not mean identity; it does not mean permanence. And I am going to be playing around this distinction probably in most of what I say.

So, let's just look at a natural object — let's say a tree. We look at a tree and we think, 'Yeah — a tree has recognizable characteristics,' and we tend to (in our mind at least) abstract that tree from its surrounding environment as though it has some kind of nature, some 'tree-ness' if you like, that is there.

But if we look at it a bit more closely... well... take the soil away and what's going to happen to the tree? It will fall over; it will die. Without rain, again it will just dry up and die. There are many conditions that are needed to keep the tree growing, changing and staying alive, and if those conditions are removed the tree starts to disintegrate: it becomes dead wood, rots again into the soil, maybe provides the basis, the nutriment, for another tree...

So I think what happens is that on the whole (and I include myself in this) we lack the imagination to see how things are conditioned and we tend to see them as having this kind of fixed, permanent nature. And obviously with things like mountains, and planets, it's even more difficult to see how they are changing, but we just need a longer-term

perspective.

Ok — so this doctrine has two important implications. First of all, because things arise in dependence on conditions they are *impermanent*. Whenever the conditions that support that object or event are taken away, the thing itself ceases; it shows its impermanent nature.

If we see this impermanence, this can lead to what we might describe as a 'serene withdrawal' from attachment to things. A lot of pain is caused by thinking that things are going to continue. So we break our best watch, somebody scratches our car, or whatever, and we get upset because we were hoping that that watch, that car, was going to stay like that more or less permanently. So everything is impermanent, and if we realize this, there is this serene withdrawal.

Secondly (and in a way this is merely an extension of the first point), nothing has a fixed, unchanging nature — and that includes us. This is what is known as the principle — or doctrine, if you like — of *anatta* or no-self (not-self). So, we too arise in dependence on conditions, and we are constantly changing, both physiologically and psychologically (mentally). Our bodies are constantly changing: we take in food, we pass out waste, we gain more wrinkles as time goes on, maybe a few grey hairs, maybe we start losing our hair. Maybe we shrink; maybe we grow. And, of course, eventually we die; all of us die.

But not only our body is changing. Our mind is changing as well. We develop new habits. We develop new skills. Maybe we become happier, or maybe we become less happy. We gain more knowledge, perhaps, over time, and, as I say, maybe gain more skills, more confidence. So we're constantly changing.

And to draw this out a bit more fully I want to introduce you to quite an important and fundamental model — a Buddhist model — of the human being... [DISPLAYS DIAGRAM]... This is called the *Kandhas* (or the *Skandhas*) — the 'Five Kandhas'. This is a way, really, of just trying to see how we are constantly changing and we don't have a fixed nature, or fixed self.

So there are five *kandhas* (or it is often translated as 'heaps' — or sometimes 'aggregates'). First of all we've got *Vijnana*: consciousness.

Then we've got *Samjna*: our perception. This is the process of interpreting our experience — like recognizing 'that's a chair,' 'that's my friend over there,' etc. — memory — all these sorts of functions that perhaps we don't think about too much, but are going on all the time. [It's] the process of interpreting our world to make it meaningful — to make sense of it, if you like.

Then we've got *Rupa*: form, or body. This refers to the physiological aspect of us. All the other *kandhas* are mental.

Then we've got *Vedana*, which is feelings and sensations.

And finally (and in a way this is the most important one for today) we've got *Sankara* — and I have rendered it here as 'volition, or habit'. Sometimes it is translated as 'volitional tendencies' — it's given all sorts of different translations in different places — but let's stick with that for now.

So we usually define or describe ourselves in terms of our *sankaras*, in other words in terms of our habits. These are usually what are most recognizable about people — you know, 'such-and-such, he's into football; such-and-such, they've got this tendency to talk very loudly,' etc. Things like that. We generally define people in terms of their leading habits or qualities — 'such-and-such is an angry person; such-and-such is a very shy person' — and we see these things as not really changing.

I want to use an analogy to try to illustrate this business about the *sankaras*, and it may or may not work for you, but I want to use the analogy of a football team. Let's, just for argument's sake, call this football team 'Manchester United' (a bit of local colour!)

...So we talk in terms of a team, or, if you like, in terms of a 'self', that somehow seems to have a certain identity that persists through time. The *sankaras* are each of the individual players. Eleven players — so, just for now, there are eleven *sankaras*. You've probably got a lot more than that... but let's say there's eleven.

And we think that there is a 'core' to this — but really what is the core to this team? Is it Ryan Giggs? Or it is Roy Keane, the captain? Well... sometimes they don't play. So, when they don't play, where is the core of Manchester United? Where has it gone? We still talk in terms of the 'team' having this identity.

Actually there is only a notional sense of identity; the identity comes from description. There is no identity there. We impose that on the experience of these eleven players, if you like.

Perhaps you could say, 'Well, what is distinctive about Manchester United is the red shirts.' But actually, sometimes they play away! They wear blue shirts; even white shirts. So where is Manchester United, when they're wearing those shirts?

Perhaps it's the manager? But managers change over time. Even if they stay for quite a long time, they move on. Perhaps it's the fans? Well, the fans too grow old... die... there are new fans.

All of the players that play for the team at the moment will one day no longer play. There will be eleven new players. But we will still talk about Manchester United.

So you can see there is this constant change going on, and it's not an absolute change — it's not that one day there is one set of eleven players and the next day there's a different set of eleven. There is continuity. Players play for several years; a new player comes in; one player drops out; etc. So there is this sense of continuity, and that's very real, that's

very present. But we need to avoid moving from there to think that *because* there is that continuity, there is some fixed unchanging Manchester-Unitedness.

Ok?

The reason why I'm banging on about this a bit is that we need to understand this business about the *sankaras* changing over time, and continuity, if we are going to understand the Buddhist idea of *karma* and the idea of rebirth. We could say that if we *did* have a core, unchanging self, we couldn't change, and from a Buddhist point of view we couldn't gain Nirvana; we couldn't gain Enlightenment. So actually it is a great boon that we *are* constantly changing.

### **Differences between Buddhist and Vedic views of karma; chetana — will; skilful and unskilful motivations; consequences**

I want to move on and zero in a bit more to draw out some of the distinctive features of the Buddhist notion of *karma*, and in particular distinguishing it from the Vedic notion of *karma*, and I want to make two points (I'm sure there are more points, but I want to make two).

First of all, [the Buddhist notion of karma] is agent-centred rather than act-centred (I'm going to explain that jargon in a minute). Secondly, it operates within the current lifetime, and not only in relation to the rebirth process.

So, first of all it is agent-centred. What was distinctive about the Buddha and the Buddha's idea of *karma*, as distinguished from the Vedic one, was that the Buddha *ethicized* the idea of *karma*.

Previously *karma* was seen in ritualistic terms, in other words in terms of the performance of a particular ritual in the appropriate way. So [in the Vedic notion of *karma*] you do this ritual in the right way and you gain positive *karmic* consequences as a result. The most outstanding example of this was the performance of certain rites after the death, particularly performed by the son for the dead father. The performance of these rites in the proper way would lead to what was called 'positive *karma*' which would supposedly somehow be transferred to the departed relative, and which would benefit them in the after-death state (That opens up another whole area about the transference of *karma*, which I'm not actually going to go into, but you might want to ask about that at some point).

Instead of this — instead of seeing *karma* in terms of ritual and the performance of particular actions in the right way — what the Buddha said was that what is most important about *karma* is *intention* — the intention behind your action — *not* the surface of the action. So in many places *karma* is equated with *chetana*, or volition/will.

So it is volition, or will, that is *karma* in Buddhism... and this is a very radical thing to say; it's a very radical move in terms of how to govern one's conduct or behavior. So

action becomes a primarily mental thing, as opposed to simply a physical action or physical behavior.

But this is not to say that overt action — physical action or speech — is unimportant. It's more to say that the ethical quality of a speech act or a physical behavior can only be understood by understanding the motivation that drove it. So you can't simply look at someone's physical behavior and know that they have performed a unskilful (or indeed a skilful) action. You need to know more about what was driving them; more about their motivation.

Intentions can be divided into two kinds: *kusala* which means 'skilful', or *akusala* which means 'unskilful'. A skilful intention is one that arises from positive emotion, and these in particular are defined as generosity, intelligence and compassion (or love). These are skilful motivations for action. Then the unskilful motives or intentions are seen in terms of craving, hatred and spiritual ignorance (delusion).

So, as I said, the ethical quality of an action can't be understood simply by examining the surface of it.

Just to give an example: two people might give me a gift. One of them may give me a gift because he wants to express his gratitude for me helping him to fix his roof (very unlikely, actually — but maybe... *maybe* that would happen!). So, out of gratitude he gives to me. The other person wants to ingratiate himself with me because he wants to prepare the ground to borrow some money. So, superficially they are both giving; it seems a very positive thing. But actually they are driven by quite different motives: one by a very positive motive of gratitude, the other by a desire to try to manipulate me, to prepare the ground to get something out of me.

So you can see that superficially the actions are the same, but actually they will have very different consequences. That is what I'm going to come on to now — the effects of *karma*; the consequences of *karma*.

Every act that we perform — every intentional act that we perform, that is — modifies our being; it modifies who we are. As I have said earlier, we are constantly changing, and what makes us change is each little intention, each little act that we perform over the days, weeks, years, etc. Sometimes these acts modify us in a big way and sometimes in just a small way: it depends on the act.

These consequences or effects are called *vipakas*, or fruits, and I think the metaphor — the analogy — of fruit is very good, because... well, what is a fruit? It is something that grows on the basis of, say, a tree. So, let's say your previous action is the tree. The tree is there. That tree will blossom into fruit. There will be a natural organic consequence, if you like. So it's not that somebody then comes along and sticks some fruit on the tree. It's kind of implicit — it's kind of organic within the tree itself — that the fruits will arise; that the fruits will emerge.



I think this is quite important really. It's not that somebody will come along and punish you for being bad; it's that the consequences of your conduct are inherent in the conduct itself. They are inseparable, if you like. And the primary consequence is that *you will be changed* by your conduct.

Let's just take an example: I act out of a very hateful, angry state of mind over a period of time. What will the consequences of that be? The primary consequence will be that I will be a hateful, angry person — that is the primary consequence. There will probably be other consequences too — like, people won't like me very much; they won't want to help me — but these are secondary consequences. The *primary* consequence is that *I will be changed* by acting out these particular intentions and volitions.

The thing is, it is not always *obvious* that we are reshaping our being in this way, and sometimes it can take actually quite a long time for the fruits of our conduct to show themselves, either skilful or unskilful.

I don't know whether any of you have read Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but it is a very good novel and well worth reading... Dorian Gray is this extremely selfish aesthete. He is very, very handsome, and (I can't quite remember how this happens in the book) he makes some kind of pact whereby however evilly he acts, he continues to look very young and handsome and people continue to like him, but his portrait, which he keeps in his attic, shows all the marks of his evil, unskilful conduct. Towards the end of his life — he is still very beautiful, people still like him, and so on — he goes up to the attic and has a look at this picture, and it's all old and really ugly, and — you know — his face is festering... this sort of thing... and, well, actually he dies at that point, and, if you like, the consequences of his previous actions are then transferred from the picture onto him.

Now I don't want to say that *karma* is like that. I'm just using this as an analogy to say that it's not always *obvious*. You may, for example, act very skilfully and positively for many years, and seemingly all these bad things happen to you — you know — people are horrible to you, you get mugged, your car gets stolen... and you think to yourself, 'What have I done to deserve this?' And actually maybe you have not done *anything* to deserve it: these things happen.

Or maybe you see somebody else who seems incredibly selfish and just wants to get whatever they can out of other people... and seemingly they do very well! They do very, very well out of life... and you're thinking, 'How can this be true? How can this principle of *karma* be true if this person who is acting so unskilfully is seemingly being rewarded for that?'

I think, you know, it's a question of confidence. In the longer term there *will* be an effect. Sometimes things come to a head, and the consequences arrive all at once. But I am making this point because I think we can think there should be some sort of quid-pro-quo thing: 'I've done this good thing, so where's the benefit?', or 'I've done this bad thing — oh my god, where's the punishment coming from?' But it's much more complex than

that. It is probably better to think in terms of a series of actions that amount to a habit, and that habit has its effect on you as a person, and then it will have wider effects on your social circle and on the world generally — rather than in terms of individual actions having much of an effect.

So from a Buddhist point of view what we are trying to do is strengthen the skilful motivations, the skilful intentions, and weaken and eradicate the unskilful ones. That, if you like, is the purpose of Buddhist ethics. That is what it aims to do.

And we do this through purifying the mind, through working on the mind directly, rather than through any external kind of purification. So for example, bathing in the Ganges is not, from the Buddhist point of view, going to bring about purification; or performing some other particular kind of ritual practice is not necessarily going to bring about purification. I'm not saying that those things *won't*, but they will *only* bring about purification if they are allied with the appropriate intention, the appropriate motivation. The acts aren't enough in themselves.

So the kinds of practices that a Buddhist engages in are meditation — which aims to work directly on the mind, to change the mind positively — and of course ethics; the following of a particular ethical code, a particular set of precepts.

And I think it's important to recognize that it isn't simply an *external observance* of these ethical precepts that will bring about the transformation. There has to be the corresponding *intention*, the corresponding mental skilfulness, if you like, that goes with it.

So — you know — one might say, 'Ok, giving is seen to be a positive thing in Buddhism: if I give a lot, then I'll become enlightened.' But, actually if you give grudgingly or with regret, that isn't going to bring about this purification. It has to be allied with this open-hearted intention. And of course that is a process that we work towards. It's not the case that we're going to be completely pure overnight. It's a process of gradual transformation and purification — through action, through meditation, and all the other practices that Buddhists engage in. And this purification can ultimately lead to what Buddhists call 'Enlightenment'; it will lead to a shift away from self-centredness to an 'other-regarding' approach to life, if you like; an approach of *compassion* to life.

### **The Six Realms of the Wheel of Life; the 'Glenn Hoddle' question — results of karma as indefinable; Nagasena's Milinda's questions; tendencies; what happens to the Enlightened after death?**

I want to talk a bit about rebirth now. According to Buddhism, if one acts skilfully — if one acts out of these positive motivations — one generally will realize a good rebirth. If one acts out of unskilful [motivations], one will have a bad rebirth. And the rebirth is seen in terms of six realms. There are two 'good' realms, if you like — happy realms — and all the others are not really very desirable... and that is marked on this model here

[INDICATES ILLUSTRATION OF 'WHEEL OF LIFE'].

So, the Human realm is seen as ideal — it's seen as the axial realm — because it is the realm from which we can gain spiritual liberation; Enlightenment. The other positive realm is the realm of the Gods, which is a very pleasant, enjoyable realm, but can lead to a spiritual complacency, at least according to this tradition.

Then we've got the 'Asura' realm, which is sometimes called the realm of the angry gods, or the warring gods. We've got the 'Pretas', or the realm of the hungry ghosts, the revenants; the 'Hell Beings', which are states of extreme suffering and pain; and then finally the 'Animal' realm.

And I have given some psychological correspondences to these. So, the God realm is a realm of aesthetic enjoyment; the Asura realm is the realm of war, power, competitiveness etc.; the Preta realm is the realm of neurosis and unassuageable greed; the Hell realm is the realm of mental illness, of paranoia, etc.; the Animal realm is the realm of crude appetite; and the Human realm... well... is the human realm. The human realm is a balanced realm, where there is a kind of balance of awareness — self-awareness — and there is a kind of mixture of pleasure and pain. Pain is not so excessive as to mean that one is completely caught up in pain, but pleasure isn't so intoxicating that one loses all idea of wanting to work on oneself, wanting to transcend one's limitations. So that's the Six Realms.

So, if one lives a brutal, hateful life, maybe one will be reborn in the Hell realm, or if one is born in the Human realm — at least according to the tradition — one will be reborn ugly and short-lived. So the tradition at least makes a *correlation* between our physical appearance and circumstances and our previous *karma*. So this touches on the 'Glen Hoddle' question.

Glen Hoddle, seemingly... I may be wrong about this, but my understanding is that Glen Hoddle said something to the effect that people who are reborn as physically disabled, are physically disabled because of their conduct in previous lives. And I was quite shocked and alarmed to read in the Daily Telegraph that the Dalai Lama agreed with him.

I don't agree with this. I am not saying that it is never true: what I would say is that we can't know this. We don't know whether we are reborn disabled, or ugly, or whatever it is, as a result of our previous conduct. I think there are other factors at play, which we may know nothing about. One example I have been reflecting on recently is the example of the drug thalidomide, which is a drug that was administered to pregnant mothers, I think, in the seventies or maybe sixties, and this led to quite severe physical impairments and disablements in the children. So how do you explain that the mother took this drug as a result of the previous *karma* of the child? It just seems crazy, really, to explain it in those terms. It would seem much more straightforward to explain it in terms of physiological factors — you know — the mother took these drugs, it had an effect on the growing fetus, and these were the consequences.

I mean, I wouldn't like to rule it out altogether and say that one's physical appearance is *never* a result of one's previous actions — I don't know about that — but what I do want to say is that we shouldn't jump to this conclusion and say, 'Ah — you've been reborn in this way and that's because this is a punishment for your previous conduct.'

In fact, the Buddha himself in several places says that the results of *karma* is one of the imponderables. We can't actually know what the consequences of *karma* will be. We can't always know whether something that happened to us was a result of *karma* or not. Similarly, things that happen to you in this life — you know — can we think that they are all the result of our previous *karma*? Let's take something as tragic and grim as the massacre in Dunblane: I believe that someone walked into this school with a gun and just indiscriminately shot quite a lot of the pupils. So, how is it, then, that this guy is going to work out which of the pupils he has to shoot? — you know — which are the ones that need to be punished for their previous conduct? ...If you think about it, it's ridiculous.

At the same time, I'm not saying that things that happen to one in one's life are *never* the result of *karma*. I think they quite often are; I think we do draw certain experiences towards ourselves. We have a certain affinity with certain experiences, or certain people, if you like, because of the kind of habits that we have. But I think it is much too simplistic to think, 'Ah — such-and-such — something bad has happened to them; it must have been because of something bad in their past life.'

So what I want to say is that other people do *not* function as agents of your *karma*. It is not other people's job to go around punishing you for your previous *karma*. That isn't how it works. There is a complex interaction of *karmic* streams. We've got our *karmic* stream; we've got somebody else's *karmic* stream. When they come together, something happens, but what happens is not a punishment for our previous conduct; it is simply the organic consequences of these two *karmic* streams interacting.

Sometimes one may act very unskillfully and not suffer at all, at least in this life: so, for example, a war criminal might escape punishment. Similarly, one might act very skillfully and suffer: so a saint might be murdered, for example. So — you know — if one sees *karma* in terms of external consequences, it doesn't really add up; it doesn't make sense. Instead, we've got to see it in terms of the effect on the mind. So the war criminal may be plagued by a bad conscience, or at the very least their emotional sensitivity is going to be severely impaired by the evil conduct that they have done. At the same time the saint, presumably, is going to feel a free conscience, a clear conscience, even while they might suffer for it.

So just to summarize: we may have been born into the human realm — as we all have been — as a result of previous *karma*, but many of the circumstances that we experience and meet in the human realm may not necessarily be results of our previous *karma*. There are other factors (such as weather, climate, biological processes...) that will play their part.

So, just to push on towards the end: if there is no 'self'... what is reborn? Well, I want to

refer to an illustration given by the monk Nagasena in this text, the 'Milinda's Questions' that I mentioned earlier. This is what Nagasena says:

*'It is like a fire which a man might kindle, and having warmed himself, he might leave it burning and go away. Then if that fire were to set light to another man's field, and the owner were to seize him and accuse him before the king, and he were to say: "Your Majesty, I did not set this man's field on fire! The fire that I left burning was different to that which burnt his field." — still he would be responsible.'*

...So this is Nagasena's illustration of what is reborn. As you see, in a way it is not an explanation — it's an image — and I think that in a way this indicates the difficulty, or the problem, of trying to explain what is reborn. Actually it's not very easy to conceptualize, and the best way to talk is in terms of this image, and I think fire is a very good one. It's very difficult to see any heart or any essence to fire; it just kind of spreads, and one fire gives rise to another, but actually what passes? You know — if you have one candle and you light another candle, the first flame is still there, but it gives rise to the second flame. So, what passes?

Ok — so that's my non-answer to 'what is reborn?' But just to give something a bit more to chew on, we could say that what is reborn is a bundle of tendencies. When we die, another being will be born that perhaps in some way inherits some of the tendencies to action that we have; some of the leading qualities, or leading characteristics, will be inherited, but, again, they may change in the new life. So from a Buddhist point of view we are not born, as people sometimes say, as blank slates. We are reborn with tendencies to behave, think, live, in particular ways.

To conclude, I just want to say a couple of words about the *escape* from *karma*, because from a Buddhist point of view the aim of life is actually to escape from the process of *karma* and rebirth (*karma-vipaka*).

Buddhism talks about the world in terms of *samsara*. This is the world as we know it, and *samsara* is the faring on. So the Buddhist sees his life and his world in terms of a constant birth and rebirth, lifetime to lifetime. I think it is quite difficult for us to get our head around this, because we're generally very materialistically conditioned, and we just think, 'born, die, that's the end of it.' But many Eastern traditions think very strongly in terms of this constant round of rebirth, and it is seen as a painful and undesirable thing, because life is so uncertain — even if you act skilfully, still bad things may happen; still you may experience a lot of suffering or *dukkha*.

So from a Buddhist point of view the aim is to *escape* from this process of *karma* and *karma-vipaka* (rebirth)... and this is done through gaining spiritual insight, or what we call Enlightenment.

So, when they die, what happens to an Enlightened person? ...Well, nobody knows! Or rather, the Buddha refused to say. Perhaps he couldn't say. Who knows what he was thinking... but it seems that this is a question that we cannot answer.

Some traditions say that an Enlightened being may undertake future rebirth voluntarily, in order to help other beings, in order to help them gain spiritual release — and this brings about the notion of the Bodhisattva, or the Enlightened being, which maybe you have come across. The Bodhisattva deliberately undertakes rebirth, out of compassion, in order to help other beings to spiritually release themselves. This principle, by the way, is very much embodied in the idea of reincarnated spiritual lamas in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. So traditionally the Dalai Lama is thought to be an Enlightened being who, over lifetimes, takes rebirth in order to help beings.

I'll stop there, and I hope that I've given you some ideas about karma and about the notion of rebirth. I kind of feel that I've probably raised more questions than I've answered, but I think these things are a bit like that really. But at least I hope that what I have done is perhaps presented a slightly subtler model of karma and rebirth than maybe you have come across so far, or at least models that I've heard that are in popular currency.

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## **QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION**

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** [...inaudible...] ...how do you move from the animal realm up?

**NAGAPRIYA:** How do you move from the Animal realm up? Well, I think this whole business of the Six Realms is pretty difficult, actually, and I'm not sure how I take it. You see, traditionally speaking, the animals don't perform *karmas* — they are not self-conscious, so they don't act skilfully or unskilfully — so the question arises: 'if you are in the Animal realm, how do you get out of it?'

I don't really know what the answer to that is. There are different ways you could approach it. One thing you could say is that the Animal realm is purely a 'resultant' realm — so you move into the Animal realm because you have performed certain unskilful actions, and once you've exhausted those results, you'll go back to the Human realm. I'm not sure if that's true, but that's one way that you could talk. Another way that you could talk about it is to say that perhaps the best hope that an animal has got is contact with human beings. Through their contact with human beings, they may actually... you know... some sort of self-consciousness 'rubs off'. For example in the case of dogs — you know — dogs do quite well...

But I personally feel that this animal thing is a bit... I don't think it really fits together that well; that's my own view. But probably in traditional terms, I think the way that they would tend to see it is a realm like the animal realm is simply a realm where you go to 'burn up' the results of unskilful action, and then somehow when you've done that you move into another realm.

The thing is, I suppose you're dealing with a model of life and cosmology that doesn't, for example, take into account Darwinian evolution... so this is one of my big questions about *karma*: how does it fit with the notion of evolution? And I certainly don't have a short answer for you on that one, but I think it's an interesting question.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Could you clarify the difference between the Animals [realm] and the Pretas [realm]?

**NAGAPRIYA:** Well, I think the Animal realm is a fairly crude realm, but it's not all that painful, necessarily — it's just a realm of crude appetite: reproduction, eating food, expelling food, etc. The Preta realm — in this model — the Pretas, or some of them at least, are said to have really big stomachs and really tiny mouths, and everything they eat changes to excrement, and everything they drink changes to liquid fire. So there is this idea that they can never be satisfied; they've got this hunger, this need, this desire, but it can never be satisfied. And this is their suffering.

And I think maybe you can see analogues in the human realm, of Preta-like beings — you know — beings who, somehow, however much they crave, however much they stick in, they are never satisfied.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** That's a similar sort of thing, isn't it?

**NAGAPRIYA:** Well, doesn't that seem like a difference?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** No, it doesn't to me.

**NAGAPRIYA:** Well, one of them seems to me just a realm of crude consuming, and the other realm is also consuming but with a much more painful angle to it. I mean, basically the Pretas is a more painful, unpleasant realm, because an animal, when it eats, is generally satisfied — yeah? It just eats — it's ok... it reproduces — it's ok... but the Preta can never be satisfied. It has constantly got this craving there.

Perhaps, to think about the difference [between the Animal realm and the Pretas realm] — if you think about some human analogues — you could think about how you get some people who are just very 'into' their crude appetites: they like eating, they like... I don't know... all sorts of sports, maybe... they're just very physically oriented... and when they eat, they're satisfied. But you get other people who, whatever they do, they're just left with this sort of hunger, this thirst, this desire. However much they've got, it's never enough — they're never satisfied by it. So I think there is a difference there. ...Has that got somewhere?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Yeah.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Is it usually taken literally? Aren't some of those realms really states of mind that we exist in already, in the human state?

**NAGAPRIYA:** It is traditionally taken completely literally, yes. But whether we can take it literally ourselves — or whether we're willing to — is a different question. On the whole I probably *don't* myself take it literally, basically because it seems to raise too many conceptual problems for me. But traditionally it would be taken literally, yeah.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** So who is in the godly realms?

**NAGAPRIYA:** Who's in it? Lots of gods!... it's inhabited by people who have perhaps lived positive lives, but without perhaps necessarily any particular spiritual practice or aspiration. In more psychological terms it might be seen as... well... nice people, really! People who are perhaps just naturally quite ethical; naturally perhaps quite generous and friendly and kind, but they're not striving to fully overcome and transcend all their unskilful motivations.

There are actually some god realms where there *are* spiritual practitioners as well. According to Buddhism there are some particular realms where there are beings practising the Dharma, practising Buddhism, and moving on to gain Enlightenment. And this led to a later idea called the 'Pure Land' where these beings would be reborn and gain full Enlightenment.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** How important is it for a Buddhist to actually take everything literally? I mean... [...inaudible...] ...being a Buddhist, when it comes down to the business of picking and choosing, and, you know, go from there...?

**NAGAPRIYA:** Right — yeah — there are two questions there, I think: 'how much do you have to believe?' — I think that's one of the things. I would say that the thing that you *do* have to believe is that you can *change for the better*. If you don't believe that, then in a way the whole of Buddhism is a complete waste of time.

[The other thing is] whether you believe that when you die you will be reborn... I don't think it is essential to believe that, but I think it is important to try and take it quite seriously and not just dismiss it, because I think that we have a tendency to think that the world view we inherit is the correct world view, and if we come across another world view that conflicts with it, it must therefore be wrong. So we are generally brought up to believe that we are all the product of biology, and when our body dies, that will be the end of the story. And maybe that's true — I don't know. But maybe it's *not* true — you know — maybe after death there will be some form of continued existence. So from a personal point of view I try to keep an open mind to that — although I have to be quite honest: I'm realizing more and more how difficult it is for me to think in those terms, because of the world view that I've inherited.



But I would say that we *have* really got to believe that we can change, you know, and change for the better. Whether we believe in Enlightenment in the sense that one day we're going to be completely liberated from all ill-will, or all ignorance, again I don't think we necessarily need to believe that for the base of practice, but I think we *do* need to have some sort of confidence in some of the practices of Buddhism, like meditation and practicing ethical precepts. We have to believe that those are actually going to lead to positive changes.

I think you'll get a different answer from different people. You might get someone who would say you've got to believe ALL of these things, or you might get someone else who would say, 'well, I don't believe any of it.' I'm trying to take a sort of middle ground these days, and trying to take the tradition as seriously as possible without necessarily thinking that it's to be taken literally, or that every detail is correct.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** So it's a test of personal experience really?

**NAGAPRIYA:** Something of that, yes — but I mean obviously that is to some extent flawed, because the personal experience depends on one's own degree of spiritual maturity, and in the absence of one's own spiritual experience I guess I have to rely on my own spiritual teachers, and to quite a large extent on the tradition — you know — I do look at the tradition quite deeply and seriously.