NARRATING KARMA AND REBIRTH

Buddhist and Jain Multi-life Stories

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CHAPTER 5

Karma and community

As the Buddhist and Jain texts are keen to remind us, karma is ultimately an individual's responsibility. It is an individual's actions that bear karmic fruit which then affects that same individual. As some Buddhist sources put it, a person is heir to their karma, for they inherit karmic fruits from their earlier actions.[1] Despite this clear individualist position, there is inevitably a social aspect to karma. At a very minimum, almost every action involves others, such that the karma of a person who crashes their car must be in line with the karma of other individuals involved – the other road-users who are late to work as a result of the delay, say, or the mechanic who makes good money out of writing off the car and then reselling it. At a more complex level, groups are sometimes said to make karma (or karmic merit) together and experience its results together, individuals are shown as able to lessen the negative karmic load of friends or relations and groups of people are often bound together over multiple lives. These communal aspects of karma will be the subject of this chapter.

Anthropologists of both Buddhist and Jain communities have commented that villagers often explain the connection between their particular village or family and the visiting ethnographer in karmic terms. As an example in print, Jonathan Walters writes of being adopted by a Sri Lankan family who were convinced that he was their deceased son reborn.[2] The experiences of these scholars, together with many more observations concerning the multi-life composition of villages and communities, suggest that karma is understood as having a communal or social dimension, such that communities or families will be reformed in future lives and bonds between individuals are preserved past death. In other words, contemporary

[1] For example the Pāli *Nikāyas* contain the formula: *kammassakā sattā kammadāyādā kammayoni kammabandhū kammappaṭisaraṇā* – 'beings are owners of their karma, heirs to their karma, born of their karma, bound by (or related to) their karma, and have karma as their refuge'.

[2] Walters 2003: 9.

religious discourse suggests that social aspects of karma are considered natural.

The idea that karma is not purely an individual matter has, however, caused some unease among practitioners and scholars, because of the possibility that it compromises the doctrine of individual responsibility which is so core to Jain and Buddhist traditions. Jonathan Walters' influential article 'Communal Karma and Karmic Community in Theravāda Buddhist History' draws attention to the scholarly neglect of the topic within Buddhist studies and argues forcefully for the importance of addressing the communal nature of karma, which he dubs 'sociokarma'. He argues:

> It makes perfect sense that community should have a karmic dimension, given the social dimension of virtually all karma. The classic acts of both *puñña* (merit) and *pāpa* (sin) almost always are social affairs. *Dāna* (giving) is always a gift to someone else (or to a group of others), and like other acts of merit (*pūjā, poya, baṇa*, pilgrimage) is regularly performed in groups; it is almost *de rigueur* to dedicate the merit of such acts to other humans . . . to the dead, and/or to deities. Likewise, most demeritorious acts also occur in communal settings: various types of killing, theft, sexual impropriety, falsehood and intoxicated excess would be impossible for the isolated individual, who nevertheless usually remains the predicate of scholarship on karma. So too, karma as result (*vipāka, phala*) inevitably has social dimensions because the goodness or badness of a good or bad rebirth is largely conceived according to social categories such as family, status, wealth, caste, power and/or political situation. Even birth among the gods, animals, or hell-beings has its social dimension.[3]

From this simple and undeniable premise – that karma always has some communal dimension – Walters goes on to enumerate seven categories of sociokarma, moving upwards in terms of the 'degree to which society is explicitly karmic, and karma explicitly social'.[4]

Three of Walters' sociokarmic categories are particularly interesting in terms of their presence in Buddhist multi-life stories. His second type, overflow karma, is the idea that a particularly karmicly potent individual, such as a *buddha* or an emperor, can affect the karma of others around him, or that individuals can transfer merit or demerit to others. This category is particularly contentious in doctrinal terms, for it appears – especially in the case of merit transfer – to directly contravene the idea of personal karmic responsibility. Walters' fourth type, the co-transmigration of social units, is what he considers to be 'sociokarma proper'.[5] Here, groups such as families,

[3] Walters 2003: 10–11. [4] Walters 2003: 17. [5] Walters 2003: 21.

friends or larger communities are reborn together in similar social relationships in multiple lives. The paradigmatic example of this is of course the Buddha and his community, for *jātaka* tales show the Bodhisattva marrying the same wife and fathering the same son and discoursing with the same wise men to the same larger community in birth after birth. Directly related to this web of karmic interactions surrounding the Buddha, Walters' fifth type, sociokarmic aspiration, addresses the ways in which participation in the web can be begun by a potent vow. It is also important to other stories in the narrative corpus, for people are often shown aspiring to occupy a particular social status. Walters' other categories, which concern the understanding that every action has a social context, that people with similar karmic pasts may be reborn together, and that political and other institutional groups may make karma, are less prominent in the narrative materials, or can be subsumed under other headings.

Walters' analysis cannot be applied unchanged to the Jain context, in which even more emphasis is placed upon the individual than in Buddhist philosophy. The ideal practice of immobility asceticism, which is believed to halt the influx of new karma and burn off existing karma, could be seen as an action with no social dimension at all. However, even practitioners of this form of asceticism are sustained by small gifts of food and water (which are themselves a source of huge merit for the donor), and rely upon the teachings of the Jain community. Their own karmic present and future may be a matter for the individual, but they still affect the karma of others, and their own karmic past may well have involved multi-life social bonds. In lay Jain practice even merit transfer appears to be practised, despite the vociferous denial of its efficacy in the scriptures.[6] It is therefore of great interest to see to what extent this idea is present in the narratives. In addition, many stories show groups of people being bound together in birth after birth, sometimes by a positive bond such as conjugal affection, but more often by considerably less positive karmic histories.

With an eye to the narrative sources, and bearing Walters' typology in mind, there are two key issues that require consideration here: merit transfer, including the notion that karma overflows from key figures, and group karma or inter-personal karmic bondage. Firstly, to what extent can an individual's karmic fruit (good or bad) be transferred to another individual? Secondly, can groups be bound together over multiple lives, by acting communally or by some other process of bondage? By exploring what Buddhist and Jain multi-life stories have to say about the communal and

[6] See discussion in Cort 2003 and below.

inter-personal nature of karma, we will see to what extent the doctrinal positions of the two traditions are borne out by these examples of karmic progress.

Merit transfer

The ability of individuals to transfer some of their karmicly accrued merit to other individuals is a very contentious issue in both Buddhist and Jain traditions.[7] The very idea appears to contradict the central tenet of Buddhist and Jain karma theory, that each individual acts and reaps the fruit of the action, and therefore that each individual must take responsibility for his or her karmic future. In Buddhism, however, the idea of merit transfer took hold fairly early, as is evidenced by donative inscriptions that transfer the merit of the gift to the dead or to all beings.[8] In contemporary Buddhist societies merit transfer is common, and is often facilitated by monks, for example when gifts to monks are transferred into gifts for deceased relatives.[9] The practice is also accepted, albeit sometimes reluctantly, in a number of Buddhist doctrinal texts. Although Jain doctrinal discourses consistently, and fiercely, refute the idea of merit transfer, Cort has recently provided plentiful evidence, in the form of donative inscriptions, ethnographic work and mortuary rituals, for the presence of merit transfer in Jain practice.[10] To what extent, therefore, is merit transfer found in the narrative literature of the traditions?

In the Buddhist context merit transfer is most obvious in those stories that deal with *pretas*, the ghosts that live on the edges of the human and animal realm. Although the *pretas* are formally a separate rebirth state to humans, animals, heavens and hells, in some contexts they seem to function as a limbo state between death and rebirth elsewhere. As noted in Chapter 2, *pretas* are the only beings that rely entirely on the assistance of others to release them from their rebirth state. The release is made possible through the transfer of merit: former friends and relations of the *pretas* are asked to

[7] Although 'merit transfer' is a common term in Buddhist scholarship, hence my use of it, it is not without problem. In many discussions of what is dubbed merit transfer, what is actually happening is that somebody is making merit on somebody else's behalf. For example, a family member makes an offering to some monks in the name of their deceased relative, and the latter, reborn as a *preta*, receives the merit. The idea that merit is transferred from the actor to the beneficiary is therefore not quite correct. For a discussion see McDermott 1984: 38.

[8] For examples of this see Schopen 1997: 34–6.

[9] For an interesting discussion of merit transfer in contemporary Theravāda Buddhism, see Keyes 1992.

[10] Cort 2003.

make offerings to Buddhist monks on behalf of the *pretas*, and the *pretas* then receive the merit from these actions. The family unit is therefore shown to be significant even after the death of one member, and the ability to make merit on another's behalf is assured.[11] Stories of this process are found in such texts as the *Petavatthu* and the *Avadānaśataka*. The idea of the *preta* as dependent upon merit transfer probably developed from their association with Hindu *śrāddha* rituals, in which the deceased becomes a spirit that must be ritually fed before it can depart for the other world. Whatever their origin, stories of *pretas* clearly affirm the efficacy of – and the need for – merit transfer within Buddhism.

Outside the stories of the *pretas*, merit transfer is less common.[12] However, we do find the idea that particularly potent individuals or groups can affect the karma of people around them. This is the notion dubbed 'overflow karma' by McDermott and Walters.[13] One example of this is the karma of kings, which is often shown to be responsible for the experiences of more than just the king himself. For example, in the *Kurudhamma-jātaka* (*Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 276) the kingdom of Kāliṅga is afflicted by drought and famine. When the people begin to protest outside the palace, the king asks what he can do to make the rain come. His courtiers advise giving alms, but this does not work. Next they obtain a rain-bringing elephant from a neighbouring kingdom, but even then there is no rain. The king sends some brahmins to a king whose kingdom is always prosperous and happy, and asks them to find out his secret. They do so, and discover from this neighbouring king (who happens to be the Bodhisattva) that the whole ruling family and key senior officials observe the five precepts. When the King of Kāliṅga begins observing these precepts the rains come and the country prospers. Thus, it would seem, a king's virtue – or lack thereof – overflows from the individual and affects his whole kingdom.

This story highlights the slippery nature of the idea of overflow karma. The story clearly shows that the king's actions affect the happiness of his subjects. This idea, however, is hardly radical, since it is common sense to acknowledge that a good king will have happy subjects and a bad king unhappy ones. If we wish to impose a karmic explanation for this state of

[11] On the continuity of family ties in the *preta* realm, see Shirkey 2008: ch. 4.

[12] It appears that only *pretas* and gods are able to benefit from merit transfer. And although a few stories show gods as the recipients of merit (see, for example, the story of a gift on behalf of the god Vessavaṇa in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* – McDermott 1984: 40–1) the idea is more firmly associated with *pretas*. The *Milindapañha* asserts that only one sub-set of *pretas* – not gods or hell-beings or animals or other *pretas* – are able to benefit: Trenckner 1986: 294.

[13] McDermott 1976 and Walters 2003.

affairs, then perhaps the karma of the king is simply aligned with the karma of his subjects, such that those who have a positive karmic balance will be born in cities ruled by virtuous kings, and those who are due to suffer the results of bad karma will be reborn in drought-ridden kingdoms ruled by unvirtuous monarchs. Thus there is no real need to posit any transfer of merit or demerit from the king to any other individual. Yet the image of the king as source of merit for his whole kingdom is a potent one, and one which has inspired rulers to consider the wide implications of their actions.

As well as the king, another key figure who has the power to profoundly affect the experiences of others is the Buddha. Walters argues that the Buddha's overflow karma is paradigmatic of this type of communal karma, for because of his teaching and karmic interactions countless beings are moving towards the future attainment of *nirvāṇa* at the time of a future *buddha*.[14] Just as Gautama Buddha's community was the result of multi-life karmic interactions, so the communities of future *buddhas* are now in the process of being formed. These central figures, with the power to radically alter a person's destiny, might be seen as the sources of overflow karma. However, once again we have to ask to what extent is it karma that is overflowing? It is possible instead to analyse this in terms of the great presence of the Buddha or the penetrative force of his teachings prompting an individual to alter his or her own karmic situation. In this way there is no movement of karma *per se*, but the actions of one particularly powerful figure can inevitably affect the destinies of others without such a transfer. Skirting around the question of merit transfer or other forms of karmic exchange by speaking simply of teachers helping individuals to help themselves is a strategy also used by Jains, as we will see shortly.

Even in the Buddhist context, where merit transfer has been fairly widely accepted, there is evidence of an ambivalence towards the idea, and there is not much clarity as to how such processes as overflow karma might actually take place. Sometimes stories about the possibility of merit transfer are even used to cast doubts on the very practice they describe. For example McDermott has argued that the *Sādhīna-jātaka* (*Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 494) affirms the efficacy of merit transfer while disapproving of its use, by showing the Bodhisattva refusing the offer of some gods to provide him with sufficient merit to stay with them in heaven. By opting to return to earth and continue his own karmic progress, the Bodhisattva implies that it is better to take responsibility for one's own merit, rather than accepting handouts from others. As McDermott analyses the story, 'As an expedient

[14] Walters 2003: 19.

the possibility of merit transference is admitted; but then the *Jātaka* turns around and rejects the practice as of questionable morality."[15] However, this story is of course from the perspective of the potential recipient of the merit, and a recipient who is hardly in need of help from others. Thus the story does not necessarily discourage people from transferring merit to less fortunate, and less spiritually advanced, individuals than the Bodhisattva, but only discourages reliance on others when one really needs to take responsibility for oneself.

A similar ambivalence towards the idea that karma (or merit) is transferable from one individual to another is found in Jainism. Although the Jain narrative corpus that is the subject of this book provides little evidence of merit transfer affecting the rebirths or karmic situations of characters, other stories studied by Cort tell of individuals making merit through such activities as going on pilgrimage or building temples and then transferring that merit to other people.[16] One curious story examined by Cort simultaneously denies the possibility that another person's karma can affect you, and affirms the possibility of helping others through your merit. According to the story, King Prajapāl had two wives, one Śaiva and one Jain, and each wife had a daughter. When they were grown up, the king asked each of them what the cause of their good fortune was. The Śaiva daughter declared that her good fortune came from her father, and he, pleased at her answer, married her to a prince. The Jain daughter, who was called Mayaṇasundarī, said that her good fortune must be due to her own karma. Annoyed at this response, the king married her to a leper named Śrīpāl, who was in fact an exiled prince and leader of a colony of lepers. Mayaṇasundarī, convinced that her own karma was to blame, worshipped the *siddhacakra*, a ninefold *yantra* (magical diagram) of sacred elements of Jainism, and used the water that washed the *yantra* to cure her husband and all the other lepers.[17] Thus, having denied the possibility that her father's karma could have affected her fortune, she proceeded to use her own karma to help her husband. Like in the *Sādhīna-jātaka* we see here the two different perspectives on merit transfer: from the potential recipient's perspective it is much better to take responsibility for one's own actions, yet from the donor's perspective it is still an act of compassion to help others.

Mayaṇasundarī's assistance of her husband was not explicitly merit transfer, but rather the sharing of the benefits of her ritual through the

[15] McDermott 1974: 387. [16] Cort 2003: 141–2.

[17] My summary is based upon that in Cort 2003: 141. According to Cort, the oldest extant version perhaps dates to the fourteenth century, and the story has enjoyed great popularity since that time.

potency of the water. This is one of the ways in which karma mobility is considered possible in Jainism, and is one example of how to sidestep the impossibility of direct merit transfer. Kelting has observed that pious Jain wives have four strategies for ensuring that their own religious practices affect their husband's well-being, none of which denies their inability to transfer merit. The first strategy is simply cajoling men to join in with rituals, perhaps even just by showing up at the end and joining in the closing actions. Even approving of and funding the rituals will earn the husband a small amount of merit, but participation is much more fruitful. Secondly, the women self-consciously serve as role models for the husbands, encouraging religious observances and Jain values in them as well, educating their children appropriately and ensuring that the dietary rules are observed by the whole household. The third option is the worshipping of guardian deities, who can confer benefits upon the husband as well as the person performing the rites. Fourthly, wives obtain objects with religomagical protective properties, such as amulets or the water that has been used to bathe a sacred image, and use these to protect the husband and indeed the whole family. Such actions are encouraged by the narrative literature concerned with the ideal of the *satī* or pious wife.[18]

One example, that of the Rohiṇī fast, will serve to demonstrate how these strategies work in practice, and how the narrative literature reinforces the ideals. The Rohiṇī fast is only for women, and requires one day of fasting per month, with a clear and unemotional mind, for seven years and seven months. As Kelting points out, the fast covers several of the options just outlined for benefitting the husband as well as the woman fasting:

> First, the faster's husband should join his wife for the closing pūjā, make a substantial donation to the temple, and throw a feast for the whole congregation at the completion of the fast. Second, for the duration of the fast, the husband and the rest of the family are made aware of the piety of his wife each month for a little over seven and a half years. Third, performing this fast is believed to garner the attention of the guardian goddess, who will protect a woman and her happiness.[19]

In addition, the Rohiṇī fast and its associated narrative present one further way in which the woman's happy marriage may be preserved. In the story, Rohiṇī is happily married to a king and has a son and plenty of wealth. She sees a woman crying over her dead son and asks her husband what is going on. She cannot seem to appreciate what sorrow is, even after her increasingly

[18] Kelting 2009: 41–7. [19] Kelting 2009: 49.

frustrated husband throws their son over the ramparts. The child is caught by a goddess, Rohiṇī remains unmoved, and so her husband asks some monks for an explanation. They explain that in her previous life Rohiṇī performed the Rohiṇī fast, and that this made it impossible for her to feel sorrow. Thus, the women performing the fast can look forward to a lifetime of equanimity, or perhaps rather a lifetime without suffering or misfortune. The fast prevents anything bad from happening to the woman who undertakes it, and this of course 'would include anything that would damage her cherished status as an auspicious wife'.[20] These Jain wives have therefore found multiple ways in which to affect another's karmic situation without recourse to the idea, so prominent in Hindu discourses on the auspicious wife, that she can transfer her own merit directly to her husband.

One other form of what might be considered a benign way of affecting another's karma is unquestioningly promoted in the narratives of both traditions. That is the use of one's own superior knowledge or understanding to help another person appreciate the truth of their situation and the need to pursue religious practices. Sometimes this happens in the context of a single life, such as when a monk or nun returns to their former family to teach them. In other cases the superior knowledge comes about with divine rebirth, such as in the many Buddhist instances of gods returning to advise their former friends or families. Thus, for example, in the *Mahāvagga* of the Theravāda *Vinaya* we hear that a deva who was previously a blood relative of Tapussa and Bhallika advised them of the newly awakened Buddha's whereabouts and of the exigency of paying him honour; as a result they became the first lay followers of the Buddha.[21] Similarly, the *Mahāvastu* mentions that Ghaṭikāra the potter, who had been friend to the Bodhisattva in the time of the Buddha Kāśyapa, was among the *devas* who planted the four sights that prompted the Bodhisattva to begin his final quest for Awakening.[22] Xuanzang records in his travelogue that the great fourth-century Buddhist philosophers Vasubandhu and Asaṅga, along with the latter's disciple Buddhasiṃha, made an agreement that whoever died first and met the future Buddha Maitreya in his heavenly residence should return and tell the others about the experience. Buddhasiṃha died first but never returned. Next Vasubandhu died, and returned to Asaṅga to describe his experiences.[23] Many other examples of gods helping their former friends and relations could be quoted, and none cause any alarm for defenders of the idea that one's karma is one's own, since teaching and

[20] Kelting 2009: 50. [21] *Mahāvagga* I, 4; Oldenberg 1879–83, vol. 1: 4.
[22] Jones 1949–56, vol. 2: 146–52. [23] Li 1996: 153–4.

assistance of this kind is merely assistance offered in order to help the individual change his or her own situation.

There are many examples of former friends or relatives returning to offer assistance in Jain narratives too. One example is the story of Tetaliputra in the *Jñātādharmakathāḥ*. In this story there is a minister named Tetaliputra, who brings up a prince in secret so the child can avoid being mutilated by the jealous king. He allows his wife to become a nun on condition that she returns to teach him later on. She practises austerities and after death she is reborn as a god. Meanwhile her former husband has reached a senior and respected position under the rule of the new king, now a grown man. The god tries repeatedly to teach Tetaliputra, but to no avail as he is too busy being important. The god therefore arranges it so that the next day nobody pays Tetaliputra any attention whatsoever. Greatly distressed, Tetaliputra decides to kill himself, and takes poison, but it has no effect. He tries to cut himself with a sword but it becomes blunt. He tries to hang himself but the noose breaks. A lake becomes too shallow to drown him, and a fire goes out instead of burning him. The god takes on the form of his former wife and teaches him about his only refuge: the Jain religion. He is prompted to remember his past births, and recalls that formerly he had been an ascetic and had earned a heavenly rebirth before becoming Tetaliputra. He decides to renounce once again, and attains *mokṣa*. His former wife thus dramatically affects his karmic situation, but it is through the simple and compassionate act of teaching, not some mysterious process of karmic transfer.

Interpersonal karmic bonds

While some stories explore the possibility that individuals might affect the karmic burden of other individuals, other stories address another social or communal aspect of karma, namely the binding together of groups over multiple lifetimes. Acts of communal merit seem to have some special force that allows groups of people – couples, families, friends, or even whole kingdoms – to be reborn together in a future life to experience the fruit of their communal actions. Simply put, those who make merit together are reborn together, and indeed, some stories suggest that those who make demerit together are also reborn together. Groups are not only bound together by their common actions, however, but also by other karmic interactions which form repeated patterns across multiple lifetimes. This type of karmic bondage can be positive, such as the repeated remarriage of two individuals, whose love for one another continues in life after life. It can also, however, be negative, such as when two adversaries continue their