Can sense be made of the Buddhist theory of karma?

Richard P. Hayes

Autumn 1989*

As a popular teaching, the Buddhist doctrine of karmic fruition (karma-vipāka) is relatively easy to understand and poses few problems. In the popular Buddhist view, the law of karma is a principle of nature, according to which a person who acts in a certain way must later experience consequences that are pleasant or unpleasant, depending upon the nature of the action itself. Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, a modern Tibetan author, thus explains the law of karma as a special case of the general law of cause and effect. "Karmic seeds" he writes, "inevitably ripen in accordance with their cause, i.e., virtue leads to joy, and non-virtue to sorrow."[1] Another modern Tibetan author, Geshe Rabten, states the matter even more forcefully: "Just as a seed cannot grow into a plant of a different type, so our actions can only produce actions of their own type. An unvirtuous action can only give rise to suffering, and a positive action can only give rise to happiness. This order can never be mixed up."[2]

According to the accounts of karmic fruition given by these Buddhists, no emotional state arises by chance or fate or luck; rather, every mood that a living being may have is the natural fruition of actions performed in the past. There is, therefore, no injustice in a universe that has as an essential part of its structure a natural moral dimension. This moral dimension is in the Buddhist view as much an invariable part of the natural universe as are such physical dimensions as the law of gravity and the laws of thermodynamics.

The popular version of the law of karma as presented above by various modern Buddhist writers is evidently well suited as a metaphysical foundation for the traditionally eudaemonic ethical guidelines of Buddhism. This doctrine gives the appearance, on the surface at least, of being well grounded in ordinary experience. Wrongdoing does, in the experience of most people, give rise to such unpleasant mental states as remorse and feelings of guilt, and these unpleasant mental states do seem to be as much a natural consequence

*Read at the Department of Philosophy, Brock University.

[1]Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, *Tibetan Tradition of Mental Development: Oral Teachings of a Tibetan Lama.* (Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, 1974) p. 71.

[2]Geshe Rabten, *The Essential Nectar: Meditations on the Buddhist Path.* Editing and verse translation by Martin Willson. (London: Wisdom Publications, 1984), p. 114.

of wrongdoing as becoming overweight seems to be a natural consequence of eating the wrong kinds of food. But how does the law of karma fare under the constraints of the more precise and rigorous presentations of Buddhist theory known as abhidharma?

The dialogues of the Buddha were generally delivered to ordinary people in ordinary language, and so they adhered to the relatively loose linguistic and conceptual conventions of society at large. The purpose of abhidharma is supposed to be to convey the teachings of the Buddha in a more exact and systematic way that is, ideally at least, as free as possible of figurative expressions and other kinds of conceptual shortcuts. The purpose of this essay is to examine the discussion of karma as found in the Abhidharmakośa of the fourth century C.E. Indian abhidharma specialist Vasubandhu.

Ideally any abhidharmic account of experience should refer only to things that are ultimately real, as opposed to things that are established only in virtue of the agreement of society. The principal criterion of being ultimately real, as opposed to being a convenient social fiction, is stated by Vasubandhu to be simplicity or irreducibility. That which cannot be broken down, either physically or conceptually, into more primitive constituents is said to be ultimately or substantially real. But that which can be physically broken or analysed into more simple concepts is said to be only conventionally real.

A piece of pottery, for example, can be broken into shards, and those shards can in turn be broken down further, in principle at least, until one finally arrives at individual atoms that are not further divisible. The pottery is therefore considered real only in virtue of a social convention that arises because the pottery serves the practical needs of the community that puts it to some specific use. To state the matter another way, a pot is a pot only insofar as it is perceived as serving the needs of people who make use of it as a vessel for storage, cooking, carrying and so forth. Once these needs no longer exist, or once the item called a pot no longer serves those needs, the word "pot" either falls into disuse altogether or ceases to be applicable to that item. A configuration of atoms that serves no specific function to society has no specific name and therefore does not have any conventional existence as a separate object. Such a configuration of atoms simply remains an indistinct part of the perceptual background. The individual atoms, on the other hand, exist independently of any social conventions. Moreover, they are the ultimate building blocks from which all other physical objects are made. And so the atoms, unlike the objects that are composed of them, are, according to Vasubandhu's criterion, ultimately real.

Applying Vasubandhu's criterion of what is ultimately real to the realm of human behaviour leads to the abhidharmic analysis of the complex, known conventionally as a person, into constituent parts that are themselves not susceptible to further analysis. What is conventionally called a person is analysed by abhidharma first into two broad sets of components, namely, the physical body and the collection of mental properties.

The mental aspect of the person is analysed into four categories: 1) the capacity to sense physical pleasure and pain; 2) the capacity to recognize

patterns; 3) the six types of sensory awareness corresponding to the the five external sense faculties and the intellect; and 4) a large number of habits and abilities that collectively define personality or character. A great deal of abhidharmic literature is devoted to giving precise definitions of these constituent parts and giving a coherent account of how they interact.

When one looks at the doctrine of karma from an abhidharmic perspective, a number of questions naturally arise. According to the popular version of the doctrine, for example, whatever action a person performs has a consequence that that same person will eventually experience. But according to abhidharma the person is not an ultimate reality. So the first challenge facing the abhidharma analyst is to describe exactly what it is that acts. This amounts to specifying which of the various ultimately real components that make up a person is the agent of a deed. The next challenge is to describe exactly what it is that experiences the consequences of the original action. This amounts to specifying which of the various ultimately real components that make up a person is the experiencer of the consequences of the deed. A third challenge is to give some account of the sense in which the agent of the original deed is the same as the eventual experiencer of the consequences. And a fourth challenge is to explain how and where the potential consequences of an action are "stored" until such time as they are realized as consequences that are capable of being experienced.

To illustrate some of the above mentioned challenges facing the abhidharma analyst, let us take an example that is often given in Buddhist literature of how karma might ripen. It is said that a person who commits murder is liable to be reborn as a predatory animal, such as a jackal. What the abhidharma analyst must be able to explain is where this "seed" that has been sown when a human being with a human mind kills a living being is stored until it naturally ripens into the consequence of a jackal's body being born with a jackal's mind. Is it to be supposed that the atoms that once made up the human being's body somehow bear the imprint of this murderous misconduct in such a way that they reformulate later into a jackal's body? And if so, how? Or is it to be supposed that the karmic imprint is borne by one of the mental properties that makes up the human being's character in such a way that the human being's character is eventually transformed into a jackal's character? If so, then which of the ultimately real mental properties is so imprinted? And how does the imprinting govern the loss of attendant mental properties suitable to a human being and the subsequent acquisition of mental properties suitable to a jackal? Bearing these questions in mind, let us turn now to Vasubandhu's abhidharmic analysis of the theory of karma.

The fruition of karma, as was said above, is a special case of the general law of cause and effect. So before we can come to terms with the special laws of karmic causality it will be necessary to review three general principles of causality discussed by Vasubandhu.

1. The first principle of causality is this: no composite thing whatsoever

arises from a single cause.[3]

2. Closely related to the first principle is the second principle: whatever is composite is innately unstable and liable to change. That is, every composite property has an innate potential to decompose.

3. From the second principle Vasubandhu derives a third principle, namely, that of radical momentariness. This principle states that whatever is composite must decompose in the very moment that it arises.

The third principle is not one that can be derived from empirical observation. Rather, it that can be derived only by reflecting upon what it means to say of a thing that it has an innate potential to do something.[4]

When we say that a thing has an innate potential to act in a certain way, we are saying that nothing outside that thing is necessary to prompt it into acting in that specified way. If we say, for example, that fire has an innate capacity to give off heat, we are saying that fire in and of itself gives off heat quite independently of any other factors. So when we say that a composite thing has an innate potential to decompose, we are saying that no further factor is necessary to prompt it into decomposition. Rather, composite things decompose entirely on their own.

If we now pursue this notion of innate potential to its logical conclusion, claims Vasubandhu, we arrive at the conclusion that whatever has an innate potential to act in a certain way must act in that way in each moment of its existence. Fire, for example, if it has an innate potential to give off heat must give off heat in each moment that it exists as fire. For if it were not the case that fire realized this potential in each moment of existence, we should have to find some explanation for why it realized its potential in some moments of its existence and not in others. If it were the case that fire sometimes gave off heat and at other times did not, this variation in its behaviour would have to be due to some factor outside the fire that was acting upon the fire to enable it to give off heat in some moments but not in other moments. But if this were the case, then the potential to give off heat would be accidental to fire and not innate. Applying this line of reasoning to a composite property, it can be seen that if a composite property has an innate potential to decompose, then it must decompose in every moment of its existence. But when a composite thing decomposes, it ceases to exist as a composite thing. Therefore, a composite thing must cease to exist in every moment that it exists. In other words, a composite thing exists for only one moment.

Vasubandhu's conclusion that no composite thing exists for more than a single moment is evidently in harmony with the general Buddhist tenet that there is no enduring identity for any composite thing. A special case of this principle is that a person has no identity, or to state the matter in another

[3]Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya ad 1:7.

[4]Vasubandhu's arguments that lead to the conclusion of radical momentariness are found in Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya ad 4:2–3. Actually, none of these principles is empirically derived. All are deduced.

way, that any belief in an enduring self is a delusion. But this conclusion also raises a number of difficult problems for the doctrine of karma. For example, if an action perishes in the very moment that it is performed, how can it have any consequences in the future? And even if this problem can be solved, the question still remains how can it be said that the composite "person" who performed the action in the first place and also decomposed immediately is the same "person" who experiences the consequences of that action at some future moment?

The problem of how an action that perishes in the very moment that it is performed can have any effects in the future is a special case of the general problem of how any composite property can have an effect in any moment after its single moment of existence. According to Vasubandhu, all composite properties have an innate potential to decompose, but some composite properties also have an innate potential to cause another property to arise in the immediately subsequent moment either in exactly the same place or in an immediately adjacent place. There are, to be sure, various constraints on what kinds of properties can give rise to what kinds of immediate successors. These constraints are outlined in Vasubandhu's discussion of the various types of cause, a complex topic that for reasons of time cannot be discussed in the present paper.[5]

The system of abhidharma that Vasubandhu endorses recognizes six basic types of cause, two of which are relevant to the topic of karma. The first of these is a type of cause called a similar cause (sabhāga-hetu), because it gives rise to an effect that is similar to it with respect to its being profitable, unprofitable or indeterminate. That is, a profitable property always engenders a profitable successor, and so on.[6] A profitable cause is defined as one that gives rise to a desired result and therefore makes one content for a period of time. An unprofitable cause is one that leads to some result other than what one desired and therefore causes temporary discontent. The only kinds of properties that are capable of being profitable or unprofitable are premeditated bodily and verbal actions, thoughts, and acts of awareness that accompany those thoughts. All other properties are said to be undefined (avyākṛta) with respect to being profitable.[7]

The second type of cause that is relevant to this discussion is called the cause of fruition (vipāka-hetu). It is regarded as the cause that gives rise to the final result of a causal sequence initiated by an action or karma in the past. This final fruition is the experience of happiness or frustration that naturally results from a profitable or an unprofitable action. Being a final result, it does not give rise to any further profitable or unprofitable properties, but it is invariably caused by an antecedent profitable or unprofitable action. One further point concerning this fruition is that only certain kinds of actions have a fruition at all. Unprofitable actions are said always to have a correspond-

[5] Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya 2:49–57.
[6] Abhidharmakośa 2:52.
[7] Abhidharmakośa 4:46.

ing fruition. But only some kinds of profitable actions have karmic consequences. According to Buddhist tradition, a person who has eradicated sensual desire, has no longing for continued existence, is free of erroneous views and has no trace of opinions never again produces karma. In other words, a person who has fully developed wisdom (prajñā) may continue to perform actions, but these actions are not forms of karma. Since a wise person's actions are not karma, she or he never has to be reborn in order to experience the consequences of actions performed in this life.[8]

Not all kinds of profitable action produce karmic fruition, for it is only karma that is accompanied by a false belief in an enduring self that produces consequences. Some people lack wisdom and therefore, motivated by a desire to experience pleasure in the future, act out of desire for personal rewards.[9] The profitable action that such people perform is called meritorious action. All meritorious action is profitable, and therefore eventually results in temporary happiness, but not all profitable action is meritorious. People who practice meditation and cultivate wisdom, for example, perform profitable actions, but they do not generate merit, for merit is the exclusive possession of those whose lack wisdom prompts them to seek personal rewards for their good deeds.

Given this outline of the types of cause recognized in Vasubandhu's system of abhidharma, we can begin to see how the abhidharma analyst accounts for how an action that immediately perishes still manages to give rise at some time in the future to an effect in the form of an experience of contentment or frustration. The initial profitable or unprofitable action immediately gives rise to an effect of the same type, and this in turn gives rise to another effect of the same type, and so on for a series of contiguous moments until finally an experience of pleasure or pain arises. But the question still remains, what is it that keeps this causal chain of contiguous moments associated with the same "person"?

It is in his treatment of this question that Vasubandhu distinguishes himself from some abhidharma theorists who preceded him. In the area of the theory of karma, Vasubandhu departs from some other Buddhist philosophers on two important issues. The first of these issues concerns what it is that binds many causal sequences together into one complex known as a person. The second issue concerns how and where a karmic potential is "stored" until its consequence is experienced at some time in the future. In the paragraphs that follow we shall first examine the alternative views on these issues, and then we shall examine Vasubandhu's criticism of these views, followed finally by a presentation of his own theory of karma.

According to some abhidharma theorists, among the many properties that make up one personality, there is a property that has the peculiar function of collecting other properties together into an integrated complex known as a continuum of consciousness. This continuum of consciousness corresponds

[8]Abhidharmakośa 2:57.

[9]Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya ad 3:28.

to what is known in ordinary conversation as an individual person. This continuum is said to be held together by a special conditioning characteristic known as acquisition, which worked in conjunction with a second conditioning characteristic known as non-acquisition or prevention. Acquisition serves to help a continuum acquire new properties and hold on to them in such a way that the continuum can be recognized over the course of time as the "same" person.[10]

In addition to acquisition and non-acquisition, the two special conditioning characteristics of the personality, some Buddhists recognized a special form of matter belonging to the group of material properties. Unlike all other forms of matter, this special form was invisible and intangible and therefore imperceptible. This unmanifested or non-phenomenal matter also played a key role in the theory of karma. According to this theory, when a person performs a bodily action or a vocal action, the action itself is sensible as a visible or audible property. Because an action can be sensed by the eye or the ear, it follows that the action belongs to the group of material properties. This primary action, like all complex properties, immediately and spontaneously perishes. Therefore, a moment after it has been performed an action is no longer sensible. Moreover, some time may elapse between the time when the sensible action was performed and the time when its consequences become manifest, and during this interval between sensible action and sensible fruition, neither the action itself nor its eventual sensible consequences are perceived. Therefore, the argument goes, there must exist a continuum of imperceptible causes and effects that link the original sensible action with its eventual sensible consequences. Thus, according to this theory, a sensible material action causes a non-phenomenal material property to arise in the immediately following moment, which in turn causes another non-phenomenal material property to arise in the moment immediately following that, and so on until one of these non-phenomenal material properties causes a phenomenal material property to arise, which can legitimately be regarded as the natural ultimate fruition of the original action.

Obviously, since non-phenomenal matter is by definition beyond the range of the senses, it can never be directly experienced but must be established by reason. Those who believed in non-phenomenal matter designed four separate arguments to prove that non-phenomenal matter must exist.[11] I shall outline two of those four arguments.

One argument for non-phenomenal matter is that the Buddha declared that the merit of a generous person constantly grows. But there is, according to this view, no way to account for this constant increase of merit in a person who is sleeping or who begins thinking of something other than meritorious action, unless one accepts that there is a non-phenomenal causal sequence at work "behind the scenes" while the person sleeps or engages in some activity other than that of deliberately increasing his or her merit.

[10] Abhidharmakośa 2:35–36.

[11] These arguments appear in Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya ad 4:4.

A second argument that was put forward is that a person may have his or her intentions carried out by a second party. A son may, for example, wish the death of his own mother. But, not wanting to perform a matricide by his own hand, he may command a servant or hire an assassin to perform the deed. In this case, neither the assassin nor the person who hired the assassin would actually be killing his own mother and so apparently neither would incur the especially grave consequences of matricide. But surely, argue the proponents of non-phenomenal matter, the law of karma cannot have such an egregious "loophole" that would allow a person to avoid serious consequences by merely having someone else actually perform a harmful act. Therefore, they say, the assassin's action of killing the mother must cause some non-phenomenal effect to arise in the continuum of the son who hired the assassin, whereby the son eventually experiences the consequences of matricide as if he had performed the murder by himself.

Vasubandhu rejects both the theory of non-phenomenal matter and the theory of two special properties of the personality called acquisition and non-acquisition. Let us consider first his replies to the arguments advanced in favour of accepting non-phenomenal matter.

The first argument was that non-phenomenal matter is necessary to account for the growth of merit in a generous person. Vasubandhu argues that the increase of merit can be accounted for in other ways than by appealing to special subtle matter. One can say, for example, that it is simply the special virtues of the recipient of a gift that multiplies the good effects of that gift in the person who gave it. A monk who accepts alms, for example, uses the nourishment from his food in especially productive ways, using his energy for such things as cultivating universal love and kindness. It is because the monk cultivates love towards all beings that the food given to him has the ultimate effect of producing much good in the world, and therefore whoever offered the gift of food is indirectly responsible for doing great good to the world at large. Since the monk continues to cultivate love even when the donor of his alms has gone to sleep or has otherwise forgotten all about giving the alms, the benefits of the alms-giving grows no matter what the donor may be doing. There is no need to posit the existence of a special property in the donor to account for the increase in his merit, since the increase in merit can be explained fully by the special virtues of the recipient.

The second argument adduced in favour of the existence of non-phenomenal matter was that it is necessary to account for karmic consequences being experienced by a person who has another act on his behalf. Vasubandhu replies to this argument by saying that all that is necessary to account for a son's ill consequences from the murder of his mother is the son's wish to see his mother killed. It is surely just this wish for the death of his own mother that serves to transform the son for the worse. It is the wish to see one's mother die, and not the actual carrying out of that wish by oneself or by another, that sets the karmic chain in motion. And this karmic sequence can be explained, as we shall see below, without having recourse to the theory of non-phenomenal matter. And since a more simple explanation can be found, there is no point

in adopting the unnecessarily complicated theory that when an action is actually performed by a person instigated to do it, the continuum of the instigator of the action acquires an invisible property that it did not have until the instigated action was successfully carried out.

In dismissing the theory of non-phenomenal matter, Vasubandhu refers to what he calls a transformation in the personal continuum of one who deliberately undertakes a certain kind of action. It is to this concept of a transformation in the continuum that Vasubandhu also appeals in his rejection of the doctrine that there are special conditioning characteristics known as acquisition and non-acquisition. If the idea of a person is to be regarded as no more than a popular convention that is superimposed upon the reality of constantly perishing complex properties, argues Vasubandhu, then the properties of acquisition and non-acquisition must also be purely conventional ideas rather than ultimately real properties. In fact, the idea of these properties is arguably as much derived from the idea of a stable person as the idea of a stable person is derived from the idea of these properties. For if we did not have the idea of a stable personality in the first place, there would be no need to explain how a given type of "person" consistently acquires the same kinds of mental properties.

Those who accepted the existence of a special property known as acquisition argued that this special property served to ensure that a person who had abandoned the belief in a real self would acquire those emotional states that are appropriate to a wise person. Meanwhile, they said, the special property of non-acquisition would ensure that the noble person would not acquire emotional states suitable to a foolish person. The view of Vasubandhu, on the other hand, is that once a person has abandoned the belief in a real self, his or her causal continuum simply becomes devoid of the causes of further unhappiness. If a lamp runs out of fuel, it is not necessary to say that the running out of fuel then produces a special property in the lamp that keeps a flame from burning in it; rather, all that is necessary is to say that a lamp without fuel no longer contains the conditions necessary for flame to burn in it. Flamelessness is not a property in itself that arises because of a special condition that prevents flame, but rather it is simply that flame no longer occurs owing to the absence of fuel. Similarly, when someone becomes free of false beliefs, it is not necessary to say that the absence of false beliefs then produces a special property in the person that keeps certain kinds of unhappiness away. Rather, it is enough to say simply that wrongful motivations no longer arise owing to the absence of false beliefs.

The depletion of the causes of certain kinds of effects in a thing can be called a transformation of that thing. The idea of a person is a conventional designation that is superimposed upon the reality of groups of properties. When those properties no longer include foolishness, then we can say conventionally that the person has undergone a transformation of character. But in saying such a thing there is no need, in the final analysis, to speak of more

than the properties themselves and the causal relations among them.[12]

Let us now recapitulate Vasubandhu's account of karma in the light of the four challenges that were outlined towards the beginning of this essay. The first challenge facing the abhidharma analyst is to describe exactly what it is that acts if there is no stable and enduring person. According to Vasubandhu, the primary action is always an intention to do something, which is an action of the mind. An intention to act that is not associated with wisdom is bound to be associated with the belief in a continuing self. Such an unwise intention is bound to be accompanied by such conditioning characteristics as selfish desire or anger, and it becomes either an unprofitable intention, in case it is accompanied by a desire to bring harm to another, or a profitable intention, in case it is accompanied by a desire to bring benefit to another. Therefore, an unwise intention becomes profitable or unprofitable owing to its association with profitable or unprofitable conditioning characteristics.

A wise intention to act gives rise to an actual bodily or vocal action. That is, one either does something or says something. The physical or vocal action that follows it can be motivated only by a wish to bring benefit to others, for wisdom can never be accompanied by a desire to do harm. Moreover, an act that is motivated by wisdom can never be accompanied by a desire for continued existence, for wisdom is the very realization that nothing endures. In the absence of a desire for continued existence, the root cause for continued existence does not exist, and therefore an act that stems from a wise motivation does not have the consequence of continued existence. In other words, a bodily or vocal action that is performed as a result of a wise intention is not a karma and therefore does not lead to karmic fruition (karma-vipāka) in the future. The causal sequence set into motion with a wise intention to act ends when the intention is carried out. Once the intention is carried out, it is completely exhausted and does not give rise to further intentions.

An unwise intention, on the other hand, is an intention that is accompanied by a belief in and desire for the continued existence of the agent. This desire acts as the cause of future properties to arise in the causal continuum. When this unwise intention gives rise to a bodily or verbal action, it gives rise not only to the action itself but also to its own successors, that is, to further unwise intentions. Moreover, the bodily or vocal action performed as a result of the unwise intention brings about a subtle physical change in the physical organ that serves as the seat of thought.

We have then, according to Vasubandhu, two causal chains set in motion by an unwise intention. The first is the formation of a habit, that is, a tendency to want to repeat the intention. This habit transforms the group of conditioning characteristics (saṃskāra-skandha). And the second is a physical change in the heart. When the heart, the seat of thought, is transformed by an action of the body or the speech, it becomes inclined by this change to act as a support of the same kinds of intentions it has had in the past. Thus when one acts in anger, for example, the heart becomes just a little more physically

[12] Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya ad 2:36.

hardened, and this hardening of the heart makes it more difficult for both kind thoughts and contentment to occur in it in the future. But when one acts out of kindness, the heart becomes a little more physically pliant, and this pliancy makes it more easy for both kind thoughts and contentment to occur in it in the future. According to Vasubandhu, this physical change in the heart takes two forms. One is an immediate change, which determines the kinds of experiences that are likely to arise in the heart for the remainder of the current life. The other is called a projection. It is this projection that determines the form of life that the heart will enter into in future births. About this more will be said later.

The second challenge facing the abhidharma analyst is to describe what it is that experiences the consequences of the original karma. Vasubandhu's answer to this is that it is the mind, which has the form of an awareness of either mental contentment or discontent, which are respectively the natural consequences of intending to help and to harm others. The physical seat of the mind is the heart, which as was described above has undergone physical changes in accordance with the accumulation of past profitable and unprofitable intentions.

The third challenge to the abhidharma analyst is to give an account of the sense in which the agent of the original deed is the same as the eventual experiencer of the consequences of the deed. According to Vasubandhu, the heart, like all other complex things, is a causal continuum of momentary properties, and the properties that it has at any given moment is the cumulative effect of previous karma. So it is just the fact that the heart is a causal continuum, an unbroken chain of momentary causes giving rise immediately to subsequent effects, that makes it in a sense the same heart when it serves as the seat of resultant contentment or discontent as it was when it served as the seat of the original profitable or unprofitable intentions.

As to the fourth challenge, which is to explain how and where the potential consequences of an action are stored until they reach fruition, Vasubandhu's answer is that karma is not really stored anywhere at all. Rather than karma being somehow stored up for future fruition, it is more a matter, as we have seen above, of the physical heart being altered in such a way that it becomes capable of being the seat of only certain kinds of experiences. A "hardened" heart, as we have seen, is much less likely to be able to be the seat of contentment than a pliant heart, and so one who has had ill intentions in the past is much less likely to be happy than one who has had benevolent intentions. It is really only in this sense that karma appears to be stored until such time as it comes to fruition.

One rather difficult problem still remains to be dealt with in Vasubandhu's account of karma. In his system of abhidharma it is the physical body that plays the leading role in determining the kinds of experiences that one has. The physical body is the seat of awareness, both in the sense that no awareness occurs without the five external physical sense faculties and in the sense that neither thought nor awareness nor mental properties can occur without their physical seat in the heart. This poses no great problem so long as one is

considering karma and its fruition within a single lifetime, where the continuum of the physical body is more obvious. But it is somewhat difficult to see how Vasubandhu might account for the commonly accepted Buddhist notion of rebirth. Since awareness cannot occur without a physical seat according to Vasubandhu, it is impossible for him to accept the theory that consciousness leaves one physical body at death and travels in a disembodied state until it enters the womb of its mother in the next life. Rather, he is committed to the view that the heart, which like all other physical things is composed of atoms, becomes dissociated from one large material body and "travels" until it finds a suitable womb.

At the moment when an egg is fertilized in a womb, the heart from a previous life-continuum joins with the newly fertilized egg to form a new life, and as the new foetus evolves it gradually acquires the kinds of external sense organs and other physical characteristics appropriate for the species of life-form that the mother is capable of producing in her womb. Thus a heart that once belonged to a human being might find itself in the womb of a jackal, where it becomes associated with the kinds of sense organs and bodily traits that only jackals have.

The type of egg or womb that a heart enters into is, according to Vasubandhu, determined by the quality of a special kind of karma, which is called projection, produced in previous lives. Acts accompanied by great stupidity or delusion, for example, are said to project the heart into the wombs of dumb birds or animals in future lives. Acts accompanied by strong greed or desire are said to project the heart into the wombs of hungry ghosts. And especially malicious acts are said to project the heart into the wombs of beings born in one of the many hells or purgatories. Acts accompanied by more benevolent motivations, on the other hand, project the heart into human mothers or into mothers residing in one of the paradises.

From all that has been described so far it can be seen that Vasubandhu provides answers from an abhidharma perspective to all the questions concerning karma that were raised at the outset of this essay. Whether or not these answers are satisfactory to a critical inquirer is another matter. Although I do not have time in the present essay to subject Vasubandhu's theories to a detailed critique, I should like to end by pointing out in general some ways in which any Buddhist account of karma and rebirth is sure to fail to provide philosophical satisfaction. And having done that, I should like to suggest a way that the doctrine of karma and rebirth can be invoked without courting philosophical disaster.

It was observed at the outset of this paper that the law of karma is generally understood by Buddhists as a purely natural law, almost like a law of physics or biology. According to this natural law, noble intentions are invariably followed by contentment and ignoble intentions are invariably followed by discontent. Such an understanding is, I would argue, the least promising way to make sense of the Buddhist doctrine of karma. Simple introspection would, I think, show that this alleged invariability just does not hold. Whereas one does not experience exceptions to, say, the physical law of gravity, one does

experience exceptions rather frequently to the law of karma as stated in popular Buddhist teachings. There do, for example, seem to be people who act rather badly in this life without apparently being bothered by guilt and other forms of anxiety, and there are also people who suffer apparently undeserved misfortunes. Moreover, it is evident that the doctrines of karma and rebirth can be preserved only by introducing a number of essentially ad hoc principles into the abhidharma system. The notion that there are special mental properties known as acquisition and non-acquisition were pretty obviously designed for no other reason than to reconcile the doctrine of karma with the doctrine of radical momentariness. And the doctrines of non-phenomenal matter and of hearts made of subtle matter that leave one perceptible body at death and go to the scene of the conception of a next life are equally obviously invoked to preserve the notion of rebirth. Thus it would seem that trying to present the doctrines of karma and rebirth as rigorously defensible conclusions is likely to serve the purpose only of making these doctrines appear, in the final analysis, quite ridiculous.

The most promising way of treating the doctrines of karma and rebirth, I would submit, is to recognize them as fictions designed to help essentially selfish people act as if they were not selfish. Such a treatment is suggested by Lati Rinpoche, a modern Tibetan lama, who has said:

> You can look at this whole question like this. Of course there is no certainty that we lived in the past, and there is no certainty that we shall live again in the future. These matters are beyond absolute proof. But suppose that you decide to act as if the theory of karma and consequence is true. You then decide to help other beings. This alone will make you feel very good. And it will make other beings love you. They will think highly of you, and they will be very willing to do things to make you happy and to help you when you are in distress. It may be that in addition to all these consequences of your decision to be helpful to others you may also be born into a beautiful pure land in the future life. There is no proof that this will happen, but you have nothing to lose if you act as if it will happen. On the other hand, if you choose to be very selfish and act in ways that harm others, you may run the risk of falling into hell in the future. But even if this is not what happens, it is still true that even in this very life, you will find that other beings fear you and hate you and will be unwilling to help you when you are in distress. So you see, you have nothing to lose by acting as if the theory of karma and rebirth is true. You definitely do have something to gain by acting as if it is true, even in this life. And it may even be that you have more to gain than you realize.

Even many of Vasubandhu's statements about karma and rebirth can easily be interpreted to suggest that these doctrines are fictions that make sense only to people who foolishly believe in an enduring self. Vasubandhu holds that the wise person, who is free of the notion of an enduring personal identity, does not produce karma. It would be very easy to argue that this is so for the simple reason that the very notion of karma is incapable of bearing up under close scrutiny in just the same way as is the notion of an enduring per-

son. Vasubandhu also argues that meritorious action belongs only to those who have a desire for personal rewards but ceases to exist in people who have no desire for such rewards. But in arguing that the desire for personal rewards is based upon a fundamental delusion, one could also say that the notion of merit, which is based on a wish for personal rewards, is also ultimately based on a fundamental delusion. In other words, merit and demerit are ultimately delusions.

There is, however, a certain danger involved in saying too directly that the doctrines of merit and demerit and karma and rebirth are merely pious fictions designed to encourage altruistic conduct. For once one admits that these doctrines are directed at fools to help them behave as if they were wise, the very fools for whom these fictions were designed are likely to conclude that there is no reason whatsoever for acting any other way than selfishly. Such people would be like the man who anticipated that he would no longer require his raft once he arrived safely on the other shore. Confidently dismantling his raft while still in midstream, the poor fool drowned. It is just to prevent such disasters that most Buddhists stop short of making sense of the doctrine of karma in the way that I have tried to do here.