

Can you give me the benefits of your good karma?

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by Richard Hayes in the autumn of 2009

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1. Transference of merit

It is common for a Buddhist *pūja* to end by a dedication of the merit that one has gained by doing to *pūja* to the welfare of all sentient beings. An example of the wording of such a dedication is the following, from the ceremony book of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO).

May the merit gained in my acting thus
go to the alleviation of the suffering of all beings.
My personality throughout my existences, and my possessions,
and my merit in all three ways, I give up without regard for myself,
for the benefit of all beings.

Just as the earth and other elements are serviceable in many ways
to the infinite number of beings inhabiting limitless space;
so may I become that which maintains all beings situated throughout space,
so long as all have not attained to peace.¹

Many Zen organizations have a ceremony of chanting the Four Great Vows of Zhiyi, one version of which is as follows:

Shu jo mu hen sei gan do
Bon no mu jin sei gan dan
Ho mon mu ryo sei gan gaku
Butsu do mu jo sei gan jo

However innumerable all beings are,
I vow to save them all.

However inexhaustible my delusions are,
I vow to extinguish them all.

¹ The Fwbo Puja Book: A Book of Buddhist Devotional Texts, ed. Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, Fifth ed., (Birmingham, England: Windhorse Publications, 1990).

However immeasurable the Dharma teachings are,
I vow to master them all.

However endless the Buddha's way is,
I vow to follow it completely.²

When performed as a ritual, few problems arise from these words. They serve as a reminder that, in the Mahāyāna context at least, the main purpose of doing any kind of ceremony is to cultivate *bodhicitta*, the resolve to become awakened in order to work for the liberation of all sentient beings from suffering. The words also serve a reminder of the Buddhist dictum that any action that is truly beneficial (*kuśala-karma*) is both good for oneself (*svārtha*) and good for others (*parārtha*). They are reminders that ultimately the distinction between self and others is a false dichotomy, since it is very difficult to draw the boundaries between oneself and the myriad of factors from the world in general that makes one who one is. They are reminders that since everything is ultimately empty of self-identity, nothing can be outside oneself since there is nothing inside oneself.

While the “transference of merit” poses few problems as a ritual, there may be certain philosophical problems associated with it if the idea of transference of merit is taken too literally. In this lecture, my aim is to explore both the spirit of transference of merit as it occurs in Mahāyāna Buddhism,³ and then to show some philosophical problems that could very well arise from the very idea that merit (or any other kind of *karma-vipāka*) can be transferred.

2. Śāntideva

The words quoted above from the FWBO pūja book are, like most of the wording of that book of ceremonies, a paraphrase of sentiments expressed in a work entitled *Bodhicaryāvatāra* by Śāntideva. In particular, they are based on lines from the tenth chapter of that work, called *pariṇāmanā paricchedo* (transformation section), in which Śāntideva says this:

**sarvāsu dikṣu yāvantaḥ kāyacittavyathāturāḥ
te prāpnuvantu matpuṇyaiḥ sukhaprāmodyasāgarān (10.2)**

Through my merit, may all those in all directions who are afflicted by bodily and mental sufferings, obtain oceans of joy and contentment.

**āsaṃsāraṃ sukhajyānir mābhūtteṣāṃ kadācana
bodhisattvasukhaṃ prāptuṃ bhavatyavirataṃ jagat (10.3)**

As long as the cycle of existence lasts, may their happiness never decline. May the world attain the constant joy of the Bodhisattvas.

This is followed by a very long litany of specific ways in which suffering beings might be transformed from unpleasant to pleasant ways of being. Śāntideva asks that all those who are suffering from the cold find warmth; that all those who are hot find refreshing breezes and

² This translation occurs on the website of the Zen Buddhist Temple of Chicago, a temple in the Sōtō Zen tradition: <http://www.zbtc.org/docs/general/shiguseigan.html>

³ The transference of merit is by no means unknown in Theravāda Buddhism. The idea is found in all forms of Buddhism. In this lecture, however, the focus will be on its expression in the works of Mahāyāna writers.

cool water; that all those who are hungry find food, that all those who are suffering the tortures of hell suddenly find themselves in beautiful and delightful places; that animals who risk being eaten find themselves in a land free of predators; that those who are fearful find protection; that those who are depressed find joy. Among this litany there are some interesting ones pertaining to women. He asks that all pregnant women have childbirth without pain; and that all women find all the clothing, food, drink, flower garlands, sandalwood-paste, and ornaments that their hearts desire. A little later on, however, he asks that all women simply be transformed into men and therefore liberated from the suffering associated with being women. After this long list of what might be seen as prayers of intercession on behalf of all the suffering beings of the world, Śāntideva concludes with these words:

**ākāśasya sthitir yāvad yāvac ca jagataḥ sthitih
tāvan mama sthitir bhūyāj jagadduḥkhāni nighnataḥ (10.55)**

For as long as space endures and for as long as the world lasts, may I live dispelling the miseries of the world.⁴

**yat kiñcij jagato duḥkhaṃ tat sarvaṃ mayi pacyatām
bodhisattvaśubhaiḥ sarvair jagat sukhitaṃ astu ca (10.56)**

Whatever suffering there is for the world, may it all ripen upon me. May the world find happiness through all the virtues of the Bodhisattvas.

This verse is especially striking. Not only is Śāntideva offering to give away his own merit for the happiness and well-being of others, but he even offers to take on their suffering and to experience for himself all the ripening of their negative karma so that they need not suffer the natural consequences of their own actions.

Exactly how all this transformation of negative situations into positive ones is to take place is never explicitly explained, but we do get a hint in the last two verses of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*:

**jagadduḥkhaikabhaiṣajyaṃ sarvasaṃpat sukhākaram
lābhasatkārasahitaṃ ciraṃ tiṣṭhatu śāsanam (10.57)**

May teaching that is the sole medicine for the suffering of the world and the source of all prosperity and joy remain for a long time, accompanied by riches and honor!

**mañjuḥṣaṃ namasyāmi yatprasādān matiḥ śubhe
kalyāṇamitraṃ vande 'haṃ yatprasādāc ca vardhate (10.58)**

I bow to Manjuḥṣa, through whose grace my mind turns to virtue. I salute my spiritual friend through whose kindness it becomes stronger.

The very last verse of the text uses the Sanskrit word *prasāda* twice. This word has a wide range of meanings in Sanskrit. The following range of meanings is listed in the Monier-Williams Sanskrit dictionary:

- clearness, brightness, pellucidness;
- purity;
- calmness, tranquillity, absence of excitement, serenity of disposition;

⁴ The full Sanskrit text is available on line on the GRETEL(Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages) site: <http://www.sub.uni-goettingen.de/> and this translation comes from The Shantideva Online website at <http://www.shantideva.net>.

- good humour; graciousness, kindness, kind behaviour;
- favour, aid, and mediation.

The English translation I have cited above translates the word in two ways. For “yatprasādān matiḥ śubhe” we have “through whose *grace* my mind turns to virtue.” And the second use of the word in the phrase “yatprasādāc ca vardhate” is rendered “through whose kindness it becomes stronger.” In both of these the idea is conveyed that it is somehow or another through the kind help of Manjuḥṣa that Śāntideva is enabled to do his share in alleviating the suffering of other sentient beings. The potential problem that this raises will be discussed a little later in this lecture. But first, let’s look at one more dramatic example of the transfer of merit in what is known best in the West as Pure Land Buddhism.

3. Amitābha Buddha

The type of Buddhism known in the Far East as Pure Land began in India, sometime around the end of the first century C.E., with the appearance of a genre of Mahāyāna sūtras that described realms of great happiness located in various quarters of the universe. The most famous of these realms of bliss was described in a sūtra known as the *Sukhavatī-vyūha* (Detailed description of the Land of Happiness.) According to this sūtra, there once lived, many eons ago, a monk by the name of Dharmākara, who had reached a very advanced stage of virtue, wisdom, and self-discipline through many eons of rigorous practices. So advanced had his practice become that he had taken all the steps that must be taken to become a Buddha. But before entering into Buddhahood, Dharmākara took a vow that he would not enter into final enlightenment unless several conditions were fulfilled. Only after these conditions were fulfilled did Dharmākara become a Buddha, taking the name Amitābha (Light beyond measure).

The principal condition was that all the merit that he had accumulated during the past many eons of practice would all be used to generate a land of great happiness, which would contain all the greatest joys and none of the sufferings of the rest of the universe.

- In this land of bliss, there would be none of the lower forms of birth: there would be, in other words, no hells, no hungry ghosts and no animals. Therefore, once a person was born into this land of happiness, then that person would no longer have to worry about falling from that state into one of the lower forms of birth.
- In this land of bliss, there would be no distinction between human beings and the gods. Everyone in the land of bliss, in other words, would be as happy as the gods in paradise.
- All the beings born into the land of bliss would be automatically endowed with enormous wisdom and energy. They would also have the ability to see great distances, hear voices from very far away and directly perceive the thoughts of other beings.
- No one born into the land of bliss would have even the slightest craving for personal property or ownership of anything, even their own bodies.
- The length of life of beings born in the land of perfect bliss would be unlimited; beings would leave the paradise only if they chose to leave; and no one would choose to leave except to enter final nirvana or to return to the world of mortals in order to give aid and encouragement to all the beings suffering there.

Admission to this land of bliss in the Western quarter of the universe would be automatically granted to anyone who had done the following things:

- heard the name of the Buddha who had founded the Western land of bliss;
- died with a serene mind (which could be secured by repeating the name of the Buddha just before dying);
- formed a sincere desire to be reborn in the land of bliss;
- not committed the five unforgivable actions: killing one's father, killing one's mother, killing an arhant, causing a schism in the Buddhist Sangha, or injuring the body of a Buddha.

Once born in the land of bliss, the beings would have no hardships to endure, and nothing else that could possibly distract their minds from the task of listening to the teachings of all the buddhas and cultivating wisdom.

The implication of this story is that it is possible for someone to accumulate a great store house of merit and then use that merit to create ideal conditions for people to dedicate themselves to the quest for final nirvāṇa. Moreover, people do not need to earn their way into the realm in which those conditions exist; it is sufficient for them simply to call with sincerity upon Amitābha, the being whose store of accumulated merit was used to create those conditions. In effect, Amitābha's vow has the ability to relieve people of the normal consequences of their bad karma, the only exception being the five grave deeds that invariably lead to rebirth in hell in the next life.

Many scholars in the West have been struck by the resemblance of this doctrine to accounts of divine grace in Christian writings. According to the doctrine of grace, God can absolve people of the wages of their own sinfulness and provide them a salvation that they have not earned through their own actions. To put it into Buddhist language, God can give his creatures the benefits of his good karma. In some forms of Christianity, of course, this ability was not restricted to God but could also be achieved through the intercession of saints.

If the doctrine of the transference of merit has a resemblance to the doctrine of grace in Christianity, and if grace as discussed in Christianity resembles *prasāda* as discussed in some Indian theistic literature, then there is a possibility that the Buddhist doctrine of the transfer of merit would be liable to the same criticisms as Buddhists leveled at those who talked of divine grace. That is the problem of what in the West has been called the problem of theodicy, or divine justice.

4. Theodicy and divine motivation

In previous lectures we have talked about some of the metaphysical issues that Buddhist philosophers discussed in connection with the doctrines of divine creation of which they were aware. At least one Buddhist philosopher also raised the question of God's character. Vasubandhu was curious about what kind of being it would have taken to create the world of suffering that all of us have been familiar with.

Among the questions that Vasubandhu raised about the theory of divine creation was the issue of why a self-sufficient and supposedly perfect being would either need or wish to create anything at all. Vasubandhu asks:

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For what purposes would God expend so much effort in creating the world? Perhaps for pleasure? Well, if God cannot make an effort without pleasure, then he has no control over that, and thus he has no control over anything else either!

Even more alarming than the possibility that God's creation of the universe was a mere indulgence in hedonism is the possibility that it was an act of cruelty, as evidenced by God's apparent willingness to allow his creatures to err and suffer for their errors. Vasubandhu says:

And if God allows his creatures to be afflicted in hells by many guardians and takes pleasure in that, then we should prostrate ourselves before such a God as that! For the verse composed about him is very apt that goes:

Because he torments, because he is severe, because he is cruel and full of might, because he devours flesh, blood and marrow they call him the Dreadful [Rudra].

Interestingly enough, few Buddhist philosophers whose works are extant and who had discussions of God's existence developed this theme in Vasubandhu's writing. We do know, however, that some Buddhist authors wrote on this matter of God's character, so their words are quoted by the Hindu theologian Jayanta Bhaṭṭa. Jayanta quotes the words of an unnamed Buddhist author as follows:

Did the Lord of creation undertake the creation of the universe just as it is after he had pondered upon a purpose? If the undertaking were purposeless, then he would be like a madman, in that his actions would not be preceded by reflection.

But, Jayanta reports his atheist as saying, God is putatively endowed with every possible joy and is free of passionate desire, and so it is difficult to see what he would think he had to gain by creating a universe without which he is already quite content. The standard answer that the theist gives to this question is that God created the world out of compassion. But, says Jayanta's adversary, for whom are we to believe that God has compassion? Compassion is a response to beings who are in pain. But surely there can have been no beings in pain before the creation of the universe; indeed, it was precisely because of the creation that previously contented souls began to feel pain and anguish. Moreover, since God is supposedly omnipotent, he might have created a universe in which sentient beings felt only joy and happiness instead of this sorry world in which what little pleasure there is is fleeting and serves only to taunt us in our misery. Perhaps we can conclude only that the creation was a joke (*krīḍā*) that God played to amuse himself. But, Jayanta has the atheist say, if the creation was a joke, it is one the humor of which is too subtle for the sentient beings to appreciate:

Neither is the Magnanimous One's joke appropriate, which causes dread in all his creatures, nor is this great effort to play it.

The arguments that Jayanta reports are reminiscent of arguments we find in the writings of David Hume and J.L. Mackie⁵ Mackie argues that if there is suffering in the world, then at least one of the following claims must be false:

1. God is omniscient. (There is nothing that God does not know.)
2. God is omnipotent. (There is nothing that God cannot do.)

⁵ See in particular David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin, Second ed., (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998). See also J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," in *Philosophical Problems: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. Lawrence BonJour and Ann Baker, (New York: Pearson Logman, 2005).

3. God is compassionate. (God is responsive to the needs of those who suffer.)

The argument goes that if God is omniscient and omnipotent, then he must not care about the suffering in the world. On the other hand, if God is omniscient and compassionate, then perhaps he simply lacks the power to end suffering. Or, if God is omnipotent and compassionate, perhaps he does not even know about the suffering in the world.

5. Applying Hume and Mackie to descriptions of the Buddha

The closer Buddhists come to portraying the Buddha as a being who knows all things, can do all things and responds to the suffering of all beings, the closer they come to describing an impossible being. Were the Buddhists in danger of making the Buddha impossible to the same degree that Hume and Mackie argued that traditional Christian conceptions of God are impossible? Let us examine each of the three predicates in turn, and see what Buddhist claims about the Buddha were.

5.1. Omniscience

Although the Buddha is often described as *sarvajña*, which literally means knower of all things, the Buddhist tradition has for the most part not taken that term literally. Jayatilleke says that in the Theravāda tradition, the phrase was usually taken to mean that the Buddha could know what he set out to know, and that his range of knowledge was greater than that of an ordinary being. Dharmakīrti ridicules the idea of a fully omniscient being and argues that anyone who is looking for a guide out of turmoil will be satisfied with someone who knows what is necessary for that task. As he puts it, what good to us is someone who knows the number of maggots living in the world?

Given that the majority of Buddhists did not depict the Buddha as omniscient, they were not depicting the Buddha as a being whose characteristics are incompatible with the fact of suffering in the world.

5.2. Omnipotence

The Buddha is often portrayed as having extraordinary powers. The canonical texts say he can discern the thoughts in the minds of other people and can hear conversations taking place very far away, and he even has the power to heal serious wounds in other people by just thinking about them. But being able to do more than most people can do is still a long way from being able to do anything at all. Usually Buddhists do not claim that any Buddha is omnipotent. Even the remarkable Amitābha in the *Sukhavatīvyūha* has limited power. Recall that his vows had the power to elevate people to a celestial realm of bliss, but even Amitābha could not prevent the karma of the five especially heinous actions from ripening as rebirth in a hell realm.

5.3. Compassion

The Buddha is not depicted as having unlimited knowledge or unlimited power to do whatever he wanted to do, but his compassion is often portrayed as reaching the idea of being universal. That is, there was no one for whom the Buddha did not care, no one whose suffering he did not want to eliminate, no one whose good fortune did not bring him joy. He is usually portrayed as the embodiment of the kind of love recommended in the Karaṇīya Mettā sutta of the Suttanipāta in the Pali canon:

Cultivate an all-embracing mind of love
For all throughout the universe,
In all its height, depth and breadth —
Love that is untroubled
And beyond hatred or enmity..

As you stand, walk, sit or lie,
So long as you are awake,
Pursue this awareness with your might:
It is deemed the Divine State here.⁶

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A clue to how one might answer this question is provided in the next to last verse of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Recall that the verse said this:

**jagadduḥkhaikabhaiṣajyaṃ sarvasaṃpat sukhākaram
lābhasatkārasahitaṃ ciraṃ tiṣṭhatu śāsanam (10.57)**

May teaching that is the sole medicine for the suffering of the world and the source of all prosperity and joy remain for a long time, accompanied by riches and honor!

Here the message seems to be that all the transformations that are to be achieved in the long list of prayers of intercession that Śāntideva has given ultimately derive from the *śāsanam*, that is, from the institutions, the community, the rules of regulations and the body of inspirational teachings left by the Buddha for the welfare of the world. It is by participating in that entire *śāsanam* that an individual plays a role in the transformation of the world. The spirit of this advice anticipates the famous saying of Mohanda Karamchand Gandhi: "You must be the change you want to see in the world." It is also reminiscent of the Quaker saying: "There is no point in praying to God to offer help to people unless you are willing to be the means by which God gives that help."

We began with a quotation from the Puja Book of the FWBO. Let me end by coming back to that tradition and mentioning an interpretation of the image of the thousand-armed bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, which is a common image in Mahāyāna iconography. The traditional story is that Avalokiteśvara had made a vow to work for the well-being of all sentient beings scattered in the ten directions of the universe, and that in making the vow he said "If my resolve should ever weaken, let me explode into a billion pieces." After working with steady resolve for some aeons, the story goes, Avalokiteśvara realized that sentient beings find new ways to make themselves miserable much more quickly than anyone can

6 <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/buddharakkhita/wheel365.html#ch1>

keep up with. He realized, in other words, that he would *never* be able to bring all sentient beings out of their miseries fueled by their greed, hatred and delusion. On realizing that, he let his resolve weaken just for a moment, and in that moment, he exploded into a billion fragments. But the god Brahma saw this happen, and seeing how very valuable Avalokiteśvara is, he reconstituted the bodhisattva, but in remaking Avalokiteśvara, Brahma gave him 1000 arms, so he could do much more to help others than before with only two hands. That is the traditional story. The interpretation of it that one finds in the FWBO is that a community is the embodiment of the 1000-armed bodhisattva. No one can do alone everything that needs to be done, but if everyone pitches in to help others, seemingly impossible tasks are accomplished. Perhaps the best way to give the benefits of one's good karma to others is to join with others in helping to do some of the tasks necessary to create a harmonious society and a healthy natural environment.

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