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doctrine, values and behaviour which one could call 'life-denying' and 'life-affirming'.³

Approaching the subject from a slightly different angle—which was to be expected, since we were not aware of each other's research before publication—I did not in my book state the problem as explicitly or as clearly as Spiro, but in my attempt to explain certain changes in Buddhism I came to similar conclusions: the life-denying Buddhism has never been the sole religion of an area or a people, because it runs counter to human nature. For example, the strict normative doctrine that each man is solely responsible for his own fate could not survive in its full rigour at the behavioural level, because it is too oppressive (pp. 242–3). Near the end of a perceptive review of my book,⁴ A. Thomas Kirsch has complained that I seem 'simply to assume that religious change results from affective inadequacy without demonstrating why this should be so or considering alternative views'. In fact I did consider alternative views, and very positively,⁵ for I do not believe that only one explanation at a time is required for a social phenomenon (they are usually over-determined) or that psychological and sociological explanations are incompatible. However, Kirsch has put his finger on a weak point, because I used 'affective inadequacy' rather as a residual explanatory category when I could produce no more specific reason for a change. Spiro seems to me to do the same, for after referring to 'a restricted set of needs, fantasies, wishes, conflicts, aspirations and so on which are deeply rooted in a universal human nature' he writes (p. 14), 'It would seem, then, that man has certain universal needs which will not for long be frustrated, and that ideas and doctrines—like some of the ideas and doctrines of normative Buddhism—which frustrate or violate these needs will eventually be modified or replaced.'

Now I am not suggesting that this explanation in terms of human nature is *false*; but it is not very enlightening, and I feel the urge to try to do a bit better. The problem of what a society of nibbanic Buddhists would look like is a pseudo-problem, to be sure, but I am still a little curious as why it should turn out to be one. Kammatic Buddhism is not fully explicable as a product of the pleasure principle. I repeat: I am not impugning the validity of the psychological type of explanation which Spiro and I have put forward. But perhaps it could be reinforced by other, more sociological (and ideally more refutable) explanations. Societies as well as individuals have needs. One of them is some degree of consensus

³ See my review of Spiro's book in *Modern Asian Studies*, 6, 4 (1972), 483–94. In my own book I had not attempted to be so systematic, but talked in the last chapter (pp. 320–3) of the contrasting ideals of self-restraint and of love. These would roughly match the cognitive structures which Spiro labels nibbanic and kammatic.

⁴ *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXII, 3 (May 1973), 554–6.

⁵ I give examples of other explanations on pp. 16–17. I find it odd that in the next sentence Kirsch complains when I use other explanations, as if I were only allowed one type of explanation (which he calls a 'model') per book.

Buddhist Karma and Social Control

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The contents of sacred texts are not simply reproduced in the doctrines of the religions which venerate them; there must be interpretation and selective emphasis. This is most obviously true when the corpus of sacred literature is large, as in Christianity and Buddhism. Historians of these religions may therefore ask why certain doctrines and certain scriptures have been emphasized at the expense of others.

Both Professor Melford Spiro and I have recently published studies of Buddhism in Theravada countries, Burma and Ceylon respectively,¹ in which we consider how a religion which scholars have deduced from its scriptures to be extremely negative and cheerless has come in practice to look positive and cheerful. In his opening chapter Spiro has a section entitled 'The Problem: The Uniqueness of Buddhism' (pp. 6–11). Normative Buddhism comprises a set of doctrines which one may with misleading brevity summarize as nihilistic and pessimistic, and the adoption of these doctrines should lead to an attitude of world-renunciation. This religion 'challenges some of our fundamental notions about religion and about man' (p. 9); where, 'except in a clinical population of depressives' (p. 10), could people believe that life is suffering—to the extent of being wholly undesirable? But, he concludes, the problem turned out to be a pseudo-problem, because in fact most Buddhists either ignore or reject this normative religion, and 'Buddhists differ very little from people in general'. He goes on to differentiate two soteriological systems in Buddhism: the one which aims for nirvana he calls 'nibbanic', the one which aims for a good rebirth he calls 'kammatic'.² In his formulation these are cognitive structures; it might be more helpful—and at least it is more readily intelligible to the non-specialist—to differentiate two whole syndromes of

¹ Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, New York, 1970; Richard F. Gombrich, *Precept and Practice*, Oxford, 1971.

² Spiro's terms are derived from *nibbāna* and *kamma*, which are Pali, the classical language of Theravada Buddhism. The equivalent terms in Sanskrit, the principal vehicle of classical Indian culture, are *nirvāṇa* and *karma*; these are the forms which (without diacritics) are familiar in English. In this article I have used the forms interchangeably.

about the locus of authority, and an ideology which permits that authority to exercise some control over deviance.

With this in mind I propose to take another look at the doctrine of karma. Followers of these controversies will be aware that the doctrine, especially in its Buddhist form, is remarkable for its intellectual power but also for its emotional ambivalence. In pan-Indian terms, the law of karma is simply a cosmic law that all crimes are suitably punished and all good deeds suitably rewarded, in the long run. The doctrine originated in Northeast India not too long before the time of the Buddha. The Buddha specified that the moral quality of an act lies solely in its intention; this differentiates Buddhism from e.g. Jainism, in which the operation of karma is physically conceived and results from the act itself. Both Buddhists and Jains posit free will. To the Jains I shall return at the end of this article.

The Theravada Buddhist (Pali) canon in its final form has an extremely elaborate theory of karma. In the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, the latest of the three main divisions of the canon, types of *kamma* are scholastically classified and elaborated at tedious length; and, on the more popular level, comparatively late canonical texts such as the *Peta-vatthu* consist of edifying stories of how punishments fit crimes and good deeds are appropriately rewarded. None of this elaboration seems to contradict in any important way the basic teaching on karma which is found in the oldest collections of doctrinal texts, the four *Nikāya*.⁶ Whether this last statement may require some modification will soon be shown by the researches of the Ven. L. Siridhamma, who is working with me at Oxford on *kamma* in early Theravada. But what first struck me while guiding the Ven. Siridhamma's research was the sheer meagreness of material on *kamma* in the four *Nikāya*; there are quite a few references to it, but they are often incidental and usually uninformative.

On reflection, the peripheral place of karma in the basic doctrinal texts is perhaps not so strange. The Buddha was preaching a soteriology rather than expounding a philosophy. And although the karma theory is a philosophical assumption underlying his message, it hardly qualifies as part of that message. It is in some form presupposed by his soteriological aim, to escape from the round of rebirth; after all, the Buddha and his listeners had presumably been brought up to believe in karma. But it forms no explicit part of the core doctrines enunciated in the first sermon: the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path; nor of such a basic text on the way to deliverance as the *Sāmañña-phala-sutta*.

Perhaps the karma doctrine, for all its power to explain *this world*, is a

fifth wheel in nibbanic soteriology. Although the theory of karma is well integrated into Buddhist doctrine from the very beginning (notably in the theories of 'dependent origination' and of the five constituents of the phenomenal person), the central message could be philosophically reconstructed without any recourse to it: one could logically accept the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the *tilakkhaṇa*, the tenet that all phenomenal existence is suffering, impermanent, and devoid of soul, without believing in either rebirth or a cosmic moral law of retribution. A profound pessimist who accepted the First Noble Truth (that life is suffering) might thirst for nirvana in this life even if he believed that if he did not attain it he would simply die—or go to reside eternally in heaven or hell; and a belief that the world was unjust would merely reinforce his pessimism.

This seems to be the philosophical reason why the karma teaching is not prominent in the basic doctrinal texts: it could easily be dispensed with. This of course makes it the more interesting that it later became so prominent—the point with which this paper is primarily concerned. But the Buddha and his followers inherited the theory, at least in a crude form, as part of their mental equipment; and so I would like to adduce two further reasons, of a rather more practical kind, for its original de-emphasis.

(1) *Karma* means 'act', a simple meaning which it always retains besides its technical ones. But the aspirant for salvation is being directed to action, to the physically inactive occupation of meditation. Moreover, if we consider *karma* again in its technical meaning as 'the moral quality of an action', the aspirant for salvation is being directed to withdraw from society and thus from those actions which are most commonly held to have a moral quality, namely actions affecting other people. Karma is typically social.

(2) The theory of karma in all its forms is intimately linked with the theory of rebirth. It is unfortunately manifest that people do not always, or even normally, get their just deserts in this life. Karma is therefore a theory which on the one hand explains why some have good and others bad luck in this life (in particular Buddhists use it to explain why people are born in fortunate or wretched circumstances), and on the other hand reassures one that all will work out fairly in the end. But the Buddha, like all great religious teachers, was not interested in gradualism, in the long view; he was preaching salvation here and now, in this life, and that is certainly the spirit in which his disciples received his message. They believed that they, as human beings, could attain nirvana whatever their station in life, so that their past karma was no longer very important;⁷

⁷ Though this statement is a simplification, I would defend its essential truth by reference to the extreme case of Moggallāna, who had actually not yet expiated the murder of his parents in a former life, and yet was able to attain nirvana in this. That the story is late does not affect my point.

⁶ *Dīgha*, *Majjhima*, *Anguttara* and *Sāyammūta*. Incidentally, almost all of the texts in the four *Nikāya* are regarded as authoritative by all classical Buddhist schools.

and that they would not be reborn, so that their future fate was also not a subject of curiosity.

The former of these points underlines what has often been said before: that the first Buddhists were asocial, even anti-social.⁸ Salvation lay outside society. Once one had taken the Buddha's message seriously enough to act on it, one abandoned all social ties, and had as little human company as possible—'Go lonely as the rhinoceros'. Authority no longer lay in human institutions, but in the *Dharma*, the truth which was proclaimed by the Buddha and interpreted by oneself. Gradually a secondary source of authority arose in the shape of the Sangha, the monastic Order; but it is crucial in the historical study of Buddhism to remember that the Sangha did not exercise its authority on matters of soteriological doctrine; its corporate acts concern the maintenance of Buddhism (especially of the Sangha itself) as an institution, not the ultimate goal achievement of its members, in relation to which its role is always recognized as unauthoritative and purely instrumental. Moreover, throughout the history of Buddhism the real salvation seekers have usually become hermits, 'forest-dwellers', and have kept fairly well clear of the organized Sangha. So nibbanic Buddhism, to use Spiro's term, is individualistic, and because it does not regard human institutions as authoritative it provides nothing for the political or administrative regulation of society.

Further, one might claim that it provides little or nothing for the regulation of the individual in society. Here it is essential to differentiate between the philosophy, the logic of the karma doctrine, and its psychological, its affective, impact. (In my book I called these the cognitive and the affective levels.) Philosophically, the doctrine declares that the moral quality of actions lies solely in the intention behind them. It does not detract from the philosophical excellence of this doctrine to point out that it seems a natural corollary of a withdrawal from society. Not only is attention drawn inwards, so that in a general way the focus moves from a man's actions to his moral character; more particularly, moral qualities, such as perseverance, are shown in the pursuit of private, not public goals; and when kindness is practised by wishing well (*maitrī bhāvanā*) rather than by doing good, an ethic of intention lies at hand. This on the cognitive level. But the meditator has been socialized in an ordinary family, in which value is attached to doing good rather than to thinking it. Thus, when Buddhist philosophy declares that good karma = good intentions = purification of the mind = spiritual progress, i.e. progress towards nirvana, terms are being equated which have quite different emotional implications and moral overtones. Passing above and beyond everyday moral acts (actions affecting other sentient beings, who are all likewise moral

agents), meditation too is held to be good karma; from the doctrinal, philosophical point of view one does not stop acquiring good karma till nirvana itself is attained. (Western confusion on this point has been common; in my review I mentioned that it even occurs in Spiro's book.) But the matter is subtler: meditation is not, in the earliest texts, specifically referred to as 'good karma'; being asocial, it is not *typical* karma. Moreover, the advanced meditator has in fact taken up an autonomous ethic: the good act is now its own reward. Remember I am now talking of the affective, the psychological position; granted, developed doctrine homologizes the higher heavens with the meditational states, so that he who attains to meditational state X is reborn in a corresponding heaven; but this scholastic invention cannot mirror the meditator's motives. The autonomous ethic is the very antithesis of the karma doctrine in its original (and again, as we shall show, in its vulgar) form: that good will be rewarded.

Moreover, the de-emphasis of future lives weakens the theodicy: true, evil deeds will be punished, as the karma doctrine says, but this is not psychologically important if we will not be around to see it. Karma retains its interest mainly in relation to past lives rather than as a predictor of the results of present conduct, and inquiry into its workings shows a slightly vulgar curiosity, typical of the unenlightened. I find it significant—though I would not stress the point—that of what one might reasonably consider the two main texts in the four *Nikāya* devoted to karma, the one⁹ is an answer to a layman's request to explain present disparities in human fortunes, the other¹⁰ discusses rewards and punishments as the results of past conduct. The emphasis is on 'Be done by as you did'; 'Do as you would be done by' is implied rather than stated.

Even the theory of rebirth itself seems somewhat awkward in classical Buddhist doctrine. It is notorious that the question of what is reborn is addressed rather infrequently and inconsistently in the Canon, so that although scholasticism contrived a definitive answer the problem has always puzzled newcomers to Buddhism. Less well known is the curiously fossilized position of the belief that spiritual adepts can recollect their former lives. Such recollection was said to be one of the attainments which the Buddha acquired immediately before Enlightenment, presumably because this was expected of yogis in that milieu; on that pattern it became part of the standard description of any Enlightenment. But after considering every classical Buddhist text on the subject, Demiéville concluded¹¹ that there was no proper Buddhist theory about it, and that its

⁹ *Cūḍa-kamma-rūbhanga-sutta*, M.N. III, 202–6.

¹⁰ *Mahā-kamma-rūbhanga-sutta*, M.N. III, 207–15.

¹¹ The words of his final paragraph merit reproduction: 'Vu l'importance capitale du dogme de la transmigration dans le système bouddhique, on aurait pu s'attendre à trouver sur la mémoire des existences antérieures une théorie bouddhique originale et bien établie. C'est ce qui ne semble pas ressortir de notre enquête sommaire. Les Āgama-Nikāya en font une

⁸ In a sociological context the *locus classicus* for this argument is L. Dumont, 'World Renunciation in Indian Religions', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, IV (1960), 33–62.

only elaboration was in the unphilosophical sphere of popular religious literature, exactly as the theory here propounded would lead one to expect.

It has been a commonplace of sociology that religion provides a means of social control. Social control implies a system of rewards and punishments, either internalized during socialization or externally supplied by institutions, or both. Nibbanic Buddhism does not legitimate social institutions; and I have further suggested that it so de-emphasizes rewards and punishments that it would be a poor instrument of socialization in the normal sense. Thus it cannot appeal to rulers of society at large, or to primary agents of socialization, namely parents: it is dysfunctional both for the polity and for the family. This does not deny that it runs counter to the normal urges of individual human beings; my argument attempts to reinforce that conclusion with more sociological considerations.

By the same token, the Buddhism that has flourished in societies has not merely been congenial to the pleasure principle, but has also permitted those societies to function. I need not labour the point. The karma doctrine, perceived as a system of inevitable rewards and punishments, is inculcated as basic to morality and to a correct view of the world; and the texts most widely selected for sermons, for school text-books, even for art and literature, are mostly tales of who got what for doing what; the purport is educational and edificatory, no less so for the matter's being entertaining. Modern apologists for Buddhism (e.g. K. N. Jayatilke) lay great stress on the 'proven' validity of the theory of karma and rebirth; even though a modified Buddhism without karma is (as suggested above) philosophically quite conceivable, and might appeal to some socially atomized Westerners, it has no attraction for those who remain embedded in society. Regulatory institutions, such as the existing legal system, and indeed the pantheon,¹² are indirectly legitimized as agents of the reward and punishment; even if punishment appears unmerited, it may result from bad acts in a former life. (This is not to say that karma is necessarily a conservative doctrine; its generality allows it to legitimate social or political change, once this is perceived as normal and/or desirable.) Ultimately karma is itself the law (behind all other laws) which will catch out the malefactor; it has an authority over and above the authority of its agencies, which is, however,

faculté commune aux religieux bouddhistes et hérétiques; l'Abhidharma l'attribue aux profanes; n'ayant en elle-même aucun caractère de sainteté, elle ne prend de valeur religieuse que par les réflexions qu'elle suggère; enfin les conteurs éludent toute systématisation.' (P. Demiéville, 'Sur la mémoire des existences antérieures', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, XXVII (1927), 298.)

¹² The co-existence of Theravāda Buddhism with other systems of belief is luckily now a commonplace in the literature. Any moral authority that gods may possess is held to derive from Buddhism; e.g. in Sinhalese belief supernatural beings hold warrants (*varāṇa*) which derive ultimately from the Buddha. (This is of course not to say that the Buddha invented karmic law, only that he explained it.) Gods, even demons, are all subject to the law of karma, and may reward or punish only as agents of law enforcement—though, like their human equivalents, they too may do wrong, for which they are in turn liable.

still not a religious (i.e. perceived as 'Buddhist') authority, but a condition of the universe. Nature itself thus has a kind of immutable authority: its essence (*svabhāva*) is in part normative ('natural law'). Wrong-doing is ultimately imprudence, and, perhaps, a matter for shame rather than guilt. Everything is under control, and the control is all the more complete for being, in the last resort, impersonal. The totally controlled, ethicized universe is the polar opposite to the solitary seeker for salvation.

In conclusion I would like to offer a hazardous speculation about how the histories of Buddhism and Jainism have been affected by the differences in their theories of karma. Jainism entered history at the same time and the same place as Buddhism, and there are great similarities between the two religions. But the Jains conceive of all karma, good or bad, as material particles which adhere to the soul and thus prevent its liberation, which again is physically conceived, as it floats to the top of the universe. The Jain who seeks salvation must therefore annihilate all traces of previous actions, which he does by asceticism, and abstain totally from all further action. Optimally he dies of starvation.

Now the number of true religious virtuosi is nowhere very high, so the fact that few wish to starve to death is probably not significant for Jain social history. Rather it is surprising that some do court this fate. But the peculiar form of Jain karma theory may help to explain why Jainism has been so much less successful than Buddhism at establishing itself in society. In the past, of course, it has had many more adherents (at least, as a percentage of the population) than it has to-day, but only within India; unlike Buddhism, it has never spread.

Weber already noted one reason for this. As Jain karma is accumulated automatically, killing an insect, for example, is in effect murder even if it was unintentional. Moreover, Jains are hylozoists, and believe that matter is everywhere inhabited by souls. Plants too have souls, so that to kill or hurt them is an evil, to say nothing of worms. Agriculture thus becomes an occupation in which one necessarily accumulates a great deal of bad karma. Jains have thus tended to specialize in the physically inactive occupations of commerce, to the economic benefit of the community. While there have been and are Jain agriculturalists, and even Jain soldiers, Jainism does not provide legitimation for the *status quo* in peasant societies.

I would like to go further than this. Jainism reinforces the clear-cut institutional distinction between laity and monks, which it shares with Buddhism, with a clear-cut ideological distinction between those who are acquiring karma and those who are getting rid of it. The Buddhist layman, who merely by living in his village is a donor (*dāyaka*) to his village temple, is already on the same moral continuum, from his point of view, as the solitary Buddhist meditator; for the list of Ten Good Deeds (*dasa kusala*

kamma), which he is constantly hearing and perhaps repeating, begins—not very logically—with three which subsume them all: *dāna*, *sīla*, *bhāvanā*: giving, morality, meditation, an ideal and also a realistic progression. But the Jain layman who is supporting Jain monks is merely acquiring good karma; that is better than acquiring bad karma, but not nearly so good as doing nothing. His really is an insufficiency ethic. The soteriological position of the Jain layman, even if he is a sedentary banker, is too unattractive to be widely adopted by choice. Although the Jaina theory of karma functions as a theodicy, it furnishes only very partial legitimation for any social activity at all.