

*Did the Buddha Believe in Karma and Rebirth?* by Johannes Bronkhorst

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## Did the Buddha Believe in Karma and Rebirth?\*

The title of this lecture may raise some questions. Before we can even try to answer the question whether the Buddha believed in karma and rebirth, we have to address a few other ones. One is whether karma and rebirth necessarily form a couple. We will see that not all scholars have looked upon these elements in this way, and that some have suggested that the Buddha may have believed in only one of these two.

An equally important question concerns the issue whether philological research can ever hope to find out anything about the historical Buddha.<sup>1</sup> Isn't it safer to say that the early Buddhist texts inform us about the views and beliefs of the, or a, Buddhist community during some period? And if philological analysis allows us to reach further back into the past (supposing it can actually do so), does this not merely lead us back to an earlier phase of the views and beliefs of the, or a, Buddhist community? Is it not, therefore, wiser to speak about early – or even: earliest – Buddhism, and leave the Buddha out of the picture?

In earlier publications I was not quite certain about this issue, and had a tendency to speak about early or earliest Buddhism, rather than about the historical Buddha.<sup>2</sup> But closer reflection suggests that this attempt to express oneself carefully may really have the opposite effect. The texts on which we base our conclusions – primarily the Sūtras – claim to pre-

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1. Some scholars may feel that the very wish to do so betrays “positivist concerns for origins” (see, e.g., HALLISEY, 1995: 36). They should perhaps be reminded that within Buddhist studies the study of the Buddha and his views holds a legitimate position, as legitimate as the study of the views of Dharmakīrti or, indeed, of T.W. RHYS DAVIDS.
2. Other scholars did and do the same; see, e.g., such titles as *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism* (VETTER, 1988), “On the annihilation of karman in early Buddhism” (ENOMOTO, 1989), etc.

sent the teachings of the Buddha.<sup>3</sup> They may be right or wrong in this, and probably they are partly right and partly wrong, but they do not even pretend to inform us, except perhaps in passing, about the beliefs and practices of the early Buddhists. Some modern scholars try to reach conclusions about early Buddhism – i.e. about the beliefs and practices of the early Buddhists, not including the Buddha himself – on the basis of other materials, such as early Mahāyāna sources. One example is the public lecture delivered here in Kyoto a few years ago by Paul HARRISON, which was subsequently published in the journal of Otani University.<sup>4</sup> HARRISON criticizes the view according to which Gautama the Buddha became progressively deified with time, and prefers to think that he may have become a virtual god even during his own lifetime, and ascribed with miraculous powers and superhuman status by his adoring devotees. HARRISON may very well be correct in this, but it seems evident that the early texts we possess say relatively little about these early Buddhists, and a great deal more about the person they adored, Gautama the Buddha, and his teaching. If, therefore, philological analysis of the early Buddhist texts can teach us something about the earliest phases of Buddhism, then most probably they can teach us more about the historical Buddha and his views than about the beliefs and practices of the earliest Buddhists.<sup>5</sup> False modesty seems therefore out of place, and I will speak of the Buddha in cases where I think that the texts allow us to reach back to the times they claim to describe.

This bold decision should not, however, make us reckless. The claim that the early Buddhist texts may tell us something about the historical Buddha and his views does not imply that they will provide us with many reliable details about the beginnings of his career. Whether we fully agree with HARRISON or not, it seems more than likely that the Buddha was held in extremely high esteem by his followers at the time of his death. It is hard to doubt that they did what they could to remember his words and ideas, i.e., the words and ideas of the years not too long before his disappearance. But I find it hard to imagine that

3. This appears also to be Richard GOMBRICH's opinion (1993: 146), who "assumes that the oldest texts do reflect what the Buddha said; all I shall say about that here is that it is a defensible assumption and in any case a necessary one if we are to ascribe any views to the Buddha at all."
4. HARRISON 1995.
5. I am aware that some scholars will consider this "sociologically naïve" (cp. PYYSIÄINEN, 1996: 108).

these same devotees knew and memorized the words and views of their teacher some forty years earlier (supposing that the traditional information about the life of the Buddha is more or less correct), when he was still unknown. There are admittedly contradictions in the old Sūtras, but there are other ways to account for them rather than seeing in them earlier views of the Buddha himself, and these ways seem to me infinitely more plausible.

Yet certain scholars claim to have information about earlier views of the Buddha, which he then supposedly modified later. FRAUWALLNER's attempts to distinguish phases in the life and teachings of the Buddha are particularly well known.<sup>6</sup> Some other scholars, too, think that it is possible to reach conclusions about the Buddha's early views, even about karma and rebirth. Tilmann VETTER, in his article "Das Erwachen des Buddha", argues that the Buddha at first sought, and realized, the 'deathless' (*amata/amṛta*), which is concerned with the here and now. Only after this realization, when he had already started preaching this discovery, did he supposedly become intimately acquainted with the doctrine of rebirth held in certain ascetic circles.<sup>7</sup> This position contrasts strongly with the one VETTER expressed in an earlier publication. There we read:<sup>8</sup> "The Buddhist doctrine of salvation ... seems firmly bound to the concept that one must continuously be reborn and die. If there is no rebirth, then one needs no path to salvation, because an end to suffering comes at death." Why did VETTER change his mind?

VETTER has come to attach particular importance to the text which is traditionally considered to contain the first sermon of the Buddha. In this first sermon initially the eightfold path is taught, and only subsequently – and in some versions of the text not at all – the Four Noble Truths. In an earlier publication I drew from this the following conclusion:<sup>9</sup> "This seems to indicate that initially those Four Noble Truths were not part of the sermon in Benares, and consequently probably not

6. FRAUWALLNER 1953: esp. pp. 178, 186, 197, 213.

7. VETTER (1996: 54) supposes, "dass der Buddha erst nach der Realisierung und Verkündigung des schon hier und jetzt ... zu erreichenden 'Todlosen' (*amata / amṛta*) mit der in bestimmten Asketenkreisen lebenden Wiedergeburtstheorie bekannt wurde oder sich mit ihr erst dann wirklich auseinandersetzte, nachdem er sie früher, wann immer er von ihr hörte, nie ernst genommen hatte"; so VETTER 1996a: 7; 1997: 42.

8. VETTER 1988: XVI.

9. BRONKHORST 1993: 107 ([101]).

as central to Buddhism as they came to be. We may surmise that the concise formulation of the teaching of the Buddha in the shape of the Four Noble Truths had not yet come into being, not necessarily that the contents of this teaching deviated from what they were meant to express." In other words, the particularities of the text can be explained with the help of some simple assumptions about the constitution and preservation of the tradition, most probably after the death of the Buddha. VETTER, as we have seen, prefers to explain these same particularities with the help of some altogether different assumptions pertaining to developments in the life of the historical Buddha.

Let me, to conclude this section, recall that VETTER does not stand alone in thinking that karma and rebirth, though accepted by the Buddha at some point of his life, are not essential to his doctrine. Another scholar who does not believe that rebirth was a necessary tenet of the teaching of the Buddha is Akira HIRAKAWA. He adds, however, that Śākyamuni did not reject rebirth, "because the belief in rebirth is one of the most important tenets of Indian religion". He then goes on: "Śākyamuni was primarily concerned with liberation from the suffering of existence. If existence consisted of cycles of birth and death, then deliverance from those cycles was his goal. Thus Early Buddhists did not need to dismiss rebirth."<sup>10</sup>

Not all scholars are ready to follow FRAUWALLNER and VETTER in their attempts to distinguish between succeeding views held by the Buddha in the course of his life. Many rather try to distinguish between views held by the Buddha and those introduced by his followers. I sympathize with this approach, and consider its chances of success greater than the attempt to trace the development of thought of the Buddha during his lifetime. This is not to say that it is easy to identify the views of the Buddha in the early texts. The many different opinions that have been expressed during the last century or so on the original teaching of the Buddha should make us extremely cautious, also in this endeavor. Here we must concentrate on some efforts that have been made to identify the views of the Buddha on karma and rebirth.

There is a tendency among some scholars to expect that the views of the Buddha on karma and rebirth should be close to the archaic views known from other early Indian sources. Such other sources we possess in

10. HIRAKAWA 1990: 6.

the texts of the Veda, and in the Jaina canon. Passages in the early Buddhist texts that are more or less similar to what we find in these other texts inform us, according to this line of reasoning, about the earliest form of the doctrine of karma and rebirth in Buddhism.

In this connection we must first deal with Tilmann VETTER's *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*, published in 1988.<sup>11</sup> The author tries to reconstruct the Buddha's views on rebirth in the light of beliefs found in Vedic texts. Referring to a paper by Michael WITZEL,<sup>12</sup> VETTER points out: "The most ancient places found in the Vedas where rebirth is mentioned show only a belief in the other world ... After a stay in heaven a person is reborn as a human being, preferably in his own family" (p. 78). By contrasting ancient Buddhism with these Vedic sources, VETTER believes that he can establish "that according to ancient Buddhism good deeds lead to heaven and bad deeds to the underworld" (p. 77). How does he establish this?

On p. 79 VETTER refers to SN 3.21, which he calls "the sutta on light and darkness". It still reflects, according to VETTER, "the old structure that good or bad conduct in the world of mankind leads either to heaven or to the underworld". A brief summary of the contents of the sutta is meant to show this. It reads:<sup>13</sup>

There are four kinds of persons (*puggala*); one who from the darkness goes to the darkness, one who from the darkness goes to the light, one who from the light goes to the darkness, and one who from the light goes to the light. The person who from the darkness goes to the darkness is reborn (*paccājāto*) in a lower class family of Caṇḍālas, basket makers, hunters, etc., in a poor family with little food and clothing; moreover the person is ugly and a cripple. And this person leads an evil life with his body, his speech and his thoughts and after death he goes to the underworld. The person who from the darkness goes to the light is also reborn in a lower class family of Caṇḍālas, etc., is ugly and a cripple, but leads a good life with his body, his speech, and his thoughts and after death goes to the heavenly world. The person who from the light goes to the darkness is reborn in an upper class family of wealthy warriors, Brahmans, or citizens where there are all the luxuries of life; moreover the person is beautiful. This person leads an evil life with his body, his speech and his thoughts, and after death he goes to the underworld. Finally, the person who from the light goes to

11. VETTER does not withdraw his earlier views in his most recent publications, so we must assume that he takes it for granted that the Buddha, when at last he became acquainted with the doctrine of rebirth, accepted it in the form presented in this book.
12. WITZEL 1984.
13. VETTER 1988: 79-80.

the light is reborn in an upper class family of wealthy warriors, Brahmans or citizens where there are all the luxuries of life; moreover the person is beautiful. This person leads a good life with his body, his speech, and his thought and after death he goes to the heavenly world.

How is this passage supposed to establish VETTER's thesis to the extent that "according to ancient Buddhism good deeds lead to heaven and bad deeds to the underworld"? Sure, they can lead there, too, but personally I would be extremely hesitant to conclude from some such passage that they can only lead there. I find it very plausible that in such discussions particular forms of rebirth may be highlighted, occasionally even to the exclusion of other forms of rebirth, depending of the particular point this or that sermon is intended to make.<sup>14</sup> Is there any other evidence in support of the thesis that heaven and the underworld are the only destinations at death?

VETTER continues on the same page 80 with the words: "Passages in the canon which mention the 'divine eye' are also grounds for assuming that in the earliest period the idea of karma was **only** connected with heaven and the underworld and not with a future human existence" (my emphasis, JB). Unfortunately for VETTER, the 'divine eye' passages do not prove much, and VETTER is honest enough to show into what quandary they get him. Consider the following passage from his book:<sup>15</sup>

The divine eye is identical to the second of the two types of knowledge which in the detailed description of the dhyāna path have been inserted between the attainment of the fourth stage of dhyāna and the realization of the four noble truths. This second type of knowledge is described (cf. e.g. MN 27, I p. 183) as follows (abridged):

"With (his) divine eye he sees creatures disappearing and reappearing, the lowly and the exalted, beautiful and ugly, with a blessed existence or a miserable existence. He understands that they return in accordance with their deeds. Some creatures do evil with their body, their speech and their thoughts. They condemn the noble (*ariya*), they have wrong views and conduct themselves [conformable to these] wrong views; after death they reappear in the underworld. But other creatures do good with their body, their speech and their thoughts. They do not condemn the noble, they have the right views and conduct themselves [conformable to these] right views; after death they reappear in the heavenly world"

14. One is here reminded of the statement attributed to Śāṅgāyāni in Jaiminiya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa 3.5.9.5 (ed. B.R. SHARMA): "This world is much afflicted with disease. But they talk and exert themselves out of love for that [other world] (i.e., heaven). Who would do away with that [other world] and come back here?"
15. VETTER 1988: 82-83.

The theoreticians of the dhyāna path thought that also a remembrance of one's former existences belonged to the enlightenment and release of the Buddha and his better disciples. But the formula of the remembrance of former existences, which is perhaps also very old but comes from a different source, does not mention a heaven and an underworld, nor karmic retribution, it is only concerned with rebirth in the world of man. It states (e.g. in MN I p. 22, abridged):

"I remember one former existence, two, three, ... ten, twenty, thirty, ... a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand, numerous aeons in which the world approaches destruction, numerous aeons in which the world expands ... There I had this name, belonged to this family, this caste, had this livelihood, experienced this happiness and sorrow, lived so long; having disappeared from there I reappeared here, had this name ..."

What conclusions should one draw from this situation? Of two supposedly very old passages one only mentions the underworld and the heavenly world, the other one "is only concerned with rebirth in the world of man". VETTER's own comment is (p. 83): "The juxtaposition of the two formulas allowed persons to mentally combine them and read in them what they expected to find there, namely that the quality of human existence is also the effect of karma." But this avoids the issue. If we assume, with VETTER, that the two passages are in contradiction, the preference for one of the two as representing the position of ancient Buddhism, or even of the Buddha, is purely subjective. But there is no reason to see a contradiction between the two. The fact that one concentrates on heaven and the underworld, and the other on human existences, may indicate that the doctrine of rebirth was given interpretations that fitted the situation, or the mood of the speaker. But both passages fit in with a general concept of karma and rebirth which concerns existences both among human beings and in heaven and the underworld.<sup>16</sup>

The supposition that the doctrine of rebirth was given interpretations that fitted the situation, or the mood of the speaker, seems to find confirmation in the circumstance, emphasized by Lambert SCHMITHAUSEN (1992: 138), that "in the Aśokan inscriptions, there is no mention of rebirth as an animal or *preta* nor even of a return to the world of men, nor is there any instance of rebirth or transmigration terminology. The only thing we find is that ... Aśoka contrasts, with this world, the yonder

16. Interestingly, Vetter ascribes this position to the later years of the Buddha (1988: 83): "... some developments may be expected within the long lifetime of the Buddha, especially that differences in human existence are explained by karma ... and that after death one does not always go to heaven or the underworld, but that one becomes directly a human being if one has no extremely good or bad karma."

world ..., and that he seems to equate the yonder world more or less with heaven ... which will be attained by those who zealously practise his *dhamma*, i.e. moral behaviour.” SCHMITHAUSEN comments: “Provided that the information the inscriptions yield on Aśoka’s view on man’s destiny after death is tolerably complete, this view doubtless looks fairly archaic. In so far as it does not mention an underworld or hell as a place where evil-doers go after death, nor return from heaven to the human world, it clearly looks even more archaic than what appears to be the oldest rebirth theory in the Buddhist canon.” This last remark – about “what appears to be the oldest rebirth theory in the Buddhist canon” – refers to VETTER’s views which we have been discussing. But SCHMITHAUSEN’s suggestion about Aśoka can be dealt with in the same way as VETTER’s views about early Buddhism. SCHMITHAUSEN himself observes (p. 139): “[Aśoka’s] silence may be understandable if these ideas were, in his time, not, or not yet, current or prominent in certain circles (e.g., Brahmanism, or among *ksatriyas*, or common people) and hence ignored by him in favour of a kind of common denominator, or if he himself, and perhaps even (some or most?) lay Buddhists at his time, still stuck to a view closer to the Vedic or *ksatriya* one than to those documented by the Buddhist canon.” One would like to add that Aśoka’s silence may be equally understandable if he, or some or most Buddhists at his time, preferred to concentrate their efforts on rebirth in heaven, rather than occupying themselves with all the other possible forms of rebirth, without, for that matter, rejecting the belief in those other forms of rebirth.

Let us now return to VETTER’s views about earliest Buddhism. Beyond the arguments just discussed, no further ones are given, as far as I can see, in support of the view “that good deeds lead to heaven and bad deeds to the underworld”. And if I evaluate the situation correctly, by far the most important argument in support of this view is precisely the one according to which “[t]he most ancient places found in the Vedas where rebirth is mentioned show only a belief in the other world”. The situation of the Buddha is evidently looked upon as a development of the one found in the earliest relevant Vedic texts. Since the early Vedic passages show only a belief in the other world, passages in the Buddhist canon that remotely suggest the same must somehow, so VETTER, belong to earliest Buddhism.

This is of course a dangerous procedure to follow. The tendency to look for the origin of the theory of karma and rebirth in the Veda, once

popular, is being severely criticized these days.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, one should not confuse Vedic passages that show a belief in the return of a person in his own family, with those other ones that show acquaintance with the theory of karma and rebirth. The former belief is very wide-spread indeed. It is attested in ethnographic literature pertaining to all the continents, and its presence in Vedic literature is hardly remarkable. Whether there is a historical connection between this belief and the theory of karma and rebirth is far from obvious, and has not so far been shown.

We can, and must, conclude that the evidence in support of the theory that in early Buddhism “good deeds lead to heaven and bad deeds to the underworld” and nowhere else is extremely precarious. Let us now consider the views of another scholar who has applied a similar method. This scholar is Fumio ENOMOTO. His article called “On the annihilation of *karman* in early Buddhism” (1989) begins with the following reflections:<sup>18</sup>

As is well known, early Buddhism and early Jainism have common aspects. Comparing the practice of the former with that of the latter, however, we find a radical difference between them. The main point of Jaina practice is to annihilate *karman* (action and latent substance left behind by it, which produces effect), while that of [the] Buddhist one is to annihilate *kleśa* (mental defilement). The idea of *karman* and transmigration appeared already in the early Upaniṣads, which are thought to have been composed before the formation of Buddhism and Jainism. We see many descriptions of how one transmigrates according to his own *karman* in the literatures of early Buddhism as well as of early Jainism. Jaina practice to emancipate from this transmigration fundamentally consists of making no new *karman* and eliminating hitherto accumulated *karman* accordingly. However, Buddhist practice would be the annihilation of *kleśa*, but not of *karman*. This seems to reflect the view whose explicit expression is found in ... later Buddhist literature ... Then did early Buddhism have no idea of the elimination or annihilation of *karman*?

This question determines the subsequent development of the paper and, I dare say, its outcome. The first and main conclusion is (p. 55): “*karman* is to be shaken off in Buddhism as well as in the early Upaniṣads and Jainism.” The justification of this conclusion is one rather short section, the main statements of which are (p. 44-45):

17. BODEWITZ 1992; 1993; 1996; 1996a; BRONKHORST 1993a. See further SCHMITHAUSEN 1995: 49 f.

18. ENOMOTO 1989: 43-44.

Making an exhaustive investigation on the occur[r]ence of the word *karman* (*kamma*) in early Buddhist literature, we find some descriptions which show the elimination of *karman*. One of them is found in the *Udāna* ... 3.1, where a mendicant who eliminates hitherto made *karman* is described in verse.

...

The idea of shaking off *karman* or the like is expressed in the literatures of the early Upaniṣads and Jainism. ... Thus this verse of the *Udāna* includes the ideas which are common with the early Upaniṣads and Jainism.

I do not know whether ENOMOTO has any further evidence than only this verse from the *Udāna*; he certainly does not refer to it in this section. He only adds a footnote which shows that the reading of the crucial word *kamma* in the verse is not guaranteed: other versions evidently had *kāma*. This, of course, weakens his position even further.

One has the strong impression that ENOMOTO is not really bothered by this lack of evidence. His main argument is evidently that this idea occurs in the Upaniṣads and Jaina literature, and that it therefore **must** have been part of early Buddhism.

Strengthened by this conclusion, ENOMOTO draws some other ones, on equally slender textual evidence. His fifth conclusion, in particular, deserves our attention. Here ENOMOTO cites the following passage from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (p. 52):

*so navañ ca kammaṃ na karoti, purāṇaṃ ca kammaṃ phussa phussa vyanti-karoti, sandiṭṭhikā nijjarā akālikā ehipassikā opanayikā paccattaṃ veditabbā viññūhi* (AN I, p. 221)

He translates:

He makes no new *karman* and annihilates former *karman*, experiencing (its retribution) successively. Such is (the way of) wearing out (*karman*) which is visible in this life, takes no time, is what one is to come and see, leads onwards (to the Goal) and is to be known by the intelligent each for himself.

ENOMOTO then comments:

The word *nijjarā* (*nirjarā*) is a technical term of Jaina practice and indicates the annihilation of *karman*, which also appears in the preceding passage of the introduction of Jaina practice. This word appearing here in Buddhist practice would also indicate the same. The practice “He makes no new *karman* and annihilates former *karman*” also is almost the same as the Jaina practice ... introduced in the preceding passage. However, the way of the annihilation is different. This is enabled by shaking of *karman* itself in early Jaina practice, but by the successive experience of the retribution of *karman* with the three fundamental stages (i.e., *śīla*, *samādhi* and *prajñā*, JB) in this Buddhist practice as the expression “experiencing (its retribution) successively” shows.

The conclusion is easy to anticipate (p. 55): “*karman* may be annihilated by the successive experience of its retribution with the three fundamental stages of Buddhist practice.” Once again, one isolated passage from the early Sūtra-Piṭaka is deemed to be sufficient to justify a conclusion about early Buddhism; the fact that there is a close similarity with early Jainism is apparently considered a supporting factor.<sup>19</sup>

The opinions which we have considered so far share one common feature. The scholars concerned apparently believe that traces of the teachings of the Buddha, or of earliest Buddhism if you like, can only be found in passages that do not fit in well with the generally recognized canonical points of view. Many earlier scholars, too, have started from this assumption, and they have produced an impressive collection of mutually differing views about earliest Buddhism.<sup>20</sup> Can we really expect to make any progress in this direction? I would think not.

Equally useless seems to me the postulate that earliest Buddhism – i.e., the teaching of the Buddha – must have been more or less identical with what we find in the relevant Vedic and Jaina texts. Much of what we find in the early Buddhist texts evidently deviates quite considerably from those ancient sources. This must then represent later developments within Buddhism. How are these developments to be explained? Do we have to conclude that the Buddha – who claimed to have a new message – had really nothing new to say, whereas his early followers – who claimed to preserve the teachings of their master – could not restrain their originality? Is this not putting things on their head? Of course new developments may have taken place after the death of the Buddha, and I think it is undeniable that they have. But admitting this is not the same as practically denying that the Buddha had anything new to say by reducing his teachings, as far as the texts possibly allow, to something more or less identical with what we find in certain Vedic and Jaina texts.

19. The idea of annihilation of *karman* through the experience of its painful results is elsewhere in the Buddhist canon attributed to the Jainas; see BRONKHORST 1993: 26 f.
20. It is somewhat surprising that Chr. LINDTNER (1997: 113) considers it “unfortunate that the debate about precanonical Buddhism ... has ... largely been discontinued”. LINDTNER himself makes some suggestions about “precanonical Buddhism” in which similarity with Vedic views is treated as supporting evidence (e.g. pp. 117, 135 f.).

This is not to deny that there are passages in the Buddhist canon that are very similar to ideas current among non-Buddhists of the time. But rather than concluding that they, and only they, represent earliest Buddhism, while all the rest was made by monks, it is precisely these passages whose presence in the Buddhist canon can be most easily explained on the assumption that they are **not** part of earliest Buddhism. They may have been borrowed from the other currents which scholars like ENOMOTO have so carefully identified.

More generally, I would like to propose two simple methodological rules. In the first place, in order to find the teachings of the Buddha, we should look for ideas that are most clearly distinct from the other currents of that time that we know of, rather than different from generally recognized Buddhist canonical views. Secondly, rather than rejecting beforehand the whole canon with the only exception of one's few favorite passages, I propose to reject more parsimoniously: in principle the canon preserves the teachings of the Buddha, but in practice certain ideas and practices presented in it have to be discarded for specifiable reasons.

These rules have of course to be handled with great care. I will not enter into a discussion of the theoretical and practical difficulties involved, but rather turn directly to the question that concerns us here: What was the Buddha's attitude with regard to karma and rebirth?

Our first methodological rule leaves no doubt as to the answer. ENOMOTO started his article with the observation concerning the radical difference between early Buddhism and early Jainism. His methodological approach looked upon this situation as problematic. Our first methodological rule, on the other hand, sees in it supporting evidence that possibly the Buddhist textual tradition has here preserved an original element of the Buddha's teaching. Contrary to other movements of that time, the Buddha did not consider physical activity to be the cause of rebirth, but rather the intention behind it. Numerous passages about the importance of 'thirst' (*trṣṇā*) are in agreement with this view. Thirst is close to intention, in that it can express itself in physical activity, but is clearly distinct from it.<sup>21</sup>

21. Such a point of view is not entirely unknown to early non-Buddhist literature; cp. Brh-Up 4.4.6 f. (with *kāma*), where VETTER (1996: 54 n. 20) suspects Buddhist influence. The Jaina Sūyagaḍa (2.6.27 f.) expresses its disgust at the Buddhist position, which might even justify cannibalism: "If a savage puts a man on a spit and roasts him, mistaking him for a fragment of the granary ... he will not be

Lambert SCHMITHAUSEN (1986: 205 ff.) has once raised the question whether karma already played a role in the theory of rebirth of early Buddhism. SCHMITHAUSEN recognizes the acceptance of rebirth at this early period, but wonders whether karma played a decisive role in it. In support of this reflection he points at the frequent mention of thirst in the early texts. I have already explained that SCHMITHAUSEN's question seems justified to me. But instead of speculating about a completely different view of rebirth which supposedly characterized the teachings of the Buddha, it seems to me more than sufficient to conclude the obvious: that the Buddha interpreted karma differently; not as just physical activity, but rather as the mental attitudes (intention, desire, etc.) behind it.

I have so far presented two positions, two different approaches, with regard to karma and rebirth in early Buddhism. I shall now present what seems to me crucial further evidence supporting the position I have been defending. This position does not only do more justice to the main body of the texts – this we have seen. In addition it enables us to explain the presence of a great number of deviating passages in the texts, including the ones which ENOMOTO used as evidence for his theory. Since I have dealt with these issues already in some recent publications, I cannot enter into details.<sup>22</sup> But nor do I need to, for my central argument is very simple.

Many of the contemporaries of the Buddha looked upon karma as physical and mental activity.<sup>23</sup> This karma was believed to determine one's future life. Many of those contemporaries did not want a future life. How could they avoid it? Two types of solution are known from the literature, both of which depend crucially on the concept of karma as physical and mental activity. Rebirth could be avoided by not acting, physically as well as mentally. This aim was accomplished – or at least efforts were made in that direction – in two ways. Some, most notably the Jainas (but not only they) practised asceticism which focused on bodily and mental immobility. The discomfort these practices entailed were looked upon as the results of earlier actions which disappeared by giving rise in this way to retributive experience. Once freed from these

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guilty of murder according to our views ... that will be a meal fit for Buddhas to feast on" (BOLLÉE 1974: 28).

22. BRONKHORST 1993; 1995.

23. JOHNSON (1995: 11 ff.) and following him DUNDAS (1997: 504) emphasise Jainism's original denial of the validity of intention in defining an action.

earlier actions, physical and mental motionlessness until death could guarantee final liberation.

Besides these ascetics, there were those who believed that the real self does not participate in the actions of body or mind. Identification with those actions is therefore essentially based upon a mistake, a misunderstanding concerning one's true nature. Insight into the true, inactive, nature of the self is the remedy for these thinkers, and I do not need to remind you that this conviction is widely represented indeed in Indian thought.

Note again that both these solutions depend vitally on a certain concept of karma. Karma has to be physical and mental activity, and not (or not primarily) the intentions behind it. This is particularly clear in the case of the ascetic practices tending towards immobility. They are attempts to stop physical and mental activity. The belief in a by nature inactive self, too, is clearly related to the view that activity brings about the results one wishes to avoid. The Buddha, however, had a different concept of karma. Not physical and mental activities as such, but intentions and desires were for him responsible for rebirth. This means that neither of the two solutions discussed could possibly be acceptable to him. Both of them are indeed criticized in the early Buddhist texts. The Jaina way of immobilization is ridiculed, and the idea that insight into the true nature of the self could lead to liberation is rejected. His problem, contrary to that of his contemporaries, was psychological, so his solution had to be psychological as well. And indeed, the early Buddhist texts contain descriptions of the path to liberation which are not attempts to immobilize the body and the mind, but which concern psychological processes, the exact nature of which it is difficult to evaluate. I think here in the first place of the long description centering on mindfulness and culminating in the so-called Four Dhyānas and liberation through a liberating insight.

My main point so far is that the Buddha's path to liberation was essentially different from that of his contemporaries, because his concept of karma was different from theirs. I do not know whether he was the only one in his time to think of karma in this way. It seems however certain that his followers kept having difficulties accepting this different concept of karma. This I conclude from the fact that practices and ideas related to the other concept of karma keep on popping up within the Buddhist tradition. Interestingly, such practices and ideas are often presented as correct at one place in the early texts, and criticized and

rejected at another. Examples have been discussed in the earlier publications referred to, and only some illustrations will be taken from them.

“A Sūtra of the Majjhima Nikāya (the Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta) and its parallels in Chinese translation describe and criticise the Jainas as practising ‘annihilation of former actions by asceticism’ and ‘non-performing of new actions’. This can be accepted as an accurate description of the practices of the Jainas. But several other Sūtras of the Buddhist canon put almost the same words in the mouth of the Buddha, who here approves of these practices.”<sup>24</sup> This practice – a form of which ENOMOTO considered to belong to earliest Buddhism, as we have seen – clearly is of the kind that we may call “inactivity asceticism”. It cannot be excluded that the form adopted by at least some Buddhists distinguished itself in some details from the form accepted by the Jainas (as ENOMOTO maintains), but even in this adapted form it corresponds to a concept of karma which was not that of the Buddha.

For certain non-Buddhists, insight into the true nature of the real self served the purpose of ending the mistaken identification with one’s actions, as we have seen. The allegedly first sermon of the Buddha accomplishes the same aim, using an amazing device. It supposedly ended the first monks’ mistaken identification with their actions, not with the help of a doctrine of the self, but with a doctrine of the not-self: since none of the constituents of a person are his self, he turns away from them; “turning away he is dispassionate; through dispassion he is freed; in the freed one the knowledge comes to be: ‘I am freed’, and he knows: Birth has been destroyed, the pure life has been lived, what was to be done has been done, so that there is no more return here”.<sup>25</sup>

In the most recent of the earlier publications mentioned above I also pointed out that practices and ideas corresponding to the non-Buddhist concept of karma continued to exert an attraction on the Buddhists, even long after the days of “early Buddhism”.<sup>26</sup> I there drew attention to the practice of physical inactivity advocated by the Chinese master called Mahāyāna in the 8th century in Tibet, and to the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine in Mahāyāna Buddhism, which is so close to the non-Buddhist idea of an inactive self that even some Buddhist texts draw attention to it.

24. BRONKHORST, 1995: 334-35.

25. BRONKHORST 1995: 344.

26. BRONKHORST 1995: 346-47.

I consider all these cases supplementary evidence (if evidence was needed) supporting the position that Buddhism – and this means in this case no doubt: the Buddha – introduced a concept of karma that differed considerably from the commonly held views of his time. Let me specify, in order to avoid misunderstanding, that I do not wish to state categorically that no contemporary of the Buddha shared his concept of karma (how could I know?), and nor do I wish to claim that in later periods only the Buddhists accepted it.

Let us return to the subject-matter of this lecture: Did the Buddha believe in karma and rebirth? The answer, in so far as the texts allow us to reach an answer, seems to me an unambiguous ‘yes’. The Buddha did believe in rebirth, and he did believe that one’s future destiny is determined by what we may call karma, but which is in some essential respects different from what his contemporaries meant by it. For the Buddha, one’s future destiny is determined by what passes in one’s mind, i.e., by desires and intentions.<sup>27</sup> And there is no reason to think that this future destiny consisted for him exclusively of heaven and underworld.

One last question: How do we explain that the Buddha’s concept of karma, i.e. of the factors that determine the details of one’s future life, differed in such an essential manner from commonly held views in his time? Here, I would think, one can only speculate. It is possible that he inherited this conviction from others, perhaps from his parents. Or, and this is a possibility that cannot be discarded offhand, he modified his views in this respect in the light of the experiences that led to, or constituted, his liberation. All this, I repeat, is speculation. But the second possibility shows that it is not guaranteed that the Buddha continued here an earlier tradition. Historians of ideas have a tendency to look for antecedents, and they are right in doing so. But this tendency should not lead to a historiography of ideas which does no longer allow for new ideas to come into being. The Buddha’s concept of karma may have been such a new idea, and the solution he offered to the problem of rebirth was almost certainly something new in his time.

27. To be distinguished from mere mental activity, which – being one form of activity – also other religious movements, such as Jainism, tried to suppress.

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## Abbreviations:

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| AN     | Āṅguttara-Nikāya, ed. R. Morris, E. Hardy, 5 vols., London 1885-1900 (PTS)                       |
| AS     | Asiatische Studien, Études Asiatiques, Bern  |
| Brh-Up | Brhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad   |
| BSR    | Buddhist Studies Review, London  |
| ChSS   | Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Varanasi   |
| JIP    | Journal of Indian Philosophy, Dordrecht  |
| MKNAWL | Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde, Amsterdam |
| MN     | Majjhima-Nikāya, ed. V. Trenckner, R. Chalmers, 3 vols., London 1888-1899 (PTS)                  |
| N.S.   | New Series   |
| ÖAW    | Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien  |
| PTS    | Pali Text Society, London  |
| SAWW   | Sitzungsberichte der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, Phil.-hist. Kl., Wien                  |
| SN     | Saṃyutta-Nikāya, ed. L. Feer, 5 vols., London 1884-1898 (PTS)                                    |
| StII   | Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik  |
| WZKS   | Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens, Wien   |