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Symposium: Lived Karma

Interpersonal Karma: A Note

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It has been twenty years since Jonathan S. Walters sought to dislodge the ingrained understanding of karma as a purely individual phenomenon. Since then, interesting work has been done on this issue, but less than one might hope and much of it siloed, addressing either texts or ethnography, either this region or that one. One of the most exciting aspects of the recent symposium on lived karma was the opportunity to explore these issues with scholars of widely varied expertise. One theme that emerged is what I will term "interpersonal karma." Across the Buddhist world, we find not only that our relationships are constituted by karmic affinities, but also that in many contexts those relationships are seen as the media through which karma unfolds. These understandings not only provide frameworks for interpreting relationships but underwrite ritual technologies through which people can form, maintain, or disperse these affinities.

Keywords: karma; narrative; ritual; lived religion; relationships

It has been twenty years since Jonathan S. Walters sought to dislodge the ingrained understanding of karma as a purely individual phenomena in his landmark essay "Communal Karma and Karmic Community in Theravāda Buddhist History." In that piece, he coined the term sociokarma and sketched out a sevenfold typology of the social dimensions of karma (Walters 2003). In the years that have passed, interesting work has been done on this issue, but less than one might hope and much of it siloed, addressing either texts or ethnography, either this geographic region or that one. One of the most exciting aspects of the recent symposium on lived karma, hosted by Dartmouth College and organized by Susanne Kerekes, Sara Swenson, and Jessica Zu, was the opportunity to explore these issues with scholars of widely varied expertise. One theme that emerged strongly from our discussion is what I will term "interpersonal karma" or "relational karma," a theme that overlaps with but extends beyond Walters' types. Across the Buddhist world, we find not only that our relationships are constituted by karmic affinities from prior lives, as Walters observed, but also that in many contexts those relationships are seen as the media through which karma unfolds. These understandings not only provide frameworks for interpreting relationships but underwrite ritual technologies of connectionwork[1] through which people can form, maintain, or disperse these affinities. In this critical note, I want to briefly survey this theme, with particular focus on the Chinese tradition that is my own specialty, but drawing upon the scholarship of others to highlight resonances with concepts and practices in the Tibetan and Theravada spheres.

Karmic Bonds, Good and Bad

That relationships are karmically constituted is well-attested in scholarship. Walters terms this the "co-transmigration of social units" and identifies the Buddha and his intimates association across lifetimes in the Jatakas as the paradigmatic example (Walters 2003: 21–22; see also Strong 1997). Appleton picks up on

[1] I take this term from Williams-Oerberg (2021), discussed briefly below.

this theme in her study of Buddhist and Jain multi-life narratives. She notes that this is more than simple karmic confluence, wherein similar karma leads people to be reborn together; emotional ties endure across lives that she dubs bonds of love and hatred (Appleton 2014: 140–150). Positive bonds are amply attested in the ethnographic record. Walters himself begins his essay with an anecdote about being "adopted" by the parents of a Sri Lankan friend as the rebirth of a son who had died (Walters 2003: 9). Nicola Tannenbaum has shown that among the Shan people of Thailand, such identifications of people as rebirths of particular individuals are common (Tannenbaum 2015). Though the Shan seem to be an outlier in the frequency of such identifications, the possibility is entertained in many cultures across the Buddhist world and there are cases of people marking the bodies of the deceased in order to identify their rebirth by a corresponding birthmark in Myanmar, Thailand, Tibet, Japan, and China (Ohkado 2017).[2] In Chinese cultures, such past life ties are more commonly identified by feeling. There is a well-developed terminology surrounding this that originates in Buddhism but is used much more widely. "To have a karmic tie" (*you yuanfen* 有緣分) is commonly used to refer to serendipitous relationships, particularly romantic, where an instant attraction or affinity is felt.[3] When used literally, it indicates that this is connection made in a past life that is being rekindled in the present (Fisher 2014: 85–870). Relationships that do not work out may be explained as "lacking a karmic tie" (*mei yuanfen* 沒緣分), while cases where a clear connection is somehow thwarted by circumstance can be described as "having a tie that was not meant to be" (*you yuan wu fen* 有緣無分).[4] The related term *duyên* is used in a similar way in Vietnam (Swenson 2020: 76). In both China and Vietnam and no doubt elsewhere, these ideas played powerful roles in shaping the larger cultural imagination through fiction (Kao 1989; Mai 2021).

Such ties are not always positive or pleasant, however. Hatred and resentment also span lifetimes. Walters notes that one Pali commentary explains Devadatta's animosity toward the Buddha as a result of him cheating Devadatta in a former existence as a merchant (Walters 1990: 87), while Appleton relates a story from the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* in which a barren woman becomes jealous of her fecund co-wife and causes her repeated miscarriages, eventually killing her. The dying woman vows revenge and the cycle is played out over and over across a series of animal births until the Buddha intervenes (Appleton 2014: 149–50).[5] In Chinese Buddhism, this idea interacted with indigenous notions,[6] resulting in the concept of a karmic creditor (*yuanqin zhaizhu* 冤親債主or *yuanjia zhaizhu* 冤家債主). These are beings, living or dead, whom one has wronged in a past life. In the present life, they continue to bear that grievance (*yuan* 冤) and afflict one until the debt (*zhai* 債) is repaid. These beings appear in ritual texts and narratives and continue to be invoked in present day Taiwan to explain toxic relationships and illness caused by the vengeful dead (Ritzinger 2020: 216–19).[7] While not as common, the term is also used in China in rituals and sermons and less commonly in conversation.[8] The idea also appears in Vietnam, where it is known as "*ong gia*" (Nguyen 2014). In Tibetan traditions, the concept known as "*lenchak*" (*lan chags*) is similar (Seton 2022; Bernstein 2013: 178–79). Like its Chinese counterpart, it can be used to explain both harmful relationships (Kongtrül 2008: 55–56) and disease (Pelayo, Rocha, and Yoezer 2022: 212).[9]

[2] I am grateful to Ben Joffe for this reference.

[3] Based on commentaries on the ancient Chinese dictionary the *Erya* 爾雅, it appears that one early meaning of the term *yuan* 緣was a type of knot on a bow string. Gil Raz, email to the author October 22, 2022.

[4] Literally "having a tie, lacking the fate/status." Some construe *fen* 分as *mingfen* 命分, or fate, others as *mingfen* 名分, or status. In practice this amounts to the same thing, since it is the status of husband, wife, etc. that is not fated. I am indebted to Erica Fox Brindley, Hsiao-lan Hu, Xiao-bin Ji, Terry Kleeman, Misha Tadd, Lidu Yi, and others for helping me think through this issue (personal communication October 31, 2023).

[5] This story is presented as a gloss on the famous verse: For never here/Do hatreds cease by hatred./By freedom from hatred they cease:/This is a perennial truth.

[6] More work remains to be done on this topic, but for brief suggestive accounts see (Huang 2021: 112–19; Liu 2016: 1–7)

[7] One also finds a similar dynamic played out in stories in which debtors, sometimes literal, as reborn as animals in the households of their creditors, who here play a more passive role (Cheung 1995: 63–64; Gjertson 1980: 58, 60–66).

[8] Xuan Fang 宣方, associate professor of Buddhist Studies, Renmin University, WeChat message to the author, February 8, 2023.

Karmic Technologies to Tie and Untie Relationships

Yet interpersonal karma is not simply an intellectual exercise in which inexplicable attractions and animosities are traced back beyond the temporal horizon. Interpersonal karma also underwrites karmic technologies to form, maintain, and dissolve these relationships.

Relationships can be formed and maintained in various ways. In Theravada traditions, it is not uncommon to seek rebirth in relationship to a particular person, such as a family member or a friend, which Walters terms "sociokarmic aspiration" (Walters 2003: 24). Among the Shan in northern Thailand, making merit together, or having merit made on their joint behalf, facilitates rebirth together (Tannenbaum 2015: 110). Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg (2021) has highlighted the formation and maintenance of karmic bonds—which she calls "connectionwork"—as a central aim of Tibetan Buddhist ritual as well. In Chinese cultures, gifts, such as rosaries or books, are commonly given in Buddhist contexts. Known literally as "karmic-bond-tying items" (*jieyuan pin* 結緣品), these tokens are bestowed by someone more senior to someone more junior (a monastic to a layperson, a temple volunteer to a new visitor) to form affinities with the Dharma generally but also with a particular temple, master, etc. One such rosary that I received in Taiwan included a photo of the master on the central bead lest I forget with whom I had just formed a bond. The most common purpose of such rosaries, of course, is tracking the recitation of the Buddha Amitabha's name. Through this practice devotees form and strengthen a karmic bond that will lead to rebirth in his Land of Bliss (*jile shijie* 極樂世界). In medieval Japanese Pure Land this karmic tie was given concrete form in a practice in which a dying devotee would hold a cord tied to an image of the Buddha to facilitate rebirth (Stone 2016: 154–56).

Ritual can also be used to dissolve troublesome relationships. In Chinese traditions, debts to karmic creditors can be resolved through repentance and other rituals. Many such liturgies dedicate merit to them in order to "untie grievance and untangle its knots (*jieyuan shijie* 解冤釋結). Elsewhere, I have discussed a community in Taiwan in which simple repentance and merit-making rituals are used to dissolve relationships with creditors including abusive boyfriends and cancer-causing ghosts (Ritzinger 2020: 11–13). In Xiamen, Avi Darshani has observed a fascinating practice employed as part of a life releasing ritual in which practitioners mold an effigy of their body (*tishen* 替身) from a steamed bun to cast into the waters to feed the karmic creditors whom presumably they have fed upon in the past (Darshani 2021: 124).[10] In Tibetan Buddhism, karmic debts can also be ritually resolved. Karmic creditors are among the beings to receive the visualized offering of the body in *chöd* (*gcod*) (Seton 2022; Bernstein 2013: 166; Stott 1989: 224) and in Nyingma rites to avert premature death (Germano 1997: 349) as well as in the"mountain smoke offering" (*ri bo bsang mchod*) liturgy by Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé (Seton 2022). Such rituals do not seem to be common in Theravada countries, but at the symposium Susanne Kerekes related a field anecdote about a woman unable to extricate herself from a toxic friendship. According to an astrologer the woman consulted, the pair had been married in a former life and vowed to be reborn together but now the relationship had soured.[11] He recommended that she visit a shrine at a particular monastery and recite a repentance-like liturgy consisting of a generic series of apologies and resolutions for good behavior.

[9] It should be noted that in all cases, this is not the only model of disease and exists alongside other frameworks, including modern medicine.

[10] Darshani attributes this practice to the ritual eclecticism of the group's guiding teacher, the Taiwanese master Haitao 海濤, connecting the effigy to Daoist and Chinese Tantric practices, but Haitao also has connections to Karma Kagyu, suggesting *chöd* (discussed below) may be another source of inspiration. While Dashani's translation refers to "enemies and relatives' karmic creditors," the underlying Chinese is *yuanqin zhaizhu*. The karmic creditors were the enemies or intimates/relatives in a past existence. This does not detract, however, from his excellent study.

[11] Interestingly, this echoes Appleton's observation that multi-life relationships in Indian Buddhist narratives are unpredictable and ultimately need to be escaped (Appleton 2014: 136). In my own fieldwork, I have likewise heard the *qin* 親of *yuanqin zhaizhu*, literally "intimacy" or "an intimate," glossed as a love that has curdled into resentment (Ritzinger 2020: 216).

Conclusion

Variations on the theme of interpersonal karma can thus be found across the Buddhist world. It figures in narrative but looms larger in the lived Buddhism of ordinary people for whom relationships are karmic and karma is relational. Whether affectionate or resentful, the idea of karmic bonds allows Buddhists to interpret their relationships transtemporally as more than contingent happenstance, while ritual concretizes this through karmic technologies with which to do connectionwork (or disconnectionwork). The prevalence of this idea ought to give us some pause about the hypothesis posited in Obeyesekere's grand Weberian imaginary experiment that the ethicization of karma led to a dispersal in India of the co-transmigratory units he saw in small-scale societies (Obeyesekere 2002). We might, instead, follow Durkheim to suggest that not only is karma social as Walters observed; karma is society. It is a projection of the human web of interpersonal relations and reciprocity into which we are all born. It is always already there but never entirely understood, universally shared in the abstract, but also unique for each individual. Sometimes chosen and sometimes not, these relationships shape our lives, opening up certain opportunities and constraining others. Increasing social complexity might make karmic relationship more, not less, appealing as a framework for understanding and navigating relationships. If this is so, then interpersonal karma is a powerful entry point through which to investigate Buddhism as a lived religion. This note has necessarily been a very partial and incomplete survey of the term based on my own work and often passing references scattered across the scholarly literature. We hope that future work will pursue this theme both within and across traditions, in literature and liturgy and in living communities.

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