

SUNY series in Buddhist Studies

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CONSTITUTING
COMMUNITIES

*Theravāda Buddhism and
the Religious Cultures of
South and Southeast Asia*

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STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Published by
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS
ALBANY

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Printed in the United States of America

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For information, address
State University of New York Press
90 State Street, Suite 700, Albany, NY 12207

Production, Laurie Searl
Marketing, Michael Campochiaro

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Constituting communities : Theravada Buddhism and the religious cultures of South and Southeast Asia / edited by John Clifford Hold, Jacob N. Kinnard and Jonathon S. Walters.

p. cm.—(SUNY series in Buddhist studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7914-5691-9 (alk. paper)—ISBN 0-7914-5692-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Buddhism—Social aspects—Asia, Southeastern. 2. Buddhism—Social aspects—South Asia. 3. Monastic and religious life (Buddhism) 4. Theravāda—Buddhism—History—20th century. I. Hold, John, 1948— II. Kinnard, Jacob N. III. Walters, Jonathan S. IV. Series.

BQ4570.S6 C66 2003
294.3'91'095—dc21

2002075877

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book
is inspired by and dedicated to
Frank E. Reynolds

ONE

COMMUNAL KARMA AND KARMIC COMMUNITY
IN THERAVĀDA BUDDHIST HISTORY

Jonathan S. Walters

INTRODUCTION:
SOCIOKARMA IN CONTEMPORARY SRI LANKA

THIS ESSAY BEGINS with my experience studying and living in a rural Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhist village on and off since 1984. On numerous occasions my deep affection for this village and its environs has been given a karmic explanation by my village friends, who consider it obvious that during previous lives I have lived there and experienced parallel social relationships with the rebirth precursors of these same villagers. Thus, for example, my university friend's mother very quickly decided that I must be a son of hers who died shortly before my own birth, come back to her in this unlikely form, a belief she instantiated by calling me "son" and teaching me to refer to everyone else in her extended family and indeed in "our" village at large according to the kinship terms that would be appropriate were I in fact her own son. Likewise, my friends often have tried to make sense of our friendships—sometimes an odd meeting of worlds, to say the least—as the karmic result of having been friends during previous lifetimes (*pera ātma mitrayo*).

More striking still is the commonplace expression of an aspiration or hopeful intention (called *prārthanāwa*) for the constitution or continuance of specific social relationships during future lives. Typical is this aspiration, which I happened to receive in the mail while composing the present essay: "I think that you really are as it were my very own brother," writes the wife of a village

friend, "We make the aspiration, 'definitely during the next life, may you be born in our very own family.'" Such aspirations, expressed in person or in letters, may include different social relationships (be my friend, father, son, husband), different specifications as regards time (in the next life, in some future life, in many future lives, in every life until we meet Maitreya Buddha and attain *nibbāna*), and as regards space (in this village, here in Sri Lanka, in America, in a Buddhist home). But the underlying assumption that karma constitutes present and future social relationships is clear throughout the variation. Family, friendship, and village community itself are constituted, at least in part, by previous karma, and will be constituted in the future by present karma. And it is important to remember that such *prārthanāwas*, far from being merely descriptive or informative, are themselves mental actions (karma) believed efficacious in bringing about desired sociokarmic results.

I should be clear from the outset that I do not take karma to be a mere proposition, idea, doctrine, concept, or hypothesis. The ordinary way it comes up in discussion is instead as an assumption, presupposition, starting point, perspective, orientation, or category of the imagination. Karma is like temperature; no one asks whether temperature exists, but rather whether this particular object is hot or cold, or how to act in response to its temperature. Likewise, I have never heard my village friends debate *whether* there is karma and rebirth, but I have often heard them debate what this particular karma *might be*. In terms of the present discussion, I have not in fact ever heard anyone doubt that I (and they) do have karmic connections to that village community, but rather have heard and participated in lively and sometimes very entertaining reflections on just how it all plays out. And whatever one may consider their epistemological value, these sorts of discussions have very real social effects in the present life, expressing and deepening the bonds of affection and loyalty that characterize social relationships, and implying various rights and responsibilities within the larger community.

It makes perfect sense that community should have a karmic dimension, given the social dimension of virtually all karma. The classic acts of both *puñña* (merit) and *pāpa* (sin) almost always are social affairs. *Dāna* (giving) is always a gift to someone else (or to a group of others), and like other acts of merit (*pūjā*, *poṃa*, *baṇa*, pilgrimage) is regularly performed in groups; it is almost *de rigueur* to dedicate the merit of such acts to other humans (the stock phrase is *jñātimitrādi*, "family, friends, etc."), to the dead, and/or to deities. Likewise, most demeritorious acts also occur in communal settings: various types of killing, theft, sexual impropriety, falsehood, and intoxicated excess would be impossible for the isolated individual, who nevertheless usually remains the predicate of scholarship on karma. So too, karma as result (*vipāka*, *phala*) inevitably has social dimensions because the goodness or badness of a

good or bad rebirth is largely conceived according to social categories such as family, status, wealth, caste, power, and/or political situation. Even birth among the gods, animals, or hell-beings has its social dimensions.

Indeed, it might seem unnecessary to argue that karma has social dimensions and society has karmic dimensions, an overlap that for convenience I dub "sociokarma." But as I shall now proceed to suggest it is actually astonishing how little this conjunction of karma and community has been recognized in the scholarship to date.

SOCIOKARMA IN THERAVĀDA STUDIES AND IN THERAVĀDA HISTORY

To the best of my knowledge the only scholarly study of the phenomenon I call sociokarma has been made by James P. McDermott, who treats it under the designation "group karma."² Drawing on the writings of twentieth-century Thai, Burmese, and Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhists, he identifies three sorts of notions of "group karma," which he designates "overflow karma," "the karma of communal relationship," and "national karma."³ His project being to "analyze some of the contemporary discussion of 'group karma,' and then to attempt to determine whether there are canonical precedents for such notions,"⁴ McDermott proceeds to discuss early Buddhist texts relevant to each of these types.

McDermott takes the term *overflow karma* from a 1956 tract on karma by Bhikkhu Sīlācāra of Ceylon; it refers to the effects of one person's karma upon the karma of others. This phenomenon is especially evident in the case of famous people, whose deeds whether good (the Buddha, Gandhi) or bad (Hitler, Alexander the Great) have had an enormous impact on millions around them.⁵ Another variant on this theme is the well-known idea that a righteous king's righteousness brings prosperity and safety to the entire kingdom, the reverse also being true; McDermott quotes a 1918 declaration by the Thai Supreme Patriarch Prince Vajiranana (Wachirayan) that "the king's acts of piety merit not only himself but the people and the guardian spirits of the kingdom" as well.⁶ More pervasive still is the overflow of all karma, even that produced by ordinary people, which inevitably affects others within one's community.⁷ McDermott finds "canonical precedent" for such a notion of overflow karma in the *Kurudhamma* and *Mañicora Jātakas*, where a perspective very similar to Prince Wachirayan's is clearly articulated,⁸ and in a *sutta* of the *Anguttara Nikāya* (III.172-73), where the Buddha enumerates among the benefits of a well-given gift the inability of thieves, kings, or impious heirs (in addition to fire and water) to destroy one's property in future lives. McDermott writes, "This suggests the recognition that no saṃsāric stream of existence is

completely independent. Although each individual is heir to his deeds alone, the ripening of his karma has consequences that reach beyond himself.”⁹

“The karma of communal relationship” follows directly from this sense of the interconnection of the karma of individual participants in any given social situation: as defined by McDermott, “in any given situation the karma of each individual must be in confluence with that of every other participant in that situation.”¹⁰ Drawing on a book by Thai physician Dr. Luang Suriyabongs, McDermott includes within this categorization the similarity in karma that must underlie birth in a single family, or for that matter within any group. He finds “canonical precedent” for the view not only in the *Anguttara* passage referred to above, but also in the story of the murder of Mahāmoggallāna as recorded in the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*, where “the karma of the sectaries and of the highwaymen had to be in confluence with that of Moggallāna before they could injure him, for they are all executed shortly thereafter.”¹¹

McDermott includes in his category “national karma” a wide range of sociokarmic phenomena that seem to be linked together, and distinguished from the first two types, by their shared political bent: the overflow karma of pious or impious kings (as suggested above by Prince Wachirayan); “family karma” conceived on a national scale (as suggested by Dr. Suriyabongs); the idea that national groups might suffer karmic punishments or enjoy karmic rewards together as groups in the future (or be suffering or enjoying such results as national groups in the present), a view McDermott traces to Egerton C. Baptist of Ceylon; and a variety of group karma perspectives that emerged in Burma during the 1950s and 1960s, including the idea that the meritorious deeds of the state are the actions (karma) of the entire populace, and plans for “state-aided karma” in which the poor would receive the dole as “karmic boosts.”¹² For his “canonical precedent,” McDermott follows Baptist’s lead in examining the story of King Viḍūḍabha’s slaughter of the Śākyans as reported in the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* (*Viḍūḍabhavatthu*) and in the *Jātakatṭhakathā* (*Bhaddasāla Jātaka*), where the Buddha explains: “Monks, if you regard only this present existence it was indeed unjust that the Sākiyas should die in such wise. What they received, however, was entirely just, considering the sin they committed in a previous state of existence . . . [when] they conspired together and threw poison into the river.”¹³

Oddly, having surveyed so much evidence of thinking about “group karma” in both modern and ancient Theravāda, McDermott nevertheless consistently tries to dismiss it as aberrant, atypical, and/or merely modern. Thus, in the case of overflow karma, he simply dismisses as “unorthodox” two extensions of the argument made by Bhikkhu Silācāra, namely that there may be unintentional transference of merit and that there may be transference of demerit. Likewise, the portrayal of the king’s righteousness affecting the pros-

perity of the people, in the *Kurudhamma* and *Manicora Jātakas*, is dismissed as “not a common one in the Pāli canon,” while in the instance of the *Anguttara* list of sociological benefits of individual merit, “it is not necessary, nor even very likely that this notion implies a concept of overflow karma, however. Rather, the point may be simply that in any given situation the karma of each individual must be in confluence with that of every other . . .”¹⁴

In this quotation the second type of group karma, “the karma of communal relationship,” appears to be fully accepted by McDermott, but here too he will not accept the implications drawn from it by Dr. Suriyabongs that

although man creates his own individual Karma, whatever he does will have its effect on his environment too. Thus, he at the same time has a common family-Karma, a racial, or national Karma or a group-Karma. The good he does will not only benefit himself but all others who live with and around him, that is, all sentient beings. And vice versa, evil will not be suffered by himself alone.¹⁵

Shying away from such conclusions, McDermott reduces the idea of karmic confluence to a mere extension of his staunchly individualist perspective: “[I]t is simply the common aspects in the action of certain individuals which lead them into membership in a group, the communal experiences of which are due to each individual member as a result of his own individual past.”¹⁶

All of these strategies are brought to bear against the evidence of the third type of “group karma,” “national karma.” Thus, the straightforward treatment of sociokarma in the Viḍūḍabha story is written off as a “rare exception.”¹⁷ Another text of the same cycle cited by Baptist, in which the slaughter of an innocent Bandhula the Mallian and his thirty-two sons is justified as “the fruit of their misdeeds in previous states of existence,” has according to McDermott “nothing . . . to suggest that this is anything other than the fruition of personal misdeeds of each individual member of the group. To read into this or similar accounts [of which there are many] a developed concept of national karma is to go beyond what is even implicitly warranted by the text. Nevertheless, the fact that Egerton Baptist cites this as an example of national karma is significant, for it points to the shaky character of the foundations on which any case for a classical precedent for a concept of group karma must be built.”¹⁸ Taking up an argument by Rev. Nyanaponika, McDermott further undermines the notion of group results for national misdeeds by pointing out that the same beings will not necessarily be reborn into the same national group during the next life, even though in the same breath he recognizes that none of the authors he discusses shares Rev. Nyanaponika’s assumption that such national continuity need be the case.¹⁹ McDermott concludes his article with the judgment that “[a]lthough isolated cases analogous to . . . overflow

karma, the karma of communal relationship, and national karma are to be found in the *Tipitaka* and early commentaries, their nature and infrequency in this literature make it clear that a systematic concept of group karma was in no sense operative in early Theravāda. . . . It is only in this century, then, that one finds a conscious effort to split with this tradition."²⁰

But McDermott is actually more generous in allowing sociokarma *some* discursive space than are the Western scholars upon whom he in turn draws, for example Winston King, whose *In the Hope of Nibbana*, though the source of McDermott's knowledge of Burmese "state-aided kamma," treats karma as positively antisocial, productive only of social passivity and indifference to others.²¹ And King in turn sees more scope for *any* discussion of karmic society than does the primary scholar upon whom he in turn draws, Max Weber, who considered early Buddhism in general so thoroughly "asocial" as to render contradictory the very existence of Buddhist community, even the community of monks and nuns.²² Yet in his discussion of Buddhist art Weber, like McDermott, presents excellent evidence of the importance of sociokarma in the Theravāda tradition.²³

It may be a question of half empty or half full, but especially in light of the fact that sociokarmic thinking is so utterly commonplace in contemporary Theravāda societies the premodern examples provided (against himself) by McDermott, King, or Weber are alone sufficient to convince me that sociokarma needs to be taken more seriously than McDermott's dismissals would suggest. I say this not merely because sociokarmic thinking is commonplace today, but also because I think McDermott vastly underestimates the significance of the very sources he uses.

Thus, the *Jātaka* as a whole represents an unmistakable monument to sociokarmic thinking in its portrayal of the constantly intersecting previous lives of the same group of people who dominate the Buddha's final/present life. Yasodharā, Rāhula, Sāriputta and Moggallāna, Ānanda, Devadatta, and a whole cast of other characters are reborn together, life after life, developing the social relationships they will have with the Buddha in the present, when the soteriological aspect of those sociokarmic connections comes to the fore. In many *jātakas* this implicit claim that the early Buddhist community was constituted through karmic connections to the person of the Buddha is made explicit by treating the early Buddhist community writ large (sometimes "the present followers of Buddha," sometimes "the five hundred monks") as the Bodhisatta's entire community during countless previous lives human, animal and divine. In the *Jātaka*, the Buddhist community is one huge interconnected karmic web transmigrating together across time toward a group fruition of all the good karma combined, realized in salvific participation in the Buddha's own intimate community.²⁴

This group transmigration clustering around the Bodhisatta is charted out and further expanded in two additional texts which McDermott and the other scholars I have mentioned do not consider at all, the *Buddhavaṃsa* and the *Apadāna*. The *Buddhavaṃsa* lays out a temporal grid across which the future Buddha, meeting up with previous Buddhas, develops his present Buddhahood; in the *Apadāna* the entire early Buddhist community is charted according to that same grid. All the arahants enlightened by Gotama Buddha turn out to be reaping the fruit of actions (karma) they performed in the same festivals, the same kingdoms, the same communities—often the same families—in which the future Buddha himself was performing his own Buddha-becoming actions. The prediction of future Buddhahood bestowed upon the Bodhisatta by each previous Buddha in the *Buddhavaṃsa* is echoed in similar predictions given by those same previous Buddhas to the rebirth precursors of the various ranking relatives and followers of Gotama Buddha, as reported in the *Apadāna*. And the *Apadāna* further enriches the picture of that particular mass of beings transmigrating together in the hope of attaining nirvana in the dispensation of Gotama Buddha, a hope that was not in vain except for Devadatta and his five hundred followers and their families (note the sociokarma) who are sucked into hell along with him. The *Apadāna* does this by drawing all sorts of different sociokarmic links among various subgroups such as married couples repeatedly reborn to marry again (the Buddha and Yasodharā, Mahākassapa and Bhaddā-Kāpilāni), nuclear families whose members meet up again and again as they progress along the Path (the Buddha and Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Rāhula and his sister, the seven daughters of Kiki King of Kāsi, numerous groups of monks), and so forth.²⁵ In these *Khuddaka* and related texts, taken as a whole, we not only find an extraordinary picture of karmic confluence, but also, given the consistent centrality of the Bodhisatta himself in this transmigrating mass, an idea closely approximating "overflow karma." And given that most *jātakas* involve kings and kingdoms, there is far more "national karma" here than McDermott has realized, too.

I would suggest further that ideas of group karma are more common in the *suttas* themselves than McDermott wants to allow. Thus, I would argue that all the *suttas* that describe the effects of good and bad karma imply karmic confluence, given that they involve social status, wealth, and so forth.²⁶ Even if most *suttas* are not as explicit about the synchrony with others' karma as is the *Anguttara* text McDermott cites, we nevertheless have reason to see the developed sociokarmic thinking of the *Jātaka* or the *Apadāna* as a playing out of ideas already there in the *suttas*, rather than as some sort of major deviation from them (which anyway would have occurred long before the twentieth century!). Indeed, in a famous *sutta* of the *Samyutta-nikāya* which is quoted not only in Theravāda but also in Mahāyāna sources,²⁷ and which Buddhaghosa treats as exemplary of "the *suttas*," the Buddha is reported to have declared that

"it is not easy to find a being who has not formerly been your mother . . . your father . . . your brother . . . your sister . . . your son . . . [or] your daughter."²⁸ This being the case, the question becomes what social relationship does *not* have some karmic precursor? At any rate, I obviously do not find an empirical basis for McDermott's claim that a systematic concept of "group karma" became operative in the Theravāda only during the twentieth century. What we find in the full *Jātaka* or the *Apadāna* collections is considerably more ancient than that, and more developed than either the contemporary perspectives cited by McDermott or the warm aspirations of my village friends.

Yet sociokarma remains underdetermined in the scholarship; McDermott, despite his dismissals, is the only scholar who has dealt with it in any depth at all. Thus, John Garrett Jones's well-known 1979 study of the *Jātakas* does not notice this dimension of the collection at all; he includes a chapter on "Karma and Rebirth" that does not mention society, and a chapter on "Social Teachings" that does not mention karma.²⁹ Charles Keyes and Val Daniel's 1983 collection of anthropological studies of karma, even the learned introduction and summary by the editors, respectively, never moves beyond the recognition that karma can effect social status, and that karma itself is a cultural construct that can vary from community to community (both very important points to be sure, but points that fall short of a recognition of karma as constitutive of community, and vice versa).³⁰ By the same token, karma plays almost no role in such seminal collections on Theravāda Buddhist society as the edited volumes on *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka*, *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Burma, Thailand and Laos*, and *The Two Wheels of Dhamma*, nor in such narratives of Theravāda Buddhist social history as Gombrich's *Theravāda Buddhism: a social history from ancient Benares to modern Colombo*³¹ or Chakravarti's *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*.³² Melford Spiro's *Buddhism in Society*, which makes its explicit project to determine the relationship between "kammatic Buddhism" and society, fails to recognize any but mundane (type 1) sociokarma and therefore can portray karma as at best an obstacle to economic development and public charity.³³

The only exceptions to these generalizations that I have been able to find in Western scholarship appear in a volume of essays that in many ways is the precursor of this present volume, and which is similarly inspired by Frank Reynolds's work, namely *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, edited by Juliane Schober. Reynolds's own leadoff essay in that volume calls attention to the social dimensions of the *Jātaka* identification of "rebirth precursors" of the Buddha and "of particular members of his family, of particular disciples, or of other contemporaries."³⁴ It also highlights the several *Paññāsa Jātaka* versions of one of the richest sources of sociokarmic speculation, the story of the romantic co-transmigrations of the rebirth precursors

of the Buddha and his wife.³⁵ John Strong's contribution to Schober's volume takes up precisely this "family affair" in the biography of the Buddha, and remarks significantly that "[k]arma is not only individual, it is collective as well, and as a result, karmic biographies treat not only of the 'histories' of identifiable karmic continua over a series of lives, but also of ongoing karmic nexuses."³⁶ Likewise, Mark Woodward's contribution to the *Sacred Biography* volume highlights the significance of the "cohorts of the Buddhas" who populate the *Jātaka* tradition, stating, "Bodhisattvas do not journey to *nibbāna* alone. Every Buddha has parents, a wife, a son, disciples, chief disciples, a personal servitor, and chief male and female lay donors who follow him on the path to enlightenment. These communities begin to form as the bodhisattva practices the perfection. . . . Future Buddhas will have similar communities. Presumably, they have already begun to form."³⁷ And my own contribution to that volume spells out some initial thoughts about what I call "the co-transmigration of social units" in the *Apadāna* narratives and about the correspondence of that literary trope to a social fact of the early post-Aśokan Period when it was composed, the fact that acts of good karma were in many instances performed jointly by large social groups including families, towns, guilds, and religious associations.³⁸

Thus, my claim *that* there is sociokarma in Theravāda Buddhist tradition is not an especially original one. In its admitted multiplicity the perspective is old, ubiquitous, and fairly obvious. But recent trends in Theravāda Studies—shifts from "early Buddhism" to "Theravāda Tradition," from the ever-decaying original core to the ever-enlarging Buddhist civilization, from the arahant in solitude to the monk as social leader, from a hyper-rational philosophy to a living religion with its own cosmology, soteriology, mythology, and *communitas*—have made it increasingly important that we *do* recognize sociokarma. And given the standing scholarly tradition that would minimize, ignore, or actively deny the presence of sociokarma in Theravāda Buddhist history, I hope it has been a worthwhile exercise to review in these general terms some of the evidence of its significance.

THE TYPES OF SOCIOKARMA

All the examples of sociokarma that I have been able to find fall into seven general categories: (1) social context, (2) overflow karma, (3) karmic confluence, (4) co-transmigration of social units, (5) sociokarmic aspiration, (6) political karma, and (7) the karma of social institutions. Though these obviously overlap, each can be clearly distinguished from the others. I have listed the types in a sort of order, with the degree to which society is explicitly karmic, and karma explicitly social, increasing as the numbers grow larger. In the

present section I describe and discuss these seven types, use them to organize the many examples of sociokarma already given above, and introduce a few further examples. This should help bring some clarity to my so far rather haphazard survey of this important topic, thereby increasing its usefulness as a tool in the study and teaching of the cultures that have presupposed the truth of sociokarmic phenomena. By way of conclusion I provide a couple of examples of how “thinking with sociokarma” can benefit both scholars and practitioners of the Theravāda.

1. The first of my categories, “social context,” refers to the most basic social dimensions of karma, without implying anything beyond the fact that karma can be performed and/or bear results within specifically social situations. With perhaps the exception of purely private acts of merit such as meditation or worship in solitude, or purely self-harming sins such as suicide, all karma occurs in a social context and therefore has inherently social dimensions. Even in my hypothetical counterinstances, the kind of person one becomes through private merit affects his or her community in all sorts of ways, not to mention the social dimensions of suicide. The same social dimensions are of course characteristic of most karmic effects, too, given that most people do belong to and experience their lives within communities. Just as one’s social background, status, wealth, power, gender, age, and other social factors will shape an individual’s actions, so the results of actions are regularly conceived according to those same factors.

The inherently social nature of karma as both action and as result becomes especially clear when a social group undertakes to perform some joint act of merit or sin. Thus, in the *Apadāna* narratives the past-life karmic seed (*kammabija*) or original act of piety which finally bears fruit in any given arahant’s present-life arahantship often turns out to have been a group act, such as participation in a royally sponsored festival, worshipping a *stūpa* “while tagging along with father,” or meeting a previous Buddha in a large assembly, while the ultimate fruit of merit is itself participation in the uniquely salvific, karma-transcending society, a Buddha’s own intimate community. In the *Buddhavaṃsa* staggering numbers of people reportedly gain entry into the Path on single occasions during the times of previous Buddhas. “Our” (*amhākam*, note the sociokarmically charged pronoun) Gotama Buddha likewise usually preached his sermons to large groups; those in the present who are moving toward arahantship in the future have very likely earned some merit in those very group situations, and will realize its result in the future society that is the intimate community of Maitreya or some further future Buddha still.³⁹ As mentioned, “the five hundred monks” or just “the followers” who constitute the Buddha’s intimate community turn out in the *Jātaka* to have perfected themselves through group actions performed in countless previous lives, and in the *Apadāna* the same

turns out to be true of “the five hundred nuns” who formed Mahāpajāpati Gotami’s most intimate community. Likewise, the Śākyaans who are slaughtered by Viḍūḍabha, the five hundred followers and their families sucked into hell with Devadatta, Bandhula the Mallian and his thirty-two sons, and other groups perform *pāpa* karma as a group in the past and/or suffer karmic effects as a group in the present, clarifying the sometimes social context for all action and result of action, evil as well as good.

2. The second type of sociokarma, overflow karma, has already been discussed at some length above. This type differs from “social context” in two ways. First, it is not necessarily the case that overflow karma would bear its results in a shared social time-space; the effects of Gotama’s preaching (or Hitler’s Holocaust) continue to overflow beyond the time-space that Gotama or Hitler occupied. Second, whereas “social context” implies no more than the fact that some karma and results of karma occur within specific social situations, overflow karma implies further that within such a situation one person’s karma directly affects that of others. The directness of this effect in the case of a good king’s overflow karma is clear in the 1345 *Trai Phum*, where the Great *Cakkavatti* King states in his “Sermon of Victory” that “[i]f any ruler or king, while he reigns, acts righteously, and does righteous things, the common people, slaves and free men, will live peacefully and happily, will have stability and balance, and will enjoy good fortune and prosperity; and this is because of the accumulation of the merit of the one who is the Lord above all.”⁴⁰ In his mythic continent of Utturukuru, all the ranking people are born with beautiful bodies and, should they exhibit any flaw, or the common people any affliction, the merit of the *Cakkavatti* is enough to remove them.⁴¹

The overflow karma of Gotama Buddha is paradigmatic of this type because people in the present moving on toward future *nibbāna* in the time of Maitreya or some future Buddha are doing so as part of the ongoing result of their karmic connection(s) with Gotama Buddha during previous lives, which were inadequate to warrant rebirth in his intimate community and *nibbāna* in his *sāsana*, but nevertheless remain soteriologically charged. According to the *Buddhavaṃsa*, all Buddhas create such soteriologically charged “overflow” karmic connections with “countless crores” of beings who meet them but do not attain one of the four stages of the Path then and there.⁴² Woodward recognizes the teleology implicit in this vision of karmically constituted Buddhist community when he speculates that future Buddhas are already constituting sociokarmic connections with members of their future intimate communities in the here and now. These bodhisattas and those with whom they forge their connections are in turn already linked together as ongoing overflow karma of Gotama and other previous Buddhas, whom all have met during previous lives, as becomes explicit in the *Anāgatavaṃsa*.⁴³

I would also categorize as “overflow karma” various doctrines and practices surrounding the so-called transference of merit, in which many

beings somehow share the merit of one individual's piety, through physical actions (such as touching offerings) and verbal expressions (uttering "sādhu!" inviting the deities or the dead to mentally share the merit, dedicating merit to friends, family and relatives) and the ideas upon which these practices are based (about the mechanism by which *anumodanā* works, what non-human beings can and cannot do karmically, etc.). Moreover, and still within this same rubric, it would appear despite McDermott's protestations that, as Bhikkhu Sīlācāra maintained, demerit also can be "shared" or "overflow" in this same way. Thus, for example, the originary sin of the Bodhisatta together with his companions (*sahāgatā*) who eventually are massacred as the Śākyans (the final result for the Buddha himself was the headache he once suffered) is said in the *Apadānatthakathā* to be the mental pleasure they experienced when watching a fishmonger kill fish (*somanassaṃ uppādayimsu*, note the collective verb). Though the *pāpa* belongs most properly to the fishmonger rather than to the boys, it is shared collectively by the Bodhisatta and his compatriots in precisely the same way that a deity or *preta* is said to share in merit; it brings them together again in a future life when they do something even worse, namely poison a river, and together again to suffer the effects of that, as the hapless victims of Vidūḍabha whose collective trickery brings on their own demise.⁴⁴

3. The third type, "karmic confluence," refers to instances when the members of a social group such as a family or neighborhood come into their social relationships on the basis of extremely similar karmic tracks, which, through what Baptist calls a "conspiracy of circumstances," all lead to that same place and time where they find themselves, the shared motivations and predilections that drive them as a group, and so forth. This type is to be distinguished from type 1 (social context) in that, like type 2, it implies a karmic basis for the fact of social context. It is however distinguished from type 2 (overflow karma) because it does not imply a direct karmic relationship *between* anyone, merely individual karmic paths so strikingly similar as to lead different beings to the same time and place. The *Anguttara* text cited above, and indeed all the *anisamsa* texts from the *suttas* to the present that proclaim sociological effects of merit, depend upon this sort of "conspiracy of circumstances": not meeting with bad people implies a negative coincidence with their karma, meeting with good people implies a positive coincidence with their karma, wealth and popularity and position and power are all at least in part social things that must find a niche amidst the sociokarmic circumstances of all others within one's community.⁴⁵

The somewhat common trope of co-birth clearly bespeaks a developed idea of karmic confluence. Most famously, the Buddha is said to have been born at the same instant as his seven "Co-Borns," or in Miss Horner's rendering "Connatal ones" (*Sahajāta*)⁴⁶ who would play key roles in his own final karma-produced existence: Yasodharā, Ānanda, Channa, Kāludāyī, Kanthaka, the Bodhi Tree, and the group of four treasure urns all arose at

that same instant on that Vesak day long ago. While the first four appear from the *Jātakas* and the *Apadāna* to have had more than coincidental karmic relationships with the Bodhisatta, and therefore to better fit the fourth and more sociokarmically determined category, "co-transmigration of social units," Kanthaka the horse and of course the Bodhi Tree and the treasure urns play no previous life role in the *Jātaka* and therefore would best fit within the rubric of this category. Because karmic confluence accounts for all karmic dimensions of society that cannot be explained by the other types, and therefore must be a vast and unfathomable thing as universal as the complete range of everyone's social interactions, everyone with whom any single individual has social interactions throughout her or his entire life is in some general sense a "co-born." Thus, karmic confluence closely overlaps with Sri Lankan trust in horoscopes; because karma determines birth and asterisms encode what is thus determined, the comparison of horoscopes in arranging a marriage is precisely a search for an appropriate karmic confluence. And as John Strong provocatively suggested at the conference where this essay was first presented, there is also room here for thinking about "karmic dispersal," the disjoining of karmic associations.

4. The fourth type of sociokarma is what I consider to be sociokarma proper, namely, the co-transmigration of social units. I believe this is also what John Strong means by "ongoing karmic nexuses." Here society is seen as an explicitly karma-constituted entity, while the social dimensions of karma are explicitly emphasized. Though social context is highlighted, type 4 differs from type 1 in assuming a karmic basis for social relationships. Though the overflow karma of previous and future Buddhas no doubt fuels co-transmigration of social units, especially the co-transmigration of their paradigmatic own intimate communities, unlike type 2, type 4 does not imply one primary actor affecting secondary actors but rather the group as such proceeding together in basic equality (or more precisely, in rotating inequality), and it does require (an extended series of) shared time-places. Likewise, the co-transmigration of social units certainly represents a karmic confluence, realized in lifetime after lifetime, but unlike type 3 that confluence is no mere coincidence in individual karmic streams: the karma itself produces what could awkwardly be called "resociety," the interval between rebirth and its necessary complement, redeath.

Here as in everything, the Buddha's own life and community are paradigmatic. Yasodharā is successively reborn as the Bodhisatta's life-partner through those myriads of *kalpas*; Mahāmāyā and her sister Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī share motherhood of him over and over; Rāhula is his son, Suddhodana his father, and Devadatta his nemesis. Though the exact social relationship also changes from birth to birth—Devadatta may be the leader, Sāriputta the father—the raw fact of social relationship does not change. And as mentioned the unit that co-transmigrates with the Bodhisatta is further universalized until the constituent members of the entire early Buddhist

community turn out to be all the Bodhisatta's close associates from previous lives, in ongoing social relationships (of discipleship, enmity, slander, parental or sexual love, friendship) with him and with each other which develop as karmic patterns unto themselves through these lifetimes, sometimes in very complex ways that have occasioned the speculation of later Theravāda thinkers.⁴⁷

Summing up the importance of this nexus of co-transmigrating cohorts of the Bodhisatta (and Buddha), at the conclusion of a lengthy reflection on the comparative superiority and inferiority of the rebirth precursors of the Buddha and Devadatta, Nāgasena tells King Milinda that:

Devadatta and the Bodhisatta accompanied one another in the passage from birth to birth [and] that meeting together of theirs took place not only at the end of a hundred, or a thousand, or a hundred thousand births, but was in fact constantly and frequently taking place through an immeasurable period of time. . . . And it was not only with Devadatta that such union took place. Sāriputta the Elder also . . . was through thousands of births the father, or the grandfather, or the uncle, or the brother, or the son, or the nephew, or the friend of the Bodhisatta; and the Bodhisatta was the father, or the grandfather, or the uncle, or the brother, or the son, or the nephew, or the friend of Sāriputta the Elder.⁴⁸

And universalizing the trope further still, the co-transmigration of social units is by no means limited to the paradigmatic biography of the Founder and his most intimate disciples.⁴⁹ Such co-transmigration of social units is generalized further into ordinary society at large. I have already mentioned the ways in which sociokarma is taken to constitute village society in Sri Lanka. Ian Stevenson's *Cases of the Reincarnation Type* relates numerous modern Sri Lankan, Thai, and Burmese examples of rebirth successors recognizing and/or entering into relationships with the families and friends of their rebirth precursors. And of course if we take literally the Buddha's statement that it will be hard to meet someone who has *not* been a member of one's immediate family in some previous life, it will be clear that there is room to conceive of literally all society, like its homologue the *Jātaka*, as one big web of co-transmigrating social units. Nāgasena continues from the passage above about the Buddha's constant co-transmigration with his cohorts to inform King Milinda that "[a]ll beings in fact . . . who, in various forms as creatures, are carried down the stream of transmigration, meet, as they are whirled along in it, both with pleasant companions and with disagreeable ones."⁵⁰ And so indeed does this category also include the negative examples mentioned above of groups transmigrating together around bad group deeds, including the Śākyaans who are destroyed by Viḍūḍabha for having once jointly enjoyed the killing of fish and later for jointly poisoning a river, the five hundred followers of Devadatta and their families who are sucked into Avīci hell together after repeated lifetimes as Devadatta's

minions,⁵¹ Bandhula and his thirty-two sons,⁵² and families tragically wiped out in bus wrecks in Sri Lanka.

5. The fifth type, "sociokarmic aspiration," flows directly from the fourth. It refers to the means by which Theravāda Buddhists attempt to act upon the presupposition that social groups are karmically produced and productive in the process of co-transmigration. Thus, for example, Milinda and Nāgasena are born together in their appointed roles as the result of such aspirations made by these men's rebirth precursors.⁵³ The paradigmatic aspiration to be born in the kingdom of Maitreya Buddha is itself fundamentally social, predicated upon being *with him* in his intimate community and often including the wish for others in one's present community to be part of that future community as well.

It will be clear that sociokarmic aspirations can take many forms. These variations on the basic theme can be categorized into two broad subtypes: (a) the aspiration that oneself or another be reborn in some particular social status, regardless of the other beings who constitute the particular society within which that status is enjoyed; and (b) the aspiration for continuity in some particular present social relationship, that is, the aspiration that the transmigrating individuals who constitute it meet up with each other in future transmigrations too.

Under the rubric of the first subdivision (a) we could include explicitly selfish sociokarmic aspirations such as the Burmese inscriptional wishes for high status, wealth, or pretty wives, mentioned by Weber,⁵⁴ as well as more altruistic but still individually framed aspirations such as the Bodhisatta's aspiration for Buddhahood, or the typical person's aspiration to play a role in the intimate community of a future Buddha such as Maitreya. In the *Apadāna* the rebirth precursors of most of the disciples in Gotama Buddha's intimate community singled out for their special talents or relationship to the Buddha—Sāriputta as chief among those with wisdom, Moggallāna as master of psychic powers, Kāludāyi as best "pleaser" (*pasādaka*) of the people, Ānanda as best servitor, and so forth⁵⁵—aspire to that social status as the culmination of their seed-pieties during previous lives. Thus, after a rebirth precursor of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī witnesses a previous Buddha praising his own combination aunt, step-mother, foster-mother, and leader of the nuns' order she, feeling a surge of mental pleasure (*pasāda*, *pasanna*) aspires to that peculiar social status (*taṃ thānaṃ*, lit. "that place"). This is not an aspiration to be Siddhartha's aunt-of-all-trades, but to be *any* Buddha's aunt-of-all-trades; the social status itself is what her karma is directed toward. In fact, the rebirth precursor only learns the identity of the Buddha whose aunt she does in fact become during her final life, after the previous Buddha intuitively provides her a prediction of its eventual fulfillment when "in one hundred thousand eons, born into Ikshvāku's clan the one whose name is Gotama will be the master in the land."⁵⁶ Precisely the same pattern is followed in the *apadānas* of various other early disciples singled out for their

“special talents,” who similarly are portrayed enjoying their then-present status in the intimate community of Gotama Buddha as a result of a specific sociokarmic aspiration for it during the time of a previous Buddha. I do not know of any Theravādin examples of individuals consciously aspiring to a *bad* future status, but the Bodhisattvas of some Mahāyāna texts who aspire to birth in hell in order to assist hell beings would certainly fit that bill. This subtype would also embrace sociokarmic aspirations for birth in a specific locale (such as the aspirations of contemporary Sri Lankans or occasional odd foreign scholars who want to be reborn in their same villages during future lives), or for a more generalized social status (such as the Burmese prayers, cited by Weber, to be reborn as a Buddhist).⁵⁷

In addition to these more individual sorts of sociokarmic aspirations, those in the other subtype (b) represent aspirations for the continuity of social relationships with particular individuals, paying less regard to one's own specific status or circumstance and more to the identity of one's companions. Most of the examples of this subtype, too, are aspirations for continual rebirth with people whom one holds dear, such as the Burmese prayers for rebirth with the members of one's own present family, or with friends or lovers, or with particular Bodhisattvas (say, particularly noble kings claiming to be such).⁵⁸ But other aspirations in this subtype are instead despicable ones for rebirth with enemies whom one will attack or revile perpetually, such as the former aspirations in this life and in many previous lives of Ciñcamānavikā, Sundarī the Slanderer, and most of all Devadatta to harass the Bodhisatta throughout his *Jātakas* and final existence.⁵⁹ There is also a middle ground here, in which aspirations to harass are for the good of the victim, such as the aspiration by Nāgasena's rebirth precursor to be reborn as King Milinda's gadfly.⁶⁰ Following from John Strong's idea of “karmic dispersal,” it is also easy to conceive of aspirations *not* to be born with bad people in general and/or the particular bad people whom one suffers in this lifetime.

6. I am uncertain that my sixth type, “political karma,” ought to be a type at all, because, unlike the examples of the first five types, and of the seventh, which I shall mention momentarily, all the examples of this sixth type could be absorbed under the other headings. Put differently, sociokarma, which is specifically political, or what we could call “politicokarma,” is no more than a specific and particularly large version of one of the other types. Thus, notions that karma and its results can occur in a specifically political context—that the state can act as a group entity, or that cakkavattitthod is a karmic result of previous merit, or the Burmese plans for “state-aided karma” surveyed by McDermott—are subsumed under type 1; social context; notions about the ability of the king's merit (or demerit) to affect everyone in his kingdom exemplify type 2, overflow karma; conceiving of the polity as a confluence of the karmic paths of its citizens obviously belongs to type 3; the state as a co-transmigrating social unit (as in the *Jātakas* when the Bod-

hisatta and his five hundred are the king and his men, or the historical Śākyaans reborn together as a political unit) exemplifies the co-transmigration of social units, type 4; aspirations such as Aśoka's to be overlord of all India clearly belong to type 5, sociokarmic aspiration; ideas that the polity itself has a karmic destiny outside the individuals who constitute it in any particular instance, such as mentioned below, exemplify the final type I have identified, the karma of social institutions (type 7).

Yet all of these types of politicokarma cannot be fit into a single one of the other categories, and for the overlapping reasons that political or “national” karma has already been treated as a separate type by others; that the polity is obviously of special centrality in any study of society; and that the examples of politicokarma are especially rich ones, I do treat it as a separate type here. I treat it *here*, at this point in the list, both because in its scope it pushes to the upper limits of the other types, and because it begins to anticipate the seventh type, the karma of social institutions. Though in most of the examples I know the various sorts of politicokarma all presume that the karmic connections and dimensions in the polity inhere in its constituents as individuals or as a group, but not in the institution itself, the polity has occasionally been considered to have a sort of karmic life of its own. It is precisely because the nation will not be populated by the same individuals in future lives that Rev. Nyanaponika throws out the whole notion of sociokarma, but to the extent that one's nation's reputation, wealth, power, military situation, and so forth are dimensions of the goodness or badness of one's birth in it, that is, are karmically constituted, it is at least possible that, say, the populations of imperialist or genocidal polities should be reborn into the populations of postcolonial societies where they experience the poverty and other forms of suffering they created during previous lives, and sometimes repeat and/or experience the terror they used in creating it. In this vein I have heard interesting ideas about the connections between the players during World War II and those in contemporary Sri Lanka.

7. The distinguishing characteristic of the seventh and final type of sociokarma, the karma of social institutions, is that the institution, whatever it may be, takes on a life of its own quite apart from the individuals who participate in it. Thus, for example, it appears from the *Buddhavamsa*, the *Anāgatavamsa* and similar texts that intimate communities of Buddhas share a structure unto themselves—with the Buddha (himself a type) at the top, two chief disciples and a servitor, orders of monks and nuns living according to the same vinaya and laypeople observing the same precepts, various specified relatives of the (every) Buddha, etc.—which roles the Buddha and arahants become karmically prepared to fill but which, like the office of God, exist outside the individuals who fill them. The karmic independence, as it were, of social institutions from the individuals who constitute them is especially clear in the Mahāvihāran *vamsas*, in which for example Arahant Mahinda declares that the Sri Lankan Sangha of monks and nuns, a number

of the most famous religious monuments of Anurādhapura and indeed the kingdom of Anurādhapura itself, and its kingship, are merely the this-Buddha-era versions of social institutions that existed as such (only the names and certain details vary) during the times of three previous Buddhas as well.⁶¹ The “resociety” of these institutions, like the succession of Buddhas and their intimate communities, cannot be effected by precisely the same masses of people, given that at least some among them became arahants who escaped karma and rebirth altogether.

CONCLUSION: SOCIOKARMA AS A HEURISTIC DEVICE

In terms of scholarship and teaching, perhaps the best justification for paying attention to sociokarma is the raw fact of its presence in Theravāda tradition. While I do not want to overstate sociokarma’s significance—karma is only one dimension of society, and society only one dimension of karma—I do think that any study of or class about Theravāda society, or karma, would be incomplete without a recognition of the ways in which these two intersect. Even if it *were* the case that no Theravādins before the twentieth century ever contemplated the social dimensions of karma, and the karmic dimensions of society, surely today, at least some Theravādins take sociokarma very seriously indeed. That alone is reason to give it some attention in thinking about both society and karma.

But knowing *that* sociokarma represents one part of Theravāda tradition is only a preliminary step in really making use of the typology; the payoff comes in learning to see sociokarma in the thick of the Theravāda histories we study. By way of example, I want to suggest—and for the sake of brevity merely suggest—that sociokarma opens up interesting new angles on the *Jātaka* stories as ethical paradigms.

The role of sociokarma in the *Jātaka* has already been spelled out in some detail above, and recognized by Reynolds and Woodward. But while reflecting on the various layers of sociokarma in the *Jātaka* in order to compose this essay, I have come to question an assumption that I think has been made universally, certainly by me, in readings of the *Jātaka* as key transmitter of basic ethical paradigms. That assumption is that ordinary Buddhists would read or listen to or look at a *jātaka* identifying themselves with or taking the subject-position of the Bodhisatta.⁶² Even if the twenty-five Buddhas of the *Buddhavaṃsa* narrative, which only covers a period of one hundred thousand plus four incalculable kalpas, should be extended into the past or into the future to produce vaster Theravādin visions of the Buddhas of the universe, like the Kandyān “Thousand Buddha Motif” studied by John Holt,⁶³ still, as far as I know all Ther-

avādins insist that Buddhas are extremely rare, that as Nāgasena proves to Milinda only one can exist at a time, and that the achievement of Buddhahood requires an effort which in every birth across that vast expanse of time is beyond the capability of any but the most exceptional being.⁶⁴ These dogmas underlie the historical record that at least publicly none but a tiny handful of Theravādins has considered himself or herself a Bodhisatta, or has been so considered by others. Instead, the vast majority of Theravādins in literature and in fact have aspired to become arahants in the dispensation of such a Buddha, and in the meantime to develop foundations for such salvific participation in his intimate community. From the beginning Theravādins have vehemently rejected the Mahāyāna claim that all Buddhists should and in fact do aspire to the Buddha-vehicle (emulate the Bodhisatta, Skt. Bodhisattva).

Yet when we treat the *Jātaka* as an ethical text, we always seem to assume that Theravādins do just that. Though I do I think there is clear basis in the *Jātaka* and related texts for considering the Ten Perfections (*dasā-pāramitā*) to be a set of general ethical guidelines intended for imitation by all Buddhists,⁶⁵ the manner in which the Bodhisatta himself fulfills them is always extreme, going beyond how even a really good person (or buffalo, or god, or rabbit) could be expected to act in such a situation. The extremes to which the Bodhisatta goes in perfecting himself have been especially glaring to commentators both in the tradition and in the academy in the case of the *Vessantarajātaka*, where the Bodhisatta’s commitment to *dāna* plays out in giving away his own kingdom, children, and wife; the ethical tension, the gut reaction that I could never do that, has been widely noted.⁶⁶ But this invites the questions, who then does imagine himself or herself Vessantara, capable of such extreme sacrifices? And if it is not with Vessantara himself, then identifying with whom can Buddhist audiences of this widely popular tale take away moral and ethical values?

John Holt’s study of the “visual liturgy” of the eighteenth-century Kandyān king Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha provides an excellent foundation for answering those questions. Holt’s study demonstrates that Kīrti Śrī himself emulated Vessantara and attempted to portray this self-identification as an all-giving bodhisatta to his people.⁶⁷ Holt makes most clear the ethical—and political and economic and military—tension embodied in this self-identification; Kīrti Śrī faced real challenges, but by all rights does indeed appear to have possessed exceptional qualities that made successful his bid to be among that handful of Theravādin Sri Lankan kings self-identified and identified by others as bodhisattas or at least as the sorts of cakkavattins who could become the same. And Holt demonstrates the many ways in which Kīrti Śrī did in fact read in the story of Vessantara his own “precarious situation.”

Holt also provides a basis for answering the second question when he points out that in the Kandyān paintings, King Vessantara and the other

characters in the story—indeed, the characters in all the *Jātakas* that Kīrti Śrī chose to depict—are dressed like (maybe even portraits of?) the Kandyans of the day.⁶⁸ The Kandyans under Kīrti Śrī could certainly have imagined themselves in the scene, participants in the story of a Vessantara as their own king—but not *as* Vessantara. They would be participants as Vessantara's family members, sharing in the sacrifices and rebukes; or as Vessantara's ministers, trying in vain to get him to steer a more prudent economic and political course; or as Vessantara's subjects, angered at the expense and confused about the reasons. For them, from the sociokarmic perspective, the story would have different morals to convey, about the reasons to stop being angry with such a Bodhisatta husband, father, or king, or about how to share in the merit of such a being with whom one is lucky enough to be co-transmigrating, and/or about how to deepen sociokarmic connections with him.

Many further examples of the positive benefits of "thinking with sociokarma" could be adduced, but such benefits go beyond scholarly ones. In practice, to express friendship or kinship in such religious terms deepens social bonds, providing society and the relationships that constitute it a transcendent foundation intimately bound up with Theravāda conceptualizations of the Path and soteriology. Moreover, as with all Buddhist teachings on karma, so sociokarma carries with it profound ethical implications, inculcating a sense of responsibility, obligation, and/or gratitude to other actors whom one encounters in life. The *Samyutta* claim that virtually everyone we meet in this life has been a close relative during previous lives is interpreted by Buddhaghosa as a method for cultivating the sublime virtue of loving-kindness (*metta*):

[An angry person] should think about that person [at whom he is angry] thus: this person, it seems, as my mother in the past carried me in her womb for ten months and removed from me without disgust as if it were yellow sandalwood my urine, excrement, spittle, snot, etc., and played with me in her lap, and nourished me, carrying me about at her hip. And this person as father went by goat paths and paths set on piles, etc., to pursue the trade of merchant, and he risked his life for me by going into battle in double array, by sailing on the great ocean in ships and doing other difficult things and he nourished me by bringing back wealth by one means or another thinking to feed his children. And as my brother, sister, son, daughter, this person gave me such and such help. So it is unbecoming for me to harbour hate for him in my mind.⁶⁹

On a larger scale, inculcating ethical responsibility for the evil deeds of the group or nation, of the sort implied by Egerton Baptist and the *Viḍḍabha-vatthu*, and the cultivation of such anger-killing sociokarmic sympathies for

opposing groups or nations, no doubt have more place today than ever in various Theravādin societies.

In a different vein, the varieties of sociokarma always serve the fundamental Buddhist purpose of undermining self-centered visions, in this case of karma and the Path, by helping one recognize that the acts and fruits of merit occur in a social context, that one's merit overflows to others in the same community (and vice versa), that all karmic fruition requires a confluence with the karma of others, that people co-transmigrate with those who play roles both good and bad in their lives, that people can act to deepen such connections with those whom they hold most dear, that even political communities have karmic dimensions (or that even karma has a political dimension), or finally, that some communities complete with their social hierarchies persist karmically independent of the individuals who in any particular birth occupy them. Any of these types of sociokarmic reflection or aspiration serves to dislocate attachment to one's own individual karma and its results, promoting in its place the kinds of altruistic compassion exemplified and advocated by the Buddha himself. After all, in the end, all karma and attachment, including that karma we call community, must be left behind.

NOTES

1. *Mage ma sahodarayek wage kiyā tamayi hitenne. Labana ātmaye nam oyā ape pawule ma ipadewā kiyā api prārthanā karanawā.*

2. James Paul McDermott, *Development in the Early Buddhist Concept of Kamma/Karma* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1984), esp. 151–56; id., "Karma and Rebirth in Early Buddhism," in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), esp. 175; id., "Is There Group Karma in Theravāda Buddhism?" *Numen* XXIII, 1 (1976):67–80. These heavily overlapping works all draw on the author's 1971 Princeton dissertation.

3. McDermott, "Group Karma," 80.

4. *Ibid.*, "Group Karma," 67.

5. Taking up the overflow karma of the Buddha as his example, Bhikkhu Sīlācāra reasons that "countless millions of beings . . . have had their Kamma completely changed for the good through the 'overflow Kamma' of Gotama, the Buddha. And that Kamma has not yet exhausted itself. It is still flowing on; and in its flow fertilizing the minds and enriching the hearts of many even today in the spiritually dullard West . . ." Bhikkhu Sīlācāra, *Kamma (Karma)*, ed. Bhikkhu Kassapa (Colombo: Bauddha Sāhitya Sabhā, 1956), 20–21, cited in McDermott, "Group Karma," 68–69 and id., *Development*, 152.

6. Cited in McDermott, "Group Karma," 69, where he is citing Robert C. Lester, *Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973),

77, who in turn is citing the original source: Prince Vajiranana (Wachirayan) in *Right is Right* (Bangkok: Bangkok Daily Mail, 1918). The idea goes back to the very beginnings of Thai Theravāda history, as it is explicit in the mid-fourteenth-century *Tiāi Phum*: "If any ruler or king, while he reigns, acts righteously, and does righteous things, the common people, slaves and free men, will live peacefully and happily, will have stability and balance, and will enjoy good fortune and prosperity: and this is because of the accumulation of the merit of the one who is the Lord above all." Frank E. Reynolds and Mani B. Reynolds, tr., *Three Worlds According to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist Cosmology* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press/Motilal Banarsidass, 1982), 153.

7. Bhikkhu Silācāra continues: "The little thread of Kamma which we call 'ours,' is thus not exclusively ours—how can it be, when, in ultimate truth and fact, there is no 'us'?—but in its course through the fabric of our national, and our world-Kamma, imparts something of its colouring to its neighboring threads. . . . We do not live, and cannot live, to ourselves, even if we want to. The many living threads of the so-called individual's Kamma twine and intertwine with other threads, and change the course and colouring of these other threads for the good or ill, according as our own particular thread is a good or an ill one." Bhikkhu Silācāra, *Kamma*, 21, cited in McDermott, "Group Karma," 69 and id., *Development*, 152.

8. Ibid., 76 and id., *Development*, 155.

9. Ibid., "Group Karma," 77.

10. Ibid., "Group Karma," 77.

11. Ibid., pp. 77–78.

12. McDermott draws on Winston King and Donald Eugene Smith for these latter points; see McDermott, "Group Karma," 72–73 and id., *Development*, 154–55. Here Baptist's views are emblematic: "[I]f a people or a group of people—the largeness of this group may even constitute the inhabitants of a single country or many countries—get together and perpetrate a wrong, will they as a group, suffer for their evil deed? Though *Kamma* is individual to each being, we cannot overlook the fact that in such circumstances, all the beings involved in the perpetration of the evil deed, have, with common consent, done so of their own freely expressed 'volition.' Accordingly, they may at some future time, by a conspiracy of circumstances, as it were, be drawn into a pool of anguish and bitterness together, all at once." Egerton C. Baptist, *The Buddhist Doctrine of Kamma* (Colombo: n.p., 1972), 32–33, cited in McDermott, "Group Karma," 72. In a footnote (n. 19) McDermott quotes Baptist quoting W. Y. Evans-Wentz in his Public Debates in Sri Lanka during the year 1921, worth repeating here: Evans-Wentz "pointed out how even religions must reap, as religions, what they sow. This he called '*Religious Karma*': 'We see now,' he [Dr. Evans-Wentz] said, 'how the whole of Christendom is just beginning to reap the harvest which was sowed in the Dark Ages. Religious Karma will see to it that if a religion has been upheld through the shedding of blood in religious persecution, as in the days of the Inquisition, or if it has propagated itself by the sword, it will be destroyed in like manner.'"

13. DhA i.360, trans. Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends* II:45–46; cited in McDermott, "Group Karma," 79. My brackets and small elision. Another version of the cycle is found at E. B. Cowell, ed., *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Famous Births*, Vol. IV, tr. W. H. D. Rouse (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990 repr. of Cambridge University Press 1895 original), 91–98 (#465, Bhadda-Sāla-Jātaka). Cf. also n. 51 and n. 52, below.

14. McDermott, "Group Karma," 77.

15. Ibid., 67, citing Luang Suriyabongs, *Buddhism in the Light of Modern Scientific Ideas* (Bangkok: Mahamakuta-Raja-Vidyalyaya Press, 1954), 72.

16. Ibid., 71, cf. id., "Karma and Rebirth," 175.

17. McDermott, "Karma and Rebirth in Early Buddhism," 175.

18. McDermott, "Group Karma," 80, my brackets.

19. Ibid., 73–75 and id., *Development*, 153–54. I have heard people speculate that the L.T.T.E. are reincarnated Nazis, who are jointly suffering and will continue suffering karmic repetition and results of their actions as Nazis even though they are not born together as Germans in the present.

20. Ibid., 80. Elsewhere McDermott portrays the "development of a notion of communal or group karma of various sorts" as one of the ways in which "contemporary Buddhists continue to extend the notion of karma in new directions," and dates its invention to a 1925 article in *The Maha Bodhi* (McDermott, *Development*, 151; cf. id., "Group Karma," 67)!

21. See Winston L. King, *In the Hope of Nibbana: The Ethics of Theravada Buddhism* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1964), 55 ("overflowing the strict doctrine of kammic merit for the better," Burmese people are generous—note that throughout, King has trouble reconciling his overly individualistic take on karma with the active concern for and kindness to others he repeatedly experienced in Burma), 148 ("Why, again, should anyone waste his precious merit-making power upon another whose destiny he can so little affect?"), 176 (lack of social theory: "is there any?"), 177 ("no real salvation to be found in the socio-historical context"), 180–81 ("basic social axiom of Buddhism" is that only the individual matters!), 231 ("*Kamma* doctrine . . . which especially connotes pessimistic fatalism and social passivity . . ."). King appears to be the source of McDermott's view that any inkling of sociokarma must be a modern phenomenon, a new development in the doctrine of karma (e.g., King, 230–34).

22. Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, tr. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: The Free Press, 1958), 213, 218.

23. "In Burma as elsewhere the religious interests of the correct Buddhist laity were oriented primarily to rebirth opportunities as indicated by source inscriptions of recent times [from late premodern Burma]. The queen mother prays always *to be born again as a high personage*. . . . [A]gain the prayer is expressed that when the future Buddha Maitreya comes, to be permitted to go to nirvana with him. Some wish to escape rebirth in a

base family. There is the wish to be born again always as a rich man and adherent to Buddha. . . . Still another would like to be born again and again together with his present family (parents, brothers, children). And another wishes in a future life to possess a particular woman as a wife. In case they should be reborn as lay persons, monks often wished, in any case, to have pretty wives. And besides such hopes is the prayer that good works be conferred on dead persons, especially those who are in hell. . . ." Weber, *The Religion of India*, 262–63, my emphases and brackets. For a parallel and especially remarkable example by the queen mother of Sukhothai in 1399 see Forest McGill, "Painting the Great Life," in *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Juliane Schober (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 208–209.

24. Mark Woodward has done some of the initial work in charting out just how regularized these sociokarmic connections become in the *Jātaka*, providing numbers of appearances (out of about 547 discrete *jātakas*) of Sāriputta (90), Moggallāna (57), Ānanda (147), and Devadatta (67). See Mark R. Woodward, "The Biographical Imperative in Theravāda Buddhism," in Schober, *Sacred Biography*, 54. T. W. Rhys Davids, tr., *The Questions of King Milinda* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982 reprint of Oxford University Press 1890 original), Part One includes an interesting appendix (pp. 303–304) of births where the Bodhisatta and Devadatta met; his list only contains sixty-four *jātakas*, but at that point (see p. 304) the proofs of Fausböll's original edition of the Pāli had only been completed up to number 513! A complete reckoning of all the rebirth "connections" (*samodhāna*) in the *Jātaka*, not just of Devadatta and other "stars" but also of all the major and minor characters, would show how thoroughly the early Buddhist community is considered here to be karmically constituted.

25. For references to these examples see Jonathan S. Walters, "Stupa, Story, and Empire: Constructions of the Buddha Biography in Early Post-Aśokan India," in Schober, *Sacred Biography*, 175–76, and corresponding notes on 191.

26. Thus, for example, the stereotyped sermon which the Buddha delivers to the laity throughout the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (e.g., T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha* [London: P.T.S., 1959, 4th edition of 1910 original], Part II, 91), on the fivefold loss to the wrongdoer and fivefold gain to the doer of good, though it treats mostly of karmic fruition in this life, does indicate in its social categories (poverty or wealth, bad or good reputation, confused or confident in "whatever society he enters," respectively) what also characterizes the fourth and fifth categories (mental state at death, station in the next life) whether bad or good. The fourteenth-century Thai compendium *Trai Phum* is very explicit that both a king's status *qua* king and the ability of the people to follow his lead are effected entirely by their respective accumulated merit (Reynolds and Reynolds, *Three Worlds*, 148, 154). Cf. Charles Hallisey, "The Advice to Layman Tuṇḍila," in *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 302–13, for a late medieval "apocryphal" *sutta* that contains numerous specific examples of social results of merit including wealth, family, gender, and political power.

27. The text is taken up by Buddhaghosa as emblematic of "the *suttas*," see n. 28, below. It is also quoted, in very much the same perspective as Buddhaghosa's but put in

the mouth of the Buddha himself as in the *Samyutta* original, in the mid-sixth c., A.D. Chinese apocryphal *sūtra Book of Resolving Doubts Concerning the Semblance Dharma* (*Xiangfa jueyi jing*), tr. Kyoko Tokuno in Lopez, *Buddhism in Practice*, 269 ("In future generations when all types of evil have arisen, all the clergy and laity should cultivate and train themselves in great loving-kindness and great compassion. Patiently accepting the vexation of others, one should think, 'Since time immemorial, all sentient beings have been my brother, sister, wife, children, and relatives. This being the case, I will have loving-kindness and compassion toward all sentient beings, whom I will succor according to my ability. If I see being who are suffering, I will devise various contrivances [in order to save them], without concern for my own body and life'). As Charles Hallisey has pointed out to me, ironically enough the Buddha makes this statement in the *Samyutta* text in order to persuade his interlocutor *not* to be attached to his own family as some uniquely constituted social form.

28. *Samyutta-nikāya* II. 189–90, cited in *Visuddhimagga* 305–307 (translated by Bhikkhu Nanamoli as *Path of Purification*, 331–32), reproduced at length and contextualized in Gunapala Dharmasiri, *Fundamentals of Buddhist Ethics* (Singapore: Buddhist Research Society, 1986), 58–61.

29. John Garrett Jones, *Tales and Teachings of the Buddha: The Jātaka Stories in relation to the Pāli Canon* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), ch. 3 and ch. 6, respectively.

30. Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel, eds., *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), especially "Introduction: The Study of Popular Ideas of Karma" (by Keyes, 1–26) and "Conclusion: Karma, the Uses of an Idea" (by Daniel, 287–300). For social status see also Keyes's article in the collection, "Kammic Theory of Popular Theravāda Buddhism," 261–86 esp. 263–64; Keyes is, however, so convinced of karmic individualism that he enters into some real intellectual gymnastics, jumping around the idea of merit-transference, in order to link the karmic individual into Buddhist community at all. This same inconsistency between presuppositions about strict karmic individualism and the ethnographic reality of Buddhist community-mindedness similarly vexed King (see above, n. 21).

31. See Richard F. Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), which treats Buddhism as "Religious Individualism" (67–69, 72) despite seeing, for example, that "if *kamma* is completely ethicized, the whole universe becomes an ethical arena, because everywhere all beings are placed according to their deserts," (69), which is a good description of type 3 sociokarma discussed below, "karmic confluence." Gombrich seems to intuit that a social history of Theravāda Buddhism would for a Buddhist have to be predicated on karma as much as a social history of Christianity would for a Christian have to be predicated on God, but he dismisses such a view at the outset on methodological grounds: "[A] social account of religion cannot command general attention unless its author aims for a certain metaphysical neutrality. If his apparatus of causal explanation depends on a particular metaphysic, so that, for example, he explains all misfortunes such as famine, disease and war as merely the results of bad *karma* or God's punishment of sinners,

he cannot command credence among those who do not accept the metaphysic" (8). Fair enough as a methodological move, but taking the "metaphysically neutral" stance is no reason to ignore the existence of the idea altogether, which in fact Gombrich proceeds here to do, comparable to a social history of Christianity written as though God had not been a concern of the Christians whose history is being narrated.

32. Uma Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987). This despite the fact that her major textual and inscriptional sources are all concerned with aspects of karma and rebirth, including sociokarmic phenomena, which clearly were part of the real-world motivation/ideology that she otherwise so carefully and provocatively recovers.

33. Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970). Spiro's explicit search for how "the members of a social group identify with each other," which he says determines "the extent [to which] the group is characterized by social integration" (476–77), is taken up in terms of karma/rebirth in an extensive chapter (438–77) that does indicate numerous type 1 examples of sociokarma (social control through fear of bad karmic results, karmic legitimation of power, social cooperation in merit-making festivals, sharedness of the belief as foundation for social solidarity) but reduces more substantial examples of sociokarma (e.g., on p. 451) to individualistic/psychological terms and ultimately sees the karma/rebirth model as socially "dysfunctional" in terms of economic development and charity (461–63); implicitly, development in Burma will occur only when karmic ideology is given up (467). Compare p. 156, where sociokarmic thinking ("how is it that an entire nation or even . . . the entire world can have the same karma, which produces the same consequence, at exactly the same time?") is dismissed out of hand on the basis of a dogmatic karmic individualism: "Since everyone's karma, and therefore everyone's karmic retribution, is individuated (a consequence of his own unique personal history extending over myriads of rebirths), this is clearly impossible."

34. Frank E. Reynolds, "Rebirth Traditions and the Lineages of Gotama: A Study in Theravāda Buddhology," in Schober, *Sacred Biography*, 22.

35. *Ibid.*, "Rebirth Traditions," 23.

36. John S. Strong, "A Family Quest: The Buddha, Yaśodharā, and Rāhula in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya," in Schober, *Sacred Biography*, 114.

37. Woodward, "Biographical Imperative," 53–54.

38. Walters, "Stupa, Story and Empire," 170, 175–76. Cites on p. 176 (and p. 191 notes 65, 66, 67, 68) are all specific examples of sociokarmic co-transmigration.

39. One group event that seems to have been particularly charged with soteriologically efficacious karma was attendance at the Buddha's funeral, which I have heard come up in various stories of people remembering past lives.

40. Reynolds and Reynolds, *Three Worlds*, 153.

41. *Ibid.*, 143.

42. I. B. Horner, tr., *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon, Part III: Chronicle of Buddhas (Buddhavaṃsa) and Basket of Conduct (Cariyāpīṭaka)* (London: P.T.S., 1975), 97 (Bv 27:20): "When these kings under Dhamma [all the previous Buddhas] had pointed out the Way for countless crores of others, they waned out with their disciples." Likewise, Gotama Buddha (tr. 95, Bv 26:22): "Living so long I am causing many people to cross over, having established the torch of Dhamma (and) the awakening of the people who come after."

43. Udaya Meddegama, tr., and John Holt, ed., *Anāgatavasa Desanā: The Sermon of the Chronicle-Tō-Be* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), 52–54: "Maitreya Buddha . . . will assist those who have gained merit during the lifetime of [Gotama] Buddha to ferry safely across the ocean of *samsāra* to attain *nirvāṇa*. . . . During the age of the present [Gotama] Buddha, those who engage in meritorious acts according to their individual capabilities will definitely see Maitreya. . . . Thus all these beings who have performed meritorious work in previous lives will have the fortune of seeing the Buddha. Those incapable of attaining *nirvāṇa* will live happy rebirths in the six heavens and human world. Those who are born as animals will be able to attain *nirvāṇa* in their future rebirths."

44. C. E. Godakumbara, ed., *Visuddhajanavilāsini nāma Apadānatthakathā* (London: P.T.S., 1954), 124–25; cf. *Viññābhavattthu* of the *Dhammapadattthakathā* (n. 13, above).

45. Cf. n. 26 above on the sociokarma of *anisamsas* in the *suttas*.

46. Godakumbara, *Visuddhajanavilāsini*, 58, 358, 531, etc.; *Jātaka* i. 54, BvA tr. 395.

47. Thus, for example, King Milinda (demonstrating considerable facility with the *Jātaka* collection!) asks Nāgasena in some detail to explain how it is "that Devadatta was altogether wicked . . . and that the Bodhisat was altogether pure, full of pure dispositions . . . and yet Devadatta, through successive existences, was not only quite equal to the Bodhisat, but even sometimes superior to him, both in reputation and in the number of his adherents," which of course Nāgasena proceeds to do. Rhys Davids, *Questions of King Milinda*, Part I, 285 (Miln 200).

48. Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda*, Pt. 1, 291–92; Miln 204.

49. Thus, according to Theravādin versions of the story (e.g., *Mahāvamsa* 5:48–61), Emperor Aśoka, Samanera Nigrodha, Devānampiyatissa of Anurādhapura, and Queen Asamdhimittā were three brothers and their maid, respectively, during a previous life who jointly (but with varying degrees of willingness) participated in the gift of honey to a Paccekabuddha. Likewise, Nāgasena and Milinda were during the time of Kassapa Buddha a monk and a novice, respectively. The novice belligerently refused a request of the monk to carry away the heap of rubbish swept up in the temple until the latter hit him with the broom. "Then for the whole period between one Buddha and the next these two people wandered from existence to existence among gods and men. And our Buddha saw them too, and just as he did to the son of Moggalī and to Tissa the Elder, so to them also did he foretell their future fate, saying: 'Five hundred

years after I have passed away will these two reappear, and the subtle Law and the Doctrine taught by me will they two explain, unravelling and disentangling its difficulties by questions put and metaphors adduced'” (Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda*, Pt. 1, 4–6; Miln 2–3). And such co-transmigration continues into the future, too, as in the claim of the *Mahāvamsa* that what we might call the “rebirth successors” of Duṭṭhagāmaṇi, his father, his mother, his younger brother and his son will be born together as the Sāriputta, Suddhodana, Mahāmāyā, Moggallāna, and Rāhula, respectively, of Maitreya Buddha (Mhv 32:81–83).

50. Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda*, Pt. 1, 292; Miln 204.

51. Cowell, *The Jātaka*, Vol. 4, 98ff. (# 466, *Samudda-Vāṇija-jātaka*), explains one strand of the sociokarma that brought them to their ruin together (which was the immediate result of slandering and reviling the Buddha), namely, that in a previous life they were marooned together on an island, which to the disgust of the original inhabitant and the local deities, they befouled with their excrement while eating all the fruits and otherwise spoiling the place. Though they were warned, they grew so fond of this life that they refused to leave even when given the opportunity and were therefore swept off the island to their death by the sea.

52. The story of Bandhula the Mallian, his wife Mallikā, and their thirty-two sons who are slaughtered with him is told in DhA and J (see n. 13). In this instance, the digression is embedded entirely within the story of Viḍūḍabha and his slaughter of the Śākyaans (Bandhula is Viḍūḍabha's father's Commander in Chief), which we have seen contains the most explicit evidence of traditional assumptions about “national karma.” Thus, context alone would warrant Baptist's assumption that group karma is operative in this part of the cycle too. This could also be argued on the basis of the specific content of the various frame stories that embed it. Thus, having their heads chopped off is clearly a parallel to Bandhula's simultaneous decapitation of 500 Licchavi kings (who try to prevent him from fulfilling Mallikā's pregnancy craving for their private drinking water, after the Buddha himself has foretold her pregnancy, which turns out to be sixteen sets of twins, born in succession), but the “former deeds” of the thirty-two sons, mentioned by Mallikā in consoling her thirty-two widowed daughters-in-law, are not specified. Especially in the context of the Viḍūḍabha story, it does not seem a great stretch to intuit that these former deeds, which produced their remarkable co-birth to be co-decapitated, was in some way a matter of “group karma.” Moreover, in the *Jātaka* version the whole cycle is somewhat oddly framed explicitly in terms of sociokarma, as a karmic explanation of why the Buddha is friendly with his kinsmen, to the point of saving them from Viḍūḍabha three times until he finally allows their bad group karma to bear its inevitable fruit. Their this-life deception is a form of false friendliness (they provide Viḍūḍabha's father, Pasenadi king of Kosala, the daughter of a Śākya nobleman's slavegirl who becomes Viḍūḍabha's mother, rather than the pure Śākya Pasenadi requests of them, and Viḍūḍabha vows revenge when he learns of it). The request of Pasenadi, ironically enough, is an attempt to get chummy with the Śākyaans so that the Buddha and his followers will feel for him the friendship they feel for their Śākya relatives. So at many levels the concerns

of this particular text clearly do seem to be both society/the group and the shared karmic effects of group deeds, despite McDermott's statements to the contrary (see above, n. 18).

53. The story continues (for first part, see above n. 49) to relate that after being hit with the broom the novice (King Milinda's rebirth precursor), weeping as he carried away the garbage, uttered sociokarmic aspirations that he should be powerful and silver-tongued in future lives. Not to be outdone, the monk (Nāgasena's rebirth precursor) makes a sociokarmic aspiration to be born as the person who in life after life puts that novice in his place.

54. See above, n. 23.

55. These “special” saints who appear in the *Apadāna* are enumerated in an earlier list of foremost (*agga*) disciples, which is found in the *Anguttara Nikāya* (F. L. Woodward, tr., *The Book of the Gradual Sayings [Anguttara Nikāya]* Vol. I [London: P.T.S., 1970 repr. of 1932 original], 16–25). They provide important structure to the *Apadāna* collection as a whole, punctuating the monks' and nuns' sections of the collection, and united according to the pattern of merit/aspiration/prediction/realized statuses described here.

56. For complete text see Jonathan S. Walters, “Gotamī's Story,” in Lopez, *Buddhism in Practice*, 113–38. Here this standardized prediction verse, which also appears in the *apadānas* of other “special” members of the early community, is v. 103.

57. King Aśoka's previous life aspiration that the bowl of honey should win him overlordship of all India would be a good example here, and the stories surrounding his unwilling brothers illustrate how literally sociokarma can be taken. Angry that the honey has been given away, the former Nigrodha reviles the Paccekabuddha as an outcaste, and as a result is himself born in low circumstances; the former Devānampiyatissa curses him across the sea and as a result is born in Sri Lanka. But these crimes do not draw them into hell because after their brother promises to share the merit they give their assent to the good deed, which bears its fruit in the positive relationships they enjoy with each other in the present. See Mhv 5:48 (“Well pleased was the king by [Nigrodha's] grave bearing, but kindly feeling arose in him also by reason of a former life lived together”); in the absence of any other explanation, presumably the sociokarmic connection is responsible for the fact that when marvelous treasures appear at Devānampiyatissa's consecration, he immediately wants to give them to Aśoka because “the two monarchs . . . already had been friends a long time, though they had never seen each other” (Mhv 11:7–19).

58. In this same vein, according to the *Mahāvamsa* (5:59) the maid who points out the honey store, rebirth precursor of Aśoka's chief queen Asandhimittā, aspires to rebirth as the elder brother's rebirth successor's (Aśoka's) beautiful wife.

59. For a discussion of these co-transmigrating nemeses, portrayals of them in the *Tipiṭaka* and later Theravādin sources, and the Bodhisatta's own role in their enmity for him, see Jonathan S. Walters, “The Buddha's Bad Karma: A Problem in the History of Theravāda Buddhism,” *Numen* XXXVII, 1 (1990): 70–95.

60. See above, notes 49 and 53.

61. This way of thinking about social institutions, monuments, and so forth as karmically persistent during the time of four Buddhas seems to have been commonplace, as it is found in sources as widely ranging as Buddhaghosa's commentaries and the travel accounts of the Chinese pilgrims. From the earliest Theravādin work proper, the *Dīpavaṃsa*, it would appear that Mahinda's revelation originally circulated in independent documents, one of which systematized it as "The 13 Subjects and the 4 Names" (Dpv 17:4), that is the institutions with a karmic life of their own and the different names by which they were known during the times of the four Buddhas (Kakusandha, Koṅāgamaṇa, Kassapa, and Gotama), at least two versions of which have been included in Dpv (15:34–73, 17:1–73). See Hermann Oldenberg, *Dīpavaṃsa: An Ancient Buddhist Historical Record* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1982), 196 (Dpv 17:4). The institutions are (as named in the time of Gotama Buddha): the Island of Sri Lanka; the Kingdom (of Anurādhapura); the kingship (of Devānampiyatissa); the Island-wide affliction (inhabitation by Yakkhas) which the Buddha came to solve; the first *stūpa* (here the Thūpārāma in Anurādhapura); the main irrigation tank in Anurādhapura (unnamed here); the mountain monastic complex associated with the *pasādaka* (here Mihintale/Silākūṭa); the garden given over to the *pasādaka* and his disciples (here the Mahāmeghavana=Mahāvihāra); the Bodhi Tree (here the Bodhi Tree of the Mahāvihāra); the nun who brings the Bodhi Tree (Sanghamittā); the monk who brings the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* (here Mahinda); and the Buddha himself.

62. For specific statements of this truism in terms of Vessantara, the example taken up below, see Forrest McGill, "Painting the Great Life," in Schober, *Sacred Biography*, 207 ("After listening to it [the story of Vessantara], we know what we must do: emulate Vessantara and give"); Richard Gombrich and Margaret Cone, trs., *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara: A Buddhist Epic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), xxi open the possibility that "women could empathize with Maddī. The loss of a child is in poor countries an experience all too familiar," then quickly close it on xxii, dismissing out of hand the possibility of reading from any other subject position ("Maddī and the children may arouse empathy in the audience, but they are not moral agents. The moral problem is that of Vessantara himself: is it right to give away one's family?").

63. John Clifford Holt, *The Religious World of Kīrti Śrī: Buddhism, Art, and Politics in Late Medieval Sri Lanka* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 67–68 and plate 11.

64. See for example Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda*, Part 2, 47–51, which in addition to answering Milinda's question about why only one Buddha can exist at a time, expands on the peerlessness of Buddhas. That point is explicit several times in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (Rhys Davids, tr., *Dialogues of the Buddha*, 152, where the gods declare "Few and far between are the Tathāgatas, the Arahant Buddhas who appear in the world . . ."; cf. 164 on Subhadda).

65. See the "Envoi-verses" of *Cariyāpiṭaka* (102–103, vv. 8–14; translated in Horner, *Minor Anthologies*, Pt. III, 49–50 of Cp), the oldest extant *Jātaka* collection, for an explicit statement of this; these same explicit verses also appear as the conclusion to *Buddhāpadāna*, vv. 69–75 (Mary E. Lilley, ed., *Apadāna* [London: P.T.S., 1925] Vol. I, 5–6).

66. Jones, *Tales and Teachings*, 133–34 finds "disconcerting features" in the story, whose "extravagant scale . . . shows a total disregard for personal feeling and . . . retains a rather distasteful ulterior, contractual character."; cf. Gombrich, *Precept and Practice*, 267 ("Westerners are not favorably impressed by the famous *Jātaka* story of King Vessantara. . . . This strikes us as excessive. It strikes the Sinhalese in the same way. The two monks with whom I brought up the subject both said that Vessantara was *wrong*. Generosity is very well, but even there one must exercise moderation."); Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 522ff. for an especially thoughtful treatment of the issues involved in judging Vessantara's moral rectitude; Gombrich and Cone, *Perfect Generosity*, xxi ("Whether any male auditors would identify with Vessantara is doubtful, for he is too apparently superhuman . . ."), xxii–xxiv ("implicit hint that Vessantara is doing something dubious . . ." even in the original text). Whether it is there in the original or not, certainly by the time of the *Milindapañha* it was problematic enough to have a lengthy dilemma conceptualized around Vessantara's excessive generosity (Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda*, Pt. 2, 114–32).

67. Holt, *The Religious World of Kīrti Śrī*, passim (esp. 89). In his focus on paintings of the *Vessantarajātaka* McGill, "Painting the 'Great Life,'" provides some interesting Thai parallels to Holt's work. Gombrich and Cone, *Perfect Generosity*, provide nicely complementary plates.

68. Holt, *The Religious World of Kīrti Śrī*, 81 (here in reference to the *Khantivāda-jātaka*, but Holt's plates as well as those in Gombrich and Cone, *Perfect Generosity*, suggest that this was the common practice); for the suggestion that some of this could be direct portraiture cf. *ibid.*, 54 and on Kīrti Śrī as Vessantara above, n. 63.

69. Cited in Dharmasiri, *Fundamentals of Buddhist Ethics*, 58–59.