



'WHO IS PULLING THE STRINGS?'

EQUANIMITY

SUPERSTITION  
KARMA  
AND  
THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING ON  
CAUSALITY

AJAHN AMARO

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## PREFACE

This small book is the fourth in a series of four, consisting of reflections and practices related to the ‘sublime abiding places for the heart’ – the four *brahma-vihāras*, in Buddhist parlance. They are also known as ‘the four immeasurables’ on account of the boundless, radiant quality of their nature.

The vision for the series is to explore these sublime abidings via the somewhat oblique approach of looking at their opposites. The four *brahma-vihāras* are listed, in the Buddhist scriptures, as:

*Mettā* – loving-kindness, benevolence, radical acceptance, non-aversion.

*Karuṇā* – compassion, empathy, appreciation of the suffering of others.

*Muditā* – sympathetic or altruistic joy, gladness at the good fortune of others.

*Upekkhā* – equanimity, caring even-mindedness, serenity amid all turbulence.

In this last book we will be investigating *upekkhā* and this through the lens of superstitious views about why and how things happen as they do. This might seem a very unusual approach to the development of this sublime quality, said to be the most subtle and expansive of the *brahma-vihāras*, however, one of the Buddha's most common reflections to support the cultivation of *upekkhā* is precisely and solely an investigation of causality: 'I am the owner of my action, companion to my to my action ... whatever action I do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.'

It is often through distorted views about nature and its laws that we take its ups and downs in a very personal way; such

an attitude is guaranteed to cause agitation and to disturb any equanimity we might have had. In this volume we will explore some of those distortions – whether it be that: ‘I’m individually responsible for everything that happens,’ or at the other extreme: ‘I am a victim of Fate, of the caprices of the gods who rule our karma’ – and see how the teachings of the Buddha might offer a fresh perspective, clarifying the view and bringing true serenity.

The other three books in the series, similarly, explore the remaining *brahma-vihāras* through aspects of mind and behaviour that oppose or confuse them.

The material published in this book is mostly based a Sunday afternoon talk, given at Amaravati in the summer of 2012. As they are at such talks, and as with all teachings offered in the Buddhist tradition, the words here are presented for the reader’s contemplation rather than being intended to be taken



as absolute truths. Those who pick this book up and read it are therefore encouraged to consider whether these principles and practices feel true to life and, if they do, to try them out and see if they bring benefit. Do they help you to deal more easily with the way you see the events of your life and the world? Do they lead you to a recognition of the balance of the Middle Way? Do they help you to be an embodiment of serenity in the midst of agitation, to 'keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you,' as Rudyard Kipling put it? If so, that is to be rejoiced.

If, however, these words don't help you, then may you find other wholesome ways of finding peace with the ups and downs and agitations that are such a stressful part of our lives.

[A NOTE TO THE READER – the Pali terms '*kamma-vipāka*' (meaning 'action and its result') and the now colloquial English 'karma' (meaning: 'the sum of a person's actions in one of his successive states of existence, regarded as determining his fate in the next; hence, necessary fate or destiny,' OED) are used broadly and in an interchangeable way throughout this book.]



## INTRODUCTION

As usual, whenever Buddhist teachings are presented, this teaching is given in the spirit of an offering for reflection and consideration, rather than being put forward as an absolute truth or something people are expected to believe or just take out of hand. Since the topic of this book is ‘superstition’ it’s worth re-stating this right at the very start. This subject – ‘Who is Pulling the Strings?’ – addresses our sense that something is in control of our life, that there are forces at work in the universe which pull the strings, as if we were being operated like puppets. But what are the forces which may be manipulating our lives, and how does all this work?

In ancient times, both in European culture and in other cultures all round the planet – Asia, Africa, Australia, the Americas – people had a somewhat animistic view of the world. When it was dry they'd think: 'The rain gods are asleep,' and when rain fell they'd think: 'The rain gods have woken up and are delivering water for us.' They'd talk of appeasing and serving the fire gods to keep on the right side of them. They would believe in spirits who ruled the thunder and lightning, the rivers, the trees and so on. That animistic world view is still very much part of our background, our cultural conditioning. The human perspective was, and in a way still is, to see the whole world as alive, as animated, with spirits living in everything and running everything. Even today many religious forms still function largely around keeping the gods happy: making sacrifices, performing acts or carrying out observances so as not to upset the rain gods, or so the fire gods won't unleash themselves and burn your village down, so diseases won't come or the river

won't rise and wash you away in the night; or nowadays, ritual behaviours followed to keep your computer program running buglessly. Thinking in these terms seems very natural and common, so it's interesting to consider how these beliefs and this perspective on the world has evolved over time.

As a result of this type of thinking we may also believe that the things we do, the choices we make, really have no effect in themselves. We may believe that our lives are not really in our hands, but in the charge of the forces, deities, programs or invisible beings who actually run everything. Even if we don't believe there is a fire god or a river god, we might still have very fixed ideas about karma. It's very common in Buddhist or Hindu cultures, but also in the West where those cultures have had an influence, to relate to karma and the results of past actions and past lives as having a definitive effect on what we experience. Someone may think: 'I have this illness because it's my bad karma'; or 'My son failed his exams because of bad

karma from a past lifetime’; or: ‘I have horrible neighbours moving in next door because it’s my bad karma.’

Someone who recently visited the monastery asked how karma ripens: who decides when it ripens and what form it takes, and what the results of past actions will be. People quite commonly have a half-formed belief there are Gods of Karma, a kind of celestial committee, that sorts out exactly what the results of our actions should be, what lessons we are due to learn, or which of our debts need to be called in. They think there’s some kind of celestial accounting system run by invisible deities who say: ‘She gets fifteen points and he loses five, and she gets fifty because she’s doing really well, but he gets 150 – and *that one* is out of the game altogether.’ This somewhat mechanistic and deterministic view of *kamma-vipāka*, action and its results, is extremely common in the religious field, particularly in the Asian religious world, but also among Westerners, and it can be held in a very fixed way: ‘what goes around comes around.’

I'm particularly surprised that people so often assume *vipāka* is always the result of action only in a *past* life. I ask them: 'What about things you've done in *this* life? Aren't they going to have some effect as well?' It's bizarre – especially since our everyday world keeps suggesting very strongly that the choices we make in *this* life matter a lot: choosing to leave that country; choosing to cheat in that exam; choosing to make that donation; choosing to marry that person... All national laws around the world, countless volumes of statutes, rest upon this principle but, despite this apparently substantial clue, there is an unconscious distancing that disempowers us from acknowledging the effects of recent choices and, more importantly, the capacity we have to make a difference now.

People have the feeling that somewhere in the remote past something was done which made some particular thing happen in this present life; that this is inescapable and there's nothing they can do about it. That particular event, that



illness, misfortune or difficulty, is the inevitable result of some personal action in a previous birth. I realize I'm making some sweeping generalizations here, but I think most people recognize some of these ideas. Maybe some of us still think that way, for example Shirley McLaine in her recent book 'What If...' (Simon and Schuster, 2014), speaking about the supposed past karma of Stephen Hawking that caused his disease or, more contentiously still, the karma of the victims of the Nazi regime that caused their horrific destruction.

‘IS THIS PRINCIPLE OF “KARMIC FATE”  
WHAT THE BUDDHA TAUGHT?’

If you look at the Buddha’s teachings, you’ll see that he spent a lot of time and energy trying to counteract the view that our lives are pre-determined by past karma; that what happens in our lives is fixed and unavoidable. It was a common view during his era, as now. For example, when Ānanda was explaining this principle to the wanderer Sandaka:

Suppose, Sandaka, a certain teacher claims to be omniscient, constantly and continually, while walking, standing, lying or awake. He enters an empty house and is not offered any food. A dog bites him. He encounters an elephant in rut,

a wild horse or an angry bull. ... When asked why [he did not foresee or do something to avoid such difficulties]. He replies, 'I had to enter an empty house, that is why I entered it; I had to get no alms-food ... I had to be bitten by a dog ...'

*Sandaka Sutta*, M 76.21

And, earlier on in the same sutta, when describing another brand of wrong view:

Suppose, Sandaka, a certain teacher upholds the view: 'All beings ... are without mastery, power and energy; they are moulded by destiny, circumstance and nature; made impure or purified for no apparent cause or reason.'

(M 76.13)

Over and over again in his dialogues with fellow wanderers, yogis and spiritual teachers of other schools (for example, in the *Devadaha Sutta*, M 101), he points out that if karma was fixed, if our actions in the present time could have absolutely

no effect, then liberation would be impossible. If the flow of our life was pre-ordained it would not matter whether we did good or harm. But common sense shows that the actions we take in this life continually have a variety of effects, and we seem able to have freedom of choice. Of course, some people say: ‘But it only *looks* as though we have freedom of choice.’ They think that freedom is an illusion, and that the choice and its result were actually already fixed in stone beforehand. This is easy enough to believe and widely held, but the Buddha repeatedly and patiently pointed out that it is not the case. As he said when a wanderer called Moliya Sīvaka asked him:

‘Master Gotama, there are some religious people whose view is: “Whatever a person experiences, whether pleasant painful or neutral, all that was caused by what was done in the past,” what do you say about this issue?’

‘Some feelings, Sīvaka, originate from bile ... phlegm ... or wind disorders ... or an imbalance of the three; that ... one can know for oneself and that is considered to be true in the world.

‘Some feelings, Sīvaka, are produced by a change of climate ... by careless behaviour ... are caused by assault ... or are produced as a result of *kamma*; that ... one can know for oneself and that is considered to be true in the world.

Therefore, when such people assert the view that: “Whatever a person experiences ... was caused by what was done in the past,” they overreach what one knows by oneself and they overreach what is considered to be true in the world. Therefore I say that this is wrong on the part of those people.’ (S 36.21; also compare A 3.61)

Certainly, what we experience in the present moment is pre-conditioned. What we experience here and now is the result

of everything that has happened in the universe since at least the Big Bang. So, having a human body and mind, picking up this book, reading these Dhamma reflections in English and being able to understand it, having the faculties of cognition and thought, memory and understanding – all these together are the results of everything that has gone before. Our life is pre-conditioned. But, according to the Buddhist understanding of things, what words I choose to say and your reactions to them are up to us as we are now. The world is definitely pre-conditioned but what we do with it here in the present moment is entirely up to us. Choices can be made, and those choices make a difference. That's why karma, actions, our efforts, make a difference. That's how orientation is given to our life, and how we are able to steer our actions, our lives and our understanding towards that which is wholesome, that which is liberating. It is not a fixed deterministic universe.

‘WHAT LAWS GOVERN LIFE  
AND THE UNIVERSE?’

The model that the Buddha described to Moliya Sīvaka has been formalized and expanded and is now known as ‘The Five *Niyāmas*’ or ‘Laws of Nature’. It may be helpful to spell these five laws out since, in this present moment, the Buddha’s teaching suggests we are experiencing the effects of all these five different laws of nature, which are all operating simultaneously.

The **first** of them is called *utu-niyāma*. *Utu* literally means ‘weather’ or ‘temperature, seasons and other physical events’, so *utu-niyāma* means the laws of physics and chemistry. When

we talk about what we experience, we don't always take into account or appreciate the fact that we have a physical body, that this is a physical universe. We experience the results of the way matter works, the configurations of the material world and how the physical laws operate.

The **second** law is ***bija-niyāma*** or the laws of biology. *Bija* literally means 'seed', so as human beings we are subject to the laws of biology, genetics. We have a human body. We need to breathe. We need to eat. We exist as part of a social group. We are of the subspecies homo sapiens sapiens. We are a particular species of creature living on this particular planet, with physical bodies and particular social patterns and forms, so we are the offspring of the biological universe. We breathe air, we are aerobic. We may think that these aspects of our life are ordinary, unremarkable, but a huge part of who and what we are is determined by *utu-niyāma* and *bija-niyāma*, by the laws of physics, chemistry and biology. What we experience during



the course of a day is very much woven into these laws, but they can seem unremarkable, and we don't often use them to judge or distinguish each other. We all breathe. There's nobody who doesn't. Nobody decides to start the New Year by giving up breathing or giving up gravity. We're all subject to the law of gravity: there's the planet, there's a body and between them is the force we call gravity. These are things we experience all the time. I can feel the weight of my body on this chair as I type, so I know the force of gravity is operating. We're breathing all the time. If any of us stopped breathing for five minutes, we'd be dead.

These are very significant and central aspects of our life which we all experience in the same way, all day long, every day. They're not news. It doesn't make the newspaper headlines that everybody keeps breathing. What does make the headlines is that so and so's been elected, so and so's been killed, so and so's been born, so and so's won a prize, so and so's caused a scandal.

It's the individual actions we take which get our attention. So the **third** of the laws is *kamma-niyāma*; the law of action and its result, or the law of the way personal choices function and the effects those choices have. *Kamma-niyāma* refers to the laws that govern the way effects take shape as a result of the personal choices that we make. Because we tend to give this third law credit for causing all the things we experience in our life, it gets far more attention than the first two, but I think it is also important to realize that our actions, and the laws of cause and effect which relate to our actions and our choices, are only relevant within the wider context of the whole natural order, within *utu-niyāma* and *bija-niyāma* – physics, chemistry, biology and the consequent laws of evolution.

The **fourth** of these laws is called *citta-niyāma* or the laws of psychology: how the mind works, how we think, the way memory works; how a thought-moment takes shape, the speed of thinking, the way emotions work, in short the laws of mental activity and the whole of the

psychological realm. These laws of the mental realm function in the same way as the laws of physics, chemistry and biology, and all these laws interrelate with each other. We feel, think, remember and plan in certain ways and according to certain patterns because that's part of the natural system. That's how minds work.

The **fifth** law is the over-arching and all-encompassing ***dhamma-niyāma***, the fundamental law of reality, encompassing the full physical and mental spectrum and beyond what is describable – the relationship between the conditioned reality and the unconditioned reality. It means the laws of how the realms of form, time, space and mind all operate – including the unconditioned, the unborn, the unoriginated, uncreated, the timeless and formless – the all-encompassing and all-embracing laws of reality at its most fundamental level. *Dhamma-niyāma* is how all these integrate and uphold the reality of the way things are.

At any one moment all five of these laws are operating simultaneously, so what we experience right now is not just the results of personal actions. Choosing to listen to a Dhamma talk or read a teaching leads you to experience an effect because of that particular karma, that choice, but it's also the result of the very fact of hearing or seeing. The mind taking that sound or sight, and interpreting it and giving it meaning, is *citta-niyāma*. And the need to breathe, the feeling of the weight of the body on the chair, are related to the laws of physics, chemistry and biology. They all play into what we experience in one moment; at any moment all of these elements are playing together.

So when we are considering who is pulling the strings, the Buddhist answer would be: 'Wrong question'. 'Who?' is the wrong question. It's not a matter of who but rather of understanding how these different forces, these different laws that contribute to our experience, operate and function in relationship to each other. In addition, it's an issue of

recognizing that karma, action, personal choices, form just a tiny proportion of the whole array. But they are the ones that get our attention, because they're the ones that are most varied or unpredictable, and because we love to personalize things and that's what sells the tabloids.

## ‘IS NATURE FAIR?’

A lot of our suffering, of *dukkha*, comes from a feeling of dissatisfaction or discontent because we think: ‘It shouldn’t be this way,’ ‘Life is unfair,’ ‘Why is this happening to me?’ or ‘Not this again – I don’t deserve this!’ Our discontent can easily be caused by a feeling that somehow the universe is out of balance, the world is out of order, and we feel this is unfair; it shouldn’t be like that. But if we expand our vision and see that the laws of cause and effect are operating, that all these different aspects of reality are contributing to our life, then how could what we are experiencing be fundamentally outside the laws of nature? How could it genuinely be unfair? It might be unfair according to our preferences, or your nation’s laws;

it might also be unwanted or not what we expected. But when we expand our view and take the whole range of different influences that are at play into its scope, we are able to let go of that feeling of wrongness or that it shouldn't be this way. There's a recognition that nature is fair: it's a non-personal and ultimately balanced system, and once we drop our self-centred habits and are able to see things in this way, we are much more able to find the quality of 'rightness'. Even though we might be experiencing an illness, or something painful or difficult which we wouldn't choose or we don't like, that feeling of wrongness or that it shouldn't be this way dissolves.

The Buddha gave a small collection of teachings called the 'Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection' (A 5.57). The first of these is: 'I am of the nature to age.' The second is: 'I am of the nature to sicken.' The third is: 'I am of the nature to die.' The fourth is: 'All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will

become separated from me’; and the fifth is: ‘I am the owner of my karma, heir to my karma, born of my karma, related to my karma, abide supported by my karma; whatever karma I shall do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.’ This reflection helps us to develop equanimity, *upekkhā*, in relationship to our lives. It counteracts the feeling that the gods are being unkind, or that if we do something harmful maybe we’ll get away with it; if nobody notices, we won’t get caught and punished. At the other end of the scale, if we do something good and are worried that we won’t get any beneficial results for it, that we won’t be rewarded or there won’t be a good result, we’re equally the heirs to those good actions too, born of them and abide supported by them. Whatever actions we do, of those we will be the heirs. This is cause and effect. In a way it’s just as inexorable as physics, chemistry and biology. It’s just the way the natural order works, and although these reflections can be very challenging or sobering, they are also gloriously realistic;



something in the heart relaxes and says: 'This is just how it is, this is the natural order of things.'

Complaining about the natural order is rather like the logic of a three-year-old who says: 'Bad rain, you shouldn't be here today! I want to play in the garden. Go away, rain, you're spoiling my game!' In the same way, we blame the changes and events in our lives and take them personally. But the Buddha's teaching naturally encourages us to create karmic influences, to take actions which will make the experience of our life more pleasant and more beneficial to others. It's not that if you do good the gods will reward you and hand you prizes, while if you do evil they will punish you, send you down to hell and imprison you in a miserable state. The Buddha's teaching is much more a system of ethics based on our psychology, on the natural systems of our mind, rather than on reward and punishment by invisible spirits or the caprices and whims of different gods. In mythology, the Greek, Norse or Egyptian gods are a pretty

unruly bunch – very unreliable, unpredictable and subject to shallow mood-swings and foibles (Niobe once boasted of her fourteen children to Leto, who only had two; those two of Leto happened to be Artemis and Apollo, however, so the two of them killed every one of Niobe's – she wept a great pool of tears for her lost children and weeps for them still... according to the myth). So, understandably, the worshippers of the ancient gods felt the need to keep them sweet and make substantial sacrifices to keep things going in their favour.

The Buddha teaches that what happens to us is not up to the gods, their moods and their rewards or punishments, but more to do with the actions that we take, with directing our minds towards what is skilful, what is wholesome. The ethics of Buddhism are psychological, insofar as we are the ones who create our rewards and punishments. As I said, if you act in a generous and kindly way your heart feels light and bright, you feel a quality of self-respect. If you act in a cruel, selfish and

destructive way, your heart feels cramped, tight and heavy. That's a natural result of selfish or destructive action. So rewards and punishments essentially come from the forces of our own nature, not from anything external to our own mind.

## ‘IS THIS A MORAL UNIVERSE?’

When we consider the process of action and reaction, we probably know from our knowledge of physics, astronomy and chemistry that the universe contains forces like electromagnetic or gravitational fields. And when we look at the Buddha’s teachings on *kamma* and *vipāka*, action and its results, we see that he suggests this is also a moral universe. Though some physicists might disagree, the Buddha taught that (along with the exclusively physical forces) there is also a moral causational field in the mental and physical universe thus the choices that are made have effects which resonate with the things that brought them into being. There is a cause

and effect relationship between different aspects of life that, in the sphere of action, is deeply conditioned by the intentions behind those actions.

Within the realm of *kamma* and *vipāka*, within this particular one of the five laws, this moral aspect is a very important element. Good actions are good karma which leads to favourable results. For example, in monasteries throughout the Buddhist world we have a little ceremony for sharing the merits generated by the making of offerings. The servery at Amaravati Monastery has to be extended quite considerably every weekend to accommodate the amount of offerings that people bring, sometimes in honour of a birthday or to commemorate someone who has passed away, and before the meal we have a little ceremony of sharing blessings. Or we talk of coming to pay respects to the Triple Gem and entering into the field of influence of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. The term the Buddha used for this was a 'field of merit', *puññakkhetta*. You might think of a

field of merit as something that happens in the temple, and the gravitational field as belonging to the physics department, but I'd say that these 'fields' are not just a matter of using the same word, but are equally real, genuine aspects of our existence.

Along with the laws of the material world, we have within our mental and physical universe the law of cause and effect, the law of the effects of good and bad action. Someone like the Buddha would create a very powerful field of merit, a pool of powerful wholesome qualities in the world, because he was extraordinarily wise, generous and kind, and he established a massive body of teachings. When you seek to draw close to the Buddha and participate in his teachings, you are entering that field. Using the analogy of astronomy, the Buddha's influence is like that of a massive star which is very large, dense and heavy, and has a powerful gravitational field, so that its presence has a powerful effect and pulls things towards it. Similarly, a great being like the Buddha creates a very powerful field of merit or

goodness, and by drawing close to such a person and entering his field, by picking up the Buddha's teachings and being open to the examples given by him, you receive some of the blessings that are in that field. You receive the benefits within that sphere of influence, as you would feel the pull of gravity from a massive star.

In Buddhist tradition we talk about *pāramitā*, the field of good deeds. During the Buddha's many many lives as a Bodhisattva he developed the Ten *Pāramitās*: generosity, renunciation, virtue, wisdom, energy, truthfulness, patience, determination, loving-kindness and equanimity; and those wholesome qualities helped him to build up this field of merit – *puñña*. So when we draw close to such a person and participate in their field of merit, we are buoyed up and influenced to act in the same way. To use another analogy, if you come to live in Britain you can use the 'field' of the National Health Service. Similarly, by drawing close to a great teacher like the Buddha

you participate in his field of merit, you become a beneficiary of that potency.

Although you might not want to believe this or don't think it is true or realistic, it's certainly possible to see how the laws of cause and effect, our actions and our words, have clear and tangible effects within our own lifetimes. Even without looking to past lifetimes or concerning ourselves with other people, we can see in our own lives that if we do something which is friendly, unselfish, kindly, if we act in an open and generous way, this has the effect of bringing brightness, ease, enjoyment into our hearts. There's joyfulness, self-respect and delight in our hearts when we act in a kind and unselfish way. These are easily discernible, beautiful, natural, pleasant qualities. If we act in a cruel way, if we act selfishly or deceitfully, if we lie to or cheat someone; if we act in a hurtful way and then look within ourselves, we feel tense, burdened, anxious, agitated – at least I do. A harmful action has an immediately discernible result,



not delayed at all. And we don't think of that effect as in any way mysterious, strange, magical or metaphysical. If you tell a lie, you immediately feel anxious that others will find out what you said is not true. If you cheat someone or steal something, immediately there is tension. The results of good and bad action are not something that's remote or far away.

I'm reminded of a teaching that the Buddha gave about *puñña*, about blessings or merit. It seems to have been given in the context of someone saying: 'Making good karma doesn't really matter. If you're focused on the higher teachings, the only things that are meaningful are wisdom and liberation. Doing good deeds and making good karma is insignificant, unimportant.' But the Buddha said:

'Don't belittle *puñña*. *Puñña* is another word for happiness.'

(A 7.62; Iti 1.18)

That brightness in the heart is the quality of *puñña* or blessings; this is the basis of happiness, the basis of freedom, so don't belittle it, don't look down upon it in a dismissive way, as if it were kindergarten Buddhism.

This is an important and powerful part of life. It's easy to say: 'This is insignificant,' or: 'I'm not really concerned about this.' But when there is the quality of *puñña*, there's an easefulness, a brightness in the heart which helps to support concentration and mental focus, and thereby the insight and liberation which come from them. And if there isn't a basis of brightness and ease, of self-respect, it's virtually impossible to develop any kind of mental focus and concentration, or any kind of real wisdom or insight. A good example that illustrates the connection between these qualities is in a story of the great lay-disciple Visākhā. When the Buddha asked her why she had requested the opportunity to make a variety of offerings regularly, she replied that:

When I remember it, I shall be glad. When I am glad, I shall be happy. When my mind is happy, my body will be tranquil. When my body is tranquil, I shall feel pleasure. When I feel pleasure, my mind will become concentrated. That will maintain the spiritual faculties in being in me and also the spiritual powers and the enlightenment factors. This, Venerable Sir, is the benefit I foresee for myself in asking the eight favours of the Tathāgata. (MV 8)

The Buddha was very pleased with this response and immediately gave her permission to make those regular offerings. It is of particular note that her interest was based not only on faith in the positive results of generosity but also upon wisdom gleaned from her own experience.

## ‘IS THIS A CONSCIOUS UNIVERSE?’

This role of *pāramitā*, the concept of a ‘field of blessings’, is also interesting in terms of considering the possibility of a causal, or moral universe. Again, this might sound a little extreme, but we can also consider that this is a conscious universe. We know that we are conscious. We are conscious of our lives, of our bodies; we are aware of the stars and planets, and all the space out there which constitutes the physical universe, and of ourselves as individuals on this planet. But in the sphere of modern physics it’s also interesting to look at the microscopic world of particle physics, to shrink the area of

attention and look at the subatomic world, where it becomes harder and harder to define what is being seen as separate from the way it is being seen and who or what is seeing it. As the well-known physicist John Wheeler wrote:

No elementary phenomenon is a phenomenon until it is an observed phenomenon.

JA Wheeler & WH Zurek, 'Quantum Theory and Measurement', Princeton, 2014, p 202

You can't say that something exists until you've observed it. You can't say that it is or what it is unless it's observed. Another physicist put it like this:

The fact that all the properties of particles are determined by principles closely related to the method of observation would mean that the basic structures of the material world are determined ultimately by the way we look at this

world, that the observed patterns of matter are reflections of patterns of mind.

Fritjof Capra, 'The Turning Point',  
Simon and Schuster, 1982, p 93

Moment by moment we are not experiencing an objective world; rather we're experiencing our mind's *representation* of the world.

When the Buddha talked about the question: 'What is the world?' He said:

That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world – this is called 'the world' in this teaching. And what, friends ... is that 'world'? The eye ... the ear ... the nose ... the tongue ... the body ... [and] the mind are that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world – [therefore] this is called 'the world' in this teaching. (S 35.116)

It's not saying that the whole world is just a dream but it's saying that our version, our experience of the world is conjured into being through the activity of our senses and our human brains. Again, we can reflect that both the world of experience and the universe as a whole have the element of causality woven into them. Not only are the forces of gravity and chemistry and physics involved, but so is our conscious mind, the element of consciousness. So what is experienced is also dependent on how it is being experienced, and our mind is involved in exactly how the world appears. This is a significant element in terms of how we can usefully apply the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha points to understanding the things that control our lives, and that what we experience is not just the effects of events in past lives, but also results from the laws of nature. Our lives are controlled by the laws of physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and also by the laws of Dhamma itself – the laws of cause and effect, *kamma* and *vipāka*. This makes our

experience a lot less personal. If we think we are experiencing an illness because of something really nasty that we did in a past life, or because of something that somebody has done to us, that makes things very personal. But if instead we broaden this view to see that what we are experiencing is according to the natural laws, and that personal choice by either ourselves or other people is only a small proportion of those laws, this makes the experience a lot more easy to digest. It leads directly to *upekkhā* – that serenity of heart that is the ‘still point of the turning world’, as TS Eliot put it. This is the capacity to be fully open and attuned to all things yet utterly unperturbed by their agitation, physical or emotional. The heart is fully open to the world yet serene, balanced and equanimous.

Even when we specifically look at how the law of *kamma* and *vipāka* operates and not at the other laws – only at our actions and the effects of those actions – that too brings a kind of evenness to our experience. When we are able to see that what



we are experiencing is affected to some degree by our actions, and are able to consider that if we do something it's going to have an effect, this brings a quality of equanimity to our experience. When we are able to see that what we experience comes about according to these inexorable and immutable laws, there's much more of a balance within ourselves: 'How could it be otherwise?' And there is peace.

‘WHEN YOU CHANT, WHO OR WHAT  
ARE YOU ADDRESSING?’

Some people feel it’s wrong to think in terms of deities or the sharing of merit; they prefer to take a sceptical realist stance and, of course, that is their own prerogative.

We chant blessings every day at the meal time. People ask us to chant *paritta*, the traditional protective verses, and I sprinkle them with ‘holy’ water and tie strings on them and their babies or chant the *Āṅgulimāla Paritta* for women who are expecting a child. So you may wonder who we are talking to when we ‘invoke’ blessings. In the introduction to the *parittas* there’s an invitation to all the non-human forces of the universe. There’s

a grand list: the *brahma* gods, the *gandhabbas* or celestial musicians, the *nāgas* or dragons, earth spirits and the *yakkhas*, the celestial demons: a long list of different deities are invited to come and bear witness. But how does invoking those deities fit in with the idea of not looking to invisible beings to help pull the right strings and make things go in our favour?

When people ask about these ceremonies, I often say: ‘You can see this in two different ways. You can see that there are qualities of goodness around us in the universe, and you can think of those qualities as noble and helpful beings in this realm or other realms. So you can consciously invite them and call upon their aid. But if you don’t like the idea of such beings, you can equally validly think in terms of inviting the bright forces from within yourself; that you are actually calling upon the brightness, the deva qualities, the radiant qualities of your own being to come forth to the surface – the word ‘deva’ means ‘radiant ones’. You’re inviting your own strengths, your own

spiritual qualities, your own goodness, to take form in order to bring blessings or support. In this way, whether you are inviting outside forces to manifest or seeking to externalize your own inside forces, the effect is really the same.

In Japan there's a very interesting pair of terms that refer to this. Japan has a strong tradition of Pure Land Buddhism, which is based around the idea of praying to Amitabha Buddha, the ruler of the Western Paradise, a Buddha Land. The idea is that if you recite the name of Amitabha Buddha with enough faith and sincerity, when you pass away you will be reborn in the Western Pure Land, live there for an extremely long time and eventually become enlightened there. You call upon Amitabha Buddha as an external force, both to bless your life in the present and also as the goal you're heading towards in the future. This is known as the path of *tariki* or 'other power'. Zen Buddhism, which operates side by side with Pure Land Buddhism in Japan, is much more to do with looking into your own mind and heart,

and developing the path of enlightenment within your own life and mind. This is called *jiriki* or 'self power'. These two powers operate side by side. *Tariki* tends to appeal to people with more of a faith-filled, devotional personality, while *jiriki* appeals more to people of a reflective, wisdom-based character, but both are equally valid in their own way. Similarly, when we look at our minds and see how they operate, we can see that it's really up to us how we live, what choices we make and whether we learn to guide our lives in skilful ways, live in a wholesome way and give up the unwholesome, learn how to cultivate unselfishness and give up selfish self-centred and destructive habits.

But we are also affected by the people we are with and the environment we are in. When you come to a Buddhist monastery or listen to the teachings, you enter the field of Gotama Buddha, or the field of a great teacher like Ajahn Chah or Ajahn Sumedho, and experience the benefits of being in that field. If we recognize that we are affected by the things we

do, we will realize that coming to a Buddhist monastery and listening to Buddhist teachings on Sunday afternoons is going to have a certain effect. Spending Sunday afternoon in the pub or watching football will also have a certain effect. What goes on inside us is ultimately up to us, but we are affected by our environment, so if we wish to support wholesome changes and qualities within ourselves, it's always wise to be attentive to what environment we choose to be in. This is also one reason why the Buddha made the comment: 'Don't belittle merit.'

Don't think that good karma is insignificant or that those aspects of spiritual training are unimportant. They are essential, because our environment affects the way we are and our capacity to draw upon the wholesome qualities within ourselves.

## ‘WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?’

To go back to the issues of *kamma* and *vipāka*, a question that was often asked in the Buddha’s time, and is also asked now, is how the events of our current or past lives affect the present. There are the folk beliefs I was describing about how we experience things in the present because of actions in the past. How true is that? What did the Buddha say about it? The folklore around this subject can be very deterministic, particularly in the Asian mythological realm.

In the Majjhima Nikāya, the Middle Length Discourses, there are two consecutive *suttas* which deal with this, *Suttas* 135 and

136, the ‘Lesser’ and ‘The Greater Exposition on Action’, the *Cūḷa-kammavibhanga Sutta* and the *Mahā-kammavibhanga Sutta*. The first one, the *Cūḷa-*, explains how the actions in a past life affect experience in the present life, and its approach is fairly mechanistic. In that *sutta* the Buddha says that if you are angry and violent and kill living beings, it’s likely that your lifespan in a future life will be short. If you are prone to anger and hatred in this life, in the future you are likely to be born ugly. If you are gentle and kind and helpful to other living beings, you are likely to be blessed with a long life; if you are harmless and kind and not prone to anger or hatred, but instead develop loving-kindness and gentleness, in lives to come you will be born beautiful. If you are stingy and selfish, you are likely to be born poor. If you are generous and open-handed, you are likely to be born into a situation of wealth or prosperity. It’s very much a case of: ‘Because of **A**, therefore **B**.’



These types of teachings and stories have a strong effect on culture and can lead to a very deterministic model. However, in the *Mahā-kammavibhanga Sutta* the Buddha addresses the question of why someone who is violent, selfish or immoral might nevertheless be wealthy, powerful and comfortable, while someone who is kind, helpful, and generous suffers from horrible diseases and other dreadful things. In other words, why is it that sometimes bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people? In reply the Buddha points out that in the present lifetime someone may be virtuous, kind, helpful and unselfish, but may experience suffering due to the resonance from past actions in an earlier life, when they weren't living so skilfully. Similarly, a person who is living unskilfully and unwholesomely now may in a previous life have developed a lot of goodness and created the causes for blessings and benefit in this life from past wholesome actions, although in this life they are caught up in delusion and are acting in

an unskilful way – the Buddha’s malign cousin Devadatta is a classic example of this latter quality.

Although the Buddha does not spell it out in this particular *sutta*, please bear in mind that such *kamma-vipāka* is only one small factor in the mix, as mentioned above in his words to Moliya Sīvaka (S 36.21). The main cause of disease is that we have a body, which is biologically complex, and any one of its billions of functions can go wrong at any time (this is what ‘balancing the humours of bile, phlegm and wind’ refers to). Years ago I did a degree in physiology and psychology; at the end of three years of studying the human body I was left with awe and the question: ‘How *can* it all work? It’s SO hyper-intricate it’s amazing we can even bend a finger, let alone pole-vault...’. I’d therefore suggest that the reason why we never hear of the problem of empty hospitals is more to do with biology (*bija-niyāma*), rather than reaping the results of past personal actions.

What we experience now is thus informed by all five *niyāmas* and the aspect of *kamma-niyāma* does not necessarily match solely what we do in this life, but can also be a resonance from past lives, maybe from thousands of lifetimes ago.

According to one of the commentarial stories, the Buddha once had a headache for three days and his attendant Ānanda, who was always trying to make everything right for the Buddha, was extremely concerned. He tried to get Jīvaka the doctor to help obtain medicines for him, but the Buddha said something like: ‘Ānanda, it’s not possible that you can do anything to alleviate this headache. In a lifetime many, many aeons ago, when I was a small boy, I caught a fish in a pond in the village and bashed its head three times on a rock to kill it. What I am experiencing now is the effect of killing that fish in that way, and this headache is going to go on for three days, until it has run its course, so there is nothing you can do about it.’ In that

particular instance the Buddha could see this resonance many ages after the source event had occurred.

Another interesting example of this kind of resonance, again concerned with unskilful action, is with the former bandit and murderer Angulimāla. When he was a monk and went on alms-round, the relatives of his victims and other people too would throw things at him, and abuse and attack him. The *Āṅgulimāla Sutta* (M 86) describes the scene:

Then, when it was morning, the Venerable Āṅgulimāla dressed, and taking his bowl and outer robe, went into Sāvatti for alms. Now on that occasion someone threw a clod of earth and hit his body, someone else threw a stick, and someone else threw a potsherd and hit him with it.

Then, with blood running from his cut head, with his bowl broken and with his robe torn, the Venerable Āṅgulimāla went to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One saw him coming in the distance and told him: ‘Bear it, brahmin! Bear it! You are experiencing here and now the result of deeds because of which you might have been tortured in hell for many years, for many hundreds of years, for many thousands of years.’ (M 86.17, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans.)

He did indeed bear it well as he was already an Arahant when these incidents occurred. At the other end of the spectrum, the Buddha often talked about the effects of wholesome action; for example:

I recall that for a long time I experienced the desirable, lovely, agreeable result of merit that had been made over a long time. For seven years I developed a mind of loving-kindness. As a consequence, for seven aeons of universal dissolution and expansion I did not come back to this world. When the universe was dissolving I was born in the Ābhassara brahma-realm, of streaming radiance. When

the universe was expanding, I was reborn in an empty mansion of Brahmā. There I was ... the Great Brahmā, the vanquisher, the unvanquished, the universal seer, the wielder of mastery. I was Sakka, ruler of the devas, thirty-six times. (A 7.62)

So our actions can ripen in the immediate future, they can ripen in the near future or they can ripen in the far future; and they can ripen in equal, stronger or weaker ways, according to circumstance. To me the juxtaposition of these two *suttas* – one of which says ‘Every volitional action will necessarily cause a related result’; while the other says: ‘Exactly how, when and where that result will manifest is necessarily uncertain’ – is a perfect teaching on the issue. The world is pre-conditioned but not pre-determined, and the future is conditioned by the choices we make here and now.

## ‘HOW CAN I USE THESE IDEAS TO IMPROVE MY LIFE?’

There are a lot of interrelated subjects that have been presented here but perhaps the most crucial consideration is: ‘How do we practise with all of this?’ I would say that there is a three-part process to be employed, moment by moment:

1. To cultivate a radical acceptance (*mettā*) toward all of the influences arriving in the present; to accept this present reality with an open heart. This means to fully accept the effects of all past causes, whether they be physical, chemical, biological, karmic, psychological or spiritual.

2. This acceptance then blossoms as the attitude of *upekkhā* – even-mindedness, serenity in relationship to all experience, both the inner and outer worlds. The heart attunes to its own fundamental nature, Dhamma itself, the integrative principle that forms the fabric of reality. There is open-mindedness, groundedness, balance.

3. On that foundation, having accepted all those varied effects with equanimity – whether they be pleasant, painful or neutral – to then work to plant good causes in the present. These good causes can best be described in the Buddha’s guidelines for Right Effort (*sammā-vayamo*):

- a. Restraining the unwholesome from arising (*saṃvara*)
- b. If the unwholesome has arisen, letting it go (*pahāna*)
- c. Cultivating the wholesome (*bhāvanā*)
- d. If the wholesome has arisen, then maintaining it (*anurakkhaṇa*)



In other teachings he lists the qualities of wholesomeness thus, with the unwholesome being defined as their opposites:

And what is the wholesome? Refraining from killing living beings is wholesome; refraining from taking what is not given is wholesome; refraining from sexual misconduct is wholesome; refraining from false, malicious and harsh speech is wholesome; refraining from gossip is wholesome; unselfishness is wholesome; goodwill is wholesome; Right View is wholesome. This is called the wholesome. (M 9.6; also compare A 10.28 & A 10.176)

In making these efforts it is important not to drift into the self-view of: 'Me doing something, to get somewhere,' but rather to let the practice be guided by mindfulness and wisdom (*sati-paññā*). For when *sati-paññā* is in the driving seat, then the

practice is always in accord with the here-and-now reality, with Dhamma.

As long as you conceive yourself as being somebody who has to do something in order to become something else, you are still caught in a trap, a condition of mind, as being a self, and you never quite understand anything properly. No matter how many years you meditate, you will never really understand the teaching; you will always be just off the mark. The direct way of seeing things now – that whatever arises passes away – doesn't mean that you are throwing anything away. It means that you're looking as you've never bothered to look before. You're looking from a perspective of what's here now, rather than looking for something that's not here.

'Ajahn Sumedho, the Anthology', Vol.3,  
Amaravati Publications, 2014, p 38

Ajahn Chah often emphasized that everything that we are is part of nature and that Dhamma and nature are synonymous:

Whether a tree, a mountain or an animal, it's all Dhamma, everything is Dhamma. Where is this Dhamma? Speaking simply, that which is not Dhamma doesn't exist. Dhamma is nature. This is called the *saccadhamma*, the True Dhamma. If one sees nature, one sees Dhamma; if one sees Dhamma, one sees nature. Seeing nature, one knows the Dhamma.

‘The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah’,  
Aruna Publications, 2011, p 485

When the mind is Dhamma, it stops. It has attained peace. There's no longer a need to do anything special, because the mind is Dhamma already. The outside is Dhamma, the inside is Dhamma. The ‘one who knows’ is Dhamma. The state is Dhamma and that which knows the state is Dhamma. It is one. It is free. (*ibid*, p 696)

Thus, in a way, the universe pulls its own strings; it is a self-adjusting universe. That implies that our intentions as well as our actions are also part of the way things are – yet without reading that ‘way things are’ as any kind of pre-destination. So rather than thinking: ‘There is the universe, and I’m this separate entity apart from it who’s doing things with it,’ we need to realize that we are intrinsically involved in the universe. We are the universe; we are part of it, and the choices we make, the dispositions that we have and our intentions are part of the way things are. It’s not that what we do is imposing or intruding upon the world in some way, or interfering with it – ‘Do I dare disturb the universe?’ again, as TS Eliot put it – but simply that we are part of it. So when our hearts are in accord with reality, when we are attuned to that reality, our actions lead to wholesomeness, to pleasantness, to freedom and delight for ourselves. But when our actions are out of accord with reality and are, say, disharmonious or destructive, there’s naturally a

painful result. Our actions are still part of the natural order, but they bring painful consequences with them.

So it's helpful to survey the events that occur and the way life takes shape, moment to moment, day by day, week by week, year by year. What we're experiencing is the flow of the natural order, and the extraordinary and miraculous thing is that within that natural order we have the capacity to make changes, to have an effect. We are able to choose, and this is what makes the possibility of liberation open to us. And when we make the choice to let go of self-centredness and move towards awakening, to let go of that which is destructive, obstructive and harmful, we can bring our hearts more and more completely into accord with that reality. In essence, what is being experienced is that the mind is becoming aware of its own nature and that it is part of the universe. And if the idea's not too high-flown, in a way the universe is able to become aware of its own nature through our spiritual efforts.

I feel that this is an important principle to understand. It's not as though the world and the universe are out there and we are separate and apart from them; no, rather we are intrinsically involved in them through what we do and what we are. When we see things in this way, we realize that our destiny, if you like to use that kind of language, is entirely in our own hands. What happens in the world now is the effect of everything that has happened before, from the Big Bang to the present. It's totally pre-conditioned. But what we do with it now, how we handle it now, the attitude that we have towards it, is entirely a matter for us. That's where the difference can be made.

We can't find freedom through always having things the way that we'd like, as a) life is not that controllable for anyone, and b) the happiness that does come is necessarily transient. The Buddha's advice is rather for us to exchange trying to find happiness through getting what we like, for learning how to find happiness through liking what we get – or at least

not finding fault with it. If we can make that shift in attitude and learn how to be open and at ease with what we've got, with how life is, then we can find a tremendous quality of harmony, peacefulness and freedom. There is the vast serene radiance of *upekkhā*.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Question:** The degree of equanimity that an individual can reach based on the insight that you mention seems to me to be limited by what life actually throws at them. For example, in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge regime some two million people died from hunger, exhaustion, disease or ill-treatment; the whole population was faced with appalling oppression. This brings up the whole question of the phenomenon of ‘equanimity’ as something almost separate from everything else.

**Answer:** I’d say that the equanimity will be different in degree – technically there are three levels: based on diversity, based on unity, and based on non-identification (M 137.18-20) – but



the deciding factor is the spiritual fortitude, the attitude of the individual towards the situation, as opposed to the intensity of suffering that is being visited upon them. For one with a liberated heart, it's essentially the same quality in all situations.

That said, in the scriptures you find a couple of different standards represented. Firstly, in *suttas* such as the famous 'Simile of the Saw' (M 21) we hear the Buddha saying:

Even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb from limb with a two-handled saw, one who gave rise to a mind of hatred towards them would not be carrying out my teaching.

He then adds that, instead, one's mind should remain:

[U]naffected, filled with compassion for the welfare of those who are doing the sawing – 'We shall abide pervading them with a mind imbued with loving-kindness; and, starting with them, we shall abide pervading the entire

world with all-encompassing loving-kindness.’ [So too with compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity.] (M21.20)

And in ‘The Advice to Puṇṇa’ (M 145), when Venerable Puṇṇa asks to go to remote and lawless Sunāparanta, the Buddha says to him:

‘Puṇṇa, the people of Sunāparanta are fierce and rough. If they abuse and threaten you, what will you think then?’

To which he replies:

‘Venerable Sir, if the people of Sunāparanta abuse and threaten me then I will think, “These people of Sunāparanta are truly kind in that they refrain from hitting me with their fists”.’

The Buddha then tests his attitude toward ever more extreme possible assaults, up to the point of him being knifed to death.

Venerable Puṇṇa responds with the same evenness, always looking on the bright side of the situation. Following this the Buddha declares:

‘Good, good, Puṇṇa! Possessing such self-control and peacefulness, you will be able to dwell in Sunāparanta.’  
(M 145.5-6)

As a counterbalance to this approach, there is also the encouragement not to go looking for trouble, if one can avoid it. One of ‘the eighteen faults of a monastery’ listed in the *Visuddhimagga* (a commentary written about 1000 years after the Buddha lived) is ‘living in a contested border area or a battle zone’. (*Vsm* IV 16)

One of the nuns at Amaravati was married to the Deputy Prime Minister of Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge takeover. She and her children were airlifted out of Phnom Penh but her husband chose to stay behind in the hope of being able to

continue to serve his country. She does not know his fate. She managed to build a new life in the US afterwards, but was extremely angry with the Khmer Rouge for the terrible suffering and destruction they meted out in Cambodia. Although she'd grown up in a Buddhist country she hadn't developed much in the way of meditation skills, but when she realized the degree of turbulence and anger within her, she began to draw close to the Moral Re-Armament group, and started to work towards reconciliation and equanimity in relation to what had happened. It took her a good ten years of direct effort and work to achieve that equanimity. Eventually she became a committed Buddhist and decided to be become a nun. More importantly, she came to a place of resolution within, where she realized that by cultivating and dwelling in hatred and aversion, she was only creating more negative karma.

On a much more familiar everyday scale, even tiny everyday acts – coping with traffic (noticing that ‘I’ am never ‘traffic’; only ‘they’ are) or having to wait some extra time before getting a cup of tea at a cafe because someone jumps the queue – can give rise to patience and offer opportunities to develop equanimity. Equanimity doesn’t mean that you approve of something or should try to make yourself like it. On a larger scale, it means recognizing that the amount of destruction and evil caused by forces such as the Khmer Rouge regime is a horrifically painful part of the natural order, but part of nature none the less. You don’t condone it, but you acknowledge that these are the extremes some people can go to and have gone to, and those are the results.

Obviously one can’t be glib about such things, but through equanimity one sees their causes and effects. One also realizes the extreme states of delusion to which those who carry out such acts are subject, and the terrible states of mind and the miserable realms they create for themselves and others.

Evil is often viewed as a separate force in the universe, as something that is outside of nature. When I came into contact with Buddhist teachings and found out they didn't have this view of evil, that seemed to make much more sense. In the Buddhist teachings there is no concept of an absolute evil. In Buddhist mythology the embodiment of that which is unwholesome is Māra, who is the Lord of Death, the trickster, the one who is always trying to fool the Buddha or his disciples into getting caught up in aversion or desire and so forth. The word *māra* literally means 'death' (*amara* means 'deathless,' as in 'Amaravati – the Deathless Realm'), so Māra is the embodiment of death and delusion. But in Buddhist mythology Māra is not an absolute evil, but merely a being who is temporarily in an extremely deluded state. In the *Māra-tajjanīya Sutta* (M 50), Mahā-Moggallāna, one of the Buddha's two leading disciples, is attacked and physically invaded by Māra. But Moggallāna reminds Māra that during the life of the Buddha Kakusandha

there was a different Māra called Dūsi. Dūsi had a sister called Kālī whose son is the current Māra; while the Māra Dūsi has now been reborn as... Mahā-Moggallāna himself. So the current Māra is, albeit across a few lifetimes, the great Arahant's nephew.

Even though this is a Buddhist fairy tale, to me it's very significant that, mythologically, a being who is supposed to be the incarnation of evil could, through many subsequent lifetimes of spiritual training, work off that delusion and break free from it, to the extent of becoming totally enlightened and a leading disciple of the Buddha. Now, you can view all this symbolical rather than as historical fact, and I would encourage that, but to me that's a very powerful message: that no wrongdoing is incurable.

Another interesting link is that between mass-murderer Aṅgulimāla and safe child-birth. After Aṅgulimāla became a bhikkhu, one day on his alms-round he came across a woman

who was trying to give birth, but the child wouldn't come, and she was in terrible pain, weeping and wailing. Aṅgulimāla felt enormous compassion, but also helplessness – there seemed to be nothing he could do. So he went back to the Buddha and described what he had seen, and the Buddha said:

‘Go back to the woman and say to her: “Ever since I was born, I have never knowingly taken the life of another living being, and by the power of this truth may you and your child be well and be at ease”.’

Aṅgulimāla politely pointed out that in fact he had taken the lives of many beings, so those words would not be true. But the Buddha replied:

‘Say to her then: “Since I have been born into the Noble Birth [i.e. since becoming a bhikkhu] I have never knowingly taken the life of another living being, and by the power of this truth, may you and your child be at ease”.’ (M 86.14-15)



Aṅgulimāla went back and recited those words to the woman, and she then gave birth quite easily. Ever since then that verse has been used as a blessing for expectant mothers right up to the present day. So, although Aṅgulimāla had killed 999 people, someone who was extraordinarily destructive and harmful was transformed by wisdom to become a force of blessing and of goodness. (As a footnote to this – over the thirty-six years I have been a bhikkhu, my experience of the Aṅgulimāla Paritta has been that it has apparently been 100% effective; every time I know of it having been chanted, the mother and child have always come through the birth process OK. Of course this might just be chance and coincidence but that does not diminish the fact that it has happened that way.)

To me, then, evil is not something outside of nature, but I would say that it entails a depth of delusion whereby the mind is completely lost in its own self-obsessions. There is an interesting book called ‘Zero Degrees of Empathy’ by the

eminent psychiatrist Simon Baron-Cohen<sup>1</sup> whose thesis in this book is that true acts of evil are extremely rare in the world, and that more often than not, what we call 'evil' comes from an absence of empathy. Thus those concerned are completely obsessed with their own perspective and have no capacity to empathize with their victims. I thought it was an interesting point, and fairly made, that it is actually quite rare for someone to commit a deliberate malicious, destructive act, knowing that it is wrong and bad, and that more often people who do what we call 'evil' think they are doing good, in their own terms, and according to their own strange and distorted logic.

**Question:** How does one let go of attachment to personal possessions like one's house or car?

**Answer:** One direct and helpful thing you can do is to use Ajahn Chah's encouragement to recognize that the car is already

<sup>1</sup> Penguin, Allen Lane, 2011

broken. Temporarily it is moving and apparently it is under your control, but it is really a broken car, a lost car, and one day its end will come; it will stop working. At the moment it is functioning and you can enjoy its use, but it is an impermanent car. As you bring such thoughts to mind, something in the *citta* may protest: ‘It’s not really gone, it’s here and it’s mine!’ But simply to raise the thought is to recognize the reality of the car’s impermanence – how could that not be so? Also, if you pass that particular layer of defensiveness and anxiety, something in the heart recognizes: ‘Well, of course! There was a time before I bought it when this car wasn’t mine, and there will be a time when it isn’t mine again. So owning this car is just a temporary arrangement; how could it not be?’ And it’s not intrinsically a car either; all the elements came together to make it in the first place and eventually they must separate again, just as the Arahant Bhikkhunī Vajirā described, with the simile of a chariot, when dismissing Māra one day:

Just as, with an assemblage of parts, the word ‘chariot’ is used, so, when the *khandhās* [the integration of mind and body] exist, there is the convention of ‘being’. (S 5.10)

You can try using a simple phrase like: ‘This is a broken car; this is a demolished house,’ and when that feeling of: ‘Yes, but it is mine, and I’m going to keep it!’ arises, bring your attention to that feeling and notice how uncomfortable it is. Or during your meditation you can visualize handing over the keys of the house or the car to someone else and saying: ‘It’s all yours!’

Until we know the pain of attachment, we won’t really let go. Until we really recognize how painful it is to feel: ‘That’s *my car, my house,*’ we won’t really let go of our attachment to them. Until we recognize the tension and painfulness of clinging and holding on to material objects, or more intangible qualities such as reputation or health, and see what a burden and an effort that clinging is, we won’t really let go of them. That simple reflection is a helpful tool.

**Question:** The last time I heard the words ‘Who’s pulling the strings?’ it was Luang Por Sumedho talking in relation to Ajahn Chah telling his villagers, five years before Ajahn Sumedho arrived, that there would be a white monk from the West coming Wat Pah Pong. That seems to indicate that he could see the future, and suggests that the future is already fixed.

**Answer:** When some people are very attuned to the way things are, they can pick up threads, patterns of causal connection and suchlike within their experience. I couldn’t say exactly what Ajahn Chah had experienced or why he would have said that to his villagers. I too have heard that story, that when they were building a *kūṭi*<sup>2</sup> at the monastery it seems the carpenter thought they were wasting wood and asked: ‘Hey, Luang Por, how come we’re building it so tall? It’s much higher than it needs to be,’ and Ajahn Chah replied: ‘Some *farang* (foreigners) will come

<sup>2</sup> A cabin in which monastics live or undertake solitary retreats.

and they're much taller than we are, so it needs to be this high.' These things are somewhat mysterious. There is no such thing as totally 'fixed' karma, but there are strong tendencies, such as with the Bodhisattva and the fish; there are causal relations which are extremely potent. The night before the Buddha's enlightenment he had a series of five dreams which all predicted that he was about to attain complete enlightenment. There are sometimes currents which are extremely powerful, and someone who is very attuned to the causational field is able to discern those currents. Also, the experience of time is quite subjective. In those states of attunement and clarity of vision, things that have happened in the far past or might happen in the future can take shape and may become apparent.

**Question:** Without being deterministic, I wonder if at some level everything is known.

**Answer:** I wouldn't say 'known', but there are causal

connections, there are likelihoods or patterns that are in place, although the very fact that things are not fixed means that the choices we make here and now make a difference. It's more like strong tendencies or likelihoods which take shape. Again, I wouldn't want to profess any direct knowledge of those kinds of abilities because I don't have them, but my understanding is that when somebody makes a prediction like that, they are talking about some strong intuition that they have. When Ajahn Chah had that conversation with the carpenter, Ajahn Sumedho was probably not yet in Thailand but I never heard the details of the timing of that myself.

Exactly how these things work I can't say but, seeing those patterns of causal relationship and how they work, also means recognizing that, yes, they are connected, but they are also unpredictable. Who you are now is connected to what you were like when you were one year old, but all kinds of things have happened since then which have caused you to be the way you

are today. When you were one year old you couldn't predict exactly what you would be like now, but there were certain trends and possibilities and likelihoods. But they weren't fixed, they were not a sure thing. So people who have this type of perception are speaking on the basis of a strong likelihood, but I would say there is still always the potential that things may take a different direction.

**Question:** My question is whether karma is always individual or whether maybe sometimes we receive the karma of our ancestors. In a way that would be a blessing because it would not be a punishment but an opportunity to learn, so in that way we could bless them as well and what we do could help to heal other generations.

**Answer:** In terms of classic Buddhist psychology there isn't any such thing as group karma or family karma. Karma concerns the actions of the individual. But things are related,



so that we inherit the effects of our parents' our grandparents' karma: their choices of where to live, what kind of occupations they chose to follow, the things that they did. We receive their effects, but karma is really to do with our own actions. So you may feel that the choices your grandparents made have resulted in your having a difficult or painful situation in this lifetime, but you can take that pain or difficulty and learn lessons from it. And you can share the merits, the *puñña* of your life and its blessings with your grandparents, in whatever state of being they might now be.

Furthermore, bear in mind that those inheritances might be filled with blessings rather than curses. My maternal grandfather, Carl Goldschmidt, was a universally respected man in the family and in his work. He was quiet, sweet-natured and was still running his own business up until when he died at 95. He had never fired an employee. He was the humanitarian axis of my family so, on the question of inheriting the effects of

the choices of our forebears: Great! I've been more than happy to receive some of the effects of his actions.

On a practical level karma is to do with the personal choices that we make here and now. Through karma we can connect our minds with the lives of others. We can think about others, even through simple things like sending a birthday card or a Christmas card. You send someone a card and they know: 'She's thinking of me – how nice!' We can make gestures of connection on a practical, ordinary material level, but which have an effect. It's also recognized that on the psychological plane, the sharing of blessings by dedicating the wholesome results of a good action to someone else has an effect of helping that person, of bringing benefit into their lives in some way. People often say: 'This sharing of merit is just superstition, it's an Asian custom, you don't find it in the *suttas*.' But you do, actually, in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (A 7.53), in a *sutta* called 'Nandamātā'

Nanda's mother describes making an offering and sharing the benefits of it with the deva Vessavaṇa, one of the Four Great Kings, and there are other instances in the *suttas* too. So sharing merit is substantiated in the Pali texts, but although you hear expressions like 'national karma' or 'group karma' or 'family karma', and people are free to use those terms if they wish, you don't really find them substantiated in the Buddhist tradition. You don't find the Buddha speaking in that way; in his terminology *kamma* has quite a narrow definition. It is the choices made by an individual based on intention; it's an intentional act and *vipāka* is its result. Breathing wouldn't be considered making *kamma* because it's just a biological function, but the choice to get up and make a cup of tea or punch your neighbour on the nose would be a personal act that you chose to do, and so would have a positive, negative or neutral effect.

**Question:** I've heard many times that when something negative happens to you, it was due to your negative karma from a previous life. But is it not possible for something negative to happen to you based on the negative karma from somebody else? If, for instance, a bus-load of people goes over a cliff and all fifty of them die, I find it hard to believe that those fifty people at that time all suffered negative karma.

**Answer:** That's *exactly* what I've been saying! Personal actions only play a relatively small part. The very fact that you have a human body, that you happen be alive, means that you can be subject at any time to sickness and death, or to great good fortune, which might have absolutely nothing to do with any personal action of yours whatsoever. Because you happen to be alive, because you happen to have a body, accidents may happen to you.

The main theme of my teaching here is that this whole idea of 'it must be someone's bad karma' needs adjusting. People

are born, so they are bound to die at some point. Personal karma may not necessarily be involved at all. The cause of death is birth. Death is going to happen to all of us in some way or other, everyone is going to die. That's how it is, that's the natural order; one day our bodies are all going to die in some way, shape or form, somewhere or other. The Buddha's way of speaking about this is very practical and direct; *kamma* is the action of an individual based on intention, from which comes the result, *vipāka*.

In this example the bus driver might have experienced some karmic effect, while for the passengers it was just random chance that the bus went over the cliff. What they would do with that final moment would be up to each one of them. But they might have got on that bus by pure chance. Similarly, there's a strong random element in the combination of DNA which came together from our mother and father before we were born, in exactly how the different bits lined up and joined together to form this pattern here or that pattern there. A lot

of it is random. It's not that there are The Gods of Karma who decide what lessons a being needs to learn and then have a committee meeting to decide how line up the four nucleotides that make up the code in your DNA – adenine, guanine, cytosine, and thymine. There's a lot of randomness in the way the natural order functions, and we often read into events a lot more meaning than is genuinely there. To me, if you really think about the different *niyāmas* and the variety of laws that are functioning, this broadens the scope enormously.

It is a weird folk belief that everything that happens must be due to someone's individual karma. Certainly, there's the fact of having been born but apart from that what happens to a person doesn't necessarily have anything to do with actions in a past life, or even in this life. I hope to have given some perspective on this, because these ideas about karma form a very strong pattern of belief in our culture, even among non-Buddhists. So when they come up, either in your own mind or

when other people raise them, I would encourage you to stop and think about them for a minute.

Since we have a body and a mind, we can experience a whole range of different possibilities. When things go well or badly we can interpret this in certain fashions, but they may involve an awful lot of projection and superstition. Thus we abdicate from our capacity to make a difference. Even when things go really badly, when we develop a horrible disease, experience a terrible accident or are treated harshly, the attitude we have to those things is entirely up to us and we can try to learn from them. That's always within our power. When we adopt the fatalistic attitude that everything is fixed, that it's just karma and there's nothing we can do about it, we're taking things personally rather than seeing things in terms of nature and its laws and thus are abdicating from our capacity to learn from events, to make good use of them and see what blessings can come from them. We are not making use of the resources

that we have. If instead we shift the perspective to setting an intention to try to learn from whatever shape things take in our lives, whether it's pleasant or painful or neutral, and always ask: 'What can I learn from this? What does this teach me?' we stop thinking in terms of good karma, bad karma, good luck and bad luck and instead we take more responsibility for our own lives. We realize that this attitude liberates us – whether we are in a fortunate situation or a painful one, whether we're being oppressed and mistreated, or whether things are very blessed and easeful – how we react is always up to us.

**Question:** I'm a bit worried by the Buddha's statement concerning the fish he hit on the head in a past life. I wonder if that tallies with the other things that you've been saying today. It sounds to me more like a joke. Or is it that if we grow closer to enlightenment, if we become more perceptive, we will become more



aware of or likely to perceive connections from past lives? To me it seems that the Buddha's saying: 'Don't bother to try to cure my headache' is almost contrary to what you have been teaching.

**Answer:** It is indeed *almost* contrary, and that crossed my mind as I was saying it, but I also said: 'There is no such thing as totally 'fixed' karma, but there are strong tendencies.' Some people, when their minds are very attuned and awakened, have the capacity to see into particular threads of past lives, but others do not. Mahā-Moggallāna had enormously powerful psychic abilities, but the Buddha's other chief disciple, Sāriputta, although he was a very good meditator, had none. He couldn't read people's minds, he couldn't see past lives, while Moggallāna could even visit different realms of beings, such as the brahma-realms. In this particular instance of the Buddha's headache, I would say that he realized that the karmic resonance was so strong no medicine could alleviate it, just as with Aṅgulimāla.

Another, more neutral example that Ajahn Chah would often give was about the habit of the Buddha's other chief disciple, Sāriputta, of skipping over puddles:

There are of course those things that we can not change – they are called residual tendencies (*vāsanā*) – but our attitudes, our behaviour can be changed.

Like in the story of Venerable Sāriputta, who would skip over puddles when he came to them. He had been a monkey in his past life and this tendency remained. Even as an Enlightened One he would go skipping over puddles, but this doesn't mean he was being heedless. As disciples of the Buddha, we cannot remove *vāsanā* – only a Buddha can do that. Venerable Sāriputta liked hopping from time to time, but he was also full of profound wisdom. It was merely *vāsanā* in this case.

(Ajahn Chah, 'Self-Training,'  
*Forest Sangha Newsletter*, July 1990)

Cause and effect are a reality in the world, but the effects of an action are not fixed, although occasionally the currents are so strong that an effect is effectively unstoppable, like the inevitability of the Buddha's enlightenment. At other times the causal connections are weaker and can fade out or be diverted. In the end it's up to us what we do with it all; as the Buddha says in the Dhammapada (Dhp 160) and which Ajahn Chah was also fond of quoting, *'Atta hi attano natho ko hi natho paro siya...* – ultimately we need to be our own authority for who else can we depend on?'

You should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dhamma as an island, the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge. (D 16.2.26)



## APPENDIX

### SOME RESEARCH NOTES ON NIYĀMA

Compiled by Ven. Anejo Bhikkhu, Amaravati, 2015

*This is a simple text containing information and source references on the Buddhist subject of the niyāma. It is intended to function as a base, a theoretical guide for anyone interested to research the subject.*

### COMMON TRANSLATIONS

The word *niyāma* has been seen translated as:

‘Fixed course’, ‘natural law’, ‘natural order’, ‘law of nature’, ‘natural fixed law’, ‘constraint of’, ‘orderliness’, ‘natural way’, ‘fixed order’, ‘certainty’, ‘way’, ‘going on’, ‘process’, ‘order’, ‘system’, ‘restriction’.

## WORD VARIATIONS

Sometimes the ‘*niyāmas*’ or ‘*niyāma*’ occur mentioned as: ‘*niyaama*’, ‘*Pañca niyāmadhamma*’, ‘*Pañcavidha niyāma*’, ‘The five *niyāma*’.

## NOTE

- It should be noted that a commonly found phrase is ‘*sammatta niyāma*’ but this is referring to something different.
- In the Pitakas the word ‘*niyāma*’ is (mostly) not used. This word seems to be mostly used only in the commentaries. In the Pitakas ‘*niyāmatā*’ or ‘*dhammatā*’ is used instead. The *-tā* suffix has the same effect as *-ness*, *-ence* or *suchlike* in English. It forms an abstract noun; thus ‘*niyāma*’ means ‘law’ while ‘*niyāmatā*’ means ‘lawfulness’ or ‘orderliness’; and ‘*dhamma*’ means ‘truth’ or ‘natural reality’ while ‘*dhammatā*’ means ‘naturalness’.

- It is also good to note that ‘*niyāma*’ and ‘*niyama*’ are different things which both can occur in the texts. The latter word, ‘*niyama*’ means ‘restraint’, ‘constraint’, ‘training’ or ‘self-control’.

#### SUTTAS ABOUT THE NIYĀMAS

- 1) *Dhamma-niyāma Sutta*, under the heading: ‘*Arising*’, (A 3.136), (p 363 in Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation). *About the law concerning the Three Characteristics.*
- 2) Under the heading: ‘*Sectarian*’, A 3.61. The great chapter, (p 266 in Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation). *About views regarding causes of pleasure and pain.*
- 3) *Devadaha Sutta*, M 101, (p 827 in Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation). *Concerns karma and how actions relate to pleasure and pain.*
- 4) *Mahāpadana Sutta* (D 14.1.17-30), (pp 203ff in Maurice

Walshe's translation) *About Dhamma-niyāma (Dhammatā) – natural laws concerning a Bodhisatta.*

5) 'Sivaka', S 36.21, (p 1278 in the two volume version of Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation). *Also see the comments for this sutta which are very interesting in relation to the niyāmas. About the 'Eight Causes of Feeling'.*

6) Under the heading: 'Seers by the Ocean', S 11.10, (p 328 in Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation) *Kamma-niyāma compared in function to bīja-niyāma.*

7) Under the heading: 'Conditions', S12.20 (p 550 in Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation), *also see comment for this section. Puts dependent origination under 'dhamma-niyāma'.*

8) Under the heading: 'Seeds', S22.54 (p 891 in Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation) *Comparing consciousness to seeds.*

9) Under the heading: 'Arising', S 14.36 (p 649 Ven. Bhikkhu



Bodhi's translation) *About equating the arising of elements to the arising of suffering.*

#### BOOKS CONCERNING THE NIYĀMAS

1) 'Good, Evil and Beyond', P. A. Payutto, (pp: 1, 10, 41, 82). *Describes and groups the five niyāma. Has a very good section on 'Beliefs which are contrary to the law of kamma' - talking about where pleasure and pain come from.*

2) 'The Manual of Buddhism – The Expositions of the Buddha-dhamma', Ledi Sayadaw, (pp 103-140). *Contains a long section on the niyāma with many references to other sources.*

3) 'Buddhism', Rhys Davids (p 118, p 240) *Talks about a 'natural moral order' and describes the niyāma.*

4) 'The Book of Analysis (*Vibhaṅga*)', PTS, Ven. U Thiṅṅila trans., (under the heading of 'Three Bases of Heresy', p 477) *Describes wrong views regarding causes for pleasure and pain.*

- 5) ‘The Expositor II (*Atthasālini*)’, PTS, Maung Tin et al. trans. (p 360) *Description and grouping of the five niyāma.*
- 6) ‘Points of Controversy (*Kathā-vatthu*)’, PTS, Shwe Zan Aung & CAW Rhys Davids trans., (pp 383-387, + many more occurrences of ‘*niyāma*’ in the index). *Technical description of the word niyāma and also other controversies where the niyāma have some involvement.*



# 'WHO IS PULLING THE STRINGS?'

BY AJAHN AMARO

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