
Amerindian Rebirth and Buddhist Karma:

An Anthropologist's Reflections on
Comparative Religious Ethics

BY GANANATH OBEYESEKERE

1995 GONDA LECTURE

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Third Gonda lecture, held on 3 November 1995 on the premises of the Royal
Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences

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ROYAL NETHERLANDS ACADEMY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Amsterdam, 1996

ISBN 90-6984-158-4

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Professor Jan Gonda whose work and memory we honor in this lecture series was, as we all know, a meticulous scholar and one of the foremost exponents of Vedic thought. Though I have enormously benefited from his work, particularly in my ongoing research on the soteriological and psychological meanings of human sacrifice, there is not the remotest chance that an ethnographer without a deep knowledge of Indology can deal with Vedic themes that were at the heart of Gonda's work. Instead I will deal with an issue that has preoccupied Indologists for some time, namely, the origin of the doctrine of karma and rebirth. I hope the Indologists assembled here will forgive me if I adopt a radical methodological approach that says 'forget India' – at least for a moment – and look at the comparative world picture on rebirth theories.

In doing so I want to go back to the older idea of comparisons in both ethnography and the history of religions, this time influenced by another bold thinker, Wittgenstein. However, instead of the ad hoc comparisons of early ethnographers and historians, I look at 'family resemblances' that underlie similarities between and across cultures in respect of a limited or finite number of 'forms of life' that can be isolated with reasonable rigor from the ethnographic record. Yet, in a departure from Wittgenstein, I make the following assumption: family resemblances might well imply an underlying common structure and consequently family resemblances refract that common structure. I am not presenting this as a principle or a dogma; only as a methodological possibility whenever 'family resemblances' appear in history or ethnography. This assumption permits me to deal with structural models and their transformations, more in the heuristic spirit of Max Weber's ideal types or Freud's topographical models, than that of Levi-Strauss's epistemological view of structure which posits that the world is organized totalistically into signs that can be represented in the form of binary distinctions.

The book I am now engaged in writing is tentatively entitled, *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist and Greek Rebirth* and it starts off with the following methodological problem. Indological scholars have spent considerable time and effort to show how the doctrines of karma and rebirth entered

into the Indian religious tradition and fully flowered in the late sixth century BCE during the great religious reform that one associates with Buddhism, Jainism and other religious movements of that time. One influential line of argument tries to show incipient notions of karma in the early and late Vedic traditions, followed by the more conspicuous references in the Upanishads and then on to Buddhism, in a single line of development. In my thinking this strategy is methodologically flawed because it assumes that the extant texts reflected the multiplicity of the religious traditions in early India. This palpably was not the case. Early India would have had a multiplicity of religious traditions, and movements; out of this welter Brahmin priests memorized and transmitted texts they considered important. The texts that we have now are a product of this 'accident of history'; thus it seems methodologically futile to construct the origins of karma and rebirth in a unilinear fashion from a body of texts that could not possibly have had that linear characteristic. On the other hand it is senseless to expect scholars to figure the origins of karma from religious traditions that have vanished from memory!

My alternative solution is a radical one. I start off with the proposition that rebirth eschatologies are not unique to India, as many Indologists and intellectuals assume, but are found scattered in such distant and unrelated places like parts of Melanesia (especially the Trobriand beautifully described by Malinowski); among Australian aborigines, in West Africa (among the Igbo and Yoruba in particular); among the Druze of Lebanon and Israel; and in the vast circumpolar regions stretching from the Northwest Coast of America and the Inuit (Eskimo) and over to Eastern Siberia. Most of these rebirth eschatologies are found in small-scale societies, traditionally labelled as 'tribes'. In my ongoing work I discuss the spread of these eschatologies and describe several of them in detail. I then ask, which of these rebirth eschatologies are closest to the Buddhist? The answer is that in places like Melanesia and West Africa there is no notion of rebirth as animals: the only region in which this conception is found is in the vast circumpolar belt, particularly among Northwest Coast Indians and the Inuit (Eskimo). Even in this region the idea of animal reincarnation takes two forms: first, what I call 'parallel reincarnation' in which animals and humans have their separate reincarnation cycles. The second is what I call 'cross-reincarnation' where it is possible for humans to be reborn as animals and vice-versa. Underlying both these conditions is an important ethical ideology which states that both animals

and humans (and sometimes plants) are permeated by a bond of common sentience, and that there is no categorical distinction between nature and culture. This recognition of animals as a larger part of sentient existence is also recognized in Buddhism. Though less well known, similar ideas were also held by the Greeks of the Pythagorean tradition, including Plato, as for example, when the latter says in *Meno* that 'all nature is akin'.¹

TLINGIT ESCHATOLOGY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ILLUSTRATION

Forgetting India for the moment let me introduce you to Amerindian rebirth eschatology through one example, that of the Tlingit of southeastern Alaska, based on the magnificent ethnographic documentation in the 1950s by Frederica de Laguna. For convenience I shall focus on their conceptions of rebirth.

The Tlingit were a conglomerate of tribes divided into matrilineal clans and lineages that were in turn grouped into two large exogamous moieties. Territorial and land rights were exercised by the clan; the chiefs or big men of the clan were the trustees and managers of the group property. Like many other Northwest Coast Indian groups, rank was important: the nobility were the heads of clans and lineages whereas the commoners were, at least in theory, their distant relatives. Below the commoners were the slaves, generally foreigners captured in war and occasionally killed at some important event like the death of a chief. Below the clans were the lineages which, as in many other unilinear societies, consisted of matrilineal kinfolk who could trace precise genealogical connections with one another. Each lineage had its own crest that represented their totems, that is, 'certain animals, birds, fish, and invertebrates, heavenly bodies, promi-

¹ Plato, *Meno*, 81,d; immediately before this Plato's Socrates refers to Pindar and other poets, thus: 'They say that the human soul is immortal; at times it comes to an end, which they call dying, at times it is reborn, but it is never destroyed, and one must therefore live one's life as piously as possible. ... As the soul is immortal, has been born often and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things.' Trans, G.M.A. Grube, *Plato: Five Dialogues* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), p. 70 (81,b-c).

nent landmarks, and even ancestral heroes and certain supernatural beings associated with them.²

The Tlingit environment was a bountiful one full of fish and sea mammals, as well as a variety of land mammals and birds that they used for consumption. Yet, as with the other groups in this same cultural and geographic area, animal and human lives were interwoven in an intricate web of species sentience. Both men and animals possessed souls, and there is no fine line between the two, because animals in their spirit homes look like people and live like them; they can even hear what people say (in Tlingit). Kindness to an animal may be miraculously rewarded by the matrilineal ancestors. 'It is not clear whether plants and inanimate things ... also have souls comparable to those of men and animals, although they are often said to have an in-dwelling spirit of some kind ... Man in his spiritual aspect is not fundamentally different from any other part of nature.'³ Owing to their belief that all of life is interwoven ('species sentience'), there is a strong Tlingit reluctance to destroy nature and 'killing creatures with souls akin to his own.' No animal or bird should be needlessly hunted; nor once hunted should the body be wasted. 'Rather, the hunter would pray to the dead animal and to his own "spirit above", explaining his need and asking his forgiveness. The dead creature was thanked in song, perhaps honored with eagle down (like a noble guest); certain essential parts (head, bones, or vital organs, depending on the species) were interred, returned to the water, or cremated, to ensure reincarnation of the animal.'⁴

Until recent times every Tlingit believed in the reality of reincarnation. Every baby, says de Laguna, was believed to be a reincarnation of a deceased maternal relative. A person speaking of the time before birth might say: 'Then ashes I was; not yet was I born', implying a reference to the period of the cremation that probably released the spirit of the dead to the other world and then to this. At the death of a person, there were eight days of mourning, though for most people cremation was on the fourth day. The souls of those who die of disease or

² Frederica de Laguna, 'Tlingit', *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 70, ed., Wayne Suttles, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1990, p. 213.

³ Frederica de Laguna, 'Tlingit ideas about the Individual', *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1954, pp. 179-80.

⁴ de Laguna, *Tlingit*, p. 209.

old age journey through tangled woods to the banks of a river that has bad weather; hence the need to cover the corpse with heavy clothes, boots, mittens and so forth. The dead person must cross the river and then reach the land of the dead. Those who die by violence at their own hands, or in battle, go to much more desirable bourn, the land above or *k'iwai'a*. They are also reborn in good circumstance, according to the Russian ethnographer, Kaminskii; hence the Tlingit wish to die young in the field of battle rather than in drab old age.⁵ By contrast those slain by their fellows for misdeeds are sent to a 'Dog Heaven', 'an undefined abode now equated with hell.' 'Those who remain in Heaven [*k'iwai'a*] enjoy a happy existence, playing shinny on the open grass. They become the northern lights and are called *k'iwai'awn*, "people above". They may appear after the funeral to greet their friends; on other occasions they prophesy war or that a relative will die by violence.'⁶ As one informant told de Laguna: 'When we see lots of Northern Lights, we always say, "that's the people of Kiwa'a playing ball".'⁷

In Tlingit thought all the dead will eventually be reincarnated irrespective of the nature of their past lives and the manner of dying.⁸ Most often the dead person decides both the place of birth and the woman who is going to conceive him or her. Alternatively, a living kinswoman may also desire to give birth to a particularly loved relative. In the former case a person will inform a close matrilineal kinswoman that he will be coming back and to name the child after him. If a person has a double soul (as is possible here) he or she could come back to two different women, and each woman will give the child one of the deceased

⁵ Anatolii Kaminskii, *Tlingit Indians of Northern Alaska*, trans., S. Kan (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1985) p. 71.

⁶ De Laguna, 'Tlingit ideas', p. 191.

⁷ Frederica de Laguna, *Under Mount St. Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit*, Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology, Vol. 7, parts 1, 2 and 3, p. 771.

⁸ In the earlier work *Under Mount St. Elias* p. 777, de Laguna expresses some informant doubts whether those bad people born in the Dog Heaven or those drowned and born as Land Otter Men can be reincarnated. She then refers to one exception in respect of the former; in respect of the latter she refers to an informant who said that a person born as a Land Otter can die there and get reborn on earth; or after about two years he may be released from this grim place.

names. In these cases the original spirit is said to divide in two. Tlingit also believe that a dead person can appear in a dream to a woman promising to return; or the pregnant woman may know from a dream which person is about to be reincarnated in her. In some instances 'the mother in childbed sees the spirit of the dead person waiting near her, apparently to forestall another soul that is also trying to claim the child,' while in others the relatives try to identify the neonate through bodily markings, a technique adopted by many Northwest Coast Indians.

The alternative strategy is, as I said, for a would-be-mother to actively seek the reincarnation of a loved relative in her own womb often by placing the hand of the dead person against her own breast. 'When the corpse has been buried (formerly cremated), she is lead eight times around the grave (or pyre), and walks away, calling the name of the deceased, but not looking back lest the soul be driven away. ... She wears a lock of hair from the right side of the deceased's head or a nail paring from his right hand sewn to the waistband of her petticoat; and during pregnancy she keeps beside her bed a tiny basket filled with the food that babies like, to hasten the return of a beloved soul.'⁹ De Laguna calls these motivations of mothers-to-be 'planned reincarnations'.

De Laguna's study is especially important because she cites cases of those who visited the other world and provided descriptions of it. Normally, this is the classic role of shamans, as Eliade describes them.¹⁰ This no doubt happens in the case of Tlingit shamans also. Yet in de Laguna's cases, these experiences are by ordinary persons, though based on the *shamanic model* of spirit journeyings. The individual experiences add a unique dimension to the formal cultural conceptions that the Tlingit have of the other world. This means that cultural eschatologies are being constructed or reconstructed or given validation on the basis of individual experience, particularly of powerful and charismatic shamans. For illustrative purposes, I shall summarize one case from de Laguna's repertoire.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 182-83.

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

The story of 'Askadut

When 'Askadut died, he did not know of it; he could however see his own body propped up, as was customary before cremation, in order to help the soul to leave the body. 'Askadut tried to get back into his body but to no avail. He saw his wife, parents, his sister and her husband grieving for him and he tried to tell them that he was alive but they couldn't hear him. Eventually, they took 'Askadut's body to the the cremation place and he followed them there. He was afraid that the fire would hurt him but it only felt warm; he watched them burn his corpse. When the cremation was over, his relations left but 'Askadut was unable to follow them. He stayed by the bushes; he then began to think of the place where the dead go and decided to walk there in the rain and the sleet, through devilclubs and thorny underbrush till his hands became sore. [The rain and sleet are, according to Tlingit ideas, a transformation of the tears of the bereaved; the Tlingit also believe that the corpse of the spirit is often dressed in mittens, gloves and rough clothes provided by members of the opposite moiety to help him through the thorny path to the world of the dead.]

At last Askadut came upon the bank of a muddy river that he couldn't cross, but he knew that he must get to the other side. There he could see a village and its people. He called out to them again and again; they didn't hear; he tired of it and yawned. Immediately the people heard him and got excited and brought him over in a canoe. [The dead, the Tlingit say, have 'reversed characteristics'. 'To them a shout is inaudible, yet a yawn is a loud sound, and when they call to each other they do so in whispers. The river or lake that the dead have to cross is called the "Lake of Dying".¹¹] The land of the dead was a big town with many people. 'Askadut went into one of the houses and, according to one informant's rendering, he saw those long dead with moss all over their faces, with trees growing from their heads, and sunken eyes. The recently dead, however, looked like ordinary human beings. [The mossy creatures were probably those who will be reborn in an unforseeable future whereas the ancestors with human forms were those who will seek immediate rebirth.]

Though the text does not make it clear, Askadut leaving the land of the dead is a structural requirement of the narrative. 'Askadut can remember his life in

¹¹ De Laguna, *Under Mount Saint Elias*, p. 769.

the other world so clearly because he has been there only for a short period. According to one account, his aunt was among the recent dead and helped to ferry him back. In any case 'Askadut followed the river and got back. Tired, he sat at the foot of a tree near the riverbank. Because the tree began to drip, he moved to another and soon found a dry one with a branch sticking out and a nice mossy place under it. He sat down leaning against the tree and fell asleep. 'He remained there for nine days. Each day the riverbank caved in, a little bit at a time, and he heard the splash of the mud and sand falling into the water. Soon it came close to his foot, and he thought, "I'll wait till it comes closer, and then I'll move away." But he couldn't move anymore. And then it was caving away almost under him, and he thought, "Well, wait till I fall down that one, then I'll climb out of there." And then it caved underneath him, and he fell down the bank into the water. And he heard someone say, "He's born already!"'¹² [De Laguna beautifully exposes the underlying symbolism based on informant associations. The river of the dead that 'Askadut crosses is also connected with the symbolism of birth and the amniotic fluid. The dripping tree which 'Askadut avoided was a woman of the opposite moiety to whom he must not be reborn, while the dry tree is his sister. What appeared to him as nine days was in reality nine months 'and the caving down each day of the bank was the baby changing his position in the mother's womb each month ... and it was also his mother's labor. He fell down at birth, because in the old days women gave birth "sitting on top of a hole". Perhaps the mossy spot under the tree also represented the moss in this hole' into which the baby fell.¹³]

To return to the story. The women took the baby up and when 'Askadut looked around for his mother, he saw instead his own sister. But his former mother who was there exclaimed: 'Oh, my son came back! That's 'Askadut's spirit!' And the baby replied: 'Yes that's me. My name is 'Askadut. I came back. You cried so much, and I heard my wife weeping, so I came back.' His former

¹² Ibid., pp. 767–768.

¹³ Ibid., p. 769. For a related experience of reentering through a 'womb door' to a new rebirth see the experiences of the Winnebago shaman Thunder Cloud in Paul Radin, 'The Reincarnations of Thunder Cloud, A Winnebago Indian' in Antonia Mills and Richard Slobodin (eds.) *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief Among North American Indians and Inuit*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 61.

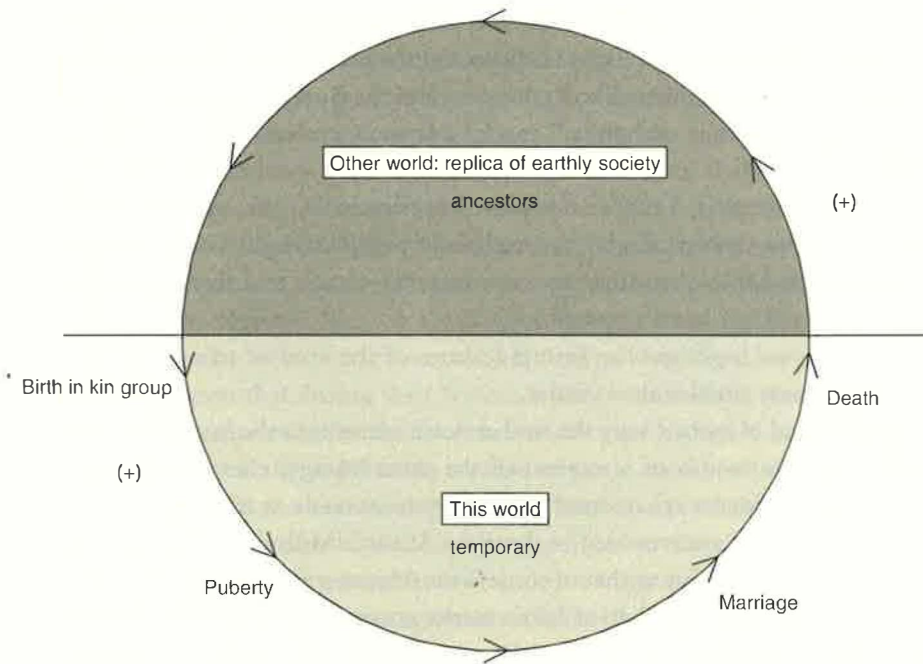


Fig. 1. Basic Rebirth Eschatology

wife recognized him by the cut or scar on his foot. 'Askadut reached for his wife with a smile. 'But he was ashamed of his sister that he wouldn't suck at her breast, and they had to get a woman of a different tribe (sib, in the opposite moiety) to suckle him.'¹⁴

THE REBIRTH ESCHATOLOGY: A FORMAL TOPOGRAPHICAL MODEL

It is not improbable that these rebirth eschatologies that extend from the Amerindian Northwest Coast into the Inuit and further into Eastern Siberia went even further and formed the basis of the more complex eschatologies of the Greek Pythagoreans and the Indians. This however is *not* the thrust of my argument:

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 768.

I am suggesting that, whether diffused or independently invented, similar eschatologies would have existed in those regions prior to the ethical and soteriological reforms of thinkers like Pythagoras and the Buddha. It is therefore necessary to construct a simplified model of such eschatologies to show the processes by which transition to more complex ones would have been effected. To put it differently, I can demonstrate experimentally, through the manipulation of a topographical model, the manner in which a simple rebirth eschatology is transformed into two other systems, first, the Greek rebirth eschatology and then the Buddhist karmic eschatology.

Let me now highlight the formal features of the kind of rebirth eschatology found in many small-scale societies.

1. In this kind of eschatology the soul at death enters into the human world, generally into the womb of a woman of the same lineage, clan or other kind of kin group. Various ways are used to identify the neonate as an ancestor returned. These techniques are recorded in detail by Antonia Mills for Amerindian societies and they are similar to that of some West African groups also.¹⁵ The most important techniques are that of birth marks corresponding to wounds, lesions and scars incurred in the previous life; or similarities in behavior between the child and a known ancestor; or an announcing dream; and sometimes relatives' visions of an ancestor in spirit form entering the house or even the womb of a woman from the group. However, the most important technique is diagnosis by shamans or seers or native doctors.

2. Having arrived in the human world, the individual traverses the life cycle and at death he or she returns to the world of the ancestors. The other world into which the soul reenters is structured on the model of the earthly social structure. And thus the rebirth cycle goes on and on; this continuity or movement from one life to another, as far as I know, is not conceptualized as the Buddhists do with their word *samsāra* and the Greeks with the term *metacosmosis* or the processes of rebirth.

3. In some of these eschatologies animals can have their own reincarnation cycles: in others a person enters into an animal spirit world and then descends into the human; or a dead human can become an animal or vice-versa. Irrespective

¹⁵ Antonia Mills, 'A comparison of Wet'suwet'en Cases of the Reincarnation Type with Gitksan and Beaver.' *Journal of American Research*, Vol.44, pp. 385-415.

of whether there is a belief in parallel or cross reincarnation, humans as well as animals and plants are spiritually bound together in a web of 'species sentience.' Thus, as with the Tlingit, in all of these societies the hunter often puts a part of the dead animal into the water and asks it to forgive him and return once again to replenish the species.

4. When you have cross-reincarnation the problem of species sentience poses a difficult dilemma or aporia, namely, the idea that animals are ancestors and therefore eating an animal is tantamount to endo-cannibalism. This becomes a grievous problem in societies like the Kwakiutl whose eschatology is such that at death one *has* to be reborn as an animal temporarily. Here the taint of endocannibalism is so great that during their famous winter ceremonials, there is a dance known as *bamatsa* or 'cannibal dance' where aristocratic Kwakiutl imitate the ingestion of human flesh; and then in a series of ritual acts they drink salt water and then vomit this noxious substance. After further acts of cleansing they are gradually reincorporated into civil society, expunged of the taint of endocannibalism. In theory animal reincarnation requires a vegetarian dietary but this is impossible to implement in non-agrarian societies like the Inuit and the Northwest Coast Indians. But not so with the Greeks: fear of endocannibalism is the basis for vegetarianism in the Pythagorean eschatology. For example, Empedocles condemns meat eaters in the strongest possible language because in eating an animal, he says, a person is eating a son, a father or mother or some other beloved kinsperson.¹⁶

5. What is striking about rebirth eschatologies is that entry into the other world is open for all and, except for the most heinous crimes and tabu violations, it is dependent on the correct performance of the funeral rituals. The logical rationale for this lack of punishment in the other world is that those who do wrong in their lifetimes are punished by the secular authorities in *this* world; hence there is no need for double or triple punishment. The reward available for all is to

¹⁶ This is clearly stated in his poem, *Purifications*, fragment 137: 'And the father lifts his own son in a changed form and slays him with a prayer. Infatuated fool! And they run up to the sacrificers, begging mercy, while he, deaf to their cries, slaughters them in his halls and gets ready the evil feast. In like manner does the son seize his father, and children their mother, tear out their life and eat the kindred flesh.' In John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1930) pp. 225-26.

be able to join the world of ancestors and then come back to one's own kin group. The positive value given to the world of ancestors and rebirth in the human world can be depicted in plus signs as in figure 1.

This is the main difference between the rebirth eschatologies that I have described above and the great historical religions like Buddhism and Christianity where virtually any violation of a moral injunction is ipso facto a violation of a religious injunction; a parallel connection exists in respect of the good one does. I shall use the term 'ethicization' to conceptualize the process whereby a morally right or wrong action becomes a religiously right or wrong action that in turn affects a person's destiny after death. Ethicization deals with a thoroughgoing religious evaluation of morality that entails delayed punishments and rewards quite unlike the immediate or this-worldly compensations meted out by deities or ancestors.

I have already shown that Amerindian religions have profound ethical concerns in such beliefs as the interdependence of all species existence. Yet, like most religions of small-scale societies, they do not believe that their social morality is anything but social. By contrast in the so-called historical religions or, to use Karl Jaspers' terminology, in those religions that developed with the 'Axial Age', this secular social morality is intrinsically defined as a religious morality which then has profound implications for society, culture and the conscience. Christians and Buddhists generally think that the morality expressed in the Ten Commandments or the Five Precepts are of a truly extraordinary nature. On the contrary, the moral rules enshrined in them are for the most part very conventional and found virtually everywhere in small scale societies because such rules are required for the minimal operation of an ordered society. Their unconventionality lies not in their substance but in their ethicization. It is ethicization that produced an important break or turn in the history of religion.

Let me highlight in this lecture a few features associated with the development of ethicization. With ethicization morally good or bad actions are systematically converted into religiously good or bad actions. In as much as any social morality must punish those who commit wrong and reward those who conform, so must a religious morality. Implicit in these notions of reward and punishment are such ideas as 'sin' (or the Buddhist *pāpa karma*), and religious merit (or the Buddhist *punya karma*). Underlying ethicization is a crucial principle which I formulate as the *conditionality or contingency of reward*. In the rebirth topography

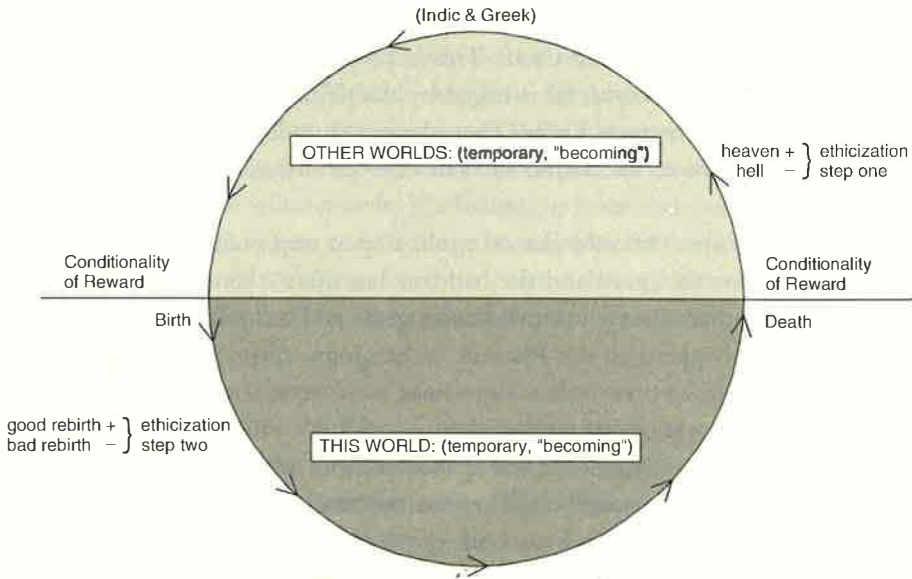


Fig. 2. *Ethicized Rebirth Eschatology*

(figure 1) the transfer to the other world depends on the proper performance of the funeral rites. But with ethicization (figure 2), entry to the other world must be *contingent* or conditional, depending on the ethical nature of one's this-worldly actions.

The logical effect of the principle of the conditionality of reward is that the other world must be converted minimally into a good world and a bad world, as realms of punishment and reward. This is *step one* of ethicization and is found in the empirical record not only in Buddhist but also in Pythagorean and Platonic eschatology.

Consider the myth of Er in the last chapter of Plato's *Republic*. The intention of Plato's Socrates is to give an account of the rewards and punishments that await the just and the unjust person after death. Yet how does Socrates or his reader know what goes on in the other-world? Socrates says that he knows of a man called Er who did go to the underworld and returned. Structurally this myth is very close to that of 'Askadut among the Tlingit and both are based on the shamanic model. Er dies in the field of battle and his soul leaves his body and goes

to the other world; he sees the rewards and punishments that are given there and describes them to Socrates in detail. This is possible because, unlike the other denizens of the other-world, he is urged by the deities not to drink the waters of forgetfulness in the river Lethe. Then there is thunder and lightning and Er dramatically returns to his corpse and recounts his experiences to Socrates and others.

Now it is possible that ethicization could stop at step one; if one is rewarded and punished for the good and the bad one has done, then rationally there is no need for another set of punishments in a good and bad rebirth on earth. This is exactly what happens in the Platonic eschatology: those who have been rewarded and punished now have a clean slate, as it were, and they can have free choice as to their next rebirth in the human world (even though Plato says most do not know how to reasonably exercise that freedom of choice). But in the Indic religions ethicization is carried on to *step two*: the human world into which the individual is eventually reborn is also one of punishment and reward, a good rebirth and a bad one, dependent on what one did in ones previous existence. In other words the same principle of the contingency of reward that operated in respect of the other-world must, in a further act of systematization, now apply to a person's rebirth in this world. This also could be topographically represented in plus and minus signs as in figure two. Further, if the person is assigned to a good or bad rebirth on the quality of his or her moral actions in a previous existence, then any prediction of the person's reincarnated status is rendered doubtful. One can no longer say that a person will be reborn into his own lineage or family or kin group; there is a *dis-location* consequent to his rebirth in a manner commensurate with his load of sin or merit rather than on the basis of his kinship affiliations. Rebirth in the same group is possible in the rare case but is not expectable in general. Associated with this break in expectations is another transformational feature; the individual now reborn cannot simply be the individual he was in his previous existence. His new persona is based on the load of sin and merit acquired in his previous incarnation.

Once reborn into a world where an ethicized morality already exists, the individual must perforce continue in his life trajectory doing good or bad, acquiring sin and merit. Then at death he is pushed once again into the other world and the cycle keeps going. Thus ethicization of a rebirth eschatology, pushed to its logical extreme, links one lifetime with another in a continuing series of ethical

links. When this happens a concomitant ontic or existential shift takes place; *it appears to those who live in these societies that rebirth is not a thing in itself but a product of the ethical nature of one's actions.* Rebirth cannot be divorced from ethics; it looks as if it is generated *from* ethics. Translated into Buddhist terms this means that the karma theory has fully developed, and it is karma that fuels the rebirth cycle known as *samsāra*. In other words, if ethicization is carried out to embrace the whole eschatological sphere constituting the other-world (or worlds) as well as the human world into which one is reborn, and if this is followed through into finite or infinite rebirth cycles, then you will have created a theory like that of karma.

What is significant about this scheme, or for that matter for any ethicized rebirth scheme like that of the Greeks, is that salvation cannot be sought within the cycle of rebirths, if by salvation one refers to a condition of bliss or one in which suffering is totally eliminated. Even if a person were to go to heaven in these systems, his stay there is *temporary*; he must be reborn in the human world which by definition is a place of suffering and temporality. Thus a logical feature of these systems is that salvation must be sought *outside* the rebirth cycle, which is what occurs in Buddhism and other Indic religions and in Pythagorean and Platonic eschatologies. For example, Plato tells us in his great soteriological work, *Phaedrus*, that a person, generally a philosopher, who has lead a moral life for three consecutive rebirths can at death permanently comport with the gods, and this means he ceases to be reborn.¹⁷

INDIC RELIGIONS AND THE DARK SIDE OF ETHICIZATION

In our discussion of Amerindian and Inuit rebirth I noted the idea of species sentience, namely the idea that humans and animals share a common essence and that all nature is kin. With ethicization step two a further development takes place: in religions like Buddhism animals get demoted such that human beings who do bad or commit sin (*pāpa karma*) might be punished by being reborn as an animal or some other lowly creature. Thus, in these religions animals lose

¹⁷ Plato, *Phaedrus*, in Walter Hamilton (trans.) *Phaedrus and Letters vii and viii* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 54.

the elevated status they had earlier and they are relegated to an inferior status. However, in the *Jātaka* tales which come from a folk repertoire the older ideas seem to prevail so that the Buddha himself appears as an animal in previous births, for example, as an elephant, a lion, a monkey, a lizard, a parrot, a pigeon, a hawk, a swallow, a cock bird, a peacock, a dog, a hare, a fish, a deer, a water buffalo, a bull, a horse, a goose and so forth. There is little in the texts to indicate that animals are an inferior species or that the Bodhisattva was born as an animal because of his bad karma.

At step one of ethicization when the ideas of heavens and hells are created another feature enters the eschatology. The heavens eventually become highly hedonistic abodes for those who have lead ascetic existences; and, more importantly, there emerge gruesome hells wherein sinners are confined. Consider such texts as the *Devadūta Sutta* and the *Bālapaṇḍita Sutta* where realms of torment are described in graphic and sadistic detail, as this concluding description in the latter text suggests:

Finally, there are beings who are reborn in hell whom the hell-guardians grab, and stretch out on their backs on a fiery floor of red-hot iron that is but a mass of flames. Then they carry out the torture of the five-fold tether; they drive two iron stakes through their hands; they drive two iron stakes through their feet; and they drive one iron stake through their heart. Truly, O monks, hell is a place of great suffering.¹⁸

It is now impossible to shirk an unpleasant conclusion. *In Axial age religions, ethicization has a dark side that is psychically connected to the deep motivations of sexually repressed religious specialists. In Buddhism it converts animals into miserable sinful beings and creates sadistic and violent worlds into which sinners are confined.* In the Indic religions these ideas are further translated into the sphere of earthly existence in the lives of those who are miserable – the poor, the maimed, the subaltern – who also become products of karma and are therefore being punished in a hell right here on earth. But beyond that one can argue that hells have been models in both Buddhism and Christianity for other arenas of torment.

The latter idea is neatly exemplified in a Buddhist Sanskrit text known as the *Aśokāvadāna*. Here the ideal Buddhist king Aśoka, prior to his conversion, asks

¹⁸ *Aśokāvadāna*, translated as *The Legend of King Aśoka*, by John S. Strong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 213.

Girika to build a prison cum torture chamber for him.¹⁹ Girika's first task was to build a torture chamber that 'was lovely from the outside as far as the gate, but inside it was actually a very frightful place, and people called it the "beautiful goal" ', a state of the art prison. Girika had one request from the king which was granted and this was that 'that whosoever should enter this place should not come out alive.'²⁰ Soon afterwards Girika heard a Buddhist monk recite the *Bālapaṇḍita Sutta* and he devised his tortures according to that example.

In the *Bālapaṇḍita Sutta* itself a parallelism is drawn between the king's punishment and the tortures of hell. In this text the Buddha has a beautiful description of the various kinds of tortures inflicted by the king on a thief. He says that the thief's suffering (for example, when he is stabbed by three hundred spears) is nothing in comparison to the tortures of hell.²¹ I think that earthly sovereigns were in fact influenced by such texts as *Bālapaṇḍita Sutta* and by the example of Yama himself, the sadistic ruler of the Great Hell, in the penal institutions they created – in such things as mutilation, torture, impaling a person through his anus with a sharp stake and trial by ordeal. Their very horror led Buddhist kings on occasion to abolish torture and capital punishment. But let it be said that, in fairness to Buddhist history, it did not transfer these schemas of hell into such religious institutions as the Inquisition.

THE BUDDHA AS SEER: SOME NEGLECTED TEXTS IN EARLY BUDDHISM

The kind of perspective that I have adopted forces us to give prominence to Buddhist texts neglected by some Indological scholars and modern day Buddhist intellectuals, particularly those texts that seem to defy the idea that Buddhism is a 'rational' religion. In my thinking the texts on hells and heavens are intrinsic to Buddhism and they cannot be rationalized as symbolic representations of inner processes or as later accretions to a rational religion. I will now move to

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 212.

²¹ *Bālapaṇḍita Sutta*, in I.B. Horner, trans., *The Collection of Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima Nikāya)*, vol. I, 111, (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1990), pp. 209–211.

other texts that have been neglected by scholars as alien to the spirit of Buddhism.

I mentioned that in rebirth eschatologies, there is a search for the previous life identity of the neonate. I also said that such searches are rare in contemporary Buddhism. This however was not the case in the period of the Buddha. In fact inquiry into past lives was a hot topic among both monks and laity. The *Mahā-padāna Sutta* has a vivid account of monks in animated conversation about their previous births. The Buddha overhears them and gives them a list of his own former births and tells them how he developed his powers of retrocognition. First: 'It is through his clear discernment of the truth, brethren, that the Tathāgatha [Buddha] is able to remember [the lives of past Buddhas].' Second: 'And gods also revealed these matters to him, enabling him to remember [all those things].' The Seer's remembrance of things past is further developed in the *Janavasabba Sutta* which is treated somewhat offhand by Rhys Davids as 'a fairy tale', though well told and edifying.²²

In this text the people of Nādika in Magadha want to know what had happened to their kinfolk after death. There seems to be nothing unusual about this request because the text tells us that it was common practice for the Buddha 'to make declarations as to the rebirth of such followers as had passed away in death among the tribes round about on every side ... saying such a one has been reborn there, and such and such a one there.' The text continues to state in general terms the karmic destiny of the layfolk of Nādika who, because they have been true devotees of the Buddha, have been reborn in blissful other-worlds. What is striking to me is that the text considers it perfectly normal for people living in large communities and kingdoms like the Kāsis, Vajjians, Kosalans and Mallas (all mentioned in the text), to ask the Seer about the post-mortem destiny of their loved ones. Is the Buddha behaving like a diviner among the Northwest Coast Indians? I think he is; and in reading this text one can further unravel the role of the the Buddhist virtuoso, the *samaṇa*, in the guise of a shaman.

The text continues: the people of Magadha are also interested in the post-mortem fate of their former king, Bimbisāra, a friend and patron of the Buddha. To find this out the Buddha enters into a deep meditation and soon there appears

²² *Janavasabba Suttanta (Digha Nikāya)* in T.W. Rhys Davids, trans. in *Dialogues of the Buddha 2*, (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1989), p. 234.

before him a spirit, invisible to all except to the Buddha, who says, 'I am Janavasabha, O Exalted One, I am Janavasabha O Welcome One!'²³ Then Janavasabha reveals to the Buddha his own identity: he is none other than his friend King Bimbisāra of Magadha, now born in the company of Vessavaṇa (Vaiśravaṇa), the great god of the Northern Quarter. 'Deceased as a human king, I am in heaven become a non-human king.'²⁴ He is a Once-Returner (*sakadāgāmi*), that is, he will be born only once more on earth and then he will achieve nirvāṇa. Janavasabha tells the Buddha that his heavenly superior, the god Vaiśravaṇa, knew of the request of the layfolk and told Janavasabha all the details; and Janavasabha then appears before the Buddha during the latter's meditative trance and gives him the required information; and the Buddha in turn can relay this information to the honest folk of Magadha via his attendant Ānanda. But this is not all Janavasabha does; he gives the Buddha a wonderfully graphic description of the divine assembly in the heaven of the thirty three gods very much in the spirit of 'Askadut and Er; and ordinary layfolk like us can learn about these matters from listening to the Buddha or by reading the *Janavasabha Sutta*. In this text Janavasabha acts very much like a spirit helper in some forms of shamanism.

Though the roles of *samaṇa* and shaman are blurred in this text, the Buddha's mode of retrocognition and visionary knowledge is not shamanic in one respect at least: the capacity to see the gods or the power to beckon them is engendered not through shamanic ecstasis but through meditative enstasis.²⁵ The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, a great text extolling the benefits of renunciation, shows how the meditating *arahant* (a monk who has achieved nirvāṇa) can remember his past lives.

'In such a place such was my name, such my family, such my caste, such my food, such my experience of discomfort or of ease, and such the limits of my life. When I passed away from that state, I took form again in such a place.

²³ Ibid., p. 240.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ The terms are from Eliade. 'Ecstasis', as the term is generally used, refers to the spirit or soul leaving the body while 'enstasis', in Eliade's usage, refers to the inward concentration of the self such that all connections with the outside world is obliterated. See, Mircea Eliade, *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom*, second edition, (New York: The Bollingen Foundation, 1969), p. 337.

There I had such and such a name and family and caste and food and experience of discomfort or of ease, such was the limit of my life. When I passed away from that state I took form again here -- thus does he call to mind his temporary state in days gone by in all their details, and in all their modes.²⁶

It seems that the *arabant* retrocognizes his own past lives through meditative enstasis; but when it comes to seeing the past lives of others he needs the help of a guardian spirit like Janavasabha.

But this is not all: in these meditative trances the Buddha acquires certain supernormal powers known as *iddhi* which reminds us of shamanic spirit journeyings. This is neatly illustrated in the *Kevaddha Sutta*.

From being one he becomes multiform, from being multiform he becomes one: from being visible he becomes invisible: he passes without hindrance to the further side of a wall or a battlement or a mountain, as if through air: he penetrates up and down through solid ground, as if through water: he walks on water without dividing it, as if on solid ground: he travels cross-legged through the sky, like the birds on wing: he touches and feels with the hand even the Moon and the Sun, beings of mystic power and potency though they be: he reaches, even in the body, up to the heaven of Brahma.²⁷

Now while this achievement resembles shamanism, or the Muni of the later *Rg Veda*, the Buddha, also known as Muni, achieves this power through enstasis, not ecstasis. Nevertheless, it seems to me, that at some level these distinctions get blurred. Though the Buddha says that he goes into the realm of Brahma, 'even in the body', he must surely mean that it is his spiritual body that achieves these cosmic journeyings. Let me make a further point: on one level the Buddhist meditator lets his mind penetrate *inwardly* as he recollects his own past lives (through enstasis). But if he is to get at the past lives of others or witness the dissolution and coming into being of past and present universes, he must either

²⁶ *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* of the *Digha Nikāya*; translated T.W. Rhys Davids in *Dialogues of the Buddha*, part 1, (London: The Pali Text Society, 1977) pp. 90–91.

²⁷ *Kevaddha Sutta*, in *Dialogues of the Buddha (Digha Nikāya)*, part 1, translated T.W. Rhys Davids, (London: Pali Text Society, 1977), p. 277. For another text that deals with this issue of supernormal powers, see *Sangārava* (Discourse to the Brahmin Sangārava) in *The Book of Gradual Sayings (Aṅguttara Nikāya)*, vol. 1, translated by F.L. Woodward (Oxford: The Pali Text Society), pp. 151–56.

seek the help of a god like Janavasabha; or he must let his mind penetrate *outwardly* into other cosmic realms (through something like ecstasis). But this surely means being able to reach out of the body as in shamanism. If my line of speculation is correct, what seems to have happened here is that ecstasy has been absorbed into enstasy; the *samana* has incorporated into his very being some of the attributes of the shaman.

The Gonda lectures are organized every year by the J. Gonda Fund. The J. Gonda Fund was established in 1993 under the auspices of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences and has the task of administering the inheritance bequeathed to the Academy by the Sanskritist and Indologist Professor J. Gonda.

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