

Karmic Calculations: The Social Implications of Karmic Causality in Tibet

Erin Burke

Karma and its place in reincarnation theory are favorite topics among scholars of Tibetan religion, underlying interpretations of almost all facets of Tibetan culture. Though karma's significance in Tibetan culture is undeniable, the specificity of its implications as a type of causality is sometimes taken for granted. Portrayals of karma as an ethically just, individualistic system of cause and effect abound in scholarship on Buddhism. Scholars often conclude that "the law of karma" is a completely rational ethic that is contingent on human agency, and therefore that it promotes morality on the social level. Gananath Obeyesekere explains karma's relationship to rebirth with his theory of "ethicization," a term he uses to "conceptualize the processes whereby a morally right or wrong action becomes a religiously right or wrong action that in turn affects a person's destiny after death."¹ Underlying his explanation of these processes is an understanding of karma's leading role in making sense of sin and suffering. Obeyesekere regards "orthodox" karma as a system of unalterable consequences of individual actions that supercedes the intervention of magic and of other beings, such as deities.

In Western culture, phrases such "you sow as you reap" and "what goes around comes around," suggest something like karma to be an objective guiding force. These descriptions of the "law of karma" liken karma to something detached, infallible and omnipotent, similar to Western conceptions of God. With such a "law" in place, ritual intervention would be unlikely. However, Tibetan Buddhism is a highly ritualized religion with practices that appeal to numerous types of forces and agents within this and other worlds.

Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research at the College of Charleston

Volume 2, 2003: pp. 13-44

© 2003 by the College of Charleston, Charleston SC 29424, USA.

All rights to be retained by the author.

Scholarly partiality towards karma and “ethical” religion comes in part from an exaltation of text and doctrine in general. Literate traditions with established textual canons are more accessible than oral traditions and rituals. Buddhist literature includes extensive elaborations on karma theory in the form of prescriptive ethical tenets and explanations of misfortune and fortuity that convey the gravity of karmic retribution. These texts justify the efficacy of Buddhist doctrine and institutions, and therefore emphasize karma as the ultimate causal model. The stories contained in them, however, do not always portray the individualistic, oversimplified version of karma that the ethicization model requires. Instead, the many permutations of karmic retribution expressed in Tibetan literature, sacred text, and everyday life are exemplary of the creativity and intellectual agility inherent in cultural applications of religious doctrine. Consideration of karma as a causal model requires an approach that appreciates its diversity of meaning for Tibetans. To appreciate this diversity, we must consider the religious beliefs and practices that inform Tibetan religious life as valid in their significance to the people who maintain them, and not as deviations from a more “orthodox,” or normative form of Buddhism.² For our purposes, it would be mistaken to bifurcate Tibetan religious practice into two opposing camps, one legitimately Buddhist that upholds ideas about ethical cultivation and enlightenment, the other superstitious and unmindful of ethics. One basic problem with the ethicization model and its consequences for “unorthodox” practices is its assumption that the normative Buddhist ideals asserted in particular texts *should* or *do* exist in the religious lives of Buddhists. There is evidence that this was not the case in early Buddhism, and observation of monastic practice today reveals that monks and nuns are not exempt from the concerns of lay people in terms of practices that do not conform to a strictly individual ethic contingent solely on human agency.³ Rather, monks’ and nuns’ practice and religious concerns as expressed in presently in observable settings and historically in epigraphy do not reflect the prescribed norms of philosophical discourse, but are very similar to laypeople’s.

Though the doctrine of karma theoretically justifies all suffering by associating it with the individual’s past actions, these actions are not always known. Therefore, unlike sin in religions without

rebirth, the offense that is the impetus for present suffering may not have occurred in this lifetime, and additional suffering may be in store if more sins were committed in previous lives, a characteristic Obeyesekere calls “psychological indeterminacy.”⁴ Scholars have observed a lack of concern for impending misfortune that can most likely be interpreted as a result of this quality of the doctrine: people do not identify with past lives they cannot recall.⁵ Similarly, though they acknowledge the effects of karma in relation to their present situations, they often employ other means of coping with or explaining their problems. Of these, Obeyesekere identifies deity propitiation and magical ritual practices as methods of persuasion and astrology as a predominate method of prediction employed by the laity. He relegates these practices to “practical secular Buddhist worship,” which he claims creates a logical contradiction in terms of an explanation for suffering: “if the gods are powerful, karma is not all-powerful; if karma is all-powerful, the gods cannot be powerful.”⁶

Though Obeyesekere is concerned primarily with the doctrine of karma as the logical conclusion of his process of “ethicization,” he acknowledges the aforementioned practices that seem to undermine the integrity of karmic theory. He solves this problem by distinguishing between “orthodox” and “village” Buddhism, two groups who are supposedly oriented toward dissimilar goals and therefore have distinct practices. Because Obeyesekere is dealing with ideal type models in order to portray the logical development of soteriological theory, his study necessarily focuses on the theoretical implications of doctrine. However, his characterization of practices that appeal to forms of causality other than karma as *secular* and “quite unlike the immediate or this-worldly compensations meted out by deities or ancestors” frequently appear in ethnographic materials on Buddhist cultures as an implicit standard against which to evaluate the social meaning of religious ritual.⁷

Philosophically sophisticated Buddhist scholars do marginalize other causal explanations that subordinate karma’s comprehensive efficacy; therefore the differences between professional Buddhist teachers and the general populace (including most monks and nuns) are notable. Furthermore, the people who do not follow the advanced contemplative methods engage in religious practices that allude to

that sphere of religion and its practitioners. In fact, the charisma of those people who do pursue enlightenment and the power they represent are fundamental aspects of social religious relationships and explanations of causality.

Karmic Permutations

In theory, karma is said to be unalterable because every action or thought arising from desire, i.e., any action an unenlightened being commits, produces an effect. On this basis, scholars such as Obeyesekere evaluate karma theoretically as a socially and psychologically stabilizing doctrine that serves to perpetuate social hierarchies. Furthermore, deviations from a model of religious practice that reflects acceptance of these characteristics are seen as something wholly separate from karma, such as interaction with spirits, or an adulteration of the “orthodox” understanding of karma. Early visitors to Tibet who harbored these assumptions about Buddhism dismissed many of the religious practices as “devil worship” and “superstition.” We do not need to venture into the “mysterious” realm of Tibetan religion to find exceptions to this perception of Buddhism and karma. We find, in fact, that the rule of karma’s inalterability is questionable in that Buddhists do not seem to accept it, with the exception of teachers and professional practitioners whose authority and livelihoods depend on the public’s acceptance of their legitimacy as embodiments of purity, worthy of veneration.

Even among communities where Theravada Buddhism developed, the model Buddhist school that Obeyesekere held as exemplary of just karmic philosophy, Buddhists practice merit transfer, where merit is shared, and appeal to local spirits and deities. Historically, there is archaeological and epigraphical information that indicates many practices that were thought to alter the practitioners’ circumstances. Merit transfer amplifies the result of good deeds because the practitioner dedicates the merit obtained through a practice to someone else. The dedication itself is a good deed, which furthers the effects of the original action. The casual observer of Buddhist cultures will conclude that Buddhists are not immobilized or resigned to inactivity. Gregory Schopen’s research shows evidence of merit transference practices in Theravadin inscriptions that predate those

of the Mahâyâna sects, and large percentages of monks and nuns participated in them.⁸ Buddhists actively navigate the courses of their lives, and they have access to numerous tools that allow them to do so. In addition to the developments that inevitably occur in a religious tradition's history, the cultures that adopt it have their own indigenous traditions that may persist after the contact with a new system. While scholars dismiss practices that involve spiritual agency and astrology as "heterodox" with little reservation, they rank among them anything the religious officials openly criticize or that is not present in text. What is notable about this definition, if it can be called that,⁹ is that even among "orthodox" Buddhist teachings on karmic processes, there is enough variation in the way authorities explain them to merit our questioning of the "law" of karma. Teachings in the form of stories and songs illustrate that the doctrine of karma provides a useful pedagogical tool with which to enforce specific ethics. Part of what makes it so useful is its flexibility.

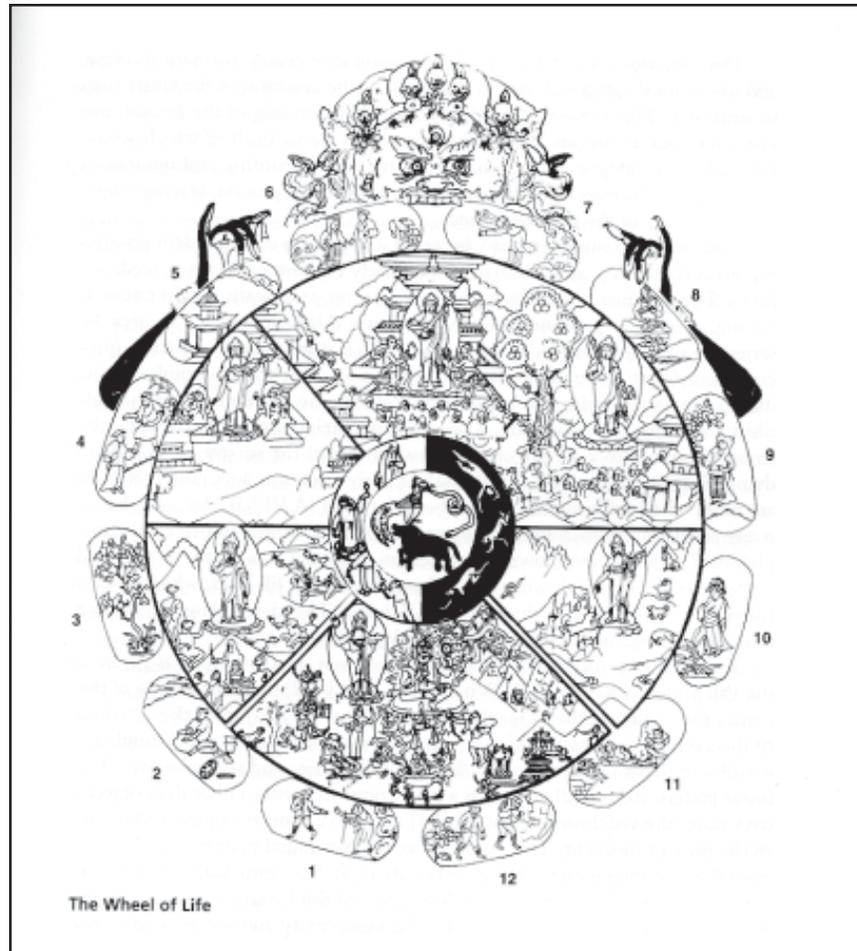
The characteristics of karma that scholars value for its justness as a moral code and its rationality as an explanation of suffering, namely its individualism and deferral to human responsibility, are not the most noticeable Tibetan expressions of the doctrine. Karma takes on many forms to many ends; it is not limited to a personal regulatory system. Tibetans use a number of images, analogies and metaphors to convey the meaning of karma, rendering depictions of a process that range from largely amorphous developments to strictly defined reciprocal exchanges. In its largest sense, karma is the force that fuels *samsâra*, or the cycle of death and rebirth that constitutes the foundation of Buddhist cosmology, which consists of many cyclic layers. Individuals' deaths and rebirths take place within a larger cycle of the evolution, stasis, degeneration, and involution of the world. That cycle is in turn part of larger cycles that make up the inconceivably large units through which Buddhist philosophers reckon time, the finer points of which are not essential to this paper. However, karma's role in the beginning of the period of evolution and Tibetan's interpretation of morality during the period of degeneration are notable. These are both generalized notions of karma. The impetus for the evolution of the world at the beginning of a cycle is the collective karma of the beings in *samsâra*. It arises as a wind, which stirs up dust that eventually

forms more solid matter.¹⁰ Similarly, during the cycle's downward turn, society collectively degenerates; immorality reigns, and lifespans decrease steadily until people only live to be ten years old. Generalized karma of this type eliminates the boundaries and individual magnitudes of karmic consequences. It is instead an amorphous force that stirs the process of becoming. However, this difference is not emphasized as something counterintuitive or requiring explanation.

The Tibetan word for karma is *las*, which means "action" or "work." In the simplest sense, karma refers to phenomena of causes and their effects. Unenlightened beings commit actions out of "thirst," which is itself contingent on the actor's perception of the world as containing objects and ideas that have an unchanging essence. An enlightened being who has realized the illusory nature of the permanence of the world does not act out of ignorance, hatred or desire, the three afflictive emotions (*kleshas*), and her actions therefore do not generate karma.¹¹ If a person has yet to experience the effects of certain actions, she will be reborn. Obeyesekere's characterizations of karma derive from this aspect of karmic repercussions. But a fuller characterization is possible; here my main source for the exposition of karmic principles is Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Patrul Rinpoche was a well-known nineteenth century teacher, and his text is used as a guide for all the major schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

The ultimate illustration of the rebirth cycle is the Wheel of Life. This image depicts the six realms of rebirth inside of a wheel, which Yama, the demon of death, holds in his hands and mouth. The three upper realms (favorable rebirths) are the heavens, inhabited by the gods; the *asura*, or demi-god, realm; and the human realm. The lower realms are, in order of increasing unpleasantness, the animal realm; the *preta*, or hungry ghost, realms; and the hell realms. Texts that describe the realms enumerate on the kinds of actions that land a person there. The six types of beings are associated with certain actions in the human realm. Though they can be ranked according to desirability, the six realms of rebirth do not represent progressive stages through which one passes in order.

Each realm contains beings who were reborn there as a consequence of their own specific actions, which can be categorized in such a way as to account for their rebirth. In the center of the



wheel is an image of three animals that represent the three defilements: a snake (hatred), a cock (desire), and a pig (ignorance). Around this is a concentric circle divided into a white half depicting rising figures and a black half that depicts descending figures. The former signifies good karma, the latter bad karma.

While the goal of religious practice based on a karmic view of the cosmos is somewhat more general, that is, to generate merit, or good karma, and to avoid amassing bad karma in order to avoid rebirth in one of the three lower realms, textual stories of karmic retribution illuminate the consequences of very specific actions. The basic ethical system stipulated in Buddhist text consists of “ten negative actions to

be avoided” and “ten positive actions to be adopted,” the latter being essentially the negation of the former. The ten negative actions describe actions of the body, speech and mind that generate bad karma. Patrul Rinpoche lists them as: taking life, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, lying, sowing discord, harsh speech, worthless chatter, covetousness, wishing harm on others and wrong views.¹²

Buddhist textual explanations of karma provide some accounts of very specific karmic retribution, elucidating the various corresponding punishments and rewards for particular actions based on this framework of sin (*sdig*) and merit (*bsod-nams*). Patrul Rinpoche is particularly vocal on this subject with respect to the tendency of small deeds to mushroom into greater effects. He tells one story about the Nâga king who came to receive teachings from the Buddha, Shâkyamuni, disguised as the Universal Emperor. The Buddha chided him: “Isn’t the harm that you did to the teachings of the Buddha Kâshyapa enough for you? Now do you want to harm mine, too? Listen to the Dharma in your own real form!” But the Nâga was afraid that the other beings would harm him, so the Buddha placed him under the protection of a powerful deity (Buddha Vajrapâni). When he transformed, he was a huge serpent “several leagues in length.” On his head grew a giant tree that crushed him while he suffered from the discomfort of the many tiny insects living in its roots. The Buddha explained to his disciples that in one of his previous lives the Nâga had been a monk during the time of the Buddha Kâshyapa and had violated his precepts. A tree snagged his robes and pulled them off, and he became very angry and chopped it down. “What you see today,” said the Buddha, “is the effect of that act.”¹³

The story conveys what Patrul Rinpoche calls “experiences similar to the cause,” in which the actor has an experience that his past action inflicted on someone else in a past life.¹⁴ This would seem to correlate with a perception of karma as an individual ethic, yet the effect, though sharing the element of the tree, is much more severe than we would expect. We should not conclude from it that Tibetans regard chopping down trees as a particularly heinous sin. Rather, the anecdote impresses upon the monks an appreciation for the deleterious effects of anger, especially anger expressed so actively in public that will reflect poorly on the image of the monastic community.

Conversely, Patrul Rinpoche tells the story of king who in a past life was a very poor man. He was on his way to a wedding one day, carrying a handful of beans, and came across a Buddha. Out of devotion he threw his beans into the Buddha's begging bowl, four of which actually fell in the bowl and two of which struck his heart. Patrul Rinpoche describes the results of this act:

The maturation of this act was that he was reborn as the universal emperor over the continent of Jambu. Because of the four beans that fell into the bowl, he reigned over the four continents for eighty thousand years. Because of the two that touched his heart, he became a sovereign over the realm of the Four Great Kings for another eighty thousand years; and because of the second, he shared equally with the thirty-seven successive Indras their sovereignty over the Heaven of the Thirty-three.¹⁵

In addition to the element of uneven causes and effects, this example illustrates how karmic retribution can be allocated to various amounts of time and over various rebirths.

Patrul Rinpoche explains that the rebirth attained as the result of committing a positive or negative action is "the fully ripened effect," which is determined largely by the emotion or mental state that motivated the action (e.g., ignorance leads to an animal rebirth, desire to rebirth as a hungry ghost, and hatred to torment in the hell realms).¹⁶ These are not inflexible stipulations, though, which is evident in stories about karmic retribution. In fact, these stories are much more particular about the intentions and actions that lead to one's future circumstances. The detailed correlations illustrate the degree to which Tibetans have developed karma as an explanatory tool. Rather than expressing karmic conditioning as beneficial or detrimental, Tibetans use it to account for specific situational and personal characteristics. It goes beyond the binary concepts of sin and merit, which renders it a didactic tool to be used to enforce ideals wider than simple moral guidelines. Some textually educated Buddhists are especially adept at spinning tales that harmonize karmic retribution, an understandably useful tool in

teaching the gravity of karma and rebirth while furthering particular agendas. The rebirth stories serve to illustrate the severity of consequence one faces in breaking certain rules, which are often those most important to the preservation of the monastic community. The hungry ghosts and the hell beings receive the most thorough attention in these kinds of stories, which can be quite gruesome.

Patrul Rinpoche writes of three types of hells: the eight hot hells, the eight cold hells, and the ephemeral hells. The former two consist of numerous hells in which the inhabitants suffer all kinds of imaginable torment, such as being chopped up, crushed, and boiled, or, in the case of the cold hells, frozen until the skin cracks open. It is the ephemeral hells where punishments are particular to the delinquent's sins. These hell beings may be in various places, and Patrul Rinpoche recounts three examples of individuals whose ephemeral hells were in the human realms. They are all examples of people who misused offerings to monks, and they all take the form of an animal that is trapped alive and being eaten by other tiny animals. The first is the Black Horse Lama from Tsang, who an advanced teacher perceived in an ephemeral hell in Yamdrok Lake. He dried up the lake in order to show his students, and they saw a giant fish that spanned the length and width of the lake. It could not move and was writhing in agony while tiny creatures fed on it. The teacher explained that the Lama had been very successful at curing people and was highly venerated. However, he accepted large donations for the services he performed. Another similar example involves a treasurer who appropriated funds from the public and was reborn as a frog being eaten alive inside of a log. In this case, it was the High Abbott of Ngor that discovered the creature.

It is notable that in both examples, the emphasis is on the personal acquisition of money at the public's expense, a fault that if suspected to be out of hand could conceivably be detrimental to monasteries and ritual practitioners. Monasteries and independent lamas depend on the general public for funds, either in the form of donations or tax funds, and therefore must show discretion when allocating these funds. Furthermore, the people who recognize them are enlightened or highly advanced teachers. The utility of these stories is threefold: (1) they enforce the doctrine of karma with specific

examples of retribution; (2) simultaneously, they use it to discourage people specifically from using religious accomplishment for personal gain; and (3) and they assure the public that the punishment for this type of sin is miserable enough that their monastic community is not taking part in it. These examples occur within the social sphere of religious activity. One can imagine a host of scenarios depicting individual sins and punishments, but these stories draw out the social aspects of karma, though Patrul Rinpoche's text addresses individuals and their practice. The consequences of his stories involve communities and institutions rather than individuals, or they emphasize the efficacy of individual vows that are primarily a reflection of institutional validity.

Patrul Rinpoche offers another short example of an ephemeral hell that indirectly enforces the validity of the monastic community while illustrating the suitability of karmic returns:

At the time of the Buddha, there was a village butcher who made a vow never to kill animals at night. He was reborn in an ephemeral hell. At night his pleasure knew no bounds. He lived in a beautiful mansion, with four lovely women plying him with food and drink and other pleasures. During the day, however, the walls of the house would transform into blazing hot metal and the four women into terrifying brown dogs who fed on his body.¹⁷

The image of the man's punishment at night is a powerful lesson on the evils of killing. However, it also conveys the power of a pure vow. We can assume that if the man had just happened not to kill animals at night (for example, while he was sleeping), he would not have experienced the pleasure that he did during the night. Monks are considered pure, and therefore offerings made to them are more meritorious than others. Their vows are the foundation of this purity. Furthermore, the story emphasizes the importance of a teacher who has taken and kept vows. Elsewhere in his text, Patrul Rinpoche tells the story again, adding that the butcher had taken the vow in front of Kâtyâyana, one of the Buddha's disciples. And though he concedes

that it is not necessary to take a vow in front of a teacher, he says that to do so “renders it particularly powerful.”¹⁸

The characteristic downfall of hungry ghosts is usually greed or envy, and their greed often takes the form of desiring money or offerings intended for the monastic community. They are particularly despicable creatures portrayed as having huge, bulbous bellies but very thin, straw-like necks. They live in lands without food and water, or, if they happen to find someone with some, they cannot ingest it; it transforms into fire or some wretched substance, such as pus or flesh. One of Patrul Rinpoche’s especially instructive tales is of a monk named Shrona who is traveling in the hungry ghost realms. He comes across a beautiful woman on a throne that has a hungry ghost tied to each of its legs. She offers him food but warns him not to give the tiniest bit to any of the creatures tied to her throne. When she leaves, the creatures begin to beg, and Shrona offers them food. The food immediately transforms, and the four creatures find themselves eating disgusting substances: the first eats chaff, the second iron, the third his own flesh, and the fourth pus and blood. The woman returns and chastises him for not heeding her words, and he inquires about her relationship to the pathetic creatures. She replies that they were her husband, son, daughter-in-law, and servant. She had been a Brahmin woman and had offered food to an arhat, Kâtyâyana, before offering any to the Brahmins or her family. She told her husband, thinking that he would like to share the merit of the action, but he reprimanded her, saying “There you are giving the first part of the food to this shaven-skulled monk! Why can’t he stuff his mouth with chaff?” Her son also complained, “Why doesn’t your bald-head eat lumps of iron?” Her daughter-in-law is suffering because she ate food meant for the woman, then lied, saying, “I would rather eat my own flesh than touch a dish that was meant for you!” Finally, the servant ate food that she was sent to take to the woman’s family, then told the woman that she would rather drink blood and pus than steal from her. The woman explains to Shrona that she wished to be born where she could witness the results of their actions, hence her rebirth as a powerful hungry ghost. “Had I not made such a wish,” she explains, “I would have been born amongst the gods of the Heaven of the Thirty-three, having given alms to a sublime being.”¹⁹

The husband and son showed disrespect for a member of the monastic community, and we assume, would have chosen not to offer the food to Kâtyâyana in the first place. Though the food that the daughter-in-law and servant ate was not part of a religious offering, it was not meant for them, and they lied about their stealing. Generosity is one of the most important ideals for a religious institution to foster if that institution expects the community to support them with offerings. The correlation of the offenders' statements with their circumstances in the hungry ghost realm illustrates the specificity of karmic retribution and its utility as a pedagogical tool. Additionally, the wife's intent to "share" the merit alludes to an individual's ability to share merit. If the husband had expressed gratitude and contentment at his wife's donation, he too would have reaped the benefits. (I will address the importance of intention and merit transfer below.)

The tone of these stories is remonstrative, and it conveys the kinds of punishments and rewards that Obeyesekere associates with cultures adhering to a religious ethic. The ethic communicated in all them pertains to the maintenance of Buddhist institutions, namely the monastic community and the venerated teachers at its head. The case of shared karma, or merit transfer, is also related to the good of the monastic community.

Tsangyang Gyatso, the Sixth Dalai Lama, whose songs are well known among Tibetans, also used karmic imagery in his writing to criticize immoral action. The following poem emphasizes the karma's inevitability, as it is used in Patrul Rinpoche's cautionary fashion:

Though seeds of good and bad deeds
Are sown in secrecy now,
The ripened fruit of each
Cannot be concealed.²⁰

This poem employs the most common metaphor for karma, that of the seed and its fruit. The phrase "fruits of action," or "fruits of karma" (*las rgyu 'bras*), is another common term for karma in popular and textual usage. The most basic meaning is that an action is like a seed, in that it will have a result just as the seed will eventually yield fruit. In this case, the author exploits the expository aspect of the

metaphor: seeds are sown underground and therefore may go undetected for a time, but the plants that emerge from the seeds grow above the soil, in plain view. The insinuation is that even actions that go unnoticed in the present will eventually come to fruition in the future.²¹ Such was the case in the aforementioned stories of the men who secretly misused offerings. Furthermore, the language in the poem that I have translated as “each” (*rang rang so so*) connotes a specificity that adds to the incriminating aspect of karma. It is more precise than the generalized “what goes around, come around” impression of karma that is so prevalent in the West. The Sixth Dalai Lama capitalizes on the possibility that each action results in a unique effect that reveals something of its originating cause, which Patrul Rinpoche also conveys in his instructive stories.

The Sixth Dalai Lama’s poem supports the individualistic portrayal of karma, but it is important to note that his use of this kind of karmic retribution is oriented toward the future. We do not find poems addressing his present state of affairs that rationalize his awkward situation with resigned acceptance of past action. Furthermore, this “orthodox” view of karma is one piece in a corpus of poetry that includes language about divination and more generalized forms of karma.

Karma and the Human Condition

The above scenarios dealt with drastically improved or worsened rebirths or future repercussions. Continuing this line of thought, that results expose previous actions and intentions, we may consider the role that karma plays in Tibetans’ perceptions of humans and their status in their present lives. In his dissertation, *Causation in Tibetan Religion: Duality and its Transformations*, Lawrence Epstein specifies that karma pertains to “any event which has some consequence upon the normal functions of one’s life,” and that it also takes on the qualities of a generalized force, or a process that Tibetans expand to include the general conditions under which they live their lives.²² This “existential condition” is the product of past actions, the visible ripened fruit arising from seeds sown, undetected, underground.²³ With this metaphor as a starting point, it is easy to see how karma might take on a deterministic character. It logically follows

that just as the type of seed dictates the fruit that will emerge, the nature of one's past actions determines one's future circumstances. Tibetans' acceptance of this aspect of karma is evident in their use of the retrospective karmic speculation to evaluate the mundane aspects of life, such as social standing, intelligence and aptitude for various skills, and even individual appearance and disposition.²⁴ Epstein notes that his informants attributed his proficiency at Tibetan language and his very decision to study Tibetans to his experience in a previous life as a Tibetan.²⁵

A broader application of karma's influence on one's individual condition extends to the larger arena of social status and wealth, which has been perceived by some as a religious tool of oppression inasmuch as it serves as a deterministic theory that sustains a social hierarchy.²⁶ While this particular application is not very useful in light of the relatively high level of social mobility in Tibet,²⁷ karma has a place in Tibetans' perception of social hierarchy. Epstein (among others) observes that Tibetans do draw explanations of socio-economic conditions *at birth* from karmic theory.²⁸ But a karmically conditioned high- or low-birth does not dictate the success, financial or otherwise, of one's entire lifetime. In addition to the fact that Tibetans' efforts at improving their quality of life through material means, karma and merit provide religious outlets through which they can attempt to influence their conditions. There are a number of rituals and practices that generate merit. Implicit in these, though, is the converse of karma's determination of social standing: wealth's contribution to one's accumulation of merit and virtue.

Because karma as a causal theory implies that the conditions of all human and non-human beings are contingent on their own actions, it also provides a basis for proactive attempts to alter one's own future circumstances. Just as Tibetans understand their present circumstances in the human realm to be karmically conditioned, they anticipate karma's influence on their futures and future rebirths. Actions that generate merit usually involve charitable acts, particularly those directed toward the monastic community. Tibetans identify certain deeds that create more merit than others, the ranking of which, Epstein observes, is contingent on the amount of money required to perform them.²⁹ On the other hand, he acknowledges that classic

textual sources expound on the importance of intention in acquiring merit. Purity of intention, which ultimately amounts to faith, is vital to the sincerity of taking refuge.³⁰ In his exposition on the importance of taking refuge, Patrul Rinpoche draws on stories that convey the assumption that a foolish or misinformed person acting out of pure motivation acquires more merit than the ritualistically sophisticated individual acting out of personal desire or obligation. These stories do little to support Obeyesekere's notion that a karmic ethic simply enforces social norms by correlating them with an afterlife that is "contingent on reward."³¹ Tales such as the one of man who offered beans to a Buddha told above promote the dramatic effects of offering to an enlightened being, rather than charity in general. The subject of these stories is faith in the Buddha, his teachings, and the monastic community, which maintains the integrity of the religion, but not of society in general.

One of the more outlandish of these is a story about "Jowo Ben," an ignorant villager whose erroneous offerings to the Jowo statue nonetheless induced the Buddha to confer great blessings upon him.³² Ben traveled from Kongpo, in southeastern Tibet, to central Tibet in order to see the Jowo. There were no caretakers around when he arrived, but he sat and observed the statue himself. Seeing the butter lamps and tormas offerings, he thought that the Jowo must like to dip the dough into the butter, which was the reason for the wicks that heated the butter.³³ He assumes that he should do the same, and samples some of the offerings. Looking on the statue with affection, he says:

What a nice lama you are. Even when the dogs come and steal the food you've been offered, you smile; when the draught makes your lamps sputter, you still keep smiling. Here, I'll leave my boots. Please look after them for me while I walk around you.

As the feet are an impure part of the body, it would normally be considered disrespectful to offer shoes to the Buddha. Accordingly, as Ben circumambulated the statue, a caretaker came and started to throw away his boots, but the Jowo statue told him to leave them, that

Ben had entrusted them to him. When Ben finished, he thanked the Jowo and told him that he should come visit him in Kongpo: “Next year, why don’t you come and visit us. I’ll slaughter an old pig and cook it for you and brew up some nice old barley beer.” The Jowo accepted, and Ben went home to tell his wife about it, asking her to look out for him when the time came. A year later, Ben wife saw a reflection of the Jowo in the river. Ben, thinking he had fallen in, jumps in the river to save him and pulled the image out of the river. However, when he returned home with it, the Jowo stopped short, and, saying that he could not enter a layman’s house, jumped into a large rock on the side of the road. The rock and the river became places of pilgrimage themselves, to which people would come and make offerings and prostrations. In his assessment of the story, Patrul Rinpoche concludes, “Although he ate the butter lamps and food from the offerings, and put his boots up in front of the Jowo – acts which otherwise could only be wrong – the power of his faith made it all positive.”³⁴

The power of faith does not sound like the rational human ethic of “orthodox” karma. It places agency in the salvific power of another being, in this case the Buddha. Faith in the Buddha and his teachings is counted among the positive thoughts and actions. Therefore, it is ethical to have faith in the Buddha, but the efficacy of faith is contingent on the Buddha’s purity. Stories containing lessons about the potency of faith include effects that are disproportionate to the *actions* committed by the followers. They further reinforce the importance of purity, and hence the monastic community. The same emphasis on monastic purity is present in the principle of donating to the monastic community. It is considered more meritorious to donate to a monk than a poor person. If we accept the assumption that an “ethical” religion enforces accepted social norms with religious principles, this outcome is counter-intuitive. The ethic here upholds the professional religious community itself but does nothing for social integrity in pragmatic terms of communal survival and social relationships.

Evidence for this kind of social evaluation of piety is somewhat contradictory in the cultural context. Ugen Gombo’s overall impression is that Tibetans are socially competitive in their merit-

making activities and enjoy discussing the amounts of donations and actions of devotion, such as circumambulations.³⁵ Moreover, the perception of religiosity within a community is, like most things, dependent on the commentator's relationship to the practitioner and the situation in which the religious practice is taking place. As in so many cases of religious devotion, lavish offerings are usually the most impressive demonstrations of piety and commitment among lay people.³⁶ However, lamas denounce the concern over material wealth in these contexts, lamenting the respect that wealth imparts. Religious purity and intention should determine a hierarchy of members of the community, they say, rather than socioeconomic status and wealth. Individual practices that do not require wealth are more complicated and varied. Circumambulation of temples and stupas is a popular form of practice, and one can observe many people doing it in deep concentration. However, many people engage in social activity while circumambulating. The very act of circumambulating rather than simply socializing, though, and the fact that many Tibetans will not walk the incorrect direction around such sites even when not circumambulating, indicates faith in the practice and the teachings that inform it, a pure attitude much like Ben's approach to the Jowo.

The relevance of intention does find its way into popular concern with the practice of confessing sins (*sdig bshag*).³⁷ Expressing pure religious intention by confessing sinful action produces "counter-karma," which assuages the retribution for an action but cannot purge its effects entirely.³⁸ The most popular and well-known success story of this ilk is the saint-poet Milarepa (*Mi la ras pa*). Milarepa, who at his mother's request used black magic against his family's enemies in his youth, later became a yogi and achieved enlightenment. Most Tibetans are familiar with his life story, and Epstein observes that they identify him as an exemplar of this principle. It does not necessarily entail a confession as understood by Westerners; for professional religious practitioners especially, it is beneficial to admit the impurity of one's thoughts and actions to oneself. Additionally, the act of doing so incurs a significant amount of merit. Patrul Rinpoche tells of one monk who was diligently arranging his offerings in preparation for the arrival of his benefactors. The monk realized that his motivations were impure — that he was only trying to impress

his visitors. He threw a handful of dust over the offerings, saying, “Monk, just stay where you are and don’t put on airs.” A teacher who later heard the story concluded that the monk’s handful of dust was “the best offering in all of Tibet.” Patrul Rinpoche links this to confession of sins, saying:

On our level, as ordinary beings, it is impossible not to have thoughts and actions which are inspired by evil intentions. But if we can recognize the wrong immediately, confess it, and vow not to do it again, we will part company with it.³⁹

This deliberate expression of religious intention finds a comfortable position in Tibetan Buddhist ritual, such as annual purifications, by directing the merit accrued toward the beings suffering in the three lower realms, though, as stated earlier, merit transference was also practiced in early, Theravada, Buddhism. Patrul Rinpoche stresses that it is essential to dedicate merit incurred during a ritual for the benefit of all beings so that they may attain enlightenment. One of the dedication formulas that he cites is: “All sources of merit accumulated throughout the past, present, and future, I dedicate as a cause of great enlightenment.”⁴⁰ The purpose of this dedication is to prolong the effects of the merit. Undedicated merit will only come to fruition once, exhausting itself in the process. Dedicated merit, on the other hand, will continue to bear fruit until it is no longer needed. Patrul Rinpoche explains, “Whatever is dedicated to enlightenment will never be exhausted, even after bearing fruit a hundred times. Instead, it will increase and grow until perfect Buddhahood is attained.”⁴¹ His instructions allude to another aspect of karmic conditions – their exhaustibility. The seed and fruit metaphor is useful in this respect: all fruit eventually withers and dies; all finite actions have finite results. Merit transference challenges this belief, though. I intentionally call it a belief, unlike the truism of karma’s general immutability, because the possibility of karma’s exhaustion is one that Tibetans accept and utilize in pragmatic ways. However, like many aspects of Tibetan religion, it is relevant *in context*.

The belief in karma’s exhaustibility most effectively establishes

its authority as a retrospective explanation; hence the tendency to defer to karma after all other options have failed, and especially in the case of death or termination of a desirable situation. One of the more lighthearted and romantic examples of this is one of the Sixth Dalai Lama's songs in which he laments the end of a love affair, but also consoles himself with a karmic rationalization:

The flower season disappeared,
Turquoise Bee, do not feel sorrow.
You should not grieve
When love's blessings expire.⁴²

The "flower season" in this poem refers to the pleasant time spent with a lover, and he is telling himself to cast aside his feelings of sorrow. Love's "blessings" refers to love as something that is ultimately the result of good deeds (*las 'phro*), and the verb *zad* means "to exhaust" or "to be finished." The notion of impermanence is implicit in this kind of karmic allusion, and the lesson of suffering emerges. Though one's own virtuous deeds engender one's present good conditions (happiness, love, wealth), these things are fundamentally impermanent and changing. Therefore, the Sixth Dalai Lama comments, one should not grieve over these things, but instead should accept their transience. In more serious situations, when people suffer from illness or sudden death, this type of resignation emerges. In spite of the many other causal factors present in the Tibetan worldview, it is often the case that if a person dies after every attempt to mollify the array of possibly aggravated personages or to reverse any number of offensive actions, the survivors will conclude that the deceased's particular karma was exhausted.⁴³ Accountability or specific sins are not the central concern in such explanations, though those issues are considered in dealing with other forms of causal agents, such as deities, spirits, and astrology. Tibetans attempt to rectify specific transgressions committed against such forces before concluding that death is imminent. In this case, karma functions more as a theme that is culturally accepted and meaningful in light of intense emotional loss.

This theme of exhaustion and irrevocability affords karma the potential to serve as a thoroughly satisfying explanation for suffering

and loss. Scholars' interest in its relation to theodicy is therefore understandable. However, there are exceptions to the inclusive, just portrayal of karma that the one-to-one ratio of the seed and fruit metaphor, a "reap what you sow" prototype, brings forward. Another metaphor for karma conveys its vague representation of causality, particularly in relationship to knowledge of the past and future. It is an oft-cited metaphor in texts, whereas the "fruit of action" symbolism is more commonly used in popular expression. It is said that karmic residue is a shadow of a bird flying: when the bird is very high in the sky, one cannot see its shadow, but as it approaches the ground, the shadow becomes more apparent. Patrul Rinpoche quotes from the *Treasury of Precious Qualities*:

When the eagle soars up, high above the earth,
 Its shadow for the while is nowhere to be seen;
 Yet bird and shadow still are linked. So too our actions:
 When conditions come together, their effects are clearly
 seen.⁴

The effects of one's actions may not manifest immediately, or even in the next rebirth; conversely, actions committed countless lives ago, imperceptible to the unenlightened being, may come to fruition at any time. Consequently, practitioners devise rituals that are intended to protect themselves in this life and to prevent suffering in future lives.⁴⁵ That this metaphor is used primarily in texts is telling of its implications. It identifies the detachment a person experiences from her past lives and future actions. Because unenlightened beings cannot remember actions in their past lives and cannot anticipate future events, the justness of the process falls apart in the absence of an individual's knowledge of the cause. Therefore, people pay less attention to this unknowable aspect of karma than to other more apparent types of causality. Authors of these texts seek to impart the need for apprehension about karmic consequences. Obeyesekere cites this "psychological indeterminacy" as the source of the "psychologically intolerable state" that necessitates the "unorthodox" practices of "village" Buddhism.⁴⁶ However, the unorthodox practices of merit transfer, deity propitiation and divination that he relegates to "village"

Buddhism are all common Tibetan Buddhist practices, even among monks and nuns. They are also present in sacred texts, as we have seen with Patrul Rinpoche's teachings. The underlying implication of the ethicization model is that rituals are problematic when they are not restricted to individual actions and consequences, or are not directly sanctioned by or beneficial to the monastic community. A perception of karma as individualistic and unalterable renders these rituals contradictory because they present a "paradox of the theodicy type whereby gods endowed with the power to alter the state of human grace are allowed to exist alongside a belief in *karma* which cannot be so altered."⁴⁷

This assessment of karma is common among scholars of Tibetan culture, too. Sherry Ortner takes this approach in her study of Sherpa rituals. In accordance with a perception of karma as unalterable and restricted to individual action and consequences, Ortner believes the karmic system "effectively disengages the actual present behavior and moral tendencies from actual present status, denying in effect that there *is* such a thing as injustice."⁴⁸ Furthermore, she assumes that karmic theory prevents envy of the rich or pity for the poor, in light of those individuals' accountability for their condition. This is typical of an abstract, constructed notion of karma that is not reflected in practice. It would be naïve to assume the absence of envy as a result of such a theory, especially when we consider the many perceptions of karma that indicate that it is not the norm.

Interestingly enough, Ortner acknowledges the Sherpa frustration at financial limitations and the implications they have for religious practice. Only families with sufficient funds can support a son who joins the monastery, and Ortner cites examples of men who express regret at their inability to pursue a monastic path. Consequently, she characterizes karma as having a "sinking" effect on an individual's social and ethical status,⁴⁹ neglecting the types of everyday ritual that anyone, regardless of economic status, can participate in, such as circumambulation, recitation of mantras, and prostrations.

Causality's Role in the Study of Tibetan Religion

The issue that this paper raises is whether a contradiction exists between a "law of karma" and the presence of beliefs and practices

that give agency to humans and other causal factors that acknowledge past action, yet reveal a desire to alter present and future circumstances. Furthermore, if it does not, why do scholars find a “law of karma” characterization so significant? The above material illustrates many of the karmic permutations in Tibetan culture and conveys the sense that karma is not a fixed and unquestionable doctrine. It is instead sometimes a pedagogical theme, others an admonition, and still others a mechanism for explaining a connection between people or a means of consolation.

There are two problems with the ethicization model that are worth noting. The first is the presence of dualistic categories, both emic and etic. Though Obeyesekere is convinced of the orthodoxy of Theravada Buddhism and paints Mahâyâna Buddhism in a somewhat less philosophically sophisticated light, he does identify some fundamental dualities that are present in Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and practice. Professional Tibetan Buddhist teachers will acknowledge a rift between the perception achieved in advanced meditation practices and the average person’s perception of the world: absolute contrasted with relative truth. Directly correlated to this is the distinction between salvation, or enlightenment, goals and lay people’s concerns rooted in the phenomenal world, ultimately constrained by karma. These categories present in Buddhist doctrine provide a pre-existing framework of division that is reflected in the opposing categories that scholars employ when discussing Buddhist cultures in which Buddhist institutions and ideas have flourished. However, whereas the categories of absolute and relative truth both have significance in textual Buddhist discourse in spite of a normative valuation of enlightened knowledge and realization, scholars’ categories often favor an ideal without attention to the worth and complexity of the practical.

One example of this is Obeyesekere’s terms “village Buddhism” and “doctrinal Buddhism.” This division appears in many forms in scholarship on Tibetan religious practice: religion vs. magic, ethical vs. natural, Buddhism vs. folk belief, orthodox vs. heterodox, soteriological vs. pragmatic. These categories are problematic because scholars do not always state their defining characteristics, or, if they do delineate the difference, there is not convincing evidence for its applicability to actual religious practice, as we have seen with notions

of “orthodox” karmic theory. The categories themselves may be more indicative of scholarly assumptions or the agendas of authoritative members of society than they are of the culture’s predominant religious beliefs and practices. The “law of karma” appeals to scholars’ familiarity with religion expressed in belief and text, religion comprised of uncompromising values and prescriptions. These aspects are present in Buddhism, and professional religious authorities are the strongest proponents of them. However, these elements do not represent the entirety of Buddhist practice; nor do they reflect the aspects of religion that should interest social scientists and scholars who study Tibetan Buddhist practice. Tibetans express this religion through application of beliefs in karma and numerous other causal agents, and the social implications of religious practice is inextricably tied to Tibetans’ creativity in their understanding of such beliefs.

The second issue has to do with the purpose of the rituals and beliefs that appear to fall outside of karma. A dualistic categorization system pits one against the other; it becomes easy to define concepts in terms of what they are *not*, rather than what they are. To say that these beliefs and practices persist in the absence of an enlightened wisdom first implies that they are false, and second, ignores their system of knowledge and practice in its own right. We can make several conjectures about why this phenomenon is common. We should state initially that this is not a newly discovered process. Scholars have long turned to the elite for information on cultural topics. Western culture values textual authority and reason. Buddhist philosophy’s affinity for reason and logic has a strong appeal to Westerners. Teachers recognized as enlightened beings are similar to scholars in that they analyze the reality experienced by the general population. They engage in activity much like our own. As outsiders, we attempt to understand what motivates the people we study and how they conceptualize their environments. Buddhist philosophy offers a systematic explanation for the way people perceive life and death; attachment and hatred; ignorance and knowledge. Their perception of reality is radically different from that of their followers. They are analytical; they offer critical assessments of behaviors that do not seem necessary from their point of view.

What is important to note about this perspective is that it serves

a specific purpose: the perpetuation of a community of religious professionals, both teachers and relatively uneducated monks and nuns. Therefore, we must not overlook the pragmatic concerns of those professionals when interpreting the extent to which individual accountability and philosophical karma theory contribute to Tibetan ritual. We cannot discount the importance of doctrine, text, and lineage in Tibetan religion. The aspects of religion that the scholars after Obeyesekere's orientation emphasize are crucial factors in any representation of Tibetan theories of causality. Lineage is particularly important, though it does not always have to be a textual lineage; it often refers to a tradition of ritual practice by a revered teacher or practitioner associated with a specific place. Furthermore, the discrepancy between enlightened, or elite, religious adept's perspectives and those of the general population does not oblige us to disregard either. On the contrary, it means we must pay more attention to the relationship between the culturally valued knowledge-holders and the general populace. In a Buddhist culture where religious institutions are largely dependent on the laity, the latter's perceptions of causality are vital to the maintenance of that symbiotic relationship.

A broader consideration of religious causality in Tibet must take into account rituals that appeal to various types of agency, including deities and astrology, and it must acknowledge the ease with which Tibetans combine types of causality. In this setting, karma emerges as a convincing theme in Buddhist story, one tool that Tibetans utilize among a collection of explanations for suffering, oddity, and extraordinary people and events. That it is not the rigid, unalterable force some have portrayed it to be should not cause disappointment or confusion. It should instead encourage us to view it within the rich tradition of ritual and belief that Tibetan religious practice represents. It is not so inconceivable that a doctrine like karma could coexist with these other beliefs if we observe the creativity with which Tibetan religious teachers and laymen alike interpret and implement it. This methodology would acknowledge the prescriptive religion of doctrine and philosophy found in text as well as religion as it is found among individuals who are part of a society that includes, and interprets, the former. Furthermore, rather than resigning ourselves to simple ethnographic description, evidence of such practices in other Buddhist

cultures suggests that a comparative study would yield similar results that would allow a more sophisticated understanding of the extent of karma's use in those cultures.

Notes

¹ Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Ameridian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth* (University of California Press, 2003), p. 75. Obeyesekere's most recent study of rebirth was published after most of the work for this paper was completed. The topics I address in relation to Obeyesekere's work are not the focus of this volume, though they are still present in his portrayal of Buddhism. *Imagining* is rather a comparative work that attempts a theoretical understanding of cultural aspects present in groups that subscribe to beliefs regarding rebirth. His stated purpose in writing the book, "This book is an attempt to demonstrate that, although one must eschew universalistic lawlike theories modeled on the natural sciences, one must also reject contemporary fascination in my own discipline for ethnographic particularity and a rejection of theory unless it shows that no theories are possible outside descriptive specificity," (p. xiv) is notable in that it is related to my objective as well. Though he admits that certain anticipated elements may not be present in specific ethnographic cases, he nonetheless values the use of theory in analyzing the implications of the similarities and differences between rebirth eschatologies. My concern in this paper is the way in which an assumption of a theory has been taken up by scholars and applied to ethnographic material in such a pervasive manner as to affect our understanding of the implications (and their theoretical significance) of cultural practices. See also Gananath Obeyesekere, "The Rebirth Eschatology and its Transformations: A Contribution to the Sociology of Early Buddhism." In Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (ed.), *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

² Ursula Sharma, "Theodicy and the Doctrine of Karma." *Man*, New Series 8:3 (September 1973), pp. 347-364. Sharma proposes this method in her study of karma and theodicy, for which she draws primarily on Indian examples. She directly addresses Obeyesekere's

theory and conclusions, pointing out that the majority of the people do not learn doctrine from text, though they may be exposed to recitation or prayer. Instead, they glean their religious knowledge from socialization and cultural education that may include concepts that are not expressed in or supported by sacred text.

³ See Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1997). In two of his articles: "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," and "Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism: The Layman/Monk Distinction and the Doctrines of Transference of Merit," Schopen challenges scholars' loyalty to textual prescriptions and argues that in many cases, the textual ideal never existed in individuals' practice. Therefore, popular manifestations of Buddhism are not transgressions of accepted norms because those norms did not necessarily exist. For example, rather than accepting evidence that monks and nuns possessed private property, he says scholars offer rationalizations that reconcile it with a textual ideal of begging and poverty. Instead, Schopen suggests, this is not an exception to a rule, but the way Buddhist practice actually was.

⁴ Gananath Obeyesekere, "Theodicy, Sin, and Salvation in a Sociology of Buddhism." in E.R. Leach (ed.), *Dialectic in Practical Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 21.

⁵ See Sharma (1973).

⁶ Obeyesekere (1968), p. 25.

⁷ Obeyesekere (2003), p. 75. There are two Tibetan terms for religion in Tibetan; however, for our purposes the topic of causality spans these two categories and illustrates the interchangeable and syncretic characters of concepts such as karma.

⁸ Schopen (1997), pp. 38-41.

⁹ Part of what is so problematic about categories such as "orthodox" and "heterodox" as scholars apply them to entire traditions or cultures is that they do not always specify their qualifications for them, though we will see that they are making certain assumptions.

¹⁰ The *Agganya Sūtra* contains a version of the story beginning with the wind, followed by the appearance of beings and food and eventually society and immoral action. The Dalai Lama also tells a version of

the story in an interview with John Avedon, “The Universe: Mind and Matter,” in *In Exile from the Land of Snows* (Harper, 1997), pp. 385-91

¹¹ A person may still experience *effects* of her past actions if her karma is not exhausted. I will address the exhaustibility of karma more thoroughly below.

¹² Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Shambala Publications, Inc., 1998), pp. 101-112.

¹³ Patrul Rinpoche (1998), p. 124. The Buddha Kâshyapa was a previous Buddha before the historical Buddha of the present eon. Buddhist doctrine holds that Shakyamuni was actually one of many Buddhas and became enlightened after many rebirths during which he turned his mind toward the Dharma. In this sense, his teachings are not new, but are the iteration of teachings that fell out of practice during the natural cycle of degeneration. Also, in these stories, an enlightened being is able to reveal the rebirth history of one person or another by virtue of their omniscience, or capacity to view the cycle of samsara and beings’ past and future rebirths.

¹⁴ Patrul Rinpoche (1998), p. 113.

¹⁵ “Jambu” is a shortened form of Jambudvîpa, southern continent, upon which we live, of the four continents surrounding Mt. Meru, the center of the Buddhist cosmos. The Four Great Kings refer to gods who are protectors of the four directions. The Heaven of the Thirty-three is a realm of gods, including Indra, who have not attained enlightenment and therefore exist in the phenomenal realm, are not immortal, and are subject to samsara, including karma. Patrul Rinpoche (1998), p. 416 and 436.

¹⁶ Patrul Rinpoche (1998), p. 112.

¹⁷ Patrul Rinpoche (1998), p. 71.

¹⁸ Patrul Rinpoche (1998), p. 117.

¹⁹ Patrul Rinpoche (1998), pp. 73-4.

²⁰ This is my translation of poem #86 of the extended collection attributed to the Sixth Dalai Lama, the transliterated text of which Per K. Sorenson provides with short commentary in his study of the original collection. See Per K Sorenson, *Divinity Secularized: An Inquiry into the Nature and Form of the Songs Ascribed to the Sixth Dalai Lama* (*Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde*, 1990), p. 295.

²¹ The Sixth Dalai Lama is an ambiguous figure in Tibetan history,

and the subject matter and authorship of the songs that are attributed to him have been the subject of scholarly debate. He was not publicly recognized at a young age as Dalai Lamas usually are, but was hidden so that the Regent could conceal the Fifth Dalai Lama's death. The Sixth Dalai Lama did not assume official residence as a monk in Lhasa until he was eleven years old. Then there were stories of romantic exploits and disinterest in monasticism. He is said to have worn laymen's clothes and earrings and participated in archery contests. Most of his poems concern love and women. He was eventually deposed, and died in the custody of his captors. Like his life, the cause of his death is mysterious; some think that he was murdered, while others claim he died of an illness. Still others accept a "secret biography" that claims the Sixth did not die young at all, but became a tantric adept and wandering lama. The story is a long and complicated one, but suffice to say that there were many factions within and without the government (the Regent, the Manchus, and the Mongolians, among others) who had varying interests in the young Dalai Lama. I believe that this poem can be read as commentary on the political situation at the time. Furthermore, assuming the Sixth Dalai Lama is the author, it takes on a more personal air; it conveys comfort in immanent justice as well as resentment of the prevalent political deception of the time, which can each be read as disgust at being implicated in such affairs, or bitterness at denial of the very political power to which he felt entitled. For analyses of the Sixth Dalai Lama's life and poetry, respectively, see Michael Aris, *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives: A Study of Pemalingpa (1450-1521) and the Sixth Dalai Lama (1683-1706)* (Kegan Paul International, 1989), pp. 108-67; and Sorenson (1990).

²² Lawrence Epstein, *Causation in Tibetan Religion: Duality and its Transformations*, Doctoral Dissertation (Department of Anthropology, University of Washington, 1977), p. 61.

²³ Epstein (1977), p. 61.

²⁴ A classic Indian example is found in Queen Mallikâ's interview with the Buddha when she asks his advice on how a woman could become beautiful and successful. She asks why a woman may be "ugly, of bad figure, and horrible to look at" rather than "beautiful, attractive, pleasing, and possessed of unsurpassing loveliness; and "indigent, poor, needy, and low in the social scale," versus "rich,

wealthy, affluent, and high on the social scale.” He replies that “when a woman has been irascible and violent, and at every thing said against her has felt hatred, and heart-burning” she will be ugly, etc; if not, she will be pleasing to look at. Furthermore, if a woman “has given alms to monks and Brahmans, of food, drink, building-sites, carriages, garlands, scents, ointments, bedding, dwelling-houses, and lamps, and has not been of an envious disposition, nor felt envy at the gains, honor, reverence, respect, homage, and worship that came to others, nor been furious and envious thereat” she will be wealthy; if not, she will be poor. Mallikâ is overjoyed at this explanation, having learned the reason for her own ugliness and wealth, and says it as if one “were to disclose that which was hidden.” She vows to uphold all of the good qualities that the Buddha listed and to encourage others to do the same. From *Anguttara-Nikâya*. See Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translations* (Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 228-231.

²⁵ Epstein (1977), p. 81.

²⁶ See Ugen Gombo “Cultural expressions of social stratification in traditional Tibet: ‘caste’ and casteism in a non-Hindu context,” *Anthropology* VII, no. 1 (1983), pp. 43-72, for an analysis of what he perceives to be a Tibetan “caste” system. Also, Ugen Gombo, “Belief in Karma and its Social Ramifications in Samsara,” in Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein (eds.), *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization* (Manohar Publications, 1985) for a study of the social ramifications of karma.

²⁷ See B. D. Miller, “Perception and Reality of Social and Physical Mobility in Tibet,” *Acta Orientalia* 44 (1990), pp. 57-67.

²⁸ Epstein (1977), p. 61.

²⁹ Epstein (1977), p. 68.

³⁰ Taking refuge is the act that officially indicates one’s status as a Buddhist. It is essentially a declaration of belief or faith. One recites: “I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the Dharma; I take refuge in the Sangha.” These are the Three Jewels, which are constantly referred to in Buddhist practice. By doing this one recognizes the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha and his realization, and acknowledges the truth of his teachings (the Dharma) and the purity of his monastic followers (the Sangha).

³¹ Obeyesekere (1968), p. 15.

³² The Jowo statue is the statue of Shâkyamuni that King Songtsen Gampo's Chinese princess brought with her to Tibet. He is the King associated with the initial official introduction of Buddhism into Tibet, the facilitation of which was fraught with obstacles, a topic I take up below.

³³ Butter lamps and tormas are standard offerings in Tibetan temples. Butter lamps can be small enough to fit in the palm of your hand or large pedestal-like objects with several wicks. The small ones are simple or engraved metal bowls filled with butter with a wick in the center. Torma are offerings made of barley flour, liquid (tea or water), and butter. They may be elaborately decorated with dyed butter or colorful pieces of paper.

³⁴ Patrul Rinpoche (1998), pp. 174-75.

³⁵ Gombo (1985) discusses the role of merit making in social status in general and the competitive nature of religious practice at the Kalacakra teachings in Bodh Gaya in particular.

³⁶ For example, Sherry B. Ortner, *Sherpas Through Their Rituals* (Cambridge University Press, 1978), observes the role of wealth in ritual.

³⁷ Epstein (1977), p. 72.

³⁸ Epstein (1977), p. 72.

³⁹ Patrul Rinpoche (1998), p. 127.

⁴⁰ Patrul Rinpoche (1998), p. 325.

⁴¹ Patrul Rinpoche (1998), pp. 325-26.

⁴² This song comes from the traditionally accepted collection given in K. Dhondup, *Songs of the Sixth Dalai Lama* (Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1981), p. 48. "Turquoise Bee" is an epithet for the Sixth Dalai Lama.

⁴³ See Epstein (1977), p. 62; Stan Royal Mumford, *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 160-61.

⁴⁴ Patrul Rinpoche (1998), p. 119.

⁴⁵ Obeyesekere (1968), pp. 21-25

⁴⁶ Obeyesekere (1968), p. 25.

⁴⁷ Obeyesekere (1968), p. 23.

⁴⁸ Ortner (1978), p. 110.

⁴⁹ Ortner (1978), p.112. She derives her interpretation, consciously

or not, from the third type of Buddhist canonical suffering, conditioned suffering. It is this type of suffering that, taken literally, can easily be used to portray karmic theory as oppressive. Conditioned suffering is the result of daily life; it reminds one that suffering is truly inherent in all of human existence and present at all junctures, unnoticed by the inattentive human eye. Patrul Rinpoche uses the example of drinking tea, an activity that all Tibetans enjoy on a daily basis. He outlines the suffering that occurs from the insects that die in the harvesting of the tea to the sores that develop on the bellies of the yaks that transport it. Conditioned suffering amasses unchecked because it is part of everyday life. Moreover, because it is unconscious and overlooked, it is offset by comparatively few conscientiously performed meritorious deeds.