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ASSISTING THE DEAD BY VENERATING THE LIVING

Merit Transfer in the Early Buddhist Tradition

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Death is an inevitable fact of life. For the religious as well as for some others, its occurrence does not necessarily imply life's termination or the final end of conscious being. In most traditional, and even in some post-traditional cultures, death is regarded as a transitional experience, a *rite de passage*: the deceased leaves behind the familiar vicissitudes of human life and enters into a new modality of being beyond. Funeral rites, perhaps the oldest religious rites known to human-kind, serve as a means to facilitate this transition. In this article, it is not my intention to speculate upon the metaphysical truth of this almost ubiquitous pattern of belief and rite. Generally, I am more interested in determining how religious interpretations of death valorize the human meaning of life. For reflection upon the meaning of death is but another way of reflecting upon the central significance of life. Specifically, I will focus upon early Indian Buddhist conceptions of death: their cultural origins, cosmological significance, philosophical rationale, and social implications.

Buddhist interpretations of death did not originate in an historical or cultural vacuum. Conceptions of the after-life, and the prescribed behavior relating to the dead, were modified adaptations of prevailing Brāhmaṇical patterns of belief. This is especially apparent when we examine the beliefs and practices of the early Buddhist laity.

While Buddhist monks were intent upon gaining release from the cyclical *saṃsāric* pattern of death and rebirth, the laity were fundamentally concerned with performing meritorious actions in this life that would improve their condition in the next. Eventually, a lay person might embark upon the renunciatory monastic path leading to *nirvāna*. But until that step was taken, performing moral acts of auspicious karmic efficacy provided the best assurance that

life after death need not be feared. According to this basic Buddhistic understanding, one of the most meritorious acts that one might perform consisted of giving gifts to the monastic community and transferring the merit of that action to one's deceased kin. Psychologically and philosophically, giving material amenities to the monastic community and merit to one's departed kin was evidence that the giver had cultivated a healthy mental disposition characterized by selflessness, compassion and charity. Cosmologically, the giver not only increased the likelihood of better rebirth for himself, but also provided an opportunity for deceased kin to share in the karmic benefits of merit. The *Petavatthu*, a popular collection of short sermons belatedly granted Pāli canonical status, frequently describes how one's suffering deceased kin are transferred to a more blissful state by meritorious deeds performed on their behalf. Socially, the effective material transactions involved in merit transfer sustained the monastic community and fostered a reciprocal relationship between the laity and the *bhikkhusaṅgha*. In exchange for receiving material amenities, the sheer presence of virtuous *bhikkhu*s presented the laity with an opportunity to make merit. In short, merit transfer was a practical and popular expression of Buddhist piety that was theoretically legitimate, cosmologically potent, and socially redeeming.

From the perspective of the history of religions, this complex of patterns associated with merit transfer also illustrates how the early Buddhist tradition accommodated and transformed fundamental Brāhmaṇical conceptions concerned with the status of the dead and the behavior of the living in relation to the deceased. Before the appearance of Buddhist theories of karmic action, people of the Brāhmaṇical tradition systematically engaged in the performance of rites designed to assist the dead in the nether world. The Buddhist incorporation and rationalization of this Brāhmaṇical pattern reveals an emerging and uniquely Buddhistic conception of death which in turn reflects a changing regard for the significance of life. Buddhism has been frequently characterized by Western observers as pre-eminently given to other-worldly pursuits on the basis of its allegedly pessimistic view of this-worldly life. In the following pages, I will contend that Buddhist transformations of Brāhmaṇical beliefs and rites concerning death portray a somewhat different pic-

ture: an increasing importance attached to this-worldly existence and an optimistic ethical imperative to live the good life.

Death and After-Life in the Brāhmaṇical Tradition

The early poets of Vedic tradition rarely speculated upon the fate of the dead. Vedic religion recognized the finitude of human life, but focussed almost exclusively upon maintaining favorable living conditions in this world. Throughout the hymnodic *saṃhitās* and the later ritualistic *brāhmaṇas*, there exists no systematic or substantial exposition of the nature of the after-life or of the obligations of the living to the dead. Yet, pertinent passages in the funeral hymns of the *Ṛg* and *Atharva Vedas*, when understood within the context of ancient funeral rites still operative within Indian society today, indicate a normative pattern of belief.

The most important passages that relate to the topic of this article concern the conception of a class of beings known as *pitaras* (fathers, ancestors). According to the *Ṛg Veda*, the recently deceased might embark upon one of two paths: one that led to the realm of the *devas* (gods) and one that led to the fathers' world.[1] In a *Ṛg Veda Soma Pavamāna* hymn, the pathway leading to the realm of the *pitaras* tends to be identified as the standard route.[2] The *Atharva Veda* mentions the *pitaras*' route without any reference to the route leading to the *deva* abode.[3] Thus, it seems likely that the pathway leading to the father's world was understood by many to constitute the normative destiny of the deceased.

When the deceased arrived in the father's world, Yama, king of this realm, provided the new arrival with a new body.[4] In later traditions, including the Buddhist, Yama figures prominently in pronouncing judgement upon the dead.[5] But in *Ṛg Veda* literature proper, neither he nor Varuṇa, who is frequently associated with the principle of order (*ṛta*), function in this capacity.[6] After being established in the fathers' realm, the deceased enjoyed various pleasurable amenities in a paradisiac setting. The fathers, bathed in a continual stream of light (a motif that suggests their newly gained heavenly status)[7] enjoyed a diet that consisted of *svadhā*, (food that provides them with their essential powers),[8] milk, ghee, honey and *soma* (all of which constitute the traditional sacrificial libations). In short, the realm of the fathers seems to represent an ethereal projec-

tion of the perfect human existence, a scenario which led A. B. Keith to write: "The picture is relatively simple: it is merely the pleasant things of earth to the priestly imagination, heaped upon one another..."[9]

But more importantly, the fathers are imagined as being perfectly capable of determining their own actions on the basis of their own wills.[10] Because they maintain the power to act upon their own volitions, they represent a source of power that can be tapped by the living. Indeed, they appear to be anxious to come to the aid of their surviving kin, especially those descendants who provide for them regularly by offering sacrifices.[11] There existed, therefore, a symbiotic relationship between the living and the dead. In *Ṛg* Vedic literature, the living call upon the fathers for various types of aid: for assistance in battle, for food, and for rain. However, the primary appeal made by the living is for help in continuing the family lineage.[12] The fathers had a vested interest in furthering the family line; for, in order to be sustained, they needed sacrifices performed in their honor. Thus, they more than welcome appeals for offspring, especially males.

This pattern of relationship between the living and the dead closely resembles the Vedic conception of the relationship between human beings and the *devas*. Just as the majority of Brāhmaṇical rituals were designed to appease the *devas*, thereby sustaining their associated natural and cosmic powers for the purpose of maintaining favorable this-worldly living conditions, so also the fathers, when nourished by ritual sacrifices, would benevolently return the favor of sacrifice by granting boons to descendants. One's ancestors, therefore, were understood to play a continuing active role in the affairs of this-worldly existence.

In later developing Brāhmaṇical tradition, the fate of the dead was somewhat modified. Upaniṣadic conceptions indicate that *pitaras* were not considered immortal, but eventually underwent a dissolution by returning to the five basic elements of the cosmos.[13] Yet, even with the Upaniṣadic introduction of karmic theories of rebirth, a theodicy which would appear to have displaced the ancient pattern of belief in the *pitaras* status, the fundamental pattern of relationship between the living and the ancestors was not significantly altered. Indeed, the fate of the dead was further

elaborated and the cosmological status of the fathers classified to resemble the three-fold classification of the heavenly *devas*.[14] Corresponding to this developing cosmological schema, a system of ritual sacrifices was designed to insure that the recently deceased could safely ascend through this triple realm of the departed beyond human life. Each generation of ancestors was thought to occupy one of these levels of heaven and to ascend progressively to higher realms until eventual dissolution.

The rites designed to promote the status of the deceased, known as *śrāddha*, continue to be celebrated in contemporary Hindu society even today. Since they are enormously complex, they cannot be fully explored within the context of this article.[15] However, a general description will indicate that the ancient Vedic pattern of reciprocal relationship between the living and the dead was not only preserved, but expanded and intensified.

The *śrāddha* rites indicate that an important function previously assigned to Yama has been assumed by surviving kin. No longer is Yama given the responsibility of providing a newly arrived deceased with a new body; that task is now the responsibility of the family. Further, the deceased is no longer understood to make his way independently to the realm of the fathers by means of "heavenly wings".[16] Immediately after death, the deceased is completely disembodied and exists in a liminal status. His physical human body has been cremated, yet his spirit remains in the vicinity. In this condition, the deceased are known as *preta* (departed). In addition to propitiating previous generations of *pitaras* and aiding them in their journeys through the triple realm beyond, the primary function of the *śrāddha* rites is to transform the deceased from this liminal condition as a *preta* to the status of *pitṛ* (father). This is done symbolically, in the manner of sympathetic magic, by ritually fashioning a body out of rice balls (*piṇḍa*) during the first ten days after death.[17] During each of the first ten days after death, a new *piṇḍa* is created representing a vital part of the new body. On the eleventh day, after the rice-body (*piṇḍa-pitṛ*) is complete, a complex series of additional rites is held. Of chief importance among them is the feasting of the ancestral fathers and the newly deceased, all of which are symbolically represented by a group of eleven priestly specialists.[18] Through the first eleven days, the mood of *śrāddha* is

generally one of mourning; but on the twelfth day, the concluding rite known as *sapiṇḍikārana* is held. This is the specific occasion during which the recently deceased symbolically joins his ancestors and becomes established as a *pitṛ*.[19] Without the performance of these rituals, the deceased remain as *preta*s and are regarded as a source of danger to the living.[20] But once established as a *pitṛ*, they gain new bodies and thus regain social status.

Just exactly when this distinction between *preta* and *pitṛ* emerged within Brāhmaṇical tradition is difficult to assert with any certainty. According to Hopkins,[21] the distinction is already assumed in epic literature. Keith believed that the distinction "can perhaps be traced right back to Sāṅkhayana",[22] a conjecture that would date the tradition as far back as the time of the *Kauṣitāki Brāhmaṇa*. Barua insists that even during the lifetime of the Buddha, the holy pilgrimage site of Gayā existed as an auspicious site for the performance of rites transforming *preta*s to *pitara*s.[23] Far more convincing is Knipe's analysis in which he concludes that the *śrāddha* feasts have their origins in the period of *brāhmaṇa* texts and were steadfastly preserved in the *sūtra*s and the *sāstra*s.[24] These critical considerations suggest that the pattern of ritual activity designed to promote the deceased from the status of *preta* to *pitṛ* was prevalent before the emergence of specifically Buddhist conceptions.[25]

The *śrāddha* rites were/are a context for the expression of a number of social and religious beliefs relating to death. For surviving kin, these rites provide an acceptable social forum for the expression of grief, a means to grapple with the sense of loss which accompanies any encounter with death. Those closest in kin to the deceased are also supported emotionally by the presence of other family relations. In addition, because previously deceased ancestors are remembered and symbolically present during the ritual process, the *śrāddha* rites also constitute a type of family reunion for both the dead and the living. Consequently, the collective heritage of the family is recalled, and familial kinship lines are both publicly and privately affirmed.

More importantly, *śrāddha* constitutes the fulfilment of an obligation. By assuring the well-being of the deceased in the after-life, a debt of filial piety is settled. And if surviving family members hope to sustain a positive reciprocal relationship with the deceased in the

future, and thus call upon his power as a *pitṛ* in times of need, they must first establish him in a venerable state. Providing for the ancestors by means of ritual service is a basic familial responsibility, a way of expressing thanks for their contributions to family life. A neglected ancestor, especially one that remains as a *preta*, can become a meddlesome nuisance or a source of serious family trouble.

For these reasons, *śrāddha* functions effectively as a ritual technique: it serves as a device which establishes the deceased in a state where the mutual interests of the living and the dead can be realized; and it provides a means for coping with death's existential sting and the period of social pollution which immediately follows death's occurrence.

To sum up, before the emergence of the Buddhist tradition, Brāhmaṇical conceptions of the after-life were somewhat paradisiac, providing that the ritual obligations incumbent upon the living were met. After the performance of ritual transactions designed to facilitate the deceased's transition from *preta* to *pitṛ*, the relationship between the living and the dead was conceived to be reciprocal in nature, an extended dimension of kinship relations.

Modifications of Brāhmaṇical Beliefs in the Pāli Canon

Although the *Petavatthu* contains a rich source of information reflecting early Buddhist understandings of the after-life, other portions of the Pāli canon generally considered antecedent to the *Petavatthu* contain a number of relevant passages to our discussion. From these passages, to be found in the *Vinaya* and the four principle *Nikāya*s, it is clear that important modifications of prevailing understandings had already taken place, while some conceptions had been completely abandoned.

One of the most conspicuous changes in the developing Buddhist cosmological view concerns the fact that the blissful abode of the fathers, or a path specifically followed by one's deceased ancestors, is nowhere to be found. What this seems to suggest is that, along with the decline in importance attached to the worship of *deva*s, ancestor veneration suffered a similar dimunition. This does not necessarily imply that Buddhism rejected the importance of the family, although this accusation was often levelled against the tradi-

tion by Brāhmaṇical rivals.[26] There are numerous instances within the *Nikāyas* and the *Vinaya* where the Buddha enjoins his disciples to honor father and mother. Indeed, honoring one's parents and serving them was a cardinal teaching for the laity.[27] However, the absence of a corresponding conception parallelling the Brāhmaṇical *pitṛ* status, and the fact that no ritual device similar to *śrāddha* or *sapiṇḍīkarana* is mentioned in early Buddhist literature, indicates differing assumptions regarding the fate of the dead. Specifically, it means that the recently deceased do not *ipso facto* gain a bliss-filled and honored position in the after-life as a result of sacrificial ritual techniques or because of their status as family ancestors.

According to the Buddhist understanding, the destiny of the deceased is directly the consequence of how well he conducted himself morally during his human life span. While this idea of karmic retribution was certainly permeating Brāhmaṇical thought during this time, it never completely succeeded in supplanting the patterns of belief and rite that we have described earlier in this paper. Ancestor veneration, and attendant conceptions of the after-life, existed side by side with the theory of karma. In early Buddhist literature, however, the karmic theory of moral retribution became the basic cornerstone for developing lore portraying life after death.

Unlike the fate of the *pitaras* and their after-worldly existence, the notion of *preta* was not abandoned by the Buddhists. It was, however, dramatically transformed in significance. *Petas* (Pāli for Sanskrit *preta*) were no longer considered to be potentially dangerous beings existing in a liminal phase of transition between the statuses of human being and *pitṛ*. According to the *Vinaya* and the *Nikāyas*, the term *peta* could still refer to a recently deceased,[28] but it might also refer to a being who had been deceased for quite a long period of time.[29] The realm in which *petas* dwell, *petaloka*, occupied a fixed position in the cosmos; and, whenever the different strata of conditioned *saṃsāric* existence are mentioned, it is identified as a realm existing immediately below the realm of human beings, yet still above the animal realm and the tortuous hells.[30] While the *Nikāyas* and the *Vinaya* do not specifically elaborate upon the conditions of *petas*, they do assume that they suffer from gruesome and lurid afflictions which make them less than human. The *Vinaya* even refers to *petas* as a way of defining that which is not human.[31]

The fact that both *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunni Vinaya*s prescribe disciplined behavior in relation to *peta*s indicates that it was commonly believed that *peta*s could appear within the human realm.[32] Despite their gruesome condition, there is no evidence suggesting that *peta*s were regarded as a dreaded source of mischief. On the other hand, their status is referred to as "untimely" because they merely realize the fruit of action and cannot initiate works on their own accord.[33] The *Mahāvastu*, while not a Pāli source, holds them in the same regard. It contains a vivid account of how *peta*s as hungry ghosts, grieve over their powerless condition.[34]

Furthermore, the *peta* status did not amount to a destiny or transitional phase through which all recently deceased must pass. The *Anguttara Nikāya* states that only those who commit one of the "ten wrong ways of action" are destined for rebirth in *petaloka*.[35] The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* echoes the same generalization but states it positively: those who are virtuous in upholding the *pañcasīla*[36] (the five basic moral precepts) or "walk in faith"[37] will avoid *petaloka*. These passages consistently predicate existence as a *peta* upon the living of an irreligious life. There is, however, one reference in the *Anguttara Nikāya* which seems to preserve the Brāhmaṇical association of *preta*s with neglected familial obligations: those who live an immoral life by not honoring father and mother, such as recluses and brahmins, will be judged by Yama as "abusers" destined for *petaloka*, the animal realm, or *Niraya* hell.[38] Neglecting one's parents is considered pre-eminently "immoral". Thus, the Buddhist inclusion of this Brāhmaṇical motif is clothed within the context of an ethical injunction.

There are many passages in the *Nikāya*s expressing a low regard for ritual sacrifice, but only two that refer to *Brāhmaṇical* funeral practices and none that indicate a specifically Buddhist practice. The first reference to *Brāhmaṇical* practice occurs in the *Tevijja Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*[39] and scoffs at prayers to Indra, Soma, Varuṇa, Iṣana, Brahmā and Prajāpati to aid the deceased in becoming united with Brahman after death. Thus, this passage does not refer to the intentions of *śrāddha* and *sapiṇḍakārana*. But a second passage found in the *Saḷāyatana Book* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*[40] does. The son of a snake charmer and apparently a village headman asks the Buddha about the practices of brahmins who, when a man has died, "lift

him up and carry him out, call on him by name, and speed him heavenwards". The Buddha's reply is in the form of questions directed at the headman and signals the Buddhist orthodox doctrinal attitude toward the central function of *sapiṇḍikārana*. In short, the Buddha asks if murderers, liars, backbiters, etc. will attain heaven even if a multitude sing his praises and say: "May this man, when body breaks up, after death be reborn in the Happy Lot, in the Heaven World". The Buddha then compares such a practice to commanding a huge rock to float on water. Finally, he says that only those who abide by the basic moral precepts attain heaven. Ethical action has replaced ritual technique.

Briefly, Buddhist canonical literature antecedent to the *Petavatthu* reveals significant departures from prevailing Brāhmaṇical patterns of belief and rite. The most important change involves the dominating presence of the karmic theory of moral retribution in determining the nature of the after-life. The destiny of the deceased was not determined on the basis of ritual devices, nor by one's ancestral status. Rather, the nature of existence in after-life depended solely on the moral quality of human actions. While the status of *pitṛ* was abandoned, the status of *preta* was transformed. No longer considered as a liminal phase, it represented a suffering existence awaiting those who had acted immorally while among the living. Unlike the deceased ancestors of Brāhmaṇical tradition, these Buddhist dead are powerless. There is no reciprocal relationship between human and superhuman beings; and there is no textual evidence suggesting that the living perform any type of actions on behalf of the dead. This brings us to the significance of *Petavatthu* literature.

The Significance of Merit Transference in Petavatthu Literature

The *Petavatthu* (literally: "Stories of the Departed") is an anthology of short stories purportedly *Buddhavācana* ("sayings" ascribed to the Buddha). However, its content and style are decidedly at odds with the four principal *Nikāyas* and the *Vinaya*. As those texts bear the heavy stamp of scholastic formulation, *Petavatthu* literature belies a folkloristic origin. While it is impossible to reconstruct the reasons for its inclusion within the canon, it is not unreasonable to suppose that it was belatedly included because of

its widespread popular appeal among the laity. The *Mahāvaṃsa* claims that Mahiṇda, Asoka's missionary son to Śri Lankā, recited the text as one of his first ploys to convert the island masses to Buddhism.[41] Henry Gehman, who first translated the anthology into English in 1938, believes that the stories were utilized by monks in preaching sermons to the laity. Overemphasizing, and reducing the importance of the text to a "mercenary motivation", he suggests that the exclusive purpose of the stories was to raise material support for the monastic community.[42] By that, he implies that the sole intent behind the giving of canonical status to the text was to cajole the laity into actively and lavishly patronizing the monastic community. There is no doubt that this motif is central to the text and we shall explore its significance more fully in subsequent pages. But the full meaning of the stories cannot be completely comprehended if we confine our analysis to a materialistic interpretation based upon an analysis of the patron/client relationship.

These stories may have been delivered as sermons by monks, but they reflect basic religious assumptions intrinsic to the spiritual world view of the common folk. Consequently, fundamental Brāhmaṇical assumptions, abandoned or ignored in more scholastic texts, resurface in the *Petavatthu* clothed in new garb. Although veneration of the dead and grieving over their departure from life is firmly discouraged in at least six of the fifty-one tales,[43] the ancient Brāhmanical belief that the living in some way benefit the dead in their after-life existence persists. The new means by which this is accomplished is through the transfer of merit, a practice advocated in eighteen stories.[44]

The structure of the plot of the overwhelming majority of *Petavatthu* stories follows a fixed formula. A certain individual, almost always a lay person,[45] commits an immoral action out of selfishness, hatred, or delusion. When that individual dies, he or she is reborn in *petaloka*, suffering from a condition of woe physically mirroring the nature of the committed wrong.[46] The *peta* then appears to the living, sometimes to a surviving kinsman,[47] who recoils in disgust. The *peta* then proceeds to tell how his misconduct resulted in such a hideous condition of suffering. Either the story ends at this point, at it does in twenty-eight stories[48] with the lesson of karmic retribution vividly illustrated, or it continues. If con-

tinued, the *peta* makes a request: the living should offer a gift to the *bhikkhusaṅgha* and transfer the merit derived from that virtuous action to the suffering *peta*. Once the gift is made, the *peta* is greatly relieved of physical torment and very often transformed into the status of a *deva*.[49] The brief tale that follows is highly illustrative of the style and content of most of the stories. It contains the basic patterns of belief and practice which make *Petavatthu* literature distinctive and relevant to the purpose of this discussion.

THE STORY OF NANDĀ

While the Teacher was living at Jetavana, he told this story:

In a certain village not far from Sāvatthī there was a certain disciple believing and pious. His wife, Nandā by name, however, was unbelieving, irreligious, avaricious, quick-tempered, rough in her speech, and disrespectful and disobedient to her husband; she would rail like a drum and indulge in abuse. Dying and reborn as a petī, she sojourned near that same village. Then one day she appeared before the lay disciple Nandasena, as he was coming out of the village. When he saw her, he addressed her with this stanza:

1. "Dark and ugly appearance you are; your body is rough and you are horrible to behold. You are red-eyed; you have yellow teeth. I deem that you are not human".

The Petī:

2. "I am Nandā, Nandasena; formerly I was your wife. For having been abusive, I went hence to the peta-world".

Nandasena:

3. "Now what wicked deed was committed by body, speech, or mind? In consequence of what act have you gone from here to the peta-world"?

The Petī:

4. "I was wrathful and rough in speech, and I also showed no reverence to you. Therefore, for using abusive language, I went from here to the peta-world".

Nandasena:

5. "Come, I give you a cloak; put on this garment. When you have put it on, come, I will lead you home.

6. Clothes and food and drink you shall obtain, if you come home. You will behold your sons, and you shall see your daughter a villain''.

The Petī:

7. ''What is given by your hand into mine does not profit me. But as regards the monks, who are abounding in the moral precepts, free from passion, and learned,

8. Regale them with food and drink and transfer to me the benefit of the gift. Then I shall be happy, blest in the fulfilment of all desires''.

9. Then promising with the words, ''Very well'', he made abundant gifts: food, drink, solid food, clothes, dwelling, umbrellas, perfumes, wreathes, and various kinds of sandals. After he had refreshed with food and drink the monks who were abounding in the moral precepts, free from passion, and learned, he transferred to her the virtue of the gift.

10. Immediately thereafter, when credit for this was transferred to her, the result came to pass. Of the gift, this was the fruit: food, clothes, and drink.

11. Then pure, having clean clothes, wearing the finest Benares cloth, bedecked with various garments and ornaments, she approached her husband.

Nandasena:

12. ''O devī, you are of excellent appearance, you are illuminating all the regions like the morning star.

13. Because of what do you have such an appearance? On account of what is happiness your portion here, and why fall to your lot whatever pleasures are dear to the heart?

14. I ask you, devī, very powerful one, you who have become human, what good deed have you done? Why have you such radiant majesty, and why does your splendour illuminate all the regions''?

The petī:

15. ''I am Nandā, Nandasena; formerly I was your wife. For having committed an evil deed, I went from here to the peta-world. Through the gift given by you, I rejoice, being free from fear from any quarter.

16. May you live long, householder, with all your kinsmen; may you attain the abode free from sorrow and passion, the dwelling of those who have willpower.
17. Here living the religious life and giving gifts, householder, may you remove the stain of selfishness together with its roots and enter heaven blameless''.[50]

The central teaching of *Petavatthu* literature is the efficacy of karmic actions. Consistent with this bedrock assumption, Nandā suffers as a *petī* for her misguided human actions. The major doctrinal dilemma herein concerns the problem of how to integrate the theory of karma with what, at first sight, appears to be undoctrinal behavior, e.g., performing actions on behalf of the dead which promote their status in the after-life.[51] Maurice Winternitz referred to this practice as a serious blemish on the theory of karmic determinism.[52] In the following pages of analysis, we shall first identify Brāhmaṇical patterns present in this story, discuss the theoretical rationale for their inclusion (especially the practice of merit transfer), and determine the sociological implications for their accomodation. Finally, we shall conclude with some general remarks concerning how this Buddhist transformation of Brāhmaṇical patterns of belief and rite relating to the dead reflects an increasing valorization of the human condition.

Nandā's request that her husband perform actions on her behalf is sharply reminiscent of *śrāddha* and *sapiṇḍīkarana* ritual intentions. The status that her husband wins for her, *devī*, is much akin to the heavenly career of a *pitṛ*. Transfigured from the status of *petī*, she not only enjoys the satisfying worldly amenities of food and drink, but she also gains a new lustrous body. In addition, Nandā expresses her wish that her surviving family will be long-lived, a motif that we first identified as a concern of the *pitaras* (fathers) for the family. Thus, three fundamental patterns of Brāhmaṇical origin are present: the deceased is transformed from the status of *preta* to heavenly existence and given a new body, a potent and vicarious action on the deceased's behalf facilitates such a transfiguration, and concern for the continuation of family lineage is expressed. If our analysis ended at this juncture of the discussion, we might conclude that the *Petavatthu* simply offers old wine in new bottles. But this is not entirely the case.

The *Petavatthu* stories are saturated with illustrations of karmic retribution. It is, as we have indicated, the fundamental teaching of the anthology. The initial episodes of Nandā's story are but a series of images reflecting an orthodox doctrinal understanding of the karmic process at work. In the opening scene, Nandā's spiritual demeanor is compared to that of her believing and pious husband. It is clear that it is her disposition, the qualitative state of her mind as conditioned by the *āsavas* (*rāga*, *dosa*, and *moha*: passion, hatred, and delusion), which generate her abusive actions. And when she appears to Nandasena, he immediately asks: "Now, what wicked deed was committed by body, speech, or mind"? This three-fold formula is consistently used throughout the *Vinaya* and the *Nikāyas* to designate the means by which behavioral expressions mirror mental disposition.[53] In an often cited passage of the *Anguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha says: "O bhikkhus, it is volition that I call karma. Having willed, one acts through body, speech, and mind".[54] In the case of Nandā, it is clear that she either does not have the discipline to control the *āsavas* by means of mental discrimination (*viññāna*),[55] or if she does, she refuses to exercise her will to act right. The abstract principles expressed in this example constitute the Theravāda understanding of karma: a mentally unhealthy disposition causally produces immoral actions which in turn produce a perpetuation of suffering. In other words: psychological conditioning of the mind leads to behavioral expressions in the social context which have future cosmic soteriological consequences. One's future status in the after-life according to this perspective, is wholly determined by one's ability to will into action a morally wholesome demeanor. It is precisely this ethic, so heavily emphasized in the Pāli canon, that has led many Western observers to typologize Theravāda Buddhism as a religion of "self-effort", rather than as a "religion of grace".[56]

Now the question arises: how can the strict determinism of karmic retribution reconcile the merit transferring activities that Nandasena performs on behalf of his wife? Or on what theoretical bases can Buddhism legitimate its incorporation of this originally Brāhmaṇical pattern of belief?

A traditionally Buddhist explanation has been given by Malalasekera.[57] In explaining how *parivaṭṭa* (transferring merit) is

consistent with the Buddhist theory of karma, he focuses his discussion upon the mental dispositions of both the doer of the deed (in our example, Nandasena) and the beneficiary (Nandā). With reference to the doer, he says: "The act of sharing one's good fortune is a deed of compassion and friendliness and, as such, very praiseworthy and meritorious".[58] In other words, the act of giving (*dāna*), is ethically productive because it is rooted in a selfless disposition of compassion directed toward the assuaging of another's suffering. With reference to the beneficiary, he says: "the recipient of the transfer becomes a participant of the original deed by associating himself with it. Thus the identification of himself with both the deed and the doer can sometimes result in the beneficiary getting even greater merit than the original doer, either because his elation is greater or because his appreciation of the value of deed is more intellectual, and therefore more meritorious".[59] Re-emphasizing the importance of the mind's condition, he goes on to say that "what is significant is that in order to share in the good deed done by another, there must be approval of it and joy in the beneficiary's heart...Here, too, as in all actions, it is the thought which according to Buddhism, really matters".[60] Malalasekera's theoretical explanation thus renders the story of Nandā and her transformation doctrinally acceptable. According to this perspective, Nandā's transformation from *petī* to *devī* results from her husband's compassionate act of selfless giving and her own ability to intellectually appreciate, and therefore *rejoice* in the virtue of a meritorious deed.

This rationale for merit transfer, based upon the theory of karma, begs a comparison with the Brāhmaṇical rationale. First, it is clear that like their Brāhmaṇical counterparts, Buddhist *peta*s remain dependent upon the living to perform catalytic actions on their behalf. However the Buddhist transformation of *peta*s involves a transformation of mind, and not just body. The shining luminescence of the *devī* status is but a cosmological reflection of Nandā's newly found spiritually healthy mind. Second, as Knipe notes with reference to the Brāhmaṇical *sapiṇḍīkarana* transaction, the transformation of *preta*s to *pitara*s involved the liturgical application of an ancient cosmogonic model to an individual's postcremation passage. With such an "understanding of the passage of the

deceased as a cosmogonic progression,... an individual's salvation [was] dependent on the correct ritual activity of his descendants''.[61] In comparison, the Buddhist incorporation of this deep-seated Brāhmaṇical belief is justified on a psychological and ethical basis, rather than upon the magical efficacy of ritual actions.

It needs to be noted, however, that the psychological and (therefore) ethical explanation by Malalasekera is something of an *ad hoc* rationalization legitimating actions performed on behalf of the dead on karmalogical grounds. Gombrich has examined the issue thoroughly by focussing upon the changed meaning of the term *anumodana*, the word used by Malalasekera to connote ''rejoicing''.[62] On the basis of his philological study, he has determined that *anumodana* originally conveyed a meaning of thanksgiving, or gratitude, that existed between the doer of an action and its beneficiary.[63] Only when merit transfer required doctrinal justification did its meaning shift from ''gratitude'' to ''joy'' or ''empathy in joy''.[64] Gombrich suggests that this shift in meaning probably occurred around two thousand years ago,[65] or about the time of the *Petavatthu's* collation. Thus, the substance of Malalasekera's argument is by no means new. Indeed, the theoretical framework of the *Petavatthu* has implicitly incorporated it. Moreover, in almost all of the *Petavatthu* stories, the protagonists (those who have committed irreligious acts) hardly inspire a spirit of gratitude or thanksgiving amongst their surviving kin. Rather, the most obvious motivations for survivors to perform merit transfer on behalf of the dead are compassion and selfless giving, motivations which agree much more easily with the karmic theory of action.

Yet, as Gombrich further has pointed out, there is one passage in what could be one of the most ancient strands of *Petavatthu* literature that gives, as a rationale for merit transfer, the motive of gratitude or thanksgiving. The passage is also found in the *Tirokuḍḍa Sutta* of the *Khuddakapāṭha* and constitutes the Buddha's explanation to King Bimbisāra of the plight of the *peta*s. Here we find the stanza:

> He gave to me, he worked for me,
> He was my kin, my friend, my intimate,
> Give gifts, then, for the departed ones,
> Recalling what they used to do.[66]

In this passage, which on the whole constitutes a theoretical anomaly in the *Petavatthu*, we find the same motive for merit transfer amongst Buddhists as we did for *Śrāddha* amongst Brāhmaṇical counterparts. Just as Brāhmaṇical family survivors fulfilled their dharmic obligations out of gratitude for the deceased family member, so are Buddhists here enjoined to do the same. Gombrich's analysis has succeeded in identifying the cultural and social roots of Buddhist merit transfer in Brāhmaṇical tradition. The stories of the *Petavatthu*, therefore, for the most part, provide a new Buddhist theoretical basis for the continuation of this popular act of piety.

There remains, however, one other doctrinal consideration which Malalasekera and Gombrich have not examined in any great depth. This concerns the role of *bhikkhu*s in the merit transfer transaction within the context of the *Petavatthu's* karmalogical rationale. *Bhikkhu*s are considered the virtuous objects of such actions and their presence makes possible the fortunate consequences that result for the deceased. Within this karmalogical understanding, the qualitative condition of the object is just as important as the mental condition of the subject if the action is to bear genuinely auspicious fruit.[67] In this connection, we can understand the importance of the collective ritual life of the monastic community. It constitutes, primarily, an aggregate expression of the *bhikkhu*s' continuously "pure" moral status.[68] In other words, it legitimates *bhikkhu*s as being worthy objects of meritorious actions. It makes them an indispensable part of merit transfer; for *peta*s, because of their irreligious acts that result in lowly spiritual conditions, cannot fulfil this doctrinally needed function. That is why in our example of *Petavatthu* literature, virtuous *bhikkhu*s, rather than the *peti* Nandā, must be the object of Nandasena's action. Moreover, explicit recognition of the *bhikkhu*s' status is made when Nandā describes them as "abounding in moral precepts, free from passion, and learned". Nanda's three-fold description is but another way of identifying the religious life of the *bhikkhu*s with the three-fold basis of the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path: *sīla* ("abounding in moral precepts"), *samādhi* ("free from passion") and *paññā* ("learned"). What this again illustrates is the karmalogical rationale for merit transfer replacing Brāhmaṇical faith in ritual techniques. And

within the context of this rationale, the act of merit transfer constitutes a cultic celebration of that which symbolizes the Buddha's Dhamma: the presence of *bhikkhus*. Hence, the spiritual values intrinsic to the Buddha's Dhamma replace those cultically expressed within the *śrāddha* rites (filial piety as a dharmic obligation). Consequently, the *bhikkhusaṅgha* replaces the "extended" Brāhmaṇical family as the primary socio-religious unit of importance in conjunction with patterns of belief and rite related to the deceased.[69] This brings us to our final consideration.

Socio-religious Implications of the Petavatthu Rationale

Within the scope of the *Petavatthu's* teachings, *bhikkhus* not only replace the Brāhmaṇical family as the primary socio-religious unit, but they also replace the deceased as cultic objects of veneration. We have already noted that in early Buddhism, there existed no reciprocal relationship between the living and the dead. However, like the Brāhmaṇical priest of the *śrāddha* rites performed on the eleventh day of ritual observance, *bhikkhus* continue the tradition of symbolizing the presence of the dead as well.

As we noted in our brief scenario of the *śrāddha* transaction, the fashioning of *piṇḍas* (rice balls) plays a key role: they are a symbol of the newly created body for the deceased and also constitute food offerings to the dead in order to allay hunger and thirst.[70] The practice of giving alms in the Buddhist context (the virtuous action performed by Nandasena in our example) is known within Buddhist circles as *piṇḍapāta* ("the casting of pinda"). Thus, *piṇḍas* are the alms which literally provide sustenance for the *bhikkhus*. Like the libations of the ancient ritual sacrifice that sustained *pitaras*, and like the *piṇḍas* of *śrāddha*, this giving of alms represents one side of an important reciprocal relationship. But here, the reciprocal relationship is strictly between the living.

Motifs associating the dead with *bhikkhus* are not entirely lacking in Buddhist tradition. In addition to the practice of *piṇḍapāta*, *bhikkhus* are often referred to as those who have "gone forth" (*pabbajā*—the term signaling the rite of renouncing society and gaining a new rebirth within the sacred world of Buddhist monasticism). As many scholars have indicated, this renunciation theoretically renders the initiate as "dead to the world", separated from the

world of the laity.[71] And further, because *bhikkhu*s are living the paradigmatic existence laid down by the Tathāgata (the one who has "gone forth"—the Buddha), they symbolize the urge to overcome rebirth, to go beyond (*pāraṇgata*).[72]

If we can speak of a relationship between the living and the "dead" in early Buddhism, it is the reciprocal relationship existing between the laity and *bhikkhu*s. As *pitara*s were a source of power to be tapped by the Brāhmaṇical living, so are *bhikkhu*s in the Buddhist context. Throughout the *Petavatthu* and other early Buddhist literature, the Buddha and his followers (the *bhikkhusaṅgha*) are consistently identified as the most auspicious fields for the making of merit. Whenever actions are performed which take either Buddha or Saṅgha as their object, powerful karmic consequences, such as the transfiguration of *peta*s, result. Thus in return for *piṇḍapāta*, *bhikkhu*s become a source of transformative spiritual power for the laity.

Within the practice of *piṇḍapāta*, those sacrificial offerings formerly given to ancestors through Brāhmaṇical priests are now given to the *bhikkhusaṅgha*. The *Petavatthu* pedagocially supports this tradition but justifies it on the basis of the spiritual virtues associated with the path that *bhikkhu*s symbolize. That is, gifts given to the *bhikkhu*s have a different motivational basis than in the Brāhmaṇical context (they are not given because the *bhikkhu* is a priest who possesses special knowledge necessary to make ritual observance efficacious). It is impossible to assess whether or not the *Petavatthu* compilers included various stories within the collection on the basis of whether or not alms to *bhikkhu*s were advocated. Only twenty-four out of the 51 explicitly promote the practice.[73] However, wherever the idea of merit-transfer is inculcated, gifts to the *bhikkhu*s are required without exception. How do we evaluate this pattern? Is it the consequence of the need to make merit-transfer karmalogically consistent (*bhikkhu*s are needed as virtuous objects to make the action productive)? Or, as Gehman asserts, were the stories of *Petavatthu* canonized because they are aimed at exacting alms from the laity by means of threatening them with the possibility of becoming *peta*s? To agree completely with Gehman is to strip the text of any spiritual significance and to blandly ignore the nature of the transactions we have tried to describe. While there are, no doubt,

unscrupulous clerics present in all ages and places, we would do much better by seeing the practice of *piṇḍapāta* as maintaining two ancient Indian practices rooted in Brāhmaṇical tradition. The first is obvious: holy men in India have been supported from time immemorial through the giving of alms by the laity. The second is that, within the Buddhist context, the entity sustained by these practices is the *bhikkhusaṅgha*. That is, as the *śrāddha* rites and *sapiṇḍikarana* sustain the "extended" Brāhmaṇical family in this-world and the next, so does the analogous Buddhist practice sustain the *Saṅgha*, which constitutes the primary sociological unit within the Buddhist purview. Giving alms to *bhikkhus*, then, is at once the continuation of a general tradition and the consequence of substituting one socio-religious entity for another in a newly emerging religious communal structure. How calculated this substitution was, in fact remains a moot question. That it could be doctrinally legitimated is evident from our discussion.

Summarizing our argument, we may say that Buddhist transformations of Brāhmaṇical patterns of belief and rite pertaining to death and the after-life indicate an increasing importance attached to this-worldly activity. Life beyond death was determined by the quality of moral actions performed before death. Various cosmological realms were envisaged as reflecting the mental conditions of the living. The dead assumed their after-life status on the basis of their mental dispositions as humans rather than upon their status as ancestors. Further, the dead were stripped of their power to act efficaciously in the human realm and became totally dependent upon actions performed on their behalf by the living. Consequently, the relationship between the living and the dead ceased to be symbiotic and became unilateral. While assisting the dead in the after-life constitutes a continuation of Brāhmaṇical belief, the Buddhists fashioned their own theoretical justification based upon the ideas of karmic retribution. Here, merit transfer became a virtuous action because both doer and beneficiary could recognize and rejoice in the intrinsic goodness of the act. And rather than constituting an act of ancestor veneration, merit transfer, an action involving support for the *bhikkhusaṅgha*, constituted a cultic veneration of the Buddha's Dhamma, which was symbolized by the presence of virtuous *bhikkhus*. As such, the *Saṅgha* replaced the

ancestors and the Brāhmaṇical family as the primary social unit of importance in connection with actions performed on behalf of the dead. Each of these transformations reflect either an ethicization of this-worldly action or an increasing importance attached to the efficacy of human life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this discussion in no way exhausts the significance of merit transfer or ancestor worship in Indian religious traditions. In Buddhist tradition, the idea of merit transfer was largely expanded in the various Mahāyana schools. It became the means by which *bodhisattva*s such as Kṣitigarbha and Amitābha were thought to rescue suffering sentient beings from the rounds of *saṃsāric* rebirth. In the Burmese, Sinhalese and Thai Theravāda traditions, merit transfer continued to play a role in funeral rites and memorial services for the dead.

The patterns of relationship between the living and the dead which we have discussed in this paper also underwent further transformations within the burgeoning classical Hindu tradition. In the *Purāṇas*,[74] the meaning of the *śrāddha* rites was brought within the karmic framework of the *saṃsāra/mokṣa* (rebirth/release) soteriological formula. Undertaking pilgrimage to Gayā became a ritually meritorious action believed to assure the attainment of *mokṣa* for departed kin as well as for the pilgrim-participant.[75] Because the Buddha, understood within this context to be an incarnation of Viṣnu, and Bodh Gayā, understood to be an auspicious site of sacred power, figure heavily in this Hindu pilgrimage process, Buddhist patterns of belief and action were in turn modified and reincorporated within the ever-absorbing Hindu religious tradition. These developments await further study.

Furthermore, the Buddhist transformations with which we have been concerned must be seen as only a portion of a general process at work during the historical epoch when the *Petavatthu* was collated. While Buddhism may have originated as primarily a cloistered community of ascetic mendicants, by the time of the Emperor Aṣoka, it had become a religion of mass appeal: that is, it had begun to develop an appealing lay ethos of its own. Consequently, it appropriated, in addition to motifs associated with ancestor

veneration, such practices as *paritta* (reciting scriptural passages as a means of generating magical protection), offering prayers to the Buddha (in hopes of enlisting his powerful assistance), and reciting the Buddha's name (as another means of gaining protection). Like merit transfer, these practices can be strictly understood as "undoctrinal", for they have no canonical basis. It must be remembered, however, that the canon was always the basis for monastic religious life and as such is the product of the monastic mindset. Even the goal of heaven, which became the goal of the laity and the believed destiny of transformed *petas*, was never the advocated goal of the monastic path. It was regarded as only another state of transitory existence that must ultimately be transcended. However, its promulgation amongst the laity by the monastic community, as evidenced by the *Petavatthu* collection, suggests that the monastic community eventually recognized the need for a broader soteriological appeal if the religion were to be sustained practically. To that end, scholastics may have doctrinally legitimated such behavior as merit transfer in order to further the needs of the religion, both materially and spiritually. In so doing, they paradoxically, on the level of doctrine, encouraged the attainment of a conditioned *saṃsāric* existence (heaven) for an increasing number of their lay constituency. The Buddhist transformation of patterns of belief and rite associated with the dead, then, was but part of this popularizing process. At the same time, it gave sanction to a religiously deep-seated and culturally ancient impulse to assist the dead in the after-life and also emphasized the re-emerging importance of the heavenly goal, i.e. a goal readily attainable by the living of a morally wholesome life. As such, it revalorized the importance of actions performed in the human realm, thus reasserting the soteriological significance of this-worldly existence.

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[1] *The Hymns of the Ṛg Veda*, 2nd ed., trans. Ralph T. H. Griffith, 2 vols. (Benares: E. J. Lazarus, 1897), 2:514.

[2] *Ṛg Veda* 2:381-2. Here, the realm of the fathers is referred to as "deathless", and the sacrificer asks to be made immortal.

[3] *Atharva-Veda Saṁhitā*, ed. Charles R. Lanman, trans. William D. Whitney, 2 vols., Harvard Oriental Series, Vols. VII-VIII (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1905), 1:206.

[4] *Ṛg Veda* 2:399; X. 14, 7-8. David Knipe notes in his "*Sapiṇḍīkarana*: The Hindu Rite of Entry into Heaven", in Frank E. Reynolds and Earl H. Waugh, eds., *Religious Encounters with Death: Insights from the History and Anthropology of Religion* (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977): 113, that "sometimes it is Agni who is requested to supervise this union of the departed's new life with a new body. (10.16.5; 10.15.14)".

[5] See, for instance, *The Collection of Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima Nikāya)*, trans. I. B. Horner, 3 vols., (London: Luzac and Company, 1959) 3:226.

[6] A. B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and the Upanishads*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925; reprinted., Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1977) 2:408-9, says that the idea of judgement by Yama is found only later in the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka.*

[7] That is, the *devas*, chief occupants of the heavens, beam their shining rays upon them.

[8] Keith, *Religion of the Veda*; 2:407.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*, 2:405.

[11] For ritual life in the cult of the dead in Vedic literature, see Keith, *ibid.*, 2:425-32.

[12] *Ibid.*, 2:425-6.

[13] For an elaboration and pertinent textual citations, see Knipe, "*Sapiṇḍīkarna*", p. 113; see also S. G. F. Brandon, *The Judgement of the Dead: The Idea of Life After Death in the Major Religions* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), pp. 168-71, and Frederick H. Holck, *Death and Eastern Thought: Understanding Death in Eastern Religions and Philosophies* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), pp. 41-48.

[14] Knipe *Sapiṇḍīkarana*, pp. 117-20, notes that the three-fold heavenly hierarchy, according to *Śatapaṭha Brāhmaṇa* 2.6.1. 1-3, was ranked in correspondence to the types of substances that ancestors offered as sacrificial offerings to the *devas* while among the living, and that this division of the fathers' world is prefigured in *Ṛg Veda* 10.15.1. Griffith, *Ṛg Veda* 2:400, n. 1., mistakenly attributes the hierarchy to "merit".

[15] In addition to Knipe's *Sapiṇḍīkarana*, see Mrs. Sinclair Stevenson, *The Rites of the Twice-Born* (London: Oxford University Press, 1920 reprint ed. New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1971), pp. 156-92.

[16] *Atharva-Veda* 1:206 (4.34.4.)

[17] See Knipe for further details, *Sapiṇḍīkarana*, pp. 115-16.

[18] Knipe notes that the number eleven indicates the identification of the *mahāpātra* priests, who symbolize the *preta* and his ancestors, with the eleven Rudras, symbols of the second of three classes of *pitaras*. See Knipe, *Sapiṇḍīkarana*, p. 117.

[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 117-22.

[20] Indeed, the entire period following death until *sapiṇḍīkarana* is one of extreme pollution. This could be the reason why the period during which *śrāddha* was observed was condensed from one year to twelve days (*ibid.*, pp. 116-17). The liminal status of the *preta* during this time recalls Mary Douglas's thesis that liminality connotes danger because an entity is between classification thereby defying ritual techniques to maintain order. See Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966). It also helps to explain why the *mahāpātras*, who symbolize

the *preta* and his ancestors, are held in such low social esteem, by virtue of their association with death.

[21] E. Washburn Hopkins, *Epic Mythology* (Strassburg: Verlag Von Karl F. Trübner, 1915; reprint ed., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974), pp. 29-31. Hopkins notes that in the epics, the *pitaras* are worshipped not only by men, but by the *devas*. By now, *pretas* are being described as ghastly and tortured beings. Their association with pollution is also clear: until they are transformed into *pitaras*, they are treated "like outcastes". Unlike *pitaras* who are consistently identified with specific ancestors, *pretas*, again perhaps because of their liminality, are rarely identified with deceased individuals. When they appear in epic literature, it is usually as a host of troops in battle.

[22] Keith, *Religion of the Veda*, 2:412-13, argues that the term *preta* is unknown in *Ṛg Veda* literature proper and its insertion as a liminal phase contradicts the *Ṛg Veda* understanding that the deceased immediately joins the *pitaras*. But Monier-Williams notes that *preta* is derived from *prē* (the prefix "pra" meaning "forth" and the root √i meaning "to go") and is found in its intensive form *preyate* in a hymn to the Goddess of Dawn, Uṣas, who makes the dark "depart" (*Ṛg Veda* 7.77.). It is then used in the *Brāhmaṇas, Upaniṣads* and the *Laws of Manu* as "to die". The actual term *preta* seems to have been first used, according to Monier-Williams, in the *Śatapaṭha Brāhmana* before its widespread employment in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Gṛhya Sūtras*, see Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *preta*, p. 711. C. A. F. Rhys Davids erroneously speculated that the term *preta* was a corruption of *pitṛ*, *Indian Religion and its Survival* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1935), p. 35.

[23] Barua's argument is somewhat strained. It is based upon the appearance of the term *aṣṭakā* (denoting memorial services for the dead held three or four times a year) in both the *Vinaya Mahāvagga* and the *Udāna* (references that I checked and was unable to locate and confirm). Barua claims that Buddhagoṣa and Dharmapala both misunderstood the technical sense of the term, and thus did not comprehend its meaning as referring to a ceremony in which oblations were offered to the dead. He says that Pāli references to *aṣṭakā* when correctly understood, are "historically important as proving beyond doubt that even during the life-time of the Buddha the annual bathing in the holy waters of Gayā tank and river was connected with the special funeral ceremonies called *aṣṭakās*, the last round of which comprised the eight days between Māgha and Phalguna. In other words, Gayā was, even at that early period of existence, a holy region for the performance of funeral obsequies and the offering of *piṇḍas*". Benimadhab Barua, *Gayā and Buddha Gayā*, 2 vols. (Varanasi: Bhartiya Publishing House, 1932), 1:244.

[24] Knipe, *Sapiṇḍīkarana*, pp. 121-22.

[25] Keith, *Religion of the Veda*, 2:414-15, speculates that the origins of *pretas*, and hence Buddhist Pāli *petas*, may be due to a transmutation of tree and water spirits. This guess is not entirely without justification; for in the *Petavatthu*, sometimes *petas* are addressed as *yakkhas*; further, in modern *Śri Lankā*, *petas* are frequently and confusingly associated with the same. See Richard Gombrich, *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 160-7.

[26] See for instance, *The Book of Discipline* (*Vinayapiṭaka*), ed. and trans. I. B. Horner, 5 vols., (London: Luzac and Company for the Pāli Text Society, 1938), 1:2.

[27] See the "Sigālovāda Suttānta", *Dialogues of the Buddha (Dīgha Nikaya)*, eds. and trans., T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, 3 vols. (London: Pāli Text Society, 1921), 3:180-81.

[28] Horner, "Introduction", *Vinayapiṭaka*, 1:lvii-iii.

[29] Louis de la Vallée Poussin puts their life span at 500 years, a day being equal to a human month. He bases this upon *Katthavatthu* 20.3, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. "peta", Vol. IV, p. 134.

[30] Above the human realm is *devaloka*, the highest of the five realms in conditioned existence. And above conditioned existence are *rupaloka* (the realms of form) and *arupaloka* (the realm beyond or without form). The five tiers of *kāmaloka* (conditioned existence) are referred to in *Majjhima Nikāya* 1:98 and 289, and in *The Book of Gradual Sayings (Anguttara Nikāya)*, ed. and trans. E. M. Hare, 5 vols. (London: Luzac and Company for the Pāli Text Society, 1936), 5:266 and 377.

[31] *Vinayapiṭaka* 1:202, 315, 332, 337; 2:201, 206, 360; 3:174, 196, 360, 364.

[32] A *dukkaṭa* (wrong doing) offense occurs when one merely touches a *peta* (*Vinayapiṭaka* 1:41 and 3:16) or walks with a *peta, Vinayapiṭaka* 3:20). Incongruously, monks are forbidden to have sexual intercourse with *petas (Vinayapiṭaka* 1:57), play pranks on them (*Vinayapiṭaka* 1:132), or steal from them (*Vinayapiṭaka* 1:97).

[33] *Anguttara Nikāya* 4:152.

[34] *The Mahāvastu*, trans. J. J. Jones, 3 vols. (London: The Pāli Text Society, 1949) 1:22-24.

[35] *Anguttara Nikāya* 4:169.

[36] *The Book of Kindred Sayings (Saṃyutta Nikāya)*, ed. and trans. F. L. Woodward, 5 vols., (London: The Pāli Text Society, 1922), 2:46. *Pañcasīla* refers to abstaining from killing, lying, stealing, sexual impropriety, and the taking of intoxicants.

[37] *Ibid.*, 179.

[38] *Anguttara Nikāya* 1:121-25. Here, an "abuser" is questioned by Yama as to whether he is aware of the story of the "four signs" in which the Buddha identified continuing sickness, old age and death as the consequences of life lived without morality observed.

[39] *Dīgha Nikāya* 1:309-10; the entire *sutta* is a critical Buddhist lampoon directed at various Brāhmaṇical practices including the performance of rites and the study of the three *Vedas*.

[40] *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 4:218-220.

[41] *The Mahāvaṃsa*, trans. Wilhelm Geiger (London: Luzac and Company for the Pāli Text Society, 1912), pp. 95-96.

[42] Henry Gehman, "Introduction", *The Petavatthu*, in *Minor Anthologies of the Pāli Canon*, ed. I. B. Horner, Part IV (London: The Pāli Text Society, 1942), p. xi.

[43] *Petavatthu*, pp. 6-7, 7-11, 14-16, 23-26, 38, and 38-41.

[44] *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7, 7-11, 11-13, 16-18, 19-21, 27-29, 29-32, 32-35, 36-37, 41-43, 44-45, 54-56, 69-72, 77-78, 93-97, 98-99, 99-100, and 105-107.

[45] In all but two stories (*ibid.*, pp. 3-4 and 4-5) where the protagonist is a *bhikkhu*.

[46] For example, a laywoman in one story (*ibid.*, 11-13) conspires against another woman to make sure that she does not bear children. She is reborn in *petaloka* where every morning she gives birth to five children and every evening must devour them. In another story (pp. 4-5), a man consistently slandering others is reborn in *petaloka* with a mouth full of worms. In yet another (pp. 29-32), a woman (Sariputta's mother), reviled *bhikkhus* saying, "Eat dung, drink urine, drink blood, eat the brain of your mother". The story continues: "Taken up at death by the power of *karma*, she was reborn as a peti who endured misery in conformity with her misbehavior". A lurid description follows.

[47] The pattern here is that if the story is to include merit transfer, the *peta* almost always appears to surviving kin. If merit transfer is not included in the story, the *peta* usually appears to a *bhikkhu* who then purportedly tells the Buddha of his encounter with the *peta*.

[48] All stories excepting those indicated in note 44 above, and five others (*ibid.*, pp. 7-11, 14-16, 23-26, 38-41, and 63-66), some of which are also found in the *Jātaka*s and in the *Vimānavatthu*).

[49] In Pāli literature, the *deva*s are greatly reduced in importance in comparison to their Brāhmaṇical role. They must be reborn as human beings if they are to enter upon the *bhikkhu* path to *nibbāna*. The *deva* status is, therefore, not a final goal to be attained, but only the favorable result of virtuous deeds performed while living the lay religious life as a human.

[50] *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

[51] As we noted, the deceased as *peta*s are in special need because of their suffering and powerless plight. There is no indication in Pāli literature of surviving kinsmen transferring merit to those assumed to have attained heavenly status. Further, those reborn in hell or the animal abode seem to be beyond help.

[52] Maurice Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, 2 vols., (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1927; reprint ed., New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1977), 2:98-99.

[53] In the *Petavatthu*, it surfaces no less than sixteen times (pp. 11-13, 13-14, 27-29, 32-35, 36-37, 41-43, 54-56, 58-63, 77-78, 79-80, 80-81, 81-83, 101-102, 103, 103-104, and 109-110).

[54] *Anguttara Nikāya* 3:294.

[55] For a discussion of the philosophical and soteriological importance attached to *viññāṇa*, see Donald Swearer, "Two types of saving knowledge in the Pāli suttas", *Philosophy East and West*, 22 (October, 1972): 355-71.

[56] See for instance, Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religion*, ed. and trans. with an Introduction by Joseph M. Kitagawa (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 93-96, and S. G. F. Brandon, *Man and His Destiny in the Great Religions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962).

[57] G. P. Malalasekera, " 'Transference of Merit' in Ceylonese Buddhism", *Philosophy East and West*, 17 (January, 1967): 85-90.

[58] *Ibid.*, p. 86.

[59] *Ibid.*

[60] *Ibid.*

[61] Knipe, *Sapiṇḍikārana*, p. 121.

[62] Malalasekera, "Transference of Merit", pp. 85-86.

[63] Cited in Richard Gombrich's " 'Merit Transference' in Sinhalese Buddhism: A Case Study of the Interaction Between Doctrine and Behavior", *History of Religions*, 11 (November, 1971: 206-207. This article corresponds almost verbatim to pp. 227-41 of *Precept and Practice.*

[64] *Ibid.*

[65] Winternitz assigns the *Petavatthu* correctly to the latest strata of literature assembled in the canon, Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, 2:99. He notes that even Dharmapala, in his commentary, believed that there was a substantial interval between the text and the life of the Buddha, despite the fact that all but eleven of the stories begin with the stock phrase, "When the teacher was dwelling at....., he told this story". In any case, the patterns with which we are dealing are, according to Gombrich, at least 2000 years old. Gombrich, "Merit Transference", p. 218.

[66] "The Story of the Petas Outside the Walls", *Petavatthu*, p. 11.

[67] For a detailed analysis, see V. P. Varma, "The Origins and Sociology of the Early Buddhist Philosophy of Moral Determinism", *Philosophy East and West* 13 (April, 1963): 25-48.

[68] In this connection, it is important to note that *pāṭimokkha* and *pavāraṇā* rituals, which express the collectively pure status of the *Saṅgha* in relation to the Vinaya rules, are held immediately before merit-making activities of the laity such as *uposatha* and *kaṭhina*. See my "Ritual Expression in the *Vinayapiṭaka*: A Prolegomenon", *History of Religions* 18 (August, 1978): 42-53.

[69] In the soteriological sense, the *Saṅgha* might be regarded as the new "extended" family. I owe this suggestive insight to Professor John Strong, private communication.

[70] Knipe, *Sapiṇḍīkarana*, p. 115.

[71] S. J. Tambhiah, for instance, in his *Buddhism and Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 65, writes "Buddhism is dramatically anti-brahmanical in enjoining contemplation of and contact with death as a major preoccupation of the monk. The accent is on visiting graveyards, confrontation with death and corpses, meditation on death to understand the transitoriness of life. The wearing of the *pamsakulina* rags gathered from graveyards is an extreme gesture of this absorption with death".

[72] I. B. Horner, *Early Buddhist Theory of Man Perfected* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1936), pp. 282-312.

[73] *Petavatthu*, pp. 1-3, 6-7, 7-11, 11-13, 16-18, 19-21, 27-29, 29-32, 32-35, 36-37, 41-43, 44-45, 54-56, 69-72, 75-76, 77-78, 84-93, 93, 93-97, 97, 98-99, 99-100, 105-107, 107 (the last two stories praising the virtue of giving gifts in general).

[74] Cornelia Dimmitt and J. A. B. van Buitenen, Introduction to *Classical Indian Mythology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), pp. 10 and 248-49.

[75] For detailed studies of this pilgrimage rite, see Barua, *Gayā and Buddha Gayā*, and L. P. Vidyarthi, *The Sacred Complex in Hindu Gayā*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1978), especially pp. 30-49 and 114-50.