

Richard Gombrich

“MERIT
TRANSFERENCE” IN
SINHALESE
BUDDHISM: A CASE
STUDY OF THE
INTERACTION
BETWEEN
DOCTRINE AND
PRACTICE

In the history of religions, it is a commonplace that practices survive the advent of new ideologies and are then reinterpreted. Ancient Roman authors were already aware that in their culture new names had been given to old cults; and, in the seventeenth century, it was the program of the Jesuits to give Christian meanings to the religious practices of India and China. Because part of the very *raison d'être* of a ritual is its repetition, its “timelessness,” ritual systems seem endowed with a life of their own, a capacity for survival independent of the meaning they are given. Christmas trees and Easter eggs have survived the transition from paganism to Christianity and, in many cases, from Christianity to secularism. But, for the great oriental religions, comparatively few such transitions have been documented, since their study lags far behind that of Christianity.

The moral responsibility of the individual is a basic feature of early Buddhist doctrine, the teaching of the Pali Canon (and other

versions of the canon in as far as they are known to us). It is the Buddha's solution to the problem of evil: one's suffering is due to one's former sin, in this or a previous life, just as one's well-being is due to one's former goodness. This is the Buddhist doctrine of karma (“action”); the term denotes both the original moral act and its power for subsequent reward or punishment. Moreover, the morality of an action depends solely on the intention behind it: intention (*cetanā*) is karma.¹ On the other hand, it is widely known that Buddhists developed what seems prima facie to run clean counter to the doctrine of karma, the idea and practice of transferring merit (good karma), so that one's good actions build up a kind of spiritual bank account from which one can make payments to others. (Incidentally, this is why the goodness of good acts has been reified into “merit.”) Thus, apparently, a sinner may reap where another man has sown, and perhaps even obviate the maturation of the seeds of evil he sowed himself. In the history of Buddhism, this “transference of merit” is often associated with the belief in bodhisattvas, who do good not only for their own spiritual advance toward nirvana but also to alleviate the sufferings of others. However in the Theravāda Buddhism of Ceylon, with which this article is primarily concerned, the “transference of merit” is fully developed, but the bodhisattva is of only minor importance.

My thesis is that the later, observable position logically can be, and in fact is, so interpreted (rationalized) as to conform to the former, canonical doctrine; and that this situation has evolved through the reinterpretation of ritual, a reinterpretation which can be traced through ancient texts and which is betrayed by shifts in the meaning of certain religious technical terms.

Since an article has recently been devoted to precisely this subject matter,² let me not attempt to do again what has already been well done, but use Dr. Malalasekere's article as far as it can take us and see where it leaves the problem. He thus describes the doctrine of “transference of merit” in Ceylonese Buddhism. “The doer of the good deed has merely to wish that the merit he had thereby gained should accrue to someone in particular, if he so wishes, or to ‘all beings’” (p. 85). “The fact of ‘transference’ does not in the slightest degree mean that the ‘transferer’ is deprived of the merit he had originally acquired by his good deed. On the

¹ *Anguttara Nikāya* III, 415.

² G. P. Malalasekere, “‘Transference of Merit’ in Ceylonese Buddhism,” *Philosophy East and West* 17, nos. 1-4 (January-October 1967): 85-90.

contrary, the very act of ‘transference’ is a gift, and therefore, enhances the merit already earned. We may add that the classical simile for this act of transference is the lighting of one lamp from another.

A doctrinally associated way of earning merit is the *pattanumodanā*, “which means ‘rejoicing in the merit of others.’” Here, the recipient of the transfer becomes the doer of the original deed by associating himself with the donor.

Malalasekere raises the question (p. 89) “... is a teaching of ‘primitive’ Buddhism,” which has always been a part of Buddhist doctrine. He supports the affirmative. Yet, to support this affirmative statement he offers two pieces of evidence: the *Milindapañha*, which is generally attributed to the first century B.C., and the ordination ceremony (*upasampadā*), at which the ordinand offers his merit to his teacher and receives it in return. This statement by the ordinand concludes the ordination ceremony (*pabbajjā*) which is the *upasampadā* proper begins, not in the *upasampadā* but in the rest of the text of these ceremonies is to be found in the *Mahāvagga*, part of the canonical Vinaya. Statements about transferring merit are not found in the Vinaya, are, in fact, appended to all Sinhalese Buddhist ordination ceremonies, denying the formula's “great antiquity” (p. 89). If the below is accepted, we may reach the unsurprising conclusion that the ordination ceremony contains at least one element after the time (whenever that was) when the ceremony was standardized in roughly its present form. Malalasekere's pieces of evidence are late, not “primitive.”

Malalasekere not only reminds us that in the Theravāda the function of ethical intention alone, but also that the doctrine has been carried so far as to hold that the good deed of another may be more meritorious than the deed oneself. For example, a Sinhalese Buddhist who spent 5,000 rupees on a public religious ceremony on his fiftieth birthday told me that a villager who had done the merit he was earning might thereby earn more merit than he did himself, without spending a cent. This is a clear reference to the New Testament story of the widow's mite. If we accept an ethic of intention, the doctrine

³ J. F. Dickson, *Ordination in Theravāda Buddhism* (London: Wheel Publication, no. 56 (Kandy, 1963), pp. 12, 14.

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indeed, many moralists might find it startling. Moreover, I do not think that it was part of the original Buddhist doctrine.

Malalasekera has cited (p. 86) as “the classic example of the transference of merit” the ritual by which it is transferred to dead relatives; and he further implies (top of p. 88) that this is where the doctrine originated. I agree with his implication. Unfortunately, in his presentation of the ritual and its aetiological myth, he has conflated canonical and commentarial texts, giving no references, to build up a single synchronic picture. I submit that, if we re-cover this ground with more discrimination, we shall see that the doctrine of merit transference has a detectable history.

To understand that history we must keep in mind the distinction between what people say and believe (conscious lies apart), which I call the cognitive level; how they act, which I call the behavioral level; and what their actions suggest to an outside observer that they believe, which I call the affective level. (Affective beliefs need not be consciously held or explicitly formulated.) I hope to show that the doctrine has developed through an interaction of these levels—behavior has affected doctrine and vice versa—and that its present status illustrates the disparity between cognitive and affective beliefs.

The Pali terms *patti* (proffering merit to others) and *pattānumodanā* (empathizing in another’s merit) are not found in these technical meanings in what we might call the oldest organized stratum of the Pali Canon—the four *Nikāyas* and the *Vinaya Piṭaka*. The cognate verb *anumodati* is used in these early texts with two closely related meanings: “to agree with,” and “to receive with gratitude,” that is, “to thank.” In the first meaning, Sāriputta says of a doctrinal debate: *na me koci bhikkhu anumodati*: “no monk agrees with me.”⁴ Parallel to the second meaning is the noun *anumodana*,⁵ “gratitude” or “thanks.” This word, from the beginning, is mainly used as a technical term for the thanks uttered by a monk on being given alms. This usage has been preserved unchanged until today in the Sinhalese *anumōdan*. The passage in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*⁶ in which the Buddha prescribes the utterance of the *anumodana* and says that it should be said by the eldest monk present does not specify the content of what is said; although the Buddha doubtless composed his thanks

⁴ *Anguttara Nikāya* III. 194.

⁵ Rarer forms parallel to *anumodana* (neuter) are *anumodanā* (feminine) and *anumodanīya* (neuter).

⁶ *Vinaya Piṭaka* (ed. Oldenberg) II. 212.

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variously to suit the occasion, one may add some benedictory formula to the effect “May it be filled,” as is said today.

After any act of merit, typically a *dāna* doer of the merit transfers it to the gods, either by reciting a Pali verse or by giving assent (“Sāriputta” recited by a monk :

*Ākāsaṭṭhā ca bhūmatṭhā devā nāgā mahiddā
Puññaṃ taṃ anumoditvā ciraṃ rakkhantu s
May sky-dwelling and earth-dwelling gods,
natural serpents) of great power, having reje
long protect the Teaching.*

The verse may be repeated with “me” Teaching.”

This transfer of merit to the gods is canonized in the *nibbāna Sutta*, the Buddha receives a meal from the gods. “The Blessed One thanked (*anumodi*) the gods. Wherever a wise man dwells he should feed the gods. Wherever strained ascetics there, and dedicate the gift to the gods. Whatever deities are there; when worshipped they honour him.”⁷

The text does not use the term *patti*, although the word expressed is the same; *patti*, however, is the term used in the *Tāsaṃ dakkhiṇaṃ ādisa ti saṅghassa dinne* (the gift’ means that when the Sangha have requisites one should dedicate, give the requisites to the deities.” And the commentator significantly says: “where worshipped they worship’: they think, ‘The gods are our relatives, and even so they give us merit.’”

The commentator is, of course, much later than the text. I think he is right about the implied origin of the ritual. We come, here, to a complex of ideas centered on the feasts for dead relatives which are common to many religions. Prima facie they are perhaps an unexpected feature of a religion which preaches constant rebirth, but they come from its Indian Hindu background and are not a birth doctrine was new. Professor von Fürer-Havenstein-Kabaler, how Chetris, a high Hindu caste in Nepal, ca

⁷ *Dīgha Nikāya* II. 88 (sutta XVI. 1. 31).

⁸ *Sumangala-vilāsini* II. 542.

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filled," as is said today.

After any act of merit, typically a *dānē* (feeding monks), the
doer of the merit transfers it to the gods, either by reciting the fol-
lowing Pali verse or by giving assent ("*Sādhu sādhu*") when it is
recited by a monk:

Ākāsaṭṭhā ca bhummaṭṭhā devā nāgā mahiddhikā
Puññaṃ taṃ anumoditvā ciraṃ rakkhantu sāsaṇaṃ.
May sky-dwelling and earth-dwelling gods, [and] *nāgas* (super-
natural serpents) of great power, having rejoiced at the merit,
long protect the Teaching.

The verse may be repeated with "me" substituted for "the
Teaching."

This transfer of merit to the gods is canonical. In the *Mahāpari-*
niḥbāna Sutta, the Buddha receives a meal from two ministers.
"The Blessed One thanked (*anumodi*) them with these verses:
Wherever a wise man dwells he should feed the virtuous and re-
strained ascetics there, and dedicate the gift (*dakkhiṇaṃ ādise*) to
whatever deities are there; when worshipped they worship, when
honoured they honour him."⁷

The text does not use the term *patti*, although the meaning ex-
pressed is the same; *patti*, however, is the commentator's gloss:⁸
Tāsaṃ dakkhiṇaṃ ādise ti sanghassa dinne cattāro paccaye tāsaṃ
gharadevatānaṃ apadiseyya pattiṃ dadeyya. " 'He should dedicate
the gift' means that when the Sangha have been given the four
requisites one should dedicate, give the merit to those house-
deities." And the commentator significantly continues: " 'When
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We come, here, to a complex of ideas centering on those funeral
feasts for dead relatives which are common to so many cultures.
Prima facie they are perhaps an unexpected phenomenon in a
religion which preaches constant rebirth, but Buddhism inherited
them from its Indian Hindu background at a time when the re-
birth doctrine was new. Professor von Fürer-Haimendorf describes
how Chetris, a high Hindu caste in Nepal, can gain merit by having

⁷ *Dīgha Nikāya* II. 88 (sutta XVI. 1. 31).

⁸ *Sumangala-vilāsinī* II. 542.

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brahmins recite sacred texts for a week (*saptāha*): “If performed as a memorial rite the *saptāha* involves the gift of an entire set of household goods to the senior brahmin priest, and it is popular belief that as a result of this donation corresponding objects of personal use will be available to the departed for his life in the next world. The fact that such an idea is inconsistent with the belief in the immediate reincarnation of every human being in a shape conditioned by his earlier deeds does not seem to disturb the Chetris, who like other Hindus see nothing incongruous in the holding of apparently inconsistent views.”⁹ Buddhists, preserving a similar rite, are more concerned with doctrinal consistency.

One of the classes of living creatures (below gods, animals, and men but above demons) in the Buddhist universe is the *preta* (Pali, *petā*), a kind of hideous ghost usually suffering from hunger and other discomforts. The word literally means “gone forth,” that is, dead; but the choice of term has been determined by a linguistic coincidence in Pali which links *pretas* with Sanskrit *pitaras*—literally, “fathers”—the ancestors of the Hindu and the recipient of his funerary libations. The Buddhist *preta*, then, although in theory the reincarnation of anyone’s relation, is in practice one’s own dead relation, typically a dead parent.

The transfer of merit at the *dānē* for the dead (*mataka dānē*) must now be recapitulated. Such *dānēs* are given at certain fixed intervals of time after the death of a relative; their number and size depend mainly on the wealth and social status of the family, but the one after seven days is obligatory—it might be called the *mataka dānē* par excellence. It is preceded by the recitation of sacred texts, and at the end of their meal the monks are usually given “requisites” (towels, pillowcases, etc.), analogously with Chetri custom. Sometimes a little of the meal—for example, a handful of rice—is thrown outside the house; this is variously said to be for the *pretas* or for the crows. The crucial ritual takes place after the monks have been given everything: the head of the bereaved household slowly pours water into some small vessel until it overflows, while the monks intone in unison:

Yathā vārivahā pūrā paripūrenti sāgaram
*Evam eva ito dīnnaṃ petānaṃ upakappati.*¹⁰
As the full water-bearing [rivers] fill the ocean, so indeed
does what is given here benefit the dead (*preta*).
Uṇṇame udakaṃ vattam yathā ninnam pavattati
*Evam eva ito dīnnaṃ petānaṃ upakappati.*¹⁰

⁹ C. von Fürer-Haimendorf, *Morals and Merit* (London, 1967), p. 168.

¹⁰ An alternative version has it as a wish: *upakappatu*, “may it benefit.”

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has it as a wish: *upakappatu*, "may it benefit."

As water rained on a height reaches the low land, so indeed does what is given here benefit the dead (*preta*).

The proceedings conclude with a short sermon on transience (*anityatā*) to console the mourners. At the end, instead of the general formula transferring merit to the gods given above, the householder (perhaps prompted by a monk) says:

*Idaṃ me*¹¹ *ñātīnaṃ hotu. Sukhitā hontu ñātayo.*

May this be for my relatives. May my relatives be happy.

While the pouring of water in Sinhalese ritual frequently signalizes a solemn act (e.g., marriage), here it seems more relevant to recall the libations poured to the Manes in other, older cultures. Here it has been reinterpreted as the verses explain. The reinterpretation of this symbolic gesture is a minor example of the type of reinterpretation which has operated on the ritual as a whole.

A Sinhalese village monk explained the proceedings to me thus. The death is primarily an occasion for doing merit (*pīna*) oneself; secondarily, for offering it in case the dead man is expecting it. He can however only rejoice and benefit from the merit if reborn as a *preta*, because if he is higher than that he does not need the merit; if he is lower, in hell (*apāya*), he cannot get it. [There is in fact a further refinement: only the top class of *preta*, "those who live on merit given by others" (*paradattopajivin*) are able to sympathize with the merit of others.¹²] But this does not mean, he said, that the relatives giving the *dānē* assume that the dead man is now a *preta*, for if we pay a call we take the food along as a gift, but if the person is out we eat it ourselves; similarly, the *pīnkama* earns merit for the living, whatever the fate of the dead. The origin of the custom of offering it to the dead is this, he said. Once King Bimbisāra gave the Buddha a *dānē*, and his ancestors, who were *pretas*, came to see it. He offered them no *pīn*; so they were sorely disappointed. In the night there was a great noise round his palace, so next morning he went to the Buddha and asked if this boded ill for himself or his kingdom. The Buddha said not so, but explained what had happened. So, to remedy his oversight, Bimbisāra gave him a *dānē* that day too and offered the *pīn* to the *pretas*.

The above statement contains small but telling points of

¹¹ Thus a Sinhalese manual in my possession. The Pali Text Society edition of the *Petavatthu* has *vo* "your" (plural) for *me* "my," but the general meaning is unaffected since *vo* agrees with *ñātīnaṃ*.

¹² Thus, e.g., *Milindapañha*, p. 294. The monk's explanation in the next four lines also occurs on the same page.

doctrinal inconsistency: it is not clear why *pretas* who have already come to the *dānē* (as in the story of Bimbisāra) should be unable to rejoice at the merit unless it is specifically offered; nor why gods, who in other contexts are always offered merit, are in this context said not to need it. However, the latter discrepancy can be removed by saying that, while the gods are in no hurry for the merit, the *pretas* need it urgently, because they are suffering in a state of woe from which only *pattānumodanā* can relieve them, because they have little or no opportunity for performing meritorious actions independently. Remember, moreover, that length of life is one of the things that decrease as one goes down the cosmic scale; the Reverend Walpola Rahula has told me of a belief that *pretas* live only seven days, which makes it essential to catch them at that point before they sink further. He very plausibly connects this with a belief found in other schools of Buddhism (Mahāyāna and Sarvāstivāda) in an “in-between state” (*antarābhava*) lasting seven days; during this period the person is suspended between death and rebirth, and any improvement in karma will of course make the next birth a better one. I must stress that this *antarābhava* is not a Theravāda belief; it goes toward explaining the seven days *dānē* on the historical, not on the doctrinal, level. From this historical angle, it is also interesting to notice that in the Pali words just quoted the donor transfers merit to all his relatives, not just the recently dead man, thus reminding us that Hindu offerings are to ancestors (*pītaras*).

The *mataka dānē*, although not described in every ritual detail, is canonical in Theravāda Buddhism. In one sutta,¹³ a brahmin says to the Buddha that brahmins give funeral feasts (*śrāddhā*; Pali, *saddhā*), praying that the gifts [given to brahmins on their behalf] may be enjoyed by their dead relatives, and he asks whether this really works. The Buddha at first replies that it does not work if the relative is reborn in hell, as an animal, as a human, or as a god, but works if he is reborn as a *preta*, in which case he lives on what his friends and kinsmen supply. In reply to further questions, the Buddha says that if the particular relative the donor had in mind is not a *preta*, other relatives who are *pretas* will enjoy it, and it cannot happen that *no* relatives are reborn as *pretas*; but anyway no donor is without reward (*dāyako anipphalo*). In this text, no reference is made to the merit of the act; the gift is said to benefit (*upakappati*) the relatives and they to enjoy (*pari-*

¹³ *Anguttara Nikāya* V. 269–73 (sutta CLXXVII).

bhuñjati) it, so presumably the object passed all this is addressed to a brahmin points up. *dhists* were consciously adapting Hindu cus-

There are many references to the custom the *Petavatthu*, which consists entirely of po- three verses cited above come from a po- *dhamma Sutta* (“The sutta of behavior due also occurs under the title, taken from the fir- *Sutta* as the seventh item in the nine-item ca- the *Khuddakapāṭha*. Here is Bhikkhu Ñāṇan- whole poem.

1. Without the walls they stand and w
And at the junctions and road forks
Returning to their erstwhile homes,
They wait beside the jambs of gates
2. But when a rich feast is set out
With food and drink of every kind,
The fact that no man does recall
These creatures stems from their pa
3. So they who are compassionate
At heart do give for relatives
Such food and drink as may be pur
And good and fitting at these times
4. ‘Then let this be for relatives;
‘May relatives have happiness.’
These ghosts of the departed kin
Foregathered and assembled there
5. Will eagerly their blessing give
For (plentiful) rich food and drink:
‘So may our relatives live long,
‘Owing to whom we have this gain,
6. ‘For honour to us has been done,
‘No giver ever lacked the fruit.’
Now there is never ploughing there,
Nor any cattle-herding found,
7. Nor merchandizing just the same,
Nor bartering for coin of gold:
The ghosts of the departed kin
Live there on giving given here;
8. As water showered on the hill
Flows down to reach the hollow val
So giving given here can serve
The ghosts of the departed kin.

¹⁴ *Petavatthu* I. 5.

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 says that if the particular relative the donor
 a *preta*, other relatives who are *pretas* will en-
 happen that *no* relatives are reborn as *pretas*;
 or is without reward (*dāyako anipphalo*). In
 ce is made to the merit of the act; the gift is
kappati) the relatives and they to enjoy (*pari-*

bhuñjati) it, so presumably the object passes to them direct. That
 all this is addressed to a brahmin points up the fact that the Bud-
 dhists were consciously adapting Hindu custom.

There are many references to the custom in a canonical book,
 the *Petavatthu*, which consists entirely of poems about *pretas*. The
 three verses cited above come from a poem entitled the *Ñāti-*
dhamma Sutta ("The sutta of behavior due to relatives"),¹⁴ which
 also occurs under the title, taken from the first words, of *Tirokudda*
Sutta as the seventh item in the nine-item canonical chrestomathy,
 the *Khuddakapāṭha*. Here is Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli's translation of the
 whole poem.

1. Without the walls they stand and wait,
 And at the junctions and road forks;
 Returning to their erstwhile homes,
 They wait beside the jambs of gates.
2. But when a rich feast is set out
 With food and drink of every kind,
 The fact that no man does recall
 These creatures stems from their past acts.
3. So they who are compassionate
 At heart do give for relatives
 Such food and drink as may be pure
 And good and fitting at these times:
4. 'Then let this be for relatives;
 'May relatives have happiness.'
 These ghosts of the departed kin
 Foregathered and assembled there
5. Will eagerly their blessing give
 For (plentiful) rich food and drink:
 'So may our relatives live long,
 'Owing to whom we have this gain;'
6. 'For honour to us has been done,
 'No giver ever lacked the fruit.'
 Now there is never ploughing there,
 Nor any cattle-herding found,
7. Nor merchandizing just the same,
 Nor bartering for coin of gold:
 The ghosts of the departed kin
 Live there on giving given here;
8. As water showered on the hill
 Flows down to reach the hollow vale,
 So giving given here can serve
 The ghosts of the departed kin.

¹⁴ *Petavatthu* I. 5.

9. As river-beds when full can bear
The water down to fill the sea,
So giving given here can serve
The ghosts of the departed kin.
10. 'He gave to me, he worked for me,
'He was my kin, friend, intimate.'
Give gifts, then, for departed ones,
Recalling what they used to do.
11. No weeping, nor yet sorrowing,
Nor any kind of mourning aids
Departed ones, whose kin remain
(Unhelpful to them acting) thus.
12. But when this offering is given
Well placed in the Community
For them, then it can serve them long
In future and at once as well.
13. The True Idea for relatives has thus been shown,
And how high honour to departed ones is done,
And how the bhikkhus can be given strength as well,
And how great merit can be stored away by you.¹⁵

The verses cited above were, in order, the ninth, eighth, and first half of the fourth. As Stede has remarked,¹⁶ verses 11 and 12 (his 10 and 11) look like an addition. Moreover, until verse 12 there is no trace of Buddhism; dead relatives are to get food and drink and benefit their donors in return. Not until the end is there mention of the Sangha or of merit, and they are not well integrated. In the context of the poem, the "this" which is given to the relative in verse 4, line 1, is food and drink; only in the ritual as now performed and explained is it merit or, rather, the chance to rejoice at merit. It is this rather complicated explanation which has circumvented a doctrinal incongruity which originally must have been glaring. A vestige of the originally Hindu practice of actually offering food has moreover been preserved in the optional custom, noted above, of throwing a little food outside the house. Those who say this is for the crows are rationalizing, although in accordance with Buddhist ethics (kindness to animals); that it is for the *pretas* must be the ancient explanation. Note that the custom has persisted, with no logical congruity, throughout the doctrinal discussions about to be presented; but, since their effect has been to shift the emphasis of the ritual entirely away from the food, it is not surprising that the handful of food for the *pretas* has declined to a barely noticed, even an optional, detail.

¹⁵ Nānamoli, trans., *Minor Readings and Illustrations* (London, 1960), pp. 7-8.

¹⁶ Wilhelm Stede, *Die Gespenstergeschichten des Petavatthu* (Leipzig, 1914), p. 63.

The story of the origin of the *mataka dānē* is taken from the commentary on the *Tirokuddesu* by Buddhaghosa's *Paramatthajotikā*. In the commentary still explained as the food, etc., not the merit, is not an important point, since the general idea is the modern one: the king gives a *dānē* to the *pretas*. More important is the event given in the commentary to the *Dhāraṇī* which Bimbisāra explained to Bimbisāra that after he had seen the *pretas* had made a row because "when you did not get the merit" (*dānē dinne pattim*). Bimbisāra therefore fed the Buddha the next day, saying 'Sir, may the divine food and drink be given to those *pretas*'" (*Bhante, ito tesam petā sampajjatū ti pattim adāsi*). They get the food themselves to the king naked. The king therefore gave the food the next day to the Buddha and his disciples. Accordingly they are clothed in heavenly garments. This is the condition of *preta* (*petattabhāva*) and *bhāva*. "The teacher, giving thanks, used to say 'Outside the walls they stand,' etc." (*Sattvāro: tirokuddesu tiṭṭhantīti tirokuddānumoda*).

In this account, the spirits are getting not only material but also tangible benefits—food and clothes. However, the food and clothes as a result of getting merit—*pattim*—is a situation. The question whether the *pretas* could get food was controversial in ancient times, even though they do so is the natural interpretation of the sutta. Nyanaponika's summary of the *Kathāvatthu*, (probably third century B.C.), question 69 is, "Can the *pretas* be given here be enjoyed by beings elsewhere?" And we are told that two sects think that the *pretas* are influenced by the *pretas*. Theravādins hold that "the mind of the *Petas* is influenced, but the material food cannot be influenced." Although this seems to contradict the Theravāda just quoted, which in their present form is younger than the *Kathāvatthu*, it is very likely that the commentaries on this ancient custom are quoting an older tradition. However the date of the final victory of orthodoxy is not clear.

¹⁷ *Dhammapada Atthakathā* I. 103-4.

¹⁸ Nyanaponika, *Guide through the Abhidhamma* (London, 1957), p. 71.

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The story of the origin of the *mataka dānē* told me by the monk is taken from the commentary on the *Tirokudda Sutta*, Buddhaghosa's *Paramatthajotikā*. In the commentary, the thing offered is still explained as the food, etc., not the merit; but this is perhaps not an important point, since the general interpretation is clearly the modern one: the king gives a *dānē* to the Buddha and dedicates it (*uddisati*) to the *pretas*. More important is the story of this event given in the commentary to the *Dhammapada*.¹⁷ The Buddha explained to Bimbisāra that after he had given the first feast the *pretas* had made a row because "when you gave the food they did not get the merit" (*dāne dinne pattim alabhamānā*). When Bimbisāra therefore fed the Buddha the next day, "he gave the merit, saying 'Sir, may the divine food and drink from here accrue to those *pretas*'" (*Bhante, ito tesam petānam dibbanapānam sampajjatū ti pattim adāsi*). They get the food, then show themselves to the king naked. The king therefore gives robes (*cīvarāni*) the next day to the Buddha and his disciples, and the *pretas* accordingly are clothed in heavenly garments. At this, they leave the condition of *preta* (*petattabhāva*) and become gods (*dibbattabhāva*). "The teacher, giving thanks, used the words of thanks, 'Outside the walls they stand,' etc." (*Satthā anumodanam karonto: tirokuddesu tiṭṭhantīti tirokuddānumodanam akāsi*).

In this account, the spirits are getting not mere merit but more tangible benefits—food and clothes. However, they get the food and clothes as a result of getting merit—plainly an ambiguous situation. The question whether the *pretas* could actually eat the food was controversial in ancient times, even though that they could do so is the natural interpretation of the sutta I have quoted. In Nyanaponika's summary of the *Kathāvatthu*, a late canonical book (probably third century B.C.), question 69 is, "Can alms which are given here be enjoyed by beings elsewhere (e.g., by the . . . Petas)?" And we are told that two sects think that they can, but that Theravādins hold that "the mind of the Petas might be favourably influenced, but the material food cannot be enjoyed by them."¹⁸ Although this seems to contradict the Theravādin commentaries just quoted, which in their present form are many centuries younger than the *Kathāvatthu*, it is very likely that the commentaries on this ancient custom are quoting an old story. But, whatever the date of the final victory of orthodoxy, it is clear that

¹⁷ *Dhammapada Atthakathā* I. 103-4.

¹⁸ Nyanaponika, *Guide through the Abhidhamma-Piṭaka*, 2d ed. (Colombo, 1957), p. 71.

“Merit Transference” in Sinhalese Buddhism

sensible Theravādin monks decided that food being visibly consumed by a monk could not possibly be eaten by someone else, so that, if people persisted in their habit of feeding dead relatives, the custom required reinterpretation. What the relatives were really getting was something else—merit.

Although we saw above that the offering of merit to the gods occurs in the four *Nikāyas*, the doctrine of *pattānumodana*, the acquisition of merit by anyone through empathizing in another’s merit, does not. According to modern doctrine, such empathy can take place whether one is “offered” the merit or not. But the whole point of the story about Bimbisāra’s ancestors was that they had to be offered the merit before they could get it, and the implication of offering merit to the gods is that they, too, cannot get it just by being present—which they are in any case (note that the reference in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* is specifically to the local gods). Moreover, even now in all standardized situations a verse or formula is recited offering the merit to specific benefactors. Why should the Pali verse be recited at the *dānē* offering the merit to the gods? The doctrinal answer (given by the monk already quoted) is that one is simply drawing their attention to the merit. The same reason can be given for the less institutionalized practice of carrying round among the laymen present an offering which one is about to make to the Buddha or the Sangha: the laymen fold their hands, touch or make to touch the offering with their fingertips, and then raise their hands to their foreheads in the gesture of worship; the person who is physically making the offering is drawing the attention of the others to his act of merit, and their gestures symbolize their participation. In this case, the doctrinal rationale fits. It does not, however, adequately explain what goes on at the ritual for the dead.

The reinterpretation of the *mataka dānē* is the nub of this problem; it can be followed by tracing the evolution of the meaning of *anumodati* from “thank” to “empathize,” “rejoice in another’s merit.” In the poem quoted above, the verb *anumodati* is used of the *pretas* (poorly translated by Ñānamoli as “their blessing give”). Then, in the commentary, the Buddha, too, does an *anumodana*. Now observe what happens. The Buddhist givers of funeral feasts have been told by the monks that their relatives are not getting the food but are getting something else—merit. The whole point of the rite is to *give* your dead relative something, so the donors are satisfied, provided they still have the feeling they are *giving*. They give their merit away to the dead, like goods or cash,

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and the dead—presumably—say thank you say the monks; the doctrine of karma will cannot really give your merit away; you dead to improve their minds by expressing your good action in feeding us. So, although rite says that the *pretas anumodanti*, this do thank you for a gift, for nothing passes between rejoicing.

This is where the meaning of *anumodati* change: as part of the doctrinal response to Once *anumodati* comes to refer just to a empathy in doing good, it is of course open any time, without having to wait for an modern position: the villagers could rejoice birthday celebrations without specific invit

But since *anumodati* was originally used gets the food and of the god or *preta* who get now open to linguistic confusion. That is, in modern Sinhalese; for, while what the mor still called the *anumōdana*, according to not he who *anumodati*, rejoices, but the go We thus get the table (which I owe to a conv Rahula) (table 1). In the table, the three p

TABLE 1

PARTICIPANTS	ACTIONS PERFORMED		
	Pali	Sinhalese	English
Donor	deti	denavā	gives
Monk	anumodāpeti	anumōdan karavanavā	causes to re
Donor	anumodeti	anumōdan karanavā	causes
Gods	anumodanti	anumōdan venavā	rejoice

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say the monks; the doctrine of karma will not allow this; you
cannot really give your merit away; you are just allowing the
dead to improve their minds by expressing sympathetic joy at
your good action in feeding us. So, although the text used in the
rite says that the *pretas anumodanti*, this does not mean that they
thank you for a gift, for nothing passes between you; they are just
rejoicing.

This is where the meaning of *anumodati* undergoes its crucial
change: as part of the doctrinal response to undoctrinal behavior.
Once *anumodati* comes to refer just to a pure mental state, to
empathy in doing good, it is of course open to anyone to do it at
any time, without having to wait for an offer, and this is the
modern position: the villagers could rejoice at the monk's fiftieth
birthday celebrations without specific invitation.

But since *anumodati* was originally used both of the monk who
gets the food and of the god or *preta* who gets the merit, the way is
now open to linguistic confusion. That is, indeed, what we find in
modern Sinhalese; for, while what the monk recites at a *dānē* is
still called the *anumōdana*, according to modern doctrine it is
not he who *anumodati*, rejoices, but the gods,—the third parties.
We thus get the table (which I owe to a conversation with the Rev.
Rahula) (table 1). In the table, the three participants (or groups

TABLE 1

PARTICIPANTS	ACTIONS PERFORMED			TYPE OF GOOD DEED
	Pali	Sinhalese	English	
Donor	deti	denavā	gives	dāna
Monk	anumodāpeti	anumōdan karavanavā	causes to cause to rejoice	desanā
Donor	anumodeti	anumōdan karanavā	causes to rejoice	patti
Gods	anumodanti	anumōdan venavā	rejoice	pattānumodanā

of participants) are on the left; in the center are the actions they
are performing in Pali, Sinhalese, and a literal English translation;
on the right is the type of good deed (according to the Pali list of

the Ten Good Deeds) which the action represents. The lines from top to bottom are in chronological sequence.

The Pali alone suffices to show that something has been twisted up here. In fact, the double causative form *anumodāpeti* is not in the dictionaries, and the plain causative *anumodeti* is cited only once,¹⁹ in the quite different meaning "get the approval of."

The popular understanding of what goes on is rather different. It also corresponds to the historical view. The monk is understood to be saying "thank you," as indeed he was by original doctrine. The donor is then understood to be giving the gods his merit as a *quid pro quo*, as if he were buying their protection for cash. However, doctrine has been so successful that what I have just called "the popular understanding" is actually not explicit: when questioned, people either confess ignorance or give the orthodox explanation. The view of merit as spiritual cash is *affective* belief only. But its antiquity is nevertheless demonstrable.

Before drawing our conclusions from this contrast between cognitive and affective beliefs, it remains to document from Pali texts the changes in the use of the terms *patti* and *pattānumodanā* which culminated in the linguistic confusion just tabulated. The transaction of exchanging merit for supernatural protection is only possible after the complete separation of the merit earned by a gift from the gift itself, a separation which we saw took place at the *mataka dānē*. In that context, the "transference of merit" was made in the *Kathāvatthu* to conform to karma doctrine by talking of the good intentions of all concerned. But this explanation becomes more strained in our next example, in which the merit of a gift is given retrospectively. In a *Jātaka*²⁰ story, the bodhisattva, born as a brahmin merchant, has gained merit by feeding a *pratyekabuddha*; he is shipwrecked, and while swimming in the sea with an attendant is picked up by a deity whose duty it is to protect virtuous men in misfortune; she did not notice the attendant, so the "brahmin gave him the merit of his good deed, and he received it gratefully" (*brāhmaṇo attanā katakalyāṇato tassa pattiṃ adāsi, so anumodī*) and was picked up.²¹ Here we are very close to the idea of a fund of merit, like a bank account, to be drawn on at will. I stress that even this passage *can* be rational-

¹⁹ *Paramattha-dīpanī* VI (*Therīgāthā Atthakathā*) 201, line 9. Even this is uncertain, since there is a variant reading.

²⁰ *Jātaka* IV. 15-22.

²¹ *Jātaka* IV. 21.

ized by reference to the doctrine of an obvious interpretation of the passage would be a kind of spiritual money. And a character when you have used it you no longer have it.

The equation of merit with money becomes clear in a story from the commentary to the *pratyekabuddha* sugarcane from his brother. When the brother demands the price [of the sugarcane], the price, if the merit I shall give the merit (the price, if the merit I shall give the merit *mūlam āharāpessati mūlam dassāmi pattiṃ dassāmi*).²² Of course, this again is a transaction, but it is clear that the merit and the money are not the same thing and that the giving of the merit will be based on benevolence or purity of thoughts. Here the transaction with doctrine may even be said to be a transaction, for which I know of no modern parallel.

Finally, let me quote from a late commentary which both *patti* and *anumodana* occur. It is reporting to describe Visākhā and her friend who built a *vihāra* for the Sangha, could, translate an exact transcription of modern procedure. Her companions,²³ "The merit I have earned by the gift of this merit."²⁴ With gladly rejoiced, 'Oh, it is good, oh, it is good.' One who concentrated especially on that gift of merit and was reborn in the Heaven of the Ten Thousand Merits (*puññaṃ pasutaṃ, taṃ anumodatha, pattiṃ adāsi, so anumodī*). *Aho sādhu aho sādhu ti pasannacittā Tattha aññatarā upāsikā pi visesato pattiṃ adāsi*). This *anumodanā* of hers she described as "rejoicing" (*suddh' anumodanā*) and hence true to the canonical text, not merely the commentary. In this case the merit was offered, that "rejoicing" is the appropriate translation is clear both from the two previous passages cited.

We have here traced a correspondence between the canonical text and an early behavioral deviation, appearing

²² *Dhammapada Atthakathā* IV. 200.

²³ *Vimānavatthu Atthakathā*, p. 188.

²⁴ The translation cannot convey the full ambivalence of the text.

²⁵ *Vimānavatthu Atthakathā*, p. 189 = *Vimānavatthu*.

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VI (*Therīgāthā Atthakathā*) 201, line 9. Even this is un- variant reading.

ized by reference to the doctrine of intention; but the more obvious interpretation of the passage would be to regard merit as a kind of spiritual money. And a characteristic of money is that when you have used it you no longer have it.

The equation of merit with money becomes virtually explicit in a story from the commentary to the *Dhammapāda* about two brothers and some sugarcane. When the younger brother feeds a *pratyekabuddha* sugarcane from his brother's field, he thinks, "If my elder brother demands the price [of the cane] I shall give him the price, if the merit I shall give the merit" (*sace me jettḥabhātiko mūlaṃ āharāpessati mūlaṃ dassāmi sace pattim āharāpessati pattim dassāmi*).²² Of course, this again is not a doctrinal treatise; but it is clear that the merit and the money are on an equal footing and that the giving of the merit will have nothing to do with benevolence or purity of thoughts. Here the incongruity of the transaction with doctrine may even be said to reach the cognitive level, for which I know of no modern parallel.

Finally, let me quote from a late commentary a passage in which both *patti* and *anumodana* occur. The words, though pur- porting to describe Visākhā and her friends after Visākhā has built a *vihāra* for the Sangha, could, translated into Sinhalese, be an exact transcription of modern procedure. Visākhā says to her companions,²³ "The merit I have earned, rejoice at it, I give you the gift of this merit."²⁴ With gladly trusting minds they all rejoiced, 'Oh, it is good, oh, it is good.' One good lady who was there concentrated especially on that gift of merit. Soon after she died and was reborn in the Heaven of the Thirty Three" (*Yaṃ mayā puññaṃ pasutaṃ, taṃ anumodatha, pattidānaṃ vo dammā ti. Aho sādhu aho sādhu ti pasannacittā sabbā pi anumodiṃsu. Tattha aññatarā upāsikā pi visesato taṃ pattidānaṃ manasā akāsi*). This *anumodanā* of hers she describes²⁵ as a "pure rejoicing" (*suddh' anumodanā*) and hence truly meritorious. (This is in the canonical text, not merely the commentary). Although in this case the merit was offered, that "rejoicing" and not "thanking" is the appropriate translation is clear both from this passage and from the two previous passages cited.

We have here traced a correspondence between affective religion and an early behavioral deviation, appearing in Buddhist stories

²² *Dhammapāda Atthakathā* IV, 200.

²³ *Vimānavatthu Atthakathā*, p. 188.

²⁴ The translation cannot convey the full ambiguity of *patti*.

²⁵ *Vimānavatthu Atthakathā*, p. 189 = *Vimānavatthu* 44. 9 (p. 40).

but never explicitly accepted by doctrine; doctrine has then made a comeback and harmonized practice with canonical theory, although not without becoming exceedingly tortuous (and philologically barbarous). The stages through which behavior evolved have been traced above: the behavior represented in passages dealing with *patti* represent gradual deviation from doctrinal orthodoxy, while the changed meanings of *anumodana* and its verbs represent the rationalizations of doctrine to accommodate the behavioral deviations. On the behavioral level, the passages first quoted for *patti* represent someone's giving their merit to another person and that person's saying thank you. Since the idea that one can give away merit contradicts a fundamental doctrine, this clear implication has to be explained away, which is done, most ingeniously, by changing the meaning of *anumodati*. Although I know of no passage which is quite explicit on the point, the identity of the last passage quoted with modern practice strongly suggests that the modern doctrine, too, had been evolved by the time it was written. For this, it is significant that the good lady attributes her rebirth in heaven to the purity of her rejoicing (*anumodanā*). This comes not in the commentary but in a canonical text, albeit a late one, the *Vimānavatthu*. The entire evolution of doctrine and behavior with which we are concerned therefore took place, in all probability, within the ancient period, that is, the period up to the final closure of the Pali Canon and the stabilization of its exegesis; and what I have called the "modern" doctrine, although clearly different from the original doctrine, may be as much as 2,000 years old.

Malalasekere concludes (p. 89) that "there cannot, strictly speaking, be an arbitrary division of 'your' merit and 'mine.'" This is his own philosophical interpretation rather than a reproduction of canonical doctrine. We have tried, rather, to show that merit has always been thought of in personal terms, as belonging to an agent, and indeed has finally been reified to a remarkable extent, affectively becoming a transferable commodity.

The pure doctrine of karma has been preserved: man is entirely and solely responsible for his own fate, creating his own future by the moral quality of his intentions. But the very rigor of this doctrine of total self-reliance has called into being an alternate, parallel system, by which there are ways out. If doctrine cannot get rid of these ways out, it has to ignore them or, better, to reinterpret them. The transfer of merit to one's dead parents and the expectation that one will, in turn, receive merit from one's

children is an excellent example of this alternate reinterpretation.

Finally, let me put it another way. The karma solved the intellectual problem of evil too perfect for emotional comfort, because one's own fault. The doctrines of *patti* and solve, or at least alleviate, this emotional the rigor of the original doctrine and, in possible to improve one's karma after death they solve, by reinterpreting them, the i justifying surviving rituals for the dead. I might add that, although the Buddhist purely individualistic, merit transference c as the common property of a social group, so for kinship solidarity. I consider its proble the individual to be more clearly demon portant. But, certainly, the present situati which accounts for its survival for over 2,0

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Finally, let me put it another way. The original doctrine of karma solved the intellectual problem of evil, but the solution was too perfect for emotional comfort, because it makes all suffering one's own fault. The doctrines of *patti* and *pattānumodanā* in turn solve, or at least alleviate, this emotional problem by mitigating the rigor of the original doctrine and, in particular, by making it possible to improve one's karma after death; at the same time, they solve, by reinterpreting them, the intellectual problem of justifying surviving rituals for the dead. Moreover, a sociologist might add that, although the Buddhist doctrine of karma is purely individualistic, merit transference can make merit appear as the common property of a social group, so that *patti* is functional for kinship solidarity. I consider its problem-solving function for the individual to be more clearly demonstrable and more important. But, certainly, the present situation is overdetermined, which accounts for its survival for over 2,000 years.