

## The Karma of Women

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What does Buddhism have to say about the social situation of women? Well, ... take your pick. If Buddhism is not what the Buddha taught, but what he started, we are provided with a complicated set of teachings, practices, and historical traditions, which are not always consistent with each other. To impose a helpful pattern upon this collection of "Buddhisms," one needs to distinguish (1) the original teachings and life story of Shakyamuni Buddha, as recorded in the Pali Canon, the oldest texts we have, from (2) later Buddhist teachings and practices, and also from (3) the actual social role of Buddhism today in maintaining or challenging the situation of women in contemporary Buddhist cultures.

As those distinctions imply, there are too many Buddhist societies to discuss in any meaningful way. This essay will focus on Thailand, one of the most devoutly Buddhist nations in the world. By no coincidence, it also has what is probably the largest (and certainly the best organized) sex trade in the world: up to a million prostitutes (out of a total population of about 61 million people), easily dwarfing the declining number of Buddhist monks (about 200,000 *bhikkhu*). Although the general topic of this book is the role of religion in violence against women, our main concern will be to understand the relationship between Thai Buddhism and its extraordinary sex industry, a major source of Thailand's GNP. Religions serve a double function in society: they reflect our most important values, attitudes and behaviors, but they also help to mold those values, attitudes and behaviors. So what role does Buddhism presently play in encouraging or rationalizing the Thai sex business? What role might it play in discouraging prostitution, and empowering women generally?

### Can Mara Be Liberated?

The earliest Buddhist texts reveal a curious ambivalence about women, which reminds us to place the Buddha's transformative message in its original social context. Although revered as the original words of Shakyamuni Buddha, these teachings were preserved orally for about 400 years before being written down, providing many opportunities for some passages to be intentionally or unintentionally 'corrected' by monks less

enlightened than the Buddha. Just as important, however, we need to remember that the historical Buddha was raised in a very patriarchal culture. His teachings as they have come down to us perhaps reveal a struggle against that sexist conditioning.

Buddhism arose largely in response to the Brahmanical culture developing in India in the middle of the first millennium BCE. Brahmanism emphasized caste and the inferiority of women. As later codified in the Laws of Manu, women were fettered to men for life: first as obedient daughters, then as subservient wives, and finally as aging mothers dependent on their sons. A wife's main duty was to produce sons. She was usually confined to the home and had no rights of her own – certainly not any opportunity to study the Vedas (reserved for male Brahmins) or engage in other spiritual practices.

Religiously, a large part of the problem was that women are polluted and polluting. This refers not only to their association with blood (the messiness of menstruation and childbirth), but especially to their role as temptress and seducer, an uncontrollable threat to the chastity of ascetic men trying to follow a spiritual path. Women were chastised for their stronger sex drive, which in more contemporary language seems like a classic example of psychological projection: ascetics blaming their own problems with celibacy on women, the objects of their lust.

Early Buddhism did not escape this misogyny, for there are many such passages in the Pali Canon, some of them attributed to the Buddha, who warned his monks about the impurity of sexuality generally, and the snares of women in particular. A prime symbol of this is the three daughters of Mara, the Buddhist symbol of evil (although a rather bland symbol compared to the malevolent Satan of Christianity), who tempted him just before his final enlightenment: his offspring *Raga* lust, *Arati* ill-will and *Thana* craving are always depicted as feminine.

In contrast to reinforcing such patriarchal stereotypes, however, the Buddha's main teaching to householders was almost revolutionary. In the *Sigalovada Sutta*, he instructs a husband to minister to his wife in five ways: by being courteous to her, not despising her, being faithful to her, giving her authority (presumably at home), and providing her with ornaments. From the other side, a wife should show compassion to her husband also in five ways: by performing her duties well, being hospitable to relations and attendants, being faithful, protecting what he brings home, and being skilled

and industrious in discharging her duties [*Digha Nikaya* 31]. Such injunctions may seem unremarkable to us today, but what is extraordinary for his times is that the marital relationship is understood to be reciprocal, with both sides having rights and responsibilities – making marriage, in effect, a contract between equals, a momentous step in the male-dominated culture of sixth-century BCE India.

But what about the spiritual potential of women? That is the acid test for religious patriarchy, and one that the Buddha eventually passed – but it took him a while. It wasn't until five or six years after his enlightenment that he agreed to meet with a delegation of women, led by his aunt and foster mother Mahapajapati Gotami. They asked for an order of *bhikkhuni* nuns to be established, to join the male *sangha* of *bhikkhu* monks. Several times the Buddha refused, but when his attendant Ananda asked him if women were equal in their capacity for enlightenment, he admitted that they were as capable of following the contemplative life. He then yielded to their repeated request – but with special conditions, eight additional rules, that made nuns forever subordinate to the monks. Unsurprisingly, internal textual evidence makes it clear that those rules were added to the passage later. The text then goes on to have the Buddha confide in Ananda that, had women not been admitted as monastics, his teaching would have survived more than a thousand years; but due to the admission of women, it would only last five hundred years. [*Anguttara Nikaya* 6.01 ff] Whether or not this prediction was actually made by the Buddha himself, it turned out to be wrong: the Buddhist teachings continue to exist, and in some ways they are thriving more than ever. For devout Buddhists, this is not a trivial point: either the text is corrupt, which implies that other passages may also have been altered, or even the Buddha was capable of significant errors; or both. We shall have occasion to return to this dilemma later.

The *bhikkhuni* – the first order of nuns in history – thrived, although their contributions to Buddhism have been neglected by the male monastics who compiled its history. Many of the *bhikkhuni* attained liberation, and the Buddha had occasion to praise at least 13 of them. Some of their enlightenment verses are included in the Pali Canon, and some of those *Therigatha* suggest a Buddhist proto-feminism. Soma Theri wrote:

What harm is it  
To be a woman  
When the mind is concentrated

And the insight is clear?

If I asked myself  
“Am I a woman  
or a man in this?”  
then I would be speaking  
Mara’s language

In other words, when it comes to the spiritual path, discriminating according to gender is a delusion.

So far, so good ... for a while. But once the Buddha was no longer around to keep an eye on things, patriarchy began to reassert itself, and the situation of Buddhist women began to deteriorate, for both nuns and laywomen. In Theravada countries the *bhikkhuni* order shrank and disappeared -- in Thailand, only about three hundred years after it had been established. Some Mahayana sutras claimed that women must first be reborn (or magically transformed) into men before they could become fully enlightened Buddhas, and this belief became widespread in most Buddhist cultures. Other Mahayana scriptures continued to present more positive images of women which are more consistent with the central Mahayana concept of *shunyata* ‘emptiness’: if men and women are equally *shunya* -- both genders lacking any self-essence – then there is no ground for any sexual discrimination. In the Chan Buddhism of China (more familiar to most Westerners as the Zen Buddhism of Japan), the enlightened mind is neither male nor female, and there are notable examples of female Zen adepts. But such spiritual subtleties did not serve to check the revalidation of male superiority in Buddhist cultures. With the partial exception of Taiwan today, where the Mahayana *bhikkhuni* order is thriving, women are perceived as inferior to men in Asian Buddhist societies. And there is a Buddhist explanation for that: those unfortunate enough to be born as women are reaping the fruits of their inferior karma.

### **The Karma of Women’s Suffering**

In Buddhist societies where women are not allowed to be fully ordained as monks, women are often told by monks that having been born a woman is a result of bad karma. In order to render this problem, the only thing that women can do is to accumulate a lot of

merit in this life, so that in their next life they will be born a man, and then they can become a monk if they choose to. This way of thinking makes women feel inferior and that they are to blame for the outcome of their lives. It makes them more willing to accept whatever gender-based violence that they experience, since it is seen as a direct result of their unlucky fate in having been born a woman.

When a woman asks for guidance from a monk when the husband is the cause of her suffering (such as instances where he has another woman, is physically or mentally abusive to her, gambles their money away, drinks alcohol, etc), the monk's main advice is for her to be patient and compassionate. Often times, the monk will say that karma is the cause of her suffering, so she has no choice but to accept and deal with the situation, and continue to be kind to her husband so that one day the karmic force will subside and everything will be fine. We found that this kind of thinking is not only the belief of the monks themselves but that it is also prominent among the followers of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, including women.... It is one of the factors that keeps a woman in a marriage even though her life may be in danger, and it explains why neighbors and community leaders choose not to intervene.

(Ouyporn Khuankaew)

In this passage Khuankaew shows the relationship between the subordination of women (including the violence they suffer) and the popular Buddhist understanding of karma. Before examining this conception and application of karma, which will be the main focus of this essay, let us consider the implications of this relationship for prostitution and the Thai sex industry.

To begin, it is important to realize that the earliest Buddhist texts do not reflect a negative attitude toward prostitutes. Unlike the moralism of Western Christendom (but perhaps not unlike the attitude of Jesus himself?), prostitutes were not condemned as sinful. Prostitution was widespread in the India of his time and the Buddha did not discriminate against them. Instead, he provided them with the opportunity to join the *bhikkhuni* order (which required them to reform and become celibate, of course) in order to pursue the path to liberation. These early texts include positive references to some prostitutes, such as the wealthy courtesan Ambapali, who is well-known in Buddhist literature for her gift of a mango grove to the Buddha and sangha. She later renounced her trade, gave away her possessions, and became a

*bhikkhuni* whose diligent practice soon led to enlightenment and a new role as a skilled Dharma teacher. Like some other prostitutes, she may have progressed so rapidly on the spiritual path because she had experienced the extremes of sensual pleasure and realized the meaninglessness of such cravings. Or is the problem better understood as the commodification of sexual pleasure, and the degradation of those expected to provide it?

Her mid-life career change suggests an important relationship that still exists between the Buddhist sangha and the status of women in Buddhist cultures. More precisely, there is a sharp *contrast* between the high social status of monks and the inferior status of women, who typically suffer from low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness. Somewhat similar to the Catholic mother whose son becomes a priest, Buddhist mothers whose sons become *bhikkhus* gain lots of merit, as well as an enhanced status in society; but the *sangha* is no longer an option for their daughters, who therefore may be called upon to serve their families in other ways. This makes the less-judgmental attitude of Buddhism toward prostitution a mixed blessing in practice. Most Thai prostitutes, like most other Asian prostitutes, work to send money to their families, which are often large and impoverished. They are trying to fulfill their sense of duty to their parents by sharing the economic burden in the only way they can (although hardly lucrative for the girls themselves, prostitution is still much better paid than factory work). The recurring problems of rural agriculture, sometimes aggravated by father's or sons' gambling debts, no infrequently lead to parents asking a daughter to 'sacrifice' for the sake of the family [Chatsumaarn Kabilsingh, "Prostitution and Bsm" 110].

One part of a solution to this situation, therefore, might involve reintroducing the *bhikkhuni* sangha [refer Tavivat's ch. in *What Men Owe to Women*]. This would not resolve the economic woes of rural families, but it would raise the status (and therefore the self-esteem) of women whose capacity for enlightenment is also thereby acknowledged. Not only would parents also gain merit when their daughter became a nun, but respected *bhikkhuni* would be in a better position to advise other women and offer spiritual guidance.

There have been some recent attempts to re-introduce the *bhikkhuni* order in Thailand and Sri Lanka, but they continue to be resisted by the established *bhikkhu* hierarchy, and it is too early to know how well they will succeed. Up to now, at least, the response of the Thai Buddhist authorities to the sex

industry has also not been helpful. The official sangha establishment tends to be quite reserved, which is to say conservative, toward all social issues, while individual monks and temples often profit from emphasizing the inferiority of women in general and the bad karma accumulated by prostitutes in particular. Women and prostitutes are encouraged to offer *dana* (money and other valuables) to the temple in order to make more merit and guarantee a better rebirth next time. As a result, some temples, especially in northern Thailand, have become wealthy and well adorned [Kabilsingh, 97].

The basic presupposition of this behavior, or social trap, is that one's present life situation, whether good or bad, enjoyable or painful, is a consequence of one's moral behavior in previous lifetimes. Ambapali escaped this bind by joining the *bhikkhuni* order and following the path to enlightenment, which puts an end to the cycle of rebirths. Since the *bhikkhuni* order has disappeared, contemporary Thai women must try to counteract the negative consequences of their bad karma in other ways. One can gain merit by reciting sutras and other devotions, but the main way is by making *dana* to the monks and temples. With enough merit, one will be reborn into more favorable circumstances – perhaps even as a man.

Unfortunately, the male Thai sangha benefits enormously from this understanding, or misunderstanding, of Buddhist teachings about karma and rebirth.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, so do all those who organize and profit from the sex industry, who are relieved of any fleeting guilt feelings they might otherwise have, and also spared any resistance on the part of their sex workers, who have no one else to blame but themselves (in a past life) for their present situation. The responsibility for their own abuse is really in their own hands, not in the powerful men and patriarchal social structures that seem to exploit them. It is a classic case of 'blame the victim', protecting the perpetrators and wrapping the structures of exploitation in invisibility and inevitability [Casting Stones, 237]. Moreover, if some women want to get uppity and rebel against this system, they are only creating more bad karma for themselves [Gross 143].

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<sup>1</sup> There have been accusations of widespread pedophilia (mainly sexual abuse of boys) within the Thai sangha, especially among those in positions of authority, but these are difficult to confirm: those with the power to investigate this evidently 'do not want to go there' [See Khuankaew, 30]. If true, the similarity with recent problems in the Catholic church, especially in the United States, reinforces questions that have been raised about the viability of required celibacy in religious institutions – and, perhaps more fundamentally, about the tendency to identify the spiritual life with celibacy.

Obviously, this understanding of karma and rebirth has important implications for much more than the Thai sex industry. The connections with other types of physical and structural violence against women could also be discussed, as well as many other non-gendered consequences regarding the rationalization of racism, economic oppression, birth handicaps, and so forth. Karma is used to justify both the authority of political elites, who therefore deserve their wealth and power, and the weakness of those who have neither. It provides the perfect theodicy: there is an infallible cause-and-effect relationship between one's moral actions and one's fate, so there is no need to work toward social justice, which is already built into the moral fabric of the universe. In fact, if there is no undeserved suffering, there is really no evil that we need to struggle against.

In summary, karma is probably the most critical issue for contemporary Buddhist societies. That brings us to our main concern: Has it been misunderstood? Is it a fatalistic doctrine, or is an empowering one?

**“By the power of my merit, may I be reborn a male...”**

(15<sup>th</sup> century CE inscription of a Queen Mother)

We have seen that karma (along with its correlative, rebirth) has become a problem for modern Buddhists that can no longer be evaded. To accept the popular, now “traditional” Buddhist understanding about them as literal truth – that karmic determinism is a “moral law” of the universe, with an inevitable and precise calculus of cause and effect comparable to Newton's laws of physics – leads to a severe case of cognitive dissonance for contemporary Buddhism. The physical causality that modern science has discovered about the world seems to provide no mechanism for karma or rebirth to operate. How should modern Buddhists respond to this situation?

In the *Kalama Sutra*, sometimes called “the Buddhist charter of free inquiry,” the Buddha emphasized the importance of intelligent, probing doubt. We should not believe in something until we have established its truth for ourselves. To believe in karmic rebirth in a literal way, simply because it is part of the Buddha's teaching (or part of the way that the Buddha's teaching has traditionally been understood), may thus be unfaithful to the best of the tradition. Given a healthy skepticism about the Iron Age belief

systems of the Buddha's time, one should hesitate before making such an enormous leap of faith. Instead of tying one's spiritual path, and social role, to belief in such a doctrine, is it wiser for contemporary Buddhists to be agnostic about it? Consider the way the *Kalama Sutra* concludes. After emphasizing the importance of evaluating for oneself the spiritual claims of others, the Buddha finishes his talk by describing someone who has a truly purified mind:

"Suppose there is a hereafter and there is a fruit, result, of deeds done well or ill. Then it is possible that at the dissolution of the body after death, I shall arise in the heavenly world, which is possessed of the state of bliss.' This is the first solace found by him.

"Suppose there is no hereafter and there is no fruit, no result, of deeds done well or ill. Yet in this world, here and now, free from hatred, free from malice, safe and sound, and happy, I keep myself.' This is the second solace found by him.

"Suppose evil (results) befall an evil-doer. I, however, think of doing evil to no one. Then, how can ill (results) affect me who do no evil deed?' This is the third solace found by him.

"Suppose evil (results) do not befall an evil-doer. Then I see myself purified in any case.' This is the fourth solace found by him."

*(Anguttara Nikaya III.65)*

These intriguing verses can be understood in different ways. The Buddha is speaking to non-Buddhists, so he does not presuppose a Buddhist worldview in describing the fruits of a purified mind. Yet there is another way to take this passage, which is more relevant for twenty-first century Buddhists. Do our actions bear fruit in a hereafter? For the sake of argument, at least, the Buddha adopts an agnostic view in this important sutra. Maybe they do, maybe they don't. In either case, a purified mind finds solace by cherishing good deeds and avoiding bad ones.

In this passage, the Buddha's lack of dogmatism shines forth. We can understand his tactful words as a skillful means for speaking with the Kalamas, who are weary of doctrinaire spiritual assertions. But we can also focus on the agnosticism about rebirth, which also implies a different understanding of karma and its consequences. If those of us who are Buddhists are honest with ourselves, we really do not know what to think about karma and rebirth. We wonder if testimony about near-death experiences supports them. At the same time, they hardly seem compatible

with what modern science has discovered about the physical world. So are they fact or myth? If I consider myself a Buddhist, do I have to believe in them? Here the Buddha speaks directly to our skeptical age: in the most important sense, it does not matter which is true, because if we know what is good for us (and those around us) we will endeavor to live the same way in either case.

Challenging the usual literal understanding is not to dismiss or disparage Buddhist teachings about karma and rebirth. Rather, it highlights the need for modern Buddhism to *interrogate* them. Given what is now known about human psychology, including the social construction of the self, how might they be understood today?

One of the most basic principles of Buddhism is interdependence, but Buddhists do not usually realize what that implies about the original teachings of the Buddha. Nothing has any “self-existence” because everything is part of everything else. Nothing is self-originated because everything arises according to causes and conditions. Yet Buddhism, as we know, originates in the experience of Shakyamuni, who became “the Buddha” – that is, “the awakened one” – upon his attainment of nirvana under the Bodhi tree. Different Buddhist scriptures describe that experience in different ways, but for all Buddhist traditions his awakening is the source of Buddhism, which unlike Hinduism does not rely upon ancient revealed texts such as the Vedas.

Buddhists usually take the above for granted, yet there is a problem with it: the Buddha’s enlightenment story is a myth of self-origination. If the interdependence of everything is true, the truth of Buddhism could not have sprung up independently from all the other spiritual beliefs of the Buddha’s time and place (Iron Age India), without any relationship to them. Instead, the teachings of Shakyamuni must be understood as a *response* to those other teachings, but a response that, inevitably, also *presupposed* many of the spiritual beliefs current in that cultural milieu – that took for granted, for example, popular notions of karma and rebirth, which were widespread at that time in India. In some of the Pali sutras, the Buddha mentions remembering his past lifetimes. We should ourselves remember that the reality of past lives was generally accepted then, and that an ability to remember them was not unique to Buddha or Buddhists. Perhaps a contemporary equivalent is the adult recovery of childhood memories – some of which are later discovered to be false.

Consider the following insightful comment that Erich Fromm made about another (although very different!) revolutionary, Sigmund Freud:

The attempt to understand Freud's theoretical system, or that of any creative systematic thinker, cannot be successful unless we recognize that, and why, every system as it is developed and presented by its author is necessarily erroneous. ...the creative thinker must think in the terms of the logic, the thought patterns, the expressible concepts of his culture. That means he has not yet the proper words to express the creative, the new, the liberating idea. He is forced to solve an insoluble problem: to express the new thought in concepts and words that do not yet exist in his language.... The consequence is that the new thought as he formulated it is a blend of what is truly new and the conventional thought which it transcends. The thinker, however, is not conscious of this contradiction. (Fromm, 1, 3)

Fromm's point is that even the most revolutionary thinkers cannot stand on their own shoulders. They too remain dependent upon their context, whether intellectual or spiritual – which, to say it again, is precisely what Buddhist emphasis on impermanence and causal interdependence implies. Of course, there are many important differences between Freud and Shakyamuni, but the parallel is nevertheless very revealing: the Buddha, too, expressed his new, liberating insight in the only way he could, in the language that his culture could understand and that he himself was a product of. Inevitably, then, his way of expressing the Dharma was a blend of the truly new (for example, the *anatta* 'nonself' teaching, the *paticca-samuppada* doctrine) and the conventional religious thought of his time (karma and rebirth?) "which it transcends." The implication that there is always tension between what is new and what is conventional speaks directly to a possible inconsistency that has puzzled many Buddhists over the centuries: is *anatta* nonself really compatible with the older, traditional beliefs in karma and rebirth?

Earlier teachings such as the Vedas tended to understand karma more mechanically and ritualistically. To perform a sacrifice in the proper fashion would invariably lead to the desired consequences. If those consequences were not forthcoming, then either there had been an error in procedure or the causal effects were delayed, perhaps until one's next lifetime (a reason for believing in reincarnation). The Buddha's spiritual revolution transformed this ritualistic approach to controlling one's life into an ethical principle by

focusing on our *motivations*. Probably the most popular early Buddhist text, the *Dhammapada*, begins by emphasizing this:

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the cart-wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs. [vv. 1 – 2]

To understand the Buddhist innovation, it is helpful to distinguish a moral act into its three aspects: my mental attitude or *motivation* when I do something; the *moral rule or regulation* I am following (for example, a Buddhist precept or Christian commandment, but this also includes ritualistic procedures); and the *results* that I seek. These aspects cannot be separated from each other, but we can emphasize one more than the others—in fact, that is what we usually do.<sup>2</sup> In the Buddha’s time, the Brahmanical understanding of karma emphasized the importance of following the detailed procedures (rules) regulating each ritual; naturally, however, the people who paid for the rituals were more interested in the outcome (results). Arguably, the situation in some Theravada Buddhist countries, including Thailand, is not much different today: male monastics are preoccupied with following the complicated rules regulating their lives (which according to the popular view is what makes them ‘good’ monks), while mostly-female laypeople are preoccupied with accumulating merit by giving gifts to them (which makes them second-class Buddhists, focused on the future karmic consequences of their commodified relationship with monks).

Earlier, I cited evidence of error and/or alteration in some passages in the earliest Buddhist texts we have, the Pali Canon. We need to remember that when trying to address apparent inconsistencies in what the Buddha said about karma. Some of his statements – and perhaps it is no coincidence that these tend to work to the material benefit of the *bhikkhu* -- support a more deterministic view (e.g., the *Culakammavibhanga Sutta*, *Majjhima Nikaya* 135, where karma is used to explain various differences between people, including physical appearance and economic inequality). However, there are

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<sup>2</sup> In modern moral theory, for example, utilitarian theories focus on consequences, deontological theories focus on moral principles such as the Golden Rule, and “virtue theories” focus on one’s character and motivations.

several other texts where the Buddha clearly denies moral determinism, for example the *Tittha Sutra* (*Anguttara Nikaya* 3.61) in which the Buddha argues that such a view denies the possibility of following a spiritual path:

"There are priests and contemplatives who hold this teaching, hold this view: 'Whatever a person experiences -- pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful -- that is all caused by what was done in the past.' ... Then I said to them, 'Then in that case, a person is a killer of living beings because of what was done in the past. A person is a thief... unchaste... a liar... a divisive speaker... a harsh speaker... an idle chatterer... greedy... malicious... a holder of wrong views because of what was done in the past.' When one falls back on what was done in the past as being essential, monks, there is no desire, no effort [at the thought], 'This should be done. This shouldn't be done.' When one can't pin down as a truth or reality what should and shouldn't be done, one dwells bewildered and unprotected. One cannot righteously refer to oneself as a contemplative.

In another short sutra, an ascetic named Sivaka asked the Buddha about a view held by some ascetics and Brahmins that “‘whatever a person experiences, be it pleasure, pain or neither-pain-nor-pleasure, all that is caused by previous action.’ Now, what does the revered Gotama [Buddha] say about this?”

"Produced by (disorders of the) bile, there arise, Sivaka, certain kinds of feelings. That this happens, can be known by oneself; also in the world it is accepted as true. Produced by (disorders of the) phlegm...of wind...of (the three) combined...by change of climate...by adverse behavior...by injuries...by the results of Karma -- (through all that), Sivaka, there arise certain kinds of feelings. That this happens can be known by oneself; also in the world it is accepted as true. Now when these ascetics and Brahmins have such a doctrine and view that 'whatever a person experiences, be it pleasure, pain or neither-pain-nor-pleasure, all that is caused by previous action,' then they go beyond what they know by themselves and what is accepted as true by the world. Therefore, I say that this is wrong on the part of these ascetics and Brahmins." [*Moliyasivaka Sutta, Samyutta Nikaya* 36.21]

Other texts could be cited, but this is not the place for a close textual analysis of all the relevant passages [refer to Nagapriya, *Exploring Karma &*

*Rebirth* (Birmingham: Windhorse, 2004).] The point to be gleaned from the above references is that the earliest Buddhist teachings about karma are not only sometimes humorous but also ambiguous, and therefore insufficient by themselves as a guide for understanding karma today. That brings us back to the Buddha's great insight into the moral preeminence of our motivations. How should we today understand the originality of his approach?

The most important point about karma is not whether it is a moral law involving some inevitable and precise calculus of cause and effect. The original Sanskrit term *karma* literally means 'action,' (*phala* is the 'fruit' of action), and as this suggests the basic point is that our actions have consequences – and, more precisely, that our morally-relevant actions have morally-relevant consequences. In the popular Buddhist understanding, the law of karma and rebirth is a way to control what the world does to us, which also implies, more immediately, accepting our causal responsibility for whatever is happening to us now. This misses the revolutionary significance of the Buddha's reinterpretation: karma is better understood as the key to spiritual development: *how our life- situation can be transformed by transforming the motivations of our actions right now*. When we add the Buddhist teaching about nonself—the claim, consistent with modern psychology, that one's sense of self is a mental construct—we can see that karma is not something I *have*, it is what 'I' *am*, and what I am changes according to my conscious choices. 'I' (re)construct myself by what 'I' intentionally do, because 'my' sense of self is a precipitate of my habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Just as my body is composed of the food I eat, so my character is composed of my conscious choices, constructed by my consistent, repeated mental attitudes. People are "punished" or "rewarded" not for what they have done but for what they have become, and what we intentionally do is what makes us what we are. An anonymous verse expresses this well:

Sow a thought and reap a deed  
Sow a deed and reap a habit  
Sow a habit and reap a character  
Sow a character and reap a destiny

What kinds of thoughts and deeds do we need to sow? Buddhism does not have much to say about evil *per se*, but our *dukkha* unhappiness is attributed to the three *roots* of evil: greed, ill will, and delusion. These need to be transformed into their positive counterparts: greed into generosity, ill will into

loving-kindness, and the delusion of separate self into the wisdom of our interconnectedness with the world that we are not 'in' but an expression of.

Such an understanding of karma does not necessarily involve another life after we physically die. As the philosopher Spinoza expressed it, happiness is not the reward for virtue; happiness is virtue itself. To become a different kind of person is to experience the world in a different way. When your mind changes, the world changes. And when we respond differently to the world, the world responds differently to us. Since we are actually nondual with the world—our sense of separation from it being a delusion—our ways of acting in it tend to involve reinforcing feedback systems that incorporate other people. People not only notice what we do, they notice why we do it. I may fool people sometimes, but over time my character becomes revealed through the intentions behind my deeds. The more I am motivated by greed, ill will, and delusion, the more I must manipulate the world to get what I want, and consequently the more alienated I feel and the more alienated others feel when they see they have been manipulated. This mutual distrust encourages both sides to manipulate more. On the other hand, the more my actions are motivated by generosity, loving-kindness, and the wisdom of nonduality, the more I can relax and open up to the world. The more I feel part of the world and at one with others, the less I am inclined to use others, and consequently the more inclined they will be to trust and open up to me. In such ways, transforming my own motivations does not only transform my own life; it also affects those around me, whom I am a part of.

This more naturalistic understanding of karma does not mean we must necessarily exclude other, perhaps more mysterious possibilities regarding the consequences of our motivations for the world we live in; there may well be other aspects of karmic cause-and-effect that are not so readily understood. What is clear in either case, however, is that karma-as-how-to-transform-my-life-situation-by-transforming-my-motivations-now is not a fatalistic doctrine. Quite the contrary: it is difficult to imagine a more empowering spiritual teaching. We are not enjoined to accept the oppressive circumstances of our lives; we are encouraged to improve our spiritual lives and social situation by addressing those circumstances with generosity, loving-kindness and wisdom. With regard to women, patriarchal institutions are not inevitable, for this 'new' understanding of karma implies that our social analysis should highlight and expose the selfish (and deluded) motivations of those who benefit from the suffering of women. Rita Gross puts it well: "what causes the negativity of women's existence under patriarchy is not

women's karma, but the self-centered, fixated, habitual patterns of those in power, of those who maintain the status quo.... This explanation, which locates the cause of women's misery under male-dominated systems in *present* ego-patterns and self-interest, rather than in past karma, also has the advantage of being a thoroughly *Buddhist* analysis, in addition to making sense in feminist terms" [145].

The prostitution industry, like other forms of physical and structural violence against women, should not be accepted by Buddhists but rather challenged as un-Buddhist -- indeed anti-Buddhist, because completely incompatible with the liberative message of Buddhism. A reformed understanding of karma can help male and female Buddhists to do this.