

“Compassionate Killing” Revisited: The Making and Unmaking of the Killing Bodhisattva

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IN INDIAN Mahayana Buddhism, the vows of the bodhisattvas were codified according to two systems. The first is called “mind only” or “vast conduct” and is said to go back to Maitreya Buddha and Asaṅga (ca. 320–ca. 390). The second is called the “middle way” or “profound view” and is said to go back to Mañjuśa Bodhisattva and Nāgārjuna (fl. ca. 2nd–3rd c.). In this way, people ascribe the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* of Asaṅga and the *Bodhisattvasaṃvaraviṃśaka* of Ācārya Candragomin (fl. 5th c.) to the Mind Only system and the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* and *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śāntideva (ca. late 7th–mid 8th c.) to the Middle Way system. The two systems differ in some ways and provide different lists of the actual vows, but the present essay is not directly concerned with the vows proper, but rather with how Buddhists have interpreted these vows and how such interpretations are influenced by or interact with other aspects of Buddhism. As the title of this essay suggests, the primary focus is on the precept of not killing and how this is affected by and interacts with such notions as karma, skillful means, and compassion in the different interpretations. The developments that I describe here for Indian Buddhism should be seen as a parallel to what Ulrich Pagel established in his study of the *Bodhisattvapīṭaka*.¹ He observed an early phase of Mahayana sutras where *śrāvaka* morality is still the greatest influence on the bodhisattvas’ disciplined conduct. Later, however, the idea of a special code of conduct for bodhisattvas was increasingly adapted to the newly developing ideal of benefitting all sentient beings and to a new way of viewing reality as characterized chiefly by non-duality. These new developments led to a gradual devaluation of the *śrāvaka* type of morality

¹ Pagel 1995.

and to the emergence of a special code of conduct of the bodhisattvas that claims skillful means and compassion as its guiding principles. In the last part of this essay, I will introduce a Tibetan attempt to reconcile skillful means with earlier Buddhist ideas of karma and morality in the training of bodhisattvas.

The first Western editions and translations of Mahayana sutras, compendia such as the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, and treatises like the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* introduced to us the idea of bodhisattvas who deliberately transgress the basic rules and norms of Buddhism such as not killing, not stealing, and maintaining celibacy. Since then, many stories of the “compassionate killing” of a living being have been mentioned, retold, and analyzed numerous times in Western academic literature, not always with the necessary attention to their complex details. The available Indian, Chinese, and Tibetan versions of such stories with their various occurrences in different sutras, treatises, and compendia, and the various manuscript editions, surely tell quite different stories that have different foci and probably different agendas. In this essay, I would first like to pinpoint the tensions these stories create vis-à-vis the teachings of early Buddhism and the *Abhidharma* literature, chiefly with reference to the research of Rupert Gethin. After that, I will discuss the problem of karmic fruition in the context of the transgression of the bodhisattva who is the hero of these stories, and the question of the role of skillful means and compassion. In the last part of the essay, the ideas of a Tibetan master of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries will be introduced, a period which I would describe as the end of the initial phase of the later spread (*phyi dar*) of Buddhism in Tibet. This master’s attempts to provide a solution to the problem that satisfies both the specifications of the early *suttas* and the *Abhidharma* literature on the one hand and the Mahayanistic impulses of these stories on the other are of considerable interest for the study of the formation of Tibetan Buddhist traditions during that period.

KILLING IN PALI SOURCES

In 2004, Rupert Gethin published his investigation into the problem of compassionate killing in Pali sources. I want to show, by presenting some aspects of Gethin’s analysis, that killing is necessarily perceived as a transgression in these sources, that the Pali commentators and the earlier and later *Abhidharma* texts explain that killing must have a moment of aversion at its root, and that such a moment of aversion cannot coincide with com-

passion. Whether such an exegesis of the Buddha’s teachings is *correct*, as Damien Keown² doubts, is not the point. For my discussion in the later sections of this essay, I am chiefly interested in the fact that some Mahayana texts seem to override the axiomatic settings of the earlier sources and in how they either skirt or address that problem. Moreover, awareness of this ancient exegetical background is also necessary to be able to fully appreciate the efforts of the Tibetan author that I will introduce later. Let me now briefly summarize Gethin’s findings.³

Pali Suttas

Gethin first establishes the precept of abandoning killing and avoiding harm for living beings as one of the courses of the ten virtuous actions, one of the “rightful actions,” and, again, the first of the five precepts. He also shows that the Buddha advises his disciples to refrain from killing in such canonical discourses as the *Brahmajāla Sutta*⁴ and the *Suttanipāta*.⁵ The results of killing, namely states of misfortune, unhappy destinies, and birth in hell are also well known, as mentioned in the *Cūḷa-Kammavibhaṅga Sutta*.⁶ Moreover, monks or nuns who intentionally kill a human being would automatically commit an “offence leading to expulsion” (*pārājika*) and lose their vows.⁷

Of great importance for our present purpose is Gethin’s analysis of the mental state of people who commit such acts, since this state is pivotal in the context of the problem of whether a karmic result will accrue. Generally speaking, to be karmically effective, an act has to be intended.⁸ By a similar token, the status of a person’s vows depends on the clarity of the mind at the moment of an act.⁹

Commentaries and Pali Abhidhamma

These points are still further clarified in the commentaries and the Pali *Abhidhamma*. In at least five works, Gethin found the explanation that

² Keown 2016.

³ Gethin 2004, pp. 167–88.

⁴ D vol. 1, pp. 3–4.

⁵ SN verse 394. For more Pali sources on abstaining from killing, see Schmithausen 1999, p. 45, n. 1.

⁶ M vol. 3, p. 203.

⁷ Vin vol. 3, p. 73.

⁸ A vol. 3, p. 415.

⁹ Vin vol. 3, p. 73.

“the act of killing has five components: a living being, the perception of the living being as such, the thought of killing, the action, and the death [of the being] as a result.”¹⁰ When these five come together, the course of action is complete, that is, the act is karmically efficient. Summarizing the Pali *Abhidhamma*, Gethin says that no matter what the circumstances, “the actual intention that directly leads to the act of killing is always motivated by some kind of aversion. . . . [I]t is a psychological impossibility, a psychological contradiction in terms that one should, when motivated by nonattachment, friendliness (and wisdom), intentionally kill another living being.”¹¹

To bring out that “psychological impossibility,” Gethin analyzes¹² what is, according to the Pali tradition, virtuous (*kusala*) and nonvirtuous (*akusala*).¹³ This is, Gethin says, really a question “about the nature of the motivations (*hetu*) that function as the roots (*mūla*) of and so underlie the intention or will (*cetanā*) to act.”¹⁴ Motivations and roots of nonvirtuous acts are greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). These roots function as immediate or decisive (*saniṭṭhāpaka*) motivations. In short, at the decisive moment of an intentional act of killing, the act cannot be accompanied by any other consciousness than one that is rooted in aversion, and “compassion is absent at the moment of the decisive intention in one who intends death.”¹⁵

Finally, regarding the *Sarvāstivādin-Vaibhāṣika Abhidharma*, Gethin points out¹⁶ that the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, too, distinguishes between a general cause (*hetu-samutthāna*) and an immediate cause (*tatkṣaṇa-samutthāna*), and between courses of action (*karma-patha*) and proper and preliminary (*sāmantaka*) or preparatory (*prayoga*) acts.¹⁷ Here, too, the course of action (*karma-patha*) conducive to killing is exclusively accomplished by hatred.¹⁸ The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* also presents the five

¹⁰ Gethin 2004, p. 172, quotes the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, vol. 1, pp. 69–70.

¹¹ Gethin 2004, p. 178.

¹² Gethin 2004, pp. 176–80.

¹³ For a philological analysis of the original meaning of *kusala* and *akusala*, see Schmithausen 2013.

¹⁴ Gethin 2004, p. 180.

¹⁵ Gethin 2004, p. 182.

¹⁶ Gethin 2004, p. 188.

¹⁷ *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, ch. 4, pp. 10, 68.

¹⁸ *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, ch. 4, v. 70 a–b. See also Bayer 2010, p. 179: “Accomplishment <of killing> [comes about] only through hatred. Because without mercilessness the killing of another being does not come about.” The addition in pointed brackets is mine.

necessary components for the course of action¹⁹ that Gethin noted in Pali commentaries.

This brief recapitulation is crucial to understanding what exactly the bodhisattva, who is supposed to be allowed and able to intentionally kill with a compassionate motivation, is transgressing against, or from what he is exempted. It will then be of great interest to observe whether anyone who claims that the bodhisattva is exempted from these axiomatic foundations, or is supposed to get off scot-free from a transgression, addresses these problems, and if so, how.

KILLING IN MAHAYANA SOURCES

Now, according to the above analysis of Buddhist thought as visible in Pali commentaries and *Abhidhamma* texts, it should be impossible for anyone to commit an intentional act of killing with compassion as the decisive (Pali, *saniṭṭhāpaka*) motivation or immediate cause (Skt. *takṣaṇa-samutthāna*). Such an act, therefore, ought to have aversion as its root and misfortune as its fruit. Nevertheless, several Mahayana texts seem to teach cases where bodhisattvas intentionally kill an evil person, and their merit may even increase as a consequence of that act.

The Upāyakaśalya Mahāyānasūtra

One such text is the *Upāyakaśalya Mahāyānasūtra*. It contains the frequently cited story of the bodhisattva captain “Great Compassionate,” who perceives in a dream that an evil person on his ship is about to kill the other five hundred merchants (who are also bodhisattvas). To prevent that person from committing this heinous crime, and thereby to save him from its dire consequences, and to protect the other merchants and prevent them from taking matters into their hands and committing a violent nonvirtuous act in self-defense, the bodhisattva himself decides to kill that person, accepting all negative consequences for himself:

“If I were to kill this person, I would, as a consequence, be born in the hell of beings and after that would have to bear birth in the great hell of beings for one-hundred-thousand eons. However, [at least] this person will not kill those merchants and [his] evil [karma] will not increase,” he thought. Sons of the family! It is like this: the captain [named] Great Compassionate intentionally

¹⁹ *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, ch. 4, v. 73 a–b.

(Tib. *ched du bsams*; Skt. *saṃcintya*) killed that man with a spear with compassion and skill to protect those bodhisattvas [i.e., the other five hundred merchants]. I was at that time that captain named Great Compassionate. Sons of the family! Through that skill in means and great compassion, I have turned my back on samsara for one-hundred-thousand eons. That person, too, died and was born in the heavenly world. Those five hundred merchants on that ship were later the five hundred buddhas of this fortunate eon. Sons of the family! What do you think? Is there the least veil of karma for the *bodhisattva-mahāsattva* who has turned his back on samsara for one-hundred-thousand eons through the gnosis of skill in means? Sons of the family! You should not view it in that way!²⁰

Note that the bodhisattva captain assumes from the outset that he will be born as a consequence of the killing in hell for one-hundred-thousand eons, yet that seems to be acceptable because neither the other merchants will be killed nor does the evil person's demerit increase further. This is, so far, in accord with the analysis of Pali and Sarvāstivādin-Vaibhāṣika Buddhism.

Note furthermore that the bodhisattva kills intentionally and with compassion and skill in means. The question must be raised, however, wherein exactly lies the skill in means and what is the role and place of compassion? Is it the bodhisattva's special skill, as is often assumed in Western writing, that he kills motivated by nothing but compassion (hence, "compassionate killing")? If that were the case, the crucial point of the story is that he is able to avoid a negative outcome for himself because of the wholesomeness of compassion. Compassion would, as one Indian author explained in the thirteenth century, "outshine" the evil deed of killing like the moon outshines the stars.²¹ Our sutra, however, does not seem to specify a function to compassion except for merely being a general motivation at the basis, or in the background, of the whole event. The principal device in this sutra is, as the title already suggests, clearly "skill in means." The specific skillful means of the bodhisattva appears to be that even by the nonvirtuous act of

²⁰ *Upāyakaūśalya Mahāyānasūtra*, Derge vol. 66, fols. 304r, line 6, p. 607, line 6. For an alternate translation of this passage see Tatz 1994, p. 74.

²¹ In this example employed by the Paṇḍita Vibhūticandra (1170–1230), a disciple of the famous Mahā Paṇḍita ("great scholar") Śākyaśrībhadrā, the stars are the *prātimokṣa* vows and the moon signifies the overpowering qualities of the bodhisattva vows; see Sobisch 2002, pp. 79–129, esp. p. 121.

killing, he is able to cause benefit for the evil person, so that not only will the latter not be born in hell, but rather in the heavenly world instead.

The consequences of that skillful act are described as follows: (1) The evil person is not accumulating even more evil and is born in the heavenly world; (2) The lives of the five hundred merchants are protected, and they do not need to commit a violent nonvirtuous deed to protect themselves. Moreover, they are thus not impeded by the consequences of such a deed on their path to buddhahood; and (3) For the bodhisattva himself, the period of his stay in samsara is reduced by one-hundred-thousand eons.

Note that, other than at the beginning of the passage, negative consequences for the bodhisattva are not mentioned. Instead, his remaining time in samsara is reduced (just like a criminal's sentence is reduced because of good conduct). The causes for these results are mentioned twice. First, in a general way, the whole outcome is said to be caused by "skill in means and great compassion." In the final sentence, however, the "earlier release from samsara" of the bodhisattva captain is specifically connected with the "gnosis of skill in means"—without mentioning compassion anymore. This seems to suggest that the positive outcome for the bodhisattva himself occurs because of the skillful act through which he prevented the death of his fellow merchants and established the evil person in a heavenly world. We may, therefore, speak of two levels of results: (1) The bodhisattva directly and skillfully brings about the benefit for others and ensures their protection, good rebirth, and unimpeded development; (2) Through the merit arising from such benefitting of others he indirectly achieves a good result for himself.

If we take the absence of the term "compassion" in the final sentence seriously, the essential factor through which the bodhisattva avoids negative and achieves positive consequences for himself must be the merit that arises from protecting and benefitting others. The role of compassion is merely that it makes the whole act possible in a general way in that it initially directs the bodhisattva's attention to the fate of these beings and stimulates him to intervene. Compassion, therefore, largely seems to fulfill the function of a general initial motivation. Maybe "compassionate killing," for which no Western author ever offered a Sanskrit or Tibetan source term, is a misnomer to begin with, and maybe we should rather speak of "skillful killing"?²²

²² See Gray 2007, Jenkins 2010, and Schlieter 2006, to mention just a few.

*The Mahārahasyopāyakaśālyā Mahāyānasūtra*²³

Let us have a brief look at another version of this story from the *Mahārahasyopāyakaśālyā Mahāyānasūtra*.²⁴ The story is here presented with a few more words but appears to be basically the same. Two important details, however, were added.²⁵

The first addition is that the bodhisattva not only expects to burn in hell for one-hundred-thousand eons, but states that he “shall happily endure that experience of suffering” (*sdug bsngal myong bar ’gyur ba de la spro bar bya*).²⁶ This notion causes a certain tension with the abovementioned secondary level of results, that is, the bodhisattva’s earlier release from samsara caused by the merit accruing from protecting and benefitting others. Such an earlier release from samsara seems to avoid suffering, but here, the bodhisattva actually happily endures his suffering when it is the result of benefitting others. Moreover, it not only further complicates the situation of the motivations in the text, but it also complicates the question of which actual skill in means underlies the bodhisattva’s actions here. A bodhisattva who “happily endures suffering” (or even is only able to bear it) appears to have obtained a stage where he is able to cope with severe suffering, and that obviously modifies the skill in means that we have identified in the *Upāyakaśālyā*. There, the skillful act was principally that the bodhisattva was able to protect and benefit others even by an evil act such as killing. Here, in the *Mahārahasyopāyakaśālyā Mahāyānasūtra*, an element of a capability to cope with adverse condi-

²³ This sutra appears in the reference list under *Sarvabuddha Mahārahasyopāyakaśālyā Jñānottara Bodhisattvapariṣcchāparivarta Mahāyānasūtra*. The most important parts in the title are *Mahārahasya* (“great secret”) and *Upāyakaśālyā* (“skill in means”). Sanskrit *saṃdhi* rules join the final sound of the first word (“a”) with the initial sound of the second (“u”), transforming both into an “o.”

²⁴ *Mahārahasyopāyakaśālyā Mahāyānasūtra*; this passage is in Derge vol. 44, fols. 61r–v, pp. 121–22.

²⁵ Tatz 1994, pp. 17–18, points out that the former version is “genuinely earlier” while the second version “displays systematic (i.e., commentarial) expansion, inflation of numbers, and alteration of concepts and terminology.” The Chinese version of the latter text is dated to 420 CE.

²⁶ The respective passage as quoted in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* is this: *utsōḍhavyam eva bhagavan bodhisattvenāpattim āpattum tac ca nairayikaṃ duṣkham*; ut-√sah, fut. pass. part., “to be endured” (Tib. *spro bar bya*), but arguably with the connotation “happily, willingly, readily.” In the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* (see Vaidya 1959, p. 24), on the other hand, the Sanskrit *utsōḍhavyaḥ* has been translated into Tibetan as *nyams su bzod nus*. I would like to thank Sonam Spitz for bringing these passages to my attention.

tions is added because the expected suffering arising from killing will not affect him negatively (i.e., he will not lose his loving kindness for others even when he suffers). However, just as we begin to imagine a bodhisattva with a superpower of patience and endurance, when the passage mentions the outcome for the bodhisattva (see below), no negative results are mentioned. One wonders, then, why he needs to be described as one who happily endures suffering (or as one who is at least capable of bearing it)? What is really achieved by adding this detail to the story? Perhaps it reflects a slightly different bodhisattva ideal, that is, one where not obtaining perfect buddhahood is the focus, but rather the bodhisattva’s unconditional commitment to the well-being of sentient beings by remaining among them in the midst of samsara? However, the inclusion of such a (new?) focus in this story, if that is what happened, now creates a tension with the element of the earlier release from samsara. A somewhat paradoxical situation arises where the bodhisattva happily endures taking the suffering of others upon himself, but at the same time gains an earlier escape from samsara.

The second addition occurs when the conclusion of the story is spelled out:

Do you think that the reducing of samsara [by] one-hundred-thousand eons and abandoning it through skill in means and great compassion is the veil of karma of the bodhisattva? Do not view it in that way! View it as the very skill in means!²⁷

Here, compassion is now explicitly mentioned together with skill in means as the cause of the bodhisattva’s reduction, and finally, his abandonment, of samsara. The *Mahārahasya*, however, does not explain how exactly compassion is supposed to function here, and our problems regarding the psychological foundations as taught in the Pali sources and the *Abhidharma* of the Sarvāstivādin-Vaibhāṣika are neither addressed nor solved. In particular, the sutra does not mention whether or how compassion plays a role in the actual act of killing. If compassion is supposed to be the general initial motivation as seems to be the case in the *Upāyakaūsalya*, it is, of course, conceivable that it contributes to the arising of a positive result in a general sense. However, that compassion is described as an element of “the very skill in means” that causes the positive outcome for the bodhisattva himself seems to be an unnecessary addition because the exact

²⁷ *Mahārahasyopāyakaūsalya*, Derge vol. 44, fol. 61v, p. 122.

same positive result has been achieved in the *Upāyakaūsalya* by merit derived from the skillful act of protecting and benefitting others alone.

Both additions do not contribute to an understanding of the story, but rather complicate it. The aspect of the happy endurance of the suffering, however, will play an important role in the teaching of the Tibetan master discussed in the last part of this essay.

The Bodhisattvabhūmi

The idea of a compassionately killing bodhisattva underwent further developments and transformations over time. In the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*,²⁸ a highwayman is about to kill a large number of *śrāvakas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and bodhisattvas. To prevent that heinous crime and the highwayman's going to hell, a bodhisattva intentionally kills him.

The vital point of this story, however, is that the bodhisattva takes care that either he himself or, alternatively, the highwayman (this point is controversial) is in a virtuous or neutral state of mind at the moment of the killing. According to Lambert Schmithausen, a Sanskrit manuscript of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* available to him clearly suggests a reading according to which the bodhisattva kills the highwayman in a moment where the *highwayman* is either in a neutral or virtuous state of mind.²⁹ This is to secure the highwayman's obtainment of an immediate good rebirth.³⁰ The Chinese- and Tibetan-language versions, however, are either ambiguous or contradict this interpretation.³¹ The commentator *Sāgaramegha (also known as *Samudramegha)³² clearly states that the neutral or virtuous state belongs to the bodhisattva, and he adds that the bodhisattva furthermore has to be free from affliction (Skt. *akliṣṭa*). Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) fol-

²⁸ *Bodhisattvabhūmi*; see Dutt 1966, p. 113, line 23, p. 114, line 2. Derge vol. 129, fol. 89b, line 2, p. 179, line 2.

²⁹ Schmithausen 2007, pp. 428–29.

³⁰ That the state of the mind at the moment of death is decisive is a widespread Buddhist view. Schmithausen (2007, p. 429 n. 20) provides some sources. According to Theravada Buddhism, even a person who has committed much evil might directly go to Tuṣita heaven, for which the example is given of King Duṭṭhagāmaṇi, who, having killed many Tamils in battle, was born in heaven. For interesting discussions of this point see Langer 2007, pp. 14–15, and Holt 1991, pp. 56–59. That the state of mind at the moment of death is of great importance is also maintained by the Tibetan master Jigten Sumgön ('Jig rten gsum mgon; 1143–1217), whose teachings will be discussed below.

³¹ Schmithausen 2007, p. 429, §2.4.

³² Derge vol. 133, fol. 169b, p. 339.

lows him in both respects.³³ The crucial passage in the Tibetan text of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* is this:

“If I kill this person, I will indeed be born in the hell of beings, but my being born in the hell of beings is imprudent (*mdo med*). If this being commits a heinous crime and goes to the hell of beings, that is [also] not acceptable.”³⁴ If the bodhisattva—with such an intention and knowing that *his* mind is virtuous or neutral—kills that person with great caution (*'dzem bzhin du*) and only out of compassion concerning the future [consequences], not only will there not be any fault, but his merit will much increase.³⁵

The text presents the case as a dilemma: it is imprudent for the bodhisattva to be born in hell, and it is also not acceptable for a bodhisattva to allow the evil person to go to hell. The only way out is to act with the skill in means of an intentional killing.

Here it is “imprudent” for the bodhisattva to be born in hell—a far cry from being happily able to endure it. The author seems to assume that such a birth would impede the bodhisattva’s loving kindness and thereby his career as a bodhisattva. May we conclude from this remark that the author had a bodhi-sattva in mind who has not yet reached the pure levels beyond the seventh *bhūmi* where fearlessness is obtained? I will return to this topic later.

The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* also adds another dimension to the bodhisattva’s skillfulness. He either takes care that the evil person is, at the moment of

³³ Schmithausen 2007, p. 429, §§3.2 and 3.3. See Tsong kha pa, *Byang chub sems dpa'i sdom pa*, fol. 71a, line 2, p. 142.

³⁴ From here onwards this passage was translated and discussed in Schmithausen 2007, pp. 429–30. I have rendered *'dzem bzhin du* as “with great caution” strictly according to my understanding of the Tibetan term, while Schmithausen translates “*schweren Herzens*” (“with a heavy heart”), surely following the Sanskrit version (*rtīyamānaḥ*). The way I have seen the term *'dzem du* employed in indigenous Tibetan texts in the context of karma is that it means that even someone with a high level of spiritual realization should be very attentive and cautious with regard to karmic consequences. Cf. Phag mo gru pa, *gSung 'bum* ('Bri gung manuscript), vol. 3, fol. 90v: *rgyu 'bras nam mkha' ltar rtogs kyang / rgyu 'bras phra zhing phra ba la 'dzem/* (“Even when one has realized cause and result to be like space [i.e., empty], one [continues to] pay very close attention to cause and result”); Phag mo gru pa, *gSung 'bum* ('Bri gung manuscript), vol. 3, fol. 163r: *chos thams cad nam mkha' dkyil ltar rtogs kyang las 'bras khyad du mi gsad/* (“Even having realized all phenomena to be like the centre of space, one does not disregard karma and result”); and rDo rje shes rab 2009, p. 323: *stong nyid rtogs nas las rgyu 'bras la 'dzem du 'gro dgos gsungs/* (“It is said: ‘Having realized emptiness, one must proceed very attentive to karma, cause, and result’”).

³⁵ *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, Derge vol. 129, fol. 89b, p. 179.

death, in a neutral or virtuous state (according to the Sanskrit manuscripts of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*) or that the bodhisattva himself is in such a state of mind (according to the commentaries by *Sāgaramegha [*Samudramegha], and Tsongkhapa). Thus, if it is as per the first case, the skillful act includes the ability to perceive the mental state of the evil person at the moment of the killing to ensure his higher rebirth. If it is as per the second case, the skillful act of killing includes the ability to kill while the bodhisattva himself is in a neutral or virtuous state of mind, which evidently indicates that he has in mind the avoiding of negative consequences for himself. In the first case, it would strengthen the idea that merit arises from the killing because the bodhisattva skillfully ensures that the person to be killed not only avoids further demerit but is also reborn in heaven. This merit arising from protecting and benefitting others would then ensure a positive outcome for the bodhisattva himself. In the second case, the door would be open for the assumption that in the bodhisattva's mind, compassion is present at the actual moment of the killing as an immediate or decisive motivation, which would conflict with the doctrines of the *suttas*, the Pali commentaries, and the earlier and later *Abhidharma*.³⁶ The *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, however, does not discuss the doctrinal problems arising from such an assumption.

FRUITION OR NO FRUITION?

If the bodhisattva kills intentionally and if the five components—a living being, the perception of the living being as such, the thought of killing, the action, and the death (of the being) as a result—come together (as explained, for example, in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* and the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*),³⁷ why is there no fruition of the karma of killing for the bodhisattva—or is there?

The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* boldly states: “Not only will there not be any fault, but his merit will much increase.”³⁸ Such statements may have been the basis for Śāntideva's famous statement:

The Merciful One, out of farsightedness,
permitted prohibited [deeds] to them [i.e., to the bodhisattvas].³⁹

³⁶ The problem also arises that a neutral state of mind would be possible as an immediate or decisive motivation since the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* mentions that state as a possible alternative to a virtuous state.

³⁷ *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, vol. 1, pp. 69–70, and *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, ch. 4, v. 73 ab.

³⁸ *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, Derge vol. 129, fol. 89b, p. 179.

³⁹ *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, ch. 4, verse 84, lines a–b, Derge vol. 105, fol. 13v, p. 27.

However, this is not so directly or unambiguously stated in the above sutra passages. The *Upāyakaṣālya* states that there is not the least karmic veil for the *bodhisattva-mahāsattva* who has reduced samsara by one-hundred-thousand eons, and the *Mahārahasya* asks, rhetorically, whether that reduction and abandoning of samsara constitutes a karmic veil. These cumbersome formulations “for someone who has reduced . . . there is no veil” and “reduction and abandoning . . . is not a veil” are far from being straightforward statements as in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (“Not only will there not be any fault, but his merit will much increase.”). It rather appears as if both sutras skirt the problem whether any negative karmic fruition occurs *at all*. They seem to argue that someone with such an amount of merit will not be in karmic debt, after all, assuming that the merit surplus has equalized the debt long ago, in other words, that karmic debt and merit can be offset against each other. This is, however, in no way explicitly stated in the text. The sutra passages actually do not seem to rule out the possibility that for the bodhisattva captain a negative fruition occurred *before* samsara came to an end (earlier than expected). Once again, strictly speaking, both sutra passages leave room for the possibility that negative karmic fruition occurred for the bodhisattva while he was still bound to samsara.

In the immediately following passage, the sutras tell the well-known story of the thorn that pierced the Tathāgata’s foot. When Ānanda asks him which deed he had done for which this is the fruition, the Tathāgata replies that it has been the “residue of the fruition of that deed,”⁴⁰ referring to the bodhisattva captain’s killing of the evil person. In other words, a negative fruition *has* arisen from the killing, of which the thorn is the last residue (Tib. *lhag ma*). Thus, most of the fruition must have occurred at an earlier time. The Buddhist tradition, however, does not agree on a single interpretation of this and similar incidents (such as the Buddha not receiving alms or eating poisoned food, et al.). Apparently, the Mahāsāṃghika tradition favors an interpretation according to which such incidents were skillful means of instructing sentient beings. The Mūlasarvāstivādin tradition, on the other hand, accepted the existence of bad karma for the Buddha, albeit as a mere faint echo of former bad deeds.⁴¹ The present sutras describe the Buddha as a superhuman being, whose body is in principle unharmable (Tib. *rd*

⁴⁰ *Upāyakaṣālya*, Derge vol. 66, fol. 305r line 7, p. 610: *las kyi rnam par smin pa’i lhag ma ’di yin*.

⁴¹ Xing 2005, pp. 106–18

rje'i sku mi tshugs pa'i sku yin).⁴² In the form they are available to us, they indeed frame the story of the thorn into an interpretation according to which the piercing of the Buddha's foot by a thorn is merely a skillful (i.e., didactic) means of convincing a particular group of people of the truth of karmic retribution. However, they do not accept it as a karmic veil (Tib. *las kyi sgrib pa ma yin*) of the Buddha, who is merely putting on a show. Thus, the sutras ultimately deny that the incident of the thorn is proof of the Buddha still possessing karmic remainders. However, within that narrative frame, triggered by Ānanda's question, the thorn is indeed presented as proof of the karmic fruition of the former deed. Curiously, Maudgalyāyana, famous for his supernatural powers, is completely unable to remove the thorn from the world to protect the Buddha. Instead, the thorn follows the Buddha to the heaven of the four classes of kings, the heaven of the thirty-three gods on top of Sumeru, to the middle of the ocean, and so forth, which must be read as an apt illustration of the infallibility and inevitability of karmic fruition. Within the narrative framework, the Buddha uses his supernatural power, which is obviously stronger than Maudgalyāyana's power, to cause the karmic residue to appear in the form of this thorn and to follow him wherever he goes. By creating this superhuman Buddha, however, these sutras merely achieve a special status for the Buddha as being able to conjure up karmic residue: "Because such is the skillful means of the Tathāgata, [the stepping onto the thorn] is not a karmic veil."⁴³ Note that this does not argue anymore primarily with the Buddha's vast amount of merit, but with the supernormal skill of being able to conjure up karmic residues in any form, and it argues that what he has, the power to conjure up, cannot be a veil. Moreover, this is not an argument for any bodhisattva being beyond the law of karma, but only for the Buddha not being veiled by karma.

However that may be, some Buddhists have interpreted the piercing of the thorn simply as an arising of the final residue of the karma of killing the evil person, albeit one that has no power to diminish in any way the Buddha's status of being liberated and awakened. One example of a person who maintains such a view will be the Tibetan master whose interpretation I introduce in the following section. Perceived in this way, such karmic fruition, no matter how small it may be, still presupposes a nonvirtuous intention at the time of the actual deed. Moreover, disregarding the problem of such final fruition, the sutras leave open the question of which other ways the negative fruition

⁴² *Upāyakaśalya*, Derge vol. 66, fol. 304v, p. 609.

⁴³ *Upāyakaśalya*, Derge vol. 66, fol. 305v line 4, p. 611.

might have manifested during the period the bodhisattva dwelled in samsara (however much reduced that period was) before he became the Buddha. In any case, the problem of the karmic fruition of the killing is not solved in the sutras. It has just been made a lot more complicated.

A TIBETAN SOLUTION

I would now like to discuss the view of a Tibetan master who attempts to provide a solution to these problems. He thereby appears to be satisfying the Mahayanistic impulses of these stories without neglecting the specifications of the early *suttas* and the *Abhidharma* literature. I have already introduced Jigten Sumgön (’Jig rten gsum mgon; 1143–1217) and his *Gongchik* (*dGongs gcig*, Single Intention) in previous articles and books.⁴⁴ Here, I will concentrate on some of his pithy one-line instructions, the so-called *vajra* statements (*rdo rje’i gsung*), from the “Bodhisattva” chapter of his most famous work and their explanation by the commentators. As we will see, these statements often have in mind the precise issues that we have been discussing in the present essay.

If It Is a Transgression, It Must Comprise Affliction

The first *vajra* statement with direct relation to the present discussion is the fifth of the “Bodhisattva” chapter: “There are no transgressions that do not comprise afflictions.”⁴⁵ As the 1633 commentary of Chökyi Dragpa (1559–1659)⁴⁶ points out, this statement is a reply to a view similar to what has

⁴⁴ His *Gongchik* (the text of which is included in rDo rje shes rab 2009) is a work that condenses the “ineffable” (*brjod du med pa*) of Mahāmudrā into one hundred and fifty core formulations, the so-called *vajra* statements (*rdo rje’i tshig*). The *Gongchik* weaves the thread of Mahāmudrā through the entire fabric of Buddhism. It presents Mahāmudrā as pervading disciplined conduct (*tshul khrims*), meditative concentration (*ting nge ’dzin*), and discriminative knowledge (*shes rab*), as well as ground, path, and result (*gzhi lam ’bras bu*), view, practice, and conduct (*lta sgom spyod pa*), and the “three vows” of *prātimokṣa*, the bodhisattvas, and mantra. For some remarks on the *Gongchik*, see Sobisch 2004, 2009a, 2009b, 2011, and 2015. For a complete translation of the text and one of its major commentaries, see Sobisch 2020. For the life of Jigten Sumgön, see Sommerschuh 2014 and 2017.

⁴⁵ rDo rje shes rab 2009, vol. 3, p. 19; Rin chen byang chub 2008, p. 179; Chos kyi grags pa 2007, p. 138: *nyon mongs pa can ma yin pa’i ltung ba med*.

⁴⁶ Rigdzin Chökyi Dragpa (Rig ’dzin chos kyi grags pa) was an important successor of Jigten Sumgön. He was the last heir of the Kyura family clan and installed a new system of “succession by incarnation.” His *oeuvre* comprises fifteen volumes of writings chiefly on the meditation practices of Jigten Sumgön’s *’Bri gung bka’ brgyud* tradition. The third volume

been maintained by Sakya Paṇḍita (1182–1251; hereafter referred to using the shortened form “Sapaṇ”) in his *Domsum Rabye*.⁴⁷ Sapaṇ held that there are four categories: (1) transgression, (2) nontransgression, (3) reflection of a transgression, and (4) reflection of a nontransgression. Accordingly, “to kill with a virtuous intention” would produce only the “reflection of a transgression.”⁴⁸ In his work, Sapaṇ supplies the scriptural authority with a quotation from the *Catuḥśataka* of Āryadeva (ca. 170–270 CE):

Since mind is the principal factor,
all the virtues and nonvirtues
of the bodhisattvas
are virtuous through their intention.⁴⁹

In his rejoinder, Chökyi Dragpa neither accepts the categories “reflection of a transgression” and “reflection of a nontransgression” nor, apparently, *Catuḥśataka*, chapter 5, verse 5, calling such views the “fruitless opinions of a scholar.”⁵⁰ An ostensible “killing with a virtuous motivation” is, according to the commentators of the *Gongchik*, in truth nothing but a general virtuous motivation (*kun slong dge ba*) and, at the moment of the actual act, a nonvirtuous execution of the act (*sbyor ba mi dge ba*). The execution of the act is

is dedicated to the *Gongchik* and one other important basic work of Jigten Sumgön, the *Theg chen bstan pa'i snying po* (Essence of the Mahayana Teachings).

⁴⁷ Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltzen opposed in many matters Jigten Sumgön’s teachings. His *Domsum Rabye* (*sDom gsum rab dbye*, comp. 1232; see Jackson 1987, vol. 1, p. 66) was composed after Jigten Sumgön’s death (1217). This was the time when the latter’s nephew Sherab Jungné (Shes rab ’byung gnas; 1187–1241) first started to teach the *Gongchik* in public (Sobisch 2014, p. 198). The commentaries of the *Gongchik* and the *Domsum Rabye* indicate that they were in many ways reactions to the teachings that floated around within the opponent’s tradition. That is to say, not all statements in these works need to be reactions to already published works. There is evidence that teachers of both schools met, and that their students received teachings from both traditions.

⁴⁸ *Domsum Rabye*, ch. 2, v. 31–32.

⁴⁹ *Domsum Rabye*, ch. 2, v. 34. Identified in Rhoton 2002, p. 93, n. 8, as *Catuḥśataka*, ch. 5, v. 5, and cited in the *Domsum Rabye* as follows: *'phags pa lha yis bzhi brgya par// bsam pas byang chub sems dpa' yi// dge ba'am yang na mi dge ba// thams cad dge ba nyid 'gyur te// gang phyir sems de gtso ba'i phyir//*. Derge vol. 97, fol. 6r, p. 12, has a number of variants: *bsam pas byang chub sems dpa' la// dge' am 'on te mi dge rung// thams cad dge legs nyid 'gyur te// gang phyir yid de'i dbang gyur phyir//*.

⁵⁰ It would be possible for the Drikungpa (’Bri gung pa, the name of Jigten Sumgön’s tradition) to accept Āryadeva’s verse, but only in one particular interpretation (see the section “Intention as the Principal Factor,” below). The commentaries, however, do not explain the matter in much detail.

nonvirtuous because at the very moment the captain Great Compassionate is stabbing the evil person, he cannot but cultivate aversion. Like the Pali *suttas* and the *Abhidharma*, the *Gongchik* maintains the view that compassion cannot be the decisive motivation at the very moment of the killing. Instead, it is rather a general, underlying motive. Chökyi Dragpa states:

If the captain Great Compassionate—even though [his general] motivation at the time of the cause is to benefit beings—does not cultivate the motivation of hatred at the time [of the actual deed], he is unable to stab [the victim with his] weapon. Therefore, the fruition of cultivating hatred is what arises later.⁵¹

Since the execution of the act is in that way immediately based on a non-virtuous mind of aversion, the very act of the killing cannot, therefore, be merely a “reflection of a transgression,” as Sapaṅ maintains. Instead, it is a transgression proper and will, consequently, have painful karmic fruition. Āryadeva’s verse states in its first line that “mind is the principal factor.” This is also maintained by Jigten Sumgön (see “Intention as the Principal Factor,” below). However, he does not accept that there are nonvirtuous acts that have virtuous motivations in more than the broadest sense. If such a virtuous mind of compassion in the broadest sense underlies an act, it will have its own virtuous fruition. However, such a general motivation of compassion does not “outshine” (as Vibhūticandra [1170–1220] maintained) the immediate motivation of aversion that is necessary for the execution of the act of killing. Both motivations come into play and will have their *respective* karmic fruitions. Jigten Sumgön speaks in this context of “separate and unmixed” karmic fruitions. This is one of several cases where he does not accept the categorizations of an Indian scholarly tradition.⁵² As I have shown elsewhere, he rather relies on the Buddha’s words (Skt. *buddhavacana*) themselves as transmitted in sutra and tantra, the experiences of the *vajra ācāryas* of the lineage, the stories that illustrate the dependent origination of an event (as found in Jatakas and sutras), and the yogi’s own experiences.⁵³

Intention as the Principal Factor

The *Gongchik* chapter on the *prātimokṣa* vows contains a *vajra* statement that teaches that “in all transgressions, the intention is the principal

⁵¹ Chos kyi grags pa 2007, p. 142 (in the context of ch. 4, *vajra* statement 7).

⁵² Cf. Sobisch 2015.

⁵³ Sobisch 2015, p. 476.

factor.”⁵⁴ Since the intention at the very moment of the killing is indeed to harm the evil person, this alone is the principal factor, and that very act itself is unavoidably a transgression.⁵⁵ As we will see later on, it is indeed possible that a bodhisattva, under the same general conditions of compassion, commits an act that is usually classified as a transgression, such as stealing or telling a lie. However, since he commits that act not only with a general intention of compassion, but also with a specific motivation that is virtuous at the very moment of the execution of the act, both the general and the decisive motivation or immediate cause are to be classified as virtuous. According to Jigten Sumgön, such acts are, therefore, “virtuous in all respects,” that is, they have both a virtuous motivation (*kun slong dge ba*) and a virtuous execution of the act (*sbyor ba dge ba*). I will return to this point in a moment. Although Chökyi Dragpa does not discuss Āryadeva’s verse in detail, he does say that the line “mind is the principal factor” refers to intention (as in *Gongchik*, ch. 3, *vajra* statement 6). That is to say that if both the general and the immediate motivation is virtuous (as in “virtuous in all respects”), there is indeed no transgression since the mind is the principal factor, even though the act may be considered nonvirtuous by one who is unable to perceive its underlying motivations.⁵⁶ Specific examples of such acts that are virtuous in all respects—although they may look from the outside like transgressions—are discussed below.

Faults and Permissions

To gain a full overview of the complexity of Jigten Sumgön’s thought in the context of the vows and conduct of bodhisattvas, let me briefly

⁵⁴ *Gongchik*, ch. 3, *vajra* statement 6.

⁵⁵ As mentioned above, several things have to coincide to make the intentional killing of a person successful. The bodhisattva has to recognize the evil person as a person, identify a vital organ of the body that—if stabbed with a lance—causes the death of that person, commit the act with a deadly weapon, and satisfy himself that the act was successful, i.e., that the person is, in fact, dead. According to the Pali commentaries and *Abhidharma* texts, this is precisely what constitutes a complete transgression that will lead to a negative karmic fruition.

⁵⁶ Thus, if we understand “nonvirtuous” in the line “all virtues and nonvirtues of the bodhisattvas” as referring to acts that are usually categorized as “nonvirtuous,” but become virtuous because the bodhisattva is “skillful in all respects,” i.e., that the bodhisattva acts with both a general and immediate virtuous motivation, then it would be acceptable for the Drikungpas to say that “all [that is usually seen as] . . . nonvirtues . . . are virtuous through their intention,” as Āryadeva says in the *Catuḥṣataka* passage quoted above.

introduce here one further important topic, namely the problem of what constitutes a fault (*nyes pa*) and permission (*gnang ba*). I have already referred to Śāntideva, who states in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra* that the Buddha has given his permission to bodhisattvas to commit acts that he has prohibited for others.⁵⁷ Candragomin made a similar statement in his *Bodhisattvasaṃvaravimśaka*:

Because they possess compassion, and out of love,
there is no fault for those with a virtuous mind.⁵⁸

Āryadeva’s *Catuḥśataka* also belongs to this group of quotations.⁵⁹ To those people who took these quotes of Indian scholars as evidence that the Buddha had permitted the bodhisattvas to commit nonvirtuous acts—and that is probably the mainstream interpretation in Tibet—Jigten Sumgön replied that “there is no permission of a ‘nonvirtuous act that does not become a fault.’”⁶⁰ Rinchen Jangchub (fl. 13th c.), probably writing in the 1260s, formulates it thus:

Due to the fundamental nature of the dependent origination of cause and result, it is not so that such [activities] are permitted because they would, thereby, not entail faults.⁶¹

In other words, if something is nonvirtuous by its fundamental nature, not even the Buddha himself has the power to permit it and thus make it so that it would not entail a transgression. The crucial point is, therefore, that the bodhisattva must be able to bear the consequences of the transgression, since such conduct is, according to Rinchen Jangchub,

[only said to be] permitted in the regard that the bodhisattva does not deteriorate through the sufferings of the result of that karma—namely, the [sufferings of the] three lower realms—and that he is able to bear [the consequences]. Therefore, faults do arise! Ask yourself: “Will I be able to bear [the consequences] or not?” There

⁵⁷ *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, ch. 5, v. 84cd.

⁵⁸ *Bodhisattvasaṃvaravimśaka*, Derge vol. 138, fol. 167v, p. 335.

⁵⁹ See *Catuḥśataka*, ch. 5, v. 5.

⁶⁰ *Gongchik*, ch. 4, *vajra* statement 6: *nyes pa mi 'gyur ba'i mi dge ba gnang ba med*. rDo rje shes rab 2009, vol. 3, pp. 22–27; Rin chen byang chub 2008, pp. 181–85, Chos kyi grags pa 2007, pp. 139–40.

⁶¹ Rin chen byang chub 2008, p. 183. Rinchen Jangchub wrote one of the three most important commentaries on the *Gongchik*.

is no other question but to analyze whether sufferings such as hunger, thirst, and freezing [in the lower realms] will overpower you, and whether your virtuous Dharma conduct will deteriorate [as a result]. The Buddha has permitted [such conduct] to those bodhisattvas who have attained acceptance of [the fact that] phenomena [are without origin],⁶² who [can bear to] remain in hell for immeasurable eons for the sake of each sentient being, but whose virtuous Dharma conduct would not deteriorate through those sufferings.⁶³

Dorjé Sherab (ca. 1200–d.u.), writing his commentary in 1267, describes the stage of realization of such a bodhisattva in the following way:

The root of not losing the benefit of oneself and others is emptiness and compassion. Consequently, if one familiarizes oneself with the quintessence of emptiness and compassion, it will be like that. Having become steadfast in that regard, even though the negative results of engaging in the use of force [as in acts such as killing] ripen, the maturation and liberation of sentient beings do occur. However, one must stabilize the root of emptiness and compassion.⁶⁴

In his comments on the eighth *vajra* statement in chapter 4, Dorjé Sherab returns to this point.⁶⁵ He explains that since both motivation and practice are great, it is from the eighth bodhisattva level (Skt. *bhūmi*) onwards that they accomplish the benefit of others in a real sense and are both able to engage in special observances (*brtul zhugs*)⁶⁶ and endure great suffering. They thus may engage in “vast liberality”—a euphemism for the activities

⁶² Skt. *anutpattikadharmakṣānti*, obtained on the eighth level (Skt. *bhūmi*) of the bodhisattvas.

⁶³ Rin chen byang chub 2008, p. 184.

⁶⁴ Dorjé Sherab (rDo rje shes rab) is the author of one of the three most important commentaries of the *Gongchik*. For the date 1267, see Martin 2001, p. 151, n. 14. rDo rje shes rab 2009, vol. 3, p. 25.

⁶⁵ rDo rje shes rab 2009, vol. 3, pp. 31–32.

⁶⁶ The term “special observances” (*brtul zhugs*) has a broad range of meanings. It is based on the concept of disciplined conduct (*tshul khrims*; Skt. *śīla*), but includes those activities that, as expressed here (and elsewhere in the *Gongchik* literature), only bodhisattvas of the pure levels (eighth to tenth *bhūmi*) can master. These observances include for the bodhisattva such practices as the offering of his body and, for the tantric adept, the transgressive activities of non-duality. For the latter, see Wedemeyer’s remarks on *caryāvrata/vratācaryā*; Wedemeyer 2013, p. 302.

discussed here. Note, however, that results accrue even for bodhisattvas of the “pure *bhūmis*” (i.e., of levels eight to ten). For a lesser bodhisattva, the results would be unbearable. Only bodhisattvas of the pure levels are able to bear such fruition because they have obtained the level of “acceptance of the fact that phenomena are without origin.”⁶⁷

“*Unmixed Results*”

Let us now return to the discussion of the unmixed results arising from acts that have both a general virtuous motivation and a specific nonvirtuous execution, such as the act of killing with a virtuous motivation. Jigten Sumgön states that the negative consequences of an act committed with an immediate cause of aversion will come to fruition even if it is based on a general virtuous motivation: “The results of virtue and nonvirtue occur separately.”⁶⁸ Dorjé Sherab applies this principle to the case under discussion:

The skill in means that is mixed with hatred is such that [both] causes and results arise separately and unmixed. The result of that hatred is said to have occurred as both a temporary and an ultimate result, [and] through the virtue of the altruistic thought [the bodhisattva’s stay in] samsara was reduced by one-hundred-thousand eons.⁶⁹

Dorjé Sherab does not explain in detail what the “temporary and ultimate results” of hatred are, but we may assume that they are what his contemporary, Rinchen Jangchub, explains in the same context as the result of the bodhisattva captain’s hatred in the instant of stabbing:

⁶⁷ Certain abilities are already acquired on the seventh level of the bodhisattvas, but discussing them would not do much to clarify the key issues of the current context. These abilities are discussed in Sobisch 2020, pp. 323, 344–45, 360.

⁶⁸ *Gongchik*, ch. 4, *vajra* statement 10.

⁶⁹ rDo rje shes rab 2009, vol. 3, p. 28. The wording of the *Upāyakaśālya* passage, at least, suggests that the earlier release from samsara is specifically caused “through the gnosis of skill in means,” e.g., the protecting and benefitting of others through killing. Since all others involved are benefitted and protected, the bodhisattva captain accumulates much merit. Dorjé Sherab mentions here only the “altruistic thought” as the cause of the earlier release. That, however, is maintained as the principal thing (“Mind is the principal factor”). It is perhaps obvious to him that benefitting and protecting others has virtuous results. In more detail, we will see below that the Drikungpas define skill in means as virtuous when it is so in all respects of cause (motivation, that is, altruistic thought), path (means or act, that is, benefitting and protecting), and result (benefit and protection).

The nonvirtuous result, however, is not interrupted by the virtue arising from the skillful act. . . . He was born for many hundred eons in the hell of sentient beings. Moreover, finally, at the time of buddhahood, that piercing of his foot with the acacia thorn was precisely a fruition of that karma.⁷⁰

Thus, as it is explicitly stated here, the temporary result of the nonvirtuous act of the bodhisattva captain is birth in hell (which is neither explicitly stated nor denied in the sutras that we have investigated above) and the ultimate (i.e., final) result is the piercing of the Buddha's foot with an acacia thorn. The doctrinal background (mentioned by Chökyi Dragpa)⁷¹ is a passage of the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*,⁷² which teaches a fourfold division of karma into (1) black actions with black results, (2) white actions with white results, (3) black and white actions with black and white results, and (4) actions with neither black nor white results (leading to the destruction of karma).⁷³ Of these, the third category is of interest here: within the realm of desire (Skt. *kāmapratīsamūyukta*), there exist actions with (1) black intentions and white means and (2) white intentions and black means. Some people hold that from such a combination of virtuous and nonvirtuous causes arises a result that is an indistinguishable "combination of black and white."⁷⁴ It is precisely this that is rejected by Jigten Sumgön, who maintains that the result is not an admixture or complete merging, or fusing, of the black and white components. Instead, as repeated many times in the *Gongchik* and its commentaries, such a result is a combination of black and white elements, where the black results arise from black actions, and the white results arise from white actions. Chökyi Dragpa states:

If one plants, for example, a mixture of barley and peas in a field, one may apply the label "mixed barley and peas" to it, but in real-

⁷⁰ Rin chen byang chub 2008, p. 186.

⁷¹ See Chökyi Dragpa 2007, p. 149.

⁷² One can find the passage at the end of ch. 1, sect. 2, of the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*; see Rahula 2001, pp. 126–27. For these four kinds of actions see also A vol. 4, p. 235, and M vol. 1, p. 387.

⁷³ According to Schmithausen 1986, p. 207, the latter "neither-black-nor-white karma" is a division where the intention (*cetanā*) is to abandon all retributive karma. It is *anāsrava* (*zag pa med pa*). Its definition differs in later treatises and commentaries. Bayer 2010, pp. 240, 400.

⁷⁴ The *Gonchik* commentaries usually do not identify their opponents. In this particular case, it clearly makes one think of Sapan; see for instance *Domsun Rabje*, ch. 1, v. 46, and Rhoton 2002, p. 47.

ity, from barley ripens barley, and from peas ripen peas, and apart from that nothing else.⁷⁵

Similarly, the *Ānguttara Nikāya* and the *Majjhima Nikāya* already explain,⁷⁶ for instance, that beings born in the human world experience their world for this reason (that is, because of “mixed karma”) sometimes as heavenly and sometimes as hellish experiences—but obviously not both contradictory experiences at the very same moment, or not fused into one experience. Therefore, to claim that the case where the captain killed with a virtuous motivation is an example of a “black action with a white result” is problematic. The white result that is experienced by the captain consists in the reduction of the number of eons he has to remain in samsara. It is still a result arising from virtue, namely the virtuous intention, as explicitly stated in Dorjé Sherab’s commentary above.⁷⁷ The white result is not the result of the nonvirtue, that is, the decisive or immediate motivation at the time of the killing and consisting of the necessary moment of aversion. Thus, in contrast to what was analyzed for the sutras above, Jigten Sumgön does not maintain an “equalizing of the karmic debt” through merit, and he does not assume that karmic debt and merit can be offset against each other.

Skillful in All Respects

The last topic that helps to illuminate the complexity of Jigten Sumgön’s thoughts on this matter is, as already mentioned above, his idea of what constitutes bodhisattva conduct that is “skillful in all respects.” This is an important point since only conduct that is skillful in all respects is completely free from all negative consequences. He comments upon conduct that is not skillful completely in all its respects as follows: “If a nonvirtuous [deed] occurs, its result will arise [even] for one who is skilled with regard to means.”⁷⁸ Rinchen Jangchub states:

If at [the times of] cause, path, or result, there is any kind of mixture of [virtue and] nonvirtue, it is not [in all respects] skilled with regard to means. The [perfect] skill in means of the bodhisattva

⁷⁵ Chos kyi grags pa 2007, p. 75.

⁷⁶ See A vol. 4, p. 235, and M vol. 1, p. 387.

⁷⁷ *gZhan don bsam pa'i dge bas*, rDo rje shes rab 2009, vol. 3, p. 28.

⁷⁸ *Gongchik*, ch. 4, *vajra* statement 7. rDo rje shes rab 2009, vol. 3, pp. 27–29; Rin chen byang chub 2008, pp. 185–87; Chos kyi grags pa 2007, pp. 141–42: *thabs la mkhas pa la mi dge ba yod na de'i 'bras bu 'byung*.

is such that all of cause, path, and result is virtuous and without nonvirtue in all respects—that is [what we] call “skilled with regard to means” [in the real sense].⁷⁹

Thus, the captain Great Compassionate did not act skillfully in all respects and, therefore, had to experience the temporary and ultimate results of the nonvirtuous act of killing a human being, whereby he was running the risk of losing the path. As Dorjé Sherab puts it: “If the old fox jumps from the lion’s jumping place, he will break his back. . . . It is paramount at first to practice conduct that is skilled in means unmixed with nonvirtue.”⁸⁰

Three Levels of Bodhisattva Practice

We can now derive from the teachings of the *Gongchik* a system of three levels of bodhisattva practice with regard to skill in means and the mixing of virtuous and nonvirtuous causes. The supreme level is the bodhisattva from the eighth level onwards. For him, there is no difference whether he experiences painful results or not, since he has attained acceptance of the fact that phenomena are without origin. The medium level is a bodhisattva slightly below that level, who has not yet attained that acceptance but is robust enough to bear painful consequences to some extent. All bodhisattvas below that level are advised to refrain completely from all nonvirtuous acts. Thus, the manner of the bodhisattvas’ practice and conduct depends entirely on the bodhisattva’s level of accomplishment. Concerning the level of the beginner bodhisattva, Jigten Sumgön speaks of conduct that is “skillful in all respects.” Such conduct completely refrains from all nonvirtuous motivations, acts, and means. Our commentators provide in this context three examples: the cases of King Kanakarvarṇa, the Brahmin Jyotis, and the Rishi Agnidatta.

King Kanakarvarṇa’s story is documented in the section of Dorjé Sherab’s commentary that contains illustrative stories (Tib. *lo rgyus*).⁸¹ The key

⁷⁹ Rin chen byang chub 2008, pp. 185–86.

⁸⁰ rDo rje shes rab 2009, vol. 3, p. 29: *seng ges* [read: *ge’i*] *mchongs sar wa rgan gyis mchongs na rked pa chag pa . . . thabs mkhas pa’i spyod pa mi dge ba dang ma ’dres par byed pa thog mar gal che gsungs/*.

⁸¹ rDo rje she rab 2009, vol. 3, p. 102; *Kanakavarṇapūrvayoga*, D vol. 76, with this story starting on fol. 51r. See also the *Kanakavarṇa Sutra*, which is part of the larger *Divyāvadāna*. To my knowledge, this part of the *Divyāvadāna* has not yet been translated; for its first part, see the edition by Vaidya (1959) and the translation by Rotman (2008). On the sections of Dorjé Sherab’s commentary, where he provides evidence in the form of illustrative stories (mostly from the sutras), see Sobisch 2015, p. 479.

points that concern us here are the following. When astrologers inform the king that a long-lasting famine will befall his kingdom, he has the stocked provisions of all his subjects collected and stored in his palace. Then, during the famine, when everything, including his private stocks, is spent on all subjects, the king hands over his last bowl of rice to a mendicant. Miraculously, the famine ends thereby. Dorjé Sherab states:

King Kanakavarṇa did *not* become a thief. Since—no matter what their status—that king was the lord of all beings, he appropriated all their wealth. Therefore, having gathered all their wealth, the ones who [previously] had wealth were without many goods afterward, and those who [previously] were without wealth did not die from hunger because [the king] took care of all of them alike. Apart from doing just that, he did not gather wealth desiring it for himself. Since he gathered [wealth] only for the peoples’ benefit, it was solely a virtuous motivation, unmixed with the three poisons. Thus, it was faultless skillful conduct.⁸²

The difference between the stories of King Kanakavarṇa and the bodhisattva captain Great Compassionate is that the king did not have the intention to steal his subjects’ wealth, whereas the captain *wanted* the evil person to be dead. In particular, it was possible for the king to gather together the wealth while he was free from selfish desire because all he needed to cultivate was the wish to benefit all beings alike. The captain, however, necessarily needed to produce a moment of aversion for the killing. The captain’s aggressive means of ending the life of the evil person was essential to the whole plan; without it, his plan to save the evil person from committing a further act of evil and the merchants from killing him would not have been possible. Gathering together and storing wealth, however, can be done without any desire to own the wealth for oneself.

The second example is that of the Brahmin Jyotis. He gave up celibacy for twelve years for the benefit of a Brahmin’s daughter, who had fallen in love with him. According to both the sutra and Dorjé Sherab’s commentary, she threatened to kill herself if the handsome Brahmin would not move in with her. He did so out of compassion for twelve years, even though he fully expected to have to go to hell for breaking celibacy. However, having practiced celibacy before for twenty thousand years, having returned to celibacy after she passed away, and then practicing the *brahmavihāras*

⁸² rDo rje shes rab 2009, vol. 3, p. 26.

intensively until the very moment of his death, he was born in the Brahma world in the moment after his death, and also reduced his samsaric existence by many eons.⁸³ However, the story (also recounted in Dorjé Sherab's commentary) clearly mentions that Jyotis "cultivated a resolve of great compassion that was accompanied by improper desire" (*'dod pa ngan pa dang ldan pa*), and thus, the story is unconvincing.⁸⁴

The third and final example is the story of the Rishi Agnidatta.⁸⁵ Agnidatta lived in a forest where one day an escaped thief appeared. Agnidatta instructed him immediately not to make himself visible to him. Later, when asked if he had seen the thief, Agnidatta could not say that he had, because that would have been a lie. However, he got into trouble when he said he did not see him because the king found out that his soldiers had caught the thief in Agnidatta's forest. When the king ordered his men to cut off the Rishi's limbs (whom he deemed to be a liar and thus a fake Rishi), Agnidatta bestowed teachings on him, and the king understood that Agnidatta was not a liar.⁸⁶ In sum, he skillfully avoided a lie and thus saved the thief from the executioners without committing a nonvirtuous deed of speech. It might be argued that he had known that the thief had escaped to his forest, but, technically speaking, he did not reply to the interrogators' question using untrue words. It is furthermore to his credit that by instructing the thief to remain invisible to him he made a conscious effort to avoid a situation where he would have to tell a lie.

If the latter two examples are not fully satisfactory, they might still illustrate how carefully a bodhisattva has to consider his acts. If he does not find a way to remain completely virtuous, he must abstain from the act or be prepared to bear the consequences.

⁸³ The story of Jyotis is from the *Sarvabuddhamahārahasya Upāyakaūśalya Sūtra*, Derge vol. 44, where it begins on fol. 37r5, p. 74, line 5. One can also find it in the *Ārya Upāyakaūśalya Mahāyānasūtra*, Derge vol. 66, where it begins on fol. 288r, p. 576. Śāntideva, too, cites it in his *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, Derge vol. 111, on fol. 93v, p. 187 (from the *Upāyakaūśalya Mahāyāna Sūtra*; English translation by Bendall and Rouse 1990, p. 163). For the story as it is transmitted in the Drikung tradition, see rDo rje shes rab 2009, vol. 3, pp. 103–4; Repa 2006, pp. 165–66.

⁸⁴ Sometimes it is not easy to get the point of such stories. In the Tibetan tradition, they may have been retold or summarized from sources that were already of secondary nature. Even present-day scholars of the tradition sometimes appear to be uncertain about their precise meaning.

⁸⁵ rDo rje shes rab 2009, vol. 3, pp. 104–6.

⁸⁶ It is not clear whether the fact that the teaching was on the doctrine of non-self plays a role here. Perhaps, understanding the selflessness of beings, the king realized that a person can, ultimately, not be seen?

CONCLUSION

Rupert Gethin has, among other things, documented three points of the Pali and *Abhidharma* literature concerning the Buddhist doctrine of acts and their results that I believe are fundamental to this whole debate:

1. Actions that are categorized as virtuous or nonvirtuous always have an underlying intention, which is again motivated by one of the six roots of greed or non-attachment, hatred or friendliness, and delusion or wisdom.
2. The intention to kill can (at least according to the Pali *suttas* and the *Abhidharmas*) never be motivated by nonattachment, friendliness, or wisdom.
3. When the intention to kill, rooted in greed, hatred, or delusion, leads to an act that has a clearly perceived living being as an object and comes to completion through the actual death of that being, the result of suffering must and will arise.

Are the two *Upāya* sutras that were investigated here trying to skirt this problem? The bodhisattva captain clearly expects painful fruition, but the sutras avoid spelling out any negative consequences in the crucial passages. They admit a karmic fruition occurring to the Buddha, but as they frame that story, this was only one of his didactic tricks. However, even if it is admitted, as it is claimed by one part of the tradition, that the Buddha cannot still have a veil of karma, this does not mean that bodhisattvas do not accumulate karma through nonvirtuous deeds. These two sutras may only be read to maintain, as they are by some, that for becoming a Buddha, the bodhisattvas must first completely purify all their karmic veils.

In these sutra passages, “means” seems to refer foremost to the exceptional method (killing), and “skill” to the bodhisattva’s ability to accomplish the welfare of others even with such an act of evil. Implicit within the skill is the bodhisattva’s insight into exactly how his intervention will play out for the other beings. However—and this is crucial—the bodhisattva clearly acts in both sutras under the explicit expectation that suffering will accrue for him. The *Mahārahasyopāyakauśalya* even states that he “shall happily endure that experience of suffering.” The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* differs in several respects from these sutras. In one interpretation, the bodhisattva has a concrete plan of how to avoid any negative consequences *for himself*. In an alternative interpretation of this passage, his skillful insight allows him to kill the evil person in the moment when that person is in a mental state that is most conducive for a good rebirth. The *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, furthermore, explicitly states that

it is “imprudent” for the bodhisattva to go to hell and that “there will not only be no fault, but his merit will much increase.” Taken together, all this indicates that this treatise indeed assumes that it is within the bodhisattva’s abilities to avoid negative consequences for himself. In fact, an essential element of the “skill” of the bodhisattva here is that he is able to commit a transgression without having to face the usual negative consequences.

Curiously, although compassion is mentioned in our three Indian sources, apart from being merely a general underlying attitude, its functioning as the decisive or immediate motivation of the killing is not visible in these texts. In fact, the label “compassionate killing” is rather misleading as it implies a central role of compassion in the very act of killing. Thus, overestimating the role of compassion may cloud our perception of what these sutras really are about: they are, above all, about skillful means of accumulating the vast amounts of merit necessary on the bodhisattva’s path to buddhahood.

Jigten Sumgön has a congenial and creative approach to the matter, and he makes a special effort to integrate all three vehicles of Buddhism.⁸⁷ In particular, he is not trying to explain away the problem that Gethin, based on the Pali literature and *Abhidharma*, calls the “psychological impossibility” of the claim that an aggressive act could be committed out of friendliness. According to Jigten Sumgön, killing must involve aversion and therefore will have aggravating fruition. The crucial point is the bodhisattva’s abilities and his level of realization. If he is a beginner, he should keep his hands off of such practices since the consequences will ruin him. His skill is to keep strictly within the boundaries of virtue and to skillfully avoid nonvirtuous activity in all respects. If he has solidified his grounding in compassion, he may be able to bear the suffering to some extent and, therefore, may be “permitted” to commit faults as far as he is able to bear the consequences. If, additionally, he has obtained the level of the “acceptance of the fact that phenomena are without origination,” he is “permitted” to take suffering upon himself because there is no danger anymore that he would lose his resolve and path. The term “permission,” however, is not used in any literal sense. It does not mean that because the Buddha allows it, there will be no consequences. The Buddha’s permission is based on a consideration of the bodhisattva’s abilities to bear the consequences. Neither the bodhisattva nor even the Buddha himself is beyond karmic frui-

⁸⁷ His efforts to include the Vajrayana context are not mentioned in the present essay. Jigten Sumgön’s teaching concerning the integrated, consistent, and simultaneous practice of all three vehicles by a single person is discussed in Sobisch 2002, ch. 14.

tion, and even the Buddha cannot suspend the universal laws of karma and dependent origination for the bodhisattva.

ABBREVIATIONS

- A *The Aṅguttara Nikāya*. Edited by Richard Morris and Edmund Hardy. 6 vols. London: Published for the Pali Text Society by Luzac, 1955–61.
- BDRC Buddhist Digital Resource Center. www.tbrc.org.
- D *The Dīgha Nikāya*. Edited by Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter. 3 vols. London: Oxford University Press, 1889–1910.
- Derge *The Sde dge Mtshal par Bka' 'gyur: A Facsimile Edition of the 18th Century Redaction of Si tu Chos kyi 'byung gnas, Prepared under the Direction of H. H. the 16th Rgyal dbang Karma pa*. 103 vols. 1976–79. BDRC call number W22084.
- M *The Majjhima Nikāya*. Edited by R. Chalmers and V. Trenckner. 4 vols. London: Published for the Pali Text Society by H. Frowde, 1888.
- Peking *The Tibetan Tripitaka: Peking Edition, Kept in the Library of the Otani University, Kyoto*. Edited by Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki. 168 vols. Kyoto: Otani University, Tibetan Tripitaka Research Institute, 1955–61.
- SN *Suttanipāta*. In Saddhatissa 1985.
- Vin *Vinaya Piṭaka*. Edited by Hermann Oldenberg. 5 vols. London: The Pali Text Society, 1879–83.

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- Bodhicaryāvatāra* (*Byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*). By Śāntideva. Derge vol. 105, fols. 1b–40b, pp. 1–81.
- Bodhisattvabhūmi* (*Byang chub sems dpa'i sa*). By Asaṅga. Derge vol. 129, fols. 1b–293a, pp. 1–586.
- Bodhisattvasaṃvaravimśaka* (*Byang chub sems dpa'i sdom pa nyi shu pa*). By Candragomin. Derge vol. 138, fols. 166b–167a, pp. 333–34.
- Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* (*sDong po rgyan pa'i mdo*). Edition of the Sanskrit text in *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtram*, edited by P. L. Vaidya. Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1960.
- Mahārahasyopāyakaśālya*, see *Sarvabuddha Mahārahasyopāyakaśālya*.
- Sarvabuddha Mahārahasyopāyakaśālya Jñānottara Bodhisattvapariṣchāparivarta Mahāyānasūtra* (*'Phags pa sangs rgyas thams cad kyi gsang chen thabs la mkhas pa byang chub sems dpa' ye shes dam pas zhus pa'i le'u zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*). Derge vol. 44, fols. 30a1–70b7, pp. 60–141.

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