

# Karma and Merit in (Thai) Buddhism

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## 1. Introduction

The topic is *Karma and Merit in (Thai) Buddhism* and thus we will define at first the meanings of the terms *karma* and *merit* before we investigate in which ways they contribute to the unique form of Thai-Buddhism. As much of the explanations regarding *karma* and *merit* are valid in other Buddhist countries as well, the term Thai has been put in parenthesis. *Karma* (Sanskrit) and *Kamma* (Pāli)<sup>1</sup> have the same meaning. I will use the more common Sanskrit version in this paper.

In the following I will deal with the Theravāda-Buddhist way of looking at and dealing with these topics. Other schools of Buddhism, like Mahāyāna, may have different positions regarding certain parts of this doctrine.

Wherever possible I have used the early Buddhist texts, the Nikāyas, as reference and tried to rely as little as possible on the commentaries. As I cannot read the early Buddhist texts written in Pāli, Sanskrit or some Chinese language I have to rely on translations of these early texts and their commentaries into English or German language. Any misinterpretation of these texts or commentaries as well as any peculiar use of the English language (I am not a native English speaker) is solely the responsibility of the author and I sincerely apologise for any mistake that may have occurred.

The relevant quotes used for this paper are given either in the text itself or in the footnotes so that readers who do not have the Nikāyas at hand can follow up easily. Sometimes I commented inside a quotation. These comments are clearly marked in [square brackets] and/or in blue colour. Pāli terms, common Buddhist terms and extended quotations in the text itself are printed in *italics*.

Any comment, suggestion, critique regarding this paper is welcome.

## 2. Karma

The belief in *karma* or the *Law of Karma* is not unique to Buddhism – it was prevalent in Hinduism/ Brahmanism before the appearance of Buddhism. The Buddha, being raised with a Brahmanic background himself, did not reject all of the Brahmanic teachings but is said to have completed and perfected some of those. Hinduism teaches a strong belief in ‘self’ while Buddhism rejects the idea of a permanent ‘self’ and these mayor differences have an effect on how *karma* and its fruit is perceived and taught, resulting in some confusion as these different views often get mixed-up.

The teaching about *anattā* (egolessness, not-self, no unchanging, permanent, enduring core or essence to anything, no ‘person’) is one of the pillars of Buddhism and questions may arise like: who is the ‘doer’ of an action respective the ‘receiver’ of its fruit and who or what is reborn in which state as the result of karmic relevant action if there is no ‘self’ (see chapter *The transcendental level of karma* on pages 7-10)? How can a karmic relevant action committed today bear fruit in a future life? Where is it stored until it ‘ripens’ and how does the fruit find its recipient in a future existence if there is no ‘self’, nothing permanent? There is talk about karmic energy or karmic potential (see footnote 8 on page 4) etc. which to me isn’t really convincing – to me it is kind of a ‘self in disguise’ turning the wheel back from the Buddha’s teaching to the older Upanishadic/ Brahmanic teaching.

Yet there are numerous places in the Nikāyas suggesting that karmic results may be received in the present life or, after death, in a future existence, eg “Wherever that kamma ripens, it is there that one expe-

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<sup>1</sup> Early Buddhist scriptures use either Pāli or Sanskrit, two closely related literary languages of ancient India.

riences its result, either in this very life, or in the [next] rebirth, or on some subsequent occasion.”<sup>2</sup> or “[...] with the breakup of the body, after death, some beings here are reborn in the plane of misery, in a bad destination, in the lower world, in hell.”<sup>3</sup>

A possible solution to this discrepancy is given for example by the late Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, a prominent Buddhist monk in Thailand of the last century. He speaks of two levels of the Buddha’s teaching: A worldly (*lokiya*) level with a focus on the moral aspect of the teaching for those living in the world and a more comprehensive level above the world (*lokuttara*) for those aiming to transcend the world in order to free themselves from the idea of ‘self’, ‘me’ and ‘mine’ and from all suffering. Both of these two levels have their value; they do not exclude each other but complete each other.<sup>4</sup>

The common teaching on *karma* is concerned with the moral level of the Buddha’s doctrine, meant to be understood and followed by people from all walks of life and to be of benefit to them. The belief “Do good, get good; do bad, get bad” and the hope/ fear of a possibly fortunate/ unfortunate rebirth help people to live together decently and to develop their mind to a higher level where the “carrot and stick”-method is no longer necessary.

## 2.1 The worldly level of *karma*

The law of conditionality (*idappaccayatā*) governs the whole universe and the *Law of Karma* is an expression of this principle related to human behaviour, yet it isn’t as strictly causal as is the law of conditionality or as is *Dependent Origination*<sup>5</sup> (the law of cause and effect as it is working in the human mind). The workings of *karma*, the relation between a deed and its fruit, belong to one of the four unthinkable or unconceivables<sup>6</sup> (*acinteyya* in Pāli).

*Karma* means ‘action’ or ‘doing’; whatever one does, says, or thinks is a *karma*. In Buddhism the term *karma* is used specifically for intentional actions of body, speech and mind. *Karma* is a cause, never the effect or result.

The intentional actions of body, speech and mind bring about a fruit or result (*vipāka*) either within the present life, or in the context of a future birth. “Karmic results are not a ‘judgement’ imposed by a God or other all-powerful being, but rather the results of a natural process.”<sup>7</sup> The aim of the Buddhist practice is to no longer produce *karma*, thus bringing the cycle of rebirth to an end. *Karma* is not stored somewhere where it will survive the death of the person, but vanishes with the death of that person as well, yet it is said to leave a potential for future results and when the circumstances for the arising of the fruit are fa-

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<sup>2</sup> *Causes*, Book of Three, AN 34(4), I 135, page 230 in / 1 /

<sup>3</sup> Book of Ones, AN 43(3), I 9, page 96 in / 1 /

<sup>4</sup> Buddhadasa Bhikkhu in / 2 /, page 129

<sup>5</sup> See my article ‘The Here-and-Now-Interpretation of Dependent Origination’, link on page 20.

<sup>6</sup> "Bhikkhus, there are these four inconceivable matters that one should not try to conceive; one who tries to conceive them would reap either madness or frustration. What four?"

(1) The domain of the Buddhas is an inconceivable matter that one should not try to conceive; one who tries to conceive it would reap either madness or frustration.

(2) The domain of one in jhana [[meditative absorption](#)] is an inconceivable matter ...

(3) The result of kamma is an inconceivable matter ...

(4) Speculation about the world [[eg beginning or end](#)] is an inconceivable matter that one should not try to conceive; one who tries to conceive it would reap either madness or frustration.

[The book of Fours, AN 77, II 80, page 463 in / 1 /]

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia / 3a /

avourable, it will appear.<sup>8</sup> An ancient Buddhist simile, narrated by Sayadaw U Silananda (/ 4 /, page 13) describes this as follows: With the help of a magnifying glass and the rays of the sun it is possible to set some burning material, eg, dried cow dung on fire. This fire was neither stored in the sun rays nor in the magnifying glass nor in the cow dung, but coming together the fire comes into existence. The circumstances for the arising of the fire have been favourable. Likewise, the results of *karma*.

The *karmic* effect of a deed is not determined solely by the deed itself, but also by accompanying factors like the nature of the person who commits the deed and by the circumstances in which it is committed. The underlying intention is more important than the outward appearance of the action. Killing an ant by accidentally stepping on it has no karmic relevance whereas the intentional killing of a mosquito may lead straight to hell.

“In Buddhism, *karma* is not pre-determinism, fatalism or accidentalism, as all these ideas lead to inaction and destroy motivation and human effort. These ideas undermine the important concept that a human being can change for the better, no matter what his or her past was, and they are designated as ‘wrong views’ in Buddhism.” (Wikipedia, / 3b /).

In the present past *karma*, created by ourselves, is continually ripening, but it is also continually being generated by our current self-directed actions and therefore it is possible to shape our future.

*Karma* can be differentiated by several criteria. We will classify it here according to their relationships with their respective results in:

- Wholesome (positive, white)
- Unwholesome (negative, black)
- Partly wholesome, partly unwholesome (an action has positive as well as negative components)
- Neither wholesome nor unwholesome (‘neutral’, ‘destructive’) karma.<sup>9</sup>

In Theravāda as in Mahāyāna Buddhism the expression *karma* means intentional action of body, speech and mind. But as any verbal or bodily action is preceded by a mental activity, *karma* is always mental.<sup>10</sup>

An action is regarded unwholesome/ wholesome when the preceding intention is based on one of the three root defilements or on their opposites respectively.

Unwholesome actions are based on:

- Greed (desire, lust, etc.)
- Hatred (aversion, ill-will, anger, etc.)
- Delusion, ignorance

or on one of their subdivisions like  
envy, jealousy, etc.

Wholesome actions are based on:

- Generosity (non-greed)
- Friendliness (non-aversion)
- Understanding, wisdom

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<sup>8</sup> Kamma or volition has potential to give results, and this potential is a tremendous force. Kamma does not end with the demise of the present life; it goes on and on. But we cannot say that kamma is stored somewhere in our body or consciousness because everything is impermanent and must be continually changing. Kamma is likewise impermanent and so disappears, but it leaves a potential in the continuity of beings so that, when circumstances are favorable for results to appear, those results appear. [Sayadaw U Silananda in / 4 /, pages 12/13]

<sup>9</sup> Four kinds of kamma: There is  
(a) black kamma with black result (*kanha-vipākam*),  
(b) bright kamma with bright result (*sukka- vipākam*),  
(c) black-and-bright kamma with black-and bright result (*kanha-sukka vipākam*),  
(d) kamma that is neither black nor bright (*akanham-asukkam*), with neither black nor bright result, leading to the destruction of kamma. [Sangiti Sutta, DN 33.29, iii230, page 492 in / 5 /]

<sup>10</sup> "It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call kamma . For having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind."  
[Nibbedhikapariyāya Sutta, AN 63, III [415], page 963 in / 1 /]

At several places in the Nikāyas, eg [MN 135/136 pages 1053...], we find descriptions regarding the deeds and their results.

In the *Cūlakammavibhanga Sutta*<sup>11</sup> we find “Student, beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior.” This is followed by a detailed description by the Buddha regarding certain deeds and possible results which may occur (see Table 1 below).

Action	If reborn in the human realm	If NOT reborn in the human realm
Killing, violence, merciless, hurting	Short-lived, sickly	Born in a state of deprivation, unhappy destination, hell
None of the above, compassion, kindness	Long-lived, healthy	Born in a happy destination, heavenly realm
Anger, hatred, hostility, resentful, bitter, irritable	Ugly	Born in a state of deprivation, unhappy destination, hell
None of the above,	Beautiful	Born in a happy destination, heavenly realm
Envy Stinginess, no offerings Disrespectful, impolite, arrogant...	Uninfluential Poverty Low social status	Born in a state of deprivation, unhappy destination, hell
Not envy Giving (donation) Respectful, polite	Influential Wealth High social status	Born in a happy destination, heavenly realm
Not knowing what is wholesome, blameable, Ignorance	Little intelligence, stupid	Born in a state of deprivation, unhappy destination, hell
Knowing what is wholesome, blameable, Wisdom	Intelligent, wise	Born in a happy destination, heavenly realm

**Table 1:** Intentional actions (*karma*) and possible results (*vipāka*)

Table 1 shows that certain deeds may have certain possible results. But the relationship between the deeds and the fruits of a karmic action are unknown to us (see footnote 6 on page 3) and the Buddha explains that someone misbehaving could be reborn in heaven and another one behaving properly could be reborn in hell and he gives the following explanation:

*“Therein, Ananda, as to the person here who kills living beings, takes what is not given, misconducts himself in sensual pleasures, speaks falsehood, speaks maliciously, speaks harshly, gossips; he is covetous, has a mind of ill will, and holds wrong view, and on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappears in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world: either earlier he did a good action to be felt as pleasant, or later he did a good action to be felt as pleasant, or at the time of death he acquired and undertook right view. Because of that, on the dissolution of the body, after death, he has reappeared in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world. But since he has here killed living beings... and held wrong view, he will experience the result of that either here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.*

*Therein, Ananda, as to the person here who abstains from killing living beings... and holds right view, and on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappears in a state of deprivation... even in hell: either earlier he did an evil action to be felt as painful, or later he did an evil action to be felt as painful, or at the time of death he acquired and undertook wrong view. Because of that, on the dissolution of the*

<sup>11</sup> *Cūlakammavibhanga Sutta*, MN 135, i203-206, pages 1053-1057 in / 6 /  
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*body, after death, he has reappeared in a state of deprivation... even in hell. But since he has here abstained from killing living beings... and held right view, he will experience the result of that either here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.*

*Thus, Ananda, there is action that is incapable [of good result] and appears incapable; there is action that is incapable [of good result] and appears capable; there is action that is capable [of good result] and appears capable; and there is action that is capable [of good result] and appears incapable.”<sup>12</sup>*

A *karmic* action and the resulting effect are not identical. The Buddha said:

*“Bhikkhus, if one were to say thus: ‘A person experiences kamma in precisely the same way that he created it’ in such a case there could be no living of the spiritual life and no opportunity would be seen for completely making an end of suffering.*

*But if one were to say thus: ‘When a person creates kamma that is to be experienced in a particular way, he experiences its result precisely in that way’ in such a case the living of the spiritual life is possible and an opportunity is seen for completely making an end of suffering.”<sup>13</sup>*

Like in the present-day justice system you won’t be sentenced to be stabbed if you have stabbed someone with a knife but you will receive an appropriate punishment depending on the circumstances – the particular fruit of that kind of action in that special case according to the laws.

The starting point of a *karmic* action is a mental process and so the result will manifest at first as a feeling of happiness or contentment respectively suffering or discontentment in the mind. These mind states may at the same time be accompanied by advantages like wealth, health, beauty, longevity etc. respectively disadvantages like poverty, sickness, ugliness, etc. on the material level.

It can take a long time until the fruit of a *karmic* deed has ripened and a fruit does not even have to follow inevitably. As long as the result hasn’t surfaced it can be altered or even neutralised. Additionally the result is dependent on accompanying factors and therefore the same action (*karma*) committed with the same intention will not necessarily show the same result (*vipāka*). “It depends on an individual’s accumulation of good or evil *kamma* and also his dominating character traits, good or evil, which affect the *kammic* result.” (Nyanaponika Thera in / 7 /). *Karma* is no unavoidable destiny nor predestined, the present not completely determined by the past. There is no need for a fatalistic endurance in misery; it is not our inescapable fate for which we have to blame ourselves. By virtuous action here and now we can generate positive *karma*, even *karma* which alters or destroys other *karma*, can accumulate *merit* and develop wisdom, the antidote of ignorance (the root of all *karma*). By developing wisdom we can influence our volition, the motor of all *karma*, in a positive way.

Not everything is determined by *karma*. The historical Buddha refuted not only the idea that all happiness and suffering is directed by a Supreme Being, but the belief that all happiness and suffering arise from previous *karma* as well.<sup>14</sup>

*Buddhism acknowledges five laws of nature, uniformly based on the principal of causal dependence:*

- 1. the natural law related to physical objects and changes in the natural environment (utuniyama);*
- 2. the natural law related to heredity; described in the saying “as the seed, so the fruit”(bijaniyama);*
- 3. the natural law related to the workings of the mind, the process of cognition of sense objects and the mental reactions to them (cittaniyama);*

<sup>12</sup> *Mahākammavibhanga Sutta*, MN 136, i 214/215, pages 1064/1065 in / 6 /

<sup>13</sup> *A lump of salt*, The book of Threes, AN 100 (9), I 250, page 332 in / 1 /

<sup>14</sup> Now when those ascetics and brahmins hold such a doctrine and view as this, ‘Whatever a person experiences, whether it be pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, all that is caused by what was done in the past,’ they overshoot what one knows by oneself and they overshoot what is considered to be true in the world. Therefore I say that this is wrong on the part of those ascetics and brahmins. [Vedanasamyutta, SN 36.21, page 1279 in / 8 /]

4. *the natural law related to human behavior, the process of the generation of action and its results. This is described in the saying “good deeds bring good results, bad deeds bring bad results.” (kammaniyama);*
5. *the natural law governing the relationship and interdependence of all things (dhammaniyama).<sup>15</sup>*

Events must not be reduced to a single law of nature, that is, not every event in human life depends on personal actions alone by excluding everything else.

According to P. A. Payutto a karmic result can ripen on four different levels.

1. **The inner, mental level.** *The results karma has within the mind itself, in the form of accumulated tendencies, and the quality of the mind, its experiences of happiness, suffering, and so on [character].*
2. **The physical or bodily level.** *The effects of karma on bodily features [figure, beauty, health etc.], mannerisms and behavioural tendencies.*
3. **The level of life experiences.** *Describes how kamma affects the events of life, specifically, external events like prosperity and decline, failure and success, wealth, status, happiness, suffering, praise and criticism. Together these are known as the lokadhamma (worldly conditions). The results of kamma on this level can be divided into two kinds:*
  - *those arising from nonhuman environmental causes,*
  - *those arising from causes related to other people and society.*
4. **The social level.** *The results of individual and collective kamma on society, leading to social prosperity or decline, harmony or discord.*

*The law of karma is dominant on mental (1) and bodily (2) levels and meets social circumstances on levels 3 and 4. When talking about “good deeds bring good results, bad deeds bring bad results”, most people tend to take note only of external visible results like success, wealth, status, etc., completely ignoring results regarding spiritual qualities, character and behaviour. However, these are of prime importance, not only in that they determine mental well-being, inner strength or shortcomings, and the maturity or weakness of the faculties, but also in their potential to determine external events. That is to say, that portion of results regarding success, wealth, status, etc. on level 3 which comes into the domain of the law of kamma, is derived from the kamma-results on the mental (1<sup>st</sup>) and physical (2<sup>nd</sup>) levels.<sup>16</sup>*

## 2.2 The transcendental level of *karma*

If one wants to understand how the Buddha’s teaching of *anattā* (not-self) and *karma* fit together, it is necessary to comprehend, at least to some degree, what is meant by not-self, what is there instead, which level of the teaching we are talking about and which kind of language is used to describe either conventional affairs or spiritual matters and ultimate truth.<sup>17</sup>

Let’s have a look at the language first. One can take the expressions in the Suttas literally (physical re-birth) or metaphorically (mental birth of the notion of self). For example ‘future existence’ can be regarded as something happening after the physical death of this body and mind or after the mental ceasing of the current ‘self’-idea followed by the birth of another ‘self’-idea with the next meaningful sense-contact. Hell could be a destination to go to after death as for example is vividly described in the *Devā-*

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<sup>15</sup> P.A. Payutto in / 9 /, pages 1-2; modified by the author.

<sup>16</sup> P.A. Payutto in / 9 /, pages 43-44; modified by the author.

<sup>17</sup> More details are given for example in my book ‘Introduction to Buddhism and to Buddhist Meditation’. A preview of the book is available at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00H8L80RO>



*dūta Sutta*<sup>18</sup> or a hellish state of mind, eg a mind tormented by anger, envy, jealousy etc. The same terms may have different meanings in worldly and in spiritual language.

The Buddha explained that there is no unchangeable, enduring core to anything we can experience. Related to our makeup as human beings this means there is no self, no soul that comes somehow into existence at the beginning of our life and that stays the same from the cradle to the grave. He clarified that what really lives life is not an enduring 'self' or 'me' but five processes of nature, five functions of nature, which he called the *Five Aggregates*, no 'self' in there. The two basic components of human life, body and mind, are divided into: Physicality or Form or Body and the four non-physical aggregates: Feeling, Perception, Mental Formation (thinking process) and Consciousness. These five functions of nature or the *Five Aggregates* function interdependently when the conditions are around for them to function and this, said the Buddha, is what experiences life, this is what lives life. Whenever we ignorantly contact the world by means of our sense-organs, whenever we see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think, we believe it is 'me' doing it but actually it is the *Five Aggregates* operating. Each of these ignorant contacts is capable to induce the notion of 'self' and no one knows how many contacts arise in the course of a lifetime or even in one year – even during a single day many hundreds notions of 'self' may arise in the mind.

There is no 'self', nothing permanent in human life. All there is, is an ever changing process of nature, labeled the *Five Aggregates*, experiencing an ever changing world. This ever changing flow of events is one meaning of *Impermanence*, according to the Buddha the first of the *Three Characteristics of Life*.

So actually there is no 'self', no 'I' no 'me' no 'mine' but we think there is and in our daily lives we make use of these expressions all the time and for interactions in society it is useful to do so, otherwise our societies, as they are now, would not function. We use this conventional language to describe human interactions but for expressing spiritual matters we need a more precise language, a spiritual or *Dhamma*<sup>19</sup> language. On the worldly level we use everyday language to describe interactions with others. We say 'me' and 'mine' and so on – nothing wrong with it. We use spiritual or *Dhamma* language on the transcendental level to deal with absolute truth, with spiritual matters. Here there is no 'me' nor 'mine'. Here is of course not anything at all, but all there is, is just an ever changing process of nature, consisting of an ever changing body and an ever changing mind (the *Five Aggregates*), no abiding self to be found in this process.

Keeping this in mind we can see that a question like: "If there is no 'self', who receives the fruit of a karmic action committed by a 'not-self'?" is not a valid question because it mixes up conventional and spiritual language: "If there is no 'self', who [['who' asks for a person or 'self' = conventional language](#)] receives the fruit of a karmic action committed by a 'not-self' [['not-self' = spiritual language](#)]?" The Buddha called someone asking a similar question a 'misguided man' and went on to explain the *Five Aggregates* and not-self to him and other monks.

*Then, in the mind of a certain bhikkhu [monk] this thought arose: "So, it seems, material form is not self, feeling is not self, perception is not self, formations are not self, consciousness is not self. What self, then, will actions done by the not-self affect?" Then the Blessed One, knowing in his mind the thought in the mind of that bhikkhu, addressed the bhikkhus thus: "It is possible, bhikkhus, that some misguided man here, obtuse and ignorant, with his mind dominated by craving, might think that he can outstrip the Teacher's Dispensation thus: 'So, it seems, material form is not self... consciousness is*

<sup>18</sup> Now the wardens of hell torture him with the fivefold transfixing. They drive a red-hot iron stake through one hand, they drive a red-hot iron stake through the other hand, they drive a red-hot iron stake through one foot, they drive a red-hot iron stake through the other foot, they drive a red-hot iron stake through his belly. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings. Yet he does not die so long as that evil action has not exhausted its result... [*Devadūta Sutta*, MN 130.10, iii183, page 1032 in / 6 /]

<sup>19</sup> Dhamma in Pāli or Dharma in Sanskrit means in brief: natural phenomenon or the teaching of the Buddha.



*not self. What self, then, will actions done by the not-self affect?'* Now, bhikkhus, you have been trained by me through interrogation on various occasions in regard to various things.

*"Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is material form permanent or impermanent?" – "Impermanent, venerable sir." – "Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?" – "Suffering, venerable sir." – "Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: "This is mine, this I am, this is my self'?" – "No, venerable sir." "Bhikkhus, what do you think: Is feeling... perception... formations... consciousness permanent or impermanent?" – "Impermanent, venerable sir." – "Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?" – "Suffering, venerable sir." – "Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: "This is mine, this I am, this is my self'?" – "No, venerable sir."*

*"Therefore, bhikkhus, any kind of material form whatever, whether past, future, or present... all material form should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.' Any kind of feeling whatever... Any kind of perception whatever... Any kind of formations whatever... Any kind of consciousness whatever... all consciousness should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.'*

*"Seeing thus, a well-taught noble disciple becomes disenchanted with material form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with formations, disenchanted with consciousness.*

*"Being disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: 'It is liberated.' He understands: 'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.'"<sup>20</sup>*

Now we are ready to deal with *karma*, not on the basic moral level but on the transcendental level leading to the end of all suffering. There is ceaseless change everywhere, no enduring 'self', 'I', 'me' or 'mine' exists. As there is no 'self' there is no 'creator' or 'doer' of *karma* and, of course, there is no 'receiver' of the fruit. All there is, is a karmic relevant action (no 'doer') followed by its fruit (no 'receiver') happening within and to the *Five Aggregates*. There is just cause and effect, endlessly, both happening in the here and now. I do not do a bad deed today but receive the result next week or in 10 years – the fruit isn't stored somewhere in the meantime.<sup>21</sup> All *karma* is mental as verbal and bodily action is preceded by a mental action (see footnote 10 on page 4) and I will experience the result at first mentally as well. The bad deed done right now has an immediate effect on 'me' (for example I may feel remorse, feel unhappy) and with this altered state of mind 'I' will do another deed with another immediate effect and so on and so on. There is a continuous flow of *karma* and *vipāka* – 'I' change from moment to moment due to physical and other natural laws and due to the *Law of Karma*. To me *karma*, followed by *vipāka* is generated and experienced more or less continually in the here and now.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> [Mahāpunnaṃ Sutta, MN109, iii20, pages 890/891 in / 6 /]

<sup>21</sup> Studying the law of kamma solely on the level of convention sometimes leads to a simplistic view of things, such as believing that a certain person, having committed such-and-such kamma, on such-and-such a day, ten years later receives such-and-such bad result. The cause and effect process referred to jumps over a span of ten years all in one step. The total stream of events involved is not taken into account, and so it is difficult to see the real process involved. Studying the same case in terms of the natural stream of events helps to see the operation of cause and effect relationships more completely and in more detail, revealing the real significance of the results which have arisen and how they have come about. [P.A. Payutto in / 9 /, page 108]

<sup>22</sup> We should see the truth that the mind that performs a deed is karma itself and the subsequent mind is the result (*vipāka*) of that karma. Other results that follow it are only uncertain byproducts, since they may or may not occur... Whenever a good or evil deed is done, goodness or evilness spontaneously arises accordingly without having to wait for later results. [...] Our understanding of how the results of karma are received or experienced must always be self-apparent (*sandiṭṭhiko*), immediate (*akālika*), and inviting of inquiry (*ehiṃpassiko*), and should never contradict the truth that the five aggregates (*khandha*) of human life are not-self"  
[Buddhadasa Bhikkhu in / 10 /, page 6]

P.A. Payutto writes:

*“The creation of kamma and its results in the present time is done without the need for an agent [self] or a recipient [self]. [...] When a cause, known as kamma, or action, arises, there follows the result, known as vipaka, within that stream of events. We call this ‘cause and effect’. This process is not dependent on an owner of those actions, or a doer and a recipient of results as an additional, extraneous entity. Kamma is the flow of cause and effect within that stream of events, unlike the conventions [on the worldly level] which are pasted over them.”<sup>23</sup>*

How it can possibly take several lifespans for a karmic fruit to ‘ripen’ – I do not know.

## 2.3 The end of *karma*

At first glance only intentional positive or negative actions will produce a karmic result according to the just, moral *Law of Karma*. Washing our hands is a neutral intentional action without karmic relevance. Of great relevance yet is another neutral, neither wholesome nor unwholesome *karma*, sometimes called ‘destructive’ *karma* (see footnote 9(d) on page 4). This is the *karma*, rather than causing the accumulation of more *karma*, which is leading to the eradication of all other *karma*, to the cessation of all suffering. It is based on the intention to create neither positive nor negative *karma*. This intention or volition, built on wisdom and altruistic efforts, is formed in the mind by means of practicing the *Noble Eightfold Path*. The perfection of the *Noble Eightfold Path* equals the extinction of all *karma*, corresponds to the realisation of *Nirvana* (see Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, in / 10 /, page 8). This ‘neither wholesome nor unwholesome’ or ‘neutral’ or ‘destructive’ *karma* actually is what the Buddha was concerned with. The Buddha taught liberation from *samsara*, the cycle of birth and death, that is the end of all *karma*.

A summary of this brief discussion about *karma* is given by the Buddha himself in the *Nibbedhikapariyāya Sutta*<sup>24</sup>:

*“It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call kamma. For having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind. And what is the source and origin of kamma? Contact is its source and origin.*

*And what is the diversity of kamma? There is kamma to be experienced in hell; there is kamma to be experienced in the animal realm; there is kamma to be experienced in the realm of afflicted spirits; there is kamma to be experienced in the human world; and there is kamma to be experienced in the deva world. This is called the diversity of kamma.*

*And what is the result of kamma? The result of kamma, I say, is threefold: [to be experienced] in this very life, or in the [next] rebirth, or on some subsequent occasion. This is called the result of kamma. And what, bhikkhus, is the cessation of kamma? With the cessation of contact there is cessation of kamma.*

*This noble eightfold path is the way leading to the cessation of kamma, namely, Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.*

*When, bhikkhus, a noble disciple thus understands kamma, the source and origin of kamma, the diversity of kamma, the result of kamma, the cessation of kamma, and the way leading to the cessation of kamma, he understands this penetrative spiritual life to be the cessation of kamma.*

*When it was said: ‘Kamma should be understood... the way leading to the cessation of kamma should be understood,’ it is because of this that this was said.”*

<sup>23</sup> P.A. Payutto in / 9 /, page 106

<sup>24</sup> *Nibbedhikapariyāya Sutta*, AN 63, III [415], page 963 in / 1 /

In the above Sutta the Buddha declared Contact as the source and origin of *karma* and, according to the teaching of *Dependent Origination* (see footnote 5 on page 3), for practical purposes ignorant Contact is the starting point for the arising of suffering, that is, we have to be aware whenever we see, hear smell, taste, touch and think, and we have to deal wisely with that contact. We need to have a sufficient amount of mindfulness and concentration to be aware when a sense-organ meets the appropriate sense-object and we have to have sufficient wisdom to respond wisely to this contact. If the contact is a wise contact, the mind stays balanced and calm. No unnecessary mental concoction, no foolish desire and no creation of new *karma*.

How can we gain a sufficient amount of mindfulness, concentration and wisdom? By developing the *Noble Eightfold Path* (the 4<sup>th</sup> Noble Truth). By practicing Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, for instance by means of concentration- and *insight-* or *vipassanā* meditation, we gain mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. Developing Right Understanding and Right Aspiration is another possibility to improve wisdom. And as we are not living alone on this planet, as we are social human beings, we need to develop the moral aspect of the *Noble Eightfold Path*, need to develop Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood as well.

Finally the *Noble Eightfold Path*, developed to its fullest, will lead to the end of suffering and to the end of *karma*.

### 3. Merit (*puñña* in Pāli)

In dealing with *merit* we face the same situation as with *karma*. On the conventional level there is a person or 'self' generating, accumulating and receiving *merit* in the present or in a future life – this is the preferred understanding, conveniently forgetting the teaching about *anattā* ('not-self'). On the spiritual level the *Five Aggregates* may produce *merit* and receive the result immediately as an alteration in the mind. The next meritorious deed will modify the mind again and by this way *merit* can kind of accumulate in the mind (eg they contribute to form the character).

*Merit* (*puñña*) is karmically wholesome action, leading to a favourable rebirth<sup>25</sup>. In Theravāda Buddhism meritorious deeds do not lead to enlightenment, but to (temporary) future happiness in this world or another<sup>26</sup>. The accumulation of *merit* is a possibility to influence the results of one's *karma*.

Mahāyāna Buddhists believe that positive *karma* alone does not lead to enlightenment. Positive *karma* may result in experiencing happy and for the further spiritual development conducive circumstances; it reduces suffering but does not lead to its end. Positive as negative *karma* is subject to change, is impermanent and exhausts itself. *Merit* on the other hand accumulates and leads to liberation. While all intentional action is *karma*, people believe that only intentional actions in connection with the *Three Jewels* (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) result in *merit*.

In Thai-Buddhism the expressions *karma* and *merit* seem to be used more or less interchangeable and for me the question arises: When offering food to a monk, a wholesome and meritorious intentional action, do I commit good *karma* resulting in a positive fruit **and** *merit* thereby? The conviction that *merit*, generated in this life, can cancel negative *karma* created in a past life corresponds to the concept of destructive *karma* that can erase other *karma*.

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<sup>25</sup> Note 52 to Sutta 1, DN, page 540 in / 5 /

<sup>26</sup> Note 116 to Sutta 2, DN, page 545 in / 5 /

### How can *merit* be generated?

According to the Buddhist scriptures the historical Buddha has mentioned three methods to generate *merit*<sup>27</sup>:

- Giving or generosity
  - Giving of material goods or skills
  - Giving of fearlessness
  - Giving of Dharma
- Moral conduct
- Mental development or meditation.

Other parts of the scriptures mention indirectly seven additional methods. Altogether they are known as the *Ten Meritorious Deeds*.

- |                                     |                                          |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| 1. Giving or generosity             | 2. Moral conduct or virtue               |
| 3. Meditation or mental development | 4. Respect or reverence                  |
| 5. Service in helping others        | 6. Transference of merit                 |
| 7. Rejoicing in other's merit       | 8. Expounding or teaching the dharma     |
| 9. Listening to the dharma          | 10. Correcting one's views <sup>28</sup> |

**The first method:** Giving or generosity is considered the easiest one; it explicitly concerns outward practice, and generates less *merit* than the two others. Material goods like food and robes for the monks, money, construction material etc. as well as bodily and intellectual capacities, eg for the construction of buildings or the teaching of the *Dharma* belong to this group. Receivers may be the own family, friends, beggars, relief organizations, hospitals, monasteries ... (for the different amount of *merit* see below). One is supposed to give with one's own hands. This is why donors hold each other by the hands or touch each other when the offering is presented – this is regarded as by one's own hand.

**The second method:** Keeping the moral precepts is regarded more difficult than giving worldly items and generates higher *merit*. Keeping Eight Precepts (e.g. on Buddhist observation days) is more difficult than keeping Five Precepts (the minimal moral obligation of a lay person) and thus creates more *merit*. Monks are asked to keep 227 Precepts (nuns 311) and top this list. (Nuns keep more precepts than monks --> consequently the *merit* should be higher when offering to a nun than to a monk!!! I'm sure it is not.<sup>29</sup>)

**The third method:** Mental development and meditation is time consuming and difficult and the most important area to work on and thus generates the highest *merit*. Amongst these are the development of concentration, wisdom and loving kindness. Ordination, even if only temporary, is another source of great *merit*.

### What determines the amount of *merit*?

The result of making *merit* depends on three components: The alms and the qualifications of the receiver and the donor. The closer receiver and donor are to the *Dharma*, the higher the *merit*. An offering to a Buddha generates higher *merit* than the same donation to a monk. The *merit* of giving a meal to a monk is higher than giving the same meal to a beggar and the same meal given to a dog creates even less

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<sup>27</sup> *This was said by the Blessed One, said by the Arahant, so I have heard:* "Monks, there are these three grounds for meritorious activity. Which three? The ground for meritorious activity made of generosity, the ground for meritorious activity made of virtue, and the ground for meritorious activity made of development [meditation]. These are the three grounds for meritorious activity." [IT 60, page 39 in / 11 /]

<sup>28</sup> Mahinda Wijesinghe in / 12 /, page 5

<sup>29</sup> You may want to have a look at my article regarding 'Bhikkhuni (nun) ordination controversy in Theravāda Buddhism'. Link on page 20.

*merit*.<sup>30</sup> And, regarding *merit*, one monk is not the same as another monk. The purer and more observant the monk is, the more *merit* he will receive.

Now, the receiver, eg a monk, will accumulate *merit* by accepting the offering as well as he is giving the donor a chance to perform her meritorious deed. Thus a kind of ‘spiral of merit’ is established. The donor generates *merit* by her donation, thereby not only increasing her own *merit* but that of the receiver as well. When donating a second time to the same receiver, the donor will generate more *merit* with the **same** donation than at the first time because her *merit* as well as that of the receiver was increased by giving/receiving the first offering – and now the *merit* of both will increase again by the second donation.

Important with all offerings is: Donor and receiver have to be morally clean, the offered alms have to be clean (stolen money does not generate *merit*) and the donor has to have good intentions otherwise no or only very little *merit* is generated.

### **Charing or dedicating *merit***

It is popular believe that after a meritorious action has been finished, the thus generated *merit* can be shared with others or dedicated to other living or diseased persons. The donor does not keep less *merit* thereby; on the contrary he will generate additionally *merit* by the action of sharing/ dedicating.

Sharing or dedicating *merit* actually violates the *Law of Karma* because the fruits of a karmic deed will be experienced by its creator only. With the construction of a so-called ‘karmic field’ one tries to circumvent this significant obstacle. Originally a Mahāyāna Buddhism invention the sharing/ dedicating of *merit* is practiced everywhere in Buddhism.

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<sup>30</sup> “Herein, Ananda, by giving a gift to an animal, the offering may be expected to repay a hundredfold. By giving a gift to an immoral ordinary person, the offering may be expected to repay a thousandfold. By giving a gift to a virtuous ordinary person, the offering may be expected to repay a hundred-thousandfold. By giving a gift to one outside [the Dispensation] who is free from lust for sensual pleasures, the offering may be expected to repay a hundred-thousand times a hundred-thousandfold.

By giving a gift to one who has entered upon the way to the realisation of the fruit of stream-entry, the offering may be expected to repay incalculably, immeasurably. What, then, should be said about giving a gift to a stream-enterer? What should be said about giving a gift to one who has entered upon the way to the realisation of the fruit of once-return...to a once-returner...to one who has entered upon the way to the realisation of the fruit of non-return...to a non-returner...to one who has entered upon the way to the realisation of the fruit of arahantship...to an arahant... to a paccekabuddha? What should be said about giving a gift to a Tathagata, accomplished and fully enlightened?”

[*Dakkhīnāvibhanga Sutta*, MN 142.6, iii 255, page 1104 in / 6 /]

## 4. Thai-Buddhism

Buddhism, mainly Mahāyāna Buddhism, was introduced to Thailand as early as the 1st century A.D. At the beginning of the Sukhothai-period (approximately 700 years ago) the Thai kings adopted Theravāda Buddhism of the Sri Lankan tradition, but retaining a number of Khmer-Hindu-Mahāyāna-elements of the declining Khmer empire. From those days originates a collection of stories by then King Lithai known as the Trai Phum Phra Ruang (Three worlds of King Ruang). Here the King was likened to a Buddha, almost but not a divinity, adored as a *Dhammaraja*, a selfless king who governs the country according to dharmic principles and who is thanks to his outstanding virtues (*karma* and *merit*) closest to the *Dharma* and therefore rightly the king. The Trai Phum mentioned explicitly that accumulated *merit* from previous lives justifies those born into a better existence in this life.

The Sukhothai- area was succeeded by the Ayutthaya period where Brahmanism and Animism flourished and more of the Brahmanical cosmology was introduced. The idea of the *Dhammaraja* was enhanced by the idea of a *Devaraja* (god-king) descending directly from the Buddha. This period was characterized by huge economical progression and prolonged murderous fighting for power in- and outside the court. Today this period is known as 'Siam's dark ages'. It came to an end when Ayutthaya was totally destroyed by Burmese forces in 1767.

Following the Ayutthaya-period, the Chakry dynasty rose to power and its Rama X is the present King of Thailand with Bangkok as its capital. They distanced themselves from the errors of the Ayutthaya-period and resorted to an idealized form of the Sukhothai period with a benevolent *Dhammaraya* as leader, yet without separating themselves from important Hindu-/Brahma-elements of the Ayutthaya area.

One can see that present day Thai-Theravāda-Buddhism was right from its beginning 700 years ago distorted by Brahmanical and Mahāyāna elements, let alone the local believes in spirits, miracles etc. Most Thais have no problems with that – they don't know or don't want to have it otherwise.

Present day Thai-Buddhism is characterised by two sects and two main forms of Buddhism:

- The two sects
  - traditional Mahanikay sect. Only one shoulder covered. In 1970 approximately 95% of Thai monks belonged to this sect;<sup>31</sup>
  - Thammayut sect, established by King Mongkut (Rama IV, king from 1850-1868). Both shoulders covered;

do not differ much regarding the teaching but more regarding the different interpretation of the monk's conduct and practice (eg ordination, accepting food, dealing with money, wearing the robe).

- Two forms
  1. The orthodox or doctrinal Buddhism
    - is characterised by correct theory and practice with focus on the original teaching and the canonical scriptures. Regarding the numbers a far minority; mainly followed by intellectual monks and lay persons, more frequent in urban than in rural areas.
  2. Popular or folk Buddhism.
    - Popular Thai-Buddhism, embraced by most Thais, is a mixture of Buddhism, Brahmanism and Animism. It relies not only on the orthodox Buddhist scriptures but on local tales and stories as well. Many Thais, especially in rural areas, do not believe in the Buddha's teaching alone, but simultaneously in Hindu-deities, spirits, in amulets and Buddha-images with magical powers, etc.

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<sup>31</sup> See Wikipedia / 13 /  
Khun Reinhard



They believe, their life is determined by the constellation of the stars and that it is possible to read one's future by astrology. Some monks are well-known astrologers, others predict the lottery numbers. For adherents of popular Thai-Buddhism the Buddhist teaching (*Dharma*) contains sacred Pāli words with magical power, which, used in ceremonies, will result in health, happiness and safety for everyone taking part in that rite. In their view monks are not just followers of the historical Buddha but holy persons with magical powers and it is advisable not to have a bad relationship to them. Many monks, themselves of rural origin, do not only accept superstition but promote it themselves, eg by selling amulets with magical powers (eg for protection from accidents or bullets).<sup>32</sup>

The religious goal of many Thais is the accumulation of *merit* by performing good deeds and giving *dāna* (mainly material donation or, in modern times, money) in order to ensure (to buy as it sometimes appears) a happy or favourable rebirth. They do not aim to escape the cycle of birth and death (to realise *Nirvana*), but simply wish to be reborn in better circumstances. They regard the realisation of *Nirvana* as unattainable for them and therefore of being of no importance for their present life, and the clergy usually will encourage them in this view. According to orthodox Thai-Buddhists only monks and of those only the most advanced are able to realise *Nirvana* in this life.

For the majority of Thais the focus of the Buddhist activities is on generating *merit* (*bun* in Thai) – usually related to a variety of ceremonies, rites and rituals generating different amounts of *merit*. Many Thais regard becoming a monk as generating a very high amount of *merit*, followed by having a son ordained as a monk. Financing the building of a monastery, trailed by donations for repairing a monastery are other excellent opportunities to produce much *merit*. Giving food to monks (daily), becoming a novice, visiting Buddhist shrines throughout Thailand, observing the Buddhist observation days, keeping the Five Precepts strictly, donating robes for the monks at the end of their yearly, three-month rainy season retreat (*kathina* ceremony) are other popular activities to accumulate *merit*. These days the amount of *merit* is often regarded as being equivalent to the 'invested' money and as many want as much *merit* as possible, giving money for the construction/ repair of a monastery is preferable to putting much effort into proper ethical conduct.

"Good deeds have positive, bad deeds have negative results". This is so engrained in Thai culture that health or illness, happiness or suffering, wealth or poverty, social status, accidents, even violent husbands are regarded to be the result of good or bad *karma* and of *merit* or *de-merit* (*bap* in Thai).

It is popular belief that karmic energy and *merit* can ripen in the present or in a future life and therefore rebirth in improved circumstances is regarded as progression or even as reward for good and virtuous behavior in the present or in a past life. Those living in luxury in this life must have earned it by virtuous actions in past existences. The wealthy and those in high and influential positions can justify their lifestyle, their social status and authority with past *karma* and *merit*. They can claim that what and how they are is due to a just, moral law and they are, due to their present status that allows for further elaborate merit-making-ceremonies, again in the better position compared to the poor regarding a future rebirth. For the *Dhammaraja*-king this means: a high birth in a royal environment is proof of overwhelming positive *karma* and immense *merit* – he is rightfully the king.

Thus wealth or poverty, social status, the quality of life and the living conditions seem, speaking in Western terms, as God-given. They cannot be criticized, have to be endured. What's left is to amass a lot of positive *karma* and *merit* (donation) in order to gain a better lot in a future life. Consequently the existing conditions get cemented and the better offs do not even need to worry about changes or reforms, let

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<sup>32</sup> For more details see Pataraporn Sirikanchana in / 14 /, pages 5 - 11



alone revolutions as the underdogs believe their misery is due to their own faults and misbehaviour in the past.

The moral qualities and the character of a person are determined by *karma* and *merit* in first place, the accompanying material conditions being kind of accessories. The relationship between *karma* and its fruit is unknown (see footnote 6 on page 3) and so it may well be, that a person is living in favourable material circumstances, yet has an unwholesome character which leads him/ her to generate mainly unwholesome karmic results in this very life because any wholesome or unwholesome action here and now is only determined by the current volition which then has a result in the future. Any karmically wholesome or unwholesome volitional action of the present (present *karma*) is not the result of past *karma*; that is, volition is not influenced by past *karma*.<sup>33</sup>

The following example may help to illustrate this: We see an infirm elderly person wanting to cross the road. The meeting with this person (not his/hers bodily and mentally condition) is the result of our past *karma*. It follows our reaction to this encounter. We may swear at him “Get out of my way lame duck”, thus creating negative karmic results or we can approach him/ her with loving-kindness and help him/ her to cross the street, thus generating positive fruits in the future. Whom or whatever we are going to meet in this life is the result of past *karma*, but our reaction to it is not. Our reaction is a new *karma*.

P.A. Jackson summarizes the popular Thai belief in *karma* and *merit* as follows:

*“In popular Thai-Buddhism merit (in Thai bun) and its opposite de-merit (bap in Thai) are regarded as being produced by previous moral or immoral actions. Bun and bap cannot cancel each other out but each has its own independent consequences determining the physical, mental and social differences between individuals. To be a man or a woman, whole or deformed, healthy or ill, lord or peasant, wealthy or poor have all traditionally been regarded as results of one’s karmic inheritance. Merit or bun is not solely an individual matter but can be shared by others in specific ritualised merit-making (tham bun) ceremonies. For example, a ritual pouring of water at the end of a religious ceremony in a temple is regarded as transferring all or part of the merit generated by the ceremony to ‘all sentient beings’ or to specifically designated people, often the recently dead. And when a man is ordained into the sangha the sponsors of the ordination are also considered to participate in the merit thereby generated.”<sup>34</sup>*

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<sup>33</sup> Sayadaw U Silananda in / 4 /, pages 14/15 and 29

<sup>34</sup> Modified according to Jackson in / 15 /, pages 279/280

## 5. Summary

*Karma* is intentional action of body, speech and mind based on volition and will bring about a result (*vipāka*). *Karma* is not fate, destiny or chance. According to the early Buddhist texts the result can ripen in this life or in a future life or even in subsequent lives. This is the generally accepted understanding of the *Law of Karma*, the worldly level, on which the teaching regarding *karma* and *merit* is usually offered and this seems to be the level most Buddhists prefer.

Complementary to the basic mundane interpretation of *karma* and *merit* is the supramundane or spiritual level of the doctrine which clarifies that the teachings on *anattā* (not-self) and *karma* do not necessarily contradict each other. While the worldly explanation helps people to behave properly in this world, the transcendental teaching leads the way to the end of all suffering.

On the mundane as on the supramundane level is any action of body, speech and mind preceded by a mental activity, that is, the 'doer' of *karma* is intention/ volition (*cetanā*) and the 'receiver' is first of all mental as well, is feeling (*vedanā*). The worldly teaching holds that as long as the result or the fruit of a karmic relevant action is not yet ripened, is still just a potential, it can be altered or even destroyed by other *karma*. Unwholesome past *karma* can be diluted by lots of wholesome *karma*. *Merit* gained in the present life can also be used to counterbalance unwholesome *karma* committed in a past life. Presently generated *karma*, that is present action, is not the result of past *karma* but depends on the current intention/ volition and thus is it possible to shape the future. *The Law of Karma* is not the only expression of the law of cause and effect and thus not everything happening to a human being is the result of *karma*.

In Thai-Theravāda Buddhism *merit* does not lead to *Nirvana* but results in a favourable rebirth whereas in Mahāyāna-Buddhism it is accumulated *merit*, not the impermanent fruits of *karma*, which leads to liberation. Most monks, like laypeople, in Thailand strive for a better rebirth through meritorious action, *Nirvana* only being regarded as a realistic goal for the most spiritually developed personalities.

In popular Buddhism *karma* and *merit* are regarded as very important but, as in many cases, there is no unified view on these topics. We have the differences between Mahāyāna- and Theravāda-Buddhism, and regarding Thailand different views extend to the monasteries and even to the monks who seemingly teach what they see fit – resulting in confusion. In Thailand everyone is free to teach, write and publish whatever they like about Buddhism. "[...] there is in fact no centrally enforced control on interpretations of doctrine. There is, for example, no central censorial body in the *sangha* which vets Buddhist publications in Thailand. Any monk or layperson is free to publish whatever interpretation of the scriptures and doctrines he or she wishes without first needing to obtain any ecclesiastical imprimatur. [...] no specific institutional constraints exist on Buddhist writings or discussion."<sup>35</sup>

The next article or book you will read about *karma* and *merit* may offer a different perspective.

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<sup>35</sup> Jackson in / 15 /, page 39

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### Abbreviations

AN	Āṅguttara Nikāya
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
IT	Itivuttaka
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
SN	Samyutta Nikāya

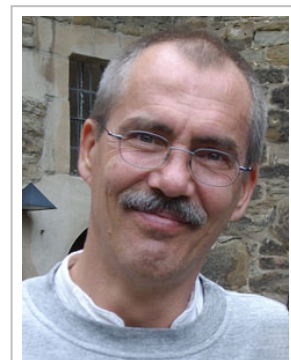
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## 7. About the author

My name is Reinhard Hölscher. In Thailand I'm politely addressed as Khun Reinhard.

For many years now I'm living in southern Thailand, studying Buddhism, practising meditation, teaching yoga and sharing my knowledge and experience regarding both *Theravāda* Buddhism and Hatha-Yoga with a large number of foreign students.

In 1995 I've started to participate in the monthly 10-day meditation retreats at the International Dharma Hermitage of Wat Suan Mokkh, Chaiya, Thailand. First as a participant, then as a helper, yoga teacher and coordinator, and later I've given talks during these retreats. Between 1995 and today I've altogether spent more than seven years at the International Dharma Hermitage.



Khun Reinhard

Together with my wife we are now offering the course 'Introduction to Buddhism and to Buddhist Meditation' at a small meditation centre in Hua Hin (Thailand). Detailed information about this course is available on our website at:

<http://www.meditationinhuahin.org>

Another interest of mine is yoga. I have practised Hatha Yoga for 46 years and taught it for more than 16 years after yoga teacher training in 2000 at the Vivekananda Ashram near Bangalore in India.

During my lessons I have introduced more than 2,000 women and men to the basics of Hatha-Yoga. Most were taught in 10-day courses.

Information, articles and books regarding my meditation and yoga experiences are available on my website at:

<http://www.khunreinhard.com>

## Publications

**eBooks** (available in PDF, EPUP, MOBI ... – format in both English and German language)

- **An Engineer Turned Meditation Teacher - 20 years fascinated by Suan Mokkh –**
- **Introduction to Buddhism and to Buddhist Meditation**
- **Enjoy Hatha Yoga**

**Articles** (PDF, free of charge, most are available in German language as well)

- **Non-Self and the Five Aggregates**
- **The Here-and-Now-Interpretation of Dependent Origination - An attempt to explain the arising of the self-concept in the human mind -**
- **Karma and Merit in (Thai) Buddhism**
- **Bhikkhuni-ordination controversy in Theravāda Buddhism**
- **Meditation – postures and practices**
- **Meditation in daily life**
- **Aging and Yoga**
- **Breathing and Yoga**                      and more ...