

# What About Karma?

Rev. Master Daizui MacPhillamy

—Former Head of the Order—

*A few months ago I was sent a manuscript that was written by Rev. Master Daizui in 1995. At that time he had been invited to write a chapter for a book being written on HIV, AIDS and Buddhist practice. As it turned out, for reasons unknown to me, they didn't end up using what Rev. Master Daizui wrote. I am not even sure of the book's title or if it was published. Around 2000 Rev. Master Daizui gave the manuscript to Rev. Master Oswin, Prior of the Eugene Buddhist Priory, where it remained unpublished until now. I am very pleased as Rev. Master Daizui's monastic disciple that "What About Karma?" is being made available, exactly as he had written it, to a much wider audience.*

*This article is Rev. Master Daizui at his best, exemplifying many of the views and qualities that made him such a deeply valued member of our Order. Using his considerable analytical skills, "What About Karma?" goes into a broad and detailed exploration of the relationship of karma to HIV and AIDS.*

*Although the operation of the law of karma is exceedingly complex, Rev. Master Daizui helps us to look at many of its important aspects and clarify several misunderstandings, thereby avoiding some simplistic and erroneous conclusions.*

*Building on this clearer understanding of karma, the article then looks at what can be said relative to HIV prevention, living with AIDS, facing the possibility of death, and to care*

*giving. As timely as a discussion of HIV and AIDS was when this was written, and as vital as this topic continues to be, the scope of this article goes well beyond these specific issues. The conclusions and suggestions offered are applicable to any illness and difficult and challenging situations we may find ourselves in—situations where we may feel, “This isn’t fair!” or desperately wonder, “Why me?”*

*In addition to his careful analysis of the law of karma, Rev. Master Daizui offers two more views that I feel are equally important. The final part of the article offers many suggestions to the caregiver. Ultimately we are all caregivers, the care we give is to what arises in the moment in our own daily practice and which may involve others. This taking care, which is none other than a direct exploration of karma, teaches us “love and the utmost respect” for what arises.*

*At the end of his introduction to the article, Rev. Master Daizui acknowledges that his understanding of karmic issues is incomplete and expects that there will be Buddhists who have more experience in the teachings than he and who will honestly disagree with him. At the time of its writing this article represented Rev. Master Daizui’s honest best. It was not written as a definitive study. It was an offering, fully recognizing and respecting differing viewpoints in the “faith that from the interaction of them will arise a greater understanding of the truth than any one of us can come to alone.”*

*—Rev. Master Hugh Gould, Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey*

If we are going to take a Buddhist approach to the issues which HIV and AIDS raise for the people living with it, and for those who love them, for their caregivers, and for the priests or teachers who may be asked to advise them, sooner or later thoughts about karma will arise. It is natural to wonder about the relationship of karma to what is going on with HIV and AIDS: after all, some really unpleasant things are, or sometime might be, happening, and we all have at least some notion that Buddhism teaches that when painful things happen it's because of the karmic consequence of some wrong action we have done. It is reasonable to ask, then, what are the wrong actions that lead to HIV infection and to AIDS? Since everyone knows that HIV infection is usually somehow associated with sex or drugs, and since those two areas of behavior are regarded with moral suspicion in many quarters, people can't really be blamed for considering the possibility that maybe HIV and AIDS are the karmic consequences of "immorality". Where do the Buddhist teachings on karma take us? Will we end up, underneath all our talk of compassion and acceptance, secretly suspecting what some other religions openly proclaim: that "AIDS is God's punishment for homosexuals and drug addicts?"

I think not. While the above line of thinking is plausible from a casual knowledge of the law of karma, I believe that it will not stand up to a more detailed inquiry into that law, such as I hope to offer here. This exploration will be based upon an analysis of Buddhist thought and teachings as well as upon my own understanding and experience. As to the former, I will note the references used so that readers may examine them for themselves. As to the latter, I owe it to the reader to state what biases I may have that could color what I say. I have a strong belief that

ethical Preceptual behavior is important, and I interpret the set of Precepts which I choose to follow as advising against both the use of street drugs and against engaging in irresponsible or abusive sexuality [27:129,137, & 138]. I also believe (and have stated publicly [22]) that same-gender sexuality is not, in itself, inherently unethical and that people of gay and lesbian orientation can, and should be welcome to, train in Buddhism in all ways and forms open to anyone else.

As to my personal experiences with AIDS, they are not very substantial. Although several people who are dear to me are HIV positive, are living with AIDS, or have died of AIDS, I am not myself HIV positive. Although I have been and continue to be a primary caregiver to someone who is seriously ill, the illness is not AIDS. Residing in a rural monastic setting, my opportunities to advise or work closely with people who are living with AIDS or with their caregivers have been few. My study of Buddhist thought and teachings, on the other hand, has been reasonably extensive and has gone on for over 25 years. The last 23 of those years have been spent as a full time monk, training as a disciple of Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett. As to what I shall say here, I am speaking for myself only, I recognize that my understanding of karmic issues is incomplete, and I expect that there will be Buddhists who have more experience in the Dharma than I who will have honest disagreement with me. Finally, I respect differing viewpoints and have faith that from the interaction of them will arise a greater understanding of the truth than any one of us can come to alone.

IN THIS FIRST SECTION, let us look at some important aspects of karma which, if misunderstood, might cause us to come to erroneous conclusions about HIV and AIDS. This will require some technical discussions of various Buddhist teachings on the topic, discussions which may be a bit “dry” and scholarly for some readers’ tastes, but which I hope will not only demonstrate the inaccuracy of negative judgmental thinking but also pave the way for some positive suggestions in the second section of the chapter.

1. *Not everything is due to karma* [19:9; 24:84]. The notion that everything that happens in the world—good, bad, and indifferent—is due to karma has been plaguing Buddhism for roughly 1,800 years, since the time of the Andhaka sect [25:xxviii & 314]. Of particular relevance to us, disease and death are not always due to karma: they are the lot of all living beings no matter what their spiritual state [13:45-47; 25:207]. Indeed, were this not true, the world would be positively cluttered with all of the arahants and Buddhist sages who ever lived. But it isn’t: they’re all dead, just as you and I will be some day. So the mere fact that someone has a serious disease, or may be dying, does not necessarily mean that the cause is karmic: it might be, it might not be.

What else could it be caused by? It turns out that in Buddhism the law of karma is only one of a set of five classes of universal natural laws (*niyamas*) [16:24-27; 19:9 & 10; 24:84 & 85]. One of these (*utu niyama*) roughly corresponds to the inorganic natural laws that in the West would be classified under physics, astronomy, chemistry, and the like, while another (*bija niyama*) more or less refers to what we would call the biologi-

cal laws, which, among other things, would include the genetics, evolution, and epidemiology of viruses. These other laws of the universe operate quite independently of karma, and they operate without regard to ethics, morality, spiritual worth, or any other human concern. Their operation is also neither “fair” nor “unfair”: they simply are. The bottom line: sometimes HIV is just a virus.

2. *There is no simple, invariable connection between one type of behavior and one karmic consequence* [12:227-230; 25:356, 384-386]. Given the independent operation of the other universal laws, could karma even possibly be relevant to the actions of a virus? Yes, it could, since although karma by itself is incapable of producing a physical object (and could not thus magically “materialize” a virus where none was present before) [25:309], it can interact with and make use of the operation of the other laws of the universe and can also influence feeling, perception, desire, thought, and the actions consequent thereon, which in turn can lead to other results such as the transmission of viruses. However, even if HIV or AIDS (or anything else) were sometimes to have a karmic component in its coming into being, we could thereby infer neither that all persons having that particular karmic consequence had done some particular action, nor that all persons who do a particular action will have that karmic consequence [21:246 & 247; 25:254-262]. I remember seeing an old Buddhist “Sunday School” children’s book in which the karmic consequence was listed for each of a series of naughty actions: “If you lie, you will have bad breath.” I didn’t think much of it as a lesson for kids; as a statement of universal truth for Buddhist adults, it’s just plain wrong.

The reason for this is that the operation of the law of karma is exceedingly complex. For example, the interaction between a volitional action and its subsequent karmic consequence (all karmas are set in motion by volitional actions, and all except fully enlightened volitional actions set some karma in motion) is a multivariate function of four aspects of the gravity of the action (whether or not it is weighty, habitual, occurring at the threshold of death, and the frequency with which it has occurred); four types of karmic function (the karma may be directly productive of a result, may augment other karmas, may suppress other karmas, or may completely supplant other karmas); and four temporal aspects of the consequence (it may occur in this life, in the next, in a subsequent one, or not at all) [6:696-699; 16:116; 24:82 & 83]. These temporal aspects mean, by the way, that it is not even possible to assume that a karmic consequence which occurs in this lifetime has anything to do with actions done in this lifetime [9:102]. In addition, other aspects, such as the actual mechanism of karmic action, are simply unknown to anyone other than the Buddhas [6:699-701; 24:81; 19:9].

To add yet another complexity, karma may not operate solely on an individual basis: some Buddhists believe that there is such a thing as collective karma, which is said to affect not only the peoples who share it but also their environment [30:50-52]. Very little has been written on this topic, perhaps because very little is known and also because the concept of collective karma is capable of generating almost any interpretation one wishes. In the case of HIV, for instance, religious conservatives could postulate that the rise and spread of the virus is due to the collective karma of modern humanity's "moral permissiveness," which they could say has been abetted by the religious

left; religious liberals could just as easily say that it is a collective karmic consequence of our overpopulation and destruction of rain-forest environments, part of the responsibility for which they might place upon the religious right. On the levels of the inorganic and biological laws, both may have some scientific evidence on their side, but what (if any) significance all this has for the operation of collective karma, no one knows. Because the concept of collective karma is capable of being used to justify not only one's opinions about social issues but also one's biases about groups of people on the basis of little or no evidence, I find it distinctly unhelpful. I mention it here to acknowledge its possible contribution to the complexity of understanding karmic issues, but I do warn that it can be a source of much theological mischief.

In view of all this, it is small wonder that the sutras hold that no one is capable of making universal statements about karmas and that no one other than the person themselves or a fully enlightened Buddha is capable of assessing a particular person's karma. "Wherefore, Ananda, be no measurer of persons; measure not the measure of persons; verily, Ananda, he digs a pit for himself who measures the measure of persons. I alone, Ananda, can measure their measure—or one like me" [13:248].

*3. AIDS does not fit the pattern of common karmic consequences of sexual misconduct or drug abuse.* While neither universal nor specific individual statements about karmic consequence can be made, broad general patterns can be described. What are the volitional actions which are traditionally believed to be conducive to the occurrence of serious chronic diseases or a short life-span? They are: deliberate cruelty to or killing

of other beings, severe ill will, and adherence to false beliefs [25:249-250; 24:78-80]. Neither sexual misconduct nor drug abuse seem to be particularly emphasized in this context.

This does not mean that Buddhism says that there are no karmic consequences for such actions. It does, and for sexual misconduct they are commonly described as including: having many enemies, having undesirable mates, rebirth without functional sexual organs, rebirth as a member of the sex one has abused previously, rebirth in dusty places, and rebirth with animal habits [7:159; 24:78-80; 25:76; 30:186-188]. Chronic diseases don't seem to be generally listed. The use of intoxicating substances is said to lead to almost any consequence, since intoxication can lead to almost any harmful action [7:160].

Since HIV in Western countries occurs with a higher frequency in gay men than it does in the general population, the question may arise in some minds as to whether same-gender sexual activity is, in itself, inherently "sexual misconduct" and is thus apt to have some pattern of negative karmic consequence reliably and uniquely characteristic of it. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, I myself don't think that it does. First, I believe that sexual *orientation* is simply not an ethical issue, a view shared by the Order to which I belong [18:2]. In consequence, we make no distinctions on grounds of sexual orientation in ordination to our Order nor in promotion within it. Since our ordained members are celibate, sexual orientation doesn't really make much difference, but we also make no distinctions on the basis of sexual orientation with regard to our lay ministers, where we accord the same respect to married heterosexual couples and to equivalently-committed gay and lesbian couples. Regarding sexual *behavior*, as I said previously, all volitional

actions have karmic consequences, but if orientation is not an ethical issue, then I believe that it follows that, all else being equal, a given volitional action will not have a significantly different level of karmic consequence if it occurs between same-gender sexual partners than it would have between opposite-gender sexual partners.

This position is not shared by all Buddhists, however, and there are well-respected Buddhist teachers both ancient and modern who clearly regard gay or lesbian orientation and/or any same-gender sexual activity as inherently immoral [28:76; 31:25]. Also, the Pali Vinaya (the ancient Indian Buddhist rules for monastics, still followed in various degrees by many sanghas) forbids the ordination of persons known as *pandakas*, a term which has variously been interpreted as meaning “eunuchs,” “hermaphrodites,” “impotent persons,” “persons congenitally lacking sexual organs,” “transvestites,” “transsexuals,” “homosexuals,” or some or all of the above [34:204-209]. From the context of these rules and the cases cited [4:108 & 109; 5:375], I doubt that their intent was to deny ordination to serious students of Buddhism who happen to be of a gay, lesbian, or bisexual orientation, but such an interpretation is clearly possible [34:207 & 208]. On the other side of the issue, there have been a few Buddhist traditions through the ages which have openly advocated and/or practiced same-gender sexual activity [34:210; 26].

In some ways more interesting to me than these explicit positions “con” or “pro” is the fact that most Buddhist writings with which I am familiar are either neutral or simply silent on the matter. Most of the references to the issue which I can find are in the Vinayas for celibate orders. In all three major

branches of the sangha these either explicitly or implicitly prohibit same-gender sexual behavior, but they approach it not as anything special but as simply one of a number of sexual possibilities, all of which are out of bounds for celibate people [3:48 & 49; 15:13; 33:17]. Beyond this, most major canonical writings just do not seem to address the topic. The issue of the ordination of *pandakas*, for example, simply does not occur in the Mahayana Bodhisattva Vinaya, which does not list any form of sexual orientation, physical sexual disability, or prior sexual behavior among the absolute impediments to ordination [27:171-176]. This impression of the essential neutrality of Buddhist writings is not unique to me; at least one scholar who researched the area extensively came to a similar conclusion, “...when homosexual behavior is not ignored in Indian Buddhist writings it is derogated much to the same degree as comparable heterosexual acts” [34:209]. And I think that it is not entirely coincidental that in a recent special issue of a Buddhist journal which was devoted to gay and lesbian Buddhist issues, not one article quoted any scriptural reference at all [52]. Perhaps my biases are showing, but I tend to conclude from all this that sexual orientation is indeed not an ethical issue and, hence, same-gender sexual activity is no more and no less likely to generate karmic consequence than equivalent heterosexual activity.

All of this does not mean that HIV and AIDS may not have some karmic components from this lifetime in their causes for a particular person (we’ll look at that later), but it does suggest that, while truly harmful sexual misconduct and drug abuse do have karmic consequences, the simplistic statement that AIDS is “obviously” the karmic consequence of an “immoral life-

style” does not fit with what has been discerned through the ages about karmic patterns.

4. *Even if AIDS were to be the karmic consequence of some action in this lifetime by some individual, it wouldn't be punishment and it wouldn't be from God.* Most of us who have studied Buddhism for any length of time know that it does not postulate a Creator God. It follows logically from this that karma, like the other four laws of the universe, is a natural law and is a description of how the universe operates, not a punitive law made by some Lawgiver [6:701; 26:24; 19:9; 24:76]. So what is the purpose of karma? Well, since it was not made by some Cosmic Creator, there may not be a “purpose” in the sense we usually think of, but there certainly is an effect: karma motivates us to train, to practice Buddhism. As such, karma is an aspect of the Buddha’s Compassion: because we feel pain as a result of doing actions which harm others or ourselves, we’re more likely to stop doing them. One who has no insight into this simply suffers the pain and wonders why; one who has some understanding of the compassionate nature of karma is motivated onward to realize true impermanence, true detachment, true refraining from wrongdoing, and true meditation [10:172 & 173].

In conclusion, I hope by now that it is apparent that if notions about karma were to lead someone to the Buddhist equivalent of the thought, “AIDS is God’s punishment for homosexuals and drug addicts,” whether that thought was applied with guilt to oneself or with judgment to others, it would be inaccurate in just about every possible way.

IS THERE, THEN, ANYTHING USEFUL that can be said about karma and HIV? Actually, I think there is: I think there are things to be said relevant to HIV prevention, to living with AIDS, to facing the possibility of death, and to caregiving.

1. “*Good people*” can get HIV. People can have some pretty strange ideas about the effects of karma. One of them is the opposite of the notion discussed above that only “bad” people get the “karmic consequence” known as HIV infection. The opposite is that “good” people can’t get HIV. The idea isn’t as silly as it sounds on the face of it, and it can come about in two ways, both of which require the false underlying assumption that karma is the cause of all things, particularly of unpleasant things like diseases. First, if one knows that good (*kusala*) karma can moderate and counteract bad (*akusala*) karma (which it sometimes can), then it is not completely absurd to believe that for one whose training and practice are strong, the accumulation of good karma will protect one from that consequence of bad karma known as becoming HIV infected (or, if one is already HIV positive, from passing on the virus to others). Second, if one believes that enlightened people are not subject to the law of karma (another well-worn and ever-popular delusion [5]), and one believes oneself to be enlightened, well... any action will seem possible without any consequence at all! The conclusion one can draw from either of these chains of reasoning is that one need not take the advisable precautions in, say, having sexual relations or in handling HIV positive bodily fluids as a caregiver, if one’s Buddhist practice is strong. Unfortunately, this idea, like its negative counterpart, is founded on faulty assumptions and ignores the existence of the other four independent

classes of universal laws. The biological laws operate in such a way that if you create the correct conditions, HIV transmission will occur regardless of how “enlightened” or “good” you consider yourself to be. The myth that one can somehow alter the operation of the fundamental laws of the universe through special “powers” derived from practice actually dates back to our same old friends the Andhaka sect around 200 C.E. [25:353 & 354]. The implications for HIV prevention are clear: viruses don’t play favorites.

2. *An understanding of karma can help a person living with AIDS to handle it well and to practice Buddhism more effectively.* “It isn’t fair; why me?” It’s a natural question to ask, but one that can lead to some pretty unhelpful states of mind if not thought about clearly: an unending round of self-doubt and recriminations can result, which can undermine positive living and practice. But, with an understanding of karma, I think that the question need not be unhelpful for those people who feel a necessity to ask it. First let’s look at it on the level of the inorganic and biological laws; here the “why?” has a straightforward answer: because at time “w” the HIV virus entered your system through route “x” from source “y” during circumstance “z”. And, indeed, it isn’t fair; it’s also not unfair: concepts of fairness and unfairness are irrelevant to these laws of the universe. They simply *are*. It is also not generally anyone’s “fault,” as it is pretty rare that anyone deliberately tries to either transmit or contract HIV. Would you have been in circumstance “z” at time “w” had you known what you know now? Probably not, but you didn’t know then what you know now. Does that mean you were stupid at time “w”? No, it means that you are wiser

now than you were then. We each do what seems most important at the time; if we see later that something else would have been better, it means that we have grown in wisdom, not that the previous actions of ourselves or others were “stupid,” “unconsciously self-destructive,” or “bad” in some other sense. Is there room to feel temporary regret or anger? Sure there is, but not room for guilt or for holding onto blame. In short, I believe that thinking clearly about how one came to be HIV positive in terms of the inorganic and biological laws of the universe can help us to *simply accept what is*. And all-acceptance, as my master Rev. Jiyu-Kennett once put it, “is the key to the Gateless Gate”. From all-acceptance one can begin to use the approach to both illness and to death that the Buddhas and Arahants Themselves practice:

So also to the Ariyan disciple sickening brings sickness, ...dying brings death, ...wasting brings destruction, ...ending brings the end; and when the end is near, he reflects thus: ‘Not to me only does ending bring the end, but wheresoever there is a coming and going of creatures, a passing on and an arising, to all, ending brings the end...;’ and when disease comes... [or] the end is near,...he does not mourn nor pine nor weep nor wail nor beat his breast nor fall into distraction. Monks, this man is called a learned Ariyan disciple; drawn out is the poisoned dart of sorrow with which the unlearned average man torments himself; the sorrowless, dart-free, Ariyan disciple has cooled the self entirely[13:46 & 47].

When there is no karmic component in the causal chain of events leading to one becoming HIV positive, then I think that the above may be an entirely sufficient answer to the question “why?” Indeed, to try to push the question beyond this point

may be apt to lead to fruitless and destructive circular thinking. But suppose you suspect that there might be some karma involved as well? That, too, can point towards deeper Buddhist practice if the misconceptions discussed in the first section are avoided. When looking for an answer to “why?” on the karmic level, it may help to know that, unlike the other universal laws, the law of karma is fair: totally and completely so [24:76]. And that can be useful in trying to think clearly about what karmas might possibly be involved in one’s own situation. A tough but potentially useful question becomes obvious, “Have I done anything in this life that has caused such great harm to other beings that AIDS would be a likely karmic consequence?” Remember, in the process of answering this question, that *in general* the most likely areas in which to look might be deliberate, extensive and profoundly destructive acts of: cruelty to or killing of other beings, hatred or ill will, or acts resulting from severe delusions.

It is highly unlikely that you will find actions in your life that are commensurate with AIDS being their karmic consequence, but what if you do? Different branches of Buddhism have different ways of dealing with karma: I’d advise approaching the situation in the manner suggested by your own teacher. If you have no particular path and are interested in what one approach looks like, I will briefly describe here what we do in my lineage of the Serene Reflection (or Sōtō Zen) tradition. For more particulars on this approach I would suggest reading the works called “Shushogi” and “Shoji,” written by Master Eihei Dōgen in 13th century Japan [11].

The first thing we do when we become aware of some action of our life that has done severe harm is to face it squarely,

with full and mindful awareness of the act and its various consequences. By the way, having practiced mindfulness and meditation makes this a lot easier and is one of the reasons for regular practice. From full, uncensored awareness and acceptance of what we have done, there naturally arises empathy for those beings we have harmed, and from this a deep sense of regret. Note I say “regret,” not “guilt” and not “shame,” as these latter two are founded on an incomplete acceptance and can be profoundly unhelpful. Regret naturally leads to resolutions to do whatever may be practical to help heal the harm one has done and to never do that sort of harm again, and this leads to making a commitment to undertake a way of training and practice which will bring these resolves to fruition (hence Precepts are a big part of our form of Buddhism). This commitment and this practice lead to the spontaneous arising of the four bases of wisdom: charity, tenderness, benevolence, and sympathy or empathy. These, in turn, produce the desire to be of service to all, whence comes the Bodhisattva Ideal. And all of the above lead to the continuing dedication to train and practice Buddhism throughout one’s life.

Now this process sounds like it has to take a long time: nope, it can all happen today if one simply turns round and faces one’s karma squarely, unflinchingly, honestly. And what if one is feeling very ill and perhaps expects to have only a short time left to live and practice: is it worth it? Yup, it sure is. Here is what Master Dōgen says on that subject towards the end of “Shushōgi”:

Should you live for a hundred years just wasting your time, every day and month will be filled with sorrow; should you drift as the slave of your senses for a

hundred years and yet live truly for only so much as a single day, you will, in that one day, not only live a hundred years of life but also save a hundred years of your future life. The life of this one day, today, is absolutely vital life; your body is deeply significant. Both your life and your body deserve love and respect for it is by their agency that Truth is practiced and the Buddha's power exhibited [11:163].

The more likely result of having a good review of one's life with an eye to past actions and their karma is that one will see some actions which one regrets, but none of sufficient gravity to be even remotely likely to result in a karmic "wake-up call" as drastic as AIDS. What then? As to the lesser karmas (some of which might possibly be contributory, but not themselves causal), it is certainly productive to clean them up in this lifetime, just like the great ones, in the manner briefly alluded to above or some equivalent in your own tradition of Buddhism. But what is one to make of the fact that no grave karmas can be discerned in his life? Two possibilities suggest themselves: either the karmic component to one's having HIV or AIDS is small to nonexistent (i.e. the causes lie primarily in the realms of the inorganic and biological laws of the universe) or a karma from before this lifetime has ripened. The former was discussed earlier; the latter gets, admittedly, a little weird.

I happen to believe in the Buddhist teaching of rebirth; I also happen to know that it is just as complicated as karma, and just as susceptible to generating strange ideas if studied only casually. Consider, for example, how the teaching that there is no soul that transmigrates from life to life (*anatta*) [24:95-97] interacts with the idea of karmic fairness. It would seem

that either there must be a soul, since fairness requires that it was “I” who sowed what “I” now reap, or that karma from past lives is grossly unfair, since “I” am reaping what someone else sowed. Actually, neither one is quite the case; although there is a connection between you and that former being who created the karma, you are not him or her [17:17-21; 19:8; 29:47]. Thus *you are not responsible* for starting this karma, although you are the one reaping the consequence. That would only be fair if in some sense you were willing to accept this burden. And that is exactly what I believe happens.

By the way, I should state that what follows in this paragraph is based primarily upon my own experience and belief, and on discussions with other Buddhists, so I have no scriptural references. I think that at the conception of a new psychophysical being (which we may call for the sake of convenience a “you”), that being, because of its oneness with Original Compassion, naturally “picks up” or “takes on” some unresolved bunch of karma left behind by a previous being, in order that this karma may have a chance to be set to rest. I believe that this karma, possibly along with other related bunches of karma and countervailing bunches of merit or “good” karma, then becomes the karmic inheritance of that new being which we will call “you”. Now “you” didn’t exactly “agree” to this in any conscious sense, but “you” nonetheless did shoulder this burden because, beneath the “you,” there is a True Nature of Original Compassion. The karmic inheritance which “you” shoulder will be one that is consistent with the conditions of your birth, your basic personality and temperament, and the spiritual problems which you address in this life. Thus, in training and practicing with these, you not only bring your own life to fulfillment, you

also set to rest one or more karmas from the past. In this very real sense we are all Bodhisattvas.

Now that may be interesting theology, but of what practical use is it to anyone? First, it makes past life karma easier to bear: you are less likely to feel overwhelming and confusing guilt or shame over something awful in the past that “you” didn’t do. Second, it makes it clear that there is no necessity to find out everything about your past karma in order to do something about it, since *simply by dealing with your temperament and problems in this lifetime you are doing all that is necessary to set that past karma to rest*. Some people do have spontaneous insights into their past karma, and that can be useful, but there is no need to try to artificially induce such insights (thereby risking false insights and all sorts of spiritual sidetracks). Third, it engenders the deepest respect for oneself and for others who bring heavy burdens of karma into this life: they are not somehow “worse” than other beings; they are the ones who have been most willing to try to bring peace to the universe. Thus, in the case of someone who feels that their AIDS may be in part conditioned by some heavy karma from the distant past (and remember, only the person themselves is capable of coming to that conclusion), that person deserves our deepest gratitude and has a remarkable opportunity to contribute to the harmony of all things by living and practicing with AIDS well.

How to live and practice with it well is, of course, the topic of several other chapters of this book, written by people far more knowledgeable in that area than I; in this chapter I am mentioning only some aspects dealing with karma. Thinking about the karmas of things long past suggests two more of these aspects. In the rather rare circumstance that one has spontane-

ous insights into what those past karmas are, one may approach them in the same manner as one does with karmas of this lifetime, with one exception. Instead of feeling profound regret for what one has done in this life, profound sadness will naturally arise when one has full awareness of what some other being (with whom one feels a connection) did in the past. From this sadness will come a resolution to see and deal with every tendency in one's own life which either goes in the same direction as the mistakes of ages past or which swings past the Middle Way to the opposite mistake (a common occurrence). This, by the way, is one of the ways to know if a spontaneous insight into past life material has a chance of being accurate; it will teach you something useful about yourself in this life, and there will be no desire to "hang onto" the experience nor to repeat the events of the past. From this resolution to train and practice will arise deeper understanding in exactly the same way discussed above.

In the more likely event that you have no such insights, yet have a hunch that there is something karmic going on that has to do with the far past, it is, as I said before, enough to proceed with one's practice in the faith that by so doing one will not only find freedom within this life but also set to rest any karmic inheritance one may have brought with one. You needn't take my word alone on that; the first Chinese Zen Ancestor, Bodhidharma, said it, too:

Understand, therefore, that all karmic suffering is produced by one's own mind, but if one is able to keep his thoughts from wandering off whilst abandoning the false and the wicked, the karma, which has been sending him spinning through the three

worlds and the six realms, will spontaneously dissipate. This ability to eliminate one's sufferings is what is called liberation [2:361].

Note, please, that Bodhidharma does not offer a magical solution here; although the karma is set to rest and the suffering caused by attachment (which includes fighting against the karma) stops, the processes of disease and eventual death, to which we all are subject, and the physical pains associated therewith, are not magically eliminated. Karmic consequence, like the consequence of the other four laws of the universe, is inevitable, even to those who are enlightened [8:96-101; 14:189,192-195]. What is not inevitable is the continuation of that karma and of the suffering born of attachments. With the karma put to rest, one can more easily approach the pains and discomforts of illness with equanimity and courage, as Zen Master Bankei (who had a very painful and serious illness much of his life) recommended in the 17th century: when faced with illness and pain, do not become involved with them or attached to them; let your awareness always remain with the Unborn Buddha Mind; go with the illness—if there is pain, go ahead and groan; in this way there is nothing you cannot endure [1:62 & 63].

All of the material in this section has been provided for those who feel a necessity to ask the question, “Why me?” I hope that it has been shown that the question can be approached in a meaningful and positive way, and that when so approached it can lead to deeper acceptance and understanding. But need it be asked in the first place? I think the answer to that is apparent from examining where we ended up each time we asked it: acceptance of what is, non-attachment, some form of meditation and ethical living, and a commitment to help all living things. If

one can go directly to these things, there is no need at all to pose the “why?” question in order to handle the issues of this life. And since we have seen that simply by doing what is needed to live and practice well in this life we automatically also clean up whatever past karmas may be with us, the “why?” question also is not needed in order to handle the issues of any past life. What I conclude from all this is that if you can go onward with the business of life and Buddhist training without asking “why?” by all means do so; on the other hand, if “why?” seems to be a question that you feel is important to ask, then a knowledge of karma may help you to ask it productively.

### 3. *Dealing with one’s karma can make for a peaceful death.*

Since karma is that which passes on after death if unresolved, it follows that having a sense that one has attended to it before death will take a major weight off of one’s mind at the time of death. Thus it is that my own master, Rev. Jiyu-Kennett, spent considerable effort in doing the sorts of things described above when facing a life-threatening illness of her own [20]. She summarized her advice to people in similar situations thus:

Train with all your strength; clean up your life; do not be afraid to look at everything that comes up. Do not expect anything in particular.... Calm your mind—be very still, very attentive, very accepting of whatever teaching the Lord of the House presents to you. It will be right for you. Know that you are not alone and know that the Lord of the House will never reject you—so do not reject Him and the opportunity and teaching that is being offered to you. *Nothing* can stop you from knowing what is in your heart. Even if there is no one to talk to, you and the Lord of the House will do just fine [17:14 & 15].

4. *An appreciation of karma can help clear away some obstacles to caregiving.* First, as I hope has become apparent, there is simply no circumstance of karma for which a judgmental attitude is appropriate, no matter how subtle it may be. Love and the utmost respect are what an exploration of karma teaches. Second, recall that we saw that a person's karma is an intensely personal thing, and one about which only they and the Buddhas can know for sure. For caregivers this suggests that we be very careful of assuming that we know what another's karma is and how to approach it, lest we do more harm than good. It also suggests that a person is best able to discern for themselves when and if the time is ripe to investigate their own karma: caregivers can provide information on various ways of doing it, make referrals, provide reading material and the like, but should be wary of any inclination to "push" another into this enterprise. Third, it should be clear that only a person themselves can deal with his or her own karma; no other person, no matter how well motivated or knowledgeable, can do it for them. By all means discuss whatever your friend wishes, listen attentively, empathize, understand, share, do whatever practical things are asked of you—but do not interfere. You also may be able to help by keeping others from interfering and by protecting your friend from some of the simplistic and fuzzy-minded ideas which seem to float around out there about karma, ideas which lead to doubt, fear, or despair. Perhaps what has been written here may be of some assistance to you and your friend in this regard. Fourth, I hope that this chapter has suggested that the exploration of one's karma can be a door to deeper practice and, indeed, to the most funda-

mental issues of life and death. As such, at least for me, it is a topic to be approached with respect.

Finally, I hope that an understanding of karma will serve as a background that will allow caregivers to appreciate more fully the advice given for them by Buddhist teachers both ancient and modern. Take, for example, that attributed to Shakyamuni Buddha Himself. He exhorted those who take care of the sick to do the following: know how to give the needed medicines; know how to discern what is helpful from what is not; offer what is helpful and not what is not; attend the ill from good will and not with hope of personal gain; do not be averse to dealing with bodily functions; and, from time to time, rouse, gladden, and satisfy the sick with talk of Dharma [13:110 & 111]. Clear thinking about karma may well extend one's understanding of what is meant by almost all of these suggestions, the same can be said of gaining a deeper appreciation of the advice given by my own master to those who are helping people who are clearly dying.

Above all, *love them*; you must not reject them or their illness under any circumstances. Be with them and love them.... Allow them to go, but there must be no rejection. Do not attempt to impose your ideas on them; do not try to convert them; do not, in other words, put yourself between them and the Lord of the House. A dying person needs to know that he is loved both by man and the Cosmic Buddha. You do your part; the Cosmic Buddha will take care of His [17:22].

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*Biographical information on Rev. Master Daizui*

Rev. Master Daizui received a B.A. in psychology and anthropology in 1967 from Amherst College. He did graduate work at Stanford University (M.A. in education) and the University of Oregon, where he received an M.A. and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. He was ordained as a monk by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett in 1973 at Shasta Abbey and was named as a Master of the OBC in 1978. He served as Rev. Master Jiyu's chief assistant and one of her primary caregivers until her death in November of 1996. Following her death Rev. Master Daizui was elected as the second Head of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives. He served in this capacity until his death from lymphatic cancer in April of 2003 at the age of 57.

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(We have used Rev. Master Daizui's own system of referencing so the notes in the text such as [13:110] means the 13th reference, page 110.)

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