

# Memories of Past Lives in *Nikāya* / *Āgama* and Mahāyāna Literature

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## Abstract

The present article critically examines two propositions presented by Schopen (1983/2005) in an article entitled “The Generalization of an Old Yogic Attainment in Medieval Mahāyāna Sūtra Literature.” The first of these propositions is that a change took place in the notion of memories of past lives in some Mahāyāna texts, turning what earlier was conceived as a demanding yogic attainment into something generally available without need for meditative accomplishment. The second, related proposal is that the early Buddhist doctrine of karma implies that all those who are not yet perfected will eventually have to face rebirth in hell or other lower realms and then have little chance of emerging from that condition again.

## Introduction

The article to be examined in this paper was originally published in 1983 in the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* and was then republished in 2005 in a volume of collected articles by the same author, titled *Fragments and Fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India: More Collected Papers*. His findings have been quoted with apparent approval, for example, by Guagni (2015),<sup>1</sup> McClintock (2017),<sup>2</sup> Tournier

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<sup>1</sup> Guagni 2015: 65 note 11: “Per un’attenta disamina del concetto di *jātismara*, e delle sue evoluzioni, nella letteratura mahāyāna si veda Schopen 2005.”

<sup>2</sup> McClintock 2017: 197: “Gregory Schopen (1983) ... in his study of the phrase *jātismara* (literally, ‘remembrance of births’) in a wide variety of

(2017),<sup>3</sup> and Keyworth (2022).<sup>4</sup> I am not aware of any critical engagement with the two main propositions presented by Gregory Schopen. In providing such a critical engagement, I first summarize the main thesis of the article and take a look at selected

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early and medieval Indian Mahāyāna texts ... notes that, unlike the remembrance of previous lives associated with the Buddha and arhats, *jātismara* in these texts is said to be obtained by ordinary persons.” Note that Schopen 1983/2005: 191 actually speaks of *jātismara* being “ascribed only to religious virtuosos—notably to *āśaikṣas*, *arhats*, and, of course, to the Buddha himself,” where the term “notably” leaves open the possibility of religious virtuosos that are not arhats or Buddhas. This nuance unfortunately gets to some extent lost with the formulation used by McClintock 2017: 197, which risks not giving due room to the attribution in *Nikāya/Āgama* literature of recollection of past lives to recluses and brahmins who then draw mistaken conclusions based on such recollection; see, e.g., MN 136 and its parallels, quoted below note 27. Such recluses and brahmins are quite obviously not arhats.

<sup>3</sup> Tournier 2017: 276: “nombreux Mahāyāna-sūtra étudiés par Schopen ... rendent accessibles une réalisation qui était anciennement le fruit exclusif de la pratique méditative,” followed by referencing a passage in the *Mahāvastu* as presumably confirming the same pattern, Tournier 2017: 276 note 84: “On comparera cela à l’idée apparaissant dans la première partie de l’*Avalokitasūtra* II, selon laquelle ceux qui ont purifié les *śīla* obtiennent le *jātismara*,” with reference to Senart 1890: 359,<sup>5-6</sup>. This idea needs to be evaluated in its context, however, which takes the form of listing a range of benefits to be expected from *śīla*, such as, Marciniak 2020: 432,<sup>14</sup>: *trṣṇāṃ cchitvāna jālinīm* (also in Senart 1890: 357,<sup>15</sup>), Marciniak 2020: 432,<sup>16</sup>: *śūnyatām śānta bhāveti bhava nābhirato muniḥ* (also in Senart 1890: 357,<sup>17</sup>), Marciniak 2020: 433,<sup>13</sup>: *phalaprāpti na durlabhā* (also in Senart 1890: 358,<sup>15</sup>), and Marciniak 2020: 434,<sup>3</sup>: *samādhiṃ labhate kṣipram* (also in Senart 1890: 359,<sup>2</sup>). Then comes the reference in question, Marciniak 2020: 434,<sup>6</sup>: *nivāsaṃ purimaṃ smare, kalpakoṭisahasrāṇi samprajānapratīsmṛto*. This occurrence does not appear to be fully in line with the cases surveyed by Schopen 1983/2005, as it neither uses the term *jātismara* nor does it occur apart from other meditative attainments, as the divine eye is mentioned subsequently. Judging from the context, neither this ability nor the others mentioned above appear to be intended as the result of *śīla* alone. The point would presumably rather be that *śīla* provides the indispensable foundation for cultivating the degree of concentration needed to be able to arouse recollection of past lives.

<sup>4</sup> Keyworth 2022: 119 considers his findings to fit “with what Gregory Schopen sees in terms of a clearly defined shift away from ‘particular ascetic or yogic attainment[s]’ toward more universal, generalized ‘blessings’ and ‘benefits’ described in Mahāyāna sūtra literature.”

instances of the relevant textual evidence. Then I take up memories of past lives as well as the doctrine of karma from the viewpoint of *Nikāya/Āgama* literature.

### The Thesis

Schopen (1983/2005: 190) begins his exploration with the statement that “[t]he obtainment of *jātismara*, ‘the ability to recollect or remember one’s former births,’ is well known in early Buddhist *sūtra* literature,” followed by providing a survey of the relevant parts of a research article by Demiéville (1927) on such recollection of past lives. Schopen (1983/2005: 191) then sums up that the research by Demiéville (1927) shows that

in the *Nikāya/Āgama* literature *jātismara* invariably occurs as only one of a list of faculties [in the sense of meditative attainments], never by itself. It is equally clear that it is invariably connected with the higher stages of meditational technique ... [i]t is also clear that in this literature it is ascribed only to religious virtuosos—notably to *aśaikṣas*, *arhats*, and, of course, to the Buddha himself.

With this reference point established, Schopen (1983/2005: 191–205) then offers a detailed survey of an impressive range of Mahāyāna texts that reflect what he considers a substantial innovation by way of presenting *jātismara* as a stand-alone attainment that appears to be in principle available to anyone, without any need to acquire meditative proficiency. Schopen (1983/2005: 192) finds that a passage from the *Upālipariṣcchā* (full title: *Vinayaviniścayopālipariṣcchā*), for example, shows that “*jātismara* is here not the result of meditational development on the part of the individual, but something that is effected by an external agent”; moreover, “*jātismara* is not presented as a faculty attainable only by the religious virtuoso. Instead, it appears as something available in one way or another to all ‘beings’.”

He sees a similar pattern emerging with passages in the *Suvarṇabhāsottama*, one of which presents ritual acts of worship as the means to gain *jātismara*. Another passage in the same *sūtra* adds yet another non-meditational activity to the repertoire, related to sacred names. Further exploration of other relevant texts then brings to light still other such activities, such as engaging with sacred texts or *dhāraṇīs*, which are also invested with the potential of effecting *jātismara*.

Proceeding to occurrences of the same idea in narrative contexts, Schopen (1983/2005: 205) finds that these “indicate that a number of the ideas concerning the obtainment of *jātismara* that we have seen previously only as doctrinal assertions were sufficiently well established so that on occasion they could be, and were, used simply as narrative elements.” Next, Schopen (1983/2005: 206) places his identification of a pattern of easy access to *jātismara* into a historical context, based on which he then offers the following overall assessment (p. 208):

In the *Nikāya/Āgama* literature studied by Demiéville, *jātismara* usually occurs as only one item in at least three stereotyped lists—the *vidyās*, *abhijñās*, and *balas*—or at least in close association with one or more of the other items in these lists. Moreover, it was attributed almost exclusively to the religious virtuoso, and it appears to have been thought to have been attainable only by means of sophisticated forms of meditational or yogic practice. In the Mahāyāna *sūtra* literature we have examined, the situation is different on all three counts. Here, *jātismara* has become completely dissociated from the traditional lists of *abhijñās*, *balas*, etc., and occurs almost always as an independent item, without reference to its earlier associates. Moreover, these texts make it abundantly clear that, far from being restricted to the religious virtuoso, it is here within the reach of virtually everyone ... Perhaps the most significant shift, however, concerns the means by which *jātismara* was thought to be obtainable ... in Mahāyāna *sūtra* literature current in the medieval period, *jātismara* was available by means of a variety of non-meditational activities: ritualized acts of worship, often directed toward sacred images ... activity connected with sacred names ... activity connected with sacred texts ... and activity connected with *dhāraṇīs*.

Following this assessment, in the remainder of the article under discussion Schopen (1983/2005: 210–215) explores implications his findings hold for the religious life of Mahāyāna practitioners in the medieval period and in relation to a supposed problem inherent in the doctrine of karma.

### **Selected Instances of the Textual Evidence**

The first case presented by Schopen (1983/2005: 192) as supportive evidence for the pattern he has identified—introduced with the statement that “we begin to find something quite different” from what is found in *Nikāya/Āgama* literature—is a passage from

the *Upālipariṣcchā*. Here, “a long list of Bodhisattvas declare their ‘capability’ to save beings, each specifying his particular means,” and the relevant case involves the ability “to mature beings by causing them to recollect their former births.”

Close inspection of this list shows that the next but one case after the quoted declaration takes the form of a bodhisattva expressing the wish to liberate sentient beings completely from *duḥkha*, and three cases further down the line a bodhisattva wishes to liberate sentient beings from all of their defilements.<sup>5</sup> Would it make sense to take these two cases as reflecting a realistic appraisal of a condition that can be “effected by an external agent”? To my mind, at least, it would seem more probable that these are instances of the typical hyperbole found in much of Mahāyāna literature. That is, I am just not sure if a literal reading of such passages—as a testimony to the actual expectation that the gaining of *jāṭismara* will be possible for anyone through the intervention of an external agent—does full justice to them.

The question of the potential impact of literalism continues with the next example, this time taken from the *Suvarṇabhāsottama*. Schopen (1983/2005: 192f) introduces this example as part of “a series of pious wishes”, such as “let the woes in the triple-thousand world be suppressed,” leading on to the wish “[m]ay all beings be mindful of their (former) births during hundreds of births, thousands of millions of births.”<sup>6</sup> Schopen (1983/2005: 194) considers this instance to be in line with the passage from the *Upālipariṣcchā*, in that here, too, *jāṭismara* “is something that is available to all living beings—even those in hells—and something that can be effected by an external agent.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the same

<sup>5</sup> Python 1973: 26,<sub>11+20</sub>: *bdag ni sems can rnams sdug bsngal dag las gtan yongs su thar par bgyid par spro lags so* and *bdag ni sems can rnams nyon mongs pa thams cad las yongs su thar bar bgyid par spro lags so*. I follow the precedent of Schopen 1983/2005: 215 note 6 in adjusting to the Wylie system.

<sup>6</sup> Skjærvø 2004: 39 (3.11): *jāṭismarāḥ satva bhavantu sarve, jāṭisatā jāṭisahasrakoṭyaḥ, anusmarantaḥ satataṃ munīndrām* (also in Nobel 1937: 23,<sub>15</sub>).

<sup>7</sup> This statement in Schopen 1983/2005: 194 concerns “the first occurrence in the *Suvarṇabhāsottama*,” and thus the one cited in my previous note.

instance also seems in line with the *Upālipariṛcchā* passage in perhaps not warranting a literal reading.

Schopen (1983/2005: 195) proceeds from another passage in the *Suvarṇabhāsottama* to what he introduces as “the *Avalokana-sūtra* ... the Sanskrit text of which is preserved in the *Mahāvastu*.”<sup>8</sup> The passage in question in the *Mahāvastu*, situated in the context of donations and worship directed toward a *stūpa* of the Tathāgata, states of an individual that, “having done *pūjā* to the Tathāgata, he becomes one who has recollection of his former births,” etc.<sup>9</sup> Another benefit mentioned in the same context is becoming free from the three root poisons in all one’s lives.<sup>10</sup> As with the earlier examples, I would be inclined to adopt a non-literal reading here.

In relation to narratives reflecting the same proposed pattern of a substantial change of meaning for *jātismara*, Schopen (1983/2005: 205) takes up a passage from the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*,<sup>11</sup> which reports that, thanks to the might of the Buddha, certain humans and *devas* recalled their former lives.<sup>12</sup> Given that this happens after the Buddha had entered a *samādhi* that resulted in all lower realms disappearing and their inhabitants being reborn as the humans or *devas* that now recall their former lives, from the viewpoint of narrative logic it is hardly surprising that this major miracle leads on to the Buddha enabling these former inhabitants of lower realms to recall who they have been

<sup>8</sup> In addition to Tournier 2017, on the topic of the titles *Avalokana-sūtra* and *Avalokita-sūtra* in particular see also Satō 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Marciniak 2020: 441,<sub>5</sub> (also in Senart 1890: 366,<sub>5</sub>).

<sup>10</sup> Marciniak 2020: 440,<sub>13</sub>: *araktāś ca aduṣṭāś ca amūḍhaḥ samvṛtendriyaḥ, bhoti sarvatra jātiṣu pūjetvā lokanāyakaṃ* (also in Senart 1890: 365,<sub>15</sub>).

<sup>11</sup> Schopen 1983/2005: 205 presents this context by quoting the relevant part from the translation by Conze 1975/1984: 40, though for some reason not providing a reference to the Sanskrit original. This differs from the procedure adopted for most of the other evidence he surveys, where he usually gives at least reference to, if not the actual text of, the respective originals. Adopting the same pattern consistently would have been preferable in particular in the present case, given a tendency by Edward Conze to provide at times rather free translations, which makes a consultation of the respective original highly desirable.

<sup>12</sup> Kimura 2007: 4,<sub>18</sub>: *atha khalu te manuṣyās te ca devā bhagavata evānubhāvena pūrvajanmāny anusmaranti sma* (also in Dutt 1934: 9,<sub>1</sub>).

previously. It seems to me more straightforward to read this whole passage as an illustration of the Buddha's might (*anubhāva*),<sup>13</sup> and to consider the recollection of previous lives by these humans and *devas* as a minor facet of the major miracle of rescuing them all from their previous existence as inhabitants of lower realms.

My above brief survey has only covered selected examples from the range of references provided by Schopen (1983/2005) and thus falls short of doing justice to all of his evidence. My point is in fact only that some of his cases do not seem to me necessarily compelling. In contrast, another example mentioned by Schopen (1983/2005: 197) is to my mind indeed convincing, even to the extent that I would consider it to be perhaps the strongest case in his study. This takes the form of a report by Xuánzàng (玄奘) regarding a *vihāra* housing a statue of the Buddha Kāśyapa, which according to word of mouth had the potential of enabling access to past-life memories if a person, being endowed with sincere faith, were to circumambulate it seven times.<sup>14</sup> Xuánzàng also mentions that at times the statue shines with light, which he reports as a fact on a par with the location of the statue northwest of the Bodhi tree.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, he introduces its potential of effecting past-life memories as hearsay. Nevertheless, the account itself shows that the possibility to achieve such recollection was part of the popular repertoire of tokens of power associated with a sacred statue in seventh-century India.

The present instance thereby stands out for being a record of actual beliefs held on the ground in the medieval Indian setting. In the words of Schopen (1983/2005: 197 and 206), it shows “that we

<sup>13</sup> Such a reading would find support in the *Dà zhīdù lùn* (\**Mahāprajñā-pāramitopadeśa*), T 1509 at T XXV 118a<sub>13</sub>; see also Lamotte 1944/1981: 483 and Zacchetti 2021: 142f.

<sup>14</sup> T 2087 at T LI 916c<sub>25</sub>: 菩提樹西北，精舍中，有迦葉波佛像，既稱靈聖，時燭光明。聞諸先記曰：若人至誠，旋繞七周，在所生處，得宿命智。The qualification of the need for sincere faith, 至誠, seems to offer an explanation ready at hand should someone circumambulate the statue seven times and still not remember any past life.

<sup>15</sup> The location may even be a reliable piece of information, given that according to Vogel 1954: 815 “Cunningham found the remains of a small *vihāra* which answers exactly the described position but the miraculous image it enshrined was not recovered.”

have to do here with an element of actual practice or, rather, that ritual activity in regard to specific Buddha images was in practice actually connected with the potential obtainment of *jātismara*” and that this “was current in the seventh century at one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in India.” In this case, my earlier reservations regarding the degree to which a particular description warrants a literal reading do not apply and I have no difficulty imagining Buddhist pilgrims in seventh-century India walking seven times around the statue of Kāśyapa in the hope that their faith is sufficiently strong to enable them to achieve the promised *jātismara*.

In relation to the main thesis proposed by Schopen (1983/2005), however, a problem is that the mode of access to *jātismara* described by Xuánzàng has no evident, specific connection to Mahāyāna thought or practice. The former Buddha Kāśyapa is well known in early Buddhist literature, and the benefits to be gained from circumambulating his statue can safely be expected to have held attraction for any Buddhist visitor to the site, independent of whether such visitors considered themselves to be on the path to Buddhahood.

### Memories of Past Lives in *Nikāya/Āgama* Literature

The statue of the Buddha Kāśyapa is not the only case where the ability to remember a past life, independent of meditative proficiency, occurs in contexts not specifically related to Mahāyāna thought or practice. Such examples can be found already among *Nikāya/Āgama* literature.

One such example involves Anāthapiṇḍada/Anāthapiṇḍika recently reborn as a *deva* who visits the Buddha and speaks a set of verses that relate to his experiences as a human in his past life, reported in a Pāli discourse and several Chinese parallels.<sup>16</sup> In *Nikāya/Āgama* literature in general, Anāthapiṇḍada/Anāthapiṇḍika features as a munificent donor with hardly any interest in meditation (Anālayo 2010: 10–12). If this report indeed involves his ability as a *deva* to remember aspects of his former human life,

<sup>16</sup> MN 143 at MN III 262<sub>,8</sub> (= SN 2.20 at SN I 55<sub>,12</sub>) and its parallels SĀ 593 at T II 158c<sub>3</sub>, SĀ<sup>2</sup> 187 at T II 441c<sub>17</sub>, and EĀ 51.8 at T II 820a<sub>25</sub>.



which to my mind is the most straightforward reading, then it would be portraying a type of memory that is not the result of meditative proficiency.

Whereas with the episode of Anāthapiṇḍada/Anāthapiṇḍika there could be some uncertainty, with another comparable instance the situation is considerably more certain. This involves a woman householder supporting three monks; all four are reborn as *devas*, with the remarkable detail that the woman is reborn in a higher celestial realm than the monks. Nevertheless, all four are reborn at a lower level than the Brahmā worlds, which in early Buddhist thought implies that none of them would have been accomplished in their previous human lives in the type of concentrative absorption required to cultivate the supernormal ability of recollection of past lives. The woman clearly remembers her former life and the relationship she had to the monks. When she scolds them for their lowly rebirth—precisely because of the remarkable reversal in hierarchy of their former relationship—two of these monks regain their *sati*, presumably in the sense of remembering their former existence and the teachings received at that time. The Pāli discourse reporting this episode has a range of parallels extant in Chinese that proceed similarly.<sup>17</sup>

Another also quite unequivocal case occurs in a Pāli discourse without known parallels. This discourse reports how memories of the previous life can arise for *devas* if in that former life they had learnt the Buddha's teachings. This can take place on hearing other *devas* recite passages of the Buddha's teaching that the *deva* in question had memorized when being a human in the previous life. Alternatively, the same may occur on hearing a monk who visits that celestial realm through his psychic power teach such passages, or on hearing another *deva* in that realm give such teachings. Still another catalyst is meeting another *deva* similarly reborn in the same heaven after having been a human, who reminds the *deva* in question that they had formerly been companions. In each such case in this discourse, the term *satuppāda* (= *sati* +

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<sup>17</sup> DN 21 at DN II 274<sub>21</sub> (see also DN II 272<sub>14</sub>), with parallels in DĀ 14 at T I 64a<sub>6</sub>, MĀ 134 at T I 634c<sub>18</sub>, T 15 at T I 248a<sub>8+15</sub>, and T 203 at T IV 477a<sub>9</sub>; see also the unfortunately not fully preserved SHT V 1421 V<sub>2</sub>, Sander and Waldschmidt 1985: 252 with note 4.

*uppāda*) designates the arising of the memory.<sup>18</sup>

An entertaining tale reflective of the same basic pattern has as its narrative setting a brahmin's father being reborn as a dog in his own former household. When the Buddha reveals this to the brahmin, the latter refuses to believe that his father could have been reborn in such a lowly condition. The Buddha encourages the brahmin to find out by himself, by asking the dog a certain question. Here is the relevant part from the *Madhyama-āgama* version, which sets in with the brahmin addressing the dog:<sup>19</sup>

“If in your former existence you were my father, show me the place where my father earlier hid gold, silver, crystal, and jewels; point out what is unknown to me.” The white dog promptly got down from its bed and went to the place where, in his previous existence, he used to spend the night. With its muzzle and paws it began digging beneath the four feet of the bed.

The narrative continues by reporting that from that very place a great treasure was recovered, and the brahmin was fully convinced that his father had indeed been reborn as this white dog. A similar episode reporting the ability of the dog to remember its former life as the father of this brahmin and reveal the treasures hidden by himself in his former life can be found in several discourse parallels extant in Chinese, in the *Karmavibhaṅga*, and in a shorter form in the commentary on the corresponding Pāli discourse.<sup>20</sup> Now, the dog in this entertaining tale clearly remembers its former life, even though the very fact of being reborn as a dog shows that the brahmin's father in his previous life as a human would hardly have been a meditative virtuoso nor would it make sense to assume that the required expertise was developed by the dog in its present life.

Another tale involving a brahmin reborn as an animal occurs in a different Pāli commentary; in this case the brahmin has

<sup>18</sup> AN 4.191 at AN II 185,<sub>12+25</sub> and 186,<sub>11+31</sub>; on the first such instance see also Anālayo 2019: 1183. Usage of the term *satuppāda* in Pāli discourses is not confined to memories of past lives.

<sup>19</sup> MĀ 170 at T I 704b<sub>29</sub>: 若前世時是我父者，當示於我父本所舉金，銀，水精，珍寶藏處，謂我所不知。白狗即從床上來下，往至前世所止宿處，以口及足搗床四腳下。

<sup>20</sup> T 78 at T I 887c<sub>8</sub>, T 79 at T I 889a<sub>23</sub>, T 81 at T I 896a<sub>29</sub>, Kudo 2004: 18,<sub>6</sub>, and Ps V 10,<sub>9</sub> (commenting on MN 135).

been reborn as a goose. In this instance, terminology that matches *jātismara* can also be found, as the relevant Pāli commentary uses *jātissara* in relation to the goose that is able to recollect its previous life as a human.<sup>21</sup> This is one of several instances of such *jātissara* episodes in later Pāli texts,<sup>22</sup> reflecting a terminological development that can safely be assumed to take off from the antecedent evident in the above occurrences in Pāli discourses of *sati* or *satuppāda* in relation to the arising of a memory of a former life (*sati* and *sara/sarati* derive from the same root *smṛ*).

In the above examples, the respective memories, particularly those involving animals, could hardly be the outcome of meditative expertise. Notably, these cases are for the most part narratives, so that the previously quoted reasoning by Schopen (1983/2005: 205) could be applied to them as well, in that these “indicate that a number of the ideas concerning the obtainment of *jātismara* ... were sufficiently well established so that on occasion they could be, and were, used simply as narrative elements.”

It follows that the supposed innovation in Mahāyāna texts—leaving aside the hyperbole in some such descriptions—is quite in line with similar understandings of the possibility of remembering one’s past life/lives reflected in early and later Pāli texts as well as relevant *Āgama* parallels. In other words, already in the *Nikāya/Āgama* literature, the mere—and at times somewhat accidental—remembrance of one past life, or even several past lives, exists alongside regular reference to the supernormal ability to recollect a large number of these at will, designated by the term *pūrvanivāsānusrījñāna/pubbenivāsānussatiññāna*. Only the latter features in *Nikāya/Āgama* literature as an extraordinary ability requiring a high degree of meditative mastery, unlike the former. Such descriptions in *Nikāya/Āgama* literature of recollection of past lives as a higher knowledge cultivated by proficient meditators therefore need to be distinguished from the more ordinary ability to remember a past life (or a few such lives), referred to in later texts as *jātismara/jātissara*, even though with some such later texts the pervasive tendency to embellishment and hyperbolic descriptions

<sup>21</sup> Sp IV 920,<sub>4</sub>; the same recurs in Jā 136 at Jā I 475,<sub>22</sub>.

<sup>22</sup> Several instances of such simple memory of a past life or lives in *Jātaka* and *Avadāna* literature have already been surveyed by Demiéville 1927: 296f.

brings these closer to each other by increasing the number of past lives recollected through mere *jāṭismara*.

Apparently based on just consulting the study by Demiéville (1927), without checking the terminology employed in the relevant sources mentioned by the latter, Schopen (1983/2005) seems to have conflated the general notion of *jāṭismara* with the more specific ability of *pūrvanivāsānusmṛtijñāna* depicted in *Nikāya/Āgama* literature. The latter is the topic of the passages from *Nikāya/Āgama* literature surveyed by Demiéville (1927: 283–291), wherefore his findings in this respect are not readily applicable to *jāṭismara* in general. In other words, using qualities associated with *pūrvanivāsānusmṛtijñāna* in *Nikāya/Āgama* literature to evaluate those associated with *jāṭismara* in Mahāyāna texts risks becoming an instance of comparing apples to oranges.

### **Karma in *Nikāya/Āgama* Literature**

Based on the same apparent terminological conflation, Schopen (1983/2005: 213f) then proceeds to draw conclusions regarding the logic of the doctrine of karma and its fruit, arguing that, in the form in which this “is presented in early Buddhist literature” as a theory:

the doctrine of karma appears—*in fact*—to have created as many problems as it solved. Its acceptance at a formative stage appears to have laid the foundations for some fundamental and far-reaching problems that only gradually became apparent. If, for example, the “logic” of karma gave a satisfying answer for the visible disparities among men, if it provided a complete solution for the problem of suffering, the very “completeness” of the solution became in its turn a serious problem. That same “solution” *in fact* inadvertently gave an almost equally complete assurance that the average man, the non-virtuoso, whether layman or monk, could, by virtue of his necessarily imperfect daily life, look forward to rebirth in the hells or other unfortunate destinies: *every* act must be paid for ... This, of course, is not good news. But once an individual was born into an unfortunate rebirth, that same “logic” made it very difficult to explain how he could ever escape from it, since such unfortunate rebirths placed the individual in situations that appeared to allow no opportunity for making merit and every opportunity to accumulate further demerit.

Schopen (1983/2005: 214) presents a translation of the Pāli version of

the simile of the blind turtle,<sup>23</sup> according to which the probability of a human rebirth for those in the lower realms is less than the probability of a blind turtle surfacing once every hundred years to put its head through the opening of a yoke floating somewhere on the surface of the ocean, and then reasons (p. 215):

As a piece of homiletics this, of course, would have been forceful and perhaps effective. But as an established “theological” position, it became a doctrinal assertion of the fate inadvertently assured for all believers—whether layman or monk—who were less than perfect. Such considerations appear gradually to have become apparent and eventually required solutions ... the modification and adaptation of the concept of *jātismara*, and much else in Mahāyāna *sūtra* literature<sub>[3]</sub> begin to make sense when they are seen as “solutions” to the problems created by the doctrine of karma—as correctives to a “solution” that became in its turn a problem.

In a more recent publication, Schopen (2012: 291) draws further conclusions based on what he identifies as a “strict and strong version of the law of karma found throughout Buddhist literary sources.” In line with the above reasoning, according to Schopen (2012: 287) “the doctrine of karma ... had disastrous consequences for birds, bugs, and really bad sinners, that is to say<sub>[3]</sub> a very large portion of all living beings: They were left without any means of redemption, and in effect condemned to an all but eternal existence in a lowly and disgusting form of life. There was virtually no way out.”<sup>24</sup>

First of all, I think that the import of the simile of the blind

<sup>23</sup> SN 56.47 at SN V 455,<sup>24</sup> with parallels in a Gāndhārī manuscript, Allon 2007, and in SĀ 406 at T II 108c<sub>7</sub>.

<sup>24</sup> In line with the precedent set by the reasoning adopted in Schopen 1983/2005, Schopen 2012: 285 notes that “redemption does not result from anything that the birds and bugs do—they are not actors, but the objects of action,” which appears to be in line with his earlier identification of *jātismara* attained through an external agent rather than personal effort in meditation practice. This is followed in Schopen 2012: 286f by presenting a contrast to “mainstream monastic sources” exhibiting “a very different attitude towards the creatures that medieval *sūtra* and *dhāraṇī* sources seem to want to save,” in that there is no concern “to redeem bugs, birds, and snakes, but ... to keep them at bay ... to protect humans from them.” This seems to be in line with his earlier proposed contrast between mainstream and Mahāyāna texts regarding *jātismara*. Schopen 2012: 287 then refers back to his earlier discussion of karma in Schopen 1983/2005: 213–215 as “worth rehearsing” in the context of his present exploration.

turtle—taken up also in Schopen (2012: 288) by providing a translation of the same Pāli passage and thus presumably seen as important evidence—may not call for a literal reading, in this respect being similar to some cases of *jātismara* discussed above. Throughout, I think we need to leave sufficient room for the depiction of miracles and the use of metaphors to perform a function of their own. This simile appears to be indeed “a piece of homiletics,” probably intended primarily for spiritual edification rather than to define with precision a doctrinal position.

The circumstance of foregrounding this simile for an assessment of the doctrine of karma, or else adopting what to my mind is too literal a reading of what appear to be hyperbolic descriptions, seems to be in line with a more general tendency in the work of Gregory Schopen, evident also in his way of dealing with *Vinaya* literature, in particular that of the Mūlasarvāstivādins. Finnegan (2009: 35) identifies in his work a “tendency to underestimate the implications of the fact that the *MSV* [Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*] is a *literary text*, and not a historical artifact of roughly the same order as bones and stones.” Finnegan (2009: 36 note 72) adds the following observation:

As immensely productive as Schopen’s scholarship has been for our thinking about the concerns of Buddhist monasticism ... [t]here is simply nothing in this method of reading the text that prevents one from taking the *MSV* [Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*] as offering proof of the existence of all manner of man-eating demon in northwest India during that period, given the corroborating evidence of statuary and other archaeological remains that also refer to such creatures.

In the present case, in addition to the simile of the blind turtle, the only other text mentioned by Schopen (1983/2005: 214) in the context of his assessment of the early Buddhist doctrine of karma is a verse from the *Dhammapada*.<sup>25</sup> The verse indicates that it is

<sup>25</sup> Dhp 127, which has a parallel in Uv 9.5, Bernhard 1965: 170. Schopen 2012: 291 mentions another verse of related import, referring in his note 48 to Lamotte 1936: 226 note 48, who quotes *na prañāsyanti karmāṇi kalpakoṭīśatair api, sāmagrīm prāpya kālaṃ ca phalanti khalu dehinām*, followed by providing references to the *Dīvyāvādāna*, *Bodhicaryāvatāra-pañjikā*, *Abhidharmakośavyākḥā*, and *Madhyamakavṛtti*. This in a way complements the perspective on geographical locations provided in Dhp 127 and Uv 9.5 with a temporal perspective, in that the fruition of karma can take place even after an exceedingly long period of time has passed.

not possible to avoid the retribution of evil deeds by staying in some particular location, be it in the sky, in the ocean, or in a mountain cleft. According to the Pāli commentary, the verse simply conveys that the ripening of karma will happen even in the locations listed in the verse, exemplified by three case stories where retribution for a former evil deed happens to a bird while flying in the air, to a woman while travelling on a boat, and to a group of monks while staying overnight in a cave.<sup>26</sup> The point of the verse would thus be that, when the time has come for karma to ripen, this will take place independent of the geographical location where the person in question may be or try to escape to. This does not seem to provide direct support for the proposed interpretation, for which the simile of the blind turtle appears to be the chief source.

Rather than relying on this simile, in order to appreciate the doctrinal position on karma in *NikāyaĀgama* literature it would seem more promising to turn to discourses that, together with their parallels, have as their primary purpose an exposition of this doctrine. Two instances of such doctrinally related expositions are particularly relevant here. One of these is the *Mahākamma-vibhaṅgasutta*, whose title indicates that an analysis of the doctrine of karma was considered by its reciters the key topic of the exposition. The Pāli version and its parallels extant in Chinese and Tibetan agree in indicating that the circumstances of one's next rebirth do not depend solely on the ethical quality of one's present conduct, and it is in principle considered possible that an evildoer will be reborn in heaven and one who acts in wholesome ways will end up in hell.<sup>27</sup> The respective rebirths are the result of a corresponding type of karma, but this had been undertaken at a different time. Thus, the evildoer will still experience retribution at some time in the future for the evil deeds, but the present rebirth in heaven results from some wholesome activities performed at a different time. In other words, the perspective of karma and its fruits stretches over innumerable lifetimes rather than being

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Neither of these verses implies the type of karmic determinism proposed in Schopen 1983/2005 and 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Dhp-a III 38,2.

<sup>27</sup> MN 136 at MN III 209,<sup>20</sup> and its parallels MĀ 171 at T 1.26.707a<sub>26</sub> and Up 5004 at D 4094 *ju* 264a<sub>7</sub> or P 5595 *thu* 7a<sub>3</sub>.

confined to fruition taking place right away in the next life.

From the viewpoint of *Nikāya/Āgama* literature, only deeds that are particularly potent from a karmic perspective must ripen in the next life. Examples on the positive side are having developed and not lost the ability to attain an absorption, due to which rebirth in the corresponding Brahmā world can be expected in the next life,<sup>28</sup> or else having gained even just the first level of awakening, which will make it impossible for the next (or any subsequent) rebirth to occur in a lower realm.<sup>29</sup> Examples on the negative side, with the next rebirth definitely being in a hell realm, are if one has intentionally performed one of the five crimes of immediate retribution, which are killing one's mother, father, an arahant, causing a Buddha to bleed, or causing a schism in the monastic community.<sup>30</sup> But with more ordinary actions the time of ripening need not be in the next life and can instead occur only after several rebirths. This combines with the indication provided in the above *Dhammapada* verse, according to which being in a particular location will not stop the fruition of bad karma, once the time of its ripening has arrived. The same holds for the fruition of good karma, of course, wherefore a wholesome deed done in the distant past of a former life can come to fruition in a lower realm and then lead to a better rebirth.

Another relevant discourse begins with the Buddha referring to a misunderstanding of karma, showing that here, too, the actual doctrine is central to the exposition. According to the ensuing exposition, the effect of a particular deed depends on the overall behavior of the person in question. This finds illustration in the difference between throwing a piece of salt into a small cup of water or into a large river: only in the first case does the water become undrinkable.<sup>31</sup> In other words, even a seriously unwhole-

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., AN 4.123 at AN II 126,<sub>16</sub> and its parallel MĀ 168 at T I 700c<sub>2</sub>.

<sup>29</sup> This finds expression in the standard qualification of a stream-enterer as being *avinipātadhamma*, found, e.g., in MN 6 at MN I 33,<sub>2</sub>, which has its counterpart in 不墮惡法 in the parallel MĀ 105 at T I 596a<sub>11</sub>.

<sup>30</sup> On these five see Silk 2007.

<sup>31</sup> AN 3.99 at AN I 250,<sub>1</sub> and its parallel MĀ 11 at T I 433a<sub>21</sub>. As pointed out by Dhammadinnā 2014: 80: “According to the early Buddhist position, if karma were invariably to bear fruits that are precisely commensurate with the deed, i.e., if karma were deterministic, liberation from *samsāra* would



some deed (= a substantial piece of salt) can be counterbalanced by otherwise wholesome conduct (= a river of water instead of a cupful). This presentation can also be related to a verse in the *Dhammapada*, different from the one quoted above, according to which an evil deed can be covered or obstructed, in the sense of being counterbalanced, by doing what is wholesome.<sup>32</sup>

Taking into account these selected passage from *Nikāya/Āgama* literature relevant to the doctrine of karma clarifies that some lack of perfection of the average practitioner does not have to result in a lower rebirth, as it can be counterbalanced by otherwise wholesome conduct. Moreover, even if some particular karma should result in rebirth in a lower realm, emergence from a lower rebirth does not depend on being able to accumulate merit in that same condition, as it can occur due to good karma performed previously. This obviates the invention of an easy access to *jātismara* as a supposed solution to the problem posed by a deterministic conception of karma.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

The above examination suggests that the alleged problem inherent in the karma theory results from a misunderstanding due to a literal interpretation of a simile, and the supposed solution to this in the form of a reinterpretation of *jātismara* seems to result from a terminological conflation. All of this could have been avoided in the first place by directly consulting at least one of the relevant primary sources from *Nikāya/Āgama* literature referenced by Demiéville (1927), who unfortunately does not give the Sanskrit terms for what he refers to as “la faculté de se souvenir des existences antérieures” or, more briefly, as “mémoire des

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be impossible, in which case there would be no prospect for the religious life and no opportunity for the complete end of *dukkha*.”

<sup>32</sup> Dhp 173, with a parallel in Uv 16.9, Bernhard 1965: 226.

<sup>33</sup> The same holds for the concern with redemption of those born in lower realms, where a straightforward explanation has already been proposed by Schopen 2012: 287, albeit only as an additional factor, in that “[t]he development in the meantime of the ... ideal of the enlightenment of all living beings must be another important factor.” The arising of this ideal suffices to explain a concern with saving sentient beings in lower realms.

existences antérieures.” Such consultation would have shown that the standard formulation to introduce the supernormal ability of recollecting past lives in Pāli discourses is *pubbenivāsānussatiññāṇāya cittaṃ abhininnāmeti*,<sup>34</sup> without a reference to *jātissara*, the Pāli counterpart to *jātimara*. Alternatively, checking the Pāli dictionary by Rhys Davids and Stede (1921/1993, 282) could have led to identifying instances of the usage of *jātissara* in later Pāli literature, which could also have helped to clarify the situation. One way or another, alongside references to recollection of past lives, *pūrvanivāsānusmṛtijñāna/ pubbenivāsānussatiññāṇa*, already *Nikāya/Āgama* literature recognizes the possible arising of a memory from a past life without necessarily requiring meditative expertise, referred to in later tradition as *jātimara/jātissara*. The passages from Mahāyāna texts surveyed by Schopen (1983/2005) thus do not involve an innovation, instead of which they can be seen to flesh out and present with additional hyperbole a basic possibility already recognized earlier.

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### Abbreviations

AN	<i>Āṅguttara-nikāya</i>
CBETA	Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association
D	Derge edition
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
Dhp-a	<i>Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā</i>

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<sup>34</sup> Occurrences in the *Dīrgha-nikāya* tend to have the additional *abhinīharati* before *abhininnāmeti*; see, for example, DN 2 at DN I 81.<sup>11</sup>

DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
Jā	<i>Jātaka</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
P	Peking edition
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ <sup>2</sup>	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
SHT	Sanskrihandschriften aus den Turfanfunden
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
Sp	<i>Samantapāsādikā</i>
T	Taishō edition (CBETA)
Up	<i>Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā</i>
Uv	<i>Udānavarga</i>

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