

# A New Hope for Understanding: Adapting the Buddhist Paradigm of Merit Transference to Explain the Substitutionary Sacrifice of Christ

Karl V. Dahlfred  
GCTS Box 91-A

April 11, 2003  
Dr. Timothy C. Tennent  
WM722 Applied Anthropology for Missions

## Synopsis

This paper aims to examine the implications, benefits, and challenges of using the Buddhist concept of merit transference to explain the redemptive work of Christ to those with a karmic worldview, with particular attention to the Theravada Buddhist context. The first part of the paper will examine the nature of karma, merit, and merit transference as they exist in the minds of Buddhists, particularly Theravada Buddhists. The second part of the paper will deal with adapting the merit transference paradigm to explain the cross of Christ, followed by an analysis of the potentially positive and negative consequences of presenting the Gospel in this way.

## Outline: Adapting the Buddhist Paradigm of Merit Transference to Explain the Substitutionary Sacrifice of Christ

### I. Introduction

- A. Difficulty of explaining substitutionary sacrifice to Buddhists
- B. The search for a contextualized explanation of the cross of Christ and the gift of grace
- C. Statement of Thesis

### II. The Karmic Paradigm

- A. Karma as an explanation of reality
  - 1. Tanha (*desire*), Karma, and Suffering
  - 2. Karma as a paradigm of moral causation
    - a. An individual's past actions determine current state of being
    - b. An individual's present actions determine future state of being
- B. The Limits of Karma as an explanation of causation
  - 1. Karma invoked as ultimate explanation when no other explanation satisfies
  - 2. A competing paradigm of causation in popular Buddhism: Spirits
- C. The Individual Nature of Karma
  - 1. Theory: Individual's Karma is determined solely by that person's actions

### III. The Nature of Merit

- A. Definition of merit
- B. The benefits of having merit
  - 1. Benefits for the next life: Spiritual insurance
  - 2. Benefits for this life: social recognition and respectability
- C. How merit is acquired
  - 1. Actions which produce merit
    - a. Popular ways of merit making: religious offerings and rituals
    - b. Less popular ways of merit making: wisdom, morality, and mental discipline

### IV. Challenges to presenting the redeeming work of Christ to Buddhists

(or "Why Jesus Christ doesn't make sense in a world ruled by karma")

- A. Jesus sowed good but reaped evil (i.e. the cross)
- B. One's destiny is individually determined – no deity or outside force can help
- C. Salvation by anything except good works is incomprehensible

## V. The Nature of Merit Transference in Buddhism

- A. Definition of Merit Transference
- B. Merit Transference in Buddhist Tradition
  - 1. Ordination to Monkhood
  - 2. Funeral rites
- C. Transferring and Receiving Merit
- D. Merit Transference fulfills felt needs in the Buddhist community
  - 1. Mitigates the harshness of pure karma
  - 2. Bridges the gap between detachment and living in society
  - 3. Unites individual determinism and social solidarity

## VI. Merit Transference: Adapting a Buddhist paradigm to explain the redeeming work of Christ

- A. Jesus is a man of merit par excellence
- B. Jesus laid down his life on cross to effect double transference of merit
  - 1. Jesus transfers his good merit to people that they share in its benefits
  - 2. Jesus transfers the bad merit of others to himself
- C. Those who are credited with Jesus' good merit have their bad merit taken away, thus freeing them from the consequences of bad karma
- D. Prayer: Receiving the benefits of Christ's double transference of merit

## VI. Adaptation of merit transference paradigm appeals to unmet felt needs in the karmic system

- A. Can not break out of cycle of sin and death / rebirth
- B. Can not escape from consequences of bad merit / sin
- C. Never know if have more good merit or bad merit
- D. Fear of hell, death, and afterlife

## VII. Dangers of using merit transference as a Gospel-communicating paradigm

- A. Universalism
- B. Salvation for Non-Christian Dead
- C. No Denial of Basic Paradigm of Karma and Merit: Karma still rules over God

## VIII. Introducing an adapted merit transference paradigm of Christ's redeeming work

- A. Personal Evangelism: Asking "Why do you make merit?"
- B. Personal Evangelism: Tissa Weerasingha's cross illustration used with Buddhist terms and Scripture verses

## IX. Conclusion

- A. The Need for Further Study of Merit Transference as applied to Christ
- B. A New Hope for Understanding: Merit Transference as a Viable Option for Evangelism

One of the most tenacious difficulties in explaining the Gospel to Buddhists is relaying the reality and meaning of the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In an impersonal universe ruled by the iron law of cause and effect, each individual stands or falls by his own merits and the idea of one being accomplishing the liberation of another seems ludicrous. José Ignacio Cabezón, a Cuban-born Catholic turned Buddhist, shares a story that highlights the very real challenge which this poses to any Christian who desires to communicate Christ.

One of my most memorable adventures as a cultural intermediary occurred about twelve years ago when I translated for a Christian colleague who was visiting the monastery in southern India where I was living. He was there working on a translation of a Buddhist text, and I volunteered my services as interpreter. One day, in the course of his conversations with one of the senior scholars of the monastery, it came up that he was a Christian, and my teacher asked him to share some of his beliefs. My friend chose to focus on Jesus' identity as messiah. As I finished translating the words of my colleague, my teacher broke out in a fit of laughter, much to my embarrassment. He then proceeded to question his interlocutor in the kind of pointed and unabashedly adversarial way that is typical of the Tibetan monastic debate courtyard. There ensued a lively exchange, but when all was said and done, my teacher's basic question was this: How can the death of one individual act as the direct and substantive cause for the salvation for others?

One of the most significant and striking details of this account is the senior monk's initial response to the idea of messiahship. He laughed in utter amazement that someone would really believe such an idea. For those who hold a karmic view of the world, namely Buddhists, the concept of substitutionary sacrifice is not even on the horizon in terms of plausibility. One would have to be a fool to suggest that such an idea be taken as seriously.

---

Cabezón, José Ignacio, *Jesus Christ through Buddhist Eyes*, Buddhist-Christian Studies, volume 19, 1999, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, p.58.

However, it is into the world of karma that Christians must speak the Gospel and make it a viable option for Buddhist seekers of truth. As Christians, how are we to contextualize the cross of Christ for Buddhists without compromising the essence of the Gospel? Tissa Weerasingha, a Sri Lankan pastor and theologian, has suggested using the concept of merit transference to explain the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ to Buddhists on their own terms. Weerasingha is not the only one to have put forth the idea of using merit transference to explain the Gospel but he has perhaps done the most to develop the idea in written form. His brief yet fascinating description of the concept and its adaptation is the inspiration for this current investigation into the possibilities for using merit transference to bridge the gap of understanding between Christian communicators and Buddhist listeners. To that end, this paper aims to examine the implications, benefits, and challenges of using the Buddhist concept of merit transference to explain the redemptive work of Christ to those with a karmic worldview, with particular attention to the Theravada Buddhist context. Yet before we attempt to adapt the merit transference paradigm to explain Christ, we need to understand more exactly the nature of karma, merit, and merit transference as they exist in the minds of Buddhists, particularly Theravada Buddhists. We must first establish what it is that we are adapting, or in other words, the context into which we want to speak. Otherwise, our efforts at contextualization will be misinformed and ineffective at best, and syncretistic and dishonoring to God at worst. Once the groundwork for understanding is laid, we will then move on to adapting the merit transference paradigm to explain the cross of

---

See also Johnson, Alan, *Wrapping the Good News for the Thai*, [http://www.agts.edu/syllabi/ce/summer2002/mthm639oleson\\_sum02\\_np\\_r3.pdf](http://www.agts.edu/syllabi/ce/summer2002/mthm639oleson_sum02_np_r3.pdf), 2001, p.23.

Weerasingha, Tissa. *The Cross and the Bo Tree: Communicating the Gospel to Buddhists*. Taichung, Taiwan, Asia Theological Association, 1989, p. 72-76.

Christ, followed by an analysis of the potentially positive and negative consequences of presenting the Gospel in such a way.

Karma is an undeniable constant that defines reality for the Buddhist. At the most basic level, it may be defined as the moral law of cause and effect. It is because of karma (or *kamma*) that there is suffering. And the root cause of suffering is desire, or *tanha*. “The Buddha analyzed *tanha* as being of two types: the first, caused by ignorance (*moha*), conduces to bad kamma; the second, the desire for existence, conduces to good kamma.” Both types of desires result in action, which in turn produces karma. Morally positive actions result in good karma. Morally negative actions result in bad karma. Good and bad karma accumulate throughout an individual’s life and have ongoing consequences for the present life and successive lives until one is liberated from the cycle of rebirth into Nirvana. In the same way that present karma affects the future, past karma likewise affects the present.

In a general sense, past and current karma determines a person’s general state of being, whether it be harmonious or miserable. People who are happy and rich are assumed to have good karma and those who are poor and sick are assumed to have bad karma. Karma determines one’s general condition, but it does not necessarily dictate everything that happens in a person’s life. In popular Theravada Buddhism, karma is only invoked as an explanation for a (usually

---

*karma* and *kamma* will be used interchangeably in this paper, both referring to the same concept.

Transliterated Pali *tanha*, Thai ตัณหา.

Keyes, Charles F., *Merit-Transference in the Kammic Theory of Popular Theravada Buddhism*, In Keyes, Charles F. & Daniel, E. Valentine, eds. *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983, p.261.

bad) situation when no other cause seems to fit. This is often the case with seemingly random and tragic events such as traffic accidents. While I was living in Thailand, I often heard Thai Buddhists explain the cause of an accident with the simple phrase *pen wane pen kam* or “It’s fate, it’s karma.”

While karma is sometimes seen as the cause of an event in one’s life, “the results of previous kamma... cannot in fact be known until they have actually manifested themselves, [therefore] a person can assume that he has freedom to act.” This presumed ability to choose opens the way for other theories of causation to exist side by side with karma. In a country such as Thailand where Buddhism is merely an overlay on top of a basically animistic worldview, spirits (especially unhappy ones) are often pointed to as the cause of misfortune, sickness, and bad luck. Identifying a spirit as the cause of your unfortunate situation has the advantage of giving you a measure of control over your situation. Whereas karma is unavoidable since it is determined by your own previous actions, a spirit may be appeased with the proper offering or ritual and the bad situation thereby remedied.

If one determines that a particular spirit is the source of malady, it gives a person of sense of control over their current situation. In contrast, the effects of karma cannot be remedied because the present harvest of woe has already been sown in the past. The reaper cannot change the type of seed that he has sown when the harvest is already upon him. So, as opposed to an

---

Ibid., p.265-267.

Thai เป็นเวรเป็นกรรม.

Keyes, p.266.

Ibid.,p.266.

external causal agent such as a malicious spirit, bad karma cannot be blamed on anyone except oneself. While it is true that one must eventually face the results of past bad actions, karma need not be fatalistic in the sense that the future is predetermined and unchangeable. The past has continuous effects in the present but how one lives their life in the here and now makes a difference, for better or for worse. On the bright side, a person can make merit to help shape a more harmonious future in this life and successive lives. On the downside, of course, one can squander their accumulated good merit with immoral living thereby setting themselves up for a more miserable future.

In popular Theravada Buddhism as practiced in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries, the making of merit (or *bun*) plays an important role in the whole karmic system. For a simple definition of merit, we might say that merit is a type of spiritual brownie point that produces rewards (good karma) for the one who makes it. The corollary to merit is demerit (or *baap*) which results from negative action thereby bringing eventual retribution to the doer. The benefits of making merit fall into two general categories: benefits for the next life and benefits for this life. “First, merit is seen as a form of spiritual insurance, an investment made with the expectation that in the future – and probably in a future existence – one will enjoy a relatively prolonged state without suffering... In its second fundamental meaning, merit is also valued for the quality of virtue that a person acquires in the eyes of others through his or her acts of merit-making.” If a person is particularly virtuous, it may be said that they have great value

---

Thai บุญ.

Thai บาป (This word has also been adopted in Thai Christianity to mean “sin” in the Biblical sense).

Keyes, p.267-8.

(or *khun*). Much less common however, is the man who “has merit” (or *mi bun*). This designation has typically been restricted to kings and certain monks who demonstrate great power and use that power to moral ends. A person who has merit is quite rare and the common man can hardly hope to be a person of great virtue or morality. In light of this, it can be said that although there are many ways that a person can make merit, very few of these are actually practiced. Charles F. Keyes has this insightful observation:

For the majority of Theravada Buddhists throughout South and Southeast Asia, merit-making is equated with religious action. It is not that these Buddhists lack knowledge of the other modes of the Path taught by the Buddha – that is, of *panna*, “wisdom,” *samadhi*, “mental discipline,” as well as *sila*, “morality” – but that most people conceive of themselves as being unable to pursue these other modes of action to any significant degree.

This is to say that giving gifts to monks and performing occasional religious rituals at the temple are a whole lot easier than actually living a moral and disciplined life. It is difficult to be good therefore the prospect of earning merit through religious action is very appealing and is the most popular form of merit making practiced in Theravada Buddhist cultures.

Karma and merit saturate the thinking and mindset of Buddhists and function as filters of understanding for any new ideas that they encounter. When Buddhists are presented with the message of Jesus Christ, his cross of crucifixion, and substitutionary death to take away their sins, that message goes through the filters of karma and merit. Because of these pre-existent paradigms that in great measure shape their worldview, they try to relate the gospel message to

---

Transliterated Pali *guna*, Thai กุณ.

Thai มินุญ.

Keyes, p.269.

Ibid., p.267.

what they already know about the world. When that happens, they soon discover that Jesus Christ does not make much sense in a world ruled by karma.

It is easy to understand that Jesus lived a good life and in fact made much merit as he helped the poor and sick, and taught people to be good. Jesus certainly must have had good karma. But if Jesus had such good karma and was such a good person, why did he meet such a gruesome and untimely fate, put to death as a criminal although he had done nothing to merit such a punishment? The law of karma dictates that those who do good will receive good, but those who do evil will receive evil. Jesus does not fit the mold of what should happen in a world ruled by karma.

But even if one were able to swallow the fact that Jesus' death is an exception to the normal karmic rule, it is ludicrous to assert that his actions can help alleviate anyone else's bad karma. Each person lives and dies unto himself. No deity or outside force can help pay someone's karmic debt. Everyone must eventually reap the consequences of the bad karma that they have sown in this and previous lives. To say that Jesus can take away your karmic debt seems too easy to be true.

Furthermore, not only is Jesus supposed to be able to take away the consequences of your bad karma, but you also don't have to do anything to make that happen. According to the law of karma, any benefit derived must be accomplished by action. The Christian message of salvation by faith does not make sense in world ruled by actions. Anything which one receives must be earned. A salvation not earned cannot possibly be real.

---

This phrase reflects a common Thai idiom, *tam dii dai dii, tam chua dai chua*, Thai ทำดีได้ดี ทำชั่วได้ชั่ว.

As can be seen, the challenges to presenting the message of Christ to those with a karmic worldview are formidable. However, it may be possible to use a paradigm from within the karmic system to explain Christ's redeeming work in a way that is understandable to Buddhists, namely merit transference. Simply put, the idea is that a person who makes merit can transfer the benefits of that merit to other people. Although this seems to stand in paradox with the individualistic nature of karma, merit transference is still widely practiced in Theravada Buddhist countries. The two most common situations in which one would encounter merit transference are the ceremony for ordination to Buddhist monkhood and in Buddhist funeral rites. One of the primary reasons that each Thai man becomes a Buddhist monk for a time is to make merit for his mother and father. A son who refuses to become a monk is seen as an ungrateful child who denies merit to his parents, particularly his mother who cannot enter the monkhood herself. It is significant to note that merit transference is not peripheral to the intent of ordination nor is it a later addendum to a more primitive or "pure" Buddhism. In his article on merit transference in Ceylonese Buddhism, G.P. Malalasekera makes this helpful observation:

It may be pointed out that in the formula in which the candidate for ordination seeks permission from the ordaining monk, the following words occur: "Reverend Sir, forgive me all my faults. May the merits gained by me be shared by your Reverence. It is fitting also to allow me to share the merits gained by your Reverence. It is good. It is good. I share in it." Now, there can be no doubt about the great antiquity of the formula and, therefore, of the teaching enunciated in it.

In addition to ordination, merit transference is also popularly practiced in funeral rites. Because the fate of the deceased is not certain, relatives will usually make merit for the sake of their loved one at the funeral in hopes that they will receive a better rebirth or at least not be forced to

---

Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, Thai Gospel Press, Bangkok, 1975, p.121-2.

Malalasekera, G.P., 'Transference of Merit' in *Ceylonese Buddhism*, *Philosophy East and West* 17, Nos. 1-4, 1967, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, p.85-90.

wander the earth as a ghost in spiritual limbo. In the following story, Malalasekera provides helpful insight into the long history of merit making for the dead in Buddhist tradition.

The classic example of this transference of merit, etc., is a story connected with Bimbisara, king of Rajagaha, a contemporary of the Buddha and a great patron of Buddhism during his lifetime. It is said that the king once invited the Buddha and a retinue of monks to his palace for a meal. At the conclusion of the meal, there was heard a great din outside. The Buddha revealed that it was caused by some of Bimbisara's kinsmen who, after their death, had been born as *petas* (evil spirits) and were suffering the pangs of hunger and thirst. He told the king that it would be of no use to give them food or drink because, on account of their evil deeds, they could not partake of such things. But, said the Buddha, if the merit the king gained by giving food to holy men were to be transferred to his departed kinsmen, by virtue of the merit so acquired, they would enjoy the fruits thereof and be able to satisfy their needs. This the king did and the result was immediate. The erstwhile *petas* now became happy beings and they made their gratitude known to the king in no uncertain terms. The Buddha went on to say that the greatest boon one could confer on one's dead ancestors was to perform "acts of merit" and transfer to them the merit so acquired.

From these examples, we can see that merit transference has been a feature of Buddhism since ancient times. It is not enough however, to establish that merit transference takes place but we must also examine how it takes place. In order to transfer merit from one individual to another there is no particular transference ceremony as distinct from the making of merit itself. The one who is making merit "has merely to wish that the merit he had thereby gained should accrue to someone in particular, if he so wishes, or to 'all beings.' The wish may be purely mental or it may be accompanied by expression in words. This could be done with or without the particular beneficiary being aware of it." Thus, the weight of the transference process lies entirely on the shoulders of the one who would be making and giving away the merit. The role of the receiver of merit is entirely passive. It should also be noted that in transferring merit, the maker of merit does not lose any of the benefits of the merit that he has transferred. Both the one who transfers and the one who receives share in the benefits of merit made by only one of them. In fact,

---

Ibid., p.86-87.

Ibid., p.85-86.

Ibid., p.86.

the very act of “transference” is a good deed in itself and, therefore, enhances the merit already earned. The act of “sharing” one’s good fortune is a deed of compassion and friendliness and, as such, very praiseworthy and “meritorious.”

Merit transference also plays a significant role in meeting felt needs produced by the doctrine of karma. The Buddha sought to make sense of suffering in the world and refined the idea of moral cause and effect that we know as karma. Those who receive good in life have earned it and those who receive bad have also earned it.

The original doctrine of karma solved the intellectual problem of evil, but the solution was too perfect for emotional comfort, because it makes all suffering one’s own fault. The doctrines of *patti* and *pattianumodana* [i.e. merit transference] in turn solve, or at least alleviate, this emotional problem by mitigating the rigor of the original doctrine.

In his article on karma, Charles F. Keyes also addresses felt needs produced by karma, proposing that merit transference is absolutely essential to maintaining a karmic worldview for those who do not enter the monkhood. Without the concept of merit transference, it would be impossible for those who live in the world to “adhere to a religion committed to the renunciation of the world.” But if one who renounces the world (i.e. a monk) can transfer his merit to those who are still attached to the world, then it is possible for those who live in society to continue to believe in a religion that denies it. This connection between monk and society also brings a sense of community or societal unity to a worldview that declares that each person lives and dies only to themselves. Merit-transference thus fulfills some particular felt needs in a Buddhist society, namely mitigating the harshness of karmic determinism, bridging the gap between detachment

---

Ibid., p.86.

Gombrich, Richard, *Merit Transference in Sinhalese Buddhism: A Case Study of the Interaction Between Doctrine and Practice*, History of Religions, volume 11, 1971, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p.219.

Keyes, p.262-286.

Tambiah, S.J., *The Ideology of Merit and the Social Correlates of Buddhism in a Thai Village*, In *Dialectic in Practical Religion*, E.R. Leach, ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1968, p.41 as found in Keyes, Charles F. & Daniel, E. Valentine, eds. *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983, p.274.

and living in society, and uniting individual karmic determinism with social solidarity in the community.

Now that we have laid some groundwork in understanding the nature of karma, merit, and merit transference, we can properly examine how the merit transference paradigm might be adapted to explain Christ's substitutionary sacrifice. As was mentioned earlier, Buddhism contains the idea of the "man of merit". This is an individual who not only has a great amount of merit but also "display[s] an unusual ability in the exercise of power... [and has] harnessed that power to moral ends." We can thus say that by virtue of Jesus' life and works, that he was a man of merit par excellence. Also, in light of his perfection Jesus "generated an infinite quantity of kusala [i.e. good merit]." In Buddhism, this term is generally restricted to kings and particular noteworthy monks but since Christ is a divine king there should be no problem in designating him as a man of merit.

If Jesus is a great man of merit, then the merit which he can transfer to others would be substantial indeed. Therefore, people who have done much evil might receive the benefits of Christ's righteousness. This idea of being credited with righteousness is quite Biblical as we see Abraham credited with righteousness by God (Genesis 15:6) and as Paul explains to the Roman believers that "...through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous." (Romans 5:19 NASB) The transference of merit from Christ to an ordinary person should not be difficult to understand since this type of positive merit transference happens often within Buddhism. However, in order for our adaptation of the paradigm to work, we must speak of the transference

---

Keyes, p.269.

Weerasingha, p.73.

of demerit, or sin, as well. If merit can be transferred, should not demerit be able to be transferred as well? Jesus Christ, by virtue of his divine nature and status as a man of merit is able to not only transfer merit to others but also to transfer demerit to himself. It is no ordinary person who can transfer demerit, but only God has this prerogative. “So a double transference took place wherein man’s guilt was transferred to Christ and His grace was transferred to man. He suffered on behalf of man. It was a SUPREME MIRACULOUS, INEXPLICABLE MERIT-GENERATING death on the cross!” As the Scripture says, “He made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” (2 Corinthians 5:21 NASB). In terms of payment for evil already done, Christ’s death fulfills both the law of karma and the demands of God’s justice.

Although merit transference in Buddhism can take place without the knowledge of the receiver, a Christian adaptation of the paradigm would necessarily include an acknowledgment of receipt or conscience willingness to have the double transference of merit effected on behalf of the recipient. This willing reception of Christ’s work would most logically take the form of a prayer of confession. The person would pray to Christ in thankful acknowledgement of what Christ has done for him in transferring the benefits of Christ’s merit and in taking away his demerit and suffering the consequences for it on the cross. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9 NASB)

---

It should be noted that Jesus Christ did not suffer on the cross because of any bad merit of his own, as some Buddhists imagine.

As Weerasingha points out, “On the contrary, he laid down his life voluntarily because of the SORROWS AND SUFFERINGS of mankind. He GAVE UP HIS LIFE. THE CROSS was not FORCED upon Him. It was his supreme COMPASSION that made him die, rather than ask people to save themselves, dispassionately.” (Weerasingha, p.75-76).

Weerasingha, p.74.

Presenting the work of Christ in this way should appeal to unmet felt needs in the karmic system. Jesus Christ offers what Buddhism can not. For Theravada Buddhists, there is the feeling that it is practically impossible to break out of the cycle of sin and rebirth, even for monks. Demerit can not be escaped and the dark cloud of bad karma is always hovering over a person's life. While a mature understanding of Christian truth must necessarily deny the existence of rebirth and reincarnation, the fear of bad karma and a terrible future may be used as a point of contact to present the freedom that is available in Christ. If one can transfer their bad merit to someone else, namely Christ, and receive the infinite benefits of his good merit, than there need not be any fear of hell, death, or the afterlife. The otherworldly benefits of receiving Christ's righteousness are heaven, happiness, and freedom from suffering.

While there are advantages of adapting a Buddhist paradigm to explain Christian truth, there are also inherent dangers. Buddhists understand merit transference in a certain way and could come to some false conclusions about the Gospel once the idea of merit transference is applied to Christ. The first of these potential dangers is universalism. In Buddhism, the one who makes merit can transfer that merit to anyone he chooses, with or without their knowledge. All it takes to transfer merit is the desire to do so on the part of the maker of merit. The receiver of merit need not be aware that merit is being made for him. This might lead some to conclude that since Jesus Christ wants all to be saved (cf. 1 Timothy 2:3-4), then all are saved automatically. The double transference of merit happens instantaneously by virtue of Christ's willingness for it to happen. This misunderstanding must be corrected by emphasizing the need to decide to receive Christ's righteousness and to allow Him to take away our unrighteousness. The second

---

Smith, Alex, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes*. Littleton, CO: OMF International, 2001, p.58-59.

danger is similar to the first. Buddhists often make merit for dead relatives, therefore one might conclude that Christ can effect double transference of merit (i.e. salvation) for non-Christians who are already dead. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that some might give money to the church or do some other good deed in an attempt to effect double transference of merit for their deceased loved ones. This is clearly not biblical (cf. Hebrews 9:27) and must be gently explained to new Christians who have believed via the merit transference paradigm. A third danger, and perhaps the most problematic one, is that an adaptation of the merit transference paradigm would seem to affirm the basic paradigms of karma and merit as an accurate description of reality. Talking about Christ in such a way may unintentionally leave listeners with the impression that God is bound by the law of karma and can only effect man's salvation within the confines of that system. Although reaping what you sow is a Biblical principle (cf. Galatians 6:7), God still rules the universe and decides what will happen to whom as can be seen in the case of Job. Suffering is not necessarily the result of one's own bad karma. The feasibility of using the merit transference paradigm may hinge upon this point and more research, particularly field research with Buddhists and Buddhist-background Christians, needs to be done in order to see whether true understanding of the Christian faith can be brought about by using such a paradigm.

In order to evaluate the value of using merit transference to explain the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ, I would like to suggest a couple ways of presenting this adapted paradigm. To begin a discussion with a Thai Buddhist about merit transference and Christ, missionary Alan

---

See Weerasingha, Chapter VI, p.36-39 for further discussion of the supremacy of Christ vs. karma.

Johnson suggests starting with the question, “Why do you make merit?” Most Thai people would answer by talking about the desire to have a better next life or afterlife. When I have discussed merit making with Thai people, I would often respond to such a statement by asking how much merit one needs to make in order to have a better next life. In other words, how do you know if you have more good merit than bad merit? It would seem that merit and sin (bad merit) are in a competition or race. Sometimes merit goes out ahead but sometimes sin takes the lead. However, no one really knows at any given time whether they have more good merit or bad merit. All the Thai people whom I’ve talked with are honest enough to admit that nobody really knows how much good merit needs to be made in order to have a better next life or to outweigh their bad merit. At this point, the idea of Jesus as a man of merit who can transfer both good and bad merit may be introduced and explained. In his book *The Cross and the Bo Tree: Communicating the Gospel to Buddhists*, Tissa Weerasingha suggests another way of presenting the idea of merit transference using a diagram of a cross, the Buddhist terms *kusala* (good merit), *akusala* (bad merit), and *kamma*, as well as Scripture references to support transference of both good and bad merit. He walks the reader through a step by step method which he uses in talking about the meaning of the cross with Buddhists.

In addition to the above suggestions for presenting Christ via merit transference, it is my hope that as this paradigm for sharing the Gospel becomes more widely known, others will use, develop and analyze it further for more effective ministry among Buddhists. There are almost

---

Johnson, Alan, *Wrapping the Good News for the Thai*, [http://www.agts.edu/syllabi/ce/summer2002/mthm639oleson\\_sum02\\_np\\_r3.pdf](http://www.agts.edu/syllabi/ce/summer2002/mthm639oleson_sum02_np_r3.pdf), 2001, p.23.

Johnson refers to this concept as “The Performance Gap”, p.17.

Weerasingha, Tissa. *The Cross and the Bo Tree: Communicating the Gospel to Buddhists*. Taichung, Taiwan, Asia Theological Association, 1989, p. 72-76.

certainly practical and theological implications regarding the use of merit transference to present Christ that have not been addressed in this paper and require further research and investigation. As this concept receives more attention from missionaries and Christians in Buddhist cultures, I trust that issues overlooked in this brief analysis will receive the necessary attention and such study will help to stimulate more creative contextualized evangelism among Buddhists.

In terms of the research already conducted in the pages of this paper, it would seem that the benefits of using the merit transference paradigm would outweigh the disadvantages. The idea of substitutionary sacrifice is presented using a modified form of a paradigm that Buddhists already understand and such usage can bring about comprehension of Christ's work on behalf of man without introducing a totally new paradigm. There will most likely be misunderstandings about the nature of Christian merit transference but these can be corrected and explained in the process of discipleship of new Christians. As new believers grow in Christian faith, it may be less necessary to speak of Christ's redeeming work in terms of merit transference, but as an introductory way to share the Gospel with Buddhists, the paradigm should be sufficient to create an understanding of the rudiments of the faith. Even if more mature Christians should choose to preserve the language of merit transference when speaking of Christ, this should not prove to be a problem given that they understand that God rules over karma, and not vice versa. As this paradigm is used with Buddhist seekers of truth, it is my hope that God would be pleased to bring many to faith in our Savior Jesus Christ who credits with righteousness all who trust in His name. Amen.

## Bibliography

- Cabezón, José Ignacio, *Jesus Christ through Buddhist Eyes*, Buddhist-Christian Studies, volume 19, 1999, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, p.51-61.
- Gombrich, Richard, *Merit Transference in Sinhalese Buddhism: A Case Study of the Interaction Between Doctrine and Practice*, History of Religions, volume 11, 1971, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p.203-219.
- Johnson, Alan, Wrapping the Good News for the Thai, [http://www.agts.edu/syllabi/ce/summer2002/mthm639oleson\\_sum02\\_np\\_r3.pdf](http://www.agts.edu/syllabi/ce/summer2002/mthm639oleson_sum02_np_r3.pdf), 2001
- Keyes, Charles F., *Merit-Transference in the Kammic Theory of Popular Theravada Buddhism*, in Keyes, Charles F. & Daniel, E. Valentine, eds. *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983, p.261-286.
- Malalasekera, G.P., *'Transference of Merit' in Ceylonese Buddhism*, Philosophy East and West 17, Nos. 1-4, 1967, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, p.85-90.
- Petchsongkram, Wan, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree: Some Observations on Communicating the Christian Faith in Thailand*, Tranlated and edited by Frances Hudgins, Bangkok, Thai Gospel Press, 1975.
- Smith, Alex, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes*. Littleton, CO, OMF International, 2001.
- Weerasingha, Tissa, *The Cross and the Bo Tree: Communicating the Gospel to Buddhists*, Taichung, Taiwan, Asia Theological Association, 1989.

Appendix:

A Table of Some Buddhist Terms in English, Thai, and Transliterated Pali

English	Thai	Transliteration from Pali
Sin	บาป / อกุศล	Baap / Akusala
Desire	ตัณหา	Tanha
Dharma	ธรรมะ	Dhamma
Eternal	นิรันดร	Nicca
Ignorance	อวิชชา	Avijja
Impermanence	อนิจจัง	Anicca
Merit	บุญ / กุศล	Bun / Kusala
Meritorious Deed	กุศลกรรม	Kusalakam
Nirvana	นิพพาน	Nibbana
Karma / Action	กรรม	Kamma
Suffering	ทุกข์	Dukkha
Wisdom	ปัญญา	Panna
No Self	อนัตตา	Anatta
Self	อัตตะ	Atta