

## **Rhythms of Spiritual Praxis as Discipleship from Karma to Atonement among Believers from a Tibetan Buddhist Background**

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### Abstract

This article summarizes the author's master's thesis research about the experience of Tibetan Buddhist (TB) background believers transitioning from tacit belief in Karma to experiential understanding of the atoning work of Christ, how those who seek to disciple TB background believers can better serve them on their journey to freedom from the 'iron law' of Karma, and, what tools of praxis, already present within the Church, are available to contextualize to the TB world for this purpose. The study confirms that words alone are inadequate to move TB background believers from belief in Karma to experiential understanding of the Atonement of Christ. Interviews with TB background believers reveal a struggle to make this transition. Observations from the literature and interviews suggest: 1) rhythms of spiritual praxis have power to transform beliefs at the tacit level, 2) certain spiritual disciplines are especially effective in this regard, 3) church traditions such as the Eucharist and repetitive prayers also have great potential for tacit level transformation and Christian formation in relation to the Atonement.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhists, discipleship, Christian formation, Atonement, spiritual praxis

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Throughout the vast Tibetan Buddhist (henceforth referred to as TB) world a repeated complaint of missionaries and disciplers of new believers, is that soon after becoming followers of Jesus many revert back to Buddhism. What happened? The question itself and corresponding answers are multifaceted. This article explores one of those facets, the issue of Karma. What are the experiences of new believers from a TB background, in struggling to transition from a tacit belief in Karma to an experiential understanding of the atoning work of Christ? Where do current discipleship methods that focus almost exclusively on right thinking fall short in assisting the new believer in this transition? How can missionaries, mentors, and those who seek to disciple, better serve these brothers and sisters in Christ on their journey to realize forgiveness in Christ and freedom from the 'iron law' of Karma? What tools of praxis, already present within the Church, are available to contextualize to the TB world for this purpose?

Karma simply means "action/deed" (Boon-Itt, 2011, p. 8) and is described as the "iron law" of Tibetan Buddhism (A.G. Smith, 2001, p. 24). In Tibetan Buddhist belief there is both bad Karma and good Karma, but no forgiveness or mercy. In five years of living among Tibetan refugees of North India, I observed that a Tibetan Buddhist's belief in Karma is not formed and shaped in them simply by reading texts or listening to teachings. From before a Tibetan Buddhist can walk, they are carried with their mothers as she turns prayer wheels with mantras written inside meant to earn multiple merits (good Karma) with one turn. As children grow up and begin to ask questions about life around them, they are answered with explanations of Karma from many past lives at work in people's current life that explains either suffering or good fortune. As children grow older, they may join their parents at the temple prostrating before the Buddha statue or other sacred idols/icons

to earn merit meant to outweigh accumulated bad Karma. In addition, there are sacred pictures called *thangkas* that depict ideas of Karma such as the ‘Wheel of Life’ (“Wheel of Life,” n.d.), showing the various realms in which one’s Karma may determine rebirth location. Children are often warned about their behavior with explanations that bad Karma may mean they are reborn in one of the several hell realms depicted on the *thangka*.

The young TB person may also see grandparents turn all their attention in old age to preparing for death, dedicating time and resources (including large financial gifts to monasteries and lamas) in hope of earning enough merit for a good rebirth. Sometimes elderly will even leave family to live closer to a prominent monastery or lama for this purpose, believing that detaching from family moves them closer to enlightenment. Through all this and more, the understanding and belief in Karma is formed and shaped in a TB person at the tacit level over many years. It is formed through community, stories and explanations about life, pictures, and praxes that create an experience with Karma. What they know about Tibetan Buddhism and Karma is learned in community, engaging in practices both corporately and individually.

The argument of this research is that discipling a new believer from a TB background in the area of Karma cannot rely exclusively on discipleship methods that focus on “right thinking.” One cannot simply say, “You’re forgiven in Christ, no more Karma!” and expect belief to be formed or reformed at the tacit level. As Dallas Willard states, “If we push ‘right doctrines’ on people they end up trying to follow something they don’t really believe” (2014, Chapter 1). The new believer’s understanding of forgiveness in Christ must also be experienced through praxis, and new belief formed and shaped through a rhythm of such praxes.

There are many customs and sacraments present in the Church that may be employed as rhythms of praxis for this endeavor. The final decision on which praxes to use, in what ways, and at what frequency must be decided by mature TB background believers. It is not expected that applying the findings of this research will by itself solve apostasy among TB background believers. The aim is to start necessary discussion on employing formative rhythms of praxis for discipleship of new believers from TB background in transitioning from tacit belief in Karma to an experiential understanding of unmerited forgiveness in Christ.

### **Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism**

In order to employ rhythms of spiritual praxis to better disciple new believers from a TB background in the area of Karma versus Atonement, a basic understanding of Tibetan Buddhism is helpful.

#### **Siddhartha Gautama**

Siddhartha Gautama is said to have been the first person to reach enlightenment and subsequently, Nirvana. He was also the first Buddha. Siddhartha was born as a prince in “about 563 B.C.... on the North Indian plains” (Tsering, 2006, pp. 34–35). Legends say the prince rarely left the palace and knew nothing of suffering. One day on an outing he was deeply disturbed by the suffering he observed so “the young prince resolved to find a way to deliver mankind from its bondage to pain, illness, and death” (Tsering, 2006, p. 35). Siddhartha decided to leave the palace life and seek a solution to suffering through religion. In all his searching of religion he could not find a way for mankind to escape suffering.

The moment of his enlightenment is said to have taken place in the city of Bodhi Gaya, in the north Indian state of Bihar. Tradition says that while meditating under a Bodhi tree on his

experiences “he resolved not to get up until he had found the secret of release from suffering” (Tsering, 2006, p. 36). Afterwards, he began to teach his new doctrine (or Dharma in Sanskrit). His teaching was profoundly impacted by “religious ideas current in India... early Hinduism . . . monism, Karma, illusion (the view that the visible world was incorrectly perceived), and deliverance from suffering through meditation” (Tsering, 2006, p. 37).

### **Particularities of Tibetan Version of Buddhism**

By the time Buddhism made its way into Tibet, it had already split into different schools of thought and practice in India, Sri Lanka, and other parts of Asia. The development of Buddhism in Tibet was greatly affected by the practice and worldview of shamanism.

Unlike other forms of Buddhism stating that reaching enlightenment would require thousands and possibly millions of rebirths to accomplish, Tibetan Buddhism (also known as Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism) teaches that enlightenment and thus entry to Nirvana may be reached within a single lifetime through employing mystical or magical practices (Buys, 2003, sec. 2.3.1.3). To the shamanistic worldview, which seeks to find the most effective way to manipulate the spiritual world around it, Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism seemed much more efficient (Tsering, 2006, p. 227). Using Buddha’s initial teachings as a foundation, Tibetan Buddhism employs esoteric and tantric practices including yoga and meditative visualizations, to pursue shorter paths to enlightenment and escape from suffering. Within the daily practices of Tibetan Buddhism, one finds many merit-making short cuts earning incredibly high levels of merit with relatively simple actions. Tibetan Buddhists believe that by repeating the Mantra of Chenrezig they can earn lifetimes of good merit (Novick, 1999, p. 164). Prayer wheels of varying sizes are filled with papers with the mantra written on it thousands or millions of times, depending on the size of the wheel. One turn of the wheel is deemed the equivalent to chanting the mantra as many times as it is written inside the wheel. These prayer wheels are found in monasteries, along paths around sacred places (where the devoted walk in circles in another merit-making act, spinning the prayer wheels as they walk), and many other places within their communities.

### **The Role of Karma in Tibetan Buddhism**

An important observation from TB people’s understanding and experience with Karma is that it is truly viewed as an unbendable law (A. G. Smith, 2001; Tenzin Gyatso, The 14th Dalai Lama, 2006). There is no room for mercy, forgiveness, or grace. When the 14th Dalai Lama describes this trait of Karma he does not try to evade the hopelessness attached to it. He states, “If we are unable to remove the negative karma accumulated from past faulty actions, which is already present in seed form in our own minds, there is not much hope of gaining rebirths that are wholly good or in escaping the inevitable suffering of cyclic existence” (2006, p. 154).

Understood in this way, Karma presents itself within the life of a TB person not just as an abstract idea, but as a solid, unmovable perceived reality, a formidable obstacle to their discipleship into an experiential understanding of the atoning work of Christ.

There is common misperception that in Buddhism people believe that earning enough good Karma/merit is what gets them to Nirvana. While good Karma can assist toward reaching enlightenment and thus entering Nirvana, it is not the deciding factor. Karma (good or bad) simply determines the kind of rebirth one will attain.

There is a large gap between the religious understanding of Buddhism for monks and for lay people. Lamas and monks focus on teachings, meditations, and tantric exercises, expecting to

reach enlightenment in this lifetime. Lay persons, however, have little hope of achieving enlightenment in this lifetime. Their lives are consumed with the mundane realities of survival. Thus, their best option is to earn as much merit and as little demerit in this lifetime as possible to be reborn once again in the human realm, perhaps as a monk. For this reason, Karma is very much on the forefront of the layperson's mind as they grow older.

In summary, Tibetan Buddhism seeks liberation from the cycle of suffering which is birth, death, and rebirth, teaching that rebirth is caused by the karmic conditions reaped in previous lives. In this way, it is understood that Karma determines the realm of rebirth. Suffering is the main question that Tibetan Buddhism attempts to answer. Enslavement to the "iron law of Karma" is the lot of those still in the cycle mentioned above.

### **Christian Formation and Discipleship**

The aim of Christian formation is to see every believer live to the fullest of his or her created purpose: to image God to others and all creation, and in so doing to reflect the glory of God in all that is said and done. With this aim in mind, Christian formation must lead the believer to a deeper understanding of their identity, which can only be understood in Jesus, the Godman. Said another way, Jesus is the telos for Christians, "the very embodiment of what we're made for, of the end to which we are called" (Smith, 2016, p. 90).

The goal of Christian formation, then, is Christlikeness born from intimate connection or communion with our Trinitarian God (Jethani, 2014, Chapter 6). For the believer to experience the beauty and wonder of fellowship with the Trinity, the issue of shame and forgiveness must be addressed. Shame drives humans to hide from God and from each other, making the fullness of fellowship we were created for nearly impossible. Thompson (2015) argues that formation and transformation depend on our connecting and being vulnerable, whereas shame "leads us to cloak ourselves with invisibility" (p. 29). The core of a life of deep Christian formation and discipleship is relational connection, only possible in the forgiveness and atoning work of Jesus. Understanding the atoning work that Jesus accomplished is vitally important.

Successful discipleship depends on a right understanding of the forgiveness and new life that Christ invites us into. For TB background believers coming from karmic communities, the task is even more difficult: the tacit level of belief in Karma must be overcome and re-formed before Christ's atonement can possibly be perceived as a new reality.

### **Atonement Theories**

There are various theories of atonement within Christianity that attempt to explain what Jesus accomplished in his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. Identifying how best to communicate the atonement with TB background believers and pre-believers will assist in developing appropriate rhythms of praxis to aid in discipleship.

Scot McKnight argues that all theories of the Atonement are metaphors used to explain what Christ accomplished, each helpful in its own way in describing the work accomplished in the atonement, but that no one metaphor gives us the full picture (p. 38). The primary atonement theories include the "Christus Victor," "Satisfaction," and "Moral Influence" motifs.

If each of the theories and metaphors touches in part on the truth and magnitude of what Jesus accomplished in his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, then it is appropriate to choose a metaphor that best communicates within one's context. A more comprehensive understanding of the atoning work of Christ can then be explored as the disciple further matures.

The “Christus Victor” theory, also known as the “Classic Idea of Atonement,” says that the work Jesus accomplished was, as Gustaf Aulen states, “a Divine conflict and victory; Christ - Christus Victor - fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself” (2016, p. 4). But just who are these “tyrants”? Aulen lists them as “sin, death, and the devil” (p. 20). This theory of atonement would also say that because Jesus (the God-man) himself is the one who triumphs in this conflict, God has entered into the world and reconciled both mankind and the world to himself, thus righting the broken relationship between mankind and God.

The “Christus Victor” motif may serve as the best metaphor for the TB world. With the “Christus Victor” metaphor we see a picture of “a God who invaded the karmic world of cause and effect. If karma concludes that we get what we deserve, God by his grace offers what we do not deserve. Grace goes beyond karma. It provides the picture of a Cosmic Conflict which we are a part of” (Dumitrescu, 2018).

### **Is Karma Taught in Christianity as Sowing and Reaping?**

Beyond considering theories of atonement, we also briefly address whether the Bible teaches Karma. Some surmise that the Bible teaches Karma when they read passages such as, “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap” (Gal 6:7, ESV). It is not helpful for Christians simply to deny any relation between the biblical law of sowing and reaping, and the Buddhist law of Karma. Those who are tasked with discipling new believers should be able to articulate why one is different from the other.

Thankfully, Christians serving among Buddhist peoples have tackled this question with great depth and wisdom. In his insightful work, Russell Bowers Jr. suggests that sowing and reaping is a reality and even equates it in some ways to Karma but with an important distinction. Bowers notes, “The phenomenon is arguably more understandable if behind it stands one who causes people to reap what they sow. Who other than God could see and judge the intangibles, such as intention, which are said to be more important than deeds themselves? The best hope for freedom from inexorable karma is the God who stands above it. Particularly this is so if this God has taken on himself in the person of Christ the painful consequences of our evil thoughts and deeds.” (2018, p. 25)

As Dumitrescu similarly affirms, “The Bible describes a God who invaded the karmic world of cause and effect. If karma concludes that we get what we deserve, God by his grace offers what we do not deserve. Grace goes beyond karma. It provides the picture of a Cosmic Conflict which we are a part of.” (2018, p. 64)

Another verse in the Bible that might cause one to believe the Bible teaches Karma would be, “He will render to each one according to his works...” (Rom 2:6). Here we find another distinction between Karma and the biblical principle of sowing and reaping: accountability. In Tibetan Buddhism there is no teaching about a supreme being of any kind that mankind is accountable to for their actions. The Bible tells us that because we were made by the Creator God, we are accountable to him for our actions and even our thoughts.

### **Tacit Level Beliefs Shaped by Repetitive and Rhythmic Practices**

Western Evangelical missionaries are often unfamiliar with the use of rituals or repetitive rhythmic practices in discipleship. However, the Tibetan Buddhist world our disciples come from is full of

such praxes. The absence of such Christian praxis may even prompt a new disciple to feel a lack of depth to their faith.

Connection with God and others is especially formative when coupled with embodied spiritual practices or counter-formative practices which, with their routines and rhythms, can disciple at the tacit level. These routines and rhythms of praxis reshape the disciple's thought processes, identity, beliefs, responses, and desires. In her lecture, "Lent to the Rescue," Julie Canlis claims "As Christians we can find our identity in the repetition and the routines of our spiritual lives" and "Routines can help us act our way into a new way of thinking and being" (Canlis, 2015). James K. A. Smith speaks about how our loves and our desires are shaped by rituals or regular practices. Smith suggests that these loves, desires, and beliefs operate at a level often obscured from conscious awareness, the tacit level. He even suggests that true formation does not happen without repetition (Wheaton College, 2016). This is not a new idea. An old Latin proverb states, 'Repetitio mater studiorum est': Repetition is the mother of learning.

Another word for tacit beliefs is worldviews. Tom Bloomer states, "You cannot change worldview by reading the Bible more or by memorizing more. Jesus never did a Bible study with his disciples. Worldview equals tacit belief systems. Ideas alone are not strong enough to change tacit beliefs/worldview" (personal communication, January. 24, 2017). Smith echoes Bloomer when he says, "God doesn't deliver us from the deformative habit-forming power of tactile rival liturgies by merely giving us a book" (2016, p. 83). Implicitly held beliefs and worldviews do not change by discipleship that is solely focused on teaching right thinking or good doctrine.

As described earlier, rituals are an extremely important and belief shaping part of the lives of Tibetan Buddhists. Smith suggests that "Christian discipleship that is going to be intentional and formative needs to be attentive to all the rival formations we are immersed in" (2016, p. 38). He also calls these rival formations, liturgies. He says, "We must learn to exegete the rituals we're immersed in . . . to see our familiar surroundings...so we can recognize the liturgical power of cultural rituals we take for granted as just 'things we do'" (2016, p. 40).

Not only must a discipler think about spiritual practices useful in forming belief in the new believer, but they must also be aware of the liturgical like rituals of the culture around the new believer that would seek to deform their new faith. Smith explains that it is not just the messages of these cultural liturgies but the "very form of the practices themselves, their liturgical power to (de)form" (2016, p. 46) that is important to be aware of during the discipleship process.

### **Spiritual Disciplines as Formative Praxis**

What are the benefits of spiritual disciplines, and what spiritual disciplines might be especially useful to reform belief at the tacit level around the topics of Karma and atonement?

Smith writes, "...the spiritual disciplines are conduits of the Spirit's transforming grace" (2016, p. 67). He suggests that through the practice of disciplines, we position ourselves to have an encounter with God's presence and thus an experience with his grace. It is not that the exercise of the discipline has merit such that through it God deems us worthy of grace, but rather that we have, through the practice of a discipline, quieted ourselves; un-busied ourselves long enough to encounter the truth. Smith goes on to say, "He meets us where we are, as creatures of habit who are shaped by practices, and invites us into a community of practice that is the very body of his Son" (2016, p. 68). Again, we see the communal aspect of formation at work through the disciplines: we are not an island unto ourselves but are created to be a family together in Christ.

We now consider some specific spiritual disciplines.

**Prayer.** Both corporate and individual practices of prayer are important in the formation of a new believer. Prayer, in all its various forms, continually brings us to the place of awareness and enjoyment of God's presence where one can encounter and have an experience with Truth that counters the lies of the cultural liturgies around us. David Fitch describes prayer as "posturing ourselves before the Ruler of the universe" (2016, p. 166). Packiam refers to a Latin proverb that says, "Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi: The way you worship and pray shapes the way you believe, which in turn shapes the way you live" (2013, p. 20). In his statement we see the power of prayer in the presence of God to form and shape the disciple.

Two aspects of repetitive prayers are captivating. First, that of repetitive praying of the Scriptures, and the second, praying The Lord's Prayer regularly. We consider them in turn.

One model of repetitive praying of the Scriptures is to pray the Psalms. Packiam calls the Psalms "a language school; they train you in the language of prayer" (2013, p. 31). He suggests that by praying the Psalms one learns the language of prayer through imitation and repetition just as a child learns to speak. For those that would argue that Jesus warned against vain repetition, Packiam says, "Far from being the 'vain repetition' Jesus warned against, Psalm praying for the early Christian was about spiritual formation" (2013, p. 31).

Palmer describes prayer as one of the ways he has learned to maintain "contact with love's reality in the midst of misleading appearances" (2010, p. 17). In the place of prayer all striving to accomplish anything in our own strength ceases as our helplessness comes into the presence of an almighty God. In stressing the importance of prayer, Fitch declares, "prayer is the ground of all the disciplines" (2016, p. 179). If this is true, any process of discipleship of a new believer must include a healthy praxis of prayer in various forms, both corporately and individually.

McKnight mentions a practice of prayer from the early Christians that included praying three times a day. It is believed that they prayed "the Jesus creed (Mark 12:28-32), the Lord's Prayer, and perhaps even the Ten Commandments" (2007, p. 155).

The practice of prayer holds great potential for the discipleship of TB background believers from Karma to Atonement. Dumitrescu recognizes its potential when he says, "Christians may use prayers and other rituals in order to communicate grace" (2018, p. 61). Praying in a repetitive form, known as reciting mantras in Tibetan Buddhism, is something TB background believers would be familiar with and thus could fit well into their cultural context.

Reciting the Lord's Prayer has, like the Eucharist, been a practice in the Church since the beginning and shows great promise as formative praxis for the TB background believing community. This is a practice that Jesus himself passed on to His disciples when they asked him how they should pray (Luke 11:1-4). Bill Johnson tells us that, "The Lord's Model Prayer provides the clearest instruction on how we bring the reality of His world into this one" (2013, p. 79). An important part of that reality is the victory of the atonement: the reality that we are forgiven and freed from sin and can live in right relationship with God.

Jethani describes the Lord's Prayer as "the pattern of life in communion with him" (2011, p. 113). In that place of communion, the reality of forgiveness is assured as restored relationship with God is savored. As the words "Your kingdom come, your will be done" (Matthew 6:10) are recited, the one praying is reminded that God is the one who rules the world of the believer: not Karma, not sin, nor anything else. They are submitting themselves under God's system of justice

and grace and mercy and saying no to the reign of Karma they were previously under. “The kingdom is not only subjects, it’s space and time, systems and realities that shape how we live” (Fitch, 2016, p. 171). So, when praying for his kingdom to come, we are asking that all rival systems such as Karma be disarmed and for the systems of his Kingdom, such as Grace, to replace them. When reciting the words, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12) the one praying is invited to remember that they have been forgiven in Christ and are to participate in the atoning work of Christ as they extend forgiveness to others. They are recognizing and reminding themselves repeatedly that unlike under the ‘iron law’ of Karma, in Jesus there is forgiveness and new life.

The praxis of reciting the Lord’s Prayer has the potential to shape belief as prayer brings the disciple into the place of communion with God. The words of the Lord’s Prayer speak of the reality of the Kingdom of God where grace and Atonement rule over Karma, sin, death, and law. The communion with God’s Spirit in the place of prayer confirm the truth of these words in the heart and mind of the disciple. Undoubtedly the routine or praxis of praying this prayer will have a formative effect on a believer seeking to overcome the tyranny of Karma.

**Compassion/Serving.** Another discipline worth considering is compassion or service. Johnson describes service to others as, “an overflow of worship” (2013, p. 203). He also suggests that acts of service can solidify one’s own identity in Christ. Tom Bloomer suggests that, “Compassion changes the way we see things” (personal communication, January 24, 2017) in that as we serve others through compassion, we tend to be less critical in how we understand what we see around us. As we serve others, we tap into the nature of God that sent Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, to enter fallen humanity and be a sacrifice for all mankind.

Almsgiving, hospitality for the stranger, care for orphans and widows, were important to the life of the Early Church. Fitch notes “The early church understood the space between the disciple of Christ and the poor to be sacred. In being present to the poor, Christ himself would be specially present” (2016, p. 114). Jesus himself said, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40) Christ reveals himself as God who responds to the suffering and brokenness of humans with compassion.

As a disciple experiences the graceful and merciful heart of Jesus in the practice of compassion and service to “the least of these,” the possibility that there could be such a thing as mercy and grace for them in their brokenness is awakened. This being the case, the praxis of compassion and service becomes an open door to the realization and experience of the atonement of Christ.

### **Church Traditions as Formative Praxis**

In addition to spiritual disciplines such as those listed above, the Church is also filled with rich traditional practices useful for formation and discipleship. Many of these traditions have been practiced since the beginnings of the Church. According to James Smith, we do not have to try and invent new formative practices for our churches. He says,

If our loves are liturgically formed - if learning to love takes practice - then we need to be sure that the practices of Christian worship reflect the plot of the gospel, that the lineaments of Christian worship rehearse the story line of Scripture. Such an understanding of Christian worship is precisely what we find in the ancient heritage of the church. We do not need to reinvent the wheel, nor do we need to invent new



liturgies. We can find gifts in what the Spirit has already given the church, inheriting, and faithfully contextualizing the accrued wisdom of Christian worship. (2016, p. 90)

Following is a review of traditional practices for discipleship from Karma to atonement.

**The Lord's Supper/Eucharist.** McKnight asserts,

...the Lord's Supper is a praxis of atonement. It reminds each person of their need to be in fellowship with Christ's atoning work, it reminds the local community of faith of its corporate need to feast upon the Lord, and it visibly declares to all that the Christian community is a community that draws its life from Jesus Christ, the crucified and resurrected Lord.... As such, we find restoration with God, with self, with others, and with the world around us. (2007, p. 154)

Further, the physical action of eating the bread and drinking the wine invites the disciple to have a physical experience with the truth of Christ's atonement. As James Smith urges, "Christian worship must be more than just teaching us how to think. There must be doing and practice. In Christian worship, the doing of Christian worship teaches us something about the Gospel that we could not know otherwise" (Wheaton College, 2016). Jones agrees when she states, "We are creatures who learn through our senses, through materiality..." (2014, p. 32).

Jethani points out that the Lord's Supper also represents a "right ordering of the world" (2014, p. 129). The bread and the wine, he says, are "symbols through which our righteousness before God has been restored; by Christ's body and blood we may now live in right relationship to God" (p. 131). The taking of the Eucharist has been a rhythm of praxis in the Church since its inception, and is the clearest practice in the Church that points us to the atonement.

**Lent.** Lent is the observance of the forty days leading up to Easter. It is a time of preparation. Different parts of the Christian Church observe Lent in ways including fasting, giving to the poor, placing ashes on the forehead, abstaining from eating meat on Fridays, etc. Each Sunday in the Lenten season remembers some significant event in the life of Jesus such as his 40 days of temptation in the desert, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the transfiguration, etc.

The season of Lent is filled with metaphors in action that tell the story of the atonement, such as the ash placed on the forehead on Ash Wednesday. This act is "a sign of humility before God; a symbol of mourning and sorrow at the death that sin brings into the world. It not only prefigures the mourning at the death of Jesus, but also places the worshipper in a position to realize the consequences of sin" (Ren, 2004, p. 30).

The fasting, abstaining of meat, and giving to the poor all facilitate a connection to Jesus. The actionable metaphors, teachings, and rhythm of annual observance in the keeping of Lent specifically point to the atoning work of Jesus Christ. The fact that Lent is an observance of a historical event of atonement is also powerful. David Lim suggests that for disciples from a TB background "there will need to be at least two major worldview changes: from samsaric (cyclical) to historical (development in space and time), and from impersonal force to personal deity" (2018, p. 80). Observing the Christian calendar, including Lent, will be useful in the endeavor to shift the mind of the TB background believer from "cyclical" to "historical."

In summary, we find that praxis is helpful in discipleship and formation. Understanding the value of embodied practices is critical to seeing implicitly held beliefs reformed. Spiritual disciplines and traditional Church practices were identified as being especially pertinent to the

topic of the research. All of this together creates a potentially powerful way forward in the discipleship of TB background believers from Karma to atonement.

## **Empirical Study**

### **Rationale**

On the basis of the above literature review and the author's conversations with colleagues involved in the discipleship of TB background believers, it was confirmed that believers from a TB background struggle to transition from a belief in Karma to an understanding of the atonement. The literature review also affirms the direct correlation between rhythms of praxis and the forming or reforming of belief. Finally, it was also observed that there are many practices already within the Church which may be useful to assist TB background believers in the necessary transition. There is limited literature available, however, discussing ongoing discipleship of TB background believers. Most of the literature available focuses on strategies for the initial sharing of the Gospel message. After careful consideration and conversations with other missionaries working among TB peoples of why this might be, the likely answer became clear. The Church among TB peoples is still in such a stage of infancy that a robust second or third generation of strong and mature believers has not yet emerged who could write such culturally sensitive materials. The present research is intended to begin filling that void with more discussion on discipleship strategies and church life praxis to specifically assist the new TB background believing communities in their understanding of Karma versus atonement.

### **Research Questions**

The focus of this research has been to identify what, if any, struggles new believers from a TB background have experienced in their discipleship, specifically in the area of Karma versus forgiveness in Christ.

The research questions considered were:

1. What is the experience of TB background believers in transitioning from their tacit belief in Karma to an experiential understanding of the atoning work of Christ?
2. How can we as missionaries, mentors, and those who seek to disciple better serve these brothers and sisters in Christ on their journey to experiencing their forgiveness in Christ and freedom from the 'iron law' of Karma?
3. What tools of praxis, already present within the Church, are available to us that could be contextualized to the TB world for this purpose?

### **Methodology and Participants**

Finding believers from this background willing to be interviewed, or with translation available, was a challenge. These challenges resulted in eight interviews, less than anticipated. However, considering that the number of TB background believers in India and Nepal (the region I had access to) is probably less than 1000 people total (based on conversations with colleagues), eight interviews from believers in both nations still constitutes almost one percent of the population.

The eight participants interviewed included two women and six men, ranging in age from the mid-20s to 65 years old. Three persons were Tamangs (a primarily Tibetan Buddhist/Animistic tribe of Nepal), and five were Tibetan refugees located in India and Nepal. Their number of years as believers ranged from a minimum of 5 years to a maximum of 47 years. All participants have

English as their second, third, or in some cases fourth language. Quotes may contain incorrect grammar to maintain the feel and integrity of their answers. The information received from these interviews seemed to indicate a common pattern of struggle related to the topic of the research.

### **Observations from Interviews of TB Background Believers**

The questions of the interview were primarily focused on gauging what the TB background believer currently believed about Karma and the forgiveness of Christ. This was believed to be the best and most honest way to determine if they had successfully made the transition from Karma to atonement. The following commentary is structured according to the interview questions asked.

**Question 3: Please describe the level of devotion or practice you had when you were a Buddhist.** The majority of participants described themselves as not very devoted to the deeper teachings of Buddhism. Nevertheless, each one recounted being heavily influenced by their parent's practice of Buddhism. "Mr. Green" described being raised in a very strict Buddhist household but says that "after teenage years I didn't care much about Buddhism." "Mr. Red" said that he would go to the temple occasionally to turn prayer wheels and perhaps say a few mantras but, in his words, "not too deeply."

Although none of the interview participants had any formal training in the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, all evidenced having been deeply influenced by family and community with its beliefs and practices. This includes the belief in Karma and the practices associated with it. This confirmed the idea that the belief of Karma in TB peoples is not just something learned through formal teaching but through communities of practice.

**Question 4a & b: When you were practicing Buddhism or now as a Christian, did/do you often think about Karma?** Some participants were asked if they thought of Karma often before they believed in Jesus and some were asked if they still thought of Karma after becoming a Christian. In some cases, the participants had already indirectly indicated in answering other questions that they were still thinking about Karma or were confused on the topic even though they were now believers. In such cases, the question was asked regarding their Christian life: "Once you became a Christian did you still think about Karma?" This would allow for an understanding of the participant's awareness of the confusion or in some cases an understanding of the struggle experienced earlier on in their Christian life. Others had clearly shown that they no longer held any belief in Karma now that they were Christians, and so the question was presented as: "Did you often think about Karma before you became a Christian?"

"Mr. Blue" reported having a lot of fear about Karma before he became a follower of Jesus. He was afraid because he had done lots of "bad things" and was concerned about how he would be repaid by Karma. He also said "You have to be reborn, hurt again yourself, others. How can I save from this kind of circle? I had that big question." "Mr. Green" suggested that not only he, but many other TB background believers as well, still struggled with the idea of Karma after becoming a Christian - at least for the first several years.

These answers show that Karma is in fact a topic heavy on the minds of Tibetan Buddhists. It was evident from several participants interviewed, that Karma continues to be an issue during the beginning of their lives as Christians. "Mr. Green" explicitly says, "It took me so many years to understand what the meaning of forgiveness is. In my life what is the meaning of salvation? So, salvation and Nirvana, enlightenment and... saved life, it lots of difference."

With forgiveness being the opposite belief of Karma, it is clear that what “Mr. Green” was describing here was his struggle to believe that a “law” other than Karma could exist in the universe: a “law” dictated by a God who shows grace and mercy and offers complete forgiveness and salvation. The interviews suggest that TB background believers tend to take two to four years to come to an experiential knowledge of the forgiveness of Christ and his atonement.

**Question 6a & b: Describe for me a memory of when something good/bad happened to you or to someone you know, recently, since you have been a Christian and your thoughts about why it happened.** The intention of these questions was to determine whether the belief of Karma is still operational in the lives of these TB background believers. None of the participants directly answered that the reason something good or bad happened was because of Karma.

One of the participant’s responses was of particular interest. When asked how he responds today as a Christian when he sees something bad happen to someone, such as a disease or someone with a disability, he immediately responded with compassion and rejected the question of why it happened to that person. “Mr. Orange” stated, “My first reaction would be empathy, compassion based... How can I help them?” “Mr. Orange” is part of a residential community where intentional discipleship is taking place. Later in the interview, I learned that in this community the staff and those disciplined regularly visit a center with disabled people where they serve by washing toilets, bedsheets, spending time, etc. They are taught to practice compassion regularly.

It seems that there is a relationship between the praxis of compassion/serving and the reshaping of the belief in Karma with its indifference and lack of grace. The praxis of compassion seems to open the disciple’s mind to the possibility of looking beyond the supposed Karma that caused the suffering person’s condition and see the person in their suffering. This allows the disciple to join in their pain and help bring relief to the one suffering. In this way, the praxis of compassion/serving paves the way to believe that something like grace may exist in the universe, that there could be a God who, rather than leaving people to the consequences of their sins, would enter the suffering their sin has caused to bring both relief and forgiveness.

**Question 7: In the Bible there is a story where Jesus is walking with his disciples and they come upon a man who was born blind. The disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” If you had to answer the disciple’s question, how would you answer them?** This question is centered on the story found in John 9:1-3. A. G. Smith suggests that the question of the disciples in this story, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2, NIV), is believed to be “a karmic question about cause and effect” (2018, p. 106). This question was intended to gauge the level of belief in Karma still operational in the participants. Some of the answers were quite fascinating.

“Mr. Red” responded to this question by saying that before he became a Christian he would have thought that if someone was blind or had some sickness it must have been because of Karma. He then said, “But when I became Christian, I believe our Karma is Christ.” This may be a way of talking about Christ’s atonement in the TB world. Apostle Paul, when speaking about Jesus told us that, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21, NRSV). Not only did Jesus forgive our sins, he gave us his righteousness. Contextualized to the TB world – Christ became our perfect Karma.

Another fascinating and revealing response to this question came from “Ms. Brown” who has been a Christian for 47 years. She grew up in a Christian residential school for the better part of her childhood and remained Christian as an adult. When “Ms. Brown” was asked how she would

answer the disciple's question from John 9, she confirmed that she was familiar with the story and with Jesus' own answer to their question. Then she proceeded to state that she thought, "Maybe the sins of the parents or something but the answer that Jesus gave is quite good. Because he said neither he nor his parent's but to glorify." When asked why she thought the son's blindness might be due to the sins of the parents, in spite of knowing Jesus' answer, she said, "It could be like, like something they did in the past, in their life." Considering her long years of being a Christian this answer is quite shocking. It betrays the belief of Karma, that even after all these years of being Christian, remains active. Since she has had no formal discipleship in Buddhism, it stands to reason that this belief has been nurtured and influenced from the Buddhist community around her. It shows just how deeply the karmic communities around TB background believers can influence, shape, and undergird conflicting beliefs in a person who is a baptized follower of Jesus in the absence of formational and intentional Christian discipleship.

Again "Mr. Orange" answered with compassion as his guiding compass. He could not recall the answer Jesus gave in the Scripture verse. Therefore, the answer "Mr. Orange" gave was not influenced by the text. He said his first reaction would be, "How can I help that person?" thus showing compassion. Interestingly, his companion "Mr. Blue" is part of the same residential discipleship community where visiting the disabled home regularly and serving the people there has been part of their program. "Mr. Blue" also responded to the question of the disciples with compassion rather than trying to answer the question, 'Why?' "Mr. Blue's" response was, "I know the Bible verses and what Jesus did. But honestly if I tackle that kind of situation, firstly I got a kind of compassion, compassion to, he needs help...First I feel compassion for that person. Not feeling like because he sinned or because of his parent's Karma."

As mentioned under Question 6, there appears to be a connection between the praxis of compassion/serving and a clear understanding and experiential knowledge of Atonement. Both participants came from the same residential discipleship community and both had a history of a praxis of compassion/serving. They both answered questions regarding why bad things happen to people with stirring compassionate answers. Both also showed throughout the interview process a clear discipleship around Karma versus atonement.

**Question 9: The first time you heard someone tell you, "You can be forgiven in Jesus. No more Karma," what was your first thought?** This question was only asked of participants "Mr. Yellow" and "Mr. Purple" in this specific format. Although it came up in other formats with other participants as well, "Mr. Yellow's" and "Mr. Purple's" answers revealed a startling reality that may be indicative of a widespread issue among believers in the TB world.

"Mr. Yellow" in his description of his early exposure to Christianity says, "I just knew at that time I have to choose one religion. But I did not know about that forgiveness and my sins will, you know like have been forgiven." When asked how he responded when he did finally hear about the forgiveness of sin through Christ he said, "I did not deeply understand that, that word I cannot accept but I just prayed..." What is disturbing about this is that the atonement was not part of the first presentation of the Gospel to him. Further on in the conversation "Mr. Yellow" went on to say, "In our culture many people they become Christian because they are healed. We did not get that kind of teachings or that information from that Word of God that we have been forgiven. Later on after maybe one or two years they would know about that. And the healing is a kind of gospel for us. So later on we know about the forgiveness and that we are forgiven."

“Mr. Purple,” a member of the same church as “Mr. Yellow,” told a similar story. The message he heard when he first attended church was that if he wanted to be a Christian, he should change his habits. Only after he had some medical emergency of his own and saw God heal him did he begin to think that he might want to believe in this God. He did not learn about forgiveness through Christ until much later. Both “Mr. Yellow” and “Mr. Purple” showed a great deal of confusion as to whether God punishes people. Of all the participants, they more than anyone, projected retributive qualities of Karma onto the character of God. Using God as the miraculous healer alone, absent of all his other great attributes, is an unacceptable, incomplete way of presenting the gospel message to a culture, especially a culture gripped in the unrelenting chokehold of a belief like Karma. Atonement must be part of the initial message and ongoing discipleship of new believers from TB backgrounds to see true transformation take place.

Consequently, the need for a clear discipleship from Karma to Atonement is seen to be currently lacking in the fledgling communities of TB background believers. Also clearly lacking, is discipleship which employs rhythms of spiritual praxis for transformation in this area. Of the eight persons interviewed in this research, only two seemed to be well disciplined on the issue of Karma versus atonement from the outset of their journey towards relationship with Jesus.

### **Summary of Observations from Interview Data**

**The Struggle is Real.** The interviews confirmed not only that there is a struggle for TB background believers to transition from Karma to atonement, but also that the transition seems to last somewhere between two and four years from when they first come to Jesus.

**Tacit Level Beliefs.** TB peoples learn about Karma their whole lives through community and familial practices making it a belief that is held at the deep tacit level.

**Community.** Both before and after becoming Christians, TB background believers are heavily influenced by family and the karmic communities around them.

**Absence of Mentors.** Most of the interview participants who described a struggle in coming to terms with the understanding of Karma, did not have a mentor or other believer that they went to for help and clarity on the matter.

**Character of God.** In their confusion about Karma and Atonement, TB background believers often project retributive, karmic attributes on to God.

**Praxis of Compassion Helps.** Participation in showing compassion or serving those less fortunate makes grasping the reality of Christ’s atoning work easier as it introduces the practitioner to the possibility of mercy and grace versus the “iron law” of Karma.

**Teaching Doctrine is not Enough.** As in the case of “Ms. Brown,” knowing the right biblical answers does not mean that tacitly held beliefs have experienced a true transformation.

**Evangelism.** Often atonement is not part of the initial presentation of the Gospel, rather healing takes the spotlight and atonement only comes much later.

**Praxis Unknown.** The formational effectiveness of spiritual praxis is unknown among most TB background believing communities.

**Revision of Discipleship Methods.** The discipleship methods currently being employed among TB background believers should and must be revisited.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The above observations are based on a relatively small sample of the community in question. Participants in the study represented only two of the six countries where Tibetan Buddhist peoples are indigenously found, and come from two different tribes. It helped that participants included males and females, a wide age range, and a varied range in number of years as a Christian. Though a more widespread representation would be desired, this study is a starting point for ongoing conversation about rhythms of spiritual praxis in the discipleship of TB background believers, especially in the area of Karma and atonement.

### **Concluding Recommendations**

Two to four years for a new believer to struggle with the issue of forgiveness and grace is undesirable. The Christian community, foreign or TB background, can and must do better. The following recommendations must be vetted and decisions about possible implementations ultimately made by the TB background believing community itself. This research aims to catalyze the conversation.

### **Teaching about the Atonement**

Though praxes are recommended, it is still important to lay a solid foundation of words of truth. When first sharing about the atoning work of Jesus with either a TB background seeker or new believer, it may be helpful to use a metaphor that speaks about Jesus setting us free from the bondage of sin and its eternal consequences. The metaphor and language associated with the “Christus Victor” motif of atonement would serve this purpose well. The image of Jesus the Victorious Christ overcoming death, evil, and sin easily leads to the good news of freedom from the “iron law” of Karma. Together with rhythms of praxes this understanding is expected to effect a true transformation at the deepest level of belief and behavior.

### **Communal Rhythms of Praxes**

TB peoples are highly communal in culture, consistent with the general cultural make-up of Asia. In the same way that the belief in Karma was shaped largely through practices done in the communal space, so the new belief in atonement should be formed through immersion in a community of practice with other TB background believers.

**The Lord’s Supper/Eucharist.** The first recommended praxis is that of the Eucharist. Of all the Church sacraments, traditions, and disciplines this is the one that most clearly points toward the atonement. It is recommended that the Eucharist be a fixed practice for TB background believers every time they meet. The Eucharist should serve as a focal point to the worship gathering with a clear explanation or reminder of what it means and why they partake of the bread and wine. A respectful celebratory tone of thankfulness for what Christ has already accomplished would be the goal.

**Repetitive Prayers and Scriptures.** Since repetition of mantras is something that those coming from a TB background are already familiar with, the implementation of repetitive prayers and recitation of the Scriptures should be a welcomed praxis for their Christian journey of faith. It is suggested that various kinds of repetitive prayers and recitation of the Scriptures be introduced to the TB background believing fellowships. For the purposes of discipling from Karma to atonement, perhaps the Lord’s Prayer, Romans 3:21-26, I Corinthians 15:3-6, II Corinthians 5:14-15, Ephesians 1:3-10, Colossians 1:15-20 would be useful. Further, the Apostle’s Creed may be valuable to incorporate. Liturgies that speak to good theology about the atonement in worship

gatherings would also work against the rival liturgies encountered in their cultural communities every day.

**Praxis of Compassion/Service.** Compassionate service to the poor and less fortunate should be part of the normal praxis of TB background believing fellowships, both because it is good Christian practice, and because of its value in assisting new believers in grasping the mercy and grace of Christ's atonement.

**Keeping Lent.** The Christian calendar carries the believer through the life of Jesus year after year, with Lent specifically marking the time leading up to the resurrection. As TB background believers engage in the practice year after year, they will be reminded, formed, and shaped by the story of Jesus' life leading up to the cross, burial and finally, the victory of the resurrection. Entering the practices of fasting and serving the poor that often accompany the keeping of Lent again points them to the merciful and loving sacrifice of the Savior.

Combining the above practices could potentially help facilitate true transformation from belief in Karma to atonement. This would not just be a transformation of what the believer thinks or believes about atonement and forgiveness, but would be an embodied, experiential understanding of and participation in both.

These recommendations are meant to catalyze a conversation about the issue of the apparent struggle TB background believers encounter in transitioning from Karma to atonement. That conversation must include and ultimately be decided by TB background believers themselves. The goal of this research is to introduce the topic and contribute to its ongoing discussion.

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