

Chapter 3

Karma and rebirth

The texts report that on the night of his enlightenment the Buddha gained the ability to recall his previous lives. It is said that he remembered not just one or two, but a vast number, together with the details of what his name, caste, profession, and so forth had been in each life. Elsewhere the Buddha states that he could remember back 'as far as ninety-one eons' (M.i.483), one eon being roughly equal to the lifespan of a solar system. Although Buddhist doctrine holds that neither the beginning of the process of cyclic rebirth nor its end can ever be known with certainty, it is clear that the number of times a person may be reborn is almost infinite. This process of repeated rebirth is known as *samsāra* or 'endless wandering', a term suggesting continuous movement like the flow of a river. All living creatures are part of this cyclic movement and will continue to be reborn until they attain nirvana.

The idea of reincarnation did not originate with Buddhism and had existed in India for several centuries before the Buddha's time. The belief is common to many cultures and was widespread in the classical West before coming to be seen as incompatible with Christian doctrine around the 6th century. Indian conceptions about rebirth are distinctive, however, because of their association with the doctrine of karma, which holds that the circumstances of future rebirths are determined by the moral

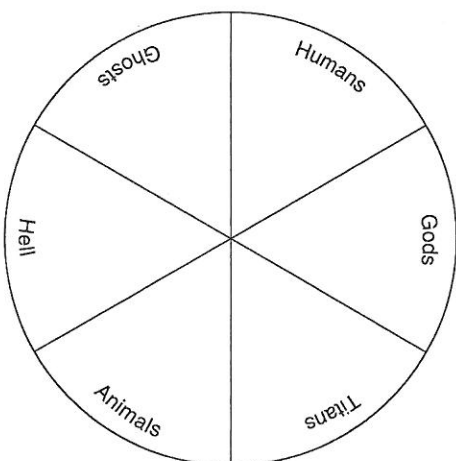
deeds a person performs in this life. Karma (Pali: *kamma*) is of fundamental importance to Buddhist thought, and to understand it we must explore a cluster of related concepts concerning cosmology and time.

The Buddhist universe

Buddhist thought divides the universe into two categories: the physical universe, which is thought of as a receptacle or 'container' (*bhājana*), and the 'beings' (*sattva*) or life forms which inhabit it. The physical universe is formed by the interaction of the five elements, namely earth, water, fire, air, and space (*ākāśa*). The last of these, space—thought of as infinite—is regarded in Indian thought not simply as the absence of the other four but an element in its own right. Through the interaction of the five elements there evolve 'world systems' (roughly equivalent to the modern concept of a solar system) which are found throughout the six directions of the universe (north, south, east, west, above, and below).

These world systems are thought to undergo cycles of evolution and decline lasting billions of years. They come into being, endure for a time, and then slowly disintegrate before being destroyed in a great cataclysm. In due course they evolve again to complete a vast cycle known as a 'great eon'. Naturally, the beings who inhabit the physical universes are not unaffected by these events, and indeed there is some suggestion that it is the moral status of the inhabitants that determines the fate of the world system. A world inhabited by ignorant and selfish people, for example, would deteriorate at a faster speed than one with a wise and virtuous population. This notion that beings are not just the caretakers of their environment, but in some sense create it, has important implications for Buddhist thinking on ecology.

It will already be clear that Buddhist cosmology differs in important respects from religious thinking in the West. In the



The 'Wheel of Life' (bhavacakra) or Six Realms of Rebirth

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Book of Genesis creation is depicted as a unique event, and the Bible teaches that the world will end on the Day of Judgement. Between these two events a temporary window of time has opened in eternity within which a unique drama—that of the Fall and Redemption—is played out. It is this drama that constitutes 'history', conceived of as a linear and generally forward-moving sequence of events. In this drama (the secular version of which substitutes 'progress' for redemption), human affairs are always centre stage. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in pre-Copernican cosmology which locates the earth at the very centre of the universe. From an Indian perspective, however, this world picture is anthropocentric and parochial. The earth is far from being the hub around which the cosmos revolves, and humans are not the only actors on the stage. Time, moreover, is conceived of as cyclic rather than linear: history has no overall direction or purpose, and similar patterns of events may repeat themselves many times over.

A Buddhist creation myth found in the *Aggañña Sutta* tells a quite different story from the Book of Genesis. The myth describes how the inhabitants of a world system which has been destroyed are gradually reborn within a new one that is evolving. At first their bodies are translucent and there is no distinction between the sexes. As the fabric of the new world system becomes denser, these spirit-like beings become attracted to it and begin to consume it like food. Slowly, their bodies become less ethereal until they resemble the gross physical bodies we have now. Competition for food leads to quarrels and disputes, and the people elect a king to keep the peace, an event which marks the origins of social life. Although the myth may be intended as much as a satire on human society as an account of creation, it provides an interesting contrast with the Book of Genesis: whereas the Judaeo-Christian tradition attributes the Fall of Man to pride and disobedience, Buddhism locates the origin of human suffering in desire.

The six realms of rebirth

Within a world system there are various 'realms' of rebirth. Early sources list five, but later ones add a further realm—that of the Titans—making six in all, and this is the scheme I will adopt here. The six realms are a popular theme in Buddhist art and are often depicted in the 'wheel of life' (*bhavacakra*). This can be seen in diagrammatic form on p. 34. The three realms above the centre line are regarded as auspicious places of rebirth, while those below it are seen as unfortunate. In a sense the arrangement is like an expanded version of the traditional Christian scheme of hell, purgatory, earth, and heaven, with the difference that a person can transmigrate repeatedly from one realm to another. The Buddhist heaven, shown at the top, is subdivided by later sources (post 5th century) into twenty-six different levels or 'mansions', so when the other five realms are included, a total of thirty-one possible rebirth destinations is arrived at.

The easiest way to picture this arrangement is to think of an office block with thirty-one floors. In the basement is hell—a place of woe where beings suffer the results of evil acts done in previous lives. While in hell they are subject to various torments—often depicted vividly in popular art—such as being boiled in oil or hacked limb from limb. The Buddhist hell (strictly ‘hells’, since there are many of them), however, is unlike the Christian one in two respects. The first is that it is not a place of final damnation: in this respect it corresponds more to the Christian purgatory, a temporary state from which a person will eventually be released. Release comes when the evil karma that sent one to hell has run its course. The second difference is that in Buddhism there are both hot hells and cold hells; in the latter the suffering is due to freezing rather than roasting.

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Above hell is the animal realm. Rebirth as an animal is undesirable for obvious reasons. Animals are governed by brute instinct and lack the intellectual capacity to understand the nature of their situation or do much to improve it. They are also hunted for food by human and other predators. Above the animals is the realm of ghosts. These are unhappy spirits that hover around the fringes of the human world and can sometimes be glimpsed as shadowy forms. For the most part, ghosts are former human beings who developed strong attachments which keep them bound to the earth. They are consumed by desires they can never satisfy, and are depicted in popular art as wraith-like creatures with large stomachs and tiny mouths symbolizing their insatiable yet constantly unsatisfied hunger. The fourth level is that of the Titans, a race of demonic warlike beings at the mercy of violent impulses. Motivated by a lust for power, they constantly seek conquests in which they find no fulfilment.

On the fifth level is the human world. Rebirth as a human being is regarded as both highly desirable and difficult to attain. Although there are many higher levels on which rebirth can be achieved, they are potentially a handicap to spiritual progress. By being reborn as

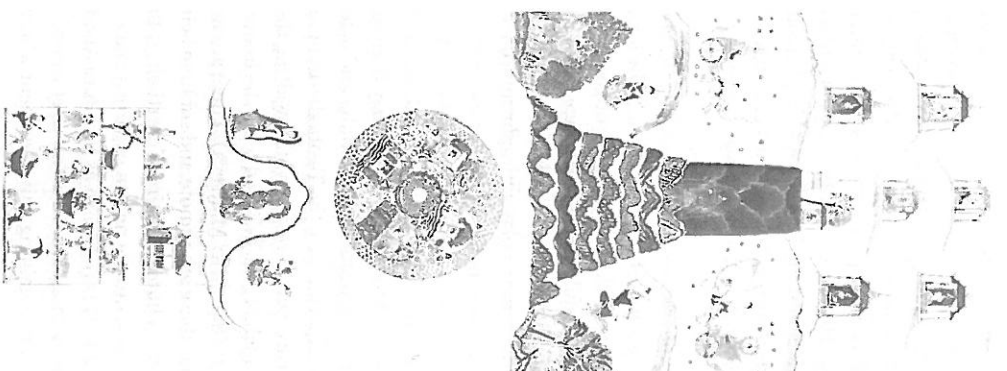
a god in an idyllic paradise one can easily become complacent and lose sight of the need to strive for nirvana. Human existence, by contrast, offers constant reminders of the vagaries of life (for example the ‘four signs’ seen by the Buddha such as old age and sickness) as well as the opportunity to seek a permanent solution to life’s problems. Human beings have reason and free will, and can use these to understand the Dharma and implement Buddhist teachings. Life as a human being is thus seen as the ‘middle way’ in offering an appropriate balance between pleasure and suffering.

The twenty-six upper storeys of our building (levels 6–31) are the abodes or mansions of the gods (deva). The lower gods are beings who, due to the performance of good deeds, now enjoy harmonious and blissful states of existence. They include important personalities from the Hindu pantheon like Indra and Brahma, who now come to play an important role in Buddhist literature, and the gods of ‘the heaven of the thirty-three’, a body of thirty-three gods ruled by their king Sakka (Sanskrit: Śakra). These dwell on the summit of the mythical Mount Meru and resemble the gods of Mount Olympus. They frequently appear on earth and pay their respects to the Buddha and listen to his teachings. Also important are the Tusita devas, amongst whom future Buddhas are said to reside while awaiting their last rebirth on earth, and which is now believed to be the home of the next Buddha, Metteya (Sanskrit: Maitreya). There are numerous Higher Gods, but these are remote and sublime beings who have little involvement in human affairs. Nevertheless, they are subject to karma and are eventually reborn like everyone else. The top five heavens (levels 23–27) are known as the ‘Pure Abodes’, and can only be attained by those known as ‘non-returners’. These are beings on the point of gaining enlightenment who will not be reborn again as human beings. The lifespan of the gods increases at each higher stage, extending to billions of years measured in human time. Time, however, is relative and is perceived differently by different beings; a human lifetime, for example, seems like a day to the gods at the lower levels.

The three spheres of existence

The notion of the six realms and thirty-one levels overlaps with another conception of the universe as divided into three spheres. The lowest of these is the 'sphere of sense desires' (*kāmaṇṇvacaṛa*) which includes all of the levels up to the sixth heaven above the human world. Next is the 'sphere of pure form' (*rūpāṇṇvacaṛa*), a rarefied spiritual state in which the gods perceive and communicate by a kind of telepathy. This extends up to level 27. Highest of all is the 'sphere of formlessness' (*arūpāṇṇvacaṛa*), an almost indescribably sublime state beyond all shape and form in which beings exist as pure mental energy.

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6. The Buddhist universe. The circle in the middle represents the flat surface of the Earth which was thought to support four large continents of different shapes. Above this are the heavenly mansions inhabited by the gods, and below the hells and other realms of suffering. Thailand, AD c.1820

Level	Meditation Level (<i>jhāna</i>)	
31	Neither Perception nor Non-Perception	8
30	Nothingness	7
29	Infinite Consciousness	6
28	Infinite Space	5
27		4
	Higher Gods	3
		2
12		1
11		
6	Lower Gods	
5	Humans	
4	Titans	
3	Ghosts	
2	Animals	
1	Hell	

Diagram of the Buddhist universe showing the 31 levels, 3 spheres of existence, and 8 levels of meditation (*jhāna*)

The gods in the four levels of the sphere of formlessness apprehend phenomena in four increasingly subtle ways: in the lowest (level 28) as infinite space, in the second (level 29) as infinite consciousness, and in the third (level 30) as 'nothingness', or the idea that the extreme subtlety of this mode of existence is akin to non-existence. Finally, abandoning even the thought of 'nothingness', there arises the ineffable state of mind known as 'neither perception nor non-perception' (level 31). This is the highest state in which anyone can be reborn. If the names of the two highest states sound familiar it is because they bear the same names as the stages of meditation attained by the Buddha under his two teachers. The Buddha gained access to these states by tuning into their 'frequency' through meditation. As we shall see, Buddhist ideas about cosmology dovetail with its meditational theory.

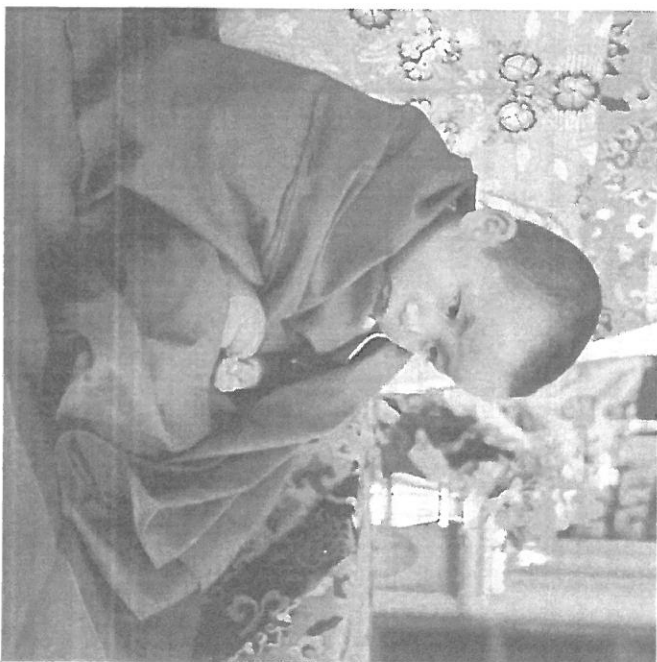
Karma

In the cosmology set out above, karma functions as the elevator that takes people from one floor of the building to another. Good deeds result in an upward movement and bad deeds in a downward one. Karma is not a system of rewards and punishments meted out by God but a kind of natural law akin to the law of gravity. Individuals are thus the sole authors of their good and bad fortune. In popular usage karma is thought of simply as the good and bad things that happen to people, a little like good and bad luck. The literal meaning of the Sanskrit word karma is 'action', but karma as a religious concept is concerned not with just any actions but with actions of a particular kind. Karmic actions are *moral* actions, and the Buddha defined karma by reference to moral choices and the acts consequent upon them. He stated 'It is choice (*cetanā*), O monks, that I call karma; having chosen one acts through body, speech, or mind' (A.iii.415). Moral actions are unlike other actions in that they have both transitive and intransitive effects. The transitive effect is seen in the direct impact moral actions have on others; for example, when we kill or

steal, someone is deprived of his life or property. The intransitive effect is seen in the way moral actions affect the agent. According to Buddhism, human beings have free will, and in the exercise of free will they engage in self-determination. In a very real sense individuals create themselves through their moral choices. By freely and repeatedly choosing certain sorts of things, an individual shapes his character, and through his character his future. As the proverb has it: 'Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.'

Buddhism explains this process in terms of *saṃkhāras* (Sanskrit: *saṃskāras*), a difficult term usually translated as 'mental formations'. *Saṃkhāras* are the character traits and dispositions that are formed when moral choices (*cetanā*) are made and given effect in action. The process may be likened to the work of a potter who moulds the clay into a finished shape: the soft clay is one's character, and when we make moral choices we hold ourselves in our hands and shape our natures for good or ill. It is not hard to see how even within the course of a single lifetime particular patterns of behaviour lead inexorably to certain results. Great works of literature reveal how the fate that befalls the protagonists is due not to chance but to a character flaw that leads to a tragic series of events. The remote effects of karmic choices are referred to as the 'maturation' (*vipāka*) or 'fruit' (*phala*) of the karmic act. The metaphor is an agricultural one: performing good and bad deeds is like planting seeds that will fruit at a later date. Othello's jealousy, Macbeth's ruthless ambition, and Hamlet's hesitation and self-doubt would all be seen by Buddhists as *saṃkhāras*, and the tragic outcome in each case would be the inevitable 'fruit' (*phala*) of the choices these character traits predisposed the individual to make.

Not all the consequences of what a person does are experienced in the lifetime in which the deeds are performed. Karma that has been accumulated but not yet experienced is carried forward to



7. Young boy identified as the reincarnation of the Tibetan lama Khenpo Rinpoche. Scene from *The Reincarnation of Khenpo Rinpoche* (India, 1991)

the next life, or even many lifetimes ahead. Buddhists disagree on exactly how this happens, but one possibility is that the performance of good deeds is like charging up a battery with karmic energy, which is then stored until a future time. Certain key aspects of a person's next rebirth are thought of as karmically determined. These include the family into which one is born, one's social status, physical appearance, and of course, one's character and personality, since these are simply carried over from the previous life. Some Buddhists adopt a fatalistic perspective and see every piece of good and bad luck as due to some karmic cause. The doctrine of karma, however, does not claim that everything

that happens to a person is karmically determined. Many of the things that happen in life—like catching a cold—may be entirely due to natural causes. Karma does not determine precisely what will happen or how anyone will react to what happens. Individuals are free to resist previous conditioning and establish new patterns of behaviour that will short-circuit the endless cycle of rebirth.

What, then, makes an action good or bad? From the Buddha's definition above it can be seen to be largely a matter of intention and choice. The psychological springs of motivation are described in Buddhism as 'roots', and there are said to be three good roots and three bad roots. Actions motivated by greed, hatred, and delusion are bad (*akusala*, Sanskrit: *akusala*) while actions motivated by their opposites—non-attachment, benevolence, and understanding—are good (*kusala*, Sanskrit: *kusala*). Making progress to enlightenment, however, is not simply a matter of having good intentions, and evil is sometimes done by people who act from the highest motives. Good intentions, therefore, must find expression in right actions, and right actions are basically those which do no harm to either oneself or others. The kinds of actions which fail these requirements are prohibited in various sets of precepts, about which more will be said when discussing ethics.

Merit

Karma can be either good or bad. Buddhists speak of good karma as 'merit' (*punña*, Sanskrit: *punya*), and much effort is expended in acquiring it. Some picture it as a kind of spiritual capital—like money in a bank account—whereby credit is built up as the deposit on a heavenly rebirth. One of the best ways for a layman to earn merit is by supporting the order of monks. This can be done by placing food in the bowls of monks as they pass on their daily alms round, by providing robes for the monks, by listening to sermons and attending religious services, and by donating funds for the upkeep of monasteries and temples. Merit can even be

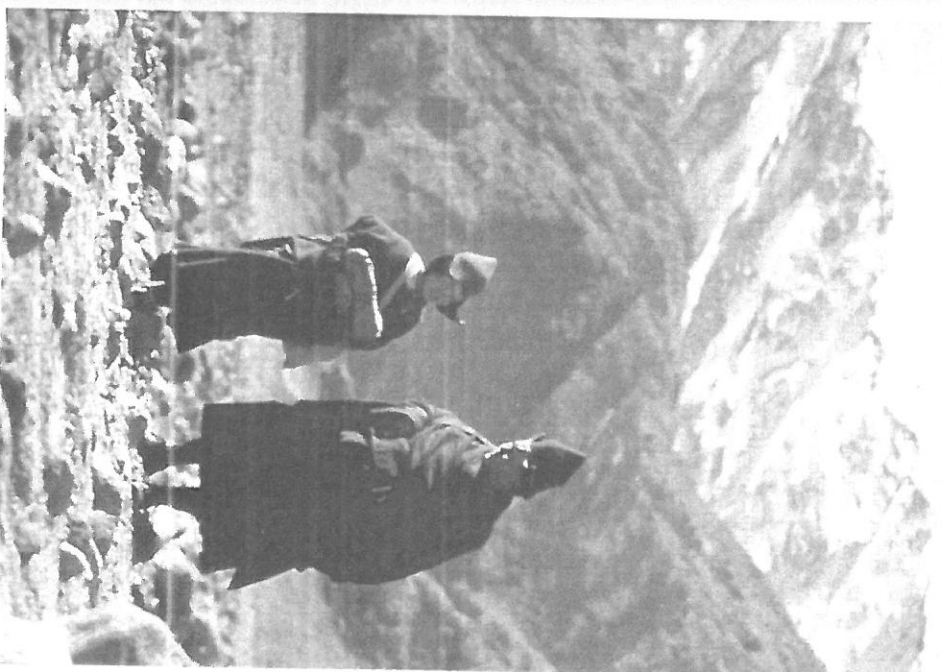
made by congratulating other donors and rejoicing in their generosity. Some Buddhists make the accumulation of merit an end in itself, and go to the extreme of carrying a notebook to keep a tally of their karmic 'balance'. This is to lose sight of the fact that merit is earned as a by-product of doing what is right. To do good deeds simply to obtain good karma would be to act from a selfish motive, and would not earn much merit.

In many Buddhist cultures there is a belief in 'merit transference', or the idea that good karma can be shared with others, just like money. Donating good karma has the happy result that instead of one's own karmic balance being depleted, as it would in the case of money, it increases as a result of the generous motivation in sharing. The more one gives, the more one receives! It is doubtful to what extent there is canonical authority for notions of this kind, although the motivation to share one's merit in a spirit of generosity is certainly karmically wholesome since it would lead to the formation of a generous and benevolent character.

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A Western perspective

Westerners often find the ideas of karma and rebirth puzzling. To a certain extent this is due to different cultural presuppositions about time and history, as alluded to in Chapter 1. In a culture which conceptualizes time as cyclic the idea of rebirth seems natural. But if people are reborn, it might be objected, why do so few remember previous lives? In part the explanation may be that cultural categories condition individual experience. In the absence of a framework of belief in reincarnation, memories of previous lives may go unrecognized or unacknowledged. Individuals may be unwilling to risk ridicule by reporting them. When such memories are reported by children they are commonly dismissed by teachers and parents as the product of an overactive imagination. There is, however, a growing body of testimony from individuals who claim to recall previous lives, many of which it is difficult to account for unless the memories are genuine.



8. A Tibetan lama accompanied by a young novice on their way to attend a dying elder in the local village. The novice carries the text of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Scene from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Canada, 1994)

Nevertheless, such recollections are rare, even in cultures where rebirth is accepted. One possible explanation a Buddhist might advance for this is that the experience of death and rebirth tends to erase such recollections from the upper levels of the mind, and that these memories can only be recovered in altered states of consciousness such as the kind induced by meditation or hypnosis.

Another common question about rebirth is: 'If people are reborn, why does the population not increase more rapidly?' Again this question arises from anthropocentric assumptions. The human world is only one of the realms of rebirth, and since beings can be reborn in any one of the six realms there is continuous movement from one to another. Some Buddhist schools, notably those in Tibet, believe there is an intermediate state which acts as a buffer between lives and in which the spirit of the deceased person remains for up to forty-nine days before being reborn. During this time the spirit glimpses all six realms of rebirth before being attracted—as if by magnetism—to the one most in keeping with its karmic state. According to other schools, however, the transition from one life to the next is instantaneous, and death is followed immediately by conception in a new life.

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Is it necessary to believe in the existence of the six realms and the heavens and hells to be a Buddhist? Not necessarily. Although most Buddhists do accept the traditional teachings, it is possible to reinterpret these in various ways as, perhaps, referring to other dimensions of existence, parallel universes, or simply states of mind. Advocates of 'Buddhist modernism', about which I will say more in the final chapter, tend to reject the more 'medieval' elements of the traditional scheme and replace them with notions more congenial to the modern age. It may even be possible to be a Buddhist and reject the idea of rebirth altogether, although this would be at the price of reducing Buddhism to something like scientific humanism. Belief in a continued personal existence in some form or other after death would seem to be a minimal requirement for most traditions of Buddhist thought.

So is the goal of Buddhism to be reborn in a more fortunate condition? Although in practice many Buddhists—both monks and laymen—ferently desire this, it is not the final solution to suffering that Buddhism seeks. The Buddha was dissatisfied with the temporary bliss he attained through the trances taught to him by his teachers, and the sublime existence enjoyed by the gods is but a prolongation of this experience. Sooner or later the good karma that results in a heavenly birth will run its course and even the gods will die and be reborn. Karmic energy is finite and eventually expires, not unlike that of a spacecraft in a decaying orbit.

The answer to the problem of suffering does not lie in a better rebirth in the cycle of reincarnation (*samsāra*)—only nirvana offers a final solution.