

Rebirth

The question of human destiny after death is probably one of the most critical questions we can raise. Nowadays it has become fashionable to dismiss this question as unimportant. But if we reflect on the extent to which our views influence our action we will see that it is quite essential to gain some understanding of the complete context in which our lives unfold. Moreover our views on the afterlife will determine what we regard as important in this present life.

Three positions of human destiny after death

There are three possible positions that can be taken on human destiny after death.

* First position, the outlook of **materialism**. It simply denies that there is an afterlife. It holds that the human being consists of organic matter. It regards mind as a by-product of organic matter, and after death, with the break up of the physical body, all consciousness comes to an end and the life process is completely extinguished.

* The second alternative is the view held in Western **theistic** religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam in their orthodox forms. They believe in an eternal afterlife. According to these religions, we live a single life on earth and after death we live eternally in some state of existence determined by our present beliefs and conduct.

* Then there is a third view, a view which prevails in the religions of the East, Hinduism and Buddhism. This is the idea of **rebirth**. According to this, the present life is only a simple link in a chain of lives that extends back into the past and forward into the future. This chain of lives is called samsara.

Evidence of rebirth in the Nikaya

* The Buddha himself claimed that he developed retro-cognitive knowledge which enabled him to read his past lives, and specific ones are described in great detail (e.g. Kutadanta DN 5; Maghadeva Sutta MN 83).

* In the first paean of joy, the Buddha says: *“Through many a birth wandered, I, seeking the builder of this house. Sorrowful indeed is birth again and again.”*

* In the Dhammacakka Sutta SN 56.11, the Buddha, commenting on the second noble truth, states: *“This very craving is that which leads to rebirth.”* The Buddha concludes this discourse with the words: *“This is my last birth. Now there is no more rebirth.”*

* In the Ghatikara Sutta MN 81, the Buddha relates to Venerable Ananda that he was born as Jotipala, in the time of the Buddha Kassapa, his immediate predecessor.

* The Anathapindikovada Sutta MN 143 describes a nocturnal visit of Anathapindika to the Buddha immediately after his rebirth as a Deva.

* Buddha’s previous birth was depicted in Apadana KN.

* There are also occasions on which the Buddha appeared at the scenes of the death of two of his disciples, Godhika (SN. I. 120-2) and Vakkhali (SN. III.119), and on both occasions he observed that they passed away without being reborn.

* Janavasabha Sutta, DN 18. When the Buddha visited a place called Nadika, Ananda questioned the Buddha about the fate of the Nadikans who had died. The Buddha’s response was that what happens to a person depends upon that person’s character.

* Mahaparinibbana Sutta, DN 16. Rebirth in good places is one of the 5 advantages of morality. The Buddha also spoke about the kind of rebirth of some of the people.

Such memories have been reported even by those who did not practice yoga, especially by children during the early stages of their lives (Ian Stevenson, Cases of Reincarnation Type).

BUDDHISM AND HINDUISM COMPARED

The word "Samsara" means literally "continuing on", "wandering on". It signifies the repetitive cycle of birth, ageing, death and rebirth.

Now though Buddhism and Hinduism share the concept of rebirth, the Buddhist concept differs in details from the Hindu doctrine. The doctrine of rebirth as understood in Hinduism involves a permanent soul, a conscious entity which transmigrates from one body to another. The soul inhabits a given body and at death, the soul casts that body off and goes on to assume another body. The famous Hindu classic, the Bhagavad Gita, compares this to a man who might take off one suit of clothing and put on another. The man remains the same but the suits of clothing are different. In the same way the soul remains the same but the psycho-physical organism it takes up differs from life to life.

The Buddhist term for rebirth in Pali is "punabhava" which means "again existence". Buddhism sees rebirth not as the transmigration of a conscious entity but as the repeated occurrence of the process of existence. There is continuity, a transmission of influence, a causal connection between one life and another. But there is no soul, no permanent entity which transmigrates from one life to another.

REBIRTH IS UNCERTAIN

How one dies will determine his future destiny. We may say that in general, how one dies depends largely on how one has lived. Nevertheless, there is no certainty that an ordinary person who has tried to live a pious and moral life will be reborn in a favourable realm of existence, or that a murderer will take rebirth in one of the woeful states.

The role of kamma in dying and rebirth can be so unpredictable that it would be more appropriate to talk in terms of probabilities and possibilities rather than certainties. We may say then that the probability of an ordinary person who has tried to live a pious and moral life being reborn in a good destination is high, but we cannot dismiss the possibility that he or she can still be reborn in an unfavourable plane of existence. Similarly, we can say that the probability of a thug's being reborn in one of the woeful states is high, but possibility of his or her rebirth in the deva world cannot be totally dismissed.

CAUSES OF DEATH

Death comes about because of one of the following causes:

- * through the expiration of the life-span;
- * through the expiration of the productive kammic force;
- * through the expiration of both;
- * through the intervention of a destructive kamma.

DYING PERCEPTIONS

To those who are dying, the kamma about to determine rebirth manifests itself in one of the three ways through any of the six-sense doors as:

- * A kamma (a good or evil deed performed earlier during the same lifetime) or immediately before his dying moments that is to produce rebirth in the next existence.
- * Kamma nimitta: A sign of kamma, i.e. an object or image associated with the good or evil deed that is about to determine rebirth, or an instrument used to perform it.
- * Gati nimitta: A sign of destiny, i.e. a symbol of the realm into which the dying person is about to be reborn.

MODES OF BIRTH

- 1) Egg-born beings (andaja)
- 2) Womb-born being (jalabuja)
- 3) Moisture-born beings (samsedaja)
- 4) Beings having spontaneous birth (opapatika)

REBIRTH WITHOUT A TRANSMIGRATING SOUL

The concept of rebirth without a transmigrating soul commonly raises the question: How can we speak of ourselves as having lived past lives if there is no soul, no single life going through these many lives? To answer this we have to understand the nature of individual identity in a single lifetime. The Buddha explains that what we really are is a functionally unified combination of five aggregates.

The five aggregates fall into two groups. First there is a material process, which is a current of material energy. Then there is a mental process, a current of mental happenings. Both these currents consist of factors that are subject to momentary arising and passing away. The mind is a series of mental acts made up of feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. These mental acts are called in Pali "cittas". Each Citta arises, breaks up and passes away. When it breaks up it does not leave any traces behind. It does not have any core or inner essence that remains. But as soon as the Citta breaks up, immediately afterwards there arises another Citta. Thus we find the mind as a succession of cittas, or series of momentary acts of consciousness.

Now when each Citta falls away it transmits to its successor whatever impression has been recorded on itself, whatever experience it has undergone. Its perceptions, emotions and volitional force are passed on to the next Citta, and thus all experiences we undergo leave their imprint on the onward flow of consciousness, on the "cittasantana", the continuum of mind. This transmission of influence, this causal continuity, gives us our continued identity. We remain the same person through the whole lifetime because of this continuity.

Venerable Nyanatiloka in "Karma and Rebirth" (Wheel no. 9): "Thus nothing transmigrates from one life to the next. And what we call our ego is in reality only this process of continual change, of continual arising and passing away, moment after moment, day after day, year after year, life after life. Just as a wave that apparently hastens over the surface of the ocean is in reality nothing but a continuous rising and falling of ever new masses of water, each time called forth through the transmission of energy, even so, closely considered, is there in the ultimate sense no permanent ego entity that passes through the ocean of samsara, but merely a process of physical and mental phenomena, taking place ever and after, being whipped up by the impulse and will for life."

WHAT CONTINUES FROM ONE LIFE TO ANOTHER

The physical organism - the body - and the mental process - the stream of cittas - occur in close interconnection. The body provides the physical basis for the stream of cittas and the mental process rests upon the body as its instrument or basis.

When death comes, the body can no longer function as the physical support for consciousness. However, when the body breaks up at death, the succession of cittas does not draw to an end. In the mind of the dying person there takes place a final thought - moment called the "death consciousness", which signals the complete end of the life. Then, following the death consciousness, there arises the first Citta of the next life which springs up with the newly formed physical organism as its basis.

The first Citta of the new life continues the stream of consciousness which has passed out of the deceased body. The stream of consciousness is not a single entity, but a process, and the process continues. When the stream of cittas passes on to the next life it carries the storage of impressions along with it.

@PRESERVATION OF IDENTITY ILLUSTRATED

An illustration may help us understand how this preservation of, identity can take place without the transmigration of any "self-identifiable" entity. Suppose we have a candle burning at 8 o'clock. If we come back in an hour, at 9 o'clock, we see that the candle is still burning, and we say that it is the same candle. This statement is completely valid from the standpoint of conventional linguistic usage.

But if we examine this matter close-up we'll see that at every moment it is burning a different section of the wick, different portion of the wax and different molecules of oxygen.

Thus the wick, wax and the oxygen being burnt are always different from moment to moment, and yet because the moments of flame link together in a continuum, one moment of flame giving rise to the next, we still say it is the same flame. But actually the flame is different from moment to moment. The flame itself is an entirely different phenomenon. It is conditioned by wax, the wick and air, and apart from them there is nothing.

@TRANSMISSION OF THE FLAME

Now we go on to the next step. Suppose the flame reaches the bottom of the candle, we take a new candle, put its wick to the flame of the old candle and catch the flame from the old candle to the new one; then the flame on the old candle goes out. So the flame has now been transmitted to the new candle. Is it the same flame or a different flame? From one angle we can say it is the same flame because it follows in continuity, it belongs to the same series. But now the flame is burning with a new physical base, with a new candle as its support. It is burning up new particles of air, new pieces of wax, a new section of wick. We say it is the same flame as the flame of the old candle because it caught fire from that and it continues the succession. But there is no absolute identity of one flame with the other, because of the conditions contributing to that flame. But we can't say that it is a different flame. To call it a different flames would not be in conformity with conventional usage.

@SIMILE OF THE CANDLE

We can apply this simile to the case of rebirth. The body of the candle is like the physical body of the person. The wick might be compared to the sense faculties that function as the support for the process of consciousness. The particles of oxygen are like the sense objects and the flame is like consciousness. Consciousness always arises with the physical body as its support. It always arises through a particular sense faculty, e.g. eye, ear, nose, etc. It always has an object, e.g. sight, sound, etc. The body, sense faculty and the object keep constantly changing and therefore consciousness and the mental factors are constantly changing. But because each act of mind follows in sequence and passes on the contents to the following, we speak of the body and mind compound as being the same person. When the body loses its vitality and death takes place that is like the first candle coming to an end. The transmission of the flame to the next candle, that is like the passing on of the current of consciousness to the next life. When the mental continuum takes up the new body that is like the flame of the old candle passing on to the new candle.

Visuddhi Magga (ch. 17): "With a stream of continuity there is neither identity nor otherness. For if there were absolute identity in a stream of continuity, there would be no forming of curd from milk. And yet if there were absolute otherness curd would not be derived from the milk. And so too with all causally arisen things. So neither absolute identity nor absolute otherness should be assumed here."

CONCEPTION

The Buddha says there are three necessary conditions for conception. There has to be a union of the father and mother, the father to provide the sperm, the mother to provide the egg. Second, it must be the mother's proper season. If the mother isn't fertile, conception won't take place. Third, there must be a stream of consciousness of the deceased person, the flow of mind that is ready and prepared to take rebirth. This third factor he calls the 'Gandhabba'. Unless all these conditions are met conception does not take place.

Maha-nidana Sutta MN i.266: a gross description of this process is found where it is said that if consciousness did not enter the womb, the psychophysical personality would not be constituted therein, or if it were to leave the womb (after some time) the psychophysical personality would not grow to maturity.

Does rebirth go on automatically and inevitably?

Is there any causal structure behind this process of rebirth? Does it go on automatically and inevitably? Or is there a set of causes that sustains it and keeps it rolling?

The Buddha explains that there is a distinct set of causes underlying the rebirth process. It has a causal structure and this structure is set out in the teaching of Dependent Arising, "Paticca-samuppada".

TEACHING OF DEPENDENT ARISING WITH REFERENCE TO REBIRTH

First, in this life there is present in us the most basic root of all becoming, namely ignorance. Due to ignorance we perceive things in a distorted way. Due to these distortions or perversions things appear to us to be permanent, pleasurable, and attractive and as our self. Due to these distortions there arises in us craving, craving for sense pleasures, for existence, for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch sensations and ideas. Basically there is craving for pleasant feeling. In order to experience pleasant feeling we require agreeable objects such as agreeable sights, smells etc. In order to obtain the pleasure these objects can give, we have to make contact with these objects. To contact these objects we need sense faculties that can receive the sense objects. In other words, we need the six sense faculties, e.g. the eye to receive sight, the ear to receive

sound, etc. In order for the sense faculties to function we need the entire psycho-physical organism, the mind-body complex.

Thus on account of craving the mind holds on to this presently existing organism so long as it lives. But when death occurs the present organism can no longer provide the basis for obtaining pleasure through the sense faculties. However, there is still the craving for the world of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and ideas. So due to this craving for existence, consciousness lets go of this body and grasps hold of a new body, a fertilized egg. It lodges itself in that fertilized egg, bringing a whole storage of accumulated impressions over with it into the new psycho-physical organism. Thus we say the new being is conceived.

“Kamma is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture. The consciousness of living beings hindered by ignorance & fettered by craving is established in a lower property (the level of sensuality)... a middling property (the level of form)... a refined property (the level of formlessness). Thus there is the production of renewed becoming in the future. This is how there is becoming.” – AN 3:76

CRAVING THE SEAMSTRESS

Hence the Buddha calls craving the 'seamstress'. Just as a seamstress sews together different pieces of cloth, so does craving sew together one life to another. It ties together the succession of lives. Craving is so powerful that it can bridge the gap created by death and rebuild the whole house of sentient existence again and again.

Thro' many a birth in Samsara wandered I,
Seeking but not finding, the builder of this house. Sorrowful is repeated birth.
O House-builder! You are seen. You shall build no house again.
All your rafters are broken; your ridge-pole is shattered.
To dissolution (Nibbana) goes my mind.
The End of Craving have I attained.

Dhammapada (154)

End of Rebirth

In the case of an enlightened being who has eliminated craving for existence (bhavatanha), consciousness finds no support in a new psychophysical personality and as a result he is not reborn.

All this is evidence that it is consciousness that serves as a connecting link between two lives. In the early texts there is no mention of this consciousness surviving even for a moment without the support of a psychophysical personality. In other words, early Buddhism does not contribute to a theory of disembodied existence. But some of the later schools of Buddhism came to believe in some form of intermediate existence (antarabhava).

Vajrayana and Mahayana Buddhists believe that the the intermediate period (bardo in Tibetan and Zhong yin 中阴 in Mandarin) may last for as long as 49 days.

This inconsistency may be reconciled for if one regarded the entity in the bardo state as another reborn being.

WHAT IS IT THAT CAUSES REBIRTH IN A PARTICULAR FORM

We see a tremendous variety among the living beings existing in the world. People and animals are of many different sorts. So we ask what is it that causes rebirth in a particular form. Does it happen through accident, by chance, without any reason, or is there some principle behind it? The answer the Buddha gives to this question is the Pali word 'Kamma'.

Kamma is the factor which determines the specific form of rebirth and it is Kamma again which determines a good number of the experiences we undergo in the course of our life. The word Kamma means literally action, deed or doing. But in Buddhism it means [volitional action](#).

REBIRTH AND MORALITY

The Buddha was not unaware that unless a person develops the higher forms of knowledge such as retrocognition or clairvoyance, which enable a person to remember incidents of the past and perceive the survival of other beings, it would not be easy to convince oneself of the validity of the doctrines of kamma and rebirth. Hence, they could not be used as

arguments for convincing the ordinary people of the need to follow a moral life.

In the absence of a strong imperative based upon either a moral Absolute or the belief in a Supreme Being or power whose omnipotence could induce the people to a moral life, in the absence of commandments of any sort but only advice to refrain from evil and to cultivate the good life, it would not be easy to encourage and urge ordinary people to adopt a moral life.

The Buddha's strategy was to utilize the doctrines of kamma and rebirth as a wager as shown in the Apannaka Sutta. Here, the immoral one faces calamity in two ways, both in this life and the next.

Common questions pertaining to rebirth?

Qn: Why are we unable to recall our past lives if indeed we had past lives? If we had past lives, we surely ought to be able to recall them?

* A reborn person is mentally incapable of recalling his past life. This is nature's protection, for it certainly is confusing if past memories keep crowding into a reborn person's present mind when he has to keep abreast of present-life conditions.

* But why is our inability to recall our past lives taken to mean that we never had past lives? To those who argue thus, one would like to pose the questions, "Which of us can remember the facts of our earliest infancy, let alone a previous life? Which of us can remember being born? Does this mean that there was no early infancy for us, or that we were not born at all?" The fact is that at the time of birth and also in early infancy our minds for the most part were existing in the bhavanga or unconscious state and not in the fully conscious state.

Qn: Why the doctrine of rebirth has no reference to a first cause?

* When the Buddha spoke on rebirth it was only for the purpose of showing that the consequences of our deeds in this life will follow us to a life thereafter, and that we should therefore be mindful in regard to what we think or say or do. In the same way when he spoke of previous births he was only seeking to explain that our condition in this life are often the results of our deeds in our previous lives. His was essentially a practical

purpose and therefore he was not in the least interested to pursue further the process of rebirth and enter into philosophical abstractions.

* In the Anamatagga Sutta, SN, the Buddha has maintained that the primary origin of life is something inconceivable.

“Inconceivable, brethren, is the origin of this faring on. The earliest point of this faring on of beings cloaked in ignorance and bound by craving is not to be perceived.”

Qn: Does a memory that a person may have, say, of an event or of himself or herself provide justification of the belief in a permanent identity?

*The memory is not independent of the event or the person of that particular time, and both these would have changed considerably. The recognition of a memory trait independent of everything else associated with it gives the false impression of an unchanging identity. The memories themselves are in a state of flux, and that flux is also dependently arisen.

* That memory can then mold the new personality. However, such a transfer is dependent upon the availability of the other conditions e.g. the current upbringing, his present personality etc.

* In Maha Tanha Sankhaya Sutta, MN 38, the Buddha is reported to have strongly reprimanded a monk called Sati for saying that the Buddha had declared that the same consciousness travels from one life to the next. Consciousness is dependently arisen. Without a cause, there is no arising of consciousness.

One often does say loosely that a man after death has gone to heaven or to hell. This is said conventionally for mere convenience of expression, just as we would say that the sun rises from the east whereas in reality the sun never rises from the east, nor does a dead man go anywhere.

Reflection to share with you:

Obtaining birth as a human is rare and more difficult than the success on the part of a sea turtle, blind in one eye, to get its head through the hole of a single-hole yoke floating back and forth on the surface of the ocean, in order to get a glimpse of the open sky.

Human life, in spite of its impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and nonsubstantiality, is a precious opportunity not to be wasted away:

**“Hard is the gain of human life;
hard is the life of mortals;
hard is the hearing of the good teaching and
hard is the arising of enlightened ones.” (Dhp 182)**

“Long have you (repeatedly) experienced the death of a mother. The tears you have shed over the death of a mother while transmigrating & wandering this long, long time - crying & weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing – are greater than the water in the four great oceans.

“Long have you (repeated) experienced the death of a father.... The death of a brother... the death of a sister... the death of a son... the death of a daughter...loss with regard to relatives...loss with regard to wealth... loss with regard to disease. The tears you have shed over loss with regard to disease while transmigrating & wandering this long, long time – crying & weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing – are greater than the water in the four great oceans.

“Why is that? From an inconceivable beginning comes transmigration. A beginning point is not evident, though beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving are transmigrating & wandering on. Long have you thus experienced stress, experienced pain, experienced loss, swelling the cemeteries – enough to become disenchanted with all fabricated things, enough to become dispassionate, enough to be released.” (SN 15:3)