

Rebirth

Bhikkhu Bodhi

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INTRODUCTON

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. One 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 byproduct 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.

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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 "**punabbhava**" 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 a 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.

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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.

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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.

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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 the candle is burning different particles of wax, every moment it is burning a different section of wick, different molecules of oxygen. Thus the wax, wick 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.

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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, eg. 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.

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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.

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, "**paticcasamupada**".

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TEACHING OF DEPENDENT ARISING WITH REFERENCE TO REBIRTH

Now we will explain the teaching of Dependent Arising with specific reference to the rebirth process.

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, 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, eg. 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.

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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 Sansara 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)

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WHAT IS IT THAT CAUSES REBIRTH IN A PARTICULAR FORM?

Now we come to the next question. 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.

(see also "[Questions on Kamma](#)")

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