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## Karma and the afterlife

A contemporary and practical perspective on aging, death and the departed  
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### 1 Death, rebirth and culture

#### 1.1 THE INDIAN BACKGROUND

##### 1.1.1 Brahminical rituals for the dead

**1.1.1.1** Many of the early Buddhist teachings on death and afterdeath are better understood when we examine them against the prevailing brahminical belief-system. Teachings such as those on the pretas (P *peta*) and the conduct of the living to the dead, which directly concern the laity, are Buddhist **adaptations** of brahminical beliefs and practices. However, as we shall notice, these are not wholesale adoptions, but are distinctly Buddhist responses to the religious needs of the laity, where the stress is on this-worldly happiness in contrast to the other-worldly pursuits of the renunciants.

The earliest Indian religious texts, the **Vedic** hymns and the later **Brāhmaṇa** ritual texts, rarely speculate on the fate of the dead, focusing almost exclusively on maintaining favourable living conditions in this world. Hence, there is little teaching here on the nature of the afterlife or the obligations of the living to the dead. It is only in the post-Buddha Atharva Veda that we see the first appearance of funeral rituals still practised in Indian society to this day.

**1.1.1.2** Up to the Buddha's time, the prevalent brahminical conception of the death centred around a class of beings known as *pitara* (pl), "the fathers, ancestors" (sg *pitṛ*). According to the Ṛg Veda, the newly dead have to take one of two paths, one leading to the realm of the gods (*deva*), the other to the Fathers. The latter is the prevalent one, that is, the path of the fathers (*pitṛ,yāna*) to the world of the Fathers (*pitṛ,loka*; P *petti,visaya*).<sup>1</sup>

When the newly dead arrives in the world of the Fathers, king Yama (ṚgV 10.14.7-8) or sometimes Agni (ṚgV 10.15.12-14, 10.16.5) gives him a new body. He is bathed in radiant light and given divine food. The Fathers are depicted as willful beings with powers that would benefit their living relatives. To gain this, the relatives, especially the sons, have to offer ritual sacrifices to the Fathers. The family would then prosper and the lineage continue.<sup>2</sup>

**1.1.1.3** By the Buddha's time, with the introduction of karmic theories in the Upaniṣads, an ethical dimension began to pervade the belief in the *pitara* (the Fathers), whose status now resembled that of the three-tiered heavens of devas.<sup>3</sup> Each generation of Fathers (ancestors) was believed to occupy one of these levels of heaven, which they ascended progressively until their eventual dissolution.

A complex system of ancestral rituals, known as *śrāddha* (P *saddha*), was introduced for the benefit of the Fathers. Essentially, the Vedic pattern of reciprocal exchanges between the living and the dead became

<sup>1</sup> Esp Ṛg Veda 10.15; see also 1.106.3, 2.42.2, 3.55.2,5.47.1, 6.52.4, 6.76.10, 7.35.12, 7.76.4, 8.48.12+13, 8.49.13, 9.69.8, 9.83.3, 9.96.11, 10.2.7, 10.14.2+3+6+8+9+11, 10.16.1+2+5+11+12, 10.17.3+8+9, 10.18.13, 10.56.4+6, 10.57.-3+5, 10.62.2, 10.64.14, 10.68.11, 10.78.3, 10.85.14, 10.88.15.18, 10.107.1, 10.130.1+6, 10.154.4, 10.169.4. See Griffiths 1896. *Petti,visaya* is commonly found throughout the 5 Nikāyas, eg D 3:264; M 1:73; S 3:225; A 1:222; It 93\*; Pv 18\*.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the brahminical rites of the dead and their Buddhist responses, see E B Findly 2003:131-138, 235-239.

<sup>3</sup> Knipe (1977:117-120) notes that this three-tiered heaven, according to Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 2.6.1.1-3, was ranked according to the type of substances that ancestors, when still living, offered as sacrificial offerings to the devas, and that this hierarchy of the world of the Fathers is prefigured in ṚgV 10.15.1. Griffiths (ṚgV 2:400 n1) errs in attributing the hierarchy to "merit."

more complex. Neither Yama nor Agni now assigned a new body to the *pitr* (sg, Father). This task was now that of the living relatives, especially the sons.

Upon dying and being cremated, the disembodied<sup>4</sup> and liminal dead is now known as a *preta*, “departed one” (P *peta*). The primary task of the *śrāddha* or ancestor worship was to transform the dead from a *preta* into a *pitr*, failing which the *preta* would haunt the living, posing a danger to them.<sup>5</sup> For each of the 10 days following the death, a *piṇḍa* (rice-ball) was made, representing a vital part of the new body.<sup>6</sup>

On the 11<sup>th</sup> day, after the *piṇḍa, pitr* (rice-body) was completed, a complex new series of rites followed. The ancestral Fathers and the newly dead, all represented by a group of 11 specialist priests.<sup>7</sup> In a sense, this marked the end of mourning, because on the 12<sup>th</sup> day, a concluding rite, **the *sapīṇḍī, kāraṇa***, was said to transform the *preta* into a *pitr*.<sup>8</sup> With the dead’s release from limbo, the living, too, has regained his social status.<sup>9</sup>

### **1.1.2 Early Buddhist conception of the dead**

**1.1.2.1** The Buddha not only rejected the worship of the devas,<sup>10</sup> widespread in ancient India, but he also rejected brahminical beliefs, especially those regarding class and the eternal soul.<sup>11</sup> Significantly absent from early Buddhism are the notions of the blissful world of the Fathers, or the path of the Fathers. This should not be construed that the Buddha rejected the importance of the family. Clearly, in **the *Sigāl’ovāda Sutta*** (D 31), for example, the Buddha admonishes us to give proper respect and care to our parents; parents, in turn, caring for their children, and even those in the family’s service; and how family members, including husband and wives, have reciprocal duties towards one another.<sup>12</sup>

Early Buddhism also has neither parallel to the brahminical *pitr* nor any ritual similar to the *śrāddha* or the *sapīṇḍīkarana*. Early Buddhist notions of ancestor veneration and related notion are all based on the teaching of karma or personal accountability. The destiny of the dead, according to the Buddha is the direct result of how well he has previously conducted himself morally as a human. Karma, then, is the basis for all early Buddhist notion of the afterlife.

**1.1.2.2** **The *pretas*** (P *peta*) are not regarded as potentially dangerous beings, but as being stuck in the liminal haunt between human and *pitr*. Early Buddhism does not teach any *pitr* state. The term *peta* (anglicized as “preta”) simply and generically refers to one departed, even one recently dead,<sup>13</sup> but is not

<sup>4</sup> By the time the Vinaya stories were composed to illustrate or support the cases of transgressions, there were some kinds of *pretas* or *pretis* (female *pretas*) who apparently had physical form [1.2].

<sup>5</sup> On the differences btw *pitara* and *preta*, see also E Washburn Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, Strasburg: Von Karl F Trübner, 1915, repr Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974:29-31. See also Holt 1981 n20.

<sup>6</sup> For details on the *śrāddha*, see Knipe 1977; also Mrs Sinclair Stevenson, *The Rites of the Twice-born*, Oxford Univ Press, 1920, repr New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corp, 1971:156-192.

<sup>7</sup> Knipe notes that the number 11 refers to the identification of the *mahāpātra* priests, standing in for the *pretas* and his ancestors, with the 11 Rudras, symbols of the second of the 3 classes of *pitara* (1977:117).

<sup>8</sup> Knipe 1977:117-122.

<sup>9</sup> The entire period between death and the *sapīṇḍīkarana* is viewed as one of extreme pollution. According to British anthropologist Mary Douglas’s thesis, liminality connotes danger because an entity is in between classification, thereby defying ritual techniques to maintain order: see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966; also Holt 1981 n20. For details of such rituals, see Sayers 2013: ch 4.

<sup>10</sup> In ***Brahma,deva S*** (S 6.3), Brahmā himself appears before a devotee to instruct her not to worship him, but to offer alms to the arhats (S 6.3/1:140-142), SD 12.4. In ***Mahā,parinibbāna S*** (D 26), when the gods perform miracles to worship him, the Buddha decries them, proclaiming Dharma practise for awakening as the “supreme worship” (D 26,5.3.2) + SD 9 (7.2). However, the Buddha’s tolerance is reflected in his allowance for deva,puja as a cultural practice: see the 5<sup>th</sup> of the fivefold offerings in ***Ādiya S*** (A 5.41/3:45 f @ SD 2.1) and ***Patta Kamma S*** (A 4.61.12/2:68 @ SD 37.12).

<sup>11</sup> On the Buddha’s rejection of brahminical theism and elitism, see ***Te,vijja S*** (D 13), SD 1.8. On the Buddha’s rejection of brahminical class ideology, see ***Aggañña S*** (D 27), SD 2.19.

<sup>12</sup> D 31 @ SD 4.1.

<sup>13</sup> V:B 1:lvii-lviii.

reborn immediately as a human, deva, animal, or hell-being. There is, however, no mention anywhere that they are intermediate beings, but seem to be a category of their own, the preta realm (*petti,visaya*).<sup>14</sup> [3.1]

In early Buddhism, the preta is never depicted in any fixed form, but is presented as exhibiting the negative and painful effects of his previous unwholesome karma.<sup>15</sup> **The (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** (A 10.177) [6.2], for example, records the Buddha as saying that beings are reborn as pretas on account of habitually committing the 10 unwholesome courses of action<sup>16</sup> [6.2].

**1.1.2.3 The Peta,vatthu**, although a late canonical work, began to depict an array of pretas, like a case-book of criminal who's who, describing them and their past bad karma that shape their present forms. In other words, they *become* the bad karma they have previously done. Of a total of 51 Peta Stories (*petta,-vatthu*), 28 of them serve as lessons in karmic retribution.<sup>17</sup>

In at least 6 of the 51 Peta Stories, veneration of the dead, grieving over one's loss, even prayers,<sup>18</sup> are firmly discouraged.<sup>19</sup> Despite this ancient sentiment reflecting an appreciation of the nature of impermanence, the Peta,vatthu also records a new development, something not found in the suttas of the 4 Nikāyas, that is, the dedication of merit by a living relative, which is shown to at once liberate the preta concerned. We have a total of 18 such Peta Stories.<sup>20</sup>

**1.1.2.4** Although **the preta realm** (*petti,visaya*, “the range of the departed”) [1.1.2.2], or in later works and the Commentaries, *petta,loka*, are schematically located below the human, but above the animals and hell-beings, they can exist almost anywhere on account of their disembodied state. In that sense, they do not have their own world (*loka*), or specific location in the cosmos, like the divine beings or other subhuman beings.<sup>21</sup>

Like the other subhuman beings—the titans (*asura*), the animals and the hell-beings—the lifespan of pretas is undetermined, depending on the power of the being's bad karma. In the case of animals, for example, we have some idea of the average life-span of the members of each species. However, in the case of pretas, despite their subhuman state, they are as individualistic as humans are. And their lifespan is not fixed, often lasting infinitely longer than humans or animals.<sup>22</sup>

**The Akkhana Sutta** (A 8.29) states that pretas are amongst those who would not be able to benefit from listening to the Dharma, because their state does not conduce to living the spiritual life.<sup>23</sup> Nor is the preta any kind of liminal or transitional state to some higher state. It is a sort of dead-end state that we need to get out of as soon as possible, before we can make any spiritual progress.

<sup>14</sup> A common Nikāya term, eg D 3:246, M 1:73, S S 3:225, A 1:222, It 93, Pv 18, Nm 1:37.

<sup>15</sup> In later stories, their sufferings are more detailed: see eg the Skt work, Mvst 1:22-24.

<sup>16</sup> A 10.177/5:269-273 @ SD 2.6a.

<sup>17</sup> The 28 stories of karmic retribution are Pv 1.1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 11, 2.5 (= Vv 7.9), 9, 11, 12 (= J 354), 3.1, 3, 4, 5, 7-10, 4.1,7-11, 13-15, 16 (= J 107).

<sup>18</sup> **Asi,bandhaka,putta S** (S 42.6) describes how the bad would go to a suffering state, no matter what prayers we offer—just like a sunken rock would not rise, not matter how we supplicate it to do so—and that the good would go to a happy state just as naturally, even without any prayer—just as ghee (or oil) from a broken jug would naturally rise to the surface of the water: see SD 39.9.

<sup>19</sup> The 6 stories of mindfulness towards the dead are Pv 1.4, 5, 6, 12, 2.5 (= Vv 7.9), 6 (cf J 454).

<sup>20</sup> The 18 stories involving dedication of merit and liberation from the preta state are Pv 1.4-6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 2.1-4, 6-8, 10, 13 [6.3.3.2], 3.2, 6, 4.2, 3, 4 (= Vv 5.2), 5, 6, 12.

<sup>21</sup> For a schema of the 31 planes of the Buddhist cosmology, see SD 1.7 (Table 1.7).

<sup>22</sup> According to Comy to **Tiro,kuḍḍa S** (Khp 7 = Pv 1.5), the pretas in the story attained their state in the time of the Buddha Phussa, the 18<sup>th</sup> buddha from Dīpaṅkara [B 19 etc] or the 7<sup>th</sup> past buddha from ours [SD 36.2 (3)], who lived 92 aeons ago (KhpA 201): see SD 2.7 (2).

<sup>23</sup> There are 8 inopportune (*akkhana*) states, wherein the beings would not benefit from the Dharma because they are unable to live the holy life, viz, (1) hell-beings, (2) animals, (3) pretas, (4) long-lived devas (the unconscious beings and the formless devas), (5) those in remote places whose inhabitants are not receptive of renunciants, (6) those reborn in the Middle Country, but with wrong views, (7) those reborn in the Middle Country but are foolish, and (8) when no Buddha arises in the world (A 8.29), SD 104.9.

**1.1.2.5** By the time of **the Milinda,pañha**, whose earlier initial sections were compiled in the 1st century CE or thereafter,<sup>24</sup> the preta mythology evolved further. While agreeing with the preta teachings of **the (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** (A 10.177) [6.2], the Milinda,pañha elaborates on the kinds of pretas, probably reflecting the religious conditions of Sri Lanka during the middle of the first millennium CE.<sup>25</sup>

The Milinda,pañha (Dilemma VIII) explains that three of the four classes of pretas do not receive any offerings made to them, that is, those who feed on vomit (*vantāsikā*), those tormented by hunger and thirst (*khu-p,pipāsa*), and those who are burning with craving (*nijjhāma,taṇhika*). Only those pretas who live on the offerings of others who (give) recalling them, do so<sup>26</sup> (Miln 294). This is apparently a new idea, as the suttas—especially **the Tiro,kuḍḍa Sutta** (Khv 7 = Pv 1.5)—clearly state that *all* pretas benefit from our offerings [8.1], properly dedicated to them with lovingkindness. [8.2]

However, as we shall see, the preta mythology continued to evolve where Buddhism was accepted by other communities and countries. Often such a mythology would reflect the social and religious conditions of that society [6.4].

## 1.2 VINAYA CASES

**1.2.1 A monk who had sex with a preta.** One of the stories (*nidāna*) for the cases of the 3<sup>rd</sup> defeat (*pāra-jika*) rule, that against a monk having sex, is that involving a female preta (*petī*), which is adjudicated as an offence entailing defeat (V 3:37). The Vinaya Commentary explains “the preti consumed by craving” (*nijjhāma,taṇhikā petī*) and so on are not to be approached, but there are pretis (female pretas) who live in mansions. Their demerit fruits during the dark fortnight, but in the bright fortnight, they experience bliss like divine beings<sup>27</sup> (VA 279).

It is difficult to imagine how a monk could have sex with a preta if she were a disembodied being. It is also highly unlikely, indeed impossible, that the monk would use psychic powers to effect such a transgression, which is a physical act. It is possible that here—in the Vinaya context, or at least in the context of such rules—*petī* refers to a woman with some kind of psychological disorder involving a mood swing or emotional episodes following the lunar cycle so that she has uncontrollable urges or diminished responsibility.

### 1.2.2 The dead has no legal rights

**1.2.2.1 The Vinaya** records a fascinating story of a monk who went to a cemetery, and removed the shroud (*paṃsukūla*) from a body that had not yet decomposed (*abhinna*). Now, a preta was dwelling in that body. We are not told whose corpse that was. The Commentary, however, tells us that the preta haunted the body on account of desire for the shroud (VA 374). Despite the preta’s pleas, we are told, the monk went away with the shroud.

Then, the preta went back into the body and moved with it (as a veritable zombie!), following the monk. On reaching his dwelling (*vihāra*), he closed the door. The body then fell down at that very spot. The Commentary tells us that the preta then lost interest in the shroud, and leaving the body, went on his way (VA 374).

<sup>24</sup> Milinda,pañha purportedly records questions by the Greek king Milinda (Menander, r 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> cent), a Bactrian king of Sakala in east Punjab. Its older first section was compiled earliest in 1<sup>st</sup> cent CE (also in Chin tr, \*Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sūtra), while the rest or most of it was written in Sri Lanka.

<sup>25</sup> The older initial section, called \*Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sūtra, was tr into Chinese in the 4<sup>th</sup> cent. No other sections of Miln is found in the Chin Tripitaka.

<sup>26</sup> *Catunnaṃ petānaṃ tayo petā na-p,paṭilabhanti vantāsikā khu-p.pipāsino nijjhāma,taṇhikā, labhanti petā para,-dattūpajīvino, te’pi saramānā yeva labhantīti* (Miln 294).

<sup>27</sup> They are said to be amongst those pretas who do not benefit from offerings made by their living relatives (Miln 294; cf 303, 357).

**1.2.2.2** The monk became remorseful. The matter was presented to the Buddha, and after examining it, the Buddha promulgated this rule: “Bhikshus, there is no offence entailing defeat for the monk. But a monk should not remove any shroud [rag] (*paṃsukūla*) from an undecomposed body. Whomever should take it, there is an offence entailing wrong-doing (*dukkata*).” (Pārājika 2.7.8 = V 3:58)

**1.2.2.3** It is difficult for us today to imagine a naked zombie following a monk pleading for the return of the corpse’s shroud. The story could well have been invented to cover a possibly legal loophole in the monastic Vinaya. Even then, the rule still stands, as it has been documented in the monastic records. Such accounts are, of course, very rare, even in the Vinaya, and there are none at all in the suttas.

If such an account were true, then we have to assume that a preta, or at least, certain pretas, are able to have some level of apparent free will. This account also suggests that the dead, or at least pretas, have no legal rights—taking a shroud from a body haunted by a preta does not entail defeat (that is, expulsion from the order). However, monastics are disallowed (under the pain of “wrong-doing) from such an action as it upsets a preta.<sup>28</sup>

## 2 Mistaken notions of rebirth and the afterlife

### 2.1 KARMA AND REBIRTH AS RIGHT VIEW

**2.1.1** Early Buddhism teaches karma and rebirth. These teachings are so entrenched in the suttas, that they are taken as a natural part of Buddhism. Above all, they are included in a key definition of right view, such as the one found in **the (Magga) Vibhaṅga Sutta** (S 45.8), thus:

There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed.	1
There is fruit or result of good and bad actions [karma].	2
There is this world, the next world.	3
There are mother and father, spontaneously born beings.	4
There are brahmins and recluses who, living rightly and practising rightly, proclaim this world and the next after having directly known and realized it for themselves.	5

(**Apaṇṇaka Sutta**, M 60,6/1:402), SD 35.5

**Lines 1-2** refer to karma. Line 1 specifically mentions that giving is efficacious, which is the basis for dedication of merit for the departed [6.4.4]. Line 2 refers to the general efficacy of our deliberate actions, that is, karma, that is, the fuel of our life, death and rebirth.

**Lines 3-4** refer to the locations of rebirth, and the modes of birth. Line 3 is a statement of the reality of “**this world**,” that is, our present existence in terms of our 6 senses (the 5 physical senses and the mind).<sup>29</sup> “**The next world**” refers to reality in terms of space, that is, there are other worlds, different from ours, and parallel universes,<sup>30</sup> and in terms of time, that is, the hereafter, into which we continue to be reborn.

**Line 5** declares the efficacy of goodness, that there is the potential for goodness in every one of us. For this reason, the Buddha teaches the Dharma: it is possible for us, through self-effort, to awaken to true reality, liberation and nirvana.

**2.1.2 Karma** (*kamma*) here is a broad term covering all our deliberate (conscious and unconscious) actions through the 3 karmic doors of body, speech and mind, and of their fruits (*phala*) or ripening (*vipāka*) that

<sup>28</sup> See Andrew Huxley 1991:324.

<sup>29</sup> See **Sabba S** S 35.23/4:15 (SD 7.1).

<sup>30</sup> On parallel universes, see **Kosala S 1** (A 10.29.2/5:59 f), SD 16.15; (**Ānanda**) **Abhibhū S** (A 3.80), SD 54.1; also SD 10.9 (8.2.3).



transform us in accordance with the habits we have been habitually committing. A thought sows an act, which sows a habit, which sows the person, which sows his destiny.<sup>31</sup>

**2.1.3 Rebirth** (*puna-b, bhava*), literally “again-becoming,” clearly refers to some kind of survival, that is, new lives after this one. Just as plants propagate themselves through seeds and other ways, humans survive through procreation, and also each and everyone of us, by way of our subconscious, continue in new lives. Our dynamic consciousness may evolve or devolve as we go through our rebirths. The meaning of life is to understand this, by way of the first two noble truths, and the purpose of life is to transcend rebirth and samsara, by way of understanding the last two truths.<sup>32</sup>

**2.2 MISCONCEPTIONS.** In our times, we are overwhelmed with knowledge and information, so that it is not surprising that some of us might be wary about accepting every Buddhist teaching without question. In fact, we hear a lot of discussions and see a lot of materials in books and on the Internet about “rebirth.” Unfortunately, many, if not, most, of these views tend to be misinformed, mistaken, lack depth, even confusing and bizarre, and are generally unhelpful to our spiritual progress.

However, it is helpful for us to have some idea of the difficulties confronting this phase of contemporary Buddhism, so that our vision and directions are clearer. We need to know what the Buddha, in the suttas, has to teach us about death and rebirth. Only with such wisdom, are we unlikely to repeat old mistakes and face their painful consequences that distract us from the path to awakening and liberation.

## 2.3 TIBETAN CONTEXT

**2.3.1 Tibetan influence.** In 1959, at the height of the Tibetan Uprising, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and his government fled to India to escape from Chinese persecution. With that, began the Tibetan exodus, and along with it Tibetan Buddhism, which became the most widespread form of Buddhism in the west. The cultural dominance of Tibetan Buddhism was highlighted, for example, by the well-received film by Bernardo Bertolucci, *Little Buddha* (1993).

Bertolucci’s film interweaves two stories: the story of the Buddha and that of a child living in Seattle, USA, with his parents in the late twentieth century, and whom two Tibetan monks in exile identify as the reincarnation of one of their eminent lamas. The film gives us the clear impression that the child has reincarnated from ancient India into modern-day America, “just as if the Tibetan dogma of reincarnation were directly descended from the teachings of the Buddha.” (Fauré , 2009:52)

**2.3.2 Reincarnation problems.** Ever since religion became organized, it was also used politically (to wield power). Indeed, it was the notion of reincarnation which enabled the Gelugpa school to seize the main monasteries of the other schools and allow their leader, the fifth Dalai Lama, to become a sort of divine king of Tibet with the blessing of the Mongols.<sup>33</sup>

However, notes Fauré, there are drawbacks to this system: ever since it came into existence, the succession of Dalai Lamas has been little more than a long series of intrigues in the monasteries or at the palace. During the period from the discovery of a new reincarnation to the maturity of the new Dalai Lama, the government was controlled by a regent who often sought to remain in power. Thus, during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, four Dalai Lamas died before ascending the throne, some in mysterious circumstances. Fortunately, this sad state of affairs ended with the thirteenth Dalai Lama. (2009:54)

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<sup>31</sup> Further, see **Karma**, SD 18.1.

<sup>32</sup> On the meaning and purpose of life, and the truths, see SD 1.1 (4.0).

<sup>33</sup> For a more detailed study on this aspect of Tibetan history, see **Rule by incarnation**, SD 72.7 & Franz Michael, *Rule by Incarnation: Tibetan Buddhism and its role in society and state*, Boulder, CO., 1982.

### 2.3.3 Political exploitation of religion. Fauré continues,

“It is, however, necessary to distinguish this Tibetan type of reincarnation from the Buddhist dogma of transmigration which is merely a consequence of the doctrine of karma. Transmigration is, in fact, the passing of any being from one life to another, at a level of existence determined by his or her karma, whereas Tibetan reincarnation implies the rebirth of a charismatic individual: certain beings can choose the form in which they wish to reappear to pursue their mission.

It takes an excessive shift in meaning to present this relatively late and purely Tibetan institution as stemming from orthodox Buddhism. In fact, the notion only developed at the end of the twelfth century in the Karmapa school when one of the great lamas of the school, Düsüm Khyempa, had the idea of foretelling his own rebirth. This notion had the advantage of keeping the prestige of a charismatic master alive within the school after death. The idea spread like wildfire to the other schools, notably the Gelugpa, which used it to establish the lineage of the Dalai Lamas.”

(Fauré, 2009:52 f)

This Tibetan phenomenon of reincarnation should be viewed within the context of the Tibetan culture. Until recently, it was, in fact, limited to Tibet and the surrounding kingdoms (Bhutan, Sikkim, Ladakh, Mongolia), and played no part in Indian Buddhism itself, nor in other non-Tibetan forms of Buddhism which developed in Asia.

### 2.3.4 Tibetan reincarnation today

**2.3.4.1** In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of reincarnation spread with the Tibetan diaspora to Europe and North America. However, no reincarnated lama has yet been found among Afro-Americans, Latinos, Indians, southeast Asians, let alone among the communist Chinese. Clearly, the Tibetan reincarnation is more than just a religious system: it is a political institution, and like all political institutions of a religious nature, it is, and must, be open to question.

The media had reported on the rivalry between the Chinese and Tibetans concerning the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama (the other great spiritual authority of Tibetan Buddhism, along with the Dalai Lama) and that of the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa. The matter becomes even more complicated when Tibetan Buddhists believe that not just the lama can reincarnate into another body, but the lama’s “verbal principle” and his mind, too, can be reincarnated *separately*. This may occur within or without the lineage, and may occur simultaneously or at different times. Such ideas may be acceptable in fiction writing, but to be taken as historical realities in a religion, clearly suggests that there are deeper psychosocial problems underlying it.

**2.3.4.2** In 2007, the Chinese government passed a decree, to take effect September 1, that each of these people who plan to be reborn must complete an application and submit it to several government agencies for approval.<sup>34</sup> Today, not only has **the tulku system** (as it is traditionally known) become outmoded, but is being exploited by those who know the way of worldly power to use it against the Tibetan Buddhists themselves. Clearly, in an age when communist Chinese are looking for reincarnate lamas among their supporters, the tulku system of reincarnation has now become more of a disadvantage to the Tibetan Buddhists. The present Dalai Lama’s declaration that he would not be reincarnated was surely made in this context.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> State Religious Affairs Bureau Order No 5 (simplified 国家宗教事务局令第5号; traditional 國家宗教事務局令第5號), officially, “Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas” (simplified 藏传佛教活佛转世管理办法; traditional 藏傳佛教活佛轉世管理辦法), is an order from the State Administration for Religious Affairs. The Order states that a Reincarnation Application must be filed by all Buddhist temples in that country before they are allowed to recognize individuals as tulkus (reincarnated lamas) or “living Buddhas” (活佛 *huófó*) (a misnomer rejected by mainstream Buddhists). See also *China Daily*, 4 Aug 2007.

<sup>35</sup> See Faure 2009.

**2.3.5 Ethnic Buddhism** is limited by culture. Its teachings, rituals and features are defined by the culture and limited to this world, often to religious politics, or simply to politics. In this sense, culture limits and holds us back to this world [5.2.1.1]. In this case, it holds us back to Tibetan culture, an ethnic Buddhism. It's a great place to begin our experience of Buddhism, but the Dharma is a path, on which we must make our journey.

So, we may begin with ethnic Buddhism, but we cannot stop there. The Buddha Dharma transcends culture, and empowers us with cultivation (*bhāvanā*), that is, to rise beyond the limits of culture, beyond our body, speech, and social conditionings, to the liberating space of the mind, so that we awaken to true and unconditioned reality, as the Buddha and the arhats have done.

### 3 The 49 days of the dead and their significance

#### 3.1 THE INTERMEDIATE BEING

##### 3.1.1 Those reborn immediately

**3.1.1.1** The early Buddhist texts nowhere maintain that all rebirths are immediate. We can surmise that only the “learner” (*sekha*) saints (the streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners, and the arhats-to-be), are reborn immediately. So, too, those bound for rebirth in the form world and formless world, on account of their wholesome minds and conduct, are reborn immediately there.

The notion that all beings are immediately reborn is first mentioned in a late paracanonical work, **the Milinda,pañha**.<sup>36</sup> However, according to Vasubandhu, rebirth in the hell-state is immediate (Abhk 3.13.b) [3.1.1.2]. He also says that intermediate beings are not said to have been born (*upapanno bhavati*), but are said to be arising (*upapadyamāna*) (apparently because they have no parents) (id).

**3.1.1.2 The Abhidharma,kośa,bhāṣya** (4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century) of Vasubandhu, summarizing the views of the Sarvāstivāda, an early Mahāyāna school, is the main source of our current views on the intermediate state and intermediate being.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, it identifies the intermediate being as **the gandharva** (anglicized from Skt; P *gandhabba*) [3.1.3], or being (or consciousness) to be born<sup>38</sup> (Abhk 3.12c). [3.1.3]

##### 3.1.2 The gandharva

**3.1.2.1** Another post-Buddha development, which is more cultural than spiritual in significance, is the notion of **the “7 weeks” of the intermediate existence** or in-between birth existence (*antarā,bhava*). Although a small minority of Theravada Buddhists, mostly those subscribing to Abhidhamma teachings or influenced by them, hold the view that rebirth occurs immediately upon one's dying, the majority of Buddhists, Theravāda, Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna, accept the notion that rebirth can take up to as long as 49 days to occur.

**3.1.2.2** During this intermediate existence, the being is known as **a gandharva** (*gandhabba*; Skt *gandharva*)<sup>39</sup> [3.1.1.2], and is of a mind-made or disembodied form, fed and propelled by craving. When questioned about this, the Buddha replies, “Vaccha, when a being has laid down this body, but is not yet been reborn in

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<sup>36</sup> Miln 83: see SD 2.17 (3). For a doctrinal discussion, see **Is rebirth immediate?** SD 2.17. Here, we examine the issue as contemporary cultural phenomena.

<sup>37</sup> See esp Abhk 2.8-18 (Abhk:P 380-400).

<sup>38</sup> The suttas mention these 3 conditions needed for a being to arise: (1) a gandharva or being-to-be-born, (2) the coitus of parents, and (3) the mother's fertile period (M 1:265, 2:156; VA 1:214; Miln 123;

<sup>39</sup> On the gandharva (*gandhabba*), see M 1:365, 2:256; cf the “establishing of consciousness” (*viññāṇassa ṭīthi*, S 12.39/2:66) and the “descent of consciousness” (*viññāṇassa avakkanti*), S 12.59/2:91. See also VA 1:214; Miln 123; Divy 1.440; Abhk 3.12c (Abhk:P 1:386).



another body, it is fuelled by *craving*, I say. For, Vaccha, at that time, craving is the fuel.”<sup>40</sup> Here, “craving” clearly refers to the force of the being’s past karma that is presently acting upon him in that state.

**3.1.2.3** On the other hand, we can say that while the saints (except for the arhats) and the dhyanic beings [3.1.1] are reborn immediately into a spiritually conducive rebirth, the unawakened, on account of their attachment to their erstwhile abodes and habits, tend to have great difficulties letting go of them so that they are unable to move on.<sup>41</sup> And so the intermediate being is stuck in between births, sustained by its craving.

### **3.1.3 Vasubandhu**

**3.1.3.1** Even this karmic support must weaken, and there comes a point—it is uncertain for how long: immediately, a week, indefinitely, or perhaps 49 days—the intermediate being falls from its state. Presumably, when all its sustaining karma is exhausted, it falls from the intermediate state into the birth-form that it is karmically disposed to. The early suttas do not say what its form is, but it appears to be disembodied or “without form” in the sense that it is mind-made.

**3.1.3.2** However, according to **Vasubandhu**, the Abhidharma,kośa author, all intermediate beings are either human, or a sense-world being, or a form world-being, but never a formless-world being (apparently because the intermediate being assumes some kind of form).<sup>42</sup> And such a being cannot assume or be reborn into any other kind of realm (Abhk 3.14d). As Vasubandhu does not cite any sutta for such a view, we must assume that he is simply expressing his own opinion.

## **3.2 A CULTURAL NOTION OF THE DEAD**

**3.2.1** Now that we have some idea of the origin and nature of the notion of the intermediate state, let us go on to explore how Buddhists view death in this light. Let us begin by asking a pertinent question: **What dies?** Or, in the popular mind, “who” dies? What or who is it that Buddhists see as moving on in between births? Ironically, most Mahayanist Chinese or East Asian Buddhists seem only to have a fuzzy notion of the after-life. Their heaven, apparently, like Olympus, is only inhabited by the gods and non-humans. Humans, at best, only might visit such places, but are not reborn there. So it seems. [6.6.2.6]

In fact, the idea we are likely to glean from their calendar of rituals is that their dead are all inexorably relegated to the preta world or the hell realm. The task of the living relatives (as a rule, only filial relatives, especially the sons, are empowered to help their dead), is to offer the proper prayers (often influenced by Daoist elements), as a rule, comprising of material offerings, that would make such afterlives more comfortable.<sup>43</sup> As in life, so in death; so in the afterlife and afterdeath.

**3.2.2** Another implicit notion seems to be that their dead remain in those subhuman states for all time. The rule is that we do not see any teaching, even myth, of such beings being reborn into any higher state, or even return to the human world, except as revenants, troubled and troubling ghosts with unsettled issues in this life. It is as if such a world-view (if we can call it that) comprises only our present life and the hereafter. It is also a popular cultural notion (despite Buddhist teachings to the contrary) that there is the “soul” (靈魂, simplified

<sup>40</sup> See **Kutūhala S** (S 44.9,15), SD 23.15.

<sup>41</sup> Abhidharma Mahā, vibhāṣā states that rebirth may occur instantaneously, after a week, indeterminately, or after 49 days. Understandably, the longest period became the most prevalent, and this is the duration stated in such works as Abhidharma,kośa,bhāṣya (esp Abhk 3.10, 12de, 14d, 40ab = Abhk:P 383, 386 f, 393 f, 441 f respectively) and Yogācāra,bhūmi,śāstra,

<sup>42</sup> Abhk 2.13. On a schema of the 3 worlds—*kāma,loka*, *rūpa,loka* and *arūpa,loka*—see SD 1.7 (Table 1.7).

<sup>43</sup> The main Chinese Buddhist ritual for the dead is the prayers offering during their 7<sup>th</sup> lunar month. See *How Buddhism became Chinese*, SD 40b (1.4).

灵魂 *línghún*), which, upon the death of the human body, leaves this world, and passes on forever into the hereafter (either as a preta or a hell-being).<sup>44</sup>

**3.3 THE 7-WEEK RITUALS.** Buddhists who follow Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially the form found in East Asia (China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam) and the Chinese diaspora, view the 49-day intermediate state as a transitional period that is crucial to the karmic destiny of the dead. The dead who lack wholesome karma, or whose karma is a mixture of good and bad, or their temperament distracts them from any wholesome rebirth, are stuck in the intermediate state, subject to the whims of bad karma.

If such a being were just able to arouse even a single good thought, he would fall from that intermediate state—but due to his karmic state, this is almost impossible. However, with some help from the living, the intermediate being or *gandharva* would be freed from his intermediate state and move on to a happier rebirth.

The 49 days are a window of opportunity for intercession, during which relatives could perform the proper rituals, especially the “dedication of merits” (*pariṇāmanā*) for the dead [6.2.2], which may involve lengthy, noisy and chants and rituals (for those who can pay for their hefty fees). Traditionally, these rituals are performed every 7<sup>th</sup> day, culminating in the final “the 49<sup>th</sup> day ceremony.”<sup>45</sup> The period of 7 days at the end of which such rituals are performed, and the rituals themselves, are known as “**the 49 days**” or “the 7 × 7-day service”: *qīqī jì* (七七忌) or *qīqī [rì] zhāi* (七七[日]齋) in Chinese, *shichi,shichi no ki* (or *shichi,shichi [nichi] sai*) in Japanese, or *ch'il,ch'il ki* or *ch'il,ch'il [il] chae* in Korean.

## 4 Dealing with the dead

### 4.1 SOCIAL ASPECTS

**4.1.1** Asians, especially ethnic Buddhists, tend mostly to view rituals for their social significance. As such, they perform the last rites and memorial rites for parents and loved one mostly because it is a family or “cultural” tradition. **The Dāna Vatthu Sutta** (A 8.33) illustrates such a sentiment in terms of giving gifts, thus: “One gives, thinking, ‘This was given in the past, done in the past, by my father and my father’s father. It would not be right for me to let this old family custom die!’”<sup>46</sup> In itself, this is only a family or cultural tradition, but when properly done [4.3], it is more likely to benefit the intermediate being.

**4.1.2** Amongst the more status-conscious Buddhists (who see religion as a social status marker), then, such rituals are done to make a good public impression, or perhaps to show that one is worthy of the family inheritance. Status-conscious ethnic Buddhists tend to see even such simple Buddhist gestures of *anjali* (the lotus palm) as a status-marker, so that they only make the *anjali* to those “worthy of it” (like religious dignitary or even VIPs who may not be Buddhist). They are unlikely to make such a gesture to “lesser” Buddhists, or to respond likewise if such Buddhists *anjali* them. Such a wrong practice should of course be corrected at the right time, especially when educating our young Buddhists.

### 4.2 RELIGIOUS ASPECTS

**4.2.1** Most ethnic Buddhists come from families that are religiously fragmented. There may be Daoists and Christians in the family, too. This complicates the situation when the last rites are performed. Although the Daoist members might join in the rituals, the Christian members would only watch from a safe distance, if they are present at all—they are present only in body but not in spirit, like zombies.

<sup>44</sup> See *How Buddhism became Chinese*, SD 40b (4.1.1, 4.1.3.1).

<sup>45</sup> SE Asian Buddhists, however, take the “100<sup>th</sup> day ceremony” as the grand finale of the final rites for the dead.

<sup>46</sup> As at **Dāna Maha-pphala S** (A 7.49,5), SD 2.3; also SD 6.6 (2) (7).

Often enough, the Christian family members (for various reasons) might insist on their dead Buddhist parent be given Christian rituals. The Buddhist members usually either do not know how to object, or feel that “religious tolerance” should be shown here!<sup>47</sup>

**4.2.2** On a darker level, especially amongst uninformed Buddhists, or sectarian Buddhists with a parochial background, their understanding of death tends to be heavily skewed by the kind of teacher or group they associate with. Many Chinese Buddhists might unwittingly revert to Daoist beliefs, or to folk superstitions regarding the dead, and so are pressured to do all kinds of rituals, usually very expensive and noisy ones. Ironically, they would participate in such rituals rather unwillingly, or merely as a ritual, without understanding exactly what is going on, but simply hoping that all of it would quickly end! To them, then, this has nothing to do with the wellbeing of the departed, but merely a politically correct ritual and socially approved gesture.

### 4.3 SPIRITUAL ASPECTS

**4.3.1 Proper attention.** To informed Buddhists, dying is only a temporary end to a temporary process, the closing of a chapter, and the opening of a new volume in the book of life. Ritually, that is, in terms of external or social aspects, we would like to keep the last rites as simply, beautifully and meaningfully as possible. During such moments, proper attention should be shown to both the dead as well as the living. Since we shall address the dead in the rest of this essay, we shall here only discuss our tasks to the living, especially those close to the dead in terms of simplicity, beauty and truth [4.3.3].

**4.3.2 Simplicity.** In terms of simplicity, we should be reminded that when dealing with death and the dead, we should always respect the dead. To “respect” means to accept the person or situation as he or it really is, and to learn whatever we can from this. When informed of a death, we need to ask ourselves these questions:

(1) **What is the significance of this death?** Who are those who are immediately affected, and may need counsel and succour? We need to respond to this first. Clearly, we must examine who, amongst the living are worst affected by the loss. We must help such people deal with the loss and resultant loneliness. We may not even have to say much in terms of grief counselling, but our physical presence with those who are affected by the loss is always comforting and meaningful.

It is meaningful in the sense that it is, to say the least, our gesture of appreciating the loss of one near and dear, and love and respect for those close to him. This is a time for bonding and re-bonding amongst the living, so that the social family is strengthened by its functionality. It is in times of loss that we begin to appreciate the living even more.<sup>48</sup>

(2) **What are the practical tasks to be done in this connection, and who should be doing them?** We need to inform relatives, friends, even the public, of this loss, so that they, too, may properly prepare themselves to respond to the loss. To be able to gaze at the bodily remains of our dearly deceased, immediately upon his departure, is a great privilege. This is like being able to spend the last living moments with him. Indeed, if sojourning in the intermediate state, he would need all the spiritual help we can give by way of lovingkindness [8.2] and dedication of merit [6.2.2].

(3) **What should I do here?** What are my immediate tasks here? There is always something to be done on such occasion. Even if we are not certain of our duties, our presence near the deceased or for him will always be helpful and meaningful. For oneself, upon hearing the news of a death, we can begin by having a quiet moment to cultivate lovingkindness, dedicating it to the deceased, recalling his goodness.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Such a state of affairs shows that such Buddhists are still spiritually and socially weak. Spiritual strength comes from understanding the relevant sutta teachings, and social maturity comes from the wholesome support of the local temple or Buddhist community. On **the social family**, see SD 37.8 (6.2.2.2).

<sup>48</sup> On the social family, see SD 37.8 (6.2.2).

<sup>49</sup> On the cultivation of lovingkindness, see **Karaṇīya Metta S** & SD 38.3 (6).

### **4.3.3 Truth and beauty**

**4.3.3.1** In Buddhist psychology, we often speak of the Dharma as embodying both truth and beauty.<sup>50</sup> **Truth** (*sacca*) here refers to the true reality that we are confronted by the loss of someone near or dear, a great teacher, a good friend or a fellowman. Death, then, is a crucial time for reflection and learning. It is a time when the Dharma can speak to us directly, especially on the painful yet real truth of impermanence. It is a time for deep reflection, wise sharing or peaceful silence, depending on our personal inclination. [6.3.4]

**4.3.3.2 Beauty** (*sobhā*) is a synonym for good (*kalyāṇa*). More specifically, it describes the nature of the wholesome (*kusala*), that it is also true (*sacca*), and on a higher level, refers to true reality (*yathā, bhūta*). In other words, as we have noted [4.3.3], the Dharma comprises truth and beauty. Now let us apply the Dharma to death and rebirth.

Although we have lost someone near and dear, we will always have good memories of him. Death is a moment of parting with one who is near and dear to us. This is a moment when we should reflect on his spiritual beauty, the good that he has left behind, so that our lives have been much better, especially where we have, directly or indirectly, learned about ourselves, others and life as a whole.

## **5 What is reborn?**

### **5.1 WE CREATE OUR OWN WORLD**

#### **5.1.1 Our senses are our world**

**5.1.1.1** The early suttas mostly teach on dealing with our present conditions, especially understanding the nature of our own body and mind. In simple terms (for the sake of mindful meditation), what are body and mind? **The body** is our 5 physical senses: the sense-faculties of eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body. This is our world, the world of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches—they are collectively known as sense-objects.

The **mind** is that aspect of our being that knows or feels the activities of the 5 physical sense-faculties, as well that of the mind itself. The human mind is, in a way, unique, in that we are, or can be, conscious of ourselves. It is this self-consciousness or reflexive consciousness that directs and builds our minds in a spiritual way.

Both the body and the mind work together to form our “world,” the “**all**” (*sabba*).<sup>51</sup> Our world, then, comprises our 6 sense-faculties (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind), their respective sense-objects and sense-consciousnesses. The 6 sense-faculties are the sources of our knowing. The 6 sense-objects are all that we can know, that is, knowledge itself. There is nothing meaningful beyond this. We can try to speculate, but this will only vex us, even test our sanity.<sup>52</sup>

**5.1.1.2** The sense-faculties are said to be our “internal” senses, because they are physical, our body itself. The sense-objects are our “external” senses, because they are mental; the body experienced in the mind. However, such experiences only occur when our attention or **sense-consciousness** is present when our sense-faculty meets its sense-object. When these three—say, the eye, a visual object and visual consciousness (attention)—are present, then, there is an experience of seeing.<sup>53</sup>

**5.1.1.3** Our experience does not stop there; it would not make “sense,” if it does. In fact, it is not easy to just stop there; we want to go on, we want to “know” more. All this happens at a speed faster than even light-

<sup>50</sup> On Buddhism as beauty and truth, see SD 40.1 (8.1.2); SD 46.5 (2.4.2) as aesthetics; SD 37.8 (2.3) in right livelihood. See also Piya Tan, Reflection, “No views frees,” R255, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> See **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1.

<sup>52</sup> S 35.23 @ SD 7.1.

<sup>53</sup> On this basic nature of experience, see **Madhu, piṇḍika S** (M 18,16-18) + SD 6.14 (4.2) on the perceptual process.

ning.<sup>54</sup> So, in an important sense, we have no choice, but to move on to perceive or recognize the sense-object.<sup>55</sup> What we perceive we feel, that is, evaluate as something “pleasant” (if we had a pleasant experience of “it” in the past), “unpleasant” (if we recall “it” as an unpleasant past experience), or as “neutral,” that is, see it as “neutral” (neither unpleasant nor pleasant), as stated in **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23).<sup>56</sup>

### **5.1.2 What controls our world?**

**5.1.2.1** This is where we should stop, but this is unlikely if we do not know how to stop. So, we are compelled to move on, and pursue the pleasant, reject the unpleasant, and ignore the neutral. This is how **karma** works: it feeds itself like a uroboros, a snake biting its own tail.<sup>57</sup> Here, karma means a habitual tendency, and it works, simply put, thus:

Whenever we crave for a pleasant feeling for a sense-object and follow it,  
we are likely to crave again: we reinforce the latent tendency of lust (*rāgānusaya*).  
Whenever we dislike an unpleasant feeling for a sense-object and follow it,  
we are likely to hate again: we reinforce the latent tendency of aversion (*paṭighānusaya*).  
Whenever we ignore a neutral feeling for a sense-object,  
we are likely to ignore it again: we reinforce the latent tendency of ignorance (*avijjā'anusaya*).<sup>58</sup>

These are the roots of our suffering—**the latent tendencies** of lust, of aversion, and of ignorance—lurking so deep in our unconscious,<sup>59</sup> that we never really know them except by their negative effects on us. They work to control our every action, our habits, and our rebirths, so that we continue to slave for them. In fact, these are, so to speak, our karmic genes, which propel our rebirths and shape them. This is also known as the “existential consciousness” [9.2.1.3], because it is the mind that keeps us going as long as it is fuelled by craving and karma [7].

**5.1.2.2** There is no way of uprooting the latent tendencies, except through deep meditation, so that we awaken to true reality, and are fully freed from them as arhats.<sup>60</sup> However, we can work against them at their weakest level, that is, their manifestation as **the 3 unwholesome roots** (*akusala,mūla*) of greed, hate and delusion, in our preconscious, that is, just before we think, speak or act.<sup>61</sup>

However, we are on tricky ground here. The unawakened mind—the great “I”—likes to think that it is in charge, but the reality is that we have no free will at all.<sup>62</sup> We are caught in the flood currents of sense-desires, existence, views and ignorance.<sup>63</sup> When we are unawakened and unmindful, we become the tools of our own senses (that is, we are ruled by our feelings).<sup>64</sup>

Our minds are caught with the notion of being this and that, that is, we see existence as a state of *having*, of things and collecting them, rather than really *being*, directly experiencing the world.<sup>65</sup> We are simply

<sup>54</sup> For an idea of the speed at which our mind works through the brain, see **Free will and Buddhism**, SD 7.7 (12).

<sup>55</sup> On perception, see **Saññā**, SD 17.4.

<sup>56</sup> S 35.23/4:15 @ SD 7.1. On feeling, see **Vedanā**, SD 16.6.

<sup>57</sup> A uroboros is a serpent or dragon biting its own tail, symbolizing samsara. The myth of Sisyphus reflects this tendency, too: see **Yodh'ājīva S** (S 42.3), SD 23.3 (1).

<sup>58</sup> For more details, see **Anusaya**, SD 31.3.

<sup>59</sup> On the Buddha conception of the unconscious, see **The unconscious**, SD 17.8b.

<sup>60</sup> On awakening and the arhat, see **Mahā Assa.pura S** (M 39,21.3), SD 10.13 & SD 3.15 (3.9).

<sup>61</sup> On the preconscious, see SD 17.8b (1.1.2; 2.2; 6) & SD 7.10 (3.3).

<sup>62</sup> See **Free will and Buddhism**, SD 7.7.

<sup>63</sup> These are the mental influxes (*āsava*), the workings of the senses on our minds so that we are caught up in the rut of samsara and suffering, see SD 30.3 (1.3.2).

<sup>64</sup> That is, we are caught up with running after pleasant feelings, rejecting unpleasant feeling, and ignoring neutral feelings, so that we respectively reinforce greed, hate and delusion, and so karma is formed: see **Saṅkhārā**, SD 17.6.

<sup>65</sup> On having and being, see SD 43.1 (3.2.5); also Reflections, “To have or to be?” R166 2012 & “From love must come wisdom” R254 2012.



caught up with views, without understanding their nature and purpose, that they are merely stages of our understanding of reality.<sup>66</sup> No matter how much we can know of life or the world, we are still spiritually ignorant if we do not fully understand the 4 noble truths, and are liberated by that understanding.<sup>67</sup>

**5.1.2.3** Even then, we can only “stop” the workings of the unwholesome roots here if we are morally virtuous and mindfully resolute. To be **morally virtuous** means to show lovingkindness to self and others in terms of life, happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom, values embodied in the 5 precepts.<sup>68</sup> Essentially, this entails keeping our body and speech free of greed, hate and delusion, so that our mind, too, does not need to process any negative emotions.

When *body and speech* are wholesome, it is easier for the mind to settle peacefully, so that it is joyfully mindful. This, in turn, conduces to our mind stilling itself, so that we experience even more profound calm and clarity. Such a mind easily cultivates insight towards self-understanding, and is better strengthened, especially through meditation, against the effects of the unwholesome roots.

## 5.2 OUR BODY AND SOCIETY

### 5.2.1 Humanity

**5.2.1.1** On a broader level, to practise moral conduct is to see our body and speech as constituting our **society**. This is the Buddhist training in moral virtue, the first of the 3 trainings.<sup>69</sup> On account of our respecting others in terms of life, happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom, we are effectively contributing to a good society<sup>70</sup> or a healthy community of happy, creative and spiritual individuals. This is the kind of society that conduces to human progress.

**5.2.1.2** We are born with a human *body*, but we are not *human* yet. We are born with the potential for being human. Our **humanity** comes from the humanizing influences of our parents and human peers. Then, with mental cultivation, we free and shape our human mind from its animal past: we give it the space of the present to evolve by understanding how *change means growth*, that impermanence is the cradle of all existence. Effective human development begins with this truth.

We are *not* born human, but we are born with a human potential—the ability and willingness to accept ourselves as we are: “Ourselves” means *ourselves* and others: we must accept **ourselves** first (we must at least try), that is, to see and use our capability for self-good and capacity for self-love, which then empowers other-good and other-love. We are not always capable of accepting ourselves, on account of our upbringing, or social conditions, or schooling, or religion. When we fully accept ourselves, we see the evolving *others* as connected with ourselves.

**5.2.1.3** At some point in our life, there is a powerful stirring in our heart to break out of our shell of the conditionings by family, peers, culture, society, and religion—we feel a desire to *be* ourselves. We are at first just not sure what we are or want to be. A chrysalis does not know that it is becoming a free-flying butterfly: it just wants to crawl out of its cocoon.

This powerful drive to get out of our conditioning and restraining cocoon is lovingkindness (*mettā*) or unconditional love—our wholesome self-acceptance. If this is not stifled or stunted, then, we become an angelic being amongst humans: wisely compassionate and readily responsive to others with love, ruth,<sup>71</sup> joy

<sup>66</sup> See **The notion of *ditṭhi***, SD 40a.1.

<sup>67</sup> On the 4 noble truths and wisdom, see SD 1.1 (6).

<sup>68</sup> On the 5 values, see SD 1.5 (2) Table.

<sup>69</sup> On the 3 trainings, see ***Sīla samādhi paññā***, SD 21.6.

<sup>70</sup> On the good society, see SD 40a.1 (15.3).

<sup>71</sup> I love this almost forgotten Middle English word, of which we have inherited only its pain in “ruthless.” The Dharma can well use and resurrect *ruth*, giving it true vitality for our times. The OED defines “**ruth**” as “the quality of being

and peace.<sup>72</sup> These are the many names for the “divine abodes” (*brahma, vihāra*): they make gods and angels of us right here and now. This is our **divinity**, which is what naturally evolves from our humanity through the beauty of the Dharma, that is, the joy of understanding and accepting impermanence and the truth that it entails—that despite the fleeting moments, there is always time for love, ruth, joy and peace.

The 4 divine abodes are traditionally known as lovingkindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), gladness (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). They are the divine potential of our humanity. This is at the root of our humanity, which we shall examine now, and then look again in greater detail at our divine potential [5.2.3].

**5.2.1.4** We each have a human potential—how does this potential fruit into **humanity**? Our gratitude is due to our parents in that they have given us a human body and life. Even beyond that, they have *humanized* us by their love and care for us. Often, this parenting or humanizing process is also helped, even enhanced, by other care-givers and those who inculcate wholesome values in us as we grow as humans.

When the first seven or so years of a child are well and warmly nurtured by human parents and care-givers, then the child is more likely to fully realize his human potential early in life. This mundane human act of boundless love—a mother’s love or mothering love—that is the civilizing factor in us. It allows us to accept, even value, one another, other life-forms and nature herself.

**5.2.1.5 Civilization** refers to the willingness and ability of humans to communicate and socialize to such a level that we are able to form a human network that is more significant in more ways than the family or the tribe. This is what allows and encourages the rise of cities and cultural unity that conduces to every kind of human progress.

What makes civilization successful and worthwhile is the culture underlying it. **Culture** refers to our ability to learn from our mistakes, and progress on account of a growing pool of common genius and interacting strengths, that, in some way, allows a person to tap his human potential to enrich himself and others, and to advance or expand his civilization.

**5.2.1.6 Culture** prevents us from reverting into our animal nature, by conditioning us to conform, even contribute, to the civilization, the cultured crowd. Good culture limits us in a positive way to maintain our humanity, and to use it for the greater good. But the goodness of culture works only as far as its civilizing influence goes and how it goes.

If culture merely limits us to our own crowd, the tribe, then we may feel the safety of numbers and certainty of common actions. However, if we are limited to just these, then we are unlikely to live or work for greater good, whether for ourselves or for others. Tribes tend to be inward looking and unfriendly to other tribes. The tribe only serves its purpose when we are divided or uncertain.

Once we meet other tribes, we must at once seek to learn from them and meet on common ground. This common ground is humanity itself. This is a bigger or higher “tribe,” if you like. But being a bigger tribe stills keeps us as a tribe. When it is very big, it often becomes a race. This is a tribalism we need to work with and grow out of, too. To go beyond this bigger tribalism of race, we must rise even higher than our humanity, we must look up to spirituality. [5.2.2]

## 5.2.2 Spirituality

**5.2.2.1** While culture limits us with an identity, even uniformity, **spirituality** liberates us with universality, a commonality that is not merely rooted in the past—as in culture—but in the ever-living present and our presence to one another. Culture limits, spirituality liberates. Culture limits us by making us inward-looking,

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compassionate; pitifulness; the feeling of sorrow for another; compassion, pity.” Its earliest recorded use by OED is 1175 and its latest uses were recorded in Walter Scott’s poem, *Marmion*”: “Upon whose wrinkled brow alone, Nor ruth, nor mercy’s trace, is shown.” (1808:2.19), and in Thomas Hughes’ *Tom Brown at Oxford*: “He ... was filled with ruth for the poor wrong-headed youngster” (1861:xvi).

<sup>72</sup> On love, ruth, joy and peace, see SD 38.5 (2.3.2.1).

but looking within our bodies. Spirituality liberates but looking inwards, too, but looking into our mind-heart.

Spirituality is a matter of the spirit—the opening of the mind, the moving of the heart, beyond the body. With it, we are able to see beyond the physical and social worlds—the human person, the body politic, the human race—to what really defines the good in them, in us. What makes society possible is the human spirit that is found in varying strengths in individual persons but which can link with other to emerge as a greater strength and agent for wholesome change. From humanity must rise spirituality.

It is the human potential for learning, change and growth, that allows the individual to form society, and that society to conduce to the nurturing of individuals with even a stronger spirit, one that moves even more minds and bodies to give the greatest good to the greatest number that nurtures the evolution of wholesome individuals. Humanity grows and gives rise to community; spiritual gives community true life by allow us to be ourselves—to become individuals

**5.2.2.2** When more individuals in such a community or society are wholesomely disciplined, inspired by ethical values, they work to further sink the roots of a good society that conduces to the cultivation of healthy minds. In this way, human progress is enhanced, and spiritual growth, too, is possible. Wholesome human progress and spiritual growth are the hallmarks of **a spiritual community**, even an ideal society.

A spiritual community or ideal society allows us to live our human lives to the fullest potential, the highest of which is the enjoyment of true joy and liberating wisdom. True joy is mental creativity and peace that we live with here and now. It is a sort of heaven on earth, right where we are.

Heaven is not a place, but a mental state, one of perpetual bliss and inner peace, like the eye of the storm.<sup>73</sup> While the worldly winds rage about us, we move with joy, peace and wisdom wherever we go, benefitting others by our presence and actions. Wherever here we go, there is happiness; wherever we are, we bring heaven. We begin to understand that heaven and divinity are not places, but our own mental states.

### **5.2.3 Divinity**

**5.2.3.1** We do not need to go to heaven to be angels or gods. Being a god or angel is not a fixed state or status, but how we wholesomely conduct ourselves—so teaches the Buddha.<sup>74</sup> We each have our divine potential, which we must tap and cultivate it. Even if we do not have angelic bodies, our minds can be godly, our hearts divine. This is done through the cultivation of the 4 divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*).<sup>75</sup>

Our divine potential is rooted in **lovingkindness** (*mettā*), that is, an unconditional self-acceptance and unconditional love towards others, accepting others as they are, and moving on from there. A family, too, needs to be rooted in lovingkindness, with its members accepting one another just as they are. However, a truly wholesome family is one rooted in all the 4 divine abodes.

**5.2.3.2** As part of a family, we show **compassion** to other members, too. We are kind to them even when they do not deserve it. Even difficult people can change, and our compassion, in some way, sooner or later, helps in their wholesome growth. Our negative attitude to them, on the other hand, is likely to endorse what is negative in them.

**5.2.3.3 Gladness** is our open joy in the goodness and success of others. In this way, gladness breeds gladness, joy feeds joy. Just as constructive criticism by another is an appreciation of our being, such gladness is a celebration of our being. As with us, so with others, too. Gladness is the light that shines deeper into our being to reveal our potential and inspire our talents in wholesome creativity so that we become truly good in what we love doing and what we need or love to do.

<sup>73</sup> On the spiritual community as an ideal society, see **Right livelihood**, SD 37.8.

<sup>74</sup> See eg **Te,vijja S** (D 13,76-79), SD 1.8.

<sup>75</sup> See **Brahma, vihāra**, SD 38.5.

**5.2.3.4 Equanimity** is that inner peace towards the vicissitudes of life. Despite all our lovingkindness, compassion, and gladness, we might feel that there is more to be done. We may have goals in our lives, and even include others in our plans and goals. But the goal-posts may get moved around in the course of our life. This inner calm helps us to look on with a clear heart, knowing that not everything is within our control.

Karma, too, often works its way into our best laid plans. Our present state is conditioned partly by our past, partly by the choices we have made. We need to let go of old ideas, and seek new ways of thinking, talking, working, and loving. What we see as failures often point to what we fail to foresee or understand, but, more importantly, we can and must learn from failures, ours and others, so that we can reflect on and revise our vision, motives and actions. Failure is a crossroads when we need to ask ourself, “What is the best I should do now?”<sup>76</sup>

**5.2.3.5 The 4 divine abodes**, then, are the qualities we must cultivate so that we can wholesomely socialize with the world. They might, amongst other things,<sup>77</sup> be called **the social virtues** or the qualities for socialization. Such a socialization begins with warm friendships with another or a peer group. It grows and matures into mutual efforts at problem-solving or inspiring others towards a better life. Such a life can only be defined by a growing awareness and activity of the 4 divine abodes. They are called “divine” abodes, because when we properly cultivate lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity, we live like gods, and make a heaven of our lives right here in this world.<sup>78</sup>

## 5.2.4 Personality and habits

**5.2.4.1** Those who fear death have not really lived their lives fully in a wholesome sense. Notice how the great minds and hearts of our society tend not to fear death and to die happy. In a vital sense, such great people have well prepared themselves for their last moments. The point here is that we need to live our lives well, and be present to the moment, learning and enjoying all that it has to offer in its wholesomeness and wisdom.

We celebrate such individuals, not only because they have lived fully, tapping their potential and working with their talents, but also because, by their examples and works, our lives are much richer and happier. Another vital characteristic we would notice in the great men and women—no matter how many there are—is their diversity as well as uniqueness. They are courageously and truly individuals.

**5.2.4.2** To live well, then, is to work ourself toward self-realization of our potentials, human and divine. Self-realization is the most natural basis for our becoming individuals, our individuation process. An interesting way of understanding the individuation process is that of finding and extending space in our life. In the suttas, and in Buddhist art, we often see **the subhuman planes**, especially the hells, as being crowded and having sameness of personality, like a herd of cattle, or an army of ants, or a cloud of flying insects.

The **heavens**, on the other hand, is depicted as being infinitely spacious, and each of the divine beings, despite enjoying great bliss, seem to be unique beings. The human world is an in between state, and humans have a choice to evolve into divinity or devolve into subhumanity. It all depends on our mind and heart, knowing and feeling, working in harmony with reflexive awareness so that we can learn from our own failures and weaknesses, and those of others.

<sup>76</sup> Or, “What is the firm action I can take now?”: see **Alabbhaniya Thāna S** (A 5.48,72), SD 42.1.

<sup>77</sup> On “social virtues,” see SD 40a.1 (15.3.2), or “social emotions” (A 3.65, 15.1), SD 35.4a). On “divine abodes” (*brahma, vihāra*), see SD 38.6 (1.1.8). They have also been called “godly qualities,” see M 55,7 (the Buddha as Brahma) & M 99; “positive emotions” (SD 38.5 (2.1.1; 7.2.2), “qualities of a leader or of leadership” (SD 38.5 (2.3.3)); “qualities of professionalism,” SD 37.8 (2.5). See **Karaṇīya Metta S** (Sn 1.8,9d) n on *brahman etam*, SD 38.3.

<sup>78</sup> See **Brahma, vihāra**, SD 38.5.

**5.2.4.3** Ours is an on-going evolution from the animal, to the human, to the divine, and beyond. The animal life is basically that of a crowd, the sameness and predictability of a species.<sup>79</sup> Not only must we rise above our **animal** nature and tendencies, but we also need to transcend whatever pulls or holds us down to the subhuman levels. Even in this life itself, we must avoid turning into **asuras**, emotionally violent and calculating demons who see others as only things and tools for our purposes and pleasures. Then we become the proverbial killers of geese that lay golden eggs.<sup>80</sup>

Or, we could fall, in this life itself, into the subhuman realm of **the pretas**, those who have a lot of things, or even everything, but still keep wanting. Their lack of contentment keeps them perpetually poor. So, they become addicts to appropriating, see only things and numbers. Theirs is a world of dark addictions, like Sisyphus pushing his beloved rock to the hill-crest, only to see it run downhill again, and excitedly running after it. He actually enjoys his task: it is easy, repetitive and gives him a sense of achievement.<sup>81</sup>

**5.2.4.4** We don't have to "go to hell," to become **hell-beings**. We *are* indeed hell-beings when we are habitually violent, enjoying in seeing others hurting and getting hurt. We see and use pain as a tool to manipulate others, and to take charge of the situation. In this sense, control freaks who lack compassion are virtually hell-beings. These are the asuras of science fiction: the Morlocks of literature<sup>82</sup> and the Wraiths of space science fiction,<sup>83</sup> who feed off the lives of others, destroying them, and ultimately, their own violence destroys them.

If we are caught in these subhuman states, then, we are already dead to the human world. We are then the veritable "living dead," virtual zombies inhabiting a human world, with moving body parts, a dysfunctional mind, without a heart. We don't have to wait for death to fall into such subhuman states. As we think so we are. Our karma makes us what we are.

**5.2.4.5 Technology** may also have the same negative effects on us, if we allow it to dominate and de-humanize us. We become veritable zombies, wanting in warmth and attention to those around us, skilled in talking and playing with machines, but incapable of really communicating and loving fellow humans. Or, we turn into animals, seeking pleasure, comfort and entertainment that money can buy, caught up with things.

Technological addiction attracts a host of other subhuman traits: we become pretas, as predictable as moths being drawn to the flame of perceived pleasure, but never satiated, never learning from the lesson of pain. We become asuras, ferocious demons of success and plenty, emotionally alienated, measuring and thingifying others, violent even to those close to us just to get what we want, falsely friendly only when caught in a moment of need.

As hell-beings, we show even greater habitual violence, perpetually in the power mode, answering hate with hate, an eye for an eye. We see violence in everything and everyone, so that when we find no "other" victims, we would hurt and destroy even our own kind. Violence seems to be our food, life feeding on death. How can this be life? If there is no life, are we already dead?

<sup>79</sup> On the animal birth, see **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129,18-23), SD 2.22.

<sup>80</sup> On asuras, see SD 39.2 (1.3) & SD 40a.1 (11.2.2).

<sup>81</sup> On Sisyphus, see SD 23.3 (1); SD 48.3 (1.2.2.2).

<sup>82</sup> **Morlocks** are a fictional creatures created by H G Wells in his novel, *The Time Machine* (1895). They are a violent troglodyte race, evolved from humans, living in 8,028<sup>th</sup>-century English countryside. They are ape-like, with large eyes, with little or no clothing, covered with only grey fur. As a result of underground living underground they are albinos, with little or no melanin, so that they are extremely sensitive to light. They mainly feed on the gentle Eloi, another race descended from humans, living above ground. The Morlocks treat the Eloi as cattle, providing them with all their necessities, and they do not resist being captured.

<sup>83</sup> The **Wraith** are a fictional alien race of formidable vampire-like telepathic creatures who first appear in the TV series *Stargate Atlantic* (2005-2006). They are intelligent humanoids, genetically close to insects, but are predominantly human. They evolved in the Pegasus galaxy after a human population seeded by the Ancients (highly spiritual humans) was fed upon by an insect called the Iratus bug, which has the ability to draw upon a human's life to heal itself. As they fed, the bugs absorbed human DNA, to evolve into the Wraith. They feed on humans, treating them like cattle, and regarding this habit as nothing more than natural predation.



### 5.2.5 Being of the moment

#### 5.2.5.1 The (Karaja,kāya) Brahma,vihāra Sutta (A 10.208), in its key passage, says:

Whether you are a woman or a man, you cannot take this body along when you depart (from this world). Bhikshus, this mortal life is but an intermediate state of consciousness” (*citt’antaro ayam... macco*) (A 10.208,2.2/5:300), SD 2.10

The sentence “**This mortal life is but an intermediate state of consciousness**” (*citt’antaro ayam ...macco*) means that “this life is but a moment of consciousness (in a stream of consciousness)” or poetically, “This mortal frame is but a halfway house of the mind”).

The Commentary gives two explanations:

- (1) *citta,karaṇo*, “caused by the mind [consciousness], or the mind is the cause,” that is, taking *antara* as a cause; or
- (2) *citten’eva antariko*, “with this mind [consciousness] itself in between,” where *antara* is taken to mean in-between, intermediate, that is, in one thought-moment, one is in this world, and in the next, it is the rebirth-consciousness, when one becomes a deva, a hell being, or an animal.<sup>84</sup> (AA 5:77)

**5.2.5.2** From all this, we can deduce that the phrase, “**intermediate state of consciousness**” (*citt’antara*) refers to consciousness as the present moment. Our life, then, is this very present moment that we are aware of, right now. But the moment we are aware of it (or not), it is gone. It is impermanent, changing, becoming other, right here and now.<sup>85</sup>

From the Commentary, we can understand that, firstly, it is our mind or consciousness (*citta*) that is the connecting link between other mind-moments. This “in-between consciousness” (*citt’antara*) is, of course, the present moment. This very moment is our life itself, and it is moving by rapidly a thought-moment at a time. This is what we really are. In other words, although we seem to be mentally stable, we need only a moment to change our mind.

Secondly, only a thought-moment separates us from another state of being, whether “a deva, a hell being, or an animal” (AA 5:77). We may have a human body, but our mind is in a constant state of flux. When we are really blissful, such as in dhyana, then we are devas; when we are physically violent, suffering and causing suffering, then we are hell-beings; when we are fearful, unwilling or unable to learn, stuck with the crowd, then we are animals. As we think so we are (Dh 1-2).

**5.2.5.3** For our purposes here, however, we can take *citt’antara* to refer to our present life itself, to mean that we are “creatures of the moment” or “momentary beings.” However, it is interesting that the preta and the asura (violent exploitative demons) are not mentioned by the Commentary. Despite this silence, we can safely assume that the same notion of a “momentary being” also applies to these two subhuman beings or states. In our cyclic addictive habits, we fall into the preta state, despite our human body; when we are emotionally violent, measuring and exploiting others, then we are asuras. We create our own moments.

## 5.3 INDIVIDUATION

### 5.3.1 Meaning of life

**5.3.1.1** What is the meaning of life? Or, more simply, what is life about? One of the most obvious things we can observe of life is that from the moment we are born, we start to decay. Just like flowers on a plant

<sup>84</sup> For related refs, see M 1:266, 2:156 f; S 4:400; A 4:70-74/7.52. Abhidhamma traditionalists are likely to interpret this as the life-continuum (*bhav’anga*).

<sup>85</sup> See SD 48.2 (2.3.1.3).

that mature into fruits that ripen, we, too, mature physically, and if we are wise and diligent, our minds ripen, too—nevertheless, we still age. We give nice names to the various stages of decay in our life—yet, life remains a terminal case of decay, a terminal disease.

**5.3.1.2** Buddhaghosa, in his **Visuddhi,magga**, shows how the 3 characteristics—impermanence, suffering and non-self—are to be applied to the 10 stages of life. That is, each stage is impermanent, weakening and disappearing (hence, suffering) even before reaching the next stage (hence, not the self).

Here, in these decades:

The first 10 years of a person living a hundred years are called the tender decade;

for, he is a tender unsteady child then.

The next 10 years are called the sport decade; for, he is very playful then.

The next 10 years are called the beauty decade; for, his beauty fully blossoms then.

The next 10 years are called the strength decade; for, his strength and power fully mature then.

The next 10 years are called the understanding decade; for, his understanding is well established then.

Even in one naturally weak in understanding, some understanding, it seems, arises then.

The next 10 years are called the decline decade; for, his fondness for playfulness, beauty, strength and understanding decline then.

The next 10 years are called the stooping decade; for his person stoops forward then.

The next 10 years are called the bent decade; for, his person is bent like a ploughshare then.

The next 10 years are called the dotage decade; for, he dotes then and forgets what he has done.

The next 10 years are called the prone decade; for, a centenarian mostly lies prone. (Vism 20.51)<sup>86</sup>

**5.3.1.3** The meaning of life, then, is that it is a process of impermanence, change, and becoming-other. Decay occurs at every stage of our life, fully affecting the body, and, to some extent, the mind, too. There is not a single moment that life remains still—if there were any kind of serious break, we would not be alive. For, to live is to change; to exist (in the case of inanimate things), too, is to change.

To exist is to *be* in time. Existence is time; being is time. Time is change. Meaning comes from change; meaning *is* change. Without change, we perceive nothing: there is no “we,” nor “perceive,” nor “nothing” to even talk about. Hence, we obviously and clearly cannot speak of anything as being eternal, except in metaphorical terms. We might try to conceive of something “eternal,” but it only exists as a concept or idea, a virtual reality at best, not a true reality.<sup>87</sup>

**The Kara.ja,kāya Brahma,vihāra Sutta** (A 10.208) has this enigmatic term, “intermediate state of consciousness” (*citt’antara*), which, I think, refers to consciousness as the present moment. Our life is this very present moment that we are aware of, right now. But the moment we are aware of it (or not), it is gone. It is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise, right here and now.<sup>88</sup> In short, life is but a moment, but one that recurs incessantly, giving an illusion of eternity.

## **5.3.2 Purpose of life**

**5.3.2.1** At the start, it must be said that life, in itself, has no purpose at all. Let’s say we see a group of people gathered together, as we ask, “What is their purpose in gathering here?” If they are queued up before a ticket booth at a cinema or sport stadium we might say that they are planning to buy a ticket to see a show or watch a game; or they could each have other hidden purposes. But, this is not very useful knowledge.

We could get more serious, and ask, “What is the purpose of life?” Again here, we must further ask, “whose” life? Different people would have different purposes or goals in life. A scientist might want to discover the cure for an illness; an artist might want to complete his masterpiece; a student might want to

<sup>86</sup> Cf sad Jacques’ monologue on “the seven ages of man” in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7.

<sup>87</sup> As an important corollary, it is clear, too, that we can never have any “eternal God”

<sup>88</sup> A 10.208,2.2+3.7+3.15 & SD 2.10 (2.2).

pass his exams. Such people have what are called “**instrumental**” purposes, that is, theirs are short-term goals, or they are goals that have been created by themselves. Such goals are unlikely to better them in any way.

**5.3.2.2** Philosophers also speak of an “**intrinsic**” purpose, that is, a goal that is good in itself. For example, if we were to say that our purpose in life is “to be happy,” it would not help to ask further, why we want to be happy. Being happy is good in itself. As such, we can speak of our purpose as Buddhists is to seek awakening as arhats in this life itself. This is good in itself, there is nothing further beyond nirvana!

If we think that this goal is too difficult for us, then we should at least say that our purpose as Buddhists is to attain streamwinning in this life itself. Although this may not exactly be a final goal like arhathood, it does put us on the path in that direction. At least, attaining streamwinning in this life itself prevents us from falling into the subhuman states, from which it is very difficult to escape because it is almost impossible to act in any wholesome way in such realms.<sup>89</sup>

### **5.3.3 The true individual**

**5.3.3.1** The best way to live this life is to aspire to streamwinning in this life itself, as advised by the Buddha himself in the 10 suttas of **the Okkanta Samyutta** (S 25). All we need to do is to understand the nature of impermanence, and then to habitually reflect on it, no matter what happens. This is, in fact, the least we can and must do, as true Buddhists, in this life itself. Otherwise, we might become “purposeless” Buddhists. Or worse, we could be reborn in subhuman realms, where it is almost impossible to do good works, or arise in some inconducive human family or environment, where we are unable to learn the Dharma, much less practise it.<sup>90</sup>

Once we sincerely aspire to attain streamwinning in this life, we are heading for the path of **individuation**, that is, becoming a true individual, someone who is free from the way of the crowd. The “crowd” here refers to a group mentality or tribalism, which tends to be exclusivist or elitist, and so lacking in lovingkindness and humanity. When we join such a crowd or tribe, we are allowing ourselves to be manipulated and misled by others through selfishness, superstition and stupidity (the 3 S’s of the crowd).

**5.3.3.2** In psychological terms, the spiritual maturation on the Buddhist path can be said to be that of **individuation**, the process of becoming a true individual. Why do we need to become such an individual? An important reason is that we are born into a crowd that keeps growing: first, the family, then the community, our society, the country and the world. As we grow in such an environment, it gets more crowded, and we are conditioned and challenged by the crowd.

The crowd wants to absorb us, making us just like it, a faceless statistic. We are easily deluded by the crowd into thinking that if we are not with the crowd, we are against the crowd. But the crowd never thinks, and as such, it is usually wrong.

Or, we could look the other way, at ourself, but can only make sense of our self against others. So we try to compare ourself with others in the crowd. When we perceive another as having more things, titles, wealth, beauty, power, and so on, we try to imitate that person. But we are only judging others by their public facade, mistaking externality for inner happiness. This is the working of the unwholesome root of greed.

Conversely, we tend to see as undesirable whatever that seems to differ from or oppose these desirable qualities. We then simply reject those realities, refusing to acknowledge them. We show hate and anger towards them. In due course, we taste the bitter fruits of pursuing such passing fancies and living in a false world. We have become very emotionally negative members of the crowd.

**5.3.3.3** To be a **true individual** is to rise above the crowd, to see things, not from the crowd or crowded level, but from a higher and bigger perspective. The well known Daddabha Jataka (J 322) is a fable about

<sup>89</sup> On attaining streamwinning, see **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3.

<sup>90</sup> See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7,

rising above the crowd. A timid hare sleeping under a vilva (*beluva*) tree is dreaming that the sky is falling. So, when a ripe vilva fruit falls on a palm-leaf, making a loud sound, he at once leapt up and ran, shouting, “The sky is falling!”

The forest animals, seeing him running and shouting, panic, too, and follow him and run. A growing number of panicked animals followed until it is a sizeable crowd, perilously heading towards the great ocean. A wise young lion, seeing the predicament of the crowd of running animals, stands on a high rock and gives a loud roar.

This stops the running animals in their tracks. Then the lion, asking why they are running, finally comes to the hare. Taking the timid hare on his own back, they return to the scene of the “fallen sky,” only to discover that it is only a ripe vilva fruit that has fallen.<sup>91</sup>

The crowd never thinks; only the individual is capable of wholesome thought. That is why we see the Buddha sitting alone under the Bodhi tree. Only later, the 5 monks gather around him to benefit from his awakening. The 5 monks, too, have decided to leave the crowded life, seeking the open space of the true Dharma.<sup>92</sup>

**5.3.3.4** Once we have sincerely aspired to work towards the attaining of streamwinning in this life itself, we have taken the first step on the spiritual path of **individuation**.<sup>93</sup> The true individual is one who works to discipline his body and speech, so that they conduce to mental peace and clarity. Such a harmonious mind is attended by a habitually joyful heart.

The habitual joyfulness of the true individual arises from inner stillness, especially from the experience of dhyana. Even without dhyana, the true individual may still enjoy a constantly blissful heart through being in touch with the Dharma, such as studying and understanding the sutta teachings. In this way, the true individual grows to be ever more emotionally independent.

**5.3.3.5 The streamwinner** is a true individual who is emotionally independent, since his attainment arises independent of others (*apara-p, paccaya*). In other words, his constant happiness does not arise on account of any external source. He is by nature happy, on account of his contemplative habit of cultivating inner calm and clarity.

Even at this very first stage of the noble path, the streamwinner is endowed with compassion and wisdom that benefit others. The reason for this is that he has become a full-fledged true individual, one who is truly emotionally independent. Such an individual has no fear of death, since he is destined for awakening within 7 lives at the most.<sup>94</sup>

Even we, as aspirants to streamwinning, would have no fear of death. Constantly reflecting on impermanence, we are sure of attaining streamwinning in this life itself. Of such a person the Buddha declares, “He is incapable of doing any intentional deed by which he might be reborn in hell, or in the animal birth, or in the ghost realm. He is incapable of dying without having attained the fruit of streamwinning.”<sup>95</sup> This is an excellent way of not being falling into any subhuman state after death, and of continuing our spiritual progress until we reach awakening.

<sup>91</sup> J 322/3:74-78; quoted at AA 2:277.

<sup>92</sup> For a related reflection, see “Free thinking,” R138, 2010.

<sup>93</sup> On individuation, see **Me: The nature of conceit**, SD 19.2a (1.2).

<sup>94</sup> On the streamwinner and his “7 lives at most,” see **Niṭṭha S** (A 10.63), SD 3.3 (1.2).

<sup>95</sup> S 25.1,4 @ SD 16.7. This is the Sutta’s key statement and clearly refers to what, after the Buddha’s time, is referred to as a “lesser streamwinner” (*culla, sotāpanna, cullaka, sotāpanna*). See **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3(6).

## 6 Sutta teachings on rebirth

### 6.1 HOW WE ARE REBORN

#### 6.1.1 What are we made of?

**6.1.1.1** We have already noted that we comprise only body and mind [5.1]. Our body is made up of **the 4 elements**, that is, earth, water, fire and wind. We have earth-like solid parts that resist other solids and in doing so “destroys” itself, that is, changes into say the water element. Water, here, an ancient term for “liquid,” makes up more than three-quarters of our physical body. Water, as we know, can heat up and boil.

Our body heat not only keeps us warm and mammalian, but also digests our food. Most significantly, it is fire, so that it burn us up, the way oxidation occurs in the ripening of fruits and the rusting of metals. In other words, we are always decaying, too. Part of the decaying process arises from our incessant movements, such as our posturings (standing, walking, sitting and lying down) and activities (such as breathing and processing food). The movements in our body are called the wind element.

**6.1.1.2 The 4 elements** are not fixed or permanent states, but are processes that define our body: our body is the 4 elements. **The Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2) describes how a meditator, emerging from deep dhyana, should reflect on the nature of his body, thus:

He understands thus:

“This body of mine is form, composed of the 4 great elements,  
born from mother and father, nourished with rice and porridge,  
subject to uncertainty, rubbing, pressing, breaking up and destruction.

And this consciousness of mine lies attached here, bound up here.” (D 2,87), SD 8.10

This statement means that consciousness here (in a human being) is dependent on the physical body. Consciousness cannot exist in itself: we must be conscious *of* something. Consciousness is not a state, but an activity connected with one or other of the 6 senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind).<sup>96</sup> Here, we can take “consciousness” as a general term for the mind [6.1.2.1].

**6.1.1.3** The analysis of our being as comprising of the 4 great elements is for the sake of a set of spiritual exercises on **the 3 characteristics**.<sup>97</sup> Just as these elements are impermanent, changing, becoming other, so, too, this body is impermanent, changing, becoming other. Just as what is impermanent is unsatisfactory, even so this body is unsatisfactory: it has to be fed regularly, to be cleaned regularly, to be attended to regularly, to be rested regularly—even then, in the end it must be discarded (Dh 41) [6.1.2.1]. **The Mahā Hatthi, padôpama** (M 28), then, says,

Now, avuso, there comes a time when the external water element is agitated and then **the external earth element** vanishes.<sup>98</sup>

Avuso, when even this external earth element, great as it is, is seen to be impermanent, subject to destruction, subject to disappearance, subject to change—what more of this body that lasts but for a short while, but which is clung to by craving? There can be no considering that (earth element) as “I” or “mine” or “I am.”<sup>99</sup> (M 28,7/1:187), SD 6.16

<sup>96</sup> On consciousness, see *Viññāna*, SD 17.8a. On being conscious of something, see SD 17.8a (7).

<sup>97</sup> On the 3 characteristics, see *Atam,mayatā*, SD 19.13 (1).

<sup>98</sup> Early Indian cosmology says that in the cosmic cycle, the world may be destroyed by either “water,” “fire” or “wind.” See *Aggañña S* (D 27,10-15/3:84-88) in SD 1.1 & Vism 13.30-65/414-422.

<sup>99</sup> “‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am,’” *ahan ti vā maman ti vā asmī ti vā*. See the more detailed formula M 28,6.2 @ SD 6.16. See also (*Dhātu*) *Rāhula S* (A 4.177/2:164 f), SD 67.6.



**6.1.1.4** So far, we have spoken of dying in bodily terms [6.1.1.1-2]. Here, we shall deal with the sutta’s **definition of life**. Besides our physical body, we are also mind, our non-physical aspect. More specifically, “mind” here refers to the “existential consciousness” [5.1.2.1; 7.2]—that which *is* the intermediate state or interbirth being. Again, we must remember that this mind, too, is not a state but it is *a being*, in the sense that it is *becoming* other every moment. Otherwise, it would not be regarded as living, and capable of rebirth.

This non-physical aspect of our being is what we call “life.” This broad term is more clearly defined in the suttas. Let us look at the physical aspects of life first, that is, our 5 senses. **The Mahā Vedalla Suta** (M 43), Sāriputta explains to Mahā Koṭṭhita that our 5 physical sense-faculties persist dependent on “life [vitality]” (*āyu*), which, in turn, depends on “heat” (*usmā*), life [vitality] (*āyu*).”

The Majjhima Commentary defines “**life**” or “vitality” (*āyu*) as the life-faculty itself (*āyum eva*, MA 2:350), which maintains and vitalizes the other material phenomena of the living body (MA 2:351).<sup>100</sup> This may sound tautologous, but the point there is that what we today medically define as “life” is only *one*, the measurable, aspect of our being.

**6.1.1.5** There is also the component of **heat** (*usmā*, also *usumā*; Skt *uṣman*), which is the karma-born heat (of the living body).<sup>101</sup> This is our body warmth, the process of digestion, and other such process that supports life. In simple terms, we may call this “energy” in a broad sense of the word. And this heat or energy is itself dependent on life or vitality. In other words, both *āyu* and *usmā* are mutually dependent. Sāriputta uses the parable of the lamp to explain this mutual dependence, that is, “just as in an oil-lamp that is burning, its light is described as being dependent on its flame, and its flame is described as being dependent on its light.”<sup>102</sup>

## 6.1.2 How we die

**6.1.2.1** What is death? Having discussed the relevant issues thus far, we are now ready to examine the sutta’s **definition of death**. Again here, we have the benefit of **the Mahā Vedalla Suta** (M 43), where Sāriputta defines death as follows:

“Avuso, when this body loses how many states is it then discarded, cast aside, lying like a lifeless log?”<sup>103</sup>

“Avuso, when this body loses three states, that is—

- |                    |                |           |
|--------------------|----------------|-----------|
| (1) vitality,      | <i>āyu</i>     | [6.1.1.3] |
| (2) heat, and      | <i>usmā</i>    | [6.1.1.3] |
| (3) consciousness. | <i>viññāṇa</i> | [below]   |

—it is then discarded, cast aside, lying like a lifeless log.”<sup>104</sup> (M 43,24/1:296), SD 30.2<sup>105</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Cf D 2:106; S 2:266; A 4:311; U 64.

<sup>101</sup> MA 2:351; see also D 2:335,15; M 1:295,24≠ S 2:97,10 = 4:215,23 = 5:212,22; S 2:83,9, 3:143,4\*, 4:294,21.

<sup>102</sup> M 43,22/1:295 (SD 30.2).

<sup>103</sup> Here a dead body is meant. The lack of consciousness in a body is necessary, but not sufficient, to constitute death; vitality (*āyu*) and vital heat (*usmā*) must also disintegrate, all at once. Quoted at MA 2:351; cf S 3:143; Dh 41; Tha 468.

<sup>104</sup> Cf “In no long time, this body, alas, | will lie on the earth, | cast away, bereft of consciousness, | like a useless log (*aciraṃ vat’ayam kāyo | paṭhavim adhisessati | chuddho apeta,viññāṇo | nirattham va kalingaram*, Dh 41)..

<sup>105</sup> For more details, see SD 48.2 (2.3), incl the differences btw death and the attainment of cessation.

A similar teaching is briefly mentioned in **the Phena,piṇḍa Sutta** (S 22.95), where the Buddha declares:

When vitality, heat and consciousness then, it lies there cast away,	leave this physical body, without volition, food for others. <sup>106</sup>
(S 22.95,15(4)), SD 17.12	

Paraphrased, death occurs when, firstly, the familiar characteristics of life (the breath, heart-beat or pulse, and brain activity) stop. Secondly, the body loses its heat or energy. Here, we may have some way of detecting or measuring body-heat, but it is not as easy to detect the person’s energy. Thirdly, consciousness leaves the body. The Sutta Commentary glosses consciousness here as “the mind” (*citta*). For our purposes, we can call this the “existential consciousness.”<sup>107</sup> [9.2.1.3]

**6.1.2.2** We may know the definition of death, but we may still not understand *what it really is*. It is not always easy to understand death, much less to talk about it in some coherent or useful way, even when we know the right words. We feel that we are talking about something we have not experienced or have forgotten about (if we believe in rebirth).

When we know so little, or anything palpable, about death, understandably we often tend to resort to myths and superstitions. A myth is not necessarily false, but is an aspect of non-physical reality that is given some palpable and familiar form, reflecting something deeper and more real than what it appears to be or what we think it is.<sup>108</sup>

Take, for example, the various realms—**the divine, the human, and the subhuman**—need not be taken as actual places we are born into, but are rather states of mind that we *become* when we think or act in those ways. If we habitually cultivate the divine abodes (lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity), we are, in those mental moments at least, enjoying the bliss of divine beings. Our body may be human, but our mind is divine.

**6.1.2.3** On the other hand, if we are habitually exploitative and calculating (like asuras), or ignorant and fearful (like animals), or materialistic and addictive (like pretas), or violent and destructive (like the hell-beings), then we are virtually such beings. We may have a human body, but our minds are those of an asura, or an animal, or a preta, or a hell-being. These are all characteristics of the crowd, as they all tend to be very crowded realms, so that the beings there need to conform to their kind just to survive, that is, perpetuating their subhuman states.

**6.1.2.4** Being human, too, is a state of being—what we really *are*—not merely the kind of body we *have*. We may be born human—that is, biologically endowed with a human body—but our minds must evolve with proper humanization (especially love, warmth, learning, and space to grow and let grow) [5.2.3.2]. The human mind needs to be cultivated both in learning to think clearly and to feel beauty.

Essentially, here, **thinking** means using concepts and making sense of our physical experiences. **Feeling**, on the other hand, refers to attending directly to an experience, accepting it for what it really is, and learning from it. In simple terms, to think is to create concepts and use ideas; to feel is to learn and to enjoy the experience with understanding.

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<sup>106</sup> *Āyu usmā ca viññāṇaṃ | yadā kāyaṃ jahantimāṃ | apaviddho tadā seti | parabhattaṃ acetanaṃ*. This is a hapax legomenon (found nowhere else), but cf Sāriputta: *āyu usmā ca viññāṇaṃ, athāyaṃ kāyo ujjhito avakkhito seti yathā kaṭṭhaṃ acetanaṃ* (When this body discards vitality, heat and consciousness, it then lies like a log without volition) in **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43,24/1:296,9-11), whose comy qu the S 3:143 stanza (MA 2:351; also at PmA 1:153). Cf “In no long time, this body, alas, | will lie on the earth, | cast away, bereft of consciousness, | like a useless log (*aciraṃ vat’-ayaṃ kāyo | paṭhaviṃ adhisessati | chuddho apeta,viññāṇo | niratthaṃ va kalingaraṃ*, Dh 41).

<sup>107</sup> MA 2:351,7. For further details, see SD 48.2 (3.1) Criteria for death. On existential consciousness, see **Viññāṇa**, SD 17.8a (6.1.0).

<sup>108</sup> On death as myth, see **Māra**, SD 61.8. On myth in general, see **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 (1). On the body’s breaking up after death, see SD 48.2 (2.3.2).

**6.1.2.5** The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines **superstition** as the belief that particular events happen in a way that cannot be explained by reason or science, or that particular events or things bring good or bad luck. If reasoning is used here, then it is a misunderstanding or wrong view that “there is a reason for everything,” and that “reason” is a single external cause behind any act or event.

As each and everyone of us would have our own reason for such a thing that has happened, it is a “personal truth” or “private truth” (*pacceka,sacca*). Such views can, however, be compelling, especially when preached by the charismatic or enforced by the powerful. Then, it becomes more widely held, as “view-truths” (*ditṭhi,sacca*) or “view-based truths,” because they are based on our views.<sup>109</sup>

**6.1.2.6** Classic examples of such personal truths are those of the “cow asceticism” (*go,vata*) and the “dog asceticism” (*\*kukkura,vata*) mentioned in **the Kukkura,vatika Sutta** (M 57). These are the views underlying the practice of the young Koliya, Puṇṇa, a cow-vow ascetic (wearing horns and a tail),<sup>110</sup> and the naked ascetic [*acelaka*], Seṇiya, a dog-vow ascetic (behaving in a dog-like manner).<sup>111</sup> Another case of dog asceticism is that of the naked ascetic [*acela*] Kora-k,khattiya the dog-ascetic, recorded in **the Pāṭika Sutta** (D 24).<sup>112</sup>

In the Kukkura,vatika Sutta (M 57), the Buddha declares that if we were to declare that by such practices as the cow-vow, the dog-vow, or any other similar vows, no matter how pious, we would face any of two bad kinds of rebirth, thus:

Puṇṇa, there are two destinies for one with wrong view, I say: either hell or the animal kingdom!<sup>113</sup>

As such, Puṇṇa, if his dog vow is fulfilled [succeeds], it takes him to **the company of dogs**; if it is unfulfilled, it takes him to **hell!** (M 57,3+5), SD 23.11<sup>114</sup>

The word “unfulfilled” here means that he has piously declared that he would keep to such a vow, but in not doing so, or merely giving lip-service, he would be holding wrong views, or be preventing himself from straightening his views. It has been stated that if we ourself hold a habitual wrong view, we are likely to be reborn in an animal world [6.1.3.2].

**6.1.2.7** However, if we are to teach such a wrong view, and others, too, believe and practise them (so that they, too, face a bad rebirth in due course), then we would be reborn as hell-beings.<sup>115</sup> The reason for this is quite clear. To preach such wrong views and make others follow them means that we must make extraordinary efforts to present our views, refute the views of others, and generally make a great impression of ourselves before others. This is called the “power” approach, the way of the evangelists, the way of religious intolerance and emotional violence. Violence tends to breed violence. [6.1.3.1]

<sup>109</sup> On superstition, see SD 40a.8 (5.2); also **Superstition**, SD 79.1.

<sup>110</sup> M 57.4-6/1:388 f @ SD 23.11. Comy says that he wore horns on his head, tied a tail behind him, and went about eating grass with the cows (MA 3:100)

<sup>111</sup> Comy says that he exhibited all the actions typical of a dog, and the both of them were play-mates (*saha,pāmsa-kīḷikā sahayakā*) (MA 3:100).

<sup>112</sup> D 24,1.7-10/3:6-9 @ SD 63.3.

<sup>113</sup> Qu at Kvu 14.8.3/505. Bodhi: “It should be noted that a wrong ascetic practice has less severe consequences when it is undertaken without wrong view than when it is accompanied by wrong view. Although few nowadays will take up the dog-duty practice, many other deviant lifestyles have become widespread, and to the extent that these are justified by a wrong view, their consequences become that much more harmful.” (M:ÑB 1260 n601). Cf **Tala,puṭa S** (S 42.2/4:307 @ SD 20.8), where it is applied to the wrong view that actors and performers are reborn amongst the “Laughing Devas.”

<sup>114</sup> Qu at Kvu 14.8.3/505.

<sup>115</sup> Cf (**Ānanda**) **Subha S** (D 10), which states that bad actions of body, speech and mind (wrong views), too, bring about rebirth in “a plane of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell” (D 10,2.33.2), SD 40.13.

**6.1.2.8 In the Tala,puṭa Sutta** (S 42.2), the stage manager Tala,puṭa asks the Buddha about the karmic fate of actors who entertain others. The Buddha replies that if we were to arouse greed, hate or delusion in others, we would be creating bad karma that bring us rebirth in a hell-state. “Now, manager, for an individual of wrong view, there is only one of two destinies: either hell or the animal realm, I say,” declares the Buddha.<sup>116</sup>

**6.1.2.9** Few today would go so far as to practise such bizarre observances as the dog-vow or cow-vow. But there are other more sophisticated versions of religious vows, such as those of saving or liberating the whole world or all beings. We just need to pause a moment and think, “What does this mean? Can we really save ‘all beings’?” “Is this really happening?” “What kind of people are saying this?”

“All” here would refer to not only beings of the present, but also of the past, and the future, and, besides referring to human beings, also to divine beings, and subhuman beings. Does this mean that we have the power to cancel or upgrade their karma, especially the subhuman beings? Of course, we could speak metaphorically, that the “all” [5.1.1] here refer to our senses, meaning that we are liberating or purifying our senses. But this is another matter altogether, albeit a safer one.

**6.1.2.10** Despite better education and information today, we still see deviant life-styles and practices in the world, even in the name of Buddhism. Some of these practices, such as belief in the redeeming powers of merely reciting a sutra name, or even the ritual purification of karma, are widespread. When such practices are justified by wrong views, those who hold such views will clearly face their negative and painful consequences here and now (at least in a psychological way) and in the hereafter (in a karmic way).<sup>117</sup>

### **6.1.3 How rebirth occurs**

**6.1.3.1** It is said that if the dog-vow ascetic or the cow-vow ascetic persists in his practice, he would be reborn in the animal realm, respectively, as a dog or as a cow, or even fall into the hells [6.1.2.2]. How does this happen? Here, let us first recall that we, as humans, are made up of body and mind [9.2.1]. We may have a human body, but our mind is less certain or stable. Much of our mind depends on how we think: as we think so we are (Dh 1 f).

**6.1.3.2** Take the case of the cow-vow ascetic. He imagines himself to be a cow, acts like a cow, and sounds like a cow. If he habitually does this, then his mind is effectively that of a cow’s, even though he has a human body. When he dies, his human body perishes, but his cow-dominated mind persists. As such, his surviving mind, as existential consciousness, or the life-continuum (*bhav’āṅga*), or intermediate being, would move on to be attracted to a bull and cow mating.

**6.1.3.3** Here, Vasubandhu (flourished 4<sup>th</sup> century), in his **Abhidharma,kośa,bhāṣya** years, has something very interesting to say about the sex of the intermediate being, that is, a rebirth hypothesis on its sex, an insight that predates Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) by over 1500 years. The Bhāṣya says this:

It possesses sight [vision], by virtue of its karma. Even though far away, he sees the place of his rebirth. There, he sees his father and mother mating [in union]. If he is male, lust of a man arises towards the mother; when it is female, the lust of a woman arises towards the father.<sup>118</sup>

(AbhkB 3.15ab)<sup>119</sup>

<sup>116</sup> **Tala,puṭa S** (S 42.2/4:307), SD 20.8.

<sup>117</sup> Cf **Tala,puṭa S** (S 42.2/4:307), SD 20.8, where it is applied to the wrong view that actors and performers are reborn amongst the “Laughing Devas.” Cf Bodhi’s view in M:ÑB 1260 n601. On the nature of views and the need to abandon them, see **The notion of diṭṭhi**, SD 40a.1.

<sup>118</sup> *Sa hi karmaprabhāvasambhūtena cakṣuṣā sudūrastho ’pi svamupapattideśam prekṣate | tatrāśya mātāpitrostām vipratipattim drṣṭvā pumsaḥ sataḥ pauṃsno rāga utpadyate mātari stryā satyā straino rāgāḥ udpadyate pitari.*

The impression we get here is that the intermediate being's sexuality (a mental disposition) is already determined at this point. The being simply reacts instinctively at the moment of conception.

## 6.2 WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A PERSON IS REBORN?

**6.2.1 The (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** (A 10.177)<sup>120</sup> is one of two loci classici, the key sources, for suttas on how a person is reborn. The (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta gives us some very interesting and vital insights into the nature of rebirth, while the other text, **the Tiro,kuḍḍa Sutta** (Khp 7)<sup>121</sup> [8.1] instructs us how to actually help the departed. In fact, both the Suttas deal with an ancient conception of pretas (*peta*) as simply “the departed,” without any technical connotation that it is a “realm,” or even class, of beings, the way they are viewed in later times and today.

**6.2.2 Dedication of merits.** The (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta [6.2.1] deals with the dedication of merit (erroneously called “transference”)<sup>122</sup> [6.6]. Jāṇussoṇi asks the Buddha about the efficacy of giving, that is, whether the departed would receive any offerings made to them. The Buddha answers by saying that only the “departed” (*peta*) can receive such offerings and, in fact, need the merits of such wholesome deeds.

In connection with the brahminical giving to their departed (*peta*), the Buddha tells Jāṇussoṇi, “For, brahmin, while he [the departed] remains there, it is a place where [it is possible that] the giving would accrue to him” (A 10.177,6.2). This is an irony which Jāṇussoṇi or we might not at once notice. What the Buddha is effectively saying is that the departed (in the brahminical sense) “remains there,” that is, as pretas. In the Tiro,kuḍḍa Sutta (Khp 7), the Buddha presents the missing vital ingredient, and how the pretas are liberated [8.1.7].

### 6.2.3 Animals that have good lives

**6.2.3.1** This (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta also discusses why some animals lead good lives. The explanation given bears significantly on the nature of good karma (such as being the animals' being generous in their previous lives), and also how bad karma also works on them. The message is that it is not enough just being generous, but we need to be morally virtuous, too. The Sutta theme, however, is that “the giver is not fruitless” (A 10.177,35.2), that is to say that, we will reap the karmic benefits of our generosity and such deeds, but the quality of life depends on our moral virtue.

**6.2.3.2** Essentially, the Sutta is saying that if we habitually do good deeds, such as being kind to others, doing social work, even teaching Dharma, and other good deeds, *but* do not keep the basic precept and a wholesome mind,<sup>123</sup> that is, do not live morally virtuous lives, whether as laymen or as monastics, our karmic fruits would be commensurately mixed.

**6.2.3.3** “**The giver is never fruitless,**” declares the Buddha (A 10.177.35). Hence, even if we were an immoral but generous person, a kind social worker or a great Buddhist teacher, we would enjoy the fruits of such giving by being well treated in the future life or lives. However, due to the lack of moral virtue and mental wholesomeness, we *become* how we have actually behaved in the present life. We would be reborn as animals—such as well loved pets and well treated animals—in the next life!

<sup>119</sup> For Pruden's tr of Poussin, see AbhkB:P 395.

<sup>120</sup> A 10.177/5:269-273 (SD 2.6a).

<sup>121</sup> Khp 7/6 = Pv 1.5/4 f (SD 2.7).

<sup>122</sup> On the misconception of “transference of merit,” see SD 2.6a (3) & SD 2.7 (4). On the levels of religious language, see **Neyy'attha Nī't'attha S** (A 2.3.4-5/1:60), SD 2.6b.

<sup>123</sup> **(Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 10.177) here specifically lists the 10 courses of actions (*kamma, patha*), ie, actions of body, speech and mind. If they are unwholesome (*akusala*), they will fruit in bad karma; if they are wholesome (*kusala*), good fruits will follow [7.4.3.3]: see A 10.177,2-6 @ SD 2.6a.



**6.2.3.4** However, if we habitually live a moral life, keep a wholesome mind, and also act with generosity and kindness, then we would be reborn into happy new lives. We would then enjoy the fruits of our generosity and *become* the person reflecting the good we had habitually been doing before, in being well regarded and well treated by others, too.<sup>124</sup>

## **6.2.4 Mixed karma**

**6.2.4.1** The same message is found in **the Puñña,kiriya,vatthu Sutta** (A 8.36), which discusses the 3 grounds of merit-making (*puñña,kiriya,vatthu*), that is, giving (*dāna*), moral virtue (*sīla*) and mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*). A person who rarely practises generosity, has little moral virtue, and *no* mental cultivation, says the Sutta, is reborn amongst humans, but into unfavourable circumstances (A 8.36,3). In a similar case, where the person does have *some* moral virtue, he is reborn as a human into *favourable* circumstances (A 8.36,4).

In the case of those of who show great generosity *and* great moral virtue, they are reborn in any of the sense-world heavens (A 8.36,5-10). The Sutta further notes that in each heaven, their celestial leader surpasses the other devas of their respective realms in 10 blessings.<sup>125</sup> All this is the result of practising the 3 grounds for merit.<sup>126</sup>

In short, for really good heavenly rebirth, we need to have great track record of generosity, moral virtue and mental cultivation. It is moral virtue that is the decisive factor in the quality of life that we create for ourselves in due course. In other words, it is not enough just being good (such as being generous or doing social work), but we need to be morally virtuous, too (have a wholesome motive behind our actions).

**6.2.4.2** Karma can be viewed as being so capricious as to allow even good people to be reborn in bad states, or so it seems. If a habitually good person were, in his last moments, to harbour negative thoughts, they could work on him to bring on an unhappy rebirth. In such a moment, like breeds like, one thought explodes into many more similar ones: as we think so we are. So thinkers beware!

In **the (Kamma) Mallikā Sutta** (A 4.197), queen Mallikā asks the Buddha what causes a woman to look ugly or beautiful, and to be poor or wealthy, and to have little influence or great influence. The Buddha explains that a woman who is habitually angry would turn out to be ugly; one who does not give, would turn out to be poor; one who is often jealous would turn out to be one of little influence. The opposite of these would bring their respective good qualities. Mallikā then confesses she must have been previously habitually angry, generous and unjealous, and that she aspires to practise the wholesome qualities of non-anger, of generosity, and of non-jealousy.<sup>127</sup>

## **6.3 MANIPULATING KARMA**

### **6.3.1 The last thought-moment**

**6.3.1.1** The key deciding factor for our immediate rebirth is our last thought-moment, but we have no control over it, as it acts as a kind of karmic momentum, dependent on our dominant habits. As long as we keep up our mindfulness, especially when this has been a long-term practice, we are likely to be able to sustain a wholesome mind right to the last moment. [7.4.3]

**6.3.1.2 The Dhammapada Commentary** tells a tragic story about queen Mallikā, a good woman, with only a rare lapse of immoral conduct. It is said that once she committed an immoral act with a dog in the

<sup>124</sup> A 10.177,10-35 @ SD 2.6a.

<sup>125</sup> I.e., in divine lifespan, divine beauty, divine happiness, divine fame, divine lordship, divine form, divine sound, divine fragrance, divine taste, and divine touch.

<sup>126</sup> A 8.36/4:241-243 (SD 22.17).

<sup>127</sup> A 4.197/2:202-205 (SD 39.10).

bath-house. However, the memory of that misconduct constantly filled her with remorse to her very last breath. Despite her being a habitually virtuous woman, that final karmic momentum pushed her into Avīci hell, where she suffered for 7 earth days.<sup>128</sup>

After her funeral rites, whenever the king wanted to ask the Buddha about Mallikā's rebirth, the Buddha simply made the king forget about the question. Otherwise, he would be shocked by Mallikā's sad state, and lose hope in his own goodness. On the eighth day, when the queen's bad karma had been exhausted, so that she was reborn in Tusita heaven, the Buddha then broke the happy news to the king.<sup>129</sup>

**The (Mallikā Kāla,katā) Kosala Sutta** (A 5.48) records the Buddha's Dharma lesson to the bereaved king. We are not told on which day this teaching was given to the king. However, from the context—the king was speechless with sorrow—we may say that it could have been on the very day of Mallikā's death.<sup>130</sup>

**6.3.1.3** How do we prevent such a predicament as that of queen Mallikā, so as to prevent the working of negative karma bringing on a bad rebirth? The rule of thumb is to ensure that the dying person passes away peacefully, free of greed, hate, and delusion. The dying should be comforted by being gently reminded not to worry about his worldly affairs.

We should carefully listen to the dying person's last instructions and desire for closure, and ensure him that they will be properly done. Above all, his mind should be free from any delusive thoughts, and to calm and clear his mind and heart.

**6.3.1.4** In Asia, the relatives of the ill or dying should ensure that evangelists do not hijack him with bedside preachings and conversions, as he may be too weak to turn away such self-righteous intruders. Furthermore, conversion to God-religions is especially unhelpful because the dying would be unwittingly subscribing to an eternalist view [8.1.5.1]. Even though the convert may appear calm, it is merely false euphoria (mostly due to past conditioning of a dominant evangelical presence).

Such a deluded mind is likely to assume birth amongst the animals, or if the dying is unhappy over the situation, he could be reborn in a worse suffering state [6.2.4.2]. One of our tasks in keeping vigil over the dying is keep the vultures of death away.

**6.3.1.5** Assuming that, on account of the dying person's last thought-moments being wholesome, so that he is reborn in a heavenly world—this would only be a respite for as long as his supporting good karma lasts. Even for the highest gods, once their supportive karma is exhausted, they are straightaway reborn in a sub-human plane, even in hell, in this cosmic “snakes and ladders” game.<sup>131</sup>

There is only one way to stay out of the subhuman planes, that is, to attain sainthood, at least streamwinning. As **streamwinners**, we are “no longer bound for the lower world.” Even as a faith-follower or a truth-follower, who practises the perception of impermanence, aspiring for streamwinning in this life itself, we are

<sup>128</sup> This appears to be the shortest time recorded in the suttas of anyone spending time in any of the hells. The suttas do not give details of the life-spans in hell, except perhaps mentioning Devadatta spend a “world-cycle” in hell (A 6.62/3:402,21), and so, too, for a schismatic (It 1.2.8/11,10\*). Both **Iti,vuttaka Comy** and **Abhidharma.kośa** say that a lifespan in Avīci is an “intermediate aeon” (P *antara,kappa*; Skt *antaḥkalpa*; ItA 70; Abhk 3.83b). This is prob 1/80<sup>th</sup> of the “great aeon” (*mahā kappa*), or complete world-cycle (Kvu 13.1/476 f; BHSD; ItA:M 1:174 n2). Abhk adds that the life-span in 6 of the hells (Saṃjīva, Kālasūtra, Saṃghāta, Raurava, Mahā Raurava and Tapana) are the same as those in the sense-world heavens (such as that of the 4 great kings, etc). Could we, instead, imagine that, in the case of Mallikā, a day in Avīci amounts to a whole human life-span (*kappa*), ie, about 100 earth years, so that she spent 700 hell years in Avīci, which is equivalent to 7 earth days.

<sup>129</sup> **Mallikā Devī Vatthu** (DhA 11.6/3:119-123). The way the Buddha tells king Pasenadi of Mallikā's rebirth is an example of right speech, ie, the Buddha does not speak of what is true, useless and unpleasant, but speaks of what is **true, useful and pleasant**, at the right time: see **Abhaya Rāja,kumāra S** (M 58,8/1:395), SD 7.12

<sup>130</sup> A 5.49 (SD 42.14).

<sup>131</sup> See **(Nānā,karaṇa) Puggala S 1** (A 4.123/2:126-128), SD 23.8a. On **self-identity** (*sakkāya*), see **(Catukka) Sīha S** (A 4.33) @ SD 42.15 (2).

“incapable of doing any intentional deed by which [we] might be reborn in hell, or in the animal birth, or in the ghost realm.”<sup>132</sup>

**6.3.2 Going for refuge.** As our human conduct is usually complex and mixed, our karmic fruits would similarly reflect our past and present habits. However, an important idea in early Buddhism regarding karma and rebirth is that our last thought-moment is the key factor behind the kind of rebirth or spiritual state we will attain. [7.4.3]

A famous example is that of the erstwhile drunkard, **Sārakāṇi**, whom the Buddha declares to have become a streamwinner when he died. Despite his earlier transgression, Sārakāṇi has gone for refuge in the 3 jewels, and has “kept to the training at the time of his death.” His case is recorded in **the Sārakāṇi Sutta 1** (S 55.24).<sup>133</sup>

### **6.3.3 Choosing our sex through rebirth**

**6.3.3.1** Amongst ethnic Buddhists and patriarchal communities, being born or reborn as **a woman** is often viewed as the result of bad karma, or at least bad luck. Occasionally, certain rare statements in the suttas might be misinterpreted as disparaging women.<sup>134</sup> However, such statements should be understood from the context where men have actually misjudged women, even been victimized by women. In other words, they reflect the men’s weakness for treating women as sexual or servile objects. Otherwise, such statements sound simply out of character with the predominantly positive early Buddhist conception of women as spiritual equals of men in terms of awakening.

In important ways, our desires mould us, just as our hand tends to take the shape of what it grasps. If we are overwhelmed by the idea of being a man, then we are virtually a man; if we habitually harbour the notion of being a woman, then we are virtually a woman. In either case, we would be reborn as whatever sexuality we are attracted to or preoccupied with.<sup>135</sup>

**6.3.3.2 The Ubbarī Peta Vatthu** (Pv 2.13 = Pv 25) is the story of a woman who chooses to be reborn in the brahma-world. It is said that she was a queen of the rajah Brahma, datta for 86,000 lives.<sup>136</sup> She is also told that

You were a woman, a man, too, The limit of the distant past	and born in an animal’s womb, too. is thus not to be seen. <sup>137</sup> (Pv 2.13.12 = Pv 378)
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Realizing that she has gone through so many births, she wearies and decides to change her fortune. She renounces the world, and the closing verse of her story says:

Having cultivated a heart of lovingkindness having abandoned a woman’s mind,	for the sake of rebirth in the brahma-world, she was reborn in the brahma-world. (Pv 2.13.19 = Pv 385)
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It should be noted here that her abandoning “a woman’s mind” simply means that she has transcended her sexuality.<sup>138</sup> The brahma-world is populated by beings of a dhyanic nature; in other words, they are *without form* and as such are *sexless* (Vbh 418).

<sup>132</sup> (Anicca) Cakkhu S (S 25.1,4+5), SD 16.7.

<sup>133</sup> S 55.24/5:375-377 @ SD 3.6.

<sup>134</sup> See esp A 1.1.1-5 (a man’s obsession with women; cf A 1.1.6-10, a woman’s obsession with men); A 5.230 (women compared to a black snake).

<sup>135</sup> On the nature of sexuality, see **Saññoga S** (A 7.48), SD 8.7. On Piṇḍola’s advice to Udena on how to deal with sexuality, see **Piṇḍola Bhāra, dvāja S** (S 35.127), SD 27.6a(2.4).

<sup>136</sup> See Harvey 1995: 68.

<sup>137</sup> This alludes to S 2:178 = S 3:149 = 151, also 5:226.

### **6.3.4 Aspiring to awaken in this life**

**6.3.4.1** The most practical teaching the Buddha has given us regarding karma and rebirth is how to attain streamwinning in this life itself. This is, indeed, the goal that we—especially as lay practitioners or monastics who have difficulties with attaining dhyana—should aspire to, that is, streamwinning. The method for effecting our aspiration is **the perception of impermanence** (*anicca,saññā*), as laid out in the 10 suttas of the Okkanta Saṃyutta (S 25).

**6.3.4.2** The very first discourse in that Saṃyutta is **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), where the Buddha is recorded as declaring that if we are to habitually practise the perception of impermanence, whether we are strong in our wisdom-faculty or in our faith-faculty (that is, whether we are wisdom-inclined or faith-inclined),<sup>139</sup> we would surely attain streamwinning in this life itself.

Of such a person, the Buddha declares, “He is incapable of doing any intentional deed by which he might be reborn in hell, or in the animal birth, or in the ghost realm. He is incapable of dying without having attained the fruit of streamwinning.”<sup>140</sup> Our key practice, then, should at least be the perception of impermanence. This means that we will never fall into the subhuman planes (the asuras, pretas, animals, and hell-beings), but attain wholesome rebirths in the human world, or in the heavens, and within 7 lives at the most, we will attain arhathood.<sup>141</sup>

## **6.4 EVOLUTION OF THE PRETAS**

**6.4.1 Etymology.** In the oldest suttas and strata of early Buddhist teachings, there is no mention of any ghoulish pretas, much less the “hungry ghosts” we often hear of in ethnic Buddhism today. In the two key suttas on death and the departed—the **(Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** (A 10.177)<sup>142</sup> and **the Tiro,kuḍḍa Sutta** (Khp 7)<sup>143</sup>—they are depicted merely as the departed (*peta*). It is this term that we have anglicized as “preta” (following its Sanskrit form, *preta*).

It is also interesting to note that while the (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta is quite an ancient text, the Tiro,kuḍḍa Sutta is actually a relatively late canonical text. However, in both these Suttas, the word *peta* simply means “the departed,” which is derived from *pa* (Skt *pra*), “before, ahead” + √I, “to go” + *ta*, ie, *ita*, past participle, “gone,” of *eti*, “to go.” *Peta*, then, literally means “one who has (or is) gone ahead,” that is, “the departed.” The “realm of the departed” is called *petti,visaya*. [6.4.2]

In the (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta, when the brahmin Jāṇussoṇi questions the Buddha about the pretas (the departed), the former is asking the Buddha on his views regarding the brahminical conception of *peta* (a belief found also in Hinduism, Sikhism and Jainism). In the early texts, even in the late canonical *Peta,vatthu*, the pretas assumed a variety of forms, and do not have their own realm like the other beings (except perhaps the animal kingdom). Even the realm or “range” of the pretas (*petti,visaya*)<sup>144</sup> is merely a generic term, without any specific location.

<sup>138</sup> That she decides to rise above her sexuality (being a woman) is not that it is bad karma to be one, but that the Brahma-world is populated by dhyanic beings, constantly enjoying the bliss of dhyana, and are formless, so that they are sexless. See **Saññoga S** (A 7.48), where it is stated that a person should rise above being merely a sexual being in order to spiritually progress (A 7.48,2-3/4:57), SD 8.7, [6.3.3.2].

<sup>139</sup> Wisdom and faith are two of the 5 spiritual faculties, which are faith, energy, mindfulness, samadhi and wisdom: see SD 3.6 (3).

<sup>140</sup> S 25.1 (SD 16.7).

<sup>141</sup> On attaining awakening within 7 lives, see **Niṭṭha S** (A 10.63), SD 3.3 (1.2).

<sup>142</sup> A 10.177/5:269-273 (SD 2.6a).

<sup>143</sup> Khp 7/6 = Pv 1.5/4 f (SD 2.7).

<sup>144</sup> Eg **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,3.2(4c)), **Das’uttara S** (D 34,2.2(7c)); **Mahā Sīha,nāda S** (M 12,35+36+39×4), **Deva,dūta S** (M 130,2); **Okkanta Saṃy** (S 25.1-10×20), **Mitt’āmacca S 2** (S 55.17×2), **Sarakāni S 1** (S 55.24×2), **Sarakāni S 2** (S 55.25×2); **Nivesaka S** (A 3.75/1:222 + 223), **Akkhaṇa S** (A 9.29/4:226), **(Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 10.177/5:270; **Aggi S** (It 93); **Sāriputta Thera Mātu Vathu** (Pv 117/18).

**6.4.2** Texts such as **the (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** (A 10.177) suggests that the Buddha is familiar with the brahminical doctrines and practices, such as the “ancestral offerings” (Skt *śrāddha*; P *saddha*). In fact, in Brahmanism, the *preta,loka* is a place where the deceased reside for a year while waiting for the *śrāddha* (supplementary funeral rites) to be completed. From here, the deceased will move on to their next rebirths.

The Sanskrit term *pitṛ,loka* (P *petti,visaya*) means the world (*loka*) of the fathers or ancestors (Skt *pitṛ*), and is a restful place in Brahmanism where the souls of the good temporarily dwell. Sometimes it is identified with one of the heavens, such as Yama,loka. They dwell there as long as proper offerings are made by living relatives, especially the son. However, once their accumulated merit has been exhausted, they must return to earthly rebirth to continue their goal of ultimate liberation from rebirth and redeath.<sup>145</sup>

In the (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta, the Buddha gives the brahmin Jāṇussoṇi a Buddhist interpretation of the ancestral offerings. This also shows that such teaching and practices could have been an accommodation or “buddhicization”<sup>146</sup> of popular practices. The Buddha, however, insists on a new element, missing from the brahminical or popular versions, that is, the cultivation of lovingkindness in such practices. [3.4.3]

**6.4.3 Who become pretas?** In the early stories, pretas are said to have been previously greedy, deceitful, corrupted, compulsive, jealous, or false people. As a result of such karma, they become beings afflicted with an insatiable hunger for a particular substance or object, such as dirt, faeces and corpses. In later times, they are depicted, especially in Buddhist art, in every bizarre manner imaginable. The vital point to note here is that these pretas are not being “punished” for their misdeeds, but that, when their human bodies cease to function, they are merely left, as it were, with their unwholesome habits and character. They have *become* their own karma, which is that of a preta. [1.1.2.2]

**The Peta,vatthu** and similar later works, such as the *Avadāna,śataka* [6.4.4] base their stories on the basic karmic mechanism of early Buddhism. However, they evoke a tacit message that monastics should be supported, never abused, and generally respected, on the pain of being reborn as pretas. Understandably, such stories must have arisen at a time when monasteries were large and well established in urban areas or patronized by affluent urbanites.

Such wealth and influence would surely attract criticisms, for various reasons, from both non-Buddhists, as well as Buddhists. This is probably also the time when individuals or groups, for sectarian or other worldly reasons, would try to undermine such well-established monasteries with new mythologies and theologies, and come up with such polemical works as the Lotus Sutra.<sup>147</sup>

**6.4.4 Pretas as “hungry ghosts.”** By the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium, the preta mythology evolved into at least 4 types—the vomit-feeder, those tormented by hunger and thirst, those burning with craving, and those dependent on the offerings of others—as listed in **the Milinda,pañha** [1.1.2.5]. Such ideas were probably introduced in Sri Lankan Buddhism, and from which we first have the inklings of “hungry ghosts,” a notion that became popular in Chinese and East Asian Buddhism.

The current popular notion of pretas as “hungry ghosts” and how they look probably comes from **the Avadāna,śataka** (“A hundred stories,” late 5<sup>th</sup>-early 6<sup>th</sup> century),<sup>148</sup> attributed to the Mūla,sarvāsti,vāda in northwest India, probably Bamiyan, in Afghanistan. In their preta stories (found in ch 5), they are depicted with faces like a mountain-peak, bellies like a mountain, and a mouth like the eye of a needle. They are naked, covered only with hair, so that they each look like a flame. They make mournful sounds, and so elicit pity from humans.<sup>149</sup>

<sup>145</sup> On a comparative study of brahminical and Buddhist conceptions of death and the departed, see Holt 1981.

<sup>146</sup> Meaning, “making Buddhist of.”

<sup>147</sup> The Lotus Sutra (*Saddharma,puṇḍarīka Sūtra*), compiled btw 100-200 CE, is a polemical sectarian work that attempts to discredit early Buddhism and introduce a new “one vehicle” (*eka,yāna*) theology, that of the Lotus Sutra, where arhats still need to become Buddhas (chs 2 + 4), and the Buddha is seen as a sort of eternal God-like being (ch 11, 15-28).

<sup>148</sup> See The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, 2014, sv.

<sup>149</sup> See eg KhpA 207. King Bimbi,sāra only hears frightful noises in the night, but sees no shapes (PvA 22).



The Chinese Mahāyāna, basing their beliefs in such texts, characteristically depicts pretas as suffering from an extreme degree of hunger and thirst. Hence, they called them “hungry ghosts,” *èguǐ* (餓鬼), which is not a direct translation of the Sanskrit term. In popular Chinese lore, the hungry ghosts are sometimes conflated with the hell-beings, or regarded as being located in a particular realm of their own.

## 6.5 MERIT CANNOT BE TRANSFERRED

**6.5.1 Dedicating merit.** We have already noted that, in the suttas and early texts, the word “transfer” is never used as an action word for “merits” (*puñña*). Instead, it is the absolutive *ādisa* or *ādissa*, or some form of *ādisati* [6.2.2]. Even thus far, our discussion shows that merit (*puñña*) is neither negotiable nor transferable. Here we will briefly survey how the notion of merit came to be seen as a transferable, even negotiable, “currency,” and also examine the early Buddhist teachings on the topic.

To summarize the key points: We have already discussed that to make an effective dedication of merit, that is, bringing some kind of spiritual benefit to the pretas (only pretas, then again only some, are the beneficiaries), at least 3 positive components must be present. (1) We must recollect that person (when he was a human). (2) We should recall some good that the person has done before. And (3) we must cultivate a heart of lovingkindness on that occasion. [6.6.2.6]

**6.5.2 The Sādhina Jātaka** (J 494) is a short Jātaka story relating how, in a past life, the Buddha himself eschewed Sakra’s (*sakka*) offer, on account of his divine power (*devānubhāvena*), to lengthen Sādhina’s life in heaven, so that he continues to enjoy divine life. Sādhina declines the offer, declaring that he prefers to work his own good. This story suggests that Sādhina rejects any kind of “merit transfer” (assuming that this were possible) from Sakra.<sup>150</sup>

Once upon a time, the Bodhisattva is once born as Sādhina, king of Mithilā. He builds six alms-halls and spends daily 600,000 pieces of money on alms. He lives a good life, and his subjects follow his example. The gods in the assembly of Tāvātimsa heaven praise him, and various devas wish to see him. So Sakra sends Mātālī, with his chariot, to fetch Sādhina to Tāvātimsa. When he arrives, Sakra gives him half his kingdom and his luxuries. For 700 human years (approximating 100 heavenly years), Sādhina enjoys heavenly life. (J 1:359)

His karma then nears exhaustion, and feeling dissatisfied, he wishes to return to his royal park on earth. Sakra offers to extend his life (a sort of merit transfer) by his powers, but Sādhina refuses. He declares that he wishes to perform his own good deeds. Then, he bodily returns to his kingdom on earth.

Upon arriving in the park, its keeper, recognizing the king informs the reigning king, Nārada, the seventh in direct descent from Sādhina. Nārada arrives, pays homage to Sādhina, and offers to return the kingdom to him. Sādhina refuses it, saying that all he wishes is to distribute alms for seven days. Nārada arranges for a great alms-distribution. For seven days Sādhina gives alms, and on the seventh day he dies and is born in Tāvātimsa.

The story is told to lay followers to show them the importance of keeping the precept-day. Ānanda is identified with Nārada and Anuruddha with Sakra. Sādhina is one of the four humans who went bodily to Tāvātimsa.<sup>151</sup> (J 494/4:355-360)

## 6.6 HOW MERIT IS MISCONCEIVED AS BEING TRANSFERABLE

**6.6.1 Mistranslation.** The suttas unequivocally reject the idea that **merit**, being a mental quality (like love or hate) can ever be “transferred”<sup>152</sup> [6.5]. However, even today, we often hear the term “merit transfer,” “transference of merit,” or its variations being used especially amongst ethnic Buddhists and those who are

<sup>150</sup> See James P McDermott 1974. For a conflicting interpretation, see Heinz Bechert, 1976:42 f.

<sup>151</sup> Miln 115, 271; MA 3:318 (spelt *sādhina*). The 4 who bodily went to Tāvātimsa were the musician Guttila (J 243), king Mandhātā (J 259), king Sādhina (J 494), and king Nimi (J 533).

<sup>152</sup> Pv:G 37 ad loc tr *ādisa* as “transferred.”

not familiar with sutta teachings. In order to correct such a wrong view and to prevent their painful repercussions [6.1.2.3], let us examine how such a superstition must have arisen in the first place.

One of the key factors favouring the superstition that merit can be transferred surely must have arisen from the wrong translation of the verb *ādissa*, which is the absolutive of *ādisati*, “(of merit) indicating, pointing out, having allotted, dedicated.”<sup>153</sup> The best translation of *ādis(s)a*, then, is “dedicated,” not “transferred.” The latter is problematic as “transferred” suggests that merits are negotiable and lacking personal accountability. [6.6]

### **6.6.2 Nandā Peta,vatthu** (Pv 2.4).

**6.6.2.1** Let us now apply this proper translation of *ādis(s)a* as “dedicated” to **the Nandā Peta,vatthu** (Pv 2,4), a key preta-story of such a practice. This is a story about the devout layman Nanda,sena and Nandā, his avaricious and irreligious shrew of a wife. When she dies, she is reborn as a preti (*preti*, a female preta), red-eyed and yellow-teethed, with a rough and ugly body, haunting outside the village.

**6.6.2.2** One day, she meets her erstwhile husband, Nanda,sena, and confesses her condition to him. The good layman, pitying his erstwhile wife, offers her his cloak (presumably, she is naked, too), and invites her home where he will feed her and she will meet their children. She explains to him that she is unable to receive whatever is given to her, except through what is properly offered to the virtuous monks, pleading:

- |     |  |  |          |
|-----|--|--|----------|
| (1) | <i>Hatthena hatthe te dinnam<br/>na mayham upakappati<br/>bhikkhū ca sīla,sampanne<br/>vīta,rāge bahu-s,sute</i> | What is given by your hand into mine<br>accrues not to me.<br>But only through the monks, morally virtuous,<br>free from lust, deeply learned. | (Pv 174) |
| (2) | <i>Tappehi anna,pānena<br/>mama dakkhiṇam ādisa<br/>tad āham sukhitā hessam<br/>sabba,kāma,samiddhinī’ti</i>     | With food and drink regale and<br><u>dedicate</u> the giving to me.<br>That shall make me happy,<br>fulfilling every desire.                   | (Pv 175) |

**6.6.2.3** The narrator goes on to tell us that Nanda,sena then offers the virtuous monks various and abundant gifts: hard food, soft food, drinks, cloth, beddings, parasols, incense and garlands (Pv 176). Then, he dedicates the merit of the giving to her. (Pv 177).

On account of that giving and dedication, she is transformed into a pure being, cleanly dressed in the finest cloth, and beautifully adorned (Pv 178-181). Nanda,sena is unable to recognise her (Pv 182), as she has turned into a god, a beautiful radiant being. So, she introduces herself again to her erstwhile husband (Pv 183), explaining that what he is seeing is the result of his pious offerings to the virtuous monks (Pv184). She then blesses him and his family, wishing that he, too, would enter heaven (Pv 185),

**6.6.2.4** EVALUATION. Nandā’s request that her husband makes an offering to some virtuous monks and dedicate the merit to her is clearly reminiscent of the brahminical *śrāddha* and *sapiṇḍīkarana* [1.1.1.3]. Furthermore, through Nanda,sena’s ritual action, his erstwhile wife’s status is transformed from being a female preta (*preti*) to that of a female deva (*devī*)—which closely parallels the transformation of the *preta* to *pitṛ* of the brahmins [1.1.1.3]. Furthermore, we see the devi Nandā actually blessing her erstwhile husband and family, “Live long, houselord, with all your relatives!” (*ciram jīva gahapati saha sabbehi nātibhi*, Pv 184b).

These are certainly new developments in Buddhist ideology, without any precedent in the suttas. They would well be a response to the growing influence of Brahminism and popular religions, and the demands of the more worldly Buddhists (which are, after all, the majority). Having said that, we must admit that the

<sup>153</sup> Eg Pv 99; PvA 70,2; UA 423,18.

Nandā Peta, vatthu, like the other peta stories, and also the stories of the Vimāna, vatthu, are all unequivocally based on the notion of karmic retribution. [8.1.3]

**6.6.2.5** The question now, especially with regards to the Nandā Peta, vatthu, is this: **How do we reconcile the strict determinism of karmic retribution with the voluntary merit dedication?** Nandā becomes a preti on account of her own unwholesome actions, but when Nanda, sena dedicates to her the merit of his generous offerings to the monks, it transform her into a divine being. What force or forces are at work here? Or, how does the dedication of merit help Nandā to transform herself?

It is not Nanda, sena’s dedication of merit alone that transforms Nandā. Through Nanda, sena’s offerings and his dedication of its merit to Nandā, she is able to “rejoice” (*modāmi*). She says: “Through the giving you’ve made, I fearlessly rejoice everywhere” (*Tava dinnam dānam modāmi akuto, bhayā*, Pv 184a). Then, Nandā, now a devi, blesses Nanda, sena and his family (Pv 184b).

We also notice that when Nanda, sena first meets his erstwhile wife, Nandā, as a preti, he at once, showing neither fear nor disgust, offers her his own cloak, and invites her home, as if she were human (Pv 173). In short, Nanda, sena is a compassionate man. This is confirmed further when he at once carries out his erstwhile wife’s request to make offerings to virtuous monks, and dedicate their merit to her. The offering, too, is made with compassion and joy—these aspects are more obvious in **the Tiro, kuḍḍa Sutta** (Khp 7) [8.1].

**6.6.2.6** Nanda, sena’s lovingkindness and compassion empowers the preti Nandā to be able to accept herself (lovingkindness), and with the inner joy (gladness), she is able to free herself from the preta-state. Even though she does not deserve the kindness (she becomes a preti on account of her own unwholesome conduct), she is shown compassion by Nanda, sena. After all, compassion is kindness shown to another even when he does not deserve it.

Compassion, as we know, as the second of the 4 divine abodes [5.2.3], the first of which is lovingkindness (*mettā*). Compassion is **lovingkindness** in action. Hence, even though it is not explicitly mentioned in the Nandā Peta, vatthu, it is implicitly and fully present, especially when Nanda, sena dedicates the merit of his offering to his erstwhile wife, the preti Nandā. This is clearly suggested by *modāmi*, a verb used by the preti Nandā (Pv 184a).

In fact, if lovingkindness is absent, the dedication would not work. It is then merely ritual lip-service. This is often the case in ethnic funeral rites, performed by professional priests and performers for a fee. The whole process is predominantly a noisy external show of filial piety, where the mental state or the mourners or bereaved seem to have no place. The impression we get is that the living relatives do not even realize they are simply consigning the dead to the preta realm or to hell. [3.2.1]

**6.6.2.7** A very vital lesson is to be learnt here, about self-effort (*atta, kāri*)<sup>154</sup> or self-welfare (*att’attha*), and other-effort (\**para, kāri*) or other-welfare (*par’attha*). The starred term is an innovation in contrast to the well known term “self-effort.”<sup>155</sup> The pair, self-welfare and other-welfare, is well known,<sup>156</sup> and usually there is a third, the welfare of both (*ubhay’attha*).<sup>157</sup> **The Attan Tapa Sutta** (A 4.198 = Pug 4.24) is a discourse on self-benefit (*atta, hita*) and other-benefit (*para, hita*).<sup>158</sup>

We often speak of early Buddhism as being a “self-effort” or “self-help” system. However, if we carefully consider the nature of meditation, for example, as conceived and taught in the early Buddhist texts, we will clearly notice the vitality of the twin aspects of self-good and other-good.

<sup>154</sup> See **Atta, kāri S** (A 6.38), SD 7.6.

<sup>155</sup> Eg Dh 80, 104 f, 145, 160, 165, 379, 380; cf 158, 159, 166.

<sup>156</sup> A 3:63; Dh 166; Nc 26.

<sup>157</sup> **Dasa, bala S 2** (S 12.22/2:29), SD 96.9; **Āvaraṇa S** (A 5.51/3:63 f), SD 32.3.

<sup>158</sup> A 4.198 @ SD 56.7 = Pug 4.24/56 f @ SD 4.24. Cf “on account of self” (*atta, hetu*), “on account of others” (*para, hetu*), and “on account of wealth” (*dhana, hetu*), Sn 122.

**6.6.2.8 Breath meditation** is well known amongst meditators as an excellent mental tool for self-centering (inner calm, clarity and healing).<sup>159</sup> **Lovingkindness**, on the other hand, is not only self-healing, but also other-healing, in that we are able to influence and help others in a wholesome way through evoking positive emotion. Such an emotion empowers others by way of self-acceptance and self-compassion that permits personal healing, growth, creativity and happiness. As we have noted, lovingkindness is the key emotion in the dedication of merit [6.6.2.6], and we will see this again, even with greater significance, when we examine the Tiro,kuḍḍa Sutta [8.1].

### **6.6.3 Pretas and gods**

**6.6.3.1 The Peta,vatthu**, along with its happier counterpart, **the Vimāna,vatthu**, both of which sometimes share common stories, belong to the latest strata of canonical Buddhist literature.<sup>160</sup> In pragmatic terms, we can see that one of the basic ideologies behind the Peta,vatthu stories—that our ritual action can uplift the departed from their preta state—is clearly a response to the brahminical ritual of *śrāddha* and *sapiṇḍī,kāraṇa* [1.1.1.3]. The departed can now be relieved of their suffering and uplifted spiritually in a Buddhist way, especially with the agency of merit dedication empowered with lovingkindness. Like the Vimāna,vatthu, the Peta,vatthu is a late work, too.<sup>161</sup>

**6.6.3.2 The Vimāna,vatthu** (“stories of heavenly mansions”), on the other hand, is an anthology of 83 stories related by devas to the arhat Moggallāna when he visits the heavens, and who, in turn, recounts them to the Buddha. Karma, in these stories, is thus seen as retributive rather than existential. It is seen as a mechanism of punishments and rewards—do bad, we fall into the preta state (or the asura, the animal, or the hell-being); do good, we find a place in the heavens.<sup>162</sup>

**6.6.3.3** In terms of form, content and style, both the Peta,vatthu and the Vimāna,vatthu are unsophisticated, and belong to popular genre of pious stories for the laity. In modern psychological terms, the stories in both books tend to be **behaviouristic**, where *good begets good, bad begets bad*,<sup>163</sup> the rewards being fully harvested in the afterlife. In fact, both works are very late entries into the canon, probably during the Second Council (in Vesālī, about 100 after the Buddha’s passing, around 250 BCE), that is, just before the canon was closed.<sup>164</sup>

**6.6.3.4** Of the 51 preta stories, a total of 35 admonish the giving of alms to monastics, but only 16 do not.<sup>165</sup> **Pv 3.3** exhorts us to “do an act that bears fruit here” (*karohi kammaṃ idha vedanīyaṃ*) (Pv 444a). **Pv 3.10** refers to stupa worship (*thūpa,pūja*, Pv 512a), attesting to its lateness. **Pv 4.13** is about a person helping another repair his cart-wheel axle, and after dying, is reborn as an earth-deva (Pv 800).

Both the Peta,vatthu and the Avadāna,śataka (ch 5) presents stories that legitimates monastics as being worthy recipients of gifts. Through such offerings dedicated to the pretas, they are alleviated from their preta

<sup>159</sup> On **breath meditation**, see **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118,5-7+15-22), SD 7.13 & **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62,24-30), SD 3.11.

<sup>160</sup> Winternitz 1933 2:98-100; Norman 1983:70-72; O von Hinüber 1996:50 f (§§100-102).

<sup>161</sup> Pv 498 + 505cd (**Kūṭa,vinicchayaka Pv**, Pv 3.9) parallel vv 28 + 32 of **Kiṃ Chanda J** (J 511/5: 9 f) **Kaṇha Pv** (Pv 2.6) have the same verses as **Ghaṭa J** (J 454/4:84-87). **Uruga Pv** (Pv 1.12) have the same verses as **Uruga J** (J 354/3:164-167) [8.3]. The verses of **Goṇa Pv** (Pv 1.8) closely resemble those of **Sujāta J** (J 352/3:156 f).

<sup>162</sup> Interestingly, such rebirths only occur in the sense-world heavens, no higher (ie, not in the form world or the formless world, which are attainable only through meditative attainments).

<sup>163</sup> On this simplistic, but inaccurate, conception of karma, see **Isayo Samuddaka S** (S 11.10/1:227 f), SD 39.2.

<sup>164</sup> The close parallel btw Skt *Kaṇṭhakasya Vimāna,vatthu* (Mvst 2:191-195) and *Kaṇṭhaka Vv* (7.7), indicates a date of origin prior to the split between the sects. Some of the Vv verses are borrowed from the Jātakas, eg **Guttila Vv** (Pv no 33) has two verses from **Guttila J** (J 243/2:252), whose prose comy (the story) quotes Guttila Vv. **Agāriya Vv** (Vv no 65) and **Agāriya Vv 2** (Vv no 66) include verses from **Vidhura Paṇḍita J** (J 545). See Norman 1983: 70 f.

<sup>165</sup> The 16 preta stories are: Pv 1.2, 3, 7, 8, 2.6, 12, 13, 3.4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 4.10, 11, 13, 16.

state, often to attain divine transformation. Such a slant in these preta stories have attracted the criticism that the story compilers, presumably monastics, have “a mercenary motive in compiling the tales” (H S Gehman, Pv:G xi). However, giving alms to monastics has been a common practice by the laity ever since there were Buddhist monastics. Giving alms with lovingkindness and dedicating the merits to the departed is simply a meaningful act for a meaningful occasion, where the laity would also have an opportunity to listen to the Dharma.

#### **6.6.4 The best field of merit**

**6.6.4.1** In the recollection of the sangha (*saṅghānussati*), the noble sangha—the holy community of saints<sup>166</sup>—are said to be “a supreme field of merit for the world” (*anuttaram puñña-k,khettaṃ lokassa*). We have noted that although the conventional sangha is not the *saṅgha* which is the third refuge, it may still be a “field of merit” if the individual monastics comprising is morally virtuous.

In fact, even making an offering to a single virtuous monastic is to cultivate enormous merit. In other words, a “field of merit” does not consists of “persons” merely in the sense of the 4 elements, but more so of their hearts (moral virtue and compassion) and minds (wisdom and liberation). This means that we can also be generous and kind to the laity, such as lay Dharma workers and the elderly.<sup>167</sup> The best field of merit then is the one that is immediately available to us.

**6.6.4.2** It means that we should be habitually generous and kind to others. Otherwise, the “merit-making” is likely to be merely a ritual (where the body and speech may be involved, but not the mind and heart), that is, it is done without understanding and lovingkindness.

To perform an act of merit (*puñña,kamma*), then, is an act of the body (our initiatives and presence), speech (wholesome speech) and mind (lovingkindness). Body, speech and mind are our three doors of karma. All our actions are done through one or other of the three avenues. Of course, the mind (that is, attention and intention) must always be there, too, to constitute a full and efficacious act.

**6.6.4.3** Traditionally and scripturally—such as in the recollection of the sangha—the noble sangha is said to be “the best field of merit” (*anuttara puñña-k,khetta*). The reason is that the noble sangha comprises saints who are always morally virtuous. They comprise of renunciants who are not gainfully employed in any economic way, and of laymen, who, like the monastics, are streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners, and arhats. Such laity, too, are morally virtuous, although as streamwinners and once-returners, they look and live like ordinary laymen, but are restrained and guided by the 5 precepts<sup>168</sup> and moral virtue.<sup>169</sup>

The noble sangha is *the* best field of merit because they are a constant and consistent source of moral virtue and goodness. The conventional sangha can be the best field of merit in the absence of the noble sangha, and when such monastics (comprising the conventional sangha) are morally virtuous, and especially when they are gathered harmoniously together. The strength of their fellowship easily inspires us to be moral and good, too, so that we work to transform ourselves by walking the path to awakening.

**6.6.4.4** Symbolically, the sangha as a community of wholesome renunciants, are the best field of merit because of their **renunciation** (*nekkhamma*). On a social level, this means that they have given up the bio-

<sup>166</sup> “Noble” (*ariya*) means the saints of the Buddha path, viz, the streamwinner, once-returner, non-returner, and the arhat. Their 6 qualities of bona fide members of the conventional community of monastics who practise the Dharma-Vinaya for the sake of awakening in this life. The conventional or monastic sangha, however, is not one of the 3 refuges (*ti,saraṇa*), the Buddha, Dharma, sangha. Here the “sangha” refers only to the unawakened conventional monastic community.

<sup>167</sup> Eg “For one who habitually shows respect, | constantly respectful, of elders, || four states increase: age, beauty, happiness and strength.” (Dh 109; see also SD 22.13 (1.1.1)).

<sup>168</sup> On the 5 precepts, see **Veḷu,dvāreyya S** (S 55.7), SD 1.5 (2); **Sīlānussati**, SD 15.11 (2.2); SD 21.6 (1.2); SD 37.8 (2.2).

<sup>169</sup> On moral virtue, see SD 1.5 (2).



logical family, that is, a narrow biological conception of the family, the one that brings us into samsara to populate our species, the biological crowd. The renunciants, through their training (in moral virtue, mental stillness and wisdom)<sup>170</sup> or through their attaining sainthood, form the spiritual family.

In other words, the sangha members are accessible to any of us who needs spiritual guidance or emotional succour. They help and heal us as experts and virtuosi in their own way, especially their understanding and experience of the Dharma, and, above all, by their own inner peace and outer radiance. Often, just the sight (*dassana*) of such sangha members is sufficient to inspire peace and joy in us.<sup>171</sup>

**6.6.4.5** When a sangha member *has* truly renounced the world and *is* one who has renounced worldliness, then he is “dead” to the world, so to speak. He may be *of* the world, but he is no more *with* the world. Now, we cannot give directly to the departed, the pretas, because they are of a different dimension. The sangha of renunciants are in our living presence, and on account of their moral virtue, they are worthy of our gifts and charity, not as fees for services performed, but out of our faith in the Dharma and in their goodness.

Ideally then the best field of merit is when the recipients are a morally virtuous sangha, the giver is also morally virtuous, and the gift is also wholesome (something allowable and obtained in a moral way). For the best benefit of the pretas, the giver and also the recipient would dedicate the merit to the pretas, that is, they are remembered with lovingkindness [8.1.7].

## 7 Bedside counselling

### **7.1 COUNSELLING THE SICK**

#### **7.1.1 Lifeguards and swimmers**

**7.1.1.1** Given the opportunity, it is better if we are able to help calm, clear and light up the minds of the sick or the dying, rather than dedicating merits to the departed. Dedicating merits to the departed, in a sense, is like being a life-guard to swimmers in difficult waters; bed-side counselling is like teaching the sick or the dying to help themselves. Isn't it better for us to be good swimmers than to fully rely on a single or even a number of life-savers?

“**Bedside counselling**” is a broad term for comforting and instructing the sick and dying. Often, it is difficult to distinguish between the two. Death can occur at any moment. Even if the patient recovers, our effort is a valuable lesson in itself, especially as a dry run so that he is better prepared when the real situation occurs. We are fortunate to have a number of instructive suttas on counselling the sick. The main ones will be mentioned or highlighted here.

**7.1.1.2** One of the admonitions of the Buddha that serves well as a universal mantra from the sick and dying is taught to the elderly Nakula, pitā, as recorded in **the Nakula, pitā Sutta** (S 22.1). When Nakula, pitā complains of his infirmity and asks for a suitable teaching, the Buddha teaches a succinct one-liner, “My body may be sick, but my mind will not be sick.”<sup>172</sup>

Nakula, pitā was so elated by the wisdom of the teaching that it does not occur to him to ask the Buddha what it entails! Sāriputta then comes along, explains to Nakula, pitā that the saying refers to “non-owning” or letting-go of the 5 aggregates, that is, form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.<sup>173</sup> The one-liner is well worth remembering and used appropriately to comfort and instruct the sick and dying. A simpler

<sup>170</sup> These are the 3 trainings, see *Sīla samādhi paññā*, SD 21.6 & SD 1.11 (5)..

<sup>171</sup> As in the case of **Assaji**, when the wanderer Sāriputta meets him for the first time: see SD 42.8 (1.2)..

<sup>172</sup> *Ātura, kāyassa me sato cittaṃ anāturaṃ bhavissati*. On the 2 kinds of pain, see **Sall’atthena S** (S 36.6,9-10), SD 5.5.

<sup>173</sup> S 22.1/3:1-5 (SD 5.4). On the 5 aggregates, see SD 17.

version of this instruction is that of “disowning the pain,” when it is applied to whatever pain, physical or mental, that arises.<sup>174</sup>

**7.1.2 Nakula.mātā and Nakula,pitā. The Nakula Sutta** (A 6.16) is about how a wise and compassionate wife counsels her husband who is “worried sick.” The wife, Nakula,mātā, notices that her husband, Nakula,pitā, is deeply anxious. She reassures him, in both worldly and spiritual terms, that there is no need of any anxiety on his part either for their children or for her. After each reassurance, she declares, “Therefore, houselord, do not have any longing at the time of dying. Painful is dying when you are with longing. The Blessed One disapproves of dying with longing.”

Essentially, she is comforting her husband, and reminding him that, if these were his last moments, he should not be burdened with worldly worries. She speaks with such wisdom and conviction that he regains peace of mind and recovers immediately. Later, when they meet the Buddha, he congratulates Nakula,pitā on having such a wise and virtuous wife.<sup>175</sup> In fact, Nakula,mātā and Nakula,pitā are declared by the Buddha to be the ideal married couple (A 1:26).<sup>176</sup> In the **Sama,jivi Sutta 1** (A 4.55), the Buddha instructs Nakula,mātā and Nakula,pitā on how they can be reborn to be happily together again in future lives [7.4.2].

**7.1.3 Mahānāma as counsellor. The (Mahānāma) Gilāyana Sutta** (S 55.54) records the Buddha instructing the layman saint Mahānāma<sup>177</sup> on how one “wise lay follower” (*sappañña upāsaka*) should guide another who is dying to be reborn into higher states. The Buddha instructs Mahānāma that he should first inspire the person’s faith in the 3 jewels. Then, he should progressively remind the dying to let go of thoughts about parents, about spouse and family, about worldly pleasures, about heavenly pleasures, and about the various heavens, reminding him that even the highest heaven is “impermanent, uncertain,<sup>178</sup> trapped in self-identity.”<sup>179</sup>

Finally, when the dying person’s mind is calm, he should remind him to direct his mind “to the cessation of self-identity,” that is, to let go of any kind of identifying with his body (form) or mind (feeling, perception, formations, or consciousness).<sup>180</sup> In other words, he is guiding the dying to the attaining of streamwinning, or even arhathood (depending on the person’s spiritual capacity), at the moment of dying.<sup>181</sup>

<sup>174</sup> On “disowning the pain,” see **Amba,laṭṭhika Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 61,17/1:419), SD 3.10.

<sup>175</sup> A 6.16 @ SD 5.2. Cf **Nakula,mātā S** (A 8.48), where the Buddha speaks of the 8 qualities that brings a woman rebirth amongst the devas (A 8.48/4:268 f), SD 5.3..

<sup>176</sup> They are individually recorded as being the foremost of those who have trust (*vissāsa*) amongst the female lay disciples (A 1.266) and the male lay-disciples respectively (A 1.257/1:26).

<sup>177</sup> See **Cūḷa Dukkha-k,khandha S** (M 14) where the layman Mahānāma, a once-returner, asks the Buddha why despite his spiritual attainment, he still has thoughts of lust, hate and delusion. The Buddha replies he has yet to progress at least a stage further to overcome the roots of sensual desires (M 14.2/1:91), SD 4.7.

<sup>178</sup> “Uncertain,” *adhuva*, more usu *addhuva*, “not fixed, not permanent, uncertain, doubtful” (CPD).

<sup>179</sup> “Trapped in self-identity,” *sakkāya pariyāpanno*, lit “included in self-identity”; alt tr “enmeshed in self-identity.” Childers (DPL): “included, contained, belonging to.” As in **Sīha S** (S 22.78) where the devas who regard themselves as permanent, stable and eternal are really “impermanent, unstable, not eternal, trapped in self-identity” (S 3:85). The Comy there explains the expression as “included within the five aggregates.” Thus when the Buddha teaches them the Dharma sealed with the three characteristics [impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, not-self], exposing the faults in the round of existence, the fear of knowledge enters them. (SA 2:288).

<sup>180</sup> On a simple level, the overcoming of *sakkāya,diṭṭhi* (“self-identity view”) leads to streamwinning: see **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3(5.1).

<sup>181</sup> “Cessation of self-identity,” *sakkāya,nirodha*, a syn of the 3rd noble truth = nirvana: D 3:216 (*antā*), 3:240; M 1:299; S 3:159, 5:410; A 2:33, 2:165, 3:246, 3:401; see also DA 3:992, AA 3:153; *sakkāya = te,bhūmaka,vaṭṭa* (“cycles of the 3 worlds,” ie sense, form, and formless worlds) (AA 3:404). This instruction is to direct the dying person’s mind away from rebirth in the Brahmā world towards the attainment of nirvana.

“Then, Mahānāma,” declares the Buddha, “there is no difference between a lay follower who is thus liberated in mind and a monk who has been liberated in mind for a hundred years, that is, there is no difference between the one liberation and the other.”<sup>182</sup>

### **7.1.4 Mahānāma’s death**

**7.1.4.1 The (Gati) Mahānāma Sutta 1** (S 55.21) and **the (Gati) Mahānāma Sutta 2** (S 55.22) deal with the same topic of terminal counselling. Both Suttas open identically with Mahānāma telling the Buddha that he (Mahānāma) finds difficulty keeping mindfulness, and thus worries about his spiritual destiny should he die unmindfully. Mahānāma is then reassured of his happy destiny.

**7.1.4.2 In the (Gati) Mahānāma Sutta 1** (S 55.21), the Buddha reassures Mahānāma by saying that since he has the fivefold noble growth (*ariya,vaḍḍha*)—that is, in faith, moral virtue, learning, charity and wisdom—he should have a good rebirth. What is interesting here is that only in this Sutta does the Buddha specifically tell Mahānāma that his mind “has for a long time been fully developed” on the fivefold noble growth.<sup>183</sup>

**7.1.4.3 In the (Gati) Mahānāma Sutta 2** (S 55.22), the Buddha simply states and defines the 4 limbs of a streamwinner (*sotāpannassa aṅgāni*),<sup>184</sup> that is, the qualities of a streamwinner of the path [7.1.4.3]. The Sutta simply closes with the Buddha saying that just as a tree that leans to the east, when cut, would fall to the east, “even so, Mahānāma, the four states bends towards nirvana, slopes towards nirvana, tends towards nirvana.”

## **7.2 DYING AS A SAINT**

### **7.2.1 Deathbed counselling**

**7.2.1.1** The most famous deathbed (*maraṇa,seyya*)<sup>185</sup> scene in religious history is arguably that of the Buddha’s passing away, fully related in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16).<sup>186</sup> The second most famous of the Buddhist deathbed scenes is that of Citta the houselord, as recorded in **the Gilāna,dassana Sutta** (S 41.-10)<sup>187</sup> [7.3.2]. And the passing away of Anātha,piṇḍika<sup>188</sup> is clearly the third most famous of such final scenes, recorded in **the Anāthapiṇḍik’ovāda Sutta** (M 143).

The first Sutta records the last instructions of the Teacher himself. The second records how a great lay Dharma teacher counsels the living from his own deathbed. And the third is about the death of the Buddha’s chief lay supporter and his final request.<sup>189</sup>

**7.2.1.2 The Anāthapiṇḍik’ovāda Sutta** (M 143) records the first case of a profound teaching, previously given only to renunciants, now given to the laity (that is, when they are spiritually mature and

<sup>182</sup> S 55.54/5:408-410 @ SD 4.10. “Between the one freedom and the other,” *vimuttiyā vimuttiṃ*, as at A 3:34 in ref to arhathood. Comy says that when one freedom is compared to the other, there is no difference to be found (SA 3:292). In effect, this is a statement that the dying layman has become an arhat. On laymen arhats, see SD 4.10 (3).

<sup>183</sup> S 55.21,6/5:369-371 @ SD 23.1a.

<sup>184</sup> On the 4 limbs of a streamwinner (*sotāpannassa aṅgāni*), see **Pañca Vera Bhaya S 1** (S 12.41,10-14), SD 3.3-(4.2).

<sup>185</sup> MA 5:78, apparently a hapax legomenon: this is the only place this word is found!

<sup>186</sup> D 16/2:72-167 @ SD 9. It is also the longest of all ancient Indian literary compositions: op cit (3), and is sometimes compared with Socrates’ death: op cit (13a).

<sup>187</sup> S 41.10/4:303 f @ SD 16.16. On Citta the houselord, see also **Pubba,kotṭhaka S** (S 48.44), SD 10.7 (5) & **Nigaṇṭha Nāta,putta S** (S 41.8.5/4:298), SD 40.4.

<sup>188</sup> On Anātha,piṇḍika’s background, see **Anātha,piṇḍika S 1** (S 55.26), SD 23.2a (2).

<sup>189</sup> For a list of deathbed scenes mentioned in the Canon, see **Gilāna,dassana S** (S 41.10), SD 16.16 (2).

ready). Sāriputta admonishes the dying Anātha,piṇḍika on letting go of the 18 elements (the 6 sense-faculties, and the respective sense-objects and sense-consciousnesses), of sense-contacts, of feelings, of the 4 elements, of the 5 aggregates, of the formless bases, and of the world (the here and the hereafter), and to what is seen, heard, sensed or cognized—that is, the totality of human experience in physical and mental terms—Anātha,piṇḍika is moved to joyful tears, that he has never before heard such a profound and beautiful Dharma talk. His last request is that such teachings be given to the laity, too.<sup>190</sup>

**7.2.2 Anātha,piṇḍika’s streamwinning.** The **Anāthapiṇḍika Sutta 2** (S 55.27) records how Ānanda (a streamwinner) counsels Anāthapiṇḍika who is seriously ill. Ānanda counsels him in having faith in the 3 jewels and keeping the moral virtue that is “dear to the noble ones.” These are actually the 4 limbs of a streamwinner. Anātha,piṇḍika declares that he is fully accomplished in all these 4 qualities, and Ānanda exults in this, declaring that Anātha,piṇḍika is, then, a streamwinner.<sup>191</sup> [7.2.2]

### **7.2.3 The layman Dīgh’āvu’s non-return**

**7.2.3.1 The Dīgh’āvu Sutta** (S 55.3) is a valuable record we have of the Buddha himself counselling the dying layman Dīgh’āvu. As in the case of the dying Anātha,piṇḍika, when Ānanda teaches him the 4 limbs of streamwinning, the Buddha, too, teaches them [7.2.2] to the dying layman Dīgh’āvu.

However, instead of leaving the matter there, the Buddha, building on that attainment of Dīgh’āvu’s, goes on to teach him “the 6 things conducive to true knowledge.”<sup>192</sup> These are 6 meditations, that is, (1) contemplating impermanence in all formations (*sabba,saṅkhāresu aniccānupassī*);<sup>193</sup> (2) perceiving suffering in what is impermanent (*anicce dukkha,saññī*); (3) perceiving not-self in what is suffering (*dukkhe anatta,saññī*); (4) perceiving abandonment [letting go of defilements] (*pahāna,saññī*); (5) perceiving fading away [dispassion] (*virāga,saññī*); (6) perceiving cessation (of suffering).<sup>194</sup> Dīgh’āvu declares that he has learnt these teachings before, and “lives committed to these dharmas.”<sup>195</sup> [7.2.3.3]

**7.2.3.2** Then something remarkable happens. Dīgh’āvu is worried about his father, who is still living. In other words, restlessness (*uddhacca*) has arisen in him. The Buddha at once reassures Dīgh’āvu, who says,

“But, bhante, it occurred to me thus:

‘After my passing, may this householder Jotika not suffer distress!’”

“Dear Dīgh’āvu, think not so. Come now, dear Dīgh’āvu, the Blessed One speaks to you: pay close attention to it.”  
(S 55.3,9), SD 23.16

Having put Dīgh’āvu’s mind to rest, the Buddha then continues teaching him the Dharma. Dīgh’āvu dies a non-returner.<sup>196</sup>

**7.2.3.3 The 6 things conducive to true knowledge** (*vijjā,bhāgiya,dhammā*) appears to be quite a big list of teachings to master. On the contrary, they form a smooth sequence of recollection and perceptions, done with a calm and clear mind. It begins with the main practice of perception of impermanence, suffering, and non-self,<sup>197</sup> and simply observing what follows. The practice, which we can train ourselves to do, goes as follows:

<sup>190</sup> M 143/3:258-263 @ SD 23.39.

<sup>191</sup> S 55.27/5:385-387 (SD 23.2b).

<sup>192</sup> On the “6 things conducive to true knowledge (*vijjā,bhāgiya dhamma*), see SD 23.16 (1).

<sup>193</sup> Only (1) here is listed as *–anupassī*, but while the rest as *–saññī*, but they are practically identical in practice. See

**Vijjā,bhāgiya Dhamma S** (A 6.35/3:334): (1.2).

<sup>194</sup> S 55.3/5:344-347 (SD 23.16).

<sup>195</sup> S 55.3,8.2 (SD 23.16).

<sup>196</sup> S 55.3/5:344-347 (SD 23.16).

<sup>197</sup> These are, of course, the 3 characteristics: see SD 19.13 (1)..

- (1) contemplate the **impermanence** of everything within and without; [6.3.4.2]
- (2) note how whatever is impermanent is **suffering** (unsatisfactory);
- (3) note how whatever is impermanent and suffering is **non-self**;
- (4) there is nothing we can hold on to now, we would naturally let them go;
- (5) then, we notice (since there's nothing to lust after), how lust fades away; and
- (6) without lust, there is no more suffering.

This is actually a simpler form of the “dependent on solitude” (*viveka, nissata*) formula, which brings about arhathood. This path needs being utterly free of all restlessness (*uddhacca*) and even the subtlest notion of self and self-related thoughts (such as rebirth in the form or formless realms).<sup>198</sup>

### **7.2.4 The monk Phagguna's non-return.**

**7.2.4.1 The (Gīlāna) Phagguna Sutta** (A 6.56) records how the monk Phagguna falls seriously ill, and Ānanda informs the Buddha about it, and advises the Buddha to see him. The Buddha visits him and teaches him the Dharma. Shortly after that Phagguna dies with a radiant complexion. When Ānanda asks the Buddha about this, he replies that Phagguna has died as a non-returner.

**7.3.4.2** Ānanda then asks the Buddha how Phagguna has died in such a wholesome way, attaining non-return. The Buddha then explains that there are these 6 “advantages of timely listening to the Dharma, of timely investigating its meaning” (*cha ānisamsā kālena dhamma, savaṇe, kālena atthūpaparikkhāya*), that is,

- (1) at the time of dying, he listens to the Buddha teaching him and dies **a non-returner**;
- (2) at the time of dying, he listens to the Buddha's disciple teaching him and dies **a non-returner**;
- (3) at the time of dying, he himself reflects on the Dharma and dies **a non-returner**;
- (4) at the time of dying, he listens to the Buddha teaching him and dies **an arhat**;
- (5) at the time of dying, he listens to the Buddha's disciple teaching him and dies **an arhat**;
- (6) at the time of dying, he himself reflects on the Dharma and dies **an arhat**.

In short, here Phagguna (probably a streamwinner)<sup>199</sup> dies, benefitting from the Buddha himself teaching him the Dharma, on account of which he attains non-return.<sup>200</sup>

## **7.3 SPECIAL DEATHS**

**7.3.1 Dhānañjāni's rebirth. The Dhānañjāni Sutta** (M 97) records how Sāriputta counselling the brahmin Dhānañjāni on two occasions. Dhānañjāni's pious wife has died, and his new wife is not religious at all. Sāriputta reminds Dhānañjāni to be mindful. The brahmin then confides in Sāriputta that he is worried over 10 worldly matters, that is, concerning:

- (1) parents to support;
- (2) wife and children to support;
- (3) slaves, labourers and servants to support;
- (4) services towards friends and companions to discharge;
- (5) duties to relatives and blood relations;
- (6) duties to my guests;

<sup>198</sup> On the “dependent on solitude” formula, see *Viveka, nissita*, SD 20.4.

<sup>199</sup> This surmise is based on the Buddha's remark that “Here, Ānanda, a monk's mind is not freed from the 5 lower fetters” [§3 etc], meaning that he is probably a streamwinner, or perhaps a once-returner, but not a non-returner (who has broken all the 5 lower fetters. *The 5 lower fetters* (*oram, bhāgiya samyojana*), (1) self-identity view (*sakkāya, ditthi*), (2) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rules and rites (*sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma, rāga*), (5) repulsion (*paṭigha*). On *the 10 fetters*, see SD 23.4 (2.3) n.

<sup>200</sup> A 6.56/3:379 (SD 23.4).



- (7) duties to my ancestors;
- (8) duties to the gods;
- (9) duties to the rajah; and
- (10) this body's needing satisfaction and care.

Sāriputta counsels him by assuring him that it is better that he should, on account of these 10 matters, live a Dharma-based life, than not to. Sāriputta then leaves.

Later on (we are not told of the duration), when Dhānañjāni is seriously ill, Sāriputta again counsels him, this time in a similar manner as the Buddha has done for Mahānāma, as recorded in **the (Mahānāma) Gilāyana Sutta** (S 55.54) [7.1.3]. Sāriputta successively questions the brahmin regarding the better world, in this sequence: hell, the animal kingdom, the pretas, the human, then the various heavenly levels of the gods, until the highest of the sense-world gods. Then, uncharacteristically, Sāriputta teaches Dhānañjāni how to be reborn in the brahma world.

Apparently, Dhānañjāni dies that same day, and when the Buddha learns that Sāriputta has left the brahmin “while there was still a higher task to be done,” he questions Sāriputta. The latter replies that since Dhānañjāni is a brahmin, he thought that it was appropriate, out of respect for him, to teach him how to be reborn in the brahma world.<sup>201</sup>

This remarkable event testifies to the openness of the early Buddhists, at least in the case of Sāriputta, showing a deep tolerance for the beliefs of others. While this story is a great tale to recount in an inter-faith dialogue, the fact remains that Sāriputta could have actually helped the brahmin to at least attain streamwinning, if he wanted to.

**7.3.2 Citta's death. The Gilāna Dassana Sutta** (S 41.10) is a remarkable record of Citta's self-counselling and teaching on his deathbed. In Buddhist spirituality and literature, Citta's dying scene is truly the most famous, after the Buddha's own parinirvana.<sup>202</sup> While in other cases, we see the dying being counselled, here we have the dying Citta admonishing his own living relatives.

As Citta lies on his deathbed, it is reported that various kinds of earth-bound deities hovered around him, pleading that he make a wish to be reborn as a world-monarch so that he could make great offerings to them in his future life. Citta instead admonishes them: “That is impermanent, that is unstable, too. One should abandon that, too, and move on!”

Citta's final teaching, from his deathbed, is remarkable in that he is actually admonishing his relatives and the latter-day lay audience like ourselves to have wise faith in the 3 jewels and practise charity, that is, sharing whatever we have that is “worthy of being given away” (*deyya, dhamma*) with the morally virtuous. Here, it should be understood that charity (*cāga*) includes moral virtue; for, we cannot truly practise charity without being morally virtuous. In other words, these are the 4 wonderful qualities that are the foundations leading to the path of streamwinning.<sup>203</sup>

## 7.4 CHOOSING OUR REBIRTH

**7.4.1 How do we choose our rebirth? The Saṅkhār'upapatti Sutta** (M 120) states that a “monk” (meaning any devout follower) who cultivates the 5 noble growths (*ariya, vaḍḍhi*),<sup>204</sup> that is, who is accomplished in faith, moral virtue, spiritual learning, charity and wisdom, is empowered to aspire to be reborn in any wholesome rebirth he chooses. He may choose to be reborn amongst wealthy kshatriyas (ruling elite), brahmins (educated class) or houselords (propertied class), or amongst any of the heavens up to the highest of the formless realms.

<sup>201</sup> **Dhānañjāni S** (M 97/2:193-195), SD 4.9.

<sup>202</sup> **Mahāparinibbāna S** (D 16,5.1-6.7/2:137-156), SD 9.

<sup>203</sup> **Gilāna Dassana S** (S 41.10/4:303 f), SD 16.16.

<sup>204</sup> On the the fivefold noble growth (*ariya, vaḍḍhi*), see **Vaḍḍhi Ss** (A 5.63+4/3:80), SD 3.4 (4).

This is all he has to do, says the Buddha,

He fixes his mind upon it, resolves his mind upon it, cultivates his mind upon it. These aspirations and this abiding of his, thus cultivated, thus often developed, leads him to be reborn there. This, bhikshus, is the path, the way that leads to rebirth there.” (M 120), SD 3.4

However, declares the Buddha, the best aspiration of all is that of becoming an arhat, because we will then be reborn nowhere at all!<sup>205</sup>

### **7.4.2 How to be reborn with our loved ones**

7.4.2.1 **The Sama,jīvi Sutta 1** (A 4.55) records a teaching by the Buddha to the loving old couple, Nakula,mātā and Nakula,pitā, on how they can remain happily together for this life and in future lives. The factors that promote this happy partnership are “the factors of compatibility” (*sama,jīvi,dhamma*), that is, compatibility in faith, moral virtue, generosity and wisdom.<sup>206</sup>

7.4.2.2 On a broader social level, there is a longer set of qualities, a sort of expansion of the 4 factors of compatibility, that is, the 6 “**conditions for conciliation**” (*sāraṇīya,dhamma*):

- |  |                          |                      |
|--|--------------------------|----------------------|
| (1) showing lovingkindness through bodily deeds, | <i>mettā,kāya,kamma</i>  |                      |
| (2) showing lovingkindness through speech,       | <i>mettā,vacī,kamma,</i> |                      |
| (3) showing lovingkindness through thought,      | <i>mettā,mano,kamma</i>  |                      |
| (4) mutual sharing of what one has,              | <i>sādhāraṇa,bhogī</i>   |                      |
| (5) compatibility in moral virtue,               | <i>sīla,samaññatā</i>    |                      |
| (6) compatibility in view.                       | <i>diṭṭhi,sāmaññatā</i>  | (D 3:245; A 3:288 f) |

These 6 qualities endear us to others and cause others to constantly recall us with respect, joy and love. As such, they also conduce to social and communal harmony, solidarity and progress.

### **7.4.3 Refuge-going**

7.4.3.1 Early Buddhism teaches that it is our mind that decides how we shall die, and so chart our own afterlife destiny. Even a drunkard, Sārakāṇi the Sakya, who has gone for refuge, and kept to the training at the moment of death, is able to attain streamwinning. The refuge-going serves as a strong reminder of the ideals of the Buddha, Dharma and sangha. As a result, at the moment of dying, Sāra,kāṇi is able to calm and clear his mind through Dharma training, that is, a habitually Dharma-inspired life. [6.3.1]

Our Dharma teacher, if we are respectful and attentive to him, becomes our spiritual friend, a life mentor, who teaches us appropriate Dharma to cultivate joy in us, and proper meditation for the sake or inner calm, so that we are well prepared for our last moments. The story of Tamba,dāṭhika the public executioner is another example of effective other-help in Dharma [7.4.3.2].

7.4.3.2 **The Tamba,dāṭhika Cora,ghātaka Vatthu** (DhA 8.1) of the Dhammapada Commentary is the story of Tamba,dāṭhika, the executioner of thieves. He had joined a band of thieves, numbering some 500. When they were captured, no one wanted to execute them, but Tamba,dāṭhika himself volunteered to do it, and so was richly rewarded and lived well.

In due course, he was appointed public executioner, and by the time he reached the age of 55, he had executed a total of 2000 thieves. By then he was unable to chop off the thieves’ heads with one clean blow of his axe, and so brought great suffering upon them. He was retired.

<sup>205</sup> **Saṅkhār’upapatti S** (M 120/3:99-103), SD 3.4.

<sup>206</sup> **Sama,jīvi S 1** (A 4.55,2.3/2:63), SD 5.1.

One morning, Sāriputta, noticing that he was ready for spiritual realization, visited him for alms. Tamha, dāṭhika happily gave his milk-rice to Sāriputta, and stood by fanning him as he ate. At the end of the meal, Sāriputta taught him Dharma but Tamha, dāṭhika was unable to attend to the elder's words.

When the elder inquired, he said that his mind was ridden with guilt recalling all those he had killed. The elder then resorted to a skillful means,<sup>207</sup> and asked him, "Did you do this on your own free will, or did someone else make you do this?" "The king made me do it, bhante." "In that case, lay disciple, what wrong did you do?"

Now that his mind was pacified, he was able to attend to the elder's Dharma teaching. With renewed patience, he was able to single-mindedly focus on the elder's thanksgiving, as a result of which he attained streamwinning. In due course, his karma ripened, and an old enemy in the form of a cow attacked and killed him. Upon dying, he was reborn in Tusita.

Later, when the monks asked the Buddha how such a cruel man, who had killed so many people, was able to be reborn in heaven. The Buddha replied that he had a "great spiritual friend" (*mahanta kalyāṇa-mitta*) in Sāriputta. When they asked him how, despite himself, he was able to attain streamwinning, the Buddha replied, "Measure not the Dharma I've taught as being little or much. One saying full of meaning is good enough."<sup>208</sup> Reflecting on the occasion, the Buddha uttered this Dhammapada verse:

<p><i>Sahassam api ce vācā anatta, pada, samhitā ekam gāthā, padam seyyo yam sutvā upasammati</i></p>	<p>Even if there were a thousand sayings, composed of useless words, better is a single line of verse, hearing which, one is pacified.</p>	<p>(Dh 100)<sup>209</sup></p>
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**7.4.3.3** Our last thought-moments are the decisive factor in deciding the kind of rebirth we would assume after death. However, we do not have any real control over such thoughts, as the experience of diminishing control over our physical body and mind can be very troubling when we are unprepared and lack spiritual training and integrity.

In other words, we have to train our mind well even now to be habitually calm and clear. How we act through the 3 doors of karma (body, speech and mind)<sup>210</sup> decisively shapes the future course of our life. The next preparation is that of empowering ourselves against any emotional difficulties or traumas, and to accept the vicissitudes of life<sup>211</sup> as they are, that is, to constantly practise the perception of impermanence [6.3.4]. This is the best preparation for a non-meditator for keeping our mind on an even keel, even to the last moments. [6.3.4]

**7.4.3.4** Learning **meditation** is certainly the best way to keep our mind calm and clear to the present moment, and also a good preparation for the last moments. The recollection on death<sup>212</sup> helps us appreciate the present and helps motivate us in living a wholesome life, as we are morally accountable and more aware of karmic retribution.

<sup>207</sup> Lit, "The elder thought, 'I will trick him.'" (*Thero vañcessāmi nan'ti cintetvā*).

<sup>208</sup> *Mayā desita, dhammassa appam vā bahum vā'ti mā pamāṇam gaṇhatha. Eka, vācā'pi hi attha, nissitā seyyāvāti.*

<sup>209</sup> DhA 8.1/2:203-209 ad Dh 100.

<sup>210</sup> These are the 10 courses of karma, in an unwholesome sense (*akusala kamma, patha*) or in a wholesome sense (*kusala kamma, patha*). The 10 unwholesome courses of action are: (1) destroying life, (2) taking the not-given, (3) indulging in sexual misconduct, (4) false speech, (5) divisive speech, (6) harsh speech, (7) useless talk, (8) covetousness, (9) malevolence, (10) false views. The 10 wholesome courses of action are those of refraining from the unwholesome courses, viz: (1) refraining from destroying life, (2) refraining from taking to not-given, (3) refraining from sexual misconduct, (4) truthful speech, (5) unifying speech, (6) pleasant speech, (7) beneficial talk, (8) non-covetousness, (9) benevolence, (10) right views. See **(Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 10.177,2-6), SD 2.6a

<sup>211</sup> These are the 8 worldly conditions (*loka, dhamma*): gain and loss, fame and ill-fame, blame and praise, joy and pain; see **Loka, dhamma S 1+2** (A 8.5+6), SD 42.2+3.

<sup>212</sup> See **Mindfulness of death**, SD 48,1 & **Marāṇa, sati Kathā** (Vism 7), SD 48.14.

The recollection on death should never be done by itself, as it looks at only one aspect of life (albeit a vital one). It should be enriched and balanced with the two staple meditations: the mindfulness of breath<sup>213</sup> and the cultivation of lovingkindness.<sup>214</sup> The breath meditation is especially good for calming and clearing our mind, keeping it centred and undisturbed.

**7.4.3.5** Lovingkindness significantly helps us in the breath meditation if we have difficulties with it. It has its own benefits, too, the most vital of which is that of emotional radiance and stability. Lovingkindness meditation keeps us habitually happy and wholesome. If the breath is meditation for the head, then loving-kindness is for the heart, but they should be done in a balanced way for the best effect.

We have noted how lovingkindness meditation, especially in connection with the 4 divine abodes (lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity) [5.2.3], can bring about rebirth in the brahma world. However, reflecting on its impermanence, when it is well developed, helps us along the path to streamwinning. **The Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62) closes with the Buddha declaring that, when the breath meditation is properly and habitually cultivated, “even the last breath leaves [ends] with your knowledge, not without it.”<sup>215</sup> In other words, we pass away mindfully and joyfully.

## 8 Helping the dead move on

### **8.1 THE TIRO,KUḶḶA SUTTA** (Khp 7 = Pv 1.5)

**8.1.0** We mentioned the two key texts on pretas and how a person is reborn [6.2.1], that is, **the (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** (A 10.177)<sup>216</sup> [6.2] and **the Tiro,kuḶḶa Sutta** [6.2.1, 6.4.1]. We will now further examine the latter, as it gives us, in essence, all the vital practical and spiritual details we should know about pretas. Here, we shall, amongst other things, give special attention to understand how we can help the departed move on happily.

[It would be helpful to take a break here, and go on to read, or at least skim, through these two Suttas, so that we have some familiarity with the structure of these Suttas, and know where to look when they are alluded to.<sup>217</sup> Or, if we are eager to read on, then we should at least go through the Tiro,kuḶḶa Sutta first—at least read the Sutta’s origin story at SD 2.7(2).]

Below we will examine the text of **the Tiro,kuḶḶa Sutta** (Khp 7 = Pv 3.5)<sup>218</sup> in the light of our themes here, that is, “karma, death and rebirth.” For the Pali text and other details, we should refer to annotated Tiro,kuḶḶa Sutta translation itself (SD 2.7).

#### 8.1.1 Location of the pretas

**(1) Outside the walls they stand [wait], at junctions and cross-roads,  
They stand at the door-posts, having returned to their own homes.** (Pv 5.1)

**8.1.1.1** The looks of the pretas are as different as the bad karma they have done. They are also incapable of human language. However, they are capable of making mournful sounds, which close relatives might be

<sup>213</sup> On the breath meditation, see **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118), SD 7.13.

<sup>214</sup> On lovingkindness meditation, see **Karaṇiya Metta S** (Sn 1.8 = Khp 9), SD 38.3.

<sup>215</sup> *Ye pi te carimakā assāsā te pi viditvā nirujjhanti no aviditā ti.* When a dying person is mindful of his breath, he dies calmly with mindfulness and clear comprehension. **Visuddhi,magga** says: “Herein there are three kinds of final breaths on account of cessation, that is to say, final in *becoming*, final in *dhyana*, final in *death*. For, among the various kinds of existence, in-breaths and out-breaths occur only in the sense-sphere existence, not in the form-existence nor the formless existence. That is why there are final ones in existence. They occur in the first three dhyanas but not in the fourth. That is why there are final ones in the dhyanas.” (Vism 8.241/291 f).

<sup>216</sup> A 10.177/5:269-273 (SD 2.6a).

<sup>217</sup> **(Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 10.177) is in SD 2.6a; **TirokuḶḶa S** (Khp 7 = Pv 3.5) is in SD 2.7.

<sup>218</sup> Khp 7.1 = Pv 3.5 (Pv 14), SD 2.7.

able to perceive. Emotions tend to run high after someone we know well has died, especially when there are also others around us who are emotionally distraught like us. Often enough, we tend to project our own fear or guilt, and see these emotions as pretas. So we cannot be absolutely certain, especially when we have been culturally conditioned in such beliefs.

**8.1.1.2** Here, the Sutta uses the word “**stand**,” which can also mean “to wait.” They *wait* because they seem to be feeling some terrible lack, and are seeking some kind of fulfillment. Basically, they are like addicts who are unable to get a fix, and are hungering for it.

Pretas are often depicted as standing and waiting outside walls and road interchanges. Pretas are emotionally incapable of joy, but are heartsick beings. Imagine people we know who are really depressed. So they lurk in places where they feel safe. Or, they feel a sense of loss, hoping to find some directions to a safe and familiar place; hence, they lurk at interchanges. However, as we have noted [1.1.2.2], they can be anywhere in an unpleasant way, depending on the bad karma they have done.

**8.1.1.3** As chickens come home to roost, pretas return to their familiar abodes, such as “**to their own homes**,” when they were alive. These places may be their own erstwhile homes, or places they were most attracted to in life, that is, where they habitually spent their time. If they were gambling addicts, that place would be the casino they frequented. If they enjoyed going around drunk in the night, then they may be caught up in the shadows and darks places they had been familiar with. It’s like the places we would habitually head for whenever we had the chance.

## 8.1.2 Why they suffer

(2) **Food and drinks are aplenty,  
but no one recalls them,**                      **food hard and soft are served  
(these) beings conditioned by karma.**<sup>219</sup>                      (Pv 5.2)

**8.1.2.1** Although their living relatives make lavish offerings and perform noisy elaborate rituals, they do not benefit from these at all. The reason is simple: “**No one recalls them.**” As we have noted, we don’t just “pray” for our ancestors. We need to reflect why we do this. First, we recall the good things they have done for us (forget the bad memories). Then, we cultivate loving-kindness and hold it in our hearts [8.2].

Lovingkindness is the “mechanism” that empowers the pretas to transform themselves. Basically, it’s like we have good relatives and friends who are kind to us, and they invite us to have a meal with them. The kindness helps us enjoy the meals they have prepared for us, and we are uplifted by all this. The thought really counts here.

**8.1.2.2** Like us, pretas, too, are **conditioned by karma**, that is, in their case, by bad karma. They are not being “punished” by their karma: we do not say the floor is punishing us when we fall (we were careless and fell). Rather, they have done some unwholesome actions, especially habitually. When their human bodies expire, they are left with the habitually unwholesome mind, or the guilty memory of some terrible deed. As they think, so they are. (Dh 1-2)

## 8.1.3 How to dedicate merits

(3ab) **Thus they give to their relatives,  
pure, exquisite, timely,**                      **they who are compassionate,  
fitting drink and food, (saying:)**

<sup>219</sup> “Conditioned by their karma,” *kamma,paccayā*. Pv:BK has “on account of their deeds.”



(3c) *Idam vo*<sup>220</sup> *ñātīnam hotu  
sukhitā hontu ñātayo.*

“Let this be for relatives!  
May relatives be happy!”<sup>221</sup>

(Pv 5.3)

**8.1.3.1** In popular folk rituals, we see people placing all kinds of offerings on huge tables and platforms for the dead, even holding stage-shows or performing folk operas for these unseen beings. But, ironically, they cannot partake of any of this.

Once, my loving cat brought me a dead rat, placing it right at my feet. I thanked her, and told her that I don’t eat rats! Similarly, it is said, Mahā Brahmā, the High God, himself, once appeared before his pious devotee and told her that he neither needs nor can partake of earthly offerings, since he is God.<sup>222</sup>

**8.1.3.2** Of course, I appreciated my cat’s gesture, and loved her even more, so that she received more and better food for herself. Mahā Brahmā, too, out of gratitude, advised the pious devotee to offer the food to her own son, the arhat Brahma,deva, whereby the fruits of such an offering would truly be immeasurable.

In other words, the offerings (proper ones and morally gotten) should be given to deserving people, especially the community of morally virtuous monastics, or those who deserve our compassion and generosity, such as helpless old folks, unsalaried lay Dharma workers, and, of course, the destitute and helpless.

**8.1.3.3** When such offerings are made with a mind of lovingkindness, and their merits specially dedicated (*ādissa*) [6.6.1] to our relatives, if they are pretas, they would benefit. The great thing about loving-kindness is that even if our relatives may not be pretas, but reborn as divine beings, or humans, or animals, they may be able to feel our lovingkindness.<sup>223</sup> That’s why we are instructed to regularly cultivate a heart that says, “May all beings be well and happy!”

#### **8.1.4 How pretas’ sufferings are alleviated**

(4ab) **And they, having gathered there,**

**the departed relatives gather, too.**

(4cd) **In the abundant food and drink**  
“Long may our relatives live,  
For honour to us has been done,

**they wholeheartedly**<sup>224</sup> **rejoice:**<sup>225</sup>  
**on whose account we gain these!**  
**and givers are not fruitless!**”<sup>226</sup>

(Pv 5.4)

**8.1.4.1** The sentence, “**they wholeheartedly rejoice**” (*sakkaccaṃ anumodare*) is salient in the preta’s existential or spiritual state, that is positively transformed.<sup>227</sup> Our task, then is to transform the negative emo-

<sup>220</sup> Traditionally, esp in Sinhala Bsm, this is often taken as a pronoun, *vo* “your,” and changed to *me*, “my,” when reciting for one’s own relations and friends. This is, however, a later innovation. Textually and grammatically, *vo* here is actually *ve*, an emphatic particle, marked by an exclamation mark here. See PED: Vo<sup>2</sup>. The reverse equivalence of *ve* for *vo* is also common: see eg **Sela S** (M9, Sn 560 = Tha 830) n, SD 45.7.

<sup>221</sup> Comys make an interesting remark here: “an object dedicated in this manner becomes a condition for the departed to do wholesome actions” [like wholesome thoughts, vv 5cd & 6ab] that fruit immediately (KhA 209; PvA 27). It appears that the departed here uplift themselves through their own spiritual energies (with initial help from relatives). Cf Pv:BM 34 n46.

<sup>222</sup> **Brahma,deva S** (S 6.3/1:140-142), SD 12.4.

<sup>223</sup> It is unlikely that hell-beings would benefit from our lovingkindness, unless perhaps we are dhyana-attainers who direct lovingkindness power by our calm and clear minds. Hell-beings are like condemned prisoners who have to serve out their time. Understandably, we need to avoid all bad karma that would transform us into hell-beings.

<sup>224</sup> “Wholeheartedly,” *sakkaccaṃ*. PvA:BM has “respectfully.” This is what empowers the departed, uplifting them from their suffering state, that is, to say, their own wholesome mental state such as by wishing their living relatives well as shown here. See (1).

<sup>225</sup> *Anumodare* (“they rejoice”) = *anumodanti* (Khps 209 = PvA 26), 3 pl med of *anumodati*. See tr n.

<sup>226</sup> “Givers are not fruitless,” *dāyaka ca anipphalā*. Cf (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi S: “the giver is not fruitless,” (*dāyako pi anipphalo*) (A 10.177.9/5:270), SD 2.6a. See Intro above.

tions of others into positive ones. The preta state, after all, is a karmic one; it is mind-made. What is mind-made can be transformed by another mind, a stronger and happier mind. In other words, our meditation (especially the cultivation of lovingkindness strengthened with stillness of our breath meditation) is the best way to help transform them.

**8.1.4.2** It also means that any dedication of merit, must also be done with **lovingkindness**. This is a point that needs to be constantly repeated, so that it is remembered. In our pain, fear and guilt over the loss of some near or dear, we tend to forget that our lovingkindness is the best thing that can help them to **rejoice** (*anumodare*), to be transformed into happy beings.

A preta is utterly, on his own, unable to perform any karmically wholesome act (like an utterly despondent person). This rejoicing is the only deed of merit that the preta is capable of doing, even then with the intercession of living relatives.<sup>228</sup>

**8.1.4.3** Our affinity with the dearly departed, any kind of departed for that matter, will re-connect us when we gather to dedicate merits to them, or even when we single-mindedly do this by ourself, say, we are studying or living overseas, away from other relatives. Again here, it's the thought that really counts, a thought that is empowered with lovingkindness. [8.2]

**8.1.4.4** Remember how we feel despondent on our birthday when no one seems to remember it. Then, when we reach home, we find our relatives and friends gathered with a surprise birthday party. Our despondence turns into elation. Basically, this is what happened with a preta: our merit dedication done with lovingkindness, or even the lovingkindness alone (being cultivated any time we feel like it, not for as a calendar ritual) would alleviate these hapless pretas.

**8.1.4.5** The point is we do not really know which relative, friend or acquaintance has been reborn as pretas. Our dedication can help anyone, not just relatives. As the Buddha says in **the (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** (A 10.177), the preta realm ("realm" here simply refers to their state, not a location) is never empty of pretas. We have wandered so long in samsara, this cycle of lives and deaths, that we have been friends, relatives, spouses, siblings children, and pets (yes, animals) to one another.<sup>229</sup>

**8.1.4.6** The lesson here is: Why wait until they are departed to be kind to them; be kind to them right now while they are still living. Being habitually happy, they are unlikely to be pretas to haunt us. Anyway, the living world is an immeasurable one. There will always be pretas related to us or acquainted with us, even if we are kind to all our living relatives and friends. But it's a great blessing to have relatives who are reborn as divine beings or, better still, as streamwinners and saints!

**8.1.4.7** Our deceased relatives who have not yet passed on into new rebirths, and are caught in an intermediate state, or in a preta state need our spiritual intervention, as it were, especially by our dedicating merits to them and by showing them lots of lovingkindness. Having been uplifted by the dedication and lovingkindness, they will reciprocate by blessing us in their own way, as stated in the verse above. "**No giver is without fruit,**" meaning, every act of charity we do, with lovingkindness, has its karmic potency to benefit us and other beings, including the pretas.

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<sup>227</sup> On the significance of the Buddhist dedication of merit to pretas against the brahminical offering to ancestors (*saddha*), see **(Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 10.177) @ SD 1.6a (1.5.2).

<sup>228</sup> See PvA 26, 69 f.

<sup>229</sup> A 10.177,6.2 + 8 @ SD 2.6a.

### **8.1.5 Other preta offerings are useless**

- |   |  |          |
|---|--|----------|
| <b>(6ab) There is no farming there,</b>   | <b>nor cattle-herding found;</b>   |          |
| <b>(6cd) Businesses, too, there are none,<br/>with what is given here are supported</b> | <b>(nor) buying and selling with money:<br/>the departed over there.</b> | (Pv 5.6) |

**8.1.5.1** There is no farming or business of any kind amongst the pretas. In other words, they are unable to support themselves. They live as long as their karma prevails (which is often aeons), and suffer from incessant hunger and pains. They are also incapable of going any wholesome deed in which to rejoice. So, they are in constant sadness and sorrow. Understandably, they are sometimes called shades (Greek σκιά; Latin, *umbra*), similar beings in western mythology.

**8.1.5.2** Ethnic Buddhists can be materialistic and simple-minded (if we are one, we are often also the other), so we tend to think: as on earth, so in heaven, or the preta realm. Our dearly departed must surely need what they were used to in life. But we have had many lives, and many more to come. Ironically, ethnic Buddhists seem to think in eternalist terms as if this was the departed’s only life, and their preta state is an eternity.<sup>230</sup> This is a wrong view, and it helps neither us nor the departed. It only brings us an animal rebirth.<sup>231</sup> [5.3.3.5]

**8.1.5.3** Then there is the “burning” tradition of pious folks, which cause more ecological pollution without benefiting anyone except the undertakers and joss-shops that sell these products and encourage these services. It’s obvious that commerce, trade and agriculture do not exist amongst the pretas, or in the other realms; these are human enterprises.

The “hell money” with their generous zeroes seems to reflect a severe inflation in the preta world or the hells (the folks are not certain which), if they use money there at all. Better than burning false money is to burn the real one: that would help us reflect its real value and our simplistic tendencies and superstitions! We need to be educated to be free of such anti-culture.

**8.1.5.4** The Thais, even today, have a very wise tradition of spending some money in printing useful books for free distribution to anyone who comes for the cremation rites of the departed. These white-covered books often have pictures of the departed and some write-ups on their achievements and goodness, and, of course, the book itself, which might be some useful and out of print religious scripture or writing, or the deceased’s works or favourite book. In this way, even in death, the departed benefit the living.

### **8.1.6 How merits work**

- |  |  |          |
|--|--|----------|
| <b>(7) Just as water falling on highlands<br/>even so what is given here</b> | <b>reaches down to the lowlands,<br/>accrues to the departed ones.</b> | (Pv 5.7) |
| <b>(8) Just as the swollen rivers<br/>even so what is given here</b>         | <b>fill the ocean full,<br/>accrues to the departed ones.</b>          | (Pv 5.8) |

**8.1.6.1** The pretas are “beings conditioned by karma”<sup>232</sup> [8.12(2)]. This means that they are “mind-made,” and have some kind of mind, similar to ours. With such a mind, although less complex than that of a human, the preta is capable of benefitting from the merits that is dedicated by someone imbued with loving-

<sup>230</sup> On effects of the eternalist view, see eg SD 44.1 (1.1.2.4-1.1.2.5).

<sup>231</sup> On animal birth, see also **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129,18-23), SD 2.22.

<sup>232</sup> On how our karma shape us, see **Bhava S 2** (A 3.77), SD 23.13.

kindness. The preta, in other words, on account of his karmically weaker or inferior state is unable to give joy, because he is unable to generate any.

However, through the agency of someone who dedicates merits to the preta, he is able to cognize such an act. This is like a lit candle (the lovingkind dedicator of merit) lights another candle (the preta). Nothing is actually transferred (except some heat), but the wick of the second candle is able to light up. The light here is lovingkindness, which is instrumental in the alleviation of the preta's state.

From the verses' imagery, the merits of the dedicator are like "water falling on the highlands," and the preta's mind are "the lowlands." "The swollen rivers [filling] the ocean full" is a figure for the merits empowering the preta, so that he is able to bless the dedicator [verses 5cd+6ab].

### **8.1.7 Lovingkindness for the pretas**

**(9) *He gave to me; he worked for me:*                      *a relative, friend, and companion to me*<sup>233</sup>—  
       **give offerings then for**<sup>234</sup> **the departed,**                      **recalling what they have done before.**     (Pv 5.9)**

**8.1.7.1** How do we recall the goodness of the departed? They have been our caring parents, loving spouses, beloved partners, dear relatives, affectionate friends, happy companions. Or, they have been good or generous to us. Or, they were great and wise teachers and mentors. They deserve our gratitude: this is our duty to them.

We happily give in their memory. On account of our love and happy memories, our actions benefit those who are worthy of charity. When we give we recall the goodness of the departed with lovingkindness. These are loving gifts. Then we dedicate the merits of such giving to the dearly departed.

### **8.1.8 Sorrowing does not help**

**(10) Neither tears nor sorrow                                  nor any mourning whatever—  
       they help not the departed—                              the (departed) relatives remain the same.                      (Pv 5.10)**

**8.1.8.1** When we mourn or lament for the dead, we do so for ourselves, to express our pain at such a great loss, or some ethnic circles, we are expected by others around us to do so, as an expression of filial piety. The affluent might even hire professional mourners to give the funeral a cosmetic veneer of sorrow and loss, but it is all a show. In other words, it is all a social convention, expectation or display rather than a religious emotion, much less a spiritual experience.

**8.1.8.2** Such emotions, however, being merely external, do not help the departed in any way, because they are not very positive. They do not help the living either, because it is a routine or drudgery we unhappily have to perform. Negative emotion is generated, and this is not sorrow for the dead, but an impatience for the ending of the whole event as soon as possible.

**The Uraga Jātaka** (J 354) or **Uraga Peta,vatthu** (Pv 1.12) has beautiful verses to reflect on for such an occasion. [8.3.2].

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<sup>233</sup> From this passage it is clear that, although relatives are given priority in merit-dedication, this practice covers any departed ghost. It might be argued that "relative, friend, and companion" simply reflect the *relationship* or bond that existed between the living and the departed. Nevertheless, in practice, modern Buddhists would dedicate merit to any departed human. See Intro (2).

<sup>234</sup> *Petānaṃ* is 3 pl gen, translatable as "to the departed" or "for the departed." The latter applies better here considering, that we cannot directly make any material offering to them, but this must be done by means of acts of loving-kindness.

### 8.1.9 Efficacious giving

- (11) **But when this offering is made, will be for their good for a long time:** **well placed, to the sangha given, it serves them now as well.** (Pv 5.11)
- (12) **This duty to relatives has been shown— strength, too, has been given to the monks—** **on how to best honour the departed; not small is the merit accrued to you!** (Pv 5.12)

**8.1.9.1** Karma acts in two ways: it works for us, and for others, too.<sup>235</sup> Not only should we avoid bad, do good, and purify the mind; we should also induce and inspire others to do so. In the case of merit-making, when we make proper offerings, we cultivate the merits, but dedicating them with lovingkindness to the departed, also benefits them. In simple terms, our wholesome thoughts benefit others.

**8.1.9.2** What better way of generating such wholesome thoughts of merits than through offerings to a sangha of virtuous monastics? In this way, we benefit many, in more ways than one. When such wise and virtuous monastics are healthy and live long, they are able to teach and inspire more people to goodness and the true path to awakening. In this way, we honour not only the dead, but also the living, and we benefit on both counts.

## 8.2 LOVINGKINDNESS

### 8.2.1 Lovingkindness empowers dedication

**8.2.1.1** In the **Tirokuḍḍa Sutta** (Khp 7 = Pv 1.5)<sup>236</sup> [8.1], the merits of the offerings, we are told, are dedicated to the pretas, with **lovingkindness**, so that “**they [the departed] wholeheartedly<sup>237</sup> rejoice.**”<sup>238</sup> In other words, the state of the departed is transformed into something wholesome. This means that there is a possibility for them to rise from that state for a higher rebirth, or that new good karma would be generated by them so that they are reborn into a better state soon enough.

**8.2.1.2** Sometimes, we need to show compassion **by not doing anything**—by allowing a being to live out its natural life—so that, undisturbed, it will be able to enjoy the fruiting of its good karma. This is illustrated by a quaint Dhammapada story (DhA 18.3)—or a case study—of **the monk Tissa who was reborn as a louse.**

It is said that a certain monk of Sāvattḥī named Tissa is very attached to his robe of fine cloth. He suddenly dies of indigestion and is reborn as a louse inhabiting that very robe he is attached to!

With his death, his robe becomes the community property. Still attached to the robe, it is said that the louse runs up and down the robe, screaming, “They are plundering my property!” The Buddha perceiving this, instructs the monks to set the robe aside for a week. At the end of the week, Tissa the louse dies and is reborn in Tusita heaven. It is then that the Buddha allows the monks to divide the robe up amongst themselves.<sup>239</sup>

Even if this story is taken as fictitious, it is a psychologically instructive case story. **We become our karma**; our karma becomes us. We become what we are attached to: the hand takes the shape of what it grasps. Even as a louse, Tissa exhibits the same attachment that he has as an undisciplined monk. However,

<sup>235</sup> On how karma works with and for others, see **Group karma?**, SD 39.1.

<sup>236</sup> Khp 7/6 = Pv 1.5/4 f @ SD 2.7.

<sup>237</sup> “Wholeheartedly,” *sakkaccaṃ*. PvA:BM has “respectfully.” This is what empowers the departed, uplifting them from their suffering state, that is, to say, their own wholesome mental state such as by wishing their living relatives well as shown here. See SD 2.7 (1).

<sup>238</sup> This sentence is salient in referring to how the preta's existential or spiritual state is positively transformed. see SD 2.7 (1).

<sup>239</sup> DhA 18.3/3:341-344 (Dh 240); for Eng tr, see *Buddhist Legends* (DhA:B) 3:120-122.



the Buddha, out of compassion—shows kindness to Tissa even though he does not deserve it—lets Tissa the louse have his way (by leaving the robe aside for a week), so that he dies happy and is reborn in a heaven.<sup>240</sup>

In terms of the continuity of consciousness, we can say they Tissa *has become* a louse, or that the louse *was* the human, Tissa. Although there is no fixed or permanent frame of reference of a being—no abiding essence—we can still provisionally relate to any one of the being’s lives as a spiritually instructive lesson or discussion.

**8.2.2 Lovingkindness is a form of dedication.** In the **Nanda,mātā Sutta** (A 7.50), Nanda,mātā of Veḷukaṅṭha offers a meal to the Sangha headed by Sāriputta and Moggallāna, and dedicates the merit to Vessavaṇa, one of the 4 Great Celestial Kings: “Bhante, may the goodness through the merit of this giving be for the happiness of the great king Vessavaṇa!”<sup>241</sup> Notice here that the dedication of merit is, in fact, a form of lovingkindness cultivation.<sup>242</sup>

The rationale behind such a notion is simple and clear enough. If our bodily actions and speech can affect others, making them happy or unhappy, moving others to do good, do bad, or do nothing, surely the mind behind such actions can affect others, too, when we wholesomely cultivate it, and mindfully direct it to others. Here is where the thought really counts.

### **8.2.3 The merit of lovingkindness**

**8.2.3.1 Why is lovingkindness (*mettā*) so significant in the dedication of merit and in our relationship with the departed?** The simple answer is that lovingkindness is a vital part of all kinds of living communication, Lovingkindness is, in fact, the most effective way of human communication with the pretas: it empowers the pretas to rejoice in the dedication of merit.

It is the lovingkindness that defines the dedication—no lovingkindness, no dedication. A dedication without lovingkindness does not work because it would not make the preta rejoice. When the preta is unable to feel happy, it remains stuck in the preta state. Only when the preta rejoices in the offering is it able to be alleviated from that state, [8.1.4.1]

**8.2.3.2 How do we generate lovingkindness to the pretas? The Tiro,kuḍḍa Sutta** (Khp 7 = Pv 1.5) explains how lovingkindness is expressed as gratitude and compassion [8.2.3.3], so that the pretas rejoice in it [8.1.7 (10)]. We can generate lovingkindness to the pretas in any of two ways: through gratitude or through compassion. The ritual of offering is merely incidental because by itself, or if it is done without lovingkindness, it would not work. Even if the verse of dedication [verse 4ab] is recited, the merit would not affect the preta in any way. Indeed, there would be no merit, in the first place, without any lovingkindness.

The first way in which the merits arise is through the giver’s recollecting the kindness of the preta when he was a human—that is, by way of **gratitude** [verse 10]. The preta deserves this dedication of merit because he has done some good in the past (*pubbe ca kata,puññatā*).<sup>243</sup> The giver, by this gesture of gratitude, cultivates lovingkindness, and generates merits, and goes on to dedicate them to the pretas. This method is commonly done by relatives on behalf of their loving departed.

**8.2.3.3 The dedication of merit** can also be extended to others, that is, to “**a relative, friend, and companion...recalling what they have done before**” [verse 10bd]. These two lines clearly show that we can dedicate merits to any pretas, not just those who were our relatives.

The second way in which that merits are dedicated to the pretas is through the giver’s **compassion**. As we have defined, compassion is kindness shown to others even when they do not deserve it [6.6.2.6], but it also is a desire and action to remove the suffering of others. Such a dedication is said to be compassion

<sup>240</sup> DhA 18.3/3:341-344: see SD 26.9 (1.6.3.3). Cf SD 38.3 (5.5).

<sup>241</sup> *Yad-idaṃ bhante dāne puññaṃ hitaṃ Vessavaṇassa mahārājassa sukhāya hotū ti* (A 7.50.2/4:65).

<sup>242</sup> For other cases, see SD 2.6a (3).

<sup>243</sup> **Maṅgala S** (Khp 5,3b).

because *we do not have to do this*. It is not a duty that we must perform. We would like to help remove the sufferings of our dearly departed so that they move on to better births.

### **8.2.4 How lovingkindness alleviates the pretas**

**8.2.4.1** We may now ask **how does lovingkindness alleviate the preta? The Tevijja Sutta** (D 13),<sup>244</sup> **the Saṅkha,dhama Sutta** (S 42.8)<sup>245</sup> and **the (Karaja,kāya) Brahma,vihāra Sutta** (A 10.208)<sup>246</sup> contain an interesting technical term, “karma done in a limited way” or “limited karma” (*pamāṇa,katam kammaṃ*), which the Aṅguttara Commentary says refers to sense-sphere karma (*kāmāvacara,kamma*)” (AA 5:78), which encompasses the universe we live in.

**8.2.4.2** The Saṃyutta Commentary explains that “When (simple) lovingkindness is mentioned, this can be interpreted either as access concentration<sup>247</sup> or as dhyana, but when it is qualified as ‘freedom of mind’ (*ceto,vimutti*) it definitely means dhyana (*jhāna*)” (SA 3:105). The point is that if a person masters the “freedom of mind by lovingkindness” at the level of dhyana, he has the karmic potential for rebirth in the form realm.<sup>248</sup>

**8.2.4.3** The key passage of **the (Karaja,kāya) Brahma,vihāra Sutta** says:

“Indeed, bhikshus, the freedom of mind by lovingkindness should be developed by a woman or a man. Whether you are a woman or a man, you cannot take this body along when you depart (from this world).

Bhikshus, this mortal life is but an intermediate state of consciousness (*citt’antaro ayam bhikkhave macco*).

He knows thus: **“Whatever bad deed I did before with this physical body, their result will be experienced here and they will not follow me.”**<sup>249</sup>

Lovingkindness, if developed in such a way, will lead to the state of non-return, in the case of a monk who is established in the wisdom found here [in this teaching], but who has not attained to a higher freedom. (A 10.208,2.2/5:300), SD 2.10

The Sutta Commentary explains the highlighted sentence as follows: “It will be a karma ripening in this existence (*diṭṭha,dhamma,vedanīya,kamma*). They will not follow one to the next existence because the ripening in the next existence (*upapajja,vedanīya*) has been cut off through the practice of lovingkindness. This passage should be understood as a reflection made by a streamwinner or a once-returner.” (AA 5:78)

**8.2.4.4** On a simpler level, the above passage [8.2.4.3] attests to the power of **lovingkindness** is limiting the effects of our karma. If we regularly and habitually cultivate lovingkindness—such as falling asleep with a simple cultivation of lovingkindness or “sleeping happily” and doing the same when waking—that heart of

<sup>244</sup> **Tevijja S** (D 13,77/1:251), SD 1.8.

<sup>245</sup> S 42.8,17/4:322 @ SD 57.9.

<sup>246</sup> A 10.208,1/5:299 @ SD 2.10.

<sup>247</sup> In comy terms, there are 3 levels of mental images (*nimitta*): (1) the preparatory image (*parikamma nimitta*) or the meditation object perceived at the start of one’s meditation. (2) When this image has reached some degree of focus, albeit still unsteady and unclear, it is called the acquired image (*uggaha nimitta*). (3) On greater mental focus, an entirely clear and immovable image arises, and becomes the counter-image (*paṭibhāga nimitta*). As soon as this image arises, the meditator has attained access (or neighbourhood) concentration (*upacāra samādhi*). It is also by means of the counter-image that one gains full concentration (*appanā samādhi*). See **Nimitta**, SD 19.7 (3) & **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (7) (What happens when we attain dhyana?).

<sup>248</sup> This is the fine-material world of dhyanic beings, such as the brahmas. They often assume the form of pure light, but are generally invisible to us. See Vism 9.49-58/309-311; also S:B 1149 n346; A:B 315 n73.

<sup>249</sup> *So evaṃ pajānāti: yaṃ kho me idaṃ kiñci pubbe iminā karaja,kāyena pāpa,kammaṃ katam, sabbam taṃ idha vedanīyam; na taṃ anugaṃ bhavissatīti.*

lovingkindness prevents us from harping on past negative events and unwholesome thoughts, so that we have a positive and wholesome mind.

This is the kind of heart or mind that is able to limit the effects of negative karma in this life itself. A simple way of explaining this is that we are not “fighting off” such karma, but we let it take its natural course, without adding new fuel to it. Such karma then would not “follow” us into future lives. It ends right here, as it were. However, other karma would still work on us. Hence, we need to keep up our practice with the perception of impermanence [6.3.4].

**8.2.4.5** When this **lovingkindness** is directed to the memorial offering, the dedication of merit and the pretas, it is able to trigger a similar effect on the pretas, too. They are able to generate lovingkindness, and with that they end, at least for the moment, the karmic momentum that holds them as pretas. They fall from their preta state to attain some better human, or even divine state, as the preta stories tell us [6.6.2].

Clearly here, the lovingkindness must be mindfully done, and not merely as an impersonal and mechanical ritual, or even a display of piety and ostentatious prayers. We have to maintain proper effort in mindfulness, cultivating lovingkindness, ideally, as if we were meditating, as we conduct the memorial offering and when we dedicate the merits to the pretas. This is where the thoughts truly count.

### 8.3 THE URAGA JĀTĀKA (J 354)

#### 8.3.1 Two stories

**8.3.1.1** Here we will look at two parallel stories, the Uruga Jātaka (J 354) and the Uruga Peta,vatthu (Pv 1.12). The narrative explains why none in the family mourn the loss of a dear member. Sakra, the king of the gods, acts as a kind of facilitator, asking questions that help us understand the actions of the living member of the family. The verses are very inspiring and instructive in connection with dealing with the departed.

**8.3.1.2** **The Uruga Jātaka** (J 354) is almost identical with **the Uruga Peta,vatthu** (Pv 1.12) [6.6.3.1n], except that in the latter, the protagonist is a brahmin with his wife, a son, a daughter, the son’s wife, and a servant girl. Their verses are identical, and are here translated directly. Also included are the free verse translations by H T Francis and N A Neil (*The Jātaka*, 1893 3:107-111).

**8.3.1.3** Once the Buddha meets a landowner (*kuṭumbi*) whose son has died, and he is lamenting his loss. The Buddha consoles him, saying, “Friend, what is of the nature to break up, breaks up; what is of the nature to be destroyed, is destroyed” (*āvuso, bhijjana,dhammaṃ nāma bhijjati, nassana,dhammaṃ nāma nassati*),<sup>250</sup> and applies to everyone and every thing. Then, upon the landowner’s request, he tells the Jātaka story.

#### 8.3.2 Story summary

**8.3.2.1** Once, the Bodhisattva was born as a farmer with a wife and two children, a son and a daughter. When the son has grown up, the Bodhisattva got him a wife. So, together with a female servant, they were a family of six. They lived happily and lovingly together. The Bodhisattva often admonished his family thus:

“As you have received, so give offerings; keep the precepts, observe the holy days; cultivate the mindfulness of death, be mindful of your mortal state. For, death would surely come to these beings.

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<sup>250</sup> The English philosopher, Francis Bacon (1561-1626), tells the story of the Greek Stoic philosopher **Epictetus** (65-135), who one day saw a woman weeping for a broken pitcher, and next day saw another woman weeping over her dead son. Then, he said, “Yesterday I saw the brittle broken, today I saw the mortal dead” (*Heri vidi fragilem frangi, hodie vidi mortalis mori*) ([Bacon: The Advancement of Learning, Book 1](#) [1605], Cambridge, 1922:72.

Certain is death, uncertain is life. All conditioned things are transient, subject to decay. Be diligent night and day.”<sup>251</sup>

They all accepted his teaching and practised it.

**8.3.2.2** The Bodhisattva was working in the field with his son. One day, his son was bitten by a snake. The Bodhisattva, seeing the son fall, went to investigate, and found him dead. He carried him, laid him at the foot of a tree, and covered him with a cloak. He neither mourned nor wept. Mindful of impermanence, he said:

“That which is subject to breaking up has broken up, that which is subject to death is dead. All conditioned things are transient and liable to death.”<sup>252</sup>

**8.3.2.3** Then, he sent word through a passer-by to inform his wife and summon his family to the field. Meanwhile, he calmly went on with his work. His wife, on receiving the news, remained calm, too. She gathered the other family members and brought food, as usual, for the Bodhisattva’s lunch. None of them mourned or cried.

**8.3.2.4** The Bodhisattva, sitting in the shade where his son lay, ate his food. And when he finished his meal, they gathered wood for the funeral pyre, on which they cremated the body. Not a single tear was shed by anyone. They were all mindful of death, contemplating that all conditioned things are impermanent and subject to breaking up.

**8.3.2.5** By their virtue, the king of the gods Sakra’s heavenly throne heated up (which meant his own virtue was being challenged, unless he investigated). Disguised as an old man, he approached the family and asked, “What are you doing?”

“We are burning a human body, sir.”

“It looks more like you’re roasting the flesh of some beast you have slain.”

“No, sir, it’s a human body we’re burning.”

**8.3.2.6** Then Sakra said, “This man you’re burning must have been some enemy.”

The Bodhisattva replied, “No, sir. It is our own son, not an enemy.”

“Then, he couldn’t have been a dear son to you.”

“He was very dear, sir.”

**8.3.2.7** “Then, why do you not weep?”

The Bodhisattva then replied in verse:

*Urago ’va tacam jīṇṇam  
hitvā gacchati sam tanum  
evam sarīre nibbhoge  
pete kālakate sati.*

Just as a snake sloughs off its worn-out skin,  
having discarded that body, it goes its way,  
even so, the body is of no more use  
to the departed who has done his time.

*Dayhamāno na jānāti | ñātīnaṃ paridevitam  
Tasmā etaṃ na socāmi | gato so tassa yā gatīti.*

What is burning knows not | the lamenting of relatives.  
Therefore, we sorrow not in this: | he fares to his destiny.

<sup>251</sup> *Tumhe yathā, laddhaniyāmen’eva dānaṃ detha, sīlaṃ rakkhatha, uposatha, kammaṃ karotha, maraṇa-s, satim bhāvetha, tumhākaṃ maraṇa, bhāvaṃ sallakkhetha, imesaṃ hi sattānaṃ maraṇaṃ dhuvam, jīvitam addhuvam, sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā khaya, vaya, dhammino ’va, rattiṇ ca divā ca appamattā hothāti. (J 3:162)*

<sup>252</sup> *Bhijjana, dhammam pana bhinnam, maraṇa, dhammam matam, sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā maraṇa, nipphattikāti.*

Free translation:

Man quits his mortal frame, when joy in life is past,  
E'en as a snake is wont its worn out slough to cast.  
No friend's lament can touch the ashes of the dead;  
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.<sup>253</sup>

**8.3.2.8** Then, Sakra asked the Bodhisattva's wife, "How, lady, what was the dead man to you?"

"I sheltered him for ten months in my womb, and after he was born I suckled him. I taught him how to walk and stand. He was my grown-up son, sir."

"Now, lady, a father, a man by nature, may not weep, but a mother's heart is tender. Why, then, do you not weep?"

She then replied in verse:

*Anavhito tato āgā, | ananuññāto ito gato  
yathā'gato tathā gato, | tattha kā paridevanā*

Uncalled he came thence, | unbidden he's gone hence.  
as he has come, so he is gone; | what is there for lament?

*Dayhamāno na jānāti | ñātīnaṃ paridevitāṃ  
tasmā etaṃ na socāmi | gato so tassa yā gatīti.*

What is burning knows not | the lamenting of relatives.  
Therefore, we sorrow not in this: | he fares to his destiny.

Free translation:

Uncalled he hither came, unbidden soon to go;  
E'en as he came, he went. What cause is here for woe?

No friend's lament can touch the ashes of the dead:  
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.<sup>254</sup>

**8.3.2.9** Sakra then asked the sister, "Lady, what was the dead man to you?"

"He was my brother, sir."

"Lady, surely sisters are loving towards their brothers. Why do you not weep?"

She, too, replied in verse:

*Sace rode kisā assaṃ, | tassā me kiṃ phalaṃ siyā  
ñāti, mitta, suhajjānaṃ, | bhiyyo no aratī siyā*

If I weep, I would be thin, | what reward is that for me?  
There would be even more pain | for relatives, friends,  
and comrades.

*Dayhamāno na jānāti | ñātīnaṃ paridevitāṃ  
tasmā etaṃ na socāmi | gato so tassa yā gatīti.*

What is burning knows not | the lamenting of relatives.  
Therefore, we sorrow not in this: | he fares to his destiny.

Free translation:

Though I should fast and weep, how would it profit me?  
My kith and kin alas, would more unhappy be!

No friend's lament can touch the ashes of the dead.  
He fares the way he had to tread.<sup>255</sup>

**8.3.2.10** Sakra then asked the dead son's wife, "Lady, what was he to you?"

"He was my husband, sir."

"Women surely, when a husband dies, as widows are helpless. Why do you not weep?"

She replied in verse:

<sup>253</sup> Tr Francis & Neil, op cit.

<sup>254</sup> Tr Francis & Neil, op cit.

<sup>255</sup> Tr Francis & Neil, op cit.



*Yathā'pi dārako candam, | gacchantam anurodati  
evam sampadam 'ev'etaṃ, | yo petam anusocati*

As a boy desiring the moon, | goes about wailing,<sup>256</sup>  
this, too, happens | to those who mourn the departed,

*Ḍayhamāno na jānāti | nātīnam paridevitam  
tasmā etaṃ na socāmi | gato so tassa yā gatīti.*

What is burning knows not | the lamenting of relatives.  
So, we sorrow not in this: | he fares to his destiny.

Free translation:

As children cry in vain to grasp the moon above,  
So mortals idly mourn the loss of those they love.

No friend's lament can touch the ashes of the dead:  
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.<sup>257</sup>

**8.3.2.11** Sakra then asked the servant,

“Lady, what was he to you?”

“He was my master, sir.”

“No doubt, he must have beaten you. And now that he is dead, you're free of him, you weep not.”

“Speak not so, sir. That's not the case. He was full of patience, compassion and love for me. He was like a foster-child to me.”

“Then why do you not weep?”

And she replied in verse:

*Yathā'pi udaka,kumbho, | bhinno appaṭisandhiyo  
evam sampadam ev'etaṃ, | yo petam anusocati*

Just as a broken pot | cannot be put together again,  
even so this is the case | when we lament the departed.

*Ḍayhamāno na jānāti | nātīnam paridevitam  
tasmā etaṃ na socāmi | gato so tassa yā gatīti.*

What is burning knows not | the lamenting of relatives.  
Therefore, we sorrow not in this: | he fares to his destiny.

Free translation:

As a broken pot of earth, ah! who can piece again?  
So, too, to mourn the dead is nought but labour in vain.

No friend's lament can touch the ashes of the dead:  
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.”<sup>258</sup>

**8.3.2.12** Sakra, deeply impressed by the answers he heard, said:

“You all have diligently been mindful of death. I am Sakra Deva,rāja. Henceforth, you are to labour no more. I will bless you with 7 treasures beyond measure.<sup>259</sup>

Give offerings, keep the precepts, observe the holy days, and be diligent.”

And thus, filling their house with immeasurable wealth, he left.

<sup>256</sup> Cf **Maṭṭha,kuṇḍali Vatthu**, DhA 1.2/1:28-35; tr DhA:B 1:161-165..

<sup>257</sup> Tr Francis & Neil, op cit.

<sup>258</sup> Tr Francis & Neil, op cit.

<sup>259</sup> Here, the 7 treasures (*satta ratana*) are pearl, crystal, beryl, conch, quartz, coral, silver, gold, ruby, cat's-eye: see SD 45.18 (2.7)

## 9 What survives death?

### 9.1 BRAIN OR MIND

#### 9.1.1 The nature of rebirth

**9.1.1.1** We have already mentioned what is reborn [5.1], that is, the mind, or, more specifically, the existential consciousness [8.2], along with its latent tendencies [5.1.2.1]. Here we will briefly examine what all this means, especially how the mind survives the brain. Buddhism is able to accept the scientific hypothesis (that is what it is at the moment) that the mind is the activity of the brain. However, from early Buddhism, we can deduce that the brain and the mind are different things.<sup>260</sup>

**9.1.1.2** Consider the plants: they arise from seeds; they grow, flower, fruit, seed and die. The seeds continue to grow into new plants, and the whole process recurs. If this life-cycle can occur with plants, which have no consciousness—not the kind that humans and animals have—then, surely the human consciousness somehow continues through another life-cycle.

Early Buddhism does not locate the mind anywhere. The mind pervades the whole body, and is able to radiate beyond the physical body. In this sense, the mind is energy; we may call it a kind of psychic energy, which can be cultivated and refined.

#### 9.1.2 Karmic accountability

**9.1.2.1** In this section, we will try to briefly answer the question, “**If the mind is purely mental, then how can it be responsible for our actions?**” Let us begin by working with the notion that a mind is purely mental. A mind may be mental, and if it remains so without acting upon others and affecting them in some way, then we can rightly say that no external action (bodily or speech karma) has been done.

In a human, the unexpressed mind alone cannot break a precept or commit a crime. However, when a mind—let’s say a disembodied being—causes harm to us merely by his thought (such as through psychic powers), then it is morally responsible for the thought, and also their effects us.

We, the victim, on our part, will react to such an attack depending on our karmic propensity, that is, the presence of unwholesome roots (greed, hate, delusion) or wholesome roots (charity, lovingkindness, wisdom). If our unwholesome roots are stronger, then we would suffer more, but if our wholesome roots are stronger, then we would suffer less, even not at all.<sup>261</sup> Either way, the negative force of the perpetrator’s deed will act on him, even if it is not immediately.

**9.1.2.2** According to early Buddhism, the human mind is not all mental. Only mental consciousness (*mano, viññāna*) is fully mental, but all the other senses—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching—have physical aspects. In other words, the mind affects external states, that is, others and the world, through our body (that is, the 5 physical senses) and through speech (the mind communicating with other minds). We also communicate with our own mind, that is, in a reflexive manner.

This is where training in moral virtue helps us wholesomely restrain our body and speech [5.1.2.3], and training in mental cultivation works to control and, in due course, uproot, the unwholesome roots of action [9.1.2.1; 9.2.1.2]. In other words, when we are habitually in control of our 3 doors of karma (body, speech and mind), our existential consciousness (what is reborn) benefits and becomes wholesome. This means that we are likely to have a good rebirth when the time comes. [7.4.3.3]

<sup>260</sup> On the problem of the brain and the mind, see SD 17.8c (7).

<sup>261</sup> Take the case of Sāriputta, who, although slandered and assaulted upon on a number of occasions, does not react with any anger nor vengeance: **Vuṭṭha Vass’avāsa S** (A 9.11) + SD 28.2a (3).

**9.1.2.3** We return now to the question “If the mind is purely mental, then how can it be responsible for our actions?” [9.1.2.1]. In other words, how is karma transmitted through such a fluid mental process? The simple answer is: through continuity and memory. **Continuity** (*santana*) is the working of a karmic network of causes and effects in our own body, speech and mind

Indeed, karma is never static: it is always happening in some way, either through the body, through speech, or through the mind—mostly through the mind, where karma actually arises—which conditions us, and is, in turn, conditioned by its habits, especially our habits of the heart. Whether we *know* or not that this karmic process is going on, karma still works on us.<sup>262</sup>

When we know that karma is working on us, we call it **memory** or mindfulness. We are able to recall, at least some aspects of the causes and effects that have been working on us. This memory or mindfulness is vitally significant in our effort to control, even lessen or stop, karma from acting on us—or, from creating karma altogether, such as in dhyana.

### **9.1.3 Karma can be conscious or unconscious.**

**9.1.3.1** The suttas define **karma** as intention (*cetanā’ham bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi*), or, more fully, “Karma, bhikkhus, is volition [intention], I say. Having intended, one acts through body, speech and mind.”<sup>263</sup> We need to understand here that an intentional act (whether bodily, verbal or mental) need not always be conscious (*sampajāna*). Even an “unconscious” (*asampajāna*) act is karmic, and is potent: it will fruit when the conditions are right.

A related Vinaya term is *acittaka*, which also freely translates as “unconscious.” It refers to a class of offences committed in an unconscious manner or through misperception.<sup>264</sup>

In fact, most of our unwholesome acts are done “unconsciously,” in two important but related senses. Firstly, we are not aware that we are doing something bad, but go on doing it anyway [9.1.3.2]. Secondly, when we are unmindful, our unconscious or latent tendencies (*anusaya*) exerts itself, making us its puppets, so that we act unwholesomely<sup>265</sup> [5.1.2].

**9.1.3.2** Take the case of a religion that is God-centred and power-based. The preachers and practitioners of such an ideology delude themselves into thinking that “God is on our side,” so that they are the superior race that must conquer others or convert them to this God. The colonialism of the 15<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries began with the Catholic church, dividing the “heathen” world amongst themselves. This snowballed with Protestant Britain and Netherlands getting to the power game of world-conquering, too, in due course.

Once the conquering started, there were the mass killings, genocides, cultural domination and psychological effects, much of which is still being felt even today, such as the perception that the white skin is superior and that western religion (namely, Christianity) are socially superior to others.<sup>266</sup> These are cases of unconscious karma working on a massive scale.<sup>267</sup>

**9.1.3.3** On a more personal level, we have the case of **false views**. For example, we might subscribe to the serious wrong view that arhats still need to become Buddhas (such as claimed by the Lotus Sutra), and that the Buddha is actually an eternal being, or that we are already enlightened but are unaware of it. When we believe in such false views, we cut off our Dharma roots in the true teachings of the historical Buddha,

<sup>262</sup> See **The unconscious**, SD 17.8b.

<sup>263</sup> *cetanā’ham bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi. Cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti, kāyena vācāya manasā*, in **Nibbedhika (Pariyāya) S** (A 6.63/3:415), SD 6.11.

<sup>264</sup> MA 2:549,21; DhA 2:42. Its opposite is “conscious” (*sa,cittaka*). *Acittaka* means that an action is done habitually, reactively, unknowingly, unmindfully, “without a thought.” Cf “unintentional” (*asañcetanika*, M 1:377,5; DhA 1:225,-11; *asañcicca*, V 3:79,28).

<sup>265</sup> See **Anusaya**, SD 31.3. On **unconscious acts**, see SD 51.20 (2.2).

<sup>266</sup> For a **list of atrocities** committed by the Church, officially “apologized” for by the Catholic Pope, see SD 38.1 (3.2). On **Christian colonialism**, SD 39.1 (7.3.4).

<sup>267</sup> Further, see **Group karma?**, SD 39.1 esp (7.3.4).

and go deeper into theological polemics, ideological sophistry and triumphalism (such as that Mahāyāna, the great vehicle, is “superior” to Hīnayāna, the inferior vehicle, which is applied to Theravāda and early Buddhism, called “mainstream Buddhism” by scholars).<sup>268</sup>

Such a self-conditioning then induces us to rationalize (reason wrongly) that we need not meditate; just reciting some Buddha’s name or mantra would “save” us, even bring us rebirth in some “paradise.” Such cosmic Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and paradises are often perceived to be eternal. As such, we unwittingly fall into the extreme view of **eternalism** (*sassata, diṭṭhi*).<sup>269</sup>

If we believe, for example, that the Lotus Sutra Buddha could give “predictions” (*vyākaraṇa*) of the future Buddhahood and “Buddha-lands” of awakened arhats, such as Ājñāta Kaundīnya, Śāriputra, Mahā Maudgalyāyana, Subhūti, Mahā Kātyāyana and others, then doesn’t this suggest predestination, which is a kind of extreme view of **annihilationism** (*uccheda, diṭṭhi*)?<sup>270</sup>

The dangers of such wrong and extreme views are simply dire. Because of the falsity of such views (the Buddha never teaches them and they are untrue, anyway), if we hold strongly onto them, we would be reborn as animals. If we teach such views to others, then we are creating for ourselves the subhuman states (as pretas or as asuras)<sup>271</sup> even in this life itself, and the hell-states in the hereafter. [6.1.2.3]

**9.1.3.4** We are all slaves to our views, trying to shape a world with them. What we are really shaping is our karma. When our views habituate us, fettering us to rituals and vows that reinforce such views, our mind devolves into an animal state even in this life itself. When we induce others into such false views, then we effectively narrow their minds so that they, too, are fettered by those views—this is a hellish crowdedness, where we are controlled by our views, we desire to control others through our views, even by mental and physical violence.<sup>272</sup>

When we realize that our views arise from some kind of self-identity, we begin to free ourselves from such views. When we understand how we create our own self-views, we are more likely not to depend on external realities but work to understand ourselves. When we accept that our self-view is but a phantom that tries to control us, we empower ourselves to turn away from the crowd and move towards the eightfold path.

A wholesome way to expedite our reaching the true path is to aspire for it, that is, to aspire for **stream-winning** in this life itself.<sup>273</sup> We live joyfully and clearly seeing impermanence—that everything must change, even our own views. As we become ever more free from our views, we progress on the path towards nirvana, when we are fully free from all views.

## 9.2 WHAT SURVIVES DEATH

### 9.2.1 Body and mind

**9.2.1.1** Now, we can usefully answer the question, “**What survives death?**” or more exactly, “Which part of us (our being of mind and body) continues after our body dies?” We have noted that we comprise body and mind [5.1.1.1]. Our body is our physical senses: all these have a shelf-life. Even before their expiration date, they begin to show signs of decay and malfunction. When a vital organ like the heart stops functioning, all these senses, too, stop feeding sense-data to the mind, and we surely die in due course. So, we can be certain that none of our physical body survives death in any conscious way.

<sup>268</sup> See SD 27.6b (4.1.1).

<sup>269</sup> On eternalism (*sassata, diṭṭhi*), see SD 1.1 (3).

<sup>270</sup> On annihilationism (*uccheda, diṭṭhi*), see SD 1.1 (3).

<sup>271</sup> Pretas are addictive beings, which would include those who use religion to accumulate wealth, power, and pleasure. Asuras are power-driven beings who measure others, and dominate and manipulate them for selfish purposes. In either case, religion, piety and social services are only a veneer for their false and selfish life-styles. See SD 2.22 (1.7).

<sup>272</sup> Take the case of the public executioner, **Tamba, dāṭhika**, who was such a violent man that he even volunteered to behead the gang of thieves who gave him refuge. He was so used to killing, that he was made the public executioner, and he beheaded thousands. He did not give this any thought, until late in his life, after his retirement. [7.4.3.2]

<sup>273</sup> See (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

**9.2.1.2** Our mind, too, is composite, comprising sense-contacts, feeling, perception, intention (or volition), and attention. “Sense-contacts” are the activities of our sense-faculties (seeing, hearing, etc), which we discern and evaluate with “feeling,” that is, whether we see them as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. The “intention” here refers to whether we are motivated by the unwholesome roots (greed, hate, or delusion) or by the wholesome roots (generosity, lovingkindness, or wisdom). “Attention” here refers to any of the 6 sense-consciousness, that is, our mind directed to the sense-object. These are the aspects of our mind that “name” things so that we can make sense of them.

**9.2.1.3** Collectively, all these constitute our cognitive consciousness:<sup>274</sup> this is what dies when the time comes. What remains is a tiny “fraction” of our mind, as it were, and this is called our **existential consciousness**, also called the subconscious [9.2.1.4]: *this is what is reborn*. Traditionally, this is called the “life continuum” (*bhav’āṅga*)<sup>275</sup> or rebirth consciousness (*paṭisandhi, citta*). The term used in the suttas is “gandharva”<sup>276</sup> (*gandhabba*) [3.1.1.2; 3.1.3] and so on.<sup>277</sup> While we actively live, the subconscious functions as our existential consciousness,<sup>278</sup> in contrast to our cognitive consciousness, which is the working of our physical senses and the mind.

The rebirth consciousness is the last moment of the subconscious in this life. If the rebirth is immediate, then it is identical with the **death-consciousness** (*cuti, citta*). However, if an in-between state follows—in the case of those who are not born immediately—then their death-consciousness is their last mind-moment before they are reborn into a new state.

**9.2.1.4 The subconscious** works like a seed in plants or like a biological gene. It contains our “karmic code,” which is carried on life after life. This karmic code is what regenerates into a new being, but with a familiar old karmic code. We continue where we left off in the last life, as it were.

Even in life, the subconsciousness exists as our existential consciousness [9.2.1.3]. However, when our senses cease to function, then we are left with our subconscious which has to move on. It has to seek a new body to function. **The intermediate state**, then, is the subconscious that exists by itself when it has no body in which to function. As such, it is, then, lacking any willful ability, pushed on only by craving and karma.<sup>279</sup>

## **9.2.2 Our karma survives death**

**9.2.2.1** Another way of talking about **dying** is that it is our karma that survives and continues after we die. “We” here refers to our conscious body (*sa, viññāṇaka, kāya*),<sup>280</sup> that is, the physical body and cognitive consciousness. It is in this sense that **the Cūḷa Kamma Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 135) says that

beings are owners of karma, heirs to karma, born in karma, bound by karma, have karma as their refuge. It is karma that divides beings into low and excellent. (M 135,4), SD 4.15

**9.2.2.2** Here are some **Dhammapada** verses that reflect on karma, death and rebirth, which fittingly close this study:

*Gabbham eke uppajjanti  
nirayaṃ pāpa, kammaṃ*

Some arise in the (human) womb;  
bad-doers arise in hell;

<sup>274</sup> On cognitive consciousness and existential consciousness, see SD 17.8a (3).

<sup>275</sup> See **Viññāṇa**, SD 17.8a (6.1) & **Nīvaraṇa**, SD 32.1 (3.8).

<sup>276</sup> This is an anglicization of the Skt word.

<sup>277</sup> See eg SD 2.17 (3+8).

<sup>278</sup> On their difference, see SD 17.8a (6.1.2).

<sup>279</sup> For a diagram showing the subconscious or rebirth-consciousness, see SD 17.8a, Fig 6.1.

<sup>280</sup> M 3:18, 32, 36; S 2:252 f, 3:80 f, 103, 136 f, 169 f; A 1:132-134, 4:53. The term invariably appears as *sa, viññāṇaka, kāya* in Comys (MA 4:94, 104; SA 2:214).



<i>saggam sugatino yanti parinibbanti anāsavā</i>	Those well-conducted go to heaven; the influx-free <sup>281</sup> attain nirvana.	(Dh 126)
<i>Idha socati pecca socati pāpa,kārī ubhayattha socati so socati so vihaññati disvā kamma,kiliṭṭham attano</i>	Here he sorrows, hereafter he sorrows: the bad-doer sorrows both ways. he sorrows, he is afflicted, seeing his own defiled deeds.	(Dh 15)
<i>Idha modati pecca modati kata,puñño ubhayattha socati so modati so padmodati disvā kamma,visuddham attano</i>	Here he rejoices, hereafter he rejoices: the good-doer rejoices both ways. he rejoices, he is inspired, seeing the purity of his deeds.	(Dh 16)
<i>Idha tappati pecca tappati pāpa,kārī ubhayattha socati pāpaṃ me katan'ti tappati bhiyyo tappati duggatiṃ gato</i>	Here he suffers, hereafter he suffers: the bad-doer suffers both ways. he suffers, thinking, "I've done bad!" He suffers even more, gone to a bad rebirth.	(Dh 17)
<i>Idha nandati pecca nandati kata,puñño ubhayattha nandati puññaṃ me katan'ti nandati bhiyyo nandati suggatiṃ gato</i>	Here he is happy, hereafter he is happy: the good-doer is happy both ways. he is happy, thinking, "I have done good." He's even more happy, gone to a good rebirth.	(Dh 18)

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<sup>281</sup> The influxes (*āsava*) are the samsaric flood-currents of sense-desires, existence, views and ignorance that drown us in ignorance and suffering.

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