

Bhava Sutta 1-2

The Discourse on Existence 1 & 2

[Karma, rebirth and existence]

(Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.76-77/1:223 f)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2007

Introduction

1 BHAVA IS A PROCESS. In Buddhism, personal existence is conceived as a dynamic process. The Commentaries distinguish between two constantly shifting phases of existence, namely, the karma process (*kamma, bhava*), when we engage in volitional activity, which sows the seeds of rebirth and future experiences, and the rebirth process (*upapatti, bhava*), when we experience the result of past karma and within which the karmic past bear its fruits.

The two **Bhava Suttas** (A 3.76 f) give a succinct explanation of how the karma-process generates the rebirth process and “further rebirth” [§2]. The two texts are almost identical, advocating karma (*kamma*) as what differentiates beings into their respective realms.¹ The two discourses differ only in the word for the content or nature of existence (*bhava*), or what is reborn and persists as “life.”

2 KEY TERMS. The Bhava Sutta 1 (A 3.76) uses the term “consciousness” (*viññāṇa*) [§1b] to refer to what is reborn and continues in subsequent lives, while the Bhava Sutta 2 (A 3.77) uses the words “volition” (*cetanā*) and “aspiration” (*paṭthāna*) [§1b].

Thus, too, Ānanda, karma is the field, consciousness is the seed, craving is the moisture,² for *<the consciousness>* *<the volition and the aspiration>* of beings, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, that is established in *<a low realm>* *<a middling realm>* *<a subtle realm>*.

Even so, Ānanda, there is further rebirth. Even so, Ānanda, there is existence.

Iti kho Ānanda kammaṃ khettaṃ viññāṇaṃ bījaṃ taṇhā sineho avijjā, nīvaraṇānaṃ sattānaṃ taṇhā, saṃyojanānaṃ <hīnāya dhātuyā | majjhimāya dhātuyā | paṇītāya dhātuyā> <viññāṇaṃ paṭiṭṭhitāṃ | cetanā paṭiṭṭhitā patthānā paṭiṭṭhitā>.

Evam āyatim puna-b, bhavābhiniḥatti hoti. Evam kho Ānanda bhavo hoti ti. [§1b etc]

The three terms are used synonymously here, but they also denote different aspects of the mental process related to rebirth and existence. More specifically, **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*) here refers to what is known in later, scholastic, Buddhism as “rebirth-linking” (*paṭisandhi*) or “rebirth consciousness” (*paṭisandhi citta*).³ A modern term for this would be “existential consciousness,” as contrasted with “cognitive consciousness,” which constitutes our daily waking experiences.⁴

Volition (*cetanā*) is another word for karma: “Volition, bhikkhus, is karma, I say! Having intended, one creates karma through body, speech and mind.” (A 6.63).⁵ This refers to any “intentional” action through the body, speech, or mind, that is motivated by any of the three unwholesome roots (greed, hate, or delusion). Such actions may be conscious or unconscious. For example, is we habitually make the **aspiration** (*paṭthāna*) for a heavenly birth, that thought is reinforced in the subconscious as a latent tendency or habitual karma. At the moment of dying, this habitual karma is very likely to dominate us, resulting in our being reborn in such a place.

¹ On karma, see **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41/1:285-290) = SD 5.7 & **Karma** = SD 18.1.

² This set of similes qu at SnA 2:429 & PaṭA 107. For the simile in a different context, see **Kasi Bhāra, dvāja S** (S 78.11/1:172 f = Sn 1.4).

³ See VbhA 155-160.

⁴ On these two terms, see **Viññāṇa** = SD 17(6.1).

⁵ *Cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi. Cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti kāyena vācāya manasā* (A 6.63/3:415) = SD 6.11.

Conversely, if we habitually live like an animal (that is, often driven by ignorance, fear, lust, or violence), then we are likely to be reborn as an animal. If we habitually live like an asura (often driven by appropriating things, using people, thirst for power, or violating others), then we are likely to be reborn as an asura. If we habitually live like a preta [hungry ghost] (often driven by neurotic desires or addictive habits, such as drug-taking, or gambling), then we are likely to be reborn as a preta. If we habitually live like a hell-being (constantly driven by violence, harming and killing), then we are likely to be reborn as a hell-being. If we habitually live like a god (often driven by charity, moral virtue, and mental stillness), then we are likely to be reborn as a deva. Above all, if we live healthily as a human being (cultivating charity, moral virtue, mental stillness, mindfulness and wisdom), then we are assured of spiritual liberation.

3 THE THREE WORLDS. Another interesting feature of the two discourses is their treatment of **the three realms** as “low” (*hīna dhātu*), “middling” (*majjhima dhātu*), and “subtle” (*paṇīta dhātu*), that is, the sense-world, the form world, and the formless world, respectively.

The “lowly” sense-realm (*kāma, dhātu*) [§1b] is the realm of beings dependent on some form of physical senses, and is the lowest of the three existential spheres. It comprises the human world, the subhuman realms (the hells, the animal kingdom, and the ghost realm of the departed), and the six lower heavens.⁶ It is said to be “low” (*hīna*) because the beings there are dependent on the physical senses and the mind.

The “middling” form realm (*rūpa, dhātu*) [§2] is the realm of blissful dhyanic existence of radiant fine-materiality,⁷ whose beings still have the faculties of seeing and hearing, but which along with the other physical senses are temporarily suspended in the four dhyanas.⁸ The beings of such realms are called brahmas (*brahmā*), or “high gods,” who normally have almost nothing to do with the sense world, since they are absorbed in their celestial dhyanic bliss. When they do appear in the sense-world, they apparently have to emerge from their dhyanic state.⁹

The “subtle” formless realm (*arūpa, dhātu*) [§3] comprises of beings of pure energy, that is, without any physical form whatsoever.¹⁰ They exist only as varying refined states of the four mental aggregates (feeling, perception, formations and consciousness). These beings have no contact with the sense-world whatsoever.¹¹

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⁶ That is, the heavens of the four great kings (*cātum, mahā, rājika*), the thirty-three (*tāva, tiṃsa*), the Yāma devas (*yāma*), the Tusita devas (*tusita*), the gods who delight in creation (*nimmāṇa, ratī*), and the gods who lord over the creations of others (*para, nimmīta, vasavattī*). Later systems add a sixth realm, the asuras or titans (*asura*). See **Saṅkhār’upapatti S** (M 120.6-11/3:100) = SD 3.4.

⁷ See **Saṅkhār’upapatti S** (M 120.12-32/3:100-103) = SD 3.4.

⁸ Notice that in **Dhamma, cakka-p, pavattana S** (S 56.11), the heavenly beings who exult at the Buddha’s having taught the first discourse only go as high as the 1st-dhyana Brahmas: see (S 56.11.18/5:423) = SD 1.1. The reason is that, as there is still some level of mentation—by way of initial and sustained applications (*vitakka, vicāra*)—these Brahmās are still in contact with the sense-world. In the realms beyond the 1st dhyana, thought process as we know it ceases completely so that they each exist in isolation as it were, each enjoying the glory of their meditative state as *pure light* for as long as their karma fuels it.

⁹ The most famous case of a brahma appearing on earth is that of Brahma Sahampati inviting the Buddha to teach the Dharma to the world: see: **Ariya, pariyesanā S** (M 26.19-21/1:167) = SD 1.11; **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14.3.1-7/2:36-40); the Vinaya (B 1:4-7); **Āyācana S** (S 6.1/1:136-138) = SD 12.2 esp Intro (1). See also the humorously instructive **Brahma, deva S** (S 6.3/1:140-142) = SD 12.4, where Brahma tells a brahminee that divine beings do not consume offerings made by sense-worldlings.

¹⁰ See **Saṅkhār’upapatti S** (M 120.33-36/3:103) = SD 3.4.

¹¹ On the view that the formless realm does *not* exist, see **Apaṇṇaka S** (M 60.29-31/1:410) = SD 35.5.

The First Discourse on Existence

(A 3.76/1:223 f)

1a Then, the venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed One. Having approached the Blessed One, he saluted him, and sat down at one side. Seated thus as one side, the venerable Ānanda said this to the Blessed One:

“‘Existence! Existence!’ venerable sir, so it is said. How does existence occur?”

1b “Now, Ānanda, if there were no karma ripening in the sense-realm, would there appear any sense-realm existence?

“No indeed, bhante.”

“Thus, too, Ānanda,
karma is the field,
consciousness is the seed,
craving is the moisture,

for *the consciousness* of beings, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, that is established in a **low realm**.

Even so, Ānanda, there is further rebirth. Even so, Ānanda, there is existence.”

2 “Now, Ānanda, if there were no karma ripening in the form-realm, would there appear any form-realm existence?

“No indeed, bhante.”

“Thus, too, Ānanda, karma is the field, consciousness is the seed, craving is the moisture, for *the consciousness* of beings, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, to be established in a **middling realm**.

Even so, Ānanda, there is further rebirth. Even so, Ānanda, there is existence.”

3 “Now, Ānanda, if there were no karma ripening in the formless realm, would there appear any formless realm existence? [224]

“No indeed, bhante.”

“Thus, too, Ānanda, karma is the field, consciousness is the seed, craving is the moisture, for *the consciousness* of beings, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, to be established in a **subtle realm**.

Even so, Ānanda, there is further rebirth. Even so, Ānanda, there is existence.”

— evaṃ —

The Second Discourse on Existence

(A 3.77/1:224)

1a Then, the venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed One. Having approached the Blessed One, he saluted him, and sat down at one side. Seated thus as one side, the venerable Ānanda said this to the Blessed One:

“‘Existence! Existence!’ venerable sir, so it is said. How does existence occur?”

1b “Now, Ānanda, if there were no karma ripening in the sense-realm, would there appear any sense-realm existence?

“No indeed, bhante.”

“Thus, too, Ānanda,
karma is the field,
consciousness is the seed,
craving is the moisture,

for *the volition and the aspiration* of beings, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, that are established in a **low realm**.

Even so, Ānanda, there is further rebirth. Even so, Ānanda, there is existence.”

2 “Now, Ānanda, if there were no karma ripening in the form-realm, would there appear any form-realm existence?

“No indeed, bhante.”

“Thus, too, Ānanda, karma is the field, consciousness is the seed, craving is the moisture, for *the volition and the aspiration*, of beings, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, to be established in a **middling realm**.

Even so, Ānanda, there is further rebirth. Even so, Ānanda, there is existence.”

3 “Now, Ānanda, if there were no karma ripening in the formless realm, would there appear any formless realm existence?

“No indeed, bhante.”

“Thus, too, Ānanda, karma is the field, consciousness is the seed, craving is the moisture, for *the volition and the aspiration*, of beings, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, to be established in a **subtle realm**.

Even so, Ānanda, there is further rebirth. Even so, Ānanda, there is existence.”

— evaṃ —

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