

2.3 Have We Met Before? A Buddhist Perspective on Rebirth

By Piya Tan ©2003

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1. PROBLEM OF REBIRTH

Most Buddhists take the teaching of rebirth for granted. But little do we realize that it is one of the most difficult doctrines in Buddhism to prove since it is currently beyond our experience, or we are usually unable to recall any such experience.

If we regard the God idea of the theistic religions as a problem to God-believers, then I think that rebirth is a parallel problem to the Buddhists. Of course, both faithful Christians and confident Buddhists would claim they have no problem whatsoever with the respective teachings. That is so long as they do not think about it and no one asks the right (or wrong) questions!

And today we are going to ask a lot of questions. We will even play the devil's advocate. In other words, I do not promise to answer every problem here. But as long as we ask questions and freely do so, as is the Buddhist tradition, then the answers await us in due time.

2. REINCARNATION OR REBIRTH?

Scholars use a number of big words in connection with rebirth: reincarnation, metempsychosis, metempsychosis, transmigration of the soul, even renaissance.

Reincarnation simply means "taking physical form again", in other words, a physical body is involved. For Buddhists, rebirth may occur in a formless realm.

Metempsychosis is not a disease, but a Greek-derived word, meaning "the passing of the soul (psyche) into another body (a human or animal). In Buddhism, we do not accept the idea of an unchanging soul. Moreover, we believe that rebirth can occur in forms other than human or animal, such as hell-being, asura demon, or heavenly being.

Metempsychosis is another Greek-derived word, meaning "the migration into one body of different souls". Again Buddhists find this definition problematic.

Transmigration is a literal translation of the previous two Greek terms. These three terms can be used in connection with the Hindu doctrine of rebirth.

Renaissance is French for "rebirth" but has been used exclusive in the cultural and historical sense in English.

Palingenesis, the condition of continued becoming is the best technical term for "rebirth" as understood by the Buddhists. Interestingly, it is also the Greek term for the Christian idea of "rebirth" in the sense of being "born again" after baptism. But the connection is only in word, not in the spirit.

So we are happily stuck with rebirth or, less commonly, rebecoming.

3. REBIRTH IN BUDDHISM

Brahmanism, and its later form, Hinduism, teach that the soul is an emanation of the Param'ātman (Supreme Soul) to which, after its wanderings in the world, it will in the end return.

The Buddhist technical term for rebirth is *puna-b.bhava* (Pali) or *punar.bhava* (Skt), literally meaning "re-becoming". The term is free of the idea that anything permanent or substantial passes over in the process. Later Buddhist literature, however, mostly use *paṭisandhi* (lit. "reunion, relinking").

THE BUDDHA'S KNOWLEDGE OF REBIRTH

The Buddha's doctrine of rebirth explains some difficult points, such as human inequality and the existence of suffering, which other religions have great difficulties explaining. This is the classic passage

of the Buddha's claim to the Three Knowledges (*tevijjā*) (stock passages taken from the Bhaya.bherava Sutta, M no. 4; also V 1:3-4; M nos. 7, 77):

(1) Knowledge of the recollection of past lives.

When my concentrated mind was thus purified...and unshakable, I directed it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives [Vism 13:13-71]. I recollected my manifold past lives..., many aeons of world-contraction and expansion....

(2) Knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings.

...I directed [my mind] to knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings [Vism 13:71-101]. With the divine eye (*dibba.cakkhu*) [clairvoyant vision], purified and supernatural, I saw beings passing away and reappearing, the inferior and the superior, the beautiful and the ugly, the fortunate and the unfortunate. I understood how beings pass on according to their deeds....

(3) Knowledge of the destruction of the defilements.

This knowledge ends rebirth: attainment of Nirvana.

...I directed [my mind] to knowledge of the destruction of the mental cankers. I directly knew: "This is suffering... This is the origin of suffering... This is the cessation of suffering... This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering."

(4) Declaration of enlightenment.

The Buddha attains Nirvana.

...When I knew and saw thus... I directly knew: "Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done is what had to be done, there is no more coming to any state of being".

(M 1:22 f; Sn 502)

4. PROOFS OF REBIRTH

There are 5 kinds of evidence: spontaneous, experimental, experiential, scriptural and spiritual.

(A) SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE

This is what has been mentioned in the previous section.

In modern terms, the first 2 knowledges are called retrocognition.

(B) SPONTANEOUS EVIDENCE

Geniuses. Child prodigies could have inherited their genius from past lives.

Christian Heineken: talked within a few hours of his birth at Lübeck (W. Germany in 1721. He could repeat passages from the Bible at 1, answer questions on geography at 2, speak French and Latin at 3, and at 4 was a student of philosophy. He died before he was 5.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), the British philosopher, could read Greek at 3. By his eighth year he had read the original Greek Aesop's *Fables*, Xenophon's *Anabasis* [Greco-Persian war 5th cent. BC] and the whole of the historian Herodotus. At 8 he started learning Latin, the geometry of Euclid and algebra, and began to teach the younger children of the family.

(C) EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE

(1) Theodore Flournoy made the earliest recorded experiments by a psychologist. He was a professor of psychology in the University of Geneva. He recorded his data and findings in a book called *Des Indes à la Planète Mars*, Geneva, 1899.

Flournoy experimented with one of his Swiss subjects and recorded that she was an Arab chief's daughter who married a Hindu prince about 4 centuries before. The subject spoke and wrote Arabic and

Prakrit, which she knew in the regressed state, but not in her normal life. She also gave details of experiences in that life, re-enacting and reliving some of the scenes.

(2) Dr. H.J. Eysenck recorded the case of a Mrs. Smith whose work necessitated her going into various hospitals but in doing so she experienced a very strong fear reaction. The sight of hairy arms or knives also produced such a reaction.

Under hypnotic age-regression, she was able to recall and relive the incidents that were responsible for her condition. It all arose from the shock caused by a mastoidectomy¹ performed on her at the age of 16 months. (*Sense and Nonsense in Psychology*, Penguin, 1958)

(3) Phobias. Most of our phobias can, in fact, be traced to past experiences, whether in the historical present or in previous lives.

(D) EXPERIENTIAL EVIDENCE

(1) Personal recollection.

Some people could simply give an account of their past lives without being induced in any way.

(2) Dr. Ian Stevenson.

He did one of the best scientific studies on rebirth: *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, NY, 1966). The accounts were given by persons, mainly children, of their alleged past lives, which when subsequently check, prove to be historical and accurate and could not have been derived from any normal source in this life.

(3) *Déjà vu*.

This is the feeling of “I’ve been here before!” This feeling could apply to places as well as people, especially those we met for the first time.

The American couple in Bombay. The couple, visiting Bombay for the first time, found some parts of the city to be very familiar to them. To test their knowledge, they went to a certain spot, where they expected to see a house and a banyan tree in the garden. A policeman informed them that he recalled having heard from his father that they (the house and the tree) had, in fact, been there before, and that the house belonged to a family called Bhan. Curiously, this couple had called their son Bhan because they liked the name! (W.C. White, *Beyond the Five Senses*, NY, 1957)

(4) Edgar Cayce.

His life and doings are recorded in Dr. Gina Cerminara’s *Many Mansions I* (NY: Sloane. 1950). There is strong evidence that Cayce had remarkable clairvoyant powers, that is, personal actions or abilities regarding things beyond the normal human senses, things hidden from sight or at a great distance. For example, he diagnosed illness sometimes from a distance without seeing the patient.

More remarkable, he went on to give accounts of the prior lives of some of these individuals, and also gave the alleged karmic causes of their present illnesses. Like child prodigies, Cayce must have inherited his knowledge and abilities from his past lives.

(5) Our untrained mind.

If our minds are untrained, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to recall our past experiences. When it is so difficult for us to recollect what we did last year, last month, last week, or even yesterday, how could we recall our deeds in past lives?

But through proper meditation practice, we will be able to recollect past lives, if we choose to.

(E) PERSONAL (OR SPIRITUAL) EVIDENCE

This is our own experience of rebirth resulting from our meditation. However, as long as we are not yet enlightened, our ability of retrocognition may not be totally correct, or our evaluation of our perceptions may be faulty. It is possible that we may “think” that we were so and so in our past lives.

My experiences in Thailand. My Thai sounded *Isan* (NE Thailand). My best friends are from there, etc. And the food I like is also *Isan*! I also find it easier learning Thai than learning Mandarin!

¹ An operation on a bone behind the ear.

5. PROBLEMS OF REBIRTH

Philosophers and opponents of rebirth have forwarded various possible reasons for rejecting it. The most common and important arguments against rebirth are:

(A) The lack of memories of former lives.

Basically, this argument is: we cannot remember any past lives. I've already given at least 3 answers against this argument:

1. We have very short memory span.
2. Spontaneous recall of past lives.
3. Various methods can be used to recall rebirth (for example, meditation),

BUDDHIST EXPLANATIONS

Analogy of milk. A bowl of milk is left standing and the next day turns to curds. Although they are physically different, they are sequences in the same process (Miln 40 f, 48).

A lamp burns in the 3 watches of the night. Is the flame the same or different? "It is not the same, and it is not another." (Miln 40; cf. 47 where the flame burns a village.)

Analogy of the candles. One candle is burning. It lights another candle. The flame is "passed on". It is the same, yet not the same flame. (The flame arose because of proper conditions.) [This analogy also illustrates not-self.]

(B) The fact of population growth.

Simply stated, there are more people on earth now than say a millennium ago. Now where did the extra souls come from? (This question has several assumptions that do not apply to the Buddhist doctrine.)

1. Buddhists do not believe in a permanent soul. So we need not imagine a fixed number of souls waiting around in some heaven to be reborn as a human on earth.
2. It is possible that some dying people's thoughts influence more than one "being-to-be-born" (foetus) at a time.
3. It is possible that lower animals may be reborn as humans.
4. There are many other realms of existence. Any of these alien beings may be reborn on earth as a human. Buddha once tells Ananda:

As far as the sun and moon move in their course and light up all the quarters with their radiance, so far extends the thousandfold world-system. Therein there are a thousand moons, a thousand suns, a thousand Sumerus, lords of mountains: a thousand Rose-apple Lands [Indias], a thousand Western Continents [*Aparagoyāna*], a thousand Northern Continents [*Uttara.kur*^], a thousand Eastern Continents [*Pubba,videhā*]; four thousand mighty oceans... [along with a thousand of each of the various heavens.] This, Ananda, is called "The system of the thousand lesser worlds".

(A 1:227)

The Buddha goes on to tell Ananda of "a system a thousandfold the size of this [system]" and "a system a thousandfold the size of this is called 'The Thrice-a-thousand Mighty Thousandfold World System'" (*ti,sāhassa.mahā,sāhassa.loka,dhātu*).²

The Buddha then tells Ananda that "his voice" could be heard throughout this vast world system or even farther!

6. WHAT IS REBORN?

From the analogy of the candles (point 8b above), it is clear that nothing is transferred during rebirth. However, in order to talk about it as a process, we need to use concepts. Such a concept is the

² On the world systems, see, for example, Randy Kloetzli, *Buddhist Cosmology*. Delhi: MLBD, 1985: ch 3.

intermediate state (*antarā.bhava*) or *intermediate being* (*antarā,bhava.sattva*) which links one birth-moment to the next.

The dying and rebirth process, for example, according to the Tibetan tradition, may last up to 49 days. During that time, the “conscious principle” or “psychic factor” (*rnam shes*)³ of the deceased encounters many visions that are the personification of his own past karma.

The actor in the “out-of-body experiences” and the “near-death experiences” is this *intermediate being*, which is your own consciousness. [See Lecture 2,14.]

The Metta Sutta has an interesting term, *sambhavesī*, “those seeking birth” (M 1:48, S 11:11):

bh[^]tā vā sambhavesī vā / sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhit'attā

Those already born or those seeking birth: May all beings be happy-minded!

The term, *sambhavesī*, evidently refers to the “intermediate being”. The Pali texts also refer to this “intermediate being” or “being-to-be-born” as *gandhabba* (Skt *gandharva*), in which case it is the object of rebirth consciousness (*paṭisandhi.citta*

As such, it is consciousness that is reborn.

7. HOW REBIRTH OCCURS

The difference between death and birth is only one thought-moment. The last thought-moment in this life becomes the first thought-moment in the next life. As such, the Khuddaka.pāṭha Comy records the Buddha as saying:

When the Aggregates arise, decay and die, O monks, every moment you are reborn,
decay and die.” (KhA 78)

So life is a moment to moment, and we have to prepare well for each new moment.

8. MOMENT OF CONCEPTION

According to the **Mahā,taṇhā.saṅkhaya Sutta**, the Buddha teaches that for the conception of an embryo, the following 3 conditions must be present:

1. the union of the mother and the father;
2. the mother’s season; and
3. the being-to-be-born (*gandhabba*) is present. (M 1:266, 2:157; Miln 123 ff.)

In other words, for life to arise, the biological conditions alone are not enough: a conscious being must be present, too.

9. WHAT IF REBIRTH IS FALSE?

The Buddhist teaching is that life continues after death. So death is *not* goodbye, but just a brief *farewell!*

Imagine if there were no rebirth—that this is our only life, and death is the final end of all things as we know them. Then:

- (a) Suicide could be seen as an easy solution to an existence perceived as inherently more painful than pleasurable.
- (b) Hedonism, the total abandonment to pleasure, would be widely practised. People would try to enjoy life and take advantage of other people and nature as much as they can since they will not face any consequences in future lives.

³ On the term “psychic factor”, first used by Prof. C.D. Broad, see John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, London: Macmillan, 1976, 1985: 344.

- (c) Self-interest (egoism). People would take advantage of others and everything else (esp. Nature) for selfish ends.

THE FOUR SOLACES

At the end of the **Kālāma Sutta** (A 3:62, Vibh 378), the Buddha says that if a disciple were to have a mind free of greed, hate and delusion, he stands to enjoy the four solaces:

1. If there is rebirth and karma, then after death, he will be born into a happy world.
2. If there is neither rebirth nor karma, still he lives in this world safe and happy.
3. Suppose evil deeds have evil consequences: he worries not because he has done no evil and so faces no evil consequences.
4. Suppose evil deeds have no evil consequences: he enjoys the best of both worlds!

10. BUDDHIST PURPOSE OF LIFE

Many are born *Homo sapiens*, but how many evolve into humans?

Greed turns us into hungry ghosts.

Hatred makes us demons.

Delusion changes us into animals.

Indeed, it is often said in the Buddhist scriptures that to be born a human is a very rare and wonderful thing indeed:

Rare is birth as a human being.

Hard is the life of mortals.

Hard it is to hear the True Dharma.

Rare is the arising of Buddhas. (Dh 182)

Conversely, now that we are born as human beings, now that we can listen to the True Dharma, now that we are living in a Buddha age, we are extremely fortunate. Hence, we can fulfill life's true purpose: to grow, to evolve into liberated beings.

11. REBIRTH AS A LESSON

Rebirth (or the doctrine of rebirth) implies that we are a part of this unimaginably vast network of living beings, Indra's Net of Jewels, spanning the whole universe, covering the three periods of time. We have been mothers and fathers to one another; we have been sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, to one another. Conversely, we also have played the role of bad guys, of enemies and villains, even of Devadatta and Mara. But there is always hope if we understand our true higher nature.

Thich Nhat Hanh, in *Peace is Every Step*, relates how he was affected by the story of the Vietnamese boat people who suffered in the high seas off Thailand. One day he received a letter telling him about how a young girl on a small boat was raped by a Thai pirate. His first reaction was one of anger at the pirate. You will naturally take the girl's side, he said. It's easy. You only have to take a gun and shoot the pirate.

But what if you are the pirate? You were born and raised in the pirates' village; then you would grow up into a pirate yourself. This is because educators, social workers, politicians, and others did not do something, or did not do enough about the situation. If we were born in those fishing villages, we may become sea pirates years later. If you take a gun and shoot them, then *you* shoot all of us, because all of us are to some extent responsible for this state of affairs.

After a long meditation, he wrote this poem, one of the most moving Buddhist poems in our time, entitled "Please Call Me by My True Names", because we have so many names.

*Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow
because even today I still arrive.*

*Look deeply: I arrive in every second
to be a bud on a spring branch,*

*to be a tiny bird, with wings still fragile,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.*

*I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
in order to fear and to hope.
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and
death of all that are alive.*

*I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river,
and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time to eat the mayfly.*

*I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond,
and I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence,
feeds itself on the frog.*

*I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchants, selling deadly weapons to Uganda.*

*I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate,
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.*

*I am a member of the politburo, with plenty of power in my hands,
and I am the man who has to pay his "debt of blood" to my people,
dying slowly in a forced labor camp.*

*My joy is like spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in all walks of life.
My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills the four oceans.*

*Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.*

*Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion.*

(Peace is Every Step. London: Rider, 1991:123 f.)

—evam—