

# 1 Rebirth in Early Buddhism and Its Significance

Understanding karma and survival without any abiding agent

A survey by Piya Tan ©2020

“What’s past is prologue.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 2, scene 1, line 253, Antonio to Sebastian.

## 1 Rebirth: believe or accept?

### 1.1 THE BUDDHA'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Although the ancient Indians reportedly believed in **rebirth** (*punabbhava*)<sup>2</sup> or were at least aware of it, the suttas and Commentaries consistently report the Buddha's **direct knowledge** or personal verification of rebirth experiences both of his own and of others. For us, the unawakened, who have no such powers, we should at least be properly informed of this key early Buddhist teaching.

### 1.2 A MODERN CASE SUGGESTIVE OF REBIRTH

**1.2.2** Fortunately, by the time this chapter was due to be written the learned scholar monk and meditator, **Analayo Bhikkhu** of Germany, has published one of the most remarkable scholarly researches on rebirth [2018]. It started as a documented study of the **xenoglossy** [12.1.1] exhibited by a young Sri Lankan boy, Dhammaruwan, who was able to spontaneously recite ancient Pali texts [12.4].

Analayo's present work gives greater emphasis on **the Āgamas**, the Chinese versions of the Pali suttas. Yet, these same materials found in the Pali suttas give a fuller treatment of the topics at hand. Hence, in this study, the emphasis is on **the suttas**, with the Āgama versions as support where relevant.

This study is partly based on Analayo's work, which should be read in full, especially his study of Dhammaruwan (ch IV and Conclusion: Transcriptions of sutta texts recited by Dhammaruwan). SD 57.1, however, not only focuses on the Pali texts, but also on the practice aspects of the teachings on karma and rebirth.

**1.2.3** Vasubandhu's Sanskrit classic **Abhidharma,kośa and Bhāṣya** (it's autocommentary), of Sarvāstivāda tradition (late 4<sup>th</sup> century CE), have also been extensively used here in the discussion on the intermediate state [3.4.2]. He gives many helpful details not found in the Pali suttas and also affirms sutta teachings. This work also benefits from Analayo's extensive references, to which are added further readings, especially from the suttas.

**1.2.4** Since a key theme of this paper is that "the mind can be independent of the body and the brain," this paper should be read with the closely related study, **Meditation, the brain and survival** (SD 24.5).

### 1.3 ASSESSMENT OF REBIRTH BELIEF

**1.3.1** Like many informed Buddhists, rebirth for me personally is not a crucial issue, since I find no reason not to believe in it; I accept it, in principle at least, as it is taught in the suttas. I would also welcome any scientific or academic study on rebirth, even those with compelling evidence that rebirth is impossible. Such findings would be of great interest to me in understanding how science and the academic mind work. It would be highly unlikely that such learning would bring any major change in my acceptance of rebirth as taught by the Buddha.

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<sup>2</sup> "Rebirth" is the widely accepted translation for *punabbhava*, "again-becoming." Reincarnation properly means "taking a physical body again," which is only one aspect of rebirth as taught in early Buddhism. Metempsychosis (Latin from Gk: *meta*, "with, after, from" + *empsychos*, "animate," from *en-* + *psykhē*, "breath, life, soul") is not only technical but also suggest the involvement of a "soul."

### 1.3.2 Not a dogma but a truth to be verified

**1.3.2.1** In the spirit of early Buddhism, we are not required, even as Buddhists, to blindly believe in rebirth. If there is any good reason for us not to accept any teachings on rebirth, we judiciously set them aside since early Buddhism is a quest for true reality.

Even some prominent monks in the Thai tradition were known to reject the rebirth doctrine. One of Thailand's best known kings, Mongkut (1804-1868), during the time of his monkhood (1824-1851), was often skeptical of the existence of heaven and hell or any kind of future state or rebirth.<sup>3</sup>

**1.3.2.2** One of Thailand's best known monks and teachers, Buddhadasa often spoke and wrote of rebirth in terms of our practice of understanding and cultivating the good and avoiding the bad in this life itself. He often interpreted even canonical references to rebirth in a metaphorical manner.<sup>4</sup>

As practising Buddhists, we begin with having faith in, even a provisional acceptance, of the Buddha's teachings, especially on **karma and rebirth**, which are, after all, taught in an empirical manner (*yathā, bhūta*) or in a metaphorical manner (*pariyāyena*). Our task, then, is to see how these teachings work in the real world, in our own life. The best tool for our task is our understanding of the suttas: the ancient and authentic records of the historical Buddha's teachings.

To understand the suttas, we must befriend them, be well connected with them, in a way, like how we get and read our daily papers, or use our phone to communicate with others. In this case, we learn to know and live the suttas. We begin by studying what we find interesting in the suttas and build up our understanding of them by "link and sense."

The **link** is how we connect with the suttas and remember their teachings. The **sense** is our growing insight into the suttas, seeing how they connect with one another, and with true reality. All this helps in our Dharma practice and spiritual progress.

**1.3.3** As one who practises early Buddhism and who respectfully values academic learning, I am confident that good scientific and academic research would actually help us better understand rebirth. My task is to search the suttas and understand, as it really is (*yathā, bhūta*), what the Buddha teaches, especially of karma and rebirth. My respect for academic discipline hopefully will prime and prepare me for careful reading and insight into the suttas and related teachings, as may be seen in this study.

## I. EARLY BUDDHIST TEACHING ON REBIRTH

### 2 Dependent arising

#### 2.1 THE 12 LINKS

**2.1.1** The teaching of **dependent arising** (*paṭicca samuppāda*) is a key early Buddhist teaching. When we "see" (understand) it, we are said to have understood the Dharma.<sup>5</sup> Oddly, it is not explained in full as the other key teachings such as the noble eightfold path [SD 10.16] or the 5 faculties [SD 56b]. We will

<sup>3</sup> On king Mongkut's skepticism of rebirth, see eg **Bradley**, "Prince Mongkut and Jesse Caswell," 1966:39, and **Reynolds**, "Buddhist cosmography in Thai history," 1976:212.

<sup>4</sup> On Buddhadasa's metaphorical interpretation of rebirth, see, eg, **Gabaude**, "Thai society and Buddhadasa," 1990:214 and **Seeger**, "How long is a lifetime?" 2005:111-115.

<sup>5</sup> **Mahā Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 28,28.3/1:190,37), SD 6.16; the Chin parallel, MĀ 30 (T1.26.467a9).

here examine *the fullest form* of dependent arising formula: the 12 links. Then, we will look closer at two of the links: consciousness and name-and-form [2.4].

Although the full cycle is often called “**the 12 links**” (*nidāna*, or “causal links”), they are actually “supports” (*pacaya*); hence, their activity is technically called “dependent co-arising” (*paṭicca samuppāda*) or “dependent mode” (*paccaṃyākāra*). As such, they connect with one another but in only 11 ways, that is, by the linking *proximately* with one another.<sup>6</sup> The 12 links are as follows:<sup>7</sup>

(1) ignorance	<i>avijjā</i>
(2) (volitional) formations	<i>saṅkhārā</i>
(3) consciousness	<i>viññāṇa</i>
(4) name-and-form	<i>nāma,rūpa</i>
(6) the 6 sense-bases	<i>saḷ-āyatana</i>
(7) contact	<i>phassa</i>
(8) feeling	<i>vedanā</i>
(9) craving	<i>taṇhā</i>
(9) clinging	<i>upādānā</i>
(10) becoming (existence)	<i>bhava</i>
(11) birth	<i>jāti</i>
(12) decay and death	<i>jarā,maraṇa</i>

**2.1.2** Contemporary teachers and scholars of Buddhism seem divided in their view of dependent arising into 4 main views. The 1<sup>st</sup>, the predominant “traditional,” view is the mainstream, following the commentarial tradition, sees the 12 links as straddling over **3 lives**, that is, the links are taken literally and objectively as stages in our samsaric lives.<sup>8</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> view, the “reformist,” sees dependent arising as occurring in the present moment (Buddhadāsa)<sup>9</sup> or non-temporally as the framework of existence (Ñāṇavīra).<sup>10</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> or “historical” camp views that the Buddha originally teaches dependent arising as a rejection, even a parody, of Vedic cosmogony.<sup>11</sup> The Buddha demythologizes the Vedic speculation on the nature of universe to show the conditioned arising of *dukkha*, “unsatisfactoriness.”<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, all these views are correct in their own way and represent the multi-faceted nature of the Buddha’s teachings, including dependent arising. This is the 4<sup>th</sup> approach, which is the open “view” of dependent arising. In *theory*, dependent arising explains conditionality; in *practice*, it is to uproot ignorance and so overcome *dukkha*. And *dukkha* is the recurring content of rebirth, as we shall see.

## 2.2 SPECIFIC CONDITIONALITY

**2.2.1** The goal of early Buddhist practice is to free oneself from being afflicted with *dukkha*. The conditionality of *dukkha* is best reflected in the principle of underlying dependent arising itself, that of **speci-**

<sup>6</sup> See SD 5.16 (1.4.2).

<sup>7</sup> On the 12 links of dependent arising, see SD 5.16 (4).

<sup>8</sup> See SD 5.16 (8.2, 10); for **Bodhi**’s defence: “A critical examination of Ñāṇavīra Thera’s ‘A note on Paṭiccasamuppāda,’ 1988ab; also **Jones**, “New light on the twelve *nidānas*,” 2009:243-245.

<sup>9</sup> See eg **Bucknell & Stuart-Fox**, “The ‘three knowledges’ of Buddhism,” 1983:104; **Seeger**, “How long is a life-time?” 2005; also SD 5.16 (9, 11).

<sup>10</sup> See **Jones**, op cit 2009:245-247 (Buddhadāsa’s view) [below]; 247-249 (Ñāṇavīra’s view).

<sup>11</sup> See **Jurewicz**, “Playing with fire,” 2000; see also **Gombrich**, “Obsessions with origins,” 2003, 11-14 and **Jones**, op cit 2009.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion: **Anālayo**, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 2003:243-245.

**fic conditionality**, which is simply the occurrence of 12 links, or better, the 12 “linkings.” This key process is often tersely stated in the suttas as follows:

<i>Imasmim sati</i>	<i>idam hoti</i>	when this is,	that is,	
<i>imass’uppādā</i>	<i>idam uppajjati</i>	with this arising,	that arises;	
<i>imasmim asati</i>	<i>idam na hoti</i>	when this is not,	that is not,	
<i>imassa nirodhā</i>	<i>idam nirujjhati</i>	with this ending,	that ends.	(S 12.21/2:28) <sup>13</sup>

**2.2.2** The principle of **specific conditionality** works in the same way *both* for dependent arising (the arising of *suffering*), and for dependent ending (the removal of *ignorance*). The cycle of dependent arising begins with ignorance which snowballs through the various links leading up to *suffering*. **Dependent ending** starts with the non-arising of ignorance which progressively breaks the various links resulting in the *ending* of suffering.<sup>14</sup>

These 2 cycles are, in fact, the same as the 1<sup>st</sup> + 2<sup>nd</sup> noble truths (suffering and its arising) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> + 4<sup>th</sup> truths (ending of suffering, and the path to its ending), respectively. The principle of specific conditionality is versatile, and works with dependent arising with 10, 9, or even 5 links. The suttas mention several such variant listings, confirming that the 12-link cycle is merely a prominent occurrence but not the only case of the principle of specific conditionality.

## 2.3 DEPENDENT ARISING: THE MOMENT OR OVER 3 CONSECUTIVE LIVES?

### 2.3.1 A cycle over 3 consecutive lives

In the standard cycle of dependent arising, “**birth**” (*jāti*), according to **the (Nidāna) Vibhaṅga Sutta** (S 12.2) and its parallels, should be understood as referring to the birth of living beings<sup>15</sup> [2.2.2]. The Commentaries, however, interpret this 12-link cycle as extending over 3 consecutive lives. The 3-life interpretation is, in fact, also found in **the Paṭisambhidā, magga**, an Abhidhamma work found in the 5<sup>th</sup> Nikāya of the Pāli canon,<sup>16</sup> whose presentation in several ways builds on **the Vibhaṅga**.<sup>17</sup> Such an interpretation is also found in the Jñānaprasthāna, an important work in the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma.<sup>18</sup>

### 2.3.2 A momentary cycle

On the other hand, **the Vibhaṅga**, a key canonical text in the Theravāda Abhidharmas, depicts the cycle of 12 links as occurring in a single mind moment.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, this is not a specific Theravāda sectarian notion. Similarly, the Mahāvibhāṅgā,<sup>20</sup> a massive compendium that builds on the Jñānaprasthāna, says that all 12 links could operate within *a single mind moment*.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>13</sup> **Dasa Bala S 2** (S 12.22/2:28,18), SD 63.15, which as a sequel to **Dasa Bala S 1** (S 12.21/2:28,7), SD 63.14; its Skt parallel is SHT VI 1457 R1 (**Bechert & Wille** 1989:143; **Waldschmidt** 1958:388 §3). The Chin version is found eg in SĀ 348 (T2.99.98a16-17). See also **Speyer**, *Avadāna, śataka*, vol 2, 1909:105,15. For nn: SD 5.6 (2).

<sup>14</sup> On these 2 cycles as the meaning and the purpose of life, respectively, see SD 1.1 (4.0.1).

<sup>15</sup> S 12.2/2:3,6 (SD 5.15), and its parallels in Skt fragments, **Tripāṭhī**, *Fünfundzwanzig Sūtras des Nidānasamyukta*, 1962:162,7 (§16.14); in Chin, SĀ 298 (T2.99.85b11), T2.124.547c24; and Tib, D 4094 ju 140b1 or Q 5595 tu 161a8.

<sup>16</sup> Pm 1:52,19.

<sup>17</sup> See eg **Warder**, Pm intro, 1982:xxxv.

<sup>18</sup> T26.1544.921b17 states that 2 links pertain to the past (ignorance and formations), 2 to the future (birth and decay together with death), and the remaining 8 links pertain to the present.

<sup>19</sup> Vibh 144,2; this is, in fact, Buddhadāsa’s view [above].

<sup>20</sup> See eg **Cox**, *Disputed Dharmas*, 1995:34.

<sup>21</sup> T27.1545.118c7.

### 2.3.3 Complementarity

In sum, it seems that, from the perspective of the Sarāstivāda and the Theravāda Abhidharma and commentaries, the two interpretations—the momentary cycle and the 3-life cycle of dependent arising—are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary perspectives. This interesting complementarity is, in fact, clearly evident in the suttas, in that the teaching of dependent arising concerns a basic principle of **conditionality** that, although not confined to rebirth, all the same, most certainly applies to being reborn.

## 2.4 CONSCIOUSNESS AND NAME-AND-FORM

### 2.4.1 The Mahā, nidāna Sutta (D 15)

**2.4.1.1 The Mahā, nidāna Sutta (D 15)** and its parallels give a detailed exposition of dependent arising that throws significant light for a better understanding of the early Buddhist teaching of rebirth. The Sutta records the Buddha as instructing the elder Ānanda on the profound nature of dependent arising. The Buddha uses the term “**specific condition**” (*idap, paccaya*) [2.2] for each of the 9 phases of dependent arising listed.

He traces dependent arising from the bottom up, starting with defining **decay and death**; then, **birth**; followed by **existence**, and so on, until the conditioned arising of **name-and-form** from **consciousness**. Next, the Sutta presents consciousness and name-and-form as standing in a reciprocal conditioned relationship to each other, that is, in a “looped” dependent arising. We will soon see how this looped dependent arising helps us to appreciate the early Buddhist conception of rebirth.<sup>22</sup> [2.5.1.1]

**2.4.1.2** The Dīrgha, āgama<sup>23</sup> version of the Mahā, nidāna Sutta, too, presents this reciprocal cycle in the following way, similarly found in the parallel versions:<sup>24</sup> Name-and-form conditions consciousness, and consciousness conditions name-and-form. This enigmatic statement needs explanation. In the early Buddhist texts, “consciousness” (*viññāṇa*) refers to the mind’s ability to be conscious *of* something, that is, *of form*, that is, any kind of “external” sense-object cognizable to any of our senses. In short, this is a sort of “mind-matter” dichotomy: the well known “**name-and-form**” (*nāma, rūpa*).

“**Form**” (*rūpa*) represents the “material” side, the matter, of experience, which also includes form as “fine-material” or “subtle matter” dimension of the celestial realms described in early Buddhist cosmology. “**Name**” (*nāma*) refers to the functions of the mind *apart from consciousness*.<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that in dependent arising, name does *not* include consciousness (as found in later tradition). Otherwise, the reciprocal conditioning link relationship between consciousness and name-and-form would imply consciousness as self-conditioning or that there are two separate consciousnesses. This becomes clear when we examine another related key text [2.4.2.1].

<sup>22</sup> D 15, 2.2/2:56,31 + 21/2:62,38 (SD 5.17).

<sup>23</sup> Dīrgha, āgama (DĀ) is the Chin tr of the Skt version of the Dīgha, nikāya, prob belonging to Mūla, sarvāstivāda.

<sup>24</sup> DĀ 13 (T1.1.61b20); MĀ 97 (T1.26.580a1); T1.14.243c2; T1.52.845b11.

<sup>25</sup> See, eg, **Ñāṇavīra**, *Clearing the Path*, 1987:76; Harvey, “The mind-body relationship in early Buddhism,” 1993: 32; **Ñāṇamoli**, *A Pali-English Glossary of Buddhist Technical Terms*, 1994:56; **Hamilton**, *Identity and Experience*, 1996:125; **Reat**, “The historical Buddha and his teachings” (Ency of Indian Philosophies), 1996:45; **Ñāṇananda**, *Nibbāna: The mind stilled*, vol 1, 2003:5; **Anālayo**, *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima Nikāya*, 2011:71 n221, and “Nāma-rūpa” (Ency of Indian Religions), 2017.

### 2.4.2 The (Nidāna) Vibhaṅga Sutta (S 12.2)

**2.4.2.1 The (Nidāna) Vibhaṅga Sutta (S 12.2)** and its Ekottarika, āgama parallel define “name” (*nāma*) as comprising *only* the following mental factors:<sup>26</sup> *feeling, perception, volition [intention], contact and attention*. In the early Buddhist analysis of experience, “**feeling**” (*vedanā*) refers to the hedonic tone of experience as being pleasant, painful or neutral. “**Perception**” (*saññā*) matches experience with concepts and thereby recognizes it. “**Volition [intention]**” (*cetanā*) is the purpose in reacting to experience or its potential.

“**Contact**” (*phassa*) is the meeting of various factors in experience, coming together in a particular moment of time-space with the *form* (material) aspect of contact occurring as “resistance” (*paṭigha*, what we understand as “sense-stimulus”) and the *naming* (psychological) aspect of contact occurring as designation (*adhivacana*, something close to “conception”).<sup>27</sup> “**Attention**” is the noticing or accommodating a particular aspect out of an experience.

The interaction of these mental aspects brings about “**name**,” that is, resulting in the formation of *concepts*, which is how we refer to and name things, whether mentally or verbally, and to categorize them. Hence, *feeling, perception, intention, contact, and attention*, working together, make up the “name” in **name-and-form**.

**2.4.2.2** Out of these 5 mental factors, that of **volition** or intention should be well understood for a proper appreciation of the teaching of **karma**, which serves as the background for **rebirth** in early Buddhist thought. Hence, we should look into volition more closely. [4.1.2]

Name-and-form, as the *conceptual* and *material* aspects of experience, encompasses all that is experienced by consciousness. Here, both name and form depend not only on each other, but also on consciousness. The conceptual and material properties of an object need *consciousness* in order to be experienced. Consciousness, in turn, depends on *name-and-form* to provide the content of what it is aware. For this reason, consciousness is always conscious of something, and does not arise in itself.<sup>28</sup>

This reciprocal conditioning between consciousness and name-and-form is the basic process of any experience. Our virtual world is this constant flow of exchanges between consciousness and name-and-form; and the resultant inflow further embellishes our world of sense-experiences and mental knowing—our construction of a private reality, a virtual world.

**2.4.2.3** What we perceive or imagine to be a “person” or “self” is just this reciprocal conditioning between consciousness and name-and-form [2.4.2.2]. It is the **continuity** (*santati*) of our living experiences of life without an unchanging agent or abiding essence of any kind. This truth reflects the reality of the early Buddhist teaching of **non-self** (*anatta*), according to which there is no entity, nothing enduring, in any aspect of experience.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> S 12.2/2:3,34 (SD 5.15) and its parallel EĀ 49.5 (T2.125.797b28). A similar def is found, eg, in M 9/1:53,11 or EĀ 46.8 (T2.125.778c24). Skilling (1993:158) notes a quote in Vasubandhu’s *Pratītyasamutpāda, vyākhyā* that defines “name” in terms of feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention. However, texts preserved by Mūla-sarvāstivāda and Sarvāstivāda, prob influenced by later developments, tend to define “name” as equivalent to the 4 immaterial aggregates, thus including consciousness: eg, MĀ 29 (T1.26.463c25), SĀ 298 (T2.99.85a28), Tripāṭhī 1962: 160,1 (§16.7), and D 4094 ju 140a3 or Q 5595 tu 160b8.

<sup>27</sup> Cf “conceptual impression” (*adhivacana, samphassa*), D 15,20 (SD 5.27).

<sup>28</sup> On consciousness being “conscious of” something, see SD 17.8a (7).

<sup>29</sup> Gombrich, muses on the profound reality of *anatta*, thus: “all the fuss and misunderstanding can be avoided if one inserts the word ‘unchanging’, so that the two-word English phrase becomes ‘no unchanging self’... for the Buddha’s audience by definition the word *ātman/attā* referred to something unchanging. (*What the Buddha Thought*, 2009:9)

The early Buddhist teaching of non-self does not imply that there is nothing subjective in our experience. It means that subjective experience is a process devoid of any abiding entity, that it is a flowing stream of **consciousness**, comprising a dynamic process of name-and-form; and **name-and-form**, in turn, are a dynamic process of consciousness.

Another important point to consider is that it is this interactivity between name (the mind) and form (“things,” mental and physical) that induces us to “think”: *to feel, to perceive, to intend, to conceive, and to mentally attend to an object* [2.4.2.1]. These processes work on the interactivity of the 5 “fingers” of *feeling, perception, intention, contact, and attention*. The suttas call this **papañca**, the “high 5’s” of our mental proliferation!<sup>30</sup>

**2.4.2.4** Further, it should be noted that, unlike later traditions, early Buddhism does not say that all phenomena are only momentary that end as soon as they have arisen.<sup>31</sup> Instead, in early Buddhist usage, **consciousness** refers to a continuously changing process of *being conscious*. Post-Buddha traditions tend to see consciousness like a staccato series of conscious moments, each passing away as soon as it has arisen. Such an idea makes it more difficult to envision the continuity of conscious experience simply like a flowing river or a blowing breeze.

Only in post-Buddha times, especially amongst the scholastics and theologians of later organized Buddhism, does this process of “**being conscious**” come to be seen as a “conscious being.” What is merely a process comes to be seen as a measured state, even an *entity* or *entities*, a series of infinitesimally minute moments that, at super-speed, arise and pass away at once. In due course, the *state* is further fixed by the fiat of theologians into statements of profound moments and samadhis (especially in Mahāyāna). The realization or acceptance of such *statements* then defines or inherits the status of lineage and empowerment.<sup>32</sup>

**2.4.2.5** In important ways, it is an issue of **language** trying to freeze into words what is ever freely moving. The noun “consciousness” tends to mislead us into viewing it as a permanent *entity*, a fixed thing. It is better, surely, to speak of it, using a verb, as just of “being conscious.” It is not an entity but a process. To speak or even write the strains of a beautiful piece of music or song with enigmatic “plinks” and “plonks” may amuse us like speech-bubbles in a colourful cartoon, but the reality is that we can only experience the passing moment, and feel the flow of life. For, without the flow, there is nothing to know, nothing to feel: we have not lived well and fully.<sup>33</sup>

## 2.5 DEPENDENT ARISING AND REBIRTH

### 2.5.1 Birth, death, rebirth

**2.5.1.1** We now return to the **Mahā,niḍāna Sutta** (D 15) account of reciprocal conditioning between the looped dependent arising of consciousness and name-and-form [2.4.1.1], since this is closely connected with the idea of rebirth. The Buddha is recorded as instructing Ānanda thus:

<sup>30</sup> On “mental proliferation” (*papañca*), see **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18) + SD 6.14 (2). See also Analayo, “The five ‘fingers’ of name,” 2020.

<sup>31</sup> The theory of momentariness appears to have arisen after the closure of the canonical Abhidharmas. For details, see **von Rospatt**, *The Buddhist Doctrine of Momentariness*, 1995:15-28. **Griffiths’** assumption that the teaching of rebirth stands in contrast to that of non-self (*Notes Towards a Critique of Buddhist Karma Theory*, 1982:283 f) does not hold for the early Buddhist position on rebirth, which does not involve the notion of momentariness (**Analayo**, *Rebirth in Early Buddhism & Current Research*, 2018 n23 (digital).

<sup>32</sup> On the issue that “the statement is not the state,” see SD 10.16 (1.3.2.3); SD 49.5b (4.6.4.2).

<sup>33</sup> On language and non-self, see SD 2.16 (10); SD 5.17 (7).



It is said: ‘**With consciousness as condition, there is name-and-form.**’

Ānanda, how consciousness conditions name-and-form should be known in this manner:

If there were no *consciousness* to descend into a mother’s womb, would name-and-form take shape in the womb?”<sup>34</sup>

[Ānanda:] “Certainly not, bhante.”

(D 15,21.1/2:63), SD 5.17<sup>35</sup>

In other words, at the moment of conception the same basic principle is in operation that also governs continuity during the life of an individual. This principle involves a “**looped dependent arising**” (reciprocal conditioning) between consciousness and name-and-form. In these interrelated processes, it is *the process of consciousness* that “enters” the mother’s womb, so to speak, which thus shows that the early Buddhist conception of rebirth is more complex than a mere mind-body duality. [2.5.1.2]

**2.5.1.2** The role of **consciousness** as *that which is reborn* can also be seen in relation to its possible departure after conception. **The Mahānidāna Sutta** (D 15) dialogue [2.5.1.1] continues:

“If, after descending into the mother’s womb,<sup>36</sup> the consciousness were to depart, would name-and-form be generated in this state of being here?”

[Ānanda:] “Certainly not, bhante.”

(D 15,21.2/2:63), SD 5.17<sup>37</sup>

The corresponding part in 3 out of the 4 parallels involves two separate inquiries, one about consciousness departing from the womb, the other about consciousness being cut off in the case of a young boy or girl.<sup>38</sup> The answer in both cases is simply “No.” The main point made in this way remains the same

<sup>34</sup> Cf **Titth’āyatana S** (A 3.61) where the Buddha declares: “Based on the 6 elements, there is descent into the womb; | (On account of) such a descent, there is name-and-form; | With name-and-form as condition, there is contact; | With contact as condition, there is feeling. | Now, it is for one who feels that I make known [the 4 noble truths]” (A 3.61,9/1:176), SD 6.8. This clearly shows that feeling arises with the descent of the gandharva (rebirth consciousness) into the womb. However, this is not a common interpretation of *viññāṇa-nāma,rūpa* dyad, where “*viññāṇa* in this context became the consciousness that descends into the mother’s womb at conception, while *nāma-rūpa* became the body complex that takes shape and, after developing sense-organs (*saḷāyatana*), experiences contact (*phassa*) and so on.” (Bucknell, “Conditioned arising evolves,” 1999:339). More commonly, *viññāṇa* is “the consummation of the 6 types of consciousness associated with the sense organs, which makes the version read like an account of the psychological process of sensory perception.” (Bucknell op cit 1999:327): see **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18,16-18/1:111-113). See discussion on *nāma,rūpa* in the essay **Dependent arising**, SD 5.11 Intro.

<sup>35</sup> The Chin parallels say effectively the very same things: DĀ 13 (T1.1.61b8-10); MĀ 97 (T1.26.579c16), T1.14.-243b18, and T1.52.845b7.

<sup>36</sup> See SD 54.8 (5.4.3).

<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in the Chin version: DĀ 13 (T1.1.61b11-12).

<sup>38</sup> D 15,21.3/2:63,7+11 (SD 5.17), MĀ 97 (T1.26.579c18+19), and T1.14.243b19+21. T1.52 does not take the form of a question-and-answer catechism and is therefore not directly parallel to the present exchange. The depiction in all versions of a departure of consciousness from the womb would point to the phenomenon of stillbirth. It is uncertain whether another stream of consciousness could take the place of the departed one. **Sakka,pañha S** (D 21) has a related account where Sakka, lord of the devas, states that even as the Buddha is teaching that Sutta, he passes away and is at once reborn in the same body, right before the whole heavenly assembly, but only he and the Buddha knows what happened (D 21,2.8.2), SD 54.8; also DA 3:732,30. Although this involves the same stream of consciousness being reborn, it appears that an already existing body (in this case a celestial one) can continue beyond the moment when consciousness departs; but we are not told how the needed support for the continuity of name-and-form is given by the stream of consciousness being “reborn.” Snellgrove recounts a related idea in Tibetan Buddhism of a “‘transfer of consciousness’, whereby the adept ... injects his ‘life principle’ into any recently dead body ... of his

in all the different versions, that is, for name-and-form to “come to grow,” consciousness is the necessary condition, and this applies to *conception, pregnancy and childhood*, indeed, to life itself.

### **2.5.2 “Being conscious”**

**2.5.2.1** Conversely, according to **the Mahā,vedalla Sutta** (M 43) and its Madhyama,āgama parallel, at death, when the body loses vitality and heat, consciousness will depart.<sup>39</sup> In this way, consciousness appears to be what provides the transition from one body to another, or, to be precise, instead of “consciousness,” it is better to speak of “being conscious,” thus properly reflecting the actual process of change.

This process of being conscious, or consciousness in transition from one life to the next, is attested in **the Vakkali Sutta** (S 22.87). The question now is *where* someone who has just died may have been reborn. The parallel versions agree in referring to what may have been reborn as his “consciousness.”<sup>40</sup>

**2.5.2.2** Such rebirth can according to early Buddhist cosmology involve a variety of forms. Besides human and animal rebirths, it can also take the form of rebirth in various celestial realms and thereby occur with a kind of “bodily form” that differs substantially from the material body of humans and animals.

The suttas often depict heavenly beings as moving around at the speed of thought unobstructed by any object, while being able to see and hear. A similar ability is found in good meditators, who are said to be able to generate a **mind-made body** (*mano,maya kāya*) that function in a similar manner as the beings of the sense-sphere heavens.<sup>41</sup>

### **2.5.3 Gandhabba**

A well known sutta term related to the rebirth process is **the gandhabba**. Elsewhere, especially in accounts of celestial beings, it refers to the gandharvas or divine minstrels, one of the lowliest of divine beings inhabiting the realm of the 4 great kings, the earth-bound heaven closest to our world (the other being Tāvātimsa, the heaven of the 33).<sup>42</sup> In terms of the rebirth process, this term can be descriptively translated as a “being to be born,” since this is just the role it plays.

**The Mahā Taṇha,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38), **the Assalāyana Sutta** (M 93) and its parallels say that, for conception to occur, the parents must come together, the mother has to be in season, and the *gandhabba* needs to be present.<sup>43</sup> The quote is from a discussion between a seer and a group of brahmins, sug-

choice” (*Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 1987:498). Notably, such a case of consciousness departure and a new consciousness arriving to take its place in the same womb so that the foetus continues to live, is not found in any of the early suttas nor supported by it.

<sup>39</sup> M 43/1:296,9 (SD 30.2) and its parallel MĀ 211 (T1.26.791c12).

<sup>40</sup> S 22.87/3:124,10 (SD 8.8) and its parallels SĀ 1265 (T2.99.347b10) and EĀ 26.10 (T2.125.642c27); for a study and tr see **Anālayo**, “Vakkali’s suicide in the Chinese Āgamas,” 2011b. In this particular case, Vakkali’s consciousness is unestablished anywhere, since he passes away as an arhat.

<sup>41</sup> On the mind-made body, see, eg, **Upadhyaya**, *Early Buddhism and the Bhagavadgita*, 1971:375 f; **Eimer**, *Skizzen des Erlösungsweges in buddhistischen Begriffsreihen*, 1976:55; **Johansson**, *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*, 1979:35-39; **Hamilton**, *Identity and Experience*, 1996:144-164, **Radich**, *The Somatics of Liberation*, 2007:224-187; **Lee**, “The meaning of the ‘mind-made body’,” 2014; **Anālayo**, “Levitation in early Buddhist discourse,” 2016a.

<sup>42</sup> On the gandharvas, see SD 7.10 (3); also D 15,4.2 (SD 5.17).

<sup>43</sup> M 38,26/1:265,37 (SD 7.10); MĀ 201 (T1.769b23); M 93/2:157,1; its parallels MĀ 151 (T1.26.666a10) and D 4094 ju 111a6 or Q 5595 tu 127b1. Another parallel, T1.71.878b5, speaks of what “becomes the child,” 為作子者. The *gandhabba* recurs as one of the 3 conditions for conception in M 38/1:265,36 and its parallel MĀ 201 (T1.26.-769b24), whereas another parallel, EĀ 21.3 (T2.125.602c19), speaks of the “external consciousness,” 外識, and in

gesting that the choice of the term *gandhabba* in the **Assalāyana Sutta** and its parallels reflects brahminical terminology, but adopted here without any implications of a permanent self as in the brahminical usage.

## 2.6 REBIRTH AND THE LATENT TENDENCIES

**2.6.1 The Cetanā Sutta 1** (S 12.38) and its Saṃyukta,āgama parallel give us valuable psychological insight into *how consciousness is related to rebirth*. What we think, or better, *how we think*, is rooted in our **latent tendencies** (*anusaya*) that lurk in our unconscious. This is that part of our mind so ancient and ingrained in its habits and views that we are rarely aware of how routinely and profoundly it compels all our thoughts, speech and actions.<sup>44</sup>

Such habitual actions, in turn, form the objects for the arousing and establishing of consciousness. This then leads to the dependent arising of birth and so on. Since there is an *object* for the establishment of consciousness—it finds a “footing” [support] (*gadhati*)<sup>45</sup> in our lives—there is *further and future* birth, decay, disease and death.<sup>46</sup>

According to **the Cetanā Sutta 1** (S 12.38):

“What one intends, and what one plans, and has latent tendency—this is a mental basis for the support [establishing] for consciousness.

When there is a mental basis [condition], consciousness is established.

When that consciousness is established and grows therein, there is **further [continued] arising of rebirth.**”  
(S 12.38/2:65,15), SD 7.6a

The Saṃyukta,āgama parallel similarly states thus: “If one intends, if one gives rise to deluded conceptualizations, those latent tendencies form an object [support] for the establishment of consciousness.”<sup>47</sup>

### 2.6.2 Latent tendencies

**2.6.2.1** In early Buddhist texts, **the latent tendencies** (*anusaya*) are dispositions deeply rooted in the unconscious.<sup>48</sup> The above passage [2.6.1] relates these latent tendencies to our deluded thought-processes to rebirth by way of their being a basis for the continuity of consciousness in samsara. They

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the next line of the “consciousness that which wishes (to be reborn),” 欲識. On the *gandhabba* see: DPPN sv; **Pischel & Geldner**, *Vedischen Studien* 1, 1889:77-81; **Oldenberg**, *Die Religion des Veda*, 1894:244-250; **Windisch**, *Buddha's Geburt und die Lehre von der Seelenwanderung*, 1908:14-27; **Masson**, *La religion populaire dans le canon bouddhique Pāli*, 1942:121-123; **Wijesekera**, “Vedic *gandharva* and Pali *gandhabba*.” 1945; **Upadhyaya**, op cit, 1971:373-375; **Wayman**, “The intermediate-state dispute in Buddhism,” 1974:231-234; **McDermott**, “Karma and rebirth in early Buddhism,” 1980:169-171; **Hoffman**, *reality and Mind in Early Buddhism*, 1987:67-69; **Karunaratne**, “*Gandhabba*,” 1991; **Harvey**, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995:105-108; **Cuevas**, “Predecessors and prototypes,” 1996; **Langer**, 2000:9-17; **Blum**, “Death,” 2004: 204; **Oberlies**, “Der Gandharva und die drei Tage währende ‘Quarantäne’,” 2005; **Premasiri**, “Rebirth,” 2005:525; **Somararatne**, “Citta, manas and viññāṇa.” 2005:176 f; **Anālayo**, “Rebirth and the *gandhabba*,” 2008b; **Werner**, “Death, rebirth and personal identity in Buddhism,” 2008:38; **Hara**, “Divine procreation,” 2009:220 f.

<sup>44</sup> On the latent tendencies, see **Anusaya**, SD 3.1; *anusaya* as the unconscious: SD 17.8b (6).

<sup>45</sup> The use here is *ārammaṇa*, “mental support or object”: **Kāya.gata,sati S** (M 119,23 passim), SD 12.21; (**Arahatta**) **Bāhiya S** (U 1.10,27b\*), SD 33.7.

<sup>46</sup> (**Arahatta**) **Bāhiya S** (U 1.10,27b\*), SD 33.7.

<sup>47</sup> SĀ 359 (T2.99.100a24-26).

<sup>48</sup> On the unconscious in early Buddhism, see SD 17.8a (6.1); **The unconscious**, SD 17.8b (1).

fuel our sensual lust, aversion and ignorance<sup>49</sup> so that we remain fettered to the world of cyclic existence.

**2.6.2.2** Such latent tendencies are already present in an infant, even though it would not yet be able to notice their effects on the mind, or display them in their actions. This psychological reality is famously stated in **the parable of the infant in the Mahā Māluṅkya,putta Sutta** (M 64), which runs thus:<sup>50</sup>

(1) For, even a young tender infant, lying on its back, does not have the notion of ‘self-identity’ (*sak-kāya*); for, how could the self-identity view arise for him?

Yet, the latent tendency of self-identity view lies in him.

(2) For, even a young tender infant, lying on its back, does not have the notion of Dharma; for, how could doubt regarding the Dharma [teachings] arise for him?

Yet, the latent tendency of doubt lies in him.

(3) For, even a young tender infant, lying on its back, does not have the notion of ‘virtue’ (*sīla*); for, how could attachment to rituals and vows with regards to moral virtue arise for him?

Yet, the latent tendency of attachment to rituals and vows lies in him.

(4) For, even a young tender infant, lying on its back, does not have the notion of ‘sense-desire’ (*kāma*); for, how could sense-desire in sense-pleasure arise for him?

Yet, the latent tendency of sense-desire lies in him.

(5) For, even a young tender infant, lying on its back, does not have the notion of ‘a being’ (*satta*); for, how could ill will towards beings arise for him?

Yet, the latent tendency of ill will lies in him.<sup>51</sup>

Such passages inform us that the latent tendencies accompany consciousness from the time of conception. In other words, our consciousness, even at conception, is not a clean slate, but rather already bearing the karmic imprints from past lives. Although the suttas do not go into details beyond listing some of the latent tendencies, we have sufficient teachings to understand their implications: that they burden us with fetters of samsara.

**2.6.2.3** We may provisionally regard these psychological imprints carried by the latent tendencies as some kind of **karmic memories** or past-life residues, since they shadow us from life to life. From an early Buddhist perspective, these are pervasive and powerful factors that influence or shape the new-born, in addition to hereditary traits of the parents and the nurture of the present conditions. In short, we are the product of both *past karma* and *present conditions*, of both nature and nurture.

### **2.6.3 The body that is reborn**

**2.6.3.1** The reciprocal conditioning of consciousness and name-and-form also implies that this continuity of memory is in itself a changing and conditioned process [2.4.1.1]. Although they burden us with certain but clear disadvantages, they are neither fixed nor predictable in their effects. These effects are often restrained or magnified by present conditions, the circumstances of which we are rarely, if ever,

<sup>49</sup> These 3—*kāma, raga, paṭigha, avijjā* respectively—are the 3 key latent tendencies (*anusaya*): **Sammā Diṭṭhi S** (M 9,65-67), SD 11.14; **Anusaya**, SD 31.3 (8.2).

<sup>50</sup> **Mahā Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 64,3/1:432 f) + SD 21.10 (2). A similar parable is found in **Abhaya Rāja,kumāra** (M 58,7/1:394 f), SD 7.12. Cf “body ... speech ... thought ... livelihood ...” in **Samaṇa,maṇḍika S** (M 78,8/2:24 f), SD 18.9; cf “the young seedlings ... the young calf” in **Cātumā S** (M 67,7/1:458 f), SD 34.7. See Chin parallel: MĀ 205 (T1.26.778c25-29); Tib parallels: D 4094 ju 260a6 or Q 5595 thu 2b3; for parts of the discussion of the latent tendencies preserved in Skt: SHT V 1279 V8-R5 (**Sander & Waldschmidt**, SHT Teil 5, 1985:202).

<sup>51</sup> On these latent tendencies (*anusaya*), see **Anusaya**, SD 31.3 (1.2).

aware. It is, as if, they lurk in the shadows of our lives, and strike at any opportunity when we stray away from the light of goodness or self-restraint.

**2.6.3.2** One of the conditions that influence the accessibility of memories from the past life is the degree to which **new memories** from the present life impact the mind. We have new experiences which bring new responses, and we have memories of these as our present moments are quickly relegated into the past in the present life.

Moreover, many other **bodily skills**, such as being able to talk or walk, are not readily present to the infant, even though they were learned in a previous existence, but have to be acquired anew. Although such details are not discussed in the suttas, the type of continuity that arises in this life is clearly not a completely identical copy of the knowledge, skills and abilities of the previous being.

**2.6.3.3** For illustration, we may perhaps think of a **river** that, after flowing swiftly down a steep course, due to the geographical conditions, turns *into* a lake with an outlet on the other side. Much of the silt carried along by the river's swift flow will settle on the bottom and the banks by the time the water has entered the lake. The water that flows *out* of the lake, although clearly flowing on with the water that has entered it, will no longer carry along the silt or very little of it.

Like the river flowing into and out of the lake, the early Buddhist conception of **rebirth** is a continuity from one life into the next, but this does not imply a full identity of its earlier and later appearances. The past life and the present, and their continuity, has some *similar* features and also some *new* or *different* qualities. Hence, such a continuity is famously said to be *neither the same nor different* (*na ca so, na ca añño*) in nature.<sup>52</sup>

### 3 Recollection of past lives

#### 3.1 RECALLING OUR PAST EXISTENCES

**3.1.1** The suttas often state that although we do not always have memories of our past existences in our normal waking state, we can recall our past lives through the cultivation of deep states of meditation. Such states would give us access to the subconscious levels of our mind that can, in turn, recall our past existences going back many lives depending on the power of our meditation.

We should not imagine that the events of our past lives were as if recorded permanently and unchangeably on video like a movie film. The Buddha and the arhats—through their profound powers of dhyanic meditation—are, of course, able to recall, to the last detail, so to speak, of their past existence as far back as they wish (in the case of the buddhas) or as far as their meditative powers allow (in the case of the arhats).

**3.1.2** Being unawakened, even with dhyanic mental powers, our recall of past existence is likely to be limited to the immediate past life, and which is also likely to be patchy and inaccurate. Such recalls are likely to be skewed or coloured by our social conditioning, religious beliefs and psychological state. After all, even our memories of this-life events, even of recent times, are either limited or inaccurate, often both. More often than not, such memories are unlikely to be eidetic (almost “photographic”) but more likely to be constructed.

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<sup>52</sup> Miln 40 f, 48; SD 17.1b (2.3); SD 17.5 (3.2); SD 48.4 (3.4). See also Gethin, *Foundations of Buddhism*, 1998:138-146; also Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, 2007:32-35.

We tend to have a skewed or revised memory of what really happened even in recent events, depending on how such events are viewed and how they affected us. Even in all our honesty, we are likely to have a reconstructed or biased recall of our recent past. Perhaps, with the powers of great mindfulness or profound meditation, or perhaps that rare “gift” of **retrognition**, we may recall certain episodes or glimpses of past-life events with some useful details or helpful accuracy. [3.3.2]

### 3.2 THE BUDDHA’S REBIRTH RECOLLECTION

#### 3.2.1 Continuity and identity

**3.2.1.1** The Buddha tells us that he himself developed the power of **retrognition** during the night of his awakening. **The Bhaya,bherava Sutta** (M 4) and its Chinese version, record the Buddha’s pre-awakening recollection of past lives, both of his own (reported in the 1<sup>st</sup> person) and those of others (as he has himself witnessed them).<sup>53</sup>

Understandably, in such accounts, he would identify himself in the past-life dramatis personae, involving many other disciples and present-life actors, each playing their different role, each with their own actions and fruits. This is clearly the case in **the Jātaka** (stories of the Buddha’s past lives),<sup>54</sup> where the Buddha, as Bodhisattva, is the protagonist, and in the conclusion, he identifies the key members of his current audience as respective incarnations of the characters in the story of the past.

**3.2.1.2** This is in line with the point made earlier regarding the significance of the **non-self** teaching in early Buddhism. It does not deny that there is an individualized form of continuity from one birth to another; it only denies that this continuity involves *a permanent and unchanging agent*.

Here is an extract from the Buddha’s recall of his own past lives, as recorded in **the Bhaya,bherava Sutta** (M 4):

“I recollected manifold past lives ... ‘There I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such the end of my life.

Passing away from that state, I re-arose there. There too I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance.<sup>55</sup>

Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life-span. Passing away from that state, I re-arose here.<sup>56</sup>

Thus I recollected manifold past lives in their modes and details.” M 4,27/1:22,17 (SD 44.3)<sup>57</sup>

The Chinese parallel also mentions the ability to recall one’s former name, living circumstances, and death. Such descriptions clearly show the continuity of one’s identity even when the body has stopped functioning and ceased to exist.

<sup>53</sup> M 4/1:16-24 (SD 44.3).

<sup>54</sup> Traditionally, **Jātaka** (only the verses are canonical) is the 10<sup>th</sup> book of the 5<sup>th</sup> collection, the Khuddaka Nikāya.

<sup>55</sup> Comy says that this refers to the Bodhisattva’s penultimate birth, ie, in Tusita heaven. He was a devaputta named Seta,ketu (“white flag” or “white comet”); his clan was that of the devas as they had only one; his complexion was golden; his food, celestial in nature; and the only discomfort he felt was that of formations (*saṅkhāra, dukkha*) (ie with neither physical nor emotional pains); and his lifespan was 57 crores and 6 million earth years (576,000,000 years!) (MA 1:126; VA 1:161).

<sup>56</sup> Here on earth, amongst humans, in queen Mahā Māyā’s womb (MA 1:126).

<sup>57</sup> For the Chin version: EĀ 31.1 (T2.125.666b27-28. Parts of this recollection of the Buddha’s past lives are also preserved in Skt fragments: SHT IV 165 folio 15 R5-9 (**Sander & Waldschmidt** 1980:191) and SHT IX 2401 Rb+c (**Bechert & Wille** 2004:195).

### 3.2.2 Rebirth and realms

**3.2.2.1** According to early Buddhist thought, it would follow that anyone who cultivates the mind up to the point where such recollection becomes possible would, in principle, be able to access such information. This, in turn, implies that the doctrine of rebirth is considered the outcome of an insight that is replicable through meditative practice rather than being just a metaphysical speculation.

According to **the Mahāpadāna Sutta** (D 14) and its Dīrgha,āgama parallel, the Buddha developed the recollection of his own former lives up to the point where he recalled having lived in all of the different realms listed in early Buddhist cosmology (except for the pure abodes).<sup>58</sup> This confirms that the early Buddhist teachings on different realms of rebirth are based on the Buddha's own direct knowledge and experience.

**3.2.2.2** This is somewhat comparable to looking back over our own present life and understanding how some experiences had a decisive influence on what we did and have become. Being able to recollect our past lives, then, offers a direct appreciation of how the intentions behind our past deeds shape our present, an influence that continues over and beyond the transition from one life to another.

As practising Buddhists, we are likely to see so much personal blessings and spiritual benefits that we are enjoying now than if we had not followed the Buddha's teachings. In this connection, the Buddha declares that it is a supreme blessing to have done good in the past (*pubbe ca kata,puññatā*).<sup>59</sup>

## **3.3 THE BUDDHA'S RECOLLECTION OF OTHERS' REBIRTHS**

### 3.3.1 Accounts of the Buddha's past and of past buddhas

**3.3.1.1** While **the Jātakas** [3.2.1.1] relate stories of the Buddha cultivating various "**perfections**" (*pāramī*), which cumulatively contribute to his becoming the Buddha, or which are characteristics of one who is heading towards buddhahood, these are not actually biographical accounts. Rather, they are stories that highlight the morals or quality of *the act* than the greatness of the being—despite the fact that he is often addressed as the "great being" (*mahā,satta*). This is *neither* his title *nor* a status but merely an appellation descriptive of his emerging virtues of a buddha-to-be.

**3.3.1.2 The Buddha,vaṃsa** (the "lineages of buddhas"), the 14<sup>th</sup> book of the Khuddaka Nikāya, is a work in verse of the parallel life-cycles of the 25 buddhas, concluding with that of our historical Buddha, Gotama [ch 26]. A chapter is dedicated to each buddha, and in which are listed personal details, such as the species of the Bodhi tree under which he sits at the time of awakening, as well as the name that the future buddha Gotama assumes under each past buddha. The final chapter recounts the distribution of the relics of Gotama Buddha.

**3.3.1.3** While the Buddha,vaṃsa is a hagiography (sacred biographical accounts) of the 25 buddhas, **the Apadāna** (the "harvests" (of past good deeds)),<sup>60</sup> the 13<sup>th</sup> book of the Khuddaka Nikāya. It is a collect-

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<sup>58</sup> D 14/2:50,6 (SD 49.8); DĀ 1 (T1.1.10b10, a passage without the Skt parallel (**Waldschmidt**, *Das Mahāvadāna-sūtra* 2, 1956:160 f). A similar reading is at **Mahā Sihā,nāda S** (M 12/1:82,1), SD 49.1, and its parallel, T17.757.596-b20; see also EĀ 31.8 (T2.125.672a18). Since only non-returners, who have reached the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the 4 paths of awakening, are reborn in the pure abodes, the Buddha could not have spent a past life there, as he fully awakened only in his last life.

<sup>59</sup> **Das'uttara S** (D 34,1.5(1)/3:276); **Cakka S** (A 4.31/2:32), SD 36.10(2.1.1); **Maṅgala S** (Khp 5.3b/3,5 = Sn 263b/-46).

ion that includes hagiographies [sacred accounts] of 547 monks and 40 nuns, all arhat disciples who lived in the Buddha's time. The text also contains two introductory chapters in verse.

The 1<sup>st</sup>, the "Buddhâpadâna," is a series of encomiums praising the merits and perfections (*pāramī*) of the Buddha and an account of the past lives during which he mastered each of these qualities.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter, the "Pacceka,buddhâpadâna," deals with solitary buddhas who do not teach (*pacceka,buddha*).

Quite distinctively, the Apadâna names 35 past buddhas, in contrast to the 24 listed in the Buddha,-vaṃsa [3.3.1.2]. This is one of the reasons that the Apadâna is presumed to be one of the latest books in the Pāli canon.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> chapters recount the noble deeds of the elders, including many of the best known disciples. Each story focuses on a specific meritorious deed performed by one of these elders while they trained under a past buddha, followed by an account of what benefit it produced in subsequent lifetimes, and how this ultimately led them to achieve arhathood in their last life. The collection thus highlights the merit that results from perfecting specific types of moral deeds over different lives.

**3.3.1.4** Despite such a wealth of sacred stories, the early tradition has no complete "biography" of **Gotama Buddha** or Sakyamuni. Instead, it seems intent on showing his similarity to **the buddhas of the past** (and the future buddha) rather than his uniqueness. This concern was mainly to show that the Buddha's teaching was not the innovation of an individual—he was neither messiah nor prophet—but a human who rediscovers and declares the "ancient path" (the noble eightfold path to nirvana). This occurs each time in basically the same manner, since the remote past, by a person who undergoes the same kind of extended experiences.

**3.3.1.5** Hence, the doctrine of the existence of past buddhas allowed the early Buddhist community to claim spiritual authority similar to that of the Vedas of the brahmins, and of the Jaina tradition of past "ford-makers" (*tirthaṅkara*). The brahmins, in their desperation to outshine, even debunk, the Buddha, retaliated by introducing the doctrine of avatars (*avatāra*, "(divine) descent," or simply, "incarnation") of their Deity, of which Gautama Buddha was, to them, the 9<sup>th</sup> of 10 evolutionary or millenarian incarnations.<sup>61</sup>

### **3.3.2 The Buddha's retrocognition of others' lives**

**3.3.2.1** On the night of his awakening, the Buddha reportedly proceeded from having recollected his own past lives to surveying in some detail the passing away and rebirth of other beings. In this way, he was able to ascertain the driving force causing living beings to wander through the rounds of births and deaths, propelled onward in accordance with their karmic fruits. The relevant extract from **the Bhaya,-bherava Sutta** (M 4), says:

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<sup>60</sup> The Ap contents: Buddhâpadâna (*buddhâpadâniyo dhamma,pariyāyo*, pp 1-6), *pacceka,buddhâpadâna* (pp 7-14, 58 verses: 8-49 = S 35-75), *therâpadâna* (ie *sāriputtâpadâna*, etc, in 547 (or 550) chs incl Buddha's "past bad karma," *pubba,kamma,piloti* (pp 299-301 ≈ Avklp ch 50), and *therī,apadâna* (ie, *sumedhâpadâna*, etc, in 40 chs); Gandha,vaṃsa (Gv) 57,4; DA 1:15,28, 17,12; VA 1:18,14; KhpA 12,9; Maha,bodhi,vaṃsa (Mbv) 94,28; much of these autobiographies given full (*tena vuttam apadāne*) in ThaA (see Ap:Ce pp v-ix); ThīA [Ee pp ix-xii]; UA 263,27 f. Sāra,-saṅgaha 134,24 f (*tatrāyam apadana,pāḷī*). **Skt** versions with Ap-like legends: Divyâvadâna (Divy), Avadâna,śataka (Avś), Avadâna,kalpalatā (Avklp).

<sup>61</sup> On avatar, sv Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions, 2006:99.



“I saw—by means of **the divine eye** [clairvoyance],<sup>62</sup> purified and superhuman—  
 beings passing away and re-appearing,  
 and I knew how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate,  
 faring in accordance with their karma:  
 ‘These beings—who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech, and mind,  
 who reviled the noble ones, held wrong views  
 and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views—  
 after death, when the body had broken up,  
 had re-arisen in a plane of misery, a bad destination, a lower realm, in hell.  
 But these beings—who were endowed with good conduct of body, **[23]** speech, and mind,  
 who did not revile the noble ones, who held right views  
 and undertook actions under the influence of right views—  
 after death, when the body had broken up, had re-arisen in a happy destination, in heaven’.”  
 (M 4,29/1:22,30), SD 44.3<sup>63</sup>

**3.3.2.2** We can see here how the Buddha is able to witness that those who had acted in unwholesome ways were reborn in bad realms of existence and those who had acted in wholesome ways in good realms of existence. In this way, his vision of rebirth and of the working of **karma** clearly contribute to his wisdom of awakening. Thus, the suttas tell us how the Buddha awakens after he has cultivated both the recollection of his own past lives and of how other beings pass away and rearise in accordance with their past karma.

### 3.4 SPONTANEOUS BIRTH AND THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

#### 3.4.1 The non-returners

**3.4.1.1** Before examining the nature of karma itself, it helps to understand, or at least be aware of, the nature of the transition from one life to the next. In early Buddhist thought, this transition is in **an intermediate state** or in-between existence (*antarā, bhava*). Although later traditions hold different views of it,<sup>64</sup> the idea of an intermediate state is implicit in the listings of the different types of non-returners.<sup>65</sup>

**3.4.1.2 Non-returners** are individuals who have reached the 3<sup>rd</sup> of 4 levels of awakening taught in early Buddhism (the preceding two being streamwinning and once-returning) and are on the path to becoming arhats, fully awakened ones. In addition to the 3 fetters that are overcome by streamwinning (self-identity view, doubt, and clinging to rituals and vows),<sup>66</sup> non-returners have eradicated the 2 related fetters of sensual desire and aversion.<sup>67</sup> Having attained this high degree of mental purity, they are non-returners in the sense that they are beyond returning to be born in the sense-world, and will take birth only in heavenly realms referred to in early Buddhist cosmology as the “pure abodes” (*suddh’āvāsa*).<sup>68</sup>

<sup>62</sup> *Dibba, cakkhu*, clairvoyance, not to be confused with the Dharma-eye (*dhamma, cakkhu*) (see M 4,102 n), SD 44.3.

<sup>63</sup> Cf Chin version: EĀ 31.1 (T2.125.666c4-5).

<sup>64</sup> For a survey of the Buddhist schools that accepted or rejected the intermediate existence, see Bareau 1955: 291.

<sup>65</sup> On the 5 kinds of non-returners, see **Niṭṭha S** (A 10.63,3), SD 3.3(1.2); SD 2.17 (4-5).

<sup>66</sup> On the 3 fetters, see SD 56.1 (4.4.1); **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8.

<sup>67</sup> On the 10 fetters (*dasa saṃyojana*) and sainthood, see SD 40a.1 (15.4.4) n; SD 49.14 Table 2.

<sup>68</sup> On the location of the 5 pure abodes, see SD 23.14 (Table 3).

**3.4.1.3** One type of non-returner attains the final goal of full awakening “**in between**” (*antarā, parinibbāyi*).<sup>69</sup> The reference to such a non-returner is preceded by a mention of one who attains the final goal *at the time of death*; he is followed by another type of non-returner who attains the final goal *on being reborn* (a case of “spontaneous rebirth” [3.4.3] in a pure abode).<sup>70</sup> The context is clearly that the one who attains the final goal “in between” must do so in some sort of intermediate state.

This is especially clear from the simile used in **the Purisa, gati Sutta** (A 7.52) to illustrate how 3 non-returners who are the type that attains the final goal “in between.” Summarized, the similes for the 3 kinds of non-returners who attain final nirvana “in-between” (*antarā, parinibbāyi*), are as follows:

... when a white-hot iron pot is struck,

(1) a spark flies off and *at once goes out*;

(2) a spark flies off, then *up* and then *goes out*;

(3) a spark flies off, then up, and *before cutting into the ground, goes out* (*anupahacca, tala*).

(S 7.52/4:70,16), SD 82.10<sup>71</sup>

**3.4.1.4** In contrast, the type of non-returner who attains the final goal on being reborn is compared to a spark or sparkling metal fragment that becomes extinguished *upon hitting the ground*. Such similes confirm that the non-returners mentioned earlier attain the final goal *in mid-air*, so to speak. They also implicitly show that this can happen at different times in this interim existence, just as the bright spark can become extinguished right away or else after moving for some moments through the air. Apart from this indication, however, the suttas do not tell us about the possible duration of such an intermediate existence.<sup>72</sup>

**The transition from one life to another** finds comparison in the simile of a flame, which, with the support of wind can cross over a distance even without any fuel and is able to set fire to fuel that is not immediately contiguous to it.<sup>73</sup> Similar to the wind acting as a support for the flame, craving is considered to function as the support for the mind at the time of transition from one life to the next.

Unlike the wind, which will abate on its own at some point, as long as **craving** continues in unawakened beings, drowned in ignorance, it is this bond, that according to the early teaching, binds consciousness to present and future bodies. To be free from this bond, we must eradicate ignorance and craving.

**3.4.1.5** Vasubandhu’s<sup>74</sup> **Abhidharma,kośa,bhāṣyā** [1.2.3] gives us some interesting information on the intermediate state with details not found in the Pali canon, but rooting itself in the suttas. The Kośa starts by asking: “**What is an intermediate being, and an intermediate existence [state]?**” And answers:

<sup>69</sup> See, eg, S 46.3/5:69,24 and its parallels SĀ 736 (T2.99.196c16 or SĀ 740 (T2.99.197a25).

<sup>70</sup> Comy on **Bojjhaṅga Sīla S** (S 46.3), SD 10.15, tries to reconcile this reference with the denial of an intermediate state in Theravāda orthodoxy by suggesting that one who attains the final goal in between will do so during the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the life in a pure abode. Bodhi comments that this “disregards the literal meaning” of the expression and “also overrides the sequential and mutually exclusive nature of the five types as delineated elsewhere in the suttas. If we understand the term *antarā, parinibbāyi* literally, as it seems we should, it then means one who attains Nibbāna in the interval between two lives, perhaps while existing in a subtle body in the intermediate state. The *upahacca, parinibbāyi* then becomes one who attains Nibbāna ‘upon landing’ or ‘striking ground’ in the new existence, ie, almost immediately after taking rebirth.” (S:B 1902 n65). See SA 3:142,22.

<sup>71</sup> For this passage in the Chin version: MĀ 6 (T1.26.427a28-b8). Analayo’s tr, however, mentions only 2 of the 3 similes: 2018:48 n42 (digital). See also Abhk 3.12e (mislabelled as 12d in Abhk:Pr 3:387).

<sup>72</sup> But see **Abhidharma,kośa,bhāṣyā** [1.2.3], where Vasubandhu agrees that “it is not fixed (*nasti niyama iti*) ... It lasts as long as it does not encounter the meeting of the conditions for rebirth (*yāvad-upapatti, sāmagrīm na labhate*)” (Abhk 3.14d; Abhk:Pr 3:393).

<sup>73</sup> S 44.9/4:399,26; SĀ 957 (T2.99.244a26), SĀ2 190 (T2.100.443b1); D 4094 nyu 88a6 or Q 5595 thu 135b2.

<sup>74</sup> On Vasumitra and **Abhodharmakośa,bhāṣyā**, see Princeton Dict of Bsm svv.

“Intermediate existence, which inserts itself *between* existence at death and existence at birth, not having arrived at the location where it should go, cannot be said to be born.

Between death—that is, the 5 *skandhas* [aggregates] of the moment of death—and arising—that is, the 5 *skandhas* of the moment of rebirth—there is found an existence—a “body” of 5—that goes to the place of rebirth. This existence between two realms of rebirth (*gati*) is called **intermediate existence**.

This existence is produced: why not say that it arises (*upapanna*), why not attribute birth (*upapatti*) to it?

We say that it is arising (*upapadyamāna*); but it is not born.<sup>75</sup> In fact as its etymology indicates (*pad = gam, upapanna = upagata*), to be born is to arrive. Intermediate existence (or intermediate being), when it begins, has not arrived at the place where it should go, namely to the place where the retribution of actions [karma] is manifested and achieved.<sup>76</sup>

Both Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhi, magga* (5<sup>th</sup> century: 604) and Buddhapālita’s *Madhyamaka, vṛtti*<sup>77</sup> (6<sup>th</sup> century: 544) say that the intermediate being arises immediately upon dying.<sup>78</sup>

### 3.4.2 The intermediate state, the intermediate being

**3.4.2.1** Vasubandhu further says that the form of human reborn as an intermediate being is like that of a 5- or 6-year-old child but his organs are fully formed. Hence, the intermediate state of the Bodhisattva (in transit between his death as a Tusita deva and conception in Mahā, māyā) is similar to the fullness of youth, adorned with the major and minor marks (*sa, lakṣaṇānuvyañjanaś ca*).<sup>79</sup> For this reason, when his intermediate being descends into his mother’s womb, he illumines the thousandfold universe with its 4 continents.

But, adds Vasubandhu, we know that the Bodhisattva’s mother saw in **a dream** a small albino elephant enter her side. This was “only a sign” (*nimitta, mātram*), because, for a long time, the Bodhisattva has been freed from animal rebirth.<sup>80</sup>

**3.4.2.2** The orthodox Theravādins deny the intermediate state against the Sammitīyas and the Pubba, seliyas.<sup>81</sup> These latter stress the existence of a non-returner called “one who attains final nirvana in

<sup>75</sup> See Abhk 3.40c (Abhk:Pr 3:441 f).

<sup>76</sup> Pruden’s tr: Abhk 3.10 (Abhk:Pr 3:383). On the intermediate state see Abhk(P) 3.2CDE = 3.10-15, 40c; 4.53ab, 6.34a, 39 (Abhk:Pr 383-394 + nn); also Poussin, *L’Abhidharmakośa*, 1926: 32 n1; Lin, *L’aide-mémoire de la Vraie Loi*, 1949: 52-54; Wayman, “The intermediate-state dispute in Buddhism,” 1974; Bareau, “Chūu” (Hobogirin), 1979; Harvey, *Selfless Mind*, 1995:98-104, 2013:59 f; Cuevas, “Predecessors and prototypes” 1996, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead* 2003:40-44; Blezer, *Kar gliñ Ži khro*, 1997:6-26; Kritzer, “Antarābhava in the Vibhāṣā” 1997, “Semen, blood, and the intermediate existence” 1998, “The four ways of entering the womb (*garbhāvākṛānti*)” 2000a, “Rūpa and the antarābhava” 2000b, “Life in the womb” 2008:78-81, “*Garbhāvākṛāntau*” 2013, *Garbhāvākṛāntisūtra* 2014:11 f; Somaratne, 1999; L de Silva, “The antarābhava,” 2004; Langer, *Rituals of Death and Rebirth*, 2007:82-84; Lin, “The antarābhava dispute,” 2011; Lee, “The meaning of ‘mind-made body’,” 2014:70-75. As noted by Somaratne 1999:152, Kalupahana & Tamura, “Antarābhava,” 1965:730 err in stating that the intermediate state is a late concept.

<sup>77</sup> See eg *madhyamka, vṛtti: Mūlamadhyamakakārikās (Madhyamikasūtras) de Nāgārjuna avec la Prassanapadā commentaire de Candrakīrti*, ed L de la V Poussin, 1903-13; *The Madhyamakaśāstram ... Madhyamakavṛtti* .

<sup>78</sup> For other views and refs, see Abhk:Pr 3:506 n85.

<sup>79</sup> Ie, *tri, sāhasra, mahā, sāhasra* universe (Abhl 3.74), that is so say, a buddha-field (Skt *buddha, kṣetra*; P *buddha, khetta*). The “major marks” (Skt *lakṣaṇa*; P *lakkhana*) are the 32; the minor marks (*anuvyañjana*) are 80; ie, the marks of “the great man” (*mahā, purisa, lakkhana*): **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 3), SD 36.9 esp (4); SD 36.9 (3+4).

<sup>80</sup> After the beginning of the “100 world-cycles” (Abhk 4.8). Abhk 3.13b :: Abhk:Pr 3:390.

<sup>81</sup> Kvū 8.2/2:361-366. **Sammatīya** (Skt *saṃmitīya*) was a subsect of Vajji, puttiya (Skt *vātsi, putriya*), remembered primarily for its view of a “person” (*pudgala*) that is neither the same nor different from the 5 aggregates; and **Pubba, seliya** (Skt *pūrva, śaila*, “eastern hill”) was an offshoot of Mahāsaṅghika, assoc particularly with Cetiya (Skt

between” (Skt *antarā, parinivāyin*).<sup>82</sup> They do not attribute the intermediate state to beings who are going to hell, to the non-conscious realm (Skt *asamjñika*; P *asañña, satta*), or to the formless realms (Skt *arūpya, dhātu*; P *arūpa, dhātu*).

Other early Indian schools that deny the intermediate state were the Mahāsaṅghikas, Eka-b, bohārikas (Skt Eka, vyahārikas), Lokottara, vādins, Kukkuṭikas, Mahāsāsakas (Vasumitra) and Vibhajja, vādins.<sup>83</sup> Vasubandhu [3.4.1.5], in his **Vyākhyā, yukti**, adds that their views varied: no intermediate state; one preceding birth into the 3 worlds; one preceding birth in the sense world, and (the only correct view, according to him), one preceding birth in the sense-world or the form-world.<sup>84</sup>

Since the intermediate beings have the 5 aggregates (*pañca-k, khandha*), they arise only in the “sense-world” and the “form-world,” not in the formless world. In the form-world, their form will be refined, too, unlike those of the sense-world beings (Abhk 3.13). However, an intermediate being is said to be mind-made (*mano, maya*), Vasubandhu explains that this is because he is produced by the mind (*manas*) alone, “without being supported by anything external, such as semen, blood and so on.”<sup>85</sup> Hence, we must assume that they are not normally visible.

### 3.4.3 The spontaneously born (*opapātika*)

**3.4.3.1** The non-returners are often referred to in the suttas as those who are “**spontaneously born**” (*opapātika*), a term usually used of devas and brahmas who arise in their heavens, as it were, *spontaneously*, that is, without the need of biological procreation.<sup>86</sup> The narrow sense of *opapātika* as “spontaneously born being” also refers to one of the 4 “wombs” (*yoni*) or manners of birth, that is,

- |                                 |                         |                                       |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| (1) the egg-born (oviparous),   | <i>aṇḍa, jā yoni</i>    |                                       |
| (2) the womb-born (viviparous), | <i>jalābu, jā yoni</i>  |                                       |
| (3) the moisture-born, and      | <i>saṃseda, jā yoni</i> |                                       |
| (4) the spontaneously born.     | <i>opapātika yoni</i>   | (D 33/3:230; M 12/1:73) <sup>87</sup> |

**3.4.3.2 The Mahā Sīha, nāda Sutta** (M 12) gives the following definitions and examples for the 4 modes of birth [with the same from Vasubandhu’s **Abhidharma, kośa**, given within square brackets]:

(1) “**The egg-born**” refers to those beings “born by breaking out of the egg-shell” (*aṇḍa, kosam abhinibbhijja jāyanti*). [Those born from eggs (*aṇḍebhyo jāyante*), such as geese, cranes, peacocks, parrots, thrushes, etc.]

*caitya*) school centred in Andhra region of S India. These are 2 of the post-Buddha pre-sectarian (non-Mahāyāna) **18 mainstream Indian schools** [Routledge Ency of Bsm, “Nikāya Buddhism,” 2007:549-558; list: Princeton Dict of Bsm 2014:1091]. See *Saṃmitīya, hikāya, śāstra* (T32.1646.3); *Kāraṇa, prajñāpti, śāstra* 11.5 (Poussin, *Cosmologie bouddhique* 1914-19:341).

<sup>82</sup> See Abhk 3.40c & Abhk:Pr 386.

<sup>83</sup> See *Vibhāṣā*, T27,356c14.

<sup>84</sup> “Even though there is a difference in time and place between death and birth, because in the internal, there is no destruction following upon birth, these Schools do not admit *antarābhava*” (*Vibhāṣā*, T27,352b18-366a1).

<sup>85</sup> *Śukra, śoṇit’ādikaṃ kiñcid, bāhyam-anupādāya bhāvāt* (Abhk 3.40c) [Pruden oddly adds as “flower”: Abhk:Pr 3:442]; on *mano, maya*, see Abhk 2.444, 8.3c.

<sup>86</sup> On divine beings (devas and brahmas) being referred to as *opapātika*, see **Mahā Cattārisaka S** (M 117,5 n), SD 6.10.

<sup>87</sup> D 33,1.11(36)/3:230; M 12,32-33/1:73 (SD 49.1); also UA:M 1:255; Vism 17.148/552. In the Skt texts, see Abhk 3.8cd (Abhk:P 3.8cd/380); the 4 modes of birth are related to the 5 destinies (*gati*) in *Kāraṇa, prajñāpti*, ch 15 (Poussin, *Cosmologie bouddhique*, 345).

(2) “**The womb-born**” are beings born by breaking out of a caul (*vatthi, kosam abhinibbhijja jāyanti*). [Those born from a caul (*jarāyu*), such as elephants, horses, cows, buffalos, asses, pigs, etc.]<sup>88</sup>

(3) “**The moisture-born**” are beings who are born in rotting fish, in a decomposing corpse, in spoilt broth, in a cesspool, or in a sewer. [Those born from moisture, the exudation of the elements, earth, etc, such as worms, insects, butterflies and mosquitos.]

(4) “**The spontaneously born**” are gods,<sup>89</sup> hell-beings, certain human beings and some beings in the lower worlds.<sup>90</sup> [Those beings who arise all at once, with their organs neither lacking nor deficient, with all their major and minor limbs. They are said to be “apparitional” (Skt *upapāduka*; P *opapātika*),<sup>91</sup> arising on account of having done good (*sadhu, karitvād-upapādukā*) and because they arise all at once (without an embryonic state, without semen and blood); such as gods, hell-beings, or intermediate beings.)]

(M 12,32-33, SD 49.1; Abhk 3.8cd; Abhk:Pr 3:380 f)

**3.4.3.3 The Abhidharma,kośa** [1.2.3] says, “Beings in hell, intermediate beings, and the gods are apparitional (Skt *upapāduka*; P *opapātika*), too.” (Abhk 3.9bc). In other words, the *antarā, bhava*, like the hell-beings and the gods, are *opapātika*. As already pointed out, the Sanskrit cognate of *opapātika*, according to the Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary, is *upapāduka* or *aupapāduka*.

**Max Deeg**,<sup>92</sup> in his paper<sup>93</sup> presented to the “Closer to Reality Conference,” held in Kuala Lumpur in December 2008, notes that *aupapāduka*, as “being just before rebirth” (Tib *brdzus-te skye-ba'i sems-can*),<sup>94</sup> is related to the Wheel of Life, and says that **Vinīta,deva** takes it to mean *bar-ma-do'i srid-pa'i sems-can* (a being between two existences).<sup>95</sup> In other words, as discussed above, the *aupapāduka* (P *opapātika*) can also refer to the intermediate being.

**3.4.3.4** We can now say that the Pāli *opapātika* and the BHS *aupapāduka* overlap where they also mean “intermediate state.” If this is acceptable, from the right-view pericope quoted above [2], the Buddha would be saying that to reject the notion of the intermediate state is wrong view, and to accept it is right view—which actually makes good sense! Of course, we know that *opapātika*, more broadly encompasses the sense of “beings that are reborn” (as in the above pericope). However, one problem still remains, we need textual evidence why the Buddha would highlight this particular “right view,” that there are beings in the intermediate state.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>88</sup> On the various modes of impregnation: Miln 123; VA 1:213; Windish, *Buddha's Geburt*, 1908:24.

<sup>89</sup> The gods of the pure abodes (*suddh'āvāsa*), the 5 highest heavens of the form world (*rūpa,loka*) are all non-returners, living out their last birth to become arhats and attain nirvana (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46).

<sup>90</sup> *Devā nerayikā ekacce ca manussā ekacce ca vinipātikā*.

<sup>91</sup> *Opapātika* (also *upapātika*, *upapattika*) def in Comy as “beings that upon dying are reborn” (*cavitvā uppajjanaka,satta*) (SA 2:338,23 = AA 2:370,28).

<sup>92</sup> School of Religious and Theological Studies, Cardiff University, UK.

<sup>93</sup> Deeg, “Buddhist interpretations of phenomena covered in part 1,” 2008:9/13 fn 13.

<sup>94</sup> **Hodge** (foll the **Yogācāra, bhūmi** Index), thinks that the correct Tib transcription for *aupapāduka* should be “*rdzus-te skye-ba'i sems-can*.” “But this term is used to denote the fourth mode of birth, the spontaneous birth type. I am not aware that it signifies a being in the intermediate state (bar-do). Hope this helps for a start.” The relevant forms from the **Yogācāra, bhūmi** Index (Chin, Skt, Tib) are: 化出 *aupapādukaḥ saṃbhavati*, rdzus te 'byung bar 'gyur ba; 化生 *aupapādukā yoniḥ*, rdzus te skye ba'i gnas; 化生 *upapāduka*, rdzus te skyes pa; 化生衆生 *sattva upapādukaḥ*, sems can skye ba; 化生有情 *sattva upapādukaḥ*, sems can skye ba; 化生有情 *sems can rdzus te skye ba*. **rdzus** means “a guise, to disguise.” **Brdzus** means “to transform, miraculous.” The Chinese 化 *huà* has a similar range of meanings to *brdzus*. So *brdzus* seems the better version, says Lusthaus. Richard Nance, foll **Mahāvuyutpatti** 2282, says “*brdzus te skye ba*” = *upapādukāḥ*. (Personal communication.)

<sup>95</sup> Deeg quotes **Monika Zin & Dieter Schlingoff**, *Saṃsāracakra. Das Rad der Wiedergeburten in der indischen Überlieferung*, Dusseldorf, 2007:24, 115.

<sup>96</sup> Further see **Is rebirth immediate?** SD 2.17. On LBL (“life-before-life”) recalls, see **Miracles**, SD 27.5a (5.2.4.3).

The Pāli term *opapātika* is cognate with the Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit (BHS) *upapāduka* or *aupapāduka*. The Pāli form *opapātika* is a secondary derivation from *upapāta* (a hyperpalism<sup>97</sup> for *upapāda*), which is, in turn, a verbal noun of *upapajjati*,<sup>98</sup> which has a broad sense of “arise, occur, to be possible,” and here specifically means “to be reborn.” The CPD defines *opapātika* as “spontaneously produced (ie without perceptible causes),” or more simply, “taking rebirth directly,’ ie, not going to an egg or a womb or some kind of generative fluid” [3.4.3.5]. In short, *opapātika* refers to a “direct rebirth.”

**3.4.3.5 On the etymological development of *upapāda* and its hyperpalism *upapāta*,** L S Cousins has some insights:

In the form of written Middle Indian current especially from the second century BC to the first century AD words derived from Sanskrit *upapāta* and from Sanskrit *upapāda* were often identical in form. But there was no standardized spelling. From the second century AD or so onwards, there was a general move towards a more standardized and literary form of written language. This eventually produced the languages we know as Buddhist Sanskrit and Pali (and probably others).

In the case in question it meant that those who were tidying up the texts needed to make a choice between a derivation from *upapāta* and one from *upapāda*. The ancestors of the Pali tradition chose the former (perhaps seeing a connexion also to *upapatti*), while the ancestors of the Sanskrit texts known to us chose the latter.

Originally, there was not much difference in meaning. Both effectively mean “taking rebirth” and one has to understand this as meaning “taking rebirth directly,” ie not going to an egg or a womb or some kind of generative fluid. “Direct rebirth” seems to be the default mode for everything except human beings and animals.

(L S Cousins, personal email communication on Buddha-L, 25 Jan 2008)

**3.4.3.6<sup>99</sup>** The term “spontaneously-born” (*opapātika*) is often used to refer to the rebirth of a non-returner in the pure abodes [3.4.1.2]. More broadly, that is, in terms of a rebirth, it refers to *all divine and hell beings* that arise without procreation or biological generation (in a sense, especially in the sense-world, we can apply the term “parthenogenesis” for such cases).<sup>100</sup> [3.4.3.1]

I suggest that it has a third, the most comprehensive sense (yet non-technical and its earliest sense), referring to all beings capable of rebirth (and redeath). In other words, it is derived from *upapatti*, “re-birth.” This is the sense that applies in the right-view pericope [3.4.3.4]. The wrong view, then, is essentially a rejection of rebirth, especially the view that this is our only life, a kind of materialism.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>97</sup> A **hyperpalism** (also **hyper-palism** or **hyperpalism**), like a hypersanskritism, is an “over-correction,” an attempt usu by a redactor to modify a word-form for a more literary appearance. See Heinrich Lüders, *Beobachtungen über die Sprache des buddhistischen Urkanons*, Berlin, 1954: 110 n5, §122, 141.

<sup>98</sup> Derived from *upa* + *vPAD* + suffix *-ika*; cf Skt *upapāda*, *upapāduka*, *aupapāduka* (qvv in BHS); cf also Skt *upapatti*, *aupapattika*.

<sup>99</sup> This same idea is discussed in some detail in terms of the right view pericope in SD 40a.1 (5.1.2).

<sup>100</sup> Such a usage does have its problems, the main one being that, as a scientific term, it refers to only physical beings. In other words, we need to “borrow” or “convert” such words and re-define them in the word that computer scientists and experts borrow or coin new computer terminology. We should take care to avoid pre-defining such terms when we read Buddhist literature, and ask two important questions: (1) What does the author or teacher mean or could mean here? (2) What sutta or dharma sense is this term trying to convey, or what do we need to remember regarding the Buddhist sense of this term?

<sup>101</sup> See **Mahāli S** (D 6,13/1:156), SD 53.4.

In the “right view” pericope,<sup>102</sup> then, it makes good sense if we translate *opapātika* as simply meaning or as including the sense of “beings that are reborn.” This is close to the traditional sense, and does not merely mean “spontaneously born” as a characteristic of the non-returner. This, then, is an affirmation of **rebirth**, a key aspect of right view. [3.4.3.2 (4)]

## 4 The moral context of rebirth

### **4.1 KARMA ACCORDING TO EARLY BUDDHISM**

#### **4.1.1 Karma and rebirth**

**4.1.1.1** We have already noted how *feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention*, working together, make up the “name” in **name-and-form** (*nāma,rūpa*) [2.4.2.1]. The mental aggregates—feeling, perception, formations and consciousness—*together with craving, karma and ignorance* are the mental factors that attract or construct the material factors (form, *rūpa*) to bring forth and support our body-mind existence. This, in the suttas, is called **the “body accompanied by consciousness”** (*sa,viññāṇaka - kāya*) or, simply, the “conscious body.”<sup>103</sup>

Our body-mind, like everything else, animate or inanimate in the universe, is habitually changing. Since it *consists of parts*, it changes constantly and rapidly since birth. We are so habituated to this that we take it for granted, and neither see nor understand its significance. Further, this makes it almost impossible for us to ascertain, even though personal experience, to know how exactly **rebirth** takes place. For this reason, too, it is easy for materialists—especially in our times—to totally reject the truth of rebirth.

**4.1.1.2** Rebirth, according to early Buddhism, is closely connected with **karma**. The moral quality of our volitional deeds can be witnessed in how well we stave off challenges by **craving**, rooted in **ignorance**. It is this moral strength and courage that decide the kind and quality of life we now live, our next life and future lives. These karmic effects, however, do not operate in a *monocausal* manner. Alongside karma, a range of other conditions, which also shape or influence the quality and direction of our present life. In other words, simply put, we are also conditioned by the laws of physics, biology, psychology and nature, which we will discuss later. [4.2.1]

#### **4.1.2 Karma is intentional action**

**4.1.2.1** Craving closely relates to volition [intention], mentioned earlier as one of the components of “name” (*nāma*) [4.1.1.1]. Craving is bad and unskillful because it arises from **ignorance** and works with it. Craving and ignorance, the key twin latent tendencies (*anusaya*),<sup>104</sup> work in tandem feeding their venom through the 3 unwholesome roots of greed (*dosa*), hate (*lobha*) and delusion (*moha*) in our lives.<sup>105</sup> The latent tendencies, lurking deep in our unconscious, are the accumulation of our past negative habits and

<sup>102</sup> To hold that “There are no spontaneously born beings” (*n’atthi sattā opapātikā’ti*) is a wrong view: M 1:34,9 (MA 1:164,7 = DA 313,11) = S 5:346,17 = A 1:232,19 (AA 2:349,18), qu at Vism 677,25. On the existence of devas (in the broad sense of “divine beings”), see (**Majjhima**) **Saṅgārava S** (M 100,42), SD 10.9, but note that the Buddha uses the term *adhideva*, “superior gods,” SD 10.9 (4).

<sup>103</sup> SD 17.8a (12.3); SD 56.1 (4.3.2.2) n.

<sup>104</sup> See **Anusaya**, SD 31.3 esp (2.2).

<sup>105</sup> On the 3 unwholesome roots (*akusala,mūla*), see **Mūla S** (A 3.69), SD 18.2; SD 4.14 (1.5); SD 50.20 (3.1.3).

present potential for bad karma. Insidiously, they work their powerful tentacles on a **preconscious** level, that is, tightly grasping thought and darkly skewing our speech and action.<sup>106</sup>

“**Karma is intention, I say**” (*cetanā’ham kammaṃ vadāmi*), declares the Buddha.<sup>107</sup> Psychologically, **intention** is our deliberate mood or goal, **conscious or unconscious**,<sup>108</sup> active in our **preconscious**, the mind just before we speak or act in *greed, hate or delusion*. When we do *not* express such a thought through speech or bodily deeds, then, there is neither karma of speech nor of body. We are said to be **morally virtuous** to that extent. For this reason, we keep **the precepts**.<sup>109</sup> **The mind**, however, can only be properly tamed at its own level through mindfulness and meditation.<sup>110</sup>

**4.1.2.2 Intention** (*cetana*) operates through a network of conditions fed by the other components of *name* [4.1.1.1] as well as by *the reciprocal conditioning* between **consciousness and name-and-form** [2.4.1.1]. Hence, **karma** (*kamma*) refers to such *mental* volition (a deliberate thought) as well as to intentional *verbal* expression and *bodily* action (deliberate communication through speech and body, respectively).<sup>111</sup> However, we should not confuse this with the popular usage, in which “karma” stands for *the results*, which are, properly speaking, the “**fruit**” (or *fruition*) (*vipāka*). So, there is **karma** and there is its **fruition**.

**4.1.2.3** Although **karma** literally means “action,” it refers to “**intentional action**”; unintentional action is called **kiriya** and bears no fruit on the doer. Karma, as **intentional action**, has the potential of fruiting, where *good begets good, bad begets bad*,<sup>112</sup> but not always immediately or apparently. Whether such actions are mental, verbal or bodily, they will bear their results for us, and for others, too, under the right conditions. These latter are the reciprocal conditioning of *consciousness and name-and-form*, where karma as intentional or volitional action also applies to the present life as well as to the transition from one life to another.

**4.1.2.4** Here’s a simple example of **how karma works both on us and on others**. As I type on the keyboard, these words and sentences appear on the computer screen, which are then stored and shared as digital files or as hard copies: this is my karma and its present fruit. My mental action behind typing certain keys forms meaningful sentences on the screen. These express my ideas and the ethical tone of my intention. You, the reader, then make sense of these words and ideas each in your own way: this is the fruition of your own karma.

In other words, we each bear the karmic fruit in our own way. Basically, this is how karma bears fruit for each of us. For this reason, we need to mindfully keep the precepts of moral virtue to ensure that this interaction is wholesome (*kusala*).<sup>113</sup> [4.2.3.3]

<sup>106</sup> On **the preconscious**, see SD 17.8b (2.2; 6.1).

<sup>107</sup> **Nibbedhika (Pariyāyā) S** (A 6.63/3:415 (SD 6.11); Kvu 8.9.36/392).

<sup>108</sup> On karma, **unconsciously** done, see (**Kamma,vāda**) **Bhūmija S** (S 12.25), SD 31.2.

<sup>109</sup> On the practice of moral virtue, see SD 1.5 (1); helped by lovingkindness, SD 1.5 (2.9).

<sup>110</sup> On **mindfulness training**, see **Nimitta & anuvyañjana**, SD 19.14. On **meditation** as a training, see **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.2. On the 3 trainings: **Sīla samādhi paññā**, SD 21.6; SD 1.11 (5).

<sup>111</sup> A 6.63/3:415,7 (SD 6.11) and its parallels MĀ 111 (T1.26.600a23) and D 4094 ju 200a1 or Q 5595 tu 228a4; also Abhk (Pradhan) 1967:192.10; Abhk 4.1c-d :: Abhk:Pr (tr) 4:552. Cf Abhk 2.24 :: ABhk:Pr 1:189.

<sup>112</sup> On this popular maxim—good begets good, bad begets bad—or “as we sow, so we shall reap,” see SD 3.5 (1.1).

<sup>113</sup> This interaction involves *speech, deed and thought*, and, in moral training, they are laid out as **the 10 whole-some courses of karma** (*dasa kusala kamma, patha*): **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41,7-10), SD 5.7; **Sañcetanika S** (A 10.206,1-7), SD 3.9.



## 4.2 KARMA AND ITS FRUITS

### 4.2.1 Karma as one of the natural orders

**4.2.1.1 The Sīvaka Sutta** (S 36.21) tells us that what we experience now is the fruition not just of past karma in the sense of our past deeds, but also of conditions like bodily disorders, change of climate, or external violence.<sup>114</sup> This shows that in early Buddhism, the results of karma operate within a network of various causes and conditions; that karma does not work in a monocausal manner.

**4.2.1.2** According to early Buddhism, the quality and circumstances of our current situation is decided by **the 5 natural orders** (*pañca,niyāma*), that is:

- (1) the natural order of “**heat**” (*utu,niyāma*), includes temperature and decay (the laws of physics);
- (2) the natural order of “**seeds**” (*bīja,niyāma*), the physical organic order, eg, heredity (biology);
- (3) the natural order of **karma** (*kamma,niyāma*), how our intentions affect our thoughts, speech and actions, past, present and future;
- (4) the natural order of **the mind** (*citta,niyāma*), the process of cognition, the nature and power of the mind (psychology); and
- (5) the natural order of “**nature**” (*dhamma,niyāma*), causality and other natural and psychic phenomena, and nature itself (such as gravity) (the laws of nature).<sup>115</sup>

The emphasis is, however, often on **karma**, because it is the one condition that is amenable to being brought under control through mental training. Clearly, then, the early Buddhist teaching of karma is not deterministic.<sup>116</sup> Instead, our current intentions are *only one condition* in a network of interrelated conditions that act together to shape or influence our future.

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<sup>114</sup> S 36.21/4:230,13 (SD 5.6); SĀ 977 (T2.99.252c21), and SĀ2.211 (T2.100.452b14). That karma is only one in a set of conditions recurs also for different experiences in **Samaṇa-m-acala S 1** (A 4.87/2:87,29), SD 20.13, and **Samaṇa Sukhumāla S** (A 5.104/3:131,6), and for different types of disease in **Giri-m-ānanda S** (A 10.60/5:110,1), SD 19.16. Wujastyk comments on the factors besides karma in **S 36.21** that “this is the first moment in documented Indian history that these medical categories and explanations are combined in a clearly systematic manner.” (“The path to liberation through yogic mindfulness in early Āyurveda,” 2011:32).

<sup>115</sup> DA 2:432; DhsA 272; SD 5.6 (2).

<sup>116</sup> Of the numerous writings highlighting that the early Buddhist karmic teaching is not deterministic, see: **Jaya-tilleke**, “The Buddhist doctrine of karma,” 1968; **Gómez**, “Some aspects of the free-will question in the Nikāyas,” 1975:82; **Nyanaponika**, “Reflections of kamma and its fruit,” 1975:91; **Story**, “Karma and freedom,” 1975:74; **Fujita**, “The doctrinal characteristics of karman in early Buddhism,” 1982:151; **Siderits**, “Beyond compatibilism,” 1987:153; **Jayawardhana**, “Determinism and indeterminism,” 1988: 408; **L de Silva**, “Freedom,” 1991:273; **Keown**, “Karma, character and consequentialism,” 1996:340; **Halbfass**, *Karma und Wiedergeburt im indischen Denken* 2000:102; **Harvey**, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* 2000/2005:23, “Freedom of the will,” 2007:59; **Hershock**, “Valuing karma,” 2005:6 f; **Nelson**, “Questioning karma,” 2005: 4; **Anālayo**, “Karma and liberation” (A 10.-208), 2009a:2-4; Obeyesekere (*Imagining Karma*, 2002:130), notes **Anālayo** (2018:71 n47), is unclear in his view: after correctly stating that according to the early Buddhist notion of karma “human pain and suffering can arise from non-karmic causes. For example, illness can be caused by karma, but it can also be caused through the sole action of the bodily humours,” he nevertheless continues to qualify this early Buddhist notion of karma as “deterministic.” **Jayatilleke**, in fact, says just the contrary: “Buddhism, it may be noted, was opposed to all forms of determinism.” (*Survival and Karma in Buddhist Perspective*, 1969:28).

#### **4.2.2 Karma is not deterministic**

Since both our intention and its eventual results operate within a wider network of various conditions [4.2.1], the actual process of karma and its fruition can take a variety of forms. A familiar situation is cited by **the Cūḷa Kamma,vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 135): that being prone to anger has its karmic fruit in our being *ugly*.<sup>117</sup>

The way karma works, an intentional act now is the seed of future fruit—that is, in this life itself, in the next life, or in some subsequent life or lives, or in any or all of these. However, this does not mean that everyone who fails to satisfy current ideals or fashion of beauty must have been angry in his or her past life. This would be falling into the error of monocausality [4.1.1.2]. The point of the Cūḷa Kamma,-vibhaṅga Sutta is only to point out a strong possibility, not a fixed eventuality.

#### **4.2.3 The relativity of karmic fruition**

**4.2.3.1** The suttas further highlight another complexity of karma: its relativity to attending conditions. This is well illustrated by the famous **parable of a lump of salt**.<sup>118</sup> According to the parable, a lump of salt will affect the drinkability of water differently: such as, if it is dropped into a small cup of water or into a large river. In the former case, *the cup of water* will clearly become salty and undrinkable, but in the latter case, the effect would probably be unnoticeable.

Similarly, the effect of any karmic deed depends on our overall moral development, not just external conditions, including other people. This principle is especially significant when a habitually good person, in an uncharacteristically poor lapse of judgement, makes a mistake or commits an immoral act. On account of his habitual goodness, the effects of his misdeed bear only a small negative fruit, or even none at all.

However, in the case of a habitually bad person, even a small mistake or, worse, an intentional bad deed, would at once bear negatively on him. This is not to say that a *good* person will always “get away” with a rare bad deed. Rather, it is to highlight the fact that our habitual good will help us stand “in our own cognizance” when we have committed a bad deed, especially so when we are contrite about that badness.

**4.2.3.2** **The remorse** that a habitually good person feels when he commits an uncharacteristically bad deed shows that he appreciates the significance of the situation and reflects his natural goodness. Even though he has done a bad deed *intentionally*, he realizes the nature of the unwholesomeness of his bad intention (rooted in greed, hate or delusion) [4.1.2.1].

In doing so, he sees the true reality of the situation. In this sense, we may say that it is natural for us, especially as humans, to do good. Doing bad actually goes against the natural course of human development and awakening. Or, simply, doing bad prevents us from growing as a true individual.

**4.2.3.3** When we are, by nature good, or we have made a deliberate turnaround to being a good person, such a wholesome act has great transformative potential for good. This good turn is famously illustrated by the story of the former bandit and serial killer **Aṅgulimāla**. As a youth (originally named Ahimsaka, “the non-violent”), he studied in an ashram in Takkasila. Being one of great compassion, often

<sup>117</sup> M 135/3:204,18 and its parallels MĀ 170 (T1.26.705a29), T1.78.887c27, T1.79.889c27, T1.80.892a28, T1.81.-897a9, T17.755.589a27, Karmavibhaṅga (**Kudo**, *The Karmavibhaṅga*, 2004:52,6; 2007:98,9), with its Tib counterpart, **Lévi**, *Mahākarmavibhaṅga*, 1932:185,25), and D 339 sa 301a4 or Q 1006 shu 312b8.

<sup>118</sup> A 3.99/1:250,1 and MĀ 11 (T1.26.433a21); see also **Dhammadinnā**, “Semantics of wholesomeness,” 2014: 114.

helping around his guru's house, he was slandered by jealous colleagues of committing gross inappropriacies with his guru's wife and daughter.

The foolish guru, believing the slander, plotted dastardly against Ahimsaka, requesting from him, as a teacher's offering, a total of 1,000 human fingers, one from each victim. Deeply respectful of the guru and obliging him, Ahimsaka went out on his bloody quest, awkwardly transforming himself from one non-violent into a notorious serial killer in the Jālinī forest of Kosala.

Just as he was on the verge of obtaining his last finger, ready to kill his own mother, the Buddha interceded, partly to prevent him from committing matricide, partly because he was ready for awakening. Meeting the Buddha and listening to him, Aṅgulimāla, recalled his past goodness and realized the wrongness of his killings.

Interestingly, in his case, his killings were compelled by his guru—a case of one person initiating bad karma in another [4.1.2.4]. The Buddha (that is, his teaching) reminds Aṅgulimāla of his past habitual goodness, which he recalls to his great advantage, bringing him his own awakening. This means that our actions do affect others in a bad or a good way. However, ultimately, we can and must decide which path to take. This is called wholesome **self-reliance**.<sup>119</sup>

### 4.3 KARMA AND RIGHT VIEW

#### 4.3.1 When the good suffers and the bad prospers

**4.3.1.1** The wholesomeness of **the last moments of our life** is considered to be of particular importance for possibly keeping or turning karmic fruition in our favour, especially when we uphold right view as death approaches. This idea is found in a teaching on the intricacies of karma given in **the Mahā Kamma, vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 136).

The Sutta which states that when we do good, we may still experience negative results. On the other hand, someone who has done bad may enjoy, seemingly, at once pleasant results. The reason is that the ripening of karma is complex, and not something that operates in a monocausal manner; nor do the appropriate results immediately follow the karmic cause.<sup>120</sup> [4.3.1.2]

**4.3.1.2** **The Mahā Kamma, vibhaṅga Sutta** [4.3.1.1] exposition on karma should be examined in connection with the early Buddhist teaching that samsara, the cycles of rebirths and redeaths go unthinkably far back into the past that a beginning point cannot be discerned.<sup>121</sup> This perspective points to the early Buddhist—and ancient Indian and broadly Asian notion—that **time is cyclic**, contrasted with the Middle Eastern theological idea that time is linear: some God creates the world “in the beginning,” and then, at his whim, will destroy it “in the end.”

**The Mahā Kamma, vibhaṅga Sutta** teaching on karma also implies that the amount of deeds we have done thus far is staggering. Since a particular present deed need not result in instant fruition, the karmic results we experience now could be related to the ripening of some other deeds, even those from the distant past.

<sup>119</sup> His story is in MA 3:304-319; DhA 3:169 f; ThaA 3:54-64. His arhathood and awakening are reported in **Aṅgulimāla S** (M 86/2:104,1), SD 5.11; SĀ 1077 (T2.99.281a26), SĀ2 16 (T2.100.378c29), T2.118.509b23, T2.119.511-a19, EĀ 38.6 (T2.125.721a7); for a tr of SĀ 1077 and a comparative study, see **Anālayo**, “The conversion of Aṅgulimāla in the Saṃyukta-āgama,” 2008a.

<sup>120</sup> M 136/3:207-214 (SD 4.16).

<sup>121</sup> See, eg, **Assu S** (S 15.3/2:179,21), SD 16.13(3), and its parallels SĀ 938 (T2.99.240c26) and SĀ2 331 (T2.100.-486a19); part of a corresponding statement has been preserved in Skt frag SHT 1.167 R3, (**Waldschmidt, Clawiter & Holzmann**, SHT, Teil I, 1965:95). Another parallel, EĀ 51.1 (T2.125.814a28), has no counterpart to this intro statement, although the rest of the text clarifies the same basic principle.

**4.3.1.3** Hence, that our present wholesome action is seemingly followed by negative results should be understood as involving 2 aspects: (a) the present act is wholesome and sooner or later will bring good results, and (b) the experience of the present karmic fruit is that of some unwholesome deed we have done, even from the distant past.

The same principle applies to the case of someone who is **doing bad but seems to be enjoying it**. The bad done now will certainly have bitter fruits, but due to other good deeds carried out in the past, even the distant past, this person will at once seemingly enjoy pleasure. Such a person is clearly blinded by wrong view. He is like those, when the sea suddenly recedes far from shore, rush into the exposed seabed to pick stranded fish and other things. Within the hour, the tsunami waves will arrive to drown them.

### **4.3.2 One life is not enough**

**4.3.2.1** Even from our discussion thus far, it is clear that the early Buddhist teaching on karma and rebirth is complex. The workings of **karma** cannot be proven or disproven on account of just one life, or even just the transition from one life to the next.

**The Brahmajāla Sutta** (D 1) shows how various wrong views arise because of recollecting just one previous life.<sup>122</sup> This means that just taking into account the previous life is an insufficient basis for drawing any correct or useful conclusions regarding our karmic experience. Indeed, we need to carefully and properly survey a whole range of previous lives in order to appreciate the workings of karma on an individual. The suttas also speak of grievous karma that has an “immediate” effect on the perpetrator, that is, fruiting within this life itself or at the moment of dying.<sup>123</sup>

**4.3.2.2** The complexity of the working of karma can be illustrated by the example of **students sitting for exams**. The student’s success or good results cannot be rightly assessed by how he had prepared for it on the day before the exams. A good student might have diligently prepared for months prior to the exams and even taken the last day off to relax. A bad student, on the other hand, could have put off studying until the last day. Then, he frantically burns the candle until very well past midnight, losing sleep. We can only know how the student’s preparations benefitted his exam results by taking into account a much longer period of preparation than just the frantic day before the exams.

Moreover, even sustained preparation over a long period does not assure good results. Some exam questions may have been formulated in such a confusing manner that even a good student will fail. Yet, other questions could be so easily set that even a bad student manages to pass.

The results of such exams are thus indeterminable. All that can be said with certainty is that those who prepare themselves well are likelier to get better results. This uncertainty about exams also illustrates the indeterminable and non-deterministic nature of karma.

<sup>122</sup> For a comparative study, see **Anālayo**, “Karma and liberation” [A 10.208], 2009.

<sup>123</sup> The suttas list **the 6 grave misdeeds** (*cha abhiṭhāna*): (1-3) murder of one’s mother, one’s father, an arhat, (4) causing a schism in the sangha (monastic community), (5) physically attacking a Buddha so that he bleeds; (6) turning to another teacher (other than the historical Buddha): **A 1.15.4-9/1:27,13-37**, **6.87/3:436 f**, **6.93/3:439** (mention) (SD 12.14), **6.94/3:439**; **Khṇ 6.10** (KhṇA 189,17) = **Sn 231**, qu at Kvu 109,9\*. **The 5 (heinous) deeds** (*ānantarika kamma*) with retribution in the very next life (viz, rebirth in hell), viz 1-5 of the above: **A 5.129/3:146**; AA 2:5,7 5,15 = VbhA 426,19 + KkhvṬ 46,36; **SD 46.19 (3.1)**; SD 2.17 (1.3.2); SD 10.16 (5.5.5.2 n). See also Mahāvūyutpatti 2323-28 (§122), Sakaki, 翻譯名義大集 (*Hon’yaku meigi-dai-shū*, “A compendium of names”), 1916:172, and **Silk**, “Good and evil in Indian Buddhism,” 2007. In terms of the exams simile [4.3.2.2], one who has done little or no good in the past would not enjoy its good fruit in this life: this would be like a student who, for a reason, has been disqualified from the exams. Clearly, such a student will never pass the exams.

**4.3.2.3 The results of karma** (*kamma, vipāka*) are “unthinkable” (*acinteyya*), beyond our normal mental powers: when we try to figure them out, we “would only reap our share of madness or vexation”! (*yaṃ cintento ummādassa vighātassa bhāgī assa*).<sup>124</sup> The exact working out of the results of karma is hard to know.<sup>125</sup> We can only discern a natural norm that bad will eventually have its well-deserved painful and bitter fruition, just as good will eventually bring pleasant results.<sup>126</sup>

**The Mahā Kamma, vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 136) [4.3.1.1] agrees with the idea that having right view is a factor that can prevent the ripening of any bad karma at the time of passing away so that we are reborn in a happy state.<sup>127</sup> This highlights the last moments of our life as being of vital importance for influencing, even determining, the conditions of the next life, by way of having and keeping right view at that crucial time. The significance of **right view**, then, is central for appreciating the position of rebirth in early Buddhism.

#### 4.4 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RIGHT VIEW

##### 4.4.1 The denial of rebirth

**4.4.1.1** The standard sutta definition of **wrong view** explicitly includes the denial of rebirth and of the karmic fruition. An example of such a wrong view is found in **the Akkhaṇa Sutta** (A 8.29) that states it as being highly deplorable when, in spite of being so fortunate as to be born when the Buddha’s teachings are available, we reject rebirth and karmic fruition.<sup>128</sup>

**The Brahmajāla Sutta** (D 1) and its parallels list the denial of rebirth as an annihilationist view. This view falsely affirms that we are annihilated once the body breaks up at death, in the sense that nothing survives the death of the physical body.<sup>129</sup>

**4.4.1.2 The Sāmañña, phala Sutta** (D 2) states that Ajita Kesakambala, one of 6 sectarian teachers of the Buddha’s time, utterly denied rebirth, holding the wrong view as stated in the suttas. He is attributed

<sup>124</sup> **Acinteyya S** (A 4.77), warns that these 4 are “unthinkable” (A 4.77/2:80), SD 27.5a(5.5.2) = SD 35.1(7).

<sup>125</sup> **Griffiths** explains that “Buddhist karmic theory is no open-and-shut determinism wherein it is possible to calculate with precision the karmic accounts, as it were, of any given individual. Things are much more complex than that.” (“Notes towards a critique of Buddhist karma theory,” op cit, 1982:289)

<sup>126</sup> On this “folk” view of karma, see **Isayo Samuddaka S** (S 11.10), SD 39.2.

<sup>127</sup> M 136/3:214,21 and its parallels MĀ 171 (T1.26.708b21) and D 4094 ju 267a7 or Q 5595 thu 10b3. Becker notes that later “schools of Buddhism ... placed increasing emphasis on the holding of right views at the moment of death and ... [even] considered this to be more important than living a moral life in determining one’s future rebirth.” (1993:13)

<sup>128</sup> A 8.29/4:226,12 (SD 104.9) and its parallels MĀ 124 (T1.26.613b24) and EĀ 42.1 (T2.125.747a26), as well as a quotation in **Sūtra, samuccaya** (Pāsādika 1989:7,8) and T32.1635.50b27; parts of this exposition have also been preserved in Skt fragment Or 15009/64 v5-6 (**Nagashima**, “The Sanskrit Fragments Or. 15009/51-90 in the Hoernle Collection.” 2009:139). The references in these texts speak of the denial of the existence of “another world” and of the fruit of wholesome and unwholesome deeds. The expression “another world” occurs in **Pāyāsi Sutta** (D 23) in a discussion about rebirth, making it clear that it refers to being reborn in another world: **D 23,2/2:316,13 + 9/2:319,-11** (SD 39.4), DĀ 7 (T1.1.42c2), MĀ 71 (T1.26.525b16), and T1.45.831a13; on this Pāyāsi S passage [6.2].

<sup>129</sup> D 1/1:34,7, DĀ 21 (T1.1.93a26), T1.21.269b9, a Tibetan discourse parallel, Weller 1934, 56,6 (§185), a discourse quotation in T28.1548.660a21, a discourse quotation in D 4094 ju 151b3 or Q 5595 tu 174b6, and a Skt fragment parallel, SHT X 4189 V4-5 (Wille 2008:307); for a tr of the relevant section in DĀ 21 and a comparative study see **Anālayo**, “Views and the *tathāgata*,” 2009b.

to have held that a human being is simply made of the 4 elements (earth, water, fire and wind) and will just come to nothing at death.<sup>130</sup> Ajita is recorded as declaring thus:

“This person (that we are) is a composite of the 4 primary elements. At death, the earth (in the body) returns to and merges with the (external) earth-body. The fire returns to and merges with the external fire-body. The water [liquid] returns to and merges with the external water-body. The wind returns to and merges with the external wind-body. The sense-faculties scatter into space.

Four men, with the bier as the 5<sup>th</sup>,<sup>131</sup> carry the corpse. His eulogies<sup>132</sup> are sounded only as far as the charnel ground. The bones turn pigeon-colored. The offerings end in ashes.

Generosity is taught by fools. Those who say that there is such a notion make false, empty chatter.<sup>133</sup>

With the break-up of the body, the wise and the foolish alike are annihilated, destroyed. They do not exist after death.” (D 2,22/1:55,15), SD 8.10<sup>134</sup>

This shows that **the materialist view** was already known in ancient India. Moreover, since the doctrines of these 6 teachers were repeatedly held up as being contrary to what the Buddha taught, they are clearly regarded as wrong views.

**4.4.1.3** According to the passage mentioned above, to live at the time when the Buddha’s liberating teachings are available and hold such wrong view is considered a predicament comparable to being born *dumb and dull*, unable to understand the meaning of what is being said [4.4.1.4]. In both cases, we are prevented from benefiting from the Buddha’s liberating teachings.

The contrast made in the suttas between the Buddha’s teaching on rebirth and this materialist view implies that the doctrine of rebirth was not a belief widely accepted in ancient India.<sup>135</sup> Hence, it seems highly improbable that the rebirth teaching in early Buddhism should be attributed to the wish to accommodate the presumed appeal of the notion of rebirth among contemporaries of the Buddha and his followers.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>130</sup> D 2,22/1:55,15 (SD 8.10). German tr of the sutta, **Meisig**, *Das Śramaṇyaphala-Sūtra*, 1987:145; Eng tr and study, **MacQueen**, *A Study of the Śramaṇyaphala-Sūtra*, 1988:41.

<sup>131</sup> Four men, each holding a leg of the bier, and the bier itself is the fifth object.

<sup>132</sup> *Padāni*, alt “funeral orations” (M:ÑB).

<sup>133</sup> *Tesaṃ tucchā musā vilāpo ye keci atthika,vādaṃ vadanti*. Comy says that this refers to the fruits of giving (MA 3:227).

<sup>134</sup> For Dīrgha,āgama version: DĀ 27 (T1.1.108b26-c1). For a comparable doctrine, see T1.22.271b28 and Saṅghabhedavastu (**Gnoli**, *Saṅghabhedavastu 2*, 1978:221,6; also **Vogel**, *The Teachings of the Six Heretics*, 1970:11,10)), attr to another of the 6 teachers: **Bapat**, “The Śrāmaṇyaphala-sūtra,” 1948:109.

<sup>135</sup> **Jayatileke** notes that “as is evident from the Buddhist and the non-Buddhist literature, there was a variety of views on the question of survival at the time covering almost every possibility that one can think of.” (*Survival and Karma in Buddhist Perspective*, 1969: 8). Jayatileke concludes that “it is false to say that rebirth was universally accepted by the Indian religious tradition prior to the advent of Buddhism.” (*Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963:372). **Analayo**, 2018:57 (digital).

<sup>136</sup> **Jayatileke** points out that it is “not correct to say (as many scholars have done) that the Buddha took for granted the belief in rebirth current in society at the time ... the Buddhist theory of survival has its origin in the Enlightenment of the Buddha and not in any traditional Indian belief.” (op cit, 1969:8 f). **Premasiri** adds that “the evidence contained in the various scriptural sources including the Pali Canonical scriptures does not favour the conclusion that Buddhism would have accepted the doctrine of rebirth because it was a well-established belief in the pre-Buddhist background.” (1996:138).

**4.4.1.4** The same can also be seen from the central position accorded to **the denial of rebirth** as an instance of wrong view. A notion taken over from the ancient Indian setting just to placate popular beliefs would hardly have been invested with such a vital function in the early Buddhist soteriology, the teachings of awakening and nirvana.

Only when we understand and accept **the materialist position** as being a wrong view that affirms the body's death as tantamount to the annihilation of a living being, we can see that it is diametrically opposed to the grain and spirit of the Buddha's teachings. Upholding such a wrong view is considered to make one "dumb and dull" since we have rejected true reality and would consequently face its bitter and painful fruits.

#### **4.4.2 The right view pericope**

**4.4.2.1** As already noted, the suttas tell us that the early Buddhist teaching on **rebirth** is based on these 2 important premises:

- (1) that the Buddha and the full-fledged arhats have the power **to recollect their own past lives**,<sup>137</sup> which confirms the reality of rebirth, that is to say, this is not our only life, and also that we are conditioned by the past, but we have the power to shape our future lives; [3.2] and
- (2) that they also have **the ability to investigate the rebirths of others in accordance to their karma**,<sup>138</sup> which confirms the reality of karma, that is to say, although we are conditioned by the past, we can use the present (training the body and mind) to shape our present life and destiny. [3.3]

**4.4.2.2** These key twin premises [4.2.1.1] underpin all the 6 points of this well-known pericope, which is also **a definition of right view**:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| (1) <i>atthi dinnam, atthi yittham, atthi hutam,</i>              | There is the given, the offered, the sacrificed.  |
| (2) <i>atthi sukata, dukkaṭānam kammānam phalam vipāko,</i>       | There is the fruit or result of good or bad deeds.  |
| (3) <i>atthi ayam loko, atthi paro loko,</i>                      | There is this world, the next world [hereafter].  |
| (4) <i>atthi mātā, atthi pitā,</i>                                | There is mother, there is father.   |
| (5) <i>atthi sattā opapātikā,</i>                                 | <u>There are <b>sattā opapātikā</b></u> . <sup>139</sup>  |
| (6) <i>atthi loke samaṇa, brāhmaṇā sammagatā sammā, paṭipannā</i> | There are recluses and brahmins who, living rightly and practising rightly, having known and realized for themselves this world and the hereafter, proclaim them. |

(**Sāleyyaka Sutta**, M 41,14/1:288), SD 5.7.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>137</sup> P *pubbe, nivāsānussati ñāṇa*: see **Miracles**, SD 27.5a (5.4).

<sup>138</sup> P *cutūpapāta ñāṇa*, "the knowledge of the falling away and rebirth (of beings)," or "knowledge of rebirth according to karma" (*yathā, kammūpaga ñāṇa*), or "the divine eye" (*dibba, cakkhu*): see **Miracles**, SD 27.5a (5.5).

<sup>139</sup> "Spontaneously born beings" [4.4.2.4], often said of a non-returner; sometimes, also of divine beings and hell beings. In the pericope on wrong view: **D** 1,2.27/1:27, 2,23/1:55, 6,13/1:156, 23,2-11/2:317-329, 14-20/2:332-339, 21/2:342, 33/2:356 f, 33,3.2(4)/3:265, 34,2.1(7)/287; **M** 41,10/1:287, 60,5-6/1:401 f, 76,7/1:515, 110,11/3:22, 22/3:24, 114,10/3:52, 117,5/3:72; **S** 24.5/3:206, 42.13(III)/4:348 f, (IV)/4:352, (V)/355 f; **A** 3.115,6/1:269, 8.29,3/4:-226, 10.176,5/5:265, 10.200,2/5:284 f; **Nm** 1:188. Cf A 4.191/2:186 f.

<sup>140</sup> Also: **M** 60,6/1:402, 110,22/3:24, 114,10/3:52, 117,6/3:72; **S** 42.13(III)/4:349, (IV)/4:352, (V)/4:356; **A** 3.115,-6/1:269, 10.175,10/5:268, 10.200,4/5:285; **Nm** 188. The pericope on wrong view: **D** 1,2.27/1:27, 2,23/1:55 (DA 165,24), 6,13/1:156, 23,2-11/2:317-329, 14-20/2:332-339, 21/2:342, 33/2:356 f, 33,3.2(4)/3:265, 34,2.1(7)/287; **M** 41,10/1:287, 60,5-6/1:401 f, 76,7/1:515, 110,11/3:22, 22/3:24, 114,10/3:52, 117,5/3:72; **S** 24.5/3:206 (SA 2:338,12 = DA 165,24), 42.13(III)/4:348 f, (IV)/4:352, (V)/355 f; **A** 3.115,6/1:269, 8.29,3/4:226, 10.176,5/5:265, 10.200,2,23/-5:284 f; **Nm** 1:188. Cf A 4.191/2:186 f.

**4.4.2.3** The rebirth teaching features significantly in all the 6 points of the right view pericope [4.4.2.2]. This significance becomes clear when we examine the meaning of each of these 6 points, as follows:

- (1) The goodness of charity is, firstly, the basis of wholesome social relationship. On a spiritual level, the goodness of giving, especially to the virtuous and the needy, generates karmic merits that can benefit even the departed, in particular, the pretas, who are caught in a state of addictive dependence. The joy accompanying such dedication of merits to them frees them from their hapless state for a happy **rebirth**.
- (2) The efficacy of karma, that good and bad intentions have their own fruits, so that we are accountable for our own actions, and that our spiritual destiny is in our own hands. Even when our good karma (present actions) may not bear fruit here and now, it will facilitate for us a happy **rebirth**, and, under the right conditions, ripen at any time.
- (3) This is not our only world and we are not the only beings around, certainly not to dominate others; for, there are other life-forms and other universes. Since all these beings are born, it clearly follows that they will be **reborn**.
- (4) We arise from parents, not from some imaginary being or agency; understanding and accepting this relationship is the basis of a healthy *family* life and wholesome *society*, that is conducive to peace, prosperity and personal development. We have been living in samsara, through countless **rebirths**, for such a long time that we have been *parents, siblings and children* to one another, not to mention being spouses, companions and friends to one another.<sup>141</sup>
- (5) There are beings that are **reborn**, faring according to their karma, some in suffering states, some in happier states as spontaneously born beings, some in between realms until their karma ripens to propel them on, and there are also liberated states.
- (6) There are even here and now those who are morally virtuous, who have attained high levels of a personal understanding of true reality, who have attained some level of spiritual awakening, and are as such in a good position to help liberate others by their wholesome examples and compassionate teachings. The good amongst them will attain good or better rebirths, while the morally virtuous and mentally disciplined will, upon becoming arhats, be free from **rebirth**.

**4.4.2.4** Of special interest here is the expression, "spontaneously born beings," *sattā opapātikā*, which, following the Pāli Commentaries, generally refers to beings undergoing rebirth. Hence, the sentence (5) of the right view pericope [4.4.2.2] can be read as: "There are beings that are reborn" [3.4.3.6]. We can easily tease this sense out of the Dīgha Commentary's explanation of the "wrong view" version of the statement, thus:

*N'atthi sattā opapātikā* means to say that beings after dying are not reborn (*n'atthi sattā opapātikā ti cavitvā upapajjanakā sattā nāma n'atthi ti vadati*). (DA 1:165 = MA 3:332)

This is to hold a wrong view but outrightly rejecting that there is no rebirth. This, then, is likely to encourage a materialistic, "this-life only," mindset that rejects the teaching and truth of karmic accountability and potentiality. We may then be tempted to believe that since we often see the good suffer and the bad prosper, karma, too, is false. Hence, materialism is also likely to be amoral: we are likely then to define good and moral ethics in terms of only this-life realities.

<sup>141</sup> S 15.14-19/2:189 f (SD 57.2-7).



### 4.4.3 Alternative definitions of right view

**4.4.3.1 Right view** (*sammā,diṭṭhi*) is the beginning and basis for the noble eightfold path that constitutes the early Buddhist progressive training starting with moral virtue of body and speech. This is the basis for mental training of calm and clarity, so that we are no more fettered by the body and know how to free the mind. Together, moral virtue and mental concentration bring forth the wisdom instrumental for gaining awakening and liberation, such as that as taught in **the Mahā Cattārīsaka Sutta** (M 117).<sup>142</sup>

This, however, does not mean that we must accept **rebirth** on blind faith in order to progress on the path: there are other ways of describing right view. One of the alternative definitions of right view is the exact opposite of wrong view that thus affirms rebirth and the fruits of karma, such as that stated in **the (Dasaka) Cunda Sutta** (A 10.176).<sup>143</sup>

**4.4.3.2** Another alternative definition of **right view** presents it as insight into the 4 noble truths, such as that given in **the Sacca Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 141).<sup>144</sup> Although the 4 noble truths are rooted in the rebirth teaching, the basic idea and practice they entail is that awakening can be attained without the need for any belief in rebirth.<sup>145</sup> Indeed, upon awakening, its truth would only be inexorably clear to us. [4.4.3.3]

**4.4.3.3** The fact that the suttas present such **alternative definitions of right view** gives us the latitude to take up Dharma-spirited practices leading to the path of awakening *without a dogmatic acceptance of rebirth*. This does not imply, however, the possibility of utterly rejecting rebirth, since this would amount to holding wrong view.

This latitude in early Buddhism makes good sense because, without awakening, whatever we think we know or understand, or accept as true, can only be provisional at best. Even when we uphold and declare the word of right view, we have yet to realize for ourself **its truth**. In other words, it is not merely *knowing* Buddhism that liberates us, but it is our *understanding and transformation* on the path of awakening that liberates us as true individuals bound for liberation and nirvana.

**4.4.3.4** The point, then, is that when we wish to walk on the path of Buddha Dharma, we need *not* affirm rebirth as a matter of mere belief. The question of rebirth may simply be set aside as something that we are unable to verify at present, without going so far as to deny rebirth and uphold that there is nothing beyond the body's death. In fact, this is just the positive attitude the Buddha encourages us to take when we are faced with such a predicament. He speaks at length on how we can make a "safe choice" in this. [4.4.4]

<sup>142</sup> M 117,7/3:71,23 (SD 6.10) and its parallels MĀ 189 (T1.26.735c13) and D 4094 nyu 44a4 or Q 5595 thu 83b4.

<sup>143</sup> See A 10.176/5:268,1 (SD 79.12) and its parallel SĀ 1039 (T2.99.272a4) both instances are preceded by a corresponding description of wrong view: the Skt version is found in a quotation in Abhidharmakośa,vyākhyā (**Wogihara** 1936:409,19).

<sup>144</sup> See M 141,21/3:251,12 (SD 11.11); despite differences in formulation, the parallels MĀ 31 (T1.26.469a15 and T1.32.816a17) make basically the same point. Another parallel, EĀ 27.1 (T2.643b23), only refers to right view, without drawing out its implications; for a tr and study of EĀ 27.1 see **Anālayo** 2006a. Collins 1982:92 distinguishes 3 types of right view: "firstly, that of a general and pan-Indian pro-attitude to the belief system of karma and saṃsāra; secondly, that of knowledge of Buddhist doctrine and the motivation to accept and introject it; and thirdly, that of progress towards, and attainment of, liberating insight."

<sup>145</sup> It should also be understood that we should not utterly reject rebirth, but keep an open mind since, at this point, we can neither prove nor disprove it. [4.4.3.1]

#### 4.4.4 The sure teaching

**4.4.4.1** One of the most remarkable statements in religious freedom and spiritual wisdom is the Buddha's teaching of "the safe wise choice," given in **the Apanṇaka Sutta** (M 60). Here, the Buddha assures us that, despite our inability to prove rebirth (or any Dharma teaching) from our own experience or wisdom, we can still be assured of *a safe and wise choice of beliefs*. The Sutta recounts the Buddha counselling a group of householders on how to resolve for themselves the contradiction between those teachers who deny rebirth and those teachers who affirm it.<sup>146</sup>

**4.4.4.2** In **the Apanṇaka Sutta**, the Buddha gives a long discourse on these "safe choices" in the form of **the 4 sure (apanṇaka) teachings**. There are these 2 key positions in terms of spiritual truth [the section numbers marked with "§" refer to those in **M 60** (SD 35.5)], and their safe choices, summarized thus:

- (1) one *denying* karma (moral responsibility) and rebirth (or survival, that is, a hereafter or life after death) (*n'atthika, vāda*), and
- (2) its diametrically opposite view (*uju, vipaccaṇīka, vāda*) which affirms karma and rebirth<sup>147</sup> [§6].

The Buddha then declares that in such a situation, a wise person (*viññū puriso*) [§9] would reason as follows:

##### **The nihilist (who rejects moral responsibility and the hereafter)** [§§8-9]

- (1.1) If a person adopts the 1<sup>st</sup> position, and there is *no* hereafter (*sace ... n'atthi paro loko*), then, he will have no cause for regret but only happiness for himself (*sotthim attānam karissati*).
- (1.2) But if there *is* a hereafter (*sace ... atthi paro loko*), then, he would *suffer*, arising in a subhuman plane (*apāyam ... upapajjissati*).
- (1.3) Anyway, he would be *reproved* in this life as an immoral person and a nihilist (*diṭṭhe va dhamme viññūnam gārayho, dussilo ... n'atthika, vādo*).
- (1.4) If there is a hereafter, he would stand to lose in both worlds (*ubhay'attha kali-g, gaho*).
- (1.5) Thus, in choosing this alternative, he would benefit only one way (*ek'aṃsam pharivā tiṭṭhati*).

##### **The wise (who affirms moral responsibility and the hereafter)** [§§10-11]

- (2.1) On the other hand, if a person adopts the 2<sup>nd</sup> position, and there *is* a hereafter (*sace ... n'atthi paro loko*), then, after death he would be *happy*, arising in heaven (*param maraṇā ... sugatim ... upapajjissati*).
- (2.2) Anyway, he would be *praised* in this life as a moral person and an affirmer of moral responsibility and the hereafter (*diṭṭhe va dhamme viññūnam pasāṃso, silavā ... atthika, vādo*).
- (2.3) If there is a hereafter, he would benefit in *both* worlds (*ubhay'attha kaṭa-g, gaho*).
- (2.4) Thus, in choosing this alternative, he benefits both ways (*ubhay'aṃsam pharivā tiṭṭhati*).

<sup>146</sup> M 60, 7-31/1:402-410 (SD 35.5); part of the description of the view that denies rebirth has been preserved in Skt fragment SHT III 966 Bd (**Waldschmidt, Clawiter & Sander-Holzmann** 1971:226, identified by J-U Hartmann in **Bechert & Wille**, SHT 9, 1996:272).

<sup>147</sup> Karma and rebirth are not directly mentioned in the arguments of **Apanṇaka S** (M 60), but the allusions and implications are clear. Hence, I have freely used karma as a blanket term for references to moral efficacy, etc, and rebirth for references to the hereafter, the afterlife for related ideas. I find this non-technicality vital for helping us see the Buddha's early teachings as a coherent whole moral accountability and survival are widely accepted. However, I am not advocating that, on account of such a notion, we regard modern Buddhists who reject karma and rebirth, or put them on hold, as it were, to be having "wrong view." Here, we are all taking our own careful and measured steps towards the middle path.

We may represent the “Buddha’s wager” as follows:

	<u>If p is true</u>	<u>If p is false</u>
We wager p	We are happy in the hereafter	We are praised by the wise here and now
We wager not-p	We are unhappy in the hereafter	We are reproved by the wise here and now

The most logical and reasonable conclusion here is to choose p because, in doing so, we *win* either way. However, if we choose not-p we *lose* either way.<sup>148</sup>

**4.4.4.3** The 2 alternative positions [4.4.4.2] are for those who reject or deny moral efficacy and the hereafter and for those who affirm them. It is argued, on logical and rational grounds, that it would be *better to choose the affirmative*, irrespective of the truth-value. Philosophically, **the Buddha’s wager** is a precedent of Pascal’s wager, but there are important differences.<sup>149</sup>

The Buddha’s advice is for us to reflect on the consequences of holding these two opposing views. Such a reflection will, assures the Buddha, lead us to the conclusion that the affirmation of rebirth (besides being, from an early Buddhist perspective, an affirmation of what is actually true and right) encourages us to act in wholesome ways, unlike the denial of rebirth. This, in fact, serves as a less devious and more sensible alternative to Pascal’s wager.<sup>150</sup>

Hence, when we wish to follow the Buddha’s teaching, but have *doubts about karma and/or rebirth*, we only need to follow his advice and make “**the safe choice**.” Clearly, the teaching of rebirth is rooted in our living a wholesome life here and now. In this spirit, we only need to follow a teaching that promotes such a wholesomely purposeful way of life, even when we are unable to personally verify rebirth. This is the “middle way” for the unawakened.

#### 4.4.5 Personal verification

**4.4.5.1 The Kālāma Sutta** (A 3.65) (also known as **the Kesa,mutti Sutta**) records a teaching given by the Buddha to householders who are faced with conflicting views held by various teachers. The Buddha teaches them (and us) how to overcome our doubts in such a predicament. It is a strategic teaching given by the Buddha to help us out of our doubts about the Dharma.

Here, too, the Buddha recommends that we reflect on the wholesome and unwholesome consequences of such views. Unlike in **the Apanṇaka Sutta** (M 60) [4.4.4], where he shows us how to see the benefit of affirming teachings that give us a wholesome advantage, in **the Kālāma Sutta**, he actually declares that it is all right to doubt (*alam vicikicchitum*)<sup>151</sup> regarding doubtful teachings, especially where the views conflict and there seems to be no way of resolving them ourselves.<sup>152</sup>

**4.4.5.2** In **the Kālāma Sutta** (A 3.65), the Buddha begins by speaking on the moral worthiness of a religion or teaching: we are not to follow any religion blindly. The Buddha closes his discourse with a guarantee that whether we accept rebirth and karma or not, as long as our “mind is *without enmity* thus, *without ill will*, uncorrupted thus, purified thus,” we would enjoy 4 self-assurances or spiritual solaces (*assāsa*)—similar to the spirit of the “safe choice” of **the Apanṇaka Sutta** (M 60) [4.4.4].

<sup>148</sup> See Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963:405 f.

<sup>149</sup> See **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65), SD 35.4a (7.1). This whole section is taken from SD 35.5 (4).

<sup>150</sup> On Pascal’s wager, see SD 35.4a (7).

<sup>151</sup> A 3.65,3/1:189,6 (SD 35.4a).

<sup>152</sup> A 3.65/1:188-193 (SD 35.4a).

Hence, with a mind that is *purified, free of hate and malice*, we right here and now enjoy these 4 “self-assurances” (*assāsa*) [§17]:

If there is an afterlife and karmic result,	then, he will undergo a good rebirth.
Or, if there is none,	still, he lives happily right here in this life.
Or, if bad results befall a bad-doer,	then, no bad will befall him.
Or, if bad results do not befall a bad-doer,	he is purified anyway.

(A 3.65,17/1:192 f), SD 35.4a

While the Apanṇaka Sutta offers us the choice of a “provisional acceptance” of *karma and rebirth* as a “safe choice,” the Kālāma Sutta instructs us to actually live with **love, ruth, joy and peace** (living a life of moral virtue and wholesome mindfulness). In that way, it does not really matter to us whether *karma and rebirth* are true or not: our good life has kept us safe from any negative karma fruition or rebirth anyway. Hence, **the Kālāma Sutta** is *not* a “charter of free inquiry,” but rather a guide for the perplexed.<sup>153</sup>

**4.4.5.3** In a comparative study of **the Kālāma Sutta** (A 3.65), we are faced with a textual problem. While the Sutta advises us to doubt what is doubtful, in **the Madhyama,āgama** (Chinese) parallel, however, the Buddha is depicted as instructing us *not* to have doubts.<sup>154</sup> Instead, he declares:

“You yourselves do not have pure wisdom with which to know whether there is an afterlife or not. You yourselves do not have pure wisdom to know which deeds are transgressions and which are not.”

He then explains the 3 unwholesome roots of karma, how they lead to moral transgressions, and then the 10 courses of wholesome karma, and how they bring moral virtue.<sup>155</sup>

Besides this difference, when evaluating the advice given in the Apanṇaka Sutta (M 60) and the Kālāma Sutta (A 3.65), we should bear in mind that their audiences are not a gathering of the Buddha’s followers.<sup>156</sup> In other words, the teachings given here are not addressed to those who have decided to

<sup>153</sup> **Story** comments on A 3.65 that “the true meaning of the Kālāma Sutta [is] not the licence to doubt everything and to go on doubting, which many people today are all too eager to read into it.” (“Karma and freedom,” 1975: 101).

<sup>154</sup> MĀ 16 (T1.26.438b13-439c22): 汝等莫生疑惑 *rǔ děng mò shēng yíhuò*. The same difference recurs between an acknowledgment of the appropriateness of doubt in relation to various views in vogue in the ancient Indian setting, found in **Pāṭaliya S** (S 42.13/4:350,15), SD 65.1, and its parallel MĀ 20 (T1.26.447a22), where the Buddha rather discourages having doubts. In such a situation where the original text in one tradition was inverted, it is difficult to ascertain which one actually underwent inversion; perhaps we could go by the context. In **(Duka) Sāriputta S** (A 2.36), eg, Sāriputta explains that the “internally fettered” is a “returner” (to the sense-sphere), while the “externally fettered” is the non-returner; but the Chin parallel, MĀ 22 (T1.448c23-25) states just the opposite: see A:B 2012:74 + 1626 n256.

<sup>155</sup> MĀ 16 (T1.26.438c12-439c22): 汝等莫生疑惑. The same difference recurs between an acknowledgment of the appropriateness of doubt in relation to various views in vogue in the ancient Indian setting, found in **Pāṭaliya S** (S 42.13/4:350,15), SD 65.1, and its parallel MĀ 20 (T1.26.447a22), where the Buddha instead discourages against having doubts. In such a situation where the original text in one tradition was inverted, it is difficult to ascertain which one actually underwent inversion; perhaps we could go by the context. In **(Duka) Sāriputta S** (A 2.36), eg, Sāriputta explains that the “internally fettered” is a “returner” (to the sense-sphere), while the “externally fettered” is the non-returner; but the Chin parallel, MĀ 22 (T1.448c23-25) states just the opposite: see A:B 2012:74 + 1626 n256.

<sup>156</sup> In **M 60**, the householders explicitly indicate that they do not have firm faith established in any particular teacher (M 60,4/1:401,22), SD 35.5. **A 3.65/1:188,22** and **MĀ 16** (T1.26.438b29) portray different ways in which the householders greet the Buddha on arrival, which implies that some of them feature merely as interested visitors and do not consider themselves as followers of the Buddha.

follow the path of liberation taught by the Buddha and consider themselves his followers.<sup>157</sup> This is a valuable lesson in how the Buddha responds to what we today call the spirit of “interfaith openness and dialogue.”<sup>158</sup>

#### **4.4.6 Speculation and direct knowledge**

**4.4.6.1** If we are to effectively follow the Buddha’s teachings, we should heed his advice on not wasting our time speculating about what we *were* in the past, what we *will be* in the future, even what we *are* now. Such advice can be found in **the Sabbāsava Sutta** (M 2) and its parallels, where he encourages us rather to spend time cultivating meditative insight, or strengthen our mindfulness, so that we progress to streamwinning.<sup>159</sup>

**4.4.6.2** What **the Sabbāsava Sutta** (M 2) considers as problematic is not the idea of our having been someone else in the past but rather our engaging in theoretical speculations which only burden us with unverifiable views about constructed and uncertain states. In contrast to the critical attitude encouraged in the Sabbāsava Sutta, other suttas regularly commend recollection of one’s own past lives as one of **the 3 superknowledges** (*abhiññā*). Unlike speculating about the past, this is personally verifiable knowledge.

These 3 superknowledges correspond to the realizations attained by the Buddha on the night of his awakening, mentioned above [3], that is, the recollection of our own past lives, the direct witnessing of the rebirth of others in various realms of existence, and the gaining of awakening through the eradication of the influxes (*āśava*).

**The Saṅgārava Sutta** (M 100) and its parallel in a Sanskrit fragment report the Buddha identifying the epistemological foundation (how we know things) of his own awakening to be precisely such superknowledge.<sup>160</sup> The clear difference between the superknowledges regarding rebirth and the speculations described in the Sabbāsava Sutta is of an epistemological type (concerning how we know things), inasmuch as *abhiññā* is *direct experiential knowledge*, which is far removed from mere theorizing or speculating.

**4.4.6.3** Another aspect of the 2<sup>nd</sup> superknowledge—that regarding the rebirth of others in various realms of existence—is highlighted in **the Naḷaka, pāna Sutta** (M 68). The Sutta says that the Buddha would at times declare the rebirths and level of realization attained by deceased disciples, giving as the rationale for such declarations that it serves as an inspiration for others to emulate those disciples.<sup>161</sup>

Helpful as this attitude may be, it should not be brought to extremes. Hence **the Mahā, parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) reports an occasion when the Buddha censured Ānanda (or in the parallel versions, unnamed monks) for continuing to inquire about the rebirth of various individuals.<sup>162</sup>

As already evident from **the Sabbāsava Sutta** (M 2), our priority should be given to attaining streamwinning ourself, thus entering the path that will lead to an end to rebirth. **The Mahā Taṇhā, saṅkhaya**

<sup>157</sup> For other cases where the Buddha teaches the unconverted, see SD 1.4 (2.3).

<sup>158</sup> For a similar response in this spirit of “interfaith dialogue,” see **Udumbarikā Sīha, nāda** (D 25) & esp SD 1.4 (2).

<sup>159</sup> M 2,7-8/1:8,4 (SD 30.3) and its parallels MĀ 10 (T1.26.432a16), T1.31.813b11, EĀ 40.6 (T2.125.740b21), and D 4094 ju 92b5 or Q 5595 tu 105b5. **Carrithers** explains that “for the Buddha the specific details of transmigration were never so important as the principle underlying it: human action has moral consequences, consequences which are inescapable, returning upon one whether in this life or another.” (*The Buddha*, 1983:54)

<sup>160</sup> M 100,7/2:211,23 (SD 10.9) and fragment 348r1 f; Zhang 2004:12 f.

<sup>161</sup> M 68,10-23/1:465-468 (SD 37.4) and its parallel MĀ 77 (T1.26.545b26).

<sup>162</sup> D 16,2.8-2.9/2:93,13 (SD 9); also **Giñjak’āvasatha S 1** (S 55.8/5:357,10) and its parallels in a Skt fragment version (**Waldschmidt**, *Das Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, 1951:168,8 (§9.17)), as well as DĀ 2 (T1.1.13a29), T1.5.163b7, T1.6.-178b27, and Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya (T24.1448.26c8), with its Tibetan counterpart (**Waldschmidt**, op cit, 1951:169,9 (§9.17)).

**Sutta** (M 38), in turn, states that one who has gained penetrative insight into dependent arising (*paṭicca samupāda*), loses all interest in speculating about what he might have been in the past, what he might become in the future, or even what he is in the present. Here, again, direct insight into true reality is shown to be better than theoretical speculation.<sup>163</sup>

**4.4.6.4** The ideas of **direct insight** (*vipassanā*) and **superknowledge** (*abhiññā*) find their most salient expression in the suttas in the 4 stages of awakening—arhathood, non-returning, once-returning and streamwinning—which are directly related to the teaching of rebirth. According to early Buddhism, a streamwinner will only be reborn 7 lives at most, a once-returned will be reborn in this world once, and a non-returned will be reborn once in the pure abodes.<sup>164</sup> An arhat has reached total freedom from rebirth, reflected in the stock passage on the attainment of full liberation in that “**birth is destroyed** (*khīṇā jāti*).”<sup>165</sup>

We can thus see how rebirth is the teaching that underpins our spiritual progress, from giving up and avoiding wrong views, through Dharma-spirited practice in all the stages of the path, all the way up to its consummation through the attainment of the 4 levels of awakening. Clearly, then, rebirth is unequivocally an integral aspect of early Buddhist teaching.<sup>166</sup>

#### **4.4.7 Overview of karma and rebirth in early Buddhism**

**4.4.7.1** Early Buddhist psychology centres on our being “bodies attended by consciousness” (*sa, viññāṇaka kāya*) [4.1.1.1]. They arise through **dependent arising**, which is basically a conditioned interlink between consciousness, and mental activities, comprising “name” (attention, etc) and “form” (the experience of matter) [2.1-2.4]. This conditioned interactivity works as **the continuity** during a single life, and from one life to another without the involvement of any permanent entity that continues to live or is reborn. [2.5]

Once we are reborn, our past habits (mostly the negative ones) lurk in our unconscious as **latent tendencies** that compel us, through the subconscious, to act unmindfully with *greed, hate and delusion*. This is called **intention**, which is what **karma** really is. The effects of karma continue to work beyond the present life, and its potential is carried over into the next life and subsequent lives through **rebirth** [2.6]

**4.4.7.2** Through meditative training, we may be able to access memories of **past lives**, which include remembering our name, living circumstances and death in that past existence [3.1-3.3]. The form of rebirth taken is seen to follow **the law of karma**, in the sense that *the moral quality* of our volitional deeds, in particular, the impact of **craving** as the limbs of ignorance, has an effect in this life and in the

<sup>163</sup> M 38,23/1:264,37 (SD 7.10) and its parallel MĀ 201 (T1.26.769a10).

<sup>164</sup> See, eg, (**Tika**) **Uddesa S 2** (A 3.86/1:233,13), SD 80.13, and its parallel SĀ 820 (T2.99.210b29; for a discourse quotation regarding the prospective rebirth of a streamwinner see the Abhidharmakośa, vyākhyā (**Wogihara** 1936: 554,6).

<sup>165</sup> See, eg, **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2/1:84,11 (SD 8.10) and its parallels, DĀ 20 (T1.1.86c7), T1.22.275c26, and the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya (**Gnoli** 1978:250,30).

<sup>166</sup> **Premasiri** comments that “one might contend that the first Truth of the unsatisfactory nature of life ... may be understood without the hypothesis of rebirth, but it becomes completely meaningful only under that hypothesis.” (*Buddhist Philosophy on Rebirth*, 2001:209). **Premasiri** concludes that “the Buddhist doctrine of liberation (*vimutti*) derives its meaning and significance primarily from its teaching concerning the inevitability of ... a repeated series of births and deaths ... the ultimate goal of Buddhism, and the way of life recommended in order to attain it, would lose much of its significance if the teaching concerning rebirth is not considered as a cardinal tenet of the system.” (“Rebirth,” 2005:521)

future. Far from having *a single cause* (“monocausal”), such effects arise from the workings of various conditions [4.1.2].

**4.4.7.3 Conception** is described as the “descent” of consciousness into a foetus, which implies the continuity of past memories but not of the whole of the deceased’s mental processes [2.5]. The transition of such consciousness from one life to another, or rather *the transition of such a process of being conscious*, seems to involve **an intermediate existence** of unspecified duration [3.4.1; 3.4.2]. The idea of **a spontaneously born being** is part of the right view pericope, which evinces its broad sense as referring to *rebirth* in general. [3.4.3]

**4.4.7.4** Alongside **karma**, a range of other conditions—physical, biological, psychological and natural—can influence the circumstances and quality of our present life [4.2.1]. The early Buddhist doctrine of karma is therefore not deterministic [4.2.2]. Nor are the results of karma seen as having only an immediate effect. Rather, they can fruit even after a long interval, under the right conditions. This, in turn, makes it impossible to *prove or disprove* the doctrine of karma based on taking into account only a single life or the passing on from one life to the next. [4.2.3]

**4.4.7.5 Right view** is the foundation of the early Buddhist path of practice. While right view does not require accepting rebirth on mere *faith*, it does require keeping an open mind to what is beyond the sphere of our personal verification, but not the utter denial of rebirth. [4.3]

The doctrine of rebirth is an integral and essential component of early Buddhist thought and cannot be reduced to a taking over of popular notions from the ancient Indian background. The suttas often show us how rebirth and its workings have been verified by the Buddha himself on the night of his awakening. Rebirth is also intrinsically intertwined with the different levels of awakening recognized in early Buddhism. [4.4]

## II. REBIRTH CONTROVERSIES

### 5 Speculation and vision

#### 5.1 THE UNDETERMINED QUESTIONS

##### 5.1.1 Right view and speculative views

**5.1.1.1** The suttas depict the setting in ancient India in the Buddha’s time as teeming with various thinkers, teachers and recluses ready to debate their respective views. In line with the contrast between theoretical speculation about past lives and direct insight [4.4.6.4], early Buddhist texts often express an attitude of disinterest in debating any speculative theories.

**5.1.1.2** Such rejection of speculative views, several of which concern rebirth, is eloquently expressed in **the Atthaka, vagga** (Sn 766-975) of the Sutta Nipāta, the 5<sup>th</sup> book of the Khuddaka Nikāya (the minor collection); it is also preserved in a Chinese translation.<sup>167</sup> On this account, some scholars

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<sup>167</sup> Sn 766-975/151-189 (a collection of 16 ancient suttas, Sn 4.1-16) and T4.198.74b8-189c23, tr **Bapat**, “The Arthapada-sūtra spoken by the Buddha,” 1945, 1950.

have concluded that, with the rejection of views and the centrality of right view, rebirth as a key teaching of early Buddhism is seen to conflict with them.<sup>168</sup>

The Buddha of the Aṭṭhaka,vagga, it seemed, taught no doctrines except the avoidance of any entanglement in views. This was the time of **the “silent sage” (muni)**, when the Buddha and the early arhats were quite contented to spend their time meditating in the forests and living solitary lives. It is likely that this was **the earliest Buddhism**, belonging to the very 1<sup>st</sup> period of the Buddha’s ministry.<sup>169</sup>

If the Buddha did not teach doctrines such as karma and rebirth—which were unverifiable by the unawakened—it probably meant that at that time, he had no reason to teach them. He was then teaching those who were ready to be arhats. Hence, his focus would be an implementation of right view in the spirit of the 4 noble truths.

The main task of these earliest followers<sup>170</sup> was to recognize how craving and attachment lead to the dogmatic adherence to views and rituals. Their vision became “rightly” directed once they saw through craving and attachment in their fixation to views. It was only when the Buddha’s teaching became more widespread and the number of unawakened followers grew significantly that teachings such as those on karma and rebirth were given, so that they were able to see a bigger picture of samsara and how they were caught in it. With this understanding, they were more ready to turn to the path. These were teachings that are also *meant for us today*.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> See, eg, **Gómez**, “Proto-Madhyamika in the Pāli Canon,” 1976; **Vetter**, “Some remarks on the older parts of the Suttanipāta,” 1990:44-52; **Burford**, *Desire, Death and Goodness*, 1991:45-70. **Analayo** is esp critical of **Fronsdal**, *The Buddha Before Buddhism*, 2016: “The title of his study and translation of the Aṭṭhaka,vagga announces the topic to be ‘the Buddha before Buddhism’; the collection is then introduced in **Fronsdal** 2016:10 with the comment that ‘it may well be that these teachings lay at the heart of the earliest tradition. Many of the rest of the surviving teachings could be considered elaborations, adaptations, and digressions from these early foundational teachings.’ Yet in the final part of his study, **Fronsdal** (141) convincingly refutes the argument that certain teachings are not mentioned in the collection because they were not yet formulated, pointing out that this ‘ignores the fact that different genres of texts may emphasize very different ideas. Poetry, for example, is not a common place for referring to numerical lists.’ In addition, **Fronsdal** (146) reasons that the Aṭṭhaka-vagga ‘may well represent the teaching emphasis of one person or group. Rather than being chronologically earlier relative to some other early Buddhist teachings, the Book of the Eights may have its origin with a particular Buddhist group in a particular location.’ This successfully undermines claims that the Aṭṭhaka-vagga is best read as preserving some sort of pre-canonical Buddhism substantially different in orientation and values from what can be found in common in the 4 main Pāli Nikāyas and their parallels.” (**Analayo** 2018: n80)

<sup>169</sup> On periods in the Buddha’s ministry, see SD 1.1 (2.2); SD 40a.1 (1.3).

<sup>170</sup> “Followers” usu refer to those with faith in the Buddha who have not yet attained the path, but, depending on the context, may broadly refer to all who look up to the Buddha as their only teacher: [5.4.2.1] n on *sāvaka*.

<sup>171</sup> **Norman** concludes his study of the Aṭṭhaka,vagga by stating that “there is, however, no reason whatsoever for believing that the form of Buddhism taught in the [Aṭṭhaka,]vagga represents the whole of Buddhism at the time of its composition, and that everything not included in it must be a later addition” (“The Aṭṭhakavagga and early Buddhism,” 2003:519). Sn:B 2017:39 says that such a conclusion “would have bizarre consequences. It would in effect reduce the Dhamma to a collection of poems and aphorisms with only the barest unifying structure”—a conclusion that overlooks that these discourses “have a different purpose than to provide a comprehensive overview of the Dhamma. As works mostly in verse, their primary purpose is to inspire, edify, and instruct rather than to provide systematic doctrinal exposition.” For a detailed discussion: **Fuller**, *The Notion of Diṭṭhi*, 2005:148-153. For an appraisal of the philosophy behind the Aṭṭhaka,vagga, see **Jayawickrama**, “A critical analysis of the Sutta Nipāta,” 1948:45-57, and **Premasiri**, *The Philosophy of the Aṭṭhakavagga*, 1972; on its poetic nature: **Shulman**, “Early Buddhist imagination,” 2012.



### 5.1.2 Who have seen have no views

**5.1.2.1 The Aggi Vaccha gotta Sutta** (M 75) explains that the Buddha has set aside all “views” (*diṭṭhi*), which are after all incomplete, often skewed, even wrong ways of looking at the world. He has set aside all views because he has “seen” (*diṭṭha*) the “all” (*sabba*), everything there is to know, and that can be known.<sup>172</sup>

On directly seeing into true reality, he sees the impermanent nature of the 5 aggregates—form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness—which is all *that we really are, their arising and their passing away*.<sup>173</sup> The Saṃyukta,āgama parallels to the Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta state the same insight in a different way by saying that the Buddha has “seen” the 4 noble truths.<sup>174</sup>

**5.1.2.2 The Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1) is a literary classic in the study of speculative views. It gives an analysis of 62 bases for views by way of how they arise from the misinterpretation of certain experiences or wrong ways of reasoning.<sup>175</sup> This Sutta is also a comprehensive psychological analysis of how views are formed on account of craving and ignorance.<sup>176</sup>

Such suttas help us understand the process of view-formation, and should be studied alongside **the Aṭṭhaka,vagga**. While the Aṭṭhaka,vagga highlights the non-clinging to **views**, texts such as the Brahma,jāla Sutta explains how such views arise. All these texts emphasize on the attaining or the direct insight that comes from seeing through views, knowing them for what they really are and so becoming free of them, bringing us a calm, clear and joyfully liberated mind.

## **5.2 THE PROBLEM WITH SPECULATIVE VIEWS**

### 5.2.1 The 10 undetermined points

**5.2.1.1** The Buddha’s refusal to go into debate for its own sake, or even for a religious discussion, is accentuated by his refusal to take any stand in speculative views. However, the frequent accounts of debates and speculations in the suttas show that they were of great interest to seekers in the central Gangetic plains in the Buddha’s time. Since several of the debated positions relate to rebirth, they are relevant to our current study.

**5.2.1.2** These debated positions were well known and formed a set known as **the 10 undetermined points** (*avyākata*) or undeclared statements, since they comprise theses or speculative views that have been “set aside” (*ṭhapanīya*) by the Buddha due to their indeterminable nature or being questions wrongly put.

<sup>172</sup> **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1.

<sup>173</sup> M 72,15/1:486,11 (SD 6.15).

<sup>174</sup> SĀ 962 (2.99.245c21) and SĀ2 196 (2.100.445b8).

<sup>175</sup> For an analysis of different views: D 1/1:12,29 (SD 25), DĀ 21 (T1.1.89c23, T1.21.266a4), a Tib parallel (**Weller** 1934:14,30), a quotation in T28.1548.656b19, a quotation in D 4094 ju 143a5 or Q 5595 tu 164b3; for Skt fragment parallels: **Anālayo**, “Views and the Tathāgata,” 2009:226 n23.

<sup>176</sup> **Bodhi**, in his *The All-embracing Net of Views*, explains that, according to the Brahmajāla S, “the Buddha does not trouble to refute each separate view because the primary focus of his concern is not so much the content of the view as the underlying malady of which the addiction to speculative tenets is a symptom” (1978:9). Katz thinks that the Sutta presents a “psychoanalysis of metaphysical claims” (1982:150). Fuller holds that “the Brahmajāla Sutta ... is a clear example of *sammā-diṭṭhi* signifying that all views have been transcended.” (2005:115).

The 10 undetermined points are as follows:

I. The world (cosmology)

- |                               |                                    |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| (1) the world is eternal;     | <i>sassato loko</i> <sup>177</sup> |
| (2) the world is not eternal; | <i>asassato loko</i>               |
| (3) the world is finite;      | <i>antavā loko</i>                 |
| (4) the world is infinite;    | <i>anantavā loko</i>               |

II. The self (or soul) (metaphysics)<sup>178</sup>

- |   |                                  |
|---|----------------------------------|
| (5) the self is the same as the body;   | <i>taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ</i>     |
| (6) the self and the body are separate; | <i>aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ</i> |

III. The *tathāgata* [a being]<sup>179</sup> (ontology)

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| (7) a <i>tathāgata</i> [a being] exists after death;               | <i>hoti tathāgato param, maraṇā</i>                  |
| (8) a <i>tathāgata</i> does not exist after death;                 | <i>na hoti tathāgato param, maraṇā</i>               |
| (9) a <i>tathāgata</i> both exists and does not exist after death; | <i>hoti ca na ca hoti tathāgato param, maraṇā</i>    |
| (10) a <i>tathāgata</i> neither exists nor not exist after death.  | <i>n'eva hoti na na hoti tathāgato param, maraṇā</i> |

(M 63,2/1:426,10 passim), SD 5.8<sup>180</sup>

**5.2.1.3** Understandably, at least some of the Buddha's unawakened followers still had speculative views. A well-known case, recorded in **the Cūḷa Māluṅkya Sutta** (M 63), depicts its protagonist, the monk Māluṅkya,putta, is so desperate for an answer to these questions that he is ready to leave the order unless the Buddha gives him a definite statement regarding these 10 points. The Buddha's stand is unequivocally illustrated by the famed parable of the man shot with a poisoned arrow [5.3.2].

## **5.2.2 The Buddha as the silent sage**

**5.2.2.1** The Buddha began his teaching life as **the Sakya, muni**, "the silent sage of the Sakyas." The "silent sage" (*muni*) is the earliest ideal of renunciation found in historical Buddhism. **The Aṭṭhaka, vagga**

<sup>177</sup> The Mahāsaṅghikas lists 14 theses by extending the theses, *antavā loko* and *sassato loko* (below) into 4 logical alternatives each. Curiously, this extension is not found in the Pali canon, which has only the 10 theses. See **Jayatileke**, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963:288 (§469).

<sup>178</sup> Interestingly, the question of whether there is a soul or not is not included here (which prob means that it was generally taken for granted, outside of Buddhism, that it exists). (**Vaccha, gotta**) **Ānanda S** (S 44.10/4:400 f) records the wanderer Vaccha, gotta asking the Buddha just these 2 questions—is there a soul? Is there no soul?—and both times the Buddha remain silent. The Buddha later explains to Ānanda the reasons for his silence (SD 2.16).

<sup>179</sup> Comys generally def *tathāgata* as "being" (*satta*): in a speculative view, clearly, *tathāgata* more broadly refers to a "saint," in a general sense of someone liberated, *not* necessarily only a buddha or an arhat. For a canonical def of *tathāgata*, see **Pāsādika S** (D 29,28 f/3:135 f); also **Toshiichi ENDO**, *Buddha in Theravāda Buddhism*, 1997: 195-206 (ch V). On the ineffability of the *tathāgata*, see **Harvey**, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995:235-245. See foll §3.

<sup>180</sup> This last tetralemma is found in many places in the suttas. The Chin version is at MĀ 221 (1.26.804a26-28), with parallels in and T1.94.917b18. In **Param, maraṇa S** (S 16.12/2:222 f), SD 96.13, the Buddha mentions it to Mahā Kassapa; in **Anurādha S** (S 22.86/3:116-119), SD 21.13. The tetralemma is mentioned by lemma in 4 suttas in Saṃyutta (S 24.15-18/3:215 f). The **Avyākata Saṃyutta** (S 44.2-8/4:381-397) contains some suttas dealing with it: see S:B 1080 n165. For a philosophical discussion, see **Jayatileke**, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963: 350 & **Kügler**, "The logic and language of nirvana," 2003:100 f. For study nn, see SD 5.8 (2); **The unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10.

(Sn ch 4) [5.1.2] centres on the nature of the muni. This ideal is also the theme of such texts as **the Uraga Sutta** (Sn 1.1),<sup>181</sup> **the Khagga,visāṇa Sutta** (Sn 1.3)<sup>182</sup> and **the Nālaka Gāthā** (or Moneyya Sutta) (Sn 3.11).<sup>183</sup> On account of their *muni* theme, these texts can be considered as the “*muni* suttas.”

**5.2.2.2** The key text on the *muni* is, of course, **the Muni Sutta** (Sn 1.12). It is in 3 parts: after the introduction (Sn 207-210), the Sutta describes the Buddha as a *muni* (Sn 211-219); then in the 3rd and last part (Sn 220-221), the monk as a *muni*.<sup>184</sup> In an important sense, the Buddha awakens as a *muni* and remain so all his life. For 7 weeks after the awakening, the Buddha is mostly in some kind of *silent* meditation. He avoids the villages or any crowd, and happily lives in the solitude of the remote forest.

The Buddha is an awakened muni: his “silence” is neither merely the physical silence of his surroundings nor merely the *ritual* or *moral* silence of the body. His is, more importantly, the “inner” silence of the mind on account of his liberation: he is **free from all views**—for, he is awakened; hence, free from craving and ignorance, and beyond rebirth.

**5.2.2.3** As a *muni*, **the Buddha** is free from all speculating, especially those about cosmology [undetermined points 1-4], about metaphysics [points 5-6], and about ontology [points 7-10] [5.1.2.2]. Through his own awakening, he has *seen* fully and clearly the nature of such speculations, especially after he has himself directly seen into the true reality of all things (*sabba*) [5.1.2.1]. Hence, the muni’s silence, in the case of the Buddha and the arhat, is simply another word for true awakening, or *moneyya*, the silence of wisdom, also known as the “noble silence.”

Knowing, the Buddha as *muni*, is silent; knowing, he teaches the Dhamma for the benefit of others so that they, too, can experience this silence of wisdom. Such a wisdom is free from the cacophony, uncertainty and frivolity of speculative views. Indeed, for the noisy crowd that is the world, this quest for *inner silence* is more urgent than words on karma and rebirth. These, after all, are at best speculative views for the unawakened; only through self-awakening do we realize their truth and reality.<sup>185</sup>

### **5.2.3 The parable of the poisoned arrow**

**5.2.3.1** Our quest as practising Buddhists, then, is not to prove that karma and rebirth are true, or that *our* theories are the right ones, others false. Our quest is that of seeking out that which prevents us from knowing the reality of such truths, what sort of truths they are, and how this knowledge can benefit us. This true quest is dramatically illustrated by **the parable of the man wounded with a poisoned arrow**, or, briefly, the parable of the poisoned arrow, found in **the Cūḷa Maluṅkya Sutta** (M 63).

**5.2.3.2 The Cūḷa Mālūṅkya Sutta** (M 63) recounts how the Buddha refuses to take a stand on any of the 10 theses [5.2.1.2]. When the monk Mālūṅkya,putta demanded that the Buddha take a stand on the 10 theses, or he would give up the training, the Buddha’s immediate reply was clear and simple: When Mālūṅkya,putta first joined the Buddha’s order, there wasn’t any agreement that the Buddha would explain the 10 theses to him! Moreover, the undetermined theses are just that: undetermined, “that would still remain undetermined by a tathagata and, meanwhile, the person would die.”<sup>186</sup>

<sup>181</sup> **Uraga S** (Sn 1.1/1-17\*/p1-3).

<sup>182</sup> **Khagga,visāṇa S** (Sn 1.3/35-75\*/p6-12), SD 109.3.

<sup>183</sup> **Nālaka Gāthā** (Moneyya S) (699-723\*/136-139), SD 49.18—ie, **Nālaka S** (Sn 3.11/679-723\*) without its *vatthu, gāthā*.

<sup>184</sup> Sn 1.12/207-211/1.12/[35-38: see SD 49.20 (2); SD 44.1 (1.4.1); SD 40a.1 (1.3.1).

<sup>185</sup> See **Silence and the Buddha**, SD 44.1.

<sup>186</sup> M 63,4/1:429,1 f (SD 5.8).

The Buddha then goes on to show the disadvantage and danger of speculating on any of these 10 theses. He compares such an attitude of affirming or rejecting any such thesis to someone who has been shot with a poisoned arrow. Instead of getting the arrow extracted at once to prevent the poison from spreading throughout the body and killing him, this person first wants to have answers, mostly irrelevant to his health and life, about the characteristics of the bowman, the bow and the arrow. Before any such questions may be answered, or even as they are being answered, the victim would have died.

**5.2.3.3** The lesson of this parable is that our present world, our existential state, is far from being a happy one. Instead of wondering about who created this world, or what kind of being or agency he or it is, we will only keep on suffering, or be deluded by our momentary happiness to be lasting. The Buddha's attitude of rejecting such speculative views is consistently seen in the suttas.

Our task is to at once seek within ourself to understand how we create this virtual world; how craving drives this kind of creativity; how this can be corrected and ended; and to embark on that path of awakening to true happiness.<sup>187</sup>

### 5.3 WHY THE BUDDHA SETS ASIDE SPECULATIVE VIEWS

#### 5.3.1 Speculating about the world

**5.3.1.1** The Buddha's reluctance to discuss or take any stand on the 10 undetermined points, and their irrelevance to the spiritual life, has been convincingly shown by the parable of the man shot with the poisoned arrow [5.2.3]. To better understand the Buddha's silence on these points and their irrelevance to the spiritual life can be well appreciated when we consider the significance of these 10 points. Although there are 10 points or theses, they actually relate to one another in 3 sets, that is: I. regarding cosmology; II. regarding metaphysics, and III. regarding ontology, thus: [5.2.1.2]

- I. the theses on **cosmology**, are about the physical world, that is, the universe as a whole in terms of time and space, whether it is eternal or not, finite or infinite.
- II. the theses on **metaphysics** ask whether the soul and the body are identical or are separate.
- III. the theses on **ontology** speculate whether the *tathagata* [a being] survives death or does not or both or neither.

**5.3.1.2** In the case of **the cosmological theses**, the early Buddhist stand is clear: that is everything is impermanent; hence, there is nothing eternal, not even the universe itself.<sup>188</sup> Even in declaring the reality

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<sup>187</sup> The reason(s) for the Buddha's refusal to discuss the 10 avyākata points has been a popular topic of discussion amongst scholars; **Oldenberg**, *Buddha, Sein Leben, Seine Lehre, Seine Gemeinde*, 1881:256-263; **Schrader**, "On the problem of nirvana," 1904-05; **Beckh**, *Buddhismus*, 1919:118-121; **Keith**, *Buddhist Philosophy in India and Ceylon*, 1923:62-67; **Thomas**, *The Life of the Buddha*, 1927:201 f; **Poussin**, "Agnosticism (Buddhist)," ERE 1928; **Organ**, "The silence of the Buddha," 1954; **Murti**, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 1955: 36-50; **Nagao**, "The silence of the Buddha and its Madhyamic interpretation." 1955:38; **Frauwallner**, *The Earliest Vinaya*, 1956: 141 f; **Jayatilleke**, op cit 1963:470-476; **Smart**, *Doctrine and argument in Indian philosophy*, 1964:34 f; **Kalupahana**, *Causality*, 1975: 77 f; **Lamotte**, *Traité*, 1976:2003-2005; **Collins**, *Selfless Persons*, 1982:131-38; **Pannikar**, *The Silence of God*, 1989: 61-76; **Tilakaratne**, *Nirvana and Ineffability*, 1993:109-121; **Harvey**, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995: 84-87; **Vélez de Cea**, *The Silence of the Buddha*, 2004; **Manda**, "The meaning of *tathāgata* in the *avyākata* questions," 2005; **Karunadasa**, "The unanswered questions," 2007:129-149; **Anālayo**, "Some renditions of the term *tathāgata* in the Chinese Āgamas." 2017c:13 f.

<sup>188</sup> See, eg, (**Udāna Loka S** (U 3.10/33,15) where the Buddha declares that all kinds of existence (*bhava*) are impermanent, unsatisfactory, subject to change; cf Mahāvastu (**Senart** 1890:418,11).

that the world is not eternal, the Buddha would have to rebut the other 3 theses. Yet those who have upheld such views are unlikely to admit they are wrong, unless they can, through their own insight, see this reality. But when they are able to do so, they would not take any of these stands in the first place!

**5.3.1.3** Moreover, the word “**world**” (*loka*) itself has 3 senses:

- (1) the external world of space and time (*okāsa, loka*);
- (2) the world of beings (*satta, loka*); and
- (3) the world of formations (*saṅkhāra, loka*).<sup>189</sup>

In a sense, the external universe is “permanent,” but it keeps going through 4 phases of *devolving*, *de-evolved*, *evolving* and *evolved*—as stated in **the (Catukka) Kappa Sutta** (A 4.156)—a kind of pulsating universe.<sup>190</sup> Hence, it is “subject to change” (*vipariṇāma, dhamma*).

Of this external world, declares the Buddha in **the Nibbedhika (Pariyāya) Sutta** (A 6.63), “the wondrous in the world remains just as they are” (*tiṭṭhanti citrāni that’eva loke*).<sup>191</sup> It is our craving for the “wondrous in the world” that we must manage and master. This is an important sense in the 3<sup>rd</sup> meaning of “world,” that is, the world of formations. This is the virtual world we mentally project and live in. This mind-made world is *more real* than the external world, that is, **samsara** (*saṃsāra*), the cycle of rebirths and redeaths.

### **5.3.2 Speculating about the immortal soul**

**5.3.2.1** Group II of the 10 theses—the 2 points about an immortal soul [5.2.1.2]—is a metaphysical speculation with a logical problem of implicit premises or hidden claims. An **implicit premise** of an argument is a statement that does not appear explicitly but that is intended by the arguer to be a premise to help make the conclusion follow from the premises. An implicit premise is only acceptable or justified when it is uncontroversial or obvious.

**5.3.2.2** In the 2 theses on the immortal soul (*jīva*) and the body—whether they are identical or different—the implicit premise or hidden claim is that *the soul does exist*, but which the Buddha rejects. Hence, it is meaningless for the Buddha to make any statement about them, notwithstanding whether this relationship is that of identity or of difference.<sup>192</sup>

**5.3.2.3** A further noteworthy point why the Buddha refuses to make a stand on the question of *the identity or difference of the soul and the body* is that his teaching does not advocate any kind of clear body and mind dualism, that we are really a “**body accompanied by consciousness**” (*sa, viññāṇaka kāya*) or, simply, the “conscious body.” [4.1.1.1]. This being the case, the Buddha has to reject both the theses on the soul and the body as “inapplicable” to his teaching, and thus should be set aside [5.2.1.2].

<sup>189</sup> Vism 7.37/204 f; DA 1:173 f; MA 1:397, 2:200; SD 15.7 (3.5.1 (2)).

<sup>190</sup> A 4.156/2:142; see SD 2.19 (9.1.1); Vism 13.28-30/414-422; cf D 1:14, 3:109; It 15, 99; Pug 60; Kvu 11.5/455 f; Miln 232.

<sup>191</sup> A 6.63, 3.4/3:411, 14 = S 103\* (S 1.34/1:22, 26), SD 6.11.

<sup>192</sup> A related fallacy is that of “begging the question,” where the arguer assumes precisely what is meant to be proven. Eg, “The Lotus Sutra is a Sutra; therefore, it is true.” We beg the question: How do we know that *this* Sutra is true, esp when it is a post-Buddha work, written by a number of people over a few centuries based on outside influences? See SD 40a.10 (5.2).

### 5.3.3 Speculating about the *tathāgata*

**5.3.3.1** Now, we examine Group III of the 10 theses: speculation about ontology (the nature of being). This concerns **the *tathagata*** (“one thus gone,” *tathā gata*, or “thus come,” *tathā āgata*), which, even the suttas acknowledge was in common use in ancient India for a liberated saint. A similar term, in fact, was used by the Jains for their liberated one, the *tahāgaya*.<sup>193</sup>

The Commentaries tell us, however, that those who held any of these 4 theses regarding the post-humous state of a *tathāgata* (“one thus come”), did so taking it as a popular expression for a living being (*satta*).<sup>194</sup> However, it is more likely that there was another common usage of *tathagata* in the sense of someone who has died, one that was common in post-Buddha Indian literature.<sup>195</sup>

**5.3.3.2** Basically, the same principle behind theses of Groups I and II apply to those of Group III, too, since the premises are simply different: those of the Buddhist and the non-Buddhist. The same basic principle, evident from the questions regarding the world and the soul, also holds for **a *tathāgata***, where the taking of a position about what happens to a *tathāgata* at death would first of all require clarifying what the term “*tathāgata*” actually refers to. Since there is no common idea of *tathagata*, it would be futile for the Buddha or anyone to take a stand on the posthumous state of such a being.

## 5.4 THE DESTINY OF ONE AWAKENED

### 5.4.1 A 5<sup>th</sup> thesis?

**5.4.1.1** Despite the Buddha’s clear rejection of the 10 theses [5.2.1.2], even maintaining silence regarding them [5.2.2.3], not all his followers fully appreciate his position. After all, being still unawakened and lacking wisdom, their views and ignorance overwhelm them, as we have seen in the Cūḷa Māluṅkya Sutta [5.2.3], how Māluṅkya,putta is troubled by the 10 theses.<sup>196</sup>

Technically, each of the 3 groups or sets of the 10 theses is based on the widely accepted tetralemma of logical possibilities (Skt *catus,koṭi*) in ancient Indian logic.<sup>197</sup> Group II, however, has only 2 premises (instead of the possible 4 alternatives).

<sup>193</sup> **Thomas**, in his “Tathāgata and Tahāgaya,” quotes Sūyagada 1.15.20: *tahāgaya appadiṇṇa cakkhū logass’anutarā*, which he tr as the *tahāgaya* “who are free from undertakings, eyes of the world, supreme.” (1936:781-788)

<sup>194</sup> *Satto tathāgato’ti adhippeto* (DA 1:118,1); *tathāgato’ti satto* (MA 3:141,21; SA 2:201,4; AA 4:37,22). **Gnana-rama** notes that this implies that “those questions have been asked either due to eternalist or nihilist or sceptic points of view” (“Tathāgata,” 1997:236). **Manda** adds with some doubt that “Buddhaghosa does not intend to imply that a *tathāgata* is a normal person. On the contrary, it is clearly natural for him to regard a *tathāgata* as an enlightened one. The only question is whether a *tathāgata* ... exists in this world as a *satta* or a living being.” (op cit 2005: 716 f)

<sup>195</sup> **Hopkins**, in “Buddha as Tathāgata,” notes several instances where *tathagata* means “in such a state or condition,” at time even referring to the condition of someone who is dead, such as in Rāmāyaṇa: “If he sees Rāma dead” (*rāmaṃ tathāgataṃ drṣṭvā*, 5.13.28), and Mahābharata: “where the king (lay) dead” (*yatra rājā tathāgatāḥ*, 1.125.-14) (1911:207). **Endo**, in *Buddha in Theravāda Buddhism*, following Nakamura, says that “the term *tathagata* is employed in the Mahābharata XII, 146, 26 to mean ‘to have achieved a superb or wonderful state’.” (2002:363 n7)

<sup>196</sup> For a detailed study of the 10 theses, see **Unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10.

<sup>197</sup> On the Indian logical tetralemma (*catu,koṭi*), see **Anurādha S** (S 22.86,4), SD 21.13; **Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 63,2.2) + SD 5.8 (2+3); **The unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10 (1-4). On this term, see **Robinson**, “Some logical aspects of Nāgārjuna’s system,” 1957:301. The term is used here simply as a helpful term for the 4 alternatives, bereft of its philosophical technicalities.

**5.4.1.2** Let us look at these 4 predications or statements, quite common in the Buddha's time (and in fact today, too), using this well known set of alternative views or tetralemma: [2.2.3]

- |                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| (1) p                   | eg "there is an afterlife" ( <i>atthi paro loko</i> , literally "the next world exists");               |
| (2) not-p               | eg "there is <i>no</i> afterlife" ( <i>n'atthi paro loko</i> ); <sup>198</sup>                          |
| (3) both p and not-p    | eg "there is and is not an afterlife" ( <i>atthi ca n'atthi ca para loko</i> );                         |
| (4) neither p nor not-p | eg "there <i>neither</i> is <i>nor</i> is not an afterlife" ( <i>n'ev'atthi na n'atthi paro loko</i> ). |

**5.4.1.3 The (Khandha) Anurādha Sutta** (S 22.86) and its Sanskrit fragment parallel report that the recently ordained Anurādha, on being confronted with the 4 positions regarding the destiny of a *tathāgata* after death, declares that there was a position apart from these 4 alternatives<sup>199</sup> of declaring what happens to a *tathāgata* after death.<sup>200</sup>

His questioners rejected his reply and ridiculed him of ignorance, since the 4 alternatives of the tetralemma exhaust the possibilities that could be proposed according to ancient Indian logic. This account of Anurādha is significant in showing us how the tetralemma is viewed by the ancient Indians and understood by the Buddha.

**5.4.1.4** While Anurādha's questioners took the tetralemma as a logical standard, the Buddhist view is that such a stand would still be dependent on the notion of the 4 alternatives. The 5<sup>th</sup> alternative then is still a *conditioned* truth.<sup>201</sup> In this significant sense, we can see how, in fact, the Buddha is compelled to be silent or face the ridicule of those who uphold the Indian logical convention.

## **5.4.2 Tathāgata as one liberated**

**5.4.2.1** The Buddha and the arhat—both fully awakened individuals—are free from any kind of rebirth. This truth is often stated in the awakening pericope, declaring that for them, "**birth is destroyed** (*khīṇā jāti*)."<sup>202</sup> [1.8.3]. Understandably, the Buddha or his disciples (*sāvaka*)<sup>203</sup> abstain from taking any of the 4 positions on a *tathāgata* after death, especially when the term, according to common usage, refers to an *actual living being*. In this connection, the true nature of such a "**living being**" (*satta*) is often highlighted in the suttas, such as **the Vajirā Sutta** (S 5.10) and its Saṃyukta, āgama parallels.

<sup>198</sup> In itself, this is interesting, as it is incl in the def of wrong view: "There is this world, no other world," *n'atthi ayam loko, n'atthi para, loko*, lit "this world does not exist, the next world does not exist." The fuller def occurs in **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41,10/1:287), SD 5.7 & **Apaṇṇaka S** (M 60,5-12/1:402-404), SD 35.5; also **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,22-24/1:55 f), SD 8. For comys on such wrong views, see Bodhi 1989:69-86 (on Sāmañña,phala S, D 2). See also **Jaya-tilleke**, op cit 1963:79 f, 91 f.

<sup>199</sup> Ie, "apart from these 4 grounds" (*aññatra imehi* [vl *annatr'imehi*] *catuhi ṭhānehi*, S 22.86,5/3:116,21), SD 21.13.

<sup>200</sup> S 22.86/3:116,20 (SD 21.13) = S 44.2/4:380-384, and Skt fragment Kha ii 3 R2 (de La Vallée Poussin 1913:579); SĀ 106 (T2.99.32c16) notes that the Buddha simply clarifies that, although these positions have indeed been left undetermined, this is not because the Buddha is bereft of knowledge and vision. This is much wiser position to take.

<sup>201</sup> On the problem of the "5<sup>th</sup> alternative," see SD 40a.10 (4.2.3).

<sup>202</sup> This stock phrase often occurs in the pericope on the Buddha's awakening: **Bhaya,berava S** (M 4/I 23,24), SD 44.3, and its parallel EĀ 31.1 (2.125.666c18).

<sup>203</sup> "Disciple or disciples" (*sāvaka*) of the Buddha refer to those who have reached the path (as streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners) or nirvana (as arhats), whereas those with faith in him but yet to attain the path are either *upāsaka* (m) or *upāsikā* (f).

According to the Sutta, the nun Vajirā explains *satta* in this way:<sup>204</sup>

- |     |  |   |
|-----|--|---|
| 553 | What “being” is there that you assume?<br>It is a <u>mere heap of conditioned states</u> : | How you have fallen into views, Māra!<br>here no being is to be found.          |
| 554 | Just as with parts assembled together<br>even so, when there are the aggregates,           | we have the word “ <b>chariot</b> ,”<br>there is the convention of a “being.”   |
| 555 | Only suffering comes into being;<br>Other than suffering, nothing comes to be;             | only suffering stands and passes away.<br>other than suffering, nothing ceases. |

(S 553-555\*/5.10/1:135), SD 17.6 (6.2.2), SD 102.13

**5.4.4.2** In **verse 554** of the Vajirā Sutta [5.2.4.1] the living being is represented by a chariot, the ancient Indian equivalent of our car or automobile. Like the modern vehicle, the ancient chariot, too, is made up of parts, properly assembled, working as “a chariot.” This is not to say that the word has no *meaning*: after all, meaning is a “name” (*nāma*) that we attribute to a physical form or structure.

Now, when we dismantle the different parts of the chariot and lay them out on the ground, it is certainly no more a chariot; none of the parts can, in itself, or even some parts taken together, be called a *chariot*. Only when these parts are properly assembled together in working order, do we call it a *chariot*.

**5.4.4.3** The parable does not deny that a chariot or a being exists at all. The point is only that there is no substantial entity that corresponds to the notion of a “chariot” or a “living being.” On closely examining either a chariot or a living being, we will notice that it comprises only a changing process of conditioned parts or interdependent aggregates that work together and function as what we refer to as a “chariot” or a “being.”

This parable illustrates why any statement on the posthumous condition of a *tathagata* in any substantialist terms cannot be meaningful in any real sense. Hence, of the 4 proper ways of answering a question (*pañha vyākaraṇa*) recognized in early Buddhist thought—categorically (yes/no), analytically (in detail), by counter-questioning, or by silence (setting aside the question)—it falls into the last category, questions that are to be set aside.<sup>205</sup>

## 6 The ancient Indian debate on rebirth

### **6.1 MISUNDERSTANDING REBIRTH**

#### **6.1.1 Monks with wrong views**

**6.1.1.1** Not all the monks or followers of the Buddha in his own time are awakened as arhats. The unawakened, if they are uninstructed, improperly instructed, or unwise, are likely to hold wrong views. The suttas show that some of these monks even have serious misunderstandings about rebirth.

<sup>204</sup> SĀ 1202 (2.99.327b8-10) (full tr: **Anālayo**, “Defying Māra,” 2014d:125 f), parallel to S 5.10/1:135,19 and SĀ2 218 (2.100.454c28); see also **Enomoto**, *A Comprehensive Study of the Chinese Saṃyuktāgama* 1, 1994:42 and D 4094 nyu 82a7 or Q 5595 thu 128b2. While **Vajirā S** (S 5.10) calls the nun as Vajirā, the parallels name her as Selā.

<sup>205</sup> **Saṅgīti S** (D 33/3:229,20); **Abhaya Rāja,kumāra S** (M 58) @ SD 7.12(4): **Pañha Vyākaraṇa S** (A 4.42), SD 46.12, and its parallels in a Skt fragment (**Stache-Rosen**, *Dogmatische Begriffsreihen im älteren Buddhismus II* (Saṅgī-ti,sutra) 1968:106 §4.26), DĀ 9 (T1.1.51b1), and T1.12.230a4; see also Saṅgītiparyāya (T1536 @ T26.401b27), and Abhidharmakośa,bhāṣya (**Pradhan** 1967:292,12 §5.22).



**The Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38), for example, recounts a monk named Sāti holding the wrong view that it is this very same consciousness that is reborn, that is, some kind of abiding entity (as in the Vedic teachings).<sup>206</sup> Moreover, when the Buddha asks him what he understands by “consciousness,” he replies that “it is that which speaks and feels here and there; it feels the results of good and bad deeds.” Again, this is some kind of reified consciousness that, as it were, acts on its own. Correcting him, the Buddha declares: “Misguided one, have I not stated in many ways that **consciousness is dependently arisen**,<sup>207</sup> that without a condition there is no arising of consciousness?”<sup>208</sup>

**6.1.1.2 The Mahā Puṇṇama Sutta** (M 109) relates the case of a certain unnamed monk who holds a wrong view that the teaching on non-self implies that there is “no one” who is affected by the fruition of karma. “What self, then, will deeds done by the non-self touch [affect]?”<sup>209</sup> Apparently, the monk has difficulty in understanding how karma can produce results without a self to receive them: if there is no self, what is it that feels the fruit?<sup>210</sup>

The Buddha then teaches the assembly the whole of the characteristics of the 5 aggregates pericope—as taught in **the Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59)<sup>211</sup> which highlights non-self (*anattā*). In **M 109**, he highlights (earlier in the Sutta) the gratification triad<sup>212</sup> (the gratification, the danger, the escape in regard to each of the 5 aggregates), and the arising and overcoming of self-identity view (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*).

It is likely, too, that the monk is either very new or has not completed his basic 5-year tutelage (*nissaya*). Any monastic who misses this vital 5-year tutelage is likely to have difficulty living as a proper renunciant following the Vinaya, even if he masters the word of the Dharma. Neophytes who do not measure up to the basic tutelage may have to remain with his teacher for 10 years, or even permanently.<sup>213</sup>

**6.1.2** In both cases—M 38 and M 109—the Buddha first makes it clear that the respective monks had badly misunderstood the Dharma, pointing out what their respective errors are. Then, he points to the principle of **conditionality** that is dependent arising. This shows the key to the teaching that we all must bear in mind, forgetting which, we are likely to end up with wrong views as in the case of the two monks mentioned above.

A proper understanding of dependent arising as the Buddha’s key teaching helps us see that it is possible, indeed meaningful, for us to exist *without* the need of any unchanging self, and with the *affirm-*

<sup>206</sup> M 38,5/1:258,14 (SD 7.10) and MĀ 201 (1.26.767a9); part of his statement has been preserved in Skt fragment SHT V 1114b1 (**Sander & Waldschmidt**, SHT Teil V, 1985:109). **Norman** points out passages in Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.4.2 and 4.4.22 that reflect ideas similar to this view supporting the impression that the monk in question has not fully given up ideas inherited from Vedic culture. (“Death and the *tathagata*,” 1991:256)

<sup>207</sup> “Consciousness is dependently arisen,” *paṭicca,samuppannaṃ viññāṇaṃ*; the Buddha then elaborates on the cycles of dependent arising. Cf **Mahā Hatthi,padōpama S** (M 28): “These 5 aggregates of clinging are dependently arisen.” (M 28,28/1:191), SD 3.13.

<sup>208</sup> M 38/1:256-271 (SD 7.10).

<sup>209</sup> *Anatta,katāni kammāni kam attānaṃ phusissantī ti* MA explains: “In what self do these results appear? Speaking thus, he fell into an eternalist view (*sassata,diṭṭhi*)” (MA 4:79). The Chinese version says: “If deeds are done by non-self, then who will experience the retribution in the future?” 作無我業 zuòwúwǒyè, 於未來世 yú wèi lái shì, 誰富受報 shéi fù shòu bào. SĀ 58 further differs from the Pali in saying that the monk here is one “with dull faculties,” 鈍根 dùn’gēn, and “ignorant,” 無知 wú zhī, one with “evil wrong view,” 惡耶見 è’ yējiàn. See (**Khandha**) **Channa S** (S 22.90,5 n), SD 56.5.

<sup>210</sup> M 109,14/3:19,12 (SD 17.11) = **Puṇṇama S** (S 22.82/3:103,27); SĀ 58 (2.99.15a12) [SD 17.11 (T1.1 f; 2.2.2)] and D 4094 nyu 56a6 or Q 5595 thu 98a4.

<sup>211</sup> S 22.59/3:66-68 (SD 1.2).

<sup>212</sup> The gratification (*assāda*) triad: “the gratification ... the danger ... the escape” in regard to each of the 5 aggregates: SD 56.19 (2).

<sup>213</sup> SD 40a.8 (4.2.2.3).

ation of continuity beyond death. The reality is naturally simple and clear: there is nothing in the world we can take to be unchanging or eternal, from the atoms to the universe itself. And our **mind**, even though it is ever-changing, continues even after the death of this body, taking up a new one in the next life, and in subsequent ones until we attain nirvana.

## 6.2 A MATERIALIST'S EXPERIMENTS

### 6.2.1 Pāyāsi the materialist

**6.2.1.1** We have earlier noted how the suttas give us the impression that in the Buddha's time, the idea of rebirth was not universally accepted [4.4.1.3]. Hence, it is not surprising that, on occasions, the Buddha's disciples have to defend the teaching of rebirth against those who reject the idea of any kind of posthumous survival. An interesting case of this is reported in **the Pāyāsi Sutta** (D 23).

**6.2.1.2 The Pāyāsi Sutta** (D 23) recounts a lengthy debate between the materialist prince<sup>214</sup> Pāyāsi and the elder Kumāra Kassapa on the subject of rebirth. Besides the debate reported in this sutta, a similar one is also found in a Jain text.<sup>215</sup> For such a debate to be found in an external source only confirms the historicity or common source of this account. It also shows that Buddhism was not the only religion that had to respond to the materialist challenge. This situation was common enough so that other religions, too, had to defend their teachings on rebirth against the materialists.

**The Pāyāsi Sutta** reports how Pāyāsi concocts at least 9 bizarrely cruel experiments in an effort to prove that the only personal reality is the body. According to the description of these experiments, criminals were exploited or executed in various ways to determine whether some immaterial substance or soul could be seen to escape from them, especially at the moment of their passing away.

**6.2.1.3** Here are some of the experiments as recorded in **the Pāyāsi Sutta** (D 23):

“Here, master Kassapa, people, having **caught a thief in the act**, brought him in, saying:  
‘This thief, sir, was caught in the act. Inflict upon him whatever punishment you wish!’  
Then, I said this to them:

‘In that case, sirs, cast this man alive into a large jar.<sup>216</sup> Close its mouth, cover it up with wet leather, then smear and spread wet clay over it, mount it onto an oven and start a fire.’<sup>217</sup>

Replying, ‘Very good!’ to me, they cast that man alive into a jar. Closed its mouth, covered it up with wet leather, then smeared and spread wet clay over it, **[333]** mounted it onto an oven, and started a fire.

When we knew that the man was dead, we brought down the jar, broke the covering, and opened the mouth. Then, we carefully looked to see if his life-force was coming out.<sup>218</sup>

<sup>214</sup> “Prince,” from *rājañña* (Ved *rājanya*), “high courtier, kshatriya, prince, chieftain”: SD 39.4 (3).

<sup>215</sup> **Bollée**, *The Story of Paesi*, 2002; for a comparison of the Buddhist and Jain versions of this sutta: **Leumann**, “Beziehungen der Jaina-Literatur zu anderen Literaturkreisen Indiens,” 1885:470-539 and **Ruben**, “Materialismus im Leben des alten Indiens,” 1935:143-51; see also **Frauwallner**, op cit 1956:193 f and **Ganeri**, “Experiment, imagination, and the self” (Pāyāsi), 2014.

<sup>216</sup> “Large jar,” *kumbhī*, a huge round pot (like the Malay *tempayan*). The Chin versions give the following: DĀ 7 (T1.1.44a13): 大釜 dà fǔ (big cauldron); MĀ 74 (T1.26.528b27): 鐵釜 tiě fǔ ... 銅釜 tóng fǔ (iron cauldron or copper cauldron); (T1.45.833): 鑊 huò (cauldron, big iron pot, wok).

<sup>217</sup> *Tena hi bho imam purisam jivantam y’eva kumbhiya pakkhipitva mukham pidahitva allena cammena onandhitva allaya mattikaya bahalavalepanam karitva uddhanam aropetva aggim dethati.*

<sup>218</sup> *Yada mayam janama kalam, kato so puriso’ti, atha nam kumbhim oropetva ubbhinditva mukham vivaritva sanikam nillokema app’eva nam’assa jivam nikkhamantam passeyyamati.*

But **we did not see his life-force coming out.**

This, master Kassapa, is *the reasoning*, whereby such is the case, *in a manner of speaking*,<sup>219</sup> that is to say:

*‘There is no other world no other world, ... no fruit or result of good or bad actions.’*

(D 23,14.5-10/2:332 f), SD 39.4<sup>220</sup>

The reference to an “**other world**” is to rebirth in some other realm. Other experiments of Pāyāsi on other criminals are described (summarized) as follows:

A thief caught in the act was punished thus: While still alive, he was weighed. Then, he was strangled with a bowstring and weighed again.

Now, when he was alive, he was *lighter, softer, and more flexible*,

but when he was dead, he was *heavier, stiffer, and less flexible*.

Hence, *there is no ... spontaneously born being ... etc.* (D 23,16.5-18/2:334),<sup>221</sup> SD 39.4

Another thief caught in the act was punished thus: He was slowly put to death “without destroying his hide [cuticle], skin, flesh, sinews, bones and bone-marrow.”

First, the criminal was **held** in different postures—lying prone, on his sides, standing, standing on his head—and examined for any emerging life-force.

Then, his body was **pounded** in various ways—with the hand, with a stone, with a stick, with a sword—and then shaken in various ways. No life-force was seen to emerge.

Hence, *there is no ... spontaneously born being ... etc.* (D 23,18/2:336 f),<sup>222</sup> SD 39.4

Having caught a criminal in the act, he was **flayed** alive, but no life-force was seen to emerge. Then, they cut out his skin ... his flesh ... his sinews ... his bones ... his **bone-marrows**—but no life-force was seen to emerge. (D 23,20/2:339,10),<sup>223</sup> SD 39.4

**6.2.1.4** For Pāyāsi to speculate in such a bizarre manner must admittedly be seen as remarkable for his time, to be testing religious ideas by conducting such quasi-scientific experiments. This is despite the cruel and bizarre way that Pāyāsi had actually ordered his servants to conduct the experiments, or even if he had simply made up these descriptions for the sake of debate. In either case, the underlying basic assumption behind them is that, for anything to exist, it needs to be physically measurable in some way. To that extent, his experiments may be regarded as “scientific” at least for his times.

Pāyāsi’s materialist position, in fact, foreshadows a common attitude that is resorted to again and again in debates surrounding rebirth right up to our times. According to this materialist or “scientific” position, all of our mental experiences are nothing but a by-product of matter, and can and must be accounted for in *material* terms. Hence, to this view, anything that is not physically observable and measurable cannot be regarded as being real or true.

<sup>219</sup> “In a manner of speaking,” *pariyāyena* [§5.5, 11.2] as Kumāra Kassapa is speaking on a worldly level (yet it can, in an extended way, also mean “reason”): see above [§5.5] n.

<sup>220</sup> Chin version: DĀ 7 (T1.1.44a10-17); for a tr and comparative study of DĀ 7 see **Anālayo**, “Debate with a sceptic (1),” 2012c; “Debate with a sceptic (2),” 2013. In MĀ 71 (1.26.528b26), the investigation takes place while the criminal is being cooked; see also T1.45.833b28.

<sup>221</sup> DĀ 7 (T1.1.44c25-45a3); MĀ 71 (1.26.528b1); T1.45.833a29.

<sup>222</sup> Most of this section does not seem to be found in the Chin versions.

<sup>223</sup> DĀ 7 (T1.1.44b7); MĀ 71 (T1.26.528c25); T1.45.833c22.

## **6.2.2 Kumāra Kassapa's rebuttal**

**6.2.2.1 The Pāyāsi Sutta**, fortunately, also records the elder Kumāra Kassapa's immediate responses to rebut the assumptions underlying Pāyāsi's experiments. With the use of various **parables and similes**, he explains that, granting the validity of Pāyāsi's quasi-scientific approach, we must then also accept as true to the claims of the congenitally blind that since they do not see certain things, these do not exist!<sup>224</sup>

**6.2.2.2** Kumāra Kassapa, using a number of remarkable parables, further debunks Pāyāsi's presumption that **the mind** should appear in such easily seen physical forms at the time of death. Such claims, charges the elder, is like someone chopping up fire-sticks and pounding them to bits trying to seek the fire inside it!<sup>225</sup> It is like someone who has heard **a conch** being blown, and then requests that conch to make the sound again. (Some textual versions add that he goes on to hit the conch, kick it, or threaten to smash it, in an attempt to hear its beautiful sound again).<sup>226</sup>

Kumāra Kassapa's rebuttals represent the kind of response with which Buddhists of later times will try to answer the materialist challenge that for something to be real or existing, it must be physical or palpable. Even modern science in the form of quantum physics admits that we tend to construct or influence what we experience (with which early Buddhism agrees), and that we tend to influence what we observe.<sup>227</sup> The point is that the old so called scientific presumption that only what is measurable and physical are real is not always true, especially for mind-made realities.

## **6.3 CONSCIOUS CONTINUITY WITHOUT AN ABIDING AGENT**

### **6.3.1 Milinda and Nāgasena**

**6.3.1.1** The use of parables and similes to counter materialistic assumptions in a debate about rebirth recurs in later Indian religious literature. **The Milinda,pañha** (the questions of Milinda)<sup>228</sup> reports the monk Nāgasena in friendly debate with a king Milinda (Greek, Menandros).<sup>229</sup> Like many before him, the king is puzzled by the idea of rebirth without an abiding soul or agent. Nāgasena, in his reply, makes use of the famous **parable of a lighted lamp**, which goes thus:

"Maharajah, suppose a person were to light a lamp. Would it burn all night long?"

"Yes, bhante, it might burn all night long."

"What do you think, maharajah? Is the flame in the 1<sup>st</sup> watch the same as that in the middle watch?"

"No, bhante."

"Is the flame in the middle watch the same as that in the last watch?"

"No, bhante."

"Is it then, maharajah, the flame in the 1<sup>st</sup> watch is one thing, the flame in the middle watch another, and the flame in the last watch yet another?"

"Not at all, bhante. It was burning all night depending on just the lamp."

<sup>224</sup> D 23,11.7-13/2:328,3; DĀ 7 (T1.1.43c29); MĀ 71 (T1.26.527a24); T1.45.832b27.

<sup>225</sup> D 23,21/2:341,1 and its parallels DĀ 7 (T1.1.44c2), MĀ 71 (T1.26.529a17), and T1.45.834a13.

<sup>226</sup> D 23,19/2:337,23 and its parallels DĀ 7 (T1.1.45a22), MĀ 71 (T1.26.528a9), and T1.45.833a12.

<sup>227</sup> See SD 17.8c (9.11.3); SD 36.1 (4.4.2.4); SD 49.8b (17.1.3.2); SD 53.36 (1.2.2.4).

<sup>228</sup> See SD 2.17 (3.3).

<sup>229</sup> Presumably a Bactrian Greek king who lived during 2<sup>nd</sup> cent BCE. On Milinda, see, eg, Arunasiri 2002.

“Even so, maharajah, a continuity of states (*dhamma,santati*) runs on: one arises, another ceases. It runs as though there were neither before nor after. Consequently, neither the same nor different (*na ca so na ca añño*), one goes on to the last phase of one’s consciousness.”

Upon the king’s request, Nāgasena gives another parable, that of **milk** turning into curds, into butter and into ghee. Each state is neither the same nor different as milk or any of these milk products. (Miln 40,20-41,10)<sup>230</sup>

**6.3.1.2** Nāgasena’s point is that the flame continues the whole night long, but this is not always the same flame, yet it is neither a different flame nor is there a need to introduce a new flame. This brilliant parable illustrates the Buddhist position that there is a continuity of consciousness, even though the consciousness of one particular moment is not the same as the consciousness of the next or another moment.

In doctrinal terms, **non-self** (*anatta*) denies that it is exactly the same light that burns throughout the night. However, it does *not* deny that there is a continuity of the flame burning and producing light: this continuity is merely a process without any unchanging essence. **Rebirth**, too, is a continuity of consciousness without any abiding entity.<sup>231</sup>

Early Buddhist psychology does not teach that consciousness moves on to a new body. Rather, just as one lamp’s wick lights the wick of another, and this new wick lights up on its own (considering all the right conditions are present), so, too, the consciousness of A, upon dying, rearses as A1, and so the consciousness continues under the right conditions.

## 7 The rebirth debate in modern times

### **7.1 MISINTERPRETATIONS OF KARMA AND REBIRTH**

#### **7.1.1 Properly understanding karma**

**7.1.1.1** Most of the ideas we have discussed so far, especially in the suttas, are still relevant to karma and rebirth even today. After all, they are the key teachings in Buddhism in general. One common source of misunderstanding about **karma**, however, is that we tend to look outside of ourself, even to others, as the source of our karmic sufferings.<sup>232</sup> We should avoid such a wrong understanding of karma in at least 2 basic ways.

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<sup>230</sup> Chin version: T32.1670A.698b8-13. The relevant part of the parallel T32.1670B.708c21 has already been tr by **Guang Xing**, “Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sūtra,” 2007:141; for a tr of this passage in both versions, see **Demiéville**, “Les versions chinoises du Milindapanha,” 1924:115 f.

<sup>231</sup> Miln 71,19; Chin version: T32.1670A.700a10, with its counterparts in T32.1670B.715c3-4. See also **Demiéville**, op cit 1924:154 and **Guang Xing**, op cit 2007:173.

<sup>232</sup> A notorious case of extreme and wrong views that can cause serious misunderstanding of karma is found in **Edwards’ Reincarnation: A critical examination**. According to him, one who believes in karma will face the following consequences: “The suffering individual in his view deserves to suffer because he committed evil acts in this or else in a previous life. It is not only not our duty to help him but it would seem on karmic principles that it is our duty not to help him ... as far as I can see ... karma is completely vacuous as a principle of moral guidance.” (1996:42). Further, he writes that “karma provides no guidance on how to act but it does have implications concerning the appropriate attitude towards successful and unsuccessful people, towards those who are happy and those who are suffering: we should applaud and admire the former and despise or even hate the latter.” (43). At one point, he makes this bizarre conclusion: “since the Jews deserved extinction, the Nazis were not really criminals and should not have been prosecuted.” (44).

Firstly, to attribute our mind-made sufferings on external agencies or sources is often a sign of **superstition**.<sup>233</sup> To correct this misattribution is to understand the nature of karma and examine how we have been holding up our moral conduct (in terms of speech and actions). Since karma is intention [4.1.2], it is also imperative that we keep our motivations free from greed, hate and delusion as much as possible.

**7.1.1.2** Secondly, we should correct the wrong notion that whatever happens to us is karma: this is **fatalism**, not karma.<sup>234</sup> Karma is neither fatalism nor determinism (*niyati*): it is neither *monocausal* nor *without a cause* (*ahetu, paccaya*).<sup>235</sup> As we have noted, karmic fruition does not occur in a *monocausal* way [4.1.1.2], but arise when the right conditions are present.

Moreover, karma is only *one* of the 5 natural orders that work on us [4.1.1.2; 4.2.1.2]. Karma and its fruition work in a *multicausal* and *indeterministic* manner, with a number of conditions that can arise at any time, often unexpectedly. The roots of our present karma fruition often go back into our long past, even past lives [2.6.3]. Hence, what we are, especially our present conditions, are the result of *both* past karma and present conditions, of nature and nurture.

## **7.1.2 Creating good karma**

**7.1.2.1** Since karma is **intention**—our motive behind our thoughts, speech and action—they are mind-based. The Buddhist teaching of karma is meant to encourage us to take responsibility for our present actions and be accountable for our past actions and future ones. In other words, our thoughts, speech and actions have far-reaching consequences.<sup>236</sup>

The past is gone; the future has not yet come. We can and must deal with our present.<sup>237</sup> The key concern here is about how to respond skilfully in the *present* situation, right now.<sup>238</sup> Before we act, we should watch our preconscious mind, our motive [4.1.2.1]—that it is free from *greed, hate and delusion*. Greed and hate are easier to counter than delusion. A safe bet that we are not moved by delusion is to act by reflecting on the nature of **impermanence**, and to show whatever is impermanent with lovingkindness.<sup>239</sup>

**7.1.2.2** The early Buddhist teaching of **karma** does not in any way imply that those who suffer karmic fruits simply deserve them—much as we are tempted to do when we see the good prosper and the bad suffer. The point is that karma is not the only cause of suffering. Our past deeds are *not* always responsible for our *present* state. [7.1.1.2]

We should skilfully work with our present karma, how we conduct ourself *right now*, especially in the face of life's vicissitudes. We should be karmically ready to respond wisely to gains as we do to losses; to fame as we do to obscurity; to blame as we do to praise; to joy as we do to pain. These are the 8 winds of

<sup>233</sup> Superstition is often the same as “attachment to ritual and vows” (*sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa*), one of the 3 fetters which, when broken, brings us streamwinning. See **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8 esp (5).

<sup>234</sup> On fatalism or determinism, see **Atta, kāri S** (A 6.38) + SD 7.6 (1).

<sup>235</sup> On non-causality, see **Titth'āyatana S** (A 3.61,2), SD 6.8; on causality and agency, see **Atta, kāri S** (A 6.38) + SD 7.6 (2).

<sup>236</sup> **Stevenson**, in *Children Who Remember Previous Lives*, comments that some “Westerners find the idea of chance somewhat appealing, and to the extent that they do so, they may think that of reincarnation uncongenial.” (1987:232). “If a person cannot accept responsibility for the outcome of one life, he will not welcome being asked to assume it for two or more lives.” (231)

<sup>237</sup> On this sentence, see esp **Bhadd'eka, ratta S** (M 131,3/3:187), SD 8.9.

<sup>238</sup> **Bodhi** concludes that “the ultimate implication of the Buddha's teaching on kamma and rebirth is that human beings are the final masters of their own destiny.” (*Dhamma Reflections*, 2015:189)

<sup>239</sup> For more instructions on this practice of minding our actions, guarding the 3 doors of action, see **Amba, laṭṭhi-ka Rāhu'ovāda S** (M 61,9-17/1:415-419), SD 3.10.

life, the worldly conditions (*loka, dhamma*), that blow so uncertainly, with unpredictable strengths and duration.<sup>240</sup>

## 7.2 THE SEEMING QUIRKS OF KARMA

### 7.2.1 Karmic conditionality

**7.2.1.1** It is worthwhile reminding myself that the early Buddhist teaching of karma does *not* involve **monocausality** [7.1.1.2]. There is *no* single cause, such as our past deeds alone, that is the only condition responsible for our present situation. Hence, in karmic terms, we should never react to a state of suffering with anger, fear, guilt or blame. Instead, we should wisely attend to that suffering state, be it our own or that of others.

This means that we should first mindfully observe **the problem** for what it really is. Having defined or delineated the real problem, we work to examine the causes and conditions that have brought it about. Only then, we are in a better position to effect its ending. Finally, we must, at the right time, work to end it or at least learn from it. In short, karma is predominantly about taking **right action** right now.<sup>241</sup> Even when this does not seem to work, the Buddha's advice is pragmatic: ask myself, "What shall I do now?" and rightly act on it.<sup>242</sup>

**7.2.1.2** A related problem is our attempt **to properly understand the workings of karma**. As our earlier discussion of **the Mahā Kamma, vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 136) has shown [4.3.1], often enough, we see that those who have done good seem to suffer, while the habitually bad seem to prosper, at least for the time being. We must remind myself that karma works in a complex, often unpredictable, manner, and we are only noticing the "surface" of things.

We need to look deeper into the situation to understand **its karmic context**. For the good, the night often seems darkest before dawn; for the bad, it is only a seemingly pleasant lull before the storm. The doers of good and of bad will both, in due course, have to respectively taste the fruits of their own karma.

We are never always there to notice this: in a way, it may be our karmic fruit that we do notice such karmic workings: when we fret at such apparent "injustice," we may ourselves create bad karma as such; when we learn or understand the real drama unfolding before us, we have no fear of karma. In other words, we should be minding our own karma letting the karmic waters find their own level.

### 7.2.2 No body-mind duality

**7.2.2.1** Another problem is that the early Buddhist teaching on **continuity from one life to the next** is assumed to be based on *a simple mind-body duality*.<sup>243</sup> Yet, the reciprocal conditioning between con-

<sup>240</sup> See **Loka, dhamma S 1+2** (A 8.5+6), SD 42.2+3.

<sup>241</sup> This is also putting the 4 noble truths into practice: SD 56.7 (1.2.1.4).

<sup>242</sup> See **Alabbhānīya Tḥāna S** (A 5.48,72), SD 42.1.

<sup>243</sup> See, eg, **Batchelor**, in *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, who assumes that to explain rebirth we need to "posit an impermanent, non-physical mental process to account for what is reborn. This unavoidably leads to a body-mind dualism." (2010:38). "I rebelled against the very idea of body-mind dualism. I could not accept that my experience was ontologically divided into two incommensurable spheres: one material, the other mental. Rationally, I found the idea incoherent." (38). In *After Buddhism*, he concludes (again) that "Buddhist proponents of rebirth ... opt for a body-mind dualism. They maintain that mind and matter are ontologically separate 'substances' (Skt: dravya) and thus fundamentally incommensurable." (2015:300)

sciousness and name-and-form, as presented in **the Mahānidāna Sutta** (D 15) [2.5.1] shows that this is not the case.<sup>244</sup>

**7.2.2.2** The same reciprocal conditioning also makes it clear that the early Buddhist conception of the principles governing rebirth is in harmony with its teachings on the lack of a permanent self (*anatta*). This serves to clear up another common misunderstanding, namely, the view that rebirth conflicts with the teaching on non-self.<sup>245</sup> The doctrine of **dependent arising** can be considered as the other side of the coin of the teaching of *anattā*: the two require each other rather than standing in any kind of opposition to one another.

### **7.2.3 Karma and numbers**

**7.2.3.1** Among those unfamiliar with the sutta teachings on karma and rebirth, there is sometimes the problem of how to reconcile rebirth with **the current human population growth** and our knowledge of the evolution of the human species. The question usually is that if rebirth were true, how is it that the human population is increasing.<sup>246</sup>

This is really a non-problem since early Buddhism teaches that rebirth operates in the reality of various realms or dimensions of existence within which rebirth occurs. Even if we can neither prove nor disprove karma based on empirical evidence from our present life, the current population growth factors are neither support for the idea of rebirth nor reject it. There is no early Buddhist notion that only a fixed number of human beings are reborn! Rebirth and demography are in no way interdependent.<sup>247</sup>

**7.2.3.2** There is today a seemingly new controversy of sorts regarding rebirth. As people become more aware of Buddhism or the Buddhist teaching of rebirth, and as they try to fit these new ideas into the mould of their private views, they conclude or contrive that the Buddha did not teach rebirth.<sup>248</sup> No one who is properly informed, even merely well read, in Buddhism would usually make such an assertion, unless perhaps their motive is to actually debunk the teaching in keeping with their agenda, for whatever reason.

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<sup>244</sup> Early Buddhism does not teach body-mind dualism [5.3.2.2]. Yet, **Edwards** argues that “reincarnation logically presupposes an extreme form of dualism”; hence “to refute reincarnationism it is quite sufficient to show that the extreme form of dualism is untenable.” (op cit 1996:14 f)

<sup>245</sup> **Willson** charges that “amateur writers on Buddhism never tire of making the absurd claim that the teaching of rebirth is somehow contradicted by the principle of Selflessness.” (*Rebirth and the Western Buddhist*, 1984:16). Among these “amateur writers on Buddhism,” seemingly is the likes of **Batchelor**, for whom “a central Buddhist idea, however, is that no such intrinsic self can be found ... how do we square this with rebirth?” (*Buddhism Without Beliefs*, 1997:36). Ironically, this is just the kind of reasoning used by Christian evangelists in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Sri Lanka, when attacking Buddhist beliefs! See, eg, **Young & Somaratna**, *Vain Debates*, 1996:82 f.

<sup>246</sup> See eg **Edwards**, op cit 1996:225 f.

<sup>247</sup> On the issue of the increase in human population, **Jayatileke** rebuts that “this objection would be valid if the theory required that any human birth at present presupposes the death of a prior human being on this earth. Such a theory would also make it impossible for human beings to evolve out of anthropoid apes since the first human beings to evolve would not have had human ancestors.” (op cit 1969:43)

<sup>248</sup> **Story** observes that “there are certain persons today who try to maintain that the Buddha did not teach rebirth. Whether they propagate this view in the mistaken belief that by so doing they make Buddhism more acceptable to the modern mind, which they imagine is completely wedded to materialism, or because they wish to convert Buddhism and Buddhists to the materialist-annihilationist view which the Buddha expressly repudiated ... they are sufficiently refuted in every expression of the Buddha’s teaching.” (*Karma and Freedom*, 1975:15)



It would, of course, be very surprising if a “Buddhist” were to resort to the denial of rebirth as some kind of apologetic exercise. Perhaps, such a claim may have arisen from the brand of Buddhism they uphold. Or, perhaps, they felt that Buddhism, or more likely, *their* Buddhism, should be more acceptable to the contemporary audience.

It’s hard to imagine how we can actually exactly know what this “audience” (how huge is the number?) is thinking. Surely, this is at best a quixotic venture, or at worst, a Procrustean reinvention of Buddhism in our own image. In between, informed scholars and teachers may accuse such an innovator, if he is informed of Buddhism, of intellectual dishonesty or brash close-mindedness.<sup>249</sup> Others may even dismiss it as plain stupidity, considering the latitude that Buddhism offers in matters of belief. [4.4.3]

The earliest records we have of the historical Buddha’s teachings—the Pali suttas—which are today easily accessible in good translations, without any doubt contain numerous teachings on rebirth. This only shows that it is an integral part of early Buddhism. If we are true seekers of truth and awakening, such informative and insightful texts leave us almost no ground for any notion that the historical Buddha did not teach rebirth or that he taught rebirth only as an “expedient means,” without himself really accepting it.<sup>250</sup>

### 7.3 THE CONFIRMATION BIAS

#### 7.3.1 The nature of religion

**7.3.1.1** Since early Buddhism rejects the theistic Supreme God and the abiding Soul ideas, and allows us latitude in matters of doctrines (such as karma and rebirth), some Buddhist writers proclaim it to be *not a religion*.<sup>251</sup> Religion or not, it’s how we see Buddhism and act on it that makes it what it is, at least for us. We do not at once understand *the whole* of Buddhism: our views and misconceptions often stand in the way of our direct vision of what Buddhism really is, as realized and taught by the Buddha.

One of the most common philosophical issues for a Buddhist is how we see Buddhism—how *open*, *clear* and *correct* we are in understanding what the Buddha teaches. Such attitudes are especially significant in our debate or discussion on karma and rebirth, that is, understanding the problem of selective attention arising from what in cognitive psychology is called “**confirmation bias**” or “my-side bias.”

**7.3.1.2 Confirmation bias** is when we fail to see an idea or a situation rightly or see only a part of it, so that truth, reality or information is misread or misunderstood.<sup>252</sup> The impact of such “confirmation bias” negatively influences our processing and evaluation of reliable information on rebirth.

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<sup>249</sup> **Story** argues that “to maintain that the Buddha did not teach rebirth is surely the most curious aberration that has ever made its appearance in Buddhism. It places upon one who holds the burden of proof that most of the statements attributed to the Buddha were not made by him at all ... for one claiming to be a Buddhist to maintain that the Buddha did not teach rebirth is an intellectual dishonesty of the worst kind ... even if the doctrine of rebirth were not true, it is true that the Buddha taught it. The denial of that fact constitutes a lie.” (op cit 1975:92)

<sup>250</sup> **Jayatilleke** opens his *Survival and Karma in Buddhist Perspective* by pointing out the following “misconceptions”: that “the Buddha utilised the doctrines of rebirth and karma ... to impart ethical teachings but did not himself believe in these doctrines” and “the Buddha was not interested or held no specific views about the question of human survival or life after death. He roundly condemned speculation about the past or the future (ie about prior lives or future lives) as unprofitable and mistaken. He was only concerned with man’s present state of anxiety, suffering and dissatisfaction and the solution for it.” (op cit 1969:1 f)

<sup>251</sup> See eg **Fauré**, *Unmasking the Buddha*, 2009:27-34 (“a philosophy, not a religion”).

<sup>252</sup> An example of this is **Batchelor**’s view of the undetermined questions as showing that “by refusing to address whether mind and body are the same or different or whether one exists after death or not, he [the Buddha] undermines the possibility of constructing a theory of reincarnation.” (op cit 2010:100). Yet *jīva* does not refer to the

Confirmation bias will make us dismiss or discount even empirical evidence or reliable truths that contradict our views or which we do not accept. Yet, we will find support from even less convincing evidence but which seems to agree with their views. Through such bias, even a random set of ideas, events or results were seen or made to support our fixed views, even though those very same things also support the contrary position!<sup>253</sup>

**7.3.2** This bias often includes a tendency to remember or exploit the strengths of *confirming* evidence but the weaknesses of *disconfirming* evidence; to take confirming evidence as relevant and reliable, but disconfirming evidence as irrelevant and unreliable; and to accept confirming evidence even at face value while sharply criticizing disconfirming evidence.

Cognitive psychologists have noticed that the effect of confirmation bias affect even the intelligent<sup>254</sup> and those with higher education.<sup>255</sup> In fact, confirmation bias has been shown to have had a considerable effect on **science** itself.<sup>256</sup> Skeptics with confirmation bias tend to zealously dismiss anything as false and fake whatever conflicts with their preconceived notions even in a so called “free” society.<sup>257</sup>

**7.3.3** The danger of confirmation bias is even more real and insidious in **a religion** in which the teaching or the teacher demands to be accepted without question and wholesale: to believe and be saved. In such a scenario, the faithful is likely to be very eager or fearful to accept whatever is said or taught by the authorities as truth, to keep the status quo or be accepted as a member of the tribe.

Even in Buddhism, when we *lack proper understanding of the suttas* but rely on a favoured or feared guru and his teachings, we are likely to accept anything so long as it is part of the official dogmas or supportive of them. Such dogmas then become our part of preconceived notions. We easily dismiss as false and fake whatever conflicts with our preconceived notions. It is especially significant that confirmation

“mind,” and the *tathāgata* does not stand for “one” in general but much rather for an “awakened one.” Besides misunderstanding these key terms, his view also discounts the significance of the Buddha’s silence on these speculative questions.

<sup>253</sup> **Lord, Ross & Lepper**, “Biased assimilation and attitude polarization,” 1979:2099. **Hart et al**, in “Feeling validated versus being correct,” point out that the strength of this bias is such that “people are almost two times ... more likely to select information congenial rather than uncongenial to their pre-existing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.” (2009:579)

<sup>254</sup> **West, Meserve & Stanovich**, in “Cognitive sophistication does not attenuate the bias blind spot,” found that “more intelligent people were not actually less biased ... cognitive ability provides no inoculation at all from the bias blind spot—the tendency to believe that biased thinking is more prevalent in others than in ourselves.” (2012: 515). **Stanovich, West & Toplak**, in “Myside bias, rational thinking, and intelligence,” conclude that “individuals of higher intelligence are often just as likely to engage in biased reasoning as people of lesser intelligence.” (2013: 262)

<sup>255</sup> **Greenhoot et al**, in “Prior beliefs and methodological concepts in scientific reasoning,” report from their research that “the data here suggest that it is entirely possible to engage students in a curriculum on scientific reasoning and have them perform at a high level on the general concepts when tested about those concepts and the generation of scientifically valid conclusions, yet fail to use those concepts effectively when reasoning scientifically about real-world issues—particularly those with scientific solutions that may be at odds with their own existing prior beliefs.” (2004:219)

<sup>256</sup> **Nickerson** defines “Confirmation bias,” and gives an informative survey of such cases in the history of science. (1998:197). On how new information is interpreted in a way to support their pre-existing beliefs: **Talluri et al**, “Confirmation bias through selective overweighting of choice-consistent evidence,” 2018.

<sup>257</sup> Confirmation bias is often an internal “yes man,” echoing back our beliefs, like Uriah Heep in Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* (1850). (Zweig, “How to ignore the yes-man in your head,” 2009).

bias is often an **unconscious tendency** (*anusaya*).<sup>258</sup> We often do not even know that it is present in us, blindsiding us.

Confirmation bias hardens and narrows our mind, leaving it barren (*khila*) so that no new ideas, especially liberating truths can grow on it.<sup>259</sup> Thus, confirmation bias prevents us from seeing our views as being provisional (*pariyāyena*),<sup>260</sup> which prevents us from being nurtured by the goodness of a teaching so that we can move on to higher, more liberating, truths. We are left leashed like a dog in the manger guarding our blind faith and fixed views, barking away at whatever seems to challenge them.

## 7.4 OVERVIEW: TWO KEY IDEAS

### 7.4.1 What we cannot speak about should be left in silence

The Buddha's teaching on rebirth continues to be a topic of debate from ancient India up to our own times. The ancient Indians of the Buddha's time were often curious about the destiny of a spiritually liberated being. **Without being liberated or awakened ourselves, we can only speculate on this.** The Buddha, as an awakened being, understands the problem of such an ineffable experience and the problem of the language trying to express it. Hence, he is silent on this, directing us to work on what really will help us on the path to liberation.

### 7.4.2 Some realities cannot be measured

The suttas recount bizarre experiments by an Indian materialist trying to prove that nothing survives death. The notion that only when something can be measured that it makes sense or exists is an ancient materialist bias. **Not all things in life are physical or measurable.** Clearly, some of the most significant things in our lives—happiness, love, kindness, goodness, wisdom—cannot really be measured. Our ability to free our mind of bias and keep it open to truth allows us to understand true reality and, as a result, be free from the limits of the physical and worldly, and find true happiness.

## III. SOME POSSIBLE EVIDENCE OF REBIRTH

### 8 Phenomena suggestive of rebirth

**8.0** Since there is already a huge collection of readable studies and reports on the various possible evidence of rebirth, we will not examine them here, except to list some authentic, relevant data and related literature which may be followed up. The general purpose of this section is to highlight the universality of rebirth and their documentation for helpful study.

The richest source of records and evidence relating to rebirth is found in religious texts. Since this is not an encyclopaedic study on rebirth but a introductory survey of "rebirth in early Buddhism," we will, of course, focus on the Buddhist texts, and relevant evidence and studies that support the veracity of such teachings. Rebirth studies have now reached such a level that it is difficult to simply dismiss it.<sup>261</sup>

<sup>258</sup> See *Anusaya*, SD 31.3. For a scientific research: Forscher et al, "A meta-analysis of procedures to change implicit measures," 2019.

<sup>259</sup> *Ceto, khila S* (M 16) + SD 32.14 (2.2).

<sup>260</sup> *Pariyāya nippariyāya*, SD 68.2; SD 3.9 (7.5.1); SD 50.25 (1.4); SD 56.11 (3.1).

<sup>261</sup> *Dell'Olio*, in "Do Near-Death Experiences Provide a Rational Basis for Belief in Life after Death?," argues that "we don't need conclusive evidence for a rational belief since most of the beliefs we consider to be rational do not have conclusive evidence." (2010:122). *Carter* concludes that "reincarnation provides a rational and coherent explanation for the data from past-life memory cases. At this point, it would appear that reincarnation provides the best explanation of the data." (*Science and the Afterlife Experience*, 2012:65)

## 8.1 NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

### 8.1.1 NDE from ancient times to our times

What we today understand as **near-death experience/s** (NDE or NDEs) have been reported since ancient times, such as in imperial China, up to modern day.<sup>262</sup> Besides India, Tibet and China, NDEs have been reported from various non-Western cultures such as Africans, the hunter-gatherer cultures in North and South America, aboriginal Australians, the Māori of New Zealand, and the natives of the Pacific islands, such as Guam and Hawai'i.<sup>263</sup>

The topic has attracted public and academic attention in recent times as improved health care have enabled the resuscitation of victims and patients. Consequently, we hear of more reports of NDEs, instead of their being ignored by patients or dismissed by specialists.

### 8.1.2 Universality of NDEs

**8.1.2.1** The suttas often recount the Buddha and his leading disciples visiting various heavens and other realms, and returning to relate their encounters with other beings to the congregation. Such visits appear to have been originally conceived of as being undertaken with a **mind-made body**.<sup>264</sup> We have already noted how this is done with such a body, which accomplished meditators are able to project for themselves. [2.5.2.2]

**8.1.2.2** The suttas also report how heavenly beings come to visit the Buddha or his disciples. **The Anātha,piṇḍik'ovada Sutta** (M 143), for example, reports the case of the Buddha's chief lay supporter, **Anātha,piṇḍika**, who, having passed away, is reborn in Tusita heaven. As a deva, he approaches the Buddha in the night and utters a paean on the 3 jewels, which the next morning the Buddha recounts to the assembly.<sup>265</sup>

**8.1.2.3** **The Makhā,deva Sutta** (M 83) and **the Nimi Jātaka** (J 541) contain the story of king Nimi, who on account of his moral virtue, was invited by Sakra, lord of the devas, to visit Tāva,tiṃsa, the heaven of the 33. His journey is reminiscent of a near-death experience, except that he makes his journey bodily, as it were. On his way there, from his heavenly chariot drawn by Mātali, he is able to see the hells, as he has requested, before arriving in Tāvatiṃsa. Although invited by Sakra to remain there, he chooses to return to earth to continue his life of moral virtue. Upon dying, he is reborn in the Brahma world.<sup>266</sup>

**8.1.2.4** In terms of **mythical significance**,<sup>267</sup> we can read such stories as cultural narratives illustrating how our own moral virtue brings us visions of reality and lives of heavenly bliss. The early Buddhist

<sup>262</sup> See, eg, **Feng & Liu**, "Near-Death experiences among survivors of the 1976 Tangshan earthquake," 1992; on attitudes in contemporary China toward such experiences, see **Kellehear, Heaven & Gao**, "Community attitudes towards near-death experiences, a Chinese study," 1990.

<sup>263</sup> For a survey of relevant research see, eg, **Belanti, Perera & Jagadheesan**, "Phenomenology of near-death experiences: A cross-cultural perspective," 2008, and **Kellehear**, "Census of non-Western near-death experiences to 2005," 2009.

<sup>264</sup> See **Analayo**, "Levitation in early Buddhist discourse," 2016a.

<sup>265</sup> M 143/3:262,8 (SD 23.9) = S 2.20/1:55,12; Chin parallels: SĀ 593 (T2.99.158c3), SĀ2 187 (T2.100.441c15), and EĀ 51.8 (T2.125.820a25).

<sup>266</sup> M 83,12-19/2:80,19 (SD 60.8; cf J 541/6:127,32), MĀ 67 (T1.26.515a3), EĀ 50.4 (T2.125.809c17), T3.152.49-b14, and Bhaiṣajya,vastu of Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya (Dutt 1984:113,4) and D 1 kha 55b6 or Q 1030 ge 51b3.

<sup>267</sup> On the psychology of myths, see SD 52.1 (1).

narratives of the suffering subhuman states and the blissful celestial heavens often serve to inspire and guide us to lead morally virtuous lives of humanity as the basis for our **divinity**. Rebirth, then, is psychologically, our process of devolution into suffering states on account of cultivating bad karma, or of evolution into happier beings on account of keeping up good karma.<sup>268</sup>

**8.1.2.5** Rebirth and survival are not limited to Buddhist teachings, but found in many religions and belief systems throughout history and across cultures and religions. There is, for example, **the Tibetan Book of the Dead**, which, however, is a post-Buddha work of Tibetan provenance. It is not exactly about rebirth as it is to create conditions favourable for rebirth, and is ritually read or whispered into the ears of the remains of those just deceased.<sup>269</sup>

Actual near-death experiences (NDE) are described in some versions of the scripture on Bhaiṣajya-guru, “the medicine teacher,” another late Mahāyāna text. It relates how the deceased, on being brought for reckoning before king Yama, can be made to return to their body through devotional prayers for the intercession of Bhaiṣajya-guru Buddha. If this is successful, they resurrect as if waking from a dream.<sup>270</sup>

**8.1.2.6** Even earlier than either the Tibetan work or Buddhism was the so-called **Egyptian Book of the Dead**, whose description, it has been suggested, derived from familiarity with near-death experiences.<sup>271</sup> An ancient Greek belief is related in **the myth of Er** in Plato’s *Republic* about how a soldier was killed in battle. Even after several days, his corpse did not decompose, and he returned to life on his funeral pyre to relate his experiences in the otherworld. It is, of course, possible that this might have been Plato’s literary device to present his views of the afterlife.<sup>272</sup>

**8.1.2.7 Premodern Christianity**, too, had its strong beliefs in what we would call rebirth and NDEs. There is the biblical story of Lazarus who returned from the dead.<sup>273</sup> The apostle Paul, in his writings, briefly referred to a visit to heaven.<sup>274</sup> The 6<sup>th</sup>-century pope, Gregory the Great, reported accounts in which souls were taken away from their bodies by mistake and then came back to life.<sup>275</sup>

Nearer our times, as **religion** became more organized and tribal, its respective beliefs and accounts that do not meet the approval of the religious elite were expunged or reinterpreted to fit into the official

<sup>268</sup> Frightening visions and experience of hellish states also occur in the NDEs of our times: **Kastenbaum**, “Happily ever after,” 1979:19-22; **Greyson & Bush**, “Distressing near-death experiences,” 1992; **Rommer**, *Blessing in Disguise*, 2000; **Bush**, “Afterward: Making meaning after a frightening near-death experience,” 2002, and “Distressing Western near-death experiences,” 2009.

<sup>269</sup> The best known tr of this work is **Evans-Wentz**, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 1927; for a study see, eg, **Cuevas**, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 2003.

<sup>270</sup> **Schopen**, *The Bhaiṣajyaguru-sūtra*, 1978:61,27 Skt, and 98,3 Tib; with Chin parallels in T14.449.403c25, T14.-450.407b22, T14.451.415c8; see also T 21.1331.536a2.

<sup>271</sup> **Walker & Serdahely**, “Historical perspectives on near-death phenomena,” 1990:105 f; for descriptions of otherworld experiences in Zoroastrianism: **Skjærvø**, “Afterlife in Zoroastrianism,” 2013. **Schumann & Rossini**, *Becoming Osiris*, 1995:110-112. **Ross**, “The same old story,” 1979:31 notes the continuity of the Book of the Dead’s tenets evident in this ancient text “today among most of the religious tribes of the Sudan.”

<sup>272</sup> *Republic* 10.614-21; on the Myth of Er, as well as other such tales, see, eg, **Platthy**, *Near-Death Experiences in Antiquity*, 1992; **Bremmer**, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife*, 2002:90-96; and **van der Sluijs**, “Three ancient reports of near-death experiences,” 2009.

<sup>273</sup> The Bible, John 11:43. On resurrection from a Buddhist perspective see **Gethin**, “The Resurrection and Buddhism” 1996.

<sup>274</sup> The Bible, 2 Corinthians 12:2. On Gnostic Christianity and near-death experiences see **Bain**, “Near death experiences and Gnostic Christianity,” 1999.

<sup>275</sup> **Moricca**, *Gregorii Magni Dialogi, Libri IV*, 1924:286,22

tenets.<sup>276</sup> Some modern Christians, like Geddes MacGregor, an Episcopalian priest and professor of philosophy, have made a case for the compatibility of Christian doctrine and reincarnation.<sup>277</sup>

Although the majority of theistic religions and their sects reject the rebirth idea, particular groups within them do, in some ways, accept **reincarnation**. Such groups include the mainstream historical and contemporary followers of Cathars, Alawites, the Druze, and the Rosicrucians.

### **8.1.3 Cultural varieties of NDEs**

**8.1.3.1** The inner realities that we habituate and conjure are more real than *the external realities* before us. Traditional Chinese, for example, are likely to meet the Yellow Emperor presiding over a vast bureaucracy administering the affairs of the dead and the living. Traditional Indians are likely to see the messengers of Yama, the lord of the dead. An afterlife belief common to both Chinese and Indian cultures is the motif of mistaken identity, where the recently deceased, mistaken for someone else, is eventually released, and then revived.<sup>278</sup>

The early Buddhist account of Yama lording over the hells, not as a karmic punisher, but more as an existential counsellor, routinely asks every one of those who have come before him why he has not heeded his “divine messengers” (*deva, dūta*)—a young infant, an old man, a sick person, a criminal being punished, a dead man—depicting birth, decay, disease, karmic suffering and death. We should be wise to live the moral or spiritual life so that we do not have to face him!

In fact, in **the Deva, dūta Sutta** (M 130), Yama is himself depicted as tiring from the repetitive questioning of the countless hell-bound beings, and aspires to be born in the time of the Buddha so that he may live a life of renunciation bound for liberation himself.<sup>279</sup> Provisionally, we can thus see him as an **allegory** of karma and rebirth combined: by our own actions, we incur suffering upon ourselves. Hence, we have the power to reverse this cycle: to do good and free ourselves from rebirth,

**8.1.3.2 Contemporary Western accounts** of NDEs tend to give less or no significance on decisions made by authority figures. An interesting case of such an NDE is where the one responsible for taking account of the life of the recently deceased turns out to be a computer!<sup>280</sup> Clearly, such a narrative is likely to be conditioned by our pre-death social conditionings.

Still, it should be noted that NDEs do at times differ from the expectations and beliefs of the subject.<sup>281</sup> There are documented cases of Christian patients during an NDE encountering a spiritual being and, full of awe, ask whether that being is Jesus, only to be told: “No.”<sup>282</sup>

<sup>276</sup> The Roman Church officially rejected reincarnation in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Council of Constantinople (553 CE).

<sup>277</sup> **Cranston**, *Reincarnation in Christianity: A new vision of the role of rebirth in Christian thought* (Quest Books), 1990: see Geddes MacGregor: Books.

<sup>278</sup> The prominence of the motif of mistaken identity in Indian NDEs, eg, emerges from the cases studied in **Osís & Haraldsson**, *at the hour of death* (*At the Hour of Death*, 1977:154-184); **Pasricha & Stevenson**, “Near-death experiences in India, A preliminary report,” 1986; and **Pasricha**, “A systematic survey of near-death experiences in South India,” 1993 and “Near-death experiences in South India: A systematic survey,” 1995.

<sup>279</sup> M 130,28-30/3:186 (SD 2.23): 5 messengers (§§4-8); cf the 3 messengers (**Yama**) **Deva, dūta S** (A 3.35), SD 48.10.

<sup>280</sup> **Zaleski** reports: “one woman who revived from cardiac arrest tells of watching details of her life being noted down; in her case, the recording angel was a computer.” (*Otherworld Journeys*, 1987:129)

<sup>281</sup> **Moody** observed that “many persons have stressed how unlike their experiences were to what they had been led to expect in the course of their religious training.” (*Life After Life*, 1975:140). On the limited impact of societal notions of the nature of NDEs on actual reports of their occurrence, see also **Athappilly, Greyson & Stevenson**, “Do prevailing societal models influence reports of near-death experiences?” 2006.

<sup>282</sup> For such a case: **Rawlings**, *Beyond Death’s Door*, 1978:98; and another: **Rommer**, *Blessing in Disguise*, 2000: 28.

**8.1.3.3** Subjects of NDEs not only described a wide range of **otherworlds** but also the nature of their transition to that world,<sup>283</sup> such as a tunnel with a great light at its end, or just a brilliant source of light. Others reported various visions of holy beings and places, and hearing various sounds and voices, both familiar and unfamiliar, and even a sense of love and well-being.<sup>284</sup>

Subjects often report acting or experiencing in NDEs with greater clarity than usual, despite being physically comatose or having cardiac arrest—when they should not be able to have such conscious experiences. Such reports conflict with the learned assumption in contemporary science that the brain is the source of mental activities, which is often the key rationale for some scientists' objection to the idea of rebirth today. [8.3.2.2]

**8.1.3.4** A 3-year longitudinal<sup>285</sup> study has shown that some Buddhist meditators are able to willfully induce near-death experiences at an appointed time. Unlike traditional NDEs, the meditators were consciously aware of experiencing the meditation-induced NDE and retained control over its content and duration.<sup>286</sup> The Dalai Lama has also asserted that experienced meditators can deliberately induce the NDE state during meditation, being able to recognize and sustain it.<sup>287</sup>

Interesting and authentic as such studies may be, these are very private experiences of meditators trained in a particular religious tradition with its own paradigm of rules and reality. It is also impossible for the scientists or experts to experience for themselves the reality of the meditators. Hence, they have only 2<sup>nd</sup> hand reports to work with at best. Bearing this in mind, it would still be useful to examine the outcome of such a study.<sup>288</sup>

#### **8.1.4 Some verification of NDE**

**8.1.4.1** One of the recent authentic cases of NDE is that of **Pam Reynolds Lowery** (1956-2010), from Atlanta, Georgia, an American singer-songwriter.<sup>289</sup> In 1991, at the age of 35, she stated that she had an NDE during a brain operation performed by Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix, Arizona. Reynolds was under close medical monitoring during the entire operation. During part of the operation, she had no brain-wave activity and no blood flowing in her brain, which rendered her clinically dead. She claimed to have made several observations during the procedure which later medical personnel reported to be accurate.<sup>290</sup>

**8.1.4.2** The case of Pam Reynolds is not the only one where the subject's NDE report can be verified. A series of patients, apparently able to give details of the resuscitation procedures carried out on them after cardiac arrest, witnessed by them from a vantage point above, have been compared with a control group. The control group consisted of cardiac patients who did not have an NDE and who were

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<sup>283</sup> On similarities between these aspects of NDEs and children who appear to remember the intermission between a past and the present life, see **Sharma & Tucker**, "Cases of the reincarnation type with memories from the intermission between lives," 2004.

<sup>284</sup> See eg **James Mauro**. "Bright lights, big mystery," *Psychology Today*, July 1992; **Lowe**, "What happens when you die?" *Newsweek* 2017.

<sup>285</sup> "Longitudinal," concerning the development of something over a period of time.

<sup>286</sup> **W Van Gordon et al**, "Meditation-induced near-death experiences, 2018.

<sup>287</sup> **Dalai Lama**, *The Universe in a Single Atom*, 2005:157.

<sup>288</sup> **Marsh**, *Out-of-body and Near-Death Experiences*, 2010.

<sup>289</sup> **J E Geshwiler**, "Pam Reynolds Lowery, noted for near-death episode." *The Atlanta Journal—Constitution* 28 May 2010. See also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pam\\_Reynolds\\_case](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pam_Reynolds_case).

<sup>290</sup> For an assessment: **Analayo** 2018:128-130 (digital).

asked to imagine as vividly as possible resuscitation procedures, so that many of them made major errors.<sup>291</sup>

In contrast, the NDE subjects gave accurate and detailed descriptions of their near-death state. A real problem here was that the control group had not actually undergone cardiac arrest.<sup>292</sup> To make up for this deficiency, another similar study was carried out with a control group that did go through a resuscitation but without having an NDE. The results nevertheless confirmed the earlier study, in that those who did not have an NDE made more errors in their descriptions.<sup>293</sup> Such findings confirm the less likelihood that the NDE subjects had false memories of resuscitation procedures, had imagined them, or had made them all up.<sup>294</sup>

**8.1.4.3** The way that the leading lay-disciple of the Buddha, the houselord **Citta**, dies may be considered as a near-death experience in the real sense of the term: he is actually *dying*. Now, he is a non-returner who has mastered the 4 dhyanas. **The Gilāna Dassana Sutta** (S 41.10) reports that as Citta lies on his deathbed, his living relatives think that he is babbling to himself. The reality is that he is actually teaching the devas a lesson in impermanence. They have come requesting him to be reborn as a wheel-turning monarch, so that they will gain the honour of his devotion; but he dismisses them for suggesting such a frivolity.<sup>295</sup>

**8.1.4.4** Considering the numerous cases of NDE reported and studied, it is difficult to deny or discount that such experiences are genuine. Indeed, on account of this, and the popularity of Buddhism today, we are even more familiar with NDEs, and better understand them than ever before. The point is that this positive development only highlights the fact that NDEs pose a serious challenge to the assumption that mental activity is solely the product of the brain. Our body is a conscious one, and much of our life is mind-made.<sup>296</sup>

## 8.2 PAST-LIFE REGRESSION

### 8.2.1 The therapist's influence

**8.2.1.1** When the recollection of a person's past lives is somehow induced, it is called **past-life regression**. Such an induced recall of past lives may be done through meditation [8.1.3.4], or by way of hypnotic regression. Ian Stevenson, for example, reported such recall by a **Buddhist nun in Thailand**, about 20 years old, while *meditating*, unexpectedly recalled two of her past lives as an infant. She was to give various personal details of her previous parents. Stevenson confirms that she had no previous contact with those families, yet all these details turned out to be correct.<sup>297</sup>

**8.2.1.2** Past-life memory may also be induced by way of **hypnotic regression**. The main problem with this method is that it is difficult to verify its veracity. Hypnotic suggestion may lead to the creation

<sup>291</sup> Sabom, *Recollection of Death*, 1982:115-161.

<sup>292</sup> Blackmore, *Dying to live*, 1993:120.

<sup>293</sup> Sartori, *The Near-Death Experiences of Hospitalized Intensive Care Patients*, 2008:273 f.

<sup>294</sup> Siegel argues that the "hypothesis of hallucinogenic induction of near-death experiences is supported by hard data" ("Life after death," 1981:160).

<sup>295</sup> S 41.10/4:303 f (SD 16.16).

<sup>296</sup> For further reading, see **Analayo**, 2018:130-134 (digital).

<sup>297</sup> Fiore, *You Have Been Here Before*, 1979:6.



of imaginary past lives.<sup>298</sup> It is also possible, as found in another study, that those “who report memories of past lives exhibited greater false recall and false recognition” compared to those who did not report such memories.<sup>299</sup>

A further problem that studies have found is the degree to which past-life memories induced through regression are often influenced by **the beliefs and expectations of the hypnotist**.<sup>300</sup> Conversely, there are findings that even with such induced suggestion, the results produced interesting variations.

**8.2.1.3** In one study, three groups undergoing past-life regression were primed differently. Group 1 was told about it in positive terms; group 2 in neutral terms; and group 3 in highly skeptical terms. 85% of group 1 did experience past-life regression; 60% of group 2 did; but only 10% of group 3 did. This does suggest the influence of subjectivity on such experiences.<sup>301</sup>

Yet, it is remarkable that the 10% of those who were introduced to past-life regression in negative ways still had such experiences!<sup>302</sup> While it is true that there are potential pitfalls in regression therapy, this also suggests that the resulting experiences need not entirely be the result of the hypnotist’s suggestion. Nor is it wishful imagination the only source for such experiences, since some subjects find their expectations not met at all by the kind of past-life memory recalled under hypnosis.<sup>303</sup>

## **8.2.2 The population increase**

**8.2.2.1** Other interesting findings from regression therapy included a study of data obtained from over a thousand reported regressions over various periods corresponding to our knowledge of increase in world population during preceding centuries.<sup>304</sup> Helen **Wambach** further noted that the regressed lives were distributed almost exactly 50:50 between past lives as a female and as a male (1978:124 f).

However, Jonathan **Venn** objects to this as relevant evidence on the grounds that “a 50:50 ratio is precisely what she should have expected, given an equal probability of obtaining either a male or a female personality,” adding that no control-group data had been gathered from non-regressed subjects.<sup>305</sup>

**8.2.2.2** Yet in a somewhat related finding, Jim B **Tucker**, based on a statistical analysis of children who remembered past lives of someone whose cause of death is known. Once those who had a *natural*

<sup>298</sup> **Kampman & Hirvenoja**, “Dynamic relation of the secondary personality induced by hypnosis to the present personality,” 1978.

<sup>299</sup> **Meyersburg et al**, “False memory propensity in people reporting recovered memories of past lives,” 2009:402.

<sup>300</sup> **Spanos et al**, “Secondary Identity Enactments during Hypnotic Past-Life Regression,” 1991; **Spanos**, “Multiple identity enactments and multiple personality disorder,” 1994. **Spanos** concludes that “past-life personalities are ... contextually generated, rule-governed, goal-directed fantasies. Subjects construct these fantasies to meet the demands of the hypnotic regression situation.” (*Multiple Identities & False Memories*, 1996: 141 f)

<sup>301</sup> After describing the experiment and results, **Baker** concludes that this shows past-life regression phenomena to be “the results of suggestions made by the hypnotist, expectations held by the subject, and the demand characteristics of the hypnoidal relationship.” (*Hidden Memories*, 1992:161)

<sup>302</sup> In fact, **Lucas** notes that “the most obvious barrier to regression work is a belief system that is strongly skeptical of the concept of past lives.” (*Regression Therapy*, 1993:51)

<sup>303</sup> **Freedman** reports working with clients who had been made to believe by a psychic that they had spectacular past lives. On being regressed their expectations remained unfulfilled, as they rather experienced much less glorious and unimpressive past-life memories. This type of failure suggests that the regression experience cannot be entirely the product of wishful thinking; otherwise, there would have been no reason for the imagination of such clients to fail to produce what they were expecting. (*Soul Echoes*, 2002:35)

<sup>304</sup> **Wambach**, *Reliving Past Lives: The evidence under hypnosis* (1978:137 f).

<sup>305</sup> **Venn**, “Hypnosis and the reincarnation hypothesis,” 1986:413.

death were examined on their own, an approximate rate of 50:50 resulted between males and females. In the case of those who died *unnaturally*, however, over 70 percent were male. The reason could be that men were more likely to engage in high-risk behaviour, including fights, and therefore more often suffer a violent death, a suggestion borne out by statistics of violent deaths in countries like the US.<sup>306</sup>

### **8.2.3 Unexpected results**

**8.2.3.1** In another study, the results showed that in several cases subjects gave inaccurate details. Yet, subsequent research actually showed that they were *correct*, after all.<sup>307</sup> One case was that of someone without any previous knowledge of Spanish who, under hypnosis, remembered having been a woman in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spain. After investigation, not a single error was found in the over-hundred facts she had presented.<sup>308</sup>

In another case, the hypnotized subject recalled his life in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England, where he had never been to before. The details he gave were corroborated, including the names of two villages that either no longer existed or had been renamed. He also used an obsolete term only found at that time in that part of England.<sup>309</sup>

**8.2.3.2** Although the personal past-life accounts may at times contain historically accurate information, it also allows the subjects to introduce some amount of **personal experimentation**. NDEs occur spontaneously, and, as such, are rarer than past-life regression, which seems to be possible for almost anyone willing to try.

Going through a hypnotic therapy allows the subjects to even experiment with their imagination and concerns without ever needing to prepare in some demanding meditation, taking years of practice, or to have acquired mental skills, that according to early Buddhist sources are required to be able to recollect past lives at will.<sup>310</sup>

Past-life regression allows anyone interested to have a personal experience and then decide whether what we recall actually in some way is meaningful or reflective of our experiences, attitudes and beliefs in our present life. In fact, past-life regression gives us an opportunity for personally trying out whether memories that are subjectively experienced as belonging to a past life can be accessed, whatever their historical value.

### **8.2.4 Memory and its problems**

**8.2.4.1** As a rule, both past-life recall (spontaneous) and past-life regression (induced) require our **memory** to be good, or at least working in our favour. Cognitive psychology informs us that **memory** does not work like a tape recorder or a copy machine, faithfully reproducing a replica of our experien-

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<sup>306</sup> Tucker, *Return to Life*, 2013:136 f.

<sup>307</sup> Wambach (op cit) reports that in "instances in which my subjects felt that their data were wrong, according to their own view of history, research showed that their unconscious had presented them with a more accurate picture ... If past-life recall is fantasy, one would expect our conscious knowledge of history to provide the images. When the images contrast with what we believe to be true, and yet prove on careful study to be accurate, then we must look anew at the concept of past-life recall as fantasy." (1978:112)

<sup>308</sup> Tarazi, "An unusual case of hypnotic regression with some unexplained contents," 1990.

<sup>309</sup> Ramster, "Past lives and hypnosis," 1994, 75-77, 84 f.

<sup>310</sup> On the tendency in later Buddhist texts to claim that past-life recollection did not require any mastery of meditation, see Schopen, "The generalization of an old yogic attainment in Medieval Mahāyāna Sūtra Literature: Some notes on *Jātismara*," 1983.

ces. Photographic memory is very rare. From early Buddhist psychology, we know that we tend to construct our past, of what we want or do not want to remember of it. [8.2.4.2]

These quirks of memory often result in inaccurate or even false recall—of which Gregory **Schacter** identifies as the “7 sins of memory”: “transience,” “absentmindedness,” “blocking,” “misattribution,” “suggestibility,” “bias” and “persistence.” The first 3 sins involve different kinds of forgetting, the next 3 refer to different kinds of distortions, and the final sin concerns intrusive recollections that are difficult to forget.<sup>311</sup>

**Transience** refers to how memory fades with time; **absent-mindedness** arises from inattention or shallow processing of ongoing events or forgetting them in the future; **blocking** is to the temporary inaccessibility of information stored in memory. **Misattribution** is when we access the wrong source; **suggestibility** refers to memories that are implanted from leading questions or comments from past experiences; **bias** is retrospective distortions and unconscious influences related to current knowledge and beliefs. **Persistence** refers to intrusive recollections that are difficult to forget.

**8.2.4.2** Far from being merely *reproductive*, our **memory** is rather of a constructive nature. When we are asked to remember, often, our first reaction is more of an attitude or mood, upon which we construct the “memory,” which is actually new or different information. Hence, it is rare that our memory is actually exact or even correct.<sup>312</sup>

One of the common ways we construct or add on to our memory is **imagination**. Our imaginings tend to lead us to “remember” what we did, when, in fact, we had not. The greater our imagination or the more frequent we imagine only adds on to our confidence in the mistaken responses.<sup>313</sup>

**8.2.4.3** A **false memory** may even begin at the point of origin: when we are actually experiencing what is to be remembered, we do not give wise attention; instead, we project our imagination, and construct a photoshopped pastiche of what really happened. Or, we infer the experience, we jump to conclusion, and remember that inference or conclusion.<sup>314</sup>

When we recall that past event, often we are no longer able to distinguish between the original data and the inference we have drawn. This is, in fact, “false memory,” although the subject does not see it this way: this is just what the term means.<sup>315</sup>

This revealing perspective on the limitations of memory is sobering. It should always be kept in mind as a common factor in past-life recall, and it is wise to remember this when we evaluate any past-life recall or any study of it.

## **8.2.5 Therapeutic value**

**8.2.5.1** **Recollection of past lives** in early Buddhism serves to enable adept meditators to witness their own past lives and so verify for themselves the truth of the Dharma-based perspective on the round of rebirths (*samsāra*). In our time, **regression therapy** has evolved to some degree as functioning to work with memories evoked by the patients as pertaining to their past life.

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<sup>311</sup> **Schacter**, “The seven sins of memory,” 1999; Schacter et al, “The seven sins of memory: Implication for self,” 2003.

<sup>312</sup> **Bartlett**, *Remembering*, 1932: 205, 207, 213. **Anderson & Pichert**, “Recall of previously unrecalable information following a shift in perspective,” 1978.

<sup>313</sup> **Goff & Roediger**, “Imagination inflation for action events,” 1998:28.

<sup>314</sup> **Bransford & Johnson** explain that “processes of making inferences ... occur quite frequently in the normal course of comprehending. Generally, we may not be aware of them.” (“Considerations of some problems of comprehension,” 1973:391)

<sup>315</sup> **Roediger**, “Memory illusions,” 1996:85.

The relief or healing potential of regression therapy is not in the mere experience of past-life images, but rather when it is able to relate or perceived to relate specifically to the subject's present psychological problems.<sup>316</sup> Needless to say, then, the successful use of hypnotic regression in therapy does not imply that the memory of a past life is veridical.<sup>317</sup>

**8.2.5.2** The regression therapist, it is well known, sees practically no relevance in the accuracy of any past-life recall. Whether those past lives "relived" are fantasies or actual experiences lived in the past does not really matter to the therapist: he is only concerned with the therapeutic effects.

Where past-life regression seems to help, **the benefit** is the immediate remission of chronic symptoms that do not return, even after months or years. The increasing use of past-life regression in therapy gives the impression that such a type of recollection can be produced almost on demand: by the therapist's standards, the past-life recall has functional success. The question remains, however, whether verifiable information on any past life can be properly obtained in this way.<sup>318</sup>

### 8.3 REPORTS OF CHILDREN AND THE BLIND

#### 8.3.1 Cases of NDEs

**8.3.1.1** NDEs in little children are especially interesting in their own way. Such cases involve children who were apparently able to report details associated with their resuscitation process, even though they, due to their physical condition, should not have been able to witness these or be able to recall them later.<sup>319</sup> Such NDE cases can seemingly even happen with the newly born or the prematurely born who are in the incubator, and who only years later are able to inform others of their experiences.<sup>320</sup>

**8.3.1.2** Just as interesting as NDE cases involving children, are the experiences of **the blind**, some of whom have been blind from birth. Yet during NDEs, such patients report visions, some of which have later been verified.<sup>321</sup> This is remarkable since it contradicts what we know about the normal visual imagination of the blind:<sup>322</sup>

It is well known that there are no visual images in the dreams of the congenitally blind. Those blind before the age of 5 also tend not to have visual imagery. Yet, not only were their NDEs unlike their usual dreams, but in the case of those congenitally blind, they stood out as unique precisely because they contained visual imagery, even when their dreams had always lacked this element.

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<sup>316</sup> **Woods & Barušs** note that "no measurable psychological benefits were found to be associated with the presence of past-life imagery" as such, which may be because "past-life imagery is more effective when targeted toward the treatment of specific psychological disorders." ("Experimental test of possible psychological benefits of past-life regression," 2004:604, 606)

<sup>317</sup> **Stevenson** points out that a "regressed patient may, moreover, seem to remember some traumatic experience in the 'previous life' that is relevant to present symptoms, and he or she may feel better afterward. These events, however, are not evidence that the patient did remember a real previous life." ("A Case of the Psychotherapist's Fallacy," 1994:190)

<sup>318</sup> **Fiore**, *You Have Been Here Before*, 1979:6.

<sup>319</sup> For a survey of NDEs by children see, eg, **Morse et al**, "Childhood near-death experiences," 1986; **Ring & Valarino**, *Lessons from the Light*, 1998:97-121; **Atwater**, *Children of the New Millennium*, 2003; **van Lommel**, *Consciousness Beyond Life*, 2010:71-79.

<sup>320</sup> **Sutherland**, "'Trailing Clouds of Glory': The near-death experiences of Western children and teens," 2009:92.

<sup>321</sup> For surveys see **Ring & Valarino**, op cit, 1998:73-95 (or Ring & Cooper, *Mindsight*, 1999); **Fox**, *Religion, Spirituality and the Near-Death Experience*, 2003:212-34; **Long & Perry**, *Evidence of the Afterlife*, 2010:83-92.

<sup>322</sup> **Ring & Cooper**, "Near-Death and Out-of-body experiences in the blind," 1997:126 f.

**8.3.1.3** However, the NDEs of such children and the blind are very difficult to verify. Although NDEs of children and the blind, as well as apparently verified information obtained during such experiences, are certainly significant, often the evidence they provide does not allow individual verification.<sup>323</sup> Unlike NDE reports of the normally sighted subjects, where we can, with some effort, actually verify their claims, we usually only have written reports of NDEs in children and the blind. Hence, it is difficult, even impossible, to verify their claims.

**8.3.1.4** The second-hand testimonies of NDEs are often difficult to verify. Take the case of one account of an NDE during cardiac arrest, according to which the patient was able to see details of the surgery schedule board outside, and noticed the hairstyle of the head nurse and that the anaesthesiologist was wearing nonmatching socks. Closer inspection, however, uncovered that the whole story was fabricated and the patient in question never existed!<sup>324</sup>

In fact, *fake* NDE accounts are as difficult to uncover as it is to prove *authentic* ones. That an NDE account is fake or fabricated, or perhaps the result of a patient's self-delusion, can only be confirmed once correct recall during an NDE is proven under controlled conditions. Yet, due to the accidental nature of cardiac arrests, and that there is no way to predict that a cardiac arrest will induce an NDE in the patient, it is simply difficult, even impossible, to reproduce such evidence under controlled conditions.<sup>325</sup>

### **8.3.2 Significance of NDEs**

**8.3.2.1** Despite these technical difficulties of verifying NDEs, **the incidences of reliable cases** and their frequency are promising and supportive of our study of rebirth and how the mind works according to early Buddhism. The overall conclusion we can safely draw from the properly verified cases of NDEs is that during a period devoid of normal brain activity, the subjects have experiences that they later on recall vividly. This recurring feature of NDEs has been so extensively documented that there is no reason to doubt its veracity.

The point needs to be stressed that individuals reporting NDEs often describe their mental processes during the NDE as being **remarkably detailed and lucid** and their sensory experiences as unusually vivid, equalling, even surpassing, those of their normal waking state. These are experiences outside of their normal brain activity, *which are clearly known to have ceased*.<sup>326</sup>

**8.3.2.2** Furthermore, we have by now a huge collection of verified NDE reports from widely divergent cultures in different countries, and across different periods of history, reporting complicated cognitive and perceptual experiences **when brain activity was severely impaired or had even ceased**. Such experiences do not easily reconcile with the prevalent or popular notion that *mental activities depend entirely on the brain*. [8.1.3.3]

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<sup>323</sup> As noted by **Greyson**, "Near-death experiences," 2014:354, "the accuracy of out-of-body perceptions during NDEs challenges the conception that they are hallucinations. However, the evidence, although at times corroborated by independent witnesses, consists of uncontrolled observations reported spontaneously after the fact."

<sup>324</sup> This case has been discussed in **Ring & Lawrence**, *Lesson from the Light*, 1993:225.

<sup>325</sup> On unsuccessful attempts to set up perceptual targets in places where NDEs are likely to occur, so that they are outside the normal visual range and could only be perceived by someone having an NDE, see **Augustine**, "Does paranormal perception occur in near-death experiences?" 2007:230-34; **Greyson**, "Comments on 'Does paranormal perception occur in near-death experiences?'" 2007:242-43; **Holden**, "Veridical perception in near-death experience." 2009:203-11.

<sup>326</sup> **Greyson**, "Implications of near-death experiences for a postmaterialist psychology," 2010:40.

NDEs have repeatedly been shown to occur while the subjects' brains are having total anoxia,<sup>327</sup> without any electrical activity, as a result of cardiac arrest. According to present scientific and medical knowledge, this fact alone should suggest that there should not be any level of consciousness. Yet an NDE is a lucidly conscious experience, which makes explaining them a truly challenging task for any physicalist and reductionist view of modern science and medicine.<sup>328</sup>

### **8.3.3 Reconsidering the brain-mind relationship**

**8.3.3.1** The question [8.3.2.2] does not appear to be solved by postulating that *some remnant of brain activity* is still possible during cardiac arrest. In fact, the issue is not whether there is *any* brain activity, but whether there is the type of brain activity that is considered necessary for conscious experience.

Such activity is detectable by EEG,<sup>329</sup> but it is abolished both by anaesthesia and by cardiac arrest. Hence, it is implausible to account for NDEs under anaesthesia or in cardiac arrest by a hypothetical residual capacity of the brain to process and store complex information under such conditions.<sup>330</sup>

**8.3.3.2** Such NDE findings compel us to reconsider the relationship between the brain and the mind. While it is true that every body-based experience has correlations with brain activity, this correlation does *not* imply that the brain activity caused the experience. Suppose someone listening to music were being monitored for brain activity, such activity would be evident. No one would, however, conclude that the origin of the music was in the brain!<sup>331</sup>

We must conclude then that the mind is not brain-based, and that mental activity, even when reflected in the brain, occurs on its own. While there is such mental activity reflected in the brain, or better, the body as whole, we can call our being **a conscious body** (*sa, viññāṇaka kāya*), as taught in early Buddhism. [4.1.1.1; 5.3.2.2]

## **8.4 CHILDREN'S PAST-LIFE MEMORIES AND CHILD PRODIGES**

### **8.4.1 Children's past-life memories**

**8.4.1.1** Children's past-life recall is less problematic than hypnotic regression, since it is less likely that such memories are a case of **cryptomnesia**, when something forgotten is recalled without its being recognized as such by one, who believes it is something new and original.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Anoxia is that state in which the body tissues (in this case the brain) have an inadequate or no supply of oxygen. See **van Lommel et al**, "Near-death experience in survivors of cardiac arrest," 2001:2943 f, & **Parnia et al**, "A qualitative and quantitative study of the incidence, features and aetiology of near death experiences in cardiac arrest survivors," 2001:154 [both in SD 24.5 (1)].

<sup>328</sup> **Facco & Agrillo**, "Near-Death experiences between science and prejudice," 2012:4.

<sup>329</sup> EEG = electroencephalograph: A diagnostic test that measures the electrical activity of the brain (brain waves) using highly sensitive recording equipment attached to the scalp by electrodes.

<sup>330</sup> **Greyson, Kelly & Kelly**, "Explanatory models for near-death experience," 2009:227. **Agrillo** "concludes that "basically, it is hard to believe that NDEs can be entirely accounted for in terms of some hypothetical residual brain capacity to process and store such complex experiences under those critical conditions" (Near-death experience: Out-of-body and out-of-Brain?" 2011:7).

<sup>331</sup> **Holden, Greyson & James**, "The field of near-death studies: Past, present, and future," 2009:11 f.

<sup>332</sup> **Brown & Halliday**, "Cryptomnesia and source memory difficulties," 1991.

Children who recall what they perceive as a past life often begin to relate details when they are as young as 2 or 3, or even earlier, as soon as they are able to speak. This leaves little time or occasion for them to have acquired such details and then forget their source.

**8.4.1.2** There are no sutta records of children's past-life recall as described, since such recollection of past lives needs to be cultivated through deep dhyanic meditation. Even though the Bodhisattva himself was able to gain the 1<sup>st</sup> dhyana when he was only 7,<sup>333</sup> to be able to recall past lives through meditation, one needs to have attained the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana.<sup>334</sup>

However, there seems to be hints of children recalling their past lives in the Commentarial stories, such as the Jātakas. One such story is **the Mūga, pakkha Jātaka** (J 538), one of the last 10 great Jātakas, recorded in the Jātaka Commentary. The Bodhisattva is reborn as a prince of the kingdom of Kāsī. Even as a month-old infant, it is said, the prince recalls how he had ruled for 20 years as king of Benares, and was in turn reborn in hell for 20,000 years. Not wishing to relive through those pains, he pretends to be a mute cripple so as not to succeed to the throne.<sup>335</sup>

**8.4.1.3 Tibetan Buddhism** has the tradition of special children who are able to recognize items pertaining to their alleged past incarnation. Such children are regarded as the successors to a particular ecclesiastical role. From a tray of random items, the child is to pick those items that belonged to the previous holder. With the child's selecting the right items, he is recognized as the new "tulku" (incarnation).<sup>336</sup>

#### **8.4.2 Researches by Ian Stevenson**

**8.4.2.1** Amongst the academic scholars, **Ian Pretyman Stevenson** (1918-2007),<sup>337</sup> after 50 years with the University of Virginia School of Medicine (USA), continued his specialized research in rebirth, or **reincarnation**, as he called it.<sup>338</sup> He investigated the idea that emotions, memories, even the physical bodily features, can be transferred from one life to another.<sup>339</sup>

Over a period of 40 years in international fieldwork, he investigated some 3,000 cases of children who claimed to remember past lives.<sup>340</sup> He held that certain phobias, phobias, unusual abilities and illnesses could not be fully explained only by heredity or the environment. In addition to genetics and the environment, he believed that reincarnation might possibly provide a third, contributing factor.<sup>341</sup>

<sup>333</sup> See SD 52.1 (5.2).

<sup>334</sup> On the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana, see **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2,83), SD 8.10; SD 27.5a (4.3.7).

<sup>335</sup> Also called **Temiya J** (J 538/6:4,1); Tib (Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya): D 1 kha 254a3 or Q 1030 ge 236b2; Chin: T3.152.20b9, T3.167.408b11, T3.168.410c7; and **Tamai**, "The Tocharian Mūgapakkha-Jātaka," 2017.

<sup>336</sup> **J Samuel** notes that, eg, "the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama is the present-day member of a series of rebirths stretching back through historical time to the 1<sup>st</sup> Dalai Lama and before him to the early Tibetan kings" (*Civilized Shamans*, 1993: 151). For a study of the historical beginnings of such rebirth lineages in the different traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, see Schwieger, *The Dalai Lama and the Emperor of China*, 2015:17-31, and for a description of the tulku tradition by one of its members: **Thondup**, *Incarnation*, 2011.

<sup>337</sup> See also SD 27.5a (5.4.2.2).

<sup>338</sup> Obituary by E W Kelly (Dept of Perceptual Studies, U of Virginia Health System, Charlottesville, VA) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian\\_Stevenson#cite\\_note-Kelly-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_Stevenson#cite_note-Kelly-1).

<sup>339</sup> **H Tanne**, *British Medical Journal* 334 29 Mar 2007:700. <https://www.bmj.com/content/334/7595/700.extract>.

<sup>340</sup> **M Woodhouse**, *Paradigm Wars*, 1996:143 f; C Bache, *Dark Night*, 2000:34 ff.

<sup>341</sup> **I Stevenson**, "The phenomenon of claimed memories of previous lives: Possible interpretations and importance," *Medical Hypotheses*. 54,4 2000:652-659 [doi:10.1054/mehy.1999.0920](https://doi.org/10.1054/mehy.1999.0920); "The explanatory value of the idea of reincarnation," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 164,5 1977:305-326. [doi:10.1097/00005053-197705000-00002](https://doi.org/10.1097/00005053-197705000-00002).

**8.4.2.2** Stevenson wrote around 300 papers and 14 books on reincarnation, including *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (1966),<sup>342</sup> *Cases of the Reincarnation Type* (4 volumes, 1975-1983) and *European Cases of the Reincarnation Type* (2003). His most ambitious work was the 2,268-page, two-volume *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects* (1997). He reported 200 cases in which birthmarks and birth defects seemed to correspond in some way to a wound on the deceased person whose life the child recalled. He wrote a shorter version of the same research for the general reader, *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect* (1997).<sup>343</sup>

**8.4.2.3** Stevenson is not without **his critics**, the harshest of whom was the moral philosopher, Paul Edwards, editor-in-chief of Macmillan's *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.<sup>344</sup> Another critic was William Frawley, a linguist, thought that Stevenson was cavalier in his analyses of the language of his subjects [8.5.1.1].

**Analayo** gives this guarded appraisal of Stevenson's work: "The reader would be well advised to consult the full report of each case for a proper appreciation of its value (as well as other cases I have not included). I might also mention that in some cases I tend to be less convinced than Ian Stevenson of their merit, although this would at least in part be due to the difference between reading a written report and actually meeting its protagonists. But even with only written reports to assess the situation, several of the cases he has recorded strike me as impressive, and I think fraud as an explanation for all of them can safely be discarded." (2018:150, digital)

**8.4.2.4** Stevenson and others have, over the years, documented cases of **children's memories of past lives** and related phenomena. The documented cases of birthmarks and birth defects taken together are apparently authentic, and should not be dismissed as being simply the pious beliefs or wishful imagination of the faithful. These cases show that at least some of them do reflect genuine memories from the past.<sup>345</sup>

Unlike the documented children's memories and birthmarks, however, in the case of **xenoglossy**, however, researches and findings are rarely convincing. We shall later examine an interesting case documented by the German monk, Analayo [8.5].

### **8.4.3 Child prodigies**

**8.4.3.1** A **child prodigy** is defined in psychology research literature as *a person under the age of ten who produces meaningful output in some domain to the level of an adult expert*. The term wunderkind is sometimes used as a synonym for child prodigy, particularly in media accounts. Sometimes **child prodigies** are believed to be the reincarnation of those who, in past lives, have mastered the skills or abilities that the prodigies now have, and in whom those streams of consciousness arise anew.

**Mozart** (1756-1791), for example, wrote his first musical pieces at 5 years old: a Minuet and Trio in G major (K 1). He wrote his first Symphony—in E-flat major, K 16—at 8.<sup>346</sup> At 11, he wrote his first Piano Concerto—in F major, K 37—that was too difficult for anyone else to play.

Even more remarkable was **Jean-Louis Cardiac** (1719-1726), who could recite the alphabet at only 3 months, read Latin and translated it into French and English at 4 years; was proficient in Greek, Hebrew,

<sup>342</sup> 1966; 2<sup>ND</sup> rev & enl ed 1974: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twenty\\_Cases\\_Suggestive\\_of\\_Reincarnation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twenty_Cases_Suggestive_of_Reincarnation).

<sup>343</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Where\\_Reincarnation\\_and\\_Biology\\_Intersect](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Where_Reincarnation_and_Biology_Intersect)

<sup>344</sup> See **Bache**, *Dark Night, Early Dawn*, 2000:35; **Almeder**, "A critique of arguments offered against reincarnation," 1997. Further, see Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian\\_Stevenson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_Stevenson).

<sup>345</sup> For a summary and discussion on some cases of children's past-life recall, see 2018: ch III.3 (pp148-176, digital).

<sup>346</sup> W A Wolfgang Amadeus, *Die Sinfonien I*. Tr J Branford Robinson, Kassel: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 2005:IX.



arithmetic, history, geography and genealogy at 6. Sadly, like many prodigies, he died very early, in his case, at 7.

**John Stuart Mill** (1806-1873) was, by definition a child prodigy, definitely a child genius. The eldest son of the British historian, economist and philosopher, James Mill, was educated exclusively by his own father, a strict disciplinarian. By 8, he had read the original Greek Aesop's *Fables*, Xenophon's *Anabasis*, and the whole of the historian Herodotus. He was acquainted with the satirist Lucian, this historian of philosophy Diogenes Laërtius, the Athenian writer and educational theorist Isocrates, and 6 dialogues of Plato. He had also read a lot of history in English.

At 8, too, he started learning Latin, the geometry of Euclid, and algebra, and began to teach the younger children of the family. At 12, he began a thorough study of Scholastic Logic, and also reading Aristotle's logical treatises in the original Greek. The following year, he started on a study of the work of Scottish political economist and philosopher Adam Smith, and that of the English economist, David Ricardo.<sup>347</sup>

**8.4.3.2** From a scientific or materialist viewpoint, we may dismiss child prodigies and child geniuses as the product of nurture. This may be partly true, that is, such children were born into the right conditions for their genius to flower and flourish, with special talented people to nurture them.

However, early Buddhism speaks of past roots (karma) and present conditions (*pacaya*), of both **nature and nurture**. The positive point here is that nothing good that we learn is ever lost. It stays with us for life after life, and when we persist in living a moral and mindful life, we attract such goodness, strengthen it, and allow it to flower into genius. Properly cultivated it also directs us into seeing the path of awakening.<sup>348</sup>

## 8.5 XENOGLOSSY

### 8.5.1 Definition

**8.5.1.1** One of the prominent features of past-life recall experience studied by researchers is **xenoglossy**.<sup>349</sup> Also called xenoglossia or xenolalia, it is a paranormal phenomenon in which a person is able to speak, recite or write in a language he could not have acquired by natural means, that is, not learned in this life.

There are actually 2 types of xenoglossy: the recitative and the responsive. **Recitative xenoglossy**, which is the most common type, is when the speaker uses words and phrases of which he does *not* understand the meaning. It is thought that this form of xenoglossy is, more likely than not, to be related to cryptomnesia [8.4.1.1].

The other kind, **responsive xenoglossy**, is much rarer: it is when the speaker *does* understand the meaning of what he is saying. It is in this form of xenoglossy that is thought by some to be related to past-life memories. This is the kind of xenoglossy we will examine below in relation to a very special case related to early Buddhism, that is, the case of Dhammaruwan [8.5.2].

**8.5.1.2** How reliable is xenoglossy? [8.4.2.4] Some critics of Ian Stevenson, especially linguists, were unimpressed. The axe that they ground against him was based on their perception that he did not seem

<sup>347</sup> New Ency Britannica 15<sup>th</sup> ed, 1983: Mill, John Stuart.

<sup>348</sup> **Feldman & Morelock**, "Prodigies," 2011:261-265; **McClelland**, *Ency of Reincarnation and Karma*: (1) Child prodigies or geniuses; (2) Children remembering past lives; Butterworth, "What makes a prodigy?" *Nature Neuroscience* 4, 1 Jan 2001:11 f. For general reading: <https://thesearchforlifeafterdeath.com/2017/04/06/is-reincarnation-responsible-for-prodigy-in-children/>.

<sup>349</sup> From the Greek ξένος *xenos*, "stranger, foreigner" and γλῶσσα *glōssa*, "tongue" or "language."

to take their field, linguistics, seriously, that he saw language in any way he thought fit, especially when it seemed to support his “metaphysics” of reincarnation belief.<sup>350</sup>

**William J Samarin**, a linguist from the University of Toronto, Canada, for example, writes that Stevenson had chosen to correspond with linguists in a selective and unprofessional manner. He noted that Stevenson communicated with one linguist for some 6 years “without raising any discussion about the kind of things that linguists would need to know.” He also wrote that most of Stevenson's collaborators were “fellow believers” in the paranormal, starting with a preconceived notion.<sup>351</sup>

Another linguist, **William Frawley**, in a review for Stevenson's *Unlearned Language: New Studies in Xenoglossy* (1984), wrote that Stevenson was too uncritically accepting of a paranormal interpretation of his cases. In one case, a female subject could only answer yes or no questions in German which Frawley found unimpressive that it should have been xenoglossy at all.

In another, the female subject could speak Bengali with a poor pronunciation. Frawley noted that she was raised on the language of Marathi (related to Bengali), had studied some Sanskrit from which both Marathi and Bengali derived, and was living in a town with thousands of Bengalis. He concluded "Stevenson does not consider enough linguistic evidence in these cases to warrant his metaphysics."<sup>352</sup>

The psychologist **David Lester**, after evaluating Stevenson's cases, wrote that the subjects made grammatical errors, mispronounced words and did not show a wide vocabulary of words in foreign language. Hence, they could not be considered evidence for xenoglossy.<sup>353</sup>

**8.5.1.3** To be fair, Stevenson was not a linguist and did not work to affirm or debunk any linguistic theory. He was not even trying to prove that rebirth is true as a religious belief. According to journalist **Tom Shroder**, “In interviewing witnesses and reviewing documents, Dr Stevenson searched for alternate ways to account for the testimony: that the child came upon the information in some normal way, that the witnesses were engaged in fraud or self-delusion, that the correlations were the result of coincidence or misunderstanding. But in scores of cases, Dr Stevenson concluded that no normal explanation sufficed.”<sup>354</sup>

In fact, much as Buddhists laud Stevenson's work, as an academic, he expressly avoided any out and out statement that his research proved reincarnation. Instead, he said that his research was highly suggestive of reincarnation. Furthermore, to lessen any misconstrual that his work had a religious bias, Stevenson even implied that when such cases did suggest reincarnation, it showed no relationship to karma. His interest in reincarnation was purely academic; at least, that was his official stand.

**8.5.1.4** Clearly, one of the greatest challenges to Stevenson's work, despite his trying to be scientific or at least professional in it, is that there is no perceptible or accepted mode of measurement for his data. After all, how do we ever measure rebirth or karma, or even anything suggestive of either. All he had been doing, and his successors are now doing, is to study cases suggestive of rebirth with academic discipline and curiosity.

Perhaps, his field of “perceptual” study of reincarnation is going through what economics or sociology went through (whether it belonged to the sciences or the humanities) before either was recognized as a discipline in its own right. His detractors would, of course, disagree with even that.

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<sup>350</sup> On this section, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xenoglossy>. For other criticisms of Stevenson's findings (with refs), see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian\\_Stevenson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_Stevenson).

<sup>351</sup> **Samarin**, *Xenoglossy: A Review and Report of a Case by Ian Stevenson*, 1976.

<sup>352</sup> **Frawley**, Review of Stevenson's *Unlearned Language*, 1985:739.

<sup>353</sup> **Lester**, *Is There Life After Death?* 2005.

<sup>354</sup> **Tom Shroder**, “[Ian Stevenson sought to document memories of past lives in children](#),” *Washington Post* 11 Feb 2007.

### 8.5.2 A genuine case of xenoglossy

**8.5.2.1** One of the most remarkable contemporary studies suggestive and supportive of rebirth is that of the young Sinhala boy Dhammaruwan's xenoglossy by the monk **Analayo** (2018 ch IV). In the 1990s, Analayo was in charge of a meditation centre on the outskirts of Kandy, and the young Dhammaruwan, on account of his interest in meditation, often went to the centre, and the two became good friends.

Although Analayo knew about Dhammaruwan's past-life memories, he showed little interest in it. His interest was more in Dhammaruwan's **slow, measured and melodious style** of chanting Pali passages (closer to the Burmese style, especially when recited by a single person).<sup>355</sup> The standard chanting style of the traditional Sinhala monks tends to be quite swift and almost monotonous.

At that time, Analayo was doing his PhD research on **the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10), which he was trying to memorize. Dhammaruwan offered some helpful practical advice, in the course of which they became close friends. Later, Analayo obtained taped recordings of Dhammaruwan's chants which he had authenticated, and then studied and analyzed in great detail. (2018 ch IV.2-4)

**8.5.2.2 Dhammaruwan** was born in Matale (in the heart of Sri Lanka's Central Hills), on 18 November, 1968. At only about 2 years old, he would spontaneously sit in meditation, and then start chanting in a language not understood by his mother. It was later learned that he was chanting in Pali. But the style was an unfamiliar one.

According to Dhammaruwan's memories, he learned the Pali chants in a former life in India, where he was born a brahmin's son, trained in memorization of the Vedas. He became a Buddhist monk and a student of the eminent monk and commentator Buddhaghosa (fl c 270-450 CE) at Nalanda, India. He was trained with some other monks as **a reciter** (*bhāṇaka*). He was chosen to accompany Buddhaghosa to Sri Lanka, where they stayed at the Mahāvihāra in Anurādhapura, of which he remembered various details.

Although on his visit to the ruins of Anurādhapura, Dhammaruwan pointed out where he lived, and other places of significance, some of which were confirmed, there is no way such evidence could in themselves unequivocally prove the veracity of his other statements, much less of rebirth. What is more significant and interesting was his ability to recite ancient Pali texts from memory. However, upon attaining adulthood, he lost all his ability of such recitation.<sup>356</sup>

**8.5.2.3** Dhammaruwan was only 3 years old when he chanted **the Dhamma,cakka-p,pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11). In fact, as a young boy, he could recite from memory a total of 13 texts (from the available recordings):

• Mahā,nidāna Sutta	D 15	SD 5.17	Dependent arising
• Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta	D 16	SD 9	The last days of the Buddha
• Mahā,satipaṭṭhāna	D 22	SD 13.2	The 4 focuses of mindfulness
• Anatta,lakkhaṇa Sutta	S 22.59	SD 1.2	Non-self of the 5 aggregates
• Gilāna Sutta 1 (Mahā Kassapa)	S 46.14	SD 43.11	The 7 awakening-factors
• Gilāna Sutta 2 (Moggallāna)	S 46.15	SD 43.12	The 7 awakening-factors
• Gilāna Sutta 3 (Bhagavā)	S 46.16	SD 43.13	The 7 awakening-factors
• Dhamma.cakka-p,pavattana Sutta	S 56.1	SD 1.1	The first discourse
• Giri-m-ānanda Sutta	A 10.60	SD 19.16	10 meditations for the sick
• Maṅgala Sutta	Khp 5 = Sn 258-269	SD 101.2	The supreme blessings

<sup>355</sup> This is from my own observation.

<sup>356</sup> Analayo 2018:208 f (digital).

• Ratana Sutta	Khp 6 = Sn 222-238	SD 101.5	Recollection of the 3 jewels
• Metta Sutta	Khp 9 = Sn 143-152	SD 38.3	Lovingkindness
• Dhammapada		some verses	

**8.5.2.4** Dhammaruwan’s recitations of these **13 texts** revealed several errors typical of oral performance, ranging from *minor mispronunciation to substantial loss of text*. The recited texts also departed in various ways from the Pāli editions consulted, making it safe to conclude that they were not based on any published edition available in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Sri Lanka, that is, any traditional Pali texts available in his time. Given that several variants are distinctly “un–Sri Lankan,” it also seemed rather improbable that any Sri Lankan manuscript served as a basis for the chants.<sup>357</sup>

**8.5.2.5** Dhammaruwan’s recitals recurrently included the brain (*matthaluṅga*)<sup>358</sup> in the listings of body parts for meditation, thereby departing from all consulted Pali editions. The Pali text of **the Giri-m-ānanda Sutta** (A 10.60), for example, preserves a standard list of 31 body-parts which excludes the brain, while the commentarial lists give 32 parts.<sup>359</sup>

That the brain did indeed eventually become part of such a list in a version of **the Giri-m-ānanda Sutta** (A 10.60) is attested by a Tibetan translation of a Theravāda version of it done in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This is a late commentarial list.

**8.5.2.6** Dhammaruwan’s recitation of **the Dhamma.cakka-p,pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11) has a substantial addition that mentions different form brahma-realms (*rūpa,loka*).<sup>360</sup> Such a list of *the form world* is absent from all the 4 Pāli editions (the Sinhala, the Burmese, the Siamese and the PTS) of the Sutta available today.<sup>361</sup> This list of the whole form world is, however, found in a protective chants (*paritta*) collection in a Theravāda lineage of textual transmission, called **the Catu.bhāṇavāra,pāli** (the paritta anthology) of Sri Lanka.<sup>362</sup>

<sup>357</sup> On the significance of these errors, see **Analayo** 2018: ch IV.2.

<sup>358</sup> Fully, it is stated as *matthake matthaluṅgam*, “brain in the head” (Khp 3, KhpA 60; Pm 1:6 f; Vism 8.126/260).

<sup>359</sup> See A 10.60,6(4)/5:109,26 (SD 19.16)

<sup>360</sup> This addition incl the foll form-world (*rūpa,loka*) realms: *brahma,pārisajjā devā, brahma,purohitā devā, mahā, brahmā devā; ābhassarā deva, paritt’ābhā devā, appamāṇ’ābhā devā, subha,kiṇṇakā devā, vaha-p,phalā devā; asaṅṅā,sattā; avihā devā, atappā devā, sudassā devā, sudassī devā, akaniṭṭhakā devā*. See Vbh 422-426; Vism 7.40-44; Abhs ch 5; also **Gethin**, “Cosmology and meditation,” 1997:194; **Masefield**, “Mind/Cosmos maps in the Pali Nikāyas,” 1983:85; also SD 1.7 (App).

<sup>361</sup> The reason for the omission of the form world (and the formless world) is basically that they are simply not in normal contact with our universe. They would neither be able to hear nor to pass on the good news of the Buddha’s 1<sup>st</sup> discourse. Hence, they are naturally omitted from the Dhamma.cakka-p,pavattana S recitation.

<sup>362</sup> **Ānandajoti**, *Catubhāṇavārapāḷi*, 2009:70-73. **Saddhatissa** explains that “because many thousands of deities assemble to listen to this discourse, people believe that on occasions of reciting it deities are pleased and so protect the listeners.” (“The significance of *paritta*,” 1991:130) (Note the pietist “belief” tone of this statement.) This would provide a reason for expanding the list of devas listening to the Sutta (and thus presumably expected to be present also during its subsequent recital). On the role of devas in relation to paritta recitation in general, **L de Silva**, reports that at first, “when paritta was employed for exorcism, the gods were informed of demons who were stubborn and unyielding. Later, when paritta became a prophylactic and benedictive ceremony freely performed for a variety of purposes, and when there was no particular complaint to be made to the gods, the message would have assumed the form of a formal invitation extended to them” to be present during the recitation (*Paritta*, 1981:136). This is “magical” or apotropaic Buddhism: see Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 1982.

It is also not found in any of the Chinese parallels to this Sutta.<sup>363</sup> A parallel in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya preserved in Chinese translation follows a reference to what corresponds to the *brahma, kāyikā* devas with the Chinese counterpart to the *akaniṣṭha* brahmas (corresponding to the last in the list of form realms),<sup>364</sup> without bringing in any of the others. Even this class of brahmas is not mentioned in the corresponding version of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya preserved in Sanskrit and in Tibetan translation, whose lists do not go beyond any reference to these brahmas.<sup>365</sup>

**8.5.2.7** Despite Dhammaruwan’s supply of details of his alleged past life as a sutta-reciter (*bhāṇaka*) and his identifications of ancient locales in Anurādhapura, none of these details can really be corroborated. They may seem to suggest he was an Indian monk in the past, but we cannot be more certain than that.

In sum, the evidence surveyed in Analayo’s work (2018) suggests that Dhammaruwan’s chanting of the texts as a child is **a genuine case of xenoglossy**, in the sense of involving a recitation of material in Pāli that he did not learn and was not made to recite in this way in his present life in Sri Lanka. This alone is very remarkable.<sup>366</sup>

## 8.6 CONCLUSION

**8.6.1 Rebirth** (*punabbhava*) [1.1] is a key early Buddhist teaching intimately linked to that of karma (*kamma*). As in religious teachings, tenets that are unique or vital to a religion (or system), are mostly a matter of **faith** since they are clearly stated in the sacred texts. However, almost unique to early Buddhism, there is no compulsion that we must believe is karma, rebirth or any teaching unless we can sufficiently understand it.<sup>367</sup> [1.3]

Being unready to accept a teaching is different from outright unbelieving or rejecting such a helpful teaching. It means that we are free to choose what we believe. What we choose to believe or not will shape our mind and heart: this will teach us which way to head for. We must then watch our way. We may be free to choose, but we must face its consequences, live with them; for, we are shaped by them.

**8.6.2** While God-centred religions or systems tend to see **time** as linear in a world created by some external agency, such as a supreme creator, early Buddhism teaches that time is *cyclic*, so that **rebirth** is an endless cycle of life and death, naturally functioning on its own, without any agency. For all that exists, must change, and rebirth is just that: our lives change but we are trailed by karmic habits that hold us within this endless cycle of rebirths and redeaths.

In a God-system, we are warned that our wisdom is but foolishness in God’s eyes (how wise are we to know this?). **Early Buddhism** works with the understanding that a single life, on account of our ignorance and craving, is simply too short for us to make any wise choice between an eternal heaven or eternal hell. Indeed, none of these is eternal anyway if they do exist.

<sup>363</sup> For a detailed study with trs, see **Anālayo**, “The Chinese parallels to the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta” (1) 2012, & (2) 2013.

<sup>364</sup> T24.1450.128a23: 阿迦尼吒天.

<sup>365</sup> Gnoli, *Saṅghabhedavastu* 1, 1977:137,7, and Waldschmidt, *Das Catuspariṣatsūtra*, 1957:157,11.

<sup>366</sup> For the full report on Dhammaruwan and the significance of his recitations, see Analayo 2018: ch IV.

<sup>367</sup> A unique exception is the teaching of **impermanence** (*aniccatā*), which may be accepted in faith or through wisdom, since it is a natural reality as taught in the Okkanta Saṃyutta (S 25): see **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

### 8.6.3 Dostoyevsky, in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) writes:

“I can’t help thinking that if the devil doesn’t exist and, therefore man has created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness.”

“Just as he did God, you mean.”<sup>368</sup>

**Feuerbach** seems to pick up from there, and says:

“Man first unconsciously and involuntarily creates God in his own image, and after this God consciously and voluntarily creates man in his own image.”<sup>369</sup>

These great words become even more interesting and instructive when we replace “the devil” and “God” with “**rebirth**.” Just reflect on it! We create our own rebirth; we live it, we die for it; the cycle goes on and on.

**Rebirth**, at its root, is a space-time reality, the space we make, the time we take, to learn the ropes of samsara, to cut through them, so that we are free from the bondage rooted in craving and ignorance. Suffering arises in us, amongst us, because we have yet to understand what craving and ignorance really are.

**8.6.4** Hence, **suffering** is not something we can avoid: it’s always there in us in some form. The question is whether we try to ignore it, to deny it, to push it away, and so learn nothing. Or, we look deep into this painful but real pattern of life, and learn our lesson: that we have projected this craving through our ignorance, that we are looped in ignorance through craving. They are the head and the tail of the uroboros—the snake devouring its own tail— that is samsara consuming itself.

The roots of rebirth are the here and now, our being: this **now** going on within us, in our minds and hearts. Ignorance and craving are the darkness within that we must recognize. In doing just this, we see the clear light, the truth why suffering arises. Knowing the *arising* of suffering, entails knowing its ending, too. With this knowledge, we must ourselves turn to the path of awakening and so free ourselves by the steps of that path. With that, karma is ended, so is rebirth. This is **nirvana**.

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## Reading List

[Titles unlisted here are found in latest edition of **the SD Guide**, SD 01]

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<sup>368</sup> Fyodor **Dostoyevsky**, in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880): pt2 bk 5 ch 4, Ivan (middle brother) conversing with Alyosha (Alexei, youngest brother) (tr David Magarshack, 1967:279).

<sup>369</sup> Ludwig **Feuerbach**, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), tr George Eliot. 2008:78.

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