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Is Rebirth Immediate?

A study of canonical sources on rebirth and the intermediate state

Essay and translation by Piya Tan ©2003; rev 2010

[For an introductory study, read “Rebirth in early Buddhism,” SD 57.1]

1 Early Buddhism and later teachings

1.1 EARLY SOURCES

1.1.1 The Pali Canon contains some of the oldest materials we have of **early Indian Buddhism**. Its language is simple, colloquial, and beautiful. However, many of the teachings and doctrines of the early Canon can be quite profound and confounding even for advanced but unawakened scholars. As such, it is common for students and experts alike to rely on the Commentaries and later works by respected teachers to throw light on such difficult passages and teachings.

1.1.2 The post-Buddha Abhidhamma and the Commentaries on the early texts can in themselves be very profound, not to mention their more developed and more systematic (hence more technical) language. While the Suttas present the Dharma (teaching and truth) both in terms of conventional (*sammati* or *sammuti*) ideas and on the ultimate (*param’attha*) level,¹ “graduated to suit the mind of the average man,”² the **Abhidhamma** is an attempt to present only the *essential Buddhist doctrines*, that is, the ultimate truth minus the conventional truth.³

1.1.3 However, there is sometimes a tendency to regard the words of the Abhidhamma and the Commentaries as being more “canonical” than the Pali Canon itself—especially common amongst those who come to know of the Abhidhamma without some useful understanding of the Suttas. However, if the Suttas are well-studied and analyzed, all the essential doctrines are quite clearly and comprehensively expounded there. Interestingly, most if not all such early doctrines are echoed in **other schools outside the Theravāda** even when the Theravādins themselves differ (or appear to differ) from the Canon.

1.1.4 In fact, the teachings of the Pali Canon have parallel versions in another ancient source, **the Āgamas**, which are now preserved mostly in Chinese translations, but are nevertheless very valuable sources. Often the texts of the two collections—the Nikāyas and the Āgamas—fully agree, but even where they do not, it is interesting, because we can investigate the reasons for this and discover a more ancient or authentic interpretation of the teachings. All such sources, including the Sanskrit versions preserved in various languages, are useful in giving us a better understanding of what the Buddha really taught and how to practise Buddhism effectively.

1.2 PERSONAL STUDY AND PRACTICE

1.2.1 When **personal spiritual practice** is properly combined with modern critical scholarship, that is, when one looks at the Buddhist texts as being more than merely religious literature but as the records of

¹ MA 1:137,20-139,24; AA 1:94,19-97,14; ItA 1:82,4-83,33. Also DA 2:382,20-383,29; SA 2:391,18-392,18 types; KvūA 34,13-36,22 = JPTS 1889:33 f.

² Nyanatiloka, *Guide Through the Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, 1957: xii f.

³ Two good books on Abhidhamma for the serious beginner would be the *Visuddhi,magga* (by Buddhaghosa) and the *Abhidhamm’attha Saṅgaha* (by Anuruddha), both of which have been translated into English.

the momentous spiritual awakening of the Buddha and his saints, then we have the most effective and profitable tools for understanding the Buddha Word. When these tools are applied to the Pali Canon, there is little need to fall back on the Abhidhamma and the Commentaries, since the latter two are themselves culturally bound and often sectarian.⁴

1.2.2 However, if we are aware of the special features and limitations of the Abhidhamma and the Commentaries, and use them with an understanding that they are supplementary to the Canon, then they would serve as effective and profitable research tools in our efforts to understand and benefit from the Buddha's teachings, especially in an age when we have **the complete Pali Canon** and other early texts that are more accessible and more closely scrutinized than ever before, and more easily and effectively disseminated in a universal language.

1.2.3 When this understanding of **spiritual scholarship** is applied to the discussion of such salient problems as the nature of rebirth (whether it is immediate or not), we can uncover some clear evidences in the Canon itself that help us clarify this problem, which apparently even the Abhidhamma and the Commentaries have not totally addressed. Occasionally, if not frequently, the land-sighting bird has to return to the ship.⁵

1.3 COMMENTARIAL VIEWS

1.3.1 Although the teaching of rebirth is generally accepted by Buddhists of all traditions, the problem of the "intermediate (or in-between) being" or "**intermediate state**" arose soon after the Buddha's passing. The reason for this is mainly because it is not explicitly mentioned in the Nikāyas or the Āgamas. Although some traditional or sectarian Theravādins denied the intermediate being or state, many other ancient schools affirmed it.⁶

1.3.2 Sujato's comments here are very instructive:

It should be noted that many modern Theravādins do, in fact, accept the in-between state, despite the fact that it's "officially" heretical. Popular belief is, so far as I know, on the side of the in-between state; so is the opinion of the forest monks of Thailand, based on their meditative experience; and so is the opinions of most monks and scholars I know, whose ideas are based on the Suttas.

The main canonical argument against the in-between state, relied on by the Kathāvatthu,⁷ is that the Buddha mentions only three states of existence (*bhava*): the sense world, the form world, and the formless world. If the intermediate state exists, it should fit into one of these worlds, but it doesn't: therefore, there's no such thing. This argument, however, rests on mere linguistic pedantry. If I say my house has three rooms, someone might object that it also has a corridor, which is an "in-between room." Is this a fourth room, or is it merely a space connecting the rooms? That simply depends on how I define it and how I want to count it. Maybe my definition is wrong or confused – but that doesn't make the corridor disappear!

⁴ See for example Gombrich 1992a:160 f.

⁵ For a discussion on a naturalistic Buddhist conception of rebirth, see SD 18.11 (3-4).

⁶ According to THICH Thien Chau, *The Literature of the Personalists of Early Buddhism*, 1999: 208 n764, certain Mahāsaṅghika branches and the early Mahīśāsakas rejected the in-between state, while the Puggalavādins, Sarvāstivādins, certain Mahāsaṅghika branches, later Mahīśāsakas, and Darstantikas accepted it.

⁷ Kvu 8.2; Kvu:SR (*Points of Controversy*) 212 f.

The Kathāvatthu offers a further argument, based on the idea of the *ānantarikakamma*.⁸ These are a special class of acts (such as murdering one’s parents, etc.) which are believed to have a kammic result “without interval”: ie one goes straight to hell. But again this argument is not convincing, for the meaning of *ānantarika* here is surely simply that one does not have any interceding rebirths before experiencing the results of that bad kamma. It has nothing to do with the interval of time between one birth and the next.

These arguments sound suspiciously *post hoc*.⁹ The real reason for the opposition to the in-between state would seem rather that it sounds suspiciously like an animist or Self theory. Theravādins of old were staunch opponents of the Self theory: the critique of the thesis that a “person” truly exists and takes rebirth is the first and major part of their doxographical treatise, the Kathāvatthu; a similar though shorter debate is attributed to the Kathāvatthu’s author Moggaliputtatissa in the Vijnānakāya of the Sarvāstivādins.¹⁰ The idea of an immediate rebirth seems to me a rhetorical strategy to squeeze out the possibility of a Self sneaking through the gap. It agrees with the general tendency of Theravādin Abhidhamma, which always seeks to minimize time and eliminate grey areas. But philosophically this achieves nothing, for whatever it is that moves through the in-between state, it is impermanent and conditioned, being driven by craving, and hence cannot be a “Self.” (Sujato 2008:5; emphases added) [3.1]

2 Scientific study of rebirth

2.1 Rebirth is one of the pillars of Buddhist doctrine. In very simple scientific terms, albeit a hypothetical one, the Buddhist conception of life and rebirth is well described by **B Allan Wallace**:

Your psyche emerged some time while you were in your mother’s womb. It’s continuing to evolve, and eventually it’s going to implode back into the substrate, carry on as a disembodied continuum of consciousness and then reincarnate. (Wallace 2006b:5)

Wallace goes on to confidently state that this is a testable hypothesis, and although it may be possible to repudiate such ideas (as in any hypothesis), it is worthwhile to look for positive evidence. Two types of studies—those on out-of-body experience (OBE)¹¹ and near-death experience (NDE)¹²—are being done by neurologist, **Dr Bruce Greyson**¹³ at the University of Virginia, and by **Dr Olaf Blanke** at the University Hospitals of Geneva and Lausanne in Switzerland.¹⁴

2.2 An out-of-body experience (OBE) typically involves a sensation of floating outside of one’s body and, in some cases, seeing one’s physical body from a place outside of one’s body (autoscopy). About one in

⁸ On *ānantarika kamma*, see SD 57.1 (4.3.2.1) n.

⁹ *Post hoc*, fully, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, means, literally, “after this therefore because of this.” The post hoc fallacy is committed when it is assumed that because one thing occurred after another, it must have occurred as a result of it. Mere temporal succession, however, does not entail causal succession. Just because one thing follows another does not mean that it was caused by it. In ancient times, whenever there was an eclipse, the Chinese would fire crackers and made a din with whatever they could. The “dragon” always released the sun after that!

¹⁰ T26.1539. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vijnanakaya>. A recent discussion of the argument on time in the Vijnānakāya is at <http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-ADM/bastow.htm>.

¹¹ See <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/TECH/science/09/19/coolsc.outofbody/> & <http://obebibliography.info>.

¹² See eg http://www.parapsych.org/members/c_b_greyson.html & B Greyson, “The near-death experience as a focus of clinical attention.” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 185,5 May 1997:327-34.

¹³ See eg <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/09/19/health/main522488.shtml>.

¹⁴ See eg <http://www.near-death.com/experiences/triggers07.html>.

ten people are reported to have had an OBE at some time in their lives.¹⁵ Reportedly, people can *will* themselves out of their bodies, or *find* themselves ejected from their bodies usually after a feeling of paralysis. The feeling may be attended by some kind of *epiphany* (usually reflective of one's religious familiarity) or a sense of profound peace and love. There are also those who report that they actually travel to other places (astral travel), even those unfamiliar to them. The experience generally lasts only for about a minute or so.¹⁶ OBE strongly suggests that our consciousness can somehow leave our physical body.

2.3 A near-death experience (NDE) is that of a person who nearly died, or who experienced clinical death but then revived. The experience is more often reported in recent times, especially since the development of cardiac resuscitation techniques. Some people believe it can be explained by hallucinations produced by the brain as it dies, while others believe that such an explanation cannot account for all the evidence.¹⁷

A majority of individuals who experience an NDE see it as a verification of the existence of an after-life.¹⁸ Popular interest in near-death experiences was sparked by Raymond Moody Jr's book *Life after Life* (1975), where he investigates 150 cases of NDEs, and by the founding of the International Association for Near-death Studies (IANDS) in 1978.¹⁹ According to a Gallup poll approximately eight million Americans claim to have had a near-death experience.²⁰ Scientists are still unsure of what really causes an NDE.²¹

2.4 Buddhists generally regard OBE and NDE as suggestive of **rebirth**,²² an important Buddhist doctrine that scientists generally have difficulty accepting, mainly because of an apparent lack of empirical means for observing and measuring it. The more brilliant scientific minds, however, are usually more open to such ideas. The famous English biologist, **Thomas Huxley** (1825-1895), for example, regarded reincarnation as a plausible idea and discussed it in his book *Evolution and Ethics and other Essays* (1893).²³

2.5 There are many qualified people who have investigated **reincarnation** and come to the conclusion that it is a legitimate phenomenon, such as psychotherapist Peter Ramster,²⁴ Dr Brian Weiss,²⁵ Dr Walter Semkiw,²⁶ and others, but their works are generally ignored by the scientific community. The rebirth specialist, Ian Stevenson, on the hand, has published dozens of papers in peer-reviewed journals.

¹⁵ See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/4271018.stm.

¹⁶ See eg <http://www.oxfordreference.com/pages/sample-09>.

¹⁷ See Pim van Lommel, "Near-Death Experience, Consciousness, and the Brain: A New Concept about the Continuity of Our Consciousness Based on Recent Scientific Research on Near-Death Experience in Survivors of Cardiac Arrest." *World Futures* 62,1-2 Jan 2006:134-151.

¹⁸ E W Kelly, "Near-death experiences with reports of meeting deceased people." *Death Studies* 25,3 Apr-May 2001:229-249.

¹⁹ See <http://www.iands.org/>.

²⁰ James Mauro, "Bright lights, big mystery." *Psychology Today*, July 1992.

²¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_and_physiological_views_of_near-death_experiences.

²² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reincarnation#Scientific_research.

²³ In *Collected Essays* 9, London: Macmillan, 1893.

²⁴ Peter Ramster, *In Search of Lives Past*, Somerset Films & Publishing, 1990. ISBN 0-646-00021-7

²⁵ <http://www.brianweiss.com/read.htm>.

²⁶ Walter Semkiw, *Return of the Revolutionaries: The Case for Reincarnation and Soul Groups Reunited*, Norfolk, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2003. ISBN 1-57174-342-1

2.6 Ian Stevenson (1918-2007)²⁷ of the University of Virginia, USA, compiled the most detailed collections of personal reports claiming to knowledge of their past, and published his findings in books such as *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*.²⁸ Stevenson spent over 40 years studying children who had apparently recalled their past lives. In each case, Stevenson methodically documented the child's statements. Then he identified the deceased person the child allegedly identified with, and verified the facts of the deceased person's life that matched the child's memory. He also matched birthmarks and birth defects (such as wounds and scars) on the deceased, verified by medical records such as autopsy photographs.

After another 20 years of research into rebirth, he published another book, *Where Biology and Reincarnation Intersect* (1997).²⁹ The book comprises detailed accounts of past lives where the subjects led less than virtuous lives and died horrible deaths.

Stevenson believed that his strict methods ruled out all possible "normal" explanations for the child's memories. However, it should be noted that a significant majority of Stevenson's reported cases of reincarnation come from Eastern societies, where the dominant religions teach rebirth.

2.7 The most obvious objection to reincarnation is that there is no evidence of a physical process by which a person could survive death and travel to another body, and researchers such as Stevenson recognize this limitation. Another fundamental objection is that most people simply do not remember previous lives.

Some skeptics dismiss claims of evidence for reincarnation as arising from selective thinking³⁰ or as the psychological phenomena of false memories³¹ that often come from one's own belief system and basic fears, and thus cannot be counted as empirical evidence. Other skeptics, such as the astrobiologist **Carl Sagan** (1934-1996), however, see the need for more reincarnation research.³²

An important point that needs investigation is: *How does rebirth occur without a soul?* This however has been discussed elsewhere.³³

3 The intermediate state

3.1 Buddhists generally have no problem with the doctrine of rebirth. However, there is the question whether rebirth is immediate (as held by the Abhidhamma traditionalists) or whether it might take some time, going through some kind of **intermediate state** (as more commonly held today). Those traditionalists who reject the doctrine of the intermediate state (*antarā, bhava*) claim that the Buddha did not teach it.³⁴

The main canonical argument (perhaps the only one) is that the Buddha mentions only 3 states of existence: the sense world, the form world and the formless world. If the intermediate state exists, it should fit into one of these worlds, but it is nowhere mentioned to be so.³⁵ [1.3.2]

²⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_Stevenson.

²⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twenty_Cases_Suggestive_of_Reincarnation.

²⁹ Ian Stevenson, *Where Biology and Reincarnation Intersect*, Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997.

³⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selective_thinking.

³¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/False_memory.

³² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reincarnation_research.

³³ See SD 18.11(3.1-3.2). On moral issues concerning rebirth, see **Virtue ethics**, SD 18.11.

³⁴ Kvu 361-366; UA 92-94 = UA:M 136-140; Buddhadatta's *Bhāratīyā Bauddh'ācāryayā*, 1949:229,14.

³⁵ Kvu id = Kvu:SR 212 f. The Kathā, vatthu was written 218 years after the Maha Parinirvana, by Moggalī,putta Tissa, the presiding monk at the Buddhist Council held during Asoka's reign in India (KvuA 4,25).

3.2 The earliest reference to the doctrine of “immediate rebirth” is found in **the Puggala Paññatti**, the fourth book of the Abhidhamma, where it is stated:

Katamo ca puggalo antarā,parinibbāyī?

*Idh’ekacco puggalo pañcannaṃ oram,-
bhagiyānaṃ saññōjanānaṃ parikkhayā
opapātikā hoti, tattha parinibbāyī³⁶ anāvatti-
dhammo tasmā lokā. So upapannaṃ vā
samanantarā apattaṃ vā vemajjhaṃ
āyu,pamāṇaṃ ariya,maggaṃ sañjaneti
upariṭṭhimānaṃ saññōjanānaṃ pahānāya.
Ayaṃ vuccati puggalo antarā,parinibbāyī.*

And what is the person who is attains nirvana in between?

Here, a certain person, having destroyed the 5 lower fetters, is one of spontaneous birth, where he attains nirvana, not of a nature to return from that world. Having arisen (there) and having abandoned the higher fetters, he brings forth the noble path immediately or before reaching the middle of his life. This is called the person who attains nirvana in between.

(Pug 1.49/16 f)

The gist of this interpretation is the rejection of **an intermediate state** (*antarā,bhava*), a being in between two lives. Instead, the traditionalists (as here in Pug 1.49) interpret the *antarā,parinibbāyī* as a non-returner who attains arhathood during the first half of the life span in his next existence.

However, the phrase *antarā,parinibbāyī* literally means “one who attains nirvana in between.” There is no good reason, based on any sutta, to deny *the possibility* that certain non-returners, after dying as a human, arises in an intermediate state and attains nirvana in that state itself, without having to take any other rebirth.³⁷

3.3 The Milinda,pañha (which the Burmese tradition regards as canonical) also *rejects* the idea of an intermediate state. This is a work of Buddhist apologetics in the form of a debate and discussion between Menander (a 2nd century Indo-Greek king, Menandros) and a monk named Nāgasena.³⁸ Milinda asks the question: “**Who is reborn faster: one who is reborn in the Brahma world or one who is reborn in Kashmir?**”

Nāgasena answers that both of them are reborn in equal time, and gives two similes. In the first simile, Nāgasena asks Milinda to think of two places—one 200 leagues away (Kashmir) and another just 12 leagues away (Kalasi)—and asks the king how fast he needs to think of either of them. The king answers that he takes equal time. The second simile is a classic one:

“What do you think about this, sire? If two birds were to fly through the air and one should alight on a tall tree and the other on a short tree, and if they came to rest simultaneously, whose shadow would fall on the earth first and whose shadow would fall on the earth later?”

“They would do so simultaneously, revered sir.” (Miln 83, Horner’s tr)

However, it is important to note what is *not* said here: there is *no mention* of the intermediate state. Nāgasena’s argument is simply *that rebirth can be immediate*, taking only a thought-moment.

³⁶ Meaning that having attained nirvana (becoming an arhat), he continues living in the pure abode without re-returning to the sense world. On the translation of *parinibbāyī* as simply “who attains nirvana,” not “who passes finally away” (at least in this context), see SD 50.13 (1.3.1.2-1.3.1.3).

³⁷ Further, see SD 50.19 (1.3.3).

³⁸ On some problems of the Milinda,pañha, see von Hinuber, 1996 §III.4.

3.3 On the other hand, the Pali Canon—and the texts of the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna—all agree that there is an intermediate period (not exceeding 7 weeks). In this study, we shall examine **the Kutūhala,-sāla Sutta** (S 44.9),³⁹ **the Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38)⁴⁰ and various other canonical sources on the nature of the “intermediate state.” Vasubandhu’s **Abhidharma,kośa**, a 4th-century Sarvāstivāda work, (especially Abhk 3.10, 12de, 14d, 40ab)⁴¹ contains interesting teachings on the intermediate being. For this paper, I have relied heavily on **Peter Harvey’s** excellent work on the subject (1995 ch 6), which is recommended for your reading. I have also given additional references of my own.

Historically, the rejection of an intermediate state is a dogma that first appears in later polemical works, namely, the Kathā,vatthu (3rd century BCE) and the Milinda,pañha (2nd century). Practically all the other living schools and traditions accept the notion of the intermediate state. Even modern-day monastics, like **Brahmavamso** openly speak of it:

Another passage which gives strong support to the “intermediate” state is found in [A 7.52] which lists the seven types of non-returner together with similes. The first three types of anagamis are called “antara,parinibbayin” and are likened to a spark flying off a hot piece of metal which cools: (1) just after falling off, (2) while flying up, (3) while falling down, all before establishing themselves on the ground. The implication is of a state between death and re-appearance in the Suddh’āvāsa. (Personal communication) [5]

Brahmavamso also mentioned in one of his public talks in Singapore (2002) that his experiences in dealing with the dying in Thailand strongly suggest the existence of the intermediate state.⁴²

4 Canonical references to the intermediate state

4.1 The Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta (M 38.26/1:265 f), SD 7.10 [Excerpt]

Bhikshus, the descent of the being-to-be-born⁴³ occurs through the union of 3 conditions. Here, we have the union of the mother and the father; but the mother is not in season, and the being-to-be-born is not present. In this case, no [266] descent of a being-to-be-born occurs.

But when

- there is the union of the mother and the father;
- the mother is in season; and
- the being-to-be-born (*gandhabba*) is present [4.2]

—through the union of these three the descent of the being-to-be-born occurs. (M 38,26/1:265 f)

4.2 Assalāyana Sutta (M 93,18/2:156 f), SD 40a.2 [Excerpt]

[Five hundred brahmins from various provinces who have assembled in Sāvattthī choose the 16-year-old brahmin student Assalāyana, a master of the Vedas and brahminical learning, to challenge the Buddha in his view on “the purification of the four castes.” Despite the protests of Assalāyana who thinks the

³⁹ S 44.9,12-15 (SD 23.15).

⁴⁰ M 38,26-29 (SD 7.10).

⁴¹ Abhk:P 383, 386 f, 393 f, 441 f respectively.

⁴² See John Ireland, U:l 128 n21 & Mahasi Sayadaw, 1981:13 f; also Bodhi S:B 1406 n53, 1411 n75.

⁴³ *Gabbhassāvakkanti*. Here, the “being-to-be-born,” *gandhabba*, does not refer to a “heavenly minstrel” or any celestial being. It is used here and in **Assalāyana S** (M 93.18/2:157) in this sense of a being arriving for rebirth. **Mahā Nidāna S** (D 15/2:63) speaks of consciousness as “descending into the mother’s womb.” [5]

*Buddha “speaks the Dharma,” he is nevertheless asked to challenge the Buddha. Assalāyana reluctantly presents his predicament before the Buddha who expounds to him various similes, and closes his arguments with this story regarding the seer **Asita (“the dark”) Devāla and the seven brahmins**. Not recognizing the seer, the seven brahmins repeatedly cursed him, but he became progressively “more comely, beautiful, handsome.” On realizing their mistake and discovering his spirituality, they paid him homage.]*

Then the seven brahmin seers went to see the seer Asita Devāla⁴⁴ and paid homage to him. Then he said to them:

“Sirs, I heard that while the seven brahmin seers were dwelling in leaf huts in the forest, this bad false view arose in them: ‘Brahmins are the highest caste, those of any other caste are inferior; brahmins are the fairest caste, those of any other caste are dark; only brahmins are pure, others are not; brahmins alone are the sons of Brahmā, the offspring of Brahmā, born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.’

‘But, sirs, do you know if the mother who bore you went with only a brahmin and never went with a non-brahmin?’

‘No, sir.’

‘But, sirs, do you know if your mother’s mothers back to the seventh generation went only with brahmins and never with non-brahmins?’

‘No, sir.’

‘But, sirs, do you know if the father who bore you went with only a brahminee and never went with a non-brahminee?’

‘No, sir.’

‘But, sirs, do you know if your father’s fathers back to the seventh generation went only with brahminees and never with non-brahminees?’

‘No, sir.’

‘But, sirs, **do you know how the descent of a being-to-be-born comes about?**’

‘Sir, we know how the descent of a being-to-be-born comes about. [157] Here, there is the union of the mother and father; the mother is in season; and the being-to-be-born is present;

—through the union of these three the descent of the being-to-be-born takes place.⁴⁵

Then, sirs, do you know for sure whether that being-to-be-born is a kshatriya, or a brahmin, or a merchant, or a worker?

‘Sir, we do not know for sure whether that being-to-be-born is a kshatriya, a brahmin, or a merchant, or a worker.’

‘That being so, sir, then, who are you?’

‘That being so, sir, we do not know who we are.’

⁴⁴ Asita Devāla. MA identifies him with the Buddha in a past life to show that even then when the Buddha was of inferior birth, the brahmins could not answer his question: how can they do so now that he is Buddha? His name-sake visited the baby Siddhattha, they were most likely two different individuals. Both of them were also called Kāḷa (“the black”) Devāla. It is possible that they could be the same person.

⁴⁵ *Gandhabba*. The meaning of this term becomes clear in the following conversation [4.1n]. See M 1:365, 2:256; VA 1:214; Miln 123; Divy 1.440; Abhk 3.12c (Abhk:P 1:386).

4.3 The Kutūhala,sāla Sutta (S 44.9/4:399 f), SD 23.15

4.3.1 Dead but not yet reborn

The Kutūhala,sāla Sutta speaks of how a being “a being has laid down this body but has not yet been reborn into another body” [15].)

10 “This recluse Gotama—leader of an order, leader of a group, the teacher of a group, well-known and famous ford-maker, well considered [regarded as holy] by the masses—declares that rebirth of a disciple who had died, passed away, thus:

‘That one was reborn there. That one was reborn there.’

But in the case of a disciple who is a supreme person, a perfect person, attained the highest, when that disciple, too, who had died, passed away, he does *not* declare his rebirth thus:

‘That one was reborn there. That one was reborn there.’

But, he declares of him, thus: ‘He has cut off craving, and through full mastery over conceit, he has made a total end of suffering.’

11 There is uncertainty in me, master Gotama, there is doubt in me. How should the Dharma of the recluse Gotama to be understood?”

12 “It is fitting that you are uncertain, that you doubt, Vaccha. Doubt has arisen in you over what is doubtful.

Vaccha, I declare that there is **rebirth for one with fuel [with clinging] (*upadāna*)**,⁴⁶ **not for one without fuel [without clinging].**

13 Vaccha, just as fire burns with fuel, not without fuel, even so, Vaccha, I declare that there is rebirth for one with fuel [with clinging],⁴⁷ not for one without fuel [without clinging].⁴⁸

14 “But, master Gotama, when a flame is tossed by the wind and goes a long way, what does master Gotama declare to be its fuel?”

“Vaccha, when a flame is tossed by the wind and goes a long way, I declare that it is fuelled by the wind [the air]. For, Vaccha, at that time, the wind [the air] is the fuel.”

15 “And further, master Gotama, when a being has laid down this body, but has not yet been reborn in another body, what does master Gotama declare to be the fuel?”

“Vaccha, **when a being has laid down this body, but is not yet been reborn in another body, it is fuelled by craving**, I say. For, Vaccha, at that time, craving is the fuel.”⁴⁹

4.3.2 Sujato’s comments

Sujato, in his paper, “Rebirth and the Intermediate State in Early Buddhism,” presented to the “Close to Reality” Conference (Malaysia, 2008), notes here:

⁴⁶ “Fuel.” The Pali *upadāna* is a pun meaning both “fuel” and “clinging.” Here it is tr in keeping with the simile of the fire. A similar usage of *anāhāra* (lit “without food”) appears in **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72.19/ 1:487) where the Buddha uses the simile of a fire “without fuel” to illustrate the nature of nirvana.

⁴⁷ This sentence, in essence, is the same as Sn 1074: *accī yathā vāta,vegena khitto | atthaṃ paleti, na upeti saṅkharā* (Sn 1074), “Just as a flame tossed about by the force of the wind...goes out and no longer counts (as a flame),” (Norman, 1992:120) a teaching the Buddha gave to Upasīva.

⁴⁸ *Seyyathā’pi vaccha, aggi saupādāno jalati, no anupādānaṃ, evam eva kho’haṃ vaccha saupādānassa kho’haṃ vaccha uppattiṃ paññāpemi, no anupādānassa.*

⁴⁹ *Yasmim kho vaccha samaye imaṃ ca kāyaṃ nikkhipati, satto ca aññatarāṃ kāyaṃ anuppanno hoti, tam ahaṃ taṇhūpādānaṃ vadāmi. Taṇhā hi’ssa vaccha tasmim samaye upādānaṃ hotī ti.* (S 44.9/4:399 f), SD 23.15.

From this we can conclude that the Buddha, following ideas current in his time—for Vacchagotta was a non-Buddhist wanderer (*paribbājaka*)—accepted that there was some kind of interval between one life and the next. During this time, when one has “laid down” this body, but is not yet reborn in another, one is sustained by craving, like a flame tossed by the wind is sustained by air. The simile suggests, perhaps, that the interval is a short one; but the purpose of the simile is to illustrate the dependent nature of the period, not the length of time it takes. While a fire is burning normally, it is sustained by a complex of factors, such as fuel, oxygen, and heat. But when a tongue of flame is momentarily tossed away from the source fire, it can last only a short while, and in that time it is tenuously sustained by the continued supply of oxygen. Similarly in our lives, we are sustained by food, sense stimulus, and so on, but in the in-between, it is only the slender thread of craving that propels us forward. The difference is, of course, that the flame will easily go out, while the fuel of craving propels the unawakened inexorably into future rebirth. (Sujato 2008: 6)

4.4 The 5 kinds of non-returners

4.4.1 Here is an excerpt from **the (Bojjhaṅga) Sīla Sutta** (S 46.3) on the 5 kinds of non-returners:⁵⁰

12 Bhikshus, when these 7 awakening-factors⁵¹ have been developed and cultivated here in this way,⁵² 7 fruits and benefits may be expected. What are the 7 fruits and benefits?

13 (1) One attains final knowledge early in this very life.

(2) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life, then one attains final knowledge at the time of death.

THE 5 KINDS OF NON-RETURNERS:

(3) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life or at the time of death, then with the utter destruction of the 5 lower fetters,⁵³ one becomes an attainer of nirvana in the interval [intermediate state] (*antarā, parinibbāyī*).

(4) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life, or at the time of death, or in the interval [intermediate state], then with the utter destruction of the 5 lower fetters, one becomes an attainer of nirvana upon landing (*upahacca, parinibbāyī*).

(5) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life, or at the time of death, or in the interval [intermediate state], or upon landing, then with the utter destruction of the 5 lower fetters, one becomes an attainer of nirvana without exertion (*asaṅkhāra, parinibbāyī*).⁵⁴

⁵⁰ S 46.3/5:69 f. For full sutta, see **(Bojjhaṅga) Sīla S** (S 46.3/5:67-70), SD 10.15. A list of the 5 kinds of non-returners without comment are given in **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,2.1(18)/3:287,21-23).

⁵¹ “Awakening-factors,” *sambojjhaṅga*: mindfulness, dharma-investigation, effort, zest, tranquillity, concentration, equanimity. See **Ānāpāna, sati S** (M 118), SD 7.13 §29-40.

⁵² That is, experiencing the awakening-factors to the point of dhyana: see **(Bojjhaṅga) Sīla S** (S 46.3.4b-11/5:67-69), SD 10.15.

⁵³ **The 10 fetters (*dasa saṃyojana*)** are: (1) Self-identity view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), (2) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma, rāga*), (5) aversion (*paṭigha*), (6) greed for form existence (*rūpa, rāga*), (7) greed for formless existence (*arūpa, rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61, A 5:13, Vbh 377). In some places, no. 5 (*paṭigha*) is replaced by ill will (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are the lower fetters (*orambhāgiya*), and the rest, the higher fetters (*uddhambhāgiya*).

⁵⁴ *Asaṅkhāra, parinibbāyī* (D 3:237). BDict: “*Asaṅkhārika-citta*, an Abhidhamma term signifying a ‘state of consciousness arisen spontaneously,’ ie without previous deliberations, preparation, or prompting by others; hence:

(6) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life, or at the time of death, or in the interval [the intermediate state], or upon landing, then with the utter destruction of the 5 lower fetters, one becomes an attainer of nirvana with exertion (*sa,saṅkhāra,parinibbāyī*).⁵⁵

(7) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life, or at the time of death, or in the interval [intermediate state], or upon landing, or with exertion, then with the utter destruction of the 5 lower fetters, one becomes one bound upstream, heading towards the Akaniṭṭha⁵⁶ realm (*uddhamisoto akaniṭṭha,gāmī*).

19 Bhikshus, when these 7 awakening-factors have been developed and cultivated here in this way, these 7 fruits and benefits may be expected. (S 46.3/5:69 f), SD10.15

4.4.2 This list of the 5 kinds of non-returners is found in **the (Bojjhaṅga) Sīla Sutta** (S 46.3/5:69 f) and a number of canonical passages, namely:

Saṅgīti Sutta	D 33,1.9(18)/3:237	
(Bojjhaṅga) Sīla Sutta	S 46.3/5:69 f	SD 10.15
(Indriya) Vitthāra Sutta 1	S 48.15/5:201	
(Indriya) Vitthāra Sutta 2	S 48.15/5:201	
(Indriya) Vitthāra Sutta 3	S 48.15/5:202	
Eka,bījī Sutta	S 48.24/5:204 f	
Satt'ānisamsa Sutta	S 48.66/5:237 f	
(Iddhi) Phala Sutta 2	S 51.26/5:285	
(Ānāpāna) Phala Sutta 2	S 54.5/5:314	
Sarakāni Sakka Sutta 2	S 55.25,8/5:378	
(Uddesā) Sikkhā Sutta 2	A 3.86,3/1:233 only the last & the first kinds	SD 80.13
(Uddesā) Sikkhā Sutta 3	A 3.87,3/1:234	SD 80.14
(Cattāro Puggalā) Samyojana Sutta	A 4.131/2:133 f, listed in reverse	
Sa,saṅkhāra Paṭipadā Sutta	A 4.169/2:155-157 (indirect references)	SD 50.17
Dukkha Anattā Nibbāna Sutta 1	A 7.16,4/4:13 f	
Dukkha Anattā Nibbāna Sutta 2	A 7.17,4/4:14	
Purisa,gati Sutta	A 7.52/4:70	SD 82.10
(Sattaka) Āhuneyya Sutta 1	A 7.80/4:146	
(Navaka) Sa,upādisesa Sutta	A 9.12.6/4:380	SD 3.3(3)
(Dasaka) Niṭṭha Sutta	A 10.63,3/5:120	SD 3.3(1.2)
(Dasaka) Avecca-p,pasanna Sutta	A 10.64,3/5:120	
Paṭisambhidā,magga	Pm 1:161	
Puggala Paññatti	Pug 1.42-46/16 f; 10.1/74 (PugA 198-203)	

‘unprepared, unprompted.’ This term and its counterpart (*sasaṅkhārika* [see foll n]), probably go back to a similar distinction in the Suttas [A 4.171; ‘Path’ 184]. See Table I; examples in Vism 14.84 f.” (normalized)

⁵⁵ *Sa,saṅkhāra,parinibbāyī* (D 3:237). BDict: “*Sasaṅkhārika-citta* (in Dhs: *sasaṅkhārena*): a prepared, or prompted, state of consciousness, arisen after prior deliberation (eg weighing of motives) or induced by others (command, advice, persuasion)—see Table I; exemplified in Vism 14.84 f.” (normalized).

⁵⁶ Akaniṭṭha. **The pure abodes (*suddh'āvāsa*) form the 5 highest form-heavens populated only by non-returners, where they attain arhathood and nirvana. The pure abodes and their inhabitants' lifespans, are: Āviha (“Non-declining,” 1000 MK), Ātappa (“Untroubled,” 2000 MK), Sudassā (“Beautifully Visible,” 4000 MK), Sudassī (“Clear-visioned,” 8000 MK) and Akaniṭṭha (“Peerless,” 16000 MK) (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46). MK = *mahā kappā*. that is, a full cycle of a world-period or cycle of the universe (V 3:4 = D 3:51, 111 = It 99; D 1:14; A 2:142). For cosmological map, see Kevaḍḍha S (D 11), SD 1.7 Appendix; for world cycle, see Aggañña S (D 27), SD 2.19.**

Kathā,vatthu

Kvu 105, 106, 215, 242, 275, 291, 366

4.4.3 The Sīla Sutta (S 46.3) discusses the 5 types of non-returners in the same order as at **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33), listing them after someone who has become an arhat “at the time of dying”: clearly this implies that the order represents a decreasing speed of spiritual attainment.⁵⁷ This would certainly make it likely that the first of the 5 types of non-returners attains *nibbāna* “in between” death and rebirth. Harvey comments:

The interpretation given in the Theravādin Abhidhamma and commentaries, though, is that this non-returner attains *nibbāna* immediately after “arising” in a new rebirth, or at some time before the middle of the life-span there⁵⁸ (Pug 16; AA 4:7). Less contentiously, the next of the non-returners is seen as one who comes to attain *nibbāna* between the mid-point of his life-span there and his death; the fifth type is one who is reborn in each of the five “pure abodes” until he attains *nibbāna* in the last of these (Pug 17). (Harvey, 1995:100; emphasis added; refs rev)

5 Similes of the 5 kind of non-returners

5.1 Peter Harvey continues his argument that the above Theravāda interpretation of the one who “attains nirvana *in between*,” in the light of **the Purisa,gati Sutta** (A 7.52), “can be seen to be a rather weak and strained one” (Harvey 1995:100). The Sutta compares the 5 kinds of non-returners [4] respectively to:

- 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*);
 - (4) a spark flies up and then after cutting into the ground (or upon landing), goes out (*upahacca,-tala*);
 - (5) a spark flies up and falls onto a bit of grass or sticks, igniting them, then cools down after they are consumed;
 - (6) a spark flies and falls onto a large heap of grass or sticks, but cools down after they are consumed;
 - (7) a spark flies up and falls onto a heap of grass or sticks such that a fire spreads, but then goes out when it reaches water or rock, etc.
- } *antarā,parinibbāyī*
(A 7.52), SD 82.10⁵⁹

5.2 The interpretation given in the Theravāda Abhidhamma and Commentaries is that the non-returner is reborn in the pure abodes (*suddh’āvāsa*), and there attains nirvana immediately after “arising” in a new rebirth, or at some time before the middle of the life-span there (Pug 16, AA 4:7). However, there is no question of whether the non-returner is “reborn” by means of conception or “descending into the womb.” They are all of immediate “spontaneous birth” (*opapātika*, M 1:465), rather than being born from a womb or an egg (M 1:173).⁶⁰

⁵⁷ S 46.3/5:69 f; D 33,1.9/3:237.

⁵⁸ For a significantly different tr, see SD 56.15 (1.2.2.2).

⁵⁹ A 7.52/4:70-74 (SD 82.10); see also DA 1030 = AA 2:350; cf SA 3:114; AA 4:7; Masefield 1986:115.

⁶⁰ On the pure abodes, see SD 47.15 (2.3).

5.3 As such, to “cut into the ground” (or “upon landing”) refers to the start of a new rebirth. For the “fire” to spread and then go out (simile 5) means to the experience of several rebirths before the non-returner “cools” by attaining nirvana.

As the Theravādin interpretation of the *antarā-parinibbāyī* non-returner (1-3) is that he attains *nibbāna* at some time between the start and middle of the next life, and the “cutting-short (*upahacca-*)” non-returner (2) attains it after this, then the “cutting into the ground (*upahacca-talamī*)” of the simile would have to represent the middle of this life, which seems *most* artificial. Even the commentary (AA 4:39) sees similes 1a-c as involving a “bit” which is still in “space,” “not having reached the earth”; reaching the earth would naturally apply to the very *start* of a life. The *antarā-parinibbāyī* must thus be one who attains *nibbāna* after death and *before* any rebirth.

(Harvey 1995:101; Masefield 1986:116, 120 agrees; cf Wayman 1974:236)

6 Existence (*bhava*)

6.1 The (Cattāro Puggalā) Saṃyojana Sutta (A 4.131.3-4/2:133 f) mentions 3 kinds of fetters that cause rebirth, namely:

- (1) The lower fetters (that bind one to the world of sense-desire) (*oram, bhāgiyā saṃyojanā*).
- (2) The fetters that accrue arising (*uppatti, paṭilābhikā saṃyojanā*).
- (3) The fetters that accrue existence (*bhava, paṭilābhikā saṃyojanā*).

(A 4.131.3-4/2:133 f; see Masefield 1986:114)

The first set of fetters is abandoned by one “going upstream to Akaniṭṭha,” ie the least advanced non-returner. The first two groups of fetters are abandoned by the *antarā, parinibbāyī* non-returner. All three groups of fetters are abandoned by the arhat.

The mention of the last two groups of fetters is very interesting and instructive. The “upstream” non-returner is clearly not beyond “arising” (*uppatti*) in a rebirth since he has several rebirths in the pure abodes, ending in the Akaniṭṭha. Only the highest kind of non-returner is beyond such “arising,” but he is not an arhat, ie one who has attained nirvana in this very life by destroying the fetters leading to “existence.” The **non-returner**, on the other hand, only attains nirvana *after* his death, that is, *before* “arising” in any rebirth. That intervening period before his nirvana is known as “existence” (*bhava*).

It can thus be seen that the “early Suttas” did accept a between-lives state, known as “becoming,” [existence,]⁶¹ in which it is possible for a non-returner to attain *nibbāna*. An Arahat, though, attains *nibbāna* in this life, so as not to enter “becoming,” while most beings pass through it and go on to arise in a rebirth. (Harvey 1995:102)

6.2 There is evidently an allusion to this state of “existence” (*bhava*) as an intermediate state between death and the next life in **the Chann’ovāda Sutta** (M 114 = S 35), where Mahā Cunda instructs Channa the Vajjī,⁶² quoting the Buddha thus:

⁶¹ The Sarvāstivādins teach that there are **4 kinds of “existence” (*bhava*)**: intermediate-existence (*antarā, bhava*); arising-existence (at the moment of conception) (*upapatti, bhava*); ante-death existence (during life, prior to death) (*purva, kāla, bhava*); and death-existence (at the moment of death) (*maraṇa, bhava*) (Abhk:P 3.10-13cd/2:45, 37d-38c/117; Mahāvīyutpatti 245, 1271).

⁶² The other Channa was a Sākya, that is, Prince Siddhattha’s charioteer.

For one who is dependent there is wavering (*calita*);
 For one who is independent, there is no wavering.
 When there is no wavering, there is tranquillity (*passaddhi*).
 When there is tranquillity, there is no inclination (towards craving or existence) (*nati*).⁶³
 When there is no inclination, there is no coming and going (*agati, gati*).⁶⁴
 When there is no coming and going, there is no passing away and rebirth (*cut'upapāta*).
 When there is no passing away and rebirth, there is neither here nor beyond nor in between the two (*na ubhayam antarena*).

—This itself is the end of suffering. (M 144,11/3:266 = S 35.87,20/4:59 = U 81)⁶⁵

6.3 Another well known canonical statement of an intermediate state (albeit rejected by the Commentaries) is that found in **the Māluṅkyāputta Sutta** (S 35.95):

⁶⁶“When, Māluṅkyāputta, regarding what is seen, heard, sensed and cognized by you,
 in the seen will be only the seen;
 in the heard there will only be the heard;
 in the sensed there will only be the sensed;
 in the cognized there will only be the cognized,
 then, Māluṅkyāputta, you are ‘not by that.’⁶⁷

When, Māluṅkyāputta, you are ‘not by that,’ then you will ‘not be therein.’⁶⁸

When, Māluṅkyāputta, you are ‘not therein,’ then you will ‘be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two’.⁶⁹

⁶³ “Inclination,” *nati*, lit “bending,” alt tr “bias” (M:ÑB 1116).

⁶⁴ “Coming and going,” *āgati, gati* (text has wr *agati, gati*) (D 1:162; M 1:153, 328≠Tha 917; S 3:53; A 3:54 = 74), where it refers to “rebirth, re-arising.” At M 1:334=335, Māra says *bhikkhūnaṃ... n’eva jānāmi āgatiṃ gatiṃ vā*, seems to mean: “I do not know how to get a chance over the those *bhikkhus*” (CPD)

⁶⁵ Cf S 12.40,3/2:67 @ SD 7.6(6c).

⁶⁶ This teaching is also given to the ascetic Bāhiya Dāruṅgīya (**Bāhiya S**, U 1.10/8). According to SA, in the form base, ie in what is seen by eye-consciousness, “there is only consciousness,” that is, as eye-consciousness is not affected by lust, hatred or delusion in relation to form that has come into range, so the *javana* will be just a mere eye-consciousness by being empty of lust, etc. So, too, for the heard and the sensed. The “cognized” is the object cognized by the mind-door adverting (*mano, dvārāvajjana*). In the cognized, “only the cognized” is the adverting (consciousness) as the limit. As one does not become lustful, etc, by adverting, so I will set my mind with adverting as the limit, not allowing it to arise by way of lust, etc. **You will not be by “that” (*na tena*):** you will not be aroused by *by that* lust, or irritated by *that* hatred, or deluded by *that* delusion. **Then you will not be “therein” (*na tattha*):** the seen.” For eye-consciousness sees only form in form, not some essence that is permanent, etc. So too for the remaining types of consciousness (ie the *javana* series, SPṭ), there will be merely the seen. Or, alternatively, the meaning is “My mind will be mere eye-consciousness, which means the cognizing of form in form. When you are not aroused by that lust, etc, then “you will not be therein”—not bound, not attached, not established in what is seen, heard, sensed and cognized. (See Bodhi S:B 1410 n75)

⁶⁷ *Na tena*, that is, one would not be aroused “by that” lust, etc. See prec n.

⁶⁸ *Na tattha*, that is, one would not be “therein,” ie in the seen, etc. See prec n.

⁶⁹ “Be neither here ... nor in between the two,” *n’ev’idha na huram na ubhayam antarena*, meaning that one would not be reborn anywhere. Comy rejects *in between the two* (*ubhayam antarena*) as implying an intermediate state (*antarā, bhāva*). However, a number of canonical texts apparently support this notion (see, for example, **Kutuhala, sāla S**, where the Buddha declares: “When, Vaccha, a being has laid down this body but has not yet been reborn in another body, I declare that it is fuelled by craving.” (S 4:400; cf M 1:266, 2:157).

6.4 A similar allusion to an “in-between” (*antara*) is made in this Dhammapada verse:

<i>Upanīta, vayo’va dānī’si sampayāto’si yamassa santike</i>	Truly advanced is your age now, you are heading into Yama’s presence.
<i>vāso pi ca te n’atthi antarā pātheyyam pi ca te na vijjati</i>	There is not a stop [no rest] <u>in between</u> , and you have no provisions for the journey, too. (Dh 237)

The third line (with *antarā*) does not mean that the being is not reborn “somewhere in between” or an intermediate state. Rather it means that there is no refuge, no respite, from samsaric life. Death will always catch up with us, no matter where we are reborn, even in the intermediate state.

7 Beings seeking rebirth

7.1 *Sambhavesī*

7.1.1 The **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38) provides another important clue to our understanding of the intermediate being. In his teachings to correct Sāti’s wrong view that the same consciousness migrates from life to life, the Buddha declares:

Bhikshus, there are these four kinds of food for the maintenance of beings that already have come to be (*bhūtā*) and for the support of beings to be born (*sambhavesī*). What are the four?

They are physical food [consumable nutriment], gross and subtle; contact as the second; mental volition as the third; and consciousness as the fourth.⁷⁰ (M 38,15/1:261)

7.1.2 The **Atthi,rāga Sutta** (S 12.64) similarly mentions the *sambhāvesī*, right at its opening, thus:

“Bhikshus, there are these 4 kinds of food for the maintenance of beings that are already born or for the support of beings to be born.⁷¹

What are the four?

- (1) Edible food, gross and subtle.
- (2) Contact [sense-impression].
- (3) Mental volition.
- (4) Consciousness.

These, bhikshus, are the four kinds of food for the maintenance of beings that are already born or for the support of beings to be born. (S 12.64.2-3/2:101), SD 26.10

7.1.3 Here *sambhavesī* is a rare grammatical form: it is a future active participle (Geiger 2000 193A), meaning “(about) to be born.” It occurs in opposition to *bhūta* (“who is born; being,” in **the (Karaṇīya) Metta Sutta** (Sn 1.8/147 = Kh no 9),⁷² thus,

⁷⁰ *Kabaḷiṅ, kāro āhāro oḷāriko vā sukhumo vā, phasso dutiyo, mano, sañcetanā tatiyā, viññāṇaṃ catutthaṃ*. See M:NB 1186 n120 on *sambhavesī* and *āhāra*.

⁷¹ *Cattāro’me, bhikkhave, āhārā bhūtānaṃ vā sattānaṃ tītiyā sambhavesīnaṃ vā anuggahāya*. The term *sambhavesī* (“being to be born”) here refers an “intermediate being,” one who has not attained a proper rebirth. [3-4, 7]

⁷² See Sn:N (1992: 177 (Sn 147n); K R Norman, 1997: 162.

- 5 Be they seen or unseen;
 Those that dwell far or near;
 Those already born or those seeking birth (*sambhavesī*)—
 May all beings be happy-minded! (Sn 147/26 = Khp 9/8,20), SD 38.3

Often this rare form is mistaken to be a tatpurusha and resolved as *sambhava + esi*, meaning, “one who seeks an existence.” As a future active participle, it simply means “is about to be born, going to be born.” As such, *sambhavesī* here clearly refers to the intermediate being. This meaning is also attested in the Sanskrit Hīnayāna works. In the *Abhidharma,kośa*, for example, the term *saṁbhavaīṣin* is one of the five names for the intermediate existence (*antarā,bhava*), along with *mano,maya, gandharva* and (*abhi*)*nir-vṛtti*.⁷³

7.2 Mindful conception. In this connection, it should be noted that **the Acchariya,abbhūta Sutta** (M 123) records that when the Bodhisattva, is reborn in the Tusita heaven, while remaining there, and when he descends into his mother’s womb (during the Conception), all these are done “mindfully and fully knowing” (*sati sampājano*).⁷⁴

The Sampasādanīya Sutta (D 28) and **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33) speak of the 4 modes of conception (*gabbhāvakkhantiya*):

- (1) one descends into the mother’s womb unknowing, stays there unknowing, and leaves it unknowing;
- (2) one descends into the mother’s womb fully knowing, but stays there unknowing, and leaves it unknowing;
- (3) one descends into the mother’s womb fully knowing, stays there fully knowing, but leaves it unknowing;
- (4) one descends into the mother’s womb fully knowing, stays there fully knowing, and leaves it fully knowing” (*sampajāno c’eva mātu,kucchim okkamati, sampajāno mātu kucchimim thāti, sampajāno mātu kucchimā nikkhamati*).⁷⁵ (D 28,5 = D 33,1.11(37))⁷⁶

A number of other suttas similarly speak of the fully conscious conception, gestation and nativity of the Bodhisattva.⁷⁷

These modes of rebirth, especially (2-4), do not actually prove the existence of an intermediate state but possibly demonstrate the likelihood of immediate rebirth, and understandably form the basis for the dogma in some fundamentalist Theravada circles that “rebirth is immediate” and that that is the one and only truth. Furthermore, the last three modes of rebirth show that a spiritually advanced person is able to consciously choose his future parents and place of rebirth.

⁷³ Abhk:P 3.40c-41a/441 f. On *sambhavesī*, see also Buddhadasa 1992:88-92.

⁷⁴ M 123.1-6/3:120. **Mahāpadāna S** (D 14.1.17/2:12) similarly records that the past Buddha Vipassī, when still a Bodhisattva, descends into his mother’s womb “mindfully and clearly aware.”

⁷⁵ D 28.5/3:103. Comy says that these 4 refer to (1) worldly humans; (2) the 80 great elders; (3) the two chief disciples of a Buddha and the pratyeka-bodhisattvas (ie pratyeka-buddhas in their last life); (4) to the all-knowing Buddhas (DA 4:176).

⁷⁶ D 28,5/3:103 (SD 14.14) = D 33,1.11(37)/3:231.

⁷⁷ **Tathāgata Acchariya S 1** (A 4.127/2:130 f); **Bhūmi,cala S** (A 8.70.15-17/4:313), adds the Buddha fully knowing relinquishing of his life-formation (decision to pass away) as a fourth cause of earth tremor (A 8.70.18).

8 Parables for the intermediate state

8.1 The intermediate state (*bhava, antarā, bhava*) evidently functions as a transition between different forms of rebirth, as a vehicle “for transferring the continuity of character and also a time for the necessary re-adjustment.” In fact, the Saṃmatīyas saw the between-lives as a time for readjustment before a new mode of self-expression. (*Sammitīya, nikāya Śāstra*, tr K Venkataraman)

8.2 There is an important connection between the similes 1a-c [5] and the knowledge of the passing-away and arising of beings (*cutūpapāta, ñāṇa*) (D 1:83). **The Sāmañña, phala Sutta** (D 2), in explaining this power of the recollection of beings faring according to their karma, employs this simile:

Maharajah, just as if there were a palace in the central square [of a town where 4 roads meet] (*siṅghāṭaka*), and a man with good eyesight standing on the top of it were to see people **entering** (*pavisanti*) a house, **leaving** (*nikkhamanti*) it, **wandering** (*sañcaranti*) along the carriage-road, and **sitting down** (*nisinnā*) in the central square [where four roads meet]. The thought would occur to him, “These people are entering a house, leaving it, wandering along the carriage-road, and sitting down in the central square [where four roads meet].” (D 2,96/1:83)

Here the usage of “entering” (*pavisanti*), “leaving” (*nikkhamanti*) and “wandering” (*sañcaranti*) refers respectively to one being reborn, dying and seeking a new birth. The “house” represents the body or form of rebirth, and “sitting down (*nisinnā*) in the central square [where four roads meet]” refers to the consciousness finding a new birth in the sense-world (the four roads representing the four elements, earth, water, fire, wind). Here, the “**sitting down**” of the simile refers to the “discernment⁷⁸ coming to be established in a new personality, after wandering in search of ‘it’.” (Harvey 1995:103)

8.3 Another simile for the knowledge of the rebirth of beings, given in **the Mahā Assapura Sutta** (M 39) compares it to the knowledge of a man standing between two houses, who would “see people entering the houses and leaving it, and coming and going, and wandering about” (M 39,20.2/1:279). “This simile,” concludes Harvey, “emphasizes the mid-stage of becoming [existence] as one of wandering and wavering, indeed, one of *coming and going*.” (Harvey 1995:103).

8.4 A similar metaphor, this one dealing with meditation, found in **the Kimśuka Sutta** (S 35.245), provides the glosses for each of these terms:

Suppose, monk, a king had a frontier city with strong ramparts, walls, arches, and with six gates. The gate-keeper posted there would be wise, competent, and intelligent; one who keeps out strangers and admits acquaintances. A swift pair of messengers would come from the east ... the west ... the north ... the south and ask the gate-keeper, “Where, my good man, is the lord of this city?” He would reply, “He is sitting in the central square of the city [where the four roads meet]. Then, the swift messenger would deliver their message of things as they are to the lord of the city and leave by the route by which they came.

I have made up this simile, monk, to show you the meaning, that is to say: “**The city**” is a designation for this body consisting of the four elements, originating from mother and father, built up of rice and gruel, subject to impermanence, to being worn and rubbed away, to breaking apart and dissolution. “**The 6 gates**” are a designation for the 6 internal sense-bases. “**The gate-keeper**” is a designation for mindfulness. [195] “**The swift messengers**” are a designation

⁷⁸ “Discernment,” Peter Harvey’s term for “consciousness” (*viññāṇa*).

for calmness and insight. “**The lord of the city**” is a designation for consciousness. “**The central square [where four roads meet]”** (*siṅghāṭaka*) is a designation for the 4 great elements—the earth element, the water element, the fire element, the wind element.’ “**A message of things as they are**” is a designation for nirvana. **The route by which they had arrived** is a designation for the noble eightfold path (S 35.245/4:194 f), SD 53.10⁷⁹

8.5 SUMMARY

Harvey summarizes the various similes for the intermediate state as follows:

- “inclination”: leaving the body with a desire for further rebirth, like a man leaving a house, or a bit flying off a hot, beaten piece of iron;
- “coming and going”: wandering back and forth *seeking* a rebirth, like a man wandering on a road or between houses, or a hot iron bit that flies up in the sky;
- “falling away and arising”: falling from one’s previous state, one’s previous identity, into a new rebirth, like a man settling down in a square or entering a house; or a hot iron bit falling and cutting into the earth.

As shown in **the Kutūhala,sālā Sutta** (S 44.9),⁸⁰ the whole intermediate state is like a leaping flame driven and fuelled by the wind, representing craving. “That is, craving provides the impetus and energy to seek another rebirth and the intermediary existence is flavoured by such craving.” (Harvey 1995:103).

9 Miscellaneous

9.1 LENGTH OF THE INTERMEDIATE STATE. The early suttas see the intermediate state as a state of existence that is fuelled by craving for rebirth, which one enters when one’s consciousness (the main process of the life-principle) leaves the body.

In a dream-like existence, it [the intermediate being] wanders about seeking a new life, kept going by craving and accompanied by will and aspiration. On finding a new life, it falls into the womb (in the case of rebirths involving this), and sets off the production of a new mind-and-body, which had been craved for. This all takes place, of course, within the parameters set by karma, the “field” in which the “seed” of discernment [consciousness] grows (§6.16).

(Harvey 1995 §6.31)

The Kathā,vatthu Commentary (by Buddhaghosa) states that the intermediate state lasts a week or more (KvuA 105). Vasubandhu (fl 4th cent), the early Mahāyāna master, teaches that it may take as long as needed to unite the conditions for a new birth (Abhk:P §14da/p393). Other sources say: a very short time (Vaibhāśikas), seven days (Vasumitra), or seven weeks, but not longer. (Abhk 2:48 f; Abhk:P p394)

9.2 THE BRIGHT LIGHT. People with near-death experiences (NDE) or out-of-body experiences (OBE) often report seeing a bright light at the end of a tunnel. Harvey argues (1995 ch 10) that this refers to the consciousness found in deep sleep and at the moment of death is seen (in the Theravāda) as “shining radiantly” (*pabhassara*, A 1:8-10, 10 f).

⁷⁹ PTS numbering is S 35.204/4:194 f.

⁸⁰ S 44.9.13-15/4:399 f, SD 23.15.

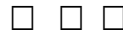
It also makes sense of the reference in the *Bardo Thödröl* (“Tibetan Book of the Dead”) to people confronting a pure white light in the intermediary existence: in the first of the three stages of this, the mind is said to be in an unconscious and luminous state which is somehow equated with Amitābha, “Infinite Radiance,” Buddha (Fremantle & Trungpa, 1978:37). Such ideas also seem to connect with the idea, in other Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, that this Buddha will come to meet his devotees at death. (Harvey 1995:104)

9.3 SLEEPING & DYING. The intermediate state is *not a fully conscious state*. The early suttas, such as **the Pāyāsi Sutta** (D 23,16/2:333 f), talk of the life-principle as leaving a person either on dreaming or in death. The materialist prince Pāyāsi thinks that he has disproved rebirth when he puts a criminal in a sealed jar and lets him die and saw no life-principle leaving the jar when it is opened.

The venerable Kumāra Kassapa⁸¹ explains to Pāyāsi how his gruesome experiment does not disprove rebirth, as, for example, when the prince **dreams**, his attendants do not see his life-principle “entering or leaving” him; as such, the life principle is not denied, but accepted, as an invisible phenomenon (Harvey 1995 §6.7).

Amongst other early references to sleeping and dying in similar terms are:

- (1) **The Pāyāsi Sutta** (D 23/15/2:333 f) uses the expression “gone to one’s day-bed (*diva,seyya*)” for taking a siesta, while **the Metta Sutta** (Sn 29) closes with the remark that one with moral virtue, right view, and freedom from sense-pleasures will go no more to “a womb-bed” (*gabbha,seyya*), in the sense of “he would not be reborn.”
- (2) **The Vinaya** uses *okkamati* both in the sense of “descent” of consciousness into the womb at conception (Harvey 1995 §6.9) and also of “falling” into sleep (V 1:15).



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⁸¹ Harvey errs here saying it is *Mahā* Kassapa.

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