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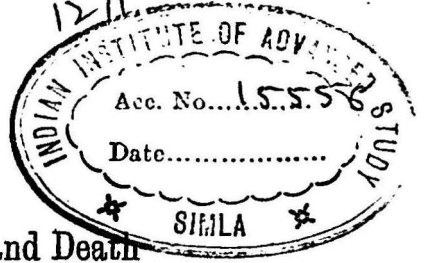
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### Samsāra or Buddhist Philosophy of Birth and Death

That birth precedes death, and death, on the other hand, precedes birth, is one of the principal tenets of Buddhism. The constant succession of birth and death in connection with each individual life-flux constitutes what is technically known as Samsāra (together-wandering). Several renderings are given of this enigmatic formula of Buddhist thought. One of the least correct as regards the wording, and the most misleading as regards the meaning, is "Metempsychosis," which in reality implies a transmigration of *something* or, to be more precise, an *immortal soul*. The Vedāntists will perhaps readily agree with this translation, as it only confirms the teachings of Upaniṣads, which say "just as the worm from leaf to leaf, even so goes the Ātman, the self, from existence."

Buddhists, on the contrary, strongly object to such a rendering for, according to Buddhist philosophy, there is no *goer* but a mere *going*, no *doer* but a mere *doing*. Since there is no proper English equivalent that fully conveys the meaning of the Pāli terms, it is preferable in every way to retain the original, and so avoid all misconceptions.

What, then, is the absolute beginning of Samsāra or, to put it in other words, what is the primal origin of life? This is a question which perplexes many a profound thinker. The expected answer has not yet been obtained, despite the fact that it has received the attention of all thinking men and it is not too much to say that in all probability it never will be.

The Indian Ṛṣis who are venerated for their colossal intellect have expended an enormous amount of labour and energy in order to comprehend this riddle of life. Deluded by the web of illusion, they have deduced all their so-called facts from the unwarranted thesis of an imaginary "self," and have concluded that life has for its origin the mystical Paramātman.

Christianity also professes to give an explanation. Citing the analogy of the clock, it attempts to trace everything to the fiat of an Almighty God. With due deference to the teachings of Christ, suffice

it merely to state in the words of Schopenhauer that "the birth of an animal as arising out of nothing, and accordingly, its death as an absolute annihilation, whilst man who has also originated out of nothing has yet an individual existence, is really something against which the healthy mind revolts, and which it must regard as absurd."

Unfettered by any religious belief, freed from all dogmatic assertions, but solely relying on *common sense*, modern science steps in and endeavours to tackle the problem with her usual accurate investigations and ingenuity. In spite of her systematised knowledge she may fairly be compared to a child making its first observations in natural history. Nevertheless we gladly welcome her into our midst for she neither claims to be perfect, nor does she deem it a sacrilege if one has the audacity to contradict her views. To an age, or rather to people who strongly believe in the creation of an omnipotent God, the scientific theories that life has had a beginning in the infinite past and that man is evolved from the ground ape, are indeed very valuable substitutes.

Buddhism interposes and pertinently says "*without beginning and end is Saṃsāra. A beginning of beings, encompassed by nescience, who, fettered by the thirst for life, pass on to ever new births, verily is not to be perceived.*" It seems further to address the enthusiastic seekers after truth and say: Young friends, worry not in vain, seeking for a beginning in a beginningless past. If life is an *identity*, it must necessarily have a primal origin. Life, strictly speaking, is a flux or force like electricity or gravitation, and, as such it necessitates a beginningless past. Whether you are descended from an arboreal or a ground ape, created by God or Brahman, birth, death and suffering are inevitable. Seek therefore the cause of his 'faring on' that concerns all humanity, and utilise every ounce of your valuable energy to transmute this life-stream to the unchangeable, unconditioned state, the Nibbāna.

To a materialist who loves to speculate for the mere sake of argument these words will, of course, be of no avail. Well, it makes no great difference to Buddhism. The word of Buddha is intended only for those sorrow-afflicted brethren to whom the Dhamma has become a necessity. "The Dhamma is like some painful cure which no rational person would undergo on its own account but because necessity compels."

Accordingly, in the search after the cause of birth and death Buddhism takes for its starting point the *being as he is*, here and now,

and traces back the causes of his conditioned existence. From the Buddhist point of view all men and animals are composed of inter-related mind and matter (Nāma and Rūpa), which constantly change with lightning rapidity, not remaining for even two consecutive moments the same. Though all are identical inasmuch as they possess the two common factors mind and matter, yet they are all so varied that, leaving animals aside, even amongst mankind no two persons are found to be alike in any respect, each person having his particular traits of character.

One might say that the variation is due to heredity and environment. No doubt they are partly instrumental; but surely they cannot be solely responsible for the subtle distinctions that exist between individuals. Otherwise we fail to understand why twins often physically alike, sharing equal privileges of up-bringing, are often temperamentally, intellectually, and morally totally different. Tracing back the individual, therefore, to the foetus in the womb to see where lies the cause, we discovered two other common factors the sperm-cell and the ovum-cell. Now a question might arise as to whether these two are the only materials for the production of the foetus. We must perforce answer the question in the negative. For we cannot comprehend why precisely "he" should spring from the particular sperm and ovum-cell in question and not another, since one has equal claims to the other. Buddhism makes the matter clear by attributing this appropriation of cell-matter to the existence of a *third element*. "By the conjunction of three things, O'Bhikkus," runs a passage in the Mahātaṇhā Sankhaya Suttanta (No. 38) of the Majjhima Nikāya, "does the formation of a germ of life come about. If mother and father come together, but it is not the mother's proper period, and the 'exciting impulse' (gandhabbo) does not present itself, a germ of life is not planted. If mother and father come together, and it is the mother's proper period, and the 'exciting impulse' also presents itself, then a germ of life is there planted." This newly discovered element is, in the words of Abhidhamma, termed Paṭisandhi-viññāṇa (linking-consciousness).

We have now found out the first term of life's progression, but our limited knowledge does not help us to proceed further and determine the cause of this 'exciting impulse.' The Buddha, however, developing a supernormal sense, so as to penetrate into realms beyond the reach of normal sense, comprehended also the root of this third element. He tells that the coming-into-being of the linking cons-

sciousness is dependent upon the passing away of another consciousness in a past birth, and that the process of arising and passing away is the result of an all-ruling powerful force known as Kamma. One might call for proofs. It must frankly be admitted that this proof cannot be furnished by an experiment upon the lecture table. Whether we believe in a past existence or not, it forms the only reasonable hypothesis which bridges certain gaps in human knowledge concerning facts of every day life. Our reason tells us that this idea of past birth and Kamma alone can explain the degree of differences that exist between twins, how men like Shakespeare with every limited experience, are able to portray with marvellous exactitude the most diverse type of human character, scenes, and so forth, of which they could have no actual knowledge, why the work of the genius invariably transcends his experience, the existence of infant precocity, the vast diversity in mind and morals, in brain and physique, in conditions, circumstances, and environments observable throughout the world, and so forth.

There is yet a further cause besides Kamma, continues the Buddha. Not knowing the four realities (Saccāni), allured to life by the wholly illusory inclination to sensual pleasures, one does good and evil, which constitute what is known as Kamma-energy that materialises in multifarious phenomena. Unknowingness (Avijjā) is therefore the cause of birth and death; and its transmutation into knowingness or Vijjā is consequently their cessation. The result of this Vibhajja method of analysis is summed up in the Paṭiccasamuppāda. The Paṭṭhāna succinctly expresses the same in the following words. In virtue of unknowingness (Avijjā), Craving (Taṇhā), Activities (Saṅkhārā) Attachment (Upādāna), and Volition (Cetanā), arise Rebirth-Consciousness (Paṭisandhi-viññāṇa), Mind and Matter (Nāma, Rūpa), Six Senses, (Saḷāyatana), Contact (Phassa), and Sensation (Vedanā).

The first set of five causes produces the second set of effects, which, in their turn, play the part of cause to bring about the former five. Thus the process of cause and effect continues *ad infinitum*. The beginning of the process cannot be determined, nor the end either *if the life flux is encompassed by nescience*. But when this nescience is turned into knowledge, and the life-flux diverted into Nibbāna-Dhātu, so to say, then the end of process or Saṃsāra comes about.

Briefly expounding the cause of Saṃsāra set forth in these enigmatic formulas of thought, and dealing with the not less interesting problem

of life's last episode, we find Buddhism assigning death to one of the following four causes :—

(1) The exhaustion of the force of Reproduction (Janaka-Kamma) that gives rise to the birth in question (Kammakkhaya). The Buddhist belief is that, as a rule, the thought, volition, or desire, which is extremely strong during life-time, becomes predominant at the point of death and conditions the subsequent birth. In this last thought-moment is present a special potential force which may be either weak or strong. When the potential energy of this Reproductive Kamma is exhausted, the organic activities of the material form in which is corporealised the life-force, cease even before the approach of old age.

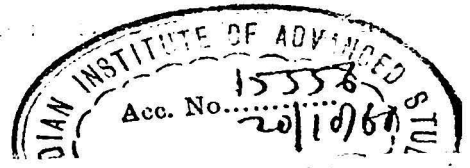
(2) The expiration of the life term (Āyukkhaya). What are commonly understood to be natural deaths due to old age, may be called under this category. There are various planes of existence according to Buddhism and to each plane is assigned a definite age limit. Irrespective of the Kamma force that has yet to run one must however succumb to death when the maximum age limit is reached. It may also be said, if the force is extremely powerful the Kamma-energy rematerialises itself in the same plane or even in some higher realm as in the case of Devas.

(3) The combination of both Kamma and Āyu (Ubhayakkhaya).

(4) The action of a stronger arresting Kamma (Upacchedaka) that suddenly cuts off the Reproductive Kamma before the expiry of the life-term. A more powerful opposing force can check the flying arrow and bring it down to the ground. Just in the same way a very powerful Kammic force is capable of nullifying the potential energy of the last thought-moment and destroy the psychic life of the being. The death of Devadatta, the Buddha's cousin was due to an Upacchedaka-Kamma. The premature death of the Crown Prince of Russia may also be instanced as an example of this class.

The first three types of death are collectively called Kāla-maraṇa (timely death), and the last is known as akāla-maraṇa (untimely death).

Explaining the cause of death in the foregoing manner, Buddhism tells us that there are also four modes of birth, viz:—Egg-born creatures (aṇḍaja), womb-born creatures (jalābuja), moisture-born-creatures (saṃsedaja), and creatures having a spontaneous birth (opapātika). This broad classification embraces the entire range of beings that possess life.



Birds and reptiles that are born of eggs belong to the first division.

The womb-born creatures comprise all human beings, some Devas inhabiting the earth, and those animals that take their conception in the mother's womb.

Those that take moisture as material for their growth, such as mosquitoes, are grouped in the third class.

Creatures having a spontaneous birth are generally invisible to the naked eye. They are said to be born with a form as if of fifteen or sixteen years of age appearing suddenly, independently of parent. Since they do not pass through the embryonic period which cause the total oblivion of the memories of the past, they are capable of recollecting their past births. 'Passing thence he was born as a deva and glanced into the past to see what good act conditioned him to be born thus,' are passages which often recur in the Suttantas. Brahmans, Devas of heavenly realms, Petas, and the miserable ones who are subjected to torments and suffering in the wicked states (Nirayas) belong to this last division.

It must be mentioned here, before we come to deal with the actual process of re-birth, that Darwin's theory of evolution finds no place in Buddhism. Buddhists do not believe in a succession of physical forms. The new physical vehicle is not the successor of the past, though it must be admitted that the coming-into-being of the present is conditioned by the passing away of the past. The multifarious forms are merely the manifestation of Kamma-force. "Unseen it passes whithersoever the conditions appropriate to its visible manifestation are present here showing itself as a tiny gnat or worm, there making its presence known in the dazzling magnificence of a Deva or an Archangel's existence. When one mode of its manifestation ceases it merely passes on, and where suitable circumstances offer, reveals itself afresh in another mode or form."

It is common to say after witnessing an outbreak of passion or sensuality in a person whom we deemed characterised by a high moral standard, "how could he have committed such an act, or followed such a course of conduct? It was not the least like him. It was not the least like what he appeared to others, and probably to himself." What did it denote? It denoted, Buddhists say, a part at any rate of what he really was, a hidden but true aspect of his actual self, or, in other words, his Kammic tendencies.

Dormant but undestroyed and with an ever-present possibility of rising again there lie in us all according to Buddhism five natures

viz., Divine (Dibba), human (Mānusika), brutal (Tiracchina) ghostly (Peta) and hellish (Nerayika). These natures, however civilised we may be, may rise in disconcerting strength at unexpected moments so long as we are worldlings (Puthujjana). We live for one thought-moment just as the wheel rests on the ground at one point, and are always in the present. The present is constantly slipping into the irrevocable past. Now we sow the seed of the future. Now, even now, we are creating the hells that we shall be hurled into. Now, even now, we are building the heavens that comfortably accommodate us. What we shall become is determined by this present thought-moment. In just the same way according to Buddhist philosophy the impending birth is determined by the immediately preceding thought, which is generally the thought volition, or desire that was extremely strong during our life-time. Therein, therefore, lies the possibility for the Kamma force that manifested in the forms of a human being to re-manifest itself in the shape of a brute, ghost, deva or a human being, or, in other words, for a Kammic descent in one bound in the so-called evolutionary scale of forms.

As there is possibility for a Kammic descent so there is also the possibility for the contrary—a Kammic ascent. When the animal is to die, for instance, it will experience a moral consciousness that will ripen into a human birth. This last thought-moment does not wholly depend on any action or thought of the animal, for generally it is dull and incapable of morality. It depends on some ancient good deed it has done in the round of existence, and, which for a long time has been prevented from producing its result. In its last moment the animal therefore cherishes idea, desires or images which will cause a human birth.

Poussin, a French writer, illustrates this fact well by the law of heredity. A man may be like his grandfather but not like his father. The germs of a disease have been introduced into the organism of an ancestor; for some generation they remain dormant; they suddenly manifest themselves in actual disease. So intricate is the living complex, so mysterious the law of heredity, a Westerner says. So intricate is the law of Kamma, so mysterious is the effect of Kamma, Buddhists would say.

And now, to come to the most interesting and extremely subtle point of our subject;—

Suppose a person is about to die. From the seventeenth thought-moment reckoned backward from the point of death no renewed



physical functioning recurs. Material qualities born of Kamma (Kammaja Rūpa) arise no more, but those to which came into being before the static phase of that thought-moment persists till the time of the dying thought and then cease.

This critical stage may be compared to the flickering of a lamp just before it is extinguished.

To this dying man is presented Kamma, Kamma-nimitta, or Gati-nimitta. By Kamma here is meant some action of his whether good or bad. It may be a weighty action (garuka Kamma) such as Samādhi (established one-pointedness of the mind) or Parricide, and so forth. These are so powerful that they totally eclipse all others and appear very vividly before the mind's eye. If experience has afforded nothing weighty, he may take for his object of thought a Kamma immediately before death (Āsanna Kamma). It would not be far wrong to say that most of the soldiers who die fighting would be having a death-proximate Kamma, such as the killing of their fellowmen. Consequently their re-birth can in no way be desirable. In the absence of an Āsanna Kamma a habitual meritorious or demeritorious act (Āciṅṅa Kamma) is presented, such as stealing in the case of a robber, or the curing of the sick in the case of a physician. Failing all these, some casual act, that is one of the cumulative reserves of the endless past (Kaṭattā Kamma), becomes the object of thought.

By Kamma-nimitta is meant any sight, sound, smell, taste, touch or idea which was obtained at the time of the commission of the Kamma, such as knives in the case of a butcher, patients in the case of a physician, an object of worship in the case of a devotee, etc.

Gati Nimitta is some sign of the place where he is to take birth, a thing which invariably happens to dying individuals. When these indications of the future birth occur, and if they are bad, they can be turned into good. This is done by influencing the thoughts of the dying man, so that his good thoughts may now act as the proximate Kamma, and counteract the influence of the re-productive which is about to effect in the next re-birth.

Taking for the object one of the above, a thought-process (Cittavithi) then runs its course even if the death be an instantaneous one. It is said that the fly which is being crushed by a hammer on the anvil also experiences such a process of thought before it actually dies. Abhidhamma enumerates twenty types of re-birth processes, but as space does not permit of their description here, let us imagine for the sake of convenience that the dying person is to be reborn in the



human kingdom and that the object is some good Kamma. The process of de cease-consciousness (*cuti-citta-vithi*) is as follows.

His *Bhavaṅga* consciousness is interrupted, it vibrates for two thought-moments and passes away. After which the mind-door consciousness (*Manodvārā-vijñāna*) rises and passes away. Then comes the psychologically important stage—*Javana* process, which here runs only for five thought-moments by reason of its weakness instead of normally seven. As such it lacks all reproductive power, its main function being the mere regulation of the new existence. The object in the present case being desirable, the consciousness here experiences is probably a moral one—automatic or volitional, accompanied by pleasure, and connected with knowledge or not, as the case may be. The *Tadālambana* consciousness which has for its function a registering or identifying for two moments of the object so perceived may or may not follow. After this occurs the death-consciousness (*Cuti-citta*) the last thought-moment to be experienced in present life. There is a misconception among some that the subsequent birth is conditioned by this thought. What actually conditions re-birth, let it be said, is not this de cease-thought, which in itself has no special function to perform, but that which is experienced during *Javana* process.

With the ceasing of the consciousness of de cease, death actually occurs. Then no more material qualities born of mind and food (*Cittaja* and *Āhāraja Rūpa*) are produced. Only a series of material qualities born of heat (*Utuja*) goes till the corpse is reduced to dust.

By death is here meant, according to *Abhidamma*, the ceasing of physic life of one's individual existence or, to express it in the words of a western philosopher, the temporal end of a temporal phenomenon. It is not the complete annihilation of the so-called being, for, although the organic life has ceased, the force which hitherto actuated it is not destroyed. As the *Kammic* force remains entirely disturbed by the distintegration of the fleeting body, the passing away of the present consciousness only conditions a fresh one in another birth. In the present case the thought experienced whilst dying being a moral one, the re-birth-resultant consciousness takes for its material an appropriate sperm and ovum-cell of human parents. Simultaneous with its rising spring up the body-decad, sex-decad, and base-decad the seat of consciousness—(*Kāya-Bhāva-Vatthu-Dasaka*). The re-birth consciousness then lapses into the sub-conscious state (*Bhavaṅga*).

“The new being which is the present manifestation of the stream of *Kamma*-energy is not the same as has not identity with the pre-

vious one in its line ; the aggregations that make up its composition being different from, and having no identity with, those that make up the being of its predecessor. And yet it is not an entirely different being, since it is the same stream of Kamma-energy; though modified per chance. Just by having shown itself in that last manifestation, which now is making its presence known in these perceptible world as the new being (Na ca so na ca añño)."

The transition of the flux is also instantaneous and leaves no room whatever for any intervening stage (antara bhava). The continuity of the flux at death is unbroken in point of time. The time duration is equal to the time occupied by one thought-moment i.e. less than the billionth part of the time occupied by a flash of lightning. The only difference between the passing of one thought-moment to another, so to say, or the dying thought-moment to the re-birth consciousness, is that in the latter case a marked perceptible death is visible.

One might say here that a subject cannot exist without an object. What then is the object of this sub-conscious state? The reply is: self-same object which was presented to the mind's eye immediately before death.

One might further ask:—Are sperm and ovum-cells always ready waiting to take up this re-birth-thought? As Doctor Dahlke says in his "Buddhism and Science," this taking hold is not something that has law, that runs its appointed course according to definite laws, but it is law itself. A point on the ground is always ready to receive the falling stone.

Thus does this process of birth and death ever recur as long as this inexorable law of Kamma prevails.

NARADA

