

**KAMMA
AT DEATH
AND REBIRTH**

**Sayadaw
Dr. Nandamālābhivaṃsa**

**ABHIDHAMMA
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Note to readers

Kamma at Death and Rebirth is a selection of Sayadaw Dr. Nandamālābhivamsa's lectures and Dhamma talks given throughout the years at several venues in Myanmar and abroad in the Netherlands, Singapore and Malaysia. Some talks had to be transcribed or translated first before compilation. Thanks to Ayya Aggañāṇī who took the trouble and time to sift through the chapters for any slip-ups (on the part of the compiler).

The compiler

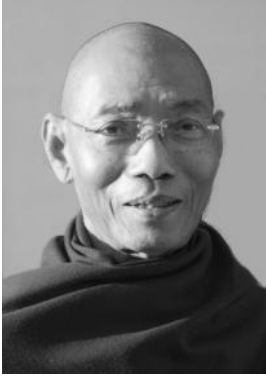
Acknowledgement

With great enthusiasm I read this compilation remembering vividly the Dhamma talks and lectures on Kamma given by Sayadaw Dr. Nandamālābhivamsa in The Netherlands in past years which I had been lucky enough to attend. I appreciate very much the immense work which my humble Malaysian Dhamma friend Sayalay Vimalañāṇī undertook for this compilation in spite of the sometimes difficult circumstances in Sagaing, Myanmar, where she lives. In the name of the future readers who will certainly be benefited by her work, I want to profess gratitude to her.

We, the Abhidhamma Förderverein e.V. (German Abhidhamma Association), are happy to be able to publish this booklet and have it printed here in Myanmar.

Aggañāṇī
Sagaing, February 2016

Biography of Dr. Nandamālābhivaṃsa



Sayadaw Dr. Nandamālābhivaṃsa, born in Sint-ku in the Union of Myanmar in 1940, began his education in a monastic school in Mandalay Division. He was ordained a novice at 10 by Sankin Sayadaw of the prestigious Vipassanā Monastery in Sagaing Hills.

At the age of 16, he had already passed the Dhammācariya (Dhamma teacher) examination; and at 21 he had cleared the difficult Abhivaṃsa examination. He also furthered his education in Sri Lanka and India, obtaining higher degrees. His doctorate thesis was about Jainism in Buddhist literature.

Sayadaw Dr. Nandamāla is one of the founders of the well-reputed study-monastery Mahāsubodhayon in Sagaing Hills. In 2003 he founded Dhammavijjālaya (Centre for Buddhist Studies) adjoining Mahāsubodhayon Monastery for foreigners keen to further their studies and practice. He also established the Institute of Dhamma Education (IDE), a new Buddhist learning centre in Pyin Oo Lwin. Since its opening in 2013, he has been holding courses for both local and overseas students.

At the same time Sayadaw Dr. Nandamāla holds numerous responsibilities: among them, he is the rector of Sītagu International Buddhist Academy (Sagaing Hills). Also, after the opening of the International Theravāda Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) in 1995, he served as a visiting professor. Since 2005 he has been its Rector.

Sayadaw Dr. Nandamāla serves to promote and propagate the Buddha's teachings both in Myanmar and abroad. From 2003 he began teaching Abhidhamma in Europe, Malaysia and Singapore. Having given many Dhamma talks throughout the years in Myanmar, he is well-known to the public for his individual, lively and practical approach, using examples from daily life. He is also the author of numerous books in Myanmar, Pāli and English (see below).

List of some publications in English

- The 90 Years of Life of Daw Malayee (1975)
- with Critical Introduction to the Text (Thesis for the degree of Master of Philosophy) (1996)
- Buddhism and Vegetarianism (1990)
- Fundamental Abhidhamma (1997)
- A Study of Jainism according to Buddhist Literature (Thesis for the degree of Ph.D.) (2004)
- How to Practise the Four Noble Truths
- Akusala: the Nature of Poison (2010)
- The Path to Happiness (2010)
- The Buddha's Advice to Rāhula and Rāhula's Life (2012)
- Eight in One (2013)
- The Exits of Mind (2013)
- Samatha and Vipassanā (2013)
- An Analysis of Feelling (Vedanā) (2013)
- A collection of Dhamma Talks 1 (2014)

Because of his excellent knowledge of the Buddha's teachings and his experience in teaching, in 1995 and 2000 he was conferred the titles of Aggamahāganthavācakaṇḍita (Senior Lecturer) and Aggamahāṇḍita respectively by the government of Myanmar.

Foreword

"Like travelers we make our way through life beginning in our mother's womb. At some point or another we will have to disembark at the journey's end. Each holding on to kamma's ticket, we are bound for our respective destination."

In "Kamma at Death and Rebirth" Sayadaw Dr. Nandamāla explains simply and succinctly the process at this journey's end whereby kamma takes over us just before death to sow its seed for the next life. Along the way Sayadaw clears up some common misconceptions about ghosts, an interim life before rebirth, reincarnation, and so on. He asks "Who is it who shifts from one life to the next?" and "Who is it who performs kamma and receives its result?" - in dismissing the notion of a permanent entity or soul. Issues about cloning and the efficacy of prayer to stop kamma are also raised.

At the end he concludes that kamma will take us to a destination that befits our actions and deeds carried out in this life: as shown in the age-old adage of "You reap what you sow".

Sayadaw Dr. Nandamāla's aim is to distinguish the original teachings of the Buddha from the other doctrines, especially those which share the same terms like "saṃsāra", "kamma" and "kamma-result" with Theravāda Buddhism. Hopefully this book will help readers further their understanding of, and clear any confusion and doubt about this subject.

1 Life's conclusion

Everyone who gets to be born will without fail meet with death. The Buddha said, "Jati paccayā jarā-maraṇa." Due to birth, old age and death will be the outcome. Travellers have their destinations whether they drive, fly, take a train or boat. Wherever they are heading, there has to be a journey's end. In the same way, beginning in our mother's womb we make our way through life. Like everyone else we will have to disembark at the end of life's journey at some point or another. One existence after another, each life is only a temporary process due to different kammās.

Even on the way here, on the road I saw a girl who had been run over by a car. Imagine, at a time when I was coming to speak about death. Was she dead or still alive? I don't know.

Why does death occur? What are its causes and conditions? Abhidhammattha saṅgaha gives four causes.

Exhaustion of the lifespan

The first type is expiry of the lifespan or ayukkhaya¹. If you were to read the obituary columns in the newspapers, you would find that it is over 60 when the time is up. That is why 75 years has been designated as the average lifetime nowadays. Why is this so? It is because by 50 or 60 a person has become a grandparent.

¹ Ayu = lifespan, khaya = exhaustion, finishing of.

There are people who try all sorts of medicine, diets and therapies to prolong their life. Yet I have never heard of any success stories. Even the Buddha lived only up to 80 at the time when the lifespan was 100 years. Based on His kamma He should have lived up to an incalculable number of years. Nonetheless based on conditions of climate and nutrition (utu and āhāra), His lifespan could not match those of the others. So at 80 He attained parinibbāna due to exhaustion of His lifespan.

Not many people can live to complete their whole lifespan; they die before that period runs out.

Death on the expiry of kamma

In some instances the kamma which brought about a human birth has weakened so much that it cannot continue to maintain that life to the end². Let us say that a person's natural extent of life was supposed to be 100 years long. Yet he died in his twenties. Why this is so is that the kamma supporting his lifespan was no more. This is to say that his wholesome kamma gave him only this much time to remain alive so that he has to pass away prematurely.

Death on the expiry of both kamma and lifespan

Another type is ubhayakkhaya where ubhaya means the two together. There is a saying: the wick and oil are both used up. As both are finished, the flame is extinguished. Similarly a person dies when both his kamma and lifespan are exhausted.

Death from destructive kamma

Upacchedaka kamma is the fourth cause which does not allow life to continue. Instead it cuts off the lifespan before the time is ripe, due to certain causes and conditions. It could be the

² Kammakkhaya.

person's own unwholesome kamma of the present life or a past life. So because of destructive kamma, death could occur in an accident: being killed in a car or a plane crash, or in a shipwreck, in a storm under a falling tree. A person could get murdered or he could take his own life. By some means or another, destructive kamma cuts off the productive kamma that brought about a person's existence.

Take the example of Venerable Mogallana, an educated Brahmin in his present life who had become an arahant with great psychic powers. Though he was very good, his previous kamma was not, as he had once in a past life tried to kill his parents. Thus he had to face evil kamma's result in his present life. If he had not become an arahant he would have gone to hell again. Like a convict's sentence of 10 years being reduced to one year: what is being beaten to death compared to going to hell again?

We can assume this is destructive kamma. This akusala kamma cut off his life which had been produced by kusala kamma. We can also consider it in another way: the Venerable's lifespan was about to end. If the robbers had not murdered him, he would still have to die that day. If so this cannot be called destructive kamma, only obstructive kamma (upapīlaka kamma), causing him pain and injury. However, that is my opinion.

Then, according to Ledi Sayadaw, death due to illness can also be included in upacchedaka maraṇa. Before the lifespan can be completed, some sickness³ causes death because of kamma

³ Sickness need not be wholly due to kamma. There are diseases caused by wind (vātasamuṭṭhāna). Phlegm can cause illnesses to arise (semhasamuṭṭhāna) as well as bile (pittasamuṭṭhāna). Then changes in the

result (kamma-vipākaja). It is then considered as death from destructive kamma since the person's lifespan is not fully completed. Also, his kamma has yet to be exhausted. In this case we can find many instances of such a death.

When death occurs

What takes place is that the heart becomes weak. The last energetic mind (maraṇāsanna javana) arises just before death, taking as object something seen or heard, for example. Or a visible object appears in the mind door as in a dream. The mind sinks into it, inclining to it with taṇhā. Or it becomes agitated with fear. Then cuti or death consciousness arises. At the same time kamma-born matter comes to a stop. With this, one existence is concluded.

It is not enough to conclude that death has occurred merely because the heart has stopped beating. In deep sleep the mind is still there because regular breathing in and out is controlled by it. For those who are unconscious, the breathing may be so subtle that it cannot practically be detected.

How then to decide that a person is really dead? You should not conclude that death has taken place merely because the heart has stopped beating. Even without the heartbeat or breathing, we cannot be sure that he is definitely dead. He could be

climatic conditions can lead to sickness (utuviparināma). Or it could be due to careless or excessive behavior and treatment (visamaparihāra). Sickness too can result because of one's efforts and over-exertion or through assault, accidents, influence of deities or witchcraft (opakkamika). Due to a combination of two or three of these factors of wind, phlegm and bile, there can be illness (sannīpāta). Lastly, because of kamma result, there arise diseases (kammavipākaja). For these eight kinds of disease-causing factors, read Sivaka Sutta of Saṃyutta Nikāya (Vedanāsaṃyutta).

unconscious. Following the Piṭaka text, a person is considered dead only when three factors are fully present:

- * Āyu: the body and mind are protected by jīvita or life. At death this ceases.
- * Usmā: Tejo element produced by kamma as body heat stops at death. That produced before death may still be present.
- * Viññāṇa: Any consciousness including bhavaṅga⁴ which maintains the continuity of the mindstream comes to a stop.

Only when these three factors totally cease can death be said to occur. The assumption that a person has died because he has stopped breathing can lead to problems. I recall when I was young, I read in the papers about a man in Bangladesh who was pronounced dead by a doctor after checking with a stethoscope. As he was of another religion, it meant burial within a day. The grave was not filled properly. Had the body been cremated, all would have been lost at the start. Five hours later this person regained consciousness. Because he was young, he had the strength to shove off the layer of earth covering him and climb out of the grave. When he entered his house, the family was scared to see him. They had seen him buried as a corpse. Now that he was back could only mean that it was a ghost. In the end the family sued the doctor who had pronounced him dead.

Another similar incident took place in Mandalay about four or five years back. A young Chinese girl was pronounced dead. She was then sent for burial. As the hearse reached the cemetery gate, she suddenly regained consciousness. However, as she was considered to bring bad luck, she was not allowed

⁴ Bhava = life, aṅga = cause, factor. Its literal meaning is "factor of life" though it is usually translated as life continuum.

home again. A little building was constructed for her near the cemetery. For this reason in the past it was usual to keep the corpse for seven days. Nowadays if death occurs today, the burial or cremation would be held tomorrow. A person with ill-luck could end up being sent to a mortuary. Then waking up and making a lot of noise, he could be mistaken for a ghost and end up being beaten to death.

At one time there was a story going round about an old man in a village. He had passed away and was due for burial. In the meantime he was temporarily placed in a pit: a few shovelfuls of earth were spread over the body. However, he regained consciousness, and asked for water. Instead of being helped, he was struck on the head with a hammer and then reburied.

If we were to consider that existence is according to kamma, then we can feel some consolation in hearing this kind of a story.

* * * *

2 A lottery draw at death

At a lottery draw you would have probably come across a drum filled with little balls marked with numbers. As the drum is turned round and round, there is no way of telling which ball will drop out of the outlet. In the same way out of the multitude of kammās, we cannot tell which one of them will have the chance to produce the next life. We have accumulated so many good and bad kammic actions. Any one has the chance to produce its effect at life's end. For any ordinary person, nothing is definite. Only for a sotāpanna, we can be sure because the door to apāya or the woeful states is closed to that person.

At the time of dying some mental state will take over our mind, turning it black or white. If it is akusala's influence, the mind darkens. Then the next life becomes black. If it is white, the next life will also become white. For someone whose livelihood used to be killing animals with guns and dogs, near death he can dream that he is tracking an animal with the dogs and using his gun. What will be his feeling then? It is not a peaceful one, no? Dying with that mind is terrible for the next life.

Yet nothing can be sure. It is not certain if we had committed a killing (or break precepts), we will fall into apāya. In Myanmar there is a story of a hunter who was nevertheless reborn as a human. Some offer big dāna and build big temples, observe sīla. Yet at death they are reborn in a woeful state.

It is the last object we receive just before death which is decisive. It could be due to past kamma which is renewed at

this point in time. Besides renewed kamma, there is immediately accumulated kamma. This new kamma is performed just prior to death. For example a friend brings flowers to us. Seeing these flowers as the last image we pass away. We could hear chanting as the last object received before death.

At one time when the Buddha was teaching the Dhamma near a lake, a frog jumped up to listen. Though it could not understand, it could understand that the sound conveyed, not ill-will, but compassion. Just by listening, it acquired a pure and peaceful mind. A cowherd passing by accidentally stabbed it with his staff. The frog died and was reborn as a deity due to its pure mind. He saw that he was a frog in his previous life. Immediately he went to see the Buddha, requesting Him to preach the Dhamma to him. As the deity listened he became a sotāpanna.

Queen Mallika, wife of King Kosala, was reborn in Avici hell for a short period because near death she became unhappy, regretting that she had once deceived the king. Then there was a monk during the Buddha's lifetime who received new robes from his sister. He kept them nearby intending to wear them the next morning. During the night he fell sick and passed away, with a mind wanting to wear these robes. So he was reborn a louse there despite his practice of meditation for over 50 years.

The new kamma carried out prior to death is asanna or death proximate kamma and it is possible to have the object changed, that is, if there is no weighty (garuka) kamma standing in the way. So this period is crucial.

“Where did you put the bank books?” This sort of question should not be asked. Neither should the dying person be questioned: “Who do you wish to give the ring to?” or “In which pawn-shop are they kept?” If such questions are raised, then that person is off the straight road to a peaceful death.

There is a story of a good-hearted lady who observed sīla, and would always offer water to travellers. Unfortunately for the old lady, the sight of her sons and daughters crying at the bedside made her unhappy. Though she had done a lot of dāna in her life, she was said to have been reborn as a ghost.

Changing the kamma before death

Asanna kamma gives its effect in the next life if it is carried out near death. It is like an aged person seated near the door entrance of the bus (of death). He exits first, not the others seated further away. In the same way, since it happens just before death, asanna kamma is given priority.

Venerable Sona of Anuradhapura had a father who had been a hunter. In his old age he was persuaded by his son to become a monk. Near death the old man had fearful dreams of being chased by dogs. He was shouting, “Please save me! Many dogs are coming after me!” Venerable Sona knew that he would be reborn in the woeful states. So he carried the old man to the pagoda to offer flowers and candles. He told the dying man to worship the Buddha and not to be frightened now that he was in a safe place. The old man’s dream changed. He now saw beautiful deities coming as he passed away. So he was reborn in the deity world.

There is a story in a commentary from Sri Lanka about a fisherman who was near death. An arahant visited him out of compassion and saw that at death he would be reborn in apāya.

So the arahant asked the dying man to take the Three Refuges and Five Precepts. Though he was in pain, the man agreed and repeated after the monk. After saying "Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi," he died. Reborn as an earth deity, he was very happy to have been saved from apāya. The deity approached the monk and told him if he had administered the five precepts, his rebirth would have been in a higher deity world.

Nonetheless as long as the person did not eradicate kilesas (mental defilements) as a sotāpanna, this was only a temporary escape. The door to the woeful states would always be open for him.

* * * * *

3 The last object in life

Last year I met a nurse from America who looked after dying patients in the big hospitals. So she had witnessed different ways in which people die. Some depart after a violent struggle to pull free from death. Others fight back. Then there are those who die with their eyes wide opened in terror as though they are seeing something fearful. Certain people pass away, smiling. Thus this nurse has seen at close range people dying in many ways. She asked for the reason why.

I explained that depending on the kamma-related object received just before death, the person's expression shows its effect on him. If it is something pleasing, he dies smiling. If it is something frightening, he will die struggling with a contorted face.

It is usually at such a point in time that what he had performed as kamma – one of these actions – will arise like a shadow to overpower the mind.

How kamma produces its result

Kamma is a mental act; then it is gone forever. Every day we accumulate kamma – good and bad – all momentary mental states. But its energy lies dormant. How to understand such latency? If we open up a mango seed we cannot find the root, leaf and other parts. Though fire does not exist in a lighter, its latency is there -- much like the tree within the mango seed. Also when we were young, we could not write ABC... Then we went to primary school to learn the alphabet. The knowledge is

not lost. Its quality remains or how else could we continue to develop in our studies? Kamma is like that quality which is not a substance and cannot be seen.

Let's say that we get angry again and again with someone or something. Each time the anger ceases because it cannot always stay according to the nature of rising and falling. Yet its energy remains as a quality in our thought process. This is how kamma lies latent.

This mental quality is very funny. Habitual ideas usually come when we are lying down. What type of thoughts habitually arises in you when you are alone? Some ideas repeatedly appear, becoming a tendency. For instance we hate somebody. Sometimes we think that we will never think about him. But such thoughts come again and again. This becomes habitual.

So in the meanwhile kamma slowly matures in our mindstream, waiting for a chance to appear. It can produce its effect even after a very long time, say, when we are lying on our deathbed. Such a habitual state of ours will appear, such as hatred. We dream that we are angry with that person. Or we remember something we did long ago – but forgotten till now. It appears in our mind as a dream near death.

The three objects

Near death an object manifests at one of the six sense doors. We see or hear the object, desirable or not. But this is unlike normal times as kamma has created this object. It could be one of these three types of objects:

Kamma

From the huge amount of kammās accumulated in us, just one which has ripened appears. As it belongs to the past, it

manifests only in the mind. Due to its kammic force – pure or impure – which cannot be controlled or avoided – it overshadows the thought process, even for someone lying unconscious. It is a recollection of whatever had been done in the past.

Take a hunter who has been killing animals for years. He could dream of chasing an animal, killing it. A meditator could dream of sitting in a meditation hall. If we are habitually angry, we could dream of quarrelling with someone. The mind becomes angry as we relive what we used to experience before.

Kamma nimitta (condition of the kamma)

It is the object experienced when the kamma was performed in the past. It can also belong to present kamma. For a past object it manifests only in the mind-door. A present object can appear at any of the six doors. A Buddha statue, flowers and candles, the person we are quarrelling with, the weapon used or the animal hunted: these objects, or the surroundings, such as a meditation hall, related to our kammic action are kamma nimitta.

Gati nimitta (sign of destination)

As a present object, it appears at any of the six doors, indicating the place of rebirth. We can see with our own eyes an ugly ogre, calling and approaching us, but not the other people near us. That is why we shout, "Save me! Save me! He wants to throw me into the fire!" Or we see a friend coming to fetch us to a nice mansion. Thus we are being briefed in advance of our destination after death. This gati nimitta usually appears as a visible object.

According to the text, if you see deep forest where you are alone, you will be born a peta. If you are fearful, being

surrounded by dangerous fire, you will be born in hell. For somebody who is bound for hell, hell fire or big black dogs can manifest to him. Really terrifying beings could come to drag him away. For sure he will die struggling, showing the whites of his eyes – literally frightened to death. Should you perceive that you are among animals like horses, dogs or cows, you will be born in the animal kingdom.

Then if you find yourself entering a beautiful house with a garden, your birth will be in a rich man's house. On the other hand, if you enter a hut, it means you will be born to a poor family. Some people see a beautiful place or scenery. This sign shows their rebirth in the deva or human realm. Somebody destined for birth in the deity world could see devas coming to fetch him in their chariots. Or he could find himself arriving at a garden with a mansion. It is as though he has already arrived at the scene of his next destination. So that is registration for the next life.

Chariots for Dhammika

Due to serious illness, lay devotee Dhammika was near death. Monks were invited to chant for him. As he lay listening, devas in carriages from the six deity worlds arrived at the entrance to the house. These deities called to him, "Please follow us to our realm," contending with one another, like trishaw peddlers or horse carriage drivers at the railway station or jetty.

Dhammika told them, "Hold on. Please wait for a while." He really saw them, hearing their voices calling him.

"Please wait for a while. Please wait."

Hearing these words, the monks said, "He's telling us to stop."

So they stopped chanting. At this instant Dhammika lost consciousness. Only after the monks had left did he regain consciousness. He found his family crying, and asked, "Why are you all crying?"

"Just now, father, while listening to the Dhamma, you ordered the monks you had invited for chanting, 'Please stop. Please wait.' So they went back."

"I wasn't talking to the monks. Over there these carriages from the deity worlds have come to fetch me. Can't you see them?"

But nobody could see anything. They thought their father was hallucinating. Yet he could really see them with his own eyes.

Aware that Tusitā realm was the best where the Bodhisattas lived, Dhammika asked for a garland. He then threw it at the carriage from Tusita. All that his family could see was the garland dangling in mid-air but not the carriage it was hanging from. This is a gati-nimitta which can only be seen by the owner of that kamma which has ripened.

So like a shadow falling over the mind, one of the three objects manifests itself as the person passes away.

Preparing ahead

As the kind of object received just before death is decisive, we should at least try to prepare ahead to have a peaceful death, free of anxiety during those last moments. We should have ready in our heart the Dhamma to rely on. So that we can readily reflect on all our meritorious deeds, we should cultivate that habit in advance.

To keep our life's journey straight, we should try to incline the mind towards wholesome actions in daily life. We prepare ahead by instilling the Dhamma in our hearts. Reflecting on the Dhamma, and upholding our precepts -- this way we will reach life's exit peacefully.

* * * * *

4 Kamma sows its seed at death

Much like fruit bearing seeds, a lot of kamma has accumulated in us. However, in general not all seeds can develop into plants. A great deal becomes food for humans. Animals also eat them up. Even with water and soil, if the temperature is too high or too low, these seeds cannot grow. Only when the right conditions join together can they sprout. So many factors are needed. It is the same with kamma. Kamma alone cannot act to produce a new life. Newly accumulated kamma has to remain in the mental process, maturing with time like fruit with seed. Only with the main conditions of two kilesas, taṇhā (craving) and avijjā (ignorance) can kamma ripen.

According to the Buddha, it is taṇhā which produces re-existence⁵. Due to attachment, life occurs again: taṇhā ponobbhavikā⁶. Like heat is the nature of fire, taṇhā's nature is to enjoy, to take delight and to be attached. It delights in lust (nandirāga). Wherever taṇhā is, it enjoys. In some suttas the Buddha refers to it as bhavanetti which leads to the renewal of life. Yet taṇhā alone cannot do the work.

It needs avijjā to hide the true nature of the object so that we cannot see its defects. The Buddha explained that ignorance hinders⁷ so that instead of seeing the object's real nature, we

⁵ Yāyam taṇhā ponobbhavikā nandirāga sahaḡatā tatra tatrā bhinandinī. (In the Dhammacakka Sutta.)

⁶ Puna = re or again and again; bhava = life; ika = causes, produces. So ponobbhava means a new existence or another life.

⁷ Avijjā nivāraṇaṃ.

see in other ways. This is like viewing a panoramic landscape painting, thinking that it is real. Avijjā can disguise an ugly object to look beautiful, pleasant or good. Covering its bad aspect, this kilesa prevents us from seeing its dangers. As a result we see what is bad as good and vice-versa. Yet avijjā does not conceal all that is true. For this reason the Buddha said that it only covers up partially and makes it difficult to see the truth⁸.

How avijjā and taṇhā act together

How does the pair act together? Which one leads? Sometimes it is taṇhā; at other times it is avijjā. You see, at times we act out of ignorance. Sometimes, it is due to craving. Some people know the evil result but they cannot avoid doing something due to craving. Some do not know; therefore they did. At that time avijjā leads. Take a drug addict. The first time he does not know the bad effects of taking drugs. Thus he starts to experiment with drugs. At that time avijjā leads. After becoming an addict, he already knows the dangers of drug-taking. Yet he cannot abstain as his craving is stronger and stronger. This time taṇhā leads.

Then when we are deluded by avijjā over an object, taṇhā arises as craving for it. It acts as a fetter to bind us to it. Some insects think the candle flame is beautiful with its golden colour. Thus they plunge into the fire. If they knew it would burn, they would never have flown into it.

Our situation is also like that of those insects. We plunge into suffering. What do most of us do everyday in life? Not knowing how to differentiate between what should be done and what shouldn't be done, we think what should be done shouldn't be

⁸ Sabhāva paticchādana.

done – and what shouldn't be done we think should be done. This is due to avijjā's influence. Shrouded in ignorance, most of us do not know the true nature of sense objects. As a result attachment, clinging and covetousness appear. Avijjā and taṇhā become more powerful in time. As a consequence won't we act with great effort to get what we desire? In doing so, we accomplish many acts of kamma through the mental, verbal and physical doors. In this way we accumulate more and more kammic power in our mindstream. The kamma which is building up will create our next existence. In the meantime it remains in waiting. Only near the end will it emerge.

As the Buddha taught, avijjā and taṇhā are great helpers of kamma to produce the next life⁹: these three being the main conditions for rebirth.

Kamma as soil

People do both good and bad deeds. For those who do merit, due to the power of kusala kamma, a good indication appears at death. As for those who have done akusala deeds, unwholesome kamma's force will produce a bad indication.

Ignorance hides the object's nature so that attachment or hatred arises in the dying person. If it is attachment, taṇhā ties the mind to the object. For instance, he could see an ogress as a beautiful deity. Craving then arises. Or he could dream of fire, thinking it is gold. He wants to have it. The mind near death grasps it as the last object¹⁰. As the mental process ends, immediately because of the kammic force the rebirth consciousness appears to begin the new life.

⁹ Avijjā nivāraṇaṃ, taṇhā saṃyojanaṃ. (Bhava Sutta of Aṅguttara Nikāya, Book 3.)

¹⁰ This could be an object of kamma, kamma-nimitta or gati-nimitta.

The Buddha used metaphors to explain the process: kamma is the soil (kammaṃ khettaṃ)¹¹, consciousness is the seed (viññāṇaṃ bījaṃ) and taṇhā is the moisture (taṇhā sneho). However, in other discourses He usually likens kamma to a seed. I thought over this point many times, trying to understand why the Buddha compared kamma to soil for cultivation. What I understand is this: near death the last object created by kamma takes over our mental process until death consciousness arises. After that, rebirth consciousness appears, seizing this last object. At this time there is nothing for this citta to depend on except the kammic force. To grow this viññāṇa seed, there can be no other soil where it can sprout. Only kamma has created this last object. Therefore it is like the soil wetted by the moisture of craving where the viññāṇa seed can germinate. This is how the tree of life comes to grow in the kammic soil, with avijjā and taṇhā providing the support.

How to struggle free of this object? At this time – when we are lying in a coma, our mind possessed by this object – kamma plants its seed. So this is how we pass from the present life to the next one.

Attachment at the start of life

Whatever type of life it is, the new sentient being loves it. This is because the first javana or energetic mind that follows the rebirth consciousness is with attachment to this new life.¹² So every being begins existence with a lobha-mūla citta. Since there are no sense-organs as yet (and therefore no new sense

¹¹ Bhava Sutta, Aṅguttara Nikāya, Book 3.

¹² It is called bhava nikanti javana citta. (Bhava = life; nikanti = love of.) Mental process when life begins: Paṭisandhi - Bhavaṅga₁ - Bhavaṅga₂-.....- Bhavaṅga₁₆ - Manodvārāvajjana - Javana₁ - Javana₂ - Javana₃.....- Javana₇ - Bhavaṅga - Bhavaṅga Here Javana₁ to Javana₇ are lobha-mūla cittas.

object), this first energetic mind with desire depends on the rebirth consciousness' object. Even for rebirth in hell: the sentient being at first sees hell-fire as gold because of its bright golden colour and is attracted to it. Thus there is greed even in hell. It is the same with us. Sometimes we see and are attracted to something which we think is beautiful. Later it turns out to be something deadly.

That is the nature of existence: to be interested in and have attachment for the new life which has appeared. Even bees have bhava nikanti. Like the moths and insects attracted to fire because of its bright golden colour – they happily draw near and then suffer for it. So every being is attached to life – ants, dogs and cats – all delight in their life. If cats and dogs could speak, and if you were to ask them whether they like their life, they would all say “Yes.”

There is an episode in the Jātakas about a king whose young queen had recently passed away. Having dearly loved her, the grief-stricken king had her body preserved in oil. He would cry and cry beside the corpse. In the meantime the queen had been reborn as a dung beetle with a mate. Yet she now preferred her new life, loving her new husband even more than the king of her former life.

So all beings wherever they are born are happy due to attachment.

* * * * *

5 No waiting list for rebirth

At one time I went to Germany to teach Abhidhamma. In class one student asked, "With regards to cloning, how could it be explained according to Abhidhamma? Is it possible?"

I replied, "Yes, it's possible. As long as conditions for conception are present, it will take place, whatever the setting."

For conception to occur these conditions must be there, generally speaking: normally just before the mother's menstruation¹³. There must be union of sperm and ovum¹⁴. The gantabba to be conceived will be there.

Who does this gantabba refer to? It is the person who has just died and is ready to be born. There are many different views since ancient times about this gantabba. There is a belief in some traditions and Buddhist sects too that the spirit of the newly deceased has to wait between seven and 49 days to be reborn. Many races are inclined to think this way. For example, Tibetans believe that it takes 49 days. Japanese too believe in such spirits.

In 1997 I visited Japan and went to Koyasan where there are a lot of monasteries. I met a Japanese monk who was chanting mantras for the dead. I asked him why. He said that chanting was to help those spirits remaining in the tomb or cemetery, to give them guidelines to find a new life.

¹³ Mātāca utunī.

¹⁴ Mātāpitaro sannipatitā.

“Do you know how many spirits have found a new life through your chanting?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied, “But by tradition I’ve to chant.”

Elsewhere too people chant over the newly deceased, thinking that the spirit is searching for rebirth. Their purpose is to help guide this gantabba to the next life. In Singapore and Malaysia some chant Abhidhamma text over the corpse.

Many people in Myanmar assume that when a person dies, the viññāṇa or spirit (which is called “butterfly,¹⁵) lingers in the vicinity of the house for seven days.

Some people believe that at death the deceased’s spirit emerges to search where it can start a new life. Unable to find it, the spirit takes temporary refuge in an interim life called antarābhava¹⁶. They think that the person becomes a ghost during this interval. I think that most people identify a ghost’s life with this antarābhava. However, the life of a ghost is that of a peta. This being cannot be seen with the human eye; so people think it is a “spirit”. There is one person I know who can recall his previous life as a peta -- and not as a gantabba.

Memory of being a peta

He is a Burmese monk U Sobhana, now over 80 years old. He used to stay in San Francisco with Sayadaw U Silananda. He told me about his past life in the same village, but in a different house: so in his previous life, one house; this life, the next

¹⁵ Leik-pya in Myanmar.

¹⁶ Antara = interval; bhava = life. So it means the interval between this life and the next.

house. He could remember his previous name and why he died. Everything he could remember: how he caught a disease and was treated in hospital. But he died because it was incurable. He recalled people carrying his dead body and performing the funeral rites. After that he could not remember what happened. The next thing he could recollect was that he was sitting alone under a tree, in deep forest. Nobody was around. Then he heard someone calling his name. He rose up to look and saw a gentleman riding a white horse.

"Follow me," the man ordered. So he did. When they emerged from the forest, he saw that they had arrived at a village.

"Oh, this is my village," he said, as he recognised it of his previous life.

At the village, the gentleman pointed out a house, "Go and enter that house."

The monk-to-be realised it was his former home. Though he tried to enter, he could not because no one would let him in.

The gentleman then instructed him, "If it's not possible, then enter this house."

The future Venerable was born there.

Because his two lives were spent in the same village, many people could remember his date of death. There was a two-month gap between these two lives, taking into account the nine months spent in his mother's womb. He thought that during that period he had become a peta immediately after his death. That was why as another being he could witness his own funeral – following the people carrying his corpse to be

cremated. Then finding himself seated alone in deep forest: it was as a peta. He was not waiting for another life.

Many of those who believe in an interim life are Buddhists -- but with different views. However if they were to study very carefully the Buddha's teachings, they will find that He said that rebirth takes immediate effect once death occurs. He explained it as *anantarapaccayo*¹⁷. This is to say death precedes rebirth without any interval. Immediately with *cuti* consciousness ceasing, rebirth consciousness called *paṭisandhi* arises at once. Like cutting water with a knife, it is immediately rejoined.

There is no such interim state of waiting as in a waiting list for conception to take place. It is not like travellers without a ticket who are put on the waiting list. Those who wish to come to the human world do not need a ticket or wait their turn on the waiting list. It does not work this way.

No gap between death and the next life

The moment a person dies, there is not even a second's lapse before he comes to be conceived. If the right factors are present, then through kammic force, the person's rebirth consciousness appears simultaneously where they are – no matter how far away.

It is like a TV broadcast coming from abroad. But with proper equipment to receive the signals, the picture and sound appear instantaneously. It is the same with the new embryo and the person with the *cuti citta*. Once this last consciousness occurs – lasting for only a mental moment in arising, stopping and falling¹⁸ – at its cessation, without a break the next mind that

¹⁷ As one of the 24 conditions in *Paṭṭhāna*.

¹⁸ *Uppāda*, *ṭhiti* and *bhaṅga*.

follows is gantabba, the one to take conception. It appears somewhere opportune for rebirth. There is always a suitable place to be found for it: even in a laboratory for creating clones.

How the gantabba appears

In Paṭiccasamuppāda the Buddha taught that productive kamma (or saṅkhāra) conditions the rebirth consciousness: saṅkhāra paccaya viññāṇaṃ¹⁹. Then in another relation He mentioned “Viññāṇa paccaya nāma-rūpaṃ”. Here viññāṇa is the leading – not the producing – factor. When it arises, nāma arises together with it along with kamma-born matter. In this case nāma refers only to the mental states (cetasikas). All are created by kamma.

We must talk about this saṅkhāra which belongs to the previous life. The resultant viññāṇa it produces belongs to the next life: we call it birth of a new life. How is contact made between these two lives?

You see death ensues with the last mind of one’s existence which is cuti citta. But the last vital moment is not death consciousness. Cuti only shows the end of the final thought process like the last flicker of a candlelight flame. The last energetic mind (maranāsanna javana) which occurs before it is the key. Why these javanas are crucial is that they grasp the last object created by kamma²⁰. This object produces rebirth because it will continue up to the next life without a break.

¹⁹ Here saṅkhāra is volitional action or cetanā, which the Buddha declared as kamma.

²⁰ Let’s say, before dying, the person sees an object (very strong). So his last thought process is an eye-door process with a strong object: B1- B2 - B3 – Pañcadvārāvajjana - Cakkhuvīññāṇa - Sampatichana - Santīraṇa - Voṭṭhabbana - Javana1 - Javana2 - - Javana5 - Tadārammaṇa1 -

With the ceasing of cuti citta, rebirth mind arises, created by kamma. However, not just kamma alone, it must have other kinds of support. What are they? One is the last object acquired by the maranāsanna javanas. It acts as a support. Depending on it, viññāṇa appears. Without any object to hang on to, no citta can exist. Its characteristic nature is to know an object. No doubt that kamma gave rise to it. However only by grasping on to this kamma-created object – as it would hold on to a tightly secured rope – can it come up. Otherwise no paṭisandhi can make its appearance.

So this object belongs to both lives. It started in the previous life and continues up to the new life²¹, forming a bridge. Without this bridge we cannot go on to the next life.

In the planes for five-aggregate beings not only the object, but also the supporting vatthu-rūpa²² must exist, which acts as the seat of consciousness. This is to say that there must be a base for the paṭisandhi to rest on. Thus hanging on to the object as it would a clothes line, the rebirth consciousness at the same time can rest on the vatthu-rūpa as it would a seat. With these two supports, the paṭisandhi can establish its existence. (Note

Tadārammaṇa2 - B - Cuti (death) - Paṭisandhi (birth in new life) - B - B ...
And so on. Here B is bhavaṅga.

²¹ Subsequently this new object becomes the past object (of the previous life), carried on for the whole of the next life by its paṭisandhi, bhavaṅga and cuti. Thus this object determines our new life. If it is a bad object (a fearful one, for example), it produces a bad effect in the next life.

²² Three types of rūpa produced by kamma appear together with nāma at conception: the kāya pasāda or source of sensitive body, source of sex or bhāva and the heart that acts as the base of the mind (hadaya vatthu). The other four pasāda rūpa (sensitive matter of the eye, ear, nose and tongue) appear only later.

that not every plane of existence has such vatthu-rūpa as support, particularly not in the arūpa plane where beings have no rūpa.)

Hence when death consciousness ceases, viññāṇa as rebirth consciousness appears without any gap because the mental process runs non-stop without any interruption. This is the start of a new life as explained by the Buddha²³.

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²³ Bhava Sutta (Aṅguttara Nikāya).

6 Paṭisandhi: the link to saṃsāra

For all living beings kamma provides a life by producing a paṭisandhi citta²⁴ for each and everyone at death. In uniting two lives, this rebirth consciousness provides the continuity so that the mental process is not interrupted.

By its act of linking two different lives, two different mental processes – for example, a past life as a human, a new life as a dog – we wander from life to life in saṃsāra’s various planes, depending on conditions and different paṭisandhis. By means of this rebirth consciousness, the 31 realms of existence can be categorised, in the same way as these cittas are differentiated in producing rebirth.

Paṭisandhi produced by akusala

Let’s take the rebirth consciousness produced by akusala: upekkhā santīraṇa²⁵, with the associated feeling of indifference. The 11 akusala kammās are able to produce this citta except for the one with uddhacca (restlessness) which has not enough power to produce a new life. This akusala paṭisandhi is the same for all beings in the four apāyas. However, for hell beings the suffering is most intense. Animals are better off by comparison. On the other hand petas have a better lot than

²⁴ Paṭi = once more, again; sandhi = to join, unite. Being the effect of kamma, this resultant consciousness is like a mirror image which cannot be changed. It cannot also be repeated once it has been launched by kamma.

²⁵ It is the same citta in the mental process. But at rebirth, its work is not to investigate the object. As its name is misleading, here it is called upekkhā santīraṇa.

animals. Although the paṭisandhi citta is the same, why is there a variety of beings born with it? That is because there are other conditions.

The akusala performed by an individual is not the same as that done by another. The extreme kind results in hell. The less extreme akusala results in animal birth. Evil of a lesser degree ends in a peta's life. So at the time kamma acts, it can be with full-strength or reduced in power. By seeing the degree of akusala, the result can be foreseen. A high degree brings about rebirth in an equally drastic environment like a fiery volcano. So there is a degree: extremely hot, hot, or not hot environment associated with the level of akusala. There are also different levels of planes according to the degree of unwholesomeness.

Despite having the same rebirth consciousness, beings in the woeful states do not share the same experience. Therefore various akusalas carried out have different powers, each having its own degree or level.

Human paṭisandhi

For people, their rebirth consciousness can be one of nine types: kusala vipāka upekkhā santīraṇa and eight mahāvīpākas.²⁶ Deities too are born with these mahāvīpāka cittas. However, are these cittas of the same grade or class? Again, there is no similarity in producing their results. Some people are poor, others rich. Some are intelligent while others are not. Some are long-lived, others have short lives. Why is this so? It is because what they had done previously is not the same.

²⁶ There are eight because they can be with pleasant or neutral feeling, with knowledge or without, and with or without hesitation.

Of the eight mahāvīpākas, the first is the strongest and the best with the three roots of alobha, adosa and amoha. If the knowledge factor is not present, then the condition of birth is two-rooted or dvihetuka. Only alobha and adosa are present, unlike the three-rooted (tihetuka). Thus in an act of merit (for example, in dāna), when knowledge leads, the merit gained is called ñāṇa-sampayutta kusala. Without amoha, it is ñāṇa-vipayutta kusala, of a lesser sort.

For these different grades of kusala at the time of conception, their associated cetanās will give different grades of paṭisandhi result. This is a natural law or niyāma that kammās will produce their results of similar form. This is to say that tihetuka kusala will give rise to tihetuka paṭisandhi result. A dvihetuka kusala will produce a two-rooted rebirth consciousness. So a type of kamma only gives result of the same kind. Put in another way: through the kamma carried out by you, you will receive its corresponding result.

Then whether there is knowledge or not, some people are ever light-hearted by nature. This is due to somanassa dominating the rebirth consciousness. They are happy-born on this basis. Those with neutral (upekkhā) feeling are hardly inclined to smile. Their demeanour is usually rather solemn. Rarely are there happy smiles. So through the factor of feeling, the difference among people can be seen. Which one are you?

The Buddha was born with the first mahāvīpāka citta, accompanied by pleasure, connected with knowledge, and without prompting²⁷. However, some Abhidhamma scholars in Sri Lanka maintain that the Buddha's paṭisandhi could not be accompanied by somanassa since He was always composed and

²⁷ The mind with somanassa sahaḡata, ñāṇa-sampayutta, asaṅkhārika.

steady in everything that He did. The rebirth consciousness could only have been with upekkhā. Nonetheless many others disagree. This is why the following terms are used to extol the Buddha: piyamukha – the Buddha’s face was always lit with a happy smile. Even in talking, He had this habit of smiling first before speaking. Sukha sambhāsa: It was easy and pleasant to converse with Him.

As for people without the wisdom factor, they need time to figure out any ordinary matter, being unable to give spontaneous answers or ready solutions. Those with the wisdom factor are sharper. We call such people bright or endowed with a high IQ. They are able to quickly understand, being mentally nimble because of ñāṇa-sampayutta at their conception. It is accepted that only tihetuka yogis striving in meditation can realise the noble Dhamma. Those with the condition of ñāṇa-vipayutta will not be able to reach that level. (However, their efforts will not be in vain. To a certain extent progress can be made.)

Besides the mahāvīpākas, there is the rootless upekkhā santīraṇa citta. People born with it are physically or mentally handicapped. In the womb they were already blind, deaf, that is, with an innate defect. Unlike the mahāvīpākas their paṭisandhi is produced by kamma with weak strength. So despite the advantage of human birth, it is one which is below par.

What is originally given by kamma cannot be changed. For instance, a person with a two-rooted condition will not be able to upgrade to a higher level by acquiring the wisdom factor. Neither too can he change his disposition. So according to one’s kamma carried out, one will be brought to one’s destination in life by it. Those who appear in the human and deity realms had

done wholesome acts like giving dāna, observing sīla and practising meditation. Those who had committed duccharita will arrive in the woeful states.

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7 U Ba and Maung Hla: the same or two different persons?

Consider the case of U Ba who at his death came to be reborn as Maung Hla. This child could recall his past life, "I've come back. I remember I was the man called U Ba in that life."

How rebirth occurs at U Ba's death

This old man became ill towards the end. What were the main factors that would determine the sort of death he would have now, lying in a coma? These were avijjā, taṇhā and kamma. One of the previous deeds of his past emerged as a dominant object in his mind just as he was about to pass away. This object overwhelmed his mind even as he lay unconscious. Avijjā then concealed the nature of this last object. Because of taṇhā's influence, U Ba was pleased with it, the mind inclining towards it. With the cessation of this mind, cuti or death consciousness arose. Kamma-born matter came to a stop now that kamma for this life was finished.

At this moment because of the propelling kammic force of saṅkhāra and its helpers, the rebirth consciousness appeared in the other life. This citta took U Ba's past act as its object too. (You should note that no mind can arise without an object.) In this way as life ended for U Ba, the last object received in his coma reappeared in another existence – Maung Hla's. This is how a relation exists between these two people. This object taken from U Ba's existence together with new kamma begins in Maung Hla's paṭisandhi.

As U Ba's cuti citta ceased, Maung Hla's rebirth consciousness began. As long as U Ba's death consciousness did not cease, Maung Hla's paṭisandhi mind could not appear. This cuti mind's cessation was a condition for Maung Hla's rebirth consciousness to arise. In Paṭṭhāna this is known as anantarasatti: only after one mind has disappeared can the next one appear²⁸.

However, before U Ba's death, Maung Hla did not yet exist. So Maung Hla and U Ba's existence can be said to be online. There was only one line in the mental process.

Can cuti mind become rebirth consciousness?

Can U Ba's death consciousness become Maung Hla's paṭisandhi citta? It is not possible because this cuti mind was due to one of U Ba's past kamma. When U Ba was conceived, his rebirth consciousness arose due to kamma of his previous life. That kamma produced its effect in U Ba's life. Due to it U Ba's paṭisandhi, bhavaṅga, and cuti consciousness were the result²⁹.

Let's say that the rebirth mind of U Ba was a resultant consciousness disassociated from knowledge (that is, as a mahāvīpāka ñāṇa-vippayutta). During his lifetime he listened to Dhamma talks, meditated and studied Buddhist literature. He also performed meritorious deeds. As his paṭisandhi citta was disassociated from knowledge, so was his cuti mind. At his death as cuti citta ceased, the following paṭisandhi consciousness arose, accompanied by pleasure (somanassa saḡata) and with knowledge (ñāṇa-sampayutta). This was due to the power of good kamma of his meritorious deeds which gave their result at death.

²⁸ Due to anantara paccayo, samanantara paccayo, natthi paccayo and vigata paccayo.

²⁹ These cittas shared the same object which kamma created.

So Maung Hla's rebirth consciousness came associated with knowledge while U Ba's death consciousness was disassociated from knowledge. Therefore are the two the same? They are not, given that kamma had brought about the difference. It is impossible that U Ba's cuti citta could have passed on to become Maung Hla's paṭisandhi mind. If it was so, then both would have been identical. Only the effects of the good and bad kamma performed by U Ba were to be experienced by Maung Hla.

The same person or different people?

U Ba in this life has passed away. In that existence Maung Hla has come into being. All that U Ba had done kammically would be borne by Maung Hla – he would have to undergo the results. Are these two really the same person? No, they are not the same. Then are they two different people? No, they are also not two dissimilar persons. What can be said is that they are connected by cause-and-effect in a common and unbroken line of consciousness arising and falling away.

Consciousness arises due to conditions. Before that it was nowhere, only a potentiality. Having arisen, it ceases right away when conditions stop. So the mindstream is a continuous running flow of cittas arising and disappearing. This phenomenon the text calls santati or process, which moves all the time.

Listen to my voice as I speak. It is apparent that the sounds are continuously disappearing. The sound of the preceding word has disappeared to be followed by that of the succeeding word. Each sound appears based on its own cause. Let's say in reciting A, B, C, D ... After A has been pronounced, the sound ceases. Only then B sound appears, based on its own cause and

not because of A. Similarly it is not so that C arises due to B sound, but due to its own cause. Also D sound does not arise as a result of C, but on account of its own cause and condition.

This is the way death and rebirth occur, given their cause and conditions like these sounds of A, B, C, D ...

In the mind process of seeing a visible object for instance, after the five-door adverting consciousness³⁰ has ceased, only then eye-consciousness or cakkhu-viññāṇa comes into being. It is not so that this eye-consciousness emerges due to the adverting consciousness. Then at the time eye-consciousness disappears, the receiving consciousness³¹ appears. Again, it does not arise because of eye-consciousness.

In this way it is an unbroken process: the preceding mind disappears to be followed by the arising of the next consciousness³². We can compare U Ba to the five-door adverting consciousness and Maung Hla to eye-consciousness as these two are online. They share the same experiences and situation in this single line. However we cannot say that there is only one individual. Nature is such that there is a difference between the two.

³⁰ Pañcadvārāvajjana citta.

³¹ Sampaṭicchana citta.

³² The order cannot be avoided as a citta niyāma. It is just like the seasonal order of spring, summer and so on. Nobody created such orders, only the relation of cause-and-effect. Like driving a car: it is not just the driver who drives. He cannot do so if some part is missing such as the wheel, petrol, for example. The Buddha did not create this niyāma. He just discovered and named this order of mental process through His knowledge and mental power.

No wonder the Buddha said that this is difficult to understand. Not knowing the nature of arising and falling in this mental process, we – even as Buddhists – can readily accept the idea of reincarnation.

* * * * *

8 Who is reborn?

As Theravādins we say, “Whoever dies is reborn,” as a part of common speech. But who is it who shifts from one life to the next?

Who wanders in saṃsāra?

At a superficial level both Buddhism and Hinduism share the same terms such as saṃsāra, kamma and kamma-result. However, there is a big difference in view about how sentient beings revolve in the cycle of rebirths.

In Hinduism *atta* is the one who is wandering through saṃsāra. This soul is called by several names. For example, Hindus use the term “*atman*” meaning individual soul which is the creation of Brahma or the universal soul. In their view all living beings possess a permanent entity which is the handiwork of the Creator. (Liberation or *mokkha* is realised when this individual soul unites with Brahma.) Saṃsāra and kamma are explained from the aspect of soul: the work carried out by *atta* is kamma. So this is a big difference with the Hindu kamma doctrine.

On the other hand the Buddha explains kamma without *atta*, as *anatta*, which is unlike other religions. This point is very important. Otherwise, you might get confused about the term and think that the Buddha derived it from Hinduism as some Hindus have claimed. In Theravāda Buddhism there is no such Creator God or universal soul who creates *atta*. There is no permanent entity which goes around saṃsāra performing kamma. Instead of a soul there are only the five aggregates of

mind-and-body³³. No one created them. They cannot be everlasting because they are always changing in a continuous process of arising and falling.

Nonetheless, it is rather difficult to realise this point by ordinary thinking. Yet without understanding the issue, a person will get only more muddled up with the various doctrines of Hinduism and many Buddhist sects.

The monk Sāti

At one time during the Buddha's lifetime, a monk called Sāti claimed to have understood what the Buddha taught about saṃsāra and kamma: "According to what I understand, it is the spirit in a man's mind-and-body which experiences or speaks." (In Hinduism the *atta* makes use of both the body and mind to speak or act. This is *attaniya*, meaning that the permanent entity owns both the body and mind.)

Take the example of a car. Driving it, the owner can go wherever he likes. In the same way the soul is the body's proprietor. It is the one who talks, feels and experiences, who has joy or sadness, and who enjoys. This was how Sāti saw it: the spirit which experiences both happiness and unhappiness is the one who passes from one life to the next. Imagine that this was the view of a monk during the Buddha's lifetime.

"Tadeva viññāṇaṃ saṃsarati," were his very words about the so-called permanent consciousness which wanders through the cycle of rebirths by transmigrating from one body to another, life after life.

³³ Aggregates of matter, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness.

Hearing this, the other monks said, "Don't talk this way. This is not the Buddhist view." Surrounding him, they tried to explain what the right view was. Sāti was not convinced. With this they brought him to the Buddha who then asked him, "Well, you have been talking about viññāṇa. Which viññāṇa are you referring to?"

"Vado vedeyyo. It is the consciousness which talks, feels and experiences the results of both good and bad kamma."

Sāti was only stating a Hindu belief even though he was a Buddhist monk.

Then the Buddha said, "How do you come to such an understanding of what I had been teaching? I had explained that consciousness arises owing to conditions³⁴. It is not permanent. It arises based on a cause. Without a cause, will it arise?"

"No, it will not, Venerable Sir."

That is why in paṭiccasamuppanna, "paṭicca" means depending on, and "samuppanna" is to come to arise. Mind appears depending on a cause. Without a cause, it does not occur.

The Buddha has explained the way eye consciousness arises. When the eye and a visible object come into contact, eye consciousness arises. If these two do not meet, will eye consciousness arise? No, it will not. Similarly, when sound comes into contact with the ear, at that time ear consciousness arises. When the tongue and a taste meet, tongue consciousness arises. The body and a tangible object make

³⁴ Viññāṇaṃ paṭiccasamuppannaṃ.

contact with the arising of body consciousness. Then as the mind comes together with a dhamma object, mind consciousness appears.

When you make a careful attempt to observe these conditions, you will see that the object is not permanent: becoming apparent, it then ceases. Next, is the sensitive eye permanent? No, it is not. Similarly, sound once it happens vanishes in an apparent way. The sensitive ear which receives this sound is not permanent. Based on such impermanent conditions, how could the resulting consciousness be permanent?

According to the Buddha, for something which arises only to disappear, how could it pass from one existence to the next?³⁵ Before it can make a transfer, it would already have ceased.

In spite of the Buddha's explanation, Sāti's wrong view could not be dispelled.

No one at work

Sāti could not understand the idea of kamma without *atta*: who is the one who acts and who experiences kamma's result? According to other religions, *atta* is the one and *atta* receives the effect. Some monks even during the Buddha's lifetime also thought this way: if there is no *atta* who will experience the effect of kamma? One monk raised these questions³⁶: "Without *atta* how can kamma take effect? Without *atta*, who receives the result of kamma? Who is responsible for kamma?"

³⁵ *Anicca sambhūtaṃ kuto niccaṃ bhavissati.*

³⁶ In *Samyutta Nikāya*.

Buddhists must clearly see that it is only phenomena. Phenomena act, phenomena receive. There is no doer³⁷, no experiencer and no atta. That is right view. The meaning is that in a process the phenomena perform good and evil kamma. Therefore kamma results appear to this process. We have individual process. It is responsible for whatever we do. The Buddha asked, "How to identify ever-moving saṅkhāra as atta?"

Yet like Sāti, for many Theravādins having a right view is quite difficult. Not only is the issue hard to understand. Many of them have been influenced by different views of other religions.

Reincarnation or rebirth?

If you were to look up the word "reincarnation" in the Cambridge dictionary, you will find a reference to the term "spirit". This refers to the atta which we have been discussing. According to the dictionary, Hindus and Buddhists (probably meaning Tibetan Buddhists) believe in reincarnation: at death a person's spirit which is eternal enters another body. When the body becomes worn out, the spirit moves on to a new one. At the time of shifting, who makes the choice? It is kamma which decides the move from one life to another. So far this accords with Theravāda Buddhism. However, who is it who reaches the next life? At this point we must realise the fundamental difference. There is no one who can be reborn. There is no such eternal spirit which moves from one body at death to the next one. Nevertheless, many people have the idea that at the time of death, the spirit abandons the body for a new one. This belief is common in many schools of Buddhism and among

³⁷ "There is no doer of a deed
Or one who reaps the deed's result;
Phenomena alone flow on –
No other view than this is right." In *The Path of Purification*, XIX, 20.

individuals like Sāti the monk. This idea is shown in such examples: of a baby bird which is transformed and flies away; of a person who changes his old clothes for new ones; or who moves from his old house to another. Similarly, his attā leaves the body at death for a new body. This is the way it is seen in Hinduism.

Tibetan Buddhists firmly uphold the idea of reincarnation even though they accept the Buddha Dhamma. Their teachings of saṃsāra and kamma have been mixed with beliefs contrary to the original teachings as taught by the Buddha. If we were not well-versed or established as Theravāda Buddhists, we would probably follow these Tibetan Buddhist devotees in their practice: learn to chant "Om mani padme hum (within the lotus is the ruby³⁸). This mantra concerns reincarnation because in Tibetan Buddhism it is given foremost priority.

Reincarnation has no place in Theravāda Buddhism which maintains only the relation of cause-and-effect. What is accepted instead is the term punabbhavo or rebirth. In a renewal of existence, it is neither the same person himself nor somebody totally different³⁹. The idea is that the person who died is once again born as a new individual. Although there is a connection between the two, it is not so that the deceased came to life again as this new being.

According to the Buddha, there is only mind and body. The five aggregates which make up a person are anatta. Besides these what else is there? There is nothing else. The Buddha pointed out that holders of wrong view have identified one of these aggregates as a permanent entity. Yet if we were to examine

³⁸ Mani= ruby; padme = lotus.

³⁹ Na ca so na can añño. (In Milindapañha Pāḷi.)

these aggregates, we would find nothing whatsoever – within and without – which is of a permanent nature. Nowhere can *atta* be found: this was what the Buddha had plainly stated. In this world not even one small bit of matter is permanent.

Yet it is easier for view-holders of *atta* to explain *saṃsāra* to people. This is because they can use the example of replacing a broken-down body with a new model. Depending on *kamma*, the person who did many meritorious acts would get a good body: as a human or a deity. Otherwise, he would get one of an animal or *peta*, for example.

In such matters of rebirth, the Buddha said that it is extremely difficult to make any ordinary person understand. Even many Theravādins mix up ideas of reincarnation and eternalism (*sassata diṭṭhi*) with their beliefs. Many carry out meritorious acts with the aim of reaping benefits in their next life. Without contemplating, especially without the perspective of *vipassanā* insight, it is easy to acquire these wrong views. So, like *Sāti* the monk, many think that consciousness is a permanent entity wandering through *saṃsāra*.

* * * * *

9 How to stop kamma

In saṃsāra many different kmmas have been accumulating in us. Take a tree bearing thousands of fruit each time. If all these seeds were to grow into trees, what would happen? We will be in deep forest. But not all the seeds can develop. In the same way, not all the accumulated kmmas within us can produce their effect. Only a few will have the chance. Some become expired. Others have no opportunity to produce their result. Otherwise we have no way to escape from kamma.

Actually we must first understand that kamma cannot be removed directly. What has been done cannot be undone. Can we change what happened yesterday? Can we bring it back? No, we cannot because it has gone. It is impossible to change what has been done.

Ways of stopping kamma

All religions have their own ideas and ways of stopping kamma. For Christians Jesus Christ removes their kamma and saves their lives. A bad person can be saved too by Christ at the moment of death through forgiveness. By leading a pure life, praying and confessing to the priest or pastor their sins, a Christian can escape from kamma.

Muslims pray five times a day – that is good kamma. They also observe the Ramadan. In this way they can remove bad kamma. Jains (according to the Buddhist canonical text) believe that they can stop any kind of new kamma, not just the bad ones. Old kmmas already accumulated can be removed by

austere practice. In this way they believe that they can escape from kamma and attain liberation.

Can prayer help?

In India Brahmins have the practice of praying over the corpse, "May you be born in heaven." However, according to the Buddha⁴⁰, prayers can do nothing. They also cannot bring a better life or save others. What happens if a heavy stone is dropped in water? It will sink. Then suppose many Brahmins gather together to pray, "O big stone, rise up. O big stone, rise up." By praying, will the stone rise up or not? It is the same for a bad person. Suppose we were to pray for him, "Please go to heaven. Please go to heaven. May you have a better life." It would be impossible for it to happen. Then the Buddha gave an analogy for a good person: a pot of ghee breaks, falling into water. The ghee floats to the water surface. Many people gather around to pray, "Ghee, please sink. Please sink." This is also impossible for it to happen. Thus praying is not possible.

The Buddhist way

The Buddha always mentioned kamma together with kilesa as a pair. People usually point to kamma alone. But without kilesa, kamma becomes isolated and cannot take effect. In brief, if kilesas or mental defilements cease, kamma will cease. If kilesas remain, so will kamma.

You see, this is the point of Paṭiccasamuppāda which shows the whole picture of our life. Here the Buddha specified the root kilesa as avijjā in the cycle of birth and death. Volitional activities of saṅkhāra or kamma arise depending on ignorance. Thus "avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā". Because of our ignorance, we act according to our wish, not knowing what should or shouldn't

⁴⁰ Gāmaṇisaṃyutta, Asibandhakaputta, Saṃyutta Nikāya.

be done. This saṅkhāra produces the kamma-result of viññāṇa, that is, a rebirth consciousness of a new existence. So "saṅkhāra paccayā viññāṇaṃ". With the right conditions paṭisandhi seed will sprout, with nāma-rūpa arising with it. Thus the Buddha said, "Viññāṇa paccayā nāma-rūpaṃ". Then "nāma-rūpa paccayā saḷāyatanaṃ": with sense organs communication with the outside world is possible. We see, hear, think, and so on. With communication, feeling arises. We want more and more of desirable objects. Craving appears. Hatred develops with undesirable objects. Then there is "vedanā paccayā taṇhā". The mind with taṇhā becomes strongly occupied with grasping, that is, upādāna. With this situation, there is a desire for life existence. As kamma accumulates, through it birth will occur again. Consequently worry, lamentation, mental pain, despair, that is, problems will follow. Thus in the perspective of Paṭiccasamuppāda: What begins again is not a permanent entity, but just phenomena which are a mass of suffering, started by moha.

So this cycle occurs again and again with saṅkhāra accumulating, like a tree which seasonally bears flowers, fruits and seeds in a never-ending round.

If you do not like the seed and wish to escape from such an endless process, you must cut the tree's root. No need to chop down the tree. In Dhammapada it is said that if you do, leaving the roots intact, the tree will grow again and again. If you do not cut off the kilesas, these mental defilements will come again and again. The root is the main supporting condition: that is, the kilesa root of the saṃsāra tree of avijjā and taṇhā. If cut, the saṅkhāra fruit will cease. Therefore there will be no production of seed again.

Pitting kamma against kamma

In some suttas The Buddha pointed out the seven factors of enlightenment or bojjhaṅgas and the Noble Eightfold Path as kammās⁴¹. These kammās are very important because they can destroy the other kammās. It is like some people who have to take anti-body⁴² medicine. But if it is produced naturally in the body, then such medicine is not necessary. Isn't that so? It is nature to nature; here it is kamma to kamma. If we were to develop these factors of enlightenment and the Noble Eightfold Path, we can escape from kamma. Being very powerful, these dhammas never produce rebirth. Instead they lead to Nibbāna, destroying kamma in saṃsāra.

However we must be careful to note that not all kinds of pīti are kamma, only those belonging to bojjhaṅga. Pīti associated with akusala is not kamma. The Buddha also never said that vīriya associated with akusala is kamma, only vīriya in bojjhaṅga and maggaṅga is kamma. Similarly ekaggatā (also called samādhi) cannot be called kamma when it is associated with akusala. It is kamma only as ekaggatā in bojjhaṅga and maggaṅga. The

⁴¹ According to Aṭṭhasālinī, 21 cetasikas associated with cetanā or motivation are called kamma. The three akusala ones are covetousness (abhijjhā), hatred (byāpāda) and wrong view (micchā diṭṭhi). Then non-covetousness (anabhijjhā), anti-hatred (abyāpāda) and right view (sammā diṭṭhi) belong to kusala. Also there are the seven factors of enlightenment and the eight factors of the Noble Path. There is overlapping of some cetasikas, for example samādhi belongs to both bojjhaṅga and maggaṅga. Sammā diṭṭhi is the same as paññā and dhammavicaya sambojjhaṅga. So the list can be reduced to 17 cetasikas including cetanā: 1. Sammā diṭṭhi 2. Sammā saṅkappa 3. Sammā vācā 4. Sammā kammanta 5. Sammā ājīva 6. Sammā vāyāma 7. Sammā sati 8. Sammā samādhi 9. Pīti sambojjhaṅga 10. Passadhi sambojjhaṅga 11. Upekkhā sambojjhaṅga 12. Abhijjhā 13. Byāpāda 14. Micchā diṭṭhi 15. Anabhijjhā 16. Abyāpāda 17. Cetanā

⁴² a substance produced in the blood by the body to fight disease.

Buddha wants to say that these cetasikas only at a high level can lead to Nibbāna.

At arahatta-magga

By developing these factors in meditation a point is reached when they are matured enough (especially in right understanding) and when all mental defilements are burnt down. Kusala is the direct opposite of akusala. As long as there is akusala, kusala will remain. If there is no more unwholesomeness, wholesomeness is not necessary. As a result kamma has no more supporting conditions. It is like keeping a seed in a bottle away from soil and water. Arahatta-magga is the highest kusala occurring. After that no more kusala arises. (Instead there is kriya.) Whoever does so has become an arahant with ignorance discarded and no kilesas remaining (kilesa nirodha). So his mahākriya cittas are like the blooms of a flowering tree whose root has been cut. Eventually the tree will shrivel and die. As kamma cannot work anymore in him, his actions are like the flowers on the tree which will not bear fruit. His actions cannot produce the next life because he is without any mental defilements. Even though his mahākriya cittas have alobha, adosa, and amoha which are contrary to lobha-dosa-moha, they have no more enemies to fight. In some countries there is always peace because there are no rebels to wage war. Though there is an army, it is only for show. In the same way alobha, adosa and amoha associated with mahākriya cittas have no more enemies to fight. Thus kammic energy cannot accumulate. Unlike us, as our mental process has both good and bad roots, such kammic energy continues to build up.

For the arahant at death – as kamma cannot produce any vipāka – kamma-result also ceases. All suffering is finished. That is Nibbāna when the fire is extinguished as no fuel is left. Meanwhile in his present life without kilesas, no passions like

lust and hate can arise. His mind is calm and equanimous in freedom or vimutti.

Although no new kamma accumulates, old kammās still remain. What has been done still remains. They are still online as long as there are the five aggregates. Though the old kammās are powerless to produce a new life, they can still act to support or obstruct throughout the arahant's present life. Times were not golden all the time even for the Buddha. He had to suffer from evil actions done many aeons ago. That is akusala kamma's result which is unavoidable.

Then there is Aṅgulimālā who had murdered hundreds of people, and who had even tried to kill the Buddha. As a monk he attained arahantship with all kilesas cut off. Although he had killed so many, his pāṇātipāṭa had no effect for the next life. Otherwise he would have been in hell. Being very powerful, arahatta magga had written off whatever akusala he had done. But in the present life he could not avoid former kamma's result. On his almsround, his bowl would get broken, and his robes would be torn. Many stones would hit him, causing blood to flow and at times broken bones. Because people were still afraid of him, they would close the door on him.

A worldling and an arahant's attitude to life and death

Consider the case of Venerable Sāriputta, an arahant. Seven days earlier he conducted a "medical" check-up on himself and realised that he would pass away after a week. For any ordinary person who is told by a doctor, "You have terminal cancer," after a medical check-up, he would get very worried. This is due to attachment to the body. Even monks too were no different during the Buddha's lifetime.

There was a monk who suffered a lot in sickness. As he was a good meditator, attachment and other mental defilements had

not appeared for a long time. This led him to think that he was an arahant, having no kilesas. But he had – only he did not know it. As he disliked living any longer in pain, he wanted to kill himself. That is subtle hatred. You see, trees start very small, hatred too. He had ignorance of his own mental state. Venerable Sāriputta tried to dissuade him from committing suicide. But as soon as he left, the sick monk cut his throat with a razor.

The human mind is very funny. After cutting his throat, fear appeared. He realised then, "I've to die." At that moment he noticed the fear. "Oh, fear is dosa. I've kilesas after all." Before that he thought he had no attachment to life, being detached about his body and everything. Thus he thought he had no mental defilements. As a good meditator, he noticed it when fear arose. Immediately he contemplated it as a meditation object. In so doing, he became an arahant. Just after attainment of arahatta-magga and phala, he passed away -- a happy end for a suicide.⁴³

Due to ignorance of his hatred and fear, he committed suicide. Had he realised earlier, "Oh, my kilesas are temporarily hidden. Inside, they're still there," he would never have killed himself. "I'm free of mental defilements. So I can commit suicide." Is it possible that he could have this thought? Such an idea is impossible. If he wanted to die, it was because he hated to live. Hate is important. Nobody wants to die. Death is never liked. However he disliked his present situation, that is, it mattered more to him.

⁴³ Such an arahant is called *jīvita samasīsi* (*jīvita* = life, *sama* = equal, and *sīsa* = head). In horse-racing, two horses reach the finishing post at the same time. Here, death and attainment reach the goal – not together, only seconds one after the other.

This was not so with Venerable Sāriputta. He was not worried, having really no attachment to his body or his life. He only thought of carrying out his last duty: to explain the Dhamma to his mother (who still prayed to Brahma)⁴⁴.

In the first place, Venerable Sāriputta saw life as a big problem, so heavy just to stay on living. Yet his attitude was not due to depression: "Life is so burdensome. It is like bearing a mountain on my head." In the Theragāthā, he recited this verse: "I have no attachment to my life. I do not want to die. I have no wish to live or die." He was just waiting for his last day. That day would be his reward, because then "I will be free from all kinds of suffering."

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⁴⁴ It took him a week to walk back to his native village. On the seventh day he arrived, and stayed in the room where he was born. Late that night he became ill with diarrhoea. Near dawn of the next day, after listening to his talk, his mother realised the Dhamma. Not long after, he passed away.

Travelling with kamma's ticket

If you were to consider any person, you would find that his or her situation is unlike that of another. It is not just about livelihood; it concerns the actions and disposition which set each of them apart. How is it so? Some individuals take the lives of others; while some avoid doing so. Some steal or swindle others of their property. Others would not even touch another's belongings. There are people who have illicit sexual relations. Yet others would not even consider such an idea. So isn't there such dissimilar conduct? You can easily see such differences in behaviour around you.

In the same way regarding verbal action, some are deceitful in speech in contrast to those who only speak the truth. Then there are those who make mischief by setting one person against another, while some try to reconcile the two parties. Some people are abusive unlike others. Or they like to talk nonsense or about unbeneficial things. In contrast some do not. So where speech is concerned, it is apparent no two individuals are the same.

Next for consideration is one's disposition. Some people are always overcome by *abhijjhā* by coveting others' property. But others cannot be bothered to even take a look at another person's property, let alone to hanker for it. Then some individuals wish to see others harmed in contrast to those who only wish for their well-being and happiness. There are people

who do not believe in kamma and its result as well as those who do.

Thus there are those who commit wrongdoing as well as those who do good. Look at the neighbourhood, the community and the circle you are in. Haven't you come across these contrasting types of behaviour? Following these people's death, is it possible that these two types of persons will reach a similar life-existence? No, they will not. This only goes to show that their respective destinations will be according to kamma⁴⁵. Thus a realm of existence is where kamma produces its result. Given the variety of kammās, it follows there is a range of beings and their planes of existence. It would be impossible to have only one plane. Due to the different goings-on of people, there is no way their destination in the next life will be the same. It is like boarding a train at Yangon to go to Mandalay. On the way it will pass several stations. Some passengers will alight at these stations, but not those bound for Mandalay. In the same way given all sorts of kamma performed by people, there are various destinations they will head for at life's conclusion. In general there are the five gatis.

If you take a look at the world, you see people travelling about, going to wherever they intend to go. To find out where, you just need to look at the ticket they are holding on to. There are passengers in trains, buses, cars and planes. If you were to check at the arrival and departure of the big airports in any country, you will find that practically there is an aircraft landing or leaving every minute. So people are coming and going every minute. All do not have the same destination. They are going according to the ticket they hold.

⁴⁵ Yathā kammaṃ gato.

Some will arrive at the human realm to begin human life. Having bought their kamma's ticket, they are bound for where it pays its result. This was not taught by the Buddha through inference or speculation. For this reason He said, "It is not through hearsay from the others that I teach the Dhamma. Having seen for Myself, thus I come to know it personally." Through His wisdom⁴⁶ with the divine eye or dibbacakkhu, He could view the entire world, "Yes, this person is committing evil." The road he is travelling on: where it ends, the Buddha could see. In His discourses He would give analogies⁴⁷ to show people's different destinations.

The five destinations

There are the five routes which lead to different habitations. One of them ends in a huge pit of live coal. Thus the Buddha could see: this man is walking on the road which leads to this fiery pit. Reaching it, he would fall in. That is when he would begin to suffer. This is to say that he is the one who will arrive in hell. Thus anyone who was committing unwholesome deeds was heading for the pit of red hot coals via the niraya gati road.

"Yes, that man is walking on that road. At the end of it is an immense and deep pit of excrement," the Buddha knew through His dibbacakkhu abhiññā. By carrying out certain acts, this person at the end would fall inside this pit of excrement. This is the sort of individual who would become an animal.

Where does the next route end? It ends in a desolate plain with a few trees of scanty foliage. There is nowhere to find shade in the intense heat. The Buddha could tell from the kind of acts committed that a certain individual was on this road going to

⁴⁶ Yathā kammūpaga ñāṇa.

⁴⁷ As in Majjhima paṇṇāsa Pāli of Majjhima Nikāya.

this place without shelter from the scorching heat. This dry and barren area was the place of petas. According to what He saw, those who arrive here would have to endure fatigue and miserable living conditions.

As for the next road: let's say that someone is looking down from the peak of a hill. He sees a person walking along a road which leads to a lake surrounded by big trees. So this person would eventually arrive in a shady forest. In the same way, the Buddha could tell by an individual's deeds that he would arrive at this cool and pleasant abode to stay: this was the human plane.

Then another way ends in a palatial building with a turreted roof, well-furnished within. Just by seeing someone walking along this road, we would know that he would eventually arrive at this beautiful mansion. So too the Buddha would know through a person's actions which route he has taken and its end. In this case He could see this person living peacefully and happily in this grand building free from harm and danger, having arrived at the deva realm.

Thus the Buddha used these analogies in His discourse on the various planes of existence to point out to us that according to our kamma committed, we will arrive at the respective life-existence. By following a particular route, it will lead us to a particular abode. So in coming to know about kamma, we will understand the different kinds of kamma performed and where they will bring the doer.

As a result a diversity of beings wander through the 31 planes of existence according to their kamma. So kamma is primary. Through it the paṭisandhi or rebirth consciousness is created accordingly: at this or that realm we come into existence. After

that if we are unable to do good deeds, doing akusala instead, there would not be much peace and stability then in the round of rebirths. Thus there is a saying in Burmese: Shining brightly in the Brahma realm, and then grunting at the pig's trough. It is not possible to be reborn as a pig directly after passing away from the brahma realm. In the brahmas' cultivation of samatha, the power of kusala is very great. So at death they cannot directly be reborn as an animal. They can appear in the human or deity worlds. Only in their third life there is a chance of taking up a pig's existence. As yet it is because they are not yet exempted from apāya. Why this is so is that they have not yet cleaned themselves up within.

We have first of all to clear up the interior, which is still dirty and in a mess. This is the main task. The problem lies with the lobha, dosa, moha and the other kilesas. As long as they remain within us, we will continue to perform akusala kamma. As long as we continue to do akusala, we will continue to revolve in the 31 planes. Should we happen to do good, we will arrive at a good destination. If we happen to do bad, we will get to a bad one. In this way we drift – now upstream, now downstream – through saṃsāra. Haphazardly we go in life's journey.

This is why the Buddha taught the planes of existence based on kamma. Since kamma is the basis, the decisive factor rests on ourselves.

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Instructions for the application of Abhidhamma in daily life and meditation

Ciraṃ tiṭṭhatu Abhidhammo!



“Like travellers we make our way through life beginning in our mother’s womb. At some time or another we will have to disembark at the journey’s end. Each holding on to kamma’s ticket, we are bound for our respective destination.”

In “Kamma at Death and Rebirth” Sayadaw Dr. Nanda-mālābhivamsa explains the process whereby kamma takes over us just before death to sow its seed for the next life.

Along the way Sayadaw clears up some common misconceptions about ghosts, an interim life before rebirth, reincarnation, and so on. Asking “Who is it who shifts from one life to the next?” and “Who performs kamma and receives its result?” he dismisses the notion of a permanent entity or soul. Issues such as cloning and the efficacy of prayer to stop kamma are also raised.

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