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## Chapter Six

### The Theravada Buddhist Doctrine of Survival after Death

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#### 1. Introduction

The concept of the continuance of life after death goes back to many thousands of years in the history of human thought. The belief that humans continue to exist in some sense or some form has been widely prevalent from the time of our prehistoric ancestors. It has found expression in forms of worship, rituals and primitive as well as sophisticated formulations of religious and philosophical doctrines. The belief in survival after death, in its different formulations, has variously been called transmigration of souls, metempsychosis, rebirth, rebecomings and reincarnation. Most Indian religions have a concept of individual life lived in a series of births and deaths involving the belief that all human beings not only survive their deaths but also have lived in some form superior or inferior to the state in which they find themselves in the present, before the beginning of their present state of existence. The moral outlook of people who profess religious ideologies which contain the belief in rebirth as an important or essential doctrine in the system has been largely influenced by this belief. In the regulation of human behavior it has played a role which is equally significant as the belief in God in monotheistic religious systems.

The belief in rebirth is one of the cornerstones of the Buddhist view of the nature of living beings and their destiny. It is an integral part of the Buddhist theory of reality.

The Buddhist concept of salvation or liberation, which follows from its analysis of the nature of the human predicament becomes meaningful primarily in terms of the doctrine of rebirth. The religious goals and ethical ideals of Buddhism are closely linked to its doctrine of *samsara*, which involves the belief that all living beings are bound within a cyclic process of births and deaths, the first beginning of which is unknown. This process is believed to continue with respect to each individuated life in the universe, until the attainment of *nibbana*, which is considered as the final liberation from the miseries which are necessarily bound up with this cyclic process.

The early Buddhist scriptures rarely attempt to analyse in detail the mechanism involved in rebirth or to defend this view against the skeptic, but there is no doubt that it considered the belief as an important constituent of what it held to be the right view (*sammaditthi*) essential for leading the Buddhist way of life. In using the scriptural material belonging to the Theravada Buddhist tradition as a basis for inquiring into the concept of rebirth it is possible to distinguish, from a chronological point of view, three stages in the development of Theravada ideas.

The earliest stage is reflected in the Pali Suttapiṭaka where the idea of rebirth finds in most instances tacit acceptance. Other principal Buddhist teachings belonging to this stratum of literature on the nature of man and his destiny presuppose the reality of rebirth as a fact of human existence. There is no special attempt to describe or explain the process of rebirth or to answer theoretical questions regarding the consistency of the Buddhist theory of rebirth with other Buddhist teachings such as the doctrine of no-self (*anatta*) and the Buddhist analysis of the individual into a fluxional series of mental and material processes.

The second stage in the development of Theravada Buddhist ideas about rebirth is reflected in the post-canonical work *Milindapanha* where an attempt is made to focus on the distinctive features of the Theravada doctrine of rebirth and to show how the Theravada notions of moral responsibility, *kammic* retribution and personal identity through many lives is intelligible despite its denial that it is a transmigrating immutable soul of the nature of a spiritual substance that gives identity to the continuing series of mental and material phenomena. The third

stage is reflected in the exegetical literature of the great Theravada commentator Buddhaghosa, and the post-commentarial Theravada Abhidhamma treatises, which were influenced by the later Abhidhamma scholasticism of the Theravada tradition. It was at this third stage that an attempt was made to develop a full fledged Theravada theory of rebirth making use of the developments of speculative psychology in the Theravada Abhidhamma.

#### 2. Ideas on Life-After-Death in the Pre-Buddhist Indian Background

There is general agreement that the Buddha lived in the fifth century B.c. In terms of the history of the development of religious and philosophical ideas in

India. It is reasonable to place the Buddha among the teachers belonging to the *sramana* tradition which emerged as a religious and philosophical movement opposed to Brahmanical orthodoxy of the Vedic tradition. This period was probably contemporaneous with that of the emergence of the ideas contained in the collections of the Middle Upanishads, the religious and philosophical movement of the Jainas, the skepticism of the Ajivakas and the early Indian materialist teachings. It is important to examine the special significance of the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth as represented in the Theravada canon, viewed in the light of the historical context in which Buddhism arose using as a guide to our inquiry the religious and philosophical literature of the period.

How widespread was the belief in rebirth in India at the time of the rise of Buddhism? It appears that most scholars are of the opinion that it was so widespread that the Buddha did not have to make any effort to convince his followers of its truth. The absence in the Pali Nikayas of an attempt to explain the mechanics of rebirth, or to defend it against skepticism is believed to be an indication that it was taken for granted in early Buddhism because it was found already to be a well established belief. According to Oldenberg, Buddhism inherited from Brahmanism most of its important dogmas. E.J. Thomas believes that Buddhism took for granted certain specific Indian beliefs the chief of which was the belief in transmigration and the doctrine of the retribution of action

136 1.

because they were already established as elements of a commonly accented view of life in most Indian religions.<sup>2</sup> However, this opinion has not gone unchallenged. K.N. Iyengar who examined the early Buddhist epistemological teachings contends that early Buddhism expressly criticized the attempt to accept a belief merely because it was found in a well established tradition.<sup>3</sup> Besides, there were several beliefs which were widespread and well established like the belief in the existence of an immutable soul and the belief in creation which Buddhism did not accept. The Buddha, in his epistemological teachings rejected authority, tradition and other means of knowledge and insisted on the importance of basing one's truth claims on intersubjectively verifiable experience. In addition to drawing attention to the general epistemological approach of early Buddhism in countering the opinion that Buddhism accepted the theory of rebirth because it found wide acceptance in the pre-Buddhist religious background, K.N. Iyengar has drawn attention to the fact that a thorough examination of the religious and philosophical literature which may be said to have preceded the collections of the Suttapiṭaka or belonged to roughly the same period does not testify to the fact that the belief in rebirth was widespread or that there was any clear formulation of a rebirth theory during the pre-Buddhist period.

A clear conception of transmigration is conspicuously absent in the Rgveda. The idea that the departed ancestors survive in the realm of *Pitrs* was associated with the Vedic ritual of ancestor worship, but the Rgvedic notion of *Pitrs* does not suggest that the departed ones could be subject to repeated death and rebirth. There is also mention of the destiny of the evil doers as destruction in the abysmal hell to which they are cast. The Atharvaveda too makes no mention of a belief in transmigration. The Brahmanas refer to the possibility of a second death (*punarmanu*), but there is no trace of a systematic doctrine of transmigration in this literature. The Upanishads present a variety of speculative theories about the destiny of man, and rebirth is sometimes presented as one of the theories. Upanishadic sages like Yajñavalkya, Uddalaka and Prajapati propounded theories

137

about the eternity of the soul, affirming the survival of the soul after bodily death, but not the possibility of transmigration in a series of future lives. <sup>4</sup> Upanishadic speculation appears to have led to a variety of one-life-after-death theories. Upanishadic passages sometimes speak of the journey of the soul of the dead person passing from this world to the wind, the sun, the moon, finally reaching the world free from heat and cold to dwell there eternally.<sup>5</sup> According to the Taittiriya Upanishad, the dead person takes different personality forms which are said to consist of food (*annamavam*), of the life-principle (*pranavam*), of mind (*manomavam*), of consciousness (*viṇanamayam*) and of bliss (*anandamayam*). <sup>6</sup> The Pothapada Sutta mentions the belief in this variety of personality forms reflecting the fact that the compilers of the Pali canon were aware of these Upanishadic beliefs. There is mention of rebirth as man or animal in the Bhṛhadaraṇyaka and the Chandogya Upanishads, but this does not seem to have been the standard belief in the Upanishads? It is in the later post-Buddhist Upanishads that the belief in transmigration appears to have been generally accepted. <sup>8</sup>

While there is no evidence to suggest that the belief in rebirth was

universally accepted or widespread prior to the advent of Buddhism, there is also evidence both in the Pali Nikayas and other literary sources to the effect that there was a substantial section of thinkers during the time that Buddhism emerged, who questioned the belief in any form of personal survival after death. This rejection and skepticism came mainly from the materialists, the sceptics and the free thinking elite of the time. The materialists must have had considerable influence on the thought of the period. In the Buddha's general classification of the different world-views of the time, he distinguishes between eternalism (*sassatavada* or *sassataditthi*) and annihilationism (*ucchedavada* or *ucchedadit.t.hi*). The Pali Nikayas also refer to them as *bhavadit.t.hi* and *vibhavaditthi*, and as two extreme views on the nature of life held in mutual opposition to each other.<sup>9</sup> The fact that such a distinction is made in the Pali Nikayas shows the degree of influence the annihilationist view must have had on the thinking of this period. In the light of this evidence it is reasonable to

138

conclude that the belief in rebirth was neither universally held nor widespread at the time of the emergence of Buddhism. It is possible that the doctrines of *kamma* and rebirth took definite shape under Buddhism and Jainism and this could also be the explanation for the wide prevalence of the belief in the post-Buddhist period of Indian religion and philosophy. The evidence contained in the various scriptural sources including the Pali Canonical scriptures does not favor the conclusion that Buddhism would have accepted the doctrine of rebirth because it was a well established belief in the pre-Buddhist background. What the evidence suggests is that there were only rudimentary ideas on the possibility of a future life. It was probably under Buddhism and Jainism that these rudimentary ideas were given definite shape and systematically woven into the soteriological fabric of these systems. To say that rebirth is a belief which Buddhism took for granted as an inheritance from the Brahmanical system is to underestimate the importance of the contribution of Buddhism in the field of Indian eschatology.

### 3. Rebirth in the Suttapi~aka of the Pali Canon

The scriptural material preserved in the Suttapi~aka of the Theravada Pali canon is generally believed to represent the teachings of Buddhism prior to its division into different schools of thought. Therefore, as a primary source for the study of Buddhist ideas in their earliest form, the literature preserved in this stratum requires special attention. There is evidence that at least by the third century B.c. the scriptural collections of the Theravada canon took final form, until they were officially put to writing in the first century B.c. in Sri Lanka. It is reasonable to believe that the original core of ideas was preserved in a mnemonic tradition which goes back to the time of the Buddha himself. The historical records of the Theravada tradition maintain that this function was officially entrusted to certain leading disciples of the Buddha at the first council held one month after his demise where his teachings were rehearsed by a council of one hundred of his immediate disciples. Although there is a possibility that later ideas crept into these collections as a result of editorial handling at subsequent

139

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Theravada Councils which rehearsed the Buddha's teachings, it is highly probable that some of the earliest Buddhist responses to existing religious and philosophical ideas are reflected in the canonical collections of the Suttapitaka.

#### 3.1 The Alleged Epistemological Basis of the Belief

An epistemological claim that the Buddha is represented as making according to the Pali Nikayas is that his teachings are not based on traditional authority or pure reasoning, but on personal knowledge of a special kind referred to as *abhinna* (higher knowledge or super-cognition). There are six types of *abhinna* mentioned in the *suttas*, out of which two are admitted as means of directly verifying in one's personal experience the truths of rebirth and *kamma*. The first is called *pubbenivasanussati-nana*, meaning knowledge involving the memory of previous lives, and the second, *cutupapata-nana*, meaning knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings. The second is believed to be a social application of a super-cognitive faculty described as *dibbacakkhu*, meaning clairvoyance, the possessor of which is said to be capable of seeing things that do not come within the focus or range of the normal eye. All super-cognitive faculties are said to be a natural causal consequence of a systematic cultivation of the mind through the practice of yoga. Early Buddhism did not consider the two super-cognitive faculties associated with the knowledge of rebirth and *kamma* to be an exclusive attainment of the Buddhist Yogi. The Pali Nikayas mention that the Buddha himself, prior to his own independent search for truth, underwent training under teachers who were proficient in the techniques of yoga meditation and attained some states of meditative rapture. The Brahmajala sutta attributes

some of the metaphysical dogmas which the Buddha rejected to recluses and Brahmins who indulged in rational speculation based on experiences such as memory of past lives which they acquired by yogic exercise. 10 According to the Buddhist description of the process of acquiring the higher cognitive faculties which are sometimes described as extrasensory perceptions the human mind can be inclined towards the operation of these abilities when it reaches a very high level of mental composure or concentration (*samadhi*). The Samannaphala-sutta, 140

for instance, describes the point at which the meditator is able to incline his mind towards the acquisition of these higher forms of knowing in the following terms: He (the meditating *bhikkhu*) whose mind is thus composed, purified, cleansed, freed from blemish, freed from defilement, refined, made pliable, and made steady, and immovable, applies and inclines his mind towards the knowledge involving the remembering of past lives. 11

In tracing the development of epistemological approaches in Indian thought K.N. Javatileke observes that dependence on a kind of experience obtained by means of a special training of the mind through *yoga* became common during the time of the emergence of Buddhism and was used as a method of knowing by the the Buddhists, the Jains, the Ajivakas and the thinkers of the Middle and Late Upanishads. 12 It is possible that these traditions picked up a contemplative tradition which was already there and gave it prominence over the ritualistic religion which had gained prominence under the influence of orthodox Brahmins. The super-cognitive experience of remembering pre-existence is described in numerous canonical passages. The standard canonical description is to be found in the Samannaphala-sutta, which is supposed to be a discourse of the Buddha intended at describing the progressive fruits of the Buddhist path. According to this description, the mind of the *bhikkhu* who attains a sufficient degree of composure can be inclined to restore the memories of previous lives going back not to one or two but limitlessly through many periods of evolution and dissolution of the world system. One who acquires this ability is said to be able to remember every detail of one's pre-existent lives, including the nature of one's physical form, name, family, the experiences of pleasure and pain one has had, and the nature of one's death. This is explained not as a direct access into the past as though the past were still in existence, but as a restoration of past memories. Where the standard description of this experience is to be met within the canonical texts, it is stated that this experience is exactly similar, at the phenomenological level, to the experience of a person who sets out on a journey from one's own village, and visits a number of places in other villages, later 141

returns to one's own village and remembers whatever experiences one had in one's visits, or whatever activities one engaged in during that time. B This is one ... of the three kinds of knowledge (*tevijjii*) which the Buddha and most of the early *arahats* (Buddhist saints) claimed to possess.

The other super-cognitive experience called *cutupapata-nana*, related to the knowledge of both rebirth and *kamma*, is an application of a wider faculty described as *dibbacakkhu* the possession of which is believed to enable a person to exercise clairvoyant vision. When this kind of supernormal vision is attained it is believed that one can personally witness the occurrence of rebirth in the case of other persons who pass away from this existence. One is said to be able to observe not only the occurrence of rebirth but also that it occurs according to a certain causal pattern. It is said that one could observe through the activity of this faculty that those whose conduct has been morally good take a happy rebirth and those whose conduct has been morally evil take an unhappy rebirth after their death. 14 Clairvoyant perception as is generally understood in early Buddhism is the faculty by which one can transcend the limitations imposed by the normal physical eye on one's ability to have visual experience of things and events occurring in physical space. Clairvoyance, in other words, enables one to have an extended visual experience. Thus in the exercise of clairvoyance one is said to be able to have access to visual objects which are inaccessible to one's normal human visual capacity. However, the content of the cognitive experience of clairvoyance takes the form of visual data and nothing else. For something to be the content of a visual experience there must be a visible form causally related to the experience of seeing. Clairvoyance is not a means of seeing the past or the future directly. It is only a contemporaneous event that can be observed by means of clairvoyance. When referring to the application of clairvoyance for observing the survival of beings after death, the canonical texts say that a person with clairvoyant vision observes the death and rebirth of any particular individual, at the time this process takes place. There are certain theoretical difficulties about the intelligibility of the Buddhist position with respect to both these so-called super-cognitive faculties which are claimed in Buddhism as the 142

experiential basis for the doctrine of rebirth. Closer attention will be paid to these difficulties later in this chapter.

Instances are mentioned in the Pali canon itself of skepticism about the Buddhist claim to have super-normal faculties of knowing in general, and also the claim that these faculties can be used to verify the truth of rebirth and *kamma*. One such instance is where a Brahmin student named Subha refuses to accept the Buddha's claim to have super-normal faculties of knowing, referring to the opinion of a senior Brahmin teacher named Pokkharasati. In the opinion of the latter, the claim that a human being is capable of acquiring a special kind of super-human knowledge and vision is a ridiculous, worthless and an empty one. IS The other instance referred to in the Pali canon is the discussion between a Buddhist monk named Kumarakassapa and a person named Payasi who was skeptical about the belief that human beings survive after death and that they experience the fruits of good or bad acts of the present life in a future existence. 16 As reasons for his disbelief, Payasi points out that (1) no individual who departs from this world has ever returned and informed us about his survival in another existence and (2) it is not possible to observe anything passing out from the dying person to be born in the next world. Payasi found it impossible to believe in the truth of a future life because he could not find any empirical evidence in favor of it. Kumarakassapa argues that Payasi's assumptions are mistaken, and that there are other explanations to account for the facts that he adduces as disconfirming evidence for the hypothesis that people are reborn. Above all, it is pointed out that an argument of the form 'I do not see X: I do not know X; therefore X does not exist' cannot be valid. For if it is valid, a person born blind could say that because he does not see light, colors or material forms and objects, they do not exist. Kumarakassapa's point is that since ordinary persons do not have the super-normal faculties for verifying the truth of rebirth and *kamma* they should not commit themselves to the view that these beliefs are not true, disregarding the experiences of those who have acquired those higher faculties. The above evidence shows that the expressly stated epistemological foundation for the 143

canonical Buddhist doctrines of rebirth and *kamma* was super-normal experience which may be called a kind of extra-sensory perception (*abhinna*). However, one may be inclined to hold either that these claims about extra-sensory perception are mythical embellishments for asserting certain religious dogmas or that those experiences actually occur to the religious believer but are not veridical in any empirical sense.

According to the Theravada canonical standpoint, the first beginning of individuated life cannot be traced even by the exercise of the super-normal regression of memory into past existences. For according to the Buddhist belief about the retrocognitive memory experienced in *pubbenivasanussati-na!* the more one goes back into the past the more one remembers. The postulate of a creator God as the explanation for the first beginning of the individuated process in the cycle of birth and death (*samsara*) is not accepted in Buddhism. The causal formula consisting of twelve factors is sometimes given to explain the process of death and rebirth, but it is categorically stated that none of these factors can be viewed as an uncaused first cause of the process. In the Pali canon the Buddha is often represented as saying that *samsara* is without a known beginning (*anamatta-gaava!*... *samsara, pubba koti na panna-*). This position is consistent with the Buddhist rejection of revelation and speculative reason as a means of establishing extra-empirical truths. One's own personal past can be restored in one's memory going back to a beginningless pre-existent past. But reaching absolute beginning is believed to be a practical and psychological impossibility.

### 3.2 Place of the Doctrines of Rebirth and *Kamma* in the Canonical WorldView

How important are the doctrines of rebirth and *kamma* to the Theravada canonical world view? Attempts are sometimes made by modern interpreters of Buddhism to argue that the Buddha did not accept the dogma of transmigration. Keith for instance believes that the doctrine of transmigration is incompatible with the Buddhist doctrine *anatta* (no-self), and suggests the possibility, that the 144

Buddha as a true rationalist absolutely declined to accept the dogma of transmigration. I? J.G. Jennings quite definitely holds that the Buddha did not believe or teach rebirth or karma. 18 This view cannot be accepted unless we have' reason to say that the Theravada canon has grossly misrepresented the Buddha. The teaching of the Buddha is often presented in all Buddhist traditions in the form of Four Noble Truths. The first truth, *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness) as conceived in the Theravada canonical teachings, is not confined to the unsatisfactoriness of the present life alone. The idea of a cyclic existence (*samsara*) involving a repeated process of birth, death, old age, disease and

frustrations is emphasized in Theravada Buddhism in order to draw attention to the urgency of the need to work out one's salvation. The Buddha is said to have uttered a paean of joy immediately after attaining enlightenment. There he makes emphatic reference to the mass of *dukkha* suffered in numerous lives in the cycle of *samsara*.<sup>19</sup> The Buddha is represented as saying that he as well as others have suffered for an immensely long time in *samsara* due to the failure to understand the Four Noble Truths. It is also important to note that the Buddha considered the doctrine of annihilation (*ucchedavada*) as a wrong belief (*miccha-ditthi*), one of the two theoretical extremes to be avoided. Some existing beliefs held mostly by thinkers inclined to a materialist world view at the time of the Buddha such as that there is no world beyond (*natthi para loka*), that there is no fruit or consequence to be enjoyed or suffered by the doer of moral or immoral actions (*natthi sukata-dukkatana~ kammana~ phala~ vipaJco*), that there are no spirit worlds in which beings come into being spontaneously without the observable biological processes of the world accessible to normal sense perception (*natthi satta opapatika*) were considered by the Buddha as false. The ultimate goal of Buddhism, *Nibbana*, is viewed as the destruction of birth (*jato*) and consequently, the process of *samsara*. In the standard formulation of the principle of Dependent Origination (*paticcasamuppada*) met within the Pali canon, birth is given as the cause of old age, death, misery, frustration and anxiety (*jati paccaya jaramarana-dukkha- damanassupayasa uppajjantO*). So at least one aspect of *Nibbana* is that it is liberation from the miserable process of rebirth 1/

145

which brings in its train the whole mass of suffering. The eradication of all tendencies that give rise to the continuity of the five aggregates of grasping to which the personality of a being is analyzed in Theravada Buddhism is believed to be the means of preventing birth taking place. The ending of rebirth or re-becoming amounts to the ending of *dukkha*. Although the teachings of the Buddha could be reinterpreted in such a way that the meaningfulness of its concept of *dukkha* is confined to the present life of an individual, the weight of the evidence in the Pali scriptures does not favor such a reinterpretation. Some of the principal aspects of the Buddhist world view, its teachings about the moral life and its views on the human predicament may be meaningful even to a person who does not believe in pre-existence or survival. But this does not alter the fact that the Buddha himself accepted the reality of rebirth, and that the belief was traditionally held to be an essential part of the Buddhist world-view. If Buddhism totally denied the continuity of individuated life and personal identity in a series of pre-existent as well as possible future lives it may be argued that given the Buddhist premise that there is a predominance of misery, the more convenient solution to escape such misery would have been suicide rather than a scheme of rigorous self discipline and spiritual training. But the established view in all Buddhist traditions is that beings undergo a lengthy process of spiritual evolution through an incalculable series of *samsaric* lives. The attainment of full enlightenment (*sammambodhi*), or sainthood (*arahatta*), is not believed to be a product of an individual's spiritual endeavour during a single human lifetime. It involves the fulfillment of perfections over an incalculable period of time in *samsara*. This idea of spiritual evolution over many births in *samsara* has determined to a large extent the moral teachings that apply to the ordinary life of the layperson in Theravada Buddhist societies.

The Buddhist teachings of the Theravada canon discourages inquiries into matters of a metaphysical nature as well as those having no immediate relevance to the goal of liberating oneself from the unsatisfactoriness that is part of man's existential predicament. According to the Sabbasava Sutta, to be preoccupied with thoughts such as from whence did I come, did I exist in the past, will I exist

146

in the future is to give way to wrong reflection (*ayoniso manasikara*), which results in the growth of cankers (*asava*).<sup>20</sup> The canon also refers to an instance in which the Buddha, addressed a class of people whom he considered to be intellectuals of the time (*vinnu purisa*). They had been sceptical about the rebirth doctrine. In this instance the Buddha had advised them to give up evil conduct even if they could not accept rebirth as a fact, for that would ensure them happiness in the present life in any case, while also protecting them from any harm that could befall on them if it turned out to be the case that there is a future life.<sup>21</sup> The Buddha did not consider it necessary to know the truth about rebirth to understand the existential truth that here and now man creates suffering for himself and others by acting under the sway of greed, hatred and delusion. What was of immediate concern for the Buddha was not the intricate details about the mechanics of rebirth, but the effective means of overcoming the miseries that are present here and now. This explains the absence of any detailed inquiry into the rebirth mechanism for its own sake in the canonical sources.

3.3 Theravada Notions on the Nature of the Cosmos and the Variety of Life

## Forms in the Universe

According to the Theravada view of the nature of the cosmos, the world known to most of us inhabited by humans and other lower species of life, is not the only one in which living beings exist. There are other planes of existence in which a variety of other forms of life exist. This view of the nature of the cosmos and the variety of life forms inhabiting the different planes of existence is closely linked to the Theravada doctrines of *kamma* and rebirth. Pre-existence and survival is not conceived merely in terms of a series of earth-lives. Buddhism grades the various existences in the cosmos according to the quality of the pleasure or pain experienced by living beings born in them. The Pali canonical scriptures mention that the Buddha was able with his clairvoyant vision to see some forms of existence in the cosmos in which everything one experiences is unpleasant and painful and others in which everything one experiences is pleasant

147

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and enjoyable. The former are called hells (*niraya*) and the latter heavens (*sagga*). Whether any particular individual is reborn in one of the *niraya* worlds or in one of the *sagga* worlds is determined by his *kamma*.

There are several classifications in the Pali Nikayas of the types of existence to which a living being could be reborn. One principal classification is in terms of five types of destiny (*pancagati*). The five types of destiny are given in the followings order: (1) *niraya* (purgatory), (2) *tiracchanayoni* (existence as lower animals), (3) *pittivisaya* (the ghost world), (4) *manussa* (human world) and (5) *deva* (existence as divine or luminous beings). Out of these (1) to (3) are considered woeful states of existence (*duggati*) while (4) and (5) are considered pleasant states of existence (*sugati*). Another classification which is usually tied up with the destiny of living beings according to their spiritual maturity is given as three types of becoming (*tayo bhava*). In ascending order, they are (1) *kamabhava* (the sensuous realm), (2) *rupabhava* (the realm of subtle forms) and (3) *arupabhava* (formless realm). The material worlds with desires and greed including the world of humans and worlds of some *devas* come within the sensuous realm. The Realm of Form and the Formless Realm are considered to be higher spheres of existence in which persons who have attained a high level of mental culture and an altered state of consciousness through the practice of meditation are reborn. The Theravada canon also refers to nine types of abodes of living beings (*navasattavasa*). The first four of these abodes are differentiated in terms of the similarity or dissimilarity in the type of physical and psychical constitution of the beings born in these abodes, as being dissimilar in body as well as consciousness, similar in body but dissimilar in consciousness and so on, while the others correspond to the states of rapturous meditative consciousness attained, beginning with the sphere of infinity of space (*akasanancavatana*) and ending with the *nirodha samapatti* (the rapturous state in which both perception and feeling cease to function). The last abode is called the abode of unconscious beings (*asannasatta*). The first seven of these abodes of beings are also called the seven stations of consciousness (*sattavinnanattithiyo*). According to yet another division into four planes of existence (*bhumi*), post canonical Theravada texts

148

mention (1) *apayabhumi*, (2) *kamasugatibhumi*, (3) *Rupavacarabhumi* and (4) *aropavacarabhumi*. Under this classification the first includes all spheres described as woeful states of existence and the second the human world and some states of heavenly existence like the *Catummaharajika* and the *Tavatimsa* heavens where a predominance of sensuous enjoyment is to be found. The remaining two correspond to (2) and (3) in the classification under the three types of becoming mentioned above and are conceived as spheres transcending sensuality where persons who have attained a kind of meditational superconsciousness are reborn. Names of a number of heavenly worlds falling under these spheres occur in the Theravada literature with vivid descriptions of the pleasures and comforts enjoyed by beings born in them. There also are instances in which names of woeful states called *nirava* and vivid descriptions of the sufferings evil doers reborn in those states are subjected to are given. Such enumerations may be seen as an attempt on the part of Buddhist cosmological thought to create its own cosmic mythology, to fit the life of morality and spirituality advocated in the Buddhist teaching and to conceive the universe as consisting of many planes of existence inhabited by diverse types of living beings enjoying or suffering varying degrees of pleasure or pain depending on the state of their moral and spiritual development. All spheres of existence, whether they be purgatories or heavens, were conceived as temporary stations in the beginningless flow of *samsaric* life. In the ultimate sense they were all considered to be characterized by unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) because of their transient nature. The process of wandering hither and thither in this vast and

endless cosmic ocean of *samsara* is without a known beginning. In this process there occurs progression as well as regression depending on the operation of the spiritual law of *kamma*. One who enjoyed the pleasures of the highest heaven may regress to suffer in the most tortuous hell depending on what one has inherited in the form of *punna* (merit) or *papa* (demerit). Corruptibility is ever present as a fact about the predicament of all beings exposing everyone to the danger of being thrust by virtue of one's own behavior into the deepest abyss until such time as one gets established in at least the first fruit of the path of spiritual progress (*sotapatti*) which ensures liberation at the end of the attainment

149

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of enlightenment. Life in the human condition is believed to be the most opportune moment for progression, or even for the final deliverance, for it is in the human condition that one could engage in spiritual activity. In the heavenly forms of existence one enjoys the fruits of good *kamma* and shows no concern for spiritual progress, and in the lower forms of existence, one suffers the consequences of bad *kamma* and lacks the freedom, intelligence or capacity for spiritual endeavor. The ultimate goal of the Buddhist is to attain *Nibbana* which puts a final end to birth in any form.

#### 3.4 Rebirth, Kamma and the no-self doctrine

One of the distinctive features of the Theravada Buddhist theory of rebirth is that while affirming the continuity of individuated existence and personal responsibility for one's good or bad deeds in terms of reaping *kammic* consequences in the course of existence in many lives to come, it denies the persistence of an immutable entity or spiritual substance which is liberated and attains immortality at the end of an individual's spiritual career. The doctrine that there is an eternal essence called the *atman* or *jiva*, a Self in a metaphysical sense, which transmigrates until it attains final liberation from the cycle is referred to in the Pali canonical teachings as *sassatavada* (eternalism). The Buddha considers this as equally objectionable as the other extreme which holds that all beings are annihilated at death (*ucchedavada*). The metaphysical question whether the body of a person is identical with the essence of his life or the soul (*tam jivam tam sariram*), or whether they are different (*annaññam jivam annam sariram*), appears to have been debated during the time of the Buddha. The Buddha refused to commit himself to either of these two positions. He considered the view that the body or the material component and the mind or the animate part of a living being are identical as an affirmation of the annihilationist doctrine. According to this view bodily identity is a necessary condition for the identity of a person. When the body disintegrates at death its spatio-temporal continuity ceases. What is referred to as mind is merely a by-product of matter which cannot in any way continue to exist when the body of a living being is destroyed.

150

From this view it follows that there is no person in the absence of the body which appears at birth, attains gradual maturity, performs various observable functions, and disintegrates after death. The other view that the body and soul are different was considered by the Buddha as an affirmation of the eternalist doctrine. This was the position taken by thinkers who believed in the existence of an eternal soul entity. According to this doctrine the soul is indestructible. Salvation consists in freeing the eternal soul from its bondage to the transient body. The Buddha accepted continuity of individuated existence, but rejected the theory of an eternal substance over and above the changing processes of mind and matter. This position is often presented as the theoretical middle way of the Buddha which avoids falling into the two extremes of eternalism and annihilationism. The eternalist thinkers found it difficult to account for rebirth and *kamma* without postulating an eternal soul which is the enduring subject of all experience. On the assumption that change and personal identity are incompatible notions they accepted an eternal soul as the principle which gives identity to the person not only in one life time, but through a series of *samsaric* births. The annihilationist thinkers did not find any convincing epistemological reason for believing in a self which is separable from the body, and concluded that personal identity is preserved only as far as there is spatio-temporal continuity of the body. Buddhism denies both the dualistic doctrine according to which the body is perishable but the soul is eternal, as well as the monistic doctrine of the materialists of a single individuated life according to which a person consists of nothing but the body and its observable behavior. So Buddhism seems to be rejecting the assumption that change and personal identity are incompatible as well as the assumption that bodily identity is a necessary criterion of personal identity. Canonical Buddhism of the Theravada tradition appears to be presenting a qualified dualism in connection with the question of the body-mind relationship. The Buddha appears to have used analysis as an effective method of teaching. Sometimes the Buddha himself preferred to be called an analyst

(*vibhajjavado*), and later, the Theravada school which claimed to follow closely the original word of the Buddha also described itself as the analytical school of

151

Buddhist thought. The no-soul doctrine of Theravada Buddhism may be seen as a consequence of the application of the analytical method in examining the notion of a person. Throughout the Pali Nikaya literature the analysis of what we conventionally call a person or a being into its constituent elements occurs very frequently.

According to one mode of analysis the psychophysical organism (*namarupa*), is analysed into five aggregates or groups (*pancakkhandha*). They are (1) *rupa* (material form), (2) *vedana* (sensations), (3) *sanna* (perceptions), (4) *sankhara* (volitions) and (5) *vinnana* (consciousness). *Rupa* represents the material constituent of person and is believed to be composed of the four material elements commonly described as earth (*pa'havi*), water (*capo*), fire (*tejo*) and air (*vayo*). *Vedana* signifies all sensations which are analysed mainly in terms of their hedonic tone into pleasant (*sukha*), unpleasant (*dukkha*) and neutral (*adukkhamasukha*) sensations. *Sanna* stands for all concepts arising from the activity of sense perception. *Sankhara* are the dispositional tendencies that have become relatively stable features of an individual's personality. They can also be described as character traits of an individual that have become established as a result of repeated types of bodily, verbal and mental functions. *Vinnana* stands for the consciousness generated by each of the six senses admitted in Buddhism. Right knowledge leading to emancipation consists in having insight into the fact that all these constituents of personality are causally conditioned (*paticcasamuppanna*) and transient (*anicca*), that they involve unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and that they do not have the immutable character traditionally attributed to the Atman, the metaphysical soul. There is no person over and above these five aggregates. A person is merely a causally conditioned process consisting of the unbroken flow of these five aggregates. It is a mistake to identify the person with anyone or with the totality of these aggregates. To look for the person within or outside these five aggregates as a separately identifiable entity is to make something like what Gilbert Ryle called a category mistake.<sup>22</sup> The canonical sources laid the foundation for what later came to be asserted in the Theravada tradition of a strictly no-self doctrine. In the canonical

152

teaching itself it is said that the concept of a person or a being is a worldly convention (*sammuti*). Just as the word chariot comes into our linguistic usage when certain parts are put together in a certain order and connection, so the convention 'being' arises when the aggregates are found to be organized in a certain relation.<sup>23</sup>

The entire empirical world including the subject of experience as well as the objects of experience is sometimes analyzed in Buddhism, without resorting to the common subject object terminology. The analysis of the phenomenal world into twelve spheres (*dvadasayatana*) consisting of the six senses and their objects and also into eighteen elements (*attharasadhātu*) consisting of the twelve spheres plus the consciousness generated from the interaction between each sense and its datum, as for instance, the visual consciousness generated by the interaction between the visual sense and material forms, appears to be an attempt to conceptualize reality leaving aside the common notions of persons and objects.<sup>24</sup> The analytical approach of the canonical scriptures provided the basis for the later Theravada assertion that there is no invisible person identifiable in terms of an immutable essence residing within the visible physical body. The Theravada adopted a reductionist approach reducing a person to its constituent elements and denying the theoretical position that linguistic entities like personal pronouns and terms like self, and person refer to a simple entity which has an existence of its own apart from the causally conditioned processes of mind and matter. The question of identity has been raised in the Pali Nikayas with regard to the Buddhist doctrine of *kamma*. There is an instance in the Pali Nikayas, where the Buddha's teaching concerning the absence of permanence in the aggregates constituting personality, is said to have been understood by one of his immediate disciples as involving the view that one does not experience the consequences of one's good or bad deeds. This, however, is immediately rejected by the Buddha himself as a misunderstanding.<sup>25</sup> Here too, the canonical position is represented as a middle position between two extreme views. The first extreme to be avoided is that there is a permanent entity which is both the agent of actions

153

and the experiencer of the consequences of deeds (*so karoti so patisamvediyati*). The second extreme is the view that there is no continuity whatsoever, between the doer and the experiencer (*anno karoti, anno patisamvediyati*). The former is identified with the eternalist doctrine and the latter with the annihilationist

doctrine.<sup>26</sup> While rejecting the belief in a metaphysical soul, Buddhism made an attempt to reconcile its position on the nature of a person with its assertion of personal responsibility for moral and immoral actions, the consequences of which were believed to be personally experienced in the round of rebirths. This position is merely asserted in the canonical period, but Milindapanha a post-canonical Theravada work resorts to many analogical arguments to rationally defend it. In rejecting both the "identity view" expressed as "the self -same person is the doer and the experiencer of the consequence of the deed" (*so karoti, so patisamvedeti*) and the "discontinuity view" expressed as "the doer is one and the experiencer of the consequence of the deed another" (*anno karoti, anno patisamvedeti*) the Pali canonical sources present as an alternative explanation which avoids these positions and takes the middle way, the explanation in terms of the twelvefold formula of dependent origination.

Buddhism was faced with the problem of explaining the basis on which personal identity can be understood in the absence of an enduring entity like the soul or *Atman* admitted in other systems which accepted the doctrine of reincarnation. It appears that the problem had occurred to some of the disciples of the Buddha as shown in the instance of Sati's error mentioned in the Pali canon. Sati is reported to have held the view that it is *vinnana* (consciousness) that transmigrates without undergoing change (*vinnaṃ sandhavati sa-sarati ananna-*). He believed that *vinnana* is the self-identical subject of experience, the doer and experiencer of the consequences of good or evil action. The Buddha, however, does not allow this, and repudiates Sati's view as a heresy. and reprimands him for expressing a view which is contrary to his teaching.

*Vinnana*, it is pointed out quite emphatically, is a factor of personality that is constantly conditioned and renewed with dependence on the senses and their respective data.<sup>27</sup> It is no simple immutable entity which has the character of

154  
personance attributed to the metaphysical Atman. The Buddha's position was that whatever is referred to by the terms *Scitta, mana and vinna!*, all of which were used as synonyms of mind is subject to change with greater rapidity than the material component of personality, the physical body. The physical body obviously serves as the most convenient criterion for establishing the identity of a person within one life time, for although the body itself undergoes change, it remains to be spatio-temporally continuous. But how is identity to be established after the physical body is destroyed at death? Mental phenomena cannot be conceived as being spatially located, although they may in some sense be conceived as enduring in time. The Buddhist theory is compelled to resort to some explanation in terms of mental continuity in order to make its concept of personal identity through many lives intelligible.

### 3.5 Mechanics of Rebirth According to the Theravada Canon

It has already been mentioned that the Pali Nikayas avoided the detailed discussion of the mechanics of rebirth. However, certain implications can be drawn from statements related to the birth and death of beings scattered in the *suttas*. It was probably the development of these implications that was attempted in the later scholasticism of the Abhidhamma. In the Mahatahasankhaya-sutta of the Majjhimanikaya, the Buddha states that conception of a life in a mother's womb takes place when three conditions come together. The first condition is the sexual union of the parents. Secondly, the mother has to be a menstruating woman. Thirdly, there should be the presence of a factor referred to as the *gandhabba*.<sup>28</sup> Buddhism appears to have recognized a third factor of a psychic nature unobservable by the ordinary senses as necessary for conception to take place in addition to the biological processes that are open to ordinary sensory observation. The Pali Nikayas do not clarify the concept of *gandhabba*, and as a result it came to be understood differently in the Theravada and other schools of Buddhism. According to some non-Theravada Abhidhamma schools *gandhabba* stands for an intermediate ghostly kind of existence to which the departed person is believed to enter before that person takes a definite rebirth. Theravada rejected

155  
the notion of an intermediate existence (*antarabhava*) and interpreted *gandhabba* as the psychic element which reconnects "in the rebirth process. It was conceived as a kind of *vinnana*, consciousness or mind factor which was later explained in Theravada scholastic doctrine in terms of its theory of mental moments (*cittakkhana*).

In the Theravada tradition the twelvefold formula of dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*) is interpreted as an application of the notion of dependent origination to explain the process of *dukkha* in the cycle of *samsaric* births. The twelvefold formula links *dukkha* to birth (*jatO*). It is repeated birth that creates the burden of *dukkha*. The cause of *dukkha*, as explained in the Four Noble Truths is craving (*tanha*). Therefore craving can also be said to be the cause of rebirth. For craving results in clinging (*upadana*) and clinging results in

becoming (*bhava*) and the becoming takes place in one of the three planes of existence, the sensuous plane, the plane of subtle form, or the formless plane. Buddhaghosa interprets the twelvefold formula of *paticcasamuppada* as classifiable into factors that belong to the past, present and future births in the *samsaric* process of any particular individual. *Avijja* (ignorance) and *sankhara* (volitional impulses) belong to the past life, *vinnana* (consciousness), *namariipa* (psychophysical organism), *salayatana* (the six sense spheres), *phassa* (sense contact), *vedana* (sensation), *tanha* (craving), and *upadana* (clinging) belong to the present life and *bhava*, (becoming) *jati* (birth) and the rest belong to the future life. Although it is highly doubtful whether the Buddha actually intended the twelvefold formula to be applied in this manner, Buddhaghosa's classification points to some crucial links in the formula. As an explanation of the rebirth process the connections between *sankhara* and *vinnana*, and between *vinnana* and *namarupa* are believed to be particularly significant. In the relation expressed as *sankhara paccaya vinnanam* (consciousness is dependent on dispositions or volitional tendencies) it is proposed that *vinnana* is to be interpreted as "the psychic factor which survives physical death and by entering the womb helps the development of a new individuality in conjunction with the

156  
biophysical factors ...in a newly begun individual." 29 According to the Mahanidana-sutta, the psychophysical organism (*namarupa*) of a new being would not develop unless consciousness enters the mother's womb. Even after entry into the mother's womb, if consciousness subsequently leaves, the birth of a new being would be stalled. The repeated process of birth, decay, death and suffering is explained in the *sutta* as a result of *vinna!la* getting established in the psychophysical organism.<sup>30</sup> *Vinnana*, in this context, appears to have been taken as having a kind of loose connection with a particular biophysical organism. It is however recognized as the animating principle which sustains the growth and continuity of any particular biophysical organism. Although the concept of an unchanging eternal *vinna!la* which bears the character of the Soul or Atman is not recognized in Buddhism, the possibility of the continuity of the psychic process in combination with a new biophysical base appears to be admitted. The idea of a stream of consciousness which flows with unbroken continuity establishing itself in this world and in the other world (*purisassa vinnanasota!fl ...ubhayato abbocchinna!fl idha loke pati~hitan caparaloke patitthitan caY* is found in the canon.<sup>31</sup>

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In the Nidanamyutta of the Samyuttanikaya where most of the Buddha's! utterances on dependent origination are classified there is a passage which clearly states that rebirth takes place as a consequence of consciousness taking a foothold in a renewed process of becoming. It says:

Whatever one intends, whatever one plans for, whatever one has a latent desire for, that becomes an object for the establishment of consciousness. When (such) an object is given, that becomes a foothold for consciousness. When consciousness is established there, and when it grows, there is the occurrence of a future becoming.<sup>32</sup>

What the passage can be understood as is saying is that volitional charged desires, and the latent tendencies of the mind, do not let consciousness get dissolved at physical death. The strong active as well as latent desires cause the mind to cling to life, resulting in consciousness to seek for a new foothold to continue to survive. So the con~sciousness charged with volitional energy, craves

157  
for a new base for its survival and finding a base in a new environment which is chosen according to its inclinations, it thrives, leading to a renewed progression of a psychophysical being (*tasmim patitthite, vinnane virulhe, namarupassa avakkanti hoW*.<sup>33</sup>

The canonical reference to the *gandhabba* the presence of which was believed to be a requirement for a new human birth to take place has been interpreted and understood in the Theravada Buddhist tradition as this psychic element which survives the disintegration of the physical components of an individual at death. Nyanatiloka Thera, for instance, speaks of "karma energy" (*kamiavega*) as a necessary factor for the rebirth of a being. According to him it is this karma energy to which metaphorical reference is made in the *suttas* as *gandhabba*.<sup>34</sup>

The connection between *sankhara*, and *vinnana* in the formula of dependent origination is understood as the connection between *kamma* and the nature of the consciousness which continues into a new birth. It has already been mentioned that Buddhism accents a variety of planes of existence in the universe, affording varying degrees of pleasurable and painful experiences for beings taking birth in them. The form of existence in which a being is reborn is believed

to be determined by *kamma*. There are many instances in the canon where the function of *kamma* in the rebirth mechanism is discussed. The volitional impulses generated through the activity of body, word and mind are believed to condition a certain psychic potential capable of determining the destiny and the nature of experience of a particular individual. These volitionally generated forces or impulses sometimes referred to as *abhisankhara* have been characterized as either *punna/kusala* (wholesome) or *papa/akusala* (unwholesome), the former involving consequences which are unpleasant and the latter consequences which are pleasant in *samsaric* existence. According to this belief, it is persons with a greater share of wholesome *kamma*, who are born in spheres of existence in which life is generally more pleasant than painful. Buddhism makes the distinction between *punna/kusala* and *papa/akusala* purely

158  
in terms of a universalizable ethic. *Papa/akusala* impulses are generated by bodily, verbal and mental conduct which has greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) as their source. Thus typical instances of deeds generating unwholesome impulses are killing, stealing, unchastity, dishonesty, harsh and unrestrained speech etc., and of those generating wholesome impulses are charity, generosity, loving kindness, honesty and so forth. The Buddha explained the observable differences among living beings as a consequence of past *kamma*. According to the Buddha, there is a general correlation between the inequalities that living beings inherit by birth and their previous *kamma*. The inferiority or

excellence in the situation that any particular living being finds itself is said to be determined by *kamma* (*kammamsatte vibhajati vadidaññhinappanitaya*). The Culakammavibhanga-sutta mentions some general kammic correlations such as a short life span for those who had indulged in killing, frequent affliction with disease for those who had indulged in causing pain and injury to living beings and so on.<sup>35</sup>

The canonical teachings imply in no unmistakable terms that it is possible for a human being to regress into a birth as a lower animal depending on the nature of the dispositions one has cultivated. Dispositions are generally characterized as falling into two opposing groups as those which are not hurtful (*abyabajjha*) and those which are hurtful (*sabyabajjha*). They are acquired in the process of volitional activity performed by body, word and mind. A person who has the tendency to be reborn in a hurtful form of existence is one who has intensified hurtful dispositions in his behavior. This position is stated explicitly in the Kukkuravatika-sutta of the Majjhimanikaya. Two contemporaries of the Buddha who had adopted forms of ascetic practices known during that time are said to have inquired from the Buddha the relationship between their ascetic practices and future rebirths. One was a person who had resolved to take the canine vow (*kukkuravata*) which involved living exactly in the way dogs lived and the other, a person who had resolved to take the bovine vow (*govata*) which involved living exactly in the way cattle lived. The Buddha says that the one who fulfills the canine vow is likely to be reborn among dogs and the other who fulfills

159  
the bovine vow is likely to be reborn among cattle, for they have cultivated the dispositions that lead to such a rebirth. The Buddha says one is reborn according to the way one acts (*vam knroti, tena upappajjati*)<sup>36</sup>

Among the few instances in which the canonical texts deal with the mechanics of rebirth, there is one which suggests that the moment of death is very crucial in the determination of a person's future life. According to the Mahakammavibhanga-sutta, it is not the case that all those who have generally conducted themselves in an evil manner in this life are reborn in an unhappy state in the birth that immediately follows their departure from this life. This applies to one who generally conducts oneself in a morally good manner too, for even such a person's immediately following birth could be an unhappy one. In the Mahakammavibhanga-sutta, such an irregularity could sometimes occur due to two main reasons. One is that although a person has generally led a good life, his mind may get polluted at the moment of death resulting in an unhappy rebirth or although a person has generally led an evil life, a change of mind may occur at the moment of death resulting in a happy rebirth. The other reason is that the *kammic* potential which has been gathered in the remote past in *samsaric* existence may suddenly manifest itself at the moment of death to determine his future life.<sup>37</sup> The first suggestion has been elaborated upon by the later Theravada teachers on Abhidhammic lines. It also plays an important role in the popular beliefs and practices of Theravada Buddhists to the present day. It has become a common Theravada practice to make every effort to introduce wholesome stimuli to the dying person by his loved ones in order to condition his last thought moment to ensure that he attains a good rebirth.

According to the Sankharupatti-sutta, one can exercise a certain degree of

free control and direction over the dispositions and determine the future birth according to one's wishes. A person with certain moral qualities like confidence, virtue, learning, renunciation and wisdom is said to be able to cultivate the kind of mentality and resolve, and develop the kind of dispositions required for birth in a happy state.<sup>38</sup> In such instances the emphasis is on the possibility of control  
160

and direction of the rebirth making mechanism by the moral will of the individual concerned. At any point in a person's conscious life the nature of the dispositions can be enhanced, altered or given new direction. Thus within a scheme in which the notion of *kamma* is admitted to play the principal role in determining rebirth, an attempt is made to give sufficient emphasis to the individual's ability to exercise free choice.

The canonical position, which remained unaltered in the Theravada tradition was that the process of rebirth goes on as long as a person attains what is described as *asavakkhayanana*, the emancipating knowledge which leads to the destruction of all the defiling and rebirth-making influxes. This is what Buddhism calls the attainment of *nibbana*. With this attainment all the effect producing *kamma* is believed to be destroyed. A person who has attained this culmination of the goal of spiritual endeavor is described in Buddhism as one who has abandoned all effect producing *kammie* energies of a wholesome or unwholesome nature *punnapapapahina*). In the Theravada canon the ultimate attainment is said to assure one of the destruction of birth (*khina jatO*). The consciousness of a person who has attained the emancipating knowledge called the knowledge involving the destruction of impulses does not get established in a state of future becoming (*bhava*) in any of the three realms *kama*, *rupa* and *arupa*. Such a person is said to be completely calmed (*parinibbuta*) and to have put a final end to repeated birth. The aggregates of personality, *rupa*, *vedana*, *sanna*, *sankhara* and *vinnana* are finally dissolved putting a final end to *dukkha*. The Buddha in his own day had to confront the question as to what happens to the person who attains this kind of emancipation. The question was raised whether he continues to exist in some form or completely ceases to be. This is a question that canonical Buddhism left unanswered among a number of other questions of a metaphysical nature. The Buddha's position regarding such a question has been that the question itself is inappropriate and therefore, cannot and need not be answered. The Buddhist position is that a person in the sense of a really identifiable entity, does not exist, even before the attainment of emancipating knowledge. So the question whether any entity survives after the final death of  
161

the enlightened person is declared to be inappropriate. This explanation conforms to the doctrine of soullessness (*anatta*) in Buddhism. In the Theravada Abhidhamma period such questions were answered primarily in terms of the doctrine of two truths, conventional (*sammuti*) and absolute (*paramattha*). Although there were some suggestions in this direction in the canonical period this doctrine was explicitly formulated only during the Abhidhamma period of Buddhism.

The Kathavatthu, a text included among the seven books forming the Abhidhamma collection of the Theravada canon, shows that the question of identity became a subject of debate within different schools of Buddhism as early as the third century B. c., that is within two hundred years after the demise of the Buddha. The Kathavatthu opens its refutation of heresies that had emerged within the Buddhist tradition itself by refuting what it describes as the *puggalavada*. According to the commentary to the Kathavatthu, the Vajjiputtakas and Sammitiyas within the fold of Buddhism, and other heretical teachers outside Buddhism are said to have held the view that in reality there is a Self, Being, or Soul. The Theravadin argues:

If the identical soul when deceasing from this world and being reborn in another, is nowise different, then there will be no dying nor will taking life be possible.<sup>39</sup>

The Kathavatthu presents from the suttas a quotation which cannot be traced in the extant *sutta* collection of the Theravada canon. However, the point made in the quotation appears to be quite consistent with the position generally taken in the *suttas* about the notion of a self. According to this passage, the eternalists declare that there is a real self both in this world and the world to come. The annihilationists declare that there is a real self in this world itself but no such thing survives in a world to come. A fully enlightened Buddha declares that in fact and reality there is no self either in this world itself or in a world to come.<sup>40</sup> The Kathavatthu also rejects another theory accepted in some non-  
162

Theravada schools of Buddhism that there is a kind of intermediate existence (*antarabhava*) between a person's death and the taking of a new birth. The Commentary to the Kathavatthu attributes this view to the Pubbaselivas and the Sammitivas. The Abhidharmakosa which belongs to the Sautrantika sect also

advocated the view that a being immediately after death remains in the state of an intermediate existence and the *sutta* reference to *Gandhabba* has been explained in this tradition as a reference to this intermediate being seeking for a life in a new birth. The Theravada position is that a being can reappear only in one of the three forms of becoming (*kamabhava*, *rupabhava* or *arupabhava*) and that there can be no other *bhava* according to the teaching of the Buddha.<sup>41</sup> According to this view there is an unbroken continuity of the stream of consciousness with the last thought moment called departing consciousness (*cuticitta*) giving rise to the immediately succeeding moment of consciousness, the relinking consciousness or rebirth consciousness (*pa-sandhicitta*) in the next birth.

3.6 Religious and Moral Uses of the Rebirth Doctrine in the Theravada Canon  
There are some texts in the Theravada canon which are exclusively devoted to using the doctrinal notion of rebirth, presumably not in any actual sense but in the form of literary fiction. The purpose of these literary works seem to be to promote certain religious and moral ideals. The *Jataka* literature which has served as a supreme source of Buddhist moral values, as well as a basis for the enrichment of the art and literature of Theravada cultures is a classic example. The canonical portion of the *Jakas* contain in versified form, some utterances alleged to have been made by the Buddha himself on certain appropriate occasions to teach a moral by referring to the remote past in which the Buddha himself in his former births engaged in the perfection of the virtues required to attain Buddhahood. Some of these stories appear to have been adopted from the prevailing folklore to suit the moral purposes of Buddhism. The popular notions about rebirth among Theravada believers have been conditioned largely by these *Jataka* tales. The *bodhisatva*, or 'the being destined to become the Buddha' is represented in these tales sometimes as having taken a birth among animals such

163

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as a deer, a lion or a monkey, sometimes as a deity', or a human being. The intention was to illustrate through these tales the admirable and virtuous qualities that one who aspires to the attainment of the supreme enlightenment of a Buddha ought to cultivate, and thereby give moral guidance and direction specially to the Buddhist lay community. Each of these stories is devoted to the illustration of a recognized Buddhist moral or one of the perfections of the *bodhisatva* such as *dana* (*liberality*) *sila* (*virtue*) etc, admitted in Theravada Buddhism. These stories are meant to create the conviction among the lay Buddhists that spiritual progression is not limited to just one life but one could gradually perfect oneself until one attains complete liberation as a fully enlightened Buddha, a *paccekabuddha* (one who is enlightened but incapable of guiding others) or an *arahanta* (one who has attained enlightenment by following the guidance of a fully enlightened Buddha).

The rebirth doctrine has enabled the lay Buddhist to reconcile himself or herself to the position that his or her ultimate goal is *nibbana*, the final liberation from the cyclic process of *samsara* although he or she has not adopted a life of full renunciation. The lay Buddhist is more prone to accumulate more and more *punna*, which in terms of the *kamma* doctrine assures him or her of an improvement of his or her lot in *samsara* specially by preventing the possibility of falling into any of the purgatories (*apayaloka*). The ideal of the Buddhist monk, however, is full renunciation in order to attain the final goal here and now.

There are two other collections in the canon, also in versified form, serving a similar religious and moral function. They are the *Petavatthu* and the *Vimanavatthu*. Both collections deal with the survival of departed beings in the spirit worlds. In the *Vimanavatthu* reference is made to a relatively superior kind of non-human existence, in which a departed person is said to enjoy the fruits of his or her good deeds. The *Petavatthu* is the more interesting out of the two collections in that it is the scriptural representation of a very significant Buddhist ritual based on the belief in the survival of beings after death. The *Petavatthu* refers generally to survival in a woeful kind of ghostly world where

164

the beings are believed to be destined to suffer the afflictions of hunger, thirst and other intensely painful experiences due to their misdeeds in their former life as human beings. In Buddhism the term *peta* generally meant "departed one". This term also acquired a special meaning when it began to refer to a special class of beings who having departed from this world survive for some period of time in the world of *petas*. The Buddhists, in accordance with the doctrine of *kamma* and rebirth conceived of this world of ghostly existence as the *pettivisava*. The term *pettivisava* has a verbal correspondence to the Vedic *pitrs* but unlike the Vedic *pitrs* who were also supposed to be departed ancestors, the beings inhabiting the *pettivisava* were believed to lead pitiable and painful lives due to bad deeds of the past (*papakamma*). The *petas* in this sense are believed in Buddhism to belong to the class of *vinipatika*, those who lead a woeful life in

hell. In the *Atanativa* sutta the *petas* are described as beings bent on evil, as backbiters, murderous brigands, crafty minded rogues, thieves and cheats. Based on this concept of a world or sphere of *petas* a distinct Buddhist ritual emerged in the form of making offerings to dead ancestors. Unlike in the pre-Buddhist Vedic tradition the Buddhist ritual ceased to be a ritual concerning ancestor worship. Buddhism appears to have moralized the earlier practice of making offerings to ancestors through its insistence that the living are in a better position to help the dead ancestors than the dead are to influence the living. According to the Buddhist concept, our beloved ones could be reborn in the woeful world of *petas* due to excessive greed, attachment, jealousy, anger, illwill or any of the unwholesome traits of mind developed as a human being. However, they can be released from this plight if the living perform meritorious actions and confer merit on them, who as a consequence of rejoicings in those meritorious actions will be purged of their evil dispositions and become capable of attaining a better rebirth. The *Petavatthu* mentions many such instances in which departed ones attain almost immediate release from their woeful condition as a consequence of meritorious actions performed by their living relatives. The Buddhist ritual of offerings to ancestors is recommended for reasons such as showing one's gratitude to the departed relatives, and expressing one's compassionate and caring attitude towards them. Buddhism makes use of this practice also with a view to

165

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lessening the sorrow of the living relatives by creating the conviction in them that they can still retain their link with the dead through the performance of wholesome deeds and transferring the merit to them for their benefit. So the *Petavatthu* says "Neither weeping nor sorrowing nor any kind of lamentation aids departed ones". The only way one could help them is by doing a meritorious deed and making them rejoice in it. In Theravada countries, the ritual takes primarily the form of offerings of alms (*diina*) to the Buddhist monks, (an act which is believed to be of great merit depending on the purity of the receiver as well as the attitude of the giver) one week, three months and one year after the death of a relative.

#### 4.1 Post Canonical Elaborations of the Doctrine of Rebirth: Milindapanha

It is in the Abhidhamma text *Kathavatthu* referred to above and the postcanonical Pali literature that the distinctively Theravada views on the doctrine of rebirth were developed. Out of this Theravada literature the post canonical but precommentarial text known as the *Milindapanha* is very significant. The *Milindapanha* opens its argumentative defence of distinctive Theravada doctrines with its attempt to justify the compatibility of the no-soul doctrine with the doctrine of rebirth. Nagasena, the exponent of the Theravada position in answer to questions posed by King Milinda, declares that Buddhism does not recognize the real existence of individuals. All reference to individuals made by the use of proper names and pronouns are mere linguistic usages which do not stand for real entities. Whatever is referred to by such usages is reducible to other constituent elements. It is the coming together of the constituent elements such as material form, sensations, perceptions, volitions and consciousness and their order and connection which gives rise to the linguistic conventions designating individuals or persons. Persons have no real existence (*na hi ettha puggalo upalabbhati*) 42 Nagasena is called upon by Milinda to explain how rebirth and moral responsibility is to be explained in terms of such a doctrine of impersonal existence.

166

The chief term employed in the discussion of rebirth in this context is 'reconnexion' (*patibandhi*). In answer to the question as to what reconnects, Nagasena says that it is the psychophysical organism (*namarupa*) that reconnects. However, Nagasena denies that any element from the present psychophysical organism passes onto the next birth. According to him volitional actions of a wholesome or unwholesome nature are performed through the medium of the present psychophysical organism, and as a consequence of those volitional acts, another psychophysical organism arises in rebirth. In this context Milinda raises the question of identity which appeared to him to be problematic in terms of the Buddhist denial of soul. Milinda asks Nagasena whether the person who is reborn is the same or a different person. Nagasena's answer is that it is neither. What the latter wishes to establish is that although there is no unchanging entity which gives identity, there is an unbroken continuity which entitles us to speak of the "same" person. Nagasena points out that even in one lifetime the question of identity could be puzzling. The grown up person not the same as the young tender infant who once was lying on his back. Nevertheless we do have a concept of identity. Clarify the Theravada position on this point Nagasena says in response to Milinda's inquiry:

It is one 'I', sire, that was the boy, young, tender, lying on his back, and it

is the same, that am now full grown, and all these are held together as a unity in dependence on this body itself.<sup>43</sup>

Nagasena goes on to give several similes in this context, one of which has been used very commonly by Theravada Buddhists in defence of the Theravada position. The continuity of any individuated series is compared to the flame of a lamp. The same lamp is believed to continue to burn all night long although the flame of the lamp is continuously changing. Nagasena's explanation is that there is such a continuity of *dharmas* or elements of existence with imperceptible and unbroken succession giving us the idea of sameness. Nagasena's analysis of the problem suggests that what the Theravada appears to be refuting is not the common sense view that there are persons, but the metaphysical view that what we refer to in using terms such as entity or substance which remains immutable

167

through all the changes of its observable characteristics. There is no such observable or unobservable entity or substance which is the essence of what we refer to conventionally as a person in *samsara* or in *nibbana*. The challenge that the Theravada theory has to face concerns the problem of giving an intelligible answer to the question as to what preserves the identity of the person in the absence of the criterion of a spatio-temporally continuous body. When we are concerned with one life there is at least one observable body which emerges with birth, grows, and remains in an unbroken continuity holding the mental life together until the time of death despite the many changes that it might undergo in this process. Those who hold the theory of a reincarnating soul can say that the identity is preserved because it is the identical soul which is reincarnated in another body. But Theravada Buddhism holds that it is only the aggregates, mental and physical that exist and that they all have only a momentary existence. How then are the aggregates which are separable into a series of moments of physical and mental elements organized and combined to form one particular individual and hang together without intermingling with others? The Theravada explanation is that it is through causation and contiguity. No single thread runs through the entire series, but there is a causally conditioned continuity. Among the many factors in the contiguous series, the *kamma* formations of each individuated existence are seen as the crucial link determining the next individuated existence.

The Theravada position cannot be construed as a rejection of the commonsense view that there are persons. The conventions of ordinary language are valid so long as one is not misled by linguistic conventions into believing in fictitious entities. However in many contexts the actual Theravada position on the concept of a person is obscured by the unqualified assertion that there are no persons. Nagasena himself appears at times to be putting the Theravada view in this unqualified manner although when he goes on to explain the Theravada position in detail he makes it clear that what the Theravada denies is the existence of metaphysical substances.

168

#### 4.2 Buddhaghosa and the Later Theravada Abhidhamma

In the commentarial works and the treatise *Visuddhimagga* of the great Theravada commentator, Buddhaghosa, who is credited with the compilation of the bulk of the Pali commentarial literature, the no-self doctrine of early Buddhism is reiterated. Buddhaghosa maintains that *samsara* is not a series of transmigrations of a soul but an unbroken continuity of the *khandha*, *dhatu* and *ayatana*.<sup>44</sup> Buddhaghosa quotes from the authoritative Theravada tradition known to him in favour of the thesis that in reality there is only a process of mind and matter, but no being or person.<sup>45</sup> Another quotation by Buddhaghosa asserts that there is no doer of action (*kamma*) or an experiencer of the consequences (*vipaka*). There is only a flow of pure elements (*suddha dhamma pavattanti*).<sup>46</sup> Buddhaghosa maintains that thinking in terms of a person who suffers and who is delivered from suffering by following the path of the Buddha is not quite appropriate. Again he quotes from the tradition which asserts:

There is only suffering, but there is no one who suffers. There is no doer, but there merely is action. There is attainment of peace, but there is no person who attains it. There is a path to deliverance, but no person who walks along it.<sup>47</sup>

Canonical Buddhism had used the simile of the chariot to deny the concept of a simple metaphysical entity called the soul (*atta*) or being (*satta*) which is immutable, and to show that personality is analyzable into five transient aggregates (*panchakkhandha*). It is to be noted that Nagasena too used the same simile in denying the reality of the person. He maintained that a person or a being does not exist in the ultimate sense (*paramatthato*) but only as a linguistic convention (*lokasamanna*). This distinction between linguistic convention and what accords with real existence is elaborated in Buddhaghosa's commentaries

and subsequent Theravada Abhidhamma as a distinction between two types of truth, the absolute (*paramattha*) and conventional (*sammuti*). According to this distinction, the Buddha is said to have used two types of language. The language of *paramattha* is said to have been used by the Buddha when he spoke a

169

.. language which corresponded to the nature of reality. *Paramatthalingua* was defined by Buddhaghosa as that which was in agreement with the real characteristics of phenomena (*dhammanam bhuta lakkhanam*) while *sammuti* was defined as the symbolic or figurative linguistic usage of the world (*lokasanketa*), 48 According to this view the elements to which things were analyzed have a reality which the compounded things do not possess. The elements are the basic characteristics of existence whereas the objects, things and individuals or beings are not real characteristics of existence. Theravada asserts that it is possible to observe empirically the processes of *ropa* (material form), *vedana* (*sensation*) etc. but not individuals or persons. If they are separate realities they should be observable in the way *ropa*, *vedana* etc. are observable. The units are real but not the compounds identified as individual objects or persons. Theravada appears to be denying not only the view that there is a basis for identity, but also that there is a basis for unity when we speak of persons and objects from the standpoint of ultimate truth (*paramattha sacca*). However, a possible objection to the Theravada position is that there is no limit to the possibility of analyzing the observed complexes of reality. If this is so, the so-called ultimates admitted by Theravada Abhidhamma could themselves not be ultimates. If the aggregates (*khandha*) and elements (*dhatu*) have a reality, it cannot be because they are the ultimate constituents of reality which have a fixed nature. It may be argued that the world is ordinarily experienced in Gestalt fashion, as persons and things. The so-called simpler processes can be looked upon as products of subsequent analysis depending on the interest and purpose of the person who carries out the analysis. What Theravada should have emphasized was not that persons do not exist in reality because they are unobservable, but that persons in the form of permanent and simple entities do not exist in reality because such entities are unobservable. The Buddha's analysis of the individual into five aggregates cannot be conceived as an attempt to search for the ultimate ontological constituents of Being. The purpose of the Buddha's analysis appears to be a pragmatic one. It is aimed at ridding people of the illusion that there is something worth clinging to as an eternal essence within or outside one's personality. Insight into the emptiness and unsubstantiality of what

170

one clings to as one's own leads to the dispassion that is necessary for the elimination of the cankers. It is for this pragmatic reason that the Buddha instructed his disciples to gain analytical insight into the actual nature of the factors of personality.

While explaining the concept of a person in terms of the distinction between two kinds of truth, Buddhaghosa made use of the Abhidhamma concept of *bhavanga* consciousness to explain the problem of continued individuality after death. The term *bhavanga* occurs for the first time in the Milindapanha to explain the psychology of dreams and sleep.<sup>49</sup> Nagasena says that in deep sleep the mind goes into *bhavanga*. In canonical Buddhism consciousness is not described as a persisting entity or a permanent, residing consciousness within the human body, but as being produced by the coming together of certain conditions. The Buddha is represented in the canon as rejecting the view of Sati who held that there is an unchanging consciousness which transmigrates in *sam sara*.<sup>50</sup> Consciousness is explained in this context as being produced by the interaction of external stimuli and the senses. The idea of an ongoing consciousness even when the senses are not active does not seem to have been admitted. Theravada thought appears to have been influenced by other schools of Indian thought which called for an explanation as to the condition of the mind when no sensory activity takes place. In the Milindapanha Nagasena makes use of the concept of *bhavanga* which was probably borrowed from the Sarvastivada Abhidharma. *Bhavanga* came to mean a kind of potential consciousness which persisted even in the absence of any sensory activity preserving the identity of the individuated stream of consciousness. In recent expositions of the Theravada position the expression *bhavangasota* is referred to as the sub-conscious 'life-stream'. Nyanaponika Thera describes it as the precipitate of all our actions and experiences, which must have been going on from time immemorial and must continue for immeasurable periods of time to come. He believes that it is similar to what modern psychologists call Soul or the Unconscious.<sup>51</sup> It was Buddhaghosa who made use of the concept of *bhavanga* for the first time to explain the process of rebirth. It enabled the Theravada Abhidhamma theorists

171

.. since the time of Buddhaghosa to explain the process of rebirth without depending on the idea of a permanent soul, an idea which was considered to be a heresy in all schools of Buddhist thought. Theravada introduced this new concept to explain the link between one birth and another maintaining that the *bhavanga* of an individual at death connects up with the *bhavanga* at rebirth. Theravada theorists considered this explanation as an elaboration of the causal connection succinctly stated in the canonical formula of the *paticcasamuppada* as the psychophysical organism is dependent on consciousness (*vinna paccava namarupam*). Buddhaghosa says that a connection is established between two moments of *bhavanga* consciousness in the stream of any individual passing from one birth to another, the preceding moment being the death consciousness (*cuticitta*) and the succeeding one the relinking consciousness (*patibandhacitta*). There is an unbroken continuity of the mind established by the relinking consciousness which immediately follows the death consciousness. This continuity is said to go on until one attains Arahantship. With the attainment of Arahantship the death consciousness is said to cease forever without giving rise to another relinking consciousness. At the moment of death-consciousness three kinds of consciousness moments referred to as *kamma*, *kammanimitta* and *gatinimitta* could occur. *Kamma* signifies all the good and bad volitions of the past. *Kammanimitta* is a kind of mental image of a material object associated with the performance of a good or bad act. At the moment of death the *kamma* or *kammanimitta* which comes forward is not necessarily related to the moral or immoral acts performed in a person's immediate existence. It may be one which was performed many millions of aeons ago in a person's *samsaric* life. According to Buddhaghosa even in cases of instant death, the connecting thought moments determining the character of the next life occur. 52 *Gatinimitta* indicates, through some kind of mental image which functions as a sign, the kind of place in which the dying person is destined to be reborn. The sign that occurs to a person destined to be born in hell is said to be similar to a metal cauldron, one that occurs to a person destined to be born in the human world could be the womb of a mother and those that occur to a person destined to be born in heaven are images of heavenly trees, chariots and beds. 53 The post-commentarial

172

Abhidhamma treatise, Abhidhammatthasangaha of Anuruddha, presents a more detailed discussion of the nature of the moment of death-consciousness. 54 It is not certain how far these statements in the Theravada religious literature were based on an actual study of the near-death experiences of persons although this possibility cannot be ruled out. It is also possible that they were mere *a priori* speculations of Theravada teachers who attempted to make the rebirth process intelligible without introducing the hypothesis of a soul.

The Theravada theory that the last moment of a person's life is crucial in determining the next birth has had important consequences on Theravada religious practice associated with death. The *Visuddhimagga* and the *Vibhangatthakatha* refer to the Buddhist custom of the loved ones of the dying person surrounding the death bed and performing meritorious acts which could become the objects of perception for the dying man. The dying person is presented with objects of the senses which have some religious or meritorious association such as flowers and incense, the sound of religious chantings and other objects which are offered in the common Buddhist offering called *Buddhapuja*. This practice has been preserved in Theravada societies even to the present day. A striking feature of the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth is that throughout the history of the tradition attempts are made to explain the rebirth mechanism in psychological terms.

Theravada Abhidhamma in particular presents a dynamic view of existence according to which the life continuum is merely the current of momentary existences or successive units of consciousness linked together by causal relations. The Abhidhamma theorists linked their analysis of the psychological processes connected with rebirth with their general analysis of perception. According to the analysis of the perceptual process elaborated in the Abhidhammatthasangaha making use of the concept of *bhavanga* which was introduced into Buddhism to retain the unbroken continuity of an individual mental stream, *bhavanga* (the passive, flow of the subconscious mind continuum) is disturbed whenever an external impression through one or other of the six sense

173

<>: channels impinges upon it. At this point when a disturbance in the subconscious mind is created a series of active thought moments is said to be generated which ends with the consciousness relating to the object, the holding of the object and registering it upon the mental stream. It is believed that there are sixteen thought moments between the first awakening of attention to the object and the registering

of it in consciousness. The principal stages of this process are called *bhavgacalana* (excitement of the subconscious mind continuum), *bhavgupaccheda* (cutting off or interruption in the smooth flow of the subconscious current), *pancadvaravajjana* (turning towards one of the five sense doors), *sampaticchana* (reception of the object in the form of actual seeing, hearing and so on), *santira:za* (discrimination in terms of associative ideas by which the mind is able to identify the impression that has been received), and *vothapana* (determination or conscious recognition, with the object assuming a definite identity in the mental awareness). This is said to be followed by a full course of cognition lasting seven *javana* thought moments. The process is completed by two moments of *tadalambana* (registration of the impression in the mental stream). Abhidhamma theorists made use of this elaborate analysis of the perceptual process to explain the continuity of the mental stream from death to rebirth. The Visuddhimagga states that when appropriate objects are presented before the senses of the dying person at the end of the usual stages of perception beginning with the excitation of the unconscious mind continuum, and proceeding up to the stage of determination, there arise five moments of cognition (*javana*) instead of the usual seven, due to the weakness of the mind at the moment of death. This is followed by two moments of *tadarammana*. After that there occurs one moment of death consciousness (*cuticitta*), taking as its object the object of *bhavana*. This is followed by rebirth consciousness (*patisandhicitta*) taking up the same object. According to the Abhidhamma theory between death and rebirth there necessarily is a presentation of objects in the form of *nimitta* (sign) depending on the nature of a person's *kamma* and the nature of the thoughts with which the dying person is preoccupied proximate to the dying moment. Theravada doctrine maintains that this happens as a natural course of psychological events while also suggesting the possibility of influencing the

174  
psychological processes of the dying person by the artificial presentation of objects at the dying moment. The continuity of the stream of consciousness is maintained by the immediate link between the *cuticitta* and *patisandhicitta*. Theravada explained rebirth without the notion of a transmigrating soul in terms of its theory of a psychoethical series of conscious moments and the underlying subconscious life continuum.

#### 5. Critical Discussion and Concluding Remarks

It is clear that neither the canonical nor the post canonical scriptures of Buddhism adequately answer all the questions that arise to a critic who is skeptical about the doctrine. In the case of most of those who profess to be Buddhists the doctrine is accepted on the authority of the Buddha and the Buddhist tradition. Many Buddhist intellectuals believe that although initially, one may accept the theory on faith, one can reach a point when one directly apprehends its truth by the development of the super-cognitive faculties (*abhinna*) which are believed to be acquired as a consequence of meditative culture of the mind. The tendency is also common among many Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike who are favorably inclined to a belief in some form of survival after death that the evidence of parapsychological research carried out in accordance with the rigor involved in the scientific observation of a phenomenon is likely to render the belief scientifically plausible. There are others who respond to the belief from the standpoint of religious neutrality and relying on the cognitive paradigm suggested by modern science dismiss it altogether as religious fiction. As a corollary to the latter there are attempts to explain the significance of the teaching in terms of the sociology or philosophy of religion. Attention is drawn to anthropological evidence of the wide prevalence of reincarnation theories associated with the world views of primitive societies and attempts are made to explain such theories on the basis of sociological models. Philosophers of religion are inclined to consider religious doctrines of reincarnation, rebirth or metempsychosis as belonging to the category of religious utterances expressive of no cognitive content. They propose that such utterances should not be treated as

175  
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factually informative but should rather be viewed as being neither true nor false. Lastly, the conceivability of survival after death is rejected by some philosophers on logical and *a priori* grounds.

Early Buddhism makes no pretense to solve all theoretical issues about the mechanics of rebirth. Rebirth and *kamma* are claimed to be facts about the nature of the individual verifiable by super-cognitive experience (*abhinn"ij*). However, limitations are admitted even in the capacity of *abhinna* to solve all theoretical issues about the nature of rebirth and *kamma*. According to the Buddha, the first beginning of *samsara* cannot be known. The nature of the variety of living organisms and the laws to which they are subject as well as the ultimate nature of the operations of the laws of *kamma* are said to be

incomprehensible (*acintivo*). Given that the early Buddhist claim to the extrasensory means of verifying the truth of rebirth was made as a serious factual claim, some questions can be raised about its intelligibility. The immediate response of someone who is skeptical about such extra-sensory abilities is that it is highly improbable that anyone could genuinely claim to possess them. This is likely to be a common empirical response to the Buddhist claim.

Suppose that X claims to have developed *abhinna* and he claims to be able to remember an immediately preceding life of his in a far distant country C under the name N. Suppose also that X claims to have used his faculty of *abhinna* to identify a person P as the same person as A in a previous birth. In terms of the Buddhist teaching, such a person may be said to be claiming the ability to exercise the super-cognitive powers necessary for verifying the reality of rebirth. X's claim to remember that he was N cannot in itself show that X actually remembers. But suppose that N was a real person who actually lived in country C, and most of the memory claims of X fit the evidence about the life of N that we have gathered by empirical means while it is highly improbable that X had any way of knowing by ordinary means about the life of N. Rebirth could, at least, be conceived as one plausible hypothesis to explain such circumstances, although other paranormal hypothesis may also be suggested. The other case gives rise to

176  
a more difficult theoretical problem. For X claims to be using the paranormal faculty of clairvoyance to observe some person other than himself passing away and being reborn. Clairvoyance, as admitted in early Buddhism is a refined faculty of vision which enables a person to observe contemporaneous happenings which are beyond the ken of normal vision. X's claim to be able to identify P as the same person as A in a previous life needs explanation. For there is a break in the spatio-temporal continuity of the body of A, and P's body cannot be identical with that of A. It is logically possible that X has the ability to describe accurately matters connected with the lives of P and A, which could independently be established by other normal means of observation. Yet the problem of identity remains unresolved. The Buddhist tradition does not seem to have taken an interest in resolving such theoretical problems although it would not have been altogether impossible to suggest plausible solutions.

The conceivability of both supposed claims mentioned above to observe rebirth paranormally as well as the intelligibility of the reincarnation hypothesis to explain sporadic occurrences which have drawn the interest of the parapsychologists rests on the question of the logically acceptable criteria of personal identity. If there are valid *a priori* reasons for rejecting the conceivability of rebirth it is not possible to hold it even as a tentative hypothesis. The question whether rebirth is logically possible depends on the question whether it is logically permissible to stretch the meaning of the expression "the same person" in such a way that we could accommodate certain imaginable puzzle cases. In this connection, philosophers have paid attention to two competing criteria for the identity of persons. Some philosophers argue that it is either a necessary or a sufficient condition of saying correctly that a particular person before us is P that the body which that person before us has is the body that P had. Others argue that it is either a necessary or a sufficient condition of saying correctly that a particular person before us is P that that person should have the memories of P. If one takes the first position, rebirth is logically impossible. If one takes the second position not only is rebirth conceivable but also other extraordinary occurrences or puzzle cases such as bodily transfer are

177  
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possible. After a careful discussion of the problem of personal identity in relation to some hypothetical puzzle cases which may prompt us to conceive of the possibility of bodily transfer. Terence Penelhum concludes:

**In** spite of much recent writing on the puzzles, there seems to be no satisfactory demonstration that the change in convention that would follow on our saying a transfer had occurred would lead to absurdities. It therefore is a possibility. 55

This conclusion has a bearing on the Buddhist concept of rebirth as well, since it lends support to the claim of the Buddhist believer that rebirth is not an unintelligible hypothesis.

According to Gananath Obeyesekere, the doctrines of rebirth and karma in Buddhism belong to what is describable as religious eschatology. **In** his opinion "religious eschatologies are not unique creations of individual religious geniuses, but are also collective representations--socially shared ideational systems--which have their genesis in the social structure and the collective historical experience of a particular social group." Obeyesekere says:

"The Indian religious philosophers can be credited, not with the invention of the rebirth theory, but rather with transforming the "rebirth

eschatology" into the "karmic eschatology," through a process of speculative activity which I label "ethicization...,"<sup>56</sup>

Obeyskere leaves out of consideration the question whether the theory of rebirth and *kamma* as held in Buddhism is factually true, and attempts to give a sociological explanation for the theory as we find in early Buddhism. Such approaches are common to all inquiries into utterances which occur in the context of human activity which is usually described as "religious" conducted by those who take the accepted methodology of modern science as the paradigm for cognitive inquiry. The sociology of religion does not admit the existence of religious truths or religious knowledge, but admits sociological or anthropological truths in the form of knowledge about religion. However, the religious enthusiast who admits ways of knowing which in his or her opinion transcends the ways of

178  
knowing used in modern science. (as for instance the *abhinna* claimed by the Buddhist) would understandably object to the social scientist's approach. The Buddhist who insists on claiming cognitive meaning to statements about rebirth and *kamma* could maintain that there are numerous phenomena of human experience which cannot be explained by the materialist assumptions of modern science. Those who hold this view are inclined to take serious note of the phenomena that come under the investigation of parapsychology, a field of inquiry which cannot as yet be said to have gained complete scientific respectability.<sup>57</sup> Obeyskere's observation that rebirth theories were very widespread in the institutionalized eschatology of tribal peoples in different parts of the world does not necessarily imply that an anthropological explanation is the only plausible explanation. Those who are engaged in research into parapsychological phenomena have also found numerous extraordinary occurrences throughout the world, unexplainable by means of the physical and biological assumptions of modern science and which suggest paranormal hypothesis for their explanation. <sup>58</sup> It is possible that the wide prevalence of a belief in a life after death is due to the fact that there are some elements of human experience, however seldom they may occur, requiring explanations that modern science by the very nature of its epistemological and ontological assumptions cannot provide. Therefore, it appears unreasonable to conclude that a cognitive meaning cannot conceivably be ascribed to the eschatological doctrines of Buddhism.

Another approach to the understanding of the doctrine of rebirth and *kamma* in Buddhism is the one adopted by philosophers of religion who wish to apply the Wittgensteinian method of linguistic analysis to clarify the logical structure of what they describe as religious language. According to Frank Hoffman, the Buddhist assertion "There is rebirth", has to be viewed as an instance of the use of distinctively religious language. Strictly speaking, it is neither true nor false. Such statements are to be understood in terms of the religious form of life within which they have a use. According to this view it is inappropriate to seek to prove or disprove such statements in the light of scientific evidence. They are part of

179

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the conceptual background of early Buddhism.<sup>59</sup> There is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that the Buddha intended his teaching about rebirth and *kamma* to be understood as making no claim to truth. The Buddha was definitely making an epistemological claim that he had personally observed without relying on the authority of tradition, that rebirth and *kamma* are facts about the nature of man and his destiny. As John Hick argues, the non-cognitivist theories on religious doctrines (such as rebirth), "are not accounts of the meaning of religious language as the speech of actual religious communities, but proposals about the meaning that it ought to be given in the future".<sup>60</sup> They are not descriptive but radically revisionary. Throughout the Buddhist tradition statements about rebirth and *kamma* have been understood by Buddhist believers as cognitively significant. This does not preclude the possibility that Buddhists themselves adopted fiction as a literary device in the inculcation of religious doctrines and values, as already pointed out in connection with the *fataka* literature and canonical collections like the *Petavatthu* and *Vimavatthu*.

An assumption shared by those who attempt to understand Buddhist doctrines through such philosophical approaches and the anthropologist who wishes to understand them through the social scientist's approach, is that all genuinely factual and cognitive inquiries occur only within the confines of the empirical sciences. The religious believer can question this assumption. He could point out that human experience reveals the limitations of the currently accepted epistemological and ontological assumptions of empirical science. The scientific dogmatism which seeks to explain phenomena which cannot conceivably be explained on the basis of such assumptions, it may be maintained, does not do justice to some aspects of human experience, which if found to be

part of reality, is likely even to radically transform the widespread materialistic worldview based on currently established knowledge in the empirical sciences. Therefore, the Buddhist believer who persists in claiming cognitive status to his belief in rebirth and *kamma*, can reasonably reject the proposed non-cognitivist explanations of the grounds of his belief.

180

In conclusion it is worth recapitulating some distinctive features of the Theravada Buddhist doctrine of rebirth and *kamma*. It seeks to make the doctrine intelligible in terms of the theoretical middle way which avoids the extremes of materialistic annihilationism and substantialist eternalism. The idea of an eternal spiritual substance in terms of which the goal of salvation and the religious life becomes meaningful finds no place in Buddhism. In this respect Buddhism differs from many other religious traditions which admit survival or reincarnation doctrines. According to Buddhism, even in this immediate life, it is not the existence of an eternal spiritual substance which serves as the criterion of unity and identity of a person. The acceptance of such a substance is unnecessary to make our ideas of moral responsibility intelligible. Theravada Buddhism has always attempted to explain the rebirth process in psychological terms. It is recognized as an event which can be explained in terms of the doctrine of dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*). The Theravada concept of personal identity across many lives, implies the rejection of the view that the identity of the body is both a necessary and sufficient criterion of personal identity. It considers the unbroken continuity of the psychic constituents of personality as more fundamental than the criterion of bodily continuity in determining the identity of a person. Personality is a causally dependent process, but not a simple and static entity. Identity and change are not incompatible notions in the context of our practical and conventional discourse about persons and things. However, it is a requirement at the higher level of understanding which ensures liberation from the miserable human predicament that the clinging to the notion of personality itself has to be given up. When this clinging ceases, the factors of personality which produce repeated misery are dissolved and the *samsaric* process comes to an end. Theravada Buddhism explains this not as an annihilation of a really existent person (*sato sattassaucchedam*). For according to the Theravada doctrine, the notion of a person in the form of a spiritual essence or substance is an illusion. Hence it explains its spiritual endeavor not as an attempt to end personality but to end the process of *dukkha* which rests on the illusion of an eternal spiritual essence. Knowledge of rebirth is not absolutely necessary for understanding the reality of *dukkha* and the other Noble Truths of

181

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Buddhism. Therefore, the Buddha, while accepting rebirth as a fact about the nature and destiny of man, paid little attention to theoretical problems about rebirth.

183

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#### Endnotes

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3. *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, (George Allen and Unwin Ltd. London, 1963), p. 369f.
4. *Ibid.* p. 40 f.
5. *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* 5.6.1.
6. 3.10.5.
7. *Brh.* 6.2.15-16; Ch.5.101-8.
8. E.B.T.K. p. 374.
9. *Majjhimanikaya*, (Pali Text Society, London). [M] 1.65.
10. *Dighanikaya*, (Pali Text Society, London), [D] 1.13.
11. *Ibid.* 1.81
12. E.B.T.K. p. 61; ~: *V* ~
13. D 1.81.
14. *Ibid.* 1.82 f.
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15. M 2.200
16. D 2.316 if.
17. *Buddhist Philosophy in India and Ceylon*. A.B. Keith (Oxford 1923) p. 14.
18. *The Vedantic Buddhism of the Buddha*, J.G. Jennings, (Oxford University

- Press, London 1947, pp. xxii-xxvii; xxxvi-iv.
19. *Dhammapada* (Dh.) 154.
  20. M 1.8.
  21. N 1.401 f.
  22. *Concept of Mind*. (Penguin-Books, 1963).
  23. *Yatha hi angasambhara hoti saddo ratho iti evam khandhesu santesu hoti satta ti sammuti* Samvuttanikaya (P.T.S. London) [S] 1.135.
  24. The twelve spheres consist of the six internal spheres enumerated as visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile and mental and the six external spheres which are the data of the internal sense spheres such as visible forms, sounds, smells etc. The eighteen elements are made up of the six internal spheres and the six external spheres plus the specific consciousness connected with each of the six internal sense sphere.
  25. M 3.19.
  26. S 2.20.
  27. M 1.259.  
185
  - ..
  28. M 2.266.
  29. M 2.266.
  30. K.N. Javatileke, Some Problems of Translation and Interpretation, *University of Ceylon Review*, vol. VII No.3, p.2-215.
  31. D 2.105
  32. S 2.65.
  33. Ibid. 66.
  34. *Kamma and Rebirth*, (Wheel No.9, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy. 1964) p.2.
  35. M 3.203.
  36. M 1.390.
  37. M 3.214.
  38. M 3.99 f.
  39. Points of Controversy, translation of Kathavatthu, S.Z. Aung and Mrs. Rhys Davids (P.T.S. London, 1915), p.29.
  - 400 K,th,v""thu cPoTos.L70680
  41. Ibid. II.361f. ./
  42. The Milindapanho, (P.T.S.) p. 25.  
186
  43. Milinda's Questions (Sacred Books of the Buddhists Vol. XXII) translated from the Pali by I.D. Horner, Volume I, p. 55.
  44. Visuddhimagga (P.T.S.) Vol. II, p. 544.
  45. *Naman ca rupan ca idhatthi saccato Na hettha satto manujo ca vijjati* (Ibid. p. 595)
  46. Visuddhimagga 602.
  47. Ibid. 513.
  48. Dighanikaya Atthakatha, Sumangalavilasini (P.T.S. London 2.383)
  49. *Buddhist Psychology Of Perception*, E.R. Sarathchandra, (The Ceylon University Press, Colombo 1953), p. 76.
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187
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