

---

# Rebirth and Afterlife in Buddhism

Carl B. Becker

More people inhabit Asia than all the rest of the world put together, and the scope and diversity of their linguistic and religious traditions defies simplistic exposition. Strictly speaking, all of the world's great religious traditions—Judeo-Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist, among others—have originated in Asia. These and many less-known traditions have not only existed side by side, but have influenced each other and branched into numerous sects and independent religions. It would be unreasonable if not impossible to try to catalogue all of their various attitudes towards death and the hereafter in a single presentation. Therefore, this article will focus on the most international and philosophical of the East Asian traditions mentioned above, namely Buddhism, and review the fundamental ideas about survival, rebirth, and the nature of the afterlife found therein.

## REBIRTH IN EARLY BUDDHISM

From its earliest beginnings, the philosophy of Buddhism has paid considerable attention to the issues of death and afterlife. A profound recognition of impermanence, suffering, and death is central to the philosophy of Buddhism. According to the traditional biography of Gautama Siddhartha, it was the sight of an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a holy man which led him to renounce his palace and worldly possessions and seek a solution to the problem of suffering. The impermanence of life became a model for his understanding of the impermanence of all things; the suffering of disease and death became expanded into the Buddha's teaching that all is ultimately suffering (*dukkha*). The idea that life continues after death is fundamental to Buddhist thought, and is usually expressed in the idea of rebirth in human or animal bodies. *For if there were no rebirth—if death were the ultimate end of all experiences—then suicide could be seen as an easy solution to an existence conceived as inherently more painful than pleasurable.* Moreover, if this existence were thought to be the only one that a given man might experience, one might be more easily encouraged to make the most hedonistic use of these few short years, rather

than seeking to overcome personal desires and transcend materialism. It is precisely this Buddhist view — that this life is but one of millions of continuous lives of suffering, destined to continue indefinitely until the cycle is stopped — that necessitates a path of selflessness and discipline leading to enlightenment and freedom. Thus, not only death but the conviction of survival is essential to the Buddhist philosophy. For various cultural as well as philosophical reasons, many of the countries that have adopted Buddhism have paid much attention to its death-related ceremonies and rituals. In China and Japan, the elaborate ritual of Buddhist funerals, and the practice of warriors meditating on corpses and graveyards, has given Buddhism the epithet of a “religion for the dead” (cf. Amore, 1974, p. 134). In several respects, the issues of death and survival are more important to Buddhism than to the Judeo-Christian philosophical traditions.

Broadly speaking, Buddhists believe that there are two significantly different possibilities after death: either some aspect of the person's psychophysical influence will be reborn in a new body or he will achieve a state called *nirvana*, which is above and beyond the realms of death and rebirth. There has been substantial debate about what is reborn, and about how the state called *nirvana* should be interpreted.

Culturally speaking, Buddhism has been modified by each of the countries it has entered or influenced, but the most important divisions are probably the southern Theravada school (represented by the Pali *Nikayas*), the Sino-Japanese Mahayana, and the Tibetan Tantric. In general, we might classify these three divisions as follows: the Theravadins believed that “salvation” is to be achieved through self-culture and meditative disciplines; the Mahayanists believed in salvation through the grace and power of god-like Bodhisattvas; and the Tantric practitioners sought salvation through magical practices or rituals. This article focuses on the concerns of the Theravadins, who probably best represent the classical and paradigmatic Buddhist worldview.

### The Context of Early Buddhism

Even prior to the Buddha, numerous schools of Indian philosophy already held dogmatic views about the nature of man, the self, and survival of death. The earliest *Vedas*, or sacred writings of the Brahmins, use the word *atman* (Sanskrit; Pali, *atta*), which refers to the animating force, life, breath, or soul, and is analogous to the Greek term *psyche*. Eventually, many schools came to think of *atman* as an unchanging and eternal core of man's being, the seat of consciousness that survives bodily death. This *atman* is said to be reborn through numerous existences (human, subhuman, or divine). It was to be ultimately liberated from this cycle of rebirths by intellectually and meditatively realizing its oneness with *Brahman*, Absolute Reality, of which the *atman* was essentially a tiny part (De Silva, 1975, p. 20).

By the time of the Buddha (560–480? B.C.) many theories had arisen as to the nature, origin, and fate of the *atman* (these are discussed and refuted in the

*Brahmajala Sutra*; see note on *Anuttara*). The major contenders in the debate seem to be the *eternalists* and the *nihilists*. The eternalists held that the soul was separable from the body at death like a sword from its scabbard or the pith from a blade of grass. Radhakrishnan (1939, p. 83) summarizes this view:

If there is one doctrine more than any other which is characteristic of Hindu thought, it is the belief that there is an interior depth to the human soul which, in its essence, is uncreated and deathless and absolutely real.

At the same time, however, schools of nihilists and materialists held either that there was no soul at all, or that it was dissolved into various component elements at death. These views were not merely differences in metaphysical speculation, but they resulted in drastically different ethics and lifestyles. The materialists, fearing no postmortem reward or punishment for present deeds, tended to advocate either hedonism or passive inaction. Eternalists, on the other hand, often stressed respect for living beings and ethical self-discipline to the extent of self-mortification (*atta-kilamatham-yoga*). Thus, the Buddha arrived on a scene already dominated by highly sophisticated philosophies of the soul and life after death.

### The Theory of No-Soul

After a long course of ascetic austerities and meditations, Gautama Buddha came to see that all phenomenal elements are constantly changing and impermanent (*anicca*). Not only are men not inhabited by an unchanging essence or soul, but furthermore there is nothing in man that can properly be identified with a soul at all; this is the theory of *anatta*, or no-soul. Based on this analysis, the Buddha saw suffering (*dukkha*) to be a pervasive characteristic of material existence, and ascribed this suffering to man's desire for unattainable permanence and a false clinging to a mistaken notion of individual self-importance. Early Buddhists used several arguments to demonstrate this ultimate unreality of an *atta* or permanent unchanging self.

The most widely quoted of the arguments against the soul appear in the questions of King Milinda (Greek: Menander), in which the king and Nagasena discuss the concept of the self; although postdating the Buddha himself, they are representative of Theravada thought on the issue. In these illustrative but typically very repetitive conversations, Nagasena asks the king whether a chariot can be equated to its yoke, axle, wheels, body, or flagstaffs. Of course the king denies that a chariot is equivalent to any of its components taken alone, but he defends his use of the word "chariot" as an appellation or designation of the composite entity. The conclusion to be drawn is that the word "chariot" refers to nothing other than the aggregate of these material elements, and that there is no innate "chariot-ness" within it (De Bary, 1969, pp. 30-32). Just as the chariot can be analyzed into its material components, with no residue of "chariot-ness" left over, the Buddhists teach that man can be analyzed into five essential aggregates, which exhaustively describe the

human being and eliminate the need for any underlying soul. These five aggregates (*panca-kkhandā*) are not limited to material elements, but include sensory and psychological components.

Since a person cannot be identified with any of the *khandas* taken alone, and the *khandas* taken together exhaust the description of the person, the Buddhists conclude that there is no remaining self or *atta*, outside of the interdependent complex just described.

With human essence, self, or soul (*atta*) thus analyzed out of the picture, the question of what happens to man after death becomes even more serious. Superficially, it might seem that when the body disintegrates at death, all of the other *khandas*, which are mutually interdependent on bodily processes, must also cease and disperse. But we have already observed that the idea of rebirth is indispensable to the coherence of the Buddhist philosophy. In fact, the Buddha taught that the karma (action, especially mental volitions) of the dying man had a cause-effect relation, and in that sense a continuity, with the birth of new beings. He used the term rebirth, as opposed to reincarnation, which might imply that a single soul were reincarnated in several consecutive bodies. Rebirth, on the other hand, suggests a causal continuity, but not personal identity, between one birth and the next.

Buddhists hold that this teaching was not merely a crude attempt to reconcile traditional Hindu concepts of karma and reincarnation with an ethical theory that de-emphasized the centrality of the self (Jayatilleke, 1974, p. 134). Rather, they say that these conclusions were based upon the direct paranormal knowledge of the Buddha, attained through years of meditation. These extra-sensory capacities, common to many meditative traditions, enabled the Buddha a clear recollection of his previous lives (*pubbe-nivāsa-nussatīna*, retrocognition) and a direct vision of the death and rebirth of beings (*cutāpapattanāna*) (Upadhyaya, 1971, p. 368).

Even in his own day, Buddha was frequently misinterpreted by rivals as denying the doctrines of karma and rebirth. The Buddha, when questioned, explicitly denied this interpretation. Another philosophical reconstruction would assert that the karmic effects of actions influence other future generations, but not the reborn individual.

[Buddha's] later followers endeavored to reconcile his twofold doctrine of no-permanent-soul and the moral responsibility of the individual. . . . In the Hindu view, the same individual acts and suffers in different lives; the usual *modern* Buddhist view is the same; but the strict *original* Buddhist view is altruistic, the actor being one, and the ultimate sufferer or beneficiary another individual. (Jennings, 1947, p. xxxvii; emphasis ours)

This is an ingenious attempt to make the idea of karma more palatable to modern behaviorists, but it flies in the face of the letter and the spirit of early Buddhist teachings. Since a permanent underlying self is denied, it is true that there is no absolute identity between the original actor and the later recipient



of the fruits of that karma—just as I am not the same person now that I was when I started studying Buddhism. But the causal connection between my earlier studies and my present views and experiences is unmistakable. Buddha's theory of karma is not humanistically reducible to biological and sociological influences continuing after death. Nor is death the end of the road for the individual, or else suicide would relieve us of the suffering of existence. Man dies and is reborn. The corpse and the new baby are causally conditioned and interconnected, but not identical.

### Analogical Treatments

Numerous analogies in the early texts help to explain the importance of continuity over strict identity in the causal process. Nagasena gives the case of the man who steals mangoes, and later pleads that the mangoes which he stole were different from the ones which the owner planted. King Milinda agrees that although the stolen mangoes are not identical with the ones planted, they are nevertheless causally conditioned; neither the same nor totally unrelated, they are different parts of a single causal sequence. If a fire were to spread from a neglected campfire to an adjacent field, the burning field could be called neither the same fire nor a different fire from the campfire. Similarly, the curds that form today from yesterday's milk, or the verse that the student repeats after learning from his teacher, are neither absolutely identical to nor different from the original milk or original poem. There is merely a causal sequence of events that enables us to identify one with the other, or to say that one has given rise to the other. Rebirth is taken as another case of this same sort of process (Trenckner, 1962, pp. 46–48).

Clearly the sort of identity that humans have throughout their lives is a continuity of constantly changing mental and physical conditions, only identifiable with previous states through its spatiotemporal and causal contiguity. Opposing the Hindu analogies of the soul as an inchworm moving (relatively unchanged) from one leaf to another, the Buddhists prefer the analogue of the flame passing from wick to wick—a process lacking any permanent shape or substrate. It would appear that in answer to the question "What is reborn?" we should accept the Buddha's answer that there is no permanent thing or stuff which flits from body to body, but rather than when the five *khandas* are dissolved at death, the four nonmaterial *khandas* continue, like a causal current or stream of existence-energy (*bhava-sota*) to influence another material substrate—a fetus in a receptive womb (Jayatilleke, 1974, p. 119).

### Intermediate States

However accurate this characterization may be, it is very difficult to depict to ourselves just how this immaterial causal current operates. Skeptics might argue that analogies of flames and curds are appropriate to the case of identity between a boy in 1950 and the man he became in 1990, where a continuous material substrate and memory are available. But it is precisely the lack of such

a material substrate between the dying man and the newborn baby that renders these analogies inadequate. Even in Buddha's day, there were strong movements to reinstate the *atta*, or one of the *kkandas*, or a subtly material self, as the stuff that went from point A to point B (i.e., the corpse to the fetus). One of the most eligible candidates for the "entity which is reborn" was the *vinnana*, the *khandas* most closely connected with consciousness. Pande lists several texts that support this view, suggesting that the idea of a transmigrating *vinnana* is pre-Buddhist. This *vinnana* resembles the *atta* (Skt.: *atman*) of some Hindu *Upanishads*, with the important difference that it is not taken to be something permanent, but rather as an ever-changing complex (Pande, 1974, pp. 493–495). Later Buddhists seized on the Buddha's use of the term *gandhabba*, the mental complex essential to the birth of a baby, as the stuff which is reborn, or they confused the psychic body (*manomayam kayam*) admitted by Buddhist meditation theory, with that which is reborn. The *vajjiputtakas* came to be known also as *puggalavadins*, because they proposed that there was a *puggala* or self, neither identical to nor different from the *khandas*, and that it was this *puggala* which was reborn. They claimed that Buddha's teaching of *anatta* did not mean that there was no self whatsoever, but simply that there was no eternal and unchanging self (Pande, p. 490, n. 223). Buddhaghosa (1931) criticizes the *puggalavadins* from the standpoint of the *Abhidhamma* school, centuries later, but then he proceeds to substitute the term *bhavanga*, or "existence factor" in exactly the same role. Asanga, in the *Yogacarabhumi*, discusses an intermediate state between the death of the former person and the birth of the latter (Wayman, 1974, p. 238):

There is synonymous terminology. The term "intermediate state" is used because it manifests in the interval between the death state and the birth state. The term *gandharva* is used. . . the term *manomaya* is used. . . the term "resultant" (*abhinivrtti*) is used because it is productive in the direction of birth.

Such a proliferation of the terms used to refer to the entity that is reborn, and such theorizing about the intermediate states between death and rebirth, are contrary to the teachings and antispeculative attitude of the Buddha. However, they demonstrate the difficulties of even the most outstanding classical commentators in making sense of rebirth as an energy transfer across distances without a substrate.

Hindus like Radhakrishnan and Westerners like Grimm have suggested that the Buddha developed the *anatta* theory for ethical reasons, but that he actually believed in a sort of *atta* being reborn in successive bodies (cf. Upadhyaya, 1971, pp. 302–304). The cultures of China, Japan, and Tibet, lacking both the vocabulary and the sophisticated philosophical tradition of the Buddha, adopted even more concrete ideas of transmigrating souls. However, early Buddhism taught an instantaneous rebirth of thought complexes, neither identical with nor different from the dying person, and not definable in terms of a single permanent underlying substance. Since there is no single element or substrate that is reborn, if we wish a more detailed description of rebirth,

- we must inquire not about the object or stuff that is reborn, but rather about the process and the factors that influence it.

### The Determinants of Rebirth

The belief in rebirth in new bodies was quite widespread even prior to the Buddha's time, with protracted debate about its implications. Some people contended that, in accordance with the law of Karma, those who had done a preponderance of good deeds would be reborn in happy states, and those who had done a preponderance of evil would be reborn in evil states. Others, while admitting the concept of rebirth, denied the effect of karma in placing a soul in a new womb; they gave counterexamples of good men who had purportedly been reborn in evil circumstances, and evil men who were reborn in happy situations. The Buddha discusses each of these views with Ananda in the *Mahakamma-vibhanga sutta* (*Greater Analysis of Deeds Sutra*). In each of many similar sections, the Buddha asserts first of all that there are such things as good and evil deeds, and that we should not allow ethical distinctions to become blurred. Then he proceeds to support the idea of karma even further by declaring that all deeds will ultimately produce their effects, good for good and evil for evil. Both views—that good and evil lives inevitably produce good and evil rebirths, respectively, and the converse, that there is no correlation between actions and rebirths—are condemned as the result of overgeneralization from too limited an understanding, perhaps from psychic visualization of too limited a sample. The Buddha suggests that some deeds (*karmas*) are operative and others inoperative. However, the total balance sheet of good and evil deeds performed during a given lifetime is summarized in the state of mind held by the dying person. This is fully in accord with the Buddha's teaching that there are no underlying substances but only sequences of thought processes, and that the transition from death to rebirth is but another instant in the continuity of such psychophysical processes. The *Mahakamma Sutra* explains:

At the time of dying a right view was adopted and firmly held by him; because of this, at the breaking up of the body after dying, he arises in a good bourn, a heaven world. . . . or at the time of dying a false view was adopted and firmly held by him; because of this, on the breaking up of the body after dying he arises in sorrowful ways.

The Buddha is not saying that these firmly held views at death are the exclusive determinants of rebirth. He is suggesting that both previous deeds and the last-held thought complexes may influence rebirth, in accord with his avoidance of strict determinism and indeterminism. Historically and philosophically, this teaching is important because it opens the door to future schools of Buddhism, which increasingly emphasize the holding of right views at the moment of death, and which consider this to be more important than living a moral life in determining one's future rebirth.

A somewhat clearer version of the nature of the transference of energies at death is gained by placing it within the Buddhist view of conception. In the Buddhist view, sexual intercourse alone is inadequate to give rise to a conscious human being. For conception to take place, there must be present not only the male sperm and the female ovum, but also karmic energy (sometimes also called *gandhabba*) from a third source. According to Nyanatiloka (1955, p. 2):

Father and mother only provide the necessary physical material for the formulation of the embryonic body. . . . The dying individual with his whole being convulsively clinging to life, at the very moment of his death, sends forth karmic energy which, like a flash of lightning, hits at a new mother's womb ready for conception. Thus, through the impinging of karmic energies on ovum and sperm there arises, just like a precipitate, the so-called primary cell.

The analogy of lightning here may be illustrative. We know that light is generally given off by physical objects glowing, burning, or reflecting other light, and we know that sounds are generally produced by collision or friction between two objects. And yet, on careful analysis, the lightning is seen to be neither a physical object nor the collision of physical objects, yet it produces light and thunder. In fact, by the time that the light and sound reach our senses, the atmospheric processes that gave rise to the phenomenon we name lightning are already stabilized and the infinitesimal electrical particles involved are already absorbed in a new state in which they are no longer identifiable. Lightning is a visible manifestation of the imperceptibly rapid movement of imperceptibly small particles. In rebirth, the Buddhists would say, the character of the person born demonstrates that there had been, prior to his birth, the influence of these life-clinging karmic forces, imperceptible except through their effects.

The Buddha sought to avoid speculative and doctrinal extremes in any direction. He said that his understanding of rebirth was gained not from metaphysical speculation or Hindu mythology, but from direct (paranormal) perception of the workings of the universe.

### Philosophical Difficulties with the Buddhist Concept of Rebirth

There are at least three obvious philosophical difficulties in the Buddhist case for rebirth: (1) the problem of the spatiotemporal gap between the dying man and the newly conceived fetus; (2) the problem of population increase in the number of living beings; and (3) the problem of evidence for or against the rebirth theory. Let us examine the Buddhist resolutions to each of these issues.

#### *Spatiotemporal Gaps*

The Buddha's descriptive analogies of rebirth are very effective in explaining the senses in which the person born is neither identical to nor different from the person who had just died. But in each of them (mango, flame, wave, child becoming a man, etc.) there is a spatiotemporal continuity from one state to

the next, which enables us to identify the latter with the former as part of the same larger process or pattern. In the case of death and rebirth, however, there is no visible continuity between individual  $A_1$  on his deathbed and fetus  $A_2$  which receives the karmic lifeclinging impulse at  $A_1$ 's death. There is at least a spatial gap between the location of the final thoughts and volitions of the dying man and the arising of the first rudimentary consciousness in the infant or fetus. Although no precise way exists of determining whether there is such a temporal gap or not, the gap between the season of the greatest number of deaths (winter) and the season of the greatest number of births (spring) would seem to suggest a gap between the last thoughts of dying man and the first thoughts of newborn babes. Moreover, there is a vast difference between the complexity of verbal and intellectual thought patterns possessed by the majority of old men at their deaths, and the manifestly nonverbal and undiscriminating thought structures of all newborn infants. Thus the continuum of death and rebirth observed paranormally by the Buddha might seem to be contradicted. To make sense of the Buddhist theory, then, we must approach it not only objectively, but from within the philosophical view of reality that the Buddhists held. A return to the Buddhist perspectives on *khandas* and *kamma* will help us resolve these apparent dilemmas.

In the Buddhist view of the person, only the first of the *khandas* is grossly material; the rest are fundamentally psychological characteristics, nonetheless ontologically real for all their being immaterial.

The Buddhists admit that all material elements return to dust at death, and therefore we are wrong to seek any *physical* traces linking a dying man with a newborn babe. The nonmaterial *khandas*, however, are not limited to spatial dimensions, which implies that a dream or a thought cannot be located spatially within a cranium. Moreover, telepathy, clairvoyance, and "out-of-body" travel are accepted within the Buddhist worldview as natural results of long ascetic and meditative practice. Practice of such powers (*siddhis*) is condemned by the Buddha as being un conducive to enlightenment, and likely to distract the practitioner from more spiritual goals. While modern Westerners would consider telepathy to be an inexplicable example of causation at a distance, early Buddhists could easily accept this phenomenon of one well-trained mind reading the thoughts of another, or transmitting its thoughts to one not physically present.

If we grant that thoughts cannot themselves be spatially located (although associated with a specific person), and that they can be sensed or transmitted psychically by individuals who are physically separated, then we have also conceded that causation at a distance is possible in the realm of psychological phenomena. This is precisely what the Buddhist rebirth theory contends: that psychological factors continue to influence one being or another uninterruptedly. More specifically, the dying man's wish for life naturally becomes associated with that baby whose psychophysical makeup is most receptive to precisely those psychic complexes. We may or may not choose to reject the theory of rebirth on other grounds, but any *a priori* dismissal on the

basis of spatial gaps alone is thus eliminated by this analysis. The problem of temporal continuity need not arise at all if we accept the early Buddhist tradition completely. But if it is held that the problem of temporal continuity does arise, or that it is another aspect of the spatiotemporal causality problem, it might be answered in any of several ways.

First, along the analogy of the nonspatial character of consciousness outlined above, it might be argued that consciousness is essentially nontemporal, as demonstrated by our abilities to remember past situations vividly or to foresee future situations clairvoyantly. Thus, it might be argued, psychic components (*khandas*) neither exist nor cease to exist when dissociated from their cranial counterparts; they simply are not amenable to temporal measurements until they are again affiliated with neural, physiological structures existing within this temporal continuum.

Another approach would be to argue that there are formless realms where old thoughts, actions, and desires (*kamma*) await fruition. Such a postulate is sometimes taken as a prerequisite for the acceptance of a nondeistic karma theory. If it is admitted that all thoughts and deeds are "stored" in some not merely physiological sense, until the situation is right for their fruition as moral reward or recompense, then there need be no additional difficulty in admitting that the consciousness complex or karmic energy of a dying individual might be similarly "stored" temporarily until the optimally suited conditions for its rebirth matured. However, the mechanism of such a "storage" process, either for karma or for individuals, remains inexplicable.

A third approach would be to suggest that consciousness is reborn, immediately, not necessarily in a human realm, but perhaps as a god, spirit, animal, or other creature whose birth passes unnoticed. This possibility will be discussed more seriously below. The important conclusion to be recognized here is that, if any of the above perspectives are admitted as possible, then the period between death and rebirth can be accounted for, and the problem of spatiotemporal continuity no longer stands as an objection to the theory of rebirth.

#### *Overpopulation*

The problem of overpopulation is often raised against the doctrine of rebirth or reincarnation. Simply stated, it observes that there are more people on planet earth now than a millenium ago, and asks where all the souls of the new people came from. The argument itself rests on several assumptions that do not apply to the Buddhist theory, but let us reason our way through them.

In the first place, Buddhism believes neither in a temporal nor eternal soul, as has been emphasized above. Therefore, we should not imagine a condition of millions of disembodied souls "waiting around" in ethereal heavens for embodiment. Rather, both mind and body are evolved from material and psychological components. It is completely within the realm of reason that psychic complexes have evolved with ever-increasing complexity to suit their



material bases, over the course of millions of years. It is possible that some dying people's thoughts influence more than one fetal organism at a time. Alternatively, it is possible that beings elsewhere in the universe, on other planets, or in spirit realms are reborn as men. Finally, the increasingly animal tendencies of mankind, if they are such, might be taken as an indication that an ever-increasing number of animal souls are finding expression in human minds and bodies these days.

While these responses are largely speculative, the important point is that the Buddha recognized many levels of existence of beings not recognized by most modern Westerners. Although these resemble those of the pre-Buddhist Upanishadic tradition, the Buddha denies that he has merely copied a prior mythology. In numerous contexts and on many different occasions, he refers to his own interactions with gods and spirits, made possible by his paranormal powers. If there indeed exist such invisible beings, then a population count of visible beings alone is inadequate to invalidate the theory of rebirth.

The Buddhist view of the universe is more comprehensive than that normally held by modern materialists. We already observed how the Buddhist analysis of human personality into *khandas* gives equal ontological footing to psychological and physiological components of persons. In its broadest categories, the Buddhist universe may be divided into the realms of things immaterial and formless (*arupadhātu*), those with form but only subtle matter (*rupadhātu*), and the physical/sensual realm of form and gross matter (*kamadhātu*). It is thought that rebirth can take place in realms of hell, ghosts, titans (*asuras*), animals, men, and gods (Story, 1975, pp. 65f.) Just as there are many classes of men and animals within the visible material realms, so there are many classes of gods, spirits, and demons in the invisible realms. But it is generally held that only on the human level can man's karma (thought and action) influence his destiny; the other levels are essentially expiatory or compensatory, places where the merit or demerit of prior lives is rewarded or punished. Neither heaven nor hell are taken to be eternal in the Christian sense. Gods and demons are also subject to causal laws and to the cycle of death and rebirth, although their lives are held to be longer than human lives. These other realms (*lokas*) are not necessarily seen as physically above or below this one, but as interpenetrating it; sometimes they are conceived as generated by consciousness in an idealist fashion (Amore, 1974, p. 124). There is one question as to whether the Buddha really believed all of the mythology behind the doctrines of heavens and hells, or merely taught it as a moral goad for the common people in his audience. It is clear, however, that the Buddha believed in the existence of (and claimed to have interacted with) invisible gods and spirits, and that he saw people born into higher or lower realms of existence depending on their karma and mental states (Jayatilleke, 1974, pp 135, 143).

Against rebirth, Westerners generally adduce the fact that very few children seem to remember their previous lives. On the other side, the Buddhists might argue that even a few documentable cases might indicate the plausibility of the rebirth theory, for what is expected is not perfect memory by everyone of



former lives, but simply some indications of influence. It is important to note that the rebirth theory is not logically self-contradictory nor poses the sort of insurmountable philosophical difficulties that confront the purely materialistic theory of the resurrection. For this early Buddhist formulation to work, however, it demands acceptance of at least (1) causality at a distance, (2) the existence of psychic powers not dependent on physical bodies, and probably (3) the existence of some realms other than the visible material one.

If these Buddhist premises are granted, then the Buddhist theory of rebirth based on psychic continuity and influence can be rendered coherent and in that sense tenable. The question of whether rebirth theory in fact accounts better for observed data than other theories then becomes an empirical one, which we shall consider shortly. There may be many psychological reasons for personally preferring or averring from the theory of karma and rebirth (e.g., the oft-cited allegation that it leads to a philosophy of resignation and stagnation), but these feelings clearly have no bearing on what is actually the nature of reality.

### NIRVANA: THE ALTERNATIVE TO REBIRTH

The Buddha did not envision rebirth in a happy heaven as the ultimate goal of life. The heavenly realms, although pleasant, are causally conditioned and therefore impermanent, producing additional suffering in their demise. The common majority of suffering humanity might well wish to escape its suffering even temporarily through a heavenly rebirth. But a more enlightened perspective would suggest that the entire cycle of birth, death, rebirth, and change is inextricably interlaced with suffering. In that case, the ultimate goal to be sought is not a temporary stay in heaven but a permanent release from the entire cycle of birth and death. In early Buddhism, such a release can only be obtained from right practice and thought while in the human realm; even the gods and demons must become human (and male) before such freedom can be realized (Jennings, 1947, p. xliii). Therefore, although the human realm experiences more suffering than the heavenly realms, it is privileged above all others in its access to this soteriological option: the complete escape from the wheel of rebirth.

This escape, or freedom, is generally known as *nirvana* (Pali: *nibbana*). Its etymological roots suggest the meaning of "blowing out" or extinction (cf. Upadhyaya, 1971, pp. 337, 341). It is often analogized to the blowing out or extinguishing of a fire (the passions). It might seem that if all existence is suffering, then the only escape from suffering is in nonexistence. Such reasoning has led many western interpreters to conclude that nirvana is simply the utter extinction of personality, although the Buddha sometimes explained it in more palatable terms so as not to shock his listeners. Since nirvana is the final goal of Buddhist life and teaching, it is essential that we come to terms with this question: does nirvana actually imply annihilation, or some form of survival after death?

The early Buddhist scriptures are far from unambiguous about the meaning of nirvana. Their allusions to it tend to be more allegorical than literally descriptive. Problems of interpretation are intensified when we try to translate the words and concepts of nirvana into English, in a dramatically different culture and age. We may take four views as representative of the major schools of thought: (1) nirvana as annihilation; (2) nirvana as eternal life; (3) nirvana as an ethical state in this world; and (4) nirvana as a transcendent, ineffable state in which time and person are superceded.

Among the first modern interpreters of Buddhism to the West was Eugene Burnouf, who translated the Lotus Sutra and other Pali and Tibetan works into French in the mid-19th century. Burnouf's view of nirvana is typified by his translation of a passage in the *Avadanasatakam* (1876, p. 525):

Until finally, Vipasyin, the completely perfect Buddha, after having performed the totality of obligations of a Buddha, was like a fire of which the fuel is consumed, entirely annihilated in the element of nirvana in which nothing remains of that which constitutes existence.

This analogy of extinguishing a fire or lamp becomes archetypical for annihilationist interpreters, its conclusions based primarily on etymological grounds.

Even within the Buddha's lifetime, his opponents were quick to accuse him of teaching a nihilistic philosophy with the goal of self-annihilation. The Buddha was equally insistent in countering these charges, for there had been annihilationist philosophers before him, and he scrupulously avoided their paths. Refuting the annihilationist misinterpretations, he addressed his monks:

[I] am accused wrongly, vainly, falsely, and inappropriately by some ascetics and Brahmins: "A denier is the ascetic Gautama; he teaches the destruction, annihilation, and perishing of the being that now exists. . ." These ascetics wrongly, vainly, falsely, and inappropriately accuse me of being what I am not, O Monks, and of saying what I do not say. (Grimm, 1958, p. 5)

There are even passages that would indicate the Buddha took a much more positive, even eternalistic view of the nature of man.

I did exist in the past, not that I did not; I will exist in the future, not that I will not; and I do exist in the present, not that I do not. (Jayatilleke, 1974, p. 200)

Perhaps it was a more serious encounter with passages like these that caused Western interpreters to rethink their original annihilationist interpretations. LaVallee Poussin came to believe that there are states of blessedness and existence beyond the power of language to depict or mind to imagine until actually experienced. He advocated that Westerners continue to think of nirvana as a kind of annihilation, because Western thought patterns will not enable us to conceive of blessedness or existence apart from mental and physical objects, which are not present in nirvana. To avoid building mythical

"castles in the air," which would not correctly describe the reality of nirvana, the Buddha remained silent, but this silence should not be taken to imply that nirvana were not a real state. If LaVallee Poussin is correct in this interpretation, it goes a long way towards explaining both the reticence of the Buddha to verbalize his understanding of nirvana, and the difficulty of Westerners to see nirvana as anything other than annihilation.

While there are many arguments that the Buddha did not believe in a nirvana of annihilation, the arguments that he did believe in the eternal bliss of a soul in nirvana can be summarized into three types: (1) Buddhist borrowing from Samkhya or Brahmanism; (2) the theory that anatta applies only to the khandas and that a soul might exist outside of them; and (3) the positive metaphors and adjectives used to describe nirvana. However, none of these arguments is very strong, and they often amount to little more than a rationalization for the conviction that a great world religion could not be nihilistic. There are dangers in both the annihilationist and eternalist viewpoints, as K. N. Upadhyaya appropriately comments on the views of Grimm, Kieth, and Radhakrishnan (1971), p. 38):

All this clearly shows that these scholars, while countering the annihilationist view of Nibbana, are carried away by their own arguments to the opposite extreme of eternalism. It is indeed, very difficult to steer clear of these two opposite views. . . .

It seems that the Buddha had tried to avoid both extremes, and one way to follow him in this is a humanistic agnosticism.

When questioned as to whether the saint exists after death, the Buddha remained silent. There is widespread agreement on one point: the reason for the Buddha's silence on this question was that he felt that such speculation or knowledge did not lead to spiritual or moral advancement. The man in this world is analogized to a man wounded by an arrow, who can waste no time in asking the shape and origin of the arrow and the man who shot it. Rather, he must exert all his energy towards removing the arrow, the immediate cause of his suffering. Similarly, the Buddha taught a way towards the relief of the suffering of this immediate material existence, and not a system of metaphysics. The circle of birth, death, and rebirth can be broken if desires and cravings are eliminated.

The entire teaching of *anatta* was more to encourage a selfless moral life than to provoke discussions on the nature of a soul. These considerations lead many Buddhist scholars to the conclusion that nirvana refers not to any ontological state, nor to a view of existence or nonexistence after death, but rather to an ethical state here and now. This conclusion does seem to have the happy advantages of not reading too much into the Buddha's silence, and not leading to invidious comparisons of Buddhism with other religions.

Japanese Mahayana Buddhists also tend to emphasize the ethical implications of nirvana in this life, which they prefer to term *satori*, or "enlightenment."

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the ethical state of the enlightened person is not merely one of apathy or of total detachments; it is one of action and compassion as well. It closely follows the Bhagavad Gita's model of selfless action (*niskamkarma*) and makes way for the model of the Bodhisattva: the compassionate enlightened being who returns to this suffering world to save and help unenlightened sentient beings. Yamakami explains (1912, p. 33):

In its negative aspect, Nirvana is the extinction of the three-fold fires of lust, malice, and folly. . . . In its positive aspect, Nirvana consists in the practice of the three cardinal virtues of generosity, love, and wisdom.

D. T. Suzuki denies that non-Buddhists are even qualified to deal with the problem of nirvana, but his own interpretation appears very similar to Yamakami's. For Suzuki (1963, p. 51), nirvana is destruction

of the notion of ego-substance and of all the desires that arise from this erroneous conception. But this represents the negative side of the doctrine, and its positive side consists in universal love or sympathy (*karuna*) for all beings.

Many scholars of stature have thus interpreted nirvana as a state purely limited to the world of living men, with little or no reference to existence after death. Some interpret nirvana as mere detachment from worldly desires; others add the requirement of positive ethical action within the world. Although this may seem to be a more noncommittal, and hence safer, approach than the extremes of nihilism or eternalism, it still tends either to one side or the other. If the entire message of the Buddha were simply that men should be moral and not concern themselves with the afterlife, then no matter how profound this philosophical attitude, it lacks the conviction of one who has seen that men are reborn repeatedly into lives of suffering and that all karma must bear its fruit. If being detached or compassionate alone is enough to eliminate suffering and karma, we should expect some further description of how such actions or attitudes stop the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth, which are the bottom line of Buddhist philosophy.

Early Buddhism has reference to two types of nirvana: *upadhisesa* ("with substrate") and *nirupadhisesa* ("without substrate"). The former is the state of the saint still living in the world; the latter is the state of the saint after death. Even if we admitted that the "ethical state" interpretation adequately explained the meaning of "extinction" (in terms of extinction of desires while the body still lives), we would still be left with the troubling question of what is meant by a bodiless ethical state, the second kind of nirvana discussed! Surely it makes no sense to speak of postmortem apathy, detachment, or compassion, of a being that ceases to exist after death! Moreover, we have already seen that the Buddha repudiated nihilism and affirmed that he would continue to exist. We also know that nirvana refers not to a personal, body-dependent existence after death, for the body and *khandas* are held to separate. And Buddhism clearly repudiates the notion of permanent or unchanging entities, including souls, in

this material phenomenal universe. To paraphrase Conan Doyle's famous observation, when all else is ruled impossible, the improbable must remain the fact. So it seems with early Buddhism: both eternalism and annihilationism have been ruled impossible, and nirvana must mean something more than an ethical state, because there is a type of nirvana after the body is dead and inactive. Thus, however distasteful to Western language-bound thought patterns, the only alternative seems to be that there is a state which language does not adequately describe, and yet is one which the Buddha and Arhats experienced before and after death. This state, although difficult to characterize or talk about, is not nothing, it is *nirvana*.

The analogies of a flame passing from wick to wick and ultimately extinguished, or of different water always flowing through the "same" river, are often used to describe the ever changing nature of the phenomenal world, and the similarity-in-difference of the man who is reborn with the man who has died. However, extinction of the flame is not the only analogy for nirvana. Another important one is that of the small flame swallowed up in a larger one. As King Milinda learns from monk Nagasena (De Bary, 1969, p. 30):

"Reverend Nagasena," said the King, "does the Buddha still exist?"

"Yes, your majesty, he does."

"Then is it possible to point out the Buddha as being here or there? . . ."

"If a great fire were blazing, would it be possible to point to a flame which had gone out and say that it was here or there?"

Thus, there is a sense in which the individual flame is no longer identifiable, no longer individual, no longer limited to a single wick. It is not therefore utterly destroyed, but rather expanded by losing its prior individuality. Like raindrops in the ocean, they do not lose all existence whatsoever, but rather lose the prior limitations and characteristics of their separateness.

"[Nirvana] takes away the sting of death and leads to immortality in the sense of the "Upasama" [merging] of the individual in a higher reality, like that of a burning flame in its source" (Pande, 1974, p. 504). Narasu (1907, pp. 224f.) also insisted that "the denial of a separate self, an *atman*, does not obliterate the personality of a man, but liberates the individual from an error. . . ." This may seem like a very foreign concept to individualistically indoctrinated Westerners. There is a famous passage in the eighth Udana in which the Buddha asserts that there is a state which is unborn and uncompound (cf. Woodward's trans., 1948, II, p. 98). From this reference also, we may conclude that nirvana is, that the Buddha who has attained nirvana is, and that this teaching is not merely a sugarcoating for a doctrine of annihilationism. Why, then, was the Buddha so adamantly silent about the nature of this state? Pande (1974, p. 510) suggests that

One describes it best by preserving silence, for to say anything about it would be to make it relational and finite. . . . Buddha adhered to this position so rigorously that his silence has become enigmatic.

Thomas concludes that the Buddha had reached the realization of a state about which neither existence nor nonexistence as we know it could be asserted. LaVallee Poussin agrees that Western language lacks the subtlety needed to convey the nature of nirvanic states. If Conze is correct that only mystical knowledge is possible of nirvana, then it is understandable that the Buddha should desire to avoid easily misinterpreted metaphors. Jayatilleke (1974, p. 122) reasons that

The person who has attained the goal is beyond measure (*na pamanam atthi*). Elsewhere, it is said that he does not come within time, being beyond time (*kappam neti akappiyo*) or that he does not come within reckoning (*na upeti sankham*). In other words, we do not have the concepts or words to describe adequately the state of the emancipated person.

It is just this inaccessibility to verbal description that has rendered nirvana such a difficult concept for language-bound Western philosophers. The negative adjectives so often applied to nirvana should not be taken as evidence of Buddhist nihilism. Instead, like the *via negativa* of the medieval Christian descriptions of the mystic Holy, they deny that nirvana has anything in common with the mundane or conceptual. Upadhyaya (1971, p. 343) explains

They by denying everything mundane and conceptual to Nibbana suggest its supramundane and non-conceptual nature in the best possible way, though the positive expressions are also useful in so far as they assert the reality of Nibbana and allay the fears of the nihilistic conception.

With typical Buddhist logic, we are left with the following conclusion: Nirvana neither exists nor does not exist, i.e., it is neither within the realm of existence as we know it, nor is it an illusion. The saint is not reborn, nor does he die, nor is it proper to use any ordinary adjectives about the ineffable state he experiences. His old personality does not continue, and yet the person is not utterly annihilated. Such a state of nibbana is achievable, and it is a viable alternative to rebirth after death. To accept that there are states of being beyond the phenomenal, not even amenable to description in everyday discourse, may require a radical change of worldview of Westerners lacking in mystical experience. Yet this idea—that there are blissful and otherwise indescribable nirvanic states—seems to be the clearest conclusion we can reach concerning what the Buddha experienced and was trying to communicate. Thus, Buddhism presents us with two alternatives to the Western ideas of survival in heavenly realms: (1) a “rebirth” of mental processes and characteristics into another human (and possibly nonhuman) body; (2) an achievement of a transcendent bodiless state defying further referential description, but characterizable by peace, bliss, and absence of change and desire. This view of the nature of life and the inevitability of rebirth became popular throughout South and East Asia and remains dominant there today.

## REFERENCES

- Amore, R. C. 1974. The Heterodox Philosophical Systems. In *Death in Eastern Thought*. Ed. F. H. Holck, pp. 114-162. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Anguttara Nikaya (Gradual Sayings)*. Unless otherwise specified, all scriptural references will be taken from the Pali Text Society editions. Ed. Thomas or C.A.F. Rhys-Davids. London: Luzac or Oxford University Press.
- Buddhaghosa. 1931. *The Path of Purity (Visuddhimagga)*. London: Pali Text Society.
- Burnouf, E. 1876. *L'Introduction a l'histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Cie.
- Colebrooke, H. T. 1873. *Miscellaneous Essays*. Ed. E. B. Cowell. London: Trubner & Co.
- Conze, E. 1951. *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*. Oxford: Bruno Cassirer.
- DeBary, T., ed. 1969. *The Buddhist Tradition*. New York: Modern Library.
- DeSilva, L. A. 1975. *The Problems of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity*. Colombo: Study Centre for Religion and Society.
- Grimm, G. 1958. *The Doctrine of the Buddha*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
- Jayatilake, K. N. 1974. *The Message of the Buddha*. New York: The Free Press.
- Jennings, J. G. 1947. *The Vedantic Buddhism of the Buddha*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas.
- Kalupahana, D. J. 1975. *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii.
- LaVallee Poussin, L. 1908. *Bouddhisme: Opinions sur l'histoire de la dogmatique*. Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne et Cie.
- Law, B. C. 1973. *Heaven and Hell in Buddhist Perspective*. Varanasi: Bhartiya Publishers.
- Nyantiloka Mahathera. 1955. *Karma and Rebirth*. Colombo: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Narasu, L. 1907. *The Essence of Buddhism*. Bombay: Thacker & Co.
- Pande, G. C. 1974. *Studies in the Origins of Buddhism*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas.
- Radhakrishnan, S. 1939. *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Rhys-Davids, T. W. 1921. Nirvana. In *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, 326a. London: Luzac & Co.
- Sarathchandra, E. R. 1958. *The Buddhist Psychology of Perception*. Colombo: University Press.
- Story, F. 1975. *Rebirth as Doctrine and Experience*. Kandy: Buddhist Publications Society.
- Suzuki, D. T. 1963. *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Trenckner, V., ed. 1962. *Milindapanho*. London: Luzac & Co.
- Upadhyaya, K. N. 1971. *Early Buddhism and the Bhagavad Gita*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas.
- Wayman, A. 1974. The Intermediate State Dispute. In *Buddhist Studies in Honor of I. B. Horner*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
- Woodward, F. L., trans. 1948. *Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon*. Esp. *Udana VIII*, Vol. 2. London: Oxford University Press.
- Yamakami, S. 1912. *Systems of Buddhist Thought*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press.