

Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 106

The Ups and Downs of Rebirth

Stories From the Buddhist Texts

*as told by
The Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw
of Burma*



BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

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**Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka**

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First published: 1986

BPS Online Edition © (2014)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS and Access to
Insight Transcription Project

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The Ups and Downs of Rebirth

The Story of Queen Upari



Queen Upari was the chief queen of King Assaka who once ruled over the country of Kasi at its capital Patali. She was said to be of great beauty, Ancient kings used to select the most attractive maidens of their kingdom to become their queens. Consequently all their queens were noted for their charm and loveliness. Queen Upari was outstanding amongst them because of her raving beauty and enchantment. Bewitched by her alluring comeliness King Assaka, had lost his heart on her.

Much adored by the monarch and while still in the prime of her beauty and charm, Queen Upari went to the gods' abode. Now "to go to the abode of the celestial being" is a Burmese cultural usage to denote the death of a royal personage. Likewise, "flying back" means the passing away of a Buddhist monk, a mere cultural usage. A dead person finds rebirth in an

existence as conditioned by kamma the previous volitional activities. As it happened, Queen Upari, in spite of the saying according to the cultural usage that “she had gone to the god’s abode,” actually made her rebirth in the abode of the lowly beetles.

With the passing away of his adored queen, King Assaka was consumed by fiercely burning fires of sorrow and lamentation, He caused the corpse of the queen embalmed in oil, to be placed in a glass coffin and kept it underneath his bedstead. Overwhelmed by grief, the king lay on the bed without food or sleep, wailing and moaning over the loss of his beloved queen. The royal relatives and his wise ministers tried to console him and give solace by reminding him of the nature of impermanence and conditionality of existence, all to no avail. The corpse in the coffin, being embalmed in oil, would remain well preserved just like those treated with chemical preservatives of modern times. The queen would therefore appear to the king as if she were lying, sleeping in the coffin. The sight of the corpse acted like fuel to his burning sorrows and lamentations which continued to consume him for seven days. At that time, the Bodhisatta was a hermit, endowed with abhiññā supernormal jhānic powers, living in the forest of the Himalayas. He happened to scan the whole world using his abhiññā, and saw King Assaka in the throes

of intense sorrow. He knew also that no one but himself could save the king from his misery. He therefore made his way to the royal garden of King Assaka by means of his jhānic powers.

There a young Brahmin came to see the hermit, who made enquired him about King Assaka. The young man told him how the king was being overwhelmed by grief and requested him to save the king. "We do not know the king. But if he came and asked us, we could tell him about his wife's present existence," replied the hermit. Thereupon the young man went to the king and said to him. "Great Sir, a hermit endowed with celestial eye and celestial ear has arrived in the royal garden. He said he knew and could show the present existence of the departed queen. It would be worthwhile to go and see him."

Upon hearing that the hermit could show him the queen in her present existence, the king immediately took off for the royal gardens in a carriage. Arriving there, he paid respectful homage to the hermit and addressed him. "Reverend Sir, is it true that you claim to know the present existence of the queen Upari?" On the hermit admitting his claim, the king wanted to know where she was reborn now.

"Oh, great King, Queen Upari took delight in her beauteous appearance and was very vain about it. She

had spent her time engaged only in beautifying herself to make herself more alluringly attractive, forgetting all the while to perform meritorious deeds, to give alms and observe moral precepts. In consequence, she has passed over to a lowly existence. She is presently reborn as a female cow-dung-beetle in this very garden,” the hermit told the whole story very frankly.

Persons favoured by fortune enjoying privileges of wealth, family, education, rank, physical beauty etc., are prone to exhibit haughtiness in their dealings with others. Shrouded in their own vanity and self-esteem, they become neglectful in their performance of meritorious deeds. Humility plays no part in their make-up. The Blessed One had taught in the Cūlakamma-vibhaṅga Sutta that such vainglorious, haughty persons are liable to land up in lowly inferior rebirths. On the other hand, unpretentious persons who show humility and pay reverential respect to those deserving homage will be reborn in noble families.

Queen Upari of our story was extremely beautiful, and, being the chief queen of the ruling monarch, was of very high status in life. She had her head turned by these pre-eminent qualities and looked down with contempt on those to whom she should have shown her respect. For such unwholesome attitudes and actions, it may be presumed she was reborn a lowly

female cow dung-beetle. On hearing this account of the rebirth of his beloved queen as a female beetle, King Assaka promptly rejected it, saying, “I don’t believe it.”

The hermit replied, “I can show you the female beetle and make her talk too.” The king said, “All right. Please do so and make her talk too.” The hermit, using his supernatural powers of *abhiññā*, made a vow for both the male and female beetles to make their appearance before the king.

When the male and female beetles emerged from the heap of cow dung into the presence of king the hermit said, “O King, the female beetle which is following from behind was your chief queen Upari. Having abandoned you, she is now trailing the male cow dung-beetle wherever it goes. O king, have a good look at the female beetle who was lately your chief queen Upari.”

The king refused to believe the hermit. “I can’t believe that such an intelligent being as my queen Upari was reborn as this female beetle,” said the king.

True, for those who do not quite believe in the laws of kamma and its resultant effect, who do not understand the principles of conditionality or casual relationship, as explained in *paṭicca-samuppāda*, it would be difficult to accept that a being of the human

world should have gone down as low as to become a mere beetle. Even in these days when Buddha's teachings are widely prevalent, there are some people holding the view that "when man dies, he cannot descend into an existence inferior to that of a human being." So it is not surprising that during the dark ages when Buddha's dispensations were yet unheard of, such stories of incarnation were received with scepticism.

Nevertheless, according to the teachings of the Buddha, for as long as one has not yet attained the status of an Ariya, one can descend from the human world or the celestial realm into the four lower states of existence; conditioned by the bad kamma and the mental reflex just before death, rebirth may take place in the lower order of beings. On the other hand, conditioned by good kamma and wholesome mental attitude on the threshold of death, ascent may be made from an inferior sphere of existence into the higher realm of human and celestial beings.

There is the story of a bhikkhu named Venerable Tissa who developed attachment to his saffron robes when he was about to die. As a consequence, he was reborn a body louse making his home on those very robes. There is another story of a frog who met its death while listening to a discourse by the Buddha. He became a celestial being in Tavatimsa celestial abode.

These are examples which serve as evidences of various transformations at the time of rebirths.

But King Assaka, not having heard of such discourses, could not accept that his queen had become a female beetle. Accordingly he refused to believe it. The hermit therefore proposed that he would make the female beetle talk. The king accepted the proposal. Thereupon the hermit made the vow, using his supernatural powers, to have the conversation between him and the female beetle comprehensible to the king and his audience.

“Who were you in your past life?” the hermit asked.

“I was the chief queen Upari of King Assaka,” replied the female beetle.

“What now, female beetle, do you still love King Assaka or do you love only this cow dung-beetle?”

To which the female beetle gave the reply: “True, King Assaka was my husband in my past life. At that time, I used to roam about in this garden, in the company of King Assaka, enjoying the five sense pleasures of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. But, now that I am in the new existence, I have nothing to do with King Assaka.”

The King Assaka was greatly distressed to hear the harsh, unfeeling words of estrangement from the lips

of the female beetle. He thought to himself: “I had loved and adored her so much. I could not betake myself to throw away her dead body. But she had become so antipathetic and nasty to me.”

He felt so disgusted with his old queen Upari that he ordered even while sitting there: “Go and have that woman’s body removed.” Then having bathed and washed himself, the king went back to the palace. He made another court-lady his chief queen and carried on ruling over his country wisely. The hermit Bodhisatta, after giving good advice to the king, went back to the Himalayan sanctuary.

The moral from this story is that Queen Upari, while in the human world, had taken delight in being a human person, and a queen at that. She would never have even dreamed of being reborn a female beetle. But in accordance with her past kamma, when she happened to be reborn a female beetle, she at once took to the life and delight in the physical body of a beetle. She esteemed and adored the physical body of the male beetle a hundred times, a thousand times more than that of King Assaka.

That she felt quite at home in her lowly existence as a cow dung beetle is due to *taṇhā*, craving, which finds delight everywhere; that is why the Buddha had said, “craving has the tendency to delight wherever it finds

rebirth.”

Reborn as a dog, it takes delight in a dog’s existence; reborn as pig, as a fowl, there is always delight in each existence. Even having been born as children of affluent parents of upper social class, there are cases of them sinking down to poverty-stricken existences and yet enjoying their lives therein. Some of them even resisted the efforts of their parents to take them back into the fold of family, since they are finding their new life quite enjoyable. It is craving again which is giving them pleasure wherever they are, delighting in whatever sense object presents itself.

From Brahma Land to Pigpen

At one time the Blessed One went into Rajagiri for alms round. On seeing a young female pig, the Blessed One smiled. Noticing the white radiations which shone forth from the teeth of the Buddha, the Venerable Ānanda knew that the Buddha was smiling.

Accordingly he asked; “What has caused Sire to smile?”

The Blessed One pointed out the young female pig to Ānanda and said, “See that young female pig? She was a young woman in human existence during the dispensation of Kakusan Buddha. When she died, she was reborn a hen in the neighbourhood of a monastic feeding-hall. The small hen fell victim to an eagle. But earlier she happened to have heard the recitation by a Buddhist monk of a meditation subject which aroused wholesome thoughts in her. By virtue of these merits, the small hen was reborn as a princess named Ubbari in a royal family. The princess Ubbari later left the household life and became a wandering mendicant. Residing in the mendicants’ residence she happened one day to gaze at the maggots in the latrine. The worms served as an object for meditation (contemplation of ugliness of worm-infested corpse or contemplation of a white object) by which she attained the first jhāna. When she passed away, she was reborn a Brahma in the first jhānic Brahma world. On expiry from the Brahma world, she became the daughter of a rich man in the human world, which she left again only to be born a pig now. I saw all these events which made me smile.”

On hearing this story of repeated births in various existences, Venerable Ānanda and other monks

became greatly alarmed and agitated with religious emotion. The Blessed One stepped going on the alms-round, and while still standing on the roadway, stated teaching the Dhamma in six verses the first one of which stated:

“If the main roots of a tree remain undamaged and in good condition, even when the upper branches are cut off, that tree will grow again developing new buds and shoots. Likewise, if there remain defilements (lying dormant) which are not yet eradicated by the noble path, this suffering of rebirth will arise time and again successively.”

What is conveyed by this verse is this: “During her existence as princess Ubbari, she renounced the world to become a wanderer. By practising meditation, she attained the first jhāna which could dispel or cut away only the defilements of craving for sensual pleasure which appear as sensuous thoughts at the mind’s door. By means of suppression jhāna can put away the defilements only to a certain distance for a certain period of time. Thus she was able to dispel the craving for sensual pleasure when she attained the first jhāna and later in the Brahma world. But when she was born again in the human world as the daughter of a wealthy man, the craving for sensual pleasure reappeared because it had not been rooted out by the noble path. The craving for existence, of course,

persisted even when she had attained the jhāna. Thus, because the latent defilements had not been completely uprooted, she had to descend from the Brahma world, through the human world, into a pig's existence. As long as craving persists, repeated rebirths will take place in this way in various existences."

In reference to this story of descent from the Brahma World to a pig's existence, ancient Sayādaws had left an aphorism: "in Brahma land, she shines bright; in pig's pen, too, she finds delight." But it is not possible to be reborn as a pig, straight from the Brahma world, nor as any other animal, nor in the realms of petas, starving ghosts, nor in the states of misery. By virtue of access concentration, proximate to the jhāna previously attained, rebirth can take place only as a human being or in a celestial abode. The young female pig of the above story also passed through human life where she was born as the daughter of a wealthy man. It is quite possible that she landed in a pig's existence after being the daughter of a wealthy man because of the bad kamma she had committed then in being haughty and insolent to those to whom she should have shown respect.

When the young female pig died, she was reborn in a royal family of Savaṇṇabhūmi which is generally taken to be the country of Thaton. From being a

princess of Suvaṇṇabhūmi, she passed over to Varanasi, India, as a woman. She then became a woman in Vanavasi, southeast of Bombay. From there, she was reborn the daughter of a horse-merchant in the seaport town of Supparaka, northwest of Bombay. Next she became the daughter of a ship-owner at the port of Kavira in the south-eastern most part of the Indian peninsular. This is the coastal district inhabited by the Tamil people. After that life, she was reborn in the family of a government official at Anuradhapura of present day Sri Lanka. Her next life was as a daughter of a rich man, named Sumana from Bhokanta, a village south of Anuradhapura. She took the same name, Sumana as her father. Later her father left that village and settled down in the Mahāmuni village of the Dīghavapi District. One day a minister of the king Dutthagamini, named Lakundaka Atimbara, happened to visit the Mahāmuni village on a certain business. Upon seeing the young lady Sumana, he fell madly in love with her. He married her with great pomp and ceremony and carried her off to his village Mahāpunna.

The Venerable Mahā Anuruddha who resided at the monastery of Taungsun happened to visit her village for alms round. While waiting for offer of alms food at the gate of Sumana’s house, he saw Sumana and said to his monk. followers: “Bhikkhus, how wonderful,

what a marvel! The young female pig of the Blessed One's time is now the wife of the minister Lakundaka Atimbara."

On hearing this exclamation, Sumana, the wife of the minister, developed *jātissara ñāṇa*, knowledge of previous existences. With the help of this faculty, she recalled to her mind the previous existences she had passed through. In consequence, she became agitated with fear at the prospect of repeated births in the cycle of existences. Asking permission from her minister husband, she went to a bhikkhunī monastery and got herself ordained. After ordination, she listened to the discourse on Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta at Tissa Mahā Vihara monastery. Practising mindfulness meditation in accordance with the sutta, she became a sotāpanna, well established as a stream-winner in the first stage of the path and fruition. Then when king Dutthagamini came on the throne, she went back to her native village, Bhokkanta, where at the Kalla Mahā Vihara monastery she heard a discourse on Asivisopama Sutta which enabled her to attain the fourth stage of the fruition and become an Arahat, completely free from influxes, passions.

The Story of Samana Deva

Even if one were engaged in meditation practise to dispel craving until one became fully developed in the knowledge of the path, craving could still give rise to rebirth. This fact is borne out by the story of a deva (god) named Samana.

During the lifetime of the Buddha, a certain young man, having established faith in the dispensation of the Buddha, got himself ordained and stayed with his preceptor for five years. He performed all the major and minor incumbent duties and learnt thoroughly the *patimokkha* discipline for the bhikkhus. He also mastered the procedure for purifying himself from serious as well as trifling offences. Then, taking a meditation object of his choice, he repaired to a solitary abode in the forest and devoted himself incessantly to the practise of meditation.

His efforts at meditation were very strenuous. Even at midnight, which the Blessed One had allowed as the time for rest and sleep, he continued on with the practise. Thus striving day and night and getting enervated by lack of sufficient nourishing food, he was suddenly seized with a cutting pain, a paralytic stroke, which ruptured the spinal nerve causing him instant

death. He was meditating while walking and thus is said to have passed away in the course of performing the duties of a bhikkhu.

According to the commentary, if any bhikkhu, while engaged in walking up and down the cloister walk or standing, leaning against the leaning post, or sitting or lying down at the head of the cloister walk with the double robe on his head, passes away, he is said to die in harness. So also a bhikkhu dies in harness if he passes away in the course of preaching a sermon, particularly on liberation from the chain of existences.

As the bhikkhu of our story was engaged in meditating while walking up and down the cloister walk, we could take it that he passed away while he was contemplating the *nāmarūpa* of the body postures in accordance with the teaching in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Although he had put in a great deal of effort in the practise of meditation, he passed away without attaining the Arahat path, because he was not yet fully endowed with supporting acts of perfections (*paramis*) necessary for such attainments.

Complete eradication of craving is not possible unless the Arahat path has been attained. That this bhikkhu had not yet developed even up to the stage of the stream-winner will become clear later. Therefore, because of craving which can cause rebirth, he was

reborn in the celestial abode of Tavatimsa. A magnificent celestial palace awaited him in consequence of the merit he had acquired in the practise of meditation. By spontaneous rebirth, he appeared as if just awakened from sleep, at the entrance of the palace, a celestial being resplendent in full celestial attire.

At that moment about one thousand celestial princesses who had been awaiting the arrival of the master of the palace, saying, "Our Lord has arrived, let us entertain him," came gathering round him, holding musical instruments in their hands to welcome him joyously. The deva lord of the palace, however, did not even realise that he had taken a new existence in a new world. He was under the impression that he was still a bhikkhu of the human world. On the sight of the celestial damsels, he took them to be female visitors to his monastery. He covered up his bare left shoulder with the upper garment and remained seated, his eyes lowered and assuming a very dignified and reserved pose.

Realising at once that the new being must have been a bhikkhu in his previous existence, the celestial ladies addressed him, "My lord, this is the abode of the celestial beings. It is not the time to be observing the code of bhikkhu discipline. It is the occasion for enjoyment of celestial pleasures." But he continued on

maintaining solemn reserve and dignity. "This deva has not realised that he has become a celestial being in the realm of the deva's. Let us drive home this fact to him, by our welcoming revelries." So saying, the celestial damsels started playing the musical instruments accompanied by songs. The deva all the more tightened his retiring disposition, maintaining his dignified solemnity, thinking that the female visitors had come to his forest abode to abandon themselves to frivolous merriment.

Whereupon the celestial ladies brought out a body-length mirror and placed it in front of the deva. On seeing his reflection in the mirror, he finally realised that he had left the bhikkhu's existence and taken rebirth in the celestial land. The Samana deva was greatly perturbed then. He reflected: "I did not take up meditation to be reborn in this celestial land. My object was to attain the most profitable goal of Arahant fruition. But I am now like a boxer who entered the boxing competition aiming at the championship gold medal but was awarded only a bundle of turnips." Extremely agitated in mind, he thought: "The celestial pleasures are easily attainable. The lifetime of an Enlightened One is a rare occasion. To hear the teaching of the Buddha and to attain the noble path is of utmost importance. By wallowing in the celestial pleasures, there is the danger of losing the opportunity

of meeting the Buddha.” So without taking the trouble of entering the palatial building, he repaired hastily to the presence of the Buddha while the restraint he had observed as a bhikkhu still remained intact. His celestial damsels also accompanied him as if they were anxious not to lose sight of him. On reaching the presence of the Buddha, he addressed him:

“Most Venerable Blessed One, in what manner will it be possible to avoid and proceed along past the Nandavana garden otherwise known as the Mohana garden, the grove of stupidity, because it serves to encourage foolish behaviour in the celestial beings who visit it; where thousands of female celestial beings indulge in singing and yodelling; where numerous demons, goblins and spirits haunt.”

Here the deva referred to the celestial females as demons and goblins and to the Nandavana gardens as the grove of stupidity because he was still in a repulsive mood towards sensual pleasures as a consequence of his intense efforts at *vipassanā* meditation. The commentary explanation of the deva’s query as to “how to proceed along” was that he was requesting the Blessed One for guidance on *vipassanā* which provides access to the *Arahat* fruition. The Buddha reflected on all the circumstances concerning the deva and taught him the Noble Eightfold Path.

The deva Samana, while listening to the discourse, reflected on the meditation practises of his former existence. Although he had not been able to attain to higher knowledge as a bhikkhu in spite of strenuous efforts at meditation, in the existence of a deva whose physical body was free from impurities, he was able to develop, in no time, successive stages of insight until he attained the path and fruition of the first stage and realised *Nibbāna* thus becoming a *sotāpanna*, a stream-winner.

The main point which this story of Samana deva has brought home is that, although the bhikkhu had been engaged ardently in *vipassanā* meditation, as the *Ariya* path which could cut off craving had not yet been attained, this craving had, after death, caused rebirth in the new existence as a celestial being. The story also pointed out how the *Ariya* path could be developed and how, as a deva, higher knowledge could be attained with ease.

A Story from Sri Lanka

There lived in a village in Sri Lanka, a man who was misbehaving with the wife of his elder brother. The woman was more passionately attached to her paramour than to her legitimate husband. She therefore instigated her lover to get rid of his elder brother. The man remonstrated, "Woman I Don't ever talk like that." But after she had repeated her evil suggestion three times, the lover asked, "How would I go about it?" She replied, "You go with an axe and wait for him at the riverside near the big caper tree. I'll send him there." Thereupon, the man proceeded there and lay in wait for his elder brother, hiding amongst the branches of the tree.

When the husband came back from his work in the forest, the wife made a show of loving affection for him, and fondly brushing his hair she said, "Your hair needs cleaning, it is too dirty. Why not go and shampoo it at the riverside near the big caper tree?" Happy with the thought, "My wife is very tender with her affections for me," he went accordingly to the bathing place at the riverside. He was preparing to wash his hair, bending his head down, when his young brother came out from the hiding place and cruelly chopped his head off with an axe.

Because of the clinging attachment to his wife, he was reborn a green snake (a rat snake according to Ceylonese scholars). Still attached to his wife, the

snake took to dropping himself down from the roof of the house upon the woman. Realising that the snake must have been her former husband, she caused it to be killed and removed. Even after passing away from the snake's existence, his attachment for his former wife still remained strong and he was reborn a dog in his old house. As a dog it was still clinging to his former wife, following her everywhere even she went out to the forest. People made derisive remarks, "The hunter woman with the dog is going out. Wonder where she is headed for!" The woman asked her lover again to kill the dog.

His attachment still intense and persisting, the dog was reborn a calf in the same house. The young calf also went following her everywhere, drawing laughter and ridicule from the people again, "Look, the cowherd has come out. Wonder which pasture her cattle are going to graze in!" Again the woman asked her man to kill off the young calf. Again his tenacious attachment to his wife caused rebirth, this time in her womb.

In the human world which he regained, he was born endowed with the faculty of recalling previous existences. Exercising this faculty, he went over the past four existences and was greatly distressed when he came to know that they were all terminated at the instance of his former wife. "What an irony to have

taken rebirth in the womb of such an enemy” he lamented.

He would not let his mother, the enemy, touch him. Whenever the mother tried to hold him, the baby cried out vociferously. So the grandfather had to take over the task of bringing up the child. When the child reached the age when he could speak, the grandfather asked him, “My dear child, why do you cry out when your mother tries to hold you?” “This woman is no mother to me. She is my enemy who killed me off for four successive existences.” So saying, he recounted to his grandfather the story of his previous lives. On hearing this sad tale, the old man wept, embracing the child and said, “Come, my poor grandchild, let us get away. I see no gain in staying here.” They went away and stayed in a monastery where both of them received ordination and in time, through practise of meditation, were able to attain Arahatta path and fruition and gained Arahathship.

The moral to be drawn from this episode is that attachment gives rise to repeated existence at the very location of that attachment. This story clearly bears out the truth of the teaching, “attachment brings about fresh existences.” But after the existences of a snake, a dog and a calf, meeting violent death in each, in the last life as a human being, when he attained Arahathship, the craving was completely extinguished.

There would be no more rebirth for him, and he would be free from all forms of suffering. It would be well to take to heart the moral of this story and strive for freedom from all suffering through the practise of vipassanā.

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