



Does Rebirth Make Sense?

Newcomers to Buddhism are invariably impressed by the clarity, directness, and earthy practicality of the Dhamma as embodied in such basic teachings as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the threefold training. These teachings, as clear as daylight, are accessible to any serious seeker looking for a way beyond suffering. However, when new Dhamma students encounter the doctrine of rebirth, they often feel it just doesn't make sense. At this point, they suspect, the teaching has swerved off course, foundering in pointless speculation and fantasy. Even modernist interpreters of Buddhism seem to have trouble taking the rebirth teaching seriously. Some dismiss it as just a piece of cultural baggage, "ancient Indian metaphysics," that the Buddha retained in deference to the worldview of his age. Others interpret rebirth as a metaphor for changing mental states, with the realms of rebirth seen as symbols for different moods and emotions. A few critics have even questioned the very authenticity of the texts on rebirth, arguing that they must be interpolations.

A quick glance at the Pali suttas would show that none of these claims has much substance. The teaching of rebirth crops up almost everywhere in the texts, and is so closely bound to a host of other doctrines that to remove it would virtually reduce the Dhamma to shreds. We find, for example, that the Buddha explains his own enlightenment as the realisation of the three higher knowledges—the first two involving direct cognition of other lives—and also instructs his disciples how to attain these knowledges themselves. When the texts speak about rebirth into the five realms—the hells, the animal world, the spirit realm, the human world, and the heavens—they never hint that these terms are intended symbolically. To the contrary, they even say that rebirth occurs "with the break-up of the body, after death," which clearly implies they mean the idea of rebirth to be taken quite literally.

In this essay I don't intend to argue the case for rebirth. Instead, I wish to show that the idea of rebirth makes sense. I will be contending that it "makes sense" in two ways: first, in that it is intelligible, having meaning both intrinsically and in relation to the Dhamma as a whole; and second, in that it makes sense, by helping us to make sense, to understand our own situation in the world. I will try to establish this in relation to three domains of discourse, the ethical, the ontological, and the soteriological. Don't be frightened by the big words: the meaning will become clear as we go along.

First, the teaching of rebirth makes sense in relation to ethics. For early Buddhism, the conception of rebirth is an essential plank of its ethical theory, providing an incentive for avoiding evil and doing good. In this context, the doctrine of rebirth is correlated with the principle of kamma. The teaching of kamma asserts that all our morally determinate actions, our wholesome and unwholesome deeds, have an inherent power to bring forth fruits that correspond to the moral quality of those actions. Read together, the twin teachings of rebirth and kamma show that a principle of moral equilibrium obtains between our actions and the felt quality of our lives, such that morally good deeds bring agreeable results, bad deeds disagreeable results.

It is only too obvious that such moral equilibrium cannot be found within the limits of a single life. We can observe, often poignantly, that morally unscrupulous people often enjoy

happiness, esteem, and success, while people who lead lives of the highest integrity are bowed down beneath pain and misery. For the principle of moral equilibrium to work, some type of survival beyond the present life is required, for kamma can bring its due retribution only if our individual stream of consciousness does not terminate with death.

It may be the case that this insistence on some kind of moral equity is an illusion, an unrealistic demand we superimpose on a universe cold and indifferent to our hopes. There is no logical way to prove the validity of rebirth and kamma. The naturalist might just be right in holding that personal existence comes to an end at death, and with it all prospects for moral justice. Nevertheless, I believe such a thesis flies in the face of one of our deepest intuitions, a sense that some kind of moral justice must ultimately prevail. To show that this is so, let us consider two limiting cases of ethically decisive action. As the limiting case of immoral action, let us take Hitler, who was directly responsible for the dehumanising deaths of at least ten million people. As the limiting case of moral action, let us consider a man who sacrifices his own life to save the lives of total strangers. Now if there is no survival beyond death, both men reap the same ultimate destiny. Before dying, perhaps, Hitler experiences some pangs of despair; the self-sacrificing hero enjoys a few seconds knowing he's performing a noble deed. Then beyond that—nothing, except in others' memories. Both are obliterated, reduced to lifeless flesh and bones.

Now the naturalist might be correct in drawing this conclusion, and in holding that those who believe in survival and retribution are just projecting their own wishes out upon the world. But I think something within us resists consigning both Hitler and the compassionate hero to the same fate. The reason we resist is because we have a deep intuitive sense that a principle of moral justice is at work in the world, regulating the course of events in such a way that our good and bad actions rebound upon ourselves to bring the appropriate fruit. Where the naturalist holds that this intuition amounts to nothing more than our own ideals projected out upon the cosmos, I would contend that the very fact that we can form such a conception of cosmic moral justice is deeply significant. It shows, however vaguely, that we have some deep connection with an objective ground of moral justice reflected subjectively in our moral sense.

Now, if we do indeed inhabit a morally coherent universe, then moral justice must eventually prevail, and since such justice clearly does not obtain within a single life, some form of survival is needed to ensure its ultimate triumph. Two alternative forms of survival are possible: on the one hand, an eternal afterlife in heaven or hell, on the other a sequence of rebirths. Of the two, the hypothesis of rebirth seems far more compatible with moral justice than the view of an eternal afterlife; for any finite good action, it seems, must eventually exhaust its potency, and no finite bad action, no matter how bad, should warrant eternal damnation.

The above considerations are not intended to prove the truth of rebirth as a ground for ethics. The Buddha himself does not try to ground ethics on the ideas of kamma and rebirth, but uses a purely naturalistic line of moral reasoning that does not presuppose personal survival or the working of kamma. The gist of his reasoning is simply that we should not mistreat others—by injuring them, stealing their belongings, exploiting them sexually, or deceiving them—because we ourselves are averse to being treated in such ways. Nevertheless, though the Buddha does not ground ethics on the theory of rebirth, he does make belief in kamma and rebirth a strong inducement to moral behaviour. When we recognise that our good and bad actions can rebound upon ourselves, determining our mode of rebirth and bringing us happiness or suffering, this gives us a decisive reason to avoid unwholesome conduct and to diligently pursue the good.

The twin teachings of kamma and rebirth thus shed light upon our situation in the world. They show us that our present living conditions, our dispositions and aptitudes, our virtues and faults, result from our actions in previous lives. When we realise that our present conditions reflect our kammic past, we will also understand that our present actions are the legacy that we

will transmit to our kammic descendants, that is, to ourselves in future lives. The teaching of rebirth thus enable us to face the future with fortitude, dignity, and courage. If we recognise that no matter how debilitating our present conditions might be, no matter how limiting and degrading, we can still redeem ourselves, we will be spurred to exercise our will for the achievement of future good. By our present actions of body, speech, and mind, we can transform ourselves, and by transforming ourselves, we can surmount all inner and outer obstacles and advance towards the final goal.

The teachings of kamma and rebirth have a still deeper ethical significance than as simple pointers to moral responsibility. They show us not only that our personal lives are shaped by our own kammic past, but also that we live in an ethically meaningful universe. Taken in conjunction, they make the universe a cosmos, an orderly, integrated whole, with dimensions of significance that transcend the merely physical. The levels of order that we have access to by direct inspection or scientific investigation do not exhaust all the levels of cosmic order. There is system and pattern, not only in the physical and biological domains, but also in the ethical, and the teachings of kamma and rebirth reveal just what that pattern is. Although this ethical order is invisible to our fleshly eyes and cannot be detected by scientific apparatus, this does not mean it is not real. Beyond the range of normal perception, a moral law holds sway over our deeds and via our deeds over our destiny. It is just the principle of kamma, operating across the sequence of rebirths, that locks our volitional actions into the dynamics of the cosmos, thus making ethics an expression of the cosmos's own intrinsic orderliness. At this point ethics begins to shade into ontology, which we will examine in the next part of this essay.

(to be continued)

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Publications

New Arrivals

- *The Therigatha—A Reevaluation*, Vijitha Rajapakse. Wheel No. 436/437.
- *Parents and Children*, Ven. Medagama Vajiragnana Nāyaka Thera. Bodhi Leaves No. 151.

Recent Reprints

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Book Review

The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka. H.L. Seneviratne. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. 358 pages.

The nondescript title and subdued cover of this book will ensure that it does not attract to itself the vituperation that was vented upon Stanley Tambiah's *Buddhism Betrayed?* and led to its banning in this country. But in its treatment of the same theme, the recent history of the Sri Lankan Buddhist order, Seneviratne's book cuts far deeper in its analysis than the older title. While Tambiah's mild and generally conciliatory study focused upon the historical events that drew the Sangha into political activism, Seneviratne looks below the surface for the causes that underlie this development. As an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Virginia, he casts his project in the form of an anthropological inquiry revolving around the question whether an ethnically dominant Buddhist culture can effectively implement the universalistic values of tolerance, non-violence, and pluralism basic to Buddhist ethics. The answer he arrives at, based on this case study of the Sri Lankan Sangha, is a sadly pessimistic one.

Seneviratne begins his narrative with Anagarika Dharmapala, the charismatic leader of the Buddhist revival at the turn of the last century. He discerns in Dharmapala's thought two major strands, distinct yet closely interwoven, each pregnant with future possibilities. One, which he calls the "economic and pragmatic" aspect, emphasised the need to improve the village-based economy through a revitalisation of Buddhist lay ethics. The other, the "political and ideological" strand, painted an idealised picture of the ancient Sinhala state as a model for national reawakening. What was distinctive about this picture was its blend of politics, religion, and ethnicity, a blend that was to prove so portentous later in the century.

Dharmapala saw the task of guiding the Buddhist revival as devolving on the monks. In his often fiery essays and speeches he urged the monks to give up their ritualism and temple comforts in order to preach "true Buddhism" to the backward villagers. Partly under Christian influence, Dharmapala believed that national regeneration required the adoption of such workaday virtues as diligence, thrift, sobriety, punctuality, and honesty. By propagating these values among the common people, he held, the monks could promote the "twofold good" of economic progress and spiritual development.

While Dharmapala's message caused only slight ripples in the Sangha during his own lifetime, beginning in the 1930s his words began to take effect. As Seneviratne sees it, his message made its impact in two great waves corresponding to the two strands of his vision. In the 1930s and 1940s the economic-pragmatic prong of his agenda took off and inspired a number of dedicated, energetic monks to throw their weight behind the nascent Village Development movement. Seneviratne describes in detail the careers of three such monastic "hero-giants," who moved among the villagers teaching them the disciplines needed for economic betterment. However, despite their earnest efforts, the Village Development movement ultimately failed, mainly because it could not cope with the complexities of a modern national economy.

At roughly the same time that the "economic-pragmatic" wing of the Dharmapalite agenda folded, its political-ideological message resonated with the aspirations of a group of monks associated with the Vidyalankara Pirivena. These monks, whose most articulate spokesman was Ven. Walpola Rahula, heartily welcomed the idea that the task of the modern monk is social service. But for these educated monks, eager to carve out a role for themselves in the newly independent nation, the Sangha's commitment to social service meant above all participation in politics. Thus, this group gave birth to the figure of the "political monk," who claimed that his role as policy advisor and lobbyist was part of "the heritage of the bhikkhu" coming down from the country's ancient past.

Though controversial in the early days of independence, the political monks were able to ride the waves of changing social conditions and new educational opportunities to ensure themselves a prominent voice in national affairs. In Seneviratne's view, it is this politicisation of the Sangha in the guise of "social service" that is largely responsible for plunging the island into the prolonged ethnic crisis that has engulfed it since the late 1950s. While the monks viewed themselves as the guardians of "country, nation, and religion," Seneviratne holds that in practice this conviction has amounted to an ethnic chauvinism with tragic consequences for people of all communities. He contends that the idea of social service espoused by these monks has been little more than a pretext for meddling in national politics, partly to bolster their own prestige and partly to serve a divisive ethnicity.

In his chapter "The Anatomy of a Vocation" Seneviratne follows the evolving role of the monk into the 1980s and 1990s. He shows how the redefinition of the bhikkhu's task as social service has led to nothing less than "an opening of the floodgates" which allows the younger monks to do almost anything they please (p.210). Educated in secular universities, exposed to urban culture, these new monks have exchanged traditional monastic roles for a secular lifestyle that blurs the lines separating the renunciant from the layperson. While most social service monks pursue humble careers as salaried school teachers, the smartest and most enterprising have constituted themselves into a powerful monastic elite having close ties to politicians, financiers, and business leaders. Their ranks even include a Provincial Council member and the president of the national nurses union: strange vocations for men who have ostensibly renounced the world to seek Nibbāna!

The decline in standards of monastic conduct has drawn sharp criticisms both from within the Sangha and from the laity. Seneviratne surveys the main lines of criticism voiced in pamphlets, songs, and the press, but the deepest and most trenchant critique is his own. He can be hard, even scathing, when documenting the failings of the monks, but one is left feeling that the value of his critique is diminished by a lack of constructive counter-proposals. Perhaps as an anthropologist it is his job merely to describe what he has observed and to leave the task of envisaging alternatives to others. Nevertheless, the book would have been richer if he had used his astute intelligence to offer more positive alternatives.

Seneviratne is also prone to make risky generalisations, as for example when he treats the politically vocal monks as a single block without acknowledging the diversity of views that actually exists within the Sangha. Though ethnocentric attitudes no doubt dominate, the Sangha also includes a group of influential monks who have consistently stood for a just and peaceful solution to the ethnic conflict, and have done so on the basis of the universalist ethics of Buddhism. In his haste to criticise, I believe, Seneviratne has failed to give these monks due credit.

Such oversights and omissions apart, however, Seneviratne's book remains a work of prime importance for understanding contemporary Sri Lankan society. Though it is cutting, hard-hitting, and provocative, it makes many points that have long needed to be made, and it makes them with a deeply stirring passion. One would hope that at least parts of the book will find their way into an accurate Sinhala translation, so that it can help the Sangha understand how it is seen among the intelligentsia in the wider world.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Guidelines to Sutta Study

The Discourse on the Destruction of Craving (cont.)

Having picked up the series two-thirds of the way down and taken it back to ignorance, the Buddha next runs through the entire series in forward order, beginning with ignorance. This time he follows the standard sequence, which proceeds from ignorance to craving, then from craving to clinging, and thence to existence, birth, and finally ageing-and-death. Thus here all twelve factors are included. Still one more time, by questioning the monks, he again traces the series backwards, starting from the very end and working back to the beginning. It is this reverse series that we will use as the basis for exposition here.

But first a few words about context. When the Buddha introduces dependent origination at this point in the discourse, this is not done arbitrarily but refers back to the problem with which the sutta began. It will be recalled that when the discourse opened, the bhikkhu Sāti had been going around claiming that “it is this same consciousness”—consciousness conceived as a persisting self—“that transmigrates through the round of rebirths.” The Buddha first refuted the conception of consciousness as an independent self by pointing out that consciousness arises through conditions. With reference to the present life, he showed that each type of consciousness occurs in dependence on its own immediate conditions, namely, a particular sense base and object. Now, at the present point in the sutta, the Buddha brings in the teaching of dependent origination to reveal the structure of conditions that underlies the round of rebirths inclusive of consciousness in its entirety. By showing that in any given life consciousness is a conditioned phenomenon arisen through conditions operating from previous lives, the Buddha pulls the rug out from any attempt to posit consciousness as a permanent self.

The structure of twelve conditions defined by the formula of dependent origination is entirely “impersonal.” Its twelve terms make no reference to a lasting subject or person who undergoes the experiences they signify. Each term simply designates a particular aspect of experience arisen from an antecedent condition and functioning in turn as a condition for some other aspect of experience. The twelve factors constitute an autonomous process. It operates entirely on its own, without any outside agent directing it from above or any self-identical subject animating it

from within. To see the twelve factors functioning in this way, solely through their interlocking conditional relationships, is to get a glimpse into the selflessness and emptiness of all phenomenal existence.

In the catechism the monks reply to each question the Buddha asks as if the answers were obvious to them, but for us, at this distance in time and worldview, the connections between certain links are far from self-evident. The first link is clear enough: Birth is the condition for ageing-and-death, for if we were not born we would not grow old and die. The formula next says, “Existence is the condition for birth.” This proposition is not at all obvious, and even seems counter-intuitive, for we normally think it is birth that brings us into existence. In that case, how can existence be the condition for birth?

According to the suttas, birth (*jāti*) is not parturition, emergence from the womb, but conception, the first spark of new life in the embryo. When we ask about the condition for birth, what we are thus asking about is the factor that initiates new life, and the answer to this question hinges on another question: “What actually happens when life springs up in the womb?” The answer the Buddha gives is that consciousness “descends” into a newly fertilised ovum, thus giving rise to a new organism with a material component (the fertilised ovum) and a mental component (consciousness and its factors). So to inquire into the condition for birth is to ask what propels consciousness into the fertilised ovum. This question refers us to the prenatal background to conception; that is, it takes us back to the preceding existence.

To make it clear how existence is the condition for birth, the Pali commentaries distinguish two phases of existence: a kammically active phase, *kamma-bhava*, when we engage in actions with the kammic potential to generate new existence in the future; and a kammically passive phase, *upapatti-bhava*, when we reap the results of our past kamma. Throughout any given life, the two phases incessantly alternate at lightning speed, somewhat like the current in a florescent tube. But the kammically active phase does not bring forth its results at once. Rather, the kammically active phase of one existence is the cause of the resultant phase in a future life, determining the objective external conditions under which we live and the subjective aptitudes and dispositions within which our experience is framed. It is this kammically active phase of existence that the commentaries identify as the meaning of *bhava* in the statement, “Existence is the condition for birth.” Thus, from the commentarial point of view, this phrase means that our past accumulations of kamma govern the conditions under which we will be reborn and the passive experiences we undergo in life.

This explanation of “existence” cannot be found as such in the suttas themselves, and perhaps introduces a technical distinction not explicit in the original texts. When analysing dependent origination, the suttas define “existence” (*bhava*) simply by way of the three realms of existence—sense-sphere existence, form-sphere existence, and formless-sphere existence—but without saying precisely how this should be understood in relation to birth. We might see the idea underlying the term “existence” here to be the whole process by which our kammic activities direct the stream of consciousness towards rebirth in a new realm of existence. Thus “existence” is the bridge connecting the present life and the future life. It defines the process by which our kammic accumulations, impregnated with ignorance and craving, constantly steer the stream of consciousness towards new possibilities of existence, and at death actually propel it into a new realm of rebirth. When that transitional process is completed, then existence has issued in birth.

Existence in turn is conditioned by clinging. The reason we engage in activities with the potential to engender new existence is because we cling to our present existence made up of the five aggregates. We cling to existence through our attachment to sensual pleasures, through our views and opinions, through our expectations regarding the future, and through our conception

of our personal identity, our notions about who and what we really are. Thus clinging is the condition for existence. Clinging in turn is conditioned by craving: our strong attachment is rooted in an unquenchable thirst for sensual pleasures and for continued existence. Craving is conditioned by feeling, feeling by contact through the six sense bases, contact by the six sense bases themselves, and the six sense bases by “name-and-form,” the sentient organism.

(to be continued)

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

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