



Does Rebirth Make Sense? (Part II)

The teaching of rebirth, taken in conjunction with the doctrine of kamma, implies that we live in a morally ordered universe, one in which our morally determinate actions bring forth fruits that in some way correspond to their own ethical quality. Though the moral laws that link our actions with their fruits cannot be demonstrated experientially in the same way that physical and chemical laws can be, this does not mean they are not real. It means only that, like quarks and quasars, they operate beyond the threshold of sensory perception. Far from being mere projections of our subjective ideals, the moral laws lock our volitional deeds into an all-embracing cosmic order that is perfectly objective in that it functions independently of our personal desires, views, and beliefs. Thus when we submit our behaviour to the rule of ethics, we are not simply acting in ways that merit moral approval. By conforming to the principles of ethics we are doing nothing less than aligning ourselves with the universal law of righteousness and truth, a law that stands at the bedrock of the cosmos.

This brings us to the ontological aspect of the Buddhist teaching on rebirth, its implications for understanding the nature of being. Buddhism sees the process of rebirth as integral to the principle of conditionality that runs through all existence. The sentient universe is regulated by different orders of causation layered in such a way that higher orders of causation can exercise dominion over lower ones. Thus the order of kamma, which governs the process of rebirth, dominates the lower orders of physical and biological causation, bending their energies towards the fulfilment of its own potential. The Buddha does not posit a divine judge who rules over the workings of kamma, rewarding and punishing us for our deeds. The kammic process functions autonomously, without a supervisor or director, entirely through the intrinsic power of volitional action. Interwoven with other orders in the vast and complex web of conditionality, our deeds produce their consequences just as naturally as seeds in a field bring forth their appropriate herbs and flowers.

To understand how kamma can produce its effects across the succession of rebirths we must invert our normal, everyday conception of the relationship between consciousness and matter. Under the influence of materialistic biases we assume that material existence is determinative of consciousness. Because we witness bodies being born into this world and observe how the mind matures in tandem with the body, we tacitly take the body to be the foundation of our existence and mind or consciousness an evolutionary offshoot of blind material processes. Matter wins the honoured status of "objective reality," and mind becomes an accidental intruder upon an inherently senseless universe.

From the Buddhist perspective, however, consciousness and the world co-exist in a relationship of mutual creation which equally requires both terms. Just as there can be no consciousness without a body to serve as its physical support and a world as its sphere of cognition, so there can be no physical organism and no world without some type of consciousness to constitute them as an organism and world. Though temporally neither mind nor matter can be regarded as prior to the other, in terms of practical importance the Buddha

says that mind is the forerunner. Mind is the forerunner, not in the sense that it arises before the body or can exist independently of a physical substratum, but in the sense that the body and the world in which we find ourselves reflect our mental activity.

It is mental activity, in the form of volition, that constitutes kamma, and it is our stock of kamma that steers the stream of consciousness from the past life into a new body. Thus the Buddha says: “This body, O monks, is old kamma, to be seen as generated and fashioned by volition, as something to be felt” (SN 12:37). It is not only the body, as a composite whole, that is the product of past kamma, but the sense faculties too (see SN 35:146). The eye, ear, nose, tongue, body-sense, and mind-base are also fashioned by our past kamma, and thus kamma to some degree shapes and influences all our sensory experience. Since kamma is ultimately explained as volition (*cetanā*), this means that the particular body with which we are endowed, with all its distinguishing features and faculties of sense, is rooted in our volitional activities in earlier lives. Precisely how past volition can influence the development of the genome lies beyond the range of scientific explanation, but if the Buddha’s words are to be trusted such an influence must be real.

The channel for the transmission of kammic influence from life to life across the sequence of rebirths is the individual stream of consciousness. Consciousness embraces both phases of our being—that in which we generate fresh kamma and that in which we reap the fruits of old kamma—and thus in the process of rebirth, consciousness bridges the old and new existences. Consciousness is not a single transmigrating entity, a self or soul, but a stream of evanescent acts of consciousness each of which arises, briefly subsists, and then passes away. This entire stream, however, though made up of evanescent units, is fused into a unified whole by the causal relations obtaining between all the occasions of consciousness in any individual continuum. At a deep level, each occasion of consciousness inherits from its predecessor the entire kammic legacy of that particular stream; in perishing, it in turn passes that content on to its successor, augmented by its own novel contribution. Thus our volitional deeds do not exhaust their full potential in their immediately visible effects. Every volitional deed that we perform, when it passes, leaves behind a subtle imprint stamped upon the onward-flowing stream of consciousness. Each volitional deed deposits in the stream of consciousness a seed capable of bearing fruit, of producing a result that matches the ethical quality of the deed.

When we encounter suitable external conditions, the kammic seeds deposited in our mental continuum rise up from their dormant condition and produce their fruits. The most important function performed by kamma is to generate rebirth into an appropriate realm, a realm that provides a field for it to unfold its stored potentials. The bridge between the old existence and the new is, as we said above, the evolving stream of consciousness. It is within this stream of consciousness that the kamma has been created through the exercise of volition; it is this same stream of consciousness, flowing on, that carries the kammic energies into the new existence; and it is again this same stream of consciousness that experiences the fruit. Conceivably, at the deepest level all the individual streams of consciousness are integrated into a single all-embracing matrix, so that, beneath the surface of events, the separate kammic accumulations of all living beings crisscross, overlap, and merge. This hypothesis—though speculative—would help account for the strange coincidences we sometimes meet that prick holes in our assumptions of rational order.

The generative function of kamma in the production of new existence is described by the Buddha in a short but pithy sutta preserved in the Aṅguttara Nikāya (AN 3:76). Venerable Ānanda approaches the Master and says, “‘Existence, existence’ is spoken of, venerable sir. In what way is there existence?” The Buddha replies: “If there were no kamma ripening in the sensory realm, no sense-sphere existence would be discerned. If there were no kamma ripening

in the form realm, no form-sphere existence would be discerned. If there were no kamma ripening in the formless realm, no formless-sphere existence would be discerned. Therefore, Ānanda, kamma is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture for beings obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving to be established in a new realm of existence, either low (sense-sphere), middling (form-sphere), or high (formless-sphere).”

As long as ignorance and craving, the twin roots of the round of rebirths, remain intact in our mental continuum, at the time of death one especially powerful kamma will become ascendent and propel the stream of consciousness to the realm of existence that corresponds to its own “vibrational frequency.” When consciousness, as the seed, becomes planted or “established” in that realm, it sprouts forth into the rest of the psycho-physical organism, summed up in the expression “name-and-form” (*nāma-rūpa*). As the organism matures, it provides the site for other past kammās to gain the opportunity to produce their results. Then, within this new existence, in response to our various kammically induced experiences, we engage in actions that engender fresh kamma with the capacity to generate still another rebirth. Thereby the round of existence keeps turning from one life to the next, as the stream of consciousness, swept along by craving and steered by kamma, assumes successive modes of embodiment.

The ultimate implication of the Buddha’s teaching on kamma and rebirth is that human beings are the final masters of their own destiny. Through our unwholesome deeds, rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion, we create unwholesome kamma, the generative cause of bad rebirths, of future misery and bondage. Through our wholesome deeds, rooted in generosity, kindness, and wisdom, we beautify our minds and thereby create kamma productive of a happy rebirth. By using wisdom to dig more deeply below the superficial face of things, we can uncover the subtle truths hidden by our preoccupation with appearances. Thereby we can uproot the binding defilements and win the peace of deliverance, the freedom beyond the cycle of kamma and its fruit. This aspect of the Buddhist teaching on rebirth will be explored more fully in the third part of this essay.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Book Review

Buddha in Theravada Buddhism: A Study of the Concept of Buddha in the Pali Commentaries.
Toshiichi Endo. 1997. 421 pages. Available from the Buddhist Publication Society.

Since the Buddha is the fountainhead of all Buddhist faith and practice, the book under review, though a work of technical scholarship, acquires practical relevance by charting, with close attention to detail, the metamorphosis the concept of Buddha has undergone within the Theravāda school of Buddhism. The focus of Endo's investigations are the Pali *Aṭṭhakathās*, the commentaries to the *Tiṭṭaka*. He treats the commentaries, not as mere exegetical tracts explaining the canonical texts, but as invaluable sources for understanding the development of Theravāda thought.

The commentaries that we inherit date from approximately the fifth to the seventh centuries A.C., but are purportedly based on the more ancient commentaries that were kept at the Mahāvihāra in Anurādhapura. Unfortunately, as Endo notes, the old Sinhala commentaries did not survive the ravages of time, and thus we have no way to determine exactly which ideas in the extant *Aṭṭhakathās* stem from the old commentaries (whose terminal date he puts at the third century A.C.) and which originated with the commentators themselves. The two major commentators were Achariya Buddhaghosa and Achariya Dhammapāla, who between them have commented on most books of the *Sutta Piṭaka*. From the evidence Endo amasses, it appears that Buddhaghosa was a conscientious transmitter and systematizer of the old Mahāvihāra lineage, while Dhammapāla emerges as a more creative figure with a penchant for tapping ideas from other Buddhist schools and integrating them into the Theravāda framework.

The commentaries do not treat the concept of the Buddha in a synoptic way within the confines of a single treatise, but strew their comments across a vast number of works compiled to explain the canonical texts. Hence the task of collecting this material is a daunting one, calling for wide knowledge of the commentaries, insight into their doctrinal implications, and skill in welding one's insights into an integrated structure. Endo meets these challenges admirably well, offering us not only an impressive mountain of factual information but a model for future research into the contributions the commentaries make to our understanding of Buddhist thought. While the book could have benefitted from a round of careful stylistic editing and should have been subjected to more punctilious proofing, its author has presented us with a work of creative and painstaking scholarship.

In the first part of his book, Endo delineates the concept of the Buddha as it appears in the Pali Canon. He notes early on that an ambiguity concerning the nature of the Buddha is discernible even in the four *Nikāyas*, our oldest source material. While some suttas portray the Buddha simply as a human teacher, the pioneer on the path to enlightenment who stood out from his arahat disciples mainly by the priority of his attainment, other texts elevate the Buddha so high above his disciples that his very humanity tends to fade from view. The picture becomes still more complicated by the canonical trend towards the multiplication of Buddhas, which makes of Buddhahood a universal archetype of which particular Buddhas are concrete embodiments appearing in different eras.

This ambiguity created a tension within early Buddhism, still noticeable to some extent in contemporary Theravāda, between the need to preserve the Buddha's historical humanity and the drive towards an apotheosis of the Buddha's status. While the Theravāda insisted on giving priority to the Buddha's humanity, other schools drifted towards Docetism, the view that the Buddha Gotama was a mere "phantom" conjured up by the eternal transcendent Buddha for the benefit of erring humanity. The later texts of the canon, though avoiding Docetism, are still marked by traces of apotheosis. On the one hand, they exalt the Buddha's spiritual qualities to

heights unknown in the old Nikāyas. On the other, they multiply the number of Buddhas, creating in the process a lore of Buddhahood that was to become the focus of Buddhist devotion.

These trends, already apparent in the late canonical texts and such post-canonical works as the *Milindapañhā*, become still more marked in the commentaries, which Endo focuses on in the second part of the book. Here he explores such developments as the ascription of omniscience to the Buddha, the amplification of the Buddha's psychic powers, and the new emphasis on his great compassion. He also examines the various lists of the "eighteen unique qualities of a Buddha" introduced in the post-canonical literature and the glorification of the Buddha's bodily form. All these developments, he notes, are indicative of the move to exalt the Buddha as an expression of religious fervour and as a way to establish the supremacy of his teaching. The commentators further elaborate their understanding of the Buddha's nature in their detailed explanations of the "nine attributes of the Buddha" (merely enumerated in the suttas) and of the enigmatic word "Tathāgata" which the Buddha used with reference to himself. Endo's exposition of the relevant texts underscores the creative role played by Achariya Dhammapāla, who did not merely repeat the stock explanations of Buddhaghosa but introduced new modes of exegesis that either stemmed from another Buddhist school or originated with himself.

Once the number of past Buddhas was multiplied and the prospect of future Buddhas was admitted, the Buddhist community focused its gaze upon the aspirant to Buddhahood and the course he had to undertake to become a Buddha. Thus, across all the Buddhist schools, the figure of the Bodhisatta came increasingly into the spotlight. Though the Theravāda school never came to advocate Buddhahood as a universal ideal (the hallmark of the Mahāyāna) but retained arahatship as the prescriptive goal, Theravādin commentators set out to delineate the key events in a Bodhisatta's gradual progress to Buddhahood. In the third part of the book Endo devotes a chapter each to the Bodhisatta figure, the Bodhisatta career, and the practice of the *pāramīs*. His investigations bring to light ways in which the commentaries attempted to expand the bounds of Theravada Buddhism to incorporate developments taking place in the other Buddhist schools. Thus, while the older texts use the word "Bodhisatta" to refer exclusively to a future Buddha, Dhammapāla extends the notion of Bodhisatta more widely to anyone who aspires for any of the three types of enlightenment (*bodhi*), whether as a disciple, a Paccekabuddha, or a supreme Buddha. Again, while the full perfection of the *pāramīs* is uniquely obligatory for a future Buddha, the *pāramīs* also become practices to be fulfilled by candidates for any type of enlightenment. They thus come to constitute the common preparatory ground for all Buddhist aspirants, the prerequisites for attaining the paths and fruits of liberation.

I must briefly call attention to one important omission in Endo's discussion in Part III. He repeatedly notes that Dhammapāla absorbed his innovative ideas on the Bodhisatta and the *pāramīs* from other Indian Buddhist schools, yet, when discussing Dhammapāla's treatise on the *pāramīs*, he does not seem to realise that large blocks of that treatise have been lifted almost verbatim from a Sanskrit Mahāyāna work, the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*. Long ago I called attention to this "borrowing" in my introduction to *The Discourse on the All-Embracing Net of Views* (1978). When this fact comes to light, we can see how, in Dhammapāla, the Theravāda could open its gates to admit an important stream of Mahāyāna thought, yet assimilate it in such a way that it remained consistent with formal Theravāda doctrine.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Guidelines to Sutta Studies

In the last instalment of this series, we traced the chain of conditions laid down in the formula of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) from ageing-and-death back to existence. The term “existence” (*bhava*) here can be seen as a shorthand designation for the entire process by which our kammically potent activities propel the stream of consciousness towards rebirth into a new realm of existence: the sense-sphere realm, the form realm, or the formless realm. The Buddha next inquires what keeps this process of kammic causation rolling from life to life, and the answer he provides is that the decisive condition for the production of renewed existence is clinging (*upādāna*). Because of our clinging—which at the most fundamental level is our attachment to the five aggregates as “I” and “mine”—we engage in various activities, wholesome and unwholesome, and at death these activities have the capacity to generate new existence. Wholesome action produces new existence in a happy realm, unwholesome action in a miserable realm, a state of suffering. But whether the new existence is fortunate or unfortunate, the underlying condition for its arising is clinging.

The condition for clinging, in turn, is craving (*taṇhā*). Clinging is, in a sense, a “hardening” or intensification of craving. First one craves for an object, and then, when one acquires it, one holds to it tightly and refuses to let go of it. The Buddha speaks of craving as threefold. The grossest type of craving is sensual desire, the desire and lust for objects cognized through the senses. But there is also a craving for the continuation of personal existence, and, in extreme cases, a negative craving for self-annihilation, for personal extermination.

In his exposition of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha declares that craving is the origin of suffering, but in the formula of dependent origination he traces the entire chain of causation back to the deeper causes that underlie and sustain craving. By doing so he will show, indirectly, what must be done to eradicate craving. Thus, continuing the series, he says that craving is conditioned by feeling (*vedanā*). *Vedanā* is the “affective tone” of experience: not emotion, a more complex phenomenon, but the bare “felt quality” that accompanies any occasion of cognition. Feeling is distinguished into three classes as pleasant, painful, and neutral. We crave primarily for pleasant feeling, but when we undergo pain we crave to be free of it, and when we experience neutral feeling we hold to it with a subtle craving based on its relative peacefulness.

Feeling arises in all the six sense doors, and this implies that the condition for feeling is the mind’s contact with a sense object. Thus the Buddha states next that contact (*phassa*) is the condition for feeling. Contact is the meeting of sense object, sense faculty, and consciousness; or more precisely, the encounter of consciousness with an object via a sense faculty. This means that contact can take place only through the six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*): the sensitive eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. Thus the six sense bases are the condition for contact. The mind is included as a sense base because much of our experience is purely mental. Even when the physical senses are not being stimulated by sense objects, a constant barrage of mental impressions—ideas, images, thoughts, and desires—slips through the “mind door” giving rise to feelings born of mind-contact.

The six sense bases in turn exist in dependence on “name-and-form” (*nāma-rūpa*). “Name-and-form” is an expression that the Buddha adopted from Brahmanism and redefined with a new meaning consonant with his own system. In the Buddha’s doctrine, “name-and-form” signifies the entire mental-and-material structure of a living being, exclusive of consciousness, which serves as its condition. “Form” is the material structure, the bodily organism, analysed into the four primary elements and derivative material phenomena. “Name” is the basic mental

structure, consisting of those mental factors operative in all cognition—contact, feeling, perception, volition, and attention.

The mental and material structures can arise and subsist only in conjunction with consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Hence the Buddha says that consciousness is the condition for name-and-form. According to the Buddha, for a human life to begin, a stream of consciousness must pass over from a deceased being and “descend into the mother’s womb.” Until consciousness links up with a newly fertilised ovum, there is no genesis of a new organism and thus no manifestation of name-and-form. But when consciousness does penetrate the ovum, the egg is transmuted into the embryonic body of a new living being, and along with consciousness the mental factors making up “name” also begin to manifest. This reciprocal conditional relationship between consciousness and name-and-form continues throughout the entire course of life: consciousness infuses the whole mental and material structure to make them participants in all experience; and the mental and material structure provide a footing for consciousness to grow and flourish.

The next proposition in the series is intended to show why consciousness continues from life to life, and why it assumes the particular modes it does. The Buddha says, “With volitional formations as condition, consciousness comes to be.” During our day-to-day lives we are constantly engaged in activity. Since all activity springs ultimately from volition, these activities are the volitional formations (*saṅkhārā*). Our volitional actions do not disappear when our deeds are done, but leave subtle imprints on the onward-flowing stream of consciousness. They impart specific kammic potentials to consciousness, tune consciousness to a particular “vibrational frequency” that determines the future direction of our being. It is these wholesome and unwholesome formations of kamma, created by our volitional actions, that propel consciousness forward into a new existence. In the first instance, some especially powerful or habitual volitional formation comes to prominence at the time of death and determines the realm and circumstances in which the stream of consciousness will re-arise. Then, during the course of life, one’s volitional formations mature and bring their own results according to the fixed law: wholesome formations lead to happiness and well-being, unwholesome ones to misery and suffering.

The underlying condition for our volitional formations is ignorance (*avijjā*), which the Buddha defines as lack of knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. Because we fail to penetrate the Four Noble Truths in all their fullness and depth, we engage in different types of actions, wholesome and unwholesome, and thereby accumulate kamma. This kamma is the volitional formations, which propel consciousness from life to life and mature as the pleasant and painful fruits of our deeds. Thus the whole round of becoming, as discerned by the Buddha, ultimately revolves through the impetus given to it by ignorance. To eradicate ignorance through the arising of wisdom is to break the round of becoming at its most fundamental level.

(to be continued)

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