

# ANSWERS TO YOUR QUESTIONS

By Mr. Francis Story

## MR. CHEW AH WAH – IPOH

Q.1. *If Buddha allows Buddhist to eat meat, doesn't that encourage killing of animals? Surely if nobody eats meat, nobody will kill animals for sale.*

A. Even since Devadatta raised this point with the object of creating a schism in the Sangha (SANGHABHEDA, one of the five ANANTARIKA-KAMMA, 'heinous actions with immediate destiny), it has been a stumbling-block to many people. The Buddha rejected Devadatta's proposal, and the fact that He had never made any rule against meat-eating, as we find abundantly proved in the Vinaya and elsewhere, shows that He did not consider it to carry any moral responsibility provided that the meat was pure in the three ways; namely that it was not seen, heard or suspected to have been from an animal specially killed for one's consumption. Moral responsibility does not extend further than that. Which is just as well, for if it did, nobody would be free from the responsibility of killing. The cultivator who grows our rice, vegetables and fruit is compelled to kill certain animals, birds and insects that otherwise would destroy it, thus making the eater of rice, fruit and vegetables as much responsible for the death of those creatures as the eater of meat. Speculations as to what would result if nobody ate meat are purely theoretical and could never have any practical application.

Those who believe that the Buddha's Wisdom and Insight are superior to their own do not question His judgement. Others must follow their own beliefs, and if they feel responsible for the death of animals killed for sale, they should be vegetarians for their own peace of mind. But they should not on that account try to force their belief upon others, nor take an attitude of moral superiority, for the plain fact is that, although well-meaning, they are mistaken.

Q.2. *If life itself is suffering, and the highest attainment for a Buddhist is Nirvana, a state in which he is not born again, am I right to assume that life is worthless and of no significance?*

A. Conditioned existence in Samsara is certainly without intrinsic worth. The Buddha has nowhere said that it is good, but has likened it to a burning house, a perilous ocean, a bubble and a mirage. The question of

its significance is another matter: it bears whatever significance we choose to put into it. By living the Life of Purity in accordance with the Dhamma we can invest our lives with the highest significance, both for ourselves and for others.

Q.3. *If rebirth is instantaneous, how do you explain those cases in which people who died for several hours or even a day or two, become alive again?*

A. Nobody comes alive again after clinical death lasting more than a few seconds. The cases referred to are not true cases of death, but of catalepsy. But this is beside the point, and is mentioned only for the sake of accuracy. What is meant by rebirth in Buddhism is not necessarily immediate rebirth in human form. The BHAVANGA-SOTA, or 'stream of becoming' is continuous, and upon the dissolution of the old Five-khandha process the final thought-moment (CUTI-CITTA) is immediately followed by the arising of a new PATISANDHI-VINNANA (CONNECTING-CONSCIOUSNESS), which may be associated with some OPAPATIKA (spontaneously-arisen) form such as that of a Deva or Brahma, or, on the lower levels, a preta, bhuta or a being in the states of purgatory. What are commonly called 'spirits' are OPAPATIKA beings.

Q.4 *If rebirth is instantaneous, how is it possible for the spirit or whatever you call it, of the dead to visit the family?*

A. The answer given to the preceding question explains this. The OPAPATIKA being, or 'spirit', is the rebirth of the person who has died. In course of time the 'spirit' will pass away from that state, to be born again elsewhere.

Q.5 *If our life is not fated, how do you explain that certain people, e.g. clairvoyants, can predict the future with uncanny accuracy? Examples of accurate prediction are the assassination of President Kennedy and recently in Malaysia there was a case in which a man predicted the numbers of the 1st prize of the Social Lottery.*

A. If all events were predictable it would point to a deterministic universe and to a fatalism in human affairs that would completely eliminate free will. Buddhism denies this fatalism, asserting that within the framework of KAMMA as cause and VIPAKA as result, man is the maker and arbiter of his own destiny. The doctrine of predeterminism is one of the sixty-two false views which the Buddha categorically rejected in the

Brahmajala Sutta while elsewhere He denounced it as a most pernicious influence upon character, robbing man of all incentive to right effort.

Against this we have the fact that the Buddha Himself was able to predict the destinies of certain persons; even, in the case of those destined for Buddhahood, many kalpas ahead. The answer to this seeming contradiction lies in the Buddhist principle of dynamic and multiple causality. Not only does it require more than one cause to produce a given result, but each of the many causes represents a stream of events flowing through time, which by the modification introduced by other causal streams connecting with it may be increased in force, diverted, weakened or eventually thwarted of its possible result. When, however, all the streams of causality are running in the same direction they reach a critical point at which their course becomes irreversible. The resulting event is then predictable because it has become inevitable. The vow to attain Supreme Buddhahood, for example, is a karmic act of such magnitude - supported, as it must be, by the necessary good predispositions - that it forms the critical point at which the aspirant's course becomes irreversible. In the opposite case, this is equally true of the five ANANTARIKA-KAMMAS mentioned previously: their unwholesome force is so strong that no other karmic influence can prevent its fruition. Thus it happens with certain historical events; when the trends flowing towards them reach the critical point, nothing can prevent their occurrence. An example of this is the escalation towards war. It reaches a certain point from which none of the opposing forces can withdraw, and conflict becomes unavoidable. In the case of the assassination of a statesman, many originally discrete streams of causality may be involved. It begins with a remote possibility, the germ of an idea in the minds of a few people, or perhaps just one person. If other causal trends are favourable, it turns into a definite possibility, then to a point at which it becomes a certainty. That is the point of no return, and the event becomes predictable to those who are endowed with precognitive faculties. If all the streams of causality involved could be known, it would be possible for the ordinary intellect to determine the critical point at which the probability of the event turns into a certainty. But all the data are never available to us even after the event, much less before it. Such knowledge, however, does lie within the province of a Samma-Sambuddha. Other people may obtain foreknowledge in dreams and visions, but the faculty is extremely rare, and hardly ever under conscious control.

In the numerous lists given of the five mundane spiritual powers (LOKIYA-ABHINNA) no mention is made of prophecy or prediction,

the reason being that it is only in the case of a person whose destiny has become fixed (NIYATAPUGGALA), either by his having committed one of the five ANANTARIKA-KAMMAS mentioned previously, or his being addicted to one of the erroneous views with fixed destiny (of which predestination, or HETUKA-DITTHI, is one), or, at the other end of the scale, his having attained the state of Ariya (SOTAPATTI-SAKADAGAMI-, ANAGAMI or ARAHATTA-MAGGA or PHALA), that the future can be foretold with certainty.

On the other hand, in the Brahmajala Sutta various forms of supposed divination are listed, with the observation that they are low arts not practised by the Buddha or His disciples. Here the implication is that they are deceptions on somewhat the same principle that in English law it is an offence to PRETEND to tell fortunes.

It may be objected that the foregoing does not satisfactorily account for the instances of people accurately foretelling winning numbers in lotteries, etc. The difficulty can be overcome if we assume that because of good kamma a certain person is destined to win a large sum, and that therefore the number of the ticket he holds is the number that will be drawn for the first prize. In such a case it would be the good kamma of the person concerned which brought the streams of causality together and made the event predictable.

A more serious objection is encountered if we admit the possibility of long-range predictions such as those attributed to Nostradamus. Relatively few philosophical attempts have been made to reconcile precognition of this kind with free will, but an important contribution to the subject was made recently by Prof. C. J. Ducasse (NATURE, MIND AND DEATH). The classic debate on the position of free will in a causally-determined universe was carried a step further by Henri Bergson in 'Creative Evolution.' The arguments of these philosophers are highly abstruse and too lengthy to be reproduced here. It is sufficient to say that their conclusions support the belief that neither precognition nor causality furnishes any basis for a strictly deterministic view of life.

The Buddhist position is the same as that of all other ethical systems in affirming man's moral responsibility, and hence his liberty of choice between right and wrong.

Q.6. *Since animals are not capable of doing good, how can they ever be reborn as human beings?*

A. Animals are reborn as human beings when the results of their bad Kamma are exhausted, by the force of residual or 'stored-up' kamma (KATATTA-KAMA) from a previous life as a human being. There are, however, many examples to show that some animals are capable of producing good kamma themselves, as in the case of dogs which save life, elephants which protect their fellows when they are wounded, and monkeys which also go to one another's aid in time of need. Animal behaviour is often far more complex than we commonly suppose.

Q.7 *Is it true that an animal suffers less than a human being?*

A. Animals vary greatly in their physiological and neurological make-up, and it would be unsafe to generalize on their reactions to pain. In the higher vertebrates, and animals particularly, it is probable that the actual physical suffering at the time of being experienced is equal to that of a human being in a similar situation. But we cannot say that it is accompanied by the emotional disturbance which the same amount of pain would cause in a human being. The animal seems to have less capacity for experiencing pain retrospectively or in anticipation. In the case of insects and some other relatively simple organisms for example, octopuses which have been observed to devour their own tentacles – it is questionable whether pain is experienced in any way comparable to the sensations of human being.

Q.8 *When a person, having attained Nibbana (NIRVANA), dies what happens to him?*

A. The 'Self' concept being entirely illusory, there is in fact no one who attains Nibbana, except in the conventional sense (VOHARA-KATHA). One who has reached ANUPADISESANIBBANA (PARINIBBANA) with the grasping-factors of personality destroyed, has passed completely out of Samsara and does not come back to conditioned existence. Nibbana in the ultimate sense is therefore a state beyond all the categories of Samsaric experience: it is not 'existence' nor is it 'non-existence'. Because of this, it cannot be described or communicated by words.

Q.9 *Does a Buddhist believe in Luck?*

A. Buddhism teaches that all things arise from causes, so that what appears to be good luck or bad luck is simply the result of previous kamma conjoined with the circumstances which enable it to ripen. But it must be remembered that the experiences of our lives are not ALL the results of kamma.

Q.10. *Why can a medium who goes into a trance, communicate with the Gods and the dead?*

A. Communication with spirits is made possible by the possession of certain psychic faculties, including the DIBBA-CAKKHU (clairvoyance) and DIBBA-SOTA (clairaudience), or the medium's ability to become temporarily 'possessed' by the Deva or spirit. It is probable that those who have these faculties had cultivated them by meditational practices in a previous life.

Q.11. *Why can some people see ghosts while others cannot?*

A. The answer is the same as that given to the previous question. The ability to see beings on other planes of existence is developed by Jhana. But the spontaneous seeing of frightful or disgusting beings of the PETA-LOKA can also be the result of past bad kamma. For example, Ven. Mahamoggallana, being an Arahant, was able to look on frightful beings in the PETA-LOKA with equanimity, and draw from them instruction profitable to others, but to an ordinary worldling the sight would have been painful, distressing and fearful. In the latter case the experience is to be classified as painful sensation resulting from bad kamma.

Q.12. *What is the purpose of life, if there is any?*

A. Life in itself has no purpose except the gratification of desire. This in turn engenders more craving, and perpetuates the round of suffering. Beings are bound to the wheel of Samsara by their AVIJJA (Ignorance), which makes them take that which is impermanent to be permanent, that which is really suffering to be happiness, that which is without selfhood to be 'Self' and that which is unpleasant as being pleasant. These four delusions of perception and of consciousness are called VIPALLASA. The higher purpose which we can put into life is to destroy Ignorance and Craving and so attain Nibbana.

On another level there is also, of course, the purpose of devoting our lives to the benefit of others, by social and humanitarian work. But this in itself only produces results that are transient and circumscribed. One who devotes himself to his own liberation is at the same time helping others, both by his example and the spiritual aura he spreads around him. As the Buddha said, it is only one who has extricated himself from the mire who can effectively pull out others. This, one of the Buddha's most vivid

metaphors, is unfortunately one of the least understood. It does not mean that we should all withdraw ourselves from the world, but that we should not neglect our own spiritual advancement while immersed in work for others. The best of intentions can lead to bad results if not guided by higher wisdom.