

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

By D. B. Jayasinghe

It is a peculiar fact that whenever questions of a metaphysical nature crop up we never handle them in the same way that the Buddha Himself is known to have handled such questions. For instance, there are several questions regarding which the Buddha has maintained a studied silence. The most important of these questions relates to Rebirth. “When a man dies is he reborn, or not reborn, or both, or neither?”

We cannot deny that we have discussed this question at length and with unsatisfactory results. On the other hand there are special occasions on which the Buddha has explained the problem of Rebirth itself in so many words. But we never use this explanation. Instead we improvise explanations of our own which only tend to disprove what the Buddha Himself has said. Why?

Quite apart from the Buddha’s silence there is a very good reason why we should not discuss this question at all. For, those who call upon us to prove the reality of Rebirth must first prove the reality of death. If death is unreal then the question of Rebirth does not arise. The famous Western philosopher Bertrand Russell regarded death as annihilation. He has compared the death of a man to “the snuffing out of a candle”. Strange as it may seem it is this metaphor of a candle flame which we use for proving Rebirth. What then does the candle flame prove, annihilation or Rebirth?

Before the first atom bomb fell on Hiroshima we believed that when a candle extinguishes itself by burning itself out there is nothing left. Now we know that all the matter of which the candle is composed is converted into the kinetic energy which is responsible for the heat and light produced by the candle. That energy is converted into other forms, none of it being lost.

In the same way the body undergoes chemical changes but not an atom is destroyed and can be identified at any stage even after it begins pushing up the daisies. How then can we believe that a potent force like the mind will be destroyed without leaving even a trace behind? In fact the inseparability of Space and Time which forms one of the main conclusions of the Theory of Relativity proves the inseparability of the body which lives in the world of space and the Mind which lives in the world of Time. If, therefore, the body dies while the mind is still alive then it must find another body. Hence Rebirth. If this preliminary objection is ignored then the onus of proof falls back on us and the flood gates of controversy are opened wide. Quite recently the daily

papers carried a Rebirth controversy which lasted a whole year and produced more heat than light.

The Studied Silence

Several significant facts emerge when we consider the different occasions on which the Buddha has referred to these questions. Those who are accustomed to Western ways of thinking will see in the very form of these questions a flagrant violation of the Law of the Excluded Middle. For, how can the same man be reborn and also not be reborn? Surely it must be the one or the other. Obviously there is a difference in the Laws of Thought as conceived in the West and in Buddhism. Why?

Another fact is that it was only when laymen asked these questions that the Buddha observed silence. Yet silence was only a part of the treatment. He always invited the questioner to enter the Order and lead the holy life. It is also known that those who accepted the invitation and became arahats have never even referred to these questions which worried them so much at one time. We also know the emphasis which He has placed on renunciation. It is therefore obvious that the correct method of learning the truth about these questions is by leading the holy life even as the Buddha Himself did. Why then is it that we must change our whole way of life if we wish to apprehend the truth? Certainly no other religious teacher has made such a demand.

The pre-Buddhist Brahmanic philosophers explained Karma and Rebirth by assuming that each man was endowed with an unchanging Self or Soul which passed over from life to life with a record sheet duly inscribed. But the Buddha's doctrine of Anatta denied the reality of this Self or Soul. Thus the only way a Buddhist can explain Rebirth is by showing how change can take place in the absence of anything which can undergo change or remain the same when it is not changing into something else.

It is a peculiar fact that we never adopt this method though it can be done as will be shown later. Instead, we generally explain Rebirth by showing that there is something which goes over from life to life, thus contradicting the Anatta doctrine. For instance, the hypnotic age regression method proves that there is at least a certain portion of the memory which has passed over unchanged from a previous life. It is the same in the case of spontaneous memories of certain children. In the case of the infant prodigy whole chunks of memory have passed over intact and far out-weigh what the infant has acquired in this life. Even our arguments in favour of Rebirth disprove the Anatta doctrine. The usual method is to reduce change to motion and motion to rest and then say that at the bottom of the process there is something that does not undergo change, conveniently forgetting that we have deprived change of its very nature and essence.

The Buddha's own explanation of Rebirth will come as a surprise to many because it has nothing in common with our approach to the subject. It will be found in His discussion with members of the Order. Having invited them to join the Order if they wished to find the answers to certain questions He could not very well refrain from helping them in their difficulties.

The Venerable Anuruddha who had failed to give a satisfactory explanation of Rebirth to certain non Buddhist sectarians asks the Buddha himself what the correct explanation should be. The Buddha's only reply was to recite the Anatta Lakkhana Sutta from beginning to end. In the Punnamani Sutta the Buddha explains the connected problem of moral responsibility and Kamma to the brethren by repeating the Anatta Lakkhana. In the Maha Nidana Sutta the Buddha explains Rebirth to the Venerable Ananda by reciting the Paticca Samuppada which is only the practical version of the Anatta Lakkhana showing how the world arises. The Bhikkhu Sati's heretical view that it is the mind which goes from life to life is refuted by reciting the Paticca Samuppada. The ailing Vakkali expresses a desire to see the Buddha and the Master says that it is enough if he sees the Dhamma. For, whosoever sees the Dhamma sees the Buddha. And then he gives Vakkali the essence of the Dhamma by repeating the Anatta Lakkhana. Culla Saccaka asks the Venerable Assaji what it was that the Buddha taught most often and the reply is the Tri Lakshana of the Anatta Lakkhana which the Buddha Himself later confirms. In the circumstances whenever we are questioned about Rebirth our duty is to recite the Anatta Lakkhana or the Paticca Samuppada. But this is the only explanation he never give. Why?

Contradictions resolved

If now, we accept the proposition that we live in a Four Dimensional world but believe that it is a Three Dimensional world then it is easy to understand how there can be two different sets of the Laws of Thought and how these two sets can get mixed up so that the Excluded Middle is also sometimes included.

If the fact of our double life is accepted then man's object in life should be to realize the true nature of the Four Dimensional world in which he lives. Nothing else can be more important. Obviously the best method is to give up the Three Dimensional way of life and begin living the Four Dimensional way of life at once. The passengers in the two trains must cease looking at one another and try to catch even a glimpse of the country they are passing through. What then is the Four Dimensional way of life? Beings in the Four Dimensional world cannot and do not hurt one another. Life being lived in common there is no sense of private property and all that goes with it. Being truth seekers they never tell lies. Far from the over indulgence of the senses they will use them very sparsely because they know that their true function is to

hide the real nature of the Four Dimensional world. In effect the Four Dimensional way of life is none other than the holy life. It is by living that life that we can grasp the true nature of this world. Buddhism is a such way of life.

Even with regard to the silence of the Buddha we have misdirected ourselves completely. We explain it by calling the Buddha a Pragmatist, a Nihilist, an Agnostic etc. As will be seen from the Avyakatha Sanyutta He has explained it without calling anybody names. He compared the body to foam, the feeling to a bubble, perception to a mirage, the mind to an illusion etc. What can He then say if He is asked about the length and breadth of a mirage or an illusion. Who can give the vital statistics of a ghost?

In promoting Space to the status of a reality we were in effect promoting Nothing to the same status. For Nothing is only another name for empty Space. This leads to many fictitious problems. If there was a time when there was Nothing then who created the world? Of if nothing is real then the only alternative to Rebirth is annihilation. It is this bugbear of Nothing which coaxes us to prove Rebirth even at the expenses of disregarding the Buddha's advice to leave such questions alone. All these problems vanish when we realize that Space and Nothing are useful but unreal concepts.

One of our most embarrassing problems is due to our failure to distinguish the two worlds from each other. We look upon Rebirth as a form of Motion from life to life and endow it with all the characteristics of the Three Dimensional world in which Motion must always have an efficient cause which may be external or internal. The Greek philosopher Aristotle explained Motion by saying that God was responsible for perpetually pushing things around not only in heaven but even on earth. Those who believe God should therefore be the first to believe in Rebirth. But it is they who do not believe in it.

The Hindu philosophers said that there was a real "goer" who could not "go" or "stop" whenever he liked. The Buddha denied that there was such a "go-er". Hence the question "How can there be a going without a goer?" The Buddha told Angulimala that He had stopped going and that it was Angulimala who could not stop his going. Apparently Angulimala's difficulty was not in continuing his going but in stopping it. Most likely, he would go on forever whether he liked it or not. And he had good reasons for entertaining such a belief. From the stars in their courses to the electrons inside the atom there is nothing that is not in perpetual motion. Why should Angulimala be an exception?

It will now be seen that the initial mistake was to regard Rebirth as a phenomenon of the Three Dimensional world in which there must always be an efficient cause for Motion. As a matter of fact, Rebirth involving change is a phenomenon of the Four Dimensional world in which Motion is only an illusion.

It is wrong, therefore, to regard Rebirth as a form of Motion and, if we do, contradiction can be the only result. And yet even an illusion is based on a reality in the same way that we cannot see fountains in the desert unless we have seen them elsewhere. What then is the reality of which Motion is only an illusion? The General Theory of Relativity has shown that Motion is only an external Three Dimensional view of an internal process of change taking place in the Four Dimensional world. What is change in the Four Dimensional world appears as Motion in the Three Dimensional world in the same way that a Three Dimensional sphere will look like a Two Dimensional circle on the Two Dimensional world. Thus if we look upon Rebirth as a form of Motion then an efficient cause in the form of a real “goer” becomes necessary. But the Three Dimensional world in which Motion is real is, as we have seen, a wholly imaginary world. The illusion that it is the real world is fostered by the five concepts aforementioned with the help of the five senses. On the other hand the real world is the Four Dimensional world in which Rebirth becomes a form of Change which requires no cause because change is real and self caused in this world. Given this process of change everything else, even the illusion of a “goer” as a necessary concept can be explained.

In conclusion, a logical Three Dimensional proof of a non-logical Four Dimensional process like Rebirth is not possible. The nearest is one which refers to both worlds, the Three Dimensional and the Four dimensional. Now the way in which the passage of a Four Dimensional being through a Three Dimensional continuum appears to a Three Dimensional being in that continuum must bear a close resemblance to the way in which the passage of a Three Dimensional object through a Two Dimensional continuum appears to a Two Dimensional being in that continuum. Consider the passage of a Three Dimensional sphere through a Two Dimensional plane surface. The Two Dimensional beings will only see a circle passing through their world and may well ask where the circle came from and where it went. If the Three Dimensional beings living in the sphere are told that the Two Dimensional beings have mistaken a sphere for a circle they would in all probability burst out laughing. It is only a Buddha who can in such circumstances retain His composure and maintain a dignified silence.

If life is regarded as a form of Motion then stops and starts are inevitable and an efficient cause is also necessary. Regarded as a continuous form of change, no cause is necessary because universal and perpetual Change is the sole reality in both worlds. From that point of view there is neither birth nor death, neither end nor beginning. And the problem of Rebirth does not arise.