

CONCEPT OF REBIRTH IN BUDDHISM

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THE doctrine of rebirth, which Buddhists regard not as a mere theory but as a fact verifiable by evidence, forms a fundamental tenet of Buddhism, though its summum bonum is attainable in this life itself. The Bodhisatta Ideal and the correlative doctrine of freedom to attain utter perfection are based on this doctrine of rebirth.

Documents record that this belief in rebirth, viewed as transmigration or reincarnation, was accepted by some spiritual teachers and many ordinary men in the West as well as in the East.

The Buddhist doctrine of rebirth should however be differentiated from the trans-migrating and reincarnation of other systems because Buddhism denies the existence of a transmigrating permanent soul, created by God.

It is Kamma that conditions rebirth. Past Kamma conditions the present rebirth; and present Kamma in combination with past Kamma conditions the future. The present is the off-spring of the past, and becomes, in turn, the parent of the future.

The actuality of the present needs no proof as it is self-evident. That of the past is based on memory and report and that of the future on fore-thought and inference.

If we postulate a past, present, and a future then we are at once faced with the mysterious problem - "what is the ultimate origin of life ?"

One school, in attempting to solve the problem postulates a first cause, whether as cosmic force or as an Almighty Being. Another school denies a first cause, for in common experience, the cause ever becomes the effect and the effect becomes the cause. In a circle of cause and effect a first cause is inconceivable. According to the former, life has had a beginning; according to the latter it is beginningless. In the opinion of some, the conception of a first cause is as ridiculous as a round triangle.

Modern science endeavours to tackle the problem with its limited systematised knowledge. According to the scientific point of view, we are the direct products of the sperm and ovum cells provided by our parents. But science does not give

a satisfactory explanation with regard to the development of the mind, which is infinitely more important than the machinery of man's material body. Scientists, whilst asserting "amni vivum ex vivo" "all life from life" maintain that mind and life evolved from the lifeless.

Some religious systems assert that soul, and averted essence of men, spring from God; parents only provide the gross garments for a soul.

Now, from the scientific point of view, we are absolutely parent-born. As such, life precedes life. With regard to the origin of the first protoplasm of life, or "colloid" (whichever we please to call it), scientists plead ignorance.

According to Buddhism, we are born from the matrix of action. Parents merely provide us with a material layer. As such, being precedes being. At the moment of conception, it is Kamma that conditions the initial consciousness that vitalizes the foetus. It is this invisible Kammic energy, generated from the past birth, that produces mental phenomena and the phenomenon of life in an already extant physical phenomenon to complete the trio that constitutes man.

Dealing with conception of beings, the Buddha said in Mahatanhasnkaya Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya, "Where monks, three are found in combination, there a seed of life is planted. Thus if a father and mother come together, but it is not the mother's period, and the "being to be born" is not present, then no seed of life is planted. Or, if the father and mother come together and it is the mother's period but the "being to be born" is not present, then again no seed of life is planted. But when Monks, the father and mother come together and it is mother's period and the "being to be born" is also present, then by the combined agency of these three, a seed of life is planted."

When a man dies the Earth element returns to Earth, the water Element returns to Water, The Wind Element returns to Air, The Fire Element returns to fire and the senses pass into space. Is that all? What happens to the dying man's craving force? Remember that the craving force is one of the strongest forces in existence. It is stronger than electricity. Just as electricity persists as a force, the craving force must exist as a force whether it is mental or physical force—a force is a force. The mental force which can create an atomic and hydrogen bomb is no mean force. The craving force is the most potent force in the universe and that force at the time of death must follow the law of the conservation of energy like all other forces.

Just as an electric light is the outward manifestation of invisible electric energy, even so we are the outward manifestation of invisible Karmic energy. The bulb may break, and the light may be extinguished but the current remains and the

light may be reproduced in another bulb. In the same way Karmic force remains undisturbed by the disintegration of the physical body, and passing away of the present consciousness leads to the arising of a fresh one in another birth, but nothing unchangeable or permanent passes from the present to the future. Here the bulb may be compared to the parental cell and the electric energy to Karmic force.

The difference between death and birth is only a thought moment: the last thought-moment in this life conditions the first thought-moment in the so called next life, which in fact, is the continuity of the same series. During this life itself too, one thought-moment conditions the Buddhist point of view. The question of life after death is not a great mystery.

Buddhism does not totally deny the existence of a personality in an empirical sense. It denies, in an ultimate sense, an identical being of a permanent entity but it does not deny continuity in a process. The Buddhist philosophical term for an individual is Santati that is, a flux or continuity. This uninterrupted flux or continuity of psycho-physical phenomena conditioned by Kamma, having no perceptible source in the beginning less past nor any end to its continuation in the future, except by the Noble Eightfold Path, in the Buddhist substitute for the permanent ego or eternal soul in other religious system.