

THE ASTRAL BODY AND THE BUDDHA-WORD

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Buddhism is a scientific religion, because it can stand scientific investigation.

One such investigation is on the astral body – the ‘Bhavasankhara’ which Buddha taught was encased in our physical body but which could leave the physical body during astral-travel. The findings of scientists in parapsychological research have confirmed the truth of the Buddha-word.

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Ed

I write this article not to refute accepted views or enter into a controversy but to bring to the notice of intelligent Buddhist readers some of the Buddha’s teachings and their implications on the above-mentioned subject in the context of the findings of modern Parapsychological Research. We will thus be in a position to evaluate and know what are the genuine Buddha’s teachings about life, death and rebirth, and how far they are substantiated by the findings of modern scientific research. We will be able to know what interpretations of the Buddha-word are untenable and have become discredited by verifiable evidence.

In the Sanyutta Nikaya the Buddha teaches the following regarding the process of death:

“Ayu usma ca vinnanam, yada kayam jahanti man,
Apaviddo tada seti, nirattam va kalingaram.”

This means that the span of life, body temperature, and the mind leave the body at death. Then the body lies lifeless like a log of wood. It should be noted that mano, citta, and vinnana are synonyms in Theravada Buddhism and therefore nobody can object to the translation of vinnana in the above verse as mind.

The life-span is associated with karma. Karma is associated with vinnana or the mind according to the Paticca Samuppada teaching, “Sankhara paccaya vinnanam”. According to the Maha Tanha Sankhaya Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya a monk called Sati, a disciple of the Buddha entertained a view that *this very same mind* fares on in Samsara. (“Tadeva vinnanam sandhavati, samsara ti”.) The Buddha’s objection was to the words “tadeva vinnanam” – the very same mind, in this statement. He did not object to the idea of the mind faring

on in Samsara. He taught that the mind that fares on in Samsara is not an unchanging, immutable entity. He taught that the mind functions according to the Law of Dependent Origination and cannot be considered a changeless and enduring principle.

In the Maha Nidana Sutta of the Dhiga Nikaya the Buddha asks Ananda the following question: “Ananda, if the mind does not descend to the mother’s womb could there be a combination of mind and body in an embryonic life?” Ananda replies: “No, Venerable Sir”. Here the Buddha teaches unequivocally that the mind enters the mother’s womb during the process of birth. Again the following passage also occurs in the same Sutta. “Ananda, if the mind enters the mother’s womb and gets out will there be a combination of mind and body of an embryonic being?” “No, Ven. Sir”, replies Ananda. Thus we see that there are occasions when the mind which enters a mother’s womb departs due to the vicissitudes of its karma. On such occasions the expectant mother delivers a foetus devoid of life.

How does the mind depart from the mother’s womb? With what is it associated? The Sutra in the Samyutta Nikaya, Upaya Vagga has this to say: “I do not say that it is possible for the mind to arrive or depart, or develop and grow without being in conjunction with form, sensations, perceptions and mental formations”. Thus the Buddha teaches that the mind cannot exist alone by itself, it must necessarily be associated with form, sensation, etc., wherever and whenever it exists anywhere. The Buddha has answered the question why the mind travels in association with form and the other 4 factors, viz. vedana, sanna and sankhara, or sensations, perceptions and mental processes, and a body or form of whatever kind. This means that the body could be a physical body as in the case of human beings or an astral body as in the case of spirits and celestial beings.

Now let us refer to the 5th Sutta of the Nakula Pita Vagga of the Majjhima Nikaya, “Rupa dhatu kho gahapati vinnanam oko, vedana dhatu ... sanna dhatu, ... sankharam dhatu ... kho gahapati vinnanam oko, vinnana dhatu raga vinibhandanca vinnanam”. “O householder, the form (rupa) is the abode of the mind, similarly sensation and the other factors abide in the mind.” In other words the mind exists in conjunction with sensations, perceptions, etc. The mind is attached to and is fixed to form and the other four factors on account of craving for existence. Craving is the factor that binds and keeps them together. Thus we see that according to the Buddha’s teaching in this Sutta the mind fares on in Samsara in conjunction with form and the other four mental factors in a state of conditioned existence, i.e. in accordance with the doctrine of Dependent Origination. The teaching of the Buddha is that the fivefold combination of existence bound to dukkha or unsatisfactoriness (sanoccema / amcai / adamal / jamda / dillja).

Now the question that arises is, what is this body or form that arises in conjunction with the mind and its concomitants? Herein the Buddha's words in the Pottapada Sutta help us to solve this problem. In this Sutta, the Buddha teaches of 3 bodies in man. They are:

1. Olariko atta patilabho, rupi chatunnam mahabhtiko, kabalinkara shara bhakke ... i.e. the physical body maintained by the ordinary food we eat.
2. Manomayao attapatilabo, rupi, manomayo, sabbanga paccangi, i.e. the astral-body, ethereal-body or secondary body of Psychological Research and sukhama sarira of Indian yogis and religious men.
3. Arupo atta patilabho, arupi sannamayo – a still finer form of the astral body that prevails in the Brahma realms.

The second of these is the astral body or sukshama sarira in which the mind travels for rebirth, or existence in the intermediate spirit existence between births. The Commentator Buddhaghosha goes to explain these three types of bodies and gets badly confused and has bungled the whole thing. The astral body referred to (2) above is the sukhama sarira referred to in Hindu scriptures. It is called the ethereal-body, bioplasma body, etc. in Spiritualism and Parapsychology. The Buddha when he was alive used this body (mano-maya kaya) for astral travel to the Brahma world to preach the Brahma Nimantaka Sutra. When he was about to pass away into Nirvana it is said in the Maha Parinirvana Sutra that he discarded or severed this astral-body. The word used in the Sutra for the astral-body is "bhava-sankhara". It is so called because it is this body that goes from life to life in Samsara. The Buddha taught that the bhava sankhara or manomaya kaya is encased in our physical body. The following passage in the Anguttara Nikaya confirms this.

"Dasa ime dhamma sariratta, katame dasa? Sitam, unham, jigacca-pipasa passavo, kayasankharo, vaci sankhara, ajivasankharo, ponobhaviko, bhavasankharo."

The bhava sankhara referred to here is the astral body or mano-maya kaya which functions in the physical body. The word "ponobhavika" is used in the above text because a person departs from this life at death in this body for rebirth. Irrespective of what Buddhaghosha may say in his commentaries it is this body in association with vedana, sanna, sankhara and vinnana that constitutes the panca upadana skanda or five groups of grasping. I would request my readers not to enter into controversy with me taking their stand on Commentarial explanations, as I do not consider them authoritative. They are

only sectarian interpretations about which the early disciples of the Buddha disagreed at the 2nd Council.

The findings of Parapsychological Research in the West amply confirm the truth of the existence of the astral body. In his world famous book “Life After Life” Dr. Raymond Moody gives the findings of 10 years of research. He cites well-authenticated cases of patients who were able to get out of their bodies while under operations, accidents, drowning, etc. These patients after they are revived and brought back to life after being declared clinically dead have narrated their experiences between the time of death and revival. These show that the human mind is capable of existing in a disembodied state, travel about and get back. These are called O.B.E. – Outside Body Experiences. Dr. Moody cites about 200 such cases. The famous British Psychic Researchers Podmore and Myers published their book, “Phantoms of the Living”. In this they gave instances of 250 people who were able to project their minds outside the body, travel astrally and get back. These people had been observed as phantoms by people when they visited them in their astral travel.

Hereward Carrington and Sylvan Muldoon’s book on astral-projection is a classic dealing with this phenomenon. Experiments were set up with Dr. Carrington doing the reporting and Muldoon doing the astral-projections. “Journeys out of the Body” is an account of Robert Monroe’s experiments in this field. Monroe is a reputable researcher with a radio-engineering background. Alan Landsburg in his “In Search of Strange Phenomena” says in page 49 of his book, “There are two ways to accomplish astral projection, one wilfully projecting the inner self to a pre-determined location, and reporting back for purposes of information or research. Two, voluntary dissociation of the inner-self during sleep and travel to external locations. Many or all of these events experienced in the astral state are remembered upon waking with the same intensity and clarity that is typical of all astrally psychic dreams.

Robert Crockal, a prominent British Psychic Researcher who has studied hundreds of astral projections says, “In the out-of-body experiences reliance is chiefly placed on cases in which the claim that a person is externalised as a double or psychical body seems to be corroborated by the fact that his apparition was seen by others and two cases in which the experience is repeated experimentally”.

Experiments by Dr. Karlis Otis of the American Society for Parapsychical Research with a psychic named Claudette L. Keilly have proved that she was able to report back the details observed by astral travel. Experiments with Harry Stuart, the psychic, have proved that pet dogs and kittens were able to actually see the astral-body of their master when he was requested to visit a pre-

arranged target room by astral projection. The literature on the subject is extensive, and cannot be cited in a short article such as this.

However, I would like to refer readers to the following books for further evidence on the existence of the astral-body.

1. Life after Life – Dr. Raymond Moody
2. Mystery of the After-Life – Frank Smyth & R. Stevenson
3. Journeys Out Of The Body – Moreel
4. Mind Travellers – Brad Steiger
5. In Search of Strange Phenomena – Alan Landsburg
6. Mystery Of The Inner Self – Stuart Halryod
7. Life Before Life – Helen Wambeck
8. Exploring The Occult – Chapter 3 – Astral Projection