

THE BUDDHIST DOCTRINE OF REBIRTH (*punabbhava*)

By Egerton C. Baptist

The question of rebirth has fascinated man since time immemorial. What is rebirth? According to Buddhist belief, it is the continuation of the process of becoming into a new or succeeding existence where the new 'being' is not the same as the dead 'being', yet the new is not altogether different from the dead 'being'. The Buddhists term this process of rebirth 'Punabbhava'. In punabbhava the elements of being join one another in serial succession; one element perishes, another arises, succeeding each other instantaneously, producing one who is neither the same person as nor a different person from the one before. One important characteristic of punabbhava is – good or bad karma does not end at death but is carried on to the new existence.

In the account that follows Egerton C. Baptist, a noted Buddhist scholar, gives a convincing explanation of the Doctrine of Rebirth, using 4 examples for illustration, the most interesting being that of a certain monk who suddenly died leaning against a terrace-post in deep contemplation only to find himself reborn instantaneously, also leaning against a door post, in the abode of the gods.

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One would understand the process of rebirth through a simple illustration. Take a photograph, for example, of oneself. Now, from that photograph take another. From the second take a third, and so on, until say, ten thousand pictures have been taken. Would we not recognize the final copy by the very marks that have been reproduced in it from the original? In other words, is not the final copy a faithful reflection or reproduction of the original? Besides, did anything from the first photograph pass into the ten-thousandth? That briefly, is how MEMORY is sustained and maintained, from moment to moment, from thought to thought, and indeed, from birth to birth! It is the same process that enables 'memory' to be preserved from infancy to middle-age, to the time of death and also to the moment of re-linking or 're-becoming' (*Punabbhava*) of the new existence, when one dies in the 'old state' and from it arises another (new) 'being'. Of course, throughout the process, whether it is in a single existence through its many phases (of infancy, middle-age, etc.), or when the new existence arises, the succeeding thought-processes are not the same as their predecessors, nor are they very much different! Only a 'continuity' or *santati* is maintained from the past into the future. The process of '*bhava*' or 'becoming'

alone continues and since the process of 'bhava' is continued into the new or succeeding existence, the word 'Punabbhava' is used instead. From this explanation, one would see clearly that the word 'Punabbhava', as distinct from 'bhava', is used here to explain the continuation of the process-of-becoming into the new or succeeding existence. In other words, the word 'Punabbhava' as distinct from the word 'bhava' is the word that explains a new birth – or rebirth – when one dies and is re-linked to or is reborn in a new state.

In this process of 're-becoming' or rebirth, nothing passes from the old or dead 'being' into the new 'being' that is reborn. Even 'consciousness' does not pass over from the past existence into the new existence. Consciousness springs, as it were, by means of Causes (*hetu*) belonging to the former existence and the process of 'becoming' just continues. This happens in the same manner as a seal leaves its impression or an echo or sound is heard, or an image is produced in a mirror; nothing passes from one to the other. However, it must be remembered that were it not for the preceding conditions (*hetu*), the subsequent reproductions would not be found. Can we then say that the 'being' reborn is the same as the 'being' that died? No, since nothing from the dead 'being' came over to the new 'being'. Can we also say that the new born 'being' is different from the dead 'being'? No, again. Why? Because, were it not for the dead 'being', there would not have been the new born 'being'. So the Blessed One says that the new 'being' is not the same as the dead 'being', nor is the new 'being' altogether different from the dead 'being'. *Na ca so na ca anno!* Processes alone roll on!

There is only a serial succession of mental and physical elements. The elements which form the tree are not the same as those which form the fruit nor are they different. The fabricating power of the seed will show this. Let us take the mango seed. The fabricating power in the mango seed will produce only mangoes, and not any other fruit. There is, therefore, a serial succession of elements of its own kind which produces its own kind. Similarly, there is no absolute sameness of the elements of the past with those of the present or those of the present with those of the past or the future. There is only a serial succession – the mere maintenance of continuity. If there should exist full identity or absolute sameness between different stages, milk could never turn into curd. And if there should exist absolute diversity, then too curd would never come from milk. Similarly, if in a continuity of existence any karma-result takes place, then this karma-result neither belongs to any other being nor does it come from any other being.

Would there be moral responsibility for what one does – good and evil? Yes, of course. The following dialogue between the Ven. Nagasena Thera and King Milinda in the Buddhist Commentaries makes this point quite clear. "It is," says Nagasena, "as if a man were to buy from a cowherd a pot of milk and were

to leave it with the cowherd and go off thinking he would come the next day to take it. And on the next day it turns into sour cream. And the man were to come back and say, 'Give me the pot of milk.' And the other were to show him the sour cream; and the man were to say, 'I did not buy sour cream from you. Give me the pot of milk.' And the cowherd were to say, 'While you were gone, your milk turned into sour cream'; and, they quarrelling were to come to you. Whose cause, Your Majesty, would you sustain?" "That of the cowherd, of course," said King Milinda. "And why?" "because in spite of what the man might say, the one sprang from the other".

"In exactly the same way, Your Majesty, the Name and Form which is born into the next existence is different from the Name and Form which is to end at death; nevertheless the new Name and Form sprang from the past Name and Form. Therefore, one is not freed from one's evil deeds." The elements of being join one another in serial succession; one element perishes, another arises, succeeding each other instantaneously and producing one who is neither the same person as nor a different person from the one before.

"Take another example, Your Majesty," says the Ven. Nagasena. "It is as if a man were to ascend to the top storey of a house with a light and eat there; and the light sets fire to the thatch. And the thatch sets fire to the house; the house sets fire to the village. The people of the village seize him and say, 'Why, O man, did you set fire to the village?' He says, 'I did not set fire to the village. The fire of the lamp, by whose light I ate was a different one from the one which set fire to the village.' They quarrel and come to you. Whose cause, Your Majesty, would you sustain?" "That of the people, of course," said the King. "And why?" "Because, despite what the man might say, the latter fire sprang from the former." "In exactly the same way, although the Name and Form which is born into the next existence is different from the Name and Form which is to end at death, nevertheless it sprang from it."

Indeed, one would think the Ven. Nagasena was seeking to drive the point home even further, when he asks again, "What do you think, O King? Are you now, as a grown-up person, the same as when you were a little, young, tender babe?" "No. Ven. Sir, I am quite a different person now." "In the first watch of the night does one lamp burn, another in the middle watch, and yet another in the last watch?" Are they the same? "No," says Milinda again. "The light during the whole night depends on one and the same lamp." "Just so, O King, is the chain of phenomena linked together. One phenomenon arises another vanishes, yet all are linked together, one after the other, without interruption. In this way one reaches the final state of consciousness neither as the same person, nor as another person."

Much in this manner too, in the process of *Patisandhi* or re-linking of the old and the new existence at death, not a single element of being has come into his existence from a previous one. The groups which have come into being in this existence depending on past karma will perish and others will come into being in the next existence, but not a single element of being will go over from this existence into the next. “Just as the words of the teacher do not pass into the mouth of the pupil who repeats them; and just as the features of the face do not pass to the reflection in the mirror nevertheless the appearance of the image depends upon them. And just as the flame does not pass over from the wick of one lamp to that of another, nevertheless the existence of the flame of the second lamp depends upon that of the former. In exactly the same way not a single element of being passes over from a previous existence into the present existence, nor hence into the next existence. The birth of the groups, the organs of sense, objects of sense, and sense-consciousness of the present existence, depends upon those of the past existence. So too from the present groups, the organs of sense, objects of sense, and sense-consciousness, will be born the groups, the organs of sense, objects of sense, and sense-consciousness of the next existence.”

This elucidation of a very difficult and abstruse aspect of the Buddha’s deeper teachings (*Abhidhamma*) should make it clear to the discerning and intelligent reader, how the processes of *Punabbhava* or re-becoming or rebirth, together with memory and moral responsibility, are maintained from existence to existence. There is no ‘soul’ or ‘self’ migrating from body to body and existence to existence.

The *Samyutta Nikaya* records a typical example of how this happens in actual life and practice. A certain bhikkhu, we are told, strove to emulate the Buddha’s example, but died suddenly in a state of deep contemplation while he was leaning against a terrace-post. His life-work unfinished, he was instantaneously reborn in the heaven of the Thirty Three (*Tavatimsa*, god Sakka’s abode). And there too, he was seen leaning against a doorpost. Nymphs or angels accosted him with song and music, but he believed that he was still a bhikkhu, and only realized what had really happened when they held a life-size mirror before him, revealing his new godlike figure. Bitterly disappointed at his earthly failure and escorted by celestial attendants, he visited the Buddha. And that is how we have this story. Note how the procession of thoughts flowed from a human form to the form of a god! Nothing else had happened. That is why he was not even aware of what had actually happened. It required a mirror to make him realise that his very physical being had changed its form!

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