

An Explanation of Rebirth



by
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Association for Insight Meditation

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Is Rebirth the Buddha's Teaching?

Rebirth is a topic that crops up frequently on the Dhamma Wheel Buddhist Forum. Many similar topics have been merged into the thread — [The Great Rebirth Debate](#) — which currently extends to over 480 pages. Some believe that the doctrine of rebirth is a later addition to the Buddha's teaching adopted from Hinduism. Others are sceptics for whom only seeing is believing. However, there should be no doubt that the Buddha taught about rebirth in multiple realms of existence, and that the destiny of beings after death depends on their own kamma, or volitional actions. As it says in the Dhammapada:

“Through many births I wandered in *saṃsāra*,
seeking, but not finding, the builder of this house.
Painful is repeated birth.” (Dhp v 153)

Again:

“Some are born in a womb;
evil-doers (are reborn) in hell;
the virtuous go to heaven;
the Arahants attain nibbāna.” (Dhp v 126)

Only the Arahants are not reborn after death, the other Noble Ones are reborn in the celestial realms, or in the human realm. Others may be reborn in any of the six realms depending on their kamma.

So why is there any controversy? Some claim that changes were made to the teachings after the Buddha's demise (*parinibbāna*). This may be true, some teachings are clearly of later origin, but the teachings about rebirth and the realms of existence are so pervasive in the Suttanta and Vinaya Piṭaka that we would have to reject far too many discourses to conclude that the doctrine of kamma and rebirth was a later accretion from Hinduism.

There are also many teachings that focus on the realisation of the Dhamma in this very life. Nibbāna is not a realm of existence like heaven, which the pious reach after death. It must be realised in this very life by gaining insight into the three characteristics — impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and not-self (*anatta*). The Arahants and Buddhas do not 'enter' *parinibbāna* when they die — they put an end to all rebirth in any realm of existence. It is good advice to stress the importance of striving hard to gain realisation in this life, and not to put off the important task of mental

purification until some future existence. In traditional Buddhism there is far too much emphasis on making merit through pious works and not nearly enough attention given to the diligent practice of meditation. On this topic, please refer to [A Manual of Profound Meaning](#) by the late Venerable Ledi Sayādaw. The traditional teachings about rebirth can also lead to the wrong view of Eternalism. [Sāti Thera](#), on hearing Jātaka¹ stories recounted by the Buddha such as that in the [Ghaṭikāra Sutta](#), came to the wrong conclusion that it was consciousness that transmigrated throughout many existences. This doctrine of reincarnation, is not the Buddha's teaching. The [Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta](#) repudiates this wrong view of Eternalism, explaining that consciousness is dependently arisen.

Among materialists and sceptics the opposite wrong view of Annihilationism is prevalent. Some believe that life ends at death, and those who entertain this wrong view may quote sources like the [Paccaya Sutta](#) advising against speculation about rebirth in the different realms of existence:

“When a disciple of the noble ones has seen well with right discernment this dependent co-arising and these dependently co-arisen phenomena as they have come to be, it is not possible that he would run after the past, thinking, ‘Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what was I in the past?’ or that he would run after the future, thinking, ‘Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I be in the future?’ or that he would be inwardly perplexed about the immediate present, thinking, ‘Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where is it bound?’ Such a thing is not possible. Why is that? Because the disciple of the noble ones has seen well with right discernment this dependent co-arising and these dependently co-arisen phenomena as they have come to be.”

¹ The Jātaka is a book of verses in the [Khuddakanikāya](#). What we know as the Jātaka stories are mostly Commentaries on these verses. There are also many stories of previous lives in the Dhammapada Commentary, and others such as the [Ghaṭikāra Sutta](#) or the [Mahāsudassana Sutta](#) (DN 17) in the Suttanta Piṭaka.

Such fruitless speculation is rooted in personality-view, and can only lead to more doubt and confusion. Other sources urge us to reflect on the ownership of kamma. It is a fundamental part of right view. For example, the [five facts for constant recollection](#) by a householder or by one gone forth:

“Sabbe sattā kammassakā kammadāyādā, kammayoni, kammabandhū, kammappaṭisaraṇā, yaṃ kammaṃ karissanti kalyāṇaṃ vā pāpakaṃ vā tassa dāyādā bhavissanti.”

“All beings are the owners of their actions, heirs to their actions, born from their actions, related to their actions, and have actions as their refuge. Whatever action I shall do, for good or for ill, of that I shall be the heir.”

Skilful reflection like this removes doubt about the importance of developing the Noble Eightfold Path, which gives confidence and spiritual urgency (*saṃvega*).

It may seem that the Buddha is giving contradictory advice — in the first quote we are asked not to speculate about what we were in the past, or what we will be in the future, or even what we are in the present life. However, in the second quote we are urged to reflect constantly on the future consequences of our actions, and the ownership in this life of our past actions. Both kinds of advice are helpful and appropriate. We should reflect on the inevitability of death, and its unpredictable nature. When long-life milk is manufactured, it is stamped with an expiry date, but when living beings are born, none have an expiry date stamped on their body. They may live for just a day or for a hundred years, and it is hard to know in what way death will occur. However, one can be sure that death will be followed by rebirth as surely as the sunrise follows the sunset, unless one practices so diligently in this precious human existence that one attains the final goal in this very life. Reflecting wisely, one will abstain from evil deeds, cultivate wholesome deeds, and purify the mind to gain deep concentration and insight.

The Special Qualities of the Buddha

“Iti pi so Bhagavā, arahamaṃ, sammāsambuddho, vijjā-caraṇa-sampanno, sugato, lokavidū, anuttaro purisa-damma-sārathi, satthā deva-manussānaṃ, buddho, bhagavā ‘ti.”

“Such indeed is the Blessed One, worthy, fully self-enlightened, endowed with knowledge and conduct, fortunate, knower of the worlds, the incomparable tamer of trainable men, teacher of gods and men, enlightened and blessed.”

Arahant (worthy): The Arahants are totally free from greed, hatred, and delusion. Thus they are worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of reverence, an incomparable field of merit for the world. Even among other Noble Ones, they are the most worthy due to having removed all defilements.

Sammāsambuddho (fully self-enlightened): Not depending on others, he has fully realised all truths by his own efforts. His knowledge is direct and empirical, not like that gained by any intelligent person through listening and reflection.

Vijjā-caraṇa-sampanno (endowed with knowledge and conduct): Having rightly understood all that can be understood, the Buddha acts fully in accordance with their knowledge.

Sugato (fortunate): Having attained the final goal, the Buddha has reached a good destination safe from all dangers. He is also well spoken, speaking only words that are beneficial.

Lokavidū (knower of the worlds): With the divine-eye surpassing that of ordinary men he sees other realms of existence and the destiny of beings passing away here and reappearing there, or passing away there and reappearing here.

Anuttaro purisadamma-sārathī (the incomparable teacher of trainable persons): Since he knows with his mind the thoughts of others, their past lives, and their spiritual potential, he can always give the most appropriate teaching, or remains silent if a person is not yet ready to understand the Dhamma.

Sathā deva-manussānaṃ (teacher of deities and humans): Not only did he teach monks and nuns, male and female lay disciples, he also taught deities in such discourses as the [Hemavata Sutta](#) (the second discourse), the [Maṅgala Sutta](#), the [Sakkapañha Sutta](#), and many other discourses to non-human beings.

Buddho (enlightened): He is fully awakened to the Four Noble Truths. He taught the Dhamma tirelessly for 45 years to everyone who wished to hear it. After sleeping only one hour at night, his regular morning practice was to enter the absorption on Great

Compassion, then to survey the world with his divine-eye and see with his higher powers who was ready to understand the Dhamma.

Bhagavā (blessed): Although endowed with all kinds of attainments, and worldly fame and gain, with eminent disciples, wealthy and powerful supporters, and lavish offerings, he remained detached from them, happily receiving offerings also from slaves and outcastes, while teaching the Dhamma to all without favour or prejudice.

During his lifetime, some opposed the Buddha, plotted to kill him, or to discredit him. Devadatta and Sunakkhatta, entered the Saṅgha and developed some limited psychic powers after learning meditation from him, but then turned on him through envy. The wicked monk Sunakkhatta rebelled because the Buddha refused to teach him a meditation method. Knowing the limitation of his abilities, the Buddha declined to instruct him. After losing faith due to this, Sunakkhatta claimed that the Buddha had no psychic powers, but taught a teaching gained through reasoning alone. The details are given in the [Mahāsihanāda Sutta](#).

“The Tathāgata has these ten powers, possessing which he claims the herd-leader’s place, roars his lion’s roar in the assemblies, and sets rolling the Wheel of Brahma.

“Sāriputta, when I know and see thus, should anyone say of me: ‘The recluse Gotama does not have any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. The recluse Gotama teaches a Dhamma (merely) hammered out by reasoning, following his own line of inquiry as it occurs to him’ — unless he abandons that assertion and that state of mind and relinquishes that view, then as (surely as if he had been) carried off and put there he will wind up in hell. Just as a bhikkhu possessed of virtue, concentration and wisdom would here and now enjoy final knowledge, so it will happen in this case, I say, that unless he abandons that assertion and that state of mind and relinquishes that view, then as (surely as if he had been) carried off and put there he will wind up in hell.”

This is the equivalent of apostasy in Buddhism, but the apostate is not punished by the Buddha or by his disciples. The apostate is

simply left to his or her own devices. If an apostate falls into hell it is only a natural result of wrong actions and speech, which are dependent on wrong view. If an apostate later realises his or her error, and regains faith in the Buddha's teaching, then he or she can return to the right path. It is like someone who is lost in the desert who starts walking in the wrong direction after becoming disorientated. They may perish before they reach safety, but if they realise their error in time, then can reach an oasis.

The attitude of the Buddha to someone who has lost faith and will not listen to instruction is given in the [Kesi Sutta](#), the discourse on the Horse-trainer.

“If a tamable person does not submit either to a mild training or to a harsh training or to a mild and harsh training, then the Tathāgata does not regard him as being worth speaking to or admonishing. His knowledgeable fellows in the holy life do not regard him as being worth speaking to or admonishing. This is what it means to be totally destroyed in the Doctrine and Discipline, when the Tathāgata does not regard one as being worth speaking to or admonishing, and one's knowledgeable fellows in the holy life do not regard one as being worth speaking to or admonishing.”

This comparison to training horses is also used in the Buddha's attribute of *“Anuttaro purisadamma sārathhi,”* which literally means “The incomparable charioteer of trainable persons.” Headstrong, arrogant, and stubborn individuals cannot be taught by anyone — not even by a Buddha. A student of Buddhism should adopt a skilful attitude, neither blindly accepting whatever the teacher says nor keeping the mind closed or disinterested in what the teacher has to say. Isn't that the best way to learn any subject? One assumes that the teacher has studied the subject in some depth, and understands at least the basics about the subject. Then the student must reflect carefully on what the teacher says, carry out some experiments, and see if the experimental results tally with what the teacher said. If they do not, then one should do more experiments, read books by other teachers, and continue one's inquiry until one can reach a satisfactory understanding of the subject that one is studying.

What is Rebirth?

Well informed Buddhists believe in life after death, and this is an important motivation for them to be careful about their actions, speech, and thoughts in this life. Whatever we do with intention is called kamma, which has impetus leading to results (*vipāka*). When people talk loosely about kamma in the sense of ‘fate’ they are referring to *vipāka*, which is the result of kamma, not kamma itself. To understand why and how rebirth takes place, we need to understand about the law of kamma. It is a natural law, not unlike Newton’s third law of motion — to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. However, the law of kamma operates in the realm of morality, ethics, and psychology, though results often affect the physical realm too.

In Buddhism, no Almighty God decides the destiny of beings, but kamma is an almighty force. Nevertheless, it is an extreme, and wrong, view to believe that everything happens because of past kamma. Using the analogy of a plant, past kamma is just the seed, present kamma is like the effort of cultivating the plant. Sunlight, soil, fertiliser, water, pesticides, *etc.* are also vital to the plant’s healthy growth. So past kamma is only responsible for about one sixteenth — the remainder is due to other causes.

The infinite variety of volitional actions (*kamma*) done by living beings divides them into high and low states:¹ killing and cruelty result in short lives, kindness and compassion lengthen life. Stealing in this life results in poverty in future lives, but generosity leads to wealth. Honour and respect shown to others leads to positions of status and privilege, while disrespect results in the opposite. Jealousy leads to powerlessness, while appreciation of others’ abilities leads to influence.

Not every kamma can give its result immediately, and its result is not a fixed quantity, since we can do other kamma afterwards that mitigates or enhances its potency. For example, if we shoot a snooker ball along a table, another ball can alter its course or even reverse its direction. However, if we fire a rifle bullet it is much harder to change its course after it has left the barrel. The potency of kamma depends on its target too. An angry thought directed at a criminal who is trying to kill us would be less potent than anger directed towards, say, our mother who is trying to stop us from doing something shameful. The more pure-hearted the target of

¹ [Cūlakammavibhaṅgasutta](#), Majjhimanikāya, Sutta 135.

our thoughts, the more powerful the kamma will be — and this applies to wholesome kamma too. So generosity shown to saintly persons like the Buddha has enormous potential, whereas equivalent generosity directed towards animals or drug addicts will have less power, though it will still be beneficial. Frequently repeated actions that become habitual also have strong potential.

Death-proximate Kamma

The realm where rebirth takes place depends only on the last moment of consciousness at death, but this last moment is conditioned by actions and thoughts done when death is near. So the Buddhist tradition is to encourage dying persons by reminding them of good deeds they have done. Children should try to be equanimous — if they weep or cling to their dying parents this may lead to unwholesome mental states and unfortunate rebirth. The importance of the final moments is clearly illustrated by the following true story from the time of the Buddha.

A large gang of robbers was caught by Buddhists who offered to spare the life of any one of them who would execute all the others. The robber chief volunteered to do this, executed all his former comrades, and remained in public service as its executioner until his old age. On the day that he was due to die, the executioner met Venerable Sāriputta, the chief disciple of the Buddha, and offered his own meal to him. Venerable Sāriputta tried to teach the executioner, but he could not listen attentively due to remorse over his many evil deeds. Venerable Sāriputta then asked him if he had wanted to kill all the people that he had executed. He replied that he had only done what he had to do. This put his mind at rest so that he could pay attention to Venerable Sāriputta's teaching. By meditating effectively as instructed, the executioner attained a deep stage of insight knowledge close to his death, and when he died he was reborn in a heavenly realm.

This shows how important present actions are, compared to past kamma. Even in the midst of doing evil deeds it is possible to have skilful thoughts such as, "This action that I am doing is very shameful and is liable to lead to evil consequences." Conversely, while doing a good deed we can have many unskillful thoughts such as, "I am a very kind and generous person who only thinks about the benefit of others." The law of kamma is very profound. To predict the results of a given kamma is only within the understanding of a

Buddha or someone like him. Nevertheless, we can easily understand that it is vital to cultivate wholesome thoughts, speech, and deeds at every opportunity. We do not need to cultivate unwholesome thoughts, since they grow like weeds without any encouragement. To purify the mind through meditation is crucial, and to straighten out wrong views we must study the Dhamma thoroughly.

The Danger of Wrong Views

Wrong views are very harmful because they mislead people. Everyone does what they think will lead to their own happiness — no one wants to be unhappy. However, due to wrong view people imagine wrong to be right, just like someone lost in the desert who thinks that north is south. The harder they try, the farther astray they go. Three wrong views are particularly blameworthy. The belief that everything that happens to any individual is the will of an almighty god, the belief that everything is due to previous kamma, the belief that there is no cause for anything. All three views deny the importance of one's present actions.

Christians generally believe that God created the world and living beings, but they also believe that they will reap as they sow, so their view is partly right. Those who hold the fatalistic view that everything is due to past kamma are mostly wrong, since only a fraction of the present results are due to past kamma. The third view that there is no cause for anything is totally wrong. Right view holds that every cause gives appropriate effects, and every effect has its corresponding cause. There are four basic causes: kamma, food, climate, and mind.

Many people do not believe that there are other realms of existence such as hell, ghost and demon realms, where evildoers suffer after death. The Buddha taught that such realms do exist, so many people now hold wrong views. One who holds firmly onto such wrong views is opposed to the teaching of the Buddha, and so will be reborn in the lower realms after death.

Don't Confuse Cynicism with Intelligence

Intelligent people rightly ask, "Why should anyone believe in such realms, since their existence cannot be proved?" The existence of such realms can be known by direct knowledge through very deep concentration like that developed by the Buddha. It can also be logically

proved or inferred by a thorough and careful study of the Buddha's teachings, though it cannot be proved by modern science, which relies on measuring material phenomena. It is not yet possible to know someone's thoughts by electronics, though it is possible to tell with some degree of accuracy whether someone is lying. This is done by measuring physical changes caused by emotions like fear or anxiety. These days, those who can gain direct knowledge are very rare. However, an intelligent person can gain firm confidence in the Buddha's teaching by studying the scriptures, or books by learned monks.

How do we know about the existence of atoms? No one can see an atom with the naked eye, nor even with the most powerful optical microscope. Electron microscopes can only show the patterns made by atoms on a screen. Anyone with a good knowledge of science will readily accept that these patterns represent individual atoms. However, someone lacking scientific knowledge would find it very hard to understand what atoms were.

Before Einstein, no one would have given much credence to the equivalence of matter and energy, or to the curvature of space and time, but these abstruse laws of nature are now widely accepted. It took very considerable effort to convince intelligent people about these strange facts. Many ordinary people cannot appreciate the significance of Einstein's theories, and are completely baffled by them.

Those who have neither training in meditation, nor a thorough knowledge of scripture, are ignorant regarding nonhuman realms. Well-educated Buddhists and experienced meditators smile when cynics dismiss such realms and beings as mere superstition.

A Precious Human Rebirth

The various realms of existence are completely open to most living beings. Human beings or deities can be reborn as animals. Animals can occasionally be reborn as human beings or deities. For most human beings, there is little likelihood that they will be reborn in the human realm again after death. The last thought-moment is the deciding factor. Only those who have realised nibbāna are assured of rebirth in the higher realms of existence. Most human beings and deities are facing downwards, since the foolish majority are much more inclined to indulge in sensual pleasures than to do wholesome deeds. Being reborn in higher

realms is rarer still for animals since they live by primitive instincts, which means lustful, aggressive, and deluded kamma. Some pets may live a life of luxury, enjoying the company of compassionate and intelligent human beings, but how can they donate things to others, study religion, or practise meditation?

The human realm is therefore a very precious opportunity to make wholesome kamma, which most people squander due to their lack of insight. To meet the Buddha's teachings is even rarer than to gain human rebirth, but many born in Buddhist countries pay little heed to the teachings of pious and learned monks. Among those who practise the Dhamma sincerely, most do not have sufficient confidence, effort, mindfulness, concentration, or wisdom to gain liberation in this very life. Most good Buddhists are self-satisfied with doing pious deeds, since they lack a deep and thorough knowledge of the scriptures. The executioner taught by Venerable Sāriputta was more spiritually advanced than many Buddhists of today. He was very fortunate to meet an excellent teacher like Venerable Sāriputta, but also wise enough to realise his own faults.

If one reflects wisely on the undeniable facts of birth and death, one should realise that rebirth will follow death, as surely as Monday morning follows the weekend. Moreover, one will realise that one is powerless to choose one's next existence, unless one has gained complete mastery over one's mind. Most people cannot even avoid getting angry when criticised, abused, or frustrated. How could they avoid falling into hell if the memory of some bad kamma they have done comes to their mind on their deathbed? If we have done too little wholesome kamma and too much unwholesome kamma, we will panic when confronted by death, and unwholesome kamma will gain the upper hand. So we should perform the ten types of wholesome kamma diligently.

What are the ten types of wholesome kamma? Generosity, morality, mental development (study and meditation), reverence, service, sharing of merit, rejoicing in others' merit, listening to (or studying) the Dhamma, teaching the Dhamma, straightening wrong views (by questioning learned monks or studying good Dhamma books).

We should avoid the ten types of unwholesome kamma too: killing living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, abusive speech, slander, idle-chatter, covetousness, ill-will, and wrong view.

Last, but not least, we should purify the mind through meditation until supramundane right view is gained on the realisation of nibbāna. Only this can ensure that one does not fall into the lower realms after death. The mind is crucial, it leads our speech and actions. If we hold wrong views, our thoughts, speech, and actions will also be wrong. So gaining right view is of the utmost importance.

Rebirth is not Reincarnation

Theravāda Buddhists do not use the terms ‘transmigration’ or ‘reincarnation’ because both of these expressions imply the existence of a permanent soul or self, which is contrary to the Buddha’s teaching of not-self (*anatta*). We prefer to use the term ‘rebirth.’

I will explain the distinction between the Buddhist doctrine of ‘rebirth’ and the Hindu doctrine of ‘transmigration’ — it is an important point, and one that is often misunderstood. This is hardly surprising, since it is through not understanding the nature of a person or being, a self or soul, that we have all wandered so long in the cycle of birth and death. The Buddha’s teaching of not-self and rebirth was a radical departure from the theory of transmigration of souls that was commonly held at his time. Unless one studies carefully, or practises insight meditation with a strong commitment, one can easily misunderstand this teaching. Generally, people will err on the side of eternalism, or on the side annihilationism, instead of seeing the Middle Path of Buddhism.

Light a candle with a match, or visualise doing it. Hold the wick directly above the lighted match, but not actually touching the flame. Watch carefully. The wick will begin to smoke, and will then burst into flame. Does the flame jump from the match to the candle? Is the candle flame the same as the flame on the match, or is it a different one? If we describe the process scientifically we will say that the heat from the flame on the match vaporised some paraffin wax from the candle, and the paraffin vapour ignited, producing a new flame. The two flames are separate and burn from different fuels, but are causally related.

Likewise, kamma done in one existence is like the heat. The candle is like the physical basis provided by the parents. The candle flame is like the newly born being that arises dependent upon previous causes and present supporting conditions. One important difference between rebirth and the two flames is that the last conscious moment

of the previous existence ceases totally, then rebirth consciousness arises immediately afterwards. No mental or physical phenomena “transmigrate” or pass between the two existences. Rebirth is simple a process of cause and effect. Whatever potential a being has accumulated throughout many existences is preserved to give its results whenever and wherever conditions are ripe. No good or evil deeds that a being does are destroyed at death. Some may be too weak to give any effect, but any significant kamma retain its potential to give results at some point in the future, as the seeds of desert plants await the coming of rain. Powerful kamma give its results immediately, while weaker kamma may have to wait for aeons to mature.

The Debate of King Milinda

The following extracts are all from “[The Debate of King Milinda](#)” — an abridgement of the translation of the Milindapañha. This famous work of Buddhist literature from the 1st century BC, is based on dialogues between a Buddhist monk and a Bactrian Greek king — [Menander I](#).

What is in a Name?

King Milinda went to Nāgasena and after exchanging polite and friendly greetings, took his seat respectfully to one side. Milinda began by asking:

“How is your reverence known, and what sir, is your name?”

“O king, I am known as Nāgasena, but that is only a designation in common use, for no permanent individual can be found.”

Then Milinda called upon the Bactrian Greeks and the monks to bear witness: “This Nāgasena says that no permanent individual is implied in his name. Is it possible to approve of that?” Then he turned to Nāgasena and said, “If, most venerable Nāgasena, that is true, who is it who gives you robes, food and shelter? Who lives the righteous life? Or again, who kills living beings, steals, commits adultery, tells lies or takes strong drink? If what you say is true then there is neither merit nor demerit, nor is there any doer of good or evil deeds and no result of kamma. If, venerable sir, a man were to kill you there would be no murder, and it follows that there are no masters or teachers in your Order. You say that you are called Nāgasena; now what is that Nāgasena? Is it the hair?”

"I don't say that, great king."

"Is it then the nails, teeth, skin or other parts of the body?"

"Certainly not."

"Or is it the body, or feelings, or perceptions, or formations, or consciousness? Is it all of these combined? Or is it something outside of them that is Nāgasena?"

And still Nāgasena answered: "It is none of these."

"Then, ask as I may, I can discover no Nāgasena. Nāgasena is an empty sound. Who is it we see before us? It is a falsehood that your reverence has spoken."

"You, sir, have been reared in great luxury as becomes your noble birth. How did you come here, by foot or in a chariot?"

"In a chariot, venerable sir."

"Then, explain sir, what that is. Is it the axle? Or the wheels, or the chassis, or reins, or yoke that is the chariot? Is it all of these combined, or is it something apart from them?"

"It is none of these things, venerable sir."

"Then, sir, this chariot is an empty sound. You spoke falsely when you said that you came here in a chariot. You are a great king of India. Who are you afraid of that you speak an untruth?" And he called upon the Bactrian Greeks and the monks to bear witness: "This King Milinda has said that he came here by a chariot but when asked 'What is it?' he is unable to show it. Is it possible to approve of that?"

Then the five hundred Bactrian Greeks shouted their approval and said to the king, "Get out of that if you can!"

"Venerable sir, I have spoken the truth. It is because it has all these parts that it comes under the term chariot."

"Very good, sir, your majesty has rightly grasped the meaning. Even so it is because of the thirty-two kinds of organic matter in a human body and the five aggregates of being that I come under the term Nāgasena. As it was said by Sister Vajirā in the presence of the Blessed One, 'Just as it is by the existence of the various parts that the word "Chariot" is used, just so is it that when the aggregates of being are there we talk of a being'."

"Most wonderful, Nāgasena, most extraordinary that you have solved this puzzle, difficult though it was. If the Buddha himself were here he would approve of your reply."

Me and My Shadow

“How many rains do you have Nāgasena?”

“Seven, your majesty.”

“But how can you say it is your seven; is it you who are seven or the number that is seven?”

And Nāgasena said, “Your shadow is now on the ground. Are you the king, or is the shadow the king?”

“I am the king, Nāgasena, but the shadow comes into being because of me.”

“Just so, O king, the number of the years is seven, I am not seven. But it is because of me that the number seven comes into being and it is mine in the same sense as the shadow is yours.”

“Most wonderful, Nāgasena, and extraordinary. Well has this puzzle been solved by you, difficult as it was.”

Rebuttal of the Soul Belief

Devamantiya, Anantakāya and Maṅkura went to Nāgasena’s hermitage to accompany the monks to the palace. As they were walking along together, Anantakāya said to Nāgasena:

“When, your reverence, I say, ‘Nāgasena’ what is that Nāgasena?”

“What do you think that Nāgasena is?”

“The soul, the inner breath, which comes and goes.”

“But if that breath, having gone out, should not return would that man still be alive?”

“Certainly not.”

“But when those trumpeters and the like have blown their trumpets does their breath return to them?”

“No venerable sir, it doesn’t.”

“Then why don’t they die?”

“I am not capable of arguing with you sir, pray tell me how it is.”

“There is no soul in the breath. These inhalations and exhalations are merely constituent powers of the bodily frame.” Then the elder talked to him on the Abhidhamma and Anantakāya was satisfied with his explanation.

Is the Same Person Reborn?

“He who is reborn, Nāgasena, is he the same person or another?”

“Neither the same nor another.”

“Give me an illustration.”

“In the case of a pot of milk that turns first to curds, then to butter, then to ghee; it would not be right to say that the ghee, butter and curds were the same as the milk, but they have come from that so neither would it be right to say that they are something else.”

What is Reborn?

“What is it, Nāgasena, that is reborn?”

“Mind and matter.”

“Is it this very mind and matter that is reborn?”

“No, it is not, but by this mind and matter deeds are done and because of those deeds another mind and matter is reborn; but that mind and matter is not thereby released from the results of its previous deeds.”

“Give me an illustration.”

“It is like a fire that a man might kindle and, having warmed himself, he might leave it burning and go away. Then if that fire were to set light to another man’s field and the owner were to seize him and accuse him before the king, and he were to say, ‘Your majesty, I did not set this man’s field on fire. The fire that I left burning was different to that which burnt his field. I am not guilty.’ Would he deserve punishment?”

“Indeed, yes, because whatever he might say the latter fire resulted from the former one.”

“Just so, O king, by this mind and matter deeds are done and because of those deeds another mind and matter is reborn; but that mind and matter is not thereby released from the results of its previous deeds.”

The One Who Knows

“Is there, Nāgasena, such a thing as ‘The one who knows’ (*vedagū*)?”

“What is this thing?”

“The living principle within that sees, hears, tastes, smells, feels and discerns things; just as we, sitting here, can look out of any window we wish to.”

“If, O king, the living principle within can see, hear, taste, smell and feel things like you say, can it not also see forms through the ear and so on?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Then, O king, the living principle within cannot make use of whichever sense it pleases as you suggested. It is, O king, by reason of the eye and forms that sight and those other conditions arise, namely; contact, feeling, perception, intention, one-pointedness, vitality and attention. Each arises simultaneously with its cause and herein ‘The one who knows’ cannot be found.”

Transmigration or Rebirth?

“Is there any being who transmigrates from this body to another?”

“No there is not.”

“If that is so, would there not be an escape from the result of evil deeds?”

“Yes there would be an escape if they were not to be reborn, but there would not be if they were to be reborn. This mind and body process commits deeds either pure or impure, and because of that kamma another mind and body process is reborn. Therefore this mind and body is not free from its evil deeds.”

“Give me an illustration.”

“If a thief were to steal another man’s mangoes, would he deserve punishment?”

“Indeed he would.”

“But the mangoes he stole were not those that the owner had planted; why should he deserve punishment?”

“Because those that he stole resulted from the others.”

“Just so, O king, this mind and body process commits deeds either pure or impure, and because of that kamma another mind and body process is reborn. Therefore this mind and body is not free from its evil deeds.”

Where is Kamma Stored Up?

“When deeds are committed by one mind and body process, where do they remain?”

“The deeds follow them, O king, like a shadow that never leaves. But one cannot point them out saying, ‘Those deeds are here or there,’ just as the fruits of a tree cannot be pointed out before they are produced.”

Putting an End to Rebirth

Buddhists believe that death is always followed by rebirth until one attains enlightenment (Arahantship), which means the eradication of all ignorance and attachment. With this attainment the Arahant puts an end to kamma, so the cycle of rebirth and consequent suffering, old age, and death is cut off at the death of an Arahant or Buddha, which is called *parinibbāna*.

The Noble Ones

If a wise disciple of the Buddha practises insight meditation diligently and attains nibbāna for the first time he or she puts an end to rebirth in the lower realms of suffering: hell, ghosts, demons, and animals. At this first stage of enlightenment, the meditator is called a Stream-winner (*sotāpanna*), because he or she has entered the stream that leads to the final liberation of Arahantship.

The Stream-winner has destroyed the wrong view of a permanent self, soul, or ego, and so is incapable of doing any evil deeds such as killing living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, telling lies, or taking drugs and alcohol. He or she has attained unshakeable confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha due to direct experience of the Four Noble Truths. For the same reason, the Stream-winner is not attached to rites or rituals. However, the Stream-winner has not yet eradicated the deeply rooted mental defilements of ill-will, lust, attachment to material existence, attachment to immaterial existence, pride, restlessness, and ignorance. Since sensual attachment is a strong fetter, a Stream-winner can lead a fairly normal family life, but he or she will never do any immoral deeds, and will always pay the deepest respect to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha. The Stream-winner will be reborn at the most seven times in the human realm, before attaining final liberation as a human being, or in the celestial realms.

At the second stage of enlightenment, the Once-returned removes the stronger forms of lust and anger. He or she can still enjoy married life, but will be more serene than a Stream-winner.

The Non-returned who has attained the third stage of enlightenment is strikingly different to ordinary people, since he or she has no lust or anger at all. Such a saintly person has no sexual desire

at all, so will be naturally inclined to ordain as a monk or nun, but may remain as a lay person to fulfil social commitments.

At the final stage of Arahantship, all the remaining mental defilements are destroyed totally. All conditions for rebirth are eradicated, so the Arahant is not born again, but attains the end of all suffering after living out his or her remaining life span. Such a perfect human being is worthy of the highest honour and deepest respect. The benefit of paying respect to such perfect ones, or offering alms to them is immeasurable. The consequences of insulting, harming, or bearing malice towards them are dire too. To kill a perfect one is equivalent to killing one's own mother or father, leading inevitably to rebirth in hell after death.

Anyone who abuses or harms an Arahant will soon suffer one of ten calamities: severe pain, loss of wealth, bodily injury, grievous illness, madness, oppression by the king, a serious accusation, loss of relatives, destruction of his property, or destruction of his house by fire. On the dissolution of the body, such a foolish person will be reborn in hell¹ (unless he asks for forgiveness from the Arahant he has offended). To offend any Noble One is a serious offence that will obstruct one's spiritual progress.

The Buddha advised that these four should be treated with great care and respect, even if they are young: a poisonous snake, a royal prince, a virtuous monk, and a fire. A bite from even a small snake can kill. A young prince has a lot of influence and will one day become king. A virtuous monk will never harm anyone, but insulting or harming a virtuous disciple of the Buddha is powerful bad kamma. A small fire, if left unattended, can burn down an entire village.

The Importance of Mental Kamma

One should not allow lust or ill-will to grow out of control, nor should one overlook minor wrong-doing. As a water-jar is filled with drops of water, a fool gathers evil little by little. According to the Buddha, mental evil is worse than verbal or physical evil. Mind is chief, mind is the forerunner, if one speaks or acts with an evil mind, suffering follows as the wheel follows the hoof of the ox that pulls it. So wrong views, ill-will, and covetousness are powerful mental unwholesome kamma that should not be overlooked.

¹ [Dhammapada, vv 137-140.](#)

Everyone knows that lying, adultery, stealing, and killing are wrong so they usually try to avoid these evils. However, mental evils are often disregarded due to ignorance. The Buddha laid stress on mental development (*bhāvanā*) to remove these mental evils. Studying the Buddha's teaching is mental development; so too are chanting *suttas*, and tranquillity and insight meditation.

With the development of insight, one can gradually put an end to kamma that leads to rebirth, but one should be wary of false teachings. Because the Buddha said, "*Avijjā paccaya saṅkhārā* — mental formations (*kamma*) arise dependent on ignorance" some foolish teachers advocate that one should not make any effort to practise meditation, as all striving means fresh kamma. If one removes all the good timber from a forest, only weeds, vines, and brambles will remain. Likewise, if one is negligent in performing wholesome kamma such as almsgiving, morality, and meditation, the mind will naturally incline towards evil deeds. Only one needs to be wary of "making merit" that supposedly will lead one to nibbāna automatically, without the need to meditate. No such path exists.

Therefore, one should be quite clear that eating little, sleeping little, talking little, and diligently practising the exercises in tranquillity and insight meditation is wholesome kamma of the highest order that will culminate in the attainment of nibbāna.

With the technique of bare awareness the meditator observes the mind and body objectively, remaining equanimous in the face of pleasure and pain. This equanimity breaks the link between feeling (*vedanā*) and craving (*taṇhā*), putting an end to the cycle of dependent origination. Without the practice of mindfulness, craving develops into attachment, which leads to fresh becoming (*bhava*), or in other words, to volitional activities (*kamma*), which in turn cause fresh births (*jāti*) followed by aging and death (*jarā-maraṇaṃ*).

Wholesome activities such as charity, morality, or paying homage will lead to fresh births, and although the results of such wholesome kamma are good, *e.g.* health, wealth, beauty, and long life, any birth in any realm of existence is inevitably accompanied by aging, separation from loved ones, sorrow, and despair.

Whenever a meditator practises wholesome deeds, he or she should direct the mind towards nibbāna, *i.e.* towards the cessation of craving for sensual pleasures and existence. It is impossible for

a non-meditator to appreciate the superiority of cessation over pleasurable feeling. Non-meditators regard sensual pleasures and delight as blissful, and always incline towards the enjoyment of pleasant feelings, which leads to craving.

Meditators also enjoy pleasant feelings and dislike painful feelings, however, if they have a good understanding of dependent origination, and appreciate the superiority of the joy and happiness that occurs during meditation over the oppressive and dangerous joy and happiness that is connected with sensual pleasures, they are weary of pursuing the latter, preferring to exert their energies in cultivating concentration and insight. Even the most refined sensual pleasures such as art, architecture, classical music, high fashion, haute-cuisine, landscaping, and appreciation of nature, are seen as troublesome to the ardent meditator who abstains from listening to music, eats only for the sake of nutrition, and uses clothing and lodgings merely for protection from the extremes of climate.

If pleasant feelings lead to an increase in wholesome qualities then they should be pursued, but if they lead to growth in unwholesome qualities then they should not. The refined pleasant feelings experienced through developing concentration are blameless, blissful, and incline to nibbāna, which is the cessation perception and feeling. If unpleasant feelings such as stiffness of the limbs arise from meditating for long periods, or from restraining sensual desires, they should be patiently endured because that stirs up effort, and increases other wholesome qualities such as mindfulness and concentration.

The Buddha's teaching is profound, it goes against the current of desire, and is not easily understood by an ordinary person. That is why the Buddha was initially reluctant to teach. Even among those who are Buddhists from birth, and who have heard the teachings many times, there is a reluctance to get down to doing any serious meditation practice. In my experience, it is only when they have been severely oppressed by disease, loss of relatives, or great financial hardship, that people will take a keen interest in the Dhamma. The truth of suffering is concealed by perceptions of pleasure and stability, so it is difficult to penetrate. Studying the Dhamma by reading, listening to discourses, and questioning the learned is vital as it helps to remove wrong views. Such efforts to understand the Buddha's teaching is the [wholesome kamma](#) of

straightening one's views (*diṭṭhūjukamma*), while entertaining wrong views is unwholesome mental kamma. There are some Buddhists who believe and maintain that striving hard in meditation is the practice of self-mortification. Some even go so far as to discourage others from practising meditation, which is wrong speech. Instead, they urge their friends and relatives to enjoy sensual pleasures, which is unwholesome kamma. If he or she cannot practice meditation for some valid reason, a well-informed Buddhist will at least encourage and support others to do so by providing alms or taking on the duties of others.

When I was practising meditation at Chanmyay Yeikthā in Rangoon, Burma in the 1980's, a young woman who was practising at the meditation centre at that time was a divorcee with two young children. Her pious parents happily took on the responsibility of caring for her children for two months so that she could devote herself full time to the practice of mindfulness meditation.

In Burma, a meditation retreat entails practising from 4:00 am until 10:00 pm without a break, allowing only six hours for sleep. Some diligent meditators sleep even fewer than the maximum number of hours permitted. From 1949, when the Mahāsi Sayādaw first started teaching *vipassanā* meditation at the Mahāsi Yeikthā in Rangoon, the daily schedule was from 3:00 am until 11:00 pm! In later years, as the numbers of meditators increased and some with less determination or ability also wished to practice, the rest period was extended to six hours. For a meditator, six hours of sleep is adequate because they are not engaged in heavy physical labour, and do not have to face the many stresses involved in social interactions throughout the day that ordinary working people do. The meals are cooked and served by volunteers, who also wash the dishes and keep the meditation centre clean. All that the meditators have to do is pay careful attention to all of their mental and physical activities throughout the day. It is a great blessing to have such an golden opportunity.

May all of you avail yourself of the precious opportunity to engage in the diligent practice of mindfulness meditation to gain happiness in this very life, and to destroy rebirth in the lower realms of existence by attaining nibbāna. At the very least, may you acquire unshakeable confidence in the true Dhamma, straighten your views, and incline your heart towards the cessation of rebirth in *samsāra*.