

Death, Rebirth and Personal Identity in Buddhism

Karel Werner

This paper analyses three concepts crucial to the Buddhist doctrine: (1) Death which all living beings have to go through and which figures in the canonical texts in a personified form as Māra, the ruler of saṃsāra, and death as the dissolution of the constituents of personality which even Māra must undergo. However, the actuality of death, even within saṃsāra, is virtually denied by the doctrine of rebirth and by the passing into the deathless state of nibbāna on liberation. (2) Rebirth is described as a continual process governed by the circular chain of dependent origination which guarantees individual continuation through life from childhood to old age and through the sequence of rebirths. It can be broken only by a free decision and subsequent effort to accomplish liberation. (3) Identity of the individual is preserved by this continuity despite the absence of any unchanging core of the personality, which is unfathomable and continues even into the state of liberation. This was the teaching of the Pudgalavāda school which spelled out the implications of the Pāli discourse known as the 'Burden bearer' and which was supplemented in Mahāyāna by the teaching according to which five saṃsāric khandhas are transformed into the fivefold transcendental wisdom of the accomplished ones.

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I. Death

The concept of ‘death’ occurs in two contexts in early Buddhist sources. First, it appears under the term *māra* in a general meaning and as such designates the whole of the saṃsāric world and also the mode of existence which involves death (cf. several *Mārasuttas* of *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya*). In these texts death is represented in a personified form and the term then becomes the name of a spirit being (*yakkha*), Māra, who is regarded as the Lord of the realm of death, i.e. of the saṃsāric world. Second, the concept of death, usually expressed by the word *maraṇa*, refers to the lot of all beings in the saṃsāric world, namely the event of their physical death which is followed by their rebirth in a new life within *saṃsāra* on whatever level, or by *nirvāṇa*, as the case might be.

1. Māra

There is obviously an ambiguity in the Pāli scriptures about the term *māra*, sometimes designating the mortal mode of existence and at other times referring to a spirit being so that the word is written in modern editions of the texts and their translations with a capital M. Since Pāli manuscripts do not use capital letters, a decision has to be made according to context. As a spirit being, Māra is regarded as the ruler of the whole realm of manifested reality or the cosmos (*saṃsāra*) with all its levels of existence by virtue of the fact that every living being within the manifested cosmos has to die and so is Māra’s ‘subject,’ as it were. Even the whole cosmos undergoes periodic dissolution under Māra’s power; on this account he has the epithet *antaka* (‘end-maker,’ destroyer), sometimes used as another name for him. As the ruler of all living beings he bears, in some commentaries, the name Vassavattī

(possessor of control), Namuci (“he whom neither gods nor men escape”) and Pajāpati (the lord of creatures); the latter is one of the names of the creator god in the Vedic literature (Prajāpati) and represents the trend in the Buddhist tradition which does not reject pre-Buddhist deities, but incorporates them in a different, often subordinate capacity. As to the nature of the Māra as a spirit being, Pāli commentaries refer to him sometimes as a *devaputta* whose domicile is *paranimmitavasavatti deva* world, the highest sphere of *kāma-avacara*, the realm of sense desires. This would mean that his power does not reach into the four spheres of forms (*rūpa-avacara*) and four formless spheres of existence (*arūpa-avacara*), although the lifespan of beings inhabiting them, albeit long, is also limited so that, strictly speaking, they still belong to the saṃsāric world. But they are not under the sway of *kāma* owing to their spiritual achievements, having only some residual attachment (*upādāna*) to existence (*bhava*). In the *Mahāsamaya Sutta* of *Dīgha Nikāya* (DN XX, 12; PTS II: 259) he is mentioned among *asuras* on account of his warlike nature and retinue of warriors (*mārasena*, DN XX, 22; PTS II: 262). As the lord of creatures and their controller, whom neither gods nor men can escape, Māra is nevertheless aware of the limitations of his power posed by the spiritual endeavour of beings who curb the pleasures of the senses and strive for release from the realm of dying. He therefore seeks to disturb their efforts by various pranks and temptations and to lure them back by seductive visions to return to the enjoyment of sensual pleasures.

Most scholars regard the passages where Māra appears as a living individual to be an allegorical personification of death. This is particularly the case where he approaches the Buddha in order to dissuade him from the pursuit of his liberating mission. The commentary to verses 179-180 of *Dhammapada* (DhA, Buddhavagga, PTS III: 195-196) relates how Māra already appeared to Gotama before he embarked on spiritual training, just at the moment when he was about to leave his palace to become an ascetic. Māra promised him what would have particularly delighted his father, King Sudhodana, namely rule over the whole world within seven days (a story reminiscent of the temptation of Christ by Satan later told in the Christian

Bible—Matthew 4, 8-10). Needless to say, Gotama was not persuaded.

The next encounter of the Buddha with Māra is related in verses in the canonical collection *Suttanipāṭṭa* (SN III, 2; PTS I: 74-77; verses 425-445). It transpires from this account that Māra appeared and positioned himself near the Buddha (*buddhassa santike*) when he was sitting by the river Nerañjarā, presumably just after his enlightenment but still emaciated from previous severe ascetic practices. Nevertheless, the Buddha was still exerting himself in deep meditation to consolidate his achievement and so it seems that Māra was not fully aware of the Buddha's liberated state of mind and assumed that the ascetic Gotama was continuing to practise austerities as a means to achieve freedom. He suggested to the Buddha that he was near death and should lead a better life accumulating merit. By religious practice (*brahmacariya*) and the performance of fire offerings, he would gain abundant rewards. What use was all his striving? The Buddha naturally rejected Māra's propositions and pointed out that he was beyond the need of merits and rewards and was strong enough to fight off all Māra's forces, among them the negative mental states of lust, aversion, hunger and thirst, craving, sloth and torpor, dread, doubt, slander and obduracy, false gain, self-aggrandisement and disparagement of others (these mental states were apparently viewed also as personified forces, since the text mentions that Māra was heading them on his elephant). The Buddha said to Māra that he would face him and his retinue and defeat with his supreme wisdom his army, which gods and the world could never overcome. Then he would go from country to country and train disciples (*sāvakas*) who would themselves subsequently escape Māra's clutches and, free from desire, finally go where there is no sorrow (*yattha gatvā na socare*).

This is probably the seminal canonical account of Māra as a powerful *yakkha* intent on keeping all beings within the range of sensory desires (*kāmāvacara*) by diverting them from spiritual efforts aimed at liberation and, interestingly, by promoting instead conventional religious practices consisting of the performance of meritorious deeds and rituals which bring rewards in heaven and on earth, but of course they are still within *saṃsāra* and therefore only temporary and do not provide permanent security which means that those

who perform conventional religious practices remain Māra's subjects.

This account was subsequently elaborated in Nidānakathā, Buddhavaṃsa commentary and later literature into colourful descriptions of the battle between Māra with his powerful army and the Buddha with his supreme wisdom and certainty of being liberated. The assault started according to these versions even before the Buddha's full enlightenment. Formidable weapons were hurled at the Buddha, but he rendered them all harmless by his magic power. The frustrated Māra then claimed as his sole possession the spot on which the Buddha was sitting and denied the Buddha the right to occupy it. But the Buddha claimed that he had won the right to it by the performance of many deeds in which he sacrificed life, limb and property to help suffering beings in their plight. Challenged to prove it, the Buddha called on the earth goddess by touching the earth with his right hand to bear witness for him. The earth responded with a terrifying roar and then the goddess herself appeared with a large retinue and produced a flood which washed away Māra's army. The *Dhammapada* commentary quoted above adds another episode to these attempts to defeat the Buddha. It continues the story (DhA, Buddhavagga, PTS III: 196-198) by saying that after failing to tempt Gotama with his offer of world rule Māra kept pursuing him step by step in the hope of entrapping him somehow. When after six years he had failed to prevent Gotama's enlightenment, he sat down, defeated and depressed. In this state he was approached by his daughters Taṇhā, Arati and Rāga (craving, aversion and lust) who wanted to help him and suggested that they would have a go and try to seduce the Buddha by displaying their charms before him with song and dance, accompanied by a multitude of beauties. Māra was sceptical but they went ahead, of course without the slightest effect. This episode has earlier canonical roots in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, which reports that Māra pursued the Buddha for seven years (the commentary explains that the seventh year was after enlightenment, although the canonical text does not specify the timing), watching for his chance without success, obviously not understanding the nature of buddhahood which once achieved could not be lost. Then comes the episode of Māra's daughters trying to seduce the

Buddha, which was summarised in the quoted *Dhammapada* commentary, and is rendered at great length in this canonical text (SN I, IV, 3, 4-5; PTS I: 122-127).

Not even during the first year after enlightenment (or seven years if we disregard the commentarial timing) did Māra give up. He probably thought that the Buddha, who would eventually have to die as anybody else, was still bound by his fetters. And so he approached the Buddha on a number of occasions described in the *Māra Suttas* of the *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya* (SN I, IV, 1, 1 - I, IV, 3, 5; PTS I: 103-127), but the Buddha always explained to him that he was completely free from any fetters. Once Māra accused the Buddha of abandoning ascetic practices and consequently becoming impure while regarding himself as pure. But the Buddha explained to him the uselessness of austerities; only the practice of morality, concentration and wisdom (*sīla, samādhi, paññā*) was the path to enlightenment and he had accomplished it. This is again an interesting comment. Not only conventional religious practices but even ascetic efforts current inside and outside the main stream religion of the day were inefficient in securing lasting results.

At other times Māra tried also to frighten the Buddha by various apparitions, but when he finally understood that the Buddha was beyond his power he tried to persuade him to rest content with his liberation without showing the path to others, of course again without success and so he kept trying at least to obstruct the progress of the Buddha's disciples to *nirvāṇa* by various means, for example by entering their bodies in the guise of illness, disturbing their meditation and making other mischief. Once he assumed the form of a bull and proceeded to break the alms bowls of monks of a certain community so that they could not go round to collect their daily meal until they obtained new bowls. On another occasion he possessed the householders of a village and made them withhold alms from monks so that they had to return to their monastery hungry.

Māra was also carefully watching the death process of monks who had advanced on the path to liberation, in order to get hold of their consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and lead it astray in the course of rebirth. It would appear that he

was unable to discern their status clearly and circled also round dying *arahats* watching out for their consciousness, as transpires from a commentarial story about an *arahat* monk who committed suicide. This event alarmed some other monks who approached the Buddha for an explanation and asked where the suicider would be reborn. The Buddha pointed in the direction where the departed monk had lived in seclusion and asked them if they could see the mist hovering above that place. He then explained to them that it was Māra who took this form to look for the consciousness of that monk, but in vain, because the departed monk was an *arahat* and his consciousness did not grasp any new opportunity for rebirth within *samsāra*, the realm of death. The monk had fallen seriously ill and if he had continued living, he would have had to be looked after by other monks which would distract them from their effort on the path to liberation. This is the only instance in which suicide is permissible in Buddhism. Suicide by an unliberated person, on the other hand, generates unwholesome *karma* and worsens his prospects for a favourable rebirth. A similar but lengthier canonical story is related about the monk Vakkali (SN III, XXII, 87; PTS III: 119-124) after whose suicide the Buddha took his monks to his cave and pointed out to them Māra in the form of mist hovering around and looking in vain for Vakkali's consciousness (*viññāṇa*). A further similar canonical story is told about the monk Godhika (SN I, IV, 3, 3; PTS I: 120-122) who was not ill, but on reaching the point of liberation of the mind (*cetovimutti*) he never succeeded in finalising it. When it happened seven times, he decided to kill himself. Thus resolved he realised when grasping the knife that he had just severed the last mental tie to existence and so he achieved total emancipation at the moment of death. His suicide was not followed by rebirth, which the Buddha explained to his disciples in a similar way as in the above two stories.

In his determination to keep his subjects in his domain so that they would be constantly reborn into it Māra repeatedly tried to prevent the spreading of the Buddha's message of liberation. The timing of these attempts is not consistent in the sources and it seems to stretch over a longer period of time. According to the account in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*,

however, which was related by the Buddha to Ānanda a few months before *parinibbāna*, Māra approached the Buddha just after his enlightenment, but obviously after the Buddha had put aside his initial reluctance to pass on his newly acquired wisdom to others because of the difficulty for most people to grasp it let alone to follow it. Māra now urged him to pass immediately into *parinibbāna* and spare himself the vexations of teaching. But the Buddha replied with the following powerful statement:

I will not pass into final *nibbāna*, o Evil One, as long as no *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs*, *upāsakas* and *upāsikas* of mine become *sāvakas* and *sāvikas*, accomplished, educated, confident, learned, preservers of the teaching, who have reached perfect harmony with the teaching, have entered upon the proper course, are of perfect conduct, and having acquired mastership of their own, will explain, expound, make known, establish, reveal, analyse and make manifest the teaching, and having well refuted with truth adverse false doctrines which have arisen, will disseminate this wonderful doctrine (DN XVI; PTS II: 112-113).

The Buddha then continued his narration to Ānanda and said that now, when he had reached eighty years of age, Māra approached him again and reminded him of his promise to pass away, implied in the above quotation, after fulfilling his mission as described in it. The Buddha honoured his promise and stated a point of time in the near future when he would pass into *parinibbāna*. (This narrative is combined with Ānanda's failure, before the Buddha promised Māra to pass away in the near future, to ask the Buddha to live on till the end of the present cosmic period, but that is another story.)

The question now is: How do we explain these episodes in which Māra appears as a person—a powerful albeit conceited deity? Are they to be regarded as allegorical (the view prevailing in scholarly interpretations) or are they to be taken at their face value, because many of them are canonical and presented as the word of the Buddha himself? The canonical texts never waver in the manner of describing Māra as an actual person who is even subject to rebirth like anybody else. This means that being a Māra is a

temporary form of rebirth in the *deva* world (like Indra or Brahma Sahampati) which anybody who develops appropriate tendencies may be born into for a time, perhaps for a world period. Māra could even enter the path to liberation and aspire to enlightenment (Indra/Sakka, for example, did so and reached the first stage of sanctity, *sotāpanna*, see MN XXI, 2, 7; PTS II: 184). This is corroborated by Moggalāna, one of the Buddha's two foremost disciples, who disclosed to the present Māra (when he was bothering him with stomach troubles) that he, Moggalāna, had been in a past life the Māra at the time of the Buddha Kakusandha and subsequently suffered for a long time in hells for injuring one of the two foremost disciples of that Buddha (MN I, 50; PTS I: 333). Obviously, Moggalāna then changed his ways and turned to spiritual training when he was reborn in the human world again. Now Moggalāna gave a warning to the present Māra by telling him the story and providing him with the opportunity to change his ways and avoid future karmic consequences of his misdeeds. Some canonical passages even depict Māra as honouring the Buddha.

Now if Māra as a spirit being of some standing among other deities and communicating with the Buddha should be regarded as an allegorical figure symbolising evil tendencies in the human character, then other figures of gods visiting the Buddha would also have to be seen as having only a symbolical role. That goes for Brahma Sahampati and others, including monks who had died as the Buddha's disciples, were reborn in the *deva* world and came back to pay him their respect and ask for further instructions. Many buddhologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw it that way and took from the Pāli Buddhist texts only their rational and ethical teachings, ignoring or brushing aside all supernatural traits as mythology, while some of them, being believing Christians, would nevertheless admit, within their own adopted religious tradition, to the existence of higher and lower existential spheres (heaven, hell and perhaps also purgatory) and their inhabitants—angels and devils, including the figure of Satan as tempter who shares some features with Māra, even if he is not death personified.

Personification of death is an ancient phenomenon going back into

Indo-European prehistory and surviving in folklore and fairy-tales till the present day. In Slavonic folklore death is represented as the goddess Morana, her name being philologically related to Māra. In her aspect as the queen of winter her effigy is drowned in a river during village spring festivals—which does not prevent her from performing her function among people all year round. There are stories told by some sensitive people claiming to have seen a dark figure approaching the deathbed of an ill person surrounded by family members and neighbours and reporting that the death occurred when the figure stopped at the side of the bed.

However, the question whether the stories about Māra in the Pāli discourses of the Buddha are allegorical or are meant to be taken literally cannot be resolved by academic discussion. Outspoken denial of the existence of non-material levels of reality and their inhabitants is no longer favoured, but neither is outright admittance possible. Academics must therefore, so to speak, remain sitting on the fence. Buddhists, on the other hand, are in a different position: they are, by accepting the principle of rebirth, karmic law and liberation, also accepting by implication the transcendent features of the teaching. Fortunately, Buddhism does not require literal belief in its scriptures and everyone is free to form their own conclusion or leave the question open—a kind of ‘wait and see’ attitude. And so here the case rests.

2. Physical death (*marāṇa*)

Not much is said in the Buddhist sources about death or the process of dying. It is simply defined as the dissolution of the five constituents (*khandhas*) forming the phenomenal personality, which is followed by their reassembling or rebirth of the person in one of the six existential dimensions of the universe or by disappearance of the personality from the cosmos and passing into the ineffable state of *nirvāṇa* (Pāli *nibbānadhātu*).

In the ultimate sense, therefore, death is in the Buddhist view non-existent, *nibbāna* being a deathless state (*amatta-dhātu*) and *saṃsāra* being a continuous sequence of rebirths. Physical death is just a transition of the

person from one place to another while changing the 'garment' in which one appears to others and oneself. Death is never defined as ceasing to be or passing into non-existence and suggestions to that effect are rejected by the Buddha as wrong views and classified as 'annihilationism.' That is, from the Buddhist point of view, all there is to it and one does not have to apply deep analysis of textual references to demonstrate this explanation. So it is not death as viewed externally, for example as a loss by bereaved relatives, which is the real concern of a Buddhist. It is rather the process of dying everybody has to pass through which is for him a tedious affair owing to its repetitiveness and which may be accompanied by pain. Possible painful experience of dying is a worry for everybody. Even just the anticipation of death or of the event of dying is unpleasant and in modern societies the thought of it has been banned from people's minds (unlike in medieval Europe with its ubiquitous injunction *memento mori*). When the idea of dying does occur to people, it often produces fear, especially in those who have no religious commitment. It may be fear of nothingness if they believe only in one life based on biological processes of the bodily organism, or it may be fear of possible punishment for past misdeeds after death if one did not give much thought to the questions about life and death, but with approaching old age starts feeling uncertain ('What if what religions teach is true after all?'). Or one may simply experience general unease. The Buddhist outlook, however, presents a clear and rationally well argued explanation, albeit not readily demonstrable, in the form of the doctrine of rebirth in combination with karmic laws and with the possibility of liberation from it all for good.

II. Rebirth

Originally there are enumerated in the Pāli *suttas* five *gatis* or destinations for beings to be reborn in (hell, the spirit world, the animal world, the human world and the world of higher beings-*devas* and *asuras*). The word *devas* is usually translated as 'gods' and the designation *asuras* is sometimes rendered as 'demons' which is not quite correct, because they are

also divine beings albeit of a lower nature than *devas*; they are therefore sometimes referred to by a term from Greek mythology as ‘titans.’ Despite their unequal status and differences in character, *devas* and *asuras* appear to intermingle and communicate with each other, sometimes in a hostile and sometimes in a friendly manner.

Two or three hundred years after the Buddha’s demise, the *gati* or sphere of higher beings was divided into two, the world of *devas* and the world of *asuras*. This view emerged for the first time in the teachings of the sect Vātsīputrīya later known as Pudgalavāda and came to be generally adopted. The resulting six existential dimensions are vividly depicted in the so-called wheel of life known mainly from Tibetan paintings (*thangkas*). Each of the six existential dimensions has of course a large number of interconnected subdivisions with some contacts between their respective inhabitants. From our own experience we are aware not only of the variety of levels of human existence from primitive to civilised, but also of the bewildering multitude of beings in the existential dimension of animal life (which includes insects) and we can communicate with them to varying albeit limited degrees.

Rebirth into one of the dimensions of existence is governed by the laws of *karma* inherent in the cosmic process or *saṁsāra* (‘global flow’) just as other laws of nature are, without any need for a divine lawgiver in the form of a god creator. The karmic law is akin to the modern scientific term of ‘causal law,’ i.e. the continuous sequence of cause and effect, but the operation of the karmic law is supposed to be understood in the context of a wider complex of twelve interdependent links in a circular chain usually called ‘dependent origination’ and sometimes also ‘conditioned co-production’ (*paṭiccasamuppāda*, Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*) in which the key notion is not ‘causality’ but ‘conditioning’ (there are ten links enumerated in DN II, 39; SN II, 104 and twelve links in SN II, 5 and in *Visuddhimagga* XVII). A substantial difference between the chain of dependent origination and the modern notion of causal law is in the circularity of the former while the latter makes the impression of running in a straight line, as it were; this produces

the question of an infinite past or of a possible beginning of the line, and the problem of an infinite future. Neither is easy to grasp. Theistic religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) purport to have solved this problem in their belief in an almighty Creator God who is responsible for the beginning and end of the world and time and promises his created beings eternal life thereafter, whether in bliss or in torture; that of course requires unquestioning faith. Buddhism, on the other hand, makes its propositions not in the form of a dogma to be accepted on faith, but in what is referred to in modern times as theory to be verified by experience, albeit on a higher than intellectual level and for every individual for himself.

The circularity of the chain of dependent origination, it is true, does present problems to intellectual understanding, but it makes the question of a beginning or end irrelevant. Modern science has come to a similar intellectual impasse with Einstein's circular space and relativity of time. Although the early Buddhist teaching can be viewed as a theory, it should not be regarded as a philosophical system with a claim to ontological validity (which may—or may not—have happened in some later Mahāyāna schools of thought). It appears from a careful scrutiny of the canonical texts in Pāli to have been conceived as a psychological device for meditation aimed at opening a higher vision and suprarational understanding, rather than as a philosophical picture of reality and its workings.

The chain of dependent origination is dealt with in the Pāli Canon in several discourses. One of its simple enumerations runs as follows:

paṭiccasamuppāda:

- (1) *avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā* - (2) *saṅkhārā paccayā viññāṇaṃ* -
 (3) *viññāṇaṃ paccayā nāmarūpaṃ* - (4) *nāmarūpaṃ paccayā*
saḷāyatanaṃ - (5) *saḷāyatanaṃ paccayā phasso* - (6) *phasso paccayā*
vedanā - (7) *vedanā paccayā taṇhā* - (8) *taṇhā paccayā upādānaṃ* -
 (9) *upādānaṃ paccayā bhavo* - (10) *bhavo paccayā jāti* - (11) *jāti*
paccayā - (12) *jarāmaraṇaṃ*

An interpretative translation may run as follows:

(1) conditioned by ignorance are [corresponding types of] synergies [volitions, volitional tendencies, desires, inclinations, urges, drives, instincts], (2) conditioned by synergies is [a corresponding type of] consciousness, (3) conditioned by [the particular type of] consciousness is [a corresponding type of individual] being [endowed with shape and specific mental framework], (4) conditioned by [the particular type of] being are six bases [of perception—5 senses and the mind], (5) conditioned by the six bases [of perception and mentation] are [the appropriate types of sensory and mental] impressions, (6) conditioned by [sensory and mental] impressions is feeling, (7) conditioned by feeling is craving, (8) conditioned by craving is attachment, (9) conditioned by attachment is [the process of continuous] existing, (10) conditioned by existing is [repeated] birth, (11) conditioned by birth is (12) [repetitive] aging and dying [and because dying occurs in unenlightened beings in the state of ignorance, the chain continues on and on]

As mentioned above this scheme does not represent a philosophical doctrine about reality, which means that it is not an ontological theory. It does not refer to the cosmic process or *saṃsāra* ('global flow') or to reality as a whole. It does not explain the beginning of the world process or the origin of individual beings. The chain of dependent origination is, to stress it again, just a psychological explanation of the functioning of the individual phenomenal personality to be meditated upon. Ignorance (*avijjā*) is not the first cause of the process of existence nor the first link in this chain, but permeates it throughout.

Being circular, the chain can be broken anywhere which would lead to its collapse and consequently to liberation. But the concentration to achieve liberation from the chain of dependent origination usually focuses on removing ignorance (by developing insight into the nature of reality through meditative endeavour) and craving (by practising renunciation or aloofness with respect to the attractions of life and mindfulness when engaged in unavoidable affairs of everyday life).

The chain is also an illustration of the working of the karmic process

which is impersonal, but not entirely automatic; it receives input from the variants of synergies (*saiṅkhāras*) which include conscious decisions, whether wholesome or unwholesome, and the effort to carry them through. Conscious decision to go for liberation is also what, paradoxically, is the *conditio sine qua non*, i.e. the necessary condition without which the process of breaking the chain of conditioned existence cannot be started and liberation cannot be won.

Conscious decision making—which presupposes the so-called ‘free will’—is the greatest mystery of human life, a puzzle for the intellect and a disputed topic in philosophy. It is rejected by some misguided scientists as an impossibility, often by those engaged in biological research into the workings of the nervous system and the brain. But the freedom to make choices is the essence of human existence whether it is fully and knowingly used for directing one’s life or neglected so that one’s life is adrift and shaped by impulses and blind reactions (attachments, craving, urges, habits, etc.). In fact, to live a negligent life, to allow laziness and lethargy to prevail in one’s life, is also a choice and a kind of act of freedom of will.

Nobody has ever given an entirely satisfactory explanation and interpretation of the chain of dependent origination; it is, in its entirety, beyond conceptual grasp. But a feeling of understanding it beyond concepts can be developed if the chain is taken up, as it was originally meant to be, as a subject of meditation, not only in the sense of thinking about it, but viewing it internally by identifying its individual links as they present themselves to the mind during meditational sessions and occasionally also amidst normal everyday activities. First, of course, one has to memorise it and be able to go through it in one’s mind verbally with full concentration in the sequence presented above and also in reverse order as it is also given in some canonical discourses. When the processes of existence as reflected in their analytical dissection into the links of the chain are eventually contemplated internally without verbalisation, the feeling of grasping their significance starts dawning on one and one begins to understand the possibility of breaking the chain at any one of the twelve links so that it will collapse

and liberation will be won. Such an event would require an overwhelming act of choice, an absolute and irreversible decision. One can occasionally find a description of such a break-through to enlightenment or *satori* in the stories about accomplished Zen masters. Sometimes one can identify at which link the chain was actually broken at the moment of the break-through.

One of the interpretations of the chain of dependent origination illustrates its functioning over three successive lives (Nyanatiloka 1956: 119-120). But the whole chain operates in full all the time, throughout one's life. One can sense the presence of all its links in every single moment, even though one particular link may be prevalent at one moment and another one next moment. Even birth is here all the time. One is reborn, so to speak, every moment with a slightly modified appearance, character etc.

One can experiment with the functioning of the chain and the possibility of breaking it and achieving also just a partial liberation from a particular aspect of one link even on a minor scale in everyday life, for example, focussing on a particular form of attachment (*upādāna*) such as meat eating. When deciding on one's next meal, the mind may conjure up a picture of a steak. Identifying mentally this attachment one can make a decision and go for a vegetarian meal. If this is repeated, the attachment to meat eating becomes weakened and eventually liberation from it is achieved on a permanent basis; one is, so to speak, reborn free from that particular attachment. A similar procedure can free one from the addiction to smoking, etc.

Looked at from this angle, rebirth can be experienced at any time, not just after physical death.

III. Identity

The feeling one gains from meditating on dependent origination removes also any problems concerning one's sense of identity. Identity is preserved within the process of dependent origination by the factor of continuity of consciousness (in a wider sense which includes its 'unconscious' or

subconscious layers) from moment to moment and from life to life.

There is no direct definition of identity in the discourses of the Buddha in the Pāli Canon. No questions arise as to one's identity during the present lifespan despite gradual or even abrupt changes in one's bodily state or appearance owing to aging, illness or injury, or in one's mental make-up as a result of changing features of character brought about by external influences such as environment or education or by inner mental processes—effort to achieve growth of personality or negligence and indulgence in an easy going life style. As to one's identity in successive lives, the Buddha's discourses are quite clear: he talks about beings dying in one place and being reborn in another one. Often he answers questions put to him by his monks about the whereabouts of a departed monk and discloses his new status on a different level of existence, sometimes even referring to him by the same name which he had in his terrestrial life. He also talks about himself in different past lives and describes the place and circumstances in which he lived, what status and name he had, what he did and what consequences his deeds had for him in the next lives.

Thus identity of personalities throughout one life as well as through successive lives in a continuous line is taken for granted, but an ambiguity remains about their inner nature and possible nucleus or inner core of the personality and whether it is such an inner core, called 'I' or 'self' which passes from life to life and guarantees one's identity in the process. However, when one uses these personal pronouns to make a statement about oneself, they never refer to an inner core. The pronoun 'I' (*aham*), usually pinpoints only a particular aspect of oneself. (For example, "I wash myself" refers to my body, "I am sad" concerns my feeling, etc.) The same holds for the 'self' (*atta*, *ātman*); both these expressions are constantly shifting between the five constituents (*khandas*) of the phenomenal personality (*nāmarūpa*), of each of which it is frequently said in the Buddha's discourses that they are 'not-self' (*anatta*), 'not-I,' 'not mine,' because each one of them is constantly changing and usually does not respond to our wishes. Yet the person carries on and can be identified as such because there is continuity. It would seem

that this continuity is psychologically guaranteed by memory, despite the phenomenon of forgetting, because forgotten events in our life remain stored in the unconscious or subconscious layers of our mind and many of them can be recovered with a little effort and those buried too deep with the help of a psychoanalyst. Forgotten memories from the past lives can be recovered, according to the Buddha's discourses, as a result of meditational progress when the fourth *jhāna* has been achieved, as happened to the Buddha during the night at the end of which he reached perfect enlightenment (*samāsāṅgibodhi*). Some of his disciples also developed recollection of past lives (*pubbenivāsānussati*). From this we may conclude that there must exist some kind of a repository of personal experiences preserved as memories which is not the core of the personality, but which preserves it as a unique individual functioning structural process through all the changing external circumstances and shifting mental patterns up to the moment of enlightenment and even beyond when the phenomenal personality (*nāmarūpa*) becomes the unfathomable *tathāgata*.

When talking in general terms the Buddha refers to an individual as a being (*satta*) or a person (*purisa* or *puggala*) or even by the compound *purisapuggala* (SN XVI, 7; PTS II: 206-208), which may be rendered as 'individual person.' This would appear to be the expression best suited to designate the structurally coherent process of the individual continuous stream of experiences through lives preserved as a personal volume of conscious or "unconscious" memories which is being constantly added to. Whether this process carries along within itself an abiding self, an *atta* (Skt. *ātman*) in the ultimate sense is never discussed in the discourses of the Buddha and it obviously cannot be decided by conceptual reflexion. The Buddha does not say explicitly anywhere that there is no *atta* or that there is one. He always just points to the changing phenomenal constituents (*khandhas*) of the personality structure as being *anatta* (not-self). The explicit denial of *atta* in the form of the extreme *anatta* doctrine was developed by the post-canonical Theravāda school which denies any abiding or connecting factor holding the personality together and considers it to be just a conglomerate of constituents

which is constantly reassembled by *karma*. The Theravāda school wrongly identifies the concept of self (*atta*), taken by Theravādins to mean an abiding and unchanging substance, with *satta*, *puggala*, *purisa* which of course are not referring to individuals as unchanging entities, but are expressions designating beings and persons who are constantly changing yet continuously identifiable individuals.

The Pudgalavāda school drew a conclusion from this ambiguity and regarded the notion of ‘person’ (*puggala*, Skt. *pudgala*) as referring to an unfathomable entity like the notion of *buddha* or *tathāgata*, even though *pudgala* is burdened in *saṃsāra* with the five constituents (*khandhas*) while *tathāgatas* are unburdened from them (even though they can use and manipulate them). The teachings of this school spread far and wide and dominated Buddhist thought for a thousand years, except in the countries with strong Theravāda affiliation. The Pudgalavāda conception of personality eventually merged in a way with Mahāyāna doctrines and the school as such petered out as a result. The thesis of Pudgalavādins is based on the following canonical verse:

bhārā have pañcakkhandhā /
bhārahāro ca puggalo /
bhārādānaṃ dukkhaṃ loke /
bhāranikkhepanaṃ sukhaṃ //

a burden verily is the fivefold conglomerate /
 and the burden-bearer is the person /
 taking up the burden is suffering in the world /
 discarding the burden is bliss //
 (SN III, XXII, 3, 22, 1 - PTS III: 25-26)

The early canonical texts in Pāli do not use one single expression for personality, but resort to suitable expressions according to context. The burdened (phenomenal) personality composed of five *khandhas* is frequently called *nāmarūpa* which we interpreted in the context of the dependent origination as ‘individual being endowed with shape and a specific mental framework.’ An individual in the spirit world seeking rebirth on the human

level is referred to by the Buddha as *gandhabba* (Skt. *gandharva*) which is also the term used for beings who live in lower heavenly levels of existence. A *gandhabba* is also a bearer of five *khandhas*, having all the mental constituents as well as a shape (*rūpa*) and is therefore also a *nāmarūpa*. So is a celestial being (*deva*) or any other being of the *rūpāvacara*. If a being is reborn in formless heavenly spheres, he does not have a shape, but is a bearer of four *arūpino khandhā*, a collection or body (*kāya*) composed of four formless mental constituents and called *nāmakāya* ('mental body').

In Theravāda Abhidhamma texts there is a term for beings between incarnations suggesting continuity and therefore their identity from life to life, namely *paṭisandhi viññāṇa*, linking consciousness, which is reminiscent of the story mentioned above when Māra was looking for the consciousness of a suicidal *arahat*. If a being from formless abodes is reborn in a lower heaven or on earth or even in a lower world, it acquires again a shape, the fifth *khandha*, namely *rūpakāya* (bodily shape). This is composed of four elemental forces (earth, water, air and fire) which, although immaterial, get congested on earth so that they become 'corporeality' and appear as solid matter and we speak of having a material body. But in other dimensions (the lower heavens, the spirit world or in 'hells') the four elemental forces are less tangible although they also produce 'bodies' in the form of perceivable shapes.

When liberated, a person becomes a *mahāpurisa*, *uttamapurisa* or *tathāgata*. All these terms express the prevailing feeling and basic view held about the ultimate reality of the individual being as a complex continuous and fluid structure, perhaps devoid of permanent, unchanging core, but persisting through all changes of character on the phenomenal level and continuing also, on liberation, as an individual into the absolute, nirvāṇic level. The prevailing impression from all Buddhist traditions is that all the Buddhas of the past persist as perfect personalities with distinct individual features in their nirvāṇic dimension (*nirvāṇadhātu*), even with some links to the saṃsāric world and beings in it for whom they feel compassion (*karuṇā*) and to whom they render help with their wisdom (*paññā*, Skt *prajñā*). Those whose names are recorded in Pāli canonical and commentarial texts are, like the Buddha Gotama or the Buddha Dīpaṅkara, addressed in invocations even in the Theravāda countries. The Mahāyāna schools are much more explicit on this

point and describe and depict in art Buddhas of different world systems and time epochs as communicating with each other and being still active in the saṃsāric world, for example the Buddha Śākyamuni and the Buddha Prabhūtaratna in the Lotus Sūtra; the event is depicted as an illustration to its Chinese version and Musée Guimet in Paris possesses a sculpture of the two Buddhas sitting side by side and engaged in conversation. As to an indication of the nature or character of individual Buddhas in their ultimate state, this topic was elaborated in some Tantric or Vajrayāna schools. In this respect it is the Tibetan tradition which has preserved a little explored teaching according to which the transition of the personality from the saṃsāric to the nirvāṇic level is achieved by the transformation of the five saṃsāric *khandhas* into the fivefold transcendental wisdom. Although there has been some work published on this topic (for example, Anagarika Govinda 1959, 1962, 1969, 1983), it is still one which requires further research.

Abbreviations

- DN *Dīgha Nikāya*. PTS.
 MN *Majjhima Nikāya*. PTS.
 SN *Saṃyutta Nikāya*. PTS.

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