

Rethinking Rebirth: A Modern Buddhist Challenge To Justification Of Prevailing Myth, Inequality And Social Injustice

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Buddhism is a unique religion in the world because of its matchless fundamental teachings such as *Anishwarwad* (No God Theory), *Anantmvad* (No soul doctrine), not to believe in infallibility of religious texts, *Anicchavada* (Law of Impermanence) and others which makes it so different to an extent that it does not properly qualifies the sociological definition of a Religion¹. However, against these above mentioned unique theories of the Buddha, the prevailing concept of ‘rebirth’ in Buddhism brings it on a similar footings with other religions especially the Indic religions²; further the observance of rituals accentuate to categories it in the definition of religion. The concept of Rebirth which has its basic roots in the *Chhandogya Upanishad*³ is of course a universally accepted doctrine in Buddhism across world and traditions—with a little change from its Hindu counterpart. In Buddhism the evidence of rebirth is present in the oldest Pāli canonical Tipitika which is believed to be original words of the Buddha. In the *Maha-Assapura Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 39.19)*, the Buddha said to recollect his manifold past lives⁴:

One birth, two births, three births, four, five, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, one hundred, one thousand, one hundred thousand, many aeons of cosmic contraction, many aeons of cosmic expansion, many aeons of cosmic contraction and expansion, [recollecting], ‘There I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose there. There too I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose here.

Rebirth is not restricted only to Theravāda countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar but the followers of Mahayanist or Vajrayanist sects and their various offshoots such as Pure Land, Western Buddhist Order (TBMSG), Lamaism, etc., in various parts of the world such as Tibet, China, Japan, Korea and the Buddhists of United Kingdom, etc., firmly believe this concept is a core and fundamental teaching of the Buddha. Thus, whenever there have been any attempt to question the validity or logic behind ‘rebirth’, the majority of the Buddhists easily shut it down.⁵

¹ According to Oxford dictionary of Sociology, Sociologist have defined religion by reference to the sacred rather than to belief in a god or gods, because it makes social comparison possible; for example, some variations of Buddhism do not involve a belief in God. p. 643.

² All the Indic religion Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism and other minor religious sects believe in rebirth. This concept is so ingrained in Indian psyche that even the Indian Christians and Muslims too practically believe in this concept despite the fact that there is concept of rebirth in their religions.

³ The concept of rebirth is first appeared in the Rig Veda which later became an established concept of all Indic religions.

⁴ See: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.039.than.html> - accessed on 14 April 2015 - This is a section reflected in other suttas such as MN 4.27, or *Dīgha Nikāya* 2.93-94.

⁵ Dr Ambedkar who converted to Buddhism along with five lakh of his supporters tried to rationalize the concept of rebirth and karma. He distributed his rational version of Buddhism to world Buddhists but the traditional Buddhists rejects his version by saying that it is not Buddha’s Dhamma but Ambedkar’s Dhamma. Traditional Buddhists also

However it is interesting to note that despite its presence in various Buddhist traditions, 'rebirth' is not a core teaching of the Buddha who propagates his Dhamma with '*Dhammacakka Pavattana Sutta*' where he lay stress on the middle path; and explained the 'noble eight fold path': *samma ditthi, samma sankappo, samma vacha, samma kammanto, samma ajivo, samma vayamo, samma satti* and *samma samadhi*. All these steps are practical and a perfect way to end one's sufferings and to live harmoniously in the world. This is no doubt a basic need of the Buddha's Dhamma - if a layperson follows these teachings s/he would naturally led to the life of perfection which is another name of Buddhahood.⁶ Thus a person could be a Buddhist without having belief in rebirth. But on the other hand those Buddhists who insist on believing in 'rebirth' as reality seldom realize that their belief is harmful to society as it creates undue distinctions between humans and justifies these divisions to such an extent that it affects the egalitarian fabric of the society. It is known that human society irrespective of regional and socio-economic locations is always ready to differentiate and discriminates certain class of her people on the basis of numerous biases such as gender, race, class, caste, color and creed. Belief in rebirth either in the form Hindu teachings or Buddhist teachings or any other teachings quite softly paves a way to justify these differences and discriminations by relegating these distinctions as the impact of one's past live evil *karmas*. Ancient Hindu texts, including the Gita, propagate the same underlying message to justify discrimination on the basis of sex and caste. Buddhism however discards the existence of soul yet its emphasis on the continuity of consciousness however ultimately results in the justification of exclusion and discrimination in society. For instance, a traditional Buddhist scholar Dr Shundi Tachbana opines⁷:

Some people suffer from poverty and physical weakness, or their social status is low. They are placed in theses unhappy conditions—though it is true that poor, weak or lowly conditioned people are not always unhappy - because they have committed sinful actions in their previous existences.

In the Abhidhamma Pitaka, it is mentioned that the effect of past live evil of karma of Gautam Buddha resulted in his birth as a child of a poor fisher woman.⁸ So the caste and class based hierarchies also found to be attested in *Lalitavistar*⁹:

The (Bodhisattva) with his divine eye, perfectly pure and surpassing the human, the Bodhisattva saw sentient beings passing away and being reborn, in good castes and bad castes, good destinies and ill destinies, low and high.

The inhuman and unjust teaching of rebirth doesn't end here it further extended to include birth of as a women, transgender, slave, differently able, sick, and born with deformities, and animal— as a result of one's past live karmas. Not stopping with the birth in a so called miserable life, the *Pravrajyāntarīya-sutra*¹⁰ went further to justify

discards the attempt of western Buddhists and sometime refuse to believe them as Buddhists. See <http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/articles/should-i-believe-in-rebirth/>

⁶ The Four Aryan Truths are also part of Dhammachakkapavattana Sutta, which traditionally hints at rebirth but here it more as metaphor.

⁷ Karma in 'Buddhistic Studies ed. BC Law p.704

⁸ Abhidhamma in Daily Life, Ashin Janakabhivamsa ed. U Ko Lay p.213

⁹ Quoted from Rebirth and Western Buddhist' Martin Willson p.13

¹⁰ Nagarjuna in *Sutra-samuccaya*. Eng. transl: Bhikkhu Pasadika, Linh-Son Publications d' Etudes Bouddhologiques, No.7, p.25. quoted in 'Rebirth and Western Buddhist' Martin Willson p.15

the slavery and discrimination against unprivileged people on the ground of deeds of one's past live karmas:

If, Mahanama, a householder is given to four modes of behavior, he [will have to endure] adverse conditions: he will be born again and again, born either blind, dull-witted, dumb, or as an outcaste, always living in misery, always a victim of abuse. He will become a hermaphrodite or a eunuch, or be born into lifelong slavery. He [may also] become a woman, a dog, a pig, an ass, a camel or a poisonous snake, and [thus] be unable to put the Buddha's teachings into practice.

In India, the Dalits continued to be discriminated and excluded on this ground, so in Tibet until annexation of China, the slavery and sexual abuse of women was sanctified.¹¹ The karmic rebirth also justifies domestic violence. A Thai Buddhist feminist Ouyporn Khuankaew shares her personal experience that how her family accepted the misbehavior and ill treatment of her father towards them on the ground of karmas; she also shares other incidents in Thailand where domestic violence is being sanctioned and justified on similar grounds¹²:

A close friend of mine had a ten-year marriage with a husband who was an alcoholic. With immense suffering, she went to see a monk and ask for spiritual guidance. The monk said to her, "Be patient and keep making more merit (*puñña*) so that one day the accumulated merit will help (to) improve your life." That same monk gave similar advice to her friend whose husband was having an affair with another woman. The monk told her friend, "There is nothing you can do about it. Keep being nice to him. Do not ever challenge his behavior, because you have done bad karma to him in your previous life.

The continuous efforts to impose rebirth thus attacks the foundation of the Buddhism which is otherwise humanist in nature and is based on the foundation of 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. This dogma being illogical, inhuman and unscientific is a biggest stumbling block in the propagation of Buddhism and questions the authenticity of great humanist Mahakarunika and brings the Buddha down below the founders of other religions. However, as the propagator of this concept largely comes from the traditional Buddhist strongholds they failed to realize that this concept is harming the propagation of Buddhism to the new individuals. In India, this concept gave a tool to the academicians to oppose Buddhism and to establish supremacy of Hinduism. For instance, a well know privileged-caste-Muslim historian Irfan Habib charged the Buddha for perpetuating caste system in India¹³. A similar charge on the Buddha was levied by Y Krishan¹⁴ a well acclaimed Hindi author Rahul Sankrityayan who at time became a Buddhist monk and credited for collecting and translating a large volume of Buddhist literature ultimately left Buddhism on same ground.¹⁵ At present a

¹¹ There are many unattested stories available in web describing sexual abuse of Tibetan women by the monks.

¹² Buddhism and Domestic Violence: Using the Four Noble Truths to Deconstruct and Liberate Women's Karma in Rethinking Karma

¹³ See, Essays in Indian History: Towards Marxist Perspective

¹⁴ Y Krishan 'Buddhism and Caste' in 'The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Vol. 9, 1986'.

¹⁵ See, Buddha Darshan, Rahul Sankrityayan

comparatively less able but famous writer Dharmaveer also been frequently criticizing the Buddha.¹⁶

Rebirth thus unnecessarily creates conflict between rationalists and Buddhists and giving rationalists an undue chance to supersede Buddhism, which otherwise qualifies humanists and rationalists in all grounds. This is precise reason that there had been successful attempts by modern Buddhist individual practitioners and propagators not only to question the concept of rebirth but to discard it.

Dr Ambedkar in his book, 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' says that it is incorrect to believe Pāli canon as the original words of the Buddha. He argues this issue on a ground that as the art of writing was not developed at the time of the Buddha. Therefore to preserve dhamma, Bhikkhus had to memorize what they had heard but as the Buddhist canonical literature is as vast as ocean. Therefore to memorize all this was indeed a great feat so there is always possibility of misreporting the teachings of the Buddha. Ambedkar listed five such cases mentioned in the Alagaddupama Sutta, the Mahakammavibhanga Sutta, the Kannakatthala Sutta, the Mahatanhasankhya Sutta and the Jivaka Sutta. Rebirth and Karma being much popular in Brahmanic religion would have led to incorporate the Brahminic (*Hindu*) tenets into the Buddhism. Referring this case PL Narasu, says, 'All these superstitions in Buddhism are the lingering taints of the atmosphere of Brahmanism and Jainism which surrounded Buddhism in its initial stages. No wonder that an overgrowth of these smothered the life out of Indian Buddhism by "Hinduization". A creed based on the belief in the administration of justice in a future life, tends to deteriorate through the play of unworthy motives.¹⁷ Ven. Bhikkhu Buddhadasa stressed further that the adulteration in Buddhism was not merely at the Buddhist period but is still continuing he says¹⁸:

Nowadays, wrong teachings concerning karma are publicized in books and articles by various Indian and Western writers with titles such as "Karma and Rebirth." Although they are presented in the name of Buddhism, they are actually about karma and rebirth as understood in Hinduism. So the right teaching of Buddhism is misrepresented.

In Secular defense of Buddhism, Dough Smith challenges a quotation of Pāli canon (mentioned above) with a following rational argument¹⁹:

If we assume a life lasted on average twenty years, a hundred thousand births takes us to a time some two million years ago. Modern humans (*homo sapiens*) originated some ten thousand prior births ago, on this scale, so at that time the Buddha would have been remembering prehuman ancestors. That's to say, over ten thousand births ago, the bodhisatta (as he would have been at the time) could not have been born into the human realm, since there were no humans. And although the origins of language are foggy, that is probably well before modern languages arose. Yet there is no mention in the suttas that his appearance, food, or clan lifestyle would have diverged radically from the settled towns of 5th c. BCE India. If we take that time period back to the aeons of cosmic contraction and expansion, the problems only ramify. Around 700,000 to a million lifetimes ago we are into the pre-hominid. At this point there is certainly no developed

¹⁶ He is propagating the Buddha as inhuman and anti-Dalits, his articles frequently appears in famous Hindi monthly 'Hans'.

¹⁷ Lakshmi Narasu, Religion of the Modern Buddhist, p.126.

¹⁸ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu: Karma in Buddhism: A Message from Suan Mokkh p.4 in Rethinking Karma

¹⁹ <http://secularbuddhism.org/2013/05/29/a-secular-evaluation-of-rebirth/>

language, and the bodhisatta would have had no name. He could only have been one or another variety of animal, but even so, animals only go back about 600-700 million years. Prior to that it's not clear the bodhisatta could have been reborn on Earth at least that would be the case if we assume that only animals have the consciousness available for kamma and rebirth.

If one argues that the Bodhisatta, may have been born in other planets is not validate as Smith further claims²⁰:

Of course, the Buddha could have been reborn on other planes or planets, but once again there is no mention of vast divergences in body plan, language, culture, or surroundings that would indicate such a rebirth. Indeed, the evidence provided in MN 39 is consistent with a world in which humans always existed in a way much as in the Buddha's own time. If this is evidence for rebirth, it is not very convincing. More convincing would have been some otherwise inexplicable stories about social, linguistic, and morphological change as the Buddha retreated into memories of the distant past.

But the Buddhist intellectuals Dr Ambedkar and Ven. Buddhadasa don't end with criticizing rebirth but they instead explain the rationale behind its meaning and discarded the dogma of continuation of same self human life after death. Dr Ambedkar opined²¹:

The Buddha denied the existence of the soul. But he is also said to have affirmed the doctrine of karma²² and rebirth. At once a question arises. If there is no soul, how can there be karma? If there is no soul, how can there be rebirth? These are baffling questions. In what sense did the Buddha use the words karma and rebirth? Did he use them in a different sense than the sense in which they were used by the Brahmins of his day? If so, in what sense? Did he use them in the same sense in which the Brahmins used them? If so, is there not a terrible contradiction between the denial of the soul and the affirmation of karma and rebirth? This contradiction needs to be resolved.

Ven. Buddhadasa opposed the traditional concept of rebirth and explains it in another scientific and logical way in the following words²³:

Rebirth occurs every time one does a deed, and that rebirth occurs spontaneously at the moment of action. We need not wait for rebirth to happen after death, according to the usual worldly understanding. When one thinks and acts, the mind changes spontaneously through the power of desire (*taṇhā*) and clinging (*upādāna*), which immediately lead to becoming (*bhava*) and birth (*jāti*) in accordance with the law of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). There is no need to wait for physical death in order for rebirth to occur. This truth should be realized as the true teaching of Buddhism, as a core principle of the original, pristine Buddhism that states there is no self (*attā*) to be reborn.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The Buddha and His Dhamma

²² Dr Ambedkar explains dictum of Karma simply as "Reap as you sow" in this very life.

²³ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu: Karma in Buddhism: A Message from Suan Mokkh p.5 in Rethinking Karma

A Theravāda monk, Ven. Bhikkhu Vinita who is though from believer in the traditional form of rebirth however, presents also presents it in a scientific form. He says²⁴:

Truth is, death occurs every moment of our lives. Cells in our bodies live and die and are replaced by newly generated cells. We get reborn every moment. This life continuum, or existence, is like the river that flows seemingly constant, seemingly an entity. But no single drop remains the next day of the watery column that had formed the river the day before. From a Buddhist viewpoint, when that life continuum - that existence - is interrupted, the present manifestation of the stream of kamma-energy is transformed. This event is what we know as death.

This is a noble and logical explanation of rebirth and seems to the correct meaning that the Buddha wanted to use in his Dhamma; however, the only problem in this explanation is that Ven. Buddhadasa did not spoke on the question of what happened after death? Here Dr Ambedkar says that a body is composed of four elements prithvi (earth); apa (water); tej (fire); and vayu (air), when a human body dies these four elements does not dies with the body but they join the mass of similar elements floating in akash (space). When the four elements from this floating mass join together a new birth takes place. Dr Ambedkar further stressed that the elements need not and is not necessarily from the same body which is dead. They may be drawn from different dead bodies. However, one should not draw a conclusion that when these four elements meet in space a human being would suddenly be formed, rather it is and explanation that a life (maybe in form of microorganisms) is the result. Thus Dr Ambedkar says, the Buddha's view is in consonance with science, which affirms energy is never lost; annihilation in the sense that after death nothing is left would be contrary to science for it would mean that energy is not constant in volume. It is only in this sense that the Buddha could be said to have believed in rebirth.

Among the non-believers there are a few western Buddhists for instance Gill Fronsdill²⁵ who discards rebirth as mere metaphor. 'Rebirth and similar concepts are not a part of most westerners' cultures, so many western Buddhists, as well as some eastern Buddhists, take rebirth as a metaphor, rather than literally....The many gods and demons, heavens and hells, that some traditional Buddhists accept as real, are things that strain our credibility. And rebirth strikes many of us as a metaphor rather than a literal reality. Because of these things, to some traditional Buddhists we are just not Buddhists at all. (George Boeree 2002)²⁶

The traditional Buddhists however with some of their western followers for instance Francis Story²⁷ and Stevenson²⁸ tried to present the evidences of rebirths but these stories were very well discarded by various western Buddhist scholars²⁹ and practitioners.

The misconception of rebirth in Buddhism occurs only by the wrong understanding of this term which in original text is not 'rebirth' (*Punarjanma*) but re-becoming (*Punarahava*)³⁰. This is the precise reason that wherever the instances of rebirth (actually re-becoming) appears in the Pāli texts there is complete denial of

²⁴ <http://www.buddhistdoor.com/OldWeb/bdoor/0003e/sources/rebirth.htm>

²⁵ <http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/articles/should-i-believe-in-rebirth/>

²⁶ C George Boeree, An introduction to Buddhism, Dharmafower.net p.

²⁷ <http://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebdha179.htm>

²⁸ <http://www.near-death.com/experiences/reincarnation01.html>

²⁹ <http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/articles/should-i-believe-in-rebirth/>

³⁰ Former Theravāda monk and now Lay Professor CD Naik, insists that 'rebirth' is not a Buddhist term rather it is 're-becoming.'

transmigration of soul or soul like any other element. In fact in Milindapanha, Bhikkhu Nagasena gave examples of mango and lamp to explain re-becoming, where he says that from one flame thousands of lamps could be flamed without transmigration of original flame or from one mango thousands of new mangoes could be grown without transmigration of the original mango. Both these examples are sufficient to show the continuity of race or life rather than rebirth of an individual after her death. It is interesting that if Bhikkhu Nagasena was believer in rebirth, he than instead of giving examples of fruits and lamps could gave examples of his own past lives (the so-called lives before being born as Nagasena, which were later added in the Milindapanha).

The traditional Buddhists however insist that a life is possible only when a *ganddhabba*³¹ is present at the time of copulation of male and female, who while watching the sex if attracts towards male, a female is born or if he attracts towards female, a male is born. However with the development of modern science it is now well established that for a birth of child there is need of presence of only two elements - female egg and male sperm. Development begins with fertilization, the process by which the male gamete, the sperm, and the female gamete, the oocyte, unite to give rise to a zygote³². Further determination of sex of child is also known to be dependent of chromosomes. Not only this there are now not only the development of tube babies possible but also surrogacy has been started, matter does not stops here now even creation of human clones is possible. In none of these mode of birth whether natural or through artificial means presence of *ganddhabba* or *patisandhi* is needed.

Conclusion

The traditional concept of rebirth is thus not only discarded by using simple logical thinking but it is also refuted in the scientific researches. Yet its popularity in common mass and the Buddhists is because of a human weakness of clinging and attachment. We humans are so deeply attached to our dear and near ones that we can't tolerate their departure even by the death³³ therefore to make ourselves connected with the dead, rebirth gives a hope. But this concept instead of providing healing to humans has ultimately become an instrument to justify inequality and injustice. The Buddha rightly said 'attachment brings sorrow'. The belief in continuity of consciousness is also against the Buddha's fundamental teaching – the principle of impermanence. If the rebirth is taken out of Buddhism, it would be easy to propagate Buddhism to new individuals across world and could provide hope and support to all those who are being treated as despised and underprivileged on the grounds of gender, caste, class, race, health etc.

³¹ Thupten Tenzing, Karma and Rebirth in Buddhism, Bulletin of Tibetology p.18

³² T.W. Sadler, Langman's *Medical Embryology* (10th edition, Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2006, p. 11): quoted from <http://liveactionnews.org/life-begins-at-conception-science-teaches/>

³³ It is said that Ms. Rhys David becomes attracted towards Buddhism as she found concept of rebirth in it because she wanted to see her dead son back to his life.