

CHAPTER 22

WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF LIFE?

“Inconceivable is the beginning, O disciples, of this faring on. The earliest point is not revealed of the running on, the faring on, of beings, cloaked in ignorance, tied by craving.”

—Samyutta Nikāya

Rebirth, which Buddhists do not regard as a mere theory but as a fact verifiable by evidence, forms a fundamental tenet of Buddhism, though its goal Nibbāna is attainable in this life itself. The bodhisatta ideal and the correlative doctrine of freedom to attain utter perfection are based on this doctrine of rebirth.

Documents record that this belief in rebirth, viewed as transmigration or reincarnation, was accepted by philosophers like Pythagoras and Plato, poets like Shelly, Tennyson and Wordsworth, and many ordinary people in the East as well as in the West.

The Buddhist doctrine of rebirth should be differentiated from the theory of transmigration and reincarnation of other systems, because Buddhism denies the existence of a transmigrating permanent soul, created by God, or emanating from a *paramātmā* (divine essence).

It is kamma that conditions rebirth. Past kamma conditions the present birth; and present kamma, in combination with past kamma, conditions the future. The present is the offspring of the past, and becomes, in turn, the parent of the future.

The actuality of the present needs no proof as it is self-evident. That of the past is based on memory and report, and that of the future on forethought and inference.

If we postulate a past, a present and a future life, then we are at once faced with the problem “What is the ultimate origin of life?”

One school, in attempting to solve the problem, postulates a first cause, whether as a cosmic force or as an Almighty Being. Another school denies a first cause for, in common experience, the cause ever becomes the effect and the effect becomes the cause. In a circle of cause and effect a first cause³²⁰ is inconceivable. According to the former, life has had a beginning, according to the latter, it is beginningless. In the

320. “There is no reason to suppose that the world had a beginning at all. The idea that things must have a beginning is due to the poverty of our imagination.” Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not a Christian*.

opinion of some the conception of a first cause is as ridiculous as a round triangle.

One might argue that life must have had a beginning in the infinite past and that beginning or the first cause is the creator.

In that case there is no reason why the same demand may not be made of this postulated creator.

With respect to this alleged first cause men have held widely different views. In interpreting this first cause, Paramātma, Brahmā, Isvara, Jehovah, God, the Almighty, Allah, Supreme Being, Father in Heaven, creator, order of Heaven, Prime Mover, Uncaused Cause, Divine Essence, Chance, *Pakati*, *Padhāna* are some significant terms employed by certain religious teachers and philosophers.

Hinduism traces the origin of life to a mystical Paramātma from which emanate all *Ātmas* or souls that transmigrate from existence to existence until they are finally reabsorbed in Paramātma. One might question whether there is any possibility for these reabsorbed *Ātmas* for a further transmigration.

Christianity, admitting the possibility of an ultimate origin, attributes everything to the fiat of an Almighty God. As Schopenhauer says,

“Whoever regards himself as having come out of nothing must also think that he will again become nothing, for that an eternity has passed before he was, and then a second eternity had begun, through which he will never cease to be, is a monstrous thought.

“Moreover, if birth is the absolute beginning, then death must be the absolute end; and the assumption that man is made out of nothing, leads necessarily to the assumption that death is his absolute end.”³²¹

Argues Spencer Lewis:

“According to the theological principles, man is created arbitrarily and without his desire, and at the moment of creation is either blessed or unfortunate, noble or depraved, from the first step in the process of his physical creation to the moment of his last breath, regardless of his individual desires, hopes, ambitions, struggles or devoted prayers. Such is theological fatalism.

“The doctrine that all men are sinners and have the essential sin of Adam is a challenge to justice, mercy, love and omnipotent fairness.”

Huxley says:

“If we are to assume that anybody has designedly set this wonderful universe going, it is perfectly clear to me that he is no more entirely

321. See *The World as Will and Idea*.

benevolent and just, in any intelligible sense of the words, than that he is malevolent and unjust.”

According to Einstein:

“If this being (God) is omnipotent, then every occurrence, including every human action, every human thought, and every human feeling and aspiration is also his work; how is it possible to think of holding men responsible for their deeds and thoughts before such an Almighty Being?”

“In giving out punishments and rewards, he would to a certain extent be passing judgment on himself. How can this be combined with the goodness and righteousness ascribed to him?”

According to Charles Bradlaugh:

“The existence of evil is a terrible stumbling block to the Theist. Pain, misery, crime, poverty confront the advocate of eternal goodness, and challenge with unanswerable potency his declaration of Deity as all-good, all-wise, and all-powerful.”

Commenting on human suffering and God, Prof. J. B. S. Haldane writes:

“Either suffering is needed to perfect human character, or God is not Almighty. The former theory is disproved by the fact that some people who have suffered very little but have been fortunate in their ancestry and education have very fine characters. The objection to the second is that it is only in connection with the universe as a whole that there is any intellectual gap to be filled by the postulation of a deity. And a creator could presumably create whatever he or it wanted.”³²²

In *Despair*, a poem of his old age, Lord Tennyson thus boldly attacks God, who, as recorded in Isaiah, says, “I make peace and create evil.”³²³

“What! I should call on that infinite Love
that has served us so well?
Infinite cruelty, rather, that made everlasting hell.
Made us, foreknew us, foredoomed us,
and does what he will with his own.
Better our dead brute mother
who never has heard us groan.”

Dogmatic writers of old authoritatively declared that God created man after his own image. Some modern thinkers state, on the contrary, that man created God after his own image.³²⁴ With the growth of civilisation man’s conception of God grows more and more refined. There is at

322. See his essay on “A Plea for Atheism,” *Humanity’s Gain from Unbelief*.

323. Isaiah, XXV, 7

present a tendency to substitute this personal God by an impersonal God.

Voltaire states that God is the noblest creation of man.

It is however impossible to conceive of such an omnipotent, omnipresent being, an epitome of everything that is good—either in or outside the universe.

Modern science endeavours to tackle the problem with its limited systematised knowledge. According to the scientific standpoint, we are the direct products of the sperm and ovum cells provided by our parents. But science does not give a satisfactory explanation with regard to the development of the mind, which is infinitely more important than the machinery of man's material body. Scientists, while asserting "*omne vivum ex vivo*" "all life from life" maintain that mind and life evolved from the lifeless.

Now from the scientific standpoint we are absolutely parent-born. Thus our lives are necessarily preceded by those of our parents and so on. In this way life is preceded by life until one goes back to the first protoplasm or colloid. As regards the origin of this first protoplasm or colloid, however, scientists plead ignorance.

What is the attitude of Buddhism with regard to the origin of life?

At the outset it should be stated that the Buddha does not attempt to solve all the ethical and philosophical problems that perplex mankind. Nor does he deal with speculations and theories that tend neither to edification nor to enlightenment. Nor does he demand blind faith from his adherents in a first cause. He is chiefly concerned with one practical and specific problem—that of suffering and its destruction, all side issues are completely ignored.

On one occasion a bhikkhu named Māluṅkyaputta, not content to lead the holy life, and achieve his emancipation by degrees, approached the Buddha and impatiently demanded an immediate solution of some speculative problems with the threat of discarding the robes if no satisfactory answer was given. He said,

"Lord, these theories have not been elucidated, have been set aside and rejected by the Blessed One—whether the world is eternal or not eternal, whether the world is finite or infinite. If the Blessed One will

324. "A strict demonstration of the existence of God is utterly impossible. Almost all the proofs that have been offered assume in the very premises the conclusion to be proved." Rev. W. Kirkus in *Orthodoxy, Scripture, and Reason*, p. 34.

"We have got to recognise that evil falls within a universe for which God is responsible. We cannot absolve God for permitting the existence of sin and pain."—Canon. C. E. Raven, *The Grounds of Christian Assumption*.

elucidate these questions to me, then I will lead the holy life under him. If he will not, then I will abandon the precepts and return to the lay life.

“If the Blessed One knows that the world is eternal, let the Blessed One elucidate to me that the world is eternal; if the Blessed One knows that the world is not eternal, let the Blessed One elucidate that the world is not eternal—in that case, certainly, for one who does not know and lacks the insight, the only upright thing is to say: I do not know, I have not the insight.”

Calmly the Buddha questioned the erring bhikkhu whether his adoption of the holy life was in any way conditional upon the solution of such problems.

“Nay, Lord,” the bhikkhu replied.

The Buddha then admonished him not to waste time and energy over idle speculations detrimental to his moral progress, and said:

“Whoever, Mālunkyaputta, should say, ‘I will not lead the holy life under the Blessed One until the Blessed One elucidates these questions to me’—that person would die before these questions had ever been elucidated by the Accomplished One.

“It is as if a person were pierced by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and relatives were to procure a surgeon, and then he were to say, ‘I will not have this arrow taken out until I know the details of the person by whom I was wounded, nature of the arrow with which I was pierced, etc.’ That person would die before this would ever be known by him.

“In exactly the same way whoever should say, ‘I will not lead the holy life under the Blessed One until he elucidated to me whether the world is eternal or not eternal, whether the world is finite or infinite...’ That person would die before these questions had ever been elucidated by the Accomplished One.

“If it be the belief that the world is eternal, will there be the observance of the holy life? In such a case—No! If it be the belief that the world is not eternal, will there be the observance of the holy life? In that case also—No! But, whether the belief be that the world is eternal or that it is not eternal, there is birth, there is old age, there is death, the extinction of which in this life itself I make known.

“Mālunkyaputta, I have not revealed whether the world is eternal or not eternal, whether the world is finite or infinite. Why have I not revealed these? Because these are not profitable, do not concern the bases of holiness, are not conducive to disenchantment, to passionlessness, to cessation, to tranquillity, to intuitive wisdom, to enlightenment or to Nibbāna. Therefore I have not revealed these.”³²⁵

325. Cūla Mālunkya Sutta (MN 63).

According to Buddhism, we are born from the matrix of action (*kam-mayoni*). Parents merely provide us with a material layer. Therefore being precedes being. At the moment of conception, it is kamma that conditions the initial consciousness that vitalises the foetus. It is this invisible kammic energy, generated from the past birth, that produces mental phenomena and the phenomena of life in an already extant physical phenomena, to complete the trio that constitutes man.

Dealing with the conception of beings, the Buddha states:

“Where three are found in combination, there a germ of life is planted. If mother and father come together, but it is not the mother’s fertile period, and the ‘being-to-be-born’ (*gandhabba*) is not present, then no germ of life is planted. If mother and father come together, and it is the mother’s fertile period, but the ‘being-to-be-born’ is not present then again no germ of life is planted. If mother and father come together and it is the mother’s fertile period, and the ‘being-to-be-born’ is present, then by the conjunction of these three, a germ of life is there planted.”³²⁶

Here *gandhabba* (= *gantabba*) does not mean “a class of devas said to preside over the process of conception”³²⁷ but refers to a suitable being ready to be born in that particular womb. This term is used only in this particular connection, and must not be mistaken for a permanent soul.

For a being to be born here, somewhere a being must die. The birth of a being, which strictly means the arising of the aggregates (*khandhānaṃ pātubhāvo*), or psycho-physical phenomena in this present life, corresponds to the death of a being in a past life; just as, in conventional terms, the rising of the sun in one place means the setting of the sun in another place. This enigmatic statement may be better understood by imagining life as a wave and not as a straight line. Birth and death are only two phases of the same process. Birth precedes death, and death, on the other hand, precedes birth. This constant succession of birth and death connection with each individual life-flux constitutes what is technically known as *saṃsāra*—recurrent wandering.

What is the ultimate origin of life?

The Buddha positively declares:

“Without, cognisable beginning is this *saṃsāra*. The earliest point of beings who, obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving, wander and fare on, is not to be perceived.”³²⁸

326. Mahātaṇhāsamkhaya Sutta (MN 38). Although wick and oil may be present, yet an external fire should be introduced to produce a flame.

327. See F. L Woodward, *Some Sayings of the Buddha*, p. 40.

This life-stream flows *ad infinitum*, as long as it is fed with the muddy waters of ignorance and craving. When these two are completely cut off, then only does the life-stream cease to flow; rebirth ends, as in the case of buddhas and arahants. A first beginning of this life-stream cannot be determined, as a stage cannot be perceived when this life force was not fraught with ignorance and craving.

It should be understood that the Buddha has here referred merely to the beginning of the life stream of living beings. It is left to scientists to speculate on the origin and the evolution of the universe.



328. *Anamataggo' yaṃ bhikkhave saṃsāro, pubbakoṭi na paññāyati avijjānīvaraṇānaṃ sattānaṃ tanhāsamojjanānaṃ sandhāvataṃ.*

"Incalculable is the beginning, brethren, of this faring on. The earliest point is not revealed of the running on, the faring, of beings cloaked in ignorance, tied to craving." F. L. Woodward—*Kindred Sayings*, part iii. p.118.

"Inconceivable is the beginning of this *saṃsāra*, not to be discovered a first beginning of beings, who, obstructed by ignorance and ensnared by craving, are hurrying and hastening through this round of rebirths."—Nyānatiloka Thera.

Saṃsāra, literally, means recurrent wandering. *Atthasālinī* defines *saṃsāra* thus:

*Khandhānaṃ paṭipāti dhātu-āyatanāna ca
Abbhocchinnāṃ vattamānā saṃsāro'ti pavuccati.*

("Saṃsāra is the unbroken succession of aggregates, elements, and the sense-bases.")