

WHAT IS IT THAT IS REBORN? (NO-SOUL)

Neither the same nor yet another.

—*Visuddhimagga*

 part from mind and matter, which constitute this so-called being, Buddhism does not assert the existence of an immortal soul, or an eternal ego, which man has obtained in a mysterious way from an equally mysterious source.

A soul which is eternal must necessarily remain always the same without any change whatever. If the soul which is supposed to be the essence of man is eternal, there could be neither a rise nor a fall. Nor could one explain why “different souls are so variously constituted at the outset.”

To justify the existence of endless felicity in an eternal heaven and unending torment in an eternal hell, it is absolutely necessary to postulate an immortal soul. Bertrand Russell said:

It should be said that the old distinction between soul and body has evaporated, quite as much because ‘matter’ has lost its solidity as because mind has lost its spirituality. Psychology is just beginning to be scientific. In the present state of psychology belief in immortality can at any rate claim no support from science. (*Religion and Science*, p. 132.)

According to Ernst Haeckel, the learned author of the *Riddle of the Universe*:³⁷⁰

This theological proof that a personal creator has breathed an immortal soul (generally regarded as a portion of the Divine Soul) into man is a pure myth. The cosmological proof that the ‘moral order of the world’ demands the eternal duration of the human soul is a baseless dogma. The teleological proof that the ‘higher destiny’ of man involves the perfecting of his defective, earthly soul beyond the grave rests on a false anthropism. The moral proof—that the defects and the unsatisfied desires of earthly existence must be fulfilled by ‘compensative justice’ on the other side of eternity—is nothing more than a pious wish. The *ethnological* proof—that the belief in immortality, like the belief in God, is an innate truth, common to all humanity—is an error in fact. The *ontological* proof—that the soul, being a ‘simple, immaterial, and indi-

370. *Religion and Science* p. 166.

visible entity’ cannot be involved in the corruption of death—is based on an entirely erroneous view of the psychic phenomena; it is a spiritualistic fallacy. All these and similar ‘proofs of athanatism’ are in a perilous condition; they are definitely annulled by the scientific criticism of the last few decades.

If nothing in the form of a spirit or soul passes from this life to the other, what is it that is reborn?

In this question it is taken for granted that there is some thing to be reborn.

A few centuries ago it was argued “*cogito ergo sum*” (“I think, therefore I am”). True, but first it has to be proved that there is an “I” to think.

We say that the sun rises in the East and sets in the West, although we know that actually it is not so. We have to admit that one cannot strike an identical place twice although to all appearance one has done so.

Everything changes so soon. For no two moments are we identically the same.

Buddhists agree with Bertrand Russell when he says:

“There is obviously some reason in which I am the same person as I was yesterday, and, to take an even more obvious example, if I simultaneously see a man and hear him speaking, there is some sense in which the I that sees is the same as the I that hears.”³⁷¹

Until recently scientists believed in an indivisible and indestructible atom. For sufficient reasons physicists have reduced this atom to a series of events; for equally good reasons psychologists find that mind has not the identity of a single continuing thing but is a series of occurrences bound together by certain intimate relations. The question of immortality, therefore, has become the question whether these intimate relations exist between occurrences connected with a living body and other occurrences which take place after that body is dead.³⁷²

As C.E.M. Joad says in *The Meaning of Life*:

“Matter has since disintegrated under our very eyes. It is no longer solid; it is no longer enduring; it is no longer determined by compulsive laws; and more important than all it is no longer known.

The so-called atoms, it seems, are both “divisible and destructible.” The electrons and protons that compose atoms “can meet and annihilate one another,” while their persistence, such as it is, is rather that of a wave lacking fixed boundaries, and in a process of continual change both as regards shape and position, than that of a thing.

371. *Religion and Science*, p. 132.

372. *Riddle of the Universe*, New York, 1901 p. 203-04..

Bishop Berkeley, who showed that this so-called atom was a metaphysical fiction, held that there existed a spiritual substance called a soul.

Hume in his search after a soul declares:

There are some philosophers who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self: that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other—of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception...³⁷³

Bergson says:

All consciousness is time existence; and a conscious state is not a state that endures without changing. It is a change without ceasing; when change ceases, it ceases; it is itself nothing but change.

John B. Watson, a distinguished psychologist, states:

No one has ever touched a soul, or has seen one in a test tube, or has in any way come into relationship with it as he has with the other objects of his daily experience. Nevertheless to doubt its existence is to become a heretic, and once might possibly even had led to the loss of one's head. Even today a man holding a public position dare not question it.³⁷⁴

Dealing with this question of soul, Prof. William James writes:

This soul-theory is a complete superfluity, so far as according for the actually verified facts of conscious experience goes. So far no one can be compelled to subscribe to it for definite scientific reasons.

This me is an empirical aggregate of things objectively known. The I which knows them cannot itself be an aggregate, neither for psychological purpose need it be considered to be an unchanging metaphysical entity like the soul, or a principle like the pure Ego viewed as out of time. It is a thought, at each moment different from that of the last moment, but appropriative of the latter, together with all that the latter calls its own. All the experimental facts find their place in this description, unencumbered with any hypothesis save that of the existence of passing thoughts or states of mind.³⁷⁵

373. William James, *Principles of Psychology*, p. 351.

374. Watson, *Behaviourism*, p. 4.

375. *Principles of Psychology*, p. 215.

He concludes his interesting chapter on the soul with the words: “And in this book the provisional solution which we have reached must be the final word: *The thoughts themselves are the thinkers.*”

And this is an echo of the very words of the Buddha from 2500 years ago in the valley of the Ganges.

Buddhism, teaching a psychology without a psyche, resolves the living being into mind and matter (*nāma-rūpa*) which are in a state of constant flux.

In the ancient days the Indian sages too believed in an indivisible atom which they called *paramānu*. According to the ancient belief thirty-six *paramāṇus* constitute one *anu*; thirty-six *anu*, one *tajjāri*; thirty-six *tajjāris*, one *rathareṇu*. The minute particles of dust seen dancing in the sunbeam are called *rathareṇus*. One *paramānu* is, therefore, 1/46,656th part of a *rathareṇu*. With his supernormal vision the Buddha analysed the *paramānu* and declared that the *paramānu* consists of interrelated forces known as *parāmatṭhas* or essentials of matter. These *parāmatṭhas* are *paṭhavī*, *āpo*, *tejo*, and *vāyo*.

Paṭhavī means the element of extension, the substratum of matter. Without it objects cannot occupy space. The qualities of hardness and softness which are relative are two conditions of this same element.

Āpo is the element of cohesion. Unlike *paṭhavī* it is intangible. It is this element which makes the scattered atoms of matter cohere and gives us the idea of body. When solid bodies are melted, this element becomes more prominent in the resulting fluid. This element is found even in minute particles when solid bodies are reduced to powder. The element of extension and cohesion are so closely interrelated that when cohesion ceases extension disappears.

Tejo is the element of heat. Cold is also a form of *tejo*. Both heat and cold are included in *tejo* because they possess the power of maturing bodies or, in other words, it is the vitalising energy. Preservation and decay are due to this element. Unlike the other three essentials of matter this element, also called *utu*, has the power to regenerate by itself.

Vāyo is the element of motion. Movements are caused by this element. Motion is regarded as the force or the generator of heat.

“Motion and heat in the material realm correspond respectively to consciousness and kamma in the mental.”

These four are the fundamental units of matter and are invariably combined with the four derivatives—namely, colour (*vaṇṇa*), odour (*gandha*), taste (*rasa*), and nutritive essence (*ojā*).

The four elements and the derivatives are inseparable and interrelated, but one element may preponderate over another, as for instance,

the element of extension preponderates in earth; cohesion, in water; heat, in fire; and motion, in air.

Thus, matter consists of forces and qualities which are in a state of constant flux. According to Buddhism matter endures only for seventeen thought-moments.³⁷⁶

Mind, the more important part in the complex machinery of man, consists of fifty-two mental states. Feeling or sensation (*vedanā*) is one; perception (*saññā*) is another. The remaining fifty are collectively called volitional activities (*saṅkhārā*), a rendering which does not exactly convey the meaning of the Pali term. Of them volition or *cetanā* is the most important factor. All these psychic states arise in a consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

According to Buddhist philosophy there is no moment when one does not experience a particular kind of consciousness, hanging on to some object whether physical or mental. The time limit of such a consciousness is termed one thought-moment. Each thought-moment is followed by another. Thus the succession of mental states contains a time element. The rapidity of the succession of such thought-moments is hardly conceivable.

Each unit of consciousness consists of three instants (*khaṇa*). They are arising or genesis (*uppāda*), static or development (*ṭhiti*) and cessation or dissolution (*bhaṅga*).

Immediately after the cessation stage of a thought-moment, there occurs the genesis stage of the subsequent thought-moment. Each momentary consciousness of this ever-changing life process, on passing away, transmits its whole energy, all the indelibly recorded impressions, to its successor. Every fresh consciousness consists of the potentialities of its predecessors together with something more. There is therefore a continuous flow of consciousness like a stream without any interruption. The subsequent thought-moment is neither absolutely the same as its predecessor since its composition is not identical—nor entirely different—being the same stream of life. There is no identical being, but there is an identity in process.

It must not be understood that consciousness is in bits joined together like a train or a chain. On the contrary, “it constantly flows on like a river receiving from the tributary streams of sense constant accretions to its flood, and ever dispensing to the world around it the thought-stuff it has gathered by the way.”³⁷⁷ It has birth for its source and death for its mouth.

376. It pleases the commentators to say that the time duration one thought-moment is even less than the one millionth part of the time occupied by a flash of lightning.

Here occurs a juxtaposition of fleeting states of consciousness but not a superposition of such states, as some appear to believe. No state once gone ever recurs—none absolutely identical with what goes before. These states constantly change, not remaining the same for two consecutive moments. Worldlings, enmeshed in the web of illusion, mistake this apparent continuity to be something eternal and go to the extent of introducing an unchanging soul (the supposed doer and observer of all actions) into this ever-changing consciousness.

The four kinds of psychic phenomena, combined with the physical phenomena, form the five aggregates (*pañcakkhandā*), the complex-compound termed a living being.

One’s individuality is the combination of these five aggregates.

We see a vast expanse of water in the sea, but the water of the ocean consists of countless drops. An infinite number of particles of sand constitutes the sea-beach, but it appears as one long sheet. Waves arise and dash against the shore, but, strictly speaking, no single wave comes from the deep blue sea to lose its identity on the shore. In the cinematograph we see a moving scene, but to represent that motion a series of momentary pictures must appear on the screen.

One cannot say that the perfume of a flower depends on the petal or on the pistil or on the colour, for the perfume is in the flower.

In the same way one’s individuality is the combination of all the five aggregates.

The whole process of these psycho-physical phenomena which are constantly becoming and passing away, is at times called, in conventional terms, the self or *atta* by the Buddha; but it is a process, and not an identity that is thus termed.

Buddhism does not totally deny the existence of a personality in an empirical sense. It denies, in an ultimate sense (*parāmañña saccena*), an identical being or a permanent entity, but it does not deny a continuity in process. The Buddhist philosophical term for an individual is *santati*, that is, a flux or continuity. This uninterrupted flux or continuity of psycho-physical phenomena, conditioned by kamma, having no perceptible source in the beginningless past nor any end to its continuation in the future, except by the Noble Eightfold Path, is the Buddhist substitute for the permanent ego or eternal soul in other religious systems.

How is rebirth possible without a soul to be reborn?

Birth, according to Buddhism, is the arising of the *khandhas*, the aggregates or groups (*khandhānaṃ pātubhāvo*).

377. Compendium of Philosophy—, S.Z. Aung & C.A.F. Rhys Davids, London 1910, p. xii.

Just as the arising of a physical state is conditioned by a preceding state as its cause, so the appearance of these psycho-physical phenomena is conditioned by causes anterior to its birth. The present process of becoming is the result of the craving for becoming in the previous birth, and the present instinctive craving conditions life in a future birth.

As the process of one life span is possible without a permanent entity passing from one thought-moment to another, so a series of life-processes is possible without anything to transmigrate from one existence to another.

The Buddhist doctrine of rebirth should be differentiated from the theory of reincarnation which implies the transmigration of a soul and its invariable material rebirth.

In the *Milindapañhā* and *Visuddhimagga* the Venerable Nāgasena and Buddhaghosa have employed several similes to illustrate the truth that nothing transmigrates from one life to another.

The simile of the flame is very striking. Life is compared to a flame. Rebirth is the transmitting of this flame from one group to another. The flame of life is continuous although there is an apparent break at so-called death.

King Milinda questions:

“Venerable Nāgasena, does rebirth take place without anything transmigrating?”

“Yes, O King. Rebirth takes place without anything transmigrating.”

“Give me an illustration, Venerable Sir.”

“Suppose, O King, a man were to light a light from light, pray, would the one light have passed over to the other light?”

“Nay, indeed, Venerable Sir.”

“In exactly the same way, O King, does rebirth take place without anything transmigrating.”

“Give me another illustration.”

“Do you remember, O King, having learnt, when you were a boy, some verse or other from your teacher of poetry?”

“Yes, Venerable Sir.”

“Pray, O King, did the verse pass over to you from your teacher?”

“Nay, indeed, Venerable Sir.”

“In exactly the same way, O King, does rebirth take place without anything transmigrating.”

Again King Milinda questions:

“Venerable Nāgasena, what is it that is born into the next existence?”

“O King, it is mind and body that is born into the next existence.”

“It is this same mind and body that is born into the next existence?”

“O King, it is not this same mind and body that is born into the next existence, but with this mind and body, O King, one does a deed—it may be good, or it may be evil—and by reason of this deed another mind and body is born into the next existence.”

“Venerable Sir, if it is not this mind and body that is born into the next existence, is one not freed from one’s evil deeds?”

“If one were not born into another existence, one would be freed from one’s evil deeds but, O King, inasmuch as one is born into another existence, therefore is one not freed from one’s evil deeds.”

“Give me an illustration.”

“O King, it is as if a man were to take away another man’s mangoes, and the owner of the mangoes were to seize him, and show him to the king and say —‘Sire, this man hath taken away my mangoes’; and the other were to say, ‘Sire, I did not take away his mangoes. The mangoes which this man planted were different from those which I took away. I am not liable to punishment.’ Pray, O King, would the man be liable to punishment?”

“Assuredly, Venerable, Sir, he would be liable to punishment.”

“For what reason?”

“Because, in spite of what he might say, he would be liable to punishment for the reason that the last mangoes were derived from the first mangoes.”

“In exactly, the same way, O King, with this mind and body one does a deed—it may be good, or it may be bad —and by reason of this deed another mind and body is born into the next existence. Therefore is one not freed from one’s evil deeds.”³⁷⁸

The Venerable Buddhaghosa elucidates this intricate point by citing the similes of echo, light, impression of a seal, and reflection in a mirror.

A modern writer illustrates this process by a series of billiard balls in close contact.

If, for instance, another ball is rolled against a stationary ball, the moving ball will stop dead, and the formerly stationary ball will move on. The first moving ball does not pass over, it remains behind, it dies; but it is undeniably the movement of that ball, its momentum, its kamma, and not any newly created movement, which is reborn in the second ball.³⁷⁹

In like manner—to use conventional terms—the body dies and its kammic force is reborn in another without anything transmigrating from this life to the other. The last thought-moment of this life perishes conditioning another thought-moment in a subsequent life. The new

378. See Warren, *Buddhism in Translation*, pp. 234, 235.

379. Dr. Ānanda Coomarasvami, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*. p. 106.

being is neither absolutely the same—since it has changed—nor totally different, being the same stream of kamma energy. There is merely a continuity of a particular life-flux; just that and nothing more.

