

ANOTHER KIND OF BIRTH

by

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*"All creations and destruction
are but momentary shadow
of phenomena"*

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- * Birth is perpetual suffering.
True happiness consists in eliminating the false idea of “I”.
- * Mankind’s problems reduce to the problem of suffering, whether inflicted by another or by oneself.
- * Everyday language—Dharma language :
In everyday language the term *birth* refers simply to physical birth from a mother’s body; in Dharma language *birth* refers to a mental event arising out of ignorance, craving, and clinging.
- * Whenever there arises the mistaken idea “I”, the “I” has been *born*; its parents are ignorance and craving.
- * The kind of birth that constitutes a problem for us is *mental* birth.
- * Anyone who fails to grasp this point will never succeed in understanding anything of the Buddha’s teaching.

The subject we shall discuss today is one which I feel everyone ought to recognize as pressing, namely the following two statements made by the Buddha :

“Birth is perpetual suffering.” (*Dukkhā jāti punaṣṣunam*) and

“True happiness consists in eliminating the false idea of ‘I’.” (*Asmimānassa vinayo etaṃ ve paramasukham.*)

Mankind’s problems reduce to the problem of suffering, whether inflicted by another or by oneself by way of mental defilements (*kilesa*). This is the primary problem for every human being, because no-one wants suffering. In the above statements the Buddha equates suffering with birth: “Birth is perpetual suffering”; and he equates happiness with the complete giving up of the false idea “I”, “myself”, “I am”, “I exist”.

The statement that birth is the cause of suffering is complex, having several levels of meaning. The main difficulty lies in the interpretation of the word “birth”. Most of us don’t understand what the word “birth” refers to and are likely to take it in the everyday sense of physical birth from a mother’s body. The Buddha taught that birth is perpetual suffering. Is it likely that in saying this he was referring to physical birth? Think it over. If he *was* referring to physical birth, it is unlikely that he would have gone on to say “True happiness consists in eliminating the false idea ‘I’” because this statement clearly indicates

that what constitutes the suffering is the false idea "I". when the idea "I" has been completely eradicated, that is true happiness. So suffering actually consists in the misconception "I", "I am", "I have". The Buddha taught: "Birth is perpetual suffering." What is meant here by the word "birth"? Clearly "birth" refers to nothing other than the arising of the idea "I" (*asmimāna*).

The word "birth" refers to the arising of the mistaken idea "I", "myself". It does *not* refer to physical birth, as generally supposed. *The mistaken assumption that this word "birth" refers to physical birth is a major obstacle to comprehending the Buddha's teaching.*

It has to be borne in mind that in general a word can have several different meanings according to the context. Two principal cases can be recognized: (1) language referring to physical things, which is spoken by the average person; and (2) language referring to mental things, psychological language, Dharma language, which is spoken by people who know Dharma (higher Truth, Buddha's teaching). The first type may be called "every-day language", the language spoken by the average person; the second may be called "Dharma language", the language spoken by a person who knows Dharma.

The ordinary person speaks as he has learnt to speak, and when he uses the word "birth" he means physical birth, birth from a mother's body; however in Dharma language, the language used by a person who knows

Dharma, “birth” refers to the arising of the idea “I am”. If at some moment there arises in the mind the false idea “I am”, then at that moment the “I” has been *born*. When this false idea ceases, there is no longer any “I”, the “I” has momentarily ceased to exist. When the “I” idea again arises in the mind, the “I” has been *reborn*. This is the meaning of the word “birth” in Dharma language. It refers not to physical birth from a mother of flesh and blood but to mental birth from a mental “mother”, namely craving, ignorance, clinging (*taṇhā, aviḥḥā, upādāna*). One could think of craving as the mother and ignorance as the father; in any case the result is the birth of “I”, the arising of the false idea “I”. The father and mother of the “I” - delusion are ignorance and craving or clinging. Ignorance, delusion, misunderstanding, give birth to the idea “I”, “me”. And it is *this* kind of birth that is perpetual suffering. Physical birth is no problem; once born from his mother; a person need have nothing more to do with birth. Birth from a mother takes only a few minutes; and no-one ever has to undergo the experience more than once.

Now we hear talk of rebirth, birth again and again, and of the suffering that inevitably goes with it. Just what is this rebirth? What is it that is reborn? The birth referred to is a mental event, something taking place in the mind, the non-physical side of our make-up. This is “birth” in Dharma language. “Birth” in everyday language is birth from a mother; “birth” in Dharma language is birth from

iṣauronce, craving, clinging, the arising of the false notion of “I” and “mine” These are the two meanings of the word “birth”.

This is an important matter, which simply *must* be understood. Anyone who fails to grasp this point will never succeed in understanding anything of the Buddha’s teaching. So do take a special interest in it. There are these two kinds of language, these two levels of meaning: everyday language, referring to physical things, and Dharma language, referring to mental things, and used by people who *know*. To clarify this point here are some examples.

Consider the word “path”. Usually when we use the word “path” we are referring to a road or way along which vehicles, men, and animals can move. But the word “path” may also refer to the Noble Eightfold Path, the way of practice taught by the Buddha – Right understanding, right thoughts, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration – which leads to nirvāṇa. In everyday language “path” refers to a physical road; in Dharma language it refers to the eightfold way of right practice known as the Noble Eightfold Path. These are the two meanings of the word “path”.

Similarly with the word “nirvāṇa” (*nibbāna*). In everyday language this word refers to the cooling of a hot object. For example, when hot coals become cool, they are said [in Pāli or Sanskrit] to have “nirvāṇa’d”; when hot food in a pot or on a plate becomes cool it has “nirvāṇa’d”. This is everyday language. In Dharma language “nirvāṇa”

refers to the kind of coolness that results from eliminating mental defilements. At any time when there is freedom from mental defilements, at that time there is coolness, momentary nirvāṇa. So “nirvāṇa” or “coolness” has two meanings, according as the speaker is using everyday language or Dharma language.

Another important word is “emptiness” (*sūnyatā*, *suññatā*). In everyday language, the language of physical things, “emptiness” means total absence of any object; in Dharma language it means absence of the idea “I”, “mine”. When the mind is not grasping or clinging to anything whatsoever as “I” or “mine”, it is in a state of “emptiness”. The word “empty” has these two levels of meaning, one referring to physical things, the other referring to mental things, one in everyday language, the other in Dharma language. Physical emptiness is absence of any object, vacuum. Mental emptiness is the state in which all the objects of the physical world are present as usual, but none of them is being grasped at or clung to as “mine”. Such a mind is said to be “empty”. When the mind has come to see things as not worth wanting, not worth being, not worth grasping at and clinging to, it is then empty of wanting, being, grasping, clinging. The mind is then an empty or void mind (จิตว่าง), but not in the sense of being void of content. All objects are there as usual and the thinking processes are going on as usual, but they are not going the way of grasping and clinging with the idea of “I” and “mine”. The mind is devoid of grasping and clinging

and so is called an empty or void mind. It is stated in the texts: "A mind is said to be empty when it is empty of desire, aversion, and delusion (*rāga, dosa, moha*)."

The world is also described as empty, because it is empty of anything that might be identified as "I" or "mine". It is in this sense that the world is spoken of as empty. "Empty" in Dharma language does not mean physically empty, devoid of content.

You can see the confusion and misunderstanding that can arise if these words are taken in their usual everyday sense. Unless we understand Dharma language, we can never understand Dharma; and the most important piece of Dharma language to understand is the term "birth".

The kind of birth that constitutes a problem for us is mental birth, the birth or arising of the false notion "I". Once the idea "I" has arisen, there inevitably follows the idea "I am such-and-such". For example, "I am a man", "I am a living creature", "I am a good man", "I am not a good man", or something else of the sort. And once the idea "I am such-and-such" has arisen, there follows the idea of comparison: "I am better than So-and-so, "I am not as good as So-and-so", "I am equal to So-and-so". All these ideas are of a type; they are all part of the false notion "I am," "I exist". It is to this that the term "birth" refers. So in a single day we may be born many times, many dozens of times. Even in a single hour we may experience many, many births. Whenever there arises the idea "I" and the idea "I am such-and-such", that is a birth.

When no such idea arises, there is no birth, and this freedom from birth is a state of coolness. So this is a principle to be recognized: whenever there arises the idea “I”, “mine”, at that time the cycle of saṃsāra has come into existence in the mind, and there is suffering, burning, spinning on; and whenever there is freedom from defects of these kinds, there is nirvāṇa, nirvāṇa of the type referred to as *tadanga-nibbāna* or *vikkhambhana-nibbāna*.

Tadanga-nibbāna is mentioned in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. It is a state that comes about momentarily when external conditions happen, fortuitously, to be such that no idea of “I” or “mine” arises. *Tadanga-nibbāna* is momentary cessation of the idea “I”, “mine”, due to favourable external circumstances. At a higher level than this, if we engage in some form of Dharma practice, in particular if we develop concentration, so that the idea of “I”, “mine” cannot arise, that extinction of “I”, “mine” is called *vikkhambhana-nibbāna*. And finally, when we succeed in bringing about the complete elimination of all defilements, that is full nirvāṇa, total nirvāṇa.

Now we shall limit our discussion to the everyday life of the ordinary person. It must be understood that at any time when there exists the idea “I”, “mine”, at that time there exists birth, suffering, the cycle of saṃsāra. The “I” is born, endures for a moment, then ceases, is born again, endures for a moment, and again ceases—which is why the process is referred to as the *cycle* of saṃsāra. It

is suffering because of the birth of the “I”. If at any moment conditions happen to be favourable, so that the “I”-idea does not arise, then there is peace — what is called *tadanga-nibbāna*, momentary nirvāṇa, a taste of nirvāṇa, a sample of nirvāṇa, peace, coolness.

The meaning of “nirvāṇa” becomes clearer when we consider how the word is used in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. In that text we find that hot objects that have become cool are said to have “nirvāṇa’d”. Animals that have been tamed, rendered docile and harmless are said to have “nirvāṇa’d”. How can a human being become “cool” ? This question is complicated by the fact that man’s present knowledge and understanding of life has not been suddenly acquired but has evolved gradually over a long period.

Well before the time of the Buddha people considered that nirvāṇa lay in sensual delight, because a person who gets precisely whatever sensual pleasure he wishes does experience a certain kind of coolness. Having a shower on a hot day brings a kind of coolness; and going into a quiet place brings another kind, in the form of contentment, freedom from disturbance. So to begin with, people were interested in the kind of nirvāṇa that consisted in an abundance of sensual pleasure. Later, wiser men came to realize that this was not good enough. They saw that sensual pleasure was largely a deception (*māyā*), so sought their coolness in the mental tranquillity of concentration (*jhāna*). The *jhānas* are states of genuine mental coolness and this

was the kind of nirvāṇa people were concerned with in the period immediately before the Buddha's enlightenment. Gurus were teaching that nirvāṇa was identical with the most refined state of mental concentration. The Buddha's last guru, Udakatāpasa Rāmaputra, taught him that to attain the "*jhāna* of neither perception nor non-perception (*n' eva saññā n' āsaññāyatana*)" was to attain complete cessation of suffering. But the Buddha did not accept this teaching; he did not consider this to be genuine nirvāṇa. He went off and delved into the matter on his own account until he realized the nirvāṇa that is the total elimination of every kind of craving and clinging. As he himself later taught: "True happiness consists in eradicating the false idea 'I'". When defilements have been totally eliminated, that is nirvāṇa. If the defilements are only momentarily absent, it is momentary nirvāṇa. Hence the teaching of *tadanga-nibbāna* and *vikkhanbhananibbāna* already discussed. These terms refer to a condition of freedom from defilements.

Now if we examine ourselves we discover that we are not dominated by defilements *all* the time. There are moments when we are free from defilements; if this were not the case we should soon be driven mad by defilements and die, and there would not be many people left in the world. It is thanks to these brief periods of freedom from distress-causing defilements that we don't all suffer from nervous disorders and go insane or die. Let us give Nature due credit for this and be thankful she made us in such a way

that we get a sufficient period of respite from defilements each day. There is the time we are asleep, and there are times when the mind is clear, cool, at ease. A person who can manage to do as Nature intended can avoid nervous and psychological disorders; one who cannot is bound to have more and more nervous disorders until he becomes mentally ill or even dies. Let us be thankful for momentary nirvāṇa, the transient type of nirvāṇa that comes when conditions are favourable. For a brief moment there is freedom from craving, conceit, and false views, in particular, freedom from the idea of “I” and “mine”. The mind is empty, free, just long enough to have a rest or to sleep, and so it remains healthy.

In days gone by this condition was more common than it is now. Modern man, with his ever-changing knowledge and behaviour, is more subject to disturbance from defilements than man in past ages. Consequently modern man is more prone to nervous and psychological illnesses— which is a disgrace. The more scientific knowledge he has the more prone he is to insanity! The number of psychiatric patients is increasing so rapidly the hospitals can't cope. There is one simple cause for this: people don't know how to relax mentally. They are too ambitious. They have been taught to be ambitious since they were small children. They acquire nervous complaints right in childhood and by the time they have completed their studies they are already mentally disturbed people. This comes from taking no

interest in the Buddha's teaching that the birth of the idea of "I" and "mine" is the height of suffering.

Now let us go further into the matter of "birth". No matter what type of existence one is born into, it is nothing but suffering, because the word "birth" refers here to attachment *unaccompanied by awareness*. This is an important point which must be well understood: if there arises in a person's mind the idea "I am such-and-such" and he is *aware* that this idea has arisen, that arising is *not* a birth [as that term is used in Dharma language]. If on the other hand he deludedly identifies with the idea, that *is* birth. Hence the Buddha advised continual mindfulness. If we know what we are, know what we have to do, and do it with awareness, there is no suffering, because there is no birth of "I" or "mine". Whenever delusion, carelessness, and forgetfulness come in, there arise desire and attachment to the false idea "I", "mine", "I am So-and-so", "I am such-and-such",, and this is birth.

Birth is suffering: and the kind of suffering depends on the kind of birth. Birth as a mother brings the suffering of a mother, birth as a father brings the suffering of a father. If, for example, there arises in a person the illusory idea of being a mother and therefore of wanting this, that, and the other thing—that is the suffering of a mother. It is the same for a father. If he identifies with the idea of being a father, wanting this and that. grasping and clinging—that is the suffering of a father. But if a person has awareness, there is no such confusion and distortion; he simply knows

in full clarity what he has to do as a father or as a mother and does it with a steady mind, not clinging to the idea “I am this”, “I am that”. In this way he is free from suffering; and in this condition he is fit to rear his children properly and to their best advantage. Birth as a mother brings the suffering of a mother; birth as a father brings the suffering of a father; birth as a millionaire brings the suffering of a millionaire; birth as a beggar brings the suffering of a beggar. What is meant here can be illustrated by the following contrast.

Suppose first a millionaire, dominated by delusion, desire, attachment, grasping at the idea “I am a millionaire”. This idea is in itself suffering; and whatever that man says or does is said and done under the influence of those defilements and so becomes further suffering. Even after he has gone to bed he dwells on the idea of being a millionaire and so is unable to sleep. So birth as a millionaire brings the suffering of a millionaire. Then suppose a beggar, dwelling on his misfortunes, his poverty, his sufferings and difficulties — this is the suffering of a beggar. Now if at any moment either of these two men were to be free of these ideas, in that moment he would be free from suffering; the millionaire would be free from the suffering of a millionaire, the beggar would be free from the suffering of a beggar. Thus it is that one sometimes sees a beggar singing happily, because at that time he is not being born as a beggar, is not identifying himself as a beggar or as in any sort of difficulty. For one moment he has forgotten it,

has ceased being born a beggar and instead has been born a singer, a musician. Suppose a poor ferryman. If he clings to the idea of being poor, and rows his ferryboat with a sense of weariness and self-pity, then he suffers, just as if he had fallen straight into hell. But if instead of dwelling on such ideas, he reflects that he is doing what he has to do, that work is the lot of human beings, and does his work with awareness and steadiness of mind, he will find himself singing as he rows his ferryboat.

So do look closely, carefully, and clearly into this question: what is it that is being referred to as *birth*? If at any moment a millionaire is “born” as a millionaire, in that moment he experiences the suffering of a millionaire; if a beggar is born as a beggar, he experiences the suffering of a beggar. If, however, a person does not identify in this way, he is not “born” and so is free from suffering — whether he is a millionaire, a beggar, a ferryman, or whatever. At the present day we take no interest in this matter. We let ourselves be dominated by delusion, craving, attachment. We experience birth as this, that, or the other, I don’t know how many times each day. Every kind of birth without exception is suffering, as the Buddha said. The only way to be free from this suffering is to be free from birth. So one has to take good care, always keeping the mind in a state of awareness and insight, never disturbed and confused by “I” and “mine”. One will then be free from suffering. Whether one is a farmer, a merchant, a soldier, a public servant,

or anything else, even a god in heaven, one will be free from suffering.

As soon as there is the idea "I" there is suffering. Grasp this important principle and you are in a position to understand the essential core of Buddhism, and to derive benefit from Buddhism, taking full advantage of having been born a human being and encountered Buddhism. If you don't grasp it, then though you are a Buddhist you will derive no benefit from it; you will be a Buddhist only nominally, only according to the records; you will have to sit and weep like all those other people who are not Buddhists; you will continue to experience suffering like a non-Buddhist. To be genuine Buddhists we have to practise the genuine teaching of the Buddha, in particular the injunction: *Don't identify as "I" or "mine"; act with clear awareness and there will be no suffering.* You will then be able to do your work well, and that work will be a pleasure. When the mind is involved in "I" and "mine", all work becomes suffering; one doesn't feel like doing it; light work becomes heavy work, burdensome in every way. But if the mind is not grasping and clinging to the idea "I", "mine", if it is aware, all work, even heavy or dirty work, is enjoyable.

This is a profound, hidden truth that has to be understood. The essence of it lies in the single word "birth". Birth is suffering; once we can give up being "born", we become free from suffering. If a person experiences dozens of births in a day he has to suffer dozens of times a day; if he does not experience birth at all, he has no suffering at all.

So the direct practice of Dharma, the kernel of the Buddha's teaching, consists in keeping close watch on the mind, so that it does not give rise to the condition called the cycle of saṃsāra, so that it is always in the state called nirvāṇa. One has to be watchful, guarding the mind at all times so that the state of coolness is constantly there, and leaving no opportunity for the arising of saṃsāra. The mind will then become accustomed to the state of nirvāṇa day and night and that state may become permanent and complete. We already have momentary nirvāṇa, the type of nirvāṇa that comes when circumstances are right, the nirvāṇa that is a sample, a foretaste. Preserve it carefully. Leave no opening for saṃsāra, for the idea "I", "mine". Don't, let the "I" -idea come to birth. Keep watch, be aware, develop full insight. Whatever you do, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, do it with awareness. Don't become involved in "I" and "mine". Then saṃsāra will not be able to arise; the mind will remain in nirvāṇa until it has become fully accustomed to it and unable to relapse — and that is full or complete nirvāṇa.

Since childhood we have lived in a way favourable to the birth of "I" and "mine", and have become used to the cycle of saṃsāra. This habit is hard to break. It has become part of our makeup, and so is sometimes called a fetter (*saṃyojana*) or a latent disposition (*anusaya*), something that is bound up in our character. These terms refer to the habit of giving birth to "I", "mine", of producing the sense of "I", "mine". In one form it is called greed

(*lobha*); in another form it is called anger (*krodha*); in another form it is called delusion (*moha*). Whatever form it takes it is simply the idea “I” “mine”, self-centredness. When the “I” wants to get something, there is greed; when it doesn’t get that something, there is anger; when it hesitates and doesn’t know what it wants, there is confusion, involvement in hopes and possibilities. Greed, anger, and delusion of whatever kind are simply forms of the “I”-idea, and when they are present in the mind, that is everlasting *saṃsāra*, total absence of *nirvāṇa*. A person in this condition does not live long. But Nature helps. As we saw in the beginning, through natural weariness the process sometimes stops of itself, there is sleep or some other form of respite, and one’s condition improves, becomes tolerable, and death is averted.

The various enlightened beings that have appeared in the world have discovered that it is possible to prolong these periods of *nirvāṇa*, and have taught the most direct way of practice to this end, namely the Noble Eightfold Path. This is a way of practice intended to prolong the periods of coolness, or *nirvāṇa*, and to reduce the periods of suffering, or *saṃsāra*, by preventing as far as possible the birth of “I” and “mine”. It’s so simple it’s hard to believe—like the Buddha’s statement: “If monks will practise right living, the world will not be empty of *arhats* (enlightened beings).” (*Sace me bhikkhū sammā vihareyyum asuñño loko arahantehi assa.*) One finds it hard to believe. But if one examines it, one must believe it.

In the simple statement “If monks will practise right living, the world will not be empty of arhats” the expression “right living” has an important and profound meaning. Right living implies absence of the idea of “I”, “mine”. We are living day after day, but we are not living rightly, so the idea of “I” and “mine” is born. It pops up numerous times every day, so there is no chance for full nirvāna to come in and we don’t become arhats. Right living means living in accordance with the Noble Eightfold Path: right understanding, right thoughts, right speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and right concentration. If we have these eight kinds of perfection, we are practising right living. And if we live rightly in this way, the mental defilements cannot arise, “I” and “mine” cannot be born; they wither away, like an animal deprived of nourishment. Right living deprives the “I” and the “mine” of nourishment, and so prevents them from taking birth. In time they lose their strength and the day finally comes when they dry up completely and disappear for good –and that is what is called attaining the Fruit of the Path, total nirvāna.

The important thing is continuous right understanding and right action, so that the “I” and the “mine” cannot arise, so that there is no birth. When there is no birth of any kind, there is no suffering of any kind, and that is true happiness, as the Buddha said. Once one has examined this matter and come to realize that birth is *always* suffering, every time, one takes good care to avoid birth. It is easy to understand that the birth referred to is something mental,

something in the mind, but it is very difficult to master this birth. In a single day or even in a single hour one may experience this kind of birth many times, many dozens of times. Be careful about this problem of birth; it is a problem that faces us here and now. If we can master this kind of birth here and now we will also be able to master the birth that comes after physical death. So let's not concern ourselves with the birth that follows physical death; instead let us concern ourselves seriously with the birth that happens *before* physical death, the kind of birth that goes on while we are alive, which happens dozens of times every day; let us learn to master it and the problem will be eliminated. If birth can be eliminated here and now, in this life, that will be the end of birth for good and all.

Everyone concerns himself with the trivial question in what form he will be reborn after death, wondering into which of the eight realms of existence he will be reborn: as a hell-being, an animal, a *preta* (hungry ghost), an *asura* (frightened ghost), a human being, a god of the sensuous heaven (*kāmāvacara*), an embodied brahma, or a bodiless brahma. Each of these possible forms of rebirth falls under either of the two headings Sugati and Duggati, depending on the nature of the corresponding feelings. Those states that are desirable or satisfying are called Sugati; those that are the opposite are called Duggati. But this is not the doctrine the Buddha taught. He taught: *if there is birth there is nothing but perpetual suffering*; and this is so regardless of the realm into which one is born, because "birth" refers

to grasping and clinging, as already discussed. No matter what one is born as, it is suffering. The form of the suffering may vary, as in the case of the millionaire and the beggar, but it is suffering nevertheless, suffering as heavy as that of the Duggati realms. And while birth in the Duggati realms brings the sufferings of the Duggati realms, birth in the Sugati realms brings the sufferings of the Sugati realms. Birth has to be stopped altogether. Don't go wondering what you will be reborn as; don't go thinking of being reborn as a human being, or a god, or a brahma. The result will be the suffering of a human being, a god, or a brahma, because even the brahmas experience suffering, the suffering of brahmas. If brahmas were free from suffering, there would have been no need for Buddhism. Buddhism came into existence in order to produce *āryas*, people who have put an end to suffering of every kind, the suffering of human beings, of gods, and of brahmas. This is why the Buddha is referred to as the "Teacher of gods and men": he taught to put an end to suffering for all beings.

Here caution is needed. A person here in this particular life has the possibility of being reborn into any realm of existence in the vast cycle of *saṃsāra*: into one of the lower worlds or Duggati as a hell-being, animal, preta, or asura; into the middle realm as a human being; or into one of the higher realms as a god of the sensuous sphere, as an embodied brahma, or (at the highest level) as a bodiless brahma. So there are eight possibilities: the four woeful states or lower realms, the human world or middle realm,

and three heavens or upper realms. Each of these eight forms of birth is suffering in its own particular way. If one identifies with one's state of birth, one is bound to experience the corresponding kind of suffering — and every one of us has, in his everyday life, experienced these eight kinds of birth. Let us try to understand what this means. We shall deal first with birth in the woeful states, birth as a hell-being, animal, preta (hungry ghost) or asura (frightened ghost).

The real meaning of “hell” is anxiety (ความร้อนใจ, literally “mind-heat”). Anxiety burns one like a fire. If a person is worked up, burning with anxiety, then he is to be recognized as a hell-being. Whether monk, novice, lay follower, householder, or whatever, if he is burning with anxiety (“mind-heat”), burning through involvement in “I”, “mine”, then he is in hell.

If at some moment a person is deluded, then at that moment he is a dumb animal. At any time that a person, male or female, monk or layman, or whatever, is deluded, he has taken birth as an animal. The meaning of birth as an animal is delusion.

At any time that “I” and “mine” go the way of mental hunger and thirst, as when a gambler or a person buying lottery tickets suffers a hunger for money, a hunger to win a prize, a mental hunger — that is birth as a preta (hungry ghost). Birth as a preta is extreme mental hunger.

If there is fear, timidity, that is birth as an asura (frightened ghost). The word “a-sura” means “not brave”, an asura is any timid, frightened person.

In a single day we may be born in all four of these states. Watch! Notice in what form the “I” and “mine” arise. If they arise in the form of anxiety, one has been born a denizen of hell; if as delusion, an animal; if as mental hunger, a preta; and if they arise in the form of fear, one has been born an asura. Here is an example to illustrate.

A gambler who makes a blunder and loses everything experiences anxiety, as if burnt by fire; he has fallen into hell right there in the gambling-house. Again, when he is so deluded as to think that gambling can solve his problems, he is a dumb animal—even before he begins playing. When, in the course of playing, he has an uncontrollable mental hunger, then he is a preta. And when he is afraid of being beaten and losing everything, then he is an asura. This single example, the case of a gambler in a gaming-house, shows how one may be born as a hell-being, an animal, a preta, or an asura

Our grandparents were no fools, otherwise they would not have had the saying: “Heaven is in the heart; hell is in the mind.” Their children and grandchildren apparently *are* fools because they think one goes to heaven or hell only after dying, after having been put into the coffin. Examine this idea and you will see how foolish it is. So

let us be as intelligent as our grandparents, at least to the extent of recognizing that heaven and hell are in the mind.

Think of the example of the gambler, who can become a hell-being, an animal, a preta, or an asura. Anxiety can come from wrong-doing or as a result of karma. Anxiety is hell. Delusion can sometimes be so bad as to be almost beyond belief. Have a good think about it; examine it and you will see that we are sometimes unbelievably deluded. This delusion leads us into inappropriate or bad action. As for hunger, it is always present: desire for pleasure, desire for fame, and so on. If it reaches the point of being a mental thirst, one becomes a preta. Why be hungry? We have sufficient intelligence to know what we have to do, so let's do it contentedly, without preta-like hunger. Even if we do buy lottery tickets, we don't have to do it with preta-like hunger. We can buy our tickets simply for the fun of it, or we can think of how we are thereby helping provide funds to develop the country. We don't have to buy tickets out of hunger, as pretas. If there is awareness, "I" and "mine" do not arise and one is not hungry, not a preta. But if awareness is lacking, one is hungry, one has become a preta here and now. It is the same with fear. Fear can become a habit. Think about it. To be afraid, as some people are, of even earthworms, lizards, geckoes, and mice is just going too far. This is unjustified fear. Then there is fear of ghosts, things whose presence cannot even be demonstrated. And something some people are very afraid of is Dharma. They are afraid that practising Dharma will make life

tasteless and dry, that nirvāṇa is simply tasteless and dry. So they fear Dharma and nirvāṇa. Such people are full fledged asuras, right here and now.

Now we move up to the realm of human beings. The term “human being” in this context implies fatigue, exhaustion, shedding sweat, hard work, trading the sweat of one’s brow for food and sensual pleasure. It has nothing to do with anxiety, delusion, or the others; it is the honest exchanging of the sweat of one’s brow for things one wants. This is the meaning of the term “human being”. Don’t think of it as of a type with the terms “hell-being”, “animal”, “preta”, and “asura”, which refer to something much lower. “Hell” means anxiety, “animal” means delusion, “preta” means hunger, “asura” means fear. “Human being” means something of a totally different type. It means simply striving, persevering, working to get things one wants honestly and fairly, purchasing them with the sweat of one’s brow. This is what it is to be a human being. In short the meaning of “human being” is fatigue, a condition of habitual fatigue.

Higher than this are the gods of the *kāmāvacara* (sensual) heaven. These are the gods we hear about who have celestial mansions, attendant angels, and so on. The reference is to a condition of freedom from fatigue, and abundance of every sensual pleasure. Higher again is the state of a person who has become bored with sensual pleasure, who has come to see sensual pleasure as something contaminating and wishes to live uncontaminated

and pure. This is the heaven of the embodied brahmas (*rūpabrahma*), in which there is involvement in material things. And higher again is the level where one sees the body as impermanent, not worth becoming involved in, and feels it would be better to have no body at all. A person who feels this way is called a bodiless brahma (*arūpabrahma*).

The meanings of these terms are not as in everyday usage. For example the hell depicted in temple murals, with great copper cauldrons, seas of acid, rains of lances and swords, is a metaphore, an illustration in material terms of mental states that cannot be depicted. It is a physical illustration of anxiety and worry ("mind-heat"). Similarly we have physical representations of delusion, hunger, and fear. Similarly again the "human realm" is the condition of fatigue. And the *kāmāvacara* heaven is complete sensual satisfaction; when a person has, by means of money, power, good luck, or whatever, attained satisfaction in sensual pleasure, and is free of fatigue, he is a god in the sensual realm, called *kāmāvacara*. And a bodiless brahma is one who has become tired of this, who has ceased being involved in sensual pleasure and takes delight only in pure things, things that do not contaminate.

Let us examine the state of our own minds. Sometimes we are infatuated with sensual pleasure, but when we repeat it over and over, we become fed up with it and wish to have a rest from it. Sometimes we want to play, or interest ourselves in other material things, and those

things fail to satisfy, and we begin thinking of non-physical things such as good fortune, name and fame. Let's put it more simply. There are people who are infatuated with sensual pleasure and there are others who prefer to amuse themselves with hobbies, such as gardening or keeping tropical fish or pigeons, and become infatuated with them. The mind is liable to change in this way. Now it may happen that a certain person at a certain time comes to see that all these things are a source of confusion and not to be compared with mental things—thoughts and dreams about possible good fortune, about beauty, or about name and fame, non-physical things. These various conditions differ considerably among themselves; they constitute a series of levels. The point to note is that a single person is liable to experience any of these eight kinds of birth. Examine yourselves and see how many different states the mind can go through. On a certain day a certain person may be involved in sensual pleasure for an hour or so. Then he may feel having a break from it by going and playing sport or amusing himself with some hobby. At other times he may feel like having a complete rest, free from all disturbance. Sometimes he has to be a "human being", working for long hours, becoming fatigued. And sometimes he spends a few minutes in hell (anxiety); or in the condition of an animal (delusion), or a preta (hunger), or an asura (fear). So a single person may experience several kinds of birth in a single day; and in a week he may experience all eight kinds. He may be born in one of the woeful states (hell, animal,

preta, asura), in the human realm, or in the heavens of gods and brahmas. But whichever kind of birth it is, it is nothing but suffering; freedom from suffering comes only with freedom from birth. This last statement is difficult to understand; but once you have understood it, you have understood the whole of the Buddha's teaching.

The expression "freedom from birth" does not imply that one is not born again after physical death, that after having died and been placed in the coffin one is not reborn. Please think about this: if in the daily round there is only awareness, preventing the arising of "I" and "mine", the "self" - idea, egoism – that is freedom from birth. When nothing remains but awareness, one is able to do what one has to do, and to do it properly. Under these conditions, doing one's job is fun; to be able to do one's job properly without any "I" or "mine" is a joy. This is the essence of the Buddha's teaching. In effect it calls on us to live with a mind free from the idea "I", "mine". Every religion teaches this; it is based on a law of nature, which can be proved rigorously, scientifically.

Buddhism teaches that if one's thoughts include the idea of self, self-centredness, that is suffering. Christianity teaches the same thing; it teaches us not to think in terms of "I" or "mine", not to misidentify as "I" or "mine". But most Christians don't understand this teaching, just as most of us Buddhists don't understand the Buddha's teaching on this matter. It's the same the world over and in every religion: no one understands the real essence of his own

religion. We Buddhists don't understand what is meant by "Don't be born! Stop being born!" We don't understand it and so we are perplexed, disbelieving it, or even considering it a false teaching. Perhaps we do not go so far as to accuse the Buddha of teaching false doctrine but still that idea is there in our minds; or we may think that any monk expounding this doctrine is misrepresenting the Buddha. This is what happens. So we fail completely to understand the doctrine of *anattā* (non-self) and *suññatā* (emptiness), the doctrine that there is no "I" or "mine". Consequently we experience suffering. We are born frequently; we experience more of saṃsāra than of nirvāṇa.

The proof of all this is the fact that the hospitals for nervous and mental disorders are overfilled. This is all the proof needed; we don't have to ask further. People simply don't understand the truth about how to prevent mental illness. This is the objective of the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha's goal was a life of awareness, continuous awareness, seeing the world as something empty of "I", "mine", keeping the mind always free of the idea "I", "mine", leaving only the awareness, so that one knows what has to be done, and does it. This is the essence of the Buddha's teaching; there is no more to it than this.

Now at this point I should like to say something about a Christian teaching which Christians themselves take no interest in. It is a piece in the New Testament, from the book of Corinthians, in which St Paul sums up the entire teaching of Jesus. It is a short piece of instruction to the

Corinthian people: “If you have a wife think as if you have no wife. If you have wealth, think as if you have no wealth. If you are suffering, think as if you were not suffering. If you are happy, think as if you were not happy. If you go to buy goods at the market, bring nothing home.”

Here we have the essence of the Buddhist teaching in the Bible: “If you have a wife, think as if you have no wife.” Paul is speaking to the men; he does not mention that a woman who has a husband should think as if she had no husband, but this is understood; the statement is good for both wife and husband. The meaning is: “Don’t grasp and cling; don’t identify as ‘mine’.” If you have wealth, don’t go clinging it, thinking of it as *my* wealth; in effect, think as if you had no wealth. If suffering arises, then acknowledge it and it will go away. Don’t think of it as *my* suffering. If you have happiness, then don’t think of it as *my* happiness. If you go and buy something at the market, bring nothing home. This means: while we are carrying our purchases home from the market, our mind is not identifying them as “mine”. In this sense we are bringing nothing home. This is a Christian teaching, the essence of Christianity. I once asked a Christian, a high-ranking teacher, how he understood this passage. At first he was speechless, then he said “I’ve never taken any interest in it.” He had never taken any interest whatever in this piece from the Bible because he thought it unimportant. He had taken great interest in the subject of faith

and so on, but had taken no interest in this, the most important subject of all. *Every religion worthy of the name aims essentially at teaching freedom from self-centredness.* Every religion includes the important teaching of freedom from self and from concern with self—in which, however, its adherents take no interest. They are like us Buddhists, who take no interest in the doctrine of *summatā* and *anattā*, the characteristic doctrine of Buddhism.

It can be said, then that, mankind is taking no interest in the thing that is most important to mankind. People are interested only in chattering and eating, self-centred pastimes which increase “I” and “mine”. Consequently they are more often hell-beings, animals, pretas and asuras than human beings. And when they *are* human beings, they are sweating and striving far too much, not knowing how to relax. If they are in one of the heavenly realms, they are experiencing the corresponding kind of suffering—as gods, or brahmas, or whatever. This is because they don’t understand. They have fallen under the influence of Māra (Satan) : they have been drawn into the way of Māra rather than in to the way of the Buddha.

Māra (Satan) is yet another thing we don’t understand properly. In reality “Māra” denotes all the fascinating things that draw the mind and subjugate it. Māra is these things, in particular sexual and other sensual pleasures. Māra’s commander-in-chief entices us into the *paranimmitavasavattī* heaven, the heaven that abounds in sensual delights, where other off-siders of Māra then wait

on us, serving us and attending to our every need. This is what is meant by "Māra's commander-in-chief". At present we are underlings or victims of Māra because we are desiring these things and are thereby cultivating the "I" and the "mine". Once "I" and "mine" have arisen, there is no end to it; one has got into the Māra current rather than the Buddha current. This is all there is to Marā. Whenever there exists in the mind the idea "I", "mine", then Māra is present, one is an underling of Māra. And whenever the mind is empty of "I", "mine", one is a follower of the Buddha. In a single day you may be an underling of Māra for a few hours and a follower of the Buddha for a few hours. Everyone realizes this so there is no need to discuss it here. Everyone can see for himself that in a single day "I" and "mine" may be present for a few hours, and absent for a few hours.

At any moment when "I" and "mine" arise, one is born as this or that, and identifying with it; and that is suffering, every time. We ought to fight shy of this and take steps to prevent its arising. We have to foster and prolong those periods of emptiness and quietness, or nirvāna, and in time we shall be free of all ailments, both mental and physical. Diabetes, high blood pressure, heart diseases—all these come from "I", "mine". Identification as "I" or "mine" is a source of disturbance which prevents our getting sufficient rest. When the mind is confused, the sugar metabolism becomes abnormal, rising and falling sharply, and the result is some physical illness.

Mental illness also results, in the form of mental suffering. In short, the body can't take the stress and the result is nervous or mental illness, or even death. Though one may escape death, one is sure to experience much suffering and melancholy, as if one had fallen into one of the hells.

This whole question could be treated in much greater detail. For example, we have spoken of hell as equivalent to anxiety, though the more detailed texts recognize eighteen or twenty-eight or more different hell-regions. Ultimately, however, they all involve suffering from heat; there is no hell that is cool. With the pretas it is the same. Several different kinds of pretas are recognized: serpent-pretas, pretas with mouths the size of a needle's eye and bellies the size of a mountain hence never able to satisfy their hunger, and others. But they all amount to the same thing: hunger. You can interpret all these details how you like, at a great or little length as you like, so long as you understand the basic meaning: hell-beings suffer anxiety, animals are deluded, pretas are hungry, asuras are afraid, human beings are fatigued, *kāmāvacara* gods are infatuated with sensual delights, embodied brahmas are infatuated with pure physical things, and bodiless brahmas are infatuated with pure mental things. These are all forms of "birth". Without exception, everyone who is "born" is certain to suffer. Try to give up this identifying altogether. "True happiness consists in eliminating the false idea 'I'". Maintain awareness and insight; be free of "I" and "mine" and you will be free from

suffering. Maintain this condition; when it has become permanent, that is genuine and complete nirvāṇa.

We already have momentary nirvāṇa. Let us prolong it, reducing suffering, or saṃsāra, as far as possible. Let us not waste this opportunity, this eighty-year or hundred-year long life into which we have been born. If we don't effect this improvement we may never get anywhere, even if we live a thousand years; but if we do effect this improvement, we may achieve full nirvāṇa in this very life. Whether a person is a child, a teenager, an adult, or an eighty-year-old, if he properly understands the meaning of all this, how suffering arises and how it ceases, he will be able to cure all his ailments effectively, to control self-centredness, the "I" and the "mine"; he will automatically become fed up with it, and begin experiencing coolness, happiness, freedom from suffering. This is all there is to it. The Buddha summed it up briefly when he said: Don't grasp at or cling to anything whatsoever (*Sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāya*), that is, don't cling to it as "I" or "mine". No matter what it is—physical object, condition, action, mental object, result of action, or whatsoever—don't think of it as "I" or "mine". Think of it as belonging to Nature, as Nature itself, as a part of Nature obeying the laws of Nature, as the property of Nature. Don't take it as "I", "mine". Anyone who is so bold as to think of it as "I", "mine", is a thief, appropriating for himself something that properly belongs to Nature. No good can come of thieving; it is bound to lead to the

suffering of a thief. Hence of Buddha's teaching that we shouldn't grasp at or cling to anything as "I" or "mine". Hence also his statement, so terse that it is hard to understand and even harder to accept: "If people will practise right living, this world will not be empty of arhats". This statement sums up the whole teaching.

I hope you will all take an interest in this teaching of the Buddha, that you will think it over, examine it, and come to understand it. It is the profound and essential core of the Dharma, and it is genuinely capable of helping us attain freedom from suffering.



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