

KAMMA, DEATH AND REBIRTH

From a transcribe of Bhante Suvanno Mahathera

Collated by Jinavamsa

First Printed in April 2002

INTRODUCTION

By Brother Vijita-nanda Tan

The twin Doctrine of Kamma and Rebirth is one of the most important teachings of the Buddha. Many are ignorant of its workings, and due to this ignorance, Buddhists who do not have a proper understanding of the Law of kamma, lose faith and take refuge in other teachings in their attempt to find solace when they encounter difficulties and suffering.

The Law of Kamma, like the Law of Gravity is a natural law and operates according to its own nature and it is to our benefit to heed it. Claiming to be ignorant of this law, or ignoring it does not exempt us from its results. As a person who jumps off a tall building will crash to the ground, resulting in his death, similarly a person who ignores the law of kamma will result in his ending up in the woeful existence.

Understanding the Law of Kamma gives us the confidence to face life's ups and downs; and deter us from doing misdeeds. This confidence also strengthens and deepens our peace, happiness and courage, knowing that the law protects us when we have done good deeds. This knowledge gives us self-reliance and teaches us to take refuge in ourselves, because the Buddha has said that it is by ourselves that we become pure or impure, no one can purify another;

attana va katam papam, attana va visujhati. Suddhi assuddhi paccatam, no anno annam visodhaye – Dhammapada 165.

So, as a Buddhist, we become stronger in our faith when we realise that the evil we do will one day return to haunt us in more than equal measures and so we should be very careful that what we think, say and do is good, pure and true. Living within

the Law of Kamma will surely restrain us from wrong doings for others' sake as well as for our own. Accumulating good kamma enable us to overcome evil and destroy the fetters that keep us from our goal, *nibbana*.

If more people understand the Law of Kamma there would be less greed and envy in the world. The 'haves' would strive to do charitable works and develop projects beneficial to mankind, while the 'have nots' would understand that their present condition is due to their own past kamma and not harbour feelings of injustice. In this way, the pain and suffering of the poor due to the effect of their past kamma would be lessened by the generosity and social conscience of the rich. This practical plan of living taught by the Buddha is a great step forward in mankind's social and spiritual progress. Also, it will greatly help to reduce the terrible consequences of greed, hatred and delusions.

The Buddha said, "Intention, O Monks, is what I call kamma. *Cetanaham bhikkhave, kamma vadami.*" Furthermore, he also said in Dhammapada 124, "There is no ill for him who does no wrong." Kamma is volitional action, it denotes only such actions performed with intention, or purposeful activity, and is a process of action and reaction. It is not a decree prescribed by authority but a principle determining the sequence of events. It is not fatalism, nor does it require a law-giver. Some have the mistaken impression that the results of evil deeds can be nullified by making offerings to the gods or by praying for forgiveness, little do they realise that there is no getting away from their actions once performed. "Not in the sky, nor in mid-ocean, nor in a mountain-cave, is found that place on earth, where abiding, one may escape from the consequences of ones evil deeds." (Dhammapada 127). The Buddha further advised, "An evil deed is better not done, a misdeed torments one hereafter. Better it is to do a good deed, after doing which one does not grieve (Dhammapada 314). It is wise for one to heed the Buddha's advice, as mentioned in Dhammapada 91; "An evil deed committed does not immediately bear fruit, just like milk curdles not at once, but smouldering it follows the fool, like fire covered with ashes."

All religions teach that good and bad actions reap their appropriate results, and we can experience this by reflecting how such actions work in our lives. For example, after performing a good action we feel happy that we have made others happy. In the Dhammapada, the second stanza says, “ If a person speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows him like the never-departing shadow.”

By the law of kamma, a baby when born must inevitably reap kammic results (*vipaka*). If we understand this well and accept the changing nature and that *vipaka* is everyone’s due, we will not be demanding that it be otherwise. To be at peace with ourselves and to be able to see things as they are and cope with our problems in life is indeed a great awakening to the teachings of the Buddha.

DEATH

In Dhammapada 129, the Buddha says, “All tremble at the rod, all fear death. Comparing others with oneself, one should not strike nor cause to strike.”

When one contemplates on death, one comes to comprehend the fleeting nature of life. When one understands that death is certain and life uncertain, one should try to make the best use of one’s life by working for self-development and for the development of others instead of wholly indulging in sensual pleasures.

When a being is born death begins to stalk him. From birth, death follows beings like an executioner; waiting for an opportunity to strike. Birth is the beginning of death, which shadows us from the time we were born. We have no respite from death. The fear of death is our constant companion. “As there is fear in the morning, when fruits are ripe; that they will fall; so mortals are in constant fear; when they are born, that they will die.”

One noble reaction possible for people is to engage in meritorious activities. “I will die one day,” is the concept that will unceasingly prod the individual to enrich himself or herself with

merits. The “Reflection on Death” is considered one form of religious practice that is conducive to the fulfilment of many aspects of spiritual life. One should constantly reflect that all compounded things must break up; “even the Buddha, peerless in the human world, breaks-up at death; what could be said of me?”

REBIRTH

Everything in the universe is constantly in a process of changing or in the process of becoming from one existence to another existence (*punabhava*). When we apply this process to human beings, we say that a person is reborn and returns to an earth-life when he dies and this goes on until the person becomes a saint (arahant), at which time, rebirth ends. This continuity of the life process is not transmigration of a ‘soul’. When a person is living, there is no entity to be found in that process. It is this continuity which we conceptualize to be a permanent personality, which personality changes from infancy to old age and death. Thus in daily conversation, the pronouns “I”, “We”, “myself” are used to convey these concepts. Even the Buddha had to use these terms himself. Is the doctrine of *anatta* (non-soul) incompatible with the doctrine of rebirth? It is not, if we look at rebirth as being a process and not of a self or soul. The process of rebirth is a form of energy, generated by our cravings (*tanha*), and grasping (*upadana*), and it is merely the manifestation of kamma, nothing more. This new being is not the same as the previous one (*na ca so*), just as the old man is not the same as the baby from whom it came physically and mentally. At the same time, it is not another (*na ca anno*). Its identity with the former being is merely a causal sequence. It exists because the former existed and it is the kammic tendencies that find rebirth in a new being.

When discussing rebirth, two criteria should be understood:

- (a) The physical criterion; meaning the reborn being cannot have the same body as the previous being (*na ca so*).
- (b) The memory criterion; meaning the reborn being inherits the memory of the previous existence, this memory being retained within the kammic energy finding existence in the new being (*na ca anno*).

All religions teach rebirth in one form or another; that there is life after death, thus enabling meaningful striving for moral restraints and mental purification. The present life is considered as preparation for a future life, a kind of school where a being learns to qualify for perfect understanding and celestial bliss. Buddhism is unique in that its concept of rebirth is soulless, in which rebirth is not of persons, or souls of persons, but of actions; kamma. These will give rebirth according to their own nature. Hence, if a person has lived a worldly good life, all his good actions (*kusala kamma*) will produce good effect (*kusala vipaka*), if the circumstances offer the opportunity.

The person devoted to virtue has four consolations with regard to his virtuous acts and rebirth.

- (a) If there is a future world and if good and bad deeds have results for the doer, then the virtuous person knows himself to be safe, and can expect a happy situation.
- (b) If there is no rebirth and if deeds have no future effects, then he at least lives happily in this world, without worries.
- (c) If evil happens to evil doers, then he who does no evil, is secure and free from harm.
- (d) If no evil happens to evil doers, then he in any event, will not meet with evil fortune.

Rebirth can be taken as a mental event, something that takes place in the mind. Once the idea of "I" has arisen, other ideas arise like, "I am a man", "I am a good man", "I am better than so and so". In a single day, we may be reborn several times. So we remain in *samsara*, and continue to suffer. If we engage in some form of Dhamma practice like meditation, we develop concentration so that the idea of "I", and "mine" do not arise; "I" and "mine" is eradicated, and we experience temporary *nibbana*. If we succeed in bringing about complete eradication of this false idea and all defilement, we attain full *nibbana*.

In keeping to the conviction mentioned in this short introduction I have personally come to the conclusion that "I am a nobody" and "I am going nowhere when the time comes for me to die". I

will just let whatever karma that I have accumulated in my life take its course and I will pass away to fare according to my deserts.

I will end my introduction with an analogy by Francis Story in his book “Rebirth as Doctrine and Experience”, in which he wrote:

Everybody, seemingly, knows what is meant by the statement that the sun gives out light. But is this accurate? Well, what actually happens is that the sun generates energy, which is then projected into space where it travels through millions of miles of sheer emptiness, where it remains in black darkness. However, when it enters the earth’s atmosphere – a physical object – its character changes. When diffused by the myriad particles of gas in the atmosphere it becomes discernible to our eyes and we call it light. So what the sun gives out is only energy which does not become light until the right physical conditions, viz; something substantial to reflect it, physical organs and consciousness capable of receiving and interpreting it are present.

In the same way, no ‘soul’ is transmitted from one person to a subsequent one in the process of rebirth but the kammic energy becomes a new personality when it is drawn to the physical constituents of embodied life (the foetus formed from the ovum and sperm of the parents). The new being bears the kammic characteristics of the past being, just as the energy of the sun becomes light on contact with solid objects capable of reflecting it.

VIJITA-NANDA TAN
(TAN TEIK BENG)

KAMMA, DEATH AND REBIRTH
by
THE VENERABLE ACARA SUVANNO

In the *Mangala Sutta* it is said that listening to the Buddha's Dhamma is one of the highest blessings, so to be able to share the Buddha's Dhamma with you has made me extremely happy. It is good that you are keen to listen to the Dhamma; better still if you were to practise the Dhamma as a way of life. From my experience most people prefer to listen to Dhamma talks rather than to practise it. But, to practise the Dhamma especially *Vipassana* meditation is much more beneficial and is the only way to the purification of the mind, reducing suffering and setting us onto the correct path to *nibbana*.

The Buddha said, "*Bhikkhus*, there is only one way to the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and distress, for the attainment of the right method for the realisation of unbinding; and that is the Four Foundations of Mindfulness." These talks that you are listening to are valuable only as a guide to the practice of the Dhamma. It is good to keep them and listen to them from time to time. Circulate them to your friends and in this way you too will be, as I have been doing for many years, spreading and practising the Dhamma. As you know; 'The Gift of Dhamma excels all other gifts.'

Many people are uncertain about the nature of Kamma, Death and Rebirth, so I shall elaborate more on this very essential knowledge as expounded by the Buddha. We shall begin with kamma; for when you truly understand the reality of kamma, you will realise the benefits of doing good deeds. You will not be complacent but strive harder to attain higher spiritual goals along the Dhamma way. Kamma is a Pali word that means 'action'. There is no suitable single word in the English language which

exactly expresses the meaning. It is for this reason that the Pali term is used. It is also known by the Sanskrit term, "Karma".

KAMMA

The Buddha said that kamma is action. However it does not mean just any kind of action. It refers to those actions that are associated with *cetana* or volition. In other words, it is an intentional action, an action which is performed with consciousness. In the strict sense of the Buddha's doctrine, volition itself is kamma.

Kamma is the energy that determines our circumstances in this life and shapes our condition in the future. It is the energy that survives man at death and links this life with the next. Without kamma there can not be re-birth. Nothing of the mind or body is reborn, only this powerful energy of kamma.

Generally speaking, all our actions can be classified into three categories, namely:

Thoughts (mental action),
Words (verbal action) and
Deeds (bodily action).

However, one should bear in mind that certain reflex actions, or instinctive actions, which are performed without intention or without consciousness, do not constitute kamma as such actions are not liable to yield any moral consequences to the performer. If one swats a mosquito in a reflex action; this has no volition, but if one were to intentionally kill a mosquito, this constitutes a volitional action. It is the correlation between volitional action (kamma) and its consequence (*vipaka*) that constitutes the Doctrine of Karma.

The Buddha's Path is one of good conduct and sound morality. By following this Path we refrain from unwholesome thoughts, speech and actions or deeds and therefore do not accumulate bad kamma. If we live an unrestrained life, responding to desires, cravings and passions of the senses, we create bad kamma.

Kamma is therefore, good or bad according to the quality of mind, speech, or bodily actions. Both good or bad kamma produce rebirth, but the good will naturally bring about conditions which are favourable, while the bad will produce circumstances which no wise individual would seek. The results of good or bad kamma can be experienced in this life, the next or subsequent ones. The state of *nibbana* does not result from either good or bad kamma, but only from extinction of all kamma. A person who reaches the state of *nibbana* and who will not be reborn into *samsara* is called an Arahant.

The inconsistencies of life and the conditions that bring about rebirth into different situations and environments give causes for very serious thinking. Why are some born to riches while others to poverty? Why does one prosper and another fail? Some are clever and some are dull; others are gifted with great charm and beauty while others lack these qualities. Why is one born maimed or to a life of sickness, while others less worthy, enjoy good health? Why should one baby be taken to the grave while another lives to old age? The good man is often beset with misfortune while the scoundrel prospers.

Western philosophies do not seem to have any satisfactory answer to these questions, but the Buddha explained them as the workings of kamma. The Buddha's Dhamma is of a scientific nature, but in the case of kamma, we are in a similar position to the scientist when he is asked to prove the atomic theory, gravity, evolution or electricity to a layman. We are told that 'proof', as we often understand the word is difficult to evidence. Much scientific knowledge is accepted without question because there is no other possible explanation of a phenomenon. Most scientists are now learning to apply and use matter and radiation without waiting for it to be explained. The reasoning of kamma is in the same position as the scientists seeking to explain certain scientific knowledge. Many men of knowledge had now acknowledged that kamma is the logical answer to these observations of natural phenomena.

Hereditary and environmental factors had been the easy way to explain a person's character and circumstances, but this opened many other queries. One of the most obvious would be; why do twins in many cases have different natures, though from the same parents? Only within the framework of kamma does the enigma become clear, and we must realise that living beings are born as consequences of their own good or bad actions. This enlightened knowledge is of paramount importance to mankind, because if the past can condition the present, then it is logical that our conduct today will determine our future.

Science is making rapid strides and have shown that not everything can be weighed in a balance or placed in a test tube. Many of the greatest mysteries, while much in evidence, still have no answers. This is especially true in the field of psychology and psychiatry.

The vast majority of mankind respond much more readily to the baser instincts and desires, evil passions and unhealthy attachments to things and ideas, thereby conditioning their future existence to the level where such tendencies determine their characters and subsequent natures, not necessarily consecutively or in tandem. These base instincts and desires produce bad kamma and it is only when we learn from the right teacher, that we can be sure of higher spiritual development, conditioning a better rebirth commensurate with the moral qualities we have lived by. But merely wearing the label of 'followers of the Buddha', is without substance if we do not practise earnestly to control the mind and observe morality in total.

However, not everything that happens to us is the result of past kamma. We are subjected, by the fact that we exist, to sufferings from natural causes, the deeds of others, and above all, from our ignorance. Certain illnesses are caused by physical phenomena, such as wind, heat, or the change in seasonal conditions, or the imbalance of the physical elements of the body. It is also true that certain kinds of diseases are kamma originated. We are responsible for our actions, and though kamma may condition

the circumstances, it cannot make us commit a crime if we do not desire to do so.

When the above facts are taken into consideration it will not take an intelligent person very long to see that we are not pawns in a game, but the makers of the game. We cannot, of course, undo our past, but with this vital knowledge at our disposal, we can by our good and wholesome deeds shape our own joyful future and reduce the severity of results of unwholesome kamma!

From whatever actions of his past, man has built his present existence, he is equally capable of being the architect of his own future and with the right guidance he can be sure of it being a happy one. More so with the knowledge of the Dhamma to guide him.

The time for kamma to take effect can be divided into three categories:

(1) Immediately effective...

A person doing *dana* with wholesome thoughts and joy has already set wholesome kamma functioning, whereas a drug pusher has set his unwholesome kamma functioning when he is filled with bad and fearful thoughts while pushing his wares. Undoubtedly, deeds done with wholesome intentions induces instant wholesome effects whilst it is true that unwholesome deeds will have bad and unwholesome thoughts and bring instant unwholesome results.

(2) In this very life...

The second type of resultant kamma takes place gradually and has four stages to it:

(a) Transformation of appearance: Through *dana*, a person changes from being stingy to liberal, following which his character and attitude improve. Further should he practise Metta meditation his countenance will be serene and radiant.

(b) Resultant thoughts: After a time the acts of wholesome deeds and practice of *metta* will transform a person's nature from intolerant, aggressive and angry to a more compassionate state.

Subsequently, his mental state will transcend from the worldly to the saintly level. It is obvious that *dana*, *sila* and *bhavana* make one a better individual.

(c) Innate influences conferring various properties and abilities: Some people are born musically inclined, thus they acquire the skill easily. This ability is carried over from a previous existence. In the same way, some progress faster in whatever they do, as in the case of meditation, due to previous cultivation.

(d) Certain manifestations at the time of death: In this very life, a person who has habitually performed wholesome deeds will see good and wholesome signs at death. This is much in evidence in a meditator who has been meditating for some time. He will notice wholesome signs such as the rising and falling of the abdomen or images of devas and so on, indicating a calm mind and that he is destined for a good rebirth. In contrast, an aged lady who has never meditated and who has spent her old age gambling will become senile and unable to do good deeds, or chanting and listening to Dhamma talks.

(3) In subsequent rebirths.

The sense bases of thoughts, sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch are determined by past kamma; rebirth is influenced by kamma.

The Buddha has said that nowhere can one escape the effects of kamma; not even a Bodhisatta. Once the Bodhisatta was born as a king and at one instance of his kingship, he had a man beheaded. As a result of this he had to spend eighty thousand years in hell.

In summary :

1. What is kamma ?

The Pali term kamma (Sanskrit: *Karma*) literally means action or doing. Any kind of volitional or intentional action whether mental, verbal or physical is kamma. It covers all that is included in the phrase: "thought, word or deed." Generally speaking, all good and bad actions constitute kamma. In its ultimate sense, kamma means all moral and immoral volition. Involuntary, unintentional or unconscious actions, though technically deeds, do not constitute kamma, because volition, the most important

factor in determining kamma, is absent. Without intention, a deed is sterile; it produces no reaction of moral significance. However, if a deed is done with no conscious intention and without due care, but proves harmful to others, the lack of mindfulness and consideration in its effects on others, will constitute unwholesome kamma and will have its result. Though harm was not intended i.e. the deed was not motivated by hate, there is present another unwholesome root, delusion, which includes for instance, irresponsible thoughtlessness.

2. How does the Law of Kamma operate ?

Kamma is action and *Vipaka*, the fruit or result. Kamma is the cause and *vipaka* is the effect. According to the Law of Kamma, every volitional activity is accompanied by its due effect. In the *Samyutta Nikaya* it is said:

*According to the seed that's sown,
so is the fruit ye reap therefrom.
Doer of good will gather good. Doer of evil, evil reaps.
Sown is the seed, and thou shalt taste the fruit thereof.*

Kamma is a law in itself that operates in its own field, without the intervention of an external independent ruling agency. To illustrate, in the intention to perform a specific action, initially we give it some thought and when we decide that it is meaningful in terms of our own reference, we make the decision to do the deed. As examples, such actions could be decisions to perform *dana*, keeping *sila* and practising *bhavana*. Supposing you are planning to perform *dana* tomorrow. The planning of the *dana* is the intention or '*cetana*' and during this initial stage of planning, kamma commences; the second stage is achieved when the volitional act of *dana* is performed; ending when the act of *dana* is completed.

To understand it better we need to know *cetana*. *Cetana* is extremely important, the Buddha said, as it affects the quality of one's rebirth. It has three stages. As in the above examples, firstly there is the intention of doing *dana*, the germ of an idea to do *dana*: the second stage is the act of performing *dana* itself

culminating in the completion of *dana*, the final and third stage. As a matter of interest, no others except the Buddha teaches '*cetana*'.*

*A mental state that is instrumental in doing the deed, good or bad, wholesome or unwholesome. Technically, kamma means the mental state which arises in the mind when people do some deed. Whenever there is a deed good or bad there arises in the mind this mental state, and this mental state organizes the other associated mental states and also engages itself to the object. So, that mental state is like a chief pupil in a class who studies and also encourages other pupils to study. In the same way that mental state acts upon the object itself and also encourages or organizes the other mental states arising together with it to act on the object. This mental state is called "cetana" in Pali, and it is translated as "volition". So what we call kamma is not actually the deed, good or bad, but that mental state that accompanies or that arises in the mind of a person who does the good or bad, or wholesome or unwholesome deed. (U. Silananda: A Talk on Kamma, Rebirth and Suffering)

For a clearer understanding of *cetana*; refer to "Abhidhamma in Daily Life by Ashin Janakabhivamsa revised by U Silananda: Chapter IV' pp121-123.

We take for example three persons within the same income group and each has decided on performing *dana*. The kammic effect on each person can be different. The first person may offer *dana* to his mother with gratitude. He wishes her well and has appreciation for what his mother has done for him. He tells her: 'Dear mother, my success in life today is due to your sacrifices and your love.' Thus his *cetana*, which had been carried out with love and understanding may render him a loving mother at his future rebirth or he may be reborn as a *deva* with great radiance and be attended on by *devi*. The second person may perform his *dana* with a different attitude or intention. He understands that he should perform *dana* so as to gain rebirth in the *deva* realm. He aspires to be a *deva*, or maybe to be among the five hundred *devi*. With such intentions in mind he presents a gift to his mother and wishes her happy birthday without true and sincere emotion

for her as his mother. Such a *dana* may gain his rebirth in the *deva* realm where he would enjoy the sensuous pleasure for the period of his merits and then be reborn in the lower realm. In the case of the third person he is aware that he must do *dana*, but he does not know the reasons why or the benefits thereof. He thus performs it with ignorance.

Moral/immoral actions begets moral/immoral resultants. It is not possible for one person to perform moral/immoral actions and another person to receive the moral/immoral results.

Kamma embraces both past and present deeds. It is not fate. Nor is it predestination, imposed on us by some mysterious unknown power to which we must helplessly submit ourselves. It is one's own doing which reacts on one's own self, and so it is possible to divert the course of our kamma to some extent. How far one diverts it will depend on one's commitment to the basic three pronged teachings of the Buddha; to stop doing evil, do good and purify the mind, through the three trainings of *sila*, *dana* and *bhavana*.

3. What is the Cause of kamma ?

Ignorance (*avijja*) or "not knowing things as they truly are" is the chief cause of kamma. Associated with ignorance is its ally, craving (*tanha*), the other root cause of kamma. Unwholesome actions are conditioned by these two causes. No kamma is accumulated by one who has eradicated craving and has understood things as they truly are. Buddhas and *arahants* do not accumulate fresh kamma as they have eradicated ignorance and craving, the root causes of kamma. However, they will still receive the results of their past kamma.

4. Who is the Doer of kamma ? Who Reaps the *Vipaka* ?

The answer is given in the *Visuddhi Magga* (Path of Purification).

*"No doer is there who does the deed.
Nor is there one who feels the fruit".*

In the Buddha's teachings, there are two types of truth namely: conventional truth and absolute truth. For conventional purposes, we use such terms as man, woman, animal, being, self and so forth. In reality, there is no unchanging entity or any being in the form of a man, woman, animal or anything permanent that can be called a self. The so-called fleeting form consists only of mental and material processes that are constantly changing, not remaining the same for two consecutive moments.

This so-called being consists of the Five Aggregates or groups that are the aggregates of Matter, Feeling, Perception, Mental Formations and Consciousness. There is no doer apart from the action, no thinker apart from the thought. Who then is the doer of kamma? Who feels the effect?

*Volition or intention (cetana) is itself the doer.
Feeling (vedana) feels the fruit or effect.*

Apart from these mental processes, there is none to sow and none to reap. So kamma is not an accretion of the self or soul since there is no permanent self or soul to begin with.

5. Where is all the kamma ?

An action (kamma) once performed, is finished as far as its performance is concerned. It is also irreversible. What remains of the action is its potential, the inevitability of its result (*vipaka*). Within a lifetime, a person performs many actions, both moral or immoral. Thus he has accumulated kamma of various kinds. Where is all this kamma? In answer to this question by King Milinda, the Ven. Nagasena replied:

"Kamma is not stored somewhere in this fleeting consciousness nor in any part of the body. But dependent on mind and body, it rests, manifesting itself at the opportune moment, just as mangoes are not said to be stored somewhere in the mango tree, but dependent on the mango tree they lie, springing up in due season". In the same way, fire is not stored in a match but under the right conditions of friction, the match will produce fire.

Kamma is an individual force or potential that is transmitted from one existence to another.

6. Is One Bound to Reap All That One has Sown in Just Proportion ?

While the Law of kamma ensures a close correspondence between our deeds and their fruits, there is another side to the working of kamma which is just as important. This is the modifiability of kamma, and the fact that the Law of Kamma does not operate with mechanical rigidity but allows for a considerable range of modifications in the ripening of the fruit. Various external conditions can effect modifications in kamma. Internal conditions such as the total qualitative structure of the mind from which the action issues also play a part. To one, rich in moral or spiritual qualities, a single offence may not entail the weighty results the same offence will have for one who is poor in such protective virtues. The Buddha compares this with the taste of water from a cup wherein a lump of salt has been added against the taste of water from the Ganges River in which the same lump of salt has been thrown in. The following story will help to illustrate. This story is from the Pali Canon, compiled and translated in Ceylon by the Venerable Buddhaghosa in the 5th century and rendered by Nanamoli Thera.

About two thousand years ago there was a young man living in Rohana not far from the southern capital of Mahagama. He came of a family of hunters and they lived near the Great Monastery of Gamendavala.

When he grew up, he decided to take a wife and raise a family. So he worked hard, trapping creatures in the jungle, selling the meat and making a profit. He was in fact very diligent in this for some years and he was able to lay up for himself quite a bit of money and quite a lot of future suffering!

One day he went into the woods as usual and as he felt hungry, he killed a deer caught in one of his traps, grilled the meat over a fire and ate it. Feeling thirsty after that and finding no water at hand, he walked to the Great Monastery of Gamendavala, which

was quite some distance away. When he got there, he went to where the drinking water was kept; but though ten pitchers were there as usual, he found them all empty. He was parched by then and losing his temper a little, he exclaimed: "Well really! All these *bhikkhus* living here and not a drop of water for visitors!"

Inside the monastery, the Elder Cula Pindapatika Tissa heard the complaint and desiring to help, went out; but glancing at the water pitchers, he saw that they were all full! He thought; "This man is about to turn into a living ghost"; but he said; "Lay follower, if you are thirsty here is water, drink it"; and taking one of the pitchers, he poured some water onto the man's hands. As he drank, the water seemed to disappear as if from a red-hot pan. Though he drank till all the pots were really empty, still his thirst was not slaked.

The Elder who knew him well said; "Lay follower, you are half a ghost already. It is because of all the cruel things you do. What is to become of you?"

The young man said nothing; but after he had saluted the Elder and departed, those words were like sharp jungle thorns piercing deep into his mind as he walked along. Suddenly his indecision left him. He went the round of all his traps and broke them up. He returned home, where he told his wife that he must leave her and the children. Then he made arrangements for their welfare, after which he freed the deer and the birds he had caught and caged, broke his spear and turned his back upon his home.

He went straight to the monastery and asked to be admitted as a novice. The same Elder told him; "Friend, life gone forth into homelessness is hard. Will you be able to live it?"

He assured the Elder that his experience, as he saw it, allowed him no alternative. So the Elder admitted him and duly instructed him in the general meditation on the parts of the body. He lived quietly for a while, studying the Buddha's words, meditating and doing the various duties.

One day while reading the Discourses with his teacher, they came upon the passage in the Devaduta Sutta, which says; “Then the warders of hell throw him back into the Great Hell again.” He asked; “Do they really take a being who has just escaped from such immense suffering and throw him back again into the Great Hell, Venerable Sir?”

“They do, friend. All that are the results of evil deeds done by the beings themselves.”

“Can hell be seen, Venerable Sir?”

“No, but I will show you something like it.”

The Elder had all the novices pile wet wood on the top of a flat rock. Then as though by supernormal powers he appeared to draw a tongue of fire no bigger than a fire-fly from the hell region, which fire, he guided towards the wood. As soon as the small flame touched the wet wood, there was a flash and the wet wood was turned to ashes.

The other looked at the Elder and asked; “Venerable Sir, how many vocations are there in this Dispensation?”

“There are two, friend: the Vasadhura or Vocation of Practice and the Ganthadhura or Vocation of Books.”

“Venerable Sir, books are for clever people. But I have faith and that is based on suffering, which I can see for myself. Let me follow the Vocation of Practice. Give me a special meditation subject, Venerable Sir.”

The Elder expounded a special meditation subject to him, instructed him all that he must do, and explaining how he should develop both concentration and insight into the true nature of experience.

From then on he lived a very strict life, doing the regular duties now at the Monastery of Cittalapabbata, now at Gamendavala

and now at Kajaragama. He was so anxious not to neglect his task that whenever he felt drowsy he would put a plait of wet straw on his head and sit with his feet in water.

Once at Cittalappabata after meditating through two watches of the night, he applied wet straw on his forehead in an attempt to keep off the sleepiness that weighed down on him. Towards dawn, he heard the voice of a novice chanting this verse from the Arunavatiya Sutta on the slope of the Eastern Rock:

“Arise, arise, bestir your hearts,
And strive to know the Buddha’s Words.
As tuskers crush a shed of rushes
Deal Mara’s hordes the final blow,
Since he that will in diligence
Live out this Law and Discipline,
Shall leave the roundabout of rebirths
And make an end of suffering.”

The words seem as if addressed directly to him. The flooding happiness brought on by these words heralded the onset of concentration. Then the new transparent clearness in his mind enabled him to see for himself without depending on others the true conditioned nature of all existences and he reached the Fruit of the Path of Non-Return. Soon afterwards with supreme effort he attained Aranhantship, whereupon he uttered this exclamation:

“With wetted straw upon my head
I walked the night until I knew
The Path’s Fruit that is last but one:
But now I have no doubts at all.”

So intricate is the net of *Kammic* conditioning that the Buddha declared kamma-result to be one of the “four unthinkable”; (these are; speculation about the range of power of a Buddha; about the range of jhanas in one who is absorbed in jhana; the results of kamma and about the beginning of the universes; A.

Nikaya IV.77); and warned against treating it as a subject of speculation. But though the workings of kamma may escape our total comprehension, the important practical message is clear: the fact that kamma-results are modifiable frees us from the shackles of predestination and fatalism and keeps the road to liberation constantly open before us.

The kamma doctrine of the Buddha is a teaching of moral and spiritual responsibility for oneself and others. An individual's moral choice may be severely limited by the load of greed, hatred and delusions and their results which he carries around; yet every time he stops to decide on a course of action, he is free to throw off the load. At this precious moment of choice, he has the opportunity to rise above all the menacing complexities of his unfathomable *kammic* past. It is through right mindfulness that man can firmly grasp that fleeting moment, and it is mindfulness again that enables him to use it for making a wise choice.

As volitional activities or kamma has its roots in Ignorance and Craving, beings who have not completely eradicated these defilement will accumulate kamma and still undergo rebirth after death. Lack of this understanding usually leads to wrong believes.

We must realise that the intention to perform an action is in the consciousness itself. There are two types of *cetana*; one that has results or bear fruits and the other does not bring any results. There are twenty of the type that bears fruit. These are divided into ten wholesome or *kusala* and ten unwholesome or *akusala* deeds. These can be separated into bodily actions, speech and thought.

By bodily actions: By speech: By thoughts:

- 1) killing
- 2) stealing,
- 3) committing adultery
- 4) false speech
- 5) slander
- 6) harsh speech
- 7) frivolous talk

- 8) covetousness
- 9) ill-will
- 10) wrong view

These ten unwholesome or *akusala* actions can lead one to be reborn as hell beings, animals, *petas* or *asuras*.

The ten wholesome or *kusala* actions on the other hand is sure to lead one to be reborn in a happy realm such as the human realm, the six *deva* realm. These two realms are the sensuous planes where there are males and females. With meditation (*bhavana*), one can be born in the *brahma* world where all are males. As one's meditation develops, one can be reborn in the formless world (*arupa loka*). Everyone must realise the importance of wholesome deeds, without which it is impossible to gain a good rebirth. These wholesome deeds are:

- 1) practising *dana*
- 2) practising *sila*
- 3) practising *bhavana*
- 4) honouring and respecting our parents and elders
- 5) supporting and looking after their needs when they are sick
- 6) transferring of merits to departed ones
- 7) rejoicing in the success of others to reduce our jealousy
- 8) listening to Dhamma
- 9) sharing of the Dhamma with our parents and family members
- 10) having right views

The practice of these 10 wholesome actions will lead one to a happy realm.

There are five types of actions that do not produce kammic effects. These are:

- 1) Through meditation and by nature of his attainment an arahant is not capable of performing actions that create kamma. His stay in this world is only temporary. When his life-span ends he attains *nibbana* and there is no more rebirth for him.

- 2) Maintaining body posture, that is performing functional bodily actions like shifting body or blowing at certain parts of the body when it hurts or aches.
- 3) Actions that cause glandular secretions. These are the workings of the ductless glands found in the brain, kidneys, pancreas, etc. the secretions flow to the tissues causing one to turn pale, frightened or shiver.
- 4) Breathing during meditation; whether slow or fast, subtle or coarse is a natural phenomena. It is kammically ineffective.
- 5) The six-sense consciousness of seeing, smelling, feeling, touching, tasting and thinking. These are resultant kamma. They are actions receiving, investigating and registering performed by the resultant in operative thoughts. These are the resultant kamma which does not cause fresh kamma.

Those who perform wholesome deeds will meet with favourable conditions, helpful people (or in Hokkien dialect; “*kooi yin*”) and come in contact with things beautiful and favourable, while those who perform unwholesome actions will meet with ugly and unpleasant situations.

Parents can sometimes be able to know the realm of existence where their new born child came from by their behavioural pattern. For example, one who comes from a woeful state will be a ‘cry-baby’, most of the time. He is moody and mournful and is always throwing tantrums. One who is from a *deva* world will be loving, pleasant and respectful. Having being in the planes of existence where they originate, for very lengthy periods, tendencies and characteristics are deeply ingrained in the kammic memory; in rebirth beings carry with them their tendencies from their past lives.

Thus the Buddha said that beings are owners of their kamma, heir to their kamma, born of their kamma, are related to their kamma, and have their kamma as their refuge. Whatever they do, whether good or evil, of that they will be the heir; in Pali:

“Sabbe satta kammassaka, kammadayada, kammayoni, kammabhandhu, kammapatīsarana yam kamman karoti kalyanam va papakam va tassa dayada bhavissanti.”

Kamma is what creates distinctions among beings in terms of their qualities and attributes.

From the Dhamma Dipani by Ledi Sayadaw, we quote the following writings:

When close to death, a human being urgently needs good thoughts to achieve good status in the next existence. During one's last thought moments, previous wholesome kmmas produce good mental objects, enabling one to be reborn in the fortunate realm of existence. Otherwise bad kmmas will predominate at this crucial moment, and bad mental objects will send one to hell. In the four lower realms of existence a sentient being knows nothing of the value of almsgiving, keeping moral precepts, or practising meditation. Lower beings who find themselves lacking wholesome kamma are further hampered by the lack of opportunities to do good. Observe the daily behaviour of dogs, pigs, cows, buffaloes, crows and other animals. Their moral sense is very limited, so they often indulge in deeds that are not morally acceptable by human standards. They have little chance to do good.

Therefore a dying being in the lower realms has a very slim chance of experiencing good mental objects to gain higher existences. Evil kmmas usually manifest, leading again to realms of misery. Even a virtuous person in this human world cannot safely say that, at the moment of death, immoral kmmas will not influence the next rebirth. Although one may have given alms, observed morality, and performed other meritorious deeds, one may experience very bad thoughts at death. Without regular practice of the four right efforts, no one can guarantee the arising of good thoughts. Every ordinary person has done countless unwholesome kmmas in past lives and in this existence, which can mature at any time, producing corresponding results. For the majority of people today, wholesome kmmas are relatively few. So their past immoral kmmas will produce results in future lives.

One's present wholesome deeds may not stem the tide of past unwholesome karmas with their impending results, which must give appropriate results at some time. As a universal principle everybody is subject to moral responsibility. All types of karmas are waiting for their chance to mature at any time. Thus, countless past karmas of various types remain for each person as latent forces. If a foolish person now gathers fresh evils, the chance of past misdeeds giving their effects increases, for like begets like.

For those who have to suffer in hell even once, the floodgate of past evil karma opens, letting in the bad effects. So, generally speaking, various powerful evil karmas make the suffering in hell very long and tedious, as successive bad results get their chance to mature in various ways. Bad karmic results predominate in the lower realms and one will undergo long-term sufferings for the evils of past lives. Consider the evil done in the present life to evaluate the nature of impending bad results. Therefore, in the *Sammohavinodanā*, the commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgani*, a note of warning is struck for this awful possibility. Under some unfortunate circumstances or due to slight misconduct, one may be reborn in hell. Once in those unhappy conditions, other grave karmas of previous existences will find the opportunity to make their appearance too and suffering increases a thousand-fold. Past evil karmas are ever ready to manifest their influences and powers, especially so in the lower existences. The moral is, "don't let evil take its chance" or "don't open the doors of evil." The present life is very important and crucial for future existences.

DEATH

Death according to Buddhism is the cessation of the psycho-physical life of any one individual existence. It takes place by the passing away of the life faculty (*jīvitindriya*), heat and consciousness. Death is not the complete annihilation of a being, for though that life-span ended, the force that hitherto actuated it is not destroyed.

According to the Buddha's teaching of Dependent Origination, "Consciousness depends on Volitional Activities (kamma)." To understand this relationship, we need to realize that in reality, there is no such thing called a being, only mental and material processes called *nama-rupa*. Even during one's lifetime, these *nama-rupas* arise and pass away continuously. As explained in the Abhidhamma, at death, consciousness ceases together with the life faculty (which consists of fifty-two mental factors*). What we take as 'self' is actually mental and materiality (mind and matter), or the five aggregates namely body (*rupa*), feelings, perception, mental formations and consciousness (*nama*). They arise and cease collectively. Irrespective of whether one is born a Brahma or a king, it is kamma that determines one's rebirth. After the dissolution of the death consciousness, the rebirth-linking consciousness arises in the new life. *Cuti-citta* is connected with the old existence whereas the *patisandhi citta* is associated with the new existence. Rebirth comes after death in a non-stop process and there is no, as is commonly believed, holding period of seven or forty-nine days. The Buddha's explanation is that there is nothing that transmigrates from the old body to the new body. The Kammic force flows from the old body to the new.

Death is the extinction of the last consciousness on dissolution of the old *nama-rupa*. Rebirth is the immediate arising of a new consciousness called the re-linking consciousness, together with the new *nama-rupa*. The arising of the re-linking consciousness is conditioned by the last kamma before death. If this kamma is wholesome, rebirth will take place in a happy existence; if unwholesome, rebirth will take place in an unhappy existence. This is what the Buddha meant when He said that "all beings are born of their kamma (*kammayoni*)".

*Refer to The Manual of Abhidhamma by Narada edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

To most of us, at one time or another, death must have given rise to fearful thoughts and questions, uncertainties and worries. What value do we place in life, when suddenly loved ones, friends or even acquaintances are lost to us forever without even saying

good-bye? What is life worth, if eyes that once sparkled with joy and love are closed forever? Thoughts such as these are not to be repressed. It is just these inquiring thoughts, if wisely pursued, that will ultimately unfold the potential inherent in the human mind to receive the highest truths. Contemplation of death leads to awakening to the real issues in front of us.

According to the Buddha, death, far from being a subject to be shunned and avoided, is the key that unlocks the seeming mysteries of life. It is by understanding death that we understand life; for death is part of the process of life in the larger sense. Life, death and rebirth are the events in a long continuous process, each arising dependent on the dissolution of the previous one in continuity without any break in between their appearing. They will come and go as long as we are ignorant of the nature of their existence and in our ignorance, we crave for the coming of life, not knowing that its stay is only temporary, and that where there is life, death follows. Thus we drift from existence to existence, until we find the anchor of Dhamma, from which we acquire the knowledge to end the process. It is the contemplation of death; the conviction that it will come upon us at any time, beyond our control, that softens the hardest of hearts, showering others with love and compassion, and destroys the barriers of caste, creed and race among the peoples of this earth all of whom are subject to the common destiny of death. With this knowledge the fear of death is no more and we can go on with life knowing that we are ready at any time that death calls. This is facing reality and it builds calmness and clear thinking in our lives.

In the *Anguttara Nikaya* the Buddha has said, "Oh Monks, there are ten ideas, which if made to grow, made much of, are of great fruit, of great profit for plunging into *nibbana*, for ending up in *nibbana*." Of these ten, one is death. Contemplation on death and on other forms of sorrow such as old age, and disease, constitutes a convenient starting point for the long line of investigation and meditation that will ultimately lead to Reality.

How great and useful is the contemplation of death can be seen from the following beneficial effects enumerated in the *Visuddhi*

Magga: -- "The disciple who devotes himself to this contemplation of death is always vigilant, takes no delight in any form of existence, gives up hankering after life, censures evil doing, is free from craving as regards the requisites of life, his perception of impermanence becomes established, he realizes the painful and soulless nature of existence and at the moment of death he is devoid of fear, and remains mindful and self-possessed. Finally, if in this present life he fails to attain to *nibbana*, upon the dissolution of the body he is bound for a happy destiny." Thus it will be seen that mindfulness of death not only purifies and refines the mind but also has the effect of robbing death of its fears and terrors, and helps one at that solemn moment when he is letting go of his last breath, to face that situation with fortitude and calm. He is never unnerved at the thought of death but is always prepared for it.

While we are alive we should be preparing for death, for if we only think of death at the moment of dying we will be too late and there is nothing we can do to prepare ourselves for the changeover. In the *Majjhima Nikaya, Devaduta Sutta* we are reminded to be constantly on the lookout for the Five Divine messengers that will surely appear before us and should we recognise them we will be ready when the time comes to report to King Yama, as did King Makhadeva (*Sutta 83, Majjhima Nikaya*) when his barber showed him a grey hair and said "The divine messengers have appeared, Sire." Thus was the King ready to prepare himself for the events that followed.

And what are the divine messengers? A young tender infant, wallowing in its own excrement and urine; an old man or woman, crooked and doubled up, supported by a walking stick, tottering frail, youth gone, teeth broken, grey haired with limbs all blotchy etc., a sick person uncared for lying in his own excrement and urine; a robber being caught and punished by torture and whipping and executed; a dead person, bloated and mangled, oozing pus and matter, maggot ridden and smelly. These are the divine messengers and we should earnestly take heed of the message inherent in these messengers; else when death finally arrives, we are not ready and we struggle to hold on

for a few moments more to complete our responsibilities. It is too late! Not acknowledging the divine messengers, one truly does not understand that existence is only for the moment and that all the sensuous desires are but temporary and impermanent in nature.

What are the Modes of Death ?

The *Abhidhamma* defines death as the cutting off of the life faculty and occurs due to the following 4 causes:

- (1) Through the expiration of the life-span exemplified by the exhaustion of the oil in an oil lamp, when the oil is used up the light goes off just like the end of one's life span. This is the kind of death that comes about for the beings in those realms of existence where the life-span is bound by a definite limit, such as on the human plane, where this is understood as death due to old age and of a natural cause. The present life span is around seventy-five years. During the Buddha's time, a person would live up to a hundred years. For every hundred years, life span is diminished by a year. Therefore, after two thousand five hundred years, a person can expect to live up to about seventy-five years.
- (2) Through the expiration of the productive kammic force, exemplified by the exhaustion of the wick; here is still oil but the wick is burnt out so life ends. This is the kind of death that takes place when the kamma generating rebirth expends its force even though the normal life-span is not exhausted and there are otherwise favourable conditions for the prolongation of life.
- (3) Simultaneous exhaustion of both kamma force and expiration of life-term, as in the simultaneous exhaustion of both wick and oil.
- (4) Action of a stronger kamma that suddenly cuts off the power of the reproductive kamma before expiry of the life-term, as in a gust of wind blows out the light although there is still oil and wick. Death in this way is tragically premature.

Untimely deaths: The emergence of the destructive kamma that causes premature death.

The first three types of death are called Timely Death while the last one is called Untimely Death.

“Death -- just let it go along its way. All the things of this world die, they have death built-in. How can you expect them to be constant and enduring when the time comes for them to die, they have to die. Nothing can constrain or contradict this. Even *arahants* have to die; for them however, there is the difference that they pass away without concern and worry. As for us, we're worried even before we die perturbed and possessive. In death, the worry and possessiveness intensify so that they pile up into a threat bigger than a mountain. Be careful not to let that happen to you. Make sure you get beyond such anxieties.” Quote from a Thai meditation teacher.

Ledi Sayadaw had the following question put to him: On the death of a sentient being, is there a 'soul' that wanders about at will?

“When a sentient being leaves one existence, it is reborn either as a human being, a Deva, a Brahma, an inferior animal or as denizen of one of the regions of hell. The sceptics and the ignorant people hold that there are intermediate stages (*Antarabhava*), between these, and that there are beings who are neither of the human, the Deva nor the Brahma worlds, nor of any one of the states of existences recognised in the Scriptures but are in an intermediate stage. Some assert that these transitional beings are possessed of the five khandhas.*

Some assert that these beings are detached 'souls' or spirits with no material envelopes and some again that they are possessed of the faculty of seeing like Devas and further, that they have the power of changing at will, at short intervals from one to any of the existences above. Others again hold the erroneous theory that these beings can and do fancy themselves to be in other than the existence they are actually in; for example, one such being who is

a poor person and yet fancies himself to be rich, he may be in hell and yet fancies himself to be in the land of Devas and so on. This belief, during the intermediate stage between existences is false and is not recognised in the Buddhist Teachings. A human being in this life, who by his kamma is destined to be a human being in the next will be reborn as such, one who by his kamma is destined to be a deva in the next, will appear in the land of devas, and one whose life is to be in hell will be found in one of the regions of hell in the next existence.

The idea of an entity or 'soul' or spirit 'going', 'coming', 'changing', 'transmigrating' from one existence to another is one entertained by the ignorant and the materialistic and is certainly not verified by the *dhamma*. There is no such thing as 'going', 'coming', 'changing', etc., in between existences. The concept which is in accordance with the *dhamma* may perhaps be illustrated by the picture thrown out by the cinematograph, or the sound emitted by the gramophone, and the relation to the film or the sound-box and disc respectively. For example, a human being dies and is reborn in the land of the *devas*. Though these two existences are different, yet the link or continuity between the two at death is unbroken in point of time. And so in the case of a man whose future existence is to be the nethermost hell; even though the distance between hell and the abode of man appears to be great, yet in point of time the continuity of 'passage' from the one existence to the other is unbroken, and no intervening matter or space can interrupt the transit of this man's kamma from the world of human beings to the regions of hell. The 'passage' from one existence to another is instantaneous and the transition is infinitely quicker than the blink of an eyelid or a flash of lightning.

Kamma determines the realm of rebirth and the state of existence in such realm of all transient beings (in the cycle of existences which have to be traversed till the attainment of *nibbana*).

*They are corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness (Pali: *rupa* and *nama*, of which *nama* is *vedana*, *sanna*, *sankhara* and *viññana*).

Kamma in their results are manifold and may be effected in many ways. Religious offerings (*dana*) may obtain for a man the privilege of rebirth as a human being, or as a *deva* in one of the six *deva* worlds according to the degree of the merit of the deeds performed. And so with the observance of religious duties (*sila*). The five *jhana* or states of enlightenment, are found in the Brahma worlds or Brahma-loka up to the summit, the twentieth Brahma world. And so with bad deeds, the perpetrators of which are to be found grade by grade down to the lowest depths of the nethermost hell. Thus, our kamma, past, present and future, were, are and will ever be the sum total of our deeds, good, indifferent or bad, according to whether our actions are good, indifferent or bad. As will be seen from the foregoing, our kamma determines the changes in our existences.

'Evil spirits' are therefore not beings in an intermediate or transitional stage of existence, but are really very inferior beings and they belong to one of the following five realms of existence, namely:- world of men; world of *deva*; the regions of hell; animals below men; and *peta*.

They are very near the world of human beings. As their condition is unhappy, they are popularly considered as evil spirits. It is not true that all who die in this world are reborn as evil spirits, though human beings who die sudden or violent deaths are apt to be reborn in these lowest worlds of *deva*."

REBIRTH

The Buddha taught that rebirth is a continuing process from death to a new existence, without a break and there is no passing on of any form of entity to the next. Knowledge of rebirth was discovered by the Buddha on the night of his Enlightenment, at which time he also acquired the capacity to know his own previous lives and the lives of other sentient beings. It was also at this time that he acquired the ability to know how beings find rebirth into the different planes of existence according to their deeds. The results of good or bad kamma can ripen in this life, the next or subsequent ones.

The Buddha taught that rebirth is dependent upon conditions and that these conditions are interrelated; the beginnings of which are not to be found. Rebirth is conditioned by kamma. The physical elements which make up the form of the being to be reborn is dependent upon the quality of his or her actions in previous existences.

Repeated rebirths is unavoidable so long as there are clingings and cravings in the mind. It is always pleasant to be kind to all beings; humans or otherwise, as we cannot see into the circumstances of our rebirth or of others. Who knows when one will be experiencing the results of bad kamma? Man is not able to know his past. According to the Buddha the past actions condition the circumstances of the present. Among these circumstances we must include our characters, which even in brothers, so often differ. Even if the past is beyond repair, we can at least gain by our present knowledge and act with greater caution for the future.

The law of Cause and Effect, is indisputably acknowledged today; it is generally accepted that nothing arises without a cause. But few realise that the chain of causes can go beyond human perception. This can be applied to past, present and future. Few today would refute this simple principle, yet it is comparatively new to western thought although followers of the Buddha have known it for thousands of years. The Buddha, however, took the law to its logical conclusion and applied it to our lives. Through our ignorance in the past we do not realise that we are the owners of rebirth producing kamma. With this kamma and the new birth, there arises mind and body. These give rise to the senses, relationship with the senses and the sensations we experience. Our sensations manifest themselves as desires and attachments to things and ideas. These determine our actions and therefore kamma, which in turn brings about rebirth. Rebirth provides the condition for continuing mind and body, senses and cravings, kamma and further rebirth. So the chain goes on and on. It will go on and on, but only if we do not find the key to break the chain and bring it to an end. Where is the chain to be

broken? The links that seem the strongest are also the ones we can sever ourselves. They are the links of craving and attachment. Conquer these and you conquer rebirth, suffering, woe and despair.

Every birth is conditioned by the past good or bad kamma which predominates at the moment of death. Bodily forms are only the outward manifestations of the unseen kammic energy, and this energy carries with it all the characteristics which lie latent, but arises to the surface at unexpected moments. The death of a person is merely the temporary end of an ever-changing phenomenon, the present form perishing and another taking its place in accordance with the thought that was most powerful at the death moment; for at the last moment of one's present life, a forceful evil kamma may appear, conditioning one's rebirth into the realm of misery (*dugati*). However, if one's meritorious kamma appears, one's mind will become glorious and hence one will be reborn into the realm of happiness (*sugati*).

One unit of consciousness perishes only to give birth to another, persistently flowing on like a river. When a person is about to die, no renewed physical function occurs. The material qualities of the body which are produced by kamma, temperature, mind and nutriment from food, arise no more; this critical stage being comparable to the flickering of a lamp just before it is extinguished. Now to this dying man one of three things appears very vividly before his mind's eye, namely:

- (1) kamma,
- (2) kamma *nimitta* or
- (3) *Gati nimitta*

(1) **kamma**. - by kamma is meant intentional action, whether good or bad and is of four kinds:

(a) *weighty* kamma. Action that conditions the future birth, such *weighty* kamma will certainly produce results in this life or in the next. It can be good or bad; such a thing as meditational practice, for example being good and killing which is bad, especially so in

the case of serious crimes involving matricide, patricide, the murder of an arahant or the mere wounding of a Buddha. As said above, *weighty* kamma such as that just mentioned, will for certain produce unwholesome results in this life or the next. If a dying man has no such *weighty* kamma as the object of his dying thought he may see an action, kamma, done immediately prior to the death moment.

(b) death proximate kamma. Owing to the great part it plays in determining the future birth, much importance is attached to the type of object of the final dying thought moment. The custom of reminding the dying man of good deeds performed by him, and letting him see wholesome things like robes and other offerings, which they will offer on his behalf, still prevails in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and other Buddhists countries.

Sometimes a bad person may die happily and receive a good birth, if fortunately he remembers or does a good act at the last moment. But although he enjoys a good rebirth, this does not mean he will be exempted from the effects of the evil deeds he performed during his many previous lifetimes. On occasion, a good person may die unhappily by suddenly remembering an evil act of his, or by harbouring some unpleasant thought perchance compelled by unfavourable circumstances. This was what happened to Queen Mallika who at the moment of death recollected a certain misdeed she had done and was reborn in Avici hell for a period of seven days, although all her adult life had been devoted to the Buddha. King Pasenadi was overcome by grief as he loved her very much. He asked the Buddha where she had been reborn. The Buddha not wishing to add to his grief did not answer him for seven days, after which he told King Pasenadi that she had been reborn in Tusita heaven. These, however are exceptional cases, for as a rule the last thought moment is conditioned by the general conduct of a person. In any event it is always advisable to remind the dying person of his good deeds, and to turn his attention away from all worldly bonds and worries.

(c) *habitual* kamma. It is the type of action that one habitually performs and remembers, and these habits, whether good or bad, become second nature, tending to form the character of a person. In one's leisure moments one frequently reverts to a characteristic type of thought. A miser for instance, will constantly be thinking of his money and may not be able to detach his mind from his cherished possessions; a social worker will be interested in his social activities; a spiritual adviser will be always intent on his spiritual work. Thus each one of us may be dominated by our habitual doings, especially at our death moment. In the absence of all these as objects of the dying thought moment, some causal act is presented from the accumulated reserves of the endless past of each being.

(d) *cumulative* kamma, reserves of causal deeds, accumulated from beginless past actions, which may at any time become the object of the dying thought moment.

So one of these four actions, kamma, naturally appears very vividly before the mind's eye of the dying man, ie.,(a) *weighty* kamma, (b) *death proximate* kamma, (c) *habitual* kamma and (d) *cumulative* kamma.

(2) **kamma nimitta**. In the case of kamma *nimitta* the object of the dying thought moment is that thing appearing in the form of a sight, sound, smell, taste, touch or idea which has dominantly been associated with the performance of a particular kamma, such as knives in the case of a butcher, patients in the case of a doctor, an object of worship in the case of a devotee, etc.

(3) **Gati nimitta**. Is the object of the dying thought moment which takes the form of some sign or indication of the place where the dying man will take rebirth; a thing which frequently appears to dying persons. Symbols of one's destiny may be forests, mountainous regions, mother's womb, celestial mansions, etc. When these indications of the future birth occur, and if they are bad, they can be turned into good. This is done by influencing the thoughts of the dying man so that his good thoughts may

now act as good *proximate* kamma, and counteract the influence of the bad kamma which would otherwise affect his subsequent birth. An example is the case of a mental patient in a hospital where I was then working, who had visions of chains round his neck and was trying to remove them vigorously. Another is the case of the brahmin, who saw heavenly chariots awaiting him when he was about to pass away.

During the time of the Buddha, Cunda, a butcher, would tie up his pigs, beat them until they become swollen and then scald them. This is said to make the resultant meat tastier. A week before his death he was squealing and crawling like a pig. The monks informed the Buddha mistakenly that Cunda was busily slaughtering pigs, but the Buddha replied that he was actually behaving like one. His mentality and behaviour were those of a pig. He was destined for Avicci Hell (bottomless hell).

The last thought moment, which is death consciousness, is called *Cuti Citta*. A thought moment has three stages (a) arising, (b) static, (c) cessation. The arising and perishing of a thought moment occurs a billion times in the twinkling of an eye, or the snapping of two fingers or in the time of a flash of lightning. Only the Buddha can see the arising and perishing of this thought moment because he is omniscient. As he approaches death, the dying man's consciousness gets weaker. If he grasps at any one of the above three death signs, that will become the object of his rebirth consciousness. Rebirth comes after Death in an unending continuous process.

The process of rebirth after death is an immediate one, following on the last conscious moment of life in the dying being. There is no room for an intermediate state. Adherents to the Theravada teachings do not believe that the spirit of the deceased person takes lodgement in a certain state until it finds a suitable place for its rebirth. Rebirth takes place immediately, and there is no difference in time whether one is born in heaven or in a state of misery, as an animal, a human or into any one of the Thirty One Planes of Existence

In rebirth, the new being which is the present manifestation of the stream of kamma-energy is not the same as, and has no identity with the previous one in its line; the aggregates that make up its composition being different from, and having no identity with those that make up the being of its predecessor. And yet it is not an entirely different being, since it has the same stream of kamma-energy.

In the Buddha's explanation of rebirth; on the cessation of the last moment of consciousness in this present life, the first moment of consciousness of the next life arises. There is no interval or gap between these two moments of consciousness, it is a continuation of the same process without a break. However the last conscious moment conditions the form of existence that is the following rebirth consciousness. In this way, present consciousness passes away to be replaced by the following life consciousness in a continuous stream of the same process. There is no soul or any form of permanent entity following the consciousness. The relinking consciousness is endowed with the energies of the fading consciousness of the existence in the previous process.

In this process all the conditions required for the conception of the being must be present, only then will the being to be reborn be able to take on its life. In the Buddha's own words; "*Bhikkhus*, the conception of an embryo in a womb takes place through the union of three things. Here, there is the union of the mother and father, but it is not the mother's season, and the being to be reborn is not present; in this case there is no conception of an embryo in a womb. Here there is the union of the mother and father and it is the mother's season, but the being to be reborn is not present; in this case too there is no conception of an embryo in a womb. But when there is the union of the mother and father, and it is the mother's season and the being to be born is present, through the union of these three things the conception of an embryo in a womb takes place." says the Buddha. (*Majjhima Nikaya Sutta* 38.26). The mother and father serve only as material base for the new living being.

The craving for existence is an exceptionally strong energy that dominates a man's subconscious mind. Science tells us that energy is never lost or destroyed and the craving to go living is so strong as to be able to exist in another being at the right condition. The energy that leaves the body at death does not disintegrate, but is reformed into another new being ready for rebirth. At the last thought moment of a dying being this single most powerful kammic energy will grasp at the opportunity to relive in another being ready to be born when right conditions prevail. This is not a phenomenon to be marvelled at as this is a natural law. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so the kammic energy will find the nearest right condition to enter its new home and thus a new being is born, which is not the same being as before and yet not any different as it is the same kammic stream that is flowing along till conditions arise for its cessation.

Egerton C. Baptist puts it succinctly when he wrote: "For, the energy generated by the act of craving is directive and tremendous in its effect. That is to say, whenever we crave, the energy so created will bring about that object that we crave. Whatever we desire strong enough and definitely enough we shall obtain.....further afield the cravings of our previous existence also pre-dispose us to our present cravings. If they have been specific along certain lines; say the desire to become builder of houses; the results will also be specific as far as the new circumstances will allow. In the next birth then, we shall become builders of dwelling houses through an innate tendency that will drive us to that direction.

In our next birth then we shall show aptitude to building blocks; in youth we shall desire to erect tents and other shelters or study architecture; in manhood we shall become building contractors or architects. There is always an intermingling accumulation of energies from previous cravings, some stronger, some weaker, some more definite, some less so, they will, all of them tend to come to the surface sooner or later, as opportunities present themselves and as they are evoked by circumstances. That is why human life is so varied and in many respects so contrary.

Whatever energy has been generated, that must also be released. Craving generates energies; action releases it!

This tendency to action, this generated and stored up energy is what constitutes our self. We are nothing more nor less than tendency to action resulting from cravings.”

Thus human birth depends on four conditions; namely; the man, the woman, the woman’s generative capability and the kammic life force of one who has died. Any one of these conditions not being fulfilled; the new being will not find rebirth.

From this we know that rebirth takes place because of conditions and these are the cravings to live; the clinging to life due to man’s ignorance; because of these man will go through the rounds of life, not knowing that all these are impermanent, not substantial and full of suffering. As long as man do not realise these three characteristics of life, he will desire to go on life after life, aeons after aeons, seeking what is to him sensuous gratification, which will always allude him till the meritorious deeds he has performed direct him to the correct path and then he will find the way to eradicate the defilement keeping him tied to the rounds of suffering he calls life.

If we were to obtain a quick motion picture of any particular individual’s life form from his birth to his death, the most striking fact that would attract our attention would be the changes that will be manifested throughout the series of pictures. The infant changes to the child; the child to the adult; the adult to the decrepit old person who collapses to death. These changes go on in every part of the individual’s body; not only in the body but also in the mind, so that any adult individual who surveys his own existence will realize that the child that was, is now no more. That child had a different body, in size as well as in form, different likes and dislikes and different aspirations. That child is almost a stranger to the present adult. And yet the adult is held responsible for whatever the child had done in his childhood as there is continuity (or identity) in the process of life-force from childhood to manhood, as the child becomes a man.

In exactly the same way the new being is endowed with the same stream of *kammic* energy or life-force as its predecessor, so it is responsible for whatever its predecessor has done. This new being has as much identity with the previous one as the adult individual of today has with the child that was; nothing less nothing more.

This is well expressed in the *Milinda Panha*. King Milinda asked *Arahant Nagasena* whether he who is reborn remains the same or becomes another. "Neither the same nor another", was the answer he received.

"Suppose, O King, that a man were to light a lamp, would it burn the night through?"

"Yes, it might do so, Venerable Sir."

"Now, is it the same flame that burns in the first watch of the night, Sir, and in the second?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Or the same that burns in the second watch and in the third?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Then is there one lamp in the first watch, and another in the second, and another in the third?"

"No, the light comes from the lamp all the night through."

"Just so, O King, is the continuity of a person or a thing maintained. One passes away, another comes into being; and the rebirth is, as it were, a continuous stream, without a break. Thus neither as the same nor as another does a man go on to the last phase of his self-consciousness."

Asked for another illustration, *Arahant Nagasena* gives that of milk which, once it is taken from the cow, after a lapse of time, turns first to curd, and then from curds to butter, and then from butter to ghee. Just as it would not be correct to say that the milk was the same thing as curds, or the butter, or the ghee, but that they are produced out of it, so he points out the continuity of a person or a thing as being maintained in the same way.

There is also the illustration of a wave of water in a lake or the ocean. A certain mass of water is raised up as a wave. As the wave passes on, or seems to pass on, a moment or so later it is

not the same mass of water that forms the wave, but a different mass altogether. Yet we speak of the wave "passing on".

The being in this present existence, is conditioned by the circumstances in the previous, and all past existences. One's present position in character and circumstances is the result of all that one has been in previous existences; but what one will be in the future depends on what one does now in the present. The true adherent to the Buddha's teachings regards death as a momentary incident between one life and its successor, and views its approach with calmness. His only concern is that his future should be such that the conditions of that life, should he be reborn into the human world, may provide him with better opportunities for perfecting himself, spiritually. Better still, that in the present life his training may end in his attaining *nibbana*. Understanding, as he does, the great doctrine of kamma, he perceives that it is within his power to alter or modify the quality of the life that continues in the next rebirth, and that his future environment will be conditioned entirely by what he had done and how he had behaved, in this and in his previous lives.

Let us digress a bit to study some cases of rebirth conditioned by actions of the past.

Some years ago in Britain, a 32-year-old housewife named Naomi Henry recalled two of her previous lives while under hypnotic treatment. Naomi was the mother of four children. A compulsive smoker, she agreed to undergo hypnotic treatment to explore the possibility of stopping the habit. She was guided to recall beyond her present life. She recalled that in a previous life she was born Mary Cohan who married a man named Charles Gaul much against her will. She had two children, Pat and Will; but she was dissatisfied with the marriage because her husband had ill-treated her. Trembling with fear she described how her husband had beaten her to death.

She was able to recall that she married Gaul, more than a century ago. The events she described were subsequently verified by a parish priest in the village she named. The priest found the

records pertaining to the marriage of Mary Cohan and Charles Gaul. The authenticity of her story has been established beyond doubt.

Shanti was born in 1926 in Delhi, India. From about her third year she made references to her former life, where she stayed in a village 60 miles from Delhi. Identifying herself as Lugdi, she said, she was married to a cloth merchant named Kadar Nath Chaubey; and that she died ten days after giving birth to a boy. Her perplexed parents wrote about these revelations to Chaubey, who they discovered was still alive and who confirmed the correctness of all the information. Chaubey also visited the girl's home unannounced, but she had no difficulty in identifying him. Inquiries revealed that the girl had never been out of her native Delhi, and on a subsequent documented visit to her previous life's village she was able to substantiate her story. This case was investigated in 1936 by the International Aryan League.

In Sri Lanka, a boy by the name of Wijeyratne was born in January 17, 1947 in the village of Kaltota, off Balangoda, he was slightly deformed at birth with a thin and emaciated right hand which had fingers that were half the normal size. He also had a marked hollow on the right side of his chest below the right collar-bone and the right armpit. At the age of three, Wijeyratne developed the habit of walking around the house muttering to himself whenever he was alone. On one occasion his mother overheard him saying that the deformity on his right hand was due to having stabbed his wife in his previous life. Subsequently he provided further details about the circumstances surrounding the stabbing and the murder charge brought against him. These details were substantiated on checking the records of the Supreme Court.

Is there such a thing as a human being who is reborn and who is able to speak accurately of his or her past existence?

Ledi Sayadaw said: Certainly, this is not an uncommon occurrence and is in accordance with the tenets of Buddhism in respect to

kamma. Such a person is called a *jatisara puggalo* from *jati*, existence; *sara*, remembering; and *puggalo*, rational being.

The following (who form an overwhelming majority of human beings) are unable to remember their past existences if and when reborn as human beings.

Children who die young.

Those who die old and senile.

Those who are strongly addicted to the drug or drink habit.

Those whose mothers during their conception, have been sickly or have had to toil laboriously, or have been reckless or imprudent during pregnancy. The children in the womb being stunned and startled lose all knowledge of their past existences.

The following are possessed of a knowledge of their past existences:

Those who are not reborn (in the human world) but proceed to the world of *devas*, of Brahmas or to the regions of hell, remember their past existences.

Those who die sudden deaths from accidents, while in sound health may also be possessed of this faculty in the next existence, provided that the mothers, in whose wombs they are conceived, are healthy, clean lived and quiet women.

Again, those who live steady, meritorious lives and who (in their past existences) have striven to attain, and have prayed for this faculty often attain it.

TYPES OF REBIRTH.

- (a) '*Opapatika-patisandhi*': spontaneous rebirth. *Deva*, Brahma, sinners in hell, *peta*, *asura*, *yakka* are beings reborn with mature bodies, without having to pass through development stages. Born conditioned by their kamma and have no parents.
- (b) '*Samedaja-patisandhi*': moisture born. Insects and some form of sentient beings. These have no parents and are born conditioned by their kamma.

- (c) '*Andaja-patisandhi*': egg born.
(d) '*Jalabuja-patisandhi*' : womb born. Humans and mammals.
Also some inferior *deva*.
Conceived in the mother's womb. It is the fertilisation of the sperm and the ovum.

(For further reading and also some other cases of unusual rebirth refer to "Abhidhamma in Daily Life" , Chapter Nine, by Ashin Janakabhivamsa, translated from Burmese by U Ko Lay).

The words reincarnation or transmigration have no place in the Buddha's Teachings as they have connotations of permanent entities or souls that go on to the next material body; these entities or souls will continue on the phenomenon of entering new lives in a continuous stream. Such a theory has no bearing on renewed life force in the Buddha's teachings. Such a theory too, presupposes the existence of a super permanent being able to oversee the lives of living beings everywhere, whereas the Teachings of the Buddha is absolutely free from the believe in such a being who stands guard over all other beings as a judge and executioner, regulating all life forms and everything in the universes. This does not conform to the Buddha's Teachings that all beings have three characteristic; namely that all things are impermanent, non-entity and full of unsatisfactoriness. Everything is dependent on a cause and furthermore, there is no first cause.

It is not possible to trace a first cause or the origin of anything. The Buddha emphatically declared that the first beginning of existence is something not conceivable and those who try to do so would only be rewarded with mental derangement. However there is a natural law of cause and effect. The cause or the arising of life is dependent on the ignorance and cravings built up in a being and accumulated through many life times.

"There is no such thing as chance. Every event is the consequence of previous events; everything that happens is the effect of a combination of multitude of prior causes; and like cause always produce like effects. The laws of causality and of the uniformity

of nature prevail everywhere and always." (Viscount Simon; *Belief and Action* {Penguin Books; 1939}).

A SIMPLE FUNERAL

As a sequel to this Dhamma talk it would be appropriate to make a few notes on how a Theravadin Funeral may be conducted, bearing in mind that at death, nothing is left and the five aggregates that make up the person when alive has disintegrated and returned to the elements that had conditioned its rising.

Sabbe sankhara aniccati. All compounded things are impermanent, the Buddha said.

First, a few words as to what should be done before death. When a person is seriously ill and near death, it is a good practice to invite one or more monks to his or her bedside to give a Dhamma discourse, to chant suttas and to administer the Three Refuges. Taking the Five Precepts too at this juncture, should be necessary for one who professes to be an earnest follower of the Buddha's Teachings, as he or she will find joy and comfort in being able to see and hear a monk.

A person who is aware of his last moments in this existence should keep his mind calm, peaceful and mindful as death approaches. He should reflect on the good deeds that he had done and feel confident that these good deeds would give him a good rebirth in his future existences. He should accept death as a natural and inevitable process, reflecting that he and all beings come and go according to the kamma that they had accumulated. By gracefully letting go and accepting death, a person would expire peacefully and hopefully gain a good rebirth in the heavenly realms or if in the human world, that he or she may be born to good circumstances as an intelligent human being.

In view of the fact that all beings are owners of their own kamma, it is important that while alive they do good deeds and live wholesome lives so that they are assured of a happy rebirth on dying. Of course, the final goal of all existences should be the

attainment of *nibbana*, which is the cessation of all sufferings and release from returning to the rounds of *samsara*.

Though it is understandable that there will be grieving and sorrow at the time of death, it is good for family members to restraint themselves from weeping and wailing in front of the dying person. This is because such tears and emotion will only upset the dying person making it more difficult for him or her to depart. One should allow a person to go peacefully, understanding that when one's time has come one has to go. Undue clinging and attachment will only conduce to more suffering. In fact, family members may assure the dying person that he or she need not worry about them, that he or she should keep the mind calm and peaceful and that it is alright to go when the time has come. In this way the dying person too may feel relieved and expire peacefully.

When death finally claims the person, the body should be cleansed and clothed. A simple and neat attire will do. Jewelry and ornaments, real or imitation, should not be worn. This is because the deceased had already taken rebirth and would not be able to take anything along with him.

At the moment of death, should a person have many attachments, he or she will not be ready to leave this world. Due to this clinging he or she will not find rebirth as a human being, but rather as a hungry ghost. Such a hungry ghost will return to the place of its attachment and remain haunting it as it has not prepared itself to leave this world. To ensure a better future rebirth for such a hungry ghost, merits accrued from performing *dana* should be transferred to and shared with it. This practice of sharing of merits is widely adhered to in Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka. However in Malaysian society, with a mixture of Taoism and Buddhism, such a practice is rarely seen or understood.

During the funeral ceremony family members should keep peace with one another as, if the deceased was still around, he or she would hope that all the family members get along well and be

safe. The deceased would not like to see them bickering and arguing over any matter regarding properties and so on.

As for the casket, it need not be expensive. It may be moderately priced or, if one is poor, a cheaply priced one will do as well. An understanding person would not want his or her family to incur unnecessary expense. He would instead prefer that *dana* be done with the money that is saved through having a simple funeral.

A photo of the deceased may be put before the casket. Dhamma wordings, such as the last words of the Buddha: *All conditioned phenomena are subject to dissolution. Strive on with diligence for the liberation from suffering*, may be put up as a form of edification and inspiration, so others may reflect and live meaningful lives.

There are many Chinese funeral traditions and taboos mistakenly believed to be accepted Buddhist practice. However a person following the teachings of the Buddha who wishes the deceased to have a proper funeral, should discard many of these practices. With no disrespect or offence meant to those who wish to follow Chinese funeral rites and rituals, the following advice is meant only for those who wish to bury their deceased according to correct Theravadin principles:

Firstly we need to differentiate between custom and religion. Custom is a local practice. For example, certain families allow guests to gamble while they accompany the mourners through the night; this is to allow guests to have some entertainment, otherwise they may find it boring and depressing to sit the night through. However, those in mourning should not be involved. Others should take charge of these activities. With some activities to occupy them, the guests and mourners can keep awake through the night. Money should not be placed on the table. Such localised activities are customary and not religious in nature.

It would be good to inform your guests and visitors that you do not accept joss-papers and other similar items. However should any relatives wish to practise or perform other rites of respecting

the deceased, they should be allowed to do so, for the sake of respecting their good intentions. Should some relatives criticise your form of practice; it is an opportune time to explain to them that this is the way the Buddha taught.

It is a Chinese tradition that relatives and friends visit the family of the deceased to pay their last respects. To welcome such visitors, simple food, fruits and other light refreshments are usually served. In line with their own tradition, some relatives may offer a roast pig as a mark of respect to the deceased; the offer may be accepted and allowed to be displayed on the table. However family members of the deceased should not follow such a practice, as such an offering means a life has to be taken on behalf of the deceased, thus creating bad kamma for the deceased's next rebirth which may then be short-lived. I am sure that it is our hope and sincere wish that the deceased be reborn to a long and fruitful life. Family members should not commit any killing on the deceased's behalf.

Following some old traditions, persons of some substance will organise their own funeral arrangement themselves, in readiness at their own demise. They will prepare expensive items of jewellery, such as jade, rings, bracelet and other precious stones, in the mistaken believe that if these expensive items of jewellery were to be buried with them when they die, they will be able to buy themselves a good passage through hell, should they land there.

When a person passes away funeral directors will prepare the corpse for its last rites. Unscrupulous funeral directors when performing these rites, and when embalming the corpse, will take the opportunity to take away the expensive jewellery, as they line the coffin with joss-paper and other paraphernalia. After arranging the corpse neatly, they will request the mourners to have a last look at the deceased. They however, will caution the mourners that they should be careful not to allow their shadow to fall onto the coffin; he warns that; if a person's shadow were to fall onto the coffin, such a person would follow the deceased to the other world or some other misfortune will befall him or

her. Superstitious and naive people who believe this explanation, will only glance at the coffin and then hurriedly turn away. The jewellery and expensive stones, that were meant to be buried with the corpse eventually end up in the funeral directors' pockets. This form of tradition has been passed down for generations, with unwholesome kamma accrued to those involved.

In some instances, the dead may not be buried immediately as some family members may be away overseas studying or on business and thus the dead may have to be kept for a longer time before burial. If the delay is expected to be lengthy, arrangements will have to be made for a place in the cemetery or death house to place the coffin. The corpse will start to rot and bloat. If the coffin is not sealed properly, an unpleasant stench will permeate; pus and slime will ooze from it. Thus, joss-papers are used to line the coffin and absorb the slime from the rotting corpse. However as time passed, the reason for this practice has been forgotten and it becomes a superstition.

Burning of joss-papers.

There is no need to burn joss papers and other paper paraphernalia as the Buddha's Teachings do not recommend that paper houses, maids, manservants and cars for the deceased be offered as a burnt offering. The burning of such items is a Taoist practice and even in China, where this belief originated, such practices are few to-day. This practice of offering and burning material possessions in the believe that the dead are able to enjoy their worldly material possessions in their next life is a superstitious belief and is not in line with the Buddha's Teachings, as such it should be discontinued. Furthermore such practices are dangerous and expensive.

The tradition of burning joss papers is to keep the mourners warm in the cold winters in China, while keeping awake at night watching over the corpse. Some also attribute this practice of burning joss papers near the feet of the corpse, to the need to light the way in the darkness of hell. Contrary to this believe, hell should be bright enough for the deceased to see the way.

Apropos, why is it assumed that the deceased is in hell and not in any heavenly abode? If the deceased had led a good life, surely he or she would have found instant rebirth in heaven, so where is the need to light the way? Do the relatives not have faith that the deceased's good deeds will surely find him or her in heavenly abodes? If they have faith in the morality of the deceased then there is no need to burn joss papers at all!

The Buddha said that when the dead is gone, the wise should take care of the living; especially so if those living are parents, more so if the surviving parent is a mother. The probability will be that all her children are living away from her. She will be sad and worried as her husband has passed away and she has nobody to turn to when she needs help. It is now the responsibility of the children to show their love and care by making regular visits to their surviving parent and venerate the deceased especially during festivals. Other members of the family should take this opportunity to visit the surviving parent and engender a closer family unit, the more so if they stay far away from each other. During Chinese New Year or other important occasions, it is good to meet and spend time together. In this way the living will be cared for and the wise will commend these actions, whereas disharmony among the siblings will cause them to be criticised.

We should be grateful to our departed parents for the love and care that they have showered on us. We should transfer merits to them whenever we perform any *dana*. Loving kindness, care and filial piety towards parents in the present life are wholesome actions which will accrue positive results in future existences. Wholesome deeds such as these should be practised in all urgency, as sometimes conditions may not afford us the opportunity, even if we desire to do so.

Practising proper funeral rites according to the Buddha's Teachings is practical and economical as it is very easy to spend exorbitantly for a funeral, which in any event is unnecessary and will not benefit the deceased. In the Chinese tradition, name and fame is very important, especially so if the family is well to-do. Sons and daughters, will stage demonstrations of filial piety such

as; crying and wailing, processions of musical bands, burning of paper representations of material possessions of houses, cars and so forth, performing operas for the dead and other traditional practices. Such opulent demonstrations are for public consumption and are more to appease the conscience of the living than anything else.

Such expenses should be avoided and it would be better to save for the future generations, as such extravagant demonstrations do not benefit the deceased, but go to enrich the funeral directors and suppliers of such products. Donating to worthy causes such as old folks' homes, needy children's funds or any other humanitarian needs would serve the deceased better, as the benefits of the meritorious acts when transferred to the deceased would help it in gaining a better rebirth in future existences. In addition those responsible for initiating these meritorious deeds on behalf of the deceased also reap the benefits. This is a "A win-win situation" for all concerned.

A dying man left RM13,000/- to his family for his funeral expenses. His instructions to them were to spend within the budget of RM10,000/-. Following the dead man's wishes the family ordered a small paper house. However, the undertaker recommended that it would be just as economical to have the paper version of the deceased's worldly possessions; "We will bill you later and it will not cost much." They were repeatedly assured that it would not cost much to do this and that. However, at the end of the day the expenses amounted to RM17,000/- !

There is no sense whatever in performing other practices of dubious origin, such as placing a basin of water and towel under the casket (because the deceased can't possibly make use of this); a bowl of rice with chopsticks in front of the casket (the deceased cannot partake of such food); hanging mosquito netting over the casket and displaying decorative lighting around the casket. Burning joss sticks or candles before the casket is also not advisable as this may cause a fire.

However as Chinese we have some traditions which we should abide by, for example the giving of “huat koi” or “good luck cakes” for the well-wishers when they leave after the ceremonies are over. Or as some people do, offer candles, red threads, sweets, fruits such as mandarins, oranges or apples. These going away gifts symbolise the gratitude of the bereaved family and wish the guests a safe trip home. Such a harmless and well meaning tradition should be preserved.

Doors may be closed at night when visitors have left, so family members may take a rest. After the funeral there is no need to hold a house cleansing ceremony to ward off bad luck. This is just a superstitious practice; there is also no need to wash ones face with holy water.

The Buddha taught that our true refuge or protection lies in our practice of *dana*, *sila* and *bhavana*; in the good kamma we create by doing good deeds, keeping precepts and meditating. Thus, if we follow the Buddha’s teachings in accordance with the Noble Eightfold Path, we would already have had the best protection and we should not resort to superstitious practices.

We should encourage simplicity and wisdom, remembering that the deceased would already have taken rebirth, and if he or she had been a knowledgeable Theravadin practitioner, he or she, too would have wanted to do away with meaningless rites and rituals.

Some tradition has it that the deceased be called to partake of breakfast and other meals just as if he or she was still alive. The Buddha has said that when a person has passed away, there is nothing left but the shell that was once a living person. As such the dead is not able to eat anymore. It is also not necessary to wail and cry. Some family members, demonstrating their filial piety to observers, cry and beat their chests when they see guests coming. If more than a hundred or more guests were to arrive everyday for the next ten days, the mourners will get very sick themselves.

There is also no need at all for the burning of paper houses, paper cars, “hell” money and other paper paraphernalia. In the same manner the conducting of various rites and rituals are unnecessary. All these would probably cost an astronomical sum of money and would be wholly wasted, as the deceased would not be able to benefit from any of these procedures nor would any merits be accumulated. According to Theravada practices, it is not possible that what is burned here can materialise in another world. What is burnt just stays burnt! And it is also not possible that the spirit can be guided from hell or some such location to heaven. Rebirth is instantaneous upon death and the nature of rebirth would depend generally on the kamma or deeds done by the person while he or she was still alive. Thus, the importance of living a virtuous life can never be over emphasized, as once a person dies, he or she cannot be expected to be “saved” by rites and rituals and the like.

The money that is saved from the abandoning of non-beneficial rites and rituals can instead be used to do *dana*, offerings of requisites to monks and temples and donations to charitable institutions in memory of the deceased. So too the family of the deceased can request that in lieu of wreaths; friends and relatives may make donations to charitable institutions. The merits accrued could then be dedicated to the deceased and to all beings.

There is no need for family members to wear specially made black or coarse clothes. One could wear ordinary clothes or wear white or some grey or plain sober colours to reflect the occasion. Traditionally gunny clothes were worn covering head to toe, serving as a hood for the head. They are usually supplied by the funeral parlour where one purchases the coffin. These clothings are often dirty, unwashed and soiled with the tears and phlegm of the previous users. How did such an unhealthy practice come about? In the cold winters in China, mourners who cannot afford warm clothes, used the cheap gunny or sack cloth to keep themselves warm. Others followed naively and soon the superstitious came to the belief that the wearing of such clothing signified the close relationship to the deceased.

We are taught by the Buddha to accept the fact of death and not to mourn or lament. Crying and weeping, the Buddha said would not bring back the dead but would only cause the living more suffering. He, Himself practised this and was praised by Sakka for this perfection. I would like to relate the following story from the Jataka Tales (No.354).

Once when Brahmadata was reigning in Benares, the Bodhisatta was born in a brahmin household, in a village outside the gates of Benares. He supported his family by farming. He had two children, a son and a daughter. When the son was grown up, the father brought a wife home for him from a family of equal rank with his own. Together with a female slave they composed a household of six. They lived happily and affectionately together. The Bodhisatta thus admonished his family; "According as ye have received; give alms, observe holy days, keep the moral law, dwell on the thought of death, be mindful of your moral state. For in the case of beings like ourselves, death is certain, life uncertain: all existing things are transitory and subject to decay. Therefore take heed to your ways day and night." They readily accepted his teaching and dwell earnestly on the thought of death.

Now one day as usual, the Bodhisatta went with his son to plough his field. While at the field the son gathered together the rubbish and set fire to it. Not far from where he was working, was an anthill in which lived a snake. The smoke hurt the snake's eyes. Coming out of his hole in a rage, it thought, "This is all due to that fellow," and bit him. The youth died on the spot. The Bodhisatta on seeing him fall, left his oxen and came to him and finding him dead, took him up and laid him at the foot of a certain tree and covering him up with a cloak, he neither wept nor lamented. He thought to himself, "That which is subject to dissolution is dissolved and that which is subject to death is dead. All compounded existences are transitory and liable to death." And recognising the transitory nature of things he went on with his ploughing. Seeing a neighbour pass close by the field, he asked, "Friend, are you going home?" and on his answering "Yes," the brahmin requested, "Please then go to our home and

say to the mistress, 'You are not to-day as formerly to bring food for two, but to bring for one only. And hitherto the female slave alone has brought the food, but to-day all four of you are to put on clean garments and come with perfumes and flowers in your hands,'"

"All right," the neighbour said and went and spoke these very words to the brahmin's wife.

She asked, "By whom, Sir, was this message given?" "By the brahmin; lady." he replied. Then she understood that her son was dead. But she did not so much as tremble. Thus showing perfect self-control and wearing white garments and with perfumes and flowers in her hand, she bade them bring food and accompanied the other members of the family to the field. But not one of them shed a tear or made lamentation. The Bodhisatta, still sitting in the shade where the youth lay, ate his food, and when his meal was finished, they all took up fire-wood and lifting the body on to the funeral pyre, they made offerings of perfumes and flowers and then set fire to it. But not a single tear was shed by anyone. All were dwelling on the thought of death.

Such was the efficacy of their virtue that the throne of Sakka manifested signs of heat. Sakka said, "Who, I wonder, is anxious to bring me down from my throne?" And on reflection he discovered that the heat was due to the force of virtue existing in these people and being highly pleased he said, "I must go to them and utter a loud cry of exultation like a roaring of a lion and immediately afterwards fill their dwelling place with the seven treasures." And going there in haste he stood by the side of the funeral pyre and asked, "What are you doing?"

"We are burning the body of a man, my lord."

"It is no man that you are burning," he said. "Me thinks you are roasting the flesh of some beast that you have slain."

"Not so, my lord," they said. "It is merely the body of a man that we are burning."

Then he said, "It must have been some enemy?"

The Bodhisatta said, "It is our own true son and no enemy."

“Then he could not have been dear as a son to you.”

“He was very dear, my lord.”

“Then why do you not weep?”

Then the Bodhisatta, to explain the reason why he did not weep, uttered the first stanza:

“Man quits his mortal frame, when joy in life is past,
E’en as a snake is wont its worn out slough to cast.
No friend’s lament can touch the ashes of the dead:
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.”

Thus Sakka questioned the other members of the family: the wife, the sister, the daughter-in-law and the handmaiden; and they all to explain their reason why they did not weep explained in stanzas as follows:

To the brahmin’s wife, “How, lady did the dead man stand to you?”

“I sheltered him ten months in my womb, and suckled him at my breast and directed the movements of his hands and feet and he was my grown-up son, my lord.”

“Granted lady, that a father from the nature of a man may not weep, a mother’s heart surely is tender. Why then do you not weep?”

Her reply was:

“Uncalled he hither came, unbidden soon to go;
E’en as he came, he went. What cause is there for woe?
No friend’s lament can touch the ashes of the dead:
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.”

To the sister: “Lady, what was the dead man to you?”

“He was my brother, my lord.”

“Lady, sisters surely are loving towards their brothers. Why do you not weep?”

Her reply was:

“Though I should fast and weep, how would it profit me?
My kith and kin alas! Would more unhappy be.

No friend's lament can touch the ashes of the dead:
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread."

To the daughter-in-law: "Lady, what was he to you?"
"He was my husband, my lord."
"Women, surely when a husband dies, as widows are helpless.
Why do you not weep?"
Her reply was:

"As children cry in vain to grasp the moon above,
So mortals idly mourn the loss of those they love.
No friend's lament can touch the ashes of the dead:
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread."

To the handmaiden: "Woman, what was he to you?"
"He was my master, lord."
"No doubt you must have been abused and beaten and
oppressed by him and therefore, thinking he is dead; happily, you
weep not?"
"Speak not so, my lord. This does not suit the case. My young
master was full of long-suffering and love and pity for me, and
was as a foster child to me."
"Then why do you not weep?"
Her reply was:

"A broken pot of earth, ah! Who can piece again?
So too to mourn the dead is nought but labour vain.
No friend's lament can touch the ashes of the dead:
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread."

Sakka after hearing what they all had to say, was greatly pleased
and said, "You have carefully dwelt on the thought of death.
Henceforth you are not to labour with your hands. I am Sakka,
king of heaven. I will create the seven treasures in countless
abundance in your house. You are to give alms, to keep the
moral law, to observe the holy days and take heed to your
ways." And thus admonishing them, he filled their houses with
countless wealth and so parted from them.

On the eve of the funeral day, monks should be invited to do some chanting, more for the benefit of the bereaved rather than the dead.

It is a good practice that on the day of a funeral, monks be invited to start the funeral ceremony by accepting *dana*, after which the *suttas* are recited and then the transfer of merits to the deceased. On the day of the funeral, after the appropriate *suttas* have been recited, the coffin should be taken outside for guests to pay their last respect. With the attending monks in the front of the cortege the funeral proceeds to the funeral parlour. After another chanting at the graveside or the crematorium, the coffin is lowered into the ground, *suttas* will again be recited. At this stage, the funeral directors will request that the mourners turn their backs to the deceased. This practice is not necessary and facing the coffin as it is lowered into the burial ground or into the crematorium is not hazardous or dangerous and will not cause the mourners to go to hell as is cautioned by the funeral directors. In fact in certain religious rites, clods of earth are thrown into the grave, signifying final release as it were.

While attending a funeral and there are monks present one should sit with legs pointing away from a Buddha image or the monks, and on a lower level to the monks, as they are fully ordained representatives of the Buddha

Once born a person is subject to old age, sickness, death and rebirth. All of us have gone through this process repeatedly through countless aeons, the tears that we had shed due to our sufferings are more than all the waters in the oceans of world. Sometimes in our rebirths, we are reborn as animals, different beings in the other planes of existence or in hell for very long spells. We may have killed or been killed for many a time; so much so that the blood we have shed in countless existences are also more than all the waters of the oceans in the world. All beings have been reborn so many times that whomever we meet in this present life has been a relative of ours in some past life as a father or son, a mother or a sister, a teacher or a pupil, a friend or a foe. The Buddha has said that it is highly improbable that

anybody we meet today has not been related to us in one way or another at some stage in our past lives. We are reborn due to the greed, anger and delusions inherent in all of us. When we fail to eradicate these defilements we will find rebirth into the lower realms such as hell, as an animal or as a hungry ghost. Thus we have all passed through the process of death and rebirth in countless times, yet we have never remembered the sufferings that we have gone through and we crave to return again and again. It should be our aspirations not to find rebirth at all and to aspire to reach the state of emancipation – *nibbana*.

References

A discourse on *PaticcaSamuppada* (Dependent Origination) by the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma

Reference: The Buddhist Doctrine of kamma and Rebirth by Venerable Narada Maha Thera.

Rebirth a Buddhist Concept by Sayadaw U Thittila/Ven.Pandit P.Sri Pamaratana Nayaka Thero.

Cases of rebirth: by Ven. Pandit P.Sri Pamaratana Nayaka Thero.

Buddhist Reflections on Death by V.F. Gunaratna.

Milinda's Question – Sacred Books of the East

Egerton C. Baptist: The Supreme Science of the Buddha.

Recommended reading; A Guide To Proper Buddhist Funeral by Koperasi Buddhisme Malaysia Berhad.

The Spectrum of Buddhism; Piyadassi: Ch.7

Abhidhamma in Daily Life. Chapter Nine by Ashin Janakabhivamsa translated by U Ko Lay.

A Talk of Kamma, Rebirth and Suffering; by the Ven. Sayadaw U Silanandabhivamsa, Rector Sayadaw; The International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University, Yangon at 9:30 a.m. on the 13th March, 1999

