

**A CRITICAL RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION
“DID THE BUDDHA TEACH REBIRTH?”**

**RESPON KRITIS ATAS PERTANYAAN
“APAKAH BUDDHA MENGAJARKAN KELAHIRAN KEMBALI?”**

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Abstract

The theory of rebirth is widely accepted in Indian philosophy and it is mostly connected with the soul which keeps moving from one life to another life. Since the Buddha rejects the concept of the eternal soul by presenting *Anatta* theory, many questions are risen whether the Buddha teaches rebirth. Some people assume that the Buddha accepts the doctrine of rebirth because it is popular in pre-Buddhist traditions. This present research purpose is to give a critical explanation of the question of whether the Buddha teaches rebirth. This research is carried out with a library approach by collecting information from canonical texts as well as their commentaries. This research results from a comprehensive explanation of rebirth taught by the Buddha which is very unique and different from the theory of rebirth explained by other Indian traditions. The theory of rebirth (*punabbhava*) taught by the Buddha neither has an association with any external authority such as *Brahma*, *Jagadātma*, or God, nor with any internal entity such as *ātma*, *pudgalātma*, or soul. The teachings dealing with rebirth are found in many discourses, especially interconnected with a theory of Karma.

Keywords: Rebirth, Punabbhava, Soul, Atma, Buddhism

Abstrak

Teori tentang kelahiran kembali memang diterima secara luas dalam filsafat India, yang umumnya berkaitan dengan konsep jiwa yang berlanjut dari kehidupan ke kehidupan. Karena Buddha menolak teori jiwa yang kekal dengan memberikan ajaran *Anatta*, maka banyak pertanyaan muncul apakah Buddha mengajarkan kelahiran kembali. Beberapa orang menganggap bahwa Buddha menerima ajaran kelahiran kembali karena itu sudah populer di tradisi-tradisi sebelum Buddhis. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memberikan penjelasan kritis mengenai pertanyaan apakah Buddha mengajarkan kelahiran kembali. Penelitian ini dilakukan dengan kajian kepustakaan dengan mengumpulkan informasinya dari kitab Kanon beserta kitab Komentarnya. Penelitian ini menghasilkan penjelasan komprehensif mengenai ajaran kelahiran kembali yang diajarkan oleh Buddha, yang begitu khas dan berbeda dengan teori kelahiran kembali yang diajarkan oleh tradisi-tradisi India lainnya. Ajaran kelahiran kembali (*punabbhava*) yang diajarkan Buddha tidak ada kaitannya dengan entitas eksternal seperti *Brahma*, *Jagadātma*, atau, dewa, juga tidak ada kaitannya dengan entitas internal seperti *ātma*, *pudgalātma*, atau jiwa. Ajaran-ajaran yang berkenaan dengan kelahiran kembali dapat ditemukan di banyak khotbah, khususnya berkaitan dengan teori Karma.

Kata Kunci: Kelahiran Kembali, Punabbhava, Jiwa, Atma, Buddhisme

INTRODUCTION

Rebirth is philosophical teaching believing that there are future births after this life. It is mostly identified as reincarnation or transmigration in some religions. The theory of rebirth is one of the popular teachings among Indian religions, such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. It is regarded as a part of the theory of *Samsāra* or the cycle of birth and death.¹ As long as one hasn't cut off the chain of *Samsāra*, he

¹ *Samsāra* is explained as the unbroken process of aggregates, elements, senses (*Khandhānañca paṭipāṭi, dhātuāyatanāna ca, Abbotchinnaṃ vattamānā, samsāroti pavuccati'ti*). DA. II. 496; SA. II. 97; AA. III. 206; DhsA. 10.

will be born again and again in different worlds according to their karmic powers performed in the previous lives.

Although each Indian religion has a different idea in regard to rebirth and how to put it to an end, most of them encourage people to do good actions and collect merits for the sake of better future birth. Therefore, talking about rebirth among followers of Indian religions is not very hard. Nevertheless, the response is different when talking about a rebirth to the people who are not following Indian religions. Especially for the western people and the followers of Abrahamic religions,² it is not easy to understand rebirth. The theory of rebirth is not taught in Abrahamic religions. Even though they believe in an afterlife, it is not reincarnation or rebirth. According to them, after dying from this world, everyone is judged by God or divine judgment on whether he is suitable to go to eternal heaven or hell based on his deeds. Therefore, according to them, there is no rebirth. It is also hard for western people to believe in rebirth since it is beyond visible experience. Scientifically, it is difficult to prove that there is rebirth or the next existence because it is not experienceable in this world.

For Buddhists, there is no doubt about the existence of rebirth. On many occasions, the Buddha taught his teachings interconnected with rebirth. Therefore, without accepting the theory of rebirth, the whole of Buddha's teachings would be meaningless. Nevertheless, recently with the influence of the western way of thinking, there are some people who critically inquire whether the Buddha taught rebirth. This critical question arises since there is no single discourse that specifically discusses on rebirth. A deeper critical question also comes into being whether the Buddha inherited the idea of rebirth from pre-Buddhist thought. Seeing this fact, this paper purposes to give a critical response to the question "did the Buddha teach rebirth?"

METHODOLOGY

It is qualitative research with a library approach, in which the research is carried out by collecting relevant information mainly based on primary sources and secondary sources. The canonical texts and their commentaries are considered primary sources. Any form of relevant contemporary works written by modern scholars is considered a secondary source. The main focus of this study is discussing the theory of rebirth as taught by the Buddha in order to find out the uniqueness of the theory of rebirth. It is also to show that the Buddha teaches rebirth not by copying other traditions. Through a thorough study on the mentioned above topic, this research results from some findings such as:

1. Though there is no single discourse bearing with name *Punabbhava*, it does not mean the Buddha does not teach rebirth. The theory of rebirth is taught in relation to other cardinal teachings such as the theory of *Kamma*.
2. The Buddha teaches rebirth which is very unique because there is no association with the concept of the eternal soul commonly accepted by Indian traditions.
3. Though the final goal of Buddha's teaching is *Nibbāna*, which is described as no more birth, rebirth is a consequence for those who haven't attained *Nibbāna*. As long as one has not fully eradicated the defilements, one has to wander in the circle of birth, being born again and again depending on one own *Kamma*.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Rebirth in the Pre-Buddhist Era

It is widely understood that the concept of rebirth had taken root in Indian religious thought before the time of the Buddha. Oldenburg said that this doctrine of rebirth was one of the dogmas inherited by Buddhism from earlier Brahmanical religious traditions.³ According to E.J. Thomas, transmigrating and the doctrine of retribution of action were well established as a part of the commonly accepted view of life during the pre-Buddhist times. The Buddha took them for granted because they were already widely

² Abrahamic religions refer to three sister monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

³ EOB. VII. p. 522.

accepted.⁴ These arguments show that the concept of rebirth was popular among Indian religions. However, those arguments were challenged by Prof. K.N. Jayatilleke. He pointed out that on the contrary, a clear conception of rebirth is conspicuously absent in the Rig Veda. As revealed in the Rig Veda, there was a conception of departed ancestors from this world surviving in the world of the ‘Fathers’ or “*Pitrs.*” But there was no conception of departed ones being repeatedly subject to birth and death. Furthermore, Brahmana literature has references to a second death, but there is no evidence of a theory of transmigration. A variety of theories of the destiny of a person after death can be found in the Upanisads. Among those theories, rebirth is sometimes presented as one among several other alternatives. Although many Upanisadic sages, such as Yajnavalkya, Uddālaka, and Prajāpati who held the belief in the eternity of self, believed in the survival of the self after death, they did not speak of a series of future life. Furthermore, K.N. Jayatilleke said that though there is mention of rebirth as man or animal in the Brhadaranyaka and Chandogya Upanisads, it cannot be said to be the standard belief in the early pre-Buddhist Upanisads.⁵ In his article titled “*The Buddhist View of Survival*”, K.N. Jayatilleke said that it is, therefore, not correct to say that the Buddha took for granted the belief in rebirth current in society at that time.⁶

It is important to note that not all religious traditions accepted the theory of rebirth. Buddhist scripture has references to a group of thinkers who reject the theory of rebirth.⁷ There were some skeptics who did not wish to commit themselves to any definite views on rebirth.⁸ During the Buddha’s time, mainly there were two predominant philosophical concepts with regard to life after death. They were eternalism (*Sassatavāda*) and annihilationism (*Ucchedavāda*).⁹ Pāli Nikāya also refers to those two views as *Bhavadiṭṭhi* and *Vibhāvadiṭṭhi*.¹⁰ Those who believed in eternalism advocated that there is an eternal entity which is called the soul that keeps moving from one life to another following one’s death to exist in either eternal heaven or hell or to attain with final union with the creator God. On the contrary, those who believe in annihilationism advocate that there is no life after death. According to them, at the time of death and with the breakup of the physical body, the entity that existed in this life annihilates with nothing remaining after death.

These two predominant views influence the practice of people in society. According to eternalism, the body is one and the soul is another (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*). They think that soul is imprisoned in the body, therefore, in order to release it and for union with the universal soul, one has to practice some penances. Therefore, they practice self-mortification (*attakilamathānuyoga*). Annihilationists or materialists, on other hand, say that the soul is identical to the body (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*). According to this, with the death of the person, his soul also perishes. In regard to this, they advocate self-indulgence in sensual pleasures (*kāmasukhallikanuyoga*). *Brahmajāla Sutta* reports sixty-two views; fifty-five views are belonged to eternalism and seven other views have belonged to annihilationism.¹¹

Buddhism is neither eternalism nor annihilationism. The Buddha rejected those views and considered them as extreme views. Just after his enlightenment, the Buddha advised to monks to avoid self-

⁴ E. J. Thomas, “Buddhism in Moderns Times,” University of Ceylon Review (Colombo), 9 (1951): 2016. See also in Kalupahana, David J. 1976. *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*. Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii. p. 44.

⁵ EOB. VII. p. 522.

⁶ Jayatilleke, 2010. p. 104.

⁷ Basing on epistemological argument, some people said thus “I do not know this, I do not see this, therefore it does not exist” (*tamaṃ na jānāmi, tamaṃ na passāmi tasmā taṃ natthi*). D. II. 330.

⁸ As recorded in the Buddhist discourse, sceptics are those who did not categorically answer the question whether there is life after death or not (*atthi para loko, natthi para loko*). D. I. 58.

⁹ D. I. 13.

¹⁰ A. I. 83.

¹¹ D. I. 1-46.

indulgence in sensual pleasures (*kāmasukhallikanuyoga*)¹² and self-mortification (*attakilamathānuyoga*).¹³ It is because the Buddha had different idea in regard to life after death. Therefore, Buddhism has different viewpoint in regard to rebirth.

Did the Buddha Teach rebirth?

One of popular critical questions asked by modern scholars regarding Buddha's teachings is about rebirth. There is a tendency on some people to believe that the Buddha, as an empiricist, could not contribute to a metaphysical theory like rebirth. For them, empiricism is confined purely to sensory experience. Other assumed that the Buddha accepted the doctrine of rebirth because it was popular in the pre-Buddhist tradition.¹⁴ In short, a critical question arises whether the Buddha taught rebirth or not.

In order to answer that question, Buddhist literature should be examined carefully. In the Pāli literature, theory of rebirth is termed in different terms, such as:

- *Punabbhava* (renewed existence, new birth and re-becoming)¹⁵
- *Upapāta* (rebirth)¹⁶
- *Upapatti* (rebirth)¹⁷
- *Punabbhavābhiniḍḍatti* (born again)¹⁸
- *Āyatikabhavā* (state of being hereafter)¹⁹.
- *Puna gabbhaseyya* (being in a womb again)²⁰
- *Paṭisandhi* (reunion)²¹
- etc.

Among those terms, *Punabbhava* is mostly used in the Buddha's discourses. "Puna" means "again" and "bhava" means "existence" or "becoming." Therefore, *Punabbhava* can be translated as "Rebirth" or "Re-becoming."

The concept of rebirth in Buddhism should be distinguished from the concept of reincarnation, transmigration, and metempsychosis as commonly explained by other religions. Rebirth in Buddhism does not convey a similar idea as reincarnation, transmigration, or metempsychosis. Reincarnation (*punarjanma*) is normally understood as the transmigration of a permanent soul (*atman*) from one body to another. In other words, the soul takes a new body in the next birth. On the other hand, rebirth (*punabbhava*) in Buddhism does not convey such meaning. As Buddhism teaches Non-soul theory (*Anatta*),²² therefore Buddhism rejects the idea of a permanent soul which moves from life to life. The theory of rebirth in Buddhism becomes unique because it neither has an association with any external authority such as *Brahma*, *Jagadātma*, or God, nor with any internal entity such as *ātma*, *pudgalātma*, or soul. Therefore, it is not correct to say that the Buddha copied or inherited the theory of rebirth from other religious thinkers.

It is possible that at that time many people had sort of ideas about life after death or rebirth respectively. But the idea they had was not similar to what the Buddha taught. Generally, rebirth or reincarnation they believed is rebirth which has an association with either internal soul or external soul. However, rebirth in Buddhism does not have any association with those things. Buddhism does not subscribe to the dualist hypothesis that "the soul and body are different" (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*) nor

¹² The practice self-indulgence is criticized by the Buddha as low (*hīna*), vulgar (*gamma*), the way of worldlings (*pothujjanika*), ignoble (*anariya*), and unbeneficial (*anattasamhita*). S. V. 421.

¹³ The practice self-mortification is criticized by the Buddha as painful (*dukkha*), ignoble (*anariya*), and unbeneficial (*anattasamhita*). S. V. 421.

¹⁴ Kalupahana, 2009. p. 70.

¹⁵ D. II. 15.

¹⁶ S. IV. 59.

¹⁷ M. I. 82.

¹⁸ M. I. 294.

¹⁹ Sn. 28.

²⁰ Sn. 29.

²¹ Paṭis. I. 52.

²² All things are devoid of soul (*sabbe dhammā anattā*. M. I. 228).

to identity hypothesis that “the soul and body are the same” (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*), but according to Buddhism, one is born is neither the same nor another (*na ca so na ca añño*).²³ Therefore, rebirth in Buddhism is new concept explained only by the Buddha.

It is very important to note that, for Buddhism, rebirth is not the final goal of practicing Buddha’s teaching. The main goal of Buddhism is to attain Nibbāna which is free from rebirth. This was the main focus why Siddhattha left his palace in search of liberation or supreme happiness which is not subject to the vagaries of repeated birth, aging, illness and death. As reported in the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta*, he approached to Ālāra Kālāma and Udaka Rāmaputta to learn their teachings. However, he left those teachers because he recognized that their teachings led not to the goal he sought.²⁴ Instead of being born in the highest state of existence, Siddhattha wanted to find liberation which is no more birth.²⁵ Then he strived hardly with his own way and finally he attained enlightenment or liberation which is called Nibbāna. Hence, liberation he attained is liberation which is no more birth. Therefore, he uttered “This is my final birth (*ayamantimā jāti*). There is no more rebirth (*natthi dāni punabbhavo’ti*).²⁶ Attaining Nibbāna or being an Arahant is described with term “*Khīṇā jāti*” or the possibility of rebirth is destroyed.²⁷ Similarly, it is described as “*Khīṇaṃ purāṇaṃ navaṃ natthi sambhavaṃ*”²⁸ or “*Bhavā sabbe samūhatā*.”²⁹

Though the goal of Buddhism is Nibbāna which is no more birth, however rebirth is a consequence for those who haven’t reached that level. Therefore, as long as one hasn’t attained Nibbāna, he has to face rebirth. The Buddha said that rebirth happened to those who still had clinging, but not to those who didn’t.³⁰

Considering its significance, theory of rebirth plays important part as a connection to other Buddha’s teachings. It is very significant teaching to explain the cardinal Buddha’s teachings such as theory of Karma and Dependent Origination. The Buddha teaches that this life is neither beginning nor final. Everyone had wandered in in sansaric life. And as long as one is unable to cut off the chain of Saṃsāra, everyone is born again and again. Considering this fact, the theory of rebirth supports the existence of past life and hereafter.

Although the Buddha didn’t teach special discourse on rebirth, it doesn’t mean the Buddha did not teach rebirth. There are many evidences to prove that the Buddha teaches rebirth. In explaining ‘*Abhiññā*’, there are two *Ñānas* that have connection to rebirth - *pubbenivāsānussati ñāṇā* and *dibbacakkhu ñāṇā*. *Pubbenivāsānussati ñāṇā* is a knowledge that gives an ability to remembers manifold former existences with its detail. *Dibbacakkhu ñāṇā* is a knowledge that gives an ability to see beings vanishing and reappearing and see how beings are reappearing according to their deeds (*kamma*).³¹ By this knowledge, one can see where others be born after dying from this world. The Buddha had this kind of knowledge therefore the Buddha knew future rebirth of others.

In explaining the four stages of purification, the Buddha also showed how many rebirths for those who have reached them. It is up to seven for those reaching the first stage (*sotāpanna*) one to those who reaching the second stage (*sakadāgāmi*); rebirth followed by total liberation in the pure abodes for those reaching the third (*anāgāmi*); and no rebirth for those reaching the fourth (*arahat*).³² It means those who haven’t reached arahanthood, they have to face rebirth. When his disciples who haven’t reached

²³ Mil. 40.

²⁴ M. I. 240.

²⁵ *So kho ahaṃ, bhikkhave, attanā jātidhammo samāno jātidhamme ādīnavaṃ viditvā ajātaṃ anuttaraṃ yogakkhemaṃ nibbānaṃ pariyesamāno ajātaṃ anuttaraṃ yogakkhemaṃ nibbānaṃ ajjhagamam.* M. I. 167.

²⁶ M. I. 167.

²⁷ M. I. 184.

²⁸ Sn. 41.

²⁹ Thag. 10.

³⁰ *Seyyathāpi, vaccha, aggi saupādāno jalati, no anupādāno; evameva khvāhaṃ, vaccha, saupādānassa upapattim paññāpemi, no anupādānassā’ti.* S. IV. 399.

³¹ D. I. 81 – 82.

³² D. III. 255.

arahanhood passed away, the Buddha would comment on his rebirth. For example, the death of householder Anathapindika. It is said that after his death, he is born as a heavenly being in Tusita Heaven.³³

The theory of rebirth is closely associated with the theory of Karma. In explaining the fruit of karma, the Buddha also often said that karma done in this life can be felt either here and now, in the next birth, or at some other time (*tassa diṭṭheva dhamme vipākaṃ paṭisaṃvedeti upapajja vā apare vā pariyāye*).³⁴ The clear evidence can be found in the explanation found in *Cūla* and *Mahā Kammavibhaṅga Sutta*. After dying from this world, based on accumulated merits or his karma, one can be born in these five destinies, such as purgatory (*niraya*), the animal species (*tiracchānayoṇi*), the sphere of the departed ancestors (*pettivisaya*), the human world (*manussaloka*) and the world of gods (*devaloka*)³⁵

Buddhist literature has used the theory of rebirth to promote Buddhist moral values. Classic illustrations can be found in the *Jātaka* stories. Two other books called *Vimānavatthu* and *Petavatthu* of *Khuddaka Nikāya* are also illustrative of rebirth stories.

CONCLUSION

The theory of rebirth is one of the important teachings in Buddhism. Since Buddhism accepts the theory of *Samsāra* or the repeated cycle of birth, the theory of rebirth no doubt should be accepted. The entire Buddha's teachings would be meaningless without accepting the theory of rebirth. The theory of rebirth is used as a connection to other cardinal teachings of Buddhism. Especially in explaining the fruit of Karma, the theory of rebirth is important, because the fruit of Karma done in this life can be felt either in this life, in the next birth, or some other time. Though the main goal of Buddhism is to attain Nibbāna which is no more birth, however, rebirth is a consequence for those who haven't reached that level. Therefore, rebirth is faced by everyone until Nibbāna is attained. Based on the facts explained in the above discussion, it is not correct to say that Buddhism copied the idea of rebirth from other religious traditions. Buddhism has unique features in regard to a rebirth that is not explained in any other religion. Some discussions have been dealt with above to prove that the Buddha taught rebirth.

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³³ M. III. 262.

³⁴ M. III. 214.

³⁵ A. IV. 459.