Is Rebirth Immediate?

A study of canonical sources

Selected with notes by
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Introduction

1 Early Buddhism and later teachings

1.1 EARLY SOURCES. The Pali Canon contains some of the oldest materials we have of **early Indian Buddhism.** Its language is simple, colloquial, and beautiful. However, many of the teachings and doctrines of the early Canon can be quite profound and confounding even for advanced but unawakened scholars. As such, it is common for students and experts alike to rely on the Commentaries and later works by respected teachers to throw light on such difficult passages and teachings.

The post-Buddha Abhidhamma and the Commentaries on the early texts are in themselves very profound, not to mention their more developed and more systematic (hence more difficult) language. While the Suttas present the Dharma (teaching and truth) both in terms of conventional (*sammati* or *sammuti*) ideas and on the ultimate (*param'attha*) level,[1] "graduated to suit the mind of the average man,"[2] the **Abhidhamma** is an attempt to present only the *essential Buddhist doctrines*, that is, the ultimate truth minus the conventional truth.[3]

However, there is sometimes a tendency to regard the words of the Abhidhamma and the Commentaries as being more "canonical" than the Pali Canon itself—especially common amongst those who come to know of the Abhidhamma without some useful knowledge of the Suttas. However, if the Suttas are well-studied and analyzed, all the essential doctrines are quite clearly and comprehensively expounded there. Interestingly, most if not all such early doctrines are echoed in **other schools outside the Theravāda** even when the Theravādins themselves differ (or appear to differ) from the Canon.

1.2 PERSONAL STUDY AND PRACTICE. When **personal spiritual practice** is properly combined with modern critical scholarship, that is, when one looks at the Buddhist texts as being more than merely religious literature but as the records of the momentous spiritual awakening of the Buddha and his saints, then we have the most effective and profitable tools for understanding the Buddha Word. When these tools are applied to the Pali Canon, there is little need to fall back on the Commentaries and the Abhidhamma, since the latter two are themselves culturally bound and often sectarian.[4]

However, if we are aware of the special features and limitations of the Commentaries and the Abhidhamma, and use them with an understanding that they are supplementary to the Canon, then they would serve as effective and profitable research tools in our efforts to understand and benefit from the Buddha's teachings, especially in an age when we have **the complete Pali Canon** and other early texts that are more accessible and more closely scrutinized than ever before and more easily and effectively disseminated in a universal language.

When this understanding of **spiritual scholarship** is applied to the discussion of such salient problems as the nature of rebirth (whether it is immediate or not), we can uncover some clear evidences in the Canon itself that help us clarify this problem, which apparently even the Commentaries and Abhidhamma have not totally addressed. Occasionally, if not frequently, the land-sighting bird has to return to the ship.[5]

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[1] AA 1:95; KvuA 34.

[2] Nyanatiloka, *Guide Through the Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, 1957:xii f.

[3] Two good books on Abhidhamma for the serious beginner would be the Visuddhi,magga (by Buddhaghosa) and the Abhidhamm'attha Saṅgaha (by Anuruddha), both of which have been translated into English.

[4] See for example Gombrich 1992a:160 f.

[5] For a diacussion on a naturalistic Buddhist conception of rebirth, see SD 18.11a(3-4).

2 Scientific study of rebirth

Rebirth is one of the pillars of Buddhist doctrine. In very simple scientific terms, albeit a hypothetical one, the Buddhist conception of life and rebirth is well described by **B Allan Wallace:**

> Your psyche emerged some time while you were in your mother's womb. It's continuing to evolve, and eventually it's going to implode back into the substrate, carry on as a disembodied continuum of consciousness and then reincarnate. (Wallace 2006b:5)

Wallace goes on to confidently state that this is a testable hypothesis, and although it may be possible to repudiate such ideas (as in any hypothesis), it is worthwhile to look for positive evidence. Two types of studies—those on out-of-body experience (OBE)[6] and near-death experience (NDE)[7]—are being done by neurologist, **Dr Bruce Greyson**[8] at the University of Virginia, and by **Dr Olaf Blanke** at the University Hospitals of Geneva and Lausanne in Switzerland.[9]

An out-of-body experience (OBE) typically involves a sensation of floating outside of one's body and, in some cases, seeing one's physical body from a place outside of one's body (autoscopy). About one in ten people are reported to have had an OBE at some time in their lives.[10] Reportedly, people can will themselves out of their bodies, or find themselves ejected from their bodies usually after a feeling of paralysis. The feeling may be attending by some kind of epiphany (usually reflective of one's religious familiarity) or a sense of profound peace and love. There are also those who report that they actually travel to other places (astral travel), even those unfamiliar to them. The experience generally lasts only for about a minute or so.[11] OBE strongly suggests that your consciousness can somehow leave your physical body.

A near-death experience (NDE) is that of a person who nearly died, or who experienced clinical death but then revived. The experience is more often reported in recent times, especially since the development of cardiac resuscitation techniques. Some people believe it can be explained by hallucinations produced by the brain as it dies, while others believe that such an explanation cannot account for all the evidence.[12] A majority of individuals who experience an NDE see it as a verification of the existence of an afterlife.[13] Popular interest in near-death experiences was sparked by Raymond Moody Jr's book *Life after Life* (1975), where he investigates 150 cases of NDEs, and by the founding of the International Association for Near-death Studies (IANDS) in 1978.[14] According to a Gallup poll approximately eight million Americans claim to have had a near-death experience.[15] Scientists are still unsure of what really causes an NDE.[16]

Buddhists generally regard OBE and NDE as suggestive of **rebirth**,[17] an important Buddhist doctrine that scientists generally have difficulty accepting, mainly because of an apparent lack of empirical means for observing and measuring it. The more brilliant scientific minds, however, are usually more open to

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[6] See http://archives.cnn.com/2002/TECH/science/09/19/coolsc.outofbody/ & http://obebibliography.info.

[7] See eg http://www.parapsych.org/members/c_b_greyson.html & B Greyson, "The near-death experience as a focus of clinical attention." Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease 185,5 May 1997:327-34.

[8] See eg http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/09/ 19/health/main522488.shtml.

[9] See eg http://www.near-death.com/experiences/triggers07.html.

[10] See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/4271018.stm.

[11] See eg http://www.oxfordreference.com/pages/samplep-09.

[12] See Pim van Lommel, "Near-Death Experience, Consciousness, and the Brain: A New Concept about the Continuity of Our Consciousness Based on Recent Scientific Research on Near-Death Experience in Survivors of Cardiac Arrest." *World Futures* 62,1-2 Jan 2006:134-151.

[13] EW Kelly, "Near-death experiences with reports of meeting deceased people." *Death Studies* 25,3 Apr-May 2001:229-249.

[14] See http://www.iands.org/.

[15] James Mauro, "Bright lights, big mystery." *Psychology Today*, July 1992.

[16] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_and_physiological_views_of_near-death_experiences.

[17] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reincarnation#Scientific_research.

such ideas. The famous English biologist, **Thomas Huxley** (1825-1895), for example, regarded reincarnation as a plausible idea and discussed it in his book *Evolution and Ethics and other Essays* (1893).[18]

There are many qualified people who have investigated reincarnation and come to the conclusion that it is a legitimate phenomenon, such as psychotherapist Peter Ramster,[19] Dr Brian Weiss,[20] Dr Walter Semkiw,[21] and others, but their work is generally ignored by the scientific community. The rebirth specialist, Professor Ian Stevenson, on the hand, has published dozens of papers in peer-reviewed journals.

Ian Stevenson[22] of the University of Virginia, USA, has compiled the most detailed collections of personal reports claiming to knowledge of their past, and published his findings in books such as *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*.[23] Stevenson spent over 40 years studying children who had apparently recalled a past life. In each case, Stevenson methodically documented the child's statements. Then he identified the deceased person the child allegedly identified with, and verified the facts of the deceased person's life that matched the child's memory. He also matched birthmarks and birth defects (such as wounds and scars) on the deceased, verified by medical records such as autopsy photographs.

After another 20 years of research into rebirth, he published another book, *Where Biology and Reincarnation Intersect* (1997).[24] The book comprises detailed accounts of past lives where the subjects led less than virtuous lives and died horrible deaths.

Stevenson believed that his strict methods ruled out all possible "normal" explanations for the child's memories. However, it should be noted that a significant majority of Stevenson's reported cases of reincarnation come from Eastern societies, where the dominant religions teach rebirth.

The most obvious objection to reincarnation is that there is no evidence of a physical process by which a person could survive death and travel to another body, and researchers such as Stevenson recognize this limitation. Another fundamental objection is that most people simply do not remember previous lives.

Some skeptics dismiss claims of evidence for reincarnation as arising from *selective thinking*[25] or as the psychological phenomena of *false memories*[26] that often come from one's own belief system and basic fears, and thus cannot be counted as empirical evidence. Other skeptics, such as the astrobiologist **Carl Sagan** (1934-1996), however, see the need for more reincarnation research.[27]

An important point that needs investigation is: *How does rebirth occur without a soul?* This however has been discussed elsewhere.[28]

3 Problem of the intermediate state

Buddhists generally have no problem with the doctrine of rebirth. However, there is the question whether rebirth immediate (as held by the Abhidhamma traditionalists) or whether it takes some time, going through some kind of immediate state (as more commonly held today). Those traditionalists who reject the doctrine of the intermediate state (*antarā,bhava*) claim that the Buddha did not teach it.[29] The main canonical argument (perhaps the only one) is that the Buddha mentions only three states of exist-

[18] In *Collected Essays* 9, London: Macmillan, 1893.

[19] Peter Ramster, *In Search of Lives Past*, Somerset Films & Publishing, 1990. ISBN 0-646-00021-7

[20] http://www.brianweiss.com/read.htm.

[21] Walter Semkiw, *Return of the Revolutionaries: The Case for Reincarnation and Soul Groups Reunited*, Norfolk, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2003. ISBN 1-57174-342-1

[22] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_Stevenson.

[23] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twenty_Cases_Suggestive_of_Reincarnation.

[24] Ian Stevenson, *Where Biology and Reincarnation Intersect,* Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997.

[25] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selective_thinking.

[26] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/False_memory.

[27] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reincarnation_research.

[28] See SD 18.11(3.1-3.2).

[29] Kvu 361-366; UA 92-94 = UA:M 136-140; Buddhadatta's *Bhāratiyā Bauddh'ācāryayā,* 1949:229,14.

ence: the sense world, the form world and the formless world. If the intermediate state exists, it should fit into one of these worlds, but it is nowhere mentioned to be so.[30]

The earliest reference to the doctrine of "immediate rebirth" is found in the **Milinda,pañha** (which the Burmese tradition regards as canonical). This is a work of Buddhist apologetics in the form of a debate and discussion between Menander (a 2nd century Indo-Greek king, Menandros) and a monk named Nāgasena.[31] Milinda asks the question: "Who is reborn faster: one who is reborn in the Brahma world or one who is reborn in Kashmir?"

Nāgasena answers that both of them are reborn in equal time, and gives two similes. In the first simile, Nāgasena asks Milinda to think of two places—one 200 leagues away (Kashmir) and another just 12 leagues away (Kalasi)—and asks the king how fast he needs to think of either of them. The king answers that he takes equal time. The second simile is a classic one:

> "What do you think about this, sire? If two birds were to fly through the air and one should alight on a tall tree and the other on a short tree, and if they came to rest simultaneously, whose shadow would fall on the earth first and whose shadow would fall on the earth later?"
>
> "They would do so simultaneously, revered sir." (Miln 83, Horner's tr)

However, it is important to note what is *not* said here: there is no mention of the intermediate state. Nāgasena's argument is simply that rebirth is immediate, taking only a thought-moment.

On the other hand, the Pali Canon—and the texts of the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna—all agree that there is an intermediate period (not exceeding 7 weeks). In this study, we shall examine **the Kutūhala,-sāla Sutta** (S 44.9/4:398-400), **the Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38.26-29) and various other canonical sources on the nature of the "intermediate state." Vasubandhu's **Abhidharma,kośa**, a 4th-century Sarvāstivāda work, (especially Abhk:P 3.10, 12de, 40ab) contains interesting teachings on the intermediate being. For this paper, I have relied heavily on Peter Harvey's excellent work on the subject (1995 ch 6), which is recommended for your reading. I have also given additional references of my own.

Historically, the rejection of an intermediate state is a dogma that first appears in later polemical works, namely, the Kathā,vatthu (3rd century BCE) and the Milinda,pañha (2nd century). Practically all the other living schools and traditions accept the notion of the intermediate state. Even modern-day monastics, like **Brahmavamso** openly speak of it:

> Another passage which gives strong support to the 'intermediate' state is found in [A 7.52] which lists the seven types of non-returner together with similes. The first three types of anagamis are called 'antara,parinibbayin' and are likened to a spark flying off a hot piece of metal which cools: (1) just after falling off, (2) while flying up, (3) while falling down, all before establishing themselves on the ground. The implication is of a state between death and re-appearance in the Suddh'āvāsa." (Personal communication) [5]

Brahmavamso also mentioned in one of his public talks in Singapore (2002) that his experiences in dealing with the dying in Thailand strongly suggest the existence of the intermediate state.[32]

4 Canonical references to the intermediate state

4.1 The Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta (M 38.26/1:265 f) [Excerpt]

Bhikshus, the descent of the being-to-be-born (*gabbhassâvakkanti*) takes place through the union of three things. Here, there is the union of the mother and the father; but the mother is not in season, and the being-to-be-born[33] is not present. In this case, no **[266]** descent of a being-to-be-born occurs.

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[30] Kvu id = Kvu:SR 212 f. The Kathā,vatthu was written 218 years after the Maha Parinirvana by Moggalī,putta Tissa, the presiding monk at the Buddhist Council held during Asoka's reign in India (KvuA 4,25).

[31] On some problems of the Milinda,pañha, see von Hinuber, 1996 §III.4.

[32] See John Ireland, U:I 128 n21 & Mahasi Sayadaw, 1981:13 f; also Bodhi S:B 1406 n53, 1411 n75.

But when

- there is the union of the mother and father;
- the mother is in season; and
- the being-to-be-born (*gandhabba*) is present

—through the union of these three the descent of the being-to-be-born occurs. (M 38.26/1:265 f)

4.2 Assalāyana Sutta (M 93.18/2:156 f) [Excerpt]

[*Five hundred brahmins from various provinces who have assembled in Sāvatthī choose the 16-year-old brahmin student Assalāyana, a master of the Vedas and brahminical learning, to challenge the Buddha in his view on "the purification of the four castes." Despite the protests of Assalāyana who thinks the Buddha "speaks the Dharma," he is nevertheless asked to challenge the Buddha. Assalāyana reluctantly presents his predicament before the Buddha who expounds to him various similes, and closes his arguments with this story regarding the seer* ***Asita ("the dark") Devāla and the seven brahmins****. Not recognizing the seer, the seven brahmins repeatedly cursed him, but he became progressively "more comely, beautiful, handsome." On realizing their mistake and discovering his spirituality, they paid him homage*.]

Then the seven brahmin seers went to see the seer Asita Devāla[34] and paid homage to him. Then he said to them:

"Sirs, I heard that while the seven brahmin seers were dwelling in leaf huts in the forest, this evil false view arose in them: 'Brahmins are the highest caste, those of any other caste are inferior; brahmins are the fairest caste, those of any other caste are dark; only brahmins are pure, others are not; brahmins alone are the sons of Brahmā, the offspring of Brahmā, born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.'

'But, sirs, do you know if the mother who bore you went with only a brahmin and never went with a non-brahmin?'

'No, sir.'

'But, sirs, do you know if your mother's mothers back to the seventh generation went only with brahmins and never with non-brahmins?'

'No, sir.'

'But, sirs, do you know if the father who bore you went with only a brahminee and never went with a non-brahminee?'

'No, sir.'

'But, sirs, do you know if your father's fathers back to the seventh generation went only with brahminees and never with non-brahminees?'

'No, sir.'

'But, sirs, **do you know how the descent of a being-to-be-born comes about?**'

'Sir, we know how the descent of a being-to-be-born comes about. **[157]** Here,

there is the union of the mother and father;
the mother is in season; and
the being-to-be-born is present;

—through the union of these three the descent of the being-to-be-born takes place.[35]

Then, sirs, do you know for sure whether that being-to-be-born is a kshatriya, or a brahmin, or a merchant, or a worker?

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[33] "Being-to-be-born," *gandhabba,* does not refers to a "heavenly minstrel" or any celestial being. It is used here and in **Assalāyana S** (M 93.18/2:157) in this sense of a being arriving for rebirth. **The Mahā Nidāna S** (D 15/2:63) speaks of consciousness as "descending into the mother's womb." See n4.

[34] Asita Devāla. MA identifies him with the Buddha in a past life to show that even then when the Buddha was of inferior birth, the brahmins could answer his question: how can they do so now that he is Buddha? His namesake visited the baby Siddhattha, they were most likely two different individuals. Both of them were also called Kāḷa ("the black") Devāla. It is possible that they could be the same person.

[35] *Gandhabba.* The meaning of this term becomes clear in the following conversation. See n2.

'Sir, we do not know for sure whether that being-to-be-born is a kshatriya, a brahmin, or a merchant, or a worker.'

'That being so, sir, then, who are you?'

'That being so, sir, we do not know who we are.'

4.3 The Kutūhala,sāla Sutta (S 44.9/4:399 f)

(The Kutūhala,sāla Sutta speaks of how a being "a being has laid down this body but has not yet been reborn into another body" [15].)

10 "This recluse Gotama—leader of an order, leader of a group, the teacher of a group, well-known and famous ford-maker, well considered [regarded as holy] by the masses—declares that rebirth of a disciple who had died, passed away, thus:

'That one was reborn there. That one was reborn there.'

But in the case of a disciple who is a supreme person, a perfect person, attained the highest, when that disciple, too, who had died, passed away, he does *not* declare his rebirth thus:

'That one was reborn there. That one was reborn there.'

But, he declares of him, thus: 'He has cut off craving, and through full mastery over conceit, he has made a total end of suffering.'

11 There is uncertainty in me, master Gotama, there is doubt in me. How should the Dharma of the recluse Gotama to be understood?"

12 "It is fitting that you are uncertain, that you doubt, Vaccha. Doubt has arisen in you over what is doubtful.

Vaccha, I declare that there is **rebirth for one with fuel [with clinging] (*upadāna*),**[36] **not for one without fuel [without clinging]**.

13 Vaccha, just as fire burns with fuel, not without fuel, even so, Vaccha, I declare that there is rebirth for one with *fuel* [with clinging],[37] not for one without fuel [without clinging]."[38]

14 "But, master Gotama, when a flame is tossed by the wind and goes a long way, what does master Gotama declare to be its fuel?"

"Vaccha, when a flame is tossed by the wind and goes a long way, I declare that it is fuelled by the wind [the air]. For, Vaccha, at that time, the wind [the air] is the fuel."

15 "And further, master Gotama, when a being has laid down this body, but has not yet been reborn in another body, what does the master Gotama declare to be the fuel?"

"Vaccha, **when a being has laid down this body, but is not yet been reborn in another body, it is fuelled by *craving***, I say. For, Vaccha, at that time, craving is the fuel."[39]

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[36] "Fuel." The Pali *upadāna* is a pun meaning both "fuel" and "clinging." Here it is tr in keeping with the simile of the fire. A similar usage of *anāhāra* (lit "without food") appears in **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72.19/ 1:487) where the Buddha uses the simile of a fire "without fuel" to illustrate the nature of nirvana.

[37] This sentence, in essence, is the same as Sn 1074: *accī yathā vāta,vegena khitto | atthaṁ paleti, na upeti saṅkhaṁ* (Sn 1074), "Just as a flame tossed about by the force of the wind…goes out and no longer counts (as a flame)," (Norman, 1992:120) a teaching the Buddha gave to Upasīva.

[38] *Seyyathā'pi vaccha, aggi saupādāno jalati, no anupādānaṁ, evam eva kho'haṁ vaccha saupādānassa kho 'haṁ vaccha uppattiṁ paññāpemi, no anupādānassa.*

[39] *Yasmiṁ kho vaccha samaye imañ ca kāyaṁ nikkhipati, satto ca aññataraṁ kāyaṁ anuppanno hoti, tam ahaṁ taṇhûpādānaṁ vadāmi. Taṇhā hi'ssa vaccha tasmiṁ samaye upādānaṁ hotî ti.*

4.4 The five kinds of non-returners

Sīla Sutta

(S 46.3/5:69 f)[40]

12 Bhikshus, when these seven awakening-factors[41] have been developed and cultivated here in this way, seven fruits and benefits may be expected. What are the seven fruits and benefits?

13 (a) One attains final knowledge early in this very life.

(b) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life, then one attains final knowledge at the time of death.

(1) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life or at the time of death, then with the utter destruction of the five lower fetters,[42] one becomes an attainer of nirvana in the intermediate state [*antarā,parinibbāyī,* D 3:237].

(2) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life, or at the time of death, or in the interval, then with the utter destruction of the five lower fetters, one becomes an attainer of nirvana upon landing [*upahacca,parinibbāyī,* D 3:237].

(3) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life, or at the time of death, or in the interval, or upon landing, then with the utter destruction of the five lower fetters, one becomes an attainer of nirvana without exertion [*asaṅkhāra,parinibbāyī,* D 3:237].[43]

(4) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life, or at the time of death, or in the interval, or upon landing, then with the utter destruction of the five lower fetters, one becomes an attainer of nirvana with exertion [*sa,saṅkhāra,parinibbāyī,* D 3:237].[44]

(5) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life, or at the time of death, or in the interval, or upon landing, or with exertion, then with the utter destruction of the five lower fetters, one becomes one bound upstream, heading towards the Akaniṭṭha[45] realm [*uddhaṁsoto Akaniṭṭha.gāmī,* D 3:237].

19 Bhikshus, when these seven awakening-factors have been developed and cultivated here in this way, these seven fruits and benefits may be expected. (S 46.3/5:69 f)

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[40] See SD 23.15 for the full sutta.

[41] "Awakening-factors," *sambojjhaṅga:* mindfulness, dharma-investigation, effort, zest, tranquillity, concentration, equanimity. See **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118) = SD 7.13 §29-40nn.

[42] The 10 Fetters are: (1) Personality view (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*), (2) persistent doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rules and rites (*sīla-b,bata,parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma,rāga*), (5) repulsion (*paṭigha*), (6) greed for form existence (*rūpa,rāga*), (7) greed for formless existence (*arūpa,rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61, A 5:13, Vbh 377). In some places, no. 5 (*paṭigha*) is replaced by illwill (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are **the lower fetters** (*orambhāgiya*), and the rest, the higher fetters (*uddhambhāgiya*).

[43] *Asaṅkhāra,parinibbāyī* (D 3:237). BDict: "*Asaṅkhārika-citta,* an Abhidhamma term signifying a 'state of consciousness arisen spontaneously,'ie without previous deliberations, preparation, or prompting by others; hence: 'unprepared, unprompted.' This term and its counterpart (*sasaṅkhārika* [see foll n]), probably go back to a similar distinction in the Suttas [A 4.171; 'Path' 184]. See Table I; examples in Vism 14.84 f." (normalized)

[44] *Sa,saṅkhāra,parinibbāyī* (D 3:237). BDict: "*Sasaṅkhārika-citta* (in Dhs: *sasaṅkhārena*): a prepared, or prompted, state of consciousness, arisen after prior deliberation (eg weighing of motives) or induced by others (command, advice, persuasion)—see Table I.; exemplified in Vism 14.84 f." (normalized).

[45] **Akaṇiṭṭha**. The Suddh'āvāsa or "Pure Abodes" are a group of 5 of the highest form heavens populated only by non-returners, and where they attain arhathood and nirvana. The five Pure Abodes, ie their inhabitants and respective lifespans, are: these worlds are **Āviha** ("Non-declining," 1000 MK), **Ātappa** ("Untroubled," 2000 MK), **Sudassā** ("Beautifully Visible," 4000 MK), **Sudassī** ("Clear-visioned," 8000 MK) and **Akaṇiṭṭha** ("Peerless," 16000 MK) (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46). MK = *mahā kappa.*that is, a full cycle of a world-period or cycle of the universe (V 3:4 = D 3:51, 111 = It 99; D 1:14; A 2:142). For celestial map, see **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11) = SD 1.7 Appendix; for world cycle, see **Aggañña S** (D 27) = SD 2.19.

This list of the five kinds of non-returners is found in **the Sīla Sutta (S 46.3/5:69 f)** and a number of canonical passages, namely:

Saṅgīti Sutta	(D 33.1.9(18)/3:237)
(Indriya) Vitthāra Sutta 1	(S 48.15/5:201)
Eka,bījī Sutta	(S 48.24/5:204 f)
Satt'ānisaṁsa Sutta	(S 48.66/5:237 f)
(Iddhi) Phala Sutta 2	(S 51.26/5:285)
(Ānāpāna) Phala Sutta 2	(S 54.5/5:314)
Sarakāni Sutta 2	(S 55.25.8/5:378)
(Uddesā) Sikkhā Sutta 2	(A 3.86.3/1:233, only last & first kinds mentioned)
(Uddesā) Sikkhā Sutta 3	(A 3.87.3/1:234)
(Cattāro Puggalā) Saṁyojana Sutta	(A 4.131/2:133 f, listed in reverse)
Dukkha Anattā Nibbāna Sutta 1	(A 7.16.4/4:13 f)
Dukkha Anattā Nibbāna Sutta 2	(A 7.17.4/4:14)
Purisa,gati Sutta	(A 7.52/4:70)
(Satta,puggala) Āhuneyya Sutta 1	(A 7.80/4:146)
(Sāriputta) Sa,upādisesa Sutta	(A 9.12.6/4:380)
(Diṭṭhi,sampanna) Niṭṭha Sutta	(A 63.3/5:120)
(Sotāpanna) Avecca Sutta	(A 64.3/5:120)
Puggala Paññatti	(Pug §42-46/16 f)

The Sīla Sutta (S 46.3/5:69 f) discusses the five types of non-returners in the same order as at the Saṅgīti Sutta (D 33.1.9/3:237), listing them after someone who has become an Arahat "at the time of dying": clearly this implies that the order represents a decreasing speed of spiritual attainment. This would certainly make it likely that the first of the five types of non-returners attains *nibbāna* "in between" death and rebirth.

The interpretation given in the Theravādin Abhidhamma and commentaries, though, is that **this non-returner attains *nibbāna* immediately after "arising" in a new rebirth, or at some time before the middle of the life-span there** (Pug 16; AA 4:7). Less contentiously, the next of the non-returners is seen as one who comes to attain *nibbāna* between the mid-point of his life-span there and his death; the fifth type is one who is reborn in each of the five "pure abodes" until he attains *nibbāna* in the last of these (Pug 17). (Harvey, 1995:100; emphasis added; refs rev)

5 Similes of the 5 kind of non-returners

Peter Harvey continues his argument that the above Theravāda interpretation of the one who "attains nirvana *in between*," in the light of the **Purisa,gati Sutta** (A 7.52/4:70-74), "can be seen to be a rather weak and strained one" (Harvey 1995:100). The sutta compares the five kinds of non-returners [4] respectively to:

When a hot iron slab is beaten,

1a a bit of which comes off from the hot iron, and then cools down;
1b a bit of which comes off, flies up and then cools down;
1c a bit of which comes off, flies up, and then, before cutting into the ground, cools down (*anupahacca,talaṁ*);
} *antarā,parinibbāyī*

2 a bit of which cools after cutting into the ground (*upahacca,talaṁ*);
3 a bit of which flies up and falls on a bit of grass or sticks, igniting them, then cools down after they are consumed;
4 a bit of which falls on a large heap of grass or sticks, but cools down after they are consumed;
5 a bit of which flies up and falls down on a heap of grass or sticks such that a fire spreads, but then goes out when it reaches water or rock, etc.

(A 7.52/4:70-74; DA 1030 = AA 2:350; cf SA 3:114; AA 4:7; Masefield 1986:115)

The interpretation given in the Theravāda Abhidhamma and Commentaries is that the non-returner is *reborn* in the Pure Realms (*Suddh'āvāsa*), and there attains nirvana immediately after "arising" in a new rebirth, or at some time before the middle of the life-span there (Pug 16, AA 4:7). However, there is no question of whether the non-returner is "reborn" by means of conception or "descending into the womb." They are all of immediate "spontaneous birth" (*opapātika,* M 1:465), rather than being born from a womb or an egg (M 1:173).

As such, to **"cut into the ground"** refers to the start of a new rebirth. For the "fire" to spread and then go out (simile 5) means to the experience of several rebirths before the non-returner "cools" by attaining nirvana.

> As the Theravādin interpretation of the *antarā-parinibbāyī* non-returner (1a-c) is that he attains *nibbāna* at some time between the start and middle of the next life, and the "cutting-short (*upa-hacca-*)" non-returner (2) attains it after this, then the "cutting into the ground (*upahacca-talaṁ*)" of the simile would have to represent the middle of this life, which seems *most* artificial. Even the commentary (AA 4:39) sees similes 1a-c as involving a "bit" which is still in "space," "not having reached the earth"; reaching the earth would naturally apply to the very *start* of a life. The *antarā-parinibbāyī* must thus be one who attains *nibbāna* after death and *before* any rebirth. (Harvey 1995:101; Masefield 1986:116, 120 agrees; cf Wayman 1974:236)

6 Existence (*bhava*)

6.1 The (Cattāro Puggalā) Saṁyojana Sutta (A 4.131.3-4/2:133 f) mentions three kinds of fetters that cause rebirth, namely:

(1) The lower fetters (that bind one to the world of sense-desire) (*oram,bhāgiyā saṁyojanā*);
(2) The fetters that accrue arising (*uppatti,paṭilābhikā saṁyojanā*);
(3) The fetters that accrue existence (*bhava,paṭilābhikā saṁyojanā*).

(A 4.131.3-4/2:133 f; see Masefield 1986:114)

The first kind of fetters are abandoned by one "going upstream to Akaniṭṭha," ie the least advanced non-returner. The first two groups of fetters are abandoned by the *antarā,parinibbāyī* non-returner. All three groups of fetters are abandoned by the arhat.

The mention of the last two groups of fetters is very interesting and instructive. The "upstream" non-returner is clearly not beyond "arising" (*uppatti*) in a rebirth since he has several rebirths in the Pure Abodes, ending in the Akaniṭṭha. Only the highest kind of non-returner is beyond such "arising," but he is not an arhat, ie one who has attained nirvana in this very life by destroying the fetters leading to "existence." The **non-returner**, on the other hand, only attains nirvana *after* his death but *before* "arising" in any rebirth, an interim period known as "existence" (*bhava*).

> It can thus be seen that the "early Suttas" did accept a between-lives state, known as "becoming," [existence,][46] in which it is possible for a non-returner to attain *nibbāna.* An Arahat, though, attains *nibbāna* in this life, so as not to enter "becoming," while most beings pass through it and go on to arise in a rebirth. (Harvey 1995:102)

6.2 There is evidently an allusion to this state of "existence" as an intermediate state between death and the next life in **the Chann'ovāda Sutta** (M 114 = S 35), where Mahā Cunda instructs Channa the Vajjī,[47] quoting the Buddha thus:

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[46] The Sarvāstivādins teach that there are **four kinds of "existence" (*bhava*)**: intermediate-existence (*antarā,-bhava*); arising-existence (at the moment of conception) (*upapatti,bhava*); ante-death existence (during life, prior to death) (*purva,kāla,bhava*); and death-existence (at the moment of death) (*maraṇa,bhava*) (Abhk:P 3.10-13cd/2:45, 37d-38c/117; Mahāvyutpatti 245, 1271).

[47] The other Channa was a Sākya, that is, Prince Siddhattha's charioteer.

For one who is dependent there is wavering (*calita*);
For one who is independent, there is no wavering.
When there is no wavering, there is tranquillity (*passaddhi*).
When there is tranquillity, there is no inclination (towards craving or existence) (*nati*).[48]
When there is no inclination, there is no coming and going (*agati,gati*).[49]
When there is no coming and going, there is no passing away and rebirth (*cut'upapāta*).
When there is no passing away and rebirth, there is neither here nor beyond nor in between the two (*na ubhayaṁ antarena*).
—This itself is the end of suffering. (M 144.11/3:266 = S 35.87.20/4:59 = U 81; cf S 12.40/2:67)

6.3 Another well known canonical statement of an intermediate state (albeit rejected by the Commentaries) is that found in **the Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta** (S 35.95):

[50]"When, Māluṅkyāputta, regarding what is seen, heard, sensed and cognized by you,
in the seen will be only the seen;
in the heard there will only be the heard;
in the sensed there will only be the sensed;
in the cognized there will only be the cognized,
then, Māluṅkyāputta, you are 'not by that.'[51]
When, Māluṅkyāputta, you are 'not by that,' then you will 'not be therein.'[52]
When, Māluṅkyāputta, you are 'not therein,' then you will 'be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two'."[53]

7 Beings seeking rebirth

7.1 ***Sambhavesī.*** **The Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38) provides another important clue to our understanding of the intermediate being. In his teachings to correct Sāti's wrong view that the same consciousness migrates from life to life, the Buddha declares:

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[48] "Inclination," *nati,* lit "bending," alt tr "bias" (M:ÑB 1116).

[49] "Coming and going," *āgati,gati* (text has wr *agati,gati*) (D 1:162; M 1:153, 328≠Tha 917; S 3:53; A 3:54=74), where it refers to "rebirth, re-arising." At M 1:334=335, Māra says *bhikkhūnaṁ… n'eva jānāmi āgatiṁ gatiṁ vā,* seems to mean: "I do not know how to get a chance over the those *bhikkhus*" (CPD)

[50] This teaching is also given to the ascetic Bāhiya Dārucīriya (**Bāhiya S**, U 1.10/8). According to SA, in the form base, ie in what is seen by eye-consciousness, "there is only conciousness," that is, as eye-consciousness is not affected by lust, hatred or delusion in relation to form that has come into range, so the *javana* will be just a mere eye-consciousness by being empty of lust, etc. So, too, for the heard and the sensed. The "cognized" is the object cognized by the mind-door adverting (*mano,dvārâvajjana*). In the cognized, "only the cognized" is the adverting (consciousness) as the limit. As one does not become lustful, etc, by adverting, so I will set my mind with adverting as the limit, not allowing it to arise by way of lust, etc. ***You will not be by "that" (na tena)*****:** you will not be aroused by *by that* lust, or irritated *by that* hatred, or deluded *by that* delusion. ***Then you will not be "therein" (na tattha)*****:** the seen." For eye-consciousness sees only form in form, not some essence that is permanent, etc. So too for the remaining types of consciousness (ie the *javana* series, SPṭ), there will be merely the seen. Or, alternatively, the meaning is "My mind will be mere eye-consciousness, which means the cognizing of form in form. When you are not aroused by that lust, etc, then "you will not be therein"—not bound, not attached, not established in what is seen, heard, sensed and cognized. (See Bodhi S:B 1410 n75)

[51] *Na tena,* that is, one would not be aroused "by that" lust, etc. See prec n.

[52] *Na tattha,* that is, one would not be "therein," ie in the seen, etc. See prec n.

[53] "Be neither here…nor in between the two," *n'ev'idha na huraṁ na ubhayam antarena,* meaning that one would not be reborn anywhere. Comy rejects *in between the two (ubhayam antarena)* as implying an intermediate state (*antarā,bhāva*). However, a number of canonical texts apparently support this notion (see, for example, **Kutuhala,sāla S**, where the Buddha declares: "When, Vaccha, a being has laid down this body but has not yet been reborn in another body, I declare that it is fuelled by craving." (S 4:400; cf M 1:266, 2:157).

> Bhikshus, there are these four kinds of food for the maintenance of beings that already have come to be (*bhūtā*) and for the support of beings seeking a new existence (*sambhavesī*). What are the four?
>
> They are physical food [consumable nutriment], gross and subtle; contact as the second; mental volition as the third; and consciousness as the fourth.[54] (M 38.15/1:261)

Here, *sambhavesī* clearly refers to the intermediate being. This word, evidently with the same meaning, is also found in **the Metta Sutta** (Sn 1.8/147 = Kh no 9):

> **5** Be they seen or unseen; **[26]**
> Those that dwell far or near;
> Those already born or those seeking birth (*sambhavesī*)—
> May all beings be happy-minded! (Sn 147 = Kh no 9)

In the Abhidharma,kośa, a Sanskrit Buddhist work, the term ***saṁbhavaiṣin*** is one of the five names for the intermediate existence, along with *manomaya, gandharva* and *(abhi)nirvṛtti* (Abhk:P 3.40c-41a/2:122).[55]

7.2 Mindful conception. In this connection, it should be noted that **the Acchariya,abbhūta Sutta** (M 123) records that when the Bodhisattva, is reborn in the Tusita heaven, while remaining there, and when he descends into his mother's womb (during the Conception), all these are done "mindfully and fully knowing" (*sati sampājano*).[56] **The Sampasādanīya Sutta** (D 28) and **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33) speak of the four modes of conception (*gabbhâvakkhantiya*):

(1) one descends into the mother's womb unknowing, stays there unknowing, and leaves it unknowing;
(2) one descends into the mother's womb fully knowing, but stays there unknowing, and leaves it unknowing;
(3) one descends into the mother's womb fully knowing, stays there fully knowing, but leaves it unknowing;
(4) one descends into the mother's womb fully knowing, stays there fully knowing, and leaves it fully knowing" (*sampajāno c'eva mātu,kucchiṁ okkamati, sampajāno mātu kucchismiṁ ṭhāti, sampajāno mātu kucchismā nikkhamati*).[57] (D 28.5/3:103 = D 33.1.11(37)/3:231)

A number of other suttas similarly speak of the fully conscious conception, gestation and nativity of the Bodhisattva.[58]

These modes of rebirth, especially (2-4), do not actually prove the existence of an intermediate state but possibly demonstrate the likelihood of immediate rebirth, and understandably form the basis for the dogma in some fundamentalist Theravada circles that "rebirth is immediate" and that that is the one and only truth. Furthermore, the last three modes of rebirth show that a spiritually advanced person is able to consciously choose his future parents and place of rebirth.

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[54] *Kabaḷiṅ,kāro āhāro oḷāriko vā sukhumo vā, phasso dutiyo, mano,sañcetanā tatiyā, viññāṇaṁ catutthaṁ.* See M:ÑB 1186 n120 on *sambhavesī* and *āhāra.*

[55] On *sambhavesi,* see also Buddhadasa 1992:88-92.

[56] M 123.1-6/3:120. The **Mahāpadāna S** (D 14.1.17/2:12) similarly records that the past Buddha Vipassī, when still a Bodhisattva, descends into his mother's womb "mindfully and clearly aware."

[57] D 28.5/3:103. Comy says that these 4 refer to (1) worldly humans; (2) the 80 great elders; (3) the two chief disciples of a Buddha and the pratyeka-bodhisattvas (ie pratyeka-buddhas in their last life); (4) to the all-knowing Buddhas (DA 4:176).

[58] **Tathāgata Acchariya S 1** (A 4.127/2:130 f); **Bhūmi,cala S** (A 8.70.15-17/4:313), adds the Buddha fully knowing relinquishing of his life-formation (decision to pass away) as a fourth cause of earth tremor (A 8.70.18).

8 Similes of the intermediate state

8.1 The intermediate state (*bhava, antarā,bhava*) evidently functions as a transition between different forms of rebirth, as a vehicle "for transferring the continuity of character and also a time for the necessary re-adjustment." In fact, the Saṁmatiyas saw the between-lives as a time for readjustment before a new mode of self-expression. (*Sammītīya,nikāya Śāstra*, tr K Venkataraman)

8.2 There is an important connection between the similes 1a-c [5] and the knowledge of the passing-away and arising of beings (*cutûpapāta,ñāṇa*) (D 1:83). **The Sāmaññ**a**,phala Sutta** (D 2)**,** in explaining this power of the recollection of beings faring according to their karma, employs this simile:

> Maharajah, just as if there were a palace in the central square [of a town where four roads meet] (*siṅghāṭaka*), and a man with good eyesight standing on the top of it were to see people **entering** (*pavisanti*) a house, **leaving** (*nikkhamanti*) it, **wandering** (*sañcaranti*) along the carriage-road, and **sitting down** (*nisinnā*) in the central square [where four roads meet]. The thought would occur to him, 'These people are entering a house, leaving it, walking along the streets, and sitting down in the central square [where four roads meet]' (D 2.96/1:83)

Here the usage of "entering" (*pavisanti*), "leaving" (*nikkhamanti*) and "wandering" (*sañcaranti*) refers respectively to one being reborn, dying and seeking a new birth. The "house" represents the body or form of rebirth, and "sitting down (*nisinnā*) in the central square [where four roads meet]" refers to the consciousness finding a new birth in the sense-world (the four roads representing the four elements, earth, water, fire, wind). Here, the **"sitting down"** of the simile refers to the "discernment[59] coming to be established in a new personality, after wandering in search of 'it'." (Harvey 1995:103)

8.3 Another simile for the knowledge of the rebirth of beings, given in **the Mahā Assapura Sutta** (M 39.19/1:279) compares it to the knowledge of a man standing between two houses, who would "see people entering the houses and leaving it, and coming and going, and wandering about" (M 39.19/1:279). "This simile," concludes Harvey, "emphasizes the mid-stage of becoming [existence] as one of wandering and wavering, indeed, one of *coming and going.*" (Harvey 1995:103).

8.4 A similar metaphor, this one dealing with meditation, found in **the Kiṁsuka Sutta** (S 35.204), provides the glosses for each of these terms:

> Suppose, monk, a king had a frontier city with strong ramparts, walls, arches, and with six gates. The gate-keeper posted there would be wise, competent, and intelligent; one who keeps out strangers and admits acquaintances. A swift pair of messengers would come from the east…the west…the north…the south and ask the gate-keeper, "Where, my good man, is the lord of this city?" He would reply, "He is sitting in the central square of the city [where the four roads meet]. Then the swift messenger would deliver their message of things as they are to the lord of the city and leave by the route by which they came.
>
> I have made up this simile, monk, to show you the meaning, that is to say: **"The city"** is a designation for this body consisting of the four elements, originating from mother and father, built up of rice and gruel, subject to impermanence, to being worn and rubbed away, to breaking apart and dissolution. **"The six gates"** are a designation for the six internal sense-bases. **"The gate-keeper"** is a designation for mindfulness. **[195] "The swift messengers"** are a designation for calmness and insight. **"The lord of the city"** is a designation for consciousness. **"The central square [where four roads meet]"** (*siṅghāṭaka*) is a designation for the four great elements—the earth element, the water element, the fire element, the wind element.' **"A message of things as they are"** is a designation for nirvana. **The route by which they had arrived** is a designation for the Noble Eightfold Path…. (S 35.204/4:194 f)

[59] "Discernment," Peter Harvey's term for "consciousness" (*viññāṇa*).

8.5 SUMMARY. Harvey summarizes the various similes for the intermediate state as follows:

"inclination": leaving the body with a desire for further rebirth, like a man leaving a house, or a bit flying off a hot, beaten piece of iron;
"coming and going": wandering back and forth *seeking* a rebirth, like a man wandering on a road or between houses, or a hot iron bit that flies up in the sky;
"falling away and arising": falling from one's previous state, one's previous identity, into a new rebirth, like a man settling down in a square or entering a house; or a hot iron bit falling and cutting into the earth.

As shown in **the Kutūhala,sāla Sutta** (S 44.9/4:398-400) [3.13-15], the whole intermediate state is like a leaping flame driven and fuelled by the wind, representing craving. "That is, craving provides the impetus and energy to seek another rebirth and the intermediary existence is flavoured by such craving." (Harvey 1995:103).

9 Miscellaneous

9.1 LENGTH OF THE INTERMEDIATE STATE. The early suttas see the intermediate state as a state of existence that is fuelled by craving for rebirth, that one enters when one's consciousness (the main process of the life-principle) leaves the body.

> In a dream-like existence, it [the intermediate being] wanders about seeking a new life, kept going by craving and accompanied by will and aspiration. On finding a new life, it falls into the womb (in the case of rebirths involving this), and sets off the production of a new mind-and-body, which had been craved for. This all takes place, of course, within the parameters set by karma, the "field" in which the "seed" of discernment [consciousness] grows (§6.16).
> (Harvey 1995 §6.31)

The Kathā,vatthu Commentary (by Buddhaghosa) states that the intermediate state lasts a week or more (KvuA 105). Vasubandhu (fl 4th cent), the early Mahāyāna master, teaches that it may take as long as needed to unite the conditions for a new birth (Abhk:P §14da/p393). Other sources say: a very short time (Vaibhāśikas), seven days (Vasumitra), or seven weeks, but not longer. (Abhk 2:48 f; Abhk:P p394)

9.2 THE BRIGHT LIGHT. People with near-death experiences (NDE) or out-of-body experiences (OBE) often report seeing a bright light at the end of a tunnel. Harvey argues (1995 ch 10) that this refers to the consciousness found in deep sleep and at the moment of death is seen (in the Theravāda) as "shining radiantly" (*pabhassara*, A 1:8-10, 10 f).

> It also makes sense of the reference in the *Bardo Thötröl* ("Tibetan Book of the Dead") to people confronting a pure white light in the intermediary existence: in the first of the three stages of this, the mind is said to be in an unconscious and luminous state which is somehow equated with Amitābha, "Infinite Radiance," Buddha (Fremantle & Trungpa, 1978:37). Such ideas also seem to connect with the idea, in other Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, that this Buddha will come to meet his devotees at death. (Harvey 1995:104)

9.3 SLEEPING & DYING. The intermediate state is not a fully conscious state. The early suttas, such as **the Pāyāsi Sutta** (D 23.16/2:333 f), talk of the life-principle as leaving a person either on dreaming or in death. The materialist prince Pāyāsi thinks that he has disproved rebirth when he puts a criminal in a sealed jar and lets him die and saw no life-principle leaving the jar when it is opened. The venerable Kumāra Kassapa[60] explains to Pāyāsi how his gruesome experiment does not disprove rebirth, as, for example, when the prince dreams, his attendants do not see his life-principle "entering or leaving" him; as such, the life principle is not denied, but accepted, as an invisible phenomenon (Harvey 1995 §6.7).

Amongst other early references to sleeping and dying in similar terms are:

[60] Harvey errs here saying it is *Mahā* Kassapa.

(1) **The Pāyāsi Sutta** (D 23/15/2:333 f) uses the expression "gone to one's day-bed" (*diva,seyyaṁ*)" for taking a siesta, while **the Metta Sutta** (Sn 29) closes with the remark that one with moral virtue, right view, and freedom from sense-pleasures will go no more to "a womb-bed" (*gabbha,-seyyaṁ*), in the sense of "he would not be reborn."

(2) **The Vinaya** uses *okkamati* both in the sense of "descent" of consciousness into the womb at conception (Harvey 1995 §6.9) and also of "falling" into sleep (V 1:15).

□ □ □

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040602; rev 060209; 071118; 080503