Revisioning Buddhism 2
[a reaffirmation of the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

Becoming human: it's easier than you think

Contrary to popular Buddhism and Buddhist mythology, it is *not* difficult to obtain human birth. This popular wrong view is encouraged by the misquoting of the parable of the blind turtle alluded to in the later works without reference to its context in **the Balapandita Sutta** (M 129) where it is stated:

> Bhikshus, suppose a man were to throw into the ocean a yoke with a single hole in it. Then the east winds carry it westwards; the west winds carry it eastwards; the north winds carry it southwards; the south winds carry it northwards. Suppose a blind turtle were to come up from the ocean depths once in a hundred years.
>
> What do you think, bhikshus? Would that blind turtle put his neck through the yoke with a single hole in it?"
>
> "Even if it could, bhante, it would only happen after a very long time."
>
> "Even then, bhikshus, it is more likely that the blind turtle would put his neck through the single-holed yoke than would the fool, once fallen into a lower world [animals, the pretas, the hells], regain the human state, I say! Why is that?
>
> Because in the lower worlds *there is no Dharma-faring*, no doing of what is wholesome, no performance of merit. There they eat each other, preying on the weak.
>
> (M 129.24/3:169) = SD 2.22

A very close parallel to this parable is found in **the Chiggala Sutta 2** (S 56.47). In both cases, the reference is to rebirth in "a lower world," that is, as a preta (departed being), an animal, or a hell-being, or (according to later mythology) as an asura (narcissistic demon). The Chiggala Sutta 2, however, mentions IGNORANCE OF THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS as the reason for the difficulty of regaining human birth (S 56.47/5:455 f).

The context of the two passages is identical and should be well noted, that is to say, "the fool, once fallen into a lower world" would find it very difficult to regain the human birth. This is because there is no practice of Dharma or making merit there (according to the Balapandita Sutta, M 129), nor knowledge of the four noble truths (according to the Chiggala Sutta 2 (S 56.47). It is in this connection that the statement of the difficulty of human birth should be understood. Hence, there is no issue of the contradiction between "rarity of human birth" and the increasing human population.

On the other hand, it is very easy for celestial beings to "fall" (cavati) from their divine state and be reborn into the human realm. It is very rare indeed that a celestial being is ever reborn from a lower heaven to a higher one. (I can think of only two canonical cases, that of two gandharvas (celestial minstrels) who cultivated mindfulness and were reborn in the brahma world (Sakka,panha Sutta, 21.1.11),[1] and the non-returners in the Pure Abodes).

[1] Thanks to Bhante Sujato for reminding me of this episode (email, 8 Aug 2009)

The reason for this divine devolution is that our heavenly states are supported by our store of good karma and other factors (such as the local life-span). Once the karmic support is exhausted or the divine being reaches the end of his lifespan, he would "fall" from that state.

According to the Saleyyaka Sutta (M 41), it is easy to be reborn as a human being, or even as a divine being—you can aspire for it. But there is a catch: we need to live morally virtuous lives. Moral virtue is the fuel that propels us into such births and keeps us on that trajectory. Live a morally virtuous life and aspire for such a birth, and you will obtain it. The quality of the human state that we are reborn into will also very much depend on the kind of karma we have in store.

We may *have* a human body, but it is difficult to *be* human, so that in the end it is also difficult for us to *remain* in a human body (Dh 182). In other words, if we behave like an animal (living a cyclic life of eating, enjoying sense-pleasures, without mental development), or we live in fear and blindly following others, we are likely to be reborn as animals, if we are not already one!

In the Saddha Janussoni Sutta (A 10.177), the Buddha declares that if one does good works (including social work) but does not keep the precepts (whether monastic or lay), he would be reborn as an animal treated as pets (elephant, horse, cow, chicken etc) which are well cared for!

In other words, we do not live by rice and bread alone, not by faith alone, but we are nourished by sense-stimuli, mental volition and consciousness. However, even when the physical body is deprived of material food, and dies, our mental body or existential consciousness continues to be become sustained by our habitual thoughts, and to be reborn according to how we use our sense-faculties.

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READINGS:

Balapandita Sutta (M 129): http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com/2.22BalapanditaSm129piya.pdf

"The Body in Buddhism" (SD 29.6a):
http://earlypalisutta.googlepages.com/29.6aThebodyinBuddhismpiya.pdf

Saleyyaka Sutta (M 41): http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com/5.7_Saleyyaka_S_m41_piya.pdf

Saddha Janussoni Sutta (A 10.177):
http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com/2.6SaddhaJanussoniSa10.177piya.pdf