

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### REASONS TO BELIEVE IN REBIRTH

*“I recalled my varied lot in former existences.”*

~ Majjhima Nikaya

#### 24.1 HOW ARE WE TO BELIEVE IN REBIRTH

- 24.1.1 The Buddha is our greatest authority on rebirth. On the very night of His Enlightenment, during the first watch, the Buddha developed retro-cognitive knowledge which enabled Him to read His past lives.
- 24.1.2 “I recalled,” He declares, “my varied lot in former existences as follows: first one life, then two lives, then three, four, five, ten, twenty up to fifty lives, then a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand and so forth.”
- 24.1.3 During the second watch the Buddha, with clairvoyant vision, perceived beings disappearing from one state of existence and reappearing in another. He beheld the “base and the noble, the beautiful and the ugly, the happy and the miserable, passing according to their deeds.”<sup>1</sup>
- 24.1.4 These are the very first utterances of the Buddha regarding the question of rebirth. The textual references conclusively prove that the Buddha did not borrow this stern truth of rebirth from any pre-existing source, but spoke from personal knowledge — a knowledge which was supernormal, developed by Himself, and which could be developed by others as well.

- 24.1.5 In His first paean of joy (*udana*), the Buddha says: “Through many a birth (*anekajati*), wandered I, seeking the builder of this house. Sorrowful indeed is birth again and again (*dukkhajati-punappunam*)<sup>2</sup>.”
- 24.1.6 In the Dhammacakka Sutta<sup>3</sup>, His very first discourse, the Buddha, commenting on the second Noble Truth, states: “This very craving is that which leads to rebirth” (*y’ayam tanha ponobhavika*). The Buddha concludes this discourse with the words: “This is my last birth. Now there is no more rebirth (*ayam antima jati natthi dani punabbhavo*).”
- 24.1.7 The Majjhima Nikaya relates that when the Buddha, out of compassion for beings, surveyed the world with His Buddha-vision before He decided to teach the *Dhamma*, He perceived beings who, with fear, view evil and a world beyond (*paralokavaj-jabhayadassavino*).<sup>4</sup>
- 24.1.8 In several discourses the Buddha clearly states that beings, having done evil, are, after death (*parammarana*), born in woeful states, and beings having done good, are born in blissful states.
- 24.1.9 Besides the very interesting *Jataka* stories, which deal with His previous lives and which are of ethical importance, the Majjhima Nikaya and the Anguttara Nikaya make incidental references to some of the past lives of the Buddha.
- 24.1.10 In the Ghatikara Sutta<sup>5</sup>, the Buddha relates to the Venerable Ananda that He was born as *Jotipala*, in the time of the Buddha *Kassapa*, His immediate predecessor. The Anathapindikovada Sutta<sup>6</sup> describes a nocturnal visit of Anathapindika to the Buddha, immediately after his rebirth as a *Deva*. In the Anguttara Nikaya<sup>7</sup>, the Buddha alludes to a past birth as Pacetana the wheelright. In the Samyutta

Nikaya, the Buddha cites the names of some Buddhas who preceded Him.

- 24.1.11 An unusual direct reference to departed ones appears in the Parinibbana Sutta<sup>8</sup>. The Venerable Ananda desired to know from the Buddha the future state of several persons who had died in a particular village. The Buddha patiently described their destinies.
- 24.1.12 Such instances could easily be multiplied from the Tipitaka to show that the Buddha did expound the doctrine of rebirth as a verifiable truth<sup>9</sup>.
- 24.1.13 Following the Buddha's instructions, His disciples also developed this retro-cognitive knowledge and were able to read a limited, though vast, number of their past lives. The Buddha's power in this direction was limitless.
- 24.1.14 The Dhammapada commentary relates the story of a husband and wife who, seeing the Buddha, fell at His feet and saluted Him, saying:  
“Dear son, is it not the duty of sons to care for their mother and father when they have grown old. Why is it that for so long a time you have not shown yourself to us? This is the first time we have seen you?”
- 24.1.15 The Buddha attributed this sudden outburst of parental love to the fact that they have been His parents several times during His past lives and remarked:  
*“Through previous association or present advantage  
That old love springs up again like the lotus in the water.”*<sup>10</sup>
- 24.1.16 There arise in this world highly developed personalities, and Perfect Ones like the Buddhas. Could they evolve suddenly? Could they be the products of a single existence?

24.1.17 Heredity alone cannot account for prodigies, “else their ancestry would disclose it, their posterity, in even greater degree than themselves, would demonstrate it.”

24.1.18 The theory of heredity should be supplemented by the doctrine of Kamma and rebirth for an adequate explanation of these puzzling problems.

24.1.19 If one believes in the present and a future, it is logical to believe in a past.

24.1.20 If there be reason to believe that we have existed in the past, then surely there are no reasons to disbelieve that we shall continue to exist after our present life has apparently ceased.

24.1.21 It is indeed a strong argument in favour of past and future lives that “in this world virtuous persons are very often unfortunate and vicious persons prosperous.”

24.1.22 We are born into the state created by ourselves. If, in spite of our goodness, we are compelled to lead an unfortunate life, it is due to our past evil Kamma. If, in spite of our wickedness, we are prosperous, it is also due to our past good Kamma. The present good and bad deeds will, however, produce their due effects at the earliest possible opportunity.

## 24.2 **WHAT DO KAMMA AND REBIRTH EXPLAIN?**

24.2.1 They account for the problem of suffering for which we ourselves are responsible.

24.2.2 They explain the inequality of mankind.

24.2.3 They account for the arising of geniuses and infant prodigies.

- 24.2.4 They explain why identical twins who are physically alike, enjoying equal privileges, exhibit totally different characteristics, mentally, morally, temperamentally, and intellectually.
- 24.2.5 They account for the dissimilarities amongst children of the same family, though heredity may account for the similarities.
- 24.2.6 They account for the extraordinary innate abilities of some men.
- 24.2.7 They account for the moral and intellectual differences between parents and children.
- 24.2.8 They explain how infants spontaneously develop such passions as greed, anger and jealousy.
- 24.2.9 They account for instinctive likes and dislikes at first sight.
- 24.2.10 They explain how in us are found “a rubbish heap of evil and a treasure-house of good.”
- 24.2.11 They account for the unexpected outburst of passion in a highly civilised person, and for the sudden transformation of a criminal into a saint.
- 24.2.12 They explain how profligates are born to saintly parents, and saintly children to profligates.
- 24.2.13 They explain how, in one sense, we are the result of what we were, we will be the result of what we are; and, in another sense, we are not absolutely what we were, and we will not be absolutely what we are.
- 24.2.14 They explain the causes of untimely deaths and unexpected changes in fortune.

24.2.15 Above all they account for the arising of omniscient, perfect spiritual teachers, like the Buddhas, who possess incomparable physical, mental and intellectual characteristics.

### 24.3 NOTES ON CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

1. Majjhima Nikaya, Mahasaccaka Sutta, No. 36, i. 248.
2. Dhammapada, v. 153.
3. Maha Vagga, p. 10, Samyutta Nikaya v. 428. See ch. 6.
4. Majjhima Nikaya i, 169.
5. Ibid. ii, 45 (No. 81).
6. Majjhima Nikaya iii, 258 (No. 143).
7. Part i, 111.
8. Digha Nikaya ii, 91 (No. 16).
9. Cp. Mr. J. G. Jennings, *The Vedantic Buddhism of the Buddha*.
10. See *Buddhist Legends*, vol. 3, p. 108.