

A Survey of Buddhist Theory of Rebirth
By Ven. Thich Minh Dieu

A SURVEY OF BUDDHIST THEORY OF REBIRTH

III. BUDDHIST THEORY OF REBIRTH

The aim of the Buddhist path is liberation from suffering. The Buddha liberated himself from the suffering of bondage in the round of repeated birth and death (*saṃsāra*). However, in order to achieve that goal a Buddhist should understand properly the phenomena of *kamma* and rebirth in *saṃsāra*. This understanding is so necessary for the Buddhist that Ashin Ottama writes: “If we wish to understand the Buddha’s Teaching in its original dimension- in its undiminished magnitude and significance- we require a proper understanding of three basic principles which form the framework of the Teaching: *kamma, rebirth and saṃsāra*.”¹ Generally speaking, as the doctrine of *kamma*, the doctrine of rebirth also relies on the Buddha’s three insights and it is interpreted completely in the doctrine of *Paṭicca-samuppāda*.

Regarding the scope of this chapter, the following scheme it to be mentioned. First, the justification of rebirth along with the dynamical primary causes leading to rebirth should be given. In doing so, the significance and role of rebirth theory in *Sutta* passages would be underlined. Secondly, with the help of Buddhist cosmogony, a classification of beings in the circle of *saṃsāra* would be presented. Lastly, some typical Buddhist stories of rebirth would be presented.

III. 1. Justification of rebirth

Many passages belonging to the Buddha’s discourses refer to rebirth. Those passages are often accompanied by *kamma* or by craving (*taṇhā*) or five aggregates

¹ Ashin Ottama (1998). *The Wheel Publication No. 425/427*, Sri Lanka: Karunaratne & Sons Ltd, p. 7.

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(*pañca khandhā*) or conditioned origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). Rebirth is a vivid Buddhist teaching which can be experienced in this universe. Thus, it is that Nārada writes: “*Rebirth*, which Buddhists do not regard as a mere theory but as a fact verifiable by evidence, forms a fundamental tenet of Buddhism, though its goal *Nibbāna* is attainable in this life itself.”²

Furthermore, the narratives of previous lives of the Buddha as well as his holy disciples’ stories³ make sure of the accounts of *rebirth*. On the basis of power of retro-cognition (*Pubbenivāsānussati-ñāṇa*) and clairvoyance (*dibbacakkhu*), the Buddha and his *Arahant* disciples could recall their previous lives.⁴ On the very night of his enlightenment, during the first two watches the Buddha recalled his past lives and witnessed beings disappearing and appearing from an existence to another... The Buddha uttered:

153. Through the round of many births
I roamed without reward,
without rest, seeking the housebuilder.
Painful is birth
again & again.

² BHT. p. 222.

³ *Jātaka (Stories of The Buddha’s Former Births)*, trans. (ed.) by E. B. Cowell, 3 Vols., Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass Publishers, rpt. 1999. *Theragāthā (The Elders’ Verses)*, I, trans. from the Pāli by K. R. Norman, London: PTS, 1990. And *Therī-gāthā (The Elders’ Verses)*, II, Trans. from the Pāli by K. R. Norman, London: PTS, 1991.

⁴ M. Bhayabherava Sutta (Fear and Dread), Sutta No. 4, trans. from the Pāli by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (1960) & Bhikkhu Bodhi (1995), USA, Boston: Wisdom Publications, p. 105.

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154. House-builder, you're seen!
You will not build a house again.
All your rafters broken,
the ridge pole destroyed,
gone to the Unformed, the mind
has come to the end of craving. ⁵

In the *Ghaṭṭikāra Sutta*⁶ the Buddha related the Venerable *Ānanda* about his past life in the time of the Buddha *Kassapa*⁷. He was the Brahmin student *Jotipāla*. Owing to his friend's encouragement, potter *Ghaṭṭikāra*, came to visit Buddha *Kassapa* and became his disciple.

III. 2. Primary causes of rebirth

The doctrine of rebirth was preserved in *Brāhmaṇical*, *Upaniṣadic* systems as well as in some *Śramaṇic* Schools which were previous to the Buddha. However, these traditions considered rebirth as the phenomenon of the soul's transmigration, in which the soul or *ātman* is identified with static agent. The Buddha instead of rejecting this idea he considered *kamma* and craving (*taṇhā*) as the key functions lead to rebirth. It is, in other words, this craving⁸ is the fuel for taking place of rebirth.

⁵ DHP. No. 153-154, trans. from the Pāli by Bhikkhu Thanissaro,
(Reference to <http://www.accesstoinight.org/canon/khuddaka/dhp/index.html>)

⁶ M. Ghaṭṭikāra Sutta, Sutta No. 81, trans. from the Pāli by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (1960) & Bhikkhu Bodhi (1995), p. 670f.

⁷ The Buddha Kassapa is said to be immediate predecessor of the Gotama Buddha. See D. Māhapadāna Sutta (The Great Discourse on the Lineage), Sutta No. 14, trans. from the Pāli by Maurice Walshe (1987, 1995), USA, Boston: Wisdom Publications, p. 199f.

⁸ S. Vol. iv, LIV, X, (*The Debating Hall*), trans. from the Pāli by F. L. Woodward, London: PTS, rpt. 1993, p. 281.

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“It is this craving which produces rebirth accompanied by passionate clinging welcome this and that (life). It is the craving for sensual pleasure (kāmataṇhā), craving for existence (bhavataṇhā), and craving for non-existence (vibhavataṇhā).”⁹

It is necessary to note that the conditions that cause rebirth can be observed in several facets. Particularly speaking, *kamma* and craving can be considered as the primary causes for leading to rebirth. Desire, lust, craving, dogmatic bias etc., related to physical body (*rūpa*), or sensation (*vedanā*), or perception (*saññā*), or mental formation (*saṅkhāra*), or consciousness (*viññāṇa*) are to be considered as clues linking to rebirth.

The *Bhavanetti sutta*¹⁰ said:

“The cord of rebirth! The cause of rebirth!” is the saying, lord. Pray, lord, what is the cord of rebirth and what is the ceasing of it?

“That desire, Rādha, that lust, that lure, that craving, those grasping after systems, that mental standpoint, that dogmatic bias which is concerned with body...as well as with feeling, perception, activities, consciousness, - that is called “the cord of rebirth.” The ceasing of these is called “the ceasing of the cord of rebirth.”

⁹ BHT. p. 90; & see also: S. Vol. v, LVI, XII, II, i. Dhammacakkappavattanasuttava²⁹an± (The setting rolling of the wheel of the Norm), trans. from the Pāli by F. L. Woodward, London: PTS, rpt. 1994, p. 357.

¹⁰ S. Vol. iii, XXIII, *Leading to Becoming*, trans. from the Pāli by F. L. Woodward, London: PTS, rpt. 1992, p. 157.

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In the same manner, the *Gaddulabaddha sutta*¹¹ and the *Mahāvedalla sutta* (The Greater Series of Questions and Answers)¹² showed ignorance (*avijjā*) which is fettered by craving as the original cause of rebirth.

The *Gaddulabaddha sutta* runs:

At Sāvattthī... Then the Exalted One said:

‘Incalculable, brethren, is the beginning of this round of rebirth. No beginning is made known of beings wrapped in ignorance, fettered by craving, who run on, who fare on the round of rebirth.

There comes a time, brethren, when the mighty ocean dries up, is utterly drained, comes no more to be. But of beings hindered by ignorance, fettered by craving, who run on, who fare on the round of rebirth, I declare no end-making...’

It is said in the *Mahāvedalla sutta*:

“Friend, how is renewal of being in the future generated?”

“Friend, renewal of being in the future is generated through the delighting in this and that on the part of beings who are hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving.”

“Friend, how is renewal of being in the future not generated?”

¹¹ S. Vol. iii, XXIII, *Leading to Becoming*, trans. from the Pāli by F. L. Woodward, London: PTS, rpt. 1992, p. 126-128.

¹² M. Sutta No. 43, trans. from the Pāli by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (1960) & Bhikkhu Bodhi (1995), USA, Boston: Wisdom Publications, p. 390.

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“Friend, with the fading away of ignorance, with the arising of true knowledge, and with the cessation of craving, renewal of being in the future is not generated.”¹³

On the other hands, owing to the misunderstanding of the reality of universe and beings, human beings always worry about something that is non-existent externally (*bahiddhā asati*) and non-existent internally (*ajjhataṃ asati*). Consequently, beings are tied up in knots and are bound in the round of rebirth. This issue is mentioned in the *Taṇhāsutta*.¹⁴

‘The Buddha said: “Monks, I will teach you craving that ensnares, that floats along, that far-flung, that clings to one, by which this world is smothered, enveloped, tangled like a ball of thread, covered as with blight, twisted up like a grass-rope, so that it overpasses not the Constant Round (of rebirth), the Downfall, the Way of Woe, the Ruin. Do ye listen to it carefully? Apply your minds and I will speak.’

‘Yes Lord,’ replied those monks to the Exalted One. The Exalted One said this:

‘And of what sort, monks, is craving that ensnares... in which this world is smothered...?’

There are these eighteen thoughts which are haunted by craving concerning the inner self and eighteen which are haunted by craving concerning what is external to self. Now of what sort are the former?

¹³ Loc. cit. p. 390.

¹⁴ A. Vol. II, Mahāvagga, Taṇhāsutta, trans. from the Pāli by F. L. Woodward, London: PTS, rpt. 1992, p. 225-6.

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Monks, when there is the thought: I am,-there come the thoughts: I am in this world: I am thus: I am otherwise: I am not eternal (asmi): I am eternal: should I be: should I be in this world: should I be thus: should I be otherwise: May I become: May I become in this world: may I become thus: May I become otherwise: I shall become: I shall become in this world: I shall become thus: I shall become otherwise. These are the eighteen thoughts which are haunted by craving concerning the inner self.

And of what sort, monks are the eighteen thoughts which are haunted by carving concerning what is external to self?

When there is the thought: By this I am, -there come the thoughts: by this I am in the world: by this I am thus: by this I am otherwise: by this I am not eternal: by this I am eternal: by this should I be: by this should I be in this world: by this should I be thus: by this should I be otherwise: by this may I become: by this may I become in this world: by this may I become thus: by this may I become otherwise: by this I shall become: by this I shall become in this world: by this I shall become thus: by this I shall become otherwise. There are the eighteen thoughts which are haunted by carving concerning what is external to self.

Now these... are called “the thirty-six thoughts haunted by craving.”

Thus such thirty-six thoughts of past, thirty-six thoughts of future, such thirty-six thoughts of present time make up one hundred and eight thoughts which are haunted by craving.

Verily, monks, this is that craving that ensnares, that floats along, that is far-flung, that clings to one, by which this world is smothered, enveloped, tangled like a ball of thread, covered over with blight, twisted up like a grass-

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rope, so that it overpasses not the Constant Round, the Downfall, the Way of Woe, the Ruin.”¹⁵

The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (The Great Passing The Buddha’s Last Days)¹⁶ and *Paṇhamakoṭṭigama sutta*¹⁷ state that rebirth in *saṃsāra* is caused by not understanding, not penetrating the Four Noble Truths. But when one understands and penetrates the Four Noble Truths, he uproots the craving, and destroys the link to becoming. He liberates from becoming.

‘Monks, it is through not understanding, not penetrating four Ariyan truths that we have run on, wandered on, this long long road, both you and I. What are the four?’

Through not understanding, not penetrating the Ariyan truth of Ill ... we have run on, wandered on, this long long road, both you and I.

But now, monks, the Ariyan truth of Ill is understood, is penetrated, likewise the Ariyan truth of the arising, the ceasing of Ill ... is penetrated. Uprooted is the craving to exit, destroyed is the channel to becoming, there is no more coming to be.’¹⁸

III.3. Rebirth with relevance to *gandhabba* and *viññāṇa*

¹⁵ Loc. cit. p. 225-6.

¹⁶ D. Mahāparinibbāna Sutta: Sutta No. 16, trans. from the Pāli by Maurice Walshe (1987,1995), USA, Boston: Wisdom Publications, p. 91.

¹⁷ S. Vol. V, trans. from the Pāli by F. L. Woodward, London: PTS, rpt. 1994, p. 365.

¹⁸ Loc. cit. p. 365.

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‘This’ being, ‘that’ becomes; from the arising of this, that arises; this not being, that becomes not; from the ceasing of this, that ceases.’¹⁹

This signifies that rebirth takes place depending on the process of causality. It is said that *Gandhabba*, which may be identical with Consciousness (*viññāṇa*), and plays a crucial role for occurring of rebirth.²⁰ However, it is not regarded as an eternal agent but that as a causal agent. The Buddha condemned wrong view of *Bhikkhu Sāti* holding eternal idea that “It is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of rebirths, not another.”²¹ He then taught the teaching of dependent origination (*Paṭicca-samuppāda*) to remove *Sāti*’s misunderstanding. Thereafter, he explained the process of rebirth with the law of dependent origination.

“There is the union of the mother and father, and it is the mother’s season, and the being (*gandhabba*) to be reborn is present, through the union of these three things the conception of an embryo in a womb takes place.”²²

The first, (the union of the mother and father), accounts for the seed which forms the physical body (*rūpa*). The second and the third (the mother’s season and *gandhabba*) are crucial factors for the seed to grow in the mother’s womb. However, the mother’s season is only a temporary factor. But *gandhabba* or the third condition is very significant in that it determines the nature of the psychological personality of

¹⁹ S. vol. ii, Dasabalasutta, trans. from the Pāli by Mrs. Rhys Davids, London: PTS, rpt. 1994, p. 23.

²⁰ M. Sutta No. 38, Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta (The Great Discourse on the Destruction of Craving), trans. from the Pāli by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli (1960) & Bhikkhu Bodhi (1995), USA, Boston: Wisdom Publications, p. 358.

²¹ Ibid. p. 349.

²² Ibid. loc. cit. p. 358.

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the new being. *Gandhabba* in this context is identical with ‘consciousness’ (*viññāṇa*) in *Mahānidāna sutta*²³ where consciousness is said to associate with body-and-mind (*nāma-rūpa*) during the process of forming a new being inside the mother’s womb. Here, we have evidence from the text as follows:

‘I have said: “Consciousness conditions mind-and-body.”... If consciousness were not to come into the mother’s womb, would mind-and-body develop there?’ ‘No, Lord.’

‘Or if consciousness, having entered the mother’s womb, were to be deflected, would mind-and-body come to birth in this life?’ ‘No, Lord.’ ‘And if the consciousness of such a tender young being, boy or girl, were thus cut off, would mind-and-body grow, develop and mature?’ ‘No, Lord.’ ‘Therefore, Ānanda, just this, namely consciousness, is the root, the cause, the origin, the condition of mind-and-body.’²⁴

In the same manner, the *Titthayatanadisutta*²⁵ describes the progress of constitution of a new being as follows:

“Based on the six elements, monks, there is descent into the womb. This descent taking place, name-and-shape comes to pass. Conditioned by name-and-shape is the sixfold sphere (of sense). Conditioned by the sixfold sphere is contact. Conditioned by contact is feeling... this is the arising of ill.”

²³ D. *Mahānidāna Sutta* (The Great Discourse On Origination), Sutta No. 15, trans. from the Pāli by Maurice Walse (1987, 1995), USA, Boston: Wisdom Publications, p. 226.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 226.

²⁵ A. Vol. I, III, trans. from the Pāli by F. L. Woodward, London: PTS, rpt.1989, p. 160.

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Besides, consciousness is treated as one of four kinds of food for keeping living beings in the cycle of rebirth. It arises from craving in respect of the links of conditioned origination. This issue is described in the text as follows:

“*Bhikkhus*, there are these four kinds of nutriment for the maintenance of beings that already have come to be and for the support of those about to come to be. What four? They are physical food as nutriment, gross or subtle; contact as the second; mental volition as the third; and consciousness as the fourth.

Now, *bhikkhus*, these four kinds of nutriment have what as their source, what are their origins, from what are they born and produced? These four kinds of nutriment have craving as their source, craving as their origin; they are born and produced from craving...”²⁶

As we have seen before,²⁷ *cetanā* conditions the arising consciousness. Consciousness is the condition for rebirth to take place. It is said in *Cetanā-sutta*:²⁸

“That which we will, brethren, and that which we intend to do and that wherewithal we are occupied: - this becomes an object for the persistence of consciousness. The object being there, there comes to be a station of consciousness. Consciousness being stationed and growing, rebirth of renewed existence takes place in the future ...”

²⁶ M. Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta (The Great Discourse on the Destruction of Craving), Sutta No. 38, trans. from the Pāli by Bhikkhu Ñāṇmoli (1960) & Bhikkhu Bodhi (1995), USA, Boston: Wisdom Publications, p. 353.

²⁷ See Chapter II: *Cetanā is kamma*.

²⁸ S. Vol. II, *Cetanā-sutta*, trans. from the Pāli by Mrs. Rhys Davids, London: PTS, rpt. 1994, p. 45.

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All above quotations emphasize the phenomena of rebirth in which consciousness (*viññāṇa*) plays a key role. It connects with six elements to form a psychophysical personality. With regard to the cycle of dependent origination, it is this consciousness more or less that is influenced by past *kamma* (ignorance: *avijjā* and mental activities: *saṅkhāra*) and craving (*taṇhā*) of the departed at death moment. Thanks to those conditions along with the new biophysical contribution of the parents a new psychophysical personality is formed in mother's womb.

III. 4. Buddhist cosmogony with relevance to rebirth

Based on the Theory of Dependent Origination (*Paticca-samuppāda*), early Buddhism constituted the cosmogonic theory. Due to the Dependent Origination Theory, there is no beginning and ending of this physical cosmos.²⁹ It is very interesting to know that Buddhist cosmos does not limit only up to this world. But it stretches horizontally lower and upper worlds respectively called the Sensuous World (*kāma-loka*), the Fine Material World (*rūpa-loka*), and the Immaterial World (*arūpa-loka*). Of these, the Sensuous World embodies the plane of human existence and another. Beings are reborn in these three worlds depending on their *kamma* and craving. It is said that each of these three worlds comprises of several planes or realms where beings exist. Buddhist *Abhidhamma*³⁰ divides these three worlds into thirty-one planes of existence.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 118f.

³⁰ Abhidhammattha Sangaha (A Manual of Abhidhamma), trans. from the Pāli by Nārada (1968), Ceylon: Buddhist Publication Society, p. 235-236. See also: "A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma", translation revised by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Sri Lanka, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993, p. 189ff.

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Buddhist tradition regards *Aggañña Sutta* as the representative discourse to express Buddhist cosmogony. It is unfortunate that the content of the *sutta* as we have in our hands so far is not maintained its original form. The first half of the *sutta* is not linked to the rest half. By investigating the *sutta*, Gombrich³¹ appears to accept the *sutta* is ascribed to the Buddha, but he does not believe that the *sutta* maintains its exact form in which it was originally recited (at the First Buddhist Council). Therefore, for him, the *sutta* is satirical in intent. And it can not be understood unless we realize that it makes several allusions to the *Brahmanical* scripture.³²

In his statement of Buddhist Metaphor, Allegory, Satire, Gombrich insists that: “This is no minor matter for the history of the Buddhist view of the world. Strictly speaking, the *Aggañña Sutta* is not a cosmogony, since for Buddhists an absolute beginning is inconceivable (SN II, 178ff.); but it explains how the world came into being this time round...”³³

It is said in *Aggañña Sutta* that when this world (earth) degenerates and inevitably comes to an end, beings here are reborn in another world. After a long period, this world again begins to arise. At a time of this becoming, the beings from the *Ābhassara Brahmā* world,³⁴ having departed from there, are mostly reborn in this world. These beings have self-luminance and have the ability to fly in the sky.³⁵

In addition, due to their craving, discrimination, persistency etc., this world becomes completely established and the beings come to be here.

³¹ R. Gombrich. (1992), *The Buddha's Book of Genesis?*, Indo-Iranian Journal 35: 159-178, p. 162.

³² Ibid. p. 162

³³ HBB. p. 82.

³⁴ This world belongs to devas, beings here have streaming Radiance (*Ābhassara*) surrounding their bodies.

³⁵ D. Aggañña Sutta (On Knowledge of Beginnings), Sutta No. 27, trans. from the Pāli by Maurice Walshe (1987, 1995), USA, Boston: Wisdom Publications, p. 409.

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“Then some being of a greedy nature said: “I say, what can this be?” and tasted the savoury earth on its finger. In so doing, it became taken with the flavour, and craving arose in it. Then other beings, taking their cue from that one, also tasted the stuff with their fingers. They too were taken with the flavour, and craving arose in them. So they set to with their hands, breaking off pieces of the stuff in order to eat it. And the result of this was that their self-luminance disappeared. And as a result of the disappearance of their self-luminance, the moon and the sun appeared, night and day were distinguished, months and fortnights appeared, and the year and its seasons. To that extent the world re-evolved.”³⁶

In *Abhidhamma Sangaha*,³⁷ the matter of The Thirty-One planes of Existence with relevance to the three Worlds is surveyed one by one.

A. The Sensuous World (*kama-loka*):

This world consists of eleven realms in which there are four realms of unhappiness (*Apāya*: devoid of happiness) and seven happy realms (*Sugati*).

1. The four realms of unhappiness:³⁸

(i) *Niraya* (ni + aya: devoid of happiness)- woeful realm (hell) where beings atone for their evil *kamma*. They are not eternal hells where beings are subject to endless suffering. On the exhaustion of the evil *kamma* there is a possibility for beings born in such realms to be reborn in blissful states as the result of their past good *kamma*.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 410.

³⁷ *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* (A Manual of Abhidhamma), trans. from the Pāli by Nārada (1968), Ceylon: Buddhist Publication Society, p. 235f.

³⁸ Tāsu, nirayo, tiracchānayoṇi, pettivisayo, asurakāyo ceti apāyabhūmi catubbidhā hoti.

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(ii) *Tiracchāna-yoni* (*tiro* = across; *acchāna* = going), the animal kingdom.

According to the Buddha, human beings who have committed evil may be reborn as animals. There is however, the possibility for animals to be reborn as human beings or even as gods in a heavenly world as a result of the good *kamma* accumulated in the past.

(iii) The realm of *Petas*: The word *peta*, often translated as “hungry ghost,” refers to a class of beings who are tormented by intense hunger and thirst. They are also suffering from other afflictions from which they can not find relief. The *Petas* have no realms of their own. They live in the same world as human beings- in forests, bogs, dirty surrounding, cemeteries, etc. Though they remain invisible to humans except when they display themselves or are perceived by those with the divine eye. There is a Buddhist text, called *Petavatthu*³⁹ (Stories of the departed), which exclusively deals with the stories of these unfortunate beings. *Saṃyutta Nikāya* also relates some interesting accounts of these *Petas*.

“Just now, friend (*Lakkhaṇa*), as I was descending Vulture’s Peak hill, I saw a skeleton (*aṭṭhisankhalikaṃ*) going through the air, and vultures, crows and falcons kept flying after it, pecking at its ribs, pulling it apart while it uttered cries of pain. To me, friend, came this thought: ‘O but this is wonderful! O but this is marvelous that a person will come to have such a shape, that the individuality acquired will come to have such a shape!’”⁴⁰

³⁹ *Petavatthu (Stories of The Departed)*, trans. from the Pāli by, H. S. Gehman, London: PTS, rpt. 1993.

⁴⁰ S. Vol. ii, *Lakkhana*, trans. from the Pāli by Mrs. Rhys Davids (rpt. 1994), p. 170

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(iv) *Asura-yoni*- the place of the *Asura*-demons. The word *asura*, often translated “titans” is used to refer to various classes of beings. As a realm within the woeful plane the Buddhist commentators identify the *asuras* with a group of tormented spirits similar to the *petas*. These *asuras* are to be distinguished from the *asuras* that combat the gods of the *Tāvātimsa* heaven, who are included among the *Tāvātimsa* gods.

2. The seven happy realms or the Sensuous Blissful Realms (*kāmasugatibhūmi*):⁴¹

(i) *Manussa*- The realm of human beings.

The word *manussa*, human, literally means those who have sharp or developed minds. As the human mind is very sharp, this makes man much more capable of weighty moral and immoral action than any other class of living beings. The human being is capable of development up to Buddhahood, and also of such serious crimes as matricide and parricide. The human realm is a mixture of both pain and happiness but because it offers the opportunity for attaining the highest happiness, it is called a blissful realm.

(ii) *Cātumahārājika*- the lowest of the heavenly realms where the Guardian Deities of the four quarter of the firmament reside with their followers.

(iii) *Tāvātimsa*- literally means thirty-three- the Celestial realm of the thirty-three *Devas* where *Deva Sakka* is the King. The origin of the name is attributed to a story which states that thirty-three selfless volunteers led by *Magha* (another name for *Sakka*), having performed charitable deeds, were

⁴¹ Manussā, cātummahārājikā, tāvatimsā, yāmā, tusitā, nimmānarati, paranimmitavasavattī ceti kāmasugatibhūmi sattavidhā hoti.

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born in this heavenly realm. It was in this heaven that the Buddha taught the *Abhidhamma* to the *Devas* for three months.

(iv) *Yāmā*- ‘The Realm of the *Yāmā Devas*.’ That which destroys pain is *Yāmā*.

(v) *Tusita*- literally, happy-dwellers, is ‘The Realm of Delight.’ Traditional Buddhist belief is that the *Bodhisattas* who have perfected the requisites of Buddhahood reside in this Plane, waiting the right opportunity to be born as a human being and become a Buddha.

(vi) *Nimmāṇaratī*- ‘The Realm of the *Devas* who delight in the created mansions.’

(vii) *Paranimmitavasavattī*- ‘The Realm of the *Devas* who make others’ creation serve their own ends.’

It is to be noticed that the last six are the realms of the *Devas* whose physical forms are more subtle and refined than those of human beings and are imperceptible to the naked eye. These celestial beings too are subject to death as all mortals are. In some respects, such as their constitution, habitat, and food they excel humans, but do not as a rule transcend them in wisdom. They have spontaneous births, appearing like youths and maidens of fifteen or sixteen years of age.

B. the Fine-Material World (*rūpa-loka*)

Superior to the Sensuous World is the Fine-Material World where consists of sixteen realms whose inhabitants (the *devas*) experience extremely refined degrees of mental pleasure. These realms are accessible to those who have attained at least from the first up to the fourth level of *jhāna* (meditation).

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1. The realms of the First *Jhāna*:

The First *Jhāna* comprises of three realms of Brahma as follow:⁴²

- (i) *Brahma Pārisajja*- The Realm of the Brahma's Retinue.
- (ii) *Brahma Purohita*- The Realm of the Brahma's Ministers.
- (iii) *Mahā Brahma*- The Realm of the Great Brahmas.

The highest of these realms is *Mahā Brahma*. It is so called because the dwellers in this Realm excel others in happiness, beauty, and age-limit owing to the intrinsic merit of their mental development.

2. The realms of the Second *Jhāna*:

The Second *Jhāna* also consists of three realms as follow:⁴³

- (i) *Parittābhā*- The Realm of Minor Lustre,
- (ii) *Appamāṇābhā*- The Realm of Infinite,
- (iii) *Ābhassarā*- The Realm of the Radiant *Brahmas*.

3. The realms of the Third *Jhāna*:

The third *Jhāna* also possesses three realms as follow:⁴⁴

- (i) *Parittasubhā*- The Realm of the Brahmas of Minor Aura,
- (ii) *Appamāṇasubhā*- The Realm of the Brahmas of Infinite Aura,
- (iii) *Subhakiṇhā*- The Realm of the Brahmas of Steady Aura.

4. The realms of the Fourth *Jhāna*:

The Fourth *Jhāna* consists of seven realms as follow:⁴⁵

- (i) *Vehapphalā*- The Realm of the Brahmas of Great Reward,
- (ii) *Asaññasattā*- The Realm of Mindless Beings,

⁴² Brahmapārisajjā, brahmapurohitā, mahābrahmā ceti paṭhamajjhānabhūmi.

⁴³ Parittābhā, appamāṇābhā, ābhassarā ceti dutiyajjhānabhūmi.

⁴⁴ Parittasubhā, appamāṇasubhā subhakiṇhā ceti tatiyajjhānabhūmi.

⁴⁵ Vehapphalā, asaññasattā, suddhāvāsā, ceti catutthajjhānabhūmi ti rūpāvacarabhūmi soḷasavidhā hoti.

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(iii) *Suddhāvāsā*- The Pure Abodes which are further subdivided into five realms, viz.:⁴⁶

- (1) *Avihā*- The Durable Realm,
- (2) *Atappā*- The Serene Realm,
- (3) *Sudassā*- The Beautiful Realm,
- (4) *Sudassī*- The Clear-Sighted Realm,
- (5) *Akaññhā*- The Highest Realm.

It is necessary to note that in the Realm of Mindless Beings (*Asaññasattā*), beings are born there without a consciousness.

Here only a material flux exists. Mind is temporarily suspended while the force of the *Jhāna* lasts. Normally both mind and matter are inseparable. By the power of meditation it is possible, at times, to separate matter from mind as in this particular case. When an *Arahant* attains the *Nirodha Samāpatti* (sustained cessation), too, his consciousness ceases to exist temporarily. Such a state is almost inconceivable to us. But there may be inconceivable things which are actual facts.

The *Suddhāvāsas* or Pure Abodes are the exclusive Realms of *Anāgāmis* or Non-Returners. Ordinary beings are not born in these states. Those who attain *Anāgāmi* in other realms are reborn in these Pure Abodes. Later, they attain Arahanship and live in those realms until their lifetime end.⁴⁷

C. the Immaterial World (*arūpa-loka*):

⁴⁶ Avihā, atappā, sudassā, sudassī, akaniññhā ceti suddāvāsabhūmi pañcavidhā hoti.

⁴⁷ Puthujjanā na labbhanti suddhā vāsesu sabbathā sotāpannā ca sakadāgāmino cāpi puggalā.

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This World embodies four realms in which matter or bodies are totally devoid but only mind maintain there. Those who attain from the first up to the fourth level of *Arūpa Jhāna* are considered to be born in these four realms.⁴⁸

- (i) *Ākāśānañcāyatana*- The Sphere of the Conception of Infinite Space,
- (ii) *Viññāṇañcāyatana*- The Sphere of the Conception of Infinite Consciousness,
- (iii) *Ākiñcaññāyatana*- The Sphere of the Conception of Nothingness,
- (iv) *Ñeva Saññā Nāsaññāyatana*- The Sphere of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception.

III. 5. Buddhist stories regarding *kamma* and rebirth

There are many stories regarding *kamma* and rebirth in *Pāli Suttas* and commentaries. On account of these sources, there are three sample stories selected to bring out the doctrine of *kamma* and rebirth.

Death of *Moggallāna* The Great⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Ākāśānañcāyatana*abhūmi, *viññāṇañcāyatana*abhūmi, *ākiñcaññāyatana*abhūmi, *nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*abhūmi *ceti arūpabhūmi catubbidhā hoti.*

⁴⁹ This story translated from the commentary on (Dhammapada) stanzas 137-140 by Henry Clarke Warren. See Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism In Translations*, Delhi 7:(continues..) Motilal Banarsidass, 1st rpt. 1989, p. 221-226. This story can also refer to *Buddhist Legends* vol. ii, translated from the original Pāli text of the Dhammapada commentary by E. W. Burlingame, Harvard: the Harvard University Press, rpt. 1969, p. 304-8.

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“*Who striketh him.*” This doctrinal instruction was given by the Teacher while dwelling at Bamboo Grove; and it was concerning the elder, *Moggallāna* the Great.

For on a certain occasion those who were members of other sects held a meeting, and took counsel as follows:

“Brethren, do you know the reason why the alms and the honor given to the monk Gotama have increased?”

“No, we do not. Do you?”

“Yes, truly: we know. It is solely due to *Moggallāna* the Great, For he goes to heaven and questions the deities concerning their previous karma, and then he returns and tells it to men: ‘It is by having done thus and so that they now enjoy so great glory.’ Also, he asks those who have been born in hell concerning their karma, and returning, he tells it to men: ‘It is by having done such and such evil deeds that they now experience so great misery.’ And the people, when they have heard him, shower alms and attentions upon him. If we can only kill him, the alms and the honor that now go to him will be ours.”

The suggestion met with universal favor, and it was unanimously agreed that in some way or other he should be killed. Then they stirred up their supporters and obtained from them a thousand pieces of money, and summoning some red-handed highwaymen, they said,

“An elder, called *Moggallāna* the Great, is dwelling at Black Rock. Go there and kill him.” And they gave them the money.

The highwaymen greedily took the money, and went and surrounded the elder’s house in order to kill him.

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The elder, perceiving that he was surrounded, got out through the key-hole and escaped. Having failed that day to find the elder, they came again on another day and surrounded him again. Then the elder pierced the peaked roof and sprang into the sky. In this manner, neither during the fore part nor during the middle of the month, were they able to capture the elder. But when it drew towards the latter part of the month, the elder found himself held back by his previous karma, and could not flee. The highwaymen captured him, and broke his bones into bits of the size of rice grains. And when they supposed he was died, they threw him into a thicket, and departed.

But the elder thought, “I will see the Teacher (the Buddha) before I pass into Nirvana.” And swathing himself about with meditation, as with a bandage, and thus stiffening his body, he went to the Teacher by way of the air. And having done obeisance, he said:

“Reverend Sir, I am about to pass into Nirvana.”

“You are about to pass into Nirvana, *Moggallāna* ?”

“Yes, Reverend Sir.”

“From where?”

“From Black Rock.”

“In that case, *Moggallāna*, recite to me the Doctrine, before you go: for I have no other such disciple as you.”

“I will do so, Reverend Sir.” And having done obeisance to the Teacher, he sprang into the sky. And when he had performed various miracles, such as the elder *Sāriputta* did on the day he passed into Nirvana, he recited the Doctrine. And having done obeisance to the Teacher, he went to the forest of Black Rock and passed into Nirvana.

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Now the report that the elder had been murdered by highwaymen spread over all the continent of India, and king Ajātasattu dispatched spies to hunt for them. And as the highwaymen happened to be drinking together in a tavern, one of them struck his comrade, and threw filth into his hand.

“How now, you ill-mannered dog!” said the other, threateningly; “Why did you throw filth into my hand?”

“And why, you rascally highwayman, did you give the first blow to *Moggallāna* the Great?”

“And how do you know I hit him?”

While they were thus quarreling, the spies heard and arrested them, and informed the king. And the king had the highwaymen summoned into his presence and said to them:

“Did you kill the elder?”

“Yes, sire.”

“Who instigated you?”

“The naked ascetics, sire.”

Then the king seized five hundred naked ascetics, and buried them together with five hundred highwaymen up to their navels in pits dug in the royal court. Then he covered them with straw, and set fire; and after thus burning them, he took iron plows and plowed them into bits.

In the lecture-hall the priests raised a discussion, saying, “*Moggallāna* the Great met with a death unworthy of him.”

Then came the Teacher, and inquired,

“Priests, what is the subject of your present discussion?”

And they told him.

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“Priests, the death of *Moggallāna* the Great was unsuited to his present existence, but suited to his karma of a previous existence.”

“Reverend Sir, what was this karma of his?”

And he told the whole story, as follows:

These was once upon a time at Benares a certain high-caste youth who took care of his father and his mother, himself grinding and cooking their food, and performing all the other work of the house. And they said to him,

“Child, you are tiring yourself out with trying single-handed to the work of the house in addition to your work in the forest. We will get you a wife.”

“Mother, father! I do not need anything of that sort. As long as you live, I will take care of you with my own hands.”

But in spite of his repeated refusals, the insisted, and got him a wife. The girl waited on the old people for a few days, but finally got so that she could not bear the sight of them, and angrily said to her husband:

“It is impossible to stay in the same house with your parents.”

But when she found that he would not listen to her, she chose a time when he was out of the house to scatter the floor over with rubbish and the scum of rice-gruel. And on his coming home and asking her, “What means all this?” she said,

“It is the work of these blind old people. They do nothing but make the house dirty. It is impossible to get on with them.”

And so, as the result of her incessant talk, this great soul, although he had fulfilled the perfections, broke with his parents, and said to her,

“Very well! I know what to do with them.”

Then he fed them, and said,

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“Mother, father! Your relatives are expecting you in such and such a place. We will go to meet them.”

Then placing them in a cart, he went along with them until he had come to the heat of the forest. On arriving there, he put the reins into the hands of his father, and said,

“Father, take the reins: the oxen will follow the track. I will get down on the ground, for there are highwaymen hereabouts.”

And going off a little way, he altered the tones of his voice and uttered a cry like highwaymen when they make an attack. And while his mother and father, who heard the cry and supposed it came from robbers, were calling out, “Child, you are young: leave us, and save yourself!” he pounded them, and slew them, all the time uttering the robber yell. Then leaving their bodies in the forest, he returned home.

When the Teacher had related this by-gone occurrence, he continued and said,

“Priests, the fruit of this one deed of *Moggallāna*’s was torment in hell for many hundreds of thousands of years, and death by pounding, in a hundred existences, as suited the nature of his crime. *Moggallāna*’s death is, therefore, suited to his karma. Also the five hundred highwaymen, and the five hundred heretics, have met with a suitable death for doing harm to my innocent son. For they who harm innocent persons are liable to calamities and misfortunes of ten different sorts.”

Having thus shown the connection, he taught them the Doctrine by means of the stanzas:-

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137. “Who striketh him that striketh not,
And harmeth him that harmeth not,
Shall quickly punishment incur,
Some one among a list of ten.
138. “Or cruel pain, or drear old age
And failure of the vital powers,
Or some severe and dread disease,
Or madness him shall overtake.
139. “Or from the king calamity,
Or calumny, shall be his lot;
Or he shall see his kinsfolk die,
Or all his wealth shall disappear.
140. “Or conflagrations shall arise
And all his houses sweep away;
And when his frame dissolves in death,
In hell the fool shall be reborn.”

From the story we learn that one can not escape his seriously retributive *kamma*. Especially, the persons who have committed killing parents are bound to be born in hell.

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Now we turn to the story of *Kolāliya*.⁵⁰

Thus have I heard. Once the Blessed One was staying at Sāvattthī, in the Jetavana in Anāthapiṇḍika's park. Then the *bhikkhu Kolāliya* came up to the Blessed One, and having saluted him sat down on one side. Seated there the *bhikkhu Kolāliya* said this to the Blessed One: 'Sāriputta and Moggallāna have evil desires, venerable sir; they are under the influence of evil desires.' When this had been said, the Blessed One said this to the *bhikkhu Kolāliya*: 'Do not (speak) thus, *Kolāliya*; do not (speak) thus, *Kolāliya*. Put your mind at rest in respect of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, *Kolāliya*. Sāriputta and Moggallāna are amiable people.' A third time the *bhikkhu Kolāliya* spoke to the Blessed One: 'Although the Blessed One, venerable sir, inspires faith and confidence in me, nevertheless Sāriputta and Moggallāna have evil desires; they are under the influence of evil desires.' A third time the Blessed One spoke to the *bhikkhu Kolāliya*: 'Do not (speak) thus, *Kolāliya*; do not (speak) thus, *Kolāliya*. Put your mind at rest in respect of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, *Kolāliya*. Sāriputta and Moggallāna are amiable people.' Then *bhikkhu Kolāliya* rose from his seat, saluted the Blessed One, walked respectfully around him, and departed. A short time after he had departed, the *bhikkhu Kolāliya*'s whole body broke out in boils the size of mustard seeds. These became the size of kidney-beans, and then of chick-peas, and then of jujube stones, and then of jujube fruits, and then of myrobalans, and then of unripe vilva fruits, and then (ripe) vilva fruits. After becoming as large as (ripe) vilva fruits they burst, and discharged pus and blood. Then *bhikkhu Kolāliya* died

⁵⁰ Sutta-Nipāta (The Group of Discourses), Mahā-vagga, trans. from the Pāli by K. R. Norman, London: PTS, 1995, p. 74-8.

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of that disease, and was reborn in the *Paduma* hell for hardening his heart against *Sāriputta* and *Moggallāna*.

Then as night was passing away, Brahmā Sahmapati, of outstanding radiance, illuminating the whole Jetavana, came up to the Blessed One and stood on one side after saluting him. Standing there Brahmā Sahmapati said this to the Blessed One: ‘The *bhikkhu Kolāliya*, venerable sir, is dead, and after death he has been reborn in the Paduma hell for hardening his heart against *Sāriputta* and *Moggallāna*.’ Thus spoke Brahmā Sahmapati, and when he had spoken he saluted the Blessed One, walked respectfully around him and disappeared on that very spot. ...

So spoke the Blessed One, and when the Well-farer had said this, the Teacher spoke again:

‘Surely in the mouth of a man, when born, an axe is born, with which a fool cuts himself, saying a badly-spoken (utterance).

He who praises him who is to be blamed, or blames him who is to be praised, accumulates evil by his mouth. Because of that evil he does not find happiness.

That losing throw is of small measure which (consists of) that loss of wealth at dice, even all one’s property together with oneself. This indeed is a greater evil, which sets one’s mind against well-farers.

Since he maligns the noble ones, having directed evil speech and mind (against them) he goes to hell for one hundred thousand and thirty-six Nirabbudas and five Abbudas.

Speaking of what never happened one goes to hell, or if someone, having done something, says “I did not do it”. (He goes to hell too). Both of them, passing away, become equal, men of base deeds in the next world.

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Whoever offends against an unoffending man, a purified man without blemish, the evil rebounds upon that self-same fool, like fine dust thrown against the wind.

Whoever is attached to the quality of greed, he reviles others with his voice, (being) ungenerous, mean, niggardly, avaricious, attached to slander.

Foul-mouthed, abandoned, ignoble, an abortionist, evil, doer of wicked deeds, lowest of men, wicked, base-born, do not speak much here. You are doomed to hell.

You scatter pollution to (your) disadvantage. A doer of wrong, you are maligning the good (people). Having practiced many evil practices, you will indeed go to the pit (of hell) for a long time.

For no one's action disappears (completely); truly it comes back. Its owner assuredly obtains it. The doer of wrong, the fool, sees misery for himself in the next world.

He goes to the place of impaling upon iron spikes, to the iron stake with its sharp blade. Then there is food like a ball of heated iron, thus appropriate.

(The hell-keepers) when they speak do not speak pleasantly. (The hell-dwellers) do not hasten towards them; they are not arriving at a refuge. They lie on scattered coals; they enter a blazing mass of fire.

And tying them up with a net (the hell-keepers) strike them there with hammers made of iron. (The hell-keepers) come to blind darkness indeed, for it is spread out like mist.

Then moreover they enter pot (s) made of copper, a blazing mass of fire. In those they are indeed cooked for a long time, jumping up and down in the masses of fire.

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Then the doer of wrong is cooked there in a mixture of pus and blood. Whatever region he inhabits, there he festers, as he is touched.

The doer of wrong is cooked there in water which is the abode of worms. There is not even a shore to go to (for refuge), for the cooking pots all around are all the same.

Moreover they enter that sharp Asipatta wood, (and) their limbs are cut to pieces. Seizing their tongue(s) with a hook, pulling them backwards and forwards, (the hell-keepers) strike (them).

Then moreover they approach Vetaraṇī, difficult to cross, with sharp blades (and) with razors (in it). Fools fall there-in, evil-doers, having done evil deeds.

There black and spotted dogs, and flocks of ravens, (and) greedy jackals indeed devour them, as they are wailing, (and) vultures and crows strike them.

Difficult indeed is this way of lie here (in hell), which wrong-doing people see. Therefore in the remainder of his life here (on earth) a man should do his duty and not be careless.

These loads of sesame seeds which are compared (in number) to the *Paduma* hell have been counted by the wise. They come to five myriad crores indeed, and twelve hundred crores besides.

As many as (there) miserable hells have been said (to be) here, for so long must people dwell there too. Therefore, in the midst of those who are pure, amiable, and have good qualities, one should constantly guard speech and mind.’

This story instructs us that person, who has been abusive at, insulted to the holy men is subject to be born in hell.

Let us now turn to the story of the childless man.⁵¹

⁵¹ S. Vol. I, trans. from the Pāli by Mrs. Rhys Davids, London: PTS, rpt. 1993, p. 115-8.

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...At Sāvaththī, the king, the Kosalan Pasenadi, once visited the Exalted One, at noonday... And the Exalted One said to him: ‘How now, sire, whence come you at this hour of the day?’

‘See here, lord: at Sāvaththī there has just died a burgess who was a wealthy man. He died intestate, and I come from seeing that his moneyed to my palace-eight millions in gold, lord, to say nothing of the silver. And yet that burgess’s food consisted of sour husk-gruel left over from the day before. And his clothing-hempen garments in three lengths. And his carriage- he drove about in a rotten little chariot rigged up with a leaf-awing!’

‘Even so, sire, even so. A mean man who has acquired a great fortune cheers and pleases (therewith) neither himself nor his parents, nor his wife and children, nor his slaves, craftsmen and servants, nor his friends and colleagues; nor does he institute for recluses and Brahmins any offering stimulating spiritual growth, productive of future bliss, fruitful in happiness, conducive to celestial attainment. Those riches of his, not being rightly utilized, are either confiscated by kings or by robbers, or are burnt by fire, or carried away by flood, or are appropriated by heirs for whom he hath no affection. That being so, sire, riches that are not rightly utilized run to waste, not to enjoyment.

‘It is like a lake, sire, of clear, cold, delicious, crystalline water, with good shores and most lovely, but lying in a savage region. None could come to draw or drink from it, bathe in it, or make any use of it whatever. Even so are the riches of a mean man...

‘But if a generous man have acquired a great fortune, he cheers and pleases (therewith) not only himself but also his parents, his wife and children, his slaves, craftsmen and servants, his friends and colleagues. He institutes offerings for

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recluses and Brahmins stimulating spiritual growth, productive of future bliss, fruitful in happiness, conducive to celestial attainment. His case may be compared with a lovely lake, such as I spoke of, but which lies near to village or township, where folk can draw and drink from it, bathe in it, and use it for any other purpose. Such riches go to enjoyment and not to waste.

Like waters fresh lying in savage region
Where none can drink, running to waste, and barren,
Such is the wealth gained by a man of base mind.
On self he spends nothing, nor aught he giveth.

The wise, the strong-minded, who hath won riches
He useth them, thereby fulfils his duties.
His troop of kin fostering, noble-hearted,
Blameless, at death faring to heavenly mansion.

‘Even so, sire, even so, sire. This wealthy burgess in a former birth bestowed alms on a Silent Buddha named Tagarasikkhi. Saying: ‘Give ye alms to the recluse!’ he rose up and went away. But afterwards he repented of his gift, saying: “It were better that the slaves and workmen had eaten it.” Moreover he slew the only son of his brother because of his fortune.

‘Now, sire, by the effect of his action in bestowing alms on the Silent Buddha, Tagarasikkhi, he was reborn seven times to a happy destiny in heavenly worlds, and by the residual result he has seven times caused this Sāvattī to make him eminently rich.

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‘By the effect of his action in repenting afterwards of that gift, thinking “it were better that the slaves and workmen had eaten it,” he inclined his heart to denying himself excellent food, clothes, carriages, and enjoyment of his sense-desires.

‘By the effect of his action in slaying his brother’s only son because of his fortune, he has [already] been punished many years, many hundred, many thousand, many hundred thousand years in purgatory. And by the residual result he has caused this seventh intestate property to enter the royal treasure.

‘Of this wealthy burgess, sire, the ancient merit is used up, and fresh merit is not accumulated. To-day, sire, the burgess is suffering in the Great Roruva purgatory.’

‘Even so, lord, he is there reborn.’

‘Even so, sire, he is there reborn.’

Grain-store and hoarded wealth, silver and gold,

Or whatsoever property there be,

Or all whose living doth on him depend:

His slaves, his craftsmen and hired menials-

All this he hath to leave, naught can he take;

All this is matter for abandonment.

But what he doth, by act or word or thought:

That is the thing he owns; that takes he hence;

That dogs his steps like shadow in pursuit.

Hence let him make good store for life elsewhere.

Sure platform in some other future world,

Rewards of virtue on good beings wait.