

# THE ILLUSION OF REINCARNATION

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In modern Buddhist jargon, the terms ‘rebirth’ and ‘reincarnation’ are considered synonyms and, due mainly to the popularity of some lamas regarded as *tulkus*<sup>1</sup> or, as is commonly said, ‘reincarnations’ of important spiritual masters of the past, the conviction has spread that the belief in reincarnation is really based on the Buddha’s teaching. But, as Gyatrul Rinpoche affirmed, the ‘genuine tulkus’ are not persons who, after having discarded a body, come back to take another one; instead they are ‘effortless emanations’ comparable to ‘light rays emanating from the sun.’<sup>2</sup> Therefore, if tulkus do not transmigrate according to the common conception of reincarnation, what does the rebirth of people who are not tulkus consist in?

At the Buddha’s time, a monk disciple of his, immortalized as ‘Sāti, the fisherman’s son’, on the basis of stories of past lives recounted by the Buddha, believed that it was one and the same consciousness to pass from body to body; so he said: “As I understand the Dharma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness, not another, that continues and flows through the rounds of births.”<sup>3</sup> After having summoned Sāti, the Buddha inquired of him what was the consciousness subject to rebirth. Sati answered: “Revered sir, it is that which speaks and feels here and there; it feels the results of good and evil deeds.”

Sāti’s reply seems obvious: the consciousness or mind that transmigrates, wandering in the cycles of rebirths, is just that which speaks and has experiences here and there, in this place and in a different one, at this time and at another one; in fact, it is always just this same consciousness that experiences the effects of positive and negative deeds (*karma*) in all those existences. Even nowadays, many Buddhists would implicitly agree with Sāti, yet they should reflect on the firm and severe words spoken by the Buddha after Sāti’s reply: “You, misguided one, have misrepresented me by your wrong understanding and harmed yourself, and stored much demerit – for, this will bring you harm and suffering for a long time.”

As Piya Tan has written, introducing the quoted text, “The *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta* teaches the conditionality of consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Consciousness, in other words, is not an entity (like an immortal ‘soul’ or enduring ‘substance’) transmigrating life after life, but it is a ‘stream of consciousness’ (*viññāṇa-sota*).”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, if not even ordinary beings transmigrate according to the common conception of reincarnation, what is the cycle of rebirths called *saṃsāra*? I shall try to answer this question turning initially to a non-canonical Buddhist source, the *Milindapañha*, which relates the supposed dialogue of the 2nd Century B.C.E. between the Indo-Greek king Milinda (Menander I Soter) and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena. I shall next cite some passages of particular significance.

“What is meant by the round of rebirths (*saṃsāra*)?”

“Whoever is born here, dies here and is born elsewhere. Having been born there they die and

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<sup>1</sup> The Tibetan word *tulku* (*sprul sku*) corresponds to the Sanskrit term *nirmāṇakāya*.

<sup>2</sup> Padmasambhava, *Natural Liberation*, Commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), pp. 151-152.

<sup>3</sup> *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* 38.1).

<sup>4</sup> See [www.dharmafarer.org](http://www.dharmafarer.org), SD 7.10, p. 94.

are born somewhere else.”<sup>5</sup>

“What is it, Nāgasena, that is reborn?”

“Mind and matter.”<sup>6</sup>

“You were explaining just now about mind and matter. Therein, what is mind and what is matter?”

“Whatever is gross is materiality, whatever is subtle and mind or mental-states is mentality.”<sup>7</sup>

Mind and matter (*nāma-rūpa*) constitute the psychophysical organism. Usually, ‘name’ (*nāma*) does not include consciousness or mind (*citta*), but solely mental factors (*cetasika*), yet here the term is defined as whatever is subtle, the mind and mental-states or factors<sup>8</sup> in a physical body which is matter or ‘form’ (*rūpa*). Rebirth would thus concern just such a psychophysical organism.<sup>9</sup> Evidently, the word ‘rebirth’ must not be understood literally, otherwise one should also consider the new physical body the rebirth of a preceding physical body. In fact, the term *paṭisandhāti*, translated in the former quotation as ‘is reborn’, means precisely ‘links again, reconnects’. Therefore, rebirth is a link, connection or bond that is established, due to karma, between the past life and the new life: the conscious subject of the former life does not come back to live again, just as its physical body does not live again. On this point the following passage is explicit:

“Is it this very mind and matter that is reborn?”

“No, it is not, but by this mind and matter deeds are done and because of those deeds another mind and matter is reborn.”<sup>10</sup>

In the *Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta*, that starts with the confrontation between the Buddha and the monk Sāti, the consciousness which has abandoned the physical body and finds itself in the intermediate state (*antarā-bhava*) is called *gandhabba* (in Sanskrit *gandharva*), namely a ‘spirit’. With its karma the spirit conditions the forming of the new organism; nevertheless it does not become the psyche of that body, as Sāti mistakenly believed. In fact, the consciousness of the preceding life and the consciousness of the subsequent life are not the very same individual, because they spring up on the basis of different conditions, yet belong to one uninterrupted stream of consciousness.<sup>11</sup> The *Milindapañha* clarifies this point, specifying that mind and matter arise together as yolk and egg-shell:

“Why are they not born separately?”

“These conditions are related like the yolk of an egg and its shell, they always arise together

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<sup>5</sup> Bhikkhu Pesala, *The Debate of King Milinda* (Penang: Inward Path, 2001), p. 65. Cf. T. W. Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda*, Part I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), p. 120 (III.6.9).

<sup>6</sup> Bhikkhu Pesala, *op. cit.*, p. 46. Cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 71 (II.2.6).

<sup>7</sup> Bhikkhu Pesala, *op. cit.*, p. 47. Cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 76 (II.2.8).

<sup>8</sup> *Ye tattha sukhumā cittacetasikā dhammā*. In this context mind or ‘name’ is a synonym of ‘mental body’ (*nāma-kāya*), while matter or ‘form’ stands for ‘physical body’ (*rūpa-kāya*). In the scheme which illustrates the twelve *nidāna*, i.e. the causes or sources of *saṃsāra*, the third factor is consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and the fourth is ‘name-and-form’; yet, both of them can be interpreted from the viewpoint of actual life or from the viewpoint of rebirth. In the first case *viññāṇa* is ‘biological consciousness’, the mind born together with the physical body, therefore ‘name’ includes mental factors only, namely sensations (*vedanā*), concepts (*saññā*) and impulses (*sankhāra*). In the second case, *viññāṇa* is ‘evolutionary consciousness’, characterized by its karmic program, and constitutes the rebirth link, therefore ‘name’ includes also the mind or consciousness of the new organism. On the distinction between the two types of consciousness, defined by Piya Tan respectively as ‘cognitive’ and ‘existential’, see [www.dharmafarer.org](http://www.dharmafarer.org), SD 17.8a, pp. 16-20.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Cetanā Sutta 2 (Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.39)* that refers to rebirth (*punabbhava*) as “the descent of name-and-form” (*nāma-rūpassa avakkanti*); see [www.dharmafarer.org](http://www.dharmafarer.org), SD 7.6abc, pp. 43-44, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Bhikkhu Pesala, *op. cit.*, p. 46. Cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 71 (II.2.6).

<sup>11</sup> See *Sampasādanīya Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 28.7)*, [www.dharmafarer.org](http://www.dharmafarer.org), SD 14.14, p. 117.

and thus they have been related through time immemorial.”<sup>12</sup>

Although the new psychophysical organism is not the same organism of the former life, neither is it totally different from that; indeed, due to the inherited karma they belong to the same stream of consciousness:

“He who is reborn, Nāgasena, is he the same person or another?”

“Neither the same nor another.”

“Give me an illustration.”

“In the case of a pot of milk that turns first to curds, then to butter, then to ghee, it would not be right to say that the ghee, butter and curds were the same as the milk, but they have come from that, so neither would it be right to say that they are something else.”<sup>13</sup>

The link between the former life and the present one consists in the psychic inheritance of the karma pool, analogous to the biological inheritance of the gene pool, as one may infer from the following metaphor illustrating the mechanism of *samsāra*:

“It is like the case of a man who, after eating a mango, should set the seed in the ground. From that a great tree would be produced and give fruit. And there would be no end to the succession, in that way, of mango trees.”<sup>14</sup>

The mango seed symbolizes the psychic inheritance of the karma pool; so, just as a mango tree does not transmigrate into a tree born from its seed, there is no real transmigration of an entity from body to body. King Milinda was probably familiar with the notion of transmigration, due to his Greek religious culture, therefore perhaps perceiving the Buddhist conception of *samsāra* as abstruse. The following passages attest to his difficulty and, at the same time, constitute the most widely known, ingenious answer given by Buddhist philosophy:

“Can there be any rebirth where there is no transmigration?”

“Yes there can, just as a man can light one oil-lamp from another but nothing moves from one lamp to the other; or as a pupil can learn a verse by heart from a teacher but the verse does not transmigrate from teacher to pupil.”<sup>15</sup>

It is plain that the flame of a lamp, used to light another lamp, does not transfer from lamp to lamp, in the same way a poem or a song does not pass from brain to brain. There is an influence generated by the lit lamp on the unlit lamp or by one who recites some verses on one who hears them. Such influence symbolizes what in the text is called ‘rebirth’ (*paṭisandhi*), that is, the karmic connection between a life which is finished and a life which is starting. Reincarnation, understood as transmigration (*saṅkamati*) of the same consciousness or soul through many existences is, therefore, a deceptive definition of *samsāra* from the viewpoint of the mind that, identified with the contents of its experience, erroneously believes itself to be the same conscious subject of all the lives considered as its own. But, if the spirit (*gandhabba*) does not become the conscious subject of the new body, what happens to it?

Since in the ancient sources the nature of *gandhabba* and the modality of its relationship with the new organism are only hinted at, I have searched for confirmations of the Buddhist conception of rebirth in the studies conducted by some professional hypnotherapists. Although their common belief is comparable to the one held by the monk Sāti, being thus misleading as regards the aim of lib-

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<sup>12</sup> Bhikkhu Pesala, *op. cit.*, p. 47. Cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77 (II.2.8).

<sup>13</sup> Bhikkhu Pesala, *op. cit.*, p. 43. Cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, pp. 63, 65 (II.2.1).

<sup>14</sup> Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 120 (III.6.9).

<sup>15</sup> Bhikkhu Pesala, *op. cit.*, p. 59. Cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 111 (III.5.5).

eration from *samsāra* pointed out by the Buddha, their research results are nonetheless of great interest. They concur in painting a picture of rebirth quite different from the one commonly imagined.

The first important anomaly highlighted by the studies published to date is that the spirit destined to be reborn does not generally remain inside the foetus, but moves around it, going in and out, even right up to the time of birth. Furthermore, referring to her statistical investigation conducted in the '70s on 750 people subjected to hypnotic regression, Helen Wambach wrote: "Another group of 5 percent of my subjects reported that they did not really enter the foetus even at birth, but were able to leave the foetal consciousness at will after birth."<sup>16</sup> One of her subjects stated: "I was mostly out of the foetus. I was also out a lot until one year of age."<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, the spirit not only is independent and different from the foetal consciousness but, surprisingly enough, it remains as such also after birth. For how long? No more than one year? The most astonishing data are reported by Dr. Michael Newton. Here are two significant dialogues drawn from hypnotic regressions of his patients:

Dr. N: Then at birth, I supposed the hard work of the merger is over?

Soul: To be honest, the merger isn't complete yet for me. I talk to my body as a second entity up to the age of six. It is better not to force a full meld right away. We play games as two people for a while.<sup>18</sup>

Dr. N: How far along in age is the body by the time your soul stops leaving the child altogether?

S: At about five or six years of age. Usually we get fully operational when the child starts school. Children under this age can be left to their own devices a lot.<sup>19</sup>

The completion of the rebirth process, when the spirit is supposed to merge with the human mind, seems to coincide with full amnesia, that is, the spirit's oblivion of afterlife and past lives. Andy Tomlinson quotes the following dialogue with Liam Thompson, who under hypnosis relates the mechanism of oblivion:

*At what point are the memory blocks going to be put into place?*

As a child.

*And how does the process of putting these memory blocks into place work?*

As my brain develops its personality, my immortal self will quieten down like a light bulb switching off. It's never completely out, it's always there, always on dim.<sup>20</sup>

What is the immortal self in this context? It appears to be the consciousness of the spirit; but, if it switches off, does it follow that only the human self remains switched on, namely the biological consciousness born together with the body as yolk with eggshell?

This description of rebirth is finally disconcerting; yet, if it were true that the spirit can be independent of the organism, not only during foetal development but even up to the age of six, the common notion of reincarnation would be logically untenable. Moreover, the spirit that is waiting to meld with a six-year-old child's consciousness resembles more a psychic parasite or a possessing demon than a soul about to be born again. Does their fusion really take place?

In order to answer this question and verify the results published by important researchers such as

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<sup>16</sup> Helen Wambach, *Life Before Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Newton, *Destiny of Souls – New Case Studies of Life Between Lives* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 2004), p. 394.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Newton, *Journey of Souls – Case Studies of Life Between Lives* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1997), pp. 270-271.

<sup>20</sup> Andy Tomlinson, *Exploring the Eternal Soul – Insight from the Life Between Lives* (Winchester: O Books, 2007), p. 152.

Dr. Michael Newton, I too have learned to conduct hypnotic regression sessions. In this way, together with my team, I have been able to ascertain that, actually, the completion of the linking process between the spirit and the organism can also wait until starting school age; in any case, it is normal that the spirit moves around the body after birth. Therefore, the biological consciousness, that is, the psyche or mind which gradually, within the body, develops the capacity of being aware of itself and of the world, has not really lived other lives, inasmuch as it arises together with the body.

Moreover, inquiring into the question of the 'merger', I have found that amnesia does not at all mark the complete fusion of the spirit and the human mind. Indeed, the much hoped-for and eagerly awaited reincarnation never reaches completion, because it is psychically impossible. It would be possible only if the body had no biological consciousness or its own mind. Since this is not the case for a natural human body, the sole way in which the spirit can continue to use it is by remaining independent from it; that is also the modality by which entities such as psychic parasites and possessing demons can exploit the human organism. But, unlike them, the spirit is bound to drink from the river Lethe; so, when the light bulb switches off, in conjunction with full oblivion, instead of becoming the conscious subject of 'its' physical body, the spirit simply falls asleep and remains immersed in a kind of oneiric state. The spirit's own subtle body thus stays attached to the physical body, almost like a sack on its back, fulfilling the function of storage of the karma pool at the level of the 'deep unconscious'.

The most bewildering discovery has been the ascertainment that inside the spirit's sack, there are not only the recordings of the past lives, but also many of the consciousnesses who lived them; in the form of psychic energies, they are all more or less asleep, in a dream state. Their dreams generate karmic impulses which affect the human mind, much as the experiences of actual life can affect the dreams of those consciousnesses, that nonetheless remain unaware of what is actually happening to the living being they are attached to.

Since one's own mental consciousness and the consciousnesses of one's karma pool are bound together by the same karmic threads, they are comparable to the beads of a pearl necklace, or to the rings of a chain. As long as a being remains unaware of the original pure nature of its consciousness, beyond karma and identification with any experience, it is incapable of unhooking itself from the karmic chain and, consequently, it remains only a part and an expression of a stream of consciousness or psychic energy.

The process of so-called rebirth is nothing more than a kind of 'psychic recycling', where the spirit that erroneously believes it can live again in a human body contributes only to forming a new organism through its own karma pool. Then, when amnesia prevails, the spirit inexorably ends up being reconverted into psychic energy at the level of the 'deep unconscious'.

Unfortunately, so far research published on the afterlife and reincarnation undertaken through hypnotic regression mirrors the same methodological error, due to ignorance of the true nature of consciousness. One's conviction of being one's own experiences, actions, sensations, emotions, thoughts, memories, imaginations and so on, is unreliable because it is an illusory perception of one's self. Consequently, the fact of reliving under hypnosis or remembering by other modalities experiences of one's own former existences proves solely one's identification with those psychic contents, which could well have been lived originally by other consciousnesses.

In order to rectify this error, I asked the subjects reliving under hypnosis the experience of rebirth to describe those events not only from the viewpoint of the spirit, but also from the viewpoint of the child's mind, and then from a neutral position independent of the first two. In this way, the subjects were able to transcend the sense of identification with the experience of rebirth recorded in their unconscious minds and, therefore, to see the events objectively, without falling into the trap of believing that the conscious entity of the former life had become, after amnesia, the conscious entity of the subsequent life.

Finally, the fact that the hypnotic regressions to the 'life between lives', namely the intermediate state, reveal afterlife dimensions inhabited by reassuring guides and masters, who explain the evolu-

tionary value and the karmic necessity of reincarnation or rebirth on this planet or elsewhere, does not assure the validity of the presumed truths thus evinced. Even were such entities real, they might want to mislead the disembodied spirits, as well as humans trying to contact them; or they might be deceived by the powerful, obscure alien beings who reign over *saṃsāra*, known collectively as Māra in Buddhism and named ‘archons’ in the ancient Gnosticism of the Middle East. A person under hypnosis is incapable of perceiving the real identity of those supposedly wise entities, unless she or he has been correctly trained to discern between false and true reality. To be capable of doing that one should follow the teachings of truly wise beings such as the Buddha, able to recognize Māra’s traps and aware of the ultimate nature of reality. Unlike the guides and masters of the deceptive hereafter, the Buddha taught to transcend *saṃsāra* here and now, remaining free from the illusory identification with one’s impermanent experience.

Let go of the past,  
let go of the future,  
let go of the present,  
and cross over  
to the farther shore of existence.  
With mind wholly liberated,  
you shall come no more  
to birth and death.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Dhammapada* 348 (24.15). Translated from the Pāli by Acharya Buddharakkhita.