

# The Buddhist Concept of Life, Suffering and Death, and Related Bioethical Issues

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Buddhism has been considered to be the core of Thai identity since the establishment of the first Kingdom in the 13th century. Though the present constitution does not make it compulsory for every Thai to follow the Buddhist beliefs and practices, for the majority of the Thai population one cannot be a true Thai without being a Buddhist. Since early times the Thai sangha, the order of Buddhist monks, has been integrated into the state structure to provide legitimation for the monarch and/or political rulers. The institution of kingship, sangha and nation are considered as the basic triad of social solidarity and identity. They have been so intermingled in the course of history and are so deeply meaningful to the hearts of the people as to form the core of what may be called the civic Thai culture.

## Life

The cause-effect nature of life

The teaching of Buddhism centers primarily on human existence consisting of life, suffering, death and the way out of it. The Buddhist perspective on life, suffering and death can never be truly understood apart from the Buddhist laws of causality (Paticcasamuppada) and mutation. For the Buddhist these two laws are natural laws that operate universally in all physical and mental phenomena. The law of cause and effect is thus expressed: "when this exists, that exists, when this arises, that arises, when this is not, that is not, when this ceases, that ceases."<sup>1</sup> This is interpreted as meaning that all that exists is the result of antecedent causes. Each "event" or "happening" acts as the cause or the necessary condition for the arising of the following event, which then provokes or causes another event. Thus, as used in Buddhism, the relation between cause and effect is only that of the earlier to the later phase of a single process. Therefore, in the context of this natural law, life consists of many psychophysical factors.<sup>2</sup> It is a fabric of causes and effects, arising existing and continuing by the concatenation of these factors mutually conditioning one another. In Buddhism this process is specifically referred to as the kamma process. Kamma (or karma in Sanskrit) means volitional activity whether mental, verbal or physical. The concept is used to emphasize that life consists of interwoven activities of causes and effects. In this sense the preceding cause transmits its potential force to, and is received by, the following effect. Life is made possible because each of these factors is both conditioning and conditioned, with no beginning and no end point : the process is an endless cycle. Death is considered an integral part of existence and is one phase of this endless cycle; in no sense is death seen as terminating the cycle. This conditioned existence is called in the Buddhist texts samsara<sup>3</sup> and represented in Buddhist art by the Wheel of Life (bhavacakra).<sup>4</sup> This is in contrast to the unconditioned state of nibbana (nirvana in Sanskrit), which is the Buddhist highest ideal.<sup>5</sup>

### The frailty and insecurity of life

In addition to this cause-and-effect nature of life, there is also an emphasis placed on its impermanence (anicca) and insubstantiality (anatta), through another law of mutation also referred to as the law of change. This law is expressed in the following formula : "all compound things are impermanent."<sup>6</sup> By definition a compound object cannot be static or stable. In Buddhism this is extended to the idea that everything physical or mental is by nature transitory and in a constant state of change. Whatever rises must fall. This state of change must thereby result in decline and decay. In this sense existence is an unending cycle of growth and decay, integration and disintegration. That change is the very essence of existence is implied by the law of mutation, and this is applied to the life process. In this process the apparent unity of existence is divided into five aggregates, known as the khandhas. These five aggregates are material form (rupa), feeling (vedana), perception (sanna), disposition (sankhara) and consciousness (vinnana) and they include three traits : arising, remaining and passing away.<sup>7</sup> Owing to its ephemeral nature, life is like a dream, quite brief and fleeting. However, Buddhism encourages us to work with this fleeting nature of life. Buddhism teaches that life, however brief, should be lived fruitfully so that there are no regrets. By emphasizing that the present moment is of paramount importance, Buddhism defines this moment as both cause and effect. As an effect the present is the product of the past, and as a cause it is the building block of the future. It is the only moment of life that one can free oneself from the effects of the past and at the same time project oneself into the future.

### The void in life

Along with the frailty and insecurity of life, it is believed that at the center of existence there is a void. This void is the result of the insubstantial nature of life, and the aggregates, although forming a recognizable and perceivable object, do not produce a substance " all of them are insubstantial, a part of the endless movement of life. Even consciousness, considered the most important of the five aggregate, is in a state of constant flux. It has no stable quality and thus cannot remain constant for even a single second. In the thinking process, as thoughts enter and leave, there is no substantial ego. The apparent sameness seen in life is actually the continuity of preceding causes and subsequent effects. An analogy would be a process of filming in which projections are made of a series of running movements by many people to give the appearance of the action of one running person. The unity arises from continuity. It is the spectator who perceives this series as a single person. In the same way there is no identity in the process of change. What exists is the rapid change and unbroken line of causes and effects. This gives rise to the concept of a substantial self in the same way that one ray of light is produced by a succession of flames.

### The reality and illusion of life

Despite this plain fact of experience people still believe in ego-consciousness, clinging to the fallacy that there is a permanent, abiding substance of Soul in and behind consciousness. Life for them is therefore a reality and an illusion. The five aggregates are real, but the enduring Ego is illusion. The term "self" is a name for the linkage of all five aggregates just as the term "human being" refers to an aggregate of body and mind. For Buddhism this term "self" is a societal invention for the purpose of communication. Therefore the "self" is an idea, not real. Devoid of a substantial Ego, life is like a bubble, with its center a void. This non-egocentric view of life is a

belief and an explanation of human existence unique to Buddhism. This understanding encourages us to look at life objectively and to refrain from viewing it in terms of self-centeredness. By negating the self in life Buddhism tries to eliminate the vanity caused by self-absorption.

### Suffering

#### The painful aspect of life

We may then conclude that in the Buddhist perspective life is characterized by three important traits : conditionality (cause and effect), impermanence, and insubstantiality. There is also one additional trait which must be mentioned. This is suffering (dukkha).<sup>8</sup> Suffering is used in Buddhism as a broader concept to include pain, grief, misery or unsatisfactoriness, which would normally be seen by most people as suffering, as opposed to happiness; it refers also to a unique phenomenon of the universe. In general there is impermanence and imperfection of life, which both cause suffering. Some elements of suffering, such as grief, pain, misery, are inherent in the experience of living and cannot be avoided. Should a person be fortunate enough to avoid most forms of suffering, there is no question that death as the final form of suffering is inevitable. And one's own death or the death of one who is deeply loved causes suffering. Owing to this reality of death, Buddhism concludes that human existence is insecure, fragile and filled with suffering. The very transitory nature of life is a cause of suffering, for even happiness is seen to be temporary. While experiencing happiness, which by definition is the absence of pain, one has expectations of the continuation of the state of joy. But these expectations can never be met. Certainly, this is no rosy-spectacled view of life. Yet Buddhism does not absurdly deny the presence of happiness (sukkha) in human existence. Buddhist texts list various kinds of pleasures, including sensual pleasure and the joy of family life, that one can enjoy, comparable to the list of the common experiences of suffering.<sup>9</sup> However, Buddhism does not want us to accept happiness uncritically. Subject to the law of mutation, our feelings and attitudes are liable to change. Similarly, these objects of pleasures (such as a new motor-car, a glass of beer, a girl friend) cannot last long for they contain within themselves the potential for change and decay. Having undergone change and decay, they cease to give us happiness in their new forms. One should always remember that life contains a number of undeniably unpleasant experiences, which nobody could ever pretend are enjoyable, such as old age, disease, death, being separated from what we like, and being associated with what we dislike. All these make up the painful side of existence which humanity tends to ignore.

#### The reality of suffering

Buddhism accepts the fact that, like happiness, suffering is subject to change. But at the same time Buddhism points out that there is no balance of happiness and suffering. The painful side of experience usually outweighs happiness. However pessimistic it may seem, Buddhism tries to address the reality of suffering, without any pretence or deception, so as to focus on this painful side of life. At the same time it tries to probe beneath the fact of suffering in search of its causes and a way to end. The Buddha's insight, in its concentrated form, is found in the Four Noble Truths (ariyasacca). They are the truth of suffering (dukkha), the causes of suffering (samudhaya) the method to end suffering (nirodh), and the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the cessation of suffering (magga).

In order to cease from suffering one should not project suffering on to others. Nor should one become a masochist or a martyr and enjoy suffering. Nor should one find attachment to a

substitute whether in the world of art or of such other pleasure-giving areas as sex, drugs and liquor. Substitutes are to be avoided because they feed ego gratification (tanha). In Buddhist thought fulfilling the ego's needs is itself a cause of suffering.

#### The root-cause of suffering

As mentioned earlier, lacking a permanent Ego at the center of our being and transitory in our nature, we long to find and to cling to something substantial in the ceaseless flow of change. We therefore project reality onto an illusory Ego for the purpose of gratification. Possession is used as a means of ego-gratification to fill this void. The use of people as objects to be manipulated for our needs is another way in which we attempt to solidify ourselves. But it is like building a house on sand. There is nothing substantial there. The grains fall apart and dissolve, and the house crumbles into dust. We still feel inadequate or unsatisfied, no matter what we get, because our ego-desires (tanha) are by nature insatiable.

It is seen in Buddhism that much of the misery of life is caused by self-centeredness and the constant desire to satisfy one's own needs. These ego-desires are the very root of all evil, including greed, lust, hatred, lying, deceit, and crime. It is the delusion of the Ego that begets all forms of these ego-desires. Because ego-desires are the cause of most human suffering, it is the elimination of the Ego that is necessary to end our unhappiness. And because the Ego has no reality of its own we are able to abolish it through our efforts. This is not seen as an easy process. Buddhism discourages ego-focus because it wants us to realize our nonpersonal potentialities. Besides, self-concentration does not allow the pursuit of truth and righteousness. The value of life does not depend on quantity but on quality. Any life lived solely for the self is a life not worth living, as there is no room for the highest goal of attaining nibbana, the liberation from the endless life-cycle, samsara existence. It is this ultimate goal that makes life worth living. Thus to be absorbed and engrossed in the temporal, impermanent part of life matters little.

#### The Sanctity of life

##### The justification of killing

Since life is so worthwhile the first precept in Buddhism prohibits the taking of life. Within this precept all killing for whatever reason is not allowed.<sup>10</sup> But there is room for taking life for just cause. A story in the Jataka tales concerns the bodhisatta, the future Buddha, who kills a bandit in order to save 500 merchants.<sup>11</sup> The exception also includes self-defense and suicide in some circumstances. Self-defense is acceptable only when all alternatives have been exhausted. The precept upholds the sanctity of life of all human beings regardless of the conditions of their lives. As a rule suicide is prohibited. Even when one is suffering from a painful and incurable disease, or when one's life is unsatisfactory, one should bear it quietly and patiently while simultaneously trying to rid oneself of the pain and suffering in all possible ways. Yet in some cases, according to Buddhist scriptures, taking one's own life is allowed for noble ends. The giving of one's own life to save the lives of others, as a bodhisatta gave himself to a hungry lioness to save her from eating her own cubs, is one example of this exception. Another is suicide to escape from an incurable illness that is an obstacle to the attainment of nibbana.<sup>12</sup>

##### Mercy-killing

Aside from these rare cases killing cannot be justified. Killing is killing even if it is called mercy killing. As the means for killing nowadays has become easily available one has to wonder whether the so-called mercy killing is truly for the sake of the patient or for those who accept

killing and encourage it. There are cases in which the motivation to save self from suffering (e.g. getting rid of one's own repugnance with the suffering of the other) is stronger than the motivation to save the other.

In the light of such understanding Buddhism strongly opposes assisted suicide. In the Buddhist view assisted suicide is not an act of compassion as claimed by many people. Killing always brings bad karmic results both to the person who is killed and to the perpetrator. When requested by patients to assist them to end their own lives Buddhism advises us instead of acting upon the request we should try to find different available means to ease their suffering according to the kind of suffering, physical, emotional or psychological, the patients are undergoing. Such is the way of genuine compassion.

#### Killing and letting-go

It is with such belief that Buddhism is strongly against active euthanasia where direct killing is involved by doctors, relatives or friends. But in the case of passive euthanasia Buddhism draws the distinction between "letting go" of life and "killing". "Letting go" means neither hastening death nor unnecessary prolonging of life. Prolonging death unnecessarily means prolonging suffering while "letting go", allowing death to come naturally, will lessen suffering as long as there is appropriate pain maintenance and total care of the patients and their families.

#### Animal experimentation

The precept against the taking of life is not limited to human life but includes animal life as well, irrespective of size. Animal life is valued because animals share with human beings many of the same qualities of suffering, pain, pleasure and conception. Other living beings which do not share human qualities such as plants, are not included in the precept. Owing to his compassion and his conviction that privilege entails responsibility (the principle of noblesse oblige) the Buddhist usually considers it his duty to care for the well-being of all animals and at the same time is against the killing of animals as a sport or for luxury or for ritual sacrifice. A strict observation of this precept leads many devout Buddhists to vegetarianism.<sup>13</sup>

In Buddhist thought animal life is also sacred, but human life is considered more important. It is only a human being who has the direct path to nibbana. This is because of man's potentiality due to his central position in the universe.<sup>14</sup> This position cannot be shared with other sentient beings including animals. Buddhism is well aware of the necessity of some animal experimentations to advance scientific knowledge that can help cure life-threatening diseases. Accordingly, this kind of animal experimentation is acceptable if there is no other way to attain such knowledge. Experimentation for cosmetics and minor disease are thus ruled out. In the case of experimentation that has great benefit to mankind Buddhism asks us to carry it on in a way that is humane as much as possible. The animal must be provided with the best living conditions and made to feel the least pain. Where animals need not to be killed for the purpose of experiment, because of the contributions they have made for human benefit, they should have the best care throughout their natural lives.

#### Death

Having discussed the concept of life and suffering in Buddhism let us now turn to the related concept of death. As already discussed, death is an essential part of the human predicament. It is one of the conditioned and conditioning factors of the cycle of causes and effects (samsara) in which human beings exist. It is also shown that death is one of the central causes of the suffering

of human existence.

#### Brain death and organ transplantation

Buddhism defines death in terms of the concepts of impermanence (anicca) and insubstantiality (anatta). The standard definition of death in Buddhist texts describes death as "the falling away, the passing away, the separation, the disappearance, the mortality of dying, the action of time, the breaking up of the aggregates, the laying down of the body."<sup>15</sup> In this definition death is seen as the total dissolution of the five aggregates, the factors constituting the individual.

This Buddhist view of death is congruent with the concept of total brain death in the present discussion. The ceasing of the functioning of the high cortex does not constitute "death" in Buddhism. By recognizing that dying is a process and not an event such a total brain death view allows for a window of opportunity for the taking of organs for transplantation. It also provides protection against the pre-mature removal of organs. The ceasing of the functioning of the high cortex alone is only the death of the cortex and not of all other vital organs

#### The relationship between death and life

As the manifestation of the impermanence of life, death is not a one-time event but occurs at every moment of life. Since the aggregates are in a state of constant flux, birth (seen as arising) and death (seen as passing away) are always present in juxtaposition to each other. These momentary lives and deaths are one phase of the cycle. From another perspective death is nothing but the arising of the new state in place of the preceding one. This may be explained by means of an analogy with a house-gate. To one who is outside the house the gate is an entrance, whereas to the one inside the house it is an exit. But for both of them it is the same gate.

Similarly, the preceding state in the cause and effect process is called birth, whereas its following state is viewed as death, although both of them belong to the same single process.

Hence in its analysis of the nature of existence Buddhism also places emphasis on the reality of death. It is through an understanding of death that we gain an understanding of life. Buddhists thus see the attempt made by people to define the meaning of life as an attempt to define the meaning of death. A man who defines death as merely one event in the unbroken cause - and - effect continuum should be able to rid himself of anxiety and then could live life to the fullest conquering the vicissitudes of life. But this is impossible without the full realization that life and death are two inseparable aspects of one entity.

#### The wheel of life and death

Buddhism agrees with the generally negative view that death is the fearful and disastrous culmination of an existence already marred by sorrow and suffering. This tragedy of death is magnified by the certainty of rebirth (again-arising) and the repetition of suffering and death (passing away) in samsara existence. That we are locked in the wheel of life and death is an indication of the fundamental emptiness of existence. The continuity and duration of life and death for each individual is incalculable, since if the collection of the bones of one person's repeated rebirth could be amassed, they would form a mountain of skeletons. This imprisonment in the round of existence, however, is neither arbitrary nor ordained by a huge power. It is rather the result of one's own deeds (kamma), good or bad. Through his deeds each person weaves his own web of fate. It is therefore in the power of each individual to either remain in the endless cycle or to escape from it. For in this cycle he is both cause and effect, the entire act or deed on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the consequence of the act. As an effect of his past deeds he

is the product of the past. But as a cause he is a field of possibilities : he has the ability to gradually free himself from the past and to become whatever he wants to be.

#### Ways to cope with death

Buddhism places death at the heart of the human predicament while also recognizing it as the primary solution to this predicament. This religion has maintained that one cannot find liberation from the human predicament by denying death but only by confronting it. Therefore Buddhism does not condone a melancholic reaction to the death of those dear to us. What is necessary when death occurs is that we understand its meaning and cope with it in a realistic and intelligent manner.

As a means of solving the predicament of death Buddhism has developed special systematic techniques of meditative methods, called *moranasati* and *asubha bhavana*, to enable us to face the fact of our death with equanimity and understanding and ultimately to attain *nibbana*, in which there is neither life nor death. These meditations are concerned with concentration on the idea of death (*moranasati*) and actual observation of decomposing corpses (*asubha bhavana*). Through progressive stages of confronting and comprehending death the meditator is led towards control and freedom. The meditations give him an increased sense of non-attachment towards himself and the world as well as more control over his own mental development. In addition, these meditations further the process of freedom or liberation by revealing the impermanent and substantial nature of existence. As a result he is moved towards liberating wisdom (*vijja*)<sup>16</sup> that would free himself from the clutch of the illusory Ego and its selfish desires, particularly the lust for life (*bhava tanha*), the craving for sensual pleasure (*kama tanha*), and the craving for the immaterial sphere (*vibhava tanha*)<sup>17</sup> and ultimately from the wheel of life and death.

#### The spiritual importance of dying

As we have seen in the discussion on the concept of life, Buddhism considers every moment in life of great importance, for it is the moment in which one constructs one's own destiny. More emphasis, however, is placed on the last moment in life, or the dying process, in which all the five aggregates of existence are disintegrating. For in Buddhist thought in this last moment the last stage of consciousness (*cuti vinana*) of one's life is passing away to give place to a new stage of consciousness (*patisanthi vinana*), which will form another life by its new association with the new aggregates of existence. Even if the character of the new life is affected by the whole previous life, the nature of the last conscious state still contributes significantly to the quality of the ensuing one. If it is wholesome (*kusala*), this will produce a wholesome inauguration of the new life. Similarly, if it is unwholesome (*akusala*), the ensuing new life will be unwholesomely inaugurated.

Consequently, it is of great importance that special care should be given to enable the dying to die a "good death" i.e. a calm, and happy peaceful death which will occur only when the mind of the dying is clear and subtle, never be impaired by analgesics or sedatives. Impairment by drugs would affect the consciousness of the dying person and make it impossible to fill his mind with wholesome and happy thought.

In this respect Buddhism enriches the philosophy of the hospice movement, devoted to the full physical, psychological, social and special care of the dying, and reaffirms the significance of the dignity and importance of death and the need for spiritual care. Buddhism also teaches that removing one's thought focused on the pain of death can be done through specific meditations, which are usually mastered only after years of practice. By using these specific meditations one

can transform oneself into a state of painlessness. In order to reach this understanding one has to be prepared to devote oneself to the study and the practice of meditation. Without his long and arduous effort no one can ever reach the stage. As this power is available to very few, the question of withholding pain-killing drugs and sedatives from those who have not made such preparation is a serious one.

### Concluding Remarks

Buddhism can serve as a resource for the on-going discussion of bioethical issues which have arisen with new scientific knowledge and new circumstances of modern life. The Buddhist "middle way" ethic, based on the concept of interdependence, for example, is an alternative between the two extreme positions on abortion i.e. the pro-abortion view and its opposite. Similarly, the Buddhist emphasis on intention as the important ingredient in ethical decision is useful for our reflection on bioethical issues in the gray areas where ethical water becomes muddy and where one has to choose between the two evils. The Buddhist understanding of death as a process and not an event is another example. It supports the total brain death approach which prohibits the premature removal of organs for transplantation. Moreover, the Buddhist death-accepting attitude and the great spiritual importance it gives to the dying process can significantly contribute to the discussion on euthanasia and the care for the dying. This Buddhist approach to dying also implies the right to die (i.e. to let death come naturally without fruitless treatment) of a person when there is no hope for recovery. The "letting-go-of-life" view is an alternative between act-utilitarian approach where the end justifies the means and the opposing deontological position. But since all the bioethical issues that have been under discussion today are the questions and challenges which Buddhism has not encountered before, Buddhism has to reflect on its traditional understanding in a new way to meet new circumstances. Living tradition has always done this in different times and places. That is why they could still remain alive today. Such adaptation is necessary and does not violate the teaching because Buddhism itself teaches us not to cling to any belief and practice, but to direct our attention to reality and what will release suffering from human kind.

### Notes

1. The book of the Kindred Sayings, Vol. II, trans. Rays Davids (London :Luzac and Co., Ltd., 1952), p. 23.
2. These factors are ignorance (avijja), volitions or Kamma formations (samskaras), consciousness (vinnana), the six faculties-the five senses plus mind-(ayatana)-, contact (phassa), feeling (vedana), craving (tanha), clinging (upadana), becoming (bhava), again-becoming (jati), decay (jara), disease (phayadhi), death (norana), grief (domanassa), lamentation (parideva), suffering (dukkha).
3. The term samsara refers to the round of life and death in which the whole range of sentient beings, from the tiniest insect to man, is believed to exist. Only the human being, however, has the potential to terminate this endless cycle. See also notes No.5 and No.14.
4. For discussion of the Wheel of Life, see The Three Jewels by Sangharakshita (London : Ryder & Company. 1967), pp. 68-82.
5. There are various meanings of nibbana found in different contexts in Buddhist texts. In the paper the term is used to mean the unconditioned state of consciousness in which there is the ceasing of the "I" (Ego), lust, hatred and delusion, the three principal forms of evil in Buddhism. This state is not caused, not originated. It simply makes itself known when all that is opposite

(ego-absorption, lust, hatred and delusion) is removed. There are two kinds of nibbana " sa-upatisesa nibbana-nibbana without the disintegration of all the five aggregates of existence, and anu-patisesanibbana-nibbana without any element of life remaining. It is believed that with this state of consciousness completely void of any defilement a person is released from the round of existence. This liberating Wisdom (vijja) is thus like the indispensable key that unlocks the chains binding us to the wheel of life and death. See also Note no.16.

6. Buddhism in Translations by Henry Clarke Warren (N.Y. : Atheneum, 1968), p. 150.

7. These five aggregates are sometimes given in a threefold scheme : (i) physical (rupa) : (ii) sense-perception and reaction (vedana. Sanna and sankhara): (iii) consciousness (vinnana). In this case the three groups are called rupa, cetasika (conditioning factors of consciousness) and citta (state of consciousness). The five aggregates are also arranged in two groups : (i) rupa (ii) nama (the other four aggregates).

8. Suffering constitutes an essential part of Buddhism. All its teaching is primarily focused on this unpleasant fact of experience. "This I do teach," declared the Buddha, "suffering and the cessation of suffering" (The Book of the Kindred Sayings, Vol. III, trans. F.L. Woodward. London : Luzac and Co., Ltd. 1954. p. 157). This preoccupation with suffering has made many outside observers frequently regard Buddhism as a pessimistic religion. Such misunderstanding arises from their looking at suffering apart from the context of the Four Noble Truths (i.e. the fact of suffering, the causes of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the Eightfold Noble Path which leads to the cessation of suffering). The Buddhist approach to suffering emphasizes a sense of realism and certainly discourages any attempt to brood over suffering and be agonized by it. It would be more appropriate to describe Buddhism not as "pessimistic" but as "realistic" for it begins with the fact of experience. However, the Buddha's teaching went far beyond this simple observation of the facts of life. The Buddha penetrated the causes of suffering and showed the way to end it.

9. See The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy, by Lama Angarika Govinda (London : Ryder & Co., 1966), p. 63.

10. In Buddhist texts it is stated that for an act of killing to be complete and kammically potent (i.e. producing unwholesome effect) five conditions must be observed : (i) the knowledge that the being is a living being, (ii) the intent or resolution to kill, (iii) the act of killing by appropriate means, (iv) the resulting death. In the absence of any one of these conditions, the act would not constitute killing even though death should follow, and will not entail any evil effect on the doer.

11. Bodhisattava is a term that refers to the one who is a Buddha-to-be. It is believed that prior to becoming a Buddha, Gotama the Buddha was bodhisattava in 550 previous lives practicing all kinds of perfection (e.g. Perfection of Wisdom, Perfection of Compassion, Perfection of Vigor). The stories of the Buddha's previous lives are collected in Jatakas Stories.

12. From a story in the Jatakas Stories. This event has been used by Mahayana Buddhism to justify suicide. The Buddha was said to give approval to suicide of a monk named Godhika who, after attaining the state of spiritual release through meditation six times in succession and then falling away from it, committed suicide the seventh time he attained it, in order not to fall away from it again (Samuvutta-Nikaya I, pp.120f). On 11 June 1963 a Vietnamese monk, Thic Quang-Duc, burned himself to death to oppose the Diem regime. Whether his suicide was morally justified or not has been an open question since his death.

13. Vegetarianism is one of the main controversial issues among Buddhists today. Many devout Buddhists are vegetarian and some do not wear silk because they do not want to have the lives of the silkworms on their conscience. In fact there is no coercion or compulsion in Buddhism. The

practice of the moral precepts (sila) is self-imposed obligation. Similarly, there is no rule or injunction in the teaching of Buddhism that a Buddhist should live wholly or even principally on vegetables. Whether or not meat is eaten is purely an individual concern. What matters most is what the mind takes in, feeds on, and puts back out into the world. Purity comes from a (moha), the germs of defilement

14. In the Wheel of Life the place which is allocated to the realm of men is in the third cycle. There man is depicted at the center, with gods and Titans in the north, tormented spirits in the south, animals in the west and revenants in the east. In relation to animals, only man can experience both joy and suffering without being addicted to any of these experiences, and thus has the potential to transcend them and to free himself from the round of existence. In addition, man can have unhealthy and healthy volition, whereas animals usually tend to have unhealthy more than healthy volitions. It is therefore extremely difficult for animals to free themselves from samsara existence. Animals can be helped through being associated with human beings, especially if the humans are spiritually advanced.

15. Buddhism in Translations by Henry Clarke Warren (N.Y.: Atheneum, 1963), p.202.

16. Wisdom (vijja) means knowledge of the true nature of the world and human existence—impermanence, insubstantiality and suffering. This knowledge as opposite to ignorance (avijja) has within itself a power to free a person from ego-absorption. Through knowledge the "I (Ego) falls, and with the fall of the "I" fall also ego-desires. The transformation of ignorance to knowledge is synonymous with the act by which the "I" is dissolved. The eradication of the "I" is at the same time the termination of the cycle of life and death. "By the dissolving away of that attachment (to the "I"), the life impulse (the will-to-live) is dissolved; by the dissolution of the life-impulse, being (the five aggregates of existence) is dissolved; by the dissolution of being, birth is dissolved; by the dissolution of birth are dissolved old age and death, woe, distress, sorrow, grief and despair." (quoted by Paul Dahlke in Buddhist Essays, New Delhi : Swarn Printing Press, 1978, p. 182).

17. In Buddhist cosmology there are three planes of existence (loka), each "higher and subtler" than the preceding one and each consisting of many sub-planes. First there is the Plane of Desire, in which are included earth-bound deities, the world of human beings, and various worlds inhabited by spirits, infernal beings. Next to it comes the Plane of (Subtle) Form, the world of the deities which, though dissociated from "matter", is bound up with spiritual forms. Finally, the Formless Plane, inhabited by deities of the highest order of all (called arupa-bhrama), representing various dimensions of pure but still mundane consciousness. Bhava tanha usually refers to the desire for extinction and is also interpreted as the desire to be born in the last Plane. Even this Plane is subject to impermanence and a part of the Wheel of Life and Death, though the duration of life is much longer than in the other Planes. For a detailed description of the Buddhist cosmology see The Three Worlds of King Ruang; translated from the Thai Trai Bhuum Phra Ruang, by Frank and Mani Raynolds (Chicago University Press, 1983).

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[Go back to EJAIB 14 \(4\) July 2004](#)

[Go to commentary by Leavitt](#)

[Go back to EJAIB](#)

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