



## Death and Rebirth in Buddhism: Myth and the Ultimate Truth

Yongyut Khamkhong<sup>1</sup>, Phraplad Sura Yanatharo<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Business English Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Phranakhon Rajabhat University

<sup>2</sup>Master of Public Administration Program, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya Surin Campus

yongyut.k@pnru.ac.th

### Abstract

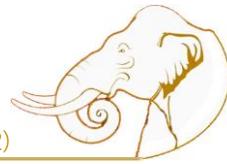
Since the first day we were born, all of us are heading towards death, the sure path of all life on this earth. Yet, we are too overwhelmed with responsibilities till we forget that we are about to die at any minutes. It is therefore a good reason we should ponder upon death and understand some essences in it. When Prince Siddhartha saw death for the first time, he realized that all lives are living in sufferings from birth, aging, illness and death. The Teacher showed the way to the deathlessness, the end of all sufferings and the life we should live. Death in Buddhism was associated with a myth of ‘rebirth’. This study was intended to analyze the belief in death and rebirth in Thai society compared to the Teacher’s true teachings.

**Keywords:** Death, Rebirth, Buddhism

### Introduction

In the eye of most people, death is negative, horrifying and should not be mentioned in any conversation. Some even think the utterance of death can bring bad luck to their life or they might invite death to life faster. Nevertheless, all of us are walking towards death since the first day we were born. Death is imminent and inevitable no matter how hard we try to prolong life with all the medical technology, wealth, power and influences.

In many cultures including Thailand, people believed in ‘rebirth’ that there is a spirit leaving the body after one died. This spirit will go to heaven or hell or still roam around on earth depending on their good or bad actions during their life time. All kinds of media, especially movies and TV drama, love to show this rebirth-related stories added to their fantasy and the film makers know that it can sell to the local Thais and neighboring countries. Not everyone nowadays agrees to this belief of rebirth and they are likely to

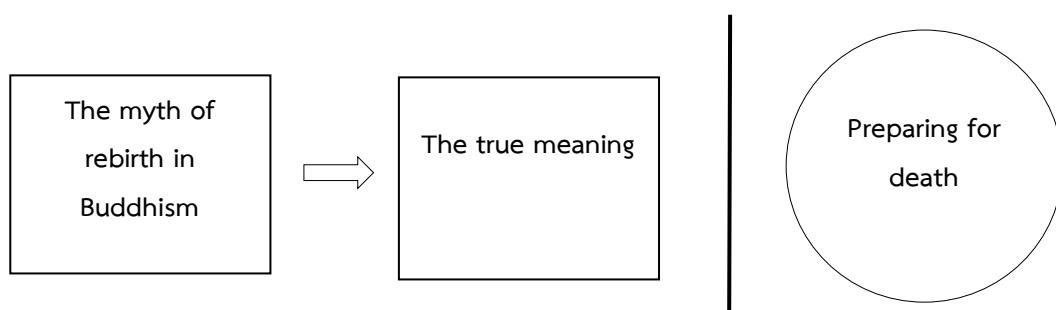


perceive it as an entertainment. However, many Thais still cling to this belief and it is worth investigating in an academic way.

The rebirth, true or not, is difficult to say. This paper will investigate the nature of this belief among the Thais and compare it with the Teacher's teachings. Furthermore, the discussion on the appropriate preparation for death was brought here as well so we might be able to seek the peaceful end or even liberate ourselves from all sufferings, according to the Teacher's teaching.

### Analytical Framework

The author has put the analytical framework as follows:



### The Buddha

The Teacher was born Prince Siddhattha in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE in Lumbini, a western province of today Nepal. At the age 29, he came out of the palace for the first time and saw the 'four sights' which was an old person, a sick person, a corpse and an ascetic. He left his palace and became an ascetic, spending 6 years searching for the truth to end all human sufferings. He achieved enlightenment through meditation under a Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya and was known as the Buddha, meaning 'the awakened one'. He taught a path to Nirvana or the freedom from ignorance, craving, rebirth and sufferings. He died at 80 years in Kushinagar. In his last days recorded in Mahaparinibbana Sutta, the Teacher said to his main disciple, *"Now I am frail, Ananda, old, aged, far gone in years. This is my eightieth year, and my life is spent. Even as an old cart, Ananda, is held together with much difficulty, so the body of the Tathagata is kept going only with supports... Therefore, Ananda, be islands unto yourselves, refuges unto yourselves, seeking no external refuge; with the Dhamma as your island, the Dhamma as your refuge, seeking no other refuge. ... Those bhikkhus of mine, Ananda, who now or after I am gone, abide as an island unto themselves, as a refuge unto themselves, seeking no*

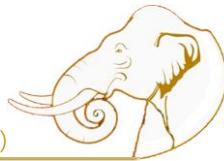


*other refuge; having the Dhamma as their island and refuge, seeking no other refuge: it is they who will become the highest, if they have the desire to learn" (Vajira and Story, 1998). The Teacher's body is decayed and ended too but he reached Nirvana, the end of all sufferings, leaving behind the paths for us to follow.*

### Rebirth in the Public Eye

It is very common to hear Thai people saying that it is their karma from the previous life that leads to their sufferings at this present moment. Therefore, it is imperative for them to do merits in this life so that they will be reborn in a better state of life. If they are deeply in love, they will make a wish to meet their lovers again in next life. You hear this time and time again on television and among friends in the office. It seemed very common for the Thais to prepare themselves for next life. Monks are preaching about this 'rebirth' and people love to visit temples to listen to the sermons, and make merits. A mother who lost her child from a road accident was seen saying on TV that her child's merits from the previous life has extinguished so his life has to end. By thinking this, her grieving soul is being soothed for some degree as if the fatal accident was unavoidable and created by the unknown power from above.

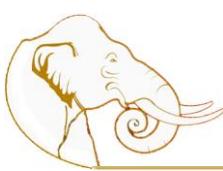
Thai people believed that a spirit will travel around after death to find the new body so they can be reborn according to their karma. This is not the concept of Buddhism but rather the belief of Hinduism that penetrated into Thai society a long time ago. Hinduism holds a concept of *atman* that can be reborn in the shape of an angel, human, animal or plants (Wanhu, 2017, p.57). The belief of 'spirit' or 'Vijnāna' in Buddhism is quite different. Buddhism explains the spirit in the form of 'consciousness' which is attached to the six sense bases of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. For example, the eye-consciousness occurs when a contact happened between the eye and an object. It is not the permanent form of spirit that roams around for rebirth. Surprisingly, the Buddha himself who rejects the idea of permanent *atman* was still worshipped as if his spirit still exists nowadays. You can still see Buddhists offering food to the Buddha image and pray for the Buddha's spirit to consume the offered food. They do this tradition out of the faith and this practice is still there in most Buddhist temples all over the country. The tradition might have been there for generations without the clear explanation from the scholars. Once it was accepted as a part of religious belief, it becomes a norm that is hard to break.



It is not uncommon to see the news of this old belief of a spirit possessing someone in a village and it needs a sorcerer to perform a religious ritual to expel that fierce spirit out of the victim's body. The family has to pay the invited sorcerer for this important event. The sorcerer can also invite a spirit of a dead person to use his/her body as a medium so the dead can communicate with the grieving family. Also, the ceremony needs some budget to perform. Recently, a Thai TV program which co-hosted a ghost medium was prosecuted as they visited sacred places of a former king and claimed that the spirit of the king talking to them. This made the public angry because they respected the king (Brighttoday, 2020). The producers apologized and pulled out the program from screen. All the above examples have shown that the belief in existing spirits is still here in the country where animism was practiced prior to the coming of Buddhism around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE during the time of Indian Emperor Asoka (Kusalasaya, 2006). The mixture of animism, Buddhism and other religions was found practicing in the country.

The mural paintings in Buddhist temples in Thailand always depict the 'rebirth' of the spirit after death. The illustrations are mostly related to the Three Worlds or *Traiphum*: 1) The World of Desire which has 11 realms. Most of these are in hell. 2) The World of Material Factors consisting of 16 realms; and 3) the World Without Material Factors consisting of 4 realms. (Reynolds and Reynolds, 1982, p. 358). The last two worlds are in heaven. The *Traiphum* was originally compiled during the reign of King Phraya Lithai of Sukhothai era, around 1345 CE and was thought to be the first formal book written in the country. It basically describes the next world your spirit will go. If you do good deeds during the life time, you will be reborn in heaven as a god after death. If you do bad deeds, you will go directly to hell.

For example, if you commit adultery, you will be reborn in a hell called *Sansheep* where there are giant trees with thorny trunk. Each thorn is 16 inches long and constantly on fire. The hell guards carrying sharp lance will force you to climb the tree all the time. One day in this hell equals 9 million years of the human world. You will spend one whole year of hell there (Sukhothai Provincial Office, 2022). Meanwhile, those who use lying, divisive speech, abusive speech and idle chatter will be reborn in a hell called *Roruvamahanarok* where your body will be put face down in a huge iron lotus. All limbs will be locked steady. Hot flame of the hell fire will pour out from below to your mouth, nose, ears at all time. One day in this hell equals 576 million years of the human world.



You will be punished repeatedly for 4,000 hell years (Sangngern and Wongsathit, 2020, p.76).

The ones living with laziness will be reborn as an animal. The ones with greed and stinginess will become a hungry ghost. Those with hatred and anger will be reborn as a hell being (Tsomo, 2006).

The horror of the hells and the severe punishment after death was sometimes interpreted as a political tool by the country leaders to easily govern the commoners. The stories were composed by or attributed to kings for purposes of legitimizing their power and charisma (Brereton, 2017). The fear of the rebirth in an unlikely place or with deformed body was still in the mindset of many Buddhists in Thailand. Parents also used this belief to threaten their children not to perform bad deeds or else they will be reborn in a bad shape next life. The acceptance of the present life as a notion that they did some bad 'karma' from the previous life is still a common belief among many people. Sometimes it affected the medical needs as many people still believe that they should not donate organs after they die because they might be reborn without those organs in the next life. It is not unusual to hear Thai doctors explaining about religious belief related to organ donation.

## Rebirth in Buddhism

The topic of 'rebirth' was mentioned by the Teacher himself in many Suttas but the meaning of the word is different from what most people think. In *Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta* (The Greater Craving-Destruction Discourse), the Teacher rebuked a monk named *Sati* the Fisherman's Son, who bares the view that consciousness runs and wanders on from birth to birth, not another. The Teacher then taught the Dependent Origination, the circle of birth and rebirth from 'within' and how to end all sufferings, which is the ultimate goal of Buddhism.

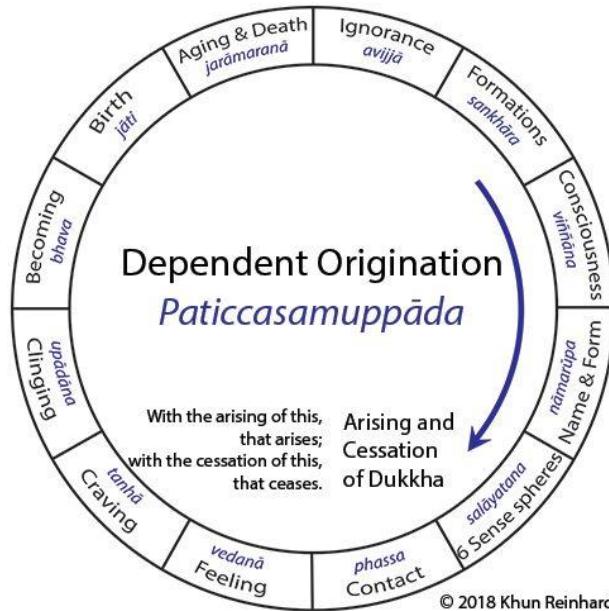
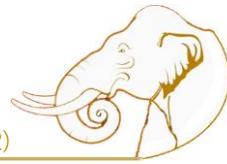
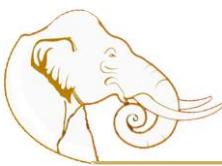


Figure 1: Dependent Origination (Reinhard, 2018)

It is the process of how ‘birth and rebirth’ occurs in our mind, starting from one’s ignorance till the aging, death, sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses and despairs. We can choose to let the circle of these sufferings getting ‘reborn’ in our heart repeatedly or we choose to end all sufferings in this life time. We can control this ‘rebirth’ before we actually die from this physical body. The Teacher emphasized the need to release all the sufferings as he put it, *“Just as the ocean has a single taste — that of salt — in the same way, this Dhamma-Vinaya has a single taste: that of release”* (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2011).

The release of all sufferings is the main concept of Buddhism especially the deep understanding of ‘craving’ before ‘clinging’ takes place. The Teacher taught us to stop our heart from craving and that’s why the freedom from craving is a must to learn (Punthunon and Buddharaksa, 2019). You can study, work, eat with intelligent discrimination, not by desire. If we do things under the desire, we will worry while doing it and after it finished. Meditation schools mostly emphasized the ‘contact’ when the eye sees the visible objects; ear and the sound; nose and odor; tongue and taste; body and touch; mind and mental objects. The mind should be alert and fast enough to capture this short moment of the contact so that it stops there before the ‘feeling’ comes to play. Then the meditators can continue meditation without having the troubled feeling arousing within their heart. To stop right there at the ‘contact’ before it leads to feeling, craving, clinging and the rebirth of all



sufferings that follow suit is easily said than done. But this is the cessation to the rebirth of our sufferings. The concept of ending the rebirth can be found in Bāhiya Sutta.

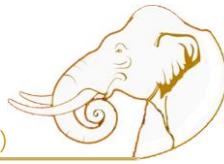
Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth heard that the Teacher was staying at Sāvatthī so he went to ask for the teaching. The Teacher was walking for alms in the city when Bāhiya approached. Even if the Teacher told him that it is not the right time to teach, Bāhiya insisted several times. With that short moment, the Teacher said:

*"Then, Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress"* (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1994).

Then the mind of Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth right there was released from effluents through lack of clinging. Shortly after that, he was killed by a cow. The Teacher asked the monks to cremate his body and build a memorial. The Teacher told the monks that Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth is ‘totally unbound’. It is also interesting to know that Bāhiya was not even a Buddhist monk when he realized the ultimate truth of Buddhism. Buddhist scholars nowadays explained that anyone in any religions can release themselves from all sufferings as well if they follow the right path.

When seeing a visible object and one does not cling to the object, there will be no feeling attached to it. Then, there is no suffering in one’s heart at later stage. It is only the eye and the object. There is no ‘you’ and ‘I’ or ‘mine’ because these words reflected that ‘self’ still exists. Buddhism do not accept the existence of self. In reality, all things are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not selves. All things are not worth getting or being (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 1996).

If one is not aware of the contact when the eye was attracted by the object, the feeling of being satisfied or unsatisfied plays in our heart. The ‘I’ and ‘mine’ occurs right away as ‘I am satisfied’ or ‘I am not satisfied’ with what ‘I’ see. In the split of a second, the desire to get or reject that object arises, hence, the clinging to that visible object follows,



in either positive or negative way. We may think that we will fulfill our heart once the desired object was obtained. The fact is that we still want to have a greater desire. The desire will never stop as long as we allow it to flourish in our heart. In short, it is the desire that controls our life. This is the rebirth of desire and suffering in the Teacher's teaching.

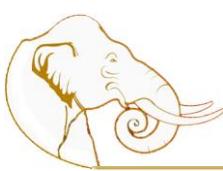
Every human seemed to suffer from this endless vicious circle of 'action and result' and 'action and result' continuously. It is known as the Wheel of Samsara. This Samsara is not the circle of physical existence after another, but the arising of desire, and the result of one's effort to grab what one wants. It is one's inability to stop desiring so the entire life was controlled completely by one's own endless desire. This very circle brings us suffering and torment (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 1996).

Some monks during the Teacher's time also had questions about life after death. In *Cula-Malunkiyovada Sutta*, a monk called Malunkyaputta asked the Teacher why he did not explain these ten questions: the cosmos is eternal, the cosmos is not eternal, the cosmos is finite, the cosmos is infinite, the soul & the body are the same, the soul is one thing and the body another, after death a Tathagata exists, after death a Tathagata does not exist, after death a Tathagata both exists & does not exist, after death a Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist. The Teacher gives this explanation:

*"Malunkyaputta, it's not the case that when there is the view, 'The cosmos is eternal,' there is the living of the holy life. ... When there is the view, 'The cosmos is eternal,' and when there is the view, 'The cosmos is not eternal,' there is still the birth, there is the aging, there is the death, there is the sorrow, lamentation, pain, despair, & distress whose destruction I make known right in the here & now.*

*"... And why are they undeclared by me? Because they are not connected with the goal, are not fundamental to the holy life. They do not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, Unbinding. That's why they are undeclared by me.*

*"... And what is declared by me? 'This is stress,' is declared by me. 'This is the origination of stress,' is declared by me. 'This is the cessation of stress,' is declared by me. 'This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress,' is declared by me. And why are they declared by me? Because they are connected with the goal, are fundamental to the holy life. They lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, Unbinding. That's why they are declared by me" (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1998).*



These ten unanswered questions can be found in other Suttas in the Pali Canon such as: Aggivacchagotta Sutta, Vacchagottasamyutta, Abyākatasamyutta, **᳚ānātitthiya** Sutta, Potthapāda Sutta, and Pāsādikā Sutta. These ten questions are among 62 wrong views explained in details in *Brahmajālasutta* (Chakma, 2017).

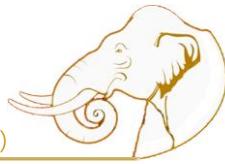
And what are those paths of practice leading to the cessation of stress? They are: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration (Access to Insight, 2013). Right view and right resolve are categorized as **Wisdom**, while right speech, right action and right livelihood are **Virtue**. Right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration are grouped in **Concentration**. The Buddhists always put the three groups by this order of The Virtue, Concentration and Wisdom, as the core path for reaching enlightenment and personal conducts. There are some details of each path. For example, the right speech or sammā-vācā is abstaining from lying, divisive speech, abusive speech, and idle chatter (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2008).

### The Moment of Death

We all die even if we are kings or commoners. British poet James Shirley (1596-1666) put it in a classic way:

Scepter and Crown  
Must tumble down,  
And in the dust be equal made  
With the poor crooked scythe and spade

Since death is imminent in our life, Buddhist scholars suggested we pay attention to the moment of our death so that we can liberate ourselves from all sufferings at that very last moment. The moment of death should be treated towards the purest state of mind or else our mind can be impure in an unwelcoming destiny, if there is any. Those who do not know Buddhism and those Buddhists who do not pay much attention to the Buddha's teaching may naturally develop anxiety or agitation about their possessions, wealth, loved ones and even jobs they are to leave behind. What is the state of mind for the dying person whose mind is full of worries and clinging? They probably do not care about liberating their mind at all.



If it is not the time of death, it is natural for our mind to fall under the influence of the delightful in colors and shapes, sounds, odors, tastes and tactile objects. On certain occasions, our mind may escape from the influence of these seductive things and experience the tranquility and bliss which comes from practicing concentration (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 1996, p. 132) But in the time of death, what should we do with our mind so that we do not waste the important moment that will occur only once in our life time?

The Teacher taught that all things are fallen into three universal characteristics, namely, impermanence, unsatisfactoriness (suffering) and non-selfhood. All things possess the nature of instantly changing and they bring suffering to those who want to hold to their impermanence. Nothing in the world can be regarded as ‘mine’ as we have to let go all possessions after we die. Even our own body, we still have to leave behind decayed and disintegrated. Those who understand this Dhamma will not fear death because death or the ending comes to all lives and all things naturally. Our life then enjoys the living temporarily and leaves at the time allotted to it by our actions. When we understand these three natures, we tend to not cling to life and this body because ‘we’ do not really exist since the beginning. Life is only the collection of aggregates that come to being due to the harmony of many factors. Once, the impermanence plays the part, each factor decays and this body needs to go. When we understand this, we will not feel depressed, agitated or lamented to leaving the world. Our mind should be calm, pure and without the clinging to all things we have to leave behind. This is the merit of understanding this three characteristics Dhamma.

The dying moment is crucial so the preparation to death is important. It is improper for relatives to disturb the body and mind of a dying person who should be given enough time to negotiate the stages of the dying process in the most skillful and advantageous way possible. Relatives should restrain themselves and keep quiet from grief and any disputes among themselves. The lamentation of the loss may cause the mind of the dying person to attachment while the disputes over the possessions and wealth may cause anger and disappointment. Any types of disturbances should be avoided near the bed of the dying person. The mind on a dying body can be freely liberated from this *samsara* or kept attached to the worldly suffering depending on this last moment (Tsomo, 2006).

Over the death, the Teacher said to his disciples, “*All lives, children, adult, stupid, smart, rich, and poor will all die. All creatures are like the clay pot; either small, big,*



*ripe or raw will one day break. My age is now ripened. My time is little. I will leave you very soon. I've reached my own refuge. You all should not be careless, keep your mindfulness, purify your morality, have right intention, and restrain your mind. The ones who are not careless in this Order will leave rebirth, and decay, reaching the end of suffering" (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya, 1996, Vol.10, p.131-132)*

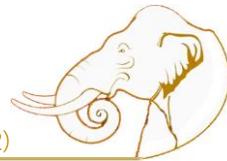
In *Maranassati Sutta* on mindfulness of death, the Teacher reminded us to constantly think of death because it may come to take us at any time, “... *whoever develops mindfulness of death, thinking, 'O, that I might live for the interval that it takes to swallow having chewed up one morsel of food... for the interval that it takes to breathe out after breathing in, or to breathe in after breathing out, that I might attend to the Blessed One's instructions. I would have accomplished a great deal' — they are said to dwell heedfully. They develop mindfulness of death acutely for the sake of ending the effluents. Therefore you should train yourselves: 'We will dwell heedfully. We will develop mindfulness of death acutely for the sake of ending the effluents.' That is how you should train yourselves*” (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997).

## Conclusion

We all are walking towards death since the first day we are born. So we should consider death as a natural part of life, not something unwelcoming and detesting. Many Buddhists believe in the rebirth of physical existence from one life to another. However, some Buddhist scholars interpreted the Teacher's teaching on different way. The 'rebirth' is the reoccurrence of suffering from craving, agitation and illusion in our own heart. To end this *samsara*, one should understand the circle of sufferings, especially the contact between the six senses of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind; and the external objects of visible objects, sound, odor, taste, textile objects and mental objects. Once, one is aware of the contact and does not allow feelings to occur in the mind, the craving, the attachment, the birth, and all sufferings will not occur. This is the way to liberate oneself from all sufferings and attachment. It is the *samsara* in our heart. For dear comrades of birth, aging, illness and death, may the Buddha bless you all.

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