

# Dying to Live

**Role of Kamma in Dying and Rebirth**

by Aggacitta Bhikkhu



E-mail: [bdea@buddhanet.net](mailto:bdea@buddhanet.net)  
Web site: [www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net)

**Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc.**

# Dying to Live

The Role of Kamma in Dying and Rebirth

*Aggacitta Bhikkhu*

Edited by  
*Leong Liew Geok*



Sukhi Hotu Dhamma Publications



# Dying to Live

The Role of Kamma in Dying and Rebirth

*Aggacitta Bhikkhu*



DYING TO LIVE:  
The Role of Kamma in Dying and Rebirth

---

*Published for free distribution by*



SUKHI HOTU SDN BHD

42V, Jalan Matang Kuching,  
11500 Air Itam,  
Penang.

Tel: 604 8277118 Fax: 604 8277228

11A, 1st Floor, Jalan SS24/8,  
Taman Megah,  
47301 Petaling Jaya,  
Selangor.

Tel: 603 7062833 Fax: 603 7062733

Email: [sukhihotu@quantrum.com.my](mailto:sukhihotu@quantrum.com.my)

Copyright © 1999 AGGACITTA BHIKKHU

No part of this book may be reproduced for commercial purposes in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Aggacitta Bhikkhu

Dying to live : the role of Kamma in dying and rebirth /

Aggacitta Bhikkhu ; edited by Leong Liew Geok.

ISBN 983-9382-24-1

1. Theravada Buddhism. 2. Meditation—Buddhism.

3. Buddhism—Doctrines. I. Leong, Liew Geok. II. Title.

294.391

Layout by *Sukhi Hotu*

Illustrations by *Ng Ai Lin, Chuah Ghee Hin* and *Toya*

Printed by *Majujaya Indah, Selangor*

First edition November 1999

*Cover Story:*

**The Bhikkhu who became a Deva**

Suddenly, as if from a dream, he awoke dressed in golden finery and standing at the gates of a glittering mansion. Aghast, the new deva saw that he was a monk no more. There was no place in the entire heavenly realm quiet enough to practise. He was trapped. (Full story [pp. 74–78](#))

In memory of my mother, Chan Ching Keng

*Your intuitive words of wisdom:  
“When you give, you must give the best”  
resonate still in my memory  
though long have we been estranged  
since you gave  
your last gem away  
to the Triple Gem.*

*O Heiress to the Sasana!  
May your unconditional love  
and intrinsic benevolence  
not fade away  
with waning memory  
but live on in my heart—  
for all sentient beings.*

## Note on Buddhist Terms

Non-English Buddhist terms (including some proper nouns) are *italicised* with full diacritical marks on their first appearance in the text, and elsewhere, whenever they appear within brackets. In all other references, they appear in normal font. English translations of these terms are placed within square brackets which usually accompany their first appearance.

In Chapters 1 and 2, selected key words and concepts of Abhidhamma appear in **bold**. Also, Pali words are used with Anglicised plural or adjectival endings.

The Glossary of Buddhist Terms (pp. 112–119) provides a more detailed explanation of selected terms and concepts.

-----

According to Theravada Buddhism, the earliest, most authentic, extant record of Gotama Buddha's teaching, rebirth occurs immediately after death. This booklet presents, in a lucid style combining *Abhidhamma* concepts with *Suttanta* narrative, and aided by colourful diagrams and illustrations, a comprehensive exposition of the nature of kamma and its often unpredictable role in dying and rebirth.

It brings across the message that an understanding of the kammic forces involved in the process of dying and rebirth can better equip us

- to help dying relatives and friends die a good death and obtain a good rebirth;
- to face death with foresight and insight and thus have greater control over our future destiny;
- to continually conduct ourselves in wholesome ways, especially through the practice of *dāna* [giving], *sīla* [virtue] and *bhāvanā* [meditation], that we may increase the chances of a good rebirth and a speedy enlightenment.

And most important, *Dying to Live* shows us how it can be done.

# Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ix
PREFACE .....	xvi
INTRODUCTION	
Rebirth is Uncertain .....	19
Ordered Randomness .....	20
1 SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES OF ABHIDHAMMA	
Mental Phenomena .....	22
Doors of Action and Cognition .....	25
Cognitive Process ( <i>Cittavīthi</i> ) .....	26
Material Phenomena .....	30
2 FOURFOLD KAMMA	
The Nature of Kamma .....	33
Some Aspects of Kamma .....	34
1 By Way of Function .....	35
2 By Order of Ripening .....	40
3 By Time of Ripening .....	40
4 By Place of Ripening .....	41



3 THE PROCESS OF DYING AND REBIRTH	
Causes of Death .....	48
Dying Perceptions .....	49
Death and Rebirth .....	51
4 RIPENING ORDER OF REBIRTH GENERATING KAMMAS	
Weighty Kamma .....	54
Near-death Kamma .....	56
• An Ex-hunter's Death .....	56
• The Public Executioner .....	60
• The Bhikkhu Who Became a Flea .....	62
• Queen Mallika's Misdeed .....	64
• Erakapatta Naga Raja .....	67
Habitual Kamma .....	74
• The Bhikkhu Who Became a Deva .....	74
• Cunda the Butcher .....	78
• Dhammika Upasaka .....	80
• A Dutiful and Loving Mother's Death .....	82
Reserve Kamma .....	83
• The Flea Reborn in Tusita Heaven .....	84
• Queen Mallika's Case .....	86
• A Can of Uncooked Rice .....	86
5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION	
Proposals for Skilful Dying .....	90
A Great Example .....	92
Conclusion .....	103
APPENDIX .....	105
GLOSSARY .....	112



# Acknowledgements

WHILE I WAS in the midst of preparing a Dhamma talk entitled “The Role of Kamma in Dying and Rebirth” to be given on 3rd October 1998 to the public at the Buddha Dhamma Centre (BDC), Kuching, Sarawak,\* I received an urgent telephone call from my eldest sister, Dolly Leong, informing me that my aged mother had been warded in the Penang Medical Specialist Centre and had hinted that she wanted to see me. Since it was then nearing the end of the *Vassa* [Rains Retreat], I promised her that I would return to Penang immediately if my family thought that my presence there was urgently needed; but otherwise, only after the end of the *Vassa*.

As it turned out, Kamma ordained that I give my first and only public talk in Kuching during my four-year stay in Sarawak

---

\* An audio tape recording of the original talk is available at Sukhi Hotu.

before returning to Penang immediately after the Vassa, to see my bedridden mother. A month after my return, she passed away.

In the light of the abovementioned circumstances surrounding the Dhamma talk, and its coincidental theme (which now appears in this little book as the Introduction, and Chapters 3 and 4), I decided that it would be most appropriate for me to elaborate on it by adding Chapters 1 and 2, and Ven Dr Rastrapal's personal account in Chapter 5, and to have the entire text published for free distribution, so that my family and myself may offer a share of our merits to our departed mother, wherever she now may be.

I am most grateful to the many in different parts of Malaysia who have helped in the preparation of the original talk, and the subsequent production of this publication. First, my thanks to the Buddhist devotees in Sarawak. Tan Guan Soon's passionate commitment to Dhamma service can hardly be equalled. In one of his regular lunch *dāna* [offering of food] visits during Vassa '98, he gave me the gist of Ven Dr K Sri Dhammananda's recently delivered Dhamma talk, "Kamma and Rebirth", to the Kuching Buddhist Society (KBS), Sarawak. Chief Reverend (as he is popularly addressed) did not complete his talk because he ran out of time, so I felt motivated to continue what he had initiated, with a sequel. Subsequently, Tan Guan Soon acted as a volunteer liaison man for KBS and BDC in making the arrangements for my talk. Wong Teck Hua of KBS readily offered his PC facilities so that I could access the stories (now appearing in Chapter 4) from the Pali Commentaries in the Vipassana Research Institute's *Chaṭṭha*

*Saṅgāyana CD-ROM from Dhammagiri (Version 1.0)* kindly sent to me by Goh Poay Hoon.

Wung Wei Kee, President of BDC, was much more than just my principal supporter throughout my stay in Sarawak. A successful businessman who is far more knowledgeable and experienced than I was in the realm of spiritual practice beyond the confines of particular traditions, he is a veritable Truth Seeker, in and of the world, whose magnanimity, humility, patience, unconditional love and benevolence made such an indelible impression on me that I often regard him as the most unwitting, unobtrusive teacher I've ever had. When he heard about what I needed to prepare for the Dhamma talk, he immediately sent numerous books from his well-stocked library, on near-death experiences, dying, death, the after-life, remarkable cases of regression hypnotism, and other related topics, for my reference.

Wendy Francis and Leu Fong Yuen of BDC also managed to procure other books that I needed, in particular, *The Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, Sayadaw U Silananda's *Lecture Notes and Diagrams on the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*—both of which helped to form the fundamental structure of this work—and Francis Story's *Rebirth as Doctrine and Experience*, with its many informative, thought-provoking, documented cases of children spontaneously recalling their past lives.

I am also indebted to Ng Song Hee, President of the Tze Yin Orthodox Buddhist Society, Kuching, who so cordially invited me to reside for the Vassa of 1998 in his sprawling, beautifully landscaped orchard, with its charming octagonal pavilion in the

middle of an enchanting pond in which archipelagos of pink and white lotus bloomed. It was in his comfortable and well-furnished meditation lodge overlooking this panoramic scene that the preparations for the talk—the reading, meditating, writing, rehearsing—were made.

During virtually all the four years I was in Sarawak, Mrs Wung Wei Kee consistently provided, with compassionate loving-kindness, balanced, nutritious and delicious meals, wherever I was, even when I was staying alone in the forest about seventy-five miles away from her home.

In West Malaysia, I must thank the monks at Balik Pulau Hilltop Hermitage: Phra Ajahn Mahañano, who kindly permitted the PC facilities in his *kuti* (monk's cottage) to be used, in his absence, by Ven Tejadhamma, who gladly keyed in the bulk of the text and patiently helped me design the colour diagrams in Chapters 1 and 3; Ah Huat (Chang Keng Hai) and his family, in whose lovely, well-maintained orchard the Hermitage is situated, for their devotion and efficiency in serving the needs of resident monks with the best possible amenities and support for the study (including writing) and practice of the Dhamma.

In Petaling Jaya, Hor Tuck Loon, Chan Lai Fun, Low Weng Kuan, Eng Lai Hiang and Rebecca Tam proofread earlier versions and gave many constructive suggestions besides providing abundant support with research material, nutrition, health, accommodation and other services while I was preparing and revising the draft of this work in Selangor at the beginning of 1999.

After I returned to Penang in March, a well-wisher who prefers to remain anonymous, passed me Lim Lay Hoon's copy of Ven Dr Rastrapal's *The Five Visions and Beckonings of Future Life*, which fortuitously provided me with the material for Chapter 5. She happily keyed in an edited extract from the work, as well as the Preface, Acknowledgements and other parts of the final draft, before copying the data into a diskette. Hor Tuck Loon, of Sukhi Hotu, Petaling Jaya, was responsible for this book's layout and design. Credit must also go to Ng Ai Lin and Chuah Ghee Hin for the illustrations in Chapters 3 and 4, and to Toya for colouring the cover drawings.

On returning to Selangor at the end of May, to finalise details of the draft and cover design, Chuah Aik Sam, Low Weng Kuan, Eng Lai Hiang, Yap Yau Chong, Hor Tuck Loon, Chan Lai Fun and the Teo family arranged for my stay in comfort and seclusion. Subsequently, Dr and Mrs Wong Wai Cheong of the Selangor Buddhist Vipassana Meditation Society, invited me to reside in its new Hermitage, Bodhirama Estate, in Kuala Kubu Bharu, where I made revisions based on the editor's suggestions. Lee Lee Kim, Chairman of Buddhist Wisdom Centre, Petaling Jaya, kindly lent me his notebook computer facilities, and volunteer *kappiyakāra*kas (bhikkhus' stewards), How Eng Keong and Lee Theng San, taught me how to use them.

During Vassa '99 in Taiping, members and friends of the Taiping Insight Meditation Society provided overwhelming support to enable me to complete the final revisions in my Notebook. Their efforts were all the more commendable because

my *vihāra* [monk's dwelling place] is only accessible by foot, motorbike or four-wheel drive, and is not supplied with municipal electricity and water. I am particularly grateful to the Society's Chairman, Goh Keat Soon, and to Ng Kian Chong, Ker Seong Ngo, Lim Lay Hoon and Tan Bee Chun for arranging and providing transport and PC facilities; Lim Loon Yeow for his IT expertise and assistance in making corrections in the computer; and Ooi Eng Huat, the benevolent owner of the orchard, Khemarama [Haven of Delight], in whose grounds my vihara was built.

Many of the Abhidhamma explanations in this volume are taken verbatim from *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993). However, in not a few instances, language and terminology have been simplified, the arrangements altered, and explanations added to make this work more easily accessible to the reading public. I thank BPS for permission to quote from its publication and hope it will take my revisions of the original text in the spirit in which they were undertaken.

I thank the Saddhamma Foundation for permission to use an extract from Sayadaw U Pandita's *In This Very Life* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993). The story of "The Bhikkhu Who Became a Deva" in Chapter 4 is a slightly revised version of the original, which I translated.

My grateful acknowledgement is also due to Ven Dr Rastrapal Mahathera of the International Meditation Centre, Bodhgaya, India, who kindly consented to having an edited extract of his

intriguing personal account included in the final chapter, and to my elder sister, Leong Liew Geok, who edited the manuscript from cover to cover, despite her busy schedule.

This booklet will also appear in Chinese translation, thanks to the willing efforts of Leu Fong Yuen and friends, thus making available to readers who may be more familiar with the Mahayana view, the orthodox Theravada interpretation of what happens after death.

In closing, I must record my profound thanks to the publisher, sponsors, printer and all those who have helped, in their own special ways, to make this free publication possible.



# Preface

DIFFERENT PEOPLE HAVE different views and beliefs about what happens after death. Although all Buddhist Schools are unanimous that death marks the end and beginning of life for sentient beings still bound to *saṃsāra* [the round of births], not all share the same views, observations and interpretations with regard to the actual process of dying and rebirth.

Tibetan (*Vajrayāna*) and Chinese (*Mahāyāna*) Buddhists believe that after death, the spirit of the dead person passes through an intermediate period (*bardo* in Tibetan, *zhongyin* in Mandarin)—which may last for as long as forty-nine days—during which it undergoes a series of unearthly, extraordinary experiences, including a “small death” at the end of each week, before it is finally reborn into another realm of existence. In

contrast, orthodox Theravada Buddhism, which is the earliest, most authentic, extant record of Gotama Buddha's teaching, asserts that rebirth takes place immediately after death.

It may not be too naive to suggest that this difference between the schools could be more apparent than real; for if one regarded the entity in the bardo/zhong yin as another reborn being, then this doctrinal inconsistency could very well be reconciled, although Theravadins may still question the weekly "small deaths" and forty-nine day duration. But it is not within the scope of this booklet to speculate on the rationale and credibility of this belief. Rather, the purpose of this work is to present a comprehensive picture of kamma and the often unpredictable role it plays in the process of dying and rebirth according to orthodox Theravada doctrine, so that we can make use of this understanding:

- to help dying relatives and friends die a good death and obtain a good rebirth;
- to face death with foresight and insight and thus have greater control over our future destiny;
- and be inspired to continually conduct ourselves in wholesome ways, especially through the practice of *dāna* [giving], *sīla* [virtue] and *bhāvanā* [meditation], thereby increasing our chances of a good rebirth and speedy enlightenment.

With the aid of colour diagrams, basic concepts of Abhidhamma are first introduced in order to facilitate a thorough

understanding of what happens, on a microscopic level, to the body and mind of a person dying to live again. Since kamma is inextricably linked with Abhidhamma principles, and our main subject of discussion is one of its specific roles, the whole of Chapter 2 is devoted to an exposition of the nature of kamma and its various aspects, classified according to four different ways of analysis.

Chapter 3 begins by surveying the causes of death and the possible manifestations of the kamma that is about to produce rebirth in the dying person, and concludes by presenting a microscopic description, accompanied by a colour diagram, of the actual process of dying and rebirth, based on the basic principles of Abhidhamma introduced in Chapter 1.

Those who do not appreciate or have little inclination for the Abhidhamma approach will certainly find the concluding two chapters, which form a major part of this booklet, a most welcome change. In Chapter 4, the order in which specific types of kamma generate rebirth is discussed with the help of many interesting stories—mostly extracted from the commentaries, but including a few modern ones—and accompanied by pencil drawings.

Finally, Chapter 5 summarises and concludes this booklet with some proposals for skilful dying, and a dramatic personal account of a young monk's own observations and masterly manipulation of the changing visions experienced by a dying Buddhist devotee.

---

# INTRODUCTION



## REBIRTH IS UNCERTAIN

HOW ONE DIES will determine his future destiny. We may say that in general, how one dies depends largely on how one has lived. Nevertheless, there is no certainty that an ordinary person who has tried to live a pious and moral life will be reborn in a favourable realm of existence, or that a murderer will take rebirth in one of the woeful states.

What the righteous emperor, Asoka, did for Buddhism was unparalleled in history, yet after his death, he was reborn as a snake. A *bhikkhu* [Buddhist monk] during *Kassapa*<sup>1</sup> *Buddha's*

---

<sup>1</sup>In our *Bhaddakappa* [Auspicious Aeon], a record number of five Buddhas are destined to appear: Kakusandha, Konagamana, Kassapa, Gotama and Metteyya. During Kassapa Buddha's time, the average human life-span was 20,000 years.

*Sāsana* [Dispensation] meditated for about 20,000 years alone in the forest. Despite his long enduring efforts, he did not attain enlightenment but was reborn as a dragon called Erakapatta Naga Raja who lived beyond our Lord Gotama's life span. A public executioner, on the day of his retirement after fifty-five years of service, offered almsfood to Venerable Sariputta, listened to his Dhamma talk, and was killed shortly afterwards in an accident. When asked about his destiny, the Buddha said that he had been reborn in *Tusita* Heaven.

As you can see from the foregoing examples, the role of kamma in dying and rebirth can be so unpredictable that it would be more appropriate to talk in terms of probabilities and possibilities rather than certainties. We may say then that the probability of an ordinary person who has tried to live a pious and moral life being reborn in a good destination is high, but we cannot dismiss the possibility that he or she can still be reborn in an unfavourable plane of existence. Similarly, we can say that the probability of a thug's being reborn in one of the woeful states is high, but the possibility of his or her rebirth in the *deva* [heavenly] world cannot be totally dismissed.

### **ORDERED RANDOMNESS**

The reason for this unpredictability is that the deeds or kammass that one performs in the course of existence are extremely varied. But despite their apparent variability and inherent unpredictability, there is an invariable, profound law that governs the order

in which certain types of kamma ripen to give rebirth. The few but crucial, moments of consciousness before death will determine a future lifetime of celestial bliss, human pain and pleasure, or suffering in a state of deprivation. A clear understanding of this profound law would be invaluable to anyone who believes in it. He or she would then be in a better position, if circumstances allow, to exercise some control over his or her future destiny and also to help dying relatives and friends by providing them with conducive circumstances for a good rebirth.

# SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES OF ABHIDHAMMA



BEFORE DISCUSSING THIS profound law governing the role of kamma in dying and rebirth, we should first be familiar with some basic concepts of Abhidhamma, the third Basket of the *Tipiṭaka* [Three Baskets] of Theravada Buddhism, which is fundamentally an analysis of mind, matter and their interrelated processes based on a comprehensive systematization of the Buddha's teaching that combines philosophy, psychology and ethics into a unique and remarkable synthesis.

## **MENTAL PHENOMENA**

According to the Abhidhamma, mind occurs in a continuous stream that consists of an unbroken succession of discrete



cognitive<sup>1</sup> events called *cittas*. A *citta* is a complex unit comprising **consciousness** itself, i.e. the basic awareness of an object, and a group of **mental factors** called *cetasikas* that have more specialised tasks in the act of cognition. To use the analogy of a glass of coloured water: the coloured water in the glass can be compared to a *citta*, the pure water to consciousness, and the various dyes that colour the water to mental factors. Each *citta*, being a separate conscious event, has its own object of awareness; but not all objects can be remembered after they have been perceived. For example, many dreams cannot be remembered and many things that one has done or said in waking life cannot be recalled from memory. There are various types of *cittas*, each distinguished by ethical quality, function and peculiar combination of mental factors. For the purpose of this booklet, one will need only to know that *cittas* can be very broadly classified into kammic, resultant and functional *cittas*.

**Kammic *cittas*** are those that have kammic potency. These are either wholesome or unwholesome in nature. The mental factor of **volition** (*cetanā*) in any one of these *cittas* is kamma. Although volition arises and passes away simultaneously with its *citta*, the kammic energy created by it does not dissipate

---

<sup>1</sup> The noun *cognition* and the adjective *cognitive* are related to the verb *cognize*, which is a rather uncommon and high-sounding word, but which is used in the Abhidhamma as a technical term to denote the very simple and fundamental act of perceiving an object, of being conscious or aware of an object. Despite many attempts to express this meaning by a simpler word, I finally have to resort to it again because of the less than appropriate connotations of the nouns and adjectives derived from common verbs such as “know”, “perceive”, or “be aware of.”

until it has given its effect, or, in some cases, until it becomes defunct.

**Resultant cittas** are the effects of kammic cittas. Therefore they do not have kammic potential.

**Functional cittas** are neither the effects of kammic cittas nor do they have any kammic potency.

The **time-scale** used in Abhidhamma is based on the *cittakkhaṇa* or mind-moment. This is the life-span of a citta, which is so fleeting that, according to the commentators, in the time that it takes for lightning to flash or the eyes to blink, *billions* of mind-moments can elapse in immediate succession. Each mind-moment in turn consists of three sub-moments: arising, presence and dissolution. Within the breadth of a mind-moment, a citta arises, performs its momentary function and then dissolves, conditioning the next citta in immediate succession. Thus, through the sequence of mind-moments, the flow of consciousness continues uninterrupted like the waters in a stream.

To preserve this continuity in an individual existence, a certain type of resultant citta called *bhavaṅga* arises and passes away every moment during life, whenever there is no active cognitive process taking place. This type of citta is most evident during deep dreamless sleep, but also occurs momentarily during waking life and for countless times between occasions of active cognition. *Bhava* means life and *aṅga* factor; so *bhavaṅga* is sometimes translated as life-continuum, or sub-consciousness, because its object of awareness cannot normally be recalled.

The first citta in an individual existence is called **rebirth-linking citta** and the last, **death citta**. These two cittas belong to the same type of resultant citta as that of the bhavanga and all three have the same object of awareness. Rebirth-linking cittas are further classified as **three-rooted** if the three wholesome mental factors of *alobha* [non-attachment], *adosa* [non-hatred] and *amoha* [non-delusion] are present; **two-rooted** if only *alobha* and *adosa* are present, and **rootless** if none of them is present. Only a being born with a three-rooted rebirth-linking citta can attain *jhāna* [meditative absorption], *magga* [path] and *phala* [fruition].

## DOORS OF ACTION AND COGNITION

The term “door” (*dvāra*) is used metaphorically in the Abhidhamma to denote the medium through which the mind interacts with the objective world. Three doors of action are specified—body, speech, and mind—the channels through which the mind acts upon the world, thereby creating kamma (see [Chapter 2, sections 4.1 and 4.2: pp. 41-44](#)). Again, six doors of cognition are recognised: the six sense-doors (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind), each serving as a door by which the cittas occurring in a cognitive process perceive their object, and by which the object enters into the range of the cittas. The sensitive substance in the eye is the door for the cittas belonging to an eye-door cognitive process, enabling them to cognize visible

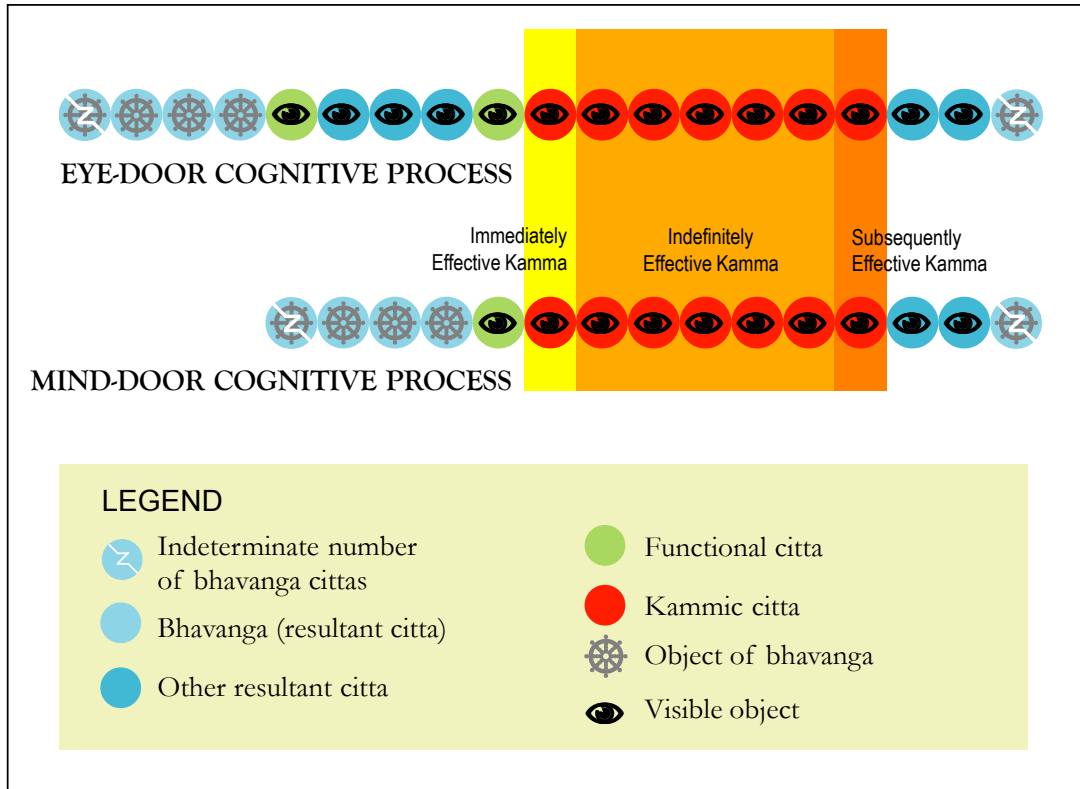
forms through it. The same holds for the other sense organs in relation to their respective processes and objects. Unlike the first five doors, the mind-door is not material but mental, i.e. the bhavanga citta. When an object is to be cognized by a mind-door process, the cittas belonging to that process gain access to the object solely through the bhavanga citta, without immediate dependence on any material sense faculty.

### COGNITIVE PROCESS (*CITTAVI-THI*)

When an object impinges on a sense-door, the bhavanga is arrested and an active cognitive process occurs for the purpose of cognizing the object. Immediately after the cognitive process is completed, again the bhavanga supervenes and continues for an indeterminate period of time until the next cognitive process arises. Diagram 1 graphically represents *only* two complete cognitive processes (out of many possible permutations) each at the eye-door and mind-door respectively. Although in reality cittas do not have shape or colour nor do they occupy space, to facilitate explanation, each citta here is represented by a coloured circle with a symbol of its object in it. The cittas sandwiched between the bhavanga cittas process the object apprehended at the respective sense-doors in various ways. I shall not elaborate on the specific functions of the resultant and functional cittas involved in this cognitive process. Instead, since the focus of discussion is the role of kamma, I shall devote my explanation

DIAGRAM 1

COGNITIVE PROCESSES



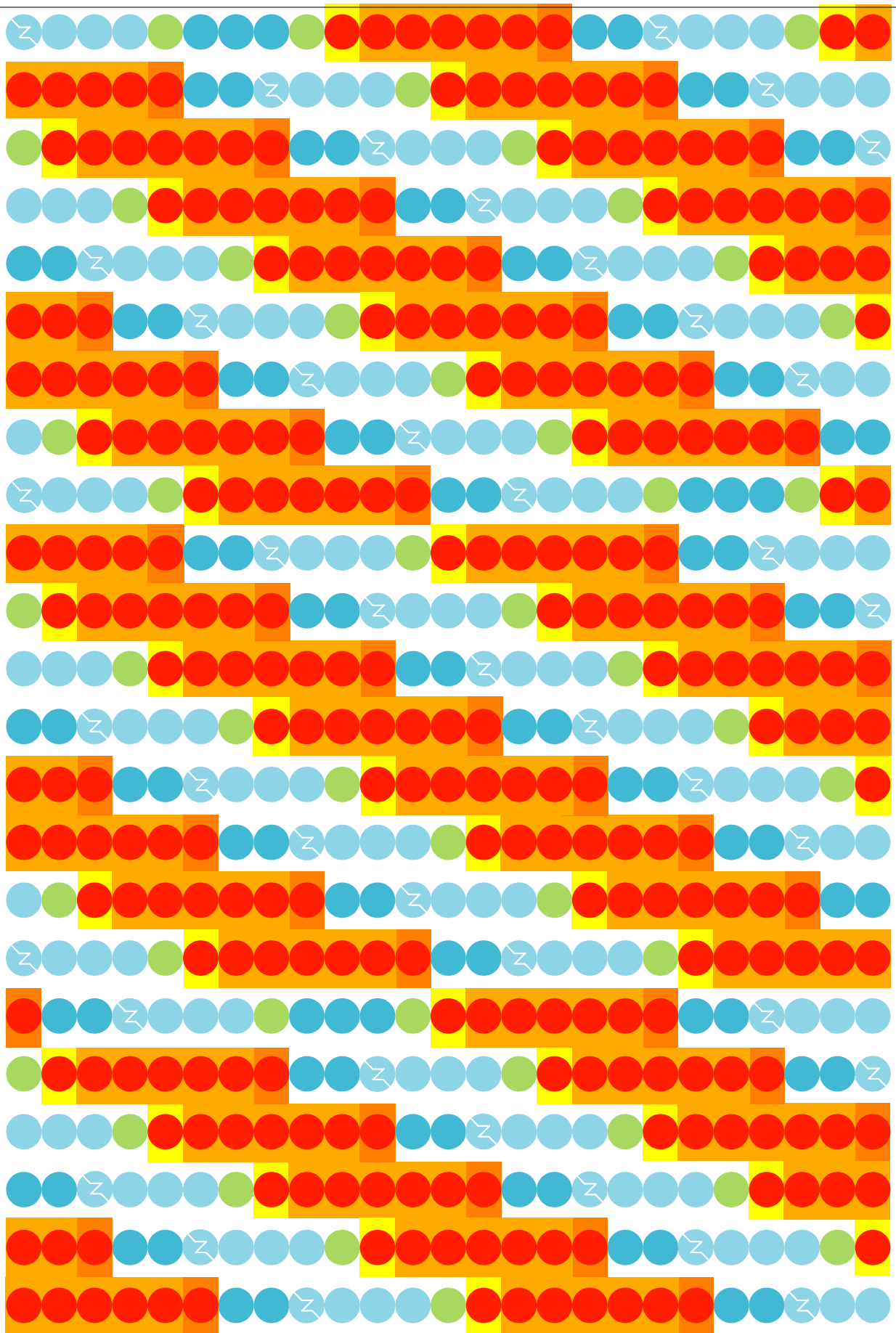
to the seven kammic cittas inherent in every cognitive process experienced by ordinary beings.

After an object has been apprehended at a sense-door and subsequently processed by a functional citta (in the mind-door process), or functional and resultant cittas (in any of the other five sense-door processes), the kammic cittas then respond to it in various ways—either wholesome or unwholesome. The mental factor of volition associated with each of the seven kammic cittas arises and then dissolves together with its citta. But the kammic energy created by each mind-moment of volition has a potential life span that differs according to the order of its origination. The kammic potential created by the volition in:

- the first kammic citta, being the weakest of all, constitutes **immediately effective kamma** which will give its appropriate effect in the present existence, or will otherwise become defunct;
- the second to the sixth kammic cittas, constitutes **indefinitely effective kamma** which will give its appropriate effects whenever circumstances permit, starting from the second next existence (after the present one) until the being gains total liberation from samsara. Not even *arahants* [liberated persons] or Buddhas are exempt from the effects of this kamma, e.g. Venerable Moggalana, with all his psychic powers, could not escape being slaughtered and cut up into pieces by a band of thugs because he had brutally beaten up/murdered his blind old parents in a past existence;
- the seventh kammic citta, which is the weakest but one in the series, constitutes **subsequently effective kamma** which will bear appropriate fruit in the immediate next life, or will otherwise become defunct.

To give a vivid impression of how much kammic potential can be created in a minute fraction of a second, a continuous series of cognitive processes occurring at the eye-door and mind-door is graphically shown in [Diagram 2](#). Here is a brief explanation of the diagram: after the eye-door process has ceased, a memory of the visual object comes into range at the mind-door and sets off many sequences of mind-door processes

KAMMA CREATED IN A MINUTE FRACTION OF A SECOND



LEGEND

As in Diagram 1 except that the object of bhavanga citta (☸) and the object of all other cittas (👁) are not shown in the diagram, but should be understood.



whereby the object is recognised, conceptualised, thought about, and perhaps acted upon verbally or physically. The number of these consequent processes varies according to circumstances and need not conform to the arbitrary pattern in the diagram. For a detailed explanation of these processes, see *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Kandy: BPS, 1993), pp. 163-165.

## MATERIAL PHENOMENA

The Abhidhamma classifies material phenomena into primary and secondary elements. Primary elements are called the four great essentials (*mahābhūtā*), comprising earth, water, fire and air—each denoting respectively particular material qualities, viz. softness/hardness, fluidity/cohesion, coolness/heat, and motion/pressure. Secondary elements are derived from, or dependent upon, the four great essentials, e.g. colour, sound, smell, taste, gender, nutriment and the sensitive substances in the sense-organs that register light, colour, sound, smell, taste, and physical sensation. The four great essentials are the fundamental constituents of matter and are inseparable from each other. Through various combinations with other derived elements, they form minute, elementary particles called *kalāpas*, of which all animate and inanimate material phenomena are ultimately composed. In fact, the four great essentials and four derivatives—colour, smell, taste and nutriment—are always bound together and are present in all material objects, from the simplest

to the most complex. The most fundamental kalapa consists solely of these eight elements while the most complex one comprises a total of eighteen elements. Each kalapa has a life-span of seventeen mind-moments.

Kalapas originate in four ways: from **kamma**, **citta**, **temperature** (fire element) and **nutriment**. Kamma produces kalapas at each sub-mind-moment—starting with the arising sub-moment of the rebirth-linking citta, until the seventeenth mind-moment preceding the death citta.

With the exception of rebirth and sense-door cittas, which are resultants, all other kammic, resultant and functional cittas in the sensual plane produce kalapas. The rebirth citta does not produce citta-born matter, since at the moment of rebirth the matter that arises is born of kamma and because this citta is new to the new existence.

At the time of rebirth, the internal fire element found in kamma-born kalapas combines with the external fire element and starts producing organic temperature-born kalapas.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter the fire element in the kalapas born of all four causes produces organic temperature-born kalapas throughout the course of existence.

The internal nutriment, supported by the external, produces kalapas starting from the time it is swallowed. The nutriment

---

<sup>2</sup> In this section, *internal* means “of the kalapas produced by the kamma, citta, fire element, or nutriment pertaining to the being in question”; and *external* means “of the kalapas produced by causes not pertaining to him or her but to the surrounding environment or extraneous substances.”

taken by a pregnant mother, pervading the body of the embryo, creates matter in the child. Even nutriment applied on the body is said to create matter. The nutritive essence in the internal kalapas born of the three other causes also produces kalapas. The nutriment taken on one day can support the body for as long as seven days.

In summary, a prior knowledge of the basic principles of Abhidhamma introduced in this chapter will help us to comprehend better, the following chapters on the workings of kamma, and what happens to the mind and body of a person dying to live again.

# FOURFOLD KAMMA



IN ORDER TO gain a clearer understanding of the role of kamma in dying and rebirth, a holistic introduction to the nature of kamma and some of its various aspects would be helpful. As the subject of kamma is both profound and complex, a rather academic approach has been adopted here which, I hope, will not deter or discourage the general reader. However, if the following discussion is too dry, technical or boring, this chapter could be set aside and returned to subsequently.

## **THE NATURE OF KAMMA**

The word *kamma* means literally action or deed, but in the Buddha's teaching it refers exclusively to volitional action. From

a technical standpoint, kamma denotes wholesome or unwholesome volition (*cetanā*), volition being the factor responsible for action. Thus the Buddha declares: “It is volition, monks, that I call kamma, for having willed, one performs an action through body, speech or mind.” All volitional action, except that of a Buddha or an arahant, constitutes kamma. As mentioned in the last chapter, although volition arises and passes away together with its citta, the kammic potential created by it does not dissipate until it has given its appropriate effect or becomes defunct. Buddhas and arahants are bound to experience the ripening of their past kamma as long as their psycho-physical personalities persist, that is, until they pass away.

The law of kamma (*kammaniyāma*) is self-subsistent in its operation, ensuring that willed deeds produce their effects in accordance with their ethical quality just as surely as seeds bear fruit in accordance with their species. The direct products of kamma are the resultant cittas that arise when kamma finds the right conditions to bear fruit. Kamma also produces a distinct type of matter in the organic bodies of living beings, called kamma-born matter, which was briefly explained in the preceding chapter.

### **SOME ASPECTS OF KAMMA**

By applying four different methods of analysis, kamma can be classified into four fourfold divisions, making sixteen types of kamma in all. A summary of this is given in Diagram 3, and followed by a detailed explanation.

DIAGRAM 3

**FOURFOLD KAMMA AT A GLANCE**

<b>1 By way of function</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.1 Productive kamma</li> <li>1.2 Supportive kamma</li> <li>1.3 Obstructive kamma</li> <li>1.4 Destructive kamma</li> </ul>
<b>2 By order of ripening</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2.1 Weighty kamma</li> <li>2.2 Near-death kamma</li> <li>2.3 Habitual kamma</li> <li>2.4 Reserve kamma</li> </ul>
<b>3 By time of ripening</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1 Immediately effective kamma</li> <li>3.2 Subsequently effective kamma</li> <li>3.3 Indefinitely effective kamma</li> <li>3.4 Defunct kamma</li> </ul>
<b>4 By place of ripening</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4.1 Unwholesome kamma</li> <li>4.2 Sense-sphere wholesome kamma</li> <li>4.3 Fine-material-sphere wholesome kamma</li> <li>4.4 Immaterial-sphere wholesome kamma</li> </ul>

**1 BY WAY OF FUNCTION**

Kammas perform different functions (*kicca*), of which four are mentioned here. Any kamma, under different circumstances, can perform any or several of these functions.

**1.1 Productive (*janaka*) kamma** is wholesome or unwholesome volition which produces resultant cittas and kamma-

born matter, both at the moment of rebirth-linking and during the course of existence. At the moment of conception, productive kamma generates the rebirth-linking citta and the kamma-born types of matter constituting the physical body of the new being. During the course of existence, it produces other resultant cittas and kamma-born matter, such as the sense faculties, gender, and the heart-base (the seat of consciousness, which is different from the anatomical heart). Only a kamma that has attained the status of a full course of action ([see p. 42](#)) can perform the function of producing rebirth-linking, but all wholesome and unwholesome kammas without exception can produce results during the course of existence.

- 1.2 **Supportive (*upatthambhaka*) kamma** is kamma which does not gain an opportunity to produce its own result, but which, when some other kamma is exercising a productive function, supports it, either by enabling it to produce its pleasant or painful results over an extended time without obstruction, or by reinforcing the results produced by another kamma. For example, when through the productive function of wholesome kamma one is reborn as a human being, supportive kamma may contribute to the extension of one's life-span and ensure that one is healthy and well provided with the necessities of life. When an unwholesome kamma has exercised its productive function by causing a painful disease, other unwholesome



kammas may support it by preventing medicines from working effectively, thereby prolonging the disease. When a being has been reborn as an animal through the productive force of unwholesome kamma, supportive kamma may facilitate the ripening of more unwholesome kamma productive of painful results, and may also lead to an extension of the life-span so that the continuity of unwholesome resultants will long endure.

- 1.3 **Obstructive (*upapīlaka*) kamma** is kamma which cannot produce its own result but nevertheless obstructs and frustrates some other kamma, countering its efficacy or shortening the duration of its pleasant or painful results. Even though a productive kamma may be strong at the time it is accumulated, an obstructive kamma directly opposed to it may counteract it so that it becomes impaired when producing its results. For example, a wholesome kamma tending to produce rebirth in a superior plane of existence may be impeded by an obstructive kamma so that it generates rebirth in a lower plane. A kamma tending to produce rebirth among high families may produce rebirth among low families; kamma tending to produce beauty may produce a plain appearance, etc. In the opposite way, an unwholesome kamma tending to produce rebirth in the great hells may be counteracted by an obstructive wholesome kamma and produce rebirth in the minor hell or among the *petas* [departed ones].

During the course of existence, many instances may be found of the operation of obstructive kamma. In the human realm, such kamma will obstruct the good results produced by wholesome kamma, facilitating the maturation of unwholesome kamma that results in suffering and causing failures with regard to property and wealth, or family and friends. In the lower realms, obstructive kamma may counteract the unwholesome rebirth-producing kamma, contributing to occasions of ease and happiness.

- 1.4 **Destructive (*upaghāṭaka*) kamma** is wholesome or unwholesome kamma which supplants another weaker kamma, prevents it from ripening, and produces instead its own result. For example, somebody born as a human being may, through his or her productive kamma, have been originally destined for a long life-span, but a destructive kamma may arise and bring about a premature death. At the time of death, at first a sign of a bad destination may appear by the power of an evil kamma, heralding a bad rebirth, but then a good kamma may emerge, expel the bad kamma and having caused the sign of a good destination to appear, produce rebirth in a heavenly world (see “Dying Perceptions,” p. 49, for an explanation of sign of destiny). On the other hand, a bad kamma may suddenly arise, cut off the productive potential of a good kamma, and generate rebirth in a woeful realm.

According to Ledi Sayadaw (a renowned Abhidhamma Master of Burma who lived from 1846 to 1923), destructive kamma can also be responsible for cutting off the efficacy of any of the sense faculties—the eye, ear, etc.—causing blindness or deafness, sexual mutation, etc.

The *Vibhāvinī Ṭīkā* (the sub-commentary to *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, *The Manual of Abhidhamma*) distinguishes between productive kamma and destructive kamma on the ground that productive kamma produces its result without cutting off the result of some other kamma, while destructive kamma does so after first cutting off another kamma's result. But other teachers cited by the *Vibhāvinī* hold that destructive kamma does not produce its own result at all; it completely cuts off the result of the other kamma, giving still a third kamma the opportunity to ripen.

Ledi Sayadaw gives the example of intentional killing to illustrate how one kamma may exercise all four functions. When a person takes another's life, as long as the volition of killing does not have the opportunity to ripen, it exercises any of the other three functions: it may support the ripening of other unwholesome kamma; or obstruct the ripening of other wholesome kamma; or cut off entirely the efficacy of wholesome kamma. When the act of killing secures the opportunity to ripen, then each volition involved in the act has the power to produce one rebirth in the woeful planes; thereafter, such volition has no further power to produce rebirth-linking. However, such kamma

can continue to exercise the other three functions, as well as the function of producing results during the course of existence, even for a hundred thousand aeons or more into the future (see pp. 9-10 for the kammic potential created by volition).

## 2 BY ORDER OF RIPENING

This section concerns the order of precedence among different kmmas in taking on the role of generating rebirth-linking in the next existence. Being the major subject of this book, it will be explained in Chapter 4.

## 3 BY TIME OF RIPENING

3.1 **Immediately effective** (*diṭṭhadhammavedanīya*) **kamma;**

3.2 **Subsequently effective** (*upapajjavedanīya*) **kamma;**

3.3 **Indefinitely effective** (*aparāpariyavedanīya*) **kamma;**

The three types of kamma above have already been explained in the preceding chapter, [pp. 27-28](#).

3.4 **Defunct** (*ahosi*) **kamma:** This term does not designate a special class of kamma, but applies to kamma that, although due to ripen in either the present existence or the next existence, did not meet conditions conducive to its maturation. In the case of arahants and Buddhas, all their accumulated kamma from the past which was due to ripen in future lives becomes defunct with their final passing away.

## 4 BY PLACE OF RIPENING

Here, place of ripening refers to the four planes of existence according to Theravada Buddhist scriptures:

- the woeful plane;
- the sensuous blissful plane;
- the fine material-sphere plane;
- the immaterial-sphere plane.

Though a distinction is made between the woeful plane and the sensuous blissful plane, both planes are actually subdivisions of the sense-sphere plane.

**4.1 Unwholesome Kamma** can be created by beings in any plane of existence, but the *brahmās* [asexual deities] of the fine-material sphere and immaterial-sphere planes as well as *anāgāmis* [non-returners] and arahants in any plane are incapable of committing any unwholesome kamma associated with lust or anger. Generally, unwholesome kamma has the potential to produce rebirth-linking in the woeful plane; but during the course of existence, it gives effect anywhere in the sense-sphere plane or the fine-material world, according to circumstances.

There are ten unwholesome courses of action (*akusala-kammaṭṭhā*) classified according to the doors (*dvāra*) through which the kamma is generally performed (see Diagram 4).

DIAGRAM 4

**TEN UNWHOLESOME COURSES OF ACTION**

Door	Body	Speech	Mind
<b>Unwholesome Course of Action</b>	1 Killing	4 False speech	8 Covetousness
	2 Stealing	5 Slandering	9 Ill will
	3 Sexual misconduct	6 Harsh speech	10 Wrong view
		7 Frivolous talk	

The expression “generally performed” is used because such actions as killing and stealing can also be produced by speech, i.e. by command, yet even in such cases these actions are still considered bodily kamma. Similarly, though such actions as false speech, etc. may also be done bodily, i.e. by writing or by hand signals, they are still considered verbal kamma because their main medium of execution is the door of speech.

The first seven courses are identified with the volition initiating an effort to accomplish the respective action. Such volition is an unwholesome kamma regardless of whether or not it completes the action, but if it does reach completion of the action and achieves its aim (e.g. the death of the intended victim, the appropriation of another’s property, etc.) then it becomes a **full course of action**. *The characteristic of a full course of action constitutes a kamma with the potency to take on the rebirth-generating role.*

The last three courses of action generally occur only in the mind and without reaching intentional expression through body or speech. **Covetousness** (*abhijjā*) is the wish to acquire another person's property. Even though greed for another's property arises, it does not become a full course of action unless it arouses in one the desire to take possession of that property.

**Ill will** (*vyāpāda*) is the mental factor of hatred, which becomes a full course of action when it arises with the wish that another being meet with harm and affliction. **Wrong View** (*micchādiṭṭhi*) becomes a full course of action when it assumes the form of one of the nihilistic views which deny the validity of ethics and the retributive consequences of action. Three such views are mentioned often in the Sutta Pitaka:

- nihilism (*natthika-diṭṭhi*), which denies the survival of the personality in any form after death, thus negating the moral significance of deeds;
- the inefficacy-of-action view (*akiriya-diṭṭhi*), which claims that deeds have no efficacy in producing results, thus invalidating moral distinctions; and
- the acausality view (*ahetuka-diṭṭhi*), which states that there is no cause or condition for the defilement and purification of beings, that beings are defiled and purified by chance, fate, or necessity.

In the ultimate sense, unwholesome kamma is identifiable with the volition in the twelve unwholesome

kammic cittas associated with attachment (*lobha*), hate (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*).<sup>1</sup>

4.2 **Wholesome kamma of the sense-sphere** can be performed by beings (except Buddhas and arahants) in any plane of existence. It has the potential to produce rebirth-linking in the sensuous blissful plane, but during the course of existence, it can give effect anywhere in the sensuous world or the fine-material world, according to circumstances.

By way of the door of action, ten courses of wholesome kamma are enumerated: the three of body are abstinence from the three unwholesome bodily deeds; the four of speech are abstinence from the four unwholesome verbal deeds; the three of mind are non-covetousness, non-ill will, and right view (see Diagram 5).

DIAGRAM 5

## TEN WHOLESOME COURSES OF ACTION

Door	Body	Speech	Mind
Wholesome Course of Action	Abstinence from		8 Non-covetousness
	1 killing	4 false speech	(generosity)
	2 stealing	5 slandering	9 Non-ill will
	3 sexual misconduct	6 harsh speech 7 frivolous talk	(loving-kindness) 10 Right view

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed enumeration and explanation of these cittas, see *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Kandy: BPS, 1993), pp. 32–40.



Similarly, wholesome kamma of the sense-sphere is threefold as giving (*dāna*), virtue (*sīla*) and meditation (*bhāvanā*), or tenfold as the ten bases of meritorious deeds (*dasapuññakiriyavatthu*):

(1) giving, (2) virtue, (3) meditation, (4) reverence, (5) service, (6) transference of merit, (7) rejoicing in others' merit, (8) hearing the Dhamma, (9) teaching the Dhamma, and (10) straightening out one's views (see also Diagram 6).

DIAGRAM 6

### BASES OF MERITORIOUS DEEDS

Threefold	Dana	Sila	Bhavana
Tenfold	1 Giving	4 Virtue	7 Meditation
	2 Transference of merit	5 Reverence	8 Hearing the Dhamma
	3 Rejoicing in others' merit	6 Service	9 Teaching the Dhamma
			10 Straightening out one's view

The passive aspect of sense-sphere wholesome kamma can be viewed in the ten wholesome courses of action, where abstinence plays a predominant role, while its active aspect is classified under the threefold and tenfold bases of meritorious deeds.

However, in the ultimate sense, it is eightfold according to the volition in the sense-sphere kammic cittas associated

with non-attachment (or generosity), non-hate (or loving-kindness) and non-delusion (or wisdom).<sup>2</sup>

**4.3 Wholesome kamma of the fine-material sphere** is purely mental action. It consists of meditation that has reached absorption and is fivefold by distinction of jhana-factors.<sup>3</sup> Each wholesome jhana citta has the potential to generate rebirth in the fine-material realm that corresponds with its own level.

**4.4 Wholesome kamma of the immaterial sphere** is also purely mental action. It consists of meditation that has reached absorption and is fourfold by distinction of the object.<sup>4</sup> Immaterial-sphere wholesome jhana citta has the potential to produce as its result only its corresponding resultant citta, which fulfills only three functions of rebirth, bhavanga and death in the immaterial realm to which it pertains.

In this chapter, the nature of kamma and some of its various aspects have been discussed. From these, and the preceding chapter's exposition of the kammic potential created during normal cognitive processes, the following conclusions may be drawn:

---

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed enumeration and explanation of these cittas, see *A Comprehensive Manual*, pp. 45–48.

<sup>3</sup> For an enumeration of these five fine-material sphere jhana cittas see *A Comprehensive Manual*, pp. 53–54; and pp. 56–59, for a detailed explanation.

<sup>4</sup> For an enumeration of these four immaterial sphere jhana cittas see *A Comprehensive Manual*, pp. 60–61; and pp. 62–63, for a detailed explanation.

- Physical and verbal actions are accompanied (before, during and after their execution) by innumerable sets of cognitive processes (see p. 29);
- In each set of (mind-door or five sense-door) cognitive processes there are seven kammic cittas (see p. 27);
- Depending on the order of occurrence, the volition in each of these kammic cittas creates immediately, indefinitely, and subsequently effective kammass (see p. 27–28);
- Only kamma constituting a full course of action (see p. 42) has the potential to generate rebirth, but it can also be functionally obstructive, supportive, or destructive (see p. 39); other kammass can only exercise the latter three functions;
- Only the kammic potential created by *one* wholesome or unwholesome volition, out of a vast variety, can generate one rebirth (see p. 39) and sustain that life (see p. 41);
- All sentient beings are experiencing the results of their past wholesome and unwholesome kamma, in an incessant, intricate, interplay of kammic functions, while they (except arahants and Buddhas) are continually creating new wholesome and unwholesome kamma during conscious life (i.e. moments of active cognition).

The kammic forces involved in the process of dying and rebirth are thus interactive and complex.

# THE PROCESS OF DYING AND REBIRTH



## CAUSES OF DEATH

NOW LET US see what the Abhidhamma has to say about death and rebirth. Death comes about because of one of the following causes:

- through the expiration of the life-span;
- through the expiration of the productive kammic force;
- through the expiration of both;
- through the intervention of a destructive kamma.

To elaborate, certain realms of existence have definite life spans, e.g. the heavenly realms. When a deity's (*deva's*) life reaches the age limit of that particular plane of existence, he will have to die even though the productive kammic force sustaining his life

may not have been exhausted. In the human realm, this should be understood as death in advanced old age due to natural causes. But when the kamma sustaining life expends its force, death will also take place even though the normal life-span has not yet expired.

Death can also occur through the simultaneous expiration of both the life-span and productive kamma. A powerful destructive kamma can also cause death by cutting off the force of the life-sustaining kamma prematurely even though the normal life-span may not be expired. Examples of this are violent deaths and deaths due to sicknesses.

## **DYING PERCEPTIONS**

To those who are dying, the kamma about to determine rebirth manifests itself in one of four ways through any of the six-sense doors as

- A **kamma** (a good or evil deed performed earlier during the same lifetime) that is to produce rebirth in the next existence. For example, a kind person with spiritual inclinations may remember the act of making a donation to an Old Folks' Home, refraining from buying pirated computer software, or practising meditation in an intensive retreat; whereas an unscrupulous person may remember how he or she schemed to murder a relative in order to inherit some property, embezzled funds held in

trust for the *Saṅgha* [Community of Theravada Buddhist monks], or committed adultery with a neighbour's spouse;

- A **sign of kamma**, i.e. an object or image associated with the good or evil deed that is about to determine rebirth, or an instrument used to perform it. For example, a devout person may see the image of a monk or pagoda, a physician may see the image of a stethoscope, a butcher may hear the squeals of slaughtered pigs, a social worker may feel the touch of the poor child he or she had assisted, a contractor may see the image of the undersized iron bars that were used to cheat his or her employer;
- A **sign of destiny**, i.e. a symbol of the realm into which the dying person is about to be reborn. For example, a person heading for a heavenly rebirth may hear celestial music, a person heading for the animal kingdom may see forests or fields, a person heading for a rebirth in hell may feel the heat of infernal fire, a person heading for a ghostly realm may see a ghost coming to take him or her away;
- Apart from these three manifestations, there is yet another alternative. The kamma that is to produce rebirth in the next existence does not appear as a memory image of something that was previously done, but appears to the mind door as if it were being done at that very moment just before death. For example, the dying person may feel as though she is actually quarrelling with her husband, although the quarrel occurred many years ago.

## **DEATH AND REBIRTH**

Thereafter, attending to the object thus presented, the stream of consciousness continually flows, inclining mostly towards the state into which one is to be reborn.

Then, either at the end of a cognitive process or at the dissolution of bhavanga, the death citta arises and ceases. Within this terminal process the kammic cittas, by reason of their weakness, occur for only five mind-moments. This process lacks original productive kammic potency, but acts rather as the channel for the past kamma that has assumed the rebirth-generative function.

At the time of death, kamma-born kalapas no longer arise starting with the presence sub-moment of the seventeenth citta preceding the death citta. Kamma-born kalapas that arose earlier occur until the death citta and then cease together with it. Following that, the kalapas born of citta and nutriment come to a cessation. Then the body remains a mass of inanimate material phenomena born of temperature and continues as such until the corpse is reduced to dust.

Immediately following the dissolution of the death citta, there arises in a new existence the rebirth-linking citta, having the same object as that in the final cognitive process of the previous life. This rebirth citta is a resultant citta produced by the kamma responsible for the objects apprehended during the final, but crucial, moments of consciousness prior to death.

Simultaneous with its arising, this same kamma produces kalapas which set off a chain reaction by generating more kalapas

born of the internal fire-element and nutriment and thereafter by combination with the external fire-element and nutriment. In the meantime, the cittas following the rebirth-citta will also start to produce kalapas, all this leading eventually to an intricate mass of kalapas arising and passing away which can be identified as a foetus, or the spontaneous body of the new being (hell being, spirit, deva, or brahma).

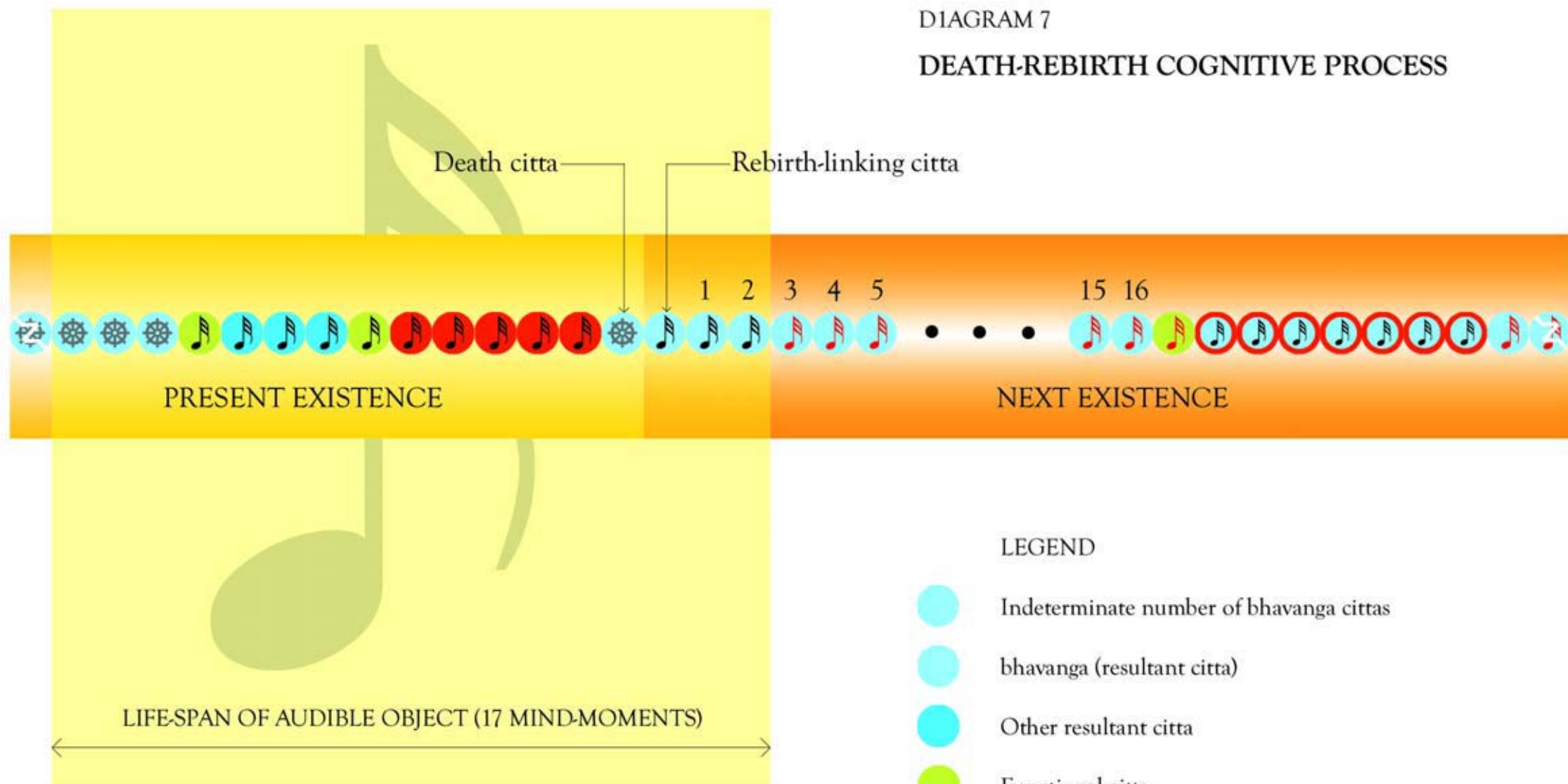
The rebirth-linking citta is followed by sixteen bhavanga cittas. Then a mind-door cognitive process occurs in which the seven kammic cittas develop an attachment to the new existence. These cittas take for object the rebirth citta. When this process ends, the bhavanga again arises and perishes, and continues thus whenever there is no intervention of a cognitive process. In this way the stream of consciousness flows on from birth till death, and from death to new birth, “revolving like the wheel of a cart” (see [Diagram 7](#) for a graphic explanation).

This is a microscopic view of death and rebirth according to the Abhidhamma model. Even if one cannot thoroughly understand the sequence of the cittas and kalapas involved in this transitional process, one need not be unduly anxious. While the above explanation clarifies the Theravada assertion that rebirth occurs immediately after death, it is not essential for understanding the principles of skilful dying, which will be discussed in the following chapters.



DIAGRAM 7

DEATH-REBIRTH COGNITIVE PROCESS



LEGEND

-  Indeterminate number of bhavanga cittas
-  bhavanga (resultant citta)
-  Other resultant citta
-  Functional citta
-  Kammic citta
-  Object of bhavanga (in present existence)
-  Present audible object
-  Past audible object
-  Rebirth citta as object of kammic citta

Note:

The above diagram shows one typical rebirth cognitive process with a present audible object (e.g. celestial music) occurring as a sign of destiny. With other objects the process would occur differently. Note that the audible object, with a life-span of 17 mind-moments, is a present object during the 14 cittas of the last cognitive process of the present existence and the first 3 cittas of the next existence; from the third bhavanga on, it becomes a past object.

RIPENING ORDER  
OF REBIRTH  
GENERATING KAMMA



WHAT WOULD BE more significant and useful to one is, I think, to understand the law that governs the order in which certain types of kamma present themselves to the mind in the few crucial moments before death. The kammās we have performed in the course of life are extremely varied: which particular type of kamma takes priority over others in determining rebirth?

According to the Abhidhamma, weighty kamma gets foremost priority in producing rebirth, followed by near-death kamma, habitual kamma and reserve kamma.

**WEIGHTY KAMMA**

Weighty kamma is kamma of such powerful moral weight that it cannot be replaced by any other kamma as the determinant of

rebirth. On the unwholesome side, weighty kamma means the kammic potential generated by any one of the following:

- maliciously creating a schism in the Sangha;
- the wounding of a Buddha;
- the murder of an arahant;
- matricide;
- parricide;
- a fixed wrong view that denies the basis for morality  
(see p. 43).

On the wholesome side, weighty kamma means the attainment of the jhanas and maintaining the jhana attainment until death, after which, it will generate rebirth in a brahma world appropriate to the jhana attainment. If one attains jhana in a two-week retreat, and then goes back to the world without maintaining it, then the jhana attainment will not qualify as weighty kamma during death. Or if one were to develop the jhana and later were to commit one of the heinous crimes mentioned above, the good kamma would be obliterated by the evil deed, and the latter would generate rebirth into a woeful state. For example, Devadatta lost his psychic powers and was reborn in hell for wounding the Buddha and causing a schism in the Sangha.

But if someone were first to commit one of the heinous crimes, he or she would not be able later to attain jhana, path (*magga*) or fruition (*phala*) because the evil kamma would have created an insurmountable obstruction. Thus King Ajatasattu,

while listening to the Buddha's Discourse on the Fruits of Recluseship, had all the other conditions for reaching stream-entry (*sotāpatti*), but because he had killed his father, King Bimbisara, he could not attain the path and fruition.

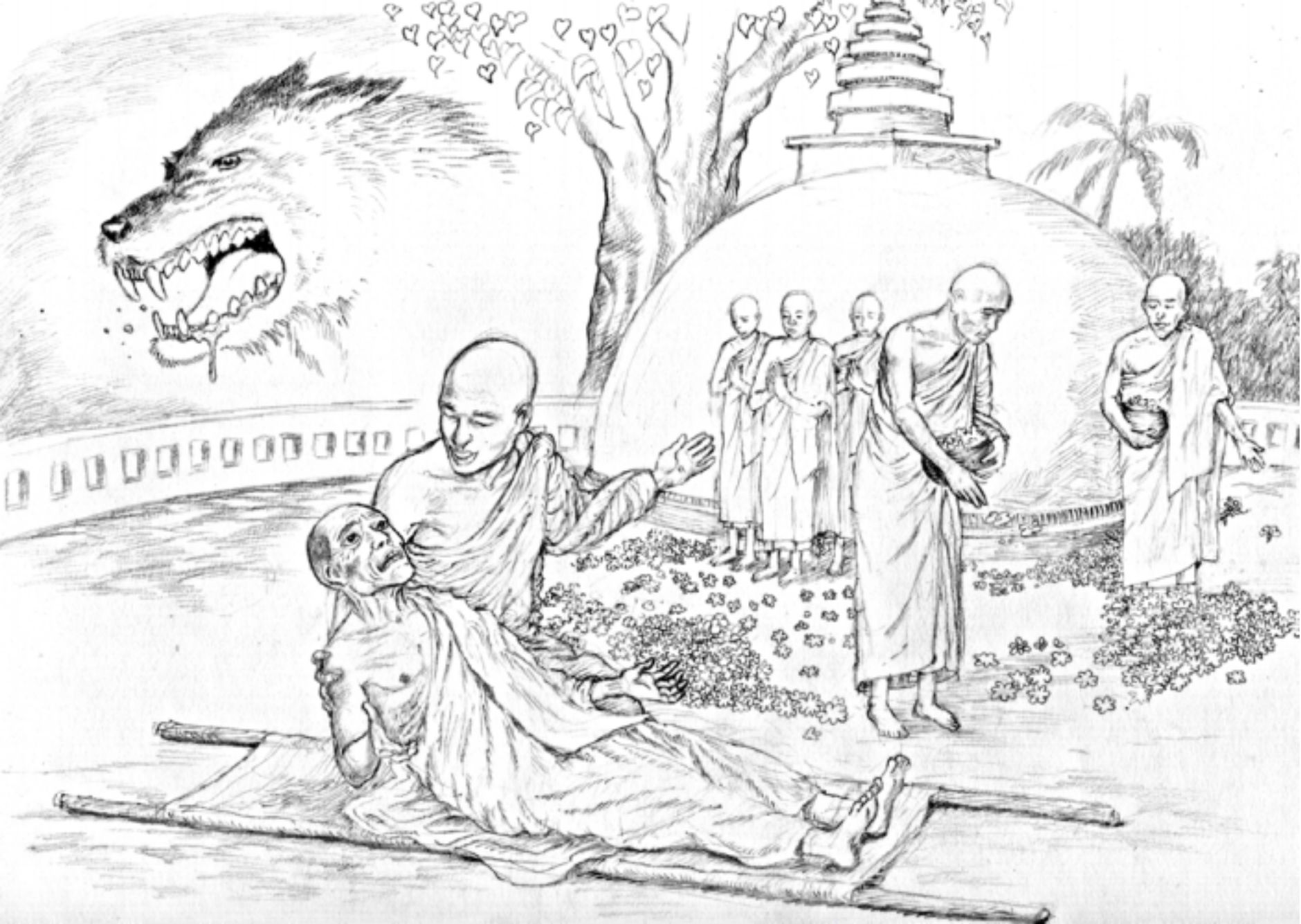
However, the Buddha predicted that after having repaid their kammic debts, both Devadatta and Ajatasattu would, in some future existence, attain enlightenment as *Pacceka Buddhas* [Solitary Buddhas].

## NEAR-DEATH KAMMA

The next priority is taken by near-death kamma, a potent kamma remembered or performed shortly before death, i.e. immediately prior to the last cognitive process. If a person of bad character remembers a good deed he or she has done, or performs a good deed just before dying, he or she may receive a fortunate rebirth. Some examples follow.

### ✦ **An Ex-hunter's Death**

This story took place in Sri Lanka during the heyday of Theravada Buddhism, when there were reputedly many arahants still around. One such arahant was a Thera or senior monk. His father was a hunter who later renounced the world and joined the Sangha at a late age. Towards the end of his life, he became delirious. His face was contorted with fear as he tried to fend off an invisible foe.



*“Look, father,” the Venerable Thera said, pointing to the flowers at the pagoda, “We have made an offering of flowers to the pagoda on your behalf. Rejoice, father.”*

“What’s wrong, father?” the Venerable Thera asked.

“A black dog! A fierce black dog is attacking me!” his father answered excitedly.

The Venerable Thera knew that the unwholesome livelihood of his father had created this vision. Quickly he instructed his *sāmaṇeras* [novices] to collect flowers and arrange them neatly at the base of the monastery’s pagoda. Then they transported the Venerable Thera’s father on his deathbed to the vicinity of the pagoda.

“Look, father,” the Venerable Thera said, pointing to the flowers at the pagoda, “We have made an offering of flowers to the pagoda on your behalf. Rejoice, father.”

His father opened his eyes and smiled in joyful appreciation. Then he closed his eyes again and was calm and peaceful as he breathed his last breath.

This story holds a good lesson for all of us. If the Venerable Thera had not intervened, but had stood there passively watching his father dying a fearful death, the latter would have been reborn in a woeful state. But because of his timely and creative intervention, he gave his father a crucial opportunity to generate a wholesome mental state at the very last moment before his death—a wholesome mental state rooted in generosity (*alobha*) and accompanied by joy—that was potent enough to cause a good rebirth.





*But he was unable to pay attention because he kept remembering all those people whom he had executed. The Venerable Sariputta noticed that and asked, "Why are you not paying attention?"*

### • The Public Executioner

Another example is the story of the public executioner that I mentioned at the beginning (p. 20). He had been a robber and murderer before he was appointed by the king to be a public executioner. After 55 years of service, on the day of his retirement, he was dressed in his best, had prepared his favourite food, and was about to eat it when Venerable Sariputta, who had just emerged from his absorption, stood at his door, begging for alms. He thought it was very befitting that the Venerable Sariputta should come on such an auspicious occasion. So he invited the Venerable Sariputta in, offered him his favourite food and stood by his side fanning the Thera while he was eating. At the end of the meal, the Venerable Sariputta gave him a Dhamma talk. But he was unable to pay attention because he kept remembering all those people whom he had executed.

The Venerable Sariputta noticed that and asked, “Why are you not paying attention?”

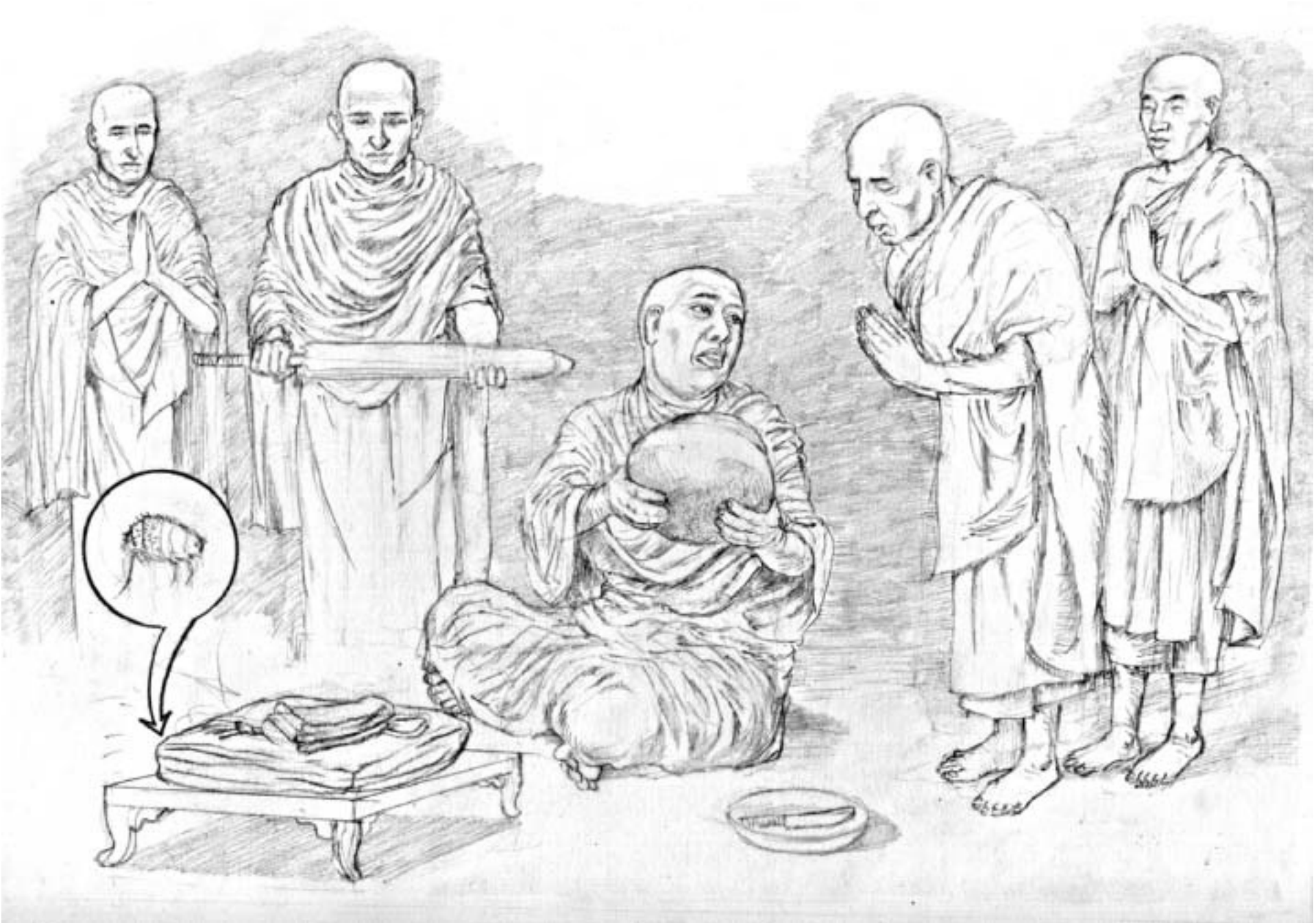
He told him the reason. The Venerable Sariputta thought, “I shall deceive him.” Then he asked,

“Did you do it out of your own choice or did someone order you to do it?”

“The king ordered me to do it, Bhante,” he replied.

“Now, *upāsaka* [Buddhist layman], if that is the case, was it unwholesome?”





*After his funeral, the Sangha convened to distribute his possessions. The indignant flea was running frantically within the robe, shouting, "These monks are robbing me of my property!"*

The former executioner was a slow-witted fellow. When he heard the Thera's question, he felt relieved and said, "No, it wasn't unwholesome. Then carry on with your Dhamma talk, Bhante." Now that his conscience had been appeased, he could concentrate on the Dhamma talk. In fact, as he listened to the talk, he developed insight knowledge until *saṅkhārupekkhañāṇa*, just short of the first stage of enlightenment.

After the Dhamma talk, he accompanied Venerable Sariputta outside along the street but on his way back was gored by a cow. When the monks heard about his death, they asked the Buddha where he was reborn. The Buddha replied that because of the insight knowledge he had attained while listening to Venerable Sariputta's talk, he had been reborn in Tusita Heaven.

On the other hand, if a good person dwells on an evil deed done earlier, or performs an evil deed just before dying, he or she may undergo an unhappy rebirth. Here are three examples from the Dhammapada Commentary.

#### • The Bhikkhu Who Became a Flea

During the Buddha's time, a bhikkhu by the name of Tissa received a fine, beautiful robe that he cherished. He left the robe on the clothesline and thought, "I shall wear it tomorrow." However, that night he died of indigestion and was reborn as a flea within the folds of

his brand new robe. After his funeral, the Sangha convened to distribute his possessions. The indignant flea was running frantically within the robe, shouting, “These monks are robbing me of my property!”

The Buddha heard that with his Divine Ear and asked Venerable Ananda to postpone the distribution of the robe for seven days. On the eighth day, after the robe had been distributed, the monks wondered about the reason for the postponement.

The Buddha said, “Because of his attachment to his new robe, Tissa was reborn as a flea. If you had distributed the robes sooner, its indignation would have caused another rebirth in hell. However, on the seventh day the flea died and was reborn in Tusita Heaven. So I allowed you to distribute the robe on the eighth day.”

In this story, Venerable Tissa was impeccable in the *Vinaya* [Buddhist Monastic Discipline]. His only misdeed was in harbouring a strong attachment to his own rightful property. But because this thought was rooted in attachment (*lobha*), it was ultimately unwholesome. And because it persisted until just before his death, it was potent enough to cause rebirth in a woeful state, albeit for only a short spell.

There is a popular belief that people who die with strong attachments to their animate or inanimate properties are reborn as ghosts or animals haunting, or in the vicinity of, their properties.

### ✦ **Queen Mallika's Misdeed**

Queen Mallika was the chief consort of King Pasenadi of Kosala. One day she was in the bathroom with a pet dog. As she bent down to wash her calves, her pet dog started to make amorous advances that she did not resist. In fact, she stood there enjoying the physical contact. The King saw what was happening from a window up in the palace and reviled her when she came up, "Begone, you wretch! How can you do such a thing?"

"What did I do, sire?"

"Intercourse with a dog!"

"Never, sire."

"I saw it myself. I don't believe you. Begone, you wretch!"

"O Great King, whoever is in that bathroom appears to be two from this window. Sire, if you trust me, enter that bathroom. I shall look at you from this window."

Susceptible in temperament, the King listened to her and entered the bathroom. Queen Mallika stood by the window to look. Then she screamed, "Eek! Foolish Great King! What's this? Having intercourse with a she-goat!"

"Never, dear, I don't do such a thing!"

"I saw it myself. I don't believe you," insisted Queen Mallika.



*Queen Mallika stood by the window to look. Then she screamed,  
“Eek! Foolish Great King! What’s this? Having intercourse  
with a she-goat!”*

Then the King thought, “Hmm, perhaps she’s right after all. It’s probably just an optical illusion.”

The deluded King was taken in. But in her heart, Queen Mallika was filled with remorse. She thought, “The King was deceived by me because of his foolishness. I have done evil and I slandered him. Even the Lord Buddha, his Foremost Disciples and his Great Disciples, will know of this evil deed of mine. O grave indeed is the kamma done by me!”

Now it was well known that Queen Mallika was a very pious and generous lady. She was the King’s companion in his *Asadisadāna* or Incomparable Dana to the Sangha headed by the Lord Buddha, where the expenditure amounted to 140 million *kahāpaṇas* [ancient Indian coins]. The white umbrella, seat, bowl-stand and footstool for the Buddha were made of jewels and precious metals and were priceless. When Queen Mallika was dying, she forgot all about this magnificent dana and remembered instead that unfortunate incident, dwelt upon it with remorse, and was reborn in *Avīci* Hell.

The King loved Mallika very much and was greatly grieved by her death. After her funeral, he approached the Buddha to ask him where his pious queen had been reborn. But the Buddha made him forget the purpose of his visit. When he returned to his palace, the King

wondered why he had not asked his question, so he came back the next day. For seven consecutive days the Buddha made him forget his question every time he came. After having suffered in Avici Hell for seven days, Mallika was reborn in Tusita Heaven. On the eighth day, the Buddha went personally to the palace for alms. This time the King took the opportunity to ask the Buddha about Mallika's destiny. He was relieved and delighted to hear that she had been reborn in Tusita Heaven.

- **Erakapatta Naga Raja**

The dragon king Erakapatta has already been mentioned in the Introduction. Here is the full story. At the time of Kassapa Buddha's Sasana, he was a bhikkhu. One day as a young bhikkhu, he was travelling in a boat along the Ganges when he reached out and held a blade of grass called *erakapatta*. *Eraka* is the name of the grass and *patta* means leaf or blade. He did not release his hold on the blade of grass even though the boat was moving speedily along. So naturally it broke into two. Now, according to the Vinaya, it is a light offence to damage vegetation intentionally. But he thought, "Well, it's just a trifle," and did not bother to confess his offence to another bhikkhu.

Let me digress here a little. A monk's virtue (*sīla*) is different from that of a layperson's. If a layperson should intentionally

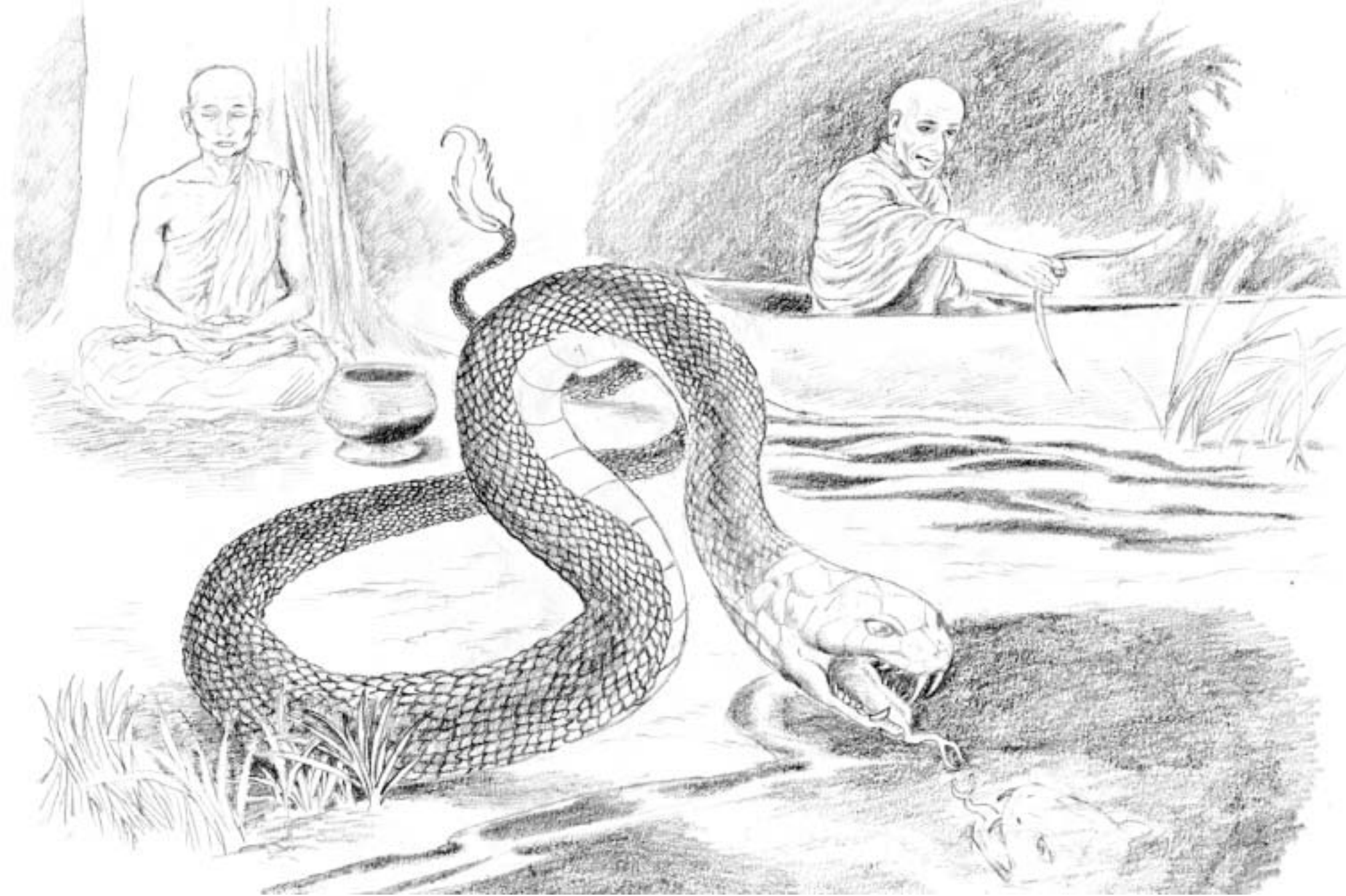
break a precept, all that he needs to do to restore the purity of his sila is to make a resolution, immediately or later, not to break that particular precept again. But it is not so easy for a bhikkhu. After having committed a Vinaya offence, a bhikkhu must atone for it by confessing to another bhikkhu if it is a light offence, or by undergoing a period of temporary penalty requiring a formal meeting of the Sangha if it is a grave offence, or by expulsion from the Sangha if it is a Defeat or *Pārājika* offence. Only after having gone through the required procedure is his sila considered to be pure again. Moreover, purity of sila is regarded as a prerequisite for meditative progress.

But the bhikkhu who broke the blade of grass thought the act a mere trifle and did not bother to atone for his offence. He must have completely forgotten about the misdeed for subsequently, he meditated for 20,000 years in the forest! Yet, despite his perseverance, he failed to attain enlightenment. Indeed, when he was dying, he felt as though that erakapatta, that blade of grass was strangling him. Now he *really* wanted to confess his offence, but there were no bhikkhus around.

“Oh, impure is my sila!” he lamented.

At that moment, he died and was reborn as a dragon king by the name of Erakapatta Naga Raja. As soon as he saw his new body, he was again filled with remorse. “After all those years of meditation I am now reborn in a rootless frog-eating species. O, tragedy of tragedies!”





*As soon as he saw his new body, he was again filled with remorse. "After all those years of meditation I am now reborn in a rootless frog-eating species. O, tragedy of tragedies!"*

Nagas have very long lives and Erakapatta Naga Raja lived beyond our Lord Gotama's life-span.<sup>1</sup> When he heard that another *Sammāsambuddha* had already appeared, he came to pay his respects to our Lord Gotama and to lament over the cause of his unfortunate rebirth. The Buddha then gave a discourse and concluded with the following verse [now found in the Dhammapada]:

“Rare is birth as a human being  
Hard is the life of mortals  
Hard is the hearing of the Dhamma  
Rare is the appearance of Buddhas.”

At the end of the discourse, 84,000 beings attained enlightenment. The dragon king too would have attained the fruit of stream-entry but for the fact that he was an animal (born with a rootless rebirth-linking citta).

For me this is a very thought-provoking story. During his 20,000-year meditation retreat, was the bhikkhu practising

---

<sup>1</sup> According to the Commentary to the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* (DN 14), after the *parinibbāna* [final passing away] of Kassapa Buddha, the life-span of human beings very gradually shortened from 20,000 years to 10 years because of continuous moral decadence. From this minimum level, with the realisation of the importance of morality and the improvement of moral standards, human life-span very gradually lengthened until at last it regained the maximum term of an incalculable aeon (*asaṅkhyeyyakappa*). Then moral standards started to decline again, resulting eventually in a gradual shortening of human life-span to the minimum of 10 years. It was during this period of decline, when the average life-span was 100 years, that our Lord Gotama appeared as the fourth Buddha in our Bhaddakappa (see also p.19, footnote 1).

tranquillity (*samatha*), or insight (*vipassanā*) meditation, or both? Did he ever achieve access or momentary concentration, even for short periods of time? Did he ever remember his offence? What was the reason for his failure to attain jhana, path and fruition? Was it because of insufficient *pāramīs* [perfections], or because his bhikkhu sila was not absolutely pure? Was this story invented by the Elders of Old in order to instil a sense of fear into bhikkhus that they might become more conscientious in observing the Vinaya, and thereby preserve the unity of the Sangha and prolong the life of the Sasana? Most probably we shall never know the answers to these questions.

Nevertheless, canonical and commentarial Vinaya literature explicitly states that intentional transgression of the Buddha's authority, i.e. Vinaya rules, would obstruct the attainment of jhana, path and fruition, and also rebirth in a favourable realm of existence (*saggamokkhānaṃ antarāyaṃ karontīti antarāyikā... Sañcicca āpannā āpattiyo āṇāvītikkamantarāyikā nāma...*). There is also a paragraph in the fifth book of the Vinaya Pitaka, *Parivāra*, which says:

Discipline (*Vinaya*) is for the sake of restraint, restraint for the sake of freedom from remorse, freedom from remorse for the sake of joy, joy for the sake of rapture, rapture for the sake of tranquillity, tranquillity for the sake of pleasure, pleasure for the sake of concentration, concentration for the sake of knowledge and vision of things as they are, knowledge and vision of things as they are for the sake of disenchantment, disenchantment for the sake of dispassion, dispassion for the sake of release, release for the sake of knowledge and vision

of release, knowledge and vision of release for the sake of total unbinding without clinging.

In the *Meghiya Sutta*, the Buddha recommends that a bhikkhu whose paramis are still immature for enlightenment should cultivate a number of things, one set of which is:

Here a bhikkhu is virtuous. He dwells restrained in accordance with the restraint of the *Pātimokkha* [Code of monastic rules], perfect in conduct and resort; seeing danger in the slightest faults, he trains himself by undertaking rightly the rules of training.

This exhortation is frequently given throughout the Pali Canon, even in the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*. Yet, contrary to such overwhelming scriptural evidence, it is apparent, even to a casual observer, that robed meditation teachers and practitioners of today, who are supposed to be “perfect in conduct and resort, etc.”, may not exactly be paragons of virtue (according to Vinaya standards). How can one reconcile this discernible discrepancy between theory and practice?

Different people have different standards of conscience. Some monks are bold and daring and are not easily disturbed by their conscience. During meditation, they may not be haunted by guilty feelings about their imperfect sila. On the other hand, some monks are cautious and sensitive by nature, and are easily agitated by the slightest misdeed. Such monks, when they are dying, may run a greater risk of harbouring remorse over Vinaya offences they have not atoned for.



*Aghast, the new deva saw he was a monk no more. There was no place in the entire heavenly realm quiet enough to practise. He was trapped.*

To summarise, when there is no weighty kamma, and a potent near-death kamma is performed, this kamma will generally take on the role of generating rebirth. This does not mean that one will escape the fruits of the other good and bad deeds one has performed during one's life. When they meet with suitable conditions, these kammas too will produce their due results.

## HABITUAL KAMMA

In the absence of weighty kamma and near-death kamma, habitual kamma generally assumes the rebirth-generating function. Habitual kamma is the deed that one habitually performs. Here are a few examples from the scriptures.

### ✿ **The Bhikkhu Who Became a Deva**

There was once a young man who, after having listened to one of the Buddha's discourses, thought that leaving home for the homeless life of a renunciate would be more conducive to the thorough practice of the Dhamma. So he renounced the world and became a bhikkhu. After the required five years of dependence on a teacher, he had mastered the Vinaya and had become self-sufficient in his meditation practice. Then he retired to a forest alone. Because of his fervent wish to become an arahant, the bhikkhu's practice was extremely strenuous. In order to devote as much time as possible to meditation, he did not lie down to sleep at all, and hardly ate. Alas, he damaged

his health. Gas accumulated in his belly, causing bloating and knife-like pains. Nonetheless, the bhikkhu continued single-mindedly with his practice, without adjusting his habits. The pains grew worse, until one day, in the middle of a walking meditation, they cut off his life.

The bhikkhu was instantly reborn in *Tavatimsa*, the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods. Suddenly, as if from a dream, he awoke dressed in golden finery and standing at the gates of a glittering mansion. From the celestial palace, a thousand *devīs* [female deities] rushed out to welcome their master for whom they had been waiting.

Amidst the joyous clamour, our poor hero had no chance to notice that he had died and been reborn. Thinking that all these celestial maidens were no more than lay devotees come to visit the hermitage, the new deva lowered his eyes to the ground, and modestly pulled up a corner of his golden outfit to cover his shoulder. From these gestures the devīs guessed his situation and cried,

“You’re in devaland now. This isn’t the time to meditate. It’s time to have fun and frolic. Come on, let’s dance!”

Our hero barely heard them, for he was practising sense-restraint. Finally, some of the devīs went into the mansion and brought out a full-length mirror. Aghast, the new deva saw he was a monk no more. There was no place in the entire heavenly realm quiet enough to practise. He was trapped.

In dismay, he thought, “When I renounced the world, I wanted only the highest bliss, arahantship. I’m like the boxer who enters a competition hoping for a gold medal and is given a cabbage instead.”

The ex-bhikkhu was afraid even to set foot inside the gates of his mansion. He knew his strength of mind would not last against these pleasures, far more intense than those of our human world. Suddenly, he realised that as a deva he had the power to visit the human realm where the Buddha was teaching. He flew off immediately to where the Buddha was, followed by his thousand companions. He explained his plight to the Buddha who replied by giving him very concise meditation instructions. The deva perceived the Buddha’s point and immediately became a *sotāpanna*, or stream-enterer. Although the instructions were directed towards the ultimate goal of arahantship, this bhikkhu deva did not have the potential to gain final enlightenment. His paramis were sufficient to carry him only as far as stream-entry.

In this story, vipassana meditation is the habitual kamma that generated the bhikkhu’s rebirth in Tavatimsa Heaven. Since he was not even aware that he had died and been reborn, it is unlikely that either past kamma, sign of kamma, or sign of destiny presented itself to him during the last few moments of consciousness just before death. The fourth alternative of the kamma appearing as if it were being performed at that very moment just before death seems to be a likely possibility. This





*Before he died, he was in such great pain and agony that he was grunting, squealing and moving about on all fours like a pig for several days.*

can be substantiated by the fact that the new deva was still practising sense-restraint amidst the rapturous welcome given by his retinue of devis. This story is a good example of how, if one dies while practising vipassana meditation, a very strong solid foundation is laid for speedy enlightenment in the next life.

### ✦ **Cunda the Butcher**

During the Buddha's time, there lived a very cruel and hard-hearted butcher by the name of Cunda who slaughtered pigs by torturing them. Cunda had been in this profession for many years and in all this time, he had not done a single meritorious deed. Before he died, he was in such great pain and agony that he was grunting, squealing and moving about on all fours like a pig for several days. After much anguish, he died on the seventh day.

Some bhikkhus who heard the grunting and squealing coming from his house for several days thought that Cunda must have been busy killing more pigs. They remarked that he was a very cruel and wicked man who was totally devoid of loving kindness and compassion.

When the Buddha heard their remarks he said, "Bhikkhus, Cunda has not been killing pigs. His past evil deeds have caught up with him. Because of the great pain he had to suffer before his death, he was squealing, grunting and behaving like a tortured pig. Today he died and was reborn in hell."



*The devas in the chariots were all clamouring, "We will take you to our devaloka!  
We will take you to our devaloka! Be reborn in our devaloka and enjoy!"*

### ❧ **Dhammika Upasaka**

Once there lived in Savatthi a lay Buddhist by the name of Dhammika who was virtuous and very fond of charitable acts. He generously offered food and other requisites to the Sangha regularly and also on special occasions. He was, in fact, the leader of many virtuous lay Buddhists in Savatthi. Dhammika had many children and all of them, like their father, were also virtuous and devoted to charity. When Dhammika was very ill on his deathbed, he requested the Sangha to sit by his bedside to recite the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. The bhikkhus started to recite, “*Ekāyanoayaṃ bhikkhave maggo sattānaṃ visuddhiyā...*”

At that moment, six fully decorated chariots from the six *devalokas* [heavenly realms] arrived. The devas in the chariots were all clamouring,

“We will take you to our devaloka! We will take you to our devaloka! Be reborn in our devaloka and enjoy!”

Dhammika wanted to listen to the sutta and did not wish to be interrupted, so he told the devas, “Wait, wait.”

But the bhikkhus thought that he was addressing them, so they stopped their recitation. Dhammika’s children saw their father’s abnormal behaviour and started to cry. The bhikkhus, finding themselves in an embarrassing situation, left and returned to the monastery. After a short while, Dhammika, who seemed to have lost consciousness, regained his senses and asked his children why they were crying and where the monks had gone.



*The meditation teacher perceived the arrival of a celestial vehicle that looked more like an Elizabethan carriage than a Roman chariot.*

When he heard his children's answer he said, "I wasn't talking to the venerable sirs, but to the devas in the chariots."

"What chariots? We don't see any chariots," the children said.

"Where is the garland I made? Now which devaloka is delightful?" Dhammika asked.

"Tusita Heaven, the abode of all *bodhisattas* [future Buddhas] and the Buddha's parents, is delightful, father."

"Then throw this garland upward saying, 'Let this hang onto the chariot from Tusita Heaven.'"

When the children did that, they saw the garland hanging in mid-air, for they could not perceive the chariot.

Then Dhammika said, "You see, that garland is hanging onto the chariot from Tusita Heaven. I'm going there. Don't worry about me. Just wish that you want to join me up there and keep on doing good deeds as I did." After saying that, he died and was reborn as a deva in that chariot.

This is an example of a dying person perceiving the sign of destiny, which is not perceptible to other ordinary persons.

### ❧ A Dutiful and Loving Mother's Death

I was told that a contemporary meditation teacher was at the deathbed of an old lady. Her breathing and heartbeat had stopped and a doctor was trying to resuscitate her by massaging her chest. At that moment,



the meditation teacher perceived the arrival of a celestial vehicle that looked more like an Elizabethan carriage than a Roman chariot. But oddly enough, the drivers were dressed in ancient Chinese imperial costumes.

He told the doctor, “It’s too late, the carriage is already here,” and also spoke to the dying lady, “Let go. Don’t cling to anything in this world.”

Naturally, her children and relatives by her bed started to wail, which is something very undesirable because this would only consolidate her attachment to her loved ones and may obstruct rebirth in a favourable realm. Fortunately in this case, it did not happen.

Soon, another, larger carriage arrived. It seemed that because there was a respectable monk present, the devas felt embarrassed to take her away, so the meditation teacher was obliged to leave the room. Shortly afterwards, according to him, she left, but in the smaller carriage. Later, upon inquiry, the meditation teacher discovered that the old lady had been a very dutiful and loving mother. It is possible then that habitual kamma could have generated her rebirth in heaven.

## **RESERVE KAMMA**

Finally, in the absence of weighty kamma, near-death kamma and habitual kamma, reserve kamma plays the role of generating

rebirth. The word “reserve” here is actually a contextual rendering of the Pali word *kaṭattā* which literally means “because it was or had been done.” This type of kamma actually refers to all deeds that have been done in the present lifetime which are not included in weighty, near-death or habitual kammās, as well as other deeds that were done in past lifetimes. A few examples follow.

- **The Flea Reborn in Tusita Heaven**

The Venerable Tissa was reborn as a flea for seven days because of his strong attachment to his new robe. This may be seen as an example of how near-death kamma produces rebirth. During its life span of seven days, the flea did not have the opportunity to perform any wholesome weighty kamma, near-death kamma or habitual kamma to generate a good rebirth. Yet after seven days, it died and was reborn in Tusita Heaven. What could be the type of kamma responsible for this fortunate rebirth? Venerable Tissa was a virtuous monk, impeccable in the Vinaya. His wholesome habitual kamma of observing the bhikkhu precepts did not have a chance to ripen when he was dying because of the intervention of his unwholesome near-death kamma. But now, at the expiration of this unwholesome near-death kamma sustaining the life of the flea, Venerable Tissa’s wholesome habitual kamma became the flea’s wholesome reserve kamma responsible for its rebirth in Tusita Heaven.





*Ko Nyo's initial anger turned to awe and then grief as he listened to the boy's story. Then he burst into tears and wailed, "I'll never kill again! I'll never kill again!"*

### ✦ **Queen Mallika's Case**

Similarly, Queen Mallika was reborn in Avici for seven days because of her unwholesome near-death kamma, which upon expiration gave the opportunity for her past good kamma, now the reserve kamma of the hell-being, to ripen. In other words, the hell being did not have a chance to do any wholesome weighty, near-death or habitual kamma in Avici. But its reserve kamma, which was a good deed done during Queen Mallika's lifetime, generated rebirth in Tusita Heaven.

### ● **A Can of Uncooked Rice**

Here is another example, a story that actually happened in Burma. As I have forgotten the names of the people involved, I use fictitious ones.

Ko Nyo and Ko Nee were peddlers, travelling by foot from one village to another selling betel nuts and betel leaves. One day Ko Nee ran out of uncooked rice, so he borrowed a can from Ko Nyo. However, he never got to repay his friend that can of uncooked rice for he was bitten by a poisonous snake and died that very night.

Some years later, a little boy accompanied by his distraught parents arrived at Ko Nyo's house in a village some distance away from the town where they lived. This was the first time the boy had been to Ko Nyo's house and village, yet he was the one who had led his parents there.

“Hey! Nga Nyo! Don’t you recognise me?” shouted the boy the moment he saw Ko Nyo. Ko Nyo felt really angry and insulted to be addressed so rudely by a little boy. “Nga Nyo” is a very intimate way of address that is used only by a close friend who is older. He stared at the boy and was about to give him a good hiding when his parents intervened.

“Ko Nyo, please forgive him. Please be patient and listen to what he has to say.”

“Here,” said the boy, “take back your can of uncooked rice. Huh! After so much suffering. You know, after I died I was reborn in your house as a fighting cock. I won some fights for you but I lost in the last one. I was already badly wounded and half dead then. But you got real angry and threw me onto the ground in a fit of rage. While I was lying on the ground, dying, one of your cows came towards me and sniffed me as if in pity. Then I died and was reborn in her womb. Later she gave birth to me and I was staying at your cattle-shed as a young calf. Then you decided to slaughter me for beef. As you all pinned my legs down and started to slaughter me, my parents passed by and watched the scene. My mother said, ‘It’s so cruel. If it were my calf, I wouldn’t want to slaughter it...’”

Ko Nyo’s initial anger turned to awe and then grief as he listened to the boy’s story. Then he burst into tears and wailed, “I’ll never kill again! I’ll never kill again!”

This story is another example of how reserve kamma can produce rebirth. As a fighting cock and a young calf, there was no opportunity for one to do good deeds. To be born as a human being is a result of wholesome kamma. So we can safely assume that the calf's reserve kamma, which was probably a wholesome deed performed during Ko Nee's lifetime, is directly responsible for its rebirth as a boy in a comparatively well-to-do family.

# SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION



I HOPE THAT the stories I have related have been both instructive and entertaining. Now I shall summarise what I have said before concluding with some practical suggestions on how to die a good death.

I began by saying that the role of kamma in dying and rebirth can be unpredictable because the deeds one performs in the course of life are extremely varied. Nevertheless, there is a law governing the order in which certain types of kamma ripen to give rebirth. After introducing some basic principles of Abhidhamma and discussing various aspects of kamma, I showed how the Abhidhamma views the four causes of death, the four manifestations of rebirth-producing kamma to the dying, and lastly, the order in which the four types of kamma ripen to

produce rebirth. Examples to illustrate the workings of these four types of kamma were provided.

What have we learned thus far? And how will that help us to face death squarely, and to have some control over our future destiny? How can we use this knowledge to help our dying relatives or friends die a good death and obtain a good rebirth? These are questions that we should ponder. I have some modest suggestions that I hope will act as a catalyst for you to come up with more creative ideas.

## **PROPOSALS FOR SKILFUL DYING**

There is an age-old tradition in Sri Lanka that came about through the knowledge and awareness of the potency of near-death kamma. Indications of this tradition can already be seen in two stories told earlier:

- The story of Dhammika Upasaka who requested the Sangha to recite the Satipatthana Sutta when he was on his deathbed;
- The story of the Venerable Thera who ingeniously changed his father's fearful sign of destiny by providing conducive circumstances for him to perform a good deed at the very last moment.

The salient principles of this tradition are:

- Reminding the dying person of the meritorious deeds he or she had performed earlier in life. One could keep a

special notebook where the dates and nature of significant meritorious deeds one had performed are recorded. When one is dying, someone could read the list out to one.

- Providing the dying person with the opportunity to perform a good deed, e.g. listening to Pali chanting if one understands or appreciates it, listening to Dhamma talks, making flower *pūjā* [offering] on one's behalf as in the Venerable Thera's story, encouraging one to mentally recite the Three Refuges continuously as a mantra, or to engage undistractedly in any meditation practice one is most familiar with. These are only a few examples. Perhaps you can think of more creative alternatives.
- Persuading and helping the dying person to let go of all attachments to his or her beloved ones and possessions, and also to harbour no regrets or remorse over anything that has been done. To this end, the dying person's beloved ones should be told not to wail and lament at his or her deathbed, for this may consolidate his or her attachments and/or grief. We have already seen the fatal consequences of near-death attachment and remorse in the stories of Venerable Tissa who became a flea, the bhikkhu who was reborn as a dragon king, and Queen Mallika who was reborn in Avici Hell. There are many other ways of helping a dying person die in peace (for a sample of more detailed suggestions to help the dying, [see the Appendix](#)). Books have been written on this subject. One such book that I

found to be very interesting and enlightening is *Final Gifts—Understanding the Special Awareness, Needs and Communications of the Dying*, by Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelly (New York: Bantam, 1997).

### A GREAT EXAMPLE

A commendable, practical application of the above principles can be seen in the intriguing account of Venerable Dr Rastrapal Mahathera's personal experience, first published in 1977,<sup>1</sup> twenty years after it had occurred during his fifth year as a bhikkhu. At that time, he had been requested to go to the bedside of a dying gentleman, Mr Abinash Chandra Chowdury, age 56, who was renowned as a devout Buddhist. Here is an edited extract from the Venerable Mahathera's personal account:

When I reached his house, I found the place packed with his relatives and friends. It was then about 8.30 p.m. There was a hush of silence enveloping the house as the people around were all in suspense. I started chanting a couple of suttas and when I finished, I heard Mr Chowdury uttering feebly and intermittently, but with much devotion,

“Buddha... Dhamma... Sangha... Anicca... dukkha...  
anattā... mettā... karuṇā... muditā... upekkhā...”

---

<sup>1</sup> See *The Five Visions and Beckonings of Future Life* (Calcutta: Shri A B Das Gupta and SMT A R Das Gupta, 1977), for the full account.



I observed that his condition was fast deteriorating. I placed my hand on his right forearm and asked, “How are you feeling?”

“My time has come for leaving this world,” he replied. “There is no hope of life for me any longer, Bhante.”

“But upasaka, you’re only 56,” I said, trying to console him, “and you can’t possibly die so early in your life. A life devoted to virtue, which is a source of inspiration to your fellow villagers, cannot be cut short so early...Now would you like to take the five precepts and listen to some suttas?”

“Yes, Bhante,” he replied.

I administered the five precepts and recited a few suttas, which he listened to with great devotion. After pausing a while, I felt curious to know whether he had any vision appearing before him for his eyes were closed all the time I was by his bedside. I kept on asking him about it at short intervals. Each time he told me that he did not have any vision at all.

At about 11.30 p.m. he muttered something. We all could make out that he was relating a vision of the bodhi tree at Buddhagaya where Gotama had attained full enlightenment. This was perhaps a memory of his visit there. Then I asked him, “Are there any objects there?”

“Yes, Bhante!” he exclaimed. “My [deceased] parents are there. They’re offering flowers to the *Vajrāsana* [Diamond Seat on which Gotama sat when he attained enlightenment] under the bodhi tree.” This he repeated twice.

“Upasaka, ask them whether they would like to take the five precepts.”

“Yes, Bhante. They’re already waiting with their hands in *añjalī* [palms placed together with fingers pointing upwards].”

After administering the five precepts, I again asked him whether his parents would like to listen to some suttas and on getting an affirmative reply, I recited the *Karaṇīya Metta Sutta*. I felt thrilled at the turn of events, and so too, I think, were the others present who were watching the scene with great excitement, as this was something quite unprecedented for them.

It was then clear to me that the vision he had of his parents indicated that he was going to take birth in the human world<sup>2</sup>—and that also on a higher strata because the bodhi tree appeared in the vision too. But I felt that a man of his devotion deserved a still higher plane of existence for his next birth; so I went on asking him whether he was having any other visions. A little while later, I found a change coming over him. He seemed to have turned worldly-minded and asked his relatives to free him from his debts. It was then 1.40 a.m. At that moment I asked him whether he was perceiving any other vision.

“I see long hair!” he exclaimed feebly.

“Do you see eyes?” I asked.

“No, I don’t,” he replied, “because it is covered from head to foot with dark hair.”

I could not make out what this apparition signified, but

---

<sup>2</sup> I beg to disagree with Ven Dr Rastrapal here. I think this vision signifies an impending rebirth in the world of spirits where his departed parents had probably been reborn.

I felt that if death came to the gentleman at that moment, he would be reborn in some lowly plane of existence. (On a later date when I asked for clarification of this vision from Venerable Ñānissara Mahathera and another learned monk, Venerable Silalankara Mahathera [then Sangharaja of the Bangladesh Sangharaja Bhikkhu Mahasabha], both were of the opinion that the dying man might have gone to the world of *petas* [ghosts] if he had died then.) So in order to drive out the apparition, I started chanting the suttas, which had the desired result, for the dying man exclaimed that it had vanished when I asked him about it.

Nevertheless his worldly attachments seemed to persist. He next asked his relatives to remove from under his bed a new mattress that he wanted to be kept for his only son who was then staying at a distant place—in Calcutta, India. He did not want the mattress to be burnt together with his dead body, as was the custom among some Buddhists here at Chittagong in Bangladesh. Then he again lapsed into a state of extreme exhaustion.

“Upasaka, what are you experiencing now?” I asked.

“I see two black pigeons, Bhante,” he replied.

At once I realised that it was a vision of the animal world where he might be reborn after death. The time was then 2.00 a.m. Since I didn’t want him to pass away into the lowly animal realm, I again started to recite the suttas.

When I had finished a couple, I asked him, “Are you seeing any more visions?”

“No, Bhante,” he replied.

I then resumed discourses on the Dhamma and after a while, I asked him several times whether he was seeing any other visions. At last he exclaimed,

“I see a heavenly chariot coming towards me!”

Although I knew that no barrier could stand in the way of the heavenly chariot, still, in honour of the devas, I asked his relatives around his bed to make way for its approach.

Then I asked him, “How far is the chariot away from you?”

He made a gesture with his hand to indicate that it was by his bedside.

“Do you see any one in the chariot?” I asked.

“Yes,” he nodded, “celestial men and women.”

“Ask them whether they want to take the five precepts,” I told him, for I had read in the scriptures that devas obey and respect not only monks but also pious devotees. On his conveying their assent, I administered the five precepts. After that I again asked, through him, whether they would like to listen to the *Karaṇīya Metta Sutta*, and with their consent, I recited the sutta. Then I asked whether they would like to listen to the *Maṅgala Sutta* which I recited when they gave their consent. However, when I again asked whether they would like to listen to the *Ratana Sutta*, the dying man waved his hand to signify that the devas did not wish to listen to this sutta.<sup>3</sup>

“They want you to go back to your *vihāra* [monastery],” he told me. I then realised that the devas were getting impatient to take him away to heaven, but I wanted to intercede and prolong his life on earth.

---

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the devas were afraid that they might have to make way for other more powerful devas who might come to listen to the sutta. [See Glossary](#).

So I told Mr Chowdury, “Listen, upasaka. Tell them to go back because it is not time for you to die yet. You’re only 56. They’ve come to take you to heaven by mistake. I myself and all others present here will transfer our merits to them. In exchange, we beg them to spare your life.”

After this there was a pause for about ten minutes and the dying man’s posture seemed to indicate that the devas were in a thoughtful mood; but in the end he said, “They don’t agree to your suggestion. They want you to go back to your vihara.”

His relatives at that moment became disconsolate and wanted me to stay on till his end came, fearing that some bad apparitions might appear in my absence to take him to the lower realms. The devas, however, insisted that I should go. When his relatives realised that they could not retain me any longer, one of them beckoned me to another room. I pretended that I was leaving the house, but slipped into the other room and waited to see from there his passing away into devaloka.

After a while he exclaimed, “Bhante is sitting in the other room. The devas want him to leave that room also and go to his vihara!”

I felt amused and stayed on in spite of what I was told. Suddenly I heard him muttering excitedly, “Don’t tie me up and drag me!” This he repeated several times.

I could not conceal myself any longer and hurried to his bedside. “What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Some ghastly goblins are trying to drag me along with them,” he answered.

I realised that if he died at that moment, he would go to the hellish realm. So I started to recite the suttas once again and after a pause I asked him, “Are the goblins still there?”

“No,” he said, “they have departed.”

By that time, the long night was almost over and streaks of dawn were visible in the eastern sky. The devas were still there waiting in their chariots; this I gathered from the dying man after asking him. Again I made a request to the devas through Mr Chowdury to leave him in exchange for the offering of merits acquired by everyone present, including myself. All, by their acclamation, approved of my suggestion. This time, the devas relented as I could gather from the dying man, and took their departure.

“Do you still see any vision?” I asked.

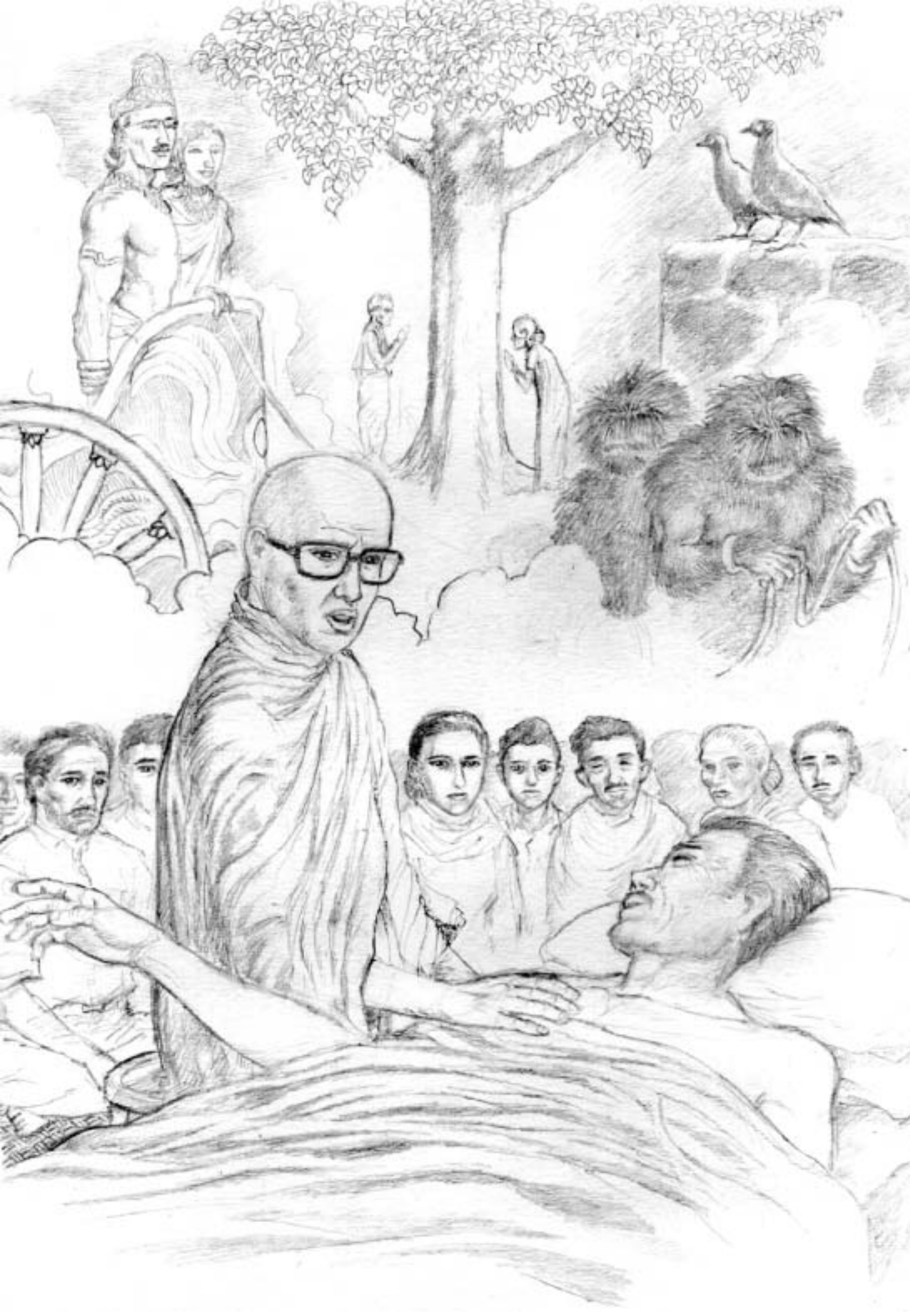
“Yes,” he replied, “my parents are still lingering on under the bodhi tree.”

This meant that the pull from the human world was very strong on him and he might be reborn in this world.<sup>4</sup> Again I suggested that we all offer our accumulated merits to his departed parents in exchange for which they should take their leave as the devas had done. It appeared from the dying man’s indication that his father was willing to agree to my request, but not his mother. I was upset and expressed my resentment at the maternal intransigence.

“How can this be?” I said. “Now, you tell them that as the devas have agreed to my request, it is quite improper for them

---

<sup>4</sup> See previous footnote.



*Venerable Rastrapal at the bedside of Mr A C Chowdury who was then perceiving dying visions.*

not to do so. This sort of conduct on their part will cause them harm.”

I had to remonstrate thus several times before it produced the desired result. His parents, as I could gather from him, finally took their leave.

Now that all the visions that had appeared before the dying man were gone, a visible change came over him. He took a deep breath and showed signs of liveliness. When some of his relatives came near him with a lamp to have a close look at his improved condition, he exclaimed, “Don’t worry any more! I’m not going to die.”

A wave of joy and relief swept over all of us to see the dying man coming to life again. We all felt overwhelmed by this unprecedented event which had been unfolding in a kaleidoscopic manner. It was then 5 o’clock in the morning. A sleepless night had passed for all those present, but strangely enough, there was no sign of exhaustion shown by anyone, so absorbing and thrilling had this incident been. I then took my leave and returned to my vihara.

However, our victory over death was short-lived. At about 10.30 a.m., Mr A C Chowdury’s brother-in-law called to inform me that after passing some five hours in an apparently good condition, he had relapsed into complete exhaustion and his end appeared to be imminent. Both of us hurried to his house, which was overflowing with crowds of curious villagers who had heard of the night’s dramatic events.

I took my seat by his bedside and asked, “How are you feeling now?”



“I can’t survive any longer,” he gasped.

I gave words of encouragement and urged him to remember the good deeds he had done in life. Occasionally I asked whether he was having any vision. Each time, the reply was “No.”

It was then 11.20 a.m. and one of his relations, realising that the time for a monk’s last meal of the day was drawing close, asked me to retire for my meal. I told him rather vehemently that I could not possibly leave Mr Chowdury at that stage, even to have my meal. This created a ripple of sensation among all the onlookers for they were at fever pitch to see how events would unfold.

I again asked the dying man, “Do you see any vision?”

“Yes,” he said, “they have come again... the devas in the chariot.”

The appearance of the devas at the time when I insisted on staying by his bedside instead of retiring to take my last meal for the day intrigued me for a long time. Later, when I sought clarification on this matter from Venerables Ñānissara Mahathera and Silalankara Mahathera, they both told me that the devas must have been waiting for me to depart to take my meal so that they could take away the dying man in my absence; but when they found that I was resolute about staying, they eventually appeared to take him away.

“Bhante, the devas implore you to go back to your vihara,” said the dying man. “They insist that you go back to your vihara.”

“Why?” I asked myself. Could their hesitancy in taking the dying man from my presence be due to their obligation to me for having taken the five precepts and listened to the suttas from me? The plausibility of this explanation was confirmed

by both the Venerable Mahatheras when I related the incident to them later on.

As I felt his death was imminent, I asked him to tell the devas, “They can take you away in my presence. I have no objection to their doing so. I give you permission to leave us most gladly.”

I did this because he was going to the region of the devas to which he was entitled by virtue of his merits and which I sincerely wished for. I next asked his elder brother, wife and daughter to bid him their final farewell, which they all gladly did.

The stage was now set for his departure for the next world. His face was bright and full of beatitude as he took his leave from us by uttering his last words, “I am going now.”

Then I placed my hand on his chest. I felt that it was still quite warm. The dying man, as I could gather, was still conscious, and seemed to be muttering to himself the devotional phrases that he had recited throughout his life. He then lifted his right hand with great effort and moved it in a way that seemed to indicate that he was reaching out for something. I could not make out what he wanted until someone from the crowd suggested, “Bhante, maybe he’s trying to touch your feet, as he did last night.”

I moved my right foot into contact with his outstretched hand. The contact seemed to have caused great satisfaction as could be seen from the expression on his face. He bent his arm, touched his forehead with that hand, and then placed his arm straight by his side. I felt the warmth in his chest gradually decreasing and within a minute or two, his body

suddenly jerked and there was a last gasp before it became still and lifeless. When his chest felt quite cool, I withdrew my hand and looked around. No one wept, nor were there any sounds of lamentation coming from any quarter; everyone was either sitting or standing quite calmly. This was a fitting, final farewell to a dying man, quite in conformity with the instructions I had given to Buddhist devotees in the course of my Dhamma talks.

In the above account, we may observe that the visions perceived by the dying man changed according to his state of mind. Favourable visions, e.g. the bodhi tree and the celestial chariot, appeared when his mind was religiously inclined, while unfavourable visions, e.g. the hairy creature, black pigeons and fearsome demons, were perceived when his thoughts turned worldly or were agitated. Another observation is that the recital of the suttas drove away his worldly thoughts and consequently the inauspicious apparitions, and the taking of the five precepts resulted in the appearance of the devas till finally, after a few setbacks which were commendably overcome by the compassionate and skilful intervention of Venerable Rastrapal Bhikkhu, the way was paved for the dying man to be reborn in a heavenly realm.

## **CONCLUSION**

Besides doing as many good deeds as possible to increase the probability of a good rebirth, perhaps the best thing to do to

prepare for a good death is to practise vipassana meditation because it helps one to let go of everything—all attachments, fears, regrets, anger, hatred. If only Venerable Tissa had noted his attachment, and Queen Mallika, her remorse with vipassana mindfulness (*satisampajāna*) just before death, neither would have had to endure a week of suffering, but both would have proceeded straight to heaven like the bhikkhu who meditated right through into devaland. Furthermore, if the last few crucial moments of consciousness before death are involved in observing physical or mental phenomena in terms of impermanence, suffering and non-self, then the object of the rebirth-linking and bhavanga cittas of the next existence will also be a vipassana object. This means that the being of the next existence will be three-rooted and power-packed with the potential for speedy enlightenment.

May we all endeavour to live a pious, virtuous and meditative life, thereby increasing the probability of a good rebirth, and consolidating the possibility of a speedy enlightenment.

# Appendix

*Grateful acknowledgement is made to Koperasi Buddhisme Malaysia Berhad (Malaysian Buddhist Co-operative Society Limited) for permission to reprint the following edited excerpt from its free publication, A Guide to Proper Buddhist Funeral (Petaling Jaya: KBMB; 1999), pp. 1–5.*

---

## **THINGS TO BE DONE WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER IS CRITICALLY ILL**

### **1** *Overcoming our own fear and attachment*

The best way to help someone who is dying is to encourage him to have a positive, peaceful mind. That means being free of disturbing emotions such as fear, anger, attachment, depression, etc. To be able to help someone else achieve such a state of mind, we need to work first on our own state of

mind, i.e. work on reducing our own fear, etc. If we ourselves have disturbing emotions regarding death, it will be very difficult to help another person overcome his.

In the case of loved ones, it is best to learn to let them go. Clinging to them will cause both our mind and the mind of the dying to be disturbed. So it is advisable to be calm and peaceful, willing to listen to whatever they wish to say. Be kind, sensitive and supportive, but try to avoid strong emotional reactions.

- 2 The dying person too should be encouraged to accept death as a natural and inevitable phenomenon, and that all of us come according to our kamma and have to go according to our kamma.

*Sabbe sattā maranti ca, mariṃsu ca marissare.*

*Tethevāhaṃ marissāmi; natthi me ettha saṃsayo.*

All beings surely die, have always died and will always die. In the same way I shall surely die; doubt about this does not exist in me.

*Anonymous*

- 3 He should constantly be encouraged to reflect on the good deeds that he has done, and be reassured that these wholesome deeds of his will lead him to a good rebirth and support him in his next life.

*Kammassakomhi kammadāyādo kammayoni kammabandhu  
kammaṇṇisaṇṇo. Yaṃ kammaṃkarissāmi kalyāṇaṃ vā  
pāpakaṃ vā. Tassa dāyādo bhavissāmīti.*

I am the owner of my deeds, heir of my deeds; I originate from my deeds, am bound to my deeds, have my deeds as my refuge. Whatever deed I do, whether good or bad, I shall be its heir.

*Anguttara Nikaya 6.1.7*

- 4 Family members may reassure the dying person that he need not worry about them, that he should keep his mind calm and peaceful, and that it will be all right to go when his time comes.
- 5 Give donations and do other meritorious deeds in his name and share the merit with him. If possible, get him personally involved in the meritorious act, or else he should be informed about it and he should acknowledge it.

*Idha nandati, pecca nandati. Katapuñño ubhayattha nandati.  
Puññaṃ me katanti nandati; bhiiyo nandati suggaṭiṃ gato.*

Here he is happy, hereafter he is happy. In both states the well doer is happy. “Good have I done” (thinking thus), he is happy. Furthermore, is he happy, having gone to a blissful state.

*Dhammapada 18*

- 6 If the dying person has faith in the Buddhasasana, a small image of the Buddha, Kuan Yin or some other bodhisatta which the sick person has faith in, may be placed strategically by his bedside as an object for contemplation (a constant reminder of the noble qualities the icons represent).

- 7 Chanting of appropriate *parittas* [protective verses] by either monks or laymen could be organised to comfort the dying person and his family members.
- 8 He should be encouraged to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. Monks could be invited for breakfast or lunch dana and gifts in the form of requisites could be prepared for him to offer to the Sangha.
- 9 If the dying person has been practising meditation, remind him of the importance of mindfulness. Encourage him to constantly note the arising and falling of events, viz. thoughts, memories, emotions, visions, sensory perceptions.

True it is, true it is, householder, that your body is sickly, soiled and encumbered. For householder, who would claim even a moment's health, carrying this body about, except through sheer foolishness? Therefore, householder, thus you should train yourself: "Though my body is sick, my mind shall not be sick." Thus, householder, must you train yourself.

*Samyutta Nikaya 22.1.1*

- 10 Dhamma friends who are practitioners of meditation can be invited to radiate loving-kindness (*mettā*) to the dying person to ease his suffering. In their absence, you too can do it by yourself. Sitting in a comfortable posture, first radiate metta to yourself, then to the sick person. You may mentally use words like, "May you be well and happy. May you be free from suffering. May you be in good health. May you be at



peace”. Feel the peaceful metta from your heart envelop and penetrate the heart of the sick person. Feel the vibrations that come with the loving-kindness enveloping the sick person’s body.

11 *Helping someone who is not a Buddhist*

If the dying person belongs to another religion or has little faith in the Buddhasasana, encourage him to have faith, to pray, to have positive thoughts, etc. in accordance with his religious beliefs and practices. Do not try to impose your own beliefs to convert him as this may give rise to confusion, disturbing emotions or negative thoughts in the mind of the dying.

If the person has no religion, but seems to be open-minded, you can try to talk about the Dhamma, for example, about loving-kindness and compassion, about the truth of impermanence, about the Four Noble Truths, etc. You can try to talk about the Buddha, taking refuge in the Triple Gem, etc. but be sensitive: don’t be aggressive, otherwise the person could react negatively. If the person has no interest in religious or spiritual matters, find ways to talk to him so that he can be free of anger, attachment, fear, etc. and have a positive, peaceful state of mind.

**Note:**

Most people are afraid of death because they feel uncertain of the future. If one is not an *ariya* [saint], there is still the chance of rebirth in *apāya* [a state of deprivation i.e. hell, peta or animal realms].

Though we do not wish to be reborn into a woeful plane, there may be deeds performed in the past that can still cause rebirth in *apaya*. It is useless to think of *apaya* with aversion and fear, but the thought of *apaya* is helpful when it reminds us to cultivate *kusala kamma* (wholesome action) at this crucial moment, instead of *akusala kamma* (unwholesome action).

In the *Samyutta Nikaya* (11.6.4), we find the Buddha advising Mahanama about how a wise lay follower who is sick may be admonished by another wise lay follower.

“A discreet [sotapanna] lay disciple, Mahanama, who is sick... should be admonished by another discreet lay-disciple with the four comfortable assurances thus: “Take comfort, dear sir, in your unwavering loyalty to the Buddha, saying: He is the Exalted One, Arahant, fully enlightened One... Take comfort, dear sir, in your unwavering loyalty to the Dhamma... Take comfort, dear sir, in your unwavering loyalty to the Sangha... Take comfort, dear sir, in your possession of the virtues dear to the Ariyas...” A discreet lay disciple, Mahanama, who is sick... should be admonished by another discreet lay disciple with these four comfortable assurances.

Then, supposing he has longing for his parents, he should thus be spoken to:

If he says “I have longing for my parents,” the other should reply, “But, my dear sir, you are subject to death. Whether you feel longing for your parents or not, you will have to die. It were just well for you to abandon the longing you have for your parents.”

...longing for children,... longing for five human pleasures of sense,... longing for heavenly delights... etc.

Then if the sick man’s thoughts are so fixed, let the other say, “My friend, even the Brahma World is impermanent, not lasting,

prisoned in a person [subject to individuality]. Well for you, friend, if you raise your mind above the Brahma World and fix it on cessation from the person pack [five aggregates, i.e. matter, feelings, memory, mental factors and consciousness].

And if the sick man says he has done so, then Mahanama, I declare that there is no difference between the lay disciple who thus avers and the monk whose heart is freed from the *āsavas* [taints of the mind] that is, between the release of the one and the release of the other.”

# Glossary of Buddhist Terms

*Italicised words in the explanations below are individually glossed. A number within brackets denotes the page in the text where a more detailed explanation can be found, and a numeric superscript, the number of the footnote on that page.*

**Abhidhamma** Higher Dhamma, constituting the third Basket of the *Tipiṭaka*.

**abhijjhā** covetousness.

**adosa** non-hate; loving-kindness.

**aggregates, five** matter, feelings, memory, mental factors. (*cetasikas*) and consciousness (23), of which sentient beings are generally constituted.

**ahetuka-ditṭhi** acausality view (43).

**ahosikamma** defunct *kamma* (40).

**akiriya-ditṭhi** inefficacy-of-action view (43).

**akusala** unwholesome.

**akusalakamma** unwholesome action/deed.

**akusalakammamāpatha** unwholesome course of action (42).

**alobha** non-attachment; generosity.

**amoha** non-delusion; wisdom.

**anāgāmi** non-returner, i.e. an *ariya* who has attained the third stage of enlightenment/sainthood, and so will not “return” to take rebirth in the sense-sphere plane, but will be reborn in the *brahmā* realm.

**anattā** non-self.

**anicca** impermanence.

**añjali** palms placed together with fingers pointing upwards as a sign of respect.

**aparāpariyavedanīyakamma** indefinitely effective *kamma* (28).

**apāya** state of woe, i.e. hell, *peta*, or animal realms.

**arahant** a liberated person who has eradicated all defilements, i.e. an *ariya* who has attained the final, fourth stage of enlightenment/sainthood, and so will not be born again after *parinibbāna*.

**ariya** saint; noble; one who has attained any of the four stages of enlightenment/sainthood, ie *sotāpanna*, *sakadāgāmi*, *anāgāmi*, *arahant*.

**asadisadāna** incomparable *dāna*.

**asaṅkhyeyyakappa** incalculable aeon (70<sup>1</sup>).

**āsava** taint of the mind.

**Avīci** the deepest and severest hell.

**bardo** gap in between; intermediate state between death and rebirth (xv).

**Bhaddakappa** Auspicious Aeon (19<sup>1</sup>).

**Bhante** Venerable Sir.

**bhāvanā** meditation; mental/spiritual development.

**bhavaṅga** life-continuum; sub-consciousness (24).

**bhikkhu** Theravada Buddhist monk.

**bodhisatta** future Buddha.

**brahmā** asexual deity.

**Buddhasāsana** the Buddha's Dispensation.

**cetanā** volition (23).

**cetasika** mental factor (23).

**citta** consciousness, mind (23).

**cittakkhaṇa** mind-moment (24).

**cittavīthi** cognitive process (8 ff.)

**cognize** know, perceive, be aware of an object (23<sup>1</sup>).

**commentarial** of or relating to the classical commentaries on the *Tipiṭaka*.

**conditioned phenomena** physical and mental phenomena which arise due to the interaction of causes or conditions.

**dāna** giving; an offering of food or other requisites.

**dasapuññakiriyavatthu** ten bases of meritorious action (45).

**deva** male deity; deity in general.

**devaloka** heavenly realm.

**devī** female deity.

**Dhamma** Teaching of the Buddha.

**diṭṭhadhammavedanīyakamma** immediately effective *kamma* (28).

**dosa** hatred; anger; unpleasant mental state ranging from subtle dislike to intense hate/anger.

**dukkha** all-pervading unsatisfactoriness; suffering inherent in all *conditioned phenomena*.

**dvāra** door (25)

**janakakamma** productive *kamma* (35–36)

**jhāna** meditative absorption (46)

**kaḥāpaṇa** ancient Indian coin.

**kalāpa** minute, elementary particle of matter (30–31)

**kamma** volitional action (23, 27, 28, 15 ff.)

**kammaniyāma** law of *kamma* (34)

**kappiyakāraka** *bhikkhus'* steward, i.e. “one who makes” (*kāraka*) things allowable (*kappiya*) for *bhikkhus*. The *Vinaya* forbids a *bhikkhu* from doing certain things, e.g. accepting and storing food after noon, helping himself to food that has not been formally offered, weeding and pruning, handling money, selling and buying, etc. A layperson who performs such things on his behalf is called a *kappiyakāraka*.

**Karaṇīya Metta Sutta** Discourse on Loving kindness.

**karuṇā** compassion

**Kassapa Buddha** the Buddha before Gotama Buddha (19<sup>1</sup>)

**kaṭattākamma** reserve *kamma* (83)

**icca** function.

**kusala** wholesome.

**kuṭi** monk's cottage.

**lobha** attachment; mental state ranging from subtle liking to gross craving.

**magga** path; the first supramundane *citta* at the moment of enlightenment.

**mahābhūtā** great essentials (30).

**Mahāpadāna Sutta** Great Legend Discourse, where the Buddha gave a biographical sketch of the six *Sammāsambuddhas* before Him, and a detailed account of the earliest of them, Vipassi Buddha, before and after His enlightenment (19<sup>1</sup>).

**Maṅgala Sutta** Discourse on (the Highest) Blessings.

**Meghiya Sutta** Discourse to Ven Meghiya on how to prepare for enlightenment.

**mettā** loving-kindness.

**micchādiṭṭhi** wrong view about the true nature of reality (43).

**mindfulness** careful, objective, mental observation of *conditioned phenomena* in the light of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*.

**moha** delusion about the true nature of reality.

**muditā** appreciative joy.

**natthika-diṭṭhi** nihilism (43).

**nutriment** nutritive essence, a secondary element present in all *kalāpas* (30–32).

**Paccekabuddha** Solitary Buddha, i.e. person who has attained *arahantship* and consequent psychic powers all by himself, but is unable to guide others to enlightenment (cf. *Sammāsambuddha*).

**Pārājika** Defeat, i.e. a disciplinary rule for *bhikkhus*, the breaking of which entails permanent expulsion from the *Saṅgha*.

**pāramī** perfection of ten virtues: *dāna*, *sīla*, renunciation, wisdom, effort, patience, truthfulness, resolution, *mettā* and equanimity.



**parinibbāna** final passing away/liberation of an *arahant*.

**paritta** protective verse.

**Pātimokkha** Code of monastic rules.

**peta** departed one; ghost.

**Piṭaka** Basket (of palm leaf manuscripts on which Theravada scriptures were first inscribed); a major division of Buddhist scriptures (see also *Tipiṭaka*).

**pūjā** offering.

**Ratana Sutta** Jewel Discourse where asseverations of truth based on the virtues of the Three Jewels (Buddha, *Dhamma*, *Saṅgha*) were made for the welfare of the audience. Tradition holds that Ven Ananda, at the Buddha's request, recited this versified discourse repeatedly throughout the night to dispel evil spirits which caused an epidemic during a famine in Vesali. Many deities gathered to listen to the recitation, lesser deities making way for more powerful ones. Consequently, the evil spirits were forced to flee.

**sakadāgāmi** once-returner, i.e. an *ariya* who has attained the second stage of enlightenment/saint-hood, and so will "return" only once more to take rebirth in the sense-sphere plane.

**samatha** tranquillity.

**sāmaṇera** novice Theravada Buddhist monk.

**Sammāsambuddha** Buddha, i.e. a human being who, after innumerable lifetimes of *pāramī* development, attains *arahantship*, omniscience, and exclusive psychic powers all by himself, consequently having the extraordinary ability to expound the *Dhamma* and guide others to enlightenment (cf. *Paccekabuddha*).

**samsāra** round of births.

**Saṅgha** Community of *bhikkhus* and *sāmaṇeras*.

**saṅkhārupekkhañāṇa** insight knowledge of equanimity regarding all perceptible, *conditioned phenomena*.

**Sāsana** Dispensation (of the Buddha).

**Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** Discourse on the Four Foundations of *Mindfulness*, where the Buddha explained various subjects of meditation (mostly *vipassanā*) under four main categories.

**satisampajāna** *mindfulness* and clear comprehension.

**sīla** virtue; moral integrity.

**sotāpanna** stream-enterer, i.e. an *ariya* who has attained the first stage of enlightenment/sainthood.

**sotāpatti** stream-entry.

**sutta, suttanta** discourse; string (that “ties” utterances together).

**Tāvatiṃsa** Heaven of the Thirty-three Dieties, i.e. the second heavenly realm of Theravada Buddhist cosmology.

**Tipiṭaka** Three Baskets (*Piṭakas*), the full set of canonical Theravada scriptures i.e. *Vinayaṭiṭaka*, *Suttaṭiṭaka* and *Abhidhammaṭiṭaka*.

**Tusita Heaven** the fourth heavenly realm of Theravada Buddhist cosmology.

**upaghāṭakakamma** destructive *kamma* (38).

**upapajavedanīyakamma** subsequently effective *kamma* (28).

**upapīlakakamma** obstructive *kamma* (37).

**upāsaka** Buddhist layman.

**upatthambhakakamma** supportive *kamma* (36).

**upekkhā** equanimity.

**Vajrāsana** Diamond Seat (where the Buddha sat when He attained enlightenment).

**vihāra** monastery; monks' place of dwelling.

**Vinaya** Discipline, i.e. monastic law and regulations for the *Saṅgha*, constituting one of the Three *Piṭakas*.

**vipassanā** insight into *conditioned phenomena*; seeing things as they really are.

**vyāpāda** ill will.

**zhong yin** consciousness in the middle; intermediate state between death and rebirth ([xvi](#)).

# Biodata

**AGGACITTA BHIKKHU** was ordained as a *sāmaṇera* [novice monk] at the age of 24 on Wesak 1978 in the Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre, Penang, by its founder, Phra Khru Dhammabarnchanvud. He received his Higher Ordination at the end of 1979 from the Nayaka (Leading) Sayadaws of Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha, Yangon, Burma, with the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw U Sobhana acting as his *upajjhāya* [preceptor].

Since his renunciation, he has studied and practised the Dhamma under various teachers—Phra Khru Dhammabarnchanvud, Sayadaw U Javana, Sayadaw U Pandita, Lampang Sayadaw U Dhammananda, Yan Kin Forest Sayadaw U Tissara, and Pha Auk Forest Sayadaw U Acinna—as well as by himself, including living the life of a solitary forest-dweller in the jungles of Southeast Asia for more than ten years.

A Dhamma-practitioner at heart, the venerable bhikkhu has written/translated/edited the following practice-orientated works: *The Importance of Keeping the Five Precepts* (1982); *Cessation Experiences and the Notion of Enlightenment* (1995); “Tales of Cessation” (in *Vipassanā Tribune*, Nov 1998); *Dhamma Therapy* (trans., 1984); *In this Very Life* (trans., 1993); and *Raindrops in Hot Summer* (ed., 1995).

**LEONG LIEW GEOK**, the venerable author’s elder sister, is an Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore, where she has been teaching since 1981. Born in Penang, she was educated in Penang, Australia, England and the United States. She is the author of *Love is Not Enough* (1991), a collection of poems, and a second volume, *Women without Men* (1999; forthcoming). She edited *More than Half the Sky: Creative Writings by Thirty Singaporean Women* (1998). She is currently working on a collection of essays on the Literature in English of the Pacific War in Malaysia and Singapore. She is married, and has three children.