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Buddhist Rebirth: A Survey of Pre-Modern Asian Thought

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During, and most especially after the death of the Buddha, there existed much confusion and speculation regarding Buddhist doctrines of rebirth. The theoretical and philosophical aspects of the concepts of rebirth were among the concerns of these Buddhists. How could one be reborn if one did not have a self? How did one's karma affect the circumstances of one's rebirth? On another level, there was much debate over the mechanics of rebirth. How does one's karma trigger rebirth if there is no transmigration? Is there an intermediate state of being between death and life, and if so, what form did this state take?

Some schools did not approach the philosophical problems of rebirth. Taking the teachings of karma and rebirth as true based on accounts of extra-sensory verification by Gautama Buddha and others (Hick 349), these chose to concentrate on the practical aspects of practice in the here-and-now rather than to tie up valuable time and energy in intellectual nit-picking.

Still other schools banked on rebirth, so to speak, finding in it the key to eventual liberation.

In an attempt to display the range of concerns and interests regarding rebirth, I plan to make a brief and sampled survey of a few select schools and sects of Buddhism. More emphasis will be placed on Indian Buddhism as it was here that much of the debates raged and were settled for the descendent forms of Buddhism in other parts of the globe, namely China and Japan. Special consideration will be given, however, to Tibetan and Pure Land schools as their understandings of or interest in rebirth vary

significantly from that of traditional Indic-Buddhist views. While contemporary scholars, particularly those in the West, have begun to tackle the karma and rebirth debates once again, adding to the fray scientific reasoning, I will not be addressing their efforts here.

THE INDIC DEBATES

No-Self and Rebirth

It is important to the study of rebirth that frequently it is asked, What it is that is reborn if not the Self (*atman*)? And since there is no Self, but only bundled aggregates, one wonders if it is the aggregates that are reborn and then to what extent those aggregates which continue to arise in a separate life constitute the same personal entity which existed in the former life. (The precise relation between the aggregates and the personal entity was thoroughly explored by the later Indic Madyamaka school, the theories of which are detailed later in this paper.)

First, let us look at the earlier Indic schools which determined that death and rebirth as we generally know it were not really different than momentary death and rebirth.

There are many students of Buddhist thought who have few problems accepting intellectually the Buddhist doctrine of *Patitya-Samutpada*, co-conditioned origination, which involves the concept of momentary birth and death, and the interconnected simultaneous arising of the five *skandhas*. A greater intellectual leap-of-faith, so to speak, is required in extending

this understanding to the link between one's death and subsequent rebirth.

Looking more closely, in a given ordinary moment of our life, our present actions give rise to, that is condition, the following moment. The actions performed during this instant of existence bear their fruits in the context of a complex and intertwining set of karmic activity originating not only with the individual her or himself, but with the entire environment s/he interacts with. Because of this, any given act's consequences will be shaped by this tremendous interconnectedness of other actions and their consequences. A certain sense of homogeny of existence is thus maintained. Most actions one performs will not drastically alter the general conditions of existence and thus contiguity and continuity is easily perceived, and usually expected. (The problem lies with the fact that this very continuity is mistaken as a Self or *atman*.)

Just as the differing individual frames of a motion picture appear to follow, or even flow, one into another and make sense, each individual instant of existence appears to follow or flow one into another. The conditions of one moment in our everyday lives are so similar to the conditions of the next that the casual causal relationship is evident. This momentary death and rebirth is easily validated.

Specifically, the individual personal entity which dies and is reborn every moment is made up more or less of it's five intimately intertwined skandhas in interaction with the surrounding environment. At the point of biological death, this

association dissolves. Poussin defines death in the Buddhist perspective as

the dissociation of the organism constituted at birth to experience the fruits of a certain set of actions. . . . death marks the end of this homogeneous renewing [of momentary existence]: it is the separation of the constituent elements of the pseudo-individual, the dissociation of the elements (*skandha*), i.e. of the gross elements (*mahabhuta*, *rupakaya*) and of the *vijana*, or intellect. (Poussin 447)

With biological death the physical form, one's body, ceases to function in a manner which will support the arising of all of the other constituent parts. Let's study this in more detail.

The first skandha, Matter, makes up our physical form. The second skandha, Sensations, which are "experienced through the contact of physical and mental organs with the external world" (Rahula 20), is dependent upon the first, as the physical and mental organs are made of matter. The third skandha, Perceptions, which "recognize objects whether physical or mental" and "are produced through the contact of our six faculties with the external world" (Rahula 21), depends upon the second (and therefor the first) as sensations must exist to be perceived. The fourth skandha, Mental Formations, "include all volitional activities" (Rahula 22). As volitional activities arise due to attachments to objects, and attachments can only occur where objects are perceived, Mental Formations are dependant upon the third skandha (and thus on the first and second). The Fifth skandha, Consciousness, is simply awareness.

The Buddha declared in unequivocal terms that consciousness depends on matter, sensation, perception and mental formations, and that it cannot exist

independently of them" (Rahula 25).

So, as the body dies, sensory organs cease to function, perceptions come to an end, and mental formations based on perceptions discontinue to arise. This leaves consciousness to condition rebirth.

But the connection between this death consciousness and the birth consciousness is much more difficult to comprehend than that between momentary death and rebirth. This is because the moment of death conditions a following state of existence that is dramatically different than that of the "ordinary" day-to-day existence one knows to be her or his life. Going back to the analogy of the motion picture, the casual causal relationship between these two moments would be as difficult to comprehend as story line of a Humphrey Bogart movie to which a Whoopi Goldberg movie had been spliced. Both continuity and contiguity are not as readily apparent.

Intermediate State

Of much dispute between the various schools of Indian Buddhism was the issue of an intermediate-state between the moment of death and the moment of rebirth (McDermott 170). Let us first take a very brief look at a few of those schools which believed in an intermediate state of existence.

According to Bareau, the Saravastivadins, Sammatiyas, and Purvasailas believed firmly in an intermediate existence that linked death and rebirth (449). In addition, the Vatsiputriyas

also held a belief in an intermediate existence between death and rebirth, but their conception of this existence varied greatly from the others, as we shall see. The Theravadins and Mahasanghikas, on the other hand, firmly denied all forms of intermediate existence (Bareau 449).

Representative of a number of schools believing in intermediate existence is the Sarvastivadins. Vasubandhu, in his Sarvastivadin years, argued that between the moment of death and the moment of rebirth, each of which are made up the five aggregates, is the karmically determined *antara bhava*, also made up of the five *skandhas*. This is said to arise in the place of death and carry the "configuration of the future being" (McDermott 171-172).

Vasubandhu at that point held that rebirth takes place in the following manner: The fairly substantial and conscious *antara bhava*, possessing both a "divine eye" and a "fully developed set of sexual organs" sees its parents joined in intercourse and becomes aroused by the scene. It becomes desirous of one of the parents (the father, if female and the mother, if male) and jealous of the other parent. Thus, out of this desire and hatred, it becomes attached in the womb, where it conditions the first moment of "birth existence" (*pratisamdhi*) (McDermott 170-172).

The early school of the Vatsiputriyas, or Pudgalavadins (McDermott 168), which developed from the Sthavira school, also believed in an intermediate state of being. However, while the intermediate being explained by Vasubandhu consisted solely

of a bundle of five aggregates, the Vatsiputriyas' intermediate being did not. They believed, rather,

in the existence of a "person" (*pudgala*) who is neither identical to the five aggregates (*skandhas*) that make up the living being nor different from them; [and existing] neither within these five aggregates nor outside them. . . . [T]his "person" lives on from one existence to the next, thus ensuring the continuing identities of the agent of an act and of the being who suffers its effects in this life or the next. (Bareau 448)

In other words, the *pudgala* does not undergo change. It does not die to be reborn in each conscious moment. Yet, ineffably, it is neither true that it remains the same from one instant to the next (McDermott 169). This view was unique among the early Buddhist schools, and the hypothesis of the *pudgala* was rejected by all other sects as being a "disguised" concept of *atman*, though the Vatsiputriyas maintained that it was not (Bareau 448).

The Theravadin school, which still survives to this day, denied the possibility of an intermediate state, and explained the process of rebirth in terms of "rebirth-linking (*patisandhi*) of the present state with the immediately preceding . . . state of becoming (McDermott 169)." The Theravadin figure Buddhaghosa posited that in the normal experience of death the sense faculties fail one by one, leaving only the consciousness supported only by "the heart-basis". The very last instant of consciousness before death (the *cuti vinnana*) karmically conditions the very first instant of consciousness, the (*patisandhi vinnana*) which occurs at the time of conception.

Thus, nothing is carried over. Rather the relationship

between the *cuti vinnana* and the *patisandhi vinnana* is analogous to the relationship between a seal and wax: the seal and the impression it leaves in the wax are obviously not the same entity, but the impression is very much caused, or conditioned by the seal. This results in the impression, which takes on the same shape, or qualities, of the seal. Thus nothing, including the karma itself, transmigrates. Instead,

What was reborn was not an entity, but an evolving consciousness, whose quality had been conditioned by karma. Furthermore, karma was understood to be more than just acts and deeds in any one life. It was above all the volition that stood behind those deeds.
(Mathews 125)

Determinism, Retribution, Karma, and the Middle Way

It is because of this volitional element that the theories of karmic retribution found in some texts puzzle some scholars. The natural or physical elements of one's environment usually cannot be traced to volitional actions. A rock warming up as sunlight hits it may be a karmic process, but there is no volition involved. While social and economic conditions arise from people's volitional actions, and although an individual is linked somewhat to that arising due to their participation in the various social and economic institutions (the Chinese Hua-Yen School was particularly aware of this), the link is not a direct one.

Karma provided tendencies or conditions rather than consequences as such. . . . If anything could be said to be predetermined, it was the physical environment that can give rise, or not give rise, to opportunity. Canonical Buddhism recognized apart from karma, other

forces that affect causality. These included biological laws, accident and attack. It would be incorrect to assume that *dukkha* or *sukha* (pleasure) were the product only of one's karma or actions. (Mathews 125-6)

To illustrate, in the Cakkavattisihanada Sutta, "unstable social and economic conditions are said to be conducive to crime" (Mathews 139). To say that a person who is the victim of a crime is suffering retribution for a crime that s/he committed in the past would be incorrect, as the cause of the crime is more linked to the criminal's past conduct, and to the greater social and economic conditions at large, than it is to the victim's past actions. Although it can be argued that the victim helped somewhat to condition the occurrence of the crime by participating in the social and economic processes, that this participation would be enough for retribution of this scale to occur, it would follow that all would be the victims of such crime.

The other problem of belief in retribution is that it leans towards a deterministic understanding of the karmic process. It is certain that the Buddha's teachings did not support deterministic views. Given these arguments, it can be assumed that when the Buddha spoke of karmic retribution, he may have been addressing audiences for which such a lesson would have been most useful (*upaya*).

So how then is this related to rebirth? How is it that past actions affect the present moment and future moments, especially those occurring in the next life, in a way that is not

deterministic? How is karma not-yet-expended "carried" into the next life?

In the Theravadin *Abhidamma*, karma was seen as "a continuum, a process interpenetrating and spanning past, present, and future occasions" (Mathews 127). Here karma is existent not as a substance but as a potential. While a past act no longer exists as such, its potential is present in the moment at hand. For example, "each inspired thought process renders service to the next mental state, passing on the totality of its energy" (Mathews 127).

It is because of this that the last thought is so integral to the process of rebirth. Or perhaps more accurately, as Mathews has pointed out, it is not necessarily the last thought, or death-consciousness, but rather the thought preceding and thus conditioning it is the most important (Mathews 130). In a person dying in a timely and natural manner is said to experience a "terminal" thought consciousness,

which is affected by one of three thought objects: recent karma (either as volition and deed just performed, or as something that has been habitual); a symbolic memory of one great act, good or bad (*kamma-nimitta*); or by some indication or anticipation of the place of rebirth (*gati-nimatta*). [It is] this experience [which] is registered by the final death-consciousness (*cuti-citta*). (Mathews 129)

It is this that has the power to enter into the appropriate matrix as rebirth consciousness (*patisandhi-vinnana*), carrying with it all the surplus karma of the previous existence. (Mathews 130)

The Yogacara school presented a slightly different answer to this issue by developing the concept of the Storehouse

consciousness (*Alaya-Vijnana*). This is one of the six types of consciousness making up the aggregate (*skandha*) of consciousness (*vijnana*). It is roughly similar to the Western notion of the subconscious in that it has influence on one's actions but is unknowable by ordinary humans. This consciousness serves as a receptacle of karmic "seeds" (*bijas*), or energies generated by one's actions. According to Weinstein,

Like the other types of consciousness, the *alaya* is impermanent, reproducing itself, as do the seeds that comprise it, from one moment to the next. It differs from the other six types of consciousness, which are readily discernible, in that it is fully cognizable only to Buddhas. . . .(177)

The precise functioning and nature of the *alaya* was debated heavily among Yogacara scholars in the 6th and 7th centuries C.E., the most influential of which was Dharmapala (530-561 C.E.), as it was his interpretation which was transmitted to China where it was adopted and further developed by Chi, or K'uei-chi, "into the doctrinal system subsequently called Fa-hsiang (Jpn., Hosso)" (Weinstein 178).

This doctrinal system divided the aggregate of *vijnana* into eight types rather than six. Fa-hsiang counted the *alaya* as the eighth of these, and held that it

receives the effects of all good and evil acts, whether physical, verbal, or mental, and stores them as "seeds." When the appropriate conditions are in place, these seeds, as the word implies, produce their own effects, which are manifested as the unique psychological and physical makeup of each being. The realm and conditions of rebirth are likewise determined by the mixture of seeds stored in the *-vijnana*. (Weinstein 178)

The seventh consciousness, of which ordinary beings are also unaware, "is that part of the mind that is turned inward, mistaking the for a real self (*atman*), to which image it tenaciously clings". This consciousness, called *mo-na-shih*, fails to understand that "it essentially has no existence apart from the seeds (effects of acts) that it holds". This misunderstanding leads to the wrong belief that all beings have selves (*atman*), which is the precise misconception at the root off all suffering (Weinstein 178).

The Madyamaka School, the self and the Aggregates

With all of the talk of mistaken idea of Self, and of the Consciousness as being the link between successive lives, one must come back to the question of what constitutes the individual entity which experiences these successive lives.

The Madyamaka thinkers, among others, took up the debate on the relationship between the aggregates and the self (personal entity) in great length. Chandrakirti, in the sixth chapter of his *Guide to the Middle Way*, asserts that,

The self is neither essentially other than the aggregates nor of the nature of the aggregates. It is not the basis of the aggregates nor does it inherently possess them. Rather, the self is established in dependence upon the aggregates. (Koller 289)

This dependence upon the aggregates is not meant to imply that the self is completely other than the aggregates. But it would be just as incorrect to assert that the self was the same as the aggregates, or even the collection of aggregates. The

Madyamaka School, also called the "Middle-Way School", sought to understand the self, or personal entity as lying between these extremes.

Echoing the dialogue between King Milinda and Nagasena (*Milindapanha*, 25) in which Nagasena explains the concept of Anatman with the analogy of the chariot, Chandrakirti writes:

Rather the self is established in dependence upon the aggregates. In this respect it is similar to a cart, for a cart is not asserted either (1) to be essentially other than its parts, or (2) to be identical with them, or (3) inherently to possess them or (4) to be inherently dependent upon them, or (5) to be the basis upon which they inherently dependant, or (6) to be the mere collection of them, or (7) to be their shape. (Koller 289)

As the personal entity is partitive, there is no way to identify it solely with any of its parts; nor is it really possible to identify it with even the collection of the parts.

If the mere collection of the parts were the cart, the collection of the same parts placed in a heap should also be the cart. (Koller 289)

However, in the *Madyamakakarikas*, Nagarjuna says:

Of all these actions, whether dissimilar or similar, belonging to certain realms, only one would arise at the moment of birth [of a being]. (17.17)

Kalupahana analyzed this passage as so:

Here, karma is presented as the connecting link between two lives. It is one of a myriad of karmas an individual may have performed, whether they be similar or dissimilar. The fact that only one among such actions of a life-time may appear at the time of the conception of a being and which can influence the new life-process is acknowledged by Nagarjuna. He could not have been unaware of the statement of the Buddha that consciousness (*viññana* which is inextricably bound up with volitional karma) was a possible connecting link between two lives (*Digha-Nikaya* 3.105) and also of

the emphasis placed by his fellow Buddhists on the last thought of the dying person (*cutti-citta*) as having influence over a new life process. (Kalupahana, Nagarjuna 252)

Nagarjuna was clear that though the consciousness may be the link between two lives, *vijnana* is not itself to be mistaken as a Self, nor is it to be assumed that the personal entity remains the same during successive lives:

The view that I existed in the past is not appropriate, for whosoever was in the previous birth, he, indeed, is not identical with his person. (27.3) (Kalupahana, Nagarjuna 378)

Tibetan Schools and the Tibetan Book of the Dead

The Tibetans made a thorough study of the process of death and rebirth. Unlike the even the Indic schools which did believe in an intermediate state of being, the Tibetans held that the intermediate state is quite long and elaborate. Like the Indic schools, they believed the last moment of life to be far more important than the intermediate state. The last moment is of utmost importance simply because it, more than any other moment of existence during one's lifetime, conditions the state of rebirth. Let us read again Poussin's definition of death from the Buddhist perspective.

the dissociation of the organism constituted at birth to experience the fruits of a certain set of actions. . . . death marks the end of this homogeneous renewing [of momentary existence]: it is the separation of the constituent elements of the pseudo-individual, the dissociation of the elements (*skandha*), i.e. of the gross elements (*mahabhuta*, *rupakaya*) and of the *vijnana*, or intellect. (Poussin 447)

Because of this dissociation, any act performed at the instant of death will bear its fruit in a context where far fewer "outside" karmic constraints will condition the outcome. Thus a thought of wishing for a drink of water arising in everyday life will rarely have dire consequences as many factors will temper them. A thought of wishing for a drink of water at the instant of death may have the result of having conditioned one's rebirth into a hell.

In response to the great importance of the last instant of life in the conditioning the state of rebirth, Tibetan Buddhists developed the *Bardo Thodol*.

According to Evans-Wentz, this text was thought to have been handed down orally for many generations before being committed to writing probably in the eighth century C.E., the period which Tantric Buddhism was taking hold in Tibet (Evans-Wentz 73-74). In a forward to a more recent translation, however, Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche tells us that the book was one of six in a series of instructions for liberations composed by Padmasambhava and committed to writing by his wife Yeshe Tsogyal. The *Bardo Thodol*, often called "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" because, like the Egyptian Book of the Dead, it was meant to be read to the dying to assist in the transition of death, is more accurately known as "Liberation By Hearing on the After-Death Plane" (Evans-Wentz 2).

As implied by this title, it is hoped that the words will help the dying to discipline their thoughts so as to eliminate clinging or other actions in the instant of death and in the

stages of intermediate existence. Without such clinging, rebirth would not occur and thus liberation from *samsara* would be achieved. Should the individual not achieve such a state, the hearing of the *Bardo* may at least ease the transition between death and rebirth by informing the dying of the experiences to be expected during the process, and by instructing the dying in the mental disciplines to be practiced in the intermediate state which could influence the conditions for rebirth in one of the more favorable realms.

Pure Land Buddhism

Unlike most other forms of Buddhism which do not focus on rebirth as a central concept, Pure Land relies heavily on the concept of rebirth. Coupled with the belief in savior-type Bodhisattvas, rebirth into a "pure" land or Buddha land becomes the object of practice.

Pure Land Buddhism, popular from the second century CE in much of northern India and Central Asia and immensely important even today in East and South East Asia, is geared to lay Buddhists who haven't either the luxury or will to "master clerical discipline and learning" (Andrews 1). For Pure Land practitioners, the possibility of the release from *samsara* and all of its sufferings and delusions lie in the promise of a "transmigratory rebirth into a pure land, a spiritually pure Buddha-realm where all conditions are conducive to spiritual

progress and rapid advancement to enlightenment and Buddhahood"
(1).

This belief was made possible, of course, by the existence of the Bodhisattva Vow, "All beings, without number, I vow to liberate" (Kapleau 212). One popular Buddha, Amitabha (known variously as Dharmakara, Amita, Amida, Amitayus, A-mi-t'o-fo), took the Bodhisattva Vow further than most. Outlined in the *Larger Pure Land Sutra* were Forty Eight Vows. In three of these vows, Dharmakara (Amitabha) specifies the practice for rebirth into his Buddha Land; vows 18, 19, and 20:

- 18 If I should become a Buddha, and sentient beings of the ten regions who have sincere faith and desire to be born in my country, [producing] even ten reflections, are not born there, excepting those who have committed the five irredeemable evils and maligned the true Dharma, then I will not accept perfect enlightenment.
- 19 If I should become a Buddha, and, when they are about to die, do not appear surrounded by a great host before the sentient beings of the ten regions who have aroused the enlightened mind, practiced various meritorious works, have sincere faith, and have aroused their aspiration desiring to be born in my country, then I will not accept perfect enlightenment.
- 20 If I should become a Buddha, and the sentient beings of the ten regions who hear my name, reflect on my country, store up a stock of merit, and sincerely dedicated it desiring to be born in my country do not achieve the result [of their merit dedication], then I will not accept perfect enlightenment. [Taisho shinshu daizokyo, XII, 268a-b] (Andrews 10)

There are two ways that the practice of nembutsu is purported to affect the status of one's rebirth. While the *Larger Pure Land Sutra* relies on the compassion of Amitabha as

the saving force with nembutsu being the means by which aspirants demonstrate their interest in a better rebirth, the *Amitabha Contemplation Sutra* holds to the belief that the practice on nembutsu will actually annul "bad" karma. In this sutra many of the contemplation exercises close with such statements as "If one perfects this contemplation he will cancel fifty billion *kalpas* of samsaric sinful deeds and will surely be reborn into the Pure Land of Utter Bliss" [Taisho shinshu daizokyo, XII, 343b-c] (Andrews 15). Having had one's bad karma annulled, one would then become worthy of rebirth into the Pure Land.

Both sutras agree however, that by which ever means, any lowly being which had not committed one of the five irredeemable evils -- namely patricide, matricide, murder of an arhat, injuring or killing a Buddha or disrupting the harmony of the monastic order (Andrews 9) -- could attain rebirth by the practice of nembutsu (Andrews 20).

Interestingly, one Chinese sect of Pure Land founded by T'an-luan, the Sui-T'ang School, taught that even those who had committed an irredeemable sin could, with practice of the "Ten Reflections" be reborn into a buddha land (Andrews 23). From the *T'an-luan Commentary*:

Although those of the lowest grades [of rebirth] cannot comprehend that *dharmata* (true reality) is unproduced, simply by the power derived from reciting the Buddha's name they produce the resolve to be reborn and aspire to be reborn in that land. [Taisho shinshu daizokyo 1819.40.839b4-6] (Tanaka 70)

In Japan, the T'ien-t'ai, or Tendai school lent much to the development of Pure Land doctrines.

During Genshin's time, there existed a debate as to the ontological status of the pure lands and the beings which were able to inhabit them. Some schools held that buddha lands were recompense lands, reward-lands in which only buddhas and bodhisattvas could be born. Genshin dismissed this and other positions on the ontological status of the pure lands as being full of artificial distinctions, and maintained in his *Ojoyushu* that by means of "extreme nembutsu" most anyone can attain rebirth in Sukhavati, or a Pure Land (Andrews 94-95). To back this claim, Genshin referred to a passage in the authoritative Tendai text *Commentary on the Vimalakirti Sutra* set down by Chih-i:

Question: . . . how can those with heavy karma be reborn into a pure land?

Answer: Master T'ien-T'ai [Chih-i] states:
'Although the Land of the Buddha of Eternal Life has superior benefits, if at the time of death [a being with heavy karma] repents and reflects on the Buddha, his karmic obstacles will topple and he will gain rebirth. . . .'[399 *Ojoyushu*] (Andrews 95)

It is important to note the alternatives Pure Land followers have to being reborn into a Buddha Land. Buddhist thought as a whole holds that there are six possible realms into which sentient beings can be reborn. These are I. The Realm of Hells; II. The Realm of Hungry Spirits or Ghosts (*Pretas*); III. The Realm of Beasts, IV; The Realm of Angry Demons; V. The Realm of Human Beings; and, VI. The Realm of Heavenly Beings (*Devas*). Emphasis is given through-out Buddhism on how difficult it is to be born in the Human Realm, and how the tremendous opportunities for advancement available to humans are not to be wasted.

If in this world we do not try to discipline ourselves neither will we be any better in a future world. It is difficult to be born as a human being in the endless cycle of birth and death. Even though we do obtain birth as a human being it is difficult to obtain the various faculties. And even though we may have the various faculties the chances are few that one will have an opportunity to get acquainted with Buddhism. And even though one gets acquainted with Buddhism it is difficult to obtain a heart of faith. . . .(Genshin's 60)

And in the Hokkekyo we read:

during the endless and numberless Kalpas it is difficult to have an opportunity to hear this Law. And even though this Law is heard it is difficult to become a human and become acquainted with Buddhism. . . . Now, therefore, in this our present life is our one chance to depart from this sea of suffering and to obtain birth in Paradise. (Genshin's 60)

Genshin, in his *Ojoyoshu* goes to great lengths to study in gruesome detail the six realms, with particular efforts taken to explore the grisly horrors of the eight Hells. His purpose here was to instill an aversion to the six "Defiled Realms" of sentient existence in general as well as a deep fear of rebirth into one of the Hells. This aversion and fear would, it was hoped, motivate people to aspire to be reborn into a Buddha Land, or more specifically in Genshin's case, Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land, so as to be free of the dangers and torments of the six "defiled Realms" (Andrews 45).

Conclusion

The debate over rebirth has not died down among Buddhist, as evidenced by the volume of publications put out in recent years regarding this subject. While beyond the scope of this paper to

survey the contemporary works, pointing to the existence of this literature serves to convey the complexity of the rebirth problems in light of the fact that Buddhism is twenty five centuries old.

A general tendency can be seen in the level of importance given to the rebirth debates, at least among the philosophical schools, as Buddhism has moved throughout the world. In India, possibly as a result of Hindu belief structures, the mechanics of rebirth were debated hotly. As related earlier, a number of resultant issues came forth. These included: the problem of rebirth without transmigration of a Soul or Self; the quarrel over the existence of an intermediate state of being; and the possibility of karmic responsibility and retribution in death, rebirth and subsequent lives,

In China, where there was no prior established idea of rebirth, though belief in retribution of a sort was already established by the indigenous philosophical systems, the philosophical problems of rebirth were virtually overlooked while the theory of retribution was largely capitalized upon, most prominently in the Pure Land Schools.

Japan, two major schools of Buddhist thought dominated the scene. As in China, Pure Land and its various offshoots in Japan enjoyed great prominence. The other major tradition, Zen, like its Chinese equivalent, Ch'an, mostly ignored rebirth to devote energies to the problems arising "in this very instant", in hopes that enlightenment could be attained before one could experience rebirth again.

This concludes a very brief overview of the issues surrounding the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth which have been addressed in Asia before modern times.

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