

Karma and Rebirth in the Upaniṣads and Buddhism

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KARMA AND REBIRTH IN THE UPANIŠADS AND BUDDHISM

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The *Upaniṣads* and Buddhism have basically identical ideas on rebirth: Beings are, by ignorance, desire and will, entangled in an ongoing process of repeated birth and death conditioned by actions (*karma*) and operating in such a way that it is possible to link a given being to a chain of past existences. Both systems encourage release from the chronic trauma of birth and death through ethical conduct, wisdom and meditation. This similarity, coupled with the absence of a *Vedic karma*-rebirth doctrine, suggests that the *Upaniṣadic* and Buddhist doctrines may be diverging interpretations of a common, non-*Vedic* rebirth tradition.

In an attempt to cloak this non-*Vedic* rebirth idea in orthodoxy, the *Upaniṣadic* sages allude to *Vedic* verses, but these verses originally had no connexion with rebirth. The afterlife belief in the *Ṛg Veda* is simply that after death, the soul leaves the body ¹⁾ and enters heaven ²⁾ or hell ³⁾ or eternity ⁴⁾. A few verses mention “rejoining a body”, but it is clear that these refer to a heavenly body and not another mortal body ⁵⁾. Though heroes and holy men ⁶⁾ have better prospects in afterlife than the wicked and irreligious ⁷⁾, the main factor determining one’s eternal fate is the whim of the gods, hopefully to be swayed by prayer and sacrifice ⁸⁾. The thundering question of the *Veda* is “what

1) *Ṛg* 10.16.1; 10.18.11; 10.14.7-8.

2) *Ṛg* 9.113.11; 10.16.4.

3) *Ṛg* 4.5.5; 9.73.8; 10.152.4.

4) *Ṛg* 9.113.11.

5) *Ṛg* 10.14.8; 10.16.5; 10.56.1; 10.68.11. In *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.1.8.6 the supreme reward is to be born in heaven with one’s own body. Cf. *Ṛg* 10.15.4.

6) *Ṛg* 10.154.2.

7) *Ṛg* 4.5.5; 9.73.8.

8) *Ṛg* 10.14.8; 10.16.1; 10.18.11.

god shall we adore with our oblation?" 9). The *Upaniṣadic* sage answers "*Ahaṃ brahmāsmi*" "*I am Brahman*" 10).

This sudden about face from the concerns of the *Veda* may be accounted for by two non-*Vedic* teachings which found expression in both the *Upaniṣads* and Buddhism: 1) The doctrine of rebirth conditioned by *karma* and 2) *yogic* techniques. The doctrine of *karma* and rebirth wrested man's destiny from the gods and placed it squarely in his own hands, and *yogic* techniques shifted the location of the divine from outside man to inside him, replacing the ritualistic religion of the Aryans with the contemplative religion of India. The overriding concerns of both the *Upaniṣads* and Buddhism are the same, the responsibility and divinity of man. These two concerns meet in the theory of *karma* and rebirth, the arena in which man acts out his responsibility and the process by which he attains divinity.

Folk Explanations of Rebirth

The *Upaniṣads* preserve what appear to be several very ancient folk explanations of the mechanism of rebirth. The process of rebirth described in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 6.2.15-16, for example, is probably based on the common folk-belief that conception is caused by eating a plant with a soul in it. (See Fig. 1).

The passage turns on the funeral fire, the setting which is the occasion of most of the *Vedic* speculation on afterlife. But there is none of the *Vedic* pleading with gods 11) to transport the deceased to heaven; instead the process is entirely mechanical, determined by the merit of the dead man. Those who practice the religion of the *Veda* attain the promise of the *Veda*, the World of the Fathers 12), but the World of the Fathers has become the undesirable alternative in the *Upaniṣads*, the path of perpetual rebirth.

Those who by sacrificial offerings, charity and austerity (*tapas*) conquer the worlds, they pass into the smoke (of the cremation fire) from the smoke into the night, from the night into the half-month of the waning moon...

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 6.2.16 (R) 13)

9) *Rg* 10.121.

10) *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 1.4.10.

11) *Rg* 10.16.4; 10.154.2; 10.15.14; 9.113.7-11.

12) *Rg* 10.14.7-8; 10.16.1.

13) (R) = Radhakrishnan, *The Principle Upaniṣads*. Unwin, 1953.

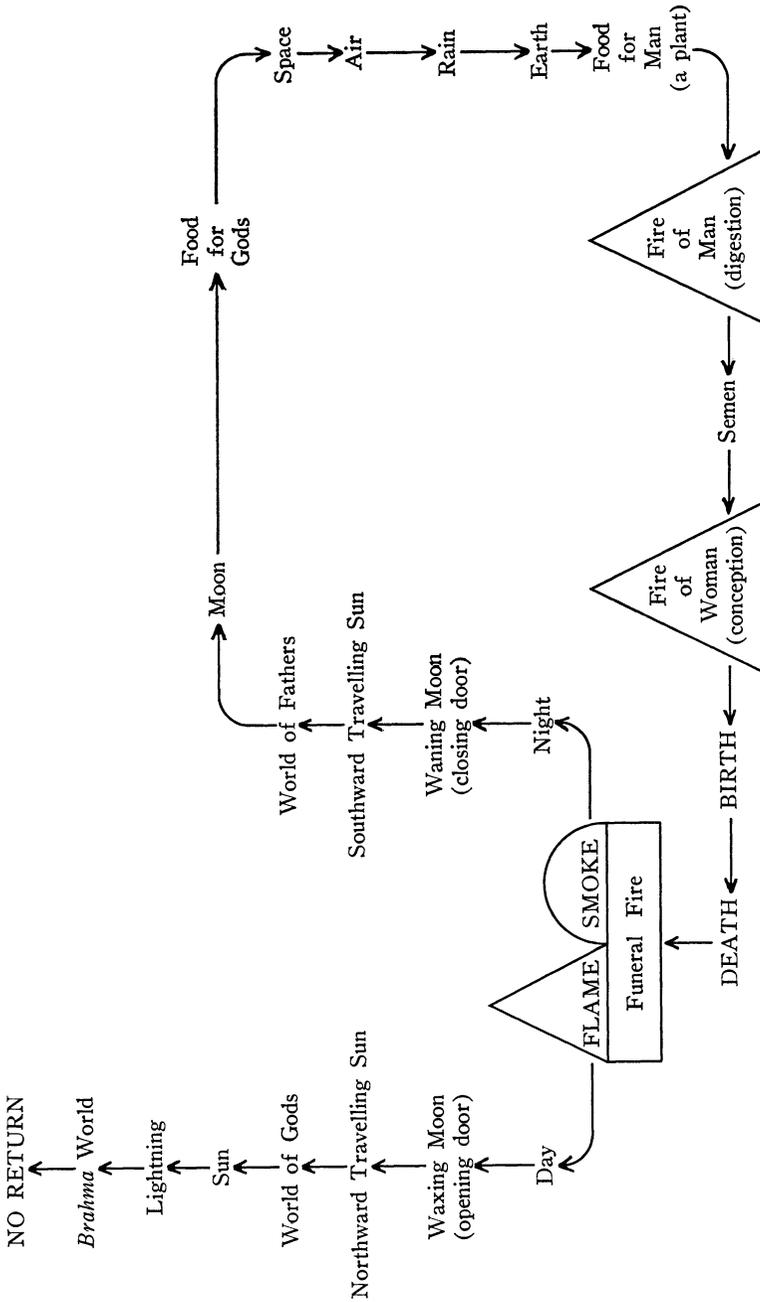


Fig. 1. The Path of the Gods and the Path of the Fathers. Paths of the souls of the released and the ignorant. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.15 & 16.

Shut out of heaven by the closing door of the waning moon, the unreleased soul enters the World of the Fathers, no longer the eternal state of bliss described in the *R̥g Veda* ¹⁴), but merely a temporary state until one enters the moon and becomes food for the gods.

The *Upaniṣads* hold that food sustains the mental as well as the physical being:

Food, when eaten, becomes threefold; its coarsest portion becomes the feces; its middle (portion) flesh and its subtlest (portion) mind.

Chāndogya 6.5.1 (R)

The gods are sustained by the subtler portions of the soul, which becomes their body and mind, and thus is not involved in the process of rebirth, but remains aloof in the divine consciousness.

4. With three-fourths *Puruṣa* went up: one-fourth of him again was here . . .

3. All creatures are one-fourth of him, three-fourths eternal life in heaven.

R̥g Veda 10.90.4 & 3 (G) ¹⁵)

The course part of the soul passes into “this space” (*eva ākāśam*) accumulating materiality as it enters air, rain and earth, three of the four great elements. Then it resides in a plant, waiting for the addition of the last great element—fire. In Indian thought, fire is life. In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, one can perceive the fire in man in the warmth of the body and by hearing the blaze when the ears are covered, the same fire as the cosmic blaze of the sun ¹⁶).

This is the universal fire which is here within a person, by means of which the food that is eaten is cooked ¹⁷).

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 5.9. (H) ¹⁸)

The ignorant man, however, fails to perceive that the digestive fire consuming food within him is only part of the universal fire in which he himself is consumed as food.

Truly, indeed, beings here are born from food, when born they live by food, on deceasing they enter into food.

Taittirīya 3.2. (H)

¹⁴) *R̥g* 9.113.7-II.

¹⁵) (G) = Griffith, Ralph T. H., *Hymns of the R̥gveda*, Chowakhamba, Varanasi, 1963.

¹⁶) *Chāndogya* 3.13.7 & 8.

¹⁷) Cf. *Maitrī Up.* 6.17; 6.26; 6.34.

¹⁸) (H) = Hume, Robert Ernest, *The Thirteen Principle Upaniṣads*. Oxford Press, 1921.

Everything here is food for death... Death, verily, is a fire. It is the food of water (*āpa*). He wards off (*apa-jayati*) repeated death, (who knows this).
Bṛhadāraṇyaka 3.2.10 (H)

Here, water consumes (i.e. extinguishes) the fire, and similarly, in Buddhism *nirvāna* means literally “having been blown out”¹⁹), that is, the fire of life. Fire is an especially evocative symbol of life which continues in repeated rebirth. The individual fire, having burned itself out leaves a dead ash, but the energy of that fire continues to exist, and may, one can imagine, kindle another fire somewhere else. On the other hand, the present fire can, while still burning, create a new fire, verifiably its offspring. Similarly, the individual is of dual origin: verifiably the offspring of his parents and mysteriously the continuation of a previous life. Thus, the result of offering food in the fire of man is semen, a form of energy which, offered in the fire of woman, gives rise to a new individual, who, it would seem derives

FIRE	HEAVENLY (that world)	RAIN CLOUD	WORLDLY (this world)	MAN	WOMAN
FUEL	sun	year	the earth	open mouth	sexual organ
SMOKE	light rays	clouds	fire	breath (<i>prāna</i>)	hairs
FLAME	day	lightning	night	speech	vulva
COALS	quarters	thunder bolt	moon	eye	insertion of penis
SPARKS	intermediate quarters	thunder	stars	ear	pleasure
OFFERING	faith (<i>śraddhā</i>)	<i>soma</i>	rain	food	semen
RESULT OF OFFERING	<i>soma</i>	rain	food	semen	person

Fig. 2. The Five Fires. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.9-13

¹⁹) Monier Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. H. Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics*, Unwin, 1970, p. 175.

the energy for his existence partly from the living energy of his parents, and partly from the potential energy of the unidentified soul which his father consumed as food. (See Fig. 2).

Immediately preceding *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 6.2.15 is a series of verses explaining explicitly the interrelationship of the five fires that together constitute the universal fire. These are: 1) the heavenly fire (that world) 2) the atmospheric fire (the rain cloud) 3) the earthly fire (this world) 4) the digestive fire (of man) 5) the sexual fire (of woman). The constituents of each of the five fires correspond to fuel, smoke, flame, coals, and sparks, thus establishing a correspondence between the five aspects of the universal fire.

Further, the result of the offering made by the gods in each fire becomes the offering in the next fire, until finally the person (*ṣuruṣa*) emerges from the sexual fire. The unreleased person, in turn, eventually becomes food for the gods who, thus sustained, continue to make offerings in the heavenly fire. The *Vedic* doctrine that the gods are sustained by sacrifice and ritual is subtly transformed from an assertion of the vital role of ritual in maintaining order in the universe, to a condemnation of ritual as the process by which man is kept in ignorance of his true identity and thus serves the gods by staying within their food chain.

Whoever knows thus "I am *Brahman*" becomes this all. Even the gods cannot prevent his becoming thus, for he becomes their self. So whoever worships another divinity thinking that he (the worshipper) is one and (*Brahman*) another, he knows not, he knows not. He is like an animal to the gods. As many animals serve man, so does each man serve the gods (as food) . . . Therefore it is not pleasing to those (gods) that men should know this.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 1.4.10 (R)

Buddhism, like the *Upaniṣads*, preserves in its canon folk ideas on rebirth alongside the more analytical doctrine. Several of the Buddhist metaphors also associate fire with existence and rebirth.

Brethren, all is on fire (*āditta*) . . . On fire with the blaze of lust, the blaze of ill-will, the blaze of infatuation, the blaze of birth, decay and death, sorrow and grief, woe, lamentation and despair²⁰.

Sāmyutta-nikāya IV, p. 10 (PTS) 21)

20) Cf. *Sāmyutta* I, p. 31, and burning house parable in *Saddharmapundarika* III, 39 f. For the "Eleven Fires", see Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics*, p. 177.

21) (PTS) = *Pāli Text Society* translation, Luzac Co. Page nos. refer to Pāli text.

In Buddhism, burning (*āditta*) is a symbol of the incessant consumption of impermanent beings on all levels, human and divine. The gods also die.

'T is food both gods and men chiefly desire.
Who may that creature be, demon or sprite
Who, unlike them, hankers not for food?

Saṃyutta-nikāya I, p. 32 (PTS)

The four “foods” in Buddhism are solid food, contact, volition, and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Craving and delight regarding any of these “foods” results in becoming, rebirth, decay and death²²). Note the resemblance of the ideas in these early Buddhist passages on food and burning (*āditta*) to the *Upaniṣadic* passage on *Aditi*, “the devourer”, who created the universe to feed himself.

He brought forth all this whatsoever exists here...
Whatever he brought forth, that he resolved to eat.
Verily he eats (*atti*) everything, therefore the *aditi*—nature of *Aditi*.
Bṛhadāraṇyaka 1.2.5 (R)

In the *Veda*, *Aditi* is an all-encompassing deity.

Aditi is the heaven, *Aditi* is mid-air, *Aditi* is the Mother and the Sire and Son... *Aditi* is all that hath been born and shall be born.
Ṛg Veda 1.89.10 (G)

Now, the complexity of Buddha’s pun with *āditta* (“on fire”) becomes clearer. The Pāli *āditta* (Sanskrit *ādīpta*) meaning “on fire” calls to mind the ambiguous Sanskrit word *aditi* which may mean “infinite” from association with the goddess *Aditi*, or may mean “having nothing to give” from *adāna*. In addition, *ādi* in Sanskrit and Pāli means “beginning” or “starting point”. Given the Indian love of fanciful etymologies based on world-play, the Buddha’s use of *āditta* in this context calls to mind a broad set of phonological associations which might be summarized: “*Āditta* (burning) is the beginning (*ādi*) and end (Sanskrit *Aditi* “devourer”), all-encompassing (*Vedic* goddess *Aditi* and Sanskrit *aditi* “infinite”), yet with nothing to give (*aditi* from *adāna*)”.

In the Buddhist *Milindapañha* the individual is compared to a fire which may ignite another fire, thus illustrating rebirth without transmigration.

22) *Saṃyutta* II, p. 101.

“Suppose a man, O king, were to light a lamp from another lamp, can it be said that one transmigrates from, or to, the other? . . . Just so, great king, is rebirth without transmigration.”

Milindapañha p. 71 (SBE) 23)

Without transmigration of an entity, asks King Milinda, how is it that one does not escape the consequence of his evil deeds? Suppose, answers Nāgasena, that a man were to set fire to a village by careless use of an oil lamp. Would the king find him guilty, or would he accept the argument, “The flame of the lamp . . . was one thing; the fire which burnt your village was another thing”? 24).

“In spite of whatever the man might say, the one fire was produced from the other”.

“Just so, great king, it is one name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*) which has its end in death, and another name-and-form which is reborn. But the second is the result of the first, and is therefore not set free from its evil deeds”.

Milindapañha p. 47 (SBE)

Both similes suffer a common fault, though, in that the first fire produces a second while still alive, whereas rebirth occurs after death. Nāgasena gives a more satisfying fire simile in the example of a lamp burning all night.

Is it the same flame that burns in the first watch of the night, Sir, and in the second? . . . Just so, O king, is the continuity of a person or thing *dhamma* maintained. One comes into being and another passes away; and the rebirth is, as it were, simultaneous (*apubbaṃ acarimaṃ*). Thus neither as the same nor as another (*na ca so na ca añño*) does one go on.

Milindapañha p. 40 (SBE)

Another common feature of the metaphorical explanation of rebirth in the *Upaniṣads* and Buddhism is the comparison of human rebirth to “rebirth” in the plant kingdom. The mango is an especially popular example:

This person frees himself from these limbs just as a mango, or a fig or a berry releases itself from its bond; and he hastens again, according to the entrance and place or origin, back to life.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.3.36 (H)

“A being born here, O king, dies here. Having died here, it springs up elsewhere. Having been born there, there it dies . . . It is like the case of a man who, after eating a mango, should set the seed in the ground. From

23) (SBE) = *Sacred Books of the East* translation. Motilal Barnarsidas, Delhi. *Milindapañha* by T. W. Rhys-Davids.

24) Cf. *Rg* 7.59.12.

that a great tree would be produced and give fruit. And there would be no end to the succession, in that way, of mango trees".

Milindapañha p. 77 (SBE)

These similes suffer the same weakness as some of Nāgasena's fire similes in that the second tree is produced while the first still lives. Again, though, Nāgasena makes it clear that the simile is primarily to illustrate the causative role of *karma* in rebirth²⁵).

The Upaniṣads and Buddhism also employ a simile comparing a man to a tree,

1. As is a mighty tree, so, indeed, is a man; his hairs are leaves and his his skin is its outer bark...
4. A tree when it is felled springs up from its root in newer form; from what root does a man spring forth when he is cut off by death?
5. Do not say "from the semen", for that is produced from what is alive (men). A tree springs also from the seed. After it is dead it certainly springs again.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 3.9.28 (R)

Here, the continuity between parent and offspring is recognized as different from the continuity between rebirths. Both men and trees produce seed from which offspring arise, but they are also both subject to rebirth when they are cut down. The condition for rebirth in the case of the tree is the surviving root. In the case of man, the condition for rebirth is ignorance and desire.

6. If a tree is pulled up with the root, it will not spring again. From what root does a mortal spring when he is cut off by death?

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 3.9.28 (R)

The next verse criticises the idea of birth as an origin: "When born, he is not born, for who should create him again?"²⁶). Birth is not a beginning, but only a continuation. The tree has its origin in the seed, but when it springs from the root, it is not said to be born; the same tree merely continues to exist. Man too, is said to be born from semen, but really he is like the cut off tree. The superstructure falls at death, but the root structure of ignorance, desire and *karma* remains firm and he comes again into existence²⁷). Buddhism contains a similar tree-man simile:

It is just as if there were a tender sapling, the roots whereof going downward and across bring upward all the juice... (If a man) were to cut

25) Cf. parable of the mango thief, *Milindapañha*, p. 72.

26) *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 3.9.28.7.

27) Cf. *Kaṭha Uṣ.* 2.3.1; *Bhagavad Gīta* 15.1.

down that tree at the root... and draw out the roots even to the rootlets and root fibres... verily that tender sapling... would be... a no-thing incapable of arising again in the future... Even so in him who contemplates the misery in all that makes for grasping... Such is the ceasing of this entire mass of ill.

Saṃyutta-nikāya II p. 90 (PTS)

These ancient fire and tree similes in Buddhism are plyed to the service of the Buddhist view of rebirth and used to explain rebirth without a transmigrating entity. The *Upaniṣads*, on the other hand, normally do incorporate a transmigrating entity in their theory of rebirth. Thus, they attribute the energy of the fire in their similes to the person (*puruṣa*) in the fire. Similarly, the plant arises from its "subtle essence" in the seed, and presumably passes this essence on to its own seeds. In one passage a teacher asks his disciple to break open the seed of a plant and asks him what he sees in it:

"Nothing at all, Venerable Sire". (The teacher said)
 "My dear, that subtle essence which you do not perceive, verily, my dear, from that the very essence of this great *nyagrodha* tree exists... That which is the subtle essence, this whole world has for its self. That is the true. That is the self. That art thou (*tat tvam asi*)".

Chāndogya 6.12 (R)

Buddhism, however, also contains a few passages suggestive of a transmigrating entity. In the *Mahātanhāsankhayasutta*²⁸), immediately after Buddha reprimands *Sati*, the fisher-monk, for asserting that "consciousness" (*viññāna*) is a transmigrating entity, Buddha says:

But if, monks, there is here a coitus of the parents and it is the mother's season and the *gandhabba* is present, it is on the conjunction of these three things that there is conception.

Majjhima-nikāya I. p. 226²⁹) (PTS)

V. F. Gunaratna says the *gandhabba* refers to the "mental content of the terminal thought of a dying person"³⁰). This is true in the light of the overall attitude of Buddhism, but here it almost certainly refers to some sort of spirit which animates the person³¹). Orthodox Bud-

28) *Majjhima* no. 38.

29) Cf. *Majjhima* II, p. 157.

30) V. F. Gunaratna, "Rebirth Explained", *The Wheel*, nos. 167-9, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1971, pp. 59-60.

31) In the Sanskrit, *gandharvas* are said to be the cause of "possession", (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 3.7.1). They have special power over women and an incessant desire to copulate. (Monier-Williams Sanskrit dictionary).

dhism admits the possibility of being reborn a spirit or ghost (*petta*), but the process is the same as regular rebirth. Immediately upon death the effects of *karmic* energy manifest as a *petta*, usually an unhappy, tormented creature, who also dies eventually and is reborn, hopefully as something else.

Now, let a brief treatment of folk-explanations of release suffice here. In *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 6.2.15, depicted in *Fig. II*, the enlightened sage passes into the flame of the funeral fire, into the day (symbol of the divine light), into the half-month of the waxing moon (an opening door), into the half-year of the north travelling sun (going into summer), into the world of the gods. Then he goes beyond the multiple gods into the sun (*ādityam*), which calls to mind the passage: "Death (*Aditi*, the devourer) becomes his body" ³². (The sun, we now know, burns with an atomic blaze that converts matter into pure energy). Thence he goes to lightening, (*vaidyutam*) a symbol of enlightenment, and thence to the "world of *Brahma*". "Of these is no return". Similarly, in Buddhism there is the "no returner" (*anāgāmin*) who either achieves release in this body or is reborn in the celestial realms where release is guaranteed.

Theoretical Explanations of Rebirth

In addition to these folk explanations of rebirth, which it seems, are survivals in the *Upaniṣads* and Buddhism of a more ancient rebirth theory, both systems present their own theoretical explanations of rebirth. These theoretical treatments represent the development of the ancient theory in the two diverging philosophical systems. On the surface, the *Upaniṣadic* and Buddhist systems appear to be poles apart, but the difference is primarily terminological, and once a correspondence between terms has been established, even the theoretical developments of the ancient theory are strikingly similar.

Since actions (*karma*) are held to be an accurate barometer of the state of mind, it is possible to say, in both systems, that *karma* determines rebirth. But both systems place the physical act in the service of *desire*, a mental state arising upon contact with the outer world. *Contact* arises without value judgement in three phases

1) *physical contact* of, for example, eye with visible objects,

32) *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 1.2.7. See above.

2) *feeling* without differentiation 3) *perception*, differentiation without valuing³³). *Karma* arises in both systems only when ego-centric value is imposed on this interaction between the inner and outer world. Thus, one desires, and as a consequence of desire, acts willfully to acquire the maximum of the type of contact which he interprets to be favourable. The Buddhist formula of conditioned genesis (*pañicca-samuppāda*) explains the process thus; without even mentioning *karma*:

Contact conditions sensation.
Sensation conditions desire.
Desire conditions clinging.
clinging conditions becoming.
Becoming conditions birth.

The *Upaniṣads* explain a similar process subordinating actions to desire:

A person consists of desire. As is his desire, so is his will; as is his will, so is the deed he does, whatever deed he does, that he attains.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.4.5 (R)

The basis of desire in Buddhism is the selfish division of experience into pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. On one level, the following *Upaniṣadic* passage also refers to such a division:

In it (*Brahman*) there is no diversity. He goes from death to death, who sees in it, as it were, diversity.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.4.19 (R)

Desire, or craving, resting on differentiation, is the motivating force of rebirth:

When a being lays aside this body and rises up again in another body, for that I declare craving to be the fuel.

Saṃyutta-nikāya IV p. 400 (PTS)

If a person knows a self as "I am this" then wishing what and for desire of what should he suffer in the body?

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.4.12 (R)

The active side of desire is will. Will is the highest faculty of the mind. It is the faculty which, if well directed effects progress in a

33) This follows the first three of the Buddhist *five aggregates*: form, sensation and perception, but note resemblance of *Upaniṣadic* ideas in *Katha* 1.3.3; and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 3.2.1-9.

positive direction, or if slack or perverted leads to downfall. Given the desires which arise automatically out of contact, the will dictates the acts.

Monks, I say that will (*cetana*) is action. When one wills, he acts by deed, word or thought.

Anguttara-nikāya III p. 145

If the process of becoming is compared to a nail being driven into a block of wood, desire is the hammer, will is the muscle behind the hammer, and *karma* is the grain of the wood. The grain (*karma*) determines the path of the nail once the force of desire has been applied by will. A well directed hammer blow drives the nail straight home, whereas a series of wild blows bends the nail and leaves it hopelessly stuck. The enlightened one, in both systems, is not subject to the directionality of *karma*, for he is no longer driven by desire and will.

Him (who knows this), these two (desires for sons and wealth) do not overcome—neither the thought “Hence I did wrong” nor the thought “Hence I did right”. Verily, he overcomes them both. What he has done and what he has not done do not affect him.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.4.22 (H)

Though both systems hold that the will as expressed through *karma* directs the course of rebirth in a happier or more miserable state, neither system values a fortunate rebirth as such. The only value in a “good” rebirth is that such a person is more likely to lead the sort of life that is conducive to release from *samsāra*. Both systems, then, are concerned not with gaining a happy rebirth, but with stopping rebirth. In Buddhism suffering (*dukkha*) has three categories.

1) ordinary suffering (*dukkha-dukkha*) 2) temporary pleasure which turns to suffering (*vipariṇāma-dukkha*) 3) *dukkha* as any conditioned state (*saṃkhāra-dukkha*)³⁴. Thus, even the fine material (*rūpa-loka*) and non-material realms (*arūpa-loka*), where there is no suffering in the normal sense, are both classified as *dukkha* since they are conditioned and subject to change. The *Upaniṣads*, too, belittle the transient good fortune that is the result of good *karma*.

That self is dearer than a son, is dearer than wealth, is dearer than all

34) Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Gordon Fraser, New York 1967 p.p. 19 f.

else... If one who speaks of anything else than the self as dear, one should say, "He will lose what he holds dear" he would indeed be likely to do so.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 1.4.8 (H)

Since there is no overlord in control of rebirth, fortunate or unfortunate rebirths cannot be viewed as reward and punishment in either system. Instead the effects of *karma* are pictured more as the working out of affinity between mind and situation. The evil doer is reborn in a painful state, not because he is being punished for his actions, but because of his affinity for pain. Ignorance sees an illusory distinction between the evil doer and the pain he causes. Actually, he is, or becomes, that very pain.

Deeds (*kamma*) are one's own, brahman youth, beings are heirs to deeds, deeds are matrix, deeds are kin, deeds are arbiters. Deeds divide beings... by lowness and excellence.

Majjhima-nikāya III, p. 203 (PTS)

According as one acts (*√kr*), according as one conducts himself, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.4.5 (H)

Good deeds produce good births, but even good deeds always bear fruit and leave one entangled in impermanent existence. Ignorance, not evil, is on both systems, the great enemy. Wisdom, however, is also confined to the willful, *karma* producing part of the individual. Buddhism locates wisdom specifically in the *saṃkhāra* (mental formations) aggregate, along with other positive and negative qualities of the mind. Wisdom is, then, only a special case of desire and will, and of itself, insufficient to overcome rebirth. Buddhist wisdom consists of right thought and right view. Right thought is the behavioral side of wisdom, associated primarily with renunciation, love, and non-violence. Right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*) is, of course, the Buddhist view, the Four Noble Truths. But *sammā diṭṭhi* is, in Buddhism, an impossibility, since all views (*diṭṭhi*) are ultimately false.

And when man takes not to himself a view,
With virtue dwells, with insight (*vipassanā*) endowed,
And hath all greed for pleasures here expelled
Then goes he to the bed-of-womb no more.

Sutta-nipāta 152 (SBB) 35)

35) (SBB) = *Sacred Books of the Buddhists* translation, Oxford Press.

Vipassanā (*vi* + *passa* = “see into”) is not in the realm of mental formations. It is an intuitional insight into the true nature of things, beyond discursive thought, and attainable through a set of meditational practices explicitly set forth in the early Buddhist scriptures. Similarly, in the *Upaniṣads*, the self is *neti, neti* “not this, not that”. It may be experienced, according to *Rāmānuja*, or entered into as a unity according to *Śaṅkara*, but not understood.

21. Let a wise *Brāhmaṇa* after knowing him (*ātman*) alone, practice the (means to) wisdom. Let him not reflect on many words, for that is a mere weariness of speech.
22. ... This self is *neti, neti*. He is incomprehensible for he is never comprehended. He is indestructable, for he cannot be destroyed.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.4.21-22 (R)

Like Buddhism, only less explicitly, the *Upaniṣads* prescribe meditational practices as the path which can free one from the impulsion of desire and will.

On knowing him, in truth, one becomes an ascetic... They, having risen above the desire for sons, the desire for wealth, the desire for worlds, led the life of a mendicant.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.4.22 (R)

Those who know this as such and those who meditate with faith in the forest on the truth pass into the flame (of the cremation fire).

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 6.2.15 (R)

Therefore let a man perform one observance only. He should breathe in and breathe out wishing, “Let not the evil of death get me”.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 1.5.23 (R)

Desire and will, the properties of the controlling faculty of the individual, comprehend all mental states from ignorance to wisdom, and without the meditational techniques, the system is closed; wisdom becomes only more and more sophisticated, becomes mere sophistry. “Many words are a mere weariness of speech”. In practising meditation, however, one seeks to transform the highest and most mysterious part of his being, his very consciousness. Up to this point, I have dealt only with the finite individual who breaks up at death, leaving *karmic* energy, and as a specific personality ceases to exist. Both systems, however, postulate an impersonal level of being by which identity may be established between two or more distinct personalities in space-time. And if anyone doubts that the Buddhist doctrine, as noncommittal as it is, does affirm a specific connexion between reborn

beings, let him recall the numerous descriptions of the precise recall by the *tathāgata* of his former births:

In such a place such was my name, such my family, such my caste, such my food, such my experience of discomfort or of ease, and such the limits of my life.

Dīgha-nikāya I. p. 81 (SBB)

The doctrine persists in the *Viśuddhimagga* where the precise method for recall of specific past lives is given³⁶). If the Buddhist no-self doctrine seems uncomfortable with the idea of rebirth, the *Upaniṣadic ātman* doctrine fares no better. In a sense, all births are eruptions of the underlying *ātman*, but this does not explain the ethical facet of rebirth, whereby the will, desire and action of a specific limited individual shape the life of a specific future individual. The *ātman* itself is not affected by *karma*.

Verily, he is the great unborn self (*ātman*) who is this (person) consisting of *viññāna* (consciousness) among the senses... He does not become greater by good works or smaller by evil works... Desiring him only as their worlds, monks wander forth... He is incomprehensible... indestructable... unattached... unfettered.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.4.22 (R)

Clearly, the *ātman* of this passage is not the *ātman* refuted in Buddhist *anātman* theory. Buddhism rejects *ātman* as an individual, immortal soul. As the term is used here, it resembles Buddhist *nirvāṇa*, unborn, unconditioned, unattached and incomprehensible. *Ātman*, however, is the non-dual basis of the dualistic (subject-object) world, whereas *nirvāṇa* has no ontological function. Still, *ātman* and *nirvāṇa* are both the ultimate goal, reached through the process of rebirth, which occurs thus: 1) personality ends. 2) An impersonal stream of identity associated with "consciousness" Pāli *viññāṇa*; Skt. *viññāna*, flows on, its course determined by the desire, will and *karma* of many personalities. 3) Ultimately, the stream may flow beyond individuality and cease to support personalities. This is *ātman* or *nirvāṇa*. *Ātman*, in the above passage, is said to "consist of consciousness" (*viññānamaya*) because it is realized through *viññāna*. *Nirvāṇa* is the cessation of *viññāṇa*, (*Nirvāṇa* = *nir* + *vāṇa* = "blown out") so it too, in a sense, is realized through *vinnāṇa*.

36) *Viśud.* 13.13-28.

Do you not see, *bhikkhus*, that murkiness?... That is *Māra*, the evil one who is searching everywhere for the consciousness *viññāna*³⁷) of Godhika... But Godhika, with *viññāna* not reinstated hath utterly ceased to live (*parinibbuto*).

Saṃyutta-nikāya I. p. 122 (PTS)

In the original texts, the conceptual, ontological distinction between *ātman* and *nirvāṇa* is the only real difference between the two theories of rebirth, and consciousness is admittedly not a precise or consistent term for the link between rebirths, though the ethical consequences of *karma* presuppose some such link. However, Buddhaghosa's "cognitive series", which comprehends an explanation of consciousness as well as rebirth, does much to clear up the vagueness in both rebirth theories and to reconcile the conceptual difference between *ātman* and *nirvāṇa*.

According to the "cognitive series" (*citta-vīthi*) theory, rebirth is only a special case of normal consciousness marked by the dissolution of one group of aggregates (i.e. the death of an individual) and the immediate arising of another. The *Visuddhimagga* says consciousness occurs in "moments". Buddhaghosa's seventeen "consciousness moments" are a collection of terms for perception and cognition drawn primarily from the *Abhidhamma*, but his theories are consistent with the earlier *Piṭaka* texts, and the seeds of his *citta-vīthi* theory may be seen in such passages as:

Visual consciousness (*viññāna*), your reverences, arises because of eye and material shapes; the meeting of the three is sensory impingement; feelings are because of sensory impingement; what one feels, one perceives; what one perceives, one reasons about; what one reasons about obsesses one; what obsesses one is the origin of the number of perceptions and obsessions which assail a man in regard to material shapes cognizable by the eye, past future, present³⁸).

Majjhima-nikāya I. pp. 111-112 (PTS)

Buddhism holds both subject and object to be impermanent and conditioned, thus consciousness *viññāna* and phenomena (*nāma-rūpa*) depend on each other

37) The *Commentary* on this passage says that *viññāna* here refers to *paṭi-sandhi-citta*, "rebirth-linking mind", but this seems to be an interpolation by Buddhaghosa of his own *citta-vīthi* theory into the text. See below and next note.

38) Hearing, smell, taste, touch and mental consciousness are similarly analyzed. Again, in the *Commentary*, Buddhaghosa interpolates his more developed theory, equating "mental consciousness" with *vajjana* and *javana* and "mind" with *bhavaṅgacitta* in his explanation of "mental consciousness arises because of mind and mental objects". M.A. II. 77.

Even so, friend, *nāma-rūpa* (name-and-form) comes to pass conditioned by *viññāna*, *viññāṇa* conditioned by *nāma-rūpa*.

Samyutta-nikāya II p. 115

According to Buddhaghosa's *citta-vīthi* theory, consciousness moments and matter moments arise, persist, and dissolve with incredible rapidity, but the mind undergoes seventeen moments of change while one material moment arises, persists and dissolves. The seventeen moments are as follows:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| o) <i>bhavanga</i> | — stream of undisturbed being |
| 1) <i>bhavanga-aṭṭa</i> | — past being |
| 2) <i>bhavanga-calana</i> | — vibration of being |
| 3) <i>bhavanga-upaccheda</i> | — arrest of being |
| 4) <i>pañcadvārā-vajjana</i> | — Five door (senses) advertance |
| 5) <i>pañca-vimāna</i> | — Five fold sense consciousness |
| 6) <i>sampañicchana</i> | — reception |
| 7) <i>sanṭirana</i> | — investigation |
| 8) <i>voṭṭhapana</i> | — determination |
| 9-15) <i>javana</i> | — apperception—seven moments for full interpretation of experience—associated with <i>samkhara</i> and productive of <i>karma</i> . |
| 16 & 17) <i>tadālabhana</i> | — registration of experience |
| o) <i>bhavanga</i> | — undisturbed stream of being |

Thus active consciousness is the repeated disturbance of the steady flow of being *bhavanga* = *bhava*—"being + *anga*—"part"). *Bhavanga* remains ever the same quality-less stream, unaffected by the disturbances which constitute consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Each of these seventeen moment disturbances transfers its energy to the immediately succeeding disturbance, thus *viññāṇa* appears to be coherent and continuous, just as a flame appears to be continuous, though really the photons of light which we describe as "a flame" are different in any two instants.

The simile of the falling mango is often given as an illustration of the process. A man is in deep sleep under a mango tree. The wind dislodges a mango which falls, disturbing the sleeper. The deep, dreamless sleep is *bhavanga*. The wind hitting the tree is *bhavanga-aṭṭa*. The subsequent swaying of the branches is *bhavanga-calana*. The falling of the mango is *bhavanga upaccheda* the "arrest" of the stream of being. Now the process enters into what may be termed "*viññāṇa*", the first three stages are "being" only (i.e. come from without). The waking of the man is *pañcadvārā-vajjana*. He removes his hat—

pañca — *vinṇāṇa*; picks up the fruit — *sampañicchana*; inspects it — *santīrana*; determines that it is a mango — *votthapana*; and eats it — *javana*, apperception. The after-taste is *tadālabhana*, registration or retention of the experience. Then he goes back to sleep — return to *bhavanga*³⁹). The seven apperceptual moments are the basis of *karma*, and as such, interact specifically with the *saṃkhara* (mental formations) aggregate. They are pictured as a wave, the strongest moment being the fourth of the seven. It is this fourth moment of apperception, along with the object of consciousness which provides the *interruption* (first three stages) in the next series of seventeen moments. It is only in the apperceptual stage that the mind of an ordinary person is distinguishable from the mind of an *arahant*, whose apperceptions are “inoperative” (*kiriya-javana*) and do not influence the next seventeen moments. Thus an *arahant* sees things “as they are” because his own mind does not enter into his consciousness, which is moved only by the object at hand. In life his *bhavanga* is disturbed only from without, so at death it is no longer disturbed. He ceases to be upon the cessation of the last mental moment of his life. His consciousness subsides into *bhavanga* and is never more interrupted. For the unenlightened being, however, death is not much different from normal life. He dies, and the fourth apperceptual moment provides the initial disturbance in *bhavanga* which marks the beginning of a “rebirth” or new being. This first moment is called, in this case, *paṭisandhi* or “rebirth-linking”. The last moment of one’s life is the primary influence in the first moment of his next life, though, as with any other series of seventeen consciousness moments, the influence of past *karma* may also impinge upon the process. In Buddhaghosa’s explanation of consciousness and rebirth, the *bhavanga* bears striking resemblance to Buddhist *nirvāṇa* and Upaniṣadic *ātman*. Like the *ātman* it is “unborn” “eternal” “changless” in the sense that water remains the same though waves (*vinṇāṇa*) may pass through it. It “seems to act” though it does not, and it is unaffected by *karma*, just as the ocean “seems to act” to produce waves, but does not, and is not essentially affected by a wave passing through. Similarly, the undisturbed *bhavanga* is a concept compatible with many of the Buddhist paradoxes about *nirvāṇa*. “*Nirvāṇa* is both the same as

39) V. F. Gunaratna, “Rebirth Explained”, *The Wheel* nos. 167-9, pp. 30-7. Shewe Zan Aung, *Compendium of Philosophy*, (PTS) Luzac, 1967, pp. 25-36.

samsāra and different from it “might be explained, “*Nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* are respectively *bhavanga* in the undisturbed and disturbed states”. Or “The *Tathāgata* neither exists nor does not exist after death” might be explained, “The *Tathāgata* does not exist in the normal sense of moving existence yet does exist in the undisturbed stream of being”⁴⁰). These statements jar the ear of one accustomed to the Buddhist practice of avoiding any conceptualization of *nirvāṇa*, but the task here is actually one of translation of Buddhist terms so they may be compared to *Upaniṣadic* terms. If we agree, for this comparison, to translate *Upaniṣadic ātman* into the Buddhist *bhavanga*⁴¹), we can go through *Yājñavalkya’s* theory of rebirth in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* and square it at every point with the Buddhist theory as interpreted by Buddhaghosa.

4.3.36. 1) ⁴²) When this (body) gets to thinness . . . through old age or disease, 2) just as a mango . . . release itself from its bond, 3) even so this person frees himself from these limbs and returns again as he came to the place from which he started back to (new) life.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.3.36 (R)

1) Recalls the Buddhist theory of causes of death; exhausted *karma* (old age) or cutting off by stronger *karma* (disease). 2) Recalls Buddhist mango parables. (cf. also *Rg* 7.59.12). 3) “Limbs” refers to impermanent five-aggregates. “Place from which he started” refers to *bhavanga* — undisturbed being. “Back to new life” refers to the first thought moment (*paṭisandhi-vinnāna*) in the subsequent being.

4.4.2. 1) And when he thus departs, life departs after him. And when life thus departs, all the vital breaths (senses) depart

40) Cf. *Majjhima* I, p. 486.

41) In *Atthasālini* p. 140, Buddhaghosa compares *bhavanga* with the *paḥasara-citta* “luminous mind” of *Anguttara* I, p. 10: “*Paḥasara-citta* is stained by foreign (*āgantuka*) defilements”. Buddhaghosa explains that *citta* is impure (*akusala*) because it “issues” (*from bhavanga*), though it is in essence pure because it is nonetheless of *bhavanga*, “as a tributary of the Ganges is like the Ganges” (and different from it). This *paḥasara-citta* is an example in the early texts of a concept compatible with the *Upaniṣadic ātman*. Though the idea is not developed in the *Pāli* texts, it became important in Mahayana in the form of “Buddha-nature” or “*Tathāgata-garbha*” which is indistinguishable from *ātman*. Cf. *The Lankavatara Sutra*, D. T. Suzuki, pp. 68 f. and *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, E. Conze, p. 84.

42) Numbers in the text correspond to numbers in the commentary immediately following.

after it. 2) He becomes one with *vijñāna*. What has *vijñāna* departs with him. 3) His knowledge and his work take hold of him as also his past experience.

1) Suggests the dissolution of the impermanent aggregates of the individual. 2) The *bhavanga* flows on. *Vijñāna* as the Buddhist *viññāna* is the “link” between births. 3) The state of mind at death and past *karma* disturb the *bhavanga* in the “next life”.

4.4.5. 1) That self is, indeed, *Brahman* consisting of consciousness (*vijñāna*) mind, life, hearing, earth, water air, ether, light and no light, desire and absence of desire, anger and absence of anger, righteousness and absence of righteousness and all things . . . 2) According as one acts... so does he become . . . As is his desire, so is his will; as is his will, so is the deed he does, whatever deed he does, so he attains.

1) “That self” and “*Brahman*” refer to undisturbed *bhavanga*. “Consisting of consciousness” etc. is in Sanskrit rendered “*vijñāna-maya, manomaya*” etc. *Maya*, (from *√mā*, “to make”) in the *Upaniṣads* and Buddhism, carries the connotation of illusion, thus, these qualities and faculties refer to the impermanent being, i.e. the disturbed *bhavanga*. That is to say, *bhavanga*, being, is disturbed (*maya*) by these qualities and faculties, and we mistakenly see the disturbance as the reality. The true reality, *Brahman*, comprehends all the conflicting qualities of disturbance. In Buddhism, the only “reality” is non-being, that is non-disturbance or *nirvāna*. 2) Refers to the various levels of *karma* production: *desire*-associated with sensual contact, *will*-associated with mental formations, *deed*-the physical culmination of sensual and mental processes, thus symptomatic of rebirth.

4.4.6. 1) The object to which the mind is attached, the subtle self (*liṅgam*) goes together with the deed . . . 2) exhausting the results of whatever works he did in this world, he comes again from that world to this world for (fresh) work. 3) This is for the man who desires. 4) But for the man who does not desire, he who is without desire, who is freed from desire, whose desire is satisfied, whose desire is the self; his breaths (senses) do not depart (*ut + kram* — lit. “go up”). Being *Brahman*, he goes to *Brahman*.

1) The “object to which mind is attached” refers to the affinity for good or evil spoken or earlier, or more exactly to the *kamma-nimitta* and *gati-nimitta* of Buddhism which are said to be respectively a mental image of a past deed which will be most influential in the course of the next life, or the mental image of one’s destiny. 2) Again, recalls Buddhist view of cause of death, exhaustion of *karma* impelling one particular “existence”. 3) As in *paticca-samuppāda*,

desires condition attachment etc. 4) The man without desires is the *aranant*, who upon death ceases to exist in the normal sense of existence, i.e. disturbed *bhavanga*. At the end of his last thought moment, active consciousness ceases and only the undisturbed *bhavanga* flows on.

4.4.12. 1) If a person knows the self as “I am this”, 2) then wishing what, and for desire of what should he suffer in the body?

1) “I am in essence undisturbed being.” i.e. If he does not associate disturbed *bhavanga* with self, 2) he is not bound by desire to impermanent (*anicca*) existence, disturbed *bhavanga*, so suffering is over for him.

4.4.13. 1) Whoever has found and awakened (*pratibuddha*) to the self that has entered into 2) this perilous and inaccessible place (the body) . . . 3) indeed, he is the world itself.

1) As the Buddha is “awakened (*pratibuddha*) to *nirvāna*, 2) “Perilous place” indicates the impermanence and changeableness of *samsāric* existence. 3) He transcends individuality, having shorn himself of the attributes of impermanence, and enters pure undisturbed being. He becomes the ontological universe *bhavanga* as opposed to the phenomenological universe (*samsāra*).

4.4.14. 1) Verily, while we are here we may know this: if not we would be ignorant; great is the destruction. 2) Those who know this become immortal while 3) others go only to sorrow (*duḥkham*).

1) The ignorant (*avedir*) suffer great destruction, i.e. repeated old age and death 2) The awakened are immortal (*amṛtās*, “without death”), which is also to say “not born”. (See below 4.4.20). 3) Existence (disturbed *bhavanga*) is *dukkha*—First Noble Truth of Buddhism.

4.4.14. If one clearly beholds him as the self, as God . . . he does not shrink away from him.

Buddha’s teaching, in his words “goes against the stream” i.e. at first one is repelled by the thought of “cessation of existence” or annihilation of individuality. The same problem arises here. One must give up individuality and enter undifferentiated being.

4.4.20. This indemonstrable and constant being can be realized as one only. The self is taintless, beyond space, unborn great and constant.

Undisturbed *bhavaṅga*, i.e. *nirvāṇa* is *indemonstrable*, not accessible to reasoning, *constant*—not like impermanent *samsāra*; *one only*—not open to experience as such since that demands duality. *Taintless*—*nirvāṇa* is beyond the effects of past *karma*. *Unborn*—Buddhist logic demands that only that which is unborn, without origin, will not suffer death and dissolution. *Great*—ultimate attainment of man. *Constant*—extinction is perpetual and eternal.