The Significance of Life and Death

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The Three-Life Cycle of the Buddha-dharma[1]

A person's life is filled with impermanence. After we are born, we grow up and mature, and over some decades, or a century or even longer, we die. Ordinary people often think that death is the end of everything. [If that were the case,] then death would not be such an important matter. However, the Buddha-dharma teaches that a person's life is not just like this: beginning from birth and ending at the time of death. If life were such a simple thing, then it would not be a big deal and we could just bumble our way through life [because nothing is meaningful after death]. But the truth is that our life is a continuation from a previous life that existed before we were born, and after death another new life connected to this present life arises in another place and time. In this way, we are in the cycle of being born then dying, then being born again. [Being trapped in] this continuing life cycle is an issue that is hard to resolve. The longing to resolve this difficult issue thus makes it an important matter. This is just like a person doing business. At the start of the financial year, they begin to conduct their business and then at the year's end they close the accounts, calculate their profits and losses, clarify how much they owe and how much they are owed, and make payments or collections accordingly. The next year the process begins again, though each year the closing of the financial accounts does not signal closure of the business. What is difficult is determining how to ensure the business can turn a profit each and every year and continue operating.

So, how do we deal with this important matter [of cyclic existence]? [One must first understand the truth of life and death, and then cease one's attachment to life. Our life, in general, is like running a business.] This year, if business is booming and a large profit is made, then the business is in a strong financial position and all things will go according to plan next year. In contrast, if this year a loss is incurred and the business is under financial stress such that we have to borrow money to prop up the business, then things can become difficult. Our life is much the same. Through the experience of birth and death, and over the course of each life, we need to think about our gains and losses. On the one hand, if we do not work hard [to develop virtues] in this present life then our life in the human form will be lost. This is considered making a loss into the next life. On the other hand, if our next life is even better than this life, then that is good. There is an important point to note. Although the year-end closing result may

[1] Among the religions in India, many also teach about a three-life cycle. Here, we are discussing the teaching specific to the Buddha-dharma.

be bad, the business can still continue if things are managed properly close to year's end. Likewise, for Buddhist practitioners, the time nearing death is quite important. In our everyday life it is, of course, important to improve ourselves and to undertake wholesome deeds, but we must also be very mindful of doing good deeds close to the time of death.

A Discussion of Death and Birth

Death is Nothing to Fear

We usually describe a whole life as being from birth to death. Some people mistakenly assume that after death everything comes to an end. Therefore, this discussion is first about death and then about the next birth. Ordinary people have a certain fear of death, but in fact death is nothing to fear. For example, if the business is operating well during the year and managed properly close to the year's end, then in the new year there will be good times. Likewise, when we are not ill, we are certainly happy with the situation. But when we have an illness and face death there is also no need to be afraid, so long as we have prepared well in our everyday life.

Three Types of Death

The Buddha-dharma explains that there are three types of death.

1. Death due to exhaustion of lifespan

When our lifespan is exhausted, even if we live for a very long time, this lifespan that is a result of past karmic forces will definitely end in death. This is just like the flame of a candle. When the oil and wick are all used up, the flame is extinguished. At present, humans can live to about 100 years old, and when people are at the end of their lifespan, death comes [naturally] and their lives cannot be extended by any means.

2. Death due to exhaustion of life's necessities

In our daily life we have the necessities of food, clothing, and shelter. There are people who have not reached old age and should not really die yet. But due to the exhaustion of their life's necessities, such as having no food, or clothes, they starve or freeze to death.

3. Death due to unexpected situations

There are unexpected situations that can cause someone to die. For example, people may die when they are caught in a situation of war or natural disaster. Some people may be accidentally beaten to death, while others may meet their death because they are sick and have no

medication, or due to not maintaining good health, which results in them being malnourished or being overworked. Dying as a result of these situations is not the same as when one's lifespan is exhausted, or life's necessities are exhausted.

The Right View of Death

Buddhist practitioners must remember two principles regarding death. One is that death can come at any time. In other words, people can die between the time when they are born and when they are aged. Individuals' lifespans are similar but some may meet their death earlier due to unexpected situations or exhaustion of life's necessities. Therefore, there is no certain time of death; that is, death may occur between the time of birth and the end of their lifespan. Hence, if we have confidence in the Buddha and want to learn from the Buddha, we must immediately begin our practices and not put them off until next year or some future year. The second principle is that we should not mistakenly regard the end of this life as purely a result of past lives' karma. In fact, our lifespan (and the time when we die) is largely subject to the result of the present life's unwholesome karma. It may be that we do things we shouldn't, neglect to look after our health, or become so lazy and idle that we end up lacking the basic necessities of life. These are what hasten death when we are young or in the prime of our lives. We must not mistake this early death as the exhaustion of our lifespan.

Endless Cycles of Birth and Death Are Caused By Karmic Forces

Until we gain liberation from [the cycles of] birth and death, another birth continues after death. How exactly does this work? Specifically, what are the factors to determine whether we progress or regress [in the next life]? The Buddha-dharma teaches that progression and regression are due to different karmic forces. Karmic forces are the potentials created by the [intentional] actions or behaviors we have undertaken. The result of a human rebirth in this life is due to karmic forces in our past lives. The next life is determined by the karmic forces caused by good and bad karmas in this life, and those karmic forces that were created in the past that have not yet come to fruition.

Among Buddhists, the idea of karmic forces is often connected to what is bad, but this is not necessarily the case. Forces created by our thoughts and then acted upon are all called "karmic forces," whether they are good or bad. Our own karmic forces will determine the fruits we reap. Therefore, the Buddha-dharma teaches, "we bear the results of what we have done." However, karmic forces are countless. They include the remaining forces caused by what we had done in

previous lives and the forces created by what we have done in this life. Among them, some are good and some are bad. So, exactly what kinds of karmic forces will come into play to determine the next life? Concerning this, there are three categories [of karmic forces that can dominantly determine the results of the next life].

1. Crucial Influence by Strong Karmic Forces

In all situations of death, when in serious illness and approaching death, for example, a certain karmic force will determine the direction of our next life. In our daily lives we all undertake many good and bad deeds, and at the time of death the karmic force that is strongest will become dominant. Regardless of whether the strongest karmic force is good or bad, we will accordingly bear the fruits caused by this strong karmic force. For example, someone who has killed their parents will always have this memory and will never forget it. Even if they [somehow] forget it, this karmic force remains extremely strong and will persist. At the time when they are about to die, they will recall this evil act. In the same vein, those who are extremely filial towards their parents, will find that upon their death bed this virtue of filial piety will naturally arise within them. This is like the following analogy. A person owes many debts and, at the end of the year, all creditors come asking for their money. If there is an extremely ruthless creditor, the person must repay that creditor first.

2. Crucial Influence of Habitual Karmic Forces

There are some people who have not undertaken extremely good or bad actions, but in their daily lives they have developed some habits. These habits can also create a strong karmic force. [Cumulatively,] minor good or bad actions can transform into good or bad yet significant karmic results. Therefore, the following analogy is used to describe this situation: "small drops of water can eventually fill a large vessel." [As for crucial influence by habitual karmic forces,] the Buddha gave the example of a large tree that grew slanted to the east. When this tree is chopped down it will fall in the eastern direction.

Chinese people often talk about disgruntled ghosts that return for their enemy's life. [For example,] those who [frequently] kill pigs, sheep, snakes and so on, will see these animals [come for them at the time before death] and become very scared and scream in pain. In fact, these animals would have already transformed after being slaughtered, from their present life status into another one in their next life, based on their own karmas. Yet, the perpetrator who kills animals would have unknowingly and continually created the [negative] karmic force of killing. The more they kill, the stronger the karmic force becomes. Therefore, [on their death

bed, for example,] images related to karmas of killing will occur to them (that is, seeing these animals demand their lives back), and the person will follow such karmic forces to their next destiny. There is a story that goes like this.

There was a person who plotted to kill a rich man to get hold of his wealth. One night, this person killed the rich man and took the wealth. The person kept feeling that the rich man was around and wanting his life and money back. The person [was so afraid and almost] died of fright. Not long afterwards, the rich man who was supposedly killed came to visit this person. [The situation at the end of the story shows that] actually the rich man was just injured but did not die. Therefore, it does not make sense if we regard what the person kept feeling as the situation in which a disgruntled ghost came back for revenge. This is because the rich man was not killed.

In the Buddha-dharma, what the person kept feeling is regarded as the case in which images related to that karma occur. Such an explanation actually accords well with the facts. Those who undertake evil actions will see karmic images of suffering and vexation on their death beds, while those who undertake good deeds and create merit will have karmic images that bring them peace and comfort at the time of death. The images that occur are all due to crucial influence by strong or habitual karmic forces.

3. Crucial Influence of Karmic Forces from Last Thoughts

In addition, some people may not have carried out any significantly good or severely bad deeds, nor developed any habitual behavior [that would create a strong karmic force] over the course of their life. For these people, at the end of their life, whatever wholesome or unwholesome thoughts occur to them will determine their next life's destiny.

The Buddha-dharma usually advises that Buddhists should encourage those who are gravely ill to recollect the buddhas, Dharma and saṃgha. Moreover, Buddhists should also praise the good deeds that the ill person has done, such as giving and upholding the precepts. The purpose is to help the dying person recall their virtues and to have wholesome thoughts occur to them such that they can rely on this [karmic] force to move toward a good future destiny. There are some people who have undertaken many wholesome deeds but at the time of their death they experience provocation and their mind is filled with sadness, so that unwholesome thoughts arise. These unwholesome thoughts will lead them to an unfavorable rebirth. This is just like

the analogy of running a business. A person runs a business and it has done well during that year. However, at the year's end, due to poor management, the entire year's efforts are wasted.

Therefore, the people who gather around a dying person, no matter how young or old they are, should not cry and lament. Such situations can disturb the dying person's mental state and cause them to have vexations. Instead, it is better to encourage the dying person to let go of everything and wholeheartedly to recollect the buddhas, Dharma, saṃgha, their generosity and so on. This is just like the situation of a business that has been struggling over the year but can continue to operate in the next year if it is well managed at the year's end. Nevertheless, the karmic forces from significant deeds or habitual behaviours are more important than the efforts made at the time before death. This is like the situation in which a person has committed very bad deeds during their lifetime, then even though others encourage that person to have wholesome thoughts on their deathbed, it is very hard for that person to do so. Conversely, if someone has carried out great wholesome deeds in their lifetime, or has developed the habit of undertaking good deeds, then combined with the encouragement to recall wholesomeness on their deathbed, their bright future destiny is assured.

The Reason for Another Birth After Death

Why is it that after death another birth comes about? When the breath stops, the mind's consciousness ceases and the body's temperature becomes cold; this is called death. In general, birth refers to the situation when one is born from the mother's womb. The Buddha-dharma has a different definition. When the consciousness, associated with karmic forces, gets into the egg that is being fertilized (in terms of humans), the birth of a new life starts. Therefore, those who have abortions to avoid the burden of having too many children break the precept of no killing.

Why is it that after death there is birth again? It is not necessary that all humans should have another birth after death. Some will be born again after they die, while others will not. For those who will be born again after death, their births are instigated by karmic forces. However, under the principle that wholesome karma will bring happy rewards and unwholesome karma will bring painful retributions, does this mean that there is no end to this cycle of birth and death, given that each person, in general, creates both wholesome and unwholesome karmas in the present life? In truth, karmic forces alone are not necessarily able to cause us to take rebirth. Apart from karmic forces, there is also the requirement of defilements as the triggering

conditions. Among the different types of defilements, the most important is the “craving” for life.

The attachment to this world and the craving to continue existing will create the causes for the cycle of birth and death. A Buddhist practitioner who wants to end the cycle of birth and death must cut off the craving for life. Karma is just like a seed. If there is absolutely no water and nutrients to nurture the seed, it will not germinate. Likewise, although we have lots of karmic seeds left, if there are no defilements of craving and so on as water and nutrients, then the painful sprouts of a next life will not germinate. However, if we do not practice Buddha-dharma and just pursue wealth and status, and crave existence, then the cycle of birth and death will endlessly remain. To end the cycle of birth and death we must thoroughly penetrate the true situation of life and let go completely. When there is no more craving for life and this remaining life comes to an end, then a new birth and death will not arise.

Until we have ended the cycle of birth and death, I hope everyone is mindful of this: not to commit any unwholesome deeds and to cultivate wholesome deeds frequently, which is to plant the seeds of goodness to reap happy rewards. Do not regard the cycle of birth and death as a pleasurable thing. In this way, a mind that loathes and wants to be distant from pleasurable things will develop, and then liberation from the ocean of suffering [that is, the cycle of birth and death] will come true.

(Dharma talk given at the lay Buddhist Society in Manila, incorporated into the text, *Buddha-dharma is the Saving Light of the World*, pages 227–33.)