

Concerning
BIRTH

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

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by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Commonly Misunderstood Buddhist Principles

Series - No. 4

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Translated from the Thai by Dhammavidū Bhikkhu

เกี่ยวกับสิ่งที่เรียกว่า “การเกิด”

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Anumodanā

To all Dhamma Comrades, those helping to spread Dhamma:

Break out the funds to spread Dhamma to let Faithful Trust flow,
Broadcast majestic Dhamma to radiate long-living joy.

Release unexcelled Dhamma to tap the spring of Virtue,
Let safely peaceful delight flow like a cool mountain stream.

Dhamma leaves of many years sprouting anew, reaching out,
To unfold and bloom in the Dhamma Centers of all towns.

To spread lustrous Dhamma and in hearts glorified plant it,
Before long, weeds of sorrow, pain, and affliction will flee.

As Virtue revives and resounds throughout Thai society,
All hearts feel certain love toward those born, aging, and dying.

Congratulations and Blessings to all Dhamma Comrades,
You who share Dhamma to widen the people's prosperous joy.

Heartiest appreciation from Buddhādāsa Indapaṇṇo,
Buddhist Science ever shines beams of Bodhi long-lasting.

In grateful service, fruits of merit and wholesome successes,
Are all devoted in honor to Lord Father Buddha.

Thus may the Thai people be renowned for their Virtue,
May perfect success through Buddhist Science awaken their hearts.

May the King and His Family live long in triumphant strength,
May joy long endure throughout this our word upon earth.

from

Buddhādāsa Indapaṇṇo

Mokkhabalārāma

Chaiya, 2 November 2530

(translated by Santikaro Bhikkhu)

Anumodanā

Dhammavidū (Kenneth Croston) is an Englishman, who, after ordaining as a Buddhist monk, lived for, altogether, seventeen years in the Dhammadūta Hermitage of Suan Mokkh Nanachat (International). He became interested in and subsequently studied the Thai language until able to read it well enough. In particular he devoted his time to the study of Buddhādāsa's work, of which the Dhammaghosana (Dhamma Proclamation) series of books particularly attracted his attention. Having read extensively from the series, he realized the value of the Dhamma revealed by Ajahn Buddhādāsa as something not often met with and of real benefit. Anyone willing to read the Ajahn's work and put into practice what they read will be able to solve their problems, that is, to practice for the ending of *dukkha*. Dhammavidū thus decided to translate what he could of Buddhādāsa's work into the English language. At this time several translations have been completed, some of which have been published, while others are awaiting publication. The Buddhādāsa Foundation considers this Dhammaghosana series of books (*Commonly Misunderstood Buddhist Principles*) ought to be speedily printed, containing, as they do, discourses on many important topics, such as *idappaccayatā*, *suññatā* and so on.

I, as President of The Buddhādāsa Foundation thus would like to thank and *anumodanā* Dhammavidū, who is, with faith and diligence, working to translate these books into the English language.

I hope that these publications will be enduring of use, of value, and of benefit to the readers.

Dhamma, Blessings, and Mettā

Buddhadhammo Bhikkhu

21 April 2558 (2015)

Translator's Foreword

Buddhadāsa concerns himself with the concept of 'birth' as being 'ego' birth, the mental form of the genre. He does use the term 'rebirth' on occasion, but never with the usual meaning, that is, as describing something taking place from physical life to physical life – the 'round of rebirths' so dear to traditionalists. He preferred to confine himself to the actually experienceable.

The term '*jāti*' is acknowledged to mean 'birth,' and not 'rebirth.' Buddhadāsa was of the opinion that the Buddha wasn't teaching such a thing so didn't concern himself with what might or might not happen once physical death had taken place, that, said he, couldn't be known with any certainty, and anyway, wasn't personally experienceable.

On the other hand, the Ajahn never denied the possibility of 'rebirth,' and acknowledged the concept as having value in any social system still dominated by ignorance: primarily as a social tool, but also as a means to another end – that is, as a conduit by way of which people could come to a more useful understanding of the Buddha's teaching.

What he meant by that was that people could come to see how the 'self' illusion – which is really the source of all human woe – is sustained by our constant seeking after stimulation, after the delightful, which, should one feel the need keenly enough, can be controlled, thereby reducing selfishness and the associated *dukkha*.

Dhammavidū Bhikkhu

14 Oct. 2558 (2015)

Concerning Birth

*A Dhamma lecture presented on 7 August 2525 (1982)
at Suan Mokkhabalārāma**

Now we come to the subject of ‘birth’ and will take a comprehensive look at this matter. If we split up the main question, there will be just two points to consider: one concerning whether a person dies and then is or isn’t born, the other concerning the sort of birth that is suffering (*dukkha*) – something that should be studied and ended.

The first question – ‘When someone dies, are they born again or not?’ – has been around since the Buddha’s time and was comprehensively dealt with then. It appears from the Pāli texts that it was examined from every conceivable angle so that there arose views, opinions, and conclusions of many kinds that could never obtain general agreement. Some people held that there was death and birth, some that there wasn’t, some that there was sometimes birth and sometimes not, and some held that one shouldn’t declare on the subject at all. The question of birth was a major issue at the time of the Buddha.

* The original *Commonly Misunderstood Buddhist Principles* Dhamma discourses were delivered to the monks, *maechis*, and laypeople at Suan Mokkh during the three months of the 1982 rains retreat. [note by the publisher]

Please consider the possible causes and reasoning behind this question, or whether the question itself is a waste of time. Does it have anything to do with Buddhism? As Buddhists, which group would we belong to – to that which holds there is death and then birth; to that which says there isn't; to that which holds that there is sometimes birth; to that which says that that's not so; or to that which holds that there's neither – neither birth nor no birth?

There are those adhering to other religions who believe that there is a 'self' involved, and that it's this 'self' that gets born, while others of a different persuasion say that's not so; yet another group hold that this 'self' is sometimes born, while others hold that it isn't – and so on and so forth. However, nobody seems to say what the Buddha said: that there isn't a 'being,' a person, that there isn't anyone doing the dying or being born. There is just a stream of conditions dependent on other conditions (*idappaccayatā*), a stream of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*).

Another question, a minor one, crops up here too, as to whether one is 'self-born,' or whether there is someone or something helping the process, something else causing birth to happen. Again, the Buddha didn't declare on that sort of thing, saying only that birth happens in accordance with the law of *idappaccayatā*, the law of nature.

There is also that sort of 'half-birth' called '*sambhāvesī*' to be considered, in which one dies and, still to be born, wanders around searching for a place to be born into. Then, when birth takes place, one becomes *bhūta* (a 'fully born' being). However, this depends on how the word '*sambhāvesī*' is understood. For those who believe in a soul or spirit to be born, but isn't yet fully born, that's *sambhāvesī*. However,

that means a self or a person only half-born, which has no place in Buddhism. Sambhāvesī can refer to mind not yet concocted to the degree that it (mind) feels it's 'me,' or that anything is 'mine' – the mind which is concocting, but which hasn't yet concocted the 'me' and 'mine' scenario fully. This can be called 'sambhāvesī.'

Next, for whom is there the question of whether there is birth after death or not? It might concern beings in general, whether there is birth after death for them or no birth after they die. It might concern those who have become Arahant, whether there is birth after death for them or no birth after they die. Both possibilities depend on the ambiguous meaning of '*tathāgata*.' Tathāgata can mean 'beings that come and go thus' and can refer to beings in general because they go and come like *satta* (sentient beings). In this case, the question is whether there is birth after death for sentient beings or no birth after they die.

However, tathāgata can also mean 'one who has realized *tathā*.' Tathā means 'thus, such' and *gata* 'reaching, realizing' so that tathāgata means 'one who has realized suchness,' which means 'Arahant,' a fully liberated being such as Lord Buddha. In this case the question becomes whether there is birth after death for fully awakened beings or no birth after they die. People still wonder about this. Yet it has nothing to do with Buddhism.

There is also the problem of what it is that actually gets born. People who follow the ancient doctrines of India say that *viññāṇa** gets born, but Buddhism doesn't include

* In the Pāli texts, *viññāṇa* usually means 'sense consciousness.' In other contexts the meaning can be quite different! [note by the editor]

that kind of consciousness; it only deals with the six sense consciousnesses. If, however, we allow that consciousness is born, in the Buddhist sense it would imply the concocting of mental activity in response to sense contact so that there occurs feeling, perception, and thought, culminating in the ‘birth’ of the ‘I’ sense within mind. This would be comparable to consciousness being ‘born.’

There is still a large question to consider: some creeds and religions hold a fundamental belief that when a person dies they go to await judgement as to whether they should be born in an eternal hell or in an eternal heaven. They get judged just once and then take birth accordingly. If, for instance, one is born into an eternal hell, it is actually eternal. If one is to be born into heaven, that will be for all eternity too, without any further change. Some creeds and religions believe in other systems. They don’t hold to that kind of thing; they don’t have a ‘death’ and then a ‘waiting around for eternal judgement to be made.’ Please consider these examples of how complex and ambiguous this matter of ‘birth’ can become.

Now, concerning whether one is born or not, when we look at this in accordance with actual Buddhist principles as contained in the original texts, then the question has to be considered from two angles: from that of those who use the language of supposition and from that of those who use the language of ultimate truth. Simply put, it is said that a person who doesn’t yet know the way things really are, who doesn’t know that the ‘self’ is illusory, will use language in one way, while someone who has that knowledge will use language in another. All or most worldly people will necessarily speak in the way of the world, in the language of supposition, and

will accept that there is a ‘self,’ that there is a ‘me,’ a ‘person’ who dies and is then born.

This has been repeated over and over again until there is hardly anybody who thinks that it can be any other way, and it is useful on the level of *sīladhamma* (ethics, virtue, morality), useful for people who have yet to realize truth. For those people, the doctrine of rebirth is the better option because it discourages wrong-doing and encourages the opposite, though it’s not the truth. If we use the language of ultimate truth, there isn’t anything that could be called a ‘self’ or ‘person’; there is only the concocting of elements, of causes and conditions in accordance with the law of nature.

However, when we mention this, people tend to misunderstand it, so we need to be careful and reserved even with ultimate truth. We should talk about such things only when it’s appropriate, only when the listener’s mind is elevated enough to understand properly. Usually it’s more fitting to talk in a way which is going to be useful, and if saying that ‘after death there is birth’ is useful, that is what we should say.

Before the Buddha arose in India, they held that there was death and then rebirth, that there was a ‘self’ or consciousness that was reborn. That was the majority belief because it was more useful than competing beliefs. Now, when the Buddha awakened, when the Buddha appeared, it was into a society where this belief was firmly established, so what was he to do? Well, he didn’t try to put an end to the belief. Rather, he gave the appearance of subscribing to it by saying that in case there’s birth after death, one should know how to act so as to obtain the best kind of birth, that

is, the suffering-free kind, and he then went about teaching the method of practice by which that kind of birth could be attained. Thus, in conformity with the then generally-held belief, teachings for obtaining the best kind of birth are scattered throughout the Buddhist Scriptures; however, the true Buddhist message is that there isn't a being or a person, only ever-changing processes of concocting, of compounding, with nobody involved in them. People tend to grab at particular bits and moments of these processes, call them a 'person' and say that they're born, age, and die, and that they're reborn. The question we need to ask is if that sort of understanding can bring any real benefit. If people want to end suffering, to really not have any suffering, what sort of understanding should they have: that there is a 'self,' the kind that can wait to be born somewhere, or that there isn't?

Right now, at this moment, there isn't a 'person,' a 'someone' who was born – but nobody understands this properly. That which was born, that which is sitting here in this place right now, isn't a person. It's really just a stream of *idappaccayatā*. All of these people sitting here aren't really people at all. They are just nature, just the *khandhas* (aggregates), the *dhātus* (elements), the *āyatanas* (sense media) concocting together in accordance with the law of nature, and flowing on, continually changing, transforming. They aren't really 'beings,' aren't 'people' at all. How many of us sitting here now understand this correctly – how many? If, however, we don't understand, that's alright. First we hear it, and then, when we have taken it in we ought to be able to grasp that there isn't anybody living life; there are just things flowing along in dependence on the appropriate causes and conditions being present. Listen to the Buddhist

teaching: there isn't a person; there isn't anyone to die, to be born, or be reborn; there is only the stream of concocting, the concocting of the *khandhas* (aggregates), the *dhātus* (elements), and the *āyatanas* (sense media) in accordance with the law of nature. Clinging to these as a 'being' or 'person' is the starting point of *dukkha* (dis-ease, distress, suffering) because when there is a 'me' and a 'mine,' then there will be the associated problems – that is the beginning of suffering.

If, however, this isn't understood, it can't be of help. So for those who still think, still cling, still have the belief that there is a 'self' which was born, will die and be born again and again, what can they do to adjust their understanding? Well, they need to acquire knowledge of just one kind – the Buddhist knowledge that can quench suffering. Clear knowledge concerning birth is important; if understanding is right, there won't be any suffering at all; if wrong, it won't correspond to natural truth and there must be *dukkha*. If there is a 'person,' there must be birth and death too; if there isn't, there won't be birth and death either. Ordinarily people think that there is someone living life, so they have birth, ageing, sickness, and death to deal with, and must suffer. If they have only that sort of knowledge, they must undergo suffering, unless they can lift themselves up a level.

For this reason the Buddha is recorded as saying that if all beings would live with him as their *kalyāṇamitta* (good friend), those ordinarily subject to birth will escape it, those subject to ageing and death will escape them, and those beings who experience sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair will escape from all of that too; that is, they will escape from all the forms of *dukkha*.

Now, any children sitting here probably won't understand how they could escape birth, ageing, sickness, and death, so putting it in a way that will make it easier for them to grasp, we will say that it's the problems associated with birth, ageing, sickness, and death that can be escaped from. These concepts of birth, ageing, sickness, and death cause us fear, anxiety, and so forth, causing us to suffer. If one can make an end of the problems that come from birth, ageing, sickness, and death, that's called 'escaping' from them.

At present, we still have the many problems associated with these concepts: we must get sick even though we don't want to be sick, must grow old even though we don't want to, and we will have to die whether we want to or not. We are still selfish so we can still be alarmed by ageing, sickness, and death – in fact by any small thing associated with death. Well, how pleasant would it be to escape from all of that? That's the aim of Dhamma study: to know the Dhamma and be able to live without, to live 'above,' the problems of life.

To sum up, since olden times there have been two schools: one teaching that there is death and then birth, and one that there is death but no subsequent birth. Now, which should we choose? We should choose the one that is useful to us. However, we must choose for ourselves because nobody can help us. For those dwelling in the world, the way of *sīladhamma*, the way of birth, is useful and will also fit in with our thinking because in truth we don't really want to disappear. We still want to be born, so then we, aiming for an elevated birth, will be inclined towards doing good and avoiding evil to whatever extent. Hence, there is some preliminary right understanding involved in regarding the

concept of rebirth as useful for getting people to do the proper thing.

Both beliefs, however, are really incorrect, because the fact is that there isn't anyone to be born or to not be born. At present, however, people tend to think in the two ways mentioned. So choose the way that's useful. Right now some people cannot, perhaps, understand that there isn't anyone who will be born or die. For them we can teach rebirth. Then it becomes a matter of being born in a good or a bad way according to one's *kamma* (intentional action), thereby encouraging people to behave. We don't object to people teaching in this way, although for the reasons already set out, it isn't the Buddhist religion.

Now we will look at the second question, that is, how many kinds of birth are there, and which kind is a problem, and which isn't?

The word 'birth' is broad in meaning. The arising of anything is called 'birth,' as with an event; an event is something insubstantial, a happening, something that occurs – there is this kind of birth. Matter, or material things, are born, as with a stone, a clod of earth, or whatever; the arising of anything material is called 'birth.' A seed, a tree, a creeper, when they arise it's called 'birth' too. Creatures are born. A person, a human being is born, gods are born, and so on. Such is the 'birth' of material things and of things that are flesh and blood.

Yet there is another kind of birth, the birth of immaterial things, problematic things – 'mental birth.' The arising of thought is called 'mental birth,' and if mind is defiled with *kilesas* (defilements, polluting states, reactive emotions),

it's called 'the birth of kilesas.' Be aware that this mental birth, this birth of kilesas, is a problem. If it's only birth of something material – a plant, an animal, a person – and isn't concerned with the mental defilements, it isn't a problem.

Further, whether it's a full birth or not needs to be considered. Birth of an infant from the mother's womb isn't a problem because that sort of birth isn't a full birth: a child born from its mother's womb cannot think about anything and thus cannot have dukkha. It must be able to think for the kilesas to arise into mind – that would be called 'full birth.' If the baby doesn't have the thoughts of 'me' and 'mine,' it isn't yet called a 'full birth' and there has merely been physical birth from the womb. Dogs and cats are born in the same manner. Only when there are the thoughts of 'me' and 'mine' is it considered to be a full birth.

We will take some time to look over birth as it occurs in the Scriptures. The first kind of birth is that which takes place in water: all the creatures, including people and beasts like cows and buffalo that begin their lives as embryos in water in the mother's womb are considered water-born. The second kind of birth is the egg-born, as in the case of birds and most reptiles. The third kind concerns the birth of micro-organisms. Ordinary life arises in these ways: the water-born, in the case of people and beasts; the egg-born, in the case of birds and creatures that need eggs first; and the accumulation-born, in the case of things that can hardly be seen but of which there are a great many – micro-organisms greatly outnumbering the visible kind, there being millions in even one drop of water.

A fourth kind of birth is called '*opapātika*,' which is a kind of 'hidden birth,' one that doesn't need the help of a

father or mother, and refers to one arisen in an already full-grown, mature condition without having had to grow up from childhood. This is known as *opapātika* (spontaneously arisen). There are two explanations for this word. Most commonly it's taken to mean the birth of a supernatural being, like an angel, a god, or a *peta* (hungry ghost), a hell-being, or whatever. Leaving this world, one goes to be born as a god or whatever without having to dwell in the mother's womb beforehand, without having to be born and go through the maturing process.

However, here we don't explain it like that. We take it to mean birth in the mental sense, that is, there is thinking, concocting in whatever way which gives rise to a 'mental birth.'

In this understanding there's no need for death to intervene, no need for anyone to die and then be born. Further, if the thinking is base, low thinking, for instance one is thinking like a bandit, then one is mentally 'born' as a bandit right there and then, while still in the same human body. So think like a robber and be born as one; think like a god and be born as a god, yet while still in a human body. To achieve birth as a *Brahma* god, develop the mind of a *Brahma*, that is, concentrate it in *samādhi* and be immediately born as a *Brahma* god, and all without having had to bother with death. If mind is *samādhi*, then one has already been born as a *Brahma*.

Which of these understandings would be useful? Think about it: that in which one needs to die first and then get born as a god, a hell-being, a *Brahma*, or something or other in another very distant world, or the instant, mental kind of birth, where one thinks in a certain manner and however

one thinks, one is born accordingly, right there and then. The second option is frightening because it happens easily and often, yet it's the better choice in that it's controllable. We can restrain mind, that is, not let it think in such a way that it takes a low birth as a bad person, a robber or anything like that. Rather, have it think in an elevated manner and be born as a good person, a wise person, or a noble one. This kind of birth is important.

You ought to understand this and strive to have the births be beneficial. Have mind think like a good person and become one; have mind think in a low, unskillful way and be born accordingly. We can manage this kind of birth called 'opapātika' – rising without a mother and father in the usual manner, without having to first go through infancy.

Thus, Buddha's birth (*uppatti*) into the world wasn't about Siddhattha being born from his mother's womb. The meaning is much different. When did Buddha arise into the world? The usual answer would be that it was when he was born. In truth it wasn't like that. Buddha arose into the world when he awakened; in the moment of awakening he was opapātika – born into the world. The 'birth' of Buddha occurred when the mental defilements were destroyed and his condition changed to that of one who sees clearly, who is a Sammā-Sambuddha. Thus, birth of the opapātika kind has great value and meaning. It might be very useful for us, inasmuch as it would allow mind to operate in an increasingly correct manner.

Here 'death' and 'birth' would have the meaning of one mind quenching and a new mind arising, of one kind of mind quenching and a new kind being 'born.' This can be called 'death' and 'birth' but it doesn't require that the body die,

enter a coffin and be taken off somewhere to be cremated. Mind is born and quenches, arises and passes away – it's the same thing as birth and death but this is a 'birth' we can manage, that is, make it happen in better and better ways.

Please take interest in whether your mind is thinking in better and loftier ways or not. Manage mind so that it's born in a more elevated manner, so that the *kilesas* (defilements) decrease, so that there is more clarity, insight, and *bodhi* (enlightenment) every time mind is born. Train mind to function in this way; control birth so that it's useful. We know very well which kind of birth it's our duty to arrange – increasingly better births. Mind being born better and better means the good of 'human being,' the good of 'deva,' the good of 'Brahma,' the good of 'noble one,' the good of 'Arahant,' all the way to the good of 'Sammā-Sambuddha.' Strive to develop ever higher mental births. These sorts of birth are desirable and aren't a problem as they don't involve suffering.

Undesirable births involve the arising of *kilesas*, because when they arise into mind, then one is low, like a bad individual, like a *peta* (hungry ghost), an animal, or a demon, but while still in this human body. Among people sitting here, if any one of them thinks in a low manner, in a way that's hot for the mind, they will be born as hell-beings. Although sitting here in this human form, inside, mentally they will be in hell. If they think in an ignorant, foolish way, they will be born as animals while sitting here in these human bodies. If they feel excessive hunger for delight, for stimulation, then they are hungry ghosts (*petas*). If they are unreasonably afraid, if they are cowardly, then they are demons (*asuras*) while in this body, while sitting here. There's no need for

anyone to die and be put into a coffin to be born in this way. Birth of this kind is a problem, is suffering.

Having seen how there are several kinds of birth, for now we are especially concerned with birth of the human mind in a desirable and increasingly elevated manner, capable of quenching suffering. Birth in an undesirable way is that which is low, which is suffering. So if the question is about which kind of birth is a problem, it's the birth of suffering, of mental torment. Bodily pain, if it doesn't hurt the mind, isn't much. There is bodily pain which doesn't hurt mentally, and there is bodily pain which does. If mind is weak, is foolish, even the prick of a thorn can cause mental pain and fear of death. Someone with strength of mind won't fear or suffer upon being cut or jabbed by a thorn. There is suffering for the mind whenever there is the arising of the 'me' thought, because then there is a 'me' experiencing life and fearing death.

The Buddha offered a useful analogy when he compared birth to two arrows: a child's toy arrow flies through the air, pierces one's body and hurts just so much, but if it's a large arrow with a terrible poison piercing one's body, it's going to hurt much, much more. Here the pain of the first sort doesn't provoke a belief that it's 'me' who's experiencing it, so it just hurts a little – like the child's toy arrow would. If, however, the pain gives rise to the feeling of 'me' and 'me will die,' it's like being pierced by the second arrow with the poisoned tip.

Hence, be aware of the sort of thinking that gives rise to 'me' and 'me will die.' Don't allow them to happen and there won't be much *dukkha* (dis-ease, distress, suffering) to experience. One must meet with injury and pain during

life; just remember that pain is a feeling arising through the nervous system, a natural phenomenon, and don't allow it to be more than that, because if anyone thinks it's 'me' who feels the pain and 'me will die,' there will be suffering. Therefore, when there is pain, fever, or injury of any kind, consider that it's just sensation happening naturally by way of the nervous system. Don't let it give rise to the 'me' who is in pain, who will die or whatever, and there won't be much suffering. It will be like being hit by the child's arrow rather than by the poisoned one.

We are hit by the poisoned arrow when deep ignorance arises. When foolish, defiled thinking that there is a 'self' occurs, it's called *upādāna* (clinging, attachment) to 'me' and then 'mine,' born from ignorance. When anything makes contact with the senses and there is no *sati-paññā* (mindfulness and wisdom), but only ignorance, it can be a big affair. The attractive becomes very attractive, the ugly becomes hateful, the fearful becomes terrifying, and 'self' on a big scale arises. When clinging (*upādāna*) to 'me' and 'mine' occurs there must be suffering.

This subject is explained in detail in the dependent co-arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) teaching. Briefly, when anything meets eye, ear, nose, tongue, or body, there is 'contact.' If at that moment ignorance is in charge, there will be one result. If it isn't and there is real knowledge instead, there will be another. If contact is ignorant, there will be ignorant feelings of pleasure or pain arising into mind; from that will be born *taṇhā* (ignorant desire), and whenever that happens there must occur the feeling of 'me,' of 'me' who desires, who will get, will take possession of whatever is being desired. It all comes from desire, ignorant desire for

ignorant feelings born from ignorant sense contact. When there is ignorant contact, foolish desire arises; foolish desire having arisen, there will be clinging to ‘me’ and ‘mine.’

This is a very important but difficult to understand matter. One should study for oneself within oneself why feelings of ‘me’ and ‘mine’ arise – the ‘me’ and ‘mine’ that are suffering. Nervous disease, madness, even death happen because of clinging to the ‘self’ idea. This is the sort of birth that is the problem.

The birth of dukkha happens because mind is ignorant and misunderstands: a sense object deceives and lures the mind into the misunderstanding that there is a ‘me’ and a ‘mine’ – mindfulness and wisdom are insufficient, so mind is deceived into feeling pleased or displeased and the defiled thinking of ‘me’ and ‘mine’ arises. This is the arising of suffering because it’s the arising of clinging to the belief that there is a ‘me’ and a ‘mine’ happening in dependence on some experience capable of causing it. ‘Me’ and ‘mine’ are *māyā* – illusion, not reality – but there is real suffering nevertheless. There’s no need for an actual, real ‘self’; only wrong perceiving and thinking that there is a ‘self’ is needed for suffering to happen.

If dukkha arises, understand well that suffering is totally unnecessary.

How do we quench suffering? If there is the arising of suffering, how will we quench it? We can quench the symptoms, or we can quench the root cause. If we have a malignant disease, we can fix the painful symptoms or we can fix the root of the pain – the disease. Anyone with wisdom will see that it’s necessary to do something about the root cause of dukkha, because to just treat the symptoms

won't put an end to it. We have to seek out the basic cause, fix it, and then it will end, will quench. We don't just cure the external effects; we cure the internal causes, the root cause too.

Whether what arises will be suffering or not depends on whether we are foolish or wise. If mind gives rise to 'birth' it will cause us to 'die' and that must be suffering. If mind sees how to fix the problem, it needn't give rise to suffering. Then even pain, fever, or danger – through knowing that it's simply just what it is, that it's really 'just like that' – won't create any suffering. Ordinarily, people can't do this so they must experience suffering. They have the unknowing of *avijjā* (ignorance) ready in mind to cause the feeling of 'I,' the habitual feeling that it's 'me' who will die one day, so they suffer. They are wary of death so they suffer – even though there isn't anything else happening to cause suffering, just being wary of death will be enough. The 'me' thought is always being concocted in mind so there is always going to be suffering; quench it and there won't be.

It's hard to understand, but suffering can arise even though there isn't a real 'self,' isn't a person to do the suffering. Suffering arises in accordance with the law of nature. In dependence on causes and conditions there is experience through the nervous system, it's painful, and then there is suffering. There isn't a real, essential 'self' involved here, but suffering arises through the ignorant mind believing that there is. Thus, suffering can happen regardless of whether there is actually a 'self' or not, so it can quench without there needing to be a real 'self' too.

This is the meaning of *anattā* (not-self) and *suññatā* (voidness), the highest Dhamma in Buddhism, allowing

access to the truth that whatever it is, it's 'just like that,' just what it is operating according to natural principles.

If a painful feeling arises, we brush it off as being 'just like that,' a painful feeling arising through the nervous system in accordance with natural principles – there's no 'me' involved. The clever mind isn't concerned with the birth of 'my' pain; it doesn't allow the birth of 'my' pain or the birth of 'my' death. For that reason there isn't a 'me' who needs to die and pain is allowed to remain as just what it is – a feeling in the nervous system. If pain is such that death must happen, the body dies but there's no 'me' to make it into suffering. At the final second, when the body perishes there's no 'me' so there's no suffering either. There is just mind without clinging. This is the ultimate Dhamma, akin to the highest art; it's the most difficult, the highest ability that anyone can develop.

Ordinarily, artistic skills are hard to acquire, but the ability to quench defilements, to quench suffering is – while still being within the limits of the do-able – yet more difficult. The Buddha didn't teach the impossible. But we are lazy. We vacillate and say that it is impossible. We don't want to do it so we have to put up with suffering.

If, however we accept that this is possible, we should try. Within the human condition we can do this. We can control mind and maintain it correctly so that it remains free of selfishness, free from 'me' and 'mine,' and then any pain will just be bodily pain occurring through the nervous system according to natural law. Whether it disappears or ends in death, it's simply a matter of the aggregates, the elements, the senses – a natural affair. Don't allow it to become a 'me' and 'mine' problem and it won't result in the dukkha of the

poisoned arrow variety; it will be like the childish arrow that merely irritates the flesh. This is the art that conquers suffering.

The birth of suffering is a lowly, most unwelcome form of birth. We know that if ‘I’ isn’t born in mind, suffering won’t happen. We know that we can be suffering-free, that Arahant mind, mind without dukkha, is possible. The mind of a smart, worldly person will produce suffering, but will also be the kind of mind that can be developed and ultimately cooled. If we have the motivation, we can practise to develop mindfulness and the sort of wisdom that accords with the Buddhist principle of anattā, that there isn’t a ‘self’ in the true sense, that the ‘self’ idea arises from ignorance and mental carelessness whenever anything contacts the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind. Whenever sense contact occurs and ignorance is in charge, the ‘self’ idea will be concocted and will further concoct love, hate, anger, and fear, which are all dukkha.

Be interested in being aware of precisely where and when the arising of the defilements that cause suffering takes place. Then we can replace them with mindfulness and wisdom, with understanding instead of ignorance. This is the point we need to grasp sufficiently.

When we know that there isn’t really a ‘self’ at all, then we don’t need to ask whether there is birth after death or not. There’s no need for such a question because we know that ‘me’ is a fiction, that there are only the *dhātus* (elements) of earth, water, fire, air, and of space, only the senses operating in dependence on the law of nature. There’s no need to bring in ‘me’ and the ‘mine.’ This is to access the final level of the Buddhist religion: that there isn’t anyone who is born or dies.

Hence we come to dwell above suffering, above kamma and its fruit, above everything, and, should anything return to cause suffering, we can brush it off by simply not accepting it.

Thus we are able to put a stop to all deliberate actions (*kamma*). If we understand that there isn't a 'me,' that there is only *suññatā* (voidness), we don't make any new kamma and old kamma cannot return to cause suffering. Whatever the kamma, if we allow it to bear fruit, the result will be suffering. Now we can control suffering, not allow it to arise into mind, so that kamma is then sterile and can't do anything to us. We're no longer the 'site' of suffering.

The word 'we' here means 'mind.' In reality it's mind that knows clearly and truthfully. Conventionally, we just say 'we.' If we don't use this word there will be misunderstanding. What suffers? Mind suffers, but we say 'we' suffer because we are accustomed to speaking in that way. Yet be aware that if there really does arise the feeling of 'we' being a solid, lasting entity, there will be suffering. If not, without 'we' and without 'ours,' there's no way for suffering to happen, and no need for the problematical questions of whether there's birth after death, or not, or sometimes yes and sometimes no. All of that messy doubting will be finished with.

Whatever people believe, whether they believe in rebirth or reincarnation, or not, they can quench dukkha in this way only. Suffering ends by being aware of mind's concocting and how concocting the birth of 'me' and 'mine' creates suffering. Don't concoct such birth of 'me' and 'mine,' and it won't suffer.

We would take the liberty here of saying that people, no matter what nationality they are, what religion they hold to, what opinions they have, if they suffer it's because they go wrong when experiencing the world, and if they're going to quench their suffering, they will do it through understanding how the non-arising of 'me' and 'mine' occurs. Although they hold to another religion with another way of teaching, still the true quenching of suffering is in the quenching of clinging to 'me' and 'mine,' so that there isn't a 'me' to live, a 'me' to die, or a 'me' to be reborn. Mind is then released, free, pure. The pure, free mind doesn't have the feeling that anyone is born or dies. Such mind isn't born and doesn't die. If mind arises, it isn't the arising of 'self.' Mind arises in dependence on causes and conditions. Only mind in process of experiencing arises, not the 'self' idea.

Our theme is the deep truth of 'birth' – that there isn't a 'self' to be born or to die. However, those who still can't see this won't be able to practise it either and may as well be reborn in order to do good. And for them, it will be a matter of death and birth, of dying and being born, dying and being born, which is tied up with the doing of good and the avoiding of evil activities. After discovering that doing good and striving to do their best still won't put an end to their suffering, they find that ending birth would be better. Stopping the arising of the 'me' who is born and dies is more useful. Elevate practice until suffering is finally released and one dwells 'above' the world. This is *lokuttara*, above and beyond the world.

If we are still worldly (*lokiya*) about how we live in this world, still having the 'me' sense, we won't be able to avoid the sense of birth and death, and we will do our best to get

around the problem of achieving good births and avoiding evil ones, so that by doing the right things we won't suffer. However, suffering there must be because there will still be birth, ageing, sickness, and death to experience, and even though we do good, make merit in whatever way, we are still going to be faced with fear of death. We need to transcend the 'self' belief that makes trouble with birth and death. Go beyond evil by way of goodness and then go beyond even goodness in order to realize lokuttara, above and beyond all goodness and wholesomeness, above suffering. The dilemma of what follows death, whether there's another birth or not, is finished when there's nobody to be born and to die. Let the problems of death and birth go by realizing that birth of 'self' is the birth of dukkha.

We are sufficiently intelligent and have studied enough to no longer give birth to the feeling of being 'me' and having 'mine' in order to die. Live beyond birth and death, though these words may sound strange. Children won't understand. Still, remember that Buddha spoke of being above birth, above death, and above everything, that this is real and can be realized by improving our minds, cultivating our hearts, and training in wisdom and true knowledge to that level, all of which is within our capacities.

Please don't take the wrong path. Endeavor to follow the right way and do good to your fullest ability. When you reach the limits of goodness, when doing good doesn't end all suffering, progress to the stage of going beyond 'self,' of letting go of 'self,' and dukkha will end. Join the noble ones above the world and be done with the problem of whether or not there is birth after death.

We have said a great deal about birth, in fact enough. We don't need to argue about whether birth follows death or not. Just don't allow suffering to happen. If you still believe that you will be born again, you need to behave in such a way that it will be a good birth. Even so, there will be suffering because there will still be a 'self' to be born and die.

So put an end to the 'self' feeling and put an end to birth and death. Put an end to getting or not getting, to winning and losing, to profit and loss, and so on, and then there won't be anything to cause confusion in our world. This would be dwelling above the world, reaching the final destination. Who will reach it first? We should vie with each other to be first, because whoever attains it will be above and beyond suffering of all kinds.

About the Author

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu was born in 1906, the son of a southern Thai mother and an ethnic Chinese father. He followed Thai custom by entering a local monastery in 1926, studied for a couple years in Bangkok, and then founded his own refuge for study and practice in 1932. Since then, he has had a profound influence on not only Thai Buddhism but other religions in Siam and Buddhism in the West. Among his more important accomplishments, he:

- Challenged the hegemony of later commentarial texts with the primacy of the Buddha's original discourses.
- Integrated serious Dhamma study, intellectual creativity, and rigorous practice.
- Explained Buddha-Dhamma with an emphasis on this life, including the possibility of experiencing Nibbāna ourselves.
- Softened the dichotomy between householder and monastic practice, stressing that the noble eightfold path is available to everyone.
- Offered doctrinal support for addressing social and environmental issues, helping to foster socially engaged Buddhism in Siam.
- Shaped his forest monastery as an innovative teaching environment and Garden of Liberation.

After a series of illnesses, including strokes, he died in 1993. He was cremated without the usual pomp and expense.

About the Translator

Dhammavidū Bhikkhu, originally from England, ordained as a monk in 1995 and has lived at Suan Mokkh, Chaiya, in South Thailand since then. He has helped to teach meditation to foreign retreatants at Suan Mokkh International Dharma Hermitage and Dipabhāvan Meditation Center at Samui Island. As a translator, he has been particularly interested in *The Dhamma Proclamation Series*, a multivolume collection of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu's major teachings.

Commonly Misunderstood Buddhist Principles Series

- 1. *Idappaccayatā - The Buddhist Law of Nature*
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- 4. *Concerning Birth*
- 5. *Concerning God **
- 6. *Nibbāna from Every Angle **
- 7. *The Whirlpool of Saṃsāra **
- 8. *The World and Dhamma **

* forthcoming

Recommended Reading (Books)

- *Mindfulness With Breathing: A Manual for Serious Beginners*
- *Handbook for Mankind*
- *The First Ten Years of Suan Mokkh*
- *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*
- *Keys to Natural Truth*
- *Void Mind*
- *The Prison of Life*
- *It All Depends **

* forthcoming

Online Resources

- www.suanmokkh.org
- www.suanmokkh-idh.org
- www.liberationpark.org
- www.bia.or.th

Buddhadāsa Foundation

Established in 1994, the Buddhadāsa Foundation aims to promote the study and practice of Buddha-Dhamma according to Ven. Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's teachings. It encourages compilation and translation of his works from Thai into foreign languages, as well as supports publication of translated teachings for free distribution.



Liberation Park

Liberation Park is a Dhamma refuge in the USA's Midwest inspired by Suan Mokkh. Here, Santikaro and friends work to nurture a garden of liberation along the lines taught by Ajahn Buddhadāsa, where followers of the Buddha-Dhamma Way can explore Dhamma as Nature and in the Pāli suttas.



Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives

Established in 2010, the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives collect, maintain, and present the original works of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu. Also known as Suan Mokkh Bangkok, it is an innovative place for fostering mutual understanding between traditions, studying and practicing Dhamma.

