

A Precious Human Rebirth



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Association for Insight Meditation

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A Precious Human Rebirth

*“Kiccho manussapaṭilābho,
kicchaṃ maccāna jīvitaṃ
Kicchaṃ saddhammasavaṇaṃ,
kiccho Buddhānamuppādo.”*

“Hard is birth as a human being,
hard is the life of mortals.
Hard is the hearing of the sublime truth,
hard is the appearance of the Buddhas.”

Human rebirth is difficult to obtain, and easy to lose. Though life is extremely precious and fragile, most people indulge in pleasures, completely heedless of their impending death, and pay little attention to the Dhamma. Many know nothing about Buddhism. Even among Buddhists, ignorance of the true Dhamma is widespread, and most just follow traditional customs.

In Burma, the majority of Buddhists will ordain temporarily at least once during their youth, and many will spend the Burmese New Year as temporary monks or nuns to practise meditation.

Temporary monks are called “*dullabha*,” which means “difficult to get,” because they have obtained the rare opportunity of ordination as a bhikkhu. Though they usually disrobe after a brief spell in the robes, some of them may remain, or return later in life. During their period as bhikkhus, most practise meditation seriously.

Even rarer than human rebirth is the arising of a Buddha in the world. Two thousand, six hundred years have already passed since the enlightenment of Gotama Buddha. No Buddha has arisen since then, and no archeological evidence has been found of other, earlier Buddhas, though there is scriptural evidence in the Pāli texts of their existence in the remote past.

Buddhas Are Very Rare

Though this is mere speculation, from what it says in the Cakkavatti Sutta (D.iii.74), one can estimate that it will be at least 100,000 years before the next Buddha appears. Twenty-eight Buddhas are mentioned in the Pāli texts. Since the time that the Bodhisatta gained the sure prediction of enlightenment at the feet of Dīpaṅkara Buddha to the present, including the Buddha Gotama, just twenty-five Buddhas have appeared during that unimaginably long interval. In the current world cycle, four Buddhas have appeared already, with Metteyya Buddha expected to appear before its end. Many interim world cycles were devoid of Buddhas.

Modern scientists believe that the universe began from a “Big Bang,” ten to twenty billion years ago. That is the current theory. One cycle of evolution and destruction of the universe can be equated to a single world cycle. So the arising of a Buddha is extremely rare.

Again, even though a Buddha has arisen relatively recently, and though his teaching is still widely available, how many people know about it? Most people in the world are almost oblivious of the Buddha and his teachings. Of those who know of it, only one or two percent know it thoroughly — perhaps five million monks and learned lay Buddhists. Of those knowledgeable Buddhists, one million may have enough faith to practise meditation in earnest at least once in their lives. Of those, perhaps sixty thousand have gained the path, its fruition, and nibbāna, which is about 0.001% of the world’s population, or one in 100,000. The proportion is likely to be much lower in countries that have very few meditation centres.

This rough estimate may suffice to illustrate the great rarity of realising the Dhamma. How can any Buddhist remain without making the slightest effort to realise nibbāna? If one gains Right Thought by reasoning in this way, one could not possibly remain heedless. Yet, because sensual desire, ill-will,

and delusion overwhelm them, ordinary Buddhists are usually heedless of the true Dhamma. Even during the time of the Buddha, some monks indulged in playing games, listening to music, watching entertainments, etc., so what can we say regarding modern monks? Too many have forgotten the purpose of the monk's life. Every monk should practise meditation regularly and earnestly.

The difficulty for intelligent human beings to realise the Dhamma is nothing when compared to that of animals, fish, birds, and insects. Though they have been reborn during this very precious Buddha era, they lack the basis for realising or practising the Dhamma. That is why the lower realms are called "states of loss (*apāya*)."

The Simile of the One-eyed Turtle

In the *Bālapanḍita Sutta* — the Discourse on the Foolish and the Wise — (*Majjhimanikāya*, Sutta 129) the Buddha describes the suffering of the animal kingdom, giving the Simile of the One-eyed Turtle to illustrate just how difficult it is to regain human rebirth, once one is reborn in the animal realm.

"O monks, I will give you a simile. A man makes a hole in a log and sets it adrift in the ocean. When the wind comes from the east the log drifts westwards. When the wind blows from the west, it drifts eastward. Similarly, north winds push it to the south, and south winds push it to the north. In the ocean is a one-eyed turtle that surfaces only once every hundred years. Is it possible that the one-eyed turtle would put its head up through the hole in the log?"

The monks replied that normally it would be impossible, but in the infinite duration of *samsāra* a chance might occur. Yet it would be very difficult for the one-eyed turtle to meet up with the drifting log. Then the Buddha explained.

"Monks this rare chance, this freak occurrence is possible, but for a bad man who is reborn as an animal or in hell to become a human being again is rarer and more difficult."

Human status is exceedingly rare. Once this rare chance is gone, one finds the greatest difficulty to be reborn again as a human being. Why? In the lower realms no opportunities exist for the performance of wholesome deeds. So, lacking good conduct, a being in the lower realms has to suffer for countless world cycles. Those reborn in the animal kingdom have to struggle for existence, preying upon each other. Animals do mostly harmful deeds with their low intelligence — the strong persecuting the weak. So there is little chance for them to be reborn in the human world. The lowest probability exists for them to upgrade themselves.

For a one-eyed turtle wandering in the ocean to encounter the hole in the log is possible only if the log never rots, and only if the turtle lives for billions of years. Yet a much smaller chance exists for a being in the lower realms to achieve human status again, for very few wholesome kammās are possible in the lower realms. This is explained in the Commentary. In the four lower realms of existence a sentient being knows nothing of the value of almsgiving, keeping moral precepts, or practising meditation. Lower beings who find themselves lacking wholesome kamma are further hampered by the lack of opportunities to do good. Observe the daily behaviour of dogs, cats, sheep, birds, fish, and other animals. Their moral sense is very limited, so they have little chance to do good. They usually do only unwholesome deeds.

Do Not Miss the Best Chance

Human existence is therefore an extraordinarily rare and precious opportunity to learn the Buddhadhamma and to do meritorious deeds. Yet, because they do not know the Dhamma well enough, most people are extremely negligent and heedless. Rare though human rebirth is, the majority of people pass their lives oblivious of the Buddha-dhamma. Many who are born in non-Buddhist countries have little or no opportunity even to come into contact with the genuine and essential teaching of the Buddha.

I was born in a non-Buddhist country. Before the age of twenty-two, I had no contact at all with Buddhism. If I ever heard the word 'Buddha' I never paid any attention to it. Like most Westerners, I was only thinking about enjoying life as best I could, with little thought for my long term future. In typical western fashion, my education was almost totally secular. Religious education in my school was very limited. Children now learn about other religions besides Christianity, and are much more likely to know something about Buddhism than when I was young.

Those born in countries where other religions are practised, will be taught religious values and attitudes totally different to those of Buddhism. It may be more difficult for someone growing up in such a non-Buddhist culture to understand the Dhamma than it was for me, since I had no religious indoctrination — just a very good moral example set by my parents. Many followers of other religions are opposed to Buddhism, because they regard it as a godless and pessimistic religion that preaches annihilation of the self. If such wrong attitudes have been instilled from a young age, it is very difficult to awaken to the Buddha's sublime teaching. Those born in communities where Buddhism has become severely corrupted over the centuries, will also have great difficulty in realising the true Dhamma.

The situation of those born in places where the orthodox teaching is still practised is much better. At least they will be inclined to do meritorious deeds such as offering alms, building monasteries and pagodas, showing respect to religious symbols, monks, teachers, and parents. They will know the basic tenets of Buddhism, and will have mundane right view.

However, even in such places, the majority of Buddhists do not rightly understand the true Dhamma. Many have a fatalistic view of kamma, and pray to the Buddha or offer alms, hoping for success in their worldly life. Lay people tend to think that only monks can meditate and realise nibbāna. They

try to make merit, but have only feeble aspirations to realise nibbāna in some future existence. For the present existence, they want to enjoy sensual pleasures, just like the ignorant masses who have no knowledge of Buddhism.

Pious Buddhists

A significant minority, however, have a different attitude. For them, Buddhism is the focus of their life, and they do not let a day pass without doing some kind of meritorious deed. They must work and study to make a living in the world, but their hearts are firmly directed towards practising meritorious deeds with the aspiration to escape from the suffering of existence. If they do not meditate themselves, at least they revere those who do. They delight in offering donations at monasteries and meditation centres, and have a high regard for the teachings of famous meditation masters. We can call them pious Buddhists.

Even pious Buddhists are heedless of the precious opportunity that is passing them by. Though meditation masters and preaching monks urge them to take up the practice of insight meditation to gain liberation from suffering, they keep putting it off. They are too busy, too lazy, too attached, or too deluded to get down to serious work. Let alone serious work, many pious Buddhists have never taken a weekend meditation retreat, though they have long since passed their prime of life. How difficult it is to appreciate the rare opportunity of human rebirth! No wonder the Buddha was initially disinclined to teach the Dhamma after gaining enlightenment.

Practising Buddhists

Those who take up the practice of insight meditation in earnest and make serious efforts to control their minds have usually faced some trauma in their lives that has shaken them out of their complacency. Before the Second World War, there were not many meditation centres in Burma. During the war,

Burma was invaded by the Japanese, and fighting between the Japanese and the Allies caused severe hardship. After the war, the Burmese took interest in insight meditation with renewed faith and zeal. The Prime Minister of Burma, U Nu, invited the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw to Rangoon to teach at a big new meditation centre donated by the philanthropist, Sir U Thwin. Inspired by the profound and practical teaching of Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw, thousands of devout Buddhists took up the practice in earnest and many of them gained the higher stages of insight, including the path, its fruition, and nibbāna. Having tasted the fruits of genuine insight meditation for themselves, their piety was no longer superficial. They became devoted to Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw and the practice of insight meditation as expounded so well by him. Because their insight was genuine and practical we can call them genuine Buddhists or practising Buddhists.

Those who have practised insight meditation seriously deserve to be called practising Buddhists because their knowledge of dependent origination, and their insight into the three characteristics of existence is direct and empirical, not just intellectual.

Those rare individuals who have attained the path, its fruition, and nibbāna are true Buddhists. Their insight is mature, and no possibility exists for them to deviate from the right path, even in their next existence when all memory of this present existence has been lost.

Though they have some insight and have gained mundane right understanding, practising Buddhists can still be heedless. Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw mentions in his discourses that some meditators, after gaining insight knowledge, go back to household life. For a few days they remain disinterested in worldly affairs, but it is not long before they get caught up again in craving and personality view. Later in life, when they meet some severe suffering, they will run back to the meditation centre to seek relief, but for the time being they remain content

to enjoy life. Even practising Buddhists are often heedless regarding the precious opportunity offered by human existence.

The Story of Sister Hla Myint

Sister Hla Myint was a senior nurse in Rangoon hospital. In her youth she practised meditation at the Mahāsi meditation centre and gained firm confidence in the practice of insight meditation. At the age of thirty-seven, a growth in her throat was diagnosed as malignant. Knowing that medical treatment was not often successful, she resorted to the practice of insight meditation, thinking, “There is no guarantee of a cure. After an operation or radiation treatment the cancer may recur or spread. The side-effects can be worse than the cure. I don’t want to go through the agony I have seen other patients endure. I want to keep my mind fully mindful and alert, without being clouded by drugs. If I undergo treatment, I may or may not be cured, but I will definitely have to suffer serious side-effects. If I meditate, I may or may not be cured, but the side-effect is nibbāna — the cessation of suffering. If I don’t attain nibbāna, I will at least get closer to it. Besides, I have absolute confidence in meditation.”

Her attitude was absolutely right. Whatever happens to us in life, we have to suffer from old age, disease, and death sooner or later. There is no escape and no treatment for old age and death. Therefore, the only thing to do is to meditate seriously to attain insight before disease, aging, and death overtake us. It will be too late to practise meditation in old age. Then our health will be failing, our digestion will be weak, our mental facilities will be dull. A lifetime of sensual indulgence and unskillful thinking creates powerful obstructive kamma that is difficult to overcome.

NOW is the time to take up the practice in earnest. Opportunities are always available to the energetic person. The lazy person will make excuses even when an ideal opportunity exists.

The Method of Mindfulness

The Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw was fortunate to ordain as a novice in his youth and, being intelligent, he successfully completed his scriptural studies while still young. He went in search of a meditation teacher at the age of about twenty-eight. After learning the right method of insight meditation from his teacher, he began by teaching it to his own family members, who soon gained deep insights. He was blessed with gifted disciples, but he also had exceptional ability and compassion. His fame gradually spread until his reputation came to the attention of Sir U Thwin and U Nu. After coming to Rangoon, he dedicated his life to teaching insight meditation, and soon became world famous. He was so learned in the scriptures that he was chosen for the central role of “Questioner” during the Sixth Buddhist Council.

The greatness of Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw lay in his impeccable observance of the monastic discipline, which was a natural outcome of his unremitting mindfulness and profound insight. Though he received many lavish offerings he donated them all for the benefit of meditators practising in his centres.

During the last years of his life, though over seventy years of age, and in failing health, the Sayādaw undertook arduous missions to the West to promote the practice of insight meditation in those countries. During these trips he rarely had more than one day to rest between one meditation retreat and the next. When he had to stay in hotels on the way, he declined to lie down to sleep, since this would have been in contravention of the monastic discipline. He continued teaching until his death in August 1982 at the age of seventy-six.

At the latest census, there were over three hundred Mahāsi meditation centres. Most of them offer year-round facilities for meditators to undertake insight meditation retreats. Foreign meditators and monks are offered free accommodation and food by the devotees, and they can stay for long periods of practice.

The effectiveness of the Mahāsi meditation method lies in its insistence on maintaining unremitting mindfulness throughout the whole day. Every bodily movement, every sensation, every sensory stimulus, every thought, and every intention, must be noted and observed as and when it occurs. To support this high level of mindfulness and concentration, the meditator must follow a strict discipline of silence, while any essential activity is done *extremely* slowly, paying attention to every physical movement. The staff and volunteers in the meditation centres provide all the meals, wash the dishes, sweep the compound, and repair the buildings so that the meditators can pay full attention to the practice of mindfulness. Most of the staff and volunteers regularly undertake meditation courses themselves, so they are sympathetic to the difficulties that meditators have to face. The meditation instructors give regular personal interviews for each meditator to encourage them in their practice.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta

Though we call it the Mahāsi method because it was made world famous by the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw, it is the very same method as the way of mindfulness taught by the Buddha in the [Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta](#). In the introduction to that discourse, mindfulness is described as the only way for the purification of beings, for the transcendence of grief and lamentation, for the extinction of pain and sorrow, for attaining the right method, and for the realisation of nibbāna.

No mindfulness means no end to suffering. When we are unmindful, defilements always appear and take over the mind. Only if we are mindful, can we keep the defilements at bay. If we practise constant mindfulness for long enough, we can gain insight knowledge, which will uproot the defilements. If we can uproot the defilements, then we have made good use of this precious human rebirth. Otherwise, we have wasted it.

To uproot the defilements is difficult. The mind is incredibly swift and difficult to perceive, so the foolish majority remain addicted to sensual pleasures and make no effort to escape from the endless cycle of existences. They remain oblivious to the danger.

To understand the true nature of the mind we must observe it closely. We must follow the systematic and scientific method called '*Satipaṭṭhāna*' or the setting up of mindfulness. The body, speech, and mind need to be restrained. The body is restrained by giving up sensual enjoyments and by slowing down all actions and movements. The speech is restrained by keeping silent, except for reporting to the meditation teacher about one's practice. The mind is restrained by systematically noting each and every physical and mental process throughout the whole day, without a break.

This is what one must do on a meditation retreat. There is no other way to rightly understand the true Dhamma taught by the Buddha and put an end to suffering. Although one can (and should) practise mindfulness in daily life too, everyone needs to learn the correct method by going on meditation retreats. Ordinary mindfulness will keep the defilements in check, but it will not give rise to deep insights. Theoretical knowledge is not enough either. Philosophical thinking and speculation arise from shallow concentration; insight arises only from deep concentration. One's realisation of the truth of suffering must be direct and empirical. How deep that realisation is depends on the accumulation of spiritual perfections, but however good one's perfections are, they cannot ripen without serious efforts now.

Do not miss the best chance!

