

Another Kind of Birth

By Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

Birth is perpetual suffering. True happiness consists in eliminating the false idea of "I". Mankind's problems are reduced to the problem of suffering, whether inflicted by another or by oneself.

In Everyday Language the term birth refers simply to physical birth from a mother's body. In Dharma Language birth refers to a mental event arising out of ignorance, craving, and clinging. Whenever there arises the mistaken idea "I", the "I" has been born, and its parents are ignorance and craving.

The kind of birth that constitutes a problem for us is mental birth. Anyone who fails to grasp this point will never succeed in understanding anything of the Buddha's teaching. The subject we shall discuss today is one, which I feel everyone ought to recognize as pressing, namely the following two statements made by the Buddha: "Birth is perpetual suffering. (Dukkha jati punappunam)", and "True happiness consists in eliminating the false idea of 'I'. (Asmimanassa vinayo etam ve paramam sukham)".

Mankind's problems are reduced to the problem of suffering", whether inflicted by another or by oneself by way of mental defilements (kilesa). This is the primary problem for every human being, because no one wants suffering. In the above statements the Buddha equates suffering with birth: "Birth is perpetual suffering"; and he equates happiness with the complete giving up of the false idea of "I", "myself", "I am", and "I exist".

The statement that birth is the cause of suffering is complex, having several levels of meaning. The main difficulty lies in the interpretation of the word "birth". Most of us don't understand what the word birth refers to and are likely to take it in the everyday sense of physical birth from a mother's body. The Buddha taught that birth is perpetual suffering. Is it likely that in saying this he was referring to physical birth? Think it over; if he was referring to physical birth, it is unlikely that he would have gone on to say: "True happiness consists in eliminating the false idea "I", because this statement clearly indicates that what constitutes the suffering is the false idea of "I". When the idea "I" has been completely eradicated, that is true happiness. So suffering actually consists in the misconception "I", "I am", or "I have".

The Buddha taught: "Birth is perpetual suffering." What is meant here by the word "birth"? Clearly "birth" refers to nothing other than the arising of the idea "I" (asmimana). The word "birth" refers to the arising of the mistaken idea "I", "myself". It does not refer to physical birth, as generally supposed. The mistaken assumption that this word "birth" refers to physical birth is a major obstacle to comprehending the Buddha's teaching.

It has to be borne in mind that in general a word can have several different meanings according to the context. Two principal cases can be recognized: (1) language referring to physical things, which is spoken by the average person; and (2) language referring to mental things, psychological language, "Dharma language", which is spoken by people who know Dharma (higher Truth, Buddha's teaching). The first type may be called "everyday language," the language spoken by the average person; the second may be called "Dharma language," the language spoken by a person who knows Dharma.

The ordinary person speaks as he has learned to speak, and when he uses the word "birth" he means physical birth, birth from a mother's body; however in Dharma language, the language used by a person who knows Dharma, "birth" refers to the arising of the idea "I am". If at some moment there arises in the mind the false idea "I am", then at that moment the "I" has been born. When this false idea ceases, there is no longer any "I", the "I" has momentarily ceased to exist. When the "I" idea again arises in the mind, the "I" has been reborn, this is the meaning of the word "birth" in Dharma language. It refers not

Another Kind of Birth

By Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

to physical birth from a Mother of flesh and blood but to mental birth from a mental "mother", namely craving, ignorance, clinging (tanha, avija, upadana). One could think of craving as the mother, and ignorance as the father of the birth of "I", and "me". And it is this kind of birth that is perpetual suffering. Physical birth is no problem: once born from the mother; a person need have anything more to do with birth. Birth from a mother takes only a few minutes; and no one ever has to undergo the experience more than once.

Now we hear talk of rebirth, birth again and again, and of the suffering that inevitably goes with it. Just what is this rebirth? What is it that is reborn? The birth referred to is a mental event.

Something taking place in the mind, the non-physical side of our make-up. This is "birth" in Dharma language. "Birth" in everyday language is birth from a mother; "birth" in Dharma language is birth from ignorance, craving, clinging, and the arising of the false notion of "I" and "me". These are the two meanings of the word "birth".

This is an important matter which simply must be understood. Anyone who fails to grasp this point will never succeed in understanding anything of the Buddha's teaching. So do take a special interest in it. There are these two kinds of language, these two levels of meaning: everyday language, referring to physical things, and Dharma language, referring to mental things, and used by people who know.

To clarify this point here are some examples: Consider the word "path": usually when we use the word "path" we are referring to a road or way along which vehicles, men, and animals can move. But the word "path" may also refer to the Noble Eightfold Path, the way of practice taught by the Buddha (Right Understanding, Right Thoughts, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration), which leads to Nirvana. In everyday language "path" refers to a physical road; in Dharma language it refers to the eightfold way of right practice known as the Noble Eightfold Path. These are the two meanings of the word "path".

Similarly with the word "Nirvana" (nibbána). In everyday language this word refers to the cooling of a hot object. For example, when hot coals become cool, they say (in Pali or Sanskrit) the coals are "nirvana"; when hot food in a pot or on a plate becomes cool it is "nirvana". This is everyday language. In Dharma language "Nirvana" refers to the kind of coolness that results from eliminating mental defilements. At any time when there is freedom from mental defilements, at that time there is coolness, momentary Nirvana. So "nirvana" or "coolness" has two meanings, according as the speaker is using everyday language or Dharma language.

Another important word is "emptiness" (sunyata, sunnata). In everyday language, the language of physical things, "emptiness" means total absence of any object: in Dharma language it means absence of the idea "I," "mine". When the mind is not grasping or clinging to anything whatsoever as "I" or "mine," it is in a state of "emptiness". The word "empty" has these two levels of meaning, one referring to physical things, the other referring to mental things, one in everyday language, and the other in Dharma language. Physical emptiness is absence of any object, vacuum. Mental emptiness is the state in which all the objects of the physical world are present as usual, but none of them is being grasped at or clung to as "mine". Such a mind is said to be "empty". When the mind has come to see things as not worth wanting, not worth being, not worth grasping at and clinging to, it is then an empty of wanting, being, grasping, clinging. The mind is then an empty or void mind, but not in the sense of being void of content. All objects are there as usual and the thinking processes are going on as usual, but they are not going the way of grasping and clinging with the idea of "I" and "mine". The mind is devoid of grasping and clinging and so is called an empty or void mind. It is stated in the texts: "A mind is said to be empty when

Another Kind of Birth

By Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

it is empty of desire. Aversion, and delusion (raga, dosa, moha)." The world is also described as empty, because it is empty of anything that might be identified as "I" or "mine". It is in this sense that the world is spoken of as empty. "Empty" in Dharma language does not mean physically empty, devoid of content.