

Rebirth and the In-between State in Early Buddhism

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Does Early Buddhism categorically reject or, on the contrary, tacitly admit the possibility of an intermediate state between two adjacent lives? How can these descriptions and views be used to make sense of research findings on 'Near Death Experiences' bring us closer to a more accurate understanding of death and beyond?

Introduction

I have been asked to discuss the perspective of early Buddhism on the notion of rebirth, and more specifically, how it may or may not be related to the empirical research on Near Death Experiences (NDEs). To address this topic it is necessary to first consider the scope of what we call 'Early Buddhism'. Next we need to have a look at some of the general, mainstream ways that rebirth is discussed in Early Buddhism. Then we will be in a position to review the texts that may be taken to support the reality of the 'in-between state'. In the conclusion, I will draw together what seem to me to be some of the more important strands connecting this paper with the 'scientific' orientation of the conference.

Early Buddhism

We're getting into troublesome political waters by even suggesting that there was such a thing as 'Early Buddhism', and that it might differ in important ways from the accepted teachings of the Buddhist schools. Of course, all the schools of Buddhism believe that their teachings derive from the historical Buddha in some sense: and they're all right, in some sense. There's no doubt that we can trace a deep continuity among the schools of Buddhism, such that they can all be legitimately regarded as heirs to the Buddha's teachings. Yet at the same time, it would be peculiar, if not unprecedented, if some things had not changed in the 2500 years of Buddhist history: and it's downright un-Buddhist to proclaim that Buddhism never changes!

The earliest period of Buddhism was unified, with no clearly defined separate schools. This period lasted until roughly the time of Aśoka, say 200 years after the Parinibbana.² The early Buddhist community gradually fragmented into the various 'schools', traditionally numbered as '18'. The school we know as 'Theravāda' was one of these '18' schools, while the school we know

1 This paper relies very heavily on research and translations by Piya Tan, especially his paper 'Is Rebirth Immediate? A study of canonical sources', from <http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com>. For the Majjhima Nikāya I rely on Bhikkhu Anālayo's *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima Nikāya* (forthcoming).

2 The exact date of the first schism is disputed. Most scholars place it in between the Second Council and Aśoka, while in my *Sects & Sectarianism* I argue the first schism could not have been until after Aśoka.

as ‘Mahāyāna’ was formed later. All the texts as we have them today were edited into their current form by the schools, using the shared mass of textual material passed down through the Early Buddhist community. The early material is primarily found in the Suttas as collected in the four or five Āgamas/Nikāyas, which I will refer to as the Āgama Suttas.³ The Vinayas contain much common material (e.g. the *pāṭimokkha*) but also many later additions. The Abhidhammas are later compositions. Hence any serious attempt to investigate Early Buddhism must be based primarily on the Āgama Suttas.

Comparing the Pali, Chinese and other sources, we hope to peer back into the time before the sects split into separate camps. From a strict scholarly point of view, that’s about the best we can hope for. But we would be dishonest if we were not to admit that the real purpose of the exercise is not to uncover what the early Buddhist community thought, but what the Buddha himself thought. How close we can approach that will probably forever remain a matter of faith.

We should sound a preliminary note of caution here. The Suttas are old texts, formed in a very different cultural context, and informed by ideas and values that are sometimes incomprehensible to us. It is hard enough to figure out even when they refer to concrete objects like plants or building styles; how much more difficult must it be to convey ideas about ‘the beyond’? We may be certain that we have access to only a tiny fraction of the linguistic and philosophical currency of the times. Moreover, the Suttas were the work of many hands, and we cannot assume that they teach one consistent doctrine. It is even possible, though faith may deny it, that the Buddha changed his mind during his life, or taught inconsistently. So let us proceed with care, and hold our conclusions lightly.

Rebirth and the Four Noble Truths

In his first sermon, which is represented by at least 17 versions in all Buddhist languages, the Buddha presented the Four Noble Truths: suffering, its origin, cessation, and the path. The first term in the definition of suffering is *jāti*, which we translate as ‘birth’, although ‘conception’ might be more accurate. Note that birth is an existential problem, to be overcome, and hence cannot merely refer to one’s birth in this life. It must refer, as the universal testimony of the Buddhist traditions affirm, to rebirth in *saṃsāra*, as part of an endless stream of lives. Hence the second Noble Truth is *yāyam taṇhā ponobbhavikā*, ‘that craving pertaining to future existence’, and the Third is ‘the complete fading away and cessation of that very craving’ (*yo tassāyeva taṇhāya asesavirāgaṇirodho...*). These few phrases establish rebirth as central to the Buddha’s fundamental teachings. From them we can draw some important conclusions.

3 The five Nikāyas of the Pali collections; the four Āgamas and various other places in the Chinese Canon; various Sanskrit and other Indic language Suttas reconstructed from ancient manuscripts; occasional texts found within the Tibetan Canon. Much of the Āgama material stems from the (Mūla) Sarvāstivāda school, although other schools, particularly the Dharmaguptaka, are also represented. Due to constraints of time, I am not able to fully research each point in this essay on a comparative basis. I note any passages I have found where the Chinese or other texts differ significantly from the Pali. I do not list all parallel versions, as in some cases there are very many; parallel suttas may be located through www.suttacentral.net. References to the Majjhima and Dīgha Nikāyas (MN, DN) refer to the Sutta number and section of the Wisdom Publication translation. SĀ, MĀ, etc., refer to the Saṃyukta Āgama (T no. 99), Madhyama Āgama (T no. 26), etc.

1. Rebirth is regarded as an ongoing process to be escaped from in the search for liberation.
2. Rebirth is determined by one's own mind, particularly one's ethical choices.
3. The practice of Buddhism aims at ending rebirth.

Precisely these three principles have been established by McEvilley as the basic constituents of a 'reincarnation belief complex', shared by many philosophers in ancient Greece and India, and nowhere else (except places that have borrowed from these sources).⁴ Of course, many cultures have some kind of belief in rebirth or reincarnation, but only in these places do we have these central ideas figured together. It is clear, then, that Buddhist ideas on rebirth have important things in common with ideas that were current in the Buddha's culture. In fact, the two best known Indian religions today – Hinduism and Jainism – also share this belief complex. This alerts us to an important point: the way the Buddha spoke about rebirth was a part of the wider cultural discourse of his time, and used current concepts and vocabulary, though, of course, he may well have used the words in his own way. This means we must ask: 'What did the Buddha's teachings on rebirth mean to the people he was addressing?'

However, it would be incorrect to claim that the Buddha simply absorbed the universal Indian belief in rebirth. In fact, the ancient Vedas speak little of rebirth⁵, and it only slowly appears in the post-Vedic literature. The radical *śramaṇa* movements, among which the Buddha counted himself, rejected the authority of the brahmanical tradition as a whole, and many of the *śramaṇas* rejected rebirth outright.⁶ There is no doubt that the Buddha would have rejected rebirth if he did not believe in it. Moreover, the *Āgama Suttas* regularly say that the Buddha realized the truth of rebirth with his own direct knowledge, and he explicitly states that he does not affirm rebirth because of what he has learned from another.⁷ Historically, the *Āgama Suttas* are the oldest texts that place this rebirth complex in a central position, and we could well argue that the Hindu belief in rebirth was conditioned by the Buddhist belief rather than the other way around.

So right away we get a good sense for the soteriological significance of rebirth within Early Buddhism. But we have learned little of the mechanics of it: How does it happen? What makes it work? How do we analyze the process in detail? We must admit that the *Āgama Suttas* do not offer us a detailed explanation of such matters. But this itself has its own significance: for the *Āgama Suttas*, the underlying basis of rebirth is not the issue. The issue is that rebirth is suffering, and practice is needed to find freedom. A detailed 'scientific' understanding of rebirth is marginal to the liberative teachings of the *Āgama Suttas*. Perhaps the main importance of 'scientific' investigation of rebirth is that it brings Buddhist teachings within a contemporary mode of discourse. This has certain benefits, not least that it engages some people who otherwise might

4 McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (Allworth Press, 2002), pg. 98ff.

5 But see Jeanine Miller, *The Vedas: Harmony, Meditation, and Fulfillment* (Rider, 1974), section 3.

6 E.g. Ajita Kesakambali at DN 2. 23.

7 Itivuttaka 70, 71.

dismiss important aspects of Buddhist teachings as ‘unscientific’.

Rebirth and the Aggregates

The definition of the first Noble Truth sums up the problem: ‘in brief, the five grasping-aggregates are suffering’ (*saṅkhittena pañcūpādākkhandhā dukkhā*). What exactly are these five aggregates, and how do they figure in rebirth?

The basic meaning of the aggregates is well-known: physical form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), volitional activities (*saṅkhārā*), consciousness (*viññāṇa*). These are all observable aspects of conscious experience. We are used to thinking of rebirth involving some mysterious entity such as a ‘soul’, so the prosaic nature of these aggregates comes as a bit of a surprise. But the Saṃyutta tells us: ‘Whatever ascetics or priests there are that recollect their manifold past lives, all of them recollect the five grasping-aggregates or one of them’.⁸ This suggests that the aggregates are empirical realities that characterize not just this life, but past lives as well. Thus the Saṃyutta tells us that the unawakened individual runs and circles around these five aggregates from one life to the next.⁹

We often find sectarian theories or other non-Buddhist contexts which interpret the ‘soul’ as one or other of the aggregates. In the Brahmajāla Sutta, to quote the best known example, the Self is said to be ‘formed’ (*rūpī*) or ‘experiencing pleasure’ (*sukhapaṭisaṃvedī*) or ‘percipient’ (*saññī*) after death.¹⁰ Similarly, *saṅkhārā* is closely associated with rebirth,¹¹ and one Sutta describes how one can use *saṅkhārā* to direct one’s rebirth.¹² And consciousness is regularly spoken of as the phenomenon that undergoes rebirth, not only in a Buddhist context,¹³ but also by those who mistakenly take it for something permanent.¹⁴

It seems to me that the five aggregates must have been used in the Buddha’s culture as a scheme for classifying soul theories. This is not to reduce the five aggregates to merely a

8 SN 22.79

9 SN 22.99, 100

10 DN 1.2.38. Similar views are described at SN 24.37–44, although these omit the description as ‘percipient’.

11 *Saṅkhārā* is defined as *cetanā* ‘intention’ at SN 22.56, 57: *Chayime, bhikkhave, cetanākāyā: rūpasāñcetanā, saddasāñcetanā, gandhasāñcetanā, rasasāñcetanā, phoṭṭhabbasāñcetanā, dhammasāñcetanā. Ime vuccanti, bhikkhave, saṅkhārā*; SA 41 and 42 similarly define *saṅkhārā* as ‘intention’, though the phrasing is a little different. AN 6.63 defines *kamma* as ‘intention’: *Cetanāhaṃ, bhikkhave, kammaṃ vadāmi. Cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti kāyena vācāya manasā. ‘It is intention, monks, that I call kamma. Having intended one acts through body, speech, mind.’ Saṅkhārā and kamma, then, which are both formed from the same root, would seem to be identical in meaning, further underscoring the relation between *saṅkhārā* and rebirth. The difference is that *saṅkhārā* tends to be used in philosophical/existential contexts like the aggregates or dependent origination, while *kamma* is used in ethical contexts.*

12 MN 120. This Sutta is peculiar in emphasizing only one’s aspiration based on wholesome *kamma* as the condition for rebirth, even in the Brahmā realms, even though this would normally be understood to require the development of *jhāna*. The only Chinese parallel for this Sutta (MĀ 168) differs considerably and lacks these peculiarities. Some unpublished Gandhārī fragments parallel part of MN 120.

13 Hence such phrases as the ‘stations of consciousness’ *viññāṇaṭṭhiti* (i.e. planes of rebirth) at DN 15.33, the *viññāṇasota* (stream of consciousness) at DN 28.7, or the *saṃvattanikaviññāṇa* (on-flowing consciousness) at MN 106.3. The Chinese version of this latter passage (MĀ 75 at T I 542b22) seems to use 本意 ‘root thought’ for *saṃvattanikaviññāṇa*. While it may be purely coincidental, this term is suggestive of the Mahāsaṅghika concept of the *mūlavijñāna* (root-consciousness), which according to Vasubandhu’s *Karmasiddhiprakaraṇa* played a role underlying rebirth similar to the *bhavaṅga* of the Theravādins or the *ālayavijñāna* of the Yogācārins. See Stefan Anacker, *Seven Works of Vasubandhu* (Motilal Barnasidass, 1998), pg. 114.

14 MN 38.3; the parallel at MĀ 201 is similar.

mechanistic classification scheme, but to bring forward an aspect that I believe would have been assumed by many of the Buddha's listeners, but is not obvious to us. Various more or less refined conceptions of rebirth were current, and the more sophisticated theorists must have arranged and compared these. I have not found a passage outside of Buddhism where the five aggregates as such were a recognized teaching; but the Suttas regularly portray sectarians as being familiar with the aggregates.¹⁵ Moreover, certain of the pre-Buddhist Self theories are clearly expressed in terms of the aggregates: for example, the Upaniṣadic sage Yajñavalkya identified consciousness as the highest Self.¹⁶ These theories no doubt descended in part from simple animist ideas, and in part from theoretical speculation; but at least sometimes the theories were based on a direct experience. However, even meditative experience might be subject to misinterpretation.¹⁷

If we are correct in supposing that the five aggregates are a scheme for categorizing Self-theories, this would explain why the teaching of not-self is so strenuously emphasized in this particular context. The Suttas say that the five aggregates exhaust the possible range of Self theories,¹⁸ and the Buddha was scathingly critical of anyone who asked how the not-self aggregates could affect the Self.¹⁹

The In-between State

After gaining a general impression of the role of rebirth in a few mainstream contexts in the Āgama Suttas, we may now have a look at the controverted question of the 'in-between state'. The basic problem is whether one life immediately follows another, or whether there is a period of time in between. This question was disputed among the early Buddhist schools. In their debates, all parties accepted the Suttas as authoritative, and quoted them in support of their position. So we usually find that when the early Buddhists could not agree, this was because the question was not addressed in a straightforward or explicit way in the Āgama Suttas. In this case the Theravādins denied the in-between state, while many other schools affirmed it.²⁰

It should be noted that many modern Theravādins do in fact accept the in-between state,

15 E.g. SN 22.59 Anattalakkhaṇa, MN 35 Cūḷasaccaka. The Chinese parallels to MN 35 (SĀ 110 at T II 35a-37b and EĀ 37.10 at T II 715a-717b) differ slightly in wording, but all indicate Saccaka was familiar with the aggregates, and indeed proclaimed them to be the Self.

16 Bṛhadāraṇṇaka 2.5.12.

17 E.g. DN 1 Brahmajāla, MN 136 Mahākammavibhaṅga. The Chinese versions are similar in this respect.

18 SN 22.47: *Ye hi keci, bhikkhave, samaṇā vā brāhmaṇā vā anekavihiṭṭaṃ attānaṃ samanupassamānā samanupassanti, sabbete pañcupādānakkhandhe samanupassanti, etesaṃ vā aññataram.* Similarly SĀ 45 at T II 11b4: 若諸沙門。婆羅門見有我者。一切皆於此五受陰見我; and SĀ 65 at T II 16b16: 若沙門。婆羅門計有我。一切皆於此五受陰計有我。

19 SN 22.82. The Chinese wording is a little different: 'So if there is no self, who will in future time receive the results of karmas performed by the not-self?' SA 58 at T II 15c. Trns. Choong Mun-keat, *The Fundamental Teachings of Early Buddhism*, Harrasowitz Verlag, 2000, pg. 67.

20 According to Thich Thien Chau, *The Literature of the Personalists of Early Buddhism* (Motilal Barnasidass, 1999), pg. 208, note 764, certain Mahāsaṅghika branches and the early Mahīśāsakas rejected the in-between state, while the Puggalavādins, Sarvāstivādins, certain Mahāsaṅghika branches, later Mahīśāsakas, and Dārṣṭāntikas accepted it.

despite the fact that it's 'officially' heretical. Popular belief is, so far as I know, on the side of the in-between state; so is the opinion of the forest monks of Thailand, based on their meditative experience; and so is the opinions of most monks and scholars I know, whose ideas are based on the Suttas.

The main canonical argument against the in-between state, relied on by the Kathāvatthu,²¹ is that the Buddha mentions only three states of existence (*bhava*): the sense world, the form world, and the formless world. If the intermediate state exists, it should fit into one of these worlds, but it doesn't: therefore, there's no such thing. This argument, however, rests on mere linguistic pedantry. If I say my house has three rooms, someone might object that it also has a corridor, which is an 'in-between room'. Is this a fourth room, or is it merely a space connecting the rooms? That simply depends on how I define it and how I want to count it. Maybe my definition is wrong or confused – but that doesn't make the corridor disappear!

The Kathāvatthu offers a further argument, based on the idea of the *ānantarikakamma*. These are a special class of acts (such as murdering one's parents, etc.) which are believed to have a kammic result 'without interval': i.e. one goes straight to hell. But again this argument is not convincing, for the meaning of *ānantarika* here is surely simply that one does not have any interceding rebirths before experiencing the results of that bad kamma. It has nothing to do with the interval of time between one birth and the next.

These arguments sound suspiciously *post hoc*. The real reason for the opposition to the in-between state would seem rather that it sounds suspiciously like an animist or Self theory. Theravādins of old were staunch opponents of the Self theory: the critique of the thesis that a 'person' truly exists and takes rebirth is the first and major part of their doxographical treatise, the Kathāvatthu; a similar though shorter debate is attributed to the Kathāvatthu's author Moggaliputtatissa in the Vijñānakāya of the Sarvāstivādins.²² The idea of an immediate rebirth seems to me a rhetorical strategy to squeeze out the possibility of a Self sneaking through the gap. It agrees with the general tendency of Theravādin Abhidhamma, which always seeks to minimize time and eliminate grey areas. But philosophically this achieves nothing, for whatever it is that moves through the in-between state, it is impermanent and conditioned, being driven by craving, and hence cannot be a 'Self'.

There are some places in the Suttas that tell 'real life' stories of people who die and are reborn. For example, the Anāthapiṇḍika Sutta says that Sāriputta and Ānanda went to see Anāthapiṇḍika as he was dying, and: 'Soon after they had left, the householder Anāthapiṇḍika died and reappeared in the Tusita heaven.'²³ While this does not mention any in-between state, neither does it rule it out. If I were to say, 'I left the monastery and went to the village', no-one would read as suggesting that I disappeared in one place and reappeared instantly in another! Such narrative episodes are too vague to determine whether they assume an in-between state or not.

The most explicit statement in support of the in-between state is probably the Kutuhalasāla Sutta, which speaks of how a being has laid down this body but has not yet been reborn into

21 Kathāvatthu 8.2 (*Points of Controversy*, pg. 212-3)

22 T XXVI, no. 1539. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vijñānakāya>. A recent discussion of the argument on time in the Vijñānakāya is at <http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-ADM/bastow.htm>.

23 MN 143: *Atha kho anāthapiṇḍiko gahapati, acirapakkante āyasmante ca sāriputte āyasmante ca ānande, kālamakāsi tusitaṃ kāyaṃ upapajji.*

another body.

‘Vaccha, I declare that there is rebirth for one with fuel [with grasping],²⁴ not for one without fuel [without grasping]. Vaccha, just as fire burns with fuel, not without fuel, even so, Vaccha, I declare that there is rebirth for one with fuel [with grasping], not for one without fuel [without grasping].’

‘But, master Gotama, when a flame is tossed by the wind and goes a long way, what does master Gotama declare to be its fuel?’

‘Vaccha, when a flame is tossed by the wind and goes a long way, I declare that it is fuelled by the air. For, Vaccha, at that time, the air is the fuel.’

‘And further, master Gotama, when a being has laid down this body, but has not yet been reborn in another body, what does the master Gotama declare to be the fuel?’

‘Vaccha, when a being has laid down this body, but has not yet been reborn in another body, it is fuelled by craving, I say.²⁵ For, Vaccha, at that time, craving is the fuel.’²⁶

From this we can conclude that the Buddha, following ideas current in his time – for Vacchagotta was a non-Buddhist wanderer (*paribbājaka*) – accepted that there was some kind of interval between one life and the next. During this time, when one has ‘laid down’ this body, but is not yet reborn in another, one is sustained by craving, like a flame tossed by the wind is sustained by air. The simile suggests, perhaps, that the interval is a short one; but the purpose of the simile is to illustrate the dependent nature of the period, not the length of time it takes. Here, as in the other contexts we shall examine below, it is not really possible to draw any conclusions about the length of time in the in-between state. While a fire is burning normally, it is sustained by a complex of factors, such as fuel, oxygen, and heat. But when a tongue of flame is momentarily tossed away from the source fire, it can last only a short while, and in that time it is tenuously sustained by the continued supply of oxygen. Similarly in our lives, we are sustained by food, sense stimulus, and so on, but in the in-between, it is only the slender thread of craving that propels us forward. The difference is, of course, that the flame will easily go out, while the fuel of craving propels the unawakened inexorably into future rebirth.

There is a stock description of the various grades of awakened beings, which appears to speak of one who realizes nirvana in-between this life and the next. This passage starts by mentioning the one who becomes fully awakened in this life, then one who realizes nirvana at the time of dying, then speaks of a kind of non-returner:

... with the utter destruction of the five lower fetters, one becomes an attainer of nirvana ‘in-between’ (*antarāparinibbāyī*).²⁷

24 *Upādāna* can mean either ‘fuel’ or ‘grasping’, and this passage puns on the two meanings.

25 *Yasmiṃ kho, vaccha, samaye imaṃcā kāyaṃ nikkhipati, satto ca aññataraṃ kāyaṃ anupapanno hoti, tamahaṃ taṇhūpādānaṃ vadāmi.*

26 SN 44.9. The Chinese parallel SĀ2 190 at T II 443b04 is similar: 身死於此。意生於彼。於其中間。誰為其取 (When this body dies, and there is desire to be born elsewhere, what sustains the interval between?) However SĀ 957 at T II 244b4 is not so explicit: 衆生於此處命終。乘意生身生於餘處. (When one ends one life, desire is the means by which one grasps hold of another body.) This passage is not noticed in the Kathāvatthu’s discussion.

27 DN 33.1.9, SN 46.3, SN 48.15, SN 48.24/5, SN 48.66, SN 51.26, SN 54.5, SN 55.25.8, AN 3.86.3 (only last & first kinds

The next kind of non-returner realizes nirvana ‘on landing’ (*upahaccaparinibbāyī*). Given the context – between dying and ‘landing’ in the Pure Abodes – it seems likely that this passage refers to an individual who, dying as a non-returner, realizes full nirvana in the in-between state. This is how the passage was interpreted by the Puggalavādins and Sarvāstivādins,²⁸ as well as in modern studies by Harvey and Bodhi.²⁹

The Purisagati Sutta makes these categories much more vivid with a series of similes, comparing the *antarāparinibbāyī* to a spark of hot iron, which when beaten, flies off the block and ‘cools down’ before striking the ground.³⁰ Again, it seems difficult to interpret this as anything but an in-between state.³¹

Like the previous passage, here the description is informed by the metaphor of fire, which symbolizes pain and entrapment. The ‘going out of the flame’ is the goal of Buddhist practice, so the fiery imagery associated with rebirth is entirely apt. The fact that nirvana can apparently occur during this stage suggests that it is of spiritual significance. It might be taken to imply that the process takes a reasonable length of time, unlike the more ‘instantaneous’ feel we noted in the ‘tossed flame’ image. Nevertheless, the ‘going out’ here is just the natural cooling off, the culmination of a process that was already nearly complete, and so it does not imply that one should give any special importance to the in-between state as a realm for practice of Dhamma.

There is evidently an allusion to the in-between state in the Channovāda Sutta, where Mahā Cunda instructs Channa the Vajjī, quoting the Buddha thus:

For one who is dependent there is wavering (*calita*); for one who is independent, there is no wavering. When there is no wavering, there is tranquillity. When there is tranquillity, there is no inclination (towards craving or existence) (*nati*). When there is no inclination, there is no coming and going (*agatigati*). When there is no coming and going, there is no passing away and rebirth (*cutūpapāta*). When there is no passing away and rebirth, there is neither here nor beyond nor in between the two (*na ubhayam antarena*). This itself is the end of suffering.³²

While the terminology used here is perhaps a little too vague to insist on a definitive interpretation, nevertheless in the light of the previous passages it is reasonable to see this as a further allusion to the in-between state.

A somewhat mysterious usage of the term *gandhabba* has also been taken as referring to the in-between state.³³ By the time of the Buddha, *gandhabba* had almost entirely reached its classical

mentioned), AN 3.87.3, AN 4.131, AN 7.16, AN 7.17, AN 7.52, AN 7.80, AN 9.12, AN 10.63, AN 10.64. A Chinese parallel SĀ 736 at T II 196c16 is similar: 而得五下分結盡。中般涅槃。

28 See Thien Chau, pp. 208-9.

29 Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind* (Curzon Press, 1995), pg. 100; Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Wisdom, 2000), pg. 1902, note 65.

30 AN 7.52

31 Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, pg. 101; Peter Masefield, *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism* (Allen & Unwin, 1986), pp. 116, 120; cf Alex Wayman ‘The Intermediate-State Dispute in Buddhism’ in *Buddhist Studies in Honour of I.B. Horner*, ed L. Cousins et al. (Dordrecht & Boston: D. Reidel, 1974), pp. 227-239.

32 MN 144.11 = SN 35.87 = Udāna 81; cf SN 12.40. See also Māluṅkyāputta Sutta, SN 35.95.

33 MĀ 201 at T I 769b24 has 香陰 ‘fragrance’, evidently deriving from Indic *gandha* (vl. 生陰 ‘birth aggregate’), while EĀ 21.3 at T II 602c19+20 has 外識 ‘external consciousness’ or 欲識 ‘desiring consciousness’. The EĀ version is

meaning of a class of celestial musicians. But earlier Vedic usage varied, and it seems to have been as vague as our ‘spirit’.³⁴ This quasi-animist meaning appears in the following passage.

Bhikkhus, the descent of the being-to-be-born (*gabbhassâvakkanti*) takes place through the union of three things. Here, there is the union of the mother and the father; but the mother is not in season, and the being-to-be-born (*gandhabba*) is not present. In this case, no descent of a being-to-be-born occurs. But when there is the union of the mother and father; the mother is in season; and the being-to-be-born is present, through the union of these three the descent of the being-to-be-born occurs.³⁵

The Assalāyana Sutta attributes the same doctrine to brahmins of the past, showing that the Buddha had no objection to adopting current views on rebirth into his teaching, as long as they did not postulate a Self.³⁶ The acceptance of the conventional term *gandhabba* suggests that whatever is in the in-between state is in some sense a functioning ‘person’, not just a mechanistic process or energetic stream devoid of consciousness. However, the use of the term is so casual and uncertain that it would be unwise to make much of it.

A stock passage on the four ‘foods’ (i.e. four physical or mental supports for life) introduces the term *sambhavesī*. Interpreted by the commentary to mean ‘one seeking rebirth’, modern grammarians prefer to construe the term as ‘one to be reborn’.³⁷ In either case it appears to refer to the being in the in-between state.

Bhikkhus, there are these four kinds of food for the maintenance of beings that already have come to be (*bhūtā*) and for the support of beings seeking a new existence (*sambhavesī*). What are the four? They are physical food, gross or subtle; contact as the second; mental volition as the third; and consciousness as the fourth.³⁸

While the early Suttas do not give us any further information, the fact that the *sambhavesī* is contrasted with the *bhūta*, which clearly means one in a state of being (*bhava*), suggests that the *sambhavesī* is in a state of potential.³⁹ The in-between state is truly ‘in-between’, it is only defined by the absence of more substantial forms of existence, and one in that state, so it seems, is exclusively oriented towards a more fully-realized incarnation.

We have already noted the use of similes to render the in-between state more vivid. A stock passage found in the Sāmaññaphala Sutta in explaining the recollection of beings faring according to their kamma (*cutūpapātāñāṇa*) employs this simile:

translated by Thích Huyền-Vi and Bhikkhu Pāsādika in collaboration with Sara Boin-Webb, originally published Buddhist Studies Review 20.1, 2003, p 76-80. Available at <http://ekottara.googlepages.com/ekottaraagama21.22>.

34 See Oliver Hector de Alwis Wijesekera, R.N. Dondekar, M. H. F. Jayasuriya. *Buddhist and Vedic Studies: A Miscellany*. (Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), pp. 175-212.

35 Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta, MN 38.26.

36 MN 93.18.

37 See Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, pp. 730-1, note 17.

38 SN 12.11, 12.12, 12.63, 12.64, MN 38.15/1:261. Cf Metta Sutta, Sn 1.8 = Kh no 9.

39 In the Abhidharmakośa, a Sanskrit Buddhist work, the term *sambhavaśīṣiṇi* is one of the five names for the intermediate existence, along with *manomaya*, *gandharva* and (*abhi*)*nirvṛtti* (Abhk:P3.40c-41a/2:122).

‘Great king, just as if there were a palace in the central square [of a town where four roads meet] (*siṅghāṭaka*), and a man with good eyesight standing on the top of it were to see people entering (*pavisanti*) a house, leaving (*nikkhamanti*) it, wandering (*sañcaranti*) along the carriage-road, and sitting down (*nisinnā*) in the central square. The thought would occur to him, “These people are entering a house, leaving it, walking along the streets, and sitting down in the central square.”’⁴⁰

Of course, a simile can only ever be suggestive. Nevertheless, it is hard to understand why the Buddha would use such a description of the process of rebirth if he wanted to exclude the possibility of an in-between state. Peter Harvey interprets this passage on the basis of the *Kimsuka Sutta*.⁴¹

Here the usage of entering (*pavisanti*), leaving (*nikkhamanti*) and wandering (*sañcaranti*) refers respectively to one being reborn, dying, and seeking a new birth. The house represents the body or form of rebirth, and sitting down (*nisinnā*) in the central square [where four roads meet] refers to the consciousness finding a new birth in the sense-world (the four roads representing the four elements, earth, water, fire, wind). Here, the sitting down of the simile refers to the discernment [consciousness] coming to be established in a new personality, after wandering in search of ‘it’.⁴²

Conclusion: the aggregates, the in-between state, and the status of science

If the five aggregates are a way of understanding rebirth into different states of being, it would only be plausible to suggest that they are also involved in the process in-between births as well.⁴³ A little reflection confirms that the aggregates are indeed experienced in NDEs or OOBES. One sees ‘forms’, lights, images, and has a sensation of moving out of the body. These are all part of the form aggregate. It should be noted that ‘movement’ is a physical property, so that the feeling of moving outside a body is a physical phenomenon, and cannot be explained with reference to a purely immaterial soul (this was, incidentally, one of the reasons why I gave up my belief in a soul). To be able to ‘see’ light, one must in some way interact with photons. There must be some physical dimension present, otherwise the photons would simply pass straight through without resistance. This quality is called ‘resistance-contact’ (*paṭighasamphassa*) in the Suttas.⁴⁴ Of course, we imagine this ‘physical’ presence not in terms of coarse physical matter (*oḷārika*), but some kind of ‘energy body’, or ‘subtle body’, the best term for which in the Suttas would be the ‘mind-made body’ (*manomayakāya*), which is said to be a ‘physical’ (*rūpī*) replica of the coarse body.⁴⁵ So the

40 DN 2.96. Sanskrit parallel in Konrad Meisig, *Das Śrāmaṇyaphala Sūtra* (Otto Harrassowitz, 1987), pg. 352. Cf MN 39.19, the two Chinese versions of which, MĀ 182 at T I 724c-725c and EĀ 49.8 at T II 801c-802b, however lack the section with this simile.

41 SN 35.204.

42 Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, pg. 103.

43 The Puggalavādiṇs explicitly described the in-between state in terms of the aggregates. See Thien Chau, pg. 207.

44 DN 15.20

45 DN 1.3.12; DN 2.85-86.

form aggregate is certainly part of this experience, even if it is not the ordinary body we typically identify with.

The subject typically experiences feelings of bliss, which are part of the feeling aggregate. Often, they will recognize family or friends who come to meet them. The ability to recognize is a part of the aggregate of perception. There comes a time when the subject often feels as if they must make a choice, to remain or return. This choice is included in the aggregate of volitional activities. Finally, the subject is clearly aware during this process, hence consciousness is operating. Thus for the unawakened person the process of rebirth may be described in terms of the five aggregates; conversely, the awakened arahant may not be described after death in terms of the five aggregates, for these have all ceased.⁴⁶

The fact that the NDE can be understood or explained in terms of the five aggregates is no arbitrary or marginal detail. It shows that for Early Buddhism rebirth was an empirical, comprehensible process that involved nothing more mysterious than the ordinary workings of the mind and body. In this instance we see the benefits of learning from all the schools. For while the Theravādins have preserved the clearest and best-understood early texts referring to the in-between state, their philosophical posture prevented them from investigating and describing this in any detail. For that we shall have to listen to the other schools, starting with the Puggalavādins and Sarvāstivādins, and passed down through the Chinese and Tibetan traditions.

It seems to me there is something deeper we can learn from reflecting on the in-between state. Change is traumatic, and we need a period of adjustment. The similes the Buddha gives – wandering from house to house, or flying like a spark in the air – capture something of the feeling of being alone and uncertain in the cosmos. The being who has left their body is flung into the unknown, where all their fears and hopes may be realized. The acts, experiences, desires, and habits of this and past lives make an impression on the stream of consciousness: we know this, we feel it every moment. Such things take time to digest themselves and crystallize in a new pattern. We do not decide the important things in life in one instant. The time of ambiguity, having left one thing and not reached another, allows space for consciousness to integrate the lessons of the past and orient itself for the future.

Despite all we have said in support of the ‘in-between’ state, I would still make an important reservation. The idea of a ‘state’ suggests a defined mode of being, but what we have seen suggests rather a *lack of being*. The in-between state is not a separate realm that somehow stands in the space between other realms. We might imagine it so, but this is just a metaphor to help us make sense of the experience. The references to the ‘in-between state’ do not focus on the objective or cosmological existence of such a realm, and to this extent I think the Kathāvatthu’s objections to the in-between state can be sustained. Rather the passages focus on an individual’s experience of what happens after death, but before the next life. It is a process of change, of seeking, of yearning to be. To speak of this as an ‘in-between state’ is admittedly a reification of the concept, which already stretches the actual statements from which it is derived. Nevertheless, it is probably inevitable that we keep using this terminology, which is fine as long as we remember that it is just a convenient way to generalize about individual experiences, not a definite realm or zone of existence.

46 SN 22.85. Also see SA 105, SA 72.

In addition to indicating the ontological status of the in-between state, the Suttas also give us epistemological guidelines: how can we know the truth about rebirth? The most obvious way is through the development of the psychic ability to recollect one's past lives and to see the arising and passing away of beings according to their kamma. These knowledges are taught throughout the Suttas, where they are depicted as arising from the purified consciousness of the fourth jhana. A second way is through inference: based on direct insight into present experience, we infer that past and future experience must have operated according to similar principles.⁴⁷ Finally, we may learn about rebirth from a reliable teacher. While less rigorous, perhaps, than the two previous means, this should not be neglected, for the vast majority of people in fact accept or reject the idea of rebirth by depending on someone they regard as a reliable teacher. For some, that is the Buddha; for others, someone who may have experienced a NDE; for others, it may be the scientific community. The Buddha frequently gave teachings on his past lives, on the rebirths of others, or on the different realms of beings, and it seems reasonable to suppose that he would only have given such teachings if they were beneficial. In any case, such means of knowing (*pamāṇa*), while they may or may not lead to correct results, are perfectly rational and do not require the postulation of any metaphysical entity.

By way of contrast, the Pāyāsi Sutta gives examples of wrong ways to learn about rebirth.⁴⁸ Prince Pāyāsi performs an elaborate series of experiments to test whether the soul exists. He takes condemned criminals and suffocates them in sealed jars to see if their soul escapes; or he weighs them before and after death; and I'll spare you the other gruesome tests. But the monk Kumāra Kassapa criticizes him for seeking for a soul in a foolish way. The lesson is worth bearing in mind. We have no guarantee that our modern scientific methods will necessarily be any more effective than Pāyāsi's; and we are more constrained in how we treat our test subjects!

47 SN 12.33, 34.

48 DN 23. In addition to several Chinese parallels, this is possibly the only Buddhist Sutta with a Jaina parallel. See Willem Bollée, *The Story of Paesi*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002.