



The Wheel of Rebirth

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The Wheel of Rebirth

When we talk about rebirth, some people laugh at the idea. They consider such a belief passé and obsolete in the technologically advanced 21st Century. Others may think that the question of rebirth belongs strictly in the arena of religion. After all, the issue of what happens after death seems remote from everyday living. Some may say, “I don’t even know about living, why ask about dying?” To such people the question of what happens after death is not a pressing concern. However, if we were to ask this question on a battlefield, where people are face to face with death, we would be more earnest in our approach to this very serious question. By looking at the issue more closely, we can potentially open the door to a more complex understanding of the possibilities that life entails.

In the Buddhist worldview, nothing is apart from the cycle of rebirth, including the physical laws of the universe. For example, the cycle of rebirth leads us to arise in the various high or low realms of existence.

The life and death of an individual human being is also part of the cycle of rebirth. However, changes in the natural world are also manifestations of rebirth, such as the cycle of the four seasons, time moving from the past to the present and then the future, and the cycle of day and night. When we change direction or move from place to place, this is spatial rebirth.

In short, everything around us is the result of rebirth. The wind blows and gathers the clouds; clouds turn into rain, which falls to the ground. The rain evaporates into the sky and becomes clouds again. This continuous process of the water cycle is a form of rebirth. When an automobile burns gasoline, it generates energy and produces carbon dioxide. The carbon dioxide is absorbed by plants. When the plants die, they decompose and become natural oil deposits many years later. This is another form of rebirth. A light can be turned on, off, and on again. This is rebirth, too.

The wheel of rebirth is not only found in changes in the universe, it is also evident in the many changes that one experiences during one's lifetime, from the time one is born until one dies. According to scientific research, there is not one single cell in the human body that remains for more than seven years. In other words, our body is totally renewed every seven years. The cellular structure, perception, and cognition of all living creatures, from simple organisms to advanced humans, are constantly moving, changing, living, and

dying. We experience these constant changes in the body as birth, old age, sickness, and death, and in the mind as our thoughts arise, abide, change, and cease—these changes are also part of the wheel of rebirth.

The wheel of rebirth also functions within a family: Once we were only the children of our parents, but later we may have become the parents of children. The changes in our economic welfare and the ups and downs of our emotions are also examples of the cycle of rebirth.

Of all the above examples of rebirth, the one that we must thoroughly understand in Buddhism is the wheel of rebirth within the six realms of existence. Buddhism teaches the possibility of rebirth not just as humans and animals, but also as ghosts, who have died with strong cravings or demons with lots of anger. There are also numerous hells and heavens in which beings can be reborn. Because of karma, the force generated by sentient beings' actions and thoughts, the cycle of cause and effect in a beginningless and endless stream of life are formed, giving rise to the manifestation of six variant life forms: heavenly beings, *asuras*, humans, ghosts, animals, and hell beings. In Buddhism, this is referred to as the “wheel of rebirth within the six realms of existence.” Master Shengan, in *Inspiration to Pledge the Bodhicitta*, said, “All beings and I since countless *kalpas* have been trapped

in the cycle of rebirth and cannot be liberated. Heaven and earth, here and there, we live in many forms, rising and falling.”

Negating the existence of rebirth does not disprove others’ beliefs, but only narrows the scope of their own lives. If there were no rebirth, there would be no past lives and, moreover, no future lives. Without future lives, existence would be short and without hope, and the outlook on life would be forlorn and uncertain. When faced with major setbacks, some people encourage themselves by saying, “Everything is going to be all right. Just wait and see how I will be doing in ten years.” Even death row inmates facing execution stick out their chests and declare, “In twenty years, I will be back.” The doctrine of rebirth provides our existence with flexibility, such that our unfulfilled wishes may someday reach fruition and that there will always be the next train of life for us to board.

Rebirth, however, is not just a religious theory; it is not simply an escape or a psychological crutch for dealing with the cruel certainty of death. It is a spiritual science that explains our existence from the past into the future. We should develop a thorough understanding of rebirth, not because we are expected to do so in Buddhism, but because this understanding can help us examine our life intelligently.

I. The Value of Understanding Rebirth

What value does understanding rebirth bring to our lives? When we understand rebirth, we know that our existence has continuity; life is no longer limited to a short span of a hundred years or so. With rebirth, life is unlimited in hope and possibilities. Within the cycle of rebirth, death is the beginning of another existence. Through the course of birth and death, death and birth, existence continues uninterrupted and the possibilities are endless. Just as when an oil lamp is nearly exhausted, its flame can be used to light another lamp. Rebirth is like this: when one of our “lamps” is all used up, we begin anew, as one by one our lamps are able to dispel the darkness.

As we go through the cycle of rebirth within the six realms of existence, our bodies can take on many forms. While the forms are different, the flame of life is inextinguishable and the lamp of wisdom never stops burning. Rebirth allows our lives to be like the ever-changing universe: we have existed from the beginning until now, persisting for ten thousand *kalpas*, yet always renewed.

Because of rebirth we are able to pass down our experience and wisdom—our history and heritage—to the next generation. If we do not pass on our cultural heritage, our efforts will be useless. Unless we pass down this heritage, our history will be very limited.

It is said that everyone is equal under the law, but there are still some people who manage to receive favorable treatment. In contrast, Buddhism teaches us that the cycle of rebirth treats everyone equally. Whether one is a noble or a commoner, everyone is subject to the cycle of rebirth. Time is the most objective judge. Birth, old age, sickness, and death are the most impartial jury. Neither King Yama nor God has control over karmic effects or rebirth, for these are determined by each individual being's past deeds. When the conditions are right, the karma we have stored up manifests as different types of painful or pleasant karmic effects. That is why the sutras say, "Millions of *kalpas* may pass, but karma does not vanish. When conditions ripen, one must bear the consequences of one's actions."

The circumstances of our rebirth, whether we are intelligent or stupid, rich or poor, are all products of our past deeds. Consider the case of child prodigies, whose talents can exceed those of university professors and experts—such talent is not a product of this lifetime; it is the culmination of learning from previous lifetimes. The doctrine of rebirth means that we are free from the hands of a divine power, for it is our own karma that controls rebirth. We are our own masters. From this perspective, every being is free and equal, and our happiness and fortune are the products of our own doing, just as misery and tragedy are. A creator cannot protect us from the consequences of

our wrongdoing, but no god can take away our merit, either. With karma and rebirth, there is no such thing as luck. We are the creators of our own destiny.

Human life is like a turning wheel, forever moving forward, life after life, so that our life is always fresh. However, our unwholesome karma is also like a turning wheel, in that it will come back around again. Only if we repent and reform will our unwholesome karma eventually be eliminated. In this way, rebirth can give us limitless hope. Although the cold winter may be long, the warm spring will come one day.

Rebirth is not a matter of rhetorical debate, or a question of whether we believe it or not. Even if we stubbornly refuse to believe in rebirth, if we examine all the phenomena in society, nature, the universe, and even between you and me, everything is within the swirl of the cycle of rebirth. Therefore, the wise approach is to understand rebirth, free ourselves from rebirth, and ultimately transcend rebirth by transforming the wheel of rebirth into the Dharma wheel of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. That is the wise approach.

II. Some Questions Regarding the Subject of Rebirth

The Buddhist doctrine of rebirth is both profound and of far-reaching importance. However, ordinary people still have many questions regarding its existence

and significance. Some of the most common questions about rebirth are listed below:

1. Is rebirth beneficial?

Some people find anguish in the thought of being reborn again. To them, it is best if death is the final chapter of their lives. Buddhism does not believe that death is the finale, but is, in fact, the beginning of another life. Our present lifetime is one of our many lifetimes, and we must learn to treasure each lifetime so that we do not waste it. With rebirth, our lives do not just end with this one, and we have the chance to again build a better future. Without rebirth, death is the ultimate end. Would it not be tragic if we go to our graves with our hopes and dreams unfulfilled? How can life without rebirth be considered desirable?

2. Why do I not remember my past lives?

If rebirth exists, why do most people recall nothing of their past lives? In the sutras it is said that “Human life truly is suffering. A grandson can marry his grandmother.” Why are we so ignorant? What makes us so forgetful of our previous lives that we could even marry our previous grandparents reborn?

Many cultures that believe in reincarnation each have their own explanation. In Chinese folklore, it is said that before one is reborn, one has to drink a

concoction that erases all memory of the previous life. Plato believed that the soul, in its journey of rebirth, had to first cross an extremely hot and arid desert before coming to a river of cool running water. With a thirst that was simply unbearable, one drank from the river without realizing that the water would wipe out all bits and pieces of the memory from the previous life. Roman mythology has a similar story that explains why one's memory of the previous life is lost after rebirth.

Buddhism teaches that people lose the memory of their previous lives because of the confusion they undergo between one life and the next. After one dies, before being reborn into the next life, one passes through an intermediate stage of existence.¹ Beings in this intermediate state of existence possess all the six senses and resemble a three-foot tall child. They have the power to pass through walls and travel effortlessly at incredible speeds, except they cannot pass through a mother's womb or the Buddha's *vajra* throne. In this state, they live and die in seven-day increments. After death, they can be reborn again. Beings in this intermediate stage can at most live for seven seven-day periods for a total of forty-nine days. Some may only live for two or three seven-day periods. At the end of this stage, they will

1. Known in Chinese as *zhongyou* (中有). This stage is also called *antarabhava* in Sanskrit and *bardo* in Tibetan.

be reborn into one of the six realms of existence. It is during this intermediate stage that we forget our previous lives, and are no longer able to recall life in the other realms. Some people may think this is a regrettable situation. After all, wouldn't it be wonderful if we had the ability to know our past and future lives, and not be subject to the confusion caused by rebirth?

But would this kind of power make us happy? Do you think it is pleasant to recall that one was a cow or a pig in a previous life? Or if one could know the future and see that one only had three more years to live, would it still be possible to live a carefree life? If one can read others' minds and know that the smiles of others are only facades of ill intentions, will one not feel hurt and angry? Without such supernatural powers, every day is a good day, and everywhere is a good place. How free and pleasant life is! That is why life and the universe operate in this orderly manner, with everything in its place and as it should be. We may have forgotten our previous lives, but by the same token, we have a new body without all the unpleasant experiences of the past. Is this not indeed a very wonderful thing, too?

3. Does Buddhist chanting affect one's rebirth?

We now know that rebirth is real, but can chanting sutras and dedicating merit to our departed loved

ones really have any impact on their rebirth? Can these actions help to liberate them?

According to the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, only two to three-tenths of the merits from chanting sutras can be transferred to the deceased, with the rest going to the person who is chanting the sutra. Therefore the best way to accumulate merit is while we are alive and strong rather than waiting for others to chant sutras for us after we have died.

Since our ability to transfer merit to the deceased is limited, how does chanting sutras benefit them? Dedicating merit to the deceased is not unlike a wealthy, famous relative who shares his glory with his family. Merit is like the passport that one needs to take a trip to the land of the Buddhas.

Consider if one were to throw a rock into a river: it would very quickly sink to the bottom. But if that same rock was placed on a ship, it could travel across the river and arrive at the other shore safely. Our heavy unwholesome karma is like a rock; the compassionate merit from chanting the sutras is like the ship, sparing us from sinking in the sea of birth and death. If a wheat field is full of healthy and strong seedlings, a couple of weeds will not be able to ruin it. The merit from chanting sutras can help the seedlings of our wholesome karma to grow, and prevent the seeds of our unwholesome karma from sprouting.

4. Do fengshui² and fortune telling have any impact on rebirth?

In Chinese culture, it is common for people to hire a fortuneteller to check the time and location for weddings, funerals, and special occasions. Likewise, a fengshui master may inspect one's home to tell you if your house alignment is incorrect, and if it may hinder the future of your descendents.

Consider a fortuneteller who looks at a couple's horoscopes and says that they are conflicting and should not get married, or asking a fortuneteller to look at a calendar and check the stars to pick a good day to bury our loved ones. In reality, of the many couples that get married on the same auspicious day, some get divorced while others remain happily married. Therefore, having a wedding ceremony on a chosen day is not important for a happy marriage. How the couples get along and foster their relationship with each other is the real foundation of a blissful union.

Things like fengshui and auspicious dates function when they are built on a foundation of morality, the laws of nature, wholesome mental attitudes, doing good deeds, and forming positive connections with others. In this way, any place becomes the perfect location and any time is an auspicious moment.

2. The belief that the direction and surroundings of a house or a tomb, can influence the fortune of a family and its descendents.

If we believe in rebirth, we should cultivate merit and virtue, for merit and virtue will be reborn with us in the next life. Likewise, we should form good relationships, for these karmic connections travel with us as well. Accumulating merit and forming wholesome karmic connections with others is the true source of happiness.

5. *What are some similes to explain rebirth?*

It can be helpful to consider some real world occurrences that are similar to rebirth, since each of us cannot know the past and future. Think about the silk clothing that we wear. Silk is made by silkworms. Silkworms spin cocoons from which silkmoths emerge. Silkworms, cocoons, and silkmoths are three entities, yet they are also one being. On the one hand, it is inaccurate to say that a silkworm is entirely different from a silkmoth; on the other hand, it is just as inaccurate to say that a silkworm is the same as a moth. It is just as correct to say that a silkworm is a silkmoth or a silkworm is not a silkmoth. Is this not unlike rebirth?

Once, there was a man who stole some coconuts. While he was savoring the taste of the coconuts, he was caught red-handed by the rightful owner of the coconuts. The owner grabbed him and yelled at him angrily, "How can you steal my coconuts!"

"I did *not* steal your coconuts!"

“How can you deny it? I planted the coconut tree,” the owner fumed.

With an air of indignation, the man replied, “Well, the coconut you planted is the seed in the ground, and I am eating the fruit from the tree. What does that have to do with you?”

The coconuts on the tree and the coconut seed in the ground are connected in a similar way to a being who is reborn. Like the growing process of a coconut from a seed, or the lighting of a torch by another, life goes on and on. The wheel of life turns and turns, without a moment’s pause.

6. Does the doctrine of rebirth conflict with the doctrine of non-self?

One of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism is that all phenomena lack an independent “self.” If this is the case, how is rebirth possible? Isn’t this a contradiction?

“Non-self” is not a negation of life. It simply means that our physical body is just a temporary combination of the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness and the four great elements of earth, water, fire, and wind. It exists because the proper causes and conditions have come together, and cannot exist if any one of these parts is absent.

Because all things come into being due to a combination of causes and conditions, there is no

part, no inherent “self,” that can exist apart from the rest. This concept is called “non-self.” The doctrine of non-self and the doctrine of rebirth are not contradictory.

For example, gold can be molded into rings, earrings, or bracelets. The forms may vary but the nature of gold is unchanged. This is the same way with our existence. In a perpetual flux through the wheel of rebirth, we wander between the realms of heaven and earth. In one life we may be named Henry, and in another Jack, or we may be reborn as a donkey in one life and a horse the next. What travels within the cycle of rebirth is not the physical body; rather it is the being within the physical body which is reborn.

7. When a being is reborn, what is it that is reborn from life to life?

If it is not the physical body that is reborn, as mentioned above, what is reborn? In Buddhism, the core of what is reborn is called the *alaya* consciousness. In the *Verses on the Structure of the Eight Consciousnesses*, the *alaya* consciousness is described as follows:

*Expansive and inexhaustible,
it has three functions:*

*A deep pool³ rouses seven waves;⁴
the winds of circumstance
Influence it. It holds all seeds.⁵
Creating the senses, the body,
and the world —
It is the first to come and the last to go.
It is the master of existence.*

Alaya consciousness is the basis of life. When the *alaya* consciousness comes into contact with different conditions and phenomena, it gives rise to various mental formations and actions, creating karma. These karmic seeds are stored within the *alaya* consciousness as if it were a large warehouse. The relative abundance of the wholesome or unwholesome karma in this giant warehouse then determines the direction of the next rebirth. When a being dies, the *alaya* consciousness is the last to leave the body, and when a being is reborn, the *alaya* consciousness is the first to arrive in the next body. It is the core of rebirth.

8. *What is the relationship between karma and rebirth?*

Now that we know that *alaya* consciousness is at the core of rebirth, what determines where we will

3. A symbol for the *alaya* consciousness.

4. A symbol for the seven other consciousnesses: the five sense consciousnesses; the mind; and the *manas*, or self, consciousness.

5. A symbol for wholesome and unwholesome karma.

be reborn? Every day, we create an endless supply of karma through our body, speech, and mind. Some of this karma is wholesome, while some is unwholesome. These two forces act as competing causes, like in a game of tug-of-war. If the force of the wholesome karma dominates, one is reborn in one of the higher realms such as the heavenly realm, *asura* realm, or human realm. If the force of the unwholesome karma dominates, we will be reborn in one of the three lower realms such as the animal realm, hungry ghost realm, or hell realm. Our karma is the deciding factor in the direction of our future lives. Therefore, cultivating wholesome conduct and eliminating unwholesome conduct is critical in our pursuit of future happiness.

9. What do the various religions have to say about the afterlife?

Almost all religions accept the idea of some sort of afterlife. But what is the final goal of this afterlife? Daoists seek longevity and everlasting youth. Christians and Catholics believe that the goal of life is to enter heaven to be with God and have eternal life. Many adherents of Chinese folk religion yearn for eternal life as well. In contrast, Buddhism believes the ultimate goal of life is to attain the state of the “non-birth.” This means that Buddhists strive to be liberated from rebirth. From a Buddhist perspective,

longevity, eternal life, or an undying life is still in the thick of the agony of rebirth. Only “non-birth” can emancipate us from the suffering of existence. It is the ultimate in serene, everlasting, joyous, pure living!

III. Evidence of Rebirth

The many well-documented records by famous scholars in history can demonstrate a surprisingly great amount of evidence for rebirth.

Wang Yangming, a famous Confucian scholar of the Ming dynasty, once visited Jinshan Monastery to pay his respects. While at the temple, he had a feeling of *déjà vu*, as if he had been there before. As he toured the temple, he came across a room with a door that was locked and sealed. It somehow seemed to him that he had lived in that room before. His curiosity eventually got the better of him, so he asked the reception monk to show him the inside of the room. The monk replied apologetically, “I am very sorry. This room was where one of our founding masters passed away some fifty years ago, and his body is still kept inside. He left word that this room was not to be disturbed. I hope you can understand why we cannot unseal the door.”

“There’s a door right here, it cannot remain shut forever. Please kindly indulge me and allow me to go inside to look around.”

After repeated pleadings from Wang Yangming, the monk realized that this guest would not leave unless he got to see the inside of the room, so the reception monk eventually let him in. Under the dim light of dusk, he saw an old monk, who had long since passed away, sitting timelessly straight upon a mat. When he took a closer look, he was taken aback. How could the face of this master look so much like his own? He lifted his head and saw a poem written on the wall. It read as follows:

*Fifty years later, Wang Yangming,
The person who opens the door
is the one who closed it.
When the consciousness once left is now back,
Only then it believes in the Chan teaching
of the indestructible being.*

As it turned out, the old monk was none other than Wang Yangming in his previous life. As he himself had closed the door in bygone days, he returned to open it that very day. As a testimonial for future generations, he wrote the following poem:

*Jinshan awakened me
like the strike of a fist;
I see through the sky under Weiyang Lake.
While enjoying the moon above the balcony,
The playing of the flute awakens
the dormant dragon.*

Among the public records of Xiushui County of Jiangxi Province was the report of a woman reborn as a renowned scholar named Huang Shangu. He became a county commissioner at the tender age of twenty-six. One day, he dreamt that he had walked to a place where he saw a silver-haired old lady preparing and making offerings in front of her residence. On the altar was a bowl of noodles and celery. The bowl of noodles smelled so appetizing that, without any hesitation, he picked up the bowl of noodles from the altar and began eating.

When he woke up, he could still taste the celery in his mouth. Huang Shangu thought it was all just a dream and did not think much of it. The next day when he took an afternoon nap, he had the same dream again. He became very unsettled and decided to see if he could find the place he saw in the dream. After some walking, he came upon a house in front of which was the same old lady in his dream. With three incense sticks in her hands, she was praying quietly. Even more incredible was the freshly prepared bowl of noodles and celery on the altar. The noodles smelled delicious. Huang Shangu was very curious, so he walked up and asked the lady, "Madam, what are you doing?"

"Yesterday was the twenty-sixth anniversary of my daughter's passing. I am making an offering to her."

Her words surprised and shocked Huang Shangu. Strange—why was it the same as his age? So he asked further, “What did your daughter usually like to do?”

“When she was alive, she was a devout Buddhist and liked to read Buddhist sutras. She vowed not to get married and was especially fond of noodles and celery. Therefore, I specially made a bowl of noodles to offer her.”

With many unanswered questions in his mind, he asked, “Would it be possible for me to look around her room?”

The lady agreed and showed him inside. The room was full of many books and sutras that he too had once read. In the corner, there was a giant chest. Huang Shangu asked inquisitively, “What is inside the chest? May I open it and take a look?”

The old lady replied that she did not know what was inside the chest or where the key was. Huang Shangu thought hard for a moment. Then, as if remembering something, he quickly found the key and opened the chest. Inside the chest were stacks of papers, written essays. Upon reading them Huang Shangu realized that their content was the same as the essays he wrote to pass the imperial examination a few years prior. He finally realized that the lonely, elderly lady was the mother of his previous life. He fell to his knees and sincerely pleaded, “Madam! I

was your daughter. Please come home with me and allow me to take good care of you.” He then welcomed the old lady into his home and wrote a poem to mark this turn of events.

*Like a monk with hair,
Like a layman free of worldly dust,
Having a dream within a dream,
I see existence beyond existence.*

Although Huang Shangu was a layman, he aspired to the life of a monk. Although he led a secular life, he was not hindered by worldly temptations. Life is like a dream; beyond life there is another existence. He could very well identify with the saying, “While dreaming, the six realms of existence are clear. After awakening, the universe is empty.”

The rebirth story of Master Hongren, the Fifth Patriarch of the Chan School, is also well-known. It was said that Hongren was an old gardener in his previous life. He had very high regard for the Fourth Patriarch, Daoxin, and wanted to become his disciple. Daoxin thought that the gardener was too old and would not be able to sustain the rigors of travel to propagate the Dharma. He therefore consoled the old gardener, “If you were to be reborn now, I might be able to stay on a few years longer to wait for you.”

The old gardener bid the Fourth Patriarch farewell before heading to a creek where he saw a young lady

washing cotton yarn. He asked, "Lady, may I stay in your house for a while?"

"You should ask my parents. I cannot make such a decision."

"I must have your permission. I dare not ask further."

The young lady saw that it was getting dark and the poor old man needed a shelter for the night, so she nodded. Strangely, this unwed lady became pregnant upon her returning home. The family was very upset and disowned her. Later, she gave birth to a nice chubby baby boy. She was distraught and threw her ill-fated baby boy in the river, but miraculously, the baby flowed up-stream against the current. Without any means of livelihood, she became a beggar to support herself and the baby. Since no one knew who his father was, he was called the "Nameless Kid." Six years went by and the boy grew to become a very lovable and intelligent young boy. One day, when Master Daoxin was preaching in the area, the young boy went up to him, tugged at the Master's robe, and would not let go. He earnestly asked the master to take him as a disciple. When the Master saw that he was only a young boy, he patted the youngster on his head and said gently, "You are too young, how can you renounce your household life and become my disciple?"

Speaking like an adult, the "Nameless Kid" demanded an answer, "Master, you complained that I

was too old in the past; now, you say I am too young. When are you going to accept me as your disciple?”

These words seemed to have jolted something in Master Daoxin’s memory. He quickly asked, “Child, what is your name? Where do you live?”

“They call me the ‘Nameless Kid.’ I live on Ten Mile Lane.”

“Everyone has a name. How can you not have a name?”

“Buddha Nature is my given name. I do not have a last name.”

Daoxin was very pleased that a young child could speak such impressive words. The Master believed that this young child would one day achieve greatness and make significant contributions to Buddhism. Later, the Fourth Patriarch passed his robe and bowl to the “Nameless Kid” who then became the Fifth Patriarch of the Chan School. The Fifth Patriarch had many disciples and, due to his efforts, the Chan School blossomed in China.

In 1942, in the Pin County of Shanxi Province in China lived a man named Tian Sanniu. He made his home in a cave. During a storm, the cave collapsed and buried him alive. While feeling suffocated, he felt himself climbing out of the mound of dirt. Once out, he saw his family huddled together crying. He asked his family what had just happened, but no one paid him any attention. Annoyed and irritated, he decided to leave his

family. His walk took him to Mingyu Pond. There he saw a narrow door, so he decided to squeeze through the doorway. Suddenly, he heard someone remark over the din, "Congratulations! You have a new son."

Unknowingly, Tian Sanniu was reborn as a son of the Zhang family; he was named Zhang Shengyou. As soon as he came out of the mother's womb, he saw that the midwife was looking all over the place for a pair of scissors. He asked her, "Isn't the pair of scissors hanging on the wall?"

All those present were shocked speechless. They thought he was some sort of demon and wanted to drown him in the river, but his mother felt sorry for him, and he was spared. For seven years, he did not dare to speak one word, yet he remembered everything of his past life. Somehow, news of the child's rebirth story reached the Tian family. The Tian family had a land dispute with their neighbor but they could not find the deed to the land. In desperation, they asked the Zhang's son to come to their house to look for the deed. Amazingly, the young boy was very familiar with the affairs of the family. He located the deed in no time and thereby resolved the argument. This story was told by the Deputy Director of Social Services of Taiwan, Mou Naihong. It was verified by the Deputy Minister of Finance, Wang Fuzhou. In this modern age of science, there are still many inexplicable anecdotes of rebirth.

Su Dongpo, the famous Chinese poet, always had a close and deep relationship with Buddhism. He was very close to a few monks and often called on them. In the *Record of Lamp Passing for Laity*, it was documented that he was Chan Master Jie in his previous life. When his mother was pregnant with him, she dreamt of a small-eyed, thin, elderly monk. She later gave birth to Su Dongpo. Many years later, through his brother Su Che, who was a government official in Gaoan, Su Dongpo became friends with three monks: Zhenjing, Wensheng, and Shoucong. They often met to discuss Chan and the Dharma. One day, the three monks all dreamt of a visit from the deceased Chan Master Jie. When they were discussing the dream, it just happened that Su Dongpo called on them. They told Su Dongpo their dream. Su Dongpo told them in return that when he was about seven, he once dreamt of himself as a monk traveling and spreading the Buddhist teachings in the Shanyou area.

Master Zhenjing immediately added, “Chan Master Jie was also from the Shanyou area. He traveled to Gaoan in his twilight years and passed away fifty years ago in Dayu.” Pursuing further, they found that Su Dongpo was forty-nine years old. It then dawned on all of them that Su Dongpo was Chan Master Jie in his previous life.

Many Chinese use the proverb, “A relationship destined to last three lifetimes,” signifying the depth and

extent of a relationship. Su Dongpo, in his book entitled *The Legend of Monk Yuanze*, described a friendship between Master Yuanze and Scholar Li Yuan. Both of them had planned to travel to Mount Emei together, but they could not agree on the route. Yuanze wanted to travel by land, but Li Yuan insisted on going by river.

Master Yuanze sighed, "Everything is determined by causes and conditions, not by the wishes of a person." They finally decided to take the water route.

While passing by Nanpu, they saw a pregnant woman with a clay jug who was fetching water along the river. Yuanze heaved a long sigh and said, "It is precisely because I was afraid to run into this woman that I suggested we use the land route. She is from the Wang family, and I am supposed to be her son. For three years, I have been hiding from her. Consequently, she has been pregnant for three years and cannot give birth. After three days, you can go over to her house to visit me. I will acknowledge you with a smile. In thirteen years, we can meet again outside the Tianzhu Temple in Hangzhou."

That evening, the master passed away painlessly. Three days later, Li Yuan paid a visit to the lady's house. The newborn baby indeed gave Li Yuan a very warm and innocent smile upon seeing him. Thirteen years later, Li Yuan traveled to the Tianzhu Temple. There, he saw a young herder riding and singing on top of an ox:

*In the past, present, and future, atop the
stone⁶ is this old soul.*

*Gazing at the moon, reciting a verse, no
need to discuss.*

*Embarrassed that my dear friend has visited
from so far.*

*This body is different, but my nature is
everlasting.*

When Li Yuan heard the song, he called out, “How is Chan Master Yuanze doing?”

The young herder waved back and replied, “Mr. Li indeed keeps his promise.” He kept playing his flute and slowly rode off into the horizon.

IV. How Can We Transcend Rebirth?

Now that we have understood some of the significance and evidence in support of rebirth, we should go a step further and explore how we can transcend rebirth. Understanding rebirth is merely a means to realize the ultimate goal of transcending the cycle. Some people find the Buddhist teaching regarding rebirth and cause-and-effect superstitious and ludicrous. Actually, all of the Buddha’s teachings are nothing more than a marvelous remedy for liberating ourselves from the shackles of rebirth, because

6. Reference to Chinese folklore in which heroes are born from stone.

it is through rebirth that we continue a cycle of lives that involve stress and suffering. From the Buddhist perspective, even life in heavenly realms is not completely free and perfect.

If we want to transcend rebirth, we must first know the cause of rebirth. The cycle of rebirth exists because of karma. Karma can be both wholesome or unwholesome, heavy or mild. It is written in a sutra, “Cut down a tree without taking out its roots and the tree will grow again. Sever our desires without eradicating their ‘roots,’ and we will repeatedly experience the suffering of rebirth. It is like making an arrow and shooting oneself with it. Just like a physical arrow, the arrow of desire hurts all beings.”

Our greed and desire causes us to rise and fall in the sea of rebirth. Only with the fire of diligence can we burn down the forest of our desires. We must use the light of *prajna*-wisdom to illuminate the darkness of ignorance and unwholesome karma. We must wield the sword of wisdom to sever the chains of rebirth.

This is the foundation for our hope, and the direction in which we expend our efforts. The Buddha once said, “This is my last rebirth.” Through the eighty-four thousand Dharma methods taught by the Buddha, we can all break through the wheel of rebirth and attain the state of total freedom.

After understanding rebirth, the next step is to not fear it. Without fear, we can live amidst the cycle of rebirth without being defiled by it. Unenlightened beings are reborn because of their karma. Some Buddhist practitioners, *sravakas*, and *pratyekabuddhas*, seek liberation from rebirth. In contrast, bodhisattvas make great vows to be reborn to help others. For example, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva steers the vessel of compassion to re-enter the world to liberate all sentient beings. Similarly, Venerable Cihang⁷ aspired to return to this world to fulfill the same vow. In the *Record of the Pure Land Sages*, it is recorded that many masters wish to be reborn in the Pure Land so they may come back to our world to help others. Many Tibetan lamas are reborn into this world after passing away, with the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama being some of the more well-known examples.

These masters truly live in accordance with the bodhisattva's vow of compassion. Their spirit is captured in the saying, "We wish for the liberation of all sentient beings from suffering; we do not seek peace and happiness for ourselves." Refusing to be deserters of humanity, they are perfectly willing to be lifeboats in the sea of misery. They are like the lotus

7. Venerable Cihang was a highly influential monastic in Taiwan who helped many of the mainland Chinese monks, including Master Hsing Yun, find lodging.

blossoms which sprout out of the mud, yet remain pure. Although reborn into this Saha world, they are free from the suffering of birth and death. They choose to re-enter the wheel of rebirth without any hesitation, yet remain unafflicted by the sufferings of rebirth. With these acts of compassion, they are true noble masters who have transcended the cycle of rebirth. Indeed, we can also look into the *Jatakas*⁸ to find that the Buddha has been reborn as a heavenly being, an animal, a monk, and as royalty. Amidst the endless cycle of rebirth, the Buddha diligently practiced the bodhisattva path. The Buddha is always working to liberate all sentient beings.

When the founder of the Guiyang School, Chan Master Guiyang Lingyou, was about to pass away, his disciples gathered around him and asked, “Master, with your level of cultivation, where are you going to be reborn in your next life?”

“Oh, I will be reborn as a water buffalo on a nearby farm.”

His disciples were shocked and puzzled. One asked, “Master, you are such a great practitioner. How can you possibly be reborn as an animal?”

“If you do not believe me, you can find the words ‘Monk Guiyang Lingyou’ on the buffalo’s left front leg. You will then know that is me.”

8. The Jatakas refer to many different sutras that recount the former lives of the Buddha.

His disciples were grief-stricken by his passing. After the funeral, they did discover a buffalo calf born on a farm nearby, and when they inspected it they discovered their master's name right where he said it would be. When they saw their previous master, now a buffalo, toiling under the blazing sun, they quickly bought the buffalo so they could take care of it in the temple. Every morning they fed him fresh green grass. Strangely enough, the buffalo refused to eat or drink. Helplessly, they took the buffalo back to the farm. There, the buffalo would work and then happily chew on its hay.

Master Guiyang Lingyou's act of compassion is an illustrative example of the saying, "If one wishes to become a great sage of Buddhism, one must first be a servant for all beings." This supreme level of compassion is beyond the shallow understanding of his disciples. It is only when one has the noble aspiration to practice the Dharma amid the sea of birth and death, and be at ease and content within the bounds of rebirth, that one is the bodhisattva who truly understands and is liberated from rebirth.

Death is like an old home that has fallen into ruin, or a worn garment that is frayed at the edges: we move into a new home, or change into new clothes. In the beginningless cycle of rebirth, we should work to make our next home into a majestic temple, and fashion our clothes into a magnificent Dharma robe.

In this way, within the beginningless cycle of rebirth,
we can attain enlightenment.