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The Wheel of Rebirth

Buddhism in Every Step 6

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The Wheel of Rebirth

Dear Venerables and Dharma Friends,

Today, I am going to discuss with you a very important, but difficult to affirm, topic—rebirth. When we talk about rebirth, some people laugh at the idea. They consider such belief passe and obsolete in the technologically advanced 21th 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. The saying, “If I don’t even know about living, why ask about dying?” reflects how some people may feel. To them, the question of rebirth is not a pressing concern. Indeed, in the ambience of this grand lecture

hall, the subject of rebirth may not seem an appropriate lecture topic. If we were to discuss this question on a battlefield, where we are face to face with death, then we would be more earnest to approach and study this very important and serious question of death and rebirth.

Sometimes we may hear young people making scornful remarks about their disbelief in rebirth. By not recognizing the existence of rebirth, they do not demonstrate intellectual sophistication but rather limitations in their understanding of life. Negating the existence of rebirth does not disconfirm others' beliefs, but only narrow 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 of life would be forlorn and uncertain! When faced with major setbacks, some people encourage themselves by saying, "Everything is going to be alright. Just wait and see how I will be doing in ten years." Even death-row inmates facing execution would stick out their chests and declare, "In twenty years, I will be back." With rebirth, human existence has some maneuvering room. With rebirth, unful-

filled wishes can materialize one day. With rebirth, there will always be the next train of life for us to board.

All phenomena in this world cannot escape the workings of the wheel of rebirth. It is because of the workings of rebirth that we are reborn into either a wholesome or unwholesome realm of existence, of which there are six. The life processes of being born and dying are examples of rebirths. Changes in nature are also manifestations of rebirths. There is the change of the four seasons. There is the time cycle of past, present, and future. There is the cycle of day and night. These are temporal types of rebirths. The change of directions and the movement from one place to the next are spatial types of rebirths. 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 to when one dies. According to scientific research, there is not one single cell in our body that has not changed in 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. This constant state of flux, renewal, and metabolic change that we experience physically (birth, aging, sickness, and death) and in our minds (the arising, abiding, changing, and ceasing of thoughts) is what we call the wheel of rebirth. This can be compared to the cyclic motion of the wheels of a car. The wheel of rebirth is also at work in family relationships; at one time we are the children of our parents, and yet in another time we become the parents of our children. The changes in our economic welfare and the ups and downs of our emotions are also examples of rebirth.

Of all the above examples of rebirths, the one that we must thoroughly understand in Buddhism is the wheel of rebirth within the six realms of existence. According to the Buddhist teachings, we humans are constantly going through cycles of rebirth. It is just that we refer to the slow and gradual changes as “arising and ceasing” or “changing and transforming,” and we reserve the term the “cycle of rebirth” to those changes that are rapid and sudden. Because of karmic influence—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, such as celestial beings, humans, spirits, and animals. In Buddhism, this is referred to as the “wheel of rebirth within the six realms of existence.” Master Shengan in his piece *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.” Yet, this profound and important law of rebirth is not accepted by the many who are ignorant of it. No wonder ancient masters would sigh and lament, “Only the sutras

can reveal such truth; only the Buddha can speak on such matters.” Rebirth is not a religious theory; it is not an escape or a psychological crutch for dealing with the cruel truth of death. It is a precise 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. Next, I will discuss the Buddhist perspective on the cycle of rebirth in four sections.

I. The Value of Understanding Rebirth

What value does rebirth bring to our lives? What meaning does rebirth add to our existence? With rebirth, 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. Living and dying, dying and living, existence continues uninterrupted while possibilities are unbounded. This can be compared to a torch. When one stick of wood is exhausted, it is replaced with another. Each stick may be different in its

components, yet the flame continues to burn. Rebirth is also like an oil lamp. When one oil lamp is exhausted, another is lit. These lamps, burning one after another, serve to shatter the darkness of the world. As we go through the cycle of rebirth within the six realms, our bodies can take on many forms, as a Henry or a Jack, as a celestial being or as an earthbound human being. While the forms are different, the flame of life is inextinguishable and the lamp of wisdom never stops burning. Rebirth is what gives our existence universality: we exist from antiquity to now and our existence is timeless. Rebirth gives meaning to existence.

Although we may say that everyone is equal under the law, some people still manage to evade the law. In contrast, Buddhism teaches us that the cycle of rebirth treats everyone equally. Regardless if one is a noble or a commoner, everyone must face the cycle of rebirth. This was well-said by the poet Du Mu, “The only true fairness in this world is gray hair; it does not overlook the heads of the rich.” Time is the most objective judge. Birth, aging, sickness, and death are the most impartial jury. Cause and effect, as well as the cycle of rebirth, are not controlled by King

Yama nor by God. Instead, it is determined by each sentient being's past deeds or karma. Our stored karma evokes and interacts with ripened conditions and manifests in varying types of painful or blessed effects. Therefore, it is written in a sutra, "Millions of kalpas may pass, but karma does not vanish. When the condition is ripened, one must bear the consequences of one's actions." Our circumstances in the cycle of rebirth within the six realms, whether we are intelligent or dull, rich or poor, are all products of our past deeds. Take the example of the six-year-old child prodigy, Naiqing Wang. His talent in mathematics surpasses the capabilities of many college professors and experts. His talent is not a product of this lifetime; it is the culmination of learning from previous lifetimes. This, too, is a form of rebirth. Rebirth liberates us from the hands of a divine power, for it is our own karma that controls rebirth. Heaven and gods cannot give us fortune or bring us disaster; we are our own masters. From the viewpoint of rebirth, every being is free and equal. Happiness and fortune are the products of our own doing. Misery and tragedy are also of our own creation. A creator cannot protect us from the consequences of our own crimes; gods cannot

take away our merits, either. In front of rebirth and cause-and-effect, there is no such thing as luck. We are the creators of our own destiny.

We should lead our life like a wheel, always moving it forward. Only then can we keep our life refreshed. Our unwholesome karmas are also like the turning of a wheel. Through repentance and change for the better over time, they can eventually be eliminated. Rebirth gives us unlimited 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 action for us to take is to intelligently understand rebirth, to be freed from rebirth, to transcend the Three Realms, and ultimately to transform the wheel of rebirth into the Dharma wheel of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

II. Some Questions Regarding the Subject of Rebirth

Although rebirth has such a profound meaning and importance, many people still have many questions regarding its existence, its manifestation, and its purpose. Here are some commonly asked questions regarding the subject of rebirth.

A. Is the Existence of Rebirth Good or Bad for Us?

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?

B. Why am I not Aware of Rebirth?

One may ask, “If rebirth really exists, how come I cannot recall anything in my past life?” It is said in the sutras, “Humans are pitiful; a grandson marries the grandmother.” Why are we so ignorant? What makes us so forgetful of our previous lives that we would even marry our grandmother? 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 previous life. Likewise, Roman folklore has a similar story of why one’s memory of previous life is lost after rebirth.

Buddhism teaches that people lose all memory of previous life because of the “confusion in-between lives.” After one dies, before reborn into the next life, one passes through the stage of “intermediate state of becoming.” Beings in this intermediate state of becoming possess all the six senses, look like a

three-foot tall child, capable of supernatural power, pass through walls, and travel at incredible speed, and permeate through everything except a mother's womb and the Buddha's diamond throne. In this state, they live and die in seven-day increments. After death, they can be reborn again. Beings in this intermediate state of becoming 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 be reborn into one of the six realms. It is because of this intermediary state that we forget our previous lives, not even recalling what realms we lived in previously. Some of you may say, "How regrettable, wouldn't life be wonderful if one could have the power of knowing one's previous and future lives, and be free of the confusion in-between lives?" Do you really think that supernatural power can make us happy? Do you think it is pleasant to recall that one was a cow or a pig in a previous life? If one can know the future and know that one only has three more years to live, can one still live a carefree life? If one can read others' minds and finds the smiles of others are only facades of ill intentions, will one not feel hurt and angry? In the absence of su-

pernatural power, everyday is a good day, and everywhere is a good place. How free and pleasant life is! Thus, there are rules of nature by which the universe and life operate. When everything settles into its respective place and evolves in due order, then all can be truly at ease. We may have forgotten our previous lives, but by the same token, we have a new body with all the unpleasant experiences of the past behind us. Is this not indeed a very wonderful thing, too?

C. Do Chanting Sutras for the Deceased Have Any Impact on Their Rebirth?

Now that we know rebirth is real, does chanting sutras and transferring merits to our loved ones who have passed away, have any impact on their rebirth? Can these actions help liberate them from rebirth? According to the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, only two- to three-tenth of the merits from the chanting of sutras can be transferred to the deceased, while the rest of the merit accrues to the person chanting the sutra. Therefore, it is best to accrue our store of merits while we are alive and strong, rather than to wait for the arrival of impermanence (death) and rely on others to chant the sutra for us after we die. After all, the merits

that can be transferred to the deceased is limited. How, then, does chanting the sutras benefit the deceased? It can be compared to the situation of one sharing in the glory of a wealthy and famous relative. It is like the passport that one needs to take on a trip; the merit can help one to be reborn into the lands of the Buddhas. When a rock is thrown into a river, it quickly sinks to the bottom. If the rock is placed on a ship, it can arrive at the other shore safely. The heavy karma of our unwholesomeness is like this rock; the compassionate merits from chanting the sutras is like the ferrying vessel, 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 have any material impact. The merits of chanting the sutras can promote the seedlings of our wholesome karma to grow, and thwart the buried seeds of our unwholesome deeds to germinate.

D. Does Fengshui¹ and Fortune Telling Have Any Impact on Rebirth?

In Chinese culture, it is common for people to hire a soothsayer to check the time and location for weddings, funerals, and special occasions. The *feng-shui* master may tell you that the house alignment is not right and that it may hinder the future of your descendents. The fortune-teller may tell you that the couple's horoscopes are conflicting and that they should not be married. When we have to check the calendar of the stars to pick a good day for our weddings or to consult soothsayers for a time and place to bury our loved ones, then our life is controlled by superstition and the belief in divine power. In reality, of the many weddings that take place on the same auspicious day, some end in divorce while others remain happily married. Therefore, having a wedding ceremony on a chosen day is not important for a happy marriage. Instead, how the couples get along and foster affinity with each other is the foundation

¹ The belief that the direction and surroundings of a house, or a tomb, can influence the fortune of a family and its descendents.

for a blissful union. Actually, the so-called *fengshui* and auspicious timing should be built on a foundation of morality, the law of nature, and wholesome mental attitudes, while accumulating meritorious actions and fostering affinity with others. In so doing, we will find everywhere is a perfect location and any time is an auspicious moment. Therefore, if we believe in rebirth, we should diligently cultivate our virtues and accumulate our merits, for our virtues and merits can be reborn with us. We should also form good affinity with others, for good affinity can be reborn with us. Indeed, accumulating merits and building good affinity with others is the true source of happiness in life.

E. Are There Some Examples That Can Illustrate the Meaning of Rebirth?

As there is no way for one to know the past and future, are there some real life examples that can substantiate the existence of rebirth? Take the example of the silk clothing that we wear. It is made by silkworms. Silkworms spin cocoons from which moths emerge. Silkworms, cocoons, and moths are three entities, yet they are also one being. On the one

hand, it is inaccurate to say that a silkworm is not a moth; on the other hand, it is just as inaccurate to say that a silkworm is the same as a moth. We are just as correct to say that a silkworm is a moth, or a silkworm is not a moth. Is this not a living example of 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 argued, “Well, the coconut you planted is the seed in the ground, and I am eating the fruit on the tree. What does that have to do with you?”

The coconuts on the tree grow out of the coconut seed in the ground; they are connected by rebirth. 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 of pause.

F. Is the Idea of Rebirth In Conflict With the Concept of Non-self?

One of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism is that “All phenomena do not have a substantial self.” If this is the case, how is there rebirth? Are they contradictory with each other? Non-self does not mean that there is no life. It means that our physical body is the illusive combination of the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental formation, and consciousness) and the four great elements (earth, water, fire, and wind), along with the right causes and conditions; it cannot exist in the absence of any one of its parts. Because it comes into being through the coming together of causes and conditions, it does not have an independent, inherent self; therefore we call it “non-self.” The idea of rebirth is not contradictory with the concept of non-self. Take the example of a piece of gold. It can be molded into rings, earrings, or bracelets. The forms may vary, yet 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. We may be a Henry or a Jack, a donkey or a horse. What

really goes through the cycles of rebirth is not the physical body, but a “true master” which lies within every one of us.

G. What is At the Core of Rebirth?

If it is not the physical body that is reborn, then what is this “true master” that is at the core of rebirth? In Buddhism, the core of rebirth is described as the *alaya-vijnana* (store-consciousness). In the sutras, the *alaya-vijnana* is described as follows:

The vast Tripitaka cannot describe [the alaya- vijnana] completely. Impacted by the winds of circumstance, the seven abysmally deep waves² arise from it. Through the effect of contact, it holds seeds for sense organs, entities of beings, and the world of receptacle³. The first to come and the last to go, it acts as the master [of existence].

² The seven types of consciousness. They are: the visual, sound, smell, taste, touch, mental, and mano (or ego) consciousness.

³ Refers to the world that constitutes the living environment of living being.

Alaya-vijnana is the basic source of life. As it comes into contact with different conditions and circumstances, it gives rise to various mental formations and actions, hence karma. The seeds of karma are [in turn] stored in this giant warehouse of *alaya-vijnana*. 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-vijnana* is the last to leave the physical body. When a being is reborn, the *alaya-vijnana* is the first to arrive in the next body. It is the core of rebirth.

H. What is the Relationship between Rebirth and the Force of the Wholesome or Unwholesome Karma that We Have?

Given that the *alaya-vijnana* is the core of rebirth, what then determines the direction of our rebirths? Everyday, we create endless karma of action, speech, and thought. Some of this karma is wholesome, while others are unwholesome. They form two dominating and competing forces, much like the situation in a tug-of-war. If the force of the wholesome karma dominates, we will be reborn into one of the three

upper realms of celestial, human, or asura existence. If the force of the unwholesome karma predominates, we will be reborn in one of the three lower realms of animal, hungry ghost, or hell. Thus, the quality of karma has a decisive influence on the direction of our future lives. Therefore, how to cultivate wholesomeness and eliminate unwholesomeness is truly the critical task in our pursuit of happiness for the future.

I. What do Different Religions Claim as the Final Goal of Rebirth?

Almost all religions accept the idea of rebirth. What do they claim as the final goal of rebirth? 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. Even most folklore religions yearn for everlasting life. In contrast, Buddhism believes the ultimate goal of life is to attain the state of “no-birth.” What this means is that we should strive to become 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 “no-birth” can emancipate us from the suffering of existence. It is the ultimate

serene, everlasting joyous pure living!

III. Evidence of Rebirth

The many well-documented records by famous scholars in history can demonstrate the rebirth is an indisputable fact.

Wang Yangming, a famous Confucian scholar of the Ming Dynasty, once visited Jinshan (Golden Mountain) Temple 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 requested 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 the relic from his body is still kept inside. He had left word that this room was not to be disturbed. I hope you can understand why we absolutely cannot unseal the door.”

“Since the room has a door, it cannot just remain shut forever. Please kindly indulge me and let me go

inside to take a look.”

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 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 up on 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 went 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 (Golden Mountain) 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 a 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. There, 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 about 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 devoted 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 had once read. In the corner, there was a giant chest.

Shan-Ku Huang 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. He was dumbfounded when he realized that the chest was full of his essays and writings from each of the prior government examinations he had taken a few years earlier. 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.*

What the poem says is this: Although he 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, “In dreams, vivid are the six realms of existence. Upon awakening, empty is the universe, without substance.”

The Fifth Patriarch of the Chan School, Hong-ren, also had a well-known story regarding his rebirth. It was said that Hongren was an old gardener in his previous life. He had very high regard for the Fourth Patriarch, Tao Hsin, and wanted to become his disciple. Daoxin thought that he 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. He went by a creek and 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, or else I would not dare to ask further.”

The young lady saw that as it was getting dark and the poor old man needed a shelter for the night, 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 could you lie and say that you have no name? Come on, tell me what is your family name.”

“Buddha Nature is my family name, so I do not have a last name.”

Daoxin was very pleased that a young child could have said 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 the Chan School really blossomed because of him.

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 “walk away” from 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 Sheg-you. 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 suggested that they drown him in the river. The 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 the news of Tian Sanniu’s rebirth as the son of the Zhang family reached the Tian family. One time, 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 Assistant Director of Social Services of Taiwan, Mou Naihuang. 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 got together 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,” to signify the depth and extent of a relationship. Actually, there is a moving story of rebirth behind this proverb. Su Dongpo, in his book titled *The Legend of Monk Yuanze*, described a friendship between Master Yuanze and Scholar Li Yuan. Both of them had planned to travel to Emei Mountain together, but they could not agree which route to take. 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 wish 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 to 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. In 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:

*An ancient apparition sits atop the
boulder of the past, present,
and future lives,*

*Enjoying the scenery and not wanting to
debate.*

*I am happy a sentimental friend has
come to visit from afar.*

*This body is different, but the nature
will long remain.*

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

The young herder waved backed 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 the significance and veracity of rebirth, we should go a step further and explore how we can transcend rebirth. A true understanding of rebirth is only a method, process, and a means to the ultimate goal of how to transcend rebirth. Some people find the Buddhist tenet regarding rebirth and cause-and-effect superstitious and ludicrous. Actually, all of the Buddha’s teachings are nothing more than the marvelous remedy for liberating ourselves from the shackles of rebirth. Because

the ultimate purpose of Buddhism is to transcend rebirth, Buddhism is indeed the wise and credible religion that can shatter the wheel of rebirth.

If we want to transcend rebirth, we must first know the cause of rebirth. The cycle of rebirth exists because of the pull of karmic forces. As karmic forces vary in terms of whether they are wholesome or unwholesome, or whether they are heavy or mild, the karmic retributions also vary. It is written in a sutra, “Cutting down a tree without taking out its roots, the tree will grow once more. Severing our desires without eradicating the ‘roots,’ we will repeatedly experience the suffering of rebirth. Like making an arrow and striking oneself with it. Thus is the arrow of flesh; the arrow of desire hurts all beings.” The thirst and craving of our greed and desires are the arrow. This arrow causes us to float and sink in the sea of rebirth. How painful! We must apply the fire of diligence to incinerate the forest of desires. We must use the radiance of prajna-wisdom to pierce through the darkness of ignorance and unwholesome karma. We must wield the sword of wisdom to sever the chains of rebirth. These are the bases of our hopes and the direction of 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.

Understanding rebirth, transcending rebirth, the next step is to be unafraid of rebirth. Living amidst rebirth yet not defiled by rebirth, Unenlightened beings are led by the force of their karma into rebirth; sravakas and pratyeka-buddhas eagerly 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 Cihang aspired to return to this world to fulfill the same vow. In the *Annals of Pure Land Noble Practitioners*, 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. The Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama are 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 all sentient

beings be liberated from suffering, not to 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 can be compared to lotus blossoms that 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 not afflicted 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 Jataka tales of the Buddha to find that the Buddha had been reborn as a deity, an animal, a monk, and as royalty. In ceaseless cycles of rebirth, the Buddha diligently practices the bodhisattva path with the ten thousand methods of the six perfections (*paramitas*). The Buddha is always working to liberate all sentient beings and manifesting the way of the Buddha.

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 after passing away?”

“Oh! I will be reborn as a water buffalo in a nearby farm.”

His disciples were shocked and puzzled, so they 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” under the buffalo’s left front leg. You will then know that is me.”

His disciples were grief-stricken by his passing. After the funeral, they did discover a buffalo calf born in a farm nearby. They also discovered their master’s name on the buffalo. When they saw the buffalo, which was their previous master, 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 understood and liberated from rebirth.

Today, I have talked with you about the Buddhist perspectives on rebirth. My main goal and hope is that all of you would face life in the future with confidence and radiance, and believe in the indestructibility of life. Death is like the disintegration of a dilapidated house; we just have to move to another comfortable and sturdy house. Death is like the fraying of worn clothing; we just have to change into beautiful and new attire. In the beginningless swirl of life, all of us should work to soon complete the majestic temple within us; we should work to soon finish the magnificent Dharma robe within us. I wish all of you will transcend rebirth, be liberated from rebirth, and realize the life of wisdom and bodhi within the endless cycle of rebirth.