The Practical Ways of Good Action and Good Rebirth According to the Cycle of Life (Bhava-saṁsāra) in Buddhism

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Abstract

This article delves into the profound Buddhist doctrines of kamma (volitional action) and rebirth, exploring their intricate relationship within the overarching framework of bhava-saṃsāra, the cycle of existence. It begins by dissecting bhava-saṃsāra, highlighting its characteristics of impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anattā), and elucidating how it is perpetuated by ignorance (avijjā) and craving (taṇhā) through the lens of Dependent Origination (Paṭiccasamuppāda). The discussion clarifies common misconceptions, particularly regarding the notion of a permanent, transmigrating self, emphasizing the conditioned nature of consciousness and the five aggregates. The paper then meticulously examines the concept of kamma, underscoring the pivotal role of intention (cetanā) in shaping ethical actions and their multifaceted consequences across various realms of existence. It further explores the nuances of rebirth, including the conditioning factors for human birth and the impact of wholesome actions on the quality of future lives. Drawing upon traditional Pāli canonical insights and contemporary Theravāda interpretations, the article presents a theoretically informed model of ethical action. This model integrates the cultivation of wholesome intentions, engagement in virtuous physical, verbal, and mental actions, and the development of wisdom (paññā). The article argues that a deep understanding and diligent application of these principles not only facilitate beneficial rebirths but also yield significant practical benefits in the present life, including enhanced mental clarity, emotional resilience, increased compassion, and a profound sense of ethical agency. This article underscores how these teachings provide a comprehensive framework for navigating existence and progressing towards the ultimate liberation of nibbāna.

Keywords: Good Action; Good Rebirth; Cycle of Life (Bhava-saṁsāra); Theravada Buddhism; Ethical Action

Introduction

The concept of Bhava-saṃsāra, the cycle of life, is a central tenet in Theravāda Buddhism, characterizing existence as a continuous interplay of blissful and suffering experiences. This cyclical existence is fundamentally understood to be unsatisfactory, impermanent, and driven by the perpetual craving for pleasure and aversion to pain (Harvey, 2000). The Buddha's doctrine of dependent co-arising (Paṭiccasamuppāda) offers a critical framework for comprehending bhava-saṃsāra, distinguishing it from erroneous notions of a permanent, unchanging self that transmigrates (Hirakawa, 1990). Beyond its profound philosophical implications, a nuanced understanding of bhava-saṃsāra provides practical clarity regarding the nature of reality, empowering individuals to consciously shape their future through ethical action.

A prevalent misconception, exemplified by the monk Sāti in the Mahā-taṇhā-saṅkhaya Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya, erroneously posits consciousness as an enduring self that persists through successive rebirths (Ña ̄ṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995, p. 350). However, the Buddha's teachings elucidate bhava-saṃsāra as a continuous process influenced by interconnected factors, rather than the transmigration of a fixed entity. The five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—continually interact and condition each other, giving rise to experiences and perpetuating existence through rebirth. This emphasis on the impermanence and conditioned nature of all phenomena, including consciousness, effectively refutes the notion of an unchanging self. Such comprehension offers a liberating perspective, fostering inner peace by reducing attachment to transient phenomena and promoting a broader understanding of interconnectedness (Hopkins, 2015).

Within Theravāda Buddhism, the ultimate spiritual aspiration is the transcendence of bhava-saṃsāra and the attainment of nibbāna, a state defined by the complete cessation of suffering and rebirth (Harvey, 2000). This liberation is achieved through the diligent cultivation of wisdom (paññā), morality (sīla), and meditation (samādhi), which collectively constitute the Noble Eightfold Path (Hirakawa, 1990). Adhering to this path enables practitioners to break free from the cycle, realizing lasting peace and freedom (Mahatthanadull, 2019). This article contributes to the academic discourse by analyzing these core concepts, examining their contemporary practical applications, and proposing a

theoretically informed model for ethical action, thereby highlighting the tangible benefits of such a path for personal and spiritual well-being.

The Cycle of Life (Bhava-saṃsāra) in Theravāda Buddhism

The Pāli term "bhava (life)" is a masculine noun derived from the root √bhū, which means "to be" or "to become." In various compounds, "bhava" is used to denote different heresies, such as "bhava-āsava" (outflow of becoming), (DN II 81, Walshe 1995) (SN V 189; Bhikkhu Bhodhi 2002), "bhava-ogha" (flood of becoming), (DN III 230; S V 59.), "bhava-yoga" (bond of becoming), (DN III 230 Maurice Walshe 1995); SN V 59; Bhikkhu Bhodhi 2002), "bhava-saṃyojana" (fetter of becoming), (MN I 477; Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, and Bhikkhu Bodhi 2005) (S III 161; Bhikkhu Bodhi 2002), and "bhava-rāga-anusaya" (the latent tendency of desire of becoming), (DN III 255; Walshe 1995), (AN IV 7; Bhikkhu Bhodhi 2012), among others. Additionally, in the Mahā Govinda Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, "bhava" is understood as a greeting used in the expression, "May the Venerable Jotipāla be well. (DN II 231 Maurice Walshe 1995). Furthermore, in the context of the four foremost things: "rūpaggaṃ" (the maximum of the form), "vedanaggaṃ" (the maximum of feelings), "saññaggaṃ" (the ultimate of perceptions), and "bhavaggaṃ" (the top of becoming): the term "bhava" is used to refer to the original state, namely "Bhavana". (AN II 79; Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2012).

The term "bhava" also emerges as one of the conditioning factors in dependent co-arising, as stated in the Pāli Canon: "Because of the clinging condition, bhava exists; because of the bhava-condition, birth exists." (SN II 1; Bodhi Bhikkhu, 2000). However, in the Pāli canon, "bhava" is characterised differently in various contexts. In the Suttas, the conditioning factor of "bhava" is classified into three categories: "sensual bhava," "form-bhava," and "formless bhava." This is referred to as "bhava". (SN II 3; Bodhi Bhikkhu, 2000). In contrast, the Abhidhamma presents two categories of "bhava": "action-bhava" and "rebirth-bhava.". Based on this interpretation, the Paṭisaṁbhidāmagga extensively explains the doctrine of dependent co-arising in the context of rebirth across three periods: past, present, and future.

The Bhava Sutta of the Aṅguttaranikāya further elaborates on "bhava," stating that when kamma, consciousness, and craving are conditioned, a being's consciousness becomes present in the triple elements of inferior, middle, and superior. (AN I 223; Bhikkhu Bodhi 2012). According to the Aṅguttaranikāya's

commentary, these elements correspond respectively to the sensory element (kāma-dhātu), form element (rūpa-dhātu), and formless element (arūpa-dhātu). (AN-a II 334; Bhikkhu Bodhi 2012). This leads to further becoming or rebirth in the future (punabbhavābhinibbatti), thus signifying "bhava" (AN I 223–24; Bhikkhu Bodhi 2012).

The concept of bhava-saṃsāra, the continuous journey of birth, death, and rebirth across various realms of existence, serves as a foundational doctrine within Buddhism (Hirakawa, 1990). Derived from Pāli, the term bhava-saṃsāra combines 'bhava' (existence or becoming) and 'saṃsāra' (wandering or flowing through) (Harvey, 2000). This cycle is fundamentally characterized by the Three Marks of Existence: impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anattā) (Hopkins, 2015). Within this framework, existence is understood as an unsatisfactory and impermanent state, perpetually driven by the craving for pleasure and the aversion to pain. Understanding this cyclical nature provides a profound perspective on the transient nature of all phenomena, fostering a sense of detachment that can alleviate suffering and promote equanimity.

The perpetuation of bhava-saṃsāra is primarily driven by ignorance (avijjā) and craving (taṇhā), which lead to the accumulation of kamma (volitional action) and its resultant effects (Harvey, 2000). The Buddha's doctrine of Dependent Origination (Paṭiccasamuppāda) intricately links these factors, elucidating the causal chain of phenomena that sustains the cycle of existence (Hirakawa, 1990). This doctrine explains how each factor conditions the next, from ignorance to suffering, thereby illuminating the mechanisms through which beings are reborn into different states of being (Hopkins, 2015). Grasping Dependent Origination offers the practical benefit of identifying the root causes of suffering, enabling individuals to intervene in the causal chain and cultivate wholesome conditions.

A critical aspect of understanding bhava-saṃsāra through the lens of Dependent Origination is the avoidance of misconceptions related to the rebirth of a permanent, unchanging self. A common misunderstanding, exemplified by the monk Sāti in the Mahā-taṇhā-saṅkhaya Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya, posits that consciousness represents an enduring self that transmigrates through successive rebirths (Bhikkhu Ñānamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995, p. 350). However, the Buddha's teachings clarify that bhava-saṃsāra is a continuous process influenced by interconnected factors, not the transmigration of a fixed

entity. The five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness) continually interact and condition each other, giving rise to experiences and perpetuating existence through rebirth. The emphasis on impermanence and the conditioned nature of all phenomena, including consciousness, refutes the notion of an unchanging self and is crucial for comprehending the true essence of the Buddha's teachings on self and rebirth. This non-self understanding provides the profound benefit of liberating one from ego-centric attachments, fostering compassion, and a broader perspective on interconnectedness.

In Theravāda Buddhism, the ultimate spiritual aspiration is to transcend bhava-saṃsāra and attain liberation (nibbāna), a state characterized by the complete cessation of suffering and rebirth (Harvey, 2000). This liberation is achieved through the diligent cultivation of wisdom (paññā), morality (sīla), and meditation (samādhi), which collectively constitute the Noble Eightfold Path (Hirakawa, 1990). By understanding the dynamics of bhava-saṃsāra and adhering to this path, practitioners can break free from the cycle and realize lasting peace and freedom (Mahatthanadull, 2019). The journey towards nibbāna itself offers immense benefits, including increased mental clarity, emotional resilience, and a profound sense of inner tranquility.

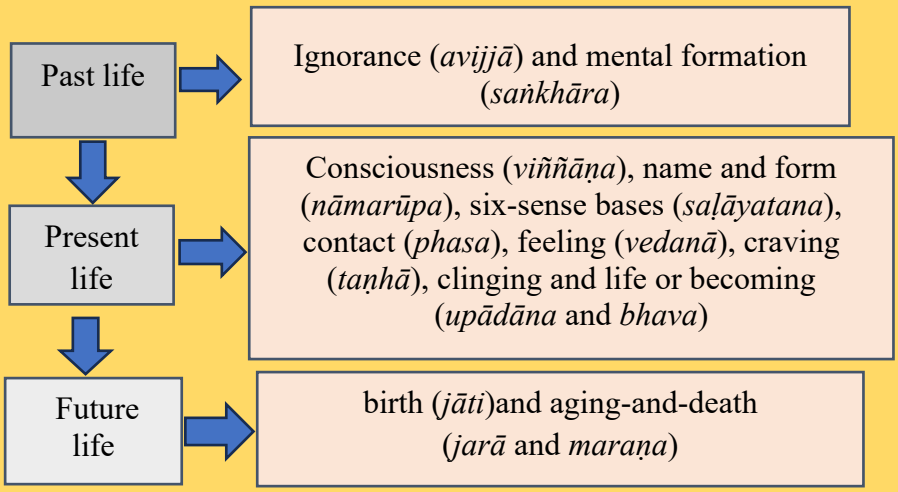

Figure 1: The Cycle of Life (Bhava-saṃsāra) in Theravāda Buddhism

The Concept of Action (Kamma)

The doctrine of kamma (Pāli; Skt. karma) is not merely a metaphysical abstraction but serves as a comprehensive ethical-psychological framework in Buddhist thought. At its core, kamma denotes intentional or volitional actions, whether performed through bodily deeds (kāya), speech (vācā), or mental formations (citta), that are motivated by cetanā (intention) and inevitably bear corresponding results (vipāka) in present or future existences (Devdas, 2008; Gombrich, 2009). Within early Buddhist texts, the emphasis on cetanā as the operative force of kamma underscores that not all actions generate equal moral weight; rather, it is the intentional quality behind an act that determines its karmic efficacy. As Bhikkhu Bodhi (2012) observes in his translation of the Nibbedhika Sutta, when the Buddha declares "cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi" ("Volition, O monks, I declare to be kamma"), he is precisely identifying mental intention as the nexus between ethical choice and its consequent outcome. This articulation moves away from any notion of fatalism, instead situating moral responsibility squarely within the agent's conscious deliberations (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2013).

Importantly, early canonical and Abhidhamma-era exegeses elaborate on how kamma functions in practice. According to the Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta (MN 38), volitions rooted in greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), or delusion (moha) give rise to unwholesome kamma, whereas those arising from non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion generate wholesome kamma, thereby shaping the continuum of consciousness through successive rebirths (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995). This taxonomy, wholesome (kusala), unwholesome (akusala), and indeterminate (avyākata), is systematically analyzed in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, where cetanā is categorized among the universal mental factors (cetasika) that condition the arising of ethical or unethical consciousness (Frauwallner, 1953; Collins, 2013). By detailing how different volitional impulses produce distinct karmic "charges," the Abhidhamma underscores both the continuity of kamma and its potential for modification: through mindfulness (sati), ethical conduct (sīla), and wisdom (paññā), one can attenuate unwholesome volitions and cultivate wholesome ones, thereby re-orienting one's entire karmic trajectory (Rhys Davids & Stede, 1921; Wallace, 2006).

Contemporary scholarship further highlights that the liberative thrust of the kamma doctrine is inseparable from its ethical dimension. Keown (2013) argues

that, by emphasizing intentionality over predestination, Buddhism equips practitioners with an enduring sense of agency—a stance that resonates with modern conceptions of moral responsibility. Likewise, Gombrich (2009) contends that the dynamic model of kamma challenges static, cyclical views of existence by foregrounding the transformative potential of conscious choice. In Theravāda monastic manuals such as the Visuddhimagga, Buddhaghosa (5th century CE) extends this framework by detailing how purification (visuddhi) of the mind through meditative insight dismantles residual karmic formations, ultimately culminating in nibbāna—the cessation of all karmic impulses (Buddhaghosa, 2020). Thus, the entire edifice of Buddhist soteriology is predicated upon understanding, refining, and, ultimately, transcending the domain of kamma through disciplined ethical practice and penetrating wisdom.

The Buddha's teachings on kamma are comprehensively articulated in the Anguttara Nikāya, where he states, "It is intention (cetanā), O bhikkhus, that I call kamma; having intended, one acts by body, speech, and mind" (Devdas, 2008). This statement underscores the pivotal role of intention in determining the ethical quality and resultant effects of an action (Helm, 2003). While physical and verbal actions are observable, it is the underlying mental state and intention that truly define an action as wholesome (kusala) or unwholesome (akusala) (Hopkins, 2015). The practical benefit here is a heightened awareness of one's inner motivations, leading to greater self-control and moral integrity.

Kamma is categorized into various types based on its ethical nature and the time of its ripening. Wholesome kamma (kusala kamma) arises from roots of non-greed (alobha), non-hatred (adosa), and non-delusion (amoha), leading to beneficial outcomes and favorable rebirths (Harvey, 2000). Conversely, unwholesome kamma (akusala kamma) stems from greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha), resulting in undesirable consequences and unfavorable rebirths (Hopkins, 2015). The ripening of kamma can manifest in the present life, the next life, or in subsequent lives, illustrating the long-term impact of one's actions (Schmithausen, 1986). This framework provides a clear ethical compass, enabling individuals to make choices that cultivate positive circumstances and avoid future suffering.

Understanding kamma is crucial for ethical living and spiritual development in Theravāda Buddhism. By cultivating wholesome intentions and actions, practitioners can mitigate suffering, foster positive states of mind, and

ultimately progress towards liberation from the cycle of bhava-saṃsāra (Mahatthanadull, 2019). The doctrine of kamma thus provides a robust framework for moral accountability and empowers individuals to shape their destinies through conscious and ethical choices (Harvey, 2000). The immediate benefits include a sense of purpose, reduced remorse, and improved relationships, contributing to a more harmonious and fulfilling life.

The Concept of Rebirth

Rebirth is a pivotal concept in Theravāda Buddhism, carrying significant implications for understanding existence and ethical conduct. The attainment of a human rebirth is understood as a direct consequence of meritorious deeds (kusala kamma) performed in previous lives (Hopkins, 2015). These virtuous actions, particularly those like offerings and moral observance, are categorized as kāmāvacara-kusala, or wholesome actions within the sensual realm. These kāmāvacara-kusala are further classified into eight categories (Devdas, 2008).

The volitional aspect (cetanā) of kāmāvacara-kusala generates nine categories of resultant consciousness (vipāka citta) at the moment of conception (paṭisandhi). These include one upekkhā-santīraṇa citta, which is devoid of non-greed (alobha), non-hatred (adosa), and non-delusion (amoha), and eight mahā-vipāka cittas. Collectively, these nine types of citta form the paṭisandhi-citta, which is responsible for conditioning human rebirth (Helm, 2003).

It is noteworthy that individuals reborn with an upekkhā-santīraṇa citta may manifest physical defects such as blindness or deafness. Although the upekkhā-santīraṇa citta originates from meritorious deeds associated with mahākusala citta, it is produced by relatively weak kamma. Consequently, the resultant paṭisandhi-citta lacks vitality, leading to inherent defects from the very inception of rebirth (Devdas, 2008). This understanding provides a compassionate lens through which to view suffering, recognizing its karmic roots and inspiring greater effort in generating wholesome kamma.

Furthermore, the quality of rebirth is not solely determined by the presence of merit but also by the strength and purity of the underlying intentions. For instance, a mahākusala citta accompanied by wisdom (paññā) can lead to a rebirth with superior intellectual faculties and a greater capacity for spiritual insight. Conversely, a mahākusala citta lacking wisdom may result in a rebirth in an affluent but intellectually limited state, highlighting the nuanced impact of kamma on one's future existence (Hopkins, 2015). The benefit here is the

emphasis on holistic spiritual development, encouraging not just good deeds but also the cultivation of wisdom for more profound and lasting positive outcomes.

Theravāda Buddhism also identifies four modes of rebirth (gati):

1. Egg-born (aṇḍaja): Beings born from eggs, such as birds and reptiles.
2. Womb-born (jalābuja): Beings born from a womb, such as humans and many mammals.
3. Moisture-born (saṃsedaja): Beings born from moisture and decay, such as certain insects.
4. Spontaneously born (opapātika): Beings that appear spontaneously, such as devas (deities) and inhabitants of hell realms, without visible parents or an embryonic stage.

These modes illustrate the diverse forms that existence can take within bhava-saṃsāra, all conditioned by past kamma (Harvey, 2000). The principle of kamma-niyāma, the law of kamma, asserts that every volitional action inevitably leads to a corresponding result, thereby ensuring moral accountability across lifetimes (Hopkins, 2015). This intricate relationship between action and consequence underscores the importance of ethical conduct as a means to navigate the cycle of rebirth and progress towards liberation. The practical benefit of this perspective is the cultivation of deep personal responsibility and foresight in one's actions.

The Abhidhamma classification of wholesome (kusala) consciousness distinguishes between those rooted in two factors (alobha [non-greed] and adosa [non-hatred], termed dvihetuka [two-rooted]) and those rooted in all three factors (alobha, adosa, and amoha [non-delusion]), termed tihetuka [three-rooted] (Gunaratana, 1988). When a wholesome act is not encircled by any unwholesome factors (akusala), it is surrounded by wholesome factors on both sides and is designated as tihetuka-ukkaṭṭha-kusala (three-rooted superior wholesome) (Buddhaghosa, 2010). Conversely, when wholesome consciousness associated with knowledge (ñāṇa-vippayutta kusala) arises without delusion, it is classified as dvihetuka because it lacks the root of amoha (Gunaratana, 1988). In contrast, wholesome consciousness that includes amoha is tihetuka or ñāṇa-sampayutta kusala, since it encompasses all three roots (alobha, adosa, amoha)—noting that amoha cannot occur independently of the first two roots (Buddhaghosa, 2020). Each of these categories of kusala conditions gives rise to a corresponding

paṭisandhi-citta (rebirth-linking consciousness) at the moment of human rebirth: tihetuka consciousness (with knowledge) produces tihetuka-paṭisandhi, while dvihetuka consciousness (without knowledge) yields dvihetuka-paṭisandhi (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2012). This systematic correspondence between the moral quality of an action and its resultant consciousness is articulated in the doctrine of kamma-niyāma, whereby the outcome mirrors the ethical nature of the volitional act (Harvey, 2000).

Moreover, the qualitative dimension of the kusala kamma that precipitates human rebirth directly influences whether the individual enters the world imbued with wisdom (paññā) or without it. Consequently, although multiple beings may share the condition of human rebirth, their paṭisandhi-citta differ according to the presence or absence of knowledge (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995). Some individuals, regardless of possessing ñāṇa (knowledge) or not, experience somanassa (pleasant feeling) upon rebirth, which can manifest as a consistently joyful temperament (Collins, 2013). Others, whose rebirth is characterized by upekkhā (equanimous but neutral feeling), often display a more severe or reserved demeanor (Gethin, 1998). These divergent affective qualities at the moment of rebirth, coupled with variations in knowledge-status, underscore the heterogeneity of human rebirth experiences (Buddhaghosa, 2020).

In Abhidhamma, four primary modes of human rebirth (jalābīja being the most common) are recognized, all of which presuppose the conjunction of a viable ovum and sperm in the mother's uterus (jalābīja paṭisandhi) (Gombrich, 2009; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995). In contemporary reproductive science, additional methods, such as in vitro fertilization and cloning, allow fertilization to occur outside the maternal body, producing a kalāla (zygote) via the deliberate union of ovum and sperm in a laboratory setting (Wilmut et al., 1997). From an Abhidhamma perspective, however, human rebirth remains possible only under "suitable circumstances" (yathābhūtaṃ), wherein the disembodied "being-to-be-reborn" (gantabbā jīva) instantaneously enters the newly formed zygote, regardless of whether fertilization is natural or artificial (Gethin, 1998; Buddhaghosa, 2020). Just as travelers need no tickets if a seat becomes available, those beings whose final death coincides with appropriate conditions for human rebirth spontaneously assume human form, reflecting the continuity of kamma beyond spatial or temporal distance (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2012).

When considering the Theravāda tradition, it is evident that the Buddha articulated his teachings (dhammas) over a forty-five-year period following his attainment of enlightenment. During this time, he tailored his instruction to the diverse dispositions of his audience, adapting both content and presentation to individual needs. On specific occasions, he highlighted the excellence of his dhammas according to a tripartite schema, at the outset (ādikalyāṇa), in the middle (majjhekalyāṇa), and at the culmination (pariyosaṇakalyāṇa)—thereby employing a systematic pedagogical method that emphasizes the grandeur of the teaching at each stage (DN I.87; Walshe, 1995). This approach underscores not only the adaptability of the Buddha's instruction but also the methodological sophistication of early Buddhist pedagogy.

Different Realms of Existence (Gati)

The concept of gati, or realms of existence, is integral to the understanding of bhava-saṃsāra in Theravāda Buddhism. These realms represent the diverse destinations to which beings are reborn, directly conditioned by their accumulated kamma (Hirakawa, 1990). The Buddhist cosmology typically outlines 31 planes of existence, broadly categorized into three main spheres: the Sensual Realm (Kāmaloka), the Fine-Material Realm (Rūpaloka), and the Immaterial Realm (Arūpaloka).

1. The Sensual Realm (Kāmaloka): This realm comprises 11 planes, characterized by the presence of sensual desires and experiences. It includes:

- Four Lower Realms (States of Woe): These are realms of suffering, resulting from unwholesome kamma (e.g., severe hatred, greed, delusion). Understanding these realms serves as a powerful deterrent to unwholesome actions, motivating ethical behavior to avoid such dire consequences.
- Hell Realms (Niraya): Intense and prolonged suffering.
- Animal Realm (Tiracchānayoni): Rebirth as animals, characterized by instinctual living and lack of spiritual opportunity.
- Ghost Realm (Pettivisaya): Beings afflicted by hunger and thirst, often bound to their past attachments.

- Asura Realm (Asurakāya): Demigods or titans, often characterized by jealousy, envy, and conflict.
- Seven Happy Sensual Realms: These are realms of pleasure and enjoyment, resulting from wholesome kamma (e.g., generosity, morality). This inspires the cultivation of virtues for happier present and future existences.
- Human Realm (Manussaloka): The most conducive realm for spiritual development, offering a balance of pleasure and suffering, and the opportunity to generate wholesome kamma and attain nibbāna. The emphasis on the preciousness of human birth encourages diligent practice and the full utilization of this unique opportunity for liberation.
- Six Deva (Heavenly) Realms: Realms of increasing bliss and longevity, inhabited by various classes of deities. These realms offer temporary happiness but are still subject to impermanence and the cycle of rebirth. While desirable, their temporary nature underscores the ultimate goal of transcending all realms.

2. The Fine-Material Realm (Rūpaloka): Consisting of 16 planes, this realm is attained through the practice of rūpa-jhānas (meditative absorptions focused on fine material objects). Beings in these realms have subtle bodies and are free from gross sensual desires, experiencing refined states of bliss. However, they are not yet liberated from all attachments. The benefit here is the motivation to develop deep meditative states, leading to profound inner peace and mental purification even in this life.

3. The Immaterial Realm (Arūpaloka): Comprising 4 planes, this is the highest realm within saṃsāra, attained through the practice of arūpa-jhānas (meditative absorptions focused on immaterial objects). Beings here exist purely as consciousness, without any physical form, experiencing extremely subtle and prolonged states of tranquility. Despite their elevated state, they remain within the cycle of saṃsāra as they have not eradicated all defilements. This further reinforces the understanding that true liberation transcends even the most sublime conditioned states, directing practitioners towards the ultimate goal of nibbāna.

The existence in these realms is impermanent; even the longest-lived deities eventually pass away and are reborn according to their remaining kamma

(Harvey, 2000). This cyclical nature underscores the Buddhist teaching that true liberation lies not in attaining a higher realm within saṃsāra, but in transcending saṃsāra altogether through the realization of nibbāna. The understanding of these realms reinforces the urgency of cultivating wholesome kamma and pursuing the path to liberation, as even the most blissful existences are ultimately conditioned and subject to cessation. This awareness brings the practical benefit of reducing attachment to worldly pleasures and focusing energy on sustainable spiritual development.

Practical Benefits of Understanding Kamma and Rebirth

This section presents the key findings derived from the documentary analysis and in-depth interviews, focusing on the practical benefits observed from understanding and applying the principles of kamma and rebirth. The insights reveal how these core Buddhist concepts contribute to individuals' ethical living, mental well-being, and spiritual progress.

1. Empowering Ethical Agency and Moral Responsibility:

Both textual analysis and informant interviews consistently highlighted that understanding kamma fosters a profound sense of personal responsibility and ethical agency. Practitioners realize that past actions influence their present circumstances, and current volitions shape their future. As one monastic scholar explained, "Without intention, there is no kamma that leads to rebirth. It is the mind's volition that truly creates the seed for future existence." This insight reduces blame and resentment, cultivating proactive ethical choices. The practical benefit is a more conscious and deliberate approach to moral conduct, leading to a reduction in unwholesome actions and an increase in wholesome ones, which positively impacts both personal integrity and interpersonal relationships.

2. Cultivating Inner Peace and Resilience:

The understanding of impermanence (anicca) and non-self (anattā), inherent in the cycle of rebirth (bhava-saṃsāra) and karma, helps practitioners navigate life's challenges with greater equanimity. Recognizing that all phenomena are conditioned and transient reduces attachment to positive experiences and aversion to negative ones. "When you know things are impermanent, you suffer less when they change," an interviewee shared. This perspective fosters resilience in the face of adversity, as individuals learn to accept the ebb and flow of life without being overwhelmed by suffering. The

practical benefit is enhanced mental fortitude, reduced anxiety, and a deeper sense of inner peace that is less dependent on external circumstances.

3. Motivation for Wholesome Actions and Spiritual Development:

The belief in rebirth, particularly the aspiration for a "good rebirth" (e.g., in the human realm with conducive conditions for practice), serves as a powerful motivator for cultivating wholesome kamma. Informants frequently cited this as a reason for engaging in practices like generosity (dāna), moral conduct (sīla), and meditation (bhāvanā). "We make merit so we can continue on the path, to be reborn in a place where we have the opportunity to hear the Dhamma again," noted a lay devotee. This motivation translates into tangible benefits: increased altruism, stronger community bonds through collective meritorious acts, and consistent effort in meditation and mindfulness. Beyond mere self-interest, this also reinforces the understanding that one's positive actions benefit not only oneself but also others.

4. Promoting Compassion and Reduced Harm:

A deeper understanding of kamma and the interconnectedness of all beings within bhava-saṃsāra naturally leads to the cultivation of compassion (karuṇā) and loving-kindness (mettā). Recognizing that all beings are subject to the same cycle of suffering and rebirth, and that unwholesome actions lead to suffering for both the perpetrator and the recipient, fosters a strong aversion to causing harm. "When you see how kamma works, you become very careful not to hurt anyone, even in thought," an experienced meditator commented. The practical benefit is a reduction in conflict, a greater capacity for empathy, and the promotion of peaceful coexistence in society.

Model of Ethical Action Leading to Beneficial Rebirth within Bhava-saṃsāra

This article extends the foundational understandings of kamma, rebirth, and the multiple realms of existence by proposing a theoretically informed model designed to cultivate ethical action that facilitates beneficial rebirths within the framework of bhava-saṃsāra. By integrating classical Theravāda teachings with practical applications, this model emphasizes the volitional nature of kamma and its significant implications for future existences.

The model is predicated on the notion that ethically wholesome actions, propelled by pure intentions, are the primary determinants of favorable rebirths.

It is structured around three interconnected pillars: (1) the cultivation of wholesome intentions (cetanā), (2) the engagement in wholesome actions (encompassing physical, verbal, and mental practices), and (3) the development of understanding and wisdom (paññā).

1. Cultivation of Wholesome Intentions (Cetanā)

The first pillar of the model involves both the eradication of unwholesome mental roots and the nurturing of ethical intentions:

- Eliminating Unwholesome Roots: Practitioners are encouraged to actively diminish the unwholesome roots of greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha). This process of mental purification not only enhances clarity and emotional stability but also serves as a safeguard against generating negative kamma that precipitates suffering (Harvey, 2000).
- Fostering Wholesome Roots: Concurrently, students are urged to cultivate the wholesome opposites, non-greed (alobha), non-hatred (adosa), and non-delusion (amoha), which manifest as virtues such as generosity, loving-kindness (mettā), compassion (karuṇā), appreciative joy (muditā), equanimity (upekkhā), and wisdom (paññā) (Hopkins, 2015). The practical benefits include the development of positive character traits, harmonious relationships, and an enduring inner contentment that naturally gives rise to actions generating favorable kamma.

2. Engagement in Wholesome Actions

The second pillar underscores the importance of actualizing ethical principles through concrete actions:

- Moral Conduct (Sīla): For lay practitioners, moral conduct is typically operationalized through adherence to the Five Precepts, abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxication. For monastics, a more extensive code governs behavior. This ethical foundation is critical in preventing the accrual of unwholesome kamma, fostering trustworthiness, and promoting a clear conscience (Harvey, 2000).

- Generosity (Dāna): The practice of giving, extending material resources, time, or knowledge, without attachment to the act, is recognized as a powerful form of wholesome action. Generosity not only curtails craving but also instills a benevolent spirit, thereby generating positive conditions in both the current life and future existences (Hopkins, 2015).
- Meditation (Bhāvanā): Meditation practices, including tranquility meditation (samatha) for developing concentration and mental stability, and insight meditation (vipassanā) for cultivating direct understanding of impermanence, suffering, and non-self, are central to this model. Although meditation ultimately aims toward the attainment of nibbāna (liberation), its practice concurrently produces wholesome kamma, setting the stage for rebirth in more favorable realms (Hirakawa, 1990).
- Translation of Ethical Intentions into Daily Life: Beyond individual practices, the articulation of ethical intentions through right speech, right action, and right livelihood, as components of the Noble Eightfold Path, ensures that one's internal dispositions are coherently manifested in everyday conduct. This comprehensive approach yields benefits such as improved interpersonal communication, stronger social bonds, and ethical financial practices (Harvey, 2000).

3. Development of Understanding and Wisdom (Paññā)

The third pillar underscores the critical role of cognitive and experiential insight:

- Comprehension of Kamma and Rebirth: A nuanced understanding of how kamma functions to condition rebirth empowers practitioners to assume personal responsibility for their existential outcomes. This awareness engenders a sense of empowerment and self-reliance, marking the first step toward influencing one's destiny (Hopkins, 2015).
- Insight into the Three Marks of Existence: Direct experiential insight into impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anattā) is essential for weakening the bonds of craving and

attachment, the very forces that perpetuate the cycle of bhava-saṃsāra. Such understanding promotes liberation from mental suffering and supports sustained inner freedom (Harvey, 2000).

- Adherence to the Noble Eightfold Path: Diligent study and practice of the Noble Eightfold Path provide a structured methodology for spiritual development. This all-encompassing framework ensures that practitioners' efforts are effectively directed toward continuous self-purification and eventual liberation (nibbāna) (Hirakawa, 1990).

In conclusion, the sustained practice of these principles is argued to lead to the accumulation of robust wholesome kamma, which in turn conditions beneficial rebirths characterized by favorable life circumstances and enhanced opportunities for spiritual growth. However, the ultimate objective is not limited to achieving a beneficial rebirth; rather, it is the progressive purification of the mind that culminates in the cessation of kamma and the eventual end of bhava-saṃsāra. This integrated approach thus contributes not only to a better future existence but also to a profound transformation of present life, marked by increased peace, compassion, and wisdom.

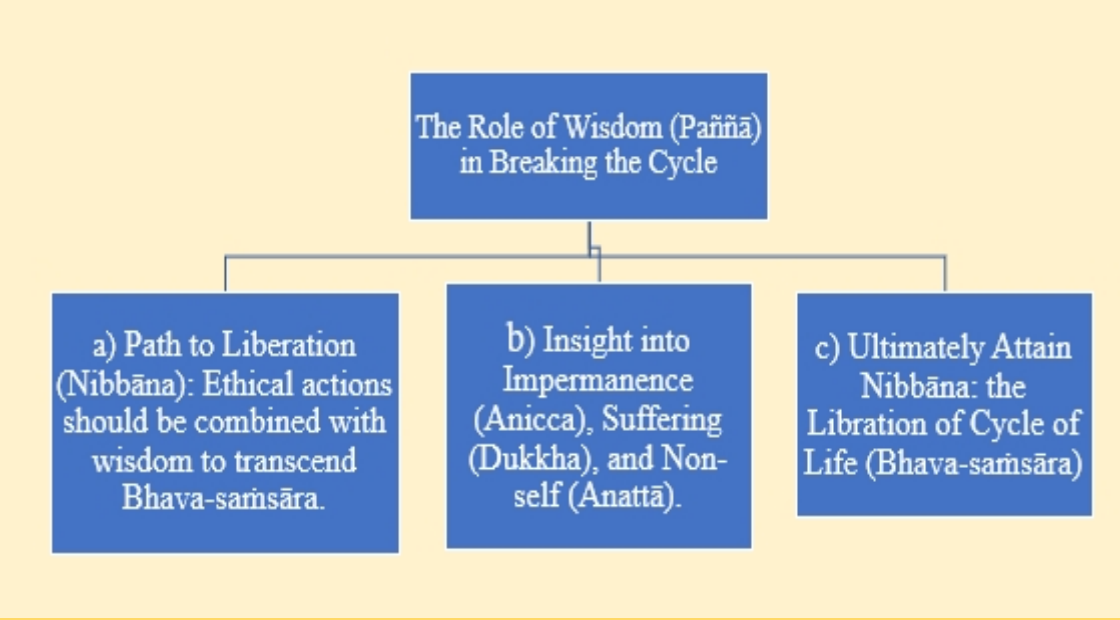

Figure 2: Theoretically Informed Model of Ethical Action Leading to Good Rebirth within Bhava-saṁsāra

Conclusion

This article has elucidated the doctrinal foundations of kamma and rebirth within the framework of bhava-saṃsāra in Theravāda Buddhism, evaluated contemporary ethical practices rooted in this understanding, and proposed a pragmatic model for cultivating conditions conducive to beneficial rebirth. Commencing with bhava-saṃsāra as the impermanent, ultimately unsatisfactory cycle perpetuated by ignorance (avijjā) and craving (taṇhā), we emphasized the pivotal role of Dependent Origination (Paṭiccasamuppāda) in deconstructing the illusion of a permanent self (attā). Central to our analysis was establishing intention (cetanā) as the defining criterion of kamma, determining the moral valence of actions, wholesome (kusala) or unwholesome (akusala), whose consequences (vipāka) mature across lifetimes.

The mechanisms linking ethical action to rebirth were examined, detailing how meritorious deeds condition human existence, the function of rebirth-linking consciousness (paṭisandhi-citta), and the critical influence of wisdom (paññā) on rebirth quality. Exploration of the four modes of rebirth and the principle of kamma-niyāma underscored both the inescapable moral accountability inherent in kamma and the diverse realms of existence (gati) it conditions, while noting the inherent impermanence and unsatisfactoriness even of heavenly attainments. Contemporary Theravāda practice demonstrates a sustained engagement with moral conduct (sīla), generosity (dāna), and meditation (bhāvanā), motivated by conviction in kamma and the aspiration for favourable rebirths. These practices yield significant proximate benefits, enhanced mental clarity, emotional resilience, increased compassion, and strengthened ethical agency, alongside their long-term karmic fruits.

The integrated model proposed synthesizes core teachings into a practical framework for practitioners, cultivating wholesome intentions, diligently practicing ethical conduct and generosity, maintaining regular meditation, and deepening wisdom regarding kamma, rebirth, and the Three Marks of Existence (tilakkhaṇa). This framework serves a dual purpose: it actively conditions more favourable future rebirths, thereby creating optimal conditions for spiritual progress, and fosters a more purposeful, peaceful, and ethically grounded present life by nurturing virtuous habits and a liberated mindset. While the aspiration for a “good rebirth” provides potent motivation for ethical living, the ultimate soteriological goal remains the purification of mind and the cessation (nirodha)

of all kamma through the attainment of Nibbāna, liberating beings entirely from bhava-saṃsāra. This study clarifies the enduring relevance of classical Buddhist doctrines in enriching contemporary ethical life, offering a robust framework for navigating existence and progressing towards ultimate freedom. Future research could fruitfully explore cross-cultural interpretations of ethical causality and rebirth or empirically investigate the psychological and behavioural impacts of adopting this kamma-based ethical model.

Abbreviations

AN	Aṅguttaranikāya
DN	Dīghanikāya
MN	Majjhimanikaya
SN	Saṁyuttanikāya

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