
IS REBIRTH IMMEDIATE?

(By Bhikkhu Dhammānanda)



In Buddhism there is a bit of a quarrel amongst different schools in regards to the question of rebirth. The question being as to whether there is a gap between one life and the one to follow, or not. So here I want to give some food for thought, which hopefully will at least for the reader of this small essay clear up the problem.

Let's take the case of Miss Pom. An old lady, which I hope to create in the imagination of you, my dear reader.

Miss Pom ever was a lady firmly established in this life, close to never did she think of religion or the meaning of life. Now she is old, her husband gone years ago. Lonely

she lives in her little apartment. Day in and day out, whatever happens in her life is mostly the same. From 8 to 10 in the morning she turns on the tv, swapping between one talk show and another.

11 o'clock usually the nurse will come, bringing her food. But sometimes she does not come, because Miss Pom can easily also cook some food from the fridge in the microwave. On Fridays she always hopes that tomorrow her grandson will come. Sometimes he comes, sometimes he doesn't. On Sundays she becomes usually a bit nervous, as on Tuesday every two weeks she has to go to the doctor and she hopes, that he does not tell her of another disease. For many years these things hardly have changed. Nothing new to pay attention to. And that is comforting, because new things are usually very confusing and distressful.

As usual at 9 o'clock she goes to bed. Rarely can she sleep peacefully through the night. Most nights she awakes various times. But today, at midnight she suddenly feels more uncomfortable than usual. Her heart fills with a stinging pain. She wants to speak, but nobody will hear her anyway. She struggles, until she loses consciousness.

In the morning she does not remember these things from last night. Her memory has grown very weak over the past years. So she goes on with her usual routines. For a long time she rarely really paid much attention to what she does, it's all just for getting through the day. But one day she notices something strange. Her little apartment

suddenly starts feeling quite different. And becoming more aware, she all of a sudden sees people in her room, which she is sure to have never seen before. They don't even notice her and move about as if the flat were their own. And in a shock it dawns on her..."Hhhh....I'm dead"...."I'm dead"... And, letting go of her grip on that life, her mind becomes clear. And seeking for some meaning in the past, memory fragments arise in her mind of "When my son was born, how selfless, how self sacrificing I have been...How sacred and meaningful it all was...I wish I could do it once more, and even better than before." And this mind, filled with such inclinations, will easily become attracted to an ovum in a woman's womb, containing seeds ready for fertilization.

Now, to come back to our initial question of 'Is rebirth immediate?' or in the more technical Abhidhamma terms 'Does rebirth-linking consciousness follow immediately after death consciousness?' I hope that the reader, seeing the realness of the above story, will find the answer naturally following it. Rebirth-linking consciousness does follow immediately after death consciousness, but death consciousness does not necessarily have to coincide with the death of the physical body.

Note: In Tibetan Buddhism there is the belief, that a person will stay after death for 49 days in bardo (an in between state between two lives). Personally, I believe that that idea might have arisen perhaps from statements made by developed practitioners. As the number 49 is a magical number (7x7), it might have been, that in ancient Tibet, magicians and developed practitioners often made a vow to, after their death 'hang around' for a maximum number of 7x7 days, to perhaps try to solve any unfinished businesses. In any case, different people's karmas are too varied for a possibility of such rigidly fixed time condition occurring naturally.