

A Buddhist Psychological Exposition of Birth and Related Experiences

Ven. Kumbukandana Rewatha Thero,
Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

Abstract

The relationship between western and Buddhist psychologies has been investigated by Buddhist scholars and Psychologists in western and eastern parts of the world. This study also followed the similar academic journey of the field and thereby the attention was paid on Buddhist Psychological teachings on birth and related experiences in human life (Psychology of Birth) which is a sub subject area of child psychology in famous western psychology. The aims of the current study were to identify the Buddhist psychological teachings on so-called subject. The Sutta Pitaka of Three Volumes of Thēravāda Buddhism (Thripitaka) and few Aṭṭhakathā Books as primary sources and other Buddhist books as secondary sources were referred for data collection. Accordingly, the needed factors for conceiving, types of births, infertility cases, deaths of children and related experiences could be found through the study. Most importantly, Buddhist psychological therapies which are of prime importance in the application into the incidents of deaths of children could be noticed and they have the implications in counseling and psychotherapy.

Key Words: Birth, Traumatic Birth Experiences, Infertility, Death of Children, Abortions,

Introduction

Of this study, it is hoped to pay our attention to the human birth and also experiences hinged around the subject. Indeed, Psychology, as one of the other subjects of the world, concerns on this respect minutely. In fact, ‘Psychology of Birth’ is the term used to introduce this subject; it is committed to present the theoretical knowledge of human birth and experiences related to it. The subject covers several years of a child from conception. This period is also considered as the early years of the Psychology of Birth. When it comes to the Buddhist literature, teachings pertained to the Psychology of Birth can immensely be found therein. Accordingly, this article aims to introduce Buddhist teachings, Buddhist Psychology of Birth, relevant to the human birth and experiences hinged around thereon. Hence, of this article, few selected themes are to be discussed for getting succeeded the aim of the study thus:

- Birth and types of births
- Abortions and Infertility
- Dying of child
- Treatments
- Traumatic Birth Experiences

Objectives

The main objective of the current study was to study the birth and related encounters in Buddhist Psychology. In addition to the main objective, the study paid attention on understanding the following facts.

- The nature of Psychology of Birth in Buddhist psychology.

- The teachings on pregnancy and pregnancy-related factors available in Buddhist psychology.
- The birth-related experiences such as abortions and traumatic birth experiences available in Buddhist psychology.
- Infertility and related cases available in Buddhist psychology.
- The available remedies in Buddhist psychology for the bereaved from the deaths of children.

Methodology

As this study concerns the Buddhist Psychological teachings on birth and related experiences available in Buddhist psychology, the main source of the relevant data is the Buddhist literature. Therefore, the researcher selected Qualitative Research Approach as the research design in the current study and to collect the data needed for achieving the objectives of the study, document searching was administered as the tool of data collection. Thus, mainly Sutta Pitaka of the three volumes of the Thēravāda Buddhism (Tripitaka) and some of Aṭṭhakathā were referred as the primary sources. In addition, secondary sources were also utilized to gather the relevant data. The information gained through primary and secondary sources was descriptively analyzed under several themes.

Birth and Types of Births

Conception alias pregnancy is the starting point of birth of a being. This is recorded in the *mahātaṇhāsāṅkhayasutta* giving the term '*gabbhāvakkanti*.' The *sutta* mentions three

factors for a conception in the mother's womb. The *sutta* insists that one or two of those three factors are not adequate to conceive and all those three factors must be presented for a successful conception. Those three factors are mentioned below; as it records in the *sutta*.

- It is the mother's season (Healthy menstrual periods of mother) (*mātā ca utunī hōti*).
- Union of the mother and father (Sexual intercourse of mother and father) (*mātā pitarō sannipatitā honti*).
- The being to be reborn (*gandhabbō ca paccupaṭṭhitō hōti*)

As noted above in the *mahātaṇhāsāṅkhasutta*, the growth of a child in the mother's womb and function of the child after whose birth are further reported. Accordingly, the mother bears her child in the womb with patient love for nine months or ten months and after the period of bearing the child in the womb, the mother delivers her child. Further, it records that, after birth, the child is nurtured by means of the mother's blood which is in Buddhism called breast-milk. As the child grows, he begins to play with a toy in his sports decade and having matured physical sense bases, he experiences both pleasant and unpleasant objects of the outward: visible forms (*rūpa*), audible (*sadda*), odor (*gandha*), taste (*rasa*) and contact (*poṭṭhabba*). Owing to the function of sense bases, the individual clings or craves of pleasurable objects while he disagrees in impinging un-pleasurable objects.

The manner of growth of a child's physical body is recorded in *indakasutta* of *saṃyuttanikāya* in which at first, it arises at the first moment of the conception in the womb embryonic phase (*paṭhamaṃ kalalaṃ hōti*). Thereafter, it

comes the second phase of the growth which is called '*abbuda*' therein, the nature of this phase is explained in the auto-commentary by giving a simile of the color of meat washed water (*maṃsadhovanaudakavaṇṇaṃ*). The next step is explained in the *sutta*, under the term '*pēsi*' and thereby it arises a thick piece of meat and thereby five *pīlakās* come to manifest. These lead to be apparent hair, nails, etc. in the embryo. Further, the child is said to be dependent on the food which the mother takes during the period of growth in the womb.

The facts included in the *indakasutta* can be considered as a microscopic exposition of growing a child in the mother's womb. When we concern the *mahātaṇhāsāṅkhayasutta* therein, it shows us that not only the gradual development but also activities of the child lead to the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*). Therefore, it is important to understand the *sutta* in that particular sense as well because it is explained the way that he becomes to re-exist as a result of attaching to the objects of pleasurable visible forms and releasing ill-will of unpleasurable visible forms. Such expositions are inherent to Buddhism as it includes an extraordinary exposition of the existence and extinction of the being.

Types of Pregnancy

The beginning of birth is said to be the conception or pregnancy. In the Buddhist teaching, there can be seen a few of such types of pregnancy. It is seen that this classification is inherent to Buddhism which cannot be found in psychology. Furthermore, the classification of pregnancy has been done based on several criteria. They are noted below.

- The classification of pregnancy based on awareness or none-awareness.
- The classification of pregnancy based on the volition of my or another.
- The classification of pregnancy based on high-born or low-born clans according to their wholesome or unwholesome.

Each of these classifications and foundations of these classifications are mentioned separately below.

- **The classification of pregnancy based on awareness or none-awareness**

There are four pregnancies mentioned in *sangītisutta*, and the classification of pregnancy has been done based on ‘awareness’ or ‘unawareness.’ Furthermore, this pregnancy occurred based on ‘awareness’ or ‘unawareness’ is connected with three occasions such as: entering the mother’s womb, living therein, and delivering. According to the discourse, afore-noted four-types of pregnancy are noted below.

- One descends into the mother’s womb unknowing, stays there unknowing, and leaves it unknowing.
- One enters the womb knowing, stays there unknowing, and leaves it unknowing.
- One enters the womb knowing, stays there knowing, and leaves it unknowing.
- One enters the womb knowing, stays there knowing and leaves it knowing.

- **The classification of pregnancy based on the volition of my or another**

In the *sangītisutta* noted above, more four types of getting a new birth are recorded. They are mentioned under the term '*attabhāva paṭilābha*,' (getting a new birth)

- One's own volition, not another's (*attasañcetanāyeva kamati, no parasañcetanā*).
- Another's volition, not one's own (*parasañcetanāyeva kamati, no attasañcetanā*).
- Both (*attasañcetanā ceva kamati parasañcetanā ca*).
- Neither (*neva attasañcetanā kamati, no parasañcetanā*).

Here, the term '*attasañcetanā*' means 'One's own volition' that the volition' which is done by one itself. Further, the term '*parasañcetanā*' intends other's volition.

- **The classification of pregnancy based on high-born or low-born clans according to their wholesome or unwholesome.**

In the *sangītisutta* noted above, there are more six types of births mentioned (*chaḷābhijātiyō*). Here, it is found the term '*abhijāyati*' to mean the birth. Those six types of birth are listed below.

- One born in dark conditions lives a dark life (*ekaccō kaṇhābhijātikō samāno kaṇhaṃ dhammaṃ abhijāyati*).

- One born in dark conditions lives a bright life (*ekaccō kaṇhābhijātikō samāno sukkaṃ dhammaṃ abhijāyati*).
- One born in dark conditions attains Nibbāna, which is neither dark nor bright (*ekaccō kaṇhābhijātikō samāno akaṇhaṃ asukkaṃ nibbānaṃ abhijāyati*).
- One born in bright conditions lives a dark life (*ekaccō sukkābhijātikō samāno sukkaṃ dhammaṃ abhijāyati*).
- One born in bright conditions leads a bright life (*ekaccō sukkābhijātikō samāno kaṇhaṃ dhammaṃ abhijāyati*).
- One born in bright conditions attains Nibbāna which is neither dark nor bright (*ekaccō sukkābhijātikō samāno akaṇhaṃ asukkaṃ nibbānaṃ abhijāyati*).

One born in dark conditions (*kaṇhābhijātikō*) is known as lower-born. Here, the term '*kaṇhaṃ dhammaṃ*' means ten sorts of unwholesome deeds. One born in bright conditions (*sukkābhijātikō*) is known as higher-born. '*Sukkaṃ dhammaṃ*' represents the ten sorts of wholesome deeds. This classification seems to have been done based on two conditions in which being who gets lower-born and does ten sorts of wholesome and unwholesome deeds is the first. And also, being gets higher-born and does the same is the second.

The same classification is also found in the *chaḷābhijātisutta* of *aṅguttaranikāya* therein the Buddha imparts six types of peculiar births. Those six types of births are extracted from the discourse thus:

- Someone of the black class produces a black state (*ekaccō kaṇhābhijātiyō samāno kaṇhaṃ dhammaṃ abhijāyati*).

- Someone of the black class produces a white state (*ekaccō kaṇhābhijātiyō samāno sukkaṃ dhammaṃ abhijāyati*).
- Someone of the black class produces *nibbāna*, which is neither black nor white (*ekaccō kaṇhābhijātiyō samāno akaṇhaṃ asukkaṃ nibbānaṃ abhijāyati*).
- Someone of the white class produces a black state (*ekaccō sukkābhijātiyō samāno kaṇhaṃ dhammaṃ abhijāyati*).
- Someone of the white class produces a white state (*ekaccō sukkābhijātiyō samāno sukkaṃ dhammaṃ abhijāyati*).
- Someone of the white class produces *nibbāna*, which is neither black nor white (*ekaccō sukkābhijātiyō samāno akaṇhaṃ asukkaṃ nibbānaṃ abhijāyati*).

This classification is also based on notions of clan and deeds. The term '*kaṇhābhijātiyō*' (someone of the black class) represents lower-born people such as *caṇḍālā*, *luddā*, etc. clans. The other term '*kaṇhaṃ dhammaṃ*' (black state) is meant; doing false actions by way of physically, verbally, and mentally. On the contrary, the term '*sukkābhijātiyō*' represents higher-born people such as *khattiyō*, *brāhmaṇō*, etc. clans. The cognate term '*sukkaṃ dhammaṃ*' is meant; doing the right actions by way of three doors. This indeed relates to the people who do wholesome or unwholesome after they got lower-born or higher-born.

Abortions and Infertility

Amidst the birth and related experiences, the abortion and infertility are also consisted of. It is seen, from the distant

past, as evidences are found in Buddhist literature, parents who expected children have stressed as a result of infertility. Abortion is a denial of children who are to be born by parents and adults. The infertility is opposite to the abortion. Accordingly, the abortion stands to deny children while the infertility represents the expectation of children. Incidents are reported to have in the Buddhist literature concerning both the abortion and infertility. Both abortion and infertility include important experiences related to the subject. The treatise of *pētavatthu* records that women who suffered from infertility has destroyed the wombs of other women.

An incident was recorded in the *Pañcaputtakhādakavatthu* on the difficulties confronted due to infertility as well as abortion as a result of which, a husband got a second wife since his first wife could not give him children or in other words because of infertility. As a result of being unable to conceive and bear children (that is being infertile), the first wife was accused in many ways by her husband's relatives. Therefore, she took action to destroy the conception of her co-wife, the second wife of her husband by giving positional ointment through a *paribbājika* woman. A similar incident was also found in the story of *sattaputtakādaka*, therein a lay Buddhist disciple was abased by his wife by being proud of her beautiful and virtuous two children. By resisting the behaviour of his wife, he brought a new wife. The first wife became angry for his action and therefore, destroyed the three months of the womb employing medico.

The experiences related to abortion and infertility are also recorded in the story of the *kāliyakkhiṇī*. According to the story, a young boy who lived in the city called *sāvatthi* was constantly being induced by his mother who finally got married. However, he was again requested to get married by his

mother and he got his second wife because the first wife was not fruitful. The first wife then was impelled to destroy the conception of the second wife in three times. Another incident of the infertility includes in the *mattā pētavatthu* in which a wife of an individual lived in *sāvatthi* was unfaithful and getting angry always. She did not bear children. Therefore, the husband took a step to get a second wife. The second wife then became faithful and well-behaved as she bore a baby after a little period.

Parental Experiences regarding Deaths of children; Buddhist psychological treatments

There is a factor that is particularly concerned in Psychology regarding dying children and birth. This is an experience that parents find difficult to bear. There are few experiences even in Buddhist literature; few cases related to dying children are recorded in Buddhist literature. They are as appeared below sequenced. Those cases are reflected: parents' grief felt because of their dead children, mental stress, etc. Furthermore, these stories even contained important advice to maintain such situations.

- *Ēkaputtasutta* states that one father, who lost his lovely son, is reported to have gone to visit the Buddha when the Buddha was dwelling in *Jētavana*. He is said to have suffered from the grief of losing his son and said to have lived with wet-cloths and psychological stress.
- *Kaṇha pētavattthu* of *pētavattthu* treatise records on excessive mental suffering of losing a child; a father is said to have badly suffered from the grief and who is also said to have rejected: having a bath, taking food,

going to his employ, and going to visit the Buddha and attending to the Buddha.

- *Uraga Jātaka* relates a story of a father who was living in the city of *sāvatti* lost his son. Owing to the unexpected incident he has shocked, cried, lamented, and he is said to have not gone out of the house and done any work.
- *Patācārā* story relates that within several minutes in a day, *patācārā* loses her two kids. Since other close relatives are also lost, she was distressed, and traumatized; she is said to have grieved as much as she is unaware of her naked. Even her name, *patācārā*, implies 'having covered ethics.'
- *Kisāgōtami* is a young lady who was suffering from infertility without having children for a few years. Later, she delivered a child; unfortunately, the child died in the childhood itself. Having taking died child with arms, she in many ways endeavored to get rid of the child.

Indeed, any age of death is painful for close relations. The Buddha has instructed many people to get their grief of losing children rid of in cases. Some psychological treatments can be identified by those instructions of the Buddha. Therefore, it is important to perceive therapeutic teachings recommended to get rid of the grief of losing children.

- **The death of a child can anytime occur from the embryonic period.**

According to the *jarāsuttaniddēsa*, a being can die at anytime from the embryonic period. As it is recorded in the *sutta*, the

death can occur in the periods of *kalala*, *pēsi*, *ghana*, *pasāka*, soon after birth, at the birthplace, after half-month, after month..... at the age of eighty, age of ninety...etc. According to the sutta, a child can die at any time after his birth. Therefore, this sutta suggests that the death should be expected at any moment. The understanding is helpful to know before that such incidents in our lives also may happen.

- ***Appamatta* or improving ten wholesome deeds**

As it is recorded in the *ēkaputtasutta*, the Buddha declares that both of deities (*dēva*) and human beings (*manussa*) who suffered (from physical and mental suffering), got downfall (disease un-fortune and wealth of youth) as a result of rejoicing with the aggregate of material (*rūpa*), feeling (*vēdanā*), etc. and go to the end of life. According to the discourse, the reason behind the suffering of something, such as losing children is well clarified in the reason of attachment of rejoicing the five aggregates. Therefore, the grief of losing children can be reduced by reducing the attachment or understanding its nature. Further, once, the Buddha has declared that one who is *appamatta* in the day and night can extinguish pleasing objects (*piyarūpa*). Here, the term '*appamatta*' means doing wholesome deeds. There is nothing for parents than children as the most valuable pleasing object (*piyarūpa*) of the world. This intends that the grief of losing children can be reduced with the help of cultivating wholesome thoughts in the mind by converting attachment of pleasing objects (*piyarūpa*) which bent towards children. Further, the grief can be reduced through involving religious activities as well.

- **Listening to stories of veterans**

It is badly in need of understanding death in order to bring down the suffering of losing children. This fact is recorded in *kaṇhapētavattu* (story of *kaṇha* devil). On one occasion, Buddha went to a house of a father who lost his child therein the householder was instructed to listen to stories of veterans to overcome his grief. Further, Buddha related such a story of veterans at the request of the householder in which the story includes teachings that assist to understand death like in these cases.

Once upon a time, king *vāsudēva* at the city of *dvāravati* was living by lamenting and unhanding everything as a result of losing his child. King's brother *ghata paṇḍita* extinguished the king's grief by making a plot. He began to walk around the whole city by looking at the sky, acting like a crazy man asking for hare. Urban people bewildered and this incident was reported to king *vāsudēva* by *Rōhaṇeyya* minister. Then the king went to his brother and asks what kind of hare do you want? King told him that he can give a hare made by using gems, metals, silver, beads, etc. or hare caught from the forest. However, the brother *ghata paṇḍita* was not satisfactory with those suggestions and he badly asked for hare from the moon. The king thought that his brother was surely suffering from crazy disease and expected things that should not be expected and he is denying himself his happy life. Here, *ghata paṇḍita* says to king that "I am to die— if the hare of the moon is not given. But why are you lamenting by thinking of a dead son? Can't you understand the meaning of this? Further, "If you know that unobtainable thing should not be expected; do you advise others to do so? Why do you lament on behalf of your son who is already lost before four months? I expected something which can be seen. However, you are lamenting with the expectation of invisible something." By uttering this story, Buddha explains that like *ghata paṇḍita* rescued his elder

brother from the grief by using the right words, if someone has this kind of ministers, servants, etc., they have no suffering. This highlights that the right guidance is important to be realized in death.s

- **Practicing Mindfulness of Death**

The *uraga jātaka* story also consists of several teachings to maintain the grief. According to the story, a Buddhist householder who was dwelling at city *sāvatti*, lost his son and became badly grieved is reported to have lived with crying, lamenting, etc. without doing anything. The Buddha then visited him in his own house and declared the *uraga jātaka* (*uraga* birth story) to overcome his grief. This story relates to a *brāhmaṇa* family called *dharmapāla* who lived in a city called *bārāṇasi* in the country of *kaśī*. There had been, in the house, husband, wife, son, daughter, daughter in law and maid-servant. They all are said to have practiced the mindfulness of death. One day while father and son were working in the paddy field, son was stung by a cobra and died. The father sent a message by repoting the incident. He asked them to come with having got a wash, wearing new clothes, having prepared a packet of rice for one, a bunch of followers and perfume, etc. All members of the family came there according to the message. In analyzing the story, it seems that anyone of the family has not lamented or suffered owing to the death. In other words, the father asked to come with having got a bath, wearing new clothes, having prepared a packet of rice for one, a bunch of followers, perfume, etc. for performing the son's funeral. They had been able to bear the separation as they practice the mindfulness of death. The following statements made by them show us the reasons not to be led to suffering.

Father – “I do not cry on account of this child as this dead body does not know the grief of relatives, after body expired, after mind left the body, after death; it is alike serpent left its old skin after expired it.”

Mother – “... without invitation, he came here. Without informing, he left the world. If he came here in accord with any karma, in the same way he left. Hence, what does it mean to cry? The burning body does not know the lamentations of relatives. So, I do not cry on account of the dead son. The journey was gone by son in accord with his will.”

Sister – “If I cry, my body will be weak. Hence, what is the use of crying for me? Attachment to relatives, friends and close-people, etc. is the forerunner of suffering.”

Wife - “Both ‘just like a moppet cries on account of the moon goes on the sky and one who laments on behalf of a dead person are the same.!”

Maid-servant – “Just as broken pitcher cannot make it as before; it is meaningless to be suffered on behalf of a person who died.”

According to this story, the recollection or mindfulness of death aids to bring down the grief of losing close relations. Death is like removal of expired skin from the body. The mind has left the body because the body is not useful furthermore. Therefore, it is useless to cry by looking at the dead. Beings are traveling in the repeated existence by getting new birth and dying in accordance with the law of karma. Attachment of human beings begets suffering. Therefore, the attachment should be maintained. The moon can never be obtained. One

after death gets never alive. It is the lesson taught by this story. This story aids to overcome the grief having strengthened the cognition through the realization. The suffering can be reduced by the way knowing one's experience is common to another.

- **Giving exercises to realize the death**

Proper guidance of Buddha recommended for overcoming the grief of losing children included in the story of *kisāgōtamī*, in which *kisāgōtamī* was instructed to bring a handful of mustard from a house where no one has ever died to cure the illness of her child. She walked whole over the city of *sāvatti* so as to find a handful of mustard from a house where anyone did not die. She could not find such a house and understood that her child cannot be cured. Having cast away the dead body of her child, she came to Buddha and understood that death is a universal truth that is common to every being. After she came back to normal, Buddha preached the dhamma and cured her grief. Buddha explained the difference between noble and ignoble persons in the world. Of them, although, one who lives a hundred years without seeing the origin and destruction is an ignoble person and one who lives one day by seeing the origin and destruction is a noble person. Here, it is highlighted that Buddha has used an exercise which aids to bring down her grief through the understanding of death.

Concerning the above-noted facts, Buddha seems to have guided people to rescue them from mental issues in different cases. Buddha has indeed guided people to overcome the grief of losing children by putting different methods into use such as the importance of nonattachment to pleasing objects, *Appamatta* or improving ten wholesome deeds, getting realization by listening to stories of veterans, think of death as simple happening and recollecting the worthlessness of grief,

realizing devoid of psychological attachments and living with the knowledge of origin and destruction of everything, etc. In fact, these psychological treatments are used in the modern psychiatric as cognitive and behavioral therapies.

Traumatic Birth Experiences

Experiences related to delivering a child are common to every mother. Each mother may be getting the same experiences. Nevertheless, these experiences can rarely be fearful. Traumatic birth experience intends that taking more periods exceeding certain dates of parturition; such incidents are mentioned in the Buddhist literature. It is mentioned in the *suppāvāsā sutta* that *kōliya* daughter called *supravāsā* is said to have borne her pregnancy for seven years and she is also said to have experienced labour pains for seven days in the process of delivering the child. Further, as it mentions in the *gabbhinī sutta* of *khuddakanikāya*, that a woman, who followed the *paribrājaka* religion, is said to have suffered in delivering her child. Her better half has been sent to the royal repository of king *kōsala* to bring remedial oil; it is said to support her parturition. Unfortunately, the oil was not allowed to bring and although he has drunk and brought oil to her, he was also said to have suffered owing to the inability of omitting the oil. These circumstances can evidently be taken into consideration under traumatic birth cases.

Conclusion

The birth and relevant experiences are accounted for under ‘Psychology of Birth.’ In fact, many teachings embodied in the Psychology of Birth can clearly be found in Buddhist

literature as well. Prerequisites for a birth and types of births are also portrayed in Buddhism: Buddhism insists that not only physical factors but also a mental fact, *gandhabba*, should be presented for a successful conception. Buddhism classifies types of birth following the facts: the clan of getting birth, sentient activities done by him, and volition led to be born, etc. Further, in consequence of infertility women have faced many difficulties from the early. As a result, a new marital life with another woman seems to have been begun. It also seems that the importance of improvement of construing death for the reduction of the grief of dead children is also laid stress on. Finally, it is found that birth and experiences related to it are also combined directly with the continual existence of beings.

Bibliography

- Bodhi, Bhikkhu, (2012). *The Numerical Discourse of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications, Boston.
- Buddha Jayanti Tripitaka Grantha Mālā, (2006), Buddhist Cultural Centre, Anderson Road, Dehiwala.
- Sarathcandra, W. *Petavatthu Aṭṭhakathāva*, Buddhist Cultural Centre, Anderson Road, Dehiwala.
- Senanayaka, G.S.B. (1999). *TherīgāthāAṭṭhakathā* (Sinhala Trans.), Royal Asiatic Society, Dehiwala, Sri Lanka.
- Walse, M. (1987). *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications, 199 Elm Street, Somerville, Massachusetts 02144.
- Wanarathna, R. (1989). *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*, Samayawardhana Publication, Maradana.

