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“Gandhabba“: meanings and uses in the pāli Canon

Abstract

Gandhabba is one of the few rare and insufficiently explicit terms found in the Pāli Canon. As the word seems to be used to personify a key element in the process of the reproduction of beings, and consequently in their process of rebirth, it is worth clarifying this usage. The meanings and connotations of *gandhabba* already present in the cosmology of Hinduism have been adapted by Buddhism for the exposition of its own doctrine; this article analyses that adaptation in order to gain a better understanding of the meaning given by the Buddha to the *gandhabba* as a personification.

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Introduction

The Canon of Theravāda Buddhism, the *Tipiṭaka pāli*, contains some rare and not very explicit words or expressions. From antiquity to our modern times, authors and translators who did not make the effort to place themselves in the cultural context that was that of the Buddha could not and cannot apprehend the meaning then given to these terms. This form of ignorance has allowed, and continues to allow, the exploitation of these words for the benefit of erroneous beliefs.

The word *gandhabba*, when used figuratively, is one of these apparently curious terms. In our view, the key role – albeit a rare one – that certain texts attribute to the *gandhabba* in the conception of an embryo, and consequently in the process of rebirth, requires us not to be satisfied with cursory interpretations.

By recalling what the Gandharvas were in Hindu mythology, we can shed light on the meanings and uses of the term that ancient Buddhism adopted and adapted to its own doctrine; we can thus deduce what the *gandhabba* could not have been for the Buddha and his first disciples, and modestly approach what the *gandhabba* could have symbolised for them.

1. The Gandharvas of Hinduism

1.1. Mythological creatures

In Hindu texts¹, the Gandharvas are male nature spirits, married to celestial nymphs, the Apsaras; some of them may be half-animal, usually bird or horse. As is often the case in Indian mythology, their parentage fluctuates: on their father's side, they are designated as creatures of Prajapati (the father of gods and demons, one of the ten Genitors descended from Brahmā, one of the three cre-

¹ The oldest Vedic text, the *R̥gveda*, often mentions a single Gandharva, likened to a demon, jealous protector of Soma, the god personifying the beverage that integrates all the vital powers of the world. The *Brāhmaṇa* incorporate the idea of a category of deities frequently opposing the gods. Their transformation into gentle creatures symbolising music and sexuality, working for the gods, was gradual and late in coming.

ator-gods of all things) as well as children of Brahmā himself, of Kashapa (grandson of Brahmā and one of the seven original Sages) or of the Sages in general; and on their maternal side, of Vāc (a Vedic deity representing “the eternal vibration”, associated with Prajapati in creation) or of Sarasvati (goddess of rivers, knowledge, wisdom and the arts, and at once the wife, half-sister and daughter of Brahmā)...

The Gandharvas possess impressive musical and vocal talents and entertain the gods in their palaces.

The most eminent of them also act as messengers between the gods and between the gods and the humans.

1.2. Symbols

As far back as the earliest texts, the Gandharvas are used as symbols. We'll come back to this usage below, as Buddhism not only incorporated these deities into its pantheon, but also adopted some of their symbolic uses.

2. The *gandhabbā* of Buddhism

2.1. Deities

Known as *gandhabbā* in the *pāli* language, these beings are classified by Buddhist cosmology on the plane of existence of the Four Great Guardian Kings (*Cātummahārājikā*), located hierarchically just above that of humans. The *gandhabbā* are no longer born of gods, but are a state of rebirth² possible for any being who has practised the simplest form of the Buddhist virtues: *sucarita*, good conduct in deed, word and thought³.

These *devā*, associated with music and sexual seduction, are endowed with a subtle body freed from the limitations of the gross body, which gives them a certain freedom in choosing the place, time and conditions of their rebirth; a very relative freedom, however, since it is subject to the effects of the *kamma*. They can move through the air and, here again, are renowned for their musical and vocal talents.

One episode occupies a special place in the *suttā*, combining the two traditional functions of the *gandhabbā* – musicians, messengers between gods and men – and above all making it possible to link the Buddha to these deities; this is the love story between Sūriyavaccasā, daughter of Timbarū, one of the most important *gandhabbā*, and another *gandhabba*, Pañcasikha: the latter goes to his beloved and, accompanied by his lute, sings her a love song in which he also evokes his veneration for the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha⁴; later, Sakka (Indra, the king of the gods) asks Pañcasikha to intercede on his behalf with the Buddha in order to obtain an audience⁵; as a reward for this service, the god convinces Sūriyavaccasā, already charmed by Pañcasikha's talents and Buddhist devotion, to marry him.



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² *Janavasabha-sutta* (S/DĪG II/5/# 285).

³ *Sucarita-sutta* (S/SAM III/10/2/# 439) and the... 110 small *suttā* which follow it in the *Gandhabbakāya-saṃyutta*.

⁴ *Sakkapañha-sutta* (S/DĪG II/8/# 348) ; cf. also *Mahāgovinda-sutta* (S/DĪG II/6/# 293 & 330), etc.

⁵ *Sakkapañha-sutta* (S/DĪG II/8/# 344-347).

2.2. A renewed etymology

Buddhist texts introduce a dimension that did not exist (or was not dominant) in Vedic or ancient Hindu texts. Although the entire word *gandharva* originated in the Proto-Indo-Aryan and Proto-Indo-Iranian languages, Buddhism will mainly perceive the single word *ghanda* (skt. *gandhaḥ*), meaning smell in general and perfume in particular. The *gandhabbā*, living in harmony with plants, will be poetically described as residing in the various fragrances of trees and flowers:

Monks, I am going to instruct you about the *devā* who belong to the category of the *gandhabbā*. Please listen to me.

Which *devā* belong to this group?

There are, monks, the *devā* dwelling in the fragrance of the roots,
the *devā* dwelling in the fragrance of the heart [of the wood],
those who dwell in the fragrance of the sapwood,
those who dwell in the fragrance of the bark,
those who dwell in the fragrance of the sap,
those who dwell in the fragrance of the leaves,
those who dwell in the fragrance of the flowers,
those who dwell in the fragrance of the fruit,
those who dwell in the fragrance of the essences,
those who dwell in the fragrance of the perfumes.

Monks, such are the *devā* belonging to the category of *gandhabbā*.⁶

Some Buddhist traditions, the Vajrayāna in particular, will develop this dimension, considering that the particular nature of the *gandhabbā* makes them accessible to the gifts of odours on which they can feed.⁷

2.3. The dual use of *gandhabba*

The word gandhabba (non-compound, all declensions)

Canon	Plural	Singular
<i>Vinaya-piṭaka</i>	3	0
<i>Suttā-piṭaka</i>		
<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>	13	7
<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>	0	6
<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i>	2	0
<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>	6	9
<i>Khuddhaka-nikāya</i>	22	22
<i>Abhidhamma-piṭaka</i>	0	0

Source: *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka 4.0 (Vipassana Research Institute)*

This count allows us to observe that:

a) The word is absent from the *Abhidhamma* treatises and therefore has no philosophical value.

⁶ *Suddhika-sutta* (S/SAM III/10/1/#438).

⁷ *Gandharva*, Philippe Cornu, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique du bouddhisme*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2006, p. 552 ; the *gandharva* is first defined as an "eater of smells".

- b) The word is almost entirely absent from monastic codes of discipline, so there is no spiritual interest in any relationship with these deities.
- c) In the ancient core of the Pāli Canon (the first four *nikāyā*), the presence of the word is concentrated in specific sections of the *Dīgha-nikāya* and *Majjhima-nikāya*.
- d) Half of the occurrences are scattered throughout the various later books of the *Khuddhaka-nikāya*.

The most useful observation here is that, of these occurrences, only 10, concentrated in 3 brief passages, concern a symbolic use of the *gandhabba*.

2.4. The *gandhabba* as a symbol

Three passages use *gandhabba* figuratively.

a) *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya-sutta*

In this *Great Sutta on the extinction of desire*, the Buddha analyses the relationship between consciousness and rebirth, with the aim of helping us to put an end to our rebirths.⁸ We find in it the following explanation:

There, *bhikkhu*, where three elements are combined, a germ of life is planted. If the father and mother unite but it is not a favourable time for the mother and there is no *gandhabba*, then no germ of life will be planted. If the mother and father unite, and the period is favourable for the mother, but there is no *gandhabba*, then again no life seed will be planted. If the father and mother unite, the period is favourable for the mother and a *gandhabba* is also present, then, through the conjunction of these three elements, a germ of life will come into existence.⁹

b) *Milindapañha*

A short paragraph summarises the above passage:

The Bhagavā has said this, “*bhikkhū*, the conception of the embryo is due to the conjunction of three factors: the mother and father unite, the mother is in a fertile period, and a *gandhabba* is present¹⁰”.¹¹

c) *Assalāyana-sutta*

In this *sutta*, the Buddha draws on all the situations of heredity, transmission, education and *kamma* to demonstrate that the condition of brahman is not innate; this allows him to set out once again his definition of the “true brahman”, synonymous with wisdom and purity, with no relation to belonging to a caste.

- Do you know how an embryo is conceived¹²?
 - Yes, brother, we know how an embryo is conceived: when the father and mother unite, when the mother is fertile and when a *gandhabba* is present; the conception of an embryo is the conjunction of these three factors.
 - But do you know for sure whether this *gandhabba* is a warrior, a brahman, a merchant or a

⁸ Cf. the clear introduction by Thānissaro Bhikkhu to his translation of the *sutta* : <https://www.dhammadata.org/suttas/MN/MN38.html>

⁹ *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhayasutta* (S/MAJ I/4/8/#408).

¹⁰ Here, as in the previous *sutta*, we translate the verb *hoti*, meaning simply “to be”, as “is present”.

¹¹ *Gabbhāvakkantipañha* (S/KHU/Milindapañha/IV/1/6/#6).

¹² The expression translated in this way is *gabbhasa avakkanti*, literally “the descent, the introduction” of an embryo.

worker?¹³

- No, brother.

- Therefore, do you know what you [really] are?

- Therefore, no, brother, we do not know what we [really] are.¹⁴

2.5. What does this symbol mean?

The *Commentary* on the *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya-sutta*¹⁵ confirms that the *gandhabba* is indeed a symbol here: the text specifies – if it were necessary! – that the *gandhabba* is not a deity attending the scene of the sexual union of a man and a woman, but that it represents the being, led by the *kamma*, that will be conceived on this occasion. The *Commentary* concludes: *gandhabboti tatrūpaga-satto*, “the *gandhabba* is the future being”. And the *Subcommentary*¹⁶ speaks of *uppaj-janaka-satto*, “the being in the process of appearing”.

From these brief and rare canonical passages, we can already deduce that the *gandhabba* represents that which, completing the cellular material, ovum and spermatozoon, is indispensable for the development of an embryo; and much more: that this *gandhabba* transmits the *kamma* of the previous existence and ensures the continuity between a being that dies and a being that is born.

However, this symbol remains very vague; can we go further and understand more precisely what is, for the Theravāda tradition, this *gandhabba* capable of animating a new being and ensuring continuity between a death and a new birth?

2.5.1. The *gandhabba* is not a soul (*attā* or *jīva*¹⁷)

From a Hindu perspective, the answer to our question would be simple: the *gandharva* symbolises the soul that has left a body and is preparing to reincarnate to form a new being. According to V. S. Apte, some ancient *Upaniṣads* already use such a personification¹⁸. Similarly, with regard to Nārada, avatar of Vishnu, condemned by his father, Brahmā, to be a *gandharva* irresistibly attracted to women, J. Herbert considers that we can see in him “the individual soul (*jīva*) in the essential perfection of its true nature and of its own action or, in other words, the self-conscious individuation in the perfection of its principle as well as of its object”.¹⁹

From a Buddhist perspective, the *gandhabba* cannot be the soul... since the soul does not exist: one of the three characteristics of everything is the absence of soul (*anattatā*) and of anything equivalent (*jīva*)²⁰; the Buddha's teaching was frequently referred to by his competitors as *anatta-vāda*, “the way without *attā*”; and according to tradition, the second discourse given by the Buddha to his

¹³ Brahmanical India was (and is) based on the division into four great castes (*vaṇṇā* - skt. *varṇā*): the *brāhmaṇā* (the purest, in charge of rites and religious teaching), the *khattiyā* (skt. *kṣatriyā*) warriors and nobles, the *vessā* (skt. *vaiśyā*), merchants or farmers, and the *suddā* (skt. *śūdrā*), dependent manual workers. Note in passing that the caste placed first here, although this is a discussion with Brahmins, is that of the *khattiyā*.

¹⁴ *Assalāyana-sutta* (S/MAJ II/5/3/#411).

¹⁵ *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhayasutta-vaṇṇanā* (S/AṬṬ/MAJ/Mūlapaṇṇāsa-aṭṭhakathā/4/8/#408).

¹⁶ *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhayasutta-vaṇṇanā* (S/Ṭīkā/MAJ/Mūlapaṇṇāsa-ṭīkā/4/8/#408). The *Subcommentary* also introduces a link with *gandha*, the perfume – *gandhabboti gandhanato* –, which confirms the late development of this link, around the fifth century CE.

¹⁷ The *ātman*, in essence unchanging and eternally liberated, can neither evolve nor transmigrate (it is precisely the ignorance of this characteristic that plunges human beings into the succession of rebirths); Brahmanism resolves this difficulty by promoting the *jīva*, designating that which, from individuality, evolves and travels from body to body until it attains definitive liberation. The *jīva* is the closest thing to the individual soul as understood in Western traditions.

¹⁸ *Gandharvaḥ*, -5, Vaman Shivaram Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, p. 648 : « The soul after death and previous to its being born again (तस्यासीद्दुहिता गन्धर्वगृहीता) *Bṛi. Up.3.3.1.* ».

¹⁹ Jean Herbert, *Nārada, précédé d'une étude sur les avatars de Vishnou*, Lyon, Derain, 1949, p. 17.

²⁰ “There is no *jīva*” – *Viññānanānatthapañha* (S/KHU/Milindapañha/II/7/15/#15).

first five disciples was precisely the *Sutta on the characteristic of the absence of an attā*^{21, 22}

2.5.2. The *gandhabba* is not an intermediate state (*antarābhava*) between two existences

The difficulty of understanding and accepting a radically “soulless” way gave rise in the centuries following the disappearance of the Buddha to so-called “personalist” currents which had in common the search for an intermediate way between the Brahmanic affirmation of the substantiality of the *ātman* and the denial by the Buddha of the existence of an *attā*; this narrow and winding path required the affirmation of the existence of an individuality (*puggala*) “neither identical to nor different from the aggregates”, transmigrating from one existence to another and subsisting even within the definitive bliss of *nibbāna*. This *puggala-vāda* was at the origin of a schism and gave rise to lineages, such as that of the Vajjiputtakā (skt. Vātsiputrīya), which was very important numerically and lasted until around the tenth century CE.

This deviant approach was progressively enriched by the introduction of a division of the cycle of life into four successive phases (existence from birth to death, existence at the moment of death, intermediate existence between death and re-conception – *antarābhava* –, existence at the moment of rebirth), by the establishment of a duration (from 7 to 49 days) of the intermediate state, by the definition of the form of the intermediate being, its behaviour, capacities and conditioning.

For the ancient “personalist” currents and their heirs within the Mahayāna and Vajrayāna, the *gandhabba* is the personification of this intermediate being.²³

Confronted with these deviations, the heirs of the ancient orthodoxy strove to preserve the teaching of a continuity between existences that required nothing essential or substantial – in the sense of Western philosophy – nor *attā*, *jīva* or *puggala* – in the sense of Indian philosophy. Neither in its earliest texts nor in its later developments has Theravāda modified its rigorous doctrinal position, summed up in this clear-cut formula:

| *Sabbena sabbaṃ natthi nāma antarābhavo.*²⁴
| This is certain, there is definitely no intermediate state.

2.5.3. So what does the *gandhabba* represent?

For the Theravāda tradition, based in this respect on knowledge of the flow of the mind – an area that is the subject of several thousand pages of canonical texts, mainly in the gigantic Book VII of the *Abhidhamma*, the *Paṭṭhāna* – the ultimate unit of thought of the dying person immediately conditions the formation of the first unit of thought of an embryo.²⁵ The link between two existences, and thus the indispensable complement of conception, is provided by *paṭisandhi-citta* “the rebirth consciousness”, associating *citta*, consciousness as an element of existence and *paṭisandhi*, the fact of reuniting again. The *paṭisandhi-citta* is the thought process that appears in the first moment of life, from the moment of conception; a process aroused and nourished by the last *kamma*-producing moments of thought of the previous life.

²¹ *Anattalakkhaṇa-sutta* (S/SAM III/1/6/7).

²² Didier Treutenaere, *Bouddhisme et re-naissances dans la tradition Theravāda*, Éditions Soukha, Paris, 3^{ème} édition, 2023, p. 176 sq.

²³ Vasubandhu (4th or 5th century) states in his *Abhidharmakośa*, a Sanskrit text setting out the theses of the schismatic Sarvastivada school, that the “intermediate existence” has five names: *gandhabba*, *manomaya*, *sambhāsinis* and *nirvṛtti* (*Abhidharmakośa* P3/40c-41a/2:122).

²⁴ *Antarābhavakathāvaṇṇanā* (Ṭikā/Abh/Pañcapakaraṇa-anuṭṭikā/Kathāvatthupakaraṇa-anuṭṭikā/8/2/#505).

²⁵ Didier Treutenaere, *To do away with the “intermediate state” (antarābhava) between two existences. A presentation of the orthodox Theravāda position and a critical review of the divergent positions*, www.academia.edu, 2023.

*Tatheva paṭisandhimhi, vattate cittasantati;
Purimaṃ bhijjate cittaṃ, pacchimaṃ jāyate tato.
Tesaṃ antarikā natthi, vīci tesaṃ na vijjati;
Na cito gacchati kiñci, paṭisandhi ca jāyatīti.*

It is through the *paṭisandhi*[-*citta*] that the continuity of units of consciousness occurs; The previous unit of consciousness ends, the next appears. Between them there is no interval, between them there is no delay; Although nothing [essential or substantial] comes from the previous unit of consciousness, the *paṭisandhi*[-*citta*] appears.²⁶

A simple phenomenon (*dhamma*) approaches existence as a result of the right conditions, it does not come from elsewhere but it does not appear without causes located elsewhere. It is a phenomenon [physical and non-physical] which appears and approaches the new existence as a result of the previous conditions, it is neither a being nor a soul (*na satto na jīvo*).

This phenomenon does not transmigrate from the past existence, but it does not manifest here without the causes which belong to the past existence.²⁷

The *gandhabba* is therefore the personification of that which will enable a rebirth consciousness to emerge and thus enable an embryo to begin its existence.

Still more precisely, the connotations of *gandhabba* adopted by Buddhism will shed some light on the immediate antecedent of rebirth consciousness, the way in which the flow of the previous existence, directed by the *kamma*, conditions the new existence.

The *gandhabba*: a messenger

The Pañcasikha episode mentioned above illustrates an essential function of the *gandhabba*, that of messenger; among the various meanings and connotations of *gandha*, we also find those of “connection”, “putting people in touch”²⁸. The *gandhabba* therefore personifies that which brings to a future embryo a complex message, the *kamma*, sent by a being whose life is coming to an end.

The *gandhabba*: an extreme subtlety

The association of *gandhabbā* with natural and particularly fine perfumes illustrates the extreme subtlety (among the various meanings and connotations of *gandha*, we also find those of “minute quantity”²⁹) of the “bearer of the message” from the previous existence, in other words of its concrete mode of transmission.

There is no reserve of the destroyed elements (*dhammā*),
nor a reserve of future elements,
and the present elements are unstable
like seeds on the point of a needle.

The dissolution of the present elements is highlighted,
which are destructible and do not mix with the previous ones.

We cannot see where they come from or where they go once they have been destroyed;

²⁶ *Kaṅkhāvitaraṇavisuddhiniddesa (Visuddhimagga II/19/#690).*

²⁷ *Sanḅhārapaccayāvīññānapadavitthārakathā (Visuddhimagga II/17/#632).*

²⁸ *Gandhaḥ*, -7, Vaman Shivaram Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, p. 647.

²⁹ *Idem*, -3.

| they appear like lightning in the sky and then disappear.³⁰

The *gandhabba*: an individual message

The almost infinite multiplicity and composition of fragrances illustrates individuation (among the different meanings of *gandha*, we find that of “the specific fragrance of each thing”³¹), the singular complexity of the elements transmitted from the previous being to the next.

The *gandhabba*: a wave

The *gandhabba* is first and foremost a musician and a singer. The melody produced by his instrument and his voice – no two melodies are exactly alike – is transmitted to listeners by waves: long before the time of the Buddha, the importance of the notions of vibration and waves had already been emphasised, to the point of being integrated into cosmology; it should also be noted that Vāc, mother of the Gandharvas, is the Vedic deity who represents “the eternal vibration”; it is she who sends inspiration to poets and visionaries, who gives the energy to express themselves to those to whom she is attached; and she is the wife of Prajapati, the Vedic personification of the mind.

The sound waves of the *gandhabba* are therefore probably the closest we have come to understanding the nature of the medium of the “data transmission” between two existences, even if we are still a long way from having unravelled all the mysteries of this medium.³²

Conclusion

| When the noble disciple understands birth, when he understands the origin of birth, when he understands the cessation of birth, when he understands the path that leads to the cessation of birth, at that point, brother, the noble disciple has a correct view, his view is straight, he is filled with firm confidence in the Dhamma, he attains the true Dhamma.³³

The primary objective of the Buddha is to free us from suffering (*dukkha*), that is, from the painful wandering (*samsāra*) from death to rebirth. The Buddha, teaching only what is directly useful for this liberation (*vimutti*), will concentrate his analyses on everything that feeds the attachment of the being to the cycle of rebirths: if attachment ceases, rebirths cease.

Knowing the other elements of the rebirth process becomes useless, if not risky: if you are too interested in satisfying your curiosity about the precise course of the passage from one existence to another, you end up focusing on this episode, trying to draw out what might make it easier to be reborn, and therefore fuelling the desire to be reborn, which is the opposite of the initial objective.

This helps us to understand the rarity of the personification of the *gandhabba*; the image of the messenger musician is enough to remind us of the essential: the *kamma* melody, tenacious, accompanies us from existence to existence until we decide not to hum it any more.

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³⁰ *Guhaṭṭhakaṣutta-niddesa* (S/KHU/Mahāniddesa/2/#10).

³¹ *Gandhaḥ*, -3, Vaman Shivaram Apte, *op. cit.*, p. 647.

³² In our view, modern science comes close when it studies the “cerebral rhythm”, the electromagnetic oscillation emitted by the brain of every living being.

³³ *Sammādiṭṭhisutta* (S/MAJ I/1/9/#93). This remarkable *Discourse on the Right View* is the work of the Venerable Sāriputta, the most eminent disciple of the Buddha.

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