

**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.*

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### **Abstract**

In the discourse or writings of authors belonging to the Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions, the assertion regularly appears that the idea of an intermediate state between death and rebirth – of an *antarābhava*, the Sanskrit and Pāli equivalent of the Tibetan *bardo* – is already present in the Theravāda doctrine. This article demonstrates that this is not the case; neither in its earliest texts nor in its later developments has Theravāda modified its initial position: there is no such thing as an *antarābhava*.

Surprisingly, a similar idea is being put forward with increasing frequency by authors belonging to the Theravāda tradition. Under the influence of competing traditions, or out of a concern for an 'inter-Buddhist ecumenism', these authors are trying to detect clues to their view in the texts of the Pāli Canon. This article examines each of these clues and draws a conclusion: these authors are re-opening, without bringing any new elements, the debate sparked off by the antique “personalist” schools; a debate, in our view, won and closed by Theravāda more than two millennia ago.

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### **Introduction**

The opinion that the existence of an intermediate state between death and rebirth (or more precisely between death and re-conception) would figure, under the name of *antarābhava*, in the Pāli Canon, is frequently expressed; either by authors belonging to the Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna traditions and wishing to find an ancient premise for their own doctrine; or by authors belonging to the Theravāda traditions, with unexpressed objectives, but probably partly under pressure from the aforementioned currents.

The existence or not of such an intermediate state is not an anecdotal point of doctrine; it is both important in itself (“something”, physical and/or mental, would survive death and precede the new conception) and in its practical consequences (it would be possible to reorientate the being during this intermediate period); it is so important, moreover, that one wonders why the Buddha, analysing in the slightest detail phenomena and processes sometimes less essential, does not seem<sup>1</sup> to have included it in his teachings.

In a first part, we will demonstrate that the idea of the existence of an intermediate state is, without any ambiguity, considered as deviant by the Theravāda, not only because it does not appear

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<sup>1</sup> Some authors consider that the existence of an intermediate state did indeed figure in the original teachings, but that Theravāda orthodoxy deliberately erased it, a 'proof' being provided by the existence of this opinion in certain ancient heterodox currents.

in the teachings of the Buddha but also because it is in itself contrary to the *Dhamma*.

In a second part, we will briefly highlight the causes of this deviation.

In the third part, we shall endeavour to demonstrate point by point the weakness of the arguments in favour of the recognition of an intermediate state accumulated by certain authors belonging to the Theravāda tradition.

## 1. The Theravāda position

### 1.1. The term *antarābhava* in the Theravāda texts

#### 1.1.1. *Antarābhava*

*Antarābhava* is a word which presents no difficulty of understanding. It is composed of the noun *bhava*, “the mode of existence”, including a becoming – *bhava* designates the plane of existence in which one lives, and into which one is reborn after death as long as one has not been able to free oneself from the *saṃsāra* – accompanied by the adjective *antara*, “in-between”, “intermediate”. It is therefore rightly translated as “intermediate state”; and it unambiguously denotes a state between death and rebirth.

#### 1.1.2. The presence of the word in the texts

Does the word *antarābhava* occur in canonical (the *Tipiṭaka*), post-canonical (the *Commentaries* – *Aṭṭakathā* – and *Sub-Commentaries* – *Ṭikā* ) and quasi-canonical texts (guides, manuals and various collections)?

*Antarābhava (all declensions)*

	Canon	Commentaries	Sub-Commentaries	Manuals
<b><i>Vinaya-piṭaka</i></b>				
<b><i>Suttā-piṭaka</i></b> <i>Khuddhaka-nikāya</i> - <i>Nettipakaraṇa</i> <sup>2</sup> - <i>Udāna</i> - <i>Apadāna</i>		2 4 1	3	
Other <i>nikāyā</i>		3	4	
<b><i>Abhidhamma-piṭaka</i></b> - <i>Kathāvatthu</i> - Other books	61	10	15 1	11

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

This research leads us to the following conclusions:

a) The word is totally absent from the heart (*mūla*) of the *Vinaya-piṭaka* and the *Sutta-piṭaka*<sup>3</sup>; it is mentioned only in the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*.

b) The word is mentioned only in a single section of a single book of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*: the

<sup>2</sup> This book from around the first century is a guide to explaining the canonical texts. The work is integrated into the *Khuddhaka-Nikāya* only by the Burmese tradition.

<sup>3</sup> It is not even mentioned in reference dictionaries such as the *Pali-English Dictionary* of the Pali Text Society or the *Buddhist Dictionary* of the Venerable Nyanatiloka.

*Antarābhavakathā* section of the *Kathāvatthu*, a collection devoted... to the refutation of doctrinal deviations.

c) The occurrences in the *Commentaries*, *Sub-Commentaries* and manuals are all, without exception, restatements of the assertions and demonstrations of the *Kathāvatthu*.

The notion of *antarābhava* is therefore mentioned in the Theravāda texts only to be criticised; between the ancient text of the middle of the third century BCE, the *Commentaries* written at the beginning of the fifth century CE, and the *Sub-Commentaries* and manuals written during the following centuries, the criticisms have remained unchanged: the notion of *antarābhava* has not undergone any late development, let alone any form of acceptance.

## 1.2. The orthodox position

The doctrinal position of Theravāda regarding the existence of an *antarābhava* is summed up in one clear-cut formula:

| *Sabbena sabbaṃ natthi nāma antarābhavo.*<sup>4</sup>

| There is absolutely no intermediate state, that is certain.

This position is mainly asserted and defended in the *Kathāvatthu*, its *Commentary*<sup>5</sup> and its *secondary Sub-Commentary*:

- *Antarābhavakathā* (*Abh/Kathāvatthu/8/74-2/#505-509*).

- *Antarābhavakathāvaṇṇanā* (*Aṭṭ/Abh/Pañcapakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā/Kathāvatthu-aṭṭhakathā/8/2*).

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

The *Kathāvatthu*, the fifth book of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, is, as its name suggests, “Objects of Discussion” or “Points of Controversy”, a collection presenting a critical examination of doctrinal views considered to be misunderstandings of the *Dhamma*. The formatting of these texts is attributed by tradition to the Thera Moggaliputtatissa, spiritual guide to the emperor Aśoka and initiator of the Third Council (250 BCE); while the survey of deviant positions was certainly initiated at that time, there is little doubt that many new elements were added over the following centuries, as new deviations appeared or old ones evolved.

The texts in this collection are difficult for the reader to approach: for centuries, these “points of controversy” were recited and immediately commented on, helping the listeners to understand; for the isolated reader, the task is much more difficult, insofar as arguments and counter-arguments are interwoven without any indication of the participants, following a complex logic<sup>6</sup>; and in many cases, there is no formal conclusion, since it seems to be so self-imposed. Fortunately, the *Commentary* and *Sub-Commentary* add a little order and clarity to the textual labyrinth; the only English translation of the *Kathāvatthu* – Shwe Zang Aung, Mrs Rhys Davids, “Points of Controversy”, Pali Text Society, London, 1915 – intelligently integrates extracts from the *Commentary* to support the main text.

The *Commentary*<sup>7</sup> summarises the orthodox position as follows:

| Some – as for example the Pubbaseliyā and the Sammitiyā – due to an inattentive understanding [*ayoniso*] of the expression “*antarāparinibbāyī*” found in the *suttā*, profess [*gaheti*] the heterodox view [*laddhi*]: “There is undoubtedly [*nāma*] an intermediate

<sup>4</sup> *Antarābhavakathāvaṇṇanā* (*Ṭikā/Abh/Pañcapakaraṇa-anuṭṭikā/Kathāvatthupakaraṇa-anuṭṭikā/8/2/#505*).

<sup>5</sup> Text compiled and written down by Buddhaghosa at the beginning of the 5th century.

<sup>6</sup> This logic is presented by C.A.F. Rhys Davids, p. XLVIII *sq.* of his luminous introduction to the translation of the *Kathāvatthu*.

<sup>7</sup> *Antarābhavakathāvaṇṇanā* (*Aṭṭ/Abh/Pañcapakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā/Kathāvatthu-aṭṭhakathā/8/2/#505*).

state [*antarābhavo*] in which [*yattha*] the being [*satto*] [...<sup>8</sup>] stands in expectation [*tiṭṭhati*] of the moment of his re-conception [*mātāpitisamāgamañceva utusamayañca olokayamāno*] for seven days or longer.”

[...] The counter-argument is founded on Bhagavā's assertion that there are only three modes of existence<sup>9</sup> [*bhavā*]: the mode of existence with senses [*kāmabhava*], the mode of existence with form [*rūpabhava*], the mode of existence without form [*arūpabhava*].

From these paragraphs we can extract the three keys to the Theravāda position:

- (1) Some Buddhist currents defend the idea that there is an intermediate state in which a person who has just died awaits rebirth for a week or more.
- (2) This deviant idea stems from the misinterpretation of a term found in the suttā: *antarāparinibbāyī*.
- (3) Orthodox criticism is based mainly on the Buddha's teaching that there are only three modes of existence: *kāmabhava*, *rūpabhava*, *arūpabhava*.

### 1.2.1. The deviant currents

While the *Kathāvatthu* gives no details of the proponents of the deviant position, the *Commentary* mentions two currents, that of the Pubbaseliyā – a sub-branch of the Andhakā – and that of the Sammitiyā. The present study is not the place for a presentation of these currents<sup>10</sup>; we need only note that both belonged to the more general category of “personalists”, who had in common the search for an intermediate path between the Brahmanical affirmation of the substantiality of the *ātman* and the Buddha's denial of the existence of an *attā*; this very narrow path involved 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. Vātsīputrīya), which was very important numerically and lasted until around the tenth century CE.

This deviant path was progressively enriched by the introduction of a division of the life cycle into four successive phases (existence between birth and death, existence at the moment of death, intermediate existence between death and re-conception, existence at the moment of rebirth), by establishing the duration of the intermediate state (from 7 to 49 days), by defining the form of the intermediate being, its behaviour, capacities and conditioning – as we shall see below, the *Kathāvatthu* controversy also deals with these last points.

### 1.2.2. The origin of the deviation: the misunderstanding of the expression *antarāparinibbāyī*

The authors of the *Kathāvatthu* were certainly not unaware of the root cause of the deviation: the desire to maintain an “essential”, or “substantial” individuality at all costs, travelling from existence to existence. Nor were they unaware that it was this desire that drove deviants to try to find between the lines of the *suttā* a justification for their belief.

<sup>8</sup> The text specifies here: “whether or not he possesses the 'divine eye' (*dibbacakkhu*), whether or not he possesses the 'powers' (*iddhī*)”; this means that this intermediate state would not only concern beings on the path to Liberation, it would concern all beings (but, it would seem, exclusively human beings).

<sup>9</sup> And consequently, what is essential here, three possible destinations (*lokā*) after death.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding these currents, it would be useful to refer again to the above-mentioned introduction by C.A.F. Rhys Davids, or more generally to the book by Étienne Lamotte, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien. Des origines à l'ère Saka*, Publications universitaires & Institut orientaliste, Louvain, 1958.

Nevertheless, the first step of the *Kathāvatthu* is to annihilate the textual pseudo-justification of the existence of an intermediate state: heresy is first defined by the more or less conscious misunderstanding or misappropriation of the words of the Buddha.

This misunderstanding, this thoughtless interpretation (*ayonisa*), relates to an expression found in the *suttā*: *antarāparinibbāyī*.

So that we too can appreciate the weakness of this reference, let us look at this expression; to understand it properly, it is necessary to recall the different categories of “noble disciples” (*ariyapuggalā*) and, among these, the different categories of *anāgāmī*.

■ **The categories of “noble disciples”** are omnipresent in the *suttā*<sup>11</sup>.

*The 8 categories of noble disciples (aṭṭha ariyapuggalā) in ascending order of success*

1-	“The one realising the path of stream-winning“	
2 - <i>Sotāpanna</i> - - <i>sattakkhattuparama sotāpanna</i> - <i>kolaṅkola sotāpanna</i> - <i>ekabjī sotāpanna</i>	“The one realising the fruition of stream-winning“	Cannot be reborn more than 8 times: - reborn no more than 7 times - reborn 2 or 3 times - reborn only 1 time
3 -	“The one realising the path of once-return“	
4 - <i>Sakadāgāmī</i>	“The one realising the fruition of once-return“	
5 -	“The one realising the path of non-return“	
6 - <i>Anāgāmī</i>	“The one realising the fruition of non-return“	
7 -	“The one realising the path of Liberation“	
8 - <i>Arahā</i>	“The one realising the fruition of Liberation“	

■ **The *anāgāmī* are subdivided into 5 categories**

Ancient Buddhism knows 31 planes of existence, 26 of which are “favourable”, breaking down into 7 planes of existence with earthly or celestial senses (*kāmaloka*), 12 celestial planes “with form” and 4 celestial planes “with subtle form” (*rūpaloka*), 4 celestial planes “without form” (*arūpaloka*). The lowest of the 5 celestial planes “with form” are “reserved” for the *anāgāmī*.

After their human death, having destroyed the 5 chains (*saṃyojanā*) binding beings to the lower existences (*orambhāgiyā*), the *anāgāmī* therefore take birth again in one of the high planes of existence (*Suddhāvāsā*) where they alone can be reborn: the planes of the Avihā, the Sudassā, the Sudassī and the Akaniṭṭhā. It is in one of these planes that they eventually attain the *parinibbāna*; and

<sup>11</sup> For example: *Saṅgītisutta* (S/DĪG III/10/8/#333), *Pahārādasutta* (S/ANG VIII/2/9/#19). See also the lists and explanations given in Book IV of the *Abhidhamma*, the *Puggalapaññatti* (ABH IV/Niddeso/1/#31-44).

it is their different paths through these planes that enables the *anāgāmi* to be classified into five categories<sup>12</sup>:

<i>Antarāparinibbāyī</i>	“The one who attains the <i>parinibbāna</i> during the first half of his existence”
<i>Upahaccaparinibbāyī</i>	“The one who attains the <i>parinibbāna</i> beyond the first half of his existence”
<i>Asaṅkhāraparinibbāyī</i>	“The one who does not have to make an effort to reach the <i>parinibbāna</i> ”
<i>Sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyī</i>	“The one who must make an effort to reach the <i>parinibbāna</i> ”
<i>Uddhamsoto akaniṭṭhagāmi</i>	“The one who attains <i>parinibbāna</i> after having traversed the highest divine existences”

This twofold reminder enables us to see that the term *antarāparinibbāyī* refers only to a half-duration of life in one of the planes of existence “with subtle form” (*rūpaloka*) necessary for certain beings, those who have attained the degree of spiritual development of the *anāgāmi*, to reach their *parinibbāna*.

The term *antarāparinibbāyī* therefore in no way refers to an intermediate state between the death and rebirth of beings; such an interpretation is quite deviant. This is what the *Kathāvatthu* points out in response to an argument from the opposite current:

- Are there not *antarāparinibbāyī*? If so, are we not right?
- Once we accept that there are such beings, does that mean that they are a distinct intermediate state? Yes, you say. But granted that there are also *upahaccaparinibbāyī*, is it also for them a distinct intermediate state? If you deny this, it also invalidates your proposition. And the same argument applies to *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyī* and *sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyī*.<sup>13</sup>

### 1.2.3. The orthodox counter-argument: there are only three states of existence

The main counter-argument is based on the affirmation by the Buddha and his great disciples that there are only three states of existence:

- There are, brother, three modes of existence (*bhavā*): the sensual mode of existence (*kāmabhava*), the mode of existence with form (*rūpabhava*), the mode of existence without form (*arūpabhava*).<sup>14</sup>

If the “intermediate” *bhava* does not belong to one of these three categories, it cannot exist:

- If there is such a state, you must identify it as either *kāmabhava*, *rūpabhava* or *arūpabhava*, which you refuse to do.<sup>15</sup>

Confronting the claim of an “intermediate state” with the precise content of the doctrine, the *Kathāvatthu* does not content itself with the reference to the exclusive existence of three *bhavā*; it also mobilises all the classifications of the *Dhamma* relating to the existence of the being<sup>16</sup>:

<sup>12</sup> For example: *Sīlasutta* (S/SAM V/2/1/3/#184).

<sup>13</sup> *Antarābhavakathā* (*Abh/Kathāvatthu/8/74-2/#509*).

<sup>14</sup> *Sammādiṭṭhi-sutta* (S/MAJ I/1/9 #94).

<sup>15</sup> *Antarābhavakathā* (*Abh/Kathāvatthu/8/74-2/#505*).

<sup>16</sup> As listed, for example, in the *Saṅgītisutta* (S/DĪG III/10).

Is [*antarābhava*] a fifth mode of generation (*yoni*)<sup>17</sup>? Is it a sixth possible destination of rebirth (*gati*)<sup>18</sup>? Is it an eighth type of support for rebirth consciousness (*viññāṇaṭṭhiti*)<sup>19</sup>? Is it a tenth place of existence for beings (*sattāvāsa*)<sup>20</sup>? Is it a plane of existence (*bhava*), a destination of rebirth (*gati*), a world of existence (*sattāvāsa*), does it belong to the cycle of rebirths (*samsāra*), is it a mode of generation (*yoni*), a support for rebirth consciousness (*viññāṇaṭṭhiti*), a place for acquiring individuality (*attabhāvapaṭilābhoti*)? Are we led to this state by the *kamma*? Are there beings who progress towards this state? Are beings born there, grow old there, die there, leave there to be reborn elsewhere? In this intermediate state are there matter (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*saṅkhārā*), consciousness (*viññāṇa*)? Is it a mode of existence with five aggregates<sup>21</sup> (*pañcavokārabhava*)?

To all these questions you answer in the negative. How, then, can you maintain your position? [...] If there is an intermediate state, you should be able to attribute some or all [of these categories] to it, but you say that you cannot.<sup>22</sup>

Once the uncertainties about the nature and characteristics of this “intermediate state” have been highlighted, a complementary counter-argument is to point out that this state does not concern all beings and that the list of those concerned is also confusing.

You deny that there is an intermediate state for all beings. Your proposition is therefore not universally valid. You deny this intermediate state to those whose retribution for deeds is immediate [...], to those who are reborn in a hell (*niraya*), to those who are reborn among the non-conscious *devā*<sup>23</sup>, to those who are reborn in one of the formless planes (*arūpa*) [...] You therefore maintain that there is an intermediate state only for [all others<sup>24</sup>].<sup>25</sup>

These exchanges between the proponents of orthodoxy and those of the new currents seem to highlight the fact that the position of the latter was not yet perfectly established; if the deviant thinkers had had other, more solid arguments, it is certain that the editors of the *Kathāvatthu* would have endeavoured to respond to them. This seems to confirm the antiquity of this section of the fifth book of the *Abhidhamma*, but also of its *Aṭṭakathā* – written down at the dawn of the fifth century from older sources: both would have been conceived before the idea of an intermediate state was perfected, consolidated, integrated into a coherent doctrine by Vasubandhu<sup>26</sup> and Asaṅga<sup>27</sup>, and finally adopted by the Vijñavāda current of the Mahāyāna.

<sup>17</sup> The four modes of generation are: in an egg, in a womb, in mould, immediately in a hell or in a paradise – *Saṅgītisutta* (S/DĪG III/10/4/#312).

<sup>18</sup> The five destinations are: a hell, animality, a ghostly existence, humanity and a paradise – *Saṅgītisutta* (S/ DĪG III/10/5/#315).

<sup>19</sup> Beings can have different bodies and different perceptions (like human beings), different bodies but identical perceptions (like certain deities), etc. – *Saṅgītisutta* (S/DĪG III/10/7/#332). Cf. the article ‘*viññāṇaṭṭhiti*’ in the *Buddhist Dictionary* by the Venerable Nyanatiloka.

<sup>20</sup> Notion close to *viññāṇaṭṭhiti* – *Saṅgītisutta* (S/DĪG III/10/9/#341). Cf. the article ‘*sattāvāsa*’ in the *Buddhist Dictionary* by the Venerable Nyanatiloka.

<sup>21</sup> The five *khandhā* listed in the previous question.

<sup>22</sup> *Antarābhavakathā* (*Abh/Kathāvatthu*/8/74-2/#506-507).

<sup>23</sup> In this plane, only subtle matter exists, the spirit is temporarily suspended.

<sup>24</sup> Consequently, 25 out of 31 plans of existence would be concerned by the existence of an intermediate state.

<sup>25</sup> D’après *Antarābhavakathā* (*Abh/Kathāvatthu*/8/74-2/#508).

<sup>26</sup> In the commentary (*Bhāṣya*) on his *Abhidharmakośa*.

<sup>27</sup> In his *Yogacārābhūmi*. According to tradition, Asaṅga was Vasubandhu's elder half-brother and gradually converted this doctor of Theravāda Buddhism to the theses of the Mahāyāna, in fact to those of the Vijñavāda school, of which he was probably the founder.

### 1.3. The process of death and the passage from death to rebirth according to Theravāda

The Theravāda position is not based solely on textual references, even if this argument is itself already solid and admissible: if an intermediate state existed between death and rebirth, this would be such an important point of doctrine that the Buddha would undoubtedly have clearly stated and explained it; however, this is not the case.

On the contrary, the assertion of the existence of an intermediate state would contradict essential elements of the *Dhamma*.

#### 1.3.1. At death, nothing remains

The Theravāda position finds its primary justification in one of the “three characteristics” (*tilakkhaṇa*): *anattatā*, the absence of an *attā*, i.e. of anything in us that would be permanent and immortal.<sup>28</sup>

In the absence of anything “essential” or “substantial” (in the sense of Western philosophy) migrating from one existence to another, death results in the cessation of the physical and psychic life of the person who dies; in Buddhist terms, the five *khandhā* (the aggregate of matter and the four aggregates of the mind: sensations, perceptions, other mental factors, which co-produce consciousness) are destroyed.

In a five-component existence, the psychic and the physical support each other. If one collapses as a result of death, so does the other.

The ancients used to say: “the psychic and the physical combine and support each other.

When one breaks down, both break down because they are linked”.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, after death, there can be no in-between occupied by “something” that would come from the previous being.

There is no store of destroyed elements (*anidhānagatā bhaggā*), nor a store of future elements (*puñjo natthi anāgate*), and the present elements are unstable like seeds placed on the point of a needle.

We highlight the dissolution of the elements (*dhammā*) present, 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; they appear like lightning in the sky and then disappear.<sup>30</sup>

Since no element comes from the previous existence, the rebirth that follows requires the complete recomposition of a being, a total (especially for human beings) or partial (for certain *devā*) re-assembly of *khandhā*. *Kathāvatthu* polemicists are therefore entitled to ask their interlocutors about the exact characteristics of the “intermediate state”, about the number and nature of the *khandhā* that would make up this type of existence.

#### 1.3.2. The continuity according to Theravāda

If the heterodox interlocutors of the *Kathāvatthu* seem to struggle to explain the characteristics of their “intermediate state”, Theravāda, on the other hand, explains in detail the process of continuity from one existence to the next in the absence of anything essential or substantial left over from the previous existence. This explanation is the subject of several thousand pages of canonical texts,

<sup>28</sup> Didier Treutenaere, *Bouddhisme et re-naissances dans la tradition Theravāda*, Éditions Soukha, Paris, 3<sup>ème</sup> édition, 2023, p. 176 sq.

<sup>29</sup> *Upamāhi nāmarūpavibhāvanā (Visuddhimagga II/18/# 675)*.

<sup>30</sup> *Guhaṭṭhakasutta-niddesa (S/KHU/Mahāniddesa/2/#10)*.



mainly in the gigantic Book VII of the *Abhidhamma*, the *Paṭṭhāna*, in its *Commentary* (*Paṭṭhānapakarāṇa-aṭṭhakathā*), its *Primary Subcommentary*, (*Paṭṭhānapakarāṇa-mūlaṭṭkā*), its *Secondary Subcommentary* (*Paṭṭhānapakarāṇa-anuṭṭkā*) and in *Abhidhamma* manuals, such as the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaho*.

From the infinite precision of the analyses in these texts, one indisputable conclusion emerges: the ultimate unity of thought of the dying person immediately conditions the formation of the first unity of thought of an embryo.

It is the knowledge of the flow of the mind that allows a conclusion of this kind to be reached.

## ■ The flow of the mind

The mind presents itself in both a passive and an active mode; the passive mode gives way to the active mode when a stimulus is received through one of the sense gates. The passive state of mind is called *bhavaṅga-citta*.

*Bhavaṅga* is a delicate term to translate: the term *bhava* means, as we have seen, “becoming”, “existence”; the term *aṅga* in this compound word is often explained in the *Commentaries* using the word “cause” (*kāraṇa*); the whole would therefore mean “cause of (the continuation of) existence”; *aṅga*, however, has an alternative meaning, that of “link”; the whole would therefore also mean “link of existence”.

*Bhavaṅga* generally refers to the state of rest to which the mind returns in the absence of stimuli, all awareness of the body and external objects then disappearing; it can in the present context be translated as “the continuum of life”; *bhavaṅga-citta* is the primary form of the mind; it flows linearly from conception to death, only interrupted by the multitude of stimuli successively received via the senses.

When a stimulus intervenes, consciousness becomes active, embarking on a thought process (*citta vīthi*). A complete thought process consists of 17 thought moments when stimulated by a material object.

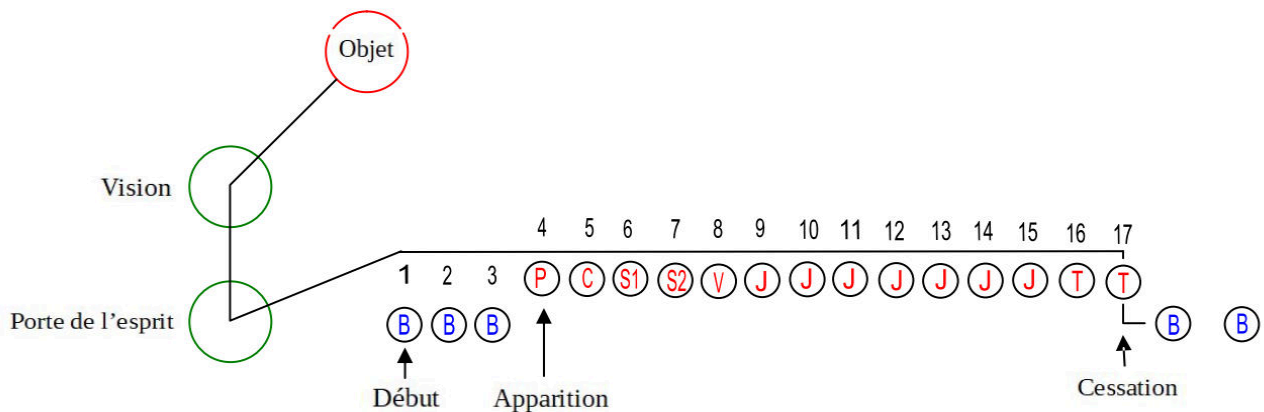
- (1) a moment that ends as soon as one of the five sense organs comes into contact with its object: *aṭṭā bhavaṅga*, “past *bhavaṅga*”;
- (2) a moment of vibration (*calana*) of the *bhavaṅga*;
- (3) a moment that interrupts (*upaccheda*) the *bhavaṅga*;
- (4) a moment when thought turns towards the object, through the door of the senses that has just been stimulated (*pañca-dvāra-vajjana*);
- (5) a moment of awareness (*viññāṇa*) corresponding to the sense stimulated: visual awareness, auditory awareness, etc.;
- (6) a moment during which the object is received: *sampañicchana citta*;
- (7) a moment whose function is to “penetrate” the object received: *santīrana citta*;
- (8) a moment of volition: *kamma*.

The object having been actively determined, the most important stage follows: this stage, called *javanā* (“the dazzling ones”), consists of seven moments of thought, (9) to (15), all of the same nature, succeeding one another even more rapidly than the preceding ones; it is at this stage that the “good” and the “bad” are constituted, depending on whether the volition has a positive root (i.e. goes in the direction of Liberation) or not. These moments of thought are both born from *kamma* and produce *kamma*.

After the seventh *javana* comes the stage of realisation, consisting of two moments of thought (*tadā-lambana*), (16) and (17).

At the end of these two moments, the *bhavaṅga* flows, until it is again interrupted by another thought process.

Example – thought process generated by a visual object (in French)



### ■ The flow of the mind at the instant of death

The tradition divides this process into a series of moments of thought, the number of which varies according to the nature (positive or negative) of the *kamma* in action at that particular moment.

- Moment of thought (-15): an image, a sign (*nimitta*) representing a past volition, spontaneously presents itself to the mind of the being who is about to die. This sign is generally called *gati-nimitta*, “destination sign”, because it indicates more or less clearly the future state of rebirth.
- Moment of thought (-14): past *bhavaṅga*.
- Moment of thought (-13): vibration of the *bhavaṅga*.
- Moment of thought (-12): interruption of the *bhavaṅga*.
- Moment of thought (-11): orientation towards the “mental door” (*mano-dvāra-vajjana*).
- Moment of thought (-10): moment of mental awareness (*mano viññāṇa*).
- Moments of thought (-9) to (-3): seven final tenuous *javanā*, weak producers of *kamma*; in any case, the latter is no longer really creative and only intervenes as a regulator of future existence (*abhinava-karaṇam*) by conditioning the “consciousness of rebirth”. The number of these *javanā* is in most cases reduced to five “because the vibration is attenuated by the proximity of death.”<sup>31</sup>
- Moments of thought (-2) and (-1): moments of “realisation” thought (*tadā-lambana*). These two moments do not exist when the dying person has cultivated a *jhāna* and is moving towards a good destiny.<sup>32</sup>
- Moment of thought (0): the thought of death (*cuti-citta*) is the last moment of thought that can be experienced during the life that is coming to an end. It is important to appreciate the difference between this moment and those that precede it: *cuti-citta* in no way determines the nature of rebirth; the *javanā*, for their part, still belonged to the *kamma* process, sinking their roots into it and determining the nature of rebirth consciousness.

With the cessation of this ultimate moment of consciousness comes death. Of the four sources that fuel (*āhāra*) existence, namely intentional actions (*kamma*), mental factors (*citta*), nutrients (*kabalīṅkārahāra*) and energy (*teja*), only the latter continues in the form of heat and declines until the body, ultimately, is reduced to dust or ashes.

<sup>31</sup> *Saṅkhārapaccayāviññāṇapadavitthārakathā* (*Visuddhimagga* II/17/#624 sq.).

<sup>32</sup> *Idem*.

## ■ The flow of the mind at the instant of rebirth

*Paṭisandhi-citta* is the thought process that appears at the first moment of life, at the time of conception; this process is aroused by the last thought moments of the previous kamma-producing life: this is how the orientations of past lives condition *paṭisandhi-citta*. In the course of a particular life, there is only one *paṭisandhi-citta*: once the linking function between the two lives performed by the *paṭisandhi* is complete, the consciousness of the embryo immediately forms a *bhavaṅga-citta* which will again flow throughout existence, again find itself ceaselessly interrupted by an infinity of stimuli and again end in a *cuti-citta*. If we return here to the description of the process we suspended with the ultimate moment of thought (*cuti-citta*), this process is completed by two new moments:

- Moment of thought (+1): rebirth consciousness (*paṭisandhi viññāṇa*).
- Moment of thought (+2): installation of the *bhavaṅga-citta*.

*Tatheva paṭisandhimhi, vattate cittasantati;*  
*Purimaṃ bhijjate cittaṃ, pacchimaṃ jāyate tato.*  
*Tesam antarikā natthi, vīci tesam 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.<sup>33</sup>

As is the succession of moments of thought during life, the continuity of the flow from death to rebirth is uninterrupted. The only difference between the passage from one thought to another in the course of a lifetime and the passage from the moment of thought of death to the consciousness of rebirth is the concomitant disappearance of the physical and psychic elements constituting one being and the appearance of the physical and psychic elements constituting a new being.

The Theravāda doctrine on the process of rebirth therefore leaves absolutely no room for an intermediate state.<sup>34</sup> The immediate aftermath of the death is an immediate conditioning in the conception of an embryo.

The individual continuity that heterodox thinkers so feared (and fear) disappearing is not erased by this passage from one life to another. Moments of consciousness are separate but, insofar as they are conditioned, they constitute a stream that flows infinitely; there is a multitude of these streams, each person being part of one of them; so, just as it is possible to speak of an identical “individual” in the course of a lifetime, it is possible to say that an “individual” is reborn as part of a continuity, without this requiring any permanence or any transfer of spirit or matter.

A simple phenomenon (*dhamma*) comes into existence as a result of the adequate 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 satta 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.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *Kankhāvitaraṇavisuddhiniddesa (Visuddhimagga II/19/#690).*

<sup>34</sup> Except if we consider that this state would itself be subject to a process of rebirth...

<sup>35</sup> *Sāṅkhārapaccayāviññāṇapadavitthārakathā2 (Visuddhimagga II/17/#632).*

The practical consequences of this teaching are very important: everything that determines the new existence must be accomplished before death; there is no space where lost time can be made up for – in Buddhist terms, where the kamma can still evolve. For a bereaved family, the desire and inability to act on behalf of the deceased can be eminently frustrating and can fuel pressure for more reassuring beliefs and practices.

## 2. The confusion of the practices

It has to be said that the assertion of the impossibility of an intermediate state, a perfectly orthodox assertion since no text in the Therā Canon explicitly refers to such a state (and indeed the opposite is firmly taught there) did not (and still does not) succeed in counteracting the opposite belief, a belief widely held among the populations following the Therā Way and, as a result, unfortunately shared by a number of *bhikkhū*.

The undoubtedly heterodox but widespread pressure for the recognition of an intermediate state is easy to understand: for laypeople, only an intermediate state can open up the necessary space for rituals designed to guide their deceased loved ones towards the best possible rebirth and to pass on to them the benefits of ultimate “merits”; for a large number of *bhikkhū*, the affirmation of the existence of an intermediate state constitutes a justification for their ritualistic practices and even for their quasi-specialisation in this type of task, to the detriment of their mental culture and their progress towards Liberation. The belief in an intermediate state may therefore be one of the keys to harmony within the Buddhist community, one of the main reasons for the links forged between monks and laypeople: the sustenance of monastic communities in exchange for the practice of rituals, mainly funerary.

We are not far from thinking that it was precisely this combination of difficulty of understanding, rivalry with the surrounding religions, need for funerary rituals on the part of the survivors and justification of monastic status, that exerted such pressure in the centuries following the Buddha's death that the idea of an *antarābhava* gradually emerged.

## 3. The modern deviations within Theravāda

Some authors in the Theravāda tradition take a position diverging from orthodoxy on this question of the “intermediate state”.

In our opinion, their arguments resemble attempts to justify deviant practices and erroneous conceptions using roundabout references.

To our knowledge, all these arguments are grouped together in two articles in English, which partially refer to each other:

- Piya Tan, « Is Rebirth Immediate », 2003 (rev. 2010), <http://dharmafarer.org> (PT)
- Bhikkhu Sujato, « Rebirth and the In-between State in Early Buddhism », Closer-to-Reality Conference, Kuala Lumpur, 2008, (BS)

<https://santifm.org/santipada/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/RebirthandInbetweenState.pdf>

We will list these arguments (▶) and, as the *Kathāvatthu* did over two millennia ago, counter them with the arguments of orthodoxy (◀) – which we do share.

### 3.1. The rejection of the *Abhidhamma*

Since the doctrine is set out down to the last detail by the *Abhidhamma* and the “abhidhammic” *suttā* of the *Suttā-piṭaka*, how can these canonical texts be totally contradicted?

By rejecting them outright.

How is this rejection justified?

#### ■ “Late” texts?

▶ The *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* and the *Khuddhaka-nikāya* of the *Sutta-piṭaka* would be “late” texts; only the texts of the first four *nikāyā* of the *Sutta-piṭaka*, the closest chronologically to the original doctrine, would be reliable:

“The Abhidhammas are later compositions. Hence any serious attempt to investigate Early Buddhism must be based primarily on the *Āgama*<sup>36</sup> Suttas.” (BS p.2)

◀ Although the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* of the Theravāda is indeed a collection that remained open until it was written down around the beginning of our era, the book that interests us, the *Kathāvatthu*, is considered by the tradition to date back to the middle of the third century BCE, its composition having served as a basis for resolving differences at the “Council” convened by Emperor Aśoka. And his section on our subject, as we have seen, seems to confirm its antiquity, insofar as the arguments and counter-arguments presented do not have the maturity that the debates after the fourth century CE gave them. Moreover, it is not illegitimate to question the supposed greater antiquity, in comparison with the *Kathāvatthu*, of the versions of the *Āgamā* to which our authors refer.

#### ■ Texts too culturally marked and sectarian?

▶ “There is little need to fall back on the Abhidhamma and the Commentaries, since the latter two are themselves culturally bound and often sectarian”. (PT 1.2.1)

◀ This double reproach is surprising, to say the least. The *Abhidhamma* and its *Commentaries* only aim to present the doctrine of Theravāda, often by opposing it to the other doctrines; how can they be reproached for a lack of acceptance of contrary ideas? As for the assertion that these texts are too culturally bound (?) to be useful, this deserves to be explained, especially as the *Abhidhamma* makes precisely the effort of translating into purely technical and philosophical terms *suttā* that are much more deeply rooted in one of the Indian cultures of the second half of the first millennium before our era. And even more strangely, our author does not apply this criticism to the texts of the heterodox and schismatic schools from which he draws his inspiration.

#### ■ Useless texts?

▶ The *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* would be unnecessary, the first four *nikāyā* of the *Sutta-piṭaka* being sufficient to set forth clearly the Dhamma of the Buddha:

“If the Suttas are well-studied and analysed, all the essential doctrines are quite clearly and comprehensively expounded there”. (PT 1.1.3)

◀ This argument reflects the rivalry between two major trends within the Theravāda, one focusing on practice to the detriment of textual knowledge, the other focusing on texts, sometimes to the det-

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<sup>36</sup> We note the choice of using the term *āgama* in preference to the canonical Theravāda term: *nikāya*. The term *āgama* generally refers to the collections of “schools” other than Theravāda, texts essentially known through their Chinese translations and their versions in Sanskrit or Prakrit, and to a lesser extent in their versions in Gāndhārī and their translations into Tibetan. The logic of our authors is to look for the doctrinal points common to all these texts, which would guarantee their primitive character. This method is based on an absolutely false idea, that of a genealogical and chronological equality between the different Buddhist currents: Bhikkhu Sujato, which is regrettable for a Theravāda monk, adopts the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna viewpoint by asserting that “the early Buddhist community gradually fragmented into the various ‘schools’, traditionally numbered as ‘18’. The school we know as ‘Theravāda’ was one of these ‘18’ schools” (BS p.1). Cf. our article: *Pour en finir avec les termes “Petit Véhicule” (Hīnayāna)*, www.academia.edu, p.21 sq.

riment of practice. This rivalry, which dates back to the time of the Buddha himself<sup>37</sup>, persists today: the *Abhidhamma*, being the quintessence of the texts, is the object of a clear disdain on the part of the proponents of the first trend – among them, by way of example, the Thai current known as the “Forest Monks”<sup>38</sup> – and of a quasi-cult on the part of the proponents of the opposite tendency – among them, all the Burmese lineages<sup>39</sup>.

#### ■ Texts without any link to the meditative experience?

▶ The position in favour of an *antarābhava* would stem from the harmonious domination of textual knowledge by spiritual practice. The proponents of the orthodox position, on the other hand, would rely solely on intellectual arguments:

“When this understanding of spiritual scholarship is applied to the discussion of such salient problems as the nature of rebirth (whether it is immediate or not), we can uncover some clear evidences in the Canon itself that help us clarify this problem, which apparently even the *Abhidhamma* and the Commentaries have not totally addressed. Occasionally, if not frequently, the land-sighting bird has to return to the ship.” (PT 1.2.3)

◀ Could the authors and commentators of the *Abhidhamma* have been pure intellectuals who had lost sight of the practice of meditation? This remains to be proved, as there is much evidence to suggest the contrary: for example, the *Visuddhimagga* by Buddhaghosa, the main commentator on the *Abhidhamma*, demonstrates in every line his great knowledge of meditative techniques and processes, a knowledge necessarily supported by a profound practice. And, conversely, we could ask whether the lack of knowledge of the texts by certain monks and currents does not entail the risk of an erroneous subjective interpretation of their meditative experience...

#### ■ Texts diverging from the *suttā*?

▶ According to our authors, the *Abhidhamma* would ignore, or even contradict, on our subject as on many others, what the Buddha expounds in the *suttā*.

◀ Any serious researcher immersing himself in the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* discovers that it contains nothing but a systematic formatting of the doctrinal material contained in the *Sutta-piṭaka*, to which it explicitly refers. Its use of ordered and methodical thinking, its precise definitions of technical terms and the delimitation of their referents, its perfect mastery of the details of the doctrine, make it a remarkable and absolutely essential tool for the knowledge and practice of the *Dhamma*.

▶ These alleged internal contradictions of the Theravāda would be highlighted by comparison with the doctrines... of other currents:

“Interestingly, most if not all such early doctrines are echoed in other schools outside the Theravāda even when the Theravādins themselves differ (or appear to differ) from the Canon.” (PT 1.1.3)

This rejection of the *Abhidhamma* and of all “*abbhidhammic*” texts, too lightly motivated by our authors, allows them in any case to embark freely on a confused search for anything that might support their belief in an “intermediate state”.

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<sup>37</sup> The Canon reports Mahācunda's mediation in a quarrel between two “schools”, that of the Jhātī (“those who practise the *jhānā*”) and that of Dhamma-yoga (“the practice of the Teaching”); the Venerable recalls that both paths are necessary and equally respectable – *Māhacundasutta* (S/ĀṄG VI/5/4).

<sup>38</sup> Let us mention the extreme heterodoxy of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu (1906-1993) who translated the *pāli* prefix *abhi*, “high, elaborate”, by “extreme, excessive” and thus renamed the *Abhidhamma* “the superfluous part” of the Canon.

<sup>39</sup> Many rituals are, for example, organised around the twenty-four modes of conditionality that are the subject of the *Paṭṭhāna* and the recitation of the “table of contents” (*mātikā*) of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*.

### 3.2. Searching for clues in the *suttā*

The aforementioned argument that everything is clearly set out in the *suttā* seems, as far as our subject is concerned, to be invalidated by the laborious nature of the search for clues supporting the *antarābhava* thesis. BS moreover acknowledges the limits of the exercise:

“We must admit that the Āgama Suttas do not offer us a detailed explanation of such matters.” (BS p.3)<sup>40</sup>

Many of the passages quoted, though followed by the honest indication that they are not decisive, are nevertheless listed by our two authors, as if from their accumulation a quasi-certainty could emerge.

#### ■ The *Kutūhalasālāsutta* (S/SAM IV/10/9)

► This *sutta* is presented by our authors as “the most explicit statement in support of the in-between state” (BS p.6, PT 4.3):

[The Buddha:] [...] Vaccha, just as fire burns when it is fuelled, and no longer burns when it ceases to be fuelled, I teach that rebirth concerns the person who fuels it through attachment<sup>41</sup>, not the person who no longer fuels it.

[Vaccha:] But, Brother Gotama, when a flame is tossed by the wind and goes a long way, what does Brother Gotama declare to be its fuel?

[The Buddha:] Vaccha, when a flame is tossed by the wind and goes a long way, I declare that it is fuelled by the air. For, Vaccha, at that time, the air is the fuel.

[Vaccha:] And further, Brother Gotama, when a being has laid down this body (*kāyaṃ nikkhipati*), but has not yet been reborn (*upapajjati*) in another body, what does the Brother Gotama declare to be the fuel?

[The Buddha:] Vaccha, when a being has laid down this body, but has not yet been born in another body, it is fuelled by craving, I say. For, Vaccha, at that time, craving is the fuel (*taṇhūpādānaṃ*)<sup>42</sup>[...]

◀ The question asked by Vaccha and the answer given by the Buddha concern what sustains the being between death and rebirth. If there is necessarily a moment of connection between death and conception, this dialogue gives no indication of how long this moment lasts; and *a fortiori* no indication that this would not be an “instant” but a “state” (*bhava*). There is nothing to suggest that the “fuel of craving” needs several days to operate; during an existence, the duration of the units of consciousness and the duration of their connection are of the order of a millionth of a second (“a billionth of a flash of light” say the *Commentaries*); why should it be any different between the ultimate unit of consciousness of the dying person and the first unit of consciousness of the embryo? To prevent our counter-argument, an *a priori* is put forward:

“The idea of an immediate rebirth seems to me a rhetorical strategy to squeeze out the possibility of a Self sneaking through the gap. It agrees with the general tendency of Theravādin Abhidhamma, which always seeks to minimize time and eliminate grey areas.” (BS p.5)

The infinitesimal brevity of the units of consciousness and of the moments of causality that link

<sup>40</sup> The author rightly adds that this emptiness can be explained by the fact that the Buddha's teaching concerned liberation from the cycle of rebirths: he was therefore uninterested in the details of the mechanism of rebirths.

<sup>41</sup> This comparison is facilitated by the dual meaning of *upādāna*, which means both “nourishment” – that which enables a process to endure – and “attachment” – generated by the senses.

<sup>42</sup> *Taṇhā*, an ardent desire, of which the powerful desire to rebirth.

them, including during the process of rebirth, would therefore have no basis in the meditative experience; it would merely be an intellectual strategy to avoid “personalist” excesses. Here again, this remains to be demonstrated.

■ **The *Channovādasutta*** (S/MAJ III/5/2/#393)

▶ A sentence in this *sutta* is similarly presented as containing “evidently an allusion to the in-between state”. (BS p.7)

For one who is dependent there is wavering (*calita*); for one who is independent, there is no wavering. When there is no wavering, there is tranquillity. When there is tranquillity, there is no inclination (towards craving or existence) (*nati*). When there is no inclination, there is no coming and going (*agatigati*). When there is no coming and going, there is no passing away and rebirth (*cutūpapāta*). When there is no passing away and rebirth, there is neither here nor beyond nor in between the two (*na ubhayaṃ antarena*). This itself is the end of suffering.

The author himself considers that “the terminology used here is perhaps a little too vague to insist on a definitive interpretation”, while concluding: “nevertheless in the light of the previous passages it is reasonable to see this as a further allusion to the in-between state”. (BS p.7)

◀ Two counter-arguments can be advanced here. On the one hand, the expression can simply be understood as a means of asserting that, for the liberated being, absolutely nothing remains of the *saṃsāra*; the frequent use of *tetralemma*<sup>43</sup> in the *suttā* has the same purpose, namely to exhaust all the possibilities of exposition of a fact or idea; this does not mean, however, that the doctrine recognizes the reality or truth of each of these possibilities. On the other hand, if we accept the idea that there is an allusion here to an intermediate state, we can consider that the negative sentence is addressed to everyone, including those who might falsely believe in something between the here and the hereafter...

■ **The *Sāmaññaphalasutta*** (S/DĪG I/2)

▶ “We have already noted the use of similes to render the in-between state more vivid. A stock passage found in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* in explaining the recollection of beings faring according to their kamma (*cutūpapātañāṇa*) employs this simile<sup>44</sup> :

‘Great king, just as if there were a palace in the central square [of a town where four roads meet] (*siṅghāṭaka*), and a man with good eyesight standing on the top of it were to see people entering (*pavisanti*) a house, leaving (*nikkhamanti*) it, wandering (*sañcaranti*) along the carriage-road, and sitting down (*nisinnā*) in the central square. The thought would occur to him, ‘These people are entering a house, leaving it, walking along the streets, and sitting down in the central square [...]’.

Of course, a simile can only ever be suggestive. Nevertheless, it is hard to understand why the Buddha would use such a description of the process of rebirth if he wanted to exclude the possibility of an in-between state.” (BS p.8)

◀ BS rightly points to the weakness of the similes, reflecting the difficulties of language in conveying complex truths in simple terms. We could multiply the canonical examples attempting, more or

<sup>43</sup> In the form “there is” (*atthi*), “there is not” (*natthi*), “there is and there is not” (*atthi ca natthi ca*), “neither there is nor there is not” (*nevatthi na natthi*). Four examples of a negative use of *tetralemma* can be found in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (S/DĪG I/2/#180).

<sup>44</sup> *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (S/DĪG I/2/#247).



less skilfully, to give a concrete account of a reality that is difficult to grasp, even unspeakable (*acinteyyā*), without the defects of each of these approaches being perceived as revealing hidden details of the doctrine; we could, for example, note the images and metaphors concerning the *nibbāna*, describing it as a place<sup>45</sup> which it is not. The weakness of this argument is all the greater because it is an isolated comparison, in the midst of a multitude of descriptions and comparisons suggesting, on the contrary, the immediacy of rebirths and making no mention of an intermediate state.

► Our authors (BS p.9, PT 8.2) endorse Peter Harvey's interpretation of this passage<sup>46</sup>:

“Here, the sitting down of the simile refers to the discernment [consciousness] coming to be established in a new personality, after wandering in search of it”.

◀ This interpretation calls for two important comments. Firstly, consciousness is said to “wander” here without a body, which contradicts Theravāda orthodoxy, according to which “the psychic and the physical combine and rely on each other; when one breaks down, both break down because they are linked”<sup>47</sup> – below, we will come back to this affirmation of the independence of consciousness in relation to the other four *khandhā*. Secondly, we can legitimately question the role of the *kamma*, since the individual seems to have a form of choice after death – we will also come back to this point, which is essential, since it opens up the possibility for the survivors to influence the destiny of the deceased during his intermediate state, and therefore to modify his *kamma*.

► Our authors try to guard against the evidence of canonical evocations of explicitly immediate rebirth:

“There are some places in the Suttas that tell ‘real life’ stories of people who die and are reborn. For example, the *Anāthapiṇḍika Sutta* says that Sāriputta and Ānanda went to see Anāthapiṇḍika as he was dying, and: ‘soon after they had left, the householder Anāthapiṇḍika died and reappeared in the Tusita heaven’<sup>48</sup>. While this does not mention any in-between state, neither does it rule it out. If I were to say, ‘I left the monastery and went to the village’, no-one would read as suggesting that I disappeared in one place and reappeared instantly in another! Such narrative episodes are too vague to determine whether they assume an in-between state or not.” (BS p.6)

◀ A reading of the texts can just as legitimately support the opposite position: the fact that no description of a death followed by rebirth mentions any waiting time does not seem to support the thesis of rhetorical imprecision. But the importance of the remarks made by BS lies elsewhere: it seems that for our author, all beings, before being reborn, pass through an intermediate state, whatever their original plane of existence and their destination plane of existence; a belief that even his ancient currents of reference did not dare to profess.

### 3.3. The generalisation of the “intermediate state” to all categories of beings

Theravāda mentions without any ambiguity in all its canonical texts that there are 31 possible planes of existence, and therefore of rebirth<sup>49</sup>. These planes are divided into several categories: planes dominated by the existence of the senses (7 terrestrial, 4 celestial), planes of existence populated by beings with form (12), with subtle form (4), without form (4). Only a tiny proportion of the

<sup>45</sup> For example, the *nibbāna* is compared to an island (*dīpa*), a shelter (*taṇa*), a place of ascetic retreat (*lena*), a refuge (*saraṇa*)... Illuminations and murals depict it as a palace, a fortress...

<sup>46</sup> Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*, Curzon Press, 1995, p.103).

<sup>47</sup> *Upamāhi nāmarūpavibhāvanā (Visuddhimagga II/18/#675)*.

<sup>48</sup> *Anāthapiṇḍikovādasutta (S/MAJ III/5/1/#387)*.

<sup>49</sup> Didier Treutenaere, *Bouddhisme et re-naissances dans la tradition Theravāda*, Éditions Soukha, Paris, 3<sup>ème</sup> édition, 2023, p. 86 sq.

beings inhabiting these planes of existence, humans and some animals, experience the passage through a matrix. The other 29 categories experience direct rebirth, without the intermediary of parents (*opapātikā*). This form of generation, moreover, gives an indication of the nature of almost all of these planes of existence, whether favourable or unfavourable: to simplify, they are the post-mortem continuity of the mental state attained at the time of death. Finally, we should add that depending on their degree of spiritual realisation, beings can have different levels of awareness of the “transition” they are going through.<sup>50</sup> In view of these last two clarifications, we can legitimately question the “usefulness” and nature of an intermediate period.

The *Kathāvatthu* and its commentaries indicate that the ancient heretical schools qualified their assertion of the existence of an *antarābhava* according to the categories of beings:

You refuse this intermediate state to those whose retribution for deeds is immediate [...], to those who are reborn in a hell (*niraya*), to those who are reborn among the non-conscious *devā*<sup>51</sup>, to those who are reborn in one of the formless planes (*arūpa*) [...]<sup>52</sup>

Our authors do not bother with these nuances. With regard to the underworld, for example, BS reinterprets the notion of *ānantarika-kamma* as follows:

“These are a special class of acts (such as murdering one’s parents, etc.) which are believed to have a kammic result ‘without interval’: i.e. one goes straight to hell. But again this argument is not convincing, for the meaning of *ānantarika* here is surely simply that one does not have any interceding rebirths before experiencing the results of that bad kamma. It has nothing to do with the interval of time between one birth and the next.” (BS p.5)

This forced interpretation ignores what Theravāda tells us about the role played by the *kamma* at the time of death, and more specifically the different forms of *kamma* that can give rise to the “sign of rebirth” at the origin of the ultimate moment of thought. If a particularly important intentional action (positive, such as attaining a *jhāna*, or negative, such as a murder) has been produced previously by the dying person, this action eclipses by its force all other past activity, invades the mind so vividly that it becomes the determining factor for rebirth; this is known as *garuka-kamma*, or “heavy kamma”<sup>53</sup>; in this case, the *kamma* is so powerful that it is not clear what an “intermediate state” might consist of. This interpretation also ignores what the Theravāda<sup>54</sup> texts tell us about the “four causes of death”: in addition to the three “timely” deaths (*kāla-maraṇa*)<sup>55</sup> there is a case of death in an abnormal time (*akala-maraṇa*), a death due to the action of a powerful *kamma* (*upacchedaka-maraṇa*) capable of brutally and prematurely annihilating the psychic, and therefore physical, life of an individual; this is how, for example, Devadatta, the cousin of the Buddha who, out of jealousy, had constantly tried to harm him, was brutally struck down. Would such a rudely interrupted existence have any chance of regaining some strength during an intermediate state?

If we leave the infernal rebirths for the elevated rebirths, our remarks remain valid. In all cases, the passage through an intermediate state would be inevitable? Here, our authors ignore the different degrees of consciousness of beings at the moment of their rebirth:

<sup>50</sup> *Saṅgītisutta* (S/DĪG III/10).

<sup>51</sup> In this plane, there is only subtle matter, the mind being temporarily suspended.

<sup>52</sup> *Antarābhavakathā* (*Abh/Kathāvatthu*/8/74-2/#508).

<sup>53</sup> *Visuddhimagga* XVII § 163-164 (VIS II/17/#632).

<sup>54</sup> *Cutipapaṇḍisandhikkamavaṇṇanā* (*Ṭikā/Abh/Abhidhammatthavibhāvinīṭikā*/5/#89).

<sup>55</sup> Which are death by exhaustion of vitality (*āyukkhaya maraṇa*), death by exhaustion of *kamma* (*kammakkhaya maraṇa*) and death by coincidence of these two causes (*ubhayakkhaya maraṇa*).

Brothers, in this world there is the man who comes into existence in his mother's womb without knowing it, who remains there without knowing it and who comes out of his mother's womb without knowing it; this is the first kind.

Brothers, there is the man who comes into existence in his mother's womb knowing it, stays there without knowing it and comes out of it without knowing it; this is the second kind.

Brothers, there is the man who comes into existence in his mother's womb knowing it, who remains there knowing it and who leaves without knowing it; this is the third kind.

Brothers, in this world there is the one who comes into existence in his mother's womb knowing it, who remains there knowing it and who comes out knowing it; this is the fourth kind.<sup>56</sup>

Consider the example of the last rebirth of the Buddha: the tradition tells us that, after having been King Vessantara, the *bodhisatta* – the future Buddha – was reborn in the world of the Tusitā deities; having realised that his *bodhi* required a final human existence, he left this plane of existence to be reborn. This is what the texts tell us:

Leaving the world of the Tusitā, I entered a matrix.<sup>57</sup>

He died in the world of the *devā*, fully attentive and conscious. *At exactly the same time*, in the maternal womb similar to the lotus flower, the *bodhisatta* was conceived.<sup>58</sup>

The same is true of one of his predecessors, the Buddha Vipassī:

Then, monks, the *bodhisatta* Vipassī left the Tusitā to, conscious and remembering, enter the maternal womb.<sup>59</sup>

The first thing to note is that the state of consciousness of the reborn being is well specified, most often using the two terms<sup>60</sup> (*patis*)*sato* and *sampajāno*; this is a reason to wonder what additional consciousness an intermediate state might actually provide.

We should also note that the verbs used for these rebirths leave little doubt as to their immediacy. *Cavati*, “to enter into movement”, “to move”, has the connotation of “to fall”; it is considered a synonym of *upapajjati*, “to be born again in”<sup>61</sup>. For its part, *okkamati* means “to enter”, “to descend into”, and sometimes even “to plunge into”. The movement following death therefore consists of immediately “entering” a matrix or a state of existence.

To prevent the objection that the coming into the world of a *bodhisatta* could be “an exception confirming the rule”, the texts give us the example of the rebirth of future “simple” *therā*; for example:

Having left my divine abode, remembering and fully conscious,  
I entered the maternal womb [...]<sup>62</sup>

These few reflections demonstrate that the question posed by the *Kathāvatthu* to the proponents of “personalism”<sup>63</sup> was not purely rhetorical: which beings, which modes of rebirth, between which and which planes of existence, are precisely concerned by the *antarābhava*? Our authors are very far from clearly answering these questions.

<sup>56</sup> *Saṅgītisutta* (S/DĪG III/10).

<sup>57</sup> *Ratanacaṅkamanakaṇḍa* (S/KHU/*Buddhavaṃsa*/1/# 66-68).

<sup>58</sup> *Acchariyaabbhutasuttavaṇṇanā* (*Aṭṭ*/S/MAJ III/3/3/#200 last §).

<sup>59</sup> *Mahāpadānasutta* (S/DĪG II/1/1/#17).

<sup>60</sup> *Sato* and *sampajāno* are virtually synonymous and express mindfulness; *patissato* adds the fact of remembering.

<sup>61</sup> *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, pp. 144 & 264.

<sup>62</sup> *Girimānandatthera-apadāna* (S/KHU/*Apadāna*/40/7/#441); *Candanamāliyatthera-apadāna* (S/KHU/*Apadāna*/49/5/# 98).

<sup>63</sup> *Antarābhavakathā* (*Abh/Kathāvatthu*/8/74-2/#508).

### 3.4. Return to the misinterpretation of *antarāparinibbāyī*

▶ The most astonishing argument is the repetition of the personalist error of interpretation of the expression *antarāparinibbāyī*:

“There is a stock description of the various grades of awakened beings, which appears to speak of one who realizes nirvana in-between this life and the next [...] This is how the passage was interpreted by the Puggalavādins and Sarvāstivādins, as well as in modern studies by Harvey and Bodhi.” (BS pp.6-7)

◀ The wilful ignorance of the *Kathāvatthu* and its *Commentary* shows its consequences here: more than two millennia after a clear explanation – which we summarised in 1.2.2.– was given of these categories of *anāgāmī*, imprecision and confusion are once again mobilised in support of the thesis of an intermediate state.

### 3.5. The use of the rarest and most uncertain expressions of the canonical texts

In support of their thesis, our authors also use expressions that are both very rare and difficult to interpret: *gandhabba*, *manomaya kāya*, *sambhavesī*.<sup>64</sup>

#### ■ *Gandhabba*

▶ ”A somewhat mysterious usage of the term *gandhabba* has also been taken as referring to the in-between state [...] The acceptance of the conventional term *gandhabba* suggests that whatever is in the in-between state is in some sense a functioning ‘person’, not just a mechanistic process or energetic stream devoid of consciousness. However, the use of the term is so casual and uncertain that it would be unwise to make much of it.” (BS pp.7-8)

◀ The use of *gandhabba* in the figurative sense is extremely rare: it occurs only 6 times, in 2 brief parallel passages of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and 4 times, summarising these same passages, in the *Milindapañha*.<sup>65</sup>

Where the three elements are combined, a seed of life is planted. If the father and mother unite but it is not a favourable time for the mother and the *gandhabba* is absent, then no life seed will be planted. If the mother and father unite, and it is a favourable time for the mother, but the *gandhabba* is absent, again no life seed will be planted. If the father and mother unite, the period is favourable for the mother and the *gandhabba* is also present, then, through the conjunction of these three elements, a life germ will come into existence.<sup>66</sup>

For beings born from a womb, i.e. human beings, the categories of *devā* inhabiting the earth and mammalian animals, the Theravāda texts emphasise that the development of cellular material, ovum and spermatozoon, is linked to the presence of a third element, essential for the formation of an embryo.

The word *gandhabba* is borrowed from the name of certain *devā* belonging to the plane of existence of the Great Guardian Sovereigns, situated hierarchically just above that of humans; these *devā*, associated with music and above all with 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 relative freedom, however, since it is subject to the ef-

<sup>64</sup> Our authors are thus following the logic of the *Abhidharmakośa* of Vasubandhu (4th or 5th century), a Sanskrit text setting out the theses of the schismatic Sarvastivada school; it states that the intermediate existence has five names: *gandhabba*, *manomaya*, *sambhavesī* et *nirvṛtti* (*Abhidharmakośa* P3/40c-41a/2:122).

<sup>65</sup> *Milindapañha* IV/1/6/#6.

<sup>66</sup> *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhayasutta* (S/MAJ I/4/8/n° 408); *Assalāyanasutta* (S/MAJ II/5/3/#411).

fects of kamma. *Gandhabba* is therefore an image, representing the non-material element that conditions the existence of a new being. The *Abhidhamma*, as we have seen, replaces this image with a much more explicit expression, *paṭisandhi-citta*: associating *citta*, consciousness as an element of existence, and *paṭisandhi*, the act of coming together again, the “consciousness of rebirth”.<sup>67</sup> The canonical conclusions are therefore the opposite of those of our authors: here, there is no person yet, even with cautious inverted commas, but a unit of consciousness integrated into a flow, a process of conditioning of a new being by the kamma of a previous being.

#### ■ *Manomayakāya*

► “Of course, we imagine this ‘physical’ presence not in terms of coarse physical matter (*oḷārika*), but some kind of ‘energy body’, or ‘subtle body’, the best term for which in the Suttas would be the ‘mind-made body’, which is said to be a ‘physical’ (*rūpi*) replica of the coarse body.” (BS p.9)

◀ The expression *manomayakāya*, not very frequent in the core (*mūla*) of the Canon, designates a faculty (*iddhi*) that can be aroused at the second stage (access concentration, *upacāra-samādhi*) of the practice of the fourth *jhāna*. It is a mental feat (*manomaya iddhi*) consisting of eliciting a bodily appearance that enables one, when visiting other planes of existence, to communicate with their inhabitants. This singular faculty is the result of an intense meditative practice and the will to make use of it; and it is above all dependent on the presence of an active consciousness. If we accept the canonical doctrine of the disappearance at the moment of death of all the *khandhā*, including, therefore, that of consciousness, it is difficult to imagine how the “intermediate state” of a common person could be of the same nature as the *manomaya iddhi* of the meditator.

#### ■ *Sambhavesī*

► Some canonical texts distinguish between *bhūtā*, the beings (*sattā*) that already exist, and *sambhavesī*, those that will exist. Grammar and lexicon are mobilized by our authors (PT 7.1, BS p.8) to exploit the nuances of interpretation of this term, to the benefit of their thesis:

“Interpreted by the commentary<sup>68</sup> to mean ‘one seeking rebirth’, modern grammarians prefer to construe the term as ‘one to be reborn’. In either case it appears to refer to the being in the in-between state [...] While the early Suttas do not give us any further information, the fact that the *sambhavesī* is contrasted with the *bhūta*, which clearly means one in a state of being (*bhava*), suggests that the *sambhavesī* is in a state of potential. The in-between state is truly ‘in-between’, it is only defined by the absence of more substantial forms of existence, and one in that state, so it seems, is exclusively oriented towards a more fully-realised incarnation.” (BS p.8)

◀ The word *sambhavesī* derives from the verb *sambhavati*, “to be produced, to appear”, and/or from the verb *sambhāveti*, “to undertake, to prepare for”. We can certainly detect *bhava*, but the root here is *bhavati*, in the primary sense of “to become”; we cannot therefore deduce that *sambhavesī* designates a being in a “state” of becoming rather than a future being. Here again, the *suttā* making the *bhūtā/sambhavesī* distinction are really only concerned with what “fuels” present existence and the desire to be reborn; they suggest nothing about a *post-mortem* “state”. Here again, it is also unfortunate that our authors ignore or disdain the *Abhidhamma*; the *Secondary Subcommentary* of the *Kathāvatthu*, has been expounding for over a millennium<sup>69</sup> why the *bhūtā/sambhavesī* pairing cannot serve as a justification for the *antarābhava* error...<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup> *Ārammaṇapaccaya* (ABH/Patthāna/19/#28).

<sup>68</sup> The reference of this text is not given.

<sup>69</sup> This text was written by the great commentator Dhammapāla (the Second) in the middle of the tenth century.

<sup>70</sup> *Antarābhavakathāvaṇṇanā* (*Tikā/Abh/Pañcapakaraṇa-anuṭīkā/Kathāvatthupakaraṇa-anuṭīkā/8/2/#507 §2*).

### 3.6. The use of “out-of-body” and “near-death” experiences

Our authors also refer to contemporary studies concerning two categories of experience that seem to suggest a form of independence of the consciousness.

#### ■ The “out-of-body” experiences

An experience of "leaving the body" consists at the very least of a sensation of floating outside one's own body, and sometimes of seeing one's own body from the outside (autoscopy); this experience may be voluntary or involuntary. Leaving the body can involve moving away from the body, to another place. For one of our authors, these experiences “strongly suggests that our consciousness can somehow leave our physical body”<sup>71</sup>(PT 2.2). BS is much more cautious in this respect, even though he mentions these experiences in support of his thesis of an intermediate state (BS p.9).<sup>72</sup>

#### ■ The “near-death” experiences

These experiences can be had by people who are dying or who have survived a brief clinical death; they have been made more numerous by advances in medical reanimation, particularly cardiac reanimation. According to our authors, “a majority of individuals who experience an NDE see it as a verification of the existence of an after-life”. (PT 2.3)

◀ One remark is immediately obvious: in both these categories of experience, the body is present<sup>73</sup>. These situations therefore absolutely cannot be compared with that of actual death, where the body – having often already been cremated – no longer has any activity (the “intermediate state”, it should be remembered, is supposed to exist for up to 49 days after death...).

### 3.7. The extent of the erroneous belief among Theravāda devotees

▶ The final argument is based on the extent of belief in an intermediate state among Theravāda devotees:

“It should be noted that many modern Theravādins do in fact accept the in-between state, despite the fact that it’s ‘officially’ heretical. **Popular belief** is, so far as I know, on the side of the in-between state; so is the opinion of **the forest monks of Thailand**, based on their meditative experience; and so is the opinions of most monks and scholars I know, whose ideas are based on **the Suttas**.” (BS p.5 ; PT 1.3.2)

◀ This argument has no value. The teachings of the Buddha are described as “against the current” (*patisoṭa*); the idea that the belief in an intermediate state “follows the current” should rather arouse distrust. Immediate beliefs are generally aroused by the “three poisons”:

| Holding erroneous views falls into three categories: with desire (*lobha*) as the cause, with aversion (*dosa*) as the cause, with ignorance (*moha*) as the cause.<sup>74</sup>

This could be summed up here as a desire to escape the effects of *kamma* after death, as an aversion to the idea that everything must be accomplished before death, and as an ignorance of the teachings of the Buddha on the urgent need to make progress during existence, before it is too late.

| Practice today, you may die tomorrow!<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> The expression "physical body" suggests that, for our author, there might be a non-physical body.

<sup>72</sup> It is surprising that our authors only refer to spontaneous experiences, without mentioning the fact that exits from the body can be brought about voluntarily by meditative practice.

<sup>73</sup> ...and even alive, because there is nothing to say that the near-death experience occurs during the brief clinical death (and not just before or just after); the adjective “near” actually tells us the opposite...

<sup>74</sup> *Kammanidānasutta* (S/AṄG X/4/2/8).

<sup>75</sup> *Bhaddekarattasutta* (S/MAJ III/4/1/#272).

With regard to the certainties arising from the meditative experience of the Thai “Forest Monks”, we may note that the meditative experience of the masters of most of the other Theravāda traditions, from antiquity to the present day, has not led to any questioning of the orthodox thesis. Here again, we are reminded of the warnings of the Buddha about the possibility of erroneous interpretations of meditative experiences<sup>76</sup>; the low regard in which certain currents hold the texts, in the absence of a clear conceptual framework, can only accentuate the risk of unfounded interpretation.

With regard to the passages in the *suttā* that would underpin the certainties of scholars and monks, we have seen how fragile they are.

### 3.8. What therefore, according to these authors, would be the nature of the *antarābhava*?

Our authors wish to reopen the antique debate. It is therefore legitimate to address to them again the questions once put by the *Kathāvatthu* to the proponents of the deviant idea – cf. above 1.2.3. The least that can be said is that our authors' answers to these questions are imprecise or absent.

One of these questions lies at the heart of the controversy: the relationship between the consciousness and the four other aggregates (*khandhā*) that make up the being.

#### 3.8.1. Piya Tan: the independence of the consciousness?

▶ The only theoretical justification for an *antarābhava* by PT is the following:

“Our consciousness can somehow leave our physical body.” (PT 2.2)

And our author states that he shares B. Allan Wallace's<sup>77</sup> conception of life and rebirth:

“Your psyche emerged some time while you were in your mother’s womb. It’s continuing to evolve, and eventually it’s going to implode back into the substrate, carry on as a disembodied continuum of consciousness and then reincarnate.” (PT 2.1)

◀ Our author, who belongs to the Theravāda tradition, therefore chooses the explanation given by a devotee of the Tibetan tradition<sup>78</sup>; he endorses two divergent doctrinal assertions, that of the existence of a “subterranean consciousness” (*ālaya-vijñāna*<sup>79</sup>) and that of the possibility of a disembodied consciousness. The choice of the verb “to reincarnate” perfectly sums up this position: at death, consciousness would leave the body and – after a certain lapse of time – enter a new body.

In the *suttā*, however, the teaching of the Buddha is unambiguous: consciousness is nothing other than the effect of conditions arising from the six “sense doors”.

Consciousness is named according to the condition from which it arises: on account of the eye and forms arises a consciousness which is called visual consciousness; on account of the ear and sounds arises a consciousness which is called auditory consciousness; on account of the nose and odours arises a consciousness which is called olfactory consciousness; on account of the tongue and flavours arises a consciousness which is called gustatory consciousness; on account of the body and tangible objects arises a consciousness which is called tactile consciousness; on account of the mental organ and mental objects arises a consciousness which is called mental consciousness.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Venerable Nyanaponika Thera, *Abhidhamma Studies*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, & Wisdom Publication, Boston, p. 10.

<sup>77</sup> *Buddha on the brain*, [Interview by Steve Paulson, 27 Nov 2006.] Salon.com Books.

<sup>78</sup> A paradoxical method: rejecting the Theravāda *Abhidhamma* as late, and therefore not accepting the full explanations given therein, PT embraces the assertions of an even later school of thought.

<sup>79</sup> Asaṅga, in his *Yogaśāstra*, considers that this consciousness carries within it the *vāsanā* or karmic imprints that project the being towards the next life.

<sup>80</sup> *Idem.* #400.

Consciousness thus disappears with the disappearance of its conditions; it is not an entity progressively shaped by successive conditions; as Buddhaghosa formulated it:

A fire that burns because of wood, burns only if it has a supply [of wood], but it dies in this very place, if there is no longer any condition, because then the condition has changed [...] In the same way, the consciousness that arises because of the eye and visible forms appears through the door of this sense organ only when the conditions of the eye, visible form, light and attention appear, but [consciousness] ceases here and now when the condition is no longer there, because then the condition has changed; but consciousness does not pass to the ear and become auditory consciousness [...].<sup>81</sup>

This is a fundamental point, because it avoids the temptation to make consciousness “a kind of perpetual, neutral, unchanging light, shining where there is nothing to illuminate”<sup>82</sup>, a substitute for the soul, a permanent entity that would constitute the thread of our existence, or even the thread of our successive existences:

If a man were to say: I show the appearance, departure, disappearance, birth, growth and development of consciousness independently of matter, sensation, perception and mental formations, he would be talking about something that does not exist.<sup>83</sup>

To a *bhikkhu* who expressed the opinion that consciousness persists through the chain of rebirths, as a kind of soul, the Buddha replied rudely:

From whom did you hear, fool, that I explained the *Dhamma* in this way? Fool, have I not in various ways declared that consciousness arises in dependence on other things? There is no appearance of consciousness without conditions.<sup>84</sup>

It could be objected that certain texts speak to us of a *viññāṇa anidassana*, a “consciousness without attribute” (or “without sign”, “without characteristic”). As far as we know, the expression appears only once in the *suttā*<sup>85</sup> and is clearly associated with the nirvana<sup>86</sup>, meaning that it refers only to the being who has definitively left the cycle of death and rebirth.

Concerning, finally, the “continuum of consciousness”: for the Theravāda, there is indeed such a continuum, the *bhavaṅga*, but this, as we have seen, takes place during existence and is interrupted during the ultimate unit of consciousness, a new *bhavaṅga* taking root during the first unit of consciousness.

### 3.8.2. Bhikkhu Sujato: more questions than answers

BS is less categorical than PT in his assertions; he nuances two points in particular: the *antarābhava* might... not be a *bhava*; the aggregate of consciousness might not be the only one to subsist during the intermediate state.

<sup>81</sup> *Uparipaññāsa-aṭṭhakathā* (Att/S/MAJ III).

<sup>82</sup> Michel Hulin, *Comment la philosophie indienne s'est-elle développée ? – La querelle brahmanes-bouddhistes*, Éditions du Panama, Paris, 2008, p. 30.

<sup>83</sup> *Upādānaparipavattasutta* (S/SAM III/1/6/4).

<sup>84</sup> *Mahātanhāsāṅkhasutta* (S/MAJ I/4/8/#396).

<sup>85</sup> *Kevaṭṭasutta* (S/DIG I/11/#99); a second occurrence (*Brahmanimantanikasutta*, S/MAJ I/5/9/#504) is in fact merely a quotation of the previous one.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. for example the verses concluding the *Asaṅkhatasamyutta* (S/SAM IV/9/2) and listing the “qualities” of *nibbāna*.



### The *antarābhava* might not be a *bhava*:

“The main canonical argument [...] is that the Buddha mentions only three states of existence (*bhava*) [...] If the intermediate state exists, it should fit into one of these worlds, but it doesn't: therefore, there's no such thing. This argument, however, rests on mere linguistic pedantry. If I say my house has three rooms, someone might object that it also has a corridor, which is an 'in-between room'. Is this a fourth room, or is it merely a space connecting the rooms? That simply depends on how I define it and how I want to count it. Maybe my definition is wrong or confused – but that doesn't make the corridor disappear!” (BS p.5)

◀ On a subject as fundamental as the existence of “something” between death and re-conception, would the question of the precise nature of this “something” be merely pedantic? Would a vague answer be quite sufficient? The reasoning here is based on the presupposition that there is definitely a corridor between the rooms, so it doesn't matter how you define that corridor. This presupposition can easily be turned on its head: what if the rooms were simply in a row?

▶ Our author, however, is more nuanced in his conclusions:

“Despite all we have said in support of the 'in-between' state, I would still make an important reservation. The idea of a 'state' suggests a defined mode of being, but what we have seen suggests rather a *lack of being*. The in-between state is not a separate realm that somehow stands in the space between other realms. We might imagine it so, but this is just a metaphor to help us make sense of the experience. The references to the 'in-between state' do not focus on the objective or cosmological existence of such a realm, and to this extent I think the Kathāvattu's objections to the in-between state can be sustained. Rather the passages focus on an individual's experience of what happens after death, but before the next life. It is a process of change, of seeking, of yearning to be. To speak of this as an 'in-between state' is admittedly a reification of the concept, which already stretches the actual statements from which it is derived. Nevertheless, it is probably inevitable that we keep using this terminology, which is fine as long as we remember that it is just a convenient way to generalize about individual experiences, not a definite realm or zone of existence.” (BS p.10)

◀ These concessions are very important, but insufficiently enlightening. The key word, repeated three times in this passage, is “experience”: the idea of an “intermediate state” would therefore come from experience. However, we have seen that the quotations from the *suttā* are hardly convincing, and hardly hint at precise experiences; in the same way, we have seen that experiences of “near-death” or “out-of-body” can be analysed differently; and we have also seen that the mere mention, without any further precision, of the meditative experience of monks of the Thai “Forest Tradition” contradicts what the masters of the other Theravāda traditions, both ancient and contemporary, tell us with precision about their meditative experience. So we are left waiting for a precise description of experiences that clearly establishes – as the thousands of pages of the *Abhidhamma* do for the orthodox position – the process of continuity incorporating the idea of an in-between.

▶ Abandoning the idea of a real “state” nevertheless leaves us with “a *process* of change, of seeking, of yearning to be” (BS p.10), situated between death and re-conception :

“Change is traumatic, and we need a period of adjustment [...] The being who has left their body is flung into the unknown, where all their fears and hopes may be realised.” (BS p.9)

◀ For the orthodox view, as we have seen, the process that includes the desire to be born again, in the midst of a multitude of feelings linked to the uncertainties of the afterlife, takes place *before death* and crystallises in the sign (*gati-nimitta*) that gives rise to the final moment of thought; but what about the "intermediate" process? Our author talks about "research", but what does this mean? Can "what remains" choose all or part of the conditions for its re-conception (the place, the parents, etc.)? Our author talks about "desire": what is the relative weight of this desire and the *kamma* accumulated during existence? Can this process be influenced in real time by outsiders (loved ones, a spiritual master, etc.)? We are left wanting more.

### **The aggregate of consciousness would not be the only one to subsist during the intermediate state**

▶ The terms used by Bhikkhu Sujato suggest the idea of a survival of the consciousness:

"We do not decide the important things in life in one instant. The time of ambiguity, having left one thing and not reached another, allows space for consciousness to integrate the lessons of the past and orient itself for the future". (BS p.10)

However, from his interpretation of "near-death" or "out-of-body" experiences, our author deduces that the intermediate state involves not just the aggregate of consciousness, but all five aggregates (*khandhā*), including the aggregate of the body, though reduced to an "energy body", a "subtle body". He rightly points out that "the five aggregates are a way of understanding rebirth into different states of being" and from this he deduces that "it would only be plausible to suggest that they are also involved in the process in-between births as well". (BS p.9)

◀ The *suttā* and the *Abhidhamma* precisely define the nature of the *khandhā* present in each of the three great *bhavā* and any nuances in the density of these *khandhā* for each of the 31 planes of existence.<sup>87</sup> And it is essential to specify that these variations in the aggregates are most often (as is the case for 26 of the favourable planes of existence) caused by the quality of virtue, wisdom and above all meditative practice attained at the moment of death<sup>88</sup>, far away, therefore, from a situation that would arise spontaneously at the death of any being.

Here resurfaces the relevance of the questions posed by the *Kathāvatthu*, soliciting at the very least a comparison of the "intermediate state" with the duly identified *bhavā*. BS's allusion to attenuated, subtle, uncertain *khandhā* also leaves us wanting more.

### **Conclusion**

I do not see anything more blameworthy than an erroneous belief, *bhikkhū*. Erroneous beliefs are extreme faults.<sup>89</sup>

Twenty-three centuries ago, by subjecting the notion of *antarābhava* to criticism, the heirs of the ancient orthodoxy were trying to preserve the teaching of a continuity between existences requiring nothing essential or substantial – in the sense of Western philosophy –, nor *attā*, nor *jīva*, nor *pug-gala* – in the sense of Indian philosophy.

For authors, who are in principle part of the Theravāda tradition, to reopen this debate, using arguments that are weakly presented and drawn from the beliefs of ancient or late heterodox currents, is, in our view, a pointless regression.

<sup>87</sup> Didier Treutenaere, *Bouddhisme et re-naissances dans la tradition Theravāda*, Éditions Soukha, Paris, 3<sup>ème</sup> édition, 2023, p. 86 sq.

<sup>88</sup> For example: *Anuruddhasutta* (S/MAJ III/3/7).

<sup>89</sup> *Tatiya-vagga* (S/AṄG I/16/3/#310).

In the most ancient texts, the Buddha teaches that the destiny of a being depends on the discipline of an entire existence, and even of a long series of existences; he never suggests the possibility of shortcuts, let alone “lightning” means, to compensate for or even overcome the effects of a long accumulation of acts.

| Effort in the moment is ineffective; only forward-looking effort (*vāyāma*) is effective.<sup>90</sup>

By insisting on the non-existence of an intermediate state, the Therā were not engaging in a useless debate: the energy put into defending this erroneous belief (*ditthi*) is mainly fuelled by the desire that this state can be used to change the situation of the deceased with regard to his future existence.

There are therefore two irreconcilable positions here: the Theravāda affirms the omnipotence of the *kamma*, which can be oriented through practice during existence, but which can no longer be modified at the end of the ultimate moment of thought; the ancient “personalists” and their heirs of the Mahāyāna and the Vajrayāna assert that there is an intermediate state which, if the right rites are performed under the guidance of the appropriate guides, enables one to modify one's destiny or even to free oneself from it<sup>91</sup>; a natural law, that of *kamma*, could be attenuated or even erased by magical rituals. There is nothing in the oldest texts to suggest that the Buddha taught anything of the sort, quite the contrary.

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<sup>90</sup> *Milindapañha* II/4/5/#5.

<sup>91</sup> The exact title of the Tibetan “Book of the Dead” is: “The great liberation of the intermediate states through listening”.

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