

## IS REBIRTH IN A SUBHUMAN KINGDOM POSSIBLE?

By Willen B. Roos

His holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, in Appendix 1 of his Memoirs “My Land and My People,” makes the following statements:

*Meritorious Karma causes beings to take rebirth in the realms of gods, demigods, and men. Demeritorious Karma causes rebirth in the lower realms of animals, pretas and hells. Thirdly, Achala Karma, Invariable Karma, causes beings to take rebirth in the upper worlds, Rupa and Arupa Dhatu, a world of form and a formless world ... (p. 243).*

These statements, short as they are, can be interpreted in different ways and it is not possible to know, from the contents of this Appendix, what His Holiness exactly means to convey. It will be noted that he does not specify the term “beings,” and also that he speaks of rebirth in different realms but not of rebirth in the different classes of beings themselves. The term “realms” could mean states of consciousness, though it is also possible that His Holiness wanted to express the popular beliefs of the Tibetans, that a human being could be reborn on earth in an animal body. This popular belief can be traced back to some of the Jataka tales in which the Buddha identifies Himself with one or another animal. For example the Tittira Jataka, translated by F. Anton von Schiefner from the Tibetan of the Kah-gyur and done into English by W. R. S. Ralston under the title “The Virtuous Animals,” ends as follows:

Bagavant said, “O Bhikkus, what think ye? I myself was the partridge of that period, the hare of that period was SARIPUTRA, the monkey MAUDGALYAYANA, and the elephant Ananda (Tibetan Tales p: 307)

However, from the discussion between the four virtuous animals, who behave not at all as beasts, one must conclude that these are rather four powerful yogins, who initiates the Golden Age (Krita Yuga) for nearly the whole of Jambudvipa. It would be an error to use this Jataka tale as a proof that the Buddha taught the possibility of rebirth on earth in a sub-human kingdom. It was obviously intended to illustrate the effect of the fivefold vow. Because otherwise the question would arise: if rebirth in an animal is the outcome of demeritorious Karma, what evil deeds were done by the Buddha and his companions previous to being born as partridge, etc.? Which would show the unsuitability of the Jataka tales as a support for the thesis of rebirth into an animal to expiate sins.

The six realms mentioned by the Dalai Lama are always depicted between the spokes of the Wheel of Life, and in Tibet these pictorial details are said to have been introduced by the famous Nagarjuna (cf. Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet*, p. 108). The wheel's broad tire is divided into 12 parts, representing the 12 nidanas, known as Dependent Origination, *pratitya samutpada* (Pali, *paticca samuppada*), but there is no obvious relationship between these 12 nidanas and the six realms. It is important to note that only two of the six realms could possibly refer to an objective existence on earth viz. the realms of men and animals. The other four cannot be interpreted as localities of physical existence and "rebirth" in these realms does not mean, therefore reincarnation in the sense of a return to life on earth. Since logic and reason compel us to give a consistent interpretation to all six realms we must conclude that "rebirth in the realm of animals" does not refer to physical existence in an animal body.

Let us now consider the important question: "Is reincarnation in a subhuman kingdom possible?" and more specifically: "Can a human Ego return to life on earth in an animal body?" Before discussing the "technical" aspects of this question I would like to mention Mrs. Rhys Davids' short article "Animal Rebirth" in which she opposes strongly the idea of rebirth in an animal. (*Wayfarer's Words*, Vol. III pp. 1093 / 1096). However, her approach is rather emotional without any sustained attempt at proving her point. Her best argument is on page 1095:

*Very significant for me is the silence in the Pali Sutta on rebirth as animal as compared with the Jataka chatter about the dog of the Pali Commentary ... It is a silence almost total, that runs throughout the Pitakas, once we omit the later Jataka Commentary ...*

On the other hand, W. Y. Evans-Wentz, in Chapter X, *The Rebirth Doctrine*, of his INTRODUCTION to "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" (p. 39 et seq) rejects rebirth into the subhuman kingdom by applying what he calls "the symbolical or esoteric interpretation" (p. 40). He states: ... the esoteric interpretation may be stated ... as follows:

*The human form (but not the divine nature in man) is a direct inheritance from the subhuman kingdoms; ... the psychical seed of the flux which the eyes cannot see-if of a human being it cannot incarnate in, or overshadow, or be intimately bound up with a body foreign to its evolved characteristics, either in this world, in Bardo, or in any realm or world of sangsaric existence ....*

*For a human life-flux to flow into the physical form of a dog, or fowl, or insect, or worm, is, therefore, held to be as impossible as putting into the bed of the Ganges River the waters of the Indian Ocean. (ibid, 42 / 3).*

I do not think that the approaches of Mrs. Rhys Davids and of Mr Evans-Wantz are wholly convincing. Therefore I shall attempt to discuss the subject of rebirth of human beings into animal bodies by using an entire different approach. A decisive conclusion on this subject requires not only consideration of the rationale of the rebirth cycle, but also a consideration of the operations of the law of Karma and of the nature of the animal kingdom.

The various kingdoms of nature differ principally in the kind and extend of their powers and their knowledge. In the process of evolution the higher kingdom appear as compounds of the lower kingdoms, in the sense that the members, say of the animal kingdom, are cooperative organizations of members of the vegetable and mineral kingdoms. The power of cohesion, which in the mineral kingdom produces a great variety of crystals, utilized in the vegetable kingdom for the formation of roots, stems, leaves, flowers and fruits, i.e. organs for a variety of specialized functions. As a result, plants have a wider range of perception, hence a higher degree of consciousness than the individual members of the mineral kingdom of which they are composed. At the same time there is for each plant an “animating something,” which keeps the various parts functioning together in harmony, to achieve a common aim, viz., the preservation of the individual plant in first instance, and the propagation of the species as the next important aim. This “animating something” could be called the “soul of the plant” for lack of better term. Though invisible and not yet discovered by science, its existence is proven by the effects it produces. Not of the visible and not yet discovered by science, its existence is proven by the effects it produces. None of the visible parts of a plant is capable of exerting the unifying power that makes plant life possible, and which forces us to postulate the presence in each plant of a discrete animating principle.

If we now go a step higher in evolution and investigate the nature of the animal kingdom, we find that its members have a still wider range of powers than that possessed by plants. With the power of locomotion added to the increased powers of sense perception, an even greater demand for cooperation between the separate parts of an animal entity is required. Its “soul has to make a wide variety of decision during the course of the animal’s existence. But these decisions are not based upon reasoning processes nor upon reflective thinking, but solely upon impulses in accordance with its innate character. This means that the actions of an animal are determined by desires and fear, both of which are stimulated by the power of memory. In the higher animals this power is greatly developed, though it can only be activated by association with sense perceptions, while in the human kingdom memory is also activated by mental processes, wherefore a man can deliberately recall events of the past and consult his store of knowledge which animals cannot do. The animal, therefore, is not

responsible for its actions, since it has no choice but to follow the dictates of his nature. This means that an animal can neither make nor dissipate individual karma, i.e. there is no merit nor demerit possible in the sub-human kingdoms. This brings up the question how, in a universe where Karma is supposed to provide JUSTICE for all beings, it is possible for animals to suffer physical pain, as they obviously do. To answer this question let us have first a close look at the nature of pain. Starting with physical pain, we see that this is merely a message telling the sufferer that something is wrong at the location where the message originated. It is intended to stimulate, or force the sufferer to take the necessary steps to counteract whatever caused the pain. This shows that PAIN is beneficial, like a fire alarm, and that its purpose is to teach the sufferer certain important facts, necessary to cope with the problems of physical life. Though all suffering is subject to the Law of Causality, this does not mean that it is always a retribution as the outcome of a demeritorious act. The members of the sub-human kingdoms suffer only as a result of physical circumstances and only so much as is useful to them for acquiring the skill necessary to avoid future suffering. There is no mental suffering in animals, and this fact alone should tell us that no comparison is possible between the sufferings of animals and men. The two belong to completely different orders of experience if we accept the suffering of young children, of idiots, of lunatics and of certain savages. Both orders of suffering serve useful though very different purposes because it is a corollary of the Law of Karma that NO SUFFERING IS IN VAIN.

Let us now consider emotional suffering as we know it in the human kingdom. In man this kind of suffering is in the mind and is produced by the knowledge of undesirable events, which have already occurred or which are now happening or are threatening to take place. The fact that these events are undesirable means that they are in conflict with his desires and therefore produce painful images in his mind which are the direct cause of his suffering. And since there is no useless suffering we must expect something good to result from it. It stands to reason that the reaction of this class of suffering tends to produce a disgust for the desires which were frustrated by the “undesirable events”. This disgust will have a weakening effect upon the corresponding desires and may gradually lead to their destruction, and eventually to liberation from the wheel of samsara.

From the above it will be seen that animals cannot have emotional suffering because they are not ensouled by “mind-beings.” What to a human being would be an emotional disturbance, such as anger, fear, etc., would be a natural activity in an animal and could not be a source of suffering followed by a destruction of desires, as this would be the end of the animal itself. This great and fundamental difference between members of the human and animal kingdom makes it impossible that an animal body could be occupied by a human soul, i.e. a mind-being, even if the latter were heavily loaded with the

karmic effects (vasana) of a long series of lives dedicated to evil actions. Reincarnations are governed by the need for dissipating the karmic vasanas, which are stored in the mind (alaya vijnana) and it is the force of attraction exercised by all the vasanas that selects a suitable vehicle for the next rebirth, a vehicle through which the greatest possible amount of karmic debts will be paid off and karmic credits will be collected. At the point in the rebirth cycle where the return to life on Earth becomes imperative the human Ego will be attracted to a family most suitable from the point of view of the karma of the Ego as well as of the future parents. But there would be no attraction between the Ego and members of a sub-human kingdom because there would not be a possibility for the elimination of vasanas which can only take place under laws and conditions similar to those under which vasanas are deposited in the alaya vijnana. Therefore the fruits of acts committed in a human existence on earth must be harvested in a human existence on earth. This, then, is the principal factor why rebirth into sub-human kingdoms does not take place.

It will still be useful to point out that rebirth into an animal body would not be a punishment for one who, during his human existence, had led a purely animal life, dedicated to pleasures of the senses, because such a rebirth would furnish uninhibited brutish enjoyments without any feeling of remorse. A punishment must have a redeeming feature, as otherwise it would be merely an act of revenge. The feeling of remorse, which comes from a spiritual source, would in this case be the only force which could make the sinner exert himself against his evil inclinations.

It is still pertinent to interpret the occasional statements found in Buddhist Sanskrit and Pali literature which seem to imply a rebirth in a sub-human entity. This nearly always refers to the process of transmigration which should not be mistaken for reincarnation. Transmigration means the constant exchange of physical and psychic elements with the surrounding space. We are constantly throwing off not only worn out physical material but also invisible psychic substance impregnated with our thought and feelings. All this material transmigrates incessantly among the members of the various Kingdoms and particles proceeding from the animal part of our nature will easily find a lodging in a corresponding beast because of the law of affinities which governs the process of transmigration. It is only in this sense that one could possibly speak of "rebirth" in a sub-human entity, but this would not involve a human Ego and it is, therefore, not a case of rebirth as commonly understood, nor the less ambiguous term of reincarnation be applicable.

The logical conclusion of all the above arguments is that the REAL MAN, the THINKER, has no affinity with animals and cannot, therefore, animate entities of that kingdom.

(The Maha Bodhi)