

3. THE LOGIC OF REBIRTH

In the early 1980's, Khenchen Appey Rinpoche traveled through Southeast Asia giving Dharma teachings. While at the Sakya Center in Kuching, East Malaysia, I, Ngawang Samten (Jay Goldberg), Rinpoche's translator, requested Rinpoche to give a teaching on the topic of rebirth. Though no tape recording of this talk has been found, it had a profound effect upon me. The following is a reconstruction of the essence of Rinpoche's teaching that evening.

First, there are two points of phenomenal existence that need to be posited. One is the issue of causation, and the other is in regards to the nature of human existence.

When we look at the phenomenal elements of this world, we see that all things arise due to a cause. Nothing in this world arises by accident, miraculously, or spontaneously. There is nothing in this world that just appears out of nowhere without primary and secondary causes. For example, a tree has the primary cause of a seed while it has secondary causes such as the seed not being damaged, it being in contact with earth, having access to water, and other conditions.

When we look at a human being, we see two primary aspects of their existence. There is the physical aspect of the person, and the mental aspect of a person. In other words, a human being consists of a physical aspect, a physical body, and a mental aspect, a mind. The physical aspect of a human being is one's physical body and all of its parts. The mental aspect of a human being consists of one's thoughts, consciousness, and mental functions.

In respect to its physical attributes, we can trace all the physical component cells of a human being back to the time of conception. In other words, if we had a "chronological microscopic instrument" we

could see all the cells comprising the present physical elements of a person's body and trace them back, one by one and moment to moment, to the time of conception. It is like looking at the rings of a tree that has been sawed down. We can see each year of the tree's existence and discover how the tree fared in relation to weather conditions, growth patterns, and the like. Within the human body, cells are dying and being produced moment by moment. If we had a special instrument, we would be able to observe elements of the present body acting as causes for the future body. Also, we would be able to see how the present body resulted from the previous cells of the same body. So theoretically, we could trace the present body moment by moment back to its existence at the time of conception, just as we could trace the rings of the present tree back to its first ring.

What were the causes of the physical body at the time of conception? The causes are the physical elements of this soon-to-be-conceived human being arising from the mother and father. In other words, the causes were the egg, or ovum, of the mother and the sperm, the seed, of the father. When these two elements come together, then the physical causes of the child being conceived are seen. And where did the mother and father come from? They both respectively came into being due to the physical existence of their own parents. Through this logic, we could go back again and again from parents to parents ad infinitum.

This proves that the physical creation, the physical existence, of each human being is brought about by the physical causes of the ovum and sperm of the prior couple joining together to produce the fertilized egg that eventually becomes the child of their union. Besides these causes, there are also secondary conditions that contribute to the birth of this child. These conditions are many in number, but they include such things as: the fertility of the ovum, the fertility of the sperm, the co-mingling of the ovum and sperm, the absence of spermicide, and many other conditions.

Previously, it was stated that a human being consists of two aspects, the physical and the mental. We have already dealt with the physical aspect of a human being and how its existence comes about through physical causes created by the parents of the child. Secondly, we need to examine the causes of the mental aspect of a human being which consists of his thoughts, consciousness, and mental functions.

Our thoughts arise one after another, popping up in our mind like water falling over the edge of a waterfall. If we were able to slow down this

process through meditation, we would see that each and every thought we have is caused by a previous thought. Thoughts do not randomly arise, but have a specific connection with the previous thought. In other words, each thought is directly caused by the very thought that preceded it. For example, someone might have the thought, “I am hungry.” If we examined the previous thought to that one, it may have been the thought, “I want to eat the apple on the table.” And this thought may have been preceded by the thought, “There is an apple on the table.” In other words, there is a sequence of thoughts that arise in relation to each other, but they arise so quickly we are not aware of the sequence. Basically, as human beings in our regular daily lives, we do not pay attention to the sequence of thoughts that arise. We are so distracted by the onslaught of our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that bombard our every waking moment (and even some of our sleeping moments) that we are mainly unaware of the sequential nature of these trains of thought.

With that said, we should understand that each thought we have is preceded by a previous thought, and this previous thought is the primary cause of the next one. If we were able to slow down the arising and appearance of each thought, we would see the previous thought that is the cause of the present one. In other words, every thought we have is produced by a previous thought. Just as physical causes bring about physical results, so mental causes bring about mental results. Now, as we saw with the physical human body, we could trace back moment by moment to the time of conception when the parents provided the physical causes for the soon-to-be-born child. However, those were only physical causes. They were not the mental cause. At the moment of conception, the parents did not provide a mental thought or mental cause for the embryo. Each parent’s thoughts continued in each of their own respective minds. At the time of conception, their stream of thoughts neither ceased nor entered into the fetus. Each parent continued with their own respective stream of thoughts and consciousness.

So, from where did the beginning of the child’s thought stream arise? Each of the parents have their respective mind-streams which continue unabated individually prior to the birth of their child and have continued on individually in relation to their own individual existence. As was stated before, nothing arises without a corresponding previous cause. Therefore, the conclusion must be that if the child did not obtain the parents’ thought streams, then it must have had a thought or a stream of

consciousness that came from somewhere else, specifically a previous thought or a stream of consciousness of its own. And, from where else could that thought or stream of consciousness arise but from the continuity of thoughts that arose from the child's previous existence. In this way, it can logically be stated that a new-born child's stream of consciousness or thoughts prior to his present existence could only have arisen from its previous existence.

Recollected and written down by Jay Goldberg.