



A Study of the Buddhist Conception of Samsara and Its Influences and Insights

Ziqing Teng

Emma Willard School, Troy, NY 12180, USA.

How to cite this paper: Ziqing Teng. (2024) A Study of the Buddhist Conception of Samsara and Its Influences and Insights. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 8(11), 2469-2477. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.11.002

Received: October 16, 2024

Accepted: November 13, 2024

Published: December 9, 2024

***Corresponding author:** Ziqing Teng, Emma Willard School, Troy, NY 12180, USA.

Abstract

In Buddhism, the concept of samsara regarding life and death views human beings as merely one form among all sentient beings. It posits that life and death are not endpoints in the modern sense. Therefore, from the perspective of karmic cycles, Buddhism criticizes annihilationism. It not only constructs a rigorous view of life and death samsara but also provides methods for transcending the cycle of life and death through spiritual practice. After Buddhism was introduced to China, this distinctive view of life and death had a profound impact on China in terms of stimulating people's subjective initiative and maintaining social stability. This study explores the Buddhist view of samsara, emphasizing its philosophical and ethical implications. By analyzing karmic cycles and life-death perspectives, it highlights Buddhism's influence on Chinese cultural values, end-of-life care, and ethical practices. The findings suggest that Buddhist teachings on samsara offer insights into compassion, equality, and community well-being.

Keywords

Buddhism; Samsara; Karma; Palliative Care; Humanistic Buddhism

Introduction

If humans are fated to die, then why are they born? This ultimate inquiry about life has, with the development of society, become a problem that plagues many people and has led to numerous social tragedies. In contemporary times, science seemingly cannot furnish an answer to the meaning of life, whereas Buddhism presents a distinctive approach. The Buddhist concept of samsara regarding life and death allows people to understand that death is not to be feared, as it is intricately linked to life. By practicing specific methods provided by Buddhism, one can alleviate the depression and anxiety prevalent among people in contemporary times.

1. Key Concepts of the Buddhist View on Samsara

In traditional Chinese culture, death is perceived as the extinguishing of a light. However, Buddhism criticizes this view. Buddhists hold that human life and death are a continuous cycle. In this samsaric cycle, people are reborn according to the law of dependent origination. And because of the law of dependent origination, as one sows, so shall one reap. When a person dies, different manifestations of reincarnation will appear according to one's own causes and effects.

1.1 All living beings will die, yet death is not the terminus

The term "sentient beings" originates from the Sanskrit word "sattva" in Buddhist scriptures, meaning those who are sentient. In the first volume of *Annotations on Consciousness-Only* (Kui Ji, n.d.), it is expounded as "sentient

consciousness”—referring to entities with emotions, mental states, and cognitive awareness. The definition of sentient beings in Buddhist scriptures encompasses a far broader range than the scientific classification of life. It not only includes visible humans and creatures in the universal sense but also encompasses many invisible sentient beings.

Matters of life and death constitute the universal attribute of all sentient beings with emotions, highlighting the profound connotation of the term “sentient beings”. As stated in the *Commentary on the Perfection of Wisdom*, “Why are they called sentient beings? Because those who are sentient are reborn repeatedly.” (Kui Ji, n.d.). In the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, life and death are subdivided into two types: one is segmented life and death, and the other is transformative life and death. Segmented life and death refers to the pattern of life and death experienced by ordinary people in the three realms and six paths. For example, humans generally have a lifespan of about a hundred years. At the end of life, it is death, and then the soul is reborn as a completely new life. Transformative life and death is considered to transcend the segmented boundaries of life and death in the three realms.

In Chinese culture, most people believe in the conclusion that “when a person dies, the light goes out”, suggesting that death implies total annihilation. Buddhists call this assertion “the view of annihilation” or “annihilation theory” and criticize it extensively. Buddhists believe that annihilation theory violates the law of dependent origination, which is regarded as a universal truth applicable in all circumstances.

In volume seven of *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra*, the Mahayana Yogācāra school questions “the theory of annihilation upon death” by using the analogy: “Just as a tile or stone, once broken, cannot be reassembled” (Kui Ji, n.d.). Then, it further poses the question: When you say that a person is annihilated after death, do you mean the disappearance of the five aggregates or the disappearance of the “self”? The five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—constitute human existence. The five aggregates arise and perish in relation to each other, and the causal chain between them is never severed. The continuous process of samsara will not end with the termination of physical functions. If it is said that the “self” disappears, in fact, human existence is merely the aggregation of the four elements (earth, water, fire, and wind) and the five aggregates composed of the body, mind, and spirit. There is no so-called “self” in this composition. Since this is the case, it is even more incorrect to say that a person is completely extinguished upon death.

1.2 The arising and ceasing occur as a result of causes and conditions

The principle of “Praty samutpāda” is the fundamental approach or fundamental concept that Shakyamuni, during his meditation, deeply explored the essence of the cycle of life and samsara and the relationship of cause and effect. It constitutes the very foundation of the Buddhist theoretical system. “When this exists, that exists. When this arises, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not exist. When this ceases, that ceases.” This generalization means that the emergence, development, and disappearance of all things are based on certain combinations of causes and conditions. Among them, the cause is the fundamental for the occurrence of things and is the internal decisive factor, while the condition is the auxiliary condition for the occurrence of things and is the external influencing factor. In this sentence, “this” refers to the cause and “that” refers to the effect. “If this exists, that exists. If this perishes, that perishes” is hailed as “simultaneous cause and effect”. Analyzed from the perspective of the flow of time, the existing things at present are actually the consequences caused by certain factors (causes) that have already disappeared in the past. At the same time, it also indicates the causes of certain results in the future. All phenomena are all in the rise and fall of the cycle of life and death and cause and effect. Relatively speaking, “If this arises, that arises. If this ceases, that ceases” is called “delayed cause and effect”. Taking humans as an example, their life activities depend on the supply of food and air to be maintained. Food and air are the causes and humans are the effects. If the cause is gone, then the person will no longer exist.

As recorded in the “Āgama Sūtra”, the principle of dependent origination is called “the Middle Way” (Madhyamāpratipad). This middle path is regarded as the supreme truth in Buddhism, avoiding the extremes of externalism and nihilism. This middle path is regarded as the supreme truth in Buddhism, avoiding the extremes of externalism and nihilism. Its view on life and death samsara showcases the unique concept of life and death in Buddhism.

In the philosophy of the Middle Way of the cycle of life and death, the existence of sentient beings resembles a chain reaction of dependent origination and cessation, endlessly continuing, with the cycle of cause and effect never ceasing. Buddhist scriptures compare this phenomenon to a continuously burning candle—while the candle itself may be consumed, the flame can be transferred and keep burning. From the Buddhist perspective, life is an endless chain of succession of life and death and succession of cause and effect. When a person passes away, they do not merely vanish. Instead, according to their actions in their lifetime, they are destined to bear corresponding

consequences. Unless one interrupts the source of generating new life through practice, this cycle of life and death, death and life will never come to an end.

According to the principle of dependent origination “When this arises, that arises”, each cause gives rise to a corresponding effect. Good karma brings positive retribution, and evil karma brings negative retribution. Based on the time it takes for these results to manifest, karmic retribution can be categorized into three types. The first is retribution in present life, which means that the karmic result appears immediately in the present moment, enabling individuals to observe the results of their deeds within present lifetime. The second is retribution in the next life, which means that the good and evil done in this life will receive corresponding retribution in the next life. From this perspective, the outcomes of the present life are a consequence of causes from a prior existence. The third is delayed retribution, that is, the karma in this life will only mature and become a karmic result in future lives. In Buddhism, in the Buddhist doctrine, doing good or evil will lead to the realization of karmic results, perpetuating the cycle of rebirth and death. Some raise questions about the fairness of this system, especially when karmic outcomes seem to unfold in a different lifetime than when the actions took place. That is, doing evil in this life and suffering in the next life seem to be consequences borne by different individuals. Therefore, isn't there no retribution for good and evil? In response to this concern, Master Tsongkhapa once said: “Karma and its result are neither non-existent nor existent for the self.” indicating that while karma is intrinsically empty, its effects endure. Karma and its result are the dual manifestations of the law of dependent origination and there is no contradiction.

1.3 The diverse facets of samsara

In Buddhist scriptures, sentient beings are divided into six realms, each representing a form within the cycle of birth and death and determined by cause and effect. Among them, the realms of devas (gods), humans, and asuras (demi-gods) are regarded as the three “good” realms, while the realms of pretas (hungry ghost realm), animals, and hell beings are considered the three “evil” realms.

The deva realm occupies the apex of the six realms, and is the best and highest among them. Buddhist scriptures further divide the heavenly realm into three realms with a total of twenty-eight levels. Although the beings in the deva realm possess supernatural powers and lead a happy life, they are also subject to mortality. Buddhism warns sentient beings not to be greedy for the pleasures of the heavenly realm but rather to seek liberation from the three realms through spiritual practice. The asura realm lies between the human realm and the heavenly realm. Although asuras possess some godlike qualities, their moral character and merit fall short of those in the deva realm, so it is also called “non-heaven.” Asuras often marred by arrogance and duplicitous intentions. Asuras accumulate positive karma but lack the purity necessary to reach the deva realm, resulting in lesser rewards. The preta realm, also known as the hungry ghost realm, is different from the traditional concept of ghosts. The karmic causes of ghosts vary, but jealousy, flattery, darkness, and greed can be regarded as common karmic causes of ghosts. Although pretas endure intense craving and scarcity, they are classified into numerous types—up to 36 varieties—based on their unique karmic circumstances. Hell is the destination for those who have committed many evil deeds. In hell, there are not only various cruel instruments of torture but also an extremely long duration. Even after their time in hell, they frequently transition to the preta or animal realms, prolonging their karmic retribution. The animal realm mainly consists of three categories: fish, birds, and beasts. Each category contains thousands of species. Their shapes, ways of living, and lifespans are all different and difficult to describe exhaustively. Animals are characterized by ignorance and an incapacity to comprehend the Dharma, leading to a cycle of suffering and missed opportunities for spiritual insight.

2. The Causes of the Buddhist Perspective on the Cycle of Samsara

The resolution of the matters concerning life and death functions as the foundation of Buddhism. Siddhartha Gautama, who later came to be known as the Buddha, originally a prince in ancient India. Growing up in the palace, he enjoyed the utmost pleasures in the world. However, during his first outing outside the palace as a young man, he came across the sufferings of sentient beings. He witnessed the arduous labor of farmers under the scorching sun, with sweat pouring down like rain. When the soil was turned over, insects scattered and flocks of birds competed to peck at the food. The exhaustion of both cattle and humans filled him with compassion and caused him to deeply reflect on the pains of existence, resonating with the suffering endured by all living creatures. Soon after, he encountered the realities of old age, illness, and death, as well as ascetics striving for liberation. This made him uneasy about the inevitable birth, old age, sickness, and death that he would face in the future, and gave him a deeper understanding of the

suffering inherent in the inescapable laws of life for all. He pondered, “If everyone must confront death, then why be born at all?” He was determined to find a way of liberation from the suffering of samsara for himself and all sentient beings. Thus, he resolutely abandoned his status as a prince and left the kingdom to live as an ascetic.

The Buddha's abandonment of the secular world is in pursuit of eternal joy, freedom from restraint, and resistance against the end of life. Initially, he adhered to the practices of Brahmanism, spending six years engaging in meditation and severe austerities, but failing to reach the realm of transcending life and death. Subsequently, he abandoned the path of asceticism and blazed a new trail, sitting on the grass by a riverbank to commence a new pursuit of enlightenment. Through deep meditation, he reached the state of serene stillness and reenacted his own cycle of life and death. Traversing the endless river of samsara, all beings were once close relatives in past lives. Therefore, with boundless compassion for saving all sentient beings, he delved deeply into the various reasons for the cycle of life and death of all sentient beings revealed by his spiritual powers. Through unremitting observation and analysis, he ultimately severed the root of samsara within his heart at the dawn of enlightenment and became a supreme awakened one who understood the truth of the universe and life - the Buddha.

2.1 All phenomena are ultimately rooted in the mind

Why do human beings experience the cycle of birth and death repeatedly? Buddhism provides a definite answer—all of this is constructed by the beings' own minds. Even the entire vast universe in which sentient beings exist is an illusion manifested by the mind. How does the mind construct this world of continuous birth and death? According to the Buddha's teachings, the actions generated by the mind lead to corresponding results, following the natural laws of karma. People thus become entrapped in the system constructed by this law, which encompasses the five aggregates, karmic results, and the cycles of the three realms and six paths.

The Sanskrit term for “mind” is “Citta”, meaning to gather or assemble. Buddhism categorizes the functions of the mind into two types: fundamental functions (“mental dharmas”) and subsidiary functions (“mental factors”). The fundamental functions are the six consciousnesses of eyes, ears, tongue, nose, body, and mind. And the direct creators of karma are the subsidiary functions, namely the “mental factors” (Kui Ji, n.d.), which are the attributes or qualities that the mind possesses.

2.2 Karma originates from delusion

The mind, through actions arising from confusion, thereby incurs the defiled karmic deeds of good and evil that lead to the bitter fruits of birth and death. “Confusions” refer to those things that can bewilder people and prevent them from recognizing the true nature of affairs. They encompass the three poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance, which are the primary causes of the cycle of birth and death. Greed and hatred are closely intertwined. For whenever one is attached to something with greed, one will then harbor hatred towards anything that obstructs the attainment of what one loves. In Buddhist thought, attachment is regarded as the direct cause of beings descending into the six realms of existence. And ignorance is understood as stupidity, that is, being dull and unaware of the true nature of the universe and life. Moreover, ignorance is closely related to attachment. Because one fails to see through things, one will become attached to certain things.

In the teachings of the Lesser Vehicle (Hinayana), two types of delusions are mentioned: “view confusions” and “thought confusions”. View confusions originate from superficial thinking and analysis, resulting in incorrect perceptions. As for the “thought confusions”, they refer to the disturbances originating from the sensorial level, such as emotions like greed, anger, jealousy, and pride. These disturbances are often inborn, deeply rooted, and not easy to get rid of.

2.3 Delusions arise from false apprehensions and attachments

The question emerges regarding the origin of the two types of delusions—view delusions and thought delusions. In Buddhism, it is expounded that they stem from psychological functions that are contrary to the truth, that is, “failure to perceive the truth” or what is called “false thoughts and views”. In other words, an inaccurate understanding of the truth is the source of afflictions and karmic deeds. Therefore, Buddhism has focused on the study of cognition. Buddhism studies human cognition through the principle of dependent origination. According to Buddhist teachings, the fundamental components of cognition consist of: sensory organs (perceptual faculties), objects (cognitive subjects), and cognitive ability (consciousness). These three elements combine with each other and jointly give rise to various

forms of cognition. Since cognition arises depending on these conditions, it does not exist independently, nor is it a direct manifestation of an eternal and unchanging "true" essence. Instead, this cognition possesses relativity, limitation, and illusoriness. If there is a lack of in-depth reflection on this, taking false understandings as the truth, this is precisely the root of ignorance.

3. The Buddhist Route to Liberation from the Cycle of Samsara

Buddhism holds that the issue of life and death is fundamental to problems related to human life, the spiritual realm, and society. Achieving what Buddhism refers to as “comprehending birth and death” would resolve these issues smoothly. The term “comprehending” has two connotations: one is to understand the true essence of birth and death, and the other is to deal with the passive cycle of existence. Since Buddhism has raised the issue of life and death, it also provides the means to break free from the cycle of reincarnation—through spiritual practice. Anyone willing to diligently cultivate themselves and “purify their minds” can eventually achieve the freedom that transcends life and death, although the process may vary in terms of duration and intensity. Buddhism has put forward different paths of spiritual practice according to the varying aptitudes of sentient beings, with a total of as many as eighty-four thousand methods. No matter which path of practice one chooses, one must undergo countless lifetimes of painstaking cultivation, the length of which is unimaginable, before finally attaining enlightenment.

3.1 Approaches to overcoming the cycle of life and death in Theravada Buddhism

Mahāyāna Buddhism synthesizes diverse paths into five vehicles: human, celestial, śrāvaka (sound-hearer), pratyekabuddha (solitary enlightened), and Buddha. The paths of the human vehicle and the celestial vehicle established by the “inferior practitioners” are driven by the “aspiration for upward progress”. This aspiration, in essence, represents an unwavering pursuit in terms of self-improvement and the pursuit of life ideals. A person lacking this positive mental attitude risks descending into a state similar to that of an animal. The Śrāvaka vehicle and the Pratyekabuddha vehicle are jointly referred to as the two vehicles and are also called "Hinayana" by Mahayana Buddhism. It is considered that their vows, fruition of attainment are smaller compared to those of Mahayana, and their doctrines are shallower. The two vehicles can be summarized by the concepts of “karma-dependent origination” and “love-dependence origination,” which correspond to the Four Noble Truths and the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination. The Four Noble Truths present four fundamental verities. The Twelve Links of Dependent Origination reveal the twelve links of the causal relationship, which are divided into two major categories: origination and cessation. The origination aspect elaborates the causal chain of defilement and purity, tracing back from outcomes like birth, aging, sickness, death, sorrow, grief, and suffering to their sources. The cessation aspect, based on the principle of dependent origination (“if this exists, that exists”; “if this ceases, that ceases”), reverses the thought process to consider how to eliminate phenomena such as aging, sickness, death, and suffering.

3.2 Approaches to overcoming the cycle of birth and death in Mahāyāna Buddhism

Mahāyāna Buddhism is in opposition to the “self-liberation” approach of Theravāda Buddhism, which concentrates solely on individual salvation. This idea emphasizes that practitioners should embrace a spirit of gratitude and boundless compassion for liberating all sentient beings, leading them all towards the state of liberation. As is stated in the Gāyāna Sutra, “The aspiration for enlightenment is the cause, and great compassion is the foundation” (Kui Ji, n.d.). The aspiration for enlightenment, or bodhicitta, is regarded by Mahāyāna as the most crucial element in attaining Buddhahood. Consequently, Mahāyāna has proposed a series of practice methods to arouse bodhicitta through insights into the sufferings of sentient beings, the pains of samsara, the interconnectedness and kindness among sentient beings, the merits of the Buddhas, and the inherent Buddha-nature within oneself (Po Luo Po Mi Duo Luo, n.d.)

4. The Historical Impact of the Buddhist View on Life, Death, and Rebirth

Since the introduction of Buddhism into China, the intellectual sphere has been marked by a tripartite equilibrium among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, which has been maintained for nearly two thousand years. The views on life and death of these three schools have also been undergoing a process of integration through continuous rejection, dialectical examination, and assimilation. The Chinese perspective on life and death has basically incorporated the viewpoints of all three schools. Although the majority of Chinese people still uphold the ideological outlooks of Confucianism and Daoism, quite a number of them have also accepted the Buddhist doctrines of the cycle of birth

and death and karmic retribution. Confucianism, compared with Daoism, is more inclined to reject the Buddhist views on life and death. As Confucius said, “Respect the spirits but keep them at a distance,” indicating that Confucians generally refrain from discussing the afterlife, instead concentrating on the present (Kui Ji, n.d.). Daoism, on the other hand, has absorbed a relatively large number of Buddhist views on life and death and has used them to reorganize and transform its own ideological system, eventually becoming very close to the Buddhist view on life and death.

Initially, Daoism pursued physical immortality, while Buddhism emphasized understanding the emptiness of life and the nature of non-birth. After the concept of reincarnation in Buddhism was adopted, the core objective of Taoist beliefs shifted from seeking the eternal life of the physical body to transcending the boundaries of life and death, devoting itself to finding ways to break free from the cycle of birth and death. For example, in the “Collection of Teachings from Zhong and Lü,” it is stated: “If one wishes to escape the cycle of reincarnation and not fall into a different form of being, one should maintain a body free from illness and aging, unaffected by the pains of life and death, standing between heaven and earth, embracing yin and yang, becoming human rather than a ghost. Through cultivation in the human realm, one can attain immortality and then ascend to the heavenly realm.” (Po Luo Po Mi Duo Luo, n.d.) Similar to Buddhism, Quanzhen Taoism holds that the four elements of the physical body are a false combination, impermanent, and impure. It advocates transcending the cycles of life and death by realizing one's inherent true nature and regards the immortality of the physical body as a minor accomplishment.

4.1 Concentrate on oneself to stimulate subjective initiative

According to the principle of the cycle of karmic retribution, all sentient beings accumulate karma with the self as the core, and these karmic forces unfold around the individual's "mundane self". The outcomes of one's actions follow the clarity of cause and effect without any ambiguity; only the individual who acts or their reborn self can bear the consequences. The retribution one experiences in this life must surely stem from the causes one has created in previous lives. Even those as close as parents and children cannot bear the karmic consequences for each other. As it is stated in the Lankavatara Sutra: “Such evil deeds are self-generated; they do not descend from heaven, arise from the earth, or come from others; they are self-invoked and must be borne by oneself” (Kui Ji, n.d.)

This Buddhist perspective has assisted the Chinese in understanding that any evil actions committed must ultimately be confronted by the individual responsible. It thus serves as a reminder for people to pay attention to their own actions. Spurred by this, people will also be more cautious and engage more in doing good deeds while minimizing evil deeds.

4.2 Standardizing ethics to maintain social stability

Since ancient times, China has had the concept of the immortality of the soul. For instance, in the excavations of the Upper Cave Man at Zhoukoudian in Beijing, decorative items such as stone beads and bone pendants were found along with the remains of the deceased. However, before the introduction of Buddhism, this idea was largely disregarded by Confucianism and Daoism, remaining a superstitious concept that was not incorporated into the traditional moral framework.

With the introduction of Buddhism into our country, the Chinese people integrated the Buddhist concepts of karma and reincarnation into their original beliefs about the soul, making it an auxiliary means to strengthen moral norms. People gradually embraced the idea that, after death, an individual's soul would ascend to paradise or descend to the underworld depending on their actions in life. This awareness of reincarnation not only emphasized the significance of moral behavior in one's current life but also increased the importance of ensuring a peaceful resting place for the deceased. To guarantee the tranquility of the departed's soul, various novel elements were introduced into traditional funeral rites. For example, after a person passes away, they hire monks to chant scriptures, hold water and land dharma assemblies, offer supplies to the beings in the waters and on land, conduct chanting and repentance, and hold commemorative activities for the deceased. This transformation has subverted the previous Chinese belief model of the “Pure Land”.

In addition, reincarnation makes people understand that what one does in this life not only has an impact on the present life but also has a profound influence on the future life trajectory. Under the influence of this concept, whether it is the learned literati or the illiterate common people, most Chinese people deeply believe in their hearts that after the end of this life, they will welcome a new life. Whenever they witness battered homeless people or stray dogs bitten by mosquitoes, they will associate it with possible past misdeeds. This vivid, visual representation of tragedy is more persuasive than the moral teachings of Confucianism and serves to awaken a sense of responsibility,

motivating individuals to pursue goodness wholeheartedly. Thus, the notion that “good brings good, and evil brings evil” has become a firm foundation of Chinese moral ethics throughout history.

5. The Contemporary Significance of Buddhist Views on Life, Death, and Reincarnation

In contemporary society, Buddhism shows great enthusiasm for charitable endeavors, and this, in fact, is an age-old tradition within the Buddhist faith. Historically, the charitable works of Buddhism have left a profound and indelible mark. Beyond acts of charity, Buddhism provides guidance that assists individuals approaching death to reduce their fear of dying, as they come to comprehend that death is not the termination of life's journey. Additionally, Buddhism stresses the equality of all beings, advocating for the protection of even the tiniest forms of life, such as flowers and trees, not to mention the treatment of other people. A gentle and compassionate stance towards others is also a central tenet of Buddhist teachings.

5.1 Investigating Buddhist charity and evolving humanistic Buddhism

Charity, in essence, stems from the profound compassion and benevolent deeds within one's heart. It precisely embodies a crucial concept in Mahayana Buddhism—the path of the Bodhisattva, which involves practicing compassion and saving the world. In contemporary China, charity has only recently gained entry into the public consciousness. However, throughout history, Buddhism has made indelible contributions to charitable undertakings. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, Buddhist believers established one of the earliest charitable institutions—the “Endless Treasury”. If interpreted in contemporary terms, this “Endless Treasury” is equivalent to a financial institution dedicated to charitable causes, with its main function being to take pleasure in helping others and relieving hardships. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, the “Endless Treasures,” founded by the Sanjiao religion, grew substantially, acquiring significant social influence that even aroused jealousy among the ruling class, resulting in its forcible confiscation. Nevertheless, the form of the charitable fund still continued in temples. It was renamed the “Longevity Treasury” during the Song Dynasty and “Relief Funds” during the Yuan Dynasty, eventually spreading to Japan where it was called “Endless Society.”

Historically, Buddhist followers were among the most active participants in charitable work. Buddhist teachings emphasize assisting sentient beings and cultivating good relationships, making engagement in charitable activities a natural behavior for monks. The ancient Chinese charitable organization, the “Hall of Six Diseases”, was founded by Xiao Ziliang, the Prince of Jingling, and Xiao Changmao, the Crown Prince Wenhui, both of whom were believers in Buddhism. Among various Buddhist charitable organizations, the most successful and influential was the “Compassionate Fields and Healing Workshop” during the Tang dynasty. In Buddhism, there is a concept of “Five Fields of Blessings,” with “Compassionate Fields” being one, mainly focused on providing assistance to the poor, sick, and lonely elderly, thus giving rise to the name “Compassionate Fields and Healing Workshop.”

5.2 Improving end-of-life care to alleviate the fear of death

In the Western world, the Roman Catholic Church established hospices in 1976, advocating “hospice care” for terminally ill patients. This approach offers comprehensive attention to the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs of patients as whole individuals, providing psychological counseling and helping them relieve pain and fear, enabling them to face the end of life with peace and dignity. As time has passed, the concept of life care has gradually been widely recognized, and specialized “palliative care units” have been successively established in various Western countries. Meanwhile, Buddhism also has a long-standing tradition of life care, having spontaneously carried out life care services for a long time and gradually formed a complete practice system of life care (Kui Ji, n.d.)

During the lifetime of the Buddha, he often engaged himself in the care and attention of the dying. For example, in the 103rd sutra of the fifth volume of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, it is mentioned that there was an elder named Nakulapita, who was already 120 years old, with a frail body and suffering from various diseases. The Buddha instructed him to cultivate within this suffering body to reach a state of not feeling pain. Subsequently, he imparted the truth of observing the impermanence of the five aggregates and the tranquility of nirvana, helping Nakulapita gain wisdom to overcome his fear of death. In the teachings of the Buddha, he emphasized that his disciples should apply wisdom and compassion to engage in the care of the dying. In the 1122nd sutra of the 41st volume of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha told lay disciples like Nandiya that those wise lay disciples of Buddhism should visit those Buddhist believers who were being tortured by illness and were nearing the end of their lives. According to their actual situations, they should teach methods and doctrines that could bring peace. First, they should instill faith in the Three

Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, which is called the “Three Refuges”—three places where one's mind can find tranquility. Many Buddhist believers actively practice the teachings of the Buddha. The *Anguttara Nikāya* records the following story: In *Sāvathī*, a wealthy merchant named *Anāthapiṇḍika* was seriously ill and on the verge of death. The disciple of the Buddha, *Sāriputta*, sensed this situation through his supernatural powers and ordered *Ānanda* to visit. During the visit, *Sāriputta* taught *Anāthapiṇḍika* to recite the Three Jewels and the doctrine of the first emptiness. This made *Anāthapiṇḍika* extremely sad, with tears streaming down his face and being unable to control himself, but it also eliminated his fear of death. Shortly thereafter, he passed away peacefully, his spirit ascending to the heavenly realms.

Under the influence of the concept of “Humanistic Buddhism,” modern Buddhism increasingly emphasizes spiritual care for the dying. Venerable Master *Huizhe* of the Chinese Buddhist College in Taiwan suggests that attention must be paid to the inner desires of those approaching death, providing them with love, compassion, and support. He proposes three stages of spiritual care: First, assist patients in understanding their condition and the remaining time of their lives, and formulate an appropriate action plan during this period. Second, guide patients to sort out their thoughts, write wills, prepare for posthumous matters, and mentally rehearse farewells with relatives and friends. Third, guide patients to meditate on the image of death, imagining themselves hovering above their bodies and overlooking everything around them.

Nowadays, in many medical institutions in Taiwan, numerous Buddhist monks are quietly devoting themselves to the cause of end-of-life care. Take Master *Sheng Yen* as an example. He views a person's passing away not as a matter for mourning but as a solemn Buddhist event celebrating the conclusion of life. He advocates reciting the “Three Refuges” for the deceased to help their souls find peace. This end-of-life chanting not only helps the souls of the deceased ascend to the Pure Land but also brings warmth and comfort to their families, alleviates their grief, stabilizes their emotions, and sows the seeds of enlightenment. Moreover, it can expand interpersonal relationships, accumulate merit, and allow the practitioners of these rites to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land, thereby enhancing their spiritual status—truly an act of supreme merit and benefit.

5.3 Fostering the notion of equality: Forging a community of life in unison

The equality advocated by the Buddha can be comprehended from two aspects: equality in the right to life and equality in the potential to achieve Buddhahood.

First, out of boundless compassion, the Buddha believed that all living beings, by their very nature, fear death. To forcibly take a life would be, if we place ourselves in their position, an unbearable act. Forcibly taking the life of another being, especially when considering their suffering, is extremely disturbing. In ancient India, monks and nuns who took religious vows carried six essential items collectively known as the “Six Monastic Essentials.” Among these, the “water filter bag” is similar to our modern cloth water filters. When traveling, monastics would inevitably need water. However, they would first use this filter to avoid accidentally consuming tiny organisms and thus prevent unintentional taking of life. Why such careful attention? Buddhist scriptures state that “Buddha observed in a single drop of water, 84,000 microscopic beings.” The teachings on non-killing and this example demonstrate Buddhism's profound respect for life. Buddhism promotes “leaving food out for mice and avoiding lighting lamps on hot nights” to prevent harm to any creature, considering even unintentional killing as an irreversible and serious offense. Conversely, protective actions towards life are highly praised in Buddhism, as exemplified by the well-known saying, “Saving a life is better than building a seven-story pagoda.” The central principle of Buddhism is to protect all forms of life, ranging from birds and animals to insects and fish, with the ultimate goal of cultivating kindness and compassion in people. By nurturing these qualities, individuals can guard against tendencies to harm or dominate the vulnerable. Such teachings foster moral growth and contribute to harmony within families and communities, ultimately leading to peace and happiness at the societal level.

Second, although Buddhism emerged within the context of Hinduism, it has always been opposed to the Hindu caste system. Buddhism maintains that even those from lower castes as defined by Hindu tradition have the eligibility and potential to practice and achieve Buddhahood. In a patriarchal society that undervalues women, Buddhism also affirms women's right to renounce worldly life and pursue spiritual practice. Furthermore, Buddhist teachings extend equality beyond humans to include plants, animals, and all forms of life. For example, the *Nirvana Sutra* states that “All sentient beings possess Buddha-nature and may become Buddhas.” After attaining enlightenment, Buddha's first disciple was surprisingly not a fellow tribesman but a king of the Naga lineage named “*Muchalinda*” (*Kui Ji*, n.d.) During the great *Lotus Sutra* assembly, Buddha even predicted the enlightenment of a female Naga being. Meanwhile, *The Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom* by *Nagarjuna* recounts the story of a dove attaining Buddhahood.

These examples indicate that beings in the Samsara in Sanskrit have the potential to realize supreme enlightenment, although the likelihood and time required may vary. The Buddhist precept of non-violence, one of the Five Precepts, goes beyond refraining from killing humans; it includes kindness to animals and cultivating a compassionate heart. Buddhism thus promotes respect for life, supports unity among nations and peoples, opposes ethnic discrimination and persecution, and calls for the prevention of war and the maintenance of peace.

6. Conclusion

Life and death are two profound mysteries that humanity cannot fully comprehend or evade. Buddhism, however, provides a comprehensive and detailed explanation for them. Both life and death are regarded as transient states, with individuals merely passing through cycles of existence. Nevertheless, samsara follows a specific set of laws, which, in Buddhist philosophy, is known as the Law of Dependent Origination. According to Buddhism, the ultimate goal of life is to transcend this cycle of life and death, leading to teachings on how one can, through spiritual practice, escape samsara. The Buddhist perspective on life and death has had a profound influence on Chinese moral philosophy and has even shaped cultural values related to ethics and compassion. In modern times, Buddhism continues to play an active role, especially in areas such as charity, end-of-life care, and promoting equality in human interactions. As the Avatamsaka Sutra states, “With the boat of paramitas, one travels through the current of life and death, neither clinging to this shore, nor reaching the other, nor pausing in midstream, while tirelessly ferrying sentient beings.” Buddhism’s view of samsara offers insights into life, death, and ethical living that remain relevant in contemporary society. As our understanding of mortality evolves, these teachings may foster a more compassionate and mindful approach to life.

References

- Chen, B. (1994). *Life and Death: The Buddhist Concept of Rebirth*. Hohhot: Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House, p. 21, p. 135, p. 177.
- Deng, D. C., trans. *Jixing Zishuo*. Taipei: Chinese Electronic Buddhist Association, p. 49.
- Doctor, T., Witkowski, O., Solomonova, E., Duane, B., Levin, M. (2022). Biology, Buddhism, and AI: Care as the Driver of Intelligence. *Entropy*, 24(5), 710. <https://doi.org/10.3390/e24050710>.
- Dy, A. C. (2022). Buddhist Modernism in the Philippines: Emerging Localization of Humanistic Buddhism. *Religions*, 13, 220. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030220>.
- Guo, C. S. (1998). The Cycle of Rebirth Without Self: The Buddhist View of Life and Death. *Yuanpei Journal*, 5.
- Kui J. (n.d.). *Cheng Wei Shi Shu Ji Lun*. Volume 1. Taipei: Chinese Electronic Buddhist Association, p. 233.
- Liu, L. F., & Zhang, Y. J. (2010). The Differences in the Views of Life and Death in Confucianism and Buddhism: Centered on the Critique of Buddhism by the Ercheng. *Studies on Confucius*, 3.
- Liu, S., & Qiu, N. (trans.). (2016). *Samyuktāgama*, Vol. 5. Taipei: Chinese Electronic Buddhist Association.
- Moon, H., & Somers, B. D. (2023). The Current Status and Challenges of Templestay Programs in Korean Buddhism. *Religions*, 14, 409. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030409>.
- Po Luo Po Mi Duo Luo, trans. (n.d.). *Bore Deng Lun Shi*. Taipei: Chinese Electronic Buddhist Association, p. 102.
- Shi, W. G. (2016). *Commentary on the Mahāvairocana Sūtra*. Taipei: Chinese Electronic Buddhist Association, p. 274.
- Song Dynasty, Hui Yan, et al. (2016). *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. Taipei: Chinese Electronic Buddhist Association, p. 749.
- Stapleton, T., & Tao, Y. (2021). The Emergence of Transcultural Humanistic Buddhism through the Lens of Religious Entrepreneurship. *Asian Studies Review*, 46(2), 312-330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2021.1970105>.
- Tang, Banlamidi (trans.). (2016). *Sutra of the Light of Wisdom*. Taipei: Chinese Electronic Buddhist Association, p. 145.
- Tang, Shi Jianwu. (n.d.). *Collection of Teachings from Zhonglü*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, p. 89.
- Xuanzang, trans. *Yujia Shidi Lun*. Taipei: Chinese Electronic Buddhist Association, p. 310.
- Zheng, X. J. (2006). The Wisdom of Life and Death in Buddhism and End-of-Life Care. In *Proceedings of the First World Buddhist Forum*.