KARMA AND REBIRTH
IN THE UPAŅIṢADS AND BUDDHISM

BY

NOBLE ROSS REAT

University of Lancaster, England

The Upaniṣads and Buddhism have basically identical ideas on rebirth: Beings are, by ignorance, desire and will, entangled in an ongoing process of repeated birth and death conditioned by actions (karma) and operating in such a way that it is possible to link a given being to a chain of past existences. Both systems encourage release from the chronic trauma of birth and death through ethical conduct, wisdom and meditation. This similarity, coupled with the absence of a Vedic karma-rebirth doctrine, suggests that the Upaniṣadic and Buddhist doctrines may be diverging interpretations of a common, non-Vedic rebirth tradition.

In an attempt to cloak this non-Vedic rebirth idea in orthodoxy, the Upaniṣadic sages allude to Vedic verses, but these verses originally had no connexion with rebirth. The afterlife belief in the Rg Veda is simply that after death, the soul leaves the body 1) and enters heaven 2) or hell 3) or eternity 4). A few verses mention "rejoining a body", but it is clear that these refer to a heavenly body and not another mortal body 5). Though heroes and holy men 6) have better prospects in afterlife than the wicked and irreligious 7), the main factor determining one's eternal fate is the whim of the gods, hopefully to be swayed by prayer and sacrifice 8). The thundering question of the Veda is "what

1) Rg 10.16.1; 10.18.11; 10.14.7-8.
2) Rg 9.113.11; 10.16.4.
3) Rg 4.5.5; 9.73.8; 10.152.4.
4) Rg 9.113.11.
5) Rg 10.14.8; 10.16.5; 10.36.1; 10.68.11. In Satapatha Brāhmaṇa 11.1.8.6 the supreme reward is to be born in heaven with one's own body. Cf. Rg 10.15.4.
6) Rg 10.154.2.
7) Rg 4.5.5; 9.73.8.
8) Rg 10.14.8; 10.16.1; 10.18.11.
god shall we adore with our oblation?" 9). The Upaniṣadic sage answers “Aham brahmaṁāmi” “I am Brahman” 10).

This sudden about face from the concerns of the Veda may be accounted for by two non-Vedic teachings which found expression in both the Upaniṣads and Buddhism: 1) The doctrine of rebirth conditioned by karma and 2) yogic techniques. The doctrine of karma and rebirth wrested man’s destiny from the gods and placed it squarely in his own hands, and yogic techniques shifted the location of the divine from outside man to inside him, replacing the ritualistic religion of the Aryans with the contemplative religion of India. The overriding concerns of both the Upaniṣads and Buddhism are the same, the responsibility and divinity of man. These two concerns meet in the theory of karma and rebirth, the arena in which man acts out his responsibility and the process by which he attains divinity.

**Folk Explanations of Rebirth**

The Upaniṣads preserve what appear to be several very ancient folk explanations of the mechanism of rebirth. The process of rebirth described in Brhadāraṇyaka 6.2.15-16, for example, is probably based on the common folk-belief that conception is caused by eating a plant with a soul in it. (See Fig. 1).

The passage turns on the funeral fire, the setting which is the occasion of most of the Vedic speculation on afterlife. But there is none of the Vedic pleading with gods 11) to transport the deceased to heaven; instead the process is entirely mechanical, determined by the merit of the dead man. Those who practice the religion of the Veda attain the promise of the Veda, the World of the Fathers 12), but the World of the Fathers has become the undesirable alternative in the Upaniṣads, the path of perpetual rebirth.

Those who by sacrificial offerings, charity and austerity (tapas) conquer the worlds, they pass into the smoke (of the cremation fire) from the smoke into the night, from the night into the half-month of the waning moon...

*Brhadāraṇyaka 6.2.16 (R)* 13)

---

9) *Rg* 10.121.
10) *Brhadāraṇyaka* 1.4.10.
11) *Rg* 10.16.4; 10.154.2; 10.15.14; 9.113.7-11.