

With birth, death applies

1. We are born. We come into this world through our birth. As we shall see in the following paragraphs, there are many ways that one can think of one's birth. However, from a phenomenological point of view our birth is always here *with* us. The fact that one is constantly engaged with the world of one's desires, decisions and miseries, means that one is born - his birth is *present*. Obviously, for someone not used to thinking phenomenologically, it might be fairly difficult to pull oneself out of the habitual way of regarding things as something which is clearly defined, something palpable in one's experience. For such a person 'birth' is an event from the past, and we shall address this issue in the paragraphs to follow. However, there is also a simpler and easily overlooked reason for one failing to grasp the phenomenological description of 'birth'. In our language the term 'birth', as a designation of experience, carries certain *past* connotations. These connotations are absolutely gratuitous, and we shall see that the reason for that lies in people's *views* (*ditṭhi*). The established usage of terminology draws its significance (i.e. the meaning of its words) from the most *common* views (on the level of humanity or a particular culture), about the nature of experience. Needless to say, the common views are rarely correct, especially when it comes to the experience of an individual. These views can never represent the real *order of things*. Thus, apart from the way we speak, and use the language, nothing requires us to think that birth can, and shall *only* be understood as a past event which has started and ended *in* time.

2. Naturally, it is possible for one to regard, and understand to a certain extent, birth as something which has happened to him a long time ago, even without having the actual memory of the event. However, this kind of limited understanding is only possible in the *objective* (scientific) *view* of the world, and oneself. We can even go a step further and say that it is precisely *because* of that view that one thinks of birth (and other things, including ageing-and-death) in these temporal categories. With this kind of view, the objective world in front of one, the world which is *in* time, takes precedence over one's experience as such, which is *of* time (cf. Ñāṇavīra Thera, *Notes on Dhamma*, FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURE, Dynamic Aspect, para. 5). One starts regarding the objects that appear *through* one's experience, as something more fundamental than the experience itself - he puts second that which is to come first, and he puts first that which is to come second.¹ As a result of this one starts regarding oneself objectively as also being *in* time. Thus, time develops into a category which has become *external* to everything, and all of the things appear as being "within" it². Therefore, one sees that others are born, their event of birth occurs in time, when he observes it externally. But because he views himself externally too, he naturally (i.e. in conformity with his view) comes to assume that his birth has *also* occurred some time ago in the past. One also assumes, since he can see it in his everyday experience, that death *will* happen to him in that same 'external' sense, "as it happens to others all the time". By regarding things in this way, he, as an individual, does not feel threatened by any of it, until the *actual* death comes of course. So, we can

1 Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, (Routledge Classics, 2007, p. 82):

I detach myself from my experience and pass to the *idea*. Like the object, the idea purports to be the same for everybody, valid in all times and places, and the individuation of an object in an objective point of time and space finally appears as the expression of a universal positing power. I am no longer concerned with my body, nor with time, nor with the world, as I experience them in antepredicative knowledge, in the inner communion that I have with them. I now refer to my body only as a idea, to the universe as idea, to the idea of space and the idea of time. Thus 'objective' thought (in Kierkegaard's sense) is formed - being that of common sense and of science - which finally causes us to lose contact with perceptual experience, of which it is nevertheless the outcome and the natural sequel. The whole life of consciousness is characterized by the tendency to posit objects, since it is consciousness, that is to say self-knowledge, only in so far as it takes hold of itself and draws itself together in an identifiable object. And yet the absolute positing of a single object is the death of consciousness, since it congeals the whole of existence, as a crystal placed in a solution suddenly crystallizes it.

2 Time, as a phenomena in one's experience, is regarded as more primordial (read - 'permanent'), than the experience of things. The things seem to come and go, while the *sense* of time stays.

see that one doesn't adopt this objective view voluntarily – when *avijjā* is present, the view is developed naturally as the quickest way of offering one assurance from a threatening world. The world and one's experience becomes explainable and measurable – one has regained *control*.

Let us get back to the phenomenon of 'birth', we were discussing. The Buddha referred to 'birth' as:

Whatever birth, taking birth, descent, coming-to-being, coming-forth, manifestation of aggregates, and acquisition of [[sense]] spheres of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called birth. (Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta, M. 9/i 50)

Thus, although we can agree that birth is some sort of a “beginning”, so to speak, a “manifestation of the aggregates”, what obliges us to think that that beginning has *ended* there? The fact that one keeps accepting and using the five-aggregates, the fact that one is constantly involved with the world of one's senses, doesn't that mean that one's *manifestation* of aggregates is *present*³? And would one be able to desire various things in the world, if those things were not manifested? If one were able to relinquish any attachment for his own body, would one be bothered when that body falls apart and dies? It is because one *affirms* that manifestation of the five-aggregates, through desire-and-lust for them, that the manifestation *exists*, it comes-into-being – with being, birth is (*bhavapaccayā jāti*). And when one regards it as 'mine', one ages, falls sick and dies (and also experiences any other misery possible in this life) – with birth, ageing-and-death (*jātipaccayā jarāmaṇaṃ...*). If there is no being whatsoever, would manifestation be able to manifest itself? And if nothing manifested, would one be able to appropriate it? And if there is nothing which belongs to one, would one suffer on account of those things breaking up and disappearing? No, because one has escaped.

3. Let us go back to the question of when birth ends. Actually, we can even ask when does birth start? The common view is that first one is conceived, and then, after nine months or so, things culminate in one being born. But when does the conception take place or when *exactly* is one born? Is it with the formation of an embryo or with cutting of the umbilical cord? Generally, the accepted view is that birth is over when the baby comes out of the womb and into the world. And when it comes to 'general views', we all know that people often tend to blindly comply to them, taking them for granted for the most (or whole) of their lives, without even realizing they are doing so. In this case, 'birth' becomes that which accords to the majority of opinions on that subject. One chooses to conform with “what everyone else thinks”, since the majority is “always in the right”. One accepts Heidegger's impersonal 'They' as a dictator of one's own values, one finds *safety* in doing so. However, no matter how secure the majority's view might seem, all it takes is for someone else to come along and say (perhaps supporting it with “the latest medical research”) that birth actually ends when the formation of an infant is completed in the womb, and that coming out of the mother is not relevant as such, to question of birth itself. (Though, for parents, even if they happen to be those scientists, this is probably *the most* relevant part⁴.) If his utterance manages to change the general opinion, if the majority of people come to accept it, we will have a new, “more accurate” view on the nature of birth. The majority might have been wrong earlier, but now it is in the right... until it changes. And one can again choose to conform to that majority and make a choice out of it, but no matter how far one goes that choice will always remain *personal*, and as such, be on the level of an *individual*. So, although one thinks what everybody else does, one nevertheless remains *responsible* for that very thinking. It becomes clear then that by choosing the majority's opinion on a certain subject (in this case

3 Furthermore, nothing obliges us to think that 'manifestation of aggregates' refers to the *event* of coming-out-of-womb. The Buddha has said that “when mother and father come together and the mother is in season and the one to be tied is present, with the coming together of these three things, there is descent into the womb” (M. 38/i 265-66). Thus, the five-aggregates are already manifested, in a way, even at the stage of an embryo, and before the infant is formed. (Cf. also A.III, 61/i, 176-7)

4 And therefore it is not *accidental* that this is most commonly regarded as birth.

'birth), out of 'faith' in modern science (or religion) perhaps, a person chooses *his individual view* on given subject. So, by deciding to accept the scientific explanation of birth, one decides that birth, for him, is something observable, an event in the world. Thus, whether one is aware of it or not, one is responsible for the *meaning* of things in one's experience. Even if we go further and say that we could pinpoint the exact *moment* of birth⁵, when, for example, conception takes place, and even if the whole of humanity, without an exception, agreed upon it, nevertheless, this would not escape the *nature* of 'view', and that is to be 'imposed' onto things in one's experience, while at the same time directly depending upon them. In our case that would most likely be the 'objective view', which is of course, based on personal preferences and inclinations⁶. Thus, for a *puthujjana* coming-out-of-womb *is that* which is birth. His birth *exists*.

The Buddha, on the other hand, talks about the *nature* of birth, as a phenomena (*dhamma*), in one's experience. He does not refer to birth as an occurrence in time, upon which even *puthujjanas* cannot agree, and this can be seen from the usual *paṭiccasamuppāda* (*p.s.*) description. In this description, *jāti* refers to that 'nature' of birth and any temporal events are completely irrelevant to it. If there is no 'birth' whatsoever, if there is no manifestation (as such) of the aggregates, a *puthujjana* would not be able to regard any event (in this case 'coming-out-of-womb') as *his*⁷ birth⁸. Thus, one doesn't suffer on account of birth as an event in the past, one suffers on account of the *nature* of birth in the *present*. In *p.s.* context, 'birth' structurally *precedes* 'ageing-and-death'. 'Ageing-and-death' is not 'birth', but they wouldn't be without it – together they arise, together they

5 This, in itself, is clearly impossible, since the "exactness", in any area of science, is determined by the capacities of one's perception (i.e. the refinement of our technology and observational instruments). (Cf. Nāṇavīra Thera, *Notes on Dhamma*, FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURE, Static Aspect, para. 16.)

6 It is very unlikely that the whole of humanity could actually agree on this (or anything), since all people are *not* the same. The birth of a baby, in this case, carries different *significance* for different *individuals*. A *mother* might say that her baby was born the moment she held it in her arms, and that it was conceived the moment she fell in love with its father. A *scientist*, in his carefully cultivated attitude of disinterestedness, might say that a baby is conceived when embryo cells become discernible (he observes it under his microscope!), and perhaps that it is born when it starts to breathe independently. For a *doctor*, involved in performing abortions, there is no question of 'baby' (i.e. 'human'), until three months are due. Thus, it is how one *feels* towards 'birth', how one *perceives* it, how one *intends* it, that *determines* what that birth *is* for him. ("Contacted, monks, one feels; contacted, one intends; contacted, one perceives." - Saḷāyatana Saṃyutta, iv,10.)

Also, compare the passage from the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta, M. 18/i III-112:

Dependent on the eye and forms (ear, nose...) eye consciousness arise. The meeting of three is contact. With contact as condition there is feeling. What man feels, that he perceives. What he perceives, that he thinks about. What he thinks about that he diversifies. With what he diversified as the source calculations about perceptions of diversification occupy a man with respect to past, future and present.

7 Compare this passage from J.P. Sartre - *Existentialism is Humanism*, chapter on 'Freedom and Responsibility':

Yet I find an absolute responsibility for the fact that my facticity (here the fact of my birth) is directly inapprehensible and even inconceivable, for this fact of my birth never appears as a brute fact but always across a projective reconstruction of my for-itself. I am ashamed of being born or I rejoice over it, or in attempting to get rid of my life I affirm that I live and I assume this life as bad. Thus in a certain sense I *choose* to be born. This choice itself is integrally affected with facticity since I am not able not to choose, but this facticity in turn will appear only in so far as I surpass it toward my ends. Thus facticity is everywhere, but inapprehensible; I never encounter anything except my responsibility. That is why I can not ask, "Why was I born?" or curse the day of my birth or declare that I did not ask to be born, for these various attitudes towards my birth – i.e., toward the *fact* that I realize a presence in the world – are absolutely nothing else but ways of assuming this birth in full responsibility and of making it *mine*.

8 This can be stated even more precisely: the temporal things (events in time) are possible *only* because there is an atemporal structure (*nature* of time) – time is *secondary* to one's experience. Hence, the *p.s.* is said to be *akālika*, 'timeless'. (Cf. Nāṇavīra Thera, *Notes on Dhamma*, NP. & FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURE). That is why, in the Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta, M. 9, we can see that a Noble disciple can, by understanding 'being', 'birth' or 'ageing-and-death' respectively, come to the same result – complete freedom from suffering, *arahatship*. *P.s.* can be understood by understanding all or *any* of its "pairs", since each of them represent, or rather *are*, the principle of simultaneous dependent origination – 'when this, this is' (*imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti*).

cease. So, it is that with 'birth', 'ageing-and-death' (and 'sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair') *apply*. Consequently, if we were to discuss *jāramaraṇaṃ*, we could say that it is because ageing-and-death is *present*, that one will age and die (and suffer) *in* time. But, if one could manage, through an understanding of the Dhamma, to free oneself from 'being' – to bring it to an end – 'birth' and 'ageing-and-death' would cease to exist for him: all of the temporal occasions for suffering would cease to be *his* suffering, since by not-being born, one doesn't have the desire to interfere with them any more – one is free.

5. Let me just say something more, for those who find it difficult to accept that the existential (phenomenological) method⁹ can validly be applied to Dhamma. We can put aside Sartre, Heidegger and those like them, and disregard what they have to say about birth. However, even in that case, still, we need look no further than the *p.s.* description in order to see what the Buddha meant by 'birth'. In *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta*, *M.* 9/i 50, it is said, as we already referred to it earlier on:

When a noble disciple has thus understood birth, the origin of birth, the cessation of birth, and the way leading to the cessation of birth... he here and now makes an end of suffering. In that way too a noble disciple is one of right view... and has arrived at this true Dhamma.

Thus, a Noble disciple, an *ariyasāvaka*, can by understanding 'birth', in the same sense that he would have understood the Four Noble Truths – directly and timelessly – free oneself and become an *arahat*. So, one may rightly ask now: would this be possible, if 'birth' were not already somehow *present*¹⁰, as a phenomena, in our experience? How would one be able to understand birth directly and without involving time? If one's birth was indeed a distant event, in some maternity ward perhaps, one's fate would be sealed according to the *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta*, since the event of birth has already passed and cannot possibly be understood directly. Fortunately, one's birth is not *in* the past, so one can, if one chooses to follow the Buddha's Teaching, cease to, in the present, regard 'birth' as his and by doing so remove himself from the domain of ageing-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. One can escape.

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⁹ We are not interested in the conclusions (or lack of them, as Ven. Ñāṇavīra would say) they drew from the method itself.

¹⁰ Cf. Ñāṇavīra Thera, *op. cit.*, NP., para. 9 & 10. This 'somehow' is important to note. If a *puthujjana*, who is not satisfied with the idea of birth being something which occurred in his past, admits that there *has to be* some other way in which 'birth' can be present, and if he admits that he doesn't see that way, he might make the *effort* to find it out, and than eventually see it.