

Saṃsāra

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Saṃsāra is the round of rebirth. It is perpetually moving in the cycle of birth and death. One is born here, grows old, suffers from diseases, dies and is reborn because of the results of one's past *kammās*. In this way the world goes on and on. *Saṃsaratīti saṃsāraṃ*—what moves on and on is called *saṃsāra*.

In the words of Nāgasena, one who is born here, dies here, and is reborn somewhere else, then again, he dies there and is reborn somewhere else—this is *saṃsāra*. Nāgasena explains what *saṃsāra* is by giving a beautiful example of a person eating a mango from a mango tree and planting its seed which grows into another big tree giving a number of fruits again, which are eaten and then their seeds are planted again which again grow into trees. In this way trees keep on growing and their beginnings are unknowable. That is why it is said that the beginning and the end of the world are unknowable (*anamataḅḅoyamaḅḅ saṃsāro*). As in a circle, neither its beginning nor its end point can be determined, so also the beginning and the end point of *saṃsāra* cannot be determined. In other words, the world is without a beginning and an end. There is no end to this process of arising and passing away and arising again. This, in fact, is called *saṃsāra*.

One is born with five groups of existence called *rūpa khandha* (corporeality group), *vedanā khandha* (feeling group), *saññā khandha* (perception group), *saṅkhāra khandha* (mental formation group) and *viññāṇa khandha* (consciousness group). They are present all the time one is moving in the cycle of birth and death. One is also born with twelve *āyatana*s (spheres) and eighteen *dhātu*s (elements). First of all, when aggregates arise, that is called birth.

*Āyatana*s are twelve in number: six personal (*ajjhatika*) and six external (*bāhira*). *Cakkhāyatana* (visual organ), *saddāyatana* (auditory organ) ... *manāyatana* (mind base), *rūpāyatana* (visible object), *saddāyatana* (sound) ... *dharmāyatana* (mind object base) etc. are twelve spheres. *Cakkhu dhātu*, *rūpa dhātu*, *cakkhu viññāṇa dhātu*, *sota dhātu*, *sadda dhātu*, *sota viññāṇa dhātu*, *mano dhātu*, *dhamma dhātu* and *mano viññāṇa dhātu* are the eighteen *dhātu*s. One is born with these six organs. How one creates one's *saṃsāra* will be explained below.

A human is born, grows old, suffers and dies and then is reborn again. In this way, *samsāra* is caused. Because aggregates or groups, spheres and elements keep on moving uninterruptedly, that is why it is called *samsāra*. Round of rebirths is called *vatta* which means circle. The circle, because it has no beginning point and no end point, therefore, stands for *samsāra*.

How this *samsāra* is caused has been very clearly explained by the Buddha through the Law of Dependent Origination. This *samsāra* does not arise fortuitously. It has a cause to arise. The Law of Dependent Origination has twelve links which are interlinked together. For the arising of one link, all other links are responsible and, in this way, the disappearance of one link means all other links also disappear.

Since every time one is born with five aggregates, *samsāra* may be called the unbroken chain of five-fold *khandha* combinations which change continuously from moment to moment. Nobody can say when this process began but it can be certainly said when this process will come to an end.

The Buddha has explicitly shown, with the help of the Law of Dependent Origination, that *taṇhā* (craving) causes suffering. Since one is born again and again because of one's cravings, one is bound to move in the cycle of birth and death so long as one's desires are not annihilated. This process of birth, death and rebirth with the five aggregates will come to an end when craving, the cause of suffering, is annihilated.

Who creates this *samsāra*? No god, not even 'God' with a capital 'G' creates it. One is oneself responsible for creating it. How does one create it? One creates it with one's five sense organs and mind. Without the mind, the five sense organs cannot create this *samsāra*. Mind takes the lead. If the mind is not active, the other sense organs cannot work.

The *samsāra* is called *prapañca* (proliferation). *Pra* may be said to stand for mind and *pañca* means five sense organs. It is these five sense organs together with mind that create *samsāra* because one develops innumerable cravings in ignorance, which remain unfulfilled and consequently one suffers.

How is *samsāra* created? In this world, one's sense organs come in contact with their respective objects (the eye comes in contact with form, the ear with sound, the nose with odor, the tongue with food, the body with tangible objects

and the mind with ideas and thoughts) then one feels some sensation. Sensations are either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. One likes pleasant sensations so wants more of them and wants them to continue. One does not like unpleasant sensations so wants them to stop. This is psychology.

But what one wants (i.e., a pleasant sensation) does not happen because every sensation keeps on changing. Nothing is permanent. Everything is impermanent (*anicca*). When there are unpleasant sensations, there is suffering and when pleasant sensations do not last and change into unpleasant ones, they also cause suffering. Thus, one's cravings for pleasant sensations to continue and cravings for unpleasant sensations to stop cause suffering in one. Cravings become stronger and stronger and become grasping (*upādāna*) which eventually leads to becoming (*bhava*). One is born again to suffer. This is how one creates *samsāra* for oneself.

The creation of *samsāra* means proliferation of one's cravings, and cravings arise when one's five sense organs and mind come in contact with their respective objects in the world, and then one reacts to the sensations caused by them. Since one reacts, one proliferates desires/cravings and creates *samsāra*.

One reacts in ignorance (*avijjā*) and creates *samsāra* in ignorance. If one realizes at the experiential level that nothing is permanent, one will neither hanker after pleasant sensations to continue nor hanker after unpleasant sensations to stop.

Samsāra and *Nibbāna*

As *samsāra* is the proliferation of cravings, *nibbāna* is their complete annihilation.

How to annihilate cravings? One creates cravings out of ignorance (*avijjā*). What is ignorance? Not to know that all objects of the world have three characteristics namely, *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering) and *anattā* (no-self). That is why *avijjā* (ignorance) is the first link of the Law of Dependent Origination which explains how *samsāra* is created. *Avijjā paccayā saṅkhāra* (One reacts out of ignorance). Since one does not know that the objects of the world that one hankers after are not permanent, one creates *rāga* (cravings) and *dveṣa* (aversion) for them. One may know at the intellectual level that nothing is permanent (not even the most beautiful objects) but this knowledge is not going to help one get rid of one's cravings for that object.

The Buddha has propounded the Noble Eightfold Path—consisting of *sīla* (moral precepts), *samādhi* (concentration of mind) and *paññā* (insight wisdom)—walking on which one can develop the capacity to know the impermanent nature of the objects of the world and develop non-attachment to them thus stopping the multiplication of one’s cravings and the proliferation of one’s *saṃsāra*. Observation of moral precepts helps one concentrate one’s mind and with a concentrated mind one can develop insight wisdom (*paññā*) to realize the impermanent nature of the objects of the world. This realization at the experiential level would enable one to develop non-attachment to things. If one attains *paññā* (wisdom), one will sooner or later attain *nibbāna* and one’s movement in *saṃsāra*, the cycle of birth and death, will come to an end.

Questions:

- 1 Define *saṃsāra*. How is it created and who creates it?
- 2 How does Nāgasena in the Milindapañho explain *saṃsāra*?
- 3 ‘*Saṃsāra* is the proliferation of cravings.’ Elucidate.
- 4 Define *prapañca* (*papañca*).
- 5 When can one attain *nibbāna*?
- 6 Bring out the difference between *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna*.
- 7 Explain the path walking on which one can attain *nibbāna*.
- 8 One creates *saṃsāra* in ignorance and attains *nibbāna* through wisdom (*paññā*). Explain.
- 9 What is the role of moral precepts (*sīla*) in attaining *nibbāna*?
- 10 How will walking on the Noble Eightfold Path enable one to attain *nibbāna*?
- 11 What is the first link of the Law of Dependent Origination? Explain in detail.