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Chances of a Human Rebirth

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This morning let us ask ourselves in all seriousness this question—
“What are our chances of being born again as human beings ?”

It is necessary to address ourselves to this question since a large majority of us do not seem to be concerned about this. They presume that there is no difficulty in being reborn as human beings, but that the difficulty is to be reborn in a higher plane of existence as in the deva-worlds.

They take for granted that rebirth in the human world is a matter of course requiring no special effort. Those who thus complacently hug this comfortable view would do well to hear what the Buddha had to say in this connection.

On one occasion the Buddha mentioned four things as being rare and difficult of achievement and one of them is rebirth in the human world.

Does this not suffice to show that entry into this human world should not be regarded in the light of a permanent passport entitling one to repeated living in the human world? Nothing short of an arduous course of righteous living can be the guarantee for a repeated entry into the human world.

How emphatic the Buddha has been on this matter can be understood when one reads what is recorded in the very last chapter (entitled Five Destinies) in the last division (Mahá Vagga) of the Samyutta Nikáya. Every paragraph in that last chapter records the dramatic manner in which the Buddha sought to bring home the truth of the

rarity of human rebirth.

The Buddha, taking up a little dust on the tip of his Anger nail addressed the Bhikkhus thus:- “What do you think, O Bhikkhus? which is greater, the little dust I have taken up on the tip of my finger nail, or this mighty earth?” The Bhikkhus replied that the little dust taken up in the Buddha’s finger nail is exceedingly small and is nothing in comparison with the mighty earth.

“Just so,” said the Buddha, “few, very indeed are the human beings who after death are reborn again as human beings, More numerous, much more numerous are those human beings who after death are reborn in other planes of existence as in the states of hell or as evil spirits (pretas) or as animals”.

If rebirth in the human world is so difficult it necessarily follows that merely living what may be described as a fairly satisfactory life and abstaining from the ‘more heinous offences is not a sufficient guarantee for a rebirth in the human world.

Most of us do not commit the more heinous offences, but this should not lull us into a false sense of security and satisfaction about our future destiny. Much less should spasmodic acts of goodness make us feel that all is well after death.

We should form definite ideals of virtuous living and every moment of our lives, in thought, word and deed, we should work up to those ideals, incline to those ideals and look up to those ideals, despite occasional failures and disappointments. Then only can we justifiably hope for a human rebirth.

In the Mahāvagga Division of the Saíyutta Nikáya there is recorded a conversation that took place between the Buddha and Mahánáma.

Buddha was at the time staying among the Sakyans in Kapilavatthu in the Banyan Park.

Mahánáma was a Sakyan. He had lived a blameless life but he feared what his future destiny would be. He therefore asked the Buddha what his future destiny would be if he were to die at once. To this the Buddha's reply is worth remembering. This is what he said:-

“Have no fears, Mahánáma, have no fears. He whose mind has for a long time been practised in faith, in virtue, in learning, in renunciation and in insight, the mind soars aloft, the mind wins the summit.

Now, your mind, Mahánáma, has long been practised in faith, virtue, learning, renunciation and insight. Have no fears, Mahánáma, have no fears.

For instance, Mahá-nama, if a tree bends to the east, slopes to the east, tends to the east, which way will it fall if its roots were cut ?”
“It will fall in the direction towards which it bends, slopes, and tends” replied Mahánáma. “Similarly”, replied the Buddha, “the Aryan disciple blessed with the four qualities I have referred to, bends to Nibbána slopes to Nibbána, tends to Nibbána.”

From this it is clear that if any one forms definite ideals of virtuous living and every moment looks up to them, bends towards them, slopes towards and tends towards them, he is bound to be reborn in states of existence where he can come closer to his ideals and ultimately realise them. His will be a progressive life here and hereafter. Only such a person need have no fears about his future life as was told to Mahánáma. He need have no fears that he will