



# **31 PLANES OF EXISTENCE**

**SUVANNO MAHATHERA**

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*displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing, or the waters in the four great oceans?”*

The Buddha gave the answer that the tears shed were truly greater.

*“Long have you repeatedly experienced the death of a mother. The tears you have shed over the death of a mother while wandering this long, long samsara, crying and weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing, are greater than the waters in the four great oceans.”*

*“Long have you repeatedly experienced the death of a father... the death of a brother... the death of a sister... the death of a son... the death of a daughter... loss with regard to relatives... loss with regard to wealth... loss with regard to disease. The tears you have shed over loss with regard to disease while wandering this long, long time, crying and weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing, are greater than the waters in the four great oceans.”*

*“Why is that? From an in-construable beginning comes birth. A beginning point is not evident, though beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving are being reborn repeatedly. Long have you thus experienced stress, experienced pain, experienced loss, swelling the cemeteries, enough to become disenchanted with all fabricated things, enough to become dispassionate, enough to be released.” (Samyutta Nikaya, Part II, XV.3)*

This brings us to the question: how enduring is *samsara*; is there a beginning and does it end? Is it eternal or not eternal?<sup>3</sup> These selfsame questions and others were contemplated by the monk Malunkyaputta, and he went to the Buddha with the intention of getting an answer from Him or else he would not continue being a monk (Majjhima Nikaya 63). The Buddha refused to give him an answer but rather declared that He could not see any conceivable point where the beginning was and the ending thereof.

To render a simile of the timelessness of *samsara*, He turned to the group of monks He was addressing and enquired of them which they thought was greater: the mother’s milk they had drunk in the course of their long travels in *samsara* or the waters of the four great oceans of the world. He stated that the mother’s milk they had drunk was the greater, thus demonstrating the lengthy duration of *samsara*.

Therefore it would appear that we have wandered in *samsara* from birth to death, from death to rebirth, again and again for so great a number of aeons that should we have been conscious of it we would surely have stopped doing so. He further said to Malunkyaputta why He had not made known the answers to those questions: “And why, Malunkyaputta have I not made known the answers to your questions? Because it is not beneficial and does not belong to the fundamentals to leading a holy life, it does not lead to dispassion and disenchantment, to cessation, to peace and to Nibbana. Thus have I not declared it to you.” The Buddha knew many things but He did not want to burden people with unnecessary knowledge that did not serve to lead them to Nibbana.

<sup>3</sup> A group of astronomers stated in *The Early Universe*, a paper in the *Atlas of the Universe* that they worked out a theory to be called the continuous-creation or steady-state theory, in which they picture the universe as having no beginning and never coming to an end; there is an infinite past and an infinite future.









