

# When Does Human Life Begin in This Body? Ajahn Brahm

By

## 1. What Did the Buddha Say?

- 1a. "(Human life begins) when in the mother's womb, the first *citta* ('mind' or 'thought') arises, when the first consciousness manifests".<sup>1</sup>
- 1b. "Bhikkhus, the descent of the *gabbha* (misleadingly translated as embryo by Bhikkhu Bodhi) takes place through the union of 3 things – the union of mother and father, the mother is in season, and the *gandhabba* (stream of consciousness) is present."<sup>2</sup>
- 1c. "If *viññāṇa* (consciousness) were not to descend into the mother's womb, would *nāma-rūpa* take shape in the womb? Certainly not, Venerable Sir."<sup>3</sup>  
*Nāma-rūpa* = feeling (*vedana*) perception (*saññā*) contact (*phasso*) will (*cetanā*) attention (*manasikāro*) and material form (*rūpa*).
- 1d. *Nāma-rūpa* and consciousness are like two sheaves of reeds standing leaning against each other. If one were to remove one of those sheaves of reeds, the other would fall. So, with the cessation of *nāma-rūpa* comes cessation of consciousness, and with the cessation of consciousness comes the cessation of *nāma-rūpa*.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. What Did the Buddha Mean?

- 2a. Human life begins when the stream of consciousness (s.o.c.) enters the embryo-fetus and the first consciousness manifests therein.
- 2b. Such an arising of consciousness is caused by the combination of 3 conditions: parental union, fertility and an s.o.c. being available.
- 2c. The above causal link is not necessarily instantaneous. Buddhist causality includes results that appear a long time after their cause. A prime example is "when there is birth, there is old age, sickness and death." It is a mistake to assume that the s.o.c. descends into the mother's womb at the very moment of parental union. Such a belief would beg the question into what does the s.o.c. descend? Into the lucky one of the millions of sperm, or into an egg that might well remain

<sup>1</sup> From Pārājika 3, the rule about deliberately killing a human being, repeated at Vinaya Mahāvagga 1.75.

<sup>2</sup> From Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of Sutta #38 of the Majjhima Nikāya..

<sup>3</sup> Mahānidāna Sutta, DN15.

<sup>4</sup> Abridged from Nidana Saṃyutta No. 67.

unfertilized? The Buddha meant that **some time after parental union**, with the other two factors also being fulfilled, there is descent of the s.o.c. into the mother's womb.

- 2d. Point 1d, above, shows that there cannot be consciousness without feeling + perception + contact + will + attention + material form (*nāma-rūpa*). When one manifests, so does the other, immediately.

### 3. When Does A New Human Life Begin?

- 3a. The embryo designates the unborn being in the first 8 weeks of development, the fetus designates the unborn being after 8 weeks of development.
- 3b. A single embryo may split into 2 or more viable embryos after a certain number of days. Prior to such an event, there cannot be 2 s.o.cs. co-existing in a single embryo, nor can a single s.o.c. split into two separate streams. Such propositions are excluded by the Buddha's doctrine of Paṭicca-Samuppāda. Either a second s.o.c. enters one of the divided embryos after the separation, or two karmically connected s.o.cs. enter the twinned embryos at the same time shortly after division. In either case, this shows that the s.o.c. can descend into the mother's womb several days after parental union.
- 3c. The Buddha consistently stated that human life in this body begins when consciousness first **manifests** inside the mother's womb. The Pāli word here rendered as "manifest" is *Pātubhūta*, which also means to be open, visible, apparent. To be precise, human life in this body begins not when consciousness first exists in the mother's womb, but when it first **shows** its existence in the mother's womb (these two events, I believe, are simultaneous).

How does consciousness first manifest its existence? Point 2d, above, states that when consciousness first manifests then *nāma-rūpa* also shows its first appearance. Two essential parts of *nāma-rūpa* are *vedana* (feeling, the ability to distinguish between painful or pleasurable or neutral sensations) and *cetanā* (will, deliberate reactions to such sensations). So, when *vedana* and will first manifest in the unborn being, then one knows that *nāma-rūpa* has first manifested; and when *nāma-rūpa* has first manifested, then consciousness has first manifested and human life has begun anew!

In conclusion, **only when the embryo-fetus first shows sensitivity to pleasure and pain (*vedana*) and first shows will (such as by a purposeful shrinking away from a**

**painful stimulus) has consciousness and *nāma-rūpa* first manifested and the new human life started.**

#### **4. Further Discussion**

- 4a. Such a definition for the beginning of human life has been argued tightly from the earliest teachings of Buddhism, those as close as we can get to what the Buddha actually said. Thus the definition has textual authority.
- 4b. Such a definition is pragmatic, because it gives us a discernible measure by which we can know when a human life has begun anew. Procedures such as the ultrasound scan can convince neutral observers that the fetus at a certain stage of development shows experience of pain and moves deliberately, but before such a stage does not manifest feeling or will. Neurologists can also confirm that prior to a certain stage of development, the fetus's nervous system is absent and therefore pain and pleasure cannot be felt. Thus such a definition is workable.
- 4c. When there is no sure-fire method of discerning the beginning of a new human life, many will err on the safe side, meaning they will push the beginning of human life impractically early, even to the stage of parental union. The above definition avoids such sloppiness based on fear.
- 4d. The ethical quality of karma has much to do with the happiness or suffering that one deliberately inflicts upon another. When the other is incapable of feeling pleasure or pain, such considerations become irrelevant. Indeed, there is a widespread revulsion at viewing a film of an abortion where the fetus manifest pain during the procedure, but such a revulsion is absent at the destruction of an embryo, in a Petri dish, that does not manifest any feeling at all. The above definition is in harmony with the ethical foundation of such revulsion. In other words, many non-Buddhists, especially those rationalists with no religious affiliations, would easily support such a Buddhist definition of the beginning of human life.

#### **5. IVF.**

- 5a. The above definition clarifies the ethics of destroying fertilized human ova that are yet to be implanted into the mother, or using them to begin a line of stem cells. Since these embryos do not show feeling or will, then consciousness also has not been manifested, and so it is not reckoned as human life.

Scientifically speaking, the nervous system has certainly not developed yet and therefore such an embryo is incapable of manifesting consciousness. Other ethical considerations may be relevant here, but certainly not that concerned with destroying a human life.

- 5b. A further clause in the Buddha's consistent definition for the beginning of a human life is the location of the manifested consciousness – **in the mother's womb**. Thus, there is a strong logical argument that states that even if consciousness did manifest somehow in an embryo in the lab, it still has not appeared **in the mother's womb**, and therefore does not fulfil the Buddha's definition of a human life. Only when that embryo-with-consciousness has been implanted in the mother's womb, then can one say that consciousness has appeared within the mother's womb and human life begun.
- 5c. There are some skilful meditators who can remember their past lives, and also those who can recall past lives through other means. Those who recall the passage from their previous life into their present existence are remarkably consistent in their recollection of being drawn irresistibly into their future mother's womb. To them, it is implausible that one could be drawn into a bunch of cells in a Petri dish in a laboratory. One of the unstated but necessary ingredients for rebirth is the sight of one's future mother, which acts as a magnet to draw the stream of consciousness in. Such an attractor would be absent in a laboratory.

Conclusion: embryos outside of a mother's womb are not reckoned as human life, and thus the ethical considerations specific to human beings do not apply.

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