

BUDDHI-MANAS, DEHA & MOKṢA

(A note about a puzzle)

I: Introduction

Among the problems related to the central metaphysic of Hinduism is the following: if *buddhi* (man, as discriminator, judge, motivator, intender, &c.) is ontologically prior to *manas* (man, as thinker, reasoner, feeler, emoter, perceiver, imager, &c.), and *manas* is ontologically prior to *deha* (man, as physical body, whether enlivened by *prāṇa* or not being irrelevant here), why must the former — that is, what I will henceforth call “the *buddhi:manas* complex”, which, with the rest of the *antaḥ-karaṇa*, roughly amounts to what the West calls “the mind” — be re-incarnated, be associated once more, or even more than once, with *deha*, to achieve *mokṣa*?¹ Put simply, the puzzle is: how can it be that a higher level of being must continually be associated, and yet re-associated, with a lower level of being, to achieve that “level” which is so “high”, that it defies even this language of “levels”? And this perhaps perplexing puzzle is our quarry in this note.

Before beginning, I should perhaps say that I am speaking *within* Hinduism, and addressing a certain problem which arises at a certain stage in the development of its metaphysic. Accordingly, I am assuming the development to have reached that point, and am *only* addressing this puzzle *at* that point. Certainly, the ontological hierarchy from which the puzzle flows is not, at least to the Western mind, self-evident. But it remains the puzzle, within this context and with this established, that I am approaching, none other: and the ground upon which it stands, and out of which it has grown, is not presently my business.

II: Elaboration: A First Kind of Being.

The puzzle before us is of course an issue within philosophy about *karma*, and it is in this wider context I will take it. Accordingly, I intend to take much as granted by all students of *karma*-theory; and most notably, that the

fact of *karma* is beyond dispute. “*Karma*” is used in a number of ways, but here I refer to something very simple — namely, those hindering traces left in the *buddhi:manas* after doing at least most actions. “At least most”, for another much ignored puzzle within *karma*-theory is whether *all* deeds give rise to these traces. But this is another puzzle, for another time.

Now this marginal assumption asks very little, and would be questioned by very few; for few would see any fault in saying that most deeds affect us inwardly, in our “mind”, leaving remainder-traces which influence future doings of a similar kind, which, that is, *incline* us, sometimes almost compel us in certain directions. These *karmic*-traces are called “*vāsanās*”, and sometimes “*saṃskāras*”. I will in future refer to them as “*vāsanās*”.

So then, our initial assumption, one pretty well beyond dispute, is that we have a *buddhi:manas* crowded with *vāsanās* which *influence* or *incline* us in certain ways. Which ways? And here emerges another fact often ignored by *karma*-theorists: that *vāsanās* in fact incline us in one of two ways, and not one only. They incline us either away from *mokṣa*, or towards it. Nobody ignores the first kind, but many tend to overlook the second. *Vāsanās*, then, though maybe mostly, are not always “bad”, but sometimes “good”, for sometimes they lead us *aright*, towards *mokṣa* and not away from it. These, very simply, are the inclinations promoting *dharma*.

All the same, even these, the right-leading ones, must in the end be overcome. For *mokṣa* involves being conditioned by nothing, and hence an end — a total end — to *attachment* (*saṅga*), the very heart and soul of inclinations. “Inclinings”, that is, are always *towards* something to which they endorse attachment. As it were, *vāsanās* are advocates who cannot help themselves but thrust us on attachment: they simply in their nature urge a “grasping after” upon us. They drive us on attachment, and hence, every one must be overcome. But still, whilst we are still searching, and not yet delivered, some inclinations are, in a relative way,

“good”. For some do urge us to grasp in the right direction, towards *mokṣa*; and these, meanwhile, — whilst, that is, we are still searching and grasping—should be encouraged and developed. Anything serving a good purpose should be allowed to do so; or, simply put, good habits are ones we should foster—even should they be, as most certainly they will, “conditionings” (*upādhis*) which, like all “conditionings”, must in the end be abandoned ($< \sqrt{tyaj}$).

But not even this much can be said for bad-*karma*, *karma* involving *vāsanās* which incline us away from *mokṣa*. To these, there can only be one response—an effort to get rid of, or to change (into good-*karma* by, say, altering habits), or transcend. I don’t suggest these terms are synonyms, but their differences need not worry us here. They are, for our purposes, simply three, inter-related terms for ways of doing the same thing—overcoming the workings and influence of bad-*karma*.

But how do we do this? Well, let us get clear about two things first of all. Firstly, if we have knowledge of the “that”, “how” and “why” of these *vāsanās*, our *buddhi:-manas* is then in a position, though maybe no more, to find out *how* to change, transcend, or rid ourselves of them. But secondly, if we haven’t even this knowledge—knowledge that our inclinations are indeed *vāsanās*, so at least often wayward-leading—we are not then even in this very beginning position. And to look, now, at the plight of this deeply ignorant man, our first kind of being.

If someone doesn’t even know his inclinations to be *vāsanās*, he will not know them as urgings, sometimes leading him to, and sometimes away from, things of lasting substance, so things more real than other things, which depend for their substance upon these lasting things. In this extreme ignorance, nothing could seem to him reason enough *not* to follow his inclinations, whatever, and take his pleasures, wherever they lead. Perhaps most are like this, or almost, these days, for these days most do appear to believe life should be led in pursuit, primarily, if not only, of physical and other fleeting things (especially “plea-

sure"). To such a person, one inclination is as worthy, or otherwise, as another; since, to him, all are *merely* inclinations, having no special weight, or lack of it. They all simply present themselves to him as equally leading, or not, to things real: so that, which he follows, and which not, will largely be a matter of how *strong* they are, or of how they relate to the *strongest* inclinations of all, to what he quite simply *wants* most of all.

The real world for him will accordingly be the world he is inclined to, the one he takes his pleasures in, or, simply, *wants*. Nothing else could determine realness for him, since, all inclinations being equal, the objects they incline him to will be seen as equal too; as equally worthy of quest, that is. In which case, since nothing distinguishes them as things to be *craved* and things to be *grasped*, nothing is likely to distinguish their ontological acceptability. They are, that is, pretty certain to be seen as *equally real*. "Pretty certain" only, because nothing *in logic* makes ontological acceptability follow in the wake of desirability. But the plain fact is—and most of this can be advanced only as plain fact—much in the ways of *psychology* links these two very closely. In the minds of men, what they find *desirable*, or a suitable object for attachment, will almost always also be what they believe to be *real*. Indeed, mostly the belief will be nothing articulate, nor anything arrived at, but something very deeply assumed. What we go after in following our inclinations will very rarely, if ever, be other than the stuff of realness for us. In fact, were we shown to be questing something unreal, most of us would stop. For most people don't like chasing chimeras; and certainly most, if not all, believe they are not doing so in following their inclinations.

So then, the real world of these, the first kind of being, will be the world of physical, and the world of mental things: at least this, and perhaps this only. If all his inclinations are of a piece, if all—or even most—are thought equally to lead him aright, nothing could be more real to him than the object of them, which will be at least things

physical and mental. It's possible, I suppose, that he might incline to things apart from these—like, say, things Spiritual; as, perhaps, do many confused people in the West who dabble with the same zest in "the Occult" as they do in sex, or the latest thought-movement. But if he does, they will have the same status as these: inclinations which are fostered or not simply in terms of how they interest him, of how much he simply happens to want what he thinks they're about. Their objects will be as real as physical and mental things: indeed, it's very doubtful that, to such a person, these inclinings which may seem to him different from physical and mental ones, do truly differ. Certainly many, and I suspect most, who in the West now dabble in "the Occult", clearly only get a different kind of physical or mental thing in doing this, and not something different altogether. They get, that is, only a new kind of physical sensation, or mind-content: they do not get something *beyond* these.

From this, then, an important conclusion follows: that, ignorant as this, our first being, is of the true nature of his inclinations (their nature as *vāsanās*), and taking reality to be their object, or what they lead him to, the only deeds possible for him will be those guided by them — *deha*, or physical-body deeds, and *buddhi:manas*, or mental doings. And I shall from here assume these the only kind, as they mostly will be; and certainly there will always be *at least* these, for at least inclinations of this kind must be had by a man who accepts all *humanly natural* ones as equal. Accordingly, he is, whatever else, always a victim to inclinations which attach him, when he follows them (as he will—some, at least), to the physical, assumed to be real and beneficial for its own sake. Just revelling in the physical, and being attached to it, will be its own reward: and certainly he will have no question about how real it is. This simply is his world, and so, will be where he lives. And if it is where he lives, it must be where he moves: and so, he must have a body. "*Deha*"-movement, in other words, is incumbent upon him for "being".

In other words, though *buddhi:manas* is ontologically prior to *deha*, this *buddhi:manas* doesn't know this; and no one can act, or motivate action, except within the bounds of what he knows, in the sense of what he *believes*. And since to him all inclinings are of a piece in leading him to realness, though differing perhaps in getting him what he wants, reality is as much physical, and hence his own reality as much bodily, as otherwise. Probably more so, indeed.

In which case — and with this we answer our question for this very ignorant man — the only movement or behaviour which, in his case, *could* lead to *mokṣa* would be behaviour, part at least of which was bodily; since, if he is even to continue *to be*, his behaviour must at least be this. So, for this kind of being, and regardless of any ontological hierarchy, approaching *mokṣa* involves *punarjanma*, or “again-birth”, involves that is, re-incarnation of the trans-migrating *buddhi:manas* in question. And because, we can now further say, “All inclines to, or groans after *mokṣa*, no matter how dimly”, is a cosmic truth or law,² *punarjanma* becomes not only needed for approaching *mokṣa*, but, in simple fact, a cosmic necessity. All beings like this, therefore, must, so will be born again in flesh.

We should, I suppose, note that this kind of being would be very rare, and perhaps not in fact occur at all. This case may be merely a logical limit to a spectrum of possibilities. And certainly, a person to whom all inclinations seem *really* of a piece, so that none, not a single one, was thought intrinsically more, or less, misleading than any other, does seem more than unlikely. And I suspect that, among real people, everyone has some form of hierarchy determining acceptability or not of his inclinations other than merely their brute strength. And if so, every real person is at least a little, though perhaps, in some cases, not very much (and perhaps less and less, these *Kali-Yuga* days), aware that his inclinations are *vāsanās*, that they can, of their *nature* and apart from his wants, lead him aright or awrong. But

still, people who go very close to this are common enough: and they must incur re-incarnation.

III: A Second Kind of Being

But what if, beyond any doubt, a person, or a *buddhi:manas*, has the knowledge in question, what if he *does* know that his inclinations are *vāsanās*, and how and why they are? Well, firstly this knowledge will naturally be more or less according to his degree of enlightenment upon this matter. He will know this more or less clearly, and about more or less of them. But let us take the case of a man who has a high degree of such knowledge, who at least knows very clearly that most of his inclinations are wayward *vāsanās*. Everything said about him will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to those of lesser degrees.

Such a *buddhi:manas* is enlightened in part already, even before *deha*-death; he bespeaks an approach to *jīvan-mukti*. Being possessed of this knowledge, he will, to whatever degree, already understand—that is, before *deha*-death—the central message of the *Bhagavadgītā*: that, “approaching” *mokṣa* involves *niṣkāma karma*, involves behaviour detached from all desire for its fruits (*phala*). “Approaching” only from his less-than-fully-enlightened side; for *mokṣa* is not an object, state, or situation, or anything else which can be said to have boundaries, so nothing which, from its viewpoint, can be said to be “approached”.

To explain this a little, as follows. Since “approaching” *mokṣa* here on our earth involves being rid of the influence of unwanted *vāsanās*, it must also involve the detachment of *niṣkāma karma*, for only this rescues us, not only from producing more misleading *vāsanās*—by rescuing us from inclining to possessions other than *mokṣa*³—but also weakens the hold of those present ones which are in essence urges, hardened into habits, for such possessions. Bad *vāsanās* are none other than this: habitual urges to centre attention *away from mokṣa*, none other, in other words, than hard and fast *desires* for things, no matter what, which are not *mokṣa*. Hence, any person who

cherishes or craves after things for what they are in themselves, or for some reason other than that they lead to *mokṣa*, is one enslaved by *karma*. Accordingly, the only appropriate attitude is one of detachment, for all things, craved for their own sake, are mere slaves. And though in passing it is well to note a point too often overlooked — that sometimes it is possible to “desire” some end because it truly enhances *mokṣa*, or its possibility (e.g., silence, or self-knowledge) — the plain fact is, “things”, in the sense of “objects with boundaries”, are alike in being essentially dangerous to the quest, since, being finite, the only nature they have in themselves is “other-than” *mokṣa*, which, at the very least, is deliverance from all limits. Hence craving them for anything to do with what they are must lead a seeker wildly astray, and only delude.

And so, a person who knows his inclinations to be *vāsanās*, or that most of them are, who knows the how and the why of them, *eo ipso* understands that *mokṣa* must involve dissociation from all desire to possess, so must involve behaviour motivated by an attitude of detachment.

Now this is well understood by our second kind of being, less ignorant as he is of himself and wordly enchantments; and he will either be trying for *niṣkāma karma* in all behaviour, or not. If he is not, this cannot be from ignorance of what must be done, as it may be of the first being spoken of, so must be from laziness, weakness, or plain wickedness.

Now let us preclude wickedness, clearly the case of a being more deeply ensnared by *vāsanās* than he knows, so an advance on the first kind only in knowing that at least many of his inclinations are *vāsanās*, and that *mokṣa* lies in overcoming them. The only explanation for refusing to do what he can to overcome, and indeed doing some other conflicting thing, can be the hidden influence of *vāsanās* he doesn't know about. For the wicked man is a being who believes he can get some benefit by doing what he vaguely sees he should not do: and if he really shouldn't do it, this means it *leads away from mokṣa*, so away from the only

goal which could bring benefit of any real kind. This man doesn't know this, so is being misled by *vāsanās* he neither realizes he has, nor has mastery over — by inclinations he doesn't realize are *vāsanās*.

A lazy or weak man is of course more enlightened, since failing to overcome his *vāsanās* is no longer because he believes doing something else will bring him benefit. He is at least not so ignorant as that. Ignorant, however, he nonetheless is; at least, a little. Since once more, nothing can explain his malingering weakness or clutching lethargy other than that, despite his "best intentions" — which I am assuming he has, since if he did not, he would be closer still to the first kind — hidden *vāsanās* lead him astray by exerting a secret *Tāmasic*-influence.

For these beings, then—those who understand the need for *niṣkāma karma*, but don't always try for it—we can say as before: because they are prey to yet hidden *vāsanās*, as well as to unhidden ones they prove too lazy or weak to tackle, *punarjanma* in a form of flesh, in "a tunic of skin", to borrow a phrase from early Christendom, remains essential for *mokṣa*.⁴

IV: A Third Kind of Being

But let us go a step further and examine a third kind of being, a man still more enlightened to his own nature and that of the world (and especially how the latter leads to *vāsanās*). What if this partly enlightened *buddhi:manas* is in fact always trying to effect *niṣkāma karma* in everything he does? What then are we to say?

Firstly, it is very important to note that such a high level of constant trying is wildly rare, achieved indeed only by a very few saints, or nearly-saints; and that most of us, most of the time, will be one or the other of the two kinds already dealt with. Which means, for most of us, the question has been answered: that, for the reasons given, and despite ontological heirarchies, re-incarnation of the *buddhi:manas* is necessary for *mokṣa*.

But just the same, what of this rare case — is it of one for whom *punarjanma* is no longer needed? Two things must be said. Firstly, if *punarjanma* proves needed, it will likely be other than re-incarnation, and “janma” into “a higher state”. As I’ve hinted with my choice of words, the term “*samsāra*” is treated loosely by translators — most of whom, though good linguists, are poor thinkers, if “thinkers” at all — and depicted by all of “re-birth”, “re-incarnation”, “trans-migration” (which most nearly conveys its literal meaning), and the accurate but ugly “metempsychosis”. Each of these mean different things, and to avoid this confusion I have in preference chosen the quite explicit “*punarjanma*”, which means “re-birth” (compare the common Buddhist term “*punarbhava*”, “again-being”), and introduced these other terms only when I mean what they say. For “re-birth” of *buddhi:manas* need not be “re-incarnation”, so need involve no further commerce with *deha*. Re-birth which is not re-embodiment clearly is not re-entry into body; and a being of this third kind, if re-born, would likely be “born” — and we should really now say “manifest” — in some non-fleshy way. But I’ll return to this later, and move now to another point.

This kind of being — and this is the second thing I said I wanted to say — though a kind of limiting, highly enlightened case of the second kind (knowers of inclinations as *vāsanās*), really should be further divided into:

- (i) those who try unceasingly for perfect *niṣkāma karma* and succeed;
- (ii) those who try unceasingly for perfect *niṣkāma karma*, and don’t succeed.

Incessant triers for *niṣkāma karma*, in other words, are themselves of two kinds: those who make the grade and achieve perfection, and those who don’t. As simple as that. Now the first, those who are made perfect, we can swiftly dismiss; not because they are of no importance, but because they are paramountly so. For such Beings are the rarest of gems among the rare, being true *jīvan-muktas*.

These are Ones Who, being perfectly detached, are *ipso facto* in *mokṣa*. "They" are, as the term implies, the paradox of being at once "living" (*jīvan*), yet "released" (*mukta*), as Christ was at once "the Son of God" and "the son of man".

I am aware that much might be said about whether a perfect *attitude* of detachment, such as we find with (i), means that the being is perfectly detached; and many writings do speak about those who have reached the rare pinnacle of this perfect attitude, having nonetheless to suffer re-birth to expunge excess *sancita karma* (that is, bad *vāsanās* left over from a prior life). To many it seems, that whilst one may lead a life which doesn't multiply *vāsanās* — achievement enough, indeed — this doesn't guarantee that all one's accumulated *vāsanās* have been gotten rid of. And nor does it. But this is not a problem I want to enter now, for whilst I would argue that a *perfect* attitude of detachment does entail "perfectly detached", since it does entail positioning oneself *at a remove* from *any and everything* (ultimately even this "attitude"), let me arbitrate those I am talking of as succeeders *are* the perfectly detached, or, to put it another way, let me say that by "perfect *niṣkāma karma*" I mean "perfect detachment", (and I frankly can see it meaning no other), so that those who, seeking perfect *niṣkāma karma*, fail, are at least *among* those whose detachment is less than perfect. And let me now pose our questions of this certainly highly enlightened kind of being: Is any kind of *punarjanma* needed for *mokṣa* here, and if so, does it involve re-incarnation? This last question will be dealt with, and answered with a qualified "No", when we return to *punarjanma* in "higher states", so I leave it till then.

This, the second of our third kind of being, tries, and tries unceasingly for *niṣkāma karma*, but fails. From this it is clear—for there could be no other reason for his failure—that he has not achieved a perfect "burning away" (*dāha*) of *vāsanās*. Some clearly malingers yet to hinder his attempts at perfect detachment by, simply, influencing

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him to attachments he knows not how to avoid. *Deha*-death for such a man cannot bring "release" (*mokṣa*), since he still exists at a *buddhi:manas*-level at which certain *vāsanā*-influence continues to be thought of as "real". To the moment of death he continues to take as wholly, unflinchingly "real" the *struggle* to overcome *vāsanā*-influence through detachment. And so, since behaviour (no matter what) must be within the confines of one's understanding of Reality, *any and all* behaviour for this *buddhi:manas* must still involve being at that level of manifestation where he *can* continue so to struggle. Hence, even for him, a highly enlightened being indeed, *some* form of re-birth is necessary for *mokṣa*: so that, even for him *punarjanma* is a cosmic necessity, straining after *mokṣa* being so for all.

V: What "Form"? A Codicil

Some form, yes—but, what? The answer is simple. We have, in all this, and excepting the *jīvan-mukti*, been speaking about re-embodiment, which I've argued to be necessary for "approaching" *mokṣa*, due to the continued activity of a certain class of *vāsanās*, namely, those which lead us to doings which *attach* us to physical things. But these are by no means the only class of *vāsanā*, or inward inclination. And at least as prevalent, perhaps more so, are those which lead us to doings which don't necessarily attach us to physical things, but rather to mental ones; which, in other words, attach us, jealously, to mind-things, like, for instance, "our own views".

I am talking of those dispositional inclinations we have, or develop, to, for instance, "take a certain position" about some matter, and especially those which lead to mental-fixations, those neurotic fanaticisms which have been the scourge of all human history. These things, as one example, but also simpler, less dramatic things — like the "tendency" always to see things in a certain way; and not just "see" mentally, in the sense of "hold views", but also "see" physically, in the sense of, "perceive the world in a certain way, *because* our mind is so disposed".

Now, if all *deha-vāsanās* have been banished, so that, in matters of the body, indeed, of physical things generally, there is perfect detachment, there no longer can be call for *punarjanma* of one kind, namely, enfleshment, or re-incarnation. But if, on the other hand, *only* these have been burnt out, so that *buddhi:manas-vāsanās* remain, perfect detachment has not been achieved altogether, for binding-*karma* lingers. In which case, whilst re-*incarnation* no longer presents a real possibility, re-*manifestation* certainly does: re-*manifestation* at that level of understanding at which the fight to conquer at least *buddhi:manas-vāsanās* is still very present and real.

This, then, is the form, certainly non-physical, so of no worry to the poser of our original question, in which *punarjanma* must occur, for occur it must, for those so highly enlightened ones mentioned above. We might call this, as it has been called, *punarjanma* on the "Heavenly level", or the *deva-lokas*. For in substance, and though we might make grades and distinctions even here, this is the place of *devas*, *asuras*, *gandharvas*, *apsarases*, and other supraterrrestrial, though not entirely "fulfilled", for not entirely "released", beings. To close with a wisdom from the *Bhagavadgītā*:

devān bhāvayatā nena
 te devā bhāvayantu vaḥ
 parasparam bhāvayantaḥ
 śreyaḥ param avāpsyatha. (Bhagavadgītā; III:11)

"With this, comfort and protect the gods,
 And let the gods take care of you:
 Each cherishing the other,
 You will obtain the Supremely Excellent."

La Trobe University
 Melbourne (Australia)

Ian Kesarkodi-Watson

NOTES

1. I am indebted to my student, Peter Fenner, for putting this problem to me in this form, and for valuable discussion about it.

2. Needless to say, I have not proven this: though the way one might would be to show, from the vantage of Enlightenment, that the *Saguṇa* Nature of That which Transcends is such that It must draw all “things” to It; which, in the case of us humans, It does through *avidyā*, as recognized “ignorance” of, coupled with a “hunger” (*aśanāyā*; see *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, 1.2.1) for, this Nature. But even this, thought it seems to me true, needs a wealth of explaining. And for now I am adding this principle of cosmic straining after *mokṣa* as a maxim of the faith, acceptable to anyone who might pose the puzzle in question. For this maxim, a highly reasonable maxim I might add, puts the final touch of completeness to the picture. With it we can *argue* that, where needed at all, *punarjanma* is not merely desirable, but cosmologically necessary: it not only should happen but always will.

3. Insofar as *mokṣa* can be called “a possession”, which is clearly only for the moment, from, one side, and by metaphor.

4. It may be objected that a being of this kind could be ensnared *merely* by *buddhi:manas-vāsanās*, so be in no need of re-incarnation. But this is false. Remember, we are dealing with a being, already enfleshed, with *vāsanās* he *must* work-out ($\sqrt{\text{dāh}}$, or “burn out”, in the *Gītās* parlance), who both knows that he must, and *how* he must, and *yet* has at least these *deha-vāsanās*. Accordingly, he must be *still has them*; and being the case of a being who’s lazy or weak unto death, he’s the case of a being who, on death, still has at least these *deha-vāsanās*. Accordingly, he must be re-incarnated.