

A Study on Rebirth Expressions:

Gabbhassa avakkanti and *gandhabba*

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Introduction

Okkanti is one of the (re-)birth expressions enumerated in DN 22 (III p.305, ll.6–9), and there are several alternatives as to what this term refers to, such as *nāmarūpassa okkanti*, *viññāṇassa okkanti*, etc. (cf. entries in CPD: derived from *ava-kram*, e.g. *avakkanti*, *okkanti*). In this paper, I shall investigate the following expressions: *gabbhassa avakkanti*, *gabbhe okkanti*, and *gabbhāvakkanti*. *Gabbha* means ‘the womb’ or ‘the embryo,’ and *ava-kram* means ‘to descend’ or ‘to enter into’ (CPD s.v. ‘*o-kkamati*’ 1b. In this paper, I translate *ava-kram* by ‘to descend¹⁾’). Researchers give various translations for the above three expressions. One purpose of this paper is to clarify their meanings.

On the other hand, in MN 38 (I p.265, l.35–p.266, l.6) and 93 (II p.157, ll.1–3), it is said that *gabbhassa avakkanti* needs the following three conditions: (1) a mother and father are in a state of union (*mātāpitaro ca sannipatitā honti*), (2) the mother is in a fertile period (*mātā ca utunī hoti*), (3) *gandhabba* is participating in (*gandhabbo ca paccupaṭṭhito hoti*). Regarding the third condition, a number of studies²⁾ take *gandhabba* as the one who descends into the womb (namely, *gabbha*). The other purpose of this paper is to examine the validity of the hitherto studies.

1. *Gabbhassa avakkanti* / *gabbhe okkanti* / *gabbhāvakkanti*

1.1. *Gabbhassa avakkanti*

Now I start my discussion. In MN 38 (I p.266, ll.3–7), there is a statement of how *gabbhassa avakkanti* occurs: ‘(the Buddha said:) and, *bhikkhus*, since a mother and father are in a state of union, the mother is in a fertile period, and *gandhabba* is participating in, thus, on the basis of the union of the three, the descent of the embryo occurs. *Bhikkhus*, the mother carries around the embryo by her belly for nine months or ten months’ (*yato ca kho*

bhikkhave mātāpitaro ca sannipatitā honti, mātā ca utunī hoti, gandhabbo ca paccupaṭṭhito hoti, evaṃ tinṇaṃ sannipātā gabbhassāvakkanti hoti. tam enaṃ bhikkhave mātā nava vā dasa vā māse gabbhaṃ kucchinā pariharati). The commentary on this section explains that although *gabbha* can mean either ‘the womb’ or ‘the embryo,’ *gabbha* here means ‘the embryo.’ *Gabbhassa avakkanti* should be taken as ‘the descent of the embryo³⁾’ because of its word form and of the statement ‘*gabbhaṃ kucchinā pariharati*.’

1.2. *Gabbhe okkanti*

Among various explanations of *dukkha* in Nidd I (I p.17, ll.11–12), there is the expression ‘*gabbhe*⁴⁾ *okkantimūlakam dukkham . . . gabbhe ṭhitimūlakam dukkham . . . gabbhā vuṭṭhānamūlakam dukkham*.’ Here, *gabbha* should mean ‘the womb,’ and *gabbhe okkanti* should be taken as ‘descent into the womb.’⁵⁾

1.3. *Gabbhāvakkanti*

In DN 28 (III p.103, ll.3–19), four kinds of *gabbhāvakkanti* are defined on the basis of whether or not the one who descends into the womb retains consciousness (*sampajāno*) in the following three periods: (1) when he descends into the mother’s belly (*mātu kucchi*), (2) stays there, and (3) goes out from there. For example, the fourth *gabbhāvakkanti* runs thus: ‘*idh’ ekacco sampajāno*⁶⁾ *mātu kucchim okkamati, sampajāno mātu kucchismim ṭhāti, sampajāno mātu kucchismā nikkhamati. ayaṃ catutthā gabbhāvakkanti*.’ Here, *gabbhāvakkanti* can be translated as ‘the descent of the embryo’ or ‘descent into the womb.’⁷⁾ It is noteworthy that *gabbhāvakkanti* here represents the following sequence of three actions: descent into the mother’s belly, staying there, and going out from there. Although the word *avakkanti* itself originally indicates only the first action of this sequence, here it includes the whole sequence.

2. *Gandhabba* in the Statement of Conception

As I mentioned above, in MN 38 (I p.265, l.3–p.266, l.6), it is said that *gabbhassa avakkanti* needs the three conditions, and the third condition is ‘*gandhabbo . . . paccupaṭṭhito hoti*.’ A number of hitherto studies state that this *gandhabba* descends into the womb. Next, I shall examine this interpretation. For this purpose, I shall pick up some examples of *praty-upa-sthā* and *saṃ-ni-pat*, which are important for the understanding of this *gandhabba*.

2.1. *Praty-upa-sthā*

Regarding *praty-upa-sthā*, I can not find any example implying ‘to descend into’ in the Pali canon. Examples I find are as follows: ‘(the Buddha said:) by the son . . . the mother and father should be attended on (thinking thus:) “I, who have been supported by them, will support (them). I’ll do the duties for them. I’ll keep the family line going . . .”’ (*puttena . . . mātāpitaro paccupaṭṭhātabbā: bhato nesam bharissāmi. kiccaṃ nesam karissāmi. kulavamsaṃ ṭhapessāmi . . .* DN 31 (III p.189, ll.5–7)); ‘(A jackal searching for food) approached to (a tortoise) and awaited close to the tortoise, (thinking thus:) “when this tortoise extends one or another of his limbs including his neck as the fifth, just at the time, I’ll catch it, pull it out, and eat it”’ (*upasaṅkamitvā kummaṃ kacchapaṃ paccupaṭṭhito ahoṣi: yadāyaṃ kummo kacchapo soṇḍipañcamānaṃ aṅgānaṃ aññataraṃ vā aññataraṃ vā aṅgaṃ abhininnāmessati, tatth’ eva naṃ gahetvā uddālitvā khādissāmi.* SN 35, 199 (IV p.178, ll.5–8)). As shown in the above examples, *praty-upa-sthā* seems to mean not ‘to descend into’ but ‘to attend on’ or ‘to await close.’

2.2. *Sam-ni-pat*

Regarding the examples of *saṃ-ni-pat* in the Pali canon, it is difficult to find the meaning ‘to descend into.’ For example: ‘when a number of *bhikkhus* got up at first light of dawn, sat down together, and gathered together, this topic came out’ (*sambahulānaṃ bhikkhūnaṃ rattiyaṃ paccūsasamayaṃ paccuṭṭhitānaṃ maṇḍalamāle sannisinnānaṃ sannipatitānaṃ ayaṃ saṅkhiyadhammo udapādi.* DN 1 (I p.2, ll.7–9)). ‘*Bhikkhus*, meeting, union and assembling of these three things is called contact by the eye’ (*yā kho bhikkhave imesaṃ tiṅṅaṃ dhammānaṃ saṅgati sannipāto samavāyo, ayaṃ vuccati cakkhusamphasso.* SN 35, 93 (IV p.68, ll.8–10)). Here, *sannipāta* (*saṅgati*, and *samavāyo*, too) of three things is called ‘contact (by the eye)’ ((*cakkhu-*)*samphassa*). As observed above, *saṃ-ni-pat* does not mean ‘to descend into’ in most of the examples. However, in MN 38 (I p.265, l.35–p.266, l.6), *saṃ-ni-pat* in ‘*mātāpitaro ca sannipatitā honti*’ seems to imply the intercourse of parents. At least in this context, *saṃ-ni-pat* can represent that a part of the father’s body enters into the mother’s. But, in this case, we should not overlook the fact that *saṃ-ni-pat* is used only for the action of parents whereas *praty-upa-sthā* (instead of *saṃ-ni-pat* or *ava-kram*) is used for *gandhabba*. This fact seems to support the understanding that *gandhabba* does not descend into the womb. Thus, from the result of above investigation of *praty-upa-sthā* and *saṃ-ni-pat*, it seems difficult to take *gandhabba* as the one who enters into the womb.

However, the hitherto studies have actually understood *gandhabba* as the one who enters into the womb on the grounds of the commentary on the statement of conception in MN 38 (Ps II p.310) and the context of MN 93 (II p.154, l.26–p.157, l.10) without carefully paying attention to the canonical statements about the three conditions for *gabbhassa avakkanti* itself. So now, I shall investigate these two passages.

2.3. The Commentary on the Statement of Conception

In Ps II p.310, ll.25–28, *gandhabba* is explained as follows: ‘*gandhabbo ti tatr’ūpakasatto. paccupaṭṭhito hotī ti na mātāpitūnaṃ sannipātaṃ olokayamāno samīpe ṭhito*⁸⁾ *nāma hoti, kammayantayantito pana eko satto tasmim okāse nibbattanako hotī ti.*’ A number of studies interpret that the commentary I quoted above explains *gandhabba* as the one who descends into the womb. But there are two difficulties with this interpretation. First, Ps explains *gabbha* before the explanation of *gandhabba* (Ps II p.310, ll.19–25. *gabbha* is called *dāraka* in that place). In other words, *gabbha* and *gandhabba* are explained separately (so Ps-ṭ). Secondly, it is difficult to understand that Ps describes *gandhabba* as the one who descends into the womb. We should take the Ps’s explanation above as follows: ‘*gandhabba* (means) a being who stands beside there. *paccupaṭṭhito hoti* does not (mean that the *gandhabba*) is nearby looking at the union of the mother and father, but he appears in the place, being driven by the *kamma* machine.’ For these reasons, I conclude that the above explanation in Ps does not intend to imply *gandhabba* as the one who descends into the womb.

2.4. MN 93

Then, I shall investigate the context of MN 93 (II p.154, l.26–p.157, l.10). Here, the Buddha talks to Assalāyana about an ancient discussion between Asita Devala and 7 *brāhmaṇas*. In this episode, to begin with, Asita Devala asks them whether the family line of their parents through generations has been purely of *brāhmaṇa* or not. They cannot answer this question. Next, Asita Devala asks them how *gabbhassa avakkanti* occurs, and they answer this in the same way as the statement of conception in MN 38. And then, Asita Devala asks them whether the participating *gandhabba* is *khattiya*, *brāhmaṇa*, *vessa* or *sudda*. They cannot answer this question. Finally, Asita Devala says ‘That being so, sirs, do you know what you are to be born as?’ (*evaṃ sante, jānātha ke tumhe hotha*) But they do not know the answer. The commentary does not explain this discussion. Hitherto studies claim that *gandhabba* in the above context is the one who descends into the womb, because his

caste is asked. If that is the case, it is suspicious that despite Asita Devala asks the family line of the parents extending far back, he does not ask *gandhabba*'s caste in the same way. This fact seems to support the understanding that *gabbha* and *gandhabba* are different beings. And the theme of this discussion is whether the following thought is correct or not: 'Only *brāhmaṇas* are the best of castes, others are inferior. Only *brāhmaṇas* are the white caste, others are black. Only *brāhmaṇas* are purified, non-*brāhmaṇas* are not (purified). Only *brāhmaṇas* are sons of *Brahmā*, offsprings of *Brahmā*, born from *Brahmā*'s mouth, created by *Brahmā*, successors of *Brahmā*' (*brāhmaṇā va seṭṭho vaṇṇo, hīno añño vaṇṇo. brāhmaṇā va sukko vaṇṇo, kaṇho añño vaṇṇo. brāhmaṇā va sujjhanti, no abrāhmaṇā. brāhmaṇā va brahmuno putto orasā mukhato jātā brahmajā brahmanimmitā brahmadāyā-dā. MN 93 (II p.156, ll.11–15)*). Now, we can understand sufficiently that the reason why Asita Devala asks the caste of *gandhabba* is because the embryo's purity is spoiled unless the caste of *gandhabba* is *brāhmaṇa*. At least, it cannot be argued that *gandhabba* who descends into the womb is the only interpretation. As a result of the above discussions about *praty-upa-sthā* and *saṃ-ni-pat*, it seems more reasonable to conclude that *gandhabba* in the context of the conception in MN 38 and 93 is not the one who descends into the womb⁹⁾.

Conclusion

I summarize the discussions above. (1) In the Pali canon, there are (re-)birth expressions constructed from *gabbha* and *ava-kram*: *gabbhassa avakkanti, gabbhe okkanti, gabbhāvakkanti*. Although various translations of these expressions have been made, they should be translated respectively as follows: 'the descent of the embryo,' 'descent into the womb,' and the third expression can be understood as 'the descent of the embryo' or 'descent into womb.' (2) *gabbhāvakkanti* in DN 28 (IV p.103, ll.3–19) not only indicates the literal meaning of *ava-kram*, but also implies the whole sequence of actions including *niṣ-kram*. This is such an expression that the first action of the sequence represents the whole sequence. It is noteworthy that (re-)birth expressions constructed from *gabbha* and *ava-kram* mean descent and on the other hand the same expressions mean descent including *niṣ-kram* (cf. Vin I p.93, ll.14–22). (3) *gandhabba* in MN 38 (I p.265, l.35–p.266, l.6) and in MN 93 (II p.157, ll.1–3) is not the one who descends into the womb. In this case, however, who descends? To answer this question, I should discuss *satta* (the being) and *viññāṇa* (the cognition) in detail, which will follow in the near future.

I would like to express my thanks to Ms. Mariko Tomita for correcting my English. Abbreviations follow the Epilegomena of CPD except T: Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新脩大藏經. All references are to the PTS edition. But partly I took the readings of Be (Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana CD-ROM) and Se (e-text). In this paper, I use mostly the Pali canon, in consideration of the divergence of canonical statements on *gandhabba* among various sects.

1) Refer to Goto [2005]. Muroji [1996] investigates the transmission of the formula on the (re-) birth through various Abhidharma literatures. 2) Anālayo [2008], which is the latest discussion on this topic as far as I know, takes *gandhabba* as the one who enters into the womb. On the other hand, Langer [2001: pp.9–17] does not think so. For comparison, in Japan, whereas there is little discussion about this matter in Early Buddhism, there are numerous studies on *antarābhava* in Abhidharma literatures. 3) This seems to describe that as a result of the descent of *satta* (the being), the embryo is formed (cf. Nishimura [2010: p.83, n.42]). In other words, how the subject of descent is called depends on the viewpoint of whether the subject is seen from his previous life or his current life. 4) Be, Se: *gabbh'okkanti*°. 5) In Th 790, there is the expression *gabbhe vokkantito* (v.l. *gabbhavokkantito*). It is difficult to decide the Skt. form of *vokkantito*. 6) Ee: adds c' eva; Be, Se: omit. 7) *gabbhāvakkanti* seems more likely to mean 'the descent of the embryo,' because *ekacco* is in masculine singular, and the destination of descent is *mātu kucchi* (cf. 1.1.). However, we can not reject the possibility that *gabbha* is paraphrased by *mātu kucchi* (in this case, *gabbha* means 'womb'). 8) Be, Se: add *paccupaṭṭhito*. 9) Then, what role does *gandhabba* play? It seems difficult to determine, since it is only said '*gandhabbo paccupaṭṭhito hoti*.' But some hypotheses have been proposed (for example, see Langer [2001: pp.9–17]).

References: Anālayo, "Rebirth and the Gandhabba," *Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Journal of Buddhist Studies* 1, pp.91–105, 2008; Goto, Toshifumi, "Yājñavalkya's Characterization of the Ātman and the Four Kinds of Suffering in Early Buddhism," *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* 12,2, pp.71–85, 2005; Langer, Rita, *Das Bewusstsein als Träger des Lebens: Einige weniger beachtete Aspekte des viññāna im Pālikanon*, Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, 2000; Nishimura, Naoko 西村直子, "Veda bunken ni okeru taiji no hassei to rinnesetsu" ヴェーダ文献における胎児の発生と輪廻説, *Ronshū* 論集 (The Association for Indology and Study of Religion, Tōhoku University) 36, pp.69–93, 2010; Muroji, Yoshihito 室寺義仁, "Tanjō (saisei) no teikeihyōgen o meguru Bukkyōto no shodenshō" 誕生(再生)の定型表現を巡る仏教徒の諸伝承, in *Kōyasan Daigaku ronbunshū* 高野山大学論文集, pp.181–196, Kōyachō: Kōyasan Daigaku, 1996.

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