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CONTENTS

Studies in Vinaya Technical Terms IV–X by Édith Nolot	I
The Sixty-four Destructions according to the <i>Samskṛtāsamskṛta-viniścaya</i> by Peter Skilling	113
Intermediate Existence and the Higher Fetters in the Pāli Nikāyas by G.A. Somaratne	121
Remarks on the Rasavāhinī and the Related Literature by Junko Matsumura	155
An Index to JPTS Volumes IX–XXIV	173

Intermediate Existence and the Higher Fetters in the Pāli Nikāyas

This article concerns what the Pāli Nikāyas have to say about the *antarāparinibbāyin* non-returners and their desire for existence and the life in an intermediate existence.¹ I shall argue that this material casts doubt on a major point of Theravāda orthodoxy.

The following are the four noble persons presented in Pali Buddhism:

1. The stream-enterer (*sotāpanno*)
2. The once-returner (*sakadāgāmī*)
3. The non-returner (*anāgāmī*)
4. The arahant (*araham*) (S V 200).

The Buddha stated that it was only in his teaching that one could find these four noble persons.² The meanings of

¹I am grateful to Professor Richard F. Gombrich (University of Oxford) for his suggestions which helped me to improve the content of this article. I also appreciate the help given by Professor George D. Bond and the late Professor Edmund F. Perry (Northwestern University) in articulating my initial thoughts into an article.

²It is not difficult to understand why Buddhist teaching was so appealing to many sorts of people. It seems Buddhism's diverse ways of presenting many noble stages and persons could embrace a variety of spiritual needs and levels of spiritual development. Buddhism could introduce arahantship here and now for those who came to it seeking no more rebirths. It could offer the stage of non-return for those who came with the aspiration to have an experience in a higher world before attaining the final goal. It could offer the stage of once-return for those who would like to come back to this world one more time to have more experiences as humans before attaining the supreme goal. Finally, it could offer the stage of stream-entry for those who are not really tired of either world but would like to have an assurance of attaining the supreme goal one day. This is also evident from the fact that all the arahants that we find in the Nikāyas are either monks or nuns. There is no reference to living lay

the Pāli names given to identify these four — one who has entered the stream, one who returns once, one who never returns, and the worthy one — also highlight that their spiritual statuses form a hierarchy on a gradual path.¹ They are explained as having achieved these statuses by gradually giving up “ten fetters” (*dasa-samyojana*). This hierarchical order is also referred to by naming them the first recluse (stream-enterer), the second recluse (once-returner), the third recluse (non-returner), and the fourth recluse (arahant) respectively (A II 238). Of the four, the arahant is the highest as he is the only fully perfected one, requiring no further instruction (*asekha*); he has achieved the supreme goal, nibbāna.² The rest are still seekers, requiring instruction (*sekha*), who are advancing towards their final goal.

These four categories of noble person are expanded in the Pāli texts in many different ways. One common expansion can be seen in the following list, where each category is divided into two stages: the path and the fruition.³

- 1a. The one who is in the process of realizing the fruition of stream-entry (*sotāpattiphalasacchikiriya paṭipanno*)
- 1b. The stream-enterer
- 2a. The one who is in the process of realizing the fruition of once-returning (*sakadāgāmiphala-sacchikiriya paṭipanno*)

arahants. The envisaged spiritual stages for the laity seem to be either stream-entry, once-return, or non-return.

¹These spiritual stages, as described in S V 25–26, are the fruitions of living a mendicant life (*sāmaññaphalāni*), a holy life (*brahmañña-phalāni*), and a holy practice (*brahmacariyaphalāni*).

²There are two other perfected ones besides these four noble persons: the Paṅcēkabuddha and the Sammāsambuddha.

³See S V 202; Ud 56; A IV 373.

- 2b. The once-returner
- 3a. The one who is in the process of realizing the fruition of non-returning (*anāgāmiṭṭhārasacchikiriyāya paṭipanno*)
- 3b. The non-returner
- 4a. The one who is in the process of realizing the fruition of arahantship (*arahattaphalasacchikiriyāya paṭipanno*)
- 4b. The arahant

In addition to this there are many other lists, and they demonstrate the multiplication of noble persons according to slight differences in attainments. Even though in many ways these other lists are expansions of the one above, an investigation into them will not only enlarge our understanding of Buddhist soteriology proper but also demonstrate the difficulty in understanding them in terms of the traditional list of ten fetters. The category of non-returns is a case in point. In the Pāli Nikāyas this noble person is expounded in various ways. The following ten non-returns can be named as an example:

1. The first *antarāparinibbāyin*
2. The second *antarāparinibbāyin*
3. The third *antarāparinibbāyin*
4. The *upahaccaparinibbāyin*
5. The *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*
6. The *sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*
7. The *uddhaṃsota-akanitthagāmin*
8. The *kāyasakkhin*
9. The *diṭṭhippatta*
10. The *saddhāvimutta*.

In this study, my main aim is to consider the non-returner type called *antarā-parinibbāyins* and the fetters of existence with which they are said still to be tied. By doing so, I will show how problematic it is to understand the various types of non-returns taking the traditional list of ten fetters as a

basis. I will point out not only the weakness of the traditional list but also why it does not include the “desire for existence”, a fetter that can be found in some other lists and which is essential in describing some of the Buddhist noble persons. A possible reason for its non-inclusion seems to be the Theravāda refusal to accept an intermediate existence. My examination of the *antarāparinibbāyins* and the fetter of existence leads me to conclude that, in spite of the Theravāda refusal, some Pāli texts assume the existence of an intermediate state for the *antarāparinibbāyins*, for they cannot be born again.

I

Both Buddhist and non-Buddhist sources show that the idea of a non-returner was a commonly understood concept in the Indian religious world at the time of the Buddha. The Buddhist definition of a non-returner in the Nikāyas, according to the *Critical Pāli Dictionary*, is that a non-returner (*anāgāmin*) is “a person who does not return (to this world), i.e. who has attained the third stage of sanctification and only is born again in the *Brahma* world before his entrance into *Nibbāna*.”¹ This means that, after his death, he will not come to the sensual realm to be born again (D III 237). The prototype of this very idea of not returning to this world is found in the following passage of the *Bṛhad-āranyaka-upaniṣad*:

Where one’s mind is attached, the subtle self goes thereto with action, being attached to it alone. Obtaining the end of his action, whatever he does in this world he comes again from that world, to this world of action. This [is for] the man who desires. But the man who does not desire, he who is without desire, who is freed from desire, whose

¹ Vin III 87, Vin II 161, Ud 56: *anāvattidhammo tasmā lokā*.

desire is satisfied, whose desire is the Soul; his breaths do not depart. Being Brahman he goes to Brahman.¹

Nevertheless, when these concepts of returner and non-returner came to Buddhism, they took on new interpretations. The Buddhist categorization of noble persons into returner (*āgāmī*), non-returner (*anāgāmī*), and arahant that we find at Itivuttaka 96 is a good example to illustrate this. The returner, as explained there, is tied with the bonds of sensual pleasure and existence; the non-returner, on the other hand, is free from the bond of sensual pleasure, but has the bond of existence; the arahant is free from both bonds.² The word *yoga* or bond in that text is equivalent to the word *saṃyojana* or fetter found elsewhere.

The traditional list of ten fetters is often divided into two sections. Thus, *orambhāgiya-saṃyojana* (“the lower fetters”) and *uddhambhāgiya-saṃyojana* (“the higher fetters”) make up the list of ten. The following five form the group of lower-fetters:

1. personality belief,
2. sceptical doubts,
3. attachment to rules and rituals,
4. sensual desire,

¹Brhad. IV.4.6 : *tad eva saktah saha karmaṇaiti lingam mano yatra niṣaktam asya; prāpyāntaṃ karmaṇas tasya yat kiṃ ceha karoty ayaṃ. tasmāl lokāt punar aiti asmaī lokāya karmaṇe, iti nu kāmayamānaḥ; athākāmayamānaḥ, yo 'kāmo niṣkāma āpta-kāma ātma-kāmaḥ, na tasya prāṇā utkrāmantī, na tasya prāṇā utkrāmantī, brahmaiva san brahmāpyeti* (translation from R.E. Hume (*The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, London: Oxford University Press, 1931, p. 141) and S. Radhakrishnan (*The Principal Upanishads*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953, pp. 272-73).

²It 96: *kāmayogayutto bhikkhave bhavayogayutto āgāmī hoti āgantā ithattaṃ; kāmayogavisaññutto bhikkhave bhavayogayutto anāgāmī hoti anāgantā ithattaṃ; kāmayogavisaññutto bhikkhave bhavayogavisaññutto arahā hoti khīṇāsavo ti.*

5. ill-will (S V 60).

The five that form the higher fetters consist of:

6. desire for form,
7. desire for the formless,
8. pride,
9. restlessness,
10. ignorance (S V 61, D III 234).

The Pāli word *oraṃbhāgiya* means “connected with the lower [worlds]”, and the word *uddhaṃbhāgiya* means “connected with the upper [worlds]”.¹ The first five of the ten fetters are called lower fetters because they tie the individual to the lower realms, also known as the sensual realms. The other five are called higher fetters because they tie the individual to the higher realms which consists of the realms of both form and the formless. By getting rid of the five lower fetters, one becomes free from the sensual realm only, and by getting rid of the five higher fetters, one becomes free from both form and formless realms.

In the Theravāda tradition, this concept of fetters is taken for granted and it is assumed that it is possible to understand the Buddhist noble persons entirely in terms of their giving up of fetters (see, for example, under *saṃyojana* in Nyana-tiloka’s *Buddhist Dictionary* [NBD]). However, there are many examples in the Pāli Nikāyas themselves where this interpretation becomes problematic.

One problem of the fetters in relation to noble persons can be seen in the following well-known Nikāya passage. The stream-enterer, the once-returner, and the non-returner are defined in relation to their giving up a certain number of

¹ All translations from the Pali in this article are based on the PTS translations with my own changes and modifications to make the meaning clear. Mp II, 130: *uddhaṃbhāgiyāni pañca bahiddhā saṃyojanāni nāma, ... uddhaṃ vuccati rūpārūpadhātu, tatth’ uppatti-nipphādanato taṃ uddhaṃ bhajanī ti uddhaṃbhāgiyāni.*

fetters (*saṃyojana*) and the arahant in relation to his destruction of cankers (*āsava*). The passage reads:

Monks, who is the first recluse [= stream-enterer]? Here a monk after the vanishing of the three fetters has entered the stream, has forever escaped the woe, is affirmed, assured of final enlightenment.

Then, who is the second recluse [= once-returned]? After the vanishing of the three fetters and the attenuation of passion, hatred, and delusion, the monk returns only once more to this world. And only once more returning to this world, he puts an end to suffering.

Who is the third recluse [= non-returned]? After the vanishing of the five lower fetters, however, the monk becomes one who is spontaneously born (*opapātika*) [as a being in a Brahmā world] and there he reaches complete nibbāna without ever returning from that world.

Who is the fourth recluse [= arahant]? But after the vanishing of cankers (*āsava*), being cankerless, he reaches already in this world, the freedom which is concentration, the freedom which is understanding, after personally experiencing and comprehending that state.¹

As this passage conveys, one becomes a stream-enterer by eradicating three fetters; a once-returned by weakening passion, hatred, and delusion in addition to the first three; and a non-returned by eradicating all of the five lower fetters.

¹A II 238: *idha bhikkhave bhikkhu tiṇṇaṃ saṃyojanānaṃ parikkhayā sotāpanno hoti avinipātadhammo niyato sambodhiparāyano. ayaṃ bhikkhave samaṇo; idha bhikkhave bhikkhu tiṇṇaṃ saṃyojanānaṃ parikkhayā rāgadosamohānaṃ tanuttā sakadāgāmi hoti sakid eva imaṃ lokam āgantvā dukkhass' antaṃ karoti. ayaṃ bhikkhave dutiyo samaṇo; idha bhikkhave bhikkhu pañcanaṃ orambhāgiyānaṃ saṃyojanānaṃ parikkhayā opapātiko hoti tattha parinibbāyī anāvattidhammo tasmā lokā. ayaṃ bhikkhave tatiyo samaṇo; idha bhikkhave bhikkhu āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ diṭṭh' eva dhamme sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja viharati. ayaṃ bhikkhave catuttho samaṇo.*

However, according to the phrasing, one becomes an arahant not by eradicating all of the fetters but by destroying all of the cankers. The phrase used there is, “after the vanishing of cankers, being cankerless” (*āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ*).

These two ways of describing the four noble persons, one in terms of fetters and the other in terms of cankers, also compel us to question the validity of the standard traditional list of ten fetters. According to the Pali Buddhist tradition the person who has destroyed the five lower fetters becomes an arahant only after also destroying the five higher fetters. However, the passage cited above does not make any reference to the five higher fetters and states clearly that one becomes an arahant after destroying cankers. One way to solve this question is to ask: Are the five higher fetters and the cankers the same? Is one a version of the other? Are cankers and the fetters more or less the same?

There are lists of either four or three types of cankers (*āsava*) in the Pāli texts. (1) Sensual pleasure (*kāmāsava*), (2) existence (*bhavāsava*), (3) speculative views (*diṭṭhāsava*), and (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*) form the four. The one omitted in the list of three is the canker of speculative views. Perhaps this is because speculative views are due to ignorance.¹ The goal of practising the Buddhist path is to achieve complete freedom from the cycle of becoming, from rebirth, in any of the three realms: the sensual realm, the form realm, and the formless realm (S V 56).

So if one becomes an arahant with the destruction of all cankers one has transcended all three realms. This means that with the vanishing of the canker of sensual desire, one becomes free from the sensual realm, and with the vanishing of the cankers of existence and ignorance, one becomes free from both the realms of form and the formless. This is analogous to the meaning of the fetters, and it leads us to

¹For the list of four cankers, see D II 81 and A I 165; for the list of three cankers, see S V 56.

conclude that cankers and fetters are more or less the same. Therefore, the difference, it seems, lies mostly in the terms used rather than in the meaning.

However, there are many other problems with this grading of noble persons according to their destruction of fetters. The various types of non-returners are a case in point. For instance, it is difficult to judge the difference between the first *antarāparinibbāyin* and the second *antarāparinibbāyin* in terms of fetters. It seems, however, that there was a common belief among the early Buddhists that one becomes a non-returner by getting rid of the five lower fetters. For instance, a householder once came to the Buddha and said that he did not see any one of the five lower fetters in himself. The immediate reply that the Buddha gave to this person was: "You have declared the fruit of non-returning" (S V 117). This means that in general one can be certain of being a non-returner when one knows that one is completely free from those five lower fetters.

After looking at various descriptions of the noble persons, however, it is difficult to think that the destruction of the five lower fetters is the only means of identifying a non-returner. Moreover, it is difficult to conclude that the five fetters are the only fetters that the non-returner has broken. Many stock passages in the Nikāyas do not name the individual fetters. A reason for this might be that when the Buddha used the terms "lower fetters" and "higher fetters" his listeners easily understood what he meant. Perhaps the Buddha did not want to create a fixed list of fetters because his original idea was to convey the nature of one's spiritual attainment by using a popular concept.

The following stereotypical passage on non-returners is an example: *idha bhikkhave bhikkhu pañcannaṃ orambhāgiyānaṃ saṃyojanānaṃ parikkhayā opapātiko hoti tatha parinibbāyī anāvattidhammo tasmā lokā. ayaṃ bhikkhave tatiyo samaṇo* (A II 238). "Through the disappearance of the five lower fetters a monk becomes an *opapātika* and reaches

complete nibbāna without ever returning from that world.”¹ As is evident from this passage and its context, the disappearance of the five lower fetters is given as the key to becoming a non-returner but they are not further identified.

It seems that the standardization of noble persons in relation to fetters took place early in Buddhist history as a response to the need for classifying and describing the differences between Buddhist noble persons. However, the Nikāyas themselves show the fallibility of such attempts. For example, texts say that the difference between the once-returner and the non-returner lies in the fact that sensual desire and ill-will have partially vanished in the former, while they have completely vanished in the latter.

According to the stock passage on the once-returner (A IV 380), however, once-returners, in addition to their loss of the first three fetters, are also partially free from passion, hatred, and delusion (*rāgadosamohānaṃ tanuttā*). Accordingly, the fourth and the fifth lower fetters should be passion and hatred or a combination of passion, hatred, and delusion. But in the list of the five lower fetters, the fourth and the fifth are named as sensual desire (*kāmarāga*) and ill-will

¹The term *opapātiko* is noteworthy. According to the PED, it means: “arisen or reborn without visible cause (i.e. without parents), spontaneous rebirth, ... apparitional rebirth”. According to NBD the term means “accidental, ... spontaneously born, i.e. born without the instrumentality of parents.” BD says further that *opapātika* “applies to all heavenly and infernal beings.” The Mahāsīhanādasutta names four *opapātika-yonis*: heavenly beings, hell beings, some human beings, and some purgatory beings (M I 73). Among these *opapātika-yonis*, where can the non-returner be born? Since the non-returner has already transcended the sensual realm, his becoming an *opapātiko* cannot be in any of the six heavenly worlds, the human world, or any lower world. Since the beings in the Brahmā worlds are also born as *opapātika*, that is, without parents, the phrase *opapātiko hoti* in the cited non-returner formula must refer to one’s becoming an inhabitant in a Brahmā world. On the term *opapātika*, see also Joy Manné (1995), JPTS XXI, pp. 78–80.

(*vyāpāda*). It is likely that passion and hatred correspond to sensual desire and ill-will respectively. Although delusion (*moha*) is mentioned above as a third factor that one lessens with the attainment of once-returning, in the list of the five higher fetters, ignorance (*avijjā*), which tallies with delusion, is given as the last, a factor that should be got rid of with the attainment of arahantship.

This means, no doubt, that both the once-returned and the non-returned have also attenuated their ignorance to a certain level together with the rest of the fetters which are not in the list of five higher fetters. It also shows that linking this classification of noble persons to a fixed list of fetters was the result of a deliberate attempt by early Buddhists to seek consistency in the Buddha's sporadic contextual teachings.

II

Two lists of non-returned are found in the Nikāyas. One list consists of five non-returned and the other of seven. It is interesting to note that the texts giving these lists often avoid discussing the noble persons in relation to fetters. In the following pages, I will briefly discuss several of these lists in relation to textual sources. By doing so, I intend to bring out the dilemma caused by the idea of the ten fetters in categorizing Buddhist noble persons.

List A (S V 201)

1. The arahant
2. [non-returned]
 - i. The *antarāparinibbāyin*
 - ii. The *upahaccaparinibbāyin*
 - iii. The *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*
 - iv. The *sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*
 - v. The *uddhamsoto akaniṭṭhagāmin*
3. The once-returned
4. [stream-enterers]
 - i. The dhamma-follower (who is on the path to stream-entry)

ii. The faith-follower (who is on the path to stream-entry)

In this list, the five non-returners are placed after the arahant. According to the text, the arahant has perfected the five spiritual faculties, namely:

1. faith,
2. energy,
3. mindfulness,
4. concentration,
5. wisdom.

The non-returners are inferior to the arahant because they have not perfected the five spiritual faculties. The differences among the five non-returners also lie in the degree of development of those five spiritual faculties. Among the non-returners, the *antarāparinibbāyin* is the highest in rank and the *uddhamṣota-akaniṭṭhagāmin* is the lowest.

At A IV 380, we find another description of noble persons with no reference to fetters, where it states that as far as the threefold categorization of morality, concentration, and wisdom is concerned, all these non-returners have the same standing: they have all perfected morality and concentration, and they have all yet to perfect wisdom. This does not imply that the non-returners have not developed the faculty of wisdom at all. All the non-returners have developed the five spiritual faculties, though less so than the arahant, so we can assume that they have developed the faculty of wisdom to a high level.

Moreover, according to A II 183, one experiences the destruction of cankers through wisdom. This means that in order to become a non-returner, one must destroy some cankers and attenuate others, sensual desire in particular; and to do so one should possess a high level of wisdom. The textual statement that one becomes a once-returner after attenuating lust, hatred and delusion (*rāgadosamohānaṃ*

tanuttā) also supports this view, though it contradicts the traditional understanding in terms of the five fetters.

List B (A IV 379–81)

1. [non-returners]
 - i. The *antarāparinibbāyin*
 - ii. The *upahaccaparinibbāyin*
 - iii. The *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*
 - iv. The *sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*
 - v. The *uddhaṃsoto akaniṭṭhagāmin*
2. The once-returned
3. [stream-enterers]
 - i. The *ekabījī*
 - ii. The *koḷaṃkolo*
 - iii. The *sattakkhattuparamo*

In this list all the noble persons are described as having residues of attachment (*saupādisesa*) but being no longer liable to birth in such unpleasant conditions as the hells, the animal world, the ghost world, or the demon world. In addition, the five non-returners are described as those who have perfected both morality and concentration; as those who must still perfect wisdom; and as those who have destroyed the five lower fetters. The once-returned, on the other hand, has perfected morality but not concentration and wisdom and is free from the three fetters and partially free from lust, hatred, and delusion. The three stream-enterers, as described here, have perfected morality only and have got rid of the first three fetters. We summarize this in the following chart:

	<i>Non- Returners</i>	<i>Once- Returners</i>	<i>Stream- Enterers</i>
<i>morality</i>	perfected	perfected	perfected
<i>concentration</i>	perfected	not perfected	not perfected
<i>wisdom</i>	not perfected	not perfected	not perfected
<i>first three lower fetters</i>	destroyed	destroyed	destroyed
<i>next two lower fetters</i>	destroyed	partially destroyed	not destroyed

List C (A V 119–20)

1. [stream-enterers]
 - i. The *sattakkhattuparama*
 - ii. The *kolamkola*
 - iii. The *ekabīji*
2. The once-returner
3. [non-returners]
 - i. The *antarāparinibbāyin*
 - ii. The *upahaccaparinibbāyin*
 - iii. The *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*
 - iv. The *sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*
 - v. The *uddhaṃsota akaniṭṭhagāmin*
4. The arahant (*yo ca diṭṭhe va dhamme arahā*)

All five types of non-returners in this list, as is stated in the text, attain complete nibbāna after leaving this world (*idha vihāya niṭṭhā*), and the rest (the three stream-enterers, the once-returner, and the arahant) attain their complete nibbāna here in this world (*idha niṭṭhā*). In understanding these noble persons, it is important to note that the Nikāyas often list two occasions on which one can attain liberating insight (*aññā*): (1) here and now or (2) at the time of one's death. The above list and one at A I 234–35 add a third occasion: (3) after one's physical death.

Accordingly, the five non-returners in the above list achieve their perfection after leaving this world (*idha vihāya niṭṭhā*), while the *sattakkhattuparama*, the *kolamkola*, the *ekabīji*, the once-returner, and the one who is an arahant here and now achieve their perfection in this world (*idha niṭṭhā*). This means that non-returners may achieve their complete nibbāna after death and in a place other than the sensual realm. The text continues by saying that all these ten noble persons have entered the stream (*sotāpannā*); are endowed with (constructive) views (*diṭṭhisampannā*); have unwavering confidence in the Buddha (*aveccappasannā*); and are firm in belief (*niṭṭhaṅgatā*).

According to the above three lists,¹ there are five kinds of non-returner. It is interesting to note that all of the non-returners in these lists are described without reference to the ten fetters. As seen above, they are defined in relation to either the five spiritual faculties, the perfection of morality, concentration and wisdom, or the way they achieve their final nibbāna.

List D (A IV 70-74)

I. [non-returners]

- i. The first *antarāparinibbāyin*
- ii. The second *antarāparinibbāyin*
- iii. The third *antarāparinibbāyin*
- iv. The *upahaccaparinibbāyin*
- v. The *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*
- vi. The *sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*
- vii. The *uddhamṣoto akaniṭṭhagāmin*

2. The arahant (*so āsavānaṃ khayā...*)

This list has seven types of non-returners because it divides the *antarāparinibbāyin* into three. The seven non-returners are named in this list as human destinies (*purisagatiyo*) and the arahant as one who attained complete nibbāna without any residue of attachment (*anupādā ca parinibbānaṃ*). All of the seven destinies are ways in which the non-returners attain complete nibbāna.

These five or seven non-returners are listed in order based on the level of each non-returner's progress on the path through developing spiritual qualities and breaking fetters. A textual passage (A I 234-35) that names the five types of non-returner states that one who perfects morality, concentration, and wisdom is most likely to become an arahant; otherwise, he is likely to become one of the five non-returners.

¹ See also, S V 69-70.

The person who trains himself in perfecting morality, concentration, and wisdom is able to accomplish, with the destruction of all cankers, the freedom which is concentration, the freedom which is insight here and now, within this life. If he fails to do so, with the destruction of the five lower fetters, he will be an *antarāparinibbāyin*; if he fails to be an *antarāparinibbāyin*, he will be an *upahaccaparinibbāyin*; if he fails to be an *upahaccaparinibbāyin*, he will be an *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*; if he fails to be an *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*, he will be a *saṅkhāraparinibbāyin*; if he fails to be a *saṅkhāraparinibbāyin*, he will be an *akaniṭṭhaparinibbāyin*, a person who is in the upper stream, heading towards Akanitṭha.

These non-returners are rated according to when, where, and how they achieve final nibbāna. Considering this hierarchy in relation to one's perfecting of the Buddhist path, we can conjecture that in the sevenfold classification of the non-returner too, if he who has perfected morality, concentration, and wisdom fails to become an arahant, he is likely to become an *antarāparinibbāyin* of the first level; if he fails the first level, then he will attain the second level; if he fails the second level, then he will attain the third level. If he fails to achieve all these, then, as in the list of five, the next highest level he can achieve is to become an *upahaccaparinibbāyin*.

In both the sevenfold and the fivefold classification, the differences among these non-returners are often given by referring not only to the fetters that they break but also to other forms of spiritual progress that they make. In one text, the differences between them are shown by similes. These similes convey to us what will happen to these non-returners after their physical death and when and how they will attain their complete nibbāna. According to that metaphorical description,

(1) the first *antarāparinibbāyin* attains complete nibbāna “just as from an iron slab, heated and beaten all day, a bit may come off and cool down”;¹

(2) the second *antarāparinibbāyin* attains complete nibbāna “just as from an iron slab, heated and beaten all day, a bit may come off, fly up and cool down”;² and

(3) the third *antarāparinibbāyin* attains complete nibbāna “just as the bit may come off, fly up, and before touching the ground cool down.”³

The three sparks of these three similes cool down before touching the ground, in other words, while they are in the air. From this we can assume that these three types of *antarāparinibbāyins* attain complete nibbāna while they are in *antarā*, an intermediate state, without being born to another life.

The similes that are given with reference to the other five types of non-returner, namely, the *upahaccaparinibbāyin*, *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*, *sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*, and the *uddhamsota-akaniṭṭhagāmin*, bear a common characteristic. There the sparks cool down after touching the ground. Thus,

(4) the *upahaccaparinibbāyin* attains complete nibbāna “just as from an iron slab, heated and beaten all day, a bit may come off, fly up, and after touching the ground cool down”;⁴

(5) the *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyin* attains complete nibbāna “just as from an iron slab, heated and beaten all day, a bit may come off, fly up, and fall on some small heap of grass or sticks, kindle fire, kindle smoke, and consume that small heap and cool down from want of fuel”;⁵

¹ A IV 70-71: *papaṭikā nibbattitvā nibbāyeyya* .

² A IV 71: *papaṭikā nibbattitvā uppatitvā nibbāyeyya* .

³ A IV 71: *papaṭikā nibbattitvā uppatitvā anupahaccatalaṃ nibbāyeyya* .

⁴ A IV 72: *papaṭikā nibbattitvā uppatitvā upahaccatalaṃ nibbāyeyya* .

⁵ A IV 72: *papaṭikā nibbattitvā uppatitvā paritṭe tiṇapuñje vā kaṭṭhapuñje vā nipateyya sā tattha aggim pi janeyya dhūmam pi janeyya aggim pi*

(6) the *sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyin* attains complete nibbāna “just as from an iron slab, heated and beaten all day, a bit may come off, fly up, and fall on a large heap of grass or sticks, kindle fire, kindle smoke, and consume that large heap and cool down from want of fuel”;¹ finally,

(7) the *uddhaṃsota-akaniṭṭhagāmin* attains complete nibbāna “just as from an iron slab, heated and beaten all day, a bit may come off, fly up, and may fall on a large heap of grass, heap of sticks, kindle fire, kindle smoke, and consume that large heap, set fire to the shrubland, set fire to the woodland and burning there, come to the edge of a green cornfield, upland, rock, water or lush countryside and there cool down from want of fuel.”²

The phrase “after touching the ground” in these readings indicates that these four non-returners attain complete nibbāna after being born in their next life, which, as is evident from other contexts, takes place in a higher realm.

The non-returners in these lists are often explained in the texts with little reference to the fetters.

The *upahaccaparinibbāyin* non-returner is listed immediately after the *antarāparinibbāyin*, so is one rank lower. Grammatically, the term *upahacca* is the absolutive form of *upahan(a)ti*; among others, it has the meanings of touch,

janetvā dhūmam pi janetvā tam eva parittam tiṇapuñjam vā kaṭṭhapuñjam vā pariyādiyitvā anāhārā nibbāyeyya.

¹ A IV 73: *papaṭikā nibbattitvā uppatitvā vipule tiṇapuñje vā kaṭṭhapuñje vā nipateyya sā tattha aggim pi janeyya dhūmam pi janeyya aggim pi janetvā dhūmam pi janetvā tam eva vipulam tiṇapuñjam vā kaṭṭhapuñjam vā pariyādiyitvā anāhārā nibbāyeyya.*

² A IV, 73-74: *papaṭikā nibbattitvā uppatitvā mahante tiṇapuñje vā kaṭṭhapuñje vā nipateyya sā tattha aggim pi janeyya dhūmam pi janeyya aggim pi janetvā dhūmam pi janetvā tam eva mahantam tiṇapuñjam vā kaṭṭhapuñjam vā pariyādiyitvā gaccham pi daheyya dāyam pi daheyya gaccham pi dahitvā dāyampi dahitvā haritan tam vā pattham tam vā setan tam vā udakam tam vā ramaṇīyam vā bhūmibhāgiyam āgamma anāhārā nibbāyeyya.*

strike, and reach. Accordingly, *upahaccaparinibbāyin* means the one who attains complete nibbāna after reaching, or touching, as in the spark simile, the ground. This means he attains complete nibbāna after being born into a next life.

As a non-returner, a *upahaccaparinibbāyin* is free from the five lower fetters (S V 69-70), but he still possesses both the rebirth fetters and the existence fetters that I think are the higher fetters. Therefore, on his death, the *upahaccaparinibbāyin* will be born in a pure Brahmā world, and attain complete nibbāna while living in that world.¹ This is because, though both the rebirth and existence fetters bind him, they are so weak that they could produce only one more life span. Buddhaghosa in his *Visuddhimagga* says that the *antarāparinibbāyin* attains nibbāna after reappearing anywhere in the Pure Abodes, before reaching the middle of his life span there, while the *upahaccaparinibbāyin* attains nibbāna after reaching the middle of his life span there (*Vism* 710, *Mp* II 330). In our view, there is no evidence in the *Nikāyas* to prove either that the *antarāparinibbāyin* is reborn in a new life or that the *upahaccaparinibbāyin* has to live pass the middle of his life span. However, it is clear that the *upahaccaparinibbāyin* attains complete nibbāna after being born in another life in the pure abodes.

¹ A set of five Brahmā worlds named as *Aviha*, *Atappa*, *Sudassa*, *Sudassi*, and *Akaniṭṭha*, are collectively called “pure abodes” (*D* III 237). In them only non-returners are born, and there they attain their complete nibbāna without ever returning to the sensual realm. *Vism* 710 classifies twenty-four types of non-returner who could live in these pure abodes. Since the inhabitants of those pure abodes are not liable to return to the sensual realm, *Bodhisattas* are never born in them. To become a Buddha one has to be born in the human world of the sensual realm (*Spk* I 50; *Bu-a* 224). The *Mahāsīhanādasutta* (*M* I 82) states that the Buddha, in his former lives as a *Bodhisatta*, had experienced almost all forms of birth except the birth in those “pure-abodes”, because if he had been born in them he would not have come back to this world again. However, there are stories which relate that the Buddha sometimes visited the inhabitants of these pure abodes (*suddhāvāsā*), and vice versa (*D* II 50).

The next two non-returners are the *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyin* and the *sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*. The word *asaṅkhāra* has two meanings. One, found in the Saṃyuttanikāya (III, 112), is “devoid of formation aggregate”. The other, found in later texts, is “unprompted” (Vism 452-53). According to the latter meaning, *asaṅkhāra* means automatic, unprompted, done by oneself without any encouragement, and *sasaṅkhāra* means prompted, encouraged by others.¹ Buddhaghosa in his Visuddhimagga says that the *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyin* reaches the highest path (nibbāna) without prompting, with little effort, while the *sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyin* reaches the highest path with prompting, with effort (Vism 710). In the Aṅguttara-nikāya (II 156), where we find four types of non-returners, the *asaṅkhāra* and the *sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyins* are further classified into two types. The four are:

1. the *sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*, who attains complete nibbāna here and now (*ditṭheva dhamme sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyī hoti*);
2. the *sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*, who attains complete nibbāna after his physical death (*kāyassa bhedā sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyī hoti*);
3. the *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*, who attains complete nibbāna here and now; and
4. the *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*, who attains complete nibbāna after his physical death.

This fourfold classification shows that both the *asaṅkhāra*- and the *sasaṅkhāra-parinibbāyins* may attain complete nibbāna here and now in this world. However, this seems to contradict the passage at A IV 119-20 which describes both these non-returners as attaining perfection after leaving this world.

¹ See also CPD on these terms; also see Edgerton's BHSD on: *anabhis-aṅkhāra-parinirvāyin*.

The last non-returner in the lists of five and seven is called *uddhaṃsota-akaniṭṭhagāmin*. The literal meaning of the word *uddhaṃsota* (Skt *ūrdhva-srotas*) is “going upstream.” Thus the *uddhaṃsota-akaniṭṭhagāmin* means “the person who goes upstream to Akaniṭṭha.” In Dhammapada 218 the *uddhaṃsota* is described as “One should be eager, determined, and suffused with thought; [such a] one, whose thought is not attached to sensual pleasures, is called an ‘upstreamer’.”¹

The idea that the *uddhaṃsota* non-returner goes upstream conveys that he is to be reborn in any of the five pure Brahmā worlds, from Aviha to Akaniṭṭha. He goes up from Aviha to Atappa, from Atappa to Suddassa, from Sudassa to Sudassi, from Sudassi to Akaniṭṭha, without turning back to be born in a lower world (see Pp 17; Pp-a 199). This means that those non-returners who are born in Atappa will never be born in Aviha, but may be born in Sudassa or Sudassi or Akaniṭṭha. Those five Brahmā worlds, which are known as the Pure Abodes, are the only places where the *uddhaṃsota-akaniṭṭhagāmin* can be born. The *uddhaṃsota-akaniṭṭhagāmin* is born in those pure dwellings because he still possesses both the rebirth and existence fetters.

III

How do fetters relate to non-returners? A II 133–34 names four types of people in relation to their having, partially having, or not having three types of fetters. The once-returner is explained in this context as someone who has yet to eliminate

1. the fetters that lead to lower realms (*orambhāgiya-saṃyojana*),
2. the fetters that bring birth (*uppattipaṭilābhika-saṃyojana*), and

¹ See also Dhp-a III, 289-290; Thī 12.

3. the fetters that bring existence (*bhava-paṭilābhika-saṃyojana*).

This text does not refer to higher fetters but instead introduces rebirth and fetters.¹ It may be that both the rebirth fetters and the existence fetters constitute the higher fetters.

The text then goes on to explain the difference between the *uddhamṣota-akaniṭṭhagāmin* and the *antarāparinibbāyin*. Both are non-returners. For the *uddhamṣota-akaniṭṭhagāmin*, although the five lower fetters have vanished, the rebirth and existence fetters still exist. For the *antarāparinibbāyin*, on the other hand, there exist neither the lower fetters nor the rebirth fetters; yet he still has the existence fetters. And for the arahant all these three types of fetters have vanished completely. Though this text elucidates the difference between these three categories of noble persons, it does not identify what these rebirth fetters and existence fetters are. We note, however, that this threefold classification tallies with It 96, where we find the categorization of noble persons into once-returner, non-returner, and arahant.

The once-returner, according to A II 133-34, comes back and is reborn in the lower realm because in him even the five lower fetters have not completely vanished. This means that the once-returner has still to eliminate all three types of fetter in order to attain complete nibbāna. On the other hand, the arahant has completely eliminated all three types: the lower fetters, rebirth fetters, and existence fetters. In this context, this text names only two types of non-returners: the first and

¹The commentary on this passage seems very unclear. It says: *uppatti-paṭilābhīyānī ti yehi anantarā uppattiṃ paṭilabhati. bhavapaṭilābhīyānī ti uppattibhavassa paṭilābhāya paccayā*: Mp III, 130-31. Then it says: *sakadāgāmissā ti idaṃ appahīnasamyojanesu ariyesu uttamakoṭṭiyā gahitaṃ; yasmā pana antarā-parinibbāyissa antarā uppatti n' atthi — yaṃ pana so tattha jhānaṃ samāpajjati, taṃ kusalattā uppattibhavassa paccayo t' eva saṃkhaṃ gacchati — tasmā 'ssa uppattipaṭilābhīyānī saṃyojanāni pahīnāni bhavapaṭilābhīyānī saṃyojanāni appahīnānī ti vuttaṃ.*

the last of the list of five, namely, the *antarāparinibbāyin* and the *uddhamsota-akaniṭṭhagāmin*.

Since all types of non-returners have eradicated the five lower fetters, they differ from each other only according to whether they have eliminated the rebirth fetters and the existence fetters (in other words, the five higher fetters?). For instance, those non-returners who are known as the *uddhamsota-akaniṭṭhagāmins* have yet to eradicate both the rebirth fetters and the existence fetters. Those non-returners who are known as the *antarāparinibbāyins* have already eradicated the rebirth fetters, and they still eradicate the existence fetters, which is why they are still only non-returners. Then the other three types of non-returners that should come between the *uddhamsota-akaniṭṭhagāmin*, the last, and the *antarāparinibbāyins*, the first, could differ from each other with regard to their level of destruction and attenuation of the rebirth fetters and the existence fetters.

In this regard too, the traditional list of ten fetters is problematic and elusive.

If the non-returners have further to eradicate the five higher fetters, those fetters, according to the list of the ten, should be

1. the desire for form,
2. desire for formless,
3. pride,
4. restlessness,
5. ignorance.

If we assume that the desire for form and the desire for formless states constitute the rebirth fetters, then there still remains the problem of identifying the existence fetters. Conversely, if we were to understand existence fetters to be the desire for form and the desire for formless, then the problem of identifying the rebirth fetters would remain unsolved. We have seen that A II 133-34 states that for non-returners there still remain the fetters that bring existence

(*bhavapaṭilābhikasamyojana*); again, It 96 states that for non-returners there still remains the bond of existence (*bhavayoga*). Considering these references to a fetter called the desire for existence, it is puzzling to find no such fetter in the traditional list of ten fetters, more specifically among the five higher fetters.

It seems to me that the listing of “restlessness” (*uddhacca*) among the five higher fetters was first a textual corruption and then slipped into the tradition to become part of the standard list. In the place of “restlessness”, it is better to read the fetter called “desire for existence”. It is also possible that in the original list there were three fetters, (desire for form, desire for formless, and desire for existence), and then the early redactors or copiers who understood the first two fetters as a division or expansion of the last deliberately replaced the last with restlessness. Here restlessness seems out of place. Restlessness, for instance, comes also among the five hindrances :

1. sensuous desire (*kāmacchanda*),
2. ill-will (*vyāpāda*),
3. sloth and torpor (*thīnamiddha*),
4. restlessness and scruples (*uddhaccakukkucca*),
5. sceptical doubts (*vicikicchā*).

Since one gets rid of sensual desire and ill-will before becoming a non-returner, one should also get rid of “restlessness” while in the first two noble stages, namely, stream-entry and once-return.

To support my view that the five higher fetters should include a fetter called desire for existence, I present two lists of fetters that we find somewhat hidden in the Nikāyas. Each list contains seven items. They are named “latencies”

(*anusaya*) in one context and “fetters” (*saṃyojana*) in another.¹ The list of seven latencies contains:

1. sensual lust
2. repugnance
3. views
4. skeptical doubts
5. pride
6. *desire for existence*,
7. ignorance.²

The list of seven fetters contains:

1. latencies (a corruption for sensual lust?)
2. repugnance
3. views
4. sceptical doubts
5. pride
6. *desire for existence*,
7. ignorance.³

¹The difference between “fetters” and “latencies”, the titles given to the two canonical lists above, is important. A passage in the Majjhima-nikāya says that personality beliefs arise with regard to one’s own personality, *sakkāye sakkāyadiṭṭhi*; sceptical doubts arise with regard to the Buddha’s teachings, *dharmesu vicikicchā*; attachment to rules and rituals arises with regard to moral practices, *sīlesu sīlabbataparāmāso*; sensual desire arises with regard to sensual pleasures, *kāmesu kāma-cchando*; and ill-will arises with regard to living beings, *sattesu byā-pādo*. For a child, these fetters exist at a latent level (*anuseti*, *-anusayo*), and so must be called personality beliefs at a latent level, *sakkāyadiṭṭhānusayo*, sceptical doubts at a latent level, *vicikicchānusayo*, etc. On the other hand, mature people, because they do not know good people and their teachings, are not only obsessed by these fetters but do not understand how to eliminate them.

²S V 60, A IV 9 : *satt’ ime bhikkhave anusayā. katame satta. kāmarāgā-nusayo paṭighānusayo diṭṭhānusayo vicikicchānusayo mānānusayo bhavarāgānusayo avijjānusayo.*

³A IV 7 : *satt’ imāni bhikkhave saññojanāni. katamāni satta. anusaya-saññojanaṃ paṭighasaññojanaṃ diṭṭhisaññojanaṃ vicikicchasaññojanaṃ mānasaññojanaṃ bhavarāgasaññojanaṃ avijjāsaññojanaṃ.*

Yet another related list is found in the Majjhima-nikāya commentary, and its title, the fetters of existence (*bhavasamyojana*), has some bearing. This same list also appears in the Vibhaṅga (p. 391). The list includes:

1. sensual desire
2. repugnance
3. pride
4. views
5. sceptical doubts
6. attachment to rules and rituals
7. *desire for existence*
8. jealousy
9. avarice,
10. ignorance.¹

In these three lists, the desire for existence is named before the fetter of ignorance, which comes last. In addition, it is important to recall the statement at A II 133-34, that for non-returners there are still the fetters of pride, desire for existence, and ignorance. We recall that this sutta mentions only these three types of fetter. Let us now take into account A IV 70-74. In explaining the seven non-returners, it says that the monk who considers:

“If it were not, it would not be mine; if it shall not become, it shall not become for me; what is, what has become, that I abandon” — acquires a state of equanimity. Then he finds pleasure neither in existence nor in a life to come, but sees with true wisdom that there is beyond a goal, a peace; yet not all in all is the goal

¹Ps I, 43: *bhavasamyojanānī ti dasasamyojanāni: kāmarāgasamyojanaṃ paṭigha-māna-dīṭṭhi-vicikicchā-sīlabbataparāmāsa-bhavarāga-issā-macchariyasamyojanaṃ avijjāsamyojanaṃ*. Vibhaṅga 391: *tattha kathamāni dasa samyojanāni? kāmarāgasamyojanaṃ avijjāsamyojana*. It is interesting to note here that in Vibhaṅga 377, we find lower fetters and higher fetters named as in the traditional lists.

realized by him, nor all in all is the latent pride got rid of, nor that *latent desire for existence*, nor that latent ignorance. He, with the vanishing of the five lower fetters, becomes

one of the three types of *antarāparinibbāyin*, an *upahaccaparinibbāyin*, an *asaṅkhāraparinibbāyin*, a *sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyin* or an *uddhaṃsota-akaniṭṭhagāmin*. According to this text, all the seven non-returners still possess at a latent level three types of defilement, namely :

1. pride,
2. *desire for existence*,
3. ignorance.

With these supporting sources, it is justifiable to conclude that either we should list the higher fetters as consisting of

1. desire for form,
2. desire for formless,
3. pride,
4. desire for existence,
5. ignorance.

Or we should not take the list of the five higher fetters so rigidly and literally, since the listing of fetters varies from context to context. In my opinion, among the higher fetters, the desire for form and the desire for the formless can be regarded as the rebirth fetters for non-returners, and the rest of the fetters, the desire for existence in particular, must be the existence fetters. This is a reasonable conclusion because the non-returners will never come back to be born in the sensual realm, and the only possibility for their rebirth is either in the form realm or in the formless realm. Moreover, those who are born anywhere are in existence, subject to birth and death.

IV

A discussion of the concept of *antarā-bhava* is crucial to an explanation of both the *antarāparinibbāyins* and the fetter of existence that we have just introduced into the traditional list of ten fetters. As seen earlier, the Aṅguttara-nikāya (A II 133-34) recognizes a clear difference between rebirth (*uppatti*) and existence (*bhava*), the rebirth fetters (*uppatti-paṭilābhika-saṃyojana*) and the existence fetters (*bhava-paṭilābhika-saṃyojana*). In addition, It 96, by stating that for non-returners there exists only the bond of existence, identifies a division between the bond of sensual pleasure (*kāmayoga*) and the bond of existence (*bhavayoga*). This division between birth and existence can also be seen from the *paṭicca-samuppāda* formula, which states: "Conditioned by clinging, existence comes to be; conditioned by existence, birth comes to be."¹

The *antarāparinibbāyin* non-returners will not be born again, but they are still subject to existence or becoming (*bhava*). This means that they are still in the realm of *saṃsāra*. For instance, a type of *antarāparinibbāyin* attains complete nibbāna *after* their physical death in this world but *before* being born into a next life. This is exemplified in the spark simile where a spark of a heated and beaten iron slab comes off, goes up into the air and cools down *before* touching the ground. What happens to the *antarāparinibbāyins* who are not liable to be born again? Where are they living when they attain final nibbāna?

To answer these questions, there is no alternative but to assume the existence of an intermediate state for these non-returners. The *antarāparinibbāyins* cannot be born again since they do not have the rebirth fetters; and yet they should continue to exist after their physical death because they still possess the existence fetters. Then, where do they attain final nibbāna, unless it be in an intermediate state? This makes us

¹ *upādāna-paccayā bhavo bhava-paccayā jāti.*

believe that these non-returners survive their physical death and continue to exist in some form without being born into another life. They will not be born into another life because in them the rebirth fetters which cause one to be reborn exist no more.

This existence of life in between (*antarā*), that is, after one's death and before birth into a next life, is called the *antarābhava*, the intermediate existence. Although this idea of the intermediate existence cannot be viewed through our limited evidence as somewhere for all sorts of beings to linger until they find a proper place to be reborn, in the case of the *antarāparinibbāyins* that is the only possibility.

Though the idea of *antarābhava* entered Buddhism in its developmental period, some evidence in the Nikāyas shows that it must have been a concept familiar to the earliest Buddhist communities. The idea of the *gandhabba*'s coming into the mother's womb for a new conception is a case in point.¹ It is not clear from where the *gandhabba* comes to the mother's womb or what this *gandhabba* means. Sutta-nipāta 147 names two types of sentient beings: *bhūtā* "beings who already exist" and *sambhavesī* "beings waiting to be born." Again, it is not clear who and where these beings are. Some may also question the meaning of *antarā* in Dhṣ 237. The verse reads:

upanītavayo va dāni si
sampayāto si Yamassa santike,
vāso pi ca te n' atthi antarā
pātheyyam pi ca te na vijjati.

The meaning of this verse is, "Your life has come near to an end; you have arrived in the presence of Yama (the king of Death); there is no resting place for you in-between; you do

¹ See M I 265-266: *yato ca kho bhikkhave mātāpitaro ca sannipatitā hoti, mātā ca utunī hoti, gandhabbo ca paccupatthito hoti, evaṃ tiṇṇaṃ sannipātā gabbhassāvakkanti hoti.*

not even have what is necessary for the road.” The word *antarā* might in this context refer to an intermediate state of existence.

The word *antarā* in the following passage of the S IV 59 is also controversial. Venerable Cunda is explaining to Channa some teachings of the Buddha:

nissitassa calitaṃ. anissitassa calitaṃ natthi. calite asati passaddhi hoti. passaddhiyā sati nati na hoti. natiyā asati agatigati na hoti. agatigatiyā asati cutupapāto na hoti. cutupapāte asati nevidha na huraṃ na ubhayam antarena. esevanto dukkhassā ti.

In him who clings, there is wavering. In him who clings not, there is no wavering. Where there is no wavering, there is calm. Where there is calm, there is no inclination. Where there is no inclination, there is no wrongdoing. Where there is no wrongdoing, there is no vanishing and reappearing. If there be no vanishing and reappearing, there is no here nor yonder nor yet between the two. That is the end of suffering.

What does the phrase *na ubhayam antarena* mean here except an intermediate state of existence? It is true that the commentaries on such passages often try to deny the idea of an intermediate state of existence. The commentary on the passage just cited says, “This is the only meaning here. Some, taking the words *ubhayam antarena*, tend to think of an intermediate existence. They talk nonsense. The existence of an intermediate existence has indeed been denied in the Abhidhamma. The word *antarena* here is to show an

alternate view. Therefore, the meaning should be: not here, not yonder, not both, the other alternative.”¹

No matter how slight these pieces of evidence are, they cannot be disregarded. The Theravādins, however, denied the existence of an intermediate existence even for the *antarāparinibbāyins*. This denial is evident not only from the discussion in the *Points of Controversy* (Kathāvattthuppakaraṇa) on the disputed point: “that there is an intermediate state of existence”, but also from the commentarial explanations of the *antarāparinibbāyins*. According to these sources, the Pubbaseliyas and the Sammitīyas, on the one hand, accepted an *antarā-bhava*, and the Theravādins, on the other hand, denied it.² The Theravāda argument was, “If there be such a state, you must identify it with the sensual realm, or form realm, or formless realm, which you refuse to do.” This unconvincing argument is repeated at *Points of Controversy*, pp. 212-13.

Because of this denial, Theravādins have to interpret the *antarāparinibbāyins* in a way that goes against the Nikāya explanations of the rebirth and existence fetters and the implications of the sparks similes applied to non-returners. In its commentary on the sparks similes, the commentary of the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* (Mp IV 39), for instance, says that the *antarāparinibbāyin* attains complete nibbāna by the extinction of all defilements during the period from his arising but before the middle of his life span in that realm. In other words, the commentary says that the *antarāparinibbāyin*

¹Spk II, 373: *ayam eva hi ettha attho. ye pana ubhayam antarenā ti vacanam gahetvā antarā bhavaṃ icchanti. tesam vacanaṃ niratthakaṃ. antarābhavassa hi bhāvo Abhidhamme paṭikkhitto yeva. antarenā ti vacanaṃ pana vikapp' antarādīpanaṃ. tasmā etha attho: n' eva idha na huraṃ aparo vikappo na ubhayan ti.*

²“The Sarvāstivādins, the Sammatīyas, and Pūrvaśailas firmly believed in an ‘intermediate existence’ (*antarābhava*) that linked death and rebirth. This concept was rejected by the Theravādins and the Mahāsāṃghikas.” *Encyclopedia of Religion* Vol. II, p. 449.

attains complete nibbāna after being born into a next life in a Brahmā world.

This interpretation not only contradicts the implications of the sparks simile of the Aṅguttara-nikāya but is also unfounded. It is certain that the main aim of this commentarial interpretation of the Theravādins is to avoid the notion of an intermediate existence. It contradicts the Nikāya explanation which clearly points out the non-existence of the rebirth fetters for the *antarāparinibbāyins*. If rebirth fetters are non-existent, how can they be born into a next life? The view of the Nikāyas seems to be that to be born again, one must have rebirth fetters.

The rejection of an intermediate existence continues even in modern Buddhist scholarship. Interestingly, but surprisingly, these rejections are made on the basis of commentaries and some purely Theravādin texts. Kalupahana and Tamura, for instance, in their article on *antarābhava* in *The Encyclopædia of Buddhism*, say :

Antarābhava, intermediate existence or existence between death in one life and rebirth in the other, [is] a philosophical concept belonging to the later schools of Buddhist thought and [is] foreign to early Buddhism. The belief in a “being” connecting two actualised individualities (*attabhāva*) and bridging the gulf between death in one life and birth in the next, a belief influenced by the animistic association of the soul-theories of earlier Brahmanism, is quite inconsistent with the basic teachings of early Buddhism.¹

Kalupahana and Tamura simply show us the traditional Theravādin view of *antarā-bhava*, but to our surprise they make no inquiry into the concepts of *antarāparinibbāyin* non-returners, the *bhava-paṭilābhika* fetters, or any other relevant sources in the Nikāyas. There is no doubt that the

¹ Vol I, Fasc. 4 (Government of Ceylon, 1965), pp. 730–33.

Theravādins are compelled to reject the concept of *antarā-bhava* because of their fear of soul (*atta*). That is to say, Theravādins always make some attempts to avoid those concepts which, according to them, may affirm or imply the existence of a soul.

The issue that we are raising here is not whether the affirmation of *antarā-bhava* compromises the non-self theory of Buddhism or whether it is inconsistent with other Buddhist teachings. Our concern is simply to point out that the Theravāda view which says that the *antarāparinibbāyins* will be born again is wrong, contrary to the teaching of the Pali Nikāyas.¹ Kalupahana and Tamura, who completely neglected those Nikāya references, should not have made the generalization that the concept of “*antarā-bhava*... is foreign to early Buddhism”, if by “early Buddhism” they mean the teachings of the Pāli Nikāyas.

V

In conclusion, let us check our emended list of ten fetters against the *antarāparinibbāyin* non-returners and the non-returners in general.

<i>Emended list of ten fetters</i>	<i>Antarāparinibbāyin Non-Returners</i>	<i>Non-Returners in general</i>
A. The five lower fetters		
1. personality belief	no	no
2. sceptical doubts	no	no
3. attachment to rules and rituals	no	no
4. sensual desire	no	no
5. ill will	no	no

¹For some secondary materials on *antarā-bhava* see Alex Wayman, “The Intermediate-State Dispute in Buddhism”, in *Buddhist Studies in Honour of I.B. Horner*, edited by L. Cousins et al. (Reidel Publishing Company, 1974); and Peter Masefield, *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1986), pp. 105f.

B. The five higher fetters

(rebirth fetters)

6. desire for form	no	yes
7. desire for the formless	no	yes
8. pride	yes	yes
9. desire for existence	yes	(restlessness) yes
10. ignorance	yes	yes

This makes it clear that the traditional list of ten fetters does not make sense of the differences between the types of non-returner. The traditional teaching that one becomes a non-returner by getting rid of the five lower fetters totally ignores differences among non-returners or indeed among any noble persons besides the main four. As we saw above, there are non-returners who are known as *antarāparinibbāyins* and who have got rid of at least two of the five higher fetters.

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