

The Origin of Life and the Universe

This article discusses the origin of life and the universe.

Where do life and the universe come from? This is a topic of interest to ordinary people as well as intellectuals who have tried in vain to resolve it. Buddhism addresses a more appropriate question: what is the true reality of the universe and of life? Where does the entire universe come from? Where do lives come from and where do they go after death? The life and death of sentient beings, as well as the container world (Skt. *bhājanaloka*) where these people reside, undergo constant formation, dwelling, decaying, and vacating. How does the universe form, sustain changes after formation, and suffer gradual decay until vacant? What are the real reasons behind these processes and transformations? They all reflect the fundamental, true reality of the universe and of life itself.

Some religions say that a creator created life and the universe. For example, monotheism says that humans are created by God. God created Adam and Eve first, and then other human beings were their descendants. If God can create Adam and Eve, why do other lives need to be born via the

reproduction process? Furthermore, why did God not create everyone to be equal? Is it because God is biased? What monotheism offers as an explanation about the origin of life is fundamentally contradictory and unable to be subjected to rational examination.

Some other folk religions believe that God is born from the Great Brahma, while others believe that God originated from the “Eternal Venerable Mother” or “Infinite Mother.” All variants about the origin of God in essence are merely different epithetic titles for a creator who gives birth to life and the universe. However, from what can be observed through cognition of the facts of direct perception about the dharma-realm (Skt. *dharma-dhātu*), these explanations do not stand up against logic, thus invalidating inferences thereof as well as their contradiction of the teachings of Buddha.

Buddha had already expounded that the life of sentient beings and the universe originate from the mind - the eighth consciousness, *tathāgatagarbha*. All dharma are manifestations of the ultimate reality of the dharma realm. The eighth consciousness, *tathāgatagarbha*, of each sentient being encapsulates the karmic seeds of their five-aggregate life. Each person's karma is stored in their own *tathāgatagarbha*, based on their own acts and deeds, and gives rise to corresponding karmic consequences. The unceasing transmigration from

birth through growth to death all relates to the eighth consciousness *tathāgatagarbha*. Further, the container world (Skt: *bhājanaloka*) where sentient beings reside is also generated by the eighth consciousness *tathāgatagarbha*. The eighth consciousness *tathāgatagarbha* of sentient beings generates the container world based on the seeds of the collective karma of those specific individuals.

The *tathāgatagarbha* gives rise to a variety of container worlds according to the corresponding karmic seeds whereby the law of causality enables individuals to receive particular consequences. All karmic seeds and seeds of nescience accumulated from past lives are stored in the *tathāgatagarbha*. The uninterrupted cyclic existence of life and death occurs because of the existence of *tathāgatagarbha*. The presence of different karmic seeds in the *tathāgatagarbha* of human beings will result in the generation of different causes and conditions and, equally, consequences on a perpetual basis

The *Sutra of the Buddha's Explanation for the Layman Śūka of Distinctions in Karmic Retribution* Vol. 1 states: “All sentient beings attach themselves to karma, depend on karma and revolve around their own karma. Hence there are different karmic levels of causes and fruitions.” This excerpt means that every sentient being possesses the eighth consciousness *tathāgatagarbha*, a

mind-entity that is neither arising nor ceasing, but is thus permanent and immutable. Nonetheless, the karmic seeds stored in the *tathāgatagarbha* vary among individuals. Each sentient being will then have different karmic effects, thus resulting in the manifestation of different forms of life. Similarly, based on these effects, each individual will be subject to the cyclic rebirth which will include different phenomena of life in different lifetimes. One can then rely on the effects to prepare for life and death in the next lifetime. One can also practice and personally realize liberation based on these effects. Since sentient beings rely on the seeds stored in the *tathāgatagarbha*, it creates various levels of causes and conditions and, based on the consequences resulting from each sentient being's own karmic acts, will result in corresponding upper, middle or lower classes of karmic outcomes. Thus, the life of sentient beings comes from the *tathāgatagarbha*, conditioned by their various karmic seeds.

Based on the Buddha's teaching in the *Sutra of the Buddha's Explanation for the Layman Śuka of Distinctions in Karmic Retribution* Vol 1.:

Lifespan, external appearances, and the social status of sentient beings can vary significantly. Some people are born into wealthy and noble homes while others into low-income families. Some may lack basic life necessities while others bask in an abundance of wealth and luxury. One breaks the law and

commits crimes with their wit and intellect, while others utilize these same assets to help human beings. From the viewpoint of karmic retribution or reward, these phenomena are caused by the different mindsets of sentient beings whereby consequential physical, verbal and mental acts are manifested accordingly. These seeds will be stored in the *tathāgatagarbha*. The true mind (eighth consciousness) of the dharma realm will then generate various karmic outcomes of the three classes (upper, middle, and lower) according to their respective karmic consequences, and bring about the next set of colorful and abundant life experiences of individuals, all contributed by the different life experiences and diverse circumstances encountered during their numerous previous lifetimes.

We will only list a few examples of some key points taught by Buddha below due to the length of this article. Please delve into the sutras for more details. Knowing the characteristics of one's own self in the current life, one's karmic seeds from past lives, and most importantly, how to improve on these habitual behaviors, all these will in turn help one to receive wholesome outcomes in future lives. The reason is that these consequences are stored in the *tathāgatagarbha* which will generate corresponding effects during each lifetime, and individuals will continue to reap in or repent for these

consequences, all at the same time contributing to future consequences based on acts committed during the current lifetime.

A sermon delivered by the Buddha on the subject of having a short life (quotations from the sutra not included, following is the summary in plain language):

A short life is closely related to an act of killing committed by the same individual. If one commits the karma of killing, abets others to kill, cheers on the act of killing (including mere thoughts), engages in physical, verbal and mental behaviors related to killing, all of these will lead to the subsequent outcome of a short life since the *tathāgatagarbha* keeps these karmic seeds which will eventually manifest themselves when the cause and condition fully mature. Other reasons for having a short life include: harming persons you hate and feeling happy or expending an effort to see the persons being killed; damaging the fetus of others or teaching the method of abortion; killing animals as offerings for paying temple tithes; coaching combat killings with death as the result. All these karmic deeds will contribute to the karmic effect of a short life in the future.

Through the observation of different phenomena of life forms, we can appreciate the complexities and variations of the resulting karmic

consequences which can vary drastically and which are attributed to the upper, middle or lower classes. Due to karmic deeds of the past lives in countless eons, these seeds of killing are stored in the *tathāgatagarbha* of an individual and will manifest different causes and outcomes according to the law of causality. As a result, a short lifespan comes into being. Since the *tathāgatagarbha* is neither arising nor ceasing, all the wholesome or unwholesome seeds stored in it will not deteriorate and it will unequivocally and equitably carry out the law of causality.

Next, we will talk about longevity as taught by the Buddha (quotations from the sutra not included, following is the summary in plain language — Based on the Buddha’s teaching in *Sutra of the Buddha’s Explanation for the Layman Śūka of Distinctions in Karmic Retribution* Vol 1.):

According to the teachings of Buddha , in order to have the wholesome, positive outcome of a long life, one must have the karmic seeds of longevity stored in one’s *tathāgatagarbha*. Karmic seeds of longevity are accumulated as follows:

1. One's own physical, verbal and mental acts avoid creating the karma of killing, including the act of killing, but dissuade others from it.
2. Praise the wholesome and pure deeds of not killing.

3. Develop a distaste for seeing others commit murder.
4. If possible, save others from being killed or assist them to protect themselves from the chance of being killed.
5. Provide consolation to sentient beings and help them overcome the fear of death.
6. Develop compassion toward people who are suffering and help them attain happiness.
7. In the case of emergency, help others to get rid of suffering with compassion.
8. Offer food to the needy regularly.

The practice of the above deeds will attract the characteristics of a long life. The *tathāgatagarbha* will record and keep these karmic seeds and one will receive the result of a long life when conditions ripen in the future. Although individual characteristics of life may vary, depending on the karma of different individuals, the eighth consciousness, *tathāgatagarbha*, will fulfill the law of causality without fail.

The formation of the universe or “container world” is the same as that of the origin of life since the *tathāgatagarbha* will provide appropriate outcomes for sentient beings according to their karmic characteristics. Through the common nature of these karmic seeds, the eighth consciousness

tathāgatagarbha will bring about a container world that is suited for sentient beings with karmas that share the same nature, so the same type of sentient beings can receive their respective karmic consequences in a container world they created together.

Based on the Buddha's teaching in Sutra of the *Buddha's Explanation for the Layman Śuka of Distinctions in Karmic Retribution* Vol 1 (quotations from the sutra not included, following is the summary in plain language), the six paths of transmigration result from karmas of sentient beings that share common characteristics, including hell denizens, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, divinities, and asuras. The six paths of rebirth are the results of the karma of sentient beings who committed acts that lead to the same destiny, and therefore will be reborn to receive the consequences in the corresponding container world. For example, if one commits karma that destines one for hell, one will be reborn to the place where that particular outcome is shared by sentient beings with the same destiny. The container world of hell is brought about by the *tathāgatagarbha* of sentient beings who have committed the acts that lead to the same karmic retribution of hell denizens. The same kind of formation of the container world applies identically to the other five paths.

Next, using the consequence of birth as an animal as an example, Buddha says in the Sutra of the *Buddha's Explanation for the Layman Śuka of Distinctions in Karmic Retribution* Vol 1 (quotations from the sutra not included, following is the summary in plain language):

The karmic effect of being born an animal results from the karma of physical, verbal and mental acts of unwholesome character or the three primary afflictions of greed, hatred or aversion, and delusion or ignorance being generated during one's lifetime. For instance, some people like to insult others using abusive language. This behavior is equivalent to that of a mad barking dog. The action of the karmic seed of this insulting being is thus comparable to that of the barking dog. One who constantly insults others is in fact fostering their own progression toward the path of becoming an animal in the future lifetime. When the collective karma of these similar types of sentient beings is formed, together with complex causes and conditions of other sentient beings, they will end up as part of the animal container world to face their karmic consequences. These other individuals would include those who inflict harm on sentient beings without cause. This is because the eighth consciousness *tathāgatagarbha* records fact-based information and maintains these karmic seeds to fulfill the rules of causality.

Another example of receiving the retribution of rebirth into the path of animals is offering impure items to sentient beings or committing the karma of adultery. The offering of “nectar” (amṛita) to Buddha that is made from a mixture of human fecal matter in some non-Buddhist sects or using it to obtain offerings from followers are additional examples. The consequential karmic outcome of doing so will be rebirth into the path of becoming an animal. Some non-Buddhist sects even practice adulterous sexual union under the auspices of the highest yoga tantra, union of bliss and emptiness, or the radiance of bliss. Nonetheless, all of these practices are deceitful and absurd claims which completely deviate from the law of causality in the dharma realm. These practices are typical behavior of an animal. Furthermore, false and slanderous speech destroying and debasing correct dharma and true sages will attain the retributive result of rebirth into hell. The violation and deviation from true teachings of Buddha to mislead sentient beings will be recorded and kept in *tathāgatagarbha* of the individual. If the sins committed are not repented before death, the corresponding retributive consequence will end up with rebirth in the animal's destiny. Additionally, if these sinful acts are infiltrated with slanderous remarks toward true dharma and sages or even evil karma of false speech against true teachings of Buddha, one will be born into the hell destiny.

The formation of human lives and the container world are the results of various karmic seeds of sentient beings that were recorded and kept by the *tathāgatagarbha*, thereby resulting in different forms of life and phenomena that come into being. The nature of the neither arising nor ceasing *tathāgatagarbha* carries out the law of causality on sentient beings equally and justly for them to receive their corresponding karmic results and gives rise to different characteristics of individual lives. At the same time, sentient beings with karma of common characteristics will create their container world together. Life after life, sentient beings will take cyclic rebirth in the six paths endlessly.

The existence of the eighth consciousness *tathāgatagarbha* gives rise to the life of a sentient being along with karmas committed in uncountable eons. The five-skandhas world of each individual, together with the container worlds of others with karmas of shared characteristics, are hence generated. This also includes the formation, dwelling, decaying, and vacating of each container world. The true reality of life and the universe is the eighth consciousness *tathāgatagarbha* that carries out corresponding karmas without fail, of oneself and sentient beings with collective karmas, to create the universe as well as the lives of individuals.

