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, viññānassa 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 (mātāpitara ca sannipatitā honti), (2) the mother is in a fertile period (mātā ca utuni hoti), (3) gandhabba is participating in (gandhabbo ca paccupat-thito 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 sannipatī honti, mātā ca utuni hoti, gandhabbo ca paccupatṭhito hoti, evam tinnaṁ sannipatā gabbhassāvakkanti hoti. tam enam bhikkhave mātā nava vā dasa vā māse gabbham 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 embryo’ because of its word form and of the statement ‘gabbham 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 okkantimulakam dukkham . . . gabbhe thitimulakam dukkham . . . gabbhā vuttañamulakam dukkham.’ Here, gabbha should mean ‘the womb,’ and gabbhe okkanti should be taken as ‘descent into the womb.’

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 mātu kucchim okkamati, sampajāno mātu kucchismin thāti, sampajāno mātu kucchismin nikkhamati, ayam catutthā gabbhāvakkanti.’ Here, gabbhāvakkanti can be translated as ‘the descent of the embryo’ or ‘descent into the womb.’ 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 . . . paccupatṭhito hoti.’ A number of hitherto studies state that this gandhabbo descends into the womb. Next, I shall examine this interpretation. For this purpose, I shall pick up some examples of praty-upa-sthā and sam-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 father and mother 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...”’ (putteta... mātāpitāro paccupāṭhātabbā: bhato nesaṁ bharissāmi. kiccaṁ nesaṁ karissāmi. kula-vāsam thāppessāmi... 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”’ (upasankamitvā kummam kacchapam paccupāṭhito ahosi: yadāyam kummo kacchapo sōndipāṇcamānaṁ āṅgānaṁ āṇātaraṁ vā āṇātaraṁ vā āṅgāṁ abhininnāmessati, tathā eva naṁ 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. Saṁ-ni-pat

Regarding the examples of saṁ-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’ (sambadhulīnaṁ bhikkhūnaṁ rattiyā paccūsasamayaṁ paccupāṭhitānaṁ maṇḍalamāle sannisinnānaṁ sannipatitānaṁ ayam sankhiyadhhammo 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 imesaṁ tiṇṇaṁ dhammānaṁ saṅgati sannipāto samavāyo, ayam 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, saṁ-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), saṁ-ni-pat in ‘mātāpitāro ca sannipatītā honti’ seems to imply the intercourse of parents. At least in this context, saṁ-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 saṁ-ni-pat is used only for the action of parents whereas praty-upa-sthā (instead of saṁ-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 saṁ-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’upakasatto, paccupat’hito hoti ti na måtipitūnaṁ sannipatāṁ oloka-ya-måno samipe tho* 8) *nåma hoti, kammayantayantito pana eko satto tasmim okāse nibbattanako hoti 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-t). 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, *paccupat’hito 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?’ (*evam 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
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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’ (brāhmaṇa va setṭho vaṇṇo, hīno añño vaṇṇo. brāhmaṇa va sukko vaṇṇo, kaṇho añño vaṇṇo. brāhmaṇa va sujjhanti, no abrāhmaṇa. brāhmaṇa va brahmuno putto orasā mukhato jāta brahmajā brahmanimmitā brahmadāyādā. 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 sam-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 womb. 9)

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 nīś-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 nīś-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 viññāna (the cognition) in detail, which will follow in the near future.

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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) Ec: adds c' eva; Be, Se: omit. 7) gabbhāvokkantiti 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 paccupatthito. 9) Then, what role does gandhabba play? It seems difficult to determine, since it is only said ‘gandhabbo paccupatthito hoti.’ But some hypotheses have been proposed (for example, see Langer [2001: pp.9–17]).


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