

# **What Does the Resurrection of Jesus Mean for Buddhists?**

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## **Introduction**

Resurrection of Jesus Christ (Mt. 28:1ff; Mk. 16:1ff; Lk. 24:1ff; Jn. 20:1ff), the pivotal concept of Christian faith, is unacceptable and unmatched to Buddhist faith not because of the essence itself but because of poor advocacy of it with skin-deep perception by some Christians. They boastfully proclaim the victory of Jesus Christ over the power of death without in-depth understanding of the reality of resurrection. Therefore, although they explain it out of their best, they unknowingly corrupt and degrade supramundane aspect of resurrection. In this situation of religious milieu, I hope, this small article will present a more understandable and convenient message of resurrection to both Christians and Buddhists in Myanmar.

## **Paradoxical Records of Resurrection in the New Testament**

The preaching that devalues the resurrection of Jesus Christ from Buddhist perspective is, for sure, bodily resurrection and empty tomb or materialization of the risen Christ. This idea is derived from such scripture texts as Luke 24:3, 23, Mark 16:5-6; Matthew 28:6; John 20:5-7. According to these texts, the dead body of Jesus was not found inside the tomb when his faithful followers went to the grave on the third day of his death. Moreover, from John 20:27, we learn that the risen Jesus allowed Thomas to test the scars on his hands and his side. The traditional teachings on bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ are rooted in all afore-mentioned texts. As a result, many Christians are attached to belief in the resurrection of Jesus in physical or natural body.

However, when we carefully read the whole chapters that deal with the resurrection of Christ, we learn that neither did Jesus resurrect in flesh like human beings alive nor was he resuscitated. Even though Jesus often showed himself to his followers in human form after his resurrection, in many occasions, they did not immediately recognize him. It means he did not take the flesh of his former body before his death on the cross because it is plausible that his followers would have recognized him easily if Jesus had taken again the natural body of his existence on earth. Two of his followers did not know the resurrected Jesus until he opened their eyes in order to make himself known to them (Luke 24: 13-31). Though Jesus sat down to eat with them and broke the bread to pass among them, we don't see that he did eat the bread. It is no surprise that Jesus touched the bread even after resurrection because having taken role of the host, Jesus used to break the bread and pass among them during his life as a human. Despite we don't know the bread was edible or divine intervention, this manner is the best clue to let the risen Jesus know to them. Likewise, while Mary Magdalene saw the risen Lord, she just thought he was the gardener (Jn. 20:15). Moreover Jesus did not allow the touch of Mary for he had already put on heavenly glory to return to his origin (20:17). If Jesus is resurrected in fleshly body or resuscitated, his appearance after resurrection can not be different from his bodily appearance before crucifixion. However, among Christians, some insist on bodily resurrection of Jesus while others emphasize on the victory of Christ over

death.<sup>1</sup>[1] Anyhow, both bodily resurrection and non-flesh resurrection are biblical. Important point here to note, nevertheless, is that literary meaning of these two concepts cannot consign the essence of resurrection in which the inadequacy of human language found it hard to explain

### **The Concept of Bodily Resurrection in the Bible**

In the Bible, not only Jesus Christ but also other prophets brought back bodily life to the dead. In one occasion, Elijah prayed for a dead boy and he revived (1 Kings 17:17-24). In 2 Kings 4: 32-37, we read that Elisha also cured a dead lad to life again. 2 Kings 13: 20-21 also recorded that the dead man returned to life as the man touched the bone of Elisha. In the New Testament, we read occasions of individual's return into life—daughter of Jairus (Mt. 9:18-26; Mk. 5:21-43; Lk. 8:40-56); son of a widow of Nain (Lk. 7:11-17); Lazarus (Jn. 11:1-44); Dorcas (Acts 9:36-42). According to these texts those dead persons became reanimated or resuscitated for God listened to his peoples' call and beseech. On the other hand, all these persons experienced bodily resurrection and, undoubtedly, came across with physical death twice. In spite of the texts that did not mention the second death of those persons that came back to life, it is simple and clear that they must have come across with death second time when human age limit stopped their bodily existence on earth. God, out of his love and mercy, gave them another extended life in natural body for all of them died of untimely death. As they come back to physical life, they cannot escape the law of bodily decay in death. To come back to life with flesh means to surrender to the law of material existence.

### **The Concept of General Resurrection in the Bible**

General resurrection transcends bodily resurrection. General resurrection will occur among the dead who no longer need to return into life with corporeality. It is the resurrection with eschatological essence. It is not resurrection to material existence, but spiritual resurrection before final judgment by God. In this will be moral examination. If one's morality is in line with the will of God, that person's reward will be eternal life in the presence of God, termed, heaven in Christian word. If one's life during existence on earth is evil, eternal damnation will be that person's portion, known as second death. The idea of spiritual resurrection is found in such scripture texts as Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:1-2; John 5:25-29; 6:39-40, 44-54; 1 Corinthians 15). Although Ezekiel 37:1-14 symbolize political restoration of Israelite people, it also highlights the concept of general resurrection. In short, general resurrection, that is to say, spiritual resurrection, has nothing to do with flesh but with the realm of morality or mental life or spiritual principle. Resurrection of the body, according to Paul (1 Cor. 15), is not a resuscitation of the former physical body but a new form of existence.<sup>2</sup>[2] The 'existence' here does not mean physical aspect of existence but the continuation of life in spiritual realm.

### **Resurrection in Ancient Religions and Jewish Sects**

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<sup>1</sup>[1]Van A. Harvey *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1964), 205.

<sup>2</sup>[2]Donald K. Mckim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 239.

Like the concept of the round of rebirths in Buddhism and resurrection after physical death in Christian faith, there is no systematized teaching of resurrection in ancient world although ancient people in the Middle East believed their gods to be ones coming back to life from death. That some gods were retrieved from the nether world or brought back to life after death was a significant belief of Mesopotamians. In like manner, the Babylonians Tammuz and the Ugaritic BAAL were mythological gods which people knew as "dying and reviving gods". However, the Egyptians believed that only after the demise of the body the dead came into untrammelled possession of one's essential self and attained a state of rarified beatitude.<sup>3[3]</sup> From Gaster's research, we learn that there was no idea of human resurrection among Mesopotamians and Babylonians. Egyptian idea of life continuation alone matched Christian conception of immortal soul, but in different way. Therefore what we may say, as Christians, today "resurrection" occurred only among ancient mythological gods.

Amidst Jewish sects in the time of Jesus, Sadducees denied resurrection (Acts 23:8; 26:8; T. B. Sanh. 90b) while Pharisees accepted the doctrine of resurrection. For Essene, the body was perishable but soul endured and mounted upward, if good, to a realm of bliss. Otherwise, the evil soul would have been consigned to a place of torment (Wisd. Sol. 3:1ff; 5:16; Jub. 25).<sup>4[4]</sup> Save Sadducees was there belief in the continuation of life after death and general resurrection among Jewish people. As their main concern is general resurrection, we can say they emphasized on the continuation of life in spiritual realm.

## **Birth and Rebirths in Buddhist Concept**

### **(a) 31 Planes of Existence**

The idea of 31 planes of existence is flourishing in Buddhism. According to their different nature, they are grouped into four categories. They are: (1) *duggati bhūmi*—unhappy plane comprising four *apāya*—woeful abodes; (2) *sugati bhūmi*—happy plane comprises one *manussa*—human plane and six *devaloka*—celestial planes; (3) *rūpāvacara bhūmi*—composed of sixteen realms of form; and (4) *arūpāvacara bhūmi*—made up of four formless realms.<sup>5[5]</sup> As four *duggati bhūmis* and seven *sugati bhūmis* are put in one sphere, the 31 planes of existence is divided into to three kinds from another angle: (1) *kāmāvacara bhūmi*—sense-sphere (4 *duggati*+ 7 *sugati*), (2) *rūpāvacara bhūmi*—realm of form (16 *brahma* planes), and (3) *arūpāvacara bhūmi*—formless realm (4 highest *brahma* realms).

Although Buddhism does not deal with the problem of the ultimate origin of matter, it states about four great essential material qualities and four ways of material phenomena development. The four great essential material qualities (*catu-mahābhūta*) are (1) the element of extension (*pathavīdhātu*), (2) the element of cohesion (*āpodhātu*), (3) the element of heat (*tejodhātu*), and (4) the element of motion (*vāyodhātu*). Inseparably, material phenomena arise in four ways: (1) action (*kamma*), (2) mind (*citta*), (3) seasonal conditions (*utu*), and (4) food (*ahāra*). According to Abhidhamma, there are 28 material qualities. In *kāmāvacara*

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<sup>3[3]</sup>T. H. Gaster, "Resurrection," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by George Arthur Buttrick and Others (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 40.

<sup>4[4]</sup>Ibid., 42.

<sup>5[5]</sup>Anuruddhācariya, *A Manual of Abhidhamma: Abhidhammattha-Sangah* (Bangalore: The B. B. D. Power Press, 1956), 225.

abodes (11 sense-spheres), all 28 kinds of material quality are seen; 23 are in *rūpāvacara* abodes (realms of form) except mindless plane (it is part of *rūpāvacara* planes) which comprises only 17 material qualities. However none of them is found in four *arūpāvacara* abodes (formless realms).6[6]

Over all, to be reborn in any plane of existence means to become enmeshed in the bond of the round of rebirths (*samsārā*). In other words, any form of rebirth by taking certain related material qualities out of 28 in the higher abodes can neither stop the power of death nor can evade the time of rebirth in other life form when one's kammic force elapses. Rebirth even in the realms of formlessness (no more material qualities) cannot guarantee the cessation of birth and rebirths. Therefore, the idea of bodily resurrection is incompatible to Buddhism. Needless to say, the assertion of bodily resurrection degrades the value of Christianity especially for those who use Buddhist lens and the claim of bodily resurrection can by no means be an incentive to Buddhist in other way round.

### **(b) The Cause of Entanglement in the Round of Rebirths**

Craving (*tanhā*) is the sole cause of rebirths. It is divided into three kinds: (1) thirst for sense pleasures (*kāma tanhā*), (2) thirst for existence and becoming (*bhava tanhā*), (3) thirst for non-existence (*vibhava tanhā*).7[7] During pursuit of the objects of sense desire, people undergo intense suffering. In this effort the pleasurable experiences produce craving and it then gives rise to attachment. To make the attachment a finish, effort is put forth and, as a result, fresh *kamma* is accumulated like wick for next rebirth. With successful practices of meditation, those who aspire to the realms of form and formless spheres are reborn as they are panting for, but freedom of physical pains and mental afflictions are there for them only until their life span is terminated with the agonies of death. Likewise, due to craving for non-existence, the nihilists do not have sense of fear in doing unwholesome/evil deeds for they don't believe in the effects or repercussions of unwholesome actions they did.8[8] Hence, craving for sense-desires and for existence in brahma realms are powerful catalysts for rebirths in 31 planes of existence. Worst of them, craving for annihilation precisely leads one to rebirth in any of the four woeful states. In the light of this teaching, desire for bodily resurrection in Christian concept can be expressed as *bhava-tanhā*—craving for existence and becoming with material qualities. As bodily resurrection is not real victory over rebirths or chain of birth and death, but one of the constituents of *samsārā* or the law of existence, the very resurrection of Jesus Christ must be a return into life beyond the bond of 31 planes of existence because the risen Christ actually trod and cracked the power of death in any form.

### **Theological Analysis on Resurrection**

In sum, there are only two concepts of resurrection in Christian circle. One is bodily resurrection on earth and the other, spiritual resurrection. For those who emphasize bodily resurrection, the resurrection of Christ is the return of Christ to bodily life on earth on the third day after his death. This is the miraculous restoration of his physical life, the reunion of

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6[6]Ibid., 32.

7[7]Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (London: The Gordon Fraser Gallery Ltd., 1978), 29.

8[8]Rewata Dhamma, *The First Discourse of the Buddha*(Yangon: Department of Religious Affairs, 2001), 86.

his spirit with his body, and yet in such a way that the material limitations were set aside.<sup>9[9]</sup> For them, only in materialized body is the essence of resurrection. Any way, resurrection for them is coming back to the law of existence.

According to Morris, the Christian idea of resurrection is to be distinguished from both Greek and Jewish ideas. The Greeks thought of the body as a hindrance to true life and accepted the immortality of the soul but they rejected all ideas of resurrection (Acts 17:32). Contrarily, the Jews highly valued the body although it would be lost. But resurrection would be exactly with the same body (Baruch 1:2). For Christians, the body is raised, and also transformed so as to be a suitable vehicle for the very different life of the age to come (1 Cor. 15: 42ff).<sup>10[10]</sup> These three views are slightly different, but they all unanimously agreed with the idea of the continuation of life beyond existence on earth.

However, originally, the Jews were attached to this earthly life and had no dream of a marvelous life hereafter. By the time between Hosea and Daniel, the resurrection idea cropped up here and there, but chiefly to point toward the political renewal of the people of Israel (Ezekiel). From the Old Testament perspective, the dead lie sleeping in the tombs; at the moment of resurrection, they will rise up again (2 Kings 13:21; 1 Samuel 26: 14, 19; Job 14:12; Ezekiel 37:10).

When comes to the four gospels, we see that they all support the concept of life after death and they view the resurrection of Jesus Christ as transcending form of life beyond existence on earth. According to Mark, the result of Jesus' resurrection will be his exaltation as Son of Man (13: 26-27; 14:62). Similarly, Matthew envisions the Son of Man's future role as the judge who will dispense eternal life and destruction (25: 31-46; 13: 24-30, 36-43). Luke, in another mode, impressively describes Lazarus enjoying eternal life and the rich man suffering torment immediately after death (16: 9-31), and the dying thief will be with Jesus "today" in paradise (23: 43). However, his views on the resurrection of the dead and the intermediate state are not clear. For John, Jesus' death is really his departure or the return to the logos or the Father who sent him. The moment of his death is the time of his glorification (13: 31-32).<sup>11[11]</sup>

As John said, provided that resurrection of Jesus was the time of his glorification, his incarnation in human form would be the time of upgrading the dignity of the body or flesh. The incarnation of God has changed the world of curse to the world of blessings. Hence, body is not merely a prison of soul as Greeks and Indian originated religious philosophies say but also is not at all the body evil which arouses only unwholesome sense-desires that then make all forms of life enmeshed in the round of rebirths as Buddhism points out. Bodily existence can embody the will of God on earth to the highest possibility as human being if life is properly dignified and developed with due respect. Therefore bodily existence is not to be condemned but to be adorned with the dignity of life. Despite the unity of the soul and the body has surrendered to the law of existence, the glorious resurrection in spiritual life transcends natural law in existential respect.

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<sup>9[9]</sup>Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 920.

<sup>10[10]</sup>L. L. Morris, "Resurrection," *New Bible Dictionary*, J. D. Douglas and Others, eds., (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 1022.

<sup>11[11]</sup>David Noel Freedman and Others, eds., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 680-689.

## Conclusion

The ground for some Christians that develops the idea of bodily resurrection is the empty tomb stories which presume a bodily resurrection or a bodily assumption to heaven. That Jesus materializes and disappears suddenly, ambiguous appearance, is also another factor that does not make a clear cut distinction between bodily resurrection and spiritual resurrection; any of which it specifically supports. Anyhow, the ambiguous appearance seems mainly to support the idea of spiritual resurrection. The ambiguous appearance stories end up with the ascension of Jesus (Mark 16:19-20; Luke 24: 50-53; Acts 1:9-11). It means Jesus did resurrect in spiritual body and ascended into heaven in heavenly glory. In spite of that the empty tomb stories seem to declare bodily resurrection, the completion of Jesus' resurrection has come in heavenly triumph with full divine essence (John 4:24). As J. A. T. Robinson said, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable (1 Cor. 15:50)"<sup>12</sup>[12], the resurrection of Jesus cannot be bodily resurrection which will again surrender to the decay of flesh. Although the resurrection story started with the empty tomb, its fulfillment made it a success with heavenly majesty, the imperishable which transcends all forms of death.

The Buddha and his faithful followers, *arahats*, according to Buddhism, triumph over the power of death roaming in the round of rebirths, called *samsarā*. There are four kinds of noble persons (*ariya*) who gain the guarantee to escape the chain of birth and death. A *sotapanna* person—the stream winner, the first stage of sainthood, who has eliminated such three fetters as self illusion, doubts, and wrongful rites and ceremonies will be reborn seven times before the attainment of *Nibbāna*. A *sakadāgāmi* person—once returnee, the second stage, has attenuated two more fetters: sense-desire and illwill. Before gaining the *arahatship*, this person will be reborn on earth only once. An *anāgāmi* person, called never-returnee in third stage, has completely discarded sense-desire and illwill. After death, this person will be reborn in one of Pure Abodes (*Suddhāvāsa*), congenial places reserved for *Anāgamis* and *Arahats*. When the age of this person in pure abode comes to an end, he or she attains *Nibbāna*. In the last stage of sainthood, namely, *arahatship*, the *arahat* completely destroyed all remaining *kilesās*—defilements.<sup>13</sup>[13] To be an *arahat* means to attain *Nibbāna*. *Nibbāna* is attainable in two modes: *saupadisesa nibbāna vatthu*—nibbanic bliss with corporeal remains and *anupadisesa nibbāna vatthu*—nibbanic bliss without corporeality. Out of four *ariya*—noble persons, *sotapanna* and *sakadāgāmi* persons must re-experience physical death though they have got a pledge for *Nibbāna*. Only *anāgāmi* person and *arahat* are to experience physical death only once and no more physical death is a disturbance to their spiritual pilgrimage. True victory over death means to surpass the power of death.

Having perceived Buddhist concept of victory over the power of death, let me express my implication of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus did appear in natural body and ate food (Mt. 28:9; Jn. 20:19f; Lk. 24:41-43) in some occasions, but in others, he did not in the same manner (Lk. 24:16; 31, 39, 41-43; Jn. 21; 1 Cor. 6:13). Jesus' appearance before his followers in natural body and taking food in some occasions seem to be, in reality, the effort of remedy to remove the followers' unbelief in Jesus' resurrection. This experience will be more than natural

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<sup>12</sup>[12]*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 52.

<sup>13</sup>[13]*A Manual of Abhidhamma: Abhidhammattha-Sangaha*, 64-5.

phenomena and that to experience with the risen Lord is identical with the feeling of experiencing Jesus during his earthly life seems to be the main message of natural appearance after his resurrection because to have an authentic experience of Jesus Christ is not bodily or physical work but mental or spiritual concern. As his followers' concentration on the risen Lord deepens, Jesus in spiritual body can communicate, to full satisfaction, their minds with substrata remains. Buddhism, to strengthen this idea, accepts that a successful meditation bring forth penetrative imaginative power. Although we are not to understand and master the mystery of resurrection to full extent, this assumption, "*spiritually well developed imaginative power of Jesus' followers, with due limit of it, can see and experience the risen Lord beyond illusory vision*", will not be going astray, I hope, from their experience of meeting the resurrected Jesus in natural body in some occasions. Although their experience had been beyond natural phenomena, they must have felt it as natural phenomena.

By and large, the New Testament mainly deals not with bodily resurrection of Jesus and of believers, but with spiritual resurrection of Jesus and of believers or saints in ancient time (Jn. 5: 25-29; 6:39-40, 44, 54; Acts 1: 22; 2: 24, 31-32; 4:2, 33, 5:30; 10:40-41; 13:30-34; 37; 17:18; 23:6-8; Rom. 6:4, 9; 1 Cor. 15:12-58). Therefore, the resurrection of Jesus is exaltation to victory and so it is with the resurrection of those that are in him. As human beings with natural body, we must value and praise the dignity of flesh on earth because flesh is essential to life in worldly existence. According to the creation story, human beings with flesh pleased God and blessed them by charging the role of ruler upon their shoulders. So, we must not condemn natural body because life principle of the soul on earth will stop at the very moment the machinery of the body even in the strongest age-portion is killed. To condemn life in flesh is none other than blaming the blessed creation of God. However, we cannot take the body with us after death because demarcation is there between existence and spiritual realm. Therefore to say that Jesus has resurrected in very natural body, from Buddhist point of view, means Jesus after resurrection is still roaming in the cycle of deaths and rebirths called 31 planes of existence. From another angle, this claim indirectly declares that Jesus did not celebrate a real victory over the power of death. As once for all indeed is Jesus' death and resurrection, any kind of death cannot impair his victory. To make this statement clear and simple, Jesus' resurrection has nothing to do with this perishable flesh on earth but is filled with the imperishable heavenly glory that is above the power of death which rules over only existence with material qualities. Although some childish believers are attached to bodily resurrection due to the limitation of knowledge, mature believers are to envision spiritual resurrection and perceive the essence of spiritual reality.

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14[1]Van A. Harvey *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1964), 205.

15[2]Donald K. Mckim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 239.

16[3]T. H. Gaster, "Resurrection," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by George Arthur Buttrick and Others (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 40.

17[4]*Ibid.*, 42.

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- 18[5]Anuruddhācariya, *A Manual of Abhidhamma: Abhidhammattha-Sangah* (Bangalore: The B. B. D. Power Press, 1956), 225.
- 19[6]Ibid., 32.
- 20[7]Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (London: The Gordon Fraser Gallery Ltd., 1978), 29.
- 21[8]Rewata Dhamma, *The First Discourse of the Buddha*(Yangon: Department of Religious Affairs, 2001), 86.
- 22[9]Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 920.
- 23[10]L. L. Morris, "Resurrection," *New Bible Dictionary*, J. D. Douglas and Others, eds., (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 1022.
- 24[11]David Noel Freedman and Others, eds., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 680-689.
- 25[12]*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 52.
- 26[13]*A Manual of Abhidhamma: Abhidhammattha-Sangaha*, 64-5.
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