

## Death, Karma and Reincarnation

(A chapter from the book [Nature of Human Thought](#) (second edition))

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Death is the most certain thing for any living entity and yet we know so little about it. It may come early or later in life but the inevitable always happens. Yet we carry out our actions and behave as if we are immortal and death does not enter into our scheme of things. However if we understand death then we will really understand life and this will help us to live it fruitfully and happily.

In almost every society the spiritual writings are about the art of living which prepares human beings for death. Thus they contain intricate details of heaven and hell. Some religions also make the description of hell extremely frightening so that people will change their behavior to avoid it. Majority of spiritual writings are about how to live properly so that one can escape the cycle of birth and death. In all these writings the underlying philosophy is of the continuity of soul.

Thus Egyptians believed that eventually resurrection will take place and so elaborate mummification ritual for treating the dead body was developed. Similar has been the case in other religions.

In Indian Yogic tradition transition of soul from body to body is like changing into new clothes. It goes through all the living species and evolves towards godhead after its karmas (Sanskrit for actions/deeds) are resolved through various births. Katha Upanishad, Patanjali Yoga Darshan and Brahma Sutra do talk briefly about the rebirth of soul in human form and how it can also be transformed into various species<sup>43</sup>. Patanjali Yoga says, “The transformation of one species into another is caused by inflowing of nature. Good or bad deeds are not the direct cause of this transformation but only act as a breaker of the obstacles to natural evolution – just as a farmer breaks down the obstacles in a water course so that water flows by its own nature”<sup>44</sup>. Hence the transfer of soul from one species to another seems to be an accepted thesis in Indian religion.

A direct evidence of continuity of soul has come from people who had near death experiences (NDE)<sup>45</sup>. NDE seems to happen when a person is declared clinically dead but after some time returns to life. Interestingly enough nearly all the descriptions of NDE are very similar and talk of getting out of the body and going through a dark tunnel and then coming into brilliant white light. Depending upon the religion of the person he or she sees Christ, Krishna, Buddha or any chosen deity. For agnostics or atheists there is a feeling of tremendous warmth and happiness in the presence of white light.

Quite a number of people have also reported that during NDE their whole life flashes by and almost all their past actions become visible. Probably it is because the memory of their present birth is still fresh. Then somehow the self is told that his/her time to die has still not come and the person “wakes up” in the body, which is being resuscitated. Interestingly enough during this period there is no concept of time. In majority of cases tremendous change in attitude towards life and death takes place in people who experience NDE. They consider dying as a pleasurable experience and are not afraid of death anymore.

One of the most detailed treatises on death and dying is the Tibetan book of Living and Dying<sup>46</sup>. Most of the material in this book is based on Indian Yogic system though Tibetan Buddhists give some terms Chinese sounding names. In this book a good description is given of what happens to the soul after death and till it gets a new body. Tibetan Buddhist Lamas call this transition state as Bardo (Tibetan word for transition). They identify the bardos as:

1. Natural bardo of life. This extends to a person’s lifetime.
2. Painful bardo of dying. This is the period, which lasts from the beginning of process of dying until the clinical death.
3. Luminous bardo of dharmata is the period after the death experience and is manifested by varied colors, sounds and light. This is similar to NDE.
4. Karmic bardo is the time interval, which lasts till the soul gets a new body. The Buddhists' believe in the Indian philosophical system that getting a new body is dependent on the karma (Sanskrit for action) of previous births. Similar beliefs exist in other religions. Hence one's actions or karma in this life seem to play a significant role in how one dies and in what form they are reborn.

### ***Karma and Fear of Death***

Karma is a Sanskrit word meaning action. However it embraces the whole meaning of living. Thus according to law of karma your actions or deeds (both good and bad) decide your future in this life or the next life. Law of karma occupies a central position in Indian philosophy. There are tomes written on it but here we will focus mostly on how it relates to death.

According to some commentators the law of karma is very deterministic. They claim that you are born according to your karma and things happen to you in your present birth because of your past karmas etc. Hence one cannot change the present life. This however negates the whole basis of Yoga which claims that one can change the *Sanskars* (memories) and hence ones life<sup>47</sup>.

Each one of us is born with a unique genetic makeup, which provides a basic template for our general behavior. This behavior is further modified by the surroundings that one encounters in life. I therefore believe that each one of us has the power to change our destiny and our memories by our actions in this life. Our actions change the neural pathways in the brain and hence the mind which

guides us to our future course of action. Thus individually we have a free will to create our own destiny [but collectively we all maybe guided towards mankind's evolution.](#)

As we saw in Chapter 1, each one of us can be thought of as an individual molecule moving “randomly” in the sea of humanity and according to the forces of opportunity acting on us. But all of us together may produce a “dissipative structure” which is the evolution of mankind. Thus the evolution of mankind towards a greater spiritual and technological sophistication is **quite certain and therefore deterministic.**

Also according to Indian Yogic system the time of death is governed by the karma of a living entity. When the karma's course is finished then death takes place. It is not clear how one can find out what constitutes karma, its duration or how many karmas a person accumulates during his/her lifetime. Patanjali Yoga Darshan simply states that *Sanyam* on his/her karma makes it possible for the Yogi to calculate the exact time of his death<sup>48</sup>. This also suggests that a Yogi has no control over his death though he may know the time of exit. However there are many instances of great Yogis who have left their body by their own will and hence can certainly select the time of their departure<sup>31, 36</sup>.

An interesting aspect of time of death was given by the great Indian mathematician S. Ramanujam who used to say that the death of a person takes place only at a certain space-time junction point. He never explained what that junction point was. Ramanujam who died in 1920 at the young age of 32 was one of the greatest mathematicians of the last century. He was basically a spiritualist and mathematics was a by-product of his spirituality. He said many times “an equation to me has no meaning unless it expresses a thought of God”<sup>49</sup>. He had some powers which made him clairvoyant and hence could predict events. He even predicted that he would die before the age of 35. Quite a number of his friends and relatives used to come to him for consultation about their future and quite a number of times he urged them to move away from their present living place so that the space-time junction point could be avoided.

Though all the living entities are afraid of death, the desire to know how and when death will take place is very strong in human beings. The first impulse on sensing impending danger is to protect oneself and survival is the cornerstone of Darwinian evolutionary theory for all living entities. The possible reasons for death fear could be:

1. The experience is very traumatic. It is accompanied by loss of identity and sometimes with tremendous physical pain.
2. The living being does not know “instinctively” what will happen to its “memory” or form. For example whether it will find a new body or will it be fixed in space for a long time. **So there is a fear of unknown.** All living entities are wired in such a way that they are afraid of losing their body and with it their form and identity. If a soul can exist without a body then we should not be afraid of death. However the form or body, which gives us the sense of ‘I’, is very afraid of losing its identity.

3. The process of learning or moving to a higher level of consciousness is disturbed and delayed. For example 20-30 years or even more can be lost in the process.
4. The living entity loses its ability to change “memory”. This ability comes with the brain attached to the body and with death the body ceases to exist. As we saw in Chapter 4 the proliferation of [species in the initial stages of evolution is a direct consequence of the desire of space “G” to have and keep a body](#). It allows the templates of memory from that species to continue.

### ***Blocking the Pain of Death***

Since the soul clings to the body, the shedding of lifetime memories at the time of death is painful. That is the reason the Indian Yogic system stresses the liberation of soul so that the painful cycle of birth and death is stopped.

Yogis also believe that reduction or elimination of pain during death would remove its fear. One of the major aims of Yoga therefore is to make the body and mind powerful enough so that pain is either reduced or removed completely.

Why there is pain and what is its purpose? Pain and pleasure are complimentary and are part of life. They are the attributes of the body. The intense physical pain is probably an outcome of the body trying to repair itself and requires very intense brain concentration for it. All other sensory inputs or other thoughts are blocked by the pain sensation. This concentrated thought might help the brain to heal the body. This is also the mechanism where single-pointed concentration helps in memory removal. Pain therefore could be one of the key mechanisms for removing or modifying memory. Any intense experience can do the same. For example intense pleasure of love for a chosen deity is the genesis of Bhakti Yoga (Yoga of devotion)<sup>41</sup>.

Interestingly, emotional and physical pains and their intensity are similar in nature and the brain does not differentiate between the two. Recent studies have revealed that fMRI scans of the subjects showed that the pain of rejection (emotional pain) and stubbing of big toe (physical pain) illuminated the same part of the brain<sup>50</sup>. We also show this similarity intuitively in our vocabulary with terms like broken heart, heartache etc. Emotional pain allows the brain to intensely focus on resolving the conflicts and at the same time helps it to send and receive thought packets.

Advanced Yogis claim to have developed a mechanism of blocking pain from reaching the brain through so called Kundalini Yoga. Kundalini is a very ancient Indian Yoga system, whose practitioners believe that there is energy (could be cerebrospinal fluid) which is coiled like a female serpent (Kundalini is the Sanskrit word for a coiled female serpent) and lies at the base of spinal chord<sup>51</sup>. [However there is no physical evidence of this mechanism and process](#). Nevertheless yogis believe that by yogic process (mostly by imagining and willing it) it can be raised in the central canal of the spinal chord to reach its ultimate destination - the brain. They also claim that once Kundalini reaches the brain, liberation of a yogi from the cycle of birth and death takes place. Raising it is done

step by step and it takes many years of practice before Yogis can raise it up to the brain. Yogis also claim that conservation of sexual energy tremendously helps in this process.

Kundalini Yoga supposedly helps to remove the sense organ inputs to the brain from various parts of the body. In medicine the pain blockers do the same. The main pain sensations from the body come through the spinal chord and probably raising of Kundalini means blocking the pain centers in the spinal chord progressively starting from the base of the spine and reaching to the top of the brain. This effectively detaches the mind from sense organs. Shri Ramakrishna used to say that as he started raising his Kundalini, his body went through the process of locking itself starting from the base of his spinal chord so that he lost control of these parts as the Kundalini traveled from the base of the spine to the head<sup>52</sup>.

Yogis believe that with practice of Kundalini Yoga the mind gets completely detached from the body. This helps in developing memory or neural pathways so that at the time of death it is quite easy for the memory or soul to leave the body painlessly. Besides, they believe that with “pure soul” (without the sense organ memories attached to it) it is possible to achieve salvation from the cycle of birth and death. This is the central theme of Indian Yogic system. Patanjali says that once the *gunas* (result of karma) are resolved through Yoga then the soul becomes pure (without memory) and merges into Universal Consciousness<sup>53</sup>.

### ***Death and Memory Removal***

At the time of death it seems the ego sense ‘I’ or sense of identity has to shed the memory of attachments of sense organs. It is through the sense organs that we perceive the world and carry out our actions; hence it is these organs which give the sense of identity to a living entity. As we have seen earlier shedding of these attachments allows the removal of lifetime memories and hence is painful. Thus almost all memories are shed except the “basic memory” which is then transferred. We do not know what that basic memory could be.

**An analogy from modern computers will be useful in explaining this memory transfer.** At the time of death there is a transfer of software (basic memory) from the body. In a computer a person transfers the software onto a new machine. In transfer of soul it is done on its own. There is no agent of transfer and hence it is guided by the forces it encounters just after death. Just like software is useless without the machine similarly the soul cannot do anything without the body (hardware). Body allows the soul (memory) to change its character just like one can modify the software through a computer machine. It is only through the body that the brain receives all the sensory inputs and the body acts like an antenna for the mind. Hence the strongest desire of the soul is to get a body. This could be any body and thus the possibility of its transfer among species.

Death is the most traumatic experience for a living entity and allows all the brain neurons to fire in a laser like fashion. This very concentrated thought just before the final exit allows the memory

or soul to be transferred to the higher dimensional space. We have shown in Chapter 2 that this space is rigid and hence could be the [realm of spirits and ghosts](#). Thus it is quite possible that all souls immediately after death may remain in suspended animation till they get a new body. However one is not sure if the memory transfer takes place between all life forms or is it governed by a certain brain size. Thus there could be a cutoff brain size below which the transformation from humans to other life forms may not take place.

The chances of ghost formation are much more in sudden death conditions. For example people who die suddenly because of a heart attack, accidents, murders etc. may not get enough time for the sense organ detachment. Thus the souls of such persons may retain the memory of body form for a little longer time which may result in the ghost form. We still do not know for how long the “ghost structure” can remain and what type of energy is required to maintain its stability. Those who die of natural causes get sufficient time for mind withdrawal or sense detachment of the soul and may follow the Tibetan path of three bardos.

The [spirits and ghosts being in higher dimensional space](#) might have the powers to affect life in our space. Such instances of spirits and ghosts affecting life have been documented and recorded in all civilizations. Even Patanjali alludes to these beings which reside in “higher places”.<sup>53(a)</sup> However the “memory” of Yogis and enlightened souls guided by their willpower and powerful minds, could transcend the realms of spirits and ghosts and [can go into even higher dimensional space](#).

### ***Reincarnation and Passage of Memory***

There are people who do not believe in life after death or reincarnation and think that after death everything finishes with the body. However there is a strong proof from a large number of cases where there has been a total recall of past lives and events by individuals (especially children) and these cases have been reported in all societies and in almost all religions<sup>56</sup>. Hence we will take the data of these cases as experiential fact and assume that there is reincarnation and life after death.

There have been many instances when rebirths have taken place in the same or nearby households brought about by a very strong will of the loved ones. The intense love creates a powerful force for the soul to be so reborn. However it is not known when and where the rebirth will take place. In a celebrated case the Indian saint Shri Ramakrishna described in detail how he and a very highly evolved Yogi decided to be born together on earth. He identified that Yogi as Swami Vivekananda, a great spiritual leader of India. However it took 20 years for Shri Ramakrishna to find out about Vivekananda although he was born within 20 km of where Ramakrishna was staying! Besides Vivekananda was born 40 years after Ramakrishna and the two met each other by chance in Calcutta<sup>57</sup>.

Since time immemorial human beings have been curious regarding what happens to all our actions, ideas, memories etc. after our death. There have been discussions on it in Upanishads and

Mahabharata but most of them skirt the subject by stressing that one should lead a moral and upright life so that death is welcomed as a friend rather than an enemy<sup>43</sup>. We will however explore this subject in the light of what we have discussed in previous chapters. Hence it is possible that after death the following may happen to all the memories and information that a person learns during his/her lifetime:

1. Information generation is an evolutionary process. Any profound or deep knowledge produced goes in the knowledge space (KS) and it continues to increase. It is never reduced. [Also all our powerful emotions and information, whether good or bad, goes into the KS.](#) This space is filled with such knowledge from all over the Universe. Thus the old saying that all our actions may come to haunt us may mean that the information is never lost.
2. The soul passing from one body to another carries the basic memory only. We are not sure presently what this memory is and what is its structure. However it could be the [user name and the password](#) just like in the Internet where these two pieces of information allows one to access all the information from the cyberspace! Once it gets into a new body and as the brain reaches full formation, then it can access the emotional information of its past births from KS. This is the genesis of reincarnation.
3. The basic memory transfer makes more sense energy-wise since it will be difficult for the transfer of soul from one body to another if large amount of memory is attached to it. Besides one of the aspects of getting a new body is that the memories of old body are removed and the “life” starts with a clean slate. Otherwise the burden of past memories can make living quite a chore since the heavy baggage of these memories will not allow the new experiences to be gained easily. Nevertheless the memories in KS effect a person’s actions indirectly and thus all our past actions can come to haunt us.
4. Probably these memories in KS are the *gunas* that Patanjali talks about<sup>53</sup>. They can be modified or removed through Yoga. With the removal of *gunas* their effect on an individual vanishes and liberation takes place.
5. It is possible that the memory of past births maybe accessed [during dreaming process](#). During the early years of our life (between 6-10 years) our brains are fully developed but the ego sense ‘I’ is nascent and still developing. Thus it is possible that during dreaming when our nascent ‘I’ is weak and nearly absent the memories of past life can be accessed from the KS. This is akin to [prophetic dream process](#) which has been the basis of great visions and discoveries throughout the history of mankind (Chapter 9). This ability to access our past lives however gets diminished as we grow older since the ‘I’ becomes stronger with addition of new experiences and memories.
6. The KS is of two types. The first that stays with earth or other livable planet. This includes the books, memories, other materials and the “atmosphere” (both spiritual and otherwise) of

earth or planet. This KS moves with the earth and earthlings can dip into it to get the knowledge so that the evolution of mankind takes place. The other KS is in the Universe and as the earth passes through it we can access it and produce quantum jumps in our knowledge. The knowledge in this KS exists because of actions of civilizations more advanced than ours.

One of the major aims of all life forms is to get a body – preferably a human one. Getting it is important in evolution of knowledge since a big human brain allows us to tune into the knowledge space (KS). Bodies belonging to other species cannot do so because of their small brain size. Hence if the soul goes into other life forms then the overall knowledge accumulation slows down and memories of past births cannot be changed or erased.

In order to avoid memory transfer after death into other species we need to cultivate our minds in such a manner that at the time of death we have a powerful structure of our thought so that most of the extraneous memories are shed and we create a great "Spiritual mass". Practice of yoga helps us in doing this. Creation of "Spiritual mass" is the only way to make sure that the transition of memory from one body to another human body is smooth and that it can also go to other planets by will. Passage of soul to other planets has been discussed in Chapter 1. It is possible that our ancient spiritual teachings about *swarglok* (heaven), etc. came because this planet was not a very comfortable or hospitable place and hence the focus was to release the soul so that it could go to other hospitable planets from where we might have originally come from.

As our technology advances we will be able to make our future world a very hospitable place so that the body could be made strong and healthy through Yoga or designer drugs. This will help to keep the mind and brain fit so that we could leave the body at will. Thus in future most souls may be able to produce a high "Spiritual mass" at the time of their death so that they could either stay here on earth by will or could go out of the Earth's gravitational field. Some Yogis claim that there are great masters who came from other worlds, have chosen to live in this world for its upliftment, and are hundred of years old<sup>54</sup>.

The "Spiritual mass" can be produced when the brain is working at its fullest and capable of producing deep thought in higher dimensional space. This is what great Yogis can do and is the basis of whole Yoga. As we age our brain loses its suppleness and gets petrified. Hence it cannot fire all the 100 billion neurons in a laser like fashion at the time of death. This limits most people's capability to get a new body by will. Some of the great spiritual leaders like Christ, Adi Shankaracharya, Sant Gyaneshwar of Maharashtra, Swami Vivekananda etc. left their bodies before they reached 40 years of age and when their brainpower was at its prime.<sup>55</sup> For others who cannot produce the critical "spiritual mass", rebirth is by chance or strongly willed by their loved ones.

### ***Basis of a Good Life***

How does one lead his/her life so that it is happy and death is painless and is welcomed more like a friend when it comes? Tomes have been written on this subject and the great masters of this world like Christ, Buddha, Patanjali and others have spoken about it from their direct experiences. It will be therefore arrogant on my part to say anything more than what they have already said. However we can try to understand it from the perspective of our theory on deep thought.

The whole basis of life is to have [continuous happiness and joy and that is possible with a very healthy body in a very hospitable world.](#) The self can only enjoy and be happy with a body (preferably a human body) since it provides an anchor to it and allows the making and breaking of memories.

One of the keys to happiness is reduction and complete removal of greed. [Greed creates tremendous conflicts and all round unhappiness.](#) Removal of greed can be achieved by cultivating a nimble brain via *Sanyam*. A healthy body can help in creating a nimble brain. The nimble brain has a tremendous processing power and hence a small amount of data is processed very efficiently to gain useful information. This helps the mind to "get satisfied" easily and helps in satiating the desire so that the person can move on. This is the major step in greed reduction.

*Sanyam* also allows enough working memory space in the brain so that majority of 100 billion neurons are available to focus on a single thought. This becomes possible only when we have less memory locked up in the brain about mundane and routine worldly activities and attachments. Also there should be an excellent conflict resolution mechanism developed internally. Deep down we should honestly evaluate our actions and should be able to live with them in peace. This act can help in freeing the mind from psychological knots, which can take up a major portion of the memory. Removal of these knots may help make the mind calm and fit for deep thought. The final word on this subject therefore belongs to Patanjali who says, "Undisturbed calmness of mind is attained by cultivating friendliness towards the happy, compassion for the unhappy, delight in the virtuous and indifference towards the wicked"<sup>58</sup>.

Making this world a better and more hospitable place can also help in calmness of mind and internal happiness. This will help us fulfill both our physical and emotional needs and can help all humans to live a very full and happy life. For most of us this planet is the only home we have. This means that besides our personal evolution [we should also contribute as much as possible to mankind's evolution.](#) In this, technology will play a very major role. It allows us to take care of our physical needs and with its progress and evolution will allow us to live in a sustainable manner. Thus to my mind the contribution of Edisons, Fords, Einsteins and Newtons of this world towards mankind's evolution is at par with that of spiritual leaders like Buddha, Christ, Patanjali, etc.

Mankind has always aspired to immortality. Thus by means of chemicals, drugs and spiritual methods humans have always strived to prolong their lives. Yogis and practitioners of healthy body

cult claim that human body can theoretically live for 125 years. There are some Yogis in India who claim that some masters have lived even for 300-400 years!<sup>54</sup> I believe that once our technology becomes very advanced then it will be possible for humans to have a long life. Whether that long life will be productive, happy and emotionally satisfying will depend a lot on how hospitable we make this planet earth. I believe [a combination of spirituality and technology can provide a basis](#) for achieving this goal (Chapter 19).

## References

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44. Ref.1, Sutra IV. 3.
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47. Ref.1, Sutra I.50.
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52. Ref.31, pg. 12.
53. Ref.1, Sutra IV. 33.
- 53(a) Ref. 1, Sutra III.52
54. Paramhansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of Yogi* , Paramhansa Yogananda Self-Realization Fellowship, LA 1979, pg. 355.
55. Sant Gyaneshwar. A great Indian saint of Maharashtra was born in 13<sup>th</sup> century AD. He rewrote the Bhagwat Gita in Marathi (the local language) so that it could become accessible to common man. This book is called Gyaneshwari. It is said that he left his body by will at the age of 21.
56. There are close to six hundred thousand sites on reincarnation in Google search engine on the Internet. However one of the most thoroughly searched scientific accounts of reincarnation is by Professor Ian Stevenson (University of Virginia department of Psychiatry) who in the last 40 years has thoroughly documented around 3000 cases of children from all over the world who remember their previous lives. The following references are on his work :

- [www.healthsystem.virgina.edu/internet/psychiatric/stevenson.cfm](http://www.healthsystem.virgina.edu/internet/psychiatric/stevenson.cfm).
- [www.near-death.com/reincarnation.html](http://www.near-death.com/reincarnation.html)
- Ian Stevenson, *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect*, Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc. 1997.

57. Shri Ramkrishna has given a very vivid description in his own words of who Swami Vivekanand was : ‘One day in samadhi I saw that my mind, going up a luminous path, went beyond the gross world studded with the sun, moon, and stars; and entered first into the subtle world of ideas. The more it ascended to higher and higher strata of that realm, the more did I see beautiful ideal forms of gods and goddesses existing on both sides of the path. I came gradually to the end of that region. I saw that a fence made of light separated the realm of the divisible from that of the indivisible. Leaping over that fence, the mind entered by degrees the realm of the indivisible. No person or thing having a form existed there. As if afraid to enter there, even the gods/goddesses possessing heavenly bodies only exercised their authority over realms far below. But the very next moment I saw seven Rishis having bodies consisting of divine light only, seated there in samadhi. I felt that in virtue and knowledge, love and renunciation, they had excelled the gods and goddesses, not to speak of human beings. Astonished, I was pondering over their greatness when I saw before me that a part of the homogeneous mass of Light in this abode of the indivisible, devoid of the slightest tinge of difference, became solidified and converted into the form of a divine Child. Coming to one of those Sages, and throwing its soft delicate arms around his neck, it embraced him, and then calling him with a voice sweeter than the music of the vina, made great efforts to wake him from samadhi. The sage did wake up, and with half-shut eyes beheld the Child. I, seeing his bright expression full of delight, thought that the Child must be the treasure of his heart – that their familiarity was of eternity. The extraordinary divine Child then expressed great joy and said to the sage, “I am going to earth you must come with me.” The sage did not reply, but his loving eyes expressed his assent. Looking on the Child with eyes of love for some time, he entered again into samadhi. I was astonished to see that a part of the mind and body of that Rishi, converted into the form of a bright light, came down to earth along the luminous path. Hardly had I seen Narendra (Swami Vivekanand) when I knew that he was that Rishi.’ Ref. 81, pg. 83-84.

58. Ref.1, Sutra I. 33.

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