

## Meeting the End of Life Without Impediments – Part 3: Rebirth or Reincarnation?

**Question:** Could you clarify rebirth, reincarnation and karmic consequence please? (*The questioner is most likely referring to the teachings in “The Five Laws of the Universe” by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett.*<sup>1</sup>) It would seem that to have a personal karmic debt after the body dies would require some individuality of Buddha Nature which would re-emerge in a new vehicle for the next lifetime. Thus there would be a new opportunity to repay that “personal” debt through reincarnation. However, my limited understanding is that the Zen tradition encourages belief in the collective Buddha nature which re-emerges with infinite variety in a given vehicle for the next lifetime. So there is rebirth but not reincarnation. If that is so then are we paying off a collective karmic debt as well? In which case, what we endure in this lifetime would not be personal karmic consequence, just as the merit we donate is for the common good and not just to get “me” off the wheel of suffering. My question springs from a larger one. Do you see a conflict which would affect practice/training by believing in reincarnation rather than rebirth?

**Answer:** Your question is one that is frequently raised. The distinction between reincarnation and rebirth is a subtle, but important one. I recommend you look at your own experience. Are you exactly the same person you were an hour ago, a week ago, a month ago, a year ago, when you were a child? Unless you’re from a different planet, I suspect the answer to that question is no. The next question is, are you completely different now than you were at those times? Again, unless you’ve learned how to stop time, I suspect the answer is no, there is a lot of similarity. What we’ve just described is “rebirth” – the same, yet not the same, not identical. “Reincarnation” usually means that a distinct entity, a soul, is reborn again intact in a new body. Many Buddhist traditions, but not all, distinguish between these two words and concepts in this manner.

Based on such personal experience, the Buddha taught that there is no unchanging, permanent, and separate self or ego. He never denied that a conventional “self” existed. His point was that it is not permanent and separate. Many of us are afraid of losing or letting go of our “self” because we fear nothingness, that something vital or essential to “us” will be lost. For Buddhists, the impermanence of the self is a teaching that can give us great hope because it means we can change. We are never stuck the way we are. This teaching was particularly important – and radical – in the Buddha’s time because it flew in the face of the caste system, which taught more or less that once a serf, always a serf (or whatever caste you were in). The correlating teaching is that there is not a Self, in the sense of a Person or Being outside ourselves. This means that That Which Is greater than us flows through everything and is not separate from us. IT is our True Nature, it is the True Nature of all things. We can change, convert, transform ourselves through training and realize the True Self which in reality is already ours. I find it helpful to look at the world in terms of verbs, rather than as nouns. Everything – each of “us,” all mind and matter, the universe itself – is a verb, a process, an activity. We are as if currents in a vast ocean, the totality of which is the Unborn in Its entirety.

In addition to teaching the flux of all life without unchanging entities (impermanence and no-self), the Buddha also stressed the law of karma, cause and effect. This natural law does not stand against there being no concrete, individual selves or things, although this may seem contradictory. I have found that seemingly paradoxical truths come to be accepted intuitively over time. Patience and faith are what keeps us training until we understand. And don’t expect to comprehend this through the intellectual alone. Practice and experience are required.

There were religious teachers of the Buddha's time who denied cause and effect, that there is direct connect between what we do now and consequences in the future. So why not live it up while we can? I think you can see the futility of that teaching, but it still exists in our modern world. It's often called "hedonism," but the contemporary outlook of "materialism" would qualify, too. By contrast, that which we intentionally do, whether of body, speech, or mind, has an effect which "we" will reap. In Buddhist teaching we talk about the five *skandhas* that comprise a human being. We refer to them every morning when we recite the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*: form, sensation, thought, activity, and consciousness. It's helpful to remember that the skandhas, sometimes translated as "aggregates" or "heaps," are flowing aggregates, more like currents in a river rather than piles upon the ground. And the particles of these flows are what the Dalai Lama in *Advice for Dying – And Living a Better Life* (© 2002) calls "moments of consciousness." It's also the case that the sensation skandha is inexorably connected to the activity skandha. The sensations (feelings) always reap what the will (intention, or activity) does. These two strands or currents of sentient life somehow stick together and thereby lend a sense of continuity to a "self" or a "being." This fact explains why "we" always pay for what "we" do.<sup>2</sup> This experience is not punishment, only natural karmic consequence. You are correct in stating that we are only personally responsibly for what we have actually done in this life. Each person their own karma makes.

However, there's much more to life than this one existence. Out of the Bodhisattva vow and the compassion central to the way the universe works (more on that later), we come into being, not as a concrete, unchanging entity, but as a mental stream that carries all the effects of that stream's past intentional actions – its confusion, its mistakes, its errors and delusions. We are not responsible for that past – thus we can relinquish guilt once we've done *sange* (repentance) for the harmful acts of this life. Yet we are given the opportunity to clean that stream up – to convert it through compassion to wisdom, to help it – "sentient beings," or moments of consciousness, of the past – see the error of their mistakes and to ensure that this karmic stream, of which we are the latest issue, doesn't repeat those errors. We endeavor to make sure that certain qualities, attitudes, mental outlooks and habits that cause suffering don't get passed on, reborn. In short, we educate our "karmic stream" to stop producing suffering and to learn to offer assistance in helping others with theirs, too. This education benefits us as well, for these submerged attitudes and habits are often at the root of our suffering-producing actions of this life. I also wish to point out that these errors and mistakes arise from ignorance, not seeing clearly things the way they really are, which is one definition of dharma, truth. Also, we receive in our karmic stream many good attributes as well.

This stance or commitment to "karmic washing" requires great altruism, caring for more than just our "self." This is bodhichitta, the Buddha-seeking, or enlightenment-seeking mind or heart. We train for self, we train for all others, we eventually train just because it's good to do, and to do anything else doesn't even come to mind as a possibility, or at least not often. We come to love others as if they were ourself, and in fact, given that there are no boundaries to our "selves," they actually are ourselves on one level. Karmic inclinations and tendencies obscure our seeing this truth. If we don't clean up our inherited stream, one could say – and most, if not all, great masters do say – then we have squandered our life as a human being. The karmic consequences of wasting a life can be dire indeed: you may end up in a "place" or state where the opportunity to make changes or encounter the liberating Dharma is very difficult or non-existent. And it's always our choice to take on this karmic cleansing process, training, and our particular stream, or not.

And yes, the merit of our training is offered to the good of all animate and inanimate things. Given the nature of merit, pure love, one does not lose any merit by dedicating it to others. It's expressed well in an American children's song: "Love is just a word unless you give it away....It all

comes back to you.” In fact, merit returns to us much more than one fold. Training and practice cleanse the karma of this life, while at the same time working on one’s past life karma and benefiting all beings as well. And the more we dedicate the benefits of that merit to others, the brighter “we” and the world become.

The scriptures say that only a Buddha can fully understand the law of karma – it’s very complex in its details – but all of us can learn the general principle and practice in accord with it. Masters give us the Precepts for this purpose – to lessen suffering for ourselves and the world – and we’re continually learning if we keep an open mind and say yes to life. It’s also said that no-self is the most difficult of the Buddha’s teaching to understand. I suggest you put your effort into your formal meditation, every-minute meditation in daily activities, and practice of the Precepts. To cultivate seeing impermanence in everything can also open up insight into these other, admittedly harder, teachings, for they are all interrelated: because everything is impermanent, not fixed, there cannot be a self that is permanent and unchanging. Hence, there is no satisfaction in any refuge other than the Heart, a mental state usually rendered as suffering, but which translates more closely as dissatisfaction, dis-ease, uncertainty, or simply stress! The awareness/experience of that un-ease is the motivation to change ourselves through training.

To keep in mind that the Buddha’s teaching is rebirth rather than reincarnation is actually quite important on a subtle level, and it has great consequences later on. If we build a house in which one wall of the foundation is made up of a different height concrete block, eventually, as the building rises, it will be lopsided and collapse. Rebirth is one block; impermanence, no self, dukkha/suffering, nirvana, and karma are other foundational building blocks of the Buddha’s Dharma (see *Zen is Eternal Life*, chapter 3, “Basic Original Teachings Essential to Zen”). Reincarnation is not the same as rebirth, and using it in conjunction with the blocks intended to fit with rebirth will not lead to liberation. When one comes across a reference to reincarnation in Buddhist literature, just remind oneself, without judgmentalism, that in fact the teaching is rebirth. That way our mental concepts and our experience match each other more closely. In fact, not following some such practice may weaken your faith, cause confusion, and block or delay one’s full comprehension of what Shakyamuni Buddha offered – complete liberation.

In the same spirit, the other practice I recommend is one that my master recommended frequently: if you don’t understand something that’s taught, put it on the back burner. It’s as if you have a huge kitchen range with various pots cooking with different teachings in them, cooking at various temperatures. Put the difficult to fathom things on the back burner on a low simmer – someday they may be ready to eat just by doing that. Or you can pull them to the front and cook ‘em on high for a while; even then they may need more time on low heat to be thoroughly cooked for a digestible meal. Rev. Master Jiyu learned this approach to training from her Master in Japan, and this process was a lifelong one for her. And if it’s good enough for her, I remind myself that it’s most likely good enough for me, too.

Few if any of us get complete understanding in a flash. Thankfully, we don’t have to know or understand everything with our brain or intellect in order to dive in and practice. An approach of faith and trust enables us to step onto the path without violating our conscience. Buddhism’s greatest appeal to me when I began meditating and encountered a genuine teaching lineage was that whatever is taught comes out of people’s direct experience/practice, and in turn, whatever is practiced verifies the teaching. Buddhism is not about beliefs, it’s about understanding from our own experience. And we have to accept something in order to step out and go and grow from there. It’s like a hypothesis in a science experiment. Most of us, if we are humble enough to admit it, could use a little

help on the spiritual path. (Incidentally, that's the sole purpose of teachers – to help us.) You can begin this faith/trust/confidence backburner method with simply one of the Three Treasures – Buddha, Teaching, Community – or even just an aspect of one. They all become One in time.

The important thing is to get on with the training rather than dithering about because in one's mind one isn't sure. Correct practice can't help but ease the heart. Take what you do know or have confidence in, try the teachings out, and base your decisions on your experience, always allowing for the possibility that there could be more that you just don't know yet – or as the Buddha put it, that you haven't yet proven true for yourself. The value is shown by the results. To use another kitchen analogy, the proof is in the pudding.

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<sup>1</sup> **Excerpt from** *An Introduction to the Serene Reflection Meditation Tradition* (Shasta Abbey, several editions). We quote here relevant portions of the third law, "The law of karma is inevitable and inexorable," and related endnote no. 2. We recommend reading the article in its entirety. "The spiritual aspect of the so-called individual "spirit" which a being, male or female, has thought of has himself or herself returns to the Source, called herein the Buddha Nature (the third Body of the Trikaya [the Dharmakaya]), in its entirety only if all past karma, both of the life-existence just ended, and those life-existences prior to it, has been purified. For example, a person who has lived an exemplary life during this lifetime may still not become one with the Buddha Nature if he has not looked deeply within himself and purified the karma he inherited from former lives.

"That part of the karma that is purified, however, returns to the Buddha Nature and becomes one with it, so that which is being thought of as an individual spirit becomes divided up, like returning unto like: the purified part of the spirit to the Buddha Nature and the unpurified part is reborn into whatever is a suitable form for its presently unpurified state...."

Note 2: "What people usually think of as their "self," "soul," or "spirit" is actually an impermanent combination of several components. Some components, such as the ego, the sense of self, the body image, and the like are personal and individual but are continually changing and do not survive death. Another component, the Buddha Nature, because it is one with the Buddha essence of the Universe [*shunyata*, "the immaculacy of emptiness"], is unchanging and eternal and yet, for the very same reason is neither personal nor individual. A third type of component is what is known as karma: this is the spiritual force set in motion by all volitional actions, whether good or ill. When we speak of a person's karma, we refer to the sum total of all such forces currently remaining ineffective which he or she has produced in this lifetime or has acquired at the time of conception from other beings which have left it unfulfilled at the times of their deaths. Positive volitional acts produce positive karma, sometimes called merit, which has positive effects on the lives of beings. This positive karma, already being at peace by its very nature, is at one with the infinite Sea of Merit of the Cosmic Buddha upon the death of the individual and thus provides no basis for an immortal soul. Negative karma, if not exhausted or purified in this lifetime, continues on after death and conditions the conception of a new being who will have an opportunity to allow it to run its course or to purify it, thus setting it to rest. Once its force is spent, negative karma ceases to exist, hence it, too, cannot produce an immortal and individual soul. The Karma produced in this life and the karma inherited from other beings are not of different types: they both act in the same way and are indistinguishable."

Master Hsuan Hua affirms this splitting up or dispersal of a karmic stream when discussing vegetarianism in *Buddhist Text Translation Society's Buddhism A to Z* (p. 213): "The 'soul' of a human being at death may split up to become many animals. One person can become about ten animals. That's why animals are so ignorant. The 'soul' of an animal can split up and become, in its smallest division, an organism or a plant....Another example is the mosquitoes. The millions of mosquitoes on this mountain may be simply the 'soul' of one person who has been transformed into all those bugs. It is not the case that a single human 'soul' turns into a single mosquito. One person can turn into countless numbers of mosquitoes."

<sup>2</sup> See Rev. Master Koshin Schomberg's clear and compassionate discussion of this point in his *Dependent Origination* (McKenna, Washington: North Cascades Buddhist Priory, 1999), pp. 3-5 and 7-9.