



DHAMMA WITHOUT REBIRTH?

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In line with the present-day stress on the need for religious teachings to be personally relevant and directly verifiable, in many dhamma circles the time-honored Buddhist doctrine of rebirth has come up for stern re-examination. Although only a few contemporary Buddhist thinkers still go so far as to suggest that this doctrine be tossed aside as 'unscientific,' another opinion has gained currency which also detracts from the teaching on rebirth.

According to this other view, the doctrine of rebirth is a mere "metaphysical" hypothesis that has no essential connections with the heart of the Buddha's teaching. The dhamma, it is said, is essentially a pragmatic, existential therapy aimed at helping us to resolve our immediate problem of suffering in the here and now. The means it offers us to accomplish this task include a variety of practical techniques that help us gain inner calm and enhance awareness of the inner workings of our minds.

At the heart of these practical techniques is the practice of meditation. Meditation promotes self-awareness and inner understanding but has no need for rituals, articles of faith, and religious doctrines, which are nothing more than crutches for weak minds. The belief system of traditional Buddhism, it is said, is merely part of the cultural baggage of Asia that we inherit along with the essence of the dhamma. But with our present enlightened understanding, we can extract the precious treasure of the dhamma from its cultural and religious baggage, and we can then discard the baggage as inappropriate in this age of scientific knowledge and technological progress.

If we suspend our own assumptions and biases for the moment and instead go directly to our sources, we come upon the indisputable

fact that the Buddha himself repeatedly taught rebirth and apparently taught it as a basic principle of his teaching. Viewed in their totality, the Buddha's discourses show us that far from being a mere concession to the mode of thinking prevalent in his time, far from being a mere cultural accretion to the dhamma, the doctrine of rebirth is intimately related to so many other teachings that to think of removing it is to risk reducing the dhamma to a pale image of its original formulation. On reflection, we would further find that the teaching of rebirth is not merely an article of Buddhist faith, an empty dogma, but has tremendous implications for the entire course of dhamma practice.

According to the Pali Nikayas, the most ancient collection of Buddhist texts, the aim of the Buddhist path is liberation from suffering. Superficially, this might seem to mean that the dhamma is concerned solely with the present life, with helping us to free ourselves from misery, anxiety, and confusion in the here and now. But if we don't stop with this mere phrase, but look into the deeper meaning of the Buddha's discourses, we will see that the Buddha makes it abundantly clear that the suffering he is ultimately speaking about is the suffering of bondage to samsara, the round of repeated birth and death. This is the suffering he wants us to fully understand; this is the suffering from which the dhamma is intended to rescue us.

To be sure, the dhamma does have an aspect that is directly visible and can be personally verified here and now. By direct inspection of our own experience we can see that sorrow, anxiety, fear, and grief always arise from our mental defilements – from our greed, aversion, and ignorance. Conversely, we can also see that sorrow, anxiety, fear, and grief can be eliminated through the removal of our mental defilements. The importance of this directly visible side of dhamma practice shouldn't be underestimated, for it helps to inspire our confidence in the

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liberating power of the Buddhist path. However, **to downplay the doctrine of rebirth and interpret the entire purpose of the dhamma as release from psychological suffering is to dilute and distort the teaching.** By doing so one seriously risks reducing it in the end to little more than an ancient system of psychotherapy.

The Buddha himself has clearly indicated that the root problem of human life is not simply the fact that we are vulnerable to sorrow, grief, and fear here and now, but that we bind ourselves, by our craving and ignorance, to the repeated round of birth, aging, sickness, and death, within which we meet the various types of physical and mental affliction. Thus the deeper problem that underlies bodily and mental suffering is our bondage to birth and death. The Buddha has also shown that the primary danger in the defilements is their causal role in sustaining the round of rebirths. As long as they remain intact within the deep strata of the mind, they drag us through the round of becoming, leading us from death to new birth and from birth to new death. And as we go on from life to life, we shed a flood of tears “greater than the waters of the four oceans.” If we consider these points carefully, we would then see that the practice of dhamma is not designed merely to provide us with a simple therapy that will enable us to allay our worries and anxieties. It aims, rather, at bringing about a far-reaching inner transformation in the very depths of consciousness – a transformation that will liberate us from the cycle of worldly existence in its entirety.

Admittedly, for most of us our primary motivation for entering the Buddha’s path has been a troubling sense of dissatisfaction

with the routine course of our ordinary lives rather than a keen perception of the dangers in the round of rebirths. However, if we are to follow the dhamma through to its end and tap its full potential for conferring peace and higher wisdom, we have to guide our practice beyond the motives that originally spurred us to enter the path. We have to outgrow our original agendas and grow into the program the Buddha has outlined for us in his clear and well-defined teachings. And this means we should be ready to investigate those essential truths disclosed to us by the Buddha, which we can then use to deepen our practice and strengthen our motivation for pursuing the goal of the teaching.

One of these essential truths is the principle of rebirth, with its counterpart, the doctrine of kamma. Though contemplating the presently existent phenomena is the key to the practice of insight meditation, it would be a fundamental mistake to hold that the entire practice of dhamma consists in simply being mindful of the present moment. The Buddhist path stresses the role of wisdom as the means of liberation, and wisdom includes not only a penetration of the present moment in its vertical depths, but a comprehension of the past and future horizons within which our present existence unfolds. To recognize the principle of rebirth will give us a panoramic standpoint from which we can survey our lives in their broader context and total network of relationships. This will spur us on in our own pursuit of the path and will reveal the profound significance of the goal towards which our practice points, liberation from the cycle of rebirths as the ultimate end of suffering.

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