

Rebirth is Relevant

March 9, 2012

The passage that we chanted just now, the Dhamma-niyama Sutta, is usually chanted on occasions related to a death. It's interesting that the really serious suttas, like this one, and the passages from the Abhidhamma, dependent co-arising, the fire sermon, the not-self sermon are chanted on occasions related to death. When you have a house warming or something that's supposed to be auspicious there are a lot of chants about happiness and blessings. Then when death comes, you have to get serious. Of course, if you only get serious when a death happens, it's usually too late.

So it's good to be prepared, good to think about it. The Buddha has you reflect every day that you're subject to aging, illness, and death. These things are normal. Not just you, everybody. And some days you have more reason to reflect. We had two funeral chants this afternoon, one we had known was going to happen, another one that just came up out of nowhere. On the way back from the trip outside, we went past an accident and the car was really badly mangled. I'd be surprised if the driver survived.

And what, they say 250,000 people die every day? So there's plenty of occasion to think about death. And yet we tend to avoid it—because for most people they have no idea of what to do. Death is one of those big mysteries and what can you do? You die. You just die. That's the way a lot of people think about it.

But the Buddha went out of his way to talk about death and rebirth. Death is not the end. Some people think that he picked up the teaching on rebirth from his culture and hadn't really thought it through. They wonder why it might be relevant to the four noble truths and the end of suffering, and so they put it aside as something they can safely ignore. But it's actually extremely relevant. For one thing, rebirth wasn't universally accepted in the Buddha's time. It was a hot issue. Some people thought that there was rebirth, other people thought there was no rebirth. And the way the question was approached centered on the issue of what a person *is*, such that a person could or couldn't be reborn. If you identify a person with something that could be annihilated, then rebirth was impossible. And even among the people who believed in rebirth, some said that there was no connection with your karma at all, that rebirth just happened to follow some fate that was determined by somebody else or something else.

But the Buddha's take was very different. For one thing, he never talked about *what* it was that took rebirth. For him, rebirth was an action. It was something you *did*. And most of us do it very unskillfully. As he said, birth, rebirth, is one of the prime instances of suffering. And because he taught the end of suffering, an important part of his teaching had to deal with putting an end to rebirth.

And because it is an action, it's something that at the very least you should learn to do skillfully. How do you develop the skill? Fortunately it's the same skill we're doing right now meditating. Rebirth is done through craving and clinging. The Buddha's image is of a fire that spreads from one house to another. And what's the bridge between the houses? It's the wind. The fire clings to the wind, which sustains it and

allows it to go to the next house.

And so in the same way, clinging is sustained by craving as it goes to the next life. Of course, craving doesn't appear in the mind only at the moment of death. Craving is appearing all the time. It's causing us to suffer to a greater or lesser extent all the time. So fortunately it's something we can deal with right here, right now. At the very least, you want to direct your desires in a skillful direction. This is why the Buddha has us employ desire to get the mind to settle down. That's a skillful desire. The desire to find awakening is a skillful desire. The Buddha encourages these things, because the desire for awakening is the only thing that's going to lead to the actual awakening and the actual end of desire.

There's that image of the desire that takes you to a park. You hear that there's a park and you want to go see it. You walk there. And when you get to the park, the desire is gone, because you're there. You don't need the desire any more. It's the same way with the path. Even though the path aims at putting an end to desire, it has to use desire to get to the goal. Once you're there, the desire is no longer needed. So we learn how to deal with our desires and our cravings and our clingings in a skillful way. That way, at the very least, we can manage this action of rebirth in a skillful manner, noticing which desires are skillful and which ones are not, and learning how to let go of the unskillful ones no matter how attractive they may be.

Ajahn Suwat used to speak very frequently about how your likes are what cause suffering. Yet for most of us, that's how we define ourselves. And that's exactly how the Buddha says we define ourselves: by our attachments, by our clingings and our cravings. Not only psychologically right now, but that's how we'll define the new identity we assume after death, at rebirth. So because this act of self-definition is an action—and that's how the Buddha primarily looked at it, as an action—you want to learn how to do it skillfully. You can learn how to master it as you go through the day. If any unskillful clingings and cravings come up, you've got to learn how to let them go—while you're healthy, while you're alert, while things are going well in the body.

Because it's not going to be easy when things start misbehaving in the body. The liver stops functioning, or maybe your heart stops functioning, or something stops functioning. There's going to be pain, there's going to be a huge sense of frustration when you can't do the things you used to do any more. If your mind isn't under control, your cravings and clingings just go wild. So you've got to learn how to gain some control over them.

This is another reason why the Buddha taught rebirth: as one of our motivations for practicing and for being really strict with ourselves as we practice. After all, some cravings and clingings in the mind appear at first glance to be no problem at all. They don't seem to be affecting anybody else. We're okay with them. But if you think about the fact that these are the things that are creating not only your identity, but the world into which you're going to be reborn, you realize that they're dangerous. It's like tuning in to a particular radio station: Whatever's on that frequency will go to that frequency. Is this the kind of world you want to create?

Because our actions do have long-term consequences. This is another reason why the Buddha taught rebirth, because you've got to

take these possibilities into consideration when you chose to act.

Every time we act it's a gamble, a wager. We have choices as to what to do. Some of them are easy and pleasant, and others are more difficult. The question is, are the more difficult ones worth it? What are the long-term consequences? And how long is long term? How far out does that go? For a lot of people, the attitude is that as long as I can get to death, ok, that's it. What happens after that will just take care of itself. Actually, death doesn't just take care of itself. We're designing what will happen after death right now. This is part of the calculation you have to make. It is a wager. Until you've gained awakening there's going to be an uncertainty. But the Buddha said it's a wise wager to take.

Because, as he noted, you can't see all the results of actions here in this lifetime. Some people say, "Everything I've seen in life is enough to convince me that karma works." Well, no, it's not. You look at some people and they do all kinds of horrible unskillful things, yet they're still alive. They thrive. The Buddha has a long list of people who thrive because they kill, or steal, or have illicit sex, or they lie, or they take intoxicants. They do it with the right people and they do it in the right way, so they actually get rewarded by society one way or another. But as the Buddha said, those are only the short-term consequences. You've got to take the long-term consequences into consideration as well.

You hear about people who take these classes where they say, "Suppose you have only one year left to live, how would you live that final year?" It would be good to have a class that says, "Suppose you really do get reborn? How would you live your life differently given that assumption?" That would be good practice, because as the Buddha said, all the enlightened ones of the past, all the enlightened ones in the future, all the enlightened ones in the present all confirm that, yes, rebirth is a fact.

This has nothing to do with the culture of India or the culture of America or Europe or whatever. For those of us who are not yet fully enlightened or even partly enlightened, it's a question mark. Can we trust them? And the Buddha said it's a good wager. You can't just say, I don't know, and leave it at that. It's like going to a financial advisor and asking, "Where should I invest my money? What's going to happen with the market?" If the financial advisor says, "I don't know; nobody knows," you go find another financial advisor. Of course nobody knows in the financial world, but they have ways of interpreting how things are going. You want to find someone who's got a good track record. Because whatever you do with your money, it's a wager. If you decided not to invest it, that's a wager too: that you'll be better off by not investing it.

And it's the same way with our actions. You can't just say, "Well, I don't know whether there's rebirth or not so I'll just leave it at that," because your decision to act or not to act is a wager.

When you reach stream entry, that's when you'll know for sure that the Buddha is right. There is a deathless and the activities that have kept you from reaching that deathless have been going on for a long time, not just this one lifetime.

These are some of the reasons why the Buddha saw that it was important, it was very relevant to the practice, that we take rebirth into our calculations every time we act. And that we make it our motivation so that we really do practice sincerely and with real determination. Be

very precise about what's going on in the mind, because it is an action. It's something the mind does, and tends to do very unskillfully, which is why it's one of the prime instances of suffering. But through the path, at the very least we can learn how to take rebirth skillfully. If we're really skillful, we won't have to do it anymore.

So it's not just some idea that was tacked on to the Dhamma because the Buddha wasn't thinking properly. There were so many issues in India at the time—lots of people had lots of different ideas—and as we know from other issues, the Buddha was very particular about which issues he would address and which ones he wouldn't. There were a lot of hot issues in India in his time that he didn't answer at all, didn't take a stand on at all. But this one he chose to take a stand on, in his own way. Because after all, he was teaching the end of suffering. He was teaching an action. All of his teachings are guides to action: What do we do so that we don't have to suffer? Even some of his more abstract teachings, like not-self, are teachings about action. Selfing is something you do: You create a sense of self. In what ways is it skillful and what ways is it just not? When is it useful to have a sense of self? And when is it useful to put it away, put it aside?

The same with rebirth: How can we train the mind so that we don't have to suffer from rebirth?—so at the very least we can handle the action of rebirth skillfully. Or even better, really skillfully, so that there's no more birth and no more suffering.

The Canon records the realizations that go through the mind of an arahant at the moment of release. The first thing that you realize after your realization of release is that this is the end of birth. There's no more birth. That's the first thing. So it's very relevant to our practice to take it into consideration. As the Buddha said, the odds of coming back with a good rebirth are pretty slim. But if we master the skills of meditation, we don't have to worry about those odds. We've got to the point where we don't have to wager.

So always keep that in mind.