

# Rebirth is Relevant

March 9, 2012

The sutta 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 Discourse—are chanted on occasions related to death. When you have a housewarming or other event that's supposed to be auspicious, there are a lot of chants about happiness and blessings. But then when death comes, you have to get serious. Of course, if you get serious only when a death happens, it's usually too late.

So it's good to be prepared, good to think about death, even if you think it's a long way away. The Buddha has you reflect every day that you're subject to aging, illness, and death. These things are normal—not just for you, but for everybody. On 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 came up out of nowhere. On the way back from the trip outside, we went past an accident, and the car was badly mangled. I'd be surprised if the driver survived. So we dedicated a chant to him.

And what, they say that 250,000 people die every day? So there's plenty of occasion to think about death. Yet we tend to avoid it—because most people have no idea of how to prepare. Death, for them, is just 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, because there's a skill to dying well—a skill that can save you from a lot of suffering, both while you're dying and after.

Because death is not the end. Rebirth happens. Some people think that the Buddha picked up the teaching on rebirth from his culture and hadn't really thought it through. They wonder how it could be relevant to the four noble truths and the end of suffering, 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 that there wasn't. 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 identified 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 at all between rebirth and your kamma: that rebirth had nothing to do with your actions, and instead just happened to follow a fate that was determined by something or somebody 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, a process. It was something you did, so he focused on how we do it. Most of us do it very unskillfully, and as a result, we suffer, again and again. But he showed that if you focus not on what gets reborn—something for which you're not responsible—but on how it happens—something for which you are responsible—you can learn to handle the process in a way that can either alleviate a lot of the suffering or put an end to it altogether.

In this way, the issues of rebirth are very relevant to the four noble truths. 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 how to put an end to rebirth.

Now, because rebirth 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 developing right now as we're meditating. Rebirth is done through craving and clinging. The Buddha's image is of a fire that spreads from one house to another. What's the bridge between the houses that allows the fire to spread? The wind. The fire doesn't have to cling to an intermediate house to spread from house to house. It can cling to the wind, which sustains it and allows it to go to the next house.

In the same way, consciousness doesn't need a body to survive. It can be sustained by clinging, and 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, trying to direct our cravings and 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 abandon unskillful mind states is 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 pull us out of unskillful desires and ultimately lead to genuine awakening, where desire actually ends.

Remember Ven. Ananda's 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, based on that desire. When you get to the park, the desire is gone, because you've arrived. You don't need the desire any more. It's the same way with the path to the end of suffering. Even though the path aims at putting an end to desire, it has to use desire to get to the goal. Desire, skillful desire, is part of right effort. Once you're there, the desire is no longer needed. You can put it aside.

So as we meditate, we learn how to deal with our desires, our cravings, and our clingings in a skillful way. In that way, we gain the experience that will enable us to deal with rebirth in a skillful manner: knowing which desires are skillful and which ones are not, and knowing how to let go of the unskillful ones no matter how attractive they may be.

Ajaan 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: by our likes. That's exactly how the Buddha says we define ourselves: by our attachments, our clingings, and our cravings. This happens not only psychologically right now, but also in the way we 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 else goes on strike. Every part of the body is capable of malfunctioning. There's going to be pain, there's going to be a huge sense of frustration when you can no longer tell the body to do the things you used to do. If your mind isn't under control, your cravings and clingings will 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 cravings are creating not only your identity now, but also the world into which you're going to be reborn, you realize that they're dangerous. It's like tuning your radio: It'll connect with whatever's on that particular frequency: hard rock or Beethoven or the ravings of some lunatic. Are your cravings on the frequency of the kind of world you'd really want to create and inhabit long-term? Sensual passion is the worse offender, because all of the worlds of intense suffering and conflict are on the frequency of sensual passion. Are those worlds you'd want to inhabit long-term?

After all, our actions do have long-term consequences. This is another reason why the Buddha taught the fact of rebirth, because you've got to take these possibilities into consideration when you choose to act.

Each 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 their long-term consequences? And how long is long-term? How far out does that go? For a lot of people, the attitude is, "As long as I can get to death, okay, that's it. That's all I care about. 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 take into consideration with every act: How do the calculations of what's worth it and what's not change when you factor in the possibility that the action will continue bearing fruit after you die? Admittedly, it's a wager. Until you've gained your first taste of awakening, there's going to be an uncertainty about whether rebirth really happens and really is shaped by your actions. But the Buddha, from his own experience of awakening, affirmed that it's a wise wager to take: to assume that both rebirth and the karmic role in shaping rebirth are genuine facts.

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 kamma works." Well, No, it's not. There are plenty of people who 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, steal, engage in illicit sex, lie, or take intoxicants. They do it with the right people and they do it in the right way to please someone in power, so they actually get rewarded by society in one way or another. But as the Buddha commented, 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 classes where they say, "Suppose you had 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 did get reborn and were reborn in line with your actions? How would you live your life differently given that assumption?" That would be good practice, because as the Buddha said, all the awakened ones of the past and present 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 the country. For those of us who aren't yet even partly awakened, it's a question mark. But you can't just say, "I don't know," and leave it at that, thinking that admitting your ignorance is enough to let you off the hook. 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 in the financial world really knows the future, but they have ways of interpreting how things are likely to go. 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 decide not to invest it, that's a wager, too: that you'll be better off burying it in the ground.

The same with your actions: You can't just say, "Well, I don't know whether there's rebirth or not so I'll just ignore the issue," because your every decision to act or not to act is a wager, and it has to take into its calculations an assumption of whether rebirth is a fact or not. Your potential for future pleasure or pain is not a matter of indifference. It may be to other people—the people who want to leave you with nothing more than a "don't know" attitude—but it shouldn't be to you.

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 very relevant to the practice that we take rebirth into our calculations every time we act—and that we make it inform our motivation so that we practice sincerely and with real determination. Be very precise about what's going on in the mind, because every instance of thinking is an action. It's something the mind does, and tends to do very unskillfully, which is why it's tied up in suffering. If we follow the path, at the very least we can learn how to think skillfully, which makes it easier to know how to take rebirth skillfully. If we're really skillful, we won't have to take rebirth anymore.

So rebirth is not just some idea that was tacked willy-nilly onto the Dhamma because the Buddha wasn't thinking properly. There were so many hot philosophical and religious issues in India at the time, and as we know from other issues, the Buddha was very particular about which issues he would address and which ones he wouldn't. Many of the issues he didn't take a stand on at all. But rebirth was something he chose to take a stand on, in his own way. After all, he was teaching a path of action to reach the end of suffering. 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 in what ways is it not? When is it useful to have a sense of self? And when is it useful to put it away, put it aside?

So if you're teaching a doctrine of action, you have to address the question of how to calculate the results of action, and that means you have to take a stand on rebirth: Is it something to take into consideration when you choose to act, or is it not? Is it a skill you have to work at developing beforehand or not? The Buddha says it is. The great ajaans say it is. So the question becomes: 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 realizing the fact of release, is the fact that this is the end of birth. There's no more birth. That's the very first thing. So it's very relevant to our practice to take this issue into consideration. As the Buddha said, the odds of coming back with a good rebirth are pretty slim. But if we really master the skills of meditation, we won't have to worry about those odds. We'll have reached the point where we don't have to wager.

Always keep that in mind.