

The Tree of Enlightenment

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CHAPTER NINE

Rebirth

In this chapter, I will look at the effects of karma in the next life or, to put it another way, I will elaborate on the idea of rebirth. But before we begin to talk specifically about the Buddha's teaching on rebirth, we may do well to spend a little time on the concept of rebirth in general.

Rebirth is a concept with which many people have difficulty. This has been especially true over the past century or so, when we have become increasingly conditioned to think in what are regarded as scientific terms, that is to say, terms that many people naively take to be scientific. This attitude has caused many people to discard the idea of rebirth because they think that it smacks of superstition and belongs to an old-fashioned, outdated way of looking at the world. For this reason, I think we need to redress the balance by creating a degree of open-mindedness toward the concept of rebirth in general terms, before we begin to consider the Buddhist teaching on the subject.

There are a number of approaches we can adopt in attempting to make a case for the reality of rebirth. One line of argument is to recall that, in almost all the major cultures of the world at one time or another, there has been a strong popular belief in rebirth. This is particularly true of India, where the idea can be traced back to the very earliest period of Indian civilization. In India, all the major religions—theist or atheist, schools of Hinduism or unorthodox doctrines like Jainism—accept the truth of rebirth. In other cultures, too, belief in rebirth has been common. To

take just one example, in the Mediterranean world, belief in the reality of rebirth was widespread before and during the first few centuries of the common era. Even today, it persists among the Druze, a Middle Eastern sect of Islam. Consequently, belief in the reality of rebirth has been an important part of the human way of thinking about the world and our place in it.

Then there is the testimony of recognized authorities who belong to various religious traditions. In Buddhism, it was the Buddha himself who taught the truth of rebirth. We are told that, on the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha acquired three kinds of knowledge, the first of which was detailed knowledge of his own past lives. He recollected the conditions under which he had been born in the past, and was able to remember what his name and occupation had been in innumerable former lives. Besides the Buddha's testimony, we have that of his principal disciples, who were also able to recall their past lives. Ananda, for instance, acquired the ability to remember his past lives soon after he was ordained as a Buddhist monk. Similarly, throughout the history of the Buddhist tradition, accomplished practitioners have been able to remember their past lives.

Nonetheless, neither of these two arguments for the reality of rebirth can be expected to be wholly convincing in the rational and scientific environment in which we live, so perhaps we need to look a bit closer to home, so to speak. Here we receive help from a very unexpected source. Some of you may be aware of the fact that in the past three decades there has been a vast amount of scientific investigation of the question of rebirth. Such research has been undertaken by psychologists and parapsychologists. Through this research we have gradually built up a very

convincing case for the reality of rebirth, a case developed along scientific lines. Many books have been published in which the details of these investigations are described and discussed.

One scholar who has been particularly active in this area in recent years is Professor Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia, in the United States. He has published his findings in about twenty cases of rebirth. One case, which has received widespread attention, is that of a woman who was able to recall her life lived more than a hundred years earlier in a foreign land, under the name of Bridey Murphy—a land she had never visited in her present life. I will not go into the specific details of cases here, because anyone interested in the scientific evidence for rebirth can read about it for him or herself. Nonetheless, I think we are now at a point where even the most skeptical among us must admit that there is a lot of circumstantial evidence in favor of the reality of rebirth.

In constructing a case for the reality of rebirth, however, we can also look even closer to home—namely, within our own experience. We need only recollect and examine that experience in the truly Buddhist way to see what conclusions we can derive from it. All of us have our own particular capabilities, our own particular inclinations and disinclinations, and I think it is fair to ask whether these are all really the result of chance and social conditioning in early life. For instance, some of us are more capable in sports than others. Some of us have a talent for mathematics, while others have a talent for music. Still others like swimming, while others are afraid of water. Are all such differences in our abilities and attitudes merely the result of chance and conditioning?

There are often dramatic and unexpected turns in the course of our personal development. Let me take my own case. I was born into a Roman Catholic family in the United States. There was absolutely nothing in my early background to indicate that I would have traveled to India by the age of twenty, and that I would spend the next two-and-a-half decades of my life predominantly in Asia, where I would become deeply involved in Buddhist studies.

Then, too, there are those situations in which we sometimes feel a strong presentiment that we have been in a particular place before, although we have not visited it in our present lifetime. On other occasions, we feel that we have known someone before: we meet a person for the first time, and yet very soon we feel that we have known that person all our lives. Alternatively, we can know someone else for years and still feel we do not really know him or her. Experiences such as these, when we feel that we have been in a particular situation before, are so common and universal that, even in the culture of contemporary France, which knows almost nothing of rebirth, there is a well-known phrase for them – the expression *deja vu*, which means “already seen.”

If we are not dogmatic, when we add up all these indications and suggestions – the belief in rebirth in many cultures and ages throughout the history of human civilization, the testimony of the Buddha and his prominent disciples, the evidence provided by scientific research, and our own personal intimations that we have been here before – I think we will have to confess that there is at least a strong possibility that rebirth actually is a reality.

In Buddhism, rebirth is part and parcel of the continuous process of change. Indeed, we are not only reborn at the time of

death, we are reborn at every moment. This, like other important teachings of Buddhism, is easily verifiable by reference to our own experience and to the teachings of science. For example, the majority of cells that compose the human body die and are replaced many times during the course of a lifetime. Even those few cells which last an entire lifetime undergo continuous internal change. This is part of the process of birth, death, and rebirth. If we look at the mind, we find that mental states (such as worry, happiness, and the like) appear and disappear every moment. They pass away and are replaced by new and different states. Therefore, whether we look at the body or the mind, our experience is characterized by constant birth, death, and rebirth.

Buddhism teaches that there are various realms, spheres, or dimensions of existence. Some texts list thirty-one such dimensions or planes of existence, but for our purposes we will make use of a simpler scheme, which refers to six such realms. These six realms can be divided into two groups, one that is relatively fortunate and the other, unfortunate. The first group includes the realm of the gods, the realm of the demigods, and the realm of human beings. Rebirth in these fortunate realms is the result of wholesome karma. The second group includes the realm of the animals, the realm of the hungry ghosts, and the hell realms. Rebirth in these realms of woe is the result of unwholesome karma.

Let us now look at each of these realms, beginning with the lowest. There are quite a few hell realms in Buddhism, including eight hot hells and eight cold hells. In the hells, living beings suffer incalculable and indescribable pain. It is said that the suffer-

ing experienced in this human world as a consequence of being pierced by three hundred spears in a single day is only a minute fraction of the suffering experienced by the denizens of hell. The cause of rebirth in hell is repeated violent behavior, such as habitual killing, cruelty, and the like.

Such actions are born of aversion, and living beings who commit them suffer the pains of hell until the unwholesome karma they have generated through such actions is exhausted. This last point is important, because it gives us occasion to note that, in Buddhism, no one suffers eternal damnation. When their unwholesome karma is exhausted, the denizens of hell are reborn in more fortunate realms of existence.

The next realm is that of the hungry ghosts. Living beings in this realm suffer chiefly from hunger and thirst, heat and cold. They are completely bereft of the things they desire. It is said that when the hungry ghosts see a mountain of rice or a river of fresh water and run toward it, they find that the mountain of rice is only a heap of pebbles and the river only a ribbon of blue slate. Similarly, it is said that in the summer even the moon feels hot to them, while in the winter even the sun is cold.

The foremost cause of rebirth as a hungry ghost is avarice and miserliness born of attachment and greed. As with the denizens of hell, the living beings in this realm are not condemned to eternal existence in the form of hungry ghosts, because when their unwholesome karma is exhausted, they will be reborn in a more fortunate realm.

In the next realm, that of animals, living beings suffer from a variety of unhappy circumstances. They suffer from the fear and pain that results from constantly killing and eating one another.

They suffer from the human beings who kill them for food or for their hides, pearls, or teeth. Even if they are not killed, many domestic animals are forced to work for people who drive them on with hooks and whips. All this is a source of suffering.

The principal cause of rebirth as an animal is ignorance. The blind, heedless pursuit of one's animal desires; preoccupation with eating, sleeping, and sexual gratification, accompanied by disregard for the need to develop one's mind and practice virtue—all these lead one to be reborn as an animal. Now, when we say, for instance, that aversion is the cause of rebirth in the hells, that attachment is the cause of rebirth among hungry ghosts, and that ignorance is the cause of rebirth in the realm of animals, it does not mean that an isolated act motivated by aversion, attachment, or ignorance will result in rebirth in the corresponding class of living being. What it does mean is that there is a definite, proven relationship between aversion or hatred and rebirth in the hells, just as there is between attachment and greed and rebirth among the hungry ghosts, and between ignorance and rebirth among the animals. If unimpeded and unobstructed by countervailing virtuous actions, actions habitually motivated by these unwholesome attitudes are likely to lead to rebirth in these three states of woe.

I am going to skip the realm of human beings for the moment in order to go on to the realm of the demigods. The demigods are physically more powerful and mentally more acute than human beings, yet they suffer because of jealousy and conflict. According to ancient Indian mythology, the demigods and gods share a celestial tree. While the gods enjoy the fruit of this tree, the demigods are custodians of its roots. Consequently, they are

envious of the gods and constantly attempt to take the fruit from them. They fight the gods but are defeated and suffer greatly as a result. Because of this rampant jealousy and conflict, rebirth among the demigods is unhappy and unfortunate.

As in the case of the other realms, there is a cause of rebirth among the demigods. On the positive side, the cause is generosity, while on the negative side, the cause is jealousy and envy.

The realm of the gods is the happiest of the six realms. As a consequence of wholesome actions done in the past, observation of the codes of good conduct, and the practice of meditation, living beings are reborn among the gods, where they enjoy sensual pleasures, spiritual happiness, or supreme tranquillity, depending on the level of the realm in which they are born. Nonetheless, the realm of the gods is not to be desired because the happiness of the gods is impermanent. No matter how much they may enjoy their existence, when the force of their wholesome karma is exhausted, the effects of their good conduct and experience of meditation spent, the gods fall from heaven and are reborn in another realm. At that moment, it is said that the gods suffer even more mental anguish than the physical pain suffered by other living beings in the other realms.

The gods are reborn in the heavens as a consequence of their practice of good conduct and meditation, but there is also a negative factor associated with rebirth in the heavens, and this is pride.

As you can see, we have an affliction or defilement associated with each of these five realms—hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, demigods, and gods—namely, aversion, attachment, ignorance, jealousy, and pride, respectively. Birth in any of these five

realms is undesirable. The three lower realms are undesirable for obvious reasons—both because of the intense suffering in them and because of the total ignorance of the beings who inhabit these realms. Even rebirth in the realms of the demigods and gods is undesirable because, although one experiences a certain degree of happiness and power among them, existence there is impermanent. Besides, the distractions and pleasures in these realms keep the beings there from looking for a way out of the cycle of birth and death. This is why it is said that, of the six realms of existence, the most fortunate, opportune, and favored is the human realm. This is also why I have left our discussion of the human realm until last.

The human realm is the most favored of the six realms because, as a human being, one has the motivation and opportunity to practice the Dharma and achieve enlightenment. One has this motivation and opportunity because the conditions conducive to practicing the path are present. In the human realm, one experiences both happiness and suffering. The suffering in this realm, though terrible, is not as great as the suffering in the three realms of woe. The pleasure and happiness experienced in the human realm are not as great as the pleasure and intense happiness experienced by beings in the heavens, nor are humans overwhelmed by the unbearable suffering that beings in the hells undergo. And unlike animals, human beings possess sufficient intelligence to recognize the necessity of looking for a means to achieve the total end of suffering.

Human birth is difficult to gain from a number of points of view. First of all, it is difficult from the point of view of its cause. Good conduct is the foremost cause of rebirth as a human being,

but truly good conduct is exceedingly rare. Second, human birth is difficult to gain from the point of view of number, for human beings are only a small fraction of the living beings who inhabit the six realms. Third, it is not enough simply to be born as a human being, because there are countless humans who do not have the opportunity to practice the Dharma. It is therefore not only necessary to be born as a human but also to have the opportunity to practice the Dharma, developing one's qualities of morality, mental development, and wisdom.

The Buddha used a simile to illustrate the rarity and precious nature of opportune birth among human beings. Suppose the whole world were a vast ocean, and on the surface of this ocean a yoke floated, blown about by the wind. Suppose, further, that at the bottom of the ocean there lived a blind tortoise who came to the surface only once every hundred years. The Buddha said that it is as rare to attain opportune birth as a human as for that tortoise to place his neck through the yoke when rising to the surface. Elsewhere, it is said that to be born as a human being with the opportunity to practice the Dharma is as rare as it would be to throw a handful of dried peas against a stone wall and have one pea stick in a crack in it.

Thus it is foolish to waste human existence, not to mention the fortunate conditions that we enjoy in free societies such as the opportunity we have to practice the Dharma. It is extremely important that, having this opportunity, we make use of it. If we fail to practice the Dharma in this life, there is no way of knowing where in the six realms we will be reborn, or when we will have such a chance again. We must strive to free ourselves from the cycle of rebirth because failing to do so means that we

continue to circle endlessly among these six realms of existence. When the karma, wholesome or unwholesome, that causes us to be born in any of the six realms is exhausted, rebirth occurs, and we find ourselves again in another realm.

It is said that all of us have circled in these six realms since beginningless time. It is also said that if all the skeletons we have had in our various lives were heaped up, the pile would exceed the height of Mount Sumeru, that if all the mother's milk we have drunk in our countless existences were collected together, it would amount to more than all the water in all the oceans. Now that we have the opportunity to practice the Dharma, we must do so without delay.

In recent years, there has been a tendency to interpret the six realms in psychological terms. Some teachers have suggested that the experiences of the six realms are available to us in this very life. This is true as far as it goes. Men and women who find themselves in prisons, tortured, killed, and so forth are undoubtedly experiencing situations similar to those of the hell beings; those who are miserly and avaricious experience a state of mind similar to that of the hungry ghosts; those who are animal-like experience a state of mind similar to that of animals; those who are quarrelsome, power-hungry, and jealous experience a state of mind like that of the demigods; and those who are pure, tranquil, serene, and exalted experience a state of mind similar to that of the gods.

And yet, although the experiences of the six realms are to some extent available to us in this human existence, I think it would be a mistake to assume or believe that the other five realms of existence do not have a reality which is as real as our

own human experience. The hell realms and the realms of the hungry ghosts, animals, demigods, and gods are as real as our human realm. You will recall that mind is the creator of all things. Actions done with a pure mind (motivated by generosity, love, and so forth) result in happiness, in states of existence like the human realm and the realm of the gods. But actions done with an impure mind (motivated by attachment, aversion, and the like) result in unhappy states like those of the hungry ghosts and hell beings.

Finally, I would like to distinguish rebirth from transmigration. You may not know that, in Buddhism, we consistently speak of rebirth, not transmigration. This is because in Buddhism we do not believe in an abiding entity, or substance, that transmigrates. We do not believe in a self that is reborn. This is why, when we explain rebirth, we make use of examples that do not require the transmigration of an essence or a substance.

For example, when a sprout is born from a seed, there is no substance that transmigrates. The seed and the sprout are not identical. Similarly, when we light one candle from another candle, no substance travels from one to the other, even though the first is the cause of the second. When one billiard ball strikes another, there is a continuity; the energy and direction of the first ball is imparted to the second. The first ball is the cause of the second billiard ball moving in a particular direction and at a particular speed, but it is not the same ball. When we step twice into a river, it is not the same river, and yet there is continuity, the continuity of cause and effect.

Hence there is rebirth, but not transmigration. Moral responsibility exists, but not an independent, permanent self. The con-

tinuity of cause and effect exists, but not permanence. I want to end with this point because we will be considering the example of the seed and the sprout, and the example of the flame in an oil lamp, in [Chapter 10](#), when we discuss interdependent origination. Thereafter, we will better understand how interdependent origination makes moral responsibility and not-self compatible.

