



Rebirth and the West

by Bhikkhu Anālayo

The idea of rebirth has ancient roots in the West. The introduction of its Buddhist formulation to the West originated from contact between Christian missionaries and Asian Buddhists. Misunderstandings resulting from these encounters appear to have had a lasting impact on Western Buddhist ideas about rebirth. Although belief in rebirth need not be considered a precondition for embarking on the path to liberation, in the way this emerges in early Buddhist thought, an understanding of this core doctrine is required for a proper appraisal of the liberating teachings of the Buddha.

Ancient Roots

Belief in rebirth has ancient roots in American and European history. Such beliefs were found among native Americans and pre-Socratic Greek philosophers alike.¹

In the sixth century before the common era, Pythagoras affirmed rebirth (*metempsychosis*), as did Empedocles in the fifth century. Pythagoras is believed to have made major contributions to mathematics; Empedocles stands out for developing a theory of four elements that has had a lasting influence on physics. This shows that, at least in those times, belief in rebirth was not necessarily seen as incompatible with the form of thought that we would nowadays qualify as scientific.

Christian Missionary Activity

Western knowledge about Buddhism has its starting point and foundation in the information gathered by Christian missionaries during the period of Asian colonization. In their attempts to convert Asian Buddhists to Christianity, the missionaries naturally had to familiarize themselves with Buddhist doctrine.

One of their conversion strategies was to dichotomize the supposedly true teachings of the Buddha from their imperfect practice by living Buddhists. In line with this approach, Christian missionaries alleged that the teaching of not-self stands in contradiction to the Buddhist belief in rebirth.² Some of them tended to focus on undermining local beliefs in karma and rebirth as meta-narratives capable of providing a meaningful perspective on the vicissitudes of life. The consequent evaluation of the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth can be exemplified with the assessment by some missionaries that “transmigration is ridiculous to the reasoning mind.”³

From a historical perspective, it is worthy of note that Western opposition to the Buddhist doctrines of karma and rebirth starts off in the context of religious polemics.

Karma and Mono-causality

Belief in a creator god, such as found in Christianity, involves an affirmation of mono-causality, in the sense that a single cause (god) is considered a self-sufficient principle for the origination of things.

Such a perspective easily interprets the Buddhist doctrine of karma through the lens of mono-causality. This type of reasoning has not been confined to Christian missionaries. A recent criticism of the doctrine of karma takes the following form:

the suffering individual ... *deserves* to suffer because he committed evil acts in this or else in a previous life. It is not only not our duty to help him but it would seem on karmic principles that it is our duty *not* to help him ... karma provides no guidance on how to act but it does have implications concerning the appropriate attitude towards successful and unsuccessful people, towards those who are happy and those who are suffering: we should applaud and admire the former and despise or even hate the latter.⁴

Such reasoning is in contrast to Buddhist thought. A discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* reports the Buddha clarifying that one's felt experiences in the present are not invariably the result of past karma, as they can also be caused by other influences, such as bodily disorders or a change of climate, for example.⁵

The *Saṃyutta-nikāya* passage shows that karma is just one among a network of conditions and does not involve some form of mono-causality. This stands in direct contrast to the assumption that all success or lack thereof is invariably explainable by karma; it certainly does not imply that those who suffer deserve to be in that condition.

It is impossible to know with certainty whether a present instance of suffering is causally related to a particular bad deed from the past. Therefore, from an early Buddhist viewpoint, when seeing someone suffering the appropriate response is compassion, leading one to try to do whatever is possible to alleviate that suffering.

Rebirth and Not-self

From the perspective of the Christian belief in an eternal soul, the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth and the teaching of not-self can easily be perceived as incompatible with each other. Given that Buddhists deny the existence of such a

soul, it seems natural for a Christian to come to the conclusion that thereby the agent required for continuity beyond the present life has also been denied.

However, this is not the implication of the early Buddhist conception of not-self. This teaching only denies the existence of a permanent agent; it does not deny continuity. Such continuity relies on causes and conditions, rather than on some unchanging entity.

An illustration provided in a discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* concerns a flame that, with the support of wind, can set fire to something that is not immediately contiguous to it.⁶ An example would be a forest fire, where even trees standing some distance apart from each other will be consumed by the flames.

Similar to the flames transiting from one tree to another without any material support other than the wind, the early Buddhist conception of rebirth envisions a transition from one body to another without any support other than craving. This is similar to the continuity of the flames, which do not contain some permanent substance, but are simply a succession of causes and conditions.

In sum, a proper understanding of early Buddhist doctrine makes it clear that the teaching of not-self is compatible with the belief of some form of continuity beyond the death of the body.

Clashing Beliefs

In the context of Christian missionary activity, it seems again entirely natural that rebirth is seen as one type of belief that needs to be replaced with another belief, which in this case is belief in an almighty god. However, the perception of the rebirth doctrine as a belief to be either accepted on faith or else rejected does not seem to capture fully the position this doctrine occupies in early Buddhist thought.

The early discourses show that rebirth was not a universally held belief in the ancient Indian setting. Some religious teachers, contemporaries of the Buddha, openly rejected rebirth.⁷ Nevertheless, the same texts do not report the Buddha checking whether his disciples believed in rebirth.

In fact, the only discourse to debate rebirth, by refuting various arguments proposed by a materialist, has an otherwise little-known monk by the name of Kumārakasapa as its main speaker, rather than the Buddha.⁸ The Pāli version of this discourse is unique in having not only several parallels preserved by other Buddhist traditions, but also a counterpart as a Jain text.⁹ It remains open to conjecture whether this is a case of Buddhists borrowing from the Jains, Jains borrowing from the Buddhists, or maybe both traditions taking inspiration from a common earlier source that is no longer extant.

An important quality in the early Buddhist path to awakening is *saddhā*, often translated as “faith,” although preferable renderings would be “confidence” or “trust.” Such *saddhā* stands more for an affective quality than a cognitive one.¹⁰ It concerns “confidence” in the three jewels, in the sense of placing “trust” in the Buddha’s claim to have awakened, in his teachings as potentially leading to awakening, and in the existence of practitioners who are on the path or have reached awakening. This differs in orientation from demanding blind acceptance of a particular belief, such as rebirth.

Right View

The outright rejection of rebirth features as an instance of wrong view in early Buddhist thought. Because right view serves as a guiding principle for the practice of the eightfold path, a complete rejection of the possibility of some form

of continuity after death could become an obstruction to progress on this path.

Right view can take two different forms. One of these two is exactly the opposite of the afore-mentioned wrong view, thereby affirming rebirth. The other formulation instead mentions the four noble truths.

This in turn would leave open the possibility that someone could adopt just the scheme of the four truths as the guiding principle for a cultivation of the eightfold path,¹¹ setting aside the question of rebirth as something neither to be affirmed nor to be rejected.

Science and Religion

Taking the position of neither affirming nor rejecting rebirth would also accord with our current state of knowledge, as we have definite and conclusive proof neither against nor in support of rebirth.

The belief that the mind can be confined to brain activities is a pervasive paradigm in modern science, which of course leaves no room for rebirth. Yet, this paradigm has never been conclusively proven. It shares the fate of other paradigmatic assumptions in science, studied by Thomas S. Kuhn in his 1962 landmark study of the *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

Such paradigms can seem so obviously right to those who operate based on them that the lack of actual proof escapes notice. It takes the accumulation of a substantial body of contrasting evidence to effect a paradigm shift, which then becomes the new orthodox framework for evaluating all evidence, just as was the case with the previous paradigm.

Due to operating from the assumption that the mind equals the brain, much of the research in neurology and related fields can easily give the impression of providing confirmation of this idea. The same impression finds fur-

ther support in everyday language, with expressions such as “this is a no-brainer,” “pick someone’s brain,” “a brain-storm,” “have something on the brain,” “to wrack one’s brain,” to be “bored out of one’s brains,” a certain person “is a scatterbrain,” a leader is “the brains behind something,” a certain location or field experiences a “brain-drain,” and so on.

Yet, the fact remains that the equation of the mind with the brain has never been conclusively proven and therefore is at present still merely an assumption. It follows that the question under discussion here is not about science in contrast to religion. Instead, a wholesale rejection of the possibility of rebirth is as much a form of belief as is its wholesale affirmation.

Understanding Rebirth

Although neither affirming nor rejecting rebirth would be a reasonable starting point for a Western Buddhist to follow the eightfold path, there is definitely a need for them to *understand* rebirth.

The doctrine of rebirth is an integral part of the early Buddhist teachings. The four levels of awakening are described in terms of their effect on future rebirths. The Buddha’s own awakening involved three higher knowledges, two of which are a direct witnessing of his own previous rebirths and of other beings passing away and being reborn.

In order to comprehend, let alone teach, the Dharma, it is indispensable that one acquaints oneself with the basic ideas and reasoning behind the doctrine of rebirth. This does not require belief but only understanding.

This much is even needed for a proper appreciation of the cardinal doctrine of the four noble truths. The second truth proposes that craving forms the condition for *dukkha*, explicitly qualified to be craving that leads to “renewed becoming”, *taṇhā ponobbhavikā*. Without acknowledging

the idea of rebirth forming the background of this teaching, such a proposition becomes difficult to understand. How can existential *dukkha*, present since conception, have a prior cause in craving?

Ignoring the early Buddhist notion that craving has been one's companion through many past lives can easily lead to the wish to refurbish the teaching on the four truths by inverting the relationship between craving and *dukkha*, on the assumption that craving can only be a reaction to *dukkha* rather than its cause. Such an inversion fails to do justice to what, according to tradition, was the first teaching the Buddha delivered after his awakening.¹²

This neatly exemplifies that, even though there would be no need to believe in rebirth out of blind faith, there is definitely a need to understand it. Such need requires in particular stepping out of the heritage of misconceived ideas promulgated by missionaries. The time is long overdue to let go of such outdated notions, which stand in such obvious contrast to the actual early Buddhist teachings.

As the preceding pages would have shown, the wholesale rejection of rebirth cannot claim to be in defense of science against religious dogma. Instead, it turns out to be rather in continuity with colonial heritage, often based on recycling erroneous ideas that originated from religious polemics.

Western Buddhists owe it to their Western heritage and scientific upbringing to examine critically Buddhist beliefs. There is no doubt about that. But they likewise owe it to their Buddhist heritage to examine critically Western beliefs.

The current ecological destruction and climate change clearly document the degree to which blind faith in Western materialist values has brought humanity close to self-destruction. The opportunity to acquaint oneself with an Asian mode of thinking that questions materialist assumptions is a precious chance for critical self-examination. It would be a shame to forego this opportunity by

dismissing offhand anything that conflicts with secular beliefs prevalent in contemporary Western society. This holds for the notion of rebirth just as for other parts of the early Buddhist teachings. Adopting a balanced approach would enable benefiting from both heritages and would at the same time exemplify the middle path approach of the Dharma.

Abbreviations

DN: *Dīgha-nikāya*

SN: *Samyutta-nikāya*

¹ On the former see Mills, A. and R. Slobodin 1994: *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief Among North American Indians and Inuit*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press; on the latter see Barnes, J. 1979/1982: *The Presocratic Philosophers*, London: Routledge, pp. 80ff.

² Young, R. F. and G. P. V. Somaratna 1996: *Vain Debates, The Buddhist-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth-century Ceylon*, Vienna: Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien, p. 82f.

³ Harris, Elizabeth J. 2006: *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter, Religious, Missionary and Colonial Experience in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka*, Oxon: Routledge, p. 50.

⁴ Edwards, Paul 1996: *Reincarnation: A Critical Examination*, Amherst: Prometheus Books, p. 42f.

⁵ SN 36.21 at SN IV 230,13.

⁶ SN 44.9 at SN IV 399,26.

⁷ DN 2 at DN I 55,15.

⁸ DN 23 at DN II 316,2.

⁹ Bollée, Willem B. 2002: *The Story of Paesi (Paesi-kahāṇayam), Soul and Body in Ancient India, A Dialogue on Materialism, Text, Translation, Notes and Commentary*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

¹⁰ Gethin, R. 1992: *The Buddhist Path to Awakening: A Study of the bodhi-pakkhiyā dhamma*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, p. 106ff.

¹¹ Anālayo, Bhikkhu 2018: *Rebirth in Early Buddhism and Current Research*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, p. 30f.

¹² Anālayo, Bhikkhu 2019: “Craving and dukkha,” *Insight Journal*, 45: 35–42.