Rebirth

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 38:40

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa.

Homage to the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I want to try and collect my thoughts around all the problems around rebirth. What I've done is put it in question form, which are the normal questions that people ask. After each question, I'll make sure that everybody's got the idea.

The first one that is interesting is what happens at death in Buddhist understanding. Actually the process—what produces your next rebirth? I'm now presuming that there is such a thing. What's going to affect your next rebirth?

It's said that when you die, some image as to where you're going to go appears in the mind. It's a product of your actions during your life. Sometimes they say it can be a strong image, an actual memory which takes you into your next life. So if you, for instance, just as you died there came this image of you squashing a fly against the window, this may take you into the deepest hells. On the other hand, catching a fly gently with the hands and showing it the window may produce a very happy realm.

We'll come to this in a minute when we come to the different sorts of realms that you can end up in. But one thing that's interesting for us as Westerners is what has been studied about the process of terminal illness. There are five states that people go through, it seems. It's been well documented. The first book written on it was called Death and Dying by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross.

Some of them you'll recognise. So when you're told, for instance, that you only have so long to live, the first thing—it's a bit of a shock, isn't it? So that's your first reaction: the shock, the horror of it. The measure of that is the measure of ourselves, the measure of our ego, the measure of how much we're attached to life.

Once the shock is over, we tend to get happier—we tend to go into a sort of magical stage, a sort of "if I do the right thing, it'll pass away." They call it bargaining. So if I eat a thousand carrots, the cancer will definitely disappear. If I pray very, very hard, God will take this disease away from me.

Then, of course, you visit the doctor and he says, "No, it's getting worse. You are going to die." The next thing is, of course, you rage. Why me? I saw this lovely cartoon once—there's a woman in bed, and there's a few friends around her, and she's saying, "Why me? Why not one of you?" Why are you saying that on

your deathbed? "Why me? Why not one of you?"

After the anger passes, there's this coming up against the reality of it. So there's no way around it now. So it's very depressing. Life's going to come to an end. If the person gets through that, then they come to that state of equanimity, acceptance.

Now just look at those. Shock, abject fear, anxiety. A sort of weird mind state where you're trying to bargain your way out of the problem using magic—running all over the world, taking this herb, that herb. Anger because it's just not working, nobody's helping you, there's no way out of the situation—frustration. Deep depression, deep sadness. Equanimity, peace.

Fear, elation—what would you call that? Excitement, anger, depression, peace. Now, if there is a rebirth, you can see if you die in any of those states, that's the one that's going to carry you. That's why in every religion they make this big effort when somebody's dying to get around them the images of their religion, which is going to make them peaceful, joyful—people giving them permission to go so the sadness disappears, singing hymns, all that sort of stuff, being with them in the last moments, just to give them that aura around them of equanimity, of peace, so that they themselves can die gently, can let go.

I think all that the Buddhist literature would say is that the image which comes to mind as you leave the body will be determined by that state you're in, that's all. And it determines where you go. If you want a full explanation of that, you can always look up the Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma on page 124, and that will give you the details.

So that's the process—it's called the death *cuti*, the death moment when you leave the body. It is going to be determined by the state of mind you're in. In Buddhist understanding, it may not particularly be that business around the illness. It could just be some big past regret that comes up. Things like that.

The next question, of course, is what happens when you die? Here, unfortunately, the Buddhist tradition gives us an option. It depends what tradition you're in as to what's going to happen to you, it seems. The Theravāda understanding, and so I'm told, Zen and those Chinese forms of Buddhism simply say that you're reborn immediately into another space, another realm, another place.

But the Tibetans have this idea of a *bardo*, where you stay for up to forty-nine days. In that state, you seem to be bombarded, or you seem to come in contact with some forms of light, figures who emanate light, who all represent the six realms. And we'll come to that in a minute—the six realms. The big one being the light of the enlightenment, of the *dharmakāya*, the body of the true law. Normally speaking, the person can't handle it, and they go for these softer lights for a different rebirth. Eventually they take rebirth wherever this soft light is. So the human realm, as I remember, it was yellow. I'm not absolutely sure. You have to look it up. Then one goes towards that light and manifests as it were through that light.

A more interesting explanation of *bardo*, in terms of our life here and now, is they talk about the in-between point between one thought and the next. Just catching that moment is meant to be symbolic of

bardo. So it's that moment of that emptiness, when the mind stops, you might say. So that's what happens at death in these two major traditions.

The next one is, of course, what are the realms of existence and how do they match what humans can experience? So, in other words, how they relate to us. Well, the six realms are hell, the animal realm, the hungry ghosts, the human realm, the angry gods, and the devas, the gods.

The hell realm, the worst of the hell realms, is reserved especially for those who've been cruel and horrible. But it really refers to, in terms of our experience, those states of mind that we ourselves would consider pretty hellish. Really delusional states, schizophrenia, deep profound depression. The big thing about a hell state, when we experience it—and all of us have experienced it in some way or other—is when we're in a bad state and just for a moment, or maybe even more than a moment, we don't think there's a way out. That's hell. I mean, if you're so depressed, if you're caught in a job and you just don't see a way out—you know what I mean? That's really, I think, the quality of hell.

The animal realm is the realm of the dull mind. So you get drunk or something like that. The problem with these two realms is that they're not very good places for enlightenment because they're too heavy. So the hell realm is obviously too painful, too deluded. And the animal realm, you don't have the intelligence. It's not possible.

The hungry ghost realm really refers to obsession, addiction, and these days we know all about them. That's really what it refers to—an addictive nature. So next time you serve yourself soup, especially when a huge desire to devour it arises, you have to warn yourself, "Oops, if I die now, I'll be a hungry ghost. I won't be able to leave this pot forever." No, no, nothing's forever.

The human realm is characterised by what we know as—in Buddhist terms, remember, everything we say is always about the liberation, always about the enlightenment—it's characterised by joy and woe, joy and woe, suffering and joy. We have this intelligence. We can make our way out, make our way out of it. That's the process, of course. *Vipassanā* is a technique we use, or in other traditions, Dzogchen, Zazen, is a technique we use to access that intelligence which is going to lead us out of this suffering. So that's specific to the human realm, you might say.

The angry gods are always fighting, always at each other. So it's obviously a place where we're angry, frustrated, whatever. Finally the devas is for the rich, the powerful and the famous. So you're just too happy, you just can't be bothered with practice. I mean, why bother when you're lying on the beach in Acapulco?

They don't particularly relate directly to these five points of a terminal illness, but it shows you that there's some relationship between that. This isn't the fullness of it. If you look at a book called The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy—a hell of a title—by Anagārika Govinda, there, of course, the later scholastics went and divided all these realms into myriad realms depending on the

particular state you were in, especially the particular absorption you were in, the particular *jhānic* state. All these different stages, these different paths, have a particular place to go to.

I don't know whether these things exist or not. Who knows? I've got this awful feeling that they're all here. They're all here around us. Just like the human realm is a jumble of hellish people, ghostly—these hungry ghosts, they're all around us here now. I can feel them, you might say.

So there we have this whole thing about the way you die, the way you're reborn. Everything that we talk about the afterlife is actually a mirror in Buddhist understanding of what you can experience in the human life. So you can say it's just a creative imagination. You can take the position of believing it—we'll come to that in a minute. Or you can take it that in fact it is a holographic universe. Everything is virtually the same. Everything contains everything else. This would go back to the idea of the Indra's net, where each jewel at the joining of each of these little ropes of a net mirrors the whole universe. So why should any other realm be really outside what we can experience here in this realm?

The next question is, what is the difference between rebirth and reincarnation? This whole thing is worked out in the Indian culture. You don't get much of this at all, as far as I know, in the Chinese culture. Of course, they believe in ancestors and stuff like that and rebirth. But in the old Confucian culture, the old ancient Chinese culture, there was obviously some idea of onward going like Christians have, but it was never worked out in any great detail, I don't think.

But the main difference between reincarnation and rebirth, between the Hindu system, shall we say, and the Buddhist system—there's a nice image. The Hindu system would suggest a string of beads. So all the beads are different, but there's this string that goes through it, a continuity, a sort of self that continues, which is steady throughout the whole of these little apparitions. Whereas the Buddhist idea would be more a line of billiard balls that touch each other. So they're all quite distinct. All arising dependent on conditions. Not entirely the same, not entirely different. But always arising, always arising, one after the other. So it's a radical transience.

The Hindu idea might give you the impression of a lump of clay which you mould into a saucer, screw it up again, mould it into a cup—the same sort of substance that's moving around. Whereas the Buddhist idea is that there is nothing that actually moves. It is more like—well, the great example of course is the body. The body itself—according to our modern science, completely changes every atom. Every atom is supposed to be changed within seven years. So next time you look in a mirror, just remind yourself: this face wasn't here seven years ago. So get back to reality. So that's the difference.

The next thing is, what are the proofs for rebirth, for reincarnation? There's a man called Stevenson who's spent his whole life going around, interviewing people, finding out about their recalls and rebirths and all that sort of stuff. Some of it is, in a sense, pretty convincing. Usually the most sharp ones come from children. Children suddenly around about the age of three to four or five suddenly remember things. There are stark examples where they've actually demanded to go and see their mother who lives in this

next village. When they take them off, they describe everybody, and they even tell how they died, and stuff like that. It's pretty heady stuff.

The other one is of course adult past life experiences where a person remembers something happened in a past life and they can sometimes prove it, sometimes prove that it actually happened. The other small thing is birthmarks caused by death. Often how you died is mirrored in the next body you get. So you get moles—and the next time you look at your moles, just say, "These must have been stabbed here in my previous life." And birthmarks. So there are things like that which are supposed to relate. Again, proven by people with past life, who then said that they were shot, and there's a mole, there's a sort of birthmark, an ugly birthmark or something, where the bullet went in, things like that.

The mark of a true past life experience, according to Stevenson and according to my understanding, is that the person remembers this past experience, re-experiences it as that person. So they're not this person. They're not actually this personality. It's as though for a moment you've become somebody else. That can happen to us in a rebirth situation in this life where a childhood memory comes up as a trauma and you remember it as that child. So that's the difference. So if somebody says, "I suddenly remember being Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo," then you can ask them, "Were you really Napoleon? Or just a memory, is it?"

There are, of course, these other reasons as to why somebody might have past life recall. The first one, and this relates to Napoleon, is called cryptomnesia. I don't know how they make these words up. Cryptomnesia. The biggest example of that that most books use is concerning a woman called Virginia Tighe. She certainly had these very vivid, clear memories of being Bridie Murphy in the south of Ireland in her past life. Described it absolutely perfectly. From everybody's understanding—this is under hypnosis, so it wasn't something conscious, you might say—it seemed to be a real proof that past life exists. Because they went there and it was there. Everything was as she said it was.

Then through an intrepid investigator they came across a certain Bridie Murphy who actually lived opposite Virginia Tighe and told her all these stories. They'd obviously sunk into the subconscious, had taken on emotional meanings and came up as a whole story of vivid images. So that unfortunately was the end of this amazing proof that there was a past life. Now that's given the whole thing a bad name, because now, well, it's just cryptomnesia. I don't know what crypto means. What does it mean? I forgot to look it up. Hidden. So it's a hidden amnesia, a hidden forgetfulness, an unknown forgetfulness. Thank you.

The other explanation, of course, from a materialist point of view, something like Dawkins or whatever, is genetic memory. So our genes not only carry just the physical nature of our bodies, but also they bring with it, like Dawkins calls them, memes. Genes and memes. So the idea is that just as you get pieces of information in your genes which make up your body, you get pieces of information which are cultural. He doesn't refer to that in the genetic structure as far as I know. It's more in the sense that that's what we do to each other. We keep giving each other these little blocks of information which we then pass on and it

builds up and builds up into a culture.

So this idea that it's within our genes is something that people might argue.

The other one is just the power of retrocognition. The opposite of retrocognition is clairvoyance, where you can see what's going to happen. Sometimes clairvoyant people really do see what's going to happen. Sometimes they don't, but sometimes they really do. So this retrocognition may be real, maybe it did happen, but it's more like a mystical ability to see into the past.

So there are your arguments against it. It depends where you are on the scale of things, as to which one attracts you.

The bad thing about the whole rebirth, reincarnation theory, we can call it theory, is that of course for the self it becomes a comforting thought. So I won't die after all. I'll keep going. Even though I might have to go through this little gate and it's painful, I will arise. And to actually turn around and just face for a moment that in fact there is no re-arising of this person, which is true. This person will not re-arise. It's a bit of a, whoa!

So to actually turn around and face the annihilation of this personality is a bit of a challenge. And it's sometimes easier to believe, well yes, the personality changes, but when I die, the changing will go on and I'll recognize me as I am, as I've always done.

And of course the other awful thing about the whole rebirth understanding is that people delay the process of their liberation, thinking, well now I'll just collect a bit of good karma, build up a good bank account, and I'll die in this lovely place, and off I go. So it's like you're delaying it, delaying it. And the whole idea of building up a bank account is based, of course, on a big ego. The very fact that you're doing good things for that ego reason undermines the whole process. In other words, you're not facing the process of liberation.

For born Buddhists, for traditional Buddhists, I would say the vast majority of lay people delay it. It's the way the vast majority of monks and nuns think. They're all building up good karma for the next life. So these are drawbacks of the belief in rebirth.

The other thing that comes across when you talk about rebirth is how do you square it up with evolutionary theory? If you look at the Buddhist scriptures they live in this ancient time of cyclic time. And this goes back to earlier times when, if you think about it, every year was virtually the same. And you did the same thing. And the society was static. For as long as you can remember and for as far as you can see, people will be doing the same thing over and over again. There was no idea of progress at all.

Progress as such didn't really come into the Western mind until fairly recently, although it was started off by this cleric somewhere around the 12th century, if I remember rightly, who, having now been 12 centuries since the birth of Christ and he hadn't returned, began to say that the time before Christ's birth

was the time of the Father. The time we're going through now is the time of Christ. And we're leading up to the time of the Spirit, when all will be resurrected. So this idea of actually going somewhere, of an aim, of an end to life, suddenly appears before us as an evolutionary process. This of course was reinforced by Darwin and all that we know these days. Although they say you can pick holes in the theory, I don't know enough about it to give you that. The fact is it's pretty convincing stuff that there's a process of evolution going on.

Whereas if you read the scriptures, what you get is the name of the past 28 Buddhas. And every Buddha has a Pali name, they have two main disciples, they go through this and it's this repetition, repetition. If you lived in those times and all you thought, considering you were, say, a farmer, working with your ox on a field day after day, no TV, no holidays, except in winter when it's dry season. You go through this, and then you have to go through these horrible old days because there's no medicine, and there may be some palliatives for pain, and people have died, their teeth are falling out. And leprosy, oh God. And the whole thing is there. When you're going to die, I don't want to come back here.

So this idea of being reborn was really quite the big thing in the Buddha's time. Everybody wanted the end of rebirth. They wanted not to be brought back as a human being, to be born into a god, not to fall down from the gods to be a human being. And it was pretty obsessive. And it actually ends up in the three great insights of the Buddha's enlightenment. That's where it's put. It's called the *Te Vidya*, the three knowledges.

The first knowledge is that he sees that the process of his rebirth has been very much according to his moral life. So whereas before the Buddha, the idea was more a chaotic reason, you just got reborn. The only way you could get out of this rebirth was through ritual, through appeasing the gods. There wasn't a close relationship with rebirth and your moral life, your ethical life. So this was an insight into the fact that it's our morality. Morality here means what is skillful. It's not just to do with killing and whatnot. It's to do with all that stuff around you, what we might call these days little neurotic patterns and stuff like that. It's the purification of the heart.

And then through his vision, he saw that this was true of all beings. So what was a personal law became a cosmic law. And the third understanding was that he'd actually completely purified his heart. Now, to be an *arahat*, to be a fully enlightened being, it's the third one you have to do. You don't have to have these other insights. So there's a small suggestion that these crept in, you might say, as part of the whole teaching around *kamma*. Part of the whole teaching around how we create kamma, the process of kamma, how it's guided by what is skillful and unskillful.

In terms of these days, does rebirth make sense? Well, I suppose if you think of it as an evolutionary process, that you're actually moving towards a liberated consciousness, a liberated *chitta*, you might say, then it is some sort of an evolutionary process. It still seems to work. It's the evolution of consciousness, you might say.

The other thing that comes across is the question about seeming inequality. I mean, people seem to die

who've been absolute villains and they seem to die in bed and fairly happy. And others who've been wonderful and good end up on the gibbet and get themselves hanged. I mean, how does that work? Well, there are all sorts of ways of trying to explain that. But one thing you have to understand about *kamma* is that our moral life is only to do with our internal, our interior life.

Of course it affects others. I mean, if I'm into stealing, that's going to affect people. If I'm into good works, it's going to affect people. But morality, my ethical life, has a direct effect upon my inner life and eventually should clear it up, should move it towards a purification. But things that happen to me on the outside, of course, are coming from other sources. I mean, it might be that I steal something and I get caught and put in jail. So that's a fairly straightforward sequence of events that I can understand. It may be that I do some little good for somebody and they turn out to be a billionaire and they give me a million pounds. So I can see how wonderful that is if you find anybody like that, by the way.

But unfortunately, suddenly you win the lottery. Suddenly you find yourself caught up in a terrorist ordeal. All these people at the moment getting kidnapped in Iraq. So obviously we live in a fairly chaotic universe in the sense that we don't know what's going to happen to us. Because there are various forces. There is the force of nature. There's the force of other people's decision-making and actions towards us. So you have to take all that into account when you think about, well, why did that happen to that person? Why did they die in this way? Why didn't they die this way? Because we're not in control of the situation we're in.

But one little example that I like to give around that is that in one of the great earthquakes, I think it was in Mexico, they found this mother and her child after something like 10 days trapped just between two blocks. And the mother had, over the period of 10 days, constantly cut her fingers in order to feed the child her blood. So presumably they were fairly comfortable down there for the time being. But it's like, that's quite something. She didn't freak out.

And finally, I suppose, a big question. Is the concept of rebirth necessary to become enlightened or to get the best out of the Buddha Dhamma? And I think you'll find amongst Western people, Western scholars and Western Buddhists, and there's one, if you look up the Journal of Buddhist Ethics on the web, you'll get some very good essays about it. The general opinion is, of course, that you don't need to believe it at all.

The Dharma itself either works now or it doesn't work at all. One sees the benefit now, here and now, *sand iṭṭhiko*, here and now, or what's the point of it? Worries about whether there is a future life or not really don't pertain to the direct practice. So the wheel of dependent origination, which is this whole process of mentation, which brings about the purification, or which upon seeing of it, the seeing of it, seeing how we cause ourselves suffering, is the process of liberation, is happening right here and now. So the escape is here and now from that. So it's not actually necessary for the Dharma to work.

And just to leave you with one little understanding that the Buddha gives in the *Kālāma Sutta*, which is a

discourse where he really talks about freedom of thought and things like that. He says well, if you live with the idea that there will be a rebirth and that your good actions here and now will produce a better life, if there is rebirth, all well and good. If there isn't rebirth, all well and good. In other words, the reason for our practice has nothing to do with whether there's rebirth or not.

So, in terms of your practice now, here, at Satipanya, this whole talk has been a waste of time. Because it's irrelevant. But it's a pleasant three-quarters of an hour.

Good. I think that's about it.

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