

Buddhist Society - Speech on Rebirth

Adeesha Ekanayake

September 19, 2011

Introduction

- Start with *Namo thassa bagavatho arahatho, etc* The translation for that is *Homage to Him, the Exalted One, the Worthy One, The Supremely Enlightened One*
- Hi everyone: My name is Adeesha and I am one of the teachers here in the Buddhist society of Ithaca College. Last week, Ron talked about Karma, and today I am going to continue that train of thought by talking about rebirth. Before I start, though, I am going to mention two things:
- The first has to do with the chant we just made. The chant is an acknowledgement of where the dhamma comes from, and I want to repeat that acknowledgement before I begin: *What I am about to share with you tonight originates not from me, but from Gautama Buddha.*
- The second is a warning: Rebirth is an idea, not a scientific concept - it might be a way to describe the objective universe, or it might be an analogy for the nature of the consciousness. Since the Buddha talked about these things a very long time ago, It is hard to get directly at what he meant, which means that there is a degree of uncertainty about what we are going to discuss tonight. If this makes you a bit skeptical about my authority to tell you about rebirth, that is perfect; I was raised in a Buddhist country as a Buddhist, and have done a lot of research, but I certainly have no fixed idea on what to believe when it comes to rebirth. As a Buddhist, though, I believe that is a good thing.

Prefer Ron's translation

cue reference to Kalama Sutta

Body

1. So, Rebirth. Let me start by mentioning the word *samsara*. If rebirth is tonight's main act, *samsara* is the stage: it is the space in which rebirth takes place. The word itself means continuous flow; *samsara* is the continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth. In the Buddhist world, it is described as a vast, vast ocean or an uncrossable stream that can only be crossed by enlightenment. Since we are going to talk about rebirth, I am going to come back to this stage several times tonight.

2. So what is rebirth? Well, it starts with the idea that after you die, you get reborn, again and again. This rebirth does not occur randomly, though: there are factors that are said to decide in which circumstances you are reborn. A principal circumstance would be what Ron talked about last week - Karma. Your Karma helps decide the circumstances of your birth.
3. I wonder if you've ever heard any of the Buddhist moral tales where the Buddha turns up as an animal (perhaps a parrot or monkey or a white elephant). I am from Sri Lanka, and I grew up on that stuff. Well, those stories raise an interesting question - *can* you be reborn as something other than a human? Well, there are quite a few of those moral tales (fables?) which point towards this. To add to them, there is also the idea of the *planes of existence*. See, according to Buddhism, there are various planes of existence; we are occupying one right now, and that would be the human world. The theravada cosmology talks about 31 planes of existence, I believe the Mahayana talks about 6. Broadly, though, they mention hells (there are hot hells and cold hells), interesting ideas like hungry ghosts and animal worlds, as well as gods and demigods. These worlds are very heaven-and-hell-esque, and in them you can see a gradient between places you are reborn in if you are bad, and places you are reborn in if you are good.
4. From here I'm going to jump back to one of my disclaimers: The idea that rebirth might not be a description of the world around us, but instead an analogy to describe consciousness itself. One of the things that makes Buddhism uniquely unsettling as a religion is the idea of no-soul. Many religions describe an *immortal soul*, which is a set of core things about you that do not change. Buddhist philosophy, however, is against that: The Buddha said that our consciousness changes from moment to moment, and that there is no part of the consciousness that will not change. So some schools of thought favor the idea that rebirth is something that applies to our consciousness; that it is reborn from moment to moment, instead of talking about life after death. Advanced practitioners of Vipassana meditation say that once you become good enough at it, that you could actually observe this process taking place in yourself. But what does that do to the heavens and hells and animal worlds that I talked about just now? Well, it is possible that those are also analogies to suffering in the real world.
5. Now, why are we even talking about rebirth like it is a bad thing? I mean, after you die, you get to be born again, right? Well, According to the Buddha, this is not a very good situation: he describes existence as a state of perpetual dissatisfaction, Which is a bad thing. Ever had a moment where you were totally satisfied? How about a full minute like that? An hour? If you are that dissatisfied in this life, how would it be if you had to go through this again and again, without end?

talk about
 niyamas if
 there is time?

6. Then what is the cause of rebirth? Well, the Buddha said that rebirth is caused by *avijja*, which is translated as ignorance. I like to think of it as lack of enlightenment. Basically, if you are unenlightened, you behave in such a way that causes you to be reborn again and again.
7. One thing that I'd like to mention at this point is a reiteration of what Ron mentioned last week: There is no Karmic police - just like the law of gravity, karmic law is not enforced by an entity. Instead, it's just part of the natural law of the universe, at least, according to the Buddha.
8. And now, to the last thing on my list: Is it real? Are we really going to be reborn? Bikkhu Bodhi, a very well renowned Buddhist scholar, certainly thinks so. In an article on accesstoinsight.org, he says that the Dhamma would fall apart if you took rebirth away from it. On the other camp, the skeptical Buddhist author Stephen Bachelor, in his book *Confessions of an Buddhist atheist*, says that things make more sense without rebirth. As for myself, I am not sure. One thing that strikes me is that rebirth (or reincarnation) was very big in the time of the Buddha. Lots of people understood it, and the Buddha was well known for putting things in terms people could understand. Quite a few ideas in Buddhism, including the idea of no-soul, are described relative to Hindu thought. This makes me feel that it would be very easy for Buddhist thought, over the years, to become infused with Hindu ideas, and I wonder if the Buddhist idea of rebirth changed as a result.

End

- So personally, I have no idea. Perhaps both ideas I talked about are true; maybe rebirth is both a description of how the universe works and an analogy for the nature of consciousness.
- I guess the one thing I do know is that we will find out when we get there.

Notes

- I wanted to talk about how the *atman* moves from one body to another, about supramundane states, and about my Buddhism is a tiered religion idea, but I didn't have space. Do you guys think I should include that somewhere in there?