

Thinking About Rebirth

February 24, 2010

Put your focus on the breath. Put aside all the narratives about today, yesterday, last month, next month, that tend to fill up your mind. For the time being, you want to be right here. There's no real narrative about the breath. There's a breath coming in and there's a breath going out. You can comment on it, but once you've commented on your last breath, you want to put that aside and comment now on the current breath coming in until things can really settle down. Then you can even stop the comments and just be with the sensation of breathing. Come to that state where everything is a Oneness. This is where we all want to get in the meditation.

So we tend to get impatient when the mind is not ready to settle down. Sometimes we think we're not supposed to think at all, that the only way we can get the mind to settle down is by forcing it down. But that's not the case. Sometimes you have to go back and dig up some of those narratives, the ones that are getting in the way. And as you've noticed, they get in the way in two ways. Sometimes they blatantly come up and the mind harries them, the way a dog harries at a bone, gnawing away, gnawing away, gnawing away. Other times, though, there are narratives that are below the surface: things you try to shove out of the way, but they won't stay shoved out of the way. They're festering someplace in the mind, and the only way you're going to get the mind to settle down is to dig them up and sort them out.

This is why the Buddha didn't simply teach meditation techniques. He also taught ways to look at the narratives of your life in terms of karma and rebirth. This is a teaching that people in the West tend to have a lot of problems with, because we don't know how to handle it. We don't know what its purpose is. We think it's just something we're forced to believe, the way our original religion forced us to believe things. But the Buddha never forced anything on anybody. He offered his teachings as aids to putting an end to suffering. And he said that the teaching on rebirth is a very skillful working hypothesis to help you understand what you're doing, why you're doing it, and also help with the narratives of your life.

He said he couldn't prove rebirth, but it is true. He said that you'll find that as you progress in the practice, you will reach a point where you actually confirm for yourself that it really is true. This isn't your only lifetime. And if you're not careful, if you keep feeding off of craving, there are going to be more.

But it's a useful framework for thinking about a lot of other issues in life as well, beside the issue of whether you're going to have another rebirth. We tend to think of rebirth as a big selfing kind of thought, which doesn't fit in with that not-selfing that the Buddha teaches. But actually it's useful for both skillful selfing and skillful not-selfing. And the teaching on not-selfing doesn't wait until the very end, when all you see are things in terms of the five aggregates, you see they're inconstant, stressful, not-self, and you let them go. Actually, the perception of not-self is the shadow side of any perception of self. When you have a definition of who you are, there's going to be something that you are not. The two go together. And the question is, where are you going to draw the line? We're drawing these lines all the time. The Buddha simply wants you to get some skillful training in how to draw the lines skillfully.

Suppose you're still young, and your sister is down the road, being beaten up by somebody else. She's inside the line of your self, she's *your* sister, so you go down to defend her. But then, when you get back to the house, you start playing together and she takes your toy truck. All of a sudden she's not your sister any more. She's part of the not-self.

We do this sort of thing all the time. We define our sense of who we are around what we want. We define our sense of what we have, what belongs to us around what we can use to get what we want. Then we define ourselves around the person who's going to be consuming what we want or enjoying what we want when we get it.

In cases like that, not-self basically covers whatever is irrelevant to that particular desire, or whatever is getting in the way of that desire. Or the things that you find you can't use in order to attain that desire. So it's a perception that we apply all the time. We're selfing and not-selfing all the time.

The teaching on rebirth gives us some good practice in learning how to do this skillfully. On the one hand, the whole idea that you can shape this life and lives into the future gives you a sense of power. It also reminds you that you're responsible. You have to make skillful decisions. So you look at this life and see: What is there that you can hold on to? What will you be able to carry over and what can you *not* carry over? You realize there's an awful lot you can't carry over at all.

What you *can* carry over are the good actions you've done in body, speech, and mind. One of the simplest teachings on not-self is the one that Ratthapala gives to King Koravya. He tells the king that the world is swept away. The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. The king objects. How can you say the world has nothing of its own? He's wealthy. He's

enjoying himself with all the sensual pleasures that a king can have. So Ratthapala asks him: Can you carry those sensual pleasures over with you into the next life? And the king says No. That's the basic teaching on not-self: There are a lot of things you can't carry over.

So what do you focus on? Well, *kammassako'mhi*, "I am the owner of my actions." You try to act in a skillful way. And the Buddha applies this to the teachings on the what he calls the *lokadhammas*, the dhammas of the world. There's gain, loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, and pain. These things come to you in the course of this life, but they're not really yours.

So you want to learn to define yourself around what real use you can get out of them. When material gain comes, you can learn how to use it skillfully so that you gain in skillful kamma, you gain in skillful mental qualities. That way, when the material gain goes, you've gotten what's really of worth out of it. Ajaan Lee says it's like squeezing the juice out of a fruit. The material object itself, he says, is like the pulp of the fruit after you've squeezed the juice out. But you've gotten the juice: the perfection of generosity. The same with status, the same with praise: If you gain status, if you gain power, can you use that power in a way that actually will leave you with some skillful kamma, with some good mental qualities?

Most people don't. Once they get some power, they want to use it for whatever. They think it's theirs, and of course when they lose their status, they get all upset that nobody pays any attention to them anymore. They don't have that power anymore. The problem was that they identified with the status when they had it. It was an unskillful way of defining self and an unskillful way of thinking about non-self. When you're praised, you have to remember to ask yourself: Why do people praise you? Because they want to encourage you in the actions you're doing. On the one hand, you have to look to see: Is this praise really worthwhile? What are they want out of you? Why do they encourage you to do that particular action? Do they mean you well? Or not? You can't just take the praise and identify, "This is me, this is what I am, a wonderful person." Because sometimes their motives are suspect.

Even when their motives are good, you have to remember it's not skillful to tell yourself, "I'm good enough as I am." They're trying to encourage you to keep on being good and to get better. When you remember that, it's a way of taking praise and using it for the purpose of developing something of value you really can take with you.

As for pleasure and pain, the Buddha has you ask yourself: What pleasures are useful? What pleasures are good for the mind? What pleasures are bad for the mind? The same with pain: There's that passage in one of the suttas where the

Buddha talks about learning how to tolerate pain. But he pairs that with a passage where he says that you also know enough not to get yourself into dangerous situations. You see a pit in your path, you walk around the pit. You don't just let yourself just fall into it saying that you're going to be patient and endure everything. You have common sense not to take on any unnecessary pains. There's plenty enough pain in the body as it is, plenty enough pain in this world as it is. You don't go out looking for it, unless you find that you're indulging yourself in a comfortable place and your mind is deteriorating. Okay, *then* you have to go out and find a place that may not be quite so comfortable. In other words, you learn how to use pleasure and use pain for the good of the mind.

So you're developing a good sense of responsibility, a healthy sense that you do have the power to shape your happiness. But you also have to be heedful. You can't just indulge in whatever comes your way that you like, because sometimes it has its hidden poisons. If you simply indulge, you're developing a lot of unskillful qualities in the mind, a lot of weaknesses in the mind. It becomes a mind that depends on things being a certain way in order for it to be happy.

The same pattern of thinking applies to other areas of life as well. You think about your relatives. They're your relatives now, but they won't be forever. As the Buddha once said, it's hard to find someone who has not been your mother, someone who has not been your father, who has not been your brother, who has not been your sister, who has not been your daughter or son. Rebirth has been going on that long.

But while you have this relationship here and now, you want to make the best use of it. Be kind to the person. Be good to the person in whatever way you find skillful, realizing that the relationship will have to end at some point. As the Buddha said, this person came into your life, or you came into their life, but you don't know where you were before or where that person was before. When they go, you don't know where they're going. Before you knew them, they didn't mean anything to you. They come into your life, they have a lot of meaning, and then they go. This is the way it is in the world.

This thought can be useful in a lot of ways. If you find yourself getting upset about the other person and really getting into huge battles with the other person, remind yourself: We're all going to die at some point, and all these issues are going to become meaningless. What you'll have left over is the karma of the way you conducted yourself. So you want to make sure that you conduct yourself in an honorable way.

This is particularly helpful when things get really bad. Society breaks down, war happens, all kinds of unfair and unkind cruel things can happen in the human

realm. And you want to make sure that you've developed qualities of mind so that you can trust yourself in those situations, that you'll do the honorable thing, and not just scramble to get a little bite to eat or be willing to kill and steal and cheat just for bare survival. Bare survival isn't worth it. Because no matter what, the body's going to die at some point anyhow.

So thinking about karma and rebirth helps you think about what really is yours, at least in a provisional sense, what you do have in your power. The five aggregates ultimately will not obey you all the time, but there are times when they do obey you. If you want your body to move in a certain way, it moves in a certain way. You breathe in a certain way and you can give rise to comfortable feelings. You can choose which way you're going to perceive things, to perceive things as self, perceive them as not-self. You can formulate thoughts, you can focus on being aware of all kinds of things that you want, up to a point. So while you have that power, try to use it well.

So there's a very strong teaching here on skillful selfing. There's important teaching on not-skillful selfing as well. The important teaching about skillful not-selfing would be to realize: This is yours for only the time being. It's not really yours. What good use can you get out of it while you have it? You have youth, you have health, for the time being. There are not a lot of disabled people who like to refer to people who are not disabled as the temporarily-abled. At some point, we're all going to become disabled in one way or another. So when that point comes, how do you want to look back on the time when you were able to use your body and able to use your mind? When the relationship ends, you want to be able to look back and say, "Okay, I used this relationship well. I used my tools well. I treated the other person well. I acted in a generous way, in a virtuous way, an honorable way."

So the teaching on rebirth is useful for developing a strong sense of responsibility, a strong sense of heedfulness, and also dispassion: thinking about the fact that everybody that you meet has been your parent, or your sibling, or your child. That way, the relationships that we tend to hold on to really strongly begin to seem to be less and less meaningful. As the Buddha says, think of all the bones you'd ever had in your bodies, all the various bodies you've had. If the bones didn't deteriorate, if there was some way to keep them, the pile would be taller than the highest mountain. When you think about that, your attachment to your body gets a lot weaker. Think about all the tears you've shed: greater than the oceans. Or even the blood that's been shed when you've had your throat slit. For what? For being an animal that they wanted kill, for being a thief that they caught

and punished. That kind of thought makes you want to get out of the whole process altogether.

So the teaching on rebirth really is a useful teaching on learning how to get good practice in not-selfing, looking at things that you tend to identify with and realizing that you can't really identify with them, can't really hold on to them as being you or belonging to you. You have them for the time being. As Ajaan Lee says, they're like things you've borrowed and you have to send them back. And in borrowing them you've had to feed an awful lot.

This is another thought that's really conducive to a sense of dismay: all the food you've had to eat, and all the creatures who've had to suffer because of your eating. Even if you're eating vegetarian or vegan food, there are all the farmers who have had to suffer to grow that food for you. This process simply keeps going on and on and on. Just that thought should be enough to make you want to gain release. It's a very strong teaching in not-self.

So the teaching on not-self isn't saved only for the very end of the practice. Just like they used to have that line of household goods, what was it? Martha Stewart Everyday? You don't have to be wealthy in order to have good things to use. In the same way, you don't have to wait till the very end of your meditation practice to get good use of this perception of not-self. Use it in the context of the Buddha's teaching on kamma and rebirth. Approach the teaching on not-self not out of neurotic hatred of yourself, but with a sense of empowerment. You really could, if you wanted to, shape things in a very good direction. And you *can* shape them in a good direction. So you want to use the things that come your way for that purpose.

But can also use these teachings for developing a sense of samvega, dispassion, that inclines the mind to want to go beyond.

So when you take these teachings and use them well, you see that they really are very helpful. They shouldn't just be tossed aside as cultural artifacts. After all, when the Buddha taught rebirth, he wasn't just picking up a belief that was already universally believed in his society. It was a controversial issue. Some people were teaching there was no such thing. Other people were teaching there was. And even when the Buddha did side with those who said there was rebirth, he interpreted it in a different way. They had the idea that there was a permanent soul that would go from one life to the next. He said that's not the case, it's a process. Look at it as a process, and you'll see that it's pretty precarious.

Just because you're a human being in this life doesn't mean you're going to be a human being in the next one. Just because you're comfortable in this life doesn't mean you'll be comfortable in the next. That's a strong lesson in what's inconstant,

stressful, and not-self. You can apply it to the narratives that you bring to the meditation. And if you apply it skillfully, you find that you can cut through a lot of the issues that are eating away at the mind.

That way, your narratives, instead of getting in the way of the meditation, lead you to want to meditate more. They clear up a lot of the issues that you've been carrying around. They incline the mind so it's ready for stillness.

So these teachings are not just cultural baggage. They're an important part of training the mind. And if you put them to use, you find that the Buddha was wise in making them part of the training.