

Lecture 5: Rebirth & Kamma

(Notes on Bhikkhu Bodhi's introductory lectures, "The Buddha's Teaching as It Is", <http://www.buddhanet.net/audio-lectures.htm>).

Part 1

Rebirth in Buddhism

Buddhism holds that there is repeated process of 'becoming', with a causal link between successive lives, but no transmigration of an enduring soul.

The mind is a succession of momentary acts of consciousness (*citta*). Because each *citta* shapes the next, there is continuity across them even without a lasting entity. At death, the body can no longer support the mental process: there is a 'death consciousness' followed by the first *citta* of a new life ('re-linking consciousness'), which inherits impressions of experience and continues the stream of consciousness with a new organism as its basis.

Analogy of the candle

- We speak of the same candle flame burning over many hours, even though it is a different section of the wick and different molecules of wax that are burning in different moments. Because there is causal continuity between moments of the flame we can speak of one flame existing over time.
- A new candle can be lit from the old one, then the old one extinguished: is it the same flame or a different one?
- From one angle, we can say the flame has been 'transmitted' from one candle to the next even though there is only a process of combustion, which now has a different physical basis—nothing has actually passed from one to the other.

The role of craving

Due to craving, the mind holds on to the psycho-physical organism (*nama-rupa*) because it is the basis for pleasurable feelings. At death, the body no longer provides this basis so there is craving to take a new one. Craving is called the 'seamstress' because it ties one life to the next.

Kamma (Skt. karma)

Literally 'action', but in Buddhism it is specifically *volitional* action.

Three 'doors' of kamma: body, speech, mind. However in all cases it is the mental factor of volition itself underlying actions that is decisive.

Distinguishing unwholesome (*akusala-kamma*) from wholesome (*kusala-kamma*):

1. Whether intention is to bring harm or benefit to self and others
2. Whether the 'roots' of action are unwholesome (greed, aversion, delusion) or wholesome (detachment/generosity, loving-kindness, wisdom)

Ten courses of negative action (*dasa akusala*):

- Body (3): taking life, taking what doesn't belong to oneself, sexual misconduct
- Speech (4): false, slanderous/divisive speech, harsh speech, idle chatter/gossip
- Mind (3): covetousness, ill-will, wrong views (especially denying the efficacy of moral action)

Part 2

Effects of kamma/karma

1. Actions can become tendencies and add up to form our character
2. The law of kamma: Actions deposit imprints on the mind which produce later effects depending on the moral quality of the kamma.

How kamma ripens

- The right conditions must be present. How we live now affects which karmas have the conditions to come to fruition.
- Kamma could ripen many lifetimes in the future.
- Kamma is too complex to be able to make deterministic statements, only general tendencies are described
- The results of karma are part of the natural property of events – results are not imposed by an external power or supervisor

Scriptural examples of karmic results

In suttas, individual differences in health, longevity, wealth, beauty, influence, powerlessness, intelligence are all mentioned as results of karmas created at some point in the past.

Which actions determine the type of rebirth? (in order of priority...)

1. 'Heavy' actions: e.g. killing one's parents
2. Actions close to the time of death
3. Habitual actions
4. Some other miscellaneous action

Three realms of existence

1. 'Sense sphere'/Desire realm
 - a. Unfortunate rebirths: hell realm, preta realm, animals, asuras,
 - b. Fortunate rebirths: 'heavenly' realms (devas), human realm
2. Fine materiality

3. Immaterial/formless realm

Fortunate rebirth

- Human existence is most conducive to spiritual practice: there is enough pain and obvious impermanence for us to become awakened to the nature of dukkha without being overwhelmed by it.
- Human rebirth results from primary for ethical conduct
- Very deep meditational absorption (jhana) leads to rebirth in the fine material and immaterial realms

Relating to the teaching on kamma and rebirth

- All the realms are outward manifestations of qualities of mind we can see in this life: their diversity is a reflection of what mind is capable of.
- The emphasis is on the 'space' in the present moment within which one can shape one's future. Previous causes can't be changed but present causes for future results are in our hands.

Kamma and liberation

- The aim of following dharma is not ultimately to have a happy rebirth but to transcend samsaric altogether
- 'The kamma which leads to the end of kamma', which comes from practicing the noble eightfold path