

All About Karma & Rebirth | Part Three of Three

Q&A with Thanissaro Bhikku

16. But how could a human mind possibly know these things? (to understand karma and rebirth work) There are two ways to answer this question: the typical way and the Buddha's way. The typical way—which has been typical from ancient India until now—is to define what a human being is, or what the mind is, and from that definition to decide what a human mind can know. If, for instance, you define the mind as just a brain, and a brain is just a bunch of atoms, there's not much that it can know for sure. But the Buddha's approach was the other way around. As he said, if you define yourself, you place limitations on yourself. So instead of starting out with a definition of the mind, he explored the skills that the mind could develop, to see what those skills could enable it to know. That's how he learned that there was a lot more to the mind than he had originally thought, and that it was capable of knowing many things that he hadn't imagined possible. By his example, he's showing how to drop some of your own cultural baggage—such as materialistic, Romantic, or Judeo-Christian views of what you are—and to try on views that will allow you to test whether he was right: by developing the same skills he did.

17. Can't I just be an agnostic about karma and rebirth, and practice without taking a position on these issues? Even though you can't know the truth of karma and rebirth prior to your first taste of awakening, you're placing bets on these issues all the time. Every time you act, you're calculating whether the results will be worth the effort. The fact that you're expecting results means you believe in the power of karma to at least some extent. Even if you deny that you're acting with any expectation of results, part of the mind is calculating that your denial will give good results of one sort or another. If you do something you know is unskillful, but tell yourself it won't matter, you're taking a position against karma. If your calculation of the results doesn't include the possibility that they could extend into future lifetimes, you're taking a position against rebirth. So you're taking positions on these issues all the time. The Buddha's simply pointing out that you'll benefit from adopting his position consciously and consistently.

18. But karma and rebirth focus on past and future. Doesn't the dharma teach us to focus totally on simply being mindful—fully present—in the present moment? The Buddha talks about the importance of focusing on the present moment only in the context of karma: You focus on the present because you know that there's work to be done in training the mind in developing skillful present intentions, and you don't know how much more time you have to accomplish that training. If you don't train it now, you'll suffer both now and on into the future. And it's important to note that mindfulness doesn't mean being fully present in the present moment. It means keeping something in mind. Right mindfulness means keeping in mind lessons from the past—either teachings you've learned from others, or lessons you've learned from your own experience—so that you can apply them skillfully in shaping your present intentions. When the Buddha discusses karma, his references to past and future almost always come back to the present. He discourages people from asking what particular actions led to their present state, or what particular future state they can expect from their current actions. Instead, he asks them to keep the general principle in mind—that skillful actions lead to good results, and unskillful actions to bad—and to focus on being as skillful as possible in the present moment, ideally for the sake of reaching awakening through the level of skill that puts an end to karma. So the present isn't divorced from the past and future in the practice. It's tied to the past and future through the dynamics of karma, and the goal of the practice is to get beyond past, present, and future entirely.

19. Why focus on issues of skillful and unskillful actions when we can instead open up to the sense of emptiness or space that already surrounds us? That emptiness is conditioned. It, too, is the result of actions—subtle perceptions, but actions nonetheless. The freedom that's truly unconditioned lies right next to our freedom of choice in the present moment. The only way to know unconditioned freedom is to get more sensitive to our freedom of choice. And we do that best by trying to get more sensitive to what's skillful

and what's unskillful in our actions. As this sensitivity develops, we'll be in a better position to judge when we're still making subtle choices, and when we're experiencing something in which no act of intention was involved at all.

21. Does this mean that awakened people have no intentions? There's no intention at the moment of awakening. But when fully awakened people return to the world of the senses, they do experience old karma. They also have new intentions, but they dissolve the potential for those intentions to yield karmic results. As the Buddha did, they dissolve the seeds as they arise. But to understand what that means, you have to gain awakening yourself!

Pali Canon | The Buddha

SN 44.9 PTS: S iv 398

CDB ii 1392

Kutuhalasala Sutta: With Vacchagotta

Question:

“And at the moment when a being sets this body aside and is not yet reborn in another body, what do you designate as its sustenance then?”

Buddha's Answer:

“Vaccha, when a being sets this body aside and is not yet reborn in another body, I designate it as craving-sustained, for craving is its sustenance at that time.”

Pali Canon | The Buddha

AN 5.57 PTS: A iii 71

Upajjhatthana Sutta: Subjects for Contemplation

Considers this: I am not the only one who is owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator; but also one who — whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.

To the extent that there are beings — past and future, passing away and re-arising — all beings are the owner of their actions, heir to their actions, born of their actions, related through their actions, and have their actions as their arbitrator.

Whatever beings do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir.' When one often reflects on this, the path takes birth.

One sticks with that path, develops it, cultivates it. As

one sticks with that path, develops it and cultivates it, the fetters are abandoned, the obsessions destroyed.

Subject to birth, subject to aging, subject to death, ordinary people are repelled by those who suffer from that to which they themselves are subject.

And if I were to be repelled by those who are repelled, that would not be fitting for me to act as they do.

As I maintained this attitude, knowing the Dhamma without paraphernalia, I overcame all intoxication with health, youth, & life
—as one who sees renunciation as rest.