



OPEN EYE

Meditation Group

See for Yourself

All About Karma & Rebirth | Part Two of Three

EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT KARMA BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK

- Thanissaro Bhikkhu

10. Other people's actions are experienced through the senses, which are shaped by your old karma.

But you say that people have freedom to choose their actions in the present. Isn't there a conflict here?

Like you, other people are free to choose their intentions in the present, but you don't directly experience their intentions. You experience actions inspired by their intentions, and how you experience those actions will be filtered by your past and present karma. Your good seeds may sprout in time to help you not to suffer from someone's bad intentions toward you, or your bad seeds may be sprouting in a way that interferes with their efforts to help you.

Lotus Bud. Courtesy of Hiroshi Wantanabe/Gallerystock.

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11. Can the Buddha's teachings on karma be divorced from his teachings on rebirth?

Not really. If there were no life before birth, karma would have no role in explaining pleasure and pain early in life. And as the Buddha said, many people are rewarded in this lifetime for doing unskillful things—he cited people who kill the enemies of a king, or who steal from an enemy of a king, or tell a lie that entertains a king—and you can probably think of similar examples in modern politics. Sometimes the results don't even show in the next lifetime—because the causal principle underlying karma is so complex.

12. But karma and rebirth are metaphysical issues. Didn't the Buddha avoid metaphysical issues?

There's no word for "metaphysics" in ancient Indian languages. The Buddha avoided two sorts of issues that we would call metaphysical—the size of the cosmos and the identity of the self—because they were distractions on the path. But because he taught a path of action to put an end to suffering, he had to explain the metaphysics of action: whether it's real, whether it

gives results, what determines those results, and how far action goes in causing suffering in the first place. If he hadn't taken a stand on these matters, he wouldn't have been able to explain how action had the power to bring suffering to an end.

13. If there's no self, what gets reborn? The Buddha never said that there is no self. He also never said that there was a self. The whole question of whether or not the self exists was one he put aside. There's a common misconception that the Buddha started with the idea of there being no self and, in the context of no self, taught the doctrine of karma, which makes no sense: If there's no self, nobody does the karma and nobody receives the results, so actions wouldn't matter. But that's putting the context backward.

Actually, the Buddha started with the reality of karma and then viewed ideas of "self" and "not-self" as types of karma within that context. In other words, he focused on seeing the way we define our sense of self as an action. Then the question becomes this: When is the activity of identifying things as your self skillful, and when is it not? When is the activity of identifying things as not-self skillful, and when is it not? Similarly with rebirth: He avoided talking about what gets reborn—which, however you defined it, wouldn't be anything you were responsible for anyway—and instead focused on how it happens, as a process. Because the process is a type of karma, this is something you are responsible for, and it's also a skill you can master: either with relative skill, reaching a comfortable rebirth, or with consummate skill, learning how not to be reborn at all.

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14. Didn't the Buddha teach people to believe only things they can see for themselves? How can people see karma and rebirth for themselves? The Buddha was very clear on the point that some of his teachings couldn't be proven until you had put them into practice. This means that they have to be adopted

as working hypotheses. A discourse on this topic (MN 60) includes teachings on topics like these: karma, the results of karma, fatalism, the experience of formlessness, and the reality of nirvana. In each case, you have to take a position on these issues if you want to put an end to suffering, so you choose whichever side seems most conducive to following a path toward that end. Similarly, when the Buddha was teaching the Kalamas to test views for themselves (AN 3.65), the test was this: When this view is adopted, does it lead to skillful or unskillful actions? So the same principle applies to the teaching on karma and rebirth: If you adopted these views as a working hypothesis, would they lead you to be more careful or less careful about your actions? A good experiment would be to devote a year to living as if you really believed in karma and rebirth, and to see how that affected the way you lived your life.

15. Didn't the Buddha simply pick up his ideas on karma and rebirth from the culture around him? It's true that the word karma already existed in his culture, but the questions of whether karma was real, whether it bore results, and whether you had any control over your karma were all hotly debated. Similarly with rebirth: Some people believed in it, others didn't, and even those who did believe in it didn't agree as to whether karma had any impact on it. So given that there was no general agreement on these topics, we can't say that the Buddha simply absorbed his teachings on them unthinkingly from his environment. Instead, he saw on the night of his awakening that people's intentional actions did have an impact on their rebirth, and that if they didn't believe in karma and rebirth, they tended to create bad karma that led to the suffering of bad rebirths. That's why he taught karma and rebirth as the major points of basic right view.

Pali Canon
On Craving and Rebirth

This sutta begins with an account of birth, noting that the birth of a human being requires not only that the parents have intercourse but also that a "gandhabba" is present. Usually in the Canon, the term gandhabba means a being on the lowest level of the celestial devas. However, the Commentary notes that gandhabba in this context means a being whose kamma enables it to take birth on that occasion, an interpretation supported by a discussion in MN 93.

By introducing a "being" into the discussion, the Buddha might be suspected of introducing a "what"

into his discussion of birth. However, on the level of dependent co-arising, the Buddha did not treat the concept of a "being" as a "what." His definition of a "being" shows that he recommended that it, too, be regarded as a process:

As he was sitting there, Ven. Rādhā said to the Blessed One: "'A being,' it's said. To what extent is one said to be 'a being'?"

"Any clinging, obsession, or craving for form Rādhā: When one is caught up there, tied up there, one is said to be 'a being.'

"Any clinging, obsession, or craving for existence, feeling... perception... fabrications...

When one is caught up there, tied up there, one is said to be 'a being.'

— SN 23.2