

Survival of Bodily Death
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The Buddhist Perspective on Survival and Reincarnation
Richard Baker Roshi

Coming from a long background in Zen and having worked with the dying at Maitri, the Hartford Street Zen Center Hospice, Richard Baker Roshi enriched the Survival conference by offering the Buddhist perspective on the issues of birth, death, karma, and reincarnation. Baker started by noting that reincarnation was not mentioned during the Vedic period in India, but was first mentioned in the Upanishads (circa 800 to 200 BCE). Buddhist perspectives on the subject developed in relation to and reaction to the strict caste system of Hinduism. Reincarnation was perceived primarily as a way of improving one's caste position.

Baker noted that as Buddhism spread out of India after the death of the Buddha, the belief in reincarnation changed depending on the region. For example, in Tibetan Buddhism, reincarnation blossomed into a highly developed doctrine central to their religious practice and way of life. However, in China the indigenous tradition of ancestor worship was not easily reconcilable with Buddhist teachings on reincarnation and so a hybrid system developed. And then as Buddhism spread to Japan through China, Japanese Buddhism, including Zen, has a less well-developed theory of reincarnation.

After briefly highlighting the history of Buddhism, Baker talked about the Buddhist perspective on karma and the dying process. One his main points was that karma is conditional, not deterministic. In other words, we are not fated to our particular lives; rather, our karma is created, and we have the opportunity to transform it in each moment and particularly at the moment of death. Baker jokingly, but seriously, said that for a Buddhist the funeral ceremony begins at birth. We start practicing with an awareness of death from the minute we are born. Each person is seen in process of simultaneously living and dying, and simultaneously being free of both.

For Buddhists, this is particularly important, because death presents us with a unique opportunity to transform our karma. Many Buddhists practice throughout their lives for the moment of dying, at which time it is possible to release many old karmic habits of mind.

Speaking to the issue of survival of bodily death, Baker said that from the Buddhist perspective what survives and is reinstated are 'dispositions' at the moment of death. Usually, the word used in Buddhism is not 'reincarnation' (meaning a new 'embodiment' of the same soul), but 'rebirth' (meaning a new birth with some aspects, dispositions, carried forward into this new birth and new body). Sometimes we say in Buddhism: "rebirth without transmigration", without the passing of a soul into another body, because there is no unchanging soul which passes from life to life.)

When we die our consciousness starts to dissolve. In Buddhist terms this is called the dissolution of the skandhas (or aggregates). And as the skandhas dissolve, we re-unite with a state of connectedness with all things. As Baker likes to put it, we are always "already-connected," and thus at the moment of death we are reuniting with the connected-ness that is always available to us. Repeated meditation practice during our life can prepare us for the special moment of death, and those of high skill are said to be able to actually influence the conditions and outcome of their subsequent rebirth.

Baker described an image to convey the Buddhist perspective on reincarnation. He said each of us is like a flame, and when we die our flame gets passed on to another so that it can burn off of someone else. A flame is always in motion. It is a continuous process of transforming energy. And so are we. Baker noted that nirvana actually means to extinguish the flame. It is to stop the passing of the flame of karma from life to life.

Having supported a number of people in their death process, Baker is particularly attuned to how a person actually leaves his or her body. Baker said that most people die from their feet and move up to the heart. Our consciousness leaves and enters from our hearts in the moments of death and birth.

Concluding his talk with a teaching from the ancient Zen master, Dogen, Baker said that in each moment we have the opportunity to complete that which appears. Not only in the moment of our physical death, but in every moment of our life. There is an arising and dying that constantly occurs. We have the opportunity to bring our conscious awareness to the moment so that completion can occur. As Baker put it, our world blossoms in the completed moment.

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