

Some Problems with Believing in Rebirth.

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I appreciate Vessantara's approach to this discussion. He's passionate, but not too dogmatic or strident. However, I'm not convinced by either the methods or the conclusions of most of the contributions to date, not even Vessantara's, though, rest assured, I personally like and admire him.

The ground is already well trampled, so how to make a fresh tracks? I want to take up Vessantara's approach of identifying problems and leaving people to make up their own minds. I aim to provide an overview of the kinds of problems that belief in rebirth causes and sketch out how Buddhists have responded in the past (most of these problems are anticipated by various traditions). I hope to show that belief in rebirth has never been straightforward, but is much less so nowadays.

It is important to stress at the outset that no Buddhist tradition has found the accounts (plural) of karma and rebirth in the Pali suttas satisfactory. Not even the Theravadins! Buddhists modified the doctrine they inherited. Mahayana schools decisively moved away from the account of karma and rebirth in the Pali texts, often inventing whole new doctrines in the process.

1. The Moral Imperative.

One of the main problems discerned by the tradition is that karma is impersonal but morality must be personal. As we know from scripture, the one who wills the actions is not the same as the one who experiences the results and (importantly) not different: "it is not he and no another". This was bought up by Abhyadevi in Feb Shabda but dismissed a bit too quickly. If I do not believe that "I" am responsible for "my" actions and that "I" will suffer the consequences, then there is no moral imperative.

This problem is tacitly acknowledged by the Jataka stories and the use they were put to. The Jatakas make explicit links between people in various lifetimes in a way that flatly contradicts most of the suttas. In the Jataka stories the one who experiences the result is just the same as one who acted in a past life. Despite the contradiction, the various early Buddhist traditions adopted the Jatakas as the main vehicle for teaching Buddhism to lay people (and used scenes from them to decorate shrines all over Greater India and beyond).

Teaching ethics using the Jatakas emphasises that our actions rebound on us personally, giving us a moral imperative to consider our actions. Motivations are tied to emotions. Emotions, on the whole, are not provoked by abstractions, but by personal experience and personal communication. A morality in which action and reward are not tightly correlated is not worth the name.

My sense is that this tacit acceptance of eternalism for pragmatic reasons when teaching ethics is ubiquitous amongst Buddhists (we do it too!). We tell different stories when it comes

to ethics and metaphysics. And for the most part no one notices. So this is a problem with rebirth that could do with some clarification at the very least.

2. Action at a Temporal Distance.

This is a problem that has exercised Buddhist minds for centuries and been one of the most productive in terms of inspiring innovation in Buddhist doctrine. According to "*imasmin sati idam hoti... imassa nirodhaa idam nirujjhati.*" when the condition for a process to be active ceases, then that process also ceases. Also according to "*cetanaa 'ham, bhikkhave, kammam vadaami*" (*Nibbedhika Sutta*. AN 6.63 PTS A iii.414) the morally significant aspect of any action is the intention (*cetanaa*) behind it. Like any mental state, *cetana* is very short lived. A mere finger snap.

When *cetana* as condition ceases, then the resultant process associated with it should also cease. So how can actions/intentions in this life produce results many lifetimes removed, long after the action has ceased? This problem is also noted by Nagarjuna in Chapter 17 of the *Mulamadhyamaka Karika* (which seems to reference the *Nibbedhika Sutta*). So for example:

If the action remains until the time of maturation, then it would be eternal;
 If it ceases, being ceased, how does it produce a fruit?
 (MMK 17.6; my translation).

I'll pass over Nagarjuna's response to this problem for the sake of brevity. Also I don't think it took off. The Theravada Abhidhamma response to this problem produced the Doctrine of Momentariness. In this view, an action produces a cascade of momentary effects that in turn become causes for further effects, and these effects ripple out from the original action until the karma is exhausted. Unfortunately connecting lives still requires a miracle.

The best known failed solution to this problem was the Sarvastivadin idea that dharmas exist in the past and future as well as in the present. Dharmas are only active in the present, but they always exist (*sarvam asti*) and are thus still available to be a condition for result at a later date.

The most popular Mahayana solution to this problem was the Yogacara idea of seeds in a storehouse, dormant until the appropriate moment. The Yogacarins invented at least two kinds of supernatural entity in the attempt, thereby making the task of explaining how karma and rebirth work significantly more difficult. The process by which seeds are stored, or when and how they mature is just as much a mystery as karma ever was.

None of the solutions satisfactorily addresses how actions can produce results in subsequent lifetimes. We can certainly produce a series of logically connected statements about the process, but we cannot explain how it happens. It is effectively an article of faith.

3. The Problem of Memories.

It's not just karma that transfers from life to life. Many people find anecdotes relating to memories from past lives compelling evidence for past lives. There are even attempts at scientific studies involving young children with apparent memories of former lives.

However, the anecdotes don't stand up to scrutiny. And the children are below school age. Testimony gathered from such young children is deeply suspect at best, and the methodologies I have seen in publications leave me doubting the whole enterprise. However, much worse from our point of view, this "scientific" evidence for rebirth points to a strong form of continuity more consistent with atman than with anatman. The child is inevitably the very same person reborn, which is problematic for us to say the least, but good news for Hindus.

But let us grant for a moment that some adults might have developed the psychic power of recalling memories from a previous life in a manner consistent with Buddhist doctrines. A great deal of research has been done on memory in recent years. Memories are tightly correlated with parts of the brain. Short-term memory in one place, long-term memory in another, and so on. We know a great deal about how brain injuries disrupt the processes of making, storing and retrieving memories.

When Alzheimer's disease progressively destroys the brain, memory processes are gradually degraded until no coherent memories can be stored or retrieved and the whole personality breaks down. Short-term memory typically worsens with age, and as 80% of the Order are over 40, I'm sure most of us have personal experience of this to some extent. One of the things we can be fairly confident of is that when the brain dies all memories stored in it are lost.

So one of the main problems for anyone who believes in rebirth in the 21st century is explaining how memories of past lives can possibly be preserved outside the healthy living brain. How are they preserved? Where they are preserved? And how do we regain access to them through psychic powers?

Buddhist rebirth would be a great deal more plausible if anyone were to be born with the ability to read the undeciphered Indus Valley script; or could show an archaeologist where to dig for a previously unknown stupa; or was born with a skill long since lost to the majority of us (like flint knapping); or if a single person remembered life as a nonhuman being such as a Yaksa, which to my knowledge they do not.

I've mainly dealt with this as a modern problem, but it is also a variation on an ancient problem. How does a previous life leave us with what we refer to as "samskaras" (what we might call behavioural memories)? The Theravadins were dissatisfied with the ways the suttas accounted for the connection between lives. In an attempt to solve this problem they invented 'relinking' (pa.tisandhi) as a function of discrimination (vi~n~naana), along with the idea of the 'stream of existence' (bhava^ngasota) to provide a more secure link between lives (See e.g. Visuddhimagga XVII 164ff). This allowed discrimination to play a role in linking important aspects of lives like temperament and biases.

4. The Buddhist Problem of Evil.

Another problem for Buddhists is that we are all born with faults. And this situation is said to be beginningless and potentially endless unless we actively try to get off the wheel.

The problem of how we got this way is left hanging. But it is one that bothers a lot of Westerners.

Some people take the Aḡaṅṅa Sutta to be a kind of cosmology, whereas it is actually an elaborate satire meant to make us laugh at theists and creationists and their crazy unsupported beliefs. But it's also at odds with evolution. We apparently evolved up, not down (if up and down are appropriate metaphors for evolution). It's hard to square the general idea of a beginningless series of rebirth with what we now know for sure about cosmology and evolution (even allowing that we are not sure about quite a lot). Modern humans evolved about 250,000 years ago. If rebirth is driven by morality, were we gradually becoming more moral to the point where human beings emerged? Or what?

Some Dharmacarins favour the Tathagatagarbha Doctrine for its statement that we are all originally pure. This contrasts nicely with the doctrine of Original Sin. But if we started off pure in the beginningless beginning, then where, how and why did we go wrong? It would be useful to know if we ever get pure again. A good doctrine of rebirth would give us a ready answer to this question. Now it may be that this is an unanswerable question, or at least only answerable with metaphysical speculation.

How does a being that is mired in greed, hatred, and delusion avoid creating the karma that keeps them in samsara. Again, this question has been one of the most productive in terms of new doctrines. If the early Buddhists had properly settled this question, their successors would never have come up with Tathagatagarbha in the first place. It is precisely an answer to the Buddhist problem of evil. Once again Mahayanists attempted solve their problem by inventing metaphysical entities (and in this case one that looks suspiciously like a soul!). Tathagatagarbha looks like another article of faith. This problem also produced a major change in Buddhist metaphysics that I will deal with separately under section 6 The Problem of Inevitability.

5. The Other Realms Problem.

The doctrine of rebirth states that there are a number of different "worlds" (loka) in which we can be reborn. These are numbered five, if we count the asuras and devas as one (which they ought to be) or six realms if we count the asuras and devas as two. The human realm and the animal realm must substantially overlap – what seems to be implied here is that one is reborn on earth as a human or an animal. The pretas are probably a caricature of the Brahmanical ancestors (Sanskrit "preta" means 'departed; dead'). I believe, but cannot prove, that Buddhists characterised pretas as always hungry because Brahmins continued to offer sacrifices to their ancestors, much as Chinese Buddhists do today. And there is Hell, which may not have come from Brahmanical cosmology, and is not described as a loka.

So where are these realms? Although we can more easily relate to them as psychological states, the texts we're citing take these realms literally as rebirth destinations. Hell is supposed to be below the earth (earth being flat). Ancestors, devas and asuras live above the sky. How plausible is any of this? Not very.

For those who embrace the Mahāyāna cosmology the situation is even more complex. Akshobhya, Amitabha and other buddhas live in parallel universes (because of the restriction of one Buddha at a time in any given world-system). Of course some modern cosmologists

have postulated a variety of many universe theories, though to the best of my knowledge communication between them is still considered impossible.

Other minor questions constellate around this one. For example, who is Yama the king of Hell? How did a deva get to Hell? How can Yama and co torture beings in Hell and apparently not themselves be subject to karma? Why does one seem to have a human body in Hell? And many more.

Our Order typically tries to steer clear of such theological questions, or treats them as mythological questions. The latter reduces rebirth itself to a myth and I think many people want it to be a bit more substantial than that.

6. The Problem of Inevitability.

In early Buddhist text the ripening of karma is absolutely inevitable. In Buddhaghosa's writings, the term "kamma-niyama" means precisely that the results of actions are inevitable and unavoidable. This is the idea in Dhammapada v. 127 and in the last part of the Angulimala story when he is attacked and injured by irate relatives of his victims. The results of karma can be mitigated by religious practices that make us more resilient, but one way or another, karma catches us up.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, but perhaps involving the Buddhist Problem of Evil, the criteria of inevitability was dropped. In mainstream Mahayana, the effects of karma are not inevitable, but can be avoided through religious exercises. We can see this in for example the chapter on karma in Santideva's Siksasamucaya. Furthermore, bad karma can be completely eliminated by chanting the Vajrasattva mantra.

A very small number of Buddhist scholars have noticed this change and only since the late 20th century. I may be the first to begin exploring its implications. It's a very new field that I'm trying to open up, so I don't expect people to have well formed opinions on this question. I'd be interested to know what people make of it. There's a draft of an article that is being peer reviewed at the moment:

https://www.academia.edu/2379399/The_Inescapability_of_karma_-_draft

Karma is the main determinant of our rebirth destination and one of several factors that determine our experience in any given birth. If karma can/cannot be avoided what are the implications for rebirth?

7. The Matter/Spirit Duality Problem.

Many of us accept the idea of disembodied consciousness. So when a person dies we have no problem accepting that their consciousness stays around the body for a period, or exists in a bardo state, or provides the continuity between lives. For believers, the death of the body does not impede perception and consciousness (cf Vessantara's citation of the Pañcattaya Sutta).

Of course, we are all able to trot out the arguments against a fixed self. After all, a disembodied consciousness need not be unchanging. But ontological dualists often have definite opinions, like: “no amount of studying matter can shed light on consciousness.” They argue for an absolute distinction between mind and body. This is just a speculative view. And it’s not a very plausible view any longer – as Dhivan says “...no contemporary philosophers suppose that consciousness can exist without a brain”. Plenty of religious people do suppose this. Some Triratna people too.

The attraction of a mind/body dualism is that it solves problem number one – the connection problem. Any kind of afterlife belief requires a way to establish or maintain continuity between this life and the afterlife. A disembodied consciousness does the job nicely. The fact that suttas deny it, did not stop Theravadins from adopting a form of literal continuity as discussed above.

It’s not enough to invoke conditionality. Just saying that “consciousness arises in dependence on causes” is not an explanation. What we tend to say boils down to this: someone dies; then a miracle happens; and then consciousness appears in another being somewhere else. We just gloss over the miracle.

Consciousness is never an entity in early Buddhist texts, it is always a process, and always consciousness **of something**. When we treat consciousness as an entity we are projecting a Western notion into Buddhism. In dualistic view consciousness is an entity made of non-material stuff that can float around – with full faculties of perception and cognition – separated from the body. Yet we know what happens when we remove someone’s eye or their visual cortex is damaged – they cannot see.

We’re willing to accept a somewhat compromised version of spirit or soul in order to account for the connection between lives, i.e. disembodied consciousness as external hard-drive, but the metaphor is easily stretched beyond the limits of credulity. All scientific evidence points to the implausibility of disembodied consciousness, none points to plausibility. There are now naturalist explanations for experiences that suggest that our consciousness leaves our body, which do not involve mind/body dualism. Many of these experiences can now routine be reproduced in a lab using electro-magnetic stimulation or drugs.

All this casts doubt on any kind of afterlife. This means that this life might well be our one and only life. And yes, OK, this is a disturbing thought. Not many people are comfortable with this idea. It seems to be denied by some Pali texts, though mostly the suttas are making the point that we ought to stop speculating about the afterlife.

8. Rebirth as a Second Chance.

The Pali Canon is pretty unequivocal on the nature of rebirth. It equates birth with “this whole mass of misery”. Pali texts **never** present rebirth in terms of a second crack at the wheel. Rebirth is a terrible burden to be put down without delay. While Vessantara sees rebirth optimistically, the Pali texts are unfailingly pessimistic about it. Rebirth is something to be avoided at all cost. Indeed, it’s better not to even think in terms of rebirth because it will be likely to lessen your determination.

If we fail to be liberated from rebirth there is no guarantee we will get another chance. A human birth is said to be as rare a chance as a turtle that pops its head up once a century, managing to pop up through a ring floating at random on the great ocean. In terms of the sutta tradition, invoking rebirth as a second chance is reckless.

According to the Pali texts, far and away the best mode of life is that of a bhikkhu(ni). But, then most people aren't that serious so the best we can hope for is a fortunate rebirth, which is pretty unlikely! And if we are aiming for a fortunate rebirth, the Pali texts say that the best way is just to support bhikkhu(ni)s. According to the Pali texts we ought to seek ordination as bhikkhu(ni)s or busy ourselves providing meditation huts, robes, and food for those who are ordained!

Obviously, I'm not serious, but my sense is that people citing the Pali Canon in support of arguments about rebirth are a bit too serious. How do we decide what to take seriously, and what not to? My feeling is that we ought not to see rebirth as a good thing, nor to treat it as a second chance for getting enlightened. If we really believed in rebirth in the way the Pali texts portray it, I think most of us would be much more motivated to get away from it. We'd want not to believe in it. We'd reluctantly acknowledge it but not want to talk about it – like all those men who came back from the war but could not talk about their experiences. The thought of rebirth would choke us, freeze our bones, and stop our hearts. But we're not like that. Most of us really like the idea. Welcome it. Embrace it. Endorse it. Even get miffed when it's denied. The word for this is bhava-chanda 'desire for being'.

9. Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Buddhist tradition has always, so far as we can tell, taught various versions of rebirth and linked them to various versions of karma. Even the Buddhist objections to views on rebirth are complex and contradictory. Once we take into account the European Enlightenment, things start getting out of hand. Thus, I hope I have made the point I set out to make, i.e. that belief in rebirth is not a straight-forward proposition. That it entails embracing doubtful metaphysical speculation, and so on.

These are not necessarily reasons for disbelieving rebirth. These are simply the problems left unsolved by previous generations of Buddhists that present day proponents ought to tackle to be credible and persuasive.

Too many people say they believe in rebirth because it "makes sense". This is precisely the argument that all religious people make for their own beliefs – it's why Mum believes in a loving God in heaven. Common sense is all too often simply what we feel comfortable with; what we desire to hear.

My experience of discussing rebirth is that the objections to naturalism are still rather ad hoc and unsophisticated. So few of us are educated in the sciences, let alone have experience of practising them, and thus we're really not in a position to evaluate what scientists are saying. And we say the same about scientists and Buddhism, yes?

Vessantara has pointed out that the consequence of doubting the metaphysical speculations of Iron Age Buddhist texts will be a major rethink of Buddhism. Well, it wouldn't be the first time. And even if we don't doubt our belief-system would seem to need an overhaul.

It's worth repeating that *not even the Theravadins* found the account of karma and rebirth in the Pali suttas satisfactory. I've mainly dealt with the issue of authority in passing, but we could do with some clarity on what the Pali texts represent. What they are probably not, is the word of the Buddha. As one wily scholar has pointed out, where we have archaeological evidence for Buddhism, it inevitably contradicts the texts. Also, so far as I can see, no one is arguing for rebirth on the basis of personal experience or from having become a tathagata. So all our views are second hand at best.

Can anyone produce a theory of rebirth that covers all these points? If they can, I've yet to see it.

It is de rigueur in our Order to seal one's point with a quote from a poet. Instead, I hope to create a new fashion by citing a piece of prose from a scientist of the most profound genius:

"Science – knowledge – only adds to the excitement, the mystery, and the awe of a flower. It only adds. I don't understand how it subtracts." – Richard Feynman.

I've written extensively about karma, rebirth, and related issues on my blog: <http://jayarava.blogspot.com>. A sort of summary of my personal view on rebirth can be found in an essay there called: "Rebirth is Neither Plausible Nor Salient." (27.1.2012).