Chapter 4

Karma and Rebirth

The Importance of Kamma and Rebirth

by Ajahn Sona

I'd like to speak about kamma* and rebirth. More particularly, rather than exploring the details of how kamma and rebirth "works," I will talk about historical Western attitudes to this idea, and address some important reasons for believing in it. I'm interested to integrate the traditional idea of kamma and rebirth into our modern views. To do so, I'll keep one eye on popular culture in the twenty-first century and (as a Theravada Buddhist) the other on the fifth century BC. I'm being somewhat brave because very few Western monks want to talk about this. How many Western monks have you ever heard give a talk about kamma and rebirth, except as a poetic attempt to explain it, or in psychological terms that would correspond to certain mental states? But I'm a very dyed-in-the-wool, traditional Theravada Buddhist and the nature of kamma and rebirth is the centre of the Buddha's teaching. No kamma, no rebirth – no Buddha's teaching! Therefore, I like to be bold about this, and say I *do* believe in rebirth and I *do* believe in karma in a very literal way.

It's good and refreshing to discuss this matter. Many teachers pussyfoot around this and for good reason. Why? Because it's not part of the history of Western thought. But if you look around, some of the most brilliant thinkers in the West don't have trouble with the notion of kamma and rebirth. Some don't find it to be illogical. In fact they actually favour it, although, as we are often wont to do it in the West, they usually modify it in their own way. Perhaps people like us, from the Western school system, often have more of a problem with rebirth than with kamma, but these two go hand in hand. I don't believe that you can make a sensible argument for kamma without rebirth.

First, I'll talk about why there is a tendency not to believe in this. Why would you have an assumption or a preference either way, especially in a post-Christian society? I could understand if you were a nineteenth century Catholic, but now many people don't think of themselves as Christian or particularly religious. Yet we have a way of thinking about things, and this way of thinking often goes unquestioned. There's huge residue in our structures of thought and logic and conviction about all kinds of things that are the result of 2000 years of Christianity in the West. We are in a sense like fish who are very surprised to discover that we swim in water. Because it's always been there, we often are not aware of the water of our intellectual environment. We're swimming in an intellectual environment – in the midst of myriad assumptions and suggestions – that has been handed to us.

One of the reasons why people are surprised at the idea of kamma and rebirth is that no authority figures in their life ever discussed it – their grade nine chemistry teacher didn't raise the issue, nor did their grade eight social studies teacher, or anybody else in their school system. Even if you think you are an independent thinker you'd be surprised how influential those twelve years of authority figures are. And then you go to university and there's no serious thought given to the matter there,

either. Of course, you will get a history of Western intellectual ideas at university but very rarely will you find kamma and rebirth brought up. If your parents don't discuss the matter then it's likely that no authority figure in your whole life has discussed it, so it's not surprising that you'd be a little bit suspicious of this idea. I relate to my own experience, here, because when I started university I started in philosophy and I think the notion of rebirth came up – but I immediately dismissed it. Many reasons came to mind. I'm very interested to look back on it, now, because I have a very powerful conviction that this – kamma and rebirth – is in fact how things work. What I'm interested in is why I thought I had such clever reasons for dismissing it. As I look back, I realize that in a sense each person is really *in* a culture. You could say that we are somewhat culturally *hypnotised*. This is true for all cultures. That is, all of us to some degree – unless you're a very type of special person – are culturally subject to suggestion from our culture. Hypnotism works through a suggestion, and we're all somewhat suggestible, so it is not surprising that when a large mass of people and everything you see in the media etc., suggest certain ways of thinking, we tend to be deeply influenced by it. It is not just a matter of even-handedly receiving and sifting through everything that comes from your parents and the media and everyone around you.

Remember that slavery was abolished in the United States just a century and a half ago. The idea that very few thinkers in the United States before the 1860s really had a problem with human slavery is most astonishing, amazing! What is also very interesting is that you find thinkers who *did* have a problem with it. They were born and raised in their societies and given the same kind of misdirection, and cues. Yet when they reached an intellectual age in their late teens or twenties somehow they began to see, "These people who you are holding as slaves are fully human, you know. They really aren't a different species at all! There's something terribly wrong here." It's a very peculiar thing to awaken from hypnosis, surrounded by a sea of people in a hypnotic state. One of the people I like to read is Henry Thoreau who was an adult roughly from the 1830s to 1860s – before the abolition of slavery. When reading him on slavery you find he reacts just like we would. It's like he's living in the wrong time; he's a very modern person: *What in heaven's name is going on? Are you crazy?* … How did he escape the conditioning? By the way, I should mention that although he lived at that time in the middle of the United States when there weren't any alternatives to Christian ideas, Thoreau also had no problem with rebirth and karma. So, independent thinkers occasionally do arise. They are somehow able to examine current attitudes in a dispassionate way, to see through such concepts, and to go beyond the hypnotic influence of their prevailing culture.

Then again, it is surprising how suggestible some of the very famous thinkers in history have been when it comes to certain opinions. They're very clever and free-thinking, and what we agree in later ages to be far ahead of their time, but they do have their weaknesses. For instance, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle didn't have a problem with slavery. Many well known people throughout history didn't have a particular problem with slavery. Even Christ didn't object specifically to it, saying, *Slaves obey your masters*. But it's interesting that the Buddha did have a problem with slavery. Over 2500 years ago he identified the ownership or traffic in human beings as one of the types of "wrong livelihood." He was also critical of the notion of caste in Indian society, and introduced a non-caste structure into the Sangha (monastic community). In addition, the Buddha accepted women as full participants in the holy life. Such instances reflect an amazing capacity to look beyond the prejudices of social conventions and ideas.

I'm bringing up these examples to encourage reflection on your own life and beliefs and political ideas, and to urge you to inquire: *Why do I think what I think? What's really going on here? Is it my mother or father, or the TV set, talking through my head? Am I really thinking for myself? Have I really examined these ideas?* These are important questions.

It is often held that the Buddha simply inherited the idea of rebirth or kamma from his culture, and that he chose not to dispute it in order to communicate other, more important, elements of his teaching. Many early investigators of Buddhism tended to assume that rebirth did not take place in any literal sense. In their reading of his teachings, the Buddha – whom many admired as a great psychologist and ethicist – referred to kamma and rebirth for one of two reasons. Either the Buddha was speaking figuratively, because he knew that rebirth and kamma did not occur but thought it was a valuable teaching to get people out of suffering, or he had uncritically absorbed this attitude from his time and culture. Perhaps we come across these assumptions less commonly nowadays but one frequently encounters them in early Western presentations of the Buddha. Yet when you read through the entire Pali Canon and its commentaries, and examine the history of that time, you see that these modern interpretations hold no water.

The fifth century BC is one of the richest centuries in all of history, certainly the most influential century to date – far more so than say the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. There's no question if you compare it. Who was alive during the fifth century BC? Sometimes I like to ask people: *how many people can you name from the fifth century BC, quickly*? You can probably name a few from the nineteenth century like Abraham Lincoln but how many can you name from the fifth century BC? You might be surprised: Confucius, Lao Tzu, Socrates, Plato, the Buddha. The twentieth century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once observed, “All of Western philosophy is a footnote to Plato.” Whether it's true or not, we're obviously still talking about Plato and we've forgotten many thinkers who came in between. It’s remarkable how we’re still playing out those ideas from the fifth century BC. I sometimes give talks in high schools and once I was speaking to six classes of Grades 8s in Penticton, BC. There were 180 of them, and I asked them “How many of you have heard of the Buddha?” Remember, this is in a non-Buddhist country 2500 years after the Buddha, and eighth-graders are not known for their learnedness in history. Yet all but *one* had heard of the Buddha (and I think she just wanted attention!). I asked how many had heard of Socrates. Five. This is amazing because it's not being pushed on every street corner or anything. I heard a story about one of Ajahn Viradhammo’s students who was a photographer. One day he was in a church to take some photos, accompanied by his twelve year old daughter. She had never been in a church before and was wandering around looking at everything. After a while she came up to him and said, “Dad! There's a guy up there who's been shot!” Looking at the wall, he said “What?! You know what this is!” - “Well he's shot or something; he's bleeding out the side,” she explained. “Don't you know what that is?” he said, “That's Jesus!” She had never heard of him. We take this for granted, but unless you're deliberately exposed to the story it's possible to be twelve years old, and never hear of Jesus!

To return to my point, more or less the whole range of possible views that we have received through Western thinkers was available and carefully examined during the Buddha’s time. The fifth century BC was a rich century that contained some very bright people with all kinds of interesting ideas. As a result, the notion that everyone in India during the Buddha’s time believed in rebirth just isn’t true. The Buddha was in regular debate with various people around him who didn’t think such things. For instance, he explicitly examines and argues with what are traditionally called “teachers of six different schools,” which pretty well covers all the possibilities. One school, the materialist, or annihilationist, school is precisely what many people believe in modern times. That was a well known course of thought in that time. What is an annihilationist? That is a person who believes that a person lives, eventually dies, and that's it. It's finished. The Buddha was very familiar with this view and he explicitly rejected it. He said, “This is a false doctrine. I do not believe this.” There were people who held the view that your life is predestined; they considered free will an illusion and that you were completely conditioned and predestined. He rejected that view. There were those who claimed that what happened to you in life

was without cause – completely chaotic and random. He rejected that view. Also the notion that external forces completely control the way you think. He rejected that view. Another view held that you could influence your life by rituals, in other words, that you could change your fate by ritually influencing a god through some means or another. The Buddha rejected that as well.

We're starting to go through most of the possibilities in life. Of course, the big fork in the road is: you die or you don't, right? So that's the first big fork in the road. If you decide that you just die, then there's no more discussion. There aren't too many variations with this, nothing to talk about. There's not two ways of annihilation; there's only one way. But if it's possible that you persist after death, there are several interesting variations. For example, some people believed that you persist but your present life has no influence on the quality of the life after death. What you thought or did or said in a life had no relevance or effect on the life that follows. Other possibilities are that it has a complete conditioning effect, or only a partial conditioning effect. All of these views were examined by the Buddha as well.

There is an early Buddhist discourse that offers a very detailed examination of virtually every possible mode of thought that you can find examined in philosophy, up to the present. It's called the *Discourse on the Great Net of Views, the Brahmajala Sutta* in the Longer Length Sayings (*Digha Nikaya*). The Buddha says that the sixty-two views he describes and examines comprise all the possible views. In this discourse he recounts them systematically, examining the faults and inconsistencies in each case. So, again, the notion that the Buddha just drifted along with the general thought of the time – that is, that he was an uncritical product of his culture – is *way off*.

Nevertheless, this has been proposed, especially by some Western lay teachers who have an admiration for the teachings of the Buddha but do not have very much knowledge about the suttas themselves. They may have never read what he said. Because knowledge of the teachings of the Buddha is not widespread in the West teachers could once easily get away with this. As time passes, though, more people in the West are becoming informed and there are more lucid and accurate translations of what the Buddha said. People are reading it for themselves. It's no longer enough to have been on one's first six week retreat in Asia, then to return as a fully qualified teacher. It doesn't go that way anymore because people know a little bit more. I find that some of the Western monks are now very well educated and thoroughly knowledgeable about the suttas and they are trying to correct some of the misapprehensions that have been passed off in the West. The ones that I'm more impressed with are talking about the nature of kamma and rebirth as a literal idea of the Buddha.

Then again, I fully understand why there should be resistance to teaching kamma and rebirth as literally true. When you're trying to present this to people you recognize that in our culture there's going to be a strong resistance to the notion – people have just never heard about it, so they will naturally struggle with it. In addition, there is great benefit to meditation. Psychologically it's such a relief from suffering. It can be admitted that you don't have to believe in karma and rebirth to get a lot of benefit, psychological relief, from these marvellous techniques created by the Buddha. Therefore it's not difficult to see why, when presenting Buddhist teachings, a teacher might want to avoid a lot of initial resistance in order for people to begin to receive some benefit from the practice.

The Buddha himself often presented his teachings this way. If he felt that an audience would be highly resistant to some notions, he set them aside. He said, in effect: *It's like a smörgåsbord that I'm offering you. Eat whatever you like. If you just like olives, go for the olives. I'm just happy for you.* It's like being a kid where you don't want to eat certain things. Eventually, though, you widen your palate. You realize: I've really missed out on some good stuff. In a sense, the Buddha is just a kindly person who knows

human nature and is very compassionately interested that people benefit in any way they can. He realizes that the mind shuts down on certain things but is open to other things, so the Buddha employs what are called skilful teachings. skilful teachings require a certain degree of assessment. A teacher needs to find out what might be useful for an audience. I find in my own experience in the West and inquiry into the history of teaching in the West for the last 40 years, that there's a degree of "spoon feeding" that often occurs, hoping not to upset anybody by mentioning certain things. That works for a while, but at some point you have to respect people, particularly the boomer generation who now are about 45 to 65. Which is to say that if you don't offer it to them now, I don't know when you will be able to do so. As a result, it is important that one present the full range of the Buddha's teachings in a very straightforward way saying, *you may have heard some of this in your meditation course and you may have just enjoyed the breath and so forth but, really, there is another, larger dimension to these teachings which are intrinsically important*.

Why should we introduce kamma and rebirth if one can get benefits from meditation without taking these ideas on board? Because the benefits of meditative techniques – for instance, the cultivation of loving kindness, compassion, and altruistic joy – are profoundly useful and helpful at a social level and healing to the individual's psyche but in themselves they don't offer enough. You might say that there isn't enough "fuel" within these practices to push you to enlightenment.

Remember that the Buddha was interested to come to the end of suffering. What did he consider to be suffering - just aches and pains in this life? What was the Buddha's problem with suffering? Why was he so disturbed about aging, sickness and death? Particularly if it's *over* when you die… that's not that so bad! What could be the problem? The reason is that he did not think you simply die. The problem is you just get born again because you haven't understood the nature of your drives, what drives you through existence. He asks us, what is the cause of suffering? Old age, sickness and death, grief, sorrow, lamentation? Is that what the cause is? No, that's what suffering is; that's the first noble truth. The cause of suffering is attachment, so even if you could superficially treat aging, sickness, and death, that's not going to ease suffering. Then again, from an annihilationist point of view, if the cause of suffering is attachment this should end when you die, right? But the Buddha pointed out that we don't get over attachment by dying. We have to uproot it with wisdom.

The four noble truths – that there is suffering, that there is a cause of suffering, that there is an end to suffering, and that there is a way (the eightfold path) to the end of suffering – don't have any coherence if you do not include the notion that the real problem carries on beyond this life. If death was the end of suffering you wouldn't need an eightfold path. You would just die and (or, *so the thinking might go*) maybe the sooner the better. Indeed, this is one of the repercussions of a strongly held annihilationist view. One might think: *well, it's starting to get painful here – I think I'll just end my suffering*. That's an argument that has been percolating through society: euthanasia might be a good idea, a very accessible and easy way for one to die and get over suffering. A compassionate person might advocate this. Why does the Buddha so object to this conclusion? It's relevant to note that Buddhist monks are forbidden to advocate suicide to anybody, even for compassionate reasons. If a monk does suggest the idea, and someone acts on it, that monk is immediately disrobed and can never be a monk for the rest of his life. That's how seriously the Buddha views this suggestion. Buddhist monks are supposed to be compassionate so why would the Buddha forbid them from making this suggestion? Why does he object to euthanasia? *Because such compassion is based on the idea that death ends suffering.*

It's built very deeply into Buddhist teaching that death is not the solution to suffering. Therefore kamma and rebirth have vital repercussions beyond what you might think. These realities affect all kinds of

political discussions and sociological views about how life works and what the best way to deal with society is, and so forth. Belief in kamma and rebirth will shape your entire view of life. I don't see any other viewpoint that gives meaning to life like kamma and rebirth.

Some people say that religious people who believe that you persist after death have wishful thinking – they're actually afraid of death and they just make up a story because they just can't face the truth. But actually, many religious people would argue just the opposite; they would say that death-as-the-end would actually be easy. You would just die and that's it – no responsibility for your actions and no further suffering, no worries. That is not a difficult possibility to face. The idea that when you die, it's over, is not *at all* a courageous conviction – that's the easy conviction. That's why it's appealing. People would prefer to not worry about it. It would be so nice if nothing that I did in my life mattered one way or the other. I would be off the hook; I wouldn't have to concern myself about this. In fact, there's a strong temptation to take up the view that death is the end because there's no responsibility.

Conversely, the view of continuation after death leaves you with responsibility – or at least the possibility, because there are two kinds of views here: One possibility is that what you did in life will have repercussions after this life. The other is that there is continuation but there is no moral connection between this life and the next. You can see that the second view undermines responsibility. If there is no connection in the next life with your actions in this life, it tends to make this life a little absurd. Whatever you do doesn't matter.

The Buddha criticized a contemporary teacher who held this view in a very strong way. This teacher denied the moral results of actions. He taught that if you slaughtered beings on one side of the Ganges River and caused others to slaughter, and then gave out gifts on the other side of the Ganges River and caused others to give gifts, there would be no moral result to either of your actions. None. We might ask what would motivate a person to teach that? If nothing matters why does he care? The Buddha was well aware of this view and utterly rejected it. The Buddha is a very rational, logical thinker, and he finds it unskilful to believe that the events in your life are meaningless, that they're causal but lack any intrinsic moral dimension. It's as if something falls on your head then gravity caused it, but there's no other reason beyond that. That's a very common view these days as well: that things happen for a reason but not one with any kind of moral dimension. The Buddha is saying, *no: physical laws are not removed from moral laws.* There is a complex interrelation among the laws of kamma, cause and effect, psychological laws, biological laws, and physical laws. It's very complex but there is intrinsic meaning to it all. He's holding that psychological wholeness is missing if you do not see that intentional ethical actions have consequences, and that what happens to you in this life is a result of previous ethical actions. If you remove the vital dimension of meaning, this creates a dizziness in life, a psychological sense that life is slightly absurd and meaningless. Your inner being feels a deflation or vertigo. There's a famous novel by Satre called *Nausea.* What is the cause of that nausea? One of the pervasive feelings dominant in the West, with science, is that what you do is not meaningful, it doesn't have any consequences. When this hits the psyche it has a dizzying effect, a feeling that you're in a completely directionless vacuum – that nothing means anything. One of the things to ask, here, is, if this – the lack of moral consequence – is true, why would you care? After all, in a non-moral vacuum, the door is open for one to reject the truth as well. If the truth is that nothing matters, why would one think the *truth* matters? In response, you may jump to the conclusion that it's important to know the truth. But it can only be important if the truth implies that it's important to know the truth. If not, who cares?

The truth is not something abstract; it's not separate from a sense of meaning. That is what the Buddha said again and again: "I don't always tell the truth, but I don't tell a lie. I only say what is true and

beneficial." If the truth is not beneficial then why say it? Do you want benefit or truth? I'll take the benefit any day. And again, if there are no consequences to any action, what is the problem with a false view? Why would you insist on truth?

This is what the Buddha actually says to a group of intelligent questioners known as the Kalamas. They asked him to provide good criteria to distinguish between the conflicting truth claims made by various teachers of the day. The Buddha pointed out that no reward could possibly be derived from the belief that death is final. None at all. This is because if you're annihilated you can never find out you were right. But what happens if you're wrong? *Bad mistake.* For one thing, you've experienced nausea and confusion in life owing to your conviction that nothing is meaningful. So the Buddha urges his listeners to bet heavily on moral meaning and continuation – kamma and rebirth. Note that he is not suggesting that one claims knowledge one doesn't have. Rather, he's saying that to have the *conviction* is utterly health producing.

The conviction that everything you do and think and say is consequential and meaningful is not lost in the universe. What happens to you in life is not random, bizarre, or irrational. It is meaningful and governed by causes in the ethical dimension, not just the physical. Bet heavily on this. The consequences of being wrong are nil, literally nil. If you are annihilated you cannot *talk* about the meaningfulness of life. All of the actions you have done would just dribble off into nothingness. There are all kinds of people in prison who have done terrible things, and there are people out of prison who have done terrible things who, in this life, are not experiencing any consequences related to those events. On the face of things, it's very hard to make any sense of it. It's simply not the case that things always work out justly in this life. So take that sense of meaningfulness seriously; most people don't think about this very much. Instead, most people seek happiness, even though they often don't do it skilfully. So the Buddha is proposing an overarching, ultimate view of reality called kamma and rebirth.

'Kamma' means that every intentional action has a consequence and that this life is but one in a series of lives without conceivable beginning. Only with this view can you come to a comprehensive sense of structure in life. Anything short tends to be diminished in terms of a deep structure of meaning, perfect symmetry, and lawfulness. That's why you want to go beyond meditation techniques like the cultivation of loving kindness, or serenity and concentration developed through breath meditation. These techniques are very powerful and contribute directly to your emotional and psychological improvement, yet they will only go to a point and then stop because the energy that can drive them any further is absent. The energy needed to propel one's practice beyond this is a conviction – not the knowledge but the *conviction* – of kamma and rebirth. It's the only thing that drives practice beyond, which is why it is vital on occasion to really think about this subject.

There are many good talks on meditation and so forth but I very rarely have heard a straight talk on kamma and rebirth, even in monasteries. It's good from time to time to really think about it, not tippy toe around it, and to realize that it really is a very important dimension of the teachings of the Buddha – something he teaches again and again. It doesn't mean that you have to try to force it on everyone who walks into a mindfulness course. This is not skilful. You have to assess your audience. But it is also not skilful or honest to pretend that it is not a part of the teaching of the Buddha, because some people in that audience may have the capacity to really intuit these ideas, and this conviction can push them to a new level of understanding, wisdom, and well-being. I happen to be one of those people. I'm really glad that somebody mentioned rebirth and kamma. As I've said, my initial assessment of the whole matter was skeptical. My character is logical and rational and I'm educated in the Western systems, so I had lots of interesting arguments this way and that way against it. Eventually I came around to a full conviction

of it. There's nothing irrational about it. There are lots of very intelligent, well qualified people who believe it. There have been a couple of monks in my monastery who have PhDs from Western universities, one in hard science. They're deeply convinced of the notion of kamma and rebirth. We don't have a problem with it at all. We don't pretend it's a story or anything like that.

It's not like believing in God. The arguments for and against the existence of God are entirely different from the teachings on kamma and rebirth. The Buddha does not argue for or against the existence of God, in fact, he's not particularly interested. He doesn't find it to be a question that will cause well-being, nor motivate one towards a reduction of suffering through the cessation of attachment. That's why Buddhism can be seen to offer a very different view from purely theistic religions in this respect.

To conclude this talk on kamma and rebirth, I trust I have made it clear that these principles are taught by the Buddha and are intrinsic to our making sense of his teachings. If you hope to attain what the Buddha called enlightenment, liberation, or freedom, you cannot possibly do so without a conviction in rebirth and kamma. It is one of the characteristics that accompanies even the first stage of enlightenment: a complete conviction in the teachings of the Buddha, including "This is right view, the belief in kamma and rebirth." This is stated by the Buddha unequivocally.

The Buddha left it wide open; you don't have to believe any of this. Yet he's saying, in essence: "I'll tell you what – it's very profitable to have a conviction about kamma and rebirth. You will feel the sense of health and well-being and sanity that comes from this conviction." The Buddha is not suggesting that one should claim knowledge, or that we should simply wish or hope that it's true. However, real benefit comes from taking it on as a conviction, betting on a view that has no down side to it. You see, we're in a genuine predicament: we're thrust into life. This is the game that must be played. Sometimes you don't want to play the game but you have to anyway. It's one of those games you just can't get out of. You know those games at school, when you say, "I don't want to play today," and everybody lets you not play? Life is not one of those; it makes you play. You cannot get out of making choices. That's the only thing about which you have no choice whatsoever. And these choices have to be made in the absence of knowledge. No one steps out of the door in the morning knowing what's going to happen to them; this uncertainty is part of being human. You get out there and you make choices, quick choices, continuous decisions, without full knowledge of the facts. You're thrust into that situation again and again, and you have to make these decisions as best as possible from what you know and can determine, from what you guess or intuit. That's how you make decisions; it's also how you make convictions. And I say that you risk your life in the process: Whatever you bet, you bet your life. Whatever you do, you bet your life. Every time you make a decision or a choice, you bet your life. It's interesting to discover what the Buddha, who after 2500 years is still remembered by 179 grade eights in Penticton, BC, had to say about this. It's valuable to consult such a source, when asking a question like, *what I should bet my life on*?

* "Kamma" is Pali for the well-known Sanskrit word "karma."

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Evidence for Karma and Rebirth
by Brian Ruhe

Before briefly giving evidence for karma and rebirth I'll outline some details of how karma and rebirth works, then there is a more thorough treatment of rebirth by Bhikkhu Bodhi. The word karma is more familiar to people than kamma so I tend to use that. Karma is a word that has become part of the English language. On the bus where I live in Vancouver, BC they have recycling ads with a cartoon showing a couple on a twin bicycle. As they are riding, the lady on the back seat tosses an empty bottle away. In the next frame an old CCCP satellite falls from the sky and crashes upon just her. The caption reads “Don't mess with karma!”

Look at the multitude of beings living on the planet. There's a wide array of animals and people. Why do beings take rebirth in a particular form? Is it by luck, by accident or chance or is there a principle underlying the process? In philosophy, there are three ways to explain how the universe generally works. One, is that this is a random, causeless universe. Things happen for no reason at all; bad things happen to good people. It's just a fool's delight! How does that make you feel? The second is, there's a god that decides on everything and he crushes AIDS babies into the dirt for his sport. Does that make you feel any better? The third is that things happen for a reason, the law of cause and effect and karma. This gives you control over your life because even in the worst times, you can still choose to do the right thing and make good karma.

Perhaps the most important question in life is “What happens after we die?” You might dismiss this, thinking that you will wait and find out, but if you deeply consider how your beliefs effect your actions you will see that your views about an afterlife determine how you act right now in this life. For example the three positions on human destiny after death are:

1. There is no afterlife. Human consciousness is just a product of the brain so when the brain and body dies, you are annihilated.
2. The theistic view in orthodox Christianity, Judaism and Islam believes that after just this one lifetime on earth you go to an eternal heaven or hell depending upon your present actions and beliefs.
3. Rebirth. Variations in this view are in Buddhism and Hinduism and now over half of the world's population believe it, including the non-religious, the new age, and even some sects of Muslims. This is the idea that this life is just one link in a chain of lives going back into the beginningless past and forward into the future.

If a person takes the materialist view, then they will believe that there will be no moral consequences to their actions after they die, because they will be extinguished and will feel no pain or pleasure because of what they have done on Earth. This view may encourage someone to focus on grasping as much sensual pleasure in this life because there is no spiritual path to build upon in a future life. They might be tempted into greed or cheating or worse if there are no consequences to their actions but many of my friends and family members share this view and they are just as moral as people who believe there will be consequences after death. The second view puts more emphasis on a person's relationship with god and trying to appease god to obtain admittance to heaven. The third view, of rebirth makes one feel more responsible for his or her actions as they believe it is going to come back to them.

Rebirth in Buddhism is the view that when you die you immediately get reborn in another form.

Karma is defined as the mental intention that initiates any action. Understanding the principle of karma is simple enough. If you do good actions, that will result in happy states of mind and better conditions in the future. If you do negative actions, that will result in unhappy states of mind and unpleasant conditions in the future. The Buddha said "Monks it is volition that I call kamma. For having willed, one then acts by body, speech or mind". What is behind action is volition; the impetus is the will. Intentional actions manifesting through body, speech and mind is what the Buddha calls kamma. This means that actions without intention are not kamma. If you're walking down the sidewalk and you step on an ant without even being aware of it, then there's no karma. You didn't break the precept against killing because you had no intention to kill (you could say that it was the ant's karmic result to die at that time). Also, if you hear something from a friend and repeat it to someone but later find out that it's not true, that's not the karma of lying because you didn't have the intention to deceive.

Karma comes through the three “gates” of body, speech and mind. We affect the world with our acts and our speech too; but just at a level of thought, if we have a sustained thought, a sustained intention, like desiring inwardly, planning, aspiring, we have mental karma. What lies behind all of this is intention and the Buddha said that mind is the forerunner of all. The Buddha defeated the leader of the Jains in a debate on this point. The Jain teacher said that actions of the body are more important than actions of the mind. The Buddha said no, actions of the mind are more important because when you accidentally step on an insect, the body kills it but the mind had no such intention, so it is the intention of the mind that determines the weight of the karma, not the body.

There are ten main forms of unwholesome actions:

Bodily

1. Taking life
2. Taking what does not belong to oneself 3. Engaging in sexual misconduct (adultery, seduction, etc.)

Verbal

4. Speaking falsehood
5. Speaking slanderous speech
6. Speaking harshly
7. Engaging in idle chatter, in gossip

Mental

8. Covetousness, yearning for the possessions of others
9. Ill will (Actively desiring harm, suffering and destruction to come to others)
10. Wrong views (specially fixed wrong views which deny the efficacy of moral action.)

By abstaining from the above, you develop the opposite virtues, the ten courses of wholesome action.

> Bhikkhu Bodhi states (Bodhi, 1984) “According to the Buddha, our willed actions produce effects. They eventually return to ourselves. One effect is the immediately visible psychological effect. The other is the effect of moral retribution.
>
> Firstly let us deal with the psychological effect of kamma. When a willed action is performed it leaves a track in the mind, an imprint which can mark the beginning of a new mental tendency. It has a tendency to repeat itself, to reproduce itself, somewhat like a protozoan, like an

> amoeba. As these actions multiply, they form our character. Our personality is nothing but a sum of all our willed actions, a cross-section of all our accumulated kamma. So by yielding first in simple ways to the unwholesome impulses of the mind, we build up little by little a greedy character, a hostile character, an aggressive character or a deluded character. On the other hand, by resisting these unwholesome desires we replace them with their opposites, the wholesome qualities. Then we develop a generous character, a loving and a compassionate personality, or we can become wise and enlightened beings. As we change our habits gradually, we change our character, and as we change our character we change our total being, our whole world. That is why the Buddha emphasizes, so strongly the need to be mindful of every action, of every choice. For every choice of ours has a tremendous potential for the future.
>
> Seen from this angle, from the standpoint of karmic law, the universe appears to maintain a certain moral equilibrium, a balance between all the morally significant deeds and the objective situations of those who perform them. So the law of kamma is a moral application of the general principle that for every action there is an equal and an opposite reaction."

What is so difficult about karma is seeing the exact details of how it works. Karma has three components: actions, their effects and their potentialities. Action has to do with the law of cause and effect. Karma is a special instance of the law of cause and effect which is the master law of the universe. Everything happens according to natural laws. Not a leaf falls from a tree except by law. The way the earth orbits around the sun is not karma; there's no being there. It's just cause and effect. So karma is the law of cause and effect in the moral dimension. For these three components, action means what you intentionally do now in the present moment. Karma always means in the present moment. The effects are the results of karma which can come much later. This means that karma is waiting for an opportunity to ripen. The lag time between these two is the potentialities which exist in your mental continuum. Someone asked the Buddha if kamma is stored in the body or the mind. The Buddha pointed at a mango tree without any fruit and the Buddha asked, "Where are the mangoes stored"? The man explained that they weren't stored anywhere, they just hadn't developed yet and then the Buddha pointed out that karma is the same way.

Karma has a tendency to develop like seeds pushing for an opportunity to sprout. It's as if we have white seeds and black seeds representing our good and bad karma. Like seeds scattered on the ground and on the rocks, not all seeds necessarily ripen. It's not a mathematical certainty that karma must ripen because karma is willed action, which is alive and organic. It is subject to the play of living forces and there's a lot of room for variation. The Buddha described three time periods in which karmas ripen. Some are due to ripen in this lifetime, some in the next lifetime and some in any lifetime after that and the third is the most powerful. This type stays with us until we reach nirvana so its results can come even after thousands of aeons in the future. Buddha taught "Tears you have shed, transmigrating and wandering, greater than the water in the four great oceans". If you have negative karmas that are due to ripen in this lifetime, but you practice virtue and stay on the side of the angels, then that negative karma may not find an opportunity to ripen. Thus when you die it gets cut off and becomes defunct karma. It's the same with the next lifetime too. Your good conduct could even influence your good karma to ripen and flower in this lifetime. The opposite is also true. If you break your precepts and fall into a bad crowd and get into the bad stuff, you may cut off some of your good karma that was due to come to you in this life while allowing negative karma to ripen. So, the ripening of our past karma is not just a passive process that happens to us, because how we act now can affect this dynamic. One karma can even be destroyed by another karma. A weighty karma is so strong that it will ripen no matter what we do.

The Buddha explained how the past life karmas of people caused huge variations in their fortunes.

- Killing in the past life results in being short lived in this life.
- Having a long life is the result of abstaining from killing and being kind and compassionate, having respect and reverence for life.
- Being sickly comes from injuring and hurting other beings.
- Being healthy comes to one who helped others, who gave and assisted others.
- Being angry results in one appearing ugly in this life.
- Being patient and cheerful in your past life make you beautiful in this life.
- People who are rich were generous in past lives.
- Being poor happens to people who were selfish.
- An influential person with authority rejoiced in the good fortune and success of others.
- A weak and powerless individual without any authority was envious of the good fortune of others, begrudging the honour, respect and veneration given them.
- Being intelligent comes from being reflective and studious, someone who always inquired and investigated matters. So it is good to ask questions of teachers.
- Being dull minded and stupid results from being lazy and negligent in the past, someone who never studied or applied much thought.
- Suffering from hunger results from stealing.
- Being in poverty comes from obstructing others from gaining their livelihood.
- Being with a great group of friends and then being separated from them is a result of seducing others partners or alienating their friends.

You can see the logic in the cause-effect relationship between our past life and this life. *Most* of our experiences are caused from actions committed in past lives.

I always get tough questions like, what about small children who starve to death in Africa, or what about people who are born crippled? Is that because of bad karma? Many teachers choose to answer the question indirectly, depending on the audience. I think the view of karma is that such people are suffering the results of past life karma. They may be very good hearted people and may have been in their past five lifetimes as well, but in a life before that they have made some mistakes and done the wrong thing and now they are feeling the result of that. It's not possible to be murdered unless you created the karmic cause in the past. It could even reduce your stress believing that you are paying off a karmic debt and knowing that you will be rewarded for your good actions. The mystery is when! Understanding the principle of karma is easy but the Buddha taught that you shouldn't try to figure out exactly how karma works in particular situations because it is so complex and subtle that it is one of the four imponderables. If you dwell on it too much it will lead you to vexation, drive you crazy and your head will explode into seven pieces, the Buddha taught, although I'm not aware of any case, in the suttas, of that actually happening. Now that you're wondering, the other three imponderables are: The range of a Buddha's mind- how much does the Buddha know? What is the extent of his psychic powers? And the range of the jhanic mind- how powerful is the mind of a meditator in the meditation absorption states? Then, there is pondering about the origin of things- did the universe have a beginning? Has it always been here? How far back does it go? It staggers the imagination. Don't go there, the Buddha says. You'll never figure it out. You would have to be a Buddha to see the direct cause and effect

relationship built into karma.

People ask me, who decides? Who decides where you go when you die? I have a dry sense of humour so sometimes I say that there is a committee of monks in Bangkok who receive applications from people after they die, and then they decide. Then I stop myself and say that it is a natural law, like gravity. It happens automatically and the result of a wholesome or unwholesome action is built right into the action itself even though the result could take lifetimes to ripen. This doesn't mean that the result will be the same thing, but roughly equivalent. If you take care of your elderly mother for a year that doesn't mean that your daughter will take of you the same way but you will be rewarded for what you did, have confidence in that. As Ajahn Sona says, karma and rebirth really is the overarching ultimate view of reality. I agree that this is the view and the only view that gives meaning and purpose to life.

In *Wings to Awakening: An Anthology from the Pali Canon,* by Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff), Access to Insight, June 18, 2009, *http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/wings/index.html. Kamma & the Ending of Kamma,* he writes:

> The Buddha's doctrine of kamma takes the fact of skillful action, which can be observed on the ordinary sensory level, and gives it an importance that, for a person pursuing the Buddhist goal, must be accepted on faith. According to this doctrine, skillful action is not simply one factor out of many contributing to happiness: it is the primary factor. It does not lead simply to happiness within the dimensions of time and the present: if developed to the ultimate level of refinement, it can lead to an Awakening totally released from those dimensions. These assertions cannot be proven prior to an experience of that Awakening, but they must be accepted as working hypotheses in the effort to develop the skillfulness needed for Awakening. This paradox — which lies at the heart of the act of taking refuge in the Triple Gem — explains why the serious pursuit of the Buddhist path is a sustained act of faith that can become truly firm only with the first glimpse of Awakening, called stream-entry. It also explains why a strong desire to gain release from the stress and suffering inherent in conditioned existence is needed for such a pursuit, for without that desire it is very difficult to break through this paradox with the necessary leap of faith.

Evidence for Rebirth

Karma and rebirth is not just a religious belief. From a Buddhist view there is evidence all over the place. Look at your tendencies, your talents and abilities and your phobias. Some of this may have been carried over from a previous life. Even though the vast majority of people don't remember their previous lives, past life memories are implicit, not explicit. You learned how to write but you don't remember how you learned. Nature is efficient that way. As a child you are not learning new things, you are remembering skills cultivated in a previous life so it's alright at age 75 to take up learning music. This is why you want the dhamma deeply embedded into your mind so it will stay with you. It's very scary to be lost without any spiritual direction. In your next life your mind will not feel at peace, it will keep searching until it finds the dhamma again. Then it will feel at home, “this is it”.

The best scientific evidence for rebirth comes from the work of Dr. Ian Stevenson at the University of Virginia. He was a Canadian psychiatrist who read newspaper articles in the late 1950's about children in Asia who claimed to remember a previous life. This caught his interest and he then devoted the rest of his life to this research from 1960 until his death in 2007. He was concerned that his work would die

with him because it wasn't popular there, in Virginia, in the Bible belt to practically prove that the Buddhist and Hindu views about rebirth are right, but the Christian, Jewish and Muslim teachings are wrong. He should have been on the Oprah Winfrey show. I and others and our monks are working to keep the results of his work alive. The work continues today with other doctors carrying on the research so the future looks good as this understanding gains wider acceptance.

A typical case is of a little boy or girl, after they begin to talk, around the age of two, three or four and they speak about experiences they had in a previous life. Sometimes they know just a few details, sometimes they talk incessantly about it and they want to get back to their previous family. It seems that about one out of 10,000 little kids have very clear recall about their previous life. This very compelling evidence I first heard about from Ajahn Sona. Many of our other monks such as Ajahn Brahm and Ajahn Jayasaro refer to Dr. Ian Stevenson as well because this is not Buddhism, this is medical science. This comes from the department of Psychiatry at a major American University. As Buddhists we can refer to this great body of over 3000 cases as scientific evidence for the Buddhist teachings on rebirth. You can find more info on this in the reference section of the reading list at the back of this book, or if you do an Internet search on Ian Stevenson you can find many cases and it takes you to the appropriate section of the University of Virginia website. I think he deserved the Noble prize in science.

What Dr. Ian Stevenson found is that in the vast majority of cases when a person dies, they immediately take rebirth in the ghost realm. Assuming that a person is not a serial killer or a total saint, the great majority will take rebirth as a ghost for some period of time. The Buddhist teachings do not specify for how long; it could be a few weeks or a few centuries. It depends upon a person's karma but Ian Stevenson found an average turn around time of one to three years from the time of death until the time someone comes out of the womb in their next human birth. The Buddha described the ghost realm as a highly varying realm, almost up to the heavenly world and almost down to the hell realm. One's future experience of being a ghost depends upon their individual karma. They may find the ghost realm reasonably pleasant, similar to their current state of mind. They could be hanging out with their ghost friends and entertaining themselves or their experience could be unpleasant and mixed. Many ghosts wander around in a somnambulistic sleep walking state, not aware of what is happening or even that they are dead. Some are attached to their house, possessions or family. There are photographs of ghosts of people who lived in a house for decades, died in the same house and when the new owner downloads film of a photo of the bedroom, they see the image of the ghost of the person who lived there before, even though they didn't see it when they took the picture.

It makes sense to have to spend some time in the ghost realm because when you die, there's not likely a womb available immediately, in the area. Another important result of Dr. Stevenson's research is that people tend to get reborn within about fifty miles from where they died. The distance varies in different parts of the world. There are many cases of Japanese soldiers in Burma who were killed in World War two and they took rebirth right there in Burma, close to where they died. Many of them identified with Japan, wanted to be in Japan and one little boy even spoke Japanese! One boy said to his impoverished parents “I'll go to Japan and get some money. I'll go to Tokyo and bring back some money.” Why didn't they take rebirth in Japan if that's what they identified with? Because most people take rebirth close to where they died and these guys were struck there; it was their karma. There are great exceptions to this but if you go on vacation to Argentina and you slip on a banana peel and die there, then you will likely get reborn right there and have to learn Spanish. So now you have an idea about what's going to happen to you and your loved ones after you die. I want you to get your money's worth out of this book.

The reason why some people can be reborn within weeks is because there are several cases of someone dying, then bumping out a spirit already in a womb, and taking over that body- a form of permanent possession. In Thailand, in the case of Sergeant Thiang, in his last life as Mr. Poh, he was a cattle rustler who was caught stealing a cow. He was set upon by villagers who threw a knife into the back of his head and killed him. He then left his body, took rebirth as a ghost and thought of his beloved brother and went to him and saw his wife who was six months pregnant. He was drawn to her womb and somehow went inside, thus bumping out the previous being. This was the law of karma in action. He was close to his brother and her so his karma seems to have superseded the previous being. It's not that he consciously knew how to do this; he was just blown on by the winds of his karma. Sometimes pregnant women feel that something is wrong with the baby, and then it's all right again. It's possible that a being could die in the womb and leave, but the fetus is still usable so another spirit comes along and takes it over. These things do happen.

One example of a case suggestive of rebirth is that of Ratran Hami who was a man living in Sri Lanka in 1927. He got married to Podi Menike but still had to go to his wife's family to collect her. When he got there she had changed her mind and refused to go to his village with him. There was another man staying there who was Podhi Menike's mother's cousin and Ratran likely misinterpreted this and got jealous, thinking he was a rival. He was very offended and embarrassed by this so he went home, sharpened his Malay knife and went back and stabbed her to death. The people present jumped on Ratran and beat him and he was arrested. At his trial he said that he was set upon by these people and he acted in self defense but the stabbing was an accident. He was found guilty and sentenced to be hung.

Before he was hanged in July 1928 he told his brother that he would come back and he was thinking only of his brother at his hanging. They were both Theravadin Buddhists so they believed in rebirth. His brother remembered him saying that he would come back as his son. Then, more than 18 years later his brother was married and the couple had a baby boy with a stunted right arm with short knobby fingers webbed together and the major muscle of his right upper chest was missing. He surmised that his younger brother had returned to him but he never told his wife that he had a brother who was hanged for murder.

When the boy, Wijeratne was 2 ? years old he began talking and brooding to himself about how he killed his wife, Podhi Menike in his past life which caused his malformed right arm. His mother listened to him and then told her husband about it but he was not surprised saying, “Oh honey, let me explain...” And he told her the whole story about his brother Ratran and Podhi Menike.

The boy went on to relate the important details of Ratran's life, including things that his father didn't know. For example he described that just before his hanging they tested the gallows by hanging a bag of sand. He described that after he was hanged he recalled falling into a pit of fire. Later he could recall flitting through the air from tree top to tree top, and once when he was in a state of delusion he acted out being a bird. This indicates that the karmic result of his act of murder may have been a temporary hellish rebirth followed by a rebirth as a bird. This is a very rare case of someone recalling an animal realm rebirth. His aspiration to return as his brother's son may have been important and helpful because he did succeed. The Buddha encouraged you to have an aspiration for where you would like to take rebirth and he describes this in the *Reappearance by Aspiration sutta* in *Middle Length Sayings No. 20* (Wisdom Publications). It's like your employer asking you, where do you see yourself five years from now?

Wijeratne completely confessed to the crime and said that he lied at his trial in his last life to get a reduced sentence. He was also unrepentant of his crime, saying that a man has a right to kill his wife if she refuses to go with him. After he grew up he was attracted to a girl who resembled Podi Menike in appearance and also in his perception that she was rejecting him. This triggered off a schizophrenic split within Wijeratne and Dr. Stevenson suggested that psychiatrists should realize that the cause of their patient's mental illness is sometimes traumas from their past lives. From a karmic perspective we can see that likely the reason why he couldn't have a good relationship with a woman is because he killed his wife in his past life. If he killed a soldier in battle, that would have been a different karma. By the time he reached age 35, he seems to have worked out his negative karma and he was married with two children, working as a school teacher and doing fine. By then he also changed his view and said that it would be best not to murder your wife in such a circumstance and it causes so much disruption for yourself and for both families involved.

Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect is a landmark book by Dr. Ian Stevenson where he provides an overview of types of cases where birthmarks or other physiological manifestations have been found to relate to experiences of the remembered past life, particularly violent death. In chapter 6, "Birthmarks Corresponding to Wounds Verified by Medical Records" he states that these cases "belong to the most important group in the entire collection. The medical records, usually postmortem reports, verify the correspondence between the birthmarks and the wounds with a certitude sometimes approached but never reached by the testimonies of informants drawing on their memories."

The first case is of Metin Koybasi. He could recall being a relative in his previous life named Hasim Koybasi who was shot in the head during the post election riot in the village in Turkey in 1963. Hasim was shot behind the left ear and the bullet was lodged on the front side of the front of the neck. The pathologist made a small incision and extracted the bullet. Metin had birthmarks on the back of the head and in the spot corresponding to the pathologists postmortem wound. He also had a powerful attitude of vengefulness toward the man who killed him in his previous life, as is often the situation in these cases. Metin once tried to take his father's gun and shoot this man, but was fortunately restrained. He later became more pacific.

There is a story from India of someone who was convicted of murder based on the testimony of their victim who was reborn and could later identify the killer. In another case, a boy told his father that in his previous life he was married and he hid some money in the wall of their home but didn't tell his wife. He needed to tell her so his father brought him to the house that he identified and they knocked on the door. Oh, excuse me but this is my son and he was your husband in his last life and he wants to show you where he hid some money? The little boy went straight to the spot and she found the money there! I don't know if she split some of the cash with him. Next, he forgot about his past life after he completed his mission.

In the courses I have been teaching on Buddhism since 1996 I have met many people with stories relating to past lives. One man told me that his father told him that when he was just two years old he told him that he was his father's father. His grandfather died two years before he was born so the timing fits. Another woman told my class that when she and her husband brought their six year old daughter to his parents' house for the first time in her life, she went upstairs to the bedroom and she remarked "Wow, this bedroom has changed a lot since I was here!" This indicates rebirth within families which is common enough. Another woman, with East Indian parents, clearly recalled that when she was three years old, and living in the Caribbean, she had a powerful experience that was like watching a movie film from her mind about a life as a man, over a century before, wearing a top hat and looking up to a

balcony at a fair skinned woman whom he loved. When it was over she felt such an attachment to that lifetime that she cried and cried.

There are other categories of evidence for rebirth. One major area is past life regression hypnosis. This is a lot easier than the way the Buddha taught it. The Buddha taught the way to recall your previous lives but he said that you need to reach the third jhana. When you come out of it you avert your mind to your earliest memories, then go back further and further until you see your previous life. Jhana gives you such a clear mind that you can see such things. If it doesn't work you need to go into jhana again. Since the vast majority of people will never reach jhana in their entire lives, the easier way to recall your past existences is through a qualified hypnotherapist. I was adverse to this idea until I met Ajahn Brahm. I asked him about his knowledge of his previous lives and his experience with the jhanas but being a monk, his precepts don't allow him to tell lay people- only other monks. Being an ex-monk didn't help me. I was surprised to hear that Ajahn Brahm thought that past life regression could be helpful for people because if they have a vivid experience of an old man, with the certainty that it was them, then that would convince them of right view- karma and rebirth. He said you wouldn't just have to take rebirth just on faith; you would know for yourself. Now there's a good reason, because it helps establish you on the noble eightfold path.

I'm still skeptical, and for good reason, about a person's ability to dig up a past life in regression and the credibility of the hypnotist because they could give suggestions so all of this needs careful consideration when people claim to know their past lives. Some claims are untrue, however this has worked well for many people and I do recommend it. Peter Ramster, an Australian psychotherapist, has documented several thoroughly investigated cases. In his book *The Search for Lives Past* (Ramster 1990 : 227) he cites the case of Cynthia Henderson, who “remembered a life during the French Revolution. When under trance, she spoke in French without any trace of an accent, understood and answered questions put to her in French, used dialect of the time, and knew the names of streets which had changed and were only discoverable on old maps”.

One of the most incredible psychic phenomena, which religious people, skeptics and atheists have continuously and deliberately ignored is xenoglossy - the ability to speak or write a foreign language a person never learned. After all other explanations have been investigated - such as fraud, genetic memory, telepathy and cryptomnesia (the remembering of a foreign language learned earlier), xenoglossy is taken as evidence of *either* memories of a language learned in a past life *or* of communication with someone in the ghost realm. Dr. Ian Stevenson has done specialized research into xenoglossy and his book *Xenoglossy* (Stevenson 1974) is one of the leading scientific studies in this area. In it he documents a study he made of a 37 year old American woman. Under hypnosis she experienced a complete change of voice and personality into that of a male. She spoke fluently in the Swedish language—a language she did not speak or understand when in the normal state of consciousness. Another case he investigated involved an Indian woman named Uttar Huddar who at aged 32 spontaneously took on the personality of a housewife of West Bengal in the 1820s. She began speaking Bengali instead of her own language Marathi. For days or weeks at a time speakers of Bengali had to be brought in to enable her to communicate with her own family.

Another category of evidence is child prodigies who have developed certain skill sets in such a high degree in past lives that they become deeply ingrained in their persona. So when that person takes rebirth, the skills come along in the new body, fully intact and a child prodigy is born. For example, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart believed that he had been a musician in many past lives where he had developed his amazing creative and technical skills.

One of the more surprising teachings of the Buddha is that it's hard not to meet people who, in the past were your mother or father, brother, sister, son, daughter or friend. You're bumping into them all the time because of the millions of combinations of past lives. So that is a bit about karma, its long time perspective and evidence for rebirth. Bhikkhu Bodhi's teachings are below. He is a senior American scholar monk who is known for his articulateness and orthodoxy.

Does Rebirth Make Sense?
by Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi

Newcomers to Buddhism are usually impressed by the clarity, directness, and earthy practicality of the Dhamma as embodied in such basic teachings as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the threefold training. These teachings, as clear as day-light, are accessible to any serious seeker looking for a way beyond suffering. When, however, these seekers encounter the doctrine of rebirth, they often balk, convinced it just doesn't make sense. At this point, they suspect that the teaching has swerved off course, tumbling from the grand highway of reason into wistfulness and speculation. Even modernist interpreters of Buddhism seem to have trouble taking the rebirth teaching seriously. Some dismiss it as just a piece of cultural baggage, "ancient Indian metaphysics," that the Buddha retained in deference to the world view of his age. Others interpret it as a metaphor for the change of mental states, with the realms of rebirth seen as symbols for psychological archetypes. A few critics even question the authenticity of the texts on rebirth, arguing that they must be interpolations.

A quick glance at the Pali suttas would show that none of these claims has much substance. The teaching of rebirth crops up almost everywhere in the Canon, and is so closely bound to a host of other doctrines that to remove it would virtually reduce the Dhamma to tatters. Moreover, when the suttas speak about rebirth into the five realms — the hells, the animal world, the spirit realm, the human world, and the heavens — they never hint that these terms are meant symbolically. To the contrary, they even say that rebirth occurs "with the breakup of the body, after death," which clearly implies they intend the idea of rebirth to be taken quite literally.

In this essay I won't be arguing the case for the scientific validity of rebirth. Instead, I wish to show that the idea of rebirth makes sense. I will be contending that it "makes sense" in two ways: first, in that it is intelligible, having meaning both intrinsically and in relation to the Dhamma as a whole; and second, in that it helps us "to make sense," to understand our own place in the world. I will try to establish this in relation to three domains of discourse, the ethical, the ontological, and the soteriological. Don't be frightened by the big words: the meaning will become clear as we go along.

I

First, the teaching of rebirth makes sense *in relation to ethics*. For early Buddhism, the conception of rebirth is an essential plank of its ethical theory, providing an incentive for avoiding evil and doing good. In this context, the doctrine of rebirth is correlated with the principle of kamma, which asserts that all our morally determinate actions, our wholesome and unwholesome deeds, have an inherent power to bring forth fruits that correspond to the moral quality of those deeds. Taken together, the twin teachings of rebirth and kamma show that a principle of moral equilibrium obtains between our actions and the felt quality of our lives, such that morally good deeds produce agreeable results, bad deeds disagreeable results.

It is only too obvious that such moral equilibrium cannot be found within the limits of a single life. We

can observe, often poignantly, that morally unscrupulous people might enjoy happiness, esteem, and success, while people who lead lives of the highest integrity are bowed down beneath pain and misery. For the principle of moral equilibrium to work, some type of survival beyond the present life is required, for kamma can bring its due retribution only if our individual "streams of consciousness" do not terminate with death. Two different forms of survival are possible: on the one hand, an eternal afterlife in heaven or hell, on the other a sequence of rebirths. Of these alternatives, the hypothesis of rebirth seems far more compatible with moral justice than an eternal afterlife; for any finite good action, it seems, must eventually exhaust its potency, and no finite bad action, no matter how bad, should warrant eternal damnation.

It may be the case that this insistence on some kind of moral equity is an illusion, an unrealistic demand we superimpose on a universe cold and indifferent to our hopes. There is no logical way to *prove* the validity of rebirth and kamma. The naturalist might just be right in holding that personal existence comes to an end at death, and with it all prospects for moral justice. Nevertheless, I believe such a thesis flies in the face of one of our deepest moral intuitions, a sense that some kind of moral justice must ultimately prevail. To show that this is so, let us consider two limiting cases of ethically decisive action. As the limiting case of immoral action, let us take Hitler, who was directly responsible for the dehumanizing deaths of perhaps ten million people. As the limiting case of moral action, let us consider a man who sacrifices his own life to save the lives of total strangers. Now if there is no survival beyond death, both men reap the same ultimate destiny. Before dying, perhaps, Hitler experiences some pangs of despair; the self-sacrificing hero enjoys a few seconds of satisfaction knowing he's performing a noble deed. Then beyond that — there is nothing, except in others' memories. Both are obliterated, reduced to lifeless flesh and bones.

Now the naturalist might be correct in drawing this conclusion, and in holding that those who believe in survival and retribution are just projecting their own wishes out upon the world. But I think something within us resists consigning both Hitler and our compassionate hero to the same fate. The reason we resist is because we have a deep intuitive sense that a principle of moral justice is at work in the world, regulating the course of events in such a way that our good and bad actions rebound upon ourselves to bring the appropriate fruit. Where the naturalist holds that this intuition amounts to nothing more than a projection of our own ideals out upon the world, I would contend that the very fact that we can conceive a demand for moral justice has a significance that is more than merely psychological. However vaguely, our subjective sense of moral justice reflects an objective reality, a principle of moral equilibrium that is not mere projection but is built into the very bedrock of actuality.

The above considerations are not intended to make belief in rebirth a necessary basis for ethics. The Buddha himself does not try to found ethics on the ideas of kamma and rebirth, but uses a purely naturalistic type of moral reasoning that does not presuppose personal survival or the working of kamma. The gist of his reasoning is simply that we should not mistreat others — by injuring them, stealing their belongings, exploiting them sexually, or deceiving them — because we ourselves are averse to being treated in such ways. Nevertheless, though the Buddha does not found ethics on the theory of rebirth, he does make belief in kamma and rebirth a strong inducement to moral behavior. When we recognize that our good and bad actions can rebound upon ourselves, determining our future lives and bringing us happiness or suffering, this gives us a decisive reason to avoid unwholesome conduct and to diligently pursue the good.

The Buddha includes belief in rebirth and kamma in his definition of right view, and their explicit

denial in wrong view. It is not that the desire for the fruits of good karma should be one's main motive for leading a moral life, but rather that acceptance of these teachings inspires and reinforces our commitment to ethical ideals. These twin principles open a window to a wider background against which our pursuit of the moral life unfolds. They show us that our present living conditions, our dispositions and aptitudes, our virtues and faults, result from our actions in previous lives. When we realize that our present conditions reflect our kammic past, we will also realize that our present actions are the legacy that we will transmit to our kammic descendants, that is, to ourselves in future lives. The teaching of rebirth thus enables us to face the future with fortitude, dignity, and courage. If we recognize that no matter how debilitating our present conditions might be, no matter how limiting and degrading, we can still redeem ourselves, we will be spurred to exercise our will for the achievement of our future good. By our present actions of body, speech, and mind, we can transform ourselves, and by transforming ourselves, we can surmount all inner and outer obstacles and advance toward the final goal.

The teachings of kamma and rebirth have a still deeper ethical significance than as simple pointers to moral responsibility. They show us not only that our personal lives are shaped by our own kammic past, but also that we live in an ethically meaningful universe. Taken in conjunction, they make the universe *a cosmos*, an orderly, integrated whole, with dimensions of significance that transcend the merely physical. The levels of order that we have access to by direct inspection or scientific investigation do not exhaust all the levels of cosmic order. There is system and pattern, not only in the physical and biological domains, but also in the ethical, and the teachings of kamma and rebirth reveal just what that pattern is. Although this ethical order is invisible to our fleshly eyes and cannot be detected by scientific apparatus, this does not mean it is not real. Beyond the range of normal perception, a moral law holds sway over our deeds and, via our deeds, over our destiny. It is just the principle of kamma, operating across the sequence of rebirths, that locks our volitional actions into the dynamics of the cosmos, thus making ethics an expression of the cosmos's own intrinsic orderliness.

II

The teaching of rebirth, taken in conjunction with the doctrine of kamma, implies that we live in a morally ordered universe, one in which our morally determinate actions bring forth fruits that in some way correspond to their own ethical quality. Though the moral law that links our actions with their fruits cannot be demonstrated experimentally in the same way that physical and chemical laws can be, this does not mean it is not real. It means only that, like quarks and quasars, it operates beyond the threshold of sensory perception. Far from being a mere projection of our subjective ideals, the moral law locks our volitional deeds into an all-embracing cosmic order that is perfectly objective in that it functions independently of our personal desires, views, and beliefs. Thus when we submit our behavior to the rule of ethics, we are not simply acting in ways that merit moral approval. By conforming to the principles of ethics we are doing nothing less than aligning ourselves with the Dhamma, the universal law of righteousness and truth which stands at the bedrock of the cosmos.

This brings us to the ontological aspect of the Buddhist teaching on rebirth, its implications for understanding the nature of being. Buddhism sees the process of rebirth as integral to the principle of conditionality that runs through all existence. The sentient universe is regulated by different orders of causation layered in such a way that higher orders of causation can exercise dominion over lower ones. The order of kamma, which governs the process of rebirth, is a higher order of causation, and at some level, not within the range of investigation by ordinary empirical means, it intersects with the lower orders of physical and biological causation, bending their energies toward the fulfillment of its own

potential. The Buddha does not posit a divine judge who rules over the workings of kamma, rewarding and punishing us for our deeds. The kammic process functions autonomously, without a supervisor or director, entirely through the intrinsic power of volitional action. Interwoven with other orders in the vast, complex web of conditionality, our deeds produce their consequences just as naturally as seeds in a field bring forth their appropriate herbs and flowers.

To understand how kamma can produce its effects across the succession of rebirths we must invert our normal, everyday conception of the relationship between consciousness and matter. Under the influence of materialistic biases we assume that material existence is determinative of consciousness. Because we witness bodies being born into this world and observe how the mind matures in tandem with the body, we tacitly take the body to be the foundation of our existence and mind or consciousness an evolutionary offshoot of blind material processes. Matter wins the honored status of "objective reality," and mind becomes an accidental intruder upon an inherently senseless universe.

From the Buddhist perspective, however, consciousness and the world coexist in a relationship of mutual creation which equally requires both terms. Just as there can be no consciousness without a body to serve as its physical support and a world as its sphere of cognition, so there can be no physical organism and no world without some type of consciousness to constitute them as an organism and world. Though temporally neither mind nor matter can be regarded as prior to the other, in terms of practical importance the Buddha says that mind is the forerunner. Mind is the forerunner, not in the sense that it arises before the body or can exist independently of a physical medium, but in the sense that the body and the world in which we find ourselves reflect our mental activity.

It is mental activity, in the form of volition, that constitutes kamma, and it is our stock of kamma that steers the stream of consciousness from the past life into a new body. Thus the Buddha says: "This body, O monks, is old kamma, to be seen as generated and fashioned by volition, as something to be felt" (SN XI.37). It is not only the body, as a composite whole, that is the product of past kamma, but the sense faculties too (see SN XXV.146). The eye, ear, nose, tongue, body-sense, and mind-base are also fashioned by our past kamma, and thus kamma to some degree shapes and influences all our sensory experience. Since kamma is ultimately explained as volition (*cetana*), this means that the particular body with which we are endowed, with all its distinguishing features and faculties of sense, is rooted in our volitional activities in earlier lives. Precisely how past volition can influence the development of the zygote lies beyond the range of scientific explanation, but if the Buddha's words are to be trusted such an influence must be real.

The channel for the transmission of kammic influence from life to life across the sequence of rebirths is the individual stream of consciousness. Consciousness embraces both phases of our being — that in which we generate fresh kamma and that in which we reap the fruits of old kamma — and thus in the process of rebirth, consciousness bridges the old and new existences. Consciousness is not a single transmigrating entity, a self or soul, but a stream of evanescent acts of consciousness, each of which arises, briefly subsists, and then passes away. This entire stream, however, though made up of evanescent units, is fused into a unified whole by the causal relations obtaining between all the occasions of consciousness in any individual continuum. At a deep level, each occasion of consciousness inherits from its predecessor the entire kammic legacy of that particular stream; in perishing, it in turn passes that content on to its successor, increased by its own novel contribution. Thus our volitional deeds do not exhaust their full potential in their immediately visible effects. Every volitional deed that we perform, when it passes, leaves behind a subtle imprint stamped upon the onward-flowing stream of consciousness. The deed deposits in the stream of consciousness a seed capable of bearing fruit, of

producing a result that matches the ethical quality of the deed.

When we encounter suitable external conditions, the kammic seeds deposited in our mental continuum rise up from their dormant condition and produce their fruits. The most important function performed by kamma is to generate rebirth into an appropriate realm, a realm that provides a field for it to unfold its stored potentials. The bridge between the old existence and the new is, as we said above, the evolving stream of consciousness. It is within this stream of consciousness that the kamma has been created through the exercise of volition; it is this same stream of consciousness, flowing on, that carries the kammic energies into the new existence; and it is again this same stream of consciousness that experiences the fruit. Conceivably, at the deepest level all the individual streams of consciousness are integrated into a single all-embracing matrix, so that, beneath the surface of events, the separate kammic accumulations of all living beings crisscross, overlap, and merge. This hypothesis — though speculative — would help account for the strange coincidences we sometimes meet that prick holes in our assumptions of rational order.

The generative function of kamma in the production of new existence is described by the Buddha in a short but pithy sutta preserved in the Anguttara Nikaya (AN III.76). Venerable Ananda approaches the Master and says, "'Existence, existence' is spoken of, venerable sir. In what way is there existence?" The Buddha replies: "If there were no kamma ripening in the sensory realm, no sense-sphere existence would be discerned. If there where no kamma ripening in the form realm, no form-sphere existence would be discerned. If there were no kamma ripening in the formless realm, no formless-sphere existence would be discerned. Therefore, Ananda, kamma is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture for beings obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving to be established in a new realm of existence, either low (sense-sphere), middling (form-sphere), or high (formless-sphere)."

As long as ignorance and craving, the twin roots of the round of rebirths, remain intact in our mental continuum, at the time of death one especially powerful kamma will become ascendant and propel the stream of consciousness to the realm of existence that corresponds to its own "vibrational frequency." When consciousness, as the seed, becomes planted or "established" in that realm it sprouts forth into the rest of the psycho-physical organism, summed up in the expression "name and form" (*nama-rupa*). As the organism matures, it provides the site for other past kammas to gain the opportunity to produce their results. Then, within this new existence, in response to our various kammically induced experiences, we engage in actions that engender fresh kamma with the capacity to generate still another rebirth. Thereby the round of existence keeps turning from one life to the next, as the stream of consciousness, swept along by craving and steered by kamma, assumes successive modes of embodiment.

The ultimate implication of the Buddha's teaching on kamma and rebirth is that human beings are the final masters of their own destiny. Through our unwholesome deeds, rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion, we create unwholesome kamma, the generative cause of bad rebirths, of future misery and bondage. Through our wholesome deeds, rooted in generosity, kindness, and wisdom, we beautify our minds and thereby create kamma productive of a happy rebirth. By using wisdom to dig more deeply below the superficial face of things, we can uncover the subtle truths hidden by our preoccupation with appearances. Thereby we can uproot the binding defilements and win the peace of deliverance, the freedom beyond the cycle of kamma and its fruit.

III

The third way in which the teaching on rebirth makes sense is the *soteriological*, a word which means "in relation to final liberation." According to the Buddha's teaching, a doctrine of rebirth is not only possible but also necessary because the goal of the teaching is nothing short of liberation from samsara, the round of rebirths. It was dismay at the prospect of endless rebirths, each terminating in old age, sickness, and death, that drove the young prince Siddhattha out from the luxurious life of the palace into the forest as an earnest, homeless mendicant seeking the path to enlightenment: "Being myself subject to birth, old age, sickness, and death, I went forth seeking the birthless, ageless, illness-free, deathless Nibbana, the supreme security from bondage" (MN 26.12). His attainment of enlightenment marked not merely the realization of a state of wisdom and inward peace, but the conviction that he had brought the beginningless round of rebirths to an end: "This is my last birth. There is now for me no renewal of existence" (MN 26.18). When he went out to teach the Dhamma, his purpose was to guide others to the same state of release that he himself had won. Again, this release was not merely relief from psychological suffering, from pain and distress. It was release from the round of becoming, which means from the round of rebirths. When his first five disciples, the "bhikkhus of the group of five," learned the Dhamma from him and brought their practice to fulfillment, they too were able to confirm: "This is our last birth. There is now for us no renewal of existence" (MN 26.30). And as the Buddha's Teaching spread, many young men and women went forth from the household life into homelessness in order to find a way out from the sea of endless birth and death, which is the sea of suffering.

Any religion flourishes against the background of a particular culture and acquires meaning from the concepts prevalent in that culture. Since different epochs and cultures are governed by different conceptual frameworks, different "paradigms," one might say that a particular religion or spiritual teaching has to be explained in terms of the conceptual framework prevailing in the culture in which it has taken root. This would apply to Buddhism as much as to any other religion, perhaps even more so because of its freedom from rigid dogma. Thus, one might argue, the Buddha expounded the Dhamma against the background of the Indian belief systems of his day, in which the idea of rebirth was generally taken for granted. In our own time such concepts as rebirth and kamma are either alien (as in the West) or outdated (for those in the East who adopt modern Western modes of thought). So, it might be asked, can't we preserve the essence of the Buddha's teaching as a practical, therapeutic path to liberation from suffering without bringing along the extra cultural baggage passed down from bygone centuries, namely, the idea that equates liberation from suffering with liberation from rebirth? Surely such basic Buddhist teachings as the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, and the three characteristics are all meaningful apart from the doctrine of rebirth. Surely one can practice the Noble Eightfold Path without believing that one's practice is going to release one from the prospects of coming back to life in this world or any other world.

The reply I would give to this proposal is a twofold one: first, I would say that if one doubts the teaching of rebirth but still recognizes the validity of such basic Buddhist teachings as the Four Noble Truths, and if one personally benefits from Buddhist practices, one should certainly adopt Buddhist teachings and practices in whatever way one wishes. If one follows these teachings sincerely, without misrepresenting them, they are bound to confer blessings on one's own life and on the lives of those within one's sphere of influence. But, I would continue, this is quite another matter from saying that we can revise the Buddha's Teaching without diluting it; that we can divest the Buddha's Teaching of the concept of rebirth without diminishing its depth and meaning. Even such fundamental teachings as the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination, if studied closely, will be seen to be intimately connected to the idea of rebirth; for the very idea of suffering or *'dukkha'* central to both these teachings gains a fuller

meaning only when it is recognized to be the suffering of repeated birth. This point has been eloquently explained by Ven. Nyanatiloka Mahathera in his classic *The Word of the Buddha*:

Samsara--the wheel of existence, lit. the "perpetual wandering"--is the name given in the Pali scriptures to the sea of life ever restlessly heaving up and down, the symbol of this continuous process of ever again and again being born, growing old, suffering, and dying…. Of this samsara, a single lifetime constitutes only a tiny fraction. Hence, to be able to comprehend the first noble truth, one must let one's gaze rest upon the samsara, upon this frightful sequence of rebirths, and not merely upon one single lifetime, which, of course, may sometimes be not very painful.

(Nyanatiloka Mahathera, *The Word of the Buddha*, 17th edition. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2001), p. 18

The concept of rebirth relates to the quest for liberation not only in setting the problem with which the Buddha's teaching deals but also in providing the condition needed for the realization of its final goal. That is, rebirth is not only that from which we must attain release; perhaps paradoxically, it is also that which makes release possible. What I mean by this seeming paradox is that the final goal of the Dhamma, liberation, is achieved by perfecting certain spiritual qualities, above all the "five spiritual faculties" of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom, and other spiritual virtues like generosity, moral discipline, patience, truthfulness, loving-kindness, and equanimity, which for most people require many lives to reach maturity. There may be a few people in whom these qualities are so prominent that they can be confident of attaining the final goal within this life itself--perhaps there are even a few who have already attained it—but for most, the requisite qualities still need further maturation before realization of the final goal becomes a realistic prospect. These faculties have to be “ripened” until they are strong and sharp enough to make the breakthrough to world-transcending liberation, and this requires time; in most cases, it requires long periods of time, much longer than a single lifetime.

When we reflect upon the degree to which such qualities as mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom had been developed by the noble ones of the past, and the degree to which we ourselves have developed them, we will see that a great distance separates us from their attainments. This should not be a cause for dejection or despair; but it is a reminder of the immense amount of work we must do on ourselves to reach the plane of the noble ones. Now as we strive to practice the Dhamma within this life, we receive a certain amount of "immediate returns" in the form of the greater peace and happiness to which the practice leads. But we also understand that this is not itself the final goal. This is not the great realization that the noble ones celebrate when they utter their lion's roar. What gives us the confidence that the practices we undertake now, in this present life, are contributing to our ultimate attainment of liberation is our trust in the principle of rebirth. It is the fact that life--or more precisely, the "stream of consciousness"--does not end with our bodily death that assures us that the wholesome qualities we cultivate in this present life are preserved and consolidated within the ongoing sequence of lives that constitutes our individual identity through samsara. From life to life, the body dies, the stream of consciousness constantly changes; it is not an immortal, changeless self. Yet while our good and bad deeds bring their desired and undesired fruits, our wholesome qualities, guided by the Dhamma, governed by the Dhamma, also acquire momentum. Like a snowball rolling down the side of a mountain, which accumulates more and more snow until it sets off an avalanche, our wholesome qualities, our spiritual faculties, gain an energy of their own, which builds up from one life to the next, as long as we continue to practice the Dhamma, until they gain sufficient momentum to break the downward "gravitational pull" of the defilements, of ignorance and craving, of greed, hatred, and delusion. It is

then that we can make the breakthrough to liberation, stage by stage, and when we reach the final stage, we end the round of rebirths.

We can thus see that, in relation to the quest for liberation, the state of bondage from which liberation is sought and the ground that makes liberation possible are the same. The state of bondage is the round of rebirths: a condition of suffering marked by aging, sickness, and death which we undergo over and over as long as we are in the grip of ignorance and craving. But while the deluded, ordinary person without access to the Dhamma remains in bondage to this round of rebirths, those who encounter the Dhamma find the path that leads to final liberation, to the unconditioned peace and freedom of Nibbana. Only the noble ones--those who have reached stream-entry and the higher stages--are assured that they will win the final goal. But those who place trust in the Dhamma and earnestly endeavor to cultivate the path can gradually advance towards the ultimate goal. Since only a few will consummate their endeavors in this lifetime, for the others, the process of rebirth becomes a process that enables them to sharpen and strengthen their spiritual faculties. Each successive life guided by the Dhamma preserves the achievements of earlier lives, providing a base from which we can continue our efforts to develop our virtues, purify our minds, and deepen our wisdom. When our moral discipline, concentration, and wisdom reach their culmination, we come to the end of the round of rebirths. However, we could never have reached that goal if there were not a series of rebirths through which our spiritual virtues could have been broadened and deepened.