

KARMA & REBIRTH

IN A NUTSHELL

Written and read by

Jinananda



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A modern Zen master was asked recently what happens when we die. His reply represents an important strand of thinking on the subject of rebirth. He said, 'I don't know. I am not a dead Zen master.' Everyone is issued a ticket at birth for the journey they must one day take to the populous realm of death. And it is a one-way ticket. As Hamlet observes, no traveller returns from across that frontier, unless in very questionable form, like the ghost of his father. It is a mystery. One cannot be sure of any kind of survival. Nor can one be certain that death is simply a blank nothing.

In the West we have become used to adopting one of two alternative positions: the first is that we die and it's all over – one performance only, with no curtain calls; the other option is that we go to some other place – heaven, hell, the Elysian fields, limbo or whatever. But there

is another, strongly held belief, which is that one can take another turn through this world. One can be reborn. The Dalai Lama, for example, owes his status as the spiritual head of the Tibetan people not by working his way up the ecclesiastical hierarchy, nor because of who his parents were, but by virtue of being the Dalai Lama in his previous life. All other people, according to this view, have antecedent lives of their own, yet for most of us these are completely obscure. There are occasionally individuals who grow up with a clear memory of what they believe to be a previous existence. But for the rest of us, there is no way of knowing who we might have been before this life, nor where we might be born next time around.

The notion of getting another chance at life might seem a comforting one at first glance, but on closer consideration one sees that it overturns some deeply

held assumptions about the nature of the individual and his or her relation to others. The idea that we might come back not as ourselves but as someone else is a dizzying one. It is an idea that claws at one's sense of inviolable individuality. If we can take possession of another life, then it means that we ourselves represent someone else's un-lived life, that we are in some sense acting out someone else's needs and volitions when all the time we imagined that we were forging our own way through life.

The other implication of rebirth is that one never knows who others have been previously. Buddhists always like to remind themselves that pretty well anyone they meet might have been their mother in a previous life. So rebirth suggests a rethink on how one frames one's sense of oneself and one's view of others. A previous generation had to absorb Freud's discovery that apparently free and independent thoughts, feelings and decisions were the products of unconscious drives, seeded in the earliest years of life. Likewise, in accepting the possibility of rebirth one might have to get used to the idea that

those drives come from much, much further back.

These ideas go to the heart of what it means to be human. Is consciousness – our awareness, our feelings, our sense of wonder and aspiration – just a kind of froth bubbling out of a world of dead matter, or does it have a validity and meaning beyond the boundaries of the body and the body's fragile hold on life?

There is no observable connection, at least for most people, between one life and the next; if rebirth happens, it does so unconsciously. However, the life one finds oneself living now is not regarded, within the many traditions in which rebirth is taken as a fact of life, as in any way a matter of accident or chance. It is supposed to follow on from the previous life as a moral consequence of it. And this is why the idea of rebirth is always associated with the idea of karma. Karma is any morally significant action of body, speech or mind. And the implication of the term is that such actions have unseen consequences for the person performing them.

When someone does something to

benefit themselves, which they know will hurt someone else, they may well feel at the very least uneasy, as if mildly poisoned. At some level, perhaps quite unconsciously, self-inflicted damage has been done. If on the other hand they do something kind for someone, the experience is usually pleasurable. They feel more themselves. It is somehow deeply nourishing.

The concept of karma is based on this observable connection between one's ethics and the experience of oneself that follows from one's actions. It just takes this connection further. It suggests that one's ethics affect one's experience of the world as well, and that this in turn affects how the world responds to oneself – even if one might have to wait until the next life for some aspects of that response. The suggestion is that one can be confident that good deeds will produce positive consequences somewhere down the line, vastly outweighing the more immediate benefits which may accrue from morally unwholesome actions. The past in this way of thinking casts a shadow over the present; and the present shadows the future in the same way. Looked at in this

way, it becomes clear why it seems so difficult to stand in the full sunlight of the present moment.

This view should not therefore be confused with ideas of reward and punishment that accompany many other religious conceptions of ethics. It is regarded as a natural phenomenon. This tendency to sideline God's judgement is implicit in most thinking around rebirth and is one reason for the Christian rejection of it. However, in a world culture that is less dominated by Western conditioning, karma – especially in its Buddhist interpretation – is increasingly viewed as a tangible ethical code for many people. As for rebirth, the prospect of coming back to the world might at least encourage some effort in keeping the earth habitable for one's return.

Notes by Jinananda



Jinananda (aka Duncan Steen) was born in Bedford in 1952 and was ordained into the Western Buddhist Order in 1986. He is the author of *The Middle Way* (Naxos AudioBooks), *Meditating* and *Warrior of Peace* (both Windhorse Publications) and has edited for publication the lectures and a number of seminars of his teacher Sangharakshita. He is chairman of the West London Buddhist Centre, where he teaches meditation and Buddhism. He also teaches meditation at the City Lit and the LSE.

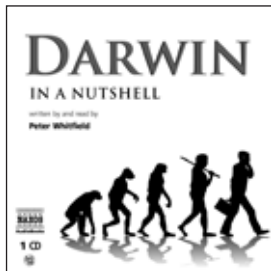
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Produced by Nicolas Soames
Recorded at Motivation Sound Studios, London
Edited by Sarah Butcher

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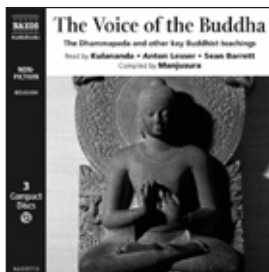
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Karma and rebirth are words used by many but properly understood by few. In his accessible introduction, Jinananda explains that although these are concepts presumed to be principally from the East they have in fact been part of the life-view of societies all over the world, from the Ancient Greeks and Gnostics to African and Aboriginal tribal communities. However, it is the cultures of India, Tibet and China that colour the contemporary understanding of karma and rebirth, and Jinanada looks at these concepts principally through the Buddhist tradition, showing that although 'actions have consequences' it is erroneous to believe that all misfortune stems from a past cause, in this or previous lifetimes.



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CD ISBN:

978-962-634-945-7

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Produced by
Nicolas Soames

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Total time
1:18:47