【Buddhist Encounters: Finding a Home in the Human Condition】

On Reincarnation and Emptiness

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1. Reincarnation

The importance of the idea of reincarnation was brought to me one afternoon in a small Sherpa village in Nepal near Mt. Everest. The village had a small Buddhist temple and it contained Tibetan texts that interested me. When I asked if I could look at the texts that were housed in the shrine room, the guardian of the temple said they were being kept for the Lama and were not available to others. I asked if I could meet the Lama, expecting to hear that he was on a trip and away. Instead, the person said, "You can. He is just over there in that house" and he pointed to it nearby. I walked over and was greeted by a woman holding a young child. They were both very beautiful and their resemblance noticeable. As you may guess, the child in her arms was the Lama. She explained, looking at the boy with a mix of pride, reverence, and sadness: "This Lama has come to me and I must care for him until he is ready to be trained again." She was aware that by the time he was five or six, he would be taken from her to live his life as a Lama.

The villagers gathered around us out of interest, and they told of how their Lama had grown old and passed away. After his death, they began to look for his reincarnation. It was no surprise that this child attracted their attention. He was bright eyed, serene, and special in appearance. Thinking that he might be the Lama, they spread out a blanket and placed personal items of the Lama on it as well as an equal number of things that belonged to others. The baby was placed on the blanket and they watched carefully to see which objects would catch his attention. Sure enough, he picked up a couple of the Lama's belongings and clung

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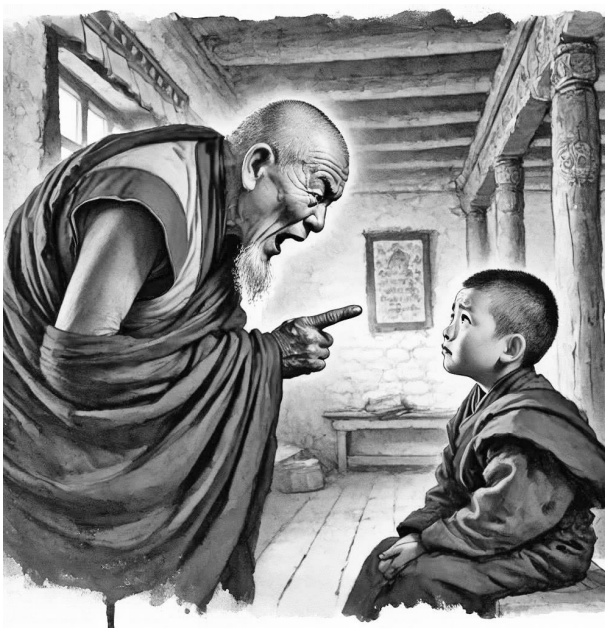
to them. At that moment they rejoiced in the knowledge that they had found the new body of their Lama. It was not an abstract thought, it was a living reality of their village and a crucial moment in maintaining the structure of life and religious practice.

It reminded me of a conversation with an elderly Mongolian Lama who was at the Berkeley campus when I arrived to teach. He had been through the same process of reincarnation with the search and discovery of the community. In his case, he described how his life changed when he was taken from his mother to the training monastery. It was a difficult journey for him, his teacher was an elderly man who had also been discovered to be the reincarnation of the major disciple of the former Lama. The task of teaching the young Lama fell to him and the child would some day return the favor and teach his next body. The old Lama at Berkeley was the highest ranking monk of the Mongolian order of Buddhism. He had escaped when a communist government had begun to dismantle Buddhism and imprison and even kill the monastics. As he told of his childhood training, he shared how difficult it had been. His mentor kept speaking to him of things that the Lama had known before his death. When the young child couldn't answer questions about doctrine, his teacher would shout "Remember! Remember! You once knew this perfectly and you taught it to me." When he was naughty, they would put him on the wall next to the gate of the monastery and passersby threw things at him demanding that he start to live like his former body. Reincarnation was a living reality and the whole community joined in the process of re-establishing their Lama to his former state of knowledge and behavior.



The elderly Lama chided the reincarnated young Lama for forgetting the knowledge he had gained in his past life.

Buddhist texts describe the process of reincarnation in detail. This requires a description or definition of death as a crucial moment when the mechanism of reincarnation must be in operation. Human experience prior to death is said to contain five aspects: form, feeling, cognition, impulse, and consciousness. These create the world that we experience. At death, the fifth of the five—consciousness, separates from the other four. It is this consciousness that from moment to moment maintains the sense of continuity.

Buddhists have various opinions about what happens to consciousness at death. Some, mainly those of the Theravada tradition, believe that in death, consciousness separates from the aspects of human experience and in the very next moment reincarnates by rebinding to a new body when the sperm and egg interact. The image is that consciousness leaves behind one construct of embodiment and instantly finds a new formation of life. This embodiment can be with any living form, animal, insect, earthly spirits, or heavenly beings. The possibilities are ranked as fortunate and unfortunate. Fortunate are those reincarnated in the bodies of gods and humans and the opposite are those who find attachment to an animal formation or a being in the dark realm which we might call Hell.

Another widespread idea is that the time between death and re-embodiment takes forty-nine days. During these forty-nine days, consciousness just exists in momentary flickers but is not affected by acquiring new karma during the Intermediate State. This is the dominant position held in East Asia. The mechanism of transmission of consciousness is the only tie between a past embodiment and a present one. The only thing that transmigrates from one life to another is consciousness.

Many Buddhists have a fond belief that this present body, which I experience as myself, has had many past lives. However, from the Buddhist perspective, each moment of consciousness, each second of being in a body that I claim to be myself is just a series of momentary and ever changing sequences. The present moment of my body is not identical to the body that existed last year, yesterday, or ten seconds ago. Change is universal and powerful. From such a perspective, the present body is not identical to a body that existed centuries ago. And yet, we are left with the experience of consciousness that can hardly be

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explained as something that arose without content at the moment of conception. My consciousness has instinct and physical implications that are fully in force at the moment of conception. Scientifically, we explain this as the continuity of DNA genetics. Our genes which come from both the egg and the sperm have the blueprint for all of human development. We are not born as a blank slate in the eyes of Buddhism. We carry in our consciousness the memory of the ages. And so, reincarnation comes down to an understanding of consciousness.

The study of consciousness has become a major topic for psychology and physics. We are now looking at consciousness as information. Is it information that migrates from one incarnation to another? The Sanskrit term is *Vijñāna*, a word having the root of *jñā*, which is the equivalent of the English word "know." For the present, we can consider knowledge as possession of information. There are many ways to possess information. One is the result of sense organs receiving information that leads to knowledge. My eye receives the reflected light and transmits the impulse into an electrical current that rushes down the optic nerve to the brain, where it undergoes further changes, some of it chemical reactions. I have an experience of "seeing" that is the *Vijñāna* that results from the sense organ receiving data and my brain produces the experience related to that event. But not all information is sensory. As mentioned above, we have a space telescope that has the capacity to capture light that started its journey more than thirteen billion years ago. These dim rays of ancient light contain thirteen billion years of information. This information is not sensory until the telescope captures it and transforms it into imagery which our eyes can reflect to the brain. Our bodies also hold information that is not sensory. We have DNA that along with the messenger RNA, is the force behind all of the cells in our body. It has information that shows our genetic heritage back through the ages and that includes the changes that have occurred through mutations of DNA. Recently, Colin Powell passed away from COVID complications, but he was already very weakened by multiple myeloma. This is caused by the failure of a cell to transmit information without change. His RNA carried the information to the body cells to reproduce faulty cells that eventually are fatal. This is just an indication that information at the cellular level is a life or death matter.

If we return to reincarnation, what happens to our consciousness when it

disentangles from the other aspects of life experience? Does it just disappear? Physics is coming up with some startling suggestions. It was thought that information in the form of light is being sucked into black holes from which it can never re-emerge. However, it is now known that even a black hole contains information and eventually radiates it. Information has survived this harshest of tests, where it has become dark matter and is no longer in any formation that exists outside the black hole. Still, when there is a breakdown of the dark matter, it radiates light containing the same information that was pulled into the hole. From these experiments, it appears that information can exist over countless years and in states that seem totally devoid of the characteristics and functions of our universe. We may or we may not believe in what is taught about reincarnation, but that does not mean we can rest assured that we are free of information from the past. What are our bodies but constructs that depend on the information stored in our DNA?

2. Emptiness: Not Nothing

The Buddhist texts are filled with statements about emptiness. It is one of the more difficult aspects of the tradition. During my early years of teaching, I struggled to give an adequate description of these passages.

As often happens, when we are floundering, a teacher appears. And so it was for me. I had begun to explore Buddhism in Korea and whenever possible from the early 1970s made trips and traveled about the nation. On one of those trips, the monks at the large monastery Tongdosa near Busan, said that I should meet one of the great living masters of the tradition. He was advanced in age and no longer traveled but his hermitage was not far from the monastery. I managed to get a message to him requesting an audience and he sent back word that it was granted. Even though he announced to the world that he wanted to retire and spend his last years in peaceful surroundings while he practiced meditation, his fame did not permit this and people flocked to his hermitage trying to hear his teaching. The road to the hermitage was unpaved and during heavy rains would become nearly impassable, and so a ribbon of concrete roadway was laid down against the hillside as a very distinct marker of how to reach the master.

When I entered his room, he was sitting on a mat and I drew one up and sat

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at his feet. He asked if there was something that I wanted or needed from him. My reply was to bemoan the fact that when I taught students at Berkeley about emptiness, they interpreted my comments to mean that it was like space, void, or featureless. For a time, each year, some of the students would proudly turn in their term paper as a blank sheet of paper indicating that they knew all about emptiness and therefore deserved a high grade. They were, of course, sent back to their writing and research when I told them that the blank sheet of paper was by no means a valid description of emptiness.

I turned to the old master as we sat there in the quiet of the remote retreat and asked him how he would teach such students. Reaching down and taking my hand in his, he said, "Let me show you. Close your eyes and for this moment feel your breath and relax." Then, he said, "Now open your eyes wide." When I did, he waved his hands through the air indicating the room before us. "This is what emptiness looks like. It is all around us everyday and everywhere. Tell your students that the *Heart Sutra* teaches "Form is nothing other than emptiness. Emptiness is nothing other than form." I often remember his teaching by looking around me and reminding myself "I am looking at emptiness in all these colors, shapes, and forms."

Is it that everything I see, every object is nothing other than emptiness? Buddhism teaches that to begin the journey of enlightenment, we must become fully aware of how our sensory organs and brain function. When I look at my room, my computer, images on the screen, my experience takes place only when the light that has reflected from each object reaches my eye, passes through the lens, activates the optic nerve which sends an electrical charge racing along it to the brain. There, the electrical charge triggers a chemical reaction that sends a spray of chemicals across the receptors and I have the experience of "seeing my surroundings." But of course my experience is not the computer screen, not the chair, my experience is in the chemical and electrical events taking place in my brain, and that experience is empty of any chair, any computer screen… none of them are in my head.

The *Heart Sutra* says that the great Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara observed his human experience and saw that it was empty. Buddhism never says that the world does not exist, that there is nothing out there. It does say that our experience of

the world is empty. There is no escaping emptiness because we are only equipped to have the experience that our senses and brain can produce and that experience is not identical to what is seen, heard, tasted, smelled, or touched. Our brain is a wonderful organ, it produces the experience that I am actually having contact with all that I sense. It produces a virtual reality that convinces us that what we experience is the thing itself. In terms of contemporary technology, we can describe the brain as something that produces a virtual reality that is so real it convinces me that I have direct contact with the external world.

Our children and grandchildren understand, when they play a computer game that surrounds them with the experience of virtual reality, they know it is a constructed experience. Battles may rage between armies and aliens, cars may race around the track, it occurs in three dimensions and can be as vivid as observing a battlefield or an event. The game players know it for what it is. They know better than my generation that grew up without computer games and virtual reality headgear. Those who spend hours with the games, come to be at home having an experience that is removed from them and yet is three dimensional and vivid. So, the old master in Korea was reminding me that my brain constructs the images that I experience even though these images are only caricatures, they are made to appear so real that it takes some convincing before we recognize them as empty. In one sense, we have been engaged in a Virtual Reality game from the moment of birth.

After my visit with the old master in Korea, I returned to the Berkeley campus and decided to seek out advice from my colleagues in the Biology Department. So, I placed a telephone call to the department and asked the secretary to help me get in touch with any faculty member working on sensory perception. She surprised me by immediately answering, “I have just the one for you.”

Her referral was to a researcher who had for many years been investigating the physical events occurring in the brain of a rabbit when it smells food. By the time I contacted him, he was two decades into his study and had identified the particular cells in the brains of the rabbits that activated when the odor of food was blown into their cages. After receiving the odor, they had only to push against a panel to release some bits of food. I described to him the Buddhist teaching of a fifth-century Indian monk Dignaga, who asserted that there are only two

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pathways to valid knowledge. Dignaga said that one way we get this knowledge is a momentary event when impulses from the sense organs trigger a response in the brain. After that event, the second mode of knowledge is the brain's construction of thoughts that provide us with our cognition of the world. I then said that this construction of thoughts was said to be empty of the thing that stimulated them. Therefore, Buddhism taught that all of our sensory experience is empty.

He was a bit taken aback and I was not sure of how he would respond to a quick lesson in information coming from centuries ago in India. Fortunately, he was open to the idea and described the results of his work. His rabbits received the information from their nose that meant food. His discovery and his contribution to brain science was proving that the cells of the brain receiving the impulse from the nose of the rabbit were active for less than two seconds. After that, the rabbits never needed to return to the nose for more information. They pushed against the panel, received food and ate with various parts of the brain being involved. He joked that the longer he studied the process the shorter the time of smelling by his rabbits. When the old monk in Korea had chanted the words of the *Heart Sutra*, that the shapes, forms, colors, smells, tastes, sensations, and sounds are all empty, he was saying that rabbits only need a millisecond of stimulus and then everything they use to respond to that flash has reference only to their own internal mental constructs.

I am often asked, "If this is true, then what is the significance of such information? How can it possibly influence what I do in my everyday life?" One example is the visit to the dental office to have a root canal. The potential pain of such a procedure would make it unthinkable without some form of control. Fortunately, we have the anesthesia that can be injected into my tissue which blocks any signals from reaching the brain. If the signals can't stimulate the brain, then my tooth can be cut, fragmented, removed and I am without pain. But, isn't it the tooth that is hurting? Isn't that tooth a reality and my pain located in it? The answer is no. The tooth does not hurt. The numbing medication is a nerve block and the lack of feeling is a matter of communication and mental processing. You can take out your eye, remove it from its socket, and put it on the table, but it won't "see" anything. That is the ancient query from a student to the master, "When the flag flutters in the wind, is it the flag that is moving or is it the wind?"

The master replied, "Neither, it is only the mind that moves." Does my tooth hurt? No. It is only the mental construct produced when information arrives from the tooth that "hurt" is experienced.

There were examples of questions directed toward the Buddha that he refused to answer. Opponents have at times used this refusal as proof that the Buddha didn't know everything. Why was it so difficult for the tradition to clearly give certain answers? We know from jokes about legal questioning in a court of law that it is possible to ask a question in such a way that any answer is self-condemnation. "Are you still beating your dog?" is a query that traps whether we can truthfully answer "no" or "yes."

Life unfolds as a chain of moments, interconnected yet distinct, like the passing of flame from one bearer to the next.

In the Buddhist texts, there is a refusal to respond to such questions. If I ask, will I go to heaven or the Pure Land after the moment of death? No matter how one answers the query, it implies that there is a self that is permanent, long lasting. The issue is not whether I will go to the Pure Land, it is about the idea of a "self." What about the "self" at the moment of bodily death? We can first attempt to understand the reality of a "self" right now at this moment: how do I exist from one second to the next?

Empress Wu of the Tang dynasty called a highly regarded monk to court and asked him to explain the Buddhist notion of an impermanent and ever-changing self. She admitted that it was not possible for her to take her experience of herself as an entity that had survived for many years and accept the idea of no-self. One can imagine the pressure placed on that monk. How could he in a few words teach her about such a complex matter? He came to the conclusion that it was not possible to give a response by words alone. And so, he set up a line of one hundred

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candles in front of her. He lit the first candle and used it to light the second one before blowing out the flame on the first. And so on down the line in sequence, using each candle to light the next in line before extinguishing its flame.

When he reached the hundredth candle and lit it, he carried the burning examples to the Empress and asked her if the flame was the same as the one he used to start the process. She replied "no." He then pointed out that a sequence of passing along a flame is like the moments that we live. Our lives are made up of discrete expressions that are tied to one another but nothing persists unchanged.

When the question is asked, will I go to the Pure Land, what is my conception of the "I"? Any answer that implies a permanent "I" that lives on one side of the moment of death and continues beyond that point into the future will violate the teaching that there is no "self" which survives for more than a millisecond. If I conclude that the "self" changes from one instant to the next in this life, then any concept of what happens to the "I" after death is exactly the same.

In the *Perfection of Wisdom*, the Buddha tells Subhuti to teach this wisdom to Bodhisattvas, those who are trying to achieve Full Enlightenment. The Buddha is testing Subhuti with regard to his thoughts about the Human Condition. Subhuti replies, "I don't see anything that can be called a 'bodhisattva' and I can't find anything that can be identified as 'Perfection of Wisdom'… so how can I teach?" He has passed the test with flying colors. Nothing has an essential essence that is permanent and always present. Everything is momentary and the change from one instance to the next is total and complete. While the texts describe rebirth, the "I" that is "reborn" is not identical to the "I" of a previous life. It is, as the monk told Empress Wu, a sequence of cause and effect. There is no permanent "self" that survives death, anymore than there is a "self" that survives right now as I speak to you. Another question is asked, "Is it possible to murder an imaginary person and thus acquire bad karma?" We might word the query a bit differently, "If my experience of others is limited to my internal mental constructions, how can there be a place for ethical and moral behavior?" Aren't these others merely mental constructs?

There is a story that I read many years ago, but it still haunts me. It is set in a future where social cohesion has begun to unravel. The problem in cities is that snipers in high-rise buildings have begun to randomly shoot innocent people

on the streets. The hero of the play hates what is happening. One day a person is shot down outside his building and he witnesses it. A newspaper picture of the body appears the following day. As the hero looks at the picture, it suddenly magnifies, the image dissolves and he sees that the picture is nothing but black and white dots. He goes to the window and looks out on the city and the same phenomena occurs, his view of the streets and buildings magnifies and he sees that it is nothing but colored dots. Up to this point, when I first heard the story, I was struck by how close it was to Buddhist teaching that what we perceive is empty of any substance of the object of the senses. The hero turns out to be anything but an enlightened person. The insight of the emptiness of the construct of our mental experience leads him to disillusion and he becomes dismissive of his previous thinking. If it is all just dots of color, then there is nothing to rely on, nothing to be gained, and nothing to require our concern. He then goes to his closet and takes out a rifle and starts to shoot people in the street. He becomes what he had most disliked, he becomes a sniper because after all, he comes to feel that if the world is different than he thought then his actions don't matter to a bunch of colored dots.

The Bodhisattvas and the Buddha are aware that their experience of others is a construct that does not contain any material element of those others. Thus, the questions are: Is it possible to teach an imaginary person? Why do it? What is the benefit? The text tells us that even though the enlightened ones fully understand the emptiness of their sensory experience of others, they still teach them. We can think of it like the hero of the story, as an act of folly to waste time on dots of color which our brain presents to us as "others." However, in our entertainment of reading or watching videos, we believe firmly in the importance of experiencing the fictional. We watch a movie that is just dots of color streaming into our vision, it is just an imaginary world that has been created. And yet, our compassion for the depicted persons can be overwhelming. Our tears flow as we observe the unfolding of a narrative that touches our sense of empathy and we rejoice if insight and wisdom are used to finally guide the individuals to safety and happiness. How is it that we can invest so much emotion in a fictional account?

I think one of the messages from these texts is an oft repeated reminder that we only have our sensory and mental experience. That experience is filled with

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the sensations of form, shape, color, pain, and delight. If we turn away from such experience as being meaningless, devoid of any requirements of ethics or feeling, then we can only enter a state of indifference, lack of compassion, and angry suffering. Such rejection of our experience would lead to a feeling of the futility of existence and inevitably an overwhelming depression of spirit. The opposite response is described by the Buddhist texts. The calm acceptance of the nature of our experience and with that the recognition of what is really happening to us, need not be a source of suffering. In fact, it is shown that with such insight, we can have enjoyment and excitement and pleasure that is more satisfying than anything we have felt before. After all, if we can watch a movie and find ourselves laughing and crying and being involved with something that we know is fiction, why can we not do the same with our sensory experience in every moment.

I take a walk everyday passing by some beautiful landscaping, a white rose that is pure and intricate in shape, a tree trunk that rises from the ground like a sculpture, a low ground cover that has tiny flowers more colorful than any larger plant. I can accept that what I am experiencing is my senses delivering stimuli to my brain, but that need not keep me from exalting in the experience and appreciating the colored dots that are being constructed by my brain into a perceived flower. Knowing that what I experience is devoid of the thing being observed, rather than leaving me bereft of emotion and enjoyment, in a surprising way, such insight can actually enhance my appreciation for the world around me. I find myself wanting to say to the white rose, "I know that I can only have the vision of you in the chemical spray of my brain, but if you are anything like what I am experiencing, you are truly beautiful." The miracle of life is that I have a mental construct, that I have an endless variety of visions that inspire, that I can feel a flood of joy on experiencing my family and my friends and a never-ending parade of shapes and colors. Once in a great while, I have a wonderful moment of experience where emptiness is not nothing, it is everything.