

Rebirth & Not-Self

March 1, 2023

As you're sitting here, you've got the potential for all five aggregates, and you have the choice as to what you want to do with those potentials. Most often, we're not aware of the fact that we have those choices, or we have a very limited sense of what those choices are. We end up creating a lot of suffering around the aggregates, even though we use them to look for pleasure.

We get *some* pleasure out of them. The Buddha doesn't deny that. He said that if it weren't for the pleasures offered by the aggregates, we wouldn't fall for them. But the extent to which we cling to them—and often we cling to them because of the pleasure—means that they constitute suffering. We also have the choice, he says, to turn these aggregates into a state of concentration.

So what choice will you make? There's a *you* here, for the time being, making that choice. As the Buddha said, as long as there's craving for the aggregates, attachment to the aggregates, there will be a being. So instead of using that being to create suffering, you use that being to get out. It's part of your motivation. And it's part of your set of tools.

You focus on the breath. There are lots of things in the aggregate of form you could focus on right now, but focus on the breath. Breathe in a way that gives rise to a feeling of pleasure. Now, you'll be helped by using a perception. Think of the breath not just as air coming in and out through the nose—because after all, the Buddha didn't say that the in-and-out breath is a tactile sensation, he said it's one of the elements in the body.

In other words, it's part of proprioception: how you sense the body from within. And you can feel the in-and-out breath anywhere you want, wherever you notice that it's clear to watch the breath, where you find that it's in a part of the body that's especially sensitive to how it feels when you breathe in, how it feels when you breathe out. It might be down in the chest, in the throat, in the middle of the head. Once you're found your spot, watch over it.

As you direct your thoughts to the breath, you can also evaluate it to figure out what feels good, what feels best, what kinds of perceptions are best, what ways of breathing are best, so that you can settle down. The directed thought and evaluation are fabrication. Then you've got consciousness, which is aware of all these things. Consciousness, of course, is part of the consciousness aggregate.

So you're engaged in these aggregate-activities. You're still holding on. As the Buddha said, there will be sense of "I am" all the way up through non-return. So

make use of that sense of “I am.” Make skillful use of it. Given that you’re going to be letting go of your sense of self eventually, the best way to do that without aversion is to train it. That way, when you do let it go, there will be a sense of appreciation, but also a sense of its limitations. You let go because you know that there’ll be something better that comes when you let go.

The realization that you have these choices now is something you want to keep in mind every time you meditate, because as you’re working with the mind right now. You’re developing habits. And you’re also getting sensitive to these aggregates that you tend to cling to, out of which you create your sense of who you are.

This will be especially important as death approaches. Most people, as they’re dying, will reach a point where they simply give up. In that case, it’s a question of their old kamma taking over. But they don’t realize that their attitude, their views at the moment of death, can have a big impact on how the potentials from old kamma will play out.

The Buddha saw this in his second knowledge on the night of his awakening. As he said, he saw that people with good karma would go to a good destination. People with bad karma would go to a bad destination. That’s his short version.

His more extended version of what he saw was that there were cases where people were doing good karma in one life, but then as they were dying, either right before death or right at death, they developed wrong view. That wrong view would pull them down, even though they had good kamma in this lifetime. Conversely, there were people who had done bad things in this lifetime, but they developed good kamma after that, or else developed right view at the moment of death, and that pulled them up.

So the moment of death is powerful. It showed the Buddha that kamma is a lot more complex than people had taught before, or even what a lot of Buddhists have taught since. What you choose at the moment of death will make a huge difference. It’ll either confirm you in your good actions, or negate your good actions and pull you down for a while. Your good actions will eventually show their results, but you may have to suffer something else in the meantime—and vice versa.

It’s all a question of the aggregates and the potentials that keep coming up with each moment, and how you deal with those potentials. So as you practice meditation, you want to get really good at being skillful in how you deal with these potentials, because as the body weakens, as the end of life approaches, it’s very easy to feel overwhelmed. But if you’re confident in your skill, you can come out okay.

The question sometimes comes up, as it came up today: When the Buddha says there's no self, then what gets reborn? Given the way Buddhism is often presented, that's a legitimate question. But it's not how the Buddha taught. He started with rebirth as a fact. That was his second knowledge. What he learned in the third knowledge didn't negate what he had learned in his second knowledge, which was why he continued to teach the second knowledge after gaining awakening.

Take rebirth as the context. Then the question is, how does the concept of not-self, or how does the activity of not-selfing, fit into that context, the teaching of rebirth? In the Buddha's analogies for rebirth, he said it's like a flame of a fire going from one house to another. In those days, the way the physics of fire was understood was that it had to have something to hold on to in order to burn. So what was it holding on to when it leapt from one house to another? The Buddha's answer was that it holds on to the wind. In the same way, you cling to your craving as you leave this body.

This was something he said in answer to the question: "What happens when one being goes from one body to the next at death?" He didn't say, "Well, there are no beings," because after all, he did say people keep on making the identity of a being for themselves by the way they get attached to the aggregates. So they latch on to their craving and maintain that identity as a being as they go from one life to the next.

Craving is the sustenance that takes you from one body to another. This is why the Buddha focused on craving as the cause for suffering. There are three kinds: sensual craving, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

Sensual craving is your desire to keep fantasizing and planning for sensual pleasures. You can ask a lot of people what they think about as they go through the day, and a lot of jobs that people have throughout the world are pretty miserable. What are they thinking about as they're doing their jobs? Thinking about sensuality, either food or sex, is what gets them through. If you have that habit, then as death comes, the body's in a lot of pain, and things are otherwise pretty much out of control, you'll latch on to any opportunity to keep on thinking about sensuality and looking for prospects of sensuality. That will take you to certain types of rebirth—not necessarily good ones.

Or you simply get afraid of the fact that you're going to be annihilated. If the possibility comes up that you could latch on to something where you wouldn't be annihilated—that would be craving for becoming—you go for it. Or if the pain of life is so bad, you might decide that you'd just rather be done with it, not become anything at all, get snuffed out—that's craving for non-becoming. That'll take you

to states of non-perception where you blank out for a while, but that particular kamma will wear off, and then you'll come back.

So as I said, the context is the teaching of rebirth. Then the question within that context is: How do you want to identify with things at that point? There are a lot of things you don't want to identify with. To begin with, any unskillful thoughts, any unskillful perceptions that would latch on to feelings that would pull you down—you want to see those as not-self.

Of course, ideally, if you want to gain total awakening, you'd let go of all aggregates, see them all as not-self, but a lot of people can't manage that. Still, at the very least, they can latch on to something that's skillful. But you have to remember: Anything you latch on to is going to limit you. As the Buddha said, whatever you're obsessed with, whatever you identify with, that's going to make a being, and it's going to place limitations on you.

It's like that story of the embryos in *The Once and Future King*. Merlin has changed Wart, the young Arthur, into a badger. He goes to see an old badger who's very much like an Oxford don. The badger has a thesis about how God created the world. Instead of creating lots of different animals, he just created lots of embryos. Then he gave all the embryos the opportunity to change their body parts into whatever tools they wanted in order to survive in the world.

So over the fifth and sixth day, they lined up and chose their tools. Some chose defensive tools. Some chose offensive tools. Finally it came to Man. And Man said, "I'd rather stay as an embryo, the way you made me. And I will *use* tools instead of committing myself to change myself into any one set of tools." And God said, "Good, you've guessed our riddle." He put Man in charge of all the others—the message there being that if you define yourself in certain ways, like avatars in a video game, you're going to be limited.

Some of us will go for certain limitations. We see them as prospects. And certain aggregate-conglomerations—or aggregate-constellations, you might say—do offer more opportunities than others. Ideally, though, total freedom comes when you let go of all aggregates. But these will be the choices you face.

As for the question, "What is it that gets reborn?"—remember, the Buddha never said there is a self or there is no self. He simply looked at selfing as an activity that we do. And it's a question of learning how to do it skillfully, and then getting so skillful at it that you get to a point where you don't need to do it anymore. Because it's a strategy for happiness, you keep following it, using it, until you've reached the ultimate happiness. Then you don't need that strategy anymore. You let it go.

So we're looking at not-self in the context of rebirth. Take rebirth as a fact. And it's not a question of *what* gets reborn. It's *how* the process happens, and how you can learn how to master the different steps in the process, so that ideally, you don't have to take rebirth. Failing that, you take a good rebirth where you can continue practicing.

When you learn to think in these ways, it clears up a lot of problems, and also focuses you on where you are responsible. If there's some *thing* that takes rebirth, then you're not really responsible. You just let it do its thing. But if rebirth is a process that depends on activities—and these are activities you're doing all the time, taking potentials that come in from the past and shaping them—you can learn to do it well. That way, when the time comes when you have to leave the body, you've got the skills you need.

That's what we're working on as we meditate. Some people say, "Well, I don't care about meditation and its relationship to death. I just want to meditate and have it in relationship to how I live my life here and now." Well, there's no way you can live your life without thinking about death. You have to figure out: What does death mean? What kind of shadow does it cast over your life? What kind of meaning does it give to the activities of your life? When you have an idea of how it can be mastered as a skill, then that points you to the skills you need to develop as you're alive.

In other words, you look at the whole story. You don't say, "I don't want to hear the climax. I don't want to hear the transition. I'll just think about everything else up until then." If you do that, you're not helping yourself prepare for what's totally inevitable. When the Buddha said wisdom comes from asking the question, "What will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?"—remember that "long-term" is really long in his eyes. It doesn't stop at death. It keeps on going.