



Reincarnation: Who Are We? (part two)

The Tibetan Buddhist understands us to be mutually interconnected externally and internally composed of an agglomeration of interconnecting components or strands called skandhas that are:

“impossible to separate one from another- in the same way colours of the rainbow cannot be separated from it or each other, and have no existence or reality in themselves”

Lama Anagarika Govinda

Govinda talks of our highest identity as kevalatva, (pure self-existence), sayujatva, (merging into the higher being or impersonal state of the universal Brahman) and svatantrya, (unqualified and complete freedom).

All these views agree that our real identity is deathless, sorrowless, beyond birth and old age and yet cannot be known without sacrificing our individual separate existence as ego in the fires of practice.

In the Buddhist text called the Visuddhimagga, a lifetime is considered as long as one thought:

“Strictly speaking the duration of the life of a human being is exceedingly brief, lasting only while a thought lasts”

“the being of a past moment of thought has lived but does not live, nor will it live. The being of a future moment of thought will live but has not lived nor does it live. The being of the present moment of thought does live, but has not lived, nor will it live..... all subject to the law of mutual interdependence”.

Identity is from this view, deeply felt and known as an incessant flow and change of elements, in continuity through time, connected through interdependence.

This continuity and interconnection gives rise to our self-consciousness, described as a factor of mind or manas which includes ego, thinking, intellect and memory. Manas is distinguished from the more expansive alaya-vijnana or ‘cosmic mind’ correlating with the Yogic vijñanamaya-kosha.

It is this experience of cosmic mind that is considered to be the super-conscious stream of existence or becoming in which all possible experiences and existences, all wisdom, all contents of consciousness are stored since beginningless time, in order to reappear in active waking consciousness whenever the contextual conditions, behaviours and mental associations set them forth.

Lama Govinda states:

Radikal Freedom - Yoga as realisation

“birth and death are only the communicating dams between one life and another, the continous stream of consciousness flowing through them does not only contain on its surface the causally conditioned states of existence, but the totality of all possible states of consciousness, the sum total of a beginningless ‘past’, which is identical with a limitless ‘future’. It is the emanation and manifestation of the basic universal consciousness, the alaya-vijnana”.

Mediating between the manas and the alaya-vijnana is the ego which can potentially see both sides, it is the potential gateway, being both the reference point for coherence of personal content and thus the focus of conventional existence, as well as the initial conception point of transpersonal desire and vision. Defiled or small mind is the uninterrupted process of ego-creating thought, that Buddhists call selfing.

This small self or small mind is the product of desire, aversion and indifference, created through continuously self-referencing, making every experience a platform for proving its own existence and value. This unskilful conditioning of unconscious intention is the small self, this grasping to support the illusion of inherent existence and value creates the illusion of the small self.

Buddha considered the only real miracle, the Padma Siddhi, as the:

“turning about in the deepest seat of our consciousness”

leading us from the view of small self in relation to the external world of objects to the inner world of completeness, fullness and all embracing universality of the big mind. This pure essence of big mind is beyond birth, old-age, death and rebirth, it is uncreated and eternal.

“In mind essence there is nothing to be grasped or named it can only be known or experienced”

“selfhood and universe are only the inside and outside of the same experience”.

Chogyam Trungpa in his translation and commentary on the Bardo Thodol translated as ‘the book of space’, is often badly translated as the book of the dead. Bardo literally means ‘gap’ and refers to the space between moments, also the space in which moments dance, as the space experienced in meditation and also that space which contains birth and death. This space of birth and death applying equally to everybody in every moment of thought and between thought. The book describes the experience of consciousness as it experiences the dissolution of the elements in death.

Both the Sankhyan view of Patanjali and the Buddhist view recognise knowledge of previous existences (purvajatijnanam) arising as one more fully identifies with the alaya-vijnana, and suggest it is possible to experience both direct perception and memory of prior lives.

Both also affirm that the notion of small self (atmabhava) ceases for one who cultivates real insight (visesadarsi).

Radikal Freedom - Yoga as realisation

This insightful view of ultimate reality is said to be unavailable to those still clinging, grasping or thirsting for self-oriented ownership of experience, for those who have as of yet failed to cultivate sufficient insight. Both Buddha and Patanjali state that ignorant and false identification with Prakriti or with the skandhas, and the thirst for experience that arises with this ego-hood is the cause of all our suffering.

The Buddhist practice of Vipassana leads to awareness of an-atman or no-self where all is vibration, even pure consciousness lasting no more than a moment. Buddhists say misperceived and misconceived this consciousness becomes 'Self' and with insight the view of any permanently abiding principle is completely dispelled.

The paradox remains that there is no individual permanently abiding principle but the abiding universal essence of big mind, and it is experiential identification as this, that liberates us from all our illusions of suffering.

Tibetan Buddhism calls the eight consciousnesses the namparshpa or 'namshes' and the folk belief is that these are what is reborn. The namshes is literally the knower of all, equivalent to vijnana in Sanskrit.

The namshes is subject to the automatic play of cause and effect, causal connection or karma leading it to its new body.

Considered as phenomena as emanations of mind in more evolved Buddhist thinking the namshes are not seen as some sort of soul passing between lives.

The maintenance of the Lamaist schools of Tibet with their reincarnated teachers as tulkus supports this folk view of reincarnation of namshes. The tulku or reborn being is considered the rebirth of the mind of the teacher. Rebirth of any being is however understood to be the consequence of grasping, the continuing vortex of energy of clinging causes an ethereal body that flows with the namshes into another body as a consequence of the ethereal bodies ardent thirst for the sensations it knew in life. Once this vortex is terminated (Citta-vrtti nirodha in Yoga) there is no rebirth, unless a being so chooses, as a way of helping other beings to become free of egoic grasping and the suffering associated with that, these beings are then called bodhisattva, beings living in the purity of Big mind and reborn to assist the evolutionary process.

Those wishing to convince themselves of their own immortality believe their 'I' is a soul or homogenous block moving from life to life, whereas it can be considered an aggregation whose constituents are transitory in nature with only a momentary existence, dependent on multiple inter-dependent causes.

Believing 'I am a reincarnation of' whomsoever is from this perspective naive and unevolved. All energies radiate outward, continue and incorporate themselves in new forms, therefore one cannot say 'I was Cleopatra' for example. Yet a particular sensation or experience could have been

Radikal Freedom - Yoga as realisation

experienced by anterior individuals, and perhaps currently they are manifesting persistence through the intermediary of the aggregation called 'I', perceptions, sensations, consciousnesses, awareness's, behaviours, cultural contexts and references travel throughout the world and are not truly the property of anyone of us."

Both Indian-Hindu and Buddhist theories work with the view of the three realms or vyahritis, Bhur, Bhuvah and Svah equated with the three realms of consciousness, the phonemes of the Om sound and the three kayas or bodies of the Buddha. These realms are the Kama Loka (realm of desire) where in Buddhist parlance the six classes of beings, humans, gods, demons, titans, animals and hungry ghosts reside, dominated by attachment and covetousness.

The Rupa Loka, the realm of pure form and abstract ideas and lastly the Arupa Loka, the realm of the inconceivable and formless.

Running in conjunction with these theories are the Tantric-Yogic map of chakras and nadis being an aspect of the multi-ordinal identity through the panchamayakoshas (five sheaths) as referred to in Buddhist and Hindu schools.

In understanding the person as comprised of the five sheaths or bodies each more subtle and each more closely allied to the spiritual generation of reality in Hindu thinking or closer to Buddha-nature in Buddhist thinking then each more subtle body is a more rarefied identity that can only be experienced to be known.

These koshas as the body of food, the material body; the body of prana, the sheath of life-energy and emotion experienced as nadis, chakras and subtle drops; the body of mind experienced through thinking, intellect and ego; the cosmic-mind body that connects one to the universal mind of correct perception beyond ego; and the body of bliss. It is the next step into the inconceivable that is ones true identity as the source of all, as the Supreme self-less Self or the self-less Buddha nature.

If this is the true identity then what can be reborn or reincarnated?

Ramana Maharshi in the book 'Be as you are' asserts that the Self or Big Mind is turiyatita (beyond the fourth) indicating there are not really four states but only one transcendental state that includes all. The real identity is pure being where there are no subjects or objects only deep awareness of being.

The centre of this experience is 'hridayam' or the heart space.

The ahamvrtti or 'I' thought merely a construct of mind equivalent to ego. Maharshi also states:

"most religions have constructed elaborate theories to explain what happens to the individual soul after the death of the body".

Radikal Freedom - Yoga as realisation

For him all such theories are based on the false assumption that the individual small self or soul is real. From the standpoint of the Self or Big mind there is no birth or death. He asserts that there is no soul that comes and goes only the thinking mind of the individual making it so.

For Maharshi the Jnana Yogi has ceased to exist as a separate mental-emotional-biological event, and therefore knows there is no real birth or death. Realisation of this truth destroys all samskaras or latent conditioned tendencies and rebirth cannot occur.

Unresolved samskaras, however, that have merely sunk into the heart on death, occasion rebirth at the right time in the right context where these latent tendencies can once again fruit.

Maharshi talks about how the jiva transfers from one body to another as a process of transfer of these samskaric attachments.

Sri Ramana accepted the laws of karma, yet qualified them by stating that they are only applicable so long as one considers oneself or others as beings separate from the Self.

“The truth burns up all karmas and frees one from all births”

Thus concurring with the Kundalini Tantra which proposes that:

“love overcomes ego”.

The Chandogya Upanishad presents a spectrum of views, the higher understanding of the Self, as total and all encompassing, which as Maharshi states, with recognition of ones existence as this, then there is neither birth or rebirth. The nature of this higher Self is love and bliss. The lower end of the spectrum of teachings are the interpretation of the paths of the soul after death.

These theories work well to offer folk beliefs and can be used to sustain a social and moral order through the religious-political elite. Such beliefs are also wide open to abusive and judgemental understandings that can easily condemn or glorify a person, based on their current status and situation, with no reference to the higher nature of the Self as totally loving and the route to recognising this loving truth being any of the Yogic methods which develop the teachings of love and wisdom.

A Tibetan teacher I worked with explicitly stated:

“Only the ignorant speak of punishment and reward (retributive karma), there is only the inexorable law of cause and effect”.

In higher and more contemporary Vedantic view and in Buddhist views there is seen to be a dissolution of the components of the multi-ordinal self (skandhas-koshas) during the process of death (intrinsically in each moment or extrinsically in physical death) with a gradual coalescence to a

Radikal Freedom - Yoga as realisation

central focus of any unresolved grasping of experience. Both Sri Ramana and Buddhists view that if there is any rebirth or reincarnation then it is this vortex of mental-emotional-desire that is reborn.

Rebirth occurs through the subtle field of the mind (manomaya to vijnanamaya), which is also an aspect of the person and one that transcends and includes the physical. This vortex attracts and is attracted to an appropriate physical form. The concept of the jiva with its ethereal wrapping of a subtle body containing its karma is a more personalised view that does tend to allow greater judgement of any individual because of their condition. The less personal Buddhist view allows less judgement to occur if clearly understood that what links and continues from one physical form to another is merely mental vortices that also in their own time work their way out into freedom.

The hierarchical caste system is a case in point of the highly judgemental use of karma and rebirth theories to sustain a social and political moral order that can condemn many lives in conventional terms to misery. The Buddhist view of the manas being the gateway between the egoic personal and the universal, and the Vedantic view of the heart being the gateway are not different in as much as manas is not considered to reside in the head but in the heart.

The Buddhist mantra OM MANI PADME HUM has many meanings one of which is the intimate connection and relationship, in realisation, of the jewel of the mind resting in the lotus of the heart, this is also reflected in the aspects of Buddha-nature which are both unobstructed compassion and total wisdom.

From the realised state it is clear there is no such thing as a person, there is no rebirth and all karma as attachment to experience is dissolved.

The concept of causal connectedness and interdependence is in essence an understanding of inter-being in which there are from an absolute view, no beings. The persistent sense of a self created through the acquisitive-rejective egoic process and linguistically sustained is in this sense a unique no-self.

From this higher perspective, punishment and reward are an alien understanding that can only arise from a perspective of egoic separation. Retributive karma though maybe appealing to some sensibilities is then lost and replaced with a concept of developmental karma, which is simply mindfully, skilfully, with great kindness moving into greater evolutionary awareness. Giving up the lower end spectrum of thinking and feeling of ones 'self' may not be possible on a mere cognitive level and without the raft of techniques developed by Yogic and Buddhist practice and transpersonal psychotherapies nigh on impossible.

Since these practices take time, energy and discipline, they are not yet available to all, hence the development of mythology and lower spectrum beliefs that speak of souls or namshes being reborn. Karma theories and higher views both of Self and no-self can support and encourage the concept of inter-being and evolutionary consciousness. From this view the connection between conventional beings is one of causal connection through time and space and beyond the physical into the more subtle realms of being such that regard for the future is one rooted in the well-being of all.

Radikal Freedom - Yoga as realisation

The recognition that in ones conventional and current lifetime acquisitive-rejective egocentric thought, feeling and action is it's own punishment and will never yield any deeper level of satisfaction or happiness could lead one to more constructive ways of inter-being relaxed in the non trivial, non interest or relevancy of any reincarnation.

Christopher Gladwell