

## Zen & Buddhism: Karma & Reincarnation

### WHEN PEOPLE

are happy and contented, they tend to take life for granted. It is when they suffer, when they find life difficult, that they begin to search for a reason and a way out of their difficulty. They may ask why some are born in poverty and suffering, while others are born in fortunate circumstances. Some people believe that it is due to fate, chance, or an invisible power beyond their control. They feel that they are unable to live the life they desire so as to experience happiness always. Consequently, they become confused and desperate. However, the Buddha was able to explain why people differ in their circumstances and why some are more fortunate in life than others. The Buddha taught that one's present condition, whether of happiness or suffering, is the result of the accumulated force of all past actions or karma.

### DEFINITION OF KARMA

Karma is intentional action, that is, a deed done deliberately through body, speech or mind. Karma means good and bad volition (kusala Akusala Centana). Every volitional action (except that of a Buddha or of an Arahant) is called Karma. The Buddhas and Arahants do not accumulate fresh Karma as they have destroyed all their passions.

In other words, Karma is the law of moral causation. It is action and reaction in the ethical realm. It is natural law that every action produces a certain effect. So if one performs wholesome actions such as donating money to charitable organizations, happiness will ensue. On the other hand, if one performs unwholesome actions, such as killing a living being, the result will be suffering. This is the law of cause and effect at work. In this way, the effect of past karma determines the nature of one's present situation in life.

The Buddha said,

"According to the seed that is sown,  
So is the fruit you reap  
The door of good of will gather good results  
The door of evil reaps evil results.  
If you plant a good seed well,  
Then you will enjoy the good fruits."

Karma is a law itself. But it does not follow that there should be a lawgiver. The law of Karma, too, demands no lawgiver. It operates in its own field without the intervention of an external, independent agency.

### REBIRTH

One question often asked is, "What happens to us after death?"

According to the Buddhists, rebirth takes place at the end of this life. Buddhists regard rebirth as a fact. There is evidence that each person has lived many lives in the past and will continue to live more in the future.

### THE CASE FOR REBIRTH

Rebirth is a reality although one may not be aware of it. Those who have developed their minds through meditation have confirmed the existence of past lives. Meditators who have attained powers of concentration have been able to recall their previous lives in great detail. The Buddha and His prominent disciples, in many countries and at different times, have been able to prove the existence of past lives. The Buddha, on the night of His Enlightenment, developed the ability to see His past lives. He also saw beings dying in one state of existence and being reborn in another, according to their actions. Thus it was from personal experience that the Buddha taught His followers the truth of rebirth.

In recent years, evidence has been collected and documented which confirms that rebirth is a fact. There have been cases of people who have been able to recollect their experience of previous lives. Their description of places and persons of the past were confirmed after thorough investigations.

The best known example of this is the case of Bridey Murphy. A Mrs. Ruth Simmons of the United States recollected a previous life in Ireland, more than 100 years ago. She said she had been Bridey Murphy in the year 1789 and gave full details of Bridey's life. The details were later checked and found to be quite accurate, although in her present life, Mrs.

Simmons had never been outside America.

In another case in England, a woman called Mrs. Naomi Henry recollected two previous lives. In the first instance, she recalled her life as an Irishwoman living in a village called Greenhalgh in the seventeenth century. Research into her case was carried out which revealed that such a village did exist then. In the second instance, she remembered that in one of her previous lives, she was an Englishwoman who became a nurse to several children in an English town called Downham in 1902. A search into the official records kept in Downham proved that such a woman did exist.

Professor Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia, U.S.A., has researched and published his findings on more than twenty cases of rebirth. These cases, which have been well documented and verified, are from various countries including France, Italy, India, Sri Lanka and Burma.

### REBIRTH IN THE SIX REALMS

Buddhism teaches that birth, death and rebirth are part of the continuing process of change. This is similar to the continuous process of growth, decay and replacement of cells in one's body. According to medical experts, every seven years, all body cells are replaced.

At the moment of death, when this life is over, and the body can no longer survive, the mind is separated from the body. At that time, the craving for life causes one to seek a new existence, and the previous karma determines the place of one's rebirth.

There are six realms in which one may be reborn after death. They are the realms of gods, the demigods, human beings, animals, hungry ghosts and the hells. These are just general categories and within each, there exist many sub-categories. The six realms of existence include three relatively happy states, and three relatively miserable states. The realms of the gods, the demigods and human beings are considered to contain more happiness and less suffering. The realms of animals, hungry ghosts and the hells are considered to be relatively miserable because living beings there suffer more from fear, hunger, thirst, heat, cold and pain.

In general, wholesome actions such as good conduct, charity and mental development, are the causes of rebirth in the happy realms of gods, demigods and human beings. On the other hand, unwholesome actions such as immoral conduct, miserliness and cruelty cause rebirth in the unhappy realms of animals, hungry ghosts and the hells.

One need not wait until rebirth to imagine what existence in other realms is like. For instance, when one is intensely happy or totally at peace with oneself, one experiences a state similar to that of the gods. When baser instincts are followed and one is totally preoccupied with eating, sleeping and sex, existence is like that of the animals. Then again, when one is overwhelmed by fear and pain, or is tortured and killed in this life, one experiences suffering like that of the hells.

Of all the six realms, the realm of human beings is considered the most desirable. In the realm of human beings, the conditions for attaining Nirvana are better. In general, in the unhappy realms, the suffering of living beings is so intense and ignorance so great that they are unable to recognize the Truth and follow the path to attain freedom. Alternatively, living beings in the realms of the gods and demigods experience so much happiness and have so many distractions that they do not think of rebirth until it is too late. Then they may be reborn in one of the lower realms of suffering. In the realm of human beings, however, people experience both happiness and suffering, and are intelligent enough to recognize the Truth and follow the path to attain freedom from the cycle of birth and death. Therefore, one is indeed fortunate to be born as a human being, and should remember that the principal cause of birth in this realm is Good Conduct.

#### THE CYCLE OF BIRTH AND DEATH

The Buddha pointed out that whenever one is reborn, whether as a human being, as an animal, or as a god, none of these states of existence is permanent. The average life span differs for living beings in the six realms of existence but none of them lasts forever. Eventually, rebirth will take place. The realm into which one is reborn and one's conditions of rebirth are determined by past and present actions. This is the law of karma at work.

Because of the force of their karma, people are born and reborn endlessly in one realm of existence or in another. The Buddha declared that there is no permanent rest in this cycle of birth and death. It is only when one follows the Noble Eightfold path taught by the Buddha and eventually attains Nirvana, that one finally becomes free from this ceaseless cycle and gains supreme and permanent happiness.

People who understand karma and rebirth see life in a better perspective. They understand that every action they perform will have its effects now and in the future. The knowledge gives them hope and strength in the face of difficulties. It gives them courage to continue doing good. They are convinced that they will experience the good effects of their wholesome actions either in the short-term or in the long-term.

## Buddhism

### Six Realms of Existence

#### The Wheel of Samsara

By Barbara O'Brien, About.com Guide

The Six Realms are an allegorical description of conditioned existence, or samsara, into which beings are reborn. The nature of one's existence is determined by karma. Some realms seem more pleasant than others -- heaven sounds preferable to hell -- but all are *dukkha*<sup>1</sup>, meaning they are temporary and imperfect.

The Six Realms often are illustrated by the *Bhava Chakra*<sup>2</sup>, or Wheel of Life.

Please note that in some schools the realms of Devas and Asuras are combined, leaving five realms instead of six.

#### 1. Deva-gati, the Realm of Devas (Gods) and Heavenly Beings



In Buddhist tradition, the Deva realm is populated by godlike beings who enjoy great power, wealth and long life. They live in splendor and happiness. Yet even the Deva grow old and die. Further, their privilege and exalted status blind them to the suffering of others, so in spite of their long lives they have neither wisdom nor compassion. The privileged Deva will be reborn in another of the Six Realms.

MarenYumi / Flickr,  
Creative Commons  
License Attribution-  
NonCommercial-Share  
Alike 2.0 Generic

## 2. Asura-gati, the Realm of Asura (Titans)



The Asura are strong and powerful beings who are sometimes depicted as enemies of the Deva. Asura are marked by their fierce envy. The karma of hate and jealousy causes rebirth in the Asura Realm. Chih-i (538-597), a patriarch of the T'ien-t'ai school, described the Asura this way: "Always desiring to be superior to others, having no patience for inferiors and belittling strangers; like a hawk, flying high above and looking down on others, and yet outwardly displaying justice, worship, wisdom, and faith -- this is raising up the lowest order of good and walking the way of the Asuras." You may have known an Asura or two.

MarenYumi / Flickr,  
Creative Commons  
License Attribution-  
Noncommercial-Share  
Alike 2.0 Generic

## 3. Preta-gati, the Realm of Hungry Ghosts



Hungry ghosts (*preta*) are pictured as beings with huge, empty stomachs, but they have pinhole mouths, and their necks are so thin they cannot swallow. A hungry ghost is one who is always looking outside himself for the new thing that will satisfy the craving within. Hungry ghosts are characterized by insatiable hunger and craving. They are also associated with addiction, obsession and compulsion.

MarenYumi / Flickr,  
Creative Commons  
License Attribution-  
Noncommercial-Share  
Alike 2.0 Generic

## 4. Naraka-gati, the Hell Realm



As the name suggests, the Hell Realm is the most terrible of the Six Realms. Hell beings have a short fuse; everything makes them angry. And the only way hell beings deal with things that make them angry is through aggression -- attack, attack, attack! They drive away anyone who shows them love and kindness and seek out the company of other hell beings. Unchecked anger and aggression can cause rebirth in the Hell Realm.

MarenYumi / Flickr,  
Creative Commons  
License Attribution-  
Noncommercial-Share  
Alike 2.0 Generic

## 5. Tiryagyon-gati, the Animal Realm



Animal beings are marked by stupidity, prejudice and complacency. They live sheltered lives, avoiding discomfort or anything unfamiliar. Rebirth in the Animal Realm is conditioned by ignorance. People who are ignorant and content to remain so are likely headed for the Animal Realm, assuming they aren't there already.

MarenYumi / Flickr,  
Creative Commons  
License Attribution-  
Noncommercial-Share  
Alike 2.0 Generic

## 6. Manuṣya-gati, the Human Realm



The Human Realm is the only realm of the six from which beings may escape samsara. Enlightenment is at hand in the Human Realm, yet only a few open their eyes and see it. Rebirth into the Human Realm is conditioned by passion, doubt and desire.

MarenYumi / Flickr,  
Creative Commons  
License Attribution-  
Noncommercial-Share  
Alike 2.0 Generic