

What Buddha Never Taught

by Steve Hagen

I have received more questions on reincarnation than any other topic I've written about, with the exception of the cow picture in Buddhism Plain and Simple. People are surprised when I point out, as I did in Buddhism Is Not What You Think, that the Buddha not only didn't teach reincarnation, his message actually counters such belief. Since I have repeatedly been asked to say more on that topic, as I was in a recent online interview, I thought it might be helpful to expand on that point here.

For thousands of years, if we are to rely on the Vedas and archaeological evidence, people living in the region we now call India worshiped countless gods through the performance of meticulous rituals. Though their needs were simple, worldly, and direct, the people devoutly believed these rites had to be performed flawlessly to ensure that they would obtain what they were seeking—prosperity, abundant crops, health, and long life. What more could anyone want?

Yet at the start of the first millennium BCE, this rapidly began to change. The Vedas had been written down by this time, but now a new kind of writing began to appear—the Upanishads. In these writings people began to ask what their former worldly concerns amounted to if, even after a life with prosperity, children, and longevity, all would be taken from them by death. Questions of death and the possibility of an afterlife became of increasing concern, discussion, and speculation. After death, they wondered, even if one ascended to heaven, how could one be sure of not dying yet again? Wasn't life difficult enough? The prospect of dying over and over and over again seemed truly dreadful, devoutly to be avoided.

They began to speak of "redeath," and the more that idea was tossed about, the more the people engaged in debates to find some solution to this new and dreaded prospect.

Those who held sway in the debates competed for students and lay followers. Thus many teachers emerged at this time, all touting their own ways of defeating the dreaded prospect. Heated rivalries became common. Indeed, the idea of redeath had become a widespread and urgent problem for the populace at large. Evolving into various ideas of reincarnation over the next few centuries, these notions spread relatively quickly, taking firm hold even among the common people of the Gangetic plain. By the time of the Buddha belief in reincarnation had become deeply rooted and widely accepted.

It must be understood that, unlike many people living in our culture today who see the prospect of reincarnation as hopeful—as a continuation of "me," the self—people of this ancient culture saw redeath as something to be dreaded, a problem to be overcome. Unlike those who entered into debates about what happens to the transmigrating soul—the *atman*—after death, the Buddha, as he said of his own teachings, "went against the stream." His teachings not only went against the beliefs of those who still looked to various deities for help and against the masses who kept themselves bound to the dictates of the caste system, his teachings went against the many who believed in the dismal prospect of a transmigrating self and against those who diligently sought release from that prospect.

Central to the Buddha's teaching is the profound and subtle insight that permanence is never to be grasped. In other words, if we settle the mind and look carefully, we do not find a self within human experience. Furthermore, he recognized this insight as the very release from the dreadful prospect of the transmigrating soul that people had been seeking. But it wasn't release because it provided a way to deal with the dreadful prospect. It was release because it was to see thoroughly that the dreadful prospect itself

was utter delusion. Simply *seeing* through the illusion of self *is* the release. There is no such prospect as redeath to be dreaded.

Though we don't know precisely what the Buddha's actual words were, it seems he may very well have spoken of *rebirth*, or more specifically, of *rebirth consciousness*. It is likely that, because the notion of reincarnation was so prevalent, and because his insight that we don't find a self within human experience was so subtle and profound and difficult, many people down through the ages have construed his possible mention of rebirth consciousness as a reference to reincarnation—the very delusion for which his teaching, when properly understood, provides the antidote.

Consequently, over the centuries a great deal has been built upon this misinterpretation. This confused and incoherent understanding of the Buddha's message has been widely propagated and handed down as if it were what the Buddha actually taught. Or, as the late Jiddu Krishnamurti aptly observed, "They didn't listen to Buddha, that's why we have Buddhism."

It seems quite unlikely that the Buddha endorsed the notion of reincarnation, since it goes so strongly against his most powerful, subtle, and profound insight—namely, *anatman*, the unlocatability of a self.

If the Buddha was not speaking of reincarnation, what could he have meant by the term *rebirth consciousness*? Simply that the immediate experience of *this moment* does not appear as *this moment* but, rather, as continuous change. In other words, *this moment* appears as very like, but different from, what appears to have immediately preceded it. The world appears as reborn, over and over, moment after moment.

Reincarnation requires a speculative belief in a substantiated self that persists from moment to moment—precisely what the Buddha's teaching of *anatman* rejects. In contrast, rebirth consciousness refers to nothing more than the awareness that *this moment* appears *now*, with its own unique before and after, without ever entailing any presumed entity that persists through time.

In other words, while reincarnation requires a self that persists through time—something that is not directly experienced and that was thus rejected by the Buddha—rebirth consciousness makes no reference to anything that is not directly experienced or observed. In short, it relies not on abstraction, speculation, or belief, but on immediate, direct experience alone.

The Buddha's realization that a self is never found—let alone that such transmigrates—precludes the possibility that he ever taught reincarnation. He was simply trying to help people out of their confusion regarding that notion.