

Freedom Through Not Knowing

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I was ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist monk in 1974, and trained in that tradition—the Geluk tradition, the more scholarly tradition of Tibetan Buddhism—for the following six or seven years. Part of that training involved dialectics, the logical and critical analysis of Buddhist doctrine. One of the assurances I was given as a young monk was that, were I to devote myself to this critical inquiry, I would come to certainty that ideas such as rebirth and karma can be demonstrated by reason to be true. A verse often cited to us by the lamas says “Just as a goldsmith analyzes a piece of metal to establish whether or not it is gold by cutting it, burning it, etc., so,” this is the Buddha speaking, “you should examine my words, and not just accept them because you have faith in me.” I found this verse very attractive. Buddhism seemed to be a tradition that did not rest in simple blind faith, but required of us a critical appraisal to arrive at our own conclusions.

A promise of certainty

But in practice, I don't think this is actually carried through. From quite an early time in my interest in Buddhism, I had considerable difficulty accepting the doctrine of rebirth. Obviously for Buddhism there is not some kind of permanent entity that can go from one body to the next. Buddhist traditions have come up with other ways to explain rebirth, usually by positing some kind of mental consciousness or something more subtle, to explain how it is that after physical death, there is an element of what is now you that will survive the dissolution of the body and implant itself somehow in a womb, in some other place. Thereby the continuity of your karmic deeds, your past actions, can later come to fruition.

The vast majority of Buddhists see the ideas of rebirth and karma as simply non-negotiable facts of Buddhist life. If you cannot buy into them, then perhaps you have no business calling yourself a Buddhist. It's almost like a Christian not believing in God.

I found a very deep intuitive affinity, in so many ways, from my first exposure to Buddhist ideas and practices. Yet some doctrines became a kind of stumbling block. My life has been almost entirely formed by my ongoing relationship with this tradition, yet at the same time in many ways I have struggled to be able to affirm myself as a person who feels very much a part of that tradition. Yet I am also aware that many of my co-religionists do not accept me as one of them, because I do not accept the doctrines of karma or reincarnation.

I spent a number of years with my teacher, Geshe Rabten, in Switzerland, pursuing scholarly training as a Buddhist monk, analyzing the concepts and terminology of Buddhism through this dialectical method. Then we got the “proof” of rebirth, from a text by Dharmakirti, arguably the most important Buddhist philosopher for Tibetan traditions. We trained in the thought of Dharmakirti, which is called the *Sautrāntika*, “one who follows the sutras.”

Confronting the proof

The proof for rebirth is this: Take for example, the mind of a child that has just been born. It existed previously because it is mind, like the present mind. That is the proof. In other words, axiomatic in this way of thinking is the idea that only mental phenomena can generate other mental phenomena. And “mind,” for Dharmakirti, literally translates as “clear and knowing.” The word “clear,” though, means “non-material.” We cannot see it, hear it, smell it, taste it, touch it. But at the same time, it's not just like space; it has a capacity to know, to cognize, and also, to initiate actions. It is a formless moral agent.

But how do we know that in fact that mind is something immaterial, and yet, dynamic; something that initiates actions and is not intrinsically tied to a physical organism? When we put that question to my teacher, Geshe Rabten, he said, “Ah, well, you see, it's not obvious, but in deep states of meditation, this

will become quite clear to you.” Now, of course, one can not dispute that. It may be true. But this so-called proof, therefore, rests upon one’s trust in the non-ordinary spiritual experiences of accomplished meditators who have actually come to see this for themselves. There are practices in the Tibetan tradition—*Dzogchen* and *Mahāmudrā* would be two examples—in which you come to know for yourself the clear and knowing nature of consciousness, and hence, that mind has to arise from a previous moment of mind; it cannot be generated by neurological or physiological processes.

But I suspect that most of us would say, “Why not?” In fact, the more we know about the brain, its extraordinary complexity, how it has emerged over millions of years of evolution, I don’t find it terribly difficult to believe that it can periodically produce a thought.

In Buddhist tradition, however, the brain is barely mentioned. Buddhaghosa believed that the brain was a kind of mucus, that when we get a cold and blow our nose, that’s bits of brain coming out. Aristotle, also no dummy, thought it was a kind of thermostat for the body. We might think of those views as naïve, but in pre-modern cultures, they were held by the most intelligent and honored intellects.

Dilemma: not knowing

So I found myself in a serious dilemma, as a Buddhist monk training to become a *geshe*, a kind of doctor of divinity within the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism. Even then, in my mid-twenties, I was being asked to give talks to Buddhist lay groups, and that was the official dogma. But that was difficult for me, because I did not believe it.

I would wake up at night sometimes in a cold sweat, worrying about whether my mind has to have as a substantial cause a previous moment of mind. This was not an academic issue; it affected my whole social and religious identity, my whole sense of being a Buddhist. The Tibetan tradition makes it quite clear that if you do not believe these things, you are not a Dharma person. I was a Buddhist failure, dressed up in monk’s clothing, but actually a fake. And yet, this inability to accept that doctrine did not affect

my own intuitive faith and commitment to what I understood to be Buddhist practice.

In one of these sleepless nights, I suddenly gained a solution: Even if I knew for certain there was nothing after death, that would not affect my commitment to the practice of the Dharma. My commitment to the ethics, the meditation, the philosophy of *śūnyatā* or emptiness, were intensely meaningful for me and did not require that belief.

I decided the only honest answer to the question “Is there life after death?” was, “I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe not.” But it does not really matter. That is when I began to consider myself as an agnostic. “Agnostic,” remember, simply means, “a-gnosis,” “not knowing.” I found that immensely liberating. Also, in a rather cynical, casuistic sense, I did not have to commit Wrong View, which of course is a terrible thing if you are a Buddhist, to deny that there is rebirth. I was not denying or affirming it.

This, I think, is what the Buddha called, in the *Brahmajala Sutta*, “eel wriggling.” “There are some monks, ascetics and Brahmins who are eel wrigglers. When asked about this and that matter, they resort to evasive statements, and they wriggle like eels.” So in some senses I was an eel wriggler. But this allowed me to continue in that tradition for some years more.

Rebirth as denial of death

But it also made me realize that the belief in rebirth, in continuity, was actually a denial of death. It allows a kind of worm-hole to wiggle out of—eel-like, perhaps—into another existence. Denying death deprives it of its power to affect your experience of this life, this moment, here and now. Much of Buddhist practice is premised on the idea that it will take many lifetimes, which gives it a large vision, but also allows for a kind of procrastination. If you do not have time to practice Buddhism in this life, make a lot of *dāna* [donations] to the monastery; in the next life you’ll get on with it.

Death, to me, is the great motivator. It forces us to recognize that this, in fact, may be the only occasion we will ever have to be here, to be conscious, to be a witness to this extraordinary world. Any theory that somehow diminishes the power of death diminishes that motivation.

The agnostic position made me aware of the power of not knowing.

This agnostic position also made me aware of the power of not knowing. It was not just an absence of knowing, but a concrete relationship to life itself. At some deep level, I do not know what follows life when I die, but I also do not know what this life is.

Sitting with not knowing

This led me more and more into the practice of Zen. Not knowing is necessarily the flip side of questioning. When we ask a question, we are implicitly acknowledging, “I do not know what this is.” If we are really serious about wanting to understand something, that means that we do not know it: We are agnostic about it. We seek therefore to pursue it to gain a deeper insight.

When I came across a book of the monk who subsequently became my teacher in Korea, Ku San Sunim, I read that his entire practice was just asking the question, “What is this?” This is cultivating what is called in Zen, Great Doubt—which I prefer to call Great Perplexity. That rang all sorts of bells within me. This was precisely where my own practice was taking me, not conforming to a set of Buddhist doctrines, but pursuing the questions for which those doctrines claimed to be the answers.

Any orthodoxy is essentially a set of answers to the great questions of life. Believing in those answers is usually what is regarded as becoming a Buddhist, Christian, or Muslim, for example. Within Chan, or Zen, or Seon, that whole way of thinking is turned on its head. A famous citation our teacher in Korea used to repeat all the time is “Great doubt, great awakening; little doubt, little awakening; no doubt, no awakening.” One’s insight, one’s awakening, is correlated to the level at which you pose that question. A great doubt is essentially an existential question.

In the legends of the Buddha, he goes out of the security of his palace walls and encounters a sick person, an aging person, a corpse, and a wandering monk. It is at those moments that the great doubt arose in him. It is the question that is asking itself almost without words, experiencing one’s own existence as questionable. “Who am I? What is this?” cannot be resolved by doctrine or belief.

Zen and mindfulness

By the time I went to Korea and started Zen training, I was already practicing *vipassanā*, *satipatthāna*, which I had been introduced to in India many years before. Doing just *vipassanā* as a younger Tibetan monk, I found it sometimes led to a flattening out of experience. But the practice of “What is this?” somehow sharpened and focused mindfulness.

Zen practice provided a juice infusing this quality of attention, waking it up. It is not just noticing the breath, the body or the feelings, but also doing so with a kind of intense curiosity, an intense puzzlement that these things are there at all. This follows Wittgenstein, who said it is not *how* the world is that is mystical, but *that* it is. I found the practice of Buddhist meditation was very much about letting go of all sorts of fixed views and opinions.

Once one lets go of those views, the world is somehow enriched. Sounds and visual objects, the world outside, one’s inner life, become intensely strange. Often religious doctrines and practices compromise the sheer strangeness of being here. What I like about Zen practice is that it discards all preconceived ideas, and leaves you in this state of radical astonishment. This, I found, was missing from my practice of *satipatthāna*. In the early tradition, we might interpret the idea of *dhamma vicaya*, investigation of dhammas (from the Seven Factors of Awakening), as something like that. But this sort of perspective is not explicit within the Pali Canon, and I find inspiration and value in the practice of Zen. The two are not in conflict; they reinforce and support one another.

Infused with not-knowing

So, the agnosticism that started out as “I’m not sure if anything exists after death or not,” became what I subsequently described as a deep agnosticism, a recognition that “I don’t know” is not just an opinion. The kind of not-knowing I’m speaking of is what you cultivate through asking almost obsessively “What is this?” to the point where you do not even need the words anymore. You reach, as the Korean texts say, “A mass of perplexity; a ball of doubt.” Like the practice of mindfulness of phenomena, this



needs to be infused and integrated into your life.

But over the years, I have become less and less agnostic about rebirth and karma. In fact, frankly, I do not believe there is rebirth anymore. I now think the term “agnostic” in some sense is not very helpful. I picked this up from a French philosopher, André Comte-Sponville. He says the problem with agnosticism is that all it is really saying is the human mind is limited in what it can know. And paradoxically, all believers are, by definition, agnostics. If I believe in God, if I believe in future lives, I am acknowledging that I do not actually know that God exists, I do not know with any certainty about future lives, but I believe it anyway.

Agnosticism keeps a spirit of inquiry alive, but beyond that it somehow inhibits commitment. You literally are eel-wriggling at this point. It is a wobbly foundation for pursuing a committed spiritual life. Given what I understand about how the world works, which is of course limited, and given what is philosophically coherent for me, the idea of rebirth is not something that makes any sense. So I consider myself a “this-life-ist,” someone committed totally to living here and now, with no thought whatsoever for any future existence.

Buddha and not knowing

I am not in any way suggesting that the Buddha rejected the idea of rebirth, or did not believe in it. In the Pali Canon, the Buddha frames many of his ideas in the context of multiple lifetimes: the stages of awakening, from stream entrant to *arahant*, are all framed in terms of how many lifetimes until enlightenment; he describes his understanding of his own previous lifetimes, how beings are born and die according to their karma—there is just too much in the Canon to say the Buddha was even agnostic about this.

But there is another strand of text that seems to not quite fit that very well. I think the Pali

Canon actually has multiple voices within it, not a single, monolithic voice. You get contradictory perspectives introduced all the time, which is part of the very richness of that literature.

In the *Kālāma Sutta* the Buddha says, don't just accept what I say because I am your teacher, because the tradition says it, or because it seems to be reasonable. At the end of that text, he speaks about the four solaces, or rewards, that come from the practice of the Dhamma. One solace says, if there is indeed another life, if there is, indeed, a law of karmic cause and effect, then, after death, you will be reborn in a happy realm and benefit from the results of your present karma. The second solace says, if there is no future life, if there is no law of karma, then, too, by practicing the Dhamma you will live happy and content, here and now, in this world. That is very striking: the Buddha seems to be saying what really matters is not what may or may not follow after death, but the quality of your experience, here and now in this very life.

Admittedly, this passage occurs once, whereas rebirth and karma occur everywhere. Nonetheless, it looks oddly out of place. For that very reason, it is probably original: It would have been in no orthodox tradition's interest to have added it later. Even more to the point is “the declared and the undeclared” in the *Mālunkiyovāda Sutta, Majjhima 63*:

Suppose, Mālunkiyaputta, a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends brought a surgeon to treat him. The man would say, “I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know the name and clan of the man who wounded me, until I know whether that man who wounded me was tall or short, or of medium height, ... lives in such-and-such a village or town or city, whether the bow ... was a long bow or a crossbow, the bow string of that bow was fiber or reed or sinew ...”

Metaphysics is not the crucial issue; suffering is.

All this would still not be known to that man, and meanwhile he would die. So too, Mālunkyaputta, if anyone should say, "I will not lead the spiritual life under the Buddha until the Buddha declares to me the world is eternal, the world is not eternal, ... the soul is the same as the body, the soul is one thing and the body another, after death, a Tathāgata exists, or after death, a Tathāgata does not exist, or both exists and does not exist, or neither exists nor does not exist." All that would still be unknown to that person, would still remain undeclared by me, the Buddha, and meanwhile that person would die.

It is very clear that the Buddha sees his teaching not as the presentation or belief in certain theological doctrines, but rather as a methodology to remove what is causing us suffering and pain. The teaching is primarily pragmatic and therapeutic. In fact, all this business about the long bow and the crossbow is a parody of the how-many-angels-can-you-fit-on-the-head-of-a-needle type theology. He is teasing those who get preoccupied with fine details of doctrine and dogma, and saying that really does not matter. What matters is the removal of the poison arrow that is killing you, which is craving, or grasping. Metaphysics is not the crucial issue; suffering is.

The questions the Buddha refuses to make declarations about are rather significant—they address rebirth, although it is somewhat obscured. The third pair of questions is "Are the body and the soul the same, or are the body and the soul two different things." The words he uses are *jiva* and *sarira*. *Sarira* is the word often used for relics, but it means basic matter, such as our bodies. The word for soul, *jiva*, is probably taken from the Jain tradition; it means the animating principle, which we could clearly understand as the mind, spirit, or soul.

He is saying don't bother about whether these two are the same or different. If you do, you will spend a lot of time getting, as they say in England, your knickers in a twist. It is striking that these questions are the same ones we still argue about. The Buddha was quite prescient. Two and a half thousand years of philosophy,

metaphysics and theology and we still struggle with the mind-body problem.

That the Buddha does not take a position on this undermines the entire metaphysics of rebirth. Because if it is not soul, or mind, or some such thing, that survives bodily death, it is very difficult to know what rebirth can actually mean. Despite this very explicit warning, most Buddhist traditions have adopted a mind-body dualism as dogma. That seems to fly in the face of a very central part of the Buddha's teaching. He is basically saying these things are not conducive to pursuing the way of life I am teaching and encouraging, through which one can address and hopefully resolve the question of suffering. Maybe he does know the answer to these questions; it is simply not an issue.

Declared: Four Truths

In the story of the arrow, the Buddha says *Therefore, Mālunkyaputta, remember what I have left undeclared as undeclared. And remember what I have declared as declared. And what have I declared? This is suffering, I have declared. This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering, and this is the path leading to that cessation. And why have I declared that? Because it is beneficial. It belongs to the fundamentals of the spiritual life. It leads to dispassion, cessation, direct knowledge, to awakening, to nibbāna; that is why I have declared it.*

And so we come back to the primacy of the Four Noble Truths. That is the teaching standing in contrast to all this metaphysical theorizing about the universe, about the mind and the body, and about rebirth or not. "Whoever in the past, the present or the future becomes fully awakened to things, does so by becoming fully awakened to the Four Noble Truths." This is the awakening; this is the core of what the Buddha's concerned with, and it is entirely something that does not entail any belief or speculation in past or future lives.

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