
Life, Death, Karma, Reincarnation

Mondo with Roland Yuno Rech

Question: *If you let pass all attachments, all illusion, what directs the actions of human beings and what is the difference between life and death?*

Roland Yuno Rech: What directs actions at this present moment is compassion. The ideal state that you describe is very rare. To abandon all attachments is the ideal of our practice. When attachment to our own ego diminishes, we are more open, available, for others. There is less fear of losing. We are less focused on ourselves, so we can help others. The compassion of the bodhisattva is not just humanitarian aid. There is a lot of compassion in this world, many people devote their lives to helping others. But the help we can give when we are on the Buddha Way is the help that consists in helping others to free themselves from their attachments and causes of suffering. It's very different from being dead; but it's the death of the ego. Many people identify the meaning of their lives by simply chasing after something, after selfish satisfactions. For them, having no desire or attachments means being dead, the very idea depresses them and makes them feel as if their life would have no meaning. There is another aspect to this question; true detachment is to realize that there is nobody to save. This is the crux of the Diamond Sutra. If a bodhisattva thinks that there are beings to be saved, they are not a Bodhisattva, because it means there is still an ego somewhere, there is still someone who saves and someone who is saved. The path of detachment is to realize that there is no one who saves and no one to be saved. From this point everyone can be truly liberated, beyond self, beyond their desire even to aid, to save. That is true freedom. It has nothing to do with death, it's the real life, the Buddha life.

Question: *I am afraid of death, not only for me but also for others. This may be a matter of attachment to life, to illusion, to ego, but I do not see how it could be different. All religions try to give an answer to death. They say that we should live the moment of death as another moment, here and now. So if it's not that dramatic, why are we so repelled? Is this some bad joke – by the cosmic order?*

R.Y.R.: The joke which would be even worse, would be if death didn't exist... We should not see death as negative. Death means that our present life is limited and there is no time to lose. All moments are precious, including the moment that precedes death. The prospect of death is the greatest incentive to live as perfectly as possible. The question to ask is: "What dies?" Every moment there is birth and death. Our ego is a very relative construction and to attach to it is an illusion. There is no fixed substance, faced with this reality we can attain enlightenment and only human beings who practice the Way can accomplish this. We can die in a state of awakening by accepting to abandon the ego. It is important to live with this awareness of death making it part of our liberation. Not to accept this reality is to delude ourselves. You can live in this state of anxiety, or transform this fear into a source of spiritual revolution.

The fundamental question is: "WHO is afraid?" It is an excellent *koan*. Fear of death arises from our imagination. Nobody knows what death is. The only thing we know is our life here and now, that which has a conscience is the one who is afraid of dying. If you realize this, everything changes. This confrontation with the fact of death is where the Buddhist Way begins. It's a

practice to live more freely. Buddhism is not a religion that tries to cover up death: it helps us live life to the fullest here and now and free ourselves from rebirth. It is a religion that awakens us in the midst of this life, such as it is, conditioned by birth and death; awakens us to a liberated mind which accepts life as life, death as death. Death is not our enemy; it's an opportunity.

Question: *I would like to know the position of Zen in respect to physical death and how we managed to imagine reincarnation, karma.*

R.Y.R.: Reincarnation is a belief which is widespread not only in Zen but in all the East, and is linked to the observation that nothing happens by chance, that our lives are part of a network of interdependence and are therefore causal. This causality does not end with death. It is the idea that our actions, the things we have done, must necessarily produce effects. If we don't see them, if the effects don't even happen during our lifetime, causes will have been "sown" that will germinate in later lives. Obviously, the question must be posed relative to the emptiness of the ego. If we say there is no substantial ego what is it that continues from one existence to another and receives karmic retribution?

The best response to this very difficult question would be that what is reincarnated or reborn is not an ego – it is simply a continuation of karma....To be honest, I'm not so interested in trying to solve this problem. What interests me, and what interests many of us who practice Zen, is how this finds form. How we are reborn and how I am reborn in each moment and the karma I create in each moment. As for the results, I think there *will* be results and I am quite ready to assume the responsibilities; but I do not calculate. I try to practice what is right, every time, without worrying about the result. I accept there will be an outcome, something will happen, but it is not the motive of my action. The motive is to live in harmony with what I understand of this existence, in the best way possible. The result is simultaneous to the action...It's the here and now that interests me. If right here, right now, I am full of greed, if I want to get something, the result of this mindset is to make me suffer, to be in the state of what is called *gaki*. To be lacking something, always; not to be grounded. The result is immediate, isn't it? I am, moment by moment what I actualise.

Question: *If the mind without defilement is realised, where can karma be?*

R.Y.R.: In the mind without defilement, we don't create more karma. This pure mind is when we practice zazen. This does not prevent past karma appearing in zazen, traces, memories of past actions, something will emerge in consciousness. If this happens, when we are in a mind without defilement, we will just watch them and let these things pass; past karma can't have a stronghold because this undefiled mind cannot be led away. It's thus a moment of great liberation - when all the constraint of our past conditionings loosens, where the things themselves find space, freedom. We no longer adhere to something, we don't react. We do nothing. We don't even 'do' zazen. We let zazen be done. But don't think that past karma disappears forever. It's just simply that the experience of sitting zazen in a state without defilement, beyond our past conditioning, gives us more space in our lives. Something loosens, and even if past karma is not completely wiped away (believing in its total abolition is delusion) you will find yourself feeling less dependent on things - now that the mind has experienced a dimension that exists beyond karma.

Question: *But isn't coming into this world already karma?*

R.Y.R.: According to traditional teaching, birth is the result of past karma; it can, of course, be the result of good karma. For example, the Bodhisattva vows are the intention to free all beings from suffering. The Bodhisattva vows are themselves intention; they are action which will undergo numerous rebirths until the end of time. These vows themselves are carriers of karma, but positive karma. As Master Deshimaru said, it's the difference between falling into the water and diving in. You fall in the water by force of your karma, the gravity of negative, uncontrollable karma – which automatically makes us function in ways we do not choose to. In sharp contrast, diving is at a given moment, becoming conscious of the global situation, one's own situation, and everyone else's who suffer, and to choose not to withdraw into a state of nirvana. On the contrary, it's choosing to remain in this phenomenal world where karma exists and to help everyone to become liberated from it. To do this, we must accept the defilement of karma: not only the karma of others - of the world in which we live - but also our *own* karma. This goes against the idea of Hinayana, which is to purify oneself from all attachment up to avoiding rebirth, to have no cause for existence. The Bodhisattva, by contrast, agrees to remain in contact with karma, his own and others', to do the work of transformation.

Question: *Some people deny the existence of karma, what do you think?*

R.Y.R.: Denying karma with the excuse that "everything is emptiness" is totally unrealistic. It's even dangerous. On the contrary, I think it's much more important to observe that nothing escapes the karmic law and so all of our actions, our words, even our thoughts have consequences: "the fruits of karma." From this, we learn more how we can master our lives, how to be attentive to and conscious of the consequences of what we do; what we say, what we believe, and what we think. The result : having a thought, action, or word which is beneficial around us.

Don't cause suffering by being irresponsible and ignoring karmic law. Dogen said one who ignores karma, causality, has not even taken the first step enabling them to enter the Way. Buddha himself tells the story of his own enlightenment, the night when satori was realized, the first thing he became conscious of was karma. On the other hand, sometimes it happens that when people study their karma it reinforces their ego. For them, their karma is a kind of a 'stamp of authenticity.' A justification of the ego. Karma is emptiness and emptiness is the ego. That's the ultimate comprehension...it's what heals all our guiltiness, attachment. Dogen observed karma from two points of view. These are discussed in two separate chapters of Shobogenzo. In *Jin Shin Inga*, he speaks of karmic causality; he recounts Hyakujo's story of the fox. In *Dai Shu Gyo*, he teaches monks the absolute point of view. We must consider both points of view: that of *ku* (emptiness), but also that of *shiki* (phenomena). Nagarjuna understood this by distinguishing between absolute truth and relative truth. We shouldn't see only one of the two aspects. We should embrace both points of view depending on each moment.