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## Life and death in Buddhism

**A future existence, in one form or another, whether as a result of reincarnation or rebirth, represents a question common to all religions. An interview as part of the French programme 'Sagesses Bouddhistes' ('Buddhist Wisdom') from 2008 on the question: how Buddhism approaches the subject of life and death.**

**Aurélie Godefroy (AG):** *Roland Rech, hello. Thank you for being with us. We are going to start with a very simple observation: all beings are born, live and die. So, why does this fact represent such a problem for human beings?*

**Roland Rech (RR):** Because human beings are attached to their own ego: it is the attachment to our own ego that makes it difficult for us to accept that it can disappear, especially if we are not awakened to the true nature of our existence. That's the whole problem. Because in this case, we will try to satisfy our desires by trying to obtain as much satisfactions as possible. We become attached to what we love, whether it be beings or activities, and we are very afraid of separating ourselves from what we have loved, from what we are attached to, from what - at times - has been the meaning of our life.

**AG:** *What we can say, it is that Buddha himself went through an existential crisis when he found himself confronted with all these questions...*

**RR:** Of course, because the fact of being born implies that one will necessarily encounter suffering at some point. Even if there are moments of happiness in our life, these moments of happiness are impermanent and this fact generates anxiety, a fear of losing what our happiness is conditioned by. So, this was the very starting point of the Buddha's approach: confront himself with the prospect of suffering because of illness, old age, death, of having to part with what he loved, of having to put up with what he didn't love. He concluded that everything that made up our conditioned existence was a cause of suffering. And, at the same time, since this posed humanity a deep question, there had to be an answer.

What is interesting about Buddha is that he is the opposite of a desperate being. He starts from suffering, but he also starts from the principle that, as long as there is a problem because of suffering, there also must be a solution.

**AG:** *So, what can we do precisely to try to resolve this question of life and death? Should we just work on our ego, try to give up its egotistical grasp, for example?*

**RR:** You have to try to really engage in a constant practice of the Way and, mainly in Buddhism, this path is focused on the practice of meditation. So, it means having a certain discipline in life, sitting down every day, with your legs crossed if possible. Learning to know oneself, learning to forget oneself, learning to discover what the deepest dimension of our existence is, through meditation.

**AG:** *And this is the case in zazen.*

RR: It is zazen, but it is also the other forms of Buddhist meditation. And then, extending this meditation through all the activities of daily life.

*AG: Why is it so important to accept impermanence?*

RR: It is important to accept impermanence, because it is the true nature of our existence and the true nature of the whole universe: everything that appears is doomed to disappear and everything is constantly changing. And if we become too attached to (what we think) we are, and we can't let go, it is as if we were constantly swimming against the current. That is to say, we get attached to things that escape us, we fear things that happen to us ... and therefore, it is important to regain a fluid mind, which instead of considering impermanence as a scandal, will experience it on the contrary as something completely normal, natural, and will learn to harmonize with it.

*AG: When we talk about the question of life and death, one often uses terms such as "beyond", "liberation", "nirvana". Can you explain what each of these terms means?*

RR: The Buddha never wanted to describe nirvana exactly. But he designated it as "the extinction of the causes of suffering", and therefore as the extinction mainly of greed (of everything that leads us to want to grasp), extinction of hatred (of everything that leads us to want to reject), and above all, extinction of ignorance ... That is to say, finally, awakening to the true deep nature of our existence. When he spoke concretely about nirvana, he evoked nirvana - above all - as the extinction of these Three Poisons. One can also say: abandonment of the illusion of the ego, separated from the rest of the outside world etc.

Nirvana is not a place one would enter after death. Nirvana is the other side of what is called samsara, that is to say the fact that we are engaged in a process of births and deaths and that this process can have an end or, at least, that we can detach ourselves from it. This is called nirvana.

*AG: And what do "beyond" and "liberation" mean in Buddhism?*

RR: "Beyond" is a term often used. It is a movement of the mind that goes beyond the obstacles that hinder it, that make it suffer. So, the mind is able of letting go. This is, I believe, the deepest meaning of "beyond". Now when we speak of "beyond" in general, we speak of "beyond death", that is to say of what will eventually be a new birth or a new existence.

But I believe that the most important thing is to understand that "beyond" is truly a movement and not a place. In the same way, samsara is a way of functioning in the world with the attachments which cause suffering, which make us peregrinate in different conditions. And beyond that, there is the inner revolution, a revolution of the mind. And we don't have to wait for death and the afterlife to reach some afterlife which would finally be a peaceful world. We can find peace immediately in this world by managing to "go beyond" our own ego, our own attachments, our own illusions.

*AG: And the "liberation"?*

RR: Liberation can be the definitive liberation of the cycle of rebirths. And this will be called the final and complete nirvana. Otherwise, liberation is the liberation of all causes of suffering and

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this too can and must be realized here and now. This liberation can be either very deep and complete, when we manage to see the true nature of our own ego and when we manage to go beyond our attachment to ourselves, to abandon ourselves completely.

But if not, there is also a liberation every time we are able to let go of something that bind us, something that blocks us, that becomes an obstacle to moving forward in our lives and that makes us suffer. Therefore, this letting go is a form of immediate liberation. So, we can go from liberation to liberation, without waiting for a final liberation that would come at the end of times or at the end of our life.

*AG: Samsara is part of the cycle of rebirth. Can you explain what it is all about?*

RR: Traditionally, samsara is the act of being reborn from life to life, according to our karma. The two are linked, karma being our words, our actions, our thoughts too, done consciously and with a positive or negative value, and which have effects. Either these effects occur and manifest themselves in this life and this life can be a form of samsara itself, or they will ripen like seeds and produce their fruits in a later life and will condition the conditions of our new birth.

Traditionally, it is said that there are 6 paths of samsara in which one can transmigrate or one is reborn:

- the infernal path (of constant suffering)
- the path of constant greed (in which one cannot satisfy one's needs)
- the animal path (a rebirth in animal form which is characterized by ignorance, the inability to awaken)
- the human rebirth (which is considered the most precious, since, although one suffers, one has the opportunity to desire to awaken and therefore to enter into the path of awakening)
- then the 2 forms of rebirth which are generally considered "above the human being" (but which are not so much superior) : these are the deities, either aggressive, angry, or the deities who are in an ecstatic state and who, because of this ecstatic state, do not see that it is impermanent and that they will eventually have to fall back into more painful states.

*AG: Are we always condemned to be reborn? Can't we get out of samsara?*

RR: Getting out of samsara is the goal of all Buddhist monks, especially those who follow the original tradition: to get out of samsara, that is to say, to put an end to rebirths. The whole purpose of Buddhist discipline (whether it is the practice of meditation, the practice of ethics, wisdom, the understanding of the teaching, the understanding of the Dharma) is to enable us to free ourselves from the need to be reborn. And then, it also implies making the choice of extinction, which is not what the disciples of the branch of Buddhism called the Great Vehicle do, because they choose the Way of the Bodhisattva.

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The Bodhisattvas, on the contrary, choose rebirth. But to be reborn no longer driven by their karma and because of their suffering, but driven by their Vows and their desire for compassion to help all living beings. And this is another form of rebirth.

One can say that the Bodhisattva comes back into a samsara existence with its sufferings, but also with such a state of mind that - in reality - he is beyond ordinary suffering. As Bodhisattva, he will suffer out of compassion, out of empathy for other beings, but he cannot suffer because of our illusions, our attachments and his karma.

*AG: It is often said that birth and rebirth are problems of dukkha, (at least that's what we hear), and therefore phenomena of samsara. Does this mean that, for Buddhism, birth is in fact only an evil of existence?*

RR: No, because the word suffering does not translate dukkha well. Dukkha doesn't just mean suffering, but means "limited", "imperfect". And I believe that the fundamental suffering of the human being is that he has, deep within himself, this Buddha nature, this nature of awakening, this truth, and that as long as he does not awaken to this truth (that enables him to overcome the sufferings of samsara), he will suffer.

But one of the great sufferings, I believe, is not to realize the true meaning of our life, to have the impression that we are really missing out, and that because of this, we are constantly pushed to pursue all sorts of desires which are consequences of the fact that we have often missed out what is the essential.

*AG: Did the Buddha express himself on life and death in some texts? Do we find in the Pali Canon, for example, sermons by the Buddha on this subject?*

RR: Yes, and the first sermon already, the Benares Sermon, is the sermon in which the Buddha speaks about life and death, since he explains the causes of suffering and how to put an end to suffering. So, it is the fundamental sutra in which Buddha suggests that there is a way to free oneself from samsara and achieve the cessation of suffering, nirvana.

Otherwise, there are all sorts of sutras in which, for example, the Buddha meets beings who have to help a dying person. And he gives them advice on how to help this dying person.

*AG: So, the question of death is still very present in the texts that are linked to the Buddha?*

RR: Of course.

*AG: Most religions speak about the afterlife. What about Zen Buddhism?*

RR: In Zen Buddhism too, there is this vision of "the beyond". Our present life is included in a cycle of life and death, so the afterlife is very present in the practice of Zen. Moreover, Master Dôgen, whom we will talk about later, said that those who do not believe in the fact that our life is included in this cycle (and takes place in 3 periods: the present life, the future life and the lives to come), are not ready to enter the path of Zen.

*AG: It is also said that "life and death is nirvana". How can something be its opposite?*

RR: We can say this in the absolute and ultimate dimension, if we consider that life and death is made up of profound impermanence, and therefore of appearances and disappearances, because everything that exists appears and disappears. This means also that everything that exists is without substance, and if it is without substance, it is already free of all causes of suffering. But all this has still to be realized.

I believe that there is an objective point of view: we can say that life and death and nirvana are identical from the point of view of ultimate truth, of emptiness. These two states of being, life and death or nirvana are ultimately emptiness. Now, if we want our life and death, our way of being in life and in death to become nirvana, it supposes a work, a practice, a path which is the way of Zen.

*AG: How did Master Dôgen express himself on this subject, notably in his texts?*

RR: Mainly he teaches that life does not become death. All this is linked to a notion of time. For Dôgen, time is not a separate dimension of existence, and existence is made of successive appearances and disappearances, so time is made of a succession of instants and each instant has its absolute value. It does not become the next instant.

*AG: They are only states after all?*

RR: They are states. He says: "Winter does not become spring. Winter is winter and spring is spring". In the same way, a log in a fire does not become ash. There is first the log state and then the ash state. It is the same for our life. This is very important, because, if we see impermanence as something continuous, there is no way to transform and free ourselves. It means that the sequence is deterministic. Whereas if impermanence is made up of separate moments, there is the possibility - between one moment and the other - of introducing a change.

*AG: He also said: "Practice meditation as if you were entering your coffin." What does this mean?*

RR: It is Master Deshimaru who reminded us of this. It means that - when entering our coffin - there is not a moment to lose to worry about all sorts of things that make us waste our time in daily life. So, at that moment, we really have to concentrate on what is essential, to live and understand in these few moments that remain for us ... and this is an opportunity for a much more intense look on our life and therefore an opportunity to achieve awakening.

This is why often human beings who have had near death experiences, the famous so-called N.D.E (Near Death Experiences), spontaneously have near-awakening experiences, because they are confronted with imminent death. So, it would be a real shame to wait until you have to die to awaken and lead a life based on this awakening.

This is what Zen teaches. And for that, we really have to practice meditation with great intensity. And not only meditation, but be attentive to all the things of our life, as if we were living our last moments or day ... Then everything becomes important in this moment, everything is lived deeply. And in the end, from this perspective of death, it is life itself that is renewed.

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*AG: One of the practices, as you said, is meditation, as zazen in Zen. What happens when we do zazen, which can help us to better envisage life here and now?*

RR: First of all, in the practice of zazen, we are very concentrated on the body and breathing and the fact of being so concentrated helps to calm the mind, and especially to not follow our thoughts, but to be really very present here and now.

I believe that, in relation to life and death, the fundamental thing is to experience the eternity of each moment, that this moment must be lived fully as an absolute moment.

*AG: Why do we also say that we transmigrate when we do zazen?*

RR: What happens in zazen is that, even if we are concentrated on the body and the breathing, we have thoughts or emotions which appear, and if we follow the thoughts and emotions, our state of consciousness changes. So, we can live in states of consciousness which correspond to the different states of transmigration we were talking about. We can be, at times, in rather strong pain, and at other times, we can be overwhelmed by certain desires or fears. At other times, we can be in bliss. In short, zazen is not something constant.

We encounter impermanence in zazen, but at the same time, we learn not to identify with these states, we go through them. This is what is extremely precious in the practice of zazen, because we constantly come back to the body and the breathing and we find each time a new mind, fresh, which is no longer conditioned by our emotions and our thoughts. And so, it is precisely a moment of nirvana, a moment of liberation.

*AG: Can you comment on this sentence: "Coming and going, birth and death are the true body of man." What does this mean?*

RR: Yes, it's a sentence of Master Dogen. It means that it is - in this life and death - that the human being can desire to practice the Path, engage in his practice and realize his True body which is the body of Buddha, which is not only an impermanent body, but which is also the body in which the ultimate Truth is incarnated.

But Dôgen tells us that this implies committing oneself concretely to the practice of the Way. This means, as far as possible, practicing meditation, receiving at least the Bodhisattva ordination, receiving the Precepts, make the Vow to practice them and engaging in a daily practice of the Way in this world, which is ultimately the only place in which one can achieve enlightenment.

This is what "life and death are the true body of man" means. Again, this may seem strange, if we take it as it is. But it must be understood that it is "realized" if there is practice, if there is a commitment to the path of Zen, to the Path of Buddha.

*A G: Many great Zen masters also teach us to let go. How do we achieve this in practice?*

RR: There are two ways to let go. What I have insisted on until now is concentration. Concentration helps us to let go, if we are very deeply concentrated on our body, if we manage to let thoughts and emotions pass more quickly and if we are concentrated on breathing.

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But above all, what helps a lot with letting go is wisdom. That is to say the deep, intimate observation of the fact that what we are attached to has no substance, that it is impermanent anyway, that we won't be able to keep it and that we ourselves and our own ego are completely impermanent and therefore cannot attach itself to anything.

In other words, detachment is not something that we obtain through effort, but through the realization that even if we want to, we can't cling to anything, because life is constantly appearing and disappearing. And the transformation with Zen invites us to find a constantly fluid mind, which embraces this becoming, this transformation without stagnating anywhere, without remaining anywhere.

The Zen mind is the mind that doesn't stagnate on anything.

*AG: And it also allows us to have a certain unity, notably not to separate samsara and nirvana. That's something that's very important too?*

RR: Yes, samsara and nirvana are not the same, but they are not different, they are not separated. Why is that? Because there is a tendency among some practitioners of Buddhism to hate samsara as the place of suffering, of transmigration, and to aspire so much to nirvana that it becomes an object of greed ... and it becomes desire again, whereas desire is the fundamental cause of transmigration. Desiring nirvana makes us move in the opposite direction to nirvana.

Dôgen insists on it a lot, when he talks about life and death. He says that if you really hate life and death and aspire to nirvana by opposing nirvana and samsara, it is as if you want to see the North Star by turning South. You are on the wrong track.

On the other hand, if you see the true nature of this samsara you are in, you realize that it is without substance, that it is impermanent, and then letting go happens immediately. And that letting go is nirvana.

*AG: Why is it also said that the Bodhisattva does not fall into samsara, but decides to dive in it?*

RR: Because the Bodhisattva found the way to achieve nirvana in samsara. But he realizes that most beings suffer deeply in this samsara and while The Bodhisattva could gain a definitive nirvana, he is animated by compassion, a compassion which is itself stimulated by the practice of zazen, which makes us feel not different nor separated from others. And this destroy - within ourselves - what makes a barrier or a separation from others. And this mind of compassion makes that, for the Bodhisattva, the meaning of his life is to be eternally reborn in the world and to practice the Way with others, to help them to awaken. And because he practices like this, his life is basically nirvana even in samsara,

*AG: Finally, could you quote us some poems written by great Zen masters?*

RR: These are poems that are written just before death. They are generally meant to bequeath a last teaching at the request of the disciples who are waiting for the master's ultimate teaching.

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Master Keizan says: "As I was born, I must die". This means that he considered dying to be a natural thing. Being born implies dying and not only at the moment of actual death, but day after day, moment after moment. So, our life is a succession of lives and deaths. And this is really what the practice of Zen teaches us, making us familiar with the fact that being born means entering into this process of birth and death, instant after instant. So, it becomes so familiar that at the actual moment of death, since I was born, I know I must die. We're not going to make a story out of it!

Another poem is by Master Ryokan, and it is this time much more about accepting the cosmic order as it is. The ultimate teaching is that, in spring, flowers bloom. In summer, nightingales sing. And in autumn, the flowers and leaves wither and fall.

*AG: Finally, we can note that on Zen temples, there is also a small signpost where something is inscribed that refers to life and death?*

RR: It's written on the wood (the piece of wood that is struck to invite people to come and practice meditation quickly). It says: "Life and death is the great matter". Or it says: "Don't waste your time, don't spoil the moment. "

*AG: Thank you, Roland Rech, for being with us.*