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# Life, Samsara, Karma

**By Claude E Mon Cannizzo**

Within Buddhism one often speaks about "reincarnation" in relation to samsara. But to avoid any confusion, I would rather call this cycle "rebirth" because many people understand reincarnation to mean that what would be reborn is a "self", an "ego", under a new human form.

But basically the most important thing is not to worry about whether we have already lived before death or whether we will be reborn after death, because this craving is linked to the fear of death which is the root of all fears. These are hypotheses that are not very important and in Zen we don't talk about them a lot, nor do we reject them either. The Buddha spoke about this because he experienced this during his awakening and understood the chain of causes and conditions of rebirths (*Innen*). Thus he was able to draw people's attention to the effects of their actions, words and thoughts, and the fact that they bear responsibility for this, by making them realize that they leave traces and condition their rebirth.

What, on the other hand, should deserve our full attention, would be to know, once we are up in the morning, how to live through our day while respecting the teachings of the Zen path. For most humans, days are filled with homework, family, work ... And for the rest of the time, they try to entertain themselves by looking for distracting occupations, moments of leisure, if their condition allows them to do so. At the same time, other people in other parts of the world are constantly afflicted with pain, disease, war or other troubles. Either way, we seek pleasure and try to do everything we can to achieve it, and when confronted with difficulties, we will do everything to overcome them.

We live through various layers of existence in our lifetimes. We have moments of pleasure, of physical or moral suffering, moments of tranquility ... In life, we go from heaven to hell, or from hell to heaven. We can also have this experience during zazen, it can be a peaceful, or a restless experience; we shift from one state to another. They are cycles, like samsara, in what are called the "six worlds."

*(Kāmaloka. The wheel of life, Samsara. The worlds of rebirths, depending on our karma. This theme will be discussed another time.)*

The term samsara also designates somehow the concept of cycles which apply to all the phenomena of our daily existence. To better understand this idea of the transformation cycle, let's take the example of a cup of tea. When a full cup of tea falls to the ground, the tea spills on the ground, so you take a sponge to mop up the tea. The tea passes from the cup to the sponge: it is a cycle; the tea passes from the sponge to the sink or wherever. The same applies to the cup, it changed shape, and went from being a cup to broken fragments, it's a cycle. The same applies to the sound of the cup falling, there is the noise of the shattering, which lingers momentarily and then disappears, again this is a cycle ...

There are longer cycles, for example when we have a migraine it can last a few minutes or a few hours. There are extremely short cycles, such as the blinking of the eyelid. Buddha said about himself:

*"During the time taken by the eyelid to blink, there were several million moments of consciousness which followed one another."*

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And of course the cycle of life, birth, old age and death in which we live here and now, with its share of successive cycles that appear and disappear at every moment points to endlessly occurring and recurring cycles.

We would like to stop thinking, but thoughts come back in an endless cycle which is born and dies constantly. We would like silence and tranquility, but there are still things that disturb us such as the cycle of our unfulfilled desires. We would like to live forever but there is old age, disease and death, the cycle of life or lives ...

This is samsara, and its main production is dukkha, not only because there are painful phenomena, but also because there are pleasant ones.

This second aspect requires some clarification. Why should pleasant phenomena generate suffering? We all agree that we are happy when a painful or distressing situation ceases. But misunderstanding arises when it comes to accepting that what is pleasant is also a source of suffering. To understand this, we need to clarify the subject of "grasping and rejecting", in other words, duality. The "I want" and the "I don't want" or the "I like", or the "I don't like". Here we touch upon the concept of "let us seize what is pleasant, and reject the unpleasant". Obviously we all choose what pleases us. Pleasant phenomena appear because we have tried to make them appear, precisely to distract us from the pain and misery of everyday life. That is why they also mean suffering and pain.

The suffering about what is pleasant does not lie in our choosing it, but in the attachment that is born from this choice and binds us to it.

The big question centers around attachment and impermanence ... Indeed, everything that appears in this life whether of our doing or not, is doomed to disappear. This is simply the basic reality of all existence. Everything is impermanent. This is also true of the pleasant and pleasure itself. When what is unpleasant disappears, it suits us, but when it is what is pleasant that disappears, we will naturally experience suffering, since we get attached to what we experience as pleasant and feel pain when it disappears.

The view of the reality of impermanence is not a pessimistic view. Moreover, in Zen there is no optimism or pessimism, but simply realism: accepting things as they are. So the reality of "the impermanence of all things" is on the contrary an invitation to live every moment in its proper measure. Live your life to the full by giving it our full attention precisely because it is impermanent. By doing this, we will eliminate any regret for failing to live to the full those experiences which, for one reason or another, due to inattention or lack of mindfulness, we failed to experience fully: with all the attendant regrets and suffering that this implies.

Whatever the case may be, in our daily life, in each of the moments that we go through, we produce the one that is to come, in a way, we make our future. This functioning is, moreover, the very subject of causes and effects that we call karma, and it is inevitable, even if we say that zazen interrupts karma, we cannot escape from it. (*Note that, karma has nothing to do with fate*) If we understand this, what becomes the most important thing is to focus on what is happening today, here and now. That means not running away from the present moment, being totally immersed in what needs to be done, to the fullest extent. This is called "zanshin" which means what is finished is well and truly over. Even though what we have to do is difficult, if we have to do it we have to see it through to its conclusion. Even though today we are building the conditions for the future, what has not yet happened does not exist. However,

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taking into account what our actions and words may generate, it is preferable that these be consistent with the Dharma, the Eightfold Path, the precepts or the paramitas ...

To practice zazen is to take root in the Dharma of Buddha, without fear. If we have been fortunate enough to practice the path of liberation today, here and now, it is because we have undoubtedly contributed to it throughout our cycles of rebirth.