A Different View Of Rebirth Part 2

Last week’s discussion, Part 1, on December 5, suggested an alternative view of rebirth, related to the profoundly transformational views of history’s spiritual masters, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammed and Martin Luther. The view was cultural—these men lived in times of cultural transformation that inspired them to look inward and discover anew the potential for human transcendence. In that context, one idea not mentioned is the proposal that the heightened introspective awareness of these people could represent an innate trend of human evolution. Our animal heritage is organized around the basic issues of organic life’s survival. The limits of these instinctual drives are demonstrated in the three root causes of dukkha: greed, aversion and ignorance.

Rebirth has a traditional standing in the history of Buddhism and Hinduism, that is, karmic influences accrue over one’s lifetime and are conditioning factors for the next time a body is inhabited. The alternative view is that each moment of cognition, reaction and behavior is a rebirth; I believe this concept is at the core of the Buddhist view of anatta, the absence of an enduring and autonomous self. Part of that concept emphasizes the complexity and profound impact of environmental conditions, especially those conditions that inform interpersonal relationships.

This week’s talk will involve the complex and very strong cultural conditions of this era, which is arguably the most radically transformative era of human history, and, on a larger scale, the history of this planet. Perhaps the most radically transformative element is the internet. For those of us connected to the internet, events are displayed on a worldwide stage. There are profound political tensions playing out around the world, interdependent on environmental disruption, economic imbalances, racial tensions and food insecurity. These stressors will continue and likely escalate for the following centuries, and this will force profound sociocultural transformations. In a sense, there will be a cultural rebirth on the planet.

How will humanity respond to this pressure? Anthropological and ecological research has suggested that survival of a species in such times of turmoil depends upon the adaptiveness to the changing circumstances of the environment. There was recently a report that some sections of the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia have actually adapted to the increase in water temperature while the majority of other areas of the reef have bleached and died.

The human sociocultural structure has to be reborn in ways that are less adversely affected by greed (rampant global consumerism), aversion (ethnophobia and fear of deprivation) and ignorance (ignoring the larger impact of consumerism and ethnophobia on the ecology of the planet). In order for this to occur, individuals must “up their game” of mindfulness, compassion and self-restraint.

Sometime in the 1980’s I recall driving through North Carolina to attend a workshop. This was in the Fall, several months after a hurricane had ripped through the Carolinas. For over 100 miles, the trees on both sides of the highway were mowed down as if by a gigantic mower. Trees that were 18 inches or more in diameter were snapped off several feet above ground *except for an occasional tree that still stood, despite the havoc nearby*! I had been practicing mindfulness meditation for several years at the time, and the impactful thought that came to mind during that ride was a sense of wonder at the resilience of those trees, and how that could represent the benefits of regular meditation practice. Somehow those trees had enough flexibility to withstand the torrential fury they were exposed to.

In the realm of psychological studies, the phenomenon of stress resilience comes to mind. There is some trait that individuals have, usually termed *self-efficacy*, that allows some people to survive extraordinarily stressful experiences. Self-efficacy is the capacity to confidently cope with the dynamic demands of a situation. An example would be the confidence and competence of a professional basketball player to respond to the rapidly changing circumstances of a game skillfully because of his or her repetitive practice of ball handling, shooting, and successfully participating in the tumultuous circumstances of the game.

Mindfulness and lovingkindness practices cultivate self-efficacy. The formal sitting practice trains one to persistently track the emergence of thoughts and impulses and then redirect attention back to the breath or the metta mantra. This competency increases with practice, particularly the immersive experience of going on retreat. This competency generalizes to the informality and spontaneity of life events. We become attached to culturally embedded expectations that function to create a social identity: “I am an employed person”, “My house won’t be destroyed by a hurricane”, “I can rely on the convenience of having a car and fuel to drive around the countryside” and so on. *These expectations and identities have always been impermanent and provisional, but we cling to them as if our very being depends upon them*!

At the core of Buddhism there are what are called the “Three Jewels”: anicca (Transitory, provisional nature of reality), anatta (The absence of an autonomous enduring self) and dukkha (The distress and confusion that emerge in consciousness when the self is organized around the belief that “I will always be OK”). As mentioned previously, during this time on the planet, humanity and life itself will be challenged by radically changing conditions in the atmosphere, the politics, the economies and the notion of work.

To the extent that we cultivate self-efficacy through regular meditation practice and integrate mindfulness and equanimity into daily life routines, we will be more likely to be resilient to the stressful events of the immediate and long-term future. Here is an adaptation of the Serenity Prayer often quoted at AA meetings:

*May the Dharma provide serenity to accept the things I cannot change*

*The self-efficacy to change the things I can*

*And the Wisdom to know the difference*

I hope this information provides motivation to cultivate mindfulness and kindness for you and everyone you encounter, no matter what the social or environmental conditions might be.