A Different View Of Rebirth

Part 1

In the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, the accumulation of karmic actions and results informs how another life on the planet operates. In the ancient forms of the tradition, this is considered to be literally true. In this discussion, I want to suggest a different view of rebirth, one that considers how cultural pressures influence the concept of karma, and how these pressures, over the course of generations, have affected the course of various faith traditions.

It occurred to me recently that the cultural norms that provided the foundations of social life for important religious innovators such as the Buddha, Jesus, Muhammed and Martin Luther were experiencing significant stress. I believe consideration of these transformative pressures can be helpful in our time on the planet, which is arguably the period of greatest cultural stress in the history of humanity.

In the time of the Buddha, the culture on the Indian subcontinent was stressed by the interactions of two different cultural norms, the Aryan and the Indus Valley Civilization. Briefly, the Aryan culture was, broadly speaking, hierarchical, with gods and a priestly clan, the Brahmins, who interpreted the will of the gods and interceded on behalf of the populace. The Indus Valley Civilization was less hierarchical and perhaps provided a spirituality manifested by the Sramanas (shrah-mah-nahs), individuals who renounced the householder life and rejected the Brahmanic authorities to practice meditation and other disciplines that would mature into the yogic traditions. Just prior to, during and after the time of the Buddha, there was a lot of warfare between different kingdoms that created a strong undercurrent of cultural uncertainty, and this likely contributed to the societal atmosphere of that era. The Buddha-to-be, Siddhartha, was raised within a hierarchical Aryan cultural norm that he rejected to follow the Sramana tradition, out of which Buddhism emerged.

In the time of Jesus, there was much conflict within the Mediterranean Basin. There had been open warfare between the Romans and the indigenous Jews and other religious subgroups for decades and there was a strong prophetic element that predicted an apocalyptic encounter between the ruling class and a messiah, who would provide relief from the oppression of the Romans.

During the lifetime of Muhammed, the predominant cultural norm was tribal and there was no coherent ideology to unify these subgroups. There were no laws, only customs, and these were variable from tribe to tribe and generation to generation.

During the time of Luther, there was great sociocultural conflict that manifested in the form of wars, the rise of nationalism and the introduction of the foundations of modern industry such as the printing press, corporations and international trade.

These different eras in human history, I believe, stimulated individuals such as those mentioned above, the undergo strenuous introspective investigation and develop spiritual ideals that were enduringly transformative. I propose that in our era we are confronted with enormous and relentless cultural stress—for over a century, cultural norms all over the planet have been radically transformed. The most important transformation is the almost instantaneous exchange of information over the internet. This has, to a very large extent, reduced any hierarchical influences of religious authority in this exploration. In fact, religious authority is increasingly conservative and reactive in a majority of the world’s faith traditions.

A common thread among these religious innovators is deep meditative introspection. Of course, the Buddha’s period of meditation training is evident. For Jesus, the scriptures report that he spent “Forty days and nights in the wilderness”. For Muhammed, he went on many retreats to a cave for meditation, from which emerged the Koran. With Martin Luther, he taught that one’s connection with God can’t be mediated by priests, but by deep reading of the Bible and prayer.

This brings to mind the Buddha’s Kalama Sutta, wherein he suggested that individuals and communities shouldn’t rely on authority through blind obedience, but rather to pay attention to what is offered, try it out for themselves and then act accordingly. This is all premised on the cultivation of mental discipline that investigates one’s individual meaning making process to determine if the cultural conditioning (karma) of that moment of self-formation is beneficial or not, and then act according to the principal of altruistic kindness. I propose that this can be a new understanding of rebirth. What do you think?