

Karma, Kyabgon, Chapter 6, “Meaning in Life and the Fear of Death” & Chapter 7, “Immortality, Reincarnation & Rebirth”

Rethinking Karma, “The ‘Positive Disintegration’ of Buddhism: Reformation and Deformation in the Sri Lankan Sangha”

Karma, Kyabgon Chapter 6, “Meaning in Life and the Fear of Death”

*P 73/87 We have to deal with the fear of death because it arises precisely because we die. It is not reducible to certain religious ideas about after-death experience. In addition, people not only fear death itself, but also the process of dying. We realize that there is no way of knowing in advance what sort of death we will have.*

*P 74/88 In the West, we have somewhat compacted the problem. Over the last century or so, death has been becoming increasingly institutionalized and removed from immediate experience. It is no longer a common experience in concrete terms. Where people used to die at home in the past, this is no longer the case, and the usual gathering of relatives and family no longer takes place spontaneously. It is no longer a communal affair, but on the contrary, it is hidden from public view, resulting in less actual contact with death and the dying. Perversely, the literature on death and dying has been growing considerably, and people are actually talking about it more and more, while handling the practical fact of it less and less.*

*P 74/89 For all these reasons-the ever-present fear of death and our lack of contact with it-it is all the more important to have a proper encounter with the facts of death and to deal with the fear of death, because, from the Buddhist point of view, coming to terms with death is part of making our life worthwhile and meaningful. Death and life are not seen as completely separate and opposed, but as giving rise to each other. They coexist in a complementary fashion. For Buddhists, the aim is not to conquer death but to come to accept it and familiarize ourselves with our own sense of mortality and impermanence.*

Reflect on your own relationship with death, your own death and that of others. If there is fear around death, what is the fear of? As a practitioner, is this something you’ve reflected on and examined?

*P 75/90 According to Buddhism, we die because we are a product of causes and conditions. Whatever is caused is impermanent, is subject to decay, to death. Human beings are not exempt, as it is a natural process. Life without death is impossible, and vice versa, and therefore the ultimate aim of Buddhist practice incorporates an acceptance of death and a cultivation of an attitude that does not reject it as something ugly and menacing that steals our life away, and thus something to be pushed aside and ignored. Nor does a Buddhist think of living forever. The Buddhist view is that everything is transient and impermanent, and so death and life are inseparably bound up with each other, at all times in fact, even while we live, as the aging process itself is viewed as a part of the dying process.*

Have you had experiences in your life that brought you into closer contact with death? As a young person, were you allowed to be close to those who were dying?

*P 76/92 People do not fear just eternal pain and suffering in hell, but extinction, not being around, not existing. This thought is very disturbing in itself for many people, and so the removal of the idea of hell will not alleviate the fear of death itself. We have a fear of death, as do other creatures, but from a Buddhist view, ours is intimately linked to our notion of a self.*

Can you see what concerns might be there for you around your own death: fear of pain, fear of loss, fear of not existing, fear of what might (or might not) come next?

*P 76/93-94 Tibetans, if they choose to, have access to traditions and practices of this nature. Monks, for instance, would go to charnel grounds, or graveyards, to practice and contemplate impermanence. . . There are Buddhist traditions, of course, like Zen, that do not have such elaborate rituals as are found in Tibetan Buddhism that involve mantras, visualizations, and so forth, and focus more on being immediately present with what is happening now, avoiding all mental constructions of what might take place, as the best form of preparation for the future, including the eventuality of death. The end result is the same. Both methods lead to a greater acceptance of the event, and the ultimate aim is the same, which is to increase awareness and develop insight.*

Reflect on this: A very direct and deliberate turning towards death as a contemplative practice; and to “focus more on being immediately present with what is happening now, avoiding all mental constructions of what might take place.”

Do you see these as distinct practices? As a Zen student, do you contemplate or meditate on death in conscious ways? What helps you to cultivate a greater acceptance of death?

*P 77/94 The Buddhist view is that life and death are inextricably bound to each other, moment to moment. The death of the past is happening right now, and we can never really see what is going to happen in the future. When one moment passes, that is death, and when another arises, that is life, or rebirth, we might say. Therefore, living in the present, with awareness, links in a fundamental way with appreciating impermanence.*

Do you understand, can you relate to, based in your experience the birth and death of each moment? Has your zazen allowed you to see into this such that it has impacted on your life?

Does this give you understanding of this teaching from the Buddha?

“This body does not belong to you nor to anyone else. It should be regarded as the results of former action that has been constructed and intended and is now to be experienced.”

P 77/94 *It does not matter how elaborate certain teachings or meditation techniques are, the fundamental aim is still to deal with immediate experience, here and now. It has nothing much to do with what might or might not happen in the future, or attaining some wonderful mystical experience in the future, because, as the masters have continuously emphasized, as important as the attainment of enlightenment is, it has to be arrived at through being in the here and now, dealing with present circumstances, not through indulging in speculation about what enlightenment might be.*

*This brings us to the critical factor of seeing meditation, reading, and contemplation as conjoined. We should not be satisfied to just think about impermanence and death; we have to have the real experience, which comes from meditation. To read about Buddhism's approach to death is important, but it needs to become an existential concern and to be translated into something approximating a real intuition or a real encounter with death. Taken to this level, all kinds of fears and emotions can arise in meditation, so we learn to deal with it in a very authentic manner. Following such a path will prevent our knowledge from evaporating in the actual experience itself. From a Buddhist point of view, so much depends upon our habits, and so thinking about death in a certain way helps us to get used to it, to become habituated to it.*

Have you, or do you, reflect on impermanence and death?

Karma, Kyabgon Chapter 7, "Immortality, Reincarnation and Rebirth"

P 81/98 *According to the Buddha, both body and mind are subject to continual change, and so even at death what is transferred from one life to the next is not an unchanging psychic principle, but different psychic elements all hanging together, samskaras – memories, various impressions, and so on – none of which is unchanging in itself. . .*

*In Buddhism, that which "reincarnates;" to use that term, is not an unchanging self but a collection of psychic materials. It is not the same soul reincarnating. It is a rebirth. It is the same individual that has come back or taken a new life, but that individual is totally different because everything about him or her has changed. There is only continuity but not identity, in the strict sense.*

Do some study on the subject of "samskaras" – that which continues from one life to the next. If the self is empty of any inherent characteristic, how do you understand the statement, ". It is the same individual that has come back or taken a new life, but that individual is totally different because everything about him or her has changed. There is only continuity but not identity, in the strict sense."

P 82-83 Reflect on the chapter's comments on the "observer" and how we impute into this a lasting or unique sense of self. Does this help clarify how to skillfully practice the observer in your zazen?

P 83/102 *There is a problem discussing these matters in the way we tend to revert to "thing" language rather than "process" language. The principle of process negates the need to define the observer so insistently as an entity, as we do with "thing" language and philosophies of substance*

When you consider each moment, and yourself, as an ongoing process rather than a "thing" how does this effect your sense of yourself, the world around you, and all that you experience?

P 83/103 *Obviously, if we assert the imputation of self to be false in the above sense, then logically, the skandhas must be treated in a similar way as a false imputation. If they are defined as "self;" how can they have rebirth within a Buddhist understanding? Again, as with the notion of self, the only thing that is denied is the permanency assigned to the skandhas-nothing beyond that. The skandhas, or the five psychophysical constituents of form, feeling, perception, disposition, and consciousness, do have existence, do have reality. It is the skandhas, apart from the first skandha of the body, that are reborn and together make up the self. Yet, just as the material things that we use and handle have reality, but no underlying essence, so too do the mental elements. Essence is what is not there. Thinking in terms of essence is very ingrained, as demonstrated in the way that we persist in seeing it in material objects. There is no imputation that all that we perceive is totally illusory and has no existence whatsoever. There is simply no underlying or inherent essence.*

Do you feel clear, in your practice, of the difference between letting go of grasping at a sense of self, and rejecting or denying a sense of self?

### **Rethinking Karma, "The 'Positive Disintegration' of Buddhism"**

There is much in the history of Buddhism about the relationship between "church and state" and the monastic and lay sangha. While this chapter provides some very limited account of this, consider this ongoing dynamic in terms of our time and place, and its implications relating to the ongoing – and evolving – dynamics of the MRO sangha's relationship between our monastic and lay community.

Also, how does this reading help you think about our sangha's involvement in racial and social justice issues? Should we, as a Buddhist community, be involved in trying to effect change in our larger society and world, or should we just be focusing on traditional Buddhist practice and liberation? What do you draw upon to help you reflect on this?

Reflecting on this in terms of your understanding of karma, think about the decisions and actions we take – as individuals and as a sangha – relating to these concerns, and the short and longterm consequences of those actions. How does your understanding of karma inform how you, and we, should consider such actions?