

THE WAY OF REBIRTH

By Mr. G.S. Porte

The confusion that was caused in Christian countries as a result of the publication of Darwin's theory of evolution is well known; the debates that followed it have also been publicized and the "problem" is still a matter for heated discussion in some places. There are people who cannot accept it; others prefer not to think about it.

We do not hear of a similar debate between evolutionists and Buddhists because it would be unnecessary. The theory indeed helps to clarify two aspects of Buddhist belief: Anatta and Rebirth.

If man is not a unique and distinct creation but a part of the evolutionary process than whatever he possesses in the way of a soul, spirit of identity is also part of that changing process; neither his physical nor spiritual form is a permanent entity. Furthermore, it is likely that the animals share, to a lesser degree whatever there is in the way of a soul, just as man shares with them an animal body, although his is more versatile and adaptable, able to move in three elements (or four, if mind is considered an element)

It is interesting to mention, by the way, that recently an opinion poll was taken in England to find out if people believe that dogs have souls. A majority thought so and would probably have extended this to horses, since they are famous for their love of these animals, but since they keep them not only as pets but as hunters it is unlikely that they would have included other species in this category.

Many English people are intrigued by the idea of rebirth but in reading books about Buddhism they usually find that whereas everything else is explained with clarity, this is not. It may be that those who wrote the Buddhist scriptures took it so much for granted that they made no lengthy explanation of it; the idea was a familiar one in India.

I first learned of the belief from a poem of Wordsworth, set in a Christian context:

“Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath somewhere else its setting
And cometh from afar;

Not in entire forgetfulness
And not in utter nakedness
But trailing clouds of glory do we come.....”
(Ode to Intimations of Immortality)

In association with the belief in Karma this becomes meaningful and not a poetic whim. In trying to clarify my ideas about it I have found it useful to use an image, that of fire.

If matches are strung in a line and the first one is set alight, the second one will catch fire as the first one is consumed and so on along the line. A more topical allusion in this country would be a row of squatters' houses. If the flames are raging anything nearby will be consumed; if the fire is less fierce it can be brought under control; a small fire may burn itself out.

In the world of forms, the emotions and illusions of man are as real as fire itself, although in the Buddhist sense they are ultimately unreal. Like flames, they can travel from body to body. The individual self that is unenlightened and burning with lust and hatred is likely to be reborn, i.e. re-embodied, in the animal form that most approximates to its lust and hatred. When Holbein painted his portrait of Henry VIII he deliberately made him look like a pig because his character was swinish, i.e. gluttonous. If Holbein had been a Buddhist and not a Christian he would have been justified in painting a pig to look like the re-born Henry VIII.

The individual who has understood the Buddha's words and has achieved some control over his emotions, ideas and sense impressions is likely to be reborn as a man.

The Buddha himself possessed such a refined and controlled flame that he could choose between letting it burn and extinguishing it. For the benefit of mankind he chose not to enter the state of Nirvana immediately.

I think that by using some such image it becomes easier to understand the way in which rebirth takes place.

I cannot claim to have any knowledge of a previous life but my receptivity to the idea is, I think, based on my experience as someone born and brought up in an European environment.

When I first read a book of the Buddha's sayings I was immediately struck not only by the truth of the teaching but by the beauty of its conception of man as achieving control of the self and ultimate enlightenment by means of right moral and intellectual effort via the Eightfold Path, without need of redemption or grace. It seemed not pessimistic but optimistic and the accretion of myth in Tibet and elsewhere did not make it idolatrous any more than Catholicism.

I seem to have felt and thought in a Buddhist way ever since I felt or thought anything at all but by reading the Sutras for the first time I was able to find an intellectual formulation for what had been vague and unformed ideas.

Why did I feel that the environment in which I lived was an alien one? Why did I believe that living things should not be harmed, even though I could see no purpose in their existence and had not heard of rebirth? This is strange since I lived among people whose chief pastime and delight was hunting, shooting, fishing and generally killing every living thing in sight.

The only explanation I can find is that Rebirth.

