

Buddhism Reborn into Zen

Austin Che

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Samsara. The never-ending cycle of death and rebirth in a world of suffering. This is the not so happy outlook on life that is at the core of Buddhism. But there is hope! Enlighten yourself and you will be free. When these doctrines of Indian Buddhism merged with Chinese thought to form Zen Buddhism, some of these basic notions remained the same. But for many Zen followers, rebirth is no longer the central issue, and life doesn't look so bad after all. Zen shifts the focus from a bigger view of many lifetimes to concentrating on reaching enlightenment in this lifetime, and not to worry about the future. In this way, Zen is a much lighter religion, in that it doesn't explicitly say we are doomed for eternal suffering.

Life is suffering. This is a fundamental idea of Buddhism. The First Noble Truth, which came from the first sermon given by the Buddha, is that "Suffering is all around us; it is a part of life." The cause of this suffering is given by the Second Noble Truth, that "the cause of suffering is craving and attachment." And unless we are able to eliminate craving, which we can do by following the Eightfold Path given by the Buddha, we will continue to suffer as we will be reborn again and again into this world.

The reason for being reborn is given by the 12-step chain given by the Buddha and is shown in the Buddhist Wheel of Life. It begins with ignorance and ends with a rebirth and aging and dying. When ignorance ceases, so does aging

and dying. In this Wheel, there are six realms that one can be reborn into. Three are for those who do bad deeds, and three reward good deeds. At the very bottom is hell, followed by the realm of the spirits. Above that is the realm of animals. The three upper realms include the human realm. Although the human realm is the lowest of the three upper realm, it is important since “only here can virtue and wisdom be increased” (*The Buddhism of South Asia*, p. 36). The other realms can be seen as either a reward or punishment for deeds done as a human. Good deeds push you up and bad deeds push you down. The upper two realms are those of the gods and demigods. The gods are subject to rebirth also, when their good karma has been used up. Since karma can only be generated by humans, you can’t stay at the top as a god forever, since eventually your good karma will disappear. Similarly, there is no way to stay in hell forever.

The Buddhist world view, although gloomy, doesn’t mean we should just throw up our hands and give up. There are those who have escaped samsara and have reached nirvana. Reaching nirvana is to escape this wheel, to escape this prison. “Nirvana is nowhere on the wheel but utterly transcends it” (*The Buddhism of South Asia*, p. 36). To achieve nirvana, we need to realize that there are three types of acts: those that generate good karma, those that generate bad karma, and those that lead to a release from samsara. Good karma allows you to go to an upper realm while bad karma will make you go to a lower realm. An important point is that good and bad karma don’t in any way cancel each other out. So to achieve nirvana, it would seem that Buddhists would tend not to do anything, for fear of creating either good or bad karma. They wouldn’t take risks, or make any action, except perhaps meditating on nothing. Effort would be spent on not doing anything. This seems a wasteful way to live life, but if one believes in samsara and decides it is time to attempt to escape from the wheel, the effort may be worth it.

However, most Buddhists and even many monks, may be satisfied with only

generating good karma. They can ensure a happy life within samsara, and not worry about salvation and release from it. In this way, you can still live a reasonable life as a Buddhist without trying to achieve nirvana. A Buddhist can accept that a lot of the world is suffering, but by doing good only, he can avoid the suffering and be reborn again and again in the upper happier realms.

It is even possible to be a Buddhist and believe in samsara without believing in reincarnation in the traditional sense. To believe in reincarnation means that an enduring self reappears after death in a new body. The Buddhist idea of rebirth only says that there is a persistent karma of an individual that reappears after death. You, as you know yourself, may not come back, although your deeds will come back and have eternal effects on the world. Do Kwang, a Zen Monk says “ ‘Reincarnation’ is not really a good way to actually put it. I’d say ‘re-existence of consciousness’ ” (<http://www.ozemail.com.au/ksolway/j14.html>).

So we see that even with the idea of samsara, Buddhists can get by in life without a very pessimistic attitude. Zen, a form of Buddhism, takes the idea of rebirth even less seriously. Zen embraces the concept of rebirth like Buddhism but it is not essential to the core focus of Zen, which is Enlightenment.

Like Mahayana in general, Zen believes in reincarnation, but the Zen monk with whom I spoke frequently gave me the impression that Zen does not take it so seriously as some other sects of Buddhists do. When we ate hamburgers together, I teased him and ask if he ever worried that he might be eating Tokugawa Ieasu. He just laughed. (<http://www.ccir.ed.ac.uk/jad/vantil-list/archive-Jun-1998/msg00053.html>)

Everything that Zen preaches seems to be merely tools or secondary to understanding and enlightenment. For example meditation seems to be a core tenet of Zen. The entire book *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* talks about zazen and meditation. Yet zazen isn’t critical to enlightenment as seen for example

by the story of the sixth patriarch, Hui-neng. Hui-neng had immediate understanding and nowhere in the story is there talk of using meditation to reach enlightenment. On the other hand, there is a definite purpose of meditation in Buddhism, and that is to eliminate karma, as shown by the story of the Buddha under the Bodhi tree. Zen doesn't care so much if you meditate or not, if you can reach enlightenment. Similarly, while the idea of rebirth is present in both Buddhism and Zen, it is not the primary point for Zen study.

We see that the focus for Zen thought differs from that of more traditional Buddhist ideas. For Buddhism, the focus and goal of life is to escape the suffering and to reach nirvana. Zen instead focuses on understanding the self and the mind. Someone on the newsgroup alt.zen summarized it well,

Keeping your Mind clean is Buddhism,
Understanding what Mind is is Zen.

These two varying philosophies allows for Zen to have quite a different outlook on life from standard Buddhist thought. Even if they may accomplish the same thing, that is achieving enlightenment may lead to nirvana, by focusing on the enlightenment rather than the rather dreary notions of samsara, Zen makes Buddhism into a much more optimistic religion. The same Buddhist ideas in the hands of Zen get turned into something different, almost as if the ideas were being reborn, in a different form, but yet still plainly recognizable if you only look hard enough.