

Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist

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Transmigration

DOES Buddhism teach transmigration? If it does, how does it work? Does the soul really transmigrate?

Such questions are frequently asked, and I will try briefly to answer them here.

I

The idea of transmigration is this: After death, the soul migrates from one body to another, celestial, human, animal, or vegetative.

In Buddhism, as it is popularly understood, what regulates transmigration is ethical retribution. Those who behave properly go to heaven, or to heavens, as there are many heavens according to Buddhist cosmology. Some may be reborn among their own races. Those, however, who have not conducted themselves according to moral precepts will be consigned after death to the underground worlds called Naraka.

There are some destined to be reborn as a dog or a cat or a hog or a cow or some other animal, according to deeds which can be characterized as pre-eminently in correspondence with those natures generally ascribed to those particular animals. For instance, the hog is popularly thought to be greedy and filthy. Thus those of us who are especially inclined to be that way will be hogs in their next lives. Others who are rather smart or cunning or somewhat mischievous may be born as rats or monkeys or foxes. This reminds us of Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondence, according to which things on earth have corresponding things in heaven or hell. Sometimes we are said to be born as plants or even rocks.

The interesting thing about this idea of transmigration as sometimes told by Buddhists is that we do not stay in heaven or hell forever. When our karma is exhausted, we come out of hell or come down from heaven. Even when we turn into cats or dogs, we do not repeat this kind of life all the time. We may be reborn as human beings again if we do something good while living as a lower animal, though it is highly doubtful that, for instance, the cat can be taught not to steal fish from the neighbors--which is what she does quite frequently in Japan--however well she, may be fed at home.

But so far nobody has advanced the method of calculating mathematically the strength of karma according to the character of each deed. Therefore, we can never tell how long our life in heaven or hell will be. In any case, we know this much: there is a time when we have to leave heaven or hell.

Buddhists are more concerned--which is natural--with Naraka (hells) than heavens. After death we generally go to Yama, who rules the spirits of the dead. He is known as Emma-sama in Japanese. He has a bright mirror before him. When we appear before him, we see ourselves reflected in it. It illuminates our entire being, and we cannot hide anything from it. Good and bad, all is reflected in it as it is. Emma-sama looks at it and knows at once what kind of person each of us was while living in the world. Besides this, he has a book before him in which everything we did is minutely recorded. We are therefore before the Lord of Death exactly what we were, and there is no deceiving him. His judgment goes straight to the core of our personality. It never errs. His penetrating eye reads not only our consciousness but also our unconscious. He is naturally legalistic, but he is not devoid of kindheartedness, for he is always ready to discover in the unconscious something which may help the criminal to save himself.

II

The idea of transmigration has a certain appeal to the imaginative mind if one is not too critical or scientific--the idea that each motive, consciously conceived or unconsciously prompted, has its ethical value and is punishable or rewardable accordingly, and that the Lord of Death ruling the underworld makes no mistake in assigning us to places where we each belong. His mirror of judgment and his records never err in this respect. These ideas correspond to our sense of justice and compensation. Instead of all sinners being summarily consigned to everlasting fire when the Day of judgment comes, it is certainly more in accord with common sense and justice that each sin, judiciously weighed and evaluated, be given its particular due. This evaluation and consignment, when demonstrated in the doctrine of transmigration, takes on a poetic coloring.

Suppose I did something wrong or something not so very bad and were made to be reborn as a cat. I would live in this animal form for a while, perhaps eight or ten years, for the cat does not live very long. My sin is expiated, for probably I behaved properly as a cat from the human point of view. As a reward, I am born again as a human being. Now, if I remembered this experience as a cat, would it not be highly interesting for me as a former cat to observe all that the mother cat now in my house does, playing with her kittens, sometimes bringing a lizard and even a little snake from the yard for the little ones to play with?

When not only the cat but all the other animals, and also plants and rocks, are looked upon from this point of view, that is, as possible forms of our reincarnation in the future as well as in the past, would not our interest in all those objects existing about us take quite a new turn and perhaps become a source of spiritual inspiration in some way?

For one thing, those forms surrounding us cease to be things altogether foreign to us. They are not strangers; they are not something hostile. On the contrary, they share our nature. We are ready to transform ourselves into their forms of existence, and they too can someday take human form when they are so conditioned. There is a mutual interest between us and them. There is a bond of sympathy and mutual understanding between human beings and the rest of the world.

Besides these considerations, the doctrine of transmigration affords us the chance of pilgrimaging throughout the whole universe, from the thirty-three heavens to the nineteen hells, including the other realms such as

the *tiryagyona* (animal), *preta* (hungry ghost), and *asura* (fighting devils).

While it is not at all pleasant to be fighting all the time, to be tortured in various ways, or to be eternally hungry, it is in accord with human nature to experience vicissitudes of existence and thereby to learn to read the meaning of life.

Nobody likes to be in hell and tortured. But because of this experience, we know how to appreciate heavenly pleasures and how to be sympathetic with our fellow beings who happen to be in not so pleasant an environment.

III

Transmigration pictures us traveling through an infinite number of Kalpas as we go on individually experiencing life in its possible varieties. Evolution, however, delineates human existence as a whole as having gone through all these stages. This is the difference between science and religion: science deals with abstractions, whereas religion is individualistic and personal. So far, evolution has not taken account of ethical implications. It has treated the subject from the point of view of biology and psychology. In the rising development of the human race, the scientists have not given much significance to the ethical and spiritual factors; they have been primarily concerned with the way man has made use of his intelligence more than anything else in his so-called upward course of development.

Transmigration reviews man's existence entirely from the point of view of ethics and religion; it is hardly concerned with his intelligence. And this is the very point where transmigration interests us. The idea may not have anything deserving scientific

investigation. But in spite of this, it perpetually attracts the attention of religious minded people.

IV

Theoretically speaking, the idea of incarnation must have come first, then reincarnation, and finally transmigration. Something took the flesh, God or the word or the devil or the first principle or anything else, which had to express itself in a tangible and visible form so that we can talk of it as something. Being made of the senses and intellect, we individualize, which means incarnation.

When incarnation is established, reincarnation is easy to follow; and when reincarnation is morally evaluated, we have transmigration. Transmigration then comes to be connected with the idea of punishment and reward.

There is another implication of transmigration, which is the idea of the moral perfectibility of human nature. Before Buddha attained Buddhahood he went through many an incarnation, and in each reincarnation he is said to have practiced the six or ten virtues of *pāramitā*, whereby in his last incarnation as a human being he became a perfect man, that is, Buddha.

As long as we have the idea of an infinite possibility of perfecting ourselves morally, we must find some way of carrying this idea through. Inasmuch as we cannot forever continue our individual existence as such, there must be another way of solving the problem, which is what we may call the eternally progressive conception of transmigration.

V

Besides this interpretation of the transmigration idea in its moral and punitive aspects, there is an enjoyable phase of it when we make it a matter of experience during our lifetime. When we scrutinize our daily experiences, we realize that we have here everything we could experience by going through an indefinitely long period of transmigration. Every shade of feeling we have while on earth finds its counterpart somewhere in the heavens or in the hells or in some intermediate realms of the *preta*, or *asura* or *tiryagyona*. For instance, when we are angry, we are with the *asura*; when we are pleased, we are transported into the heaven of joy, *nirmanarataya*; when we are restless, we have turned into the monkey; when we can imagine ourselves free from guilt, we bloom as the lotus or as the morning glory in the early summer dawn, and so on. The whole universe depicts itself in human consciousness. That is to say, our daily life is an epitome of an indefinitely long career of transmigration.

VI

As far as I can see, the doctrine of transmigration does not seem to enjoy any scientific support. The first question we encounter is, "What is it that transmigrates?" We may answer, "It is the soul." "What, then, is the soul?" The soul cannot be conceived as an entity or an object like any other objects we see about us. It cannot be anything tangible or visible. If so, how does it manage to enter into a body? How does it get out of one body when this body decomposes and pass into another body? Where is this "other body" waiting for the liberated soul to enter? The body without the soul is inconceivable; we cannot imagine a soulless body in existence somewhere to receive the soul newly detached. If the soul can maintain itself without embodying itself, why do we not find bodyless souls wandering somewhere? Can a soul subsist without a body?

If the doctrine of transmigration is to be tenable, we must say that there is something that transmigrates; if there is something, what is it? If we cannot affirm it as an entity, what can it be? Can the questions enumerated above be satisfactorily answered? There are still other questions which must be answered before we can establish transmigration.

VII

We can think of the soul not as an entity but as a principle. We can conceive of the soul as not entering into a body already in existence and ready to receive the soul, but as creating a body suitable for its own habitation. Instead of form or structure determining function, we can take function as determining form. In this case, the soul comes first and the body is constructed by it. This is really the Buddhist conception of transmigration.

Buddhist philosophy considers *trīṣṇā* or *tanhā*, or "thirst," the first principle of making things come into existence. In the beginning there is *trīṣṇā*. It wills to have a form in order to express itself, which means to assert itself. In other words, when it asserts itself it takes form. As *trīṣṇā* is inexhaustible, the forms it takes are infinitely varied. *Trīṣṇā* wants to see and we have eyes; it wants to hear and we have ears; it wants to jump and we have the deer, the rabbit, and other animals of this order; it wants to fly and we have birds of all kinds; it wants to swim and we have fish wherever there are waters; it wants to bloom and we have flowers; it wants to shine and we have stars; it wants to have a realm of heavenly bodies and we have astronomy; and so on. *Trīṣṇā* is the creator of the universe.

Being the creator, *trīṣṇā* is the principle of individuation. It creates a world of infinite diversities. It will never exhaust itself. We as its highest and richest expression can

have an insight into the nature of *trīṣṇā* and its working. When we really see into ourselves, *trīṣṇā* will bare itself before itself in us. As it is not an individualized object, self-inspection is the only way to approach it and make it reveal all its secrets. And when we know them, perhaps we may also understand what transmigration really means.

When we see the lilies of the field and observe that they are more gloriously arrayed than Solomon in his day, is this not because in our *trīṣṇā* there is something participating in the *trīṣṇā* of the flower? Otherwise, we could never appreciate them. When we follow the fowls of the air and think of their being utterly free from care or worry, is this not because the pulse of our *trīṣṇā* beats in unison with the *trīṣṇā* of the fowls? If this were not the case, how could we ever come to the understanding of those creatures? Even when Nature is regarded as hostile, there must be something in it which calls out this feeling in us-which is to say, Nature partakes of (human) *trīṣṇā*.

The atom may be considered nothing but a cluster of electrically charged particles and having nothing in common with human *trīṣṇā*. But does it not respond to the appliances contrived by human minds and human hands? And is it not because of this response that we can read into the nature of the atom and even devise a weapon most destructive to us human beings? The atom certainly has its *trīṣṇā*, and it is this *trīṣṇā* that enables man to express it in a mathematical formula.

VIII

When I was discussing this subject the other day, one of the great thinkers now in America remarked, "Does this mean that there are in our consciousness all these *trīṣṇā* as its constituent elements?" This is perhaps the way most of our readers would like to interpret my presentation of *trīṣṇā* when I make it the basis of mutual understanding, as it were, between ourselves and Nature generally. But I must say that that is not the way I conceive *trīṣṇā*. *Trīṣṇā* lies in us not as one of the factors constituting our consciousness, but it is our being itself. It is I; it is you; it is the cat; it is the tree; it is the rock; it is the snow; it is the atom.

IX

Some may like to compare *trīṣṇā* with Schopenhauer's Will to live, but my idea of *trīṣṇā* is deeper than his Will. For the Will as he conceives it is already differentiated as the Will striving to live against death, against destruction. The Will implies a dualism. But *trīṣṇā* remains still dormant, as it were, as in the mind of God, for God has not yet moved to his work of creation. This moving is *trīṣṇā*. It is *trīṣṇā* that moves. It is *trīṣṇā* that made God give out his fiat, Let there be

light." *Ṛiṣṇā* is what lies at the back of Schopenhauer's Will. *Ṛiṣṇā* is a more fundamental conception than the Will.

For Schopenhauer, the Will is blind; but *Ṛiṣṇā* is neither blind nor not blind, for neither of them can yet be predicated of *Ṛiṣṇā*. *Ṛiṣṇā* is not yet a what. It can be called the pure will. In early Buddhism, *Ṛiṣṇā* forms one of the links in the chain of "Dependent Origination," and it is demanded of us to get rid of it in order that we may be freed from grief and fear. But early Buddhists were not logical enough to push the idea of *Ṛiṣṇā* far enough to its very source. Their effort to deliver themselves from *Ṛiṣṇā*'s so-called leading to grief, fear, and so on, was also the working of *Ṛiṣṇā* itself. As long as we are human beings, we can never do away with *Ṛiṣṇā*, or, as they say, destroy it. The destruction of *Ṛiṣṇā* will surely mean the annihilation of ourselves, leaving no one who will be the enjoyer of the outcome. *Ṛiṣṇā* is indeed the basis of all existence. *Ṛiṣṇā* is existence. *Ṛiṣṇā* is even before existence.

Later Buddhists realized this truth and made *Ṛiṣṇā* the foundation of their new system of teaching with its doctrines of the Bodhisattva, universal salvation, Amitābha's "vow" (*praṇidhāna*), the *pariṇāmanā* ("turning over of merit"), and so on. These are all the outgrowth of *Ṛiṣṇā*. When a Zen master was asked, "How could one get away with *Ṛiṣṇā*?" he answered, "What is the use of getting away with it?" He further said, "Buddha is Buddha because of it," or, "Buddha is *Ṛiṣṇā*." In fact, the whole life of *Śākyamuni* illustrates this.

X

Coming back to the transmigration phase of the *Ṛiṣṇā* doctrine, I should like to assert again that this *Ṛiṣṇā* as it expresses itself is essentially the same in any form it may take. (We cannot think of it in any other way.) The human *Ṛiṣṇā* as we feel it inwardly must be that of the cat, or the dog, or the crow, or the snake. When a cat runs after a rat, when a snake devours a frog, when a dog jumps up furiously barking at a squirrel in the tree, when a pig goes around groveling in the mud, when the fish swims about contentedly in the pond, when the waves rage angrily on a stormy ocean, do we not feel here our own *Ṛiṣṇā* expressing some of its infinitely variable modes? The stars are shining brightly, wistfully twinkling in a clear autumnal night; the lotus flowers bloom in the early summer morning even before the sun rises; when the spring comes, all the dead trees vie with one another to shoot out their fresh green leaves, waking up from a long winter sleep-do we not see here also some of our human *Ṛiṣṇā* asserting itself?

I do not know whether ultimate reality is one or two or three or many more, but I feel that one *Ṛiṣṇā*, infinitely diversified and diversifiable, expresses itself making up this world of ours. As *Ṛiṣṇā* is subject to infinite diversifications, it can take infinitely

variable forms. It is *trīṣṇā*, therefore, that determines form and structure. This is what is given to our consciousness, and our consciousness is the last word, we cannot go any further.

Viewing the idea of transmigration from this standpoint, is it not interesting to realize that we are practicing this transmigration in every moment of our lives, instead of going through it after death and waiting for many a Kalpa to elapse?

I do not know whether transmigration can be proved or maintained on the scientific level, but I know that it is an inspiring theory and full of poetic suggestions, and I am satisfied with this interpretation and do not seem to have any desire to go beyond it. To me, the idea of transmigration has a personal appeal, and as to its scientific and philosophical implications, I leave it to the study of the reader.

XI

It may not be amiss here to add a word regarding the difference of attitude between the earlier and the later Buddhists toward the doctrine of transmigration and *trīṣṇā*. As we have already seen, the earlier Buddhist treatment of the subject is always negative, for it tends to emphasize the aspect of liberation or emancipation. The later Buddhists, however, have turned against this and strongly insist on *trīṣṇā* as being most fundamental and primary and needed for the general welfare not only of mankind but of all other beings making up the entire world. They would declare that *trīṣṇā* works in the wrong way when it chooses bad associates; that is, when it combines itself with the relative or psychological self, relying on the latter as the ultimate reality and as the controlling principle of life. *Trīṣṇā* then turns into the most ungovernable and insatiable upholder of power. What the earlier Buddhists wanted to conquer was this kind of *trīṣṇā*, swerved from its primal nature and becoming the thrall of egotistic impulses. Indeed, they wished, instead of conquering it, to escape from this state of thralldom. This made them negativists and escapists.

The later Buddhists realized that *trīṣṇā* was what constituted human nature--in fact, everything and anything that at all comes into existence--and that to deny *trīṣṇā* was committing suicide; to escape from *trīṣṇā* was the height of contradiction or a deed of absolute impossibility; and that the very thing that makes us wish to deny or to escape from *trīṣṇā* was *trīṣṇā* itself. Therefore, all that we could do for ourselves, or rather all that *trīṣṇā* could do for itself, was to make it turn to itself, to purify itself from all its encumbrances and defilements, by means of transcendental knowledge (*prajñā*). The later Buddhists then let *trīṣṇā* work on in its own way without being impeded by anything else. *Trīṣṇā* or "thirst" or "craving" then comes to be known as *mahākaruṇā*, or "absolute compassion," which they consider the essence of Buddhahood.