



A Difficult Pill: The Problem with Stephen Batchelor and Buddhism's New Rationalists

142
COMMENTS

13. Oct, 2010 by [Dennis Hunter](#)

Karma is a difficult pill to swallow for many Western students of Buddhism. So, too, is rebirth. And, practically speaking, these two pills are inseparable. It's hard to see how you can take one without taking

the other—at least not without getting undesirable side effects. Both of these metaphysical pills are so difficult to reconcile with our modern, materialistic and scientific way of thinking that a growing number of European and American Buddhists are calling for them to be cast aside altogether.

Stephen Batchelor is perhaps the most outspoken of these critics. He has carved out a niche for himself in the realm of Buddhist teachers: a former monk in both the Tibetan and Zen traditions, translator of Buddhist scriptures and author of numerous acclaimed books, he is a seasoned Buddhist practitioner, an authority on what the Buddha taught—and yet he also carries the torch of a scientifically-minded skeptic who is waging a campaign to do away with Buddhism's superstitions and false idols. Something of a difficult pill himself, he has become the *de facto* spokesperson for Buddhists who style themselves as the new rationalists—in much the same way as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins became the poster children for the new atheists who are waging intellectual war upon the evils and superstitions of religion in general.

Enemy number one, for Batchelor, is what he perceives as an unquestioning acceptance, among many Buddhists, of the doctrine of rebirth. In the period between his celebrated 1997 book *Buddhism without Beliefs* and his 2010 *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, Batchelor has arguably morphed from skeptical agnostic on the question of rebirth to outright denier.

Vince Horn of Buddhist Geeks [recently interviewed](#) Batchelor, followed a few weeks later by an interview with Dr. Charles Tart. The two interviews were like point and counterpoint on rebirth and other metaphysical questions. Tart is a scientist who has devoted his 50-year career to investigating a variety of 'paranormal' phenomena typically dismissed as superstition by mainstream science. Tart's interview, [An Evidence-Based Spirituality for the 21st Century](#), called for balanced and objective scientific exploration of "fringe" topics like rebirth. Tart encouraged listeners to adopt a truly scientific approach to such things, rather than a doctrinaire, "scientistic" view that nervously brushes away ideas that don't fit comfortably into the framework of current understanding.

This echoes many of the same themes discussed in Tart's 2009 book *The End of Materialism*, which attempts to make a scientific case for believing in 'paranormal' phenomena that defy a purely material explanation. Tart argues that because science today has become corrupted by the predominant materialistic ideology, any evidence that suggests a non-material, spiritual dimension to life is dismissed without due investigation. Essential science, he says, has devolved into "scientism, a materialistic and arrogantly expressed philosophy of life that pretends to be the same as essential science but isn't." In this atmosphere of dogmatic scientism, says Tart, "genuine skepticism, an honest search for better truths, turns into *pseudoskepticism*, or debunking." It is not difficult to see how this ethos frequently defines the approach of the new rationalists.

Scientism and its materialistic rejection of the spiritual dimension of life, says Tart, has



DENNIS HUNTER

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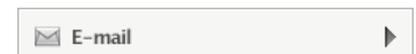
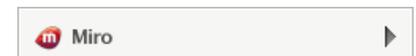
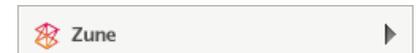
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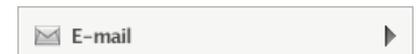
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damaged contemporary society so deeply that many ordinary people today have responded to its arrogance by adopting an anti-scientific, anti-intellectual position. This may explain why we see creationists clinging to the absurd belief that the earth is less than 7,000 years old; a creationist museum in Arkansas even proposes the fiction that human beings once rode dinosaurs like horses.

Buddhism's new rationalists argue that ancient doctrines like karma and rebirth are in the same league as those creationist myths, and that the time has come for a more scientific and secular approach to Buddhist practice. In his *Confession*, Batchelor goes so far as to doubt that the historical Buddha himself ever seriously taught rebirth. To support such an outlandish theory, he engages in hermeneutical gymnastics and a selective reading of textual sources—but, intriguing as it may be, it's difficult to take such an assertion very seriously in light of the mountains of other sources that Batchelor ignores in order to make his point.

In a candid exchange of comments that followed Tart's [interview](#) at Buddhist Geeks, Batchelor summarized his position on rebirth concisely:

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I am not interested in whether or not one is reborn. I find the whole issue irrelevant, an unnecessary distraction from what is central to the Dhamma: how to live a good life here and now. If there is rebirth and a law of karma, then this would surely be the best way to prepare for a future life. But if there is not, then one has lived optimally here and now. Moreover, this very point is explicitly made by the Buddha himself in the Kalama Sutta.

Batchelor's point here is well-taken—though, oddly, for someone who claims not to be interested in the question of rebirth, he does spend a great deal of time trying to undermine the idea and convince others not to believe in it. But his main argument is a sound one, and important: dwelling too much on metaphysical speculations can pull our attention away from what is really germane to the path of awakening. We can become lost in mystical and philosophical rabbit-holes, losing sight of the whole purpose of the spiritual path. We can, moreover, fall easily into blind, unquestioning belief—something that happens all too frequently in every religion, including Buddhism. This may be why the Buddha, in some cases, refused to answer certain thorny existential and metaphysical questions: he viewed our tendency to get hung up on such questions as a waste of time.

That the Buddha *did* teach extensively about rebirth and its relation to karma is an inconvenient truth that new rationalists explain away with a bit of cultural relativism: the Buddha, they say, taught on rebirth only because it was a commonly accepted idea in India at that time. From that, it naturally follows that since we now have the benefit of a more evolved, scientific worldview today in the West—a worldview whose materialist assumptions are at odds with superstitious ideas like rebirth—the time has come for us to dispense with this “unnecessary distraction” from the Buddha's real intent.

The problem with revisionist interpretations of spiritual traditions is self-evident. As David Loy wrote in a [recent review](#) of Batchelor's *Confession* in *Tricycle* magazine:

“

Almost every religious reformer tries to return to the original teachings of the founder, only to end up projecting his or her own understanding back onto those origins. Batchelor's Buddha too seems too modern: humanistic and agnostic, skeptical and empirical—by no coincidence, a superior version of us, or at least of Stephen Batchelor.

There is admittedly, in what Batchelor is doing, something noble and admirable. He is providing a valuable service to the Buddhist community by asking us to set aside centuries of enshrined orthodoxy and cultural bias and our own unquestioned assumptions and beliefs and wishful thinking, and to look at what we are doing on the Buddhist spiritual path with fresh, more practical eyes. To this end, his stance echoes the Buddha's instruction in the *Kalama Sutta* (which Batchelor uses as a colophon in the first part of *Buddhism without Beliefs*): do not accept any idea or belief simply because

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it is commonly accepted or handed down in the tradition, or because it's written in holy texts, or because someone you venerate stated it to be so. Instead, the Buddha advised followers to use their own *prajna* or discriminating wisdom to see what really makes sense and accords with reason and leads to happiness, and only then to accept it.

From a certain point of view, Batchelor's teachings are a skillful means to address a particular psychographic segment of Buddhist practitioners: those grounded in Western, rationalist philosophy and empirical science, whose natural inclination is towards a materialist explanation of phenomena. Students belonging to this psychographic are riding high on the hog these days, with advances in neuroscience now providing a material basis for studying the effects of meditation and other "spiritual" practices in a laboratory setting. To such ears, Batchelor's spirited war cry against the foul and outdated superstition of rebirth must come as a clarion call.

And yet....

There is also, in what Batchelor is doing, a seeming fixity of opinion that weakens his arguments. He seems bizarrely convinced that two-and-a-half millennia of realized Buddhist practitioners have been deceiving and distracting themselves with the red herring of rebirth, and that anyone who has recourse to logic and reason in these matters must draw the same skeptical conclusions as he does. In a [scathing review](#) of Batchelor's work in *Mandala* magazine, B. Alan Wallace wrote: "Although Batchelor declared himself to be an agnostic, [his] proclamations about the true teachings of the Buddha and about the nature of the human mind, the universe, and ultimate reality all suggest that he has assumed for himself the role of a gnostic of the highest order. Rather than presenting Buddhism without beliefs, his version is saturated with his own beliefs, many of them based upon nothing more than his own imagination."

Batchelor's earlier "agnostic" stance, to a limited extent, echoed the classical Zen view on the big questions: we can't really answer them, so talking about them is a waste of time. No denial, but also no confirmation. But Batchelor's shift in more recent years from self-described "agnostic" to self-described "atheist" on Buddhism's metaphysical questions suggests an evolution from open-minded skeptic to professional Doubting Thomas—or, in Tart's language, from skeptic to pseudoskeptic.

Throughout the decades of practice and study he relates in his autobiographical *Confession*, writes the About.com blogger Barbara O'Brien, "Batchelor's understanding of dharma remained anchored to cognitive knowledge and intellectual concepts, as it seems to do to this day. Whatever doesn't make intellectual sense to him, he rejects. And all too often, there goes the baby." O'Brien says that, in a nutshell, "Batchelor strongly implies that Buddhism was just fine until the historical Buddha died, at which time ignorant and superstitious Asians got hold of it and mucked it up. But never fear; now rational and enlightened westerners are riding to the rescue, and they will lift it out of the muck and make it all sparkly and fat-free."

If Batchelor has an ax to grind against orthodox Buddhist views on rebirth, one is left wondering why he does not wield the same ax on the orthodoxy of mainstream Western science and the materialistic ideology that attempts to explain consciousness and suffering—and transcendence or nirvana, if science can conceive of such a thing—purely in terms of brain function: electrochemical events occurring in a blob of animated protein twirling, purely by accident, through an insentient void. In *Buddhism without Beliefs*, Batchelor explicitly endorsed the view that consciousness can be explained "in terms of brain function," prompting Bhikku Punnadhammo, in a [critique](#) posted by Batchelor on his own web site, to respond: "Let's be clear about this. Consciousness has not at all been explained 'in terms of brain function' by modern science or by anyone else. It is entirely a metaphysical assumption that it ever can be, an act of faith of the most credulous sort that Mr. Batchelor should be the first to denounce. There is not a shred of a proof of this claim anywhere, only a pious belief in some quarters that such a proof will shortly be forthcoming."

In his comments on Tart's Buddhist Geeks interview, Batchelor turned the ax not only on rebirth, but also on karma and the traditional idea that karma plays a causal role in rebirth:

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It may be turn out to be the case that rebirth is a matter of chance and has no bearing at all on the quality of your acts in a former life or former lives.

The example Charles Tart gives of the tiny percentage of young kids on the Virginia database who might be considered as formerly wise or saintly people points in this direction. If this turns out to be so, then it would be extremely problematic for traditional Buddhists. For rebirth, in this case, would no longer have any relevance at all in terms of moral acts and their consequences.

In Western philosophical terms, Batchelor's point here suffers from the fallacy of *misplaced concreteness*. The implication is that, if rebirth were real, we could expect to observe a direct correlation between how one lived in a previous life or lives (as, for example, recalled by thousands of children in cases analyzed by Dr. Ian Stevenson at the University of Virginia) and the resultant circumstances of the child's current life. Assuming that karma holds true, if the child had been a wise or saintly person in a recalled previous life then he should be enjoying a happy human life now, and if he had been a scoundrel then he should have come back as, say, a cockroach or a poodle. That there often does not seem to be such a direct correlation—echoing the eternal mystery of why bad things happen to good people and vice versa—is a commonly heard objection to the Buddhist ideas of karma and rebirth.

Not even the Buddha ever suggested that one could find such a simplistic, tit-for-tat relationship between karmic causes and effects. However, because the Western, analytic mind thinks in linear terms, it wants to concretize karma and rebirth as a series of events each of which is conditioned by the one adjacent to it, like a row of dominoes falling one into the next. Thus there is a tendency, which Batchelor demonstrates here, to look for a direct, linear connection—as if karma and the cycle of rebirth described by the Buddha followed the laws of Newtonian physics.

But perhaps karma is less a Newtonian game and more like biologist Rupert Sheldrake's "morphic field" theory—an amorphous, energetic, living continuum that is in constant flux but has a kind of inherent memory and continuity. The morphic field of karma, influencing and influenced by everything we do, can give rise to any conceivable expression of the energies contained within it; but to presuppose that its expressions must follow a linear and orderly sequence is like asking Jackson Pollock to follow a paint-by-numbers scheme.

Despite an abiding sense of his being hell-bent on debunking the doctrine of rebirth, there is—it's worth saying again—something noble in what Batchelor is doing. And something courageous, and maybe even lovable: one has to admire his doggedness, his unflinching determination to break with orthodoxy and put forth a new vision of the Buddhist path that dispenses with sacred cows. Batchelor unflinchingly strips down Buddhist practice to what he sees as its most utilitarian components and illuminates a way to peace that is free from religious dogma.

And in all fairness, Buddhists have set themselves up for a rationalist assault like Batchelor's. Particularly in the realm of Tibetan Buddhism—the most shamanistic of the Buddhist traditions, where the doctrine of rebirth is enshrined as a political institution and as the primary basis of Buddhist lineage transmission, and the tradition in which Batchelor himself started out – one finds many practitioners today who often indulge in a high degree of superstition and magical thinking. Granted, Tibetan Buddhism abounds with anecdotal evidence that 'miraculous' and 'paranormal' things do occur, particularly in the presence of highly realized beings. Many students have personally experienced things that they find difficult to explain in materialistic terms. These kinds of experiences constitute the territory that Charles Tart has been exploring scientifically for 50 years, and the abundant data produced in his research has convinced him that such things are possible. It is also the same territory Batchelor sets out to debunk in the very first chapter of his *Confession*. He relates an incident he witnessed during his days as a Tibetan Buddhist monk, when a venerable lama was alleged to have averted a rainstorm through a display of Tantric magic. Batchelor at first fell in line with his colleagues in building up an awed story about the incident and reinforcing the belief that something magical had occurred that day, but over time he came to realize he was lying—trying to convince himself and others of something he didn't really believe.

To his credit, Batchelor makes another good point here. Belief in the mystical is like perfume: if people wear it at all, they tend to lose their sensitivity and they end up marinating in it, clueless to how much they reek. When students get carried away with

mystical ideas and put too much blind faith in titillating legends of Buddhist masters flying and walking through walls and being born through immaculate conception on a lotus flower in the middle of a lake, they are sometimes confusing history with hagiography – doing much the same thing fundamentalist Christians do when they interpret the Biblical creation story too literally. By getting caught up in such flashy distractions, students can lose sight of what should really come first on the Buddhist path: self-transformation and cessation of suffering, which is not a mystical process but a very gritty and practical one. It is hard work that brings no applause—a lot less glamorous than dissolving in a puff of smoke and a display of rainbow light, leaving behind only your hair and fingernails and a retinue of awed disciples. Many students who spend their time daydreaming about mystical experiences might be better off following Batchelor's back-to-basics regimen focusing on the four ennobling truths. Rather than trying to become a mahasiddha or sprouting a thousand arms, you might accomplish more in terms of mind transformation and benefiting self and others by practicing what Batchelor calls "Buddhism for This One and Only Life," the title of an online program he recently led for Tricycle.

Still, at the end of the day, the problem with Batchelor's war on karma and rebirth is simply that he is at war. He has set up his camp squarely on the other side of the doctrinal battlefield, and launched his crusade from a place of conviction in the rightness of his view. Robert Bellah once said of Richard Dawkins, "It is the strength of Dawkins's conviction rather than his argument that is striking." The same might be said of Batchelor. That he has the modern, rational, scientific mindset on his side of the battlefield gives him a wealth of ammunition and a sense of being on the right side of history. What seems to be missing is a basic acknowledgment that his doctrinal position is just that: another doctrine. Although he has bandied about the word "agnostic" and said he is open to being proven wrong with sufficient scientific evidence, until that day comes, Batchelor is, if only by default, saddled with carrying the banner of the doctrine proclaiming that rebirth probably doesn't exist.

"We have such an extraordinary paucity of any hard evidence that people have ever been reborn," Batchelor said in his Buddhist Geeks interview. And, of course, he is right about that. Precious little is being done in the way of legitimate scientific research to explore the question of rebirth, and the work that is being done is dwarfed by the mountain of studies presupposing that mind is purely a material function of the brain. Rebirth, in fact, is so far out on the fringe of acceptable topics of scientific research that it may be perceived as something of a career-killer. But it is one thing to acknowledge a "paucity" of scientific evidence in rebirth and quite another to be on a campaign to debunk it as outdated superstition.

In *Buddhism without Beliefs* Batchelor re-envisioned dharma practice from an agnostic point of view. "An agnostic Buddhist," he wrote, "eschews atheism as much as theism, and is as reluctant to regard the universe as devoid of meaning as endowed with meaning. For to deny either God or meaning is simply the antithesis of affirming them." He even quoted the axiom of T.H. Huxley, who first coined the term "agnosticism" in 1869: "Do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable." But isn't that precisely what Batchelor himself is now doing? In noting his shift in recent years from "Buddhist agnostic" to "Buddhist atheist," one cannot help but wonder if he has slipped onto the wrong side of Huxley's axiom. What happened to eschewing atheism as much as theism?

Batchelor and the new rationalists are, in some ways, doing all Buddhists a favor by boldly questioning traditional doctrines. Many practitioners struggle with these issues, and they cannot simply be swept under the rug: in the spirit of genuine scientific inquiry, they should be discussed openly, and with no foregone conclusions on either side. But there is also good reason to feel ill-at-ease about the agenda behind this movement. It's hard to escape the feeling that the whole movement is founded upon the prevailing materialist assumptions of Western scientism ("mind = brain function, nothing more"), and fueled by a wish to dismiss rebirth and karma in order to bolster the illusion of intellectual certainty and further reinforce that doctrine. One can dress up this kind of reductionist philosophy and call it "agnosticism" but—as they say in the advertising industry—that's just putting lipstick on a pig.

"One of the problems we human beings have is that when we have certain beliefs, we usually won't bother to look at any evidence that might contradict them, and that keeps our beliefs very strong, but keeps our knowledge less than it should be," says Charles Tart. "Understand clearly that I am not opposed to anyone having a completely

materialist philosophy of life, as long as they admit that it's a philosophy, a belief system." From that perspective, to continue calling Batchelor's atheist agenda "Buddhism without beliefs" seems disingenuous. You can either be agnostic or you can be atheist, but you can't be both.

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John Abbott · 3 weeks ago

+12

Stephen Batchelors position on this seems eminently sensible. There is not a shred of evidence for rebirth.

[Reply](#) ▶ [5 replies](#) · active 3 weeks ago



Greg · 3 weeks ago

-1

My biggest problem with Batchelor is what Wallace says - he tries to pass off "What Stephen Batchelor wishes the Buddha had taught" as "What the Buddha Really Taught" in a way that is downright dishonest and misleading to people who are not well-informed enough to know better.

[Reply](#) ▶ [1 reply](#) · active 3 weeks ago



Patrick · 3 weeks ago

-3

@ John Abbott

You obviously missed this podcast (goo.gl/qYQg) and the comments that succeed it, which detail a fair amount of evidence for reincarnation.

[Reply](#)



waywuwei [38p](#) · 3 weeks ago

+7

Of course the question must be asked: How can something which is neither phenomenal nor non-phenomenal, that which is the subject of all objectification but which itself cannot be objectified, which can't be said to be born, be re-born?

[Reply](#) ▶ [13 replies](#) · active 3 weeks ago



Mettauk · 3 weeks ago

+4

Did Buddha not teach us to question and check things out for ourselves, rather than blind belief!

[Reply](#) ▶ [1 reply](#) · active 104925 weeks ago



VinceHorn [36p](#) · 3 weeks ago

+4

I find it striking Dennis that you connect the "paucity of any evidence of rebirth" with the observation that evidence isn't forthcoming because there is very little research being done in the area. And why is there so little research being done? Because there is an automatic assumption among mainstream, rationalist, materialists that there is no such thing to begin with. Why research something that flies in the face of our doctrine? Of course, then it becomes a self-fulfilling & self-reinforcing position. Rebirth isn't real therefore lets not do research. There is no research to support rebirth, therefore it isn't real, and so on.

The problem with this approach, as Tart so brilliantly points out, is that it isn't truly a scientific approach. It doesn't examine its own assumptions, to the point where it can be proven wrong. If it can't even be willing to prove itself wrong, how can it possibly add anything to the discussion, or using it's own powerful methods, show that the traditional beliefs on rebirth and karma may also be wrong. If what Batchelor really wants to do is overturn these traditional dogmas (and frankly I see a ton of dogma in those positions myself), then he's going about it in the totally wrong way. Fighting dogma with dogma will

overturn nothing.

Reply ▶ 1 reply · active 3 weeks ago

 alan · 3 weeks ago

+7  

I'm absolutely baffled by the idea that 'proof' of karma and rebirth is a matter of objective scientific investigation and consensus (which has nothing to do with scientific truth by the way), and should academia accept it as true then the debate would be settled.

I have personal, direct experience of past lives and how the karma from a specific life has played out and been personally relevant in this one. Does that sound too kooky or New Age? Must I be deluding myself? This knowledge I won through hard, dedicated daily practice. As Buddhists, should we be approaching our practice from the default position of absolute doubt? Should our practice be secondary to academic consensus?

If you haven't had any experience of the reality of rebirth and the effects of karma, don't believe me or anyone else; if you sit some more and sit well, maybe you will discover if it is true for yourself. Isn't that the crux of Buddhism?!

Reply ▶ 4 replies · active 2 weeks ago

 acutia (26p) · 3 weeks ago

+12  

On my first quick reading, this post is detailed and reasonably comprehensive but often resorts to excessive critiques of Batchelor's speculated intentions while inadequately assessing his substantive argument with spurious tags such as "atheist", "materialist" and "rationalist", as if these intellectual associations are somehow killer blows to his position.

Reply ▶ 4 replies · active 3 weeks ago

Thaibebop · 3 weeks ago

+5  

Batchelors view is nothing new. Many Theravadan thinkers have touched upon these same issues, Buddhadasa being one of the them. Theravada is not well know in the west and therefore is not fully incorporated into discussions of this nature. It seems to me that what Batchelor is doing is carry on a debate between the two branches of Buddhism.

Reply ▶ 1 reply · active 3 weeks ago

Steve · 3 weeks ago

+10  

The burden of proof is on the people claiming that reincarnation has real, physical effects in the world. If believers in reincarnation could offer a single testable prediction, I'm fairly certain that the scientific community would fall over themselves to test it.

The problem is that, as they say, extraordinary claim require extraordinary evidence. With past-life regressions it's hard to discount the possibility that the person is simply very good at imagining themselves in different circumstances, as any good historical novelist would be.

There are theories about quantum X (fields, communication,consciousness, you name it), but the problem isn't that science won't test it, it's that science CAN'T test it. What is it that reincarnates? If this thing isn't physical, how does it interact with the physical brain? These are preliminary questions that have be answered before reincarnation can even be considered. At the moment there's simply no way to examine them further until the instrumentation catches up with the theories. The moment someone invents a "quantum MRI" or what have you, I'm sure questions about the soul will be at the top of the list of research topics.

Reply ▶ 3 replies · active 3 weeks ago

 @DhammaMetta · 3 weeks ago

+5  

It might be helpful to bear in mind what karma and rebirth refer to. Karma is volitional action, here and now, and the exact workings of the effects of karma are among the imponderables. Rebirth is the continuation of constantly waxing and waning phenomena. It's easy to get distracted by questions such as, what is reborn, what was I in the past, what will I be in the future? The underlying issue is a fixation with theories of self.

Here are a few thoughts about the Batchelor interview:

<http://morningstardhamma.blogspot.com/2010/06/ste...>

With best wishes.

Reply

 rjbullock 14p · 3 weeks ago

-3  

My issue with Batchelor is that he seems to be saying that Buddhism is simply a matter of having a "realistic" view of life and reality. Worse, he seems to confuse philosophy - which can be endlessly debated - with actual spiritual realization, which is a direct personal experience and as such not open to debate.

Reply ▶ 2 replies · active 3 weeks ago



John Abbott · 3 weeks ago

+9

The historical Christ was a Jew just as the historical 'Buddha' was raised as a Hindu. Christianity and Buddhism developed in specific historical contexts and, just as many churches here in the England were built on sacred pagan sites, surely new systems of thought have to develop from what existed and was accepted previously. Maybe the Buddha also believed the earth was flat...it doesn't make it so.

The Buddha was not a god he was a man; surely the test of our Buddhism is not what we believe but how we live. If we insist that Buddhists are vegetarian pacifists who believe in reincarnation we will surely be shutting out the rational, mainstream non religious world.

Reply ▶ 3 replies · active 3 weeks ago



Brianna 44p · 3 weeks ago

+15

I am not going to claim to be an all knowing Buddhist or that I completely grasp and understand the whole of the Dharma. I simply feel that none of it matters. Rebirth, Karma, Heaven or Hell...it is all just concepts or ideas...It may be true...it may not be true.

The point, to me anyway, isn't about things that could possibly be but the life we live now. I can't change what happens after I die but I can change my today. I am just not all that interested in what happens after death...I will find out when I die. I am interested in what I can do now.

Reply ▶ 6 replies · active 3 weeks ago



David McCarthy · 3 weeks ago

-1

I think we need to distinguish between believing in karma and reincarnation and understanding it. When I got into Dharma 30 years ago, I didn't particularly believe in rebirth, and no one expected me to. That's not the nature of Buddhism. It is axiomatic that we don't just take things on faith. But coming to an understanding of Dharma through investigation and practice is really the possibility. At some point my teacher did an in-depth explanation of interdependent origination and the whole thing started to make some sense. Later, I was asked to teach a study group on interdependent origination, and that REALLY forced me to contemplate the subject.

My issue with Batchelor is not that he questions the Dharma . . . we have not only a right, but an obligation to do so. My issue is that he is quite frankly misleading people by promoting himself as an expert without having done adequate analysis of the subject. By the way, one of the several definitive definitions of ignorance that is given in Dharma is to deny cause and effect. A scientific thinker would scarcely deny cause and effect, but what is taught concerning karma and rebirth in Buddhism is merely cause and effect at the subtle level.

Reply



mgindin 10p · 3 weeks ago

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Excellent article with many good points. To John Abbott and others who believe that karma and rebirth were part of an accepted cultural background the Buddha just accepted- nothing could be further from the truth. Please read more academic scholarship on the context of the Buddha's teachings. Hinduism post-dates the Buddha, and karma and rebirth were actually introduced into it by the Buddha and others in the shramana (forest contemplative) movement. The Buddha and others, including Mahavira (the founder of Jainism in its current form) taught that karma and rebirth were true based on their meditative experiences. They did this in explicit contrast to others who denied rebirth and/or karma. Mainstream Brahmanism at the time did not have a fully developed doctrine of reincarnation or karma yet, and the evidence is that these doctrines, like the doctrine of non-violence (ahimsa) did not penetrate Brahmanism fully, becoming part of Orthodox Hinduism, until centuries after the Buddha died. But don't trust me, read the up to date current academic literature written in the last ten years or so.

Reply ▶ 9 replies · active 1 week ago



integralhack 61p · 3 weeks ago

+17

I don't really understand the indignation in the commentators' responses to Batchelor. To me he seems very forthcoming (per the last BuddhistGeeks interview):

"So in the new book when I use the word atheist, I am in a way moving beyond an agnostic position. I am saying that, OK, deep down I do not know whether there is, let's say reincarnation, but to the extent to which I can say anything, to the extent to which we understand, now-a-days, the human body, the nervous system, the brain, the way the organism operates within the context of its environment, the fact that we have such an extraordinary paucity of any hard evidence that people have ever been reborn, let alone live to tell the tale, then I think it's extremely unlikely that rebirth is going to happen. So unlikely, in fact, that it's probably quite a good idea just to put that idea just out of circulation all together. In other words to say, 'Frankly, I don't believe there is rebirth.' Notice I've used the word believe. I don't believe—I am not saying I don't know, but I don't believe there is rebirth."

This is an intellectually honest position and if rebirth is real, presumably Batchelor's position won't prevent you from realizing it in your own practice.

Thich Nhat Hanh has made the point that the Buddhist concept of Dependent Co-arising (which implies rebirth) isn't to tell "how things are" (such setting up a metaphysical belief system for rebirth) but to promote understanding of interbeing. Positing rebirth as "real" probably won't make you a better Buddhist, but it seems that realizing this sense of interconnection and resulting compassion will benefit your Dharma practice.

Reply ▶ 1 reply · active 3 weeks ago



Mitsu · 3 weeks ago

+10  

I have been a serious practitioner for over 25 years, and I have also witnessed such a large quantity of "paranormal" phenomena (the word itself is rather silly, as if the phenomena are related to a real aspect of reality, they're not "paranormal", they're normal. They're just "paraconventional", if anything), to the point where I am quite convinced there is something unusual going on which connects people and beings across time and space. However, I also have almost never had to reference the doctrine of rebirth in any serious, practical way in my own practice, it simply doesn't arise as an issue with much pragmatic, explanatory, or practice-oriented significance, for me. My own teacher (who is an American authorized to teach in the Nyingma lineage) downplays the significance of it, and he has said at least one of his own Tibetan teachers was of the opinion the reincarnation wasn't something worth putting any attention on. Buddhism, for me, is a system of practice which ought to be about direct investigation, not about "belief" - -- and frankly the question of rebirth to my mind has almost no practical impact on practice whatsoever. It is a mostly empty metaphysical exercise, in my opinion, for people interested more in building models of the world (which is an entertaining exercise and perhaps worthwhile, but to me beside the main point). As the historical Buddha is purported to have said, concerning yourself with what happens after you die or what the origin of the universe is really has no relevance to the main issues of suffering and liberation.

As for the evidence regarding reincarnation --- how can we really evaluate this? While I think there's certainly reason to think certain "paranormal" phenomena are possible (again, that's based on my own personal investigation), which would make it possible, I think, for people to perhaps connect with memories of events that occurred in the lives of people now dead, the same mechanism can account for being able to become aware of the experiences of people currently alive who are far away, etc. (I have many stories from my own experience as well as people I respect and trust along these lines). Am I "reincarnating" someone who is already alive, if I become aware of something they are thinking or feeling?

That is to say, even if "paraconventional" phenomena are real, that's not any particular reason to buy the traditional account of reincarnation. Even the masters who lived in the past who might have taught various things based on some experience may have been teaching something that wasn't entirely justified from what evidence that had available to them. I don't see any reason why we ought to really care that much whether this or that traditional story is true or not... Buddhism isn't about believing in doctrines after all, it is a treasure trove of helpful teachings which all of us can explore on our own.

I do think Batchelor goes too far in his "certainty" --- though he has referenced, positively, some of the documentary evidence for reincarnation, so his mind is not as closed as this article seems to imply. And I do think that "paraconventional" phenomena (setting aside the theoretical doctrine of rebirth) do have practice significance, and can in fact be important in the development of a practitioner, whether they are related to something real or are simply aspects of tapping into unconscious powers of intuition. Whatever the explanation for any of these things I don't think it is helpful or appropriate to get into arguments about doctrines --- let's talk about actual things we can investigate ourselves, now.

Reply ▶ 1 reply · active 104925 weeks ago



julian walker · 3 weeks ago

+13  

oh dear. :) ah yes the soothing and existentially defensive "intellectual certainty" that death (for us as for every other organism) is death - as opposed to a brave, resilient, and supposedly "uncertain" unevidenced and unreasonable faith that consciousness can survive biological death, be transmigrated into a new body and continue doing so until it finally is liberated enough to go to some other realm of existence and be in eternal immortal communion with the invisible divine.... this is classic!

this red herring of anti-scientific, postmodern ass-backwardness is just plain silly! ah dreaded "materialism" as opposed to what - pre-scientific/pre-rational supernaturalism?!

i think this is something we can make sense of:

we are all innately mind-body dualists - for various reasons this is a side-effect of just how the brain evolved.

a combination of this dualistic conviction of consciousness/mind/soul as something distinct from the body on the one hand and a complex conflict about the nature of a death we humans can uniquely imagine and dread on the other - has resulted in many ancient cultures coming up with elaborate myths about somehow transcending death. all of these varied metaphysical assertions quite simply have never been backed up by any significant evidence and appear to be improbable if not impossible.

this does not mean that intelligent contemporary practitioners have to buy into beliefs that no longer hold water in the face of what we know now about reality - in order to gain the benefits of what are otherwise wonderful tools for doing inner work.

for spirituality to be relevant it has to keep being updated. ancient hindu-buddhist metaphysics no longer make sense, but their practical and powerful transformative disciplines for mind, body and heart are still wonderful medicine without the cultural accoutrement of outdated metaphysics.

i for one am no more interested in literal interpretations of karma and transmigration of souls than i am interested in literal interpretations of jesus being born of a virgin or ascending to heaven to sit at god's right hand.

mythic religion is mythic religion whether from the middle east or far east - and substituting one for the other does not seem like progress to me! what does is engaging in a thoughtful synthesis of deep spiritual practice and a grounded appreciation for the world that continues to be revealed to us by the unfolding of human knowledge.

Reply



Mitsu · 3 weeks ago

+3  

Your comment is conflating, however, mind-body dualism, with this debate. It's quite possible for there to be something like reincarnation without mind-body dualism --- mind-body dualism I believe is philosophically incoherent for many reasons which I won't go into here --- to the extent that there are Buddhist philosophers who buy into any form of mind-body dualism, I think they're simply poor thinkers. It's not a question of empiricism: mind-body dualism *has* to be wrong, because it implies a metaphysical separation which cannot possibly be made to make sense in the end.

However, even setting aside "paranormal" communication it's obvious that the idea of mind = brain is also wrong. Mind is more properly seen as a holistic phenomena of the operation of a system which has no strict boundary. We interchange matter and information with the world constantly, and there's no point at which you can draw a clear boundary between self and universe --- this doctrine of anatta, no-self, is central to Buddhism and is clearly correct, no fudging needed whatsoever.

One could just as easily call the moment to moment apparent continuity of our minds a form of reincarnation --- prior causes leading to future phenomena which you could see in a rough sense as being somehow related to the prior bundle of phenomena, leading to the apparent continuity of the organism. But in reality we don't have clear boundaries nor any way to absolutely define the continuity of the so-called "self".

Similarly we're interacting with the world, other people, talking, breathing, etc., etc. All of which add to the fuzziness of the boundary.

I happen to have had a lot of experience with other forms of connectivity --- being aware of events far away, etc. There's no reason to posit any sort of mind-body dualism for this --- to my mind it must be some sort of physical mechanism, who knows how, perhaps related to physics we don't yet fully understand, or perhaps it is mediated via ordinary physics. Who knows. But this further smears out what I would call my "self". Things like Jung's "collective unconscious" I think are quite likely to be real. If that's the case, then we are more like nodes in a complex interconnected network.

Sure, when the brain and body die, most of what is our "self" dies. But Buddhist doctrine also accepts that most of the personality, etc., die with the body, as well. There's something subtle the doctrine claims survives.

I don't happen to think that account is likely to be exactly right. More likely what happens is more like some bizarre network phenomena which doesn't have to do with any "spirit" surviving but just some sort of subtle network causality which may account for some phenomena you could loosely call "reincarnation". But one person might "reincarnate" in lots of other people, both before and after death, if this picture is right. Who knows? It's an empirical question. Even if this is right in some sense it doesn't imply nor require any mind-body dualism at all.

Reply



julian walker · 3 weeks ago

+4  

belief in the transmigration of a "soul" distinct from this body into another body is not an example of mind-body dualism?

if the mind is what the brain does, or to put it differently - if the mind is the subjective interior experience of being a brain/body, capable of affecting one's own functioning via the neuroplastic effects of sustained and sincere practice, and that mind is of course influenced and shaped similarly by both objective facts like genetics and illnesses as well as subjective and intersubjective details like culture, family and relationships, if the existence of a solid homunculus-like "self" is seen though by both buddhist practice and advacning neuroscience, if mind-body dualism is scientifically and philosophically undefensibler, what then is there to "reincarnate" and by what mechanism would this occur?

why have we not discovered this phenomenon and mechanism when we can map the human genome, put nano-bots into your heart to clear out arterial plaque, grow livers from stem cells in the lab, put photograph taking spacecraft on mars and build i pods the size of coat buttons that store a thousand songs?

why would it be necessary if we have come to understand the self or soul as an interior phenomenon arising from the interaction of genes, neurobiology, culture and other influences?

"the doctrine" is simple outdated science from a time before we knew what we know now. let's not idealize it and give it any more benefit of the doubt for being literally true than we would other mythic claims - like dionysos being born from the thigh of zeus!

Reply



Hokai · 44p · 3 weeks ago

+10  

It is integral to Buddhadharmā that something relatively existent can only arise from specific causes and conditions. Something immaterial cannot arise from material causes, and the same for the opposite. Immaterial and material phenomena are an indisputable fact, both subjectively (i.e. through direct perception) and objectively (i.e. through logical analysis). Whether you're a mind-body dualist or not, depends on how you interpret their connection. It's reasonable to say they are mutually dependent.

Whether we hold the view (instead of believe) that karma and rebirth are real profound processes, should only be determined based on present usefulness of such view. The Buddha taught it's better to err on the side of eternalism, but he also invited everyone interested to adopt the Middle Path, beyond both extremes of philosophical negation and affirmation, and practice in accordance with such view. The intricacies of Buddhist thought that explain what karma and rebirth "really" mean surpass the scope of this article and our comments. For most practicing folks, it is a profound mystery, and suffice to say that it surely "can" be unpacked in a highly valuable manner "without" superstition and narrow-minded literalism. It was difficult to go beyond karma in Siddhartha's time. Obviously, it still is.

Reply



Duff McDuffee · 88p · 3 weeks ago

+4  

An excellent, thoughtful article Dennis. Thanks for stimulating discussion and my thinking.

Karma is a difficult pill to swallow for many Western students of Buddhism. So, too, is rebirth. And, practically speaking, these two pills are inseparable.

Forgive my ignorance, as I am no Buddhist scholar, but I don't see karma and rebirth as inseparable doctrines. If karma can be translated as something like "causes and conditions," then it includes everything that is a cause but doesn't require any specific cause to be the case. A common non-superstitious/magickal view of karma is contained in the maxim "actions have consequences." Modern doctrines of karma may also include the causes of genetics, environmental factors, culture, family of origin, etc. Must rebirth necessarily be included in this description? The only argument for it's necessary inclusion seems to me to be a doctrinal one---"The Buddha said..." "our tradition is that..." etc. Rebirth is one possible cause or condition, assuming such a thing exists, but if it does not, there are clearly other causes and conditions that could form a doctrine of karma.

Precious little is being done in the way of legitimate scientific research to explore the question of rebirth

I can't even comprehend what is meant by this. How could the doctrine of rebirth be tested scientifically? I understand how someone could have a direct experience of something that appears to be of a past life (of course it's impossible to sort out what is "imagination" here), but if rebirth has something to do with an immaterial soul that is completely and utterly non-physical, how could this possibly be measured or even observed?

"mind = brain function, nothing more"

What would the more be? I think this is the wrong critique of neurological reductionism. There isn't anything "more"---at least physically. What is missing from scientific observation is direct subjective experience. This isn't "more" than the physical brain, but yet it is an important thing to also value and treat as "real," just as software is not reducible to hardware yet clearly runs on the hardware. In one sense, software is just logic gates on a circuit board and magnetic charges on a hard drive, but this is a terrible explanation of how to use (or program) the software itself.

Reply ▶ 2 replies · active 3 weeks ago



Mitsu · 3 weeks ago

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>if mind-body dualism is scientifically and philosophically undefensibile, what then is there to >"reincarnate" and by what mechanism would this occur?

This is a reasonable question but I think it stems from a confusion about the difference between material substrate and information flow. Information and matter are two different things, even if one may depend entirely on the other. For example, I can back up my hard drive and restore it on another machine, and it's the "same" in some information sense even though the physical substrate has completely changed. We cycle all the atoms in our bodies every 7 years or so, scientists estimate, so even though we completely replace every atom in our bodies every 7 years, we say we're the "same" person as we were 7 years previously.

So what persists in time is not the physical atoms that make up the body, but, rather, a *pattern*, kind of like a standing wave.

This pattern in fact is sustained by many causal processes, and influence by many processes, including, for example, information that we send and receive verbally, visually, etc. In a very real sense we are constantly interacting with the world around us in large flows of information. The relationship between information patterns and the physical world is a complementary one: information and dynamic patterns are in some sense non-material in that they aren't made of matter, but they don't require any non-material dualistic form in order to exist (thus I think any form of dualism is both unnecessary and incoherent, i.e., impossible). The difference between information and feedback loop patterns and the physical substrate of the body, brain, and our environment is a fundamental one, but it doesn't require any sort of substance dualism.

Now, suppose it were the case that our minds are also capable of information transmission in a nonlocal fashion, by some as-yet-unknown process. I happen to think this is possible, because of many cases in which I have observed it in my own life and in those I have known personally --- I'm not talking about vague "coincidences" but very impressive instances of what appears to be nonlocal information transmission/etc. Now, let's just say this is possible --- obviously such things can be achieved via technology (cell phones!) Suppose our biology is also capable of this. Let's also suppose that such information transmission or resonances might be able to span gaps in time and well as space (again, I know I'm positing a lot: this is merely a thought experiment).

If that were the case, it might well be possible for someone now to "resonate" or have some sort of connection or link to someone in the past --- or multiple someones, more likely. Or animals, or the biosphere, or whatever. Someone might have even a very strong such resonance --- which might explain, for example, the existence of tulku who might have some connection to their previous incarnations.

But it would also imply a much more radical picture than the, to my mind, fairly simplistic picture of reincarnation. If such connectivity exists, then in some sense we might all be interconnected with other people and the world in a way which implies that our minds only seem to be these completely disconnected islands, but in fact are interconnected like a biological internet to some degree with other minds around us, across space and maybe time. This would have to be a fairly low-level noisy sort of linkage --- operating at the level of the collective unconscious, but it is something which might be the case without having to invoke any kind of weird dualistic stance.

But even without any woo-woo connectivity the idea that our minds are wholly isolated to our brains is clearly false. We interact even now via the internet, via speech, writing, physically, etc., etc. We teach our children and we learn from each other, consciously and subconsciously. Our minds as information processes are spread out over a vast set of systems, not clearly isolated to the brain or even our bodies, but stretching out into the people around us, culture, civilization, planet, and so forth. So when we die one node disappears but echoes of our existence continue on.

[Reply](#) ▶ [1 reply](#) · active 104925 weeks ago



[dennisthehunter](#) 33p · 3 weeks ago

+7

I want to point out that I never used the word "reincarnation," which is getting thrown around a lot in these comments -- I used the word "rebirth" (which, by the way, Batchelor also predominantly uses). To my mind, they are philosophically distinct notions. Reincarnation, as I understand the term, has come to signify -- in many people's minds, anyway -- what Julian characterizes as the transmigration of a truly existing soul from one body to another -- a very un-Buddhist idea, indeed.

Rebirth, on the other hand (as I see it) encompasses a process of becoming and rebecoming that is far more subtle and difficult to understand or express in a conceptual way. It is interdependent with the essential Buddhist view of anatta or no-self (which is also subtle and difficult to understand) and teachings on the nature of mind (which, guess what, is also subtle and difficult to understand -- in fact, "it" can't be "understood" at all conceptually -- it can only be experienced).

If there is not a truly existing, separate, independent self to begin with, then how could it jump from one body to another? Yet the non-existence of a little homunculus who travels from body to body does not imply that no aspect of mind continues. For those who want to seriously study Buddhist views on rebirth, this is an important distinction to make, and it opens into a much deeper level of inquiry.

Another thing I find odd about Batchelor's objections to rebirth is that he characterizes it as "offering consoling assurances of a better afterlife" (Buddhism without Beliefs, page 114). To the contrary, it seems to me that if you truly grasp the meaning of interdependence, karma, and no-self, then the prospect of rebirth (as I have characterized it above) offers very little in the way of ego-consolation indeed. The aspect of mind that continues might be very subtle and impersonal, and have little or nothing to do with what we ordinarily think of, in our deluded ways, as the "self." So, whoever might be reborn, it wouldn't be "me" -- it would, in every practical sense, be someone else. Frankly, I don't see much consolation for my ego in that.

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