

Tricycle Talks

Episode #74 with Roger Jackson

“A Beginner’s Guide to Rebirth with Roger Jackson”

June 8, 2022



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James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. The idea that we are born again after death has been a source of fascination within and beyond the Buddhist world for millennia. Yet the history and scope of Buddhist approaches to rebirth hasn’t been widely explored by Western scholars. In his new book, *Rebirth: A Guide to Mind, Karma, and Cosmos in the Buddhist World*, scholar Roger Jackson offers the first complete overview of Buddhist understandings of rebirth. Jackson has dedicated much of his professional life to examining interpretations of rebirth in different Buddhist contexts across cultures, including how Buddhists today wrestle with the concept.

In today’s episode of *Tricycle Talks*, I sit down with Roger to discuss views of rebirth across Buddhist traditions, how you can be reborn without having a self, and whether you have to believe in rebirth to be a Buddhist.

James Shaheen: So I’m here with Roger Jackson, professor emeritus of Asian studies and religion at Carleton College. Hey Roger, it’s great to be with you.

Roger Jackson: Good to be with you, James. Thanks very much for inviting me.

James Shaheen: You’re welcome. So Roger, we’re here to talk about your new book, *Rebirth: A Guide to Mind, Karma, and Cosmos in the Buddhist World*. Can you tell us a little bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Roger Jackson: What inspired me to write it is sort of a 50-year-long struggle with what for me is a kind of koan that I heard on the first day of the first serious meditation course I ever took



from some lamas in Nepal. That was to the effect that mind is beginningless. As someone raised in the West with a somewhat skeptical, humanistic, scientifically informed worldview, this did not make sense to me. Yet it was clearly a central and seminal claim for these Buddhist teachers with whom I was studying. And so I took this, as I said, as a kind of koan and worked over the years to try to understand it.

Eventually, when I ended up in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin studying with Geshe Lhundub Sopa, I decided to do a dissertation on what I was told was the classic Indian proof of the fact that mind was beginningless, i.e., that there were past and future lives. And so I worked on that, and at least early in my academic career, that was a major focus for me. Even after I finished doing scholarly work on it, it’s remained personally a kind of puzzle, partly because I think of the question of whether it’s possible in the modern world to be Buddhist and yet not accept rebirth in the traditional, somewhat literal sense of it.

So fast forward a bit to three or four years ago, an editor at Shambhala named Casey Kemp asked me to contribute an article on rebirth in modern Buddhism to a volume edited by Richard Payne called *Secularizing Buddhism* that came out last summer. I agreed to do it. I submitted the article, and it was three times too long. I have a tendency towards this, unfortunately. And she said, “Well, this is great, but we’re only interested in the modern part of it, not all the great background you supplied. Why don’t you write a book on it?” And so she said, “Shambhala has a series on basic Buddhist ideas, and if you write a short book on that, that would be fantastic.” I wrote the book—it was sort of my pandemic project at the beginning. She said, “This is great, but it’s twice as long as it needs to be. So we’re going to publish it as a standalone volume.”

So what it attempts to do really is, as the subtitle indicates, just to survey a whole range of Buddhist ideas and practices, probably a little more focused on ideas than practices, but ideas and practices that Buddhists have developed over the centuries to think about rebirth, to think about where it happens, how it happens, why it happens, all of these basic questions. And so the book is focused more than anything else on the Indian tradition. I spent a lot of time going



through the Pali canon and looking for what seemed to be appropriate references, some of the Abhidharma texts like those of Vasubandhu and Asanga and some Theravada Abhidhamma texts as well, to try to get this general picture. I also looked at Mahayana texts in some detail to see where Mahayana Buddhism, which developed later in India, fits in with this larger picture. I also eventually developed several chapters that have to do with ideas and practices surrounding rebirth outside of India. So there’s a chapter on the Theravada world of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, a chapter on the East Asian world of China, Japan, and so forth, and a chapter on the inner Asian world of Tibet, Mongolia, and so forth. And then the last two chapters are an attempt first to survey the ways in which folks in the West, especially since around 1800, have dealt with the notion of rebirth. The very last chapter is an attempt to get at modern discussions and arguments about this with that central question I mentioned earlier very much in mind, namely, how meaningful is it to try to be Buddhist in the modern world over and against these traditional Buddhist claims of rebirth, which are not intuitive or obvious or even acceptable to many modern Western people?

James Shaheen: Right. We’ll get to that question a little bit later. But I’d like to start with asking you to walk us through some of the South Asian understandings of rebirth that were circulating at the time of the Buddha.

Roger Jackson: Sure, the South Asian world in which the Buddha lived—and nobody can agree exactly on when the Buddha lived, it should be said, but most people would place him in the mid to late part of the first millennium BCE. You might say somewhere around the time of Plato or a little bit earlier. This is an Indian world that is undergoing dramatic changes technologically, ideologically, politically, socially for reasons that are probably too complex to get into. But what had started out around 1000 BCE or even earlier as a kind of polytheistic, ritualist tradition guided by Brahmins as the central officiating religious figures and that relied a great deal on ritual sacrifice as a way not only of effecting matters in the world but also of holding the cosmos



together in some ways, this, anyway, was at least part of the system that was in place even after 1000 BCE. But through a variety of changes in society, technology, politics, and so forth, we begin to see particularly with the arrival of texts like the Upanishads a kind of new way of seeing reality. One of the new features of reality as the Upanishads began to articulate it was the prospect, which was not really present in any obvious sense in the early tradition, that even though we live and we die, it may be that we will come back again and that in fact, we may come back again after that and that the fact that we come back again, is not necessarily a good thing. I think it has to be understood that for the ancient Indic world anyway, rebirth was not something you looked forward to because the notion increasingly was that however high born or low born you might be, however rich or poor, whatever sufferings or pleasures you might have in life, they're all limited, they're all impermanent, and they cannot compare to the prospect of a kind of eternal blissful liberation, described as *moksha* or *nirvana*, that lies completely outside of this cycle of rebirth, which goes by the name of *samsara* typically.

So the Upanishads set the stage, and in the middle of the first millennium BCE, not only Brahmanical or proto-Hindu groups like those reflected in the Upanishads but also a variety of non-Hindu groups, groups that did not accept the Vedas as authoritative, groups of wandering ascetics going all over north India, were exploring both theoretically and practically and contemplatively ways in which we might actually get liberated, get outside of *samsara*. Among these various groups, these wandering ascetics, one of the groups was what we now call the Buddhist group, or just Buddhism. Siddhartha Gautama was one of a large number of wandering ascetics in north India in the middle part of the first millennium BCE, and he set himself off from the other groups partly by detailing what *samsara* looked like, the various realms of *samsara*, in considerably greater detail than most of the other groups did, although there was a similar group, the Jains, also a surviving religion today, that had their own way of talking about this, which was quite detailed. Anyway, the Buddha has set himself apart through a variety of important teachings, perhaps the most notable and controversial of which is the idea that there is no such thing as a permanent or eternal self. Whereas for Hindu groups, to identify with an unchanging



permanent pure self—atman, brahman, call it what you will—was the key to liberation, for the Buddha and for most of his followers subsequently, to understand that there is no such self is the key to liberation. So in this sense, Buddhism turned these early Hindu traditions and also Jain tradition, which though non-Hindu, also tended to adhere to the idea of a permanent unchanging self or soul, the *jiva*. So the Buddha set himself apart in this way.

The early Buddhist literature like the Pali canon, through which we get our picture of all of this, does go into a lot of detail on how samsara is structured, for instance, into six realms, and each of those realms is subdivided in various ways. You also find in the early literature both in the Pali canon and some of the Abhidharma treatises specifications as to how this process happens. The key element there is the idea of dependent origination, which often is said to be made up of 12 links that specify how it is, for instance, ignorance leads to unskillful karma, which leads to unfortunate rebirths, and so forth and so on. And then as a third major element of all of this, there’s the explanation of why it happens, which above all is linked with the idea of karma, which of course in Sanskrit simply means action and is interpreted, at least in Buddhist tradition, to mean intentional action, action that has been willed. Karma is, if you will, the specific moral version or instantiation of the broader law of dependent arising, the causative or causational nature of the universe. Karma is the way this works out in a moral sense, that is, a certain quality of action leads to a particular and appropriate result, not just in this life but in some future life as well. Those are some of the ways in which the Buddha was set within his own time period as one of many people trying to figure out how to get liberation from samsara, but then specifying these various ideas about the self and these various ways of articulating the location, the process, the reasons for rebirth.

James Shaheen: So how do so-called first-person accounts of rebirth figure into this?

Roger Jackson: Well, in the early tradition, even though we have nothing like a connected autobiography of the Buddha until some centuries after his final nirvana, there are a number of



places in the Pali Canon where the Buddha in some way or another reports on his own experiences. Those experiences in some cases give him, if you will, first-person evidence of the fact of rebirth. The most famous of these is in accounts that we find in the Pali canon, and these later become standard in the biographies of the Buddha, of the night of his awakening or enlightenment, where having conquered Mara and his hosts and his daughters, he sits under the Bodhi tree through the three watches of the night. During the first watch of the night, he describes how through a process of deep concentration, he was able to see the infinity of past lives that he had had. He was able to say, “In such and such a time I was born in such and such a place, and this is who I was, and this is what I did.” In a beginningless cosmos—remember, mind is beginningless—he could have gone on with this forever and never come to the beginning of his lives. But basically, he was able to see as directly as if he were looking at something around him there in Bodh Gaya. He was able to see what his past lives have been. So this was one way of confirming that there are past lives. And he also then in the second watch of the night, again, through this process of deep contemplation and concentration, gained what’s sometimes called the divine eye, we might call it clairvoyance, where he was able in the present to gaze about him and to see how it was that karma was leading this being or that being to this rebirth or that rebirth. So in the present, he was able to see how it is that karma connects to rebirth, and through this direct perception, this direct experience, to see that this is how things work in the cosmos. So the third watch of the night, there are different versions of it, but he then goes through the 12 links of dependent arising, understands how it is that’s a way of understanding the process of karma of ignorance, karma, and rebirth, and he undoes it all so that when the morning star appears at dawn, he realizes that he has awakened, that he’s done all there is to do, and that he is a buddha now.

James Shaheen: So some scholars have argued that rebirth was less important to the Buddha than we might think. But you don’t buy those arguments. Can you share a little bit about why



you don’t find the minimization of rebirth convincing? I mean, some people say that it was just in the water.

Roger Jackson: Yeah. It was in the water, but what’s in the water affects us to a considerable degree. There are a number of different arguments along these lines. One argument is what you might call a textual stratification argument, an argument whereby if we look at what many scholars regard as some of the earliest parts of the Pali canon found in Sutta Nipata, specifically the chapter on the eights, there seems to be less of an emphasis on rebirth than there is in what we might consider to be later strata of the Pali canon. This is an interesting argument. But I think it falls short for two reasons. The first is that you don’t have to read very far between the lines of the suttas in the chapter of the eights to see that the problem of rebirth is still there as an overriding issue for people. The other is that the textual stratification itself is subjected to some doubt, I think, and that whether the Sutta Nipata in general and the chapter on the eights in particular is truly as ancient as claimed is at least a debatable point.

The other important argument, I think this is the one that you were alluding to somewhat more, has been put forward perhaps most prominently by Stephen Batchelor. Batchelor has argued that if you really read what the Buddha is saying, yes, he talks about rebirth, there’s no doubt about it, but that he was merely doing this as a kind of sop to convention. As you say, it was what’s in the water, it was part of the lingua franca of religion and metaphysics in mid-first millennium BCE India, but that he didn’t really take it seriously, that what he was interested in according to Batchelor, and according to Batchelor’s reading of the Pali canon, was a kind of ethical, pragmatic, psychologically incisive way of being in the world and that the metaphysics was just kind of extra. It was superfluous. It really didn’t matter. And Batchelor actually has a principle of interpretation that he applies, which says that basically anything that could be found in the water, that could be found in the culture around the Buddha, is probably something that the Buddha as a tremendously original thinker just put out there for the sake of



people’s general understanding. Those points in his teaching that are unique to Buddhism, those are the ones that really ought to be the focus.

I find this unpersuasive both on methodological and on textual analytical grounds. Methodologically, it seems to me a kind of an arbitrary principle to state that anything that might have been held by other people in the Buddha’s culture can’t therefore have been really what the Buddha thought. Ironically, Batchelor, who’s done some very good work, tries to historicize the Buddha by showing how much a part of his culture he was, so why wouldn’t belief in rebirth be part of what he accepted from his culture too? The other is simply that I just think you’ve got to exclude so much material as you read through the Pali canon, you have to just put aside so many references to rebirth—the realms of samsara, the functions and processes of karma—that how much you end up with is really open to serious question. I find each of these arguments unpersuasive overall, but of course, we don’t know. The Pali canon is not a verbatim replication of what the Buddha taught. It’s the result of a long process of oral and also written redaction over the course of several centuries. So it may well be that the Buddha did not originally teach these ideas, but we can only go on the textual evidence that we have, and the textual evidence does not seem to support the idea that this did not matter to the Buddha.

James Shaheen: You mentioned earlier the five or six realms that karma lands us in after death. Can you just go over those really briefly before I ask the next question?

Roger Jackson: Sure, I mean, very briefly. Working from the most highly populated to the least populated and from the bottom up, there is hell, which sometimes is a kind of generic notion, the way it sometimes is in Western traditions, but more often and reasonably early, it gets subdivided into all sorts of different hells and eventually, you get notions of both hot hells and cold hells, occasional hells. There are a vast range of different hells that we might end up in, largely, though not exclusively, on the basis of violence committed in a particular lifetime. It can be other non-virtues as well. If you go to temples in places like Thailand and Sri Lanka, you’ll see these



wall paintings that depict the miseries of the hells and it’s pretty clear that there’s a wide range of things human beings do. Adultery is another one that can land you in one of the hells. Slightly higher than that in the typical arrangement is what’s called the *preta* or the hungry ghost realm, which is, in some senses, the realm of unquiet spirits. It’s clearly connected with broadly Indian ideas of what happens to those we love and know after they die. But it becomes kind of formalized eventually as a realm in Buddhism. We don’t have knowledge of the hell realms for the most part unless we have some kind of psychic ability. The hungry ghost realm we occasionally interact with. We don’t see it much. But there are certain times of year when we might see hungry ghosts, and we leave offerings for hungry ghosts often. This is a kind of pan-Buddhist idea. Above the hungry ghost realm, there is the animal realm, which from the Buddhist standpoint is seen as, basically, the lives of most animals are, in Hobbes’s terms, nasty, brutish, and short. They live in fear, they’re constantly needing to find food, to reproduce, and so forth. It’s not a good existence, even if you’re the president’s dog or something like that.

Above that is the human realm, which is not the highest in this pyramid but is the realm that is considered most conducive to actual spiritual progress because it’s in the human realm that we have, if you will, just the right mixture of pleasure and pain. We have intelligence. We are able to actually understand our condition. And if we’re not too miserable, we can actually do something about it. Above that, there is what’s called the asura or sometimes the titan realm, which is a realm of kind of jealous, powerful, somewhat violent gods. And above that, there are a variety of different heavens inhabited by gods and goddesses of various types, who have very long, often very blissful lives that are not in fact outside of samsara. It’s entirely possible within this whole scheme to be one of the highest of the gods in one of the higher heavens and still to end up, because some particular karma comes up for you at the time of death, down in a hell realm the next time. It’s a little bit like a Ferris wheel—you’re up one moment, and before you know it, boom, you’re at the bottom.

James Shaheen: Right, so complacency is sort of the enemy.

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Roger Jackson: Complacency is not an option.

James Shaheen: You place special emphasis on the moment of death, which, to quote you, “looms large in the Buddhist imagination, for it is the portal between one life and the next, fraught with both danger and possibility.” Can you share some of the practices associated with the moment of death and some of the beliefs around what happens immediately after?

Roger Jackson: In the philosophical and Abhidharma traditions, there are a variety of different kinds of technical explanations of what happens at the moment of death. I think that perhaps the tradition that is best known for its practices surrounding death is the Tibetan tradition, which is also the tradition that I probably know the best. There, there is a great deal of literature that was developed. Some of this, of course, comes out of the Indian context originally, but it was certainly developed in various interesting ways in Tibet, ways in which the Tibetans will talk about the different signs that may appear to us when death is relatively imminent. And then when the death process actually begins, there are a variety of internal cues that we can pick up on or signs that we can observe. There are some signs that can be observed from the outside by somebody who’s, say, tending to us. I’m doing this in the context of a “normal,” relatively slow-moving death. Obviously, there’s many types of deaths, some of them very sudden, and all these processes get telescoped dramatically in a sudden death. But in a gradual death anyway, your various sense faculties will begin to, as they say, dissolve or absorb, no longer really function. You’ll see different kinds of internal images of one sort like a mirage or fireflies or things like this. And you’ll move even more inward at a point where externally your breathing has stopped, and yet processes continue internally, whereby you happen upon or have appear to you different colored visions. They have very technical names in the literature, but basically a white vision and a red vision and then a completely black experience, followed by what then is



called the luminosity or the clear light, which is the actual moment of death from the standpoint of Tibetan tradition.

At that point, the clear light experience is similar to the experience of the nature of reality that one can attain through practicing on the path, especially the tantric path that is so important for Tibetans, and it’s possible at that moment to “get it,” get that clear light realization. Then one, in effect, can be liberated right at death. But if, like most of us, we’re unable to truly realize this and it happens just in a jiffy, then we go into what the Tibetans —the Tibetan word is the bardo, which is typically a sequence of up to seven one-week lives or stints in an intermediate realm in which one has already in a sense taken the subtle form of the karmically determined rebirth one will next have, but there are practices well known within Tibetan Buddhism, for instance, the so-called Tibetan Book of the Dead, that are instructions for those who have died about how to recognize the various visions and signs that you see as merely being manifestations of your own mind, merely being the nature of reality, and holding out the possibility that even though you missed the clear light when it happened at the moment of death, you still might get it. There are instructions for this effect that go on for 49 days typically. At the end of that, if one has still not gotten out of this downward-tending tunnel, if you will, then one will take rebirth. That’s one way of talking about that. Because the moment of death, particularly the clear light experience of the moment of death is analogous to, or really the same as, the experience of the nature of reality, there’s a great stress in practicing before you die so that you can recognize this. Many of the most advanced tantric practices that are taken up by the Tibetans are attempts to almost pre-enact your own death process so that you can recognize the various signs, the various phases of death. You can know the clear light when it appears, and you can seize upon it to gain liberation.

James Shaheen: You’ve just described the bardo experience. Is that correct?

Roger Jackson: Yes.



James Shaheen: Until just now, we’ve been talking, though, mostly about mainstream Buddhist understandings of rebirth, and by that, I mean the early Pali teachings. Can you share some of the distinctive features of the Mahayana view of rebirth? In particular, how does the emphasis on the multiplicity of buddhas and bodhisattvas change the rebirth process?

Roger Jackson: I’m not sure how much it really does, to be honest. I mean, I spent a bit of time going through Mahayana literature trying to puzzle out the seeming disconnect between the paradoxical language and rhetoric of something like the Heart Sutra or the other Perfection of Wisdom sutras are philosophers like Nagarjuna or the mind-only Yogacara texts. Anyway, a whole range of Mahayana sutras and shastras where often there seems to be either an annihilation of ideas of rebirth and pretty much everything else. There is a rhetorical level on which the Perfection of Wisdom literature, for instance, which is really foundational to the Mahayana, seems to be nihilistic. And there are other aspects of Mahayana literature that, if they’re not nihilistic, seem to be sort of totalistic or monistic in saying, for instance, everything is Buddha. So there is really no distinction. Everything is all already awakened. You have rhetoric like this at both ends in the Mahayana.

But what I’ve come to, well, two things. So the first is that this is really deceptive in a way, because there is either explicitly or implicitly running through the literature of the Mahayana this very important notion, maybe articulated most clearly and earliest by Nagarjuna, of the so-called two truths, whereby, from an ultimate standpoint, no entity or concept can stand up to rigorous analysis. It is therefore shown to be empty. That’s everything from form to omniscience, as they like to say, and he’s got chapters in his fundamental stances on the middle way rejecting karma, rejecting the Tathagata, and so forth and so on. But that’s just from an ultimate standpoint. And in fact, it’s actually the emptiness of things that guarantees that there is a conventional world that operates pretty much the way Buddhists traditionally said that it does. And so what you discover, in fact, if you read something like the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 lines, which is arguably the oldest Mahayana sutra, arguably the oldest Perfection of Wisdom



sutra, that it’s got chapters where everything is rejected and chapters where it talks about hell and going to hell. So you have to know what level of discourse Mahayana literature is working on in order to understand this. But the takeaway, it seems to me, is that there really is almost never an actual denial of the traditional cosmology as laid out in the Pali canon in the early literature.

Now, you mentioned the point about multiple buddhas and bodhisattvas, and this is, of course, one of the many ways in which the Mahayana is distinctive relative to those earlier traditions. But I think that here, again, it’s merely some changes around the edges. So for instance, if you take a very important historical and cultural phenomenon like Pure Land Buddhism, which developed, it seems, in India and perhaps Central Asia originally and found its way into Tibet, but it’s been most prominent in East Asia, particularly with its focus on Amitabha or Amida Buddha, who presides over the western paradise of Sukhavati, this becomes an option, a rebirth to aspire to, because it’s sort of on the cusp between samsara and nirvana. There are ways, that are paradises that get introduced, there is the notion that there are buddhas and bodhisattvas who can help us, whatever realm we happen to be in. So there is a little more play there, a little more possibility, perhaps. But I think fundamentally, the Mahayana in India does not dramatically alter the basic framework that was set up very early in the tradition. I would go on to say that, as in the Tibetan case that I just cited, in East Asian cases, in Theravada cases as well, obviously, there’s all sorts of particular cultural practices and different ideas and there are variations, but the themes remain the same. The cosmological structures remain the same. The aim is to be free from samsara. Even if you choose to take rebirth in it as a bodhisattva sometimes, still the aim is to not be held by samsara anymore. So in that sense, I think there’s a remarkable continuity historically and cross-culturally within the pre-modern Buddhist world.

James Shaheen: Yeah, the way you put it, the Mahayana claims bend the model, but they don’t break it. I thought that was nicely put. So one topic that often comes up in discussions of rebirth is the question of what is actually reborn, given the doctrine of no-self? In other words, how can



we be reborn without having a permanent self, and how have different Buddhist thinkers tackled this question?

Roger Jackson: Yeah, both in my classes at Carleton College over the years and in many other contexts historically for Buddhists, this is the \$64 question. The bright undergraduates would glom on to this almost immediately, and it was a real challenge because even among the various Indian schools or traditions, Jainism, Hinduism, let’s say. Hinduism is a term that actually covers a whole variety of different views and practices, but we’ll use it as a lump term. Hindus and Jains both accepted the idea of samsara. They accepted the idea of rebirth. They accepted the importance of karma in this process, and they accepted the reality of some kind of spiritual liberation. And yet, they were extremely critical of the Buddhists precisely for the reasons you were just suggesting, that with the kind of radical Buddhist claim that there is no permanent, partless, independent self, there was the danger, especially if you take this to kind of a logical extreme and come up with a doctrine, which many Buddhists did, of radical momentariness, where there’s simply no connection even between one moment and the next, then, in the minds of their Hindu and Jain critics, the Buddhists were actually destroying any possibility for a notion of personal identity, of memory, of moral responsibility, and so forth. So the Buddhists had a lot of ‘splainin to do as we would say, these days, and they came at this from a variety of different angles.

There are two that I would identify as most important. The first is kind of analogical. This is, of course, a style of argumentation that perhaps isn’t as rigorous as rational proof, but it is utilized in all sorts of different cases by Buddhist thinkers. I think the classic example here with regards to the question of rebirth is the example cited in the famous Pali text, the Questions of King Milinda, the *Milindapanha*, which is a dialogue between a Greco-Indian king and a Buddhist monk. The king asks some very, very good questions and challenges the monk on various points of Buddhist doctrine, and this is one of them. Roughly speaking, the answer that the monk gives, Nagasena, is to use the example of a torch. I’m paraphrasing this slightly from



the original, but I think it conveys the spirit of it. If you light a torch at sundown and then every hour, from that torch, you light another torch, and an hour later, you light another torch from that, and at the end of 12 hours, there is a final torch, the question arises: Is the flame of that final torch the same as or different from the flame of the original torch at sundown? There’s not exactly an answer to that. There are some ways in which it is the same and some ways in which it’s different. So there is continuity without stasis, I suppose, would be a way of putting it. Another way that it’s sometimes put in tradition, and I’ve seen this a lot in modern discussions, too, is the notion of a river, which has a certain kind of identity. But what makes up the river is the water, and the water is in constant flux and motion. Back to Heraclitus, you never step into the same river twice.

So those are sort of analogies that are used to show how, in ordinary life, we have phenomena like this. And so by extension, it could be that although there’s no permanent unchanging self, there still is this continuity that leads eventually to rebirth and therefore preserves moral responsibility, memory, and personal identity in some way anyway. The other way that it’s approached is through the whole Abhidharma tradition, the tradition of systematic metaphysics and phenomenology that’s an important part of Buddhist thought everywhere. Abhidharma often gets a kind of a bad rap, because it’s very systematic, very technical, with lots of lists. But the way I see Abhidharma is as a kind of grand attempt to describe the way the universe works without recourse to a permanent self. And so what the Buddhists are left with is a very, very complex description of the interaction of different causal forces, for instance, and how they work on the level of the individual, how they work on the level of the cosmos, how they work in the process of passage from one life to the next. So neither of these ways of coming at this is entirely intuitive or obvious or self-evident. But with a little sympathy for the analogical example and a little patience for reading the Abhidharma, we can see at least how Buddhists managed to give an account. Frankly, if you think about the accounts of the cosmos given by modern physicists, you’re not doing something, to my mind, entirely different from what the Abhidharmists did. The Abhidharmists were much more interested in mind. For them it was



central to the cosmos; for physicists, not so much. But the point is that physicists describe the cosmos as well without recourse to any kind of metaphysical substance. And somehow, it makes sense.

James Shaheen: Right, so far, we’ve focused on Buddhism in South Asia, but you talk about how Buddhism as it spread to other parts of Asia changed and rebirth was either adopted or adapted or maybe a combination of both. Would you like to say something about that?

Roger Jackson: I think the central point, as with my point about Mahayana, is that the superstructure remained more or less the same. Again, the Chinese or the Tibetans or others might add in an extra realm here and there or an extra subdivision of some realm. But I think that the description of the basic layout of samsara, the processes by which samsara is perpetuated through ignorance and karmic formations and so forth, and the operations of karma all remained more or less intact. What I had in mind when I talked about adoption and adaptation had a little more to do with the kind of cultural circumstances that Buddhists found themselves in when they arrived as missionaries in say, China, or Sri Lanka, to take two examples. My analysis is probably quite simplistic in some ways, but I think it is fair to observe generally that in certain cultures that, for instance, had not developed a long tradition of literacy, had not developed a great deal of political unity, the arrival of Buddhism was a signal cultural moment. And Buddhism came to be kind of definitive at the very least of a particular ethnic group, if not quite a whole nation, and Sri Lanka would be an example of this. It’s not of course that there was no culture in Sri Lanka, before the arrival of Buddhism around 200 BCE, but the kings of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka took it on probably for purposes that were not entirely altruistic. There was political value to this. But they kind of adopted Buddhism more or less wholesale, and Buddhism came to be definitive of at least Sinhalese culture within Sri Lanka ever afterwards. It’s an issue even to this day, and sometimes unfortunately so.



A culture like China, on the other hand, had 2,000 years of history, literature, culture, and religion behind it when Buddhism showed up in the first century of the Common Era. If the Buddhists sort of took Sri Lanka by storm, it wasn't such a hard thing. But China, for all sorts of reasons, was quite resistant to cultures and ideas that came from the outside. While there may have been some pre-Buddhist Chinese ideas about rebirth, they were not certainly developed to the degree that Indian traditions have developed these ideas. And so there was a long process of accommodation and adaptation that went on in China. Buddhists, for instance, had to really try to reconcile their notion of the six realms with vital Chinese notions of filial piety. How do you stay in touch with your ancestors if they've gone off, if they're beyond your ken in some realm you can't contact? So accommodations were worked out in that way and in other ways, but eventually, the Buddhist scheme came to be roughly accepted within Chinese culture as at least one option, but it never dominated Chinese culture in the same way that you could argue that it was kind of definitive for Sri Lankan culture, I would say, to a significant degree for Tibetan culture. Buddhism never arrived looking at some tabula rasa. There always was a culture there before, and the Buddhists always had to accommodate it to some degree. But there is a difference between being able to dramatically shape a culture as opposed to really just affecting the culture the way Buddhism did in China without ever becoming utterly dominant.

James Shaheen: So of course, Buddhism has come to the West, and we face the same riddle. Do we adopt? Do we adapt, accept or process something that is so alien to our thinking? You come up with four categories of approaches to rebirth. You call them the literalists, the neotraditionalists, the modernists, and the secularists. Could you briefly tell us what each of those is?

Roger Jackson: Yeah, the positions that I articulate probably could be applied to any religious tradition in the modern world. I don't think they're unique to Buddhism at all. But I won't get into issues of what modernity means and the place of religion within modernity. I think most



listeners are aware of the challenges that modernity and particularly Western ideas and institutions and technology and power have posed for religious traditions of various sorts, both in Europe and in the colonized world. These four positions with respect to rebirth are roughly these. Literalists come the closest to saying that the way the world works, the way the cosmos works, is pretty much to a tee the way it is described in traditional, pre-modern Buddhist literature. That is, there are these six realms, there are hot and cold hells, there are heavenly realms, karma works the way Buddhists say it does, etc., etc., with really no particular apology for that. That’s just the way it is, and we’ve got some arguments for you. Stay tuned.

Neotraditionalists, the term I use anyway, are people who are inclined, broadly speaking, to accept the truth of the traditional view. That is, they believe that we do survive death, there are rebirths, karma works roughly the way Buddhists say it does, and so forth. But they don’t simply re-present the traditional depictions, the traditional arguments. They try to alter them, bring them up to date in some ways by showing, for instance, even that the ideas of science, understandings we’ve come to about human cognition and human experience, that all of these or some of these at least actually point to the possibility that the universe is more or less the way the Buddhists described it, maybe not in a literal sense right down the line the way that it turns up in the *Abhidharmakosha* or something like that. But that, broadly speaking, it is correct, and we have reason to believe that that is so. It’s not just arbitrary on our part.

The modernist view, as I describe it—we’re moving, if you will, from right to left here, if we think of it as a kind of a political or cultural spectrum with the more conservative being the more literalist. If we move slightly left of center, then we come to what I call the modernist view, which is the view that probably the traditional descriptions and the traditional arguments just can’t really be accepted by those of us in our own modern context. And yet we don’t want to just throw all this out. These are ideas essential to Buddhism, practices, in some cases, essential to Buddhism. And so what happens with a modernist is a kind of reconfiguration of these ideas onto a more symbolic or psychological or existential plane so that, for instance, the six realms of samsara come to be less a depiction of an actual destiny that we might go to after death and more



as either psychological states that we can pass through even in the course of a single hour or a single day or depictions of the various circumstances that human beings live in in our current world. So that’s just one example of that.

And the secularist option basically says that all these ideas are from the past. They’re traditional. We can’t really even entertain them anymore. We simply have to reshape Buddhism in an utterly modern, utterly secular way, in effect Buddhism as a kind of form of secular humanism with a particular vocabulary. So that’s the range, as I see it, though these are complex categories. They overlap in various ways. There are people who fall into one or multiple categories at various times. It’s a much more complex scheme than that, but those are the basics.

James Shaheen: I can see how this applies to any religion. I mean, take transubstantiation and try the same thing with it. But let’s get to the question. Can one meaningfully practice Buddhism without karma and rebirth?

Roger Jackson: I think the answer is probably yes. But again, it depends on what you mean by “without karma and rebirth.” Do you mean without a literal acceptance of those as depicted in tradition, or do you mean in modernized terms?

James Shaheen: I was thinking of the debate that Stephen Batchelor and Bob Thurman had in the 1990s in *Tricycle*. Stephen Batchelor is known for his formulation of secular Buddhism, and Bob is a professor of Tibetan Buddhism at Columbia University. So that’s what I was really referring to.

Roger Jackson: Right. This is a wonderful debate which can be found online, and I would urge folks to check it out because it’s a scintillating conversation between two very bright people who are committed to very opposing points of view here. Thurman’s basic argument is that no, you can’t meaningfully be a Buddhist without a more or less literal belief in past and future lives. For



one thing, it makes a mockery of the bodhisattva vow to take life after life in order to assist other beings to achieve liberation. He’s got various arguments, including on the basis of memories of past lives research by Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia. He and Batchelor both agree that emptiness is the key teaching of the Buddha, that emptiness is pretty much an irrefutable way of understanding reality, and if the Buddha was correct about that, then, by extension, we ought to trust what he has to say about these metaphysical and cosmological matters. Batchelor for his part simply says, “No, I just can’t accept the arguments, I can’t accept the traditional descriptions. We just have to do the best we can with who we are and what we have.” He does concede at the very end of this debate that probably the best he could do would be to behave as if there might be past and future lives without actually being committed to them, because he, at least at that point, was adhering to what he called Buddhist agnosticism. Those are the kinds of parameters of the debate between what I would call a neotraditionalist in Bob Thurman and, in that particular instance, a modernist in Stephen Batchelor.

James Shaheen: Right. So you tend to lean toward the as-if school. I’d just like to read something that you wrote in the book. “Freed from the illusion of perfect objectivity, therefore, why not think and live as if Buddhism were true? In doing so we empower ourselves to enter, as fully as is possible in a skeptical age, into the ongoing, ever-changing life of the dharma, adopting Buddhist ideals, telling Buddhist stories, articulating Buddhist doctrines, performing Buddhist rituals, and embodying Buddhist ethics in ways that make meaning for ourselves, provide a measure of comfort to others, and perhaps contribute in some small way to the betterment of an imperfect and imperiled world in which we all live.” I wonder if you could say something about that.

Roger Jackson: I suppose in some respects this is my version of Buddhist agnosticism, because I don’t honestly know, in the end, whether rebirth is real in the ways that tradition has said it is or perhaps in the ways that neotraditionalists suggest it is. I just don’t know. And given that, given



my own skepticism about traditional arguments and perhaps traditional depictions, it seems to me that it's quite possible to be Buddhist in a tentative way. Now, I know that that goes against the grain of what many people think religion is all about, which is about commitment, faith, and so forth. It may be that this is a very pale version of Buddhism. But I think that many people in the modern world are defining themselves religiously in somewhat similar ways actually. It may turn out that maybe just around the corner that we'll discover some marvelous revelation will occur that will show me to be wrong and maybe to show everybody to be wrong.

James Shaheen: That's probably most likely.

Roger Jackson: Yes, yes. Almost certain that it will be. Probably not in my lifetime, anyway. I think I came to this long ago. I didn't really articulate it. I'm still working on articulating it all. But this came to me many years ago, when I really first discovered that I just couldn't buy the traditional arguments for rebirth, particularly those of the seventh-century Indian philosopher Dharmakirti, which are cited by Tibetans as the proof of it all. At first, I thought, well, that about does it for Buddhism for me. If I couldn't believe these central doctrines, I might as well be honest and just ditch the whole thing. What occurred to me, what I realized at that point, this was after close to 10 years of trying to be Buddhist anyway, was that willy-nilly, I had become Buddhist in almost every other way: culturally, the way I thought about the world, ritually, and I certainly believed in the value of examining the mind, of meditation, of compassion. I believed in the reality of emptiness being the nature of things and so forth. It was just so much there that was so rich and that I had become part of that I just thought, well, how much does it matter whether we accept X doctrine or Y doctrine?

Granted, there are more and less crucial doctrines to a religion, but one thing that religion scholars often do, particularly in recent decades, is point out that being of a particular religion is not just a matter of adhering to certain doctrines. It's a much larger gestalt, if you will. I've described it elsewhere as a kind of aesthetic that you take part in made up of ideas and practices



and rituals and memories and conversations and arguments and so forth. That’s broadly speaking what it means to be religious, with doctrine and their literal acceptance of doctrine being maybe not so big a part of that, after all. Maybe I’m just saying that to console myself or to justify myself.

James Shaheen: Actually, you’re consoling me too. So you conclude the book with the Buddha’s account of a previous life as a seer named Rohatissa, who traveled for 100 years as fast as the wind, and to quote the book, “died along the way without having reached the end of the world.” To close, would you be willing to read a passage from the sutta?

Roger Jackson: Sure, this is towards the very end of this. “The wise one, the world-knower, who has reached the world’s end and lived the spiritual life, having known the world’s end, at peace, does not desire this world or another.”

James Shaheen: So how does this sutta influence your own approach to studying and thinking about rebirth and the end of the world?

Roger Jackson: Yeah, I mean, end of the world, in the case of this sutta, really refers to the physical limits of the world, I think. He’s traveling and traveling and traveling, and he never gets to the end of it. I think that for me, the Buddha is making a kind of reflexive move, saying that you want to find out where the end of the world is. Or maybe you want to find out where the end of time is or the beginning of time. And that’s not the point. The place where the world begins, the place where the world ends, the place where it finds its limits is actually within you. Within your own fathom-long body is where all of this arises, all of this ceases. And if you’re going to find an end to the world, in some sense, this is where you find it: within yourself.

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Episode #74 with Roger Jackson

“A Beginner’s Guide to Rebirth with Roger Jackson”

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James Shaheen: Oh, that’s a nice way to end. So Roger Jackson, thanks so much for joining us. It’s been a pleasure.

Roger Jackson: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

James Shaheen: For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of Roger’s new book, *Rebirth: A Guide to Mind, Karma and Cosmos in the Buddhist World*, available now. Thanks again. Roger.

Roger Jackson: Thank you.

James Shaheen: You’ve been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Roger Jackson. We’d love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!