

What is karma and how does it ripen?

Keynote address by Richard Hayes at autumn meeting of
De Stichting Vrienden van het Boeddhisme
organized in cooperation with Uitgeverij Asoka
on the theme “karma en wedergeboorte”
Amsterdam, 15 November 2009

1. Greetings	1
2. Three challenges	2
2.1. Dalai Lama	2
2.2. Carl Jung	3
2.3. William James	5
3. The Asian context	6
3.1. Vasubandhu on karma	7
3.1.1. Karma and habit	8
3.1.2. The physical body as the seat of consciousness	9
3.1.3. The ripening of karma	10
3.2. Dharmakīrti on rebirth	10
4. Making sense of Asian doctrines within a Western framework	12
4.1. Making sense of karma	13
4.2. Making sense of rebirth	15
5. Concluding remarks	16
Works cited	16

1. Greetings

Dames en heren van de Stichting Vrienden van het Boeddhisme, I am honored to be in your company today and to be invited to offer some reflections on the theme of today’s meeting, karma and rebirth. This event comes toward the end of my three-month stay in the Netherlands, and I would like to acknowledge how grateful I am for all the hospitality I have received here and for the many new friends I have made. My stay in your country has been so pleasant that I can only think it must be the ripening of some very good karma from the past. This event today provides an opportunity for all of us to reflect on just exactly what it means to speak in terms of the ripening of karma. What has it meant to Buddhists of the past, and what does it mean to Buddhists today, especially to us Buddhists living in Europe and America and other parts of the world that are called The West?

2. Three challenges

Let me begin by talking about things I have seen or heard or read about that I have found thought-provoking and challenging. These are things that have made me think hard about the very idea of being a Buddhist with a Western mentality. Let me begin with Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama.

2.1. Dalai Lama

In 1997 the Dalai Lama gave a series of four ninety-minute lectures in England on the topic of the Four Noble Truths, which were released as a set of four videos on VHS format in 1998. The promotional literature for the videos describes the lectures in the following way:

The lectures were a landmark event, bringing together for the first time in the West a nonsectarian Buddhist and lay audience for over six hours of emotional and intellectually challenging engagement with these central teachings of the Buddhist canon. The impressive intellect and scholarship of His Holiness is everywhere evident in these tapes as he traverses the expansive body of Buddhist scriptures and commentaries. One also catches glimpses of his mischievous sense of humor and, of course, his inspiring compassion.

One of the most unforgettable moments in those lectures was when the Dalai Lama said that he thought it would be much better for most people to remain with the religion of their childhood rather than adopting a relatively foreign religion in their adult years. As he spoke those words, the camera scanned the audience, and one could see the shocked expressions on many of the people of European descent in the audience, many of whom were wearing Buddhist robes. It must have been a very sobering experience for many of those people who had become Buddhists, some of whom had even become Buddhist monks and nuns, to be told by one of the most highly respected Buddhists in the world that they had perhaps made a mistake in becoming Buddhists and leaving behind the religion of their childhood. Part of what I would like to explore today is the question, to what extent is it true that Western people might be well-advised not to try to acquire a relatively foreign religion such as Buddhism in their adult years.

2.2. Carl Jung

At about the same time I first watched the videos of the Dalai Lama in which he made that observation, I happened to read a very similar observation in the writings of the psychologist Carl G. Jung. He observed that as human beings achieve psychological maturity, they are constantly finding new significance in all the stories they learned as children. Not only the stories, but the rituals and the holidays of one's youth provide a rich source of emotional experiences that one spends the rest of one's lifetime striving to understand. If someone leaves those stories and rituals and holidays behind and acquires new ones, Jung argued, then the person may well be neglecting the important psychological work of integrating the most powerful and poignant experiences of childhood into the wisdom of adulthood. Moreover, an adult who converts to a new religion is likely to spend much time and energy trying to understand a whole new body of stories, symbols and rituals, often with only partial success. In the same way that most people who strive to learn a new language as adults will always speak the new language with a foreign accent, people who strive to adopt a new religion as adults will always see that new religion through slightly foreign eyes. The new religion may feel like home in many important ways, but it may also feel as if it is someone else's home in which one has become a long-term guest, never quite feeling as if one is part of the family of the hosts.

When I read the words of Carl Jung, and when I heard the words of the Dalai Lama, speaking straightforwardly about the risks of adopting a new religion as an adult, what they said had an impact on me. Their words hit home. I was reminded of an incident during the time I was studying in Japan more than thirty years ago. A Japanese friend was taking me to visit a Buddhist temple in Nara. He knew that I was in Japan to study the writings of the Indian Buddhist philosopher Dignāga. At one point of the tour we paused before a wooden image, and my friend looked at me as if he was expecting me to do something, but I had no idea what I was expected to do. Finally he said "Aren't you going to bow? This is the image of Vasubandhu, the teacher of Dignāga. Aren't you going to pay respect to your honored teacher's teacher?" I did bow, at my friend's prompting, but I was acutely aware that I never would have known that this statue was meant to be a likeness of Vasubandhu. I simply did not know the

iconographic conventions that a Japanese Buddhist learns to recognize. My Japanese friend was looking at Vasubandhu, and I was looking at an old piece of carved wood. But more than that, I was also aware of how strange it felt to me to be bowing to a wooden statue of a philosopher. Bowing to statues was not one of my childhood rituals. As much as I admire such philosophers as Socrates and Marcus Aurelius, I have never felt moved to bow when I have seen marble busts of them in the Louvre.

Not only is bowing not part of my childhood heritage, but I still have, despite decades of bowing in Buddhist temples, a part of my Protestant childhood with me wherever I go. And my inner Protestant child knows very well that it is not a good idea to worship carved images, because it is offensive to God, in whom I never really believed, even as a child. And yet, despite my not believing many of the key doctrines of Protestant Christianity at an intellectual level, my body still moves, or resists moving, according to deep-seated attitudes acquired during childhood.

Now let me try to relate my experiences with wooden carvings of Vasubandhu to the theme of today's meeting, karma and rebirth. Like the wooden images of Vasubandhu, the concepts of karma and rebirth played no part in my childhood. No adult in my life, and certainly no children that I knew, spoke about people being reborn. All the influential adults in my life took it for granted that death is simply the end of life, and until that moment comes, it is a good idea to use one's life fully to pursue learning and to enjoy simple things in moderation, always remembering that there are many people on this planet who do not have enough to eat and do not have the same opportunities as I have had. Children that I knew who came from more religious families spent a certain amount of time and energy wondering whether their relatives and neighbors and teachers would go to heaven or to hell. As I recall, most school teachers were thought to be destined for hell. Some children worried about whether their pet dogs and rabbits would be allowed into heaven, since they had been taught that heaven is for human beings only. But nowhere did I hear anyone wondering whether their pet dog had been reborn and had perhaps rejoined the family as a playful cousin.

As for karma, I don't remember hearing the word until I was in my first year of college, and when I did first hear about it, it was explained in such a

vague way that I suspected the person explaining it to me just barely had an idea of what the doctrine of karma was all about. As I recall, it was explained to me that the doctrine of karma says that nothing happens by chance; rather, consequences follow upon actions in a predictable way. One of the first expressions of this that I encountered was the opening lines of the *Dhammapada*, which I read in a course during my first year in university.

1. Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief;
they are all mind-wrought. If with an impure mind a
person speaks or acts suffering follows him like the
wheel that follows the foot of the ox.

2. Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief;
they are all mind-wrought. If with a pure mind a person
speaks or acts happiness follows him like his never-
departing shadow.¹

I can still recall that when I first read the idea that suffering follows someone with an impure mind “like the wheel that follows the foot of an ox,” I thought it was saying that suffering is *inevitable* for someone who has an impure mind. That struck me as simply false. And when I read that happiness stays with a person with a pure mind “like his never-departing shadow,” that seemed even more incorrect. Already at that tender age I knew too many exceptions to both of those generalizations. Moreover, I was convinced that *everything* happens by chance, and that people’s happiness and unhappiness was mostly a matter of blind luck. At any rate, I was convinced that whether a person is happy or unhappy is due to factors over which no one has any control, such as genetic makeup or the family into which one was born, or the socio-economic conditions of one’s upbringing as child.

2.3. William James

At this point, I would like to mention one more person whose words have shaped my thinking. William James wrote in a number of places that most human beings tend to spend their entire lives thinking within the same

1. This translation is Acharya Buddhakkhita’s, which appears on the Access to Insight web site at <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.01.budd.html>.

conceptual framework that they learned as children.² Most people discover that most of what they were taught as children works well enough for them in helping them get through life that they see no need of changing their basic beliefs and values. People may make minor changes in their beliefs, says James, but these changes are really only minor adjustments to their overall view of reality. I suspect that what William James said is true of most people; it is certainly true of myself. And therefore what I would like to do in these reflections on karma and rebirth is to say something about how a Western person with a Western education and a Western frame of reference might begin to make sense of these doctrines that were originally formulated by people whose way of thinking was in many ways quite foreign to the ways of thinking of modern Western people. Surely, it cannot be necessary to jettison the conceptual framework that has worked fairly well throughout one's life.

Before doing this, however, I should say something about how the doctrines of karma and rebirth have been discussed by some of the Asian Buddhists whose works I have studied over the years.

3. The Asian context

My academic training has been in Buddhism in India, and especially the writings of the scholastics who wrote in Sanskrit and Pali. It is therefore with their ideas that I am most familiar. It has been with their ideas that I have struggled for most of my adult life. It has often been a struggle even to develop a clear idea of what these authors were saying; it has also been a personal struggle to discern to what extent I can take those ideas, or at least some version of those ideas, and find a place for them within my own Western frame of reference. With that as background information, let me say something about how the fourth century Indian Buddhist Vasubandhu talked about karma, and how the seventh century Indian Buddhist Dharmakīrti talked about rebirth. I have no better reason for discussing these people as representatives of Buddhism than that I happen to have studied them.

2. These ideas are articulated in William James, "The Will to Believe," *New World*, <http://falcon.jmu.edu/~omearawm/ph101/willtobelieve.html> (accessed October 28, 2009); Aubrey Castell, ed. *Essays in Pragmatism*, vol. 7, The Hafner Library of Classics (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1948).

3.1. Vasubandhu on karma

Vasubandhu is given credit for writing 1000 works, many of them commentaries on the works of others and some of them independent works in which he is presenting a particular doctrine within Buddhism and defending it against real or imagined critics. One of the works for which he is best known is a very long text called *Abhidharmakośa*. At the beginning of this work, Vasubandhu explains the title. He says that “abhidharma” is a word that means the highest reality. Since the highest reality according to Buddhism is *nirvāṇa*, we should understand that “abhidharma” primarily means *nirvāṇa*. It is common for a word to be used poetically or figuratively. Sometimes, rather than talking about a thing directly, we refer to a thing indirectly by using the word for one of its consequences. For example, I might say that seeing an old friend is a pleasure, when what I mean is that seeing an old friend is a *cause* of pleasure. So since *nirvāṇa* is a consequence of wisdom, one can say that “abhidharma” figuratively means wisdom. Now wisdom is often compared to a sword that separates truth from falsehood. A sword is usually carried in a special sheath or a scabbard, and the Sanskrit word for a scabbard is “kośa.” So the full meaning of the title *Abhidharmakośa* is that this is a text which is like a scabbard which carries a sword, which is the symbol of the wisdom that leads to *nirvāṇa*. Most scholars, rather than trying to translate the title of the text, simply refer to it by its Sanskrit name.

I have offered a summary of Vasubandhu’s explanation of the title of the *Abhidharmakośa* to give a small taste of how complex and rich in detail his explanations are. If he has such an elaborate explanation for the title of his book, his reader can be sure at the outset that the explanations of everything Vasubandhu talks about will be full of details, rich in complexity and expressed in words that have many layers of meaning. All of this can certainly be said of his discussion of karma, which is the subject matter of the fourth chapter of *Abhidharmakośa*. Even if this entire meeting today were about nothing but Vasubandhu’s theory of karma, we would still be barely skimming the surface. To get the theory down in all its details would be the work of many months, perhaps even a few years. So what I offer in the next few minutes should be taken as a mere sketch of Vasubandhu’s theory as I understand it. There are three features of Vasubandhu’s theory that I would like to draw attention to: 1) the relation

of karma and habit, 2) the relation of mind to the physical body, and 3) the relation between karma and its ripening.

3.1.1. Karma and habit

In his discussion of karma, Vasubandhu repeats the usual formula for what karma is by saying that a karma is a volition or an intention. That is, a karma is a mental action in the form of a wish. The most basic form of a wish is a desire to do something beneficial or a desire to do something harmful. That is what karma is in its primary sense. In a secondary sense, a karma is something that is done with the voice or with the physical body to carry that primary intention out. So, for example, if someone wishes to be beneficial toward another person, one may speak kind words to the person or say something to cheer the person up. Or one may act on the intention more physically by giving the person a gift or performing some service for the person. So long as the intention is to do something positive for the other person, the karma is said to be *kuśala*, a word that means “healthy, competent, skillful, positive” or even just plain “good.” Even if the action has unintended negative consequences, if the intention of the action is to do something positive, then the karma is considered positive karma. An obvious example of a positive intention with a negative consequence would be a physician’s performing an operation intended to heal an illness or repair an injury, as a result of which the patient actually gets worse or even dies.

Similarly, if a person’s intention is to hurt another being in some way, then the karma is said to be *akuśala*, that is, unhealthy, incompetent, unskillful, negative or bad. For example, one may actually wish to discourage another person or make the person feel unworthy in some way and then say something harsh or belittling. Or one may act out physically by using some kind of violent physical action. As was the case with a physical action, even if the effect is other than what one intended, it is the intention to hurt that makes the karma negative. So if one tries to hurt another person’s feelings and makes a scathing remark that the victim takes as a compliment and feels cheered up, it is still the intention to hurt that makes the karma negative.

Once the nature of karma is established, Vasubandhu goes on to say that almost all the force of the karma comes to fruition immediately. That is,

one does not have to wait any time at all for the majority of the effect of an intentional action. This is so because the principal effect of any karma is to reinforce a habit. In other words, every time one decides to be kind and makes an effort to be kind, one is increasing the likelihood that in the future one will wish to be kind again. For this reason, it is very important always to be aware of one's intentions, and if one sees a negative intention forming, it is very important to make an effort to change one's thinking about a situation rather than acting out on the negative intension. So if one finds the behavior of another person annoying, there may arise a desire to say something that one hopes will annoy the other person in return. The desire for revenge can be very strong. Yet, if one remembers that speaking harshly is unlikely to do anything to make the situation better, then one might make an effort to cultivate patience, or even to see the situation in a much more positive light, and then to say something pleasant instead of saying something nasty. One of the most important aspects of Buddhist practice, therefore, is this act of remembering what the effects of an action are likely to be. The Sanskrit word for remembering is "smṛti," a word that is often translated into English as "mindfulness." To be mindful is simply to remember to reflect on the advantages of acting positively and to follow through by speaking or acting positively. By being mindful when negative impulses arise, and transforming the negativity into something positive, says Vasubandhu, one creates positive habits and cultivates good character. So this is the first observation I'd like to make about Vasubandhu's doctrine of karma. Karma is about creating such good habits that one spontaneously and effortlessly thinks, speaks and behaves in positive ways.

3.1.2. *The physical body as the seat of consciousness*

The second observation I would like to make about Vasubandhu's doctrine of karma is that he emphasizes that karma, like all mental activity, depends on the physical body. In particular, Vasubandhu says that all thoughts and volitions and intentions take place through faculties that are physically located in the heart. What is especially intriguing is his claim that the kinds of thoughts a person has—that is, the kinds of mental karma that a person cultivates—has an effect on the physical body. The heart is physically changed by the kinds of thoughts it has. Moreover, the physical condition of the heart has an effect on the kinds of experiences one is likely to have in the future. A heart that has been the seat of positive thoughts is much more

likely to have pleasant experiences. Those who strive to bring joy to others and to create harmony end up improving the condition of their own hearts in such a way that they will be more likely to feel cheerful and peaceful in most experiences, and more patient when difficult situations arise.

3.1.3. *The ripening of karma*

The final observation I should like to make about Vasubandhu's theory of karma is that his way of looking at karma is not deterministic but rather probabilistic. I think this is a very important point to remember, because many people in the West have a tendency to talk about karma in legalistic terms, as if it were a system of rewards and punishments. They may think that for every bad karma there is a particular consequence, just as when one breaks the law, then one will receive a specified penalty in the form of a fine or a requirement to do community service or spend some time in prison. Vasubandhu's discussion of karma has nothing at all of that legalistic flavor about it. Rather, he speaks of good karma as something that increases the probability of having a positive outlook on life and therefore pleasant experiences, and bad karma as something that increases the probability of having a negative outlook on life and therefore unpleasant experiences. This theme is also one that I will try to say more about later in this talk. But first, let me say something about Dharmakīrti on rebirth.

3.2. Dharmakīrti on rebirth

Dharmakīrti wrote a long and detailed defense of the doctrine of rebirth. The discussion comes up in the context of his claim that the Buddha was unique in the extent of his compassion. He anticipates someone asking why the Buddha would be any more compassionate than anyone else, and his reply is that for many lifetimes the bodhisattva who eventually became the Buddha tirelessly cultivated compassion. This response naturally invites the question how can anyone know that a single mentality can remain intact after the death of the physical body.

Dharmakīrti apparently wrote at a time when materialism was a popular philosophy. There were many forms of materialism in Indian philosophy, but the one that most concerned Dharmakīrti was the view that consciousness arises out of the complexity of the physical body and cannot exist without it. If this view of the origin of consciousness is true, then it

would follow that once the body decomposes and loses the complexity required to support consciousness, then there would be no possibility for consciousness to survive the death of one body and become associated with another one.

This is not the place to offer a detailed summary of Dharmakīrti's arguments.³ Instead, let me make three observations. First, it is noteworthy that the context in which this discussion arises in Dharmakīrti is an essentially polemic one; his principal concern is to show that the Buddha is an authority whose teachings can be taken seriously *and* that no other teacher has as much authority as the Buddha. It would be interesting to think about whether there would be a need to make such a strong defense of rebirth if one did not feel inclined to believe that no one else has as much wisdom as the Buddha.

Second, it is striking that the view that Dharmakīrti rejects is an early version of a view of consciousness that is accepted by many people in the twenty-first century.⁴ It is obvious that someone holding a materialist account of the origin of consciousness would have to disagree with Dharmakīrti. What is not obvious, and should be discussed, is whether a modern materialist would have to disagree in a significant way with the teachings of Buddhism.

Third, as a historian of Buddhist thought, I notice that there is a tension between Vasubandhu's view, which sees consciousness as something that

3. A detailed analysis can be found in several modern studies. Eli Franco, *Dharmakīrti on Compassion and Rebirth*, vol. 38, Wiener Studien Zur Tibetologie Und Buddhismuskunde (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für tibetische und buddhistische Studien Universität Wien, 1997); Richard P. Hayes, "Dharmakīrti on *Punarbhava*," in *Studies in Original Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhism*, ed. Egaku Maeda (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodo, 1993); Roger R. Jackson, *Is Enlightenment Possible? Dharmakīrti and Rgyal Tshab Rje on Knowledge, Rebirth, No-Self and Liberation*, Textual Studies and Translations in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1993); John Taber, "Dharmakīrti Against Physicalism," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 31, no. 4 (2003): 479–502.

4. One well-known argument in favor of an essentially materialist account of consciousness is found in Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1994). Similar conclusions, drawing on different evidence, are articulated in Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton, 1997).

requires a physical body to support it, and Dharmakīrti's view, which is that consciousness co-operates with and interacts with the physical body but does not require the physical body for its existence. Whichever of these two views a modern person may accept, one can say that one has one of the most highly respected and influential Buddhists in the tradition of Buddhist philosophers on one's side. One will have either Vasubandhu or Dharmakīrti on one's side. So no matter what position one takes in this dispute, one is in very good company.

4. Making sense of Asian doctrines within a Western framework

Now that these historical considerations have been explored, let us turn to how a person growing up in the modern West, whose thinking is conditioned by modern science and psychology and the philosophical currents of our world, might make sense of these two doctrines of Asian Buddhism. How might a modern Buddhist who sees the world from a Western framework make sense of karma and rebirth?

Before trying to answer that, let me say something about some of the assumptions I am making. I am assuming that the majority of people of European descent who have become involved in Buddhism have operated most of their lives within the context of a scientific worldview. Even if they are not practicing scientists, most modern Western people are accustomed to thinking of events in the physical world in terms of the laws of mechanics and the laws of thermodynamics. They are used to thinking of the consciousness of sentient beings as being connected with biochemical events in a very complex neurological system. They may have no idea how the brain works, but they know that the brain, and the rest of the central nervous system, and hormones, and chemical agents such as alcohol and drugs, all play a role in how one experiences the world and how one thinks. They are used to thinking of the world as too complex for human beings to understand. They are used to thinking of human explanations as nothing

better than approximations or as working hypotheses. And they have a fairly high tolerance of uncertainty and mystery. I am assuming that this is a fair description of the intellectual framework of most of the Westerners I know.

4.1. Making sense of karma

Given what I have said about the intellectual framework of Western people, including Western Buddhists, I would expect that few Western Buddhists think of karma as an accurate explanation of events that would otherwise be mysterious. I think most people realize that most accounts of karma are at least as mysterious and baffling as the events the doctrine of karma might be used to explain. Speaking of karma does not shed much light on the problem. So I do not think most people feel any need to *make sense* of the doctrine of karma. Rather, I assume, they see it as a poetic way of talking about all the surprises and ironies that life has in store for us. Speaking of some event as the ripening of karma is another way of admitting that one has no clear idea how and why that event happened. Buddhists learn to use this kind of poetic language because they know that is how Buddhists are supposed to talk. To be a Buddhist and not to speak about karma from time to time would be like being Dutch and not owning a bicycle.

Let me give an example of mysteries and surprises. A couple of days ago I learned of the death of a great Jain monk and scholar, Muni Śrī Jambuvijayajī. He was 87 years old. He was one of the most knowledgeable authorities on Sanskrit philosophical texts of the past century. Being a Jain monk, he followed very strict vows of homelessness. He never stayed in the same place for more than two consecutive nights. He never rode in any kind of vehicle. He walked everywhere, going from one village to another. He carried whatever book he was studying with him, and when he had memorized as much of it as he needed, he would give it away. He carried around thousands of pages of Sanskrit philosophical texts, including many Buddhist texts, in his head. His whole life was a testimony to living a simple and harmless life, a life of doing things slowly and carefully, a life of being liberated from consumerism. He died as a result of being hit by a speeding truck carrying a load of consumer goods. Nothing about the way he died makes any sense in the context of the way he lived his life. It feels like a completely senseless and tragically meaningless and

shocking accident. One wants to make some sense of it. It does not feel as though it is a suitable ripening of any of the karma of his present life, so one wonders whether something in some previous life ripened in this way. This is simply how the mind works. It craves predictability, and that means making sense of events to know what might come next.

Not knowing why things happen is a rather uncomfortable feeling. It is always tempting to seek comfort by coming up with explanations, no matter how unconvincing they may be to a critical mind. But I think it is important to dwell for a while with our discomfort. It is important to recognize how vulnerable we all are, and how helpless we all are. It is important to recognize how little control any of us has over the course of events. It is important to realize how quickly and unexpectedly death can come. All these realizations help us to come to a deeper understanding of the cardinal teaching of Buddhism, which is that your life is really not about *you* at all. All the things we take so seriously are little whirlwinds of events taking place somewhere out on the outskirts of the universe. That, as I see it, is the core teaching of non-self, of *anātman*.

There is, of course, much more to karma than a poetic way of acknowledging that life takes us all by surprise and that in the greater scheme of things we are not very important. It is also a poignant reminder that every action has consequences that someone will experience. It is a reminder that everything a person does has an effect on other living beings. Thinking of karma is a good way of thinking about our interconnectedness, our need for one another, our responsibilities to one another. I personally find it productive to think of karma as Vasubandhu thought of it. Every thought one has is forming one's character, and one's character is one of the most important factors in how one experiences life, how comfortable one is with life. The overall condition of one's character helps determine whether one embraces life with all its surprises or shrinks back in fear and loathing. Having good character, as Vasubandhu reminds us, does not make it inevitable that we will have pleasant experiences, but it does make it much more probable. Moreover, having good character makes one much more pleasant for others to live with. It benefits everyone.

Another aspect of Vasubandhu's way of talking about karma that I appreciate is his emphasis on how our thoughts have an effect on our

physical bodies. The body may be necessary to generate consciousness, but the kinds of thought a person has can have a dramatic effect on the health of the body that generates consciousness. There has been quite a lot of medical research over the past decades that suggests that the neurological networks of the central nervous system are changed in various ways that depend on how one uses one's brain. One of the most striking examples of this has been a study that shows that people who had done contemplative practices aimed at cultivating compassion have brains that react differently from the brains of control groups. In particular, those who have cultivated compassion through contemplative exercise show strong activity in those parts of the brain associated with controlling the muscles, and they have less activity in those parts of the brains associated with fear. When such people witness something unpleasant, such as another being suffering pain, they are "hard-wired," as it were, to go into action to help rather than to turn away in fear or disgust. Numerous studies also suggest that people who have cultivated certain attitudes have better chances of recovering from cancer and certain kinds of coronary diseases. It seems as though it may matter to the health of the physical body how a person thinks—or, we might say, how a person has chosen to learn how to think. In other words, the doctrine of karma may be poetry rather than science, but it is a kind of poetry that may coincide rather nicely with the findings of science.

4.2. Making sense of rebirth

On the matter of rebirth, I would have to count myself as one of those people who sees consciousness as something that emerges out of the complexity of highly organized matter, so I cannot easily imagine disembodied awareness. Therefore, understanding traditional Buddhist stories of rebirth in a literal way is not an option for me. I suspect many Western Buddhists are in the same boat. As with the doctrine of karma, however, I find it very useful to take the doctrine of rebirth as a poetic reminder that one lives on. Some time ago I heard of an African teaching that said that a person's soul remains alive so long as anyone is alive to remember one's life. So the Buddha and Socrates are reborn every time someone somewhere remembers their teaching, and Mozart is reborn every time someone plays one of his compositions, and my grandfather is reborn every time I tell one of the jokes he told me as a child. All of these ways of being reborn are very important to me. While it never occurs to me to

worry about whether I might die and be reborn as a herring to end up being sold in a Dutch fish market, I do like to think of being reborn as a pleasant memory for my grandchildren, or as a factor in an ecological environment that has been rescued from human carelessness and that will provide nourishment to future living beings on this planet that has been my temporary home for more than sixty years.

5. Concluding remarks

To conclude with a summary of my reflections on karma and rebirth, I have come over the years to think that these doctrines do not make for good science, and they make for only mediocre philosophy. But they make for excellent poetry. And for good poetry, we should all be grateful.

Works cited

- Crick, Francis. *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul*. New York: Simon & Shuster, 1994.
- Franco, Eli. *Dharmakīrti on Compassion and Rebirth*. Vol. 38, *Wiener Studien Zur Tibetologie Und Buddhismuskunde*. Vienna: Arbeitskreis für tibetische und buddhistische Studien Universität Wien, 1997.
- Hayes, Richard P. "Dharmakīrti on *Punarbhava*." In *Studies in Original Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhism*, edited by Egaku Maeda, 111–30. Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodo, 1993.
- Jackson, Roger R. *Is Enlightenment Possible? Dharmakīrti and Rgyal Tshab Rje on Knowledge, Rebirth, No-Self and Liberation*. *Textual Studies and Translations in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1993.
- Castell, Aubrey, (ed.) *Essays in Pragmatism*. Vol. 7, *The Hafner Library of Classics*. New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1948.
- James, William. 1896. *The Will to Believe*. <http://falcon.jmu.edu/~omearawm/ph101willtobelieve.html> (accessed October 28, 2009).
- Pinker, Steven. *How the Mind Works*. New York: Norton, 1997.
- Taber, John. "Dharmakīrti Against Physicalism." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 31, no. 4 (2003): 479–502.