

Transmigration

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TODAY, I have been asked to talk about transmigration, how it takes place, how it works, and so on. I myself am not very much interested in this subject. Whether I transmigrate or not, I do not much care. If I do transmigrate, well, let me do so. If that is to take place after my death, it is not something I can very well know about while I'm alive. I can't know while I'm here talking to you like this whether I will become a dog, a cat, a crow, a cow, or something else. If I become a cat, I will meow; if I become a dog I will bark and perform whatever mission dogs perform in this world, and I shall be happy with that. If someone kicks me I may bark and run away; that is perhaps all I can do. I'll be quite content with that, I'm sure.

Now in Buddhism, as it is popularly understood, what regulates transmigration is ethical. Those who behave properly go to heaven; those who do not go to hell. There are many heavens in Buddhism—about thirty-three—and twenty-one hells, if I remember rightly. In accordance to the grade of moral worth of your conduct, you are assigned to a different part of hell. When we die, we go from one state of existence to another according to the karmic value of our conduct while alive. But one thing we have to remember is this: karmic duration is never eternal; it lasts just for a certain length of time. That is a most fortunate thing. We don't stay in hell forever. Nor do we stay in heaven forever. After being in heaven, I may very well go to hell; after having stayed some time in hell, I may be transferred to heaven. This is a most fortunate thing, because torture in hell cannot just be a continuous thing; there must be a little time in between where there is a certain moment of reprieve, a certain amount of pleasure or happiness. There can never

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be a continuation of mere pain, or a continuation of mere pleasure; they must come alternately, otherwise torture is not torture, or happiness pleasurable. So, popular Buddhism, whatever that is, will say that after we have gone through a certain period of torture in hell, we will be released from it. So we can pass from hell to heaven, from heaven to hell, in the meantime incarnating ourselves—transmigrating into animals or plants, or even inorganic matter, it doesn't matter what. We all go through these incarnations—that is the most interesting part. If we did not, how dull our lives would be.

Many people think we have to go to heaven. But I doubt that heaven is such a desirable place to live in. If you were continually happy, that happiness would cease to be happiness. You might start to long for something undesirable, something which would make you unhappy so that you could experience both pain and pleasure.

The German philosopher Schopenhauer says we feel pain more than happiness. Since pain is more real than happiness, he says we should have a pessimistic view of life—that is how things are in this world. But I don't agree with Schopenhauer. If, as he says, pain is felt so intensely as to make us think this world is mere suffering, he should see that it is just because of such moments that we are able to enjoy pleasurable moments too. Why should we not concentrate our thoughts on enjoyable moments as well, instead of thinking only of pain? That would be a kind of neurosis. Enjoying happiness would be a more normal condition.

Now the question is whether this doctrine of transmigration, that is, the soul going from one existence to another after our death, is really scientifically or philosophically maintainable or not. What is that soul that goes from one state to another after our death? Where is that soul while we're alive? I understand many, many years ago a certain psychical society in Boston succeeded in weighing the soul. It was reported to be a little less than one ounce. How they weighed it I do not know. But somehow they thought there was some entity called "soul," which is liberated after the death of the body. But what I would like to know is, where is that "soul" before it incarnates itself into another body. Is it waiting somewhere? Is another body made ready for my soul at the moment of my death? Or, when there is no body ready to receive it, what does the soul do in the meantime? It cannot be just floating in the air, or spending time down in one of those twenty-one hells. Scientifically it would be very difficult indeed to prove the soul's existence. Most

psychologists, therefore, deny the existence of a soul.

Yet, on the other hand, we seem to feel there must be something in all of us that goes about doing this or that, choosing this and deciding that, and then living by that decision. It cannot be thought of as an entity which can be taken hold of. Yet there must be something. What is it? This is a great question that we all confront and find very, very difficult indeed to solve.

But there must be something. We are so accustomed to viewing a world differentiated into so many individual objects, we are apt to think of the soul as having an existence similar to other objects in the world and regard it as something existing somewhere in the body.

The first mistake we commit is to start from the assumption that what we call the physical body comes first. We should turn around and examine what we feel going on within that body. What is that which makes us feel or think this way or that way? That is the first thing which is given to us. We must find out what it is. What is that which we experience in our consciousness? Or, even before we begin to talk about consciousness, what is it that prompts us to do something, or makes us feel one way or another?

This Buddhism calls *trisna*, or *tanha*. *Trisna* means "craving" in English: "a wish to become something other than what is," "to change oneself into something else." That is the very foundation of all our existence, according to Buddhism. *Trisna* is something most fundamental in ourselves, and is capable of differentiating itself into infinite forms. When *trisna* asserts itself it takes form. *Trisna* without form cannot be conceived. When we feel something within ourselves, that feeling must express itself, it cannot just go without expression. In the same way, *trisna* always goes with form.

Perhaps it is because man is made the way he is, with hands, legs, eyes, and so on, that he feels, expresses himself, and continues his existence as he does. A cat purrs, has four paws, is quick in movement, and so on. Given a cat's structure a cat must feel and do what a cat does. So with dogs, plants, rocks, chairs, and so on. A chair is also endowed with a soul. It may be man-made but at the same time its maker has put something of himself into it so that the chair becomes an embodiment of the maker's *trisna*. But nowadays, with the machine so much in use, everything has become impersonal; that is the tragedy of modern life. We are becoming impersonal instead of personal; instead of express-

ing ourselves creatively we are becoming mechanical, and this mechanization means turning away from human nature, from human *trishna*.

So, the world becomes a dead place. Instead of being infused with greater life, the world becomes mechanized, and impersonal. If only we would reflect within ourselves to see what we really are, instead of looking outwardly and observing all these physical entities and all these machine-made things. We must see at the same time feel what we really are in ourselves. When we do, not only will we know what we are but we will know what others are, what the world is, and so on. The ultimate conclusion to be drawn from this is expressed in the idea of *trishna*. Instead of understanding transmigration to mean the soul going from one body to another, passing from one existence to another, let us consider it in this way: *Trishna* and form are inseparable—*trishna* is form, and form is *trishna*. When this *trishna* is felt or experienced, we realize the whole world is but the expression of *trishna*. *Trishna*, when it expresses itself, diversifies or differentiates. It cannot just remain in itself, it must differentiate and express itself in an infinity of forms—that is its nature. *Trishna* takes all kinds of forms, and when we realize what *trishna* is within ourselves we can say we know everything. Then, whenever we see things about us we know *we are* there, or, better, *I am* there. This is the most important part.

For *trishna* (or *tanha*), or “craving”—somehow the original Sanskrit or Pali seems to strike me as better. While I am no authority on English, I think that when we use the word “craving,” we feel “craving” is something that is dependent on the body; the body precedes while craving comes in afterwards, or the body is doing the craving. But when we use the term *trishna* or *tanha*, the feeling I get is that *trishna* comes first, expressing itself in an infinite variety of forms. Seen this way, *trishna* is essentially the same in any form that it may take. That is to say, *trishna* not remaining in itself but expressing itself in all things is in fact all things. Rather than to say *trishna* expresses itself in an infinity of forms it would be more correct to say *trishna* is the infinite forms themselves. *Trishna* cannot be conceived in any other way. That is important to remember.

Human *trishna*, as we feel it inwardly, must also be cat *trishna*, dog *trishna*, crow *trishna*, monkey *trishna*, snake *trishna*, and so on. A peculiar thing about snakes is that when people take a liking to them, the snakes become quite tame. Others are petrified by snakes. There must be something in snakes, and in us, that can both repel and attract. This contradiction

is also seen in *trishna*. Perhaps the snake is one of the most expressive manifestations of *trishna*. *Trishna* repels and attracts. It's not surprising to find the snake appearing in the Garden of Eden.

When a cat runs after a rat, when a snake devours a frog, or when a dog jumps . . . the other day while walking along the Hudson River, I saw a dog jumping excitedly up and down around a tree. It must have been after a squirrel I think. Not necessarily to catch it, just to frighten it perhaps. Anyway, after a while he gave up and left. But when I saw it, well, there I was, doing it myself. I wasn't actually doing what the dog was doing, and yet in some way I must have been doing that kind of thing before. When I look at a pig, for instance, going around making funny noises in the mud, I may abhor the sight at first, but sometimes I think I become a hog myself and grovel in the mud. At the time I may not see it that way, but afterwards I feel I have been that kind of creature.

So you see, we are in all those things. We think they are different from us, but from the standpoint of *trishna* I am expressing myself in them all. Fortunately, there are better moments. When we look above at the stars on a clear autumn night, how beautiful they are. When spring comes along all the apparently dead branches begin to sprout fresh green leaves, and how happy we feel to see them growing, and the flowers blooming so beautifully. Once there was a Japanese poetess who wrote about the morning glory. When she got up one morning she happened to see the morning glory in bloom; she was so entranced with its beauty that she forgot she had come to fetch some water from the well. The only thing she could utter was "Ah, morning glory!" She could not go any further than that. Even to utter "morning glory!" was to deviate from that first feeling of awe. What she experienced in herself was something celestial, something beyond the human world. But being human, consciousness asserted itself in her and she went on to say "Ah, morning glory!"—which was enough. Most people would want to say how beautiful or how entrancingly attractive the flower is. But she did not. The "morning glory!" stands for all things that transcend human expression. That is important. And we have to make ourselves feel it within ourselves—that is also important.

In this way, we experience all kinds of existences. I do not know whether ultimate reality is one, two, three, or whether it is really pluralistic; let philosophers decide such matters. As far as I'm concerned it does not matter whether reality is one, two, or three.

And another thing. I don't much care whether transmigration can be proved scientifically or philosophically or not. Let each do his own work. I'm content just to go through all those experiences—becoming a dog, cat, flower, star, rock, chair. . . . It is quite interesting, and even stimulating. So whenever people ask me about transmigration I wonder what it is that makes them get so interested in this question. This is a question one has to decide within oneself. It is not a matter that others can resolve for you. It's a strange thing how much we all depend on others. Perhaps as long as we live in society we have to be dependent on each other. We go to others and abide by whatever judgment they give us. But at least with this one question let us not rely on others but decide the matter for ourselves, and enjoy *trishna*.

Traditionally, *trishna* is painted in a bad light. But actually without *trishna* we cannot live. It is not something undesirable, it is a good thing, a very, very good thing indeed. Because of it we are able to experience all kinds of beings, from the lowest to the highest forms of existence. If there is a heaven or heavenly beings, we can experience them within ourselves, too. We don't have to go from this state to another state after death, or even before death, or before birth. We experience all these things in ourselves every moment of our lives. That is what is most interesting. And to appreciate that all these things are in ourselves is the real blessing of life. So, instead of saying life is a tragedy and having a pessimistic view of life, let us enjoy life and appreciate what a good thing it truly is. Thank you.