

**Question:**

The various sects within buddhism appear to differ in their teachings on karma and rebirth. If all phenomena are impermanent and there is no "I", what is there to be re-born?

**Taiun Jean-Pierre Faure replies:**

The question of life and death<sup>1</sup> is a fundamental one for us who practise the Way. To understand and above all to resolve the problem of life and death is in fact the koan of Buddhism. What is death? What is birth or rather what is it that appears when there is a birth, what is it that disappears when someone dies?

None of us can remember the moment of our birth, in the same way as none of us, as human beings, can witness our own death. Dogen says: "Who could throw light on the beginning or the end? We are born without knowing neither the beginning nor the end of our life; it is as if we saw this place where we are walking without knowing where the mountains, the rivers and the vast earth end."

Master Dogen teaches us that, contrary to what we may believe, death will not come after this present life. Birth and death are absolutely concomitant, absolutely contemporary to our existence here and now. This existence is realised as presence in each instant in the very heart of the infinity of births and deaths, of the appearance and disappearance of phenomena.

"It is a mistake to think that we pass from birth to death. Birth is a stage of the law for a time, it has already in itself the before and the after. This is why it is said, according to the law of the Awakened One, that birth is no other than non-birth. Disappearance too is a stage of the law for a time, it equally has in itself the before and the after; this is why it is said that disappearance is no other than non-disappearance."

**"...he who understands that birth-death and nirvana are one and the same thing, is an awakened one."**

In fact, he who understands that birth-death and nirvana are one and the same thing, is an awakened one. In the world of samsara the individual tries to understand reality, he thinks he can get hold of it by way of concepts. As long as he stays in the world of concepts he stays in the world of delusion.

The dualistic attitude where the "I" tries to obtain an understanding is precisely what prevents us from realising that birth-death and nirvana are one and the same thing.

Some Buddhist schools sometimes wrongly use the term reincarnation, but this is a misuse of language. The Buddha clearly made a difference between himself and the Brahmins who spoke about reincarnation. Buddha always spoke of rebirth.

There is no eternal entity such as a soul which might leave the body at the death of a person and which might come and take possession of a new body at the birth of another.

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Buddha says that all the physical and psychic elements (the five aggregates) which make up a person come together at birth, develop and disintegrate at death. These constituents are reemployed in various manners in the event of a birth. Thus the Buddha could say that he who is reborn is not quite the same, but not quite another either.

We may experience a certain intellectual dissatisfaction when we try to understand the mystery of life, of births and deaths. This dissatisfaction indeed pushes us to a true practice which - and we may be quite sure about this - makes us do the good and prevents us from doing the bad, a practice which will allow us to glide serenely into parinirvana on the day when the causes and conditions will no longer be combining for us to continue in this present form of ours.



<sup>1</sup>The expression used by Dogen is Shōji, usually translated by "life-death". "Birth-death" would be a more faithful translation, "shō" meaning "birth" etymologically.