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Exploring Karma & Rebirth



Synopsis

Every Buddhist should read it â "David Loy An excellent introduction â "Stephen Batchelor Cogent, knowledgeable, and penetratingâ "Norman FischerClarifies, examines and considers these two important but often misunderstood Buddhist doctrines. Offers an imaginative reading of what the teachings could mean for us now.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The author is a western Buddhist and his discussion of this topic is from a Buddhist perspective. I believe this book will appeal to those interested in the topic whether or not they are Buddhist. The author is conversational and engaging rather than didactic and domagtic in his tone. That is not to say that the author lacks a point of view. His viewpoint, for want of a better term, is contemporary Buddhist minimalist. While not entirely dismissive of traditional viewpoints he clearly does not adhere to them. The author seems especially troubled by the beliefs of some Tibetan Buddhists concerning karma. I was at times frustrated by the author's failing to take into account alternative viewpoints in his discussion of certain aspects of the topic of karma and rebirth. Still, I found reading this book to be rewarding even when I was in substantial disagreement with the author. In fairness, I don't believe the author intended this work to be an exhaustive examination of the topic but rather as a stimulus to thought and contemplation. In this he has succeeded admirably.

When Stephen Batchelor's BUDDHISM WITHOUT BELIEFS appeared in 1997, a new chapter on philosophy and ethics was added to the evolving story of Buddhism in the West. Batchelor

questioned, amongst other things, the need to understand karma and rebirth in such ways as to require belief in lives after lives. Nagapriya's *EXPLORING KARMA & REBIRTH* takes the discussion on these pivotal matters even further. In easily readable and convincing prose he asks how the facts of karma and rebirth can be understood without seeing the former as a kind of cosmic retributive principle and the latter as implying reincarnation. Nagapriya's Buddhism is very much this-worldly, centered on what one does in this life rather than what one should do in preparation for the next. Rather than cut to his conclusion I would rather people read the book to see how he arrives at it. Suffice it to say that people who would otherwise be attracted to the Dharma but are put off by much of its metaphysics will find a solid approach and a good teacher with Nagapriya. I do have to say, however, that if enough Buddhists and would-be Buddhists take seriously what Nagapriya is suggesting, and if they flesh out the ramifications of Nagapriya's thesis, Buddhism as we know it will change significantly in the West perhaps first, then (I suspect) wherever the Dharma is practiced.

Nagapriya has provided a good combination of scholarship and philosophical reflection. The scholarship consists of reports of how various Buddhist traditions, from Theravāda to Vajrayāna, have regarded karma and rebirth. Textual sources are provided, along with a list of suggested readings at the end of the book, so that anyone wishing to know more about the Buddhist tradition can use the book as a guide for further exploration. The philosophical reflections in the book explore such questions as how a modern person steeped in Darwinian evolutionary theory and modern depth psychology might square the traditional Buddhist teachings of rebirth and karma with how most educated people nowadays see life. Nagapriya raises intelligent questions and suggests various answers that might be given to them, but nowhere does the book become dogmatic or didactic. Rather than directing the reader toward any set of beliefs, the book helps the reader think various issues through. All things considered, the book provides an excellent introduction to the topic while also providing the non-beginner with plenty of food for thought.

This is an excellent little volume for anyone new to studying or practicing Buddhism. Personally I don't practice but have been curious about how Buddhism integrates karma/rebirth into a philosophy that also posits 'no-self.' A common confusion among those new to Buddhism asks, "If there is no eternal self, what exactly is being reborn?" Nagapriya offers some answers to this question and gives the reader a short tour of Buddhist ethics along the way. Other more academic texts I've read devoted less space to explaining the complex notion of karma (which is much more than 'what goes around comes around') and were much less lucid than Nagapriya. His writing is

wonderfully clear, which is a life-saver given the difficulty of much of the ideas he discusses. And I would be lying if I said I haven't applied some of his explanations about habit formation/changing to my own everyday life. At only 150 pages or so minus endnotes (which cite a nice mixture of Buddhist scripture and secular academic texts), it's a quick and easy read. Anyone who's tried to dabble in Buddhist philosophy knows how it can quickly become complicated and difficult. This is exactly why texts like "Exploring Karma & Rebirth" are so useful.

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