

What We Have

The other evening I was admiring a picture of my daughter, who was three years old in the photograph. I thought, "Wow, if reincarnation exists, then she must have been a Buddhist monk in a previous life!" She really looked like one.

At dawn the next morning, I peeked out the bedroom window. Fog hung like still smoke in the woods. My mind drifted, and I started thinking about the photo again. "Should I give Kayla a book about Buddhism? Maybe it would spark some past-life memories for her." But I had reservations about this. She is 14 years old now. Should I recommend a book that has as a central teaching, "Life is suffering"? Although Buddha says you can transcend that suffering, I started considering how those beliefs had influenced *my* life.

Buddha said that all forms are transitory and implied that whatever you accomplish in life will have no eternal significance. Science knows this. One day the sun will swell into a red giant. In doing so, it will swallow the earth and its history like an insignificant appetizer. If this doesn't squelch a person's optimism, nothing will. Buddha also claimed that the universe is "all one thing." Being certain about this can have a positive value. It allows you to stop struggling; you move along in life with less psychological pressure. In addition, he said that the universe is a (manifested) illusion. Only those caught in the illusion that the universe is *not* an illusion find reasons to cause others to suffer. For most people, though, adopting these beliefs is not easy. Believing that life is a temporal illusion complicates the task of defining the purpose of life.

Going deeper, I thought, "All forms are transitory." OK: If everything is passing, then what do I really own? What *can* I own for that matter, my possessions? I have never been that attached to my stuff. The cultural myth that says having many possessions will bring happiness is just that: a story designed to create a consumer class. In any event, possessions are on loan. I will have them as long as they or I last, or until someone takes them from me or I give them away. Sometimes we act as if others belong to us: husbands, wives, children, employees, subordinates, slaves, or pets. The "possession" aspect makes these relationships potentially devolutionary.

My physical, mental, and emotional bodies are on loan: "If it has a beginning, then it has an end." Sigh. The worst is this though: what if Buddha is right about the soul — that even it is temporary? If it is mortal, then my ticket to eternity vanishes. My soul is just another prop on the multidimensional stage of existence. The idea can be very cool — if I avoid attaching my consciousness to any particular identity. I am Nothing, and that has obvious cosmic overtones.

"Where did you come from, Baby Dear?"

"Out of the nowhere, into the here."

Scottish poem (1896) recited by my grandmother to my mother.

Can I own time? Not likely. The past is history, and the future never arrives. I cannot have anything that exists in either of them. Instead, I carry memories of the past and hopes for the future in my head. Both of them weigh lightly on the Reality Scale. Is there *anything* in my life that I can have then? It does not look promising....

As the morning sun thinned the veils of fog outside, I realized that I was being unduly pessimistic. I *do* have something: the experience of every moment — my whole life! It does not matter how I interpret those moments: good or bad, enjoyable or unpleasant, or in whatever way. Events continuously unfold in the Now, and they are real to me, even if they are manifested illusions! They are uniquely mine and are an intimate part of my life. Perhaps this is the gift of consciousness. I can say the same about my hopes for the future and memories of the past: they are mine in the moment. (The trick is to stay focused in the present when contemplating them.) Within this understanding lies freedom and security in a world of multi-layered limitations and certain loss.

I decided that giving my daughter the Buddhist book would not be in her best interest. Besides, I discovered that she does not like reading about philosophy or religion anyway. She likes "teen books" as "a way to relax." OK. God willing, she will have plenty of time to discover the deeper realities of life at her own pace. She is a contemplative person by nature — maybe the result of her Buddhist past.... I believe she will find a path that suits her spiritual needs and brings her happiness.

Michael <http://lightlounge.org>