

Review

Narrating Karma and Rebirth: Buddhist and Jain Multi-Life Stories, by Naomi Appleton. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. x + 239 pp., £60.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-10703-393-1 (hb).

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An enjoyable read, *Narrating Karma and Rebirth* offers voluminous narratives, lucid writing, and a skilled English translation of traditional theological terms. After publishing *Jātaka Stories*, Naomi Appleton now presents the philosophical aspects of karma and rebirth in this new collection and research of multi-life stories within Buddhism and Jainism. While not indulging in the metaphysical details and technical differences on karmic theory, *Narrating Karma* provides insight into the philosophical complexities persisting in karmic theory and current research. The author wittily justifies the subtitle with her selection of the story of Rucā and the King; this excellent narrative opens up the debate, addressing key issues of skepticism and fatalism. Rucā's manoeuvres through her multiple lives illustrate the potential for resolving these issues.

Appleton engages important questions of karmic theory, from simple quests through different realms of rebirth and tools of knowing one's past lives to more debatable topics such as merit transfer, communal and interpersonal karma, and gender issues in karmic accordance. While implicitly pushing back against Darwinian Theory, these narratives unveil karmic consequences as the driving force of the multiple-life order.

Diverse narratives depict miscellaneous archetypes, including sarcasm (Chandramati and Yaśodhara: 154), fright (Gosāla: 73), provide empathy, enlightenment, psychological analysis and more. Presenting the philosophy of non-unilateral birth nexus illumines the false notion of relationship as well (one is his own father). The author has unveiled the karmic consequences dissolving physical identity: humans do not always become humans nor is gender always same through narratives.

The book also implicitly ascertains the fact that 'as you sow so shall you reap', should not be taken literally. In Rucā's case we discover the karmic consequences of chasing other men's wives leads to hellish torments, followed by

being excluded from his proper male birth over multiple lives. The punishment is thus painfully appropriate to the act (p. 13). Hence the karmic results do not necessarily imply that if one has been chasing women, one will be chased one day.

The karmic theory of cause and effect is complex; the effects are in the visible world, but the causes in the invisible. To predict the cause by analyzing the effect is certainly a slippery path. Multiple-life stories can serve as a key avenue to its verity, yet this is not an easy task.

PRUDENTIAL RESEARCH

As Appleton concludes, 'It is possible for many beings to remember their past but few can interpret their memory correctly, all sorts of erroneous beliefs about karma and the universe have come about through past-life memories' (p. 190). The research in karma and past-life memories can be as erroneous as the interpretation they apply. Analysis is a task, often prone to unrealistic interpretation. When a story mentions that a character attained *keval gyānā* or *Boddhisattva* in the presence of Jina or Buddha, does it imply that the Great Souls transferred the karmic debts of the character? Did they mitigate them; influence or expedite their deletion - or did it just happen in their presence? Lacking discernible facts, analysis of causal karma in such cases is prone to being vague, unreal, or does not lend itself to clear conclusions, depending on how cautious the interpreter is. With regard to the issue of erroneous belief, Appleton underscores, 'It is desirable for the past life memories to be mediated by an omniscient being' (p. 190). While omniscience is vital in disabling flawed theories, prudence in research can be the solution for avoiding unreal interpretation in research. Appleton's prudent research takes care to not assume a cause but rather presents the reader with neutral analysis. For instance, she mentions, 'The simple understanding that doing good together as a team leads to experiencing its fruits together does not explain the continuing emotional bond between the individuals, which in several stories is the cause of them remarrying' (p. 141). Appleton scurries to a safe zone by using words such as 'hazy' or 'blurry' to present the ideas of karmic confluence (p. 141).

The author circumspectly confirms that Jaina narrative stories rarely affirm concept of karmic transfer, defended in the work of Professor John E. Cort (p. 155). Growing trends of performing rituals to transfer merit to other realms, or sending merit to the deceased, are approved, but it has yet to be verified whether or not such actions actually bring about karmic transfers. Appleton's readings bring to light that, at times, multi-life narratives have acted as a powerful mediator in conceptualizing new philosophies, especially as the author directs attention to Buddhist tradition (p. 103). Thus, the book serves as a positive support for researching truth-claims and studying newly

generated ideologies—as one might otherwise not be able to deny the philosophical ideas not found within these narratives.

NEW RESEARCH AVENUES

Narrating Karma and Rebirth serves as a valuable foundation for readers to raise questions and instigate further research in philosophical issues in Jainism and Buddhism, such as genders in different forms of life (the three-gender concept), or questions of homosexuality and transgenderism, which can be more comprehensively studied with narrative support. An interesting question to explore is the source of incoming life forms: According to Jainism, heavenly beings are not reborn in heaven, but in animal or human form; while in Buddhism, the *Preta* realm is an additional life form, a being from this is born in heaven (p. 57). Appleton's work generates new avenues for research to explore the journey of incoming and outgoing life forms in each realm of life through narrative evidence in comparison.

Appleton also makes a commendable effort to discuss the different sects of Jainism and Buddhism, such as the role of women's liberation in Digambara and Śvetāmbara sects in Jainism, or *arhat* and *bodhisattva* in Theravada and Mahāyāna sects of Buddhism. Appleton asserts Jain perspective that 'women lack *samyaktva* during birth' (p. 63). Though this is accepted in Digambara, Śvetāmbara do not approve of it. Hence reveals karma theory being intricate and diverse needs further research.

DIFFICULTIES OF SUCH WORK

One of the difficulties in doing such comprehensive investigation is the use of technical terminology which could be interpreted as synonymous but in fact has independent usage as well. The words *nirvāṇa* and *mokṣa* are used to mark the end of the cycle of life and death in both traditions; yet, *nirvāṇa* also has a different meaning in Buddhist tradition. They are differentiated in many unmarked instances. For instance, *nirvāṇa* is a state achieved before death in Buddhism, but the Jain conception of *mokṣa* necessitates the termination of a physical existence, namely death (p. 198). Appleton's story of Gosāla (p. 73) attaining *mokṣa* seems to refer to the Buddhist version of *nirvāṇa*, rather than the Jain *mokṣa*—a point worth noting for any researcher.

Appleton's purpose of research is to construct, communicate, and challenge ideas of rebirth and karma. The book achieves its purpose by presenting abundant narrative pieces, thought-provoking questions, and a holistic presentation. The narratives abound with anecdotes related to the positive purposes of previous birth memories. Though Appleton does mention the danger in these past life memories, the book lacks narrative work to illustrate this

danger. Is it that traditions do not have enough records of such narratives presenting the dangers of this phenomenon and are only inclined towards spiritually motivated narratives? This question requires more investigation.

AUDIENCE FOR THE BOOK

Narrating Karma and Rebirth is a valuable resource for undergraduates who are inclined to exploring issues of karma and rebirth, or the traditions of Jainism and Buddhism. Both introduction and appendix provide a good collection of sources useful for any novice researcher. It can also serve as good reading material for any faith-directed intellectual.

Overall, this is an excellent book of sources of multiple-life investigation scholars can enjoy reading and recommend to their students as well.