

**Fall 2003: If there is no self, who is it that gets reincarnated?**

*Question: In Zen Master Hakuin's Chant in Praise of Zazen, he says:*

And if we turn inward and prove our True-nature—  
that True-self is no-self,  
our own Self is no-self—  
we go beyond ego and past clever words.

*My question is, if there is no self, who is it that keeps getting reincarnated? Doesn't the idea of reincarnation imply that there is some integrated thing or self that can be referred to as existing, and which passes from one life to the next?*

**Narayan Liebenson Grady:** It's my understanding that the Buddha taught rebirth, not reincarnation. Reincarnation generally means that a permanent, intact entity passes from one body into the next, while rebirth reflects the changing nature of experience. A common metaphor for describing the process of rebirth is that of a flame of a candle lighting the wick of another candle; the flame of the second candle conditions the qualities of the first candle, and yet it is a different flame. The process of rebirth is conditioned by mental factors that have been cultivated, either consciously or unconsciously. These qualities of mind, such as desire, generosity, anger and lovingkindness, then condition the energy and form of the next birth.

We can see this process of conditioning at work in this life without necessarily believing in rebirth. If we are mindful and pay careful attention to our lives in the here and now, we can see the power of past conditioning and how it shapes our experience in the present moment. Understanding the limits and burdens of conditioning can inspire us to practice toward realizing inner freedom and the unconditioned in this very lifetime.

From an ultimate point of view, there is no self to be reborn. As Ajahn Chah says, "We must go beyond self and no self, beyond birth and death. To see a self to be reborn is the real trouble of the world."