The Hindu concept of Reincarnation and The Buddhist concept of Rebirth

Reincarnation is a belief in transmigration of the “soul” after death to another body. Based on the concept of the existence of “permanent self” (Atman in Hinduism and Soul in Christianity) – the concept of reincarnation does not fit within the Buddhist Law of Impermanence, which teaches that one’s current self is transient. For this reason Buddhism considers the concept of reincarnation as an expression of a futile desire for immortality of the ego (or lesser) self: “The function that leads us to believe in a permanent self is called the [Mano], seventh consciousness...operating in the name of self-preservation and expansion. It seems to correspond to the Western idea of the ego.” (Ikeda :Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth and death, p.156).

In a discussion about the subject, P. Ikeda explains that :”Buddhism does not accept the immortality of soul or the idea that the body is a vessel for the soul, and after death, the soul departs from the body, and moves to another body”. (Ikeda/Tehranian:Global Civilisation, page 120).

The concept of reincarnation matches the Hindu belief in the caste system, which teaches that one’s birth in a certain class of society is a repetition of a previous existence of the same social/spiritual class: “If taken literally, the reincarnation myth can lead to the legitimisation of rigid caste systems and gross social injustice”, an observation P.Ikeda agrees with. (Global Civilisation, p. 120).

Eternity of Person or Eternity of Life?

Tibetan and Hindu concept of reincarnation facilitates belief that the same individual possesses the same spiritual or social position in each lifetime. This view leads to the idea that lifetime after lifetime one’s person (or self) is fixed. In this way the Tibetan view on reincarnation advocates the “eternity of a person”, implying that the soul or self of a particular individual Lama, migrates to a new body of a child.

Buddhism, however denies the idea of continuity of a fixed soul or person : "There is no fixed self that lives on as an unchanging entity”. (Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth and Death page 26).

In contrast to the idea of “continuity of person” after death, Buddhism teaches “continuity of life” after death. All phenomena, stars, galaxies, plants, animals, people...etc... undergo the eternal cycle of birth and death. Rebirth in a future existence is not a continuity of a past personality or past social status - but a new fresh start. Clearly enough, one’s new fresh life, is not accidental because it does have certain tendencies - which are not the result of “chance” or “chaos”. Rebirth implies that the general tendencies of a new life are modulated or affected by the tendencies of a past life, however - as a whole - the new life is not strictly dictated by a fixed destiny, but has unlimited potentials of continual change.
If one - for example - creates a tendency for action as a Bodhisattva: searching for enlightenment and happiness for self and others, then at death, the karmic-tendencies created throughout one’s lifetime do not simply vanish. Karmic tendencies are like energy, which does not vanish, but will be carried further to a next rebirth for future possible manifestation. Because Rebirth is not a repetition of a past person, the new birth is not restricted to past gender, social class, spiritual position, education, individual factors or fixed self. Reincarnation implies imprisonment within the past, while Rebirth implies freedom of life’s transformation and its unlimited potentials.

**What influences one’s current life:** The Hindu-Tibetan view regards one’s current life as decided by past Karma. On the other hand, the Western perspective views one’s current life as decided by the two factors of Heredity (DNA) and Environment. However, if everything we do is dictated by past Karma or by childhood - imposed on us circumstances - then our free will and personal responsibility become meaningless.

In fact many serious court cases get defended by some lawyers offering the argument that the offender is not to be blamed, rather the bringing up is to be blamed, or the heredity, or the social forces which led to committing the offense. Similarly, some religious explanations of evil offenses also attribute the cause to fixed destiny from the past. Both views avoid the doctrine of personal choice and responsibility at this moment of life.

The starting point in Nichiren Buddhism is that each moment of one’s life (ichinen) contains great potentials and that our life was always our own choice. The elements of heredity, society and one’s own past tendencies - are all our choices (and also responsibility to elevate to enlightenment). Rebirth is a teaching of personal freedom and a vehicle for driving one’s life, parents, and circle of society towards enlightenment, through actions at each moment.

**The Buddhist Teaching of Rebirth**

According to the teaching of the “Nine Levels of Consciousness” - one’s actions in daily life, one’s particular relationships, memories and personal skills...etc, are encoded within the mind and stored in a certain level of consciousness, called the Mano (Sanskrit for Comprehending).

While each specific event in one’s life gets recorded in this level, in the same time, a deeper level of mind, the Alaya (Storehouse) records the general motives and tendencies which activated that particular event. The Alaya - or the eights level of consciousness - continually records the mechanisms of one’s actions, trends and tendencies. These mechanisms -leading to actions - can be activated (like ‘seeds’ which can sprout) in the future depending on a trigger from the environment. If no trigger from the surrounding occurs to trigger the stored mechanisms of action, then the karmic seeds remain dormant in the Alaya (subconsciousness). *Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth and Death pages 156-160.*
At the moment of death, the contents of Mano (consciousness of self, or person related memories) become irrelevant. It dissolves and vanishes with person’s death, while the contents of one’s Alaya consciousness (carrying the essence of past tendencies) remain imprinted in the filed of non-substantiality (Void, Sunyata, Ku): “The Alaya consciousness is sometimes called “nonvanishing” because the karmic seeds stored within it do not disappear at death. Our individual lives are accompanied into latency by all the effects of our karma”. (Unlocking the Mysteries …page160)

Karma in Nichiren Buddhism has a positive meaning. P.Ikeda explains: “The Buddhist doctrine on Karma is not fatalistic. Karma is viewed as the potential force through which to influence our future”. (Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth and Death page 27).

Because karma is created at this moment through our actions (deeds, speech and thinking), the focus of Nichiren Buddhism is on the present moment through which we shape the future: “Nichiren Buddhism enables us to fundamentally reform our destiny. When we truly base ourselves on Buddhism’s view of life’s eternity, we realize the first thing to change is how we live in the present”. (Buddhism Day by Day)

Nichiren Buddhism does not dwell on unverified theories of death or past karma - because its teachings are concerned with and focused on the current causes we make in daily life. What shapes the future is the present cause we make, the highest of which is that for attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime. Everything else will follow according to the present causes we make: “If we attain the state of Buddhahood in this lifetime, that state will forever pervade our lives. Throughout the cycle of birth and death in each new lifetime we will be endowed with good health, wealth and intelligence along with a supportive and comfortable environment, leading a life that overflows with good fortune. Each of us will also possess a unique mission and be born in an appropriate form to fulfil it”. (Ikeda: Faith into Action page 23)