

## Anattā and Rebirth

Talk by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

Suan Mokkh 1988

An audio recording of the talk with translation (looks like the talk was repeated or the translation was added to the recording a few months afterwards) is available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3EIZ-4xCU>

The English translation can be downloaded at:

[https://www.suanmokkh.org/retreat\\_talks/67](https://www.suanmokkh.org/retreat_talks/67)

Another version of the talk, given at Puget Sound University, can be downloaded at:

[https://www.dhammatalks.net/Books7/Buddhadasa\\_Bhikkhu\\_Anatta\\_and\\_Rebirth.pdf](https://www.dhammatalks.net/Books7/Buddhadasa_Bhikkhu_Anatta_and_Rebirth.pdf)

### Paraphrase (by Jack)

Buddhadasa suggests that the feeling of 'self' starts as an instinctive feeling, then develops into a belief that there is a soul or spirit associated with sentient things, ghosts and even insentient things. The Brahmanic, Upanishadic texts taught that we have a soul-like self (*attā*), which is reborn into another body again and again until it becomes perfect. Buddhism teaches the opposing view: that there is no such thing as a soul-like self.

### Discussion (in italics)

*Buddhadasa presents quite a loose rendering of the historical development of the notion of a soul-like self: the 'folk' theory of a soul appeared in all civilizations, in advance of any detailed philosophical and metaphysical discussion of what such a theory entails. The same can be said of the 'folk' theory of cause and effect, which underpins all Buddhist explanation.<sup>1</sup>*

Buddhadasa points out two grounds for the Buddhist view: firstly that belief in *attā* is plain wrong, secondly that belief in a soul-like self is the basis of all suffering and dissatisfaction (*dukkha*). He argues, firstly, that we fall into belief in a self as a result of early instinct; secondly, from early contact with things, generating intentional feelings of greed, aversion and confusion towards things as *other* in relation to a sense of self; thirdly, as a result of cultural conditioning.

*The idea that a soul-like self (attā) does not exist is supported by the absence of any such thing in observable experience, particularly on close attention to experience during meditation. From experience, persons determine that they are unique individuals, but cannot determine that they possess the essential defining feature of a soul: mental continuity over extended time. For although experience of oneself does seem to consist of mental continuity over time, we now know from neuroscience that mental continuity is illusory: the phenomenal present moment is made up of a variety of sensory, emotional (affective) and cognitive inputs, which all occur slightly in arrears of events in the world, because they take different lengths of time to process sufficiently to appear as parts of consciousness.*

*The variety of brain waves indicative of synchronicity across neuron-firing is a staccato external indicator of these staccato internal mental processes.*

Belief in a soul-like self is reinforced by the necessity of using terms associated with self (such as I, me and mine) in any language. Buddhists have no choice but to use these self-words in everyday communication, even though they are only true by social convention, whereas the ultimate truth, according to Buddhism, is that everything is void of a self, in that all things are just a product of the efficiency of their causes (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). Thus, the self that is referred to conventionally by language is associated with the life-story of each embodied being: it's history, it's personal psychology, and the 'face' it presents to the world. But this useful, conventional self is a not-self: it cannot be observed by paying close attention to experience.<sup>2</sup>

*The notion of a self has multiple meanings that would benefit from disambiguation. The argument between Buddhists and Brahmins seems to actually hinge on the idea and concept of a 'soul', rather than that of a 'self'. 'Soul' refers to some sort of mainly-mental essence within any physical attributes, which is continuous over time and relatively uninfluenced by cause and effect. A 'self' is recognised by sentient beings as a key feature of themselves as embodied persons, but it is not continuous or unchanged over time, precisely because it is constructed from the effects of different causal events that occur at different times. Since the concept of soul is expected to be continuous, it implies immunity from cause and effect. If the soul existed, it would be quasi-divine, whereas the self, like everything else in the world, is a thoroughly mundane construction by means of cause and effect: it is a form of personality that markedly changes and develops over time. It would be helpful if 'soul' was always used as the translation for attā, and 'not-soul' as the translation for anattā. Unfortunately, the concept of a constructed self or personality, which has considerable utility and significance for everyday life and in western psychologies, seems to have no close equivalent in early Buddhist texts. This difference of emphasis provokes some interesting questions. Was individual personality of lesser social importance at that time? Are the intimate details of human personality of too inflated a social significance in these times of obsession with celebrity?*

The ontology (the manner of being) of a soul can be boiled down to three possibilities. Brahmanic religion (early Hinduism) teaches eternalism (*śassata-ditṭhi*): the idea that there is a soul that transmigrates between lifetimes. The opposite, nihilist position is that there is nothing stable behind the concepts of self or soul (*natthika-ditṭhi*), therefore there is no 'thing' to be reborn. The Buddhists teach what they characterise as a 'Middle Way' or 'right view' (*samma-ditṭhi*) between these two views. This is the not-self (*anattā*) view, whereby persons are void of self (*suññatā*) because there is nothing but the five aggregates (*khandhas*) that make up body-and-mind: just the 'thusness' (*tathatā*) of embodied experience. Enlightenment (*nibbāna*) is just the full (psychological, operative and ethical) realisation and assimilation of this form of understanding.

*Is anything being hidden beneath the metaphorical characterisation of the not-soul view as the 'Middle Way'? For the sense of being void of self, of the just 'thusness' of experience, is very often described in terms of finding 'the true self'. Such language should not be dismissed out of hand, because it often represents an extremely meaningful experience: an altered state of mind, which is sufficiently rare to be labelled extra-ordinary, and which can be cathartic.<sup>3</sup>*

*There is one sutta in which the Buddha says that he teaches neither attā nor anattā.<sup>4</sup> In the light of the overall canon, that view is an outlier, but it is a salutary reminder that Buddhist explanations are not always mutually compatible, and that experience trumps explanation, however necessary and useful Buddhist explanations may be for the survival and continuity of the tradition.<sup>5</sup> But still, the notion of a soul or 'true self' that is unconditioned (unconstructed) by cause and effect is anomalous with respect to the rest of early Buddhist teaching, which is based throughout on the efficiency of causes and conditions. Buddhadasa's wording here is ambiguous, but he does seem to be trying to keep within the overarching theory of causation, when he says that:*

*'...this self that is not a self has to have sufficient wisdom and understanding to realize that it is not a self. And when the 'self' can see that there isn't a 'self' then all problems will cease.'*

Instead of seeing the world as a revolving round an imaginary soul that is an aloof, observing subject of everything else that happens, Buddhism considers a person to be an active, engaged combination of parts, as described in the five *khandhas* of form, perception, feeling, intentions, and sense-consciousness (*viññāṇa*), all of which aggregate into a bundle of everything that is necessary and sufficient to make up a life. Looked at from the quasi-idealist perspective that is characteristic of early Buddhist thought, things and events are only known to exist by virtue of being observed within the momentary temporal sequence that makes up a mind (*citta*). Even enlightenment is just like this: 'it is real, it is genuine, it is not-self'.

*Buddhadasa's remark about enlightenment (nibbāna) merits examination, since nibbāna is occasionally described as the 'unconditioned',<sup>6</sup> with the implication that, unlike anattā, enlightenment somehow achieves freedom from cause and effect, and from time. There is an anomaly here, against the usual description of enlightenment as just the 'blowing out' of the 'three fires' of greed, aversion and confusion, which give rise to suffering (dukkha). From the eradication of the three fires, there is no clear or direct implication that enlightenment marks a transition from causally-conditioned to causally-unconditioned. The anomaly turns on whether it is only suffering that is created out of these three unwholesome intentions, or whether they give rise to the whole world of appearances, and whether that whole world of experience (quasi-idealism) also encompasses the world that is external to the minds of sentient beings (realism). In other words, is the Buddhist path towards nibbāna taken to be just an ethical and psychological theory,*

*which mainly concerns the nature of human minds, or is it also a metaphysical theory about the underlying nature of the whole of existence, which not only makes room for the existence of the causally-conditioned but also goes on to hypothesise a causally-unconditioned state of affairs?*

*If, as Buddhadasa suggests, nibbāna is not-self, then even enlightenment falls within the realm of causes and effects: it is conditioned rather than unconditioned. Enlightened minds may be freed from suffering that has a psychological cause, but will still feel naturally-occurring suffering, such as environmental disaster or ill health. But if nibbāna is entirely unconditioned by cause and effect, then either (1) there is no knowledge possible about what happens to a Buddha after enlightenment or death, or (2) some sort of unconditioned soul-like self continues, which amounts to a fall into eternalism. (3) a third alternative is that enlightened beings cease to exist after death, which smacks of nihilism rather than the middle way.<sup>7</sup> The first and third options are both in accord with some statements in the Pāli Canon. The second option is the Brahmanic, not the Buddhist view. It would be slightly surprising if the Middle Way between eternalism and nihilism was nothing other than acceptance of the first option of not-knowing, which might markedly diminish the motivation for Buddhist practice. It may be that these three alternatives are incorrectly framed here, or it may be that the Buddha presents a theory that does indeed raise unanswerable questions about the continuation after death of both enlightened and unenlightened beings.*

It follows, from the Buddha's rejection of eternalism, that any view that makes room for the concept of a soul-like self is not a Buddhist view. In effect, it is animism.<sup>8</sup> The mind just is a succession of sense-impressions, feelings and thoughts that produce actions, which in turn produce effects. The effect is, of course, experienced, but by a different mind to the thought that produced the causal action. It must be a different mind, because there is no soul-like self that has sufficient continuity over time to both cause an action and experience the subsequent effect.

It follows from Buddhadasa's rigorous understanding of the not-self doctrine, and from the Buddhist view of the staccato nature of mental events that make up the phenomenal flow of experience, that nothing whatever can possibly be reborn: there is never anything more than the next moment in the sequence of cause and effect.<sup>9</sup> Speaking 'a little bit crudely', he says that the mere idea that something is reborn is 'ridiculous', 'silly, and 'crazy'. Instead, he says that there is 'birth', 'constantly', but 'no rebirth, no reincarnation, because there is nothing whatever to be reborn or reincarnated'.

*Buddhadasa's view of constant 'birth' feels strange because consciousness is generally felt to be a smooth experience flowing seamlessly from one moment into the next. It might help to realise that having mental events involves the 'sewing together' of many separate process, done by the brain with such consummate skill that the seams rarely ever become apparent.*

*But sometimes they do: during sleep, unconsciousness, and under the influence of psychotropic drugs. It can be disturbing to realise that not only is 'minding' a staccato process, but that it is an illusory achievement, created more from evolved memories of the way things usually are, as it is from accuracy of present-moment perception.<sup>10</sup>*

Buddhadasa adds that persons or individuals only occur 'within the thought that there is a person or individual', because there is nothing but a 'temporary...coming together of functions or processes or a grouping'... 'it's just an illusory person'.

*There is an implication here, which Buddhadasa may not have intended, that the western understanding of individuality may be too strictly defined: that we only know we exist because other people behave in such a way as to ratify our existence. Thus, individuality is a mutual communal achievement. Does this view of individuality have implications for our understanding of human rights in relation to the rights of the rest of society?*

He argues for 'three kinds of 'birth': firstly, physical birth; secondly, mental birth, whenever the mind thinks of itself as a person, as an 'I'; thirdly, there is 'birth through attachment', whenever a sensory domain or faculty performs it's function, and only so long as that function takes place.

'It's not this person getting reborn over and over again, or this 'self' getting reborn. There's no 'self' here, there's no soul here to go and get reborn a second time. There's just birth and birth and birth... all over the place, of all kind of different things.'

Buddhadasa accepts that there are frequent references in the Buddhist texts to persons getting reborn, but argues, firstly, that persons do not have:

'...to believe, but to find out for yourself which is true. And since the most important thing is suffering (*dukkha*) and the elimination of suffering, the question of whether there is such a thing as rebirth is unimportant... Arguments or discussions of something like rebirth are academic. They're not central to the primary issue...if you understand *anattā* correctly and completely, then you'll discover for yourself that there is no rebirth and no reincarnation'.<sup>11</sup>

*Buddhadasa is making several points here: firstly, that finding out for yourself is more important than believing in scripture; secondly that rebirth is an unnecessary (an 'academic') concept because the main thrust of Buddhism is towards the elimination of suffering; thirdly, that the intuitive belief that one has a soul-like self is the root cause of suffering: the underlying motivation for greed, hatred and confusion about objects that are other-than-oneself; fourthly, he makes a strong claim that to understand *anattā* is to come to realise that rebirth or reincarnation cannot happen. The second and third points are not particularly controversial. The first and fourth points render this text controversial. The first point does find scriptural support in the Buddha's injunction that one should test his*

*Dhamma in practice, rather than just accept it. The fourth point is unpalatable to traditionalists but intriguing for contemporary persons in search of some level of agreement between ancient Buddhist theory (dhamma), and scientific theory, precisely because both purport to be true explanations of the way things really are in the world. For both to be true, they have to be compatible.*

---

AN = Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 2012, *The Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Somerville, Wisdom).

MN = Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995, *The Majjhima Nikāya*, (Somerville, Wisdom).

<sup>1</sup> The *iddappaccayata* sets out a basic formula for cause and effect:

This being, that arises;  
 With the arising of this,  
 the arising of that.  
 This ceasing, that ceases;  
 With the cessation of this,  
 the cessation of that.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of not-self is one of ‘three marks of existence’ (*tilakkhana*), together with impermanence (*anicca*) and suffering (*dukkha*), all of which imply each other. MN 22:26 points out that each of the five *khandhas* that make up a complete person are impermanent, subject to change, a source of suffering, therefore, not fit to be regarded as a self. This view is frequently reinforced, as in MN 8:3, and at MN 11:9, where it is said that:

‘...there are four kinds of clinging. What four? Clinging to sensual pleasures, clinging to views, clinging to rules and observances, and clinging to the doctrine of a self.’ (trans. Bodhi 1995)

At MN 22:23 the Buddha remarks that:

‘...I do not see any such doctrine of self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair in one who clings to it.’ (Bodhi 1995).

It could be argued, on the basis of MN 102, that on achieving enlightenment the Buddha goes beyond all views, including views of self and not-self, since all views are forms of clinging. But still most of that *sutta* is concerned with repudiating all possible views of self-identity.

<sup>3</sup> There may be some connection between the western concept of ‘true self’ and the Abhidhamma concept of ‘luminous mind’ (*bhavaṅga-citta*), which is briefly mentioned in the *suttas*: AN I: 52-3 (Bodhi 2012: 97). See also the Harvey reference mentioned below in note 9.

Since this sort of mind is said to be free of defilements, it may equate to the experience of enlightenment, or even to the Mahāyāna notion of inherent potential for enlightenment (*tathāgatagarbha*). See also Bhikkhu Bodhi’s note 46 on AN pp. 1597-1598. But these ideas are all problematic if they imply mental continuity, which is the defining characteristic of the concept of a soul.

<sup>4</sup> Regrettably, the reference for this *sutta* is currently forgotten.

<sup>5</sup> For a western explanation of the priority of experience over explanation, see: Lewis, D., 1979, ‘Attitudes De Dicto and De Se’, *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 88(4), pp. 513-543.

<sup>6</sup> See Udāna 8.3:

There is, bhikkhus, a not-born, a not-brought-to-being, not-made, a not-conditioned. If, bhikkhus, there were no not-born, not brought-to-being, not-made, not-conditioned, no escape would be discerned from what is born, brought-to-being, made, conditioned. But since there is a not-born,

---

a not-brought-to-being, a not-made, a not-conditioned, therefore an escape is discerned from what is born, brought-to-being, made, conditioned. (Ireland 1997: 94).

<sup>7</sup> The Middle Way ideal of centrality between two options doesn't quite fit, in that the Buddhist view passes closer to nihilism than to eternalism, according to the traditional explanation that after death the Buddha will not be reborn again. This problem becomes apparent in MN 72: 19-20, when the use of the metaphor of enlightenment as the extinguishing of a fire has to be balanced-out by the metaphor of an unfathomably deep ocean (Bodhi 1995 note 723, pp. 1277-1288)

<sup>8</sup> *Animus* is the Latin term for a soul-like self that has continuity over time.

<sup>9</sup> Buddhadasa is not absolutely clear here, but the point may be that causes are followed by effects that are contiguous in space and time (with the possible exception of quantum spin in separated particles). To be reborn entails dying in one place, then being conceived in another, possibly after some extension of time. This problem of contiguity renders rebirth a magical hypothesis until a better explanation is forthcoming. Weak attempts to bridge the space/time contiguity gap have been made with the help of concepts such as *bhavaṅga* or *gandhabba*. For a discussion of the Abhidhamma concept of *bhavaṅga* (latent life-continuum state of mind) see:

Harvey, Andrew, 1995, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*, (Richmond, Curzon), pp. 155-179.

For a discussion of *gandhabba* see MN 38.26 (p. 358), and note 411 (p. 1233-1234). Also see an article by Bhikkhu Anālyo on *Rebirth and the Gandhabba*:

<https://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/pdf/5-personen/analayo/rebirth-gandhabba.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Varela, F.J., Thompson, E. And Rosch, E., 1991, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, (Cambridge. Massachusetts), pp. 94-96.

<sup>11</sup> For more on Buddhadasa, see:

Jackson, P.A., 1986, *Buddhadasa and Doctrinal Modernisation in Contemporary Thai Buddhism: a social and philosophical analysis*, (Australian National University, Theses Library).

Phramaha Surachai Phutchu et.al., 2021, 'Influence of Zen Buddhism on Buddhadasa Bhikkhu', *Psychology and Education*, 58 (1), 1563-1571.

Buddhadasa's monastery website:

<https://www.suanmokkh.org/buddhadasa>

The website of Santikaro, his translator:

<https://www.kevalaretreat.org/>