

THERAVADA BUDDHISM IN A NUTSHELL

– Ajahn Amaro –

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A COUPLE OF DAYS AGO a few people asked: “What is Theravada Buddhism?” It’s a good question. Oftentimes people have come across *vipassana*, insight meditation and its related teachings, disconnected from their origins. Sometimes they are not even aware that *vipassana* has anything to do with Buddhism or who the Buddha was.

How it began

The Buddha started his life as the crown prince of a small kingdom in what is now Nepal. He was born around 563 BCE although, of course, scholars and different Buddhist lineages disagree on the exact date. After being cosseted within the confines of the palace for his first 29 years, the spiritual impulse led him to take up the life of a wandering ascetic. After a few years of intense meditation practice, accompanied by many pointless austerities, he found the Middle Way and realized the true nature of things. He was enlightened.

Called upon to teach, he spent the next 45 years wandering the Ganges valley of North-east India, sharing his understanding with those who requested teachings. During this time he established a well-formed monastic order and a large lay community. His final passing away (the *Parinibbana*) was in Kusinara, in the Himalayan foothills, around 483 BCE.

As far as the histories go, it seems that, in its initial form, the Theravada school began about 100 years after the Buddha’s time. A few months after the *Parinibbana*, a great council of elders was held to formalize and establish the Teachings. A hundred years later they had a second council, again to go over all the Teachings (the discourses and the monastic rules), in the attempt to keep everyone on the same page. However, as it transpired, it was at this time that the first major split in the Sangha occurred. The way I understand it – and there are different versions of this – the larger portion of the Community wanted to change some of the rules, including allowing the monastics to use money.

The majority of the Sangha wanted to bring in these reforms, but there was a small group that said, “Well, whether it makes sense or not, we want to do things the way the Buddha and his original disciples did.” Those of the small group were known as the *Sthaviras* (in Sanskrit) or *Theras* (in Pali), meaning “Elders.” After about another 130 years, they gave rise to the Theravadan school. “Theravada” literally means “The Way of the Elders,” and that has been their abiding theme ever since. The ethos of the tradition can be characterized as something like: “Right or wrong, that’s the way the Buddha established it so that is the way we’ll do it.” It has thus always had a

particularly conservative quality to it. This is a very abbreviated version of the story, but it essentially describes the pattern of our origins.

As with all religious traditions and human institutions, over time a number of branches grew up. It is said that by about 250 years after the Buddha's time, in the time of the Emperor Asoka, there were eighteen different major schools of the *Buddha-sasana*, the Buddha's dispensation. It is important to note, however, that these were not completely separate sects. Regularly there were monasteries where people of many different schools lived with each other — apparently this was more common than not. It was normal to have schools and teachers from different strands working together and living side by side. There were different emphases, but there was considerable harmony within the Sangha also. The Theravada branch (*Sthaviravada* in Sanskrit) was just one of those schools.

The patronage of Emperor Asoka

One of the reasons why the Theravada tradition has been sustained pretty much in its original form ever since then is because of the Emperor Asoka. He was a warrior-noble king about whom it was said, in typical mythical fashion, that he killed 99 of his brothers in order to take over the throne. He then proceeded to work on the rest of India, conquering the vast majority of the Indian subcontinent. After a particularly gruesome battle with the Kalingans, where there were about 60,000 dead, he looked out over the sea of groaning, weeping, bleeding, and dismembered bodies and was suddenly struck by the folly of his ways. He realized, "This really is a terrible track that I've got myself onto." But of course by then he'd conquered the whole of India so he could afford to give himself some breathing space. He also realized, "I've got to do something about my spiritual life because if I don't do something quickly, I'm in bad, bad trouble."

He invited different teachers from different sects — not just Buddhist — to come and explain their teachings to him. One after another, different people came, but nobody was very convincing to him. Then one day, from the window of his palace, he saw a young Buddhist novice walking down the street. He was so struck by the demeanor of this child (only seven years old) that he thought, "How could such a young child have such a noble bearing and look so serene?" So he told his people to bring the child into the palace.

The king invited him in and said, "Please take a seat." The novice, knowing the protocol that a member of the Sangha should never sit lower than a lay person, and seeing that the only high chair in the place was the throne, climbed up onto the king's throne. Even if Asoka hadn't killed 99 of his brothers and conquered all India, this would have raised a few hairs on the back of his neck. So he said to the novice, "What do you think you're doing climbing on the throne?" The novice said something like, "The Dhamma is that which is supreme in the world. Having given my life to the realization of that Truth, it is my obligation to put myself in a seat which represents that."

The Emperor then started asking him questions. He was so impressed with the answers the novice gave, he thought, "I've got to find out whom this child's teachers

are.” It turned out that the boy was from the Theravada school of the Buddha’s disciples. Eventually that was the school that Asoka espoused, and since he was by then in charge of India, he decided India would become a Buddhist nation. Primarily he patronized the Theravada tradition, although he also gave support to other Buddhist lineages as well as to various non-Buddhist sects. Later his son and daughter, Mahinda and Sanghamitta, went to Sri Lanka — Sanghamitta was a *bhikkhuni*, a Buddhist nun, and Mahinda was a monk. They took the Theravada tradition to Sri Lanka and established it there in about 240 BCE.

It was through this circumstance that Sri Lanka later became a stronghold of Theravada Buddhism. It has sustained itself there for many, many centuries particularly because Sri Lanka is an island and therefore protected by its isolation. In India empires came and went, civilizations arose and departed, and many different Buddhist schools came into being and dissolved or fragmented. They eventually spread through the north into Afghanistan, Tibet, and China — later on to Korea and Japan. Theravada largely disappeared on the mainland of India in later times and completely so along with all other Buddhist schools with the advent of the Muslim invasions. Despite this, there on Sri Lanka (which was called Tambapanni in those days) the little cluster of Theravadans were hanging on, pretty much unbothered by anybody else. There were, of course, wars and famines over time, as well as other Buddhist schools operating there, however Theravada Buddhism was continually restored and maintained as the main religion.

Theravada Buddhism eventually spread throughout South-east Asia (there was a lot of traffic between India and that region) as at different times missionaries were invited from Sri Lanka and went out to Burma and later on to Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Because, particularly in those countries, they had no strong, uniting cultural forms, Theravada Buddhism and the Indian culture that backed it up became the defining influence. When it arrived in Thailand, Laos, and Burma, their societies shaped themselves around it. In most Buddhist countries, the features of the Buddha images resemble the features of the people of that country. However, what is found in South-east Asia is that the Buddhas often have Indian features. The Thai Buddha images usually don’t look like Thais at all, they have Indian features, large noses, and an Indian cast to their forms.

The language of the Theravada Teachings

Pali is the language of the Theravada scriptures. It seems to have been something of a lingua franca in the region of the Ganges valley around the time of the Buddha, closely related therefore to the language that the Buddha actually spoke. The Buddha was adamant that the Teachings should be learned in this common speech and passed on by rote learning, rather than being cast into the “religious language” of Sanskrit, let alone written down, thereby becoming the sole property of the brahmins, who were the only ones who could speak it.

Pali is something of a poor cousin to Sanskrit, having a much simpler grammar, and does not have its own alphabet. It was not written down at all until 73 BCE, in Sri

Lanka, when there was a famine and concern that, if the monks and nuns who had memorized the Teachings died off, the words of the Buddha would be lost forever. From that time on, it has been written down, simply using the alphabet of each country it has come to or, in some cases, necessitating an alphabet to be created for it.

Even though the Pali scriptures have long been committed to writing, they still keep much of their repetitive form — a form useful for rote learning and recital but sometimes wearying for the silent reader. The Canon itself is divided into three major sections: the discourses of the Buddha (*Sutta*), the monastic discipline (*Vinaya*) and the philosophical/psychological compendium of the *Abhidhamma*.

The scriptures of the Northern School (usually known as the *Mahayana* tradition) were largely written down in Sanskrit. Although they contain a portion of the Buddha's Teachings as they are found in the Pali texts (these are known as the *Agamas*), the majority of their discourses have no exact counterparts in the Pali. Having said this, however, even features that at first glance might seem unique to the Northern lineage, such as the Pure Lands, clearly have their roots in the texts and myths of the Southern. Whether these discourses were actually spoken by the Buddha and not included in the Pali collection for some reason, or whether they were composed at a later date has been hotly debated by scholars and the faithful of both schools over many centuries. The majority of scholars agree, however, that the Pali is the most ancient and trustworthy redaction of the Buddha's Teaching.

Degeneration & renewal

Throughout the time of the geographical dispersion of the Theravada tradition, the theme of a continual looking back to the original standards, the original Teachings, has been sustained. When being established in new countries, there has always been a strong sense of respectfulness and reverence for the original Teachings, and also a respect for the style of life as embodied by the Buddha and the original Sangha, the forest-dwelling monastics of the earliest times. This is the model that was employed then and was thus carried on.

Obviously in these many centuries, there have been lots of ups and downs, but this pattern is what has carried on. Sometimes the religion would die down in Sri Lanka, and then some monks would come from Burma to crank it up again. Then it would fade out in Thailand, and some Sri Lankans would boost them up — propping each other up over the centuries. Thus it has managed to keep itself afloat and still largely in the original form.

When it would be well-developed, it would get rich, and then it would get overweight and corrupt, collapsing under its own weight. Then a splinter group would go off into the forest and say, "Let's get back to basics!" and would again return to those original standards of keeping the monastic rules, practicing meditation, and studying the original Teachings.

The Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths

Although there are numerous volumes of the Buddha's discourses in many traditions, it is also said that the entirety of his Teaching was contained in his very first exposition — called *The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Truth* — which he gave to five monastic companions in the deer park near Benares, shortly after his enlightenment. In this brief discourse (it takes only twenty minutes to recite), he expounded the nature of what he named the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths.

This teaching, the Four Noble Truths, is common to all Buddhist traditions. Just as an acorn contains within it the template for what eventually takes shape as a vast and ancient oak, so too all the myriad Buddhist Teachings can be said to derive from this essential matrix of insight. What is more, enlightened Elders of both Southern and Northern traditions have agreed that this is the case.

The Four Noble Truths are formulated like a medical diagnosis in the ayurvedic tradition: a) the symptoms of the disease, b) the cause, c) the prognosis, and d) the cure. This, I'm told, is the standard format. The Buddha was always drawing on structures and forms that were familiar to people in his time, and this is how he laid out the Four Noble Truths.

The First Truth (the "symptom") is that there is *dukkha* — the experience of incompleteness, dissatisfaction, or frustration — that we are less than blissfully happy all the time. Does anybody argue with that? [Laughs] Occasionally we are blissfully happy, and everything is fine, but there are moments when we wobble, right? Why this is significant is that, if we have an intuition of an Ultimate Reality, an ultimate perfection, then how come there is this *dukkha*? But there is.

Sometimes people read this First Truth and misinterpret it as an absolute statement: "Reality in every dimension is *dukkha*" — that the universe and life and everything are unsatisfactory. The statement gets taken as an absolute value judgment of all and everything, but that's not what is meant here. These are *noble* truths, not *absolute* truths. They are "noble" in the sense that they are relative truths, but when they are understood, they lead us to a realization of the Absolute or the Ultimate. It's just saying, "There is the experience of *dukkha*; there is the experience of dissatisfaction."

The Second Noble Truth is that the cause of this *dukkha* is self-centered craving, *tanha* in Pali (*trshna* in Sanskrit), which literally means "thirst." This craving, this grasping is the cause of *dukkha*. This can be craving for sense-pleasure, craving to become something, craving to be, to be identified as some thing. Or it can be craving to not be, the desire to disappear, to be annihilated, to get rid of. There are many, many subtle dimensions of this.

The Third Truth is that of *dukkha-nirodha*. Nirodha means "cessation." This means that this experience of *dukkha*, of incompleteness, can fade away, can be transcended. It can end. In other words *dukkha* is not an absolute reality. It's just a temporary experience that the heart can be liberated from.

The Fourth Noble Truth is that of the Path, how we get from the Second Truth to the Third, from the experience of *dukkha* to ending it. The cure is the Eightfold Path which is, in essence, virtue, concentration and wisdom.

Dependent Origination – the source code

What brings us to this retreat, what gets us to use all our holiday time and pay good money to come here and suffer for 10 days is the “Big D” – dukkha. With meditation what we are looking at very closely is the bridge between the Second and Third Noble Truths: how suffering arises, what is the cause of suffering, and how we can bring about its cessation. The Buddha focused a huge amount of attention on explaining this point. He talked about the Four Noble Truths in many discourses and also went into a lot of fine analysis about the relationship between the Second and Third Truths [the last part of this sentence seems repetitive of the 2nd sentence in this para., so I deleted it].

He used the term *idappaccayata* for “causality.” It literally means something like, “the conditionality of the relationship between this and that.” This is talking about how things are brought into being – how a chain of causation brings dukkha into existence and the chain of causation that brings it to cessation. There is a little passage that is repeated over and over in the suttas which I find very helpful to recollect:

*When there is this, that comes to be.
With the arising of this, that arises.
When there is not this, that does not come to be.
With the cessation of this, that ceases.*

(A. 10.92)

This fundamental pattern underlies all the teachings on causality. In analyzing the arising of dukkha – where *does* it come from? – the Buddha points to ignorance.

The Buddha, particularly in the Theravada Teachings, avoided any kind of metaphysical speculation. It’s not as if: “Well, there was this event at the beginning of the universe, and God blinked. Therefore we suffer.” Or that this was just a trial run. There’s a Kurt Vonnegut novel where the whole of human evolution, the course of human history, and all the wars and empires and crises and glories, were brought into being because an alien, one of the Tralfamadorians, crashed their spaceship onto earth and was trying to send a message back to their home planet: “Could you send me a new distributor, mine’s gone out?” The whole current of human history had been brought about just as a way of sending this message through space.

We might get the feeling that there is just such a perverse logic behind what we experience in life, but the Buddha didn’t go into any of that. He simply said that the cause of the core problem is ignorance, not seeing clearly. Through not seeing clearly, the whole cycle begins: because there is less than total mindfulness, total awareness, total attunement to reality, we lose our balance.

This principle is known as Dependent Origination. In a way it is the nucleus of the entire Teaching, the source code for *Samsara* and *Nibbana* (*Nirvana* in Sanskrit). It is how the Buddha analyzed the nature of experience in the most radical manner. Furthermore, the realization of Dependent Origination is what he pointed to as having

been the way to his own enlightenment, and he prescribed its realization for others who were keen to cure their own disease of dukkha.

When there is ignorance, then the whole sense of "subject" and "object" crystallizes; the sense of this and that solidifies. There is an identification with the body and the senses as being "self" and the external sense-objects as being "the world outside." Because there is a body and senses, we hear, think, smell, and so forth. Because of that sense contact, feeling arises. There is pleasure, pain, or neutral feeling, feelings of interest, aversion, excitement, whatever it might be. Initially it is just a feeling, then from feeling there arises desire. Pleasant feeling will give rise to the desire to get a hold of, to get closer to: "Whoa, what's that? Smells good!" This is feeling turning into craving. There is sense contact, feeling, then craving arises from that. If it's painful or unpleasant we withdraw from it, we desire to get away from it. Craving leads to clinging, *upadana*, attachment.

Upadana leads to what is called "becoming" (*bhava* in Pali). I like to picture this as a rising wave. The mind grabs hold of an experience: "I wonder if they need any help down in the kitchen? Yes, I'm sure they do. I could peel a chestnut or two. I could really be useful down there." This is upadana. Then bhava is actually getting up off your cushion and heading down the stairs. Becoming is aiming toward the object of desire and acting on that. Bhava is what consumer society runs on. This is what the entire advertising industry and the consumer culture are aimed at fostering: the thrill of me just about to get what I want.

Then *jati* ("birth") comes after that. Birth is the moment we get what we want. It's the moment of no turning back. At bhava we can still withdraw. We can be all the way down the stairs and then think, "Get back in there. *Come on*, he's halfway through a Dhamma talk. This is really too much!" There is still time to get out of it. But *jati* is where there's no turning back. The die is cast, and we're in there spinning our story to the cook and getting what we want.

"Oh yes, I could use some help. Could you stir this for me and then taste it?"

We think, "Ahhh, I've got it!" That's the moment of getting what we want. Then, following upon the moment of getting what we want, there is the rest of it. After we're born, as we all know, there is a lot of life that happens. After the moment of birth comes the entire lifespan. After the moment of thrill has passed and we've managed to do as much tasting as we can deal with, the excitement of it starts to fade away. The feelings of embarrassment arise: "Good grief where am I at? Dragged around by my nose, when am I going to get *over* this?!" Feelings of self-criticism, self-disparagement, and disappointment assail us: "It didn't taste that good after all. After all of that...I sat there for twenty minutes cranking myself up for it, and then they put too much salt in it."

This is what is called *soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupayasa*: "sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair." (As our beloved retreat manager says, "These are a few of my favorite things.") So then what happens? There we are, we feel kind of mucky, disappointed, down. This is dukkha. Essentially that long word just means dukkha; it feels bad.

So what do we do when we feel bad? This is interesting – the Buddha said, “Dukkha ripens in two ways: either as continuing the round of rebirth or in search.” So the first of these means we feel mopey and wretched, and then we think, “Maybe they need some help with the *cake!*”

What happens if we don’t awaken is that we go back to the time when we last felt really good, which was at the bhava-jati junction when the thrill hit. That was the last time we felt good. So we just go back to where we last felt good and try it again. And again and again and again....

“Dukkha ripening as search” means we realize, “I’ve been through this 153,485 times, *enough*; this is *enough*. How can I get out of this? What can I do? What’s going on here? What is this pattern?” We’re pretty thick creatures – and I speak from personal experience. We take a lot of pounding before we learn some of these lessons.

We can be very convincing. We really build ourselves up and excuse ourselves. But what brings us here to a retreat is recognizing that trying to find happiness through that kind of gratification does not work. Even though we get fooled and lose it, something in our hearts knows: this does not work. This is what we mean by “search,” looking for the roots of how the whole thing operates.

A lesson from a chocolate éclair

Sometimes the lessons come not because we’ve chosen them. A story springs to mind about an incident which occurred many years ago at Chithurst Monastery. A friend of ours, a very sweet old faith healer in his nineties named Albert Knockles, wanted to sponsor a meal for the whole community. Normally we never cook in the afternoon or evening in the monastery, but it had been decided: “We’ve got to do this big meal for Albert.” The nuns were asked to cook it (this was before the Ten Precept,¹ brown-robed nuns existed, so all the nuns were in white and on the Eight Precepts² in those days). Some of them were happy to do the cooking in the afternoon, but some of them felt railroaded into it.

There was also an issue about whether or not it was all a big waste of time, people expending this huge effort cooking – “We’re supposed to be reflecting on alms-food being medicine for the body....” Meanwhile others were thinking, “Yeah, great, big feast tomorrow!” I was in the former camp, a sourpuss thinking, “This is all a *total* waste of time.”

As the day wore on and the evening came, some of the venerables were getting more than slightly excited by all this, and one of these was the second monk, the vice-

¹ The Ten Precepts are to refrain from killing living beings, taking what is not given, engaging in any kind of sexual activity, speaking falsely or harmfully, consuming intoxicants which cause carelessness, eating at inappropriate times, seeking entertainment, beautifying or adorning oneself, lying on high or luxurious sleeping places, and accepting money.

² The Eight Precepts follow the Ten Precepts (see above), with the exception of accepting money. Also, two of the Ten Precepts (on entertainment and beautification/adornment) are consolidated into one precept.

abbot. I spent most of the evening in contemptuous thoughts, and he spent most of the evening salivating. The next morning, after the morning chanting, meditation, and the work meeting, he confessed that he hadn't been able to sleep all night since he'd been anticipating the meal so much. When he said that, my level of contempt went off the scale, "He's supposed to be this great monk, an inspiring example, and he's just... arrrrrgghh..." But he was on a roll and was not going to be dissuaded from the belief that this was a really good thing.

Come the meal time, amongst the other things that the nuns had prepared, there were chocolate éclairs, **big** chocolate éclairs, stuffed with whipped cream; the rest of the meal was also fabulous. I was full of aversion for the whole thing.

I noticed that, when the meal had all been offered, the second monk took his éclair out of his bowl and had it in his lid, and then we started to eat. After a few mouthfuls I was forced to come to the conclusion that this really was delicious food and that maybe it hadn't been such a bad idea after all. Meanwhile I noticed the second monk *started* with his chocolate éclair. He picked it up with incredible concentration, taken two bites out of it and put it down. Then he closed his eyes and just sat there, not eating anything else.

I thought: "Well done – he's really seen the foolishness of his greed, his obsession, and he's decided to forgo the whole meal – good man, well done, impressive."

When we got to the end of the meal and were cleaning our bowls, I made some sort of comment to him like, "It was interesting that, after all the build up, you refrained from eating the meal."

He said, "I was about to be sick."

"Why was that?"

"What was your éclair like?"

"It was fine."

"I took one mouthful of mine, and it tasted like it was full of salt," he said. "I thought I must be dreaming so I took another bite, and it was exactly the same. I sat there on the edge of nausea through the whole meal."

The nuns had ended up working so late the previous night and had got so tired in the process, that they had accidentally put salt instead of sugar into one last batch of the whipped cream. Also, because they were on the Eight Precepts, they were not allowed to eat in the evening, thus they were forbidden by their Rule to consume or even taste the food they were preparing, so they hadn't noticed the difference.

He was the one who got the éclair with the salt in it: soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupayasa, the unsatisfactory result of desire. It was a great lesson.

Escape from the cycle of birth & death

In meditation, as you've probably noticed, we begin with that kind of lesson. Life smacks us in the face and says, "Wake up." Or we begin to notice a pattern. We see ourselves following this through and think, "What an idiot. Why do I keep doing this?!" Slowly, the more that we practice with it, we can catch the process earlier and earlier on,

so that as we see ourselves getting entangled, grasping, clinging, feeling the discomfort of that, then we know to let go. The more that our awareness gets refined and we bring clearer and clearer attention to the flow of experience, the more we find we can begin to catch the process where craving turns into clinging or where feeling turns into craving. We can experience a pleasant feeling but not let it turn into craving, or a painful feeling and not let it turn into hatred.

By meditating on physical discomfort, we can see that there is a way that there can be pain in the body but we are not suffering because of it. The pain is one thing, and the suffering we create around it is another. We can be quite at peace with it. There's the feeling, but it's not giving rise to desire, craving. Just as, if we're experimenting with eating one mouthful at a time, food can be delicious but we're not adding anything to it, we're not getting crazy for the next mouthful. It's simply, "This tastes good." End of story. We're more able to be with that experience because we're not racing onto the next thing, or not opinionating about it. We loosen the process in this way.

The more full the awareness is, the more we sustain mindfulness — a whole-hearted awareness — then the process of craving and dukkha does not kick into action. When there is no loss of mindfulness, then that polarity, the sense of self and other, is not so strong. The sense of "me" in here and "the world" out there, even that is loosened; it's not solidified. Then when there is a sound or a feeling, a sensation or memory, an emotion, any kind of sensory or mental impression, it is seen for what it is. It is not given a life of its own. It ceases.

By breaking the chain of causation at clinging or craving, or where feeling turns into craving, or even at the very beginning — by not allowing ignorance to arise but sustaining awareness — then the causes of dukkha are removed. If there are no causes, then suffering will not arise. "When there is not this, then that does not come to be. When this ceases, that also ceases." This is what we mean by the ending of birth and death, the ending of rebirth.

The process of Dependent Origination as a whole is also known as the *bhavacakka*, the cycle or wheel of rebirth. The terminology "getting off the wheel" or "ending birth and death," describes the very process that I've just described. Principally this is what Theravadan Buddhist practice is all about: the ending of rebirth, not being born again.

This cycle of rebirth is what was illustrated in that last story: my being born into my negativity and then being shown that there really wasn't anything to be negative about. The other monk was born into his chocolate éclair. We get born into all kinds of things. It's not just what happens in the maternity ward. Birth is happening many, many times a day. We can look at it on an external, physical level, but more directly we can see over and over the whole process on a psychological level.

Oftentimes when we chant *The Buddha's Teaching on Loving Kindness*, people find that it all sounds wonderful, and then come the last four lines:

*By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,*

*Being freed from all sense-desires,
Is not born again into this world.*

(S. 143-52)

It's easy to trip up on that last line. I don't know if any of you have had that experience. Certainly those conditioned to the Northern school of Buddhism and the Bodhisattva ideals might think, "Well, wait a minute. What's this about not being born again?" Also just from the general life-affirming philosophy that we have in the West, particularly in America, *particularly* in California. "Hey! I don't mind being reborn. This world is all right. I like this place. What's so wrong with the world anyway?!" The idea of not being reborn is looked upon as a kind of death wish. "If only I could stop being. If I could be annihilated and not exist." But that is not the right understanding.

Every one of us, I'm sure, has had at least a moment or two in the last few days when the mind was at its clearest — those "best moments" are when we're not being born into anything. Rebirth has ended. The mind is awake, and there is peacefulness, clarity. There's no sense of self. There's no time or place — just "Is-ness," Suchness. Everything is fine. We're actually at our most alive, and life is at its most perfect. Just on the tangible, experiential level "not being born" is far from being a wipe-out experience of nothingness or not feeling anything, a total anesthesia. It has more to do with both being completely alive and also completely undefined. It is a sense of awareness which has no form or place, and has nothing to do with time or individuality.

This can be hard to conceptualize, but when we talk about "not being born again," we are talking about the personal, the individual, the idea of a separate self that is not being crystallized. When we try to create an idea of what we are, we wonder, "Well, what *is* a person anyway? Surely if I'm not reborn, I've got to go somewhere, or something has got to happen. What happens?"

The Goal

There was an occasion when a wanderer, named Vacchagotta, came to ask the Buddha the question, "Where do enlightened beings go when they die?"

The Buddha said, "If we had a little fire burning in front of us and let it go out, then I asked you, 'Where did the fire go, north, south, east, or west? What would you say?'"

Vacchagotta furrowed his brow and said, "It didn't go anywhere. It just went out. The question doesn't apply."

The Buddha said, "Exactly so, Vacchagotta. The way you phrased the question presumes a reality that does not exist." We cannot say an enlightened being *goes* anywhere. The state of an enlightened one at the breaking up of the body is indescribable. (M. 72.16-20)

There is another exchange that the Buddha had, with a wanderer called Upasiva in the Sutta Nipata, in *The Way to the Beyond*. Upasiva has asked the Buddha a similar question, to which he replies:

*“Like a flame struck by a sudden gust of wind,
in a flash it has gone out,
and nothing more can be known about it.
It is the same with a wise person
freed from mind and body –
in a flash they have gone,
and nothing more can be known about them;
designation applies to them no more.”*

*“Please explain this clearly to me, Sir,” said Upasiva,
“for it’s a state that you have understood:
one who has reached the end –
do they not exist,
or are they made immortal, perfectly free?”
“One who has reached the end
has no criterion
by which they can be measured.
That by which they could be talked of
is no more.
You cannot say, ‘They do not exist.’
When all modes of being,
all phenomena are removed,
then all means of description
have gone too.”*

(S.N. 1074-6)

So this points to the Goal. In the Theravada world, we talk about the goal of the spiritual life as the realization of Nibbana. It has an inscrutable quality to it. It frustrates the thinking mind, but I feel it is very important to have at least a sense for what this is referring to – awakening our intuitive sense of the Ultimate. It’s also important to know that the Buddha didn’t speak of this Goal as something that can only be realized after the death of the body.

There is a principle that the Buddha talked about which is known as “the unapprehendability of the enlightened.” Anuradha, a young monk, has been challenged by some brahmins who ask him, “What happens to an enlightened being when they die?”

He replies, “The Buddha does not answer that question.”

“You must be either someone who is really stupid, or else newly gone forth into your tradition, otherwise you’d give us a straight answer.”

Anuradha later repeats this discussion to the Buddha and asks, “Did I answer well, or did I answer badly?”

The Buddha says, “You answered well, Anuradha.” He went on to instruct him further, “Anuradha, do you see the Tathagata as *being* the five *khandhas* [body, feeling, perceptions, mental formations, and discriminative consciousness]?”

“No, Venerable Sir.”

“Do you see the Tathagata as *having* the five khandhas?”

“No, Venerable Sir.”

“Do you see the Tathagata as *not having* the five khandhas?”

“No, Venerable Sir.”

“Do you see the Tathagata as being *in* the five khandhas?”

“No, Venerable Sir.”

“Do you see the Tathagata as being *apart from* the five khandhas?”

“No, Venerable Sir.”

“Exactly so, Anuradha. Therefore, if the Tathagata is unapprehendable here and now, while the body is still alive, how much more so after the breaking up of the body after death? What I teach, Anuradha, now as formerly, is dukkha and the ending of dukkha.” (S. 44.2)

The Buddha, in the Theravada tradition, is always pulling away from creating a metaphysical description of Nibbana, the Beyond, Ultimate Reality. Instead he always comes right back to the focus of: “If there is suffering, it’s because there is clinging to something. An identity is being created.” That’s all we need to know. The rest is whipped cream. Over and over again such abstruse philosophical questions were put to the Buddha, and over and over again he would bring it back to: “I teach only dukkha and the ending of dukkha.”

It’s not a matter of creating the perfect philosophical model (and then getting lost in it) but looking at how we feel now, what’s happening within our heart right now. As we recognize that, as we see dukkha being created, we trace it back. We realize there’s been some clinging; the clinging came from craving; the craving came from feeling; and the feeling came from that contact. We realize, “Aha! It was that thought that triggered this.” We see that and let it go. This is dukkha-nirodha, the ending of suffering.

The ending of suffering is not some kind of Armageddon, a cosmic healing at the ending of time. The ending of suffering occurs at exactly the place where the suffering is generated. When we trace back some particular event of dukkha, when we see where it has arisen from and let go of it right there, then there is no suffering.

So I offer this for your reflection, a Dhamma feast for the evening.

M. = *Majjhima Nikaya*

S. = *Samyutta Nikaya*

A. = *Anguttara Nikaya*

S.N. = *Sutta Nipata*

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