

New Life, Part 1 of 3

NEW LIFE

by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

A Dhamma lecture given at Suan Mokkh on 6 August 1986

In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhadāsa gave regular lectures during the monthly international retreats held at Suan Mokkh and then Suan Mokkh International Dharma Hermitage. Usually, Ajahn spoke in Thai and Santikaro Bhikkhu interpreted into English live. All Ajahn's teachings are now available on:

www.suanmokkh.org,

<https://soundcloud.com/buddhadasa> and

<https://www.youtube.com/@buddhadasabhikkhu7829>.

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email to: suanmokkh_bangkok@bia.or.th.

Today I'd like to talk about something which I think we have different understandings, on a topic that I think we understand differently. I think we have different opinions about the topic of New Life. As for this word 'new,' it might be new for some people but really, it's older than old. This has been known for thousands of years, but for some people who don't know about it, it seems to be very new. So this may be something new for you, but really it's something very old. There's a problem that you may not be very interested in this, that for you the word 'new' has no meaning because the thing we are talking about may seem to you to be bland or tasteless. You may not like this kind of life. It may not be the kind of life you want, so we need to talk about this kind of life that isn't up or down, isn't rising or falling, isn't getting or losing. Some of you may like the kind of life that is up and down, jumping and hopping all the time, but we would like to bring this matter before you and speak about it, even if it's something you don't like. It may be funny to talk about it, but we need to discuss it.

The first thing to look at is that this New Life is above or beyond the meaning, the value, the influence, or the power of the things we call 'good' and 'evil.' We need to look at whether this New Life has any benefits, any value, for you. Many of you are interested in what is good. You want good things. You're after what you consider to be good. But for New Life we need to go beyond good. We need to be above good, completely free of it, for there to be New Life. For most of you this might be quite a new thing, this New Life being above good, beyond good, because generally you probably are satisfied with whatever is good, with goodness, with good

things. This is generally satisfying for you but the New Life is beyond all that, above all that. And think about what the kind of satisfaction there would be in being above even good, being free of good, and the kind of happiness that would be. That is something to think about. So far you've seen that good is something in conflict with evil. We must abandon evil things, bad things, get free of bad things in order to attain what is good. We generally see things in this way, but the New Life is above all that. It's above all that that fighting, that struggle. So imagine what kind of peace and joy there is in the New Life.

Generally, we make distinctions about, we identify with, we attach to what is good or what we consider to be good, and we make all sorts of problems for ourselves in doing so. It doesn't have to be any problem with what is bad or evil, but still somehow we manage to identify and attach with the bad in order to hate it, and so there's hate and anger to our attachment to what we judge to be bad. Both of these cause all sorts of problems and agitation in the mind, but the New Life is free of all these problems. To be free of the problems caused by attachment to good and attachment to evil is what is meant by a New Life.

In general, ordinary people either are pleased or displeased. All the time there is one or the other, either displeasure or pleasure, constantly. Sometimes there is neither pleasure nor displeasure and there is uncertainty, not knowing which one of these to grab on to. This is the meaning of '*dukkha*.' This is the cause of *dukkha* in this constant being pleased with or displeased with things. This causes many problems. How peaceful would life be without this constant pleasure or displeasure? If there was New Life where there was neither this being pleased with things or being satisfied with things on one hand or being dissatisfied, displeased with things on the other, wouldn't that be truly satisfying and truly pleasing? Think about it, the New Life that is beyond pleasure and displeasure. Might that be truly satisfying? If you aren't satisfied with this kind of New Life, if it doesn't interest you at all, then what I will be saying has no value for you. It would be useless for you to listen because what I'll be talking about is this New Life, the life that is above both good and evil. You've all come from very far away, from North America, from Europe, from Australia. You've come searching for something better. You're already satisfied with the good that you already have but you're attached to something better. You're looking for something better. In spite of this pleasure that you already have, you're looking for more, more good, for better. This is a kind of attachment that you all have. Something that's either strange or maybe amusing for you is that genuine happiness is not in the good, nor in the bad. Genuine bliss and joy have nothing to do with the good, with goodness, and badness. As we go through our lives looking for better and better things, always trying to find something better than what we have, even if we reach the best, even if we've gotten to the best possible thing there is, that still isn't really the end of life. That's really not the correct goal of life. There's really no lasting happiness in that. The problem with humanity is our clinging – our grasping and attachment – to good and bad. I know what the right word to use in Thai for this but the best we can do in English is 'attachment.' So we'll have to use this word 'attachment.' When we attach to good then there follows the problems, difficulties, and hassles on the side of good. There are the problems and hassles that arise out of attachment to good. When we attach to bad or evil, then

there are even more problems and more hassles that are of the sort that happen with bad things. With criminals, they attach to the bad but they think it's good. The reason they get so involved in those things is because to them it's good, within their attachments that is what is good. To us what they're doing is bad, but still we're attached to good and bad. So in the world what we have is fighting, struggling, competition, bickering, arguing, between these two factions – the faction of good and the faction of bad. If we were to stop using the words good and bad, if we were to be finished with these words, there's another word that we could use much more safely. This word is 'correctness,' or 'rightness,' according to the way things really are. Once we see the problems and hassles and difficulties associated with goodness and we see the problems and hassles associated with evil, then we can become interested in correctness, which is above both good and evil.

If any of you or all of you were true Christians and really genuinely understood the Christian teachings, then you would understand this point very, very easily. If we look back to the beginning of the book of Genesis, there's the story of the fruit of the tree of good and evil. When God forbade Adam and Eve – the first husband and wife – to eat from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God said don't eat from that tree. If you eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, then you will die. You will die from eating that fruit. Those of you, those Christians who understand the meaning of this story, will have no problem understanding this teaching of Buddhism which I am talking to you about this morning. Though Christians interpret this story in one way and Buddhists in another, we'll look at it from the Buddhist perspective. The meaning of this is that when man attaches to the meaning of good or the meaning of evil, then there is pain, there is clinging, there is selfishness, there is frustration, agony, grief, in short there is *dukkha*. This is what God meant by death. If you attach to good or evil, you will die, you will suffer from *dukkha*. This doesn't mean the body will die. We're talking about a kind of death that is even worse than physical death. We're talking about spiritual death, we're talking about *dukkha*. Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command and they went and ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Through this knowledge of good and evil, there was attachment or what Christians call 'original sin.' This is the original sin by which spiritual death became known to man. So through this original sin, man came to know good and evil and through that knowledge attached to it. This was the original sin from which further sin has followed. So the children of Adam came to sin also. The older brother Cain saw that his father loved the younger brother a great deal. So Cain led Abel into the forest and killed him. Abel had done nothing wrong but Cain killed him only because their father loved Abel very much. So through his attachment to good, Cain became jealous and killed his younger brother. This was the first act of sin to follow from the original sin of Adam and Eve. So that was the first sin, and since then things have been carrying on like that through the attachment to good up until this very moment.

People want to be good and they fight over it and struggle for it. We don't want anybody to be as good as us. We don't want anybody to be better than us. So we're always fighting and arguing and competing in order to get or be what is good. For most of us, we only view goodness in

materialistic terms. We only see the good in things that we can possess and own. We have no idea about even mental and spiritual things. So the world today is dominated by this attachment to good, to people always wanting to have the good, to be good, and fighting over it. And this goes on and on, leading to all sorts of arguments and war, endlessly. While all this materialistic competition is going on, there's no understanding of spiritual matters. If we look on the level of society and struggle among society or wars, still a very gross superficial level, if we go into this competition between good and evil more deeply, we can see it happening within a single person. In just one individual we can see the same problem arising, so let's look a little more deeply. Through attachment to the good we take upon ourselves this thing which we can call the 'burden of life.' In identifying things as good and then clinging to them blindly, in pursuing them, these things begin to dominate us and weigh down upon the mind. This is why we call it the 'burden of life.' When there is no attachment to things, when there's no attachment to good things, then there is no burden, there is no weight upon the heart. But when we attach to anything no matter how good it is, no matter how sublime or perfect, through that attachment – whatever it is – becomes a very heavy burden which weighs down the mind and spirit. So this is how the burden of life comes about. It happens not with bad things but with good things. This is because good things are very attractive. They are good or we identify them as good because of some attractive pleasing quality which invites us to attach to them. This isn't near as much of a problem with bad things that lack this attractiveness, but when we see something is good we are attracted to it and it is very, very easy to cling and grasp to it and thereby making it a very heavy burden upon the mind. Through this arise all the struggle and conflict and lack of peace within us. Through this attachment to good there has been much materialistic progress in the world, in science, in technology, in health, in the way we feed ourselves, in luxuries, in the way we decorate ourselves and our property. There has been great material progress, all because of our attachment to the good. But because of this attachment, all of these things that we have developed are also great burdens upon us. We fear that they will be lost. We're frustrated when we don't get them. We're envious when we've got less than somebody else. We're worried that things will be stolen. These are always weighing us down. This is because of what we call '*avijjā*,' not knowing or ignorance because of the lack of knowledge about the way things really are. So this very materialistic society, this world society of consumerism and materialism is a result of this attachment to good. It's this lack of balance we have. It's not going about things in the correct way, has resulted in this situation of attachment to good, resulting in over identification with materialism, with the extremes we can see in our obsession with material goods and material things, both our own bodies, pleasures we obtain from our bodies, and the pleasures we obtain from our possessions. So these three examples that we have just given should be enough to understand what we're talking about here. The first example was how the attachment to good leads to jealousy and the problems that that brings. The second example showed how attachment to the good leads to the burden what we call the 'burden of life,' and in the third example we've seen how attachment to good leads to us going to great extremes and overdoing material progress where we've gone far beyond what is necessary and thereby created all sorts of problems for ourselves. So with these

three examples of what happens when there is attachment to the good, you should be able to see what sort of problem this causes. It should be obvious to you the degree and the magnitude of this dilemma.

Now let's look on the opposing side of this, let's look at evil. Somebody tells you that you're an evil person. How does it feel when they say you're evil? Even if you're not evil, it hurts, there is *dukkha*. This is because of attachment. So attachment to evil also causes problems and leads to *dukkha*. Through our attachment to things as evil on one hand or when we mistake evil things for the good and attach to them as good, we bring upon ourselves the burden of life just as well. Attachment to evil is just as much a burden, just as much a heavy weight on the heart and mind as attachment to good is. So all the worries and fears we have about evil things from attaching to them, through our attachment to evil things, we worry, we're afraid, we can't live with any freedom or peace because of this attachment to evil. This attachment is not coming from wisdom. This is the problem. In knowing where there are dangers and things that we ought to be afraid of, in doing so wisely from understanding things correctly as they really are, there is no problem. But when there is attachment to evil then there is ignorant fear, ignorant worries, which are completely unnecessary and cause all sorts of pain and frustration and anguish. So there are these problems with attachment to evil as well. We ought to take a look at a kind of mind that is better than this, that doesn't attach to evil, that is above evil. So attachment to goodness has its burdens and attachment to evil has its burdens. But there is something better than this, which is not attaching to either, to being above both good and evil. Rather than attaching to these, there is correctness. Correctness is no attachment, not attaching, but being above these things, being free of the pain, of the problems, of the hassles, difficulties, and *dukkha* that arise when we attach to good and evil. This is the way for life to be lived in a way where there is no burden, through non-attaching, through living correctly, through having enough mindfulness and wisdom to see the correct way and follow it. Then there is no attachment and life is not a burden at all. This is something above and beyond these habits and predicaments of attachment to good and evil.

We're always teaching our children to attach to things. From the very moment they're born we're teaching them to attach to this and to that, to my mother, my father, my house, my bed, my teddy bear, my blanket. As they grow they become more and more skillful at attaching to things. All parents, because of their love for their children, are trying to give their children the things the kids want, and this just helps the children to attach to these things more and more. So nowadays we're living in a world where our children are getting better and better, more expert and skillful, in attaching to things. All these things are attachment to what is perceived to be good. It's always attachment to the good, and our children are so good at this that it's causing all sorts of problems. Their health isn't very good. They're unable to do very well at school, and many things are knocked out of balance and lead to an unhealthy life. This is because of all of this attachment to good which we teach our children is not correct. It doesn't follow the way things are, so it causes problems. There's not any culture in the world that doesn't have this problem. All societies are teaching their children how to attach to things, to attach to the good. Each of us inherits this attachment from our parents because it's conditioned into us from the very start.

What we have here is a problem of language. We use the word ‘good,’ ‘good,’ ‘good,’ but we don’t really understand its meaning properly. Generally, when we use the word ‘good,’ what we mean is something is considered good by most of the people around us. One meaning of ‘good’ is just determined by the group, what is popular. This is one meaning of good. Or we attach to the meaning that whatever pleases us is good, whatever makes us happy is good. Both of these kinds of good are just different sorts of attachment. Whatever is good is just a kind of attachment. We’re attaching to these things, giving them the meaning as good through our attachment. Through this attachment we get ourselves into problems, especially because of this attachment we aren’t able to see what is truly good. Here again we run into the limits of language. There are these relative goods which we attach to but there is something that is truly and genuinely good. Actually it would be nice if we had a different word for it because the relative goods always lead to *dukkha*, to some form of *dukkha* because this is all bound up with attachment. But there is something that we can say is truly good but most of us can’t understand what that is because we are hindered by our attachments to relative goods. So here we have this problem of the word ‘good.’ We use it in an attached way but we also need to begin to understand how to use it in a deeper, more profound way where there is no attachment. So we have these words ‘good’ and ‘evil’ but we ought to have a better word. So let’s use the word ‘correct,’ or ‘correctness.’ Buddhism doesn’t aim at good, it doesn’t aim at evil either but Buddhism aims at being correct, not attaching to good and not attaching to bad but being correct. The meaning of correctness is the Noble Eightfold Path. The one middle way of correctness, the one balanced centered correct way of living that has eight components or factors. So let’s stop using these words ‘good’ and ‘bad.’ Let’s stop attaching to the meanings that we give to these words. Instead let’s get used to using the word ‘correct,’ and using mindfulness and wisdom find out and put into practice what correctness really is. Good and attachment to it create many problems. Bad or evil and attachment to it create many problems, but with correctness no problems are created. The word ‘God’ is often used and this is often defined as the utmost goodness, the highest good, the supreme good. This meaning of God is completely unacceptable to Buddhists because the highest good will only cause problems. So if we want to talk of a Buddhist god as a supreme thing for Buddhists, we need to talk about utmost correctness, supreme correctness. This we can take as a god for Buddhists. So this is the law of correctness, the law of living correctly. This can be taken and accepted by Buddhists. We need to understand this from the very beginning and use this knowledge as a foundation as we go further into this subject. So with good and bad equally being problems, let’s summarize what we’ve been saying to make it easier for you to remember: Transcend bad, be above the evil – this is the first thing. Go beyond or transcend evil to arrive at the good. Don’t attach to the good. Transcend the good and be above it, and then there is voidness, emptiness, or freedom. So transcend the evil, transcend the good, be above both good and evil. This is the meaning of voidness, which is to be free and be emancipated. This is where Buddhism is aiming at, at voidness, at freedom, emancipation from attaching to either good or evil. The meaning of voidness is to be without

attachment. This is all what is meant by voidness or emptiness, freedom from attachment, not attaching to good and not attaching to bad. We can use a metaphor to make this clearer: To carry a rock, to carry a big rock that has no value, there's no purpose in carrying this. This is the first kind of attachment. Carrying that rock is heavy, it's tiring, it's painful. Now to carry a diamond, a big heavy diamond which has much more value, it's much more expensive than a rock, it's still heavy, tiring, and painful. There is no peace in lugging a diamond around. To put down the rock and put down the diamond and have nothing to carry, that is voidness or emptiness. That is freedom. Attaching to the evil is *dukkha*. It's a burden upon the mind. Even attaching to the good is a heavy burden upon the mind. These are both forms of *dukkha*. To put down these burdens, to relieve the mind and the heart of these weights, this is to be free of *dukkha*. Voidness is the emptiness of *dukkha*, the absence of *dukkha*, no *dukkha*. This is what Buddhism is about. When we talk about this voidness where there is no attachment, where the mind isn't lugging around these heavy weights, this is what we mean by a New Life. There are many details that we could talk about this, and those will have to wait until later, but we wanted to clarify the basic meaning of a New Life for you today.

Now at this point we still don't know if you are still interested in a New Life. We have no idea of knowing whether you like this thing, whether it has any meaning for you. Still, we need to talk about it in order for you to begin to think about it, then maybe you'll be interested. Or maybe you prefer the word 'freedom' or the word 'liberation.' Maybe this word has more meaning for you. To be liberated, to be truly free, is to be free of attachment, to be liberated from attachment to the good and attachment to the evil. If you are after freedom, if you're trying to be free, if you want to be free, if you're fighting for freedom and liberation, then at least know what liberation means, know what true freedom is. Don't waste your time on some impossible sort of freedom. In Pāli there is the word '*kusala*,' this means 'good.' There is the word '*akusala*,' this means 'evil.' But freedom is to transcend good and transcend evil, to transcend both *kusala* and *akusala*. When we're talking about freedom, we can't describe it as either good or evil. It can't be described as right or wrong. So we need to understand the correct meaning of the word 'freedom.' If we're going to work for freedom, then we really have to understand what we're working for. If our goal is vague, then we'll never get anywhere. Or if we want to make it even easier to understand, we can talk about positive and negative. True freedom – voidness – is neither positive nor negative. To attach to the positive is to go off to one direction. To attach to negative is to go off in another direction. Neither of these are correct. Neither of these are free. To attach to either the positive or negative is the same as attaching to good and evil. It is *dukkha*. So don't bother attaching to either of these. Be free of positive and negative, of good and evil. There are some things in the world that are attached to as positive. There are other things that are attached to as the negative. But there's really no point in attaching to things in either of these ways because to do so only leads to *dukkha*, it's only to put burdens upon the spirit. So when we attach to positive things it's generally in order to love them, and to attach to negative things it's in order to hate them or despise them. But really, things are not in the world to be loved or despised. Things are not there to be attached to and judged. To hate things is a mistake and to

love them is also a mistake. To be correct is to be free of both of these errors, to be balanced in the middle, to be void and empty.

We'd like to go back to Christianity again. For those of you who are true Christians and understand the Christian teachings, you probably thought about the other tree that's mentioned in Genesis – the tree of life. The first tree was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And when Adam and Eve ate from the fruit of that first tree, there was attachment to good and evil, which is original sin, and *dukkha* has followed from that ever since. When this original sin occurred, they were forbidden to eat from the tree of life and God took that tree and protected it and kept it so that human beings cannot eat from it. From eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we are caught up in these attachments and in *dukkha*. But to eat from the tree of life is to be free of all *dukkha*. But when we are still attached, there's no way that we can eat from the tree of that fruit, and God is keeping it with himself beyond our reach and doesn't allow us to touch it. But what we ought to be very, very interested in is finding out how to eat the fruit of that tree. What must be done in order to eat the fruit of the tree of life? This is a very, very important question for us. Now the tree of life, God took it up into heaven with him and set up some archangels around it with flaming swords and all kinds of terrible weapons, so the tree of life is completely surrounded and protected in order to keep humanity away from it. It's got this heavy guard 24 hours a day so that we can't even touch the fruit of that tree. This shows us that to be above good and above evil, is probably going to take a lot of work and is going to be difficult. We're going to have to fight and struggle with those guards. We're going to have to kill off those archangels in order to eat the fruit from that tree of life. So then don't be surprised if, in your practice, you have to go through some difficulties. That's the way it has to be when God has taken the tree of life and put it up in heaven and surrounded it with powerful celestial beings with all kinds of celestial weapons.

So the work we have to do will be difficult. We have to accept this but it has its end. The eating of the fruit of the tree of life – to be above both good and evil, to be free of *dukkha* – this is what Buddhism is about. So please accept the difficulties that you're going to have to face as you study and practice in order to realize and penetrate to the truth and the reality of the state that is above both good and evil. It's not gonna be easy. Please accept the difficulties that you will have to face along the way as you study and practice and realize a New Life. To be willing to do this is to begin to let go of positivism and negativism, to go beyond optimism and pessimism, to be free of these judging types of minds, and then to come to the true meaning of New Life, to really find out what a New Life is. So this is what it's about. The only thing that really remains is for you to decide whether you like this or not, whether it interests you or not. That's the important question. Do you like the idea of a New Life? Do you want a New Life? Or are you satisfied with the old life? It's up for you to decide. It's gonna take some courage. You need a lot of courage to overcome all the traditions and customs that tie us down, all the conventional thinking that weighs us down and limits us. We have to get beyond all these things which bind us to attachment to good and to evil. Even when we go and attach to God and say that God is the highest good, we have to be really careful. If God was really good, if God was truly good, then

why would God forbid Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of life? If God was really good, that would never happen. So we have to see that God is not good but that God is above good and above evil. And if we truly understand what God is in this way then we can use God as a meaningful direction for correct practice and correct living. So it takes some courage and effort to overcome the obstacles that are in the way. This means overcoming conventional, traditional understandings of things, to get beyond these intellectual limitations, to get above good and above evil and be free. To do so takes courage. Please see very, very clearly that traditions tie us and bind us to attachment. See this most clearly. Traditions tie us to attachment. This means that we have to break with the traditions. We have to break the traditions in order to be free of attachment in order to know what the New Life is that is above good and above evil.

All that we've said today is about the New Life. That's what we've been talking about – the life that is above the influence of good and above the influence of evil. So we've explained the New Life to you. Now it's up to you to choose whether you want a New Life or not. If you're not interested in New Life, then you really don't have to do anything. You can keep on doing whatever you've been doing all this time. You don't have to go through the difficulties of a meditation retreat and of continuing this practice. Just go back to whatever you were doing. But if you like a New Life, if you would like to have a New Life, if it interests you, if this has meaning, then you're going to have to have courage and put forward effort – sincere effort – to study and practice until you understand what this is all about. Understand what we've been talking about and realize the fruit. Keep practicing until realizing the fruit of a life that is free of both good and evil, a life that is truly void. So you have the choice between New Life and the old life. For the old life you already know what to do, you've been doing it for many years. For the New Life it's time to begin anew, start working in new ways, building new skills, in order to have a New Life. It's your choice. So at this point we request to finish today's talk.

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Transcribed by Henry Barry (henry.barry@gmail.com) in July, 2023
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