

Anattā and Rebirth

by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

A Dhamma lecture given at Suan Mokkh on 13 January 1988

In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhādāsa 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. Audio recordings are now available from www.suanmokkh.org and www.bia.or.th. The following is a transcription generously made by a Dhamma volunteer. If you noticed possible improvements to the text and would like to contribute, please kindly contact the Buddhādāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok (suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com).

Today we'll be speaking about the matter of 'anattā and rebirth.' First, we'll talk about *anattā* and then we'll go on to discuss rebirth. If one understands *anattā* sufficiently, it will be quite easy to understand rebirth correctly.

The feeling of 'self' occurs naturally and instinctually at first. Then it is taught, reinforced, conditioned, more and more. This process of teaching, educating the idea, the belief in 'self' develops until it ends up in the belief in an eternal 'self' or eternal soul or whatever. This kind of belief and teaching is quite common. When the Buddha arose in the world, however, he taught the opposite matter – he taught about *anattā* (not-self).

For the primitive levels of civilization – the people living in the forests and caves – they all believed in spirits and powers and ghosts and 'selves.' And so this is a very common belief. It happens very easily, occurs very easily to the human mind. So in relation to all those spirits and angels and demons and things, people develop all kinds of ceremonies and rituals and rites which they perform in terms of the spirit and 'self' and all that. Then as any civilization or culture or tribe or whatever develops, then the beliefs about 'self,' about spirits also develop; and so do the corresponding ceremonies and rituals. These developed until, in India, the time of the Upanishads. They developed the highest teaching, the most fully developed teaching about the 'self' – which is that there's this 'self' which is reborn over and over again, or reincarnated, or

whatever; and becomes slowly purified through this long succession of births until it is completely good, and becomes the best possible ‘self’; and then stays in that eternal state for the rest of eternity. And so this very common primitive belief in a ‘self,’ its spirit then develops until the highest of that development is the belief in some eternal ‘self’ such as in the Upanishads.

This belief in ‘self’ and ‘soul’ from India spread all over the place into other cultures and civilizations. And since most in all the other cultures, there was already a receptivity for this idea, people who are already thinking in these terms though on a less developed level; so other cultures and civilizations accepted this teaching from India. And so it spread all around the world. Even in Thailand, for example, this teaching about this ‘self’ and this reborn over and over again spread to Thailand long before Buddhism came. And because of the beliefs that existed in the Thai people before that time, they were very receptive and accepted this more developed teaching about the ‘self.’ And in this way the Indian teaching of an eternal ‘self’ has spread all over.

In India they developed the highest, most developed teaching about the ‘self’ in the period of the Upanishads. This belief in ‘self’ was most, it’s developed most fully within the sect or tradition within Indian culture that is now called the ‘Tantra.’ This was the highest idea about the ‘self’ which they called the *Brahman* or which is comparable to what is also called *paramatman*. This was the highest teaching as represented in the Tantra.

At the time of the Buddha or just before the Buddha, this was considered to be the most perfect, most modern, most up-to-date teaching about the ‘self’ that contained within the Tantra tradition.

When the Buddha appeared, he taught something completely different. First of all, he taught that this *attā* thing, this belief was wrong. It wasn’t true. It wasn’t really such a thing as they were talking about. And second, that the belief in *attā*, the illusion, delusion, was also the cause of *dukkha*; that all *dukkha* is based in belief in ‘self’. So the Buddha taught *anattā* or not-self because of these two reasons: one because of the teaching of *attā* is wrong; and two because that belief in *attā* is the basis of all *dukkha*. So the Buddha had to teach something completely different.

We should also be aware of that in other groups or traditions there was some understanding of *anattā*, and they were talking about in somewhat, though in somewhat small and often insignificant ways. There were some inklings and some murmurings about *anattā* even before the Buddha. Even though they’re

talking a little bit about it, they always kept something, they always hung on to something as attā. So there was, maybe, some talk about, say that the body was not-self or material possessions were not-self, and in some of these minor ways there was talk about not-self. But in spite of that, there was always something that was kept aside as the attā, and then there was belief that this attā then would be reborn over and over again becoming better and better until reaching a state of purity.

To understand anattā, let's take a look at how the feeling or sense that there is an attā occurs. It's basically an instinctual feeling or sense that there is a 'self' in life. This happens by itself. This is a survival mechanism that we can find in all organisms, so just this instinctual feeling that there is a 'self' occurs. Unfortunately this is incorrect. Although it is instinctual, it is false because the instincts are not based in true knowledge, in correct knowledge. They're naturally occurring type of knowledge which is far from infallible, in fact, based in ignorance. So that instinctual sense of attā or 'self' is coming from ignorance and it's incorrect. But nonetheless that sense of 'self' we can see it's necessary for survival, so we can see occurring easily, spontaneously in all living organisms; but nonetheless it is false.

Now let's look at the second level of the development of attā. The child, the infant is born. After birth, at first there's just very basic instinctual feeling of 'self.' It's not very big, not very developed. But then the infant is surrounded and constantly making contact with all kinds of things which are giving rise to feelings and notions of good and bad, of agreeable and disagreeable, positive and negative. All these surrounding things start to encourage because of ignorance – the child doesn't have much knowledge. And so because the child doesn't have knowledge to know better, all these things encourage that instinctual belief in 'self' or feeling of 'self' to grow and become stronger and stronger. This occurs through the power of ignorance.

The next, the third level of this development of *attā* (self) once it is developed to the second stage; then there is the part of attā or the further development that is educated, that is taught of, this cultural conditioning every child received from parents, teachers, other cultural elements and including religion. So from all these teachings, all these instructions the child is given, further develops and strengthens the belief in 'self' and 'soul' until it becomes even a religious conviction that there is a 'self' or 'soul'; and so it grows to its fullest development. It's the third stage through all the cultural conditioning of parents, teachers, and even religion.

So notice carefully that there are three main causes or conditions for this belief in *attā* and 'self.' The first is the instinctual condition – just that basic natural sense of 'I,' of a 'self.' Then the second condition are all these surrounding things which stimulate in positive and negative, good and bad, agreeable and disagreeable ways. This then develops that *attā* further from the natural and instinctual level to, what is becoming now, ignorance (wrong knowing). This is encouraged through all the various positive and negative, affecting and influencing, or which the child is confronted with. And then that sense, that ignorant sense of 'self' that is developed, it's further established and solidified and deepened through the teaching, through belief in this thing, through our cultural instruction we've received, that we're taught to believe in his. And this occurs in all homes, in all families and all religions, in the schools, in the temples, in the monasteries, the synagogues, everywhere, the churches. That belief in 'self' and 'soul' is very firmly established and driven into the child's mind, so then that this ignorant understanding grows to its fullest extreme.

So all of us have a basic foundation that we of this sense of 'self' and then this is developed through all the information, all the things we're taught. Every language, in fact, has 'self' buried within it. All languages have some words for 'self,' for ego, 'soul,' whatever we want to call it. And many of our words imply a 'self' and so we can't use language without strengthening this belief in a 'self.' So this is so heavily conditioned into all of us. Beginning with that just basic sense or feeling of 'self,' that is very difficult to let go of it, to abandon it, to give it up. So even we find in Buddhism, we even find talk of 'self.' This is partly just because of the limitation of language. Even Buddhism that teaches 'not-self' very clearly still has to use languages that talk about 'self.' They use words like 'I' and 'mine.' And so it's often very difficult for ordinary people to understand this. And even in other cases, just we have to talk, in Buddhism we actually have to use the word 'self' (*attā*) directly, so sometimes there's even talking about 'ourselves' or the 'self' needs to do this and that. This is just the limitation of language but you should know whenever you find the word 'self' in Buddhism that we should take it to be a 'self' that is not-self. Anywhere in Buddhism you come across the word 'self' it's just using the word, but that 'self' is not-self.

So in Buddhism or with all Buddhists are forced to use the word 'self.' No way of getting around it but the meaning when Buddhists use this word 'self' the meaning is of 'not-self'. Something that is not-self. For example, something

is very well known quote the Buddha said,

“Self is the refuge of self”; “Attā is the refuge of attā.”

For this to be understood correctly of ‘self’ that attā is not a ‘self,’ that attā is not-self – this has to be understood. So when we said, *“Self is the refuge of self”* what it means is that this ‘self’ which is not-self has to be its own refuge. It has to have this not-self ‘self.’ This ‘self’ which is not a ‘self’ has to have sufficient wisdom and understanding to realize that is not a ‘self.’ And when the ‘self’ can see that there isn’t a ‘self’ then all problems will cease. This is what is meant by *“Self is refuge of self.”* A ‘self’ is not-self. It’s not-self. It’s not ‘soul.’

Besides those who teach ‘attā’ and those who teach anattā, there is the third group which teaches that there is no ‘attā’ which is attā – those who agree with that. But they also said that there is no ‘attā’ that is anattā. In Buddhism we can say that ‘self’ is not-self. But there’s another that said there is not anything that is ‘self’ and there is not anything that’s not-self. They just say that there isn’t anything. These are the nihilists – those who denied the existence of everything. This is the third group which is different, of course, from the Buddhist teachings.

So regarding this matter we can observe three kinds of approaches or three teachings. The first approach said that there is a ‘self’ in the fullest meaning of the word ‘self.’ Whatever this thing ‘self’ means, they believe in that meaning completely. This is the first. The second said that this thing we call a ‘self’ is not-self, that there is something there, there is something. So when we say ‘self’ we’re referring to something; but that something is not-self, it’s not our ‘self.’ The third group denied that there is anything at all. They said that there’s nothing. Nothing at all exists, it’s just complete emptiness. This is the nihilist. So we can see the three groups. The group that teaches existence of a ‘self’ that is really a ‘self’ in the fullest meaning of the word ‘self’ or ‘soul’ or ego or whatever we prefer. Second, that the thing called the ‘self’ is not-self, you just can’t find a real ‘self’ in there but we can use the word if we need to. And then the third group that said there’s nothing there at all. There’s just nothing at all. They’re just nihilism. These are the three groups or three teachings regarding the thing called ‘self.’

So if you’d like there are three words or three terms that apply to these three teachings and it will help you to remember them. The first, of course, is ‘attā.’ This is the teaching of a ‘self’ that really is a ‘self.’ It’s completely a ‘self,’ a ‘soul.’ That’s the first. Then there’s the middle teaching of ‘anattā.’ There’s the

thing called the ‘self’ but it’s not-self. And then the other extreme – the one extreme is the teaching that there’s a ‘self,’ there really is a ‘self’ – and the other extreme is *nirattā* which is there’s nothing at all, that the thing called the ‘self’ there’s nothing even there that can be mislabeled as a ‘self.’ There’s nothing whatsoever. So there’s *attā* which is one extreme, the complete ‘self’; *anattā* – the Buddha’s teaching, the middle teaching, the non-extreme teaching that ‘self’ is not-self; and then the other extreme of nihilism, of nothing existing anywhere. If you can remember these words and understand their meanings correctly, it will be a great value to you.

So we can see that one of these positions or teachings is to take the positive extreme, take the positive towards extreme. The other is to take the negative extreme, and then there is one which is in the middle which doesn’t go to either extreme. The positive extreme is to take existence and say that there is just complete thing exists, completely, fully. And this is called *sassata-diṭṭhi* often translated the ‘belief or view of eternalism.’ And then the other extreme or be in the middle is thing that everybody is calling it ‘self’ or ego or ‘soul.’ There’s something there but it’s not-self. This is the middle position. This is the correct understanding. It’s called *sammā-diṭṭhi* (right understanding or right view). And then the third is to take the negative extreme, take negativism to its extreme. This is called *natthika-diṭṭhi* or that nothing exists whatsoever, to say there is no existing, nothing existing anywhere at all. So there’s the positive extreme (*sassata-diṭṭhi*), the negative extreme (*natthika-diṭṭhi*), and then *sammā-diṭṭhi* (the right understanding) in the middle – that things exist, there is existence but it’s not-self, so not to go all the way into affirmation or all the way into denial.

So please be very careful when we talk about this *natthika-diṭṭhi* – that negative extreme of nothingness, of nihilism. This means nothing, there’s nothing, nothing existing at all anywhere. Nothing, none of us exists. Nothing exists. That’s nihilism or the teaching of nothingness. Please don’t confuse this with the Buddhist teaching of *suññatā* (voidness). Voidness said that there are things, they is existence; but nothing existing in itself. Everything is void of ‘self.’ There are things but they are void of ‘self.’ So be very careful to see the difference between nothingness, which is there is nothing; and that *suññatā*, which said things are not-self, are void, things are void of selfhood. *Suññatā* (voidness) is very different than nothingness. We hear sometimes the word ‘emptiness’ and it’s often confused. Which of these meanings: is ‘emptiness’ meaning nothingness? In that case it’s not Buddhism. Or is emptiness the same as voidness, empty of selfhood? Then it can be called ‘Buddhism.’ So be very

careful about the difference between *natthika-diṭṭhi* (nothingness) and *suññatā* (voidness).

So once again there's the word *natthitā* which means the state of nothingness or the state of nothing. There isn't anything, nothing at all. This is *natthitā*, completely different than *suññatā* (voidness) – there are things but they are empty, they're void of 'self.' So *natthitā* – nothingness; *suññatā* – voidness, things are existing but there's void of 'self'; *natthitā* – nothing exists at all. *Natthitā, suññatā.*

Let us stress over and over again that do not confuse *natthitā* (nothingness) with *anattā* (not-self) or *suññatā* (voidness) or *tathatā* (thusness). Don't confuse the misunderstanding, the wrong view of nothingness with the correct understanding of *anattā, suññatā, tathatā* – not-self, voidness, thusness. In the correct meaning – *anattā, suññatā, tathatā* – there is no denial of things, of existing. It said that there're things, all these things, there are things all over the place but all of these things are not-self. They are void of 'self'; they're *tathatā*, just thus without any 'self.' Please make sure you understand this; otherwise you won't have any clue about what Buddhism is.

So next we come to the question of 'What is *anattā*?' We've been talking about *anattā* but what are the thing or what is the thing or whatever that is *anattā*? First, we can say that body and mind are *anattā*. The body is *anattā* and the mind is *anattā*. For example, the body is just the body. It performs its various functions. There are physical functions that are necessary for life and the body just does these and that is *anattā*, just the functions. It's no 'self' required. The mind is *anattā*. The mind also has all the functions which it must perform in order to sustain life. But in all those various things the mind does, there is no 'self,' just the mind doing its work – so *anattā*. The body and mind are *anattā*. The body just feels it has various sense organs and the ability to sense various things. This occurs because the body contains the nervous system. It doesn't happen because there's a 'self' that feels. It's just the nervous system and all those chemical and electrical impulses and all that. That's all not-self. And then there's the mind, the non-physical part of life, doing all its various functions, and all of those take place without any 'self' being required. There's just body and mind – two things. They can function perfectly well. There's no need for this third thing – this thing people called a 'self.' It's just body and mind. This is what *anattā* is.

If we talk in terms of two things then we say, ‘body and mind’ is anattā. We can also talk in terms of five things as being anattā. These are the five *khandhas* or the Five Aggregates. The five *khandas* (aggregates) are slightly more refined look at the things we called ‘body and mind.’ The first khandha is the body. So the body can just do its function and it doesn’t need a ‘self’ to do it. The body does its work by itself – that *rūpa-khandha* which is anattā, which is not-self. Then other four khandhas are all mind – body and mind, mind being more complex. It can be seen as four aggregates. The first of these is ‘*vedanā*’ or feeling. Feeling just happens. Feeling is a function or process that the mind does, and it happens by itself. It doesn’t need anything else, it doesn’t need a ‘self’ to happen. Feeling is anattā. The next khandha, *saññā-khandha* (perceptions, discriminations), this just happens by itself. It happens within and through itself. It’s not dependent on some attā. So saññā is not-self. Then *saṅkhāra-khandha* (conception, conceiving, thinking, emotion, all that), this occurs – a function of mind; or we can just say, a function which happens by itself and this is not-self. And then *viññāṇa-khandha* (the sense consciousness), another function which is not-self. It’s not dependent on something we might call a ‘self’ for it occurs, it happens through and by itself. All five of these khandhas: feeling, conception, perception, and sense consciousness – all these is anattā.

Now we come to the thing we call ‘life.’ If we want to say two things, then we’ve got body and mind – body and mind are anattā. Or there’s five – the five khandhas. And each of these khandhas or all five of them together or any combination or none combination of them is anattā. The five khandhas are anattā. Or if we want to use just one simple word, we can just say, ‘life’ – ‘body and mind’ is life, the five khandhas is life, and life is anattā. If one just wants to say, ‘life’ life is not-self. Look carefully, examine life honestly with an open mind, and you won’t find the ‘self’ in them, just life. It doesn’t depend on this extra ‘self.’

Now we come to the word *citta* which is usually translated ‘mind,’ sometimes, ‘consciousness’ or ‘mind-heart,’ translate it whatever you want; but the *citta* is the thing where all of life, its significance, is come down to *citta* (the mind). All things have to be known through mind. So for this reason, because of the centrality of mind, of consciousness; there are many who say that this mind is attā, is ‘self.’ But in Buddhism we see that the mind is just capable of all these awareness, all these functions, it can do all these different things – that’s just the way the mind is. The mind is like that but nonetheless the mind is

anattā. Although it can do so many different things, all those functions are just like that. They're just what they are. They're thusness. There's no 'self' to be bound in any of it. So the thing called *citta* is also anattā.

And now we come to the highest thing that the mind can realize, the highest thing that the mind can penetrate. This, in Buddhism we call 'Nibbāna' or if you wish you can call it the 'Heaven' or 'Kingdom of God.' Whatever you want to call it, this highest thing that the mind can know, can realize, can be aware of; that too is anattā. That Nibbāna is just thus. It's just what it is but it's not a 'self.' There's no 'self' in it or related to it. But some religions say that this highest thing which the mind can know, they will say that this is the *paramatman* or the *Brahman* or the eternal soul. But in Buddhism it is understood to be just anattā, that such a thing is real, is genuine; but it is not-self.

So we can see that, if we look we'll see that all things have within them, we can say, a virtue, a quality that allows us to do whatever it is they do. All things have within themselves the quality that is able to perform the characteristic function of that thing. All things – whether they're, material, physical or mental, psychical, whatever – have a mechanism within themselves that allows them to perform their characteristic function, the function for which we name them. All things have this function within them; but that function, that mechanism through which they perform the function, this is all not-self. It's not some 'self' doing or controlling the function. It's just a naturally occurring mechanism at work. A very very simple example of this which we can take from the material around, this will be an example for all things – material or mental. There's a kind of weed or grass which is very common here at Suan Mokkh and it exists in the West also. It's a kind of grass if you touch its leaves, it closes up like this. It has this mechanism. This is just a common grass or plant that has this mechanism within themselves to close up. Now those who believe in 'self' will hold that there's a 'self' in that plant that makes it close up. If you hold things have 'self' then you have to say that the grass has a 'self' and that how come it closes up. But in Buddhism it says that there's just no 'self' involved; there's just natural mechanism and then it closes up. Even in plants, which will be very difficult to say that they have minds like we would say about a human being, they still have this mechanism. They can do this very strange and interesting thing but it doesn't involve a 'self.' As soon as we say that something has a 'self' then we're no longer talking about Buddhism. If there's any talk of a 'self' it's not Buddhism. It's becoming animism. As soon as we start talking about 'self'

we're talking about animism – the animism that puts 'self' in plants and rocks and river and everything.

So now we can ask that if there's no 'self,' then what is this thing we call a 'person'? Or what is a person if it's not a 'self'? We can just say, it's a bunch of ingredients, various parts compounded together, mixed together. That's all. We can talk about mind and body if we wish – very simple the two primary ingredients of a person, mind and body; or the Five Aggregates; or we can talk in terms of the elements, of the physical and non-physical elements. We can just see that what we call a 'person' are these parts, these ingredients, these components; and then these are brought together, they're put together; and then we've got a person. But if all those little parts, elements, khandhas, whatever, are not-self; then the combination of them is also not-self. Just because you stick a bunch of little things together doesn't mean you've got a 'self' – just because you can glue them together or hold them together for a little while. So whether this person – this life with the body components, and the feeling components, and the perception, and the thoughts, and the sense consciousness – all these different ingredients put together we call a 'person.' But all those ingredients and elements are not-self; so the combination, the person, is also not-self.

Then we can ask, if it's not-self then who acts? Who is the actor? Who does all these actions, all these physical and verbal and mental actions? Who is the actor? Who receives the result or the fruit of action or what is sometimes called *kamma*? Who receives the result of action, of *kamma*? Who receives, who experiences happiness and *dukkha*? It's quite simple and in fact we don't even have to use the word 'who.' We can just see that the mind thinks. It has the ability to think, so the mind thinks, and as a result of that thinking there is an action, maybe a physical action or a verbal action. And then that action takes place and leads to some results. There's a result, there's a reaction arising from that action. Now the mind that thinks is not-self. The body that acts is not-self. The mouth that speaks is not-self. So that action is also not-self. It occurs, there is a genuine action but it's not-self. Then the reaction to that action is also not-self. There's no 'who' doing all this. It's just the mental thought, the mental action, leading to a physical action or verbal action, leading to a reaction – one conditioning the next. And all of those things are not-self. The reaction, we can just say, once there is the reaction, whatever comes into contact with it, that's who experiences it. But this is speaking a little bit slobbery to say 'Whoever makes contact with that result, that reaction, that's who experiences it' – to

answer the question ‘Who experiences the results of kamma?’ which people are asking all the time. But if we look more carefully, we’ll see that there’s one mind thinks, has the intention, the ... reaction; and that reaction is experienced by a completely different mind. From this moment to the next, it’s a new mind. It’s not this mind and then another mind. So the mind that experiences the effect or reaction is a different mind. It’s not the same mind. It’s not a ‘self.’ It’s not a ‘who’ – ‘who’ implies a ‘self.’ So whether it’s happiness that’s experienced or dukkha that’s experienced, it’s just all mind experiencing it but it’s not the mind that did it or the thought. It’s different minds after another going through these various experiences. And the feelings, the experiences, the mind, all of these are anattā, are not-self.

Now we come to the question that ‘what’ is reborn? What is reborn? You can ask, ‘who’ is reborn if you’d like, or ask ‘what’ is reborn? This is the next question. But forgive us if we speak a little bit crudely. In fact this question is ridiculous and crazy. It’s really a silly question to ask, ‘what’ is reborn or ‘who,’ is even sillier. In Buddhism there’s no point in asking such a thing. As we’ve been pointing out so far, if right now, right here, sitting here, there is no attā; then how could there be some attā, something that goes and gets reborn? If right now it’s anattā, there’s no attā anywhere, there’s no ‘what’ or ‘who’ to go and get reborn. So the idea there’s one person getting reborn – and this is what rebirth or reincarnation is all about – the idea that I or you or whatever is going to get reborn somewhere, that the same person is born again; this is ridiculous. If all of this is anattā, there’s nothing that can go and get reborn. So in Buddhism there is no such thing as rebirth or reincarnation. There is birth. This is obvious. There’s birth all over the place. Things are getting born all time. You can see birth all around us. There’re all kinds of things constantly being born but there’s no rebirth. It’s never the same thing being born a second time. Every birth is new. So there’s birth. There’s load of it, endlessly, constantly. But in Buddhism there is no rebirth, no reincarnation; because there’s nothing whatsoever to be reborn or reincarnated.

There’s not a lot of time remaining. Let us take a quick opportunity to say this thing called the ‘person’ or the ‘individual’ doesn’t exist. There’s no such thing. They only occur within the thought that there is a person or an individual. What is taking place is various processes arise and pass away over and over and over again, in one or not in one but in a larger process. And so there is a temporary or coincidental coming together of functions or processes or a grouping. We can say, there’s a temporary grouping that occurs from time to

time, and that's what we call the 'person.' We see these parts come together and say, 'That's a person, that's an individual.' This is temporary. What's really happening is just a process of cause and effect – these different things occurring, these different things being born, arising out of causes. And then process, a stream of cause and effect, goes on and on and on. But the thing we call a 'person' is just the momentary grouping that it doesn't last. It doesn't have any reality. It's just an elusory person. So this is why Buddhism is a teaching of 'no man,' 'no person.' It's a teaching of Dependent Origination, this process of cause and effect, of these things just continuously arising out of causes – causes dependent upon previous causes unfolding on and on and on in a stream. This is what is occurring but there is no person in there.

So when there is just this process of a cause and effect, there is no rebirth. There is nothing that is repeatedly getting born. There's birth but no rebirth. So we should look at this word 'birth' a bit, the meaning of the word 'birth.' We can see three primary, three basic meanings of the word 'birth,' or three kinds of birth. The first is the kind of birth that everybody knows about. It's the only one many people know about. This is physical birth. The body is born out of the womb and then it grows older and older and older, reaches certain ages, and dies. That's physical birth – the kind that leads to physical death and getting buried or cremated or whatever. That's one kind of birth – physical birth. The second kind of birth is mental. It happens within the mind through the process of Dependent Origination, through a series of causes, leading to a mental birth. Whenever there is the thought of 'I am' or 'I' have, 'I' own, 'I' want, 'I' get, 'I' exist – any of these 'I, I, I' thoughts – this is mental birth, birth within the mind. The third, this is what some people are unaware of. The third one is very difficult for most people to understand. The second kind, we can say, it's birth through attachment, or birth through clinging. The third kind of birth is very difficult for many people to understand. When any of the *āyatana[s]*, if you remember this word from the first talk – the *āyatana[s]*, whenever they perform their function; that is birth. And when it stops functioning, it ceases or it goes out; it's quenched. So when the eye sees, performs its function; that eye is born. When the eye is not performing its function, then we say, eye ceases or eye quenches. When ear performs its function, ear is born. It stops functioning, ear extinguishes; and the same with nose, tongue, and so forth. Whenever something does its function, it's born. And in any moment when it doesn't do that function, then it ceases, it ends. So if you can see these, all the senses and all the sense objects and all the things associated with the *āyatanika-dhamma[s]*

– there were thirty things which we discussed in the first talk, all of them are born, they're being born and ceasing, born and ceasing, over and over again, as they do their functions and then the functions stop. So all these things are occurring like that but each time it's a different thing. And there're just all these functions, these things, these processes, these activities happening over and over again; but it's always a different thing. It's not the same. There's no same thing involved that holds it all together that we would call a 'self' – just this sense function, that sense function occurring and ending, occurring and ending. This is the third meaning of birth. So you should understand the three kinds of birth: physical birth; the mental birth through attachment, the birth of 'I,' of ego; and the third kind of birth – this birth of whenever there is a sense function, a sensory function.

So there are many who believe that in this body when the body dies there's something that remains, and then that thing goes and gets reborn in another body. This is a belief that arose in the Upanishads era and that it was accepted by many many different religions. This belief is very common but it is not Buddhism. This isn't the Buddhist teaching. Most fundamental principle in Buddhism is that in what we call a 'person' there is no person. We just use the word but there is no person here. So to say that this person goes and gets reborn is completely fallacious. There's no person here, so there's nothing to go and get reborn. There's a birth here, there's birth there; but it's a completely different person. 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 and birth all over the place, of all kinds of different things. So we can say the body, physical birth, this body is born and then it dies and another body is born and dies. But the first body is not a 'self' so there's no any other bodies that would be occur in some later time, are not rebirth of the 'self' because the first body didn't involve a 'self.' Or the mental kind of rebirth we talk about. The mind in which 'I' is born, the 'I' conception is born once, then that fades away. And then another 'I' conception is born in a different mind. This mind where the one 'I' conception occurs, and then the next mind, even if they happen in a very rapid succession is a different mind. It's not the same mind. It's not the same thing being reborn. There may be some similarities which confuse us but it's a different thing happening. It's not rebirth. There's just a birth, a mental birth, a mental birth, a mental birth, sometimes in rapid succession; but different births, different minds. And that the āyatana[s], those sense functions, each time the eye

function ceases and then functions again; it's a different eye. Can you see how just the physical eye itself, from one function to the next; it's not the same eye, or not the same ear, not the same nervous system, not the same brain? It's constantly changed, so not the same. These functions are repeatedly happening but it's never the same eye or ear or nose, tongue, body or mind that's doing the function. But when we have to talk about it, it's very difficult to explain. So whether it's the physical birth, or mental birth through attachment, or just the birth of the sense experience or the sense activity; the function is always brand new. It's just a birth. It's not something that repeats. There's no repeating thing, either physically, mentally, or in the sense activity. Just a birth, a birth, a birth, a birth! This is why we say that there is no rebirth in Buddhism, just birth. The basic fundamental teaching of Buddhism is not-self. We can say, not-person, not-soul, whatever, not-ego; and so how can there be something that is reborn? There's nothing to be reborn. There's just birth. However or unfortunate, in one place for example, there was a foolish monk who wasn't paying much attention and he was going around saying that the Buddha teaches that *viññāṇa* – now usually *viññāṇa* means the sense consciousness that arises through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind; but also many Hindus at the time believed that *viññāṇa* was a kind of spirit that was getting reborn – so this guy was walking around saying that the *viññāṇa* is reborn, the *viññāṇa* goes and gets reborn in some other body. And the Buddha said very distinctly that

“This is wrong. Don't ever say such a thing. This has nothing to do with my teaching, whatsoever. You're completely messing up the whole thing.”

The *viññāṇa* does not go and get reborn. The sense consciousness does not go and get reborn. And if you think of *viññāṇa* as a spirit, that's for sure off the teaching. However, this is very clear in the scriptures. However, somehow there are also, if anybody read some of the texts, there occur references to in a very kind of common language saying “This person went and got reborn there.” So there are these things, these references in the scriptures and so of course we've got people arguing about this thing all the time. And so as we said earlier the thing here isn't for you to believe but to find out for yourself which is true. In our understanding the most fundamental teaching of Buddhism is the teaching of not-self. The Buddha came back to this over and over again. But if you wish to give more importance to some of these references, to something like rebirth, you can do that. But the thing really to do is examine and find out which one is correct, find out for yourself which is correct. Just by citing the scriptures, we can't prove anything to you.

So now we come to the most important matter. The Buddha said that

“In the past as well as now I teach only one thing, dukkha and the quenching of dukkha.”

That’s it. That’s all the Buddha’s teachings are about – dukkha and the quenching of dukkha. So we don’t have to waste a lot of time talking about whether there is rebirth or not because that’s not a fundamental question. The fundamental matter is dukkha and the end of dukkha, the elimination of dukkha, the quenching of dukkha. If there’s any kind of birth, there’s going to be dukkha. Whether it’s just birth or whether it’s rebirth, it’s going to be dukkha. So it doesn’t matter what you call it. It’s just the matter that dukkha gets born, dukkha is born. So if the fundamental concern or question or objective is dukkha and the end of dukkha, we don’t worry about the trivialities of this rebirth thing. What is important is that how to quench dukkha, how to end dukkha. And this is why the Buddha taught anattā. The Buddha taught anattā as the way to realize this truth fully enough. It’s the way to end dukkha, to quench dukkha. So the Buddha taught anattā because that’s crucial and central for the ending dukkha. This is what the Buddha’s teaching is all about – how to quench *dukkha*. So it is necessary to teach *anattā*. Arguments or discussions of something like rebirth are academic. They’re not central to the primary issue.

So we can wrap this up by saying that if you understand anattā correctly and completely, then you’ll discover for yourself that there is no rebirth and no reincarnation. And that’s the end of the story. So we’ll end today’s talk here.

• • • • •

Transcribed and lightly edited by Pranee in Sep.-Oct. 2015
Audio files: 5125310113040.mp3 & 1988-01(4) Anatta and Rebirth.mp3

© Liberation Park, 2016

