

## Stopping the Flow of Dependent Origination, Part 4 of 4

### DHAMMA QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

Dhamma Q&A given at Suan Mokkh on 10 July 1991

*Another group of students from Puget Sound University (Washington state, USA) visited Suan Mokkh. Tan Ajahn spoke about the highest ideals of Buddhism based in Dhamma rather than mere tradition. He also fielded questions from the students. Tan Ajahn spoke in Thai and Santikaro Bhikkhu interpreted into English live. All Ajahn's teachings are now available on:*

[www.suanmokkh.org](http://www.suanmokkh.org),

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

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

*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 volunteer and the Buddhādāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok*

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❖ *“Do you think it is wise to introduce our friends or family members who have such strong problems that they need years of psychotherapy to come back to a normal, what means peaceful life to the Buddhism, to meditation, or to both? Could that help far away from a Buddhist country? Which way of doing this would be best? Should we give them books about Buddhism or meditation? Should we discuss what we learned about? Should we send them to Thailand? Or what should we do?”* ❖

~ Response by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu ~

First you should understand that one should study Dhamma and understand Dhamma in order to prevent such unfortunate situations, like when people have big psychological problems. People ought to study Dhamma first in order to not get into such things. But when people have already gotten themselves into this kind of trouble, then it is much more difficult to deal with. One can't expect any quick or immediate results.

When people already have psychological problems, heavy ones, then we just deal with the circumstances, with the situation as it goes. So one should first look at it in this way. The person who already has nervous problems or mental illness isn't able to understand the Dhamma. They may sit and listen to Dhamma talks but they don't really understand what is being said. They can't understand.

The person who is able to help them must be very skillful, very clever, have a lot of experience to know how and be able to help them. First one must talk to them until they can understand and accept for themselves that the reason they're in the situation they're in is because they don't know anything about Dhamma.

First they must realize the problem they have and admit it, and then recognize that the reason it happened is because they don't know anything about Dhamma. If we can get this across to

them then they might start to get interested in Dhamma, and then we will have some ability to communicate with them, at least a little bit, and we can work from there.

So we must be able to get across to them that Dhamma can help them. If we can get this idea across enough that they will listen, then we teach them appropriate understanding of Dhamma until they can follow along. And then take what we have told them about and think accordingly, to think in lines with the Dhamma that we are giving to them. And then so that they can start to develop some mindfulness, some awareness, so they can start to pull their mind together to overcome the tremendous dispersion and distraction, restlessness of their mind, or their anxiety, or the tension and nervousness, whatever it is. If they could start to think in terms of Dhamma correctly, so they can start to pull their mind together and be mindful.

As far as we can see, books won't do any good. Books aren't nearly as good as talking with someone. To talk with them directly, maybe give them some very simple advice about real basic approaches to meditation, and then take it step by step from there, this has some potential. So we encourage them, support them, and lead them along until there is some *samādhi*, their minds stabilize a bit. And then when they have some *samādhi*, then we can develop it further, help them further from there.

Books are of some use before people have these problems, or when they are about or starting to have these problems. Then books can still be of use. It appears that no one so far has written a book specifically for people who are getting sick in this particular way. We study the sick individual a great deal until we know the circumstances and the characteristics of the illness, we understand where it comes from, we see how it affects the person. We need to study this person very carefully to learn these things.

Sometimes we make ourselves ill in the same way. We fake it, like we have the same problem so that we can speak with them more easily. So that is all we can say on this subject.

❖ *“Do good and get good, do bad, get bad.” But some people do bad things and get good. Please advise on this?* ❖

~ Response by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu ~

This business of ‘do good, get good, do bad, get bad’ is still rather immature. It’s on a level for people who aren’t so intelligent, so one ought to be careful. This level of understanding isn’t quite yet Buddhism. It’s not up to the mark of Buddhism. For it to be Buddhism, it should say to be above and beyond good and evil. This level of understanding is very ordinary. It’s for people who haven’t developed very far spiritually; it’s a beginner’s level.

It’s a level of understanding that was taught before Buddhism, so it’s not actually Buddhism. One ought to understand it in this way. Now the confusion in this question is due to the fact that the person isn’t clear about what is meant by good and what is meant by bad. They’ve mixed up and confused the mental aspects of good and evil with the physical aspects of good and evil. And they’re attaching to certain narrow meanings of the words.

For example, somebody does something good mentally, but gets something bad materially. This is what the person is confusing – mental goodness but receiving bad material results. Or someone who materially, say how they deal with the world, is quite bad, but accidentally or coincidentally they get some happy mental results. This is what people think is to do bad and get good. Notice there's a lot of confusion here about what is good and what is bad.

So one has to straighten out this, to see, to understand, the words 'good' and 'bad' carefully, and not to just attach to common everyday or narrow understandings of these words. If we understand these teachings merely with attachment, with narrow old opinions, then it will only lead to confusion.

When looking for the causes of what's happening now, the good or bad results we're experiencing now, don't be hoping too much to find causes in previous lives. Instead look at in terms of *idappaccayatā*, the flow of causes and conditions in this life. That will have a much better chance of us staying clear and not getting confused as the questioner seems to have done.

❖ *“How would Buddhism approach the problem of addiction? Whether it be alcohol, drugs, food, or other forms such as gambling?”* ❖

~ Response by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu ~

This question of addiction is something that was warned against and taught against way before Buddhism happened. This is a very low level of morality or ethics. So first of all understand that with the question of addiction here, we're dealing on a very low or spiritually immature level, and old forms of religion that existed before Buddhism taught against this.

When Buddhism appeared it accepted the reality and truth of that as a preliminary level of understanding. So avoiding addiction – not being addicted to things like alcohol, drugs, gambling, and other low forms of behavior like that – is just a very basic preliminary morality necessary for any further spiritual development. So its place in Buddhism is a prerequisite. If one isn't able to overcome such low forms of behavior, then one won't be able to go any further into things such as meditation and higher understandings.

The problem of addiction was not very important in the old days. It only became a serious problem in later times when material development became advanced. It's only after human beings became very skillful and clever at inventing all kinds of new things to get drunk on, to get intoxicated on, that the problem of addiction has become serious. Previously it wasn't much of a problem.

❖ “Do you think traveling around the world is just an escape from your responsibility for the society you’re involved with?” ❖

~ Response by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu ~

The words ‘traveling around the world’ have many meanings, so one has to ask what meaning is meant by these words. One can travel around the world in order to study, to genuinely study things of value and importance. Or one can travel around the world in order to help people in other countries, in other societies. Or one can travel merely for pleasure, for fun, for one’s personal enjoyment.

If one is traveling in a way that is genuinely for one’s own benefit or for the benefit of others, then we must say that that is correct. But if one is only traveling for pleasure, to have fun, to see strange things or whatever, then that doesn’t seem worthwhile to us, it doesn’t seem very correct. It seems to be a bit irresponsible, it’s to take advantage of the world or of others to travel merely for one’s own enjoyment and pleasure.

But if one travels for the sake of genuine learning or to help others, then one isn’t taking advantage of anyone. In fact if one is able to really be of help in other countries, then that’s of enormous benefit for the world. You can’t call that irresponsibility; that’s to be really responsible. That’s a very high level of responsibility to be able to help in other cultures and countries. Merely traveling for fun, then that doesn’t seem worthwhile to us; it seems rather irresponsible.

Nowadays there’s a lot of technology which can help conserve resources. There are books, there are videos, there are lots of forms of communication and information exchange which has made the world much smaller, so it’s not so necessary for us go personally. We can learn all kinds of things about the world without leaving home, so one ought to use this approach first in order to conserve resources. Learn what you can from books and other sources, and only after doing that, if that isn’t enough for one’s needs, then maybe one has to travel. But there are less expensive ways to go about it to try first.

Allow us to point out another world. This is called in Pāli ‘**pāra**lokika,’ the other world. This is the world of the mind, the world inside. One can travel in this world without having to go anywhere, without spending any money. One can with mindfulness travel around the world inside and see all kinds of strange and marvelous things, learn all kinds of wonderful and profound things. So we would like to point out to you the other world, or another world, the world inside that one can travel in the mind.

To practice *ānāpānasati* in the third tetrad, which is contemplation of mind, will allow one to travel in all kinds of other worlds. One will have all the experience one needs, traveling around the other world.

❖ *“Buddhism specifies that there is no self at all, no permanent center in anything, nothing that does not change. But isn’t the element of consciousness, which is found in all living things, that unchangeable center? And though it may not be called the self, as ego is self, it is in its purified form that found in Nibbāna, the essential spirit of all living things. So while we do not contain self, while the self is illusion, spirit is not. We contain spirit, spirit is real.”* ❖

~ Response by Buddhadhāsa Bhikkhu ~

This is a rather troublesome problem, because we run into the great difficulties of language. The meanings of words are very ambiguous, so this can be quite troublesome. When we use the word ‘self’ it is something that does not exist in nature. Self (*attā*) is something that cannot be found in nature. So it might be better to speak about the word ‘soul.’ Soul is something found in living things. Different meanings are given to the word ‘soul.’ Some people treat it as if it were some eternal unchanging substance. But our understanding of the word ‘soul’ is just that it’s the natural element of consciousness, what in Buddhism is called *viññāna-dhātu* that exists in all living things. This element of consciousness is just something natural, existing on the mental or spiritual level of living beings. It is natural, it exists, and there’s no problem regarding this element of consciousness, at least at the start.

But the problem is this element of consciousness – whatever you call it, whether you call it ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ or whatever – it is very easily attached to as being self. The problem arises when we take the element of consciousness to be self or *attā*, so we need to understand what is meant by the word ‘self’ or ‘*attā*.’

The word ‘soul’ in itself is no problem, but when we cling to the soul as being self, that is the problem. Soul is just mind, it’s just the mental side or level of existence. It just refers to the mentality within life. In the Pāli language we just call it ‘life’ or the *‘jīvitindriya’* (the faculty of life), or the quality of life that exists within the mind. That’s all that’s that meant to us by soul. But as soon as we cling to that soul as being self, as being *attā*, then there arises the problem.

The problem is what does the word ‘self,’ or ‘*attā*,’ mean? So far nobody has been able to explain this word satisfactorily. People have some idea about what self is, and then explain it accordingly, but all they’re doing is talking about self or explaining self according to their own personal opinions or views. No one has been able to explain self in a universally acceptable way. Nobody is able to show what the self is. All we have are lots of opinions and beliefs about it. So we have the problem of what the word ‘self’ means, and nobody can explain it because it doesn’t really exist. Some people see something and then explain that that is the self, that is the true self, but Buddhism will not accept that anything is self. The thing might be there, but Buddhism can’t insist that it is the self. Most religions have chosen something and claimed that that is the real self, that is the true self, and then they explain according to that particular view, opinion, or dogma. But Buddhism, having looked at all those things, can’t see that any of them are really a self. Buddhism therefore teaches that all those things are not-self, that those things that different groups take to be self are in fact not-self.

You shouldn’t call them a self, you shouldn’t take them to be a self. In spite of the fact that many groups in the world are claiming that there is some kind of self and propagating that kind of understanding, and in spite of the fact that the vast majority people feel they have a

self, Buddhism denies that there is anything that really is a self, anything that ought to be called a self. Buddhism teaches, “Don’t bother taking anything to be a self, don’t bother calling anything a self.” So there’s this problem about what the word ‘self’ means. People are explaining it according to personal views, but nobody can prove that their view is correct. If somebody is able to explain the word ‘self’ in a satisfactory way, then maybe this problem will disappear. But so far they can only satisfy themselves, they can’t satisfy others.

Let’s look at the meaning of the word *attā*, which is the Pāli form, or *ātman*, which is the Sanskrit form. It seems that the original meaning of the word *attā* means ‘to be’ or ‘to exist.’ It means that essence or substance, that thing that really is, that truly exists. But even this is uncertain. Some language experts argue that the original meaning or the root of *attā* is *assa*, and that the meaning of *assa* is ‘to eat.’ Some people say the meaning of *assa* is ‘to be,’ ‘to exist,’ but some say it means ‘to eat.’ Then they explain that *attā* means ‘that which eats everything else,’ and then that just confuses the whole issue and makes a mess out of it. But others explain that *attā* means ‘that which is’ or ‘that which exists.’ The way that *attā* is usually applied in common understanding is because before Buddhism existed, all the thinkers and teachers in India said that there was some kind of *attā*, some kind of self. And it was described in various ways, such as that essence or substance which knows things through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. The spirit or whatever you want to call it that experiences the world through the senses, that is sometimes called the *attā*. Or other times the *attā* is the thing that thinks, or the thing that knows, or the thing that experiences. That substance that experiences or thinks is often explained to be the *attā*. Buddhism can’t accept that. Buddhism recognizes that there are things that can see, hear, smell, taste, touch, or things that know through the senses, and there are the things that think. But Buddhism can’t recognize that any of these things are self, because the idea of self is that there’s something that truly exists, that doesn’t change. And to think that that thing which knows through the senses doesn’t change, that has no meaning in Buddhism. Because if one observes the knowing through the senses, you’ll see that it keeps changing. There’s not some unchanging knower or experiencer.

Or take some Western thinkers like Descartes, who said: “*Cogito, ergo sum.*” (I think, therefore I am.) Here Descartes has attached to the thing which thinks, whatever it is that thinks. He thinks that that is the self, that which truly exists. But Buddhism studies the thinking and sees that, ‘Oh it can think, there are things that think without requiring any self.’ So there are those who claim that whatever it is that thinks or knows, that is the self. But Buddhism observes that all these things which know, think, or whatever – whatever it is that does things – is changing, it isn’t some unchanging substance or essence. And so this problem goes on and on. There are all the different explanations of self, but nobody can agree on them. Even the different religions – or even in each religion – give different understandings. Buddhism doesn’t accept any of those explanations of self, that those things really exist or truly exist. So this question of self is a very tangled one, and it’s an unending question. As long as people are attaching to self, they’ll keep formulating ideas and theories about the self, and this will go on endlessly. But understand that real Buddhists don’t find a self anywhere. They see the things that think and feel and experience, but those things are changing all the time, and can’t properly be called a self.

To understand these different perspectives on self, let’s take a look at the final goal. The final goal for those who have self, who hold or believe that there is self, is for this little self to merge with the big self or the great self, the eternal self, such as in the Hindu teachings. Or take Christianity where there’s the belief in some little individual self, and the goal is to co-

exist with God in eternity, to exist in eternity. So these are conceptions of some self which will enter eternity, some idea of an eternal self. The other way of looking at this, the Buddhist perspective, is that to begin with there isn't anything which is self. There never was anything that rightly could be called a 'self.' In Buddhism the final goal is eternal voidness, to realize and dwell in the eternal voidness, the voidness that is totally free and void of self and anything having to do with self. So one viewpoint is for this self to co-exist as an eternal self with the great self, or with God or whatever. The other perspective is that there never was a self, there never will be, and the final goal is to realize and live in that eternal voidness. So the problem for everyone is, 'what to do?' There are these two perspectives on self – people in this world can be divided into two camps. There are the groups that believe there is some self, and then there are those who don't see a self anywhere. And so what are we going to do about this business of self?

Let's look at the final goal or eternity as it exists right now. Let's take a look at the eternity of eternity, the eternity that we can find right here and now, not the eternity of thoughts and beliefs. If right now the mind is void – is free of all thoughts of me and mine, there's no thinking, no awareness, no sense or feeling of me or mine, of self, in the mind – then the mind in that moment dwells in eternity. The mind realizes that eternity as soon as it is void of self. But once the mind starts to think in terms of self again, once it starts to hold onto the sense of self, or the concepts of self, then that eternity disappears. This is something immediate, direct, and experienceable by everyone here. When the mind is void of self, eternity appears. When the mind is no longer void, when the mind is caught on self, centered on self, then eternity disappears. In fact that eternity is here, it's always waiting, but we can only realize it, experience it, or see it for ourselves when the mind is free of self, is void of self, of me and mine. To get this self into eternity doesn't seem to fit with experience or with reality. It seems much easier to just leave the self alone, and then eternity is right there. All you have to do is drop the self. So what you're going to do with this problem of self, or how you're going to get the self into eternity, is a difficult question.

Buddhists don't feel a need to believe anyone else. Buddhists don't accept things on someone else's authority; they investigate things for themselves and only accept what fits with their own spiritual experience. Buddhists observe in their own experience that when the mind is void of self – when there are no thoughts or feelings of self in the mind – then everything is light, the mind is free. There's wellbeing and peace, there's no problems, there's nothing that could be called *dukkha*, could be called pain, or painful, or unpleasant, or suffering. But then when the mind isn't void, as soon as there are thoughts of self, as soon as the mind holds onto something as being me, as being self, as 'this is what I am,' immediately the mind becomes heavy, tight. It's no longer free, open, vast, and luminous; it becomes small and heavy. The mind that holds to something as self is burdened. The mind that is void of self is free. Examining things in this way that when the mind is void of self, there's no *dukkha*, but when the mind is holding to something as being self, that there is *dukkha*. In order to be free of *dukkha*, which is the goal of all religions – all religions are seeking the end of suffering – Buddhists state, "Well the best way, the easiest way to get free of suffering, is just to be free of self." Having observed how when the mind is void of self, there is no *dukkha*, no pain, nothing unsatisfying, then they see that voidness of self is the way to deal with the problem of *dukkha*. The Hindus see it differently. Their approach to suffering is to take the self, to merge with the eternal self, or the *paramātmān*, which means 'supreme self.' And the Christians, their approach is for the self to do whatever is necessary to go live in the Kingdom of God. But the Buddhists see that the best approach is to just be void of self. All of you are free to

examine things for yourself, and to choose as you see fit. So these are your choices: a self that is going into eternity, or eternal voidness of self. It's up to you which you choose.

By just examining your own experience carefully, through practicing mindfulness, you can see for yourself that when the mind is void of 'I' and 'mine,' void of self, that the mind is free, is light, is cool, it has no problems. But that as soon as the mind is full of self, that things become hot, intense, that things are heavy, that there is *dukkha*. This is something that you can see for yourself, and then draw your own conclusions. If we see this, then we can understand how they explain that *attā* means 'the eater', the one that eats. Because you can see how *attā* eats the heart of the one who has *attā*. Whenever there is *attā* or self in the mind, in the heart, then that self eats the heart, it eats it, it creates *dukkha*, or suffering. So we can see some meaning in this word, this explanation that *attā* is the one that eats, or the eater. Buddhists then see that it's best to be free or void of self. If this self just eats the heart, just creates *dukkha*, it's better to be totally void, to be free of it.

Those that believe in self, who say there's a self, they deal with the problem a little bit differently. But they've got their way of dealing with this problem. They distinguish between defiled self and undefiled or pure self. And so their approach is to destroy or get rid of all the defiled kinds of self, or the sinful self. And when all that defiled self is gone, then one realizes the pure self, the undefiled self. So they see things in terms of false self, which they sometimes call 'ego,' and true self, which is sometimes called the 'eternal soul,' and that one gets rid of all the false self, and then there is the true self to dwell in eternity. So that's the approach of those who have a self. But as soon as you call it 'self,' Buddhism isn't interested. Buddhism doesn't want to have anything to do with anything called 'self,' because self in any form, whether you call it true or false, is seen in Buddhism as being an illusion. It's just something that deludes us and tricks us. So Buddhism isn't interested in anything that's called 'self.' Instead Buddhism is interested in voidness of self, or voidness from self.

So in summary, *attā* or self comes from *avijjā*, from ignorance, from not knowing or from wrong knowing. When there is no *avijjā*, none of this ignorance, then there is no self, but as soon as there is ignorance then there is self, one takes something to be self, one sees everything in terms of self. So the Buddhist understanding is that self is the result of ignorance, and that when there is no ignorance, there is no self. If one can overcome ignorance, if one can see things as they really are, then one sees that there is nothing anywhere that can be rightly taken to be self. Nothing can be correctly, truly regarded as self. Self comes from ignorance, by overcoming ignorance there is no more self.

Now the problem here, another aspect of it we should consider, is that as soon as we're born from our mother's womb we're ready to take things as self. We're born ignorant. That's not a judgment, it's just the way things go. We're born without wisdom. And so we're ready from the very start to take things as self. So right from the very beginning we begin to see things as self because of this inherent ignorance.

So as soon as we're born we become stupid. Because of this ignorance we start acting foolishly. From soon after birth when some sight strikes the eyes we think 'I see,' some sound strikes the ear and we think 'me hears,' some volatile gases enter the nose and we take it to be 'me smells.' There are tastes on the tongue and we think 'me tastes,' things touch the body and we think 'me touches' or 'I am touched,' and then thoughts, feelings, memories in the mind, we take it to be 'me.' This foolishness starts very early, practically from the

moment of birth where whatever contacts the senses it's taken as me that experiences it or knows it.

So we're tricked or deceived every time there is something that strikes the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. We take it all to be *I see, I hear, I smell*, and so on. This is the first round of deception. We're tricked here, but then we're tricked again. Whatever it is that made contact, we're tricked into thinking that's positive or negative. And so we're tricked again, that the sight, the smell, the sound, the taste, whatever, is positive or is negative. This self gets strong, this self grows even further. So we're deceived twice, and so the self gets very big.

We're tricked the first time and self arises, so that's the first level of stupidity. And then there's the feelings of positive and negative, and we're tricked even more, we become even more stupid, and the self becomes intense, much bigger, much stronger. This is something that you don't need anyone to tell you, you can just see it because this is happening to everyone here. These two levels of deception are happening right now. Everyone is sitting here with this self, deceived by this illusion of self and the illusion of positive and negative.

A very easy example will help to illustrate this, an example from childhood. A child is careless and walking, bumps into a chair. After bumping into the chair it hurts, the leg hurts or something, and the feeling arises, self, myself. And then the child also projects self on the chair. My self and that self hurt me, and so the child kicks the chair. The first level of illusion is taking this to be self, the pain in the leg or whatever, to be self. And then the second level of illusion is to think the chair is the self, and then one is so stupid one kicks the chair as if that will do any good. This illustrates very clearly these two levels of the illusion of self.

Sometimes the mother, father, or nurse will come and kick the chair too, to show sympathy or solidarity with the child. So this just makes the kid even more stupid, not to mention the adults.

So all this helps to explain this illusion or the illusions of self. The self is thoroughly stupid, it arises out of an illusion and leads and grows into bigger illusions. The soul is still dumb but it's not quite so stupid. It doesn't know anything, and it doesn't go around grabbing things to be self, but as soon as self arises, things get really messed up and everything is upside down and thoroughly stupid. If you study this, if you study how the illusions of self arise and understand it, see it, experience it deeply, then one will see through the self, and self will no longer exist. One will be free of self. There won't be any more self or of self, no me, no mine. And then there won't be any more problems or questions about self.

Sometimes we break or destroy our pencil or pen because it doesn't respond to our desires. We want it to do something and it doesn't do it, so we – aargh – break it or throw it away or smash it. This shows how stupid we can be, how broad and expansive this stupidity about self can be, that we take the pen to be a self and try to punish it and get angry at it, hate it. This is the power of the illusion of self.

Remember the short words, please try to remember the words: “Wherever there is self, there is a problem. When there is no self whatsoever, there are no problems, there are no hassles, no troubles, no pain, no dukkha.” We study Dhamma as the way to be free of pain, to be free of self. We study Dhamma to be free of this illusion of self, to be void of self, and then there are no more problems, there aren't any troubles, nothing is difficult, everything is free.

If you experience success in practicing mindfulness with breathing then you won't have any more problems with self. Practice correctly until there is deepening insight and experience of *aniccatā* (impermanence), *dukkhatā* (the painfulness of impermanent things), *anattatā* (not selfhood), *dhammādhiṭṭhatā* (the naturalness of things), *dhamma-niyāmatā* (the lawful, the natural lawfulness), *idappaccayatā* (dependence and conditionality), *suññatā* (voidness), *thāthātā tathatā* (thusness), and *atamayatā* (the mind that is untouched by anything positive or negative). Then seeing all of these there will not be any more illusions or problems with self, and then there are no more problems in life. From all of this information, all of these observations, you can study the matter for yourself, and then you will know what self is.

❖ *“My problem is that over the last few years I’ve spent much of my free time alone. Nothing wrong with that. And even though I have tried to capture the positive points of myself during this time, there is this strong feeling lurking in the background that I am not whole, or that I am less complete due to not having a meaningful loving relationship in my life; family excluded. If it matters I am not promiscuous. Any suggestions or methods to alleviate this feeling? Or gain a stronger sense of self?”* ❖

(Santikaro: We'll not worry about the last phrase since that's been adequately discussed. He definitely won't tell you how to have a stronger sense of self!)

~ Response by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu ~

First you should ask yourself carefully, whether you want or have a lover, or a husband or wife, for the sake of lessening self or for the sake of enlarging self or increasing self. Does one want a loving relationship in order to build up self, or to lessen self? If one is interested in a relationship or a lover, a husband, a wife, in order to lessen self then one won't have any of these problems. If one is married, has a spouse, has a long-term loving relationship, just arrange it so that it's a way – whether a relationship or a family – to lessen self, to get free of self, then there won't be any problem.

When you've got a single self (*attā*), then you've only got one set of problems. But when you've got two *attās*, or a pair of selves, then you've doubled the amount of problems. So when there are two selves you have to be twice as intelligent, twice as wise, twice as skillful, and able to deal with the problems of those two selves. When one has only a single self to deal with, it's easier, still difficult, but it's easier. But if you're going to have a lover or a husband or wife, and have two selves to deal with, you better find the intelligence and wisdom to be able to deal with the problems that arise from that.

If you look at it from one angle, the married life can be a life where ignorance is doubled. The foolishness of two people is put together, and there's just a lot more ignorance. But one can also look at married life as combining the wisdom, the intelligence of wisdom, of both in order to solve the problems of self, in order to overcome the problems of life.

So it depends on how you look at marriage. What is your purpose and intention in entering a relationship? Does one do so through ignorance and just merely double the amount of stupidity? Or does one do so with wisdom in order to lessen self and get free of self? One can use marriage to double the amount of wisdom. The experience and intelligence of both can be

put together to help deal with the problems of self, in order to get free of self. It's how one looks at it.

If we live the married life incorrectly then it doubles stupidity, but if we live the married life correctly it doubles intelligence and wisdom. So please try to live the married life correctly so that there is more wisdom and less self.

❖ *“My first exposure to Buddhism was through Tibetan Buddhism. Could you please comment on what you think are the essential differences between Tibetan and Thai, or Suan Mokkh, Buddhism? Would reading books on Tibetan Buddhism only confuse what we have learned here?”* ❖

~ Response by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu ~

The question we must ask you is have you gotten to the essence, the heart or nucleus, of Theravāda Buddhism, the Buddhism presented here? Have you recognized, have you found, have you gotten to the essence, the heart, of Tibetan Buddhism? If you've gotten to the heart or essence of both, you'll see that they're the same. We're talking about the true essence, the genuine essence, not illusions or our own guesses. But if one has gotten to the real essence or heart of Theravāda Buddhism, of Mahāyāna Buddhism, of Vajrayāna Buddhism as they teach in Tibet, then one sees that they are all the same.

The essence of Buddhism is to see *anattā*, to realize not-self, to realize the fact that life is not-self, to see the not-selfness of life – the selflessness of life. This is the heart of all forms of Buddhism, whether Thai Buddhism, Sri Lankan Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism, Vietnamese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Mongolian, Western Buddhism. Whatever kind of Buddhism it is, the heart, the essence is just this one thing, to realize the selflessness, the *anattā*, of life. All the schools of Buddhism teach this. This is the only true or genuine heart of Buddhism.

Now you can get confused if you take superficial matters, some of the outer or external things such as the ceremonies or the language used, or the way the monks dress or shave their heads or the rules they follow. If you take the language or the specific meditation techniques or any of the externals, then this can lead to confusion, discrimination, and even a lot of arguing, who's right, who's better, and all that kind of rubbish. But if one gets to the heart of it, then one sees that all schools, all forms of Buddhism are the same. They teach that life is not-self.

This is usually taught in the form that the five heaps (the five *khandhas*) – or in Sanskrit *skandhas* – are not-self. The body aggregate, the feeling aggregate, the perceptions aggregate, the thoughts aggregate, and the consciousness aggregate, each of these is not-self, all together they're not-self, outside of them there is nothing which is self. Seeing thoroughly that life, or these five *khandhas*, these five subsystems of life are not-self, this is the heart of all of Buddhism. Once one recognizes, realizes this essence of Buddhism then there won't be any confusion.

We have to accept the necessity that new ceremonies, new rituals, new practices, new teachings, and explanations will have to be created. There will always be a need for more of

these in order to serve the needs of people of, we could say, weak minded people. Or people who aren't very intelligent, people without very much wisdom. In order to help them there will always be a need to think up new ceremonies and so on.

There will always be a need for the people who have already gone very far in a certain direction, in a certain line of study, in order to correct the misunderstandings involved with that, it will be necessary to adapt new teachings to that situation. So this need will always exist, and so it's inevitable that there will be constantly arising new ceremonies, new methods, new teachings, and new explanations. For example if you look at some of the great Mahāyāna suttas, they are all very, very long. The Theravāda suttas or discourses are rather short. But all the famous Mahāyāna ones, almost all are very long; they begin with lots of devotional and magical stuff to get the attention of people who aren't very wise, and then slowly raise their level of understanding. Then there is a lot of philosophical stuff to deal with, people who've gotten off the track into philosophical speculations about all kinds of different things. So these very large Mahāyāna suttas are having to deal with these different needs, but in the end the purpose is to draw all of that to the essence of Buddhism. All the really great Mahāyāna suttas end with the fact that the five khandhas are not-self, with the fact of the voidness of the five khandhas, that life is not-self. The different techniques and methods will keep varying according to the needs, but the essence is always the not-selfness of life.

To help certain people who are spiritually immature, it gets even more difficult, so there's the need for the so called Pure Land Schools, or Paradise Schools, to get people some kind of heaven or paradise to look for in the next life. This *sukhāvatī*, this approach, is also necessary. We need to recognize that this is the way things are in order to help people of different levels of intelligence from different backgrounds, but we shouldn't get distracted or confused by that. We should see that the heart, the essence of every school of Buddhism, every sect, and every sub-sect, is that the five khandhas are not-self, life is not-self.

Certain methods are just techniques to stimulate the wisdom to leap out quickly. There are certain approaches which are solely designed to spark a sudden leap of wisdom. For example Zen has some of these. So there are approaches that emphasize this attempt to scare or spark wisdom suddenly.

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