

ANATTĀ & REBIRTH

by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

A talk originally addressed to students of Puget Sound University in Seattle, Washington. The explanations of rebirth they had heard seemed to contradict the principle of *anattā*. Tan Ajarn was asked to clarify the seeming contradiction.

Today, we will speak about *anattā* and rebirth. We will discuss *anattā* first, and then discuss rebirth. If we understand *anattā* properly, it will be easy to understand rebirth correctly. [1]

The feeling that one is a self occurs naturally and instinctually. Hence, people say "self." Then, they develop theories and promulgate teachings of a higher self — one more special, or more profound, than the usual daily self. Through this process of teaching and educating, the belief in self develops into the highest self: an eternal soul. This kind of belief and teaching was, and remains, quite common. When the Buddha appeared, however, he taught the opposite: that all these things are *anattā* (not-self). [2]

The primitives who long ago lived in forests and caves believed there is *attā*. They also believed in spirits, powers, and ghosts, which were taken to be selves, also. This common belief occurs easily in the human mind. Thus, there happened the teaching of *attā*, then there appeared the ceremonies, rituals, and rites in relation to all those spirits, angels, demons, and things. As civilization develops further, the beliefs about self and spirits also develop, as do the corresponding ceremonies and rituals. The highest, most fully developed version of such beliefs occurred in India during the era of the Upanishads, which taught *attā* as it is believed today: that there is a self — a fundamental basis or reality — in living things, which is successively reincarnated, which is slowly purified through this long succession of births until it finishes in eternity. This is the most highly developed theory of the primitive belief in self. This is how the highest *attā* must be taught. [3]

This teaching of self and soul spread from India into other cultures, as far as it could go. In most cultures, there was already a receptivity for this idea, even though their teachings weren't previously connected to India. So they welcomed it. Other cultures accepted this belief and it spread around the world. Even in Thailand, the Upanishadic teaching on the existence of self was taught to the fullest extent before Buddhism arrived. [4]

The teaching of the existence of *attā* progressed to its highest form in India during the Upanishad era. The Vedānta, in particular, taught the highest self. When there is the highest *attā*, the eternal self, it's called "*sammā*." This is a different meaning of *sammā* than we're accustomed to in Buddhism. It has the same meaning as "*paramatman*." This then, in India at that time, was considered the highest, newest, most excellent teaching. Such was the situation as the Buddha was about to appear. [5]

When the Buddha appeared, he thought in a new way. He saw that this teaching of *attā* and self was not true. First, the thing they were talking about did not actually exist. Second, the belief in *attā*, the teaching that *attā* exists, is the cause of dukkha. He pointed out that all dukkha is based in what we call

the "self." The Buddha taught *anattā* for these two reasons: *attā* is wrong and it is the cause of *ödukkhaò*. Thus, there appeared the teaching of *anattā*. [6]

We also should know that non-Buddhist groups had already begun to speak of *anattā* to some extent, but theirs was *anattā* in minor things, only in little things. They still held to a "true self" and distinguished some things as *anattā*, but only minor things, such as, the body, wealth, possessions, food, and different stimulating and deluding things [stimulants& delusions]. They also taught *anattā*, but held to a "self" as existing in people. This self will change, be reborn, getting better and better, until reaching the ultimate as "eternal *attā*." [7]

Now, we will consider, in particular, why the feeling that there is an *attā* occurs. Please give special attention to this matter. It happens because the instincts¹ feel or sense that there is a self in life. This happens by itself and is a survival mechanism that we can find in all organisms. But please understand that instinctual knowledge is not correct. It still lacks *vijjā* (correct knowledge); *avijjā* (ignorance) remains.² Thus, experiences that follow the instincts exclusively belong to *avijjā*. They cause us to feel that there is a self, which is a most important awareness in living. We can see that it is necessary for survival. Life bases itself on the aim that needs to be a self. Instincts are the cause of feeling that there's a self, although it isn't correct. [8]

Now, on the second level of the development of *attā*, *avijjā* increases and the sense of self builds. For example, the infant is born at first with a basic feeling of self, a natural, instinctual feeling. But then the infant is totally surrounded by all kinds of things which are good and bad, agreeable and disagreeable, positive and negative. As there is increasing experience of pleasure and pain, the instinctual sense of self grows stronger and develops preferences. Because the child does not have enough understanding to know better, *avijjā* increases and the feeling of self is confirmed and consolidated. This self is strengthened by ignorance. This is the second matter. [9]

On the third level of this development of self, of *attā*, there is the cultural teaching, the knowledge passed along by parents and teachers, that there is *attā*, that we have selves. This is the cultural conditioning every child increasingly receives from parents, teachers and other cultural elements. Even in religious teaching, when the religion holds there is an *attā*, the existence of *attā* is taught more and more. From all this instruction, the child strengthens the belief in self until it becomes a deep conviction. In the third stage, through all the cultural conditioning of parents, teachers and religions, the belief in self becomes firmly rooted. [10]

Carefully, notice that there are three main causes or conditions for this belief in *attā*. The first is the instinctual feeling, just that basic sense of a self. Then, once born, we are surrounded by environmental things and the foolishness about *attā* increases to become *avijjā*. This is encouraged through all the positive and negative factors with which the child is confronted. Next, on the third level we are taught to believe in it all. Self is further established, solidified, and deepened through our being taught to believe in it. In all homes, all families, all religions; in the schools, the temples, the synagogues, and the churches everywhere; this belief in self and soul is very firmly established and driven into the child's mind. Thus, this ignorant understanding grows to its fullest extreme. [11]

The feeling that there is self is a firm foundation in everyone. Further, every language has "self" buried within it. All languages are full of words for self, soul, or ego. Firmly fixed in our words and experiences, the self is very hard to give up. Although Buddhism teaches *attā*, it must do so with ordinary *attā* words. Sometimes the word *attā* is borrowed for use in Buddhism. We use the word *attā* in

¹ Tan Ajarn's use of terms such as this is not necessarily the same as their use in Western biology and psychology.

² *Avijjā* is the opposite of *vijjā*, which is correct knowledge of the things and facts we need to know (in order to survive spiritually), while *avijjā* is the lack of such right knowledge or is wrong knowledge, knowledge in conflict with the way things are.

Buddhism, but it refers to *attā* which is not *attā*, that is, *attā* which is *anattā*. Even in Buddhism we must talk about *attā* a lot. [12]

Buddhists out of necessity must use the word "*attā*," but with another meaning: the *attā* which is not-self, the self which is *anattā*. For instance, "self is the refuge of self; *attā* is the refuge of *attā*," which means that the *attā* which is not *attā* must help itself to realize the truth of not-*attā*, then problems end and dukkha quenches. Thus, in Buddhism the word *attā* is used, but with a new meaning: the self which is not-self, the *attā* which is *anattā*. Understand carefully and well this word "*attā*" which is "not-*attā*." [13]

There is also a third type of viewpoint, one which denies the existence of anything at all. The *attā* which is *attā* is not there. The *attā* which is *anattā* is not there. There is nothing having to do with *attā* and *anattā*. People who think this way are called "nihilists." They hold that nothing exists at all. [14]

So in this matter, we can distinguish three viewpoints. You ought to know all three, understanding is then easier. The first holds that there is an *attā* that is really a self in the fullest meaning of the word. The second says there is an *attā* is *anattā*, which can't be taken as the first kind of self, but this thing does exist. This is the "*attā* which is non-*attā*" group. The third has nothing, says there is nothing at all. Please consider this matter until seeing clearly the three teachings on this subject. One group teaches existence, that *attā* exists, *attā* according to that meaning, one-hundred percent. Another group — Buddhism — teaches that there is *attā* that is not an *attā*, which is *anattā*. The third group teaches there isn't anything at all, teaches non-existence. [15]

If students would like to remember the specific technical terms, there are three. The first term is "*attā*": there is *attā* which is *attā*. The second term is *anattā*: there is *attā* that is not-self, that is *anattā*. The third term is *nirattā*: without any kind of *attā* at all, nothingness. One extreme of *attā* is that it exists fully. The other extreme is no *attā* at all. *Anattā*, the self which is not self, is neither extreme, and is correct. There are three words: *attā*, *anattā*, and *nirattā*. They're totally different. Understand the meaning of these three words, then you'll understand everything. [16]

The first group is the positive extreme. They believe there is *attā* in the full meaning of *attā*. This is called *sassatadiṭṭhi*, the belief in full existence or being. The second sort is the middle. There is the thing which you call "*attā*" but it isn't really *attā*, it's *anattā*. This is the middle or correct view. It's called *sammādiṭṭhi*. Then the negative extreme holds that there is no existence of any kind. There's no *attā* in any sense. This is called *natthikadiṭṭhi*. *sassatadiṭṭhi* is full, unchanging existence; *natthikadiṭṭhi* isn't anything at all. In the middle is correct Buddhism. There exists the thing which you all call "*attā*." Something is there to be called "*attā*" or "*anattā*." That is, there is everything, but we don't call it or its constituent parts "*attā*." They are *anattā*. Right here is *sammādiṭṭhi*. This extreme is *sassatā*, which is wrong. That extreme is *natthikā*, which is wrong. In the middle are only the things which shouldn't be called *attā*, which are *anattā*. This is the point we must especially study and learn. [17]

Here, I'd like to go ahead to tell you that this nothingness or nihilism (*natthikadiṭṭhi*) is another meaning. Don't confuse the nihilistic teaching with the Buddha's teaching of *suññatā* (voidness). The correct word, voidness, still has existence, but nothing existing as a self. Everything is void of self. There is a big difference between nothingness and *suññatā* which holds that things exist void of selfhood. To mix up and confuse *natthikadiṭṭhi* with *suññatā* is to misunderstand Buddhism even more. Please distinguish the one group of views as *natthikadiṭṭhi* and keep it separate. [18]

To remember easily: nothingness, no thing at all, is called "*natthikadiṭṭhi*"; existence or being without *attā* is called "*suññatā*." With *natthikadiṭṭhi* there is nothing. *Suññatā* exists but is void of self. *natthikadiṭṭhi* and *suññatā* are not the same thing. You must understand this properly. [19]

Once again, don't confuse *natthikadiṭṭhi* with *anattā* or *suññatā*. Don't take nihilism to be *anattā*. These are totally different matters. *Anattā*, *suññatā*, and *tathatā* are, they exist, but their beings are not-self. They are *anattā*. [20]

Now, we come to the question of what is *anattā*. What are the things which are *anattā*? The first one to mention is that body-mind is *anattā*. The body is a physical thing that performs its various bodily functions. It can do all the physical functions needed for life, without requiring a self. This mind can do all the duties of mind without requiring *attā*, self, soul, or *atman*. If we put a self or soul in the body, that is a misunderstanding, thinking there is some *attā*. Actually it's just the body that functions in all the appropriate ways of the body. It is sensitive to things in line with the functions of a body with a nervous system. The thing we call "mind" or "heart" can do all of the duties natural for a "mind" or "heart." The body and mind function perfectly well by themselves. There is no need for a third thing – this thing people call "self" – to take possession of or control the mind. The heart exists in its own way. Its nature is to feel. It can do its duties within itself, according to its own conditions and causes. Hence the body and mind are not selves, they are *anattā*. [21]

We may divide life in two – body and mind – each one is *anattā*. If we divide into five – the five *khandhas* (aggregates) – each one of them is *anattā*. *Rūpa*, this body that we've discussed is *anattā*. Then, the mind or heart can be divided into four. There is *vedanā* (feeling), which is *anattā*. It itself feels, according to the meaning of *vedanā*, with the value of *vedanā*. *Saññā* (recognition, perception) perceives in itself, by itself. That which is *sankhāra* can think, can conceive within itself. *Viññāna* (consciousness) is consciousness by itself. These four are purely mental matters, yet they are still *anattā*. [22]

Now we come to the word "life." You can take two aspects – body and mind – as life. You can take all five aspects – the five *khandhas* – as life. Or, you can name it all in one short word: "life." Still, life is *anattā*, just as body and mind are *anattā*, and the five *khandhas* are *anattā*. Thus, please look carefully. Know the real thing called "life" – it's *anattā*. [23]

Now we will observe the important thing called "*citta*," "mind," or whatever you wish in other languages. Regarding this *citta*, we can observe that everything's significance comes down to the mind. Its meaning and value is in the mind. All things have to be known through the mind. Because of the centrality of mind, of consciousness, there are those who say this mind is *attā*, is self. Since it can do things and feel things, and because of its many other functions, *citta* is taken to be *attā*. But in Buddhism, "*attā*" is not-*attā*. The mind is capable of all this awareness, of all these functions, that is just the way the mind is. Although it can do so many different things, all those functions are just like that, they're just what they are. There is no self to be found in any of it, so this thing called mind is also *anattā* (not-self).[24]

In short, you may regard everything that we have mentioned, whether mental or physical, whichever *khandha* they may be, as having within them a virtue or quality that allows them to do whatever it is that they do. They all have a mechanism within themselves. Whether material, physical, mental, or what have you– on whatever level – they have mechanisms within themselves. They can perform their function within themselves, so they don't need an *attā* to come in anywhere. Allow us to give a tangible example of how material things can feel within themselves through their own nervous systems. A certain kind of grass³ which you have probably seen (it's all around here), opens with its leaflets fully spread like open fingers. Touch it with your hand and the leaflets close up, folding together like the pages of a book. This grass can close up on itself. Although it's thoroughly material, it still has a mechanism which can feel or experience. It closes up just as if it can feel. Those who believe in *attā* believe that there's an *attā*, *atman*, or self in this grass. Buddhism, however, holds that there's no *attā* in it, that it's not-*attā*. It has a virtue in itself that it can do such a thing. In this bodily system there's a nervous system through which it can do things just as if it were a self, soul, or whatever. So it is that on every level beginning with material life has body, mind, and feelings, nothing needs to be *attā*. If *attā*'s existence is believed in – any kind of *attā* in anything – that isn't Buddhism. It becomes animism instantly. [26]

Now we come to some further important questions. First, if there is no self, what is this thing we call a "person"? What are we? We can say that this is a collection of ingredients, of various parts

³ In Thai, *yaa maiyarap*.

compounded together. We can talk about mind and body if we wish, the two primary ingredients. We can also talk about the five *khandhas*: body, feeling, perception, thought, and consciousness. We can talk in terms of the elements (*dhātu*), both physical and non-physical. What we call "a person" is these ingredients and components which have been brought and put together. Still, they are *anattā*. If each of those parts, *khandhas*, and elements are not self, then their combination is also not-self. Simply having a collection of things holding together for a little while does not mean that one has a self. [27]

The second question is: If there is no self, then who acts? Who produces all these physical, verbal, and mental *kammas* (actions) and receives the result of those actions (*kamma*-fruit)? Who experiences happiness and dukkha? The "who" is "nobody." There isn't a need for anybody. In fact, we need not use the word "who" at all. The mind can feel, be aware, and think. It has its needs and can make the body act or the mouth speak accordingly. The mind thinks and as a result of that thinking there is an action: a physical, verbal or mental action (*kamma*). 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 not self. The action really happens, but it is not self. Then there's a reaction that happens as *kamma*-fruit. If it affects anything, just that thing is the receiver of the *kamma*-fruit. But really, if we speak correctly and straight-forwardly, there is nobody who receives the fruit of *kamma*. Although a reaction occurs, it happens to the next thing. It is a process of one thing or event conditioning the next.

If we look carefully, we see that there is one mind that thinks, that has the intention behind the action, but the reaction is experienced by a different mind. From one moment to the next it is a completely different mind. It is never the same mind, let alone a self or a "who." ("Who" implies self.) This *citta* is the maker of the *kamma*; the fruit of *kamma* happens to that (next) *citta*. It isn't the same *citta* anymore. Still, without any *attā*, the *citta* can make *kamma*, it can act. And the *citta* which isn't *attā* can experience the fruit of *kamma*. Whether happiness or dukkha is experienced, there is just mind experiencing it. One doesn't need an *attā*, there is only experience. There is only foolishness or intelligence. Take it as happy, it's happiness (*ösukha*); take it as dukkha, it's dukkha. The mind alone feels *ösukha* and dukkha, it doesn't need an *attā*. Thus we say that "nobody" makes *kamma*. If we speak in line with Buddhist principles, "nobody makes *kamma*." Although there is the acting of *kamma*, there is nobody who makes it, or receives its fruit, or is the happy one or the miserable one. There's merely *citta* together with body; that's all that's needed for experience. And all of it is not-self. [28]

Now we come to the third question which they will ask: When there is no *attā*, then what is reborn? What or who is reborn? Forgive us for being forced to use crude language, but this question is absurd and crazy.⁴ In Buddhism, there is no point in asking such a thing. There is no place for it in Buddhism. If you ask what will be reborn next, that's the craziest, most insane question. If right here, right now, there is no soul, person, self, or *attā*, how could there be some "who" or "someone" that goes and gets reborn? So there is no way one can ask "who will be reborn?" Therefore, the rebirth of the same person does not occur. But the birth of different things is happening all the time. It happens often and continuously, but there is no rebirth. There is no such thing, in reality, as rebirth or reincarnation. That there is one person, one "I" or "you," getting reborn is what reincarnation is all about. If all is *anattā*, there is nothing to get reborn. There is birth, birth, birth, of course. This is obvious. There is birth happening all the time, but it is never the same person being born a second time. Every birth is new. So there is birth, endlessly, constantly, but we will not call it "rebirth" or "reincarnation." [29]

While we have the chance, let's spill all the beans— there isn't much time left — there's no "person" or "being" (*satva*). What we call a person is merely a momentary grouping that does not last. It does not have any independent reality and is merely a stream or process of cause and effect, which is called the "dependent origination of `no person.'" Buddhism teaches dependent origination — this process of causes and effects, of things continuously arising out of causes, the causes being dependent on previous causes, the whole flow unfolding on and on. Thus, Buddhism is the teaching of "no man," the teaching of "no

⁴ This is the topic which Tan Ajarn was asked to explain.

person." There's no person to live or to die or to be reborn. Now, there's no person. It's merely the grouping of body and mind, or of the five *khandhas*, or whatever you want to call it. But this grouping which temporarily appears according to causes and conditions is not a person. Would you please understand well that it is no person who makes *kammās*, who receives fruits of *kammās*, who is happy, who is dukkha, who dies, who gets reborn. These lives don't exist like that. There is no birth or incarnation of the same person. [30]

Consider the meaning of the word "birth." Birth is an important word which we hardly understand at all. There are three kinds of birth. The first is the kind of birth that everybody knows about, physical birth. The body is born out of the womb, and then grows older and older, and then dies and is put in a coffin. That is physical birth, it leads to physical death. The second kind of birth is mental. It happens within the mind following the stream of dependent origination. Whenever there is the thought "I am," "I do," "I act," "I have," "I own," "I want," "I get," "I exist," the birth of any one of these "I" thoughts is one birth. This is the "birth" of *upādāna* along the stream of *paĒicca-samuppāda*, which is the birth of the ego. Such mental or spiritual birth is another kind of birth. The third kind of birth is very difficult for most people to understand. It is when one of the *āyatana*, that is, sense bases, performs its respective function. Performing some function means "that thing is born." You might not understand that when the eye performs the function of seeing, then the eye is born. When the eye stops functioning, then we say it ceases. When the ear performs its function, the ear is born; when it stops, the ear ceases. It is the same with the nose, tongue and so forth. There is the arising and ceasing, arising and ceasing, of the *āyatananika-dhammas*. Whenever something does its function, it is born, and when it is no longer in action, then it ceases, it ends. Each time the eye functions and ceases then functions again, it is a different eye. Can you see how the physical eye itself from one function to the next is not the same eye? How it is never the same ear, never the same nervous system? All these things are happening in this way but each time there is a birth, a different thing is born. There are only these functions, these processes, these activities happening over and over again. However, there is no same thing holding it all together that we could call a self. There are these three kinds of birth, nonetheless they aren't the birth of the same person or of the same thing. So there is no rebirth. Please get to know these three kinds of birth: the physical birth, the mental birth through attachment, and lastly, the third kind of birth happening whenever there is a sensory function. [31]

One group of people believes that there is self, there is *atman*, there is a soul which is born as this person. Once the body dies, this thing doesn't die. It goes to a new birth. Most people believe this, they take it as the basis of their beliefs. The Upanishad texts believed this. In Buddhism, however, there isn't such a thing. Buddhism does not believe there is a self or soul which is born and then dies. Thus, the rebirth of this or that person doesn't occur, because that person doesn't exist here in the first place. This is called "physical rebirth." It is something that should not be spoken of as "rebirth."

The Lord Buddha forbade his disciples to believe that consciousness or a spirit (*vi—ōa*) goes to be born. A certain bhikkhu named Sāti stated that "As I understand the Dhamma as taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through *sa×sāra* (the cycles of birth and death), not another." When other monks objected, Sāti stubbornly clung to his "pernicious view." When this was brought to the Buddha's attention, he himself interviewed Sāti. The later repeated his view, to which the Buddha scolded him richly. "Misguided man, to whom have you ever known me to teach the Dhamma in that way? Misguided man, in many talks have I not stated consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness?"⁵ Clearly, the Buddha did not accept that the "same consciousness" is reborn from life to life.

⁵ Mahātañhāsankhaya Sutta, Majjhima-Nikāya #38 (M.i.258). Translation after *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, tr. Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi (Wisdom, Boston: 1995), p. 350.
.... "Paveritaṃ viññāṇaṃ saṃsāritaṃ cavaṭaṃ." ???

Sadly there are passages even in the *Tipiṭaka* itself which say "this person was born" in such and such a place. When there are these contradictions, you must find out which understanding is correct. As to which one is correct, look for yourself. According to the main principles there is no *attā* or *atman*. So one can't really speak of physical birth as "rebirth." Mental birth can't be spoken of as "rebirth," because it's the birth of a different *citta*. The material or functional birth of the *āyatana* is not the same thing, either. For example, the eye that sees a form this moment and the eye that sees a form another moment is not the same eye. Hence, we do not speak of repeated births because it's never the same eye. There's no essence or self to any of these three eyes. There's no "new" and no "repeat," there's only the *hetu-paccaya* (causes and conditions) at some time and there is birth. Only when there are the *hetu-paccaya*, is there birth. A hundred births, a thousand births, ten thousand, a million, but never of the same person. Never of the same *attā* and never of the same thing. This is the non-existence of rebirth. [32]

Now we come to the most important matter. The Buddha said that, "I teach only one thing: dukkha and the quenching of dukkha." That is what all the teachings are about, dukkha and the quenching of dukkha. He didn't talk about other things. Whether or not there is rebirth is not the fundamental question, because once one is born here and now, there is dukkha like this and it must be quenched like this. Even if you are born again, dukkha is like this and must be quenched in the same way. Why bother talking about birth or no birth? Talk only about how dukkha arises and how dukkha is quenched. Just this is already enough. For this reason the Buddha taught *anattā*. Once *anattā* is fully realized, there is no dukkha. When there is no *attā*, dukkha isn't born, anymore. Therefore, he taught the quenching of dukkha, that is, he taught this matter of not-self. The teaching of *anattā* is essential for the ending of dukkha. Arguments and discussions about whether there is rebirth or not are a waste of time. Whether "it" will be born or not, there is still this business of quenching dukkha like this. It's better to speak about this quenching of dukkha instead. This quenching of dukkha is the fact that there is no *attā*, is understanding that everything is *anattā*. (33)

We can conclude by saying that if you understand *anattā* correctly and truly, then you will discover for yourself that there is no rebirth and no reincarnation. The matter is finished.

May we end today's lecture. Time is up and it's time to eat. I must take some nursing food, according to doctor's orders. (34)

translated by Santikaro Bhikkhu
typed by Sean MacCarthy