Kamma, Rebirth and Transcendence: A Top Down View of the Buddhadhamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 52:17

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

In my last talk I was speaking about the way our cultural perspectives—whether through science or scientism, through our romantic understanding of life, or through psychotherapy—tend to distort the teaching of the Buddha. I boiled this teaching down to ethics and transcendence.

If you look at what's happening from a scientific point of view, it's easy to understand that you're looking upward through matter. Matter begins to create chemicals, chemicals create some sort of bio-life, and so it all looks very clear—that consciousness and all the rest appears as part of that upward process of evolution. It's quite understandable that this would make sense to somebody brought up in that scientific tradition.

If you haven't been, of course—if you've been brought up in a religious tradition, one of the Christian traditions or Islam or Judaism or Hinduism—then you're looking at it from a slightly different way. You're looking down and seeing how everything slowly descends to the material base.

So that's what I want to try and do this evening: to give you a different perspective. The first thing is to be clear about what the Buddha means by transcendence, what he's pointing to.

In the last talk I also mentioned some of these quotes. The one where people feel he's been most clear is this: "There is a sphere or a dimension where there's no earth, no water, no fire, no air." Now those, of course, are the four great elements by which the mind contacts matter. So when you're looking at the pain in your knees, it will either be fiery or heavy and thick. Remember that when the Buddha talks about the world, the all, he's not talking about the objective world of science. He's talking about the way we experience it—the world that we're actually manufacturing. He's always talking from that angle. It's not that he denies that the world out there exists, but he's saying that from the point of view of liberation, it's the world that we're actually creating that we've got to be liberated from.

He says there's no base consisting of space, consciousness, nothingness, perception, non-perception. This refers to those higher jhānic states, which is the most refined place that the mind can get to. It's when the mind actually stops producing, and there's just the awareness of that space.

Then he says it's neither this world nor another world, nor both, neither sun nor moon. So he is saying that there isn't a physical world where this transcendent place is. He says there's no coming and going and

no staying—so there's no sense of space and there's no sense of time. There's no ceasing, no uprising—so it's without change. This place is without change.

Remember those three characteristics: dukkha, anicca, and anattā. So there's no suffering there—it's adukkha. There's no impermanence there—it's nicca. And of course there's no self there, no sense of a self. It's a non-dual state.

It's not fixed, it's not movable. This comes from our position where everything has a place and you can move most things. Everything changes. But there, there's nothing, so you can't talk about something being fixed or movable. And it has no support. Everything in this world is dependent on something else. Nothing arises of itself. There's no existent. But this is a place where it doesn't need anything at all.

So he's obviously pointing to something which is quite other than what we're experiencing. And that's what we mean by transcendence. He says, "Just this is the end of suffering."

Then, of course, there's the other famous passage that people quote: "There exists"—so the word *atthi*—"th ere is the not-born, the not-compounded, the not-created, the not-conditioned." But then he goes on to a second verse in which he says, "If there were not this not-born, not-compounded, not-created, not-conditioned, no escape could be discerned from the born, the compounded..."

the created and the conditioned. And then the final verse says, but because there is this not born, then there is obviously an escape.

So again, he's talking about something which is of another nature, you might say, another dimension.

And the other final one which I brought up the last time was this question of where do earth, water, fire and air find no footing? Remember, somebody asks him where the world comes to an end. So this is the world we're creating. And he says, well, that's the wrong question. You should ask where does it find no footing? So there's nothing destroyed in the process. He himself says the only thing that's destroyed in the process of liberation is greed, hatred and delusion. Everything else remains.

Where are long and short, small, fair, foul? Where are the subject and object wholly destroyed, you see? A sense of object. Remember this non-dual place. If you say there's one, there's a presumption that there may be a two, right? So that's why this word of non-dual is coined. But of course each system has a different understanding of non-dual. For the Hindus, the non-dual state is to be at one with Brahman. But in the Buddhist tradition, it's to be in this state of nibbana.

So he says that there is a consciousness which is non-manifestive. Now a consciousness that's manifestive is manifesting through the six senses—the five basic physical senses and the mind. Mind, heart, emotions and thoughts. So he said it's non-manifestive. It's without boundary. Boundaries are created by phenomena, by objects, by things. So there's nothing there. That's what he's saying. And it's all directions full of light. So consciousness. You can take that as either a state of light or a brightness as if you were

inside the bulb, or you can take it as a state of pure awareness. And he says here's where this earth, water, fire and air—so the physical nature, our physical nature—finds no footing. Here's where all these opposites, long and short, small and great and so on, subjects and objects are wholly destroyed. They don't exist there.

Okay, so now we have this, if we keep the idea of something that's transcendent. Now, what doesn't the Buddha talk about? What won't he actually talk about?

There were these ten questions that were, I suppose, the obsessions of the age. The first one is, is the world eternal? Is the world not eternal? Is the world infinite? Is the world finite? Is the soul the same as the body? If it is, then you would be an annihilationist because when the body dies, you go as well. Soul here would be your mind rather than your body. And is the soul different from the body? In which case, the soul would separate from the body and you'd be an eternalist.

So there were these two opposites at the time of the Buddha. You've got the Brahmins and the Jains who said the soul was released, the Jiva was released into a heavenly state or at one with Brahman. And there were the materialists who said, you know, that was it. When you're dead, you're dead.

And then the last four concerned somebody who was fully liberated. Does the Tathagata exist after death or does he not exist? Does he exist and not exist? And then finally, does he neither exist nor not exist? So he's cornered any sort of effort at rational—well, of course, he's silent, you see. And he's silent because the questions are always coming from the point of view of a self. And this is what he says to Vacchagotta.

Then he says his usual thing. He says they regard feeling as self, perception as self, volitional formations as self, consciousness as self—or self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. Therefore, when the wanderers of other sects ask such questions, they give such answers: "The world is eternal," and they can be very certain about it. But the thing is, he never actually says anything about it himself. He doesn't make any declaration. He doesn't give any indication as to whether it is or not.

You know, he might sort of say, "Well, for those who don't have a self, there is an eternal," and so forth. But he just goes quiet. He just goes mum. So when it comes to those sorts of questions about the world and things like that, he quite simply doesn't go there. But we'll come to something else in a minute. We'll come back to that.

The next thing that you might ask, that we might ask, but which never seems to occur in the scriptures is: Why does this occur in the first place? Where does this satipaññā—or as the Abhidhamma would put it, this nibbānic element in us, or as the Mahāyāna would point to it, Buddha nature—where does it come from? Why has it come here? Where did it all begin? These sorts of questions about the relationship of this nibbānadhātu and how it's come here are never broached. I don't know of a question that comes up in the scriptures concerning this.

And it's the same with the relationship that our individual, inverted commas, nibbānadhātus have with each other. Presumably there are lots of Arahants whose nibbānadhātus, this element, this Buddha nature, exist somewhere. Do they communicate? Do they know whether the last perfectly enlightened person is next door or upstairs? All that area just doesn't come up for discussion. It simply doesn't arise, you see.

But of course, others like the Hindus tried to work something out for that. As you become liberated in the Hindu tradition, where you get moksha, freedom, your atta, your self—inverted commas, big self—goes back into Brahman. You become Brahman, you see. So in that sense, you've got this idea that Brahman, who's neuter by the way, neither male nor female, bursts into all these different attas, and then they've got to find their way back to him. They're trying to answer this question, but it never comes up in the scriptures. The Buddha never approaches it. So that's the end of that. It's just knowing that Buddhism doesn't have a monopoly on all truth, that's all.

Now, some would say that these are known as avyākata questions. Avyākata simply means "not determined." He's just not spoken about it. But maybe there's something that is forever unknowable. Perhaps we need to accept that these sorts of questions are actually unknowable. And that may be one reason why the Buddha kept himself strictly to this particular teaching of liberation.

He does say in one place, pointing to the monks he's with, "You see all the leaves in this forest? Well, I know all this, but I've only given you a clump of leaves—which you need in order to be liberated." Though you don't know whether that was put in later, you see. In the Visuddhimagga, thank heavens it doesn't say it in the scriptures, but in this medieval work of Buddhaghosa, they describe the qualities of a Buddha. By that time, of course, he's grown into this superhuman figure, just amazing, beyond human. They say he's omniscient—meaning if he bends his mind towards anything, he'll know the answer. And one thing he knows is that the world is flat. That's a killer, isn't it? So you say, okay, you have to recognize that there's some messing about here.

So that's something he doesn't talk about. And just to go back a step, to the origins of the universe, again there's no effort to address that. There is this peculiar discourse, the Aggañña Sutta, in which he lays out a certain creation myth, but it's obviously a satire. Most people see it now as a satire. It starts with him having a talk with this man called Vāseṭṭha.

Once the Lord was staying at Sāvatthī at the mansion of Migāra's mother in the East Park. At that time, Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja were living among monks, hoping to become monks themselves. In the evening, the Lord rose from his secluded meditation and came out of the mansion, starting to walk up and down in the shade. Vāseṭṭha noticed this and said to Bhāradvāja, "Friend Bhāradvāja, the Lord has come out and is walking up and down. Let's approach him. We might be fortunate enough to hear a talk on Dhamma from the Lord himself."

"Yes, indeed," said Bhāradvāja. And they went up to the Lord, saluted him, and fell into step with him.

Then the Lord said to Vāseṭṭha, "Vāseṭṭha, you two are Brahmins born and bred, and you have gone forth from household life to the homeless life from Brahmin families. Do not the Brahmins revile and abuse you?"

"Indeed, Lord, the Brahmins do revile and abuse us."

They don't hold back with their usual flood of reproaches.

"What kind of reproaches do they fling at you?"

"Lord, what the Brahmins say is that the Brahmin caste is the highest caste. Other castes are base. The Brahmin caste is fair. Other castes are dark. Brahmins are purified. Non-Brahmins are not. The Brahmins are the true children of Brahma, born of the mouth of Brahma, created by Brahma, heirs of Brahma. And you—you've deserted the highest caste and gone over to the base caste, these shaveling, petty ascetics, servant, dark fellows, born of Brahma's foot. It's not right, it's not proper that you should mix with such people."

"So this is the way the Brahmins abuse us, Lord."

Then Vasettha told the Brahmins that they have forgotten their ancient tradition when they say that, because we can see Brahmin women, the wives of Brahmins, who menstruate and become pregnant, have babies and give suck, and yet these womb-born Brahmins talk about being born of Brahma's mouth. These Brahmins misrepresent Brahma. They tell lies. They earn much demerit.

And then he goes into exactly what happens at the end of the world. At the end of the world, you can't have all beings destroyed because then that would be the end of karma. And it would suggest that some beings are just not going to make it. So at the end of a world cycle, everybody gets shunted into this highest realm, the Abhassara Brahma, you see. And of course, there were questions asked about this by later commentators. How could this be? Because to get up there you've got to be in the highest of jhanas and be pretty pure. So the explanation was that everybody's been around this samsara so many times that they must have hit one of these jhanic states, and the good karma would come just at that moment and they'd be up in the Abhassara realm.

And this, of course, saved this whole idea of realms from bringing an end to karma. But it also suggests that everybody, all beings, will eventually be liberated, no matter how many world cycles they have to go through.

Anyway, they're all up there now. And they lived there for a very long time. And here they dwell, and having passed away, they were mostly born into this world. And they dwell mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous, moving through the air, and glorious.

Now at that time there was just one mass of water and all was darkness. This is often a creation myth—out of the chaos, the Greek chaos, which was this darkness. Out of nothingness, the Christian idea of

everything coming out of nothingness. Even science, you know, the Big Bang—where does it come from? So just out of this mass of water and all darkness, blinding darkness, neither moon nor sun appeared, no constellations or stars, night and day. There was no male or female, and so on. And sooner or later, after a very long period of time, savoury earth spread itself over the waters where those beings were, and it looked just like the skin that forms over hot milk as it cools. It was endowed with colour, smell, and taste. It was the colour of fine ghee or butter, and it was very sweet, like pure wild honey.

And then some being with a greedy nature said, "Now, what can this be?" And he tasted the savoury earth and of course he gets a craving for it. And everybody else says, "Well, what about that?" And they get into it. And the result was, of course, their self-luminosity disappeared. You see? The greed destroyed their self-luminosity.

And so then as they get more and more greedy, this beautiful skin of earth begins to disappear. And fungus grows up, which is just like that, but it's fungus. And then there's like a mushroom. Then creepers appear, shooting up like bamboo. And all the time, their luminosity diminishes and their heaviness increases. They're moving towards becoming more and more material.

And then finally rice appeared in open places, free from powder, free from husk, fragrant, and clean-grained. And as they collected this, their bodies became coarser still, and their looks became greater. The difference in their looks became greater. And then females developed female sex organs, and males developed male organs, and the women became excessively preoccupied with men, and the men became preoccupied with the women. And owing to their excessive preoccupation with each other, passion was aroused, and their bodies burnt with lust.

And later, because of this burning, they indulged in sexual activity. And those who saw them indulging threw dust, ashes, and cow dung at them, crying, "Die, you filthy beasts! How can you be doing such things to one another?" And just as today in some districts when a daughter-in-law is led out, some people throw dirt at her, some ashes and some cow dung, without realising they're repeating an ancient observance. So I don't know where that comes from—must have been one of those things you did at a marriage.

So it gets worse and worse.

And then finally, because of all the immorality, they decide to get somebody who would show anger, would censure people, would banish those who deserve to be banished. And so that was the first king, the people's choice, Mahasamhata. And then you get the idea of kingship coming in.

Because of that, a whole level of society was created—the warrior caste, the Khattiya. And he was also called Raja, which means he gladdens others with Dharma. I don't think he does. These are just glosses.

Anyway, evil things appeared, such as taking what is not given, and all that, and then he did the banishments. And then there were people who said, "Enough of this," and they became very pure, and they lived out in the forest, and these were the Brahmins. Others, of course, who couldn't meditate,

couldn't handle the meditation and the seclusion, began to adopt various trades. And then finally there were those who, the Sudda, they are base who live by the chase. So slowly but surely the four castes appeared.

But the whole discourse ends with: "The verse was rightly sung," he said, "and this too is true. The warrior caste, the Khattiyas, are best among those who value the clan." So it becomes a sort of expression of how we've got to this place, the four castes and so on, but by way of ethics. We're always coming back to ethics.

As to the question of creation, where we came from and all that, this also is not answered. So again, we have to accept that there are things that maybe are simply unknowable. But one thing we do know is that we are here. We actually are existing or becoming in this very present moment.

If we consider this Nibbana Dhatu descending—now this was later taken up by the Mahayana in the Yogacara school of the Tathagatagarbha, which meant the embryo of the Buddha. The embryo of the Buddha, meaning that within us which is deluded, comes down to find its own true nature, enters into this psychophysical organism, and then through the practice becomes the Tathagata. Tathagata means "come there" or "gone there." This "there" of course is that place of transcendence, so probably the best translation is "the one who has transcended" or "the transcendent one." And this is how the Buddha referred to himself—the Tathagata.

Now, this Nibbana Dhatu finds itself... I'll keep referring to it from now on as just Buddha nature. It's simpler. This Buddha nature finds itself in this psychophysical organism. And in the Buddha's teachings, there are these three bodies.

Again, this was developed out of the basic scriptures, the Pali scriptures, the early scriptures. These different strands of understanding were developed from those bases. My teacher, Dr. Rewata Dhamma in Birmingham, said to me that everything the Mahayana says about their teachings, you'll find the kernel of it, you'll find something of that within the basic scriptures of Pali, the early scriptures.

So these three bodies are the Dharmakaya—that's the Buddha nature. There's the Sambhogakaya, the body of bliss, and that's your mental body. And then there's the Nirmanakaya, the body of apparition, or the body that's made—this physical body that we find ourselves in. Psychophysical.

In Buddhist understanding, these two things are quite separate. Although they're melded together at this level of being, they separate at death. And then you have this rebirth into different realms, which we'll come to towards the end of the talk.

Just to remember that process where the Tathagatagarbha, the embryo of the Buddha, the Buddha nature comes down in a state of not knowing. Remember, it's not a culpable state. Ignorance is not a culpable state. It's just basically not knowing. And the mistake is made of believing itself to be this psychophysical organism it finds itself in. And then it seeks happiness. It's as simple as that.

In seeking happiness, it begins to manipulate the world. The more it has, the happier it feels, the more secure it feels—more money, friends, all that sort of stuff. And of course then you have to protect it, so that's where your aversion comes, your hatred to anybody who undermines what you have. And if the person's bigger, then of course you run for it.

So remember, those are your three basic attitudes that arise from delusion: acquisitiveness, aversion, and fear. And from that, because of those attitudes, we act in the world and create habits. And these habits are unwholesome, and they have unwholesome results.

Both inwardly, they create agitation and all the rest of it. And outwardly, of course, they create situations which aren't good for us—war, for a start.

Coupled with that, there is the wisdom factor, which grows as you begin to see how we create suffering for ourselves. Then the other side of our nature begins to manifest—the love, the compassion, the sympathetic joy, courage, gratitude, and all the rest of it.

So you could say that the process we're undergoing is moving away from the effects of that delusion towards the effects of wisdom. We're coming back, shall we say, to that original mistake. And that original mistake we call the self. It's an identity that we manufacture with the psychophysical organism we find ourselves with.

That's our practice. Our practice is to begin to discriminate, to discern those things that bring us suffering and those things that don't, that bring us happiness—real happiness. And as you come back into yourself, you come to this business of the observer. That's where the initial problem lies, because it's through the observer that you enter into the world we're creating.

I want to reinforce this idea that the Buddha only teaches ethics. Ethics, you can translate as relationship—it's how you're relating. Morality tends for us to mean wrongdoing and such, so it has a more restricted meaning in our minds—the Ten Commandments and all that. But ethics is just about relationship.

Now, we are in relationship all the time. We're in relationship with our food, in relationship to the door when we open it, in relationship with people. Our whole lives are an act of relationship. And of course, there's the relationship with ourselves too.

So ethics is really about how we relate—how, if we get it wrong, it can create suffering, and how, if we get it right, it creates happiness. Once we've grasped that the whole of our lives is relationship, then of course we want to do something about it. We want to make sure we get it right.

If you remember, when the Buddha was born, a holy man, a sage, saw him and determined that either he was going to be a world-conquering monarch or a fully self-enlightened being. The sage began to cry, and when they asked him why, he said, "I won't be around to see which one he'll go for." But the sense was

that he would actually become fully self-liberated.

Running through the scriptures, you get this alter ego of the world-conquering monarch. In one of the scriptures, the old monarch is dying. The wheel treasure—you have to imagine this wheel in the sky—when it begins to disappear, it's time for the king to move on and leave rule to his son.

Just before the son takes rule, he asks his father, "Sire, what is the duty of the Aryan wheel-turning monarch?"

And his father says: "It is this, my son. Yourself depending on the Dhamma, honouring it, revering it, cherishing it, doing homage to it and venerating it. Having the Dhamma as your badge and banner, acknowledging the Dhamma as your master, you should establish, guard, ward, and protect, according to the Dhamma, for your own household, your troops, your nobles and vassals, for Brahmins and householders, towns and country folk, ascetics and Brahmins, for beasts and birds. Let no crime prevail in your kingdom. And to those who are in need, give property.

"And whatever ascetics and Brahmins in your kingdom have renounced the life of sensual infatuation and are devoted to forbearance and gentleness, each one taming himself, each one calming himself, and each one striving for the end of craving—from time to time you should go to them and consult them as to what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, what is blameworthy and what is blameless, what is to be followed and what is not to be followed, what action will in the long run lead to harm and sorrow, and what to welfare and happiness. Having listened to them, you should avoid evil and do what is good. That is the duty of an Aryan wheel-turning monarch."

So the son says, "Yes, sire." And of course he becomes king.

But then he doesn't follow this counsel. Things went wrong, you see, and the wheel slipped from its position. A man came to the king and said, "Sire, you should know that the sacred wheel treasure has disappeared."

That's bad news.

At this, the king was grieved and felt sad, but he did not go to the royal sage or ask about the duties of a wheel-turning monarch. Instead, he ruled the people according to his own ideas. Being so ruled, the people did not prosper as well as they had under previous kings who performed the duties of a wheel-turning monarch.

Then the ministers, counsellors, treasury officials, guards and doorkeepers, and the chanters came to the king and said: "Sire, as long as you rule the people according to your own ideas, and differently from the way they were ruled before under previous wheel-turning monarchs, the people do not prosper so well. Sire, there are ministers in the realm, including ourselves, who have preserved knowledge of how a wheel-turning monarch should rule. Ask us, Your Majesty, and we will tell you."

So he asks them and consults them, and having listened to them, the king established a guard of protection—but he did not give property to the needy. As a result, poverty became rife.

With the spread of poverty, a man took what was not given—thus committing what was called theft. They arrested him and brought him to the king, saying, "Your Majesty, this man took what was not given, which we call theft."

The king said to him, "Is it true you took what is not given, which is called theft?"

"It is, Majesty."

"Why?"

"Your Majesty, I have nothing to live on."

Then the king gave him some property, saying, "Look, with this, my good man, you can keep yourself, support your mother and father, keep a wife and children, carry on a business, and make gifts to ascetics and Brahmins, which will promote your spiritual welfare and lead to a happy rebirth with pleasant results in the heavenly sphere."

Very good, Your Majesty, replied the man.

And the exact same thing happens to another man. The people heard the king was giving away property to those who took what was not freely given, and they thought, "Supposing we were to do likewise."

And then another man took what was not given, and they brought him to the king, and the king asked him why he'd done it. He replied, "Man, I've nothing to live on." And the king thought, "If I give property to everybody who takes what is not given, this theft will increase more and more. I'd better make an end of him, finish him off once and for all, and cut his head off."

So he commanded his men, "Bind this man's arms tightly behind him with a strong rope, shave his head closely, lead him to the rough sound of a drum through the streets and squares and out through the southern gate, and there finish by inflicting the capital penalty and cut off his head." And they did so.

And hearing about this, the people thought, "Now let us get sharp swords made for us, and then we can take from anybody what is not given—we will make an end of them, finish them off, cut their heads off." And so, having procured sharp swords, they launched murderous assaults on villages, towns, and cities, and went in for highway robbery, killing their victims by cutting off their heads. So you can see, once the rot sets in, you're just not going to get out of it.

And so it goes on, and then finally, after many generations—five thousand years—a Dharma monarch is re-established. But actually, it gets worse before that, because what happens is that as people get more and more unethical, they lose their lifespan. They get down to the point where a time will come when children of these people have a lifespan of ten years. The girls will be marriageable at five years old. And with

them, these flavors will disappear: ghee, butter, sesame oil, molasses, and salt. So it gets worse and worse and worse, you see.

But again, it's just this idea that morality—ethics, really—is what it's all about. And actually, that was the teaching of that Axial Age. If you look across to Lao Tzu and the Dao, and Moses with the Ten Commandments, and Socrates—all the same age. Socrates also said desire was the problem. You'll see there's a sort of awakening of mankind to this idea that you do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That was the big message of what's known as the Axial Age. So anyway, that's the Buddha's teaching. It's about ethics, you see.

So now we come to this knotty problem about rebirth. That's another question the Buddha doesn't answer—he doesn't tell us how the process takes place.

Now, we hear of people with near-death experiences, especially on operating tables, where they come out and can actually tell what happened during the operation. We also know that people have out-of-body experiences and see this whirling tunnel through which they go, sometimes into another realm. But none of that is in the Pāli scriptures. Nobody said to the Buddha, "Yeah, but how does it happen?" It's just that there's a teaching about different realms.

The basic one is, of course, the six realms. First, the purgatorial realm, which is sometimes called the hell realm. But "hell," you know, according to Dante—that's "abandon all hope, ye who enter here." There's nothing eternal in the world according to Buddhism, so it's much better to think of it as purgatory, where you purge your sins and get rid of all your bad kamma. And there are various levels of that, the worst one being the Avīci hell, of course, where those who've been extremely cruel go—which is the opposite of the Buddhist teaching about compassion.

Then there's the animal realm—you see, being born an animal. There's the human realm, which is ours. The hungry ghosts—they're the ones who are driven by greed. There's the angry devas—they're the clever people who are driven by anger, jealousy, all that sort of stuff. And then finally there's the deva realm, which is where beings are happy.

So you've got these six realms. And of course, what tends to happen is that the relationship between what we experience as human beings extends into other realms of existence. If you're in a deep depression and you don't see a way out of it, you're despairing—you're obviously in a hell realm. If you get drunk and do all sorts of daft things, then you're obviously in an animal realm. There's the human realm, of course. When we're craving for stuff and we can't just stop going for those biscuits, then we're hungry ghosts. And when we're getting angry and trying to get the best of somebody, we're in the angry deva realm. And then finally, when we're happy and peaceful and wandering about the meadows here, then we're in the deva realm.

So there's always that connection between what we as human beings can experience and the cosmology

that Buddhism talks about. Those are your basic categories, but in the Abhidhamma it gets much more refined, because then they talk about all these various realms to do with the jhānas as well. The whole cosmology is built up into this huge idea of vast different realms—many realms all over the place. Whether they exist or not is a moot point, of course.

So in order to get into these realms, of course, you've got to be reborn.

You can't annihilate. If you annihilate, you don't get reborn, and therefore you'll never experience these realms.

So when it comes to rebirth, which is very difficult for us—because if you've been brought up Christian or Muslim or something like that, then it's easier. But for people who've been brought up in a more secular way, it's very difficult to actually open up to the idea. There have been lots of studies on it. Ian Stevenson wrote *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, and there's also material on our website—I've actually put a clip up there.

But there's no way it's ever going to be proven scientifically. There's not going to be an fMRI scan of somebody being reborn. In the medieval ages, they would weigh a body before it died and then weigh it again afterwards to see how much the soul weighed. And they were always upset because it didn't have any weight—there was no change. We're trying to prove that something which is transcendent actually exists. So we can forget about trying to prove whether there's rebirth or not.

But one thing is for sure: when you start reading the discourses, it comes across all the time. You can't read the discourses without including rebirth. They don't make sense in terms of the whole law of karma without it. Even in the Buddha's awakening, we talk about the three knowledges that came to him, where he remembered his past lives, which showed him how he came to be fully liberated and what had been the driving force of that—his ethics. And then he saw other beings moving from realm to realm, driven again by their ethics. So what had been just a personal law, he saw as a universal law. And then, of course, the third knowledge was that he himself was purified of all his defilements. So it goes right back—in the tradition, it's right there at the awakening—this whole understanding about rebirth.

Bhikkhu Bodhi has written a monograph on it, and I've taken his ideas from there. The question he asks is: well, does it make sense? Is it intelligible? Does it make any sense in terms of the Dharma? You can see that without the idea of rebirth, how do you ever resolve the actions that you've made? This also moves into the idea that the universe has some sort of moral equilibrium, some sort of moral resolution to it.

You might say that's more of an intuitive thing—that eventually whatever harm somebody has done has to be mended in some way, has to be ameliorated, has to be compensated for. So you have to forget the idea of punishment. It's to do with results. You do something wrong and there will be a result within your psychophysical organism. And that result will reverberate back to this Buddha nature when it wakens up and realises, "Oh, I've done something wrong. I'm now in a world—my world, the world I'm

creating—which is full of guilt, full of remorse, full of shame."

And of course, the world then mirrors back to you. If you're very sarcastic, you find yourself being a bit lonely sometimes. So the way you behave also affects other people, and they mirror your behaviour back to you by the way they behave towards you.

There's a feeling that there must be some working out, because as we know, in the ordinary world as we see it, people get away with murder, and people who do wonderful things are never acknowledged. They might end up in a bad way too. Remember that poor man who went out to help with humanitarian work in the Middle East, and they caught him and shot him out in the desert somewhere? Jihadi John—one of the ISIS people. Do you remember that awful thing? He'd gone out to help a Muslim charity, and they showed him on YouTube just before he was to be killed. And that makes you think, well, how does that work out?

Some people think that just because you're born or you go through something terrible in this life, it's because you did something terrible in a past life. I think you've heard me talk about this tale which comes up in the Dhammapada, where there's a ship going across the ocean and it suddenly stops. It doesn't move. And the captain goes and consults these monks who are on board. They sit down in deep contemplation. Then they go to him and say, "Well, it's your wife. In a past life, she killed all these dogs"—I can't remember exactly what it was now. "So the only way it's going to move is to get rid of your wife." So he throws her overboard, and of course, the ship moves on. There's one way to get rid of your wife! So you've got these stories coming from the scriptures of moral retribution.

There's a feeling that perhaps to make sense of the whole karmic law, there has to be some equilibrium, some way in which things are worked out.

So that's an intuitive thing. Either you've got it or you've not.

And of course, in terms of the whole process that we're in, which is about liberation—and about what you might call a sort of categorical imperative in the Buddha's teaching—all beings are heading towards liberation, and they will make it. So there is in us this Buddha nature which is indestructible. That's the point. It's immortal. It doesn't die. It's not born. And so it will keep being reborn until it finds that it doesn't have to be reborn anymore and finds itself in a blissful place which we call Nibbāna.

And of course, there are two descriptions of what that is. In the Theravāda, the Self-Enlightened One just goes into Nibbāna, full stop. Nothing more is said. But in the Mahāyāna, you're drawn out to help other beings, and therefore you reappear in your bliss body in different realms. So the whole idea of karma fits in with that basic notion that all beings are destined to be liberated, one way or the other.

So it's with this sort of rational argument, you see—it's not scientific, it's a rational argument—that one might open up to the idea of rebirth.

But having said all that, of course, it doesn't matter, does it? Because the Dhamma works for us whether we believe it or not. So it's a case of really not coming to a conclusion.

I quote here Bhikkhu Bodhi: "The karmic process functions autonomously, without a supervisor or director, entirely through its own intrinsic power of volitional action." So it's just the law of karma. There's no need for a god, there's no need for punishment—it just works itself out.

There's a quote here from the Buddha which I'll end with: "The end of the world is to be seen, known, and reached by travelling—that I do not say. And yet I do not say that one makes an end of suffering without reaching the end of the world. Rather, in this fathom-long body, with its consciousness and mind, I declare the world, the arising of the world, the ceasing of the world, and the way leading to the ceasing of the world. Just this is the end of suffering."

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not confused, and that through your practice you may be liberated from all suffering—sooner rather than later.

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