Anattā & the Problem of Life-After-Life

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Over the past two nights we looked at the Anatta Lakkhana Sutta, the not-self characteristic, and one issue that has emerged in the interviews is where rebirth or reincarnation fits into all of this. So tonight we're going to examine this question.

The doctrine of what I call life-after-life is very important for the Buddha, yet in our culture it's widely rejected and widely misunderstood. This misunderstanding is part cultural and largely stems from the fact that the whole thing revolves around the issue of not-self, of anattā. So it fits as part of the teaching on this discourse, which is what we're going to explore tonight.

We'll start with māna—usually translated as conceit, though it literally means measuring. We spoke about this earlier: at the surface the self often appears as a series of narratives, but at the bottom of it is māna, which involves measurement and therefore separation. If I take something and measure it, I establish its boundaries and so separate it from everything else. Māna always implies separation, and along with that comes comparison. If this is separate from that, then how does this stack up against that?

Māna goes very deep in the human mind, according to the Buddha. On the way to full awakening, māna is the last fetter to vanish—the final barrier. When this goes completely, that's full enlightenment. This demonstrates how deep it goes in the mind.

We can get a sense of it, particularly the conceit "I am" (asmi-māna), in our experience of something behind our awareness—something that looks out and is aware. If I'm aware, I'm aware of something, so there's something out there, and then there's the awareness itself. This is the basic dyad we're working with. But I have a sense that there's someone or something behind the awareness—in a sense, the audience of the show.

This something has no content because it's behind awareness. The content of awareness is what we are aware of, which is "out there." But to be aware of something, we have this sense that there's something or someone "back here" to whom this is happening. We could turn around and make that the object of awareness, but whatever we are aware of, still, behind that awareness, we have the sense that there's something or someone there who experiences all this.

So māna is always in the shadows. It has no content. It's not a specific something—just this vague sense. It cannot be pinned down to anything. So māna, "I am," has no content, but it's energized by craving (taṇhā) and searches for content. Awareness goes out, as does desire and aversion, looking for something. So "I am"—but exactly what am I? Exactly who am I?

We're constantly searching for some aspect of experience, something we are aware of that we can hold to ground our sense of separateness, to pin it down as something. "I am this." We can see how the mind searches for something to think about. When we observe how the mind throws up cognitions, there are plenty of them, but there's tremendous energy in the mind that sooner or later will cause awareness to move out, grab one of them, and turn it into a story: "That's who I am, I am this." Or with feelings that come up—some kind of feeling or sensation in the body—bang, "That's me." Awareness grounds itself on that and we construct an identity.

This is what we've been discussing over the past couple of nights, and it's what we're experiencing in our practice all the time.

Now, this whole movement creates a way of relating to the world that revolves around what the Buddha calls extremes (anta). Remember we talked about those in the middle way—the middle way rejects anta, it rejects extremes.

In the case of māna, the two extremes are sameness and difference. As soon as I make that move of separation, this is different from that because there's separation—this is not that. So there's a sense of difference. But to have a sense of difference, there has to be a background sense of sameness, because without a background sense of sameness it doesn't make any sense to talk about difference.

So these two moves that we make—these really fundamental moves—this is different from that, but this is the same as this. We make those moves all the time and construct a world and a self out of them.

If there's identity, if there's something I am—I am this—then there has to be something beyond, something outside of identity: I am not that. These are the basic movements that construct identity: sameness and difference. In terms of the middle way, both of these possibilities are extremes. They're both wrong.

These two movements construct the basic building blocks of identity. I am this, so I'm not that. I'm male, so I'm not female. I'm Patrick, so I'm not young. I'm good, so I'm not bad, and so on.

From the middle way—in other words, outside identity—both these moves are extremes and wrong. But from inside identity, this way of looking at the self and the world makes perfect sense, and it's the only sensible way to look at things. Either this is me or it isn't. If I look into a mirror, what are the choices? It's either me in that mirror or it's somebody else. Either this is mine or it belongs to somebody else. It's not complicated. Either I am Patrick, or I'm somebody else. Either this is right, or it's wrong.

From inside identity, all of that doesn't just make perfect sense—it's obviously the only way things can operate. From outside identity, from the context of the middle way, they're both wrong.

Now, Siddhartha, who became the Buddha, penetrated into all this. Before he became the Buddha, on the night that he sat down under the tree, what happened according to the early texts? There were two accounts of his awakening, and one tells about the three vedas that he went through throughout the

night—throughout the three sections of the night.

These are the three knowledges. During the first third of the night he remembered his previous lives. During the second third he saw the falling and arising of other beings in the present. In the third of the night he attained awakening. Let's look at them, but especially the first one.

This is how the first one is described. For each life that he remembers, he says: "There I was so named, of such a clan, with such an appearance, such was my food"—my nutriment, which can be broader than food, everything that sustained life, but especially food—"such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life term, and passing away from there, I reappeared elsewhere."

He goes back lifetime after lifetime, and this is what he remembers for each one. All of these things that he mentions are identity markers. They constitute what creates a sense of identity within Indian society—how an identity is constructed.

The Bodhisattva is looking back through his memory and recognizing that at one time he held to a particular identity, but before that it was another one, and before that he had another identity, and before that he had another one—and another and another and another. He's doing something that we can do, except that he did it for multiple eons whereas we might only do it for twenty years, fifty years or whatever.

What this is about is that the Bodhisattva recognizes from his personal experience the contingency and the impermanence of identity, and how identity changes over time.

So bringing it more to our level, we could say when I was 10 I was this, when I was 20 I was that, when I was 30 I was something else, and so on. What's happening is his sense of identity is starting to be shaken up. His sense of personal identity is still there, but it's starting to be loosened. This is preparing him for enlightenment.

Then in the second knowledge, the Bodhisattva sees the same contingency of identity flowing from one existence to another—not in the past but in the present. The first knowledge is all about memory. The second extends universally outward, not just within his individual personal memory stream. So it's the same understanding, but going out in the present and universally. Not simply his identity being shaken up because it's impermanent and dependent upon conditions, but everybody's identity is caught up in the same way.

These two knowledges give the same message: identity is not fixed. It's not primary. There's something else going on which is deeper than identity. These knowledges prepared him for awakening, softened him up for the awakening.

If we look at ourselves, we take identity to be primary. For us, that's what's at the bottom. This assumption we have is fundamentally not empirical, because it's not that we can find this identity. The identity is the

product of māna. Māna is always in the shadows and we can never pin it down. So we can't actually find this identity.

If you look at what you're doing when you're meditating, a lot of the time what you're doing is failing to find it. You're seeing a process of construction. You're seeing it go very deep. You're seeing it driven by craving. It's incredibly strong. But you're not actually landing on the fixed, permanent identity. So the assumption that there is this identity is not empirical. We assume it. We experience from it—we don't experience it, we experience from it.

But this assumption is what gives death its power, and why we're so preoccupied by death and by what happens afterward. Because with death, we are the ones who die. And with birth, we are the ones who are born. And in fact, that's what makes it interesting.

The Buddha rejects both of these assumptions. For him, identity is not primary. What is primary is paṭiccasamuppāda—dependent arising. Identity, self, emerges as a series of patterns swirling around in the matrix of dependent arising. It's rather like a stream where at the same place, at certain times of year, a whirlpool will appear. Then the conditions change and the whirlpool ceases. But next year, it's back. If we visit that stream, that particular part of the stream, at the same time each year, there it is—the whirlpool. It's been here for years. I used to visit this whirlpool when I was a child, and there it is.

We look at that whirlpool, and for us, identity is primary. That's what it is. But in fact, it isn't. It's just a temporary, contingent result of a complex process which comes and goes.

And what's primary is that process. Does that make sense?

So the Buddha definitely believed in life after life, and if we ask: when the Buddha sees beings move from one existence to another, what is it that he's tracing? What's he tracking? We naturally think what he's tracing is beings. Beings are born, they die, and then they're reborn, and he's following them life after life. We naturally think in that way because for us, identity is primary. We operate from within self.

But for the Buddha, what's primary is dependent arising. He's not tracking beings. What he's tracking are networks of cause and effect over time, and from these networks emerge the perception of beings. And then those perceptions cease. And other perceptions arise, and they cease, and so on. In other words, he's tracing networks of karma vipaka—action and its ripening. He's not tracing networks of beings. You see the difference?

When the Buddha speaks of life after life, he's not saying "I am born here and then I'm born there and then I'm born over there." We tend to think that's what he's saying. We just assume that's what he's saying. He has to be saying that. But he's not saying that.

Even Buddhist intellectuals who argue against life after life—and the example I always give is Stephen Batchelor, because I was struck very much by his chapter on rebirth in his book Buddhism Without

Beliefs. I think it was chapter two where he rejects rebirth, life after life. I read the chapter and I thought, "No, he can't be saying what I think he's saying." So I started at the beginning and read it again. But the more I read it, the more he was saying what I thought he was saying.

People who argue against the doctrine of rebirth are actually arguing against the idea that it's possible for any being to be somehow transported from one body to another. That's what they're arguing against. And so the question is: well, okay, what gets transported? Obviously not the body. So the mind, or some esoteric aspect of the mind. But this esoteric aspect of the mind has to contain all the data required to shape this person's life. And nothing they can do can make this make any sense. It just doesn't hold water. There's no convincing argument. So they reject the doctrine of life after life.

But the problem is that what they're rejecting has got absolutely nothing to do with what the Buddha is teaching. The Buddha is not teaching that beings die and are then reborn. He's not saying that. He's saying that there are flowing patterns of dependent arising. These operate through time and give rise to the appearances that we perceive as beings. And these flows of cause and effect flow through very particular trajectories, based on karma vipaka—action and its ripening.

So it's not that this being becomes that being, becomes this other being. It's this cause leads to that effect, which manifests as this cause leading to that effect, which manifests as this cause leading to that effect, and so on. That's what he's talking about.

The way we think is: we think there are beings, and if we're Buddhists and we're learned and spiritual, then we say, "Ah yes, these beings are caught up in this universal pattern of cause and effect." That's not what the Buddha is teaching. The Buddha is teaching there is a universal matrix of cause and effect, and from this emerges the appearance that we label as beings. It's quite different.

We think in this way because we assume that our fundamental situation is—and let's clear away all the bullshit and just get down to the basics—we think that our fundamental situation is that either I will survive death or I will not survive death. Really, that's it. If we toss out the spiritual mumbo jumbo, this is what we come down to. This is our natural way of relating to this situation.

And of course, if I am the one who survives death, who in some mysterious way is reborn somewhere else, then I'm interested. This is important. If it's somebody else who is reborn, maybe in some abstract cosmological way, I'm not really interested.

I mean, that's a nice kind of doctrine, but I'm not really interested. And if I don't survive death, I'm definitely not interested.

This is our natural way of relating to these questions, and you can see that all of it is based on "me." What happens to me? But the Buddha is not looking at this from inside any sense of me. He's speaking from beyond identity, from outside identity. And there it's a whole different matter.

If we start talking about life after life, then what we want to know about is who lives after death. That's important, isn't it? From the Buddha's perspective, if we ask the question, "Who will leave this hall after the talk?" and we answer that question, we have also answered the question, "Who lives after death?" Because it's the same question from his perspective. It's just a different way of asking exactly the same question. And if you can answer one, you can answer the other.

The Buddha has this sense of an enormous universe within which all of this takes place. He has a variety of terms to talk about what is usually translated as rebirth. One is *upapatti*, going up or reappearance. Another one is *punabhava*, further becoming, renewed existence. And there are other terms as well, but I haven't collected them. Basically what they refer to is the Buddha's sense of the infinite possibilities of existence that are inherent in the universe. Because for him the universe is infinite. Within the infinite universe there are infinite possibilities. And essentially I think this is what he's referring to.

They do not refer to the fate of persons as they travel from one life to the next. They're not talking about that—although of course we think they are. We assume they are.

From inside identity, if there's a new birth, this is either me or it's not me. That's it. But once we step outside of identity, that dichotomy simply does not apply. The question, "Who is reborn?" simply does not apply. It's an irrelevant question. It doesn't grapple with what the Buddha is talking about.

These questions only arise within identity. They make sense only inside identity because they assume the real existence of the "who"—who is the one who dies and is reborn, or not reborn. All of these questions are just variations on the fundamental question of the self, which is, of course, "But what about me?"

From the Buddhist perspective, there can be no answer to these questions because the questions themselves are the products of craving and delusions. Take away the craving and delusion and the questions don't even arise. Whatever answer we come up with to these questions are simply expressions of craving and delusion which in turn feed more craving and delusion. It's just cycling around.

As a local Zen teacher remarked, "You cannot give a straight answer to a crooked question."

For the Buddha, there's only one way in which these questions can be answered satisfactorily, and that comes from the dissolution of the question itself. When the question dissolves, that's the answer. In other words, in this life, the craving and the delusion that drives the question—the obsession with the fate of the self, myself, the self that survives through time—when that obsession drops away, the questions drop away, and that's the answer.

The questions and any answers that we come up with are just fictional narratives. They're just more stories. They're just more blah blah blah. This of course includes answers like, "Of course there's life after life. You cannot be a Buddhist unless you believe in life after life. Unless you think you're going to be reborn, then you can't be a proper Buddhist." That too is just another fictional narrative.

We've been talking about this quite abstractly. Let me give a more concrete example. The example that I always give is based on an event that happened to me years ago after my mother died, having lived in the same house for fifty years. The family had lived there for fifty years. My mother dies and we've got to clean the place up. So there's fifty years of life...

In the course of this excavation, I came across a whole bundle of photographs, and one in particular caught my eye. It showed a boy sitting under a tree wearing some kind of school uniform, looking to be about fifteen years old. I was looking at this black and white photo, and of course the thought that arose in me was: Is this me? Or is it not me?

Because those are the two possibilities, aren't they? I mean, if you come across such a photograph, you're looking at it and there are two possibilities. This is either a photo of me or it's a photo of somebody else—it's not me.

The problem is that although I could create some kind of satisfactory narrative based on either of those answers, neither position actually sheds any light on the nature of the person who's looking now at the image, at the photo, and asking that question. All they do is create stories.

So let's go through the two possibilities. The first answer: "Oh, this is me. This is a photo of me." It doesn't work. Because it's perfectly obvious I am not that boy. I mean, I look quite different now. And I have very different thoughts and feelings. And I would never have made the same mistakes that that fifteen-year-old boy made. There's no way I would be that stupid. You know, for a start, I am not nearly as driven and confused as that boy in that photograph is. So the answer "This is me" doesn't work.

So there's only one other possibility: "This is someone else." But if I say, "Well, this is someone else," that doesn't work either. Because if this photo is not of me, then how can I be so intimate with what that boy was going through? How can I know what his thoughts and feelings were? How can I understand the situation that he was living through? So that doesn't work either.

Then I could try the variation: "This was me." But all of those answers simply are narratives. It's a sense of identity that feeds a narrative. This was me, but now I've changed, because what happened after this was such and such, and I can track it through the years. So I've got an identity narrative over time. But that's all I've got—I've just got another story.

But if I answer based on paticcasamutpada, on dependent arising, then I can create an answer that sheds light on this situation right now, on how this situation right now is constructed right now.

So, for example, the decisions that that fifteen-year-old boy made continue to shape this situation now—this one that we're sitting in. If that fifteen-year-old boy had made different decisions, we would not be sitting in this hall undergoing this retreat. This retreat would not be happening, and whatever experiences you have had since the beginning of this retreat would never have occurred.

So it's basic to the Buddha's understanding that this experience, this situation right now, is shaped in large part by decisions made previously. And this is karma-vipaka—action and its ripening.

This is one reason why karma is so important. The Buddha sees every choice as being significant because it shapes the universe. And this is why he feels it's so important that we really get to understand that process and respect it. It's easy to have a sense of powerlessness and to forget the fact that we help shape this world.

And we're doing it all the time, whether we want to or not, whether we know it or not. It's just the nature of things.

So the Buddha sees no reason to believe that death would interrupt this process of cause and effect. Death is just another event that arises and ceases dependent upon conditions. And birth is just another event that arises and ceases dependent upon conditions.

Death and what happens after—these questions are central to our fears and our vulnerabilities because we think of them in terms of the duality of existence and non-existence. My death. My annihilation. The possibility of my resurrection. For us, death has become so enormous because we think of it in terms of "mine." When we add that possessive pronoun, then it becomes really huge.

But for the Buddha, any question or answer based on the assumption of self—any question based on the assumption of self—is the wrong question, because it makes sense only inside identity. Any answer we give to it is guaranteed to be wrong.

So the Buddha does not care about theories of post-mortem survival. He has absolutely no interest in them. And when you hear people arguing against life after life, or even for it, what they're arguing about are theories of post-mortem survival. The Buddha never presents a theory of post-mortem survival. He's just not interested in it. That's not what he's talking about. He has no interest in the fate of the self.

What he's interested in is how we live now. That's important. And it's important in part because how we live now will shape the future. So what we do now is important, is significant.

To give an example of how the Buddha addresses this particular issue, if you look at the Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta, The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving—this is in the Majjhima Nikāya, number 38. In one part of it, he's examining his students on their practice. We see the Buddha operating as a meditation teacher.

He says to them: "Understanding and seeing in this way, would you run back to the past? Were we in the past? Were we not in the past? What were we in the past? How were we in the past? Having been what, what did we become in the past?"

And the students answer, "No, bhante, we wouldn't do that."

"Understanding and seeing in this way, would you run forward to the future? Shall we be in the future? Shall we not be in the future? What shall we be in the future? How shall we be in the future? Having been what, what shall we become in the future?"

"No, bhante."

Now, you notice that in these questions, the emphasis is not on past and future. The emphasis is on the "I" who runs back to the past or forward to the future. That's what he's talking about—the identity that runs back to the past to confirm its reality, or runs forward to the future to confirm its reality. And the mature students are saying frankly, "I can't be bothered. It's of absolutely no interest to me. It doesn't occur to me to think about it, much less get agitated about it."

"Understanding and seeing in this way, would you now be inwardly perplexed about the present? Am I? Am I not? What am I?"

How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go? No.

So not even the self in the present—the identity within the present—is of any interest. The self needs past and future because the self needs to be. Only past and future can give the stability through time that the self needs to actually set up camp in any convincing way. But the Buddha is saying that we can't even find it here and now, much less before and after. What we have is this, and that's all we have.

So all this is bound up with the realization of anatta, of not-self, and the middle way. Identity and difference. Me, not me. Alive, dead. For the Buddha these are extremes, aren't they? The question becomes: who are we between these two extremes? Can this question be answered in the language of identity? And if we're looking for an answer, when would such an answer be available? Well, I'll give you a hint—not in the past and not in the future.

So that's my exploration of life after life and its role in the Buddha's teaching.

There's another section which we have time to go through, along with a couple of questions.

"So you're saying the Buddha remembered his previous lives. Whose previous lives?"

No, the Buddha didn't remember his previous lives. The Bodhisattva did, before the awakening.

"Before the awakening?"

Yes.

"So his identity?"

He still had an identity.

"So previous identities?"

Yes, he remembered his own past and he remembered it in the framework of "this is who I was." So he still had a sense of identity.

"Previous lives?"

Yes, but he extended it back through previous lives, which you may choose to take as mythological rather than actual. But what he did was think back on previous identities that he had held.

"So now that's not true, you're saying?"

Right. At one point he held one identity, and then later he held another, and then later he held another, and later he held another. But each time he was holding one, his basic assumption was "this is who I am." And in that assumption is also the assumption "I've always been this, I always will be this." And each time it was wrong.

So he's shaking up his sense—the solidity, the fixedness—of his sense of identity. Because he can see that he's had lots of them. None of them have stuck around. So why should this one? None of them stuck around when identities come and go. It's the personalities.

So it's a shaking up of his sense of identity. There's still underlying—he's still not enlightened—so there's still this assumption that there has to be something there. But it's just shaking him up. So it's warming him up for the awakening.

"So that's its function in the meditation practice when it comes up?"

Yes, I think so.

If he's experiencing several different identities, that must mean—for me, at least—that something is moving from one identity to the next.

Which is probably what he assumed at that time. But you know, if he is seeing several identities, they're kind of connected. So what's connecting them?

That's the question, and he found out that they weren't connected—except in terms of cause and effect. Not identity, not something that travels through. But there's a cause here that gives rise to an effect. That in turn becomes a cause for something else to arise, which in turn becomes a cause for something else to arise.

So you don't have something fixed that travels through time. You have an event now. And that event is caused in part by something that happened before, and it will be in part the condition for something that will happen later. But this event is only now.

So the past lives the Buddha saw—they have no relationship to each other?

They have a cause-and-effect relationship to each other, a karmic relationship. But it's not the same person. Not on a personal level, not on any level except the patterns of cause and effect.

It's like the example of the whirlpool. What's the identity relationship of the whirlpool that appears in spring versus the whirlpool that appeared in the same place last year? Is it the same whirlpool? Is it a different whirlpool?

It's a different belief system, a completely different way of looking at the universe, which is alien to our normal way of seeing. We look at the universe from inside a sense of identity, and from there certain things make sense and others don't. But if you step outside that framework, it's a whole different world out there. And the Buddha is operating from outside that framework.

What about those children who claim to have experienced past lives and can do things like recite chunks of sacred Buddhist texts? Is that kind of like the Buddha before his enlightenment?

Memories arise, given appropriate conditions. And these trajectories of cause and effect go back eons. So yes, a memory arises. It fits within the same paradigm. It's no different in principle from remembering what you had for breakfast. What it is, is something being created in the present, but created dependent upon certain conditions. These conditions are immense, complex. So for some people, the conditions are such that what arises in the present—what is constructed in the present—is a memory of something that happened five hundred years ago.

I used to go to Buddha House in Adelaide, which is Tibetan, and they go on and on about doing this for your next life so you'll have a better next life. This is how the subsequent traditions worked out how to persuade people to be good—the equivalent of "if you're bad you'll go to hell, if you're good you'll go to heaven." It's at the same level.

You get literature with morality tales: someone is a thief in this life and they're reborn as a poor person, or someone is stingy in this life and reborn poor, or someone generous is reborn rich. Therefore you should be generous, not stingy.

But if you look at those stories from the perspective of dependent arising, the problem is you've got a single cause and a single effect. And the Buddha makes it perfectly clear there is no single cause and no single effect. It's an immense, infinitely complex network of causes giving rise to an immense, infinitely complex network of effects.

Now the problem is that this complexity—this immense web of interconnected causes and conditions—is too sophisticated to be boiled down to a simple morality tale. So these stories just push aside the nuanced reality and present simplified narratives. Hopefully they produce the right ethical result for their audience. This may explain why someone like Stephen Batchelor reacted so strongly to these teachings—coming from a tradition that placed enormous emphasis on believing these literal interpretations.

I mean, there's the whole concept of what's called the ālaya-vijñāna—the store consciousness or substrate consciousness in Tibetan Buddhism. I've even heard Ajahn Mahabua speak about this years ago, discussing the consciousness that transmigrates from one person to the next. Even among Buddhists, there's often strong belief in something substantial that actually moves from here to there.

But we can understand this more skillfully through simple cause-and-effect relationships. Picture a line of billiard balls—when one is struck, the energy appears to move through each ball in sequence. It looks like the same energy traveling through, like there's continuity of some thing, but it's actually just cause-and-effect relationships operating at each point of contact.

What we're talking about is causal continuity, rather than continuity of identity. Rather than some unchanging essence that remains the same throughout, we have causal continuity—a trajectory of cause and effect flowing forward through time.

Shall we explore the cultural dimensions of this teaching? I'd like to share some observations about why our particular culture has such difficulty coming to terms with the teaching of rebirth. It's really about our specific cultural conditioning.

Everyone raised in a culture—which means everyone—is conditioned to cling to certain beliefs as obviously true and right. We're often shocked when we encounter another culture that doesn't share these assumptions. We wonder why they haven't gotten their act together, not recognizing that they're simply clinging to different cultural certainties.

In our culture, we cling to science. Human beings crave certainty, and we've been trained to seek that certainty through science. Science, we believe, will tell us what's actually happening. For any belief to be worthy of acceptance, it must pass some kind of scientific test—which in practice means it must fit within standard materialist orthodoxy. Obviously, rebirth immediately gets eliminated by this filter.

When the Buddha's teachings differ from scientific materialism, we tend to frame this as a conflict—Dharma versus science. We see a battle requiring us to choose sides, forced to select either Dharma or science. This is exactly the same predicament that fundamentalist Christians face when they feel compelled to choose between Biblical literalism and scientific findings.

But Dharma is not science, nor is it contrary to science. It's simply a different discourse entirely. Dharma is teaching about the nature of human experience from the perspective of the experiencing subject—the one actually undergoing the experience.

Consider this example: It's commonly stated in Buddhist books and teachings that the Buddha taught the universe is beginningless. Have you encountered this claim? The Buddha never actually said this. What he said was: "A beginning to this saṃsāra cannot be discerned." There's a profound difference between these statements.

"The universe has no beginning" is an ontological statement about the nature of the world out there. "It is impossible to discern the beginning of saṃsāra" is not a statement about the universe itself—it's a statement about the nature of human experience and the limits of our perception.

This distinction is crucial. It's the difference between a third-person statement and a first-person statement. Science operates as third-person discourse, claiming to describe the objectively existing world out there. Dharma concerns itself with the nature of human experience itself.

Therefore, Dharma cannot actually conflict with science, because it addresses an entirely different domain of inquiry.

If we get the two of them mixed up, then if you bring in a doctrine or teaching like life after life, you've either got to believe it or take a scientific approach. In other words, if you want evidence for the teaching of life after life, where will we find it? Well, in our culture, we would think we find it in science.

And there are scientific studies about this. The famous one is University of Virginia collecting immense amounts of data about memories of previous lives of people who actually have, or claim, memories of previous lives. And some of these have been checked out and they appear to be valid. So you have sociological evidence that fits within science.

But from the perspective of Dharma, if we're looking for the evidence of the teaching of life after life, where would we find it? We would find it in the nature of our experience, right here and right now. This is where we would find it. Experience arises from a cause, and it ceases from a cause, and this process rolls on and on and on. And I've never experienced the beginning of it, and I've never experienced the end of it. All my experience tells me is that an event arises because of causes and conditions, it ceases because of causes and conditions, and another event arises because of causes and conditions, and it ceases because of causes and conditions, and so on.

So science tends to get in the way. And this is linked with our determination to cling to familiar cultural categories. Anything new in the Dharma that we come across, we force to fit into these preconceived categories. We don't generally consider the possibility of making the effort to view the world differently, the way the Buddha viewed the world.

Dharma is not a European cultural category—it does not appear in European culture. So what we tend to do when we come across Dharma is chop it up into categories that are familiar to us: science, for example, or religion. These are the two obvious ones. Science can be subdivided. Psychology—the Buddha taught psychology. Or philosophy—the Buddha taught philosophy. So we can divide it up.

We can even be more sophisticated. We can say some aspects of the Dharma are science, some aspects are psychology, some aspects are philosophy, some aspects are religion, like all this life after life business. So we'll just ditch the religion ones and keep the others. This is somehow purer.

But the problem we create there is that we necessarily misunderstand Dharma, because science, psychology, philosophy, but above all religion—these are European cultural categories. They are not Indian cultural categories. At least, Dharma does not fit into any of these categories. The Buddha did not teach psychology. He did not teach science. He did not teach philosophy. He taught Dharma. It's a different category.

If we try to take Dharma and make it conform to some European cultural category because it's familiar to us, we end up hobbling the Dharma because there will be aspects of it that simply do not fit there. So what do we do with them? Well, we chuck them out because it's not respectable. It's not scientific. It's not whatever.

So it's a question of us being willing to go to the Buddha. You're talking about Dharma. We don't know what Dharma is because we come from a European background. So you have to teach us. And we have to make an effort to actually try to figure it out. But generally, as a culture, we're not prepared to actually do that.

A student responds:

"It's true to me, not so much that it was a European thing, but it takes a lot of effort to keep on resisting, in my observation—keep on resisting the urge to either turn Buddha into an interventionist who will do something for us. And I have seen... not just Europeans do that, but I pray to Buddha to do something, which is not part of the plot. And the other thing, I think it takes a lot of effort to resist this self thing coming back after life. And that's not just the Europeans. I'll come back as well. So it's almost... it's so revolutionary that I think the human tendency is always to dilute..."

This Buddhism in those two directions, and it's not necessarily European. I agree with that—this is what the first part of the talk was all about. The commitment to self is so strong in everybody that it's very difficult to get a hold of this. So even in Asia you find people making exactly the same moves if they haven't actually got anatta. If you don't get anatta, you don't get life after life. I think it's almost unnatural to get it—you have to work at it.

Plus there's the extra stuff, the cultural stuff on top. So this is the extras that we're talking about here. So yes, I agree with you.

Then there's the issue of imagination, which I think is very important. Patrick, are you sort of arguing against the passing of Buddhism into parts so it can be digested by the West?

Oh no, that's... We're missing out on loads. Within itself it's fine. Take Buddhist psychology. You take aspects of the Buddha's teaching and meld it with Western psychology—the result is fantastic. A lot of dukkha is relieved. But to then make the move, "Well, it's just the psychology..." Okay, fine. You're a psychologist. You're out there doing mindfulness-based interventions. And someone says, "Well, wait a minute. Don't people worship the Buddha? Isn't Buddhism a religion? How can you advertise this

workshop where it has Buddhist stuff when we're a secular organization? We don't do that. We don't do religion." Oh. Yeah. You're caught. You're in this fly trap.

It's kind of like a Trojan horse, I think, in some ways. Like psychology—Buddhism and psychology in the West at the moment, it can be used as a treasure, of course. Do you listen to Buddhist Geeks? They had one episode some time ago called "Stealth Buddhism"—the idea of infiltrating the secular mindfulness movement and converting people to Buddhism. Which, if you're a Christian or whatever and you heard that, you'd be given all the more reason to reject all these mindfulness movements. It's the same path. Instead of saying, "Well look, it's Dharma, it's not religion. But if there's something in Dharma that can be helpful, go ahead."

So this comes to a challenge of imagination. Part of any tradition is imagination—is how we imagine things to be. And that includes religion and it includes science. So science, we know, is based on empiricism. But there's a large body of scientific teaching that people subscribe to without any empirical foundation whatsoever. Take the whole field of quantum mechanics. How many people have empirically experienced quantum mechanics? Or the Big Bang. The number of people who confidently assert, "Yes, yes, the Big Bang. That's how the universe began." Really? Were you there? How do you know? They had formulas.

So basically scientists would take a series of equations that work and that provide an elegance of expression. When you hear the scientists talking, the elegance and the beauty of the equation is very important for them in terms of what they decide is true. So they have a certain set of equations which they take to be elegant. You can see Vedana—he's operational here. And then they imagine a universe based on those equations and then they write books and go on TV and say this is what the universe is. And we say, "Oh yeah, it must be so because it's scientific." But it's certainly an act of the imagination.

It doesn't matter though because it's not... If they say dinosaurs were on the earth, that doesn't affect how we live now.

In some ways it doesn't matter. But let me continue.

Where it matters is this: as a culture we are conditioned to imagine the world in certain ways—ways that strike us as being quite natural. And so we resist the idea of imagining the universe differently. Life after life, as a doctrine, is part of a broader package that imagines the universe very differently from the way we imagine the universe.

The Buddha imagines the universe as infinite in space, in time, and in possibilities. Infinite time, infinite space, infinite possibilities. This is an act of the imagination—a way of imagining the universe.

Consider how Western culture has imagined the universe. For thousands of years, the Western universe, largely defined by Aristotle, was imagined to be a flat earth with a dome above it, which was the sky. This dome had holes through which light shone, because above the dome was heaven, and the light from what

we call stars was the light of heaven. The sun traveled across beneath the dome, and its brightness blotted out all of that heavenly light.

Today we imagine a much bigger universe. According to my Google search, the universe began 13.8 billion years ago. And if Google says it, it must be true. The Big Bang—there was this Big Bang 13.8 billion years ago. So it's a much bigger universe. But again, it's an act of the imagination. We do it quite naturally because of our cultural preconditionings.

Sometimes those who deny life after life do so on the grounds that we in the West are scientific. We cannot be expected to subscribe to non-scientific, even anti-scientific beliefs. We don't do non-science. We do science. That's what we do. But this is just another way of limiting our imaginations. Why not learn to imagine the universe differently if it's useful to us?

It's interesting that those who deny life after life also tend to deny the reality of awakening as a reality. This makes perfect sense because life after life gives the time and cosmological space to make the awakening project viable. If I've only got 80 to 100 years, I don't like my chances, frankly. But if I've got an infinite universe with infinite possibilities, with a trajectory that's rolling along, it's possible.

This particular act of imagination has a genuine impact on the way I live and approach practice. I don't shut down possibilities. I open up to them. What would it be like to imagine the universe as infinite and ourselves as part of a universal network that is not limited by any self-identity? What would it be like to inhabit such a universe? Perhaps it would encourage us to open up to possibilities that under conditions of normality we would never imagine, or would never accept, never consider. In part, this is an opening up of the imagination.

Other cultures have learned to imagine the universe differently. The Buddha and the traditions following him have learned different ways of imagining the universe. Why should we be so culturally insular that we simply refuse outright to make that adaptation?

Due to karmic whatevers, I have a connection with South Korea. I find South Korean culture to be incredibly interesting and dynamic. If you look at the history of Korea—much of it tragic—a couple of hundred years ago they imagined the universe in a way they had imagined it for thousands of years: in a very straightforward East Asian, Buddhist, Confucian, shamanist, Taoist way. Then around the 18th century, books began to creep in from Beijing about this new Western belief system called Christianity. These people imagined the universe in a very different way—ways that, when studied by a few members of the Korean elite, overthrew much of their social and political certainties about how society should be operated.

Then came other things: modernity crashing in, revolution, war. The Koreans have gone through this incredible transformation in which now they imagine the universe in ways very, very different from the way their ancestors imagined the universe. And you have this dynamism within that culture.

I contrast this with people like, for example, a certain Pauline Hanson, who some years ago saw street signs in Sydney written in Chinese and said, "We don't do that. We're Australians."

I'm not sure. The word "secular" is actually problematic because what makes something secular versus what makes something religious? These are culturally determined categories that emerge from a particular cultural history. What we call "secular" is often simply the dominant worldview of our culture at a particular time.

I think the real question is not whether something is secular or religious, but whether it's helpful. Does understanding dependent arising through chaos theory help you to understand dependent arising? If it does, then use it. If it doesn't, then don't. The Buddha was completely pragmatic about this. He said, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering." He wasn't interested in creating a religion or establishing secular versus religious categories. He was interested in what works.

The danger comes when we get too attached to our categories—when we say something must be secular or it's not valid, or something must be religious or it's not authentic. Both approaches can become forms of fundamentalism. The secular fundamentalist says, "If it's not scientifically proven, it's nonsense." The religious fundamentalist says, "If it's not in our tradition, it's heresy." Neither approach serves the goal of understanding reality more clearly.

What the Buddha is offering us is a way of investigating reality directly, through our own experience. Whether we use scientific metaphors or traditional Buddhist language, the important thing is that we're actually doing the investigation. The concepts are just tools. Don't mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself.

So if chaos theory helps you understand how everything is interconnected and nothing exists independently, wonderful. If it doesn't help you, then perhaps the traditional teachings about dependent arising will be more useful. The key is to remain flexible and experimental rather than getting locked into any particular conceptual framework.

The universe is far more mysterious and wonderful than any of our concepts can capture. Whether we call our approach to understanding it secular or religious is really beside the point.

I don't know. What does secular mean? It's a very vague, slippery term. The problem with words like secular is that they're often used in the context of some kind of competition for who's right and who's not right. So even to use the term means you're stepping into the contest.

But clearly there are aspects of Western culture which can be used as an entry point into understanding where the Buddha's coming from. And we would be wise to employ them if we're interested in coming to terms with the Buddha. But there's also coming from his side as well. Like your interest in the suttas—we go to him and try to work out on his own terms what he's talking about and where he's coming from.

It's easy to read. I don't know.

Okay. Thank you very much. Thank you for listening.

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