Origins 1: The Quest for Awakening

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 54:54

Tonight we're going to start a series of talks on origins. We're going to look at the first three formal discourses given by the Buddha: the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the Anattalakkhana Sutta, and the Āditta-Pariyāya Sutta. These mark the beginning of his teaching career, and these three discourses are considered extremely important by the tradition.

Before we look at the first one, before we get to it, we have to understand how the Buddha came to be teaching it in the first place. And for that, of course, we begin with Gotama.

As we've said, Buddha is a title, not a name. Before he was Buddha, his name was Gotama, and this was his clan name. In the early sources, we actually don't know his personal name. And that's true of a lot of the characters in the discourses. Sometimes they're called by their clan name—often they're called by their clan name—sometimes by nickname. But most of the time we actually don't know their personal names.

Gotama was the son of basically the president for life of the Sakya Republic. Later legend said he was a prince, the son of a king. He was not a prince, he was not the son of a king. He came from a republic. But he was a member of the aristocracy, and he would have been expected to succeed his father once his father died or retired.

When still young—and my personal hypothesis is that at this point he must have been a teenager, because that's the only way this story makes sense to me—Gotama saw aging, sickness, and death as if for the first time. In other words, he had some kind of radical insight in which he saw, for the first time, the depth of normal, everyday suffering. The kind of suffering that all sensible people were just taking in their stride. So the initial awakening is the capacity to be shocked by life. Seeing life as dukkha.

Now dukkha is omnipresent and it is inescapable, which means that anybody who lives a sane, meaningful life has come to terms with it. And so had Gotama, until the crisis hit. And now he recognises as a crisis, as something that has to be responded to, what everybody else sees as the obvious, the ordinary, the everyday. So he's radically out of sync with the world. And he's radically out of sync with his family, and in particular is radically out of sync with his father, who has the responsible job of being the President of the Republic and who expects his only son to succeed him.

Gotama is in conflict with the world, and perhaps most importantly he is totally, utterly unwilling to compromise. So in an action still scandalous, he abandons everything and walks out, including abandoning his wife and his newborn child. However, he does delay his departure until at the age of twenty-nine he actually fathers a son. And then he decides, that's it, I've done my job. I'm out of here.

Gotama is now the bodhisattva—the person or being, sattva, in search of awakening, bodhi. And his first problem is where to go. It's one thing to walk out the front door, but then where do you go?

His home is Kapilavatthu, the capital of the Sakya Republic, and this lies on the main trading route between the kingdom of Kosala to the west and the Licchavi Republic to the southeast. Kosala was the biggest of the new centralized monarchies, and its capital was Sāvatthī, which is where the Buddha later on made his centre of operations. The Licchavi Republic was the largest of the tribal republics, and its capital was at Vesālī.

So Gotama could turn west and head to Sāvatthī, or he could turn southeast and head to Vesālī. And he chooses southeast.

Why does he do that? Why does he head to the Licchavi Republic?

This area is what is now northern Bihar state, and it was the successor to the old kingdom of Videha. Videha had for centuries been a major centre for the yogic traditions that we know as the Upanishads. For example, it was in Videha that the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad was composed—one of the early, great Upanishads.

So during the Buddha's time, this was still an area where aspiring yogis would go to study and to practice. That's where Gautama goes, and he trains in the Upanishadic tradition under at least two teachers. We know there were at least two because the early discourses, the Nikayas, preserved their names: Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. They must have been really famous at that time, for the Buddha's followers—who tend to disparage anything that wasn't Buddha Dharma—to include their names in their records.

According to Buddhist tradition, these teachers taught serenity meditation up to a high level of formless absorption. Formless means the material world has completely disappeared and the mind is in a subtle realm above the physical. This may possibly be a reference to the practice mentioned in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad: the practice of silence, the silence that reveals the Ātman, the Self.

Gautama joins this tradition and practices with first one and then another teacher. What we learn about him is that he had a really fierce independence of mind along with a deeply competitive streak. This comes out in how he describes his relationships with his two teachers. Let's talk about the first one, Ālāra Kālāma.

Later on, the Buddha is telling the story to his students of his life as a student under Ālāra Kālāma, and he told them how he got himself geared up to really go for it, go for the practice. He says, "I consider: not only Ālāra Kālāma has faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom—I too have faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom." I think this is a polite way of saying, "I am at least as good as he is. And in fact, I could be better."

And so Gautama jumps into it, and in fact, he is very, very good. He does master these practices and the teachings. In each community, the teacher graduates him and says, "You've done really well. Please help out with the teaching. You've got a whole community here, and you've got something to offer. Please join in."

But Gautama rejects each tradition as inadequate. He refuses the request to contribute to the community. He walks away without looking back. And it would appear to be rather similar to his walking away from his family. Basically, he's not going to settle for anything other than full awakening, and he's not going to let anyone get in his way.

We don't know how long he spent in Videha—probably longer than the tradition cares to admit. But once he realizes there's nothing more to be learned there, he moves south. He crosses the Gaṅgā to the kingdom of Magadha, the second of the two major kingdoms in the Ganges Valley at the time. This is roughly south Bihar state. He goes to the district around the city of Gayā, a district known for its powerful and restless spirits, and for the shamans who dealt with them. To this day, it still has that reputation.

Here we see the shamanic side of Gautama coming out, an aspect that gets played down in the tradition. Are you familiar with the story of Sujātā and the Bodhi tree? This is later on, when he's on the home stretch toward awakening. He's meditating under this tree, and a young woman from the local village called Sujātā comes to make an offering to the deity, the spirit of the tree. She sees Gautama and thinks, "Oh, he must be the spirit. I should offer the food to him." Gautama, of course, does not explain that he isn't, that this is a case of mistaken identity. He just eats the lunch.

This story is variously interpreted, and these days a feminist interpretation is popular: Gautama is the macho young yogi, Sujātā is the feminine side, and when he absorbs his feminine side, then he can be enlightened. And, you know, why not? But if you look at it from the point of view of what was going on at the time, there were powerful spirits who lived in various places, including trees. If a village was making the point of worshipping the spirit, by worshipping it wasn't exactly, "Oh, we think you're so great and we're bowing to you. Wonderful."

It's take this, now leave us alone, and running away before anything bad happens. These spirits were powerful and dangerous.

Now Gautama, as a yogi, is looking for somewhere to practice. He's very familiar with this culture, and he's very sensitive—he would pick up the vibes. He's looking for a place to meditate, and he sees this tree. And he immediately knows this is the house of a powerful spirit. And he marches in and takes over.

Now imagine you're sitting at home in your lounge room. Suddenly the door swings open. This young macho bloke walks in, looks around, and says, "Yeah, this will do. Oh, you—ah!" It would be a bit of a shock.

So there he is. He's taken over the spirit's tree. But not content with that, he then steals his lunch. This is

the powerful shaman. And it's the side of the Buddha that, as I said, the tradition tends to play down.

So anyway, Gautama takes up the practice of tapas—extreme asceticism. And the purpose of this practice is to summon power. It's all about power. The power necessary for the breakthrough to awakening.

Now India has a long tradition of cultivating what we call spiritual practices in order to develop power. In the literature, there's all sorts of stories about a yogi who would develop such power that even the gods would feel threatened by him. And then what you can do with this power is compel the gods to do your will. And so it looks like that during this period of his practice, Gautama's main concern was power.

Another aspect of Gautama's practice in this phase was that it was solitary. He wants no teacher and he wants no community. He's done with that. But he attracts five companions, and these are equally fanatical. These are also committed to this tradition. And the way it's talked about, it doesn't seem to be a normal teaching community with Gautama at the head as the teacher. It seems to be more like a loose association of people with no real ties to each other. The association seems rather like competitors running the same race. So the question is, who's going to get to awakening first? And there's a sneaking suspicion among the five that it's going to be Gautama. They want to be there when it happens.

So Gautama's austerities have this competitive edge. And this is coming out stronger and stronger. This is a quote that we've already given in an earlier talk. When he's thinking back about this period, he says to his students: "I thought whatever painful, wracking, piercing feelings due to exertion practitioners have experienced in the past, in the future, or in the present—this is the utmost. There is none beyond this. Yet I have not attained any status surpassing the human by this racking practice of austerities, any distinction in understanding and seeing worthy of cultivated ones."

Now you see from this that basically Gautama is in competition with himself and with others. And he stops only when he decides he has won the race. No ascetic, anywhere, at any time, could have beaten this.

The problem is, he's won the race, but he has not won the prize. And no one seems to be applauding. He has not won any distinction in understanding and seeing worthy of the cultivated ones.

So what he's then left with is another failure. There's a sense in which he already failed with Udaka.

But he thought, this isn't it. It's not what I'm looking for.

So then he jumps into this extreme practice to the point where he's close to death. And it still doesn't work. And Gautama quits. He walks away. And his companions are scandalized and angered by his desertion. I mean, what's he saying? Is he saying that they too are wasting their time? Or has he just given up because it's too hard? Either way, they are completely disillusioned with him and they walk away.

So they are rejecting him, but is he also rejecting them? Because again, he's walking away from the community that wants to share the Dharma with him in some way, even though in this particular group

it's a bit weird. And this time he's absolutely determined. He wants no one getting in his way. He's going to do this alone.

At this point, it might be interesting to note that what Gautama is doing is employing what later became known as the mirror of Dharma, as we're talking about on Wednesday nights. He's looking into the mirror and asking himself, what's going wrong? And at this point in the retreat, it can be useful to ask ourselves: What's getting in the way now? Because what we want is momentum. We've been here a week. We're building up momentum. We want to be able to keep building on that. So it can be useful for us to check what is getting in the way now, and what do I do about it?

Anyway, let's get back to Gautama. So he's failed in the practice of yoga and he's failed in the practice of tapas. And so Gautama turns to developing his own way independently. The style of practice that he develops is what he later comes to call the middle way. And it worked. It leads him to awakening, to bodhi, under a tree that came to be called the Bodhi tree. And of course, the question is, why did he choose that tree? Well, it's pretty obvious. It must have been the power he felt radiating from it.

So he's awakened, and we'll talk more about this later on. Tonight is mostly story time. After the awakening, the Buddha—because now he's the Buddha—sits for four weeks at different places around the Bodhi tree, and what he's doing is quite feeling the bliss of deliverance. In other words, he's just had this incredible blast of enlightenment, and he's adjusting to it.

During the fifth week, when he's staying at the Goat Herds' Banyan tree, the newly minted Buddha thinks about the depth and the subtlety of what he has realized. And he says, "This Dharma I have discovered is deep, difficult to understand, difficult to awaken to, peaceful, exalted, beyond reason, subtle, experienced only by the wise. But people find pleasure in their positions, are devoted to their positions, delight in their positions. And for such people, this is difficult to see: specific conditionality, dependent arising. And this is extremely difficult to see: calming all constructions, abandoning all supports, exhausting cravings, fading away of obsession, cessation, nirvana."

He is contemplating the depth of what he has realized and thinking about how difficult it is for others to ever comprehend it. And the reason why it's difficult for people is that people cling to their positions. This is ālaya.

So what does this mean? One way of viewing the mind's activities, which I must say I personally found useful at one point, is that the thought stream consists either of norms or positions. A position is a viewpoint that we cling to in order to define ourselves—to ourselves or to others. So it represents a foundation of what we take to be real and what we take to be self.

Now, a self for the Buddha is always defined by something other than itself—something that indicates itself, that points towards itself. And this is necessarily the case because the self does not exist as something directly experienced. This is the central aspect of the Buddhist teaching of not-self.

The self doesn't exist as something directly experienced. It exists as a concept, or as a network of concepts. The self always lies just beyond, or just behind, actual experience. And it exists only in terms of its reference—something it points toward, and which in turn points toward it.

So, for example, on a really basic level, possession. Possessions point towards the self. If I own something, that something confirms my reality as the owner. After all, the possession is real, and so the owner must be real. And this, of course, is understood by the advertising industry and by politicians, who often are selling us a sense of identity. Buy this car, and I am the trendy, happy person portrayed in the advertisement. Support attacks on refugees, and I am a true blue Aussie defending true blue Aussie women. The payoff in both cases is identity.

So when I take a position on something through thinking and clinging to these concepts, I create a self and a world that seems real and solid. The positions that the mind takes serve to concretize what otherwise would have no empirical reference—the self. Taking these positions and assuming them to be real and to point towards a real person blinds us to what is actually happening.

If we're in that state, we could not possibly grasp what the Buddha had just experienced: "The Dharma I have discovered is deep, difficult to understand, difficult to awaken to, peaceful, exalted, beyond reason, subtle, experienced only by the wise." Nevertheless, I'm going to advertise an enlightenment weekend—if you pay a lot of money, enlightenment is guaranteed.

People are stuck in their positions. How can they be persuaded to abandon all positions? It's way too hard. And so the Buddha decides that he will not teach, because it's just too difficult.

But fortunately for us, there's a certain deva, a Brahma—specifically Brahma Sahampati—who is at that moment eavesdropping on the Buddha's mind. He hears this thought and is horrified by it.

Now, why was Brahma Sahampati skulking about? During the time of Kassapa Buddha, the previous Buddha, Sahampati was actually a monk. He practiced under that Buddha's teaching, and after his death he was reborn as a Brahma, way up there. Our Buddha was also a student of Kassapa, and his name then was Jotipala. So Sahampati knew Jotipala, knew he was a talented chap, and just used to keep an eye on him over the lifetimes. He happened to be keeping an eye on him at that moment and realized, "Oh my God, he's about to wreck everything."

So he rockets down to earth and persuades the Buddha to teach on the grounds that yes, you're absolutely right about the Dharma being extremely difficult to teach and to understand, but he says there are just a few people "with little dust" who will understand if you teach them. If you don't, they will perish.

The Buddha is persuaded. But notice what he thinks he's signing on to—a tiny group of highly advanced disciples. The last thing on his mind is that he's about to start a world religion. That was definitely not part of his agenda at this point.

The Buddha thinks first of Alara Kalama and then Udaka Ramaputta, his teachers. Perhaps they could get it. But the devas inform him that they have died. The tradition says Udaka Ramaputta died the day before, and Alara Kalama about a week before.

I think about the Indian idea of life after life of practicing to attain enlightenment. These teachers had attained a tremendous spiritual status, but not awakening. A Buddha pops up, and they just missed him. They were reborn in heavens so remote and so subtle that they don't even know that Buddhism ever appeared on earth.

And they're going to be sitting in that heaven for about a zillion years. Then by the time they're reborn, there'll be no Buddhism. They just missed out. So don't miss out.

The Buddha then thinks about his five former companions. Perhaps they would understand. But why was the Buddha initially unwilling to teach? It was certainly the difficulty of understanding the Dharma. Yet when he was reflecting on this, what else was he thinking? Was he also thinking of his younger self? Was he thinking of how fiercely he had clung to his own positions? Is he thinking now about how fanatical his five former companions are, and how difficult it would be to get them to see the world differently?

When Govind thought about his conflicted relationships with his family, his teachers, his companions, and when he thought of his stubbornness in pursuing the dead end of asceticism, did he think of how difficult he himself had been to teach? Was this movement towards the first teaching an attempt to find a breakthrough—in the sense that if he could find a way to teach his former self, in the form of his old companions, then he could teach anyone at all? If he could crack this nut, he could do it.

So he decides he's going to give it a go. Again, the devas helpfully inform him that the five companions are now living just north of Varanasi. The Buddha heads there in search of them. He hasn't gone very far—in fact, he hasn't even arrived at Gaya—before he meets Upaka coming down the road.

Now, Upaka is also a renunciant. He is an Ajivaka, and the Ajivikas were an early Indian sect that taught determinism. Upaka is walking along the path when he sees this young Buddha walking towards him. He's really impressed by what he sees. He stops the Buddha and says, "Friend, your faculties are clear. Your complexion is pure and bright. Under whom have you gone out? Who is your teacher? Whose dharma do you follow?"

The point about this encounter is that it is entirely unrehearsed, unprepared for. The Buddha has his mind focused on the companions. He's not expecting this. So he responds purely spontaneously in what's called an *udāna*, a spontaneous verse. I'll go through much of it, just to give you a sense of it.

The Buddha says: "I am one who has overcome everything, who understands everything, unstained among all phenomena, abandoning everything, free by putting an end to craving, having understood directly by myself—to whom should I point?" In other words, who's this teacher you're talking about? "For me, there is no teacher, and one like me is unknown. In the world with all its deities, there is no one equal

to me. I am the worthy one of the world. I am the supreme teacher. I alone am *Sammāsambuddha*. I am cool, extinguished. To turn the wheel of Dharma, I am going to the city of Kasi. In a world gone blind, I go to beat the drum of the deathless."

This is a very famous verse. Upaka responds by pointing out that this is quite a claim. The Buddha agrees. Upaka shakes his head, Indian style, and says, "Yeah, friend, maybe." And he walks off.

This expression would be equivalent to our "yeah, whatever"—or even the Australian expression, "yeah, no." In any event, he's completely unimpressed, and he walks away.

This declaration by the Buddha is inspired,

spontaneous, completely unplanned. His heart is full, overwhelmed by the good news. But Upaka is not moved.

So as the Buddha walked away, he must have been thinking, "That went well... not." In other words, he's realising that he has to be very careful, very strategic, in how he speaks, if he is not going to drive people away rather than persuade them to open up to what he's got to say.

And so he's on his way to Kāsi, to Bārāṇasī, wondering how on earth he is going to handle his five companions. And we shall find that out tomorrow.

So, any questions?

Yes, his name was Rāhula, according to tradition. Seven years after he left home, the Buddha returned. And he had, well, let's say his father was really pissed off. Seriously pissed off.

So he and his dad are having a bit of a flaming blue in the courtyard, and his wife is upstairs. She looks down and sees her husband has come back, dressed as an ascetic. Then Rāhula turns up, looks out the window and says, "Who's he?" And his mother says, "That's your father." Then she says, "Go down there and ask him for your inheritance."

Now why she wanted him to do that, who knows what's going on in her mind. But the boy does. So he marches up to his grandfather and his father—they're having a blue, and I'm showing you the footage, it's very polite. And he looks up at his father and says, "Where's my inheritance?"

And the Buddha looks down and turns. He's brought with him some of his students, and he says to Sāriputta, "Ordain that boy now." So basically, he kidnaps his son. And his father is even more pissed off.

So Rāhula goes off and becomes a novice monk, a sāmaṇera. And there are two teachings, two suttas, in which the Buddha teaches his son—one when he was still very young, and the other when he was twenty, when he was ordained as a bhikkhu.

And then Rāhula disappears. There's no mention of him. He disappears. And he's highly respected in the

tradition for this. Because as the son of a Buddha, he could have made a play for power. He could have said, "I'm the enlightened one's son. Enlightenment comes to me." And he was enlightened—he was an arahant. But he didn't. He just vanished. Not heard of again at all. And the tradition really respects him for that. They feel it demonstrates his sincerity.

Well, according to later Buddhist thinking, exactly, he would have. But according to the early tradition, definitely he didn't. And these stories come from the Vinaya Piṭaka, the Mahākhandhaka. This is the earliest history that we have of the formation of the Saṅgha—very early. So it was composed way before the theological constructs of bodhisattvas wanting to rescue everybody came into being.

The record that we have shows him basically saying to himself, "If I try to teach and nobody understands, this is going to be a real bother. So I won't do it." And he had to be persuaded.

No, it's scandalous. There is a later interpretation that, oh, this is just play acting—Brahmā was coming down just to illustrate some kind of teaching point. I don't think so. I think we can see here stories that don't fit the orthodoxy, something that was never ironed out. So the early records went through an editorial process.

And every now and again, something comes out that doesn't seem to fit the image. But you can be pretty sure that if it wasn't edited away, it was because everybody knew—no, this actually happened. And we can't just rewrite history, even though it would be less embarrassing if we did.

So the Shakyas lived in a republic. The Kshatriyas, the upper class, they had a vote—something like the Roman system. There would be an assembly, and all the major decisions were made in that assembly. Every member of the community had the right to speak publicly and to vote. So there would have to be debates. But "every member" meant male aristocrats of that status—not all men, just those of that particular status. And the president was elected.

There's no mention of terms, and it would have been probably unusual to have them. So his father expected that the young Siddhartha would take over, but he would have had to be elected as well. He would be presented to the assembly: "This is my son. I've been your leader, running this republic for decades. You've done well under my guidance. Vote for him." And everybody would likely say, "Yep, okay." Presumably that's how it would have gone. But he would have had to have earned it. If he had been hopeless, they wouldn't have elected him. So there would have been a lot of pressure on him to do well.

After his father died, they elected Mahanama—he was a cousin, part of that same broad family, a cousin of the Buddha. He became the last president, because the Shakya Republic was destroyed either soon after the Buddha's death or just before it.

Did his father and the Buddha ever resolve their differences? There's no indication that they really did. His father complained to him about Rahula's ordination, and the Vinaya rule about how old a boy must be before being allowed to ordain as a samanera was instituted because of his father's complaints. I think the

rule is something like: if the boy is old enough to throw stones at birds in the fields, he's old enough to ordain. In other words, if he's old enough to enter the workforce, he's old enough to ordain.

His mother died a week after he was born, but his mother's sister raised him. And she eventually went off and ordained. A lot of his family ordained—a lot of his cousins. In fact, the Shakyas constituted the elite, the governing elite, the people who ran the Sangha. It was largely a family enterprise, which would have been typical for the time. That probably would have really irritated his father—it would have got right up his nose.

As for his wife, I can't recall whether she went off and ordained as well. I don't think so, but it's possible.

Or it could be that she was telling him, look, this is your opportunity—go for it. Who knows? All we've got is the story.

Now, regarding Viḍūḍabha—after Pasenadi of Kosala was very old, he was overthrown. The prince was a Shakya, the son of a woman whom the Republic had sent to Pasenadi a long time before. There's a very strange story in the Buddhist tradition about why this happened, which I think is complete nonsense.

But at the time, we have two major kingdoms, and the modernizing one is Magadha. When the Buddha passed through, the king was Bimbisāra, who became a follower of the Buddha, and Buddhism was well established in Magadha. In ancient Indian history, the most common cause of death for kings was to be murdered by one of their own sons, impatient for the top job. That's what happened to Bimbisāra. His son was Ajātasattu, who appears in the later stories. Ajātasattu had a plan for imperial expansion. He launched a war north of the Ganga, destroying the Vajjian Republic, and he faced off with Kosala.

By the time the Buddha was old and coming to the end of his time, it was pretty clear that the whole political balance of power in the Ganges Valley was coming unstuck. These two elephants, Magadha and Kosala, were going to be trampling at each other and trampling everybody else.

Now, if you were a young, ambitious king of Kosala, maybe you would see an opportunity. The other thing about Kosala was that it was an old-fashioned kingdom, quite feudal. Different rajas ran their own domains but answered to the king in sovereignty. The Shakya Republic was one of these—autonomous but answering to Kosala. It was rather like Australia and the Crown. This kind of very loose confederation, maybe the king thought, isn't good enough. "I've got to have everybody under my control, and I'll start with these people. They occupy a highly strategic position, and they have a reputation for independence. I'll make an example of them." I suspect it was something like that. Power politics is power politics.

Regarding the question of enlightenment before the Buddha—there would have been ideas about enlightenment from the Upanishadic tradition, but they had the concept of Ātman and Brahman. You realize that Ātman is one with Brahman. They have a whole theology out of which the non-dual tradition emerged. But it seems the Buddha wasn't convinced. He studied it, he did the practices, but he thought, no, this isn't it. He had very high standards. It took a lot before he was satisfied.

As for the question about whether there were Buddhas before Gotama—yes, the tradition holds there were past Buddhas who were regarded as enlightened with the same status. I think there were five or seven of them listed in the early sources. But in the later tradition, they extended the cosmology out considerably.

There are an infinite number of Buddhas before and an infinite number of Buddhas after. But we don't know when that tradition began, at what point people started talking about previous Buddhas. In the early tradition, they do talk about previous Buddhas, but they all teach the same thing—they teach the Dharma.

The difference between our Buddha and the previous Buddhas was that our Buddha took a long, long, long time to become enlightened. According to the tradition, it took him six years. Can you believe it? And apparently this is because when he was a student of the previous Buddha, that previous Buddha was talking to his students about how long it had taken him to be enlightened—how after he left home it took him six days to be enlightened. And our Buddha, who at the time was a bodhisattva, thought, "Six days? I'd be at this for six years." And because of that misplaced determination, he took six years.

What happened to the previous Buddhas' knowledge? They're gone. Impermanent.

So the reason we have the Buddha's teaching is because he got convinced to teach. But it wasn't just that he decided to teach—the thing is, he was a brilliant politician and organiser. Because he didn't just teach. He created a structure that has lasted for over two millennia.

The Vinaya, the legal code that governs the life of his monks and nuns, is one of the oldest continuous legal traditions on the planet. That's the Vinaya that determines the life of the monks and the nuns—the code of discipline. Lay people aren't exposed to those legal codes; lay people have the five precepts, the Panchasila, which we chant each night. But the monks and nuns were very regulated in their life. And that code, that legal code, is one of the oldest continuous legal codes on the planet. That's an astonishing cultural achievement. So he wasn't just enlightened—he was a genius as well.

The stories of the previous Buddhas are couched in a culture and cosmology about the yugas, about how many thousands of years humans have been on the planet and the different cosmic ages. This reflects the Indian sense of time. And we don't know if there have been other planets or worlds where there have been other Buddhas. But the stories of the previous Buddhas are expressions of that worldview. There is the Indian sense that birth is followed by death, death is followed by birth, and it just rolls on. And there's no reason to suppose that it's limited to this little piece of galactic real estate. So they have a very big picture of life and the universe.

You get the Jataka stories that began to develop—these are stories of the bodhisattva's companions in previous lives. They're very famous stories, Indian folk tales. But if you look at these stories, in theory they represent the Buddhist world projected back in time, a long time ago. And if you look at the political,

social, economic structure in those stories, they're exactly the same as in the Buddha's time. In other words, for them, the past was simply the present projected backwards. But in modernity, you know you can't do that.

The past is not the same as the present—it's different. And so you have the invention of history, which says the past is definitely different and asks how we can understand it.

One of the fascinating things about these early Buddhist records is that they actually are history. Many of them are people reporting what happened in their own lifetime—how all of this started—and keeping those records. So we're witnessing the beginnings of history as we know it. But when you look at their stories of the distant past, that past is always simply the present projected backwards. In other words, they invented it.

Question from the audience: At the beginning of the talk, you were describing identity and used an example about buying something. Can you remind me how that relates to your teaching?

When the Buddha was considering whether he should teach, he said he couldn't because people are locked into their positions—*ālaya*. This is where the mind takes a position on something, and verbally it functions to concretize the self and the world. This, of course, comes out later when he starts teaching not-self, which at this point he hasn't yet mentioned. But we're going to explore not-self later in this series.

Question about vegetarianism.

There's a strong tradition of *ahimsa*—non-harming—in India. Not harming any living being. So many people were vegetarian. But the Buddha was not into food trips. And particularly for his monastics—monks and nuns—they were beggars. He rejected making vegetarianism part of the monastic rules, essentially because it would make life more difficult for the lay people. There would be certain foods they couldn't offer and others they could. And it would introduce the monks and nuns making choices about their diet. If you ordain in the Theravada tradition, one of the things you abandon is any control over your diet. Someone offers it to you—that's what you receive.

Question about reintegration and why we are split.

That's a good question. We're going to talk about life after life later in this series, although discussing it now might just create more fixed positions, so I really shouldn't go into it.

Anyway, it's getting late. Thank you very much.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.