Origins 7: Not-Self and Life-After-Life

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:06:20

We're going through a series on the origins of the Buddha's teaching, looking at the first three discourses: the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, setting in motion the wheel of the Dharma; the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, which we spent two nights on; and then we're going to start heading towards the third discourse, the Ādittapariyāya Sutta, burning.

But we're going to take a detour. We're going to continue to talk about anattā, not-self, but we're going to talk about anattā as it applies to one particular doctrine—the Buddhist doctrine of life after life, or rebirth.

Now this is a very interesting topic because it's one of the key areas where contemporary practitioners have trouble with the Buddha's teaching. This is the area that he calls āyatiṃ punabbhava, or in English, "further becoming in the future." This is what we usually call rebirth, although I prefer to call it life after life. Or one could call it death after death, because that also covers the same territory.

The Buddha is quite clear that beings live again and again and again. And he's quite clear that he sees liberation in terms of liberation from this wandering in saṃsāra—the endless series of lives that all beings must undergo until they attain full awakening. This is clearly central to the Buddha's belief structure. And this belief is almost automatically rejected by educated, rational people, because they take for granted the view of scientific materialism, which could be summarized as: mate, once you're dead, you're dead. So the teaching of life after life becomes an embarrassment, something that has to be explained away if the Buddha is going to be presented as the sensible fellow that he otherwise seems to be.

I've come across two kinds of attitudes about this. Some teachers even dismiss the teaching of life after life as some kind of cultural belief that was universally accepted in ancient India—all those miserable, superstitious peasants, what to do. And it was added to the Dharma, but it's not essential to what the Buddha's talking about, so it's an optional added extra. Some have even suggested the Buddha himself did not believe in life after life, but he included it in his teaching because it was taken for granted by everybody else, so he didn't want to pick any unnecessary fights.

There are a couple of problems with this kind of approach. First of all, this move assumes that the Buddha lied to increase market share. If he behaved like an advertising executive, why would we trust anything that he says?

But also this assumption, which is quite common—that in the Buddha's time everybody in India believed in life after life—there is no evidence for this. We don't know a lot about ancient India. This is India five centuries before Christ. We don't know much about it. But what we do know indicates that in terms of the

intellectual life at the time, this teaching of life after life was at the very least contested. It was certainly not universally accepted.

For example, there was a strong school of materialism that was one of the competing schools of thought to the Buddha Dharma. When the Buddha taught, he didn't teach in a vacuum. The Ganges Valley was a vibrant, sophisticated, multicultural society. There was no established orthodoxy. What we see as Hinduism had not yet been invented—it came later. There were whole different competing schools of thought, and one of them, which apparently was quite strong, was the Lokāyata, materialism.

We also know that in the Buddha's time, the teaching of life after life was contested. For example, if you look at the Pāyāsi Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya, there's a debate about it, where Prince Pāyāsi, who's kind of a proto-scientist, performs experiments on condemned criminals immediately before their death and immediately after their death to see if you can find any evidence of the escape of something which goes on to another life. This is science at the time of the Buddha. So it was contested. People were debating it at the time.

And it was a relatively new doctrine. According to the documentary record we have, it was first mentioned in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, which we have already mentioned, where it was introduced as a secret doctrine. The students are warned: do not mention this to people beyond this circle. In other words, clearly indicating that at the time it was highly controversial. So there's absolutely zero evidence that life after life was universally accepted at the time.

But if we are to understand what the Buddha was getting at when he taught life after life, we have to begin with where he is coming from. And as we're seeing, he's coming from the middle way and not-self, because life after life is an aspect of this teaching. It's not an optional added extra. It's built into them.

So let's begin by revising how the Buddha taught the middle way, and how he filled out this teaching with that of not-self.

We've seen that the middle way cannot be defined as the opposite of another way, because that would be an extreme—*anta* in Pali—not a middle. The opposite of indulgence is asceticism, and asceticism is just another extreme, and vice versa. So the middle way can only be found where there is no *anta*, where there is no extreme, where we are not stuck on anything. The middle way is found as a dynamic balance between opposites. We could see it as a place characterized by no fixed position.

And this balance can only be found in the presence. We can't find it if we're holding on to the past, and we can't find it if we're striving for the future. In the first discourse, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the Buddha defines the middle way as the eightfold path, which we saw as a system of dynamic complexity, where there's no place to stand still and where there's no ground upon which to build a position. Every time we do take a position, we've just lost the middle way, because we find ourselves in an *anta*, an extreme, an opposite—a place which is defined as the opposite of another place.

Five days after teaching the middle way, the Buddha taught *anattā*, not-self, in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*. He taught this to his five former companions, now his students, only after they had attained the first stage of awakening. And he did this by applying the middle way to their practice. It's these teachings that provide the context for understanding life after life.

So let's go back to self—what the Buddha thinks is self. For the Buddha, self is a construction project, and it's made up of three basic moves: craving, conceit, and view. Craving is the move "this is mine." Conceit is the move "I am this." And view is the move "this is my self."

We've looked at craving as the urge to possess, to appropriate—experience is mine. View is the most surface aspect, and it emerges as the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves. And underneath the narrative project, paired with craving, is what the Buddha calls *māna*, usually translated as conceit.

Craving and conceit—*taṇhā* and *māna*—work together. *Māna* is derived from the root *mā*, to measure. When we measure something, we necessarily define its boundaries—the place where one thing ends and other things begin. So *māna* appears as a sense of separation and therefore of difference. Separation creates borders, a duality of sameness and difference in all of its forms. *Māna* creates a world of this versus that, here versus there, near versus far, good versus bad, and so on.

Self is bound up in this play between opposites. We could say that self is bound up in the play between sameness and difference.

Let's start with difference. Difference creates the sense that I here am separate from you there—that's just a general example. In society we can see this in liberalism, where we privilege the individual over the collective.

Sameness creates the sense of identity between apparently different experiences. This thought or perception or feeling is a continuation of a thought or perception or feeling that was experienced yesterday, so it's the same—so it must be mine, it must be me. We can see this emphasis on sameness in various forms of collectivism, where we privilege the collective over the individual. This is a dynamic that's constantly shifting around. Self is bound up with this play between sameness and difference.

Self emerges as a sense of identity, and identity requires a sense of sameness over time. Sameness involves a corresponding sense of difference. If there is something I am, then there must be something I am not—there must be something beyond "I am" which I am not. So if there's "I am," there has to be "I am not," and vice versa.

In terms of the middle way, both of these possibilities—"I am" and "I am not"—are extremes. They're opposites. And that means, from the Buddha's perspective, they're wrong.

And this is clear from the Kacchanagota Sutta, which is another place where the Buddha introduces and talks about the middle way. He's speaking to Kacchanagota, who asks the question: In what way is there

right view?

And the Buddha says: "This world is normally reliant upon the duality of existence and non-existence. To one who sees the arising of the world realistically, with complete understanding, there is no sense of non-existence regarding the world. To one who sees the cessation of the world realistically, with complete understanding, there is no sense of existence regarding the world. 'Everything exists'—this is one extreme. 'Everything does not exist'—this is the other extreme. Avoiding both these extremes, a Tathagata teaches Dharma by means of the middle." And on he goes.

So here we have the middle way presented as the balance between existence and non-existence. In less abstract language, between "it is" and "it is not."

Now most of us create and live in a duality between these two. Something either exists or it does not exist. This is the natural and obvious way of relating to the world when we're doing it from inside the construction project which is self, or identity. From inside identity or inside self, this duality makes perfect sense. Either this is me, or it's someone else. Either this is mine, or it belongs to someone else. Either this is right, or it's wrong.

But if we want to understand what the Buddha means by life after life, we have to look at it from his perspective of the middle way. And that means we have to give up our normal concepts about life after life, because our normal concepts all belong to a view that assumes the reality of self.

So let's look at this teaching from inside self. Why is the question of whether or not there is life after death interesting to us? Why do so many people get excited about it, talk about it, take positions about it? Because we assume it's all about me. When the Buddha speaks about life after life, we assume what he's saying is: I am born here, and then I am born there, then I'm born somewhere else, and then dot, dot, dot, dot. In other words, we think it's about what's going to happen to us. And we do this because we naturally think in terms of self.

And so we think about a being. If you're talking about life after death, we're thinking in terms of a being moving through death from one body to another. That's the obvious way in which to think about it. And when we think about a new birth after death, our attitude to it is very simple. Either this new birth is me, or it's not me. Either sameness or difference.

When we perceive and think from inside self, we naturally perceive and think in terms of our own identity and its fate. So we assume that either I will survive death or I will not survive death. If I assume that I will survive death, that this is what the Buddha is talking about, then we have identity, sameness, existence. If we assume that I will not survive death, regardless of what the Buddha is talking about, then we're thinking in terms of non-identity, difference, non-existence.

Now of course, if I am the one who survives death, if I am the one who is reborn in some way or another, no matter how vaguely or cosmologically, then I'm interested. This is important. This is important to me.

For me. But if I think in terms of I am the one who does not survive death, then I'm definitely not interested, because this is really not important to me.

And it's perfectly clear that this perspective on the fate of the self is based on māna. It's an expression of māna, the fundamental sense of separation and comparison which is the building block of self. So when I'm in māna, as it were, I'm taken outside the felt flow of experience to the "I am,"

who appears to sit behind the flow of events, commenting upon the flow of events, watching the self move from one scene to another, like an actor seeing himself perform in a movie. And both commenting and watching occur necessarily from beyond the felt flow of experience.

We get a sense of this when we're doing the meditation practice and we find the flow of our experience is partnered by a commentator explaining it all to us. Have you ever had that experience?

Now, this is how I think about life after life from inside self. It's a flow of movement from one life to the next, as if I'm the audience watching a character move from one scene to the next. So the question is, who is that character? Is it me? Is it not me? This is the question that we're interested in.

So this is how we approach life after life from inside self. But what if we approach it from beyond self?

Not-self locates me within the flow of events. There's no external vantage point from which "I" can witness and comment on my life. There's just the intimacy of the flow itself. Even the concepts that I create about the flow of experience—for example, in the form of the commentator—is just another event, another experience, within the flow of events. And within the flow of events, there's no overarching vantage point from which to look upon this flow and make any kind of judgment about it. There's only the flow itself, encountered now, as it moves from one experience to the next.

And this gives us a very different perspective.

So, for example, when I think about life after life from inside self, the question that I want answered is: who lives after death? Now, this question is necessarily unanswerable, except for speculation. I mean, how can we know?

But let's think about a question more intimate, closer to us, closer to the actual flow of experience. Who leaves this hall after the dharma talk?

Right now, this question is also answerable only as a concept, because it refers to something that cannot be known, cannot be encountered in the present. But what we do know is that if we pay attention over a period of time, we have a chance of answering it. We can answer it in the very act of leaving the hall.

And the point is that for the Buddha, these two questions—who lives after death, and who leaves the hall after this talk—are essentially the same question. And they have essentially the same answer. The only difference is the time span involved, hopefully. Hopefully nobody's going to fall over from a heart attack

before the end of the talk. And of course, time, again, is a concept. But what is central from the perspective of the experienced flow of experience is that they are the same question with the same answer.

So how can we answer this question?

Here I'd just like to give an example of something that happened to me years ago now. When my mother died, we got together to clear out the house, and the family had lived in that house for fifty years. So there was a lot of stuff there. And going through, sorting through the stuff, I came upon a photograph of a young boy, I would say about fifteen.

And of course I'm looking at it, and the question is: is that me? Or not me? Someone else?

Now, both questions place me, here, looking at that, there. And whatever answer I give—yes that's me, no that's not me—results in a concept which is in the form of an identity created by a conceptual narrative arc that goes through time and space from the past to the present. The past portrayed in that photograph to the present, me looking at it. And this narrative arc creates a permanent identity—the one who has survived through time. Me.

And once this permanent identity is established, then I can address the question: is that an image of me or someone else?

But the problem is that neither answer sheds any light at all on the lived experience of the one now looking at this image. Neither answer addresses the fundamental question: who is looking at this image now?

So the answer "this is me"—it doesn't quite work, because I am not that boy. I look very different, and I have very different thoughts and feelings. And also, I would never make the mistakes that that boy made. And I'm certainly not as driven and not as confused as he was.

But the answer, "this is someone else," doesn't work either. If this image is not me, then how can I be so intimate with what that boy was going through? How can I be confident that I understand his thoughts and his feelings, that I understand the situation he was living in at that time?

So questions and answers framed in terms of identity—what do they actually accomplish? They feed narratives, they feed stories, but they don't shed light on this experience situation now. They result only in the construction of further identity narratives.

But answers based on the flow of events as they are experienced now—answers based on the middle way, not-self, dependent arising, emptiness—these answers shed light on what is happening in this situation and how this present situation is constructed, how it's felt, how it moves.

For example, as I'm speaking right now, it's quite clear to me that the decisions made by that fifteen-year-old boy continue to shape the experience situation. In fact, I would go so far as to say that if

that fifteen-year-old boy had made different decisions, this talk would not be happening and you would not be sitting in this hall. This experience situation that we have right now is largely shaped by decisions made before. And in turn, it is now shaping another situation.

Just as this situation right now emerges from past conditions, so does the next situation, and the next, and the next. Each situation that we experience emerges from the past, which shapes it, and in turn shapes a future that replaces it. This, of course, is the teaching of kamma vipāka—action and its ripening. We could sum it up as: something happens next. But notice we are not summing it up as *someone* happens next.

This is looking at the issue of identity and difference from outside the self—from not-self, emptiness, and so on. What we have is a flow of experience, and one of the things that characterizes this flow is that something happens next. This is the arising and cessation. If you're tracking your experience over these weeks, is it true that something happens next? Yes. And it's got nothing to do with the stories about who's who. It's just in the nature of experience itself. It arises, it ceases. It arises, it ceases. Something happens next.

So what would end this flow? What would bring it to a crashing halt? The Buddha sees no reason whatsoever to assume that it would be ended by death, because death is just another event. It arises and it ceases dependent upon conditions. And just as death succeeds birth, so birth succeeds death—from his perspective.

Then why is death so central to our fears and our vulnerabilities? It's because we think of death from outside the middle way, from inside the self. We think of death in terms of the extremes of sameness versus difference, existence versus non-existence, self versus other. I think of death in terms of *my* death, *my* annihilation, *my* possible resurrection, impossible resurrection, whatever. Or I think in terms of someone else's death, someone else's annihilation, someone else's resurrection.

When we think of death in this way, we're thinking of it from inside self. And this self is located outside the felt flow of experience. In order to check whether that death is my death, and whether that would be me alive afterwards or someone else, I have to step out of the river of directly experienced phenomena and step into the river of stories.

We could sum it up by saying that when we examine the flow of our own experience, we can see: something happens next. And what is important about this something is not identity—not the question, "Is this me or not me?" That is not important. What's important is cause and effect. How does this action ripen? That's coming at it from a completely different angle. And the death of an assumed sense of self does not eliminate the ripening, because that death is just happening in the river of stories.

So, in brief—and this is perhaps a touch controversial thing to say—the Buddha's teaching of life after life is not a theory of post-mortem survival. The Buddha has no interest in the fate of the soul. None. He's interested only in how we live now, and life after life is part of that project, because it is the flow of

experience.

We have difficulty coming to terms with this teaching of life after life essentially because of the power of our cultural conditioning. Our cultural patterns of clinging tend to blind us to what the Buddha is saying. And this is what I call the problem of domesticating the Dharma.

One problem we have is that we tend to view this issue of life after life in scientific terms. If we want to believe it, we might look for some scientifically respectable way to speak about post-mortem survival. And so, of course, the problem is that the Buddha is not talking about post-mortem survival. He's talking about the structure of experience, how one event succeeds another. But we're determined to seek a scientific explanation. And if we don't have one, we can't take it seriously.

This is part of a broader tendency to domesticate the Dharma by reading it in terms of our own cultural categories. We place the Buddha's teachings into preconceived, familiar categories like psychology, philosophy, science, religion, mythology. And we reject those parts of the teaching that we see as fitting categories we do not approve of, while we accept those aspects of the teaching that fit into categories we do approve of.

For example, we don't approve of such things as religion and mythology, so we chuck out those bits. But we do approve of such things as psychology, or philosophy, or science, so we keep those bits that seem to fit into those categories. Now this practice domesticates the Dharma, and it makes it easier for us to accept it, but it also blinds us to the radical nature of what the Buddha was actually saying. In other words, we're approaching the Dharma on our terms, not the Buddha's terms—which is a perfectly natural thing to do.

As I mentioned before, the Buddha did not teach psychology. He did not teach religion. He did not teach science. He taught Dharma. But Dharma is not a European cultural category, so we literally don't know what it means. But that's what he taught. Not these other things.

This brings us to the challenge of imagination. Part of any tradition—be it scientific, be it religious, whatever—part of any tradition is imagination. Even in our science-based culture, we find a large body of teaching that people subscribe to on the basis of faith and without any empirical foundation. In other words, it's the attitude: if the scientists say it is so, then it must be so. We assume our authorities must be right, like every other culture. It's just that in our culture the authorities are scientists rather than priests.

Every culture is conditioned to imagine the world in certain ways. And we tend to resist the suggestion that we could learn to imagine it in different ways from those with which we are familiar. Life after life is part of a broader package. It includes dependent arising, not-self, emptiness, the middle way.

It's a broader package that imagines the universe very differently from the ways we're accustomed to. The Buddha, for example, imagines the universe as infinite—in space, in time, and in possibilities. This is what makes it an optimistic vision. The teaching of life after life is one aspect of this infinity, especially in terms of the possibilities available to us.

Our culture, Western culture, is used to very limited ways of imagining the universe. For centuries, the traditional Western universe consisted of a flat earth topped by a dome—the sky—that had holes in it through which shone divine light, which we perceive as stars. And God lived above all this. This was the orthodoxy for centuries. One thing you notice about it is that it's a rather small universe, in total contrast with the universe as imagined in ancient India, which, as I said, is infinite.

Today we imagine a much bigger universe. Some people would say it began with a Big Bang, about thirteen or so billion years ago. And in this universe, awareness or consciousness is some kind of local accident. Now, that's an interesting belief. The Buddha would ask: what experience is this belief based on?

Remember the Canki Sutta, where the Buddha investigates the nature of truth. He was debating the Brahmin youth Kapatika, who presents his Vedic orthodoxy as authoritative. "This is what's true." His confidence is largely based on the fact that what he's presenting is the consensus among learned Brahmins. But the Buddha wants to know: have any of these learned Brahmins actually experienced what their tradition is talking about? And if so, what is that experience?

If we apply this to the Big Bang—was anyone here around for that? Obviously not. But we know the universe began that way through our imagination. We imagine a universe that conforms to the principles of modern science as we understand them. But of course, built into the scientific method is the assumption that what we understand today is going to be replaced tomorrow by new knowledge. So strictly speaking, what we understand today is wrong.

The point we're making here is that fundamentally, the scientific image of the universe is a product of our imagination. And if we have to use our imagination to engage in an understanding of the universe, why not begin to reimagine it on the principles of Buddha Dharma? Of course, it is an act of imagination—no doubt about it.

Sometimes people who deny life after life do so on the grounds that we in the West are scientific, and we cannot be expected to subscribe to a non-scientific teaching. That's it. But really, isn't this just another form of dogmatism? Isn't it a way of justifying closing off our imagination, just refusing to consider other possibilities? Why should we not learn to imagine the universe differently?

It is interesting that those who deny life after life also tend to deny awakening. The two views go together because life after life grants the time and the cosmological space that make the awakening project viable.

I don't know how many years any one of you have been doing this meditation practice, but given the normal human lifespan, given your experience of how long it's taken to make whatever progress you've made towards full awakening—how optimistic are you that you're going to make it in this lifetime? Or do you need more time?

This is the sales pitch, isn't it? It is. This bit about imagination is definitely the sales pitch. We'll give you time. Life after life provides us with a world in which awakening is possible, a genuine goal worth

aspiring to. And this becomes part of our imagination.

So what would it be like to imagine the universe as infinite, and ourselves as part of a universal network not limited by any kind of self-identity? What would it be like to live in that kind of universe? How would it affect our way of life?

It might, possibly, encourage us to open up to more possibilities—possibilities that our sense of normality, in other words our habitual self, has learned to dismiss as impossible.

How do we know the limits of nature? And why are we so quick to reject possibilities that are beyond our habitual cultural conditioning? Perhaps it's possible that if we opened up to the real possibility of something entirely new and entirely unexpected—like, for example, awakening—then we might find ourselves in territories that we never thought possible. How can we know in advance? And why should we, like the Brahmins of the Buddha's day, shut off this possibility simply because it's not part of our inherited cultural tradition?

Question from audience about the similarity between Buddhist teachings on rebirth and the Vedantic concept of Atman—a part of the self that lives after the body dies, stripped of memory, personality, preferences, emotions, and thoughts, with only karmic momentum remaining.

It's essentially a karmic potential, a samskara. I've always seen the Atman described in various ways, but after what I've explained, the questioner isn't sure they see the difference between those Brahmanic faiths and the Buddhist understanding of momentum that isn't disrupted by the death of the body.

I'm sure there are great similarities, because all philosophical and religious systems are products of human invention. They share similarities and they have differences. But I think from the Buddha's perspective, and from the yogi's perspective in different traditions, the main issue is: does it work? Does it take me in that direction?

For some people, imagining the world in terms of Vedanta helps them follow that direction towards awakening. For some people, imagining the universe in terms of the Buddha Dharma helps them follow. For some people, imagining the world in terms of Christianity helps them move in that direction. Because all of these teachings are just another human construction. The question is, how do they work? So it's really a matter of finding out what works and then doing it.

But here, the main project is to get a sense of what the Buddha was talking about when he spoke of life after life. That's the context of what I've been exploring. And I think the way our culture thinks about it is not what he's talking about, because we think about it in terms of self, and he did not.

The Buddha apparently had the direct capacity to see death and rebirth in real time as part of his awakening. There are, I think, true explanations or descriptions of how he attained awakening, and one of them is through the three vijjās, the three knowledges, that occurred throughout the Night of the

Awakening.

The first one was that he remembered his own previous births. If you read it in the sutta, it says he remembered he was of such and such a name, such and such a clan, ate such and such food, and so on. He remembered multiple lives. So in his memory, he went through multiple identities over a long period of time. And all the things that are mentioned are identity markers in ancient India—clan, class, name, and so on. He remembered innumerable previous identities, or rather, things that would create identity.

Then he saw beings die and be reborn in real time. So the first knowledge is going through memory, through his own mental stream, back into the past. The second one opens up—he sees all beings coming and going within the universe, death and birth, death and birth. And the third was the actual awakening through dependent arising.

This is part of his own experience. One of his titles is "Teacher of Gods and People." And "teacher of gods" is not rhetorical flourish. He set aside a certain period of time each night to teach devas. They would come to him, and he set aside that time so it wouldn't interrupt his other work. Apparently, for a deva to come to a human teacher, they've got to be quite determined, because people stink—and devas have very sensitive senses. So they're making a real effort.

There are various stories about the Buddha's disciples who travelled to this deva realm or that deva realm, and there were various meditators who would talk about travelling to different realms in their meditation. So it was all based on experience.

Now, you may conclude that if the Buddha really thought that, he must have been a bit of a nutcase.

That's fine. We can think that. But it is based on his experience. It's not a dogma that he inherited or imposed.

Someone asks whether this is one of the things the Buddha would have said, or actually said. Some years ago, we had a conversation about keeping track of all the things the Buddha said. And there were some scholarly efforts going on to identify which teachings the Buddha would have actually spoken, distinguishing them from later additions where the timing was clearly off – he was already dead when certain texts appeared.

This represents the earliest tradition. All we can really know is what we can conclude about what constitutes the earliest layer of the teachings and what's contained in them. That's the best we can do. We can't go back in time to meet him, so who knows – maybe somebody made it all up. People do suggest that, that the Buddha was really a committee. There is that theory.

Stephen Batchelor very interestingly opposes that theory, because he points out that the characters who appear in the suttas, the early suttas, are characters. You can feel them as actual human beings. Whereas if you go to the later Mahayana discourses, the Buddha is kind of a prototype, a godlike but not really

living character. The same with the Great Bodhisattvas. They're like actors on a cosmic stage. But in the early discourses, you've got actual people that you can feel were genuine people.

There's one story – I don't know if it's true or not – but one time Christopher Titmuss was urging his students to study the suttas so that they would know the Buddha's words. And somebody said, "Well, how can we know they're the Buddha's words?" And he said, "You get a feel for it when you read it."

He gave an example. He said one time he was talking to a fellow Dharma practitioner who said, "The Buddha said such and such." And Christopher said, "Nah, he didn't say that." The person said, "Yes, he did." Christopher says, "Nah, he wouldn't have said that." The person says, "I'm telling you, I read it in a sutta. The Buddha said it."

So Christopher said, "Can you bring me the sutta? Show me." The fellow goes off and researches and comes back. Puts it in front of him. There it is – the sutta. And Christopher looks at it and says, "Yep, it wasn't the Buddha who said that, it was this senior disciple. I knew the Buddha wouldn't say that."

I've got no idea whether he was having us on or not. But you do get a sense of the characters, of the living beings in the early discourses. So that is one reason why people think it's probably genuine. But strictly speaking, it's impossible to know. There's no way we can actually find out.

So the real question for the practitioner is: does this work? That's really, for practitioners, the only important question.

I spent some years in a cemetery practice, and there was a certain amount of discontent all along. Then one day, somebody handed me a book on Buddhism. I can't remember the title, unfortunately. I think the word Zen was in it, but I'm not sure. And the very last line in the book, all the way through everything, the very last line said: "I'm going to wait to check it out for myself." That's a very good idea.

And that's why it's important to die well. You've got to be present for it. One thing I think the teaching of life after life can stimulate is curiosity about the death process—and therefore to be interested and engaged in going through it. To find out. Does something happen next? We'll find out.

Someone mentioned hearing an old Ram Dass talk where he suggests that rebirth was present in Christian faith and Judaism, especially in Christianity, but was removed around the time of Constantine because it was easier to control the congregation if people didn't get another chance at it—if it was one shot only. There was one early Christian teacher from Alexandria, which was a hotbed of theological speculation, called Origen, and he taught life after life. But there's no record of anybody else teaching it. It seems to have been his idea, and it was rejected by the council, so it's not orthodox. But it is there somewhere, kind of buried in the Christian tradition. If you go through the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, they're not interested in what happens after you die. They say almost nothing about it. There's just no interest in it. And even if you look at the New Testament, Jesus throws out a couple of images, but he doesn't really talk about it much. The biblical tradition is much more focused on how to live this life.

Someone asked about enlightenment—how does that marry into experience rather than focusing on what happens next? How do they intersect? That's a big question. Just to say, if you're looking for that answer, you've got to go to suchness. Thus-ness. Just this-ness. That's where you'll find that answer. But what exactly "deathless" means—people have all sorts of debates about it, and it's too big a question for me to approach without being prepared.

Someone mentioned that in the sutta we read last night, the Buddha criticized the Brahmins for taking secondhand all these things passed down, so wouldn't that suggest we also focus on what works? Absolutely, I agree. But all I'm suggesting is that there is a resistance in our culture to taking something culturally unfamiliar, especially from Asia, and quickly deciding, "Oh, that's not our culture, that's not scientific, chuck it out," without ever really considering it. It may well be that if we open up to views of the universe which are not Western, quote-unquote, we may actually learn something, and it may actually do us good.

Someone observed that life after life hasn't really made much sense from an intellectual point of view when you just ruminate and think about it. But it starts to make sense from practice and experience through meditation once some of the stages of insight are realized—like cause and effect, the three characteristics. Something starts to shift, perspective changes, and it starts to make a lot more sense. I think that's entering that world where we can see where it fits and why it's there. Definitely.

Someone asked whether the way the Buddha taught life after life could be compatible with reports of people now who say they remember past lives—there's been research into cases of people who remember details of names and places and how they died. Yes, that's one of the things. In cultures that do not jump upon any suggestion of a previous life and say, "You're just imagining that, don't be stupid," it is quite known for children to spontaneously remember a previous life. Usually it's the immediately preceding life, and usually that memory vanishes with puberty. By the time they pass puberty, what they remember is having had a memory, but the memory itself has disappeared. So it seems to be restricted to children.

If you talk to Thais, Burmese, and so on, they tend not to discuss it with Westerners because they don't want to be looked upon weirdly or told, "Oh, you're just imagining all that." But if they trust that you can actually accept their viewpoint, people come up with surprising stories about their own memories and stories about their family and friends. And they'll tell you this not as some momentous revelation—"Wow, life after life really happens!"—but rather, "Yeah, that happened to my sister," and so on. It's just ordinary.

It's just accepted. But in our culture, we don't accept it. So if your mother is walking with her little child down the street and the child says, "Oh, Mummy, were you still in there?" what would be the response? "Oh, don't be stupid." We dismiss it. But in another culture, the response might be, "Oh, really? What did you see in there?"

Bhikkhu Anālayo has written a book on rebirth in Buddhism, which is very good. He goes through the whole thing with his very forensic mind. It's quite well worth looking at. He examines the research, the

Western research. Professor Stevenson did a lot of research on this. There's a lot of material on YouTube, actual interviews with these children. There's substantial material about it.

Some teachers say there's no birth, there's no death, there's no self—that continuation exists in the various parts of what is left: impressions we leave on other people, our deeds, our DNA, and that sort of thing, and that this is recycled infinite times with all the elements in the atmosphere. In the Abhidharma, they talk about exactly what continues—like the actions and decisions, but also the bhavaṅga, the stream of consciousness that continues, which again is a different commentary. So there's more than one approach.

Yes, there are lots of different ways in which people have talked about it and conceptualized it. The bhavaṅga, the Abhidharma approach, comes after the Buddha. Possibly. But the Buddha himself never talks about what we could call mechanics—like how it happens. He just talks about it in terms of dependent arising: when this is, that is; with the arising of this, that arises. So when scholars try to work it out, they tend to look for the mechanics, how the process actually works. But the Buddha doesn't do that. He's much more general about it. He just gives general principles. But you do get different explanations in the different traditions, for sure.

As for secular Buddhism, why not adopt what we were talking about the other night—a true agnosticism? If it is genuinely agnosticism, that would be interesting. But in my experience, most secular Buddhists I've met are dogmatic—they're just dogmatic about scientific materialism. They take that as absolute truth and aren't open to anything else. To actually maintain a genuine agnosticism, a position of no position, would be a very interesting stance to take. It would be hard. But it's very useful, I think, for the practitioner simply to have the question and then direct the mind to find out.

The thing about this is, you don't need to believe in life after life to do the meditation practice. You don't need to believe in life after life to get the benefits of the meditation practice. You don't need to believe in life after life to think of yourself as a Buddhist or not. None of this is actually necessary. It could be useful. Maybe. Possibly. Under certain circumstances. I can feel myself backtracking rapidly.

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