



2011-09-04 Buddhism Before the Theravada Part 2

John Peacock

Okay, we'll just let the others drift back, those who are not here. I just want, again, just see if there's any questions before I move on. And I'll take it into a slightly different mode. And I want to just see what...

Questioner: I guess this is working. Okay, this better? In your discussion about metaphysics and what Buddha was teaching- practical ideas, and the unknowable, reincarnation is something very unknowable for me. I was wondering what is the context of Buddha's time of reincarnation?

John Peacock

Okay, well, it's interesting that reincarnation, it's not particularly found in the Vedas, it's not particularly found in the oldest strata of literature of ancient India, it starts to occur in that set of literature, which I spoke about very, very briefly called the Upanishads. That's where it really starts to occur. And if you just literally ponder on that English word for a moment, re-incarnation is literally the same thing taking up another body. That's what it is. And "what is the same thing" is basically the question that takes up another body in the early Upanishads. While the same thing that takes up another body is the Atman. Now the Atman is the self. Literally- in Sanskrit- Atman is a Sanskrit word. And it literally means breath. The Atman was the breath- is linked to the German word for breathing and breath: Atemzug. So it's actually that which is the breath or the life or the self of the individual, which takes up residence in another body. Now, I always say there's a big difference between rebirth and reincarnation. So the context that the Buddha is speaking about is reincarnation, the belief in this very self same thing, fixed, unchanging, moving from life to life to life, until something can be liberated. Yeah, till that can be liberated, till it in fact, can merge back with Brahman. Speak up if this doesn't make sense, because I want to make sure everybody follows.

So that's the context in which the Buddha is speaking-context of the absolute was becoming the fundamental metaphysical idea of Indian society. It's the one that really permeates Indian society to this day, is the idea you know, sometimes if I'm in a sort of awful situation, then I can only wait for a future rebirth for it to be better, or, you know, to be reincarnated in a better form in that life. Okay, that's the context in which the Buddha speaks about rebirth. Well, rebirth is obviously different. Very, very different. And I'm trying to decide whether to give you the traditional interpretation or the way I actually see it within the text. I'm going to give you the way I see it, come on, I might as well go for that one. What's actually seems to me to be going on with the idea of rebirth in the text is much, much more metaphorical than literal. Again, I think he's playing with that background understanding. Because if you think about it, for a start off, if there is not this fixed self, even if there was rebirth, it's not going to be me that's reborn. Is it? So



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it's no consolation- being reborn, so being reborn isn't a great big deal anyway. I've always contented myself with the thought if something is reborn as a cockroach in the South American jungle it's not going to be me, it's gonna be something else. Now, I could even play with that idea a little bit, but I think the Buddha is using this idea as the notion of, actually rebirth is a moment to moment thing.

Now I'm going to talk about dependent origination a little bit later on. And I think you'll see the answer to this clearer within that, that this process of rebirth is a moment to moment rebirth, we literally carry our stuff over from moment to moment to moment. And if you carry your stuff over, it'll help you engage. That's actually where I was gonna go anyway. So it's a helpful question, it actually creates this: Samsāra. Samsāra. is very interesting, as a word, because Samsāra is usually-and you've probably all heard it- samsāra is the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, that's samsāra. But samsāra is actually much more than that. And that, I think, is a much later interpretation. Samsāra is, literally as the word etymologically means in Pāli, "going round in circles." That's what it means. So there's a qualitative phenomenological sense to our finding ourselves in the same place repeatedly. Does that actually have any resonance? You know, that we find ourselves in same or similar places on a almost regular basis. And that's because we're carrying the same stuff over. That is a sense of how we're reborn moment to moment to moment, the idea obviously, is to get outside of that-ewdsw liberating yourself from carrying stuff over. Now, what I often say about the concept of rebirth is: hear it in whichever way you think is helpful to you. Now my- that way, I've kind of given it to you here, is a way I think it can help us to actually think about it as a much more positive thing directly within this life without being metaphysical. Know that we carry the same stuff over. Know we repeatedly end up in similar places. And this whole cycle will continue for the rest of your life. Unless you do something about it. You know, there's the fatalism if you like, to a degree, if you don't do something about it, it continues over, continues again and again, and again, and again, doing that. So there, if you'd like, is the impetus to do something about it. The consolation, if you like, is again- within this life, in that you could be free of that, free of repetitive behavior. You know, to my classes at Oxford I often say (this has been particularly mostly therapists) I said, you know, the wheel of samsāra is basically a big version of OCD. That's what it is: obsessive compulsive disorder, so obsessively and compulsively doing the same stuff again, and again, and again, because it's driven by the same material again, and again and again. Now, if we eliminate the material that drives it, literally the motivating force behind it, which is being identified, as you know, for example, the first of them- lobha which is infatuation with stuff. That's a pretty well, big compulsion. A lot of us were infatuated by the stuff of the world. Aversion towards the stuff that we're not infatuated with. That's a huge driving force. Yeah, and then there is confusion. I tend to use the word confusion rather than delusion or ignorance.

Because get both of those other terms in western languages, delusion and ignorance have a kind of pejorative sense to them, it's your fault that you're confused and deluded, actually- it's not really. No, it's a lot because our societies are confused and our parents were confused. And, you know, we end up being confused. That's the situation that we're in. And that's kind of the backdrop to all of our behavior that gives rise to the other two things. Now, unless you can deal with that, then repetitive behavior is gonna go on. That's what's going to continue. However, if you hear it in the more traditional sense of something going on from life to life to life, well, all I can say is, if that's helpful, well, okay, it's helpful. Use it, but It's metaphysical if you're hearing it



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in that sense, I can see repetitive behavior in my life, and I'm sure you can all see it in your lives. If you look at it, if you want another version of empirical rebirth here is that your stuff goes on even after you're dead. Doesn't it? You know, all of those people you've been engaged with in your life. And, you know, had close relationship, distant relationship, aversive relationships, and everything- all that goes on. If you know if I bring up a child and traumatize that child that goes on as a bit of me in a sense going on through that child who becomes an adult, and then it goes on through their children. That's a very psychological way that our stuff goes on. Another way, and you can think about this more ecologically, as literally our garbage goes on. All the rubbish we leave behind us both literally and metaphorically. It just goes on. So I think what the Buddha's way is about really, a lot of it is actually beginning to eliminate the amount of debris that we leave behind us as we go through our lives. That I would say is literal rather than metaphysical. And I think we can see that, we can see the way others have influenced others. And that way they have been psychologically harmed or helped by others, we can see literally our rubbish going on, and so on and so forth. And there can be a very practical way of seeing this teaching. But as you know, all of the major traditions within Buddhism have rebirth as a major concept within it. I've heard things like saying, "Well, you can't possibly be a Buddhist, if you don't believe" this is the word- belief, "if you don't believe in rebirth". But on the other hand, these traditions, including, I'm not going to pinpoint any particular tradition, because I think they're all doing it. All of these traditions will say, examine everything. Analyze it, test it, don't take it on authority. I think particularly in Western Buddhism, so many times the Kālāma sutta, is cited as being really good. And then people will say, well go and believe in rebirth. Now, the Kālāma sutta, by the way, for those who don't know, is the one where the Buddha saying, basically don't believe a word I say, because I say it or somebody else says it, or it's tradition, or authority says it. Or it's hearsay, or whatever ways that we get knowledge transmitted to us. Now he's saying examine it in your experience. But on the other hand, the traditions are saying something else. That's, I think the difference between what I call the strata of the Nikayas and religion. Now what, I can only admit this for myself to you, which is what I'm interested in, is actually not religion, but I'm interested in what is there as a teaching, which can help us directly. Sorry, it's a long answer to a short question again. There's just one more and then I'll continue to talk a little bit more further.

Questioner

If I understood you correctly, earlier you said that, that the Buddha was a social critic of the societal structures of the time. And I'm sort of reminded of the way I've come to view Jesus is also being a social critic for which he was crucified. So I'm just curious, did the Buddha, as far as we can tell, come in conflict with the power structures of the time?

John Peacock

Oh, yes. Very much so. Very, very much so. He comes he comes in conflict, not in quite the devastating way, of course that Jesus does in the Gospels. He doesn't come into conflict in quite that way. But he's often put in extremely compromising political situations and positions whereas- for example, I mean, one of the classic examples there's something called the Samaññaphala Sutta again, it's in the Digha Nikaya Long Discourses where he's having a chat with the king called Ajātasattu. You know, some of you might know this text, and Ajātasattu is asking basically what "What are the fruits of living this reclusive life, the homeless life?" Now Ajātasattu- here's the background- Ajātasattu has just murdered his father. And if you go



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through the discourse, what you see the Buddha is, is gradually, very slowly beginning to bring the king around to an awareness of the deed that he's engaged in. That's the context with which it goes. Now, you often find him coming in conflict with the Brahmins. He often jokes with them, you get puts himself in positions which going to make him extremely unpopular in society, because his questioning everything within it, he's actually really confronting that society.

Now Indian society, perhaps I mean, it wasn't under the occupation, obviously, that Palestine was under that particular period with their own occupation with Jesus. And so you probably haven't got the same kind of same conflictual elements going on within it. But you're certainly finding a figure who is very unpopular. And there's a number of attempts made on the Buddha's life throughout the texts, for varying reasons, they're slightly mythologized, but you see them going on, he's put himself in extremely unpopular positions. At times, he speaks his mind most of the time, apart from the Samaññaphala Sutta, where he actually plays politics very carefully, to try and bring Ajātasattu around to an understanding of what he's been engaged in. But he's definitely coming in conflict with the powers that be of the time. When he comes into conflict with Brahmins, you often find them, for example (and I think these are probably very authentic texts, because there's no reason for them to be there, in many senses- in the canon) is they often come to him and ask him a question. The Buddha will give his response in his reply and on a number of occasions, they go away shaking their head saying, This is rubbish. I don't understand what he's saying. Really not convinced by what he's saying. There's no reason for those to be there. But it shows him coming into conflict with what's going on.

But other times, as you can imagine, he's making himself extremely unpopular. I mean, there's one particular instance- I'll give you one instance, where some Brahmins are throwing some water and the Buddha says to them (they're throwing water up in the air towards the sun) and the Buddha says to them, "What are you doing?" And he says, "We're sending water to the ancestors, then the Buddha picks up water and start throwing it in the opposite direction. And they say to him, "What are you doing?" He says, "I'm watering the fields." Imagine how popular that made him in Brahma circles. So yes, I mean, the answer, yes, it does come in conflict. But we don't see the devastating results in quite the same way. Although if you haven't read it, I would actually read Steven Bachelors last book where he puts together an alternative biography of the Buddha, you know, "The Confession of the Buddhist Atheist". Because within that, I mean, I think Stephen even speculates the Buddha might eventually have been poisoned. Which is very, very possible. Very, very possible. And this is the reason why he's saying to the others, you know, "I'll eat this. But don't let any of the others eat it at all." This particular food that's been prepared for him. He's obviously aware it's been adulterated in some way. That's right- Chunda- who's the blacksmith, that's right. Maddava sūkara, which is probably pigs meat, which would, again, would have been very antithetical to the Brahmins. Eating flesh. Okay, so we pause for some questions for a little bit and perhaps move this on just a tiny bit.

So let me let me kind of just hopefully sum up where we've got to a little bit. Buddha as critique of his society. Exactly coming from your question. Really, really engaged in critiquing his society and looking at what's going on within it, using the tropes of the language of his society as well. When I think about this and have an image of what was going on in Indian society with the Buddha walking around. I can imagine a lot of people scratching their heads going "He appears to be using the same language but somehow using it differently. Some people will engage with



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that and others won't. In the different ways in which the language is being used. He's often if not always metaphor-ising aspects of Indian (and I do say this deliberately almost) Indian religious traditions. He's engaged in an intense (I haven't mentioned this before) but he's engaged an intense relationship with the two polarities of Indian society, which are his finding a middle way between the household life of the Brahmins, that everything in brahman society was centered around house and harth. All of the religious rituals, most of them took place in the household. It was your duty, I didn't mention this, it was your duty to get married, and produce children. If you're a male. Life was mapped out, as I told you, it was a thumbnail sketch, life was mapped out literally from cradle to grave, as to what you should be doing at the stages of your life. And there's a term that they use even in contemporary Hinduism, which is called *vārṇa*, *ashrama dharma*, the duties you have at the stages of your life to your social strata. And those are completely mapped out for you. No wonder you have have dropouts, and the dissidents as I put it, who moved outside of their society.

So that's one side of the equation, which is the household life, everything in situ, everything being situated in it, literally with these duties. The other side of it was Jainism. Jainism actually presented a very different picture, which is a picture of complete asceticism. Sorry, it's my accent, I have to apologize for it. I mean, there was literally within, for example, the Jain orders and there were a number of them, a group which was known as Digambara, which was sky clad. These are the naked philosophers that Alexander the Great came across. These are the people who were very truly acetic acetic within their society. They literally could not stay more than one night in any one place, they have to keep moving on. And some of you know even contemporary forms of Jains and they have this sort of thing with wearing masks and always looking at your feet and never stepping on an insect. All this sort of really strong aspect of *ahimsa*, non violence. On the one hand, the household life is stultifying, to any spiritual awakened experience, or can be, the Buddha certainly puts it in the category of being quite difficult within that, but certainly within the stronghold of Brahmanism, it becomes virtually impossible, because it's all governed by ritual. And on the other hand, you have these extreme ascetic practices of the Jains. And so the Buddha is even creating an order that runs as a sort of social corrective between the two, between the two, so people become renouncers they become, you know, that Samanera tradition, they become Samanas, they become part of that renouncing order. But the Buddha cleverly says, you want to renounce society, I will make you completely dependent on society.

Interesting move and very clever. So it's putting them completely back in touch and dependent on that society. So you can't escape society, even if you are entering into the Bhikkhu sangha or the Bhikkhuni sangha at that time, as well. So that's part of the social critique as well; is offering even an order which is, by its very nature, critiquing the two extremes of society in its way. Then another major aspect and perhaps this is getting into slightly new material, he puts at the forefront of his movement, ethics. Now, I find this is something that actually in western dharma circles, does not get talked about enough. The whole ethical side of this, and even that some that figure within history of Buddhism, can be quite critical. Buddhaghosa says that even your meditation practices- if they're not rooted in ethics, are groundless. So look at your behavior. Look at your thinking behind your behavior. Look at intention behind that. This is all coming out from an early study of the text. He's putting ethics at the forefront of this. Now within the bhikkhu, bhikkhuni in the sangha, this is your 227 rules. Now, at worst, as a layperson, you get



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10. At minimum, you get five, you know, but they form the actual bedrock of practice. These are not slightly sort of adjuncts to practice and all too often (I don't know if that's true with yourselves, I'm sure it probably isn't) but all too often I see certainly within the UK, I see people defining their form of Buddhism by what meditation practice they do. "Yeah, I'm an Dzogchen practitioner, I practice Maha Mudra, or I'm a Zen practitioner." These are all styles of meditation. They have nothing to do actually with the dharma.

In a sense, the dharma is rooted in ethics. That is where it's rooted. It's rooted in that practice of everydayness. Yeah, how you're acting every day. And even the precepts I often find very mistranslated or curtailed, shortened, the sting, the radicality of what the Buddha is even proposing and the precepts taken out of them. So the first precept says don't kill. Okay, we're back into another 10 commandments, except we've got five of them now. But actually (and I'm not gonna go through these with you, because I think you're all familiar with them) but go back and look at the original wording of these things. They all start with A. it's a rule of training. So this is a way of training yourself, just as you sit down on the meditation cushion and train yourself in learning to not meditate, actually, but cultivate another mistranslation word *bhāvanā* does not mean meditation, that means cultivation. We're cultivating particular dimensions of experience, insight. We're cultivating calmness, we're cultivating *Mettā* we're cultivating *Karunā*, *Muditā*, *Upekkha*, you know, and so on and so forth. We're cultivating these. So a rule of training, a rule of training to refrain from harming living beings, far more interesting than don't kill, isn't it? I mean, I can actually engage with that- the other one just tells me Don't do it. Whereas to refrain from harming living things means to actually engage in an inquiry into all my relationships of harm, including harm to yourself. You're implied, you're not excluded in this. You're a living being. So how do you harm in your life? Yeah, that's the interesting thing about it. And I'll only mention one more precept, but go through them all. But the third precept is an interesting one, because it's usually just translated. Don't engage in sexual misconduct. It actually again, is mistranslated. It's actually one of the words within the whole phrase is *kāmesu*, which is sensual indulgence. Yeah, it's saying I engage in a rule of trying to refrain from sensual and sexual misconduct. So this is how you abuse your senses. We have multifarious ways- far more than ancient India, engaging in sensual misconduct, misuse and overuse of the senses. So take a close look at those.

That's again, going back to the early texts rather than this (often can be, you know, not pointing accusatory finger anybody) but can often use this blind overlay of the way that we interpret it in contemporary practice, which is we come up with a nice list because that's what Westerners are used to a nice list of things that says, Don't do this. Now, there's a there's less of an engagement with a "don't do" than with a refraining from now, I'm not going to labor this point, but look at the precepts again, reflect on the precepts on a regular basis in your daily life, because they are the bedrock upon which the rest of the inquiry- which is the way I see this path that the Buddha is giving us in the early texts, It's that upon which it rests. If you look at for example, the *Siṅgālasutta*, which is again, it's a *Digha Nikaya* sutta it's number 31, I think it is, In the *Digha Nikaya*, you'll find there this is the the sutta is directed towards *Sigālaka*, who's a layperson. And actually, as a layperson, there was all this distinction in Indian society, and the way it was portrayed in Indian society that the layperson had to look even more closely at their ethics than, say, the monastic because the monastic has these 227 rules that they have to engage in, and they have the constant scrutiny of the other monks around them, who often will



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critique them, they have to go through the Uposatha, which is actually the recitation of their faults during the the full moon and new moon periods. So there's a lot of kind of constraint on the monastics but laypeople, we have to engage even more closely, I think with the precepts. So that's kind of a little bit I think that comes out of the way this is taught. So that's the bedrock it relates, rests on.

Okay, I'm gonna go take us up to lunch on mistranslations. Out of this, because they're misleading, more often or not, I've given you quite a few, some of them I remind you of again. In many ways, the depiction we have of Buddhism places it firmly back with the translations, we often have a very religious tradition, we've just heard me speak about because I've just used a couple of words- monks and nuns, Bhikkhu Bhikkhuni, Vihāra-Monastery, these words don't actually mean this at all. bhikkhu means basically, beggar or sharer. Now literally means you know, the most basic level it can mean beggar, one who begs, but one who begs and also then shares what they have gained as food. So you go round on your pindapat with your bowl and everything and people give you, and then you go back, and then you share the food between you from this. And there was another sense of sharer. And I'm sure you can come up with what that is, what do monks and nuns share? The dhamma, this is what they share. So in receipt, in recompense for the food that they're given, which they then share out among each other, they then share their understanding of the dhamma. That was the contract within society. Vihāra is not a monastery. Now I don't know about you, but when I was first involved in Buddhism 40 years ago, and when I first heard the word monastery, I thought of Catholic monasteries, closed orders and all this sort of stuff, and silence. And then I came to this horrific thing of living in a Tibetan monastery. Which was far from that; had a main road running through it. About 600 monks in it, who never stopped talking. And it was far from a quiet haven, it's literally a dwelling place. That is all it is. Now, so again, often notice the way that we're led into picturing things by the language that we use. Now, the language of the dhamma these are just peripheral words, almost- bhikkhu, bhikkhuni, vihāra. But the language of the dhamma is very precise, the way it's used.

And often these translations mislead us in what they're doing. So dukkha, being the classic one, I won't go into that again, avijjā- ignorance. That's so pejorative. I don't know how it's here in the States but if I said that to somebody: "You're ignorant" I'll probably get punched on the nose. In a UK situation, whereas it doesn't actually mean that it means more the sense of, not just not knowing- it's not wanting to know. It has that as its major connotation, not wanting to know. No, it's not vijja, not knowing, not wanting to know. Confusion also has that connotation of confusion within it. Samsāra, you've heard me talk about that. Well, birth death rebirth, well, going round in circles. Hear it literally: going round in circles. This is a verb again, by the way, Samsāra, in its form. Nibbāna: well, this is not Buddhist heaven. Nibbāna is process nibbāna is verb. Literally if you want a technical word version of it, it's what's classed as an intransitive verb. In Pāli means it doesn't move from a subject to an object. It's an intransitive. So it's actually literally means gone out. That's what it means. And it refers to the gone out-ness of greed, infatuation, aversion, and confusion. Those have literally gone out. They cease to be the flaming forces behind your behavior. Sankhāra which is also related to Samsāra. You know, this is another word which, you know, volitional formations, standard translation of it. Volitional formations doesn't really get into the main dimension of it, which is really is habit. It's that which is a habit. Could be bad habits, could be good habits, but they're still habits. In other words, they're



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unthinking almost neural pathways upon which the mind runs, and constantly reproduce themselves, in various activities and engagements that we engage when we have. Viññāṇa, which is usually translated simply as consciousness, which then neglects the more dynamic aspect of it which is thinking- this is consciousness and thinking it's cognizance, in other words. Viññāṇa. So these are just some of the words- it's a small extract, of the kind of lexicon of words that we use continuously. Which actually, I think the English word often blocks us from really, really engaging with what the Buddha is saying, well, we've had the classic one, Buddha, awakened awakening, as opposed to enlightenment. So we can get led into a religiosity simply by the language that we use, which isn't present in the early texts.

Now, since I've got this title, which is, you know, Buddhism before Theravāda, well, Theravāda is a religious position. Let's make that clear. Now, that's not to say, it's a bad religious position. That's not the same as a good religious position. It's a religious position. It's a position and a reading of the early texts in a very particular way. It's a very selective reading of the early texts, primarily by this figure called Buddhaghosa in the fifth century, who then writes that massive doctrinal foundation for Theravāda, the Visuddhimagga. So much so that any critique and anybody who's a critic of Buddhaghosa in Sri Lanka, their books are banned. Because it's not Theravādan orthodoxy, It's not Theravādan position. And, you know, Sri Lankan, Theravādan Buddhism considers itself to be what they refer to themselves as pristine Theravāda, completely uncontaminated by anything else, yet you'll walk through the middle of Sri Lanka, and you'll find these Mahayana statues, and things like that. But what I'm trying to get you to hear is that it is an orthodoxy. There are certain things that you subscribe to as a Theravādan, which are not necessarily there within those early strata of texts. So when we start to look at these early texts, in this much more dynamic way, I would actually equate it to something that Heidegger says he does to the history of Western philosophy, which is you engage in a destructive retrieve, you actually have to destroy the tradition in order to retrieve what the tradition has cut out. Now, that sounds very dramatic, it's not as dramatic and as as aggressive as that, but it is trying to retrieve that those gold nuggets which are there in those early texts, which get so lost within this orthodoxy, which we can so easily sign up to, and lose our, insence out investigative capacities, here, and this is what you in a sense, I said the practical side of what I'm talking about, is keep alive, your investigative capacity, your capacity to engage with these texts. They will reward you if you engage in this way.

So there's a little bit about the background of Indian thought. And there's a little bit about the language that we use, present, and how that language and the orthodoxies can mislead us. And it's probably time and a way to move on into looking at some of the teachings that the Buddha gives. And I think that can be absolutely authenticated through the early texts. And see where perhaps, and you are not gonna lay explicit everything here. But where in your minds, you might see that they don't actually touch with what the tradition says, the traditions that you're used to. And I think we will probably start with things like the Noble Truths after lunch, and then have a look at also aspects of paticca-samuppāda, dependent origination, because that actually is the explication of the noble truths, or the ennobling truths as I'd like to get through to you. So perhaps we adjourn for lunch, twelve o'clock? That sounds okay. We'll take maybe an hour and 15 minutes Does that sound good? Is that too long, too short? Perfect.