

# 6 *Memento Mori*: The Buddhist Thinks about Death

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Recently I had an interesting chat with a gentleman from a local mortuary establishment who wanted me to buy a prepaid burial plan, so that my family would be spared all the trouble when the time came. Better yet, there was a guarantee that the cost would never increase beyond what I had prepaid. This is surely a prudent way to prepare for the end. I did not buy the plan, but I did become fascinated with the salesman's talk. I listened for well over half an hour and not once did the words 'die' or 'death' pass his lips. I could not resist calling this to the man's attention and he confessed that such language depressed people. I suspect that the corollary was that it would be bad for sales. But here was a man who tried hard for almost an hour to get me to buy a plan that involved embalming expenses, caskets, and burial services, and never did he refer to a corpse, embalming, death, or burial. Rather, when I 'passed on', the 'remains' would be 'prepared' and 'interred'. The lucky remains would, however, never get caught in an inflationary spiralling of costs, and survivors would not even have to decide what suit the remains would wear throughout eternity.

The salesman reflected beautifully a widespread conspiracy of silence and evasion where death is concerned. A colourful array of euphemisms, from 'passing on' to the 'buying the farm' made popular in the Vietnam War, attempt to soften the blow of death. They allow us to talk circumspectfully and delicately about what is in effect a taboo subject. Even religion, sex, and politics are sometimes permissible in polite conversation but not 'It'. We in effect deny it exists by not permitting ourselves to think of it, as Heidegger showed so cogently. We in turn justify our evasions by relegating any frank discussion to the inadmissible category of the morbid. And morbid people are no fun to be with. Yet it is, as Heidegger points out, the most possible of all our possibilities.

The taboo nature of the discussion of death reflects, I believe, what is without question the case, which is that death is the gravest of problems for human beings. I believe that this is so obviously so that I shall not try to defend what shall remain a rather flat assertion. Though it is sometimes said in flights of rhetorical fervour that there are worse things than death, I would seriously doubt that anyone really believes this. Perhaps prolonged and irremedial pain may be an exception, but aside from this, the individual can *in fact* not think of anything worse than one's own death, which must be the greatest of evils. In fact, it shall be the overriding theme of this paper that human beings are primarily motivated in their everyday conduct to escape death and that they go to great lengths to deny its reality and finality.

I have come, in fact, to think that religion is the universal human response to the problem of death. Every religion I know anything at all about, from the animistic and tribal religions of the Native Americans or Japanese Shinto, to the so-called 'salvational' religions of Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, has much to say concerning death. However, while the former religions respond in some way to the problem as part of a broader concern for such things as a plentiful food supply, mating, ritual purity, tribal unity, and harmony with natural forces, the salvational religions, by virtue of their special concern for salvation itself, seem to me to be fundamentally and primarily responses to the fact of death. I would go so far as to say that were it not for their attempt to provide a satisfactory way of dealing with the problem of death, they would have little attraction for most people. In saying this I am adopting an understanding of the sources and function of religion which operates within anthropology, which is to see any culture as a response to the environment. Religion as an important element of culture – sometimes pervasively so – must also be seen as a problem-solving strategy, whether the strategy consists of sympathetic magic or the belief in the immortality of the soul. Such an interpretation of religion has been suggested by E. O. James and others,<sup>1</sup> and in agreeing with their assessment, I am, at the same time, rejecting the possibility that a religion is divinely revealed, and hence that its pronouncements *vis-à-vis* immortality and the like are rooted in something other than the needs of people. In other words, to state it rather bluntly, people invent religion as a way of coping with life, and some religions seem to be mainly coping strategies addressing the urgent problem of death.

Now, this understanding of the origins and function of religion will not be acceptable to the Abrahamic religions, given their self-

understanding as being religions revealed by a divine being. However, the situation is different with the Indic religions, which are not revealed religions and which tend to think of themselves as being primarily functional or instrumental. This is undoubtedly true as far as Buddhism is concerned, which acknowledges that it is merely a means to the end of liberation and has no absolute claim. This is very clear in the well-known parable of the raft, in which the Buddha has likened his teaching to a raft, which is constructed to accomplish the task of transporting one across the river (the 'world', perhaps in the Pauline sense) but which is no longer needed once the other shore (nirvāṇa, liberation) is reached. However, what I shall argue in this paper is that the task for which the *Dharma* has been constructed is that of overcoming the fear of death, although this is not the way Buddhism ordinarily articulates the existential problem, which is said to be that of craving, hatred, and ignorance, and the unsatisfactory mode of being generated by them.

Thus, Buddhism is certainly not unique or even unusual in addressing the problem of death. I think that what is unusual about it is, if I am not completely off base in interpreting it as a response to death, its self-admission of being primarily a coping response to death. What is unique about it is the way it solves the problem. But my main purpose in this paper is to respond to the highly challenging and novel demand of showing that Buddhism has *religious* reasons for rejecting the notions of a self, the immortality of this self in an afterlife, and, incidentally, a divine being who is the creator and lover of this self. In other words, although other philosophies reject these for some of the same reasons Buddhism does, Buddhism as a religion of salvation or liberation differs from them in seeing such a rejection as being crucial to salvation.

We can do no better than to begin with the well-known rubric of the 'Four Noble Truths' (*catur-āryasatyāni*) as a good way of getting at traditional Buddhist ways of analysing the human problem and offering a solution. In brief, the first truth is the truth of suffering or turmoil (*duḥkha*), and it asserts categorically the universality of *duḥkha* among sentient beings. This is the human and religious problem, formally analogous to the problem of sin among Christians. The second truth is the truth of the cause or origin (*samudaya*) of *duḥkha*. The cause is located in craving (*tṛṣṇāḥ*), and expanded discussions amplify this by also asserting that hatred (*dveṣā*) and ignorance (*avidyā*) complete the list of the three 'fundamental poisons' which cause *duḥkha*. The third truth, the truth of cessation

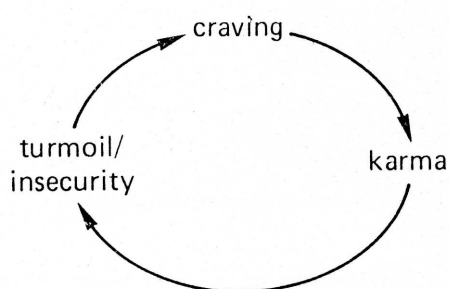
(*nirodha*), defines the religious goal as the cessation or stopping of craving, hatred, and ignorance, hence, *duḥkha*. The fourth truth is the truth of the path, or method (*marga*), which lists eight factors which bring about liberation, and these are often subsumed under the three broader categories of moral re-education, meditation, and wisdom or insight. All of Buddhism can be discussed in terms of the four truths. While traditional literature takes them in order, I shall begin with the second truth as a better place to begin for my own purpose.

The second truth finds the source of *duḥkha* in craving. Sometimes translated as 'desire', *trṣṇā* is a technical term with a very specific and limited meaning. *Trṣṇā* is a very powerful, persistent, mostly unconscious drive to perpetuate the self, to make it comfortable and happy, and to preserve its needed sense of self-importance and meaningfulness. Consequently, however the term is translated, it should be reserved to refer to this fundamental erotic drive for self-importance and self-preservation, and not to those actions we loosely categorise as desire, such as my desire to write this paper or when I want to eat because I am hungry. To Buddhistically quench desire or craving therefore does not entail ceasing to want lunch or write papers but does mean that the individual is no longer motivated primarily to preserve the self. *Karma*, then, is an intensified form of craving taking the form of vocal or physical acts designed to satisfy the craving. A lie, for instance, is seen as an attempt to avoid discomfort or worse for the self. A racial slur is an attempt to maintain a sense of self-importance through the demeaning of another. Any vocal act of this sort is always self-referential and self-generated in the sense that it is basically an attempt to maintain a sense of self-importance, self-integrity, and self-preservation. The same is true of physical acts motivated and preceded by intention or will of the same kind.

According to the Buddhist anthropology, craving and karmic action are expressions of an extremely deep-seated erotic urge towards self-preservation, which is clearly indicated by the stereotyped formula of the second truth, which speaks of craving for sensual delights and for being and becoming. However, the existential problem of *duḥkha* is created out of the self's inability to be satisfied that it is definitively secure. It never achieves a sure sense of invulnerability and significance in the face of real or imagined threats. It is frequently prevented from acquiring those things which it imagines will grant power and security, such as material things or immaterial things such as power, reputation, or philosophical certi-



tude. Even if some things are actually required, they provide no definitive security, because it is the nature of the self to be fundamentally and irremediably insecure, suspicious, doubtful, and fearful. The Buddhist picture of human life, then, is not a pretty one. Our lives are portrayed as an unremittant cycle, in which a craving for security generates acts designed to ensure security, the act fails to achieve the security, and the frustration of this fundamental urge perpetuates and indeed intensifies the self's feeling of fragility and insecurity. Now, what I have been calling 'insecurity' is what Buddhism calls *duḥkha*, often translated as 'suffering' (somewhat misleadingly) but perhaps better translated as 'turmoil'. T. R. V. Murti has defined *duḥkha* as 'impeded willing, the inconsonance of our desires with objective circumstances'.<sup>2</sup> 'Turmoil' seems to capture the sense of the term inasmuch as it portrays the restless pursuit of the self for security which it cannot find anywhere. Thus, we have the cycle I spoke of:



The object of Buddhism, as stated in the third of the Noble Truths, is to bring an end to the turmoil or insecurity by bringing an end to the craving, hatred (a negative form of craving), and delusion, the so-called 'three fundamental poisons'. The individual who has accomplished this is obviously a rather remarkable person, inasmuch as all craving of the sort I have spoken of has been eradicated and consequently his actions are no longer of the karmic sort. The transformed individual thus continues to live and function effectively in the world (the Buddha is said to have actively taught his discovery for 45 years after his own liberation and enlightenment), but unlike ordinary people, such a person is no longer driven compulsively by deep-seated urges to perpetuate the self. The Buddha, as a model of such an individual, is in fact appreciated as the ideal human being in

being a perfect union of clarity of understanding (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*).

As I have thought about this scheme of liberation and its anthropology for almost three decades, I have come to appreciate several insights which are muted in traditional literature or which are articulated in different language than that which I wish to use here. The first insight is that human beings in their unreconstructed state are severely and seriously neurotic in a way not recognised by western therapies. While most people would protest that they are healthy or 'normal', and indeed are, according to the canons of western psychology, Buddhism would on the contrary say that by its criterion, their so-called normal behaviour is conditioned by a universal and fundamental insecurity and that such behaviour is not really healthy. People are consequently victimised by a universal drive which lies beneath the threshold of self-awareness for the most part, and their normal behaviour is in fact destructive to others and to themselves. In this way, just about all of us are sick.

The second insight I find in Buddhism is related to the first and directly bears on the subject of this paper. Buddhism has, it seems to me, determined that it is a deep fear of death that is responsible for the insecurity that characterises the lives of ordinary people, and, consequently, it is the fear of death that must be overcome. In such biographies of the Buddha as Āśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita* (The Deeds of the Buddha), the young prince and Buddha-to-be is portrayed as being motivated to leave the palace and its pleasures after seeing successively an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a mendicant monk. Āśvaghoṣa tells us that the prince was then in his mid-twenties and had been completely insulated from the knowledge of such things by a protective father. Encountering old age, sickness, and death was thus a revelation, and these sights filled his heart with overwhelming grief and turmoil. His decision to abandon the palace, with its power and unimaginable wealth, along with his lovely wife and newborn son, was prompted by the need to find a solution to the problems of old age, sickness, and death. But as is abundantly clear from the teachings that came out of his quest, the solution was not to deny the reality of such things as death, nor was the solution to be one of a literal escape from them. In fact, the Buddha himself died at the age of eighty of old age and illness, so his fate was to be that of all beings. He, and his successors, never taught that death is an illusion or that one's essential self, with its memories, its uniqueness, and its subjective enjoyment of experience, would survive biological death.

Death was not to be denied as really complete and final but seen realistically and honestly. The solution to the problem of death had to be found within the context of an absolutely realistic acceptance of death. Thus, if the fear of death spoils life, and death cannot in any sense be denied or escaped, then the only solution is to remove the fear.

Now, when I say that the strategy was to overcome the *fear* of death rather than overcome death itself, I mean that Buddhism, alone among the salvational religions, refused to adopt the strategy of other religions of denying that the self really dies. Hinduism taught, and teaches, that one's true self, the *ātman*, is immortal and either incarnates in new, different bodies or, freed from the cycle of rebirths, is absorbed into the divine in eternal life. In Christianity and Islam, the soul, once created, is also immortal. Even though the body dies, it lives on. The effect in these religions is *in effect* to deny the finality and completeness of death. Physical death then is seen as an unavoidable but brief interlude between one life and a better subsequent one. *In the end*, all will be all right, and as the scriptures say, death will not triumph, death loses its sting. As a gospel song says, 'there'll be no more cryin, there'll be no more dyin'.

Buddhism in all its forms has rejected this approach to the problem of death. The individual who achieves enlightenment and liberation does not achieve subjective immortality or even manage to avoid the headaches, indigestion, and constipation that ordinary beings are subject to. What he does achieve, on the other hand, is an unshakeable serenity in the face of complete death. It is, on the other hand, impossible for him to rationalise the experience away by assuming that he will somehow survive death, because, as is well known, the very cornerstone of Buddhism is the total rejection of any notion of some substance-like entity which can survive death, whether it be the more metaphysical *ātman* of Hinduism or the more intuitively-derived *ātman* found in introspection. As far as Buddhism is concerned, it doesn't matter whether one calls it a self (*ātman*), a person (*pudgala*), being (*sattva*), or life principle (*jīva*), it is a mere illusion and certainly not immortal. Even though Buddhism incorporates within its system the more widely-spread Hindu notion of rebirth, rebirth or reincarnation *must* be interpreted in some way that avoids the implication that it is a 'me' or 'self' which is reborn.<sup>3</sup>

The Buddhist approach was to achieve serenity in the face of death by attacking the problem at its source, which is the self which craves above all else to endure and be happy. Now, when I speak of a self

which craves, I mean a mind or a consciousness which is able by virtue of its structure to objectify itself in self-consciousness, to develop an overriding concern for its own preservation and contentment, and which can imagine its possible non-being and long for its continuation. I am not referring simply to what is often called the 'instinct for survival', which is common to all sentient beings, but to a capacity probably unique among human beings to be self-aware and to care about the assumed self found in that awareness. So, when I speak of the self's craving for perpetuation and happiness, I mean human minds which objectify themselves as something independent, substantial, and enduring and which can become self-concerned in a way non-humans cannot. Thus, if it is a matter of human minds construing themselves to be selves and craving the perpetuation of these imputed selves, the proper strategy must be to see clearly that the self is a fiction and in this way to eradicate the roots of craving.

Buddhism has consistently dealt with the problem of the self and its insecurity and craving through the use of techniques which in the west are called 'meditation'. In many forms, these techniques involve a temporary 'bracketing' of various intellectual and emotional obstacles that stand in the way of a clear, objective glimpse of the psycho-physical being. By temporarily anaesthetising fear, anger, sense-desire, and so on, the individual is enabled to experience himself objectively as being what is given in an empirical analysis, rather than as being what he is told to *believe*, what he *hopes* is there, what he *supposes* will be found, or what any so-called authorities have *claimed* is there. These techniques are basically analytical in nature, designed to decompose wholes into their components. The self or person is experienced as a locus of physical and psychological factors (*skandha*), each of which is experienced as a discontinuous stream of atomic events, each atomic unit coming into an extremely brief being on the basis of antecedent conditions, and then ceasing to exist, to be followed by a successor, and so on. Such an analysis divulges nothing of a substance-like entity in which these materials and psychic factors are imbedded, nor do these factors themselves satisfy the criteria for a substance or self, being conditioned, interdependent, discontinuous, impermanent. The deeply ingrained notion of self must, consequently, be abandoned in the face of objective, empirical evidence to the contrary. The enduring, substance-like self turns out to be nothing but the mind's mistaken self-image, a delusion, and a delusion which has an enormous impact on the quality of life and the nature of motivation. In this way, through these

techniques, Buddhism arrives at the conclusion recently made by Derek Parfit, in *Reasons and Persons*, via different methods: it matters how we perceive ourselves, and our perceptions are surely mistaken.

According to all accounts, ancient and modern, the effects of insight meditation are remarkable. The individual *experiences* himself as a mere locus of incessant and extremely rapid change, a torrent of impermanent psychic and physical states ungrounded in any enduring and unchanging substance. The individual thus arrives at an experiential understanding of what he is and, more importantly, what he is not. He is led to conclude, on the basis of an objective self-analysis, that he is not the kind of self he had hitherto assumed. He is, that is, led to such a new self-understanding, not on the basis of reason, logic, or metaphysical speculation, but because a self is not given empirically in the experience of insight. Hence, the absence of a self is not a theory but a conclusion rooted in the experiential self-perception and self-understanding of a radically transformed consciousness.

The results of meditation are momentous for the individual. First, it is realised that there is nothing in the psycho-physical being of such a nature that it can or will survive the dissolution of the individual, and hence any hope for immortality must be realised as being groundless. Secondly and related to the first result, the experience of oneself as a mere configuration of conditioned and impermanent physical and mental factors must mean that one's own fate is no different from that of any other being, whether a tree, a stone, or a mosquito. There is not one shred of evidence that human life is exceptional or privileged. Such an insight must be not only extremely sobering but must be highly conducive to the eradication of the self-pride and anthropocentric arrogance synonymous with the belief in a self.

The insight I have spoken of must also have a crucial bearing on the problems of death. If, as Buddhism claims, a deep, unconscious (usually) anxiety about death has its origin in a mind-self which is by nature insecure and self-protective, then the dissolution of the idea of self-hood will remove the fear of death and its actional consequences. What is involved, which is to say the same thing, is that the individual in his new self-understanding as non-self comes to acknowledge himself, and unconditionally accept himself as essentially impermanent and mortal. What seems important here is that the individual *really* confront and acquiesce to the undeniable fact that there is no

possible way to escape death. Also, of course, since he is no longer a self which is primarily concerned with self-preservation, the knowledge of his own eventual fate will have no emotional impact. 'Easy come, easy go', so to speak.

It might be said, then, that the Buddhist approach to death is to get it over with while still living, so that the business of life is no longer dominated and conditioned by the fear of death. In fact, there is a Zen expression which says, 'Die and become thoroughly dead while living and all will be well thereafter'. In Zen this is called the 'Great Death' (*daishi*) and it is the culmination of an often long and arduous religious training which is aimed at the dropping off of the self and its concerns. However, it is understood that the ultimate object is to enjoy the 'Great Life' which emerges phoenix-like from the ashes of the extinct self. One may presumably live joyously and creatively having effectively conquered death while still knowing without doubt that one will die absolutely. In Tibetan Buddhist iconography there is another reflection of this understanding that true self-understanding kills both the fear of death and its consequences. It is the image of Yamāntaka, who is the 'wrathful' or 'angry' manifestation of the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, who in turn represents understanding or insight (*prajñā*). *Yama* is in Hindu religious symbolism the lord of the underworld; he is death personified. *Anta* means 'end', and an *antaka* is an 'ender', so Yama-antaka is literally the 'death-ender' or 'he who puts an end to death'. The meaning is that the *prajñā*-insight of self-understanding as being non-self puts an end to death, even though we all end up in that underworld.

Buddhism is thus unique among the salvational religions in finding a solution to the problem of death that not only does not rely on the notions of a self, immortality, or a deity who creates the self and confers immortality, but sees the solution to the problem as necessarily requiring that such notions are rejected. The tendency to adopt a rather realistic and naturalistic view of death also stands in contrast to salvational religions which consider death to be the 'wages of sin', an unwelcome and alien intruder which will, in the final days, be banished forever. For Buddhism, death is simply the fate of all things which are conditioned and compounded, and there is no exception to this law. This tendency towards realism in Buddhism therefore leaves it no alternative but to insist that liberation and the subsequent cessation of existential problems must be accomplished within the framework of what appears to be the case empirically rather than within the framework of *beliefs* which may offer some comfort but

which do not definitively solve the problem of the self and its overwhelming concerns. Thus, the invitation of the Buddha was not 'come and believe' but rather 'come and see' (*ehi passika*), an invitation to validate or invalidate any idea in the crucible of experimental self-understanding. He thus never rested his claims on the unseen and unseeable, although the unseen and unknowable might be pleasant to believe, but on the knowable and experientiable, although these might not be comforting. His solution to the human problem was not a religion of comfort but it promised to make a definitive end to the fear that plagues us.

Now, the above characterisation of the Buddhist approach to death must make it sound very much like recent trends in western philosophy in so far as there is a heavy emphasis on realism, a rejection of metaphysics, and an overwhelming trust in the empirical basis for knowledge. Buddhism also shares some conclusions with psychology, in so far as it assumes that such concepts as the self as an immortal entity and a protective, loving divinity who treasures the self are projections of deep-seated psychological needs. A contemporary monk-scholar from Sri Lanka, Walpola Rahula, says, in words that most Buddhists would probably endorse,

Two ideas are psychologically deeprooted in man: self-protection and self-preservation. For self-protection man has created God, on whom he depends for his own protection, safety, and security, just as a child depends on its parents. For self-preservation man has conceived the idea of an immortal Soul or *Atman*, which will live eternally. In his ignorance, weakness, fear, and desire, man needs these two things to console himself. Hence he clings to them deeply and fanatically.<sup>4</sup>

Following this rather blunt language, Rahula uses the clearly Freudian language of 'projection' and says, as I have, that the aim of Buddhism is to strike at the root of fear, desire, and weakness, which is the self.<sup>5</sup>

However, the Buddhist rejection of the concepts mentioned is not simply made out of a need for empirical consistency, a childish desire to thumb the nose at mass superstition, or even just because the notions are projections of need. After all, what is wrong with having a need for security? What is wrong with telling ourselves stories to make ourselves feel better? Is not a metaphysical whistling in the dark ultimately quite harmless?



What distinguishes Buddhism from western psychology and philosophy, despite some of their shared procedures and interpretations of human experience, is the fact that Buddhism believes that a superior life is possible if such notions are rejected. Actually, the distinction is not that sharp, for Freud clearly sees a personal and cultural advantage in the ultimate maturity of individuals who have been healed of their childhood neurosis, in his *The Future of an Illusion*. I am sure, too, that many western thinkers are also convinced that humanity can only improve once childish, unfounded notions are abandoned. However, I do not believe that the most sanguine Wittgensteinian believes that the abandonment of such notions brings about the profound kind of self-transformation envisioned by Buddhism. As Buddhism sees these notions, they are not merely projections, as Rahula says, but they are positively harmful, indeed insidious in that they *aggravate* the self's fear and insecurity and *perpetuate* the most fundamental of all problems. Consequently, while on the one hand such ideas cannot definitively solve the existential problem, on the other hand they are serious impediments to an important self-transformation. It is this 'ultimate concern' for self-transformation which makes the Buddhist critique of these notions religious in a way the western philosophical and psychological critiques are not.

My point is that the rejection of the assumptions I have been discussing must finally be considered within the context of a programme which is ultimately aimed at the creation of a more perfect human being, which I will call, in Zen fashion, the 'true man' (正人, including, of course, both male and female). The 'true man' is true in the sense that the individual has seen through and abandoned the illusion of self-hood, and, along with it, the unrelenting craving and hatred that express the self's insecurity. The whole Buddhist tradition has been consistent in characterising this individual as an ideal union of clarity of insight and compassion, as I remarked earlier. I, myself, like to see such an ideal as a kind of ultimate maturity or full adulthood, on the assumption that unfounded fear and insecurity, conduct that for the most part reflects this insecurity, and fantasies (Freud again) that serve mainly to comfort, are infantile, while an objective and realistic view of life, and a compassionate caring which refuses to interpret all decision-making and action in terms of self-need and self-protection, is the mature flowering of a seed potential contained within each embryonic human being. Such an

ideal may also be seen as the attainment of true health, assuming that a neurotic concern for self-preservation, with its compulsive and driven actional consequences, has been cured. In the most general sense, the ideal could be seen as the attainment of completeness and fulfilment.

Buddhism has also been completely consistent over the millennia in its conviction that the completeness and fulfilment of the 'true man' can only be attained through the complete transcendence or forgetting of the notion of self-hood. If the relationship between the self and human completeness is a necessary one, which I believe to be the case,<sup>6</sup> then not only is a naïve and uncritical assertion of self-hood inimicable to the achievement of completeness and fulfilment, but so likewise is the unfounded belief in the immortality of the self and in a divine being who creates and treasures it, in so far as these beliefs not only reinforce the need to believe in the reality of the self but, what is equally pernicious, they reinforce the sense of self-importance and anxiety for the fate of the self. This is what is religiously at stake in the affirmation or denial of these notions as far as Buddhism is concerned. The Buddhist must, that is, ask the question, in the total absence of any evidence that such things are objective realities, and in the face of the counter-evidence of meditational insight practices, that the self is not to be found in a careful empirical investigation, then what can such ideas be but, as Rahula says so forcibly, human inventions calculated to provide a sense of importance and security? But to cling tenaciously to the empirically and philosophically untenable in fact impedes and stalls the maturity, sanity, and completeness which are synonymous with selflessness. Selflessness by definition is totally antithetical to notions which are self-aggrandising, self-serving, and self-reinforcing, and so the notions *must* be abandoned as bad for the health.

However, the other side of the coin must be that the truly complete adult is one who accepts himself as a being who really, completely dies, and that there is no tragedy here, no cause for an incapacitating sorrow. To be a selfless self must mean that one has overcome the pathetic belief that oneself as a human being is special or privileged in escaping the end of all conditioned and compounded things. I must, in such a self-knowledge, indeed 'die like a dog', but this should not be thought of as demeaning or degrading. In fact, there can be positive benefits for sanity and health in modestly, humbly, affirming our strict continuity with the rest of living beings.

Such an appraisal of the ontological status of human beings and their fate is, from the perspective of human beings, dominated by fear and insecurity and who need individually and as a species to believe that they are 'really somebody', hard to take, to say the least. The Buddha was well aware that people by their very nature really wanted a teaching that affirmed their significance and comforted them, and he acknowledged that his teachings ran contrary to the deepest yearnings of the human heart. He said of his teachings:

I have realized this Truth [*Dharma*] which is deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand . . . comprehensible only by the wise . . . Men who are overpowered by passions and surrounded by a mass of darkness cannot see this Truth, which is against the current, which is lofty, deep, subtle, and hard to comprehend.<sup>7</sup>

'Against the current' (*paṭisotagāmi*) is a clear recognition that what he had to say about the cherished self and its hoped-for immortality were not what people wanted to hear but which had to be said because it is Truth, *Dharma*. Consequently, as I have written elsewhere, such an approach to the self and its fate is part of a teaching which is rather chilly in its lack of warmth and comfort, and it is equally uncompromising in its insistence that a complete, perfected humanity is only possible with the utter abandonment of our most cherished notions.

This cool and uncompromising view of the self and its fate is characteristic of just about all forms of Buddhism, but it is particularly evident in Zen annals, where many stories are told of the nonchalant, matter-of-fact way the great Zen masters went to their deaths. I recount just one here, which is typical in many ways and has the proper Zen flavour about it. When Eshun, a Zen nun, was past 60 and about to leave this world, she had some monks pile up some wood in the monastery courtyard. Seating herself firmly in the middle of the pile of wood, she had it set fire around the edges. 'O nun!' shouted a monk, 'is it hot in there?' 'Such a matter would concern only a stupid person like yourself', answered Eshun. The flames arose, and she died.<sup>8</sup>

But along with edifying stories of this sort, what is particularly evident in Zen history and literature is that many of its great thinkers and practitioners saw their Buddhist practice as a response to the pressing problem of death, the overcoming of which would, as I have

said above, release them to the 'Great Life'. Thus, in the thirteenth century the Japanese Zen master, Dōgen, tells us how as a young child he attended his mother's funeral and watched the smoke of the incense rise in the air and dissipate and disappear. His heart was stricken with grief and agitation at the thought that all things are impermanent and eventually disappear, like the smoke, and he became a monk at a very early age, determined, like the Buddha, to find a solution to this urgent problem. His search led him to take the perilous trip to China where he hoped he would discover the answer. Under the tutelage of the master, Ju-ching, he achieved what he called the 'dropping off of mind and body' (*shinjin datsuraku*), and liberated, returned to Japan where he founded the Sōtō line of Zen and became one of Japan's great literary, religious, and philosophical luminaries. What was the answer he found? Hee-jin Kim says:

Dōgen did not indulge in aesthetic diletantism and sentimentalism as a way to escape from the fleeting fates of life [as many of his contemporaries did] but, instead, examined the nature of impermanence and its ultimate companion, death, unflinchingly, and attempted to realize liberation in and through this inexorable scheme of things.<sup>9</sup>

What Kim means by realising liberation 'in and through' impermanence and death is that Dōgen's response to them was to confront them seriously as the primary, fundamental, universal fact of one's own being and the fact of all being, and to accept and affirm them without reservation. The 'dropping off of mind and body', which is enlightenment, is the abandonment of all false and self-serving notions, and the dropping off of the body is the freedom from any attachment to the fate of the body.

Several centuries later a Zen master in Dōgen's line, Suzuki Shōsan, echoed this same concern for decisively disposing of the problem of death. 'I teach', he said, 'Buddhism for cowards',<sup>10</sup> 'I practice [Buddhism] because I hate death'.<sup>11</sup> 'No matter how long he lives, Shōsan has nothing special to talk about but death'.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Suzuki, like Dōgen and generations of Buddhists before him, displays the understanding that the belief in a self and the fear for its survival result in a tragic distortion of life that need not be. The abandonment of the illusion of self-hood, consequently, had the dual effect of eliminating the source of the fear and permitting the individual to understand himself and, most importantly, to radically accept himself

without qualm or qualification as an ordinary conditioned, impermanent, brief coalescence of psychic and material factors. To die, then is nothing special.

It must be evident from my discussion that this rather realistic, naturalistic, no-nonsense view of the human animal, along with the basically empirical reason for doing so, is not in itself so very different from procedures and conclusions found in much recent western writing. The Buddha sounds very modern, or, I should say, modern philosophers and many theologians have become quite Buddhist in their anthropologies. I have mentioned Derek Parfit's book, *Reasons and Persons* earlier; he concludes his book with a chapter with the title, 'Buddha's View'. The British theologian, Don Cupitt, has written a book entitled *Taking Leave of God*, in which he argues that the Christian must do exactly that. Process theologians, following Whitehead, admit nothing more comforting than the possibility of 'objective immortality', the eternal remembering of our life experiences by God, but no subjective immortality is possible in the Whiteheadian metaphysics. The attitude of linguistic philosophers towards the soul, God, and immortality needs no comment. All such ideas seem to be being jettisoned as bad ideas under the probe of linguistic criticism, the dominance of empirical methods, the appeals of logic and other forms of reasoning.

The question, then, is this: is it really necessary to undergo years of strenuous meditation in order to decisively reject the self and its immortality and consequently accept death realistically and with equanimity? I think that it is certainly possible to reject the idea of a substantial self on the basis of reason, as Whitehead did, for instance, and there seems to be no empirical basis for believing that there is a kind of survival of physical death. However, the Buddhist position has always been that reason alone is inadequate in dealing with such problems as the self and its fate. To simply arrive at conclusions on the basis of mere reason is to very seriously underestimate the tenacity with which the mind clings to its belief in its self-hood and the power that the fear of death holds over the emotions, will, and conduct. In fact, it could be argued that a purely philosophically-based rejection of such notions as substantial self-hood are often little more than one more attempt on the part of the self to assert itself in some way. The self is understood by Buddhism to be capable of a thousand different ways of maintaining its sense of value, and often what appear to be objective and rational reasons for acting in a certain way are just the movements of an exceedingly cunning and

resourceful self. But it is not that good old hard-headed reason will not go at least part way in disabusing oneself of untenable and pernicious notions. Buddhism has always known that reasoning can clear up a lot of bad thinking, but finally one must resort to techniques such as meditation which have in fact been devised with the specific objective of completely restructuring the personality in a way reason can not. Without that deep restructuring, one may loudly proclaim that there is no self or immortality but the fear remains, along with the destructive and distorting consequences.

Whatever reasons contemporary philosophers and humanists may have for rationally rejecting the notions of self-hood, immortality, and God – and there are several reasons – they are not *religious* reasons, and Buddhism, in all its atheism, and with all its rejection of the very essentials of the other salvational religions, is indubitably a religion. It is a religion because its reason for being is to make possible the ultimate transformation of the ‘true man’ in all his selflessness. But, because there is an unbridgeable contradiction between the ‘true man’ and the individual who believes he is a self and that that self is somehow special and privileged in a way no other being is, then the attainment of what Buddhism considers to be perfectly human can only be achieved through the forgetting of the self and a rejection of any form of immortality. To do so means that death itself must be grasped realistically, honestly, and unemotionally. In this way, the possibility of being perfectly human and the problem of death are intimately connected in Buddhism.

Buddhism is a tough religion. It offers not a shred of comfort or assurance regarding what is without doubt our greatest concern. It will not pat one on the back with a ‘There, there, it will be all right’, but, in its own way, will snatch away the last rag of hope, remind one that life is a flash of lightning in the darkness, a bead of dew on the morning grass, and suggest that one use one’s time to settle this one great matter once and for all. A monk once asked Zen master Ta-sui, ‘When the great conflagration flares up at the end of the world and the great cosmos is completely destroyed, I wonder, will “It” perish also?’ Ta-sui said, ‘It will perish’. The monk persisted, ‘Then, will “It” be gone with the other?’ Ta-sui said, ‘It will be gone with the other’. What a sweet, kindly reply.

## Notes

1. Besides James, E. R. Goodenough, in *The Psychology of Religious Experience* (New York: Basic Books, 1965) takes a similar approach.
2. T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Religion* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965) p. 221.
3. There are several ways to interpret rebirth. The first, which is the literal reading, is clearly not a possibility for Buddhism, since Buddhism rejects the possibility of anything about the individual surviving physical death. This must be mythical and requires demythologisation. A second interpretation widely accepted by Buddhists is that it is the craving which continues on after death to become re-embodied. Craving is thus seen as the builder of this world. The relationship between individual *A* who dies and individual *B* who is born is said to be one of neither identity nor complete difference. They are *not* the same person, but they are causally related. A third interpretation is that of 'instantaneous' rebirth, which sees the individual as dying and being reborn incessantly, somewhat analogously with the process of actual entities in Whitehead's thought.
4. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1959) p. 51.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
6. I have written extensively on this in 'Dōgen's View of Authentic Selfhood and its Socio-ethical Implications', in Wm LaFleur (ed.) *Dōgen Studies* (University of Hawaii Press, 1985) pp. 131-49.
7. Rahula, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
8. Recounted in Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1961) p. 27.
9. Hee-jin Kim, *Dōgen Kigen: Mystical Realist* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975) p. 183.
10. Royall Tyler (transl.) *Selected Writings of Suzuki Shōsan* (Ithaca: Cornell University East Asian Papers, no. 13, 1977) I:72.
11. *Ibid.*, III:12.
12. *Ibid.*, III:29.



# Zen and Death: A Response to Cook

Paul Badham

I would like to thank Professor Cook for his thought-provoking interpretation of Buddhist teaching and for the striking parallels to which he draws attention between aspects of the Buddha's 'no-self' doctrine and some contemporary philosophical writing on the self. Let me start my comments first on the substantive issue of what follows from a thorough-going acceptance of a post-Wittgensteinian, or as Cook argues, a post-Buddha understanding of personhood as a constantly changing succession of impermanent psychic and physical states with no enduring self or centre. It does seem to me correct to argue that when this understanding of personhood is adopted all notions of a personal life after death do lose their coherence and death can, or at any rate should, cease to be perceived as of any great significance. If there is no satisfactory way of defining our identity now, how much more must that be the case in the hypothesis of a life after death! It is indeed not at all surprising that contemporary philosophers of mind who are increasingly attracted to such views see the notion of life after death as a total non-starter.

Moreover, I would also take Cook's point that if this view of personhood is true, then psychological balance and maturity require us to accept it as such. For I would agree that not to live in accord with perceived reality is the mark of a neurotic, or of a person suffering psychological disorientation. But whether this view of the self is in accordance with reality is what needs to be discussed. Rahula cites Asanga's remark, 'There is the fact of no-selfness',<sup>1</sup> but whether this is a fact, and what is meant by the claim, need first to be weighed. For I do not for one minute accept Professor Cook's belief that all the empirical evidence is on one side. What I would most dispute in his paper is the view that 'there is not one shred of evidence that human life is privileged'.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, what is really daunting about teaching a graduate course on the empirical evidence for survival, as I do, is the sheer amount of solid and apparently well-documented empirical evidence now available. I don't mean that the evidence is necessarily compelling for it obviously isn't, but the reason for this is

not any shortage of data, but the difficulty of reconciling this data with the well-founded picture of reality built up over the centuries by the natural sciences. As C. D. Broad points out, when weighing evidence 'we always have to take into account the probability or improbability of an alleged event, relative to the rest of our knowledge and well-founded belief other than the special evidence adduced in its favor'.<sup>3</sup>

Turning from the issue as to whether or not these notions of the self are true, I wish to raise the further issue of whether or not they can be characterised as Buddhist. At one level, of course, the picture Francis Cook paints is Buddhist in that it is put forward as an interpretation of some key Buddhist scriptures. It is a perspective which has been presented by other western scholars and has some precedent in elements in the Zen Buddhist tradition. And yet I am uneasy about it because I find it hard to square this view with some of the most deeply established elements in the Buddhist tradition. I was very struck at a previous conference on Life after Death held in Korea by the reaction of other Buddhist scholars to a paper by a Zen priest from Japan who gave a comparable picture to that presented here by Francis Cook. For their reaction was not simply disagreement, but utter bewilderment that any Buddhist could say such things!

It does seem to be the case that with the possible exception of some elements in the Zen tradition, Buddhism as a living religion has never equated death with extinction, but has had a deep and abiding conviction of the reality of a future life. As Edward Conze puts it in his preface to the section of his edition of Buddhist Scriptures which deals with other worlds: 'The horizon of Buddhism is not bounded by the limits of the sensory world, their true interests lie beyond it . . . many Buddhists believe they possess definite knowledge of life after death'.<sup>4</sup> This is also true of popular Buddhism. The popularity of the tales of Buddha's former lives, the institution of Lamaism in Tibetan Buddhism, and the fascination of Buddhist monks and laity in reported claims to remember former lives only make sense in a context of widespread belief in a fairly concrete understanding of rebirth. Then think too of the vast literature of the pure-land tradition with its pictures of heavenly existence, and think also of the vivid descriptions of purgatorial hells, or look at the detailed descriptions in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* of the experience the mind is to encounter in the Bardo world. And in the realm of culture, the ethos of funerals in Thailand displays an attitude of mind where life after death is not simply *believed in* but is treated as an unquestioned *fact*

of life, a kind of conviction far deeper than anything we know today in so-called Christian countries. Moreover, I believe that the basic reason for the American defeats in Vietnam and Cambodia was the failure of American strategies to take into account the total fearlessness of death that a still living tradition of belief in reincarnation had given to their opponents.

The problem we have to face is that the doctrine of rebirth is at least as deeply rooted in Buddhism as is the no-self doctrine, and any exposition of Buddhism which is to do justice to the complexity of the theme requires that both doctrines be given full weight. I do not believe that Mrs Rhys Davids was right to say that in the light of the rebirth doctrine we must interpret away the no-self belief,<sup>5</sup> and by parity of reasoning I think Cook ought not to say that in the light of the no-self doctrine we *must* demythologise the doctrine of rebirth.<sup>6</sup>

Any valid presentation of Buddhism must take the two beliefs into account. So let us look again at the no-self doctrine. Cook is of course right to say that the Buddha denied the immortality of the self, but he should have gone on to mention that in the next verse the Buddha went on to deny the extinction of the soul of death.<sup>7</sup> In this, as in other doctrines, Buddha sought a 'middle path'. We may wonder how a middle path is possible in such a context, yet I suggest that it does make considerable sense. In one sense death clearly marks the end of life, but if one assumes the reality of rebirth, as the Buddha did,<sup>8</sup> then in another sense death is not the end.

Every denial has to be understood against its opposing affirmation. Buddha's denial of the self is a denial of one very specific understanding of the self, the concept of *ātman*. Buddha denied that there is a permanent *unchanging* spirit which can be considered self or soul or ego as *opposed* to matter. He believed that the idea of an *abiding immortal substance* called *ātman* was a mental projection. In particular he objected to an identification of this *ātman* with a supposed world soul. As he taught, 'the speculative view that the universe is *ātman* and that I shall be that after death – permanent, abiding, everlasting, unchanging, and that I shall exist as such for eternity, is not that wholly and completely foolish'.<sup>9</sup>

I can only say that I think Buddha was absolutely right in what he denied. The concept of *ātman* is just not a valid understanding of what it means to be human. To be human is to be developing, changing, moving on. Only a dynamic concept of self-hood does justice to experience or empirical reality. But none of this excludes

Buddha's belief in rebirth, or indeed other possible ideas of a future life.

However, keeping with the Buddha let us note that he did believe that something went on. Cook rightly says that Buddhism rejects the idea that the *ātman*, or the person (*pudgala*), or the being (*sattva*), or the life principle (*jīva*), goes on.<sup>10</sup> But he does not mention what Buddhism affirms, namely that what goes on is 'linking-psyche' (*patsandhi viññāna*) – a mental unit which leaves the body at death and is subsequently reborn.<sup>11</sup> This linking-psyche, while clearly very different from the Hindu *ātman*, is not necessarily very different from what western scholars think of as the subject of the claimed out-of-the-body experiences. Certainly Saeng Chandra-Ngarm, Professor of Religion in Chiang Mai University in Thailand, has claimed near-death experiences as proof of the reality of the linking-psyche leaving the body at death, and hence as evidential support for the Buddhist understanding of life after death.<sup>12</sup>

I accept that this may go too far for some western interpreters of Buddhism, yet even Walpola Rahula, whose concept of the self Cook cites with approval, insists on real continuity through death. As Rahula says, 'what we call death is the total non-functioning of the physical body'. Yet he claims this does not imply that our physical and mental forces or energies also stop:

Buddhism says 'no'. Will, volition, desire, thirst to exist, to continue, to become more and more, is a tremendous force . . . This force does not stop with the functioning of the body, which is death; but it continues manifesting itself in another form, producing re-existence which is called rebirth.<sup>13</sup>

I suggest that will, volition, desire and the thirst to exist is quite a lot to survive, and certainly very different from total extinction.

Buddha himself explicitly denied that death meant extinction. Indeed he described the notion as a 'wicked heresy',<sup>14</sup> even when put forward as an interpretation of the final state of parinirvana! How much more when describing the simple passing on from one life to the next. The fact that it is difficult to identify our self-hood in the here and now was never perceived by the Buddha as any kind of ground for doubting the truth of the doctrine of rebirth. A child grows to be a man of 60. Certainly the man of 60 is not the same as the child of 60 years previous. But nor is he another person. Similarly, when a

person dies here and is reborn elsewhere. He is neither the same person, nor is he another person.<sup>15</sup> The popularity of this analogy in Buddhist sources indicates that Buddhism sees no *more* difficulty in establishing identity between lives as *within* life. The problem of the self remains, but it never in Buddha's view constituted any objection to his firm belief that the human destiny is to move through many lives in many worlds in the long journey to our true fulfilment.

## Notes

1. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1959) p. 56.
2. Francis Cook 'Memento Mori: The Buddhist Thinks about Death' p. 161.
3. C. D. Broad, *Lectures of Psychical Research* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962) p. 14.
4. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1959) p. 221.
5. Rahula, op. cit., p. 55, note 4.
6. Cook, op. cit., p. 159–60, and also p. 170 note 3.
7. *Visuddhimagga* XVIII, cited in H. C. Warren, *Buddhism in Translations* (New York: Athenaeum, 1973) pp. 132–5.
8. Buddha refers to the doctrine of rebirth in his First Sermon, in his Fire Sermon, and in the Dhammapada. As such it is present in the most ancient documents of earliest Buddhism.
9. Rahula, op. cit., p. 59.
10. Cook, op. cit., p. 159.
11. Saeng Chandra-Ngarm, 'Life, Death and the Deathless', in Paul and Linda Badham (eds) *Death and Immortality in the Religions of the World* (New York: Paragon House, 1987).
12. Ibid.
13. Rahula, op. cit., p. 33.
14. *SamyuttaNikaya*, XXII 85, in Warren, op. cit., p. 138.
15. Rahula, op. cit., p. 34, 'Questions of King Milinda', in Conze, op. cit., p. 150.

# Response to Cook

John Hick

Frank Cook's paper is enormously interesting, and is as challenging as it is impressive. He says many wise and (I believe) true things about our attitude to death and the way this colours the whole of life, and about the ideal of a selfless stance in which death is no longer a source of anxiety. But he also, I want to suggest, makes two dubious philosophical moves, to correct which would not affect his more practical and existential thoughts but which would change some of his more theoretical positions. I also want to raise the question whether these theoretical positions agree with the teachings of the Buddha as we have them in the Pali scriptures.

First, then, much depends, in this kind of enquiry, upon how one poses the issues and upon what is presupposed in so posing them. And I want to suggest that at two rather crucial points Cook has operated within assumptions that have to be questioned. The first comes early on when he characterises religion as a human problem-solving strategy responding to basic problems, including death as the most basic of all problems. He then says that in agreeing with this assessment of a number of anthropologists 'I am, at the same time, rejecting the possibility that a religion is divinely revealed, and hence that its pronouncements *vis-à-vis* immortality and the like are rooted in something other than the needs of people' (p. 176). But the choice between divinely revealed pronouncements and human projections is much too restricted. The basic issue is not whether religious beliefs are the supernaturally revealed pronouncements of a deity (rather than, say, valid human religious insights), but whether they are true. The truth or falsity of the belief in a transcendent reality in relation to which the human spiritual project continues after bodily death, does not depend upon whether or not this is a divinely revealed proposition. And when we see that the central issue does not concern propositional revelation but truth we see that to conclude from the fact that religion meets basic human needs to its being false is a regrettable logical *faux pas*. The suppressed premise that if religion meets human needs its affirmations must therefore be false obviously needs to be stated and defended. Without an explicit and convincing defence it cannot function as the logical plank over which anyone can

step from religious beliefs as problem-solving to religious beliefs as false. At this point Cook has, I suspect, simply taken over the modern western naturalistic worldview, with all its assumptions.

A second over-simple either/or comes, I want to suggest, in his treatment of the self. He identifies a self, such as might conceivably continue to exist after bodily death, with a substance, which he defines as something that is unconditioned, independent, continuous and permanent – this is on p. 160. A few lines later he further equates the idea of the self with that of an ‘enduring and unchanging substance’. Thus he is assuming the alternative: either a continuous, permanent, unchanging, unconditioned, completely independent self, or no self at all. Cook’s definition of a self does indeed fit the Hindu conception of the *ātman*, and it was presumably this that the Buddha was rejecting in his *anātman*, no-*ātman*, teaching. But it would be arbitrarily, and I suggest unjustifiably, restrictive to assume that there can be no notion of a self other than this. For western conceptions of the self have typically held that the human self is radically dependent upon God for its existence; that it is temporal, having been created at a certain time; that it is alive and therefore changing all the time; and the modern personalist movement of thought, going back to the early years of this century, stresses that personality is essentially interpersonal, the self existing in interaction with other selves. I suggest therefore that it is not realistic to argue: no immutable, eternal, independent self, therefore no self.

Finally, may I return to the Buddha’s teachings and ask where in them we can find the rather bleak view of the human situation that is implied in Cook’s paper. By this ‘bleakness’ I mean the idea that the goal of human existence, called *nirvāṇa*, is one that can in practice only be attained by a fortunate few, and that for the large majority our human experience consists in a short and chancy life pervaded by *duḥkha* and terminated definitively by death. For if, as Cook asserts, the spiritual project which is taking place in each individual life ends at death and becomes as though it had never been, then only those few who attain to *nirvāṇa* in this life ever attain to it at all. This means – does it not – that only a very small proportion of human beings have ever attained or (in all likelihood) will ever attain this fulfilment. And that, I suggest, constitutes bad news for the human race as a whole.

Now in contrast to this the Buddha’s teaching, as reflected in the Pali canon, affirms the idea of repeated rebirths, so that each individual spiritual project will continue through life after life until



*nirvāṇa* is attained. What is thus continually reborn is indeed not the Hindu *ātman*, as an eternal, immutable, self-existent psychic entity. It is, on the contrary, a continuant that is ever changing as it moves towards the realisation of the eternal Buddha nature. This continuant includes unique threads of spiritual development and of memory. I reap directly my own *karma*, not yours; and it is in principle possible for me, in certain circumstances, to remember having lived bits of my own past lives but not having lived bits of yours. Thus the Buddha, during the hours of his enlightenment experience, is said to have remembered his own past lives and traced his own approach to final enlightenment. This enormous enlargement of the field of spiritual change makes possible the eventual universal salvation which became a prominent theme of Mahayana Buddhism. Again, another part of the Buddha's teaching, reiterated several times in the Pali canon, concerns the *avyākata* or unanswered questions. One of these is the question about the state of the Tathagata or Buddha beyond death. The person in process of becoming perfect is reborn to continue the process; but what of the person who has become perfect and who is now a Buddha or Tathagata? The Buddha rejected the four propositions that such a one exists, does not exist, both exists and does not exist, and neither exists nor does not exist, after death. He was, I believe, thereby saying that none of the options that our unenlightened categories of thought can offer is applicable. And he added, 'Freed from denotation by consciousness is the Tathagata, he is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable as is the great ocean' (*Majjhima Nikaya*, II, 487, E.T. p. 166). This coheres with the familiar picture of the individual spiritual project continuing through life after life and then finally attaining to an eternal state which is beyond the present scope of our minds and imaginations.

But this whole dimension of Buddhism is omitted from Cook's version. He has taken from the tradition only what fits the presuppositions of contemporary western naturalism. But in doing so he has transformed the Buddha's teachings from good to bad news, and from a universal to an elitist gospel.

These are, I know, strong words. But if they are justified they would leave Cook's practical wisdom intact, though not his philosophical superstructures. But justified or not, they are uttered in the spirit of co-operation in the difficult search for truth.

# Response to Paul Badham's Response

Francis H. Cook

Paul Badham's response to my paper reflects a long-standing difficulty for westerners in confronting Buddhist teachings concerning the self and the allied question of post-mortem existence. He mentions several Buddhist teachings which make the answers to these questions either more ambiguous than I have made them out to be or which cast some doubt on my own answers. I would like to briefly respond to his thoughtful reflections on my paper.

First, does Buddhism deny the existence of any kind of personal entity that might persist after death? If fact, there are many scriptural passages and systematic texts in which the rejection of such an entity is made quite categorically. To mention just two well-known sources, the eighth chapter of the encyclopedic *Abhidharmakośa* and the *Questions of King Milinda* are both authoritative texts and both categorically deny the existence of any real self, person, soul, or substance. The *Kośa* marshalls a number of logical arguments which sound very much like those used by many contemporary western philosophers. The *Questions of King Milinda* reduces the assumed self to the status of a mere convenient, conventional label for a certain configuration of impersonal psychic and material factors. The monk Nagasena tells King Milinda that although he is called Nagasena by his fellow monks, there is *in reality* no such a thing as 'Nagasena', only a concatenation of mental and physical factors (*skandha*). Such texts are common, and many others could be cited.

Now, Paul Badham is quite correct in pointing out that in Buddhism the really correct answer to the question of the existence of the self is neither a categorical 'yes' nor a categorical 'no', because the Buddhist 'Middle Way' (*madhyama-pratipad*) tries to avoid either flat affirmation or flat denial when dealing with questions. Here, with regard to the self, a flat affirmation would be an affirmation of what in fact is not given in a careful, objective analysis of the psycho-physical being, where, instead, only momentary (*kṣanika*) flashes of mental and material energy are found. On the other hand, a

categorical denial would be a denial of an unquestionably real, numerically distinct individual. Such a flat denial could be misleading. The truth is more complex than simple affirmation or denial; when certain mental and physical factors combine in mutual dependence, there exists an individual which we may conventionally label a 'person' (and the Buddha himself used language in this non-realistic manner). However, the label is merely a convention and a convenience; the label does not indicate an objective reality. Thus, in Buddhism, 'person' and 'self' are nothing but nominal realities, like 'army' or 'city'.

But if this is the correct approach, as Badham notes, why do texts such as the *Kośa* categorically deny the existence of self and person? They do so because the human, existential problem of *duḥkha* – the unceasing turmoil of insatiable but unfulfilled and unfulfillable craving – is rooted in the belief that one is a self. The solution to the problem lies in the clear realisation that the self is a fiction. Thus, the ultimate objective of every form of Buddhism that ever existed has been to force the individual to understand experientially via meditation that the assumed real self, which is the origin of almost all decision-making and action, and consequently the source of all frustration, grief, fear, longing, and anxiety, is a mere delusion, a serious misinterpretation of the true facts of psycho-physical being.

If there are in reality only impersonal mental and physical aggregates which are impermanent and which disperse and decay upon death, then what could possibly survive death? Badham seems to see the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth as some support for a Buddhist belief in a post-mortem existence. Many students of Buddhism these days, myself included, tend to see this doctrine as a 'convenient fiction'. The term 'fiction' is self-explanatory. Rebirth interpreted literally is a problem in Buddhism because it does not mesh easily with the central teaching of no self and, moreover, is a violation of the fundamentally empirical approach of Buddhism. However, it is 'convenient' because it serves as a powerful inducement to live the kind of moral life that is a prerequisite to liberation. Interpreted literally, it serves to promote the kind of social climate that is important for both the larger society and the community of monks and nuns dedicated to liberation and which requires the support of the larger community. I find no empirical support for the notion of literal rebirth; good Bultmannian that I am, I have no recourse but to understand it in a radically demythologised and existentially more relevant manner.

As Paul Badham is obviously aware, the Buddhist teaching concerning rebirth is that the relationship between the person who dies and the person who is subsequently born is 'neither identical nor different'. Now, 'not identical' must be understood most literally. The man who dies and the dog who is born are not the same 'person'. The dog has none of those markers of personhood that characterised the dead man: memory, objectives, attitudes, tastes, emotions, and so on. The man and the dog are two different beings. They are not the same self.

However, Buddhism also says that the two are 'not different'. Now, the relevant texts show clearly that 'not different' means that there is a necessary *causal link* between the two. This means that the life of the dead man – meaning his unresolved craving, primarily – serves as a cause for the arising of the new being, the dog. However, the craving which survives the man's death is just craving; it is not personal in the form of memories, attitudes, tastes, and so on. Consequently the two beings are 'not identical'. The idea that craving is perpetuated through many lives is simply a recognition of what seems like a fact, which is that will or volition does outlive us to create later consequences. Karmic consequences seems to be empirically evident in the fact that we are aware of being touched and moved by even the long dead. But the long dead and ourselves are not just two forms of the same person or self transmigrating through the ages on a quest for moral perfection. That is not the Buddhist vision.

I therefore must reaffirm the point made in my paper; I find nothing in Buddhism to support the idea of personal post-mortem existence. A person may 'exist' in some very impersonal manner, such as in the memories of others, in one's writings, as a causal factor for the lives of later beings, and so on, but this is not any kind of *personal* survival in which I can find comfort or meaning. However, aside from the philosophical arguments concerning selves and post-mortem existence, what is of greatest importance to the Buddhist is the fact that the belief in self-hood, and the self-interest and self-attachment reflected in the longing for self-preservation even beyond death are, to the Buddhist, inimicable to spiritual health. Therefore, even if I am a self, I had better proceed through life as if not one.