

The Buddhist Paradox

by gregory stone

Anyone familiar with the religious philosophy known as Buddhism has no doubt come across one of the most puzzling paradoxes in any spiritual study: the apparent conflict between the "no soul" doctrine (anatta) and belief in reincarnation. *If one has no soul, who or what is reincarnated, and how?*

This paradox has been the source of endless speculation and has spawned varying interpretations of Buddhism. A solution to the puzzling paradox would no doubt lead to a more uniform understanding of the Buddha's teachings.

The effort to find such a solution, however, faces challenges. The primary challenge lies in the nature of Buddhism; it is a study equally weighted between theory and practice. Lacking firsthand experience that comes with hands-on practice, most will find the Buddhist texts obscure. Readers distant from the practice face even greater difficulty when confronted by the apparent conflict between the anatta doctrine and reincarnation.

In spite of this challenge, an attempt to explain the paradox is worthwhile for a number of reasons:

1) Practice follows theory; theory follows practice. If one starts with incorrect theory, practice will suffer. Thus it is worth considering whether or not a theory is correctly interpreted.

2) Buddhism has an important role to play in today's world. Confusion arising from conflicting views, however, threatens to diminish and obfuscate the Buddha's message. If the conflict between the doctrines of anatta and reincarnation can be solved, the confusion will diminish.

3) Hidden within challenging paradoxes one often finds a path to greater understanding. A paradox often masks a new paradigm, a new way of looking at the world, that provides invaluable rewards to those who persevere in attempts to resolve the apparent contradiction.

The effort begins with an analysis of the thoughts shaping the paradox. Many interpret the anatta (no soul, no self) doctrine to mean there is no soul or spirit within the composite person that is the human being.

They argue the Buddha taught that only the aggregates (khandhas or skandhas) make up the person. These are 1) material processes, 2) feeling, 3) perception, 4) mental formations, and 5) consciousness. (Consciousness in this context refers to sensations, what one might call sentience, as distinguished from the consciousness to which I later refer.)

Those who argue this viewpoint claim *all* aspects of a person are impermanent, transitory. Therefore nothing is eternal, nothing survives the dissolution of the aggregate; no self exists apart from the temporary arrangement of material factors. This view echoes the philosophy of materialism which claims all phenomena are simply emergent properties of building-block matter.

On the other hand, Buddhists speak of reincarnation. Tibetan Buddhists counsel the departed individual in the stages after death called Bardos. (See *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.) Most people have seen movies or read books about the Tibetan search for reincarnated leaders who survive from life to life. The Buddha himself spoke of his many past lives. How can such beliefs be compatible with a version of anatta which holds nothing survives, that no soul continues on past body death? The two lines of thought contradict one another.

Attempts to explain away the paradox with talk of streams of consciousness forming from old aggregates make little sense. This line of reasoning mirrors the materialistic concept that consciousness emerges out of matter and has no existence in its own right. These arguments focus solely on the impermanent and thus become circular.

As long as we restrict the discussion to the phenomenal world of impermanent forms, we will not find anything permanent. This is

a given; a self-fulfilling prophecy. By definition, nothing of the impermanent, transitory realm constitutes a permanent self.

The important question, however, is whether or not consciousness transcends the impermanent world. Some argue the anatta doctrine dictates against such a transcendent reality; others believe Buddhism takes the opposite position and supports a supernatural, transcendent realm. It is across this divide that the argument regarding the true meaning of anatta takes place.

Matthieu Ricard (*The Monk and the Philosopher*) hints at a partial solution in an alternative view of the self, which, with deceiving subtlety, can slip past a reader. Ricard acknowledges the idea of a stream of moment-to-moment consciousness—awareness of a series of impermanent states—then advances the idea of an *individual* stream of consciousness with integral continuity. This “individual stream of consciousness” comes close to being a description of a conscious, immaterial being—perhaps this is the missing “self” or “soul” that escapes notice when one considers only material aggregates.

Upon close inspection, it appears the Buddha himself did not support the strong version of the anatta doctrine. At the same time he taught there was no self or no soul (anatta), he also stated it was not correct to argue there was no self, no soul.

How could both views—a) there is no soul and, b) it is incorrect to say there is no soul—be accurate? What new distinction was he offering for his students' consideration? Any analysis of Buddhism must unravel this conundrum. A concept of what it is that reincarnates or experiences rebirth must be developed.

How was it possible for the Buddha to recall past lives if nothing of self remained in existence over the span of those lifetimes? It would seem a continuity of consciousness is necessary for such recall. Not the consciousness of bodily sensation, which we have labeled sentience, but a more fundamental consciousness—a basic self that is aware and conscious, but not material, a self not restricted to the impermanence of the phenomenal world.

Buddha warned his students to steer clear of identifying with the five aggregates: you are not your physical body; not your mind; not your perceptions; not your feelings; not your sensations. Those qualities, individually and in composite, are not self, he taught.

There must be a self, however, able to recall the aggregates that comprise past lives. A self that exists outside and separate from the five aggregates solves the conceptual impasse. It is the nature of this self, which is not the five aggregates, that must be understood in order to make sense of the paradox.

Perhaps what was meant by “no self” was, in actuality, “not self.” If one takes this view, one can see the skandhas as the “not self” while there exists that which is the self. “Self” and “not self.” This interpretation escapes the outright denial of the existence of the permanent self. It leads to an understanding of the nuances of an immaterial self that provide a different version of anatta.

The task of grasping this concept, unfortunately, requires familiarity with the practical and experiential side of Buddhism; without firsthand experience, the going gets rough. Perhaps this is the reason the Buddha declined to explicate the matter for the student who pressed for an answer; perhaps this is why he left the matter in the “indeterminate” category (in his public teachings). He could find no way to explain that which had not been experienced. Words fell short. All he could say was that it was both “A” and “not A” at the same time, apparently hoping the student would press on, looking for a deeper understanding.

This history should give us pause. Any attempt at an explanation may be foolhardy; however, I believe there are those who have had experiences which provide insights into the problem. It is primarily to their attention I address this piece. Others, lacking in such experience, may still be able to draw upon intuitive resources to conjure the picture I will paint.

Turning to one of the most famous of the Buddhist texts, we consider what the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* offers on the subject.

The *Book of the Dead* was written as an instruction manual for monks charged with guiding the recently deceased through stages after death known as Bardos. In these stages, the deceased encounters challenging phenomena that must be understood and overcome. Success in navigating this between-lives period, it is suggested, plays an important role in the future life of the deceased. It is clear Tibetans consider a conscious individual survives body death. And yet, this raises another problem...

In the Bardos, the deceased remains the effect of his mental formations, sensations, feelings, and perceptions. Though these four khandhas (or skandhas) are no longer tied to the personhood of the body, their existence continues. Accounts of near death experience support this view. Those who separate from the body in near death situations report mental imagery, perceptions, sensations, feelings, and thoughts, while separate from the body. It appears the conscious being carries with it the memories (mental formations) and connections (feelings and sensations) of its past existence as well as a sense of continuity of self.

This aggregate "baggage" explains, in part, past-life recalls—the individual stream of consciousness accumulates mental forms. It is as though the individual stream of consciousness, proceeding through time, continually sums up, or integrates, its experience. In clinging to the khandhas, this stream of consciousness (or spirit) performs like a cosmic pack rat, storing

tokens and reminders of the past in a giant cosmic scrapbook. Thus we stumble, quite unexpectedly, upon the concept of karma or kamma.

Karma can be described as past causes and effects exerting influence on the present. Our actions in the past will be revisited upon us in the present. That which we cause today will appear in our mirror in the future. Karma lies behind the admonition “what goes around come around.” It is the idea we create our own destiny, painted with an ironic brush. Apparently karma is not the impersonal cosmic force some make it out to be. If we accept the above description of the fate of the disembodied—they cling to the accumulated mental detritus of the past—it appears karma has a personal nature. The individual stream of consciousness, toting its past, insures the laws of karma play out in a very personal way.

In our explanation of reincarnation and karma, the discussion has taken a dramatic turn away from the anatta doctrine. It appears we have a continuity of consciousness which carries the accumulated past from lifetime to lifetime, making possible the laws of karma. Apparently the anatta doctrine is false and misleading. But why would the Buddha sabotage his own teachings with an untruth? It doesn't make sense. There must be a reason...

The deceased individual, without a body, clinging to the aggregates, remains trapped in a false identity, a false self. In this post-mortem state, that which might be considered a soul remains

encumbered by its attachment to the past. The being clings to mental formations, sensations, feelings, and a false self comprised of accumulated karmic "identities" that are "not self." Thus, even after death, the struggle to achieve enlightenment continues, which is the prominent idea in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Perhaps the essence of the "no soul" doctrine is the warning that the "soul identity" one assumes after death is also not the true self; that, even then, the student must learn to detach from the aggregates and no longer cling to form.

The Buddha spoke not only to the lay public, but also to dedicated monks, those who, like Tibetan Buddhists, experienced states of existence separate from the body, either as a result of meditative practice or a recall of past lives. The Buddha, perhaps, taught his most experienced followers to continue their practice beyond death. He taught them to continue efforts to cease clinging to the four khandhas which are carried into the afterlife; perhaps he taught them to detach from the accumulated mental formations that code for karma.

Not only in the Tibetan Bardos, but also in the realms of Pure Land Buddhism, we find descriptions of a phenomenal realm beyond our bodily existence. It appears the conscious being, wrapped in the four aggregates, qualifies as a soul. As the anatta doctrine teaches, this soul identity is a false self which must be

discarded if one is to achieve a cessation of suffering and reach the state of nirvana.

It is worth slowing up and taking another look at the snapshot just developed. In this picture, the conscious being, wrapped in the khandhas or aggregates—self-accumulated karma—suffers from a collection of past causes which, in the present, dictate the future. Buried within these karmic mental formations lies the compulsion to continue on the wheel of birth and death. The state of nirvana results when the conscious being steps outside the aggregates—the gross and the subtle—to stand free in the realm of the formless, free from the impermanent world of forms. Identification with false selves is jettisoned and the being becomes aware of self in the realm of the formless.

Carl Becker supports this analysis of the realms when he writes: "In its broadest categories, the Buddhist universe may be divided into three realms: things both immaterial and formless (*arupadhatu*), those with form but only subtle matter (*rupadhatu*), and the physical/sensual realm of form and gross matter (*kamadhatu*)."

The Buddha's hesitation to explain the anatta doctrine becomes clear as we explore the nature of these realms. If one's focus lies entirely within the realm of form and gross matter (*kamadhatu*), what chance does one have of understanding how the soul (*in rupadhatu*) is a "not self"? For those whose focus has

moved to the next realm (the realm of subtle form, *rupadhatu*) the teachings become critical. The Buddha might have warned those students, "You are not yet there. Do not stop. This is not the end of the path." He might have admonished them to continue past the false self that is the soul wrapped in the aggregates, on to the realm of the immaterial and formless, the realm of the pure consciousness, on to nirvana.

As with anatta, karma, and reincarnation, the literature abounds with debate regarding nirvana. Some advance nihilistic visions and interpretations. The above description, however, appears to clarify nirvana as awareness of the immaterial and formless state (*arupadhatu*). The Buddha was known to have achieved nirvana, yet remained present and teaching, which puts the lie to the nihilistic argument. Nirvana, it appears, had more to do with achieving recognition of the immaterial self, a self able to observe forms without identifying with those forms. Nirvana thus appears to be a state of consciousness free from attachment to form. Free from attachment to form, the conscious being terminates the compulsion to ride the wheel of birth and death. Achieving nirvana, the being can choose to reincarnate, but does not suffer a compulsion to do so. The bonds to suffering are severed. The form suffers, but the immaterial and formless self does not suffer, except by virtue of its attachment and identification with forms.

Thus a divide separates the immaterial and formless consciousness from the world of material forms, both subtle and gross. It is here that another key Buddhist concept, emptiness, becomes relevant. "Emptiness" refers to the idea that material forms possess no substantive, independent existence. The material world is not primary; it does not stand, uncaused, on its own. All phenomena are "empty." *Rupadhatu* and *kamadhatu* do not possess independent existence. They are contingent realms. Their existence is an "illusion." Their existence issues forth from the realm of *arupadhatu*, the immaterial and formless. Thus, Buddhism, at its heart, is an Idealistic religious philosophy, not a philosophy based upon nihilistic materialism.

The paradox that motivated our analysis fades. The contradiction dis-integrates; the integral concepts of Buddhism—anatta, reincarnation, karma, emptiness, nirvana—are woven together in a seamless unity. The Buddha was not schizophrenic; his teachings are consistent from top to bottom. They make up the most profound ontological analysis of this universe ever performed.

The paradox ends up illuminating the pernicious influence of our attachment to form, our identification with matter, subtle and gross. Out of this attachment and identification arises the philosophy of materialism, the celebration of form as ultimate, form as primary, form as ontological cause. That Buddhism, through mistranslation, misinterpretation, and misunderstanding, should

be transformed into materialism comes as no surprise. The impulse to cling to matter weaves the veil of illusion before our eyes. In our first attempts to see, it is this veil we observe. The Buddha taught us to see beyond the veil. He taught we are not that which we observe, we are not the veil—the veil is “not self.” Removing the veil does not end our sight, it frees us to see. Removing the veil does not plunge us into the darkness of nihilistic non-being, it opens our eyes to the clear light of unlimited being.

Those who adopt Buddhism as an antidote against a supernatural view of the universe will see my words as those of a heretic. Their use of the anatta doctrine to dismiss transcendent consciousness will not be served by my argument. While there are few among us who do not welcome the empirical soundness that is a hallmark of Buddhist studies, equating the empirical with materialism is an error. The Buddha demonstrated that an empirical route leads to the supernatural, to the transcendent nature of consciousness.

Copyright 2004 by Gregory Stone. All rights reserved. Permission granted to reprint any portion of this essay as long as proper attribution is included.