

The Buddha's Experiential Alternative to the Brahmanical "Self"

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Hello everyone. So it's one minute after, and people are still coming. So I'm delighted by the interest in this text that, once upon a time, I thought was really boring and just never even thought about dipping into it and seeing what it really says. Maybe it was good I waited, because now I can appreciate it after all these years.

The work of Bhikkhu Sujato has been really important for this purpose as well. He does a lot of studies these days. Sujato, if you don't know, is a monk in Australia who went off to an island off the coast of Australia for a couple of years, I think, and all he did was translate the suttas until he finished them all. It was quite an accomplishment.

He's a very good Pāli scholar and knows the Pāli well. Then he made it all available freely on the web at a website called SuttaCentral. But in recent years, he, or I don't know who else is doing it, has been doing some deep research into the connection between the suttas and the Upaniṣads, the contemporary, pre-Hindu religion of India. It's phenomenal how many connections there are.

What he did for this text for today was phenomenal, to see how strong that linkage is. A lot of that is thanks to his good work. So, for those of you interested in this kind of connection, the wider context for some of the material in the suttas, this is an interesting place to look now.

I did have an exchange yesterday and today with Kim Allen, one of our teachers here at IMC, who also has a big interest in sutta studies. She heard I was doing this class on *Majjhima One*, and we sent emails back and forth about how strongly the Buddhists wrote these anti-Brahmanical suttas. This was a huge interest at some point: to somehow differentiate themselves from the Brahmins in a very clear way. That's perhaps saying it very politely.

Maybe what they're trying to do is—there's a competition there. It seems that in the ancient world, at the time of the Buddha, there was a very strong debate culture. Debating wasn't just something you did Sunday afternoon, had a debate, and then had a beer together afterward, and it was all good. The consequences of these debates were quite huge.

There were maybe public debates, and if you lost—I haven't seen the original evidence for this, but I've read secondary literature that says—if you lost some of the debates, you were supposed to become the student of the person you lost to. So it's a pretty big thing. Some of these texts could be understood as part of a larger debate culture, where they're trying to undermine the teachings, or differentiate themselves from the teachings, of the existing religions around the time of the Buddha.

You see the Buddha frequently taking religious terms that are very important for other religions of his time and redefining them. Maybe we'll see this today. There's one Pāli word called *kevala*. When you read the English translation, it doesn't really get your attention that it's anything big.

Sometimes it's translated as “entire,” as in “the entire mass of suffering.” The mass of suffering gets interesting, but “entire” just seems like a nice adjective. What does that mean? But the word *kevala* is a very important, ultimate term of ultimate liberation or ultimate connection to reality in the Upaniṣads.

So the Buddha is contrasting himself with these kinds of teachings over and over again. Maybe we'll see that a little bit. So, I guess we've started. Welcome, and I'm delighted you're here.

Maybe it would be good for all of us, and for me, to hear maybe three or four comments from some of you about what it was like to read this text, read the study lines, study guides, and get a sense of this text in a few words. What was it like for you? Was it confusing? Was it inspiring?

Were you ready to become a monk or nun, or were you ready to throw the book across the room? I'd like to hear a little bit. Or, if there was a major question you'd like to raise—not that I will answer it right now—but so I have a sense of what's here as we gather. Yes, please, Victoria.

Yes, I found the kind of relentless thoroughness of it, and the repetitions, very compelling because I've been studying the various discourses on the lack of inherent self and sort of delving into that. I've been taking some courses with John Young in London, which is obviously a different tradition, but still very much focused right now on Nāgārjuna's commentaries. So

I was delighted, because it actually seemed very straightforward compared to some of the stuff I've been trying to read.

And what you said, which I thought was really fascinating, was about this excessive repetition. When I first jumped into the path, it seemed very annoying. But now, thanks also to your commentary, I realize how powerful it must have been. It makes perfect sense as an oral tradition, and also your statement about how it was probably meant to be chanted rhythmically.

I'm a musician, so I almost wanted to make up my own chant as I was reading along. So thank you for that. It was really very helpful. Your commentary, I appreciate.

Well, if you do, maybe send it to us.

Okay, we'll have a workshop, a chanting workshop, or just send the recording and we can listen. After I sent everything out, I realized that there is a website where a monk reads all the suttas in the *Majjhima Nikāya*. It would maybe have been nice to have included that. You could have listened to it being read.

Wow, I'll check that out.

Maybe you can send a link out to everybody afterward. See if I can find it again. Yes. Okay. Thank you.

Thank you. Daniya.

Hi. I don't know if this is—anyways, let me know if it's okay to ask. But when you do your presentation about the not-self, do you think you can differentiate between the “not mine” aspect? I get the impression by reading the suttas that everything he says is for a purpose. It has an operational definition, so to speak, for the purpose of letting go, for the purpose of dispassion and cessation.

How do you know it's the *Dhamma*? It's by the outcome, what it leads to: *virāga* and ultimately *nibbāna*. So rather than talking about self, it seems from the sutta, from an ontological perspective, it's more, “not mine.” But I don't know the Pāli enough.

I've heard this maybe subtly mentioned by Ajahn Brahm. It was “not mine, not mine,” rather than “there's no self.” Because if you look for the Loch Ness Monster, you can't find it. Who knows if there is one?

But if you have this “not mine” aspect, then when you do your presentation, can you also clarify? I don't know if you know. Well, you've translated the *Dhammapada*, so you know the Pāli. Does it really mean “not mine,” everything is not mine, versus “no self”?

What's your comment on that? When he teaches not-self, is it really just that everything is "not mine" for the purpose of *nibbāna*?

Great, great. Very good question. So we'll get to something like that, I hope. Let's see a couple more.

So, Beth. Hi.

For me, it feels more like continuation, especially after listening to your book, *The Buddha Before Buddhism*, the *Book of Eights*, which are tremendously helpful. I would really suggest everybody read that and listen to that. Great.

I feel that it is a continuation of exploration, especially to see how, in the world that the Buddha was born into, there was this very intense culture in terms of beliefs and the way that it went about. So it's remarkable. I feel really energized and happy to continue that. Thank you.

I just saw a chat. Maybe the rest of you saw it too. Marga posted, and someone else too, Barb, the link to that website that I was talking about where someone is reading it.

So, Beverly.

Yes, I processed it in relation to myself. I thought, "This is about me." Nothing I encounter is neutral. I always process everything into how my relationship to it is, always, including the sutta.

Great, great. Yeah. So you no longer think that you're a god?

No, no, it didn't fix it. I just thought I recognized it.

Oh, okay, great. Yeah. So maybe, last one, Kodo.

Yeah. Hi, Gil. I'm hopeful that sometime during the period, we'll talk about your translation choice for *maññati*.

Yes, I should imagine. Sure. Thank you.

Okay. Oh, I see someone didn't get the reading. There was reading that was sent out, with the translation and study guide. So, if you didn't get it, maybe if you put a chat in, Rob can see it and send it to you.

But for now, you didn't miss anything by missing the reading, because I'm going to change suttas on you. I know you came all prepared for *Majjhima One*, but this will be exciting. I don't know, did some of you read *Majjhima Forty-Nine*?

Majjhima Forty-Nine was mentioned in my study guide that I wrote, and it's fascinating because it pairs really well with *Majjhima One*. It's almost like taking the teachings of *Majjhima One* and turning them into a skit night. Maybe there were even people who played the parts. It was quite fun to see the teachings of the sutta being enacted by these players.

It becomes a drama rather than just a long list of things. Here again, looking at footnotes has been very helpful for me, because in *MN 49*, there's a somewhat famous verse that people who want to say that *nibbāna* is transcendent consciousness use as proof that this is what the Buddha teaches.

It goes like this: "The consciousness that makes no showing." This is Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation. Some people say, "The consciousness that is non-manifest." "And in becoming, about to unbecome"—it's very interesting English—"not claiming being with respect to all."

So people say, "Oh, this means not ordinary consciousness. This is nibbanic consciousness, and this is where the Buddha is pointing out this amazing thing." So here's a little bit of the drama. You see what's at stake.

The great Brahmā is one of the gods, and there were a lot of Brahmās. This one is called Baka Brahmā. One of the goals of some of the religious traditions of the time was to become one with Brahmā, union with Brahmā. For some people, that was considered the ultimate that you could attain.

So the Buddha goes to visit Brahmā in heaven, and Brahmā tells the Buddha:

"I say, of the permanent that is permanent, of the everlasting that is everlasting, of the eternal that is eternal, of the total that is the total. Of what is not subject to pass away, that is not subject to pass away. Of what neither is born, nor ages, nor dies, nor passes away, nor reappears, that neither is born, nor ages, nor dies, nor passes away, nor reappears. And when there is no escape beyond this, I say there is no escape beyond this."

So, to shorten, he's saying he knows what is permanent. He knows there's something that is permanent, lasting forever, never born, never dies, and beyond that there is no escape at all. So he goes on and says, "I'm telling you, Buddha, this you will find no escape beyond, and eventually you will reap only weariness and disappointment."

But here's our paragraph that we've been studying. "But if you will hold to earth, you will be close to me, within my domain, for me to work my will upon and punish. If you hold to water, fire"—all the way up to Brahmā—"you will be close to me, within my domain, for me to work my will upon and punish."

So Brahmā knows the truth. Brahmā is eternal, he knows what's eternal, and he's the most powerful figure in the whole cosmos. You had better get on with it and get close to him, hold to him, or whatever that might be. So this is what this god tells the Buddha.

Then the Buddha says, "I know this. I know all this about you. And if I hold to earth, I shall be close to you, within your domain, for you to work your will and punish. Furthermore, I understand your reach and your sway to extend this far." Baka Brahmā has this much power, this much might, this much influence.

Brahmā says, "Well, how much? How do you know the extent of my power?" The Buddha says, "As far as moon and sun revolve, shining and lighting up the quarters, over a thousand-fold such world does your sovereignty extend. And there you know the high and low, and those with lust and free from lust, the state that is thus and otherwise, coming and going of beings. Brahmā, I understand your reach and your sway to extend thus."

So you have so much power, but now the Buddha is going to say, "But I have more than you." First he says, if those of you read the text, in the middle of all those lists of things that you're supposed to find yourself in, it includes the Streaming Radiance gods, the Refulgent gods—this is Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation—and the Great Fruit gods.

He goes through and says, "I know all those, because I've been there. I've been gods like that in all my lifetimes. I know that." But, Brahmā, what you don't know is that I know more than that. That's the highest extent of the gods that Brahmā knows, but the Buddha knows more gods. He knows even what's beyond that.

Then the Buddha says:

"Having directly known earth as earth, having directly known that which is not partaken of by the earthness of the earth, I do not imagine the earth. I do not imagine to be in earth. I do not imagine to be apart from the earth. I do not imagine earth to be mine. I do not affirm earth. Thus, Brahmā, in regard to the direct knowledge, I do not stand merely on the same level as you. How then can I know less? Rather, I know more than you."

The Buddha just kind of says, "You know, I know more than you." Then he goes through many of the same categories as **Majjhima One**, repeating them. "I know this. I know this. But I'm not imagining this. I know what's beyond that."

Then Brahmā says, "Good sir, that which is not partaken by the allness of all, may your claim not turn out to be vain and empty. The consciousness that makes no showing, and in be-

coming, about to unbecome, not claiming it to be with respect to the all.” Here’s that famous quote.

But it turns out there’s a word missing in one edition, the Pāli Text Society edition of the Pāli text. That word tells you that it’s a quotation of Brahmā, and all the other editions have it clearly. This is Brahmā who says this, not the Buddha. So if you read Bhikkhu Bodhi, it looks like the Buddha is saying this, but in fact it’s Brahmā.

This is a Brahmanical idea: the consciousness that makes no showing. Then Brahmā says, “Well, you think you’re so hot? Let me show you how powerful I am. I’m going to vanish right in front of your eyes.” Then he’s not able to vanish.

The Buddha says, “Well, you can’t seem to vanish. I can vanish in front of you.” The Buddha vanishes like that in front of him. Then Brahmā realizes that maybe he doesn’t know everything after all.

So this is a dramatization of *Majjhima One*. It gives you some flavor of it. But part of the flavor of understanding is that there was a very contentious time in ancient India about these kinds of ideas.

These ideas that there’s a Brahmā, an eternal Brahmā, and that the goal of practice is to become one with Brahmā by becoming Brahmā, coming in Brahmā, realizing Brahmā in you—there’s a wide range of Brahmanical and Upaniṣadic ideas that all center around the idea of *Ātman*. And the *Ātman* is not just a small self with a small “s,” like, “I have a self sitting here. You have a self where you are.”

In terms of my computer, this laptop that’s in front of me is basically my computer, which means it has all my files in it. I need those files to get through my life. You care about me, so you’re not going to take this laptop because of what it all means if it all disappears.

By shorthand, I say it’s mine, but I’m not saying this laptop is me. I don’t take delight in the laptop. I don’t imagine that I’m in the laptop. I see my face on my tile, but I don’t imagine that I’m in the laptop.

I’m not making a self out of the laptop. It’s certainly not making some idea that the eternal self is found in my laptop. Though I’m almost ready to believe that, because I think that my talks and Audio Dharma will be around for a long, long time after I’m dead. So maybe things are more permanent than I realize.

I’m being silly, but I’m not making any kind of self around this. The idea that this is my laptop is an innocent, convenient thing to say. It helps us get along a little bit better. It helps us be

careful with each other's things and not make life more complicated than it has to be.

But there's no making the laptop me. There's no identity being created, especially any identity that suggests some kind of permanence, like a permanent soul-like thing. That belongs to the world of imagination, according to the Buddha.

Maybe what's challenging for the monks who are hearing this text is that it's unimaginable to them that their ultimate ideals, the ideals they grew up with—the ultimate ideas of identity, of a true self and *Ātman*—don't really exist. So the Buddha is saying not only that they don't exist in the permanent way that you're saying, but that it's all an act of imagination: *maññati*.

Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as “conceive.” I think Sujato does it that way as well. I prefer “imagination,” because I've gone through much of the suttas to see how this verb is used, and it's repeatedly used in ways that call on people's imagination.

He presents an imaginary scenario and says, “What do you imagine?” Or, “If you imagine this, what would you do?” He's calling on people's ability to think about something that doesn't exist, that's not real, or not actually happening, in order to have a conversation about some topic. That happens repeatedly.

So I think “conceive” misdirects us a little bit, unless we understand “conceive” in the biblical way. Then we're getting close to the Buddhist way: “conceive” means you're creating something, you're giving birth to something. But these ideas of self and *Ātman*, you can't give birth to that because, in the Upaniṣadic idea, these are everlasting. They're always here.

I've talked quite a bit here as my introduction. Do you want to ask questions, or if you want any follow-up on any of this before I continue? Jane?

So the text that you were reading from, I tried to find on SuttaCentral, but the *MN 49* is not about Brahmā there. So I'm confused about what text you were referencing. That was the conversation between Buddha and Brahmā?

Yeah, it's *MN 49*. Its title is *Brahmanimantanikasutta*, “The Invitation of a Brahmā,” is what Bhikkhu Bodhi has. That's it.

All right. Thank you.

Yeah. Dan, now you want to ask your question again?

Yes. I usually like to look at the big picture. So I'm hearing all this emphasis, as you were saying. There's a lot of emphasis on the teaching of not-self in the sense that there's not

Brahmā, there's no Brahmā. I'm looking at the purpose of that, because the purpose is to let go of craving.

Because if you think that there is a Brahmā out there, then that will keep that rebirth-producing craving. The Buddha knows a lot of stuff, but there are only a few things that he argues against. This is very worthy of arguing against because it keeps rebirth going.

I was wondering if you can comment on this. It seems that the idea of a Brahmā, or an idea of an eternal consciousness, or even in some Mahāyāna schools where the arhat keeps going and there's the Pure Land, seems like it's the same concept because it keeps that hope and craving going. So I was wondering if you can comment on the impression that I'm getting on why it's so important that the Buddha is stressing so much that there is no Brahmā out there.

Yes, I think you're right. It can relate to other similar views. Yeah, I think you're accurate there. The traditional Buddhist idea is that the goal is to no longer be reborn. The mechanism for rebirth has to be brought to an end, and the mechanism is craving, clinging, some kind of attachment.

When we die, there's something that persists, that reaches forward to grab the next life or something. What exactly the mechanism is for rebirth is pretty mysterious for the most part. But it's considered that clinging or craving, in some way, is that mechanism.

Without clinging or craving for being, for existing, then when dying happens, the flame goes out. The flame doesn't go anywhere. It just no longer burns. That's how you get out. That's how you end the cycles of birth and death.

So yes, any kind of belief that prevents you from that kind of deep letting go—and the belief in self is considered to be one of those dangerous beliefs to have. The belief in self here is not the ordinary sense of belief, as in, "I believe that I'm sitting here talking to you." It's the belief that there's something special, a kernel, a little piece inside of us that is the soul.

That soul has a direct equivalence of sorts, or can be identified in a direct way, with what is ultimately the truth of reality itself: the whole cosmos. Brahmā can be seen as a principle that encompasses the whole cosmos. So to understand the *Ātman* is to know that you are the whole cosmos as well.

There's an amazing spirituality, a kind of mysticism, in the Upaniṣadic teachings of a complete identity with the universe, a kind of oneness with the universe perhaps. There are all kinds of ways of talking about it. From the point of view of the Buddha, I think it's fair what you're saying: that kind of belief, that kind of understanding, is an act of imagination.

It's not actually experiencing what's most freeing. To be really free, you have to stop imagining. If you stop imagining, then you start seeing reality more directly.

The core insight that leads to the end of clinging involves a direct insight into things being impermanent. If you believe in permanence, you're not going to be able to see the impermanence. That gets in the way. So there's a lot of effort in the suttas to somehow help people get beyond the belief in permanence, so that filter of permanence is removed and they can begin seeing how things arise and pass.

Does that answer the big-picture question?

Good. Thank you.

So, Beverly.

Yeah. I ran across the sutta on my own years ago, and I interpreted it by myself in something more like dependent origination. It just felt so true to me that it was describing how I see things in my environment, get tangled up in them, and see them as extensions of myself. But you're describing something different.

Is there room for my interpretation in this, or did I simply get it wrong and I'm just describing something else?

I don't think there are any walls to the room of interpretation. But if you mean, is your interpretation compatible with what the text is trying to say, or what the Buddha is trying to teach in the sutta?

In the sutta.

Well, a little bit. I tried to do that in the first part of the introductory study guide, where I tried to restate it slightly so people would see themselves in it. Some people believe that who they are is their thoughts, is their thinking. They're in their thinking, their thinking is in them, or there's thinking and they exist, but they're not their thoughts.

There are all these kinds of things that people do with thinking, emotions, and all kinds of things. There are people who have nature religions now, even Buddhists who have a kind of dharmic nature religion. Their mystical sense is that they stand there in nature and really feel like the separate self disappears.

So it seems Buddhist because there's no separate self that they're focusing on. But they become one with everything. That seems closer to an Advaitic interpretation of it all, in my mind, than a Buddhist one. But I think what you're doing sounds pretty nice.

Okay. All right. Thank you.

Did it help you?

Well, it does. It helps me see what's happening when I go about perceiving things in my environment, and that it could be different. A chair could just be a chair, not a chair that I'm going to sit on, or, "Is it my chair?" or, "What should I do with that chair?" or, "Is it a chair that I like or don't like?" or, "Should I start becoming a chair maker?" You know what I mean?

Maybe there's a world beyond interpreting everything that way.

Yeah. So there's a world beyond imagining all kinds of things in relationship to chairs. Thank you. Thank you, Michael.

Hi. Thank you. If the end of clinging is necessary to be the end of rebirth, what then is a bodhisattva clinging to?

So now, I think Daniya as well earlier, and you, are mixing radically different Buddhist traditions. The question is: Do we really want to lump them together as if they're supposed to be coherent and fit together? Or do we treat them as independent enough that their teaching probably fits a wider context that we don't know, and they don't know about the Theravādin context?

To start blending them together, trying to make them coherent or explain them, is maybe doing an exercise in theology. Do you want to be a theologian?

Sometimes I can't help it.

Yes, yes, and no. If being a theologian is obstructive, then the answer is no.

Okay.

I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the bodhisattva ideal. One of the things that surprised me in doing the research was that I was trying to study the bodhisattva ideal in the earliest historical records that remain of that path. What stood out for me—many things stood out—but one thing was that the later idea that you're supposed to put off your enlightenment until you can save all beings over many lifetimes, that's not emphasized in the earliest layer.

The earliest layer is about becoming a Buddha as quickly as you can. Anyways, you have experience and study in both traditions, Zen and Theravāda. What have you come to for yourself?

For myself, the bodhisattva ideal is phenomenally important for me. I was ordained with the bodhisattva vows. But I don't take them to be literally true.

I say they are metaphors for something very deep in my heart that gives expression to something that I discovered through the practice. They work really well. It's almost like poetry that really expresses the truth of how I like to live. That's how I see it.

But for some Buddhists, what I just said is heretical.

Understood. Thank you.

Thank you for sharing. You don't out me quickly, easily.

I will not. I promise.

It's okay. So then, Debakar. Debakar. Sorry.

Yes. Thank you. I think your final comment kind of answered my question. I was experiencing a bit of the unease that the monks felt at the end of *MN 1*, because I am very much attracted to the bodhisattva ideal, and that seems to have that shade of the Upaniṣadic oneness that *MN 1* completely rejects.

So I was having this dilemma between, what is my path? Or, how would I approach reality?

Yes. Yeah. I appreciate that. That's a dilemma and a challenge.

What I'm moved to say to you in reply is that I had the textbook understanding of the Upaniṣads and how different that is from the Buddhists. I had the textbook understanding from the point of view of the Buddhists. So I think I was somewhat critical of the whole Upaniṣadic idea.

But as I'm learning more and more about the Upaniṣads and the big range, it's actually a very wide range of teaching, because it's not just one teaching. The mysticism and deep meditative experiences that people are having, even these ideas of oneness and identification with all and everything—I don't necessarily agree with the literal aspects of it, but that's not my role, to agree or disagree.

I certainly have tremendous respect that human minds can have these experiences, can touch into this, and have a purity of mind that allows them to have these kinds of experiences. It's not so far away from a very reasonable way of relating to the interdependent co-arising of this universe. We need to have a better understanding of our continuity and connection, which is so deep, in order to save this planet.

So I have a lot of sympathy now for that point of view and respect for it, and for you finding some challenge between Buddhism and your background. One of the ways that can be resolved, if you're interested, is to do a lot of meditation practice.

That's what happened to me, because I did a lot of meditation, long retreats. The longest was an eight-month retreat, and then a three-month retreat. During the three-month retreat, I went to my teacher Joseph Goldstein and said, "I think I need to become a Hindu."

He said, "Why is that?"

Well, I see that everything is impermanent. Everything is changing, except one thing. The only thing that is permanent in my experience, that is unchanging, is consciousness. That's not supposed to be the case in Buddhism, so I think I have to jump ship and become a Hindu.

Joseph just smiled and said, "Just keep looking. Just keep practicing." Then at some point, I saw something that was transformative for me. I could no longer see consciousness as permanent.

In my experience, I looked around and there was nothing in my whole realm of experience that I could see as being permanent. Nothing. Are there things that are permanent outside my experience? That doesn't matter for me, because the world of freedom and being caught, freedom and being not free, is all navigated in the world of our direct experience.

If it's outside of our direct experience, it's kind of irrelevant. When I saw that nowhere in my direct experience could I find anything permanent, that set me free. It certainly set me free from any kind of belief in a permanent self, an *Ātman*.

I'm still not saying that what I experience is true, and I want to have respect for these other religions. But what I'm suggesting to you is that both traditions have a deep meditative practice. I have tremendous faith and trust that if you enter sincerely into these awareness practices, mindfulness practice in a deep way, you'll find a way to come out of your dilemma.

Oh, thank you very much for that very clear exposition. I just want to say that I actually come from a Buddhist Theravāda background, not from a Hindu background. But I also have a great deal of attraction toward the Mahāyāna and the Vajrayāna traditions, and that's where that—

Oh, I see. I see. So then, if you want something about my personal, very personal presentation about this, on the IMC website, under Resources, there's Written Dharma. Somewhere in there, maybe it's Published Articles of mine, you'll find an article about reconciling the arhat and bodhisattva ideal.

Okay. Thank you.

Yeah, so maybe that article would be interesting for you.

Thank you. Victoria.

Yes, I got drawn into that, so I've kind of forgotten what I was going to say, but I'll improvise. What intrigued me several times is that you used the word "mystical." I've been trying to see threads of the apophatic tradition in different world religions and traditions.

Looking back at the sutta, it reminded me very much of a kind of apophatic argument: that we don't find the divine in the earth or the water, going through the elements and then all these different attributes. It's a kind of sweeping aside the dust of these beliefs that are adhered to so dogmatically, and opening up the field to possibility by doing it through a negative argument, an apophatic argument.

You're not going to find a self here or there, anywhere. It seems much more freeing and, at the same time, more convincing. Do you get what I'm driving at?

Yeah, yeah. It's very nice. I appreciate it very much. It makes complete logical sense, what you're saying.

I'm not sure that we should see the early Buddhist tradition, the Buddhist teachings, as apophatic—meaning just a radical negation of everything. That might be too absolutist, might be going too far. There's a lot of kind of—and this idea of not-self can be seen as part of it—but it's possible that we, in various countries, overemphasize the Buddhist teachings on not-self.

One way it's overemphasized is that, rather than translating it as "not-self," it's translated as "no self." Once you have "no self," it's making a metaphysical claim about reality: there is no self. There's no need to go that far.

What apparently is meant is "not self," and it's always very specific. It's always that something is not self. It's an adjective, not a noun. So you start seeing for yourself that you can't find anything that qualifies as a self.

Does that mean that there is no self? That's a philosophical, metaphysical leap, to go from not finding one to saying there is none.

Yeah, but in fact, that's why I was thinking of the apophatic tradition, because the apophatic tradition is also emphatically not saying there is no self, or, depending on the tradition, no God or no whatever it is. It's actually opening up the field by not denying the existence, but rather saying it can't be found. We'll say where it cannot be found, and then it leaves wide open where it in fact could be found.

Great. Very nice. So maybe there is much more commonality than I realized. What I've been

appreciating lately in reading the suttas is how many positive representations there are for people who become arhats.

Rather than just saying, “No, no, no, no,” and leaving it at that, there’s also, “Yes, yes, yes, yes.” There’s *paripuṇṇa*. The word *paripuṇṇa* means full of, in the best senses of the term: full of, fulfilled with, pervaded with all these wholesome states.

An arhat is described as someone who has completely become whole, has become complete in goodness. So yes, there’s no *Ātman* there. There’s no eternal self for them. But there is a positive statement, an understanding that there’s wholesomeness there, and that wholesomeness is not just a little bit of wholesome. It fills the person.

Beautiful. So does that protect Buddhism from being just one other ism?

Thank you.

Great. Thank you. So, RK.

Okay. This whole discussion you just had, the way I look at it, perhaps because of my background, is that it’s a question of whether there’s an “I” or not. I think, in a sense, what is being said is there’s no “I,” right? What I find interesting is that if you look at people like Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi, that’s exactly what they said: there is no “I.”

I know it is not a part of Buddhist practice, but if you look at Ramana Maharshi, when he had the awakening at the age of sixteen, he asked himself a simple question: “Who am I?” He had an almost instantaneous awakening. He left home without telling anybody where he was going and went to a place he had never been.

His whole practice, when he taught people or talked about it, was asking yourself, “Who am I?” and getting the answer that way. In his case, his answer probably was very, very deep, because he left home at the age of sixteen, went to a place where he had never been, started living in a temple, then in the basement of the temple because he was having problems, and went into deep meditative states.

So to me, it almost seems the Buddha is saying exactly the same thing: that there’s no “I.”

Great. It could be that he’s saying almost the same thing. But there is actually no place in the suttas where the Buddha explicitly says there is no “I.” It’s always qualified. It’s always an adjective.

So Buddhists can’t even get attached to the idea, “There is no self.” There’s nothing to attach to. That’s the idea. Maybe that’s similar to what Ramana Maharshi came to.

I love your story about him. But to equate that with the Buddha, I'm not quite sure. I don't know enough about Ramana Maharshi. A quick comparison maybe is not fair for both traditions. So thank you.

Tammy.

I was ambivalent about saying this, but I've been reading the *Dhammapada* and took Kim's class recently, your translation of that. I've also been reading the *Book of Eights*, which was your translation also. The thing that's appealing to me is that the first stanza of the *Dhammapada*, in the first chapter, starts—I hope I'm going to say this correctly in your words—"All experience is a perception of mind, led by mind, made by mind."

As a starting point for thinking about how Brahmins lay out all these dimensions of the big, ultimate self, the Brahṃā, the *Ātman*, including all of our words and elaborations, I think they are trying to label something that's actually ineffable, that I think the Buddha was pointing to. It's interesting to me to remember that the container of all of this, including the arguing back-and-forth elements of most of the suttas that I've read with yours and Kim's direction and from classes, is that my mind is trying to grasp.

It's creating the experience of something I'm trying to grasp that is ineffable and very difficult to apply language to. That's a good tiller for my ship.

Very good. I like this. Thank you very much. Maybe you were a little reluctant when you started to say this because you were afraid of what I might say.

No, I'm just talking up. It's vulnerability city. That's my deal.

You're not worried about what I might say. So then I'll say it.

Go. You go.

I think that there's no place in the suttas, for example, where anything ineffable is talked about. That's imagination. That's creating something that doesn't have to be created, as some idea about what doesn't have to have an idea about.

The Buddha is actually quite clear and very precise about what is—what's the opposite of ineffable? Effable? What is? It's my word for something that's—

Yeah, no, ineffable. I know what that means, but what's the opposite word for it?

Something that can be labeled. I don't know. Explainable.

Yeah, something like that. He's very clear that some things can be explained very well and very precisely. It's possible to understand suffering and clinging very precisely. It's possible

to see clearly the arising and passing of phenomena.

It's clearly possible to see the release of suffering, the release of clinging, and know we're not clinging anymore, and see clinging happening again. Nothing more is needed. Whether the rest of the world is ineffable or not becomes just an interesting thing in a philosophy class.

Okay.

Does that make sense?

Yes, absolutely. Thank you.

Sylvia, hi.

Hi. I'm going back to *Majjhima Number One*, and something that has stuck with me—I don't know if it's a translation—is “taking delight is the root of suffering.” Can you talk about that? Because I take delight in being free from the self, or taking delight in the present moment.

Yes. Thank you. This is a very good question that I've struggled with for a long time, trying to understand, because there's this one word, *nandi*, that the Buddha treats as a problematic state, whatever it might be. The most obvious translation is something like joy, *ānanda*, just a lot of words like this.

But there are plenty of words in the Buddha's teachings that focus on happiness, different kinds of joy, pleasing the mind, and all kinds of wonderful things. So there must be something else going on. The reason is that *nandi*, over and over again, is something the Buddha is critical of.

There are two things that might be going on. One is that the Buddha is regularly redefining Brahmanical terms for a different purpose. *Ānanda* and *nandi* in the Brahmanical Upanishads were kind of their ultimate, of sorts.

So maybe he was choosing that word on purpose to redefine it, or maybe it has another meaning that we don't know. In trying to translate it, I tried for a while to translate it as “relish,” because relish is kind of like overindulging in something and enjoying it.

Yes, exactly.

So I came to a kind of middle way, and you have to read the English carefully. I don't say they delight in it; they take delight. The word “take” here is important, because that's greedy. There's a greed in it, and you're not supposed to have that kind of greed in it.

That's my way of coming to terms with it. It may not be the best way, but somehow we have to see the word *nandi* as meaning something different than our usual idea of delight.

Okay. Thank you.

Thank you, Gil. So maybe we should stop now, but maybe we'll take one more question or comment. So, Vandana.

Yeah, thank you, Gil. Thank you so much for taking my question. I'm new to IMC teachings. I liked Joseph, listening to Joseph, and recently I heard your *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, which was very inspiring to me.

My question to you is: having deep meditative experiences leads toward saying there is also no consciousness that is permanent, and you just mentioned that, which made me very curious to hear your experience. Can you please give some explanation? How did you see that consciousness also changes?

I know that when we sleep, we don't know what is happening in the sleep time. But in meditative experiences, even bliss, joy, and serenity are seen by one continuous consciousness, or whatever. So can you please speak more to your own personal experience? I would really appreciate that. Thank you.

We're at the closing time, so I'm almost freed from the question. Sorry. But I'll do it.

I was sitting a long retreat. My mind was very still, very quiet, with very little mental activity going on. It was very peaceful. What was almost just left was some sense of consciousness and a few other small things.

Then, at some point, consciousness completely disappeared in a way that was surprising and impactful. Wow, what is that? It wasn't that I went unconscious, but it wasn't that I was conscious. It wasn't that I was neither conscious nor unconscious.

Everything stopped in a certain way. The next time I was able to be cognizant enough to understand what had happened, that's when I went, "Wow." I said, "Now I understand that consciousness is not an enduring, permanent phenomenon. It's just one more thing that can arise and pass."

More important than that, this is the phenomenally deep resolution of the topic of suffering. This is the end of suffering.

Yeah, I guess one can only experience it, right?

Yeah, yeah. You don't have to. It's not a matter of believing me or—

No, I'm just saying that. You asked for something personal, so—

Yeah. No, I'm just saying because it's very difficult to comprehend. Because if I'm gone, who is the one who was aware, who is saying later, "Wow, what was it?" It's kind of very difficult to comprehend. But I'm guessing that because, as your meditations start to deepen, there are so many things that are brand new, and I think this must be one of them. Thank you.

Yeah. This kind of question is one many people ask. You're asking a reasonable question to ask. But after that experience, I'm not inclined to see my world in terms that you used.

Who is asking the question? Who is saying, "Wow?" That has become completely uninteresting and irrelevant. There's just, "Wow." Very good. That's enough. I don't need to know any more than that.

Thank you. Thank you so much. I appreciate that a lot.

Okay. So I hope that this sutta is coming a little more alive for you and you see how rich it is, especially in terms of it being, said politely, a dialogue with one of the religious traditions at the Buddha's time, or in ancient India. It's so strongly a critique of the Brahmins that one theory scholars have is that it wasn't really a literal teaching from the Buddha, but something composed very carefully several hundred years later, when Brahmanism was on the ascent in northern India.

At the time of the Buddha, Brahmanism was quite strong in western India, but not so strong where the Buddha was. Some of it was there. But by the year 100 BCE, Brahmanism had really spread across all of northern India and was a dominant thing.

So the Buddhists had to contend with it more. They composed these very clear suttas, sacred scriptures, that offered an alternative to Brahmanical ideas. Then someone, an editor of the *Middle Length Discourses*, decided to put this text at the beginning. That wasn't the Buddha who made that choice, that's for sure. But someone thought it was important.

It's interesting in that regard that the long discourses of the Buddha begin very similarly with a text that, after a long introduction about ethics, goes through sixty-two different ancient Indian religious views that the Buddha wanted to—he doesn't come straight out and criticize them, but he says these are the views of people who don't understand. Maybe it's very polite.

At the end of that sutta, he offers the liberating insight of what's actually needed, what you need to understand and see. At the heart of that is understanding that things arise and pass, understanding dependent co-arising. That's what the Buddha has to offer.

That's not an ineffable thing. It's pointing to something very specific and clear that's liberat-

ing. What the Buddha wants to do is not create a positive belief system, not make a claim, but clear the mind away from the kinds of mindsets and ideas that interfere with direct seeing for yourself.

Then he encourages people to see in a way where that seeing is supposed to set the mind free, the heart free. So it's a very similar text in that way: the purpose of the text, how it's contending with the early Indian ideas, a whole bigger set of them. Brahmā makes an appearance there, and it's almost one of the funniest things in the suttas.

If you read *Majjhima One*, you might laugh. Then you'll see at the very end that the Buddha offers his teaching. You see how radically different it is than the emphasis that was given earlier in the text.

So I hope this was nice for you. I certainly appreciated the chance to delve into this. To write the study guide for this class was really fun too, to get a sense of it. One of the consequences of this was a much fuller appreciation of how much dialogue there was, and probably influence in both directions, between the Brahmanical religions of the time and Buddhism.

So thank you all very much. There are a few of you who are certificate students who will stay on now, and we'll have a further discussion about the certificate program and other things. Thank you.