Dear Dharma Daddy,
If There's No Self, How Does Reincarnation Work?
by Roger Corless

Dear Dharma Daddy:
How do you square Tibetan teachings on what happens in the bardo with classical Buddhist teaching on anatta. I mean, if the present Dalai Lama is the 14th-bou?

- Patrick Micel, a Soto Zen monk/practitioner living in Provence

Cher Patrick:

This comes up as often as, well, some other things that come up a lot. It's a serious matter, and Buddhists have discussed it at length throughout the ages. All Buddhist lineages have striven to maintain the teaching on the lack of inherent existence of persons at the same time as they have maintained the conventional existence of persons and the reality of rebirth. It's an issue in Theravada as much as in Tibetan Buddhism, and the best scholarly treatment of the subject, Selfless Persons, by Steven Collins (Cambridge University Press, 1982) is a study of the Theravada viewpoints. The first thing to notice is what is being denied. The Buddha did not speak English (it hadn't been invented back then); he spoke Magadhi which, most probably, was a spoken form of the literary language known as Pali, and so he did not say that there is no self, he said that there is no atta. Atta is the Pali form of the Sanskrit word atman and it can mean anything from self in a merely grammatical sense, like the English word "I" in the sentence "I am going to the store" to a technical word in various philosophical systems. Similar words in Sanskrit are pudgala and purusha, both of which have been translated into English as "person." The Diamond Sutra lists all these words and denies that anything exists which corresponds to any of them. This is very slippery linguistic territory, in English as well as Pali and Sanskrit. The Buddhist terms anatta (Pali) and anarman (Sanskrit) have been translated as "no soul" and "no ego" as well as "no self." The terms self (and its big brother, Self), soul, ego, and person can all be, and indeed have been, the subject of lengthy disquisitions. So we need to be precise.

When Buddhism denies the existence of atman in the term anatman it is using the term in a technical philosophical sense to mean atman as an
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good Socratic fashion.

Two other metaphors which are used to demonstrate how we can refer to a thing without implying an eternal, unchanging essence are a river and a candle flame. Where is the Mississippi River? Is it located above the Twin Cities or at the New Orleans delta, or somewhere in between? Is it the water, and if so, which water molecule is it? Even more mysterious, what happens to the Missouri when it joins the Mississippi? Does it vanish? If so, how? When we analyze a river like this we realize that we designate a certain dynamically changing, interdependently arising, combination of water, earth, and so on as the Mississippi and another as the Missouri. Both rivers definitely exist, but we do not find anything essential that we can cling to, lift up and say, "Here in my hand is the Father of Waters!"

The metaphor of the candle flame helps us understand how Buddhism can teach rebirth while denying that there is a thing which is reborn. When a flame is passed from one candle to another, is it the same flame, or a different flame? The flame is constantly changing, and it changes from depending on the wick of the first candle to depending on the wick of the essential core of a person’s being which is beyond, or beneath, body and mind, which is eternal, not subject to any change whatsoever. Such an atman is said to be a fantasy. Like someone from Missouri, the Buddha says, "If you have an atman, show me!" We respond by asserting our feeling that we are unique, that we are different from other persons and other objects. We have a sense of self. It is important to note that no form of Buddhism denies this. My sense of being uniquely me is not an illusion. The trouble begins when we search for the basis of this sense of self.

In a late Pali text called The Questions of Milinda (Milindapañha), which, having been composed in a Hellenized part of the Indian Subcontinent, is structured like a Socratic dialogue, the fall guy, King Milinda (possibly a Pali form of Menander) asserts that he has a self, but the interrogator, the monk Nagasena, says that he, Nagasena, does not.

"How remarkable!" says the king.

"Who is the nobody who is standing before me?" In reply, Nagasena asks the king if he came in a chariot, or on foot? In a chariot, obviously - he’s a king, after all. So where is the chariot? Is the body the chariot, or is the wheel the chariot, or the axle, or what? Well, no, those are parts of the chariot. So is the combination of the body, wheels, axle, and so forth, the chariot? No, because we can still say that a chariot exists even without one or more of those parts. It might be a broken chariot, but it would still be a chariot. "Ha!" says Nagasena, turning to the assembly.

"How remarkable! His majesty says he arrived in a chariot, and yet he cannot show me that chariot!"

"But," says the king peevishly, "I really did come in a chariot, you know; it really does exist!" Just so, observes Nagasena, chariot is a name, a designation, a conventional label, but in reality there is no such thing as a chariot, existing as an independent and eternal essence. And this is true also of the self.

"Very good, Nagasena!" says the king, wrapping up the dialogue in good Socratic fashion.
second candle. So it is not the same flame. But the flame is not extinguished and re-lit, so it is not a different flame. Logically, we must conclude that the flame of the second candle is neither the same as nor different from the flame of the first candle. There is a continuity: the causes and conditions connecting the two flames make them broadly predictable, but there is nothing which passes from one flame to the next. The second flame enters into the inheritance, as it were, of the first flame.

Applying this to a person, we can see how there can be distinct individuals who are yet and never the same from moment to moment. A person is a karmically cohesive flow of body and mind, what Theravada calls a stream of becoming (bhava sota). Death is merely a more dramatic change than the change from a baby to an adult. The components of the person, the five clusters or skandhas, separate and disperse at death, but the fruiting of karma continues and results in the arising of another set of five clusters, that is, in the birth of a being who is neither the same as nor different from the previous being. Although the texts do not put it quite like this, we might say that what passes from life to life is a kind of mental energy which bears the seeds of karma. Both Theravada and Mahayana (according to the Yogachara school) teach that the continuity between lives, and indeed our continuity from moment to moment within a single lifetime, is a function of a deep consciousness.

Theravada calls this bhavanga, which is often translated into English as "the unconscious," although Collins (in the book cited) warns us that such a translation, with its Freudian connotations, is misleading.

What about the bardos and the succession of Dalai Lamas? Bardo is a Tibetan word that can refer to any state of between-ness. A mountain pass, for example, is a bardo between two valleys, and a single lifetime is a bardo between birth and death. Tibetan Buddhism teaches six bardos: of life, of dreams, of meditation, of dying, of reality as it is (dharmata) and of becoming (entry into the next life). There is a continuity of the person in each bardo, and each has a body associated with the mind appropriate to a particular bardo. In dreams and during rebirth the body is said to be made of subtle matter and is called a wind body. Simply put, the bardo teaching is a way of understanding the flow of body-mind through life and across rebirths. It should be noted that Theravada, while it might accept the existence of the first three bardos, does not accept the existence of the bardos associated with rebirth. According to Theravada, the last moment of consciousness in one life is followed immediately by the first moment of consciousness in the next life.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama is said to be a tulku, or human form (nirmana-kaya), of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, the form which compassionate mind takes when it manifests as a being. As an aspect of pure mind or reality as it is, Avalokiteshvara is quite aware that although he exists he does not have an atman. This realization allows him to manifest in many places at many times in many bodies, sometimes all at once. His Holiness the Karmapa, the head of the Karma Kagyu lineage, is also said to be a tulku of Avalokiteshvara. The activity of compassionate mind has no boundaries. It is distinctive to the Tibeto-Mongolian form of Buddhism to identify specific persons as tulku (Mongolian: hubilgan), but it did not always do this, and it may cease to do it at some time in the future. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama has said he may be the last, but if so, that does not mean that Avalokiteshvara will no longer manifest. In China, where Avalokiteshvara is called Kuan Yin and is typically, though not always, female, she inhabits humans only temporarily or, more typically, appears in dreams, visions, and apparitions.

All of the above may sound very philosophical, and it is, but like Buddhist philosophy at its best, it has a practical result. When we realize that, although we exist, there is nothing essential about our existence, we can live without fear. If I am praised I won't get a big head and if I am blamed I won't get angry and depressed, for who is this "I" who is being praised or blamed? It is someone I used to be, either moments or lifetimes ago. I enter into that being's inheritance and I am responsible for the being's actions, but I am not that being. I react as if it were a close friend, to whom I am tied by a sacred bond, who is being praised or blamed. Most importantly, I will not fear death because I will not cling to life and, not clinging to life, I can be open to the clear light of liberation.

Send your questions for Dharma Daddy to GBE, 2215-R Market Street, PMB 456, San Francisco CA 94114 or (preferably) by e-mail to <tashi5@juno.com>.
Volunteers Needed

Those who attend the GBF Sunday morning meditation and dharma talk may not be aware of all the small (and, in some cases, not so small) tasks that must be performed to keep the sangha alive and thriving. GBF survives solely through the volunteer efforts of its members. At this moment, there are a number of important tasks for which GBF needs committed volunteers. These tasks include:

- recording team (to record the Sunday morning dharma talks)
- pot luck coordinator
- mailing party coordinator and team
- newsletter lay-out team
- GBF mailbox checker

None of these tasks should involve any huge commitment in time, but they are all very important to help keep GBF an active and nurturing community. As the old adage goes, "you get what you give." If you are looking for a way in which you can connect on a deeper level with the GBF sangha, volunteering for one of these tasks is an excellent opportunity. Please consider it. If interested, please contact Clint Seiter

BAMIYAN

by Mark S. Ritzenhein

Bamiyan Bamiyan
Standing idols
tower high as the sky
every darkened monks cave
a gaping black mouth
hungry for nourishment —
knowledge of the self.
Are there even any
ghosts left in this
long-abandoned stead?
Where are the candles
and the lotus blossoms?
Do the pigeons attain
ecstasy while roosting
on such holy heads?

Emptiness;
there is no atman
no self
no mind
no place
no knowing
no remembrance
no sitting
no practice
no incense
no attachment —
save one:
Crush idolatry!

Hard-packed
stony sand
de-natured,
atomized —
quartzite grains
pile up
like salt
at Omar's feet.

If the Mountain
cannot come to Mohammed
then Buddha shall
come in its stead.
A point must be made
but discern it:
What is the point

of anti-idolatry
if it only means
losing His head?

Enraged curators
explode in a roar;
Buddhists can't make up
their no-minds;
how can one lead a
pure life when
life is filled with
pious impurities?

Bamiyan! Bamiyan!
There are many
legless children
in Afghanistan;
one-legged statues
now represent them
in their own plight.

Bamiyan! Bamiyan!
It's only so much
sandstone —
isn't it more
important to exist
simply, without a
contexture?

Bamiyan! Bamiyan!
What would Buddha
say and do?
"Stop fighting the
demon images in
one's own mind!"

The imperators of
commerce
caravanning silk
in Bactria upon
the humpy backs
of Bactrian camels
respite in the valley
shadowed by the
godly images of the
god of life
philosophy.

A middle pathway
in a middling time
in a middle kingdom
swallowed and digested
by muddled
circumstances
statuary monumence
the only evidence
left behind.

The Middle Path in
a skillful mind in a
Western Paradise
swallowed and digested
by bloody
circumstances
statuary excrescence
the only evidence
left to mourn.

Fundamentalism
and Asceticism
stride manfully
forward,
armed to the teeth
and teeth in the arms
If you seek liberation
you won’t find it
in blowhards.

Bamiyan! Bamiyan!
Mortars flame
rockets fire
ideas tumble
who will remember
humankind when
earth, air, water, fire
crumble all our
folliced vains?

Bamiyan! Bamiyan!
Forgotten niches
recalled too late
Forget about images —
Be present in the pain
forged by ignorants
foundering in hate.

Bamiyan Bamiyan
What use is
blowing off
the idols’ heads
when all the idols’
worshipers are long,
long dead to
Buddhism and
their children’s
children’s children’s
children now gnaw on
Islam’s bitter bread?

(The tragedy of war and
hateful self-destruction)

— 3/06/01

“Bamiyan” was written before
September 11th. About it, Mark
Ritzenheim says, “My poems are
artistic endeavors. I feel compelled to
write them as an honest expression of
my feelings at the time. They are not
censored or circumscribed to satisfy
any sense of propriety, but reflect the
struggle of ideas and spiritual faith
within my own mind. Some people
may take offense, or presume that I
am attacking another religion, Islam.
This is not my intention. I only
intend to express my thoughts about
the inflexibility and folly of
fundamentalist thinking, which can
occur with any religious faith. The
circumstances of [this poem] happen to
involve what I see as the mis-
application of Islamic faith and
practice. For balance, I can cite the
newswire photo of a Sri Lankan
Buddhist monk beating upon a
burning effigy of either an Islamic
cleric (Mullah Mohammed Omar?) or
Osama bin Laden, which appeared at
the time of the Bamiyan destructions.
I found the photo equally dismaying,
and no comfort at all.”

Pen Pals for Prisoners
Anyone interested in
Corresponding with gay Buddhist
Prisoners should contact Don
Wiepert

Prisoners Urgently Need
Buddhist Books
The most frequent request from
gay Buddhist prisoners, other
than for pen pals, is for books. In
many prisons, they are circulated
among small sitting groups and
are used in daily and group
practice. All books are welcome,
particularly those suitable for
beginners. If you have any
available, please call Don Wiepert

Don will
arrange to collect them and get
them to prisoners.
Un-Happy Buddha
by Mark Rizenhein

Poor, radiant concrete thing
sitting in broken repose
just above your green,
scummy, stagnant pond—
bathtub for indigent
avian itinerants.

How did your fabled life
come to such ignoble
suffering?
Were you toppled
from holy power?
Squatted upon by
a particularly stactic
pigeon?
Crafted from
un-reinforced cement?
Your shoulders slump;
your broad, unassailable chest
is rent in lightning-bolt cracks
your perfected posture
is thrown off-center
how can you practice
meditation with such a
severely aching back?

Your noble head holds
its imperturbable
countenance—
a Mona Lisa smile
from way, way, way back.
One suspects that beauty
and perfected wisdom run
on parallel mystical tracks.

Your gray lotus throne
with its bright green skirt
arrayed in a sickening swirl
atop dark, dirty water.
What happenstance fate
or karmic restoration
led you to such an
improbable station as
this one, here
in the blowsy false
garden of bucolic antiquities,
amid live oaks and
long-dead economies?

Life is all suffering, it has been said
by the living likeness of you.
But his back wasn't broken
and his circumstances
were somewhat less dreadful
than the moated morass
which you find yourself
bound to.

Mara has done this to you;
who else would have?
A boy with a bat-stick,
a klutz with weak hands?
A big swarming flock of
migrating towhees?
A primitive-baptist
gardener zealot?

Still, you remain
unmovable image
concrete example
of quiet perfection.
Earthquake in birdbath,
sun-dappled shade
man-made object
mold-covered platform
silently contemplating
your rainwater reflection.

Remind me again
of the Four Noble Truths
the cessation of suffering
in spite of the cracks
duckweed and algae
that are part of life, too.

Crumbling, intact
serene, undisturbed
disturbed, unrelenting
discarded, unchanging
composed, decomposing
broken, unbending.

Oh, Lord Buddha image,
if you could see yourself now
for how you really are
instead of meant to be
imagine what it might be like
in heaven on earth
amid the live-oak trees
dry brown leaves
outdoor "hamam" for
bathing birds
collapsing perfection
with its wisdom preserved.

Rural Life Museum,
Baton Rouge, LA 11/02/01

Photo: Richard Roth
Sittings, followed by a talk or discussion, are held every Sunday between 10:30 AM and 12 NOON at the San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett Street (near 21st St between Mission and Valencia). MUNI: 14 Mission or 49 Van Ness-Mission, alight at 21st St, walk ½ block. BART: 24th and Mission, walk 3½ blocks. Parking: on street (meters free on Sundays) or in adjacent New Mission Bartlett Garage (75¢ first hour, then $1 per hour, $5 max.) The Center is handicapped accessible.

The December GBF speakers are as follows:

December 2: Jim Wilson
December 9: Mark Johnson
December 16: Jay Earley
December 23: Open discussion
December 30: Open discussion

The January GBF speakers are as follows:

January 6: Jim Wilson
January 13: Scott Hunter
January 20: Open discussion
January 27: Cathleen Williams

1Mark is an authority of the I Ching, which he will talk about.

2Jay will talk about the Diamond Approach of the Ridhwan Center

3Cathleen Williams is a monk at the San Francisco Zen Center.

Steering Committee Meeting
The December Steering Committee Meeting will be Thursday, December 13, at 7:30 p.m., at the home of Lee Robbins,

Local Dharma Centers
A list of local Dharma centers is available on our website and as a handout at our Sunday sittings. We encourage members to explore what these Dharma centers can offer to their practice.

GBF Needs Volunteer Hosts
GBF needs you to contribute your services to the Sangha as a Host for Sunday morning sittings. Sign up to help provide a hospitable setting for our members to come together. Call Justin Hecht for information:

Your Thrift Store Donations Earn Money for GBF
GBF members can donate their quality cast-offs to the Community Thrift Store (CTS) and GBF will receive a quarterly check based on the volume of items sold. This is a great way to support our Sangha, and the community. So far this year we have received over $800 through members’ generosity. Bring your extra clothing and other items to CTS at 623 Valencia St between 10am and 5pm, any day of the week. The donation door is around the corner on Sycamore Alley (parallel to and between 17th and 18th) between Valencia and Mission. Tell the worker you are donating to GBF. Our ID number is 40. Information 415.861.4910.

GBF Website
www.gaybuddhist.org
By the power and truth of this practice,
may all beings have happiness
and the causes of happiness,
may all be free from sorrow
and the causes of sorrow,
may all never be separated from the sacred happiness
which is without sorrow,
and may all live in equanimity,
without too much attachment
or too much aversion,
and live believing in the equality
of all that lives.
—GBF Dedication of Merit

How to Reach Us
GBF Sangha
Send correspondence and address changes to: GBF, 2215-R Market
Street, PMB 456, San Francisco,
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<gbfsf@hotmail.com>. For 24-
hour information on GBF
activities or to leave a message:
415.974.9878.

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