

The Heart of Buddhism (Anattā)

by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

A Dhamma lecture given at Suan Mokkh on 9 February 1990

In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhadāsa gave regular lectures during the monthly international retreats held at Suan Mokkh and then Suan Mokkh International Dharma Hermitage. Usually, Ajahn spoke in Thai and Santikaro Bhikkhu interpreted into English live. Audio recordings are now available from www.suanmokkh.org and www.bia.or.th. The following is a transcription generously made by a Dhamma volunteer. If you noticed possible improvements to the text and would like to contribute, please kindly contact the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok (suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com).

Today we'll speak about the heart of Buddhism. You come here in order to study about Buddhism, so it's necessary for us to take a look at the heart of Buddhism.

The heart of Buddhism is the single short word *anattā*.

This word must be translated very specifically. It means simply not-*attā* or no-*attā*. *Attā* means 'self.' So this means 'not-self' or 'no-self.' This doesn't mean that there is nothing. It just means that of all the things that there are, none of them are self. All of them are not-self.

Therefore we ought to live with the awareness or the sensitivity that there is nothing which is an *attā*, an *atman*, a self or a soul. We're alive but can't find any of these selves or souls around.

Hearing this many of you are thinking 'well that's impossible,' 'things aren't that way.' So this is something that we have to take a look at. First of all, until we see that this is the only way we can live in order to be free of *dukkha*. And second we need to see that this is absolutely possible. That there is nothing naturally in the way of this awareness.

We can take the approach that Buddhism is the last speaker on this subject. After centuries of people saying that self is like this or the soul is like that, and

engaging in such metaphysical ideas and arguments. Then Buddhism came along and said ‘don’t worry about all that – there is in fact no self, no soul.’

In fact there are other traditions, schools, and approaches which discuss *anattā*, although they use different terms. Some of them come rather close to *anattā* (not-self) as it is taught in Buddhism. But none of them are quite the same.

One of the other approaches is to speak of ‘not-self,’ saying that there is absolutely nothing that is self, that there is no self. And to push this to the extremist position that there is no self – there is nothing – which is to differ from the Buddhist approach. Which is to say that there is something which we feel to be our self – this life here – but it is in fact not-self. But there is something that one can call oneself, but in fact it is not-self.

In fact in all animals there is some sense of self. In human beings as well as in other animals, there is some kind of feeling that one’s own life is some kind of self. In animals it is very instinctual, very basic. Human beings – once we are born – have the same instinctual sense, or sense or appearance of self. And then this will, in human beings, develop further as we grow and mature. So Buddhism does not deny this, that all of us carry around with us an instinctual sense of self. Buddhism does not argue with that.

We can say or we should say, actually we must say that in the womb the infant or the fetus has no sense of self at all. But once born and then once the infant starts to experience the world through sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and mental sensations, then there starts to arise feelings of positive and negative. And then from this arises the sense of self, the sense of ego. And so in this way ego – or ‘I’ and ‘mine’ – develops eventually after birth until it becomes more and more a dominant part of thought, as is the case with all of us sitting here.

The young infant is able to drink milk from the mother’s breast. And of course this milk tastes good and the infant is satisfied. This satisfied gratified feeling becomes positive for the infant. And so there develops in the infant the misconception that ‘I am the taster’ or ‘this is delicious for me,’ ‘this is good for me.’ And so from this pleasant experience – which becomes positive – then the infant ends up with the concept of ‘I this,’ ‘I that.’ And the same happens with many other kinds of experience.

This is very interesting that first there just arises natural experience – the sense of liking the milk, of feeling positive about the experience. And out of that comes self. This is something that very few people will believe, that the sense of self comes after the experience. Most of us think it comes first.

The words – *‘the actor is born after the action’* – what do you think about that? According to the way most people think we were born a long time ago. And so according to our logic the actor must be born before the action. The way we think is you have to have an actor for there to arise any kind of action. You say this to a child – if you say the actor is born after the action – the child won’t understand what we are saying. But this is the fact. The actor is just a concept we create out of the action. And so the actor is born afterwards. If we see this, then we’ll have no trouble understanding what is meant by ‘not-self.’

Other religions or points of view may teach something different. They may say that the self, the ego, the soul – whatever they call it – came at birth, or that the self and soul existed in the womb. And there are even some who say that some self or soul existed in past lives and has been reincarnating over and over again into the present life. There are others that say such a thing and they are welcome to believe what they want. But as far as we can tell, the reality is that this self, this soul that everybody talks about arises through action. It is nothing but a sense of the one who acts – the actor – and this comes out of the action. Whenever there is some sensual activity – some experience of the world – that involves action. And out of that comes the sense that the one who experiences, experiences the pleasures, the pain, the positive, the negative. So the actor comes from the action itself, not the other way around. This is something worth studying in great detail.

Some schools will even say that there is an ego or soul in trees – that in plants and trees there is some kind of soul or self. There are some that even go so far as to say that in a rock or stone there is a dormant kind of soul. Of course they are welcome to hold whatever views they wish. But we should be clear that Buddhism denies such ideas totally.

To look at this from the other side, the negative view. When the child when the infant eats or drinks something that doesn’t taste good, then there arises to the child the experience of tasting bad and not liking it. And then a negative kind of ego is born. This negative kind of ego is angry, upset, because it tastes bad. So it works in

both ways, in a positive way and a negative way. But always the experience and then the experiencer arise as a misconception in the mind. Or take the child who is walking and carelessly bumps into a chair and hurts its leg. Then the child gets angry and kicks the chair. This is really absurd although it is quite common. Because of the painful experience there arises this negative kind of self, this angry ego. And it not only projects this sense of ‘I hurt,’ ‘I am angry,’ but also turns the chair into a self. This kind of foolishness sees the chair as some self that can be punished and so the child kicks it. These are some examples of how negative experiences also stir up ego (*attā*).

Or another child, when it bumps into the chair it feels pain. But instead of getting angry this child becomes afraid, sits down on the floor and cries. This is just another kind of negative self. Instead of an angry ego, this child is afraid. There is a frightened ego, a sorry ego, and there is *dukkha*. Whatever kind of ego it is, it arises in the same basic way. There is some action or activity, and out of that arises the idea that there must be an actor. The ego may take different forms – angry, happy, sad, afraid, whatever – but it arises in the same way, out of an action, out of the experience.

So living in the world there are, of course, pleasant positive experiences. So we get things that satisfy us. And once we are satisfied, gratified by things – whatever they may be – there arises the liking of that or loving it. Once there is this love towards things that make us happy or satisfy us, then there arises the sense of ‘the lover.’ That is – there is love, there must be someone who loves. I love, or I am the one who loves this, or I am the lover of this. So once again – love comes first, then the idea of the one who loves.

On the other hand, if for the experiences which are painful and unpleasant – the one’s that do not satisfy us, which frustrate us or disappoint us – then there arises a negative feeling which we don’t like. And then there comes anger. And then out of this anger there is the ‘I’ who ‘am angry.’ ‘I am angry.’ The ‘angry one’ is born out of the anger. The ego, the ‘angry ego,’ comes out of this negativeness, this angeriness. Not the other way around.

Hatred is the same way. There is some negativeness, some disliking. Then there arises the emotion of hatred. And out of this, the sense of the ‘one who hates.’ ‘I hate.’

Fear is the same. There is an unpleasant experience and then fear arises. And out of this fear, the idea of 'I am afraid.' The child is afraid of the chair or the shadows or whatever. It is always the same way. The actor arises out of the action, is born from the action. This doesn't make much sense but it's a fact, just the way our minds work – that the action is born before the actor.

One interesting example is from people who experiment with fish. There is one kind of fish which is rather large, kind of fierce and likes to eat small fish. So there is this other kind which of small fish. And the experimenter puts a piece of glass in the tank separating the fish. So you've got a big tank with a glass in the middle. On the one side is the big fish and it looks and sees the little fish which it likes to eat. So it swims quickly towards the little fish and bumps into the glass. And it bumps into it again and again and again. And it almost kills itself trying to get to the little fish. And it does this until it becomes afraid – not of the glass, it still doesn't see the glass. But it thinks it becomes afraid of the little fish. So that even when the glass is removed, this big fish won't go near the little one. If it sees them it swims away. So here is an example of how the sense of self is born out of the painful experience arising here. And then even in the fish, a very rudimentary sense of self which is frightened.

And all of this comes out of the fish's ignorance. This big fish just didn't know what was going on. And then out of that created the fear and the ego. So we should say right now very clearly that the fear is not real, the ego is not real. Both of them arise from ignorance. They don't exist, they are not really real in any sense.

Another thing we ought to look at is excitement. Once there arises excitement in our minds – once our minds get excited – then there arises the 'I am excited,' the 'excited self.' When there is this excited self, we go around all over looking for something to answer to this excitement. People go to sporting events. They watch boxing. They go to acrobatic feats, circuses, shows because of this excitement. It is possible that some of you, even many of you, came to Thailand because of this excited self.

So we've looked at some examples of love, anger, hatred, fear and excitement. These five examples are enough to make it clear that the actor arises out of the action or the activity.

This brings us to a point that all of you must consider very carefully. We now have two basic perspectives. There is the perspective of Buddhism that life is ‘not-self,’ that in life there is no existing, lasting self. There is just this sense of ego which arises in the mind momentarily out of our various actions and experiences. But there is no lasting self that perpetuates from moment to moment. The other view is that there is a self that we’re born with or even before that. And that this self is always waiting there to experience things.

So the Buddhist understanding is that the ‘self’ arises out of action and experience. The other is the belief that the self is the cause of actions and experiences. There are these two ways of understanding life. And now it is up to you to look at them closely and figure out which one is most scientific. Of these two ways of understanding, which is more scientific? And more important, which of these will lead to the end of *dukkha*? Of these two ways of understanding life, which one will end *dukkha*? This is something you have to examine on your own and consider on your own.

Something that will help you tremendously in understanding the fact of not-self is to study dependent origination. You’ve already had this explained to you in preparation for practicing mindfulness with breathing. The more we understand how the flow of dependent origination arises and proceeds, the more clear the reality of not-self becomes.

In Buddhism, dependent origination makes it clear that the basis what’s going on is that as living human beings we have eyes, ears, nose, tongues, bodies and minds – which are the six sense organs. And then there are sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and mental experiences – the six sense objects. When these six different pairs inter-react, then there arises sense consciousness via the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. This is the basic experiencing of life.

Now in Buddhism it should be clearly understood that this consciousness that arises is just a reaction to the interaction of the sense organs and sense objects. There are other views which say that consciousness is some kind of self or soul that’s always waiting in order to experience the world. But in Buddhism consciousness is just a reaction to the interaction of sense organs and sense objects.

These other schools, these non-Buddhist schools, say that consciousness is the activity of the soul, of the self, or whatever they call it – that this is some product or result of the self or soul. But in Buddhism, consciousness is taken to be a new reaction. It is something that has just happened anew as a reaction of sense organs and sense objects interacting. There is nothing lasting or permanent about it.

This is the first step that you must see clearly to the point of realizing that this consciousness is not-self.

Next we come to *phassa* (contact). When the sense organs, the sense objects and sense consciousness are working together as a unit, we call that ‘contact.’ For example, the eye, the sight and eye consciousness – when these three are functioning together, we call that eye contact. Now there others who will say, ‘oh this contact, that is the self.’ This is the fundamental experience of life, whether it is by the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body or mind; seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and all that. This contact is taken by others to be the self. But Buddhism observes closely and sees that these things arise naturally, they are natural functions and there is no ‘self’ involved. None of this depends on a self. It all arises naturally and then passes away. This is the understanding of Buddhism – that contact is not-self.

In Buddhism there is no contacter or there is no ‘who.’ [46.30 ??] Well who contacts? Buddhism says it’s a silly question. It is a question that has no basis. There is no one who makes contact or owner of the contact or anything like that. This idea of ‘contacter’ or the one who experiences the experiencer – all that are just illusory ideas that arise later. But in contact itself, there is no self or ego or soul or anything of that sort.

Next we come to *vedanā* (feeling). Whenever there is some kind of sense contact, then we react to that with pleasant and unpleasant feelings which we call *vedanā*. Now other groups will go and say that there must be it’s the self that feels pleasant and unpleasant. It’s the soul that experiences or feels these feelings. But Buddhism says ‘no,’ look carefully and you will see that this *vedanā* is merely a reaction to sense contact. It arises naturally. There is no self or soul involved. Those are just ideas that arise later. But in feeling itself there is no self or soul. There is no owner or feeler of the feelings.

From feeling, the ordinary reaction to feeling is desire. This whole process has been happening ignorantly. And there is this ignorant contact, ignorant feeling. And so there is an ignorant kind of desire which arises as a reaction to the feeling. It's possible that there – instead of this ignorant desire – that there can be a wise kind of aspiration. It's possible that there's just wanting to do what needs to be done. And that we don't call 'desire' (*taṇhā*) – we can call it 'aspiration' (*saṅkappa*). If – whenever there is some kind of feeling – if there's wisdom, then there'll just be an aspiration to deal with the situation correctly. But if there's ignorance then desire is the response, the kind of habitual reaction to pleasant and unpleasant feelings.

Next, we come to a very important step. First, okay there is feeling and then there is this desire. And for a moment there is nothing but desire. Just desire which is a reaction to feeling which is a reaction to the basic experience. Then there arises the desirer, the one who desires. Here's where the sense of self comes in. First, there's just desire but because of ignorance there is the sense that well there must be a desirer or the one who desires. So here the desirer is just a reaction of the ignorant mind to desire. This desirer it doesn't really exist. It's nothing but an ignorant concept – a false concept – that arises in the mind as a habitual reaction to desire.

Now this desire can take both positive and negative forms. Don't think that desire is only positive. It can also be negative. Of course often we desire to have things, to get things. We have this attractive kind of desire. But desire can also take the opposite kind of forms. Wanting to kill, wanting to destroy, wanting to annihilate something, wanting to get rid of a mosquito or something. This is also desire but in a negative form. In both positive and negative forms, it can [55.27 ??] stir up the desirer. And so love and hate – the positive and negative sides of desire – love and hate are arising over and over again whenever there is ignorance.

This is something that you ought to look at carefully today, thorough out today. How many times does the ignorance of loving and hating – of positive and negative desire – how many dozens or hundreds or thousands of times will that arise today? Try and observe this. How many hundreds or thousands of times does this occur in a single day?

So it's important to observe that these positive and negative desires arise equally. There are both these positive and negative desires happening equally. And they also bite their owners equally. Positive desires and negative desires turn on their owners, and bite and claw to the same degree. Both positive and negative desires, both loving and hating, satisfaction and dissatisfaction – these will make their owners hot. They disturb and trouble their owners. They bring *dukkha* equally. Pessimism and optimism arise in the same way and torment the optimist and the pessimist. All of these things happen equally in this way; this desire, both positive and negative, has these harmful results. This is to be observed in our ordinary life, even today.

Always remember that this whole mess is occurring because of our ignorance, because of our lack of understanding. And then even our confused and foolish thinking complicates it further. So because of this ignorance, we think that positive things can't harm us. We believe that positive things are good for us. And so we think that we can get away with indulging in positive things— we can satisfy our desires this way. And so we think that positive things are much safer and less harmful than negative things.

But in fact these positive things are far more dangerous than negative things. With negative things we can see quite clearly that we shouldn't mess around with them. But these positive things are very seductive and they trick us much more profoundly. And so that we indulge in them and become very deeply attached, and refuse to let go of these things we take to be positive. We don't see this because of our fundamental ignorance and our desire not to see. But this is how it is. And so we end up indulging in positive things over and over again. We become addicted to the positive, to the good. And then we have a life then that is trapped within positive and negative.

Every one of us is deceived by – is in love with – things we take to be good. Things that we feel positive about, that we consider to be good. We're all deceived by these things. We fall in love with them and we indulge in them. To the point that there is a very, very deep trap that we make out of these things. We may do the same with the negative, but with the positive, with the good, this is what we are truly addicted to. And then out of this addiction we create all kinds of terrible problems, out of the good, out of the positive.

And so we say that ‘to love something is to be its slave.’ To love something is to be its slave. When we are in love with something good and positive like this, then we lose all freedom. Now whether you want to be a slave or not is for yourself to decide. Whether being a slave is enjoyable and worthwhile or not, that is each person’s decision. But we’re pointing out that by this falling in love with the good, with the positive – this going crazy about the good and the positive – this makes us slaves. Whether you want to be a slave or not is for you to decide.

It’s rather pitiful, the situations we get ourselves into because we love the positive because we are crazy about the good, about good things. Then we become enslaved to these things. Then we must serve them, whether they’re physical things, or mental ideas or beliefs. Whatever these things are we must serve them. We have to spend lots of effort and time searching for them. Then go through all kinds of anxiety protecting these things, fighting over them, defending them. We go through all this trouble because we are in love with these so-called good and positive things. Might it be nice to be above all that, to be beyond all that?

Now many of you probably think that when you dislike negative things, then you are not its slave. Many people think that if we dislike something, that if we are detached from something, then we are not its slave. But this is not true. When something is negative and we don’t like it, then this leads to anger, hatred, fear, envy and all of these are various forms of slavery. Just as love is a positive form of slavery, anger, hatred, fear are negative forms of slavery. So not liking something is still to be trapped by it. And when we don’t like something, when there is this anger, hatred, fear or whatever, then we still have to serve that thing. We have to fight with it. We have to struggle to try and get rid of it, or to keep it away, to push it away. It’s the same old story, just the negative side of things. And so we go through all kinds of pains and torments because of this negative desire, because of this negative kind of slavery. And so we insist that, whether it is positive or negative, this slavery is the same. It has the same result in conflict, in pain and misery. Might not it be worthwhile to be free of all this, all this disliking of negative things?

Therefore we need to see that attachment and detachment are equally crazy. That attachment and detachment are equal forms of slavery and stupidity.

Attaching and detaching both lead to dukkha and get us nowhere. Then we see that we need to be above both attachment and detachment, to let go of both of these.

For most of us or for all of us, our days are just full of this attachment and detachment, first one then the other, arising over and over again. Attachment and detachment. There is nothing else besides these two things which is disturbing our lives, making our minds hot, worrying us, bothering us. There is nothing else that troubles us except for this attachment and detachment. Everything else would be fine if it wasn't for attachment and detachment. This is why Buddhism points beyond them to *lokuttara*. *Lokuttara* means 'above the world,' 'beyond the world,' 'to have surpassed the world.' This means to be beyond all this positive-negative, all the attachments and detachments.

Wherever there is attachment or detachment there is *attā*, there is 'self.' Lokuttara is to go beyond all that, to be free of self, to experience 'not-self,' to experience the world in life, to understand it as not-self. As long as there is attachment and detachment there is self and all the insanity, pain, selfishness, and misery. But when we go beyond this, when we realize and experience life as not-self, then there is no way that attachment and detachment can arise. This is to be above the world and free.

The ordinary person in the street likes attachment. The ordinary person is very fond of positive things, of liking things. All the people walking around, they like optimism very much, they value these things. But in fact positive and negative, attachment and detachment, optimism and pessimism – we shouldn't get involved in any of these. There is nothing truly valuable or worthy about any of them. They are just illusions that create havoc in our minds and create all the problems in human society as well, including the present destruction of the earth. It is all coming from this fondness of people for the positive, for attachment, for optimism. For all this insanity leads to all our problems.

What is wise and what is free is to be caught up in neither one nor the other – to be free of both attachment and detachment, to be free of both optimism and pessimism. This is what is truly worthy and valuable. When this occurs then there is no *attā*. When there is no *attā* then there is no attachment and detachment. This is where the true benefit and value in life lies – going beyond self, letting go of attachment and detachment.

Some of the first Western philosophers to take an interest in Buddhism, especially Schopenhauer, thought that Buddhism was pessimistic. This reflects Schopenhauer's attitude toward life much more than Buddhism's because he misunderstood. On the other hand optimism is no better than pessimism in the long run. And neither word is appropriate for describing Buddhism. Buddhism is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. Buddhism aims to be above, beyond and free of, both optimism and pessimism. According to Buddhism this is the only way we can find peace and meaningfulness in our lives.

Buddhism has a method for getting free of positive and negative, attachment and detachment, optimism and pessimism. In Buddhism this method is to see that everything – everything without exception in this universe – is not-self. Seeing that everything is not-self, there is no way that the mind can fall into the traps of attachment and detachment, positivism and negativism, and all that. By practicing until we see the reality of not-self. Seeing that everything that exists exists dependent on other things. Seeing the interdependency that everything exists only through other conditions, through seeing that this is how things exist, always changing, arising dependent on other conditions, passing away. Seeing the law of *idappaccayatā* (conditionality) like this, we see very clearly that everything is not-self. Seeing this – realizing this deeply – makes us free. We are released from our slavery and become truly free women and men. This is what Buddhism is all about. Everything else is secondary to this. The more you understand this, the more of an appetite you will have for this way of looking at things.

Take a good look and you'll see that gladness is tiring. Sadness is tiring. Gladness and sadness are equally tiring. You see that the negative is wearisome. The positive is wearisome. Positive and negative are equally wearying. Liking, anger – both of these are tiring, they waste energy. All these different opposites – positive and negative, glad and sad – all of these are tiring. Seeing this we develop an interest in being above all that, in being free of all that. It's worth observing the tiresomeness of all these pairs of opposites.

This is something of which all of us are capable. It is nothing big, sacred and holy beyond our reach. Take a careful look at the moments when you feel most at peace, when you are most at peace and at ease. Take a good look and you'll see that at that moment there is no feeling of positive and negative. There is no

gladness or sadness. There is no attachment or detachment. In those moments when we are most at peace – and these happen each day if we live in a fairly sane way. If we live in a decent way we'll have these moments. These moments where the mind is free. We'll see these moments when there is no indulging in these different pairs of opposites. This freedom from positive and negative is the meaning of Nibbāna. We can get a taste of this even in our ordinary lives. This is something that is within all of our reach – to be free of the *dukkha* that's stirred up by positive and negative.

We need to teach our children not to get caught up in the positive and negative so much. To warn our children not to fall in love with the positive the way their father and mother have.

This is the natural result of seeing the truth of nature. When we see how things truly are in nature, when we see that they are *anattā* (not-self), then the natural result is there is no attachment and no detachment. The mind is free of all that. Seeing that attachment is crazy, that detachment is crazy, the mind is free and at peace. This is what comes from realizing the way things truly are.

So we can see that this is how things are and this is what we need to do about it. But then the problem arises that we are unable to practice in the way we see we must. This is the reason why we practice *ānāpānasati*. If we could just go ahead and do what we need to do and be liberated from all *dukkha* like that, then it wouldn't be necessary to practice *ānāpānasati* or mindfulness with breathing. But because we're unable to do what we need to do, we practice mindfulness with breathing in order to develop the ability to practice correctly according to the way things are. We study dependent origination to see more and more clearly what the nature of human life is and the nature of our experience of the world. And then we practice mindfulness with breathing in order to have the ability to control the flow of dependent origination so that it doesn't lead to *dukkha*. We do these things more and more until we have the ability to practice according to the reality of not-self.

When one is totally free of and beyond the power of positive and negative, then one can say that one has Buddhism totally at that time and that one is in Nibbāna. When the mind is totally beyond positive and negative, then one is in Nibbāna. If any of you are Christians then you can say that you are 'with God.' But for those

who are Buddhist we say ‘to be in Nibbāna.’ This is what it means to practice Buddhism, to have this mind that is beyond positive and negative.

So it is necessary that you divorce the thing that you love the most, that is, ‘the positive.’ Most of you love this idea of positive much more than you love your wife or husband. It’s necessary to divorce all this positive and in this way one can be free of all power of positive and negative.

Thank you for being very good listeners, for listening patiently. We’ll end today’s class now with our thank you for your patience and attentiveness.

See you again tomorrow.

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Transcribed by Arthur Brown in Nov.-Dec. 2014.
Audio files 5125330209020.mp3 & 1990-02 (2) The heart of Buddhism.mp3

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