

What Happens to an Arahant at Death?
A Dialogue between Bhikkhu Bodhi and B. Alan Wallace

BAW: Dear Bhante, I know that you are very busy and that your time is extremely valuable, but I wonder if I might ask for a moment of your time to clarify a point of Dharma for me. A Theravada Buddhist friend of mine recently commented that, although the Buddha referred to nibbāna in 100 ways, at no time did he refer to any ultimate dimension of consciousness. In the Mahayana tradition, in contrast, there are multiple references to Buddha nature, tathagathagarbha, and so on (not to mention the Mahamudra & Dzogchen traditions of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism). However, since, according to my understanding, the death of an arahant does not imply his/her total annihilation, and since nibbāna is characterized (among many other ways) as “immutable bliss,” mustn’t there be a dimension of consciousness following the death of an arahant that continues to realize such bliss? Moreover, doesn’t the following quote from the Pali canon and a commentary to the passage imply such a transcendent dimension of consciousness?

In the *Kevaddha Sutta*, the Buddha raises the question:

“Where do earth, water, fire and air no footing find?
Where are long and short, small and great, fair and foul—
Where are ‘name and form’ wholly destroyed?”

And the answer is:

“Where consciousness is signless, boundless, all-luminous,
That’s where earth, water, fire, and air find no footing,
There both long and short, small and great, fair and foul—
There ‘name and form’ are wholly destroyed.
With the cessation of consciousness this is all destroyed.”¹

Nyananada Bhikkhu explains that in nibbāna, the four elements have no basis, for the familiar categories of “name and form,” subject and object, mind and matter vanish with the disappearance of ordinary, conceptually conditioned consciousness. This, he adds, is a corrective to the common notion that the four elements can cease altogether somewhere—a notion that has its roots in the popular conception of self-existing material elements. The Buddha’s formulation of the question and the concluding line are meant to combat this misconception.²

BB: Dear BAW, The relationship between nibbāna and consciousness was a topic of heated discussion among us Western monks in Sri Lanka, and our position in relation to this problem divided us into opposing camps. Though I have pondered the issue for long years, I have to admit I don’t have a clear solution to the problem. Perhaps the source of perplexity lies in

¹ *Kevaddha Sutta*, [About Kevaddha, DN I 223], cf. Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 179–80.

² Ven. Ñāṇanada, *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971), 59.

Western modes of thinking. But maybe not. My teacher, Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya, used to tell me how his own interpretation of nibbāna came close to the Advaita Vedantin understanding of brahman (with some differences), and in this respect, he said, he disagreed with those Sri Lankan scholar-monks who considered nibbāna to be mere cessation.

BAW: I was told that when Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya visited the Vedanta Temple in Montecito (adjacent to Santa Barbara, where I live), he was asked whether he thought the realization of nibbāna was identical to the Advaita Vedantin realization of ātman-brahman, and he allegedly replied that it was too close to call. As you may recall, I had the great privilege of training under his guidance for some months during 1980–81 at his home temple in Udumulla; and I regard him as my principal Theravāda mentor.

BB: If I remember rightly, what Ven. Ananda Maitreya said is that unlike the Advaita Vedantin brahman, nibbāna does not have any cosmological function (in the way that brahman is the substrate of the manifest universe) nor does it give rise to a creator God (the saṅgha brahman) who periodically creates, sustains, and demolishes the apparent universe. But the descriptions of nirguṇa brahman and nibbāna share many similarities.

BAW: I don't doubt that these comments about nibbāna correctly reflect the Theravāda view. At the same time, unless my memory misleads me, there is a statement in the Pāli canon in which the Buddha states that without nibbāna there would be no saṃsāra. Can you identify that statement for me? Some might interpret that as implying that nibbāna does indeed have a cosmological function, though it does not give rise to a creator God.

BB: I don't recall any such statement in the Pali Canon, and it would be inconsistent with everything else that is said there. Perhaps you are thinking of the well known passage in the Udāna §73, which says that “if there were no unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, no release from what is born, come to be, made, and conditioned would be discerned here, but because there is an unborn (etc.) a release from what is born (etc.) is discerned here” (No c'etaṃ, bhikkhave, abhaviṣṣa ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhatāṃ, nayidha jātassa bhūtaṃ katassa saṅkhatassa nissaraṇaṃ paññāyetha. Yasmā ca kho, bhikkhave, atthi ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhatāṃ, tasmā jātassa bhūtaṃ katassa saṅkhatassa nissaraṇaṃ paññāyati'ti.)

BAW: Yes, indeed, that is the passage I had in mind. You write that it would be inconsistent with everything else said in the Pali canon to assert that without nibbāna there would be no saṃsāra. But what can the “unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned” be referring to if not to nibbāna? And what can “what is born, come to be, made, condition” refer to if not to saṃsāra? I very much doubt that the Buddha was simply referring to the semantic necessity of there being the unborn for there to be the born, in the same manner that there must be non-apples in order for there to be apples.

BB 06-01: Of course the “unborn ... unconditioned” is nibbāna and the “born ... conditioned” refers to everything within saṃsāra. But it seems you misread my translation of the passage. The passage does not say, “If there were no unconditioned, there would be no conditioned,” but “If there were no unconditioned, no release from the conditioned would be discerned here.” That is, the passage is not saying that the existence of saṃsāra depends on the existence of nibbāna, but

that liberation from saṃsāra depends on the existence of nibbāna. I read this as saying that the existence of nibbāna—as an unconditioned dimension that is forever accessible—is a necessary condition for the prospect of release.

BAW: Thank you for clarifying this. This is one point where the Mahayana and Theravada traditions differ, for in the former, nibbāna is equated with śūnyatā, or emptiness, which is the ultimate reality without which the relative reality of saṃsāra could not exist.

BB: What is clear to me, on the basis of my reading of the entire Sutta Pitaka (except some later books), is that nibbāna is never identified with consciousness or a state of mind (*citta*, *mano*, *viññāṇa*). In approaching the verse you cite from the Kevaddha Sutta, I would apply a principle that Ven. Nyanaponika taught me, namely: “Don’t erect interpretations of the Dhamma based on a single passage, particularly one in verse. Always assume that the repeated statements in the expository prose texts are the ones that set forth the Buddha’s definitive position and that any passages in verse that seem to depart from that doctrinal position, if correctly understood, would actually turn out to be consistent with it.”

BAW: This strikes me as a sound principle, though I guess my own inclination is to take all the words of the Buddha—whether stated only once or repeatedly—very seriously, and to interpret singular statements in ways that are not incompatible with the rest of his teachings.

BB: That is what Ven. Nyanaponika meant. He was arguing against some who select a single passage (usually an obscure verse) and then build up an entire interpretation on its basis, even when their view contradicts the repetitive prose texts.

This certainly applies to the Kevaddha Sutta. The sutta, if you look at it carefully, does not explicitly state that this “signless, boundless, all-luminous consciousness” is nibbāna itself. I don’t interpret it as being nibbāna itself, and I do agree with you that nibbāna is an unconditioned reality, without production, without alteration, without passing (see AN 3:47, I 152), a real *dhamma* that one actually sees and experiences with the attainment of path and fruition. If that is so, it is only natural to inquire into the nature of the enlightened consciousness that experiences that dhamma.

Some contemporary interpreters of the Dhamma advance the position that nibbāna is an unconditioned dimension of consciousness, but to maintain it they either have to insert words into their rendering of the verse that are not there in the Pali or construe the verse in a way that cannot be pegged to the actual wording of the text. The latter is what Buddhaghosa does. He identifies this *viññāṇa* with nibbāna, but he then says that nibbāna is here called *viññāṇa* in the sense that “it can be cognized” (*viññāṇa*). He does this because he knows well that nibbāna cannot be the subject of cognition; for according to the Theravada doctrinal system, nibbāna is the object of the path and fruition *cittas*. Yet Buddhaghosa’s derivation, though ingenious, is not at all credible. Elsewhere in the texts, when *viññāṇa* is spoken of, it refers to the core of individual identity and to the subject of cognition, never to the object of cognition.

BAW: Again, I agree with you that nibbāna is not *viññāṇa*, but liberation must entail *viññāṇa* of nibbāna; and the crucial question is: with the death of an arahant, in which conditioned

consciousness ceases, nibbāna does not cease; and if nibbāna does not entail annihilation, then the awareness of nibbāna must continue, not with a conditioned viññāṇa, but with an unconditioned dimension of viññāṇa, presumably one that is “signless, boundless, and all-luminous.” Just as nibbāna is unborn and unceasing, the consciousness of it following the death of an arahant must also be unborn and unceasing.

BB: This would be a reasonable inference, but I have not found any passage in the texts that uses the word viññāṇa (or its cognates) in a way that affirms “an unconditioned dimension of viññāṇa.” Since the verse occurs only once in the whole Pali Canon—with a citation of half the verse elsewhere (in MN 49)—and is not elaborated anywhere else, any interpretation of it involves some degree of conjecture. My own supposition is that the “signless, boundless, all-luminous consciousness” is the consciousness of the arahant when he enters the special samadhi in which he directly experiences nibbāna with full clarity. This special samadhi is referred to obliquely in various places in the Nikāyas. For example, several suttas in the last two books of the Anguttara Nikāya, at AN 10:6 (with a variant at 10:7) and at AN 11: 7, 8, 9, speak about a monk entering a meditative state in which he is not cognizant of any of the phenomena of the world. Instead, it is said, he meditates on nibbāna as “the stilling of all conditioned things” and so forth. In the commentaries this state is called the meditative attainment of the fruit of arahantship (arahattaphalasamāpatti).

BAW: That is certainly a defensible interpretation, but is it not also plausible that it refers to the consciousness of the arahant’s direct experience of nibbāna with full clarity even after death?

BB: No, because it is clear that these texts are describing a living arahant. Actually, they don’t even refer to an arahant, but only to a monk (bhikkhu), which may support the position of the commentaries that fruition attainments at the lower levels (sekhas) can also enter this samadhi.

If you compare these descriptions with the one in the Kevaddha Sutta you will see that they are quite close. Both speak about a consciousness that is not attuned to the four material elements (hence it is not a jhāna based on a material kasina), nor one in which any of the other familiar factors of nāma and rūpa are present—“the seen, heard, sensed, and cognized.” Yet, it is said, one is percipient, so it is not “the cessation of perception and feeling” (*saññāvedayitanirodha*), an exalted meditative state in which perception is absent. What one is meditating on, according to the sutta, is nibbāna. So this is the meditative samadhi with nibbāna as the objective domain—but it is not nibbāna itself.

BAW: Agreed.

BB: The problem then is how nibbāna after the death of the arahant can be a real element (a real entity, a real dimension, a real state, whatever term one uses) describable as “ultimate bliss” etc. yet without being identifiable with viññāṇa. Some modern interpreters—including a number of prominent Western bhikkhus—hold that since nibbāna is not a state of consciousness, the death of the arahant amounts to total extinction. It is not annihilation, since annihilation (*uccheda*) in the texts is always spoken of as “the annihilation of an existent being” (*sato sattassa uccheda*) and there is no “existent being” that perishes with the attainment of ultimate nibbāna, only the ceasing of the continuum of the five aggregates. For these interpreters, all talk of nibbāna as “the

unconditioned, the deathless, the unborn,” etc., is discourse that must be interpreted (*neyyattha*, *neyārtha*). From their standpoint, the terms really mean simply the end to conditioning, the end of birth, the end of death, etc.

BAW: This really strikes me as a nihilistic interpretation of the self and of nibbāna. It implies that we don't exist at all, that the universe is absolutely meaningless, and the culmination of the path, with the death of the arahant, is total cessation of all experience—the universe has ceased to exist relative to your continuum of consciousness, that continuum has ceased. Did the Buddha not say that he did not declare the self to be either absolutely existent or absolutely nonexistent? And didn't he declare that craving for non-existence is as much a hindrance as craving for becoming. So if one equates the culmination of the path with the arahant's death with non-existence, then one has fallen to the extreme of nihilism.

BB: This isn't my position, but their position. They would say that annihilationism is the doctrine that there is a substantial self that perishes at death, but with “right view” one sees that it is only the procession of self-less aggregates that ceases and beyond this there is nothing. For them, nibbāna is total extinction. It seems to me that on this position, what happens to the arahant at the time of death is exactly what happens to every living being at the time of death *from the perspective of philosophical materialism*. The only difference would be that the Buddhist posits rebirth for those who are non-arahants while the materialist posits “final nibbāna” for everyone.

I differ from these interpreters in holding nibbāna to be an ultimate reality—not in the substantialist way repudiated by the Madhyamikas, but as indicative of something that is not a mere extinction of defilements in the living arahant or the utter cessation of the five aggregates at the arahant's passing. I take such terms as “unborn, deathless, etc.” to be referential, not mere metaphors for absolute extinction. The problem is how to bring together this ultimate reality of nibbāna, conceived as a state that (even post-mortem) is “peaceful, blissful, auspicious,” etc., with the denial that consciousness or mind is present. It's a problem I haven't been able to solve.

BAW: I heartily agree with your position that nibbāna is “peaceful, blissful, auspicious,” etc., but those adjectives are meaningless if there is no awareness of it. Therefore, logically I'm forced to the conclusion that there is no nibbāna without a consciousness of it, and this implies that with the cessation of conditioned consciousness of an arahant while still alive, there must be another dimension of consciousness of nibbāna that is unborn and unceasing—like nibbāna itself—that persists even after the death of an arahant.

BB: The solution offered by certain strains of Mahayana thought—buddha nature, tathagatagarbha, and their extensions in Mahamudra and Dzogchen—may be feasible within their own frameworks, but it would be a stretch to seek support for them in the early discourses (whether from the Pali Nikāyas or other surviving collections).

BAW: But is it not even more of a stretch to posit nibbāna as “peaceful, blissful, auspicious,” etc. without any experience of it?

BB: It might seem that way, but see the oft-quoted discourse in Anguttara Book of Nines where Sariputta exclaims “nibbāna is bliss, nibbāna is bliss.” When asked, “How can nibbāna be bliss

when nothing is felt there?” he replies, “Just this, friend, is the happiness here, that nothing is felt here.”

BAW: If there is such a thing as a koān in Theravāda Buddhism, I would point to that statement, for it seems inconceivable for there to be happiness that is not felt, experienced, or realized.

BB 16: The “extinctionists” say that, since all feeling is dukkha (a statement we find at several places in the Pali suttas), the stopping of all feeling can be called sukha simply in the sense that it is the complete cessation of dukkha. One need not posit some transcendent blissful state to justify the claim that “nothing being felt there is the bliss there.” Again, it seems weird to me to posit complete nothingness as the final goal of the Buddhadharma, but that is their position. It seems to me that this precisely confirms the 19th century Christian criticism of Buddhism as “a religion that takes sheer nothingness as its final goal,” as opposed to Christianity, which aims for an eternal afterlife in communion with the Creator.

One monk who holds this view explained to me years ago that he regards such passages as “nibbāna is blissful, peaceful, auspicious” etc. to refer mainly to the present life experience of the living arahant. In relation to the anupādisesa-nibbāna he takes such statements to “really mean” that just the total cessation of experience is the ultimate bliss, the final release from dukkha. He understood the statement about nibbāna being “unborn ... unconditioned,” in the same way, as really meaning that nibbāna is just “the end of birth, the end of becoming, the end of conditioning,” and nothing more. But, as I said, I see such statements as referring to an actuality, a state that is truly “blissful, peaceful, auspicious.” If these were just metaphors for complete extinction, it would mean a rather bleak end to the whole process of spiritual cultivation.

BAW: I couldn’t agree with you more. Further, if the entire universe arose from avidyā and nothing more, and the whole point of practicing dhamma is to obliterate all experience of reality and thereby reverse the damage done by avidyā, where did this great creator “avidyā” come from? It exists, but if there’s nothing “beneath it,” this seems an utterly bizarre ontology, and the whole point of the Buddhadharma would be reduced to negating the whole of reality (with an ever-so-brief interlude of bliss during the life of an arahant). Moreover, non-existence is certainly “not awareness” (avidyā), so it entails an absence of awareness (avidyā), or total ignorance. So the “extinctionists” are in effect advocating the theme “ignorance is bliss.” I can’t imagine a more misleading characterization of nibbāna and of the Buddhadharma as a whole.

A response to this quandary is found in Dzogchen teachings, which refer to such bliss as *mahāsukha*, an unborn dimension of bliss that is fathomed (the word “experienced,” or “felt” is not used, for those verbs are associated with conditioned consciousness) by an unborn dimension of awareness, which is nondual from (but not identical with) nibbāna. From the Dzogchen classic text *The Vajra Essence* one finds the following distinction drawn between conditioned consciousness (viññāna) and primordial consciousness (ñāna). Here’s the extended passage. I don’t pretend that it accords with the Pāli canon, but I wonder if it is explicitly incompatible with the Buddha’s teachings as recorded in the Pāli canon.

The Vajra Essence: “If you do not know how to distinguish between conditioned consciousness and primordial consciousness, you may think conditioned consciousness is primordial consciousness, and consequently circle about in delusion. So learn how to distinguish between them! Conditioned consciousness is the naturally present radiance and clarity of the unceasing objects that emerge in the expanse of cognition, which, when they

enter the sense doors, are bound by self-grasping. When looking out through the sense doors, that which appears as seeing, hearing, feeling, experiencing, and contacting external sensory appearances is called *conditioned consciousness*...

BB: I wonder if the statement, “Conditioned consciousness is the naturally present radiance and clarity of the unceasing objects that emerge in the expanse of cognition...” is correctly translated; for it seems to be identifying conditioned consciousness with the “radiance and clarity of the objects” whereas the second statement identifies consciousness with the cognizing functions rather than the objects.

BAW: No, I’ve just checked the original Tibetan, and the translation is sound. This is a recurrent theme in Dzogchen, namely the refutation of any reified distinction between subject and object. So the luminosity of conditioned consciousness manifests as radiance and clarity of objects, and the cognizance of conditioned consciousness manifests as the cognizing functions. Luminosity and cognizance are said to be the two defining characteristics of consciousness.

The Vajra Essence:

“Insofar as conditioned consciousness individually apprehends and recognizes labels and things, and arouses the three closely held feelings of pleasure, pain, and indifference, all things appear to be separate and distinct. They are given individual labels, and things are apprehended as being distinct. That acts as the basis from which emerge thoughts of attachment to one’s own side and aversion to the other’s side. The good is apprehended as being good and is made into an object of hope, thus proliferating thoughts of yearning. The bad is apprehended as being bad, and that serves as a basis from which various thoughts of anxiety arise...”

BB: But in early Buddhism, conditioned *viññāṇa* is operative in arahants and buddhas as well, so it is not essentially bound up with grasping and aversion. The *viññāṇa* (or more usually stated, the *citta*) of the *puthujjana* and lower ariyans has some degree of grasping and aversion; the *viññāṇa* of the liberated ones is free from grasping and aversion. But in all cases this consciousness is conditioned.

BAW: *The Vajra Essence:*

“What is called *mentation* manifests as the consciousness of appearances, it turns into appearing objects, and it causes appearances to be made manifest. From the very moment that a thought and a subject arise, what is called *mind* merges nondually with appearances and vanishes. Primordial consciousness is the natural glow of the ground, and it expresses itself as the five facets of primordial consciousness.

“Specifically, in the manifest state of the ground, great primordial consciousness, which has been forever present, abides as the aspect of limpidity and clarity, like the dawn breaking and the sun rising. It is not blank, like an unceasing darkness that knows nothing. All appearances are naturally present, without arising or ceasing. Just as heat is naturally present in the nature of fire, moisture is present in the nature of water, and coolness is present in the nature of the wind, due to the unceasing power in the nature of primordial consciousness, there is total knowledge and total awareness of all phenomena, without its ever merging with or entering into objects. Primordial consciousness is self-emergent, naturally clear, free of

outer and inner obscuration; it is the all-pervasive, radiant, clear infinity of space, free of contamination...

BB: The last statement resonates with the description of the *anidassana-viññāṇa* in the *Dīgha sutta*, but that consciousness is not described by any word that might be rendered “primordial.” Moreover, in the last line of the verse even that *viññāṇa* is said to cease (I don’t like Walshe’s “is destroyed,” which seems too violent). On the whole, the conceptual framework underlying the Dzogchen passage is certainly very different from the framework one finds in the Pali discourses. For example, we don’t find anything in the Pali texts that corresponds to “primordial consciousness.” The aggregate of consciousness is always distinguished into the six classes of consciousness, and consciousness is invariably held to be conditioned. See for instance MN no. 38, the Great Discourse on the Extinction of Craving:

“In many ways I have told you that consciousness is dependently arisen; there is no origination of consciousness apart from conditions. When consciousness arises dependent on some condition, it is reckoned on the basis of just that condition. (Illustrated by the six types arising on the basis of their faculty and object.)” (*Anekāpariyāyena hi vo, bhikkhave, paṭiccasamuppannaṃ viññāṇaṃ vuttaṃ mayā, aññatra paccayā natthi viññāṇassa sambhavoti ... Yaṃ yadeva, bhikkhave, paccayaṃ paṭicca uppajjati viññāṇaṃ, tena teneva viññāṇaṃtveva saṅkhaṃ gacchati.*)

There is a unique passage in *Anguttara Nikaya*, Ones, §50, which asserts “This *citta* is luminous (*pabhassaram idaṃ cittaṃ*) but it is defiled by adventitious defilements (*āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ*).” This might have been the “seed” out of which the mode of thought we find in Dzogchen evolved, though I am not sure whether there is a straight line leading from one to the other. The process may have required the emergence of the *Madhyamaka* and (in reaction to the latter) the *tathāgatagarbha* system as intermediary steps; perhaps too there was some influence from Bon. I am not at all acquainted with the philosophical underpinnings of Dzogchen.

BAW: The Dzogchen texts I’ve translated are consonant with *Madhyamaka* and of course the *tathāgatagarbha* system set forth in the “Third Turning of the Wheel of Dharma.” I’m sure you’re right that there is no mention of an unborn, primordial dimension of consciousness in the Pali canon. But if such is not posited, I still don’t see how it makes any sense to assert that the arahant doesn’t totally cease to exist at death. If such annihilation doesn’t occur, and if there is a timeless realization of *nibbāna* following death; and if that *nibbāna* is characterized as being peaceful, blissful, and auspicious; then logically there must be a dimension of consciousness that, like *nibbāna*, is unborn. On the other hand, if the death of an arahant entails total annihilation, then the fact that *nibbāna* is described as peaceful, blissful, and auspicious seems almost trivial. For that experience lasts only some years, after countless lifetimes of *samsāra* prior to becoming an arahant, and followed by an eternity of nonexistence following the arahant’s death.

BB: I agree with your argument in its essence. It’s just that different systems of Buddhist thought have their own conceptual matrixes, and there will always be some lack of congruence between them. Thus the Pali suttas—and the Theravada system as a whole (including the commentarial tradition)—always use such words as *viññāṇa* and *citta* to refer to phenomenal events rather than to a noumenal dimension of reality. Nevertheless, as you maintain, to make sense of such terms

as “peaceful, blissful, auspicious,” not to speak of such metaphors for nibbāna as “the harbor, the refuge, the island,” etc., it seems necessary to ascribe some transcendent “experiential” aspect to the post-mortem condition of the arahant, even though the five aggregates, the constituents of experience (inclusive of viññāṇa), have utterly ceased there. The Theravāda tradition left this condition unspecified, thus leading some interpreters, especially moderns coming from the West, to interpret “nibbāna without residue” as complete extinction, which they distinguish from annihilation on the ground that the attainment of nibbāna without residue involves only the ceasing of a process, not the annihilation of a self. This, however, strikes me as little more than a verbal distinction. Evidently some Buddhist schools, perhaps even from an early period, tried to fill in the conceptual gap left by the primarily *via negativa* descriptions favored by early Buddhism with more positive ascriptions. This must have started a trajectory that culminated in the modes of thought exemplified by Dzogchen.

BAW: *The Vajra Essence*:

“What are the causes and conditions by which conditioned consciousness is transformed into primordial consciousness? They are accurately knowing how thoughts of the phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa emerge—including the eight aggregates of conditioned consciousness and sensory appearances—and realizing the manner in which they are naturally perfect as the play of the kāyas and facets of primordial consciousness in the nature of ultimate reality. Then from the time that one identifies the *dharmakāya*, pristine awareness that is present as the ground, one’s conditioned consciousness is transmuted into the play of primordial consciousness. Then, regarding conditioned consciousness, by the illusory display of concepts of self alone, primordial consciousness takes on the guise of conditioned consciousness, like a pile of stones being mistaken for a man. The transformation of that into primordial consciousness is like recognizing a scarecrow for what it is instead of seeing it as a man. In this way, the correct realization of the mode of being of conditioned consciousness transforms it into primordial consciousness. It is not that conditioned consciousness must vanish into absolute space and primordial consciousness must arise from somewhere else. Instead, know that it just seems that way because of the functions of self-grasping and identitylessness.

“Conditioned consciousness is what makes the first moment of knowledge emerge in the aspect of the object, just as various images of planets and stars emerge in the ocean. What arises is closely held by conceptual consciousness; it is bound by reification, and one thereby becomes deluded. Knowledge of the reasons for that brings one to primordial consciousness.”

BB: The early Buddhist teachings surely describe the steps by which viññāṇa or citta is transformed from its normal defiled and ignorant state to that of the liberated (*vimutta*) state. But there is nothing in the early texts indicating that the liberated citta represents the emergence of some primordial citta. A possible exception is AN Ones §50, which ascribes an intrinsic luminosity to the citta. But elsewhere it is clear that the bound citta is conditioned, and the liberated citta—which is in continuity with it, not a different kind of citta—is also conditioned. I encountered excerpts from some Dzogchen masters stating that “all things pertaining to saṃsāra and nirvāṇa arise from the mind, which is itself unborn.”

This mode of discourse is quite different from the standpoint of early Buddhism, according to which the mind, whether defiled or liberated, arises and ceases, and occurs through conditions, while nibbāna is unconditioned and without arising and ceasing. Whether, at the experiential-existential level, as opposed to the conceptual-theoretical level, they amount to the same thing, or closely overlap, is something I'm not qualified to say; but it would not surprise me to learn that closely resembling experiences can be described in ways that seem incompatible at a conceptual level.

BAW: I'm sure you're right that there is nothing like the above passage from the Vajra Essence in the Pali canon. I should add that conditioned consciousness doesn't literally "transform into" primordial consciousness, for that would imply that the latter is a result of the former. Dzogchen asserts that the conceptual mind cannot grasp the nature of primordial consciousness or its relation to conditioned consciousness. Only primordial consciousness can nondually ascertain primordial consciousness. That may be why the Buddha notoriously maintained noble silence when asked about the fate of a dead arahant.

My sense is that the Pali canon is homogeneously phenomenological in content, and it therefore generally does not make explicit reference to any dimension of reality that utterly transcends the scope of our senses and conceptual mind. The only exception is nibbāna, which is characterized with positive and negative attributes. If it had only attributes of negation, then the annihilationist view might be unavoidable, however dismal it may seem. But since it has positive attributes, I feel that we must look outside the Pali canon if we're ever to find a solution.

BB: Perhaps you are right about this. I concur with your characterization of the Pali Canon as "homogeneously phenomenological in content." Even when nibbāna is being treated in strict doctrinal terms, this is done by the negation of the phenomenal characteristics of conditioned reality—and thus this mode of treatment too fits into the contours of the phenomenological approach. It's only the positive ascriptions and poetic metaphors that depart from a strict phenomenological approach. We might suppose that for the Buddha's direct disciples the personal presence of the Master was felt to be a confirmation of the ultimate reality of nibbāna and thus the negative terminology used to describe it did not pose an existential problem. But once the Buddha passed away, some lines of transmission held fast to the negative approach and tried to integrate it into their evolving schemes of systematization, as in the Pali Abhidhamma Pitaka, where nibbāna (or the asaṅkhatā dhātu, as it is referred to) is always characterized by negation of the marks of conditioned dharmas; other lines of transmission may have felt dissatisfied with this and sought to give more positive content to the ultimate object of realization.

BAW: I agree with your arguments against the "extinctionist" interpretation. The underlying premise of that interpretation appears to me to be that the self doesn't exist at all, for it is not objectively found either among or apart from the skandhas. But this violates the Buddha's statement that he affirmed neither the existence nor the non-existence of the self. Moreover, if that analysis of the self implies its utter non-existence, then a similar analysis of a clock leads to the conclusion that a clock doesn't exist at all, for it is not equivalent to any one of its component parts, nor to all of them collectively, nor does it exist as something separate from its parts. Following the same logic, no composite phenomena exist at all, so the "extinctionist"

interpretation implies thoroughgoing nihilism. According to my understanding, that clearly was not the Buddha's view.

BB: I see the teaching of anattā to be more heuristic in function than ontological. In my understanding, the fundamental problem (from the perspective of the early Buddhist texts) is the clinging to the five aggregates with the conviction that they are "mine," and the identification with them as being a truly existent "I." Attempts to define the nature of this "I" lead to doctrines of a self (*attavāda*), which situate the assumed self in relation to the five aggregates (as identical with them, their owner, etc.). So to guide disciples to liberation, the Buddha must help them to uproot this clinging, and this in turn requires breaking the mistaken appropriation of the skandhas as "mine" and the mistaken identification with them as "I." Hence the five aggregates are to be contemplated as "not mine, not I, not my self," and this leads to revulsion toward them, thence to dispassion and liberation. Thus the teaching of anattā operates within a contemplative-liberative framework.

BAW: I heartily agree. And if the Buddha's intent was not ontological but heuristic, as you write, then there is all the less reason to conclude that the self is annihilated at the death of the arahant (which I know you don't accept).

BB: However, when we step out of this framework into an ethical one pertaining to moral action as well as to spiritual cultivation, the Buddha does not hesitate to use the language of self. "It is by one's self that one purifies oneself," "there is such a thing as self-initiative" (*attakāra*), "you must be a refuge unto yourself (*attasaraṇa*), etc."

It's interesting to note that some of the "extinctionists" adopt a "hard deterministic" view of human action. One of them illustrates our normal way of making choices with the analogy of a person who, under hypnosis, is told that at 3 pm he will start to sing the "Ode to Joy," and then does so precisely as told, believing he decided to sing on his own free will. So, he says, all our choices are really conditioned by external factors and our assumption of personal responsibility for them is part of the fabric of delusion. In his view, the recognition of volitional freedom entails the existence of a self that exercises such freedom. Hence he holds that non-self entails no volitional freedom, except as a useful convention.

BAW: I shall send you an article I wrote on free will³, in which I cite the Buddha as refuting both that kind of determinism as well as "randomism," in which actions occur for no reason. I believe that the hard determinist position is a severe distortion of the Buddha's teachings, for it makes volition, the very essence of karma, empty of meaning; and it implies that we have no moral responsibility for any of our actions, since true volition never occurs. This is a travesty.

BB: I think we've explored these issues enough and can now conclude.

BAW: Thank you so much for sharing your knowledge and insights!

BB: Thank you for this enlightening exchange.

³ "A Buddhist View of Free Will: Beyond Determinism and Indeterminism." In *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 18, No. 3-4, 2011: 217-33