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Interview with Bhikkhu Bodhi

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Skype interview with Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, 16th September 2014

Transcript of video recording*

Ed.: Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ph.D., born Jeffrey Block, is an American Theravada Buddhist monk and the chairman of Yin Shun Foundation. He was the President of the Buddhist Publication Society in Sri Lanka from 1988-2010. Venerable Bodhi has many important publications to his credit, either as author, translator, or editor, including *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (co-translated with Ven. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli), *The Connected Discourse of the Buddha*, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, and *In the Buddha's Words*. In May 2000 he gave the keynote address at the United Nations on its first official celebration of Vesak. (from bodhimonastery.org & Wikipedia)

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi (BB); Ajahn Brahmalī (AB); Bhante Sujato (S)

AB: Bhante, welcome ... It's very kind of you to speak with us today. I'm going to start off with some very general questions about kamma and rebirth, and then we will hopefully get into the specifics afterwards. First of all, would you just like to speak generally on how important to you are the ideas of kamma and rebirth in Buddhism.

BB: Of course, I take the ideas of kamma and rebirth to be quite central to the Buddha's world-view. The way I see the Dhamma itself, in the classical formulation, entirely rests upon the teachings of kamma and rebirth. You can extract aspects of the Dhamma, and looking at it from a particular perspective see it as applicable to this life here and now, the way the secular Buddhists have been doing. But if one wants to get what I would call the full perspective of the Dhamma, then I would say the teachings of kamma and rebirth have a very central, critical place. If one pulls away the teachings of kamma and rebirth, then the teaching of the Dhamma, in its classical formulation, almost collapses, I would say. Basically, you're left with a rather sophisticated ancient form of – I wouldn't use the expression psychotherapy – but a kind of psychological adjustment, or a way of dealing with the here and now.

The way I've tried to structure the different aspects of the Buddha's teaching in my own way of thinking – it's actually derived from the classical commentaries – I distinguish the benefits to which the Dhamma leads. I used that for the framework in the anthology *In the Buddha's Words* [Ed.: Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications, 2005]. The Dhamma has three kinds of benefits. One is the benefit in this present life or the benefit here and now, *diṭṭha-dhamma-hita-sukha*, and the other is *samparāyika hita-sukha*, the welfare and happiness in future lives, and then there's the *paramatṭha hita-sukha*, the ultimate well-being and happiness.

The teaching of kamma and rebirth is entirely what underlies the conception of well-being and happiness pertaining to future lives. If there's no teaching of kamma and rebirth then the whole issue of securing well-being in future lives just falls to the ground. If we look at the Buddha's discourses, very often when the Buddha is teaching, particularly to lay people, he emphasises that the foundation of understanding, or the foundation of aspiration, is the ideal of achieving well-being and happiness in one's future lives by avoiding a fall into the three lower realms, the planes of misery, and securing a fortunate rebirth in the human realm or in one of the celestial realms. The principle that underlies the process of rebirth into these different realms, the miserable realms and the fortunate realms, is the principle of kamma. So the reason why the Buddha lays down teachings such as the ten courses of unwholesome kamma, the teaching of ten courses of wholesome kamma, the three basis of meritorious deeds, which get elaborated in the commentaries, and the ten types of meritorious action, and even the practices of the *brahmavihāras*, and some of the more devotional types of meditation, is to generate the wholesome kamma that will lead the person, the practitioner, to a fortunate mode of rebirth.

Ok, so that takes care of the well-being and happiness pertaining to future lives. As to the ultimate goal, the ultimate well-being and happiness, which is the attainment of *Nibbāna* ... you know, there is a tendency amongst secular Buddhists always to interpret *Nibbāna* just as – maybe they don't even use the expression the destruction of the defilements here and now – but just reducing greed, hatred and delusion and being able to live happily and peacefully amongst the fluctuating conditions of this world. Within the framework of the original teaching, *Nibbāna* is the release or liberation from the whole *saṃsāric* process of repeated birth and death. And so if one takes away rebirth, and there's no repeated birth and death, then *saṃsāra* just turns into a metaphor for the changing experiences, the changing mental states of life in this world, and that [means one disregards] the whole beginning-less and potentially endless migration from life to life. And so for *Nibbāna* to be understood as the release or liberation from the cycle of birth and death, the round of repeated births, one needs a teaching on rebirth. To us it seems elementary my dear Watson, but amongst some of the contemporary Buddhists it really raises a lot of controversy.

S: Which is why we're doing this topic.

One of the things I mentioned to Ajahn Brahmalī just now is that when I was going to a *dāna* with a Sri Lankan family in Sydney a couple of years ago with my Sri Lankan *dāyaka*, he said, "Bhante, I don't know if you've noticed, but every time we do these things they always ask about kamma and rebirth." Sometimes with a sceptical angle, sometimes not so sceptical.

It seems to me that there is a lot of diversity within the traditional Buddhist societies in their understanding of these things. Many of the most prominent reformers in Thai Buddhism, of course, were very sceptical about rebirth. King Mongkut apparently rejected the idea of rebirth

altogether, although he wasn't necessarily so forward about it. So to me the issue is not like a West versus East thing – you know, modern Buddhism versus traditional Buddhism. The traditions themselves are in a state of flux and enquiry.

AB: Bhante, I just wanted to pick up on one of things you said: when you remove rebirth and kamma, you lose the “full depth” of the Buddha's teaching. That is true, but it seems to me to be a bit of an understatement, because the core of the Buddhist teaching is usually said to be the four noble truths and the noble eightfold path. And of course the noble eightfold path leads to the awakening, the end of rebirth. Since awakening is the core of the Buddhist teaching, you're not just losing the depth of the Buddhist teaching; it seems to me, you're losing its essence.

BB: Well, yeah, it was just a choice of words. I would agree, we would lose the essence.

AB: Let us move on to the next point, Bhante. One of the things we want to do during this course is to dispel some of the myths that have arisen regarding kamma and rebirth, certainly in western society, but probably everywhere actually. What do you regard as the most common misconceptions around kamma and rebirth?

S: And the most dangerous ones.

BB: I'm not sure if I've ever really pondered that question. Ok, but let's say that there are two ways in which some of the western Buddhists, western reformist Buddhists or neo-Buddhists, look upon the teaching of kamma and rebirth in regard to the Buddha's own teaching. One is that the Buddha simply took this on board because it was part of the Indian cultural background, the Indian cultural package, and he felt he had to adapt to it in order to make his teaching meaningful and intelligible within that particular culture. It's left somewhat ambiguous, but I guess the proponents of this view differ amongst themselves as to whether the Buddha accepted kamma and rebirth or didn't really accept it and was just using it as a kind of skilful means to make his essential teaching of the four noble truths intelligible to his listeners. So this is one perspective.

And then as a rejoinder to that perspective we have the Buddha giving the account of his own enlightenment or awakening experience. In many of the texts he explains it as the achievement of the tevijjās, the three higher knowledges, which begin with the knowledge of the recollection of past lives, past dwellings. It's apparently not taken in any metaphorical sense because he's saying that, “There I had such a name, such a clan, such a caste, and this was my food, this was my experience of pleasure and pain, from there I passed away and was reborn here,” and so on and so forth. So that's the first of his higher knowledges. The second one is the dibbacakkhu, the divine eye, by which he can see the passing away and rebirth of beings and can understand how beings are reborn in accordance with their kamma. Again, it is stated in a way that it has to be taken literally; there is nothing to indicate that this is a metaphor. (Actually, I think I am approaching one of the other ways of interpreting the teaching on kamma and rebirth.) This is the Buddha's exposition of his own enlightenment experience.

Then when he's teaching his disciples, we have the full sequential training: sīla, contentment, sense restraint, mindfulness, clear comprehension, the abandoning of the hindrances before the jhānas, then we come again to the same three higher knowledges. And though, of course, to reach arahantship it's not necessary to go through the first two vijjās, I would still say that those who achieve the first two vijjās, or least the first one, really get a very powerful, incisive understanding of the range of suffering within saṃsāra, and a sense of the futility of the ordinary worldly way of life. You know you go through kindergarten, elementary school, high school, college, maybe applying for graduate school – filling out a dozen applications – having to write term papers, exams. Then you apply for a job, maybe get a pink slip of unemployment, fall in love, get married, fight with the wife, get a divorce, get into conflict over the kids – and not just one time, but thousands and thousands of times. And, wow, if you see that you don't want to go through it. [And there's] cheating and dishonesty and violence, and you accumulate unwholesome kamma. And then – and this is worse than stepping off the top of the Empire State Building and falling to the ground – you fall from the human realm into the animal realm or one of the hell realms.

S: Often belief in rebirth is said to be a consequence of not being able to accept the fact that you're going to die. You're afraid of death and then decide there's rebirth. In fact, from a Buddhist point of view rebirth is what's supposed to make you afraid.

BB: I don't know whether I'd call it a misunderstanding or a misrepresentation, or maybe we can call it a rationalisation: to say that the Buddha either didn't accept the teaching of rebirth himself and just used it as a skilful means, or he accepted it because he himself was conditioned by the Indian world-view. Now, of course, we have modern science which, at least according to the rationalistic interpreters, undercuts the idea of any kind of personal survival of death. Therefore, even if the Buddha taught rebirth, it's simply scientifically impossible, and so the Buddha was wrong about this.

But though he was wrong, we can still find value in his teaching of the four noble truths as something applicable to life here and now. And then we can give a kind of metaphorical interpretation [to rebirth]. Anger and hatred and resentment, that is what is meant by rebirth in a hell realm. When I'm really obsessed with greed and craving for some kind of pleasures that I can't obtain, that's what's meant by rebirth in the realm of the petas (the departed/ghosts). When I'm just acting on the basis of my bestial instincts and desires, then I'm reborn as an animal, and when I'm acting with some degree of rationality and restraint, then I'm remaining in the human world. And if I'm doing really beautiful and generous and kindly deeds, or experiencing lofty states of meditative mind, that's a rebirth in the heavenly realms. Maybe if I'm gaining deep insight through insight meditation, that is the Nibbāna here and now. So those, I would say, are sort of misunderstandings, misrepresentations, rationalisations of the idea of rebirth.

AB: That last point you were making there, Bhante, that is also a point which is made in the Abhidhamma, isn't it? In the Abhidhamma you have two ways of looking at dependent arising: you have the sutta way (the Suttanta-bhājanīya), which is all about rebirth, and you have the Abhidhamma way (Abhidhamma-bhājanīya), which interprets dependent arising in terms of mental states here and now. The Abhidhamma-bhājanīya seems to be the origin of the particular view you are talking about now.

BB: Not quite so, because I remember there's a difference. This is in the Vibhaṅga, in the chapter on dependent origination – I think it's chapter 6 or chapter 4. And when it treats, if I remember, it could be the last three links in the chain, it uses different terms. I'd have to look that up, it's not fresh in my memory.

S: That's right. Saṅkhārā becomes saṅkhāro for example.

BB: I wasn't thinking specifically of that. I was thinking more of bhava (existence), and especially I think jāti (birth) was replaced by something and jarā-maraṇa (old age and death) was replaced by something.

S: So that seems to be showing that the principle or pattern of dependent origination can be adapted to different contexts and still be meaningful, which I think is very true. But that doesn't mean that's what the Buddha was talking about.

BB: The Vibhaṅga is applying a number of the twelve links to particular moments of consciousness, [and] it's certainly just a metaphor.

AB: I also feel, Bhante, that one of the interesting things that comes out of that distinction in the Abhidhamma is precisely that the sutta meaning is rebirth. It's saying that if the twelve links do not refer to rebirth then you have a reinterpretation, which is called the Abhidhamma method. So that is actually making it very clear that, from the Abhidhamma point of view, rebirth is the only possible interpretation of dependent origination as it appears in the suttas.

BB: Exactly.

S: Many of the points that you're raising, Bhante, are actually our next questions. So you're obviously reading our minds as we're going along. That's very good.

AB: Maybe before we go on to the next one, are there any other misconceptions, Bhante, that you would like to bring up while we're on that topic?

S: Maybe I can give you an example of what we are thinking of, Bhante. I met a student at the University of Queensland, a Sri Lankan disabled woman who was doing a PhD, studying the treatment of disabled people in Buddhist cultures and the way that's influenced by the doctrine of kamma, especially the idea that, "It's your kamma; deal with it".

When I was in Germany last year I met a blind woman, a very remarkable lady, who among other things was a martial arts teacher, completely blind! One of the first things she asked me was, "In Buddhism, do you think blind people are bad?" because somebody had told her that it was her bad kamma that had made her blind.

BB: Now I get the drift of your question – at least what you might have been pointing towards. In my understanding – let's put it this way – when I reflect on the teaching of kamma, I don't proceed from the level of what is happening in the present and try to track it back to the past, and then say what is happening in the present must be the result of some kamma that I did in the past, or that other people did in the past. For example, when there's a plane crash – suppose two hundred people die – somebody will raise the question, "Did all of those people have a karmic disposition to die in a plane crash?" And to this I just have to say I don't know. And I don't know if the teaching of kamma necessitates that.

So in my reflection I work from the level of the cause forward to what the effect will be. When I'm considering types of action, or when I see other people engaging in particular types of action, then I reflect to myself, "Well, if these actions are unwholesome, they're going to create unwholesome kamma. And if that unwholesome kamma gets the opportunity to ripen, then its going to result in some kind of pain, misery, misfortune." And if I or somebody else performs wholesome deeds, then that's going to create wholesome kamma, and if that wholesome kamma gets the chance to ripen, then it's going to result in well-being, good fortune and happiness. And so from a practical standpoint, what's important to understand about kamma is that our good and bad deeds will respectively produce fortune or misfortune.

S: Often it strikes me that when Buddhists say these things, they're using language in a way which is quite similar to how theists will use language when they say, "It's the will of God". People say, "It's your kamma", or they say Inshallah, or that it's the will of God. It seems to me these are religious phrases which are technically meaningless. Who knows what the will of God is. Who knows what someone's past kamma was. But they perform a different function. The function they perform is to help us cope with traumatic events by asserting a belief that they happened within a framework which is meaningful to that person. So it helps you to make sense of it.

AB: It's interesting also, Bhante, that although the early suttas reject the view that everything is caused by what was done in the past, pubbakatahetu (AN 3:61), still this is what people seem to think is the case. Where does that come from do you think? What is the origin of this idea?

BB: Maybe it's just the ordinary human sense of helplessness in face of the vast, maybe tragic dimensions of human existence. And generally it applies when misfortune strikes. But if somebody, say a traditional Buddhist, is very successful in business say, and their business enterprise suddenly just rises up to the top, they're not going to ascribe it to past kamma, but to their own skill in managing their business.

S: Another question we had, Bhante, relates to the question of metaphorical interpretation versus literal interpretation. It seems to me that when we look at the suttas, there are obviously different kinds, which are, on the face of it, meant to be interpreted and read in different ways. In some cases that's clear and obvious, and in some cases not so much.

One of the distinctions we use when talking about early Buddhist texts is the distinction between the doctrinal passages and the narrative or background stories and so on. Now one of the things that's really struck me about that difference is exemplified by the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56:11). In the doctrinal body of that text we find the four noble truths, and it says, yā ayaṃ taṇhā ponobhavikā, "This craving which leads to renewed existence". This is talking about rebirth in a purely abstract, philosophical, existential way. In terms of comparative study and so on, we find that phrase in all the different Āgamas and all the Sanskrit recensions and everything, and so that's pretty much fixed.

But in the last section of the same sutta you then have the catummahārājikadevā (the gods belonging to the realm of the four great kings) and all of the different orders of devas, of gods, crying up through the cosmos. And that section, of course, from a text-critical point of view, is much less secure. We find different versions, it's in different places, sometimes it's there and sometimes not, and so on. There's definitely a difference between the doctrinal portions and, if you like, the narrative portions from a text-critical point of view.

It also seems to me that it's in those narrative portions that we usually find the more detailed references to an Indian cosmology of heavens and hells and so on, whereas dependent origination and the four noble truths, and so on, talk about rebirth in a more abstract sense. This is not where we find Sakka coming down and having wars with the asuras and running away, or the lovely story where Sakka had to turn back because he was going to run over a nest of birds, and things like this. It seems to me that these things often are meant to be taken metaphorically to a certain degree. How metaphorically I'm not sure, but to some degree: they're less literal, less serious.

So, to sum up, we can accept the teaching of kamma and rebirth quite literally when they are presented as a philosophical position. But what about all this cosmology and stuff? Is there really a Sakka up there? Are we going to be reborn in a particular heaven or not? Or, what's going on there, what do you think?

BB: It's an interesting question which I've also pondered. The way I solve this to myself – let's say I haven't arrived at a final solution for myself – is that I would accept the existence of what I would call different bandwidths in the higher realms. On this view, there will be a bandwidth, if I can use that expression, that corresponds to the sense sphere heavens. And then it seems quite reasonable to me that there should be another bandwidth that corresponds to the heavens of the rūpadhātu, the different Brahma realms. And then there would be a still higher bandwidth that corresponds to the formless divine realms. One can see these different realms within saṃsāra as, in a sense, actualisations or materialisations of the different karmic propensities of sentient beings. Not in the sense of philosophical idealism, that matter isn't real, but just the projection of mind.

But there's a kind of mutual causation going on here, or a mutual conditionality, whereby the particular realm in which we exist conditions for the most part what we can experience and what we can respond to. And so because in the past we have created kamma that functions mainly within the human band realm, we've been reborn into the human realm. We're then mostly exposed to things in the human world and respond to that in primarily human ways. So for the most part, hopefully at least, we're creating human kamma.

If we perform extremely lofty actions, but they still belong to the sense sphere, that will dispose our consciousness towards the sense sphere heavens. And so we will then be experiencing not a human world, but a sense sphere heavenly world. And if we develop the jhānas to different levels, it would make sense that what I would call the basic vibrational level of consciousness, or frequency level, would then get attuned to the bandwidth of the rūpadhātu. And if that continues up to the time of death, then it seems natural that the consciousness would function at the base level of the rūpadhātu. So then we would take rebirth into one of the realms within the rūpadhātu, the form realm. And if we develop the formless meditations and maintain those formless meditations, then it's quite natural that the consciousness will become accustomed to that ...

AB: It is interesting though, Bhante, that you actually find many of the Vedic Gods in the suttas. Vedic Gods like Varuna is right there in the suttas (SN 11:3). You seem to find some reference to Vishnu (as Venhu in SN 2:12) and Shiva (as Siva in SN 2:21), too, or at least it's a possible interpretation of some of the words we find particularly in the Devaputta-samyutta. How did those things get in there? How should we relate to them?

BB: It's quite likely that, or at least quite possible, that Vishnu, or Venhu in Pali, was originally a kind of popular village level deity. Perhaps he then acquired more and more prestige as communications spread amongst the villages and towns to the point where he was then made one of the central divine figures of devotional Hinduism. And a similar thing could have happened to Shiva. There's a devaputta named Siva mentioned in the Devaputta-samyutta. But the word Siva in its own right means something like auspicious, and so it's not necessarily the case that that Siva was the one who became the Shiva of Shaivite Hinduism.

S: As well as drawing on Indian cosmology, we also find a lot of things that are original and specific to early Buddhist cosmology – certainly the arrangements of different orders of heavens. Many of the names of specific heavens and other things we don't find in any contemporary Brahmanical literature.

BB: Yeah.

S: Where are they by the way? We've been up to space and stuff, but we didn't see any devas, any gods. If you look in the suttas, the hell realms are these realms with boiling metal, and that's actually a pretty good description of what it's like to be under the earth. And then you've got these abysmal inter-galactic spaces, which is also quite a good description of what you find out there. I don't know. But what about the heavens: where are they?

BB: Ok, this is why I brought in the metaphor of the bandwidths. The metaphor occurred to me back at the time when I was living in Sri Lanka in the Forest Hermitage in Kandy. At that time my source for getting news about the outside world was a radio that I had, that somebody had given to Venerable Nyanaponika. It had several bands, including an AM band, a FM band, a Short Wave 1 band and a Short Wave 2 band.

I used to listen to the BBC World Service. I think it was on the Short Wave 1 band. One time I turned on the radio, and I was trying to get the BBC World Service in the place where I usually got it, and I wasn't getting it, I wasn't picking it up. Then I went through the entire band from the left side to the right side, and I still couldn't pick up the BBC World Service. Then I realised that somehow through clumsiness I had knocked the pointer to a different bandwidth. I had knocked it from Short Wave 1 to FM. I realised that on the FM band I wasn't going to get the BBC World Service.

If I'm a scientific sceptic who's mind is just tuned in to the FM band, I say: "BBC World Service, come on man – this the age of science; stop bringing in this American cultural package. Look: we have eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body. And now look at the band. I'm taking it from the left side to the right side, and you're just getting every radio station, and there just ain't no BBC World Service there." (laughs) But once you change to the Short Wave 1 band, then you get the BBC World Service.

So the way I understand these different realms is that they're operating at different – and again this is probably metaphorical language – but they are operating at different base frequencies of consciousness. To tune in to these other realms there are two ways to go about it. (1) If

you want to verify the existence of the hell realms, you could go around murdering people, slandering virtuous and holy people, burning sacred books with malicious thoughts. Or (2) a simple but difficult way is to develop the four jhānas and, based on the fourth jhāna, to develop the divine eye with which one could tune into the other realms, without having to risk rebirth into the lower realms.

S: This raises a couple of questions, Bhante. The first thing is you mention that science is operating on a different frequency. But there is no theoretical reason why science has to be restricted to a material level, or what we understand today as a material level. And in fact there are huge gaps in science, like 90% of all matter is dark matter, or whatever.

I find it implausible to say that there is no relationship whatsoever between these different frequencies. So they might be segregated or separated to some degree, but there must be some conditional relation between them. It's not like parallel universes where there's no connection at all. So it seems to me that, in principle, it might be possible to investigate these things scientifically. Maybe we're in the same situation as in the Pāyāsi Sutta (DN 23), where prince Pāyāsi tried his best to do experiments, you know, using scientific methods, experimenting, measuring – I mean it's good science. Wouldn't quite get past an ethics committee these days, but nevertheless it's good science. But the methods, the tools, aren't up to it yet, perhaps.

BB: There are so many aspects, even of matter that we don't yet understand. When it comes to the relation between matter, physical form, and mind, it's just a complete vacuum in understanding.

AB: Obviously quite a bit of research has been done on various issues which relate to the ideas of rebirth and kamma, and to me the most interesting research has been on the memories of past lives in young children, most of which has been performed by Ian Stevenson at the University of Virginia in the US. This has now been taken up by Dr Jim Tucker, whom we actually interviewed a couple of weeks ago. If you look at that research – I don't know how much you know about it – what do you think about the quality of that research?

BB: Years ago I read some of the cases investigated by Ian Stevenson. And though I don't have the scientific background to be able to assess the degree of rigour that he applied to his investigations, it seemed to me to be quite rigorous, and he also seemed to be very reasonable in the way in which he went about drawing his conclusions. He didn't say this experiment proves the reality of rebirth. What he said was that he had considered the different alternative ways of explaining the phenomena that he had encountered in Sri Lanka and in other countries. Comparing these different explanations, the one which involved the fewest number of assumptions and which seemed to have the greatest degree of probability was the supposition that the consciousness of the person who passed away had reincarnated into this child who claimed to have those memories.

S: Is there any other experimental research that you have seen which is interesting in that respect? From what we've seen, Ian Stevenson's work, and now Jim Tucker's work, is the most sustained and rigorous scientific study. Are you aware of anything else that is interesting, or that we might have a look at?

BB: There is the case of Dhammaruwan.

S: He's teaching a retreat at Jhana Grove at the moment!

BB: Oh, is that so! If he were keeping this under wraps, I wouldn't bring up his case. But he's lost his reticence about speaking of this. He even tells his story over the internet, and so I have no hesitation in bringing it up.

At the time he was a boy, at the age of three, he began chanting whole suttas, fairly long suttas, in Pali. He grew up in a poor family. I think his father had either passed away early in his childhood or left the family, and so there was just his mother, his sister and him. The mother, I think, told an educated Sri Lankan couple living nearby about her son, because she thought he was possessed by a spirit. The couple heard his chanting and recognised that these were Pali suttas. They then began recording his recitation, and they recorded them over the years, starting from the age of three up to the age of ten, eleven, or twelve, when he started to lose that ability.

There is almost no other rational explanation [apart from real past life memories] for how he could know these suttas. The sceptic might say he must have listened to monks chanting them over the radio. We might accept that explanation if he had recited the Metta Sutta (Sn 1:8), the Mangala Sutta (Sn 2:4), or the Ratana Sutta (Sn 2:1), or maybe even the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. But even that would be somewhat stretching the bounds of credulity: that a 3 or 5 year old boy should be reciting the whole Dhammacakka Sutta (SN 56:11) just by listening to it on the radio, without any text in front of him. But as a 7 or 8 year old he also chanted the entire Gīrīmāṇanda Sutta (AN 10:60), and that is just so rarely chanted by monks on the radio. And then there is a recording of him reciting passages from the Paṭṭhāna, the book of conditional relations in the Abhidhamma. I didn't compare his recitation with the text, because he doesn't say which portion he's reciting ... the Paṭṭhāna consists of six or seven volumes of very repetitive text with just minor variations.

Then his intonation is very different from the contemporary Sri Lankan style of chanting: almost just by listening you can tell it's coming from another era; it's not the modern style of Sri Lankan chanting. And then there's something very interesting. I don't think anything has been published or spread around about this. Years ago I was listening to his recitation of the Mahānidāna Sutta (DN 15) with the PTS Pali edition in front of me, where they have footnotes with variant readings. I found that in a number of places where there were differences between the Sinhala and the Burmese script editions he was reciting in accordance with the Burmese script edition. But not always: there were a few places where there were differences and he was following the Sinhala edition. But in maybe 65% of the cases where there was a difference, he was following the Burmese script edition.

AB: And of course the point you're making there, just for the audience, is that the Sinhala script edition is the one he would have heard in Sri Lanka. He wouldn't have heard the Burmese script edition. And so it is very remarkable that he would've been able to recite it like that.

S: Bhante, it's interesting you say that, because I did exactly the same thing many years ago. I think it was with the Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta (DN 22), which he also recited. Again, these are suttas which never get recited: to read the full Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta takes something like 3 hours.

Just so everyone is clear, the variations we're talking about are very, very minor textual details, and even though he's so young, he's clearly

not making mistakes. He's reciting it exactly the same way in multiple repeated passages. He's not just stumbling over things or being vague; he's distinctly articulating it, in a consistent way, across different passages. And with some of the variations that I noticed, I couldn't find any particular text that had those readings at all. The conclusion I drew was that he was using a textual recension that wasn't part of the ones used for the PTS version. So, very remarkable.

BB: He is just one instance, one person that we happen to know about. Because I was living near Kandy and he was growing up in Kandy, I got to hear about it. He was 8 years old.

S: Did you hear any reciting?

BB: No, no, because he couldn't do this normally. You know, you'd ask him, "Ruwan recite such and such a text," and he was not able to do it. But just occasionally he would say to his adopted father, Bertie: "Uncle, uncle, I'm starting to remember. I'm starting to remember!" Then Bertie would get the tape recorder and set it up and record his recitation.

And then a few years ago – I think it was in 2005 – he came to visit me when I was living in Bodhi Monastery [in New Jersey]. He came on a Saturday afternoon and I had a Pali class that afternoon. I asked him in advance if I could tell his story to the Pali students. He said it would be ok. I then invited him to come to the class, and he related his story. One of the students asked, "Can you recite something now?" He looked at me and said, "What should I recite?" I said, "Why don't you recite the Metta Sutta?" And he said to me, "Do you have the text?" (laughing)

S: That's equal parts inspiring and depressing. If you want to memorise the suttas, you know it's all going to go eventually anyway.

BB: And then when he did recite, he was reciting pretty much in the contemporary style, not how he had been reciting as a boy.

AB: That fits very well with the findings of Jim Tucker and Ian Stevenson. They say that past life memories come up from the time you start to speak until about 7 or 8 years old, and after that they tend to disappear. Dhammaruwan's story seems to fit in with that scheme.

Bhante, now that we're on this topic of peoples' experiences of past lives – what about yourself? Have you had any experiences which you feel are indicative of past lives, etc.?

BB: I don't have any rebirth memories, but somehow I get a feeling I was a Buddhist monk in a past life. Once I reached a certain age, I felt a natural attraction to the life of a Buddhist monk. Of course, somebody could say, "Ok, he had psychological problems, he couldn't deal with reality, he was looking for something ..."

And I can't say I recognised anything in Sri Lanka that looked familiar. But I did have a kind of feeling that I had lived there, or had some kind of connection, a strong connection, but in an intuitive sense, not really clear, distinct recollections.

S: I had a discussion with Stephen Batchelor about this a couple of years ago, and one of the points we came to in the discussion was quite interesting. You know, we had very different takes on what we thought rebirth was and so on. But the way we came to that understanding happened in similar ways for both of us, and in both cases it was what enabled us to be fully committed to the Buddhist path.

For me that was a specific moment. I can remember it very clearly in my mind. It was few weeks after I'd done my first retreat in Chiang Mai. I can tell you exactly the time and day and where I was standing and exactly what I was doing. This intuition came to me. I don't know what it was or why, but I just felt like this thing, this consciousness, is so much bigger – it just goes on. I felt like these kind of walls around my existence just sort of fell away. It wasn't like I was seeing what was beyond them, but I just had this sense of vastness. And to me that was what brought me into it.

With Stephen Batchelor it was exactly the opposite. He could never feel that he was committed to Buddhism because he couldn't get around this rebirth thing. And then one day he thought, "Well, if I can leave the rebirth thing to one side then I can feel a sense of commitment to the Dhamma."

BB: That is the advice, actually, I give people when they come to me and say they feel attracted to the Dhamma, they'd like to get involved with the Dhamma, to practice the Dhamma, but they have doubts and problems with kamma and rebirth. I tell them, "If you have trouble with that, just put it in brackets for now, and just continue to accept whatever agrees with your understanding, and practice whatever you feel is beneficial to you." Then I say for that reason don't reject the teaching of kamma and rebirth. Just recognise that this was taught by the Buddha, and there are reasons why the Buddha taught that. But if you have trouble with it, don't reject the whole package just because you can't get over that particular hurdle.

S: I think for me that's the problem that I would have with some of the people in the secularist movement. If people say, "Look, I don't believe in kamma and rebirth," or if they say they don't know or whatever, that's fine; people have different opinions, and it's a difficult thing to know. But when you take the step to say the Buddha didn't really teach it and so on, to me that's where you lose a lot of credibility. It's just completely obvious that that's what he was teaching.

BB: When I first started to read about Buddhism, it came through – this is back in the middle 1960s – DT Suzuki's writings on Zen Buddhism [Ed.: Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, 1870-1966, was a Japanese author of books and essays on Buddhism and Professor at Otani University]. Once I saw that [rebirth and kamma] was the foundational principle on which monks lived their life and it actually came from the canonical texts, I had just no struggle with it at all.

AB: Coming back and tying this up with the idea of science again, I think one of the problems is a kind of dissonance that people sometimes feel: on the one hand they see that science is a search for truth and on the other hand Buddhism is also a search for truth, although in a more personal sense. When these two world views clash, or seem to clash anyway – one rejecting rebirth and the other saying there is such a thing – then some kind of resolution is needed. How do we deal with a situation where there is an apparent contradiction between two different ways of approaching the truth? When do we learn from science and when should we be more sceptical about scientific understanding?

BB: First, what I would say is that scientists themselves – as long as they are really being scientific – cannot undermine or disprove the teaching of rebirth. Science has proved to be very effective in generating knowledge about the physical world by working from the hypothesis that the physical world is the domain that we have to understand. So because science has been so effective by using that premise or starting-point, scientists have jumped to conclusions about things that lie outside the domain of the physical world.

Science can be a very powerful means of knowledge in understanding everything about the physical world, from the structure of cells down to the structure of molecules, atoms, sub-atomic particles, and outward to understanding solar systems, galaxies, inter-relations of galaxies, and so on. All of this works and generates a tremendous amount of knowledge when one adopts the premise that I'm going to keep my investigations within the realm of physical phenomena. But then when one jumps to the conclusion that therefore mind, consciousness, mental processes can be reduced to physical phenomena, or can be entirely explained on the basis of physical phenomena, then one has actually left the track of pure science and one has accepted a metaphysic. The metaphysic that what is real – and the only thing that is real, and the base of everything else – is physical phenomena.

Just last week I read a book, and I think it's quite an important book, by an American philosopher, Thomas Nagel, a professor of philosophy at New York University. It's called *Mind and Cosmos*. He develops a critique of physicalist reductionism, and he holds that the premise of physical reductionism cannot even explain the phenomenon of life itself. From the premise that physical phenomena alone are real, one still has enormous difficulty in explaining how, within the development of the earth, chains of atoms so quickly formed into complex molecules that were capable of self-replication. He also argues that it's virtually impossible to explain on the basis even of chains of complex molecules how a phenomenon like mind or consciousness can emerge. And he's not a theist. He rejects the hypothesis of intentional creation and interference in the cosmic process on the part of a deity. He doesn't try to come up with a definitive explanation of this, though he explores various hypotheses.

AB: So would it be fair to say that we need to distinguish between true scientific findings on the one hand and scientific beliefs or scientific opinions on the other hand?

BB: Maybe it would be safer to call them opinions of scientists.

AB: Right, opinions of scientists.

BB: Or the world-view of most or many scientists. Because there are scientists who go to the laboratory from Monday to Friday [and then on the weekend] some go to the Synagogue or Church. Some of course may be going to the Buddhist temple on Saturday or Sunday. So they're not all subscribing to physical reductionism.

S: I'm not even sure how much of this is the viewpoint of scientists. It seems to be much more the viewpoint of secularist philosophers or thinkers. Many scientists are much more modest in what they do. They just go out and do their work and they know it's got a very limited sphere.

BB: There are some scientists who're very outspoken about this point of view and who've become very prominent for that reason, such as Richard Dawkins [Ed.: b.1941, an ethologist, evolutionary biologist and writer]. And then he gets on the platform with another scientist from the United States. You get them speaking together. It could be Krauss. Yes, Lawrence Krauss [Ed.: b.1954, a theoretical physicist and cosmologist], that's it.

S: This is a bit beside the point, but an interesting example of the phenomenon you just mentioned is a scientist in the States, an India scientist called Subhash Kak [Ed.: b.1947, a computer scientist]. I'm not sure if you've heard of him, but he's done a lot of advanced work on quantum cryptography and so on, and on the other hand on astrological interpretations of the Rig Veda and Vedic ritual. So there you have the two sides. It's a very interesting CV that he's got!

He has a scientific training similar to Ajahn Brahm, who has a background in theoretical physics as well. It seems to me it has a lot more to do with ideology than the actual practice of science.

AB: Another critique that comes up with the idea of rebirth, Bhante, is that it presupposes dualism. But dualism is largely rejected in philosophy as being absurd and impossible. How do you respond to that critique of the idea of rebirth?

BB: Within the main tradition of European philosophy or Western philosophy, dualism involves the problem of the interrelationships between two substances. This is the idea which is inherited from Descartes [Ed.: Rene Descartes, 1596-1650, a French philosopher and mathematician], and no doubt he picked it up from the medieval philosophers. Once you use the idea of substances, one encounters the problem: how can there be an interaction between a material substance, which is the body, and a mental substance, which is the mind. Descartes tried to do that by locating the intersection between the two, I believe, at the pineal gland. Later philosophers have rejected the pineal gland as the point where mind and body interact, but they still find a problem with an inter-relationship between mind and body because they conceive of two substances. And so amongst those who have a background in brain research and neuroscience, the attempt is made to explain all conscious processes on the basis of neurological events and events in the brain.

But that, to my way of thinking, gives rise to the almost insurmountable problem of how purely physiological processes – even subtle processes – in the brain, within the nervous system, can give rise the presentation of the world to a subject, a subject, moreover, that is responding particularly through choices, through volition, through evaluation and assessment to the input of data from the world. That seems to me to be as enormously problematic as the idea of an interaction between mind and body.

In Buddhism we don't have the idea of substance, but we have the idea of a stream of consciousness, or a flow of consciousness, and even of a body as a constant arising and passing away of material phenomena. There is still the problem – if you want to posit one – of how mental phenomena can interact with and influence physical phenomena, and how physical phenomena can interact with and influence mental phenomena.

Whatever position one comes down to, I think the only solution is just to say that that's the way it is. The physical reductionist, when he's

confronted with consciousness, choice, decision – how consciousness, choice, decision, evaluation, knowledge can arise on the basis of purely physical processes – he's stuck too. And he has to say that that's just the way it is. And the metaphysical idealist who holds that mind is the only ultimate reality, when confronted with the close connection between mind and brain, the problem of brain damage, the damage to the functioning of the mind, when he's confronted with that problem, he has to say that that's the way it is.

AB: You know, Bhante, Bhante Sujato and myself have been discussing these things before, and it's not entirely clear to me that the Buddhist standpoint actually is a dualist standpoint. Basically we look at the world in terms of experience, right? That's where we're coming from. The idea of the sense doors. When you look at the world in terms of experience, on the one hand there is the experience of material phenomena, what you might call *rūpa*, on the other hand you have experience of mental phenomena. But the experience in the end is always rooted in the mind. It's not clear to me that we have the kind of dualistic concept in Buddhism that some people claim we have. Do you have any comment on that?

BB: That's a good observation. But still, within experience one is investigating physical phenomena. Physical phenomena always appear within experience, but I would not say that physical phenomena are purely reducible to the experience of them. I think that the fact that there can be different perspectives on the same physical phenomena serves as a firm possibility that matter exists apart from actual engagement within any individual conscious experience.

S: Whether that comes within the four noble truths, of course, is another question. To come back to Brahmalī's question: if you think about the basic description of experience in the suttas: *cakkhuñca paṭicca ca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso*, "dependent on eye and forms there is eye consciousness, the coming together of the three is contact". The idea that you have a kind of structured experience, which consists of aspects, which we can identify as physical and mental aspects, is in a way secondary. The primary reality we have is experience, which is messy and complicated and confusing and so on. So we try to draw out aspects and to identify aspects so we can make better sense of it. But that's a different thing from saying these are the building blocks from which that experience is made.

Coming back to the point you made about idealism: if we would conclude that there is no matter outside of experience, it seems we would be making the same error, from the opposite point of view, that we just a minute ago were accusing the scientists of making. That would be kind of overstepping the bounds of our epistemology.

AB: Ok, next question, Bhante. We have looked at the scientific evidence for rebirth. We could also ask the opposite question: might it be possible to disprove rebirth? What would it take to disprove it?

BB: If you had a scientist with the divine eye who would be able to see that, in the case of every person who passes away, the consciousness comes to an end, that might disprove it. (laughs)

S: In other words, it would be fairly difficult.

Ok, what about another kind of proof? There are several projects on at the moment to construct an artificial consciousness. In one extended project, for example, rather than trying to design an artificially intelligent computer, they're trying to build a digital brain. They're replicating the structure of the brain piece by piece with the hope that, once they finish building it, consciousness will pop out on top of it. Could that be a way of disproving rebirth, if you could build a computer that will become fully conscious? Let's leave aside the question of establishing whether there's consciousness. Let's say we've all agreed that it seems, well, pretty conscious. Would that prove that rebirth doesn't exist, or does it just prove that someone got reborn as a computer?

BB: That's a possibility, but a more likely possibility to me would be that they've just succeeded in constructing an extremely sophisticated machine which has been programmed with various algorithms so that it can, through a vast network of information, make what seems to be informed choices. But I would doubt, though I couldn't prove, that this very complex machine has what we would call a subjective point of view, that is, a subjective perspectives by which it is looking upon the world and actually knowing what is taking place.

S: Critics would say the same thing about you, right? You're just a complex machine.

BB: I bang my fist against the table and say my pain disproves that! (laughs)

S: It seems to me that if you look at the history of the West and India – the ancient history and the philosophers and things like that – that was the crucial point of divergence. From very early times, from before the time of the Buddha, from the time of the Upanishads, the main obsession of the Indians was to ask, "What is this subjective experience, what is this awareness?"

In the West, even today, it seems it kind of gets lost most of the time when people are thinking about these kinds of questions. A classic example being the Turing Test. How do we know whether a computer is conscious? Can a computer think? Can it answer questions, can it fool somebody into thinking it's human? It's an operational definition of consciousness. Can it do things in the way that consciousness does things? Whereas from an Indian point of view the question is: does it actually have subjective experience?

AB: Bhante, let's for the sake of argument say there was some way of disproving rebirth. Let's say science was able to come up with a solid piece of evidence that consciousness was produced by the brain. If that was the case and you were satisfied with the scientific argument, would you still be a Buddhist?

BB: If they actually disproved rebirth, then I would say, regretfully, that my belief in all of the teachings in the suttas about life continuing beyond death – being reborn, this realm, that realm, the ideal of *Nibbāna* as liberation, the end of the cycle of birth and death – all of that, I guess, would just have to fall by the wayside. But I would still be a Buddhist, a secular Buddhist, because I would still find it beneficial to continue Buddhist practices here and now. I would still find present life benefits from the Buddhist practices I've adopted.

AB: But if the Buddha got something so basic in his teachings completely wrong, wouldn't that undermine faith and confidence in the Buddha's teachings more broadly?

BB: Well, the way that I've come to develop faith and confidence in those aspects of the Buddha's teachings that lie outside the range of my

own capacity for investigation is through the benefits that I've experienced through practising those aspects of the Dhamma that come within the range of my experience. So if somebody could rigorously, scientifically, disprove survival, rebirth, kamma, it would put me in something of a logical dilemma: it is because I see a benefit in those aspects of the Buddha's teaching that I can investigate that I feel confident about those aspects that lie outside the range of my experience. But if rigorous scientists have disproved those points of the teaching that lie outside the range of my experience, then [I can still accept those teachings] that come within the range of my own experience, [because] I find happiness in life as a monk. I'm not going to disrobe just because there is no chance of being reborn in the animal realm if I take up with a young girl. (laughs)

S: Bhante, it seems to me that the teachings within the early Buddhist texts are generally speaking very coherent, including the teachings on kamma and so on. I'm just wondering whether you're aware of any problems there: are there any inconsistencies, perhaps between the Nikāyas and the Āgamas, or even within the Pali texts themselves? It has been pointed out that in a couple of places in the Pali texts there seems to be a possibility of Jaina influence in the way kamma is presented. Do you have any thoughts or opinions on that?

BB: There is a problematic passage in a sutta in the Aṅguttara Nikāya. I think you must know that passage. This is in the book of tens, and in the numbering scheme I have, it's sutta number 217 (AN 10:217). It says: "I do not say that there is a termination of volitional kamma that has been done and accumulated as long as one has not experienced (the results), and that may be in this life or in the next rebirth or on some subsequent occasion. I do not say that there is the making of an end of suffering so long as one has not experienced volitional kamma that has been done and accumulated." If one takes that literally, it seems to be saying that we have to experience the ripening of all the kamma we've done in the past. Logically, since we've done – in time without beginning – an infinite number of deeds, it seems we have to experience the results of an infinite number of actions.

S: I'm not sure if it needs to be interpreted in that way. If you look, for example, at the Mahāsudassana Sutta (DN 17), it is one of very few suttas that talks about the Bodhisattva doing something in a past life. As a result of that action he was reborn in the Brahma realm, and then puññā khayā, "with the passing away of that puññā", he fell away from that realm and fell to this realm. So maybe it's not the case that we accumulate lots of kamma from past lives, but that we do some kind of acts, and then experience the results in a realm where we've mainly experiencing things and not actually making much new kamma. Then when we come back to this life, maybe we don't have all that much past kamma that needs to be experienced. I don't know.

AB: Anyway, I think Venerable Anālayo did a comparative study on that particular sutta, and I think he came to the conclusion that the Pali version and the Āgama version were actually quite different. He thought there might have been a corruption there, in particularly a Jaina influence on the Pali sutta in this particular case. And also a couple of other suttas with a similar kind of approach to this one. Anyway, that was his conclusion.

BB: I'm not really disturbed very much by what seems to be little inconsistencies or divergences between the Pali and the Āgama versions of the suttas. Since the main principles [are the same, all we are seeing are] little inconsistencies or differences or divergences due to some degree of corruption in the transmission of the text.

S: Another question I wanted to ask you is about the Pali text itself. It seems to me that one of the reasons why it is possible to read the suttas while not accepting that they're really teaching rebirth is that a number of the most important terms in that context have some kind of association or connotation with the idea of rebirth in the Pali which their English translations don't really have. I'm thinking of terms like viññāṇa, saṅkhāra, bhava. Viññāṇa we translate as consciousness, saṅkhāra usually as volitional activities, and bhava usually translates as existence. Other ones, upapatti, we translate as re-arise. Another one is itthatta. All of these phrases, which you find somewhere or other in the suttas, are associated with the idea of rebirth, yet when we try to translate them, it's difficult to capture that nuance.

BB: Do you see that in the word viññāṇa as well?

S: Well you have terms like viññāṇa-sota and viññāṇa-tiṭṭhi, "stream of consciousness", "station of consciousness". I'm not sure what it's like in Sri Lanka, but in Thailand the word viññān, basically means ghost. I remember an idiom from when we were doing building work in the monastery, and there was a beam which was completely rotted out. The idiom was laaw dtaa vinyaan, only the ghost is left.

By contrast, when we use the English word consciousness, it's completely psychological. There's no connection with rebirth at all.

BB: A passage that's very often quoted by those who want to give a purely imminent interpretation of kamma is the Buddha's statement: "Cetanā ahaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi", "It is volition or intention, monks, that I call kamma," (AN 6:63). That gets quoted again and again, and what they never mention is that just a few lines down the Buddha speaks about the diversity in kamma in terms of rebirth: "There is kamma that leads to the lower realms, there is kamma that leads to the human realm, there is kamma that leads to the deva realms."

I know Stephen Batchelor quotes that again and again to emphasise that the Buddha gave a psychological interpretation to kamma. And so the way kamma is explained is that our volitions, our choices, our actions, influence our character, change our character. And then our character becomes our destiny in this life.

S: Do you have any advice for that? How do we frame it or get around the problem?

BB: Well, it's true the Buddha emphasised that the cetanā, the volition, is the decisive factor in generating kamma, but that doesn't mean that [rebirth is not involved].

AB: There seems to be a different way of approaching the suttas here, Bhante. On the one hand, there are those who would take the suttas as a whole, and I would include all of us in that category. We would look at them, and generally we would assume that they are authentic, that they are the word of the Buddha. But then there are others who seem to take the suttas, and then pick out the parts they like and reject others. There seems to be a different approach there.

Obviously there is some truth to both approaches, because everything in the suttas is not the word of the Buddha. We know that for sure. There are things that are late, things that have been added, like narratives and such things. How do we make the case that these are generally

authentic teachings across the board? Why is there this difference in approach?

BB: There seems to be several issues here. One is the question of what is the basis for accepting that the canonical texts, the texts within the Pali canon, their counterparts in the Āgamas, what you call the Early Buddhist Texts, are authentic texts that can be traced to the Buddha himself. I think you two have made the case for that very well with your monograph on the Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts.

S: Thank you for giving us that advertisement. We'll send you a cheque later!

BB: I don't have anything to add to that, except to suggest that with the various Buddhist texts we can say there is a probability spectrum that the Buddha actually spoke them. When we get to the Pali texts and their counterparts, the probability that they come from the earliest period goes up to something like 85-90%. Whereas with things like the Jātakas, the Apadānas, and then the Mahāyāna sūtras taken as a whole, those probabilities start going down the spectrum, until you get to the Tantras where it probably comes to zero, apart from *evaṃ me sutaṃ* ("thus have I heard", the opening phrase of every sutta, early or not). (laughs)

That's one thing. The other thing is that there's this current practice, particularly I would have to say with the lay vipassanā movement, of picking out favourite statements from the suttas, favourite sentences, and then quoting, "The Buddha said this, the Buddha said that". And then instead of [quoting in context, one just takes one piece of wood] from the lumber-yard and then builds the rest of the house with plastic, plastic that melts when the temperature goes above 90 degrees Fahrenheit. What is that in Celsius? Ok, let's say when it reaches a summer's day in Perth, the plastic starts to melt! (laughs) Not only that, now there's the further extreme of saying that [anything well-spoken came from] the Buddha.

S: Are you familiar with the fake Buddha quotes website? One of my favourites, yeah!

But we have to admit that that tendency is actually an ancient part of the Buddhist tradition. In the texts it starts off by saying that everything spoken by the Buddha was *subhāsita*, "well-spoken", and then a bit later it says that everything well-spoken was spoken by the Buddha. So that tendency has been there for quite some time.

We've come down fairly hard on the secularists in this particular session, and that's fine – they're grown up, and I'm sure they'll deal with it. But one of the things that strikes me, also if you look at traditional Buddhist societies, is that it's very natural to take bits and pieces of things. You don't just assimilate something in its entirety: we've all taken bits and pieces. And you've spoken a little bit about your own history, starting out and learning bits and pieces as you went along. Certainly, within traditional Buddhist societies it's extremely rare to find anybody who actually understands very much about Buddhism at all.

One of the things I appreciate with the secular Buddhists is that at least they do read the suttas, which of course is extremely unusual in the Buddhist world. They do meditate, and they do take these things seriously, and they discuss them and so on and so forth. So even though I have some differences of opinion with them, I appreciate the fact that they are, to some degree, very serious about what they're doing. I see it as a natural part of a process.

BB: First of all, what we call secular Buddhism is not a monolith; there's a whole variety of views in those who call themselves secular Buddhists. Some are quite like traditionalists in their understanding – they just want to know how to apply the Dhamma to life in the modern world. On the other hand, there are those who take a rather dogmatic stance in rejecting a lot of classical Buddhism that almost definitely comes from the Buddha himself.

S: There was an interesting article in the Guardian some weeks ago, probably some months ago now. I think it was written by Vishvapani, one of the FWBO writers. I can't remember the name of the article now, but it was basically a list of all the superstitions that Buddhism has to get rid of if it's going to be relevant to the modern world. Number one on the list of superstitions was kamma and rebirth.

BB: Generally I thought the FWBO people took rebirth quite literally, because Sangharakshita (Ed.: the founder of the FWBO) always brings up kamma and rebirth. Maybe somebody in another generation [are sort of] reacting against their teachers.

AB: I'm also wondering, Bhante, whether this distinction between secularism and religion is always valid. Of course, in certain spheres of life it is. If you love your rituals and your superstitions, if you are dogmatic and close-minded, and all these kinds of things, then of course there is a religious aspect there. But if you are a Buddhist who is interested in the idea of the development of the mind and in realising certain states of consciousness, this does not seem to me to be unscientific or go against the scientific method.

Are we as Buddhist monastics religious or secular? How would you describe yourself? Are you a secular Buddhist or are you a religious Buddhist?

BB: They're just labels in a way; religious and secular are labels. There's no hard and fast boundary between one or the other.

S: King Ashoka, for example, to me he was almost entirely a secularist king. His ethics were almost entirely secular. He makes a few references to heaven and things like that, but basically his program is pretty much the same as what you would expect from a secular ruler today. He's accepting all the different beliefs without distinguishing one or the other, and he's saying let's look at what the results of these things are, let's help people to live. So maybe Buddhism actually is the first secularist ... I don't know.

Sometimes I feel that Buddhism has unfortunately been swept up in a debate around the polarisation of religion and science, which it doesn't really belong to, and it's none of our business, actually.

When I was going to university and so on in the 80's, I was reading a lot of books talking about how Buddhism and Buddhist philosophy were in harmony with science, like say the Tao of Physics (Ed.: Fritjof Capra, Shambhala publications, 1975). It seems like that movement kind of got left behind; probably for political and historical reasons more than actual scientific ones. We're now living in a world which is much more polarised, and those extreme points of view have infected the dialogue in Buddhism as well.

BB: I don't know about that, because there's a lot of dialogue going on between scientists and Buddhist practitioners through the Mind & Life

Institute. The Dalai Lama is sort of the patron of that. But they have a lot of people in the fields of physics, cognitive science, neuroscience who're investigating [this area].

S: So it's still going on I suppose.

Bhante, maybe you might be able to help us out here. Ajahn Brahmalī and myself were arguing earlier, and we couldn't reach any conclusion about the question of whether you can be a Buddhist if you reject rebirth. (laughing)

BB: Again, this is a matter of labels. If somebody feels inspired by those aspects of the Buddha's teaching that apply to their present life and they want to follow the Dhamma with the benefits that it brings to them in this present life, then I would have no argument with them if they want to call themselves Buddhists.

S: So I win, Venerable. (laughs)

AB: There's no winner here. (laughs)

BB: No, it doesn't mean that one wins or loses. As I was speaking, it struck me: if they consider that they have taken refuge, they can call themselves Buddhist. But then the question came to my mind, if one is actually rejecting the teaching of kamma and rebirth, then is one taking full refuge in the Buddha and in the Dhamma?

AB: Ha!

S: This was his point. Now he's grinning!

AB: That was exactly my point!

BB: I mean, look, according to the national census, I believe millions of people in China are classified as Buddhists. During the course of their life, they're just practising the traditional Chinese folk religion. Then when they die, they bring in the Buddhist monks to perform a Buddhist funeral. (laughing) If they can be counted as Buddhists, it raises the question: once you're dead, if a Buddhist funeral is performed for you, is that enough to make you a Buddhist?

S: I looked at this question some time ago to see how many Buddhists there are in the world. If you look on the Wikipedia page, it's actually quite interesting. Of all the world religions, Buddhism has by far the greatest variation in the number of people who're estimated to be Buddhists. At the lowest end I think it's about 300 million, and at the highest end I think it's 1.2 or 1.5 billion. There's an uncertainty rating of about a billion people who're not quite sure whether they're Buddhist or not! I thought that was quite nice. (laughs)

AB: Bhante, are you up for some fun questions towards the very end? Have you still got time for that?

BB: It's getting a bit late. But let's see what you have.

AB: Ok. The first question is, considering the idea of many world systems and beings everywhere and the idea of aliens, is it possible to be reborn as an alien?

BB: Is it possible to be reborn on another planet, another galaxy? Is that the question?

AB: Right.

BB: Well, the word alien is used to refer to beings from other galaxies or other planets who visit earth. When they're on the earth, we call them aliens. But if they're staying on their own planet, then we just call them beings from another planet, another galaxy. So the question then is whether it is possible to be reborn in another galaxy or planet.

I think one point that was mentioned in a book by Francis Story and Ian Stevenson where they do some investigations of rebirth cases (Ed.: *Rebirth as Doctrine and Experience* by Francis Story, Intro by Ian Stevenson, Buddhist Publication Society, 2000) is what they call Francis Story's law. This law states that, other things being equal, the tendency is for a person who passes away to be reborn as a human being, to be reborn in close proximity to the place where they lived before. It may be theoretically possible to be reborn in another galaxy, but as long as there is human life on the planet earth, I would say the overwhelming likelihood is they'll be reborn on earth, that is, if the human realm is where their kamma ripens.

S: Maybe we should draw an analogy from the Kukkuravatika Sutta (MN 57). That sutta states that if you live as a dog you can expect to be reborn as a dog, and if you live as a cow you get reborn as a cow. By extension, if you go to the Comicon and dress up as an alien and live your life in Star Wars and stuff like that, then you've got a greater chance of being reborn in those realms.

AB: One of the phenomena you sometimes hear about, and sometimes it's taken quite seriously, is the idea of contact with aliens here and now, such as UFO sightings and even alien abductions. Sometimes I have wondered whether these things might refer to contact with other realms. Maybe we're dealing with contact with devas or yakkhas or something like that. Do you have any thoughts on this rather speculative topic?

BB: The reports of being abducted temporarily by aliens and then released, I think in virtually all cases are fabrications of the mind.

Rather than people who encounter aliens, I would think it is people who have visions of angels, especially in earlier centuries, who would be seeing devas. They would have seen what we would call devas. And maybe people who see ghosts would be seeing pretas or bhūtas or pisācas or yakkhas that for some reasons become visible to them.

S: These kinds of things, and also the widespread belief in reincarnation, are extremely prevalent around the world; they're not universal, but certainly very widespread. I'm wondering to what extent this might be because people are genuinely having similar kinds of experiences. Of course, those experiences might be purely psychological, which then tend to get interpreted in a certain way, but the most straightforward

interpretation is to say that at some level people do have these experiences.

And it does seem from our ordinary lives that this happens quite a lot. When I'm talking to groups of perhaps 20 or 30 people, I sometimes ask them if anyone has had an experience of a past life or knows someone who's had such an experience. Almost invariably somebody will say yes, referring either to their own experience, that of a family member, or that of a friend. The person had these memories, and they can't explain them in any other way. It certainly doesn't seem to be particularly rare.

So I'm wondering whether these beliefs – kind of half-articulated, shared, sometimes quite shamefully and hidden, as if families don't want to hear it – somehow manifest in these religious ideas of rebirth and even other realms. I don't know.

BB: Well, I think what Ian Stevenson found is that in cultures which do not accept the idea of rebirth, in the sense of pre-existence, children still report past lives to their parents, saying things like, "In addition to you, I have other parents who are living in such and such a town and village," and then they'll report the circumstances of their previous life and sometimes relate how they died. So it seems that in children the vestiges of their past life experience can persist into the new life, but then the parents may not have an idea of rebirth, or maybe even if they do they will try to discourage the children from persisting with these memories or tell them they're just imagining this. Then the children will suppress these memories, and then as they grow older those memories will fade out.

S: So it seems like it's something that's not easy to process on an emotional level, and people don't talk about it. I'm just wondering whether it comes out in religious doctrine as a way of objectifying it, which makes it more socially acceptable, rather than thinking, "My child isn't my own," which isn't easy to deal with.

AB: I did actually see a video recently of a researcher at Oxford University. He was arguing that religious doctrine, or religion in general, often is a result of near-death experiences. He had looked at various cultures around the world, cultures that had had no contact with each other, and he was investigating what they had in common. And certain aspects of near-death experiences were apparently common across most or all of these different cultures. He was arguing that this was the origin of a large number of religious beliefs around the world.

BB: Just one question that I have. How do you reply when people ask how one can explain that, over the centuries, the human population of the earth has been increasing, increasing, and increasing?

S: To me it seems the level of the human population is trivial. There are so many more animals on the earth than humans. So we have people swapping around between one realm and the other all the time. Ultimately, it comes down to one of those unanswerable questions of whether there is an infinite number of consciousnesses, where do they come from, and those kinds of things.

AB: That's basically how I would see it as well. But I've also heard another argument. If you look at the total number of people that have ever existed on the earth, it is far greater than the number of people alive today. So if you assume that the time between the previous life and the present life can be very large, then there's no problem with accounting for the present number of people. That is, even if you just look at people to people rebirth, there's actually no problem there.

S: Another thing – a bit off the topic, but I think quite interesting – is that the fact that there's many more people alive today than in the past means there's a much greater mass of brain alive on the planet today than at any time in the past. I don't think brains are the cause of consciousness, but they're certainly related to it. So perhaps that suggests we're more conscious than at any time in the past. The planet is more conscious, which is hopefully not a bad thing?

AB: Hopefully. Hope over experience, perhaps.

BB: Yeah, it depends on what's going on in the consciousness.

S: Right, it depends on what you use it for.

AB: Bhante, I had another speculative question, which I was going to leave out, but since we've now brought it up ... Saṃsāra is considered to be without beginning, without discoverable beginning. So in theory there would have been an innumerable number of Buddhas in the past. If there have been an innumerable number of Buddhas, but there is only a finite number of beings, then why isn't everybody enlightened already? How come we're still here?

BB: Perhaps consciousnesses can emerge.

S: Bhante Gunaratana once said he thought that consciousnesses were continually appearing.

AB: Maybe that's the case.

S: Can emerge, yeah. There's a – this is again getting very speculative and we should let you go – but there's a theory in quantum mechanics about Boltzmann brains. Have you heard of Boltzmann brains? No?

One of the basic things in quantum theory is that particles constantly appear and disappear in space. They're manifesting. If one particle can appear and disappear, then two particles can appear and disappear next to each other. And if two particles can appear, then three can, and if three can, then you can build structures. Ultimately, given that space is so incredibly big and time is so incredibly long, a brain must appear in space spontaneously. This is actually a genuine scientific theory. You can look it up: Boltzmann brains.

And if one brain can appear, many can appear. In fact given the vastness of space, the probabilities work out that there are more brains appearing in this way than there are brains actually living on planets. This causes a number of theoretical problems for science and so on, as well as for those people born in those brains, I imagine. Anyway, if there's something to this quantum idea that things can spontaneously come into being, perhaps there is some relation with the idea that consciousnesses can appear. Perhaps.

BB: In infinite time, if you sat a large numbers of monkeys at computers typing away, they are bound to type the Majjhima Nikāya. (laughs)

AB: It’s getting late.

S: And we’re getting silly.

AB: We’re very appreciative, Bhante, of you giving us so much of your time. We should let you go now. We’ve already taken your evening.

S: All the best.

AB: All the best. Bye, bye.

S: Sādhū, sādhu, sādhu!

* Unfortunately we suffered technical problems during the recording of this interview, and for this reason not everything recorded was comprehensible. In a number of places we have had to rely on memory and educated guesswork to reconstruct the interview. Still, this affects no more than 5% of the total. In most places where we were unable to fully understand Ven. Bodhi's replies, we have added our best estimate in square brackets, [].

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