

Anatta Made Simple

By *Locana*

Audio available at: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=OM770>

Talk given at an A-Level conference in 2001.

So, *anatta*. Well of course, this word means “no self” and one of the fascinating things when you’re studying religion of course is that you suddenly find you’re learning about geography, about history, different cultures; it includes all these things. And of course the great thing is you start becoming expert in all these different languages don’t you?

And if you do Islam you suddenly start picking up some Arabic; and Judaism you start learning Hebrew words. Well in Buddhism you really get two for the price of one because you have Pali and Sanskrit, these two ancient Indian languages. So you could probably all tell me what the word self is in Pali. Anybody? [QUESTION TO AUDIENCE] *Atta*, yes. So no self, or not self or non-self, this is *anatta*.

So, I know I can speak Pali to you now fluently and say *anatta* and you’ll all know we’re talking about no self. So that’s the first word on the title. And the second is “made simple.” What I thought when I got the talk, “Oh this is a great subject, you know, we’ll make it simple, you’ll all go away feeling, yes, I understand a bit of the Dharma, I understand about *anatta*.” And of course, as I start writing it I realize this is a complete joke. There’s no way I can make *anatta* simple. I mean, if I really understood it, I’d be enlightened. And if in the next hour I make you completely understand it, you’ll all be enlightened!

So, really, what hope do we have? Well, maybe we have a lot of hope but it’s going to be a tough one. So we’re going to do what we can with the subject. In fact, we know how important it is as a subject to the Buddha because he gave his first sermon on the Four Noble Truths, which I’m sure you’ve all heard of, and his very second sermon to these five monks was on *anatta*, was on no-self. And what happened? He gave his sermon – I wish he was doing the talk rather than me really – because at the end of it the five followers they all became enlightened. So, that’s how crucial it is as a subject within Buddhism. But simple? Well, let’s see what we can do.

So, the handout I’ve got here is reproduced so you can just see what I’ve chosen to do in giving this talk on *anatta*, on no-self, I’m going to try to make four simple points about *anatta*. So there you go, you can see from the very first one that we’re going to turn first of all to the first thing that we can know about *anatta* – but actually, I forgot to say, on the back of your handout we’ve got your text, the questions of King Milinda¹.

King Milinda, by the way, is a Greek king. Now what’s a Greek king doing in India? Well, the Greeks actually invaded India. Alexander the Great invaded India. And it’s a fascinating fact this but if he had managed to get a little bit further east, if he’d managed to cross the River Indus, he might have met a very, very old person who would have remembered the Buddha. So, just imagine if that had happened and he’d talked to that person and got lots of ideas about Buddhism, come back to Greece, come back to the West and those ideas would have become part of Greek culture. Just

imagine the difference that would be for us now – we’d have much more of an idea of Buddhism. It’s quite a fascinating idea isn’t it?

Well, 300 years later, this thing happened actually. There was a Greek king called King Milinda and he met a Buddhist monk. Now, King Milinda is quite a character actually: I think if he were living now he’d be a sort of chat show host and he’d be firing questions at his interviewees. He had a very fiery, a very inquisitive nature and he’d ask really sharp questions. He was always putting the monks who lived close by, was harassing them - the introduction to the text says he harassed them with questions. They were quite scared of him really. So what they did is they sent a message to a monk who lived in the heartland of Buddhism called Nagasena and they said “Please come and help us, he’s always on at us with all these questions about Buddhism. Come and help us with this king who loves debating so much.”

The King, by the way - at the end of your text you’re probably reading the conclusion - it says that before he talked to Nagasena he was a very fiery man; he had a sharp tongue; they say it’s like the tongue of a snake, of a cobra, before its fangs have been drawn. So he had a tongue a bit like a snake, it was that sharp. And Nagasena – you’re going to learn a bit of Sanskrit now – his name means “conqueror of snakes.” Now it’s probably just a coincidence but it might help you remember the name Nagasena. And in fact, we’ve got a Naga in the room – Nagapriya here is going to be talking to us later about the Sangha. So, just a little bit more about Nagasena. So, as we go through the talk I’ll be referring, and asking you to refer, to this text little bit by little bit and we’ll see if we can understand more of what it’s saying.

So, let’s turn now to *anatta* itself and the very first point, the first simple point as I’m trying to make it, the first thing that we can think about *anatta*. Well, as I put on the handout, it’s one of the three things we can really know. Now, it’s always interesting in Buddhism that when you’re talking about any subject there tends to be a little list: you’ve got the Four Noble Truths or, we heard earlier, we’re talking in the sequence of The Three Jewels. And when you’re writing your A-Level essays, or any essays in the future, it’s always a really good thing if you can draw the subject into one of these doctrinal formulae. So, if you’re talking about The Noble Eightfold Path, well, tell your examiner that you know it is part of the Four Noble Truths.

So, in the same way, when we’re talking about *anatta* let’s start off by saying “How does the Buddhist tradition see this?” Well, it’s one of the three things we can really know about life. And these are called – does anybody know actually? [QUESTION TO AUDIENCE] – I think I heard a whisper. The Three Marks or the Three Characteristics of Existence, that’s good. Well, you might think life is quite complicated, eh? There’s a lot of – the universe is vast – we are all very complex creatures; there’s only three things we can really know. Well you might think that’s surprising or you might be relieved, I don’t know. But here they are: -

- **Impermanence** is the first,
- ***Dukkha***, and
- **No self**

Well, I wish in a way we had time just to stop and think for a moment; I wish I could get you talking among yourselves, forgetting about Buddhism and thinking “What are

the three things I could really know about life?” Because I bet if I just got you to – if we brainstormed it, if I had a whiteboard here and we could write them up – I think you’d come up with these three things in a way. Because what is it you’d say? Well, some of you might say – I usually ask this question – and people say, “Well I know I’m going to die.” That’s a thing that – is that what you’d like to say? [QUESTION TO AUDIENCE MEMBER]. Not really [ANSWER FROM AUDIENCE]. Well, it’s a very common answer.

Well we know, if there’s one thing we know, we know we’re going to die. So, we know we’re going to change, we know we’re going to grow older, we know we’re going to do our A-Levels and survive it and carry on. So, we know perhaps also, external things: we know the sun is going to set; we know it’s going to rise. All of these things, of course, we can just boil down and come up with the word impermanence. That’s the first thing we can really know.

Now the second thing is that life isn’t always happy. And of course you get this word *dukkha*. It’s a very hard one to translate and very often you’ll see it translated as suffering. So you might think “Well that’s a bit of a gloomy way to start – we all know we’re going to suffer,” but actually of course it is something we all really know, that we’re not always happy. It’s something we can just say, “Well everybody knows that.” So it’s again something that we really know about life. And of course Buddhism doesn’t leave it there, it doesn’t say, “Well we all suffer and that’s it.” It says, well we can translate it a bit differently, we can say, “Things are just not quite right. Things can be unsatisfactory.” And of course it breaks it down even further and it says, “Well, we suffer. We suffer because - just ordinary pain; we might fall over; we might get earache,” anything like that and that’s just – we might cut ourselves with a knife – that’s just ordinary pain. We all know that’s going to happen. It’s already happened to us many times.

Of course we might feel actually very jolly, quite happy, but the other thing we know is that’s not going to last. Even a wonderful day like this, a wonderful opportunity at an A-Level conference, well it’s going to come to an end - it’s tough. So, even happy states, well they’re not absolutely satisfactory because they’re going to change. You might go on holiday and there’s that little niggle at the back of your mind, “When I get back I’ve got to do my revision for my exams.” That kind of thing. So, it’s just saying that even happy states have got this unsatisfactory thing about them, which is they’re going to change at some point.

And the third thing it says about *dukkha* is that, well, it’s because things have causes and conditions. Now, this is a bit more complicated and we’ll come back to it. Basically it’s saying that everything has a cause. So we’re all here because of various causes and we may be quite happy; we’re well fed, we’re warm. Well if those causes changed, well our experience might change. A bit more complex and we’ll come back to that.

So I can’t leave the subject of suffering, of unsatisfactoriness, even stress – a good translation if you want to be really modern – some people now translate it as stress. We can’t leave – or distress perhaps – we can’t leave this subject without saying, “Well why is it, why do we suffer?” And that’s why we’re all interested in the study of religions. It’s a fantastic topic because not only do you learn about different cultures, and languages and societies and so on but you really start tackling, “Well

what do we think? What do we really think? What is life?" All these big, big questions. So one of the huge questions that everybody has asked themselves is "Why do we suffer? Why do we suffer pain and all the rest?" And Buddhism comes up with an answer to this and basically it says that there are only two reasons why we ever really suffer. And you can say well we either suffer because we want something, which we haven't got, or we suffer because we don't want something which we have got. Like you don't want those horrible exams. No. So you have something that you don't want. And there's only two reasons.

And in a way I challenge you to go away - or maybe for the rest of today - and just notice if your mood drops, if you suddenly start feeling a bit miserable about something or whatever, think "Well is it because I want something which I don't have or is because I've got something which I don't want?" So just play around with that idea and see if you think Buddhism is right in analysing any unhappy states at all as being caused by those two things. And, well, if you can spot that it is the case, of course then the question comes in, what can we do about it? And this is where Buddhism starts talking about understanding, if we really understood things, also we wouldn't suffer. So it talks about the fact that we have a sort of level of ignorance. You might say that ignorance in Buddhism sort of takes the place of sin in Christianity. So, it talks about ignorance.

So you've got a set of three here. Now has anybody spotted - I've sneaked it in by the back door - another formula of three? Wanting, which we might say is craving. Not wanting, which we might say is hating things. And ignorance. Does anybody know what those three are called? [QUESTION TO AUDIENCE]. It's the Three Fires, yes. Sometimes they're called the Three Fires or the Three Poisons and if you've seen the Tibetan Wheel of Life they're at the middle. Well, they're not fires, they're animals. So, in fact Nirvana - now this is something you won't read in books - Nirvana actually means "to blow out." That's actually what it means. Nir = Out, va = Blow. So, [MAKES BLOWING SOUND] that's blowing out. What's being blown out at Nirvana? The Three Fires. So you blow out craving and greed and hatred and ignorance. In other words, you transform them. So that's what enlightenment is about, it's about making - you're no longer just wanting things, you just want to give. You've transformed greed into generosity. You're no longer pushing things away or hating them, you transform that into love. And ignorance, of course, what do you transform that into? Wisdom. So, that's a little quick summary of enlightenment and what the Buddha achieved; what his achievement was: the Three Fires. I've just sort of sneaked that in by the back door in our talk on *anatta*.

So, there we have two of the three things we can really know. Now the third is this thing, *anatta*; no self. So what on Earth does this mean? So now let's move on for the rest of the talk to look at *anatta* itself so we can see what that means.

So, *anatta* - if you look again at your handout - you'll see that the second point is that we have no fixed or unchanging self or soul. So what on Earth does this mean? Well, *anatta* really is tackling that huge question of what we really are. Who do we think we are? What are we made up of? All those questions which you might sort of think about at three o'clock in the morning if you're lying awake or if you're at a really good party and everyone has gone to sleep and there's just a few of you sitting around discussing the meaning of life. That's what this question is all about.

So, basically, it's not denying, if I say no soul, no self, it's not denying that we all exist. I mean there you are, sitting there yourselves and here am I, Elizabeth, myself, talking. It's not saying we don't exist, no, it's saying what we *think of* as the way we exist isn't how we usually think of it. In other words, it's saying we probably think we have a self, a person and a bit of us, a bit of our mind will actually think that is a thing, it's a real thing and it has it's own – we have our own real existence. And Buddhism is saying, no, you can't say that because no bit of us is really fixed. There isn't really an essence to us. A lot of you might be thinking "I don't agree with that," and that's great – this is what we'll discuss. This is what the idea of no fixed self means. It means you haven't got a real essence that is always the same.

So let's see what the text says about this. Now Nagasena, what he does, the King comes along and asks him who he is and immediately Nagasena is tackling the King; he's got under the belt really because he's immediately saying to the King, "What do you think you mean when you say 'you' and who do you think I mean when I say 'I.'" It's a bit as if someone says, "Hi, how are you?" You know, that's a normal question but if you went along and said to a friend, "Hi, what are you?" They think, "What am I? What on Earth could you mean?" It would take them by surprise. That's what Nagasena is doing, he's trying to take the King by surprise.

So, let's turn over and we'll just read what Nagasena says when he first meets the King. So the King says: "How is your Reverence known and what is your name sir?" You're always very polite if you meet a monk in the Buddhist texts.

Nagasena replies, "As Nagasena I am known great King and as Nagasena do others address me. Nevertheless, this word Nagasena is just a denomination, a designation, a conceptual term, a current appellation, a mere name."

The whole list is one long way of saying: it's just a mere name. It's just a concept.

He says: "For no real person here can be apprehended." That means, can be found, can be recognized, or can be known.

He's just saying, Nagasena is just a name, it's just a name tag if you like, it's just a label. It's a bit like, you know, here I am, I've been introduced as Elizabeth and it's a bit like me saying "Well, you know, there isn't a real Elizabeth there it's just a label, it's just a name tag." So you're left thinking, "Oh, what is she then?"

That's what Nagasena wants, he wants the King to think, "Well, hang on, what does that mean? Who are you then?" So he's got a lot of problems with this – the King – because he's thinking "Well hang on, if there's a name tag" – if you imagine Nagasena or Elizabeth is just a name tag – "well it must be a name tag to something." What's it a name tag to? If I'm just saying Elizabeth is just a name tag, well you say, "What are you then?" wouldn't you? You wouldn't really understand what I'm saying.

So this is what the King does. He's a clever King and he's got various objections to Nagasena saying this and I've put these in the square brackets. Now I'm reducing quite a lot of your A-Level text and it's a very, very good passage and you really must go and look at this. Particularly because it's the sort of passage that you might find an A-Level examiner actually honing in on to sort of say "Oh well, we'll see if they understand the King's problems with Nagasena, saying what he has." And even if you

don't get this as an essay question make sure you bring it in to your essays because the more you can refer to a primary text - text from the Pali Canon itself – the more marks you get. I mark essays all the time at University level and I give extra marks for people who are quoting primary text. So, it's great that you've got this primary text to study.

But anyway, in the square brackets we find the King's problems with Nagasena saying that Nagasena is just a name tag. So what are these?

Milinda mocks Nagasena. This is a summary of what you'll read and he asks, basically, if there is no Nagasena, who is the person then who eats? Who wears clothes? Who lives the Buddhist life? Who is it who acts? That means acting in the World. Who reaps the consequences of actions? That is karma. He's saying that Nagasena cannot just be a name tag, it's got to be a name tag which applies to a real thing and that thing has got to be a person. And the King argues it must be a person. He's arguing it in three ways.

First of all he's saying there must be a person who eats and wears robes and sleeps. In other words he's saying there must be an agent of action. Just as we all got up this morning, got dressed, had our breakfast, came here, had a coffee just now, there's a person doing that. That's what the King is saying – there must be somebody doing these things. And then there's a slightly deeper level that the King is honing in on here. He says, "Well there must be somebody who is leading the Buddhist life. He says, you are a monk; you've chosen to live the Buddhist life."

Well this is a bit like us. We think, well I am a person, it's not just that I go around eating and sleeping and getting dressed and so on ...[BANGING NOISE IN BACKGROUND]... see, there are name tags out there banging the doors. There must be people there? This is what the King said; there must be people actually banging on the doors. Who are they? There must be somebody there. So, this takes us to the slightly deeper level, hey, that they've not just decided to get dressed; they've decided to come bang on doors. In other words, they've got their own convictions. Just as we have, we think they're lousy for banging on the door, whatever, like that. In other words, you've got things which you identify as a little bit deeper, more you. You're you, I'm me, because I love my cat or I'm me because I support Man(chester) United, something like that. There are these deeper levels. I'm me because I've got certain ethical ideas. I think shooting people is wrong - that kind of thing - which I hope you all do.

So, the King is arguing there must be someone who is chosen to lead the Buddhist life. He is arguing for a person on a slightly deeper level and he doesn't stop there, because he actually says there's a person there who must be experiencing the results of karma. Now, this is a bit like us even going a deeper level still and saying, "Well it's not just that I'm a person who walks and talks, a person who believes things about ethics and has views about my cat; no, I'm somebody who thinks when I die such and such is going to happen to me." So, he's going really deep here, you see, and in Buddhist terms of course it means he's got to refer to karma.

You can summarize karma in three words you'll be relieved to know: Actions have consequences. That's how you can summarize karma. In other words, any action that you do has a consequence. It's sometimes quite hard to remember this when we're bumbling around isn't it? Anything we do has a consequence. And Buddhism goes so

far as to say that if you do a really good action you'll have a good consequence; if you do a bad action you'll have a bad consequence. And those of you who've got teachers present I'd encourage you to go home and say to your teachers "Show us the first two verses of the Dhammapada" because the Dhammapada just summarizes karma really beautifully in those first two verses. So make sure your teachers show you those if they haven't already.

Now the King is being really clever here because when he says to Nagasena, "Well, there must be a person there who's reaping the consequences of karma," if Nagasena denies that, the *whole* of Buddhism collapses because Buddhism is so centrally bound up with Karma. So it's a very clever point for the King to make. So, let's see what continues then with the text.

So basically, the King is on to a winner here and he goes on. He says "What then is this Nagasena, this person? Are perhaps the hairs of the head Nagasena?" Is he just his hair, or his nails or his skin or his teeth and so on. So what he's doing, he's picking out 32 bits of the body. Now if you were studying to be a doctor in ancient India you'd probably sit there and learn that the body has 32 parts. Nowadays, I expect it's millions isn't it? But in those days they broke in down into 32.

So he's saying to Nagasena, "What is a person made up of?" Is it just the material body? Is it just your physical bits? Now this is a materialist argument. If Nagasena says, "Yes, I'm just the same as my physical body" he'd be admitting that all he believed in was his material form. There are materialists around today. Some of you here might be materialists. It's an ultra-modern scientific point of view. You just believe that you are the processes of chemical reaction. Even your emotions, they're just chemical reactions in the brain so you're just a physical being. So what happens when you die? If you're a materialist what do you think happens when you die? Well, if you're just your material being, if that's all you are, that stops doesn't it? So you must stop. So a materialist view is also a nihilist view. Nihilism means nothing. So it's the view that everything just stops.

The Buddha denied nihilism. It's crucial this. And of course, Nagasena does too. So when the King says, "Are you the same as your physical body, these 32 parts?" Nagasena replies, "No, great King."

So, let's go on. What Nagasena is going to ask now is well, if you're not just your physical body maybe there is more to you. And Buddhism says that actually we can break down all the bits of us into just five, what they call, heaps or bundles. It's not a very grand word but that's all it is. The Five Heaps, the Five Skandhas.

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE]Hands up those who know the Five Skandhas? A few of you.

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE]Who's heard of it but is perhaps a bit unsure of what they are?

Right, that's really good. What I'm going to do now is just a little sort of experiment. You know when you're revising, it can sometimes help if you talk to other people to tell them things. Well, when you're revising the skandhas try this little experiment out on them, ok. So, what you do, is you get your family, or your friends, and you say to

them, you sit them down, and you say, “Right, tell me, what do you think you are made up of? What are you?”

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE]Now, anybody want to shout out anything they feel they could...?

[ANSWER FROM AUDIENCE]Consciousness.

So, right, here’s somebody who says what do I have about me? What do I include? All my bits of me. What do I have? I have consciousness.

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE]Anything else? What would anybody else like to call out?

[ANSWER FROM AUDIENCE]Feelings.

Alright, thoughts and feelings. So we’ve got thoughts and feelings.

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE]What else do you have that’s you?

[ANSWER FROM AUDIENCE]A body.

You’ve got a body, yes.

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE]Anything else? ...[PAUSE]What goes on up in here?

We’ve had thoughts and mind.

[ANSWER FROM AUDIENCE]Nervous system and all those chemical reactions.

A sort of nervous system and all those chemical reactions, yes.

Someone said a mind.

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE]Anybody else?

Sometimes people say to me habits or wishes. Things that they’re always wanting. Kind of deeper drives, impulses even, you know, instincts. The instinct that would make you go like that if something fell on your head. Shall I write down instincts and put it in that way?

What we have to do then is you get this list from whoever you are talking to and see if that list is the same as these Five Skandhas. So let’s see if we’ve got anything similar.

So here’s what Buddhism says. It says we’ve got form. So somebody did get this one, they said they’ve got a body. And also when you said you’ve got the chemical reactions, in a way that’s a physical thing isn’t it? So, it’s all part of our physical body, our physical make up.

And somebody said they’ve got feelings and emotions and of course, here we are, we’ve got that down as feelings.

And the next one is perception. Which in fact I think when somebody said mind and thoughts, you know, you might find your family and friends say “Well, we’ve got intelligence, that’s a bit of us.” So, I think this is what Buddhism would categorize

here as perception. You can perceive things and also sort of understand what they are. You can distinguish between them.

And then you have these deeper impulses. Habits. Did I put...? Instincts, things like that, which come from a much deeper level. Buddhism says that's a particular heap or bundle that we have.

And finally, consciousness, which you got as well.

So, what we're going to turn to next in the text is these Five Skandhas. Nagasena is being challenged by the King, the King is saying, "Well, what are you if you're just a name tag?" He's dismissed the fact he's just his physical body so the next thing the King asks, he says - because the King knows a bit about Buddhism - so he says, "Are you these five skandhas? Or is form this Nagasena? Or feeling? Or perceptions? Or impulses? Or consciousness?" So there you go, you can see the King is coming up with the Five Skandhas and saying well if you're not a person as you say you are, well maybe, or rather, he's looking for a person isn't he, saying "What is this Nagasena?" He said, well maybe you're one of these Five Skandhas.

Now, in a way it seems perhaps a bit daft to us to break it down and say well is there a person who is just form or just feelings? You might think, well, the King is being a bit pedantic here, of course Nagasena is going to say he's not just one of them because in a sense we're all of them altogether. But I was thinking about this and I thought perhaps it's not quite as daft as all that because if we just think for ourselves about these Five Heaps for a moment maybe we'd think that one or other them that we found we related to more. In other words, we might identify more with our body or our feelings, or instinct or consciousness or perception, mind. And just out of interest, just pause and think about that, if there's one of them you identify yourself with more.

I've never done this before, I'm, just really interested.

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE] Who here feels they identify themselves mostly, I mean other things will come in, but mostly they are their body? Anybody? I've got one, a few people. What you look like, that's who you are sort of thing. Hands up again. Very few.

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE] Who would say their feelings?

I'd put myself in here actually - I tend to think of myself quite often as my feelings. A few. More on that one.

What's the next one? Perceptions.

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE] Who would say they are their intelligence, their mind?

Hmmm, some of you identifying with that. Did I see a hand over there?

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE] Impulses? These deeper instincts, deeper drives?

A few.

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE] And Consciousness?

And some for that.

And so some of you don't identify with any of them, you're in the same position here as Nagasena.

It's an interesting little exercise and it's the sort of thing that's going to help you remember the Five Skandhas when you come to do it. Go back to your families and ask them "What do you think you're made up of?" and see if they come up with anything like these Five Skandhas, these Five Heaps.

So, the King has asked Nagasena if he is any of these individually and Nagasena said no he is not. So what happens then? We are carrying on our search for this person Nagasena. The King then says, "Then, is it, is this thing called Nagasena, is it the combination of forms, feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness?" And Nagasena says no. So the King thought he was being rather clever here, he thought well maybe he's just all of them together and Nagasena says no he is not.

I have to say, I find this quite puzzling. I had to think quite hard about this one. I was thinking, well Buddhism does say that we are made up of the five skandhas, that's what we are. So why is Nagasena denying that he is them all together collectively?

Now, you might want to come back at this and have better ideas than I did, or some of the other speakers might in fact, but what I thought was probably being said here is that if you have these five things which is the person and you say, right these five things, these five heaps that I've got, this is Elizabeth, well what happens? We've suddenly got six; we've suddenly got an extra thing. So I think this is why Nagasena denies it. He's saying, you can't say I am those five things collectively, I am, Nagasena is, because you've suddenly got a sixth thing, which is Nagasena. So that's what I think is being said here. So Nagasena denies it.

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE] Has that confused some of you?

It certainly needs a bit of thinking about.

So let's look back at the text. How does the King carry on? He says, "Well if there isn't a person, there isn't a thing which is either the skandhas individually or the skandhas, these heaps, collectively, then is this self somehow outside the combination of forms, feelings, perceptions and so on; the five skandhas?" And of course Nagasena says no.

So now you, some of you, might even like to argue this. I imagine that when I first started talking even you'd had this idea. You say, well, there is a bit of me somewhere and it's just a bit invisible. It's sort of special; it's unknowable. It's somehow more than just those Five Skandhas. There's a bit of me in there somewhere that is myself or my soul. Is there anybody who had that creeping idea when we – not creepy but creeping – that little idea as we spoke? Perhaps you would have done if you'd thought about it a bit more.

So, if you had, a Buddhist would say well if you really think there is a soul, you have a soul that's sort of inside there that's special, that's different from the skandhas show it to us. If you show it us we'll believe you. That's how a Buddhist argues that. We can't see it, we can't know it. How can we know it? What method have you got for telling us it's there? That's how a Buddhist argues.

So Nagasena says, “No, there’s nothing that’s outside this combination of skandhas. No special unknowable bit that you can say ‘that’s the self.’”

So the King says – he’s a bit in despair here – he says, “Then ask as I may I can discover no Nagasena at all.” And he basically accuses Nagasena of lying when he said that he was Nagasena at the beginning. And the King says there really is no Nagasena. According to the King, Nagasena has just disappeared in a puff of logic. He’s deconstructed himself entirely. He’s denied – he’s just said he’s a name tag – but he’s denied that he’s the same as his 32 parts of his body. He’s denied he’s the same as these five skandhas. He’s not them all put together and there’s not a special bit somewhere hidden away that is a real person.

How does this relate to this idea of the fixed self that we saw at the very beginning of this section? Well we’ve learnt that Buddhism does break us down into lots of different bits, lots of different bundles and so on. But it basically says that all of these bits, the 32 parts of the body, the Five Skandhas; well, none of them are fixed. They’re all changing.

It’s a very difficult question this one about the soul and the self because so many religions actually say we have a soul and many of you will be brought up with this belief that you have soul, a sort of essence. And there are many different ideas, even within Christianity, about what it means to have a soul. Some of you, who may believe this, will say well there is a bit of me that is eternal. This is called eternalism. After death, it’ll survive. Now the Buddha – you might remember he denied nihilism, he denied it would stop. He also denied it would go on forever. He denied it was eternal. This is another way we call Buddhism the Middle Way because he’s finding a middle way between these two extremes of nothing and of eternalism. That’s one idea about the soul.

Another is that the soul is unchanging. You see, you might say well things happen to me sort of on top but underneath there is a bit that is really special, and that’s just me and that never changes. It can’t be retouched or affected by the World; it can’t suffer. If you’ve done Hinduism and read the Bhagavad Gita you’ll find this is what Krishna is arguing about the soul. There’s this unchanging bit. In fact, some forms of Christianity have this; it’s somehow in our culture too. We might say, because things stay as they are, if you are born a bad person with a bad soul you’re going to be a bad person all your life. That’s quite a common idea in our culture – they’re just born bad. That’s how they’re going to be. This, from a Buddhist perspective, would be a form of damnation, just to say you’re always going to be the same. So, one idea about the soul is that it’s something unchanging.

And another one, is that it’s the basis for all our experience. In other words, we have all these experiences of life, we see things, we learn things, all these different stimuli around us, but underneath it all there’s something which is the basis for that. It’s a bit like, the analogy that I thought of, it’s a bit like if I had a whiteboard here or a blackboard or something I could write lots of things on it, lots of different colours and streams and thoughts and ideas but underneath it all there’s just this whiteboard, which is like the basis for it. And some people think of themselves like that. There’s a sort of pure essence underneath it all and all the experiences go on top. That’s a bit more complicated.

Those are some ideas about the soul. And in Hinduism, that was around at the time, those particular ideas, that we had this soul, this separate self. And of course, that soul when you died, well it came back, it was reborn in the world of samsara, of life and death. And it said that if your soul could release itself somehow from this then that would be liberation. So when the Buddha said there is no soul, partly he was just denying the Hindu idea at the time.

So, this is a point worth making in those essays on *anatta*. He's basically just denying a concept. If it hadn't been around, if he had been born in the West, he probably wouldn't have come up with this no soul doctrine. He's just denying a common Hindu idea at the time.

Now what's the Buddhist problem, now we've known, we've studied it a little bit, what's the Buddhist problem with describing a soul or a self in that way?

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE] Can anybody spot what the problem is for a Buddhist in saying that you have this unchanging, fixed, eternal soul?

[ANSWER FROM AUDIENCE] Where does it come from?

That's a really good answer, yes. What produced it? What was its cause? So that's good.

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE] What's another problem with the idea that you have this soul that's eternal and unchanging?

Yes, brilliant. It's contradicting something we really know about life. Nothing is permanent; everything is changing. So we cannot say that there is a fixed essence or soul because it's all changing. Thank you.

So, the importance of impermanence in Buddhism. Some people might say what do Buddhists believe and some Buddhists might just come down with one word: impermanence. Buddhism says if there's a bit of us that's unchanging, if there's a bit of us we think is fixed, this is really important, then we limit ourselves. We're stuck; we can never really change. It means we can never develop the qualities of the Buddha: limitless love, limitless compassion and wisdom. We think we can never change. Just imagine how awful it would be if you had to think that you are the same as you are now, always? There's no possibility of growth or development. You couldn't study; you couldn't improve your knowledge, you would never be able to pass those exams. You'd just be stuck. So Buddhism says impermanence is really important. It might be the cause sometimes of unhappiness but it's also absolutely vital to the fact that we can change.

So it concludes, and I'm going to conclude the second part, with that there's no fixed or unchanging soul or self in us anywhere. We just can't find one.

So a third simple thing that we can know about *anatta*: we are attached to our idea of a self or an ego.

Now what happens when I'm teaching *anatta* sometimes to my students - well, this happened to me actually last autumn. They were quite keen on their idea of having a soul or a self and one of them said, "No, I really still think there's a special bit of *me* inside there. I can't just be broken down into these bundles and changing heaps." And

another one, I thought very craftily, she said to me, “Well I do believe I’ve got a soul, it’s just that I believe it’s always changing.”

So, I wonder what you think I replied? Well, to the one who said that, which I thought was a very good comment, I said well maybe you’re using the word soul where a Buddhist would say one of the skandhas. Maybe actually you’re using that word but a Buddhist would just say that’s just one of the skandhas, maybe it’s consciousness, or your feelings or your deeper impulses. So that’s how I replied to that.

But the other one, that sense of well, there really is a me, I just know it, there’s a special bit inside me, that is a me which is real. That’s harder to deal with. And how does Buddhism deal it? Well, it says, yes, we know – that’s what Buddhists would say – we know, that we all think we’ve got a special bit of me. But the trouble is we’re making a mistake. Actually, it doesn’t really exist, it’s just that we’re really attached to that idea, we just really love the idea of there being a bit of me that’s just always there. In other words, we’ve got this idea of a person. That person who got up this person, drank coffee, ate, bangs on doors, whatever. And we have ideas about our life: I love my cat, I support Man. United. You have this identity. You have beliefs about what’s going to happen after death. Do you remember, those were the problems that the King had with Nagasena saying that he was only a name tag.

So, you’ve got this identity and all the time we’re just building up different parts of our identity. What colours we like, what we like to eat, what discos, what bands we like. That sort of thing. And we have our experiences. We have continuity of experience. It was me who wrote this talk and is giving it now. Surely, there must be a me there who is doing all this. You know, and I can remember way back in the past. I have this continuity, I have this memory and that gives me the idea of a me. And then there’s language. What does language do? All the time, it sets up that idea. I’m Elizabeth, this is me, myself, I. And we speak in those terms, we have to, that’s the way that language works. And there are all you, different beings, different entities. So, all the time we are building up this sense of identity, of a me-ness.

And Buddhism says, well, that’s fine, it’s natural, that’s the way the mind works because we are wanting that, we need it for security. It’s really scary to think that there’s no bit of me that’s fixed, I’m always changing. We need something to hold on to, so we hold on to our identity and we’re really attached to it. That’s what Buddhism says. When you think – there’s that special bit of me – Buddhism says we’re just making a mistake. We’re just mistaking the name tag, the label, for the real thing. We look at the name tag, which in my case is Elizabeth, and we mistake it. I mistake it, I look in the mirror, I mistake it for a me, an Elizabeth, who likes the colour blue and likes roast potatoes and chocolate pudding and things like that, and has beliefs and, in my case, practices meditation, things like that. So that’s what we’re doing.

What we have here is a very, very famous passage. Again, you might well get this as an essay at A-Level and if you don’t, bring it into your essays to show that you know this example from a primary text. So, Nagasena says, well first of all he finds out that the King came by chariot – it’s a reasonable thing to do, how did he get here. By car, by train, by bicycle? No, by chariot. It’s rather a shame that none of you came by chariot actually.

Nagasena says, “Well, if you’ve come on a chariot then please explain to me what a chariot is. Is the pole the chariot?”

And of course the King says “No, that’s not the chariot.”

So Nagasena says, “Well, is it the axle, or the wheels, or the framework, the flagstaff? Is that the chariot?”

He’s breaking it down individually. And of course the King says, “Well, no, that’s not the chariot.”

So then Nagasena says, “Well in that case I can’t see any chariot at all and your Majesty has told me a lie.”

So moments ago the King accused Nagasena of lying when he said he was a person called Nagasena. And now Nagasena, he’s rather clever here, he’s cleverer than the King, he’s turning it back and he says, “Well you’re lying when you say you came in a chariot then because I can’t see a chariot.”

But the King says, “I have not, Nagasena, spoken a falsehood. For it is in dependence upon the pole, the axle, the wheels, etc. that there takes place this denomination, this chariot, this designation, this conceptual term, a mere name.”

So he’s got the King to say that the chariot is just a name. It’s a convenient label. You can’t say I got here by, you know, wheels and driving wheels, and doors and engines. You have to say I came by minibus. It’s just a convenient label, or else conversations would go on forever and people would think you were mad. He’s just saying, it’s just a label, everybody knows if you put all those things together in a certain way you end up with a chariot and that’s how I came.

There’s quite an interesting little bit of words here; it’s “in dependence.” This name, this name tag comes out in dependence on the pole. This is a very Buddhist language here. It means one bit depends on another. So if you have a wheel, it’s got spokes. And the wheel depends on the spokes to be a wheel. If it didn’t have the spokes it would just be a hoop: a useless hoop. So things come about in dependence on one another. In fact, all these bits of the chariot they’re put together in a certain way so each bit depends on another.

Which is quite interesting because it comes back to that little thread we’ve had that everything has a cause, it’s all sort of connected in some way. Everything has a cause and are operating in dependence. We’re all here for a myriad of causes and conditions. If you sat down and thought of all the reasons why you’re here now, there would be a fantastic number. But if any one of those changed, you may not be, or a different you would be here. So, in other words, this idea that things come about in dependence on other things is really crucial to Buddhism.

So let’s just look at the very last line of the text. Nagasena shows the King that the word Nagasena is just the same as the word chariot. They’re both convenient name tags for referring to bundles of bits and parts.

So Nagasena says, “It is just so with me. In dependence on the 32 parts of the body and the five skandhas there takes place this denomination ‘Nagasena’, this designation, this conceptual term, current appellation, a mere name. In ultimate reality the person cannot be apprehended.”

In other words, Nagasena has come about who he is, in dependence on all these parts of the body and of the skandhas and so on. And we've put all the bits together in a certain way and we've called it Nagasena. But if one bit changed, he would change. So, in other words, all the bits that Nagasena holds, all those bits of him are all changes. We called them heaps didn't we, or skandhas. They're all sort of processes, processing along. That's what we are; we are a bundle of parts. In some ways, you could say we are like a river; we're just a flow of all these different bits. If you look at a river you'll see that's it made up of the banks and of reeds and of water and of pebbles and stones and fishes. All those things make the river. You can't just stop it at any one moment and say that's the river because in a sense it relies on this flow to be a river. And he says, well that's what a person is like.

Now that's the end of the text that I've given you and when you read your text you're going to come across three really good examples for understanding what it means to say, "We're not a real person, we're just a flow." And, one of them is this idea of whether there's a difference between you as a baby or you as a grown up. This is one of the examples you'll read.

[QUESTION TO AUDIENCE] Hands up. Who thinks they are the same person essentially as they were when they were a baby. When they were three, say? Anybody like to claim they've got a continuity that is so strong that they are the same in essence as that baby at three? Who thinks they are completely different from that three year old?

A few of you do, right.

So, if you're completely different how is it that you can relate to your memories of being at school, of parents, perhaps even having things around. In a sense, you can't have a complete separation, there's got to be some continuity there hasn't there? Otherwise you could rob a bank today and tomorrow you could say, "Well no, it wasn't me who robbed a bank, it was a completely different person." It wouldn't stand up in a court of law.

Does that make sense? You agree with that, those who said there was no continuity?

So, this is one example Nagasena gives, he says, well of course you're not exactly the same as that three year old or you'd still be toddling around not being able to take notes and so on. And you're not completely different. There's continuity.

And the second example he uses is like a flame. [QUESTION TO AUDIENCE] If you light a candle at midnight is that the same flame as at six o'clock in the morning or is it a different flame. What would you say?

Some would say it's a different flame. Some would say it's the same.

It's very hard to argue isn't it? It's a bit of a false question. In a way, the flame is just depending on having oxygen and fuel isn't it? It's this process, which is just depending on those things. And in the same way so is a person; we're just this flow which is dependent on all the different factors which take us through life.

And the third example he gives, I won't go into it now, is of milk and yoghurt. But if anybody has ever tried making yoghurt, you discover that you mix yoghurt into the milk and one day it's milk and the next day it's yoghurt. So you can't say, well it's

different, the yoghurt is different from the milk, because it's got this continuity. So it's like this kind of flow or a process.

Now, none of us, in talking about a flame or talking about yoghurt is going to start saying, "Ah but there's a real essence of milk, of yoghurt, or there's a real essence of a flame that is always the same." We just say, well it's a process, of course it is. So Buddhism just says, well it's the same with a person. You won't say there's a real essence to a flame, that's just a process, well how can you say that about the person?

So, that's just to highlight, when you go back to your text look at those three examples that Nagasena gives for this idea of being a flow and not being a fixed person.

So just before we move on to the next stage can we see why it is that we make this mistake? We've said we're really attached to this identity that we have. What is it that causes us to have this mistake? It's here; it's this word ignorance. Basically, it's saying, we don't really understand what we are which is why we make this mistake of having this identity and becoming so attached to us. So, this ignorance is said to be so deep, it's not enough – I mean if we all really, really understood that, we'd all be enlightened on the spot. So, it happens at a very sort of deep and existential level, this sense of ignorance and if we could break through that then we'd break through to enlightenment.

So this takes us very, very briefly to the fourth point, which I'm not going to go into much so we have a bit of time for questions. But if we understand no-self, it means spiritual growth. By this time in the talk you're probably thinking why on earth does it matter that we have a self, it's just a boring subject that I don't have much interest in. Well, Buddhism says it's really important that we do all have an interest in this idea of a self because it answers one of the key questions: why do I suffer? Why do people suffer and how can we stop?

I can't really talk about this from the point of view of enlightenment but what we can do is think about it almost in a sort of psychological way. How would it help us to think more in terms of having a fixed self, not being one unchanging person? I've just got a very few examples which might just help us think this through and see how we might see that understanding what we are, what we exist of, what we're made up of, how this can help us with the idea of spiritual growth.

So the first thing is - I'm just going to make five very quick points in the space of two minutes.

That, if we have, the idea that we're always the same. You often hear this, people say, "That's just how I am," "That's just what I'm like, it's too bad," or your Mum will say, "He's just like that" or "She's just like that." So, it's this idea of having fixed views. This can be very unhelpful; it can make us quite sad. You might think you're really bad at revision, you're really bad at exams and you carry that view around with you and it does affect how you are. So if you can begin to change that view you can begin to loosen your own ideas of yourself. You might think, well I really hate my nose; that's a view I have; I can't bear it. Well, you can't do much about the shape of your nose but you can start changing how you feel about your nose. So, in other words it's this idea of loosening up the ideas that we have about ourselves.

The second thing is we tend to be kinder to ourselves and to others if we're not so fixed in our views. So, for example, you might have a friend who's just really annoying you and they just really get up your nose. But if you start thinking, well they are just made up of all these causes and conditions, they're like they are because of causes, because of conditions and you think about them in a much more fluid self. They're not just like that as a person, they're much deeper, they are this flow that has produced this particular behaviour. Well you start being much more sympathetic. You might even find out that, you know, their hamster died last week or something and they're just having a tough time. You're just much more understanding.

So the idea of having much more of a flow, being much more fluid in yourself, makes us kinder, makes you kinder to yourself as well. And in this of course we're much more willing to learn. So if you do a bad essay and you feel really angry and you hate your teacher or you think that your teacher hates you and all these things that can happen if you get a bad mark for an essay, well in a sense you're just operating with fixed self. You're having an ego; you're protecting yourself on an ego level. I can see a few nods – people have done this. Well the idea that you are a changing person, that you can do something about that, you can begin to take responsibility for your own change, you can begin to decide, "Well, I can change, I can actually do something about that" and you can begin to develop a vision as to what you'll change into.

And when you're doing that what happens is, you bring about a change of values. You might have very materialist values where all you want is new clothes, new things. All you want perhaps is just to be liked, to be loved, that's quite a common one on our society; we just want someone who's going to love us forever. Well, thinking about ourself, or our soul, can help change values. You might think, well if there's a fixed me that wants to be loved that's just a wrong view, it can never quite happen, I'm always going to change and even if I do find someone to love me for the whole of this lifetime we're both going to die, that sort of thing.

So you start thinking, well maybe I'll shift my values, maybe I'll start thinking about how can I love others, something much more rewarding, something much more satisfying in life. This is what Buddhists will do when they think about life. They say, well let's try to find more rewarding, more satisfying things that we can really base our experience on. Actually, it's the surest way anyway to be liked is just to like other people. So, let's just change my orientation, let's change my values. So again, just having an idea of no fixed self helps in that way.

And finally, if we really think about not being fixed, not having a fixed soul, we live, according to Buddhism, we live in the way that things really are. We're not fighting impermanence, we're open to change and transformation. And once you agree – and this is really important – once you agree you can change, then you can start doing things about it. You can take responsibility for how you are. It's the start of the spiritual life in whatever way you want to frame it, in whatever religion you want to follow it. That's the start of any spiritual life.

That's the end of the talk and I have to say that it isn't a simple subject so if you found that bits of it have been confusing, that's right, it's the way things are. That's what I'd expect; it's hard to get to grips with and we'd be enlightened if we all understood it. So thank you.

References:

- ¹ King Milinda. Greek king who ruled North West India in the second century B.C.E.