

Dhammavuddho and the soul

In honour of a true renunciant who kept to the Dhamma-Vinaya

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Today, 24th December 2019, is the cremation day of Bh Dhammavuddho Hye Mahāthera (1947-2019). He passed away on 22nd December after a short illness, leaving behind an impressive collection of teachings on Theravada Buddhism and many followers who look up to the Buddha Dhamma as he did--as an exemplary renunciant, a money-free and Vinaya-abiding forest monk caring for the Bodhi tree here.



Figure 1 Bhante Dhammavuddho

Source: <https://vbgnet.org/dhammavuddho-mahathera/>

Local monk

He is an excellent example of a Malaysian monk who worked all his life to plant the Bodhi tree in our own community. He was also a personal Dhamma friend, a junior brother monk then, whom I deeply respect.

He renounced in 1983 in the Mahayana order. Disillusioned, three years later, he left this order to become a Theravada monk. Of this experience, he recalled how the Buddha gave up Brahmanism to discover the right and true path for himself.

Last teachings

Among the last teachings of Bh Dhammavuddho (“prospering in Dhamma”) are those concerning the “soul,” the “astral body,” and the “last thought moment.” He is profoundly careful to present his teachings in keeping with the suttas, the early Buddhist texts.

Let us reflect on these teachings and **dedicate the merits** rejoicing towards his awakening, and the well being of all those who are continuing his work and are inspired by him in growing local Buddhism to share globally.

Soul

In at least 8 public talks, including those given in Singapore and in Athens, Greece [see below], Dhammavuddho explains how he views the “soul”-idea and how we should understand it in accordance with the suttas.

(1) Oxford English Dictionary

He quotes the OED (Online): “A soul is the spiritual or immaterial part of a human being regarded as immortal.” Dhammavuddho stresses that early Buddhism does **not** say that it is “immortal” but simply see it as the “immaterial part of us.”

Dhammavuddho then gives 6 teachings relating to the idea of that “immaterial part of us” that we can call a “soul” in the sutta sense. He carefully quotes the relevant suttas by their reference numbers.

(2) Gandhabba (“being-to-be-born”)

M 38 (§26) and M 93 (§18) speak of the 3 conditions for **conception**:

1. coitus between parents,
2. the mother’s fertile period and
3. the **gandhabba** or “being-to-be-born” (that is, the rebirth consciousness).

Once the gandhabba descends in the womb (he uses “the egg”), gestation starts. His point is that there is such an external “immaterial” being. This we can call a “soul.”

[SD 7.10; SD 40a.2.]

(3) D 28 (§5) mentions **4 modes of rebirth**, that is, how one

1. descends into the womb unknowing, stays unknowing, is reborn unknowing;
2. descends knowing, stays unknowing, is reborn unknowing;
3. descends knowing, stays knowing, is reborn unknowing;
4. descends knowing, stays knowing, is reborn knowing.

This means that there is an external “immaterial” being, which we can call a “soul.”

[See SD 14.14; also D 14, SD 49.8; M 123, SD 52.2. Also SD 52.1 (2.3.1.3)]

(4) The Dhānañjāni Sutta (M 97,6-15) relates how “hell wardens” drag bad-doers to hell. The point of this story of facing one’s karma, Dhammavuddho points out: it is not the physical body that suffers hellish pains, but an “immaterial” being that we can call a “soul.” [SD 4.9]

(5) S 44.9 (§15) speaks of **a being** that has “laid down the body” but not yet reborn into another body. This “being” can be called a “soul,” and the Sutta adds that it is “fuelled by craving.” [SD 23.15]

(6) Finally, Dhammavuddho refers to the sutta teaching of **the 5 realms** [such as in A 9.68]:

The hells, animal, pretas, humans and the devas.

Of these, only 2 are physical (humans and animals). The other 3—the hells, pretas (departed ghosts) and the devas—are “spirit” [immaterial] beings, not of flesh but with a “fine” body.

This can be called a soul. Dhammavuddho adds that these are the **4 mental aggregates** (feeling, perception, formations, consciousness). [SD 2.20]

Last thought moment

According to Dhammavuddho, the suttas do not support any idea of the “last thought-moment” deciding the quality of our rebirth. This is a teaching found only in the Abhidhamma and later (commentarial) ideas.

According to Dhammavuddho, our mind conditions our thoughts; our thoughts condition our actions; actions become habits; habits determine our character; and character determines our “soul.”

The mind is most important. We may have a human body, but a deva “soul” or a ghost “soul” may be inside our physical body even now (that is, our mind or mentality). When we die, we are reborn as that deva or that ghost.

Astral body (mano,maya,kāya)

Dhammavuddho finally quotes D 2 (87-88, Sāmañña,phala Sutta), how the Buddha describes, in his deep meditation, he is able to create another “mind-made body” (mano,maya,kāya) that looks just like his body, what in popular lingo is called the “astral body.” This can be called a “soul.”

[Dhammavuddho says that the "mind-made body" emerges from the crown, which is not mentioned in D 2.] [SD 8.10]

Closing comments

Dhammavuddho’s usage of “soul” for the mind, the mental aggregates and rebirth-consciousness is neither new nor controversial. Even in Thailand, the word “winyaan” (Thai word of viññāṇa) is used in just this sense.

Of course, such terms are defined in accordance with the suttas. Neither the “winyaan” nor the “soul” is an eternal being or abiding self, but a simple conventional word for those aspects of our being that are **non-physical** in a living process rooted in impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self.

In short, Bh Dhammavuddho has helped to update the modern Buddhist vocabulary so that is easier for us, especially those using the English language, to relate to Buddha Dhamma at the core our being. We can live and experience the “soul” of Buddhism.

Talks by Bh Dhammavuddho on “soul,” etc.

21 Oct 2018

Sungai Puyu Wat, Butterworth, Penang, Malaysia

“Soul, last thought moment, rebirth” (Hokkien)

<https://www.facebook.com/Vihara.Buddha.Gotama/posts/luangpor-dhammavuddho-bhante-hye-2018-singapore-dhamma-talks-recordingsstory-of-/1447209935383791/>

8 April 2019

Theravada Centre, Athens, Greece

“Last thought moment & soul”

<https://www.facebook.com/Theravada.Greece/videos/1019182934949827/>.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWeifGOQgII> [13:00 onwards]

27 June 2019

Persatuan Dhamma Pasir Parit, Kelantan, Malaysia

(Kerjasama Tanah Merah & Pasir Mas Buddhist Association)

“Soul; last thought moment”

30 June 2019

Kuala Krai Buddhist Association, Kelantan, Malaysia

“Soul; last thought moment”

https://drive.google.com.../11_T4wYbiqk9zNI7kdAPi3sbFkw.../view

3 July 2019

Terengganu Buddhist Association, Terengganu, Malaysia

“Soul; last thought moment”

7 July 2019

Kuantan Buddhist Association, Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia

“Soul; last thought moment”

28 Aug 2019

Ipoh Buddhist Society, Perak, Malaysia

“Last thought moment and soul”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpt9QZWAUOU>

19 Sep 2019

Buddhist Gem Fellowship Counseling Group

In Vihara Buddha Gotama, Temoh, Perak

“Stream Entry, Soul, Last Thought Moment”

http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGs6Rn0BSiezCDS3nLgv04JqZai6LbS6g&disable_polymer=true; <https://bit.ly/2ZpSUt4>.

Q&A 2 on soul: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4rIKzqV1L0>.

Q&A 8 on last thought moment: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPZSfpHJOgM>.

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R688 Revisioning Buddhism 277

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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