

Between Anatta and the Afterlife:

Reconciling Early Buddhist Teachings on Not-Self with the Emerging Science of Near-Death Experience and Consciousness Studies

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I. Introduction: A Seeming Paradox

Among the most profound teachings preserved in the Pali Canon, the Buddha's doctrine of anatta — not-self — stands as both a philosophical landmark and a practical contemplative instruction. The Buddha taught with unwavering consistency that what human beings habitually take to be a fixed, enduring self is in fact a fluid, conditioned constellation of processes: form (rupa), feeling (vedana), perception (sanna), mental formations (sankhara), and consciousness (vinnana). None of these five aggregates (khandhas), individually or collectively, constitutes a permanent, independent self. This is not nihilism but a precision tool for liberation from suffering.

Yet the testimonies now accumulating from near-death experience (NDE) research appear, on the surface, to tell a different story. Men and women who are clinically dead for minutes — sometimes longer — return describing vivid encounters with deceased relatives who greet them with warmth, recognition, and what can only be described as personality intact. Grandmothers joke as they did in life. Brothers weep with relief. And the love that permeates these encounters is consistently described as qualitatively different from ordinary human affection: vast, unconditional, luminous.

Is this a contradiction of the Buddha's teaching? Must we choose between the rigorous psychology and metaphysics of the Pali Canon and the reliable phenomenological testimony of millions of credible experiencers worldwide? This essay argues that the contradiction is more apparent than real, and that the emerging science of consciousness — particularly NDE research, the work of psychiatrist Ian Stevenson on spontaneous past-life memories, and recent developments in non-local consciousness theory — points toward a framework that is not only compatible with the Buddha's deepest teachings but illuminated by them.

II. The Doctrine of Anatta: What the Buddha Actually Taught

To understand where Buddhism and NDE science converge, we must first be precise about what anatta does and does not claim. The Buddha's teaching on not-self is frequently misread as the assertion that nothing exists, or that experience is illusory, or that personal continuity is meaningless. The Pali Canon does not support these readings.

What the Buddha consistently denied is not experience itself but the existence of an unchanging, independent, sovereign self that owns and controls experience. In the Anattalakkhana Sutta — the Discourse on the Characteristic of Not-self— the Buddha leads his first five disciples through a careful analysis: if form were truly the self, it would not be subject to affliction; but since form is subject to affliction, it cannot be the self. The same logic applies to each of the five aggregates. The conclusion is not that nothing is there, but that nothing found among the aggregates is the thing we think we are.

Crucially, the Pali Canon introduces the term *gandhabba* to describe something that participates in the process of rebirth. Translators and commentators have wrestled with this term for centuries. In the Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta, the Buddha states that three things must converge for conception to occur: the union of mother and father, the mother's fertile period, and the presence of a *gandhabba*. The term has been rendered as 'being ready to be born,' as 'spirit,' as a 'subtle body,' or as a stream of consciousness poised between existences. The *gandhabba* is not a soul in the Abrahamic sense — it is not eternal, immutable, or created by God — but it is a functional carrier of karmic energy and momentum, a pattern of consciousness and intention that maintains enough coherence to seek and enter a new life.

The *gandhabba*, then, is neither a fixed self nor nothing. It is more like a river than a stone: a process with recognizable character, flow, and direction, shaped by its history, but without a permanent, solid core. This subtlety is essential to everything that follows.

III. Meditation, Altered States, and Non-Material Consciousness in the Pali Canon

The Pali Canon is, among other things, an extraordinarily sophisticated map of consciousness. The Samaññaphala Sutta describes the fruits of the contemplative life in graduated detail: from the jhanas (meditative absorptions) that progressively quiet ordinary cognition, to the higher knowledges (*abhinna*) that flower when the mind becomes sufficiently refined. These

higher knowledges include clairvoyance (dibba-cakkhu), telepathy (ceto-pariya-nana), knowledge of past lives (pubbe-nivasanussati-nana), and — crucially — knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings (cutu-papata-nana).

The Buddha did not present these capacities as miraculous exceptions. They are treated as natural consequences of meditative development, the mind's inherent potentials that become accessible when the obscurations of ordinary and mundane human ego-fixation are sufficiently dissolved. In this, the Pali Canon anticipates what parapsychology and consciousness science are now beginning to document empirically: that human awareness is not hermetically sealed within the individual nervous system, and that psi capacities — telepathy, remote viewing, precognition — appear in the literature with a evidence-based consistency that resists skeptical dismissal.

The pioneering work of researchers such as Dean Radin, whose meta-analyses of psi research demonstrate statistically robust effects across thousands of controlled trials, and the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research laboratory's decades of work on mind-matter interaction, collectively suggest that consciousness has properties that exceed classical materialist explanation. The meditating monk accessing knowledge of past lives and the scientist observing anomalous information transfer in a laboratory are, at some level, pointing at the same phenomenon: consciousness that is not entirely bounded by the individual brain and body.

IV. Near-Death Experiences: The Evidence and Its Challenge

The contemporary scientific study of near-death experiences gained landmark credibility with the publication of cardiologist Pim van Lommel's prospective NDE study in *The Lancet* in 2001 — one of the most rigorous investigations to date, tracking 344 cardiac arrest patients in ten Dutch hospitals. Of those successfully resuscitated, 18 percent reported a core NDE, including out-of-body perception, movement through darkness toward light, encounters with deceased relatives, and a life review. Critically, several patients reported accurate, verifiable perceptions of events occurring while they were clinically unconscious — events that should have been inaccessible to a brain with no measurable electrical activity.

The content of NDEs shows striking cross-cultural consistency. Whether reported from the United States, India, Thailand, or West Africa, experiencers describe light, love, a sense of expanded identity, and — most relevant to our inquiry — encounters with deceased loved ones.

What is remarkable about these encounters is not merely their emotional intensity but their specificity. Experiencers recognize relatives they never met in bodily life: a grandfather who died before their birth, a sibling lost in miscarriage. The relatives communicate, display characteristic mannerisms, and consistently demonstrate what experiencers describe as love that has been purified of the fears, anxieties, and wounds of ordinary human life on this planet.

Here is where the tension with anatta appears most sharp. These deceased relatives are not reported as formless radiance or pure awareness. Some have faces. Some have names. They have histories. A grandmother who was famously sardonic in life is still sardonic, though now the sharpness has been replaced by warmth. A father who struggled with emotional distance appears with that distance dissolved, yet recognizably himself. The personality seems to persist, though transformed, imbued with Metta and an energy of compassion and guidance.

V. Ian Stevenson and the Evidence for Rebirth: Convergence with the Pali Canon

The late Dr. Ian Stevenson, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia, spent four decades investigating children who reported spontaneous memories of previous lives. His methodology was meticulous: he traveled to the claimed previous location, identified the family the child described, and documented correspondences between the child's statements and the verified history of the deceased individual — details that could not plausibly have been obtained through normal means. By the time of his death in 2007, Stevenson and his colleagues had documented over 2,500 such cases, with the strongest concentrated in South and Southeast Asia, among populations with Buddhist or Hindu worldviews.

What Stevenson's cases show is not the persistence of a fixed soul but precisely what the gandhabba model predicts: a stream of karmic identity — personality traits, phobias, skills, physical birthmarks corresponding to wounds from the previous life — that maintains coherence across the death transition and re-establishes itself in a new body, often with striking specificity. Children remember names, addresses, family members, and the circumstances of their previous death. They display emotional responses — love for the previous family, grief for the previous life — that are not explicable by their current biography.

Stevenson's work sits in profound resonance with the Pali Canon's treatment of rebirth. The canon does not teach that a soul transmigrates unchanged; it teaches that kamma — the intentional

force generated by intentional thought, speech, and action — shapes the continuity of consciousness between lives. The pattern that re-emerges in the new life is causally connected to the previous one without being numerically identical to it. Stevenson's children are not, in Buddhist terms, the same person as the deceased; they are the next moment in a causal stream whose character was shaped by the kamma cultivated in the previous existence. The Buddha's metaphor is instructive: one candle lit from another. The second flame is neither the same as the first nor entirely different.

VI. The Paradox Resolved: Anatta, Personality, and the Purification of the Stream

We can now approach the apparent paradox directly. How can there be a doctrine of not-self and yet deceased relatives appearing in NDEs with personalities intact, and children remembering previous lives with specific personal memories?

The resolution lies in understanding what anatta denies and what it does not. Anatta denies a fixed, independent, sovereign self — an atman in the Upanishadic sense, an unchanging essence that exists apart from and behind the processes of experience. It does not deny that patterns of consciousness, shaped by kamma and intention, maintain recognizable character across time. A river has no unchanging essence, yet the Mississippi is recognizably the Mississippi. What gives it identity is not a static core but the coherent patterning of its flow.

The deceased relatives encountered in NDEs are, on this reading, not the same selves they were in life — they are the purified continuation of the kammic stream that animated those lives. The NDE literature consistently reports that deceased relatives appear liberated from the fears, wounds, addictions, and negative defensive structures that shaped their earthly personalities. What remains is the pattern of love, humor, characteristic care — the aspects of the person that were most deeply themselves, now freed from the overlays of ego-protection and suffering. This is precisely what Buddhist soteriology would predict: the falling away of the conditioned obscurations to reveal the luminous quality of awareness itself.

The unconditional love that experiencers consistently report as the defining quality of the NDE realm has a direct correlate in the Pali Canon's teaching on metta (loving-kindness) and karuna (compassion). The fourth jhana and the immeasurable states (brahmaviharas) are described as the mind becoming suffused with boundless goodwill — not personal affection but a quality of

care that does not depend on the characteristics of its object. What the NDE literature is documenting, on this reading, is consciousness that has shed the karmic overlays of fear and conditional love and rests in its more fundamental nature: awareness suffused with metta and karuna.

VII. Points of Resonance: Where Science and the Dhamma Illuminate Each Other

The most important area of convergence is the ontological status of consciousness itself. Both the Pali Canon and the frontier of consciousness science challenge the materialist assumption that consciousness is produced by the brain and ceases with it. The Canon treats consciousness (*vinnana*) as one of the fundamental constituents of existence, not reducible to matter. Van Lommel's NDE research, Stevenson's past-life studies, and Radin's psi research collectively suggest that consciousness exhibits properties — non-locality, persistence across bodily death, access to information beyond sensory range — that are inexplicable on a strictly materialist model.

A second resonance lies in the graduated nature of consciousness. The Pali Canon describes many levels of mind: from gross sensory consciousness to the subtle consciousnesses accessible in deep *jhana* to the awareness that persists between lives. NDE experiencers consistently describe a dramatic expansion of awareness at the moment of apparent death — a sense that ordinary waking consciousness was a narrowed, contracted version of something much larger. This maps directly onto the Buddhist description of ordinary *samsaric* consciousness as a kind of occlusion, a narrowing of awareness by craving and aversion, which meditation progressively undoes.

Third, both frameworks converge on the moral ordering of reality. The Pali Canon's teaching on *kamma* holds that intentional action shapes the texture of future experience — that the universe is not morally random, that consciousness inclines toward its own purification across lifetimes. NDE literature consistently reports life reviews in which experiencers experience their actions from the perspective of those they affected — a kind of immediate *kammic* feedback that produces, universally, not judgment but compassionate understanding. The moral arc of the cosmos, in both frameworks, bends towards compassion and love.

Finally, both point toward liberation as the trajectory of consciousness. In the Pali Canon, *nibbana* is not annihilation but the cessation of the craving (*tanha*) that drives conditioned existence — described in the *Udana* as 'the unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned.' NDE experiencers

who encounter what they describe as a presence of pure light and love — beyond all form, beyond all identity — are approaching something that, phenomenologically, resembles what the Canon points toward as the unconditioned. Whether we call it nibbana or the divine ground, the experiential report is remarkably consistent: a reality of boundless awareness and love that underlies and exceeds personal identity.

VIII. Conclusion: Toward an Integrated Understanding

The doctrine of anatta, properly understood, is not the enemy of post-mortem continuity but its most sophisticated ally. By refusing to locate identity in any fixed, static core, it opens the possibility of a continuity that is dynamic, process-based, and capable of transformation across lives and death. The gandhabba — the stream of consciousness and kammic patterning that seeks new birth — is not a soul in the Western theological sense, but it is not nothing. It carries character, tendency, love, unresolved intention, and the accumulated momentum of past choices.

Ian Stevenson's cases document this process from one angle: the re-emergence of identifiable personal patterns in children who could not have acquired them by normal means. NDE research documents it from another angle: the experience of consciousness maintaining coherence, expanding in awareness, and encountering the luminous inheritance of those who have gone before. The Buddha's Pali Canon provides the theoretical framework: a sophisticated model of consciousness as process, kamma as intentional causation, and liberation as the recognition of what awareness most fundamentally is.

What the science of consciousness is slowly building toward — and what the Buddhist contemplative tradition has held for twenty-five centuries — is a view in which the universe is not fundamentally material with consciousness as a late and accidental guest, but fundamentally conscious, with matter as one of its expressions. Within that universe, identity is real but not fixed; continuity is genuine but not static; personality persists but is capable of purification; and love — not sentimental affection but the boundless metta that the Buddha described as the liberation of the heart — is not an epiphenomenon of survival instincts but the deepest property of awareness itself.

The grandmothers who appear in near-death encounters with their sardonic warmth intact, the children who weep for families from previous lives, the meditator who accesses the memory

of past births in deep jhanic samadhi — they are all testimonies to the same profound truth the Buddha articulated beside the Ganges: that consciousness is larger than we know, that its continuity is real, and that what it moves toward, across lives and death and the long arc of awakening, is the unconditioned love that was always already its nature.

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