



## A Study of Buddhādāsa Bhikku's Concept of Death Before

### Death of Death Before Death

### การศึกษาเรื่องการตายก่อนตายตามทัศนะของพุทธทาสภิกขุ

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#### Abstract

From ancient times, death is the mysterious problem that surrounds all human beings. In Buddhist teaching, death can be overcome by facing the fact and understanding the body as the composition of five aggregates, not self and one can free oneself from all attachment by practicing the eightfold path. This article proposes the concept of “death before death” known as the end of attachment to the idea of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu as a way for bringing people away from materialism and a practice for achieving the extinction of all defilements and suffering in this life of here and now.

The aim of this article is to study the real meaning of death (*marāṇa*), to analyze and criticize the concept of “death before death” of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu which is related to the supreme goal of Buddhism (*nibbāna*) and also compare his demythologization and his own hermeneutic method with the teaching as appeared in the Buddhist texts by using the descriptive and comparative method to reflect the idea of anthropology, sociology and phenomenology of religion and scholars for building the bridge of intra-faith and interfaith dialogues among people of different religions.

**Keywords:** death before death (tai kawn tai), nibbāna

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### บทคัดย่อ

ตั้งแต่สมัยโบราณมา ความตายถือเป็นเรื่องลึกลับที่ร่ายล้อมมนุษย์ทุกคน พระพุทธศาสนา สอนว่า ความตายสามารถเอาชนะได้โดยการเผชิญหน้ากับความจริงนี้ และมีความเข้าใจว่าร่างกาย เป็นเพียงขันธ์ห้าไม่ใช่ตัวตน และบุคคลสามารถคลายการยึดมั่นถือมั่นได้โดยการปฏิบัติตาม อริยมรรคแปด บทความนี้เป็นการเสนอแนวคิดเรื่องตายก่อนตายที่กล่าวถึงการตายจากความยึด มั่นถือมั่นในตัวกูของกู และวิธีการปฏิบัติต่อความตายของพุทธศาสนิกชนว่าเป็นคำสอนของศาสนา ที่จะนำมนุษย์ออกมาจากวัฏฏะนิยมและเป็นวิธีปฏิบัติเพื่อเข้าถึงความสิ้นกิเลสและทุกข์ทั้งปวงที่นี้ และเดี๋ยวนี้

บทความนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อศึกษาความหมายที่แท้จริงของความตายเพื่อวิเคราะห์และ แสดงความคิดเห็นต่อแนวคิดเรื่องตายก่อนตายของพุทธศาสนิกชนซึ่งเชื่อมโยงกับเป้าหมายสูงสุด ของพระพุทธศาสนา คือพระนิพพาน กับทั้งเปรียบเทียบการให้ความหมายในเชิงตรรกะและ วิธีการตีความของพุทธศาสนิกชนกับคำสอนที่ปรากฏในคัมภีร์พุทธศาสนาโดยใช้วิธีการพรรณนา และเปรียบเทียบเพื่อสะท้อนถึงแนวคิดเชิงมานุษยวิทยา สังคมวิทยาและปรากฏการณ์วิทยาทาง ศาสนาผ่านมุมมองของพุทธศาสนิกชนและนักวิชาการอื่นเพื่อสร้างสะพานเชื่อมความสัมพันธ์อันดี ระหว่างบุคคลในศาสนาเดียวกันและต่างศาสนา

**คำสำคัญ:** ตายก่อนตาย นิพพาน

### Introduction

In every respect, this research has illustrated the relationship between the concept of death (*marāṇa*) and the supreme goal of Buddhism (*nibbāna*) to enhance the understanding in the subject matter as well as apply the acquired knowledge of death (*marāṇa*) to make a more worthwhile living in the current life. In addition, it reminds the researcher to pay equal attention to all social classes. Buddhist texts and their reinterpretation by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu are the extents of this study with an aim to compare various notions and opinions issued by different scholars. The contents are the discussion about the practical methodologies by means of the



Noble eightfold path, which is a way to overcome the fear of death and eliminate the attachment of self to become non-self. When a person truly conceives the definition of ‘self’, which consists of matter (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedandā*), perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*), it proves that he or she can hold down the self-adherence (*attā*) or the false idea of ‘I’ and ‘mine’. As a consequence, ignorance (*avijjā*) which is the main cause of suffering (*dukkha*) is quenched and liberation is replaced in the life of here and now.

### **Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu’s concept of death before death**

According to Buddhist texts, “Herein, death (*maraṇa*) is the interruption of the life faculty included within (the limits of) a single becoming (existence)” (Ñānamoli Bhikku, tr,1991, p. 225). Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu defines death (*maraṇa*) based on his hermeneutic method with the two kinds of languages: everyday language (phasakhon), which is spoken by the ordinary people, and *dhamma* language (phasatham), which is spoken by the people who learn *dhamma*. Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu explains the word death (*maraṇa*) through the two kinds of language as follows:

“Now let’s consider the word death. Death in everyday language means that event which necessitates putting something in a coffin and cremating or burying it. But in *Dhamma* language, the word death refers to the cessation of the idea mentioned just a moment ago, the idea of I or me. The ceasing of this idea is what is meant by death in *Dhamma* language.” (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 2007b, p. 56)

Death (*maraṇa*) is classified into two types, namely timely death (*kālamaraṇa*) and untimely death (*akālamaraṇa*). Timely death (*kālamaraṇa*) is determined by the accumulation of past merits, natural age and both. Significantly, volitional action (*kamma*) breaks it off. Thus, it is apparent that death (*maraṇa*) happens to all lives anywhere, any time and is unable to avoid.



Accepting death as a normal part of life and understanding its distinctiveness requires heedful living. Buddha taught contemplate death at every moment of breathing in and out. Upatissa Thera expresses his outlook on the Path of Freedom (*Vimuttimaggā*), just as Buddhagosācāriya does in Purification (*Visuddhimaggā*), that the benefits of mindfulness of death (*marāṇasati*) help those who contemplate constantly to enjoy the current benefits of living and confront their last moments in life with an untarnished mind.

“He is able to live long, does not cling to things, is endowed with the perception of impermanence, the perception of subjection to ill and the perception of not-self. He fares well and approaches the ambrosial. When he comes to die, he does not suffer bewilderment.” (Ehara Soma & Kheminda, tr, 1995, p. 166)

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu unveils the proper method to contemplate the death (*marāṇasati*), namely death before death (*tai kawn tai*) for commoners to adapt into their daily livings. Death before death (*tai kawn tai*) means the abilities to extinguish defilement (*kilesa*) and self attachment (*atta*) before the end of lifespan. Ignorance (*avijjā*) is the source of arising self (*atta*). Self (*atta*) is illusory; however, it happens as the mind is being dominated. People are strongly passionate (*taṇhā*) for wealth and success etc. Controversially, people should understand the fact that satisfaction and dissatisfaction occur over times in life. When desire (*taṇhā*) is fulfilled unsuccessfully, it emerges suffers in the mind. Moreover, when the mind is enslaved by the domination of materialism, it evokes greediness (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). It, thus, is completely obsessed by self (*atta*). When craving or desire (*taṇhā*) for a particular matter takes place, clinging (*upādāna*) plays a part.



Based on Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu's viewpoint, when the sensing parts of the body, namely eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body, are in contact with any forms of sound, vision, smell, touch and taste, the feeling (*vedanā*) is stimulated. Once the feeling (*vedanā*) starts to mark a level of satisfaction for something, the mind is developed into craving (*taṇhā*) and overshadowed by the clinging thoughts (*upādāna*) of 'I' and 'mine'.

“When there is contact with forms, sounds, odors, flavors, or whatever at one of the sense-doors, that contact is called, in *Pāli phassa*. This *phassa* develops into *vedanā* (feeling). *Vedanā* develops into *taṇhā* (craving). *Taṇhā* develops into *upādāna* (clinging).” (Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, 1984, p. 20)

As a matter of fact, the false belief in the idea of 'I' and 'mine' cultivates the root of fear of death (*marāṇa*) which can be referred as the detachment from anything. However, what people are formidable of the most appears when they realize that they are going to be separated from their physicality, so called 'I' and 'mine'.

Two practical intuition methods are the resolutions to this problem: one is the natural method and the other is the organized system. He insists that all people are naturally given the ability to concentrate and develop peace in the mind through the method of insight practice. This means that they ought to first realize that all matters and beings are worthless. Emptiness represents the remainder-less extinction of self. It is necessary to keep practicing the remainder-less extinction principle on the daily basis until the absolute remainder-less of self is certainly achieved. There is a possibility to prevail over death even if it is the person's last second of life. If desire, passion, and feelings are all eradicated, peace and happiness will take place in the mind.



“As one falls one leaps on, leaps on to the remainder-less extinction by establishing in the mind the feeling that nothing is worth having or being. It may be called leaping in the right direction. There is no pain of any sort. There is, on the contrary, the best possible result, attainment of remainderless extinction.” (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1984, pp. 84-85)

Another insight to be elaborated is the organized training. Generally, this organized system for the insight training (*vipassanā*) includes nine steps of ‘the perfection of knowledge’ in the Path of Purification (*Visuddhimagga*) and the Path of Discrimination (*Paṭisambhidāmagga*), all of which have been developed later-on by scholars.

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu pursues the methodical dimension offered in the Discourses of Mindfulness of Breathing in and out (*Ānāpānasaati Sutta*) through practicing the breathing meditation (*Ānāpānasati - bhāvanā*). This is undertaken with an emphasis on breathing in and out that is observed based on the sixteen stages of contemplation. When this type of meditation, say *Ānāpānasati - bhāvanā*, is exercised, the threefold training, which consists of morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*), will be ensued.

“Thus if we practice *Ānāpānasati - bhāvanā*, we will be going through the practice of both kinds of ‘*bhāvanā*’ or development. No separation of the practice is needed, and there is no need to go through any rituals or rites before actually practicing it. Just simply start practicing the meditation in accordance to the system, then morality (*sīla*), mental concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom or insight (*paññā*) will arise simultaneously.” (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 2003, p. 25)



Both of these intuitively practical methods can help people to obliterate the ten fetters (*sarṇyojana*), the mental impurities that bind human minds. The person who can destroy these ten fetters, grasp the noble path (*magga*) and fruition (*phala*) as well as reach the highest goal (*nibbāna*) is called the Perfected One (*Arhanta*). When the Perfected One (*Arhanta*) makes a contact with all forms of sound, smell, touch, sight and taste through his eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body, he is unaffected and all stimuli are ended at the moment of the contact (*phassa*). Hence, feeling (*vedanā*) does not develop craving (*tanhā*) but rather is capped. Despite being so, it is still concluded that no clinging to ‘I’ and ‘mine’ is no suffering (*dukkha*). The death encountered by the Perfected One (*Arhanta*) is without all sufferings (*dukkha*) and defilements (*kilesa*) as well as not being attached to physicality by the false conceptions of ‘I’ and ‘mine’.

“As for the word ‘*arhant*’ or ‘*arhanta*’, it was a word that was used even before the Buddha’s time. As for Buddhism, the word refers to a state of the mind in which all mental defilements have come to extinction whereby there will be no attachment to anything as being ‘I’ and ‘mine’.

(Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 2010, pp. 231-233)

Melford E. Spiro, an American anthropologist who studied *Theravāda* Buddhism in Myanmar, proposes four systems of *Theravāda* Buddhism. They include Esoteric Buddhism, Apotropaic Buddhism, Kammatic Buddhism and Nibbanic Buddhism.

The first system, Esoteric Buddhism, means the belief in a millennium of peace and happiness. The second system, Apotropaic Buddhism, means the use of magical and meritorious powers to avert and prevent evil. The third system, Kammatic Buddhism, means a religion of proximate salvation that is concerned with making and accumulating merits to be



better one's next-life status or situation. The fourth system, Nibbanic Buddhism, means a religion of radical salvation consisting of methods of achieving *nibbāna* within the current lifetime.

Spiro claims that Nibbanic Buddhism is the Buddhism which can only be pursued by male and female monks who seclude themselves from the mundane world. However, the remaining three systems aim for most Buddhist target in the world. He insists that Buddha imparts the knowledge of the abandonment of the worldly action that it is the way to achieve empty selfhood and the way to salvation (*nibbāna*):

“there is no point at which any of the doctrines of nibbanic Buddhism articulate with the secular social order, either to give it value, on the other hand, or to provide a fulcrum by which it can be changed, on the other....He (Buddha) teaches the way to redemption, but does not redeem; and His way is the way of worldly renunciation.” (Spiro, 1982, pp. 427-428)

Based on Buddhadāsa's notions, these systems are inseparable since there is a relationship between Kammatic and Nibbanic Buddhism. He criticizes that most Thai Buddhists misconceive the right approaches to make merits (Kammatic Buddhism); for example, they believe that donating money is good and it will bring them luck or take them to heaven or some better planets. Buddhadāsa disagrees with the metaphysical aspects of this belief. He claims that heaven and hell can be identified through mental cognition which composes of happiness and suffering (*dukkha*) that a person partakes in the present life. Thus, it is theoretically believed that making merits will purify the mind and leads to salvation (*nibbāna*). He suggests that: “The meaning of giving *dāna* and donations is to relinquish, to end all grasping at and clinging to things as being ‘I’ or ‘mine’ ” (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1984, p. 41).





Furthermore, he attributes that Buddha and the Perfected ones (*Arhanta*) remain their contacts with the people in the secular society by inserting *dhamma* with the lesson of empty mind (*suññatā*) into their daily activities. Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu argues that:

“The Buddha stated that He, the Tathāgata dwelt and passed His life in *suññatavihāra*. When He was teaching *Dhamma* His mind was empty of ‘self’ and ‘belonging to self’. When He was on alms - round or doing His daily tasks His mind was empty. When He was resting or enjoying Himself in His free time, He was dwelling empty of ‘self’ and ‘belonging to self’. Thus He affirmed to Sāriputta that, the Tathāgata passed His life in *suññatavihāra*.”

(Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, 1984, pp. 61-62)

Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu emphasizes the natural process of mankind and the theory of emptiness of ‘I’ and ‘mine’. He describes the word ‘emptiness’ (*suññatā*) as freedom from all defilements (*kilesa*) and suffering (*dukkha*) and salvation (*nibbāna*). “The conditions of emptiness resulting from the complete and through eliminate of the self-idea is *nibbāna*. This can be summarized by saying, *Nibbāna* is supreme emptiness or Supreme emptiness is *nibbāna*” (Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, 2007a, p. 99).

The concept of emptiness (*suññatā*) of Mahayana and Zen Buddhism’s method of instruction, which is regarded as one of the core Buddhist lessons, draws our attention to find out why intra-faith dialogue are developed for different Buddhist schools. It is apparent that the dialogue is created with an aim to enhance their understanding of what Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu called “*dhamma* language”. He explains that Buddha gives a special gift to all laypeople in secular society: the lesson of valuing self-being as emptiness (*suññatā*). This is considered as an eternal benefit and welfare-enhancement for every householder. Nonattachment and envisioning



the world as emptiness direct us to dispossession of 'I' and 'mine'; as a subsequence, birth, senescence, illness, bereavement and whatsoever are no longer the tribulations for us. A mind without all defilements (*kilesa*) is extricated from suffering (*dukkha*).

He defines that God, whom may be conceived as a person with power or as a condition, is not significant unless it is a beacon to end all sufferings (*dukkha*).

"It does not matter whether that which is called God is conceived of as a person, or as a power, or as a condition. The only characteristic required of what is called God, is that it signifies the extinction of suffering. That much is quite enough." (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1999, p. 89)

It is concerned that tribulations that occur in different religions are unknown in the core education of their own religion and in *dhmma* language. *Dhamma* language (phasatham) has reduced the metaphysical aspects and it claims that heaven and hell are only perceived psychologically in accordance with how a person places happiness (*sukha*) and suffering (*dukkha*) in the mind at his present life. If understood and reached the heart of all instructions, there will be no form of religion, but only the order of nature (*dhmma*). All religions have the same goal that is to provide the intellectual and spiritual approach to helping people get away from suffering.

## Conclusion

Buddha did not overcome physical death but he overcome ignorance (*avijjā*) of death (*marāṇa*). Ignorance (*avijjā*) is the source of arising the false conception of self in human beings' mind. Buddhadāsa uses his theory of two kinds of languages to explain the word death (*marāṇa*) in terms of *dhmma* language as the ceasing of ignorance (*avijjā*) of the idea of 'I' and 'mine'. He suggests the principle of remainder-less extinction to be practiced on a routine basis until



the absolute remainder-less of self is achieved. This has an aim to extinguish the idea of 'I' and 'mine'. Therefore, the state one reaches after overcoming all ignorance (*avijjā*) is called nirvana (*nibbāna*). It is the ultimate goal of Buddhism in which all defilements (*kilesa*) will be destroyed.

Although there are several viewpoints provided by scholars concerning the demythologization and the hermeneutic method presented as Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's theory of two kinds of languages, its actual purpose is to remind the people to live a life consciously with proper actions. The metaphysical aspects of the religious doctrine are reduced and purified to prepare a way to improve the mind quality in such contemporary living. The study also helps people of all religions to demean materialism. The preacher's objective presents a solution that directly solves the major problem which exists in all humans' lives; that is self-attachment. When the false idea of 'I' and 'mine' is terminated and the person can envision the world as emptiness, he has mastered the core objective of the lesson. Then he can maintain his daily living with happiness and mindfulness (*sati*) whilst making benefits for others in the society.



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