WHAT IS THE MEANING OF ENLIGHTENMENT?
HOW CAN ONE RECONCILE MODERN SCIENCE WITH ANCIENT RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS?
WHAT IS OUR ROLE IN THE UNIVERSE?

In A New Buddhist Path, David R. Loy examines these questions and more, addressing head-on the most pressing issues of Buddhist philosophy in our time. Investigating the unexpected intersections of Buddhist teachings and the modern world, he uncovers a new Buddhist way: one that is faithful to important traditions but compatible with today's society.

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“In A New Buddhist Path, Zen teacher David Loy has re-visioned the middle way for Western Buddhists. He describes a path that fully embraces both the amazing insights of the Buddhist tradition and the wealth of our contemporary critical analysis, while charting a course between the traps of a bare literalism and modernist materialism. He brings an unparalleled depth of both scholarship and deep spiritual insight to the project. I fear it has become a cliché to declare an instant classic, but I really believe this is a book that will mark many hearts for many years to come. This is a manifesto of genuine spiritual freedom, written for our generation.”

—James Ishmael Ford, author of If You’re Lucky, Your Heart Will Break

“David Loy is a wonderful guide along the latest turn of the Buddha’s path, as the Dharma moves through the West, encountering science, democracy, and deep ecology. Loy masterfully shows us the relevance of the Dharma in the modern world, and how it can serve the greater good.”

—Wes Nisker, author of Essential Crazy Wisdom

“The ‘New Buddhism’ is the perfect tool for integrating ancient wisdom into our rapidly changing world. The discussion in these pages is a crucial one for our future.”

—Jaimal Yogis, author of Saltwater Buddha
A New Buddhist Path
A New Buddhist Path

enlightenment

evolution

and ethics

in the

modern world

David R. Loy
To the new bodhisattvas
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Introduction:
In Quest of a Modern Buddhism 1

Path 9
  Transcendence? 10
  The Problem with Transcendence 19
  The Problem with Immanence 26
  Mindfulness 33
  Beyond Transcendence and Immanence Constructing the Self and Its World Nonattachment 41
  Letting Go 51
  Something Infinite Behind Everything 54
  Implications 62

Story 65
  A Devalued World 67
  Social Darwinism 68
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creation Stories</th>
<th>73</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A New Evolutionary Myth</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A New Buddhist Story</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creatures that Create</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Meaning of It All</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Pivotal Stage</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good vs. Evil</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignorance vs. Awakening</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Economic Challenge</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ecological Challenge</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Bodhisattva</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflections on Karma and Rebirth</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommended Books</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Author</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION:
In Quest of a Modern Buddhism

“May you live in interesting times,” says the apocryphal Chinese curse, and for those on a Buddhist path these times are doubly interesting. As Buddhism spreads to the West (or to the modern world, since “the West” is globalizing), Buddhism is encountering its greatest challenge ever: the most successful civilization in human history, whose powerful technologies and formidable institutions offer apparently limitless possibilities along with unprecedented perils.

The naturalistic worldview and materialistic values of the modern world are quite different from what Buddhism traditionally has to offer—and they also appear increasingly problematic and vulnerable, due to deeply rooted ecological, economic, and social crises that modernity has created but seems unable to resolve. Our predicament calls for new perspectives that question many of its priorities and presuppositions.

In a conversation not long before his death, the British historian Arnold Toynbee reflected that “The present threat to mankind’s survival can be removed only by a revolutionary change of heart in individual human beings. This change of heart must be inspired by religion in order to generate the willpower needed for putting arduous new ideals into practice.” Does this help us to understand his reputed prediction that the introduction of Buddhism to the West “may well prove to be the most important event of the twentieth century”? 
that the introduction of Buddhism to the West “may well prove to be the most important event of the twentieth century”?

Whenever Buddhism has spread to a new culture, it has interacted with the indigenous traditions of that society, and the result of their encounter has been something better suited to that culture. Each is changed by the other—and there is no reason to suspect that anything different is happening today: it is a safe bet that the contemporary conversation between Buddhism and the modern world will lead to the development of new forms of Buddhism particularly adapted for the members of an emerging global civilization.

Yet that predictable result does not in itself clarify the role that Buddhism will play within this civilization. Will Buddhist temples and Dharma centers adapt to modern life by helping us cope with the stress of surviving in a deteriorating ecological and economic climate? Or will we appreciate Buddhist teachings and practices because they offer a radically different worldview, with an alternative perspective on what’s happening now and what needs to be done? Or do we need both?

As these reflections suggest, the issue is not only what Buddhism can offer to modernity, but just as much what modernity offers to Buddhism. Before Buddhism came to the West, the West came to Buddhism, thanks to European imperialism and missionary proselytizing. It turned out to be a salutary wake-up call. The Mahayana scholar Edward Conze said that Buddhism hasn’t had an original idea in a thousand years. Although I’m dubious about his dates—in the thirteenth century Zen master Dogen revolutionized traditional ways of conceptualizing the Dharma—Conze’s basic point remains a challenge to Buddhism even if it applies only to the last seven hundred years. Is the encounter with modernity the best thing that has happened to Buddhism in a very long time?

This book outlines the basic features of a contemporary Buddhism that tries to be both faithful to its most important traditional teachings and also compatible with modernity, or at least with many of the most
characteristic elements of the modern worldview. Despite the ambitious title, the pages that follow inevitably offer a personal perspective on some aspects of the dialogue so far. They do not address the implications of recent discoveries in neuroscience, nor academic work in the field of cognitive science. And of course the interactions that I do address are, if not quite beginning, still in their early days. There is no question of providing a new version of Buddhism that will stand the test of time. Instead, the best that any of us can hope for is to contribute to the ongoing conversation, in the belief that a collective wisdom is beginning to emerge, which will be something more than the sum of separate voices.

The main challenge to developing a modern Buddhism is the difficulty of achieving a genuine dialogue that is not predisposed to evaluate one side in terms of the other.

On the traditional side, for the last few generations the main concern has naturally been to import particular schools of Asian Buddhism and foster support for them. Such a conventional approach might be summarized as follows: “Some adjustments need to be made, of course, but without conceding any significant alteration in the basic teachings and ways of practicing. That such traditions are premodern is not a weakness but their strength, given what the modern world has become and where it seems to be going. The prevalent Western worldview promotes individualism and narcissism, its economic system encourages greed, and society as a whole seems to be entranced in consumerist addictions and fantasies. We need to revitalize this ancient wisdom that can point us back in the right direction.”

On the other side, however, the main concern is to make Buddhism more relevant to contemporary society by secularizing it, replacing its Iron Age mythological roots with a worldview more compatible with science and other modern ways of knowing. “Sure, modernity has its problems, but we must build on the best of what it has discovered. This includes not only hard sciences such as physics and biology but also social sciences such as psychology and sociology. Instead of accepting
premodern beliefs that are no longer plausible today, we can also benefit from what anthropology and archaeology, for example, have learned about ancient ways of thinking. Only that approach can develop a Buddhism that speaks directly to our situation today—the dis-ease of modern people living in a globalizing world.”

Sympathizing with both perspectives is easy; walking the knife-edge between them is more difficult. Can we employ each viewpoint to interrogate the other, without accepting either perspective as absolute? Such an approach can be disconcerting because it is so destabilizing: what remains of one’s own standpoint? This process invokes the understanding of Buddhist practice discussed in part I, which emphasizes the realization of “nondwelling mind”: a mind that does not identify with any particular forms, including thought-forms such as ideologies, whether religious or secular.

Although the Asian Buddhist traditions continue to fascinate many of us, clearly we need to distinguish the essentials of the Dharma from cultural trappings that don’t fit as well into the modern world—do those include karma and rebirth? Yet a secularized Buddhism may assume some of the very things that a Buddhist perspective might critique as problematic. Does the prevalent materialist worldview of modern science express the truth of the world we live in, or has it become questionable—as some distinguished scientists, including Nobel laureate physicists and biologists, now believe? Differentiating science as a methodology from the dominant naturalistic paradigm opens the door to new conceptions of what this world is and to a fresh understanding of our place and role within it, which are discussed in part II.

One of the crucial issues for contemporary Buddhism is enlightenment: nibbana in Pali, nirvana in Sanskrit, awakening, liberation, realization, etc. Although it’s difficult to imagine a Buddhism (literally, “Awake-ism”) without it, there is an ambiguity about the nature of enlightenment that is becoming increasingly problematic as Buddhism globalizes and modernizes.

According to some early versions of Buddhism, this world of samsara
is inherently infested with craving, delusion, and the discontent they cause. The only really satisfactory solution is to escape it by attaining nirvana, which ends rebirth into samsara. This approach is consistent with other Axial Age religions (including Abrahamic ones such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) that also emphasize transcending (from the Latin trans + scandere, “to climb over or surmount”) this world.

In contrast, some contemporary versions of Buddhism understand the Buddhist path as a program of psychological development that helps us cope with personal problems, especially the “monkey mind” and its afflictive emotions. The influence of psychotherapy has led to a greater appreciation of entrenched mental problems and relationship difficulties, which traditional Buddhist practices do not always address well. The mindfulness movement is another promising development, but, like psychotherapy, such perspectives on Buddhism tend to emphasize accepting and adapting to this world. Throughout this book I will refer to this approach as immanent (from Latin in + manere, “to dwell in, remain in”). Although such therapeutic and mindfulness practices have much to offer, do they nevertheless overlook other important dimensions of the Dharma?

Part I argues that neither a transcendent nor an immanent understanding of Buddhism is satisfactory, given what we know today and what we need today. This section offers an alternative version of the path and its goal: the sense of self is a psychological and social construct that can be deconstructed and reconstructed, and that needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed, because the delusion of a separate self is the source of our most problematic dukkha, or “suffering.” We don’t need to attain anything or anywhere else, just to realize the true nature of this world (including ourselves) here and now—which involves a more nondual way of experiencing that is quite different from merely accepting this world as it is, or as it seems to be.

That the self is a construct accords with what developmental psychology has discovered, but a Buddhist constructivism opens the door to possibilities that modernity has not considered seriously, because those potentials are incompatible with its naturalistic perspective. In
that sense, an awakened way of experiencing and living in this world can also be described as transcending it, because the alternative that Buddhism offers does indeed transcend our usual dualistic understanding of the world and ourselves within it.

This way of describing the Buddhist path and its fruit raises some other important issues. Is the nondualist perspective developed in part I compatible with what modern science has discovered? Or with what contemporary science is discovering now? It seems difficult to reconcile a spiritual path with the materialist and reductionist paradigm that has been so successful in bending the world to our will—a worldview, to say it again, that many scientists themselves now find problematical.

Another issue raised by this way of understanding the Buddhist path is its social and ecological implications. “History is a race between education and catastrophe,” according to H. G. Wells, and the race is speeding up, on both sides. Catastrophe may not be too strong a term for the future that has begun to unfold. While global warming (a cozy euphemism for climate breakdown) is happening more quickly than most climate scientists anticipated, our collective efforts to address it remain wholly inadequate. Unless you are a banker or investor, there has been little if any recovery from the Great Recession that began in 2008, and the economic future for recent college graduates looks grim. (Bumper sticker on my car: “If the environment were a bank, we would have saved it by now.”) And the political paralysis in Washington looks unlikely to end soon, because it reflects a fragmentation in our national consciousness.

At the same time, something else is struggling to be born. Paul Hawken’s book Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History Is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World was inspired by his realization that something historically unprecedented is happening today: an extraordinary number of organizations, large and small, have sprung up to work for peace, social justice, and sustainability. His original estimate was between one million and one and a half million, but since then he has determined that the true number must be well over
two million. “Sprung up” is the appropriate verb, because this move-
ment is not organized top-down: groups are mostly independent, with
their own leaders and without any unifying ideology. It reflects a trans-
formation in our collective consciousness that may be just beginning, a
change that globalizing Buddhism is part of—and might perhaps even
become an important part of.

If awakening involves transcending this suffering world, we can
ignore its problems because we are destined for a better place. If the
Buddhist path is psychological therapy, we can continue to focus on
our own individual neuroses. Yet both of those approaches assume and
reinforce the illusion—the basic problem, at the root of our dissatisfac-
tion—that each of us is essentially separate from others, and therefore
can be indifferent to what is happening to others and to the world
generally.

The challenges that confront us today call upon us to do more than
help other individuals deconstruct their own sense of separation (the
traditional bodhisattva role). The highest ideal of the modern Western
tradition has been to restructure our societies so they become more
socially just. The most important Buddhist goal is to awaken and (to
use the Zen phrase) realize one’s true nature. Today it has become more
obvious that we need both: not just because these ideals complement
each other, but because those two types of liberation need each other.
That relationship between personal transformation and social trans-
formation is explored in part III.
At the heart of Buddhist teachings there is a crucial ambiguity. It is not a new problem: an ambivalence is apparent even in some of the earliest Buddhist texts, as preserved in the Pali Canon. As Buddhism globalizes and becomes part of the modern world, however, this ambiguity is becoming increasingly awkward. It needs to be resolved for the Buddhist tradition to fulfill its liberative potential—not only to promote individual awakening more successfully, but also to help us address ecological and social challenges that cannot be evaded.

Gautama Buddha said that he simply taught dukkha and how to end it; the four noble (or “ennobling”) truths are all about dukkha, what causes it, its cessation, and how to end it. Dukkha is usually translated as “suffering,” yet that works only if we understand suffering in the broadest sense, to include anxiety and dissatisfaction generally. Why are we haunted by a gnawing dis-ease that keeps us from enjoying our lives? The ambiguity at stake in Buddhism is directly connected with how we understand the source of our dukkha: is the basic problem the nature of this world itself, or our inability to accept it as it is? Or something else?
In early Buddhism, the “end of suffering” is nirvana, which literally means something like “blown out” or “cooled off.” But it's not completely clear what those metaphors actually refer to, because the Buddha described the nature of nirvana mostly with negatives (the end of craving, ignorance, etc.) and other metaphors (the shelter, harbor, refuge, etc.—which still leave us with the question “what sort of refuge?”).

His apparent reticence leaves us with the important issue of whether nirvana involves attaining some other dimension of reality that transcends this world, or whether it describes an experience that is immanent in this world—a state of being that might be understood more psychologically, as (for example) the end of greed, ill will, and delusion in our lives right now. Surely nirvana must be one or the other?

Today that basic ambivalence appears most clearly in the contrast between a reading of the Pali Canon that understands nirvana as an unconditioned (asamskrta) realm or dimension, and the recent “psychologization” of American Buddhism, especially in the current popularity of the mindfulness movement. Understanding the difference between these two will help us to see a third possibility, which emphasizes neither transcending this world nor accepting it as it is (or seems to be). Rather, the world as normally experienced—including the way we normally experience ourselves—is a psychological and social construction that can be deconstructed and reconstructed. We don’t need to attain anything or anywhere else, or to accept the conventional possibilities that modernity assumes. What we need to do is realize that this world is quite different from our usual assumptions about it and about ourselves.

Transcendence?

The earliest Buddhist teachings were collected into what became the Pali Canon, which is approximately eleven times the length of the Bible. The material presented is so extensive and varied that most generalizations become risky, and this is especially true regarding the nature
of nirvana. This book is not the place for a comprehensive analysis of
the canon, yet it’s important to appreciate some of the inconsistencies
in the way that nirvana is described—or what at least appear to be
inconsistencies. There are plenty of passages in the Nikayas that seem
to support transcendence and perhaps as many that seem to imply
immanence. Before getting into that, however, we need to know what
we are getting into.

According to tradition, the texts of the Pali Canon were memorized
and passed down by word of mouth for at least three hundred years
before they were written down. How well they preserve the original
words of the historical Buddha, and how much those words have been
edited and modified in the process, is a controversy that may be never
settled. We like to think that its suttas offer us a direct conduit to what
the Buddha actually said, but it’s not so simple. Religious doctrines
can evolve very quickly, especially in the earliest days, when the insti-
tutions devoted to preserving the legacy of the founder are still taking
shape. Within a single generation the parables of Jesus, an apocalyptic
Jewish prophet, became overshadowed by his new role as resurrected
god who can save us—thanks to the extraordinarily successful mission-
ary efforts of Paul, who never met the living Jesus but apparently knew
better than anyone else what Jesus really meant. How certain can we
be that the compilers of the Pali Canon knew what the Buddha meant
and accurately preserved what he taught?

Some of its mythological elements reflect ways of thinking that were
generally accepted in the Buddha’s time and place (Iron Age India) but
are more difficult to credit today. It presents the world as an enchanted
place full of supernormal powers and disincarnate spirits. There are
stories about the Buddha’s conversations with gods and the complaint
of a tree spirit whose home had been cut down. We read that the Bud-
dha flew through the air and hovered cross-legged above a river to stop
a battle between two armies. In another incident, after a debate the
Buddha suddenly rose up into the air and flew away. He also ascended
to Tusita heaven, where he taught the Abhidhamma—the third part of
the Pali Canon—to his deceased mother.
Some other issues are problematic in different ways. One of the most controversial episodes in the Canon was the Buddha’s decision to admit women into the sangha, the monastic community. According to the account in the Vinaya (the second part of the Pali Canon, which includes the rules that monks and nuns are expected to follow), the Buddha was originally reluctant to allow women into the sangha, until his attendant Ananda asked him whether women have the same potential for awakening as men do. The Buddha said yes and then agreed to admit them, provided they submit to some extra rules.

I used to appreciate this incident for the way that the Buddha allowed himself to be persuaded—until I realized that was naïve. There are several textual problems that cast doubt upon the veracity of this story, including an apparent discrepancy between when women were admitted (about five years after the Buddha began to teach) and when Ananda became his attendant (later).

What finally dawned on me, however, is that Ananda’s role was probably added later as a way to blame him for the admission of women! There are a number of other incidents in the Pali Canon that seem designed to cast a bad light on him, including a bizarre passage in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta that recounts the last days of the Buddha. In the midst of a straightforward account about his physical decline and death, the Buddha suddenly upbraids Ananda for not noticing the implications of something he’d said a little earlier: due to his well-developed psychic powers, a buddha could actually live many thousands of years, but Ananda didn’t catch the hint and ask the Buddha to do so:

Then, Ananda, the fault is yours. Herein have you failed, inasmuch as you were unable to grasp the plain suggestion, the significant prompting given by the Tathagata, and you did not then entreat the Tathagata to remain. For if you had done so, Ananda, twice the Tathagata might have declined, but the third time he would have consented. Therefore, Ananda, the fault is yours; herein have you failed.
Just in case we miss the point, this ludicrous criticism is repeated twice more. Other accounts strongly suggest that the senior monk Mahakasyapa, who apparently assumed leadership of the sangha after the Buddha’s death, had an ongoing quarrel with Ananda, so perhaps it is no coincidence that some other incidents in the Pali Canon seem designed to show Ananda in a bad light.

I mention these magical displays and personal animosities not to belittle the doctrines in the Pali Canon but to question its reliability as historically accurate. The notion that the original events and teachings were transmitted word for word for over three hundred years, without addition or subtraction or “clarification,” is implausible to say the least. It is also inconsistent with a significant difference between oral and scriptural traditions. Once there is a written text, whether or not a copy is an exact reproduction becomes more significant and easier to verify. In the oral traditions of nonliterate societies, however, several versions of the most important stories commonly circulate, and there is no single, canonized set of doctrines that practitioners are expected to accept and follow. Without a written text to fixate the words, the emphasis is on conveying the meaning, which allows more liberty of expression. A teacher’s own understanding of a topic naturally affects how it is presented, and, inevitably in an oral culture, this sometimes has consequences for how a doctrine is transmitted to future generations.

The customary Theravada emphasis on meticulous memorization and recitation suggests that the Pali Canon might be an exception, but recently discovered Gandharan birch bark scrolls—now the oldest extant Buddhist manuscripts—do not support that possibility. Dating from the first century BCE to the third century CE—the period when the oral teachings probably began to be written down—those scrolls are inconsistent with the traditional belief that a definitive version of what the Buddha said was established during the First Council (presided over by Mahakasyapa) soon after his death. Although they include some familiar material, most of the fragmentary treatises and commentaries reveal new strands of Buddhist literature not included in the Pali Canon as we know it today. Among scholars of early Buddhism, the
usual paradigm—that all Buddhist scriptures and schools are branches that diverge from the same tree trunk—has been replaced by a braided river metaphor, with multiple interacting streams that do not derive from a single source. The translator Richard Salomon has summarized the implications: no existing Buddhist collection of early Indian scriptures “can be privileged as the most authentic or original words of the Buddha.”

Nobody holds the view of an original canon anymore.

—Pali scholar Oskar von Hinüber

Keeping in mind this nuanced understanding of the Pali Canon, we can return to the issue of what the canon says about nirvana: does it transcend this world or is it immanent in this world—or is it perhaps something else altogether?

One of the most common descriptions of nirvana is “the end of birth and death”: someone who is fully awakened is not born and does not die, as in this well-known passage in the Udana:

There is, monks, a not-born, a not-brought-to-being, a not-made, a not-formed. If, monks, there were no not-born, not-brought-to-being, not-made, not-formed, no escape would be discerned from what is born, brought-to-being, made, formed. But since there is a not-born, a not-brought-to-being, a not-made, a not-formed, therefore an escape is discerned from what is born, brought-to-being, made, formed.

Another Pali Canon text, the Itivuttaka, contains the same passage and adds some verses that explicitly describe this sublime state as blissful:

The born, come-to-be, produced,
The made, the formed, the unlasting,
Conjoined with decay and death,
A nest of disease, perishable,
Sprung from nutriment and craving’s cord—
That is not fit to take delight in.

The escape from that, the peaceful,
Beyond reasoning, everlasting,
The not-born, the unproduced,
The sorrowless state that is void of stain,
The cessation of states linked to suffering,
The stilling of the conditioned—bliss.

Another Udana passage seems to further distinguish the Buddhist goal from the world we live in now:

Where neither water nor yet earth
Nor fire nor air gain a foothold
There gleam no stars, no sun sheds light.
There shines no moon, yet there no darkness reigns.
When a sage, a brahmin, has come to know this
For himself through his own experience
Then he is freed from form and formlessness
Freed from pleasure and from pain.

Yet a third Udana passage begins in the same way: “There is, monks, that state where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no air…” but goes on to assert that in this state there is “neither this world nor another world nor both; neither sun nor moon. Here, monks, I say there is no coming, no going, no staying, no deceasing, no uprising. Not fixed, not movable, it has no support. Just this is the end of suffering” (emphasis mine). Elsewhere we are told that there is no way to measure the consciousness of one who has “gone out,” because it is signless, boundless, and all-luminous: namarupa, one’s name and form, has been destroyed.

Except perhaps for the final Udana quotation, which complicates the issue, such passages seem to support an understanding of nirvana as
an unconditioned state or dimension that transcends samsara, which is this world of suffering, craving, and ignorance. The ultimate goal is to escape the unsatisfactory world we now live in by ending physical rebirth. In developing nonattachment, one can come to experience serenity and loving-kindness now, yet they are not in themselves the final solution to dukkha. Although we naturally want to improve our lives while we are here, the main goal is to avoid rebirth, because to be reborn into this world is to suffer.

Nevertheless—and you knew this was coming—there are other important passages in the Pali Canon that seem to offer a more this-worldly interpretation of the ultimate goal. Many Buddhist scholars believe that the Sutta Nipata, in the Khuddaka Nikaya, is part of the oldest stratum of the Canon, so it may provide a better glimpse of the Buddha’s original teachings and practices. This becomes especially important when we notice that some of the texts in the Sutta Nipata do not endorse a transcendent solution to dukkha, for they describe awakening as an unselfish, nongrasping way of living here and now.

In early Buddhism the move from samsara to nirvana is not a journey to a “separate reality,” but away from attachment to nonattachment, from greed and anxiety to calm and equanimity, or from “self” to “nonself.”
—Donald Swearer

The short Atthakavagga Sutta is a good example. Grace Burford’s study of it (Desire, Death, and Goodness: The Conflict of Ultimate Values in Theravada Buddhism) emphasizes that the Atthakavagga makes no metaphysical claims about the role of one’s karma in causing rebirth, or about the importance of escaping the cycle of birth and death. Instead, the sole focus is on overcoming craving and attachment. According to Burford, “It represents simply a transformation of values within human existence,” involving suddhi purity, santi peace, and panna wisdom. Because we are addicted to desire, which leads to anxiety and
conflict, the solution is just to eliminate that addiction, in which case we can live out the rest of our days serenely and happily.

This view is consistent with some other descriptions of nirvana in the Pali Canon. The goal is often described as simply putting an end to the “three fires” (also known as the “three poisons”): the unwholesome motivations of greed, ill will, and delusion. According to the Samyutta Nikaya, for someone who achieves their destruction, “nirvana is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, worthy of application, to be personally experienced by the wise.”

One of the most interesting descriptions of all is found in the Honeyball Sutta, where the Buddha teaches Bahiya Daruciriyā, a wandering ascetic who interrupted the Buddha as he was walking to collect alms. His request for the teachings was so urgent that the Buddha relented and gave him the following pithy response:

In the seen there is only the seen, in the heard there is only the heard, in the sensed there is only the sensed, in the cognized there is only the cognized: this, Bahiya, is how you should train yourself.

When, Bahiya, there is for you in the seen only the seen, in the heard, only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized, then, Bahiya, there is no “you” in connection with that.

When Bahiya, there is no “you” in connection with that, there is no “you” there.

When, Bahiya, there is no “you” there, then, Bahiya, you are neither here nor there nor in between the two.

This, just this, is the end of suffering

—Udana 1.10

The end of suffering is the most common description of nirvana, which Bahiya attained as soon as he heard these words. We will have occasion to refer to this passage later, but for the moment notice that here too there is no reference to ending rebirth, or attaining some other reality.
It is enough to overcome the sense of a self that is doing the seeing, the hearing, and so forth, by focusing on the sights and sounds themselves.

Needless to say, these few references to some passages in the Pali Canon are no substitute for a more thorough analysis of its teachings. They are sufficient, however, to raise doubts about any understanding of nirvana that attempts to find definitive answers in the earliest texts. I have sometimes wondered why the Buddha was not clearer about the nature of nirvana. Was it another way of telling us not to get preoccupied with philosophy? “If you want to understand what nirvana is, experience it yourself!” Yet maybe he was as forthright as he could be. Is the basic problem the limitations of language? Are the discrepancies in the canon because different disciples of the Buddha remembered different discourses or understood them differently? Or did those inconsistencies rise later, due to intentional or inadvertent alteration during oral transmission and explanation? Or are the discrepancies only in our own unawakened minds?

Half the people in the world think that the metaphors of their religious traditions, for example, are facts. And the other half contends that they are not facts at all. As a result we have people who consider themselves believers because they accept metaphors as facts, and we have others who classify themselves as atheists because they think religious metaphors are lies.

—JOSEPH CAMPBELL, Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor

My main concern here, however, is to raise questions about any understanding of nirvana as an unconditioned realm distinct from the conditioned world where we live now. One wonders whether such a transcendent interpretation of awakening makes the same mistake that many religious traditions fall into: taking metaphors literally. Realizing the deathless—that which is beyond birth and death—can be understood as attaining another dimension of reality that escapes this impermanent world where everything arises and passes away. It can also be understood as describing what the Buddha recommended
to Bahiya: to realize here and now that there is no “you” that was ever born or can pass away. In more modern terms, the sense of an “I” that is having these experiences is a construct that the Buddha encourages us to deconstruct, because the delusion of a separate self is the source of our most troublesome dukkha. Perhaps that does not involve achieving some other reality but simply reveals the true nature of this one.