

## Three *marks* of existence (2)

### Preamble

This week we look at the *marks* of impermanence (*anitya*) and unsatisfactoriness (*duhkha*) in a little more depth.

### Impermanence and preparing for death

The fact that we will personally die is just an example of impermanence, although it's one of particular interest to us individually. When we die we don't just leave behind our physical body. Other attachments must also be relinquished: our status, our friendships (at least in their familiar human form), and our material wealth. Constant reflection on impermanence will make it easier to relinquish what we have now. For instance it will make it easier to let go of the BMW that only has 20 000 kms on the clock, and the house that's just been redecorated. It will make our death easier.

The Buddha was constantly reminding people that they'd die. Why did he keep bringing up the subject? Obviously the Buddha didn't keep on about it because he wanted his audiences to be unhappy. He did it because he wanted people to reconcile themselves to their mortality, and to the wider truth of impermanence. He wanted them to reach a more authentic type of security and contentment, even if the initial step was uncomfortable.

Although reflecting on death and impermanence can initially seem frightening, it gives us a sense of how precious and mysterious each moment of life is.

### Questions on impermanence to ponder

- Should we go on thinking about impermanence even if it makes you unhappy? What if we are already feeling depressed?
- Are philosophical principles permanent - such as the principle that everything comes about as a result of various conditions?

### Unsatisfactoriness - the starting point of Buddhism

Buddhism is a medicine to overcome unsatisfactoriness. It's premised on the fact that we aren't completely satisfied with the current state of affairs. This is why the first line of the Metta Sutta says: "*This is to be done by one who wants to break through to the state of perfect peace.*" If someone was genuinely and completely happy with the *status quo*, then the teachings of the Buddha wouldn't be relevant to them. The well known Buddhist

formulation of the *Four Noble Truths*<sup>1</sup> also emphasises that unsatisfactoriness is the starting point of spiritual life.

Sometimes three levels of unsatisfactoriness are described:

1. simple discomfort, as when we experience physical pain from stubbing our toe, or emotional discomfort from anxiety;
2. the unsatisfactoriness of knowing that at some stage we'll be parted from the things we enjoy; and
3. the unsatisfactoriness inherent in all experiences, as long as we aren't Enlightened.

Even the first and second type can provide an impetus towards spiritual endeavour.

### Unsatisfactoriness and the need for pleasure

If we have high ideals and impose a great deal of discipline on ourselves we may end up withdrawing from many sources of pleasure. For example we may have opted out of a career that was well paid so as to allow more time for meditation, only to discover we don't derive sustained pleasure from meditation, and we miss not having lots of cash for holidays and eating out at restaurants.

Sometimes it's best to persist with a course of action that's unpleasant because it's the ethical thing to do, or for the sake of some longer-term objective. But overall, it's important to try to enjoy our lives. If we are unable to find pleasure in our current lifestyle, then we are unlikely to be able to sustain it. And if we are constantly down-at-heel we won't be inspiring to others. So it makes sense to factor our own pleasure into decision making, but to do it in a way that doesn't exclude our pursuit of noble ideals.

### Becoming happier

It's unrealistic to expect immediate happiness just because we've adopted some new philosophy. Whether we are predominantly happy or not will largely depend on our past karma (**annex 1**).

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<sup>1</sup> The *Four Noble Truths* are:

1. life is inherently unsatisfactory
2. unsatisfactoriness is caused by craving/clinging
3. if craving/clinging is eliminated then the unsatisfactoriness also goes
4. it's possible to eliminate craving/clinging by following the *Eightfold Path*.

Whatever our circumstance, we'll be better placed to move forward in a positive direction if we acknowledge (at least to ourselves) who we are now and what our external situation is.

There's a story in Peter Matthiessen's book *The Snow Leopard* about acknowledging present circumstances. Matthiessen's book is a beautifully written account of his journey in the Nepalese Himalayas to the remote Crystal mountain area. It's a very elemental part of the world with deep ravines and snowy mountains. Few people live in the vicinity of Crystal mountain, and over the winter months, when tracks are often impassable, there are even fewer people. Matthiessen arrives in the area after many days of trekking and meets a local Buddhist sage called Lama Tupjuk. The lama has copper coloured skin and chiselled features. He cuts a striking figure. But over recent years Lama Tupjuk had become a cripple, and when Matthiessen met him his legs were twisted. He could only hobble a few paces, and then only with difficulty, support by sticks. For the last eight years the lama hadn't been able to move from his location at Tsakang. Yet he seemed to be jovial.

After getting to know Lama Tupjuk, Matthiessen asked (through a translator) whether he minded living in such an isolated place, with its silences and without the freedom to travel. Lama Tupjuk looked around him, and without any trace of bitterness or self pity replied: "Of course I'm happy here! It's wonderful! Especially as I have no choice!"

Lama Tupjuk had fully come to terms with his circumstances. He didn't say "this shouldn't have happened to me", or "it's not fair". He made the most of his situation and appreciated its good features.

However the story of Lama Tupjuk shouldn't be taken to mean there's no need to take initiative in trying to improve the situation we find ourselves in. In situations where there's an obvious cause for our unhappiness, such as physical pain, there may be an obvious remedy such as a medicine. And on a deeper level we can make good karma by acting ethically, and confessing things that are weighing on our conscience.

In addition to such remedies we can focus on wholesome sources of pleasure that are available to us. For instance some individuals may have a penchant for yoga or poetry or looking at flowers. Focusing on such things is a good strategy because it brings immediate happiness, and also sows the seeds for deeper contentment later on.

It's also a good idea to look for pleasures in the heart

of quite ordinary activities, such as doing the washing-up. With mindfulness and a positive attitude cleaning dishes becomes an enjoyable sensuous experience: the warm water, the hard smooth surfaces of dishes, the shining bubbles and the swishing sound of water.

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## **Selected poems on impermanence and unsatisfactoriness**

### **My Prime of Youth**

*By Chidiock Tichborne*

(**Note:** the author was executed for having become party to a Catholic plot to murder Queen Elizabeth of England. He was about 28. The poem was written within three days of his death.)

My prime of youth is but a frost of cares:  
My feast of joy, is but a dish of pain:  
My crop of corn, is but a field of tares:  
And all my good is but vain hope of gain:  
The day is gone, and yet I saw no sun:  
And now I live, and now my life is done

The spring is past, and yet it hath not sprung  
The fruit is dead, and yet the leaves are green  
My youth is gone, and yet I am but young  
I saw the world, and yet I was not seen  
My thread is cut, and yet it was not spun  
And now I live, and now my life is done.

I sought my death, and found it in my womb  
I looked for life, and saw it was a shade.  
I trod the earth and knew it was my Tomb  
And now I die, and now I am but made  
The glass is full, and now the glass is run  
And now I live, and now my life is done.

### **Your birthday in the California mountains**

*by Kenneth Rexroth*

A broken moon on the cold water,  
And wild geese crying high overhead,  
The smoke of the campfire rises  
Towards the geometry of heaven –  
Points of light in the infinite blackness.  
I watch across the narrow inlet  
Your figure comes and goes before the fire.  
A loon cries out in the night bound lake.  
Then all the world is silent with the

Silence of autumn waiting for  
The coming of winter. I enter  
The ring of firelight, bringing to you  
A string of trout for our dinner.  
As we eat by the whispering lake,  
I say, "Many years from now we will  
Remember this night and talk of it."  
Many years have gone since then, and  
Many years again. I remember  
That night as though it was last night,  
But you have been dead for thirty years.

### **The Bodhisattva's Reply**

*By Sangharakshita*

What will you say to those  
Whose lives spring up between  
Custom and circumstance  
As weeds between wet stones,  
Whose lives corruptly flower  
Warped from the beautiful,  
Refuse and sediment  
Their means of sustenance –  
What will you say to them?

That woman, night after night,  
Must sell her body for bread;  
This boy with the well oiled hair  
And the innocence dead in his face  
Must lubricate the obscene  
Bodies of gross old men:  
And both must be merry all day,  
For thinking would make them mad –  
What will you say to them?

Those dull-eyed men must tend  
Machines till they become  
Machines, or till they are  
Cogs in the giant wheel  
Of industry, producing  
The clothes that they cannot wear  
And the cellophaned luxury goods  
They can never hope to buy –  
What will you say to them?

Or these dim shadows which  
Through the pale gold tropic dawn  
From the outcast village flit  
Balancing on their heads  
Baskets to bear away  
Garbage and excrement,  
Hugging the wall for fear  
Of the scorn of their fellow-men –  
What will you say to them?

And wasted lives that litter the streets of modern  
cities,  
Souls like butt-ends tossed  
In the gutter and trampled on,  
Human refuse dumped  
At the crossroads where civilisation  
And civilisation meet  
To breed the unbeautiful –  
What will you say to them?  
"I shall say nothing, but only  
Fold in Compassion's arms  
Their frailty till it becomes  
Strong with my strength, their limbs  
Bright with my beauty, their souls  
With my wisdom luminous, or  
Till I have become like them  
A seed between wet stones  
Of custom and circumstance.

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### **Annex 1: The principle of karma**

The word karma is now part of street language, but "on the street" it's often used vaguely and differently from its original meaning. The original meaning of the word karma is action, and in particular deliberate action (as opposed, for instance, to the action of a meteorite striking the earth through the force of gravity, or the dilation of our pupils when the light grows dimmer)<sup>i</sup>. Karma is also the principle by which deliberate ethical actions (i.e. those that come from kindness and understanding) sow the seeds for our future well being. So according to karma it's in our best interests to act ethically, because actions coming out of kindness and understanding have good consequences. Conversely, according to the principle of karma, unethical actions (i.e. those based on craving, hate or delusion) have unfavourable consequences.

This probably sounds rather abstract and complicated so an example is called for. Suppose we discover that our lover has secretly been in a sexual relationship with a friend of ours. It may be tempting to take retaliatory action, prompted by feelings of hate. But if we do this (according to the principle of karma) it will lead to even greater woe.

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<sup>i</sup> The principle of karma applies not only to external acts but also to speech and to deliberate thoughts. For instance cultivating loving-kindness in meditation

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is regarded as a good ("skilful") karma, even though there's no external physical activity at that time.