

Three *marks* of existence (3)

Preamble

This week we'll have another look at the teaching of insubstantiality (*anatman*).

If we have no unchanging self essence, what is it that's reborn?

At first sight there may seem to be a contradiction between the idea of rebirth and the Buddha's teaching of insubstantiality - that we don't have an unchanging self-essence. But these two ideas - that we are subject to rebirth, and that there's no enduring self-essence - aren't in fact contradictory. The following simile should help clarify this.

Imagine a cloud in the sky. There's just a gentle zephyr so the cloud is drifting along slowly. Its colour, position in the sky, shape and size are gradually changing. Although the cloud looks almost the same from one moment to the next, the process of change continues. Every part of the cloud is changing, and after an hour or so it looks so different that only an observer who'd been watching would know what it looked like an hour ago.

The observer would be able to appreciate that there was a definite relationship between the cloud an hour ago and what it had developed into. They might say that the earlier and later forms are the same cloud - because there was a process that directly led from one to the other. But they might also say that they're different clouds - because the earlier and later versions have different colours, shapes, sizes and positions.

Similarly for human beings. We are more or less alike from one day to the next, barring something unusual like a serious accident. There's quite a degree of commonality from day to day, just as the cloud looked pretty similar from one second to the next. But over a period of years, decades, and even lifetimes, the process of change continues so we don't only look physically different, but our minds and personalities are also noticeably changed. This is similar to the cloud that changes its size, colour, shape and position, so it's eventually unrecognisable from an earlier version.

In a sense we can say we are the same person, because we are pretty similar from one day to the next, and also because there's a direct connection between the person we were and the person we become in the future. So it's meaningful to speak of "somebody" being reborn.

On the other hand, like the cloud, we are not exactly the same from one moment to the next, and there's nothing in us that's not subject to change. So it's also true to say we've no unchanging self-essence.

The six element meditation

This meditation deepens our awareness of the truth of insubstantiality. It's structured around a division of the world into six "elements". Although these six elements aren't the elements of modern science that appear in the periodic table of elements studied in chemistry 101, this doesn't matter. The division into six elements is just a convenient way of dividing the world up into a few general categories. The six elements are:

1. earth/solidity
2. water/liquid
3. fire/heat
4. air/gas
5. space
6. consciousness.

The meditation focuses on each of these six elements in turn. Starting with the earth element, we reflect along the following lines. "*The element earth (i.e. solid substances) exists in my body in various forms: flesh, bone, teeth, hair and nails. It also exists in the outside world in the form of rock, wood, iron etc. The earth element in my body is just a tiny part of the earth element of the universe. After my death the earth element in my body will not be distinguishable from the earth element of the wider world.*"

We can also reflect that to keep going we need to regularly take in the earth element in the form of solid food, so our lives are dependent on the earth element of the wider universe.

This general pattern of contemplation is repeated for the elements water, fire, air and space.

When it comes to the sixth element, consciousness, we remind ourselves that our thoughts, memories, emotions and all the content of our mental world are always changing. An alternative approach to the sixth element is to reflect that our individual mind is just part of a higher, wider consciousness. This higher, wider consciousness is said to be like the limitless sky that contains all the individual clouds (i.e. individual minds) within it. Although awareness of this higher consciousness is beyond our present range of experience, an Enlightened person is always aware of it, and according to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* we gain a momentary glimpse of it at the time of our death.

Insubstantiality and the transcendental

The teaching of insubstantiality steers us away from pretending that some part of our individual mind is eternal.

Mystics down the ages who have glimpsed the transcendental (*lokottara*) say their “experience” of it isn’t some sort of add-on to their ordinary mind. They talk in terms of having glimpsed an ineffable truth, above and beyond their individual mind, beyond space and time. Their mystic experience confirms rather than contradicts the insubstantiality teaching.

Some questions on insubstantiality to ponder:

- We tend to define others by things such as where they live, their sex, their sexual preferences, their age, the appearance of their bodies, their education, occupation etc. But will such descriptions ever do full justice to someone? If not why not?
- People sometimes experience themselves as just a tiny part of the wider universe. They say this is a rich and pleasurable experience. How could this be?
- Sooner or later after our death we’ll be completely forgotten. Does this idea undermine our sense of self-worth?
- Sometimes we are more selfish in our mood, sometimes less so. Try to recollect a time when you were feeling more selfish. How did this mental state restrict your freedom?

Selected Poems on insubstantiality

The Emperor Wu of Han

Translated by Kenneth Rexroth

Majestic, from the most distant time,
The sun rises and sets.
Time passes and men cannot stop it.
The four seasons serve them,
But do not belong to them.
The years flow like water.
Everything passes away before my eyes.

Vitae Summa Brevis Spem Nos Vetat Incohare Longam

By Ernest Dowson

They are not long, the weeping and the laughter,
Love and desire and hate....

They are not long, the days of wine and roses;
They are not long, the days of wine and roses....
Out of a misty dream
Our path emerges for a while, then closes....
Within a dream.

Haiku

by Issa

Buddha Law
shining
in leaf dew.

Moon Festival

By Tu Fu

The autumn constellations
Begin to rise. The brilliant
Moonlight shines on the crowds.
The moon toad swims in the river
And does not drown. The moon rabbit
Pounds the bitter herbs of the
Elixir of eternal life.
His drug only makes my heart
More bitter. The silver brilliance
Only makes my hair more white.
I know that the country is
Overrun with war. The moonlight
Means nothing to the soldiers
Camped in the western deserts.

Life is King

by Sangharakshita

Hour after hour, day
After day we try
To grasp the Ungraspable, pinpoint
The Unpredictable. Flowers
Wither when touched, ice
Suddenly cracks beneath our feet. Vainly
We try to track birdflight through the sky trace
Dumb fish through deep water, try
To anticipate the earned smile the soft
Reward, even
Try to grasp our own lives. But Life
Slips through our fingers
Like snow. Life
Cannot belong to us. We
Belong to Life. Life
Is King.