

Week 4 – Facets of conditionality

Buddhism Level 2 – Buddhist Wisdom – doctrinal Dharma

MEDITATION

Mindfulness of breathing.

What in your experience of your breath is permanent?

What in your whole experience is permanent?

Where or when is the present moment?

Who is having this experience, where is the observer of it?

REVIEW OF LAST WEEK

Looked at Conditioned co-production as the central Buddhist view.

Exercise of flying to India – all the conditions that produce that experience. Experience isn't separate to them, especially if we include the more mental conditions.

Conditionality points to way that everything – physical or mental – is a product of a myriad of conditions and doesn't exist in isolation.

Corollary of connectedness – there aren't any absolute boundaries anywhere, so everything is in principle connected to everything else: images of Indras net & sea of conditions.

Looked at middle way: eg between willfulness & hopelessness – just keep setting up conditions. And more metaphysically, between existence & non-existence.

COMMON SENSE VIEW OF WORLD

People often like Buddhism because in a way it feels like common sense. But the deeper you look, the less commonsensical the world really is, according to the Dharma.

Take this common sense view of the world:

- I'm a driver inside my body
- Outside my body are lots of objects that I can see and interact with
- Some objects are Good – by associating with them I'm happy
- Some objects are Bad – by associating with them I'm unhappy
- Sometimes, to confuse, things change.

But according to the Dharma, these are "topsy turvy views". We habitually relate to things as permanent, intrinsically satisfying (or some things), and substantial – with their own existence or essence.

We'll see how the Dharma - as a consequence of conditioned coproduction, systematically refutes these views.

MARKS OF CONDITIONED EXISTENCE – THE THREE LAKSHANAS

Continue unpacking the implications of conditioned co-production

Traditional list of three “marks” of conditioned existence – ie everything governed by conditioned co-production, which includes everything that we can know.

Tho Buddha did talk of the Unconditioned – the experience of a Buddha, but bit baffling to understand

This is what Buddha said:

‘All conditioned things are impermanent (Sabbe sankhara anicca)’. When one sees this with insight, one becomes weary of suffering. This is the way to purity.

‘All conditioned things are painful (Sabbe sankhara dukkha)’. When one sees this with insight, one becomes weary of suffering. This is the way to purity.

‘All things whatsoever are devoid of unchanging selfhood (Sabbe dhamma anatta)’. When one sees this with insight, one becomes weary of suffering. This is the way to purity.

Dhammapada (trans Sangharakshita) v 277 – 279

So the three marks, or lakshanas of conditioned existence are: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and lack of unchanging selfhood.

IMPERMANENCE

All conditioned things are impermanent, or transient

Anicca (Pali) or Anitya (Sanskrit)

Obvious in way, concept not unique to Buddhism.

The universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make it.

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (121 AD - 180 AD), Meditations

Question: what is stable, permanent?

Nothing anywhere is stable. All is in a state of flow, of change, even if to our eyes they seem superficially stable.

Applies to galaxies or atoms, our body, our mind.

But because of apparent stability, we identify things that subsist, give them titles. Fine in itself, but we tend to relate to things as though they really do exist in a fixed manner.

We’ve all had experiences of realising the transitoriness of something or someone in a way which struck us.

Friend dying, seeing signs of ageing in ourself, crashing car, house getting flooded

Exercise

Discuss in a group an occasion or occasions when you felt the truth of impermanence hit you strongly. What was the experience like?

UNSATISFACTORINESS

All conditioned things are painful

Won’t say much, as have already said fair bit about dukkha.

Hopefully last exercise showed that relating to things / people / mental states as permanent causes suffering.

Dukkha as a basic friction with reality – caused by seeing things as other than they are.

Trying to hold onto things – youth, loved ones, positive states of mind (eg coming off holiday or retreat), possessions.

But people get old, die, or move away from us; our mind changes by the second; possessions can break, be stolen or lost, lose their appeal.

Furthermore, nothing in conditioned existence can truly satisfy the heart:

Even if one could cut out from the variegated web of life the bright parts of the pattern, leaving aside the dark, and assemble them into a single blaze of unmitigated brightness, the resultant experience would not even then be one of unmixed enjoyment. In the depths of the heart, there would remain a void which no conditioned thing, but only the Unconditioned, could fill

The Three Jewels, Sangharakshita, chapter 11

LACK OF FIXED SELFHOOD (ANATTA)

All things whatsoever are devoid of unchanging selfhood

The deepest and most general of the lakshanas. Sometimes called “insubstantiality”

While impermanence says that everything changes, anatta says that everything *is* change, or rather, that there is no-thing which changes

Reality isn't like a movie film, composed of stationary existent “frames” which succeed each other – it is like life, a continuous flow

Did you find a present moment in your meditation?

Since the change is continuous we are not to think of conditioned dharmas as entities lying as it were in a row side by side. They are in fact only so many sections marked off in the continuum of conditioned existence.

The Three Jewels, Sangharakshita, ch. 11

Demo: Point to table. What is it? Remove one leg [easy with Ikea table with screw-on legs!] dismantle table, one leg at a time. What is it? Can you have a two legged table? A table without legs?

If there is nothing other than conditions flowing, some faster than others, but all nonetheless flowing, then ultimately you can't select any one aspect of conditioned co-production as fixed and separate from the rest.

Any demarcations are useful for practical purposes, but they have no separate, fixed existence

So really anicca implies anatta – or rather, they are different facets of conditionality.

‘The leaf changes from green to red’....This implies that in some sense it is possible for a substance to exist without its attributes – that a leaf can hang on a tree without being green, red or any other colour... Abstracted from its green and red colour a leaf is not an independent entity but only a name. When it changes its colour what has really happened is that, as the traditional formula would have it, in dependence on a green leaf, a red leaf arises.

ibid

Most significant aspect of this doctrine is in its application to ourselves; because we naturally think of ourselves as a fixed, separate subjects in relation to a world of objects.

Question: what happened when you looked for the observer of your experience in meditation?

The misapprehension of fixed self here in relation to objects is ultimately a false view that leads to a relationship of craving and aversion towards what is perceived as “not-self”.

Once this view is undermined, our sense of self and world becomes much more fluid, and in line with the reality of conditioned existence.

INSIGHT MEDITATION

What do we do about this? Can't just change our view – so deeply embedded.

To learn to see the conditioned as impermanent, insubstantial and painful, instead of as the opposite, is not, of course, the work of a day. It can be thus seen only by means of prajna, or wisdom, a purely transcendental faculty that does not spring into existence all at once or by accident, but which has to be systematically developed on the twofold basis of an ethical life expressive of healthy mental attitudes, and a purified, concentrated and meditative consciousness.

Ibid

In particular, development of this kind of wisdom is the purpose of vipassana, or insight meditation practice. Ethics and concentrative meditation, as the first two of the three trainings, are supportive conditions for the practice of vipassana, and therefore the practice of the third training – prajna / wisdom.

Insight meditation is usually taught when there is a definite commitment to and experience of Buddhist practice. But one can reflect on the lakshanas in our life or meditation practice.

Exercise

In pairs, start speaking without too much thought beginning “I am...” and just list all the different ways in which you define or see yourself.

Eg. I am Vajrapriya, I am English, I am male, I am the son of Arthur & Di Moss.....

Try to notice where your identification is particularly strong. Do you identify most with your physical form, your history, your interests....

HOME PRACTICE

In meditation: be sensitive to the flowing nature of experience, without otherwise changing the way you're meditating.

During the day, notice when something changes or ends that you'd planned on continuing.

When talking with people, occasionally try to notice the sense of “I'm in here, having this conversation, with that person out there”. Where is the boundary between you? At your skin – behind your eyes – in between you? Notice especially if the sense of self becomes heightened, maybe because you're upset at something they say, or if you're not wanting

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

The Texture of Reality chapter, in *What is the Dharma* by Sangharakshita or CD no. 25

The Nature of Existence chapter in *The Three Jewels* by Sangharakshita