

Week 4 – Facets of conditionality

Buddhism Level 2 – Buddhist Wisdom – doctrinal Dharma

COMMON SENSE VIEW OF WORLD

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. And vice versa.

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.

Conditioned existence – unenlightened existence – is “marked” by three characteristics

‘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

IMPERMANENCE (ANICCA)

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.

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

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

But because of apparent stability, we identify things that subsist, give them names. 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. Eg. Friend dying, seeing signs of ageing in ourselves, crashing car...

UNSATISFACTORINESS (DUKKHA)

Relating to things / people / mental states as permanent causes suffering. Dukkha is 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.

LACK OF FIXED SELFHOOD (ANATTA)

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. If there is nothing other than conditions 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 – our “fixed self view”; because we naturally think of ourselves as a fixed, separate subject in relation to a world of objects. 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

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

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.

In daily life, it’s easiest to notice the ways in which we experience the opposites of the three lakshanas –relating to things as permanent, intrinsically satisfying, and substantial.

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”. Notice especially if the sense of self becomes heightened, maybe because you’re upset at something they say, or if you’re worried about what they think of you. Where is the self that’s being threatened?

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