**IMB Course Week 6: The Three Lakshanas**

**Introduction 3 mins**

The course structure follows the Threeefold Path– ethics, meditation, wisdom.

This week we will look at some fundamental Buddhist wisdom teachings, and also round off this part of the course.

**Recap**

On the first evening we introduced three basic Buddhist ideas that we invited you to try out, to see what effect they had. These were:

* We can change – in fact we are always changing, we can’t help but change.
* Happiness comes from inside, not from having or consuming things
* We are interconnected with each other and the world around us, so focusing just on ourselves is not the way to achieve happiness.

**The Three Lakshanas**

Tonight we are going to explore these ideas more deeply, and put them in a more traditional Buddhist way.

Flipchart: Three lakshanas, or marks.

Marks or characteristics of conditioned existence, life as we normally see it and live it. Characteristics of all the things and phenomena of the world we experience around us.

**Impermanence or transience (Anitya)**

**Positive=Transformation and growth 7mins**

Everything in our world, including ourselves, is constantly changing. Nothing stays the same, nothing is permanent or stable. This is true at every level. Our thoughts. The weather. The seasons – the world constantly looks different.. Our possessions wear out and break. Our bodies are constantly changing – our cells are constantly dying and growing, and we look different from what we did a few years ago. After seven years, there is not a single molecule in our body that was there to start with. We are a process, a constant process of change, not a fixed ‘thing’. This is even true of things that seem permanent to us. The difference is just the rate of change - that we change quickly while the things that seem stable change slowly. So even the hills around us are in a process of change. There are limestone hills out in the peak district that were formed from the shells of sea creatures that accumulated at the bottom of a tropical ocean millions of years ago. These shells were then covered by thousands of feet of other sediments, and buried deep in the earth so that they were transformed into rock. Then they were lifted up into a great mountain range. Then the ice ages came, and the glaciers ground away all the thousands of feet of rock above them, leaving us with the hills we see now. Which are slowly changing even as we speak.

The whole world we see around us and everything in it is a process, a flux.

The mark of impermanence corresponds to the idea we introduced that ‘we can change’. In fact we are always changing, we have no choice but to change. We do have a choice about the direction of change. We can’t stop ourselves growing old, but we can use the law of karma to change in a positive way, to grow.

We usually see impermanence as negative, because we focus on the things that we like that disappear. But each of the lakshanas has a positive side.

**The positive side of impermanence is transformation and growth.**

New things are always coming into existence, things evolve, they get more complex, new beauty arises. In fact if it weren’t for impermanence life would be intolerable. You would have to listen to me talking forever! Life would be stagnation, fixity. Impermanence, change, is what makes life interesting, what opens up new possibilities.

But because we try to hang on to what we have, keep it fixed in the way we want it, we don’t accept change, we fight it and resist it, rather than cooperating with it. We end up fighting the universe, trying to keep the ceaseless flux of existence in a shape we like, complaining when we look older or a possession breaks. We might as well complain about night following day.

**Lack of self nature. (Anatman)**

**Positive =Interconnectedness 10 mins**

It is not just that every ‘thing’ changes. There are no ‘things’.

Not if by ‘thing’ we mean something that has unchanging, separate existence, independent of all the other ‘things’ around it.

Everything is a process, a flux, and everything is a part of this process, everything is constantly interacting with everything else, everything affects everything else and is affected by everything else. We divide this process up into parts and give them names, which we need to do for practical purposes, but where we put the boundaries between different ‘things’ is arbitrary, you cannot really separate anything from its surroundings.

Everything relies on just about an infinite number of other things for its existence. Example – our breakfast cereal. Relies on the sun. The rain. Which relies on the oceans, and the whole atmosphere. The soil. Which relies on earthworms, fungi, bacteria, etc. It relies on the farmer who grew it. Who relies on the food **he** eats. He exists because of his mother and father. And all the food they ate. And all the people who grew that food. He can farm because of all the people who educated him. And looked after his health. And all the food they ate. And all the people who grew that food. Our morning oats rely on his tractor. And all the people who made his tractor. And the oil his tractor uses as fuel. Which depends on carboniferous forests, long dead trees that are now extinct. And so on. You can carry on this way forever. Ultimately, in the end, if you take it far enough, everything depends on everything else. Nothing exists in a separate way.

Can look at ourselves, for another example. We are a process, a system. That process is made up of smaller processes, which are themselves made up of other smaller processes. So we are made up of our organs, like our heart and lungs and kidney, which get on with being themselves without our having to think about them. Thank heavens. And each organ is made up of lots of cells, complicated little powerhouses that get on with being themselves, and make the organs work.

So we are made up of smaller processes. And we are also part of bigger systems.

We are part of the ecosystem of this planet. We are constantly taking things in from the outer world, and giving them back. We exist in an interaction with the atmosphere we breath, with the water of the oceans that we drink and excrete, with the food we eat, which depends on the sun, the atmosphere, all the organisms in the soil, and so on.

Then we are also part of a society, which has made us who we are, and continually affects us. We are the product of all the people who have educated us and influenced us in so many ways. If we had been brought up as an Inuit or an Afghani we would be a completely different person. And we rely for our survival on all the people who produce the things we need. We wouldn’t survive a week on our own. We rely on all the people who provide the services that keep us alive.

So we are made up of smaller systems and part of bigger systems, we couldn’t exist without these other processes, and the fact that we draw a boundary around this body, pretend this is something independent, and say ‘Me’ is to make quite an arbitrary division.

We exist rather like eddies exist in a flowing river – with a certain identity and a level of continuity of our own, but constantly changing, constantly interacting with all the other eddies and currents around it, ultimately not really separate from the water and the river.

So this is what the idea of anatman or non self nature is telling us.

We and everything else exist in a certain sort of way, but not in the way we are used to thinking. We don’t exist in a separate, independent way, we exist in a way that is interconnected and interrelated, and we depend on everything around us for our existence.

**The positive side of lack of self nature is interconnectedness**

Saying that we ‘lack self nature’ or that ‘we don’t have a self’, sounds negative. But we do have a self, a self that is interconnected and interrelated to others and the world around us. Anatman is in fact a highly positive idea. It opens up a much wider vision in which we are not just separate lonely beings in a hostile world, we are all joined, all part of something much bigger than ourselves, something wonderful and mysterious.

We have changed the order a bit here from the way we presented these ideas on the first evening, and obviously this relates to our third idea, interconnectedness. The practical implication of this is that happiness doesn’t come from focusing just on ourselves and our own wants, it comes from opening up to the interconnectedness of everything and everyone. It comes from being more about other people and the bigger picture – because our sense of separateness is an illusion. If we are cut off from others we will be deeply unhappy, and selfishness cuts us off, as does dishonesty and other unskilful actions. Generosity, kindness, and honesty all connect us with others and the universe, make us happier and more fulfilled.

**Unsatisfactoriness. (dukha) 7 mins**

**Positive =there is a happiness that doesn’t depend on externals**

This ‘mark’ is a bit different from the other two. The other two are characteristics of the nature of things. This is more about the way we relate to things than their actual nature. This is not saying that there is anything wrong or inherently unsatisfactory about the things we see around us. There is nothing wrong with a flower,or a sunset, or even a car or mobile phone or a holiday.

What this ‘mark’ is saying is that if we look to outer things and sensory pleasures for the meaning in our life, as our source of happiness and fulfilment, we are bound to be unsatisfied.

External things and sensory pleasures cannot give us permanent satisfaction. For a start they are all impermanent. We get bored with our possessions and soon want something better, and they get old, wear out and break. Sensory pleasures are over in an instant, leaving us wanting more. We get just the right job, just the right partner, just the right everything, and something is bound to change. And anyway, even if we could get all the possessions and pleasures and everything else that we hanker for, and if by some miracle we could stop this situation changing, we still wouldn’t be happy, we would get bored, we would soon begin to feel that our life is meaningless. Because ultimately we are spiritual beings, and the only way we will experience any lasting satisfaction is to move towards making our spiritual potential a reality, becoming the sort of person we have it in us to be.

So if we make our happiness dependent on outer circumstances, we will be constantly frustrated and unhappy. We need to pursue a form of happiness that doesn’t depend on outer conditions. We need to seek an inner happiness,that comes from who we are, not from what we own or consume.

So obviously this relates to the second idea we introduced on day 1 –happiness comes from inside, not from outside things.

**The positive side of unsatisfactoriness is that there IS a source of lasting satisfaction**

When we are freed from the constant desire for the next thing - I wish it was more like this, I wish I had that …. When we get off the treadmill of constant wanting, chasing a carrot that can’t be caught, we can begin to appreciate the real joys of life, such as the beauty of the natural world, the simple pleasures of everyday life, the delights of friendship. We can begin to find the peace of mind that allows us to experience higher mental states, to uncover our own inner riches.

## Groups: 15mins

How do you relate to the idea of the lakshanas; is one of them particularly meaningful for you? Any difficult questions could be given to the leader in a plenary after the groups.

**Recap of course 15mins**

Lakshanas bring us full circle, connect back to week 1

Good idea to remind ourselves of where we have been. [Get folk to sit maybe in meditation posture, or at least to close their eyes and be comfortable. Reflectively recap the course, week by week.

In week 1 we saw that Buddhism not a religion as we usually think of religions. Not a faith, more a path of practice. Does not ask us to believe, but gives us some concepts to try out for size. Saw three important Buddhist concepts: we can change, happiness comes from inside, and we are interconnected with others and the world around us, in ways we don’t usually realise.

In week 2, having heard that we can change, in fact that we can’t help but change, we looked at the technicalities of change. We saw how we get stuck in old patterns, how we go round in circles, making deeper ruts for ourselves. We saw how we can break out of our old cycles and set up new creative spirals, by being ‘in the gap’, by not reacting automatically to feeling, but by choosing to respond in different creative ways when the world pushes our buttons. We saw how the way we behave now creates the person we will be in the future, and how this determines the way we experience the world. We saw that this is the real meaming of the law of karma.

In week 3 we saw that if we are not going to be ruled by our reactions to the feelings, we get when the world pushes our buttons, we need some guidelines for our actions, some guidelines as to how to behave in a way that makes us more like the sort of person we ant to be. We jointly invented an ethical system that drew on our combined intuitions, and came up with the five principles of kindness, generosity, simplicity, honesty, and awareness as principles we should use to govern our actions.

In week 4 we expanded on these principles and looked at the five precepts, the most basic formulation of Buddhist ethics. We saw that Buddhist ethics is not about pleasing any authority or giving ourselves a hard time, it is about breaking free from our conditioning, and behaving in ways that lead to good outcomes for ourselves and others.

In week 5 we explored the balance between calm and energy in meditation, and saw how we can either calm down or brighten up in meditation, by the way we focus on the breath, by where we put our attention in the body, and by using imagery.

In week 6, this week, we reconnected with the three ideas we heard in the first week: we can change, happiness comes from inside, and we are interrelated. We saw how these are related to the traditional teaching of the Three lakshanas, the three marks of conditioned things, which are that all things are impermant, nothing has fixed independent self nature, and the things of the outer world cannot give us real lasting satisfaction.

**Conclusion and invitation 7mins**

This is the last week of the course, but really we don’t see it like that.

We saw this week that we don’t exist independently. We are hugely influenced by what is around us, especially by the people we associate with. We know from experience that it is very difficult even impossible, to practise what we have been talking about over the last 6 weeks on your own, without the support of other like minded people. We know from experience that people who try to do this very rarely keep it up for very long. There are too many pressures in the opposite direction in our society.

For this reason we don’t see this course as a stand-alone, we provide a completely FREE follow up six week course, same time same place, to explore some of these ideas more deeply, to help you keep moving forward in your meditation practice, and to help you keep up the connections with each other you have made over the last 6 weeks. We’d like to warmly invite you to continue, to come next week.

We don’t see what we’re doing with these classes as just about passing on information and skills you can take away. We see it as about building a community of people who support each other to keep moving forward. Because we all need to be part of such a community to keep practicing, without a supportive community of like-minded people none of us are going to get anywhere.

That is what we are doing at this centre. We are not providing a service that people buy and pay for, we are trying to build a community. So we don’t charge for Buddhist events at this centre. We run what we call a dana economy. Dana means generosity. A generosity economy. We try to offer classes in a spirit of generosity, because we know people benefit, and we hope other people will be generous in different ways, to allow us keep doing this. We feel this makes us partners in a common project, rather than service providers and customers. It might seem a bit of a mad idea, but it works! This Buddhist centre is evidence.It bis the centre of a thriving community.

So we are inviting you to keep going, we are inviting you to a completely free follow on. We hope to see you next week.

**Total 64mins**