

London RE Hub event March 28th 2015 – Beautiful Idea – Buddhism

Presented by Saddhabhaya of the Triratna Buddhist Order

The Three Lakshanas - The Buddha's teaching on the nature of reality, specifically conditioned existence.

The Buddha taught that there are Three Marks of Conditioned existence, these are known as the Three Lakshanas (Pali: Lakkhanas) and are as follows:

Impermanence – Pali: Anicca, Sanskrit: Anitya

All things whatsoever (stars, planets, mountains, trees, people, feelings, thoughts, views, experiences) arise on the basis of supporting conditions and pass away when those supporting conditions change.

*“This being that becomes, on the arising of this, that arises
this not being, that does not become, on the ceasing of this that ceases”*
(Praticca Samutpada – Conditioned Arising)

Anatta – Pali: Annatta, Sanskrit: Anatman

The above being true, there is nothing that exists independently of innumerable supporting conditions, therefore there is nothing that has a fixed, permanent and separate 'self' nature. In human terms, just as our bodies are impermanent, we do not have a permanent self or soul; we are part of the universal flow and change of conditions, consciousness exists within this.

Unsatisfactoriness / Suffering – Pali: Dukkha, Sanskrit: Duhkha

However... these truths do not sit comfortably with us, we feel and are convinced on a deep level that there is a fixed 'I / me' and the rest of existence and we are determined that 'I /me' will somehow be around forever.

Therefore we try to set up our little part (or if we are powerful a large part) of the world just to suit us in the belief that if we can only get everything just exactly perfect we will be fulfilled and happy ever after. So we pull towards our 'self' those things we like (craving) and we push away those things we do not like (aversion / hatred) based on this delusion / ignore-ance.

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This pulling and pushing puts us ever in state of tension with the way things are and the result is Dukkha, unsatisfactoriness or suffering. For example: Our material possessions never truly satisfy us, no matter how new and shiny they are we soon want something newer and more shiny. Other people don't behave or treat us in the way that *we believe that they should* so we become disappointed, indignant and even angry. We don't stay twenty one, our looks change and rather than embracing the benefits of maturity we try to stay young through artificial cosmetic means and so on. We try to hang on to and repeat experiences with less and less impact rather than seeking new ones. We and people around us get sick, grow old and inevitably die.

So what is to be done? Well if we recognise Dukkha for what it is and recognise that whatever we might do we are not able to control the world (let's face it we can't even control our own thoughts and emotions) then we have recognised what the Buddha recognised when he ventured forth from his home and saw the first three of the Four Sights.

Fortunately the Buddha saw a fourth sight, a wandering seeker or holy man, was impressed by his serenity and bearing and prompted to Go Forth and seek the answer to the problem of suffering. This he taught and people have been benefiting from his teaching for the last two and a half thousand years, a teaching which as you know is encapsulated in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path.

The purpose of the Eightfold Noble Path is to enable us to attain this realisation for ourself, not just an intellectual 'oh that make a lot of sense' but with everything we are so that we come to live in accordance with the way things are rather than struggling against them.

This is not just a passive acceptance of the difficulties of life, rather it is a wholehearted embracing of life, all life, a knowing that impermanence does not just mean endings, it means birth and new beginnings, it means change, suffering can become happiness, the hateful can become kind, it means we can have springtime, it means life itself.

Similarly, the teaching of non-self indicates our connection with all that lives, on all kinds of levels; the many people all over the world who grow, produce and supply the things we buy and the people who benefit from our efforts, all that we have inherited in terms of knowledge and culture and of course all that we pass on, our connection with nature, the fact that we are made of the same stuff as the rest of the universe. These are all things that we can reflect on for ourselves and see the truth of, indeed science also points us in this direction.

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So rather than futilely seeking contentment in the superficial and impermanent we turn about and find it within through the release of this tension, seeing through the delusion of fixed and separate self, knowing that we are always part of everything. Wisdom and compassion in equal and mutually inclusive parts.

To add to this talk another, bonus Beautiful Idea

The Buddha taught that we can observe all of this in our own experience with a calm and clear mind. The Buddha's teachings are not speculative philosophy nor are they revelation, rather he said that if we want to move away from suffering towards a state of being characterised by calm, wisdom and compassion then we need to insight into these facts for ourself for only then will we make progress.

Meditation enables us to calm and clear the mind but just as importantly we gain insight through our actions in the world when we bring awareness to them, actions of kindness and compassion, of ethical skilfulness that inevitably erode our sense of separation from others. As some of you will know the Eightfold Path is also characterised as a Threefold Path of ethics, meditation and wisdom, our active ethical engagement with the world, in terms of both curtailing the unskilful and cultivating the skilful, having equal status to meditation to a wisdom.

To sum things up, the Three Marks of Conditioned existence communicate the Buddha's vision of the way things are, the first two, impermanence and non-self, are observable facts in the universe, they are objective. The third, Dukkha is something that we add to our experience through our sense of being a fixed and separate self, it is the emotional, mental and spiritual turmoil that we cause for ourselves (which of course also affects us physically). Whilst there are forms of suffering that we cannot overcome, physical pain and senility being chief among those, there is much suffering that we can begin to release ourselves from and ultimately become entirely free from.

One way of describing how we do this is to look more and more deeply into these Three Marks, so deeply in fact that we move beyond or through the conditioned to the unconditioned, Nirvana. Associated with each of the Lakshanas is a Vimoksha Mukha or Gateway to Liberation but that I feel is a topic for another day

"I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering,"

The Buddha

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Where Were You Last Year?

David Brazier

Breath deep
Breath deep

The air fills my lungs and then?
My blood receives
This grace by which
I live a few moments more
My every cell replenished.
With every breath
A part of me departs
And something new
Is put in place.

The rice I ate yesterday,
Where is it now?
In my muscle, in my bone.
The juice we shared,
Where has it gone?
In our arms and legs and all.

Last month
The rice waved in the sunshine
In other lands:
In the low flood plains
Of the Mississippi
Or Irrawaddy;
And the fruit hung
On trees in Cyprus
Sicily or Spain.

And before that?
Before that their
substance
Was in the soil,
Was in the air,
Was in the seas.

Was in the seas
Waiting to be gathered up
Waiting to soar up into the
highest reaches of the sky,
Waiting to become rain.

You and I
Are mostly water.
Last year
Most of each of us
Was in the ocean.
We circulated together
In the Atlantic
Or Pacific perhaps,
For we are mostly water.

And that water was lifted
By sunshine heat
By the impact of photons
Cascading down
Beating upon the ocean's
face.

And every photon
Comes from the sun,
From the belly of the star;
You and I were stars last
year.
We chased each other
In the turbulent heart of
the sun.

So who was it that lived in
your house last year?
And where will you be
next week?
Who is your true friend
and who your foe?
And who will you be next
year?
Breath deep
Breath deep.

This air is me.
This air is you.
This air we share.
I give my substance to you
and
You yours to me.

With each breath I am
linked
In a single orbit
With the great forests.
My out breath is their
food.
Their's fills my lungs.
Last year
I was a tree
And the tree was me.

Each day
We gather up substance
And continue the task
Of endlessly
Remaking ourselves
From one another.

Each day
We discard a portion
And continue the cycle
Of endlessly
Returning ourselves
To others.

Day by day we change
And become one another,
The substance of the
universe,
Stardust and all,
Passing through us each
And we through it.

Where were you last year?
Breath deep,
Breath deep