

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Year Two

Module 4: Transcending Views

Week 1: An Overview of Views

Introduction

Welcome to this module. In it, we will be studying views, particularly Wrong View, Right View and Perfect View. The aim of the module is to familiarise you with these terms, to enable you to become clearer about their meaning and their implications, and to use them skilfully in Dharma practice. This first session aims to answer the question: why study views or View at all? The next five sessions will look at five types of wrong view and the five corresponding right views. The last two sessions will look at the ways views were thought about in the two great Mahāyāna schools of thought; the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. So the module as a whole provides a substantial introduction to View. Ways of taking the study further will be pointed out as the module progresses.

A useful introduction to the terrain is the following extract from Sangharakshita's lecture, *A Vision of Human Existence*:

Wrong View, Right View, Perfect View

In Buddhism there is no such thing as philosophy. In fact, in the Indian languages, including Sanskrit and Pāli (the languages of the Indian Buddhist scriptures), there is no word corresponding to 'philosophy', either literally or metaphorically. There is a word which used often to be translated as 'philosophy', but it does not mean that at all. That word is *darśana* (Pāli *dassana*). *Darśana* comes from a word meaning 'to see' and means 'that which is seen', or 'a sight', 'a view', 'a perspective', even 'a vision'.

This is clearly not the same thing as philosophy. The word philosophy literally means 'love of wisdom', but is more generally understood to mean 'a system of abstract ideas'. It suggests something thought rather than seen. *Darśana*, on the other hand, is very much a matter of direct perception and direct experience - *darśana* does not represent something mediated by concepts.

In Buddhism the term is not *darśana*, but *dr̥ṣṭi*. *Dr̥ṣṭi* also comes from a root meaning simply 'to see', and *dr̥ṣṭi* also means 'a sight', 'a view', 'a perspective', 'a vision'. Buddhism traditionally distinguishes two kinds of view: wrong view and right view. This is an important distinction. In order to understand the difference between the two let us look at the question of sight in the literal sense, because a view, whether wrong or right, is, metaphorically speaking, a kind of seeing.

We may say that there are two kinds of sight: bad and good. Bad sight is sight which is, in the first place, weak. Our sight is said to be weak if we do not see very far or very distinctly. In the second place, bad sight is blinkered. It is restricted to a very narrow field. We see only what is straight in front of our nose. We do not see what is to this side or that side - much less still do we see all the way round. Thirdly, bad sight is distorted, as when we look through a distorting medium - a piece of bottle glass, or a stained-glass window which makes everything look multi-coloured, or a thick fog. Sight which is weak, blinkered, and distorted is bad sight.

Good sight is the opposite of all this. Good sight is sight which is strong, as when we see for a great distance and see clearly. It is sight which is unblinkered, as when we have a wide field of vision. It is sight which is undistorted. We do not see things through a distorting or refracting medium, but see them directly.

The factors of Wrong View

With the help of this distinction between bad sight and good sight, in the quite ordinary sense, we can perhaps see something of the difference between wrong view and right view. Wrong view is, in the first place, weak. We mean by this that it does not have any energy behind it. If there is no energy behind our vision, then our 'insight' into things is weak; we do not see clearly into the true nature of things; we do not see things as they are. The energy that we need comes from meditation - meditation in the sense of dhyāna experience. This concentrated energy, which we derive from meditation experience, transforms a purely conceptual understanding of the truth into a matter of direct experience.

Secondly, wrong view is blinkered. It is limited to a narrow range of experience. This range is what we experience through the five physical senses and the rational mind. Someone whose experience is confined within this narrow range nevertheless often generalizes and draws conclusions from it, unaware of other possibilities of perception and experience. There is, for instance, the example of the man who is interested only in his job, his family, the football pools, and so on. That exhausts his interests. He has no interest in world affairs, or in the arts, or in personal development. So his experience is limited, yet he sees existence itself, life itself, simply in terms of his limited existence.

Thirdly, wrong view is distorted. Our view of things can be distorted in all sorts of ways. It can be distorted by emotion. When we are in a happy mood we see things in quite a different way to the way we see them when we are in a gloomy mood. If we dislike someone, we see all sorts of faults; whereas if we like someone, then we see in them all sorts of perfections, which perhaps they do not in fact possess. Our vision is also distorted by prejudice of various kinds - on account of race or class or religion or nationality.

Wrong view is therefore view which is weak (it does not have the force of meditation behind it), blinkered (it is limited to a narrow range of experience), and distorted (by one-sided emotions and by prejudices).

The factors of Right View

Right view is the opposite of wrong view. Right view is view which is strong and powerful. It has behind it the concentrated energy of meditation, so it gives rise not just to a conceptual understanding of things, but to a direct experience of the truth. It does not remain on the surface, but penetrates deep into the heart of things. It sees everything clearly and distinctly. Right view is unblinkered and unlimited. It ranges over the whole field of human experience. It is not confined to what can be experienced through the physical senses or the rational mind. If it generalizes at all, it generalizes from the entire range of human experience in all fields, on all levels. Lastly, right view is undistorted. It is not distorted by emotion or prejudice, but sees things as they are.

So far I have spoken in terms of views, but views do not exist in the abstract: views are always *somebody's* view. Inasmuch as there are two kinds of view - wrong view and right view - there are two kinds of people. There are people who have wrong view and there are people who have right view. There are people whose view of existence is limited, restricted, and distorted. There are people whose view of existence is unlimited in extent, unrestricted in scope, and without any distortion whatsoever.

People who have wrong view are known technically in Buddhism as *prthagjanas*, or 'ordinary folk'; those who have right view are known as the *āryas*, or 'spiritually noble'. We could say that the first are those who are without any degree of personal development, who have not worked at all on themselves, who are, as it were, just as nature made them. The second are those who have attained some degree of personal development, who have worked on themselves, and are not as nature made them: they have remade, recreated, remodelled themselves, at least to some extent.

The 'ordinary folk' are, of course, in the majority; the 'spiritually noble' are in the minority. However, it is possible to change from one category to the other. The *prthagjanas* can become the *āryas*. The ordinary person can become one of the 'spiritually noble'. One does this by developing awareness, by cultivating positive emotions, by raising one's level of consciousness, and, above all, by discarding wrong view and developing right view.

Perfect Vision

I have only spoken so far of two kinds of view - wrong and right. Really there are three kinds. The third is Perfect View, or rather, Perfect Vision. Perfect Vision is right view developed to the fullest possible extent. It is the total vision of the total man, at the highest conceivable level of his development. Perfect Vision is vision without limits; it is the unconditioned Vision of the unconditioned Reality; it is vision that transcends space and time; it is vision that transcends the ordinary framework of perception, the subject-object relation itself. Perfect Vision is the vision of the Enlightened One - the one who sees with Wisdom and Compassion. Perfect Vision, thus, is the vision of the Buddha.

Our view is wrong view. Only occasionally do we have a flash of right view. We see things, for the most part, wrongly. Not only that, we rationalize our wrong views. We present them in systematic conceptual form. These are all our so-called worldly philosophies, our various -isms and -ologies. If, however, we can have a glimpse of how the Buddha sees, we shall be momentarily raised to that level, at least in imagination, and we shall be able to see exactly where we ourselves stand. We shall have a true philosophy, which will give purpose to our lives and enable us to understand the general principles that underlie the whole process of personal individual development.

(from *A Guide to the Buddhist Path*, p.74)

Why are we looking at View at all?

In the Pāli Canon, The Buddha presents view as a keystone of his teaching:

- Right View is the first *aṅga* of the mundane eight-fold path, and Perfect Vision (which can be understood as perfected view) is the first aṅga of the super-mundane (or transcendental) eight-fold path.
- Self-view (Pāli: *sakkāya-ditṭhi*, Sanskrit: *satkāya-dṛṣṭi*) is the first of the 10 fetters (*saṃyojana*) to be overcome.
- Abstaining from Wrong View and cultivating wisdom (i.e. Right View and Perfect Vision) is the 10th precept.
- View or opinionatedness is one of the four taints (*āsava*, Sanskrit: *āsrava*) which are said to shackle us to samsāra.
- Views are said to be one of the 4 modes of grasping (*ditṭhupādāna*).
- Views are one of the 5 (or 10) defilements (Pāli: *kilesa*, Skt: *kleśa*).
- View is also said to be one of the anusayas (underlying tendencies).

Here is Sangharakshita's answer to the question: he begins by exhorting his audience to:

"...think clearly... Framed in rather more traditional terms, it is not so much 'think clearly', but 'cherish Right View'. You notice that I do not say 'cherish Perfect Vision'. That would be rather premature, because there is no Perfect Vision without Right View. Right View is the mundane form of Perfect Vision, and Perfect Vision is the transcendental form or counterpart of Right View. Unless you have Right View, you have very little chance of achieving Perfect Vision. That is why Right View is so very important. The Buddha has all sorts of things to say about Right View...

Right View is important because wrong view leads downward. There is a Pāli term 'niraya', which means 'downward', or 'downward path'. If you entertain, and especially if you cling to and insist upon Wrong View, you are very definitely on the downward path, you are in decline. So Right View is of very great importance. As I have said: no Right View, no Perfect Vision. If there is no Perfect Vision, there is no liberation, no Enlightenment, no Nirvana, no real spiritual progress.'

(from Sangharakshita's *Fifteen Points for Old (and New) Order Members* delivered in 1993, p.4.)

View represents a thick and persistent thread through both the Buddha's teaching and Sangharakshita's exposition. According to the Buddha and according to Sangharakshita, it is crucial to root out Wrong View and to develop Right View.

Everyone has a view

So how do we sort out right views from wrong views? We all have many views, some of which we are aware of and probably some of which we are only half-aware or not aware of at all. The first step is to become more aware of what they are.

Subhuti begins his book *The Buddhist Vision* with a chapter called *Everyone has a View*. This chapter is the main text for study in this first session of the module. Please make sure that you study this chapter thoroughly, which means reading it through two or three times and thinking about the issues that Subhuti raises, noting any questions that you may have about what he says.

[Beginning of extract:]

Everyone has a view, a perspective on existence. These views govern the direction of our lives; they are often almost entirely unconscious, forming a substructure to our minds, made up of unthinking assumptions about ourselves and our world. Though we may be unaware of our views and may never give them articulate expression, nevertheless, in everything we do and say, we betray our basic perspectives. It might even be said that we are our views. Our views may be self contradictory, unfounded, untrue, but

because we are so closely identified with them we may never see them for what they are.

Views range from the most casual opinions about everyday matters to theories about ultimate metaphysical issues. At bottom, everyone's system of values is founded upon some view about the purpose of life, however vague, inarticulate, or inconsistent; for example, we consider life to be the survival of the fittest, or a test for a higher life to come, or simply without any point at all. Usually, our views remain a more or less loosely associated jumble of assumptions, prejudices, opinions, and beliefs; occasionally they may be elaborated into complex and dazzling philosophies.

Even when built up in this way into finely spun structures of thought, the basis of our views is deeper than thought. Our most fundamental views are not so much concepts - though they may find conceptual expression - as powerful myths that give form to our desires and passions: myths such as Aryan supremacy, or of the historical process inevitably leading to the perfect society, or of the redemption of man by a saviour god. 'Myth' here does not mean a mere legend or fiction but an archetypal patterning of the psyche that shapes reason and emotion into a whole, thrusting in a single direction. It is these myths, which may be in contradiction to each other, together with the whole mass of our views, that move us.

Broadly, views are acquired in two ways: either we generate them for ourselves or we inherit them from the culture that surrounds us. The acquisition is usually unconscious and we exercise little discrimination in what we allow to structure our minds and lives. The views we develop for ourselves are often but rationalizations by which we provide ourselves with reasons for following our desires. Those we inherit from others are often picked up, partly from a felt need to conform to the views of our families, friends, and the social groups within which we live, and partly because they suit our wants. We are being fed with views all the time: by our educational institutions, mass media, and our everyday contacts. The very shapes of our houses and manner of our dress affect the way we see the world.

We may pick up views indiscriminately; however, once adopted, they can have a very strong influence upon the whole course of our lives and be hard to shake off. Having given shape to our emotions and thoughts, they mould our actions. We order the world in conformity with our longings, and then we live in the world that we have ourselves created. Clearly, the views we hold have consequences for us, either good or bad. They may lead us into ever recurring cycles of confusion and pain, or they may give rise to greater freedom and happiness. It is of the greatest importance that we clarify our minds and distinguish those views that are wholesome and helpful from those that are diseased and harmful, since our very lives depend upon it.

Such a clarification of our mental states requires intensive self-examination. We need to learn to be aware of our thoughts and motives; to see what it is that influences us and to what end. We then must begin to take responsibility for our own views, to see what emotions underlie them and where they tend to lead us. Thus far, the work is negative and consists largely in clearing away confusion. But how shall we see the world? - that is the question that now confronts us.

Choosing a view

Again we have basically two choices. We can either try to develop for ourselves a more comprehensive and satisfying view of things, or we can open ourselves to the influence of one that is already developed. Both options have their attendant dangers and difficulties. We may be deceived by ourselves in the first case and by others in the second. Both may have either a successful or a disastrous outcome. It is, however, to the guidance of others that we must, almost inevitably, turn. Unless we cut ourselves off from human society altogether (which is almost impossible to do today, even were it desirable), we must always be under some cultural influence from which it will be hard to disentangle ourselves. Besides, if others have, with great effort perhaps, and even suffering, managed to achieve a breadth of view far greater than our own, we would be foolish not to allow ourselves to be taught by them. Our own efforts would be greatly accelerated if we, wisely and with circumspection, let ourselves be influenced by the most enriching views in our human culture.

Our own times are probably unprecedented in the diversity of views of life available to us. In the West, our traditional Christian based culture is still extant, though now much on the defensive, and there is the new 'consumer culture', with its instant material satisfactions, which finds more and more adherents the world over. Besides these, a vast range of 'alternative' views is developing, drawn from Eastern religion and Western science, psychology and philosophy; or various combinations of these. Among all these views we must choose what influences we want. But how can we evaluate? Would not our evaluation itself be based upon a view? Are we not simply predisposed to select what most suits our own immediate desires, for better or worse?

How then can we evaluate values? We will find we are thrown back on our own experience - but our own experience carefully and critically examined. To begin with, we must be sure that we have correctly understood the view we are investigating and that we are not prematurely judging it in the light of our preconceptions about it. That done, we can ask ourselves whether or not it makes reasoned sense; whether the view is self consistent; and whether it conforms to experience. Then we can try to see what the likely consequences of that view might be if put into practice. We can examine the lives of those of its adherents we might encounter. We can even experiment to see what its effects are within our own lives.

Not only can we make a very cool and reasoned examination, but we must also take into account our own immediate responses to the view. Here we must, of course, be self critical, distinguishing our own superficial partialities from a genuine intuition. If we are healthy and straightforward, we will find that some views seem to constrict and confine us, as if we cannot think and feel at our fullest within them. Such views are too narrow to do justice to our potential as human beings. Other views, we will find, seem dark and twisted, distorting our natures into bizarre and unnatural shapes. Others again seem to lighten our hearts, open up our minds, and give us room to expand and breathe new air. They reveal vistas of limitless horizons and undreamt of possibilities towards which we feel irresistibly drawn.

The evaluative criterion is therefore within our own experience. If we know ourselves well enough and are sincere in our enquiry, we will find that we recognize an increase in genuine happiness, friendliness, and mental clarity from some views, and of suffering, alienation, and confusion from others. We can see what views tend to the former and what to the latter. Those that tend to produce more positive and wholesome states are, in Buddhist terms, ‘right views’, and those that engender negative states are ‘wrong views’.

The Buddhist view

The view that is to be presented in this book is a Buddhist view of life, and it is upon the above criterion that it asks to be evaluated. It offers itself as a way of viewing life that will help the individual to become happier, to experience greater harmony with others, and to see things with a purer understanding. In essence, this is Buddhism: a view of the infinite possibilities of human development. No ceiling confines us; there is, for Buddhism, no God for ever above and beyond man’s reach. We may, if we choose to make the effort, break through barrier after barrier in our lives, in an unending spiral of intensifying happiness, wisdom, and love.

The founder of the Buddhist tradition - known by the title ‘Buddha’, meaning ‘Awakened One’ - required no blind belief from his disciples but expressly urged them to ‘test my words as the goldsmith tests gold in the fire’. In the Buddhist texts we are again and again called upon to weigh up what we hear before we place any reliance upon it. We will then approach this Buddhist view wide awake, responsibly, separating our own thoughts and feelings from the mass of our inherited assumptions. We should be careful neither to accept blindly and uncritically nor to reject through prejudice. After listening to the view carefully and sympathetically, we can evaluate it in the light of our own reason, intuition, and experience.

Essential as this initial appraisal is, it is only the first step. Critical evaluation and intellectual assent are not enough, for Buddhism demands action of its followers. They must put it into practice, act upon it, and make it their own. Yet even this is not enough. The Buddhist view may enable one to cultivate higher and nobler states of mind and to function more and

more beneficially, but still, at this stage, it is not something one sees directly for oneself. It is reasonable, intuitively one responds to it, and all experience bears it out, but it is still, as it were, an influence from outside. The ultimate aim of the Buddhist view is to produce in those who respond to it a corresponding vision so that they see for themselves, by direct experience, the truth of that view. In a sense, then, one no longer has a view at all, for view has been replaced by direct vision.

For Buddhism, therefore, the final criterion for evaluating views is whether or not they lead to the transcendence of views, that is, to vision. Wrong views distort and stunt the lives of those who hold them, right views promote the cultivation of more and more positive mental states, but, above all, followed to their conclusion they lead to that direct experience of the nature of things which is vision. Vision lies at the heart of Buddhism. For Buddhists, it was first seen by a historical individual, Siddhartha Gautama, some 2,500 years ago, in northern India. In attaining that vision he became the Buddha. He saw that every human being has the potential to become a Buddha, and he spent the remainder of his life trying to help others to realize his vision. The tradition we know as Buddhism is the continuing attempt of the Buddha's successors to attain that vision of reality themselves, and to communicate it to others.

The Buddha's vision is beyond particular time and place. It is as relevant today as at any point in the long history of the tradition that he founded. In accordance with the changing cultures and ages within which it has been conveyed, it has been constantly renewed and re expressed. The tradition is a rich treasury of the many forms that its communication has taken. Each of these forms has had its own power to move us to make profound changes in ourselves and our world.

Our own times are characterized by a disintegration of common values. We are faced with a melting pot of views about which there is no general agreement. An increasingly prevalent view is the materialist one. The supernatural and the other worldly, heaven and hell, or other possible dimensions of being, play little part in the conscious attitude of most people today. No doubt much superstition and unreason has been cleared away, but we are left with drastically limited horizons. It is a flat, one dimensional world in which we live out our brief span between birth and death. Much of our time is taken up with elaborate housekeeping and the business of physical survival, albeit in ever increasing comfort and convenience, at least in the West. Whatever time is left we devote to entertainment. To those who feel that such a view of life leaves something in them unanswered, this Buddhist vision is offered.

(pp. 9-14 of The Buddhist Vision, Subhuti Windhorse, 2001.)

[End of extract.]

Questions

1. If our views are ‘almost entirely unconscious’, how can we know what they are?
2. What ‘myths’ are around in our own time?
3. What views have we inherited?
4. How have we inherited them?
5. Can you think of a view which is a rationalisation for a desire?
6. Can you think of an example of a view which has or could have consequences for you or someone else?
7. How can we evaluate views in order to decide whether to adopt them or not?

The second to sixth sessions of this module will each begin with a section taken from chapter 8 of Sangharakshita’s book *Know Your Mind*. The chapter is called *Forces of Disintegration*. In section 6 of the chapter, headed ‘*Dṛṣṭi or Opinionatedness*’, Sangharakshita comments briefly on five kinds of wrong view referred to in the Yogācāra tradition (pp. 181-182).

N.B. The original numbers for notes in Know Your Mind are retained in these extracts – you can follow them in the book where the corresponding notes are not reprinted here. Notes specific to this study module will be numbered from 1, as usual.

Please read the following section before the second session and try to answer and reflect on the questions that appear below.

[Beginning of extract:]

Opinionatedness (Dṛṣṭi).

Opinionatedness is Guenther’s translation of *dṛṣṭi* [Sanskrit], which literally means a sight, a view, a vision, a perspective. It means seeing things in a particular way, from a particular point of view – the implication being that this view or perspective, whatever it may be, is a limited, narrow one. It is, in fact, *mithyā-dṛṣṭi* (*micchādiṭṭhi* in Pāli) or ‘wrong view’, that view which is under the influence of kleśa – as opposed to *samyagdṛṣṭi*, right or perfect view.

In some of the earliest Pāli texts the Buddha is reported to have said that, “The Tathāgata is free from all views.”¹⁷⁸ – including even right view. The term ‘right view’ is a contradiction in terms, from that absolute, so to speak, point of view. But from our own point of view, we need right view

in order to displace wrong view. Only then will we be able to go beyond views altogether.

So *samyagdr̥ṣṭi* is not a closed system of ideas to which one permanently adheres, but a skilful attitude provisionally adopted in order to get rid of unskillful states of mind. It is a wrong view, therefore, to believe that one must give up all views in order to attain to right or perfect view. One cannot realize absolute truth without taking one's stand upon relative truth. To be paradoxical, one could say that all views are wrong views, and one of them is that one should give up all views.

One does encounter people with this kind of wrong view from time to time, people who profess a sort of intellectual and even spiritual hospitality or open-mindedness. They don't want to confine themselves to any particular philosophy or religion. They aspire to a universal vision – which is, practically speaking, beyond them. Without right views, there is no basis for right action, no basis for ethics. And without right action there is no possibility of attaining to universal vision. Only a Tathāgata has no views; while this should certainly be one's aim, one can realize it only by taking one's stand upon right views and practising on that basis.

According to Yeshe Gyaltsen's commentary [on which *Know Your Mind* is a commentary] there are five kinds of *dr̥ṣṭi*: they are – and here I am giving my own translations rather than Guenther's – fixed self-view, extreme views, attachment to ideologies, attachment to moral codes and religious observances, and wrong views regarding actions and their consequences. (p. 181)

[End of extract.]

Textual note

¹⁷⁸ The footnote on page 270 of *Know Your Mind* gives the *Chapter of the Eights of the Sutta Nipāta* as an example. This chapter, which is one of the oldest sections of the Pāli Canon, teaches that the wise man relinquishes all views. What exactly that means will become clearer as the module proceeds.

Here is a summary of the main points made in this short extract:

- Only the Tathāgatha is free from views.
- Right view is in a sense a contradiction, but we need it.
- It's a wrong view to think that we must give up all views in order to attain right or perfect view. All views are wrong views, but one of them is to think that one should give up all views.
- It's a wrong view to think that you have no view.

- We need to take our stand upon right views.
- There are five sorts of views: fixed self-view, extreme views, attachment to ideologies, attachment to moral codes and religious observances, and wrong views regarding actions and their consequences.

Questions

1. Why do you think *dr̥ṣṭi* is translated as ‘opinionatedness’ here?
2. So, according to Sangharakshita, what is meant by a ‘view’?
3. Can you give some examples of Right View?
4. Why does Sangharakshita say that Right View is in a sense a contradiction?
5. Why is it a wrong view to think that we must give up all views in order to attain right or perfect view?
6. What do you think would be the consequences of you trying to give up all views?
7. What would be the consequences of thinking that you have no view?
8. Why is it important to take our stand on Right View?

Some basic definitions

The English word ‘view’ translates the Pāli word ‘*diṭṭhi*’ and the Sanskrit word ‘*dr̥ṣṭi*’. This is how Nyānatiloka defines *diṭṭhi* in his Buddhist Dictionary:

‘**Diṭṭhi**: (lit. ‘sight’; root *dis*, to see): view, belief, speculative opinion, insight. If not qualified by *sammā*, ‘right’, it mostly refers to wrong and evil view or opinion, and in only a few instances to right view, understanding or insight. (p.61).

View as it is used here has a particular meaning, which the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*’s entry on ‘view’ clarifies:

‘A particular manner of considering or regarding something; a mental attitude; an opinion, idea, or belief concerning a particular subject or thing... An aspect or light in which something is regarded or considered.’

More definitions from the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

These definitions may help you to become clearer about some of the key words used in Subhuti’s chapter and in extracts that you’ll meet later in the module:

Value: The principles or moral standards of a person or a social group; the generally accepted or personally held judgement of what is valuable and important in life.

Perspective: A mental view of the relative importance of the relationships or aspects of a subject or matter; a point of view, a way of regarding a matter.

Ideology: A system of ideas or way of thinking pertaining to a class or individual, especially as a basis of some economic or political theory or system, regarded as justifying actions and especially to be maintained irrespective of events.

Speculative: Of the nature, based on, or characterised by speculation or theory rather than practical or positive knowledge.

Speculate: Engage in reflection or conjecture from a theory, meditate, especially without a firm factual basis [i.e. no evidence].

Concept: An idea of a class of objects, a general notion.

Metaphysical: Not empirically verifiable; based on abstract general reasoning.

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Week 2: The Wrong View of Self-view or Personality View

From ‘*Know Your Mind*’

This session begins with an extract from chapter 8 of *Know Your Mind* in which Sangharakshita addresses the wrong view of (fixed) self-view or personality view (pp.182-186).

[Beginning of extract:]

Self-view is the fundamental wrong view underlying all the others. It is the view that the five skandhas add up to, or contain, or form an aspect of, or can be identified with, the idea of a self or ego. [See below for an explanation of this.] The wrong view arises because one posits an absolutely substantial self on the basis of one’s psycho- physical experience.

We fondly embrace the assumption that we are absolutely real: that the self we experience has some ultimate validity. This misunderstanding constitutes the frame of reference within which all our other views are held. It is not just the content of our thinking; it is, as it were, the ‘continent’ of our thinking. It is as if as human beings we are entranced or mesmerized by this misunderstanding, even sometimes proceeding to rationalize it into the basis of a philosophy or religion.

All this is despite the evidence of the Buddha’s experience and teaching, and in fact the evidence of our own reason and observation. It doesn’t appear to us to be evidence, of course, because we have adopted an interpretation of our experience which is not in accord with the experience of Enlightenment, and which does not allow us to appreciate the evidence available to the Enlightened mind.

We present our views in rational terms even though they are based on an essentially irrational premise – that is, on our emotional need to believe in our own secure and unchanging ego-identity. On an ordinary day-to-day level we rationalize in this way all the time. To justify our viewpoints or actions we provide reasoned explanations which serve to disguise the true reasons for them. We like to dress up our gut reactions as rational responses to make them respectable. Then we amass more and more evidence and argument on top of the original purely personal feeling. It is possible eventually to elaborate a whole philosophy out of certain basic personal human weaknesses. One begins with a certain experience of oneself and refuses to consider any evidence that challenges this experience. On the basis of this false idea of oneself one becomes involved with objects, and this whole position is presented as a philosophy or religion. One then proceeds to become attached to this view, even enamoured of it, and eventually it becomes consolidated into certain assumptions which one never subsequently questions.

Any philosophy that is not the product of an Enlightened mind is inevitably constructed in basically this way. The rationalizations are all too easily observable, even though they may be shot through with profound insights. It is sobering to reflect that all the systematic philosophies we have, and perhaps even all the religions as well, are pseudo-rational presentations, at least on a certain level, of experiences that are essentially limited. One could even go as far as to say that any systematically worked-out view must be suspected of being a rationalization in some sense.

This is why Nietzsche wrote in the form of strings of aphorisms, especially toward the end of his life. Each aphorism represents an intuition, an insight, but he doesn't attempt to string all the insights together and work them into a comprehensive system of thought. It is significant that his *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is presented as poetry rather than philosophy. If one really wants to get to the truth of things, to the heart of the matter, the imagination is arguably a more reliable faculty than the intellect alone, and the poet a more reliable guide than the philosopher.

There are said to be twenty possible forms of self-view¹⁸¹. This figure is arrived at by distinguishing four different ways of projecting the idea of a self on to each of the five *skandhas* (form, feeling, perception, volition, consciousness), making twenty in all. If one takes form or body (*rūpa*), for example, one could say:

- i. I am my body and nothing beyond that. My body is my self; my self is my body. Body and self are identical.
- ii. The body is possessed by the self as something apart from and beyond the body. This is a common idea of the nature of the soul, that there is a psychic element, identified as the self, to which the body belongs.
- iii. The self is located within the body.
- iv. The body is located within the self – that is, the self is a wider non-material entity within which the body is contained.

One may apply this series of possibilities to each of the skandhas individually, or indeed to all five skandhas collectively. None of these views is consonant with the reality that whatever we think of as a self is no self. This is an aspect of the insight one gains when one becomes Enlightened. A statement about the Buddha's own experience of himself is to be found among what are called the 'fourteen inexpressibles' (Sanskrit *avyākṛtavastūni*). Well, the 'statement' is really a non-statement. There is nothing to be said about the Buddha's experience; it is literally ineffable.

These fourteen inexpressibles emerge from a conversation between the Buddha and the wanderer Vacchagotta [MN 72]. Vacchagotta asked the Buddha four questions, each presented as four (two in the case of the last

question) alternative views, according to the conventions of Indian logic. The first two questions concerned whether or not the universe is eternal and whether or not it is infinite. The third question was whether or not the Buddha – and by extension any other fully Enlightened being – can be said to exist after death; or whether he simultaneously exists in one sense and does not exist in another sense; or whether he neither exists nor does not exist. The Buddha rejected all these alternative views as to his status after death. None of them fits the case, he said, and to hold any one of them would be to hold a wrong view. Even during his lifetime, so the Buddha said, he is inconceivable. How can one even consider the nature of his existence after his death?

Vacchagotta's fourth question – consisting of the last two 'inexpressibles' – is the one we are concerned with here. Can it be said that the *jīvitindriya*, the life principle or life faculty of the Buddha, is identical with this physical body? This is a question of a kind that still exercises thinkers today: whether life, or mind, or whatever you like to call it, is identical with the physical body or not. The Buddha rejects both views. It's as though he is refusing to accept the assumption that the relation between body and life can be discussed in terms of their being either one thing or two.

In fact, it is impossible to think in terms of absolute dualities of any kind. Once one has a duality one is faced with the problem of reconciling it, which in the case of an absolute duality is impossible. So it's not a question of reducing what we think of as body to what we think of as life, or vice versa. The Buddha is suggesting that we shouldn't think in these terms at all. Perhaps we should follow Blake and say, "*The body is that portion of the soul which is perceptible by the senses in this age.*"

The Buddhist position would appear to be that one always has a body of some kind; it isn't always a *physical* body. If you encounter a dead body, you don't get the impression that the person himself or herself is actually there in the body. Even though it looks just like them, you don't feel that you are in the presence of that person. But put it the other way round: supposing you have the experience of encountering someone who is dead – by which I mean a purely mental experience of them, not seeing a ghost – do you experience them as a sort of disembodied intelligence or spirit? Well, no – if you've ever had that sort of experience you will know that you experience them as having a body. It isn't a physical body, but they have a body, just as they had during their lifetime¹.

Or take the case of so-called out-of-the-body experiences: even though one has the experience of withdrawing from the body, one still feels complete – one still has subtle sense-experience. That is, one is in possession of what in the Pāli texts is termed the *manomayakāya* or 'body made of mind' – through which one has supersensory experience: telepathy, clairaudience, and so on. So the body does not necessarily have to have a material

medium. ‘Body’ is more like a principle of configuration, a unitive principle.

In short, whether or not the body one experiences at any one time can be said to be identical with one’s ‘life principle’ is impossible to say. The whole question of the nature of the body is philosophically quite abstruse. It is not essentially the physical body, even though that may be the way one experiences it at the moment, because clearly one can leave the physical body, whether through death or an out-of-the-body experience; but equally clearly, one doesn’t get away from having a body completely. In the bardo of death one could say that one has a body, albeit of a different kind from that one had while alive. Furthermore, one is always connected to a physical body, if only potentially, in terms of one’s karma generating a future material existence.

But a Buddha is said to have gone beyond birth and death – and yet he still has a body. How is this? Well, one’s own physical body, the experience one has in dependence upon the body and its organs, is a vipāka; it comes to each of us as a result of our past karma. Our bodies are, in a sense, our past catching up with us. This is true also of the Buddha. One could say – although any statement about this matter is necessarily cryptic – that in realizing the non-duality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, one no more ceases to have a body than one continues to have a body. In short, once one is Enlightened, no statement as to the relationship between one’s Enlightened being and one’s physical body is appropriate.

And, as the entire Abhidharma tradition goes to considerable lengths to show, our own physical existence is more mysterious than we usually think. “Who am I?” is a question most of us leave behind with our adolescence, but it continues to be relevant. There is no ‘me’ apart from the flow of physical and mental events, apart from the five skandhas, which continually change. Deep down we don’t really believe this; and yet, as I say, the evidence is there for us to experience.

The meditation practice called the contemplation of the six elements has as its specific purpose the overcoming of the wrong view that one has a fixed, permanent self. In the course of the practice one reflects that each of the elements of which one’s body is composed – earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness – is not really one’s own. When one dies, one will have to give back these elements to the universe; they have only been ‘borrowed’ for the duration of one’s life. Even one’s consciousness, once it is no longer bound up with the body, cannot really be said to be one’s own. (*Know Your Mind*, pp.182-6)

[End of extract.]

Note

¹ Sangharakshita tells of two experiences that he has had of seeing a person as if they were alive after they had died. See the seminar *Endlessly Fascinating Cry* (p. 170). You can follow up the footnotes indicated in small numbers in the text in *Know Your Mind*.

Questions

1. How do you experience the *skandhas* (Pāli: *khandas*)?
2. Why is self view the fundamental wrong view underlying all the others?
3. Sangharakshita writes that the misunderstanding, “...*that the self we experience has some ultimate validity*,” has sometimes been rationalised into the basis of a philosophy or religion. Can you think of an example of one way in which this has happened?
4. Do you think that you “*are absolutely real*”? If so, why? If not, why not?
5. What does the phrase “*the ‘continent’ of our thinking*” mean?
6. What is Sangharakshita trying to convey when he refers to the fourteen inexpressibles?
7. What is Sangharakshita saying about the relationship between body and karma?
8. What does it mean to say that there is no ‘*me*’ apart from the flow of physical and mental events?

What is it that makes a view ‘wrong’?

Broadly speaking we can say that a view can be wrong in one or both of two ways:

1. That it is not in line with *paṭiccasamuppāda* (Pāli for ‘dependent origination’ – or ‘conditioned co-production’ as Sangharakshita prefers to call it).
2. That it is held tenaciously and relinquished with difficulty (i.e. clung to).

So what does it mean for a view to be not aligned with dependent origination? This whole module aims to explore that question. We’ll be looking at the tenacious holding of views in a later session.

What does the Pāli Canon say about wrong views?

Here again is an excerpt from Nyānatiloka's useful entry on *diṭṭhi* in his Buddhist Dictionary; I begin by recapitulating his first paragraph (p.61), and I add his short entry on *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*:

‘**Diṭṭhi**: (lit. ‘sight’; root *dis*, to see): view, belief, speculative opinion, insight. If not qualified by *sammā*, ‘right’, it mostly refers to wrong and evil view or opinion, and only a few instances to right view, understanding or insight.’ (e.g. *diṭṭhi-ppatta*, [‘vision-attainer’, one of the seven *ārya-puggala* (p.63)]; *diṭṭhi-visuddhi*, purification of insight; *diṭṭhi-sampaññā*, ‘possessed of insight’).’ (p.61).

Wrong or evil views *diṭṭhi* (or *micchā-diṭṭhi*) are declared as utterly rejectable [i.e. must be rejected] for being a source of wrong and evil aspirations and conduct, and liable at times to lead a being to the deepest abysses of depravity.

Numerous speculative opinions and theories, which at all times have influenced and still are influencing humankind, are quoted in the suttatexts. Amongst them, however, the wrong view which everywhere, and at all times, has most misled and deluded humankind is the personality belief, the ego-illusion. This personality belief (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*), or ego-illusion (*atta-diṭṭhi*), is of two kinds: eternity-belief and annihilation belief.

Eternity belief (*sassata-diṭṭhi*) [eternalism] is the belief in the existence of a persisting ego-identity, soul or personality, existing independently of those physical and mental processes that constitute life and continuing even after death.

Annihilation-belief (*uccheda-diṭṭhi*) [nihilism], on the other hand, is the belief in the existence of an ego-identity or personality as being more or less identical with those physical and mental processes, and which, therefore, at the dissolution at death, will come to be annihilated.

Now, the Buddha neither teaches a personality which will continue after death, nor does he teach a personality which will be annihilated at death, but he shows us that ‘personality’, ‘ego’, ‘individual’, ‘man’, etc., are nothing but mere conventional designations (*vohāra-vacana*) and that in the ultimate sense (see *paramattha-sacca*) there is only this self-consuming process of physical and mental phenomena which continually arise and again disappear immediately. (See [entries on] *anattā*, *khandha*, *paṭīccasamuppāda*).’ (pp.61-62).

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi: the ‘personality belief’, is the first of the ten fetters (*saṃyojana*). It is entirely abandoned only on reaching the path of Stream-winning (*sotāpatti-magga*). There are twenty kinds of personality belief, which are obtained by applying four types of that belief to each of the five groups of existence (*khandā*): (1-5) the belief to be identical with

corporeality, feeling, perceptions, mental formations, or consciousness; (6-10) to be contained in them; (11-15) to be independent of them; (16-20) to be the owner of them (p.182). [M N 44.7 – see Bhikkhu Bodhi p.397 and note 462 on p. 1239 for some helpful similes.]

From the *Brahmajāla Sutta*: extracts from Bhikkhu Bodhi's introduction to his translation of the Sutta and its commentaries

One of the most important sources for the Buddha's teaching on views is the *Brahmajāla Sutta* which is significantly the first sutta of what was apparently the first compilation of suttas (the *Dīgha Nikāya*). However, it is too long and too technical for the purposes of this module, so in order to give a flavour of the sutta, I am reproducing (by kind permission of the Buddhist Publication Society) some extracts from Bhikkhu Bodhi's interesting and helpful introduction, which is well worth reading in its entirety. The extracts come from pages 4 and 6-8. You may like to know that the *Pañcattaya Sutta* is a middle length version of this in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (number 102).

[Beginning of extract:]

Speculative views include all metaphysical theories, religious creeds, and philosophical tenets concerning issues that lie beyond the reach of possible experiential verification. These views are not necessarily an obstacle to rebirth in the higher worlds, but in every case act as impediments to the path to liberation. All such views arise out of personality view, the fundamental belief in a self or ego-entity, [...]. (p.4)

The question might arise why the Buddha is so concerned to discourage man from his inclination to speculate. Answers are to be found in many suttas where the Buddha details the adversities into which the indulgence in speculative views can lead. Views proceed from ignorance and blindness rather than knowledge. They involve misinterpretations of experience stemming from subjective distortions of the actual experiential data. They proclaim a part of the truth to be the whole, as in the tale of the blind men who take their own limited conceptions of the elephant to represent the animal in its fullness. Views lead to conceit, to extolling oneself and disparaging others who hold different views. They result in dogmatic clinging, when one takes what one believes to be the only truth and declares everything else to be false. Differences in views become a ground for quarrels and disputes, not only between thinkers but also (as is especially the case today) between nations and groups who accept contrary ideologies. And finally, the adherence to views maintains the forward movement of the round of becoming, by obstructing the acceptance of right view which leads to the cessation of the round, and by conditioning kammic accumulations that precipitate renewed existence. It is this last-mentioned danger which is especially emphasised in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*.

All the views dealt with in the *Brahmajāla* originate from one of two sources, reasoning and meditative experience. The fact that a great number,

perhaps the majority, have their source in the experience of meditative attainments has significant implications for our understanding of the genetic process behind the fabrication of views. It suffices to caution us against the hasty generalisation that speculative views take rise through a preference for theorisation over the more arduous practice. As our sutta shows, many of these views make their appearance only at the end of a prolonged course of meditation involving firm renunciation, intense devotion, and keen contemplative zeal. For these views the very basis of their formulation is a higher experience rather than an absence of one. That views of a metaphysical nature result from such endeavours indicates that they spring from a source more deeply grounded in the human mind even than the disposition to theorisation. This source is clinging to being, the fundamental need to establish and maintain, within the empirical personality, some permanent basis of self-hood or individualised existence.

The clinging to being issues in a ‘personality view’ (*sakkāya-ditṭhi*) affirming the presence of an abiding self in the psychophysical organism in one of twenty ways: as either identical with, possessing, contained within or containing one or other of the five aggregates [*skandhas*] that constitute the individual personality – material form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Arisen already at the pre-reflective level, this view in turn becomes the basis for later reflective interpretations of existence, crystallising into the sixty-two views of the sutta. As it is explained: “*Now, householder, as to those divers views that arise in the world, ... and as to those sixty-two views set forth in the Brahmajāla, it is owing to the personality view that- they arise, and if the personality view exists not, they do not exist*”. (S.IV.7.3). [see B Bodhi *Samyutta Nikāya* p.1317 (vol. 2)]

Since the notion of self-hood is accepted uncritically at the level of ordinary experience, higher attainments in meditation, as the Brahmajāla shows, will not suffice to eliminate the notion but will only reinforce it by providing apparent verification of the self originally pre-supposed at the outset of the practice. It is as if one were to lead a man wearing red-tinted glasses from a small room to an open field. The change of scene will not alter the colour of his vision, for as long as he is wearing red glasses everything he sees will be coloured red. The change will only give him a larger area to see as red, but will not help him to see things in their true colour. Analogously, if one begins a practice with a view of self, and persist without changing this view, then whatever develops in the course of practice will go to confirm the initial thesis. The attainments will not themselves alter the view, while the deeper states of consciousness that unfold will be misconstrued in terms of the erroneous notion. Taking the idea of self at its face value, as indicating a real entity, the theorist will proceed to weave around it a web of speculations apparently confirmed by his attainments: as to whether the self is eternal or non-eternal, ever-lasting or perishable, finite or infinite, universal or individual, etc.

What is essential, therefore, from the Buddhist standpoint, is not simply to practice rather than to theorise, but to practice on the basis of right understanding. Thence in contrast to the speculative systems, the Buddhist system of meditation takes as its foundation the doctrine of egolessness or non-self (*anattā*). Any states of experience arising in the course of practice, whether of the ordinary or exalted level, are to be scrutinised in the light of the 3 characteristics of impermanence, suffering and non-self [the *lakkhaṇa* (Pāli), *lakṣana* (Skt.)]. In this way, the tendency to identify with these experiences or to appropriate them in terms of the self-concept is deprived of its ground, and all binding notions of subjectivity are dislodged from their inner haunt with final certainty. (pp.6-8)

[End of extract.]

Questions

1. Can you think of examples of a metaphysical theory, or a religious creed, or a philosophical tenet that can't be experientially verified?
2. Why would a person cling to an eternalist view, and what would be the consequences?
3. Why would a person cling to a nihilist view, and what would be the consequences?
4. Can you think of a view which is neither eternalism nor nihilist?
5. What do you think is wrong with 'dogmatic clinging'?
6. How can meditative experience mislead us on the path and how can we prevent this from happening?
7. Does the red glasses analogy work for you?
8. Can you think of an example of differences of views becoming a ground for quarrel between nations?

Pāli extracts

Here are some extracts from the Pāli Canon which contain teachings on fixed self-view. First, a passage from the *Cūlavedalla Sutta* (MN 44); this passage appears in several other suttas in the same or similar form. In this sutta, Dhammadinna teaches Visākha, a lay-follower who was her husband before she became a nun. Dhammadinna was said by the Buddha to be the foremost bhikkhuni disciple when it came to expounding the Dhamma. Here Visākha asks about personality or fixed self view (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*). Dhammadinna explains that a person can mistakenly take each of the aggregates (*kandha*) to be the self.

[Beginning of extract:]

“But, lady, how does self-identification [*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*] come about?”

“There is the case, friend Visākha, where an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person — who has no regard for noble ones, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for men of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma — assumes form (the body) [*rūpa*] to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form.

“He assumes feeling to be the self...

“He assumes perception to be the self...

“He assumes (mental) fabrications [sankhara, karma formations, volition] to be the self...

“He assumes consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness. This is how self-identification comes about.”

“But, lady, how does self-identification not come about?”

“There is the case where a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones — who has regard for noble ones, is well-versed and disciplined in their Dhamma; who has regard for men of integrity, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma — does not assume form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form.

“He does not assume feeling to be the self...

“He does not assume perception to be the self...

“He does not assume fabrications to be the self...

“He does not assume consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness. This is how self-identification does not come about.”

[End of extract.]

For a good example of a variant, see MN 22 15f.

The Buddha teaching about self-view

When he attends unwisely in this way, one of six views arises in him. The view, “*self exists for me.*” arises in him as true and established “...*this self of mine is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and it will endure as long as eternity.*” This speculative view, bhikkhus, is called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views, the vacillation of views, the fetter of views. Fettered by the fetter of views, the untaught ordinary person is not freed from birth, ageing, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; he is not freed from suffering, I say.

(This quote is a slightly truncated version of the passage in Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation p. 92-3, *Majjhima Nikāya* 2.7-8.)

A short verse from the *Samyutta Nikāya*

As if smitten by a sword,
As if his head were on fire,
A bhikkhu should wander mindfully
To abandon self-view.

(SN I v302, Bodhi p. 149.)

A positive note from Sangharakshita

When I spoke of being creative, I was speaking in terms of bringing into existence something new. So you break the fetter, the first fetter of fixed self-view, when you bring into existence a new self, or by bringing into existence a new self which is essentially creative. If you want to put breaking the fetter of fixed self-view into positive terms, you could express it as being the creation of a new self.

(*Women's Pre-ordination Retreat on Going for Refuge*, 1986)

Question

Now that you have at least an initial grasp of what personality view is, can you explain what right view would be in relation to 'self'?

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Week 3: The Wrong View of Extreme View

Extreme View in ‘Know Your Mind’

This week we plunge straight into Sangharakshita’s discussion of the second type of wrong view.

Extreme view

[Beginning of extract:]

To some extent we have already dealt with extreme views. There are the two extreme views we may hold with regard to views themselves. On the one hand we may adopt a dogmatic, possessive attitude towards views, clinging to them as though they did fully express ultimate truth. The opposite extreme view is to consider it unnecessary to have any views at all, even skilful views, right views.

The fourteen inexpressibles also represent extreme views, to which the only appropriate reply was for the Buddha to stay silent. His silence was not the silence of ignorance, or of suspension of judgement; nor was it even simply the āryan silence, the noble silence of the second dhyāna, when the thought processes of vitarka and vicāra are suspended. All the alternative views he was offered were inapplicable, and he knew no explanation could be articulated in words, so he remained in the silence of the Enlightened mind.

Traditionally, the extreme views which are held to be representative are eternalism and nihilism: the view that the self is eternally existent, and the view that the self is totally non-existent. In ancient India these two views concerned whether or not the self survived death in some form. The eternalist view was that the self persisted unchanged from life to life; this is akin to the Christian view of the soul, that it survives death intact and goes on to heaven, hell, or limbo. The nihilistic view was that the whole psycho-physical organism was totally annihilated at the moment of death – which is of course the common, modern, secular view.

Such is, we may say, the psychological aspect of these two extreme views. They may also be put in a more metaphysical context. This version offers the view that mundane existence, in terms of the five skandhas, is ultimately real in some way, and at the other extreme the view that it is completely unreal and illusory at every level.

Thirdly, in ethical terms, eternalism and nihilism may be interpreted as the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-torture. It is possible to see self-indulgence – in the philosophy of ‘*eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die*’ – as a form of nihilism. And it is possible to see self-torture – for the purpose of releasing the eternal soul from its prison – as a form of eternalism. However, this is just from the viewpoint of the traditional idea of the two extremes as representing attitudes to the possibility of life after

death. It is probably more true to the psychological reality to say that self-indulgence expresses a belief in the absolute reality of mundane existence, while self-torture expresses self-hatred, and thus a desire for self-destruction and, by extension, for the destruction of mundane existence.

The Buddhist doctrine of *anātman*, no-self, is unfortunately sometimes interpreted in such terms as to appeal to this tendency towards self-destruction. If this teaching is interpreted as a total negation of the self, it will be very attractive to people who want to express their own self-hatred. Quite a few people seem to have this sort of attitude, a fascination with the *anātman* doctrine as an essentially life-denying principle. But the idea that the doctrine of no-self declares life to be worthless, meaningless, and in fact non-existent, is simply not Buddhist.

The *anātman* doctrine can also be used as a way of avoiding personal responsibility, or of sitting on one's natural energies. Anything one decides to do, particularly in an energetic or wholehearted way, becomes an expression of ego and thus doctrinally suspect. Again, this is a wrong view. The goal of Buddhahood is to go beyond the individual self, not to regress from the achievement of individual selfhood.

The ego is no more than the tendency to absolutize one's present state of being. It is not a thing, but a faulty interpretation. One is seeing something that just isn't there. The individual is there in a process of continuous change and therefore of ever-present potential development; delusion may also be there, in the form of a belief in a fixed, unchanging self or essence or soul. But that fixed, unchanging self or essence or soul or ego is not there; it never was, and it never will be. And because it isn't there, one can't do anything with it – get rid of it, go beyond it, or whatever. The best thing to do as far as the ego is concerned is just to forget about it.

We are not just an absence of self; we are an absence of *fixed* self, a flow of ever-changing components, physical and mental. The Buddha himself was evidently a powerfully distinct individual, with a very clear idea of who or what he was. To have a self-view means to identify oneself with a sort of cross-section of the flow of skandhas and imagine that one can arrest the flow at that point. It is just a state of arrested development, like being a child who says, 'When I grow up I'm going to fill my house with toys and eat sweets all day,' unable to imagine the transformation involved in growing up.

The five skandhas – the world which we experience as both subject and object – is neither the ultimate reality (because according to the Buddha's Enlightened experience things are not as we perceive them) nor completely illusory (because our experience, unenlightened though it may be, has its own validity on its own level). It is in response to our tendency to embrace one or another of such extreme views – which are of course reflected in various philosophies and dogmas, both Western and Eastern – that the Middle Way was formulated.

The Middle Way is to see the five skandhas as having a conventional or relative existence – that is, to see them as having arisen in dependence upon causes and conditions. If the extreme views are to see conditioned existence as either unconditioned or totally illusory, the Middle Way is to see the conditioned as what it is, simply conditioned. We tend to treat concepts like existence and non-existence, reality and non-reality, as absolutes, whereas so far as conditioned or relative existence is concerned (and conditioned existence is where we are when we make these distinctions) there are no absolutes.

Everything conditioned, everything phenomenal, everything mundane, arises in dependence on conditions and ceases in the absence of those conditions. The world is not completely real, but neither is it absolutely unreal. It is there to be experienced, we are involved in it, but it is not to be mistaken for absolute reality, for something that exists in an ultimate sense. It's as simple as that. It's the Middle Way, the way in which Buddhism sees the world. Really, it is just common-sense.

But, of course, we want absolutes. The Buddhist approach is to get us to think for ourselves, to see into the complexity of the situation we find ourselves in, all the different factors involved, trying to understand it truly and honestly, not sliding off that Middle Way into easy answers. To think about something objectively in this way can be very frustrating. It also takes courage, because it means taking responsibility for one's conclusions.

Most people put their faith and trust in someone who makes a strong impression, someone who is very emphatic and certain and self-confident. If you try to be careful about what you are saying, introducing qualifications where appropriate and suggesting that yours is only a certain way of looking at things, that there are other ways, and that one will have to make up one's own mind, you will make a comparatively feeble impression. On the whole, people want to know what to think, which means something black and white. They want certainty. What they are certain about is less important to them than the certainty itself. They will believe any farrago of nonsense as long as they have permission to believe in it absolutely. It is not clarity but certainty they are looking for. Certainty is security; and being exposed to the difficulties and confusions of having to think seriously is to be thrown into insecurity.

Many people seem to want to rush to take up views where, one may say, angels fear to tread. I have noticed this in, for example, Hindus with a smattering of religious knowledge. I remember on one occasion when I took the public jeep from Kalimpong to Siliguri. I was sitting in the front next to the driver when there was a hold-up of some sort, and the Bihari policeman who was controlling things, seeing there was a sadhu in yellow robes – i.e. myself – waiting there, and having nothing better to do for the moment, strolled up and started asking the usual questions: “Are you a holy man?” and so on. Then he began to tell me all about how the universe had evolved from Brahman, and how it was all unreal, and how the soul was the

same as God. He held forth in this way for about fifteen minutes and then strolled off again. There was a Tibetan Buddhist sitting behind me who had observed all this with mounting horror: “That man was talking about the Dharma,” he said at last, as if he couldn’t believe his ears. That someone with a few undigested religious notions rattling around in his head should shoot his mouth off about them, in public, to a total stranger, had left him almost speechless.

As a Buddhist one finds that one has to resist a tendency in people to look for absolutist views. They might ask about a certain gifted but wayward Buddhist teacher, “Is so-and-so a Bodhisattva or is he a total fake?” Of course, the fact is that such a person is a complex human being and worthy of more than a snap judgement either way – or even somewhere precisely in between. Or someone might say, “What’s the Buddhist view on such and such: hanging, abortion, astrology, extra-marital sex?” What they want is a definite, simple answer to take away with them.

But there is no ‘Buddhist view’ as such; there is no hierarchy of authority from which to draw one’s views. One can have one’s own view as a Buddhist, but it will not have the stamp of authority that Christians have from God or the Bible or the Pope. And people generally want the kind of security one gets from a source of authoritative judgements. As a Buddhist, the best one can do sometimes is to say, “Here are the Four Noble Truths. Do what you can with these.”

By looking for ready-made ‘Buddhist’ answers – the party line – people also want to be able to categorize one as a Buddhist. Just as people say “He’s an Aries,” or “She’s a greed type,” or “He’s an accountant,” and think they’ve got that person dealt with, classified, docketed. Likewise, if they can categorize Buddhism, then they can put one in the Buddhist category. Again, one needs to resist this tendency. It’s a way of dismissing you, disposing of you, not being concerned with you as an individual. What to think of you has been settled by the fact that you are a Buddhist. This is not to say that one should be afraid of saying that one is a Buddhist – or an accountant, for that matter – but that one should not imagine (or hope) that being a Buddhist puts one as an individual in a category.

(pp.186-191.)

The *Brahmajāla Sutta* of the Pāli Canon (for example) deals with sixty-two wrong views. This is the first sutta of the collection known as the *Dīgha Nikāya*, which is the first nikāya of the *Sutta Piṭaka* (the whole body of suttas), which in turn is the first *Piṭaka* of the Pāli Canon. This may be coincidental – after all, the Pāli Canon had to start with something – but one would like to suppose that the compilers of the oral tradition knew what they were about in this as in other matters. The suggestion is that one has to get these wrong views out of the way before one can have access to the rest of the Dharma – before, that is, one can commence the spiritual life at all. The *Brahmajāla Sutta* is the ‘great net’ in which all wrong views are

caught – that is, all the wrong views that were current in India at that time among both Buddhist and non-Buddhist spiritual practitioners. No doubt we could fish up a lot more that we have to contend with today.

One of these sixty-two wrong views is the notion that the universe is the creation of Īśvara, or God. To us, this rejection of the idea of a creator god is one of the defining ideas of Buddhism as a world religion, but in fact the Buddha at no point goes into it in any great detail, simply because it does not seem to have been a very popular view in his time. In a sense, the question is dealt with in the first two of the fourteen inexpressibles: the view that the world is eternal and the view that the world is not eternal. The belief that the universe was created by God – or indeed the belief that it started by chance or necessity – represents one extreme view; the other is the view that the universe is eternal. One might think that one of these views has to be right, but Buddhism rejects all of them.

The reason for this is that – according, at least, to the Yogācāra perspective – wherever there is the perceiving mind, there must be an object. Every attempt to account for the beginning of the universe, for example, is based on the assumption that one can rewind the spool of the universe in one’s mind and eventually come to a point where the mind is not confronted by an object. But this is not possible; it is a wrong view to think so. The Yogācārin might say that the question of whether the universe is eternal or not eternal is unanswerable precisely because the question assumes (incorrectly) that there is a mind-independent universe to which the attributes ‘eternal’ or ‘not eternal’ might be attached.

To use a traditional analogy, one could take the question, ‘*Is the horn of a rabbit big or small?*’¹⁹⁷ The horn of a rabbit cannot be big or small because there is no horn of a rabbit to have such attributes. A non-existent entity cannot have attributes! Likewise with the question ‘Is the (mind-independent) universe eternal or not eternal?’ The (mind-independent) universe cannot be eternal or not-eternal because there is no (mind-independent) universe to have the attributes ‘eternal’ or ‘not-eternal’. Thus, the question is ‘unanswerable’, because it involves an unwarranted assumption. In modern logical terms, this is an example of the informal fallacy called the ‘complex question’.

(from pp.202-203.)

[End of extract.]

Definitions

Absolute: (Philosophical meaning) Existing or able to be thought of without relation to other things. (*Shorter Oxford*)

Complex question: also rejoices in the Latin name *plurium interrogationum*. It is one of the many recognised fallacies. When a question is asked in such a way as to

presuppose the truth of an assumption buried in it, the fallacy of the complex question has been committed. (That definition comes from *Introduction to Logic* by Copi and Cohen, 2002).

One example of it is, “*When did you stop taking drugs?*” Such a question has an assumption buried in it, namely, that you at some point began taking drugs, or that you have stopped, neither of which might be true. It is extremely difficult to answer complex questions in a straightforward way without seeming to accept the questioner’s assumption(s). It is a favourite move of some barristers.

Questions

1. Why do humans have a tendency to hold two extreme views about views i.e. on the one hand, to be possessive or dogmatic about views, and on the other, to think it is unnecessary to have views at all?
2. How are the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism manifested at psychological, metaphysical and ethical levels?
3. How can the anātman doctrine be mistaken and become a wrong view?
4. How can one misperceive the five skandhas?
5. What is the Middle Way?
6. Why do people have a tendency to rush to take up views and to categorise people?
7. What does Sangharakshita mean by ‘the conditioned’?
8. Why is there no ‘Buddhist view’ as such?

Extreme view in the Pāli Canon

Two of the best places to read about extreme view in the Pāli Canon are MN 63 and 72. I give here Bhikkhu Thanissaro’s translation of 63, the *Cūḷamālunkya Sutta*, which Thanissaro calls the *Cūḷamālunkyavada Sutta* or *The Shorter Instructions to Mālunkya*. You can also read Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation of the same sutta. The sutta is famous for the poisoned arrow simile.

[Beginning of extract:]

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatti at Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s monastery. Then, as Ven. Mālunkyaṅgāputta was alone in seclusion, this train of thought arose in his awareness: “These positions that are undeclared, set aside, discarded by the Blessed One – ‘The cosmos is eternal,’ ‘The cosmos is not eternal,’ ‘The cosmos is finite,’ ‘The cosmos is infinite,’ ‘The soul and the body are the

same,’ ‘The soul is one thing and the body another,’ ‘After death a Tathāgata exists,’ ‘After death a Tathāgata does not exist,’ ‘After death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist,’ ‘After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist’ – I don’t approve, I don’t accept that the Blessed One has not declared them to me. I’ll go ask the Blessed One about this matter. If he declares to me that ‘The cosmos is eternal,’ that ‘The cosmos is not eternal,’ that ‘The cosmos is finite,’ that ‘The cosmos is infinite,’ that ‘The soul and the body are the same,’ that ‘The soul is one thing and the body another,’ that ‘After death a Tathāgata exists,’ that ‘After death a Tathāgata does not exist,’ that ‘After death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist,’ or that ‘After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,’ then I will live the holy life under him. If he does not declare to me that ‘The cosmos is eternal,’... or that ‘After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,’ then I will renounce the training and return to the lower life.”

Then, when it was evening, Ven. Mālunkyāputta arose from seclusion and went to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed down, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One, “Lord, just now, as I was alone in seclusion, this train of thought arose in my awareness: ‘These positions that are undeclared, set aside, discarded by the Blessed One... I don’t approve, I don’t accept that the Blessed One has not declared them to me. I’ll go ask the Blessed One about this matter. If he declares to me that “The cosmos is eternal,”... or that “After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,” then I will live the holy life under him. If he does not declare to me that “The cosmos is eternal,”... or that “After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,” then I will renounce the training and return to the lower life.’

“Lord, if the Blessed One knows that ‘The cosmos is eternal,’ then may he declare to me that ‘The cosmos is eternal.’ If he knows that ‘The cosmos is not eternal,’ then may he declare to me that ‘The cosmos is not eternal.’ But if he doesn’t know or see whether the cosmos is eternal or not eternal, then, in one who is unknowing and unseeing, the straightforward thing is to admit, ‘I don’t know. I don’t see.’... If he doesn’t know or see whether after death a Tathāgata exists... does not exist... both exists and does not exist... neither exists nor does not exist,’ then, in one who is unknowing and unseeing, the straightforward thing is to admit, ‘I don’t know. I don’t see.’”

“Mālunkyāputta, did I ever say to you, ‘Come, Mālunkyāputta, live the holy life under me, and I will declare to you that ‘The cosmos is eternal,’ or ‘The cosmos is not eternal,’ or ‘The cosmos is finite,’ or ‘The cosmos is infinite,’ or ‘The soul and the body are the same,’ or ‘The soul is one thing and the body another,’ or ‘After death a Tathāgata exists,’ or ‘After death a Tathāgata does not exist,’ or ‘After death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist,’ or ‘After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist?’”

“No, lord.”

“And did you ever say to me, ‘Lord, I will live the holy life under the Blessed One and [in return] he will declare to me that ‘The cosmos is eternal,’ or ‘The cosmos is not eternal,’ or ‘The cosmos is finite,’ or ‘The cosmos is infinite,’ or ‘The soul and the body are the same,’ or ‘The soul is one thing and the body another,’ or ‘After death a Tathāgata exists,’ or ‘After death a Tathāgata does not exist,’ or ‘After death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist,’ or ‘After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist’?”

“No, lord.”

“Then that being the case, foolish man, who are you to be claiming grievances/making demands of anyone?”

“Mālunkyāputta, if anyone were to say, ‘I won’t live the holy life under the Blessed One as long as he does not declare to me that “The cosmos is eternal,”... or that “After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,”’ the man would die and those things would still remain undeclared by the Tathāgata.

“It’s just as if a man were wounded with an arrow thickly smeared with poison. His friends and companions, kinsmen and relatives would provide him with a surgeon, and the man would say, ‘I won’t have this arrow removed until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble warrior, a priest, a merchant, or a worker.’ He would say, ‘I won’t have this arrow removed until I know the given name and clan name of the man who wounded me... until I know whether he was tall, medium, or short... until I know whether he was dark, ruddy-brown, or golden-coloured... until I know his home village, town, or city... until I know whether the bow with which I was wounded was a long bow or a crossbow... until I know whether the bowstring with which I was wounded was fiber, bamboo threads, sinew, hemp, or bark... until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was wild or cultivated... until I know whether the feathers of the shaft with which I was wounded were those of a vulture, a stork, a hawk, a peacock, or another bird... until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was bound with the sinew of an ox, a water buffalo, a langur, or a monkey.’ He would say, ‘I won’t have this arrow removed until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was that of a common arrow, a curved arrow, a barbed, a calf-toothed, or an oleander arrow.’ The man would die and those things would still remain unknown to him.

“In the same way, if anyone were to say, ‘I won’t live the holy life under the Blessed One as long as he does not declare to me that ‘The cosmos is eternal,’... or that ‘After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,’ the man would die and those things would still remain undeclared by the Tathāgata.

“Mālunkyāputta, it’s not the case that when there is the view, ‘The cosmos is eternal,’ there is the living of the holy life. And it’s not the case that when there is the view, ‘The cosmos is not eternal,’ there is the living of the holy life. When there is the view, ‘The cosmos is eternal,’ and when there is the view, ‘The cosmos is not eternal,’ there is still the birth, there is the aging, there is the death, there is the sorrow, lamentation, pain, despair, and distress whose destruction I make known right in the here & now.

“It’s not the case that when there is the view, ‘The cosmos is finite,’ there is the living of the holy life. And it’s not the case that when there is the view, ‘The cosmos is infinite,’ there is the living of the holy life. When there is the view, ‘The cosmos is finite,’ and when there is the view, ‘The cosmos is infinite,’ there is still the birth, there is the ageing, there is the death, there is the sorrow, lamentation, pain, despair, and distress whose destruction I make known right in the here and now.

“It’s not the case that when there is the view, ‘The soul and the body are the same,’ there is the living of the holy life. And it’s not the case that when there is the view, ‘The soul is one thing and the body another,’ there is the living of the holy life. When there is the view, ‘The soul and the body are the same,’ and when there is the view, ‘The soul is one thing and the body another,’ there is still the birth, there is the aging, there is the death, there is the sorrow, lamentation, pain, despair, and distress whose destruction I make known right in the here & now.

“It’s not the case that when there is the view, ‘After death a Tathāgata exists,’ there is the living of the holy life. And it’s not the case that when there is the view, ‘After death a Tathāgata does not exist,’ there is the living of the holy life. And it’s not the case that when there is the view, ‘After death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist,’ there is the living of the holy life. And it’s not the case that when there is the view, ‘After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist’ there is the living of the holy life. When there is the view, ‘After death a Tathāgata exists’... ‘After death a Tathāgata does not exist’... ‘After death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist’... ‘After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,’ there is still the birth, there is the ageing, there is the death, there is the sorrow, lamentation, pain, despair, & distress whose destruction I make known right in the here & now.

“So, Mālunkyāputta, remember what is undeclared by me as undeclared, and what is declared by me as declared. And what is undeclared by me? ‘The cosmos is eternal,’ is undeclared by me. ‘The cosmos is not eternal,’ is undeclared by me. ‘The cosmos is finite’... ‘The cosmos is infinite’... ‘The soul and the body are the same’... ‘The soul is one thing and the body another’... ‘After death a Tathāgata exists’... ‘After death a Tathāgata does not exist’... ‘After death a Tathāgata both exists & does not exist’... ‘After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,’ is undeclared by me.

“And why are they undeclared by me? Because they are not connected with the goal, are not fundamental to the holy life. They do not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, Unbinding. That’s why they are undeclared by me.

“And what is declared by me? ‘This is stress [dukkha],’ is declared by me. ‘This is the origination of stress,’ is declared by me. ‘This is the cessation of stress,’ is declared by me. ‘This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress,’ is declared by me. And why are they declared by me? Because they are connected with the goal, are fundamental to the holy life. They lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, Unbinding. That’s why they are declared by me.

“So, Mālunkyāputta, remember what is undeclared by me as undeclared, and what is declared by me as declared.”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Ven. Mālunkyāputta delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

[End of extract.]

Further reading

Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Introduction to Brahmajāla Sutta*, p.27ff.

Complete text: <http://tinyurl.com/p7axcm>

Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism* (Section 16 of chapter 1), 9th edition, Windhorse, 2001.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=331>

Week 4: The Wrong View of Attachment to Ideologies

This session begins with the fourth section of Sangharakshita's discussion of *dr̥ṣṭi* or views. It continues with a discussion of the *Honey Ball Sutta* (MN18), and of a key term used in that sutta.

Attachment to ideologies

[Beginning of extract:]

We have seen how an ideology is established. First of all one has a *dr̥ṣṭi*, a view, representing a certain limited and emotionally negative perspective. One rationalizes this into a philosophical position or ideology, and then one proceeds to become attached to that position, to cling to that ideology. To take a simple example, someone who felt very unsure of himself, inadequate, insecure, might perhaps be drawn to some form of, say, fascist ideology. Embracing that ideology would make him feel more sure of himself, so he would then become more and more attached to it, and more and more certain in his adherence to it.

Not all ideologies are as unskilful as this, of course, but an element of wrong view is always going to be there somewhere. Clinging to ideologies means fixing our attitudes so that we won't have to think or feel or see for ourselves. Faced with the fundamental issues of life and finding there are no obvious easy answers to them, we find security in a certain limited perspective, which we formulate into a set of views. Almost all of us do this to some degree: our personal desires, whims, and perhaps neuroses bring all kinds of views or rationalizations in their wake. Some of these we are aware of, others not. But usually our wrong views underpin the emotional basis for the way we look at the world. In a sense we *exude* our wrong views – they aren't just there as a little intellectual tangle we've got into in a little corner of the brain.

We will probably find that even our involvement with the Dharma is at least partly based upon these views, these ideologies. It is almost inevitable that we start off with impure motives. We probably have some cherished notions that we associate with Buddhism, that we feel Buddhism ought to endorse, but into which we do not enquire too deeply, for fear of being disappointed. This is where the trouble starts. If we have embraced Buddhism for the wrong reasons – which is quite common – we need to make sure that we don't cling to it in such a way as to reinforce the original weakness on account of which we embraced it in the first place. Otherwise we will be embracing not Buddhism but our own preconceived views, which we can hold even more tightly because we imagine that they are sanctioned by the Dharma.

Take the example of the person who comes to the Dharma with a mistaken view of the doctrine of *anātman*, interpreting it as a total negation of the self, unconsciously finding it attractive because it seems to reflect their

own self-hatred. They might then study this subject that they find so fascinating, research it, even write books on it. Finally they might become a well-known expert on the *anātmavāda*. In this way their whole life would have revolved around their basic neurosis and the rationalization built upon it.

Right view with regard to the self is that in truth or in reality it is a non-self [i.e. not a fixed self]. However, one can hold this view in one of two ways. One can adopt it as a skilful attitude by which one will be able to progress towards eventually transcending all views whatsoever, or else one can adhere to it as a dogma. It is possible to adopt the *anātmavāda* (the doctrine of no-self) in an unskilful, egoistic way.

This is certainly a criticism that might be levelled at some Theravādins, that they have had a tendency to advocate the *anātmavāda* in an aggressive, even belligerent manner, violently criticizing anyone who professed the opposite view. Not that these Theravādins always understood quite what they were talking about, but they were still very attached to their doctrine as a key element in their cultural and intellectual heritage, something which clearly marked them off from Hindus. One of my own teachers, Jagdish Kashyap, once remarked in the course of a lecture he was giving in Sri Lanka that one could not understand what *anātman* meant without first understanding what *ātman* or self meant. He was shouted down by the monks in the audience, who said that they didn't want him, "Bringing his Hindu philosophy here."

Such is clinging to ideology in a Buddhist context. This kind of unskilful attitude towards that which is specifically meant to help one to be skilful is a serious matter. As Candrakīrti says, "If the medicine itself becomes poisonous, where will you turn for the treatment you need?"¹⁸⁷ It is clear that sometimes what is technically a wrong view may temporarily serve a skilful purpose. For example, on the basis of a belief in an essential self or soul one may perform certain skilful actions; and on the basis of the skilful mental states arising from those actions one may realize that the idea of a self or soul could not be in accordance with reality. Up to this point that wrong view has served a useful purpose. The fact of the matter is that, until such time as we are Enlightened, we need a self; in fact, most of us actually need to strengthen and define our individuality. In the Pāli scriptures the Buddha himself speaks of, "Making the self strong"¹⁸⁸ – because a weak self is simply not capable of sustaining the shattering experience of transcendental insight.

The crucial issue is not so much whether the view held is right or wrong, but the manner in which it is held. If one holds it sufficiently lightly, so that one is able eventually to see its limitations and discard it, then at the very least one will be able to move forward. Right view that is treated as dogma is being taken as an end in itself. It is then no longer useful and therefore no longer right view. Right view must always be held as what Guenther calls an operational concept. It is all right to believe that as a

Buddhist one's operational concepts are reliable, effective, and long-lasting, but only if one keeps bearing in mind that they are still only operational concepts.

A dogmatic attitude towards right views turns them, practically speaking, into wrong views. If you try to hit someone over the head with Buddhist truth, it effectively ceases to be Buddhist truth. In any case, we have no idea at all at present what the Enlightened state – the state of realized non-ego – is like. Even to describe it as a state of non-selfhood gives us so little idea of it as to be conceivably quite misleading.

The followers of an ancient Hīnayāna school called the *Pudgalavāda* provide an interesting slant on this issue. They posited the existence of a *pudgala* or person which is distinct from the concept of ātman or self, supporting this view by referring to texts such as the *Ti Ratana Vandana* which speak of the eight noble pudgalas (*aṭṭha-āriya-puggalās* in Pāli), and pointing out that the Buddha refers to himself as a pudgala: “*There is a pudgala who has arisen for the benefit of the world.*”¹⁸⁹ So they advanced the idea of a pudgalavāda which is not an atmavāda – a position which can be defended rationally. Their opponents, of course, interpreted the key texts which the Pudgalavādins cited in support of their views differently, holding that the pudgalavāda was in fact a form of atmavāda. However, the other Hīnayāna schools admitted that Pudgalavādins could gain Enlightenment.

So the view advanced by Edward Conze in his important account of Buddhist philosophy, *Buddhist Thought in India*, that the Pudgalavādins were not really Buddhists, does not ring true.¹⁹¹ This view – that early converts to Buddhism, unable to give up their Brahminical belief in the ultimate reality of the atman, tried to smuggle in their heresy in the guise of *pudgala* or *ālaya* or *bhavanga* – rather misses the point. In India at this time the discussion was not conducted in terms of whether or not the Pudgalavādins were really Buddhists. The term ‘Buddhist’ itself hardly existed. The important point, which all parties recognized, was that they were all trying to gain Enlightenment.

The more fruitful line of inquiry is to ask: “Why did they introduce this doctrine?” If we reflect that the Buddha himself continued, even after his Enlightenment, to experience himself as himself, the answer seems clear enough. If the Theravādins reject the pudgala doctrine out of hand, this is perhaps because it is a purely metaphysical position, and they are sometimes quite unsophisticated, even naïve, when it comes to metaphysics.

The fact is that although the Pudgalavāda School and its own recension of the scriptures have not survived, it was one of the most important schools of early Buddhism. As it happens, one of the most respected Pāli scholars of modern times, A.P. Buddhadatta, came to the conclusion that they were right. Nobody bothered him about it; it was just considered a mild eccentricity on his part to be a Pudgalavadin.¹⁹¹

In the end we should have the attitude of the true Mādhyamika – the follower of the Middle Way – which is to find the truth and be receptive to it, whatever it might turn out to be, even if it threatens everything that up till now we have based our life upon. To some extent, it is bound to do this – if it is really the truth – and we should be prepared for that. (pp.191-194).

[End of extract.]

Textual notes

¹⁸⁷ See Sangharakshita, *Wisdom Beyond Words* p. 128:

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=495>

¹⁸⁸ See Itivuttaka, 111:

Complete text: <http://tinyurl.com/rxy8pf>

¹⁹⁰ See Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India*, 1967:

<http://tinyurl.com/omcvvk>

Definitions

Ālaya: see *Know Your Mind* p. 55ff

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=452>

Bhavanga: see *Nyanatiloka* p. 38.

http://www.palikanon.com/english/wtb/dic3_b.htm

Anusaya: see *ibid.*

<http://www.palikanon.com/english/wtb/a/anusaya.htm>

Questions

1. What is meant by ideology?
2. What other examples of ideology can you think of besides fascism?
3. How do, “*Our wrong views underpin the emotional basis for the way we look at the world*”? (You may find it useful to read the whole of the second paragraph as you try to answer this question).
4. For what wrong reasons do people commonly embrace Buddhism? Do you think you have done this or are doing it?

5. How can one adopt the doctrine of no-self in an unskillful, egoistic way?
6. Why do you think the Buddha spoke of the value of, “*Making the self strong*”? (Itivuttaka, 111). Does this advice negate the doctrine of no fixed self?
7. Why if you try, “*To hit someone over the head with Buddhist truth,*” does it “*Effectively cease to be Buddhist truth*”?
8. How does it feel to be practising in a tradition in which we are encouraged, “*To find the truth and be receptive to it, whatever it might turn out to be, even if it threatens everything that up till now we have based our life upon*”?

Views and obsessions in the *Honey Ball Sutta*

The *Honey Ball Sutta* (*Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*, 18 in the *Majjhima Nikāya*) offers a very useful way of thinking about how views, including obsessive views and ideologies, are generated. It also offers an interesting variation on the familiar *nidāna* chain, showing how conditionality works in the field of thinking. It’s worth remembering as we study this variant, that the ‘wheel’ is driven by the *kleśas*, craving, aversion, and ignorance, just as it is in the more familiar version.

The starting point of the sutta is a conversation between the Buddha and Daṇḍapāni, a rather pretentious young Śākyan whose name means ‘stick-in-hand’. In answer to Daṇḍapāni’s seemingly rather aggressive question as to what he teaches, the Buddha replies [A]:

“The sort of doctrine, friend, where one does not keep quarrelling with anyone in the cosmos with its devas, Maras, and Brahmas, with its contemplatives and priests, its royalty and common-folk; the sort [of doctrine] where perceptions no longer obsess the brahman who remains dissociated from sensual pleasures, free from perplexity, his uncertainty cut away, devoid of craving for becoming and non-becoming. Such is my doctrine, such is what I proclaim.”

Apparently Daṇḍapāni does not know quite what to make of this; he shakes his head, wags his tongue, raises his eyebrows until his forehead is puckered in three furrows, and goes away.

Later, the Buddha is asked by a bhikkhu what he meant by this. The Buddha tells him and other bhikkhus present that what he meant was [B]:

“If, monk, with regard to the cause whereby the perceptions and categories of complication [papañca] assail a person, there is nothing there to relish, welcome, or remain fastened to, then that is the end of the obsessions of passion, the obsessions of resistance, the obsessions of views, the obsessions of uncertainty, the obsessions of conceit, the obsessions of passion for becoming, and the obsessions of ignorance. That is the end of taking up rods and bladed weapons, of arguments,

quarrels, disputes, accusations, divisive tale-bearing, and false speech. That is where these evil, unskilful things cease without remainder.”

The bhikkhus, thinking that they need further details of this teaching, resort to Mahā Kaccāna, one of the senior disciples. Kaccāna modestly protests that they should have asked the Buddha for clarification,

“For knowing, the Blessed One knows; seeing, he sees. He is the Eye, he is Knowledge, he is Dhamma, he is Brahma. He is the speaker, the proclaimer, the elucidator of meaning, the giver of the Deathless, the lord of the Dhamma, the Tathāgata. That was the time when you should have questioned him about this matter. However he answered, that was how you should have remembered it.”

Then he agrees to tell them what the Buddha meant by his teaching.

After repeating the Buddha’s summary [B], he continues [C]:

“Dependent on eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one perceives (labels in the mind). What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates [papañca]. Based on what a person complicates [‘papañc-ates’], the perceptions and categories of complication [papañca] assail him/her with regard to past, present, and future forms cognizable via the eye.”

He then goes on to repeat this with reference to each of the senses, ending with the mind-sense:

“Dependent on nose and aromas, nose-consciousness arises...

“Dependent on tongue and flavours, tongue-consciousness arises...

“Dependent on body and tactile sensations, body-consciousness arises...

“Dependent on intellect and ideas, intellect-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one perceives (labels in the mind). What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates [papañca]. Based on what a person complicates [‘papañc-ates’], the perceptions and categories of complication [papañca] assail him/her with regard to past, present, and future ideas cognizable via the intellect.”

That is the core of this sutta’s teaching; Mahā Kaccāna says a bit more, and the bhikkhus seek endorsement for what he has said from the Buddha himself, which the Buddha gives.

A highly significant term in this sutta is ‘papañca’, which Bhikkhu Bodhi translates as ‘mental proliferation’. Papañca is well-worth going into, since it refers to obsessively held views – and indeed ideologies.

The meaning of papañca

The Pāli Text Society Dictionary's definition of papañca is rather tentative. In his booklet, Bhikkhu Nananda defines it with more confidence as 'conceptual proliferation', and it is Nananda that Bhikkhu Bodhi (in his MN 1995) follows in describing it like this: "*It seems that the primary problem to which the term prapañca [Skt] points is... the propensity of the worldling's imagination to erupt in an effusion of mental commentary that obscures the bare data of recognition.*" (MN pp 1203)

The significance of papañca

The problem indicated by the word papañca lies at the core of the Buddha's teaching. In the Honey Ball Sutta, Kaccāna teaches a chain of nidānas which highlights the disastrous consequences (of becoming the victim) of prapañca.

The central part of Kaccāna's exposition [C] can be summarised like this:

He begins by saying that in dependence on the eye and the (visual) forms available to the eye arises eye-consciousness. On the basis of these three, there is contact (*phassa*; Skt. *sparśa*). On the basis of phassa arises *vedanā* (feeling). On the basis of vedanā, arises *sañña* (perception). On the basis of sañña arises *vitakka* (thinking or applied thought). On the basis of vitakka arises *papañca* (conceptual proliferation), and on the basis of papañca arises *papañca-sañña-sankha* (which Bhikkhu Bodhi says might well mean 'the perceptual notions [arisen from] proliferation.') Kaccāna then goes through the same routine beginning with each of the other five sense-consciousnesses, including the mind.

The arising of eye consciousness (*cakkhuvinnana*) as a result of the meeting of eye (*cakkhu*) and form (*rūpa*), is an explanation of what happens at phassa, the 6th nidāna in the familiar twelve nidāna chain. Upon contact arises feeling (*vedanā*) the seventh nidāna, which, according to Nananda, brings us to the end of the result phase of the wheel.

According to this way of thinking, the causal phase begins here not with *taṇhā*, but with perception (*sañña*), which has arisen on the basis of feeling. Perception gives rise to thought (*vitakka* – which can also include applied thought since in early Buddhism *vitakka* and *vicāra* weren't distinguished). On the basis of vitakka arises papañca. So sañña, vitakka, and papañca stand in the places usually occupied by *taṇhā*, *upādāna* and *bhava*. This is not to suggest that there is a one-for-one equivalence here, but to bear a comparison in mind might be helpful.

It seems that we then enter the next result phase with papañca-sañña-sankha; this nidāna of this particular chain is taking us round to the resultant phase which normally begins with the eleventh nidāna, *jāti*.

Nananda helpfully suggests that a good reason for assigning the *Honey Ball* nidānas in this way is the grammar used. (*Cakkhuvinnam*) upajjati, phassa and vedanā are used impersonally which signifies a process which is happening to a

person. *Sanjanati* (from *sañña*), *vitakketi* and *papañceti* are all used here in the third person singular, which stresses that the person is acting in the process. He or she perceives, he or she thinks, he or she then involves him or herself in conceptual proliferation. The next link is again impersonal, which gives the impression that again the hapless subject has become the hapless object of an overwhelming force.

So what this all means is that a 'person's' eye consciousness becomes involved in the *upajjati* of sense consciousness, and the phassa, from which perception arises; from perception arises thinking, and the thinking leads to a kind of thinking which occurs when one's imagination runs riot. This in turn leads to a mind set which is obsessed with perceptions and notions that have arisen on the basis of grasping, conceit and views which gives support to the idea that one is a separate subject in the midst of objects which are available to be grasped or turned away from. So the term *prapañca-sañña-sankha*, whose exact meaning may never be established, seems to refer to a kind of obsessive mental set which from then on prejudices the way one sees, hears, and picks up on whatever one's senses latch onto. In other words, it shapes the way one interprets (and handles) one's experiences.

It is easy to get the impression that *prapañca* has only vivid manifestations; in fact, most people '*prapañc-ate*' most of the time. Every time that we get distracted into a train of thought or a chaos of thought as a result of yielding to the assumptions 'I am' etc., we are '*prapañc-ating*'.

The Buddha presented *prapañca* as a serious problem for beings. It was so serious, he seemed to be saying, that if they could get rid of this conceptual proliferation, they would become Awakened. In fact, one synonym for the Awakened state is *nisprapañco*.

How can we eliminate *prapañca*?

As we have seen, Bhikkhu Nananda helpfully explains the link between grammar and conceptual proliferation, pointing out that the link is clearly demonstrated in the syntax of the *Honey Ball Sutta*. The conclusion must be that it is our habits of thought and the way we habitually express ourselves through concepts which are grammatically ordered as objects that sustain *prapañca*. So do we have to stop thinking? Do we have to stop talking?

The answer to these questions seems to be that most of us need to choose to think to such effect that we can see through the grasping inherent in our habits of thinking. Most of us probably need to talk less and more carefully, and as we are talking we should be as aware as we can be that we are giving voice to symbols which can involve us in *prapañca*.

Of course, the Three-fold way itself addresses the problem of *prapañca*. *Sīla* offers us a chance to experience the dualistic tendency of our desires and aversions, and by degrees to adopt different habits. Meditation not only offers us the same opportunity, but also the chance to become less reactive and more creative in our responding. The *mettā bhāvanā* both supports and extends the practice of *sīla*, but

also helps us to develop the highest asceticism (patience) and contentment. See the second sentence of this session's extract from *Know Your Mind*.

The more truly contented we are, the less likely we will be to fix upon and hold onto people and things to try to satisfy our desires. A contented person is generally a less reactive person, and at least potentially, a more creative person. A contented person is more likely to use their senses without giving energy to the process which leads to papañca, and is more likely to be able to follow the Buddha's teaching to Bahiya, "*In the seen only the seen, in the heard, only the heard,*" etc. (*Udāna 1.x*). Moreover, a contented person will see the point of guarding the gates of the senses. The Buddha's teaching on guarding the gates of the senses (found e.g. in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* at *Dīgha Nikāya I.70*) is an ethical version of his teaching on papañca.

Questions

1. What do you understand by the term 'papañca' (Sanskrit: *prapañca*)?
2. How does it arise?
3. What is the significance of papañca for wrong view?
4. What is the underlying tendency to views (*ditthi-anusaya*)?
5. What does 'sañña' really mean and what role does sañña play in the generation of papañca?
6. How can we avoid 'papañc-ating'?
7. How do you think the teaching on '*guarding the gates of the senses*' relates to wrong view?
8. What kinds of thoughts and feelings do you have when your '*imagination runs riot*'?

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Week 5: The Wrong View of Attachment to Moral Codes and Religious Observances

This session begins with the fifth section of Sangharakshita's discussion of *dr̥ṣṭi* in *Know Your Mind*, and continues with an extract from *The Bodhisattva Ideal*, and from four of Sangharakshita's seminars.

Attachment to moral codes and religious observances

[Beginning of extract:]

It is said that there are 'ten fetters' which hold us back from the ultimate freedom which is Enlightenment, and the breaking of the first three, according to tradition, is synonymous with the dawning of transcendental insight. The first two fetters are 'fixed self view' and 'doubt with regard to the Three Jewels'. *Śīlavrataparāmarśa* is the third. *Śīla* means 'ethics', and in this context it refers to a formulation of rules or precepts, while *vrata*, which literally means 'vow', is a pre-Buddhist, Vedic term for a certain kind of brahminical observance. And *parāmarśa* means 'being attached to, hanging on, being under the influence of'. A good interpretive translation of this term would therefore be 'clinging to ethical formalism and conventional religion as ends in themselves'. To be bound by this fetter is to think that observing the outward forms of religious observance purely mechanically or compulsively will suffice to bring about deliverance from compounded existence. It is a superstitious belief in the inherent spiritual or salvific efficacy of, say, bathing in the River Ganges, going on pilgrimage to Mecca, receiving absolution from a priest, and so on.

It being so crucial to one's spiritual progress that one should break these three fetters, it is a good idea to approach them from every angle. I have sometimes described them in psychological terms as habit, vagueness, and superficiality,¹⁹³ while in social terms they could be described as attachment to psychology, philosophy, and religion. So here we are concerned with an essentially superficial approach to spiritual practice – that is, religion.

Samsāra is essentially an expression of compulsiveness. The fixed sense of self, the ego, is essentially compulsive, inasmuch as it has continually to reinforce its fixation by going over the same ground again and again. Such practices as bathing in the Ganges and so on are inherently egoistic acts, inasmuch as their rationale is based on the idea of a separate, unchanging self to be liberated or admitted to heaven or paradise. Such attachment to conventional religious or ethical observances simply binds us more securely to *samsāra*.

Buddhism itself, of course, has its own tendency towards this form of attachment. In Theravada Buddhism, for example, many people are strongly convinced that things like shaving one's head, wearing yellow

robes, and not eating after twelve o'clock make one a monk – and that these things are the most fundamental prerequisites to being a monk. But this is simply ethical formalism in the guise of Buddhism. In fact it is worse than that, because although the Theravada itself recognizes that these observances are matters of conventional rather than natural morality, if you try flouting these conventions in a Theravādin country, you will find you have committed a major offence.

There was an Indian bhikkhu I knew who spent a number of years in Sri Lanka, and it happened once that he picked up a severe cold in the head. He was staying up in the hills where it can get quite cold and – being an Indian – he put on a small woollen cap. This provoked a tremendous hullabaloo: there were pictures of him in the paper under such headlines as ‘the shameless monk who wears a woollen cap’ and people hooted after him in the street. For years afterwards he was nicknamed ‘the cap-wearing bhikkhu’. Of course, this happened over forty years ago; no doubt the Theravada is more relaxed about adherence to its conventional observances than it used to be.

When I returned to England after spending many years living as a bhikkhu in India, I myself provoked an astonishing reaction when I started letting my hair grow – this was while I was still wearing robes. This caused disquiet not just in Theravādin circles; Mahayanists and even Zen Buddhists all seemed to find it quite upsetting. It seemed that ethical formalism was creeping into British Buddhism although it had only been going for a few decades. So I let my hair grow longer and longer. After a lecture one evening several people came up to speak to me about the length of my hair, which by now amounted to a couple of inches, and one of them said, “*I don't know why you are growing your hair so long – it is really upsetting everybody. We don't know what it means.*”

I found it very interesting that the length of my hair should be a subject of such deep concern to so many people. Even Christmas Humphreys, who was supposed to be very broad-minded, was not, I came to understand, altogether happy about this deviation from the religious proprieties by one whom he had personally admonished to regard himself [i.e. Sangharakshita] as the Buddhist equivalent of the Vicar of Hampstead². When I eventually gave up wearing robes, there were some people who were rather pleased – and as with the issue of the hair, their approbation was not always for the right reasons – but there were others who were deeply upset, feeling that this was tantamount to giving up Buddhism.

This whole episode was something of an eye-opener for me, and when I set up the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order I tried to discourage any creeping paralysis of the forms and institutions through which we practise and spread the Dharma. It still happens, of course – people are heard to say, “*Well, this is the way we do things in the Triratna Buddhist Community.*” But in fact, things in the Buddhist movement I started are generally the way they are because I once thought, “*That's how we'll do things for now.*”

Within Triratna, nothing apart from the centrality of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels is set in stone. There isn't one right way of doing things – there never has been.

Of course in communicating the Dharma one should be responsible about this; one should draw on past experience, and not encourage mere self-expression. And we have already discussed the value of discipline, of rules, in the spiritual life. However, a certain margin of creative variation is not only permissible, but desirable. Every once in a while one needs to re-examine everything with a completely open mind. Maybe one could even go right back to the Buddha's way of doing things – just going from place to place, and talking to people.

The idea that one has to break away from religion and morality as ordinarily understood before one can really start to make any progress on the path is a radical one, even for Buddhists. But it is quite literally what one has to do. One is wasting one's time otherwise. The third fetter is really about fear of breaking the rules. But why is one afraid of breaking the rules? Basically, it is because one doesn't trust oneself. One thinks, "Well, if I don't observe the rules, who knows what will happen? All hell may break loose." Yes, perhaps it will. (pp194-197).

[End of extract.]

Textual note

¹⁹³ See Sangharakshita, *Taste of Freedom*, pp.19-22 in 1997 edition and pp. 28ff in 1990 edition:

http://www.sangharakshita.org/_books/taste-freedom.pdf

Note

² Hampstead is a part of north London. Sangharakshita led activities at a vihāra there after his return from India.

Definitions

Formalism: strict or excessive adherence to prescribed forms; the use or observance of prescribed forms without regard to their inner significance. (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.)

Compounded existence: *saṃsāra*.

Salvific: causing or able to cause salvation. (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.)

Conventional morality: social norms, e.g. monogamy.

Natural morality: skilful action, i.e. action expressive of skilful mental states, states that are free of the kleśas. See *What is the Dharma?* p. 217:
<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=382>

Questions

1. Why does Sangharakshita define the third fetter as ‘*superficiality*’?
2. Why does Sangharakshita say that, “*Samsāra is essentially an expression of compulsiveness*”?
3. What is ethical formalism and can you give other examples than the ones Sangharakshita gives?
4. Why do you think some people were pleased, “*Not always for the right reason,s*” when Sangharakshita gave up wearing robes?
5. What’s wrong with having, “*...a way we do things in Triratna*”?
6. Why might a, “*Certain margin of creative variation [be] not only permissible, but desirable*”? And why should, “*Mere self-expression,*” not be encouraged?
7. What does Sangharakshita mean when he says that, “*To break away from religion and morality... is a radical one, even for Buddhists*”?
8. What does he mean when he says that, “*...all hell may break loose,*” and how do you feel about that?

A summary by Subhuti

This is where you become attached to particular rituals and rules as ends in themselves. So it is a bit as if you said, “*Look, the Sevenfold Pūjā is the best way, and it has to be done in English, and you have to get every word right, and if you get every word right of the Sevenfold Pūjā in English, well, you will be Enlightened.*”

So that would be *śīlavrataparāmarśa*. Of course you can do the Pūjā in any language... So this illustrates what *śīlavrataparmārśa* is. We do certain things, we follow certain ways of life and so on, to help us to develop a state of mind. But what can happen is that we get attached to the way of doing things and we think that that in itself is bringing us spiritual results.

(From a talk given in India, reproduced in Lokabandhu, p 126)

Extracts from a chapter and four seminars by Sangharakshita

From ‘The Bodhisattva Hierarchy’, chapter 7 of The Bodhisattva Ideal

The third fetter is ‘dependence on moral rules and religious observances’. If we are too moral, in other words, we cannot become Enlightened. Which is not to say, of course, that if we are immoral we gain Enlightenment more easily. But if we think a lot of ourselves on account of being good, holy, and pure, if we think we’ve really got somewhere, and that those who do not do what we do ourselves, do not keep the rules we keep, are nowhere – nothing – miserable sinners, we are in the grip of this fetter. Jesus said that, “*The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath,*” but his most fervent followers are apt to forget that no religious observance is an end in itself. And more or less the same point, represented by this fetter, apparently tends to be lost on Buddhists just as easily.

For example, in Burma for a long time there was a dispute as to whether, when a monk went out of the monastery, he should cover his shoulder or leave it bare. It split the whole of the Burmese Sangha for a century: books and articles and pamphlets and commentaries were written about it, and even now it has only been settled in the sense that the parties have agreed to differ. So this is no more than an extreme example of dependence upon moral rules and religious observances as ends in themselves. Something may be good as a means to an end – meditation is good, an ethical life is good, giving is good, studying the scriptures is good – but as soon as it is set up as an end in itself, it becomes a hindrance. And, of course, this almost inevitably does happen if you apply yourself to these practices with any enthusiasm. So this fetter is very difficult indeed to break. You can’t do it by giving up rules, rituals, and religious observances; you do it by being able to follow them wholeheartedly and without attachment i.e. as a means to an end. In the meantime, this fetter is a reminder that there is no safe way of practising the Dharma. It is dangerous to practise the precepts, for example, in the sense that there is the possibility of practising them wrongly. To ask for a completely safe practice is to ask for a practice in which attitude doesn’t matter, a practice which is always sure to be the right thing to do. But that is impossible. Attitude always counts. Where there is a possibility of skilfulness, there is also a possibility of unskilfulness, until such time as one is a Stream Entrant. One can do pūjā in an unskilful state of mind or for unskilful reasons. One can go on retreat for the wrong reasons. One can read Buddhist books for the wrong reasons. One can go on pilgrimage for the wrong reasons. One can adopt a wrong attitude towards one’s meditation practice, thinking that it makes one better than other people. In short, it is possible to be a Buddhist for entirely the wrong reasons. There is no practice which is entirely safe from a spiritual point of view.

pp.188-9 on the 1999 edition:

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=454>

This passage is an edited version of part of the audio lecture ‘The Bodhisattva Hierarchy’: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=71>

Question

1. How can one be *too moral* to get Enlightened?

From *The Three Jewels* (chapters 10, 13 and 15) seminar

Or to put it perhaps more clearly and more straightforwardly, this fetter consists in the belief that it's enough if the change or the religiosity or the spiritual life is relatively external. And that doesn't just mean external practices and observances but even attitudes which don't go right deep down to the very centre of one's being. It's really more like that. In other words it's an absence of wholeheartedness. You don't sort of do things right from the very depths of your being, you do them on the periphery of your being without being really involved deep down and without doing them right from the heart as it were. This is what it really means. In other words you are just not wholehearted. You are satisfied with something relatively superficial and external. Your commitment doesn't reach right down to the depths of your being. You keep something in reserve. You go through the motions as it were, even go through the motions mentally, but deep down there's something in you that is not doing it, which is not participating.

Psychology of Buddhist Ritual seminar

One might even say that what the Buddha had in mind, when he spoke of this third fetter, was irrational dependence on ritual or irrational ritual in general. In other words that, which in psychological terms, is obsessional and compulsive.

Dimensions of Going for Refuge (revised) seminar

The third fetter is that of 'Dependence on Moral Rules and Religious Observances' (*śīlavrataparāmarśa*). It could be paraphrased, I think, as the belief that 'going through the motions' will do. You go through the motions when your heart is not really in what you are doing. You think that if you keep up appearances externally, i.e. if you observe the moral rules because that is what society requires, and maintain the religious observances because that is what your co-religionists require, then everything will be all right. This kind of attitude is what is called 'dependence on moral rules and religious observances'. Here there is a split between the external observances and your inward state of being. Though the things you are doing may be good in themselves, your heart is not in them and your performance of them is therefore empty, mechanical, rigid, artificial. Hence they don't really help you to develop: they don't get you anywhere spiritually.

From *The Nature of Existence* seminar (2nd final edition)

[For Tibetans] a recitation of the *Om Mani Padme Hum* was enough. A recitation of the Bodhisattva Vow was enough. This is also literalism. Just to say something is enough. But you know you get this in every sphere of life, one might say. This is the essence of the Third Fetter, that you just go through the motions of something. You either just don't do it, which is bad enough, or you just go through the motions of doing it. You say you believe, but you don't live up to that. Or perhaps it just doesn't even occur to you that you ought to be living up to what you profess. I think it is very easy to get into that sort of mental state of professing but not practising, very, very easy, and again, this is the essence in a way of the

śīlavrataparāmarśa, whether you profess verbally or you profess by purely mechanical actions.

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/texts/seminars>

Workpoints

For each of the above extracts, spell out the main point or points that Sangharakshita is making.

The raft

The Buddha used similes a lot in his teaching. This is one of his more famous ones:

The raft simile

“Monks, I will teach you the Dhamma compared to a raft, for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of holding onto. Listen and pay close attention. I will speak.”

“As you say, lord,” the monks responded to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One said: “Suppose a man were travelling along a path. He would see a great expanse of water, with the near shore dubious and risky, the further shore secure and free from risk, but with neither a ferryboat nor a bridge going from this shore to the other. The thought would occur to him, ‘Here is this great expanse of water, with the near shore dubious and risky, the further shore secure and free from risk, but with neither a ferryboat nor a bridge going from this shore to the other. What if I were to gather grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and, having bound them together to make a raft, were to cross over to safety on the other shore in dependence on the raft, making an effort with my hands and feet?’ Then the man, having gathered grass, twigs, branches, and leaves, having bound them together to make a raft, would cross over to safety on the other shore in dependence on the raft, making an effort with his hands and feet. Having crossed over to the further shore, he might think, ‘How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands and feet, I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don’t I, having hoisted it on my head or carrying on my back, go wherever I like?’ What do you think, monks: Would the man, in doing that, be doing what should be done with the raft?”

“No, lord.”

“And what should the man do in order to be doing what should be done with the raft? There is the case where the man, having crossed over, would think, ‘How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands and feet, I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don’t I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?’ In doing this, he would be doing what should be done with the

raft. In the same way, monks, I have taught the Dhamma compared to a raft, for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of holding onto. Understanding the Dhamma as taught compared to a raft, you should let go even of Dhammas, to say nothing of non-Dhammas.”

Translated from the Alagaddūpama Sutta – Majjhima Nikāya 22 – by Bhikkhu Thanissaro to be found on the Access to Insight website. See p.228 in Bodhi’s translation: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.022.than.html>

Questions

1. What does the raft represent?
2. What do the near and further shore represent?
3. What would be one’s motivation in wanting to carry the raft after one has reached the other side?
4. What is the Buddha suggesting that one does instead, and why?
5. What light does this parable cast on the matter of views?
6. What are the implications for your practice of this parable?

Week 6: Wrong Views Regarding Actions and their Consequences

This final session begins with the sixth and last extract from Sangharakshita's discussion of *dr̥ṣṭi* in *Know Your Mind* and continues with a short summary by Subhuti.

Wrong views

[Beginning of extract:]

This category concerns wrong views regarding actions and their consequences. They are given a category of their own because wrong views of this kind will undermine the spiritual life completely, making any kind of development on the path impossible. In this respect they are, so to speak, the cardinal wrong views. Traditionally there are four: denial of cause, denial of effect, denial of oneself as an ethical agent, and denial of the attainments of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The first of these, denial of cause, is the wilful refusal to acknowledge any meaningful distinction between good and bad actions – that is, the wilful refusal to recognize the ethical content of actions. This is a wrong view that used to have some currency in some 'beat' Zen circles ('square' Zen being the other extreme of insisting on all the rules, paraphernalia, and rituals of traditional Zen Buddhism). One would assume what one imagined to be the viewpoint of the Enlightened mind which has gone beyond mundane distinctions, including that between good and evil, or skilful and unskilful.

In fact, the Enlightened mind unquestionably perceives the difference between good and evil. If you are Enlightened you will look at compounded existence and perceive what is appropriate to or pertains to it, and this will include the necessary distinction between what is skilful and what is unskilful. Or rather, you will at least seem to others to be recommending skilful courses of action and deprecating unskilful ones. Whether you yourself see things in that way is another matter. What we may be sure of is that an Enlightened one will perceive the ethical implications of our actions far more clearly than we do.

The second of these wrong views, denial of effect, is the wilful refusal to acknowledge any meaningful distinction between good and bad actions in terms of their consequences – specifically karmic ones. This may be a straightforward conclusion arising from the first wrong view, or it may be that no effectual ethical connection between action and experience, *karma* and *vipāka*, is recognized at all.

Of course, causation is not a straightforward matter, which is why it is better to think in terms of conditionality. In the Indian philosophical tradition, there are two opposing viewpoints with regard to the relationship between cause and effect. The followers of the *Sātkāryavāda* school of thought, which brought together the *Sāṃkhya*s and the *Advaita-Vedantins*,

believe that there is essentially no difference between cause and effect, that effect is a transformation of cause, cause in another form. Various illustrations are given in support of this thesis. For instance, one can say that when water freezes, water is the cause, and ice is the effect; that when clay is formed and baked, the clay is the cause, and the pot is the effect; and that when gold ornaments are made, again, the effect is a transformation of the cause. That is the view of the *Sātkāryavādins*. The opposite viewpoint, the view of the *Asatkāryavādins*, is that cause and effect are totally distinct. When there is an acorn and then much later there is an oak tree, it seems clear that the tree is not simply a transformation of the acorn, even though the acorn is the cause of the tree. Cause and effect are, according to this view, quite different.¹⁹⁵

The Buddhist view is that the whole question is artificial, because from a practical point of view it is not necessary to assert either of these positions. Ice arises in dependence upon water; the oak arises in dependence upon the acorn. There is no need to say more than this. Besides, as Nāgārjuna points out, if cause and effect are identical there can be no causation. Similarly, if cause and effect are different, no causation is possible.

The idea of conditionality is effectively the idea of causation employed in modern science. When we use the term cause it should be understood to mean the condition in dependence on which an event is observed to occur. But although there is an event, in the sense of a happening, there is no ‘thing’ to which something has happened. There is only a process.

From an ethical perspective, the point is that actions have consequences. Unskillful actions of body, speech, and mind do not come from nowhere and do not disappear without leaving a trace. We cannot say that suffering is caused by the *kleśas*, but we can certainly observe that we suffer when we are subject to the *kleśas*.

The third wrong view with respect to actions and their consequences is denial of oneself as an ethical agent: the wilful refusal to recognize that one’s relationship with others, as well as with oneself, has an ethical dimension. Our actions affect others, and they affect us too, not only in the immediate future, but with respect to future lives as well. Our past and our future are the product to some degree of our ethical decisions.

The crucial relationship from an ethical point of view is traditionally the relationship with one’s mother and father. If one doesn’t recognize a special duty or moral responsibility towards them, one may well have lost one’s moral bearings altogether (assuming that one’s early ethical training did come from one’s mother and father). The family in which one grows up, in other words, is said to be the training ground for the maintenance and cultivation of ethical relationships in later life.

The socialization of a child takes time and skill. When it is done well, it produces an ethically aware individual, someone who has a positive

attitude towards other human beings, who actually wants to be kind and generous, and who has a positive attitude towards society generally, and can find their place in it. When it is done badly it produces someone who would sell their own grandmother for sixpence, and who has a negative and destructive attitude towards society as a whole – an attitude sometimes quite consciously and irresponsibly instilled in children, with very dangerous long-term results.

Another way of denying that one is an ethical agent is to take the view – perhaps a particularly modern one – that life, even spiritual life, is simply about doing what we feel like doing. Sooner or later, this viewpoint is more or less bound to lead to an over-valuation of the sexual relationship. This is not to say that sexual activity is necessarily unskilful on its own basic level. At the most unrefined mundane level, it is good not to be sexually blocked. There are those whose emotional development is held back by their being sexually repressed, who are unable to free up their emotions at any more subtle level than that of their sexuality. Unless some exceptional spontaneous spiritual experience arises to break through this emotional blockage, straightforward sexual experience may be the answer (which is not to say one cannot be both sexually liberated and thoroughly blocked emotionally – one can, very easily).

The idea that there is nothing to feel guilty about in one's sexuality is for many of us quite new. Because of the atmosphere of guilt that, even subconsciously, still surrounds the issue of sex, Western people sometimes find it difficult to accept sex simply for what it is – just sex. It has to be dignified, it has to be awarded some kind of spiritual validation. If one feels that there is something wrong with sex, one wants it sprinkled with religious rose-water, so to speak, to make it all right. This is perhaps one reason why even quite secular people like to have a church wedding, for example. And it is why some people who would like to be Buddhists refer to their sexual relationship in terms of the Tantra – girlfriends becoming dakinis, coupling becoming the union of wisdom and compassion, and so on. They don't want to face the fact that a purely mundane preoccupation occupies a large, perhaps central place in their life, and that a truly spiritual commitment would require a shift in their priorities.

No doubt a sexual experience can reach such a pitch of intensity that one is tempted to make some spiritual claims for it. But there is a simple test to apply here: does faith in the Three Jewels come into it anywhere? Is that intense experience compatible with a simultaneous experience of faith? Is the overall orientation of the emotion involved in that experience in the direction of what the Three Jewels represents – that is, faith in the transcendental? I would suggest that the actual experience of faith is incompatible with any quite defined sexual experience, that it will inhibit and even dissolve the sexual experience. The two cannot occur simultaneously.

The danger is twofold. Firstly, it lies in not recognizing an experience for what it is. That is, as well as not distinguishing the skilful from the unskilful, it involves not distinguishing clearly between lower and higher orders of skilfulness. The danger is that one tries to invest something occupying a lower order of skilfulness with the prestige and mystique of something that belongs to a higher order, in order to justify one's attachment to that less skilful experience.

The fourth of these wrong views, denial of the attainments of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, is the wilful refusal to recognize the possibility of liberation from compounded existence – and not just in the abstract. It is the wilful refusal to recognize the concrete reality of the Buddhist ideal as embodied in historical and even contemporary figures. It is to disbelieve that anyone has in the past or the present achieved a level of development that is qualitatively different from ordinary human existence, such as to represent an irreversible shift in their being towards an ever clearer and more compassionate realization of the true nature of existence. With this wrong view one immediately limits the range of one's own vision. This attitude is probably more prevalent among ex-Protestants than among ex-Catholics because Catholics have at least been brought up with the concrete possibility of the attainment of sainthood embodied in the lives of historical individuals right up to the present day. Protestants, however, through their objection to the worship of saints, lost the notion of sanctity as representing a different and higher level of human development. The whole idea of attaining a particular level of sanctity that is recognized as marking one off from ordinary human goodness is regarded as rather suspect in a Protestant society.

Ex-Protestants tend to think in terms of '*Believe and you will be saved.*' If they do accept the possibility of some kind of transformation they tend to think of it as a dramatic, even sensational group experience (mediated, perhaps, by an evangelical preacher). They don't tend to think in terms of spiritual evolution. If they take up meditation, they think of it as a way of being at peace with oneself, of being happy and comfortable with oneself on one's own level, not as a way of moving towards the permanent attainment of a state far beyond that level. Those who resist the possibility of radical change are really looking to reinforce their existing attitude, their existing way of life. If they take up meditation it is for the same reason that most people go to church – to partake of whatever consolation and emotional positivity they can find there, to enable them to carry on with mundane life.

The whole idea that one may develop into a substantially better kind of human being can be undermined by the assumption, widely current today, that no one is better than anyone else. The fact that you are more aware, more positive, more kind, more thoughtful, more energetic than other people, is not supposed actually to make you a better person than others. After all, it may be argued, other people have not had your advantages. You are not more developed; you are differently developed. One of the

reasons that festivals celebrating the attainment of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas like Śākyamuni or Padmasambhava are so important is that they overturn this wrong view by drawing our attention not only to the path to Enlightenment but also to actual exemplars of the attainment of its goal.

[End of extract.]

[At this point appear the four paragraphs which I transposed to extract reproduced in the thirrd session. If you want to read them you will find them there; they are the last four paragraphs.] (pp. 197-202)

Subhuti's summary

These are wrong views about the nature of karma. This is supposed to be the worst possible wrong view. And basically it consists in denying that there is such a thing as karma. There are four aspects. First of all you believe that there is no cause of good fruits. So you believe that actions do not have consequences. Whatever you do the result of that action is completely random. You can see that this completely undermines spiritual life. Then you look out from the other point of view and you deny that there are fruits, that there is some positive outcome from your meritorious action. Then you deny that there is a moral agent. You are effectively saying, *"I am not responsible for my actions"* Then finally, you assert that there is no spiritual attainment. So in other words you deny the possibility of spiritual life.

From a talk in India, Lokabandhu p. 126.

Questions

1. How does it happen that, *"Our past and our future are the product to some degree of our ethical decisions"*?
2. Do you think it's true that, *"...if one doesn't recognise a special duty or moral responsibility towards them [one's mother and father], one may well have lost one's moral bearings altogether"*?
3. What does Sangharakshita mean when he says that, *"The danger [relating to any defined sexual experience] is that one tries to invest something occupying a lower order of skilfulness with the prestige and mystique of something that belongs to a higher order, in order to justify one's attachment to that less skilful experience"*?
4. Why is it a wrong view to, *"Disbelieve that anyone has in the past or the present achieved a level of development that is quantitatively different from ordinary human existence"*?
5. Do you think there is anything wrong with people taking up meditation, *"To enable them to carry on with mundane life"*?

6. Is there anything wrong with the idea that, “*No one is better than anyone else*”?
7. What effect has our previous religious conditioning had on our views?
8. What is the right view corresponding to each of these four wrong views?

Further questions

Now that you have come to the end of the six extracts on the five kinds of wrong views from *Know Your Mind*, you may like to ask yourself these questions:

1. Do you think that any of the five kinds of views reviewed in this module has held you back on the path more than others?
2. If you have identified any view(s) which is/are holding you back, what first step do you intend to take to deal with it/them?
3. If you don't hold any of these wrong views, why aren't you Awakened?

Week 7: Views and the Madhyamaka

In the first six sessions of the module, we looked at extracts from Sangharakshita's commentary on *dr̥ṣṭi* in *Know Your Mind*. We also looked at other material, including several extracts from the Pāli Canon, which claims to record the teaching of the Buddha. The Buddha's first proclamation of his teaching in the Deer Park at Sarnath was called 'the first turning of the wheel' (For an account of that first teaching, see the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, *Samyutta Nikāya* V 420, Bhikkhu Bodhi p. 1843).

Although *Know Your Mind* is not presented as a commentary on the Buddha's teaching on views in the Pāli Canon, there is nothing in Sangharakshita's commentary which is not consistent with what we can read in the Canon. It's all what he calls '*Basic Buddhism*', that is, the core of the Dharma. It's also what Paul Williams means when he refers to '*Mainstream Buddhism*'. So thus far in the module, you have been becoming familiar with the '*Basic Buddhist*' take on views.

Since Mahāyāna Buddhism was very interested in views, it's been decided that a module which purports to deal with views in Buddhism would be incomplete without a discussion of the contribution of the Mahāyāna.

So in the last two sessions, we'll be looking at the two great philosophical traditions of the Mahāyāna, the Madhyamaka and the Yogācāra. The Madhyamaka has generally been seen as such a significant renewal of the Buddhadharma that it has been called 'the second turning of the wheel'. Views were very much an issue for the Madhyamaka.

In this session, we will begin by reading or chanting the *Heart Sutra*, either in Edward Conze's translation below, or the version which appears in the *Triratna Pūjā Book*:

http://www.fwbo-news.org/resources/heart_sutra.pdf

The Heart Sūtra

HOMAGE TO THE PERFECTION OF WISDOM, THE LOVELY, THE HOLY!

Avalokita, the Holy Lord and Bodhisattva, was moving in the deep course of the Wisdom which has gone beyond. He looked down from on high, he beheld but five heaps, and he saw that in their own-being they were empty.

Here, O Śāriputra, form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form, the same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness.

Here, O Śāriputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness; they are not produced or stopped, not defiled or immaculate, not deficient or complete. Therefore, O Śāriputra, in emptiness there is no form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor impulse, nor consciousness; No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; No forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touchables or objects of mind; No sight-organ element, and so forth, until we come to: No mind-consciousness element; There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, and so forth, until we come to: there is no decay and death, no extinction of decay and death. There is no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path. There is no cognition, no attainment and no non-attainment.

Therefore, O Śāriputra, it is because of his indifference to any kind of personal attainment, and through his reliance on the Perfection of Wisdom, that a Bodhisattva dwells without thought-coverings. In the absence of thought-coverings he has not been made to tremble, he has overcome what can upset, and in the end he attains to Nirvana.

All those who appear as Buddhas in the three periods of time fully awake to the utmost, right and perfect enlightenment because they have relied on the perfection of wisdom.

Therefore one should know the *prajñāpāramitā* as the great spell, the spell of great knowledge, the utmost spell, the unequalled spell, allayer of all suffering, in truth – for what could go wrong? By the *prajñāpāramitā* has this spell been delivered. It runs like this: Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond, O what an awakening, all-hail! This completes the Heart of perfect wisdom.

Now follows Sangharakshita's commentary (taken verbatim from *Wisdom Beyond Words*) on the first four great statements of Avalokiteśvara. The excerpts from the *Heart Sutra* appear in bold.

“Here, O Śāriputra, form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form, the same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness.”

The first statement made by Avalokiteśvara is that the five skandhas are empty. This statement represents common ground between himself and Śāriputra; both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna start from this point. According to this fundamental Buddhist teaching, the entire range of existent phenomena can be reduced to five groups or aggregates: material form, feelings (pleasant, painful, and neutral), perceptions, impulses, and consciousness. Whether one is dealing with things or persons, one can discuss them completely, exhaustively, in terms of these five categories. It isn't necessary to bring in any such separate, independent category as a self or a soul. What we call 'the self' is not anything independent of the skandhas; it is not something separate from form, feeling, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness. The 'self' is only a label for the skandhas in their collective aspect. This first great statement is that the five skandhas exhaust the whole of existence, and that there is nothing beyond them. At the same time, they are empty of any self or soul.

“Here, O Śāriputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness; they are not produced or stopped, not defiled or immaculate, not deficient or complete.”

Avalokiteśvara's second great statement goes a bit further. All dharmas, he now says, are empty. Here we begin to get into deep water. The early Buddhist classification of the whole of existence under the headings of the five skandhas was rejected by the Abhidharma tradition of which Śāriputra was said to be the founder. It was not – you might say – quite scientific enough for the Abhidharma. So they replaced the original five skandha classification with a fourfold one - into form, thought, mental concomitants, and miscellaneous, each of which was sub-divided again and again. The ultimate sub-divisions of these four categories, the irreducible elements beyond which analysis cannot go, they called the dharmas. The Sarvāstivāda, perhaps the most important school of the Hīnayāna, made out that there were seventy-two of these dharmas, the ultimate irreducible elements into which the whole of phenomenal, conditioned existence can be reduced. These are known as the 'conditioned dharmas', to distinguish them from a much shorter list of just three 'Unconditioned dharmas', consisting of space and the two kinds of nirvana. (These Unconditioned dharmas were seen as eternal, and as not arising by way of cause and effect as did the conditioned dharmas.) Altogether these make up the famous seventy-five dharmas of the Sarvāstivāda. The philosophy is a form of pluralistic realism.

The early Abhidharma philosophers had a great deal of fun classifying and cataloguing their dharmas in all sorts of different ways. They sorted out conditioned dharmas from Unconditioned ones. They distinguished dharmas that were ‘defiled’ by greed, hatred, and delusion from ‘undefiled dharmas’; and dharmas which were limited or incomplete from those which were infinite or complete. They noted how every conditioned dharma was produced and then stopped, whereas Unconditioned dharmas were characterized solely by nirodha, stopping. Scores upon scores of different types of relationship between dharmas were worked out, giving tens of thousands of permutations, and forming an enormously elaborate structure. It is hard to conceive just how elaborate this structure was, but the results fill volume after volume after volume of analysis and co-ordination of dharmas.

Avalokiteśvara asserts that all these dharmas are empty. They are not ultimately real. With this statement he dismisses the whole scholastic apparatus of the Abhidharma. The entire edifice is empty. It’s all right as far as it goes – it takes us beyond the gross delusion that things are things and persons are persons – but as a system of analysis and classification it is a product of the subtle activity of the mind, and as such it represents a subtle delusion which must ultimately be transcended.

Perfect Wisdom, represented by Avalokiteśvara, destroys not only the Abhidharma, but all attempts, both philosophical and scientific, to give a systematic intellectual account of reality. The only way you can get to reality is by destroying your ideas about reality, however subtle, however sophisticated, however convincing they may be. Their validity can only ever be provisional. So all dharmas are empty.

“Therefore, O Śāriputra, in emptiness there is no form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor impulse, nor consciousness; No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; No forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touchables or objects of mind; No sight-organ element, and so forth, until we come to: No mind-consciousness element...”

Third statement: in śūnyatā no dharmas exist. This is the corollary – the more positive counterpart, if you like – of the previous statement. It suggests that reality is quite bare, quite pure, devoid of all our intellectual constructions, all our philosophies, all our concepts. These ideas are ours. They do not belong to reality, for reality knows nothing about them. Reality rejects – to anthropomorphize a little – all our thoughts. In śūnyatā there is no distinguishing whatsoever between conditioned dharmas and Unconditioned dharmas, or defiled dharmas and pure dharmas. All such dualisms are transcended. It is like - to use a favourite image of the Mahāyāna - the unclouded sky. Clouds may be very beautiful, but they obscure the naked brilliance of the sky itself. Reality in its true state, above and beyond all our systems of thought about it, is like the clear, cloudless sky. In śūnyatā no dharmas exist.

“There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, and so forth, until we come to: there is no decay and death, no extinction of decay and death. There is no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path. There is no cognition, no attainment and no non-attainment.”

Philosophy, even Buddhist philosophy, has been disposed of. Do we imagine, then, that religion – even Buddhism itself - is going to escape? Avalokiteśvara’s fourth great statement is to the effect that there is no such thing as Buddhism. I’m paraphrasing a little – and this fourth statement is really a broader or more universal version of the third one - but this is what it comes to. He eliminates religion considered as an end in itself. There is nothing absolute or ultimate about religion. So in this part of the sutra various well-known categories of Buddhist thought are enumerated: the five skandhas, the six sense organs, the eighteen elements, the twelve links of the chain of dependent origination, the Four Noble Truths, knowledge itself, attainment, and even non-attainment. The last two items, *prāpti* and *aprāpti*, differ from the rest in that they are terms that do not occur in the Pāli Canon. They were introduced by the Sarvāstivādins as a category of the saṃskāras, and as such they represent an extreme example of abstract concepts being reified.

Avalokiteśvara declares all these philosophical and even practical religious categories, all the operative bases of our religious life, including the idea of Conditioned Co-production and even the idea of Enlightenment itself, to be śūnya, void, without ultimate validity. He is saying that if you want to develop – if your goal is Perfect Wisdom – well, you have to go beyond Buddhism. In reality, you have to realize, there is no such thing as Buddhism. Buddhism is only a raft to take you to the other shore; then it must be abandoned. It is only a finger pointing to the moon.

At this point the Zen connection with the Heart Sutra – or rather, the way the Heart Sutra works itself out practically in terms of Zen – is unmistakable. The Zen Master who replied to the question, “*Suppose I met the Buddha on the road, what should I do?*” with the terse instruction, “*Kill him.*” was telling his pupil that he had to leave Buddhism behind. If you are really set on Enlightenment, don’t let the concept of the Buddha get in the way. There is nothing that hinders you in your search for reality so much as that which is there to help you, namely religion. What should be a means to an end is so easily taken for an end in itself.

Buddhism is probably unique in seeing this so lucidly. It sweeps the path to Enlightenment clear even of Buddhism itself. No doubt you need Buddhism for a long time. You need your mantras and your meditations, your chanting and your scriptures, your lectures and retreats and seminars, and you need to use Buddhist terms and ideas. But in the end you have to go beyond the limits of their guidance, sweeping it all aside to encounter reality alone.

Wisdom Beyond Words, pp.23-30

A definition

Pluralist Realism: The meaning of pluralism that helps here is a view that the world we experience is made up of many many things that interact with each other. Realism is the view that universals have an objective or absolute existence (paraphrased from the *Shorter Oxford*). We can take ‘universal’ here to mean universally shared components – bits which everything is made of. So what Sangharakshita means by using this term is that the adherents of a sub-school of the Sarvāstivādins seems to have held that the knowable universe is made up of many universal components (dharmas) which have absolute existence and which interact with each other.

What is ‘The Madhyamaka’?

As mentioned earlier, the Madhyamaka was one of the two great philosophical traditions of the Mahāyāna, the other being the Yogācāra. It could be called a school of thought, but it was not a school of the sort that is meant when one speaks of a division of the monastic Sangha, like the Theravada, Sarvāstivāda, etc. As a school of thought, it would have crossed the various ordination boundaries of the Sangha. The project of the Madhyamaka was to explicate the meaning of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* (or *Perfection of Wisdom*), which include the *Heart Sūtra*, the *Diamond Sūtra*, and the *Ratnaguṇa-Saṃcayagāthā*. Nāgārjuna is the father of this philosophical tradition; he is a very important figure, and the works attributed to him have had an enormous effect on later Buddhist thinking, particularly in Tibet and China.

The name Madhyamaka comes from Nāgārjuna’s main work the *Mūla-Madhyamaka-Kārikā* (MK), or *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*. Many scholars now refer to the school as ‘Madhyamika’, with an ‘i’ in the penultimate syllable.

What was or is ‘The Abhidharma’?

After the Buddha’s death, his disciples had been concerned not only to collect his teachings, which they did in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, but also to explore its implications. That gave rise to Buddhist philosophy, or what is known as the *Abhidhamma*. The Abhidhamma can best be seen as a project of enquiry and investigation which began soon after the Buddha’s death and continued over many centuries. Its product was huge, and much of it was very sophisticated. Sangharakshita’s *Know Your Mind* is a commentary on a commentary of a work based on an Abhidharma work of exposition written by Asaṅga, the *Abidharmasamuccaya*. In fact, one could see *Know Your Mind* as part of the Abhidharma tradition.

The Abhidharma project was carried out within the different schools of Buddhism that arose over time. The largest school was the *Sarvāstivādins*. Sarvāstivādin scholars developed their Abhidharma on the basis of analysis. The idea was that if one analysed something and saw that it could be analysed into parts, then that thing could not be said to have inherent existence or irreducible essence. Reflecting on such an analysis would help a practitioner to realise the truth of

anattā. A sub-school of the Sarvāstivādins, the *Sarvāstivādin-Vaibhāṣikas*, arrived at the conclusion that there were phenomena beyond which one could not analyse any further, and which therefore could be understood as irreducible. These irreducible particles were dharmas. They were thought to have a momentary existence; they came and went, and combined with and split off from other dharmas very, very quickly.

In adopting this analytical approach, the Abhidharma enquirers were taking their cue from the Buddha himself, who had recommended such analysing in, for example, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, where he suggests that one analyses the body into its anatomical parts, to develop non-clinging, and likens this process to that of a skilled butcher dissecting a cow by the roadside. The six element meditation practice mentioned in the second session is recommended for similar reasons.

A good place to read more about the Abhidharma is chapter 10 of Andrew Skilton's book, *A Concise History of Buddhism*:

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=330>

There is also a helpful and readable account in chapter 8 of Rupert Gethin's book, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (see also his index):

<http://tinyurl.com/p2fhyg>

The Madhyamaka can be seen as part of the long Abhidharma tradition.

What did the Madhyamakas want to say?

Nāgārjuna in fact claimed to have no thesis that he wished to prove. One could understand him to be claiming that he was not expounding a view and that his purpose was only to refute the wrong views of those who had misinterpreted the Buddha's teaching since the Parinirvana. Later thinkers, like Tsongkhapa, argued that Nāgārjuna had in fact had a thesis since he had taught that all phenomena are empty (*śūnya*).

In the MK, Nāgārjuna presents emptiness as equivalent to that fundamental teaching of the Buddha *pratītya samutpāda*, which Sangharakshita calls '*conditioned co-production*', and others call '*dependent arising*' or '*dependent origination*'. (As we shall see, Nāgārjuna uses the term '*emptiness*' (*śūnyatā*) to indicate the '*middle*' between the extremes of eternalism and nihilism).

Nāgārjuna wants to know, if it's the case that a dharma arises in dependence upon some other thing, as the Buddha taught, then how can it be defined in a manner which the Sarvāstivādin-Vaibhāṣika Abhidharmists want to define it, as something which exists of itself and in itself, as that which possesses an irreducible essence (*svabhāva/sabhāva* – also translated as inherent existence)?³ To say that this is true undermines the whole of the Buddhadharma, which teaches that everything is empty of *svabhāva*. And that is the truth, says Nāgārjuna; everything is *śūnya*, in

the sense that there is no thing which has an irreducible essence (or inherent existence).

Nāgārjuna is careful to spell out that he is not saying that nothing exists. In fact, those who see the concept of emptiness (śūnyatā) as entailing a nihilist view, are in serious danger:

By a misperception of emptiness

A person of little intelligence is destroyed.

Like a snake incorrectly seized

Or like a spell incorrectly cast.

(Mulamadhyamakakarika, 24.11)

The victorious ones have said

That emptiness is the relinquishing of all views.

For whomsoever emptiness is a view,

That one will accomplish nothing.

(Mulamadhyamakakarika, 13:8)

It isn't that nothing exists, but that nothing exists as an individual, irreducible essence possessed of its own inherent existence. What is more, to see the teaching of emptiness as negating the teaching of the Buddha is to ignore the basic Abhidharma distinction between conventional and ultimate truth. The ultimate truth about the way things are is 'emptiness', but conventional truth is still truth, and without it one cannot practise.

The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma

Is based on two truths:

A truth of worldly convention

And an ultimate truth.

Those who do not understand

The distinction between these two truths

Do not understand

The Buddha's profound truth.

Without a foundation in the conventional truth,

The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.

Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,

Liberation is not achieved.

(Mulamadhyamakakarika, 24: 8-10)

It is very important to understand what Nāgārjuna is saying about conventional and ultimate truth. He is saying, as the Buddha said, that all phenomena arise in dependence on the basis of conditions, and pass away similarly. Everything that we see or can identify is like this – involved in pratītya samutpāda. That means that it is śūnya, empty of any inherent existence whatsoever. That is the ultimate truth about all phenomena, and, this includes the concepts we use. The fact that this is the ultimate truth about things and concepts does not mean that they do not have a relative or conventional value.

A bus, like all other phenomena, is ultimately empty, but it is still very useful to get us to the Buddhist Centre. It's conventionally true to say about the bus that it is an object which is useful to us in that way. Exactly the same applies to concepts like pratītya samutpāda, nirvana, the Four Truths, the Eightfold Path. They are ultimately empty too, but they are very useful concepts for us who are trying to develop. In fact, Nāgārjuna is saying, we could not develop without them. But ultimately they are empty, and so we know that there is nothing there for us to fix onto and become attached to. We need to get off the bus when we've completed our journey and leave it to take the other passengers somewhere else. In just the same way, we need to use the concepts that help us to develop, and not become attached to them as ends in themselves. You may at this point be realising that very much the same point was being made by the Buddha in the parable of the raft. This will probably clarify a famous couple of verses of the MK which have often confused the unwary:

*There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence and nirvana.
There is not the slightest difference
Between nirvana and cyclic existence.*

*Whatever is the limit of nirvana
That is the limit of cyclic existence.
There is not even the slightest difference between them,
Or even the subtlest thing.*

(Mulamadhyamakakarika, 25:19-20)

So is Nāgārjuna saying that nirvana, which is characterised by skilful mental states, is exactly the same as saṃsāra, which is characterised by unskilful mental states? Not at all. He is saying that they are both concepts which are relatively useful and are ultimately empty. It is not helpful to beings to treat either as ends in

themselves. Both concepts are relatively useful as means to an end, and are not to become the object of attachment. That is their similarity.

By using the concept of emptiness, Nāgārjuna is trying to clarify the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising, and how it works as the middle way between nihilism and eternalism. And both pratītya samutpāda and śūnyatā are concepts, both pointing to the middle way between eternalism and nihilism. Pratītya samutpāda is not 'nothing', nor is śūnyatā 'nothing'. Neither point towards nihilism. Nor is either pratītya samutpāda or śūnyatā 'something', let alone an absolute reality. Both, though, point towards the ultimate truth about the ways things are.

To sum up, what Nāgārjuna is really saying is: *“Don't take concepts or conceptual categories literally, and don't fix onto them. As the Buddha taught, they are a raft, which one uses for the purpose of getting to the other side. Nirvana and saṃsāra are both concepts, and neither is in some way 'outside' pratītya samutpāda. Both are śūnya.”*

Note

³ The Sanskrit word *svabhāva* is not easy to translate. I have used the term 'irreducible essence' when the term refers to something permanent that investigators were trying to find, or not find. *Svabhāva* is also translated as inherent existence, or intrinsic existence, having self-existence, or self-nature. These terms are trying to convey the idea of something which has a permanent and self-sufficient existence. I have opted in this week's material to use the term inherent existence.

Views and the Madhyamaka

The term 'view' is a very important one for both the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras and for Nāgārjuna. They both want to make clear that there is a level on which views in general, including right views, need to be seen as a form of mental rigidity, of opinionatedness. What they are trying to get across here is that whereas we unawakened beings grasp at and become fixed on particular conceptual understandings or verbal expressions and become attached to our right understanding, the Awakened mind is free of all views – even right views; it simply sees that all dharmas are empty. It just sees things in the ways that they really are. This doesn't of course mean that right views are in some way wrong, only that conceptual understanding should not be confused with real seeing. Right views are ultimately only a device to bring about perfect understanding. The theory is to help us understand. The map is to help us navigate across the terrain. One can't really say that a Buddha holds the view that all dharmas are empty. He doesn't actually hold any views or opinions at all – he simply sees things the way they really are. The mind that sees emptiness is free of any tendency to impose some sort of conceptual construct on the way things are, whereas the mind that merely has a theoretical grasp is not free in that way. We may come to believe that Nāgārjuna is right to say that all phenomena are empty, but until we actually see it for ourselves, we'll just go on behaving in the same old way.

Nāgārjuna is not trying to say that the whole Abhidharma is wrong, just as he is not trying to show that any of the other categories of Buddhist teachings e.g. the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the skandhas are wrong. He is concerned with a particular Dharma issue, that is the ontology of a ‘dharma’⁴. Put in another way, he is concerned to examine the nature of a dharma by asking such questions as: “Can a dharma be said to exist? If so, in what sense can it be said to exist? In what way does it exist?” As mentioned above, a sub-school of the Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma tended to define dharmas as the irreducible divisions in the analysis of experience, as those things which have inherent existence. What Nāgārjuna says is that, according to Buddhist principles, such ultimate divisions of analysis are just made up, and must not be taken as referring to ultimate realities in themselves. For Nāgārjuna, an account of the world in Abhidharma terms is fine, provided that we don’t view it as an exact and final description of how things are. Like the Buddha’s teachings generally, the Abhidharma must ultimately be seen as ‘conventional’, taught for the purpose of the uprooting of the kleśas, and becoming Awakened.

It’s worth noting that in seeking to establish his understanding of emptiness, Nāgārjuna appeals not to the authority of the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras, but to that of the discourses of the Buddha on dependent arising in the *Samyutta Nikāya* of the Pāli Canon. The emptiness of dharmas is not a further teaching, but something that follows inevitably from the logic of the emptiness of the self. Self ‘atman’ and ‘inherent existence’ (*svabhāva*) are equivalents. The doctrine that there is no essential self underlying persons entails the doctrine that there is no essential self underlying dharmas. Just as there is no ultimate, irreducible, unchanging ‘thing’ behind the labels ‘person’ and ‘self’, so there is no unchanging ‘thing’ behind the labels ‘greed’, ‘hatred’, and ‘delusion’, or behind the labels of non-attachment, mettā, or prajñā, or for that matter behind the labels of saṃsāra and nirvana. And this is what the Awakened ones have seen.

To sum up the Madhyamaka teaching on views, or rather the Madhyamaka critique of others’ views:

There are no phenomena whatsoever that have *svabhāva*. Everything is *nisvabhāva* (without *svabhāva*). What appears to us is real – but only up to a point. Actually nothing is as we think it is. So there is nothing permanent to grasp onto. There is no fixed self to grasp onto anything. All there is, is an ever-changing process. There is no permanent substance whatsoever anywhere. We are part of that ever-changing process. We are changing all the time, however much we might try to resist that fact. We can maximise our chances of developing into wiser and more compassionate beings if we can see that there is no point in grasping or fixing upon anything, including views and labels. But we should also use intelligently, without clinging onto them, the teachings (and the concepts in which he couched those teachings) that the Buddha has given to us. In that way, we’ll be able to direct the change that is inevitable in a positive direction.

N.B. I have drawn heavily in this section on a helpful summary of views and the Madhyamaka to be found in Rupert Gethin’s book ‘The Foundations of Buddhism’: <http://tinyurl.com/p2fhyg>

Note

⁴ Ontology means the study of the nature of being or of the essence of existence.

Regarding the five kinds of wrong views that we have looked at in previous sessions

The self exists, but not in the way we think it does. Another way of putting this is that the self that we experience has a conventional reality, but is not ultimately real. Ultimately, it has no irreducible essence whatsoever. It is empty of intrinsic existence.

The extreme views of nihilism and eternalism are concepts which cannot be seen as pointing to something ultimately true; as concepts, they are contradicted by the concepts of pratīya samutpāda and śūnyatā, which do point to the ultimate truth of things, i.e. do point to 'how things really are'.

An ideology is simply a concept or a congeries of concepts to which people have become attached. Those concepts are themselves empty of irreducible essence (nisvabhāva).

Moral codes and religious observances are also couched in conceptual expressions which, used correctly, are helpful, but which, when grasped or fixed upon, lead us to a mental rigidity which can lead us to confuse means and ends.

The teaching that intentional actions have consequences is made up of concepts; the conceptual formulation gives Dharma practitioners indispensable ethical guidance, but it is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Questions

1. What, essentially, was the Madhyamaka critique, and why was it thought necessary?
2. To what extent was Nāgārjuna saying anything different from what the Buddha had said?
3. How exactly does śūnyatā contradict eternalism and nihilism?
4. How might one misunderstand śūnyatā?
5. What does Nāgārjuna mean when he says that, "*There is not the slightest difference between saṃsāra and nirvana*"?
6. When you think about śūnyatā, how do you feel?

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Week 8: Views and the Yogācāra

Now we come to the Yogācāra, which was – or rather is – the second of the big schools of thought in the Mahāyāna. It seems to have had more influence inside India than the Madhyamaka did, and is widely seen as representing the culmination of Indian Buddhist philosophy. It is also credited with making important contributions to Buddhist psychology. It became very important outside India too, especially in Tibet and China. It seems that at least some Yogācārins saw themselves as participating in the ‘Third Turning of the Wheel [of the Dharma]’⁵.

Background to the Yogācāra

Why did it come into being?

Yogācāra probably arose as a result of a concern that the Madhyamaka’s teaching of śūnyatā could be misunderstood as nihilistic, although, as we have seen, all that the Madhyamaka was concerned to do was to make very clear that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence (svabhāva). This message can be seen as an emphatic reiteration of the doctrine of dependent origination. The Madhyamaka was not saying that phenomena do not exist at all, but that they do not exist in the way we think they do. But it seems that for some, the Madhyamaka’s apparent contention that emptiness is the final statement on the ultimate nature of things was too strong a negation; if one cannot ultimately say anything at all about things, doesn’t that mean that there can be no path of practice? Or at least isn’t it likely that some people would take it that way?

Some modern scholars think that it is more accurate to emphasise the continuities rather than the discontinuities between the Madhyamaka teaching and that of the Yogācāra. In fact it is nowadays widely thought that they had a lot in common. For example, the Yogācāra claimed to be making explicit the implications of the term śūnyatā that they thought had not been fully brought out by the Madhyamaka. It is probable that one of the origins of the Yogācāra (which means ‘Yoga Practice’) was to be found among the yogis of the area which is now Kashmir. It’s easy to imagine how some of them might respond on being told that the vivid visions they experienced in meditation were empty, even though what was really being said was that the visions were empty of svabhāva.

Note

⁵ This claim appears in the *Samādhinirmocana Sūtra. The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines* claimed to be the ‘Second Turning of the Wheel’.

Who were the Yogācārins?

The founder of the Yogācāra school was the great scholar Asaṅga (c. 310-390 CE), who, according to legend, received a number of key treatises of the school direct from Maitreya, the future Buddha. Nowadays it is thought more likely that he received them from a teacher called Maitreya or Maitreyaṅga. Several other

works are ascribed to him personally. (For more about Asaṅga see Skilton p. 123.) The other great commentator associated with the origins of the Yogācāra was Vasubandhu (c.320-400), Asaṅga's brother or half-brother, who also wrote a number of influential texts – (see Skilton p. 123). Both Asaṅga and Vasubandhu are on the Triratna refuge tree.

What Yogācārin texts are there?

The Yogācāra output, if one takes the commentaries into account, extended over many centuries. The earliest text that is identifiably Yogācāra is the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*, which will make its appearance in this session.⁶ Asaṅga's summary of classical Indian Yogācāra is the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*. Vasubandhu wrote some important works – the *Trisvabhāva-nirdeśa*, the *Vimśakā-kārikā* (*The Twenty Verses*) and the *Triṃśikā* (*The Thirty Verses*). A full list of significant Yogācāra works could be a long one, but these references are enough for this session. (See Skilton p. 121 for more).

As noted earlier, *Know Your Mind* is a commentary on an 18th century Tibetan text which is a faithful interpretation of the early Yogācāra tradition as expounded in one of Asaṅga's works – the *Abhidharma-samuccaya*. This may give you some idea of the time-span of the Yogācāra project. And if one accepts that the Abhidharma is really a name for the whole enterprise of Buddhist philosophy and the business of teasing out the implications of the Buddha's teaching, then the Yogācāra can be understood as a continuation of that enterprise.

Note

⁶ There is a text – the *Yogācārabhūmi* – which is thought to be older and which contains bits of Yogācāra.

What did the Yogācārins teach?

There were two basic teachings of the Yogācāra. One, the teaching of the seven or eight consciousnesses, will have to be dealt with quite briefly. The other, the teaching of the Three Natures, will be described a bit more fully.

The Eight Consciousnesses

You'll be familiar with the term *vijñāna* from having studied the 'Wheel of Life and Death'. There the word appears as the third *nidāna* meaning 're-linking consciousness'. It is also one of the five aggregates (*skandhas*, Pāli: *khandha*), and as such, is regarded as a flux. The Buddha taught that consciousness is, like the four other aggregates, empty, insubstantial, and, "Empty of a self and anything belonging to a self." (*suñña*).

Early Buddhist thinkers had analysed consciousness into six basic kinds which corresponded to the five senses and the mind as the sixth sense. Yogācārin thinkers built on these earlier investigations, elaborated a richer account of the sixth consciousness, the mind consciousness, and began to explicate a theory of

the unconscious. The first five consciousnesses correspond to the five senses, sight, sound, taste, touch and smell. The mind sense has two sorts of experience: the first sort results from processing by the mind of data relayed by the other sense consciousnesses, as when one smells some milk and decides that it is still fresh enough to drink, or when one sees a car approaching a pedestrian crossing too fast to stop; the second sort consists of experiences which originate in the mind itself like dreams, memories, and visions in meditation.

Then, according to Asaṅga, there are two other kinds of consciousness which underpin those six. These are the seventh consciousness, the ‘defiled mind’, the *kliṣṭa-manas*, which is called that because it is infected by the four basic afflictions or *kleśas* (the view of a fixed self, the conceit ‘I am’, clinging to self, and delusion)⁷. ‘Below’, as it were, this seventh consciousness is the eighth, ‘the store consciousness’ or *ālaya-vijñāna*, which lies at a level that is normally below the threshold of awareness. This ‘store’ is where all the ‘seeds’ which result from karmic action are deposited. The idea here is that when someone does a kind action, a good seed is deposited in the ālaya. A mean action has the effect of depositing a bad seed. The depositing of a seed is a metaphorical way of describing the process whereby a vipāka resulting from intentional actions affects our mental states and future actions. So the ālaya is the result of a being’s past karma, the accumulation of all past tendencies, strong or weak, to greed, hatred and delusion. The kind of seeds that are stored in the ālaya inform our actions and perceptions in future. But it is important to see that there is a continual interaction between the ‘input’ to the ālaya from the six senses and the *kliṣṭa-manas*, and the ‘output’ from the ālaya to the other senses or consciousnesses. It’s a two-way street. The ālaya is not a self or a thing, but the *kliṣṭa-manas* takes it to be a self, rather than what it is – an underlying process of ever-changing conditions, arising and passing away, which, as it flows on, gives a certain sense of coherence to a person’s identity. So the ālaya is the underlying basis of our conscious lives. It’s mostly hidden, and the Yogācārins thought that it was what makes us tick.

The value of the Yogācāra theory of the “store consciousness” was that it explained in some detail how the karmic process worked. Moreover, by referring the continuity of character traits and habitual tendencies to a continuously present (but always changing) underlying state of mind, they went at least some way towards showing how the doctrine of no fixed self could be compatible with a sense of personal and moral continuity.

Note

⁷ The *kliṣṭa-manas* is not mentioned in the *Samdhinirmocana*, but Asaṅga mentions it in the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*. The *kleśas* referred to here are said to be not karmic. We are born with them, but they are not the result of past actions.

The Doctrine of the Three Natures (The Trisvabhāva or Trilakṣaṇa Doctrine)⁸

The second Yogācāra teaching that we will be looking at is the trisvabhāva doctrine, or the doctrine of the three svabhāvas. In the course material relating to views and the Madhyamaka, I used the phrase ‘*inherent existence*’ to translate

svabhāva. The Yogācāra's 'Trisvabhāva' is usually translated as 'The Three Natures'. For the Madhyamaka, svabhāva meant something like atman, or soul, or permanent, self-sufficient essence. For the Yogācāra it means characteristic, or nature, or way of being. So what is meant here is three ways of being. The Yogācāra didn't mean that there were three svabhāvas in the Madhyamaka sense.

The trisvabhāva doctrine changed over time and as it was adopted in different countries. To provide an introduction to the doctrine, so that we can see how the Yogācāra understood views, I have stuck as far as possible to one version of the Yogācāra, the early classical Indian account. If you read further about the Yogācāra, you will almost certainly quickly come across different versions of it. It may be as well to know that writers do not always tell you that the version they are presenting is not the only one.

The three-natures model given here is to be found in chapter 6 of the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* as well as in the works of Asaṅga, Vasubhandu and others.

I shall introduce the version of the model which is often called the 'pivotal model'. The three natures are:

1. The *Paratantra-svabhāva* (hereafter *PT*) – the other-dependent nature.
2. The *Parikalpita-svabhāva* (*PK*) – the imagined or imputed nature.
3. The *Pariniṣpanna-svabhāva* (*PN*) – the perfected nature.

('Imputed' means 'to ascribe to', 'to attribute to', or 'to assign to', as when one imputes a characteristic to someone. One should not impute sinister motives to someone simply because they have a squint.)

Let's take them in turn:

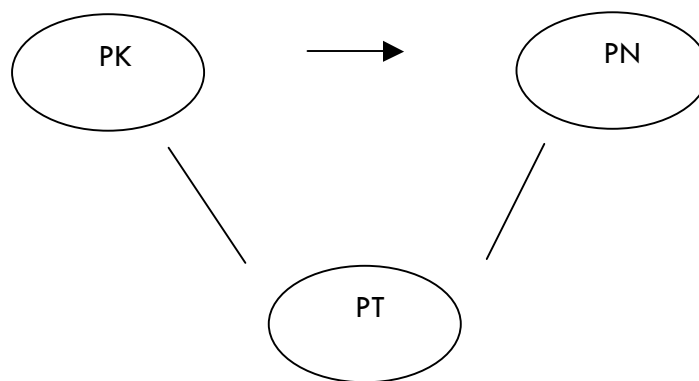
The *PT* – the 'other-dependent nature', according to the *Samdhinirmocana* – is, in effect, 'The dependent origination of phenomena'. The concept of dependent origination is basic Buddhist doctrine. As we are told by the Pāli Suttas, this is the way things are whether we understand it or not. Things arise in dependence upon conditions, and cease when conditions cease. That is what *PT* 'is'.

The *PK*, or the 'imagined' nature refers to the world as seen and interpreted by unawakened beings who are under the influence of the kleśas (afflictions). In other words they are infected by the four basic afflictions (the view of a fixed self, the conceit '*I am*', clinging to self, and delusion). What happens is that in dependence on these kleśas, we imagine a world. We imagine a view of the world which pays only selective attention to dependent origination and its implications. An example would be gold. Gold is simply a material/mineral substance like any other material substance. But we impute something to it. We not only impute value to it, but some people seek to gather it, to hoard it, and will even kill other human beings to get it and keep it. The value of gold is simply a human creation, yet 'it' creates in

people all sorts of feelings, anxieties, attachments, views, and so on which have no actual basis in reality. All these experiences are based upon a mere metal that can be used to make wedding rings, and may be useful for capping teeth, but not much else. The Yogācāra contention is that this is just one example of something we do all the time. We do it with the things that we possess, with our relationships, our plans, and our views i.e. the way we see life and the world.⁹ The Yogācāra would say that all these are aspects of the *PK*.

It is interesting to note that in Ch 6 of the *Samdhinirmocana*, the *PK* is linked to the way we use language and concepts – the labels we put on things, something, you may recall, which very much interested the Madhyamaka.

The *PN* is simply the *PT* not seen as *PK*. Both the *PK* and the *PN* arise on the basis of conditions. The *PK* arises in dependence on the kleśas. The *PN* arises in dependence on conditions which have been purified by ethical and meditation practice, and these conditions are the basis for ‘*seeing things as they really are*’ i.e. for transformative insight. From the point of view of the *PN*, we see the *PT* as it really is, i.e. without imputing anything onto it. That is the *PN* or perfected nature. This transformation or shift from the *PK* to the *PN* represents the fundamental shift in the cognitive basis of our knowledge (i.e. of our View), and the Yogācāra calls it the *asraya-parāvṛtti*, which Sangharakshita translates as, “*The turning around in the deepest seat of consciousness*”. Literally, it means ‘*the turning about in the basis*’, basis (*asraya*) indicating the ālaya.



The three natures are often arranged as in the accompanying diagram, with the *PT* at the bottom, the *PK* to the left above, and the *PN* to the right. In this way the *PT* can be seen as a kind of pivot. The task of the practitioner is to make the shift from the *PK* to the *PN*. This is usually called the pivotal model of the three natures. The *Samdhinirmocana* refers to the *PN* as the ‘suchness of phenomena’, or *tathatā*.

The Sūtra gives two similes, one of which may be particularly helpful in making all this clearer.

The simile goes like this:

The *PT* is a clear crystal. When it is put beside a blue object, it appears blue, and can be mistaken for a sapphire. When put beside a green object, it can appear green, and be mistaken for an emerald. When put beside a red object, it can appear as a ruby, and so on. These mistaken appearances and the attachment to them that ensues are the *PK*. When the appearances are seen through and the clear crystal is seen as it is for what it is, that is the *PN*.

To explain this simile a little more, the clear crystal is the *PT*. It stands for the process on the basis of which an observer, noticing the colour (that has been borrowed from a neighbouring object), imputes the quality of ‘precious gem-ness’ to the clear crystal, and becomes attached to it because of its apparent preciousness. The actual process of mistaking and continuing to mistake is the *PK*. The ethical and meditative practice of the Dharma practitioner has the effect of removing the crystal from the neighbourhood of the coloured object or vice versa, and enables the clear crystal to be seen as it is for what it is; a clear crystal. This is like saying that the crystal has been purified of the afflictions (the colours), and is now seen clearly. The clear seeing is the *PN*. At this point, it is important to understand that the clear crystal is not signifying a thing. Rather, it signifies dependent origination, which is not a thing but a complex process.

Sagaramati has pointed out similarities between the Doctrine of Three Natures and the Buddha’s teaching on the three levels of views in the ‘*Great Forty*’ (the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* – MN117.4-9). There, the Buddha talks about:

1. Wrong views
2. Right views with ‘biases’ or ‘taints’ (*āsavas*).¹⁰
3. Right views without taints.

Wrong views here would correspond to the *PK*, in that views such as *sakkāya-dit̥ṭhi* and *svabhāva*¹¹ are simply imagined. They are the product of a deluded mind, and arise in dependence on unskilful mental states.

Right views with biases is the Buddhist path of practice. It represents the movement indicated by the arrow in the diagram above. We are still affected by the biases, but we are developing more skilful mental states and deepening our understanding of the Dharma, in dependence on which we make more progress towards the *PN*. So one could say that the path of the arrow represents the mundane eight-fold path.

Right views without biases represents the *PN*, from the perspective of which we see things as they really are. The total lack of biases suggests a state either very close to complete Awakening or Awakening itself. The *PN* could be seen as the transcendental eightfold path, which might help us to see the *PN* as not so much a state, but a continuing process.

The short section in The Great Forty is well worth looking at, and more could be said by way of comparing the three levels of views with the Yogācāra account. But we will have to leave it there for now.

At this point, you may find it useful to review 1.2 and 1.3.2 in re first week of the module, where Sangharakshita talks about Wrong View, Right View, and Perfect View or Perfect Vision. Tracing the similarities between the Yogācāra's Doctrine of the Three Natures, The Great Forty's treatment of views and the path, and Sangharakshita's account could help you get a sense of the continuity of the Buddhist tradition.

Notes

⁸ The *Samdhinirmocana* usually refers to *Trilakṣaṇa* (three characteristics or natures), not *Trisvabhāva*, which is the term used elsewhere in the Yogācāra. The *Samdhinirmocana* makes the points that the 'Three Natures' have no inherent existence (*svabhāva*).

⁹ The PK is an imagined world which is a dependently arisen world, and the conditions on which it arises are the kleśas (unskillful mental states).

¹⁰ The *āsavas* (Sanskrit: *āsravas*) were mentioned on p.4 of this module, where view (*ditṭhi-āsava*) was referred to as one of the four *āsavas* (or 'biases' or 'taints'), which shackle us to *samsāra*.

¹¹ Svabhāva itself is a good example of what we imagine. It has never ever existed outside of our wrong views.

A brief note on Śūnyatā

In the Pāli Canon, the Buddha is reported to have used the term *suññata* to indicate the insubstantiality of all phenomena. It almost always refers to the anattā doctrine: "*Empty is the world... because it is empty of a self and anything belonging to a self*". (*Samyutta* IV 85, Bodhi, p.1163).

In a second sense, it also refers to an advanced mental state, as it does at MN 121 and 122. As we have seen, the Madhyamakas took up the term and used it in a way which is similar to the first sense I've just mentioned, although they made clear that concepts were just as empty as all other phenomena. There was nothing permanent or irreducible in concepts, so what was the point in clinging to them as if they were permanent or irreducible? The Yogācāra in its turn also took up the term śūnyatā. If we look at the trisvabhāva model, we see that from the perspective of the 'imagined nature', the other-dependent is not seen for what it is, but as providing things including concepts for grasping and fixing onto. From the perspective of the perfected nature, the other-dependent nature is seen for what 'it' is, a flux, a process by which phenomena arise and pass away, as empty (śūnya). There is nothing permanent or irreducible to be grasped or fixed on to, nor anyone permanent or irreducible to do the grasping and fixing onto.

In chapter 8 of the *Samdhinirmocana*, the Buddha explains the character of emptiness to Maitreya, the Buddha-to-come:

“Maitreya, the other-dependent nature and the perfected nature are seen in every way to be a nature free from the imagined (or imputed) nature which is either afflicted or purified. This nature I, s “...that which has been taught in the Mahāyāna as the nature of emptiness.”

So it seems clear that for the *Samdhinirmocana* Yogācārins at least, emptiness means dependent origination seen from the perspective of the perfected nature, which is what Nāgārjuna is saying in the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*. Interestingly, this helps to make a link between the two meanings of emptiness found in the Pāli Canon, the emptiness of all phenomena with regard to substantiality, and the advanced mental state which the Buddha calls emptiness.

What did the Yogācārins teach about the five kinds of wrong views?

- The view of fixed self: the Yogācāra thought that the view of a separate, fixed self had come about when the consciousness infected by the kleśas had mistakenly distinguished the self from the rest of the process of dependent origination. This was the *PK* at work, misreading the *PT*.
- Nihilism and eternalism. There is not nothing. That is to say that nothing does not exist. There was the *PT* (dependent origination), and the ways we pick up on dependent origination through our six senses. So there is the flux of mental activity which arises in beings. There was no irreducible essence, no atman, only the flux of dependent origination.
- What we think of as ideologies, that is to say ideas and collections of ideas that we cling to, are very good examples of the way we misinterpret *PT*. That is not to say that we don't need ideas. In fact, we badly need the ideas that the Buddha taught – as a raft. Those ideas are at least some of the necessary conditions that we need to gain insight (*prajñā*). But as soon as we begin to cling to them as ends in themselves, they can be described as ideologies. The thoughts that arise as we try to see what's happening are simply part of a mental flow, which we can work with skilfully or unskilfully. We can either grab onto those ideas and cling to them, or we can tune into the flow and do our best to work with the useful ideas and let go of the harmful ones.
- The Yogācāra view on treating moral codes and religious observances as ends in themselves is similar. To fix onto a moral code and cling to it as an end in itself is to misinterpret the nature of the *PT*. Instead we need to tune into the flow and use what opportunities we can see to act and perceive skilfully. In short, we need to treat moral codes and religious observances as a raft.
- The karmic process involves the interaction between the ālaya in which the seeds are deposited as a result of past actions, and outer consciousnesses.

What we do and dwell upon affects the ālaya, and the ālaya affects what we do and how we make sense of phenomena. The Yogācārins were saying that this is what happens, and in so doing, they were refuting the four kinds of wrong views described in week six, e.g. the wilful refusal to recognize that one's relationship with others, as well as with oneself, has an ethical dimension.

Views on the Middle Way

The history of Buddhist philosophical enquiry could be seen to go like this:

The Buddha offered a large number of teachings, although he said that he had taught only a tiny fraction of what could be taught. His teaching included positive formulations (e.g. the positive *nidānas*) and negative ones (e.g. cessation and nirvana as extinction). Some people misinterpreted the negative formulations to mean that the Buddhadharma was nihilistic or annihilationist, which either hindered their practice or turned them off completely.

As the Abhidharma project proceeded, some investigators, particularly among the Sarvāstivādin Vaibhāṣikas, came to think of dharmas as irreducible essences, for which they were criticised on the grounds that their position implied an eternalist view of reality.

The Madhyamaka were prominent among those critics, and taught, since surely they did have a message, that all phenomena were *nisvabhāva*, completely without irreducible essence (or inherent existence).

The Yogācāra saw that some people misunderstood the Madhyamaka teaching on *śūnyatā* as nihilistic, and taught that there was in fact something that was real, and that was the mental dimension of dependent origination (the *PT*).

And the story does not stop there, although we have to for the time being.

So perhaps you can see that there was a kind of dance or a kind of antiphon over the centuries as teachers tried to find ways of helping people to tread a path between nihilism and eternalism, the two extreme views that the Buddha taught that we beings are prone to falling into and which lead us away from a proper understanding of dependent origination. Probably the best compliment we can pay to all those enquirers who devoted their lives to explicating the Buddhadharma is to do our best to see what they were trying to do, to reflect on what they have to say, and to learn what we can from them. And above all, to take what they taught seriously but not literalistically.

Questions

1. How do you find yourself responding to the Yogācāra's metaphor of the ālaya?
2. What do we need to do to make the shift from the *PK* to the *PN*?

3. Does the *Samdhinirmocana*'s clear crystal simile work for you? If it does, why does it? If not, why not?
4. Do you find the Yogācāra's approach to views convincing? If so, why? If not, why not?
5. What evidence is there that either the Madhyamaka or the Yogācāra contradicted the Buddha's teachings as reported in the Pāli Canon?

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Postscript

I hope that you have found studying this module worthwhile, and that you will think that it has presented topics and issues that are worth returning to in this lifetime. We can't meditate really effectively without Right View. Right View, Right Action, and Right Emotion, and Right Awareness all support each other. And remember that, as Sangharakshita said in the extract quoted in the first session: “*No Right View, No Perfect Vision. If there is no Perfect Vision, there is no liberation, no Enlightenment, No Nirvana, no real spiritual progress.*”

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<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X30>

Sangharakshita's lively account in his lecture no 42 was probably my first introduction to the Yogācāra:

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=42>

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