



Introduction to Buddhism Course

Week 5



1. Metta Bhavana - Stage 4

Choosing the 'difficult' person

It is important to remember, in this stage in particular, to choose someone we can manage. In other words, choose someone who mildly irritates you, not someone who causes you to feel a lot of anger or deep feelings of resentment. As we build up the practice over time, we can then work with the stronger and deeper emotional tendencies involved with people who challenge us more seriously.

As with the previous stages, we are trying to contact the humanity that we share with the chosen person. For example, we can be sure that, just like ourselves:

- they experience pleasure and pain;
- they have hopes and fears ;
- they want to love and be loved;
- they don't want to suffer.

The basic stories of our lives may be different but the emotions that we experience are the same. Seeing this, we can experience a sense of connectedness and a desire can emerge for them to be well, to be happy, not to suffer and to learn from life. If this sounds all too easy, we need to consider what stops us from experiencing a sense of connectedness with the 'difficult person'. There may actually be many contributing factors, but some examples may be:

- They have hurt us in some way.
- They are not acting in a way that we think they should.
- Pride – we think they are better than us or we are better than them.
- Jealousy – they have something that we want.
- Blame – we blame them for negative feelings that are really our own.

In beginning to change our attitude toward this person it is important to remember that we have sole responsibility for our emotional states - **we create them and we can change them**. This may be a very challenging statement to hear, so it's good to examine our experience to see if it is true.

How do emotional states arise? A useful formula from the Buddhist tradition is:

Contact – feeling – craving and aversion – grasping and becoming

So what does this mean in practice?

Contact – what enters through the senses **or** the mind (thoughts, feelings etc.)

Feeling – the sensations that arise in response to contact; whether pleasant, painful or neutral. For example, in dependence on a sight, sound or taste a pleasurable, neutral or unpleasant feeling might arise.

Craving and aversion – these are **possible** responses to our feelings. Craving involves pursuing pleasant feelings, aversion is the ‘pushing away’ of unpleasant ones.

Grasping and becoming – in a sense, telling ourselves a story about the situation. At this stage we are actively cultivating emotions and 'becoming' the sort of person who acts in a particular way. For example, when we have **contact** with someone we find difficult an unpleasant **feeling** arises. We immediately experience **aversion** and tell ourselves that our life would be a lot better if this person wasn't in it (**grasping and becoming**).

2. ‘Dwelling in the gap’

Of the four stages described above, **contact** and **feeling** are ‘givens’ – there is little or nothing we can do to change them. In response to this, when we contemplate the difficult person in the Metta Bhavana we simply notice our resulting feeling ‘tone’, which may well be unpleasant.

However, the next stage is of crucial importance. In response to an unpleasant feeling, we can choose whether or not to experience aversion (or, in the same way, whether we experience craving in response to a pleasant feeling). If we can learn not to ‘choose’ aversion and craving in the short term, in the longer term we reduce our grasping and becoming – in other words, we gradually free ourselves from these reactive habits and become freer and more creative in our dealings with the world. Sometimes we talk about ‘dwelling in the gap’ between our feelings and our habitual responses to them – we can learn to stay in that gap, without automatically moving on to the next link of craving and aversion.

In practice, we can watch what happens when we bring the difficult person to mind and initially just experience the discomfort. We can respond to this with a sense of kindness. We can also notice how we add to our raw experience of discomfort by trying to push it away (aversion). We may also notice that we are telling ourselves a story about the person, thereby moving into the stage of grasping and becoming. When we notice these things happening we can gently bring our awareness back to ourselves and see what is going on. For example, we may have become tense in the shoulders or chest - we can breathe into this tension with kindness. We can also try to be clear what

emotion we are actually feeling. We could say to ourselves “I am aware that something in me is feeling angry, sad, frustrated, afraid (etc.)”. Once we have identified these bodily feelings and emotions it becomes easier to try to let go of them.

3. What is regarded as ‘wisdom’ in Buddhism?

The final step in the model of the ‘threefold path’ is that of wisdom. We sometimes use a phrase to describe what Buddhists regard as wisdom – “knowledge and understanding of the way things really are”. This is easy to say but, obviously, a lot harder actually to reach! In our look at the Buddhist idea of wisdom we need first to consider who the Buddha was, then three of the most famous articles of his teaching – the nature of conditionality (which we first encountered in week 2), the ‘three marks’ of all conditioned things and, perhaps most famously of all, the Four Noble Truths.

4. Prince Siddhartha and his quest for Enlightenment

According to legend, Siddhartha should have been happy – he was the son of a wealthy ruler on the border of present-day India and Nepal, roughly 2,500 years ago. He had a lovely wife and a young son, and was well equipped to inherit his father’s position. The legend of how he came to give all this up to seek the truth – whatever that might mean - can be taken literally, to a certain extent. However, it is more powerful still if we take it *symbolically*, because symbolism and myth have the ability, not usually possessed by dry facts, to touch our emotions. Buddhism appeals to both our reason and our emotions, and both are necessary for its message to be meaningful.

Whichever way we decide to interpret the story, it tells us that Siddhartha was deeply shocked by four realisations that came to him in quick succession, jolting him out of his complacency and effectively making his conventional happiness impossible. These realisations are often referred to as the **Four Sights**. The first three of these were of undeniable truths – every one of us will inevitably experience illness, old age and death, either indirectly or directly. The fourth was a glimpse of a completely different path from the mundane one followed by most people, in the shape of a wandering ascetic.

The devastating conclusion for Siddhartha was that, seeing the fate of human beings so starkly, he had to act radically and as a matter of urgency – to put himself outside of the norms of mundane existence and dedicate himself to discovering real meaning. His acting on this impulse is traditionally called his Going Forth – once again, it can be understood in both literal and symbolic terms. We don’t have to leave our families and move to the wilderness, but we do have to be prepared to leave aspects of our old selves behind.

In contrast to his former life of indulgence and worldly pleasures, Siddhartha was initially tempted in the opposite direction, for several years practising

extreme self-mortification that very nearly led to his death. Fortunately he realised, just in time, that he could die without having achieved the insight he was seeking and decided to take a more moderate path. This idea of this 'middle way' also has symbolic meaning – that we are unlikely to grow spiritually if our conditions are either too easy or too difficult. We need to establish a healthy balance – and in this the practice of meditation can help us to understand where we are, and in which direction we want to move.

A fascinating part of the story at this point is that Siddhartha, having abandoned his extreme austerities, had a strong recollection of how, when he was younger, he had reached a mental state of tranquillity and insight, quite by accident. He vowed that he would dedicate himself to the pursuit of insight through the medium of meditation once again. After many days and nights of unbroken meditation, on the full moon night of May, full Insight arose in Siddhartha and he became the Buddha – a term that we can translate as 'the awakened one'.

So what was the nature of the Buddha's Enlightenment? In trying to answer this question we need to make a crucial point. In a sense, his experience can be described relatively easily, if we only use factual, intellectual language. However, this is no more meaningful than trying to describe colours to someone who has been blind from birth. The full import of the Buddha's realisation can only be appreciated through direct experience, which is precisely what Buddhists ever since have sought – and what many have succeeded in gaining. Enlightenment is within reach of all human beings, as long as they are prepared to make enough of a change in their world view to be ready to embrace it.

5. Conditionality and inter-connectedness

Working as we are, for the moment, with language rather than direct experience, it is convenient to describe the Buddha's experience as one of **inter-connectedness**. What this means, put simply, is that every thing (and person) is influenced by every other thing and person, in a way that is far more complex than we are immediately likely to comprehend. We can easily explore this idea by asking ourselves questions like 'What conditions led me to be doing this, in this place, at this moment?'. The links in the chain of causality explode outwards from any given thing, eventually covering the entire scope of space and time. Buddhist thought acknowledges this web of inter-connectedness by describing all mundane things – ourselves very much included – as being 'conditioned' by other things, and therefore subject to the '**Laws of Conditionality**' or, to use the original term, the **Three Marks of conditioned existence**. What are these three laws or marks?

6. The three marks of conditioned existence

Firstly, all things, without exception, are **impermanent**. If we think anything lasts forever, we are wrong – this applies equally to our possessions, our surroundings, our relationships, ourselves and the whole planet! For ourselves and the people who are close to us, this clearly means that life is short and that none of us will be around for very long. Of course, we know this at a rational level, but we may not often stop to contemplate it at an emotional one. After all, it is often said that, if we truly acknowledged the shortness of our lives, we should live them very differently.

Secondly, all things, without exception, are **unsatisfactory**. The evidence for this is all around us, every day. Things we expect to work go wrong and need repairs or replacement. Our family and friends let us down and disappoint us. Things that are exciting when we first have them lose their shine, and we turn our attention to newer things or experiences. Our bodies (and minds) certainly can't be relied on all the time – they have a habit of going wrong as well! Although this universal truth can't rationally be denied, we do so all the time; we expect things to be everything we hope for, and then we suffer because they don't live up to these impossible standards.

The third mark is, in a way, a little harder to grasp. It is that all things, without exception, are **insubstantial**. This is intimately linked to the idea of impermanence – because the latter applies to all things. The components of all things, all the way down to their microscopic structure, and the names we give to things are only convenient and provisional. For example, I might refer to 'my house', but what is the essence of that? I might make repairs, paint it a different colour, build an extension, knock down a wall – so where is the essential 'house'? We can very easily apply the same reasoning to ourselves, as our bodies and minds are clearly changing at a surprisingly rapid rate. Ultimately, we can say that the universe is only made up of a vast number of 'processes', but no 'things'. This is a very important part of Buddhist philosophy.

If all this seems a little bleak and pessimistic, the good news is that the three marks also have their positive sides, and therein lies the radical message of the Buddha's teaching. Because we ourselves are **impermanent**, we can see our behaviour as little more than a temporary set of habits. We are completely free to exchange our bad habits, which bring suffering, for good ones which make us happier – provided we understand ourselves well enough. Our experience of **unsatisfactoriness** can be a strong spur to change – if we truly realise how pointless it is to look for happiness in mundane things, we have no choice but to turn, like Siddhartha, to a 'bigger view'. Finally, if we can really grasp the **insubstantial** nature of the very concept of 'self', we can ultimately escape suffering. Buddhism states, over and over again, that our fixation on our ego is the root cause of our suffering. Why do we place so much importance on something that won't last for long, constantly lets us down and, ultimately, doesn't even exist?

7. The Four Noble Truths

In order to apply the rather theoretical principle of the Three Marks in a very practical way, to which ordinary people could easily relate, the Buddha taught the famous model of the **Four Noble Truths**. These are as follows:

1. The Noble Truth of suffering

Whether we like it or not, we regularly experience suffering, whether through sickness, old age and death, or just because we usually can't have what we want (or are forced to do what we don't want to!).

2. The Noble Truth of the causes of suffering

We suffer because we crave for what we think we want, we experience aversion to what we don't want, and we are ignorant of how things really are – in other words, much more complex than our little selves. As we have already seen, these three habits – craving, aversion and ignorance – are sometimes known as the 'three roots of suffering'.

3. The Noble Truth of the ending of suffering

It is possible to free ourselves of the three roots of suffering, if only we understand how. Having understood those roots, we can begin to attack them.

4. The Noble Truth of the path leading to the end of suffering

The challenge for human beings is clearly to find a spiritual path which allows us to give up the three roots. This is much more easily said than done - as we have already observed, it is one thing to understand a concept, but a very different thing to relate to it, as we say, with our hearts. Buddhist teachings have adopted a huge number of models and devices to help the Buddha's followers to make this leap of imagination. Two of the best-known of these, throughout the Buddhist world, are the **Noble Eightfold Path** and the more condensed 'Threefold Path' of ethics, meditation and wisdom.

8. Homework

- To meditate 6 out of 7 times a week. You could alternate (a) the Mindfulness of Breathing, stages 1 to 4 and (b) the first 4 stages of the Metta Bhavana.

If you want a little extra challenge:

- Try to examine some aspect of your everyday life in terms of inter-connectedness. This could be either a physical object, or some part of your own behaviour. To what extent has it arisen in dependence on a complex set of conditions? What conditions does it itself create, and what things or processes arise from those conditions?
- If you have the time and the curiosity, do a little research into the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path.