

02 Introduction and Clarity of Mind

The Buddha's teachings are designed to help us to the point where we gain insight into things 'as they really are'.

This point where we gain that insight is known in Sanskrit as *yathābhūtajñānadarśana*, which we can translate as 'knowledge and vision of the reality of experience'.

The Buddha gave two main descriptions of seeing things as they really are, the first of which is the four noble truths.

- (i) Experience in life is ultimately unsatisfactory. There is nothing in our ordinary experience that can give us stable and lasting fulfilment. This is *duhkha*.
- (ii) This unsatisfactoriness is caused by our craving and grasping after things in our experience as if they were capable of being fully under our control and of giving us stable and lasting fulfilment.
- (iii) It is however possible to experience a state of lasting and stable fulfilment if we can let go of this craving and grasping. This is *nirvana* or awakening.
- (iv) To help us to realise awakening the Buddha laid down a path, known as the noble eightfold path, which we must endeavour to follow in all aspects of our lives.

Embedded within the four noble truths is a second description of seeing things as they really are; this description is known as the three marks of conditioned existence, the three *lakṣanas*.

The Buddha taught that our ordinary experience is marked by three characteristics, which are impermanence (*anitya*), unsatisfactoriness (*duhkha*), and insubstantiality (*anatman*).

Nothing exists in our experience that is not subject to arising and passing away, that is not subject to change. Impermanence. *Anitya*.

Nothing exists in our usual experience that can provide lasting and stable fulfilment. Unsatisfactoriness. *Duhkha*.

Nothing exists separately from other things. Nothing exists by itself. Everything exists in dependence upon conditions, and in turn conditions other things. Insubstantiality. *Anatman*.

The Buddha also taught that deep meditation and contemplation on each of these characteristics – a state known as ‘samadhi’ -is a potential gateway to liberation (a vimoksha mukha).

If we are able to deeply contemplate impermanence (anitya) then we can enter the gateway to liberation known as the signless or animitta gateway.

If we are able to deeply contemplate unsatisfactoriness then we can enter the gateway to liberation known as the wishless or apranihita gateway.

If we are able to deeply contemplate insubstantiality then we can enter the gateway to liberation known as the emptiness or sunyata gateway.

During the following sessions I will be explaining what is meant by each of the signless, wishless, and emptiness gateways.

Although each characteristic and gateway are contemplated separately they each arrive at the same total experience, that is ‘knowledge and vision of the reality of experience’.

In the Mahayana and Tibetan traditions it is taught that to achieve the successful contemplation of each particular characteristic, such that its related gateway is achieved, requires the cultivation in meditation and in everyday life of a particular quality of mind.

So, the successful transition from contemplation of impermanence to the signless gateway requires the cultivation of clarity of mind.

The transition from contemplation of unsatisfactoriness to the wishless gateway requires the cultivation of sensitivity of mind.

And the transition from contemplation of insubstantiality to the emptiness gateway requires the cultivation of openness of mind.

In summary, we have three characteristics of experience, each with an associated gateway to liberation, and each with a state of mind that needs to be cultivated to help make the transition from contemplation of a characteristic to its related gateway.

Again, although we approach each characteristic separately, the successful contemplation of that characteristic such that we pass through its related gateway, leads to a space of liberation that fully encompasses the attributes of not just the one but all three of the signless, the wishless and emptiness gateways.

This evening we are going to start with the first lakshana or characteristic of conditioned existence, impermanence, and particularly the quality of mind that needs to be cultivated in order that contemplation of impermanence leads to the signless gateway.

That quality is clarity of mind.

Clarity of mind is that aspect of consciousness or awareness that becomes clearly aware of what is happening.

Often, when we start to meditate, we realise just how we lack clarity, how we usually lack clear awareness of what is happening in our mind.

When we are asked to focus our main attention on our breathing in the mindfulness of breathing meditation, we become aware of just how much is happening in our mind that we were not consciously aware of. We can become aware of our mental state.

Let's just do a short meditation on breathing

Sitting in a comfortable and stable, balanced position.

Turn your attention to your breathing, to the physical experience of movement or of sensations in your body as you breathe in and out.

Resting your attention on your breathing.

Are you being distracted from following your breathing?

If so, notice what it is that is distracting you, looking for the underlying state of mind.

For example, if you are thinking of a film, underlying that activity in the mind is a desire for sensory stimulation.

What we are trying to do is to look for the presence of what in Buddhism we call the five hindrances

There are many ways in which our minds become distracted, and the five hindrances are a way of categorising those distractions.

The five categories are sense desire, restlessness and anxiety, sceptical doubt, sloth and torpor, and hatred or aversion.

As well as recognising these hindrances in the mind we can also sometimes be aware of them in our physical body. For example, a mind effected by sloth and torpor will almost certainly be accompanied by a

tired, even slumping, heavy body. A restless mind might be accompanied by a restless body that can't keep still.

So, carefully examining what is happening in your mind (and in your body).

Why is this important?

Because in order to move to insight we need a basic clarity or calmness of mind.

Calmness of body and mind and insight (or vipassana) work together.

The necessary basis of calm for insight to effectively arise is the absence of the five hindrances. The sources of distraction are absent.

We can take time in meditation to examine whether any of these distracting qualities, the hindrances, are present, and equally we can notice their absence.

If we are sitting in meditation without any distractions then we are in the state known as "access", "upacara samadhi". In this state we are able to fully engage with the particular practice.

Sometimes just bringing a distraction and its underlying mental state into full awareness is enough to diffuse its power, for it to dissipate. When that's not enough then there are a range of techniques, including ways of bringing awareness into different areas of the body, that can help to remove the hindrance.

(See Kamalashila "Buddhist Meditation: Tranquillity, Imagination and Insight" ch.4 for more on the hindrances and how to work with them.)

Developing clarity of mind is not just to be worked on meditation. In everyday life we can pause and become aware of our state of mind, and if we recognise that the hindrances are present we can take steps to reduce their impact.

Developing clarity of mind is something I'd like you to work on during your meditations and during your everyday life over the coming week.

And in preparation for a discussion next week on impermanence I would like you to notice:

How we persist in expecting things not to change

How when changes upset you and when they bring you pleasure.

Make a note of your observations and bring them with you for next week's session.