

## **05 Sensitivity of Mind**

Let's just remind ourselves where we are.

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

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.

We've spent the last three weeks looking at the first characteristic of impermanence, its associated gateway to liberation of the signless, and cultivation of clarity of mind.

Now we are moving into and exploration of the second characteristic, unsatisfactoriness, its gateway to liberation of the wishless, and the cultivation of sensitivity of mind. This evening we're focusing on sensitivity.

And as we go deeper into each of the three aspects of conditioned existence, we will find that they blend into each other. We separate them

in order to study them in more detail and to put them into practice in meditation and in our everyday lives, but as we put them into practice our experience transcends differences.

For example in the last session I told you about Nick Cave's first venture outside his home after the sudden, unexpected death of his son, Arthur, to a vegetarian takeaway where a woman who worked there and knew him, didn't say anything but squeezed his hand as she gave him his change. Nick Cave writes:

“It was such a quiet act of kindness. The simplest and most articulate of gestures, but, at the same time, it meant more than all that anybody had tried to tell me – you know, because of the failure of language in the face of catastrophe. She wished the best for me, in that moment. **There was something truly moving to me about that simple, wordless act of compassion.**”

I used this as an example of the wordless or the signless. But of course, it's also an act of wonderful sensitivity and compassion.

Our sensitivity manifests in thoughts and acts of kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy as we open ourselves to people and the world around us. (Again notice how sensitivity is linked to the quality of openness connected to the third lakshana of insubstantiality and its gateway to liberation of emptiness.)

For Gregory Orr, an American poet, this quality of open sensitivity, which he calls 'love', gives his life meaning:

“The “beloved” can be any object of affection: a person, a place, a pet. And it is within those targets of love — and our relationships to them — that Orr finds meaning for his life. “Without any sense [of] the beloved, it seems to me the world goes dead, or the world goes just to self, which is even worse,” Orr said.

And he continues:

“Of course, what we love can change over time ... it can make you crazy by ... shifting from one thing to another and yet, of course, that's also dazzling.”

He puts his thoughts into words in an untitled poem:

I know now the beloved  
Has no fixed abode,  
That each body  
She inhabits  
Is only a temporary  
Home.  
That she  
Casts off forms  
As eagerly  
As lovers shed clothes.

I accept that he's  
Just passing through  
That flower  
Or that stone.

And yet, it makes  
Me dizzy—  
The way he hides  
In the flow of it,  
The way she shifts  
In fluid motions,  
Becoming other things.

I want to stop him—  
If only briefly.  
I want to lure her  
To the surface  
And catch her  
In this net of words.

Gregory Orr

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/poet-gregory-orr-poetry-is-concentrated-testimony-of-being-a-human-being>

Even as it uses words this poem does, for me, capture something of the ever-changing and inexpressible nature of love and sensitivity.

So let's now take a look at sensitivity from the perspective of the Buddha's teachings.

As human beings we all have a capacity to feel. Everything in our experience is accompanied by a feeling tone of pleasantness, or unpleasantness or neutrality.

We can feel hurt if someone is unkind to us and feel happy if someone is kind to us. Likewise, if we act in a way that doesn't take into account other people's feelings, if we act insensitively, we can hurt them.

Our capacity to feel, our sensitivity, can be more or less developed. But we can all work on improving our sensitivity. We can work to combat negative mental states and to cultivate positive mental states. We do this through practicing the four brahma viharas (or the four immeasurables) of loving kindness (metta), compassion (karuna), sympathetic joy (mudita) and equanimity (upekkha).

And when we practice the cultivation of loving kindness (metta bhavana) we will notice how the three qualities of clarity, sensitivity and openness are linked.

Clarity is as much an emotional matter as a rational one. Unclearness is often linked to negative mental states.

So to develop clarity we need to develop emotional positivity or sensitivity.

And as emotional positivity develops, then a sense of spaciousness and openness can arise.

In this way the three qualities of clarity, sensitivity and openness help each other.

Full and lasting insight into the reality of our experience can only be achieved on the basis of positive emotion. Our rational, thinking faculty has to be integrated with our feeling or emotional faculty. Without this no deep and lasting change can occur.

An important aspect of sensitivity is a sense of connection to the wider world around us.

Dr. Tim Lomas is a lecturer in positive psychology at the university of East London with a particular interest in the words used in different languages and cultures around the world relating to the pursuit of happiness. He's also a practitioner of mindfulness and Buddhism.

In a chapter in his book "The Happiness Dictionary" Tim Lomas points out that our sensitivity can be limited if we lose sight of the importance of being connected to the wider world around us. I'd like to share with you three of the words discussed by him in relation to sensitivity and connection.

First, the African word 'ubuntu'.

Ubuntu is a shortened form of a Zulu phrase meaning 'a person is a person through other people'. Ubuntu thus implies, 'I am because you are.'

The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu said of 'ubuntu': 'It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. It speaks about wholeness; it speaks about compassion.'

Ubuntu, then, reminds us of our shared humanity.

Second the Australian aboriginal word 'dadirri'.

Tim Lomas asks, "How often do you ever really hear another person?"

As he says, too often, we interrupt or jump in as soon as our interlocutor closes their mouth.

Occasionally though we may find the patience and grace to maintain a receptive and attentive silence; just listening without any desire to impose our opinion, offer advice, or steer the conversation towards ourselves. In short, letting them speak.

Australian Aboriginal languages have a word for this kind of deep, reflective listening: dadirri.

Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann provides an evocative account of the comfort it can provide:

'When I experience dadirri, I am made whole again. I can sit on the riverbank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness.'

Dadirri can transcend the simple act of listening and can signify an entire contemplative way of life. It entails remaining receptive and attuned to the world around us in a spirit of respect and reverence.

Moreover, as Lomas emphasises, this attentiveness and respect are not reserved for human beings. ‘We can enter into communion with nature itself by opening our ears and hearts to the natural world so it may breathe its truths.’

Third, from Spain and Portugal, the word ‘simpatia’.

Tim Lomas writes:

“At its best, human interaction is like a dance. We move with balletic grace, our movements in perfect synchrony. This doesn’t mean that we must rigidly conform to tightly choreographed routines. There is still room for spontaneity.

Indeed, our most meaningful encounters tend to feel pristine and fresh, as if springing into life at that precise moment. Yet even – or especially – then, our movements somehow align perfectly with our partner’s. We intuit their intentions perfectly, a fraction of a second before they act, and respond accordingly.

The dance is fluid, supple, poetry in motion. Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking cultures might describe this ideal as *simpatía*.”

‘Simpatia literally means ‘sympathy’, evoking a sense of interpersonal harmony and accord.

One definition describes simpatia as:

“the act of participating in the affective states, the joys and sorrows of others; compassion; agreement or fusion of the emotions; communion; natural attraction of one person for another, or for a thing; inclination; the beginning of love”.

Importantly, truly connecting with others does not entail total submersion within the collective or the abandonment of one’s precious individuality.

As Tim Lomas says, ‘it’s about striving for *simpatía* and enjoying the feeling of just ‘clicking’ with fellow human beings. We each play our own melody but contribute to a vast, vibrant, coherent symphony.’

In our everyday lives, if we can keep in mind our shared humanity (ubuntu), whilst opening our ears and our hearts to truly listen to people and the world around us (dadirri) and engage with the fluid dance of interpersonal harmony and accord (simpatia), then we can better act with sensitivity.