

07 The Wishless

In today's talk I am focusing on the second gateway to liberation, apranihita.

Apranihita can be translated as 'wishless', 'unbiased', 'being free from desires', even 'without goals'. I favour 'wishless' but other translations may offer additional insights into the full meaning of this gateway.

Earlier in this series of talks I spoke about impermanence and change (the first lakshana or characteristic of conditioned existence). Then I moved on to explore how we can enter into the signless samadhi, the signless gateway to awakening, if we simply 'go with the flow', and try not to grasp, or to fix things as if they were permanent.

Assigning labels and names to phenomena is essential for our everyday life, but we need to see beyond that layer of conventional reality to the deeper nature of continuous flow and change; to fully see that all phenomena are coming into and going out of being.

But because we do not truly see with all of our being that all things are impermanent, we assume they are stable and will always be there. Then, when reality bites and things change we experience pain and suffering. We experience dukkha, unsatisfactoriness (the second lakshana or characteristic of conditioned existence).

In the last session I spoke about the opposites of sukha (happiness or even joy) and dukkha (unsatisfactoriness). I told how the words originated in the Aryan culture where 'sukha' meant a smooth ride in an ox-drawn cart, and 'dukkha' meant a bumpy ride.

And I continued that here we have a very apt metaphor for life. Are you having a smooth (sukha) or bumpy (dukkha) ride today?

We do not know what life is going to throw at us. To enter the wishless gateway means that we need to accept life with patience and positive emotion, whether the ride is bumpy or smooth.

To begin an exploration of this wishless gateway, I'm going to tell you about a memory that came up for me when writing this talk.

It's a memory from some thirty or more years ago when I was giving a talk that mentioned a then very famous American management

consultant called Tom Peters. I can't remember very much of what I said about him, except that he was rhapsodising about his new car.

What was it about his new car that gave him so much joy and appreciation? It was that it had a very conveniently placed holder next to the driver's seat, into which he could safely put his morning cup of coffee and easily drink as he drove into work.

That was the hook that caught him and caused him to buy the car.

He took that experience and then argued that manufacturers could increase sales of their products by offering many hooks to appeal to the varied tastes and wishes of their potential customers.

Life is full of hooks that play on our wishes and preferences, that are forever pulling us. And some hooks can penetrate deeply into our being, trapping us in habitual patterns of reaction that bias our perception and experience of our everyday life. And often the hooks are of our own making.

My football team loses, and the day is disjointed, my mood is irritable, my mind is searching for some quick fix, some pleasure to distract me. My view of the world around me is biased.

My football team wins, and the opposite effect takes hold, my mood is light, I'm well with the world. My view of the world around me is biased.

Of course, there are much more serious hooks that we attach ourselves to.

We can be hooked by a particular position or belief or ideology as a way of neatly explaining the world around us. We can be unwilling to tolerate the uncertainty and discomfort of staying open to other beliefs and views. We can become dogmatic. We are biased.

When we read something that supports our view than our mood is uplifted. When we read something that doesn't fit so easily with our view our mood darkens.

Then the shift one way or the other in our mood shapes or biases our relationship with the world around us.

Pema Chodron tells us that Tibetans use the word shenpa to describe these hooks. We can sense the power of these hooks when we experience the feelings of "I want this", "I don't want that", "I want that to go away".

https://tricycle.org/magazine/fundamental-ambiguity-being-human/?utm_source=Tricycle&utm_campaign=6a7d396502-Daily_Dharma_10_07_2022_S&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1641abe55e-6a7d396502-307819905

At the end of last week's talk I asked you to notice how your mood affects or biases your experience. I'm sure you can think now of examples of that from your own life. And maybe you can see how there is a feedback loop at play here. Our biases affect our mood, and our mood can then bias our view of the world.

In last week's talk I said that maybe we have an inkling that true happiness is not found in external things but is found in re-educating the heart. It's found within.

And I asked 'How to re-educate the heart?'

I suggested by practicing the five precepts in their positive form; loving kindness, generosity, contentment, truthfulness, and mindfulness; and by cultivating and developing the four positive emotions of kindness (metta), compassion (karuna), sympathetic joy (mudita), and equanimity (upekkha).

I could also have added the six perfections as a third set of practices; generosity, ethics, patience, energy, meditation, and wisdom.

From these three sets of practices, I'd like to particularly mention three individual practices that help to enter the wishless gateway; mindfulness (from the five precepts), equanimity (from the four positive emotions), and patience (from the six perfections).

To truly accept the radical uncertainty of life, to relax into all of life's ups and downs, to be mindful and patient and be equanimous in the face of whatever life throws at us, is to enter the wishless gateway to awakening.

Without mindfulness our biases, our ingrained wishes and wants, can control our mind and attitudes to the world around us, and keep us trapped in habitual reactions of body, speech and mind.

With mindfulness we can more clearly see what is happening in our mind and around us – that's clarity, the first quality of mind that helps to make the link between impermanence and the signless gateway to liberation.

And with mindfulness, and with patience, we have an opportunity to develop sensitivity – the second quality of mind that that helps to make the link between dukkha or unsatisfactoriness and the wishless gateway to liberation.

We need to develop patience, an important element in sensitivity, so that we do not react impulsively to the pressures of the moment.

And with mindfulness and patience operating together in tandem we can develop the positive emotion of equanimity, the key element in the wishless gateway to liberation.

Equanimity in this sense, as Analayo describes it, stands for equipoise or balance in relation to anything that may happen. It is an absence of reacting by way of attraction or repulsion toward what is experienced.

The practice of mindfulness and patience is not an encouragement to ignore what is experienced. But, as Analayo argues, much rather involves creating a space in which we can see fully what is there. This allows us to gain the inner freedom of seeing what is happening in alternative ways.

It's 'a superb balance of the mind'.

(Analayo, Mindfulness (2021) 12:2635–2644)

Sangharakshita's words on the second gateway to liberation (*vimoksa*) resonate and deepen Analayo's description.

As well as adding other translations of *apranihita*, such as the 'unaiming', the 'unbiased' and the 'directionless', he gives us a beautiful image for equanimity and the wishless gateway.

“...*apranihita* [is] the 'unaiming' or 'unbiased'. It is a mental state without any inclination in any direction, without likes or dislikes, perfectly still, perfectly poised. Thus it is an 'approach' to the Unconditioned [another word for awakening], but it's an approach which is by way of not going in any particular direction. You only want to go in a particular direction when you have a concept of that direction and a desire to go in it. If there's no particular direction in which you want to go, then you just, as it were, stay at rest. This state can be compared to a perfectly round sphere on a perfectly flat plane. Because the plane is absolutely level, the perfect sphere doesn't roll in any particular direction. The *vimokṣa* [gateway] of directionlessness is rather like this. It's a state of absolute equanimity in which one has no egoistic motive for doing – or not doing, even – anything.”

(Sangharakshita What is the Dharma p. 66)

So where does all this leave us?

Moving towards awakening requires us to let go of believing we are in full control of our lives. We need to let go of believing that anything in conditioned existence can bring us lasting, stable satisfaction and fulfilment. We need to accept the deep reality of our existence and give up wishing for things to be otherwise.

In the Pure Land tradition of Buddhism this is the equivalent of the arising of faith (shinjin).

Such faith requires the complete letting go of all clinging to the self. It means the death of the ego. We need to entrust ourselves to life, to give away all our self-powered wishing and desires.

The arising of faith – shinjin – involves a complete ‘change of heart’.

But does this mean that we give up on trying to change anything?

No, I don't think so.

In support of my view I'm going to turn to the famous Serenity prayer written by 20th century Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference.

Please notice that someone reciting the prayer is most definitely *not* beginning with the notion that they cannot change anything. On the contrary, they are asking the deity to grant them three things: the wisdom to separate what they can and cannot act on; the courage to act where they can; and the serenity to accept the limits of their agency.

(Thanks to Massimo Pigliucci for this:

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/i-aint-bitching-42053468>)

If we are to wish for anything it is to wish for wisdom. And as we shall see the third lakshana (of insubstantiality) and the third gateway (of emptiness), are a critical part of that wisdom.