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GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

JAKE LYNE, FORMER WCF CHAIR

“Zen is a special transmission outside of words and letters”. This saying is attributed to Bodhidharma the supposed founder of Chan Buddhism in sixth Century China. However the first record of the phrase appeared in the tenth Century, and was a literary counter to the more traditional understanding that Chan Meditation and Buddhist teachings are inter-dependent.

In 2008 a group of Western Chan Fellowship leaders visited The Buddhist Institute in Beijing; I have a photo of Simon Child standing on the steps. This was the setting of the beginnings of intellectual revival in the Chan tradition, led by the controversial reformer Venerable Taixu in the early 20th Century, in reaction to what he saw as a lamentable decline in Buddhist education.

At the time we decided to offer Buddhist educational events in our Sangha, but apart from a course on the early sutras offered by Hughie Carroll, not much happened. Then at last, two years ago, Simon Child, Fiona Nuttall, Hilary Richards and myself offered a course for WCF group leaders. It was a wonderful learning event for all of us.

In this edition of *New Chan Forum* we share some course essays, projects and poster boards.

POINTING OUT THE GREAT WAY

SIMON CHILD, GUIDING TEACHER OF THE WESTERN CHAN FELLOWSHIP

From the earliest days of the founding of Chan, in the time of Bodhidharma in the 5th Century C.E., there has been a tension between meditation practice and textual study. Bodhidharma's famous verse bears on this:

A special transmission outside the scriptures

No reliance on words or letters

Direct pointing to the heart of humanity

Seeing into one's own nature.

Bodhidharma asserted that Chan is not transmitted by words. Yet many words and books have been written (and read) both before and since, and masters both past and present use the sutras and commentaries in the teaching of Chan. Our own lineage master, Chan Master Sheng-yen (Shifu), was educated to doctorate level in Buddhist studies and frequently expressed the importance of cultivation of correct view alongside the cultivation of practice. Shifu taught Buddhist theory at a high level, alongside leading intensive meditation retreats. More than that, one of Shifu's lifelong goals was to re-establish serious scholarship within Chinese Chan, hence his early writing for Humanity magazine, his support for the Chunghwa Buddhist Institute, and his subsequent founding of the Dharma Drum Buddhist College and its application for recognition as a university.

The stereotypical view of Western Buddhists, perhaps particularly applicable to Chan and Zen practitioners who may lean on these words

of Bodhidharma (and also on ‘meditation’ being the direct translation of ‘Chan/Zen’), is that we emphasise meditation often to the exclusion of most or all other aspects of Buddhism including sutra study. Like all stereotypes there is some truth in it though the real situation is more nuanced than that, with most Westerners also being involved to varying degrees in other aspects of Buddhism including study, ritual, generosity, and so on. Nevertheless study, particularly structured study rather than random reading of Zen books, is relatively lacking. Yet structured study may be more relevant and necessary for us than for Asian Buddhists, because we have not grown up in a Buddhist culture and therefore have not absorbed any understanding from Buddhist family members and school friends or from our education.

For those who wish to lean on Bodhidharma’s words telling us not to depend on words (a rather ironic position to take), consider whether Bodhidharma may have had his fingers crossed behind his back as he said them! Bodhidharma himself left some writings behind, and furthermore he is reputed to have brought with him from India a copy of the *Lankavatara sutra*, one of the larger and more complex and intellectually demanding sutras, which he later passed on to his successor Huike. Chan has always been grounded in Buddhism and needs to be understood as a form of Buddhism.

Buddhism had arrived in China primarily via imported texts which were translated and studied from the 1st century C.E. onwards, and consequently the Buddhism which Bodhidharma encountered on his arrival in China in 5th century C.E. was largely a textual and scholarly tradition. We can understand Bodhidharma’s forceful emphasis on meditation as an appropriate response to the situation he encountered in that place

and time. Our situation as stereotypical Western Buddhists is almost the opposite; we have engaged in meditation but not engaged in serious study of the Dharma.

Why study the Dharma?

When I first heard Shifu emphasising cultivation of correct view as essential to enable full Chan insight, I misunderstood him as implying that meditational experience is dependent on theoretical understanding. Surely, I thought, just as Bodhidharma had seemed to say, experience stands apart from words and concepts and is not dependent on them? We can unpack Shifu's comments in several ways.

If one relies on experience alone then one has no basis for understanding and assessing one's experience in practice. This can lead to the risk of inflated self-assessment and claims, in relation to interesting or exciting but nevertheless minor experiences, and consequent self-inflation and distortion of ongoing practice and actions. Understanding what has been written about practice helps one to place one's own experience in the wider scope of practice experience and to avoid such errors.

Understanding the path of practice, and the theoretical basis for it, can support motivation when practice is going through a difficult patch. It can also guide one in making adjustments to one's approach to practice, or in accepting adjustments suggested by a teacher. And, importantly, it can teach one that there is more to practice than just sitting on a cushion – the path of practice very much includes one's conduct throughout the day.

This is not to suggest that theory can be a replacement for practice. Besides practice being important in its own right, supporting the cultivation



PHOTO: SIMON CHILD

of stability and insight, practice also supports theoretical understanding. What one has read, or will read in the future, is given some reality-check and confirmation in one's own practice and life-experience. In effect, not only does theory support practice but also practice supports understanding of theory. In this way the experience of practice can be integrated in an informed manner into the way we live our lives, addressing the common problem of a split between life and practice.

Leaders' Course

WCF leaders attend annual residential training/ refresher sessions in topics such as meditation instruction, managing a group, and other related topics. For reasons of time general Dharma education has been only an incidental feature of these meetings, and for reasons of geographical dispersion it has not been practical to run the more frequent events that might usually constitute a full theory course. Hence our leaders' theoretical Dharma study has been largely in their own hands with each of them addressing this in their own way; some have signed up for M.A. courses in Buddhist studies, some have attended local courses run by other educational or Buddhist organisations, and some have managed their own private study.

The WCF committee wanted to consolidate and develop the knowledge of our WCF local group leaders. In part this was intended to enhance their own understanding and practice. It was also desired to equip them better to respond to the needs of others, in terms of responding to questions asked in their groups, to enable them to give more structured introductory courses for newcomers who quite reasonably may want some information about what they are to be engaged in, and to ex-

plore more innovative ways of developing their groups and offering the Dharma to new audiences.

The Dharma is very extensive but again geographical dispersion and the difficulties of taking time away from work and family intervened and meant that we had to devise an approach which was both effective and practical, not demanding too much time travelling or away from home. We came up with a model which involved three residential modules, each of 3.5 days, over the course of a year, with pre-reading before each module, intensive teaching and group work during the module, and further work between modules such as essays and projects. This is nowhere near enough to cover all topics thoroughly but did enable us to present a 'map' of the Dharma so that future personal or structured study could be readily connected to areas already studied and hence consolidate knowledge rather than create unconnected fragments of knowledge.

Syllabus

The course was organised by Jake Lyne and taught by the four WCF retreat leaders, Simon Child, Fiona Nuttall, Jake Lyne and Hilary Richards. The first module focused on early Buddhism, looking at the pre-Buddhist culture in India, the culture into which the Buddha was born, and the early teachings and doctrines of the Buddha as available to us from the Pali suttas and the corresponding Chinese *Agamas* (The *Agamas* are translations from Sanskrit versions of the early sutras). For example we looked at the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths, Co-dependent Origination, the Three Marks of Existence (*Dukkha, Anicca, Anatta*), Rebirth, Karma, Nirvana, Ethics, meditation and mental cultivation, and more. There were also sessions on presentation skills in the first two modules,

with each of those attending giving at least one presentation to the group during the course.

The second module covered the development of the Mahayana and its teachings, such as Prajnaparamita, Madhyamaka, Tathagatagarbha, Yogacara, Bodhisattva path and Devotional practice. During the first inter-modular period, as well as each writing an essay on a topic of their choice, each leader also made specific study of a Sutra and some gave presentations on these to the group during the second module, for example on the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, *The Lankavatara Sutra* and the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.

For the third module we turned specifically to Chinese Buddhism, a form of Buddhism which arose from these earlier forms of Buddhism and which is the basis for our Chan lineage. We looked at such topics as the influences and interactions when Buddhism entered China and encountered the prior Chinese cultures of Daoism and Confucianism, the emergence of Chan as a distinct tradition of Chinese Buddhism, the Chan patriarchs with the subsequent development of Northern and Southern Schools, then the ‘five houses’ of Chan and then the Linji and Caodong lineages. We also looked at Pure Land practice and devotion to Guanyin.

We explored how some of the received history of Chan is being challenged by contemporary historians as being a constructed or rewritten history, created at the time for political reasons, rather than truly representing historical fact. In trying to make a name for itself as a distinct tradition there was a tendency for exponents of Chan Buddhist Schools to make exaggerated lineage claims, and to claim spiritual superiority over other Buddhist Schools, and there was similar competition within

Chan between the various Chan Schools. The importance of understanding this is that we avoid being caught into believing literally in some of the more exaggerated stories that have come down to us. For example the supposed dramatic iconoclasm of early Chan was probably invented centuries after the fact for sectarian and literary reasons to help promote Chan as being spiritually potent, but very probably is not an accurate historical reflection of the behaviour of early Chan Masters. Indeed even the verse of Bodhidharma with which I opened only became a defining statement of Chan several hundred years after Bodhidharma was alive.¹ Furthermore, some historians doubt whether, as presented, there was ever such a figure as Bodhidharma, and most believe that the story and person of Huineng was created as a teaching story based on more than one real-life person.

We noted how Chinese Buddhism was significantly influenced by the history and political events in China, for example the varying attitudes of emperors to the development of Buddhism, including periods of oppression, and the effects of the communist period.

We looked specifically at some significant past masters including 9th cent. Zongmi (who promoted equally both meditation and study of sutras and commentaries), 12th cent. Dahui (a strong advocate of Huatou Chan), Hongzhi (also 12th cent, who wrote extensively about Silent Illumination practice) and Taixu (a 20th century moderniser of Chinese Buddhism and advocate for social engagement).

We ended by reviewing Chan Master Sheng Yen's life and work, including the importance to him of Buddhist scholarship, of making Buddhism relevant to people's lives, and of course his teaching of Chan. We also reviewed the contribution of John Crook and the development of

the Western Chan Fellowship, and considered how all this history informs the future development of Chan in the West.

Epilogue

You will see from the above that we covered a lot of ground. But you may also note that we left large areas seemingly ignored – for example we made only passing mention to Tibetan Buddhism, to developments from Chinese Buddhism such as Japanese Zen and others, and very little mention of the many forms of Buddhism present today in both East and West. It simply wasn't possible to give any meaningful coverage to any more topics within the constraints of the course so we deliberately focused on the history and teachings that bear directly on the teachings that we have received through our lineage and which we present to our practitioners. Taking that learning further by looking at other Buddhisms is a task for the future, but will hopefully be more meaningful now that we have reviewed our history and teachings which gives us the context to better understand parallel developments in other traditions and countries.

NOTES

- 1 Peter D Hershock, *Chan Buddhism*, University of Hawaii Press, 2005, page 67

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING IN HIS TIME

JEREMY WOODWARD, SOUTH DEVON CHAN GROUP

Introduction

This essay will look at the context of the Buddha's thought and teaching (broadly referred to as Buddhism) in relation to Brahmanism and its teachings. The essay falls into two main parts, firstly a consideration on Brahmanism and its influence on Buddhism together with a brief look at the place of home-leavers in that society with a consideration of how Buddhism contrasts and compares with these other philosophical approaches.

Brahmanism

The sources for the teachings of Brahmanism are the Vedas and Upanishads which set out a system of ritual and beliefs that underpinned the organization of society at the time of the Buddha. Brahmanism is a hierarchical approach to society, divided into four classes (Pali: *vanna* Skt: *varna*¹) of Brahmins, warrior/rulers, generators of wealth and the rest ('servants') which show one's relative social purity and status. Brahmins as the priests have set themselves at the top of this literal hierarchy.

The teachings of the Brahmins reinforce this social order by being the persons who can perform sacrifices that aid *kamma* (Skt: *karma*) through which lower classes can propitiate the Gods and earn themselves a better rebirth, which in this context refers to reincarnation of their self or soul (Pali: *atta* Skt: *atman*) in the never-ending cycle of birth and death (Pali & Skt: *samsara*).



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

In the meantime, the Brahmins are striving to reach a state where they become or realise themselves as Brahman (the Universal Essence whereby a Brahmin is merged with his *atta* and becomes his self). This is a non-dual state of oneness with everything including one's self. 'This is the final magical identification. By knowing oneself, by thereby controlling oneself, one knows and controls all'.² He thereby on his death escapes *samsara*. This soteriology is only available to Brahmins.

All classes live under the rule of Dharma (Pali: *dhamma* Skt: *dharmā*) which is seen as bound up in righteousness and duty in the order of the universe.

This belief system is ultimately theistic and based on belief in speculative entities which have to be taken on trust and cannot be tried experientially and have no provable existence. Hence, while originally having a philosophical basis, with its theistic soteriology it is more akin to a religion than a philosophy; what the priest says (and does), goes.

Samanas

For those who felt that Brahmanism was not the answer, there was a well-trodden path outside society as an ascetic (Pali: *samana* Skt: *sramana*). This step placed one completely outside the social system. The individuals left society and lived on alms while seeking liberation. There are a number of *samanas* referred to in the *Suttas* (Skt: *sutra*), e.g. *Samannaphala Sutta*,³ *Kalama Sutta*,⁴ *Tevijja Sutta*.⁵

Indeed of course, when he left his home and family, the Buddha became a *samana* and recounts, in the *Ariapariyesana Sutta*,⁶ how he went for liberation, as a disciple, to two *samanas* known to him, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, neither of whose deep practices led

the Buddha to the enlightenment (Pali: *nibbana* Skt: *nirvana*) he was seeking.

And then his first five disciples were fellow samanas who thought he had abandoned the extreme ascetic path they were following when he took food and later, in the light of this perceived lapse, had to be persuaded that this had led him to an insight which was indeed worth hearing.

Buddhism

The Buddha's teaching ('Buddhism') points to a path to the nibbana also sought by samanas, while rejecting their extreme methods of practice at the same time as much of Brahmanism.

In his first sermon⁷ he starts by telling his five ascetic friends that his path is neither sensual pleasure nor self-affliction, but a middle way and that that middle way has led to pure self-awakening. They take time to accept this and to understand the import of his teaching but do so by the end of the second sermon⁸ during which he is already comparing Brahmanism and its belief in Permanent Self (*atta*) unfavourably to his insight that there is no permanent Self (Pali: *anatta* Skt: *anatman*).

The whole thrust of Buddhism is based on actual experience of the human condition and how this can be transformed by action. In contrast to metaphysics, "for Buddhism there are no nouns, only verbs".⁹

Kamma is no longer ritual action performed by someone else for you but 'is intentional, conscious, deliberate action motivated by volition, or will'¹⁰ which a person does himself/herself. This is a radical development, giving the individual the responsibility for her/his own actions and the consequences of them; '(t)his is a situation of 'total responsibility'.¹¹ Gombrich again 'just as Being lies at the heart of the Upanisadic world

view, Action lies at the heart of the Buddha's. "Action", of course, is kamma; and primarily it refers to morally relevant action.¹²

This leads on to the basis of Buddhism which is rooted in ethical transformation through action. The early suttas do refer to enlightenment, but primarily deal with how one can transform one's life by moral action (kamma), by engaging with dhamma. Kamma and dhamma are each simultaneously both a process and the result of that process.

These processes and their results are factually and experientially true. They can be experienced for oneself by doing them.

What are these processes? They include the Four Noble Tasks,¹³ Eightfold Noble Path¹⁴ and the *brahmaviharas*¹⁵ (love, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity) all of which can be salvific from *dukkha* (Pali Skt: *dubkha*).

The insight, realization or enlightenment that results from following the Path leads to an end of rebirth, and so of samsara. This is permanent, in contrast to everything else in the dhamma which is impermanent (Pali: *anicca* Skt: *anitya*). That includes the Self which, in direct contradiction of the Brahmanic teachings,¹⁶ in Buddhism has no 'permanent essence or unchanging core.'¹⁷ This teaching of *anicca* pervades the whole of Buddhism which results in a dynamic view of the world in which *dukkha* is overcome by being embraced, and then the craving (Pali: *tanha* Skt: *trnsa*) which arises from such embrace is let go of so that cessation of suffering is experienced and then the Eightfold Path can be cultivated.

There is no ultimate being either to aspire to be united with or to protect one; so, again in contrast to Brahmanism, no theology. Indeed, the Buddha also refuses (unlike the Brahmins) to speculate on matters outside direct experience, such as whether the world is finite or eternal (or not) or what happens to a person after death.¹⁸ He is interested in human

experience during life and not in speculative ideas on which there can be no certainty, just endless argument from different intellectual perspectives. As he says:

For what reason are [speculative views] undeclared by me? Because they are not useful in attaining the goal; they are not fundamental to the religious life and do not lead to aversion, dispassion, cessation, peace, higher knowledge, enlightenment, and nibbana – for these reasons these are not declared by me.

And what is declared by me? ‘This is suffering’ is declared by me. ‘This is the origin of suffering’ is declared by me. ‘This is the cessation of suffering’ is declared by me. ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering’ is declared by me.

For what reason are these declared by me? Because they are useful in attaining the goal; they are fundamental to the religious life and lead to aversion, dispassion, cessation, peace, higher knowledge, enlightenment, and nibbana – for these reasons these are declared by me.¹⁹

As a development of this rejection of Brahmanic teachings, there has recently been a suggestion that the twelve foundations or causes (Pali & Skt: *nīdanas*) in the Chain of Dependent Origination (Pali: *paticca-samuppāda* Skt: *pratitya-samutpada*) are (in addition to being at the core of the dhamma as proclaimed by Buddha), at the same time, a refutation of Vedic cosmogony on which Brahmanic thought is based.²⁰

Finally the *Assalayana Sutta*²¹ is a devastating refutation of the Brahmins’ claim that, on the basis of their birth, they have any class precedence as the highest vanna in their social hierarchy. The Buddha’s

compassion for young Assalayana, after demolishing his inculcated beliefs of the superiority of his vanna, despite Assalayana's own doubts and unwillingness to dispute these with the Buddha, is also striking.

Conclusion

This is a very brief summary of how the early Buddhist teachings can be placed in the social and philosophical context of his times. As well as refuting some core Brahmanic tenets, Buddhism was a radical challenge to the hierarchic social structures of the time, allowing lower classes,²² social outcasts²³ (*samanas*) and women²⁴ equal rank, thus opening these teachings to all.

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Anatta-lakkhana Sutta Samyutta Nikaya 3.66–68

Ariapariyesana Sutta Majjhima Nikaya 1.160–175

Assalayana Sutta: Majjhima Nikaya 2.147–157

Cula-Malunkya Sutta: Majjhima Nikaya 1.426–432

Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Samyutta Nikaya 5.420–424

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Mahasatipatthana Sutta: Digha Nikaya 1.290–315

Potthapada Sutta: Digha Nikaya 1.178–203

Samannaphala Sutta: Digha Nikaya 1.47–86

Tevija Sutta: Digha Nikaya 1.235–253

Vajira Sutta: Samyutta Nikaya 1.296–297

NOTES

- 1 The Pali (the language of the Suttas) and Sanskrit (Skt. – the language of the Vedas and Upanishads) versions of words have been given and the Pali versions used when repeated in the text.
- 2 Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought* (Routledge 2nd Ed 2012), p8
- 3 *Digha Nikaya* 1.47–86
- 4 *Anguttara Nikaya* 1.188–193
- 5 *Digha Nikaya* 1.235–253
- 6 *Majjhima Nikaya* 1.160–175
- 7 *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Samyutta Nikaya* 5:420–424

- 8 *Anatta-lakkhana Sutta Samyutta Nikaya* 3.66–68
- 9 Richard Gombrich *What the Buddha Thought* (Equinox 2013), p131
- 10 Peter Della Santina *The Tree of Enlightenment* (Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc. 1997), p97
- 11 Williams, p55 quoting Gombrich, *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon* (Oxford, MA: Clarendon Press) Ch. 5
- 12 Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began; The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (Athlone Press 1996, pp48-9
- 13 I am much taken with Stephen Batchelor's article *A Secular Buddhism* (Journal of Global Buddhism 13 (2012) pp87–107, which presents Four Noble Tasks based on a reading of the *Dhammacakkapavattana [sic] Sutta*.
- 14 *Mahasatipatthana Sutta: Digba Nikaya* 1.290–315
- 15 *Tevijja Sutta*
- 16 *Potthapada Sutta: Digba Nikaya* 1.178-203
- 17 Dale S. Wright, *Six Perfections* (Oxford, 2009), p23
- 18 *Cula-Malunkya Sutta: Majjhima Nikaya* 1.426-432
- 19 *Cula Malunkya Sutta* p431 trans. John J. Holder *Early Buddhist Discourses* (Hackett Publishing Company Inc. 2006) pp 100-101
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- 21 *Majjhima Nikaya* 2.147-157
- 22 *Algaddupama Sutta: Majjhima Nikaya* 1.130-142
- 23 *Aggivachagotta Sutta: Majjhima Nikaya* 1.483-488
- 24 *Vajira Sutta: Samyutta Nikaya* 1.296-297

PROJECT: INTENDED EXPLORATION OF THE SATIPATTHANA SUTTA (SUTTA ON THE WAY OF MINDFULNESS)

DAVID HOPE, HERTFORD CHAN GROUP

My course essay, *An Exploration of the Satipatthana Sutta*, was to be the focus of study for the Hertford group, to help us develop a deeper appreciation of the potential depth of Buddhist meditation.

However, since several members of the Hertford Chan Group are quite new to Buddhism we decided it would be useful to listen to selected talks by Professor David Eckel (available on YouTube) outlining the key divisions and themes of Buddhism that developed through the ages and as it spread through different cultures. This would provide a context against which to consider the Sutta.

We are now some way through and it has been partly successful. I say partly because several members are new and joined primarily to learn meditation and most have busy work and family lives, making it rare for us to have a full house. In consequence not everyone has listened to the lectures and follow-up discussions have been patchy, falling mainly on the shoulders of two or three people.

However, at the suggestion of a group member who has attended WCF retreats, we have begun listening to short extracts of talks given by Simon Child. These are a more manageable bite-size and take place during the evening 'sit'.

Whilst the proposal for the group to delve into the *Satipatthana Sutta* has not yet been achieved, the preparatory process has opened up new avenues perhaps more suited to the experience of the group and which

will lay the foundations for us to address the sutta later. The process has highlighted the fact that groups have their own dynamics, which need to be listened to and worked with.

A translation and introduction to the Sutta can be found here:

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/soma/wayof.html>

Professor David Eckel's talks can be found here:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLdwCuEoZ_6l4h-QfiT4hheqRJ8HnhD_II

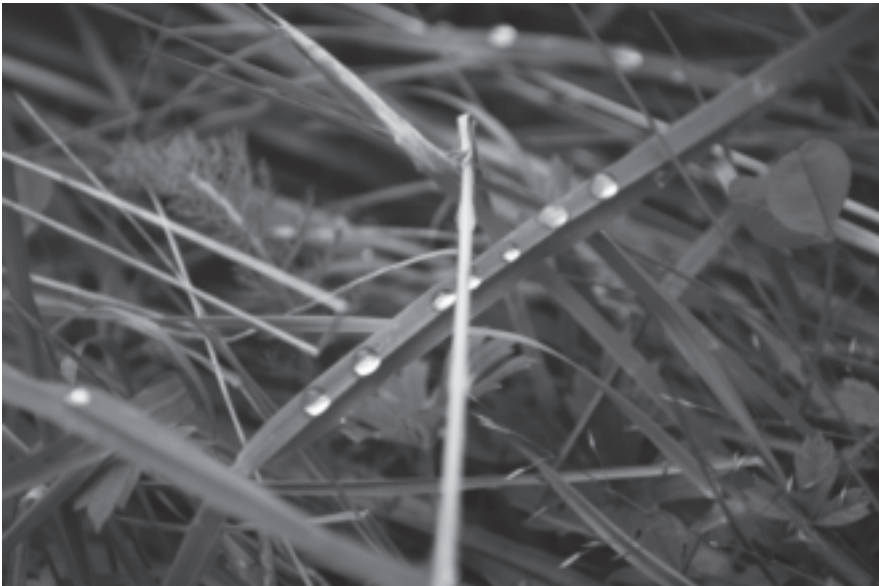


PHOTO: Claire Martin

THE PRACTICE OF DANA: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE OF MERITORIOUS ACTION

JULIET HACKNEY, SLEAFORD CHAN GROUP AND CHAIR OF THE NETWORK OF BUDDHIST ORGANISATIONS

My first real experience of Buddhism and meditation was in 2005 when I went on a Vipassana retreat. I had been working in Somalia doing voluntary humanitarian medical aid work. When I returned I was given a book about Enlightenment, which intrigued me. Going back to my comfortable life in New Zealand left me feeling confused about my experience of life. Somalia had been so intense and although there were many difficult and frightening times I suppose it had been exciting and I had felt a real sense of purpose and somehow more alive. However, I only spent six months in Somalia and it was time to return to my normal life. I found myself wondering why I didn't feel satisfied, because really I had a comfortable life in a nice place. I was also questioning myself about my core beliefs, who was I really? Had I ever had an original thought or was I just a product of societal influences, education and fulfilling expectations? The book I read suggested Buddhism was a place for exploring these things and I arranged to go to a ten-day Vipassana retreat in a Goenka retreat centre.

From the start I knew I had found something interesting and inspiring. One of the first amazing things was that the whole retreat, which was held at a purpose built retreat centre with comfortable single rooms, in a beautiful part of New Zealand with its own grounds, where tuis sang and ferns and palms grew, was completely free of charge.

Everybody went on the retreat without paying a penny! Wow – that was amazing. At the end of the retreat we were invited to make donations. We were told how much it cost for a retreatant to attend and if we wanted to we could give a donation to cover the cost of another person attending. I could have chosen to give nothing at all and was still welcome to go. This was my first lesson in *dana* and I'm still grateful for it.

Even though I had recently been doing voluntary work I was struck by how radical this experience was of being given the meditation retreat, with its teaching and shelter, completely freely and being invited to give freely. I had risked my life going to Somalia and been prepared to pay the ultimate price, but part of me expected praise and recognition. I certainly expected MSF to look after me, provide my training and support. I also think I hoped to feel rewarded personally, to feel I was a better person, more worthy perhaps. I don't think any of these things were necessarily wrong, but the experience was quite different to the gift of the retreat. Over the years since then, I have had many encounters with the practice of *dana*. I have read about it, received it and offered it, and it still inspires and interests me. What is the practice of *dana*?

Bhikku Bodhi (1995) tells us “The practice of giving is universally recognized as one of the most basic of human virtues, a quality that testifies to one's humanity and one's capacity for self-transcendence.” It is not a factor in the Noble Eightfold Path or a requisite of enlightenment, yet it claims a place of special eminence in the Buddha's teaching, being the beginning of the path to liberation (Ten Bases of Meritorious Action). In the Pali suttas the first topic to be discussed by the Buddha would be to emphasize the value of giving. He would later introduce other aspects of his teaching. Besides appearing as the first topic in the

graduated exposition of the Dhamma, the practice of giving also figures as the first of the three bases of meritorious deeds – *dana*, *sila*, *bhavana* (giving, morality, meditation or mental cultivation). That *dana* is one heading underscores its importance. It is the first step towards eliminating the defilement of greed, hatred and delusion (*lobka*, *dosa*, *moha*), for every act of giving is an act of non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. Giving is the also first of the *Ten Paramis* (Skt. *Paramitas*) perfected by the Buddha, which are the sublime virtues to be cultivated by all aspirants to enlightenment.

I look back and think I have been extremely slow to realise the value of the practice of *dana*. After my first encounter with Buddhism at the Vipassana retreat I went on to have something of a “spiritual crisis”. I sought out Zen teachers who might be able to help me. In my daily life friends and colleagues were sympathetic but didn't really understand what was distressing me – a loss of certainty about the nature of myself and my perception of reality. The Zen teachers I met were extremely helpful and generous. They gave their time freely, they gave me space to express my distress (over and over at times) and they gave me guidance, patiently encouraging me to take up a practice to help me. I found the practice extremely challenging and was not sure who/what to trust, but with each engagement there was a move towards understanding and a feeling of freedom and gradual acceptance of the way things were. During this time I was really motivated by the desire for transformation to reach the goal of enlightenment. I wanted to get something and for things to be different. I was practising for myself to fulfill these goals.

I feel very grateful to the teachers, groups and places I have encountered who have supported and sheltered me to allow this kind of explo-



Photo: Claire Martin

ration. Along the way of course opportunities arose to express this gratitude by making contributions of money and time. I also felt after a while I would express my support by becoming a member of the group adding to the desire to keep the group itself going, as well as supporting the continuation of the teaching by maintaining the group. Later I set up my own local group in order to support my own practice and offer it to others who may be interested in meditation. I volunteered my time and energy as well as financial backing.

As time passed and I walked further along the Buddhist path the challenge came to contribute more. What does it mean to be a member of a group which is a charity, the purpose of which is to offer education in Buddhism for the benefit of the public? At what point do I stop being a consumer/beneficiary of this education and become a provider/donor. This does not mean that I should be able to provide all the teaching myself, but that I should give my backing fully to whatever is required for the provision of that teaching. I felt resistant to that challenge, which seemed to imply others and I should be doing more. At what point does that request mean that it is no longer a free gift. Does it matter?

Through reading, teaching and examination of my own life this practice of dana has been extremely helpful. When I give something, my reaction to the response shines a light on my own prejudices, opinions and expectations. I notice when I feel peeved if no-one thanks me, or my gift is not appreciated, I feel good if I am rewarded or praised. So what is the “right way to give”?

Thanissaro Bhikku (2010): “There are six factors that the Buddha said exemplified the ideal gift:

The donor, before giving is glad; while giving, his/her mind is inspired; and after giving, is gratified. These are the three factors of the donor... The recipients are free of passions or are practicing for the subduing of passion; free of aversion or practicing for the subduing of aversion; and free of delusion or practicing for the subduing of delusion. These are the three factors of the recipients. – AN 6.37”

Following these guidelines the merit/virtues of giving can be maximised. This is simply a helpful guide for living, like the precepts, which allow us to avoid going in circles feeling confused and bad about how difficulties keep occurring in life. If we are clear about the best way to give and receive, the outcome will benefit the most people. This is also in accordance with the law of cause and effect, kamma.

What happens if giving is done with the aim of freeing oneself and all sentient beings – the cessation of suffering, Nibbana. This will guide the donor in giving appropriately for the benefit of all and lead to wise choices. This is the meaning of meritorious action and virtue or perfection. This is merit for all and when merit is received it can be shared. “The mind enjoys a wholesome state associated with loving-kindness and compassion as we share the merits of our good deeds” Bhikku Visuddhacara.

I am reminded of a quote from HH Dalai Lama (1998, p47):

So let us reflect on what is truly of value in life, what gives meaning in our lives, and set our priorities on the basis of that. The purpose of our life needs to be positive. We weren't born for the purpose of causing trouble, harming others. For our life to be of value, I think we must develop basic good human qualities – warmth, kindness, compassion. Then our life becomes meaningful and more peaceful – happier.

Recently I have become more involved with our Buddhist Group, I am now a committee member, I offer to help others on retreats as guest-master and I have started organising day retreats for our local group. I had not really appreciated before writing this essay how all these activities are acts of *dana*, and how helpful they are to myself and others along the way. Happily I found help with giving *dana* talks from Master Sheng Yen (2010, p50):

Wherever you go, whether or not you benefit from being there, let that place benefit from your being there. This is good practice for the mind of enlightenment and the mind of compassion. To give something back in return for a benefit received is good, but strictly speaking, this is not in accord with Buddhadharmā. *Dana*, giving, is one of the Six Paramitas, or Perfections; it means giving without conditions – it is one of the ways of the bodhisattva.

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PROJECT REPORT: TEACHING BUDDHISM IN SCHOOLS

ALYSUN JONES

This project was a development of earlier work I had done, teaching meditation to younger children (8–12yrs). I wanted to develop my work with children, ideally older children/young people (14–17yrs). I approached a few local schools and was fortunate enough for one to be interested, and really welcome what I had to offer. I was asked to come to a class of year 8 (age 12) children as a Buddhist, and talk about 'My life as a Buddhist'. A bit of a formidable task!

I decided to focus on the five lay Chan precepts. The first three are most relevant. Hopefully sexual misconduct hadn't been an issue for them yet, nor alcohol and drug use.

The young people found the issues around the precepts fascinating. There were lots of questions (Do Buddhists not eat meat in case they are eating a reincarnation of one of their relatives?), and very touching confessions (I steal things like sweets...).

I also wanted the young people to have a brief experience of meditation. This was just a few minutes, starting with listening to the sound of my Tibetan bells as the sound gradually faded away, and ended with a period of silence with breath counting. On the whole the children/young people took this task very seriously in all the classes I attended. Occasionally some found it embarrassing, and giggled, but they did not distract the majority.

I loved the freshness and energy of the young people and also the kindness and enthusiasm of their teacher. She is keen for me to come

back to do more sessions. At least I was not like the last person whom she had invited in, who got the children to lie down and relax for the whole lesson with absolutely disastrous results!

DEPENDENT ORIGATION AND REBIRTH

JANE SPRAY, FOREST OF DEAN CHAN GROUP

Dependent Origination

‘Dependent Origination’, ‘Dependent Arising’, ‘The Principle of Conditionality’, ‘The Law of Causation’ and ‘Conditioned Co-production’ are all common translations of the Pali term *paticcasamuppada*. Along with the Four Noble Truths, to which it is intimately and deeply related, it lies at the heart of the Buddha’s understanding as presented in the Pali Suttas, and as further systematised and analysed in the *Abhidharma* (and from there on into the Mahayana).

Patichsamuppada is thus a key teaching in Buddhism,¹ and one which I continue to find rich and intriguing, not least because it can be viewed, interpreted and explained in several different, though related, ways, and also because of the many different visual representations of it.

This essay will explore a little of its meaning, implications and place in Buddhism, with an emphasis on early Buddhism and in particular Dependent Origination as it relates to rebirth. I will not make the same mistake as Ananda and claim that it is all completely clear to me!² The first part of the essay looks at some general aspects of Dependent Origination.

The second part covers some different ways of considering rebirth within the process of *paticcasamuppada* and reviews some early tips from the *Sutta Nipata* on ending, or seeing through, the cycle of Samsara. A brief conclusion reminds us that all the various ways we have of trying to understand the process are themselves conditional.



In a profound sense Dependent Origination can, I think, be intuited as an alternative presentation of the Four Noble Truths of *dukkha*,³ the cause of *dukkha*, the possibility of the cessation of *dukkha*, and the Noble Eightfold Path. Perhaps the simplest introductory presentation of it is this verse from *Majjhima-Nikaya 11; Collection of Middle Length Sayings*, which shows the general principle of conditionality:

If this is, that comes to be;
 from the arising of this, that arises;
 if this is not, that does not come to be;
 from the stopping of this, that is stopped.

Putting this principle into practice, this verse ties directly in to the Four Noble Truths: the coming to being of *dukkha*, its causes and its arising, and then the possibility of its ceasing, the possibility of liberation from it. The Noble Eightfold Path also features here as the necessary '*bhavana*' to effect this liberation. *Bhavana* is a Pali word meaning cultivation or training. *Bhavana* in this context is ultimately based on *sila* – morality, ethics and the precepts.

The saying, "Sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny"⁴ illustrates this clearly and succinctly – how one thing will lead to another. It calls for clear observation and a guarding of the mind, being mindful from moment to moment of our thoughts and feelings, as well as our actions. The importance of examining and questioning our habitual, conditioned thoughts and actions within this process cannot be underestimated. A break in the chain of our habits may take the form of a liberating insight, or a skilful, as opposed to unskilful, action.

Paticcasamuppada teaches that:

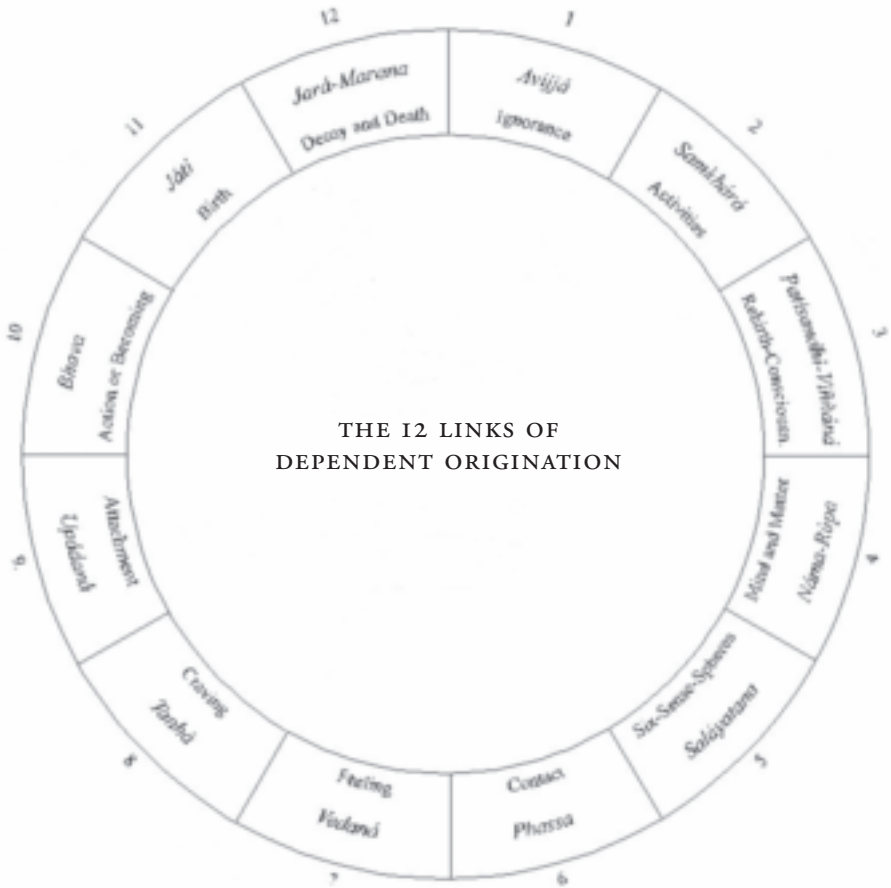
- Everything comes into being and is maintained by a complex web of conditions
- Everything is part of the network of conditions maintaining some thing else
- Nothing exists completely independent of anything else
- Everything ceases when the conditions that maintain it cease
- The whole of existence is a ceaseless process of flux and change
- Conditionality applies on all levels of existence from the physical environment to the human mind⁵



DEPENDENT ORIGINATION AS A WEB
OF MUTUALLY INTERDEPENDENT CAUSES

This general diagram sketches out how everything is linked to everything else. There is not in reality one single cause of anything, all is interrelated,

and yet the more specific model of the diagrammatic ‘wheel’, below, is also helpful for our understanding.



It is possible to discuss Dependent Origination solely in terms of its workings as a process from moment to moment. However the Wheel of Dependent Arising can also be viewed in other ways, for instance as encompassing and depicting three lifetimes, as follows:

PAST

1. Ignorance
2. Kamma-formations

PRESENT

3. Consciousness
4. Mentality-&-corporeality
5. Six sense bases
6. Impression
7. Feeling
8. Craving
9. Clinging
10. Existence

FUTURE

11. Rebirth
12. Decay-&-death

There is not space here to go into all the twelve factors, and how they link up, but there are many accounts of this in books, and online, to explore further.⁶ I will just note this important comment on the first factor, Ignorance, (*avijja* in Pali). Ignorance, although conditioned and not the ‘uncaused’ first cause of things, leads to all the other factors, and round and round in a circle. Insight and wisdom are involved in the process of letting go of craving and clinging, thus breaking the cycle of our misunderstanding, our ‘ignorance’, in thinking of the nature of the self as a permanent, fixed entity, which exists independently of everything else.

Dependent Origination and rebirth

An ‘interactive wheel of life’ can be explored here:

<http://www.buddhanet.net/wheel2.htm> .

This shows the six traditional realms of rebirth. Which one will you be reborn in? Or, should we ask, in what sense is it ‘you’?

What, according to traditional Buddhism, is reborn, from moment to moment, life to life? No ‘thing’, just an ever-changing process. Like a cloud breaking apart and re-forming or another wave arising:

Nothing transmigrates from this moment to the next, nothing from one life to another life. This process of continually producing and being produced may best be compared with a wave on the ocean. In the case of a wave there is not the smallest quantity of water that actually travels over the surface of the sea. The wave-structure that seems to hasten over the surface of the water, though creating the appearance of one and the same mass of water, is in reality nothing but a continued rising and falling of ever new masses of water. And the rising and falling is produced by the transmission of force originally generated by wind. Just so the Buddha did not teach that it is an ego-entity, or a soul, that hastens through the ocean of rebirth, but that it is in reality merely a life-wave which, according to its nature and activities, appears here as man, there as animal, and elsewhere as invisible being.⁷

A passage in the *Visuddhimagga* by Buddhagosa, makes a similar point – there is *kamma* (action) but:

No doer of the deeds is found,
No one who ever reaps their fruits.

Empty phenomena roll on.
 This only is the correct view.
 No god nor Brahma can be called
 The maker of this wheel of life:
 Empty phenomena roll on,
 Dependent on conditions all.

Since Buddhism is concerned with freedom, and in particular a release from dukkha, a crucial quality of the Great Chain of Causation is that, in the Buddha's experience, it can be broken and that is his point. There is a less well known version of Dependent Arising which shows this process too:

Conditioned by (1) suffering, there is (2) faith, conditioned by faith, there is (3) gladness, conditioned by gladness there is (4) joy, conditioned by joy there is (5) tranquillity, conditioned by tranquillity there is (6) happiness, conditioned by happiness there is (7) concentration, conditioned by concentration there is (8) knowledge and vision of what truly is, conditioned by knowledge and vision of what truly is, there is (9) disenchantment, conditioned by disenchantment, there is (10) dispassion, conditioned by dispassion, there is (11) freedom, conditioned by freedom, there knowledge that the defilements are destroyed.⁸

This process of letting go, of release, is also expressed in verse in the *Sutta Nipata*, thought by many scholars to be one of the earliest Suttas. In 'Kappa asks a question',⁹ Kappa asks:

For one stranded in the middle of the lake,
 in the flood of great danger – birth –
 overwhelmed with aging and death:

Tell me the island, dear sir, and show me the island
so that this may not happen again

[The Buddha:]

For one stranded in the middle of the lake,
in the flood of great danger – birth –
overwhelmed with aging and death,
I will tell you the island, Kappa.

Having nothing,
clinging to no thing:
That is the island,
there is no other.
That's Unbinding, I tell you,
the total ending of aging and death.

Those knowing this, mindful,
fully unbound
in the here and now,
don't serve as Mara's servants,
don't come under Mara's sway.

This is the Buddha not mincing words. He intimates a total letting go, breaking apart the chain of causation, becoming 'unbound' by it. A process involving a release from attachment and craving through seeing and understanding with wisdom, from moment to moment: 'Those knowing this, mindful, fully unbound in the here and now'.

Also, in another passage from the *Sutta Nipata*, the Buddha again states this clearly, and again brings in mindful awareness in the present moment:

Whatever you're alert to,
above, below,
across, in between:
knowing it as a bond in the world,
don't create craving
for becoming or non-becoming.¹⁰

Both craving for becoming and non-becoming are cautioned against, as two sides of the same coin. This crops up again and again in the early Suttas, as the Middle Way between eternalism and annihilation, and it illustrates the importance of a true understanding of Dependent Arising as the Middle Way.

Whether you look at Dependent Co-arising as being an illustration over 3 lifetimes, one lifetime, or a single moment, in a significant way it is the same process that is being pointed to, just from different viewpoints over different time scales. As Simon Child points out, the momentary view is not solely a modern interpretation evading the question of rebirth. It too has an ancient pedigree, and is analysed in some depth in the *Abhidharma*.

Rebirth is a process occurring moment by moment in this life. This is not just a modern Western cop out, it is an historical teaching. Rebirth can be understood as a process occurring moment by moment within life, through death, and beyond. The causes created during life may mature into effects after death, representing continuation of cause and effect beyond 'death', which could be rephrased as the process of 'my' life continuing after death, or 'rebirth'.¹¹

Whether one believes, (or even, chooses to believe) literally in rebirth in the traditional Buddhist sense, or is agnostic, thinking that it might be a possibility in some mysterious way, but that it seems rather difficult, if not impossible, to gather the hard scientific evidence; whether one looks at in terms of the interactions of genes and the environment; whether one tends to view it in terms of our being conditioned down through the generations, and having a conditioning effect in our turn, as in Philip Larkin's famous 'This be the Verse' poem;¹² whether one just does one's best to investigate the process from moment to moment; in all these approaches, and others, we need to be aware that our own view is a conditioned and dependently arisen one.

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NOTES

- 1 'Whoever sees Dependent Origination sees the Dhamma; whoever sees the Dhamma sees Dependent Origination.' The Buddha, M.I.191
- 2 See the beginning of the *Mahanidana Sutta*, *the Great Discourse on Origination*, *Sutta 15* in the *Digha Nikaya* in which Ananda is chided by the Buddha for saying too glibly that he understands it.
- 3 *Dukkha* – a Pali word often translated as suffering, but perhaps nearer in meaning to 'unsatisfactoriness'. See *What the Buddha Thought* by Rahula Walpola for a fuller discussion of its meaning and use. Originally the word meant a wheel whose hub was unbalanced and off centre, giving a bumpy ride.
- 4 Unattributed
- 5 Quoted from: <http://www.clear-vision.org/Schools/Students/Ages-15-16/Beliefs-and-values/conditions.aspx>
- 6 As Dr Hilary Richards demonstrated in her talk on the subject at Barmoor, module 1, lecture notes, Tiki. Also, an interesting book exploring this angle, 'Under the Bodhi Tree: Buddha's Original Vision of Dependent Co-Arising', by Ajahn Buddhadasa and Bhikkhu Bodhi, is coming out in paperback this June.
- 7 *Fundamentals of Buddhism, Four Lectures* by Nyanatiloka Mahathera, lecture 1, the Essentials of Buddhism <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/nyanatiloka/wheel394.html>
- 8 See Gethin note, *Foundations of Buddhism*, p157
- 9 Kappa-manava-puccha: Kappa's Question (Sn 5.10) translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu Access to Insight (Legacy Edition, version ati-legacy-2013.12.28.08), 30 November 2013

- 10 *Dhotaka-manava-puccha: Dhotaka's Questions* (Sn 5.5), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 29 August 2012, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.5.05.than.html>
- 11 Simon Child, course lecture notes 2015
- 12 The one which begins “They fuck you up, your mum and dad.....”
See <http://allpoetry.com/This-Be-The-Verse>

PROJECT REPORT: BEGINNERS EVENING

NED REITER, GLASTONBURY CHAN GROUP

The project I developed is ongoing: on the first Monday of every month, the Glastonbury Chan Group now offers a structured “Beginners Evening”. We modify our usual schedule, beginning the evening with detailed meditation instruction, followed by a 20 minute sit and a short round of kinhin. There is an opportunity for questions and feedback, followed by some teaching on the basic tenets of the Dharma, again with a chance for discussion and questions. After a cup of green tea we revert to our normal schedule which consists of a short service (chanting of *Heart Sutra*, Three Refuges and Four Great Vows), a 30-minute sit, and a short closing ceremony.

The project has been running since June 2016, and has proved very popular. As well as a good flow of beginners, regular group members have been encouraged to attend as well with the following message:

Please remember that all are welcome: indeed, the presence of regular group members at these evenings will be of great help to both beginners and instructor! We will also welcome feedback from everyone: this opportunity for beginners to explore the Dharma and Chan meditation is something being offered by our group as a whole, and will hopefully develop and ripen over time. After all, our First Great Vow is to “deliver innumerable sentient beings” – may this be a modest start to realising it!

POSTER PRESENTATION: RUNNING AND MEDITATION WORKSHOP

STUART MCLEOD, MEDWAY CHAN GROUP

The Invitation

Dear MedwayTri members and friends

I'm going to be offering a free workshop for anyone who may be interested in looking at the mutual benefits of training the body (for running) and training the mind through meditation. The workshop is something of an experiment as it forms part of a course I'm currently completing. With our club Chairman's permission, I am offering this opportunity for up to 12 willing MedwayTri members or friends who are open to trying something new. We'll explore some of the basic principles of sitting meditation and then introduce techniques to apply mindfulness and awareness to movement and running. Best wishes, Stuart McLeod

The Programme

Where and when are we meeting?

The Quadrangle near Shoreham – a centre for sustainable living and the creative arts. Saturday 14th May, 9.30am to 2.30pm

What will we be doing?

We'll start the session exploring some of the basic principles of meditation, and then we'll put that in to practice with a few periods of sitting meditation followed by discussion and reflection. My own meditation practice is in the Chan (Chinese Zen) Buddhist tradition, so that's the context from which I'll be approaching meditation. You may find the following 'Introduction to meditation' article useful as background reading.

Next, we'll move outside and look at the practice of walking meditation where we pay attention to the process of slow and controlled movement. After this, we'll do some warm-up exercises (much like you'll be used to from track training sessions) and then head out for a run. The emphasis will be very much on running at an easy pace and staying together as a group, so please don't be concerned about falling behind. I'm hoping we can run for 45–60 minutes – including a number of stops to give instruction – so please let me know if that kind of duration might be difficult for you.

We'll follow this with lunch and the rest of the session will revert back to sitting and walking meditation. We'll have a wrap up before we conclude and I will point you to further resources.

What do I need to bring?

As we will be running, please bring your usual running kit for the time of year. Once we know the weather forecast, you may need to bring a waterproof. We'll be running along the Darent Valley path which is a trail, so if you have offroad shoes, it's probably best to bring those. If the ground is dry then you may be okay with regular running shoes. For the sitting meditation, I will be bringing mats and cushions.

The only other things I'd like to ask you to bring is enough water for the day (and if you prefer to run with a bottle, don't forget to bring it with you) and some light food for lunch. Just like with running, sitting meditation is not pleasant on a full stomach, hence my suggestion that your lunch is 'light.'

Findings

A post-event questionnaire sought feedback on what had worked well and areas for improvement.

Length of the workshop

- Some felt it was just right as an introduction
- Others would have preferred a longer day both to better understand the meditation practice and to have more opportunity to work with the awareness techniques when moving.

Seated meditation

- Interestingly, those who were new to meditation found 15 minutes challenging and a long time to sit.

Walking meditation

- People generally found this to be a difficult practice, with some not liking walking in a line or feeling distracted having others in front of them.

Running with awareness

- The running methods and instruction were generally seen as helpful but more opportunity for practice was needed – at least two sessions of running in a day-long workshop.
- Running laps of a short circuit (of about two kilometres) seemed a good option for introducing people to the techniques as there was no concern about getting lost.
- One participant found it difficult to keep up and was also pre-occupied by the path surface being uneven in places.
- With everyone in single-file, it was sometimes challenging for instructions to be audible to the whole group. A small handheld microphone/belt megaphone might be useful for running instruction.
- One participant felt this was the most challenging part of the session in terms of the amount of practice it would require to absorb the techniques.

General feedback and observations

- One participant – an experienced runner and meditator – noted that it may be difficult to keep every level of runner/meditator happy as differing skills could cause division. They suggested the idea of a support leader to work with slower or faster runners, or to offer further meditation for those who choose shorter runs or want more opportunity to practice meditation.
- A longer day would have been better allowing more opportunity for instruction and practice, and also to understand more about the background/context to meditation.
- One participant would have preferred to walk the run circuit initially.
- The day was well-balanced, the venue was a highlight, and the introduction to awareness-based techniques for running was seen as very helpful. It became clear that there were different ability levels with running and a range of experience with meditation, so it was challenging to balance the needs of the group.
- This was useful as a first experiment, and will be taken forward in 2017 as a residential retreat.



VIMALAKIRTI SUTRA: THE DOCTRINE OF THE EMANCIPATION BEYOND COMPREHENSION

PAT SIMMONS, BRISTOL CHAN GROUP

The *Vimalakirti Sutra* was probably written in about 100 CE, and has been one of the most influential works in the Mahayana canon. We do not know who the author was, and the original Sanskrit version has long since been lost, as has the original translation into Chinese. But such was its popularity that it was translated into Chinese a further six times over the next 500 years. Quotations in this article are taken from the most popular of these translations; that by Kumarajiva, made in 406 CE.

It is a sutra that tells a story (sort of), so here is a quick synopsis. Vimalakirti pretends to be ill, so that more people will come to see him, enabling him to teach them further about the Dharma. The Buddha asks his disciples to visit him, but one by one they refuse: time and time again, when they have been going about their monky businesses Vimalakirti has popped up beside them and told them they're doing it all wrong. (Reading the stories told by the aggrieved monks, I was strongly reminded of the Harry Enfield character who constantly tells everyone 'You don't wanna do that!') More embarrassing still, on each occasion he has converted thousands of people standing around. The monks and bodhisattvas are scared of being further embarrassed if they visit him. Eventually Manjushri – the great bodhisattva of wisdom himself! – agrees, grudgingly, to go. You can almost hear him dragging his feet as he sets off, followed by the disciples and others. He and Vimalakirti have a long discussion, then go off to carry on the discussion with the Buddha.

The *Vimalakirti Sutra* reminds me of a wild carnival or an enormous sherry trifle. This may seem a little disrespectful of a sutra that claims to include the Buddha's own words, and which he commands Ananda to 'propagate ... far and wide'.¹ But in this sutra profound teachings on emptiness, non-duality and compassion are contained within an extraordinary conglomeration of human drama, comedy, absurdity, miracles, magic and supernatural beings (many, many super-super-natural beings).

Actually this jumble of what we might call the sacred and the profane is not surprising, because this sutra teaches that the mundane and the extraordinary are one. Enlightenment can and must be found in everyday life, in the marketplace: 'the lotus grows in the mud and mire of a damp low-lying place ... all the various earthly desires are the seed of the Thus Come One... if you do not enter the great sea of earthly desires, you can never acquire the treasure of comprehensive wisdom'.²

One of the most exciting features of this sutra is that Vimalakirti is a layman, not a monastic. He has done well in the marketplace. He is often described as 'rich man Vimalakirti' and he says he has four great store-rooms piled high with goods with which to help the poor³ – and, presumably, to clothe and feed the monks. He is a man with temporal power, from whom the monks have to beg for food, and he is also wiser, and a more effective teacher, than they are.

However, even in saying all this, I am creating what the sutra would regard as a non-existent duality. One of the core teachings of this sutra is the need for us to rid ourselves of dualistic thinking.

'What is meant by ridding oneself of dualism?' Vimalakirti asks. 'It means not thinking of phenomena as internal or external, but treating all as equal. What is meant by equal? It means that I and nirvana are

treated as equal. Why? Because I and nirvana are both empty. Why are they empty? Because they are mere names, hence empty. Neither of these two phenomena has any fixed nature or characteristics.’⁴

[Incidentally, such an understanding of non-dualism banishes all idea of women being inferior to men. Some of the teaching in this sutra, indeed, is actually delivered by a ‘goddess’. ‘Why don’t you change out of this female form?’ asks Sariputra. ‘All things are just the same,’ she replies. ‘They have no fixed form’. And she proceeds to change him into a woman and back again, and to carry on with her teaching.’⁵]

The sutra follows the logic of non-dualism right through to its conclusion: ‘They do not exist,’ says the goddess, ‘and they do not not exist.’⁶ He invites several bodhisattvas to describe non-dualism and they are wise and eloquent. Then, when they turn back to him, and ask, ‘Now, sir, it is your turn to speak. How does the bodhisattva enter the gate of non-dualism?’ he simply remains silent. Manjushri sighs with admiration: ‘Excellent, excellent! Not a word, not a syllable – this truly is to enter the gate of non-dualism!’⁷ It also sounds suspiciously like Vimalakirti once again getting one up on everyone else, but in a non-dual world such a concept has no meaning, of course!

In this light the amazing events that take place in the sutra are no more amazing than any other event, and the sutra moves easily – and sometimes comically – between the ordinary and the utterly extraordinary. There’s a lovely bit where 8,000 heavenly beings plus a load of disciples all crowd into Vimalakirti’s room, and Sariputra looks round and thinks to himself ‘but where are they all going to sit?’⁸ Later, immediately after the great exposition of non-dualism, he thinks to himself, ‘It is almost noon. What are all these bodhisattvas going to eat?’⁹ (The mother

and provider in me instantly identified with Sariputra! The voice of everyday commonsense anxiety!)

But no problem, says Vimalakirti in both cases, and summons up, first, 32,000 lion seats¹⁰ (expanding his room to accommodate them) and, later, a phantom bodhisattva who bustles off to the Buddha's super-heavenly realm to bring back one bowl of rice sufficient to feed everyone in the room plus the 84,000 extra people who happen to have just arrived and the 9 million supernatural beings who have decided to come down to earth to see what's going on.¹¹

There's an exuberance about all this that seems to me to spring directly from the liberation made possible by an understanding of emptiness and non-dualism. Once you do away with dualistic thinking, once you really understand the emptiness of all form, then maybe anything becomes possible, indeed becomes unremarkable.

Size and shape become immaterial, infinitely plastic. Mount Sumeru can be put inside a mustard seed.¹² Vimalakirti can take a whole different universe – mountains, sun, moon, rivers, people and all – in his right hand and bring it down into his room (to the great alarm of said people). Then, when everyone in the room has had a good look he puts it all back where he found it.¹³

All this is very exciting, of course, but where does it leave us less than enlightened non-miracle-working human beings? Clearly we are of no importance – after all, our very existence is in doubt – and yet here we are. And how can we make a distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, skillful and unskillful, in a non-dualistic world? 'Good and not good form a dualism'¹⁴ says the bodhisattva Pushya. How can we live without making such a distinction? And Manjushri is worried too: 'If

the bodhisattva looks on beings in this way,' he asks, 'how can he treat them with compassion?'

Vimalakirti responds to Manjushri with a long and magnificent description of the compassion with which the bodhisattva – having renounced ignorance, greed and hatred – will of necessity treat all beings. 'He treats them with a compassion unburning, for it is void of earthly desires; ... unfaltering for it carries through to the end; ... firm and durable, for the mind of the bodhisattva never flags; ... clean and pure as the nature of all phenomena is pure; boundless, boundless as the empty sky.'¹⁵

The Vimalakirti sutra quite explicitly distances itself from the Hinayana tradition, particularly with the emphasis it places on the bodhisattva as a being of infinite compassion towards all living beings. Bodhisattvas, says the Buddha toward the end of the sutra, do not abandon 'the conditioned' or simply 'dwell in the unconditioned'. They do not 'set aside great compassion', they do not 'renounce great pity'. They do not look 'with contempt on those who have yet to learn'. They 'practise unbounded charity' in whatever form is needed.¹⁶

Interestingly, Vimalakirti has already told us earlier that it is, in fact, in the bodhisattva's own spiritual interest to 'cultivate a loving mind'. 'By respecting and serving others one learns how to banish pride', 'by freeing living beings from their bonds one creates a setting for religious practice', 'by not hating evil persons one learns to temper and discipline one's mind'.¹⁷ We may think that wisdom leads to compassion – when we really understand, we might start being really nice.

No, says this great sutra of non-dualism: as often as not it's the other way round - and anyway, what's the difference?

NOTES

- 1 The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, trans Burton Watson, 1996, Columbia University Press p145
- 2 *ibid*, pp 95–96
- 3 *ibid*, p 90
- 4 *ibid*, pp 68–69
- 5 *ibid*, pp 86–92
- 6 *ibid*, p 91
- 7 *ibid*, p 111
- 8 *ibid*, p 75
- 9 *ibid*, p 112
- 10 *ibid*, p 77
- 11 *ibid*, pp 112–116
- 12 *ibid*, p 78
- 13 *ibid*, pp 133–135
- 14 *ibid*, p 105
- 15 *ibid*, p 84
- 16 *ibid*, pp 126–129,
- 17 *ibid*, pp 60–61



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