

The Seven Points of Mind Training

Part two Thursday, 19 January 2012

The second part of the four ordinary foundations continued from last week.

The first point. - Train in the preliminaries. These are known as the “ordinary” foundations to spiritual practice and they are the firm basis on which understanding is developed.

Usually in Tibetan Buddhism we pray to the lineage and the Buddhas and enlightened beings to help us in our practice but we can visualise that in whatever way we find helpful. So for Christians it could be Jesus or God, for others who perhaps do not have a conventional faith it may just be a ball of light that represents the very best in ourselves or in those we trust and aspire to be like. Really it's up to you – whatever inspires you most. We feel that light comes from them and enters into us through our fontanel – the top of the head and fills us with the light and we have a happy feeling of bliss and satisfaction.

1. The precious human birth – traditionally in Buddhism this is taken to mean that a fully endowed human birth is in fact very rare. What this means is that, apart from just being lucky enough to be born human as opposed to something else we have “leisure, freedoms and assets”. It's not that it's more valuable than other forms of life but we do have considerable powers as human beings and this gives greater possibilities but also greater responsibilities. We have the capacity collectively to all but destroy life on this planet and at the same time we are capable of transforming it very much for the better. So we need to understand that and take responsibility both personal and collectively for our impact on others and on the environment. At the same time we need to be aware that this form is easily destroyed. Not just by dying but also through unfortunate circumstances like stress, lack of freedoms and assets.

Human beings have extraordinary potential. Generally speaking we are able to do much more than just survive, which is what many other species are able to do in an extraordinary variety of ways. But usually they are hard wired into their evolutionary niche so that they are limited in the ways they can adapt. We however, like most of our cousins, the higher primates, have evolved to be non specialists and human evolution has taken that freedom to extraordinary heights. This has freed us from being constrained by an ecological niche but along with our success has come extraordinary danger. Our thinking which, though useful and beneficial, can also have the effect of alienating us from the natural world in which we live and on which we depend. Thought is a great servant and a poor master and realising our true human potential depends on recognising and appreciating the difference. According to Buddhism human consciousness gives us exceptional potential. We are able to be aware of own thoughts. We can examine and reflect on the shortcomings of life. We have freedom of choice and can make our own decisions. We are able to discriminate between good and bad and we are able to follow a spiritual path, recognising the suffering involved in birth, old age, sickness and death. At the same time we can reflect on the wonderful opportunity given to us to develop love, wisdom and compassion.

So we should really appreciate what we have.

A I recognise and appreciate the health, wealth that I currently enjoy.

B Ditto the happiness and the ease that I currently enjoy.

C Ditto the opportunities and fulfilments that I enjoy.

2. Death and impermanence- the universe and everything in it is impermanent, endlessly creative destructive, endless process. According to Buddhist thinking something can only be permanent if it exists independently from everything else, is not caused by conditions and doesn't change. But in fact everything that exists is interdependent, conditional and subject to change. "If you want to make apple pie first you need a universe!" Carl Sagan. This all readily provable and in a way quite obvious. Our lives are fragile and the physical and mental capacities we have taken for granted are gradually wearing down. Our body can be damaged or destroyed in a second and although we all know that we will die we often behave as if our lives will last forever. But death will come and the only thing we don't know is when. This can give us a false sense of security making us lazy and lethargic or it may make us insecure and impatient. Sometimes, perhaps often, a heightened sense of impermanence is liberating allowing us to see and feel the preciousness of each moment and of each being in it. The transience and the fragility of life make us more aware of it. Tibetans in exile often seem so cheerful even though they had lost everything. It may be hard for us to feel the same sense of impermanence and fragility in our lives but by cultivating an awareness of that fact we too can appreciate more fully the passing of each moment. An awareness of impermanence can also allow us to let go more easily. When we know that things will change we can more easily bear the hardship of the moment, cultivating things like patience and forbearance. In my own relationships I have often reflected that no matter how good or bad things may get they will change. Often I have found it difficult just a few minutes, let alone hours or days, to remember or more accurately "refeel" just what it was I was so upset or elated about. This gives a sense of patience, humility, humour and a deeper sense of continuity beneath the surface superficiality of things. It enables us to endure hardship and enjoy more fully the good times knowing they will not last.

But be careful this is not mere passivity because it enables us to work against lethargy and wishful thinking by energising us to the moment. *Carpe Deum*. And allows us to feel fully the pain in conditioned existence because we know it will not last.

Story of the wise man from Kashmir. P49

3. Samsaric existence is suffering. An endless stress reaction cycle of attachment- desire, aversion – hatred avoidance which pushes and pulls us out of our clear, calm and sensitive centre of the cyclone. Samsara is not a place or a situation but rather a painful state of mind dominated by greed -attachment, hatred – aversion, and ignorance – delusion. The ignorance which is really at the root of this is not a lack of information but rather a lack of clarity about our situation. Generally speaking we do not know who or what we are and what we are doing. Our true nature is absolutely pure and luminous yet we constantly overlook this "simply being" quality losing sight of it completely when conflicting emotions and concepts lure us into a false sense of self, me and mine and obscure or cloud our "original face" before we were born. Gradually our awareness is dulled by the ups and downs which come from this repeated cycle of pleasure and pain, expectation and dismay, desire, gain and loss. Into all this we weave a story which, rather than holding lightly and playfully we grasp as being absolutely true. Modern psychology shows us that we construct and often change our stories but even more fundamentally our brains are wired to complete what we perceive depending on how it has been conditioned. We often don't see what is there or do see what is not. Memories are stored under the influence of former associations and memories and these subjective mental patterns shape our whole perception of reality. Each of us has our own individual conditioning built up in this way. With practice we can begin to see these projections of the mind, withdrawing them and seeing things as they are – the "suchness" of things in their unutterable mystery.

4. Particularly impermanent are the lives of beings which are like water bubbles. When we die we will inherit the fruits of our actions. Therefore we should give harmful actions and spend all our time in the practice of virtue. This is about becoming aware of cause and effect in our lives. Each action of body, speech and mind; thought, word and deed is like a seed which has a fruit. In fact karma really means action and the fruit of the action is viparka. We reap what we sow. Actions based on greed, hatred, ignorance, jealousy or pride will have corresponding fruits because we condition our minds in this way and this in turn distorts our view of reality. What we experience now is the result of our past acts and how we act now will determine our future experience. The future is determined by how we act now and this is why liberation is possible. By recognising and regretting negative actions our “karma” (viparka) can be changed. The best way to improve our actions and their outcomes is to change the way we think. When our mental attitude is more wholesome our verbal and physical actions will follow suit. It is always possible to change any karma but we have to be careful not to push too hard as that may be counterproductive.

The second point. Practicing Wisdom and Compassion.

In the sanskrit language “Bodhicitta” has two components: “bodhi” means enlightened and “citta” means heart/mind. (these two are not separated as they usually are in our culture) Although “bodhicitta” has “many levels and dimensions of meaning it is essentially the experience of limitless compassion and wisdom that we are trying to cultivate through training the mind”. RTR

Lojong (Mind training) has two main aims:

1. the development of compassion in relative bodhicitta which frees us from our cocoon of self importance and the narcissistic gaze of self reference.
2. the development of ultimate bodhicitta which is the understanding of ultimate wisdom, clarity and awareness.

Really 1 and 2 are interrelated (two wings of a bird) and as one grows so does the other. Relative bodhicitta utilises our relationships with other people and the natural empathy we feel towards them whilst ultimate bodhicitta has to do with the ultimate nature of reality and involves a deep shift in perspective based on experience.

Ultimate bodhicitta

The mind training starts with ultimate bodhicitta so as to give us a sense of how things are in ultimate reality. The following slogans prepare us for the work of relative compassion and the practice of Tonglen (exchanging self for others).

The first of these slogans is:

“Regard all phenomena as a dream”

The objects we encounter and our reactions to them are as transitory and unreal as dreams. They seem so real while we are undergoing them but when we wake up they disappear and no trace is left. True the world is there in one way but also it is not there in the way we habitually think about it. This is because our reality, including our self, is constructed by the mind.

1. Any phenomena, a tree, a galaxy, a person, an electron depends on our mental designation of it.
2. All phenomena that participate in natural laws, affecting other entities and themselves being

affected, depend for their existence on the causes that give rise to them. Eg of sprout

3. For any entity we can identify certain attributes : it's component parts, facets or qualities. The entity depends for it's existence on these attributes and does not exist without them. Neither is it equivalent to their sum total.

Thus phenomena do exist as dependently related events but they do not appear that way.

The second of these slogans is:

“Examine the unborn nature of mind.”

The understanding of the dreamlike and provisional nature of external reality is here turned inward when we investigate the inner nature of our minds. What is the mind? Can we experience it directly? Is it an object or not? What is consciousness?

“We have the idea that our mind remains unchanged from birth through childhood to old age. This is not so. The word unborn in this slogan counters our tendency to think of the mind in this tangible and permanent way. The true nature of the mind is beyond the conditions of birth or death. It comes from nowhere and it goes nowhere. We cannot find the beginning or the end of mind. There is no mind apart from our awareness of the stream of thoughts flowing through our consciousness. The enormous volume and speed of these thoughts gives the impression of a fixed, continuous and independent mind. The mind is transient and without categories or qualities. We encounter it briefly and spontaneously but only in the present. In the meditative state when our mind is quite still, its unborn, pure and enlightened quality is briefly perceptible. This is a fleeting and inexpressible experience. We have to leave it at that. We rest in the here and now in the timeless moment between past and future.” RTR

The third of these slogans is:

“Self-liberate even the antidote and free yourself from the findings of the meditation .”

This a caution against becoming attached to meditative experiences. It is not difficult to get a glimpse of emptiness in our meditation but it is important to keep balance. One glimpse is just that and does not mean that we have attained ultimate enlightenment. We should draw no conclusions from our meditations because both the meditator and the meditations are intrinsically empty. There is no insight even in emptiness and so we can not search or find anything in it. If we did find anything in it then that would be an object of awareness. We need to ask ourselves “Who is meditating and searching for the mind?” “What is it that has been found?”

The fourth of these slogans is:

“Rest in the nature of alaya .”

Beneath the consciousness which comes from the five senses, our mind and our sense of self there is alaya, the universal ground of mind. It is the state of simply being and is the most subtle level of awareness. When it is awakened it is said to be our Clear Light or Buddha Nature expressed directly without distortion. It is the simple present. The here and now unadulterated by conditioning. Suchness. Eating just eating. Sleeping just sleeping. Etc

The clarity of alaya is usually obscured by all the turbulence of the discursive mind. In sleep we may briefly dissolve into it but then emerge in dreams so that it is yet again obscured. To meditate on

ultimate bodhicitta is to trace the subtle awareness through the three states of sleeping, dreaming and waking. To do this requires great clarity of mind, free from the superficialities of daily life and is best attempted on a cloistered retreat.

However the process can be started by bringing attention to the breathing and indeed it is the breath that we ride when we come to practicing Tonglen.

Meditation instructions p 65-66

The postmeditative stage of Ultimate Bodhicitta.

There are two stages to Tibetan meditation; the actual meditation and the post meditation stage when we try to put the experience gained in meditation into practical use.

The fifth of these slogans is:

“In postmeditation view everything as an illusion .”

The awareness of alaya influences our everyday lives. Because we see that everything is impermanent and insubstantial we are not pushed and pulled so much by attachment and aversion and we can afford to relax. We become more childlike, creative and playful.

Homework

Do the visualisation meditation at the beginning then begin to go through all the things that you are grateful for in your life – counting your blessings.

Be aware that everything and everyone is impermanent. Appreciate the people and the things in your life knowing that we do not know when we will die nor when they might die.

Notice when and how we get so caught up in the stresses and strains of our life that we lose our centre, our mindfulness. Notice if you can at the time or as soon as possible afterwards the bodily sensations and feelings connected to that.

Reflect on and practice the slogans above both in meditation and post meditation.

See things as process, appearances which in their true nature are dependently arisen and impermanent.

Enjoy the process and relax! If at any time you become tense practice the following Openess Meditation:

Focus only on the out-breath.

As you breathe out, imagine a gate opening, out into space. See all your thoughts and feelings flow through it. Feel that this continuous flow of thoughts, emotions and sensations, whatever the original form, changes into universal compassion in the form of golden light as it passes through the gate to all who live. Feel that this light of compassion fulfils the needs and wishes of everyone.

Do this for twenty minutes.