

1. Doubt – and Liberation

Last week we heard how Siddhartha tried to reach his spiritual goal through the practice of extreme austerities, nearly died in the process, and instead decided to follow the 'Middle Way' of balance, breadth and the practice of meditation as a route to Awakening. We left him on the threshold of that Awakening, in other words of becoming the Buddha. However, right up to that massively important event, Siddhartha was assailed by self-doubt, as traditionally represented by the myth of the 'victory over Mara'.

According to this myth, the Buddha-to-be was seated in meditation at the foot of a tree, when he was attacked by terrible demon hosts, all sorts of foul, unsightly, misshapen figures. These were led by Mara, who can be seen as representing everything in our natures that leads to our self-doubt and negativity. These hosts and their attack are vividly depicted in Buddhist art and poetry. They were partly human, partly animal, hideously deformed, with snarling, leering, angry, and wrathful expressions, some of them lifting great clubs, others brandishing swords, all very menacing and frightful indeed. The stones, arrows, and flames, on reaching the edge of Siddhartha's aura of light turned into flowers and fell at his feet. The significance of this is obvious and doesn't need to be explained, only to be felt. Siddhartha wasn't touched, wasn't moved, by this terrible attack. His eyes remained closed and he remained in meditation with the same smile on his lips.

Mara now sent to the attack his three beautiful daughters, whose names were Lust, Passion, and Delight. They danced in front of the Buddha, exhibiting all their charms, but the Buddha didn't even open his eyes. They withdrew, defeated. All this represents the forces of the unconscious in their crudest form. The demons, the terrible misshapen figures, represent anger, aversion, dislike, and so on. The daughters of Mara represent the various aspects of craving and desire. Mara himself represents primordial ignorance, or unawareness.

The next part of the story is known traditionally as the 'calling of the Earth Goddess to witness'. After he had been defeated, Mara tried another trick. He said to the Buddha-to-be, "You are sitting on the central point of the universe, on the throne of the Buddhas of old. What right have you, just an ordinary person, to sit on that Diamond Throne where the previous Buddhas sat?" Siddhartha replied, "In my past lives I have practised all the perfections, and have reached a point in my spiritual evolution where I am about to gain Awakening. Therefore, I am worthy to sit on this Diamond Throne, like the previous Buddhas when they gained Awakening."

Mara wasn't satisfied. He said, "All right, you say that you practised all these perfections in your previous lives, but who is your witness?" So the future Buddha, who was seated in the position of meditation, with his hands resting in his lap, just tapped on the earth - this is the famous earth-touching 'mudra', or gesture. In traditional accounts, at this point there appeared the Earth Goddess, bearing a vase in her hand. She bore witness, saying, "I have been here all the time. Men may come, men may go, but the Earth always remains. I have seen all his previous lives. I have seen hundreds of thousands of lives in which he practised the perfections. So I bear witness that he is worthy to sit in the seat of the Buddhas of old."

2. The difficulty of communicating an encounter with Reality

We can say, in modern language, that Siddhartha's doubts had finally been overcome: with their removal, he finally 'awoke' to Buddhahood. As this is the goal Buddhists are trying to reach, you'll want to know what it is. It's very hard to describe it though, as it's outside our usual range of experiences – a bit like trying to describe the taste of chocolate to someone who's never eaten it. Still, we have to try, and the Buddha and other enlightened people have given us some clues to what it might be like. Throughout the centuries over which Buddhism has been practised there have been a huge number of approaches and a bewildering mass of literature. In a sense, the problems for Westerners who first encounter Buddhism are firstly which part of this huge tradition to focus upon, and then how to make sense of what has been handed down to us in Buddhist literature. This course is obviously far too short to do justice to the question, "What is Awakening?". More importantly – and this was a problem that vexed the newly-Awakened Siddhartha – his experience of Reality was a direct one, and he wondered how (or, indeed, whether) it could possibly be communicated to other human beings.

Whatever model we choose to help us understand the Buddha, his teaching and the Buddhist community, the really important thing is that we can relate what we learn to our own direct experience. This can't be stated too strongly, as the alternative is to exercise 'blind faith' to a greater or lesser extent. It's also the reason why Buddhists practice meditation, taking time out of their normal, busy lives to examine that direct experience and see what they find!

The Buddha, we are told by traditional accounts, pondered the questions of whether and how his experience could be described to others, in order that they might be guided in the same direction. Fortunately for us (and for the millions of others who have followed his teachings over the intervening centuries) he decided that this could be done, although necessarily by indirect means. He recognised that people are very different, and need to be brought closer to Reality by a wide range of approaches. On this course we shall try to use an approach based partly on concepts – although it's very important to realise that this way of looking at things is in no way a direct explanation of Awakening, just a crude approximation to experiencing it directly. All the same it's helpful, to a degree, if we're able to relate to it, as we might say, with our hearts as well as our heads.

3. A conceptual model: Dependent Arising and Cessation

Working as we are, for the moment, with language rather than direct experience, it is convenient to describe the Buddha's experience as one of **'dependent arising'**. What this means, put simply is that everything, without any exception anywhere, comes into being in dependence on a necessary set of pre-conditions, in a way that is far more complex than we are immediately likely to comprehend. We can easily explore this idea by asking ourselves questions like "What had to happen for this object to be created" or "What conditions led me to be doing this, in this place, at this moment?". The links in the chain of causality explode outwards from any given thing, eventually covering the entire scope of space and time. Buddhist thought acknowledges this web of inter-connectedness by describing all mundane things – ourselves very much included – as being subject to the **'Law of Dependent Arising'** (and, we should really say, to the **'Law of Dependent Cessation'** – in other words, the recognition that all things also come to an end, and do so in dependence upon the ending of those conditions that have supported them).

These laws are expressed in the Buddhist tradition by the formula that is perhaps the most famous piece of Buddhist writing (and also, in some ways, the most important). We are told that the Buddha taught a formula that, translated into English, reads something like:

"This being, that becomes; from the arising of this, that arises. This not being, that does not become; from the ceasing of this, that ceases".

This universal law is sometimes referred to by other names – for example 'conditioned co-production' or, more simply, 'conditionality'. What we call it doesn't really matter; what does, as we shall begin to see later on the course, is to recognise that this apparently simple formula has enormous implications, especially for us as human beings. In the meantime, it's really helpful if we can test the formula against as many examples as we can think of – as applied to material objects, phenomena, aspects of our experience and (ultimately) our very existence.

4. More about the Mindfulness of Breathing

Last week we began to look at the Mindfulness of Breathing practice, the first classical Buddhist meditation we'll be looking at (and, according to tradition, the one that Siddhartha was practising in the run-up to his Awakening). In this practice we are actively practising awareness, using the natural process of our breathing as an object. This week we shall look at stages 3 and 4 for the first time – there will be plenty of opportunities to practice the whole of the Mindfulness of Breathing in the remainder of the course.

Stage 3

In this stage we simply let go of the counting, as it has served its purpose. Left alone with our breath, we try to experience all aspects of it from the point of view of the body. It's not just the obvious parts of the body, like the lungs and the rib cage, that are breathing – try to notice the much subtler effects of the breath in places like your back, legs or even fingers! As ever, if you find that your awareness has risen up to things that are happening in your head, make an effort to bring it down again, into the breathing body.

Stage 4

In the last stage we work to refine the focus of our attention and to make it more sensitive. Typically, we can do this by paying attention to the subtle sensation at the point at which the breath first enters the body (perhaps at the tip of your nose or the upper lip). It may seem difficult to hold this subtler awareness – the key is to stay with it in the context of a well-established background awareness of the whole body, steady and reassuringly solid.

As well as remembering not to force the breathing, it is also important to realise that we are not trying to block out sounds or blank our mind. We can't stop our sensory awareness or thoughts, but we can try not to let them occupy the centre of our awareness, leaving plenty of room for our attention to our breathing. Although the breath is the focus of the practice, to which we return again and again, this doesn't exclude the rest of our experience. At times we may find ourselves with other things like sounds, thoughts, feelings, emotions and images. This is entirely natural - we can just note their presence, then gently come back to the awareness of the breath.

Finishing the practice

To end the practice, you could stop making any effort and just sit with your experiences as they come and go. Allow your awareness to move slowly outwards - pay attention to the sounds outside and experience the weight of the body. As you finally bring the meditation to a close, try to resolve to carry into the rest of your life any awareness that you have cultivated during the practice. If possible, don't rush into anything immediately after the meditation.

5. What you could do in the week ahead

- Try to do at least 10 minutes' meditation on 6 out of 7 days – ideally, a little body awareness as a foundation for a period of the Mindfulness of Breathing.
- Try to examine some aspect of your everyday life in terms of dependent arising and cessation. This could be either a physical object, or some part of your own behaviour. To what extent has it arisen in dependence on a complex set of conditions? What conditions does it itself create, and what things or processes arise from those conditions? When the conditions that gave rise to it are removed, what happens to the object or behaviour?