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FWBO Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year
Part 4: Exploring Buddhist Practice – Wisdom

Week 1: The Way to Wisdom

The Importance of Ideas, and This Part of the Course

(Text purpose-written by Vadanya)

We all have a model of the world in our heads. Whether we are aware of it or not, we have a set of ideas, concepts, images, analogies and metaphors that we use to make sense of the world and guide our actions. It is as though we each had our own map of reality that we use to find our way around. This map is highly simplified, because reality is far too complex for us to hold in our heads. Our map bears a similar relationship to reality that a road map of France – say – bears to the actual country. If it is accurate, it is useful for finding our way around, but it leaves out almost all of the richness, beauty, complexity, mystery and wonder of the reality. If it is inaccurate, it is worse than useless, and will lead us into a succession of dead-ends, wild goose chases, and unpleasant experiences. So although our map is only ever a poor approximation to reality, it is still vitally important. Our beliefs and ideas about the nature of reality have a major effect on the way we feel, and on the way we live our life. Our beliefs can liberate us, or they can keep us stuck, and even trap us in downward spirals of negativity.

So we need to look at our beliefs and ideas about the world if we want to make spiritual progress, or even if we just want to live an emotionally healthy and productive life. For this reason examining and refining the way we think about the world is an important part of Buddhist practice – just as important as practising ethics or meditation. Refining our ideas about reality is an important aspect of the third part of the threefold path – wisdom – and it is this that we will be focussing on in this part of the course.

Wisdom and ‘Right View’

The word ‘wisdom’ in Buddhism often refers to a direct seeing into the nature of reality, beyond all words and concepts. This is part of the ultimate goal of Buddhism, but for most of us it is still a little way off. Certainly most of us do get partial glimpses of something like this direct insight as our practice unfolds, and we need to value and nurture these. But for the time being we also need to concentrate on developing what is called ‘Right View’. This means making sure that our concepts and ideas about the world are aligned with reality, and that they allow us to live a meaningful life in which we can make spiritual progress. We need to make sure that the maps we are using are accurate enough to get us where we want to go.

‘Right View’ can sound rather rigid and dogmatic. But working towards Right View does not mean signing up to a creed, taking on a set of beliefs by blind faith,

or rigidly sticking to any body of dogma. (At its best Buddhism encourages us to take all ideas with a pinch of salt, recognising that until we are enlightened any concept we use to explain the inconceivable and mysterious reality we are part of will be partially true at best.) What working on Right View does mean is honestly looking at the way we have been conditioned to think about the world, owning up to where our current beliefs keep us stuck or don't match reality, and giving open, objective consideration to some time-tested ideas that might at first seem too radical and revolutionary to fit in with the beliefs we have been bequeathed by our society, which operates on a very different world-view and set of values. Finally it might also mean being willing to try some of these new ways of thinking out – maybe adopting them for a while as ‘working hypotheses’, to see whether they do in fact open gateways to new levels of experience we had previously closed ourselves off from.

“All worldlings are mad!”

Most of us almost instinctively think that our present maps of reality are pretty much right. Unconsciously we think that maybe they could do with a bit more detail, and a bit more accuracy in places, but generally they are not too far from the truth. But the Buddhist view is more radical. According to the Buddha, if we see the world in anything like the ‘normal’ common-sense way that most humans do, then our maps are completely wrong in some important ways. And as a result just about the whole procession of humanity is lost, blundering about, looking for happiness in completely the wrong place, getting into a worse and worse mess, experiencing ever more and more suffering.

The Buddha once said that “all worldlings are mad.” ‘Worldlings’ here means not the inhabitants of planet earth, but those beings who try to get their happiness and fulfilment from the fleeting phenomena of this transient world, rather than from spiritual development. In other words it means ‘normal’ people, and, to some extent at least, you and me, and the great majority of other Buddhists. (Traditionally the state of no longer being a ‘worldling’ and becoming one of the ‘Noble Ones’ is seen as a very high attainment indeed.)

To quote Sangharakshita:

‘This is the Buddha's statement. Everybody who is not spiritually enlightened or very near to it is mad. And the Buddha isn't exaggerating. If we look around we see that we are living in the midst of a vast hospital, because everybody is sick. Living in the midst of a vast lunatic asylum, because everybody is mad. And everything, we may say, that everybody does, in this world, is the action of a madman or a mad woman. And we see only here and there some gleams, some glimpses, of sanity.’¹

The Buddha said we are mad because our worldly way of seeing things is ‘topsy turvy’ – upside-down – and he went on to describe several ways in which this ‘normal’ view of things was completely the opposite of the way things are. It isn't that we could make some improvements, but that overall we're on the right track.

About the really important things, we are completely in the dark. This is a difficult idea to accept – in fact it already requires a certain amount of wisdom to accept it!

Because in certain important areas ‘normal’ ways of seeing the world are completely upside-down, and Buddhist ways of seeing things are the exact opposite, Buddhist ideas are revolutionary. They turn our currently upside-down world-view on its head. If we truly make such ideas a part of ourselves they will revolutionise our whole being and our whole life – they will completely change our goals, the way we think and feel, and the way we speak and act. The reason this doesn’t happen as soon as we read a Dharma book or hear a Dharma talk is that the process of making an idea a part of ourselves is normally a long one, even when we have understood it intellectually and agreed that it is true. There is an enormous difference between understanding an idea as it is expressed in words, and making the truth behind that idea a constant part of the way we see the world, the way we feel about the world, and the way we respond to the world.

Working on wisdom

The process by which we make Dharmic ideas so much a part of ourselves that they can radically transform our life and our approach to the world is summed up in the teaching of the Three Levels of Wisdom. This has already been discussed in the very first session of this course, but it is so central to the Wisdom aspect of the Threefold Path – which we will be exploring over the next few sessions – that it is worth looking at from a slightly different angle as a foundation for what follows.

The Three Levels of Wisdom according to the Sarvāstivādin tradition are:

1. Hearing (or reading) – Śrūta mayī prajñā
2. Thinking or reflecting – Cintā mayī prajñā
3. Meditating – Bhāvanā mayī prajñā

To use a metaphor, the process these ‘three wisdoms’ describe is very like what happens when we eat: firstly we take the food into our mouth and taste it, then we chew it and digest it and process it in a variety of ways to change it into a form we can use, and finally we make the food a part of ourselves – it becomes us, and we become it.

Stage 1: hearing or reading

It might seem obvious that the first step in making Buddhist teachings our own is simply to hear or read the words in which they are expressed. But there is much more to this stage than that, and we need to pay close attention to how we approach this stage, by being aware of our response to the teachings and the attitude with which we approach them.

According to the Pali English dictionary, the word suta, which is the Pali equivalent of Śrūta in Śrūta mayī prajñā, means “heard in a special sense, received

through inspiration or revelation, heard, taught.” On this basis Ratnaguna² has described this stage as the way we “receive the message from the Enlightened mind through the medium of concepts.” Sometimes the Enlightened mind might seem to use an odd vehicle to transmit its concepts – a not-very-well-written book or an ordinary-seeming Dharma teacher – but often our response to hearing the Dharma even from these apparently not very impressive sources can have this quality of being special, it can have the quality of inspiration or revelation. Often people say that their first response to hearing certain Dharma teachings was an immediate sense that “this is important” or “this is right”, perhaps along with a sense that they have somehow always known this, or a leap of joy and a sense of expectation, a feeling that this is the doorway to something important. We can even have something like this response to a teaching we don’t really understand yet – people often have a strong sense that, for example, the Heart Sūtra is saying something powerful and important, without really understanding it in any detail.

Śraddhā

This response is an aspect of a quality we refer to by the Sanskrit name of śraddhā, which is often translated, rather misleadingly, as ‘faith’. Śraddhā is certainly not faith in the sense of blindly believing something that doesn’t make sense. Śraddhā could be described as a sort of heart-knowledge, coming from a union of thinking and feeling. It often manifests as an intuitive sense of rightness and importance, combined with a more down-to-earth confidence that the teachings do make sense intellectually. If we have even a slight sense of this response to hearing or reading the Dharma we should pay attention to it and nurture it, because it is important.

The Dharma is not just an ordinary teaching, it is a “message from the Enlightened mind through the medium of concepts.” Our felt sense of the rightness and specialness of the teachings is our link with the Enlightened mind. It is our link with our own potential. Speaking poetically, we could say that it is our higher self, or the future self we could become, speaking to us, telling us that what we are hearing is vitally important for our future fulfilment. It is no small thing to have a link to the Enlightened mind, or to our own higher self. We need to pay attention to it and respect it, so that we keep it in good working order. It is all too easy to get blasé about the Dharma after a while, to treat it as just another part of the clutter of ideas we have been exposed to, on the same level as our other opinions and enthusiasms and bits of information. But if we do this our link to the Enlightened mind will get weaker and weaker. To counteract this we need to remember and revisit our response of śraddhā, to keep it alive and fresh, and to nurture it so that it can grow into something that has a sustained and powerful effect on our lives. In the words of one of the earliest and most influential Mahayana texts, the White Lotus Sūtra: “If he hears [the Dharma] but for a moment, then let him joyfully congratulate himself, [saying] ‘I have now obtained a great benefit!’”

Receptivity

Sometimes, however, our initial response to some Dharma teachings is anything but śraddhā – sometimes it is scepticism or even dislike. Certainly we need to think critically about the teachings to make sure that they make sense. But thinking critically is not the same thing as being closed to new ideas because we think we already know the truth. There is an oft-quoted story about a Professor who goes to visit a Zen master. The Professor is full of his own theories and his own present understandings, yet, for some reason, he is still drawn to visit someone who he knows has a kind of knowledge he lacks. After they have been talking a while the Zen master pours tea. He fills the Professor's cup, and then keeps pouring. Tea goes everywhere, but he just keeps pouring, until the Professor shouts out in disbelief, "Stop! Can't you see the cup is full?" At which point the Zen master says, "You are just like the cup. You are already full of your own opinions, and there is no room for anything new or fresh to enter. Why have you bothered to come here?"

Sometimes we can all be like that Professor. At one level we know there is something inadequate about our present understanding of life – otherwise we would not be looking for what is missing from the Dharma. But at another level we think we know it all. We have a world-view we have picked up from our family, our society, the country we live in, our friends, our education, the media, and so forth. And often without even being aware of it we dismiss any ideas that don't fit in with the world-view we have inherited. Even if an idea has been espoused over a long period by many people who are clearly wiser and more intelligent than ourselves, if it doesn't fit in with the assumptions we've been conditioned to make, our immediate reaction is all too often to reject it out of hand. (Many Westerners' responses to Buddhist ideas that don't fit easily with so-called 'scientific' materialism are often an example of this phenomenon.)

To make room for something new and fresh we maybe need to remember that, according to the Buddha, many of our 'normal' ways of looking at things are upside down. We need to remember that we are looking for something that is beyond our present understanding of things – otherwise we wouldn't need to look for it. We need to make some space in our cup, so that we can be open and receptive. In the words of Sangharakshita:

‘Receptivity is the first requisite of the disciple, and indeed of anyone who wants to learn anything. We can be anything else we like: we can be wicked, we can be stupid, we can be full of faults, we can backslide...In a sense it doesn't matter. But we must be spiritually receptive, we have to be ready to learn. When we know that we do not know, everything is possible.’³

The first stage of the first stage of wisdom is to know that we don't know.

Stage 2: thinking and reflecting

Once we have heard and understood an aspect of the Dharma, and even gladly accepted and welcomed it, this is just the start of a longer process. We have probably all come across ideas that seemed useful and important, and been convinced that we would put them into practice, but found that in fact we quickly forgot about them. (An excellent example of this often happens on work-related training courses – after a weekend course we come away full of ideas about how we are going to revolutionise our time management, say, but by Monday afternoon we are lapsing back into old habits, and by the next week we have completely forgotten about the training.) The human mind is like a sieve, a fact acknowledged in a Buddhist saying: “Non-repetition is the canker of the spiritual life.” Unless we go over and over what we have heard and read, we probably won’t be able to bear it in mind amid the hectic rough-and-tumble of daily life, and over time it is likely to drift out of our consciousness altogether.

The White Lotus Sūtra, which we have already referred to, urges us to “receive and keep, read and recite, expound and copy” the teachings. We “receive and keep” the teachings by accepting them as our own, by taking them to our heart and keeping them close to our heart. Then we “read” the teachings, not just once, but exposing ourselves to them over and over again. Traditionally, we also “recite” – learning and chanting a teaching has often been seen as an important practice. Learning by heart is an excellent way of imprinting a teaching on the mind and understanding it, and it allows us to carry our own Dharma around with us, so that we can reflect on it whenever we are idle, and remember it even in difficult situations. Then, having understood the teachings and immersed ourselves in them over a period of time, we can also “expound.” Once we have a certain amount of understanding, teaching the Dharma to others is an excellent way of engraving it on our mind, relating it to our own and others’ experience, and deepening our understanding – as well as being an important practice of generosity in its own right. Finally, at the time the Lotus Sūtra was written down, “copying” was also an important practice for making the Dharma more widely known. Although we no longer need to hand-copy books to make them available, the act of rewriting is still a good way of getting to grips with a text and immersing ourselves in it deeply.

We see from traditional texts like the White Lotus Sūtra and many others that this stage of ‘thinking and reflecting’ has always been an important practice for Buddhists. We may not approach it in quite the same way as the Lotus Sūtra suggests, but the principles are the same – we need to immerse ourselves thoroughly in the Dharma, so that it gradually soaks into us. Over the course of our involvement with the Dharma we will probably come across the important ideas of Buddhism again and again, from slightly different angles and expressed in slightly different ways. We will probably read a number of books, hear many talks, take part in many study groups and discussions, reflect on many occasions and in many different ways, and come across many symbols, myths and stories, all rounding out and deepening our understanding. Then we may also pass on the Dharma to others, formally or informally, in a large or small way. And just as, when we go out for a walk in heavy mist we may get soaked without realising it,

these ideas will soak into our being, perhaps without us noticing that anything dramatic is happening. But when we look back we will see that our approach to life has changed radically, and that we seem to be living in a more open world, with many more possibilities.

Stage 3: meditating

The Sanskrit word *bhāvanā* in the term *bhāvanā-mayī-prajñā* means meditation: at this level of wisdom we in a sense have a direct experience of the wordless truths that the concepts of the Dharma point to, by meditating deeply upon them.

We approach this by reflecting deeply while in a higher meditative state – traditionally the first *dhyāna*, or at least access concentration. In such a state of calm focused alertness, integrated energy, and positive emotion, we begin to see behind the words or symbols in which the Dharma is expressed, to the experience beyond. We begin to have a direct wordless perception of the truth, which we call insight. Such insight is very different from a conceptual understanding – it is no longer an idea, it is a part of the very way we see the world. We can perhaps imagine, for example, that knowing intellectually that all beings are somehow interconnected – which most of us probably accept at some level – would have much less impact than living in a direct experience of interconnectedness as a concrete reality, so that we could no longer take our own sense of separateness seriously, and never feel any temptation to act just for our own benefit.

We may tend to think of such insight as an all-or-nothing, once-and-for-all experience, which at its highest level we are told it is. But we are all likely to get glimpses of insight if we meditate wholeheartedly while exposing ourselves to Buddhist ideas, and these can have a strong cumulative effect. Such glimpses behind the curtain may be intense, but, until we are well along the path, they do not seem to last. To build on them we need to revisit them, and to do this we need to turn them into a form we can remember and think about. This probably means putting them into words, although some people may prefer to use images or other symbols. We can then treat these glimpses of reality as another form of ‘hearing’, on which again we need to reflect, so that they can contribute to another cycle of meditating and becoming.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. a) “All worldlings are mad.” (The Buddha)
b) “...common-sense: the inherited stupidity of the race.” (Oscar Wilde)
What is your response to these statements?

2. What was your emotional response when you were first exposed to the Dharma? How has your response changed now that the Dharma is more familiar to you?

3. Which aspects of the Dharma have given you the strongest sense of śraddhā?
4. Have you come across any aspects of the Dharma that you tend to reject? Is your response a ‘cool’ intellectual questioning, or does it have a ‘warm’ emotional flavour – and if so, what sort of emotion do you experience in response to the teaching?
5. Have you ever radically changed your opinion about something? Do you find it possible to imagine that your existing world-view might be faulty in some areas?
6. “Non-repetition is the canker of the spiritual life.” Are you happy to keep revisiting and reflecting on the same Dharma teachings from different angles, or do you tend to want novelty?
7. Have you ever had an insight that seemed beyond words, either while meditating or at any other time? Can you describe it in words? Would a non-verbal symbol – perhaps an image – help you to revisit the experience?

Notes

1. Lecture 46: Zen and the Psycho-Therapeutic Process, by Sangharakshita
2. Reason and Reflection in the Spiritual Life, by Ratnaguna
3. Wisdom Beyond Words, by Sangharakshita, p70