Recap

Last week Dayajoti talked about papanca, the tendency of the mind to proliferate thought. She talked about helpful possible strategies, particularly in meditation, to help us release or break the chain of those proliferating thoughts. She made the important distinction between thoughts that support practice and papanca, those thoughts that disturb, distort and blind us. In terms of strategies she particularly emphasised consciously calming and turning towards the body sensations, to anchor the focus of our attention within the body to withdraw energy from the unhelpful even destructive proliferation of thoughts.

The talks this year are all part of a series exploring the Triratna system of practice. We could say the system is like a map that points to the different territories we will find ourselves in as we journey through buddhist practice. We will taste and come to know the territories of integration, positive emotion, spiritual death, spiritual rebirth and receptivity as we engage with meditation and the Dharma.

The body as a mandala of knowing

One way to picture the relation between the different aspects of practice is to see them as arising within a mandala.

A mandala is a living, interweaving patterning or arrangement of apparently separate elements around a unifying centre. The form of the mandala establishes relationships between the different parts and unifies them around its centre, it's heart. The mandala creates wholeness out of chaos,

creating, boundaries and gateways at its perimeter and relatedness between the apparently separate elements within it.

I mention the image of the mandala because it gives me a way to introduce what I want to talk about this evening. I am going to be talking about the body as a mandala of knowing. I will be suggesting that it may be useful to imagine our internal life as a mandala of numerous selves often competing for attention and control. At the end of this talk I shall be evoking the heart of this body mandala which from one perspective can be seen as having the qualities of a mirror.

A mandala is a very useful way of visualising what we mean when we talk about integration and the spiritual life. integration is the gathering together, a weaving together of the different elements of our life in a way that encourages all the qualities and energies of our being to come into relation with each other and also bring them in alignment to our core values and vision.

The reason this follows on from Dayajoti's talk on Papanca, or the tendency of the mind to proliferate thought is that papanca works against integration. It splits and divides our being and so this week my aim is to get to the roots of that proliferating mind, to discover the drivers of this endless unhelpful mental activity and the consequences of not being bound by it.

Helpful and unhelpful thought

The first thing I want to emphasise is that In talking about papanca we are not trying to demonise thought. It is the primary tool for reflection. It also allows us to function and survive in the world, it gives structure to our ever changing experience. What is most useful is that it helps us give shape to something that is first felt at a somatic level, at a body feeling level. Our bodies sensing and responding tends to activate thought. It works as an interpreter of experience. This can be incredibly useful and productive just as much as it can limit and bind us.

However, when we simply try to control and direct our thoughts, or conjure fantasies and narratives, we risk becoming disembodied. unless our thinking and knowing is connected to the felt sense of the body we are tending to move away from or simply be unaware of experiences that are actually controlling our responses and defining how we experience life. I hope it is clear that it is impossible to just think or will ourselves to enlightenment. Our thoughts can influence but cannot define or control the way we respond at a cellular level within and through the body. Our body carries our history. It carries our views, it is an unconscious memory bank that is continually reenacting the past and will continue to do so until we bring attention, wakefulness and choice to that activity and begin to integrate the bodies knowing into awakeness. Until we do that we live veiled from truly meeting ourselves, each other and our potential as human beings.

My advice is whatever you are doing, wake up as fully as possible to the sensations in the body and this will help uncover the root influences of your actions. It will resource you to differentiate between mental activity that is connecting, integrating and leading us deeper into how things are and unhelpful papanca which is splitting us into numerous selves or simply creating a disembodied fantasy, or chains of images of what might be or should have been, or should be now.

So one could say in summary that when we are awake to body sensation and it is in right relation to mental activity our practice will bear fruit. Integration will naturally arise.

The illusion of a fixed self as the cause of suffering

We talk about ourself, our spiritual practice, our meditation, our experience, and all these ways of talking and thinking create an illusion of a single definable being that is a me, that is a you or an I. Much of the activity of the proliferating mind is actually arising out of the bodies responses which are learnt patterns that we are constantly rebuilding, reinforcing, supporting or defending an imagined way of being, that I call me. The proliferating mind is a key tool for reflecting back to myself who I think I am and as importantly what I am not. It also tells me who you are and who you are not. It tends to set the rules for our relational behaviour. It monitors when we believe we are too much or too little. When we are unacceptable and when we have got it right. The proliferating mind arises unconsciously out of the patterns held in the body and attacks or defends, hides or distorts, subtlety or bluntly always attempting to bolster and maintain our particular patterning. It is working to maintain an imagined self and keep it safe. This constant juggling to endlessly recreate a sense of an already known me not only proliferates thought but also creates a sense of different selves jostling to be in control. Some are acceptable at some times and others need hiding. Some parts seem to lead and others hide in the corner. Trying to get the right self to the fore at the right time is so exhausting. This is the root of our suffering.

We suffer when we are split. The proliferating mind splits and divides us, makes parts of our bodies responses, unacceptable, wrong or imperfect. Other bits that it thinks are acceptable and right, it pushes them to the fore, displaying them to keep us safe or loved. The tragic thing is that all this activity simply bolsters our delusions and ignorance. It splits us into experiencing ourselves at odds with our potential that longs to be released, creating many selves jostling for a voice or silenced into numbness.

A quote from Seng-ts'an. An early zen teacher.

" the way is only difficult for those who pick and choose.

Do not like, do not dislike; all will then be clear.

Make a hairbreadth difference and heaven and earth are set apart.

If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against.

The struggle for and against is the minds worst disease."

So I am hoping the question in your mind might be...., that's all very interesting but how can I stop or at least slow down this internal splitting and what has all this got to do with mandalas and integration?

Working with the tendency to split

I think the first thing to say is there is no quick fix. We will find ourselves back in the same old patterns of response over and over. However each time we revisit the well worn territories in awareness we begin to see them differently, relate to them differently. I picture the constant revisiting as a gradual process of softening and slowing the desire to reenact. So we can know the patterns arising in our bodies but choose not to identify with them and act them out. We cannot change our history but we can gradually find the means to not reenact it here and now.

 Let's take a few minutes to really come into to our experience. I invite you to find the sensations of your hand, the weight , the temperature. The fingers and where they touch and where there is space between the fingers.

This is very simple, not difficult. There is sensation and we know it. We are probably not trying to make the hand different, warmer or bigger. It is just there arising in awareness. We have sensations and the knowing of sensation. It is as if we wake up the knowing of sensations of the hand by simply turning towards that region of the body with curiosity. What I invite you to also notice is that these sensations seem to be arising out of awareness itself. We turn towards the hand and it is as if the sensations seem to condense into form emerging out of awareness itself. If we refocus onto the sensations of awareness itself what does it feel like? What are its qualities? For me, I sense it as a lucid, open boundless space. Sometimes there is sensation and sometimes there is just clear this open awareness.

The path of integration is knowing that the body is a mandala of arising and passing sensations arising and fading and made knowable because they arise in a field of boundless awareness. What is ultimately integrated is sensation and awareness. Another way of saying this is integration is recognising simultaneously the ground of experience as awareness itself, which we may sense as boundless, lucid, spaciousness, and knowing that this arises out of, alongside and within the dance of appearances, the sensations that appear and fade and the lucid wakefulness are not different.

We integrate this by simply by waking up into this fullness, the abundance. We can then begin to notice how some sensations seem to come to the fore and from these that we tend to choose to act because we create particular meaning and significance around them. We spend energy juggling the mandala of sensations, rejecting, suppressing or identifying with a limited number of them. By waking up into the broad mandala of sensation and the utterly open unbounded space of awareness in which they arise, this helps us to disindentify with the desire to suppress, cling to or reenact particular sensations and allows us to notice the less visible responses that have become split off, or set outside our mandala walls. By broadening we begin to weave the well worn and the apparently new sensations arising in the body back into to relation to each other and the whole mandala of embodiment.

In this way, we are more likely to notice where we are creating binds, locks, numbness and absence. We find how our body image is often lopsided or distorted because of our habitual tendencies to notice or identify with only certain parts of our body. This exploration of the mandala of sensation can be really helpful to recognise the root of our views, our usually blind habits of being and acting. We can directly feel what we are obsessing over, clinging to or resisting. This is the precious nectar that potentially frees us, that we gather by consciously waking up into the mandala of body sensation.

So integration is not trying to banish of block or adapt our many selves but simply to wake up into the broad mandala of embodied experience and the natural spacious awareness that runs through it. Integration is the intention to notice more of what we already are, rather than focusing on what should, could or might be. The patient practice of Integration is trusting that curiosity will be sufficient to fulfil and transform our lives.

Sunyata: The heart of the mandala

This brings me to the heart of the mandala around which all arising experiences revolves and comes into relation to. The heart of the mandala is sunyata. What this means is that in the heart of the mandala there is recognition that everything that arises is utterly empty of any sense of substantiality, permanence or selfhood. Integration is the process of becoming whole by folding in whatever is arising back into this empty and paradoxically abundant heart of our being. We simply, directly know, that all that appears doesn't need adding to, diminishing or clinging to, we simply allow it to be part of our ever changing mandala of being. The more we do this the more we see that nothing needs to be banished or emphasised. Strengthened or weakened. We do not need to reify experience. When we are in informed, in touch, with this heart of the mandala our body sensations find their place in the mandala of being without effort. We know directly our response. We know what needs to be done in the face of our own suffering and the suffering we see all around us.

"Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress."

Awareness, Going for refuge and the precepts

If I had a plant in the audience I would now get them to stand up and shout out, "is that really it, are you really saying the Buddha just taught, live and respond, do whatever you like, but do it with awareness. That sounds extremely dodgy to me."

And I would answer yes I am saying that. I am not saying that is all he taught. He had many strategies to guide people away from suffering. But I do say with confidence that he taught that waking up was and is the primary act. Being awake in our experience as it is arising is synonymous with the enlightened state. Unfortunately we tend to go unconscious, go into automatic pilot and reenact, rebuild an imagined self and it is this that causes suffering.

We can go back into our felt experience and test out this teaching. At the beginning of the evening we chant the refuges and precepts. We are saying in the refuges that we aspire to turn towards that which is most precious to us, the mystery of wakefulness. The shrine articulates that which we aspire to become, an awakened being. We also acknowledge our aspiration to follow the teaching that show us how to cultivate awakeness. We also bow to the community of fellow aspirants that support each other to wake up. We go from there to recite the precepts which reflect the patterns of natural activity of one who is fully awake. We are stating this is how we intend to live our lives. They are not some random or social list of moral obligations. They reflect the natural activity that arises out of awareness. You can try it and see. You will find out that it is extremely painful to be awake and act unskilfully. We have to go unconscious to continue to act unskilfully. It is very difficult to maintain hatred and remain awake to it. Wakefulness transforms the poisons, caused by splitting, into the wisdom arising naturally out of integration.

We can only act out of hatred by losing awareness, by creating a self that needs bolstering or protecting.

We can only take that which is not freely given by losing awareness, by creating a self that needs bolstering or protecting.

We can only act sexually inappropriately towards others by losing awareness, by creating a self that needs bolstering or protecting.

We can only lie, slander and mislead through communication by losing awareness, by creating a self that needs bolstering or protecting.

We can only choose to make use of intoxicants in their many forms by losing awareness, by creating a self that needs bolstering or protecting.

Integrating and maintaining a bond with the heart of the mandala, with the truth of sunyata naturally leads us into skilful activity. Integration naturally unfolds into the mandala of practice for the benefit of all.

Akshobya and the mirror

As a way of summarising what I have been taking about this evening I want to end by acknowledging Akshobya. This figure is an aspect of another mandala that sits beneath, below our mundane mandala of practice. The mandala of the five Buddhas reflects the complete transformation of every aspect of our being, our mind and body that comes about by simply releasing utterly our grip on views of how things could or should be.

When we stop gripping, one aspect that arises quite naturally into the space of wakefulness, is described as mirror like wisdom. What is meant by that is that the knowing that arises has the same qualities as a mirror. A mirror reflects everything just as it is. We see clearly, without distortions, there is absolute clarity. We do not cling to experience just like the mirrors surface anything that arises within it, when it has passed, leaves no trace. Our being is transformed by the precision of clear seeing, clear knowing. Every detail, every shift, every undercurrent and inference is reflected with crystalline lucidity. Our most painful traits transform into exquisite wisdom by being seen for what they are. There is no clinging or desire for selfhood. At this level of the mandala the arising and passing of sensation leaves no mark of suffering. There is just this exquisite exactness in our knowing, every detail is clearly seen, just as it is. It's coming and going, arising and fading, all is tracked without addition or subtraction creating what is described as suchness. The unique flowering of appearances dance in the utterly open awake state of being.

This is the wisdom of Akshobya, the goal and fruit of integration.