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Buddhist Background Essay . Assignment Two

Critically investigate and describe how an understanding of certain elements of traditional Buddhist theory and practice might enrich the theory and practice of mindfulness as a clinical approach.

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In this assignment I consider the traditional Buddhist theory of impermanence and its current and future role in mindfulness as a clinical approach, pertaining to M.B.S.R. and M.B.C.T. programmes specifically. I have included the following sections :

- An introduction
- Understanding impermanence
- The perception paradox
- Impermanence and the mindfulness mainstream
- A more explicit role for impermanence in mainstream MBP's, moving forward?

An introduction

I became interested in impermanence following the death of my eldest son Rory on the 12th of June 2018. Initially, taking up meditation and seeking a more mindful way of life supported me in dealing with the challenge of living without him, but the transitory nature of life that his death had impressed on me opened up an interest in the concept of impermanence *(anicca)* - the inevitable arising and ceasing of all things, or the disappearance of things that have become or have arisen (Nyanatiloka, 2019. VISM. VII, 3) .This has greatly helped me see my loss in the wider context of impermanence, and of universal vulnerability - that is the general traits shared by humans that tend us towards suffering (Crane, 2017).

The Buddhist background module has been helpful, not only in reference to the subject matter, but also understanding Buddhism as a lens through which to see the world (Saunders, 2020) and as an overall way of perceiving and of being. From this I have managed to derive a sense of solace around past events, through awareness of universal vulnerability and impermanence. Additionally, armed with this knowledge I hope to deal more effectively with future difficulties and challenges.

Understanding impermanence

The Buddha highlighted three key teachings, pertaining to the nature of existence (Meshram, 2016) -

1) *Anicca* (impermanence) - all things are impermanent, subject to change
2) *Dukkha* (suffering) - all living things are liable to suffering
3) *Anatta* (non-self) - a permanent individual self does not exist

Buddhist psychology offers a comprehensive way of mapping distress along three dimensions. These are – initial pain (pain of pain), resistance to pain and impermanence (Feldman & Kuyken, 2019).

The concept of impermanence must be considered within the perspective of cause and effect. The Four Noble Truths *(ariya-sacca)* are centred around suffering, its cause and the end of suffering and its cause. The law of karma *(kamma)* says that certain kinds of acts lead to certain kinds of results (cause and effect).
The concept of dependent origination *(paṭiccasamuppāda)* is the doctrine of conditionality which shows that all phenomena are, in some way or other, conditionally related to each other. The importance of dependant origination is related to the doctrine of non-self *(annatta*) which shows, in contrast to other spiritual traditions, there is no ongoing self at the centre of experience. Dependent origination provides an alternative - things happen as a result of other things happening, phenomena are caused or conditioned, by other phenomena. Along with impermanence, dependent origination forms the indispensable condition for the realisation of the teachings of the Buddha (Nyanatiloka, 2019).

Additionally, impermanence and non-self are closely linked . If one can deeply see change in the present moment this can lead directly to seeing non-self. This process becomes a route for seeing non-self, because it is clear that everything is continually arising and passing. Continuity is essential for the establishment self and without this, there can be none. (Armstrong, 2017).

A deep understanding of impermanence is also important in the alleviation of suffering. The second of the four noble truths, teaches that all suffering is produced by craving (*taṇhā*). The truth that impermanence provides is an understanding of the unreliability, transitory and unsatisfying nature of conditioned phenomena. A key step on the path towards the removal of suffering and attainment of enlightenment, comes from the direct observation of one's moment to moment experience. (Goldstein, 2016).

Impermanence is featured prominently in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta (MN 10), an important Pali discourse that has provided the foundation for Buddhist meditational practices, down the ages (Keown, 2004). Its appearance stands out by virtue of the frequency of its repetition. There is a refrain that occurs 13 different times in the discourse, following each specific meditation instruction pertaining to the four foundations of mindfulness. Throughout the repetition, we are continually reminded of the essential aspects of the practice (Analayo, 2019). The second part of the refrain concerns contemplating the nature of impermanence; the arising, the nature of passing away and both the arising and passing away in regard to our experience (Analayo, 2019). Impermanence also plays its part in relation to the five aggregates of experience or clinging *(khandas)* which include - material elements, feelings, perceptions, formations, and consciousness. A source of dukkha is that we often take these elements as objects of clinging, but we can liberate ourselves using mindfulness in order to deeply see their impermanent nature (Analayo, 2020).

At their heart, the teachings of the Buddha represent a 'middle way', an understanding of the way things are. It does not consider belief in either solid existence or complete nonexistence. Instead of these two extremes, things are deemed to exist only fleetingly and independent of other things (Armstrong, 2017).

The perception paradox

This paradox pertains to people's perception of impermanence. It is on the face of it, an obvious notion. If someone is told they may be dead by nightfall, or their next breath may be their last, they are likely to accept this as a possibility. The catch, is that they are not deeply understanding the nature of this concept. A full cultivation of impermanence involves two separate elements - awareness and acceptance. Impermanence awareness is the cognitive or conceptual component and refers to the awareness that all phenomena are transient and are subject to dissolution. Impermanence acceptance, is the emotional and experiential component and refers to an attitude of openness and receptivity towards the transient nature of all things. It involves a sense of calmness in the face of the impermanent nature of phenomena. Importantly, this quality of mind calls for embracing change as a natural part of life (Fernández-Campos et al., 2021).

Despite considerable evidence to the contrary, there is a widespread misunderstanding about the nature of the world – a belief in the basic solidity of things. One reason for this hallucination, or deception (Rinpoche, 2017) is down to the rapidly changing nature of phenomena. For example, when we go to the cinema we cannot see the separate frames of a film. They move too quickly to be noticed individually, so we remain unaware of the reality of separation. Looking at objects from a distance can also suggest solidity. For an example with a tree, we only perceive an undifferentiated mass of colour from afar. Up close however, we can distinguish individual leaves and shades and markings on the trunk (Goldstein, 2003).

This sense of solidity is enforced by the human tendency to give names to things we are aware of, and which surround us. The function of 'name and form' (*nāmarūpa*) represents the worldly identity of any form by a name which is considered temporal and not a true identity with the nameless and formless reality (Nyanatiloka, 2019). At the outset a name or in this case, a descriptive word, is just a convenient designation so that we can communicate with one another about appearances. After countless repetitions however, these names and descriptions take on a life of their own. What was simply an invented concept, becomes static and unchanging (Armstrong, 2017)**.** Teasdale and Chaskalson (2011) underline this

point with their observations around the role of language in relation to suffering. They identify two modes of language - implicational and propositional. In terms of meaning, implicational language is general, implicit, emotional in nature and more likely to reduce suffering; whilst propositional language, is associated with specific, explicit, factual meanings and more likely to be associated with an increase in suffering. In the context of an occidental, secular discussion the word impermanent falls squarely in the propositional category.

Impermanence and the mindfulness mainstream

Kabat-Zinn's (2005, p .108) definition of mindfulness – 'moment to moment, non-judgemental awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is, in the present moment, and as non-reactively, as non-judgementally, and as open-heartedly as possible', connects implicitly to the nature of impermanence as, of course, each and every moment only exists fleetingly in the present. Not only does Kabat-Zinn's exhortation make sense as it seeks to inhibit pointless rumination about the past or future; but it also invites us to focus our energy and attention on the only (changing) moment in time, we can influence.

Fernández-Campos et al. (2021) suggest that cultivating impermanence can generate gratitude for elements of one's life that will in time, be gone. Accepting that every moment is fleeting may prompt one to appreciate life and relationships more fully. This process of approaching the present moment and all it entails may not be easy, but connecting with what we fear (e.g., suffering and impermanence) can allow us to grow. When considering this invitation on a daily basis, I am inspired by the exhortation - not to turn my head and to keep looking at my bandaged place, because I know this is where the light enters (Santorelli, 2000).

In a number of his books, John Kabat-Zinn is explicit about the existence and nature of impermanence. The chapter *Arrogance and Entitlement* (Kabat-Zinn, 2005) begins with the insight that, because we feel we can control things for a moment or two, there is consequently, a subtle way in which we tell ourselves stories about the way things are

supposed to work out. Chapter 18 (Kabat-Zin, 2013) is entitled - Change: *The One Thing You Can Be Sure Of*. Here, he reinforces the point that adapting to all the pressures we experience in life essentially means adapting to change. He observes that the role of mindfulness and meditation practice is to encourage an embodied understanding of impermanence in the face of all change, learning to release the habits of grasping that foster distress. In line with this, Fernández-Campos et al. (2021) posit that mindfulness may promote awareness and acceptance of impermanence because it allows individuals to notice changes without resisting them. For instance, by paying attention to the breath, one can notice the constant movement and exchange of air as one inhales and exhales. Additionally, and consistent with post-traumatic growth research, cultivating impermanence may encourage greater mindfulness by motivating individuals to pay greater attention to the present moment and savour it more fully.

Despite the above, it is interesting to note that impermanence is not clearly, explicitly represented, in the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (M.B.S.R) or Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (M.B.C.T.) programmes. It is however implied in a few places. In the first session of M.B.S.R. (C.M.R.P., 2020), a sense of impermanence is suggested with the raisin exercise. Here the teacher may comment upon the eating process as the fruit is consumed – the dried fruit arises and then ceases. In the same class, with the abdominal breathing practice, there is the invitation to non-judgmentally observe one's breathing from moment to moment and then bring the attention back to the breath and the present moment, when the mind wanders.

In M.B.C.T., with the sitting meditation *: mindfulness of sounds and thoughts*, in session four of the programme - *Recognising Aversion* (Segal et al., 2018) , the nature of impermanence is strongly implied via the description of clouds moving across the sky, as analogous to passing thoughts in the mind. Session six of this programme is entitled *Thoughts are not Facts*. The invitation here, is to reduce the degree of identification with what is being thought and encourage the seeing of thoughts as thoughts, simply objects of awareness and mental events that arise from them.

Despite these covert references, this is as far as the association goes. In fact, the word 'impermanence' does not appear in the index of the book. NB, the word 'change' does appear in the index but not in a context that is explicitly related to impermanence.

Far from dwelling on the overt nature and value of impermanence, aspects of mainstream mindfulness emphasise the opposite. This is manifested via a focus on consistency, a steadfastness of approach, even a sense of permanence. Some examples of this include use of the mountain meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 2013), focus on repetitive behaviours (for example repeatedly guiding the attention back to a chosen anchor point) and highlighting the cumulative benefits of consistent meditation practice over time.

There are of course, good reasons for not explicitly considering impermanence within certain MBP's. MBSR is focused on stress reduction and MBCT on individuals who have recovered from major depression. In these types of environments, there is the possibility of a negative impact by using potentially unsettling language. Follette at al. (2018) observe that, as a psychological process helps a client access the implications of impermanence, at least least two things may occur. Initially, they may feel distress and disillusionment associated with reduced expectations of mortality or sustained well-being. Following this they may come to terms with such realities, so negative events lose some of their associated qualities, including feelings of abandonment, betrayal, and disappointment. In the same vein Goldstein (2016) observed that fear, and even despair can arise as one looks deeper and sees the continual dissolution of the consciousness and its object. Follette et al. (2018) noted that observers critical of Buddhist cosmology, have remarked on the seemingly dismal nature of a perspective so concerned with suffering and its aetiology.

One source of the unsettling nature of impermanence, is down to the interpretation of the word and its usage in contemporary occidental societies. Like many words translated from Pali to English, the translation is not a direct transfer in terms of meaning. The Pali word for impermanence, anicca, is a compound word consisting of "a" meaning non-, and "nicca" meaning "constant, continuous, permanent". While 'nicca' is the concept of continuity and permanence, 'anicca' refers to its exact opposite; the absence of permanence and continuity (Wikipedia, 2021). Alternative translation options around a 'lack of continuity', passing, fleeting, or ephemeral (for example) may produce a less negative effect. As it stands, synonyms for 'impermanent' include - fluctuation, uncertainty, and volatility (thesaurus.com, 2021). As with impermanence, all these words have mostly negative connotations.

A final reason for the disconnect between the concept of impermanence and MBP's is down to different perspectives. Mindfulness incorporates an awareness and acceptance of a given moment or experience, whilst impermanence calls for an appreciation of the changing nature of experiences. To explain the nature of the latter whilst emphasising the former may confuse, as it would distract focus from the present moment. Impermanence not only requires individuals to be aware and accept what is happening now but also to acknowledge and accept inevitable change (Fernández-Campos et al., 2021).

A more explicit role for impermanence in mainstream MBP's, moving forward?

According to Rosenberg (2007), the Buddha locates impermanence at the centre of his teaching. Although there are many laws of nature, this is the one he addresses most directly and uses it as a door into everything else. The Buddha is at pains to point out that even his teachings are impermament; and not an absolute truth around which disagreement could arise. Rather they are utilitarian tools, like a raft that can be used to cross to a distant shore. Once arrived, there is no need to carry it afterwards on one's back (Armstrong, 2017).

The experience of my path has shown that an understanding of the theory of impermanence can greatly assist in a time of uncertainty. Although one can understand that specific types of content could prove unsettling for certain groups; there will be environments where a more open to discussion about impermanence and the transitory nature of life, could be of benefit.

I'd like to draw a parallel with the area of compassion which was deliberately not featured front and centre in M.B.S.R. and M.B.C.T. programmes. Kabat-Zinn's (2005) perspective, rooted in a concern that people may strive to be compassionate; was that it was preferable to be loving and kind in everything that was done, and leave it at that. The attitude from Segal et al. (2018) was that it is better for compassion to be caught than taught. In these programmes, messaging around compassion (as with impermanence) has historically been communicated by teachers via an empathetic and embodied approach.

Compassion has been catered for separately and extensively, for example through the Mindful Self-Compassion Programme (Germer & Neff, 2021), and although the theory and study of impermanence is ongoing in Buddhist environments; I would suggest investigation into the advisability of creating programmes with this subject matter, that deliver in suitable mainstream environments. As indicated above, I believe this could have considerable benefits, especially for those dealing with the loss of a loved one.

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