'The Wheel of Life' – Reflections for 4th May 2022 -prepared by Rob

Opening words: This week, we are meeting in person. If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us', we meditate at 7.30 pm on Wednesday in the prayer room of Wisdom Centre. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centering Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob and Hazel, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate, beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation, may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence, may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, stability, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction: Whilst I was preparing the meditation on the Death of Self back in March I noticed that at the end of his book Richard Rohr had an appendix showing the relationship of the self or soul to God and he drew a large circle to represent God, a small one some distant away to represent the 'false self' and another small one overlapping the God circle for the 'true self' or soul. One of his followers queried why the 'true self' circle was not wholly within the God circle, and he said that it was because we were not the same as God and that a distinction still had to be drawn. It got me thinking how I would draw these circles. I decided that I would also draw two circles, but that they would not be separate circles, in fact one would be the reverse side of the other.

I shall tonight explain why and in doing so I will draw on the Buddhist concept of the Wheel of Life or of Truth (Dharmachakra). This is appropriate as later this month (on the 15th) is the great Buddhist festival of Wesak, on the May full moon when we commemorate the birth, enlightenment and passing away (paranibbana) of the Buddha. The Buddha asked that ever monastery should have a representation of the Dharmchakra and someone on hand to explain it. I have drawn my circles on the accompanying sheet; the first represents the world (known in Buddhism as 'Samsara') and the second Nibbana – the transcendent world. They are the same thing viewed from a different direction, which is why one circle is the reverse of the other.

The Powerhouse

In the centre of each circle is a smaller one showing what drives it. In the worldly circle these are Greed, Aversion and Delusion, traditionally represented by a cockerel, a snake and a pig (I am not entirely sure why!) These three compulsions drive the world; they turn the wheel for ever onwards.

In the transcendent world, these three powerful motivations are transformed into Generosity, Loving-kindness and Wisdom/understanding, and they appear in the centre of the reverse wheel.

The Three Signs

Traditionally the middle of the wheel shows the 6 states of being – heavenly (Devas), envious and challenging (Asuras – fighting demons), moderate seekers (humans), ignorant (animal), lost in desire (Pretas – hungry

ghosts) and depressed and suffering (in hell). In this model I have shortened or summarised these possible states with the three signs of being which characterise each of the realms. These three signs are impermanence, the absence of any essential identity and the absence of satisfaction – incompleteness and consequent suffering.

The world is impermanent, so we don't stay in any particular state, but constantly change from one to another, remaining for varying lengths of time in each. Correspondingly we actually have no essence or essential self; we think we do, and we continually identify with one state or another, one type of person or another; we write our stories and believe them. But then everything changes, and we suffer. We find ultimately that there is nothing and no one with which or whom we can identify. This brings in the third sign dissatisfaction, incompleteness and suffering known in Buddhism as 'Dukkha'.

THE DHARMA SEALS

The three signs of being have their corresponding symbols in the transcendent circle because, as I said, the two circles are actually the same thing seen from a different viewpoint. The transformed or transcendent symbols are called the Dharma Seals or seals of Truth. Impermanence becomes Signlessness, Non-self becomes Emptiness and Dissatisfaction becomes Goallessness.

Signlessness: This is an indication of non-dualism. We do not have to label anything this or that. In the world we are always doing that. We name ourselves and our pets. We name our country and all the other countries. In fact we label and identify everything and to distinguish between them all. In the temporal world we have to do so, or we would become very confused. But God does not label anything. It is not just as St Paul said that there is no Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, there are no distinctions at all. This is what Cynthia Bourgeault was expounding in the talk we listened to last month. God does not "do religion". He is not concerned with Christianity or Islam or Buddhism let alone the distinction between Catholics and Protestants; these are divisions which we have ourselves created in the world. God does not divide the world up neatly or make distinctions between peoples or what we call races, their cultures or beliefs. As Cynthia pointed out, when Jesus said "Love your neighbour as yourself", he actually meant "Love your neighbour as being yourself". In the transcendent world there are no essential differences between us.

Emptiness: This is sometimes misunderstood to mean a vacuum or even depression – an emptiness within. But actually it means the opposite. As one of my teachers explained, it is more akin to "fullness"! What it means is that we do not cling to anything; we empty our minds and our hearts and prepare them for whatever arises, entering fully into every moment and every experience, but always letting them go. In William Blake's beautiful quatrain it is not "binding to ourselves a joy", but "kissing the joy as it flies". It is limitless potential. It is the emptiness of the open road ahead of us with no traffic clogging it into which we pass freely and move on.

Goalessness: This is a difficult one for Christians because we regard the world as having 'purpose' and ourselves as pursuing a spiritual path which is, hopefully, going to get us somewhere. But goallessness does not mean purposelessness. It is more like not being fixated on a goal, but enjoying the journey; in a sense the journey and the goal are one and the same. I think the best way to explain this is through a rather mundane but true story from my own life. Some years ago I was staying with a friend and I had staying with me two little dogs. Behind the friend's house was a path which wound its way eventually up a hill and onto a common. I decided that I would take the dogs to the common to have a run, but I found it very difficult. The dogs would not follow me along the path but kept running off and finding various exciting things to sniff and to root about in. I was for ever calling them back and became very frustrated that we

would never get to the common. Then one day I had a think about it. Why was I taking the dogs to the common? It was so that they could run about, enjoy themselves and get exercise. But they were already doing it. They were having a whale of a time running around the path and finding all sorts of things to explore. So I let go of the obsession with getting to the common and of calling them back and just let them run around and enjoy themselves. The strange thing was that by doing so we actually reached the common more quickly than previously when I was getting frustrated and annoyed. So those feelings were the worldly ones of dissatisfaction and lack of fulfilment, and they had become transformed into goallessness where I, and the dogs, simply enjoyed the path. It did not mean that the intention of reaching the common was gone, simply that it was no longer a focus, and that way it was achieved more easily.

The Way out

Around the outside of the Dharmachakra there are depicted 12 progressive scenes, each one caused by the last, and together known as the links of dependant origination. My teachers explained that one of these links was very important because it was the key to escape from the world and to transformation into the transcendent realm. This link is "Feeling"; so in the diagram I have just shown that link and the ones before and after it. The link before is "Contact" which we do through the six senses – in Buddhism the brain is treated as one of the senses as it channels thoughts. This link is usually shown as two people embracing. "Feeling" is then shown rather dramatically as a person with an arrow through their eye, which is slightly misleading as feeling can be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. In the normal way we react to feelings. If they are pleasant we want to pursue them and get them back; if they are unpleasant we want to get rid of them and if they are neutral we go along with them and accept them as habitual parts of our lives. So the next link, caused by feeling is wanting or "Thirst" shown as someone accepting a glass of water, and thirst goes on to attachment or clinging and then to fertilisation or becoming, then to birth leading to our dissatisfaction and suffering in the world and eventually to illness and death.

Nevertheless we can stop the process at feeling. If we become fully aware of our feelings, where they originate and where they are likely to lead, we do not have to follow them – we do not have to thirst or desire and we do not have to attach or cling. We simply notice them and let them go on their way as we do with all the sensations and thoughts which arise during meditation. This is the basis of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. The cause of suffering is thirst, and the way out of suffering is its abandonment.

Preparation for meditation

So we will now enter a period of formal meditation, moving into a comfortable position relaxing the body and letting go of the efforts, difficulties, triumphs and worries of our day. Bringing ourselves into the peace and the completeness of the present moment. Noticing our breathing as it slows and deepens. Giving attention to any points of tension or discomfort in the body. If you use a sacred word you might notice its rhythm, perhaps co-ordinating it with the rhythm of the breathing. Or you may wish simply to focus on a candle or to follow the breath. Allowing and acknowledging every arrival into our mind, every experience and thought but not attaching or clinging to them or following them – just allowing them to go on their way, like the porter in a guest House. Returning to our meditation object or point of focus whenever we are aware of the mind wandering off, in a spirit of non-judgmental acceptance.

We will meditate together for 25 minutes.

Post meditation verse: I will end with two quatrains of William Blake:

He who binds to himself a joy *Doth the winged life destroy;* *But he who kisses the joy as it flies* *Lives in Eternitie's sunrise.*	*To see a World in a Grain of Sand* *And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,* *Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand* *And Eternity in an hour.*

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**

Thank you for meditating with us; please join us again soon. Stay safe and well.

Resources:



Image from Blogspot

Circle Images, Rob's own







Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.