



# The Creation of a Context

A context is created when a particular selection of ideas, practices, concrete institutions and associations of people are put together in a particular way. A context is often mutually agreed. It is collectively defined. But it still takes place within a person's psyche. It therefore consists of mental objects.

The etymology of *context* derives from 'weaving together' (L. *contextus*, connection of words, coherence, from *contexere*, to weave together.) Merriam Webster defines it as 1. the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning 2. the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs: environment, setting <the historical context of the war>. So it has these two senses: the context of a word within language, and context as the broader setting of something. So in terms of the topic of mindfulness, the meaning of the term 'mindfulness' depends on the context it is being uttered in. Mindfulness in buddhism and mindfulness in the context of modern medicine are not necessarily the same thing, because those are different contexts.

But to reinforce this idea, even what is understood by the word 'context' depends on the context it is being uttered in. In the first definition above - 'the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning' what is emphasised is a context that is literary and discursive. The context may even be narrowly academic. In fact if the context that the word 'context' is uttered in is primarily interested in ideas, then 'context' will predominantly have this meaning. But in a different context, for instance buddhism, the notion of 'context' contains much more. For instance understanding in buddhism is not academic. It has to take place in the context of its actual practice. It also takes place in the context of institutions designed to foster that practice, what constitute its tradition. These understandings, practices and institutions have all built up over time in interaction with each other and together make up the buddhist context.

Sum of meaning of all mental objects gives context. Context is the way particular mental objects are woven together. A context implies a certain view behind whatever words are being used and it is from that context that those words need to be seen. Different situations may have an effect on how something is applied or how it is understood. A person who believes in buddhism will interpret concepts (and images) as they are supposed to be meant in that context (unless they know they are supposed to be read in another context).

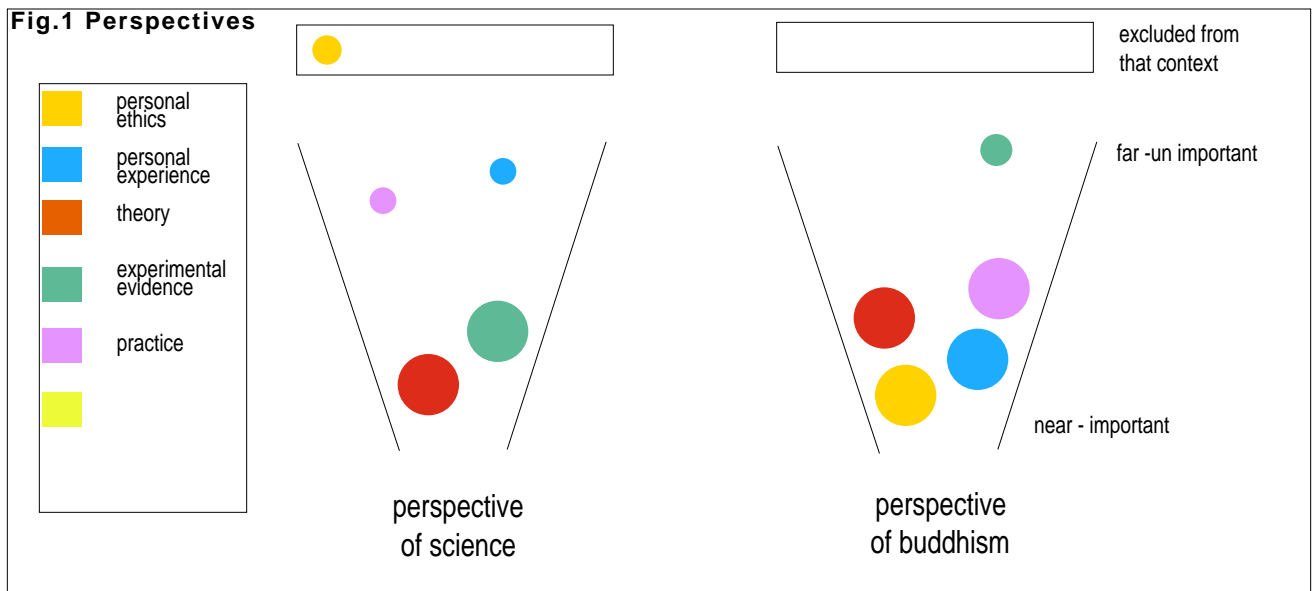
Conditioned Coproduction = universal law. Any view that arises is based on certain conditions.

Views - e.g. 6 distinctive emphases of the FWBO - these emphases make more sense if you realise the FWBO is aimed at westerners practicing buddhism. That is the context of that teaching.

A person's views are 'framed' within the particular context they are in. In 'Contextualism' there is a strong emphasis that a person's views will be shaped by their experience (\*e.g. that the middle classes, because they have not had experience of oppression, that that invalidates their views on black people. Taken to extreme this effectively invalidates all views. Communism as an ideology, intent on improving the experience of the masses, tried to enact change through imposition of experience (in China in Cultural Revolution) and through imposing a party line. Communists lived in the context of dogma and experience being seen as important. Buddhists live in a different context, where feeling, awareness, ethics and self-examination are important.

# Perspective

If a *context* is how a particular selection of ideas, practices, institutions and associations of people are put together, a *perspective* is the relationships between those things (as mental objects) *as they appear in that context*. The etymology of *context* derives from 'weaving together' and of *perspective* from 'seeing through'. (L. *per*, + *spect*.) In one context certain things may be consciously excluded. In the scientific context for instance personal ethics are excluded. That is, science may have a theory about how ethics comes about - as behaviourism does - but it doesn't propose and ethical precepts as buddhism might. It doesn't see ethics as part of what it is doing. It only really claims to address how the universe works. We can see this illustrated in the diagram below (Fig.1) which illustrates these two different contexts. In a visual perspective, the objects in the foreground are bigger than those in the background. Within the contexts of science and buddhism some things look bigger, that is are more important, more prominent, than others. In the foreground for science is adequate theory and experimental results to prove the theory. Personal experience is less important. But in buddhism, personal experience is in the foreground. Theory is also important, but it is 'held in balance' with practice. This is because buddhism *is a context of practice*. Science doesn't say that much about practice. It gives us tools but doesn't dictate how to use them. In fact understanding in buddhism grows up within a context of practice. This is because buddhism is aiming at the *embodiment of understanding within a person*, and not simply abstract knowledge, practice being what a person does to get that knowledge. The word 'practice' originates in the latin *prasso*, to do. The suffix *-ic* is associated either with becoming concrete, or with a concrete thing from which things emerge; an example being *music* as the concrete manifestation, or source for, the muse. Practice, for example meditation practice, is that which a person actually does in terms of sitting on their meditation cushion and bringing their attention to the meditation object, and from that comes meditation. Scientists have studied accomplished buddhist meditators. They have measured their brainwaves, and have found them to strongly correlate with happy mental states. This 'proof' of the effectiveness of meditation is all well and good but it still does not say anything useful about how to motivate oneself to practice meditation, it gives the 'what' (the technical side of meditation - what technique to use) but not necessarily the 'how' (how to keep practicing it). Science therefore does not have as full a perspective on meditation as buddhism has.



# 'Dhammas' and Mental Objects

Why do we translate *dhammas* as mental objects, and why are mental objects called *dhammas*?

Mind is filled with mental objects. There is never just one mental object in the Mind. *Manas* holds many mental objects in relation to each other. This is I think what we mean by a perspective - a perspective is always a perspective *between* the mental objects within it. For instance in different perspectives, different ideas become more or less prominent. In a scientific perspective much importance is given to proven theories, where in the buddhist perspective prominence is given to experience gained through practice (of meditation or ethics).

Buddhism and science are separate contexts, which is the same as saying they are different perspectives. Any term, let's take the concept of 'development', seen in one context usually has a different meaning when seen in another context. 'Development' in science means the production of better theories concerning the material world and of better technologies growing out of those theories that can better solve material problems. 'Development' in buddhism usually means a person becoming more developed in terms of who they are, usually in terms of their ethical practice and in particular their insights into reality: their wisdom and compassion. It is the same word, 'development', but the word (or mental object) is given its true meaning by the context within which it is uttered. So 'mental objects' and 'contexts' are inseparable. Why is this?

Many terms dealing with teachings and perspectives, both inside and outside of buddhism, such as 'text', 'context', 'sutra' (a buddhist scripture), or 'tantra' (a system of Vajrayana buddhist practice as practiced in Tibetan buddhism) have etymologies related to weaving or textiles. 'Text' and 'textile' are closely related. 'Tantra' means 'weave' and 'sutra' means 'thread'. A text is a weaving together of ideas, or mental objects, in a particular way. Language strings together mental objects into some sort of meaning. A context is the background of ideas, practices, people, that a concept, idea or mental object exists in.

In the 'tantra', which represents an advanced stage of Tibetan buddhism, one practices in a particular way that acknowledges a particular context of symbolic relationships and practices including initiation, close relationship with a guru, and a necessary background of long experience of buddhist practice (without which one is not really practicing the tantra).

This illustrates a point about views and contexts. A view isn't just an abstract set of ideas. It is always embedded in a context, out of which that view emerges. So for instance buddhist insights always have to emerge from the context of buddhist practice. Or, this is what buddhism says they should emerge from.

So mental objects are always mental objects within a particular context, and this is why in buddhism mental objects are given the name '*dhammas*'. It emphasises that they are mental objects as seen from a buddhist perspective. In a different system they would need to have a different name: e.g. '*atmans*' in hinduism, or 'concepts, ideas, images' in secular western philosophy.

Mental objects is quite a good choice of term because *dhammas* can be any kind of object in the mind - concepts or images. But whatever the object is, it still exists in a context. As is the case for a concept, an image's meaning also depends also on its context. This is particularly true of symbols which become meaningless out of context (or if two systems share a common symbol - as Buddhism and National Socialism do with the swastika - the meanings must be totally different).