

# 2015-06-07 Impermanence Anicca

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

impermanence, stability, impermanent, life, mind, people, cultivate, concepts, ideas, experience, insight, important, characteristics, change, insight meditation, world, day, clinging, meditation, buddhist

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning. So starting this Sunday, and for the next two Sundays, I'd like to give a series of talks on what's called the three characteristics. This particular teaching is very important for the Buddhist tradition that the insight meditation practice is housed in two champions it when I was practicing in Thailand Burma, I heard many, many talks and the three characteristics is probably the most common talk that my teachers would give. And I used to kind of tune out after a while they were so repetitive, repetitive, but they were taught a lot and they're emphasized a lot and they're really centrally important for insight meditation itself. And the emphasis they give is given to this particular teaching. It's almost as if this is a sacred teaching or sacred part part of experience that we want to kind of tune into respect, have certain reverence and care around, and to be familiar with. And the three characteristics are three aspects of all areas of our human life, which everyone shares the three common characteristics everywhere. Before I tell you what they are, I want to use an analogy. If you're an immigrant to the United States as I was the young child, and you don't speak, and you come to this country, and you don't happen to speak the language of this country, and yes, you have to decide, well, how are you going to figure out how to communicate with people in this big United States? And you look around you realize that there are many languages in this country. There are many different immigrants from all over the world have come here. There are people who've been here for millennia. who speak Native American languages, there's the oldest European language in the United States is Spanish. And there's all these different languages spoken here, and the numbers keep increasing. So you want to speak to the people who live on this land. So one approach is to learn all those languages. You know, 120 240 lang I don't how many languages are spoken this country, but you could learn them all and, and once you make sure you know them all, then you can get along just fine with everyone. That's one approach. Another approach is to learn one or two most common languages, or the common most common language that most people share, and understood that it's a shared language, this country and now more and more in the globe, and that would be English. And so English is that caught the language we have in common, and it's a lot easier to learn English one language than all the other languages. So you'll learn the common denominator, you'll learn something that everyone has in common, and then it's easier to get along. So the same thing with our human experience, we want to try to understand something that's true in all our experiences. So we can really understand something centrally important and communicate with all our experiences, be wise about them, as opposed to learn all the different particulars. Because every every experience we have is a context in particular, and all the people we meet, they're all unique in their own ways. And, but what is it we all have in common, and that what we have in common is called the three characteristics. And these are that all things that we encounter are all things that we experience, have the characteristic of being somehow in constant, being impermanent, being changeable, changing. The second characteristic is that everything that we encounter everything we meet, everything works. variance inside ourselves and outside ourselves is characterized by a Buddhist word, Indian word called Duke. And Duke has a wide variety of meanings

in different contexts, but for this purposes is probably understood as unreliable. That everything you encounter is unreliable in some particular ways. And if you understand how they're unreliable, then you're not going to rely on them hopefully and things would life a lot easier. The third characteristic is that everything that you encounter everything that you personally yourself in some particular way doesn't qualify as being the essentially true you.

And it's kind of relates to you and so cat Okay, do you know do you know if your neighbor has an itch you You don't scratch it usually, you know, you know, if you scratch your own itches. And so there's difference between us, and things that are gonna belong more uniquely to me. But even things that belong uniquely To me, it doesn't qualify as some kind of essential to, this is who I really am. So this these are called the three characteristics, the characteristics of impermanence, the characteristic of unreliability and the characteristic of what's called not to self and not self you have to understand to be not they don't qualify as the essentially true you these things. And what's important to understand what these three characteristics is they're, they characterize our experience. So they're something that we learn to see and learn to tune into. It's not something we have to believe. It's not like you have to believe any of this. It's not like that kind of religious belief. It's rather, you know, something that we, we notice it's useful to notice when this is the case, in our experience, to notice that things are changing, to notice that things are unreliable to notice that things are, have this quality of not self. And our lives are can be a lot easier to live if you keep these three things in mind, and we noticed them as they occur. And in this tradition, as well, as we go deeper and deeper into the meditation practice of insight, these three characteristics become increasingly important as as insights. In fact, they're considered to be the insights of insight meditation practice. And people have many insights. Some of them are unique to yourself, which are important insights. But what we're looking for here is that which is universal, that we all share as human beings and something that we is an understanding or perspective. That we can bring no matter where we go, no matter what the situation is. These three perspectives have value in helping us not to cling or get caught or get disappointed or frustrated. So the tradition puts a lot of emphasis on this. It's important part of a wise living. It's important part of the deepening of insight practice. And it's a catalyst for the experience of liberation.

So the today I'd like to talk a little bit about the first one, which is anicca in the Pali Buddhist language. And that usually translated into English as impermanence. And it can be said that Buddhism is one big contemplation about impermanence, so that important the whole experience and understanding of impermanence. And it's nothing unique to Buddhism, emphasizing impermanence. It's not like this is the Buddha, Buddhists have the monopoly on teachings on impermanence. It's, you know, it's something that we see in our lives and you know, some of us And remember the old Greek philosopher Heraclitus who said, You can't step in the same river twice, which was a kind of teaching about how this life that we live in the stream of life is always impermanent, always changing. And it's not not actually Groundhog's Day, however, it's always changing. It's always going to be new. And some people encounter impermanence in their lives change early in their lives, it's a big part of their life because of some sometimes cause tremendous loss are moving and, and losing their friends and going to a new place. And, or being growing up in times of war, and a lot of disruption and a lot of challenges that and you know, impermanence and a lot of instability. And so they encounter that early on, and it becomes kind of important part of their formation as a human being to encounter that. Some people encountered as they get older as you get to a certain age, maybe a little different for different people. But I was with someone this weekend they said, Oh, you haven't I get that get get it with my friends. Now mostly we talk about our health, you know, at some point to the changing, you know, change changing qualities of our physical body and our health is so big and lose such a big impact in our lives. And so interesting that it becomes a common conversation topic. And to change and impermanence loss, is something that all human beings somehow have to deal with and cope with and respond to when if we're going to

live a wise life and Indian religions back in the time of the Buddha, put all of them put a lot of emphasis on impermanence, how much the world is changing flow of phenomena river of change all the time.

And, and there's a kind of an equation that you can simplify equation to understand some of the teachings of some of the people of the time the Buddha and some Buddhists as well. And that is to equate the world of impermanence with suffering. So in other words, impermanence equals suffering. And if the world of change is the same as suffering, then the solution is to transcend this world. And so that was religion sometimes in some Buddhists also, they just get let's get out of here. Let's go to some kind of wonderful realm of consciousness that's totally removed from this world and nothing to do with it because this world is just too difficult and the only place that you can really be free or really get some kind of lasting comfort is to really go someplace in another plane. Kinda existence and most of the plane of consciousness. The Buddha had a little different equation, maybe we need to get to this is my summary of it. And that is he had tremendous recognition of impermanence, just like his compatriots are in the religious life in ancient India. And there was a connection between impermanence and suffering. But he had a different equation rather than impermanence equal suffering, his equation was impermanence, times clinging, equals suffering. So, as soon as you have that kind of equation, then you have two choices. You could still transcend if you want. You can get away if you can, if you can successfully get away with it. That's really you know, find that or you say you get away from the world of impermanence or you To drop the clinging part of the equation, because if you don't have clinging, if you have impermanence times zero, it doesn't equal improve suffering. And that's the Buddhist approach is to see that clinging is what has to be there, to go from the world of impermanence, to the, to the experience of suffering. And so to address the clinging, to understand that, but to address clinging, they, what it really helps to understand impermanence to understand to really see it and in deep way. So one of the things that I think is often true about the changing nature of our lives, is a change can bring three important things with it. It can bring a sense of loss, experience of loss, and that sometimes some people make people think about change or impermanence. That's maybe comes up first and foremost is that we lose what we cherish, to things that are important for us things we built up and created. That's sooner or later many things are lost and change. And some things are unpredictable when we're going to lose them. The, you know, you could, you can have a lot of confidence that you put together a successful life and a stable life and you have a home and your bank account and all kinds of things. But there's no guarantee it's unreliable, that those things are really going to stay for you. I had a friend I have a friend who went to the beach with her car and her car keys and driver's license back in was in 1990, I think and did the Oakland fire. And when she came back from the beach, her house had burned down and her house was her office and everything that she had her office or papers everything right all she had was a driver's license in her car key and car key. So she had to start all over again. So she wasn't expecting that, that kind of impermanence. That wasn't part of the plan.

So sometimes there are these, you know, impermanence visits this last change. But a very important part of impermanence and change is that it allows for new possibilities. Unless there was a recycling unless there was that made space that new things can grow. And this is a very I don't know, if you noticed, by me, you know, this but very common teaching to children in schools these days, is they talk about how there has to be come, you know, the leaves fall and it's a kind of a dying of leaves and leaves decompose, and that allows for the new possibility of new growth for the next year. So this idea that change also allows for new possibilities. And luckily, that's often the case that because sometimes what we lose, which what we do, is we're ready for it to lose it. Like, please, let's change this. I know more of this. I'm ready for Something else and when you know so that it's a new possibility.

The third thing that Buddhism emphasizes around the experience of impermanence, the nature of impermanent, permanence is that in that things are changing and impermanent. They change because of causes and conditions. And so the causes and conditions the wider context in which things occur. And rather than think seeing things as being solitary, individual permanent, there's a very strong emphasis in Buddhism, to understand how things exist in context, how they exist, together with other causes and conditions that bring them into play. And some of the deepest teachings in Buddhism arise out of this idea of things exist in relationship to other things, interdependence dependent co arising, that things exist, and to begin appreciating the way in which many many things in our Life are interactive and interdependent with each other. interconnected is a very powerful thing to do on many, many different levels. And certainly true on the social level, to begin appreciating how all of us are interdependent and, and, you know, contextual to each other. And they're all the different ways in which we influence and relate to each other is a powerful thing to experience and to know and to be wise about. And so, that's only possible because of impermanence. Things change because things change. We can look at the cause and conditions for their change. So to begin tuning into these three aspects of impermanence and how they work in our life, it's not just impermanence, they relate to each other things. And as I said earlier, there are people who experience impermanence, instability, variable powerfully in their life, sometimes early in life where it's formative, like it creates a sense insecurity growing up because things are so unstable growing up, and that carries into adulthood, this lack of stability. Some people experience instability because of where they live. And it's so challenging and difficult their environments in which they lived this the violence in their cities or the poverty or the various changes that go on. And so to emphasize impermanence, and how everyday everything is impermanent, sometimes it's a bit depressing. Because some people then that's what their life experience is all about. And to hear these Buddhists say, you know, just to understand everything is impermanent and you'll be happy. It's kind of putting salt in the wound. And so I think it's important to understand that the teaching on the impermanence is missing. To be an insight is meant to be a perspective, but meant to be a revelation supposed to be what we kind of notice when it when it rears its head when it's there. But it's an insight as opposed to what we cultivate through the practice. We don't cultivate the experience of impermanence. What we cultivate in the practice is stability. And we cultivate the opposite of the three characteristics.

So we cultivate stability, as the opposite of impermanence. We cultivate reliability and, and well being as the opposite of the insight into dukkha and we cultivate self confidence is the kind of corollary to insight into nats so in terms of impermanence, a lot of what the practice is about, is developing and cultivating a variety of different forms of personal stability. And first, you know, it's very important to have some if you can create some modicum of stability in your life as a whole. So, you know, such things as having maybe some you know, your home to be somewhat stable, if you can have a clean, don't have the dishes piled up in an unstable way in the sink. You know, that creates a certain kind of, you know, come in and start Oh, no, it's gonna fall over. So sometimes correct, you know, taking care of your personal life. Keeping your home maybe clean or, or a little bit orderly. You don't want to be uptight about it, I hope but, but, but to kind of, you know, you have some sense of stability around you that you don't pay your bills. If you can. You know, don't kind of like you know, wait until the last day and then scramble to try to figure out how to get it in time and you kind of do the kind of things to if you can kind of calm and settle in and have a kind of stable life for, I think is a very important thing if you want to practice and, and be able to sit down and meditate and not to be agitated and caught up. give some thought to what you do with your daily lives. And do you keep them so busy that you out of breath going from one thing to the other. And modern life has some many people here, especially here in our society. There is a lot of options. There's a lot of TV shows to watch. And, you know, a lot of different things to do. And so there can be some idea you're supposed to do it all. And it doesn't create for a lot of stability. If you're trying to do too many things, even if all the things are good. That creates more stability. If

there's more time And space between things, you can catch your breath. So there's stability on the wider playing. And then there's this kind of stability of the mind internal stability. And that's one of the functions of meditation practice is to help us cultivate stability and soften. The idea of calm comes along without to develop the sense of calm. But I like the word stability where you, the mind is stable, the mind is settled, the opposite of stability is agitated and fragile and kind of leaping around and jumping around and anxious. So to kind of figure out some way to physically, help your physical body feel stable, if you're meditating, to give some care and attention to your posture and meditation and your body and see if you can kind of settle into your body so that the body feels stable when you meditate. And the sense of stability can be quite strong. You can feel rooted and you can feel grounded. It's possible to feel you know, like there's a column of strength and stability that's here that holds us up. We're not like kind of just, you know, jello that kind of, you know, flops down and meditates on the couch and like whatever and but you know, you really, and this is one of the you know, if you see some longtime meditators, sometimes you can kind of sense that they're there's a lot of stability and strength and uprightness, and how they sit. They Don't slouch in their couch or chair when they meditate. There's they're sitting there and some upright way. So physical stability, and then mental stability to consider what your state of your mind is, is it agitated is it anxious as a jumping around, you jump between thoughts all the time. One of the places to notice these things is when you meditate, so That's one of the functions of meditation is for you to notice the quality of your mind. And if you look at your mind when you meditate, is it stable? Or is it unstable? Does it jump around? Does it move around a lot? Is it chasing its thoughts? Or is it or is there a subtleness is the mind settled or here the ability as you meditate to have it settled, still can have a strong sense of here. And so part of meditation practice is to create that stability. Knowing that it's a temporary thing, it's not something you can ultimately rely on.

But that it's very helpful to do that. So that will be cultivating the practice is stability. As we, as the mind gets more stable. Then we see change and impermanence more clearly. Not necessarily the big change, you know, you know the changes of society, the big changes of our life. But we start seeing more and more this, this the subtle, underlying changes that go on all the time, the ways in which the mind and thoughts and perceptions change constantly and are in flux how much the body is constantly a field of change going on. The more stability we have, the more we tune into the direct experience of life is a stream and flow of change all the time. And there's a kind of a paradox. And the paradox is that the more the mind jumps around, the more anxious and agitated the mind is, the more likely it's going to be caught up in thoughts and concepts. And in particular, those thoughts and concepts will have a sense of permanence will make it will fall into the delusion of harm. This is where things are, or will see things through the filter of our ideas. And we see another person. And we don't see them as someone who's changed in the moment and changing each day, and ready to kind of experience them as a new person each time. But we carry with us our old concepts of them, this is who they are, and they haven't changed. And maybe you've had the experience of kind of wanting to shake someone up and say, Hey, you know, I'm not the person I was 10 years ago. You know, please kind of give me a chance to see that I'm different or i'm not i'm in a different mood right now or something. So do not carry with us, the more work agitated with more and more in concepts more in concepts, the more likely we'll see things as permanent. The more less than mind is agitated. The less the mind is jumping around. The more stable the mind is, the less it's going to be involved in its thoughts caught up in its thoughts jumping around its thoughts and its concepts and then less it's going to overlay ideas of permanence on experience, and more we'll see change. So the more inner stability or inner instability there is, the more we assume things are permanent. The more inner stability there is, the more we see things being changeable. So I'll give you one example from this last week. So I had a cold for a week, but two weeks ago, ended last week ago. And I hadn't had a cold for quite a while. So it was kind of like, I don't know, maybe that's my excuse of what my mind did to it. But it went on and on and we're not for a week which



is a long time me so and so I I watched my mind and every day that I had the cold, I had a different idea of how this was going to be forever.

Oh, you know, oh no, no. You know nothing to do with someone who had Lyme disease. And if you're talking about our lives Oh no, this really this is it. It's not really a call it's Lyme disease. There was one day. And then and I went through all these different things and this is it, you know, each day, what was going to be permanent, got less serious. So what was impermanent? What was what was permanent, what I thought was permanent was impermanent, like every day there was a new one. So I see I know my mind well enough, but so I can kind of laugh at it and see it and not take it too seriously. But in my mind is, I don't know about your minds. Probably you're kind of more sane than me, but but my mind produces these thoughts, these ideas and, and some of those ideas are not really used that wise. And one of the kind of diluted ways my mind can function is imputing permanence and experience which I find difficult Oh, this is it, it's going to be this way forever. And I don't have to even think about it consciously. It's like there's like a certain attitude in the back of the mind that kind of like, Oh, this is it. Many years ago with my son was quite small. We having some challenges with him, particularly to the day and I didn't realize that I had was had this attitude of Oh, this is it permanent. There's always going to be this way it was. It was an operating kind of subtly in the background, until my wife and I were kind of like dealing with all the That we dealt with. And at some point we we looked up at each other. And she said to me, it's one of those days. And as soon as she said, it's one of those days, it kind of popped the bubble of my delusion, of permanence, of editor or this is it. And then you know, the whole day got better of course. So, we cultivate stability. And then as the mind becomes more stable, the deeper flow of impermanence in our life because stands out and highlight and the insight meditation practice, as a lot to do with creating this in meditation, this stability, tremendous stability and stillness in the mind. So that we start tuning into noticing how things are constantly shifting and changing. So you might see that sounds like a paradox, but this is kind of the direction that insight meditation goes is to have an x not just to have an experience deep experience of change and flow as we do this, at some point, the experience of impermanence of change becomes all pervasive meaning, every search seeing that everything in our experience, whatever we're experiencing, as an experience, as how we perceive it, how we know it is in constant flux and change, changing quite rapidly. You might think that, you know, you're seeing if you're looking at a tree, that the tree isn't so impermanent, what's impermanent is that our perception of a tree is constantly shifting and changing and being reconstructed and made up all the time. And so we start noticing that the deeper and deeper they call it spirit way in which we experience our life is in constant flux and change. Some people find this a little frightening and disorienting. This is why cultivating strong stability is really important for insight practice. So they have the stability, to be able to tune into the very deep level of change that the meditation can open up to. And then for some people, that experience of all pervasive flow of change, the river of change that caves our lives in this deep way, becomes what the tradition calls a door of liberation. There are three doors of liberation, they say, each of them corresponding to the three characteristics. The three, the door of liberation that opens with a deep experience of impermanence, is called the door of the signless. It's a little strange word signless not having a sign, and what sign means here in modern psychological English, maybe I would say, the door of projection list where we no longer project anything.

We're no longer assigning concepts, values, judgments on our experience. And this is what the human mind does, it kind of needs to do that it's kind of the constructive aspect of how we get around in our society in our world is we have we simplify things by having seeing things through the filter of concepts, and hopefully they're usually those concepts are appropriate and, and help us kind of shorthand get around the world. And that, you know, the example I like to use is like this bell, you know, we have this bell here. And so if you come into into IMC and you see this sitting up in front here, you know, it's

reasonable to assume it's a bell if, if somehow there person who wants to ring the bell, it's not here. doesn't remember to ring the bell. And you, you know, you look up and you see, oh, there's a bell up there. And, you know, people are getting restless. And so you would come up and ring the bell and do a kindness for people, you know, thing, you know, because there's a bell. So that's convenient. But this could easily be something else in a different setting. This could be a bowl to have breakfast in. And, in fact, Buddhist monastics have both very much like this, that they eat their food and they gather their food, just eyeballs, it could be a spittoon. And some of my teachers in Asia made it great meditation masters had spittoons next to them. And during their Dharma talk, suddenly you hear this gurgling and clearing of the throat then there'd be a momentary pause and then you'll hear they had very good aim. And I don't know, if you're not going to get away with that here. You'd move. So, you know, this could be a spittoon it could be, it could be a little, you know, flower vase, I suppose it could be a doorstop be put upside down, hold the door open, and you could be all kinds of things, right? So but you know, innocently and appropriately enough, we come in here, you think it's a bell, but it's quite something to be able to see. Before you see that your mind is kind of saying mind is quiet and still and see that the arising of thought Bell arises in your mind. And to know that that's a concept of the mind is made, that's being assigned to this object. As opposed to assuming that the assigned concept is a one on one correspondence with the object. And so you know, we do this with people to write to be it's sometimes it's tremendous social harm is done. Because we assign value, we assign concepts. And the two people, we see them through a certain filter, we assign things to them. And, and, and what's sad is when there's a one to one correspondence, we think it's true. But to sit quietly, or because we have enough mindfulness to watch the birth of a concept around someone else. And then just watch it arise. And to know and take responsibility. No, it comes from you. And to know that might be not it might not be a one to one match, probably it isn't. And then to be willing to kind of put that aside and see the person or directly as a person actually is. So there's a one of the doors of liberation is a door we don't assign Assign we don't assign a concept or a value onto our experience. And what happens when we don't assign anything to our experience allows us to be is that the mind has nothing to cling to. Because we cling to concepts we cling to those ideas that we have of things and we're no longer assigning value concepts, ideas, then that's considered a door of liberation when that prompts the mind to let go totally. When there's a complete, letting go, of every possible form of clinging, that consciousness can have. Consciousness is set free. It's kind of this experience of liberation. That experience so we created we cultivates the ability. It gives us insight into impermanence.

That insight into impermanence When it's strong, can for some people open to the door of the signless. And when the door that when the door sign that opens to a liberation, that each of those these opens to a gift and the gift of deep experience of impermanence the signless experience is projection less experience is the gift of having beginner's mind. The gift of being able to see fresh our experience and to not carry with us all our ideas and to project automatically our ideas onto our reality and to ourselves and to our situation. But to be able to wake up in the morning, and see this is a new moon, this is a new day. To see that every moment is a new day. There is never Groundhog Day. We never repeat anything. That the stepping into the future. Stepping into the future, the next moment, the next minute is, is as infinite. Kind of like infinite possibility. It's like, it's like a fresh start. And the idea of a fresh start always the unknown, we step into the unknown every moment. And to have that beginner's mind and that freshness and that openness and not to carry the burden, carry with us all the ideas and concepts and histories and memories, and not to automatically see the next moment the next day as it arises through the filter of the past. But to be able to see it completely fresh and open is the gift of the experience of signless liberation, the gift of kind of seeing how much we live in concepts and have an experience of not being caught in them for one. So four different steps connected To this whole thing of impermanence, so there's the cultivating the opposite, which is stability. Having the insight into it, seeing it operate, seeing impermanence in our lives perceiving how it works, seeing it well enough, that

we start seeing that because it flows and changes so much. The concepts we have don't stick. They don't work so well because the concepts follow the experience. And so then we have the signless liberation, giving up the projections and just letting go in a deeper way. And that opens up to the gift of beginner's mind. So, the next two Sundays I'm here I'll do the next two characteristics that have unreliability and not self and will follow the same four step kind of process and discuss what's the opposite of them. The inside themselves, the door of liberation they open to, and the gift that comes from that if you go through this process. So if there's one thing I'd like to leave you with the two things I'd like to leave you with. Today, Sunday, because you know, it's a lie said a lot today I apologize for saying so much is the idea that it's useful to cultivate the opposite of the insights and the insights or revelation. They come as we cultivate the opposites. That's one, and particularly around impermanence. There's something about appreciating noticing, being wise with impermanence and change that can lend itself to the gift of beginner's mind. And perhaps you might want to look a little bit right into the future of the next moment, the next minute, and see if you can tune into the fact that actually you don't have it. clue what's going to happen, that anything is possible and the unexpected and the gift of not carrying with you your old ideas, but standing there on the edge of the future the edge of the infinite unknown future and seeing it with beginner's mind, opens your life.

So, thank you