

Mindfulness of Breathing (61) Inconstancy of Experience

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We enter into the territory of insight – *vipassanā* – with the thirteenth step of mindfulness of breathing. Prior to this, meditation practice can be characterized as practicing mindfulness. After all, this is called mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out.

In the early tradition, mindfulness and *vipassanā* are classically two different things. In the modern English scene, people will sometimes use the words *vipassanā* and mindfulness synonymously. The word *vipassanā* is sometimes used as a general term to refer to the *vipassanā* tradition or to *vipassanā* meditation.

But, in the teachings of the Buddha, the word *vipassanā* does not refer to a kind of practice, but rather to the results of practice. *Vipassanā* is the result of doing mindfulness, of doing concentration, and of doing mindfulness and concentration practice together. This is one of the benefits of mindfulness of breathing. As we stay with the breath all the time, the concentration factor builds. But we are also practicing mindfulness, staying aware of what is going on. Mindfulness is present.

When mindfulness and concentration become sufficiently strong, we start having insights. We start seeing and observing in ways we don't usually do in everyday life. We start observing our moment-to-moment experience in deeper ways or with greater clarity. That is when insights begin.

The insights of insight meditation practice are not always Insights with a capital *I*. There are lots of insights with a small *i*. All of these can be very significant. The difference in my vocabulary is that the small *i* insights are the big “Aha!” moments when we see something unique about ourselves.

For example, we understand something about the conditions that led us to become who we are today. Or we see clearly the particular beliefs we are operating under. They may have been deluded or not really true. We say “Ahh,” and then we put that down. Or we see something about ourselves that we never saw before and say: “Wow! That explains why I behave this way because there is that anxiety, fear, or memory that keeps filtering my experience.” There are all kinds of very important personal insights that help us become freer.

The insights with a capital *I* – the ones that insight meditation really focuses on – are seeing things that are common denominators of all experience. They are true whether it is a personal experience unique to oneself or true for everybody. Sometimes they are called the universal characteristics of all experience.

The Buddha called these perceptions. They are qualities or aspects of how we perceive all of the things we take in. They characterize our perceptions of things. They are universal. They may be transpersonal. They are more encompassing than anything we see personally.

While personal insights are important, going deep down to the common denominator – the common characteristics – of all experiences puts us at the foundation. From there, we build the cathedrals, the citadels of our conceptual world – the world of self and self in the world of others. We build this world and philosophy, these beliefs and feelings, based on things that have the foundation of these common characteristics and common ways of perceiving.

The primary one that the Buddha emphasizes is that all experiences are *anicca*. *Anicca* is commonly translated into English as “impermanence.” This is probably not the best translation.

I want to emphasize that what we are focusing on here is what can be called experience. In philosophical terms, Buddhism and the *vipassanā* practice we do are epistemological. What that means is that we study the nature of how we know something, the nature of our *experience* itself. This is opposed to an ontological approach, which is having some understanding, belief, or interpretation about the nature of reality.

Many people want to assume or believe that insight practice brings us a deep insight into the nature of reality. It can be very reassuring to feel like we have that kind of deep, powerful understanding. However, the Buddha seemed very reluctant to make any ontological statements about the nature of reality. He was not an early physicist who understood physics in a minute way – the physics of what is really going on.

If he had been a scientist, he was a scientist of perception. He was a scientist of how the nature of perception – how we experience things – is an interface or a meeting place for what is happening in the world out there, and how the mind takes in our perceptions. The Buddha's interest was the nature of *experience*.

This can feel a bit complicated or discouraging because we want to have certainty about the world out there. But everything we know about the world happens through the filter, through the avenue of our experience – how we experience something.

It is kind of like an hourglass. The broad cup of the hourglass is the expanded world outside of us. The other end of it, the expanded cone of the hourglass, is the huge inner world that we have. The neck of the hourglass is what we see through our eyes, hear through our ears, smell through our nose, taste through our tongue, feel through our body, and what is known about what is happening in the mind – the experience of knowing, or recognizing. One way or another, everything we know has gone through one or more of those six hourglasses of perception.

With that, the inner world can make things complicated. We can invent new ideas, stories, and connections. But we don't remember or recognize that it all had its genesis in the realm of hearing or seeing. For example, language, concepts – words for things – came through hearing someone speak or reading those words. So the Buddha put tremendous emphasis on the narrow neck of the hourglass where everything comes in. Rather than seeing it as an hourglass, we can see it as the foundation upon which everything is built inside – and sometimes outside as well.

So what is the common characteristic of experience? It is *anicca* – that all experiences are coming and going. They are changing. They appear and they disappear. The details – the fingerprints of experience – appear and disappear moment by moment. Sometimes it is because what is out there is passing by really quickly, or not so quickly. But it clearly passes by.

I think some of you can hear the train whistles going by. They come and they go. They come and they go. It is pretty easy to notice that the whistles come and go. But, as I said yesterday, the way we bring attention to something is that we very rarely fixate the attention in some solid, hard way. If we do that, it tends to be stressful. Instead, very gently, the mind – the awareness – can move around taking in different details.

It is fascinating to do this with physical pain. From a distance, pain can feel as if it is solid, and we are connected to it. But, if we really pay careful attention – in an observant way – we see that the experience of pain is a kaleidoscope of all kinds of sensations going on, arising and passing. This arising and passing is repetitive. Some things come and they go, and they return. They come and they go.

This can lend a sense of continuity and even a sense of permanence: "These painful sensations are not stopping. They're continuously present." But, as we drop more deeply into the settledness of meditation and are able to observe everything intimately and closely without the mind making the leap to construct the idea of continuity, we see the arising and passing of phenomena – the repetitive and inconstant nature of all phenomena.

The word *anicca* comes from the root *nicca*, which can mean something like "constant," "continuous," and sometimes "permanent." The *a* is a negative prefix – so *anicca* is "not constant," "not continuous," "not permanent." When we translate *anicca* as "impermanent," as it is often done in English, many people hear that as meaning: "This is not going to last. It is going to come to an end." To be constantly reminded that everything comes to an end can be depressing – but it also misses the boat. This is because we have to wait. And some things take a while to end.

While it can be wise to understand and recognize that things will end, and there is a lot of wisdom in that, it is not the full story. It is not really what the Buddha is pointing to as an insight.

The core insight of insight meditation is to see the inconstancy of experience moment by moment – how experience arises and disappears, arises and disappears. So *anicca*, as one of the core insights, is probably better translated as “inconstancy” – the inconstant arising and passing of phenomena, which might be continuous – a continuous, constant inconstancy. Constant, continuous things are inconstant – like a river. A river is constant, continually flowing. But it is also never the same. There is something inconstant about a river as well.

That's enough for now. We are entering into the deep world of insight. Hopefully, you will begin appreciating the observation of inconstancy.

Thank you.