

Mindfulness of Breathing (64) The Lesson of Inconstancy

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

observing, inconstancy, dispassion, impermanence, onward leading, freedom, waves, ripples, river, sand, particulate, water, arising, passing, arising, insight, clinging, self, not-self, thumbtack, *vipassanā*, settle, liberation, suffering, flowing, changing, openness, *ānāpānasati*, enchantment

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We are still lingering in the thirteenth step of mindfulness of breathing – observing inconstancy. There is something about inconstancy and observing inconstancy that leads to the fourteenth step, which is usually translated as “dispassion.” We will get to the meanings of dispassion sometime soon. There is something about seeing impermanence that is onward leading. Seeing inconstancy opens something up – allows something to unfold, deepen, or move along.

A common term in the Buddhist scriptures is the idea of the Dharma as being “onward leading.” It is onward leading to greater and greater freedom. Settling back, resting in awareness, and becoming more and more aware of the transiency of experience – the inconstancy of experience – is very much a part of this onward leading nature.

Sometimes it is called impermanence. But as I’ve said, for some people, impermanence only implies that sooner or later something will no longer exist. It will die or be gone forever. There is wisdom to this understanding, and it could be freeing in a certain way. But the core insight of the Buddha has more to do with the momentary inconstancy of things. He did not say this, but it is like the inconstant waves or ripples on a river that flow by. Little wavelets come and go. They exist and then don’t exist. They are inconstant. They are constantly being reborn and passing away.

Many of our sensations are coming and going, coming and going. Sometimes they stay longer than we wish. But sooner or later, they pass and maybe come back again. In meditation, we settle in and start seeing more precisely – intimately, closely – how much of our experience is a flowing experience of changing sensations. Things are appearing and disappearing, sometimes in rapid succession.

Sometimes it can feel like everything is flowing sand. The reason for flowing sand rather than water is that some people say that sand is more particulate. Particular sensations have some clarity. While water flows, there is no sense of particularity in each molecule of water. Whereas with sand, there is particularity. For some people, it can feel like everything is snow or raindrops.

Settling back and getting very still, and then appreciating how everything is arising and passing – this was a very significant insight for the Buddha. The way it is described in some texts, this was his big “Aha!” moment. In seeing this, he realized: “This is the path to liberation.” With seeing this arising and passing – the inconstancy – there was light, wisdom, and clarity. The path opened for the Buddha.

Seeing the arising was important for him, but seeing the passing was very important as well. It seems like seeing the passing and ceasing of things was even more important than seeing their arising. One reason may be that when we know things pass – even if they are inconstant and they come back – we know they are not permanent. We know it is not always that way. This frees us from a mind that unconsciously or subconsciously relates to things as if they are always going to be there – as opposed to thinking: “Oh, this is just part of the flavor of the moment. This is what is coming here now. In due time, it will pass. In fact, if I pay careful attention to the particularity of the moment, it is already passing, and then arising, passing and arising.”

Knowing that suffering is not constant is very helpful. If we think that suffering is durable, stuck, solid, unchanging, it is hard to get in there. It’s like concrete – very hard to get in there and try to do anything with it. If

we see it more as flowing sand or water, and try to reach into the water and hold on to it – grab a fistful of it – it quickly disappears through our fingers. We realize that suffering does not have the solidity we thought it had.

We see that the self – all the things we could think of as “my self” or identify strongly as “This is who I am” – also has a certain inconstancy. It comes and goes. The sensations, the experience, the thing, the roles, the ideas, the feelings, the intuitions come and go. We start seeing whatever we might think of as “This is my self” is also part of the flow and current of a river. We can’t quite hold on to it.

There are gaps in the arising and passing. There are moments of freedom. The passing begins to teach us not to cling, not to grasp. We start seeing it is simply not worth grasping. This is a powerful insight that comes many times in life in all kinds of ways.

In deeper meditation, there is a sense of well-being, freedom, and openness – a lack of clinging that is so palpable that we begin feeling that any movement to contract, resist, hold on tight, linger, or be involved with something that is going on is a loss of some peace. We are actually better off in the freedom. We are better off in this deep settled, quiet peacefulness. We can learn that it is not worth clinging. We lose something in contracting or resisting.

We are not told, “As a good Buddhist, you should let go of clinging.” There is no admonition like that. It is more like: “Pay careful attention. Become quiet. And when you notice for yourself that you are worse off clinging, then don’t cling.” A lesson that helps is when we realize, in certain deep states of meditation, that clinging doesn’t work at all because whatever it is we are clinging to also is constantly passing away.

You do not have to be in a constantly passing away place in meditation to begin appreciating how much does pass away. It is possible to tune into the peacefulness, freedom, spaciousness, and openness, which the passing away allows, makes room for, or permits. If we don’t cling to the next thing that comes up and we allow it to pass, then in the space it leaves behind, we can just be open, relaxed, and take it in. Something else will arise, but rather than be preoccupied or caught by it, analyzing, reflecting on, or doing something with it, we allow the next thing to arise in that space – in the openness, the field of awareness where it just comes and goes. In the process of doing this, we learn more and more about letting go. We learn more and more about not holding on to anything.

The teaching on not-self, which is often perplexing for people, makes more sense when we understand that nothing qualifies as an enduring self. There is nothing that we can find inside of ourselves or in our direct experience – when we are really intimate and close to direct experience – that qualifies as, “Oh, that’s my self” because it passes as well. The idea is that anything that passes away cannot be an enduring self.

From the Buddha’s point of view, any doctrine or theory of the self lends itself to reification or solidification of what is the self – which is not possible when things are constantly changing. It is like there is no place to hang your hat. There is no place to tack any philosophy, idea, concept, or theory about what the self is with a thumbtack. It’s like trying to stick a thumbtack into a river – it doesn’t stick anywhere. Any theory about self doesn’t quite stick or work when this constantly flowing, inconstant nature of experience begins to open up in deep *vipassanā* practice.

The core, deepest, most important insight of insight meditation is this inconstancy of phenomena – the changing nature of the current of phenomena as it flows through, arises, and passes here in the present moment. The essence of the thirteenth step is to settle back and observe this.

As we do this, we begin feeling that the things we cling to – have passionate lust or hatred for, the ways in which we are driven about things, passionate around our attachments – do not make any sense. They start losing their allure. They start losing their enchantment. We stop falling under their spell. We begin observing that we are less and less interested in clinging, less and less interested in lust, hatred, or this driven, attached kind of passion that can happen – like the passion for money or power – the negative understandings of passion. Then the fourteenth step is observing dispassion.

Now we’ll end. This will pass as well, and we’ll make room for the next thing to happen. Chances are that it is simply inconstant. We will meet here tomorrow at the same time. Thank you.