

Insight Pentad (3 of 5) Fading of Reactivity

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

disenchantment, desires, projections, *virāga*, fading away, dispassion, gladness, well-being, happiness, nonreactive awareness, fire, fuel, concentration, impermanent

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This is the third talk on the insight pentad – the five qualities of practice or five ways that we develop. These qualities have a flow: there is a kind of evolution – a natural growth from one to the other. Of course, the process doesn't always work in a linear way. Another way of understanding this is that the five qualities work together, support each other, guide each other, and feed into each other. Maybe they flow in reverse order sometimes, but the classic order is the one that I am presenting to you.

The pentad begins with having insight, described as “seeing things as they are.” From that comes disenchantment – breaking the spell of our desires and projections onto things that are not helpful. Today, we will talk about something called “fading away,” sometimes translated as “dispassion.” I will talk about those two translations. Then comes liberation. On Friday, we will talk about the last one – the knowledge of liberation.

Today the topic is *virāga* (fading away). The insight pentad builds on the gladness pentad. One of our great treasures – a phenomenal form of inner wealth that we can have – is well-being: a sense of inner contentment, happiness, gladness, and joy. This is not necessarily easy to come to. But I think it is fair to say that most people will live their life without availing themselves of that well-being. If we slow down and really take the time to allow our inner life to settle and open, chances are that there is more well-being there than most people allow for.

But we need to stay close to, build upon, and know how to support and protect this treasure. When we sit down to meditate with this inner sense of well-being, we have a reference point for what takes us away from that, and for what keeps us close to it. When we are settled enough to begin seeing things as they are, we can see that the ways we are caught, enchanted, and preoccupied take us away from that well-being and diminish it. Of course, it doesn't feel good to leave the well-being.

We learn to see that distinction: when we are enchanted, we feel more contracted, tight, and caught up in our despair, depression, upset, or resentments, and this does not feel good. It is a diminishment of whatever well-being we can feel just by being here. Seeing this, it begins to be easier to question the value of the projections, interpretations, ideas, and desires that keep us hooked, fixated, and caught up.

So a process of disenchantment begins. We begin to see that things are changing, constantly moving, impermanent, arising, and passing. Being caught in these things is causing suffering – it is causing us pain. We see that it is not useful to define or measure ourselves by the things that we are caught in.

As we become disenchanted with our projections, the strength of the projections, the desires, and the wanting and not wanting – which are behind the projections and the enchantment – begins to diminish and fade away. This fading away is supported by nonreactive awareness. For many people, becoming nonreactively aware of what is happening here and now is a very different way of being than business as usual. As we go about our life, business as usual is to have a reaction and to live in the reaction and in the response to the reaction. We participate in it, a little or a lot, in a way that feeds it and keeps the fire going. When we keep putting logs into the fire, it keeps burning.

Our anger will not persist as long as it does unless we are putting more fuel into it, sometimes by repeating the story to ourselves over and over again. Nonreactive awareness means doing something very different: we cease to put logs on the fire. We leave things alone. We can watch the fire, whatever it might be. But a fire into which we don't put logs – a little fireplace fire or a campfire – will fade away and die out all by itself. If you have enough time one evening to watch a campfire that is not being fed, you can watch the whole process until it fades away, the flames disappear, and the hot coals cool down.

We are doing the same thing within, as we see things as they are and we become disenchanted with them. We become disenchanted with their promise that they are going to bring us happiness. This is a future happiness that is unreliable compared to the inner happiness we develop through meditation. Then our interest and the desires and aversions that go into those projections begin to fade away. That fading away is stronger with nonreactive awareness that does not add fuel to the fire.

It is fascinating to watch the process of fading away. Some things will fade away quite quickly under the gaze of nonreactive awareness. People sometimes struggle with thoughts. When they let go of the thoughts and come back to the breath, they keep getting caught up until they are told: “Just let yourself think. But bring a careful gaze – look carefully at the fact that you’re thinking and really see it.” Sometimes people are surprised by this new exercise because their thinking stops. Under the gaze of attention, thinking doesn’t have the fuel that it needs, which is often out of sight. When the main fuel is seeing, which is no fuel at all for some of these fires, things fade away.

Sometimes the fading away is very slow – days, weeks, months, maybe years for quite powerful habits. Some things can fade remarkably fast. The speed at which things fade has a lot to do with how much concentration we have together with nonreactive awareness. It is almost as if the more concentrated we are, the more open space we have for things to unwind and dissipate under the gaze of nonreactive awareness.

Part of the process of insight practice is to recognize and allow for the disenchantment. We are no longer enchanted with the things we used to want or with the belief that it was all about what we had to fix or get. We allow for fading away. This fading away is very important, beginning with the fading away of the tensions in our bodies. We can relax some of the tensions, but some take a long time. It is remarkable what deep bodywork can happen through doing regular meditation, sitting in a good posture. Things begin to relax in a deeper and deeper way.

Then reactive emotions fade away. Reactive thinking fades away. I use the word “reactive” because some of the emotional states and moods that we have are not reactive. These will not necessarily fade away the same way. Sometimes they actually get bigger and stronger because there is more room for them to flow into. These do not come from reactivity. These states are not being fed by the fuel – by the logs in the fire. Rather than being lit by the fires, it is more as if these states light up the darkness. Some emotional states, like loving-kindness, are more like the dawn where the sun rises and fills everything. It will be there for the day – it is not going to fade away quickly.

What are you disenchanted with? What projections do you have, and what beliefs and values have you invested in, consciously or unconsciously? A lot of what we think is important happens subconsciously. What do you invest yourself in that does not really serve you, that takes you away from this place of well-being? Trust the inner well-being. Then allow for the fading away.

The homework for today, if you’d like, is to spend some high-quality time throughout the day, maybe having tea, looking out the window, or going for a very nice stroll, maybe meditating a second or third time. See if you can give yourself some space and time for a day off or a sacred pause. When you do that, see what fades away. When you give yourself some time to allow for fading away – when you’re relaxed and taking a break from the usual caught-up-ness and engagement, what fades away from you? Take breaks through the day and observe what is happening in you to see what fades away. Is it good? What is the goodness in doing this? What is the value? What benefit do you get from fading away? Thank you for coming along on this insight journey.