

Dharmette: Insight (15) The Gap Between Endings and Beginings.

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Hello and welcome to this 15th talk on Insight. This week has been an exploration of the topic of *anicca*, the Pāli word A-N-I-C-C-A. It's usually translated as impermanence, which tends to emphasize the ending of things, that things will stop and cease and no longer be there. The Pāli word more literally means inconstancy, meaning that things are not constantly there, but they come and go. Some things are obvious. The meals come and go, days come and go, daytime comes and goes, mornings come and go, meditation sessions come and go, all kinds of things come and go, and they return the next day, they return the next hour, the inhale comes and goes, but it's always there, in a sense, so it's inconstant.

A lot of the deeper insight of meditation is, a lot of the wisdom, ordinary wisdom of being a human being, appreciates that things are impermanent, that things do sooner or later stop and disappear, and to learn how to be wise about that, compassionate about that. There's also this deeper truth that's not seen as clearly as the inconstancy of things. One reason we don't see it so obviously, or live in it so much, is we tend to be focused so much on one thing. There's a tremendous reification, tremendous preoccupation that mind has. Then the preoccupation of the moment can feel like it's constant. The metaphor that's used for this kind of illusion of constancy that involves a very busy and active mind is called monkey mind.

This is a mind that is, a monkey is swinging through from branch to branch in the forest, in the jungle. Before it's let go of one branch, it's already reaching to grab the next one. So it's always one way or the other involved in grasping, reaching for and holding onto. It might let go of one, you know, in grabbing the next. But the preoccupation is already in the grabbing of the next. It doesn't notice the letting go.

So what the, in a sense, what the mind is involved in is always with the grasping. So grasping can seem like it's constant. But in fact, it comes and goes. When we sit down in meditation and start to calm ourselves and get clear and clear with the mindfulness, we start seeing, among other things, the grasping mind and how it reaches and wants. We see the gap between it. We see the arising of a thought.

Rather than seeing thoughts as continuous, we see that thoughts come and go. We see that sensations come and go. With a deeper and deeper calm, *samādhi* of meditation, there's a shift to in the direct moment, of being just here, in the direct experience, now, here, just here, and we start entering into the river of change, the river of inconstancy. That can be very satisfying, and it can be very absorbing to be in that. But there's an opportunity there that we see moment to moment things are coming and going. Moment to moment, in that stream, things arise and pass.

Seeing the passing of things, seeing the ending of things, gives for all the loss it might entail, also provides opportunity. One of those opportunities, there's a number, and that is that the mind, unless we're involved with memory and caught in it, in the moment, what's not there creates space and openness in the mind, unless the mind reaches for the next branch. So as you're thinking about something, and a particular thought ends, and before the next thought begins, between the ending of one and the beginning of the next... without using thoughts to answer the question, who are you? What is awareness like? Between thoughts, what is awareness like?

Between beginning of the end of one experience and beginning of next, there might be, if you might feel, a degree of peace, a degree of spaciousness, stillness, a degree of non-clinging. So at some point in practice we start beginning appreciating the ending of things. Or we appreciate the endings and it can be disorienting. Because in the ending of something, we're so used to having something that we're orienting ourselves to, or holding on to, or some way of being that we are. This is who I am. But in the flow of arising and passing and continuing, some people then get disoriented, well, if I'm not there, you know, if I don't have a thought telling me who I am, then who am I?

If I'm not holding on to something or preoccupied by something, then how am I going to be safe? So there's a kind of a beginning of exploration, a beginning of finding a certain kind of peace, comfort, letting go. Okay. In the certain kind of freedom that's there with the absence of things. It's kind of like as things arise and pass, we see in the passing that right there, there's the opportunity not to cling. Right there, there's nothing to cling to.

There's nothing to resist, nothing to do, nothing to push against, nothing to be. Right? So

part of the emphasis, part of what comes along almost in a natural way, nothing we have to do about it, is as we start settling more and more into the impermanent, inconstant nature of direct experience, and I want to underline direct experience, not thought about experience. If we're thinking about experience, the thinking gives all kinds of other impressions of what's actually happening. It can give an impression of more constancy, more solidity. So it's not the continuity of thinking about experience.

It's the continuity of the direct experience kind of underneath the thinking level. We start to see there's freedom there. There's freedom in floating along in the current of change, and there's freedom in the spaciousness, the openness of when things end. So in the teachings of the Buddha, there are some places where he emphasized that when something, when the hindrances, for example, when greed or hatred, aversion, desires, when doubts, when anxiety and fear, when these things kind of come to some kind of end, don't just go on to the next branch. Don't just go on to the next clinging. Take a few moments to feel the absence of that.

Feel the goodness of that. Feel the spaciousness or some of the characteristics of that absence. Yes. So, monkey mind doesn't take the time to feel the simplicity of being when certain things have been put down. We just go on to the next thing to cling to and be involved in. Meditation is one of those times where we're beginning to appreciate very deeply all the things we've put down, all the things that we've let go of in meditation, settled away, relaxed into.

The absence of those things is a freshness. The absence of those things, there's a kind of freedom there. One of the things to appreciate, one of the things that's remarkable in how it leads to greater and greater freedom is to appreciate the ending of things, the absence of things, how things are not there, even if it's a momentary or maybe it's more extended. Then it gives you the opportunity to be careful not to reach for the next branch, not to fill yourself with more presence of things, but to appreciate the absence. So absence is a little bit, can be more expansive and spacious so that when we go through our lives, and we do know something, we do feel something and sense something, we're not... locked into it, but rather we feel it in a wider field, atmosphere of calm, of peace, of freedom, of non-clinging.

So rather than being a monkey swinging, grabbing one branch up to the other, we become more like a graceful, soaring bird where the vast empty sky holds our wings up, as we float, fly through and see all the changing things in our life from the vantage point of all the space that's here as well. So I hope this discussion about seeing endings, seeing the absence of things, seeing is understandable to you, and it gives you an appreciation of not just the...

the negative part of absence, not just the beginning of something new, but something in that ending of something that allows something expansive to be there. As that expansive freedom is there, then it's much easier to be with the challenging parts of impermanence and change and this life, human life. So, thank you. And so we'll continue with this series on Insight in a few weeks.

I'm going to be away on vacation for this next week. I'll come back and be here again on the 30th, Monday. I think I'll still be in my vacation place that time, but I'll teach that morning and then they'll be back here at IMC the next day. So thank you very much, and I look forward to coming back in a little over a week.