Impermanence (Aniccā)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:01:08

Tonight I'd like to talk about impermanence, *anicca*, the Pali term.

Anicca is one of what are often called the three characteristics of our experience—that everything we experience in our bodies and our minds has these three characteristics. They have the characteristic of being impermanent, inconstant. They have the characteristic of being unsatisfactory as a lasting source of happiness, of being *dukkha*, often translated as suffering. And they have the characteristic of being not-self, empty of any solid nature, the *anatta* characteristic.

As we bring our mindfulness to our experience through our practice of mindfulness meditation, we begin to see these characteristics. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, gave a dharma talk about the term *vi passana*. He asked us first what *vipassana* meant, and I responded that it meant to see clearly. That's basically what the *passana* part of *vipassana* means. He added that the *vi* part means "various things," and that essentially the various things we see clearly in our insight meditation practice are these three characteristics.

Tonight I'd like to explore with you this characteristic of *anicca*, of impermanence.

Impermanence, change—this is not really news to us. Everybody knows things change. We see it day by day. We see our bodies change. We see our friendships change. We see people die. We see people being born. We see buildings collapse. We see all kinds of things change that really are markers of change happening all around us.

In the Buddhist teachings there are four aspects to change: all birth ends in death, all meeting ends in parting, any accumulation ends in dispersal, and anything that rises falls. By that last one, the teachings say that anything elevated in space will fall, and anything elevated in power will fall. These four aspects of impermanence are the everyday way we see change happening.

And yet still, we don't really take it in. There's a way in which we know that things change, but we don't really *know* that things change.

In the Mahabharata, there is a character, Yudhishthira, who is asked, "What is the greatest wonder?" Here is his response:

"This I think is most wonderful: that the man of the world, even though he is seeing before his eyes constantly creatures dying and passing away, never for a moment does the idea enter him, 'I too have to fall. I am also a creature destined to be destroyed.' Even if it is told to him, it never enters his mind. Only

the surface mind understands the language, but the actual sense never goes into his head—that every man must one day die, yet every man lives as if they were immortal. This is the greatest wonder."

I'd like to explore this quality of impermanence and look at how we can move from having the surface mind understand this truth to really having it penetrate.

There are different ways in which impermanence can be seen. There are the obvious ways I've mentioned so far: birth ending in death, accumulation ending in dispersal, meeting ending in parting, rising ending in falling. This is the obvious change in the world—things are born and they die, things break. This is the gross or obvious level of impermanence.

There is also a more subtle level of impermanence, a kind of change that happens moment to moment. This is more difficult to see and does seem to require the mind being settled in some stillness. I'll talk about both of these, as they're both valuable to really understand—both levels of impermanence.

So why is it important to take in the actual sense of impermanence? Much of our suffering actually results from not truly recognizing and understanding impermanence.

One Buddhist scholar says, "Dukkha is but a logical corollary arising from the law of universal impermanence." The fact of unsatisfactoriness, the fact of suffering, is a logical corollary arising from the law of universal impermanence. For the impermanent nature of everything can lead to but one inescapable conclusion: as everything is impermanent, they cannot be made the basis of permanent happiness. Whatever is transient is by that very fact unsatisfactory.

Our suffering often results from clinging to things that we think will make us happy. And as those things are impermanent, they end, so the happiness is not lasting. Now, in many ways, we know things are impermanent. We don't really try to cling to that new car, for example, thinking, "Okay, now I'm going to be happy for the rest of my life because I have that new car." But there's a way that we actually do feel like it will make us happy, that it is a kind of source of lasting happiness. It's because we have this view, this way of seeing the world, that somehow we can stack up things that we like and just create a life filled with one happy thing after another, and that will be lasting happiness. We do pin our hopes on happiness in the things of the world. There's really a way in which we delude ourselves that we can be happy by stringing together a series of happy moments. And when that doesn't work, somehow we feel like we failed, that there's something wrong with us. But there's nothing wrong with us. This is natural law. And really taking in and understanding this natural law, this fact of impermanence, supports our letting go of clinging. Because when we really understand that something is impermanent, there's not so much of a move to hold on to it. The mind just doesn't see the point in clinging to it.

A poem from Rilke speaks to this way that we try to find happiness over and over again by arranging our world: "And we spectators always everywhere turned toward the world of objects. It fills us. We arrange it. It breaks down. We rearrange it and then break down ourselves. Who has twisted us around like this so

that no matter what we do, we are in the posture of someone going away? Just as upon the farthest hill, which shows him his whole valley one last time, he turns, stops, lingers. So we live here, forever taking leave."

Taking in the obvious level of impermanence—one profound way to really start to take this in is to reflect on death. Birth ends in death. Reflecting not only on our own death, but the fact that our friends will die, our families will die. Someone stated—I don't remember who it was—that within one hundred years, or maybe one hundred twenty at the most, everyone on the planet currently will no longer be living. It's kind of amazing to me to reflect on that. One hundred twenty years and everybody alive now will be dead.

Reflecting on death, reflecting on the fact that we don't know when it will happen. It is a certainty for us. It is one of the few things we can count on. But we don't know when it will happen. And the other aspect of this, particularly within our culture, is that our culture seems to want to hide death away under the covers. It doesn't really want it to be out there, seen.

I was in Burma several years ago, and several of us were taking a walk down the river. We were at a retreat center, working at a retreat—some of us teaching, some of us managing, some of us translating. We were just taking a walk that day by the river, and we saw that there was kind of a hubbub. A bunch of people from the village had gathered, and we found out through the translator who was with us that three young novices, young monks, had been swimming that morning and that one of them had drowned. They were trying to find his body. We stood around and waited with some of the villagers and some of the monks and nuns that were there. We knew some of them. They found his body and brought it up. This young boy, maybe about ten or twelve years old, had gone swimming that morning and had not finished swimming. It can happen at any time, any time.

Being Burma, things were not quite so... death is much more a part of life in Burma. Death is a part of life, but in our culture, it doesn't seem to be accepted as part of life. They brought the body up and laid it out on a platform that had been set up, and people were all around the body.

He was still in his wet robes. And it struck me really hard that I was 47 years old and I had never seen anyone dead before. Forty-seven years of life without seeing death. That's the way our culture functions. So it's hard for us to come in contact with it.

This actual sense of mortality never entering our minds is referred to in the Dhammapada: "Many do not realize that we here must die. For those who realize this, quarrels end." As Don Juan says to Carlos Castaneda, an immense amount of pettiness is dropped if you turn towards the truth of death.

So this acknowledgement of our mortality, even just this one aspect of this obvious level of impermanence, can have a huge opening impact on our hearts. Really acknowledging that the person we're having this quarrel with in this moment—both of us may die at any moment. Quarrels end. This is a very powerful recollection for us.

Along with these obvious aspects of impermanence, death is one of the divine messengers, as it's called in the Buddhist texts. Aging, sickness, and death are seen as divine messengers, opening our hearts to the truth of impermanence.

There's a story in one of the suttas about a man who died and went to hell and was met by the king of death. The king of death was questioning him, and he says, "But my good man, didn't you ever see the first divine messenger appearing among humankind?" The man says, "No, I didn't see him." And the king of death says, "But didn't you ever see a man or a woman, 80, 90, or 100 years old, frail, bent like a roof bracket, crooked, leaning on a stick, shakily going along, ailing, youth and vigor gone, with broken teeth, with gray and scanty hair, bald, wrinkled and blotched limbs?" The man replies, "Well, yes, I did see such a thing." And the king of death says to him, "My good man, didn't it ever occur to you, an intelligent and mature person, 'I too am subject to old age and cannot escape it. Let me now do noble deeds by body, speech, and mind'?" The man replies, "I could not do it. I was negligent."

And the king goes on with the same inquiry about sickness and death. "Didn't you ever see anybody who was sick? Didn't you ever see anybody who was dying? How could you have missed these heavenly messengers?" "No, I could not see them."

We have our view obscured by our own agendas. We don't see these truths, these heavenly messengers. When we can see them, it opens our heart. It doesn't have to be a depressing thing to come into contact with these truths. We learn, as we connect with these truths, to really look at what's most important to us. We learn to live from our deepest values. These truths, these divine messengers, can reorient our priorities, point us to what our real priorities are, and can result in compassion as we see that not only we but all beings are subject to these truths.

This is what we've been doing in the compassion practice—recognizing that all beings are subject to this same suffering of aging, sickness, and death.

I had a clear understanding of the connection between seeing impermanence and how that leads to compassion. On a retreat about a year ago, I was at the Forest Refuge for about three months practicing. About five weeks into my retreat, I woke up one morning and heard all these cracking and popping sounds. It was incredibly loud. I wondered if somebody was outside chopping down trees. When I looked out the window, everything was coated with massive amounts of ice. There had been a huge ice storm—maybe you heard about it; it was in the national news apparently. Power was out in New England for a long time.

When I looked out the window and saw the tree outside, it had been this beautiful little spinney of trees, and it was just bent. I could see that it was breaking. I took a walk and could see so many trees that had been devastated by this ice storm.

I could hear them. I understood then that what I'd heard, those loud pops and breaking sounds, were trees

cracking and falling under the weight of the ice. My heart went out to all the beings living in the forest—where had they gone? How much fear and challenge it must have been for them to live through this night. My heart felt such compassion through this connection with impermanence.

This opening to impermanence can be a beautiful experience, and that quality of compassion has such a lovely texture to it.

Another excerpt from Rilke, celebrating in a way this opening to recognizing impermanence:

Everything here apparently needs us. This fleeting world, which in some strange way keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all. Once for each thing. Just once, no more. And we too, just once. And never again. But to have been this once completely, even if only once, to have been at one with the earth seems beyond undoing.

At a less obvious level than aging, sickness, and death, meeting and parting, accumulation and dispersal, is what we might call subtle impermanence—an impermanence that begins to point itself out to us as we settle our minds in meditation. The moment-to-moment changing of experience.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus made this philosophy of change his standpoint, his hallmark. He really pointed to this as being the truth of the world. Everything changes. There is no static being, says Heraclitus, no unchanging substratum. Change, movement is lord of the universe. Everything is in a state of becoming, of continual flux. He continues: "You cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you."

One commentator on this philosophy goes one step further, saying: the same man cannot step twice into the same river. For the so-called man, who is only a conflux of mind and body, never remains the same for two consecutive moments. The same man cannot step into the same river.

Through meditation we start to open to this moment-to-moment changing nature of our experience. We begin to touch into this aspect of experience by noticing how much our minds change. We see that our moods and emotions come and go. During a day—today, for instance—how many different mind states did you experience? How many mind states did you experience moment to moment? Our minds change constantly.

As we turn our attention to our experience, we see its changing nature. Paying attention to something as simple as the breath, for example—it obviously appears and disappears with each breath. It rises, it falls. It rises, it falls. That part is really obvious. But even in seeing this clearly in meditation, somehow the fact of impermanence doesn't really hit us. It doesn't really penetrate.

When we stay more clearly with the rising and falling of the breath, we see even more clearly that no two moments of the breath are the same. We stay connected from the beginning, through the middle, to the end of the in-breath, and we see many sensations in that time. Ever-changing flocks of experience. No

experience we have lasts very long.

The more we meet our experience without resistance and without holding on to it—without clinging or aversion—the more this characteristic of impermanence becomes clear to us. The resistance and the clinging to experience actually obscure or mask this quality of impermanence.

Sometimes in paying attention to our experience, we can be surprised by how things change. This surprise is, in a way, a hallmark of the sense of impermanence really entering.

When we're paying attention to something and then suddenly it's gone, it's like, "Whoa, where did that go?" That's the beginning of impermanence really entering the mind.

Another example: if we're not resisting painful experience in the body, as we pay attention to what we call pain—what we think of as a solid mass or block of pain—when we're not resisting it, it becomes this dancing, sparking, moving, flowing experience. You find one place in that experience where you can feel the pain, and then boom, it disappears, then it appears a few centimeters away. Just this continual changing experience. Not one solid thing the way we had felt it to be, but a continually flowing, changing experience.

On one retreat I was really exploring this and was quite surprised at one point to see there were moments in my exploration of the pain when the pain disappeared completely—for just a split second, just a moment. Then it was back, changing, moving, and then boom, it was gone again. And I could see that if any resistance to the pain crept in, then those moments of non-pain were not perceivable. That, for me, was a kind of support for letting go of the resistance. Because in the moments of non-pain, there was just a moment when the mind would deeply rest. No pain. And then pain was back. So in a way, that non-resistance supported the mind to be able to stay present and see, again, this ever-changing flux. See appearance, see disappearance.

Body sensations are impermanent. Mental experience is impermanent. All of our thoughts, moods, feelings, images—everything that happens in our mind is impermanent. And in fact, it is more fleeting than the body. The Buddha even pointed to this. He said, "It would be better if an uninstructed ordinary person regarded this body made of the four great elements as himself or herself, rather than the mind. For what reason? This body is seen to continue for a year, for two years, for five years, ten years, twenty years, fifty years, a hundred years, and even more. But that which is called mind, is called thought, is called consciousness, arises as one thing and ceases as another continually by day and night."

So mind is impermanent. And I'll talk more about that in a moment.

This belief in permanence, the fact of impermanence not entering into our minds and our hearts, is partly because we have this fundamental misperception, this erroneous way that we see our world. We see what is impermanent as permanent. Partly this is because of the clinging, as I mentioned before—when we cling to something, it masks the impermanent quality to it. Another reason for this belief in permanence is

because things are changing so rapidly that the mind can't really touch or see that change unless the mind gets really still. So in a way, the rapidity of change obscures the fact of change.

One great way to think about this is just to consider how a movie works. I know many of you have heard this example. Now it's all bits on a digital file or something, but in the old film version, there were these still frames, and they were moved very rapidly past a light and shined onto the screen. The rapidity of the movement, the rapidity of the change from one frame to another, made it appear as though there was actually change happening, as though there was actually something happening on the screen—that there are people up there doing things, whereas it's actually just individual frames going by one after the other. But we don't see that because it's happening so quickly.

Another really amazing demonstration I had of this—of the way our minds have the capacity to create permanence, create objects out of things that aren't actually objects—was at the Exploratorium, the science museum here in San Francisco. One year I took my nephew there. He was about ten years old. We walked in, and you know, there's all the exhibits—this big warehouse of different displays. Way in the distance in the warehouse, there were these bars hanging from the ceiling, long bars about four feet long, not more than an inch or two in diameter, with flashing lights on them. There were maybe ten of them strung up across the back of the room. I looked at that and thought, "Huh, I wonder what that is"—just kind of seeing these flashing lights.

We walked around through the various exhibits, and at some point we sat down to have a refreshment, a drink. My nephew was sitting there and he said, "It's a school bus!" I looked at what he was looking at—he was looking up at the flashing bars. And I saw, when I looked up there, flashing yellow lights and a little bit of flashing red. I said to him, "I don't see a school bus."

What are you talking about?

And then he said, "It's butterflies."

I said, "What on earth are you talking about? I can't see this."

And so I took the time to sit there and really hang out with this exhibit, just observing it. And what it seemed to take was just the right movement, just the right motion of the eye from one bar to the next. The eye carried the image of one strand of flashing lights into space across to the next bar and created this illusion of a forty-by-ten foot screen—or about forty feet by four feet—hanging in space. And across that screen was driving a school bus. It was so clear. The image was so clear I could read the name of the school district on the side of the school bus.

This blew my mind—how the mind can construct this out of flashing lights. I think this is an optical phenomenon; our minds do this. Somebody called it persistence of vision or something like that. Our minds do this, and because of this we impute permanence to our experience. This was a great example. You could really clearly see there was nothing there, and yet the mind created it.

So we have this belief in permanence because we don't see the rapidity of change. In our exploration of experience, it can be interesting to explore what we think of as solid. What do we perceive as solid, as lasting? Look at that. Bring your attention to it and notice what happens as you observe it.

Right now, bring your attention to the experience of the pressure of your buttocks on your chair or cushion or bench. Just hang out with that feeling, that sensation. Come in close to the actual sensation of pressure. Can you feel throbbing? Pulsing? Vibration, tingling? These sensations are some of the markers or heralds of change. Body sensations are impermanent. We can see this by bringing attention to our body.

In our minds, we have habits and patterns that we somehow think of as being me or mine—patterns that we strongly identify with, that somehow feel like they're there all the time. It feels as though there's some reservoir of that thing hanging out somewhere, just waiting to erupt.

I had this pattern for myself. One of my many patterns before I started my practice was that I really identified pretty strongly with being miserable. I was a miserable person. There would be moments when I wasn't miserable, but when that happened, my mind usually said something like, "Well, I'm happy now, but really, I know that I'm miserable." The mind, because of its belief in that miserableness—or fill in the blank for yourself—imputes a kind of permanence to it. I believed there was this reservoir of miserableness lurking all the time.

When my mind began to settle and I actually observed in meditation what was happening, I could begin to see patterns arising out of causes and conditions, falling apart when causes and conditions changed. I could clearly see that when that pattern was gone, it was gone. It comes together out of causes and conditions and falls apart. And in between, it's not there.

So in looking at patterns and habits, recognize whether you have a sense of imputing permanence to them. In watching them, notice when they're there. Clearly notice when they're there, when you're clinging to them. But also pay attention to when they're not there—especially with some of these strong patterns and habits that we have. Recognize their presence; recognize their absence. It's a very powerful support for understanding the impermanent nature of our mental patterns.

The other exploration around this is to observe what you think of as yourself. When you have a sense of yourself being there, what is it that you are calling yourself? I found for myself, as I did this exploration, that there were just various patterns of often body contraction and thoughts and moods that were very familiar. Those were the ones I identified with. There was the angry me, the contented me, the self-righteous me, the worried me. Where is the angry me when the contented me is present?

So observing these patterns, observing these things we call self, you'll start to see they're not permanent. One instruction to Rahula, the Buddha's son—he gave an instruction to his son: "Rahula, develop meditation on the perception of impermanence. For when you develop meditation on the perception of

impermanence, the conceit 'I am' will be eliminated."

So there's a connection here between really taking in the fact of impermanence and seeing through what we think of as self. I'll enjoin you: develop meditation on the perception of impermanence.

Impermanence might be understood as actual things appearing and disappearing. Sometimes that's the way it feels. And sometimes the surprise we have when something disappears is because we have imputed a thingness, imputed a permanence to something. Then when it disappears, it's shocking to us. But the deeper understanding about impermanence is that there's not really a thing there. It's a state of universal flux—even as something arises, it's dissolving and falling apart.

There's an analogy I found so beautiful as I was looking through some of the texts on this. It's like drawing a line on water—even as you draw it, it's disappearing. That's the way our experience actually is. Even as it comes into being, it's vanishing.

Over and over again, the Satipatthana Sutta, the discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, suggests that we recognize how things come into being and how they dissolve. There's an aspect of the Satipatthana Sutta called the refrain, which is mentioned after every instruction for meditation—around the body, around feelings, around mental states, around mind objects. I'll read the one for feeling: "Abide contemplating in feelings their arising factors or their vanishing factors or both their arising and vanishing factors."

What this is pointing to, what the word "factors" is pointing to, are the conditions that support the coming into being of feeling. Over and over again, the Satipatthana Sutta enjoins us to look at the factors that cause something to come into being, the factors that cause it to disappear. This is a strong reminder for us to pay attention to how things come into being, how they fall apart.

So there's a strong connection between change and conditionality. Things don't change randomly. They come into being because of causes and conditions. When those conditions change, they pass away.

We can also observe this in our meditation. On one of my early three-month retreats—one of the first I did, I think—I was noticing that I experienced a lot of aversion to the other people on the retreat, especially during walking meditation. This was the winter retreat at IMS, and typically we were walking in rooms where people were kind of up close next to each other, and I just felt a lot of aversion.

So I spent some time walking outside, and I began noticing that I wanted to look at people when they walked by. I began noticing this strong wanting. I'd moved away from the aversion but had moved into this wanting. For a while, I kind of just put the blinders on. I said, I'm not going to look, I'm going to be a good yogi. And I basically ignored the wanting.

At some point I realized that the wanting wasn't going away. And finally—I was a little slow—it's like, oh, maybe I should pay attention to the wanting. So I started paying attention to the wanting, not acting on the

wanting. I kept my gaze down so that I didn't follow through on looking at the person when they walked by. But I really observed the quality of wanting.

What I noticed was that I would be just walking, doing my walking meditation, and if somebody appeared in my peripheral vision, wanting appeared. Boom. There was a very clear connection for me. The arising factor for the wanting was the appearance of this person in my visual field.

Then I watched the wanting. I felt the wanting. I felt how it was like being pulled—just this feeling of being pulled to look at this person. And I just kept watching the wanting. The person would walk around a little while, and then they might go into the building and disappear. And then the wanting disappeared. The vanishing of the person led to the vanishing of the wanting.

I thought this was so cool. It was really interesting to watch this process happen.

Wow, look at that—poof, wanting arises, poof, it vanishes. So I got into it for a while, just watching this process happen. And then at some point I recognized that I was actually holding on to the wanting in order to see it disappear. When I realized that, it disappeared instantly. The person was still there in my vision, but the wanting vanished because the clinging vanished.

This kind of exploration is available all day long on this retreat. You really have an opportunity to observe how your mind puts things together, how things fall apart, how things come into being and fall apart over and over again. Everything that we experience is impermanent. Everything that we experience is conditioned. Our thoughts, our feelings, our body sensations—it all comes into being and it falls apart. And not only that, the causes and conditions that create something coming into being are themselves impermanent. The causes and conditions for our experience are impermanent.

There's one sutta that points at this, and it has very deep implications. The Buddha says consciousness comes into being in dependence on a dyad. In dependence on the eye and forms—that's the dyad—dependence on the eye and things in the world, eye consciousness comes to be. So because of the eye, because of forms in the world, there is the seeing.

And then he goes on: "The eye is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. Forms are impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. Thus the dyad of eye and forms is moving and tottering, is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. Eye consciousness is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. How can it not be when it's based on what is tottering already?"

I won't read the whole section here because I don't have time, but you get the idea. He goes on further—eye contact, feeling that results from the seeing, the perception that results from the seeing—all of it is in dependence on something that is already impermanent, tottering, falling apart as it comes together.

It's not necessary for you to believe this. Look at your experience. Just look at your experience. See if you

can find anything that lasts. If you find something that lasts, look more closely at it. Keep looking. In that, you might see that breaking up. If you find something that seems solid and lasting underneath that, look more closely. Keep looking at your experience. You will not find anything that is lasting.

When we meet this recognition of impermanence, we can see this. The truth of impermanence really results in recognizing: wow, I have no idea what's going to happen next. It's a deep knowing of not knowing, a deep recognition of the fragility, the instability of everything.

And this can be unpleasant. We can react to this. We might react out of fear, sadness, grief, a feeling of disgust or betrayal. How can this be? That too is an arising experience to pay attention to—notice the reaction to the recognition of impermanence. My understanding of what's happening there is that it's a view of self. It's seeing the impermanence through the view of self—that there is someone to be afraid, to feel betrayed, to feel sad, to feel grief. So looking at that helps to support our understanding and recognition of the characteristic of not-self.

As the Buddha said to Rahula, cultivate the meditation on impermanence, the perception of impermanence. This will eliminate the conceit "I am."

I'll end by reading a couple of paragraphs from an essay called *A Walk in the Woods* by Prakanti Palo: "Everything and everybody, that includes you and me, deteriorates, ages, decays, breaks up, and passes away. And we, living in the forest of desires, are entirely composed of the impermanent."

Yet our desire impels us not to see this, though impermanence stares us in the face from every single thing around. And it confronts us when we look within—mind and body arising and passing away. So don't turn on the TV, go to the movies, read a book, seize some food, or pursue a hundred other distractions just to avoid seeing this. This is the one thing really worth seeing, because the one who fully sees it in himself is free.

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