Anicca: A Characteristic of Existence

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:42

If we look at the world from some perspective—either historically from the perspective of time or worldwide through many human cultures from the perspective of space—what we see is a great whirlwind of human activity and beings driven by many unconscious forces in the psyche, resulting in some happiness and also a lot of unhappiness for ourselves and for those we interact with. This is driven by stirrings within the human heart and mind, resulting in societal upheavals and cataclysms of revolution and the brutalities of war. If you survey the whole of human history, you don't see a great deal of inner peace on a global scale, on a historical scale.

Why is that?

The Buddha said it's because of the force of ignorance in every human mind. This force of ignorance leads us not to see clearly, and this not seeing clearly leads us into the tangle of self with all the complications of greed, aversion, and confusion that follow from it.

Steve described a few nights ago how our practice of mindfulness leads us into the investigation of our present moment experience in a way that can reveal to us the true nature of existence and lead to these liberating insights in the area known as vipassana or seeing clearly the way things really are.

As we start to see the actual individual characteristics of a phenomenon like the breath, we start to see the actual individual characteristics of a body sensation or a sound or an emotion, we start to understand the composition of the whole universe. Seeing one breath can be seeing the nature of the whole world. This clear seeing, this detailed, precise seeing is the ground from which insight arises.

The Buddha said that there are three key areas that we need to investigate and understand as we start to see the nature of things. These are sometimes described as the three characteristics that apply to all existing things. It's these three characteristics of existence that I want to talk about tonight.

The first is the quality of impermanence. In Pali, the word is anicca. The second is the quality of unsatisfactoriness. In Pali, the word is dukkha. And the third is the quality of not-self or selflessness. In Pali, the word is anatta.

What's curious is that in each of our minds there is a bias against seeing the truth of these things. The Buddha called that bias vipallasa or illusion. Because we are inherently biased against seeing these things, we have to work hard to be able to see them clearly and for that understanding to settle in us.

Our built-in bias leads us to believe and leads us to perceive existence as having the three contrary

characteristics: permanence, the capability for lasting happiness, and the presence of a self through the whole world of phenomena.

So let's start by talking a little bit about impermanence. I don't think it's news to anybody here that everything changes. I think you've probably heard this many times before. And because everything changes, we all know that we shouldn't cling. I'm not telling you anything new.

But for some reason, we all still do cling, don't we? It's very curious how we know we shouldn't cling, and yet we still do.

I was comforted by a comment of Ajahn Chah's that Ajahn Amaro relayed. Ajahn Chah was the Thai meditation master who was Jack Kornfield's first teacher. Jack calls him one of the wisest, probably the wisest man he'd met in his life. And Ajahn Chah said that, in his view, eighty percent of spiritual life was knowing that we're clinging and not being able to stop.

You ever run into that on your meditation cushion? The body's a knot of tension. The mind is racing. There's a slight hint there might be some clinging somewhere in this experience. But we just don't know how to release it.

So most of us are probably at that level where we know there is clinging happening and sometimes, maybe eighty percent of the time, it's hard to release. I'm glad Ajahn Chah said that. It made me feel a lot better.

But what this means—when we know we're clinging but we don't know how to release—is that somehow the understanding of impermanence has only penetrated partway into our beings. We know it with our mind. We may know it a little deeper in our gut, but it's like it hasn't gotten into the marrow of our bones yet. It hasn't penetrated all the way. Because if it did, we would know, as the Buddha said, nothing is worth clinging to. Nothing is worth holding onto in the light of impermanence.

But unfortunately, we have this innate resistance to seeing the truth of impermanence. Why? Because it threatens the ego. The ego is the strategy of self that we've constructed to manage the world and our relationship with the world. It is undermined by the truth of impermanence, so we all have blinkers on that prevent us from seeing it, that lead us to want to see permanence.

So I offer these remarks on impermanence tonight just hoping to make a little dent in that barrier we all have against seeing the truth of things. I think that with all three of these characteristics, we need to hear them again and again and again. And each time we hear, they go a little bit deeper.

I think Steve, tomorrow night, is going to talk more on the characteristic of dukkha, so I won't go so deeply into that this evening. I want to go particularly into impermanence and also touch on anatta, not-self, tonight.

We can think of the truth of impermanence on at least three levels, probably more. We can think of it on a

cosmic scale, the scale of one human life, and the scale of our momentary experience. I want to talk a little about all three of these.

Living as a human being with just the perspective of fifty or sixty or seventy years or twenty years, we come to think some things are everlasting. We might think that the earth is everlasting, the sun and the sky and the rains and the oceans and the rivers. When you read Native American poetry and literature, that's the implication. There's one line I particularly like from Native American tradition: "The old men say, only the earth endures." This is true from a certain perspective.

But from a scientific perspective, we now know that even the earth isn't permanent. It wasn't always here—I think it's about four and a half billion years old by latest estimates. We also know that someday it won't be here anymore. In another few billion years, the sun will burn out, and in its burning out, its flame will engulf the earth and burn it to a crisp. So even the earth and the sun are temporary. Even space may be temporary. With the collapse of all matter into the Big Bang, even space might be a temporary creation. So even on a cosmic scale, we can see everything that seems solid is subject to passing.

In the span of one human life, we can also see the effects of impermanence. This is an area that I would call the realm of reflective insight. The Buddha encouraged us to reflect again and again and again on the truth of impermanence. And seeing it in the course of one life is something that's easy to do through reflection. He said doing this undermines the game of ego, the game of the self, the strategy of greed, aversion, and delusion.

We tend not to do a lot of reflection in these kinds of retreats. We encourage you to carry on this reflection at home. And when I say reflection, what I mean is the purposeful application of thinking to dharma topics for greater understanding. So it's using thought, but in a way that furthers our insight, our dharma insight. We suggest during retreats like this that you devote your time just to the moment-to-moment development of mindfulness. But when you go home, we hope you'll make this reflective practice a part of your daily life.

So we look at our human life in this Western culture, the Western paradise as we know it, and we see that the message of our culture is about acquiring and always about more. You see this through the TV ads, which are kind of the underbelly of the culture: more money, bigger house, newer car. Now it's better body, thanks to the miracle of modern medicine. The body that you'd like to order can be yours for a price.

All of us here have seen the limitations of this belief, of this—I would almost say religious view—enough to have left it somewhat behind and looked for something else. So we come to a spiritual path, into spiritual life. And we start to understand that real happiness doesn't come from material things, can't come from material things because of this factor of impermanence. So we look in a new direction. We look in the direction of meditation. We start to understand that real happiness comes from a purified heart. When our human heart is free of the forces of greed, aversion, and confusion, then there is true peace. Then there is true happiness. We get an inkling and greater and greater confidence this is the real road to

happiness and peace.

But as we work to develop the path and develop those wholesome qualities, we find that we still bring in some of the same mindset of acquisition and holding as in the material culture. So we come into a retreat, we start developing mindfulness, some concentration builds, and we have a peaceful sitting. And we think, "Wow, this is great. This is what I came on retreat for. Now I've got the groove." And then we go out for the next walking period. "I can't wait to get back in the meditation room." And we walk and we come back in. What happened to the peace? Maybe gone.

And often the loss of that peace and concentration is much more discouraging than a drop in our savings account or a dent in our new car, because we've developed the same kind of desire and attachment around the fruits of spiritual practice. So in many ways, the events of spiritual life can come to occupy the same place in our mind as the objects of the material world—just a more refined kind of object.

There was a fascinating article in the New York Times about a year ago called "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness." Some researchers at Harvard and other universities started to explore the connection between what humans wanted that would bring them happiness and what actually happened to them when they got those things. They also studied what happened when people got the things they really didn't want and how both scenarios unfolded over time.

What they found was really interesting. They discovered that by and large, as people, we are very poor predictors of what will bring us happiness or unhappiness, and to what degree. They were focusing mostly on outer things—that was the interest level of their subjects. When people got the new BMW that they craved, they were happier, but for a short time, and then it faded. In fact, they were less happy than they expected to be, and that lower level of happiness wore off more quickly than they expected.

So the good thing that came into their life—this desired object—didn't bring as much happiness as expected, and the happiness didn't last as long. But on the other side of things, they found that events people didn't want to have happen also had less of a negative effect than people had expected. They didn't get as low as they thought they would, and they rebounded more quickly than anticipated.

To sum it up the way the reporter described it: on average, bad events proved less intense and more transient than test participants predicted. Good events also proved less intense and briefer as well.

This has great implications for us as meditators. Things generally don't make us as happy as we expect they will—even the new car or the new relationship, the new line of work, newfound wealth. But also, the things we're afraid of in life generally don't impact us for as long or as deeply as we fear they might. Even the loss of a relationship, the loss of a job, the death of a family member—people are generally surprised at their ability to rebound from those kinds of events.

What this really says is we don't know how, as people, to account for impermanence properly. We don't know how to plan for change, either positively or negatively.

What's interesting in this article is that the key researcher mentioned was kind of ambivalent about these findings. Because what does this point to? We make too much of a fuss about things. Why do we make so much fuss about the ups and downs of our life? In a lot of cases, they just don't matter that much.

So this researcher, a Harvard professor, said, "Hope and fear are enduring features of the human experience, and it is unlikely that people are going to abandon them anytime soon just because some psychologist tells them they should."

And what did the Buddha have to say about hope and fear? I think he said abandoning them was a pretty good idea. That's really what living in the moment is all about. That's what these conclusions are pointing to.

Then the researcher spoke personally: "I don't think I want to give up all these motivations. I don't think I want to learn too much from my research in this sense."

Those egos are tenacious beings, aren't they? Let's hold on to our hopes and fears—it's the juice of life!

What this points to is a willingness to trust more and more in the sense of equanimity as we ride through the ups and downs of retreat life, as we ride through the ups and downs of our daily life. Trust that we will be able to weather the storms that come and that we will be able to stay balanced through the good times also—not to get too head over heels in either direction.

One of the things that we often see on retreat is that when the concentration goes and we fall into one of the storms that come frequently on retreat, we tend to get really upset by the fact that the storm is there. The storm itself may be unpleasant, but it causes what you might call a crisis in confidence in us. We feel we've gone off track—that we're not a good meditator any longer, that maybe we've given up our effort, we've forgotten how to do the practice, we're not good enough, we're not sincere enough, or we've lost the thread and it's never going to come back.

Have you had any of these thoughts in the middle of storms? I have them all the time.

In a way, what we do is take a current moment's experience and project it indefinitely into the future. It's always going to be like this.

This happened to me in Burma. I was recently there sitting for a six-week retreat. I ordained when I was there, which is why my hair is so short—this is about two months' growth, so it's coming back, but slowly. I got there probably at the worst time of year that I could have picked. I arrived in Burma at the very height of the monsoon, and it was in one of the rainiest areas of Asia that I've ever been to. I've been through three or four monsoons in Asia, and Steve and I were talking about what the monsoons are like where we have been.

Usually there will be sun in the morning, and then in the afternoon the sky will just open up and bucket rain, dumping perhaps two inches in an hour before passing through to sunshine again. That's the sort of

monsoon I was used to, and I don't mind that.

But this monastery was positioned on the edge of the Andaman Sea, just east of India. The monsoons were blowing right off the sea and slamming into the low mountains where the monastery was located, with no buffer whatsoever. When I arrived, it was truly the height of the monsoon season. For the first three weeks, it rained probably fifteen hours a day. I saw the sun twice in those three weeks as I was adjusting to being in the robes, in a new society, new culture, new food, new teacher, new practice.

With all of that, I confess I found the rain a little gloomy. I was sitting in my kuti feeling very gloomy and thinking, "It's going to be like this for another six weeks. How am I going to stand it? I don't think I can take it." I got more depressed thinking about how gloomy it was going to be than I was just being gloomy in the first place. I weighed myself down with that sense that it's going to be like this forever. Six weeks seems like forever when you're in retreat. It was about three weeks before I could really believe that it was ever going to get sunny again.

But I had brought along a photograph of the Dalai Lama that I keep on my altar, a photograph that Sally gave me. I turned to the Dalai Lama, for whom I have tremendous devotional energy, and said, "Your Holiness, can you give me some good advice?" I heard this voice spoken in his kind of Tibetan-Indian accent saying, "Hmm, stay optimistic, cheerful, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." It came through just like that. Those were the words I heard: stay optimistic, confident, and cheerful.

I really tried to take that advice to heart. Even though it was raining outside, I tried to find that place that was optimistic and confident and cheerful. Sometimes I could do it, sometimes I couldn't. Sometimes I could follow the advice, sometimes I couldn't. But it became clear to me that what I really needed to weather this storm was confidence—confidence that there was going to be another side to it, that I was going to come through and that it was going to be okay again, as it had been okay before the storm.

When those storms come in meditation—when the delightful sitting goes away and the thoughts and emotions get chaotic or depressing or gloomy—I suggest you remember that aspect of confidence. As Kamala spoke about the other night, it's really the quality of faith that we need. If we can have that faith in ourselves, that we can come through this storm, then we really can stay cheerful in the middle of it. We can truly not be bothered by the thoughts, by the emotions, by the worries that come, because we know they too will pass. This is really the heart of equanimity. The basis of our equanimity is this quality of faith, one of the key qualities that develops with spiritual practice. But we have to go through those ups and downs many times before we can really trust that this is just a temporary phase and we'll come out the other side.

Another way we tend to ignore or deny impermanence is through the concept of "getting it all together." One day I'm going to get it all together, whether in life or meditation practice. It's not all together now, but I just have to work a little harder and get all the pieces in place at one time. Then my relationship will be in a good space, I'll be enjoying my work, my body will be fine, that old knee problem will have healed, I'll

have enough money, my parents are still doing okay, my kids are not dealing drugs anymore. At one moment, everything will be okay in my life.

But have you ever known many people for whom that's true? It seems like one thing or another is always slipping out of balance. The relationship comes into a really good place, and the job gets screwed up. Or the money comes together, but then the parent's health starts to deteriorate. Joseph Goldstein has this wonderful phrase he suggests we bring to meditation as well as to life: "If it's not one thing, it's another." And it really seems true.

In meditation also, do you ever find yourself wondering when your retreat experience is going to all come together? In my early days, I thought surely if I sit a six-week retreat or a three-month retreat, it will all come together. At some point, all these body disturbances and wandering mind and annoying, afflictive emotions will be figured out and put aside, and I'll really be able to just cruise—to float, really—on this plateau of mindfulness and concentration and equanimity and peace, day after day. That's what my retreat should be like.

I haven't gotten it all together yet. I think we're lucky if we get a day like that.

where all those factors come together and last for 24 hours. That is wonderful if you have a whole day like that. But generally what's happening is that because the factors are not under our control, they have their own lives.

We make our moderate effort, mindfulness starts to build, and out of that concentration builds. When concentration is strong and energy is good, then there's a feeling of peace and alertness. But any of those factors can start to decay. Beyond our control, they can start to decay. Doing the best we can, making our good, steady effort all the way through, the meditation may still fall apart. Other energies may come in—bodily pain, distracting thoughts, restlessness, anything.

Can we be patient with that? Can we realize that we don't have to get it all together on this long, long plateau for insight to develop? Sometimes the best insights come in that falling apart phase. Where else are we going to learn equanimity? When everything's going right in our life, we tend to get attached to the pleasant circumstances and then we actually don't learn very much. It's really when things get shaken up a little bit and we get tested that we tend to learn more. So insight tends to develop to some degree out of difficulty, out of the difficulty of change.

In this way, in spiritual life, you may hear it said that a good situation is not a good situation for spiritual insight. And a difficult situation is a good situation for spiritual insight, for developing equanimity, strength, confidence, faith, understanding.

Another major way, of course, that we deny impermanence is in our relationship to death. Again, the ego has a strong investment in not seeing the truth of our death. Freud said that our entire human neurosis was rooted in our denial of death. So there's a strong force there not letting us see it.

Someone posed a question to a wise person in the Vedas, ancient Indian literature that goes back about 3,000 years in time that predates the Buddha: "What is the greatest miracle on this earth?" And the wise person responded, "The greatest miracle is that every human is surrounded by those dying around him or herself, but doesn't believe that he or she will die."

This is pretty amazing, isn't it? Most of us haven't quite integrated the reality of our own death.

This understanding was actually one of the experiences that prompted the Buddha to begin his quest. It's said that he took a ride into the neighboring village and saw an old person, a sick person, and a corpse. These jarred him so much that he resolved to find a way beyond aging, illness, and death. The fourth person that he saw was a renunciate pursuing a life of spiritual inquiry, and he decided to follow that example.

I want to read one thing that the Buddha said about this understanding that dawned on him: "An uninstructed person seeing a corpse feels repelled and disgusted. But I reflected that I too will die and come to be a corpse someday. So it is not befitting for me to be repelled and disgusted by a corpse. Seeing this, the pride that I took in life, in being alive, entirely vanished." He went on to say that there is also a pride in being young and there's a pride in being healthy. He said he gave up all of these at the start of his quest, realizing that they were all impermanent and bound to pass.

We usually feel death as a threat of some kind, probably the ultimate kind of threat. It certainly is a threat to the ego, the sense of permanent self that we've invested in. But it's interesting—the Buddha said that it's not necessary that human beings fear death. He said some beings do fear death, other beings don't fear death.

He said that we will fear death if, number one, we are greatly attached to sense pleasures and we want to have more pleasant sense experience. Number two, if we're greatly attached to this body, if we love it and delight in it and pamper it and are very attached to it. Third, someone who has done harm to others and has neglected to do virtuous actions fears death, because that person doesn't know what the effect of those unvirtuous actions will be after dying. And the fourth person who fears death is one who does not have faith in the Dhamma, in the truth of things.

So conversely, the Buddha said that it's not necessary to fear death, as long as there is not a great attachment to pleasant sense experiences, a great attachment or delight in this body, one has not neglected virtuous actions and one has not done many harmful actions. In the classical terms, this would be one who has observed sila or morality, virtuous actions to others, and one who has practiced dana or generosity, the doing of charitable actions to others. And finally, the fourth condition is one who has faith in the Dhamma can die without fear of dying.

The Buddha felt that this reflection on death was a very helpful reflection for all his followers, not just for monks and nuns. He had one set of reflections that he encouraged the monks and nuns to do. But here's a

set that he encouraged for everybody, lay people as well as monks and nuns.

The Buddha encouraged us to carry five daily reflections in our minds. These fundamental contemplations remind us of our true nature:

I am of the nature to grow old. I have not gone beyond aging.

I am of the nature to become sick. I have not gone beyond illness.

I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond death.

At death, I will be separated from all that is dear and beloved to me.

And finally, I am the owner of my actions—my karma. All that I do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.

These five reflections were meant for everyone—lay people as well as monastics. Among them, the contemplation of death holds special power and usefulness for all practitioners.

This brings us to the third dimension of impermanence we must explore: the momentary, instant-by-instant nature of impermanence. Here we enter the realm of meditative insight, where simple reflection no longer suffices. This understanding can only emerge through sustained mindfulness that leads to quietude, concentration, and penetrating insight into the nature of our experience.

Within this moment-to-moment impermanence, we begin to see that change occurs far more rapidly than most people realize. Modern quantum mechanics reveals that electrons pulse on and off continuously—the very fabric of atoms lacks stability. An electron remains essentially unlocatable, described as a probability graph of charge distribution. While we rarely experience reality this way in ordinary consciousness, meditation can reveal the extraordinarily rapid changes occurring moment to moment.

I recall a wonderful presentation by the Dalai Lama that Sally and I attended at Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View. It was summertime, and the amphitheater held thousands of people in seats, with many more stretched across the grassy bowl-shaped lawn overlooking the stage. Monks and nuns from various Buddhist traditions flanked the Dalai Lama—Tibetan monastics in bright red robes on one side, Theravadan monks and nuns in brown and yellow on the other, along with Zen practitioners in gray and black, and Korean monastics in brown. The stage presented a colorful array of Buddhist traditions.

Behind the Dalai Lama hung an enormous painting of the Potala Palace—his former residence in Lhasa—depicted at twilight with the last rays of sunset illuminating its walls. It created the beautiful illusion of seeing the Dalai Lama where he belonged, teaching dharma before the Potala. The grassy slope and peaceful atmosphere made it feel like a Buddhist Woodstock—without the drugs, everything wonderfully clean and clear.

The Dalai Lama taught on emptiness that day, and his words proved as transformative as any substance. In exploring impermanence, he emphasized a crucial point: solid objects don't simply persist for a while before suddenly disappearing. Rather, what we perceive as solid objects are actually dissolving and reappearing moment by moment—pulsing on and off, existence itself flickering in and out of being. This understanding aligns perfectly with quantum physics and emerges from the direct insight of yogis who have developed sufficient concentration and clarity of seeing.

In our practice tradition, we must learn to observe our experience with such precision that this momentary dissolution becomes directly apparent. But what exactly is dissolving? What can we actually see and know to be in constant flux?

To answer this question, we must examine the fundamental nature of human experience itself.

This is from the Samyutta Nikaya. In this translation, it's called the Sutta on Totality.

"Monks," the Buddha said, "I will teach you the totality of life. Listen, attend carefully to it, and I will speak. I will teach you the totality of life."

That's a gutsy thing to say, isn't it? Who would have the nerve to teach the totality of life? Not Einstein, not Marx, not Freud. The Buddha said, "I will teach you the totality of life."

"What, monks, is totality? It is just the eye with the objects of sight, the ear with the objects of hearing, the nose with the objects of smell, the body with the objects of touch, and the mind with the objects of cognition. This, monks, is called totality."

In the mind and its objects, primarily we're talking about states of mind—the emotions, moods, and refined meditative states that Sally talked about both in her talk last night and also this morning in the instruction—as well as thoughts. This is primarily what's being pointed to in the objects of mind.

So from our experience: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, emotions, and thoughts. Is there anything else? Anything else significant in your experience? Is the Buddha leaving anything out in this description of totality?

Isn't it amazing how simple it is? It's such a simple description of life and yet it's so comprehensive. Nothing is left out. We have these six classes of experience—the five physical senses and then mind objects, primarily thoughts and states of mind. That's all there is.

Now, of those six areas in your experience, which are solid? Which are not dissolving?

What about a thought? Does a thought last very long? Not generally. It sort of comes and then it's gone, doesn't it?

What about a sound? It's got a little bit of a decay, but if you listen closely, there's a little bit of modulation. It's kind of changing, being reborn, changing, dying away.

What about body sensations—these objects of touch, the sensations within our body? Are these solid? Look closely in your experience, even as you sit right now. Feel the pressure of your seat on the cushion. Is it one unchanging feeling? Or is it kind of pulsing and throbbing and getting stronger and weaker moment by moment? If you look closely at any body sensation, you'll see that minute change taking place. There's nothing solid within the experience of the body.

Emotions. Has any emotion lasted all day yet? Probably not. Emotions generally don't last so long. And even then, they're kind of being reinforced, aren't they, by your thoughts? Coming and going, waning, getting rebuilt.

What about sights? Opening your eyes and looking around the room at these white walls—that looks pretty solid, doesn't it? Sight is one of the hardest senses to see impermanence in. The light changes, that's right. It looks very different now than it did two hours ago, than it did in the morning.

And even if you want to get more granular than that, remember how sight is generated. Particles of light called photons, many, many per second, fall on a wall, are reflected and bounce into our eye where they strike the retina. It's really a stream of photons that are falling on the retina, triggering signals of electricity through the optic nerve into the brain where somehow, miraculously, consciousness of seeing is created. Stop that stream of photons for one split second, the sight goes away. So this sight, which seems so solid, is actually pulsing on and off many, many times a second, triggered by the impact of these many, many, many photons.

Even this kind of seeing is accessible to yogis. I cannot say that millions of times a second a photon strikes, but the lack of solidity of sight is accessible to yogic insight. So we can verify from our direct experience the statement of the Dalai Lama that everything in our experience is dissolving moment after moment, not lasting more than a part of a second.

And then we have to ask: what is there to cling to? When we see impermanence at this level, we know clinging is not a good idea. But when we see it at this level, we really know there's nothing there to cling to.

The Buddha said nothing should be clung to because it leads to suffering. When we see on this level, we start to see there is nothing to cling to because it's all in the process of fading away, of dissolving.

The Buddha compared it to someone being swept away on the current of a river, someone who had fallen into a fast-running river and was being swept downstream. As the person went downstream, they wanted to gain a steady hold by grabbing onto things on the bank. So they would reach out, but every time they reached, they could only grab hold of a strand of grass, and it came away in their hand. Then they would go a little further and reach out on the other side to grab a clump of grass, but it just pulled out.

This is the state that we're all in with clinging. We hold on to things, but even as we hold, they're becoming unsolid. They're coming unstuck.

The Buddha had an attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life, his cousin named Ananda, who was a very gentle and lovely person. He looked after all the Buddha's needs over that time really dutifully. At one point he asked the Buddha, "What do you mean by the world?" The word for world in Pali is loka. And the Buddha made a pun in reply. He said, "It disintegrates."

The word for disintegrate in Pali is paloka. "It palokas, therefore it is called the world or loka." Why do you call it the world? What do you mean by the world? It disintegrates, therefore it is called the world.

So this world of our six senses is constantly disintegrating, constantly dissolving.

When the yogi touches this kind of insight and this kind of realization in practice, it's usually a little unsettling. I don't know if you can get that flavor or sense of it, but it's as though the ground goes out from underneath one's feet. Because in fact, one realizes that what we take to be the ground—solid and supportive—is only the sensation of hardness. It's just another touch coming through our bodily sense, which is changing all the time. So there really is no ground.

This is the area of insight that the understanding of impermanence opens up for us through practice that is not available to ordinary daily reflection. This kind of insight where we get the truth of impermanence in our marrow is accessible only through meditative deepening.

In the second of the characteristics the Buddha talked about—the area of dukkha or unsatisfactoriness, often translated as suffering—we begin to see that the world cannot give us lasting satisfaction through the six senses because of this dissolving nature. There is nothing there to hang on to. So the impermanence and the unsatisfactoriness are very closely related. When we try to hang on to something that's in the process of dissolving, we won't be satisfied.

This is from Suzuki Roshi: "Without accepting the fact that everything changes, we cannot find perfect composure. But unfortunately, although it is true, it is difficult for us to accept it. Because we cannot accept the truth of transiency, we suffer. So the cause of suffering is our non-acceptance of this truth. The teaching of the cause of suffering and the teaching that everything changes are two sides of one coin."

The third of the characteristics that I mentioned earlier was this teaching about not-self. This is actually one of the most difficult teachings of the Buddha to understand. So we have about five minutes left to cover it. That's probably about right.

I want to say before I make a few remarks about it that you shouldn't aim to understand this topic in one evening anyway, even if it was talked about for an hour. Rather, I have found that this message, this understanding, has come very slowly and very gradually over years of practice. I feel I'm still uncovering new angles to this insight, and that as I do, it continues to expand the area of freedom in my life. For me, this has been one of the central areas for greater freedom within all my dharma practice—understanding this message of anatta or not-self.

To really understand the message of not-self, I think we have to start by understanding what the Buddha meant by self. Or another way to say it is to understand what each of us means when we say "I" or "me," because there are some assumptions hidden in those two words—"I" or "me"—that we normally don't pull out and look at or question. But we really have to pull them out and become conscious of them, or we'll never understand what it means to deny the self through this concept of not-self.

So, what is implicit within our idea of a self or an "I" or a "me"?

One central aspect of our concept of self is that there exists a constant, ongoing entity—here, there, and everywhere throughout time. In some fundamental way, I have been the same entity from the moment I was born until this very day. All the experiences that have unfolded through all my years have happened to me—the same person. This represents the first characteristic of selfhood that we unconsciously accept: one continuous person or entity has moved through all these different experiences of life.

The second aspect inherent in this notion is that this "I" has somehow remained independent of all the experiences that have occurred. That I have been like a small, unchanging core wrapped within this fabric of bodily experience, sight experience, sound experience, emotional experience, and thought experience—all of it impinging upon me. All the different senses are impinging upon some unchanging center within me that truly is me. Everything is happening to me. In some ways, I am a kind of observer of it all, remaining fundamentally unchanged through all these different experiences.

When you combine these elements—constant, ongoing, independent observer—this entity cannot be found. It simply cannot be found, not within this sphere of sense experiences, not within the human realm of experience. There is no entity that matches this description.

This points to one of the important directions in our meditation practice, and I hope you will take it seriously: to look hard for that kind of entity. Only after looking earnestly for it and not finding it will you be convinced that it's not there. Something that satisfies these criteria—being the same since you were born, being independent of your experience while your experience happens to it—simply can't be found. But we each need to look hard enough until we know this for ourselves.

William James said something revealing: "When I look for the self, all I can find is a tickle in the back of my throat." Perhaps that's all any of us can find.

What the Buddha taught is that these sense experiences are not that self. A sight is not that self. A sound is not. A touch is not. A smell is not. A taste is not. An emotion is not. And a thought is not. What's left? Not much.

Interestingly, he didn't actually say there is no self. What he said is that all these experiences we can touch through meditation—those are not self. Those are not this thing called self. Those are not "I" or "me."

When we start to look carefully, we see that this sense of "I" or "me" comes strongly sometimes, especially

when we become wound up about something or invested in something, while at other times it is quite weak. Take a look at your experience in one of those moments where there's a lot of calm and spaciousness. How strong is the "I" then? It's not very strong.

What we discover is that this sense of "I" or "me" gets constructed—it grows large and becomes small. When you look again more closely, you'll see that when it's strong, it's because there's holding on to something. There's clinging. The sense of "I" is directly proportional to the strength of clinging. It is nothing else. As the clinging relaxes, you can start to feel the freedom when the sense of "I" is weak or even absent. This becomes a fantastic doorway to peace and happiness.

Once, after a talk like this, during the question period the following morning, someone in the hall raised their hand and asked me: "All this teaching about impermanence that you discussed last night—is this just some bitter pill that I have to swallow? It's not very encouraging."

It's not a bitter pill. It's simply the way things are. It's challenging to accept because we have a bias against seeing it clearly. But it's not intrinsically a problem once we adapt our worldview to accommodate this truth.

The reason impermanence is emphasized so strongly in Dharma practice is that the more we see it, the less we tend to hold on. All the teachings on impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self point us toward not holding on so tightly to our experience—neither to the highs nor to the lows.

As we develop greater and greater capacity to let go, more and more peace comes. As Ajahn Chah said, if you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. And if you let go completely, there's complete peace.

This complete peace is the doorway to Nibbana—that state which is beyond change, beyond unsatisfactoriness, beyond the limitations of sense experience. This is the real goal of our Dharma practice, and it provides the greatest liberation and freedom for our hearts.

It is in the interest of discovering Nibbana, the direct realization of the unconditioned, that the Buddha encouraged us to let go through the investigation of anicca, dukkha, and anatta—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self.

Let us pause now and reflect on these words from the Diamond Sutra: "Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world: like a star at dawn, like a bubble in a stream, a flickering lamp, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a mirage, and a dream."

In contemplating the three characteristics, we discover not a philosophy of despair, but a pathway to profound peace. Each moment of recognizing impermanence becomes an invitation to soften our grip. Each acknowledgment of unsatisfactoriness becomes a step toward contentment that doesn't depend on conditions. Each glimpse of not-self becomes a doorway to the vast freedom that is our birthright.

This is the gift of the Buddha's teaching—not to burden us with difficult truths, but to liberate us through clear seeing. When we truly understand that holding on brings suffering and letting go brings peace, the choice becomes obvious. The path becomes not a struggle against reality, but a gentle alignment with the way things actually are.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.