Insight Into Impermanence

Brian Lesage · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 46:01

Good evening, everyone.

One day, Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, was hanging out with the other monastics in the assembly hall in Jeta Grove. Jeta Grove was a place that had been donated by one of the Buddha's biggest benefactors, Anathapindika. They had just gone for alms round and had finished their meal, and Ananda began to speak to them about all these wonderful and marvelous qualities that the Buddha had.

Just after he began, the Buddha got wind of this somehow. You know how Buddhas are. He decided to come into the assembly hall and sit down. Then he asked Ananda to please continue what he was saying about all the wonderful and marvelous qualities of the Buddha.

And Ananda did. He was telling of all these amazing supernatural qualities of the Buddha, such as when the Buddha entered the womb of his mother, this great immeasurable light shone throughout the world. Not only that, the world shook and quaked. Then while he was in the womb of his mother, four young deities were always guarding him. Ananda continued, saying that when the Buddha was born, jets of water came from the sky and bathed him and his mother.

After Ananda kept on talking about these wonderful and marvelous qualities, the Buddha at the end says to him, "That being so, Ananda, but remember this too. This too is a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Tathagata, of the Buddha. Here, Ananda, for the Tathagata, feelings are known as they arise, as they are present, and as they disappear. Perceptions are known as they arise, as they are present, and as they disappear. Thoughts are known as they arise, as they are present, and as they disappear. Ananda, remember this too as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Buddha."

In this situation, I feel like the Buddha's being kind of gentle with Ananda, really pointing out to him: yes, there might be supernatural qualities of the Buddha, but the important quality of a Buddha is this ability to see the arising and passing away of experience. The arising and passing away of a thought or an emotion or a sound, like the sound of my voice, the way it comes and it goes.

Why is it so wonderful and marvelous? Because it's the thing that brings us to awakening, that leads us to our liberation. I think this has been repeated again and again, and I'm going to repeat it one more time. Have you noticed that when it comes down to it, this practice is so simple and so profound? It's simply being aware of what's happening, and also being aware of what happens to it, how it unfolds. Through this, the mind begins to awaken.

Tonight, I'd like to share with you some reflections about that second quality—that there's awareness of

experience, but also the importance of the sensitivity that's needed for how experience unfolds, how it's impermanent, how it's constantly changing. On a deeper level, this is insight into impermanence. It's the arising of wisdom.

Most of you know impermanence is one of the three fundamental characteristics that the Buddha talks about in terms of reality. The Pali word is *anicca*, which is really just the negative form of the Pali word *nic ca*. *Nicca* is usually translated as constant or permanent, so *anicca* is impermanence or inconstancy. Then there's *dukkha*, which Carol spoke at length about last night—that unsatisfactoriness, that not-quite-rightness. And the third characteristic is *anatta*, that non-self quality.

Impermanence is important. It's really important that the mind becomes sensitive to seeing this. For example, you might recall the last words of the Buddha to the monastics, to the practitioners. He says, "Bhikkhus, this is my last admonition to you." And in Pali, what he said literally means: all formations are impermanent. They're subject to change. Please strive on with diligence.

I feel like this makes sense, that the Buddha was emphasizing this in his last admonition. Because if you really think about it, if you really look at the stress and discontent and suffering in your life, have you realized that it's so much centered around how we relate to impermanence? The mind's relationship to the world being impermanent. It's our inability to truly understand this—to understand this in our bones—that's the reason why there's so much stress and suffering. It's like we're fighting with impermanence.

As Guy mentioned in his talk, samsara is this trying to correct the world of impermanence. And he mentioned those three strategies that I'm sure you've noticed arise on this retreat: the strategy of grasping, of craving, or of pushing away through aversion, or of checking out through delusion.

Let me give some examples of this just so we're clear about this fight with impermanence and how we can intellectually get it, but not actually embody this realization. I think the best example I can give of this is around a car I bought right after I was in the Zen monastery.

When I was at the Zen monastery, it was a great life. It really deepened my spiritual life. It was not so good for my financial life. So I came out of there without much money. And when I got out of there, of course, after living a while in Southern New Mexico, I needed a car. Luckily for me, a friend of mine was selling their car to me for $350. It was such a great deal. I don't know if you know these Daihatsu cars—I don't think they're made anymore—but they had three cylinders, a three-cylinder engine. And I just want you to really imagine, if I bought it for $350, what kind of condition it was in. It was actually pretty rusty. I got this can of primer paint just to paint over the rusty parts. I mean, it functioned, but I bought it for 350 bucks.

And it was amazing what happened. The first thing that broke was the electric windows, unfortunately. The electric window on the passenger side broke. And when it broke, I was so upset. It was such a crazy

thing. If you were to take a look at this car, you would think, why are you upset that the window broke? How could it not have broken? Of course, I spent a lot of time rewiring it, and I want to let you know I don't know anything about electricity, so I kind of wired it to the battery itself because I couldn't figure out how to do it elsewhere, but it actually worked quite well. And then the window on the driver's side broke, and then it was the radio, and then the air conditioning. And each time I noticed I was getting upset.

Why was the mind getting upset? Because I knew about impermanence, but I hadn't fully embodied it. I still had this idea that this was a car that was not supposed to break down. I'd spent 350 bucks on it—of course it wasn't supposed to break down. There was this fight. The mind was fighting with impermanence. And it was not only that, it was because it was *my* car. I was upset because there was this other fixation on it: *mine*. If your car were to break, I would feel for you, but I actually wouldn't be that upset. I might feel for you, maybe I'd talk to you about impermanence and how you need to let go. But it's not my car. It's a little more difficult when it enters the realm of mine.

And have you seen this? I'm sure you've seen this on the retreat here, how your mind fights with impermanence. Something changes. You notice one day the mind is a little more tranquil and concentrated. And then the next day it's a whole different world and you're bummed out. There's this fight with impermanence, as if there's this belief that that should continue. Or wanting impermanence on your terms: I'm okay with being with this pain or this emotion as long as it really starts to manifest this quality of impermanence right now. You ever notice that?

Or sometimes it's around time. I think the best example of this is when I was working at a drug rehabilitation center—the place I started to teach meditation. And please remember, the people I was teaching meditation to were in early recovery. Any of you who've gone through recovery know that early recovery is hell. It's really difficult. The mind is extremely agitated. And I would go in every morning and we would sit together. We'd do a little mindful movement and some meditation. Often we'd only sit for maybe ten or fifteen minutes. And so I began the sitting meditation, and it was silent, and we were meditating, and then in the middle of the sit, I hear this voice say, "Ring the damn bell."

Have you ever had that thought go through your mind? This person was fully embodying that fight with impermanence. We want things on our own terms.

The Zen master I practiced with put it very poetically. He would sit up during his dharma talk and say, "Here I am, up here trying to sell round trip tickets to heaven and hell, and none of you want to buy them. What's up with that?"

What is he trying to say? We don't want to take the ride of allowing pleasant and unpleasant experience to simply unfold and to skillfully respond to them. We want to get lost in fighting. We want the one-way ticket to heaven. Or we want to feel bad about ourselves and have the one-way ticket to hell. It's quite different to really be open to taking that round trip—the round trip ticket to heaven and hell—on the terms of the way reality unfolds.

So this is what it really comes down to: Can we buy that round trip ticket?

I want to point out that on a deeper level, in terms of the big challenges in your lives, have you noticed how they center around some fight with impermanence? If you can just take a moment right now to reflect on some of the most difficult times in your life—what was going on during those times?

You might notice that within those difficult times, when we reflect on them now, there was usually some loss involved. A loss of a loved one, or the loss of your health, or some ability that you used to have and no longer have. Or the loss of a job, a partner, or a lover. It could have been the loss of safety, or the loss of a kind, caring quality that you were receiving from someone, or the loss of connection.

I just want to point out that living in this impermanent world can be really difficult at times. It's challenging. And hopefully what we begin to realize through this practice is that it's because of the way the mind relates to this impermanent world. Can you see that? Through the fight with impermanence—that's where so many of our biggest difficulties arise. And hopefully, through this practice, we also get to see it's because of how the mind relates to it.

One of the things the Buddha recommended around impermanence—it's not emphasized on this retreat, but I do want to mention it—was actually having a daily reflection around impermanence. I remember right after I got married, my wife and I—I know this is going to sound a little strange, it's not the hottest and sexiest thing to do—but we decided that we were going to do this reflection every day together. We'd sit together and reflect on how eventually our marriage would completely disintegrate as a result of either estrangement or death.

I know it's not the most exciting thing to do on a honeymoon. But it was a wonderful reflection to engage in, especially together—to really begin to see the attachment and to feel our ways through that attachment so that a different kind of intimacy could arise. But we needed to really reflect upon and realize this quality of impermanence that was inherent in our bond.

There's a beautiful poem about this by Jane Kenyon. The title is "Otherwise." She wrote this, I believe at a young age—she died at forty-seven from leukemia. Just keep in mind that she wrote this during the last year of her life, and if you know anything about leukemia, it's often a very slow dying process.

She begins:

I got out of bed on two strong legs.
It might have been otherwise.
I ate cereal, sweet milk, ripe, flawless peach.
It might have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill to the birch wood.
All morning I did the work I love.
At noon I lay down with my mate.

It might have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks.
It might have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed in a room with paintings on the walls
and planned another day just like this day.
But one day, I know, it will be otherwise.

Something different comes. Something different comes in the way we relate to even the small things in life when we realize, as she says, that one day it will be otherwise.

What I really want to share with you this evening is more about what I'd call the direct experience of impermanence, not just the reflection of it, because I really feel that this is where our practice truly unfolds.

This is what definitively leads to awakening, to our liberation. That's actually what I'm excited about sharing with you—because it's that direct experience that can truly free the heart.

So not just reflecting on impermanence, but seeing it moment after moment after moment, so that a new relationship can arise to our experience. I want to talk about the details of that.

When the mind begins to see impermanence in this practice that you're doing every day here, when it really begins to get a feeling sense of it, this is when insight—the insight into impermanence—arises.

First, I want to talk a little bit about this word "insight" and how I'll be using it tonight. This word can be used in many different ways. Of course, it can be used in a psychological way. Even on this retreat, you might be sitting and, as a result, a psychological insight about your personal life arises. But the insight I'm talking about has a different flavor. It's the spiritual insight that arises from the mind clearly seeing these three characteristics: anicca, dukkha, and anatta.

To get a sense of this, I want to offer an analogy. Insight—or insight into impermanence, this wisdom or knowledge—is like the knowledge of riding a bike. If you know how to ride a bike, or even if you know how to swim, it's not an intellectual understanding. If someone were to ask you to explain how you ride a bike, how you stay on a bike, it would be pretty difficult to explain. You'd have to sit down and think about how you would put it into words. But you know, right? It's very clear. You get on a bike and there's that knowing. There might not be words for it, but there's the knowing of how to ride a bike. It's not an intellectual knowing; it's a bodily knowing.

This is more what insight is like. It's not so much that I know what impermanence is. With my car, for example, I'd read tons about impermanence, but impermanence hadn't been embodied. I wasn't riding the bike of impermanence. Insight is like this kind of wisdom—something you know in your bones and in your body, the way you know how to ride a bike.

Another thing to remember: if you can think back to when you learned how to ride a bike, sometimes that experience, when you're really riding it at first, can be a real "wow" experience—a dramatic kind of experience of "Wow, I know how to ride a bike now!" You notice the difference and it's amazing. Yet at other times, even as we refine our ability to ride, in the midst of riding, the body is learning how to be more skillful. It's gaining knowledge, but it's not really intellectually aware that it's happening. The body is getting it, but it's not a "wow" experience.

This is very important for understanding insight. Sometimes when people are on retreat, they have kind of "wow" experiences. At other times, the body is learning, gaining wisdom about insight, and there's no intellectual knowing of that. It's important to remember: sometimes it's ordinary, sometimes it's wow. And just so you know, you don't get to choose. Bummer, huh?

So again, insight is like riding a bike. It's this bodily knowing. It can be dramatic, and often it's not dramatic.

Most important: when I'm talking about insight, please remember not to follow the path of asking, "Is this insight or is it not?" The arising of insight is actually not your job. That's the job of wisdom. Our job is simply to practice, to do the practice, and then insight or wisdom arises when it arises. That's out of the job description of yogis, just so you know. Please keep it out of the job description—and know that the practice naturally unfolds. The Buddha speaks about this.

I want to share with you a passage from the Upanisa Sutta, the Discourse on Supporting Conditions, which I quoted in my last talk. The Buddha says: "Just as when the gods pour rain and heavy drops and crash thunder on the upper mountains, the water flowing down along the slopes fills the mountain cliffs and rifts and gullies. When the mountain cliffs and rifts and gullies are full, they fill the little ponds. When the little ponds are full, they fill the big lakes. When the big lakes are full, they fill the little rivers. When the little rivers are full, they fill the big rivers. And when the big rivers are full, they fill the great ocean."

In the same way—and I'm paraphrasing here—this is how the practice unfolds. We practice. There's this quality of awareness and sensitivity to impermanence. And through that, the practice unfolds naturally. It leads to the great ocean of awakening. That's all we need to do. Wisdom unfolds on its own. It does its job when we do our job of practice.

So I want to mention some things about what helps allow the mind to be sensitive to impermanence. I'll divide what we're doing into two different aspects—there are many ways of dividing it up, but I want to do it this way to explain more clearly.

When we engage in this practice, there's a quality of awareness that we're beginning to cultivate. As so many teachers have talked about, it's awareness infused with intelligence and kindness. Along with this, there's a sensitivity not only to the awareness of experience, but to how experience changes—how it unfolds, how it arises and passes away, or how there's some kind of alteration within it.

A simple way of putting this second part, the sensitivity to impermanence, is having this quality of mind of curiosity about what happens next. So it's not only "thinking"—what happens next? And then it disappears. There's a pain in my knee. Okay, there's pain, the experience of pain. Then it increases, then it decreases, then it spreads, then it contracts. There's a quality of alteration. Or a state of mind: aversion. It actually increases. Then it decreases, then increases. Or maybe it comes and goes very, very quickly. It's noticing what happens next—just a sensitivity to it.

There's a wonderful poem by the poet Ted Kooser that I feel really elucidates this quality of mind that we want. Ted Kooser was one of the poet laureates about six or seven years ago. The poem is called "A Happy Birthday." He begins:

This evening I sat by an open window and read till the light was gone, and the book was no more than a part of the darkness. I could easily have switched on a lamp, but I wanted to ride this day down into night. And to sit alone and smooth the unreadable page with the pale gray ghost of my hand.

Do you hear the simple event he's describing? He's sitting in the evening by an open window, reading, and the light is going. He has a choice. He could have easily switched on a lamp, but instead he's with the disappearance—the disappearance of reading. He can really see this unfolding of arising and passing away.

What I appreciate about this poem is that I think it speaks to what we usually do with our experiences. An experience happens, and then we move on to another experience by turning on the light. We see one experience and then go to another, but we don't see how the experience unfolds.

The best example of this is watching television. I think it's one of the worst things for our meditation, because what it does is flash an experience at us, and rather than seeing the arising of that frame and the passing away of it, there's another flash to keep the mind interested. We no longer get to see the unfolding of experience. We get flashes of exciting experience to keep the mind engaged. It's not so good for insight into impermanence.

So the mind can get habituated in that way, where we just see things but we're not seeing how they unfold.

Actually, one small caveat about this, just because I think it's fascinating. I do this work with trauma called somatic experiencing, usually around psychological trauma. And it's really incredible. I know this when I'm working with clients and also when I'm assisting, trying to teach other people how to do this. The one essential skill that's so helpful in navigating issues of trauma is this ability to notice how things change.

A lot of times when I work with people, I'll ask them again and again, "So what are you noticing?" And then they'll report what they're noticing. And then I'll have them pay attention to it and I'll ask them—I say this so often—"Can you notice if it's increasing or decreasing or changing in some way?" Or I'll ask the question, "Now if you could pay attention to that and then notice what happens next." So it's priming,

priming to see how experience unfolds.

Because a lot of times the mind gets stuck. It's like there's a feeling of fear and then the mind all of a sudden feels like, "Uh-oh, this is going to be around forever and it's going to ruin my life." You ever have that thought? It's actually just another mind state that's arising and passing away.

So what will help with this sensitivity? What I remember is a quote from the musical composer John Cage. Do you know who John Cage was? The radical avant-garde musician. He said, "I'm trying to become unfamiliar with what I'm doing."

This can be wonderful to remember, especially in the middle of a retreat when the mind starts to become familiar with experience. Can you remain unfamiliar with what you're doing moment after moment after moment? When the mind is unfamiliar with experience, it's sensitive, it's aware, and it can notice how things are unfolding.

The other thing to remember is something I recall from an interview with Sayadaw U Pandita. Before the interview, I was thinking, "Now this is a good report. This is a really good report. I really nailed it this time." So I went in there feeling pretty good about my report and really went over the details. And he said only one thing to me. He said, "Don't look for something."

It was some of the best advice I had gotten in my practice. I noticed that I was looking for something. And as a result of looking for something, I was missing what was arising and passing away in the moment.

So it's important to have this quality of sensitivity to how things arise and pass away or how they change, but not looking for it. In this relaxed manner of just allowing the mind to soak that in, the mind can be noticing an experience just for a fraction of a second and still be sensitive to how it arises and passes away. For example, a quick sound or a quick sensation. Or it could be with something of long duration, like a pain, noticing how it's changing. It's the sensitivity to it rather than the looking for it.

And it really is this simple. When the mind sees impermanence again and again and again, it begins to dismantle our habitual ways of relating to the world. It begins to deconstruct this false world that we create again and again and again, simply by seeing what's going on moment after moment after moment.

Paul Cézanne, the French impressionistic painter, said, "The day is coming when a single carrot freshly observed will set off a revolution." I actually feel that what you're doing here on this retreat sets off a revolution with this fresh quality of observing. And I don't mean that lightly. I mean a true revolution. A revolution where the mind begins to get liberated.

Also, when you're engaging in this practice—this simple practice of being aware of experience and how it unfolds—when you remain receptive to impermanence, I feel like it changes the world that we live in, the world that you live in. Because when that happens, it's as if then, when we're practicing, in those moments of practicing, everything is supporting us to awaken. Everything is giving us this teaching of

impermanence.

There's a Chinese poet by the name of Su Tung-p'o who I feel put this really beautifully, this realization that when one is practicing, everything is calling us to awakening. He says:

The sounds of the valley streams are his long, broad tongue.
The forms of the mountains are his pure body.
In this night, I heard the myriad sutras uttered.
How can I relate to others what they say?

So when you remain receptive to impermanence, it's as if the Buddha himself is teaching moment after moment. The Buddha is teaching moment after moment through this revealing of impermanence. Can you remain open to that?

I actually want to spend a little time telling a few stories of what it looks like when we begin to ride the bike of impermanence—when we begin to really get in our bones and in our body this insight into impermanence. Sometimes I like to tell stories of the old great practitioners such as Ajahn Mun or the venerable Ajahn Chah. But at other times, I would rather share with you stories about practitioners that are just like you and me. Practitioners that come on retreat and then come back into their daily life and then might go back on retreat, but they're not monastics. They're just like us. So these are not the big grand stories, just the small ones, but I think they're significant. I think they elucidate something important.

This is the first story. There was a practitioner I've been working with for a few years, and I think it was two years ago, she was living in a city which, as most of you know, the housing market got really hammered. The value of her house dropped, and she had bought this house when the market was at its high, but she needed to move. She had no other choice. So she sold it for a huge loss, basically lost all of her savings.

What she shared with me was striking. She said there was just this sense of loss. And then for some reason—and she really attributed it to her practice, and like you, she had done some long retreats and shorter retreats and was really dedicated to the practice—she said there was just this simple turn in the mind that made such a huge difference, where it went from a loss to, "Oh, wow, this is an opportunity. This is an opportunity for me to have this quality of generosity—to have this quality of generosity to the young woman who is buying my house. She gets to have such a great deal on this house, and she's going to enjoy it."

Really small, right? It was just a change in terms of how she was seeing it. But I feel that when we get this insight into impermanence in our bodies, there can be so much more flexibility, a malleability, so that the mind can move with these changing circumstances. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could allow generosity to arise like that, just in small circumstances like that? It makes such a huge difference for ourselves and

for the people around us. And this comes from beginning to ride the bike of this insight into impermanence.

I want to point out that she wasn't doing anything to make this happen. Wisdom does its work when we do our work of the practice. Wisdom arises.

One of the things I notice in my own life is that there's a little more flexibility in terms of relating to others and relating to myself—in terms of how we can box others in with concepts and how we can box ourselves in with concepts.

One story about this. Some friends of mine have two children, and one is, I think, five years old now, and the other one is seven years old. When we go over to their house, my mind can very easily slip into thinking, "Oh, that one, the boy, he's really shy and kind of withdrawn. But the little girl, she's very extroverted. She likes to really be out there in what she says and the way she acts." What I realized is that if I hold those concepts about them—in some ways they can be useful—but if I hold them, I'm boxing them in. I'm boxing them in to have this expectation of how they behave. And when I do that, I don't see as much what happens outside the box.

Have you ever had that experience when people do that to you, how confined it is when we're kept in a box? When you ride the bike of impermanence, there can be this intimacy where we really get to meet ourselves and other people in a whole different way—not in the fixed conceptual world.

I do want to point out, though, that while we're treading this path, this path towards awakening, even with deep insight, there's still this human experience that we experience around impermanence, which I think is important to name and to speak about a little bit. I'd like to elucidate it by a haiku poem by the poet Issa. This is a haiku that he wrote at the burial of his two-year-old daughter. It was either the fourth or fifth child that he had lost. And I think you know the pain of losing a child. It's that pain that comes when we lose someone that we expect to go after us, not before us. It really gives it a deeper kind of pain.

On that occasion, he wrote these three lines: "The world of dew is only a world of dew, and yet…"

The world is just impermanent. Things arise and pass away. And yet we cry and we're torn by loss. It's the challenge of grief, the pain that can arise from that. We still need to navigate that in this world and to have that quality of presence of this awareness. And in some ways it offers a promise.

There's one poem which I feel offers a promise that we can navigate through grief. It's by David Whyte, called "The Well of Grief":

Those who will not slip beneath the still surface on the well of grief, turning down to its black water, to the place that we cannot breathe, will never know the source from which we drink, the secret water, cold and clear, nor find in the darkness the small gold coins thrown by those who wished for something else.

Striking, isn't it? Those who are unwilling to slip beneath the still surface of grief. I think it's such a

striking image—that we need to slip beneath the surface of it, to go into its black water, to the source from which we drink. And I'm so struck by what's found: those small gold coins thrown by those who wished for something else. It's those gold coins that help us begin to understand the suffering of others, where compassion can truly arise.

I want to end by repeating this simple practice, making sure our awareness or intention stays in the right place. It's really just this simple practice of being aware—being aware of what's going on and noticing, having the sensitivity, the willingness to notice how it unfolds. And that's all that's needed to steer us towards awakening.

One of my teachers, the Venerable Sakyong Rinpoche, has a beautiful image of what we're doing here. He says it's kind of like the rudder of a ship. So often when we're on this ship of practice, we get lost in making sure the ship is nicely painted, making sure everything on deck is just so. But actually, all we're doing is simply turning the rudder just a little bit. It's a very small turn of the mind—a small turning of the mind towards awareness, towards this awareness that has intelligence and kindness to it. It's really slight, this sensitivity to impermanence. Yet if you were to start on the California coast and have that rudder change just a little bit, it radically changes the direction, the entire direction that your life is going in.

So may our insight into impermanence together lead to the liberation of all beings.

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