Three Aspects of Realisation

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Tonight we'll talk about the three aspects of realisation, beginning with a quote from the Buddha: "These things play a part in realisation: the perception of impermanence, the perception of pain in impermanence, the perception of not-self in pain."

So this is what we're going to have a look at tonight, going through the three characteristics which characterize the Buddha's understanding of insight.

We start with change, which we were talking about this morning. As we discussed, this concept of anicca—impermanence or change—is central to the Buddha's teaching. For him, delusion is characterized by a denial of impermanence, and awakening is characterized by a clear perception of it.

Let's begin by looking at what we mean by impermanence. Well, two things that it is not. It's not a philosophical theory of change, although it's often treated like this. A philosophical theory may hold our interest, but it's not going to lead to awakening. Anybody who knows philosophers knows that. And equally, it's not our normal everyday sense of change, which we share with everybody else on the planet, because this also does not lead to awakening.

So what is the Buddha talking about? We'll start by looking at the word itself, because in Pali it tells us something that we don't get with this very bland, abstract "impermanence." The Pali word is anicca. The "a" is the negative prefix—not. Not nicca. But what does nicca mean? In everyday Pali, nicca means stable, constant, permanent. And in everyday usage, it refers to what can be relied upon. For example, dāna is gift, and a nicca-dāna is a perpetual gift, an endowment that can be relied upon for a very long time. Bhatta is food, so nicca-bhatta is a continuous and therefore reliable food supply. And so on.

So if something is anicca, not nicca, this means not just that it changes, but that it is unstable, inconstant, discontinuous, and therefore unreliable. Not to be depended upon, not to be trusted. And this is where we see the link between anicca and dukkha, where dukkha is pain, suffering, dis-ease.

When I first started reading the Buddha's teaching, I read about this business about anicca. I thought, that sounds reasonably straightforward. And because things are anicca, therefore they are dukkha. That, I have to say, I couldn't figure out. What is the matter with this person? Seriously—if you had life without change, that would be better? What is going on here? It just didn't click at all. It took a long time before I began to understand what the Buddha was talking about.

If we rely on something unreliable, what happens? Sooner or later, we are disappointed. It's built in.

Now, in the Buddha's time, the idea of the nitya—or in Sanskrit, nitya—the permanent, was very important in the dharma philosophies of the time. The permanent in the ancient tradition is the ground of things that gives them their stability. For example, in the Upanishads, the nitya, the permanent, is ātman, self—the essential self that underlies everything. In other traditions, if we move beyond India, the nitya might be God, for example.

But what the Buddha is saying is that we cannot find any such ground. It appears that there is nothing that underlies and stabilises our experience of the world. In other words, it's change all the way down.

And it's important, again, to get a sense of what he's talking about, where he's coming from. For him, this is an empirical statement. It's not an ideological statement.

So the Buddha is not saying believe that there is no ground that stabilises your experience or you will not be saved. He's not saying that at all. What he's saying is—if I can put words in his mouth—see if you can find anything in your experience that does not change. And by the way, good luck with that. I'm sure he wouldn't have said that.

So this is the Buddha's empiricism, and getting a sense of his empiricism is central to understanding what he's talking about. The Buddha is not teaching an ideology that will explain the world to us. That's not his project. What he's teaching is an open inquiry into the nature of human experience. And to aid that inquiry, he provides us with maps of experience. One part of the map is that he will map human experience into three universal characteristics: anicca, dukkha, anatta—change, pain, not-self. But these are characteristics of experience. He's not saying they are characteristics of the objective world. He's saying these are characteristics of experience, because his project is to encourage his students to look and see for themselves. Is he right about these characteristics? So for example, can you find some aspect of your experience that does not change?

We start with impermanence, change, which we also talked about this morning. And then we have this link between change and dukkha, pain. Because what happens when we begin to recognise that whatever we try to rely upon turns out to be unreliable? Well, obviously, we become anxious. That's the obvious response. And we could even say that if we have not felt anxiety because of impermanence, we haven't yet perceived impermanence to any depth. The perception of impermanence goes a lot deeper than anything intellectual. When we really understand the fact of change, when we really start to get it, this moves us in some way.

So for the Buddha, the perception of impermanence is linked to apprehension because it gives us a felt sense of the unreliability of things, a felt sense of the essential fragility of life itself. If we are not moved by our experience of change, we haven't yet perceived impermanence in the way the Buddha is talking about.

Another way of looking at it is to say that the perception of impermanence creates anxiety because it

uncovers our attachment. What alarms me is not change as such, but the fact that things change away from the way I want them to be. Or they change in ways unpredictable by me. Or they change in ways that are uncontrollable. That's what alarms me. Life is uncertain, and whatever I seek to rely upon turns out to be unreliable—if for no other reason, then that it doesn't last. So when I look for security, what I find is insecurity. And this is what creates the pain in change.

As our practice develops, we move from the perception of impermanence to the perception of dukkha, the pain at the core of being. Or we could call it the disappointment which is inherent in clinging, in holding on. The perception of impermanence is linked to the perception of pain, and it's also linked to the perception of not-self. This is anatta. As we go deeper into them, it becomes increasingly clear that these three characteristics are interlinked. We could even say that they are three aspects of the same existential situation. It's like a three-sided coin, you could say.

Impermanence connects to pain in terms of the anxiety that it generates. How does it connect to not-self? As we practice and as our understanding of impermanence deepens, we begin to realise that what we regard as ourselves is also subject to change, inconstancy and unreliability. But of course this is difficult to accept, and we spend a great deal of energy resisting or denying our own impermanence.

So let's look at how we do that. What we do is we structure our experience to create the illusion of a permanent self. Now, just to point out again, we're talking about something experiential, not philosophical. When the Buddha says permanent, he doesn't necessarily mean lasting forever and ever and ever. What he's talking about is not changing over time—something that over a period of time does not change. This is permanent, regardless of the unit of time. And hence one reason why the Buddha is so preoccupied by what he calls self. What does it take to be a self? For example, to be a Patrick, a Dharma teacher Patrick.

What does it take to be that? Well, there has to be something in this self that remains unchanged over time. The Patrick who begins this talk has to be the same Patrick who ends it. The Patrick who is teaching this retreat has to be the same Patrick who has been teaching Dharma for a long time and plans to continue to do so into the future.

But if we're talking about experience, which is what the Buddha is talking about, what is there about this present experience of Patrick that actually remains unchanged over time? What the Buddha is betting is that if I have a close look at this, I won't find anything. Yet the self appears to be stable and, in the Buddha's term, permanent. And what gives it its apparent stability is concept.

So for the Buddha, the self that we take for granted as real, as ourselves, is real only as a concept. Now he's not knocking the concept. It's a useful concept. It's even a necessary concept if we're going to function in the world. But it is only a concept.

I relate to the world through a screen of concepts. And as we practice, we get a sense of this because we

see the mind constantly throwing up concepts. What are these concepts doing? They're explaining to ourselves who we are and what this situation is. So the world for me is what I conceive it to be. I am who I conceive myself to be.

My concept of myself is very stable. I think of myself as the same person who was born all those decades ago, who was raised in that particular house, in that particular suburb, who went to this school and that university and so on. I have a past in which I exist. Yet if I look now for the present experience of that person I was in the past, I can't find it. The experiences have vanished, but the concepts constructed from the experiences persuade me that somehow they still exist, stored somewhere.

I've reached a certain age in which I talk to my friends and we find endless amusement in explaining to each other how our bodies are falling apart. I can remember looking at old people do this and thinking, "God, what a lot of boring old farts." And now I'm one of them. But sometimes the ultimate delusion comes out in these discussions, expressed something like, "But I feel the same inside." Sure. But this is the self. Oh yes, the body's falling apart, but I'm really the same as that person who could do this and that and the other which I can't possibly do today. This is concept. It's got nothing to do with present experience.

So we project onto our experience what it does not contain. We assume there is a stable someone who is experiencing all of this, this right here. Our perception is not simply that this now is happening, but rather this now is happening to someone. This is happening to me. Does anybody here get the sense that this retreat is happening to them?

This experience, this retreat for example, is about someone—it's about me. It's for someone—it's for me. And this is, of course, simply a projection, but it's this projection that tells me how important or unimportant this whole experience is. This projection is done through three interrelated activities that together, according to the Buddha, create a sense of a self, a permanent self. These are craving, conceit, and view.

So let's get back to the beginning: impermanence. You notice that this list—anicca, dukkha, anattā; change, pain, not-self—always appears in that order. Always. Why in that order? Well, partly it's because they're listed from gross to subtle, from the most obvious to the least obvious. Change is relatively easy to recognize. Dukkha, in the sense that the Buddha is using it, is much more subtle and more difficult to connect with.

And not-self is more subtle and completely counterintuitive. So it tends to be the most hidden.

There's also a sense in which it is possible to *do* impermanence. Our preoccupation with change—we are, in a sense, conjuring up the perception of impermanence. We can do that. But we cannot conjure up the perception of dukkha. I mean, we could get a hammer and bash our knees, but this would not be the perception of dukkha the way the Buddha is talking about. And we cannot conjure up the perception of not-self because who's conjuring it up? It just doesn't work.

So in the practice, what we're doing is uncovering impermanence. And we do this essentially by paying attention to change, to transitions. To do this, we go deep into the specifics of experience, the particularities of experience. We learn to attend to the most mundane aspects of our experience. And if we're attending to these aspects of experience, we're valuing them. So we start to value what normally we just completely overlook—like, for example, breathing. Because we're not interested in seeing particular things or having a certain kind of experience. What we want to do is to discover how experience itself moves.

We could compare it to looking for a needle in a haystack. The needle is very small and very mysterious while the haystack is very large. So the task is enormous to find that needle. And of course the needle represents enlightenment or some other kind of special insight. The hay represents our normal, everyday experience, which we have come to see as unsatisfactory—which is why we are here in this retreat looking for something, looking for something special, something to justify all the trouble we have taken to come and do this practice. So we're going carefully through the haystack, looking under each tiny blade, hoping one day to find that elusive needle.

Eventually, we realise that what we're looking for is hay. In other words, what we're looking for is already here. Impermanence, change, is already happening. It's just that we have trained ourselves not to notice it. So we need to return to the obvious. We need to return to what we assume we already know and learn to see it anew—which is what we've been talking about. And hence, this is why we've been so preoccupied with the experience of distraction, because it illustrates impermanence, it illustrates change very well.

I'm sitting and I'm keeping my awareness on my meditation object and suddenly I realise I'm thinking of something that happened yesterday or may happen tomorrow. Did I make a conscious decision? "Time to have a good think." Or did it just happen despite my intention to stay on the meditation object? Usually it's the latter. And if I go through this experience enough, then I begin to notice that not only does experience change—it swings, for example, between meditation object and distraction—but I do not control these changes. They just happen.

When we begin our meditation practice, we assume that we are in charge of the project. If we persist in it long enough and go deeply enough, we realise we are not in charge of the project. If anything, the project is in charge of me.

So the practice of becoming intimate with distraction can show us all three of the characteristics. Everything is changing—impermanence. We are not in control of these changes—pain. And there appears to be no one at all in charge—not-self. These characteristics are here already in every experience. It's just that we tend not to notice them.

Now, getting back to the perception of impermanence, we begin with the observation that it is obvious that things change. But the question is *how* do they change? So our job as practitioners aiming for insight is to become connoisseurs of change. It's like people who are wine buffs and they can tell the difference

between this wine and that one, and which is slightly better than the other. They're connoisseurs of a particular kind of experience. Our job is to become connoisseurs of change.

So we're interested in the fact that one thing becomes another. We're particularly interested in the intersections of experience, the transitions from one experience to another. Things arise and cease. They begin and they end. Experiences arise and cease. They begin and they end. Do I see the arising? Do I see the beginnings of things? Do I see cessation? Do I see the end of things? Or am I missing something?

And if I'm missing something, maybe it's because I'm in the middle of things. Remember we talked about change while enduring—the place between beginnings and ends. This is where I perceive a stability which I simply assume is there. But is it really as stable as I assume? When I look closely, does it move in any way?

This kind of work is very mundane. We're just staying with the elemental qualities of experience—the movements of breathing, the sensations of the body, the feel of thinking. But we discover that every breath, every thought has a beginning, a middle, and an end. If they had no beginning, they would not arise, and so they would never be noticed. If they had no end, they would never leave. And if they had no middle—the space between beginning and end—they would be coming and going so quickly that again, we wouldn't notice them.

Sometimes I have the experience that I'm staying with my meditation object and everything seems smooth. Does this smoothness itself change? And the meditation object—is it really the same as it was before, or is it different in some ways? Is it changing? If it is changing, how is it changing? Is it like waves? And if they're waves, are they choppy or smooth? Is the meditation object more strobe-like? And if so, are the edges clear or not clear?

When things change, awareness moves from one object to another. Does it move because the initial object just ended and a new one began? Or is it that the new object attracts me before the old one has ended? These are different flavours of change. When the experience is gone, is it completely gone with no trace remaining, or is something still lingering? Is there some kind of aftertaste?

And of course, another flavour of the perception of impermanence that we've already talked about is noticing that this experience now is new. The freshness of things is another flavour.

So these are all different aspects of impermanence. As we become interested in change—not looking for any of these in particular (if something grabs you then fine, run with it)—but simply being interested in the fact of change, being curious about it. Is this the same or is it different?

When we played around with this earlier, we looked at the relationship between the meditation object and the mind which knows the meditation object. The meditation object is changing, but so does the mind which knows it. Sometimes we like the meditation object. Sometimes we dislike it. Sometimes we think the experience is good. Sometimes we think the experience is bad. Sometimes we find meditation satisfying.

Sometimes we find it unsatisfying.

And in the midst of all these changes, can we drop our obsession with how we think things should be long enough to see how they actually are and how they change? Can we drop our preoccupation with the object of experience long enough to check the mind that is aware of the object? Is that mind changing?

So as you can see, there's a lot in it. There's a lot in this perception of impermanence. And again, it is something that we do, or can learn to do. But the key point is just to become interested in transitions—to become interested in the fact that this now is different from what it was before.

So it's quite fundamentally simple, but there's an element of interest, of curiosity in it. What's happening now? What's new now?

How can we see into impermanence deeply enough to be transformed by it? And why is it transformational? Well, basically, it's when we recognize that everything changes, including the person who is experiencing the change.

When the Buddha talks about enlightenment, he talks about it essentially as process, and he has four landmark stages of this process. The fourth one is full awakening, which we won't talk about here because we'd just be caught up in theory. The first one is sometimes called in the early discourses the vision of Dharma, and sometimes it's called stream entry. This is the initial glimpse of what's really going on. There's a little Pali verse that describes this insight, appearing again and again: *yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ*—which roughly translated means, "Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease." Whatever has the nature of beginning, all of that has the nature to end.

Now, what this represents is an understanding of and acceptance of change all the way to the bottom—which of course reminds us of the old Indian story, apparently first reported by Europeans in the sixteenth century. I looked it up.

There's a learned Brahmin who's teaching his son cosmology, the nature of the universe. In classical Indian culture, the universe consists of four great continents—one to the north, one to the south, one to the east, and one to the west. India is the southern continent. In the middle is Mount Meru, and at the top of Mount Meru is the heaven of the gods of the thirty-three. Surrounding the four great continents, holding it all together, is the great ocean, and surrounding the great ocean, holding it all together, is the great wind. So this is the nature of the world as understood in the Buddha's time.

The learned Brahmin is teaching his son, and his son is very bright and very inquisitive. He's thinking about this and says, "But what's underneath all this? What holds it up?" The father is very pleased with his son's curiosity and intelligence, and he says, "Well, underneath each of the four great continents there's a big horse holding it up." Of course the son is really impressed by this. He thinks about it and says, "But what's holding up the horses?" "Underneath each horse there's a great elephant keeping it firmly in place."

Well, that's a relief. "What's holding up the elephants?" "I'm glad you asked that question, my boy. Under each elephant there's a great turtle. It brings stability to the whole system." The young lad is really impressed by this. But then he asks the crucial question: "What's underneath the turtles?" At this point his father says, "My boy, it's turtles all the way down."

And this is the teaching of impermanence. It is turtles all the way down.

The perception of impermanence matures when the mind realizes the necessity of change—not just that things change, but the necessity of it. The fact that change is built into the very nature of experience itself. This is what makes it a universal characteristic. Every experienced event arises and ceases, and it arises and ceases dependent upon other experienced events. Nothing happens in isolation. This is their nature. This is what defines them.

So the realization of the universality of change, and therefore the futility of resisting it, is the entrance into *aniccasaññā*, the perception of impermanence or the perception of change. As this perception becomes increasingly obvious, we begin to shed our attachments because the futility of holding becomes increasingly obvious.

Change is inherent to the very structure of experience, the very patterning of it, which means that the self—who we take ourselves to be—must also be impermanent and therefore not worth clinging to. If self itself changes, if nothing can be held onto as self, then holding on to it makes no sense. There's a natural tendency to let go.

But if it's turtles all the way down, if I have no ground as a self, and if holding on makes no sense, isn't this annihilation? Many people believe that the Buddha was teaching some kind of annihilation. When the perception of change is mixed with the perception of dukkha, of pain, what we have is a sense of the groundlessness of experience—but with this, a reaction of fear arises.

And this is a very natural response, one to be expected when we go deeply into this practice—this intuition of the groundlessness of experience. It arises in all sorts of quite mundane ways.

For example, it's quite common that people will suddenly slide into a samādhi state where the mind is completely still, where there's no thought, where everything is so subtle that you can't pick out any particular thing. It's very pleasant. You would think the response would be, "Oh, this is great! I think I'll just hang out here for a few hours." But often the response is, "Oh my God, what's going on?" And people will pull themselves out of the experience because of fear, a sense of alarm, because the familiar ground isn't there.

We could call it a fear of falling. If there's no ground, I'm falling into an abyss. And what happens then? This fear of falling is an existential rejection of not-self, because I feel I have to have a ground. If I don't have a firm foundation, I'm in deep trouble. I can't survive. So there's a reaction against free-fall.

But what happens when we find ourselves in free fall and realise there's nothing to fall onto? Because if there's no ground, there's nothing to fall against, and therefore nothing to fear. Free fall becomes free. What happens when we take the "fall" away from the "free"? What are we left with? Freedom.

This is the freedom of not-self. Self is attractive because what it appears to give is a foundation—to us and to the world. We construct a self because we need a ground, a solid foundation. But when we go through the anxiety of groundlessness and come out on the other side, we recognise that not only can we not find a ground, we do not need a ground. It's actually surplus to requirements.

When this realisation hits, when it really goes all the way to the bottom, as it were, this is what the Buddha calls the Dhamma Cakkhu, the vision of Dhamma. This is the first stage of awakening, the first glimpse into what's really going on. And life from there is different.

Though even at this point, there will be times when we forget this vision, forget what we've seen, and the view of self and clinging to it will reappear. But it will be much weaker than it was before. And once it's noticed, it will fade away again. Our baseline has changed.

At this point, we enter into the Noble Eightfold Path. You've all heard of the Eightfold Path, but you'll notice that sometimes people call it the Noble Eightfold Path, the Ariya Eightfold Path. Strictly speaking, the Ariya, the Noble Eightfold Path begins at this first stage of awakening. Until then, we're just on the Eightfold Path.

So there's been a significant, fundamental turning point in life and in the practice, but it is just a turning point. My teacher John Hale once commented—we were cheerfully gossiping about our fellow meditators, about who had attained the first stage and who had not—he frowned and said, "Stream enterers..." This is the other way of expressing it: to enter the stream. You're with the current now. You're not fighting against the current. You've been taken toward full awakening, and it's inevitable. You will get there. It might take a while, but you'll get there. And he said, "Stream enterers—they're almost as bad as ordinary people." I think he's right.

But how is life on the Noble Eightfold Path? I'm reminded of a Zen teaching given by my old Zen teacher, Robert Aitken Roshi, who once raised the question: What is the difference between an unawakened person and an awakened one?

Would you like to know the difference?

The unawakened person wakes up in the morning, goes to the bathroom, has breakfast, and goes to work.

The awakened person wakes up in the morning, goes to the bathroom, has breakfast, and goes to work.

And that's the difference.

So as you can see, it is a very significant difference.

With that final confusing thought, I think we've had enough for tonight.

Thank you very much.

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