Three Aspects of Realisation

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 53:35

Tonight we will talk about the three aspects of realization. Here we're continuing the theme of insight—what exactly insight means from the Buddha's perspective. We take as our text this brief teaching: "These things play a part in realization: the perception of impermanence, the perception of pain in impermanence, the perception of not-self in pain."

This is a very brief presentation of the three characteristics, and what we'll do tonight is go through them. We begin, of course, with impermanence.

When the Buddha lists these three characteristics, it's always in this order: anicca, dukkha, anattā—change, pain, not-self. The concept of change or impermanence, anicca, is absolutely central to the Buddha's teaching. He could say that what characterises delusion is a denial of impermanence, while awakening is characterised by a clear perception of impermanence. It's absolutely central, which means we have to work out what the Buddha means by anicca, classically translated as impermanence.

To begin with, it's not a philosophical theory of change. If there is such a theory, it may be interesting intellectually, but it's not going to lead to awakening. Equally, it's not our normal, everyday sense of change, which everybody knows, because that too is not going to lead to awakening. So what is the Buddha talking about?

We start with the word itself, anicca. *A* is the negative, so "not," and *nicca* is the stem—so "not nicca," where nicca means stable, constant, permanent. This is Pali language, and in ordinary everyday Pali, when people are not speaking about the Dhamma, nicca is often used to refer to what can be relied upon. For example, dāna—you know the meaning of dāna: gift, giving. So you have the expression nicca dāna. A nicca dāna is a perpetual gift, what we might call an endowment—something that can be relied upon to last for a very long time. Bhatta is food, so nicca bhatta is a continuous and therefore reliable food supply.

So anicca, impermanent, means unstable, inconstant, discontinuous, and therefore unreliable—not to be depended upon, not to be trusted. This is where you can see the link between anicca and dukkha, where dukkha is pain, suffering, dis-ease. If we rely on something unreliable, sooner or later we are disappointed. It's built in. And of course we find in our life that we are disappointed again and again.

This is essentially what the Buddha is talking about. Now, in the context of the culture in which he was teaching, the idea of the nicca, or in Sanskrit the nitya, the permanent—this is very important in the doctrines of the day. In the Upanishads, to give it the Sanskrit name, nitya is the ground of things, which gives them their stability. In the Upanishads, the nitya is ātman, self. In the Upanishads, ātman is the

essential self that underlies everything—permanent, stable, unchanging. In other traditions, the nitya might be God, so God would play the role of the nitya.

But what the Buddha is saying—and it was radical in his day—is that we cannot find any such ground. When we examine our experience and how experience flows, we cannot find anything that underlies what we experience as the world. We cannot find anything that stabilises what we experience as the world. It's change all the way down.

Again, it's important to recognise the Buddha is not making a doctrinal statement here. This is an empirical statement. It's not ideological. It's not philosophical. In other words, he's not saying, "Believe that there is no ground that stabilises your experience or you will not be saved." He's not saying that. What he's saying is: see if you can find anything in your experience that does not change.

And he might add, and by the way, good luck with that.

So this is an empirical approach. This is all about empiricism. It's about the nature of human experience. The Buddha is not teaching an ideology which, if we believe it, will save us. What he's teaching is an open inquiry into the nature of human experience. But he maps human experience, and he maps it in part according to these three universal characteristics: anicca, dukkha, anattā—change, pain, not-self. And these characteristics are characteristics of experience. They are not doctrines to be believed. Whether or not one believes them is utterly irrelevant. They are experiential, not theoretical.

So his project is to encourage his students to look and see for themselves. Is he right about these characteristics? Can you, for example, find some aspect of your experience that does not change? This is the challenge.

The Buddha feels that if we embark on this search, we might recognise that whatever we seek to rely upon turns out to be unreliable because it changes. And when we recognise this, the natural human response is to become anxious. We could 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, this moves us in some way. And for the Buddha, the perception of impermanence is linked to apprehension, to anxiety, because it involves 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 perceived impermanence in the sense that the Buddha is talking about.

One aspect of this which I personally am becoming more familiar with is in the process of ageing, where it turns out that our body is much more fragile than we assumed it to be. I don't know—have you reached the age where you get together with your friends and you start talking about how your respective bodies are falling apart? Anicca.

Another way of looking at it is 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 from the way I want them to be, or they change in ways that are unpredictable to me, or they change in ways that are uncontrollable by me. Change is inherent in life, and everybody knows this. But the perception of impermanence, and the perception of dukkha in impermanence, involves realising that I cannot control these changes.

Life is inherently uncertain. Whatever I seek to rely upon turns out to be unreliable in the sense that sooner or later it will fail me. Life disappoints. This is what creates the pain in change.

In the practice, we move from the perception of impermanence to the perception of dukkha—the pain at the core of our being and the disappointment which is built into clinging. The Buddha links the perception of impermanence to the perception of pain and also to the perception of not-self, anattā. As we go deeper in the practice, we start to explore these characteristics, and it does become increasingly clear that they're interlinked. We could even say that they're three sides of the same existential situation. We could go so far as to say they constitute a three-sided coin.

Impermanence connects to pain in terms of the anxiety that it generates. How does it connect to not-self? We're doing the practice and going deeper, and we may begin to realise that what we regard as ourselves is also subject to change, inconstancy, unreliability. But this is very difficult to accept, and we spend a great deal of energy denying or resisting our own impermanence. For example, we learn to structure our experience to create the illusion of a permanent self.

Now remember that for the Buddha, "permanent" does not necessarily mean lasting forever and ever. Again, we're talking about an experience, not a theory. For the Buddha, something is permanent if it can be seen as not changing over time. So to be a self—let's say, for example, to be Patrick—then this self has to remain unchanged over time. The Patrick who begins giving this dharma talk has to be the Patrick who finishes it. The Patrick who is giving this talk must be the same one, the same person, the same Patrick who has been teaching dharma for a long time and plans to continue to do so in the future.

In other words, there's an assumption of stability over time. There's an assumption of permanence that's built into the experience of self. But as we talked about the other night, what is there about this present experience of Patrick that remains unchanged over time? And as we talked about before, what gives the self an apparent stability is concept.

We take the self for granted as real. We take it for granted as ourselves. But for the Buddha, it's real only as a concept.

Now, this is not knocking it. Self is a useful concept. In fact, it's a necessary concept. We need a healthy sense of self to function in the world. But it is only a concept.

So I relate to the world through a screen of concepts. The world is what I conceive it to be. I am who I

conceive myself to be. And 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 house, who went to this school, who wandered off to that country, who did this thing, and so on and so forth. There's an assumption of stability over time.

But when I look now for the present experience of that person I was in the past, I can't find it. The experiences have all vanished, but the concepts constructed from those experiences persuade me that somehow they still exist, that they're stored somewhere. And the concepts persuade me that I—the person who underwent those experiences—is the same person as the person sitting here tonight. All of this is real only as concept.

And speaking of getting elderly, the universal complaint of the elderly whose bodies are decaying is: "But I feel the same inside." Now what feels the same inside is self. It's a concept. Meanwhile, the actual mind-body process is revealing itself as increasingly unreliable in the world of direct experience.

So we project onto our experience that which it does not contain. We assume a stable someone who is experiencing all of this. Our perception is not simply that this now is happening. Our perception is that this is happening to someone—it's happening to me. And that this now is about someone—it's about me. It may be that you're sitting in this room thinking that this retreat is all about you. Actually, it's about me.

This is a projection, and the projection of self is a construct. It's constructed through three interrelated activities that together create a sense of a permanent self. These three activities are craving, conceit, and view—taṇhā, māna, and diṭṭhi. If we were really going deeply into not-self, we would look at all three: craving, conceit, and view. But let's return to impermanence. We can see it's important—it's the gateway, the entry.

So how do we uncover the fact of impermanence? Essentially, it's by learning to pay attention to change. We talked about momentary immersion, khaṇika samādhi, or momentary samādhi. This is what we're cultivating in this practice. We track experience as it moves. We're not trying to attain stillness by holding onto a single object. We want to go deeply into the particularities of experience. We want to see how experience moves and shifts.

When we do this, what we're learning to attend to are the most mundane aspects of experience. And of course, what we attend to is what we value. What we pay attention to is what we think is important. In this practice, we attend to the most mundane aspects of experience, and so we learn to value them. This is why we point out that we're not interested in seeing particular things or having a certain kind of experience. What we're interested in is discovering how experience itself moves.

I think a good image—one I read many years ago, I forget who wrote it, it was a seminarian—is this: doing this practice is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Does that feel familiar? The needle is very small and very mysterious, while the haystack is very large. Where's the haystack? It's right here. So the job is enormous. And the needle, of course, represents enlightenment or realisation or whatever—some kind of

special insight.

The hay represents our normal, everyday experience, which we have come to see as unsatisfactory—which is why we're here, which is why we're on a retreat, looking for something special that will justify all the trouble we've taken to come and do the practice.

And so we carefully go through the haystack. The more diligent and obsessive meditators lift up and examine every tiny blade of hay, systematically going through that haystack, looking for that needle.

And eventually we realise that what we're looking for *is* the hay. In other words, it's already here. Impermanence, change, is already happening. It's just that we have trained ourselves not to notice it. So what we need to do is return to the obvious—to return to what we assume we already know and learn to see it anew.

This is one reason why we emphasize paying attention to the experience of distraction. We sit, and we decide to keep our awareness on the meditation object—let's say breathing. Suddenly we realise that we're thinking of something that happened yesterday or may happen tomorrow. Now, how did that event arise? What caused that event to arise? Did we make a conscious decision—time to have a good think? Or did the thought arise despite our best intention to stay with the meditation object?

Sometimes, of course, we do decide to have a nice think. But more often, it just happens. We don't have any control over it. If we go through this experience enough, paying attention, not dismissing it because it's the hay but valuing it because it's experience, we begin to notice that not only does experience change—in this case swinging between meditation object and distraction—we begin to realise that we do not control these changes. They just happen.

We begin the practice assuming that we are in charge of the project. I will come to the meditation center, I will do a meditation retreat, I will work on my practice, and I will make it better. But if we're really engaging with it, it doesn't take long before we realize we are not in charge of the project. If anything, the project is in charge of us.

And so the practice of becoming intimate with distraction can show us the three characteristics. Everything is changing. We are not in control of these changes, which is painful. And since there appears to be no one in charge, this is not self. The practice of sitting here and getting hopelessly swamped by distraction reveals the world of the three characteristics. It reveals the world of insight—if we're prepared to actually look at it.

Let's get back to impermanence, because it's the first one. If we look at this perception of impermanence, it is obvious that things change. I think if you had a non-Buddhist friend and you're talking about the retreat later on, and your friend says, "What did you learn at the retreat?"—thinking some mysterious, mystical something—you say, "Well, it turns out that things change." Would they say, "No, I think you're wrong there, mate"? Most unlikely. It's obvious that things change.

But *how* do they change? Our job as practitioners cultivating momentary samādhi is to become connoisseurs of change. We're interested in the fact that one thing turns into another. We're particularly interested in the intersections of experience, the borders where one thing becomes another—in other words, what we've been calling the transitions of experience.

Here I'll just toss out a few possibilities that you may recognise, or that you may encounter in your practice. Things change. In other words, they arise and they cease. They begin and they end. Do I see the arising? Do I see the beginnings of things? Do I see cessation, the ending of things? Or am I missing something?

Now, if I'm missing something, it could be because I'm in the middle of things, between beginnings and ends, which is where I assume a certain stability. But that which I take to be stable—is it as stable as I assume? When I look closely, does it move in any way?

The Visuddhimagga has a very interesting image for this. It says: imagine you live in an apartment, and you've got a nice window, and the window looks out at an expressway.

And this particular part of the expressway is one-way traffic, and it goes from, as you look out the window, from your left to your right. So if you look out of the window, you see the cars passing. If you turn to the left, you see the cars coming, coming, coming, coming. If you look to the right, you see them disappearing, disappearing, disappearing, disappearing. If you look straight in front, you see them arise—there they are, they're gone, there they are, they're gone.

Three different views of the same phenomenon. Different perspectives, different views one can have on impermanence, on change.

Now this work is very mundane, so we're staying with the elemental qualities of experience: the movements of breathing, the sensations of the body, the feel of thinking, as we were playing around with this morning. Every breath, every thought has a beginning, a middle, and an end. If they had no beginning, they would not arise, so we would never notice them. If they had no end, they would never leave. And if they had no middle—in other words, the space between beginning and end—they would be coming and going so quickly we would barely notice them. And by the way, that is one of the perceptions of impermanence: when things are moving so quickly we barely have time to register them.

Sometimes I find that I'm staying with my meditation object and everything seems quite smooth. Does this smoothness itself change? And the meditation object—is it really the same as it was before? Or is it changing? If it is changing, how is it changing? Is it like waves? If it's like waves, are these waves smooth or choppy? Or is the object more strobe-like—appearing, disappearing, appearing, disappearing? And if that's the case, are the edges clear or not?

Another view: when things change, awareness moves from one object to another. Does it move because that initial object just ended and a new one began? Or is it that the new object attracts me before the old

one has ended, while it still has my attention? This is another flavor.

When the experience is gone, is it completely gone with no trace remaining, or is something lingering, like some kind of aftertaste?

Another flavor of the perception of impermanence, which can be quite interesting, is noticing that this experience now is new. It's never happened before—at least not quite like this. So I think about this experience. It's about ten after eight and we're sitting in the hall, most of us in the same spots we normally sit because we've become very territorial and are prepared to defend our territory from recalcitrant meditators who think they can just move in. We're used to this particular spot and the particular view of the hall it gives us. There's a familiar speaker giving the standard dharma talk. Seems to be the same, doesn't it? Is it? Really? Or is this experience right now unique? This is noticing the freshness of things.

Another aspect we've touched upon is the relationship between the meditation object and the mind which knows the meditation object. The object is changing, and the mind which knows the object is changing. Sometimes we like the meditation object and sometimes we dislike it. Sometimes we feel the experience is good and sometimes we feel the experience is bad. Sometimes we find meditation satisfying, sometimes unsatisfying.

Can we drop our obsession with how we think things should be—a concept—long enough to see how they are and how they change? Can we drop our preoccupation with the object of experience long enough to check the mind which is aware of the object? Is that changing? How is it changing?

These are flavors of impermanence, things that may arise, even things that can be played with deliberately. The point is not to take change for granted but to become interested, to become, as I said, a connoisseur of change—someone who can really appreciate the finer flavors of change.

So we look into impermanence.

But how can we see into impermanence deeply enough to be transformed by it? For the Buddha, this is to ask: how can we see deeply enough to recognize that everything changes, including the one who is experiencing change? That also changes.

This comes out in a brief verse in Pali which appears again and again in the discourses to indicate the first stage of awakening—sometimes called the vision of Dharma, sometimes called stream entry. Roughly translated: "Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease."

So it's about change. But notice the sting in the tail. First of all, "whatever is of the nature to arise"—what is of the nature to arise? Everything. Everything we experience. Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease. The sting is in the "all"—no exceptions. This indicates a recognition, a seeing through. And that is the moment which marks the first stage of awakening. In other words, understanding and accepting change all the way to the bottom.

This reminds me of the turtles. Some of you have heard the story, maybe some of you haven't. In ancient India, they had a particular system of cosmology: four continents—one to the north, south, east, and west. India is the southern continent. Between the four continents is Mount Meru, and at its higher reaches is the heaven of the thirty-three gods. Higher still, you get into the more subtle heaven realms. What holds the four continents together is the great ocean, and what holds the great ocean is the great wind. This is traditional Indian cosmology.

One time there was a learned Brahmin teaching his young son cosmology. The young boy is very bright, with a very inquisitive mind. He thinks about this and says, "But what's holding up the great wind?" His father is very pleased. "That's a very sensible question. Under all of this, beneath each of the four continents, there are four great horses holding up this whole thing."

The young boy is impressed by this news. He thinks about it and says, "But what's holding up the horses?" The Brahmin teacher is delighted. "That's a fantastic question. Underneath the four horses are four great elephants, just holding up the whole thing." The young boy is even more impressed. "What's holding up the elephants?"

"I'm glad you asked, my boy. Not many people get this deep in the investigation. Underneath the four elephants are four great turtles." You can imagine how impressed the young boy is. But he's still thinking about it. "What's holding up the four great turtles?"

At this point, his father says, "My boy, it's turtles all the way down."

And realizing this is the entry into Dharma. Turtles all the way down.

The perception of impermanence matures when the mind realizes the necessity of change—the fact that change is built into the very fabric of experience itself. Every experienced event arises and ceases dependent upon some other experienced event. This is their nature. This is what defines them. Every experienced event is impermanent.

This is the realization of the universality of change, which you could say is cognitive.

But along with this cognitive realization comes an affective one: the futility of resisting change. And this is the entry into *anicca saññā*, the perception of impermanence.

As this perception becomes increasingly obvious, we begin to shed our attachments, because the futility of holding to anything becomes increasingly clear. This understanding is based on a perception of change as inherent to the very structure of experience, the very patterning of it. Which means, of course, that our experience of self must also be impermanent, and like every other experience, not worth clinging to. If self itself changes, if nothing can be held as being self, then holding on to a self just makes no sense. And so we enter into the perception of not-self.

All three characteristics are interlinked in this way.

But if I have no ground as self, if holding on makes no sense, what are we talking about? Isn't this annihilation?

When the perception of change is flavored with the perception of *dukkha*, of pain, we have a sense of the groundlessness of experience, and with it comes a response, a reaction—fear of falling. It's like there's a black hole and I'm being sucked into it. This fear of falling is an existential rejection of not-self, because when coming face to face with it, when the mind begins to intuit it, there's a recoil. *I must have a ground. Without a firm foundation, I am lost.* And if I get a sense of groundlessness, I have to scramble back to the ground I once had. Otherwise, how can I function in the world? I must be someone. Even being someone in pain is better than being no one.

This is how the perception of *dukkha* develops as the perception of not-self begins to mature. We find ourselves in a kind of free fall, terrified because of this fear of falling.

But once we let go, once we stop resisting the inevitable, we realize there's actually nothing to fall onto.

So what are we left with when we separate the fall from free fall? We're left with free. If there is no ground, there's nothing to fall against. And so there's nothing to fear. Free fall becomes simply free.

This is the freedom of not-self when these perceptions mature.

Self is attractive because it appears to give us a foundation—for us and for our world. We construct a self in the first place because we fear we need a ground, a solid foundation. This is a very deep psychological need. But when we go through the anxiety of groundlessness and emerge on the other side, we finally recognize that not only can we not find a ground—it turns out we don't need a ground.

We are being held by Dharma.

The ground of Dharma, if you could call it a ground, is wider and freer than any self we could construct through our concepts and our clinging.

So the perception of not-self matures, and at some point the penny drops and we realize *Nibbāna* itself. The view of self, the view of "I am," "I am this"—it drops away. And we never have the same relationship to experience again. This is the first stage of awakening, the *dhammacakkhu*, the vision of Dharma.

Now, this does not mean that we float around in a cloudy but spiritual nothing. We continue to be who we are. But we recognize our self—both the self we play to ourselves and the self we play for others—we recognize the self as just a role. And we find that we can drop those aspects of the role that cause us and others pain, and we can develop new aspects of the roles we're playing that bring happiness to ourselves and to others. We become like skilled actors who finally have some control over the script.

And of course, at times we forget our vision, and our habitual view of self, of clinging to self—boom, it pops up again. But it would be much weaker than before, and once we're aware of it, it will fade away

again. In other words, our baseline has changed.

At this point, according to the tradition, we enter into the noble eightfold path, as compared to the eightfold path. Another way the Buddha talks about this is entering the stream, becoming a stream enterer. We enter the stream

in which the practice, in which life itself, is not a struggle against the current, but a flow downstream. The Buddha says it's like a river that flows inevitably to the great ocean. It may take a while to get there. There may be many twists and turns. There may be delays when it comes against a huge great dam. But it will arrive.

So if we get to this point—stream entry or the vision of Dharma—how is life on this Noble Eightfold Path? Rather than go on and on about it, let's look at one teaching by the modern Zen teacher Robert Aitken Roshi, who once addressed the question: what is the difference between an unawakened, deluded person and an awakened, enlightened person? Everyone in the room sat up a bit straighter. This is a very interesting question.

And he explained: 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. I'll leave you to ponder that.

A question arose about how to interpret the word Dharma. Dharma is a technical term popularised by the Buddha. It entered into the whole Indian tradition after him. It's one of these terms which is layered, has different layers of meaning. In the Pali English dictionary, if you get the book version, it's kind of large pages with small print, and I think Dharma goes on for several pages. Same in the Sanskrit dictionary—huge entry.

But basically, it's got layers of meaning. Fundamentally, Dharma is the way things actually are, the way the universe actually moves—because for the Buddha, the way things are and the way things move is pretty much the same thing. Then another layer is: given that this is the way things are, what should I do about it? This is Dharma as duty. Given that this is the way things are, how should I live in response?

And Dharma, when it's used in the plural—dharmas—means the events that come and go according to natural conditions. So here, the vision of Dharma is that top meaning: the vision of "this is the way things are." But then after that—okay, now what? What do I do about it? How do I live in accordance with this? How do I cooperate with it rather than fight against it? This becomes Dharma practice.

Someone suggested this might be essentially equivalent to the Tao. I think so. It would perhaps be equivalent to Buddha nature also. When Buddhism went to China, or particularly when Chan went to China, this sense of it really was picked up—or picked up Taoism as well. That strong sense of "it's the way nature itself moves" probably would have resonated with the Taoist tradition. The way things are.

Another question arose: is there any transcending of dependent arising? Or is it only through seeing conditioning and the deep conditioning of life? Yes, there is a realisation of dependent arising, and that comes from the experience which transcends even dependent arising—the experience of nibbāna itself. Nibbāna is a directly encountered event. And that is the unconditioned, the unconstructed. Whereas dependent arising is the realm of the conditioned, the constructed. But having entered into that and come out of it, you get a new appreciation of the constructed and the unconstructed and the relationships between them. They live alongside each other. They interpenetrate. That's what one sees. It's seeing right through to the bottom. Like if it's turtles all the way down and you go right through past the bottom turtle—this is what you see. That is the liberation.

From that comes the liberation. To emerge from that experience, you're different, and you're living in a different world.

The Buddha talks about liberation and the understanding of liberation. When he discusses the progress of the two stages of insight and awakening, he distinguishes liberation from the understanding of liberation. Liberation is always an experience which is *bang*—something just changed. But what is it exactly? What's going on? This is the understanding of liberation.

Now, the understanding of liberation may arise almost immediately, or it may arise a day later, or it may arise a month later, or a year later, or a decade later, or a lifetime later, because things have to be processed. And so we're in the realm of time. But of course, fundamentally, time isn't real. So whether it takes a microsecond or a lifetime or two—what's a lifetime or two between friends?

In the texts, you get these classic experiences that people have where *bang*, it's the Big Bang Theory, *bang*, everything changes. But they're famous precisely because they're so unusual. More usually, you just have this gradual understanding. Every now and again you get a click, like something happens. But what really changes is this gradual unfolding of an understanding. You find yourself in a different world.

And of course, that first stage of awakening—stream entry—the only thing, according to the Buddha, that it changes is view. That's what is cut through. If you look at the three roots of the unwholesome—greed, hatred, delusion—that first stage cuts through delusion. But greed and hatred, they're still rolling along. They're more deeply embedded in the citta, and it takes more to actually dissolve them.

So as John Hale once commented when we were gossiping about meditators—about who had attained first stage and who hadn't—he said, "Stream enterers, they're almost as bad as ordinary people." Hence the noble eightfold path. You're just on the path now. You're definitely on the path.

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