Impermanence (Aniccā)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 35:29

Tonight we'll talk about impermanence, *anicca*. I'm preparing some talks to be given to Heart Insight, which is the local meditation group in Brisbane. I think it might be possibly five talks, but I want to go through the three characteristics: *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*. So here tonight, I'm going to be talking about *ani cca*, the first of the three characteristics.

Where they fit is that when the Buddha talks about insight—the insight of insight meditation—what he's talking about is insight or perceiving the three characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*. Impermanence or change; *dukkha* is pain or unsatisfactoriness; and *anattā* is not-self.

Let's start. Tonight we'll just talk about impermanence, but linking it to the other two characteristics because they always come as a bundle. Basically, if one of them is there, all three of them are there. It's just a question of where one's perception sits.

We'll take as our text some advice the Buddha gave to his son, Rāhula: "Cultivate the perception of impermanence, Rāhula, for when you cultivate the perception of impermanence, the conceit 'I am' will be abandoned."

Just to look at the Pali, the word that he uses for "cultivate" is *bhāvanā*, which is what we normally translate as meditation. So another way of translating it would be: meditate on the perception of impermanence.

This business about impermanence is very important to the Buddha's teaching. For him, delusion is always characterized by a denial of impermanence, and awakening is always characterized by a clear perception of impermanence.

Now if we ask, what do we mean by impermanence? Or rather, what does the Buddha mean by impermanence? It's important to realize that this is not some kind of philosophical position. He's not saying, "Here's this doctrine of impermanence, and your job as a good Buddhist is to believe it." It's not a philosophical theory of change, and it's not the normal everyday sense of change that we all share, because neither of these actually leads to awakening. So what is the Buddha talking about?

Let's begin with the word that he uses. The word is *anicca*, which is a Pali word, and it's a compound. It begins with *a*, the negative prefix, and *nicca*, which means permanent. So *anicca*: not permanent, impermanent.

In Sanskrit, this is *nitya*. Now, *nitya* means stable, constant, permanent. And in everyday Pali usage back

in the day, in ancient India, *nicca* refers to what can be relied upon. So, for example, you have *nicca-dāna*, a perpetual gift that you might make to a monastery—in other words, a gift which is going to last for a very long time and therefore we can depend upon it. Or *nicca-bhatta*. *Bhatta* is food. So *nicca-bhatta* is a continuous, reliable food supply. We don't have to worry about running out of food. We've got plenty, and we're going to have plenty.

So if something is *nicca*, it lasts a long time and therefore it can be relied upon. If something is *anicca*, impermanent, that means it is unstable, inconstant, discontinuous, and therefore unreliable. It cannot be depended upon. It cannot be trusted.

And this is why there's the link between *anicca* and *dukkha*, between change and suffering. When we rely on something unreliable, sooner or later we are disappointed.

And that disappointment is built in. It's not that we *might* be disappointed—we *are* disappointed, again and again, in whatever we project permanence onto.

The idea of the permanent is very important in Indian thought. In the Buddha's time, the nitya, the permanent, was regarded—and still is today in much Indian thought—as the ground of things that gives them their stability. In the Upanishads, for example, the nitya, the permanent, is the atman: the essential self that underlies everything. In other traditions, the nitya, the permanent, might be God—again, something reliable, lasting a long time, dependable.

But what the Buddha is saying is that there is no such ground. It doesn't exist. There's nothing that underlies and stabilizes what we experience as the world. In other words, it's change all the way down.

And again, notice that this is an empirical statement, not an ideological one. He's not saying, "Believe that there is no ground that stabilizes your experience." He's saying, "See if you can find anything in your experience that does not change." And by the way, good luck with that. It's an empirical statement based on a practice.

And it's not simply that things change, as we've already pointed out. In meditation practice—and I suggest you try this afterwards when we sit—a good place to perceive change is in the experience of distraction. When I teach retreats, I often like to ask the meditators, "Have you ever experienced distractions?" And one or two of them confess that they have.

Let's say I sit and decide I'm going to keep my awareness on my meditation object—let's say breathing. Suddenly I realize that I'm thinking of something that happened yesterday or that may happen tomorrow. Did you make a conscious decision that it was time to have a good think? Or did it happen despite your intention to stay with the meditation object? In general, my guess is it's the latter. It just happens.

If we go through this experience enough, we begin to notice that not only does experience change—we're swinging between meditation object and distraction—but we do not control these changes. They just

happen. I begin my practice assuming I'm in charge of the project, and it doesn't take very long before I realize I am not. If anything, it is in charge of me.

Now this lack of control—perceiving this lack of control—creates anxiety. That's the natural response to it. We could even say that if we have not felt anxious because of impermanence, then we haven't yet perceived impermanence. We haven't reached that perception because we spend a lot of energy resisting it.

On a larger scale, I think a very good example is climate change. There are people who seem emotionally incapable of acknowledging that the climate actually is changing—emotionally rather than intellectually. Why is this so hard for so many people to acknowledge? Why is there so much resistance to it?

Perhaps it's because to face this change requires a radical letting go. We cannot continue to live the way we have been. Business as usual is not an option. And for many people, this is just too much to bear. It's just too painful—not the theory, not the science, but the effect that this perception must have on the way we live once we admit its reality. From the Buddhist perspective, this is a classic instance of resisting the perception of impermanence and instead cultivating the perception of permanence.

So this perception of impermanence is more than intellectual. It's not about a belief. When we really understand the fact of change, this moves us in some way. For the Buddha, this perception is linked to apprehension, to anxiety, because it involves a felt sense of the unreliability of things, the unreliability of life itself. We could say that if we are not moved by our perception of change, we have not perceived anicca.

And part of the pain is because impermanence—the perception of impermanence—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 things change in ways unpredictable to me. Whatever I seek to rely on turns out to be unreliable. Wherever I look for security, what I find is insecurity. This is what creates the pain in change.

So there's a movement from the perception of impermanence to the perception of dukkha—the pain at the core of our being, the disappointment which is inherent in any kind of clinging.

Let's have a look at the link between anicca and anatta. The link here is the absence of control. One of the ways in which the tradition talks about self is that self is the one in charge. And what anicca reveals is that there's no one in charge. Of course, there's a painful quality to that realization.

But let's begin by looking at how we create the perception of a permanent self. This is the perception of permanence, which for the Buddha is the standard human position. The perception of impermanence is unusual; it's something that needs to be cultivated.

Now, the self illustrates permanence. And remember, permanent does not necessarily mean lasting

forever and ever—basically it means lasting unchanged over time. Again, we're not talking about taking on a theory. For the Buddha, something is permanent if it can be seen as not changing over time. And this is one reason why he's so preoccupied by this concept of self.

To be a self—let's say to be Patrick. Patrick is the self I'm most familiar with, so I'll talk about him. To be Patrick, this self has to remain unchanged over time. So the Patrick who begins this talk is the same Patrick as the one who finishes it. In fact, the Patrick, as introduced, who is giving this talk, has been teaching Dharma for a very long time and plans to continue to do so in the future. This is the perception of permanence in the self.

But what is it about Patrick that actually remains unchanged over time? Now, if I'm not paying attention, there's an apparent stability. But this comes through concept. For the Buddha, the self we take for granted as real, as ourselves, is real only as a concept. It's a useful concept—it gets me through the day—but it's only a concept.

We normally relate to the world through a screen of concepts. The world is what we think it is. I am who I think I am. And these concepts are stable. So for a long time now, it seems to me that... 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 those particular schools and so on and so forth.

But when I look for the experience of that person that I was in the past, I can't find it. What I've got is a memory arising now and ceasing. The experiences have vanished. The concepts constructed from those experiences remain. We project permanence onto our experience through concept.

And one of the ways in which this works is that we assume there is someone who is actually experiencing all this. So we're talking about the nature of experience. One way to look at it is: what am I experiencing? But we could turn it the other way around: Who is undergoing the experience? Who is the one experiencing this?

Our normal perception is not simply that this is happening. Rather, this is happening to someone. This is happening to me. It's about someone. It's about me. It's for someone.

It's for me. So this meeting is about me, it's for me. Therefore, I am the one experiencing this. This experience is changing, but back in here, there's something stable. This is the self.

One area where we can see this is in what the Buddha calls craving, which he identifies as a crucial aspect of the self. Essentially, craving is the urge to possess. The Buddha speaks of it as the movement, "This is mine." Now, what's the difference between something which is mine and something which is not mine? That which is mine is part of me. It's not simply an object in space—it's part of me. And to violate it is to violate me. So this relationship, "this is mine," refers to my sense that this possession is for me, about me, pointing toward me.

We make this move all the time, building a self out of it. If we ask, "What is this experience for? What is this meeting, this online meeting, for?"—it's not for nothing. It's not that it has no purpose, no meaning. Its purpose is to satisfy me in some way. The meaning of this activity is found in its function as my possession. And if there is a possession, there must be in the background its owner, the one who possesses, the one for whom all this is happening.

Which brings us back to perceiving impermanence. Particularly when I'm meditating, I can see that this experience right now is changing. It's harder to see that what this experience is *for* is also changing. Right now I might have the experience of listening to these words—that's in the foreground of experience. But what this is for is in the background: the one who is learning about impermanence. And in your experience right now, is there a sense of stability back there? Is that stability based on its hidden nature, its unexamined nature?

From the point of view of the perception of impermanence, part of the job in meditation practice is to turn awareness within to find the one that this is for, the one who's experiencing this. This can be an interesting exercise. Some people do it. And if you can find something, what people will say is, "I can see my sense of myself experiencing this." But of course, what's that for? It's for the person, the self, further back. It's like an endless going back, back, back, back, back, and never actually finding the foundation. Because whatever we turn our attention to, first of all, that changes. It does point to something further back—what it's for. But as soon as we find that, we realize it's changing too, and that's pointing to something back as well. We never actually land there. This is one reason why the perception of impermanence goes so deep.

If we talk about how we uncover impermanence, what's the method? Essentially, it's paying attention to change. If we're meditating for the purpose of insight, then we start to pay attention to change. That's a big part of the whole project. We go deep into the ordinary, mundane aspects of experience. We're learning to attend to, and therefore value, the most ordinary mundane aspects of experience. Because we're not interested in having a particular kind of experience, but in discovering how experience itself moves.

One writer compared this to looking for a needle in a haystack. That's the job. We've got the haystack. In it, there's a needle. We've got to find the needle. And the needle is very small, very well hidden, very mysterious, while the haystack is very large. Our task seems enormous—to find that needle. The needle, of course, represents enlightenment or some kind of special insight. And the hay represents our normal everyday experience, which we have come to see as unsatisfactory. That's why we're here.

That's why we're embarking on meditation practice. This is what justifies all the trouble that we take to come and do a meditation practice—because it's not satisfactory. I want something better.

So when we're practicing, we're carefully going through the haystack, looking under each tiny little blade, hoping one day to find that needle. Eventually we realize that what we're looking for is the hay.

And this is the perception of impermanence. It's already here. Impermanence, change, is already happening. It's not that we have to train ourselves—it's just that we have trained ourselves to not notice it. We've actually gone to a lot of trouble over a long time to not notice impermanence.

So if we want to uncover impermanence, we need to return to the obvious, to return to what we assume we already know and learn to see it in a new way. And this is why we can talk about learning to value the mundane—that which we normally overlook because we want something special.

In meditating for insight, we're interested in what we could call the flavors of change. Things change—okay, that's pretty obvious. But how do they change? Our job is to become, in a sense, connoisseurs of change. We're interested in the fact that one thing turns into another. We're particularly interested in the intersections of change, the place where one thing turns into another.

Just to give a couple of pointers which you might want to play around with in the meditation. First of all, things arise and cease. They begin and end. Do I see arising? Do I see the beginnings of things? Do I see cessation, the endings of things? Or am I missing something?

If I'm missing beginnings and ends, it may be because I'm in the middle of things, between beginnings and ends, in which I perceive an assumed stability. But that which I take to be stable—is it really as stable as I assume? When I look at it closely, does it move in any way?

Now this work is very mundane. We stay with the elemental qualities of experience—the movements of breathing, the sensations of the body, the feel of thinking, and so on. Every breath, every thought has a beginning, a middle, and an end. If they had no beginning, they would not arise and would never be noticed. If they had no end, they would stay unchanged forever. And if they had no middle—the space between beginning and end—they would be coming and going so quickly we would barely notice them.

So we've got beginning, middle, end. Sometimes I find myself staying with the meditation object and everything seems smooth. Does this smoothness itself change? And the meditation object—is it really the same as before, or is it changing? And if it is, how? Is it like waves, for example? It's not begin-end, begin-end—it's more like a wave-like quality of shifting. Same thing, but it just seems to be shifting. And if it's like waves, are they choppy or smooth? Or is the object more strobe-like, with distinct beginnings and endings?

Another thing to look for: when things change, awareness moves from one object to another. Doesn't 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 object has ended? That would be more wave-like.

When the experience is over, is it completely over? Is there no trace remaining? Or is something still lingering? Is there some kind of aftertaste?

Another area to see impermanence is in the relationship between the meditation object and the mind

which knows the meditation object. The object is changing, but so is the mind that knows the object. Sometimes we like the object. Sometimes we dislike it. Sometimes we think the experience is good. Sometimes we think it's bad.

Sometimes we find the meditation satisfying. Sometimes we find it unsatisfying. So 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 doing the experiencing? Is that changing? And if it is, how?

The aim is to see sufficiently deeply into impermanence that we are transformed by it. And that happens as a result of seeing that everything changes—including the one who is experiencing change.

In the discourses, in the suttas, the first stage of awakening is indicated by a little Pali verse, which in English can be translated as: "Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease." This is the realization that indicates seeing the Dhamma for the first time.

Now, if we ask what is of the nature to arise—well, roughly speaking, everything except awakening itself. And this represents an understanding and an acceptance of change all the way to the bottom.

We resist this depth of understanding because it involves admitting failure. We've tried to establish a sense of stability and therefore a sense of satisfaction. And as we said, one of our basic strategies is possession—to claim as mine. So we relate to every experience as mine, as for me. And while we might be persuaded, we might be able to accept as we get older that these attempts have failed in the past, we're not prepared to accept that this failure is in the very nature of experience. We're not prepared to accept that any attempt to gain lasting satisfaction through possession is doomed.

This involves moving from the particularities of experience to the universal fact of change itself, which we don't have time to go into tonight. But basically, this realization of the universality of change, and therefore the futility of resisting it—this is the entrance into aniccā saññā, the perception of impermanence. And that surrender of resistance is absolutely central to the perception of impermanence. We no longer resist our lives, but surrender to: this is what's happening.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha describes the mature practitioner in this way: "She lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world." This is what he's talking about—a mature perception of impermanence.

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