

# The Characteristic of Impermanence

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Retreat Talks · 16 min read

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*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.* Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble, and fully self-enlightened one.

Over the past couple of days, we've concentrated on suffering. Not simply how physical and mental pain cause suffering, but how pleasure does so. Now, see how I phrased that? It's wrong, isn't it? Nothing causes us to suffer, but the relationship we have to what we experience. In other words, it's not pain that is the primary cause of our suffering, but our aversion to it, our fear of it. Pleasures and joy do not cause suffering, but our indulgence and dependence on them does.

We have to be very careful how we use language. In what we say, how we say, is contained our view of things. So just by picking ourselves up on a simple slip such as, "this headache is unbearable," "I can't stand these people," "these politicians make me sick" – just by catching the way we talk about things and people, we can correct our view. Eventually, the penny will drop. There will be a change of heart.

Now there's an expression which tells us how things happen at the psychological and spiritual level. It's not good enough to understand the Dharma. It's not even good enough to be convinced of the Dharma. We have to work so that the correct view, the Dharma, begins to bring a change of heart. That's why in the Eightfold Path, after the number one, Right View, there comes Right Attitude. Then only does Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood follow. But we need to start somewhere, and that's to correct our view.

Now the Buddha tells us that we have three fundamental delusions about the way things really are. He puts it to us directly. No fudging. This is the way it is. He declares that not seeing the three characteristics of existence clearly causes our lives to be unsatisfactory, if not downright unbearable. The first two concern everything that has existence, and one pertains only to sentient beings, and that includes us, human beings. These three characteristics are impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self or insubstantiality.

The unsatisfactoriness is this suffering we create. That's *dukkha*. *Dukkha* means in itself a hard place. That's life. As the comedian said, "Life's hard and then you die." Again, translating from other languages never quite makes it. And *dukkha* has such a breadth of meaning, books are written about it. In fact, if we take the Buddha's own pithy description of his teachings – "I teach only *dukkha* and the end of *dukkha*" – it really does become the biggest word in the Buddha Dhamma. In the past it was translated as suffering, but that's the wild end. Most now translate it as unsatisfactoriness. It's the lack of comfort, the lack of contentment, always wanting something, and as one writer puts it, just the lack. And this is what we've

been pondering when we've talked of the hindrances and the problems of pleasure.

Now it's the turn to look at impermanence. Paradoxically, if there's one unchanging truth about the material and mental universes, it's that everything, without exception, is in a process of change.

I read an excellent book on the cosmos, on galaxies and super-galaxies. Astronomers estimate at least 100 billion galaxies – 100 billion! And some of these galaxies have millions, if not billions, of stars. The pictures of them are stunning. These colossi spinning in the emptiness of space. Huge vortices of unimaginable energy. Stars being formed, others exploding. Black holes with inverted energy that sucks everything into them from light years away. It's so big, it's beyond fantasy. The mind – well, my mind – just can't grasp it. I get lost after a few stars. I look up at the night sky and I simply cannot mentally perceive what's going on. It's too vast, too overwhelming. And it's all, all of it, in a state of ferocious change.

Coming down to earth, getting my feet back on the ground, I find the same. The ever-changing seasons, the appearance of flowers in spring, their bloom in summer, their disappearance in autumn. The leaves bright yellow-green in spring, deep green in summer, mellow brown in autumn, and then just a load of litter. The tireless sun, rising and setting every day. The snow, the ice, the sleet, the slush, the rain. There's a pattern to it all, but it's hidden, as it were, within change. There are laws governing change, but there's always change.

And human society. Just look at human history. Look at human progress, or perhaps the better word is progression, throughout the comparatively short time we've been here. Constantly changing. A restlessness. War and peace. The growth and collapse of huge civilisations. Coming down to the present, the daily news with its constant flow of changes. Businesses starting, businesses flopping. Politicians doing this, undoing that. Unions, workers, voluntary bodies. The list is legion. People doing things, changing things. Sometimes unskillfully, sometimes skillfully. But nothing can be left alone. Someone's always around to change things. Everyone everywhere, it seems, has to be doing something.

Finally, we close in on ourselves. And what do we find? Change. We change our dwellings, our friends, our jobs, sometimes our spouses and partners. Children come and go. And as we progress through life, we change inside. Things happen to us that change the way we see things. Just think how much we've changed since we were born, since we were just a bundle of gurgling, screaming flesh.

And our bodies. Every seven years – some books say five – every single atom in the body has been replaced. Next time you look in the mirror, remind yourself you didn't have that face seven years ago. And the different parts of the body are changing at different rates. We'd live a long time if our longevity was measured by our bones. Sometimes the liver grows old faster than the heart, and we die of some liver disease. Sometimes it's the heart, or the lungs, or the brain. A lot depends on how we've treated the body, but for the most part it seems to depend on our genetic makeup. In my own family, we all seem to die of strokes. I only know of one case of cancer. I have a friend whose family all die of cancer, and early too. But whatever way we go, go we must, because death is the corollary of birth, and without birth and death,

there's no change.

Now the upside of change is this birthing, these beginnings, the newness, the creativity. When we look at nature we learn that over the ages she has created masses of variations in plant and animal life. It's said that 99% of all species have become extinct. Now this seems a very high figure, but it gives an idea of how creative nature is. But it couldn't create anything new if the old didn't die.

We as human beings love to concentrate on the new, on the present fashion, the new song, the new celebrity. It's exciting and wonderful. We're always on the lookout for the new dish, the new film, the new clothes. The whole of our society is geared to the creation of the new. The whole of industry is about producing something new, upgrading. Whether it be a new source of energy, a new gadget, a new drug, a new computer game, a new perfume. So long as we concentrate on the new, we feel happy, for in our understanding, new seems to always mean good.

Individually, we concentrate on what we're going to do tomorrow, at the weekend, next week, next year, where I want to be in ten years' time, how I shall spend my retirement. Our delusion demands we look ahead. We plan for the future. And for the most part, it's exciting. It's so exciting that we don't see that things are disappearing, that things die out. We don't notice that to create something new, we have to get rid of something old. We become blind to the downside of change.

Now self cannot live long in the present. The present moment is death to self unless it presumes a next moment. Suddenly something happens that pulls us up short. I woke up one morning and brushed my teeth. All my teeth were there. At breakfast I bit into an apple. There was a snap, a crack, a front tooth fell out. Just like that. Where there had been a tooth, there was now no tooth.

Life can sometimes be like that, can't it? You wake up one morning feeling a little off, and after examinations and tests, you're given six weeks to live. You step out on the road, and bang, you're dead. There was an elderly woman got on the same plane as I did from Colombo, Sri Lanka, to London. We were half an hour into the flight and she began to fret. She had asthma and other complications, it seems. She was probably planning to spend Easter with her family. She was dead in an hour.

A good acquaintance of mine got drunk one night and went down to the cellar to get more booze. He slipped. He's now in Mandeville Hospital, paralysed from the neck down.

When such things happen around us, it's a shock, a real shock. When it happens to us, it's a trauma. Why? Why should we be shocked? Why should we be traumatised by events that are happening all the time? Isn't it because we don't care to look at the downside of impermanence? We don't want to look at it. It's scary. Yet with the appearance of the new, the old has died.

The Buddha tells us that this is one of the great weaknesses of self, that level of consciousness which identifies with the body and the personality. It's very frightened by death, death in all its forms. The mini-death of my tooth, the mega-death of my body. If I am that, what happens to me when that

disappears? The thought is too horrible to contemplate. It's got to mean annihilation. If I am the body, then I'm nothing when it's dead. If I am the personality, and that can only exist in a body, in a brain, within a given culture, then when the body dies, everything I've come to know as me, everything I am, evaporates, dissolves. There's nothing left. Death is an utter annihilation.

Now such thoughts can definitely make us gloomy. After all, there's something utterly final about death. There's no coming back. That's it. When they asked how much the old rich woman had left, the lawyer said, "Everything." When we really absorb the fact that we take nothing material with us, it can undermine our purpose for living. Why make an effort? Why bother about what sort of house I've got? What sort of car? What does it matter? The grim reaper takes all. Not a single penny of all the billions I have are of any use to me come that moment. Why live?

What about my relationships? How much of my happiness is dependent on being loved by someone? How much on being able to love someone? Yet what love lasts? Isn't there something rather sad, perhaps a little pathetic, about continuing to love someone who has died? Yet who doesn't?

Meditating on death and all its implications is a tough one. Yet to meditate on death is known as a protection. What's it protecting us from? It's protecting us from the illusion which self loves to deceive us with – the illusion of continuity. Death doesn't come to me. Yes, I know everyone dies, but that's everyone else. And anyway, if I do have to, it won't be yet. It's too distant in the future for it to be of any importance to me, for it to have any effect on my life now. How many of us go to bed and remind ourselves that we may die in our sleep that very night? A chilling thought, yet we could. My most enduring teacher, Bhante Revatadhamma, arrived back from a long flight and complained of something in his chest. The monks massaged him and he felt better. He died that night.

Contemplating death, my death, gets me in touch with that fear. And the amount of fear I feel on the thought of death or when death approaches me or when it's my turn to die is the measure of the delusion that I live by. This fear is the ground emotion of self. Self grasps and gathers and aggrandizes to allay the feelings of anxiety. It builds up shoring walls against the possibility of death. Self fights and battles and wars to defend its territory, its possessions. For to lose an inch is to lose an inch of self. And to lose an inch of self is to suffer a mini-death. And when the odds are stacked against it, self runs, flees, flies in a madness, lost in a paroxysm of fear.

How can we guard ourselves against such suffering? We do it by constantly chipping away at the delusions self would have us believe. And the delusion which comes because we don't care to observe and acknowledge impermanence is the illusion of continuity. Because we concentrate on the new, and the new is arising out of the old, we believe that reality is one continual flow of events happening to a static me. The I, the consciousness that knows what's happening, feels itself to be constant and utterly separate from the flow of change and therefore not part of it.

The contemplation of the ever presence of death is the most potent corrective that undermines this

fundamental delusion. It brings us back into reality. This is the way it is. Sure, fear arises, but it won't make us run. We see that fear is arising out of the inability to deal with reality. So in our meditation we look straight into the terrorizing eyes of fear. We investigate fear. We feel its sickliness. We sit calmly in the nausea. Slowly we come to feel at ease with that fearful inner environment. We find we can sit still in the midst of the whirlwind. We can find the eye where all is still and untouched by the surrounding tornado.

Slowly we lose our fear of fear, our fear of anxiety. Now I ask you, if we lose our fear of fear, our fear of anxiety, what can possibly frighten us? That's the place we've got to work towards – being able to sit still amidst the icy winds of fear. Then the rest will take care of itself. As always, when we leave the heart alone, we find that she cures herself. Like any turbulence, when we stop twirling it, when we stop energizing it, it loses momentum, exhausts itself, and finally comes to a stillness.

All we have to do is to find that aloof position of the observing within us, knowing the presenting fear and the fear of fear, and slowly all will quieten. In the end all fear vanishes and all possibility of fear is extinguished. The liberated one is fearless. In Buddhist iconography, this is symbolized in the *abhaya* posture, the posture of fearlessness, where the Buddha holds up his right hand, the palm facing us, offering us the protection of fearlessness. This posture we can internalize. We can visualize that hand between our awareness and emotions, and so protects the knowing from being swamped and hijacked. We can even visualize that hand before our heart and it acts as a protection against the emotional bombardment of other people.

So, contemplating death is part of our practice. That's why I include it in the evening meditation. The spiritual reason is that it undermines the hold that self has over us. When the self is broken asunder, that is our liberation. And it's not only death we should contemplate, but sickness and aging. These are mini-deaths. The one protects us from the intoxication of health. That's what the Buddha calls it – intoxication, a bewilderment, an obsession with our health. And contemplating aging lifts us out of the intoxication, the bewilderment, the desire constantly to be youthful. We always want to be young, somewhere between our twenties and early thirties. But time doesn't care for that.

Now the contemplation of death should be brought into everything. Just a momentary reminder of the impermanence of things. Relationships come to an end. Children leave the nest. The car breaks down. A ring, symbol of so many treasured memories, can be lost. A precious vase broken. Everything, everything comes to an end.

But paradoxically, this doesn't make us gloomy, honestly. This doesn't lead to depression and despair. Not if we also contemplate the fact that at all times the universe is creating itself, that we will continue to recreate ourselves until we achieve liberation. This is the Buddha's teaching. He repeated over and over again to his critics and sceptics, "I do not teach eternalism or annihilationism, but dependent co-arising."

So it is that death is never an end but a beginning, be it the end of a day, or year, or life. And this won't

stop till the day of our death as *arahats*, fully enlightened beings. That's why, after our little contemplation on sickness, old age and death in the evening, we go on to contemplate the enlightenment, the liberation, the awakening, the Buddha within, within us. That's what we're trying to bring into realization. And this balance of birth and death, appearance and disappearance, brings us to appreciate the preciousness of the very moment in which we live, the preciousness of that which exists and upon which our lives depend.

Each present moment is to be received as a treasured present. So never mind a Ming vase, the old market crock is treated with gentle carefulness. If we can begin to treat things with this carefulness and gentility, how much more so living beings, human beings, my own being. For underlying all this change, all this birthing and dying, is something which neither is born nor dies. The Buddha is quite clear about this. There is an unborn, an undying, an uncompounded, an uncreated. And that's where we're trying to get to, to try and reach that deathless ground which exists right in the midst of all these fleeting phenomena and yet is untouched by it.

That's the Buddha, walking about North India in the heat and the dust, going on alms rounds, talking to all sorts of people – some poor, some rich, some clever, some stupid, some powerful, high caste and low caste – all day long, mingling, a part of the world, affecting the world for the good. Yet within all that, the nirvanic peace, untouched by the exigencies of life. When he comes to die, he's still teaching. Finally, lying on his right side, he lets go of his decrepit, sick old body. Just like that. Easy-weezy-peasy. No fuss. No fear. Just letting go. Just going on.

And that's exactly what we're learning to do in our meditation. We're learning to let everything go, allowing everything to arise and pass away. And that's exactly the purpose we observe impermanence in all its aspects. This impermanence, this transience as taught by the Buddha, isn't the change of one substance from one shape into another. It's not as though there's a piece of clay and we can mould it into a cup, screw it up and mould it into a saucer. That's what happens when we concentrate on the new and we see only the new arising out of the old. We suffer from this illusion of continuity.

Just take this body. We've already said that every cell is replaced over a period of seven years. But it's all so slow that we don't perceive the process of change. But we also don't see the change so long as we are pleased by it. It's when those first wrinkles appear on the face or the hairline recedes a mite. Then, suddenly, we see change. Change in its darker aspect. That things are actually passing away. Just imagine if you got up one morning and looked in the mirror and saw someone else's face. Shock, horror, trauma. But at base, that's how discontinuous life is.

The Buddha tells us there's radical change. What has come to be must collapse before what is to come can arise. That's the sort of level of insight we'd all like to get to in our meditation. One of our first insights is to see the transient nature of our body in the breath, of our emotions ballooning and deflating, of our thoughts flitting. And if we keep our investigation right there, acknowledging the arising and the falling, we begin to balance our view. Before we come to *vipassanā*, we are aware of the new, the arising. Now we

balance that with acknowledging the falling, the passing.

There comes a time when we become more and more aware of the passing. We see quite distinctly that the world does really come to an end. It just breaks up, moment after moment. And if the insight into transience is to be developed rather than the other two characteristics of unsatisfactoriness and not-self or insubstantiality, then such a profound vision of the way things arise and pass away completely, moment after moment, will launch us into the first path and fruit of stream entry, the first level of spiritual liberation.

Indeed, insight can come by observing impermanence at any level, whether at the microcosm of instants or the macrocosm of the stars. And that's what we really want, because with insight there comes a change of heart. There's a change in the deepest seat of our consciousness, a veritable turnaround. And that's what brings about not just a change of behaviour, but the purification which brings in its trail a deep sense of joy and purpose to our lives.

The constant observation of transience will eventually get that penny to drop. Whether we observe it in the stars, the seasons, in the aging of the body, in the suddenness of death, or in the microcosmic world of moment-to-moment sensations, it will eventually begin to dawn on us, really dawn on us, that nothing, absolutely nothing, is worth holding on to. Not even for a moment. Not even for a nanosecond. Why? Because there's nothing there to hold on to. Like grasping water. Like grasping water.

So it is that the contemplation of *anicca*, impermanence, in all its aspects, leads to an easy renunciation of trying to find happiness in a world of pleasure and pain. Samsāra, the world of ever unquenchable searching, is this very relationship we have to the world out there and the world in here. Once we begin to let go of that unwholesome attachment, the world with all its pain and pleasure can't make us unhappy or happy. We've found that inner spiritual solitude and contentment that nothing can disturb.

Let's pause here for a moment. So all we have to do is observe, just watch, whether it's the rising and falling of the abdomen, or the rising and falling of the foot, or any movement whatsoever. For there's always a beginning and an end. A beginning and an end, and nothing repeats itself. What has arisen has gone, has arisen and gone for good. Let us have that faith in the higher faculty within us, *satipaññā*. Let that intuitive intelligence do the work, get out of the way, just watch, just observe, and all will be revealed. It's as simple as that.

The Buddha says in the Dhammapada, "All conditioned things are impermanent. When we really see this, we become disenchanted with the world. Just this is the path that liberates us from all our suffering."

Let me leave you with a more salutary note that so expresses for me the way an awakened being lives. William Blake, our homegrown mystical poet: "He who binds to himself a joy does the winged life destroy. But he who kisses the joy as it flies lives in eternity's sunrise."

May your profound insights into the characteristic of impermanence, *anicca*, allow such a depth of

detachment that in an instant all *dukkha*, all unsatisfactoriness, will evaporate completely. May you all be fully liberated from the delusion of continuity and attain that unchanging *nibbāna* sooner rather than later.

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