

Be, See, Free, We (6 of 10) Stability Reveals Inconstancy

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The subject of today's talk is impermanence or inconstancy. This is one of the three characteristics, the three insights that give insight its name ("insight meditation"). For the purposes of a deep spiritual freedom of the heart, vipassana practice brings us to a point where we're able to have a deep perception of these three different characteristics in such a way that they are catalysts for liberation.

They help free us from the ways we are caught, the ways we resist, the ways that we push things away, the ways that we don't let the free flow of life, emotions, and experiences move through us. The insights also free us from the ways in which we interfere with our own natural maturation process as we move to greater and greater freedom.

There are three characteristics that have been said to characterize all experiences. I use the word “experience” very carefully because in Theravada Buddhism there is often a tendency to say that these characterize all things (everything is impermanent, everything is suffering, and everything is not self). But it's not quite right to say everything.

Rather, the three characteristics refer to how we perceive and how we experience everything. That is what we're focusing on when we're doing insight practice. We are not making a metaphysical or physical claim about what's out there, what the nature of reality is. Rather, we are talking about the nature of how we experience reality, how we participate with reality, and how we react to reality. That is where we have deep insight.

We really see that the way that we take in, experience, perceive, and participate in the world has a deep quality of changeability, impermanence, and inconstancy and is constantly flowing. We see that how we experience is stressful and unsatisfactory in a certain way. We see there is a certain kind of suffering in the nature of experiencing itself. We see there is something about the nature of experience and perception such that it's not something to take as a self.

Experiencing rather than seeing reality points us to the intimacy of this practice. This practice is something that's very close and intimate. It is integral to the ways in which we live in this world and are in this world. These things are seen as constantly changing.

It's not unusual for many people who are not Buddhists to also emphasize impermanence and the changing nature of things. Heraclitus in ancient Greece said you cannot step in the same river twice. But what human beings will do is resist. Maybe we don't try to step into the same river twice, but sometimes we try to dam the river and stop it from changing. Sometimes we try to appropriate parts of it by picking up the water in a bucket, going back to the village, and saying, "Look, I have the river." But it's not the river, it's just the water. The river stays where it is and keeps flowing. We can't stop the flow.

Some people run away from impermanence and change, the river of time, the river of change, but you can't really do that. There's no place you can go. You can't go to the desert. Many years ago some friends of mine went to Yucca Valley and stood out in the desert during a big earthquake. They watched the desert floor pick up in waves across the desert. So they hadn't gotten away from how things change.

For some people, even Buddhists, the solution to the world of impermanence, which can be a world of tremendous suffering, is to transcend it, to really leave it behind. They do this not by going to the desert, but by going to some transcendent realm of experience, of the mind, that is really separated and removed. In a sense, they're equating the world of impermanence with suffering, so the idea is to get rid of impermanence or get away from it in order to not suffer.

The Buddhist equation is that the world of impermanence is not the problem. The problem for human life is our attachment and clinging to it. The Buddhist equation is impermanence times attachment equals suffering. If you don't want to have the suffering, the idea is not to remove the world of impermanence, because that takes everything away. Rather, you remove the attachment from the equation, and then the world of impermanence doesn't lead to suffering.

So the recognition of this world as impermanent, changing, and inconstant is fairly common. We have many different relationships with this fact. Sometimes we celebrate it when the flowers of spring come forth. Sometimes we grieve it – when the flowers wilt and pass away in the fall, for example. We sometimes celebrate the birth of a child, without the recognition that with the birth comes someone who is going to die – inherently, anything that is born will die.

It is not a crime. It's not unnatural for that to happen. It is part of the natural process in its own way, just like flowers come and go. There's so much change. Some of it we celebrate, some of it we grieve. Some things pass and we celebrate their passing, for instance when we've been sick and we're no longer sick. Then we're so glad that things change and are impermanent.

From the point of view of Buddhist practice, the idea is to learn to have very realistic attention to and recognition of the nature of this world that we live in, the nature of ourselves, and what experience is. The idea is to see clearly how things actually are. That means we don't see through things that obscure our vision, through rose-colored or tinted glasses, or through angry or hateful glasses. The idea is to be able to really see with clear glasses – clear perceptions that are not

colored by our preferences and our emotional reactivity. To really see.

That certainly means we have to learn to see the changing nature of reality and to witness it. As people do vipassana meditation, they put themselves closely in touch with their direct experience, the intimacy of how perceptions, thoughts, and emotions arise and pass. Vipassana practice is a very intimate thing to do. This intimacy is not possible if we're living in our stories about the past or the future, in the ideas that we've locked in place because of something that happened in the past.

There are people who are locked into the idea that they have to be a certain way – maybe the idea that they have to be angry at someone because they can never let go of that anger. Or they might be locked into their grief. That's who they are, and they can never not be that. There's no way out. Some people identify strongly with being a victim. Some people identify strongly with being the one in charge, dominant, and powerful. There are all kinds of ways that people try to hold on to some idea of who they are, some story of what is, or was, or will be. In some ways that story doesn't really allow them to ride the river of change, to see it as it unfolds moment by moment.

One of the functions of the meditation practice that we're doing is to see clearly enough that we can see through the veil, the filter of the stories that we live by, the identities we hold on to and grasp, and the emotions that we're stuck in. We can begin to see below that level. The intimate level below the stories is the inconstant world where things arise and pass, where sensations, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and emotions, where experience is constantly flowing. This is the river of experience that you can never step in twice. It's constantly moving and flowing.

On the way to that we begin to understand how we resist that change, and how we stay away from the intimacy and closeness to things coming and going, arising and passing. That resistance is usually where we feel stuck, where we suffer, where we feel stress, where we feel contracted, where we feel small, where we feel somehow removed from our experience, sometimes very dramatically disassociated, disconnected, lost, and confused.

As mindfulness grows, we start seeing how we are resisting the river, expecting it to be one way and not another way, only looking at things from the point of view of what's lost, or only looking from the point of view of what we can gain. We are not really being in the flow of change moment by moment as it actually unfolds. It is

a beautiful, profound, and deep, difficult process to really open up and allow the flow of the river of life to move through us.

One reason for the difficulty is that for many of us, there are all kinds of ways in which not being open to this intimate arising and passing of phenomena has meant we've bottlenecked or repressed all kinds of unresolved emotions and feelings, things that have never been completed and things that we have held in check. There can be deep grief or sadness that for some reason or other is not allowed to flow – grief or anger that has been so stuck it has become our character, or fear that is ever-present in people. Somehow we've resisted it. Somehow we've bottled it up or picked up the bucket and carried it around.

Part of this practice then is to feel and see where these difficult stuck places reside in us. This is where we need the kind regard of mindfulness, the generosity towards ourselves and our experience, the compassion and kindness in which we can hold all this. We realize that life is difficult for everyone. We are willing to slowly, slowly do the powerful work of holding our pain or suffering in kindness so that our pain and suffering can begin to flow, move, and break up. The hard crusts can dissolve, the ice can melt, no more fuel is added to the fires that burn inside of us, and the fires can cool down.

We learn slowly with time through mindfulness that this process of opening to our inner life is a trustworthy process. Sometimes people haven't opened to the depths of these things for decades. Slowly, bit by bit, maybe with the support of others, we can learn ways to bring mindfulness to our experience. Then we can trust being with experience and allow it to flow through us.

I feel that one of the great gifts that I've received from mindfulness practice is the ability to have a deep trust that when things are difficult, mindfulness is the way out. Mindfulness really supports and helps, at times when I can't figure it out. By being really present and mindful in a non-reactive way and opening to the situation, it's amazing how many times something begins to find its way to healing and resolution. Really trust the mindfulness that opens.

On the way there, it really helps to have cultivated a lot of stability, a lot of steadiness, and an ability to persevere in a kind, steady way so we don't get knocked off the road or off track. Cultivating stability and steadiness in practice is kind of like giving a sailboat a deep keel and a lot of ballast. The deep keel and the heavy weight – the ballast of the keel – keep the sailboat from being knocked over too much and capsized. It makes the movements of the boat, the wind, and the waves slower and more manageable. The captain of the boat can adjust the boat accordingly. He

has time to be responsive, letting out the sail, turning the boat a little bit, and doing all the different things that are needed to keep the boat upright. When the ballast is really strong, it's very hard to tip a boat over.

When we create stability, it becomes a ballast so no matter how difficult life gets, we don't get blown away by it or tipped over by it. We have the ability to stand and open to it and experience it. It can take quite a while to learn that stability. Meditation is one of the places to do that. If we know we need that, then we can use meditation for that purpose. We can feel ourselves grounded and rooted in the place where we're meditating. We can feel ourselves rooted in our body.

Sometimes maybe it means feeling our legs or feeling our feet on the ground. The legs and the feet are kind of a neutral place for some people or a place of confidence, or less complicated than other places in the body. We just feel the rootedness, the groundedness of the legs on the ground or on the floor as we sit and meditate. This helps us stay in the present moment and not be swept away by the thoughts and emotions that might come.

As we become more steady and stable, the ability to be more at ease with our experience comes along with becoming calmer. As the mind becomes calmer, there's less discursive thought and less story-making. We tend

to have a greater intimacy with our real moment-moment experience – what is happening here for us. That intimacy can come along with waves of new emotions, new experiences, more sadness, more fear, and more anger.

This is not a mistake. We are slowly learning to open to the river of change and seeing how things change. We are learning how to not block the river, how to not resist it, and how to not run away from it. Slowly, we learn it's safe to let the river run through. Sometimes if there's a lot of sadness, that river running through means that there'll be endless tears. There might be a long period of just crying, a backlog of tears that need to happen.

Allowing this stuff to flow and being free with all this is certainly healing emotionally, but it also allows things to settle even more. As the practice continues over the months and years, there is a greater and greater settling, quieting, and steadying. As that steadying and stability gets stronger and stronger, it supports us to see the changing nature of phenomena more and more.

That is liberating because we can start seeing that the moment-to-moment experiences and thoughts, the moment-to-moment arising and passing of how we perceive and experience emotions, is a kaleidoscope of shifting and changing things. Then it becomes clearer

and clearer where we are clinging, where we're resisting, where we're pulling back, where we're making ourselves really small, or where we're getting angry and blaming, where we're criticizing ourselves – everything we do that, in Buddhism, is called “attachment.”

The more we can see and allow things to change, the more we're able to start noticing where the wind drag is. I guess we could call it “water drag.” If you're in a boat and you put your hand in the water, it slows down the boat a little bit. Attachments of all kinds are wind drag. They slow things down. We start feeling and seeing that. As we get more and more stable, more and more still, and it feels good, it becomes obvious that letting go of the clinging is better than clinging.

We can feel the unsatisfactoriness of clinging and holding on – holding on to something and needing it to always be exactly that way, holding onto me being exactly this way (this is who I have to be, this is who I am), holding on to pleasure, holding onto an opinion, holding onto a story, holding on to a preference.

That's how this deep insight into impermanence is a catalyst and support. When we see the clinging, then we might at some point be willing to trust relaxing – not always going around with a fist, but trusting it's okay to relax and open the fist of the heart/the mind. But

opening to the world of change and constancy and things coming and going only works if we have the inner support to do so. It is so important to cultivate those inner supports.

Today the topic was stability and steadiness – the capacity for a certain kind of stillness, non-imperturbability, non-activation, and non-reactivity. Being imperturbable can also mean being non-botherable – not bothered by things so much, not seeing everything as being so significant. We don't ride every little wave of what happens and interpret it with meaning and purpose and take it personally.

Instead, to be quiet and become a little bit more like an open window that lets the wind go right through, or like an open window frame that the birds fly through. Everything goes through it because nothing blocks it. It turns out that our attachments are what block things flowing through what they call “the gateless gate” in Zen. With a lot of our experiences that we don't like, are troubled by, or want a lot, when we experience them, they kind of stop at the places where we get attached, hold on, or resist. They just stop and get stuck there, and they hurt.

But as we begin to become quieter and more open, things still come and go, and come and go, but there is

nothing to hit when there are no attachments. Then the coming and going starts flowing more and more freely. In terms of our emotional life, in some ways it becomes richer, and in some ways there are fewer highs and lows.

The kaleidoscope of emotions still occurs, maybe with a bigger range, but some of the highs and lows have a lot to do with our attachments, our preferences, our identifications, and the ways that we react and overreact to them. Then the pendulum swings to one side to the other.

With greater calmness, stability, and openness – having a heart that's porous, where the heart is an open window – the river of life can flow, and everything can be very, very meaningful. In the spring, the flowers that grow can be very significant. A certain kind of freedom of heart can deepen, mature, and be enhanced. When the flowers fall and wither in the autumn, that also has a place in the open heart. There is a different response in the heart, but it opens in a similar way and reminds us we can touch into the place of freedom – the place where that grief too is included in the kaleidoscope of what it means to be a human being.

In Buddhism, freedom does not mean that we don't feel. It means that we feel freely, allowing the feelings to come and go completely freely. When we do that, the tendency is for our feelings, emotions, and responses to

not be exaggerated. They tend not to be artificially lengthened and prolonged. Sometimes these things are prolonged for decades because we keep fueling them by holding on to something. But the heart's freedom is a richer state.

The practice of freedom is about insight into inconstancy, into change, into impermanence. It's a little unfortunate that in English, we commonly translate *anicca*, the Pali word, as "impermanence." Because for many people, impermanence means that things are here now and they're going to disappear. Being impermanent means they're going to pass away at some time.

The primary insight of Buddhist tradition into these three characteristics – the insights of insight meditation that lead to liberation – is not the intellectual recognition that things will pass, so don't get attached. Saying it that way is a little bit coarse, even callous. Rather, the insight is to notice the inconstancy of moment-to-moment experience. Inconstancy means that things don't necessarily have to disappear once and for all, but there is a way in which they come and go in perception. The same thing can repeatedly reappear.

Even with something like physical pain, when we have a story about the pain, when we react to the pain or tighten up around the pain, or tighten up around

resisting it, that pain can seem like it's constant and permanent.

It can be reassuring to be told it's all impermanent and sooner or later it will pass. (Then you reply, “ Yes – it better be sooner.”)

But with pain, inconstancy means that when you don't have a story and you don't have resistance to the pain, if you really feel the pain very intimately, the pain will be felt as a kaleidoscope of little sparks of sensations that are coming and going, arising and passing. Or you are with it for a few moments and then you hear a sound and your attention goes there, or you have a thought, or you are aware that you're hungry. Then you come back and you're aware of the pain.

The way we perceive is inconstant. But things don't necessarily have to disappear, once and for all. It is the perception of them that's moving and changing and shifting. Beginning to rest in that river of perception where things arise and pass does take a fair amount of stillness and quiet. So the paradox or the irony of this practice is that the more stable we can become, the more still the awareness becomes, the more we see that everything else is changing, flowing, and moving.

The balance of seeing both of them together is what is liberating and freeing. When we really see how inconstant things are, we release our experiences from

the stories we project onto them. We release our experiences from all the projections of judgments, the projections of bias, projections of preference, and the projections of the past, all of which we paint on top of the experience of the present. In Buddhism, this liberation is called “signless liberation,” which I think we could call “projectionless liberation” in modern English. This liberation comes when we no longer project our ideas on top of our experience.

So finally I'll say that these insights, the insight into inconstancy and the other two, are not things that you should be trying hard to perceive. It is not as if you should start straining and trying to see how everything is constantly changing. The insight is more like a revelation.

You do your practice to create adequate stability and stillness so that the inconstant nature of experience reveals itself to you. You don't want to be ahead of yourself. Just keep learning how to be in the present moment. Learn how to hold yourself steady. Learn how to take refuge in your body, your mind, and your heart's ability to be stable. Can you find the stability that's already within you, grow it, and enhance it? Can you find whatever stability that's there and make it a resource and a support for you?

As you do that, I hope that you'll feel the wonderfulness of this intimacy, closeness, and settledness that can happen as we free ourselves from the frozen river. We pause and open again and we allow things to flow. And with time, you'll see the inconstant nature of phenomena. The more you see it, the more that will support you to see more deeply the ways in which you still cling and hold on. You will experience more deeply the wonderful, profound, and happiness-producing process of being free of our clinging, free of attachment, and letting go.

For this retreat, please trust yourself, trust your practice, and trust mindfulness. Trust that you have within you the resources, the capacities for stability, stillness, and steadiness. See if you can drop into it. See if you can find it. See if you can be supported by it. By doing that, maybe the story-making mind, the reactive mind, and the discursive thinking mind can finally rest and become quieter. As the discursive mind becomes quieter, maybe there's more intimacy with now – the present moment.

In this inconstant retreat, these sittings and teachings come and go, and now this one will pass.
Thank you very much.

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