

Mindfulness of Breathing (60) The Present is Change

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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As I talked about yesterday, the fourth tetrad – the final group of four practices or steps of mindfulness of breathing – involves settling back and observing our experience.

A big part of the ability to observe what is being implied here is not to be assertive, doing things, interpreting, changing, fixing, or escaping our experience – but learning to have the stability, ease, and strength of awareness to settle back and see clearly what is happening – to clearly observe the moment. When we do not overlay our ideas and concepts, what we see is change. We see that things are changing all the time.

I think it does not take a lot to appreciate that aside from any ways in which we think things are unchanging, there is always change moment by moment. The day changes. The lighting changes slowly over time, maybe sometimes imperceptibly. If you are in a city, the sounds of the city are constantly changing. The sensations of our body are changing throughout the day. We can watch the changes as we get hungry, eat, and then don't feel hungry. We feel uncomfortable. We engage our bodies in different ways. Different muscles are used at different times, and therefore, different sensations come into play. There is a constantly shifting, changing landscape of where attention focuses and what it takes in.

Even with things that do not necessarily change themselves, what is constantly changing is how we perceive or see them. If I look at a wall, my eyes naturally do not fixate on a spot but kind of roam around. Even though the wall is not changing, what is changing is where my eyes land on the wall or the flowing perception of the wall. So whether it is something that is constantly shifting – like watching a river flowing or the act of perception continually shifting, moving, and going around – what we experience is a constantly shifting landscape of change. This insight is central to the deeper insights of Buddhist meditation.

The fourth tetrad of *ānāpānasati* begins with the thirteenth step, which is:

One trains: observing inconstancy, I breathe in.

One trains: observing inconstancy, I breathe out.

Inconstancy is one word for change. We really begin to appreciate and see the depth to which things are changing all the time. One of the reasons Buddhism puts such a strong emphasis on being present – having present moment attention – is that this is where change happens.

If we are thinking about the past, the past is not changing anymore, except in how we remember it perhaps. The future does not really exist to change. It is a projection of our imagination. But the present moment is where we can see change. This is where the river of change flows by.

According to the Buddha, everything is changing. Everything is inconstant. This is not necessarily obvious in ordinary consciousness or ordinary ways of being. But seeing change is really central to what happens in deeper meditation.

In meditation itself, we are no longer paying attention to the wall on the opposite side of the room, or to the mountain. We might say: “Well, the mountain is not

changing.” Then we have to use our logic and say: “Well, it is slowly being worn down and eroding.” It is in meditation – sitting here with the eyes closed – that we begin to open up to present moment experience and really feel, sense, experience, and observe it. What we experience in the context of meditation is the constantly shifting flow of phenomena.

This is experienced after developing strong stability. Part of the paradox is that, in meditation, the more still and stable the mind is, the more the mind observes change and impermanence. The more unstable, scattered, preoccupied, and unsettled the mind is, the more we tend to impute permanence. We tend to get caught up in our ideas, thoughts, and stories, which can often carry with them the feeling that things are constant or permanent – that, “This is the way things are.”

I have certainly fallen into the delusion of permanence without realizing it, even kind of unconsciously. If I think about it, of course, I do not believe what I’m feeling. I remember one day many years ago when I was having a difficult day with my child. My wife and I were hovering over him, trying to manage with this high-spirited child. My wife looked up at me and said, “We are having one of those kinds of days.”

As soon as she said this, I realized that I was operating emotionally as if, “This is it. We are always going to be this way. It is not going to change.” Of course, if I had thought about it, I would not have felt that way. But the emotional feeling affirmed, “This is it.” However, as soon as she said, “We’re having one of those days,” I relaxed. “Okay. This is a manifestation of the moment. This is how it is now, and it will change. You will have a different day tomorrow.”

The imputing of permanence – an emotional feeling like, “This is it!” – interferes with our ability to step back and benefit from the wisdom of change, of how things constantly shifting. This is one of the key insights of the Buddha. He does not say it in this particular way, but my interpretation is:

Things are always changing, and change is not random. Change happens because of the conditions preceding what is happening now.

As conditions shift and change, the direction of change – how things change – unfolds accordingly. Generally, we do not have rain without clouds. The clouds are the condition for the changing weather of rain happening.

When I feel cold, it is sometimes harder for me to get concentrated when I meditate. I have meditated in very cold weather, and the conditions were not there for me

to get settled and calm. There was still change happening. But the conditions did not support becoming concentrated.

There are times when the weather has been comfortable or I have been bundled up nicely. My body is not coping with cold and shivering. I have different conditions of being cozy and settled. It is easier then. The conditions are there to allow the change into a concentrated state of meditation. So depending on the conditions that are present, change goes in different directions.

A key insight, which is central to Buddhist teachings, is that things can go in either a helpful direction or an unhelpful direction – a wholesome, nourishing direction or an unhelpful, unnourishing direction. We are a little bit responsible for putting the conditions in place to support the directionality of change. We can't control it absolutely. We can't make things be a certain way. But we can put the conditions in place to support a tendency in healthy directions – beneficial ways.

A deep appreciation of change also shows us that things are malleable. Things are changeable *because* they are always changing. And we have a role to play in the direction of that change.

If we are floating down the current in a river, we understand that we are being carried by the flowing change of the river. But we also understand which part of the current we are in and how we avoid the eddies and the parts of the current that take us up against the shore. We can gently guide ourselves in the river in a way that keeps us in the central current so we keep flowing down the river.

Being attuned to change is part of the thirteenth step of mindfulness of breathing. It is to observe inconstancy. I will talk more about this tomorrow. Inconstancy is part of the family of concepts that relate to change, to things becoming different, to impermanence.

So, to observe inconstancy, observe change. And to find some degree of freedom – the same kind of freedom that we would have if we were floating on a river. There is freedom in being carried, but we are also careful about which current we go in, where on the river we are floating, and maybe even which river we are floating in.

This might be the theme for the next twenty-four hours for you: notice change. Notice how change arises and transforms depending on conditions. Also notice how your role – where you find yourself in change, your relationship to change, and how you relate to change – puts you into different currents. If you are resisting,

fighting, or attached to change, this puts you in a different river than one in which you are with change in an open, relaxed way.

There are different words, concepts, and ways of talking about the same thing. The Buddha used different words. For now, I am using the word “inconstancy” and focusing mostly on change. Tomorrow, we will pick up the idea of inconstancy more directly. The Pali word, *anicca*, is often translated as “impermanence,” but we will see tomorrow that “inconstancy” might be a better translation.

Thank you all very much, and I look forward to tomorrow.