Mindfulness of Breathing (63) Breaking the Spell

March 26, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS
clinging, arising, insight, mindfulness, phenomena, passing, experience, awareness, attached, flow, deep meditation, suffering, thinking, insight meditation, attachment, *saṅkhāra, dukkha*, *ānāpānasati, Dhammapada*, Dhp 277-279, wisdom, three characteristics, inconstancy, impermanence, suffering, not-self, river, grasping, purity, enchantment, transcripts, pain, illness, to-do list, conditions, tinnitus, mindfulness of speaking, marriage, career, translation, gender, retreats, dangers

Gil Fronsdal

The topic continues to be the thirteenth step of mindfulness of breathing. Observing, one trains oneself:

> *Observing inconstancy, I breathe in. Observing inconstancy, I breathe out.*

This is how the instructions are. Observing inconstancy, which is usually translated as impermanence, is the core insight of insight meditation and the Buddha's teachings in the ancient texts.

The definition the Buddha gave repeatedly for wisdom is:

> *Wisdom is the perception of arising and passing – the insight into the arising and disappearing of phenomena, which is noble, penetrating, and leads to the ending of suffering.*

It is the experience, the perception, of seeing things arise and pass that leads to liberation, to awakening.

The way that inconstancy is understood here is defined by many different words in the ancient language that are equivalent to English phrases like “arising and passing” and “appearing and disappearing.” It is hard to understand or appreciate how valuable this experience is to have until one experiences it in a very deep, subtle, quiet place in meditation. That is where this deep insight works – a very penetrating and noble awakening when the mind is ready to see that.

In ordinary consciousness, like walking around the street, if someone tells you to notice the arising and passing of phenomena, it probably will not stick. There probably won’t be any sense of continuity with that, resting in it, being open to it. When walking on the street, you have to take care of too many details, like figuring out what is going on.

But, in deep meditation – to be at rest and centered, in a receptive, open way, observing the flow of experience in

awareness – it is possible because we are not overlaying concepts and ideas on top of things. We are there in the direct experience of phenomena – the perceptions, sensations, beginning of thoughts, and even emotions, which might feel continuous in ordinary street consciousness. When the mind is very quiet and still, we begin to feel and sense how, in our experience phenomena momentarily, fleetingly come into and out of existence. They come into and out of awareness. The mind picks things up or doesn't pick them up.

Generally, we sew all the different moments of arising and passing together into a feeling of constancy – into the idea that experience is continuous. When we don't have ideas anymore but are just in the experience, this arising and passing occurs. To do this is liberating, partly because when we see that things are constantly in flux, it doesn't make sense to cling or grasp onto them.

It is like you see a river flow by. It is clearly moving and in flux. Then you put your hand in to grab the river and hold it. You grab a handful of the river and pull it up. By the time you open your hand, all the water has squeezed through your fingers and run off. You might have a few drops left on your hand, but you don't take them to your friends on the shore and say: "Hey, look. I have the river in my hand." If you think you are holding the river because you have those few little drops, that is

no longer the river. The river is partly defined by water that is flowing, and those drops are no longer in that flow.

The idea of picking something out of the flow of experience and holding on to it – if we are in the flow, really centered in it, then we see that we have actually left the flow. We are now holding an idea of something that is just a little drop.

It turns out that so much of what we get attached to, cling to, or resist is not actually reality, but the idea, the interpretation, or the concept we have of reality. It is hard to explain that to people in ordinary consciousness. But when we are centered, quiet, and see the vibratory, sparkling flow – the raindrop on the lake, the appearing and disappearing of phenomena – it becomes glaringly obvious that it does not make sense to cling to our experience. It doesn't make sense to resist it. Rather, open to it and just allow it to move through – allow it to flow and move.

Generally, when that happens, our relationship to our experience changes dramatically. Even with physical pain – which I know is very hard to be with. When we have the ability to be concentrated, still, and feel everything as flowing sensations, pain gets transformed into something that does not really feel painful anymore. The flow of the arising and passing of sensations

becomes a whole different way of experiencing pain. But to do that requires the mind to be very still, focused, present, and quiet.

To see the appearing and disappearing of phenomena is the core insight. In the guided meditation, I focused mostly on the arising. At some point, we'll do a meditation focusing on the passing away of phenomena, and then on the arising and passing of phenomena together.

Our relationship to things begins to shift. There is a wonderful verse in the *Dhammapada* that starts with the quote:

All things are inconstant.

Everything is arising and passing. In ordinary consciousness, things may seem continuous, unchanging. In the mind's way of experiencing, it is the experience that is arising and passing. We want to be careful that we are not getting too wrapped up in the thing that we are perceiving as being inconstant. It is the nature of how experience happens that is inconstant. There is a momentary, pixelated nature of reality or flow of experience that comes and goes, which is built into the nature of how we are aware, how we experience things.

The Buddha says (Dhp 277):

All created things are inconstant.

The Pali word is *saṅkhāra,* which I'd like to suggest is about all created experiences – all the ways in which the mind perceives, takes in, and constructs our reality. Everything like that is inconstant, in flux, and moving. Then:

Seeing this with insight,
One becomes disenchanted with suffering.

One becomes disenchanted with suffering. Who believes that they are enchanted with suffering? Enchanted may mean enamored or caught in the spell of something. Somehow, if we hate our suffering, we are caught in its spell. We are enchanted by it in a certain way if that means to be under a spell. If we hate something, we are under its spell. We are caught, entangled. Seeing the inconstancy of experience helps us to disentangle ourselves – to break the spell, to not be so caught in it.

So, all things are inconstant.

All created things [all *saṅkhāra*s] *are inconstant*.
Seeing this with insight,
One becomes disenchanted with suffering.
This is the path of purity.

This is the path of purity. This idea of purity is a little problematic. But, a few verses before, the Buddha talks about purity this way:

This is the path for purifying one's vision.

Purifying our awareness, our vision, how we see things. This does not necessarily mean becoming a saint inside. Rather, this kind of purity is coming to a place where our capacity to be aware is purified of all the filters of thoughts, ideas, reactions, and emotions that prevent us from seeing clearly. To see clearly – see things as they are – we want to see the inconstancy of phenomena.

The verse goes on:

All created things are suffering.
Seeing this with insight,
One becomes disenchanted with suffering.

Here we have suffering, the second of the three characteristics. These three characteristics – inconstancy, suffering, and not-self – are the core insights of insight meditation.

Seeing clearly starts with seeing the arising and passing. There is something about seeing this level or layer of our experience that gives birth to clear insight into what I translate as “suffering.” The Pali word is *dukkha*. Maybe it could be more usefully translated in this context as “stressful.” We’ll talk more about that on Monday.

It goes on to say:

All things are not-self.
Seeing this with insight,

One becomes disenchanted with suffering.

We will continue with this idea of the three characteristics, which are so phenomenally important for insight meditation that it is worth spending some time with them. This movement of seeing and observing inconstancy has an impact on the meditator. The impact is a process of disenchantment – breaking the spell of how we are caught, entangled, clinging, or attached to things. This is where the allure, the promise of attachment – the promise that grasping will somehow save us or do something for us – begins to be broken.

Today and during the weekend, you might want to look at this idea of inconstancy, the arising and passing of phenomena, and see if somehow that casts any perspective on how you might be enchanted with suffering or caught in its spell.

I have a little bit of time today. Formally we can stop here. If some of you would like to stay a little longer and put some questions in the chat, I'm happy to try to answer. I might not be able to answer them in order.

Q1: **"Inconstancy is not bad news. Ah ha."**

Nice.

Q2: **“Are there transcripts of your talks?”**

Yes, but I don’t think they come right away. There’s a wonderful team of people who are transcribing these talks in the morning. I think some of the talks from earlier in the year and before are available as transcripts now. If you go on Audio Dharma where the audio recordings are, it will say if there’s a transcription available. Luckily, they are lightly edited. The person heading up that wonderful project of transcribing is Meg Gawler, who often says hello here in the morning. Thank you so much, Meg and your team, for this great work that you’re doing.

Some people ask if Meg needs more help with transcription. Yes, she says you can contact the IMC Volunteer Coordinator, Hillary Borison. If you go on IMC’s website, there is a place for volunteering. You can let Hillary know.

Q3: “**Where does awareness go when we are caught in thinking?”**

Lovely question. Where does it go? Well, it depends on what we mean by awareness. If awareness is not the same as consciousness, but awareness is conscious awareness. Or – how to say it – if there is knowing awareness – we know what we are aware of, we know what is coming into consciousness. There are a lot of

things we know that come into awareness where we don't clearly and fully feel, "Ah, I know that." For example, in saying this, I was aware that I have these studio lights on here. I was aware of the light, and then I knew, "Oh, the light is on." But the second kind, the knowing of it, is different from if I don't pay attention – I don't think about it. I don't have any act of formal recognition.

I think that our consciousness or awareness gets hijacked and held hostage by our thinking. We get so glued to our thinking that our self-reflective awareness – where we know what's happening, what we're doing, and what we're thinking – gets lost because the mind is so preoccupied, so glued to our thinking. That's probably an inadequate answer, but we'll have to leave it at that.

Q4: **"Can you say more about dealing with pain, especially for those with chronic illness?"**

Yes. That is a huge topic – a very important one. There are a lot of people who are managing their life with pain and chronic illness. I think one of the great benefits of mindfulness meditation in circumstances like this is to help us not add second arrows to our pain. When we are already having tremendous difficulty trying to work with pain and chronic illness – to not add shame, self-recrimination, resentment, or anger. To not get attached

to the second arrows: “It should have been different. Why isn’t it different? I should have...” But, to learn how to be simpler and simpler. To allow ourselves to be ill and in pain in the simplest possible way, perhaps even an ordinary way, as if: “Oh, yes, I’m sick. That’s what is happening.”

Then we absolutely take care of ourselves. We try to be well and do what we can to heal the pain or overcome the illness. We don’t want to be passive about it. We do what we can, and sometimes we can’t do much. The practice can help us become very simple with it, breathe with it, and not add extra tension and stress to an already stressful situation.

As the mindfulness gets stronger and more concentrated, it is possible to bring careful, loving, compassionate attention deeply into the pain and the illness, to really feel the direct experience of it. This sometimes allows for different kinds of beneficial shifts. I don’t want to say exactly how these beneficial shifts will look. It’s different for different people. I don’t want to set up the expectation that mindfulness can help make the pain or the illness go away, and that it is healing in that way. But mindfulness practice can be healing for the heart. The illness and the pain might not go away, but the heart is healed. That is the movement of liberation, and then we become whole in a certain way.

Q5: **“Is closed captioning available for these talks?”**

You know, I believe they are through YouTube. I haven’t tracked all this so well. I’ll try to find out. I believe there’s a way, maybe down in the settings on YouTube.

Meg writes, “Closed captioning equals the Oral Notes on Audio Dharma.” Someone says, “Yeah, closed captioning on YouTube is not available live, but seems to show up later on.”

The questions go by quickly, so I miss some. I can’t do them in order. I apologize.

Q6: **“Are thoughts the central mechanism of how we cling to these inconstant phenomena?”**

I don’t know if thoughts are the mechanism for clinging, but at least in my experience, mostly what we cling to is our thoughts, our ideas. It is not so obvious until we really see how this works in a deep, quiet way. We don’t really cling to physical pleasure, but it’s more like we cling to the thoughts, the ideas that we have about what this pleasure is doing for us.

Q7: **“To get to the deepest levels of insight, it seems we have to let go of every to-do list in our life. How can we function in the world if we want to go to the deepest levels of insight?”**

Great question. Yes, to get to the deepest level of freedom, you have to put aside or let go of any clinging, all clinging. But we can still hold things without clinging. I can be attached to this striker. I can feel I'm attached to it, so I should never let go of it. And I can just drop it [the striker falls].

But it is not the *thing* that we necessarily have to let go of. When we let go of attachment, it's not the thing, unless it is harmful. The striker itself is not harmful. It's the clinging we let go of. So we can go like this [holds the striker in the palm of his hand facing upwards]. We can still hold it without any grasping.

In deep meditation, we want to put everything aside. So, with a to-do list, you might write it on a piece of paper and put it up on a shelf or leave it on a table – just put it aside. Later, you come back to it, look at it, and hold all the things on the to-do list with an open hand and an open mind. Then go through them and have the pleasure of checking them off, but don't get attached or cling to any of it. You're welcome to keep your to-do list. Hopefully, the deep letting go and the deep wisdom of meditation help you to look at the list and prioritize in a good way. Maybe a few of the things on the list are not necessary. A few of the things may represent something you're unnecessarily attached to.

Q8: **“There seem to be two kinds of inconstancy: how our awareness flickers and then, perhaps, wraps things up in a constant narrative. Is that correct?”**

Yes, that sounds nice. But things are not random. The inconsistency of what appears and disappears is not completely random. Things arise because of preceding conditions. Nothing arises out of nothing. But the conditions come together, and then things arise. In Dharma practice, we are actually putting in place conditions so that we have more consistency – so that it is more likely that if we move or grow in a certain direction, then certain things tend to arise more often. For example, if we practice a lot of loving-kindness, then that sets conditions so that if we sit and we feel pain, we are more ready to feel compassion, love, and care for ourselves than being angry with ourselves or others because of what is happening to us. So we begin to shape our relationship to inconstancy so that it tends in a more beneficial direction.

Q9: **“Will you please say more about the Buddha never saying ‘no self’ or that he had a sense of self.”**

Yes. We’ll talk about that next week when we get to not-self in this exploration of inconstancy.

Q10: **“I have tinnitus.”**

I guess I missed the question, but I too have tinnitus. One of the best things for me is if no one brings up the word because then I am reminded and I start to hear the ringing in my ears. There are times when I’ve been really troubled by this. The ringing in my ears drove me kind of batty, but I’m not troubled by it anymore. It kind of recedes. Some people find it useful to make it the object of meditation. It has a kind of constant inconstancy that is grounding. I have never found it particularly useful to pay attention to it. In fact, some teachers say that tinnitus is one of the things in mindfulness practice you should not pay attention to. The idea is to pay attention to everything in mindfulness, but not pay attention to that. It all depends on the person and what is useful and not useful. Mostly these days, I don’t give it much attention. I’ve learned not to react to it – not to be for or against it. Just, “Okay, there it is.” Then I’ll continue with my breathing, sit there, practice, and go on with other things. I know for some people when it is really bad, they have some ambient sound around them that masks or hides it.

Q11: **“It’s a challenge to hold one’s tongue and only observe.”**

Yes, to be mindful of speaking is advanced, graduate school mindfulness. There is so much attachment,

force, power, and desire that come into play in speaking. It is so beneficial to bring mindfulness to speaking. To say this in non-Buddhist terms, to be mindful of talking – what drives our talking, why we're going to say, what we do say, what is the emotional motivation for our talking – is a dramatic window into our soul. It is a window into the depth of who we are. It is certainly worthwhile to learn to speak mindfully.

Q12: "**If things are inconstant and clinging to them causes us to suffer, what does that mean for choices of the heart like marriage and career?"**

Ideally, we would choose marriage or a career without any clinging. In the flow of things, we still make choices for the direction, the purpose, and the meaning of our lives – what we want to put our heart into more than anything else. We do not have to go randomly along with whatever happens. It's a beautiful thing, for some people, to have a career or a marriage they want to devote themselves to, to be engaged in. People make other choices that are just as good and valuable. With something like marriage, and maybe with careers as well, if we wait until we have no clinging, craving, or attachment – the Buddhist idea of attachment to craving, clinging – before we get married, then perhaps most people wouldn't get married. In Buddhism, it is not a sin or a crime to be attached or to cling. It just means

we are going to suffer somewhat because of our clinging.

One way to approach marriage and career – or any choice we make for our lives – is to enfold it into our mindfulness practice. Fold it into our careful care, attention, and compassion. “Where is our clinging? Where is our attachment?” Marriage, family, and kids can be a great place to discover where we’re attached – where our clinging and craving are. It may be so deep that we wouldn’t see it in ourselves unless we were in that kind of an intimate, committed relationship. Then we can work through it and come to the other side of it. It can be folded in as a path of the practice, as opposed to avoiding all these things because we’re clinging. It’s probably best not to choose to go into marriage because you want to work out your clinging. Hopefully, that answers the question well enough.

Q13: **“What chapter and verse from the *Dhammapada* did you cite?”**

It is Verse 277 that I read, and it’s in Chapter 20, “The Path.” I’m reading from my translation that I did twenty years ago or so. It’s a little bit fascinating and – I don’t know – embarrassing, but there’s a little bit of regret for my English choices. My Pali and study of the suttas were not what they are now. I would translate some of this differently now. Also, there is the use of gender

pronouns. In order to be more gender-neutral, I did many things in a gender-neutral way. But sometimes if there were two pairs of verses, or the original was the masculine pronoun, I would do one with “he” and the other with “she.” At the time, I thought that was good, but ten or twenty years later, I understood that we want to be gender-neutral more fully because of how many people don’t fit into the binary of he and she. I regret that I left it at that. I didn’t know enough back then to make that choice.

Q14: **“Are these deep insights only really possible with lengthy meditation retreats? Have you read the Harper’s article about the possible dangers of this?”**

No, insight doesn’t require lengthy retreats. For many people – in our tradition at least – it is usually in meditation retreats that this really settles in and becomes digested. Most people see it and are impacted in a very good way by these deep insights. Once we have a clear sense of and familiarity with it, we live in a delightful, wonderful way and much more in our daily life as well. It doesn’t require deep meditation anymore to have these insights be part of the landscape and affect us.

I might have read the Harper’s article. I think I’m pretty familiar with the modern discussion about the dangers

of deep insight meditation. Generally, for people who want to go into deeper meditation experiences, it's good to work with a teacher – to be closely connected so you can ask questions about how it's going. Some of that can be a little bit disorienting. Some of the real dangers that happen have a lot to do with the attitude and way in which people practice. The people who really strive and push can have real psychological problems because they're overriding. They're not integrated. There*'s* not a relaxation – not a nice, broad unification, composure, or collectedness that supports. *Ānāpānasati* is a fantastic practice because it creates a good foundation for these insights. I think some of the people who end up in a little psychological trouble somehow leapfrog over creating the foundation of practice. They're in a hurry and gung ho, so they have deep experiences of inconstancy before they can make good use of the psychological support, well-being, and stability of a retreat. If they already have a little bit of psychological instability, a retreat can make them more unstable. This is a known phenomenon that can happen and is one of the reasons for having some connection to a teacher. Meditation retreats are where that can happen, so you have the connection and support if something like that happens.

Thank you all very much for this morning and your questions. I appreciate them, and I'm sorry if I didn't answer all the questions. I value them all. Thank you.