

# *Satipaṭṭhāna* (13) Observing Inconstancy in the Body

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

refrain, abide, arising, *dhamma*, ceasing, nature, Bhikkhu Bodhi, sensations, appear, disappear, flow, changing, experience, bell, pain, *anicca*, impermanence, inconstancy, leaves, receptive

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We are talking about the refrain of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. The first line, which we somewhat covered already, goes:

*In this way, one abides observing the body in terms of the body internally.*

*One observes the body in regard to the body externally.*

The second line is:

*One abides observing the arising of dhamma.*

*One abides observing the ceasing of dhamma.*

*One observes the arising and ceasing of dhamma.*

We are not a hundred percent certain of the meaning of

the word *dhamma* (“dharma” in English). Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as “nature” – the quality or nature of something. So:

*Observing the nature of arising in the body.*

*Observing the nature of ceasing in the body.*

*Observing the nature of arising and ceasing in the body.*

The emphasis here is not what the sensation is, but rather the process by which all sensations in the body have a way in which they appear and disappear. It is tuning into the flow – the changing nature, the appearing and disappearing, arising and passing. The practice opens up to this flow when we are able to be centered and stable in the present moment. When we are able to settle back, abide, and observe – without the mind jumping into thoughts, concepts, ideas, and reactions – the mind is just there, quietly able to observe what is happening.

Another meaning for the word *dhamma* is “experience” – the particular experiences that come and go.

Whatever experience arises in the body, we see it as arising. Whatever experience passes, we see it as passing. Whatever experience we see both arise and pass in the body, we observe that. Experiences arising and passing – this refers to things that last a very short time. Almost as soon as they arise, they are already

passing away. An example is the sound of a bell. It suddenly appears and then you are aware of it fading away. Sometimes that happens quite quickly. Some sounds, like snapping my fingers, arise (appear) and disappear almost at the same time.

As the mind gets more still and quiet, a certain magic begins appearing. We realize that the things we thought were solid, it turns out their solidity is partly a function of perceiving them conceptually through an idea, maybe subconsciously. Or they seem solid because we are holding on to them or are contracted around them.

As we get more and more deeply relaxed and settled and are able to tune into the momentary processes, we see that even something that remains, in the remaining, it is coming and going, arising and passing. For example, you might hear a constant rustling of the leaves of a tree in the wind, and say: “Oh, it is rustling all the time. It is constant.” But in fact, if you tune into the rustling, it is made up of a lot of small little rustling sensations of leaves coming and going. We take the aggregate to be continuous and solid.

The same occurs with the body – the aggregate of pain in my knee can seem like solid pain. But if we settle and become quiet enough, we can open to and receive the sensations of the pain. Often what happens is that we

drop below the aggregate level to the more particular sensations that make up the total. We see they are sparking and passing away. There is a dance of sensations all the time, even in something that felt like it was solid. As we keep practicing, this dance of sensations, comings and goings, becomes the orientation for what we are aware of.

This can happen naturally by itself. We do not have to go looking for it. In fact, looking for this way of being too soon can lead to our meditation becoming unbalanced or challenged. It is better to let this just appear as we get more settled into the practice – when we are here and relaxed in a place where we can just abide and observe. What can help and support this is to know that it is valuable.

Sometimes when people learn mindfulness practice, they are supposed to always know something. To really go in there and know: “That is pain. That is tightening. That is clenching. That is warmth. That is coolness.” It is like focusing on the concept – I don’t know if “concept” is the right word here – or the thing. But at some point, we are not interested in the thing, but in having a deeper intimacy that allows us to see – to perceive, sense, feel – that whatever thing is there, whatever *dhamma*, is arising and passing, and how it is sparking.

The word *anicca*, often translated as “impermanence,” literally means “inconstancy.” Some people think the word “impermanent” in English means it is not going to last, like sooner or later it will not be there anymore. Here inconstancy implies that something can be there and seem constant, like the rustling of leaves in the wind, but the individual bits of sound are inconstant. They come and go.

As long as we are alive, our breathing is constant. It is not impermanent, in a final way, until we die. But our breathing is inconstant in that the inbreath is not constantly there. The inbreath is inconstant because it yields to the exhale. The exhale is not constant because it yields to the inhale. They are inconstantly continuously there. They are inconstantly continuously reappearing. A lot of what we see in the body is better described not as impermanent, but as inconstant. We see inconstancy: the flow, change, moving.

We are able to rest in that experience – abide and observe, abide and just sense. Observing is akin to receptive awareness. If the idea of seeing or observing is not quite the right metaphor for you, there might be another metaphor, like feeling. Receptive feeling, receptive perceiving, is closer to what is happening than actively looking.

As we deepen into the world of inconstancy, awareness is not even receptive anymore. That implies a separation from the experience – a duality where we are a bit active, like “I am the one receiving.” It is just things appearing and disappearing, without our receiving them or actively going to them. It is just flowing in the field of awareness.

There are degrees by which this happens. Sometimes we feel hints of it, the smallest degree. Sometimes it is all pervasive. Whatever degree, it represents a movement towards healthiness in the body. The contracted, tight, and solid feeling of the body, as normal as it is, is not necessarily a problem in ordinary life. It may even be needed. But it can also be the place where we get physiologically congested, tense, tight, or restricted. Blood circulation, nerve circulation – I do not know exactly all the energies that exist in the body – does not flow as smoothly.

As we open up to this flowing, vibrant nature, it can feel like health is flowing through our body. Even if someone is sick, maybe with an incurable disease, to have access to this level of meditation feels healthy. Whether it actually heals disease is another issue. But it certainly feels good to have this deep relaxation and opening. And it probably is good for the immune system.

More important in Buddhism, this deep relaxation is a stepping stone or an opening. It is a way of being that begins showing us the potential for freedom in a deep way. That will be the topic for tomorrow. So:

*Abiding, observing the body in its arising experiences.*

*Abiding, observing the body in its ceasing experiences.*

*Abiding, observing the body in the arising and ceasing of all its experiences.*

Thank you. I look forward to being here with you tomorrow.