

## 5. THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS

The three characteristics of impermanence, dissatisfaction, and no-self are so central to the Buddha's teachings that it is almost inconceivable how little attention the majority of "insight" meditators give them. I cannot possibly overstate the usefulness of trying again and again to really discern these three qualities of all experience. They are the stuff from which ultimate insight at all stages comes, pure and simple. Every single time I say, "Understand the true nature of things," what I mean is, "Directly perceive the three characteristics." To perceive them thoroughly and directly is to be awakened.

Somehow this exceedingly important message doesn't typically seem to get through to insight meditators, so they spend much time doing anything but looking precisely, moment to moment, into the three characteristics. They may be thinking about something, lost in the stories and tape loops of the mind, trying to work out their stuff, philosophizing, trying to quiet the mind, or who knows what, and this can go on retreat after retreat, year after year, decade after decade, and of course they wonder why they don't have any insight yet. This is a tragedy of monumental proportions, but you do not have to be part of it! You can be one of those insight meditators who knows what to do, does it, and finally gets it in the truest sense.

The big message here is: drop the stories. Find a physical object like the breath, the body, pain, or pleasure, some feeling of resistance you may be experiencing, etc., and train yourself to perceive the three characteristics precisely and consistently. Drop to the level of bare sensations. This is vipassana, insight meditation, the way of the Buddhas. All the "opening to it", "just being with it", "letting it go", and so on are quite important, as we will see later, but insight meditators must—I repeat, must—look into the following:

### IMPERMANENCE

All experienced phenomena, whether physical or mental, inner or outer, are impermanent. This is one of the most fundamental teachings of the Buddha and the second-to-last sentence he uttered before he died:

*All phenomena are impermanent! Work out your salvation with diligence!*

In his last words, he said everything you need to know to do insight practices. Things come and go. Nothing lasts for even a microsecond. Absolute transience is truly the actual nature of experiential reality.

What do I mean by “experiential reality”? I mean the universe of sensations that you directly experience. There are many gold standards for reality. However, when doing insight practices, the *only* useful gold standard for reality is your own sensate experience. From the conventional perspective, things are usually believed to exist even when you no longer experience them directly, and are thus inferred to exist with only circumstantial evidence to be relatively stable entities. Predictability is confused with continuity of existence. For our day-to-day lives, this assumption is functional and adequate.

For example, you could close your eyes, put down this book or device, and then pick it up again where you left it without opening your eyes. From a pragmatic point of view, this book was where you left it even when you were not directly experiencing it. However, when doing insight practices, it just happens to be much more useful to assume that things are only there when you experience them and not when you don’t. Thus, the gold standard for reality when doing insight practices is the sensations that make up your reality *in that instant*. Sensations that are not there at that time are not presumed to exist, and thus only sensations arising in that instant do exist, with “exist” clearly being a problematic term, given how transient sensations are.

In short, most of what you assume as making up your universe doesn’t exist most of the time, from a purely sensate point of view. This is exactly, precisely, and specifically the point. Knowing this directly leads to freedom.

For you philosophers in the crowd, this is basically British empiricism taken to its logical extreme and then hardwired through repeated practice. I think the great Scot, David Hume, would have loved the assumptions of insight practices. I am in no mood to debate questions of ontology, but, for the specific task of progressing in insight practice, this empirical extreme simply works. Thus, I view empiricism through a utilitarian lens and recommend you do likewise when doing insight practices: accept that things you do not experience directly do not exist in that moment. When doing basically everything else, accept they probably do. Those sets of assumptions lead to better outcomes, and better outcomes are my primary objective.

Regarding impermanence, it is wise to reflect on our own mortality, a common reflection in many Buddhist traditions, for it is useful and true. This is a reflection on ordinary reality and thus an aspect of training in morality that is commonly used to develop motivation to train in insight. I gained some dharmic benefits and relative insights from the one hundred and sixty hours we spend in medical school dissecting a corpse down to shreds. However, when practicing insight meditation, it is far better to perceive one sensation arise and pass away. What do I mean by this? I mean that sensations arise out of nothing, do their thing, and vanish utterly. Gone. Entirely gone. Then the next sensation arises, does its thing, and disappears completely. “That’s the stuff of modern physics,” we might say. “What does that have to do with practice?”

It has everything to do with practice! We can experience this, because the first set of vibrations we have access to isn’t actually that fast. Vibrations. That’s right, vibrations. That’s what

this first characteristic means: that sensate reality vibrates, pulses, appears as discrete particles, is like TV snow, the frames of a movie, a shower of vanishing flower petals, or however you want to say it.

Some people can get all into complex wave or particle models here, but do yourself a favor and don't. Just examine your actual experience, especially something nice and physical like the motion and sensations of the breath in the abdomen, the sensations of the tips of the fingers, the lips, the bridge of the nose, beneath the nose and above the lip, or the subtle tingling on the scalp and so on. Instant by instant, try to know when the actual physical sensations are there and when they are not. It turns out they are not there a good bit of the time, and even when they are, they are changing constantly.

We are typically quite sloppy about distinguishing between physical and mental sensations (memories, mental images, and mental impressions of other physical or mental sensations). These two kinds of sensations alternate, one arising and passing and then the other arising and passing, in a quick but perceptible fashion. Being clear about exactly when the physical sensations are present will begin to clarify their slippery counterparts—flickering mental impressions—that help co-create the illusion of continuity, stability, or solidity.

Immediately after a physical sensation arises and passes is a discrete pulse of reality that is the mental knowing of that physical sensation, here referred to as “mental consciousness” (as contrasted with the problematic concept of “awareness” in Part Five). By physical sensations I mean the five senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching, and I guess you could add some proprioceptive, other extended sensate abilities and perhaps a few others, but for traditional purposes, let's stick to these five. This habit of creating a mental impression following any of the physical sensations is the standard way the mind operates on phenomena that are no longer actually there, even mental sensations such as seemingly auditory thoughts, that is, mental talk (our inner “voice”), intentions, and mental images. It is like an echo, a resonance. The mind forms a general impression of the object, and that is what we can think about, remember, and process. Then there may be a thought or an image that arises and passes, and then, if the mind is stable, another physical pulse.

Since I just used this dangerous term “mind”, I should quickly mention that it cannot be located. I'm certainly not talking about the brain, which we have never experienced, since the standard for insight practices is what we can directly experience. As an old Zen monk once said to a group of us in his extremely thick Japanese accent, “Some people say there is mind. I say there is no mind, but never mind! Heh, heh, heh!”

However, I will use this dangerous term “mind” often, or even worse “our mind”, but just remember when you read it that I have no choice but to use conventional language, and that in fact there are only utterly transient mental sensations. Truly, there is no stable, unitary, discrete entity called “mind” that can be located! By doing insight practices, we can fully understand and appreciate this. If you can do this, we'll get along just fine.

Each one of these sensations (the physical sensation and the mental impression) arises and vanishes completely before another begins, so it is possible to sort out which is which with relatively stable attention dedicated to consistent precision and to not being lost in stories. This means that the instant you have experienced something, you can know that it isn't there anymore, and whatever is there is a new sensation that will be gone in an instant. There are typically

many other momentary sensations and impressions interspersed with these, but for the sake of practice, this is close enough to what is happening to be a good working model.

Engage with the preceding paragraphs. They are the basis of great insight practice. Given that you now know that sensations are vibrating, pulsing in and out of reality, and that, for the sake of practice, every sensation is followed directly by a mental impression, you now know exactly what you are looking for. You have a clear standard. If you are not experiencing it, then stabilize the mind further, and develop more clarity about exactly when and where there are physical sensations. Spend time with this, as long as it takes. The whole goal is to experience momentariness directly, that is, things flickering, and what those things are doesn't matter one bit!

How freeing! Interpretation is particularly useless in insight meditation, so you don't have to spend time doing it when you are on the cushion. Throughout this book, I recommend reflecting on spiritual teachings and how to bring them to bear on life when off the cushion. Thoughts, even supposedly good ones, are just too slippery and seductive most of the time, even for advanced meditators, though if you can avoid getting lost in their content they are as valid a stream of sensate objects for insight practices as any other. When doing insight practices, try to limit yourself to no more than a few minutes of skillful reflection per hour of meditation. This should be more than enough. There are simply no substitutes for this sort of momentum in practice. If you can get that reflection down to no minutes at all, so much the better.

How fast are things vibrating? How many sensations arise and vanish each second? This is exactly what you are trying to experience, but some very general guidelines can provide faith that it can be done and perhaps point the way as well. Begin by assuming we are initially talking about one to ten times per second. This is not actually that fast. Try tapping five to ten times per second on a table or something. It might take two hands, but it's doable, isn't it? You could experience that, couldn't you? That's the spirit!

Not good at counting beats per second? Here's a quick trick. If you count, "one, one-thousand", at a steady pace, that is about one second per "one, one-thousand". Notice that it has four syllables. So, you are counting at four syllables per second, or 4 Hertz (Hz), which is the unit of occurrences per second. If you tapped your hand each time you said or thought a syllable, that would be four taps per second. Try it! Count "one, one thousand" and tap with each syllable. So, you now know you can experience at least eight things in a second! You experienced the four syllables and the four taps that went along with them. You probably experienced all sorts of other things also, like sights, sounds, other physical sensations, and a lot more during that one second. Yay! That is insight practice. You are already up to at least eight sensations per second. Yay, you!

Let's say you tapped twice per syllable. That would already be up to at least twelve things you perceived in a second, the four syllables and the eight taps. That actually isn't that hard to do. You are already fast enough to really bust out some insight practices. Great job! Investigate reality that fast and you will learn some seriously cool things. Add in noticing the intentions to tap each of those taps and the mental impressions of all of the sensations you just experienced, and suddenly you are rockin' it like a boss in the world of insight meditation.

There are faster and slower vibrations that may show up, some very fast (maybe up to forty times per second or so) and some very slow (that are actually made up of faster vibrations), but let's just say that one to ten times per second can sometimes be a useful guideline

in the beginning. Once you get the hang of it, the faster and slower vibrations are no big deal. Alternately, depending on how you practice, conceiving of this as like a shower of raindrops, an animated pointillist painting, or 3D TV snow might help. Reality is quite rich and complex, and thus the frequencies of the pulses of reality can be somewhat chaotic, but they tend to be more regular than you might expect. Also, there are not any “magic frequencies”. Whatever frequency or pulse or whatever you are experiencing at that moment is the truth of that moment. However, in the beginning you should go for faster vibrations over slower ones and then later try for broader and more inclusive ones over those that are narrower.

Don’t worry if things look or feel solid sometimes. Just be with the solidity clearly and precisely, but not too tightly, and that pattern of sensations that implies solidity can start to reveal its impermanence. Be aware of each exact moment in which you experience solidity and its beginning and ending. Remember that each experience of solidity is a discrete, impermanent sensation. Also, some people find things like counting frequencies and using numbers totally annoying, so, if you are one of those, just ignore those parts, as direct experience is the key regardless of whether you can count beats well. Still, the general concept that you are looking for something changing moderately fast but still quite manageable is key. “Let it go,” as those kooky Buddhists sometimes say.

Many people begin practicing and really want to solidify something like the breath so that they can finally pay attention to it. They become frustrated when they have a hard time finding the breath or their body. The reason they can’t find these is not that they are a bad meditator but that they are having direct insight into how things actually are! Unfortunately, overemphasizing the theory and concepts of concentration practice, which aims to perceive the meditation object as more solid and stable, creates much needless frustration for the insight practitioner who doesn’t know better. You should now be able to avoid a lot of that frustration and begin to appreciate why knowing some theory about the difference between insight and concentration practices is helpful.

It is also worth noting here that the frequency or rate of vibrations may change often, either getting faster or slower, and that it is worth trying to perceive clearly the beginning and ending of each vibration or pulse of reality. These are actually at least two different sensations! It is also useful to check out exactly what happens at the bottom, middle, and top of the breath if you are using the breath as an object, and to examine if the frequency remains stable or changes in each phase of the breath. Finding the exact end of the out-breath is a commonly used exercise of great profundity once mastered. Never assume that what you have understood is a final, fixed answer. Be alert. Explore carefully and precisely with openness and acceptance. This is the door to understanding.

One last thing about vibrations: exploring vibrations can be a lot like any other sport. We can think of it the same way as we would of surfing or playing tennis, and this playful game-like attitude can help a lot. “We’re out to bust some vibrations!” as Kenneth enthusiastically put it. You don’t know quite what the next return or wave is going to be like, so pay attention, keep the mind on the pulse of the sensations of your world just as you would on the wave or ball, and keep playing!

I highly recommend this sort of speed in practice not only because that is how fast we must perceive reality to awaken, but also because trying to experience one to ten sensations per

second is challenging and engaging. Because it is challenging and engaging, we will be less prone to getting lost in thoughts rather than doing insight practices. Our minds have the power to perceive things extremely quickly, and we actually use this power all the time to do such things as read this book. If you don't use that massive resolving power, you are likely to quickly get really bored and wander off to something more interesting. You can probably read many words per second. If you can do this, you can certainly do insight practices.

If you can perceive one sensation per second, try for two. If you can perceive two unique sensations per second, try to perceive four. Keep increasing your perceptual threshold in this way until the illusion of continuity shatters. *In short, when doing insight practices, constantly work to perceive sensations arise and pass as quickly and accurately as you possibly can.* With the spirit of a race car driver who is constantly aware of how fast the car can go and still stay on the track, stay on the cutting edge of your ability to see the impermanence of sensations quickly and accurately.

I will relate four of the many little exercises that I have found useful for jump-starting and developing insight into impermanence. They will demonstrate how we can be creative in exploring our reality precisely, but please don't think of them in some dogmatic way. These objects and postures are not that important, but understanding impermanence directly is.

In one of these exercises, I sit quietly in a quiet place, close my eyes, put my right hand on my right knee, my left hand on my left knee, and concentrate just on my two index fingers. Basic dharma theory tells me that it is not possible to perceive both fingers simultaneously; so, with this knowledge, I try to see in each instant which one of the two fingers' physical sensations are being perceived at any given moment. Once the mind has sped up a bit and become more stable, I try to perceive the arising and passing of each of these sensations. I may do this for half an hour or an hour, just staying with the sensations in my two fingers and perceiving when each sensation is and is not there.

This might sound like a lot of work, and it can be until the mind settles into it. It requires the concentration of a fast sport like table tennis. This is such an engaging exercise and requires such precision, making it hard to get lost in thought if I am really applying myself. I have found this to be a very useful practice for developing momentary concentration and debunking the illusion of continuity. You can pick any two aspects of your experience for this exercise, be they physical or mental. I generally use my fingers only because through experimentation I have found that it is easy for me to perceive the sensations that make them up.

In another, related exercise, I do the same sort of thing, sit quietly in a quiet place with eyes closed, but instead I concentrate on the sensations of the front and back of my head. With the knowledge that the illusion of a separate perceiver is partially supported by one impermanent sensation incorrectly seeming to perceive another impermanent sensation which it follows, such as the sensations in the back of the head incorrectly seeming to perceive the sensations of the front of the head, I try to be really clear about these sensations and when they are and are not there. I try to be clear if the sensations in the head are from the front or the back of the head in each instant, and then try to experience clearly the beginning and ending of each individual sensation. You can also do this with the sides of the head, as well as the sensations that seem to be in the middle of your head.

This practice also requires a table tennis-like precision. Half an hour to an hour of this can be quite a workout until the mind speeds up and becomes more stable, but this sort of effort



pays off. As I mentioned above, when I am engaged with this practice, there is little room to be lost in thought. I have also found this a very useful practice for developing concentration and for debunking the illusions of continuity and of a separate self (more on that later). A few have reported that this exercise makes them nauseated or dizzy, which may come from applying too much effort and not gently allowing these sensations to just reveal themselves easily and naturally. If that happens to you, be gentle and let the sensations of the front and back of the head show themselves to you naturally.

In another exercise, which is quite common to many meditation traditions, I sit quietly in a quiet place, close my eyes, and bring my attention to the breath. More than just concentrating on it, I know that the sensations that make up the concept “breath” are each impermanent, lasting only an instant. With this knowledge, I try to see how many individual times in each part of the breath I can perceive the sensations that make up the breath. During the in-breath I try to experience it as many times as possible, and try to be precise about exactly when the in-breath begins and ends.

More than this, I try to perceive exactly and precisely when each sensation of motion or physicality of the breath arises and passes. I then do the same for the out-breath, paying particular attention to the exact end of the out-breath and then the beginning of the new in-breath. I don’t worry about how I am breathing because it is not the quality of the breath that I am concerned with or even what the sensations are, but one aspect of the ultimate nature of these sensations: their impermanence, their arising and passing away.

I also don’t care much about exactly where I am experiencing the breath, as the breath is experienced in many places from nose to back to pelvis. Some traditions get particularly picky about where you notice the breath, so if you want to give one of those a try, don’t let my bias towards finding it wherever it is hold you back. When I am fully engaged with bending the mind to this exercise of following the many rich and varying sensations of breathing, there is little room to be lost in thought. I have found this to be a very useful practice for developing moment-to-moment concentration and penetrating the illusion of continuity.

In the last exercise, I take on thoughts directly. I know that the sensations that make up thoughts can reveal the truth of the three characteristics, so I have no fear of them; instead, I regard them as more glorious opportunities for gaining insight. Again, sitting quietly in a quiet place with eyes closed, I turn the mind to the thought-stream. However, rather than paying attention to the content as I usually do, I pay attention to the ultimate nature of the numerous sensations that make up thoughts: impermanence. I may even make the thoughts, which are typically occurring in the general region of my head, more and more intense just to get a good look at them.

It is essential to try to perceive how you experience thoughts at a sensate level, otherwise you will likely flounder in their content. What do thoughts feel like? Where do they occur? How big are they? What do they look like, smell like, taste like, sound like, feel like? How long do they last? Where are their edges? Only take on this practice if you are willing to try to work at the level of trying to discern what thoughts actually are rather than what they mean, represent, or imply. If we begin to explore carefully, we will realize that thoughts are made of many types of sensations, sounds, sights, physical feelings, even tastes and smells, but they will often, though not always, be associated with one predominant sense door.

If my thoughts are more auditory, as in inner talk, I begin by trying to perceive each syllable of the current thought and then each syllable's beginning and ending. If they are visual, as in mental images, I try to perceive every instant in which a mental image presents itself. If they seem physical, such as the memory of a movement or bodily sensation, I try to perceive exactly how long each little sensation of this memory lasts.

This sort of investigation can be fairly easy to do and yet is quite powerful. Things can also get odd quickly when doing this practice, but I don't worry about that. Sometimes thoughts can begin to sound like the auditory strobing section of the song "Crimson and Clover", where it sounds like they are standing at a spinning microphone. Sometimes the images that arise internally can begin to flash and flicker. Sometimes our very sense of attention can begin to strobe. This is the point! The sensations that imply a mind and mental processes are discontinuous and fleeting.

Again, this practice requires steadiness and determination, as well as precision. There is no time to be lost in the content of the thoughts, as I am trying too hard to be clear about the beginning and ending of each little flicker, squawk, and pulse that makes up a thought. This can be an especially fun practice when difficult thoughts, thoughts that have sticky or emotionally heavy content for me, are distracting from a physical sensation. I can turn on them, break them down into meaningless little blips, little vibrations of suchness, and then they don't have the power to cause me any trouble. They just scatter like confetti. They are seen as they are: small, quick, and harmless. They have a message to convey, but then they are gone.

When I am done with this exercise, I return to physical objects and their arising and passing. However, I have found taking on the sensations that make up thoughts to be another very useful exercise for developing momentary concentration and penetrating the illusion of continuity. It doesn't matter if they are "good thoughts" or "bad thoughts", as all mental sensations are also dripping with ultimate truth that is just waiting to be discovered, and thus I can proceed in my investigation with confidence regardless of what arises. Whether our illusions are penetrated using physical sensations or mental sensations is completely irrelevant, but from another point of view it is really good to be skilled at doing both, which comes with practice.

Hopefully these exercises will give you some idea about how we might practice understanding impermanence. Impermanence is a quality whose clear perception leads to wisdom, so just understanding this again and again can be enough to drum it into our thick heads, debunk the illusion of continuity, and once this is drummed into our thick heads we are freer.

This can be a subtle business, so be patient and persevere. Remember all three trainings of morality, concentration, and wisdom. Following flickering sensations and understanding the other two characteristics of suffering and no-self that they manifest can be a powerful and direct cause for deep insights and awakenings.

For five years of my practice I was mostly a "one technique freak", and that technique was noticing how sensations flicker. I would do it as often as I could, that is, whenever I didn't have to be doing something that required concentration on the specifics of my life. I would be riding an elevator, just trying to see when I could feel each foot, or lying down to sleep and noticing how many times I could experience the sensations of my breath in each second. I also tried to notice this aspect of things for every single sensation that occurred during my formal practice.



I used lots of objects, usually those that were presenting strongly at that time, and would use some variations on the above techniques as well as some others to keep me from getting stuck that I will mention shortly, but the aspect of my world that I tried to notice, things flickering, was nearly always the same. I found that by making a commitment to understanding one of the fundamentals of insight practices, I made quick progress and gained the insights I was looking for.

#### DISSATISFACTORINESS

The next characteristic is dissatisfactoriness, misery, or suffering. Various translators and scholars debate the best way to translate the Pali word *dukkha*, which is the word that I am rendering here as “dissatisfactoriness”. I will sometimes translate it as “suffering” and other ways. Other translators and authors also use terms such as “misery”, “unsatisfactoriness”, “stress”, and “anxiety”. I don’t think that we really have a perfect English word that can capture its nuances, which is why there are various opinions about how we should translate it. Such discussions can become too academic for me, as what I care most about is practice, and in practice *dukkha* is right there in your immediate experience to be understood.

There are two major aspects to the Buddha’s teaching on *dukkha*, the first and most famous being the implications of having been born, which entails issues of having a body, and the ordinary facts of physical pain, sickness, aging, and death, as well as interpersonal conflicts, personal losses, fears, sorrows, grief, lamentation, and the like. These unfortunate aspects of having been born are clearly of great significance throughout our brief lives. However, the second aspect of *dukkha* is the key for insight practices, and that is the inherent painful tension that comes because we take the sensate data coming in and misinterpret those sensations in a way that causes us to habitually create the illusion of a permanent, separate, independently functioning (acausal), localized self. This mode of perceiving experience is more painful than the other way that sensate reality can be perceived, in which sensate data imply the exact reverse: that there is naturally occurring, causal, self-perceiving, immediate transience. Insight practices can show us this other, less painful way of perceiving reality, and eventually hardwire it into our systems so that we don’t go back to the more painful way which involves the *dukkha* created by this misperception.

*Dukkha* sounds grim or pessimistic, and perhaps deservedly so in a sense, but it is also a powerful statement that our moment-to-moment separate self experience cannot, does not, and will never provide lasting satisfaction. Why? One reason is that everything is momentary. Nothing lasts, meaning that you can experience everything that you normally think of as a solid world arising and passing instant by instant. So, what could last for even the blink of an eye to satisfy? Nothing!

The point is not to be a gloomy, pessimistic, or nihilistic cynic. This sort of attitude will not help on the insight front. What does help is *an understanding of something in our relationship to all things*. There is no thought, mind state, or thing that provides lasting satisfaction. This is not to say that conventional day-to-day wisdom, such as taking care of ourselves and others, is not important—it very much is. Remember that awakening is not a thing or a mind state or a thought, it is an understanding of perspective without some separate entity that perceives.

Honesty about the truth of suffering is a relief; it's a relief not to pretend away this shared and universal condition. It can validate the actual experience of our lives and give us the strength to look into the aspects of life we typically try to ignore, deny, and avoid. Even some deep and useful insights can be distinctly unpleasant, contrary to popular belief!<sup>1</sup>

There is more to this second characteristic, and it relates to the third characteristic of no-self. We are caught up in this bizarre habit of assuming that there is a boss controller entity called "I". Yet the definition of this seemingly permanent thing must keep constantly changing to maintain the illusion in an impermanent reality. This takes up a lot of mental time and energy and is continually frustrating to the mind, as it takes so much constant work and effort. It is also mentally painful. This process is called "ignorance", that is, the illusion of an "I" which assumes that everything else not conceived as such is "not I".

This is the illusion of duality, and the illusion of duality is inherently painful. There is just something disconcerting about the way the mind must hold itself and the information it must work to ignore or deny to maintain the sense that there is a permanent and continuous self. Maintaining it is painful, and its consequences for reactive mind states are also painful. It is a subtle, chronic pain, like a vague nausea, like a mild headache. It is a distortion of perspective that we have grown so used to or embedded within that we hardly ever notice it. The suffering caused by continually trying to prop up the illusion of duality is "fundamental suffering". This definition of suffering or dissatisfaction is the one that is most useful for insight practices.

To detect this quality of reality moment to moment can be hard to do, not because dissatisfaction is so hard to find (it has been said to be the easiest of the three characteristics to tune in to), but because it takes a certain amount of courage and honesty. Yet it is so well worth it. If we finally wake up to this painful background quality we will effortlessly let it go, drop it like a hot coal that we have realized we were holding. It really works like that, and letting go in this way means being free of it.

Investigate your experience and see if you can be open to that fundamental, story-free, drama-free aspect of your bare experience that is unsettling, unpleasant, miserable, or dissatisfactory. It can be found to some degree in every instant regardless of whether that instant is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, a fact that many initially find surprising, but, as practice goes on, becomes more and more obvious. Once you have some mental stability, you can even examine the bare experience of the sensations that make up the stories that spin in your mind and see how unsatisfactory and unsettling it is to try to pretend they are a self or the property of some imagined self. If we continue to habituate ourselves to this understanding moment to moment we may get it into our thick heads and finally awaken.

This misperception of reality, called ignorance, then leads to the mind inclining towards pleasant sensations ("attraction"), away from negative ones ("aversion"), and regularly tuning out in general (another meaning of the word "ignorance"). These three basic types of reactions are generally known as the *kilesas* in Pali (*kleshas* in Sanskrit), or, somewhat dramatically, the three defilements, corruptions, or mental poisons. In terms of relative reality, they can manifest in various emotional "flavors" of greed, hatred, and delusion. More formally, and following the classification found in the *Abhidhamma*, we find ten or fourteen kilesas emphasized as being

---

<sup>1</sup>See *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*, by Oliver Burkeman.

the most dangerous for us, with a more complete list being: greed, wrong view, delusion, hatred, doubt, conceit, restlessness, sloth, worry, torpor, shamelessness, fearlessness (of wrongdoing), envy, and avarice.<sup>2</sup> This list bears a remarkable resemblance to the Seven Deadly Sins listed by Pope Gregory I (and later Dante) as lust, gluttony, avarice, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride. However, the more fundamental, non-story-based and even non-emotion-based sensations of attraction, aversion, and ignorance can be found to some degree in every instant, regardless of whether that instant is overtly pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, and regardless of the presence of or lack of the states of mind listed as defilements.

My favorite exercise for examining dukkha is to sit quietly in a quiet place with eyes closed and examine the physical sensations that make up any sort of desire, be it desire to get something (attraction), get away from something (aversion), or just check out or go to sleep (ignorance). At a rate of one to ten times per second, try to experience exactly how you know that you wish to do something other than simply face your current experience as it is. Moment to moment, try to discern every little uncomfortable shift, urge, impulse, and tension that prods your mind into fantasizing about the past or future or stopping the meditation entirely.

For that meditation period, they become my prey and nourishment, opportunities to understand something extraordinary about reality, and so I do my very best to let none of them arise and pass without clearly perceiving and acknowledging the basic sense of dissatisfaction in relation to them. So, for that period try to:

- turn on sensations of the desire to get results
- turn on the pain and unsettling sensations that make the mind shrink, reject, or contract
- turn on the boredom that is usually aversion to suffering in disguise
- turn on the sensations of restlessness that try to get you to stop meditating and do something, anything, else
- turn on anything with fear or judgment
- turn on any sensation that smacks of grandiosity or self-loathing
- turn on the things that typically derail meditation and make them into meditation objects
- turn on the sensations related to thinking about your meditation, which is generally aversion or attraction disguised by intellectual analysis. While there is value in meta-cognitive awareness, there is also great value in investigating the sensations that make up meta-cognitive awareness.

A half-hour to an hour of this sort of consistent investigation of dissatisfactoriness is also quite a workout, particularly as we spend most of our lives doing anything but looking at these sensations to gain insight from them. However, I have found that this kind of investigation pays off in ways I could never have imagined. Later, I will explain a stage called “the Knowledges of Suffering”, aka “the Dark Night”. If you find yourself having trouble with that phase of practice, come back here and try this exercise, as it can turn the tables on something that otherwise might turn the tables on you.

---

<sup>2</sup>See *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, p. 270, table 7.1.

Exploring dissatisfactoriness may not sound as concrete as the first characteristic of momentariness or impermanence, but I assure you, it is. Even the most pleasant sensations have a tinge of misery to them, not only because they end, but also due to the strange way we hold our minds to create a sense of a stable self in a changing world, so look for it at the level of bare experience. Physical pain is a gold mine for this. I am absolutely not advocating cultivating or inducing pain, as there is already enough there. Just knowing in each instant how you know that pain is dissatisfactory and miserable can be profound practice. Don't settle for just the knee jerk reaction, "of course pain is miserable!" Know exactly *how* you know this to be true in each moment, and don't get lost in stories or interpretations about it. This is bare reality we're talking about. Just be with it, engage with it, and know it at a very simple and straightforward sensate level.

### NO-SELF

The last and perhaps most misunderstood of the three characteristics is "no-self". The original Pali term, *anatta*, means literally "not-self". This same term is also rendered by other authors in other ways, some of which can be extremely problematic, such as egolessness, a terribly problematic term, since ego as understood in the Western psychological sense is not the referent of the conception of "self" targeted in Buddhism. Another problematic rendering of this term is "emptiness". Emptiness, for all its mysterious-sounding connotations, means that reality is empty of, devoid of, or lacking a permanent, separate, independent, acausal, autonomous self. It doesn't mean that reality is not there, but that reality is not there in the way it may appear to us to be. Solidity and permanence are mistaken perceptions. That the "watcher" (whatever seems to be observing things, aka the "perceiving subject") is a thing separable and independent from what is perceived is mistaken. However, all of this is not merely an illusion, though how the "watcher" is perceived and how sensate experience is interpreted initially is clearly delusional, as good practice eventually may reveal.

Sure, all experience is utterly transient and ephemeral, but that is not quite the same as saying that everything is an illusion. There is a habit of reading just a bit too much into things and mistakenly concluding that all of this means that there is some separate, permanent "me". Reality is fine just as it is and always has been, but there is a deeper understanding of it that is called for.

Let's talk a little bit about this concept and how the illusion of a self is created in the first place before we talk about how to apply this powerful and profound concept of no-self in simple ways in practice. Some theory is indispensable for the practice, as all of it can be understood directly once we have some stability of mind and some direct insight into what is mind and what is body, and when each is or is not there.

We have this notion that there really is a permanent or autonomous "I". We might say, "Hello, I am ..." and be quite convinced that we are talking about a permanent, separate thing that can be found. However, if we are just a bit more sophisticated we might ask, "What is this 'I' which I am sure is 'me'?" We have grown so habituated to the fact of its definition changing all the time that we hardly notice it, but the point of insight practice is to notice that, and to see just what it is that we are calling "I" in each moment.

We may begin with the obvious assumption: I am my body. This sounds nice until I say something like “my body”. Suppose someone points to my toenails. Are they “me”? It might seem that way until I clip them, and then, parts of them being no longer there, are no longer “me”. Likewise, say you cut off your finger. If you are your body, “you” would cease to be if you cut your finger off, but this is not the case. So, we cannot say that this “I” we fabricate is equivalent to the body.

Is the body of the present moment the same as the body at the time of my birth? If it were, wouldn’t we look the same now as we did then? It isn’t even made up of the same cells, and yet it seems to us to be a permanent thing. Look more closely, at the sensate level, and you will see that the body changes moment to moment. At the level of actual experience, all that is found is flickering stuff. So, momentariness, or impermanence, is closely related to no-self, but there is more to no-self than that.

Perhaps thoughts are the “I”. They may seem more like the true “I” than the body. But thoughts come and go too, don’t they? So, when thoughts disappear why would “I” not also disappear at that time? Are thoughts something solid enough to assume that they are an “I”? Look closely and you will see that they are not. But again, no-self is more profound even than this.

Perhaps our emotions are the “I”. Emotions, like anger or joy, really feel like they are “me”, like they are “mine”, like they are central to “my” sense of identity. The simple fact that sometimes they seem like an “I” and at other times feel like “mine”, the possession of something different from those emotions, is itself a major clue. That emotions come and go is another clue. Emotions are not stable or unchanging for even one second. They are based on a complex pattern of images, bodily sensations, and other thoughts, patterns we can get familiar with through repeated, systematic investigation. With careful examination, we realize that the many sensations that make up emotions, while powerful and seemingly important, cannot constitute a true, unchanging self.

There also seems to be something frequently called “the watcher”, or “witness”, which seems to be observing all this, and perhaps this watcher is really the “I” in question. Strangely, the watcher cannot be found, can it? It seems to sometimes be our eyes, but sometimes not, or it seems to be images in our head or something that is separate from them and yet watching the images in our head. Sometimes it seems to be our body, but sometimes it seems to be watching our body.

Isn’t it strange how we are so used to this constant redefining of ourselves that we never stop to question it? So question it! This odd sense of an unfindable watcher to which all of this is happening yet which is seemingly separate from what is happening, which sometimes seems in control of “me” and yet which sometimes seems at the mercy of reality—what is it really? What is going on here?

One of my teachers wisely said, “If you are observing it, then by definition it isn’t you.” Notice that all of what we call “reality” seems to be something we can observe. The hints don’t get any better than this. Here are some more points of theory that are very useful for insight practices and our attempts to understand what no-self means:

- There are absolutely no sensations that can observe other sensations. (Notice that your experiential reality is made up entirely of sensations.)

- There are no special sensations that are uniquely in control of other sensations.
- There are no sensations that are fundamentally split off or separable from other sensations occurring at that moment.

To begin to unravel this mystery through the development of better perceptual skills is to begin to awaken. Simply put, reality with a sense of a separate watcher is delusion, and reality just as it is, is awakening. With systematic debunking through insight practices of the illusion of some sense of a permanent, separate, independently existing self, we learn to perceive things as they are naturally.

This sort of turning our attention back to what we think of as “us” might be strange at first, awkward, seemingly vague, or nebulous. It can seem like we can’t retrain our minds to perceive things in a totally different way, to come to different conclusions based on the same data. It may seem like there is no end to our identifications with body, thoughts, emotions (and a whole host of external things such as achievements, possessions, etc.) as “self”; no limit to the tricks this process of identification can throw at us, but the tricks have their limits and there are only so many categories of sensations. When we get good at perceiving them all as they are, including everything that typically seems to be on “this side”, the whole thing can flip around, and suddenly all the sensations that seemed to be a “self” or property of that “self” are perceived as just sensations—natural, causal, transient—and not a self or permanent thing at all. In fact, they never were, and this can be clearly perceived by skilled practitioners.

It is in some ways very much like the classic drawing by William Ely Hill that can be viewed two ways, either as a young woman or as an old woman. Whichever you see first tends to stick in your mind and then it can be tricky to see the other one until someone points out the features that make up the other face, and then suddenly you see the same set of lines in a totally different way. Insight practices create effects very much like that: same sensations, totally different implications.

There is a crucial point here that I would like to draw your attention to: people often use the truth of no-self to rationalize all sorts of strange and maladaptive behaviors because they misunderstand it as justifying a nihilistic perspective: “It’s all illusion anyway,” or, “I don’t even ultimately or truly exist so why bother?” It absolutely is not all merely illusion, and since we do exist conventionally, and conventional causality functions, “bothering” is a really good idea. The illusions are in how we misconceive and misperceive phenomena versus how they actually exist.

It’s not that the constellation labeled “me”, or “you”, a grouping of physical and mental components, does not exist and function in some ordinary sense. It’s that none of those components exist independently or acausally, which is how ignorance conceives of them. Ultimate unfindability of the components of reality in no way precludes their conventional existence! And healthy conventional existence depends, crucially, on an excellent foundation of morality. All of this can only be understood at the level that makes the difference by simple, clear, precise practice, so just keep at it.

Another very important, related thing: the creation of the sense of an ultimate, permanent, continuous, stable self is a process of identification, not a stable entity in and of itself. It is like a bad habit, in this case a habitual misperception, but it doesn’t exist as something that can be



found beyond a shifting pattern of mere sensations and causality. This is important, as this bad habit can quickly co-opt the language of egolessness and come up with phrases as absurd as: “I will destroy my ego!” But, not being a stable entity that exists to begin with, it cannot be destroyed. By understanding our bare experience more clearly the process of identification can *stop*, and by identification, I mean misperceiving various aspects of experience such as body and thoughts as being equivalent to a “self”.

Any thoughts with “I”, “me”, “my”, and “mine” in them should be understood to be just thoughts that come and go. They are simply qualities of manifestation, like flavors of ice cream. It is not that chocolate is good and vanilla is bad; all flavors of experience are just flavors, and sometimes the flavor of the moment is “I”, “me”, “mine”, and the like, and even those flavors don’t constitute a real “I”, “me”, or “mine”. So, if those qualities arise, just notice them come and go like everything else. They never were an “I”, “me”, or “mine” and never could be.

Just paying attention to those flavors of experience reveals that freshness, that each-one-is-new-ness, that lack of solidity and lack of continuity. I have spent much time in practice thinking the thought, “I”, or “I am”, and then feeling what it felt like to think that, what sensations arise and vanish in relation to that thought, to get a handle on what those rapid little sensations are and getting used to seeing the truth of them. I have found this very useful. Ajahn Sumedho writes about a similar investigation in his pithy volume, *Teachings of a Buddhist Monk* (pp. 70–71).

I often hear things like, “I am always identifying with things, I am always attached to things,” with the implication that there is someone who is “bad” for “doing” this. Try to avoid this sort of story-making, and unmindful mental spinning, but be kind to yourself if it happens. The sensations that make up these thoughts are just selfless in the best of ways. Initially in practice, people often spend much time causing certain experiences to happen and others to go away, but as we get better at this, we begin to learn that all qualities of experience, all manifestation, everything we think is us and not-us, all of it is just part of the natural, causal way the universe is happening. So, it is just this that must be perceived clearly rather than be modified to suit preconceived notions of what should or should not happen. In this way, reality settles into further clarity about itself, aligns with itself, comes into its own realization of what it is and is not.

At this point you might wonder, so who or what is it that awakens? The question itself is based on a false assumption; namely, that awakening needs to belong to a permanent or separate something. Instead, we could say that it is all this transience that awakens. We don’t have to sort this out all at once. We can begin with simple steps and the rest will fall into place if we are diligent and skillful.

Now that I have made the possible seem mystical and abstruse, hopefully I will also make it seem very doable. The big, practical trick to understanding no-self when doing insight practices is to tune in to the fact that sensations arise on their own in a natural, causal fashion, even the intentions to do things. This is a formal practice instruction.

This practice may sound difficult until you think about it and then perhaps it might seem so obvious as to appear trite. But it is neither difficult nor trite, and understanding it again and again, moment to moment, can bang the truth into us, and when we fully get it we will be free. In fact, just letting whatever happens happen is so easy that people can quickly get bored or

distracted, thinking there must be something more than this, but this is a key part of realizing what is going on.

Start and perhaps remain with obvious sensations, such as physical sensations. They just show up and check out, don't they? Tune in to this. Allow this quality of things arising and passing on their own to show itself. Notice that whatever is observed is not "me" or "mine". Notice this again and again and again at a rate of one to ten times per second as before.

That is all there is to it. See, that wasn't so hard, was it? Thoughts, the breath, and all our experiences don't quite seem to be in our control, do they? That's it! Know this moment to moment. Don't struggle too much with reality, except to break the bad habits of being lost in stories, poor concentration, and a lack of understanding of the three characteristics. Initially, we may have to apply some effort to build up the meta-cognitive skills to stay with what is happening and not get lost in thought. However, as we become better meditators, we can learn to relax into what is happening and still be present with it more naturally.

Allow vibrations to show themselves, and tune in to the sense that you don't have to struggle for them to arise. Reality just continues to change on its own. That's really it. Investigate this again and again until you get it. Notice that this applies to every sensation that you experience, including all the core things we think are really "me", such as effort, the sensations that make up the process of attending itself, analysis, investigation, questioning, and the like. These are more profound instructions than they may initially appear.

While we can direct the mind to penetrate phenomena with great precision and energy, we can also sit quietly and allow reality to just show itself as it is. Both perspectives are important and valuable, and being able to draw on each along the way can be very helpful. Said another way, we can realize that reality is already showing itself, settle quietly into this moment, and be clear and precise about it. Note well: many people will totally miss these last paragraphs and get all into pushing with everything they have and will just keep plowing on that way like mad bulldozers or rabid oxen, but really this is about noticing that everything shows itself on its own naturally without any forcing on the part of anyone, so any effort finally must lead to that quiet, easy, natural understanding.

There is an apparent paradox here relating to effort and surrender. In many ways this paradox is at the heart of the spiritual life. There is much advice available on this point, but in terms of insight meditation practice I would say that if, when meditating, you can perceive the arising and passing of phenomena clearly and consistently, that is enough effort, so allow this to show itself naturally and surrender to it. If not, or if you are lost in stories, then some teachings in subsequent chapters of this book may help. Part of your job is to figure out how gentle you can be while still perceiving things extremely clearly. This takes fine-tuning and usually in the beginning requires some overshooting, but remember that this efficiency and delicacy, this subtlety, are part of your goal.

For day-to-day reality, the specifics of our experience are certainly important, but for insight into the truth of things in meditation they largely are not. Said another way, it is neither the object of meditation, the causes of the object of meditation, nor the significance of the object of meditation, but the truth of the sensations that make up that "object" which must be understood. Once you can distinguish what is mind and what is body, that's for the most part enough. So, don't get lost in the drama and stories, but know that things come and go, they don't satisfy,

and they ain't you. That is the truth. It is just that simple. If you can just not get caught up in the content and know these simple, basic, and even obvious truths moment to moment, some other wordless and profound understanding may arise on its own.

A useful teaching is conceptualizing reality as six sense doors: touch, taste, seeing, hearing, smelling, and thought. It may seem odd to consider thought as a sense door, but this is much more reasonable than the assumption that thoughts are a "me" or "mine" or in complete control. Just treat thoughts as more sensations coming in which must be understood to be impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self. In this strangely useful framework, there are not even ears, eyes, skin, nose, tongue, or mind. There are just sensations with various qualities, some of which may imply these different sense doors for an instant.

Bare experience is just dancing, flickering color, form, energy, and space, basically. Try to stay close to that level when you practice, the level of the simple, direct, obvious, and literal. But whenever you are lost in interpretation much beyond this, that ain't insight meditation, as much as people would like it to be. Have I said this enough? As the parole officer in *Raising Arizona* said, "Okay, then."

I realize that most people go into meditation looking for stability, happiness, and comfort in the face of their own existence. I have just said that I have spent many years cultivating extreme experiential instability, careful awareness of the minutiae of my suffering and the clear perception that I don't even exist as a separate or continuous entity. Why this would be a good idea is a very complex topic that I will try to deal with later, but I can honestly say that these practices are without doubt the sanest thing I have ever done in my life.

One more little carrot: it is rightly said that to deeply understand any two of the characteristics simultaneously is to understand the third, and this understanding is enough to cause immediate first awakening.