

## *The Perception of Inconstancy*

*March 9, 2022*

Someone asked a question the other day about the perception of inconstancy, *aniccam*. She was saying that many of her friends talked about how it was a very comforting contemplation, but she didn't find any comfort in it at all. And that's the whole point: It's not supposed to be comforting. But it *is* meant bring you to your senses.

"All fabrications are inconstant." Notice that's not "all *things* are inconstant." After all, *nibbāna* is constant. It's said to be permanent—although actually it lies outside of space and time, so "permanent" is not quite the right word. But it doesn't change. Still, everything else that the mind encounters goes through the process of fabrication. Everything you see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think about has to be processed. And of course, in processing, you make it inconstant.

If things were just left there without any further discussion, you wouldn't really know what to do, because there are so many ways that you could take that insight. But the Buddha says: Take it in the context of the four noble truths. That will assign a duty to whatever comes up. If you encounter any clinging, you realize that has to be comprehended, because you're going to be clinging to things that change. When you cling to things that change, you want them to be a certain way—but then they change into something else, so there's going to be suffering. You want to comprehend that, that *that's* where the suffering lies. It's not so much in the fact that things change. Suffering lies in the fact that you're clinging.

So you try to figure out why you're clinging. You come across some craving; That's to be abandoned. That's something you simply let go. You don't want to wait until it goes away on its own. And you do what you can to make sure it doesn't come back. If it does come back, let go as fast as you can. As for the cessation of suffering, that's something to be realized.

And then the path—even though the factors of the path are made out of fabrications, you have to develop them, because those are fabrications that can get you out. You can't simply say, "Well, everything's inconstant. Just leave it at that." You try to figure out, "Well, what's inconstant? In what way? And what has what potentials?"

This connects with the Buddha's teaching on what he calls *dhātu*, "element" or "potential." These are potentials that lie latent in the physical universe and in your mind. They show themselves clearly when they get provoked. Some of them are neutral, like the *dhātu* of consciousness. Some things in the mind are actually

unskillful: There's the *dhātu* of sensuality—in other words, this potential in the mind is lying there, waiting for something to provoke it—although, as Ajaan Lee noted, often it doesn't wait. It goes out looking for things to provoke it.

But then there are good potentials in the mind as well: There's the potential for mindfulness, the potential for concentration, for discernment. With these potentials, you don't just wait for them to come and go. You actively search out: Which are the skillful potentials? Which are the unskillful ones? Like right now, as you're meditating, there's a potential in the breath for there to be a sense of ease, a sense of fullness. It's there someplace in the body. You have to know how to provoke it, to bring it out. The question is, how do you relate to the body in such a way, how do you relate to the breath in such a way, that you can actually bring this out? You have to look at the way you breathe. The problem is that you're used to your way of breathing, and it's hard to think, "Maybe there might be other ways of breathing."

This is why it's useful to listen to what Ajaan Lee has to say about the breath, about the various ways it can flow in the body. His instructions give you an idea. But even then, you're just reading the words. You've got to figure out: What is he talking about in terms of how *you* relate to your breath?

Do you squeeze the breath energy out as you breathe out? If you do, you're getting in the way of the potential for a sense of fullness and ease to develop. Do you try to mark the distinction between the in-breath and the out-breath very clearly? Again, you're getting in the way, because the markers tend to be tense. You don't really need the marks. You can think of the breath as being a cycle. There are four stages in the cycle: There's the in-breath, and then there's the space between the in-breath and the out-breath, then there's the out-breath, and then there's space between the out-breath and the in-breath. The cycle goes around and around. You don't need for there to be clear markers dividing the stages. You just notice: They shade into one another. Allowing them to shade into one another allows that potential for a sense of fullness to begin to develop.

So there are potentials here. You're not just watching what's already here. You're trying to make the most of the potentials. When you do that, you're approaching inconstancy in the right way. Otherwise, nothing develops. And we do want to develop the path. We want to learn how to delight in developing the path, delight in abandoning the craving, knowing which potentials need to be encouraged and which ones should not. This is the role of mindfulness as a governing principle. It doesn't just watch things coming and going. It notices that something is skillful and so encourages it to come, and then tries to keep it from going.

So when they talk about accepting the present moment, don't think it means simply accepting and going with whatever comes up. You want to bring some skill to this. The skill lies in knowing where the potentials are with the different factors of the path, and how you can provoke them—in other words, bring them into being—and how you can *keep* them in being. Now, eventually they will fall away. It's like that raft across the river. Eventually it'll fall apart, but still you want to put it together as well as you can so that it doesn't fall apart in the middle of the stream. If it falls apart after you've got to the other side, no problem. You're already on the other side. That's what the whole purpose was—the purpose in having a raft.

So when you're dealing with inconstant things, you're dealing with change. Try to be very clear. You don't want to just label, "Everything changes, everything is inconstant," and think that you've attained wisdom of some kind. I know a monk who had been in the Forest tradition for several years. He went back home to his family, and his brother asked him, "Well, what did you learn, being a monk over there? What's this teaching of the Buddha?" And the monk said, "Well, everything is impermanent." And the brother said, "Duh. Everybody knows that."

The important thing is, when you encounter something inconstant, what do you do with it? The doing is the important part. You're not just sitting as a witness to what's coming and going. Comprehending suffering, for instance, doesn't mean simply realizing, "Oh yes, there is suffering." Comprehending it means looking in to see: What are you doing to contribute to it? And as I was saying the other day, this doesn't mean simply accepting the fact that it's there and not wanting it to change, because the line between the mental contribution, say, to a physical pain and the physical contribution to the physical pain is not all that clear. Every time there's a feeling, there's always going to be a perception. There's a passage in the Canon where Ven. Sariputta says, "Feeling, perception, fabrication—these things are hard to tease out. They come together."

The way to tease them out is to figure out, "How can I be, say, with a pain but not suffer from it? How can I learn how to be patient with it, with a minimum amount of suffering?" That means seeing how you can change the physical elements that go into the pain—in other words, the way you breathe, how you relate to the warmth in the body, the solidity in the body, the liquid sensations in the body. And then your perceptions around the pain itself: These are your mental contribution. So you keep experimenting, changing this, changing that, and see what has an effect. This is how you learn about cause and effect anyhow. You've got to manipulate what seem to be the causes, and to figure out which ones are the genuine causes.

So you want to suffer as little as possible. Ideally, you'd like the pain to go away. But it's also good if you learn how to be with the pain but not suffer from it. Knowing where the line is, where you can see how things separate out: That's going to come from experimenting.

So again, there are potentials here, some of which you've aggravated without realizing it. You want to be more conscious about how you approach the sensations appearing in the body, the sensations appearing in the mind, knowing that they are inconstant and asking yourself, "What's the best thing I can do with these inconstant things?" The Buddha's right there with advice: Use the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to them. So try to bring that framework to bear. When you look at fabrications as being inconstant in that framework, *then* you can get the best use out of them.