

From Inconstancy to Dispassion

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One of the steps in the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation is to contemplate inconstancy as you breathe in, as you breathe out. And the next step is to contemplate dispassion as you breathe in and breathe out. The question is, how do you get from A to B? Is it automatic that, when you see that things are inconstant, you develop dispassion for them? In a few cases, yes. But in a lot of cases, no. It's not automatic. You have to go through several intermediate stages. It's not the case that all our defilements and all our problems are based on our thinking that impermanent things are permanent. There are a lot of things that we know are impermanent, and yet we still go for them. Just look at the houses built on the cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. We've seen many houses slide down the hills on TV, and yet people still build houses on the hills, and they still slide. It's because the hillsides have an allure. There's something that people like about having a house on the hillside, and they're willing to pay the price, or take the gamble. That's where our real attachments are.

And it's not the case that you wait to the very end of your meditation, after your concentration powers have been fully developed, that you start thinking in these terms. You've got things interfering with your practice all the time that you've got to learn how to look at and get some dispassion for.

You start out by seeing how inconstant the desire to do those things is. Sometimes it's there; sometimes it's not. It comes and it goes. You look at the inconstancy not just to see, "Oh yeah, it comes and goes," but also to see what comes along with it, and what goes with it. In other words, when it comes, why do you jump on it?

There's that analysis the Buddha has to understand things: You have to see their origination and their passing away. You have to see their allure and their drawbacks, and then the escape. Now, the origination and passing away cover the inconstancy, and the escape is dispassion. The intermediate steps—seeing the allure and seeing the drawbacks: That's where you have to do your work. In other words, a particular defilement comes up—say, greed comes up, or anger comes up, or a particularly bad habit you have comes up: You want to see, when it comes, why is there the urge to follow through with it? What sparks the urge? What do you like about this?

We're so protective of our defilements. People come up with all kinds of excuses, saying, "Well, I've got this defilement, and you're just going to have to

excuse me because I'm going to stick with this defilement." It's like little animals that we try to protect even though they bite. You have to ask yourself, why do you want to stick with it? What pleasure do you get out of it? That old attitude, "love me, love my defilements": It's really deeply entrenched, but it doesn't get you anywhere. Because you have to remember, as the Buddha said, that aging is going to happen, illness is going to happen, death is going to happen. And with the death, you don't know when it's going to happen, it can come at any time.

He says your proper attitude toward your defilements should be that when you see you've got one, you should want to put it out as quickly as possible. It's as if your head were on fire. You use all your mindfulness, as he says, to put it out. It's interesting he uses the word *mindfulness* here. Obviously it doesn't mean just accepting things as they are, or watching them come and go without reacting. You use your mindfulness—i.e., your ability to remember that something unskillful is coming in the mind, and you don't want it. You don't want it to have power over you. So you want to see, what is the power? You have to understand the power.

Many times it's something that we don't like to admit to ourselves, which is why we can't get rid of the habit. We often find our pleasure in things that are not all that inspiring, and we don't want other people to look too carefully at it, and we ourselves don't want to look too carefully at it. It's embarrassing. And so we come up with our excuses for holding on. But then we're still suffering, and we're still making other people suffer, too. The question is, how much longer do you want an extension on this particular defilement? How much longer do you want your hair to be on fire? Because what happens when your hair is on fire: You're not the only one who's on fire. It sets fire to other people too.

So when something comes like this, you want to see: "Where is the allure? What do I like about this?" And one of the best ways of finding the allure is to tell yourself, "I'm not going to go with it." The mind is immediately going to rebel. And as it rebels, that's when you get to see it.

So it's not the case that you just let it go, let it go, let it go for a while, until you feel more inclined to deal with it. You've got to stop it as quickly as possible and say, "This is where I draw the line." And see what part of the mind objects. What is it missing? What is it going to be lacking if it can't give into that particular kind of greed or lust or aversion, delusion, whatever?

And then when you see the actual allure, why you went for it, then you can compare that with the drawbacks. Often we do know some of the drawbacks, but the allure is hidden. And because it's hidden, it seems to be a lot larger than it really is, a lot more worthy of holding onto.

What this means, of course, is that you have to be an adult around your defilements. You can't let the little children's voices inside say, "Well, I am a little child, and this is how my little child feel."—as if little children deserve to live on as children for another 50, 60, 70 years. It's not the case that the child is totally innocent and then was subjected to a horrible society that made it into a warped being. We come into life with a lot of defilements, which are fully ready to take over. As soon as we learn how to use our bodies and think a little bit more clearly, our defilements move right in. They're already there, waiting for their equipment to get stronger. Then they pick up from where they left off last time around. It's not the case that our childhood habits, our inner children, are innocent, or they should be given special treatment. If you can't outsmart your inner child, you're still not fully an adult. That's the attitude you've got to have.

So you've got to look at the allure to see what it actually is, and then you can compare it with the drawbacks. That's when you can develop some dispassion. You see that the drawbacks way outweigh the allure, and that it's high time you stopped going for the allure. If you put the two of them together, right next to each other, that's when you see clearly that you really don't want to keep falling for the allure.

There's that famous case where the monk had a vision of a courtesan standing in front of him saying, "Why are you wasting your youth? Let's enjoy ourselves together, and then when we get old then we can go forth." And he looked at her and realized: This was a trap of death laid out—the allure of the body. He saw immediately that it had to do with death. We don't usually put those two together, but that's what he put together, and that was how he was able to get past that particular defilement.

So you have to put them together in strong terms: This is the allure, but this is the drawback.

There's an allure with anger. There's a certain sense of freedom that we get to say what we want or do what we want, that we feel we have an excuse because we've been overpowered by the anger, and the situation is really bad, and we have every right to express our anger. But if you can see the damage that that does to the mind really clearly, and you realize the allure is nothing, the mind is lying to itself: Once you see that the allure is a lie, then you can develop dispassion.

And the dispassion here comes not with a sense of missing it, or regretting that you have to let it go. It's more like growing up or getting past a bout of intoxication. You suddenly sober up. Things are a lot clearer. You're released from the power of the allure. That's why the Buddha says that dispassion is an escape. You're getting out of a prison, the prison of your own defilements.

So these are the steps from seeing inconstancy to seeing dispassion. It's not simply realizing that the world has things that change. I mean, everybody knows that, and yet we still go for the changing things. The problem is not with the fact that things change. The problem is that certain things are really unskillful, and we go for them even though we should know better. So it's a matter of seeing when these things come and when they go, looking into the specifics of their inconstancy. It's not just a general principle. We're watching for the allure that's going to kick in as soon as something arises, that makes you go with it. Or the fact that you've suddenly, for a little while at least, grown tired of the allure and you've dropped it. That's where you want to look for the coming and going, look for the specifics. That's when you can start making comparisons to see that it's not worth building your house on that hillside. It's going to go sliding down. There are a lot safer places to build your house. Choose those instead.