

The Three Perceptions & Their Opposites

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The teaching on the three characteristics or the three perceptions—*inconstancy, stress, not-self*—occupies a peculiar place in the Buddha's teachings. It's always true, but it's not always beneficial. That means it's not categorical. The Buddha didn't apply it all the time. In fact, there are a couple of cases in the Canon where monks try to apply it, and the Buddha reprimands them for it.

In one case, a monk tries to argue from the principle that all feelings are stressful to say that all actions lead to stress. The Buddha reprimands him, saying that when you're talking about karma, you're talking about action, so you talk about three kinds of feeling. There are pleasant feelings, painful ones, and feelings that are neither pleasant nor painful. And it's obvious here that applying the three perceptions is a mistake. Because if you said everything you do, skillful or not, is going to lead to stress, there'd be no incentive to try to do anything skillful. If there's no incentive to do anything skillful, then you're going against one of the Buddha's truly categorical teachings, which is to try to develop what's skillful and abandon what's not—the reason being that developing skillful actions is going to lead to long-term welfare and happiness.

There's another case where a monk tries to argue that if all the aggregates are not-self, then what self is there to do the actions? And what self would there be to receive the results of actions? That line of thinking is a license for irresponsible behavior. There's nobody there responsible, nobody's going to be affected by the actions, so you can do what you want. Here again, the Buddha reprimands the monk and says that's the wrong application of the teaching.

So that particular teaching is not to be applied at all times. I know some people who've argued from the three characteristics that we have no free will, or that we have no choices in the present moment: Whatever's going to come up in the present moment is just going to come up willy-nilly, regardless of what you want. That, as the Buddha pointed out, would turn the whole idea of following a path of practice into nonsense. How could you choose to follow the path?

So you have to be careful in how you apply these teachings. There's a right time and a right place, and a wrong time and a wrong place.

This line of thinking may have been behind Ajaan Lee's ways of talking about the three characteristics. There are some times where he talks about some things being inconstant, stressful, and not-self, saying that there's also another side, which is constant, easeful and self. Sometimes he phrases it as inconstant, stressful,

and not under control on one side, and constant, easeful, and under your control on the other. But in both cases, he ends up by saying you have to abandon both sides.

It's good to look at the context for what he says, because he means two different things in the two instances when he talks about this.

In the first instance, he's talking about the practice of concentration. You're taking the breath—your sense of the body as you feel it from within—and as you start out, you notice that it's inconstant and stressful. There are a lot of things going on there that you don't control. But you're going to try to work with the breath so it does become more constant. The mind's concentration becomes more constant. There's a sense of ease in body and mind, and you gain some mastery over it. So there you are: constant, easeful, under your control.

Now eventually, you're going to have to let go of the concentration. After all, it is part of the path. It's part of the raft that's going to take you across the flooding river and that you will then have to leave behind when you reach the safety of the far shore. But if people try to practice without concentration—and this is what I think Ajaan Lee is getting at, the people who want to go straight for insight—then they haven't mastered an important part of the path. They start out with the perceptions of inconstant, stressful, and not-self. And they see any attempts to develop concentration as going against the nature of reality. So they actually describe concentration as an unnecessary part of the path, or even an illegitimate part of the path.

I've seen cases of people developing the three characteristics without a firm basis in concentration, and they get extremely depressed, thinking there's nothing they can do to change unpleasant things coming up. They abdicate power because they've been told they have no power. It's like the dogs in those learned helplessness experiments where they're put in a room where, wherever they lie down, they get electric shocks. They try to avoid the shocks, but after a while they realize they can't. So they give up and just lie there.

Then the dogs are taken to a second room where half the floor is giving shocks, and the other is not. The researchers drag the dogs back and forth from one half to the other so that they can know which side of the floor gives shocks and which one doesn't. But the dogs have gotten so used to the idea that there will be shocks at some point that they give up trying.

So just focusing on the three characteristics, without having a basis of concentration to underlie it and without having mastered the concentration to fight against the characteristics to see exactly how far they go, you can end up being very fatalistic.

After all, as we're sitting here, focusing on the breath, we're actually fighting against the three characteristics. And this is a necessary part of developing discernment, because only when you push against them do you really know how far they're true and how far they're not. But as Ajaan Lee says, eventually you're going to have to let go of the concentration, even though it's relatively constant, easeful, and under your control.

That's one of Ajaan Lee's discussions. The other one has to do more with insight. He talks about how you develop the insight into things being inconstant, stressful, and not-self, but it's very easy for the mind to hold onto that insight as a permanent thing. There's a certain pleasure that comes with that. You've got something you can hold on to that's solid and makes you impervious to the ups and downs of the world. Just as the Buddha makes a distinction between dependent co-arising and dependently co-arisen phenomena—dependently co-arisen phenomena change all the time, but the principle of dependent co-arising is constant—you can hold on to this insight and use it to pry away your attachments to lots of things. But you have to remember ultimately that these insights, too, are perceptions.

Now the Buddha never called the three characteristics three characteristics; they're three perceptions. And as he said, perceptions, no matter how perceptive they may be, are essentially empty and devoid of substance. He compared them to mirages, like a mirage of water on the horizon of a desert. The water looks real, but when you actually get there, it disappears. Just as the mirage has no essence, perceptions have no essence. But the whole purpose of the path is to find something that does have essence.

So it's important that you not mistake the insight for the goal. This again is something that happens in some insight circles. They say that when you finally see that there is no self, that's when you've reached the first level of awakening. Well, you've mistaken a perception for something that should be beyond perceptions. So even though the insights may be true about all fabrications, there comes a point where you have to let them go as well. After all, the insights are fabrications, too. If you don't let them go, you suffer from what are called the corruptions of insight, where you latch onto some experience or some insight and think you've reached the goal. And you're blind to the fact that you're still latching on.

Even though the principle of these three characteristics applying to all fabricated things may be true, there's a time where you have to let it go. That's where Ajaan Lee is asking you to let go of both constant and inconstant, stressful and easeful, self and not-self. As he says, when the Buddha is saying, *Sabbe dhamma anattā*, all dhammas are not-self, it's his way of saying that you have to

let go even of the Dhamma of your insight. It's only when you let go of everything, even true and false, that the mind is free.

So it's important to see these perceptions as tools. They have their time and their place, and you take care of them as long as you need to use them, but there's also a time and place to put them down.

We should always heed the warnings of the ajaans that even when you're right, if you hold on to your rightness at the wrong time, it becomes wrong. And watch out specifically for applying a teaching in the wrong way that forms an obstacle to the practice.

Anything that denies the power of choice, or the distinction between skillful and unskillful choices, goes against one of the basic principles underlying everything we're doing as we practice. And any idea that you're going to be arriving at right view helps prevent you get to the end. Right view is part of the raft, the raft that has to be let go. The further shore is something else entirely, and that's where we want to arrive.