

Inconstancy

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One of the basic principles of insight or clear seeing is that all compounded or all fabricated things are inconstant. They don't last. They waiver. They change. And as someone once said, So what else is new? Things change. And if that's all there was to the Buddha's insight, there wouldn't be much to it. But it goes deeper than that. It's not just that things change, but that things change in line with their conditions. And you want to be able to see that changing in line with their conditions—in other words, to see that this arises when that arises, this ceases when that ceases.

Even that's not much of an insight until you realize that we're also trying to feed in those areas where things arise and pass away. We're looking for our happiness there. And if we look for happiness in these things in and of themselves, we're going to be disappointed. And if we can't figure out the pattern, we are going to be neurotic.

I once read about a test they ran on some pigeons. They put each of them in a box and in each box there was a green lever and a red lever. In some of the boxes, when you pushed the green lever, you'd get food; and sometimes when you pushed it, you wouldn't get food. Sometimes when you pushed the red lever, you'd get food and sometimes you wouldn't. Then they compared the birds in these boxes with another set of birds placed in boxes where the levels behaved in a predictable way: When you pushed the green level, you'd food; when you pushed the red level, you wouldn't. The birds in the second set of boxes were perfectly normal. The birds in the first set of boxes went crazy and began behaving in very neurotic ways—for two reasons. One was the only way they were going to get food was by pressing levers. And yet, two, they couldn't figure out when a lever was going to work and when it wasn't. That drove them to distraction.

So as long as we're looking for food in things that arise and pass away, we've got to learn the pattern of how we're going to get good food for the mind from these arising-and-passing-away things. This is part of the Buddha's other insight into inconstancy: that even though some things arise and pass away and can't give an ultimate happiness in and of themselves, they do function as a path to the ultimate happiness, whereas other things don't. This is the pattern. The things that can function as a path to true happiness are skillful. Those that don't are unskillful. An important part of insight is learning, through observation, which is which.

So we look for inconstancy not just to see how things arise and pass away, but how we can learn how to manipulate the process so we can actually find the food that we want, and ultimately, of course, get to the point where we don't need food anymore. But the only way you get to that point is by feeding on the right things. This is why we meditate.

When you start out meditating, and you see that states in your mind are arising and passing away, you're already dealing in what's called the frame of reference of mental qualities in and of themselves. Even though your focus is on the breath, you

can't help but notice that there are times when the mind is concentrated on the breath and times when it's not. You've got to learn how to figure out both sides of the question: which things are helping to foster concentration, and which things are getting in the way of concentration. And you have to learn how to encourage the first sort of conditions, and get rid of the second.

So even though we're focusing on the breath as our primary frame of reference, there's this other frame of reference going on at the same time. You have to learn how to recognize which qualities are hindrances and which are the factors for awakening. The hindrances are the primary set of unskillful qualities; the factors for awakening are the primary skillful ones. In fact, the factors of awakening are the ones that get you started on this path to begin with, for they help you in sorting all of these things out.

The factors for awakening begin with mindfulness. Once you're mindful of the breath, for instance, you begin to see that there are skillful and unskillful qualities arising in the mind and that you've got to learn how to distinguish them. That's called analysis of qualities, the second factor for awakening. Then you foster the effort to do away with the unskillful ones and to encourage the skillful ones, which is the third factor for awakening: persistence. So right there you've got the first three of the factors for awakening. You want to encourage that ability to observe your mind, because even though you're trying to stay with the breath, or trying to stay focused on the breath, you're not going to be able to do it unless you've got these other faculties helping you along. As Ajaan Lee explains it, analysis of qualities is directly connected with directed thought and evaluation, which are factors of jhana. Those are things you need to help you get into the meditation, to get solidly with the breath.

So you're dealing with two different frames of reference right there: the body in and of itself and these mental qualities in and of themselves. So when any of the hindrances arise—sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, or uncertainty—your first duty is simply to recognize them for what they are, to see that they are hindrances and they deserve to be let go. That right there is quite an accomplishment because for the most part, when a hindrance arises, we're already with it. We're on its side.

For example, when sensual desire comes along, we see it as a good thing. We've got decades of Western psychology to prove that sensual desire can't be thwarted. If you thwart it, it turns into The Thing and goes underground. At least that's what the mind tells itself when it decides it's going to go along with the desire. There are all kinds of reasons the mind can produce for its actions, but you've got to learn how to look past them and ask yourself, "What does this desire actually do to the mind?" This is not just a matter of watching it arise and pass away. You've got to see, when it arises, what does it bring along with it? What does it do? When it passes away, what's it like? And you begin to realize when it's present it really does cloud up the mind. It creates a lot of disturbance, a lot of stress, makes it impossible to stay with the breath. And you've got to decide whether you're on the side of the sensual desire or on the side of the breath.

The same goes with ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty and doubt. You've got to decide whether you're on their side or on the side of the breath. And the best way to decide is just to watch these things,

step back from them. Ask yourself, when they come, what comes along with them? When they go away, what goes away with them? And when they come, why do they come? What intentions underlie them? Can you trust those intentions?

At this stage in the practice, this is how you use the principle of inconstancy: not just watching things arise and pass away, arise and pass away—because, after all, you’re trying to feed in these areas, so you want to find good food for yourself. What kind of food do the hindrances provide? If they give you bad food, poisonous food, spoiled food, what can you do to clear them out of the mind? So you’re not engaged in just a passive watching. You watch with a purpose. You want to get past these things.

A similar principle applies to the factors for awakening. Once you’ve analyzed things and seen what’s skillful and unskillful, you’ve got to figure out why it is that the skillful qualities arise; when they’re there, how you protect them, how you maintain them—in Ajaan Fuang’s words, how you “*prakhawng*” them. The Thai word *prakhawng* means that you nurture them along, protect them, support them.

So even though you know that they’re inconstant, you try to use the principle of inconstancy—i.e., seeing that they depend on causes and conditions—in order to nurture those conditions because you know you’re going to depend on them. These qualities are going to be your food on the path, the good kind of food that strengthens the mind.

The Buddha compares the states of jhana to different kinds of food. You’re off in a fortress at the edge of a frontier. The enemy is all around you, but you’ve got food in the fortress, so even though the enemy is laying siege, you still can stay well fed, strong, and keep up the fight. You’ve got water, rice, sesame seeds, all sorts of good food, all the way up to the fourth jhana, which is compared to butter, ghee, sugar, and honey.

And because these things are good food, you don’t just watch them arise and pass away. You do what you can to grow the food and then to keep the food because without it, the practice dies. Only when you’ve used that food to strengthen your concentration, strengthen your insight, strengthen the tranquility of the mind can you get to the point where you’ve fully mastered that process of cause and effect. That’s when you turn to look at it and see, “How far does it take me?” It’s brought you a long way, but it can take you only so far. You’re not yet at the other shore. That’s when you start looking at everything in terms of arising and passing away, and try to develop the dispassion that comes from not wanting to eat any of these things, even good food, anymore. The Buddha uses the word *nibbida*, which means disenchantment but also disgust, distaste. You’ve had enough of that food. That’s when you can let go of everything. That’s when there’s final release.

This is the stage where you treat all compounded things in the same way, whether they’re obstacles or part of the path, because you don’t need to feed anymore. The mind doesn’t have any hunger. But as long as it still does have hunger, your relationship to inconstancy is going to be different. You want to be like those healthy well-adjusted pigeons, knowing which lever gives food and which lever gives no food, or which lever gives good food and which lever gives bad. When you figure it out, you can really nurture yourself, really nourish

yourself. Then the mind stays strong.

So there are many stages in this understanding of inconstancy. Not just, "Oh, I saw concentration last night and I saw that it was inconstant, so I let it go and that was that. What's next?" That kind of insight goes nowhere. The insight that does go somewhere is the insight that sees, "Oh, when this arises, it arises because of this. When it passes away, it passes away because of that." And if the "this" is a skillful quality, you want to nurture it. If it's an unskillful quality, you want to figure out the principle of cause and effect so you can stay away, let these things go. Because you still need to feed properly. You've got to take care of yourself. You still have those four duties with regard to the four noble truths. The path is to be developed. Suffering is to be comprehended. The causes of suffering are to be abandoned, so that the cessation of suffering can be realized. So for the time being, you use the principle of inconstancy to figure out what are the causes for the path, and how you keep them going, even though they are inconstant.

It's only when you get to the end of the path that the duties change. Ajaan Mun makes an interesting point. He says, there comes a point in the meditation where all four noble truths are one. What he means is they all come to have the same duty, whether it's stress or the path or whatever. It's all compounded. It's all inconstant. It's all to be abandoned.

But as you practice you need to know where you are in the practice and what the duties appropriate to that stage in the practice are. That's how you use insight into inconstancy with wisdom and discernment, so the teaching fulfills its intended purpose.