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The Three Perceptions

I'd like to say a few words tonight about the three perceptions: *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*—inconstancy, stress, and not-self. To understand them best, you have to pay attention to the principles with which you interpret them.

Here it's important to realize there's a link between what the Buddha says in his discussion of everyday Dhamma—the Dhamma of generosity, of the precepts, of kamma in general, along with his autobiographical narratives—and what he has to say about the Dhamma in its more advanced, technical aspects. There's a connection between the two contexts that's often missed. His everyday statements aren't just wise statements floating around unsupported. Instead, they're anchored in the deeper principles the Buddha learned in the course of his successful quest for awakening. As he applies those principles to everyday issues, he's establishing a point of view that will eventually develop into more advanced insights.

A good example is when, in the context of kamma, he discusses the beginnings of discernment. He says that discernment begins with asking questions of contemplatives—in other words, wise people: “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? And what, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” In the context of these questions, discernment becomes a matter of your search for a happiness that's reliable.

It's always important to keep that context in mind.

This principle relates, of course, to the Buddha's own original quest for freedom from suffering, freedom from aging, illness, and death. What was special about his quest was how high he set the standards against which he measured the answer to that question. He didn't content himself with just the long-term. He wanted something totally unchanging. He didn't content himself with any old happiness. He wanted the ultimate: no aging, no illness, no death at all.

That was how he ended up with the four noble truths, which are basically the ultimate answer to the question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” The noble eightfold path is the course of action that leads to the ultimate happiness by bringing suffering totally to an end. It does this by inducing dispassion for the origins of craving, which are the cause of all suffering.

At the same time, this question and these standards relate to the three perceptions. They're principles for judging whether something meets the criteria established by the question. On an everyday level, if a form of welfare and

happiness is long-term and is worth the effort of claiming as yours, then it's worth holding on to. If not, you can let it go. The three perceptions are basically techniques for letting go of things that don't meet up with the criteria. "Long-term," of course, relates to *anicca* or inconstancy; "welfare and happiness" relates to *dukkha*, stress or suffering; and the "I" and the "mine"—"what I do" and "my welfare and happiness"—relate to *anattā*. If something is inconstant, stressful, and not really you or yours, it doesn't qualify to be taken as your long-term welfare and happiness.

In terms of the Buddha's quest for awakening, *anicca* relates to aging, *dukkha* to illness, and *anattā* to death. You may know the story of Ven. Raṭṭhapāla's discussion with King Koravya. Koravya asks Raṭṭhapāla, "Why did you ordain? Most people ordain when they suffer loss of relatives, loss of health, loss of wealth, but you haven't suffered any of those losses." Raṭṭhapāla replies that he was inspired to ordain by four Dhamma summaries taught by the Buddha: "The world is swept away. It does not endure. The world offers no shelter, no protection. There is no one in charge. The world has nothing of its own. One must pass on, leaving everything behind. The world is insufficient, a slave to craving."

The king asks for some explanations of these summaries, and in the course of giving the explanations, Raṭṭhapāla shows that, when he talks about the world being swept away, he's talking about *anicca* and aging together. He asks the king, "How old are you now?"

The king says he's 80 years old.

"Are you as strong now as you used to be?"

"Well, no, of course not. Sometimes I mean to place my foot one place and it goes someplace else—even though when I was young, I thought I had supernormal strength."

So that's aging: *anicca*.

The second summary: The world offers no shelter, there's no one in charge. The king argues that he has plenty of protection with all his armed forces, so Raṭṭhapāla asks him: "Do you have any illnesses?"

"Yes." He has a recurring wind illness, which is basically shooting pains in the body.

"And here you are, you're a king. Can you order your courtiers to share out the pain so that you feel less pain?"

"No, I have to experience all that pain myself."

That's illness: *dukkha*.

Then the king says, "And what do you mean, 'The world has nothing of its own'? We have storerooms filled with gold, silver, all kinds of wealth."

And Raṭṭhapāla says, "When you die, can you take any of that with you?"

"Well, no. I have to leave it in the world as I go on."

So *anattā*, not-self—not me, not mine—relates to death.

Of course, the real irony in their discussion comes when they get to the final point: “The world is a slave to craving.” The king doesn’t like being called a slave to anything. “How can you say I’m a slave to craving?”

Raṭṭhapāla asks him, “If there were a kingdom to the east and a reliable person were to come and say, ‘Your majesty, you could conquer that kingdom. It has lots of wealth, but its army is very weak.’ Would you try to conquer it?”

The king says, “Of course.” Here he is, 80 years old, and he’s just been reflecting on aging, illness, and death, yet when the opportunity to conquer another kingdom comes along, he’ll go for it.

“How about another kingdom to the west... north... south?”

The king says, “Yes... yes... yes, I’d try to conquer those, too.”

“How about a kingdom on the other side of the ocean?”

“I’d go for that one as well.”

That’s what Raṭṭhapāla meant when he said, “a slave to craving.”

That’s the real problem to which the four noble truths point: We suffer because of our craving, which makes us want to keep coming back to these things that are marked by aging, illness, and death, inconstancy, stress, and not-self. We see their drawbacks, and yet our craving keeps us yearning for more.

So when we’re exercising our discernment and applying the three perceptions to whatever’s coming up in our awareness, we’re passing a value judgment as to which actions are worth doing and which actions are not worth doing, which ones are worth the effort and which ones are not, seen in the light of the quest for genuine happiness. The perceptions are designed to raise your standards so you won’t keep craving things that will make you suffer. When you come across something in your practice, you judge it. If any of the three perceptions apply, then it’s not what you’re looking for.

Now, there *are* some things that are stressful and inconstant, but they lead to your long-term welfare and happiness. Virtue and concentration, for instance, require effort to maintain them, but because they’re essential to the path to the end of suffering and stress, you hold on to them for the time being. You wait until they’re fully developed and have performed their functions before you let them go. This means that, as you progress in the practice, you have apply the three perceptions selectively primarily to things that would pull you off the path, until you get to the very end. That’s when you apply the three perceptions across the board.

At the same time, try to remember the Buddha’s high standards for his own happiness: something totally free from aging, illness, and death. He saw that he would find ultimate happiness by letting go of all clinging to suffering, and by inducing dispassion both for clinging and for craving. This is what the three

perceptions are for. This is their role within the context of the four noble truths: to induce that dispassion.

This is an issue that comes up sometimes in discussions of Buddhist wisdom. Which is the context: What they call the “three characteristics”? Or the four noble truths? Now, the term, “three characteristics,” is not found in the Canon. It’s found in the commentaries. The commentaries tend to take the three characteristics as the context, saying that they’re a description of the true nature of reality is, and then, given that this is the way reality functions, the four noble truths are ways of negotiating the reality that’s defined by what’s inconstant, stressful, and not-self.

But there are some problems if you put the four noble truths under the three characteristics. First of all, the three characteristics themselves carry no duties. Just because something is inconstant doesn’t mean that you’ll immediately feel compelled to follow the four noble truths. We see this all around as people say, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die.” That’s their way of making the most of inconstancy, our precarious position here where death could come at any moment. The three characteristics, on their own, don’t hold out any prospect of anything lasting or truly happy. From that, it’s easy to conclude that you should look for your happiness in the realm of the three characteristics and accept that as the best you can do. You accept them as the limitations on your prospects for long-term welfare and happiness. This means that if you start with the three characteristics as your context, you can define your duties with regard to them in any way at all.

Second, if we make the three characteristics the context, we’re shaping how we understand what ignorance means. We believe that we cling because we think things are permanent. If we knew that something was impermanent, our relationship to it would not count as clinging, because we wouldn’t be ignorant.

But the reality is we cling to things and activities even when we know that the results will be impermanent. That’s because we calculate what’s worth doing in terms of the effort expended and the happiness obtained as a result. Again, this is a value judgment. As long as we see that the pleasure gained overrides the pain and the effort that goes into gaining it, then we think it’s going to be worth it.

But in the context of the four noble truths, the Buddha has us contemplate the pleasures that we’re looking for in life, the things that we’re attached to, using these three perceptions to develop some dispassion for them, to see that maybe they’re not worth it after all.

At the same time, we find in the Canon passages where the Buddha talks about people clinging to the deathless. They’ll have an experience of the discernment that allows them to see the deathless, and they’ll cling to that. That’s

what keeps them from gaining total freedom. So it's possible to cling even to things that don't change.

So there are advantages to putting the three perceptions under the four noble truths. One is that the four noble truths have clear duties. Suffering is to be comprehended, which means that you overcome any passion, aversion, or delusion around it. Its origination is to be abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation developed.

So if there's suffering, you want to put an end to it, but you can't do that by abandoning it. You have to comprehend it first until you understand what its cause is: its origination in the mind. That's what you abandon. It's like going into your house and seeing that the house is full of water, so you have to find the broken pipe from which it's gushing. You don't just bail out the water, bail out the water, bail out the water. In fact, the more time you waste bailing out the water, the more the water's going to flood your house. You've got to find the broken pipe and fix it. Then the water will go down on its own.

In the same way, you look for the cause of suffering and you solve the problem at the cause. To do that, you also try to develop the path so that you can realize the cessation of suffering. Those duties are inherent in the four noble truths.

Once we've got the duties in place, then we look at how the three perceptions function within those duties, and we can see that the duties with regard to them are clear and universal: We use these perceptions to comprehend suffering and abandon its cause.

Also, the fact that there is the third noble truth—a deathless element where there's no more suffering, found by developing dispassion for all clinging and craving: That's why the three perceptions make sense. If there weren't the prospect of that deathless element, you could justifiably say, "Well, the things that I'm clinging to, even though they're imperfect, are as good as it gets, so I might as well hold on to them." This is the way most people function as they go through life. It's not that they don't know that the objects of their clinging and craving are impermanent. They know, but they simply think, "This is the best there is."

With the four noble truths, though, you've got a challenge: The Buddha says, "No, the best is the total end of suffering, something that is totally unconditioned." The fact that we have that as a prospect, a genuine possibility, gives us the energy and the motivation to actually apply the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self to all our attachments, so that we can develop dispassion for the things we've been holding on to.

So the three perceptions are used for the sake of the third noble truth. They do that by helping to fulfill all four duties of the four noble truths, so as to overcome

your general ignorance as to what's truly worth doing in your quest for happiness.

Now, these perceptions are applied in various ways in stages along the path. When you're developing your virtue, you don't apply these perceptions to your virtue. You apply them to things that would pull you away from the practice of virtue, things that you might use as an excuse for not following the precepts. The Buddha says that there are basically three kinds of loss that would tempt people to break the precepts: loss of wealth, loss of health, and loss in terms of relatives. He says that you have to remind yourself that those kinds of loss are minor. The really serious loss is losing your virtue and losing your right view. This means that you have to learn how to view any potential loss in terms of health, wealth, or your relatives as not-self. For the time being, though, you hold on to your precepts, you hold on to your right view as yours.

Similarly with the practice of concentration: Anything that would pull you away from your concentration, you have to learn how to regard as not-self. But as you're working on developing the concentration, you don't apply those perceptions to the concentration itself. You don't say, "Well, I just saw my concentration come and go, and that taught me a lesson about *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*." That doesn't help you fulfill the duty with regard to concentration, which is to develop it. You have to be selective in how you apply these perceptions.

The way the Buddha has you develop a sense of dispassion for things that would pull you away from the path, is that first he has you see how those things originated: They come from within the mind. Notice that when the Buddha uses the word *origination*, one, it means causality; and two, it usually refers to causes coming from within the mind.

Then the Buddha has you see these things pass away. You realize that greed, aversion, delusion, fear, and jealousy come in discrete moments. They come and they go, but then you pick them up again. What keeps them going is the fact that you're stitching those moments together, one by one by one. A lot of effort goes into that.

So you have to ask yourself, "Why do I keep picking them up? What's the allure? What do I find attractive about holding on to these things?" If you don't see what's attractive about these things, you can try to let go, let go, let go, but it'll be like trying to let go of taffy: You throw it away but it still sticks to your fingers. It keeps coming back. You have to see why part of you likes these things. Once you see that, then you can compare the allure with the drawbacks of holding on. When you see that the drawbacks outweigh the allure—using the three perceptions to pass that value judgment—you develop the dispassion that allows you to truly let go. That's when you're free.

I've been giving you English equivalents for these three perceptions. Perhaps I should explain them a bit more. *Anicca* is usually translated as *impermanent*, but I prefer to translate it as *inconstant* largely because, one, its opposite, the Pali word *nicca*, means "constant" rather than "permanent." And two, "inconstancy" implies not only that things end, but that they change even as they're continuing, even as they last. They're unreliable and unpredictable.

You can build your house, say, on a mountain, thinking, "Well, the mountain may be impermanent, and maybe someday it's going to erode into the ocean, but as long as I'm around, it seems to be permanent enough, so I'll build my house there." The impermanence of the mountain doesn't really deter you. But if you realize that the mountain often has earthquakes and landslides, you'd be wise to decide not to build your house there after all. Or it's like sitting in a chair where the legs are uneven: You have to tense your legs all the time you're in the chair to keep from tipping over.

It's important to remember that *anicca* here functions in the context of the search for true happiness. Sometimes you see it explained the other way around. People say, "Given the fact that things are inconstant in the world, we have to find a happiness by learning to content ourselves with what's inconstant or impermanent." Often they'll compare this to a dance. You dance with this partner, but when this partner leaves you, you find another partner to dance with. Things keep changing, so you avoid suffering by learning how to move fluidly from one attachment to the next—as if that were the way to find happiness in a world that's constantly changing.

But when the Buddha teaches these topics, as I said, he reverses the context. In other words, you start out with your search for happiness, with the conviction that there *is* such a thing as a happiness that lasts. Then you apply the perception of *anicca*, inconstancy, to whatever is coming up in your experience, or as the result of your actions, to measure it: If the perception really fits, then you have to realize that this is not what you're looking for. It may be part of the path that you hold on to provisionally, but ultimately you realize that in terms of the goal, there must be something better.

As for *dukkha*, I translate it as *stress* rather than *suffering*, mostly because, one, stress is hard to romanticize. You can romanticize your sufferings, but you can't romanticize stress. Two, it's something that everyone recognizes as a feature of life. I knew a journalist once in Bangkok who asked me, "Why is it that Buddhists talk about suffering all the time? I don't have any suffering in my life." So I asked him, "Well, do you have any stress?" "Oh, yeah, lots and lots of stress." "That's what we're talking about." So translating *dukkha* as *stress* enables people to relate to something that they're all experiencing.

The third reason is that there are subtle levels of dukkha, even in the practice of concentration where there's a lot of pleasure or equanimity and no blatant suffering, but there's still stress. And by translating dukkha as a range of suffering through stress, you begin to realize that it covers not just the blatant suffering, but also the more refined levels of stress as well.

You also have to make a distinction between the dukkha in the three perceptions and the dukkha in four noble truths. The dukkha in the four noble truths is the dukkha caused by craving. The dukkha in the three perceptions is inherent in everything that changes, everything that's fabricated. Basically, you apply it to all the raw material that would go into a state of becoming—and that includes what we do as we engage in the process of I-making and my-making, which is how the Buddha looks at the issue of self. He doesn't have us see the issue of self as a thing that we either have or don't have. He has us view "self" as an activity, something we all *do*: We create a sense of "I" in various ways; we create a sense of "my" as we hold on to things. And because these are activities, the relevant question is not, "What is my genuine self?" It's, "When is it skillful to do those activities, and when is it not?" If you see that all the raw material that you've been using in these activities is inconstant and stressful, you begin to realize: "No matter how well I design myself, it's all going to fall apart. Maybe this is not what I want. Maybe I have to look elsewhere for true happiness."

And finally *anattā* is translated as not-self. Sometimes you see it translated as "no self," but the Buddha never took a position on the question of whether there is or is not a self. He noted that if you hold on to the idea that you have no self, that view itself then becomes an object of clinging, in the same way that the view that you have a self, however you define it, would also become an object of clinging. So instead, he has you look at self and not-self both as actions. Instead of being answers to the question of whether there's a self, they're answers to the question lying at the origin of discernment: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" When you see your sense of "self" and "not-self" as activities, then the question with regard to each becomes, "When is this activity conducive to my long-term welfare and happiness, and when does it lead to long-term harm and suffering?" The perception of "not-self" gets applied to any perception of self that would get in the way of long-term welfare and happiness.

Here again there's a question of context. Kamma, action, is the context for *anattā*, not the other way around. All too often you hear the question, "If there is no self, then who does the kamma, who receives the results, how can there be rebirth?" But that's getting the context and the content backwards. The real context is the kamma of looking for happiness, and then the question becomes how the kamma of selfing and not-selfing fits into that context. Both "self" and

“not-self” are strategies for happiness, and what the Buddha’s asking us to do is to look more carefully at how we do these things and whether our strategies are actually working or not.

Now, there’s a certain logic to how the Buddha teaches not-self. Sometimes you hear it expressed this way, like a syllogism:

“Self has to be permanent.

The five aggregates are impermanent,

Therefore: The five aggregates are not self, and

Therefore: There is no self.”

But that’s not the Buddha’s logic. He never says that the self has to be permanent. He often talks about views of self that are impermanent, saying that they can be objects of clinging to the same extent as views of a permanent self.

The actual logic for using not-self lies in seeing that there’s a greater happiness that can be found by applying the perception of not-self to the aggregates. After all, remember the whole point of creating a sense of self: It’s a strategy for happiness. The Buddha’s simply pointing out that, even though it has its uses, in the ultimate stages of the practice it’s a poor strategy to hold on to because it involves clinging, which is the same as suffering. There’s a greater happiness to be found when you let that strategy go. When you’ve tasted that greater happiness, the perception of self loses its reason for being. And when you can finally let it go, that opens the way to an unchanging happiness.

At the same time, we apply the perception of not-self because we realize that we’re holding on to things that are not as ideal as they could be. When we let them go, then we can let go of the perception of not-self, too—after all, as a perception, it’s one of the aggregates. When we drop perceptions of self and not-self, that’s when we arrive at full freedom, totally free from change.

That’s the logic of not-self.

There’s an irony here. All too often we’re told that the idea of a permanent, unchanging nibbana is at odds with the teaching that there is no self. It’s accused of being a kind of closet self. But actually, the teaching on nibbana is a prerequisite for how the teaching on not-self will work. Once you know there is an unconditioned, unchanging element that’s totally free from suffering—because it’s free from clinging—and then you look at the things that you’re identifying with as part of your strategies for finding happiness, you realize that these things are not unconditioned, these things are not free from suffering and stress, because they’re not free from clinging. That’s what will induce you to be willing to even think the idea: “Maybe I should let this go.”

Remember, the Buddha says we suffer because of craving and clinging to the things we really like, the things we really find valuable. And he’s trying to

convince us, “No, there’s something more valuable.” Only when we’re willing to listen to him will we seriously apply perceptions of not-self to these things.

When we apply these perceptions to the point of developing dispassion for the things we’ve been holding on to, that’s how these perceptions lead to an experience of unbinding. As the Buddha says, we suffer from our clinging, and it’s not the case that the things we’re clinging to are clinging to us at the same time. Ajaan Lee has a nice comparison. He says, “When you don’t eat a plate of rice when you’re hungry, it’s not the rice that’s going to cry. You’re the one who’s crying. The rice doesn’t care.” In other words, the reason we’re not free is not because these things are holding on to us, it’s because we’re holding on to them. We have to let go.

The image they use in the Canon is of a burning fire. To understand the image, you have to know how they understood fire at that time. Fire burns because the fire element or the fire property latches on to a piece of fuel on which it feeds. In fact, the word for taking sustenance is the same as the word for clinging: *upādāna*. As long as the fire is clinging to the fuel, it’ll continue to burn. When it lets go, the fire goes out and is freed. That’s the image behind the word *nibbāna*, or unbinding, meaning the extinguishing of a fire. This is the implication it had for people of those times: There is freedom to be found by letting go.

Now, the Buddha says that *nibbāna* is something indescribable, but he will talk about it to some extent so that we’ll desire to go there. To begin with, he says that it exists. This is unlike the case of the arahant, where he refuses to answer the question as to whether the arahant exists as a being. In fact, his refusal there is so thorough that he rules out all the possible answers to the question: that the arahant exists, doesn’t exist, both exists and doesn’t exist, or neither exists nor doesn’t exist. That’s because beings are defined by their attachments, whereas arahants have no attachments, so you can’t define them. If you can’t define them, then you can’t describe them. *Nibbāna*, though, is a state. States are not defined by attachments. They’re defined by whether they’re realities. The Buddha says that *nibbāna* is very much a reality—a reality with five main attributes.

- One, it is a type of consciousness. It’s not a blanking-out. It’s not consciousness in the aggregates, though. And because it’s beyond name and form, it’s not the consciousness of form found in the formless *jhānas*. It’s called consciousness without surface, a consciousness that, unlike the consciousness in the aggregates or in the *jhānas*, isn’t known through the six senses, including the sense of the mind. The image is of a light beam that doesn’t land anywhere. If you had a light beam going through space and it didn’t land on any material object, you wouldn’t be able to see it, because it wouldn’t be reflected. It’s through the reflections coming off of surfaces that we see light. But if it doesn’t land on anything—and that’s how the Buddha talks about it, he calls it

consciousness that's unestablished, a consciousness that doesn't land—it's bright in and of itself, but it doesn't appear as brightness to anything else, so it can't be located.

- Two, it is freedom. This is why the Buddha calls it *nibbāna*, or unbinding. As I said, it's like a flame that's been freed from its fuel.

- Three, it's something true, unchanging, and undeceptive. Because it's not conditioned, it's just there. It doesn't change at all.

- Four, for this reason, it's a state of security and happiness. As the Buddha said, it's the ultimate happiness.

- And five, it's excellent, the ultimate, beyond anything else that could be found.

The purpose of using the three perceptions is to reach that unbound state. They do this by inducing a state of dispassion for all of the things that we're holding on to that constitute suffering and stress through the fact that we're holding on to them. We can develop that state of dispassion first by letting go of things that would pull us away from the path. Then we finally apply these perceptions to the path itself. That's when the mind reaches total dispassion. When it reaches total dispassion, it no longer fabricates anything, because it fabricates because of passion. When it's no longer fabricating anything, then everything ceases—including the perceptions and concepts used on the path—and the mind can totally let go into total freedom.

In the experience of awakening, the six senses cease, and then you return to them, but you return with a different relationship. Even at the stage of stream-entry, you return having realized that what the Buddha said really is true: There is something that's deathless. As for arahants, after they experience full awakening, they return to the six senses with a sense of being radically disjoined from them—not in a sense of alienation, but simply because they're no longer feeding on them. They live with the six senses but without trying to gobble them down, so they can't be poisoned by them. The fact that we get poisoned by our environment is because we're feeding off of it all the time. The arahant can continue functioning within the world but with a sense of being totally freed from being influenced by the world.

So this is the goal to which we're aiming: a state of mind totally independent of the six senses. Even when the six senses end at death, that state of mind is not affected. In the meantime, before death, we can function in the world purely out of compassion. Think of the Buddha after he gained his awakening: At that point he really didn't have to teach anybody. This is a fact that bothers the commentators quite a lot: the Buddha's reflections after his awakening that maybe he wouldn't teach after all because it required a lot of effort. It was only

when he realized it would be worth the effort that he decided to give the teaching as a free gift. And because it was given freely, it's worthy of trust.