

## *Inconstancy*

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One of the perceptions that's used to develop a sense of dispassion is the perception of *anicca*, inconstancy. Sometimes it's translated as "impermanence," but the word *nicca* doesn't mean permanent. It means constant. *Anicca*, its opposite, means not constant. When you realize that, you see it all around you. Of course, we see impermanence around us, too. We know that everything is impermanent, even the mountain over there to the east. That's impermanent. But we feel it's solid enough. We wouldn't mind building a house on it, just as we've built a monastery on this mountain here even though we know that this mountain, too, is impermanent. We figure it's a good gamble, though. The odds are in our favor. The effort that goes into building something that will be long-lasting here is effort well spent. It's part of our calculation. But when you think about how inconstant things are, that changes the picture. It changes your sense of what you're looking for.

You're looking for someplace to place your happiness. It's like sitting on a chair where one of the legs is not even with the rest. It wobbles. So even though you can stay in the chair, it requires a certain amount of tension to make sure that it doesn't tip over. That sense of how precarious things are: That's what the Buddha's having you look at—even as you fight against it in the beginning of the path.

At first, we're trying to create a state of mind that's constant. You stay with one thing, and the Buddha's trying to have you shift your allegiance from looking for pleasures in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas to looking at the state of mind, the quality of a still mind for your happiness, for your pleasure. That's one of the reasons why we have the eight precepts. We place limitations on pleasures of each sense. With sights, you have to say, "No more watching shows." Sounds: No more listening to music. Smells: No perfumes. Taste: No food after noon, before dawn. Tactile sensations: No lying on luxurious beds. This forces you to look into the mind, into the breath, to find your pleasure. But as soon as you do this, you're fighting against the perception of inconstancy. You're trying to make this constant. And you find that you can.

It may not be totally under your control, but you realize that, as long as you stay with the breath—and the breath is always there—you can sit here for long periods of time if you want. The Buddha actually wants you to shift your center of gravity here so that this is where you feel at home. It's only when you're really

established here that he has you start looking into the inconstancy of even the state of concentration. You see that it, too, has its subtle ups and downs. That insight motivates you to try to get into deeper concentration. In fact, this is how you move from one level of jhana into another, or to one of the formless attainments to a more refined one. You notice that some of the factors you use to put concentration together start becoming extraneous.

In the beginning, you have to talk to yourself, evaluate the breath to make sure that the breath feels good for the body, feels nourishing, that all the different breath energies are working together, and that they're just right for the mind. The breath is not laborious, but at the same time not so subtle that you can't follow it. When it does start getting subtle, you just expand your awareness and think of the sense of well-being spreading out through the body, too. And with that expanded awareness, you feel a lot more stable here.

The breath can even get to the point where it stops, which is fine. There's still a sense of background energy in the body. You just stay with that, and you get more and more used to being here. But then you find that there's still a subtle level of disturbance here, too, so you drop whatever perception's causing that and you go deeper, deeper. So it's that disturbance, that little bit of inconstancy: It forces you to get the mind even more still, encourages you to get the mind more still because you're taking more and more seriously the Buddha's statement that there is no happiness other than peace. Wherever there's a disturbance, you want to get past it, you want to iron it out until you get the mind to the point where everything is as still as possible.

But then you find that there, too, there's still a disturbance. There's still some inconstancy. If you were looking for impermanence, you wouldn't see impermanence there. But you can see the inconstancy, moment by moment. Seeing this serves two functions. One, it alerts you to the fact that the mind is still doing something. It's not quite constant. It's not quite steady. The level of ease or the level of stress in the mind goes up and down in little bits, and you want to be able to catch what you're doing to cause that. The other function it serves, of course, is that it gives you a sense of dispassion, disenchantment with anything that's fabricated because, as the Buddha said, it's fabrication that's stressful, and yet the process of fabrication is the means through which we approach all of our experience.

So you can't tell yourself right off the bat, "I'm going to just stop fabricating entirely," because you can't do that. If you stop fabricating on a blatant level, you do it on a more subtle level. So the Buddha's having you do fabricate consciously: to get more and more subtle in your acts of fabrication until you see that even the

subtlest, calmest, most secure and stable fabrication—even that has its little ups and downs. As the Buddha said, that’s when you incline the mind to the deathless. This insight turns you around. Up to that point, the mind has been inclined to fabricate. Here, though, the Buddha’s getting you to see that even the subtlest fabrication has its drawbacks.

Another reason for having you get more subtle in your fabrication, of course, is that the insight that gets developed in this way can open up to the unfabricated.

So the Buddha’s not just bad-mouthing things for the sake of being critical. He’s telling you that what you’re going for is a lesser pleasure, when there’s a greater pleasure to be had—a greater happiness, a greater sense of well-being. But it’s going to require that you get dispassionate toward the things you ordinarily like. Simply understanding what he has to say is not going to get you there. There has to be a turn-around in the mind, as you begin to see that, yes, the more stability you can get inside, the better. You keep following that until you get a full experience of what the unfabricated is like.

The Buddha calls it seeing with the body. It’s not just an intellectual understanding or an intellectual ability to put things together. It’s a direct awareness. You become aware of something. This is one of the reasons why it’s called awakening. It’s something that’s been there all the time but you’ve been asleep to it. Now you’ve awakened to the fact that it’s there. It’s a full, full experience. The Buddha says that you touch it with the body or, in one passage, that you *see* it with the body. In other words, you experience it right where you experience your body right now. And it is a type of seeing, but it’s not seeing with your eyes. It’s seeing with your full awareness. That’s where he wants to get you.

Using the perception of *anicca*, inconstancy, is one of his strategies to help get you on his side, to get the members in charge of your mental committee on his side so that you can taste something of what he tasted, and can see something of what he saw.

So when anything threatens to get in the way of the practice, look for its inconstant side. It’s going to show itself one way or another in the uncertainty, the inconstancy, the ups and downs, the precarious nature of whatever that pleasure is or whatever that allure is. It’s there to be seen. The more sensitive you are to the little changes that are constantly going on, the more the mind will be inclined to agree with the Buddha that this is a useful perception.

There’s that one passage where he says that by whatever you conceive something, it’s already become otherwise. In other words, the simple process of forming a concept in the mind based on something takes so much time, even though it’s a flash of the eye. But in that flash of the eye, whatever it was that you

based that concept on has already changed. Change is that pervasive and relentless. So even the mountains are impermanent, but they're permanent enough for us to build houses on. You have to realize that the concentration we're working on here has its inconstancy, but for the time being we use it as the basis for our home for the mind. We know that at some point it's going to start to deteriorate, so we've got to find something better, which is why the perception of inconstancy comes in. It's something you can see right before your eyes. It's not just a concept. It's a direct experience that will lead the mind to want something better. That's what that perception is for.