Three Characteristics, The

September 25, 2003

The trick to keeping your mindfulness constant, consistent, lies in focusing on the present moment as much as possible. Don’t worry about the next moment, because it’s in worrying about the next moment, planning for the next moment, that you open the gaps that allow mindfulness to slip out. But if you’re very carefully aware of what’s happening right here, right now, give yourself totally to this moment. Which moment? Well, each moment you’re here, when there’s no question about what’s going to happen next, but simply focusing on being as sensitive as possible right here, right now. That ensures that your mindfulness is going to be consistent. There’s no moment that doesn’t come under that agenda. It’s the consistency of your mindfulness that makes all the difference. It allows the mind to settle down and to enter in a good state of concentration, that steady flame that we want to have going here, the flame of a mind in solid concentration and absorption. It comes from being steadily mindful, consistently, continually mindful, alert, aware. The normal mind is like the flame in the sutta we just chanted right now. It flickers. And because it flickers, you can’t see anything. You can’t read by it. In fact, all kinds of weird shapes come. If you ever sit in a room with a fire, you see the fire flickering, the shadows dance all over the room. Now, that doesn’t mean that the chair or the table or whatever, whose shadow is being thrown against the wall, is not dancing. But the nature of the fire, the inconsistency of the fire, makes the shadows seem to dance. If you look just at the shadows, you might assume that the table was dancing as well, the chair, the lamp, whatever. It’s only when the fire or the flame is really consistent that you can see the shadows for what they truly are. And the shadows can start giving you an indication of what’s going on in the room. If the flame is really still, then if a shadow moves, it’s a sign that there’s something in the room that actually moved. So keep this point in mind. If you want to see anything clearly, you have to be as still as possible. The Buddha’s teachings on inconsistency, stress, and not-self, they really have their meaning. They serve their purpose in the mind, which is to liberate the mind from unnecessary burdens, from the clinging and suffering that goes along with the clinging. These insights come by making the mind as constantly and as pleasant as possible. If you want to see inconsistency, you have to make yourself constant. If you want to see stress, you have to put the mind at ease. So you can start ferreting things out. If you’re really still and you see something move, the normal mind moves along with whatever happens. It’s like it’s shadowing everything or humming along with every tune that comes its way. And if you get the mind not to hum along, then you can see the tune and your awareness as something separate. And if your awareness is still and at ease, then you see that the movement of the tune or whatever it was that you’re shadowing is stressful. It’s something that you don’t really want, and you don’t have to identify with it. It’s amazing how the mind has this tendency of identifying with all kinds of things. You think that every little piece of garbage that came in through your senses and through your mind is raw material for a sense of identity, because that’s what the mind does. It latches on to things, it clings to things, it assumes things to be itself. And then as those things change and go through the rough and tumble of life, the mind is put through the rough and tumble as well. But it’s when you can begin to separate yourself out, see the distinction between a steady gaze and the flickering around that you normally would follow. That’s when you can let go of the flickering. You can let go of the feeling or the perception or the thought construct, whatever it was. And this is when the insight in inconstancy and stress and not-self really hit home. You see that you had the choice to go with those things, but you realized that you could stay right here with a sense of stillness, a sense of steadiness. And this is easier. There’s a greater sense of ease. This is where you’d rather stay. This is not total insight into not-self, but it moves you in the direction where you want to go. Last week we were talking about one of the Buddha’s discourses where he talks about developing insight into not-self as a way of developing deeper stages of concentration. This is how you do it. You see something move in the mind. You realize, “I don’t want to go there. I don’t have to go there.” Because you see it as something separate. You see its inconstancy while you’re staying with the constancy of a concentrated mind. This is how you can begin to divide things out or separate things out. You see that you would much rather stay here with the constancy. It’s easier. It feels better. And you can learn to disassociate yourself from the things that otherwise you would have moved along with, you would have flowed along with. This takes you into deeper and deeper states of concentration. And as you’ve been told many times before, ultimately there comes a point where you have to turn on that state of concentration itself. The Buddha maps this out in stages of breath meditation. You notice the movements of the breath that are unnecessary. It would be easier to let the breath be still. Then you notice the movements of feelings that are unnecessary. Let those feelings be still. You notice the movements of the mind that are unnecessary. Let those go. Because you see they’re inconstant, you don’t have to follow them. It brings the mind to greater and greater stillness. Finally, though, you turn around and look at inconstancy in and of itself. You look at the source. And you begin taking that apart as well. This is a theme throughout a lot of the teachings of the greater jhanas. If you’re simply laying the blame on things out there, they’re inconstant, they’re stressful, they’re not self, you’re missing an important part. A person from Singapore who eventually became one of Ajahn Fueng’s students wrote in a letter one time that he wanted some advice on his meditation. So he described what he was doing. He was practicing seeing everything as inconstant, stressful, and not self. That was his theme throughout the day. I read the letter to Ajahn Fueng, translating it, and his response was, “Turn around and look at that voice in the mind that’s saying inconstant, stressful, not self. That’s the troublemaker.” And that’s eventually what we’ve got to learn to live with. But in the meantime, you’ve got other levels to work on before you can get there, because our sense of identity can be so all-encompassing. You can pick up anything and identify with it. Make it part of your sense of who you are, yourself. Even such a simple thing as sitting in a room with a refrigerator humming, suddenly the refrigerator becomes part of you. All your senses get mixed together. All the aggregates. This is why the Buddha teaches us to separate things out like this. We begin to see that this huge, all-inclusive sense of self is made of lots of little tiny things, many of which cause stress if you’re trying to sing along with them, hum along with them, take them as part of you. So you have to clean out, clean out, clean out as much as you can until you’re left with the instigator inside, that habit of the mind that wants to jump on things and identify with them, claim them either as yourself or as belonging to yourself. You work into that stage by stage, but you do it by this practice of being aware of the mind, developing a center in the mind that is constant and easeful, and something that you’re going to be identifying with as you move along the path. Remind yourself that there will come a day when you have to let go, but for the meantime, this is your dwelling place. So have a sense of the observer. Have a sense of the normalcy of the mind. Maintain that as what you’re going to cling to. And anything else that disturbs that, look for its inconstancy. See where it’s stressful. If you’re going to hang onto it, then let go. This is how ease, constancy, and self play an important part in the practice. They give you the vantage point from which you can see inconstancy, stress, and not-self on many, many layers. It’s only when there are no layers left that you turn around and look at the instigator. But in the meantime, as we’re working on the layers, just work on this constancy of your gaze, constancy of your focus by giving everything you’ve got to the present moment. We come to the present moment not simply because it’s a good place to be. Important things can be done here. The work that the Buddha talked about is taking apart being and birth, clinging, and all the other factors that lead to suffering. That work is done right here. And the more consistently you’re here, the better the work you can do, the more precise, the more sensitive you are to what’s going on, and the more precise the way you respond to it. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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