June 18, 2024

Once, when I was staying with Ajahn Phuong, I got a letter from a new student from Singapore who wanted some advice on meditating. He started out the letter talking about the meditation he was already doing, which was to look at everything in daily life in terms of the three characteristics. Whatever he encountered, he was to remind himself that it was inconstant, stressful, not-self. And from the tone of the letter, you had the feeling he felt he was pretty smart. He’d gotten that far in his meditation. So when I read this to Ajahn Phuong, translated into Thai, his response was, “Well, write back to him and tell him, ‘Don’t go around bad-mouthing things for being inconstant, stressful, not-self. The problem doesn’t lie with them. The problem lies with the mind that’s calling them inconstant, stressful, not-self.’” It’s good that we think about this as we’re meditating. After all, these are the characteristics that form the basis for insight. Then we have to use them properly. If we just go around saying that everything’s inconstant, stressful, not-self, it sounds pretty negative. As Ajahn Phuong said, the problem is not with those things. It’s with the mind. Not the mind as an entity, but the problem is what the mind is doing. The mind is looking for happiness in things that are inconstant, stressful, not-self, and it’s going to get disappointed. We want a happiness that’s constant, easeful, something that lies under our control. And the Buddha doesn’t say that that’s a wrong desire. Sometimes we hear nowadays that the teachings on inconstancy teach us that, because everything is changing all the time, you have to just simply accept that fact, learn to embrace things as they come, knowing that they’re going to leave after a while. So try to milk as much out of them as you can while they’re here. And then when they go, be gracious about letting them go so you can latch on to something else, the next thing that comes along. If that were the whole of the practice, or the goal of the practice, when you think about it, that’s a pretty miserable life. Grabbing, grabbing, grabbing, and having to let go, having to let go. Actually, that’s what people do. And the practice is not simply learning to be more graceful about letting go. It’s learning to look in other places, places we don’t ordinarily look. The Buddha said that the quest for happiness is a good thing. The serious quest, when you really look at what you’re doing and learn to be more skillful. After all, he says, Nirvana is the ultimate happiness. Nirvana is the ultimate ease. And that’s where we’re going to look for true happiness. So the problem isn’t with the quest. It’s simply that we’re looking in the wrong places. We’re doing things the wrong way. And one of the more sobering parts of the practice is learning to look at your mistakes. See what you’re doing the wrong way. Learn to figure out some better way. This is why we have so much practice in meditation and being mindful, being alert. Because that’s what you want to be mindful about. That’s what you want to be alert to. To look for ways in which you’re not very skillful in looking for happiness. In figuring out better ways, better places to look, taking advantage of the good things you’ve got. Because after all, even the path is inconstant, stressful, not-self. You’re going to have to make use of this inconstant, stressful, and not-self path to take you where you want to go. The trick is figuring out which things arise in the mind that are the path and which things are off the path. And the teachings can give you some guidance. Other people can give you some guidance. But ultimately, you’ve got to learn how to weigh things and ferret things out for yourself. That’s why not everything is explained. You look at the Canon. There are a lot of interesting passages where the Buddha sets up some distinctions. He says some forms of stress are best dealt with by actively taking them apart, actively deconstructing them. Others are best dealt with simply by watching them. Forms of stress, unskillful states in the mind. Some of them respond to the first approach. Some of them respond to the second. Does the Buddha give any guidelines as to which is which? No. That’s up for you to observe. That’s up for you to figure out. Because it’s in your ability to observe, your ability to figure out, that’s where insight lies. It doesn’t lie simply in accepting what you’re told and doing what you’re told and having it all come out right in the end without your having to exercise your own judgment, exercise your own powers of observation. And those are best exercised by what we’re doing right here, right now, working with the breath, playing with the breath, seeing what works, seeing what doesn’t work, developing that habit in the mind, realizing that you may have totally misunderstood the practice up to now. So looking at ways that you may come to a better understanding, trying to bring fresh eyes to the practice every time you come, learning to be comfortable with the fact that you have made mistakes but you’ve got the possibility to learn. Otherwise, you don’t like the mistakes you’ve made, but you don’t have to be down on yourself for having made them. Using them as a learning opportunity is what makes all the difference. Because in the course of the practice, you’re going to come up with a lot of inconstant things. Concentration is inconstant, but you work with it to make it as constant as you can. There’s stress in the practice of concentration, but you’re trying to make it as easeful as you can. You make it into the path. You develop these things. And then as you do it, you get more and more clear. You have more and more insight into precisely what is and what is not the path. So even though these things are inconstant, stressful, not-self, they’re very useful. So you can turn around and look at that mind, which is pointing out how it’s disappointed in things, how it’s not getting the happiness it wants, to see precisely where the delusion is, why it’s looking in the wrong place, how it can start looking in the right place. As you get deeper and deeper into the practice, seeing the inconstancy of things, it’s less and less a verbal notion. It’s just simply you’re observing, “Oh, yes, that changes. This changes.” But the question is, what use can you get out of things as they change for the purpose of finding something that doesn’t change? Even when you get to something that doesn’t change, you can’t latch onto it. Anicca, sabbe, sankara, dukkha, all fabricated things are inconstant. All fabricated things are stressful. But then it goes, sabbe, tamanatta, all dhammas are not-self. Exactly how far does that apply? There’s a passage where the Buddha describes that once you get really solid concentration, you start looking into that state of concentration. You start to see exactly what part of that concentration falls under which of the aggregates, which part is form, which part is feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness. And then you see those five khandhas in your concentration. That’s what makes up your concentration, as they say. Everything up through the dimension of nothingness. That’s a perception attainment. It’s attained through a sannya, or perception, a label that you put on things. So even in these very subtle states of concentration, the khandhas are still there. The aggregates are still there. And as you see these things as inconstant, stressful, not-self, as you said, an alien void, a cancer, all kinds of negative things, then you turn your mind to the deathless. This is exquisite. This is peaceful. This is the relinquishment of all fabrications, nirvana. And he says, at that point, you either attain arahantship or, through that, what he calls the dharma passion, that dharma delight—in other words, delighting in nirvana as an object—you become a non-returner. Samanatha is meant precisely to uproot that particular passion, to uproot that particular delight, because that’s the last and very subtle thing that stands in the way of total awakening. And when there’s total awakening, then three characteristics don’t apply anymore. Their opposites don’t apply anymore. The very subtle happiness is there. The Buddha says it’s not a way to na, it’s not a feeling of happiness. It’s a different kind of happiness. But the whole question of self and not-self doesn’t apply. But that doesn’t mean that the teaching on not-self applies only at a very subtle level of the practice. It’s there to help you overcome your attachments to all kinds of things along the way, anything that you see that is getting in the way of a deeper and more reliable happiness, a deeper and more reliable sense of well-being. Learn how to let go. Learn to see that it’s not anything you really want to identify with. Because you see that it’s inconstant, you see that it’s stressful. So this is how the three characteristics apply in the practice. You have to be judicious in where you apply them. In other words, you don’t just let everything go without first seeing which things in the mind are the path, which things are not the path. If something is a factor of the path, don’t let it go yet. Hang on. Develop it. As for things that are not the path, those are the ones you want to let go. So that your search for happiness gets better and better directed, more and more usefully focused. Focused in such a way that it doesn’t lead to disappointment. So that it takes you where you want to go.

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