Inconstancy

July 28, 2024

Try to keep your attention constantly with the breath, all the way in, all the way out. This is what makes the meditation special. Otherwise you’re with the breath a little bit and you’re someplace else, and then back again, then someplace else. Well that’s the way your mind normally acts. You’re trying to train it in new habits, the habit of staying. The habit of making a determination and sticking with it. So stick with the breath, all the way in, all the way out, in again, in and again out. And it’s best to make the breath comfortable. So experiment for a while. You can try long breathing to begin with, to energize the body. If it seems to need energizing, keep with it. But then if it gets tiresome, then you can change. Shorter, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Try to figure out what kind of breathing feels best for you right now. And the best way to know that is to be here continually. It’s like watching a TV show. You walk into the room and then walk out of the room, five minutes later, come back. Then walk out after five minutes and come back ten minutes later. You don’t really know what’s going on. You don’t know what connects with what. In the same way when you meditate, if you’re here for a little bit and then someplace else, then come back and go someplace else, you don’t see the connections. After all, the insights we’re trying to gain here are insights about what causes what, what conditions what. And you can see those connections only if you watch continually. So try to be constant. Of course we’ve heard that the Buddha says all calibrated things are inconstant, stressful, not self. But for the time being you want to fight against those perceptions. Make your attention as constant as you can. Make the breath as pleasant as you can. Bring these things under your control. See how far you can go with that. The Buddha says you can go quite far. You get into deep states of absorption, even into formless states, infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness. It can take you far. And it’s good to see how far you can do it. Because when you hear about things being inconstant, stressful, not self, and that being reason enough to let them go, if you haven’t tested the limits of how far constancy can take you, then you won’t know for sure. If you want to make this knowledge your knowledge, you have to test it. Now the Buddha does teach the theme of inconstancy. And there’s a passage where he’s teaching his son meditation, and even before he teaches him breath meditation or anything else, he teaches him make your mind like earth. Develop thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. And then a couple of contemplations that are connected with insight. Contemplation of the body, to overcome any sense of sensual desire for the body. Then contemplation of inconstancy, to get past the perception that I am something. The question is why does the Buddha teach these things from the first up? It’s a preliminary clearing in the mind, to be willing to settle down here. If you just tell it to be still, it’ll be still for a while. But if you don’t give it good reasons, it’s going to quickly find reasons of its own to wander off. So think about the things that you might be thinking about that might be getting in the way. One of the big things the Buddha said, one of the big obstacles to concentration is sensuality. Now sensuality doesn’t mean sensual pleasures, it means your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. Which ones you want, which ones you’d like to get. You can spend the whole hour thinking about that if you wanted to. But then you can ask yourself, the object of most sensual desire is the human body. And what is there in the human body? Suppose you took off the skin, what would there be? Then you took off the different layers, spread them on the ground, you’d have a huge mess. And none of it would be very attractive. Why is that? When it’s all put back together, it is attractive. The mind can easily lie to itself. That’s when you realize the mind can lie to itself. That’s good protection against distracting thoughts. The same with thoughts of inconstancy. Whatever you can think of that would pull you away from the concentration. Anything that you find attractive, anything you find compelling. How long is that attraction going to last? The things that seem to be entertaining, how long would they be entertaining? Think about food. Say you tell someone that your favorite food is eggs. And they just keep providing you with eggs every day, every day, every day. After all, you get so you hate eggs. And so even your likes and dislikes are inconstant. And so why let them get in the way of your meditation? Because you’re going to be doing something much better here. Getting the mind to settle in, getting the mind to be still enough so that it can understand itself. So try to be here constantly. And if you find yourself tempted to go off someplace else, just remind yourself, whatever it could be, it’s not going to last. You can’t really trust it. Because that’s why inconstant things are not desirable. The word Anicca, which we’re translating as inconstant here, is sometimes translated as impermanent. I know a number of people who say impermanent things are not necessarily bad. As the Buddha said, if something is impermanent, it’s stressful. Or if it’s Anicca, it’s stressful. But say you’ve got an illness, and the illness is going to go away. Well, it’s a good thing the illness is impermanent. So why is that stressful? But you have to realize the word Anicca is the opposite of Nicca. And Nicca means constant. It’s something you do again and again and again, reliably. So if something is Anicca, it’s inconstant, it’s unreliable. That helps you see the connection between Anicca and Dukkha. And stress and suffering. It’s because things are unreliable that you can’t trust them. You can’t really find any true happiness there. So you have to make yourself more reliable. Years back, when I was with Ajahn Phuong, there was a person from Singapore who had received a copy of one of Ajahn Lee’s books. So he wrote to Ajahn Phuong, talking about his practice. He said that he tried to see everything as inconstant, stressful, not-self. He was watching TV, driving along the road, every activity in his daily life. He tried to see it with these three perceptions, inconstant, stressful, not-self. So I read that to Ajahn Phuong, and he told me to write back, “Don’t say things outside are inconstant, stressful, not-self. Turn around and look inside and see what is it that’s saying those things are inconstant, stressful, not-self. That’s the problem.” In other words, the mind is the problem, and its inconstancy is the problem. We’re looking for happiness, and sometimes we get on the right track, but then we’re unreliable. We fall off. That’s the problem. And everything that we experience in life has to go through our processing. We have raw materials coming in from karma, karma in the past, but we don’t experience them until they’re processed by karma in the present moment. And if our karma in the present moment is unreliable, then even good things coming in from the past may turn into suffering. So as we meditate, we’re not only letting go of inconstant things outside, but we’re also trying to deal with the fact that the mind itself is unreliable. We’re trying to make it more reliable by being mindful, by being alert, by being ardent and sticking with this, sticking with the meditation. Because if you want to find a reliable happiness in life, you have to be reliable. What it comes down to, of course, is the highest level of reliability would be nibbana. And that’s something that doesn’t go through any processing in the mind. It’s unprocessed, you might say. Everything else in the world is processed. We talk about the problems with processed food. The processed experiences of the mind are a lot worse, because they can make us suffer a lot more. Even when we’re processing things relatively skillfully, they’re going to have to fall apart. So we do our best to process this path, turn our thoughts, words and deeds into the path, to the point where the path can deliver us to something that goes beyond the path. That’s the only way that reliable happiness can be found. And so as best we can, we try to make our path reliable. So we find that something is, that really is constant and is the highest happiness. As far as the question of self and not-self, it doesn’t really apply there anymore. Self is a strategy, not-self is a strategy, for the sake of happiness. When you get to the ultimate happiness, you don’t need strategies anymore. So there you are. You’ve found something that doesn’t have to push against the perceptions of inconstant, because it’s constant by nature. This is what those three perceptions are for, as a measuring stick. We arrive at something in the meditation that seems really good. You’re going to ask yourself, is this really constant? You have to watch it carefully, because sometimes the higher levels of concentration can be very peaceful, very steady. But if you look steadily enough, you can see there’s some inconstancy there. That means it can’t be the real thing. There’s some stress there, so it can’t be the real thing. It’s not worth claiming as you or yours. But when you find something that is constant, and you test it again and again and again, and it holds up to the test, then you’ve found what you’re looking for.

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