

Three Perceptions

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Almost any book on Buddhism will tell you that the three characteristics—the characteristic of inconstancy, the characteristic of stress or suffering, and the characteristic of not-self—were one of the Buddha’s most central teachings. The strange thing, though, is that when you look in the Pali Canon, the word for “three characteristics,” *ti-lakkhana*, doesn’t appear. If you do a search on any computerized version of the Canon and type in, say, the characteristic of inconstancy, *anicca-lakkhana*, it comes up with nothing. The word’s not in the Pali Canon at all. The same with *dukkha-lakkhana* and *anatta-lakkhana*: Those compounds don’t appear. This is not to say that the concepts of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta* don’t occur in the Canon; just that they’re not termed characteristics. They’re not compounded with the word “characteristic.” The words they *are* compounded with are perception, *sañña*—as in the perception of inconstancy, the perception of stress, and the perception of not-self—and the word *anupassana*, which means to contemplate or to keep track of something as it occurs. For instance, *aniccanupassana*, to contemplate inconstancy, means to look for inconstancy wherever it happens.

Now, it’s true that you’ll frequently find in the Canon the statements that all things compounded or fabricated are inconstant, that they’re all stressful. And all dhammas—all objects of the mind—are not-self. So if that’s the way things are, why not just say that these are characteristic features of these things? Why make a big deal about the language? Because words are like fingers, and you want to make sure they point in the right direction—especially when they’re laying blame, the way these three perceptions do. And in our practice, the direction they point to is important for a number of reasons.

One is that the Buddha’s concern is not with trying to give an analysis of the ultimate nature of things outside. He’s more interested in seeing how the behavior of things affects our search for happiness. As he once said, all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering. The suffering is essentially an issue of the mind’s searching for happiness in the wrong places, in the wrong way. We look for a constant happiness in things that are inconstant. We look for happiness in things that are stressful and we look for “our” happiness in things that are not-self, that lie beyond our control. The three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self are focused on our psychology, on how we can recognize when we’re

looking for happiness in the wrong way so that we can learn to look for happiness in the right places, in the right ways. The contemplation of these three themes, the use of these three perceptions, is aimed at finding happiness of a true and lasting sort.

So it's good to keep reminding ourselves of this point, because our prime focus in the meditation should always be on the mind. We're not trying to analyze things outside in and of themselves. We're trying to see how the mind's quest for happiness relates to the way things behave. You always want to keep your focus here, on the mind's quest, even when you focus on the breath. When the breath gets more and more refined, with a sense of ease filling the body, you reach a stage where the mind and the breath seem to become unified and one. The mind and its functions become more and more prominent in the meditation, and the breath—as it grows more and more subtle—fades into the background. This is just as it should be, because the mind is the culprit; the breath isn't the culprit. Things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self: They're not to blame. The problem is the way the mind looks to these things for happiness. Even when it looks for happiness in a relatively wise way, these issues are relevant.

As the Buddha said, the beginning of wisdom is when you go to people who've found true happiness and you ask them: "What should I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" Notice that: My. Long-term. Welfare and happiness. Those three categories are directly related to the three perceptions. The "my" is related to not-self; "long-term" is related to inconstancy; "welfare-and-happiness" is related to stress. The three perceptions act as ways of testing any happiness you find, to see if it measures up to the standards you've set. But they follow on the "what-should-I-do." That has to come first.

In other words, as we look for happiness, we focus first on actions that don't constitute ultimate happiness but can be used as the path: things like mindfulness, persistence, and concentration. At that stage, the Buddha doesn't have us focus too much on these three characteristics. He has us focus primarily on the doing. As part of the doing, we hold on to other perceptions: the perception of breath, say, or the perception of whatever our meditation object is. We make that prominent. And we try to push that perception into a state of solid concentration—which means that we're pushing it in the direction of making it constant and easeful, and getting it under our control.

In this way, we're actually fighting the three characteristics as we try to bring the mind into concentration. We push to see how far we can find a happiness based on conditioned things. One reason for this is that if you don't push at a truth until it pushes back, you won't know how strong it is. Another reason is that we're going to need that conditioned happiness, that sense of relatively solid

wellbeing, to put ourselves in a position where we can look at things very carefully as they come to be. That phrase, “as they come to be,” comes into play when we’re no longer pushing. But we’ve got to push first.

So you keep working on your concentration in all your activities, trying to keep the mind as constantly still as possible no matter what the outside conditions may be. You create the conditions for stillness inside, a sense of ease inside, and try to maintain that stillness and ease in the face of all sorts of conditions around you. You learn to gain more skill, more control.

At this stage in the game, the issues of inconstancy, stress, and not-self apply primarily to the things that would distract you from your concentration. You try to see that no matter how attractive or alluring or interesting other topics might be, they don’t measure up to concentration as a source for happiness. They’re less constant, more stressful, less under your control. So you drop them in favor of the bliss of concentration. You keep this up, gaining these insights, until you’ve fully mastered concentration—which, as the Buddha once said, happens well after your first taste of the deathless.

This means that there’s going to be a long period in which you’re essentially working against the three characteristics, at least as far as your concentration is concerned. You’ll use these three perceptions to analyze, say, any object of lust, anger, jealousy, or fear that would pull you out of concentration. These perceptions are relevant because they’re ways of reminding yourself that you can’t find true happiness in those objects. For the meantime, that’s how you use the contemplation of these themes.

And again the focus is not so much on trying to get to the ultimate nature of these outside objects as it is on using the perception as an antidote for a tendency of the mind. After all, these perceptions are not intended to be a statement of the ultimate nature of things out there—for, when you think about it, the ultimate nature of things out there is really not all that relevant an issue. We don’t hang on to things because we think that they have an inherent nature, that they inherently exist or don’t exist. We hang on to them because we think they’re going to provide happiness that’s worth whatever effort they involve. What the Buddha is pointing out is that they really don’t provide that happiness. The happiness they do provide doesn’t really measure up. It’s not worth the cost.

So you apply these three contemplations to things outside of your concentration, and then watch to see where the mind resists. In other words, what does it refuse to see as inconstant, stressful, and not-self? When you can catch the mind resisting in this way, you’ve gained an insight into its attachments. You’ve found a spot where you need to dig down and question its resistance. What deluded fantasy is the mind trying to protect here? What attitude is it trying to hide from your scrutiny? In this way, the three

contemplations keep coming back to the mind, as they highlight your attachments and tell you where you still have work to do.

You can also apply these three contemplations to the first stages of concentration when you want to go to deeper stages. When the mind is settled and quiet on a beginning level, is it as quiet as it could be? Or is there still some inconstancy there? If you see that any of the factors of your concentration are stressful or inconstant, you drop them, and that will take you to deeper stages of concentration.

Ultimately, as your attachments to things outside of the concentration drop away, you turn your attention more to applying these three perceptions to contemplating the concentration itself. As this contemplation gets more refined, you see that even the most stable level of concentration you can attain—the one that has formed your highest experience of pleasure and ease—is composed of five aggregates on a very subtle level, and even on this subtle level their behavior displays these three features all the time. You apply the three perceptions to them to pry away even your attachment to concentration. That's when you incline the mind to the deathless—and, as the texts say, that inclination can take you in either of two directions. One is to non-returning, where you delight in your taste of nibbana as a dhamma, as an object of the mind. The other is full arahantship, when you go beyond even that kind of delight.

It's precisely at this fork in the road where the analysis of *sabbe dhamma anatta*—all dhammas are not-self—applies: where you might see nibbana as a dhamma, as an object of the mind. As long as you perceive it in that way, there's going to be attachment, there's going to be a dhamma to hold on to. So you have to learn how to overcome that attachment by applying the perception of not-self to the dhamma of the deathless. Then, the texts say, you let go of all dhammas, which allows you to see nibbana in another way—not as a dhamma, but as the abandoning of all dhammas. That's the ultimate. And at that point, these three perceptions lose their function. They've done their work, so you can put them aside. After all, they're conditioned phenomena. When you've put all dhammas aside, you put them aside, too. Arahants can continue using these perceptions as a pleasant abiding for the mind, to remind them of why they've got the ultimate happiness, but these perceptions are no longer needed in the task of bringing about release.

So remember: We're not here to arrive at the true nature of things in and of themselves, aside from seeing how their *behavior* makes them inadequate as sources for true happiness. The emphasis always points back to using the perceptions to counteract unskillful tendencies in the mind, because the issues of the mind are paramount.

Ajaan Fuang once had a student in Singapore who wrote him a letter describing how his meditation had reached the point where it was concerned solely with seeing the three characteristics in everything he encountered. Ajaan Fuang had me write in reply: "Don't focus on things outside. Keep looking back at the mind, to see what it is that keeps complaining that they're stressful, inconstant, and not self—because the fault lies not with the things: The fault lies with the mind that's looking for happiness in the wrong place."

So that's where your attention should always be focused: on the machinations of the mind. Use whatever perceptions and means of contemplation that can cut through the mind's unskillful habits, and apply them in a way that leads to the goal of the teachings: an unconditioned happiness where you can put all perceptions, skillful and unskillful, aside.