

Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta #8 - Impermanence

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 03/30/2014.

There's a story in the *Anguttara Nikāya*, the Numerical Discourses of the Buddha. It records a discussion, as many suttas do, between the Buddha and the merchant who was one of his chief lay supporters, Anāthapiṇḍika. The Buddha is telling Anāthapiṇḍika:

"In the past, householder, there was a brahmin named Velāma. He gave such a great alms offering as this: (1) eighty-four thousand golden bowls filled with silver; (2) eighty-four thousand silver bowls filled with gold; (3) eighty-four thousand bronze bowls filled with bullion; (4) eighty-four thousand elephants with golden ornaments, golden banners, covered with nets of gold thread; (5) eighty-four thousand chariots with upholstery of lion skins, tiger skins, leopard skins, and saffron-dyed blankets, with golden ornaments, golden banners, covered with nets of gold thread;..." [and the Buddha goes on and on listing the fine things that Velāma gave as a gift].

At the end of this section of the story, the Buddha tells Anāthapiṇḍika that all of this was given as a gift to someone who wasn't at all spiritually developed.

Then the Buddha recites a list of activities or recipients that would have been more meritorious, more worthy, including, in ascending order of fruitfulness: feeding the Buddha and all of the sangha; or going for refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha; or even undertaking for oneself the training in the five precepts of ethical living. And then the sutta concludes

"Even more fruitful, householder, than the great alms offering that the brahmin Velāma gave ... [would be] for one to develop a mind of *mettā* (goodwill) even for the time it takes to pull a cow's udder, would it be to develop the perception of impermanence just for the time of a finger snap."¹

So today's topic from the refrain of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the Buddha's teaching on the ways of establishing mindfulness, has to do with mindfulness of impermanence. In the refrain to the instructions on mindfulness of breathing, the Buddha is recorded as saying:

"... one dwells contemplating in the body its nature of arising, or one dwells contemplating in the body its nature of vanishing, or one dwells contemplating in the body its nature of both arising and vanishing."²

The Pāli word for this phenomenon of arising and vanishing, coming and going, is *anicca*. It is sometimes translated as "inconstancy," "transiency," or simply as "change," but the most common translation is "impermanence."

There's a number of different levels at which we can contemplate impermanence. We can explore it conceptually by looking at the erosion in mountains or deep canyons; or by looking at the fossils of dinosaurs and other creatures, or by reading, as was recently in the news, about the Big Bang and the development of the universe over trillions of years.

We can explore impermanence experientially by noticing the changing seasons, the changes in the phases of the moon, or in the changes in sunlight and weather through a cycle of a day. We can also explore it by observing the changing appearance of our bodies as we grow and age, and by observing the aging and death of loved ones, whether human or otherwise. We can open to the reality of impermanence by maintaining mindfulness of the inevitability and uncertainty of the time of our own death; reflecting that whatever is born must die.

But most crucially, through meditation we can see, or directly know in our own experience, the arising and vanishing of a sensation, a feeling-tone, an emotion or mind-state, or a thought impulse, all in this very moment. Developing the skill and capacity to do this is one of the fruits of retreat practice, because that is typically where we strengthen mindfulness and concentration to the point where we can actually see arising and passing occurring in the silent but vibrant field of awareness from moment to moment.

In the Saṃyutta Nikāya (the Connected Discourses)³, we find the Buddha saying that ignorance (or at least one form of ignorance) is not understanding "as it really is" that all conditioned phenomena -- almost everything we encounter, including physical experiences feeling-tones, perceptions, mind-states and moment to moment consciousness -- is subject to arising and vanishing. And that "true knowledge," or knowing things as they really are, is understanding or directly knowing in one's own experience that all conditioned phenomena are subject to arising and vanishing.

When we directly know impermanence in this way, it leads to an understanding that the object of our attention in that moment is not a satisfactory refuge, that it won't lead to happiness and inner peace. In other words we become disenchanted with it. Disenchantment leads to dispassion towards it. Another way of saying that is when we directly see the arising and passing of a thought, or feeling, or sensation or any other kind of object, then we no longer take delight in it. When we no longer take delight in it, that leads to not clinging or letting go. And when we no longer cling to the object, we become free from the *dukkha*, the unsatisfactoriness of it.⁴

Because of this Anālayo Bhikkhu tells us that our practice is to "keep calmly knowing change."⁵

The Buddha puts it all in perspective and gives us further encouragement in these passages from the Dhammapada⁶:

Better than one hundred years lived
 Without seeing the arising and passing of things
 Is one day lived
 Seeing their arising and passing.

Notes

1. Adapted from Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., AN 9.22, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2012, pp. 1274-1277. (Note: substituted "mettā (goodwill) for BB's "lovingkindness" and added text in [brackets] for easier reading.)
2. Adapted from Bhikkhu Bodhi, MN 10, "The Four Establishments of Mindfulness," *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, p. 282. (Used gender neutral "one" in place of "he.")
3. SN III.22.126 {III.171, PTS} Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, pp. 972-73.
4. SN III.22.50, Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans, p. 889 { III.51, PTS}, MN 74.12 {I 500 - PTS} Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995; & AN 7.61 {IV 88, PTS}, Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. pp. 1061-1062.
5. Anālayo Bhikkhu, *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna*, Cambridge, UK: Windhorse Publications, 2013, p. 20.
6. Dhṛ 113, Gil Fronsdal, trans., *The Dhammapada: A New Translation of the Buddhist Classic with Annotations*, Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2005, p. 29.