

The Monkey Mind

(S 22:61)

The uninformed person might become disenchanted with, disengage from, and become free of this body, made of the four great elements. Why is that? Because the piling up and wearing down, the taking up and laying aside of this material body is evident.

Yet that which is called mind, or thought or consciousness—that he would not become disenchanted with, would not disengage from, would not become free of. Why is that? Because for a very long time he has been attached to, identified with, and grasping onto that, [thinking:] ‘This is mine, this is who I am, this is my self.’

It would be better for the uninformed person to approach this material body as self rather than the mind. Why is that? Because the material body endures for a year, two years...even up to a hundred years or more. While that which is called mind, or thought or consciousness arises in one way and ceases in another—day and night!

Just as a monkey, making its way through the forest or the jungle, grasps a branch; and releasing it, he grasps another: So also that which is called mind, or thought or consciousness arises in one way and ceases in another—day and night!

Upon the Tip of a Needle

(Mahā Niddeśa 1.42)

Life, personhood, pleasure and pain:
This is all that’s bound together
In a single mental event
—A moment that quickly takes place.

Even the spirits who endure
For eighty-four thousand eons
—Even these do not live the same
For any two moments of mind.

What ceases for one who is dead,
Or for one who’s still standing here,
Are all just the same aggregates
—Gone, never to connect again.

The states which are vanishing now,
And those which will vanish some day,
Have characteristics no different
Than those which have vanished before.

1. According to the Buddhist teachings, to see things as they really are means to see them consistently in the light of the three characteristics. Not to see them in this way is the defining mark of ignorance. During the next few weeks, we can turn our attention to the first of these—the characteristic of *anicca*, impermanence. The Buddha placed great emphasis on insight into *anicca*—stating that it is more important than refuge in the Triple Gem, undertaking to observe the five precepts, and maintaining loving-kindness.

“Fruitful as the act of giving is... yet it is still more fruitful to go with confident heart for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha and undertake the five precepts of virtue... Fruitful as that is... yet it is still more fruitful to maintain loving-kindness in being for only as long as the milking of a cow... Fruitful as that is... yet it is still more fruitful to maintain perception of impermanence in being for only as long as the snapping of a finger.” (A 9.20)

In the Dhammapada 113 we read: “Better a single day of life perceiving how things rise and fall than to live out a century yet not perceiving their rise and fall.”

During the next few weeks, reflect upon and write about your experience and understanding of impermanence so that your insights can be made more conscious and accessible to you. Study and reflect. Why do you think the Buddha placed such emphasis on insight into *anicca*?

2. In his teaching, the Buddha could have simply **stated** that all things are impermanent . . . and left it at that. Instead, throughout the suttas we find that he repeatedly (and effectively!) made use of similes and metaphors. It is interesting to reflect upon this as a teaching tool. He said over and over again that insight is not an intellectual realization but rather a profoundly experiential one. Through the use of simile and metaphor, he seems to guide the student to this more experiential understanding of what he was teaching. It’s as if he wants us to do more than “think” about these things, but rather wants us to “feel” them, to have direct intuitive knowledge.

Essay -- Making the Best of It

Sensory information hurtles upon our eyeballs at the speed of light, crashes into our eardrums at the speed of sound, and courses through our body and mind as fast as an electro-chemical signal can flash from one neuron to the next. How do we deal with all this data without getting overwhelmed? By blocking out most of it, and stepping down the voltage on what little is left.

The brain freezes the world into discreet mind moments, each capturing a barely adequate morsel of information, then processes these one by one in a linear sequence. The result is a compiled virtual world of experience, more or less patterned on what’s “out there,” but mostly organized around the needs and limitations of the apparatus constructing it. It is like the brain and its senses are hastily taking a series of snapshots, then stringing them together into a movie called the stream of consciousness.

The Buddhists have a pretty good word to describe this system: delusion. It doesn't mean we are stupid, only that the mind and body are designed (so to speak) to distort reality in some very fundamental ways. For starters, each moment of consciousness creates an artificial node of stability out of a background that is thoroughly in flux. As the flip-chart of mind moments rapidly unfolds, we weave all sorts of narratives about the way things are, filling in the blanks with various assumptions, projections and aspirations. Taking these as real, we go on to seek gratification and security to a degree the constructed system cannot support. The ensuing dissatisfaction is organized around the notion of "myself," who is both the one who wishes things were different than they are and the one who suffers when they are not. We are hard wired, in other words, to misconstrue the nature of reality by obscuring the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness of it all.

There is another way the amount of data we need to process at any given moment is even further reduced. Most of what comes in to the system does not even reach the threshold of consciousness but is relegated to the unconscious. The precious resource of conscious awareness is generally apportioned only on a "need to know" basis. When first learning a task, such as playing the piano, we have to "think about it" and "try" consciously to make our fingers go where they are supposed to go. But as the right connections are made in the brain and among the muscles of the fingers and hand, the patterns subside into lower levels of consciousness and after a while it feels as if we are playing "automatically."

Because this process works so efficiently, it is not long before most of what we do in our lives can be accomplished without having to be very conscious of it. You would think this frees up our mental energy for some really creative things, but alas this is too seldom the case. More often than not consciousness is used merely to seek out the things that please us and strategize about how to get more of them, or it is used to disparage the things that displease us and to conspire to avoid, ignore, or destroy them. We wind up using our conscious mind to pursue new ways of desiring things to be different than they are, while the unconscious mind is relegated the task of maintaining whatever habits we happened to have stumbled into in previous endeavors to change what was happening. The Buddhists have a good word for this too: dukkha.

Much of meditation has to do with learning to use consciousness as a tool for transforming our unconscious, where all the underlying dispositions abide. Paradoxically, we can only change what we are not aware of by becoming more aware of something else. That is to say, our unconscious has been conditioned by all sorts of unwholesome patterns of response, and these are used to guide conscious behavior. By definition we are not aware of most of these, but become aware of the suffering they cause in the course of lived experience. By training conscious awareness on an innocuous object such as the breath, we strengthen its ability to open to more and more of the information available to the senses in present time.

As the mind fills with direct sensory experience, which it does when practicing mindfulness of the body, for example, it empties of desire for things to be otherwise than they are. Mindfulness by definition means being present to whatever is happening here and now—when mindfulness is strong, there is no room left in the mind for wanting. With less liking and disliking of what arises, there is less pushing and pulling on the

world, less defining of the threshold between self and other, resulting in a reduced construction of self. As the influence of self diminishes, suffering diminishes in proportion.

It is natural and inevitable that we are always working with an imperfect model of reality. It makes a difference, however, to understand the limitations of our constructed system, to see more clearly the consequences of it being both unskillfully and skillfully employed, and to use this knowledge to maximize the well-being available for ourselves and all those around us. The Buddhist word for this is wisdom.

The essay points to how we process the range of information that bombards our senses at any given moment – process what is “out there” and organizing it according to our needs and limitations. It’s as if “the brain and its senses are hastily taking snapshots, then stringing them together into a movie called the stream of consciousness” In doing so, “the mind creates stability out of a background that is continuously in flux” thus distorting our perception of reality. In the Visuddhimagga it says that we learn that by observing the rise and fall, and this illusion of continuity can be dispelled. “ The characteristic of impermanence does not become apparent because when it is concealed by continuity. The rise and fall are not given attention.” Insight into impermanence does not occur by observing the continuity and connectedness in the dhammas but by noticing their disconnectedness.

Meditations

With Impermanence – as with all teachings – we can take two approaches to practice. With the first approach we hold the perception of impermanence in our minds and endeavor to see experience in terms of impermanence. We are holding the teaching and trying to see impermanence in terms of that. The second approach is the reverse. We attend to the experience in a continuous way. Over time, we see and realize the experience begins and ends. With this approach, it is as if insight into impermanence is a side effect of continuous observation and reflection. We aren’t looking for it (as in the first approach) but we realize it all the same. We study the teachings and we practice, trusting that this particular teaching will reveal itself in time. You may want to spend some time practicing with each approach.

S, 22.45

“Bhikkhus, Form (feeling, perception, volitional formations, consciousness) is impermanent. What is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering is non-self. What is non-self should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: This is not mine, this is not myself. When one sees this thus as it really is with correct wisdom, the mind becomes dispassionate and is liberated by the taints by not clinging. By being liberated it is steady, by being content, he is not agitated.”