

Anapanasati

Stage 13: Contemplating impermanence I breath in / out

Still lightly anchored in awareness of the breath, with a broad awareness of sensations feelings emotions and thoughts, we contemplate their impermanence.

“Contemplate” here does not mean think about or reflect upon. It means rest in a direct awareness of our particular experience

- Awareness reveals particular things to us: ‘thinking about’ deals in abstract general concepts
- The particular things in our experience are characterised by impermanence: abstract general concepts are characterised by the opposite

For example, we might think of a leaf changing from green to red, as though a leaf could hang on a tree without being green, or red, or any other colour. In fact there is no enduring ‘leaf’ with changing characteristics: only a process of changing colour, form, texture ... The concept ‘leaf’ is characterised by permanence, the experience of colour, form, texture by impermanence. We contemplate impermanence by resting in awareness of particular experiences, and letting go of our ideas about our experience.

In meditation the main concepts in play will be ‘Body’ ‘Self’ ‘Room’

Body

Looking at what we label ‘Body’ we find a variety of physical sensations, covering some but not all parts, and varying. Also, each physical sensation has a sort of vibrancy: a texture or scintillation with a quality of momentariness.

- We don’t experience ‘Body’ as a totality: just certain sensations in certain areas: other areas are neutral
- Attending to this we move beyond the concept of ‘Body’ in the abstract to participate more fully and deeply in the sensations that arise: what our experience actually is.
- This leads us directly to the quality of impermanence: we’re with their momentariness and flux

Self

Similarly we assume an ongoing ‘Self’ that has these sensations, feelings, emotions, thoughts: but we do not experience this.

- When we look for the self we always come back to some particular experience
- The self is in a continual process of construction. This process of self-referencing is part of the flow of our impermanent experience, and worth noting and contemplating as such.
- Identification: one aspect of self-referencing is our tendency to identify with some experiences and not others:
 - Does ‘I am feeling X’ or ‘I am aware of a feeling X’ fit better?
 - Note how optional identification is: we can move from identifying to not with no other change in our experience: since our identity is not fixed, we are free to choose what, if anything, to identify with.

- In relation to hindrance, it is useful to shift from eg 'I am anxious' to 'I am aware of anxiety' and identify with the broader awareness
- Implicit self-referencing:
 - Self-referencing is generally implicit in likes/dislikes and in wanting/not wanting
 - It often underlies hindrances: eg we may experience anger on being contradicted because it challenges our self-view as knowledgeable or experienced on which our sense of security rests.
- Self-referencing is happening all the time: we can't just stop it, but we can usefully become aware that it is going on, and of the fluidity and malleability of the process
- Note also how experience leads to self-reference and then to self-view
 - Eg: experiencing sukha -> self-referencing: 'I am experiencing sukha' -> self-view: 'I am the sort of person that experiences sukha in meditation' -> self-view: 'I am a good meditator'
 - Similarly, we get the reverse with hindrances.
 - Developing awareness of this tendency/process leads to a more flexible and equanimous self-view: not taking ourselves too seriously: something characteristic of our most experienced meditation practitioners and teachers.

Room

'Room' is that part of the world we're directly aware of in meditation.

- With scientific materialism being the background world-view, we tend to have a strong view of the objective reality of the world 'out there': but we do not experience this directly: we experience sights, sounds, touch, taste, smell. The rest is a model or concept, just as 'Body' is a concept ('Body' is sort of half-way 'out there')
- Eg, my visual impression of the room is blurred, but I don't assume the room itself is blurred: so I'm identifying with some aspects of my visual experience as 'self' (the blurring) and the rest as 'room'. This is the same process of identification or self-reference which we described with feelings.
- Contemplating impermanence in relation to the 'room' or 'world outside' is not a practice of thinking of ways in which the objective room as we conceive it might be changing (eg candle smoke blackening the paint on the ceiling) which would generally be too slow to perceive.
- Rather it is just the same as with 'Body': noting the momentariness and flux of sense impression: along with the fluidity and malleability of our identification with aspects of sense experience as 'Self' and aspects as 'World'

Meditation

There are 2 ways of contemplating the transitoriness of sensations, feelings, emotions, thoughts:

1. (Unhelpful): Thinking about it: Applying the label 'Impermanent'. Tends to go along with attending to an idea of 'Breath' and an idea of 'I' who is 'breathing' as in 'I am breathing in: now I've stopped: now I'm breathing out – yes that was all impermanent: now I'm breathing in again
2. (Helpful): Following the direct physical experience of the body breathing:
 - This directly informs us of its impermanence without labelling
 - We fully participate in the breath as a breathing being