The Context of Impermanence

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Some of the best dharma talks I have ever heard are the ones given by the Buddha. Fortunately, much of what he said was recorded and transcribed, and though there are numerous historical questions we are unable to fully answer about their transmission, I have found that, by and large, what is published in the Pali Canon is an immeasurably valuable source for trying to understand--in some detail--what the Buddha taught regarding the nature of my own experience.

I like to look very closely at what is recorded in these texts, and use scholarly tools such as linguistic analysis, cross-referencing and comparative translation schemes to clarify, as much as possible, what exactly the Buddha might have been trying to communicate. Also very important to this process is the use of common sense and one's own present experience. So I invite you this week to share in such an exploration of the central Buddhist notion of impermanence, *anicca*.

Let's start by recognizing the roots of this word, *anicca*. Like many other important words in the Buddhist vocabulary, it's constructed as a negative. The prefix "*a*-" reverses its meaning, and what is negated is the term *nitya* in Sanskrit or *nicca* in the Pali spelling (the two languages are very similar). This word *nicca* means everlasting, eternal, unchanging. In what sense was the word "permanent" being used in ancient India? What exactly were the Buddhists negating?

In the intellectual environment in which Buddhism evolved, the concept of something being stable and lasting was very important. Many religious traditions of the world take this view: clearly the world of human experiences is constantly changing, the data of the senses and all they reveal is in constant flux, but underlying all this change surely there must be something stable, something that it all rests upon.

In the pre-Buddhist Indian world, the word *nitya* was often used to designate that foundation, that stability. The view put forward in the Upanishads, for example, suggests that within all the changes of the individual being there is a deep part of one's psyche, called the *àtman* or the self, that in some way either underlies or transcends (these are just different perspectives on the same model) all of the changes that go on moment to moment. If we could only discover this subtle self in our experience and dwell in it moment to moment, we would manage to overcome the transience of the world and become established upon something eternal and everlasting.

This idea works on both the microcosmic and the macrocosmic level. There is a sense that all the way out there, at the very limit of this world or world system, there is something permanent (*nitya*) from which this world emerged—Brahman or God. And all the way in here, deep in the inner-most world, there is also something stable—the soul or Self. In the profound mystical intuition of the Upanishads these two are not separate, but are two manifestations of the same reality.

This is the background against which Buddhism was working. And the Buddha, with his several excursions into the nature of human experience, basically came to the conclusion that this is an entirely constructed concept. The claim of stability articulated in these traditions is really just an idea that we project on to our world; it is not to be found in actual experience. So one of the principle insights of the whole Buddhist tradition is that the entire world of our experience—whether the macrocosmic material world or the microcosmic world of our personal, inner experience—is fundamentally not permanent, not unchanging. Everything is in flux.

So that's a place to start. Let's begin by looking at this issue from its broadest perspective, as an *idea* of change or non-change. Then gradually, as the week goes on, we're going to move away from the level of concept to the level of experience, becoming intimate with the details of looking at change in our experience, moment after moment after moment.

One of the widest views we can begin with is I think fairly well expressed in a series of passages of the *Samyutta Nikàya* called the *Anamatagga Samyutta*. This volume is a collection of discourses organized around certain themes, and one of these themes is the application of this word *anamatagga*.

The construction of this word is again negative: *ana* + *mata* + *agga*, all of which together is taken to be "incalculable" or "unthinkable." The *ana* is a negative prefix; *mata* is from a root (***man***) which means "to think, to conceive;" and *agga* means an end, the tip, or the extreme of something; when applied to time, as it is here, it means the very beginning point. So literally the word means something like "unthinkable beginning point."

These texts represent a whole section of discourses about what is fundamentally inconceivable to human beings, fundamentally unimaginable or inaccessible to the mind. And one of the things inaccessible to us is the immense scope of the drama we find ourselves in. Not only does this vast history go back over our long personal history, beyond this life to innumerable rebirths, but even this entire world system we inhabit can be seen to be just one episode in a much larger cyclic order of the creation and destruction of cosmos after cosmos.

Let's look at the first line of this text:

Incalculable is the beginning, brethren, of this faring on. The earliest point is not revealed of the running-on, the faring-on, of beings cloaked in ignorance, tied to craving. (Samyutta 15.1&2)

It's a small phrase, and yet it includes a lot of important things. First of all, the beginning is what's incalculable. In other contexts we'll also find that the end is incalculable. One of the interesting themes of Buddhist cosmology, which is now drawing the attention of modern cosmologists, is its approach to time in general. It's largely non-historical; everything is cyclic, and, in a way, timeless.

And because these cycles go on and on and on, it really doesn't make any sense, conceptually, to even think about or talk about the beginning or the end of something. In fact, beginnings and endings are entirely constructions of the mind. Yet we seem to have inherited from our Greek philosopher ancestors the notion that there had to be something that started it all--an unmoved mover, perhaps? It is just conceptually necessary.

But the Buddhist critique of this view would be simply to say that "beginning" and "end" are just ideas that have been created by our minds to serve a useful purpose. They are helpful in defining our world: the beginning and end of the planting season; the end of my field and the beginning of yours. There are various ways in which the mind carves reality up into spatial categories that we call things—where this thing ends and that thing begins merely indicates a transition between things.

And we do the same thing with time: where this day ends and the next day begins; this hour ends, the next hour begins. But these are all entirely constructed concepts. The notions of "beginning" and "end" by definition can never be fixed, because they are always defined by, and are placed beyond, any other concept (kind of like the New Hampshire presidential primary). The problem is that when we take a concept derived from a limited context, one that functions to help us keep the days, seasons, objects and fields straight, for example, and then try to project it back into imaginary beginnings and ends, the usefulness and even the meaning of the concept breaks down.

So the Buddhist critique of conventional cosmology is less a metaphysical insight than a psychological one. Absolute beginnings and endings are concepts that by nature express much more about the structure of our minds than they reveal of the world. This is a theme we will find ourselves returning to again and again throughout our experience with meditation practice.

The next phrase to look closely at is the expression: ***faring-on; the running on, the faring on of beings***. There is another foreign concept imbedded in this wording that needs to be carefully looked at. Can anybody guess what Sanskrit or Pali word is being translated by this phrase? It is such a common word, it's almost an official member of the English language now: *samsàra*. We often we hear *samsàra* contrasted with *nirvàna: samsàra* is this fallen, changing world of suffering, while *nirvàna* is a perfect, transcendent world. But that's not really the way the term is used in the Pali texts at all. *Samsàra* is a word based on the verb *sarati*, which means "to flow." It is used of water, as with the flowing of water through streams and rivers. As such what is here translated as "faring on" might more literally be called "flowing on" or "on-flowing."

So the word *samsàra*, though constructed as a noun, is not refering to a thing as much as to a process. As soon as this life is over, the momentum of existence—whether conceived as consciousness or as karmic formations or dispositions—somehow flows into a whole other life. And at the end of that life, if certain important factors are unresolved, the momentum abides and flows on to another life, and another. The texts use the analogy of water over-flowing one pot to fill and eventually overflow another and another.

We are also going to find this to be a very useful concept for describing the nature of conscious experience, flowing on from one moment on to the next. In Buddhist understanding, the dynamic of what happens between lifetimes is not very dissimilar from the explanation of what happens between moments. So when we get more focused in our practice on the microcosm of experience, we're going to see that conditioned experience flows on from one moment to another in the same way it flows on from one lifetime to another. In both senses of the word, then, we are living our whole existence as an on-flowing: *samsàra*.

We should also look at the final part of this first quotation, at the important expression: ***cloaked in ignorance, tied to craving***. Ignorance and craving are the two fundamental factors keeping us in the world of suffering—they are keeping us from seeing things as they are, from accepting the impermanence of our experience. They significantly prevent us from discerning the impermanence of our experience. Each works in a specific way to prevent us from seeing clearly: Ignorance obscures reality, while craving distorts it.

The Pali phrase for *cloaked in ignorance* is *avijjà-nivarana*, the latter being a word having to do with one thing covering, obscuring, or hindering something else. It suggests something hidden underneath a cloth, for example, or, in a popular poetic expression, the moon obscured by dark clouds. You might recognize the word *nivarana*, for it is the technical term for the hindrances. The five hindrances—sense desire, ill will, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt—obscure or prevent access to concentration meditation in much the same way that ignorance in general hinders us from accurately perceiving the changeable nature of our experience.

Ignorance, of course, is used in a very technical sense in Buddhism. It does not mean unintelligent or uneducated. It means not being able to see the truth of change, of unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness (the three characteristics), or the inability to discern the truth of suffering, the causes of its arising, its passing away, and the means used to achieve that passing away (the four noble truths). There seems to be a trust that the mind, being inherently capable of true knowledge, would naturally understand the nature of its situation if it weren't for this covering of ignorance. So sometimes we meet with metaphors of uncovering the mind's ability to understand by removing obstacles (e.g., delusion), and sometimes we find metaphors of bringing a lamp (of wisdom) into the darkness so that one can see more clearly what is present.

Another common symbol of ignorance in Buddhist art is a blind man fumbling around. But this man is not in total blindness, and this is half of the problem. It's not so much that we cannot see at all; it is that we see badly. In this sense ignorance is not only a passive lack of clarity; it also involves actively mis-knowing, misperceiving, and misunderstanding the nature of our situation, which leads us very much astray.

Finally we come to the phrase *tied to craving*, which is a rendering of the Pali expression, *tanhà-samyojana*. Again, you might recognize the word *samyojana*, for this too has an independent life in the technical vocabulary of early Buddhism. Officially there is a list of ten "fetters" or "bonds" or "attachments," but here the word is used more generally to refer to the binding process itself. What is really binding us to *samsàra*, what is fueling this craving, is an underlying tendency in each of us as human beings to pursue pleasure and avoid pain.

A natural feature of all our experience is that it's accompanied by an affect tone or feeling tone. Everything we experience generally feels pleasant or unpleasant. Sometimes we can't tell whether it's one or the other, but that too is a natural part of our sensory apparatus. Unfortunately, because we have this underlying tendency for gratification, we want—we crave—for the pleasurable aspects of our experience to continue. We also have an underlying tendency to avoid pain, and so we yearn for the painful aspects of our experience to stop or to remain unacknowledged. So this force of craving, in both positive (attachment) and negative (aversion) manifestations, arises naturally (though, as we shall see, not necessarily) from the apparatus of our sensory experience.

The problem is that when this craving is present in experience, it prevents us from being authentically in the moment. For one thing, this craving impels us to act, and in acting we fuel the process of flowing on. It also prevents us from seeing our experience "as it is," and inclines us to view it "as we want it to be." This, of course, contributes to a significant distortion of reality. The wanting itself is the fetter, the tie, the attachment. Because of our *wanting* to hold on to the pleasure, and our *wanting* to push away the pain, we are both *tied to craving* and *tied by craving*.

You might think of it as a ball and chain that we're dragging around with us. As long as we're encumbered by this burden, it is going to influence how we confront each moment's experience. The intriguing thing about this ball and chain, however, is that it's not shackled to us—we clutch it voluntarily. We just don't know any better.

It is imortant to recognize the way in which these two factors—*ignorance* and *craving*—support and reinforce one another. If we understood that the objects we cling to or push away are inherently insubstantial, unsatisfying, and unstable, we would know better than to hang on to them. But we cannot get a clear enough view of these three characteristics, because our perception of the objects is distorted by the force of our *wanting* them to be the source of security, satisfaction and substance. If we could let go of wanting experience to be one way or another, we could see its essentially empty nature; but we cannot stop wanting, because we don't understand these things we want so much are ephemeral.

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And so we are *cloaked in ignorance* and *tied to craving;* and we are also incapable of discerning a begining or an end to the flowing-on known as *samsàra*. Taken as a whole, this passage is laying out the nature of the human condition and the limitations of our ability to see the impermanence of our own experience. It shows how, from one moment to the next and from one lifetime to the next, we are compelled to move on and on and on, continuing to construct and inhabit our world. And both the beginning and end of the entire process are entirely beyond the capacity of our minds to conceive.

So this passage sets the stage for us: this is the starting point of our week's investigation. No story is going to help us much in figuring out what we're doing here. All we have is what is right in front of us, and that is obscured by the ignorance and craving we continue to manifest.

But this is by no means an insignificant starting point. The beginning and end of the process might be unknowable, but we *can* know what is present to our immediate experience. Since there is no point in wasting energy on speculation about origins or destinies, our attention is best placed on investigating the present and unpacking the forces that keep it all flowing onward. This is really where Buddhism starts and where it thrives—in the present moment. We have no idea how many moments have gone before or how many will yet unfold—either cosmically or individually—but each moment that lies before our gaze is, potentially, infinitely deep.

The critical factor is the quality of our attention. If a moment goes by un-noticed, then it is so short it might not even have occurred. But if we can attend very carefully to its passage, then we can begin to see its nature. The closer we look, the more we see. The more mindful we can be, the more depth reality holds for us.

The Buddhist tradition points out some of the dynamics of the present moment—its arising and passing away, its interrelatedness to other moments, its constructed qualities, the interdependence of its factors—and then we have to work with it from there. The only place to start is the only place to finish—in this very moment. And that of course is why the experiential dimension to Buddhism—the practice of mindful awareness—is so crucial. You can't think your way out of this. You just have to be with the arising and passing of experience, and gain as much understanding from the unfolding of the moments as you can.

Step by step, investigated moment by investigated moment, the illusions that obscure things and the desires that distort things will receed as they yield to the advance of insight and understanding. In this direction lies greater clarity and freedom.

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