

Meditation on Impermanence

The Buddha said that all produced things are impermanent, that is, they change moment by moment. "Produced things" doesn't refer only to things produced in a factory like cars or shoes, but includes all things that arise from causes and conditions, such as plants, trees, animals and insects, mountains and oceans, as well as our bodies and minds. All these things do not remain the same from one moment to the next, but are constantly changing. This isn't just a philosophical theory, but a fact of life; the actual way things exist. Through not being aware of or accepting this reality of things, we become attached to people and things—wishing them to remain the same and last forever—and then become deeply disappointed when they do not. Making ourselves familiar with their impermanence enables us be more realistic and frees us from a great deal of unnecessary suffering, and this meditation will help us to do that...

Preparation

Sit in a comfortable position, with your back straight, and let your body relax. Spend some time letting your mind settle down in the present moment. Let go of thoughts of the past or the future. Make the decision to keep your mind focused on the meditation-topic for the duration of the meditation session.

Motivation

When your mind is calm and settled in the present, generate a positive motivation for doing the meditation. For example, you can think: "May this meditation help bring about greater peace and happiness for all beings," or: "May this meditation be a cause for me to become enlightened so that I can help all beings become free of suffering and become enlightened as well."

Body of the meditation

Begin the meditation by observing your breathing, and slowly become aware of the impermanence of your breathing. Each breath is different from the one that came before it, and is different from the one that comes after it. You are breathing in different air with each breath, and your body is changing with each breath: there are different sensations around the nose and inside the nostrils; your lungs expand and contract, your abdomen rises and falls. So in each moment, with each breath, there is change, flux and flow.

Then think about other changes that are taking place in your body in each moment. Think of how your body is made of many different parts—arms, legs, head, skin, blood, bones, nerves and muscles—and how these parts themselves are made of yet smaller parts, such as cells. Be aware of the movement that is going on each moment: the beating of your heart, the flow of your blood and the energy of your nerve-impulses. On a more subtle level, cells are being born, moving about, dying and disintegrating.

On an even subtler level, all the parts of your body are made of molecules, atoms and sub-atomic particles, and these are in constant motion. Try to really get a feeling for the change that is taking place each moment in your body....

Then turn your attention to your mind. It too is composed of many parts—thoughts, perceptions, feelings, memories, images— following one after the other, ceaselessly. Spend a few minutes simply observing the ever-changing flow of experiences in your mind, like someone looking out of a window onto a busy street, watching the cars and pedestrians passing by. Don't cling to anything that you see in your mind, don't judge or make comments—just observe, and try to get a sense of the impermanent, ever-changing nature of your mind.

After reflecting on the impermanence of your inner world—your own body and mind— extend your awareness to the outer world. Think about your immediate surroundings: the cushion, mat or bed you are sitting on; the floor, walls, windows and ceiling of the room you are sitting in; the furniture and other objects in the room. Consider that each of these things, although appearing solid and static, is actually a mass of tiny particles whizzing around in space. Stay with that awareness of the impermanent, constantly-changing nature of these things.

Then let your awareness travel further out, beyond the walls of your room. Think of other people: their bodies and minds are also constantly changing, not staying the same for even one moment. The same is true of all living beings, such as animals, birds and insects.

Think of all the inanimate objects in the world and in the universe: houses, buildings, roads, cars, trees, mountains, oceans and rivers, the earth itself, the sun, moon and stars. All of these things, being composed of atoms and other minute particles, are constantly changing, every moment, every millisecond. Nothing stays the same without changing.

While you are meditating, if at any point you experience a clear, strong feeling of the every-changing nature of things, stop the thinking or analyzing process, and hold your attention firmly on this feeling. Concentrate on it for as long as possible, without thinking of anything else or letting your mind be distracted. When the feeling fades or your attention starts to wander, again return to analyzing the impermanent nature of things.

Conclusion

Conclude the meditation with the thought that it is unrealistic and self-defeating to cling to things as though they were permanent. Whatever is beautiful and pleasing will change and eventually disappear, so we can't expect it to give us lasting happiness. Also, whatever is unpleasant or disturbing won't last forever—

it might even change for the better!—so there's no need to be so upset about it or to reject it.

Dedication

Dedicate the positive energy from doing the meditation that all beings will find perfect happiness and freedom from all suffering.