



WISDOM ACADEMY

Introduction to the Manual of Insight

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Lesson 7:
Equanimity

Reading:
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Manual of Insight

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Equanimity

Eventually, your insight meditation will strengthen enough that you will be effortlessly able to be equanimous with respect to conditioned mental and physical phenomena. The noting mind will become so clear and subtle that your awareness will seem to easily flow by itself. A meditator will even

be able to perceive very subtle mental and physical activities without any effort, and will see their impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self natures without reflecting about it.

If a meditator notes touch points at different places on the body, he or she will be aware of just one sensation of touch after another, but not of any physical form or shape, and the sensations of touch will feel very subtle, like the touch of a cotton ball. Sometimes you may feel so many different sensations in the body that your awareness moves very quickly all around the body. Sometimes it will feel as if both the body and the mind are moving upward. At other times, only a few regular objects will be obvious, and you will be able to calmly and steadily note them.

Sometimes the rising, falling, touching, hearing, and so on, together with the whole body, may disappear, and you will only be aware of the mind arising and passing away. You may experience a rapture that feels like being bathed in a cool, soothing shower, a tranquility, or a crystal-clear light like a bright sky. Although a meditator may not take such extreme delight in such pleasant experiences as he or she would have before, he or she may still become attached to them. Note any attachment that arises, in addition to noting the rapture, tranquility, or clear light. If these experiences persist, ignore them and note other objects instead.

At this level of insight meditation, a meditator will clearly comprehend every object and the mind that notes them. You will know: “These phenomena are not me or mine, and they are also not anyone else or anyone else’s. They are only conditioned mental and physical phenomena. Conditioned phenomena are noting conditioned phenomena.” Observing objects becomes very pleasant at this point, like tasting a delicious flavor. No matter how long you practice, you will not be gratified and will not feel any unpleasant sensations, such as stiffness, numbness, pain, or itching. Thus your meditation postures will become very stable. You will be able to easily maintain the positions of your head, body, arms, and legs, and will be able to practice for two or three hours in a single posture, whether sitting or reclining, without getting tired or feeling stiff. Time will pass so quickly that two or three hours of practice will seem like just a few moments.

Sometimes the noting mind will become very swift and your noting will be especially good. If you begin to feel anxious about what is happening, note it as “anxious, anxious.” If you begin to think that your practice is improving, note it as “evaluating, evaluating.” And if you begin to antici-

pate further progress in insight knowledge, note it as “anticipating, anticipating.” Afterward, return to steadily noting the usual objects.

You should neither increase nor decrease your energy at this stage. Because some meditators fail to note mental states such as anxiety, excitement, attachment, or anticipation, their awareness gets dispersed and decreases. Some meditators feel excited and increase their energy. Ironically, this leads to a decline in practice because the wandering minds of anxiety, excitement, attachment, or anticipation take them far away from insight. This is why, when your awareness becomes swift and your noting becomes especially good, you should keep your practice steady, without increasing or decreasing your energy. Using this approach, your practice will lead directly to nibbāna, where all conditioned phenomena cease.

Nonetheless, a meditator may experience many fluctuations in his or her practice at this level of insight meditation. Do not be disappointed; be persistent. Priority should be given to noting any objects that arise at the six sense doors as they present themselves and to widening your awareness to note whatever arises in any part of the body. But it is impossible to note this way once your practice becomes very subtle and continuous. So once your practice gains momentum, before it becomes too subtle, note objects without setting any limits. If a meditator notes objects carefully, whether it is “rising,” “falling,” “sitting,” or other mental and physical activities, his or her practice will gain momentum before long. Then your awareness will flow smoothly, as if by itself, without much effort. A meditator clearly and calmly perceives conditioned phenomena that instantaneously disappear.

At this point your mind will no longer be vulnerable to any kind of temptation or disturbance. However alluring an object might be, it will not be able to captivate your mind. Likewise, however disgusting an object might be, it will not affect your mind either. A meditator simply perceives seeing as seeing, hearing as hearing, smelling as smelling, tasting as tasting, touching as touching, and knowing as knowing. Thus “sixfold equanimity” or equanimity regarding the six senses will appear every time you note. Even thoughts or reflections like, “How long have I been sitting? What time is it?” will no longer arise; these thoughts, let alone the previous kinds of reflections, will have ceased.

However, if your insight knowledge is not yet mature enough to produce noble path knowledge, after one, two, or three hours your concentration will weaken and the mind will begin to wander. Then your noting mind may slacken and have gaps in between. On the other hand, if your noting

becomes swift and especially good, you may become excited and anticipate progress. This, too, can lead to slackening. If you note these mental states of evaluation, anticipation, or excitement without fail, then your practice will regain strength.

But if your insight knowledge is still not mature enough, your practice will eventually decline again. Thus there can be a great deal of fluctuation in practice at this time. Those who know or have heard about the stages of insight knowledge may encounter even more fluctuations. This is why it is better not to learn how the insight knowledges progress in advance. In any event, do not be disappointed. These fluctuations indicate that your insight is coming very close to path knowledge and fruition knowledge. You could realize path, fruition, and nibbāna at any time, once the mental faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom fall in harmony.

INSIGHT KNOWLEDGE OF EQUANIMITY TOWARD PHENOMENA

When one's insight knowledge of reobservation becomes fully mature, one will be able to experience the three universal characteristics of present phenomena as they arise and pass away, without much effort. At that point one's practice gains momentum and proceeds smoothly for long periods,

and it will seem as if phenomena are observing themselves (*saṅkhārāva saṅkhāre vipassanti*).⁶⁰⁵ One will also be able to clearly experience any of the various aspects of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, or not-self. One will no longer be fearful, weary, disillusioned with conditioned phenomena, or preoccupied with desire for deliverance. There will be absolutely no more dissatisfaction or thoughts that one's practice is not going well. One will have no worry or anxiety regarding the destruction or loss of material things. One no longer has the fear one had during insight knowledge of fear. The mind will be extremely clear and one will think that one is having the most peaceful experience one has ever known.

But one will not take extreme delight in one's experience, as was the case during the immature stages of insight knowledge of arising and passing away. Instead one's practice will proceed smoothly and steadily for long periods. Knowledge that is aware of phenomena without exerting much effort and proceeds smoothly and uninterrupted becomes, as if by itself, insight knowledge of equanimity toward phenomena.

Just as [a person who has lost all interest in a former spouse who acted unfaithfully], a meditator wishes to be free from all conditioned phenomena and so observes them again. Because he or she does not take them to be "I" or "mine," he or she abandons fear and delight with respect to these phenomena. The meditator's mind is balanced and he or she feels equanimity toward all conditioned phenomena.

Seeing it in this way, the meditator's mind retreats, departs, withdraws from, and no longer expands into the three existences, four births, five destinations, seven stations of consciousness, and nine spheres. Either equanimity or repulsion (*pāṭikūlyatā*) become well established in the mind. This insight is called knowledge of equanimity toward phenomena.⁶⁰⁶

Note that the expression "no longer expands" means that the process of observing cannot be directed or spread to many objects according to one's will but simply becomes spontaneously aware of objects. At this point one's mind does not delight in any object, however pleasant it may be, even if one deliberately tries to enjoy it. One is uninterested in relishing or enjoying anything. One's mind is unable to wander off for long periods and, when it does wander, it returns to being mindful of its own accord.

For the benefit of your general knowledge, I will explain how phenomena are observed from two aspects (*dvikoṭika*), and so on, in the following sections.

The three stages of equanimity

Initially, there is the desire for deliverance; in the middle, there is renewed observation; finally, there is balanced awareness. How? Initially, there is the desire for deliverance; in the middle, there is renewed observation; finally, there is balanced awareness of arising [. . . of occurrence, . . . of sign, . . . of accumulation, . . . of relinking, . . . of despair.] This is called knowledge of equanimity toward phenomena. Arising is unsatisfactory. Thus it is seen with desire for deliverance, renewed observation, and balanced awareness. This is called knowledge of equanimity toward phenomena. Arising is fearful . . . Arising is worldly . . . Arising is

conditioned . . . This is called knowledge of equanimity toward phenomena.⁶¹⁹

Note that in subsequent repetitions of this verse, initial arising is replaced in turn by occurrence, sign as having a solid form, shape, or substance, accumulation of wholesome actions, relinking, destination, first arising, reappearance, birth, old age, sickness, death, worry, lamentation, and despair. The second paragraph is repeated four times for each of these, replacing unsatisfactory with fearful, worldly, and conditioned.

Desire for deliverance, renewed observation, and a balanced awareness constitute this knowledge. In early stages, when one feels weary of the initial arising and so on [of phenomena] due to the knowledge of disenchantment and is eager to escape from them, it is knowledge that desires deliverance. In the intermediate stages, when one observes phenomena once more with the purpose of getting free from them, it is knowledge of reobservation. In the last stage, after one has been freed [from attachment and concern regarding phenomena], balanced awareness becomes well established.⁶²⁰

Note that here the phrase “after one has been freed” means that one has eliminated any attachment to, or concern about, conditioned phenomena. The statement “balanced awareness becomes well established” means that from the mature stages of insight knowledge of reobservation through peak knowledges that lead to it, the awareness that contemplates conditioned phenomena continues very smoothly, balanced, and steadily for long periods without much effort.

These three insight knowledges are actually the immature, intermediate, and mature phases of the same insight knowledge. They all involve the same understanding that both observed objects and the mind that observes them are constituted of nothing but conditioned phenomena with the same characteristics. Thus the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* says:

The insights called desire for deliverance, reobservation, and equanimity are the same in terms of their characteristics. They are different in expression only.⁶²¹

For this reason, one may experience insight knowledge of equanimity toward phenomena very soon after insight knowledge that desires deliverance and insight knowledge of reobservation.

Peak insight knowledge of equanimity toward phenomena

For some meditators, insight knowledge of adaptation, knowledge of change-of-lineage, and path knowledge and fruition knowledge quickly follow insight knowledge of equanimity toward phenomena. But others at this stage may experience many fluctuations over a long period, moving between an insight of strong and moderate quality. The *Visuddhimagga* describes the dynamic in this way:

[In days of old, sailors at sea would release a land-finding crow to find the nearest land. If it sighted land, the crow would immediately fly to the coast, otherwise it would return to the ship.] In the same way, if a meditator's knowledge of equanimity toward phenomena recognizes the peace of nibbāna as peaceful, it leaves the ongoing process of phenomena behind and rushes to nibbāna. If not, it returns again to take conditioned phenomena as its objects. Like sifted rice or carded cotton that becomes increasingly refined with repeated processing, this insight becomes well established by repeatedly observing conditioned phenomena in a variety of ways, abandoning fear and delight in them, maintaining a balanced contemplation of them [without too much or too little effort] and resting [awareness] on the three universal characteristics.⁶²²

The *Visuddhimagga-mahāṭīkā* says that when knowledge of equanimity toward phenomena is at its peak, objects become apparent without much effort and awareness of them happens by itself. It will seem as if observed objects and the mind that observes them happen by themselves. Therefore, it is said that one is able to observe conditioned phenomena and the three general characteristics without much effort and with a balanced mind, free from fear or delight.

The passage above says that insight knowledge of equanimity toward phenomena sees and rushes to nibbāna. This means that this insight has developed into an insight that leads to emergence, which leads directly to

insight knowledge of adaptation that occurs just prior to the knowledge of change-of-lineage that actually takes nibbāna as its object. In other words, when one repeatedly develops insight knowledge of equanimity toward phenomena, it becomes sharp, clear, and powerful enough to produce insight knowledge of adaptation, which in turn leads to knowledge of change-of-lineage with which one actually sees nibbāna. Thus the mind rushes into nibbāna, taking it as its object. As the *Mahāṭṭikā* describes it:

Being sharp, clear, and powerful, equanimity toward delightful and fearful phenomena is well established. Such equanimity toward phenomena, when repeatedly developed until mature enough to produce knowledge of adaptation, is said to see nibbāna as ultimate peace. Then, abandoning the ongoing process of conditioned phenomena, this knowledge is said to rush straight to nibbāna. Thus it can be said that knowledge of equanimity toward phenomena is one with knowledge of adaptation and knowledge of change-of-lineage.⁶²³

Developing contemplation of impermanence

We begin to develop contemplation of impermanence from the moment that insight becomes clear enough to break up the continuity of phenomena. To explain further, unless one notes the mental and physical phenomena involved in mental and physical movements or actions the moment they occur, it is impossible to see them as they really are, let alone to see them arising and passing away. Because of this one mistakes a series of successive phenomena for a single phenomenon. When one sees something repeatedly or over a prolonged period, for example, one thinks that what one is currently seeing is the same as what one saw before. This kind of delusion also occurs when one hears something and so on. The term “continuity” (*santati*) refers to the continuity of phenomena that causes one to think that the thing one is currently seeing is the same thing one saw before, and so on. Because this continuity obscures it, one is not able to see the impermanence of phenomena and thinks that they exist forever.

Thus continuity can only hide phenomena when one fails to observe their arising and passing away. But if one uninterruptedly observes phenomena, he or she will be able to see them occurring one by one and to distinguish between successive phenomena. One will even be able to distinguish between the initial arising and final disappearance of a single object. As a result of seeing phenomena as separate entities that are not joined to the previous or following one, the continuity of phenomena is destroyed, and the characteristic of impermanence—including appearance, presence, and disappearance, or nonexistence after having arisen—becomes obvious of its own accord. In this way one begins to develop contemplation of impermanence.

When one clearly sees the characteristic of impermanence, one may begin to note phenomena in a different way, as simply “impermanent, impermanent.” Similarly, if one sees phenomena as unsatisfactory or not-self, one may note, “unsatisfactory, unsatisfactory,” or “not-self, not-self,” respectively. However, simply reciting “impermanent,” “unsatisfactory,” or “not-self,” does not accomplish anything at all. What is important is to accurately understand these characteristics. We can develop the contemplations of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self without using this kind of labeling at all, if we understand the true characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self by observing phenomena the moment they occur.

Such labeling may give rise to assumed knowledge, without any actual understanding of impermanence and so on. So (as shown in chapter 5) I advise meditators to observe the actual mental and physical phenomena involved in actions or movements the moment they occur, rather than reciting “impermanence,” “unsatisfactoriness,” and “not-self.” I mention this other way of labeling only for general information.

Impermanence does not appear because continuity hides it, because one has not contemplated arising and passing away. If one sees arising and passing away and continuity is broken, the characteristic of impermanence appears in its true nature.⁷⁴⁶

For one [who does not pay attention] the characteristic of impermanence does not appear because continuity hides it. Continuity is able to hide it because one does not pay attention to arising and passing away. [This means that the characteristic

of impermanence does not appear while continuity is concealing it.] For one who sees arising and passing away, arising does not go into passing away, and passing away does not go into the next arising: the moment of arising is one thing, and the moment of passing away is another thing. Separate moments [of arising and passing away] appear even for a single phenomenon, not to mention for past phenomena. [This means that past and present phenomena, as well as present and future phenomena, are separate things.] This is why the commentary says, “If one sees arising and passing away,” and so on. Here, “continuity is broken,” means that observation that phenomena happen one after the other and in succession reveals that the continuity of mental and physical phenomena is false. Phenomena do not appear to be joined together to one who correctly observes arising and passing away. Actually, they appear to be separate, like iron bars [that are not joined together]. In this way, the characteristic of impermanence is exceedingly obvious.⁷⁴⁷

In accordance with this text, the initial arising and the final passing away of a single phenomenon becomes apparent to a meditator who uninterruptedly observes phenomena at the moment they occur; so it becomes obvious that the previous phenomenon is one thing and the following phenomenon is another. They are seen as separate [things] and not as one thing or two things joined together. This reveals and destroys the previously held concept of continuity. For one who has destroyed the concept of continuity, the characteristic of impermanence arises in its true nature and becomes obvious of its own accord. We can see the characteristic of impermanence in one of these two ways: as arising, presence, and passing away, or as nonexistence after having arisen. When we experience this genuine and real characteristic of impermanence, we call the knowledge that understands phenomena to be impermanent “contemplation of impermanence.” Whenever this genuine knowledge occurs, the perception of permanence (*niccasaññā*) and resulting unsatisfactoriness are abandoned. The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* says:

One who sees impermanence abandons the perception of permanence.⁷⁴⁸

Here “one abandons the perception of permanence” refers explicitly to perversion of perception and implicitly to perversion of consciousness and perversion of view. This method of implying the full meaning [of a statement] is called “figurative usage” (*padhānanaya*). The most important or obvious aspect is mentioned explicitly when using it, and the other aspects are implied. In the statement “The king is coming,” for example, it is implied that not only the king but also his retinue of many attendants is coming. In the same way, this sentence explicitly mentions perversion of perception, which implicitly includes perversion of view and perversion of consciousness, and all of their mental constituents. According to the *Mahāṭikā*:

The perception of permanence believes in permanence and is taken as the leader of [the various kinds of] perception for the purpose of this description. The same is true for the perception of pleasure (*sukhasaññā*) and the perception of self (*attasaññā*).⁷⁴⁹

Abandoning latent defilements

Which perception of permanence must be abandoned—past, present, or future? Past defilements have already disappeared and no longer exist, so one does not need to abandon previous defilements. Future defilements will come into existence at some point, but they have not yet arisen at the moment of observation, so one does not need to abandon future defilements either. Whenever one is observing impermanence in the present moment, only wholesome insight awareness exists and there are no defilements to be abandoned, so one doesn’t need to abandon present defilements, either. When the mental and physical phenomena that arise at the six sense doors are not rightly observed and understood to be impermanent, while these mental and physical phenomena are being perceived to be permanent, conditions are actually right for defilements to be able to arise. So you should understand that defilements that could arise when conditions are right are the defilements that must be abandoned. These defilements, which cannot be described as actually existing in the past, present, or future, are called “latent defilements.”

There are two types of latent defilements: those that dwell in a continuum (*santānānusaya*) and those that dwell in objects (*ārammaṇānusaya*). “Defilements that dwell in a continuum” are defilements that dwell in the

[mental] continuum of ordinary people (*puthujjana*) and trainees, those noble ones who have not yet attained the fourth fruition knowledge, the fruit of arahantship (*arahattaphala*). These may arise any time that conditions become favorable. “Defilements that dwell in objects” are defilements that dwell in objects when they are not observed. Whenever an object is not rightly understood to be impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self, defilements may arise in ordinary people and trainees because they take it to be permanent, satisfactory, and self and in accordance with conditions. This kind of defilement is also called “defilements that arise when sense objects are not observed” (*ārammaṇādhiggaṭuppanna*). It is only this defilement that dwells in the objects that is abandoned by means of insight.

Latent defilements are of seven kinds, namely: desire for sensual objects (*kāmarāgānusaya*), aversion (*paṭighānusaya*), conceit (*mānānusaya*), wrong view (*diṭṭhānusaya*), doubt (*vicikicchānusaya*), desire for existence (*bhavarāgānusaya*), and ignorance (*avijjānusaya*). In this world, attachment to sensual objects and to existence lies dormant in everything that is lovable and pleasant, while aversion lies dormant in everything that is unlovable and unpleasant. Delusion lies dormant in both of these. Also conceit, wrong view, and doubt, which go hand in hand with delusion, should be regarded to exist in that mind.⁷⁵⁰

The “lovable and pleasant” sense objects (*iṭṭhārammaṇa*) mentioned here are of two types: those that are inherently pleasing (*sabbhāva iṭṭhārammaṇa*) and those that deceptively appear to be pleasing (*parikappa iṭṭhārammaṇa*). For example those objects, beings, sounds, and so on that are truly beautiful are regarded as inherently pleasing. While human waste, rotting corpses, and so on may be pleasing to a dog, pig, or vulture, that appearance is deceptive. But both are considered to be pleasing objects (*piyarūpa, sātārūpa*) in which desire for sensual objects and existence lies dormant.

Likewise, there are two types of disagreeable objects: those that are inherently unpleasant (*sabbhāva aniṭṭhārammaṇa*) and those that deceptively appear to be unpleasant (*parikappa aniṭṭhārammaṇa*). Both of these, the inherently unpleasant one and the deceptively unpleasant one, are considered unpleasant objects (*appiyarūpa, asātārūpa*). Aversion lies latent in all of these unpleasant worldly phenomena. Whenever desire or aversion

lies latent in these pleasant-pleasing and unpleasant-displeasing objects, delusion also lies latent in them. And, if delusion lies latent in them, it also means that conceit, wrong view, and doubt, which go hand in hand with delusion, lie latent in that mind. “To lie dormant” does not mean that they exist hiding somewhere but that they provide an opportunity for the mental defilements to arise when conditions are right, because either insight knowledge or path knowledge has yet to abandon the defilements. According to the texts:

Here, “desire lies latent” means that it lies latent in pleasing objects, because it has not yet been abandoned.⁷⁵¹

Of [the two types of] potential defilements, attachment lies latent in pleasant objects by means of the defilements latent in objects.⁷⁵²

Of the two types of potential defilement, desire, having not yet been completely abandoned by the paths, lies latent in one’s mental continuum in such a way that it may arise when conditions are favorable. The same is true when it lies latent in pleasing and agreeable sense objects.⁷⁵³

There exists the possibility that defilements will arise with respect to every object that insight knowledge or path knowledge has not yet rightly understood. This is obvious in the phrase “defilements lie latent in these objects” mentioned above in the commentary and subcommentary. Therefore, the Buddha said:

The underlying tendency to lust should be abandoned in regard to pleasant feeling. The underlying tendency to aversion should be abandoned in regard to painful feeling. The underlying tendency to ignorance should be abandoned in regard to neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling.⁷⁵⁴

Defilements that lie dormant in sense objects

The type of defilement that lies dormant in sense objects is also called “defilements that arise when sense objects are not observed” (*ārammaṇādhigga-hituppanna*). This term is defined by the commentaries as follows:

When with the arising of a visible form [and so on, at the eye door and so on] one apprehends the object first, defilements do not yet arise. Only after the object has been firmly grasped and in accordance with the conditions do they arise. That is why they are called “defilements that lie dormant in sense objects.”⁷⁵⁵

If one clearly experiences a pleasing or displeasing object [such as visible form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or mental object], then defilements [like greed, aversion, and so on] can arise either in that very moment or later. If they arise at that very moment, it is obvious that they are able to recur later on. Due to wise attention and other factors, the defilements may not yet arise at that very moment. However for a person who has a distinct impression and keeps the object firmly in mind, the defilements can certainly arise later when one reflects on the object, when similar or dissimilar objects are encountered, or when somebody else gives a reminder.

The defilements arise because the object has left a lasting impression and is kept firmly in the mind. Thus this kind of defilement that is ready to arise because the object has left a lasting impression and is kept firmly in the mind is called “a defilement that lies dormant in sense objects.” Regarding this matter, one should pay special attention to the passage “Only after the object has been firmly grasped.” It is only because the object has left a lasting impression and is kept firmly in the mind that the defilements connected with that object arise at a later time. One should understand that if this were not the case, the defilements would not be able to arise.

There is no doubt that a noble one is free from this kind of latent defilement, having completely abandoned them by means of path knowledge. How can one abandon it by means of insight? If one observes objects [such as visible form, seeing consciousness, sound, hearing consciousness, and so on] the moment they arise at the six sense doors, and sees them to be impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self, then one does not perceive them as permanent, satisfactory, and self, either in that moment or later when one thinks about those objects. Thus defilements do not arise, are not able to arise, or do not have an opportunity to arise based on an object that one has observed. “Having no opportunity to arise” means that whenever an object is observed, defilements do not lie dormant in it, and that such firmly grasped objects are free from latent defilements. Being free from defilements that lie dormant in objects, one is also free from obsessive and transgressive defilements, as well as from wholesome and

unwholesome kamma and their resultant mental and physical phenomena. Because right understanding emerges from insight, it becomes impossible for defilements, kamma, and its results to arise, since all of these are based on wrong perception. They are abandoned by means of knowledge. The subcommentary says:

First, contemplation of impermanence temporarily abandons the perception of permanence [by means of substitution of opposites]. Without this contemplation, defilements based on the perception of permanence and the volitional deeds resulting from these defilements will give rise to resultant phenomena later on. All of these are abandoned by not giving them an opportunity to arise. They are likewise abandoned by means of contemplation of unsatisfactoriness and so on. This is why the commentary says that insight temporarily abandons defilements together with their resultant phenomena.⁷⁵⁶

If one fails to understand the characteristic of impermanence with respect to an object that occurs at the six sense doors, the defilements associated with the perception of permanence will have the opportunity to arise. These defilements are said to “lie dormant” in objects that are not understood to be impermanent, because due to this lack of understanding one will again think about these objects later when the necessary conditions are present. Such thought is actually an obsessive defilement. And again, after one has thought about this object, when the necessary conditions are present, because one still sees it to be permanent, one may act on it, either to obtain or enjoy it or to destroy it. So these defilements amount to the real volitional actions (*abhisankhārā*). Resultant phenomena arise in a new existence due to these wholesome and unwholesome volitional actions, in accordance with conditions.

In a new existence mental and physical phenomena can only arise when there is kamma. They cannot arise without kamma. Kamma cannot arise without the defilement that perceives things as permanent. Defilement cannot arise without the opportunity to perceive things as permanent. When an object is rightly understood to be impermanent the moment it arises at the six sense doors, there is also no longer any opportunity to perceive it to be permanent. Therefore, when we rightly understand an object that arises at the six sense doors to be impermanent and contempla-

tion of impermanence arises, then the object is completely freed from the latent defilement that perceives it to be permanent. The object will also be completely freed from the obsessive defilement that thinks about it as being permanent, as well as from the transgressive defilement that commits [unwholesome acts] connected with that object.

When there are no volitional actions, a new existence that is the result of kamma can no longer arise; one has been completely freed from it. Because contemplation of impermanence is able to completely free one from even a new existence, it is said that it abandons the defilements, beginning with the latent defilements, kamma, and their resultant phenomena. “Abandon” means to cause to disappear, to not arise, or to give no opportunity to arise. The same is true with respect to contemplations of unsatisfactoriness and not-self: the defilements that will arise when perceiving things to be satisfactory or self are abandoned in the same way. This is why the commentary says that insight temporarily abandons the defilements together with their resultant phenomena.

Defilements latent in the mind-continuum

Some defilements lie dormant in the mind-continuum of ordinary people and noble ones at the three lower stages of enlightenment. Such defilements can arise any time, when conditions are right, because they have not yet been abandoned by means of the four paths. This is similar to the situation of a person with malaria: one is considered sick so long as one has not been completely cured of the disease, even though one may not currently be experiencing any of its symptoms. Likewise, if a person who has not given up eating meat is asked, “Do you eat meat?” then, although this person isn’t eating meat at that very moment, he or she would have to answer, “I eat meat,” because he or she has previously eaten meat and will eat it again in the future.

In the same way, the seven types of potential defilements lie dormant in the continuum of ordinary people. Five of these are also dormant in noble ones at the first and second stages of enlightenment, where wrong view and doubt have been abandoned. Three—desire for existence, conceit, and delusion—are dormant in noble ones at the third stage of enlightenment. Although these defilements may not be arising with the three phases of appearance, presence, and disappearance at this moment, they have arisen in the past and will arise in the future according to conditions. Because the possibility that they will arise has not yet been eliminated, they are ready

to arise or lie dormant in each and every person's continuum. This is why the Abhidhamma says:

The latent defilement of delusion, the latent defilement of conceit, and the latent defilement of desire for existence lie dormant in the continuum of a nonreturner (*anāgāmi*). The latent defilement of delusion, the latent defilement of desire for sensual objects, the latent defilement of aversion, the latent defilement of conceit, and the latent defilement of desire for existence lie dormant in the continuum of noble beings [at the first and second stages of enlightenment (stream enterer and once returner)]. But the latent defilement of wrong view and the latent defilement of doubt do not lie dormant in their continuum. The latent defilement of delusion, the latent defilement of desire for sensual objects, the latent defilement of aversion, the latent defilement of conceit, the latent defilement of wrong view, the latent defilement of doubt, and the latent defilement of desire for existence lie dormant in the continuum of an ordinary person.⁷⁵⁷

However, all seven of these latent defilements cannot occur together at once. For example, desire for sensual objects cannot arise at the same time as desire for existence; desire cannot arise along with aversion and doubt; aversion cannot occur at the same time as conceit, wrong view, doubt, and desire; conceit cannot accompany wrong view, doubt, and aversion; wrong view cannot coexist with doubt, desire for existence, and conceit. However they can all lie dormant together.

We also cannot say that latent defilements arise, exist, and pass away like the obsessive and transgressive defilements. Actually, because path knowledge has not yet abandoned them, they lie dormant in the continuum of beings and have the potential to arise in accordance with their conditions. The following passages from the Abhidhamma show how these latent defilements of desire for sensual objects and aversion lie dormant together, and how they arise.

The latent defilement of desire for sensual objects lies dormant in a person's continuum. Can the latent defilement of aversion lie dormant in that person's continuum as well? Yes.

The latent defilement of desire for sensual objects is arising

in a person's continuum. Can the latent defilement of aversion arise in that person's continuum as well? Yes.⁷⁵⁸

The latent defilements have not yet been abandoned in a person's continuum, nor are they prevented from arising when conditions are favorable. They arose in his or her continuum before and will do so again later, even though they are not arising at the moment. It is with reference to this that it was said, "The latent defilement of desire for sensual objects arises in a person's continuum, and the latent defilement of aversion arises in a person's continuum as well."⁷⁵⁹

Based on the phrase "nor are they prevented from arising," the *Mūlaṭīkā*, a subcommentary on the Abhidhamma, says that only seven types of defilement, and not others, are strong enough to lie dormant in one's continuum. The commentary also explains that these are called "latent defilements" because if conditions are favorable they will arise, not only because the paths have not yet abandoned them, but because tranquility and insight are not preventing them from arising.

According to the Pāli texts and commentaries, seven, five, or three types of latent defilement always lie dormant in the continuum of ordinary people and trainees. These latent defilements also lie dormant when wholesome states, resultant states, relinking consciousness, life-continuum, and death consciousness are occurring. They even lie dormant in nonpercipient beings, not to mention when unwholesome states are occurring. These latent defilements lie dormant in the continuum of ordinary people and trainees because they have yet to be abandoned and can arise when the necessary conditions are present. Only path knowledge can completely abandon these kinds of latent defilements. Insight, however, cannot completely abandon them, but it can only temporarily abandon them by means of suppression. This is in accordance with this passage from the *Visuddhimagga*:

Even when suppressed by serenity or insight, they are still called "arisen through nonabolition."⁷⁶⁰

Thus, as the phrase "contemplation of impermanence abandons the perception of permanence" illustrated before, we should understand that the latent defilements lying dormant in objects and the states that are

connected to them (obsessive and transgressive defilements, kamma, resultant phenomena) are only temporarily abandoned. The *Visuddhimagga* says with this aim: “Contemplation of impermanence abandons the perception of permanence.”

Impermanence reveals unsatisfactoriness and not-self

In this case it is obvious that if one has understood the object to be impermanent the perception of it as permanent can no longer arise. But one may wonder: “Although one has understood objects to be impermanent, can the defilements that perceive them to be satisfactory and self still arise?” We can conclude that they cannot.

If one has clearly experienced the characteristic of impermanence by seeing objects disappearing after they have arisen, then one cannot see these impermanent objects to be satisfactory, to be a self, or to be a being.

In fact, if one reflects on phenomena that disappear as soon as they have arisen [according to one’s empirical knowledge of impermanence], one can determine that because they constantly arise and pass away, these phenomena are unsatisfactory, unpleasant, not to be accepted, and undesirable. And because these phenomena do not obey one’s wishes, they do not belong to anyone but arise and pass away of their own accord. The following text from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* provides an irrefutable example:

The perception of impermanence should be developed to eradicate the conceit “I am.” When one perceives impermanence, the perception of [not-self] is stabilized. One who perceives non-self eradicates the conceit “I am,” [which is] *nibbāna* in this very life.⁷⁶¹

This passage makes the point that perception of impermanence establishes perception of not-self. In other words, perception of not-self develops of its own accord when one sees things to be impermanent. The phrase “the conceit ‘I am’” (*asmimāna*) refers to the type of conceit that believes “I am.” This type of conceit of self-existence arises even in the continuum of life of a noble being of the first three stages. When they do something admirable, for example, they may think, “It is I who has done this thing.” This is also called “pride in what is worthy” (*yāthāvamāna*). Noble ones, of course, know that there is no such thing as what ordinary people identify in a conventional sense as a self, a being, or life. However, when they do

something praiseworthy, they may still act or speak with conceit, thinking, “It is I who thinks, speaks, or acts this way.”

This type of conceit that occurs in noble ones should be called “conceit of view” (*ditṭhimāna*), because it is uprooted in a similar way to the way that the wrong view of personality is uprooted. When we say that right view abandons wrong view in the case of the higher paths, the wrong view being referred to is actually this kind of conceit rather than the wrong view of personality that the first path abandons. Only the fourth and final path knowledge of arahantship can completely abandon this kind of conceit. When one clearly sees impermanence, one can also see not-self. When one clearly sees not-self, one can completely abandon the conceit “I am” by means of the path knowledge of arahantship. Therefore, in order to abandon the conceit “I am” the Buddha said, “The perception of impermanence should be developed.” The commentary gives this explanation:

The line “When one perceives impermanence, the perception of non-self is stabilized” means that if one sees the characteristic of impermanence, one also sees the characteristic of not-self. If one sees one of the three universal characteristics, one also sees the other two. This is why [the Buddha] says, “When one perceives impermanence, bhikkhus, the perception of non-self is stabilized.”⁷⁶²

If one understands one among the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self, then one also understands the remaining two. According to the two texts mentioned above, when one reflects on an object that one has seen to be impermanent, one only sees it as unsatisfactory and not-self by nature all the time; one does not see it as satisfactory and self by nature. So understand that when one understands an object to be impermanent, one eliminates not only the defilements that would arise based on the perception of permanence, but the defilements that would arise based on the perception of satisfaction and self are also eliminated because one can also see that the object is by nature unsatisfactory and not-self.

Conceptual and absolute characteristics

I will now discuss the following passage from a commentary on the Abhidhamma:

People tend to say, “It’s impermanent,” when, for example, a pot or a cup breaks. The characteristic of impermanence appears to them in this way. They tend to say, “It’s suffering,” when they experience [pain, such as from] a boil or a thorn. The characteristic of unsatisfactoriness appears to them in this way. The characteristic of impersonality, however, does not appear; it is like darkness. It is not evident and is difficult to know. It is difficult to talk about and explain. Whether or not a buddha has arisen, the characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness appear. But the characteristic of not-self does not appear when a buddha has not arisen, only when a buddha has arisen.

Even the most powerful masters, the Bodhisatta Sarabhangā and other hermits and ascetics, could only teach the characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness, but not not-self. If they could have taught [about the third characteristic], their disciples might have attained path knowledge and fruition knowledge. However, the characteristic of not-self is the domain of only an omniscient buddha, and no one else. Thus it is said that the Buddha had to teach about the characteristic of not-self from the basis of either the characteristic of impermanence, the characteristic of unsatisfactoriness, or both of them.⁷⁶³

Actually the characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness that non-Buddhist teachers are able to teach are not the real characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness that are objects of insight; they are only conventional ideas connected with the characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness. To elaborate, a pot or a cup is a conventional idea that does not really exist in the ultimate sense. So the breaking of a cup does not reflect the real characteristic of impermanence that one must experience with insight. The understanding of impermanence upon the death of a person is only a fake understanding of the characteristic of impermanence. For ordinary people, the characteristic of unsatisfactoriness that appears as unpleasantness resulting from a boil or a thorn is not the characteristic of unsatisfactoriness in its ultimate sense. This is because they identify it as something that belongs to a person, who doesn’t really exist in the ultimate sense. They think, “I am suffering; I am in pain,” and

so on. Thus it has nothing to do with the ultimate mental and physical phenomena that one must understand with knowledge.

The three characteristics that are referred to in the passage from the commentary on the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* explained above are the real ones that can only be understood by means of knowledge. If one understands one among those three characteristics, then one understands the other two. So, as the commentary to the *Sammohavinodanī* says, in order to cause people to understand the characteristic of not-self, the Buddha taught it on the basis of the characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness.

Having said this, the characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness by means of which one can understand the characteristic of not-self are the real characteristics that one must understand by means of insight. Like the characteristic of not-self, they are also difficult to understand, and persons other than the Buddha cannot teach them. That is why the *Mūlaṭīkā* says:

Teaching the characteristic of not-self is not the domain of any one other than the Buddha. The teaching of the characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness that reveal the characteristic of not-self is not the domain of any one other than the Buddha. [It is difficult to teach these because they are not obvious.]⁷⁶⁴

The commentary states that no one other than the Buddha can teach the characteristic of not-self, and that he had to teach it on the basis of the characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness. In light of this, it is shown that when one has not understood the real characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness, one has not understood the characteristic of not-self. Or in other words, if one understands the real characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness, one also understands the characteristic of not-self. Other than the Buddha, no other person can understand the characteristic of not-self, nor can they understand the characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness. Therefore, other than the Buddha, no other person can teach the characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness that reveal the characteristic of not-self; only the Buddha can do it. This means that it is difficult to teach the real characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self, because they are not obvious.

The characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness that reveal the characteristic of not-self that are mentioned in this subcommentary are the real characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness that one must understand with insight. They are not the fake characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness connected with a broken pot or a piercing thorn. The *Anuṭṭikā*, a subcommentary, distinguishes between these two types of knowledge as follows:

The understanding of the characteristics of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness gained from seeing a broken pot or from feeling a piercing thorn is not a way that can lead beings to a definite understanding of the characteristic of not-self. The characteristic of not-self is only definitely understood when one understands the conditioned and oppressive [nature of phenomena].⁷⁶⁵

To elaborate, one who has developed insight or cultivated insight *pāramī* and observes mental and physical phenomena is able to see: “The mental and physical phenomena that constitute the eye and so on are conditioned by kamma, the primary elements, and so on. Thus they are impermanent, since they arise without having existed before and vanish after they have arisen; they are unsatisfactory, being constantly oppressed by arising and passing away; and they are not-self, occurring of their own accord without obeying anyone’s will.”⁷⁶⁶

Summary

Contemplation of impermanence is to understand impermanence by observing the unique characteristics of mental and physical phenomena that arise at the six sense doors and to see both their arising and passing away or only their disappearance. Knowledge that understands a presently observed object to be impermanent is called “empirical contemplation of impermanence” (*paccakkha aniccānupassanā*).

After thoroughly empirically understanding this, one also understands that the mental and physical phenomena from the past, which one cannot directly know, were likewise impermanent. One also understands that whatever mental and physical phenomena there are in this world are also impermanent in the same way. This understanding that comes by way of reflection is called “inferential contemplation of impermanence” (*anumāna aniccānupassanā*).

The contemplation of impermanence, either empirically or inferentially, begins to arise with insight knowledge of comprehension. It is fully developed with regard to its function of abandoning the defilements beginning with insight knowledge of dissolution. This is why in the *Paṭi-sambhidāmagga* of the Khuddaka Nikāya the Buddha said:

One who sees impermanence abandons the perception of permanence.⁷⁶⁷

I will now briefly explain contemplations of unsatisfactoriness and not-self. One can understand them in detail in the same way that contemplation of impermanence has been explained above.