



Three Stages Of Perceiving Impermanence, by Shinzen Young

Impermanence is just appreciating the normal changing-ness of each experience at deeper levels of poignancy. One way to think about this is in terms of three aspects of impermanence: the trivial, the harsh, and the blissful.

At first, impermanence may present itself in a kind of trivial way. For example, you are meditating, and you start feeling an itch. You get preoccupied with it for a while. Then something distracts you, and when you come back, the itch is gone. You didn't actually feel it go, you are just aware that something previously present is now absent. Your attention was broken, but you still noticed that something changed. This level of understanding impermanence is based on a lack of continuous concentration. A deeper appreciation of impermanence comes about through continuous concentration.Â

As your concentration skills grow, and you are able to focus on things more continuously without being distracted, you begin to appreciate how things continuously change. But continuous change does not necessarily imply smooth change. At this stage, your experience of change may be abrupt, jagged, perhaps even harsh. For example, you are

watching a pain in your leg, and you notice that it is pounding, twisting, stabbing, shooting, crushing, or exploding. Now, these are very abrupt and uncomfortable modes of movement, but they are movement

nonetheless. They are ways in which the pain sensation is changing. It seems like somebody has stuck a knife in your leg and is twisting it to the right, to the left, jabbing it in, pulling it out. It is harsh, it is abrupt, it is jagged, but it represents a continuous contact with changing-ness. Â This doesn't happen only with painful experiences. The same can happen with intense pleasure.Â

Eventually, your concentration and equanimity skills mature to the point where your experience of change is not only continuous, but smooth as well. A softening takes place. The impermanence becomes fluid, soothing, bubbly, more like an effortless breathing in and out. This is because your focus is like a high-resolution monitor or a high-definition TV screen, and you are able to perceive subtler movements with clarity. To make a techie metaphor, it's as if you have increased the sampling rate or bandwidth of your change detector. You can't force this to happen, but as you are paying attention and developing an acceptance of the harsher kinds of impermanence, they break up into gentler kinds of impermanenceâ€”stately undulations, effervescence, effortless spread, and collapse. When this happens, the impermanence starts to comfort you, it becomes like a massage.Â

At this point, we are on the edge of an important transition, because now we can yield to the flow and let it "meditate us." The perception "I am meditating" fades into the background and is replaced by the perception that "impermanence is meditating me."

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