

Why impermanence?

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Each of the 10 suttas of the **Okkanta Saṃyutta**, “the connected teachings on the descent (into the boat up the stream to nirvana)” (S 25.1-10) is about the Buddha’s instructing us to reflect on **impermanence**. The benefit is that we will attain stream-winning in this life itself, if not certainly at the moment of passing away, (SD 16.7)¹.

The question is: How does this happen, especially when we are full of defilements? These defilements, the **7 latent tendencies** — sensual lust, aversion, views, doubt, conceit, lust for existence and ignorance — lurk in our **unconscious**, ever ready to rise into action at the slightest provocation by greed, hate or delusion, which are ever-present in the unawakened mind.

The 3 fetters

The latent tendencies play havoc when we identify ourself – see any kind of permanent or eternal **self** – in our body, feelings, perception, formations (karma) or consciousness. There is no abiding self in any of these or anywhere else – this is the reality of **non-self**. This, however, is not easy to know or see.

The latent tendencies flourish when we fail to rely on our own efforts for good and turn to **rituals and vows**. This is to solve problems that arise within our own mind and heart by relying on something *outside* of us – like magic, superstition, God-idea, etc. We do not really understand the true reality of **suffering**.

The latent tendencies take hold of us when we **doubt** the true teaching of **impermanence** as taught in the suttas and the Buddha’s advice that we should constantly reflect on impermanence. This doubt makes us seek succour and security in teachers, gurus and cults. We are unconsciously drawn to their success, popularity, power, pleasure, wealth and so on.

Overcoming latent tendencies

The (Saḷ-āyatana) Anusaya Sutta 1 (S 35.58), SD 70.17, teaches us how, by reflecting on the **impermanence** of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, we overcome the latent tendencies, thus:

“Bhikshus [Monks], when one knows and sees that the eye is **impermanent**, the latent tendencies are abandoned.

When one knows and sees that forms are *impermanent*, the latent tendencies are abandoned.

When one knows and sees that eye-consciousness is *impermanent*, the latent tendencies are abandoned. ...

¹ <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/16.7-Anicca-Cakkhu-S-s25.1-piya.pdf>

When one knows and sees as *impermanent* whatever has arisen dependent on eye-contact and is felt as pleasant or painful or neutral, the latent tendencies are abandoned.”

The same process applies to the ear, nose, tongue, body and mind.

Dealing with feelings

According to the Sutta passage, the latent tendencies can be destroyed by cultivating **insight** [wisdom] into impermanence. Such insight is the mindful seeing of the changing nature of all that is being experienced.

When we **see** something, for example, this experience includes the sense-faculty, its object, the corresponding type of consciousness and other aspects of that experience, especially its “feeling” tones, that is, as being pleasant, painful or neutral. Such a comprehensive appreciation of impermanence helps to prevent immediate unwholesome **reaction** to the feeling tone of that visual experience or any other sense-experience.

The 3 feelings

Thus, our instinctive mode of reacting to feeling by wanting what is pleasant, pushing away what is unpleasant, and ignoring what is neutral, can be overcome. When feelings are seen as being **impermanent**, they are freed from much of their reactive potential. Given that they will change anyway, we are less prone to be spurred on to unwholesome action.

Such insight negates the impact of the latent tendencies, which otherwise operate beyond the range of our awareness or conscious control. By learning to withstand the instinctive urge to at once react, the latent tendencies are gradually weakened in their power to make us at once react negatively to the 3 types of feelings.

The key strategy here is that of slowing down, even preventing, our negative mental reactivity to pleasure, pain and neutral feeling. Instead of negatively reacting at once to some hedonic stimulus, we have enough time to see or reflect on the situation as it emerges and understand its implication.

No emotional reactivity

Thus, the reflection on impermanence trains and keeps us from emotionally reacting to pleasure, pain and neutral feeling. As our insight into impermanence grows, we begin to see the true nature of **suffering** in all these 3 feelings. And in due course, we fully understand the lack of permanence, attractiveness and self in them. We have realized **non-self**.

In fact, even when we as much as see and know that all things are **impermanent** as true reality, we break through into streamwinning, as explained above. That is to say,

by weakening our latent tendencies and overcoming our emotional reactivity to any kind of experience, whether pleasant, painful or neutral.

Hence, it is vital that we aspire to attain streamwinning in this life itself, so that we attain the path of awakening here and now.

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