

Moment-to-moment Practice



Sayalay Susīlā

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This was taught by the Buddha, and has been
experienced by all the ennobled:

“Whatever is subject to origination due
to cause is all subject to cessation.”

*Yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ
sabbam taṃ nirodhadhamman'ti.*

(SN 56.11)

About the Author



Venerable Sayalay Susīlā is the founder and current Abbess of the Appāmada Vihari Meditation Center (AVMC), in Penang, Malaysia, since 2014.

Sayalay was born in 1963 in Pahang, Malaysia. Sayalay began developing her keen interest in insight meditation while at the University of Science Malaysia, where she obtained a degree in mass communications in 1987. After graduation, Sayalay worked as a high school teacher for a year and a half. Being increasingly disenchanted with worldly matters and desiring to be dedicated to the practice more than ever, she resigned her post to take up meditation full time for three years.

In 1991, Sayalay ordained as a Theravada Buddhist nun in the Burmese tradition at the age of 28, in Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre, Penang, Malaysia. Six months after her ordination in 1991, she went to Panditarama Monastery in Myanmar, where she practiced intensively for nearly three years under the guidance of the famous meditation master Venerable U Pandita Sayadaw.

In 1994, wishing to cultivate concentration meditation, Sayalay moved to Pa Auk Forest Monastery in Myanmar. She placed herself under the guidance of the renowned monk Venerable Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw, and remained in the forest for 14 years. In addition to an assiduous program

of meditation, she also learned the *Abhidhamma*, ancient discourses, and the Pāli language from Pa-Auk Sayadaw. Meanwhile, she became his English-to-Chinese interpreter in Myanmar and abroad.

From 2000, Sayalay started teaching the *Abhidhamma* extensively in various renowned centers internationally, including those in Malaysia, Australia, Singapore, and Taiwan.

In order to deepen her own understanding of the *Dhamma*, Sayalay also practiced different meditation methods during her stay in Myanmar, including those taught by Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, Mogok Sayadaw, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, and Goenka. As a result of both her breadth of exposure and depth of practice of various meditation methods, Sayalay has become an unusually accomplished teacher—one who is able to present the subtleties of the Buddha's teachings in a simple and direct way. In particular, she presents the most profound division of the teaching, the *Abhidhamma*, in a lucid manner grounded not in pedantic philosophy, but in actual meditation experience.

After leaving Myanmar, Sayalay studied and practiced according to the suttas, putting an

emphasis on teaching and practicing the *Satipatthāna*, the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

Sayalay has traveled extensively as a meditation and *Abhidhamma* teacher, presenting the *Abhidhamma* and sutta expositions in formal lectures and talks, and has conducted meditation retreats throughout the United States, Canada, Eastern Europe, Russia, Australia, India, China, Indonesia, Singapore, and in her home country of Malaysia. In 2015, Sayalay led the first International Novitiate Program with Venerable Sanghasena held in Ladakh, the region of the Himalayas of northern India.

Sayalay Susīlā has a unique gift to teach and present the Buddha's teachings with profound depth, vividness, directness, precision, and clarity. Her teaching is very much appreciated by her students globally. As an effectively bilingual speaker in both English and Chinese, Sayalay is uniquely able to expound the Dhamma and teach to a wide global audience. In addition, Sayalay is also fluent in Burmese, Hokkien, and Malay.

Sayalay is the author of many books published in both English and Chinese. Her most well-known English book is *Unravelling the Mysteries of Mind and Body through Abhidhamma* 《揭开身心之奥秘》 (second edition, both Chinese and English).

Other books she has published in English include:

1. The Path to Happiness
2. Contemplation of Feeling
3. Dhamma Essence Series
4. Inner Exploration
5. The Nine Attributes of the Buddha
6. Mindfulness of Breathing

Her Chinese publications include:

1. *From this Shore to Far Shore* 《从此岸到彼岸》
2. *The Practical Manual of Abhidhamma* 《阿毗达摩实用手册》
3. *Turning the Wheel of the Dhamma* 《正法初现》
4. *The Development of the Faculties* 《面对悲欢离合怎么办 :根修习经》
5. *The Nine Attributes of the Buddha* 《佛陀的九种德行》
6. *Contemplation of the Mind* 《洞见心之真相: 念处经之心念处》
7. *The Path to Happiness* 《朝向快乐之道》

8. *Dhamma Essence Series* 《佛法精粹》
9. *Mettā Bhavana* 《慈爱禅》
10. *Paṭṭhāna* 《二十四缘发趣论》

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Introduction

The Buddha, the Enlightened One, sees the world of the Five Aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness¹—as an illusion.

Conversely, we see it as pleasurable, permanent, and having an entity or essence. This is because the latent defilement of ignorance lies dormant in our

¹ The Five Aggregates consist of form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Form is the material, or the body; while perception, feeling, formations, and consciousness are all constituents of the mind, including emotions, volitions, thoughts, and behaviors.

mind and darkens it, making the true nature of the world invisible to us.

By viewing the world in a distorted way, we develop strong craving and clinging to the Five Aggregates. We desire to indulge in the sensual pleasures brought by the Five Aggregates and desperately grasp them as “I” and “mine.”

Delighting in and craving for the Five Aggregates develops the strong potential for the growth of the future Five Aggregates—rebirth (SN12.1). A new life brings a new body and mind, and in consequence triggers aging, sickness, death, lamentation, sorrow, pain, and despair, thus the whole mass of suffering. Unfortunately, people do not see things this way. With distorted and dimmed views, they see the world as colorful and the life joyful, oblivious of the truth that they are entangled by ignorance and craving, and enslaved in the wheel of rebirth, suffering life after life.

Nonetheless, it is possible to eliminate craving and bring suffering to an end. The Buddha has pointed out a path that leads us to see the true nature of the world of the Five Aggregates of Clinging with the three universal characteristics of existence—

impermanent, unsatisfactory, and devoid of essence. By following this path, insight knowledge is developed and the darkness of ignorance is dispelled, then one can let go of craving and clinging, and eventually reach liberation.

To achieve this goal, the primary task of a practitioner is to comprehend the nature of suffering in the Five Aggregates of Clinging. In the first discourse, known as “The Turning of the Wheel of the Dhamma,” the Buddha taught what had never been taught before:

The Five Aggregates of Clinging are the Noble Truth of Suffering. The Noble Truth of Suffering must be known. (SN 56.11)

Contrary to conventional notions, the Buddha told us, the Five Aggregates of Clinging are the source of pain instead of pleasure, and are the first noble truth that must be known. This was indeed unheard before!

How do we get to know the Noble Truth of Suffering? We must recognize it and contemplate it continuously with mindfulness and wisdom. Therefore, the Five Aggregates of Clinging become

the object of insight meditation. If we repeatedly attend to them wisely, recognize their arising and cessation, contemplate on their impermanence, the unsatisfactory nature inherent in the Five Aggregates will be revealed gradually.

When enough wisdom is accomplished to comprehend the nature of the Five Aggregates to be a heap of suffering, we voluntarily abandon attachment to them. Who would cling to something that causes suffering? From moment to moment, wisdom leads to comprehension of the Five Aggregates as impermanent and suffering; as a result, we let go of craving and clinging to them from moment to moment. Free from craving and clinging, we are liberated from moment to moment.

Nowadays, there are many different approaches to insight meditation. I would like to introduce a simple approach that is applicable in formal meditation as well as daily life. Before reaching the final goal—revealing the true nature of physical and mental phenomena—this method also provides a temporary shelter that protects us from the harassment of unwholesome mental states such

as fear, worry, greed, anger, lamentation, jealousy, and depression.

I call this method “moment-to-moment practice.” It requires two important mental factors: mindfulness and wisdom.



1.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness comes face to face with the object of focus, and reflects the object faithfully according to its true nature without reacting to it.



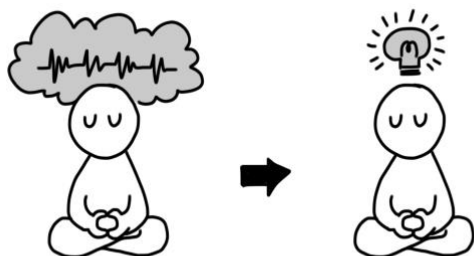
Mindfulness Reflects the Object Truthfully

Mindfulness comes face to face with the object of focus, and reflects the object faithfully according to its true nature without reacting to it. In other words, mindfulness sees the object as it really is, free of prejudice, bias, judgment, and preference, for these are purely personal opinions that distort the truth only to please the beholder, strengthening the view of self (atta).

Mindfulness bears the object in mind truthfully and does not forget the object. It is sustained attention on the object.

Mindfulness Restrains Impulsive Reactions

Mindfulness simply observes, recognizes, allows, and accepts phenomena arising in the present moment for what they are, neither embellishing nor diminishing them.



Mindfulness slows down mental activity

This allows wisdom to see the transient nature of phenomena

For example, when anger—a mental state—is present, a yogi recognizes its presence. This is in accordance with the teaching on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness:

He understands mind affected by hate as mind affected by hate. (MN 10)

“He understands mind affected by hate” means objective observation of the angry mind with mindfulness. Mindfulness keeps one emotionless despite the presence of anger, which is agitating to the mind. Mindfulness restrains the harmful habitual emotional agitations such as resistance and loathing. That is to say, mindfulness keeps compulsive reactions under control. However, mindfulness needs to be cultivated and

strengthened by continuous effort since reacting impulsively is the natural tendency of the human mind.

For example, when a man feels irritated by criticisms he received from another, instead of mindfully observing the arising anger dispassionately, he becomes upset due to his natural tendency. The anger triggers a compulsive reaction and he feels obliged to strike back. If he does strike back, irreparable damage would be done between the two parties involved. However, if he is able to call up mindfulness to observe anger from a third-party perspective, the habitual reaction could be stopped, and he would refrain from striking back. Here we can see, with the protection of mindfulness, he is able to guard his mind, thus guarding himself from taking unskillful kammic actions.

Mindfulness Protects the Mind

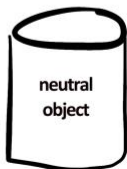
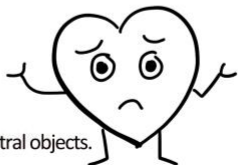
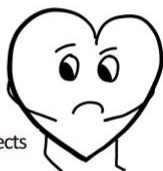
The untrained mind will respond as it always has—



With craving toward pleasant objects



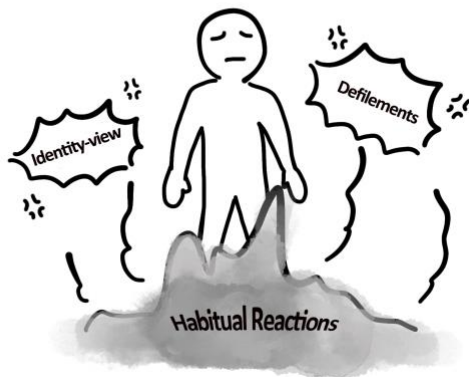
With aversion toward unpleasant objects



With ignorance toward neutral objects.

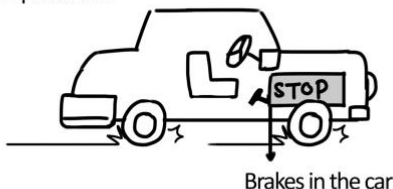
Without mindfulness blocking the impulse to react, the untrained mind will respond as it always has—with craving and attachment toward pleasant objects, with aversion and repulsion toward unpleasant ones, and with ignorance toward neutral ones.

Such habitual reactions agitate the body and mind like burning flames, and strengthen the identity-view and defilements, putting us in a state of restlessness and affliction.



Such habitual reactions, driven by greed, anger, and ignorance, agitate the body and mind like burning flames, and strengthen the identity-view and defilements, putting us in a state of restlessness and affliction. If we further cling to these reactions and grasp them as “I” or “mine,” identity-view would be further strengthened. As a consequence, more unwholesome kammic actions will be done by body, speech, and mind, bringing woe to others and ourselves.

Mindfulness is compared to...



Therefore, mindfulness can be compared to the brakes in a car. Imagine a car without brakes arrives at a crossroad when the traffic light turns red. Driving with no ability to stop, we will certainly meet with an accident.

Therefore, when mental defilements arise, keep alert and maintain mindfulness. Mindfulness observes the defilements keenly and prepares to stop at any time. In this way, mindfulness protects the mind from reacting to the arising of defilements.

Mindfulness Paves the Way for Wisdom

Just as a farmer must plough the ground in order to be able to sow—so, too, mindfulness fulfils an important preparatory role for the arising of wisdom.



As mindfulness comes face to face with the object without reacting to it, mental activity slows down, allowing wisdom to directly see the transient nature of phenomena.

The Buddha said:

Just as a farmer must plough the ground in order to be able to sow—so, too, mindfulness

fulfils an important preparatory role for the arising of wisdom. (AN III)



2.

Wisdom

The Function of Wisdom

Wisdom is a clear state of mind without confusion. It can dispel the darkness of ignorance. Such darkness conceals the three universal marks or characteristics of existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness (suffering), and the impersonal nature of phenomena. Not only does ignorance blind us, it also cheats us to fall into the wrong notion that the body and mind are permanent, joyful, and in our possession. Thus attachment to the body and mind, i.e., the Five Aggregates, is developed.

In insight meditation practice, the Five Aggregates clung to as self are the objects of mindful observation and keen investigation.

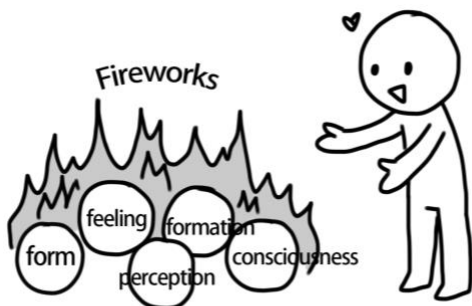


The darkness of ignorance conceals the three universal marks of existence: impermanence, dissatisfaction, and the impersonal nature of phenomena

Ignorance Fosters Attachment to the Five Aggregates

First of all, why do we cling to the Five Aggregates? It is because we do not yet see their faults or the danger inherent in them. An innocent child may be fascinated by the beauty of fireworks and develop an intense craving for them. Then grasping them out of curiosity, the child gets burnt. When this happens, the child may become disillusioned and realize that fireworks are not what they seem. They

are dangerous and not something to hold on to. As a result, the child may turn away from grasping it.



The danger inherent in clinging to the Five Aggregates

Likewise, before the inherent danger of the Five Aggregates is realized, we perceive them in a distorted way and may be fascinated and delighted by them. We may misunderstand and regard them as permanent, able to satisfy or fulfill us, or as under our control. So, we develop craving for them.

Until wisdom arises and penetrates the true nature of the Five Aggregates and their three universal characteristics—being impermanent, unsatisfactory, and impersonal—the danger of them remains concealed. But when wisdom

succeeds, their nature is revealed. We become disillusioned and disenchanted with them. By directly knowing and seeing the danger inherent in the Five Aggregates we have been clinging to for such a long time, we may become willing to abandon the immediate cause of our suffering—craving.

To develop this level of mindfulness and wisdom, I hereby recommend a powerful method of observation and inquiry for the necessary knowledge to arise. This method is called moment-to-moment practice.

Moment-to-Moment Practice

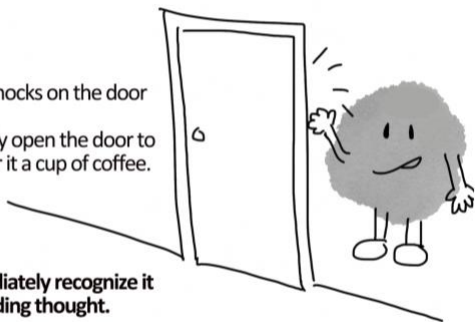
We use the acronym “RADICAL” to easily remember what to do during this moment-to-moment practice.

The first step is to develop mindfulness, which has the two aspects of Recognizing and Accepting:

RECOGNIZE.

When a thought knocks on the door of the mind, do not immediately open the door to entertain it or offer it a cup of coffee.

Instead, immediately recognize it just as an intruding thought.



Recognize the phenomena (whatever phenomenon arises in this moment from or in the body and mind, such as anger, joy, greed, confusion, tension, fear, sleepiness, pain, happiness, depression, stiffness, heat, etc.) as they arise. Let it be what it is, merely an impersonal mental and material event. For example, when a thought knocks on the door of the mind, do not immediately open the door to entertain it or offer it a cup of coffee, otherwise the thought will stay. Instead, immediately recognize it just as an intruding thought. Then, the thought will leave. We just have to train the mindfulness to be alert, not sluggish.

ACCEPT.



Accept what is just as it is, **equanimously**. For example, after sitting for thirty minutes in meditation, unpleasant bodily sensations may arise here and there. Just be mindful of that unpleasant bodily sensation without resisting it. Resisting the unpleasant sensations activates the underlying tendency of aversion and irritates the mind and body—doesn't this simply make the situation worse? Therefore, do not resist. If agitation arises due to pain, shift your attention to be mindful of the agitated mind state, accept and stay with it for a while without reacting further, and see what happens to the agitation.

To refuse to accept what is, just as it is, means creating a conflict between what is real at this moment and what we want things to be or how we would have them turn out. This is just a manipulation of self.

DEPERSONALIZE.

For ordinary people, identity-view (the belief that the experience is mine or the “experiencer” is me) stubbornly remains intact, contaminating our perception of almost everything that arises from body and mind as self. If delusion leads us to spontaneously grasp them as mine or myself, then the remedy is to depersonalize or dis-identify, and see phenomena as they really are—as impersonal. We can mentally label them as “not belonging to me” each time we recognize their presence. This is paying attention to the true nature of phenomena.

For example, say you feel sorrowful over the separation from your beloved one. By identifying the sorrow as “me,” and “belonging to me,” the sorrow will intensify due to clinging to the emotion as self. If you can depersonalize the sorrow and

mentally note “not myself” dispassionately, the sorrow will not take root in the heart and cause you to lose control over your emotions. This process is similar to pulling on the string that connects all the beads in a necklace. Once the string is gone, there is no necklace.



When we regard our emotion as self and as permanent, we “freeze” or “pause” the emotion. Our clinging interferes with the arising and passing nature of the emotion. As a result, the emotion seems lasting and “real,” owing to our holding on to it and false identification with it.

It is not tenable to view sorrow as self, for sorrow soon passes away when conditions change. If

sorrow were self, then it would follow that “I” (myself) would pass away along with sorrow. All emotions are conditionally produced from moment to moment. They undergo birth, aging, and death, and therefore are impermanent and beyond one’s control. To regard them otherwise is a wrong way of perceiving things, giving rise to the defilements of craving and view.

One of my students in the USA shared her experience with me:

During a personal retreat last year, I had an interesting experience regarding feeling. I was sitting in the afternoon and the mind was fairly calm, resting on the breath easily. I started to get some pain in my legs where they touched the cushion. When I could no longer ignore the pain, I decided to investigate it. I tried to separate the unpleasant feeling from the sensation. I wanted to see the unpleasant aspect of the pain only—just the unpleasant nature separate from the actual sensation itself. It was difficult to see at first and also difficult to bear—it seemed to encompass my whole mind and was also wrapped up with a

feeling of resistance, which caused tension in my head and chest. I tried to relax and let go of the resistance and tension, but it was too great.

Suddenly, a thought entered my mind. It was a quote from Sayalay Susilā's articles that I had read recently. It said, "What feels the feeling? Feeling feels the feeling..." As soon as this thought arose, the unpleasant feeling separated completely from my mind and jumped out in front of me. It's hard to explain, but it's as if the unpleasant feeling was sitting in front of me, separate from me. The resistance and tension completely disappeared because "I" no longer identified unpleasant feeling as mine, although it was still there. I was completely amazed and felt very relaxed and free.

Then I turned my attention back to my legs—I wanted to know what was happening there. To my surprise, there was no pain at all. There was only sensation coming and going in different parts of my legs. Once again—amazing.

Through the rest of the day and retreat, I played with separating feelings from “myself”—pleasant feelings while eating, unpleasant feelings while sitting. It was quite entertaining—I had never experienced anything like it, nor thought anything like it was possible.

I realized that trying to let go of craving or resistance is not as effective as seeing feelings as “not mine.” Once I have dis-identified with pleasant or unpleasant feeling, the respective craving or resistance disappears on its own.

To depersonalize or dis-identify is to pay wise attention to or mentally note arising phenomena as “not me,” “not mine,” “not myself,” but “merely conditionally produced phenomena.”

I would like to quote part of a letter from another student from the USA to see the immediate result of de-personalization of whatever phenomena one experiences:

During the last 3-day retreat, at one point, I felt so miserable after realizing everything is impermanent. I could not face the real world

surrounding me. After arriving home, I recalled that you once taught us how to contemplate suffering. You said to see “suffering as suffering,” “suffering is phenomena,” and “suffering is not a self.” The effect was immediate after I contemplated in this way. My suffering went away in no time and I felt the great pleasure of being relieved.

Knowing that nothing really belongs to “me,” look upon whatever states that arise dispassionately. See whatever arises as foreign, as a third party, as empty—which is to say, devoid of self. In this way, we can free ourselves from entanglement. From a psychological point of view, this way of looking at things allows us to step back. We separate emotionally and are thereby relieved of the worry and fear that, in truth, do not belong to us. In reality, mental and physical phenomena momentarily arise, perform a function, and naturally fall away.

One of my students, a clinical psychologist, used my method of practicing mindfulness, wise attention, and investigation of Dependent Origination in her clinical practice to treat patients,

and achieved significant results. She shared the following information with me:

As a clinical practitioner in psychology, I found Sayalay Susīlā's teaching very inspiring, especially the practice of mindfulness and wise attention. I used this method to treat some of my patients in the clinic by asking them to recognize the arising feelings merely as feelings, and to separate "I" from those feelings. I asked them to learn to contemplate: The feeling in presence is simply a feeling, this feeling is not mine, it is not permanent. Some patients would raise doubts: It sounds like some kind of self-hypnosis or self-deceit. I explained to them: This notion is not a fabrication created by our mind, it is indeed the true nature of all natural phenomena. Feeling is only a phenomenon that is subjected to dependent origination. It comes and goes constantly, it is impermanent, and the brain needs to be trained to comprehend. I also shared my own experience with them: On an occasion when I had a quarrel with my mother-in-law, I used this contemplation method to recognize the arising and cessation

of my own feelings. Meanwhile, I also contemplated the feelings from my mother-in-law, and recognized the arising and cessation of her feelings, too. Those feelings simply existed as feelings, they were neither mine nor hers, they were conditioned, impermanent phenomena.

One patient responded very well to this method. She said she was habitually obsessed with the unpleasant feelings as her own feeling, and it was extremely difficult to separate herself out of them. Achieving this knowledge is a significant improvement of the patient. To follow up, I guided her to learn to comprehend that all suffering is conditioned phenomenon. Things happened because of the conditioning events, not because of her, nor to target her.

INVESTIGATE.



"If that phenomenon is neither me nor mine,
what is it and where does it come from?"

At times it is appropriate to investigate both
the proximate and root cause of a phenomenon.

Investigation is the mental factor of wisdom. Although it is one of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, it is largely ignored in the practice of insight meditation. To remedy this, it is sometimes helpful to ask, "If that phenomenon is neither me nor mine, what is it and where does it come from?" At times it is appropriate to investigate both the proximate and root cause of a phenomenon. For example, when abusive words contact the ear, unpleasant feeling arises in our minds. After mindfully recognizing and accepting this unpleasant feeling, avoid the trap of spontaneously identifying with it by depersonalizing it through investigation.



When abusive words contact the ear, unpleasant feeling arises in our minds. After mindfully recognizing and accepting this unpleasant feeling, avoid the trap of spontaneously identifying with it by depersonalizing it through investigation.

Look at what the unpleasant feeling is dependent on. Such unpleasant feeling comes from the ears' contact with abusive words. Ear contact is the proximate cause. Unpleasant feeling is the effect. This is merely conditionally arisen cause and effect. When abusive words stop impinging the ears, contact ceases, then feeling ceases. Of course, most of us remain embroiled in unpleasant feeling that arises from contact with abusive words even after ear contact has ceased.

What then is the root cause of ongoing suffering after the proximate cause (ear contact) has

subsided? It is rooted in the ignorance that identifies the past unpleasant feeling as “mine” and “myself.” Although the abusive words have ceased to impinge the ear, we hold on to the unpleasant feeling that has passed and think — “I am hurt,” “I feel so miserable,” “They abused me.” Here, you can see, all the thoughts are centered on the cherished “self.”

Due to these ill-directed thoughts (*citta-vipallāsa*), memory repeatedly impinges on the mind-base rather than the ear. The memory has a much longer life and causes suffering to arise again and again.

Is it startling to find out why the words of praise are pleasing to the ears and the words of abuse hurt? Though both are merely sounds.

By tracing the causes and conditions of suffering, we tackle them at their root and understand, “This feeling was just a conditionally arisen phenomena governed by causes and conditions.” Neither cause, condition, nor conditionally arisen phenomena is a self, or belong to a self. With the arising of such insight, we transform the suffering into knowledge.

Without discerning cause and effect, one might fall prey to the illusion that there is a static, unchanging self, as happened to Venerable Channa.

Venerable Channa, after listening to a discourse given by a senior monk, connected with the impermanent and not-self nature of the Five Aggregates. He thought, "I understand that the Five Aggregates are impermanent and not-self, but still my mind does not leap up, grow confident, steadfast, released by the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation. Instead, agitation and clinging arise, and my mind turns back, thinking, 'But who, then, is the self?'" (SN 22.90)

Venerable Channa was full of doubt and perplexity. With the help of Venerable Ānanda, who taught him to see things in a cause-and-effect relationship without an abiding and permanent self, he finally made a breakthrough in the Dhamma and attained Arahantship.

Having understood that all phenomena occur in a cause-and-effect relationship without an owner, we can proceed to contemplate impermanence.

CONTEMPLATE.

Contemplate *impermanence*. All conditioned phenomena have the natural life span that includes destruction and decay. Thus, they are called *aniccam*—impermanent, inconstant, arising and passing away. According to the commentary of *Alagaddupama Sutta*: The Simile of the Snake (MN 22), the Five Aggregates are impermanent in nature because of their four intrinsic properties listed below:

- i. their state of rising and falling,
- ii. of change or alteration,
- iii. of temporariness,
- iv. of lack of permanence or lasting quality.

After learning the concept of impermanence, we move on to contemplate the object—all physical and mental phenomena—as impermanent. If your body feels hot, put your mindfulness with the heat. First, recognize it and focus on it, then, divert your attention to notice its change, especially the fading away and the disappearance. There is one common mistake made by most yogis: When observing an object, either a physical sensation (pain, itchiness,

heat, etc.), or a feeling (pleasant or unpleasant), or a mental state (greedy mind, anger, jealousy, fear, etc.), they tend to focus on its most stable aspect—the arising—which manifests more vividly compared with the other aspects. This may lead to the false impression that the object is constant, or permanent. This is a trap one must avoid.

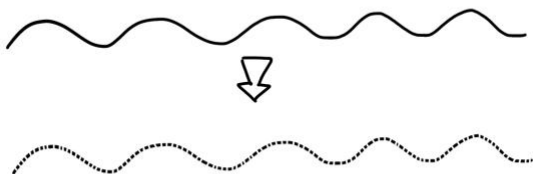


After recognizing the arising of the object of observation, a yogi must pay attention to its cessation. The characteristic of impermanence is concealed when attention is not paid to the ceasing of the object observed. When two different phenomena—one of fading away and another of

arising—are mixed up in a series in rapid succession, the untrained mind perceives them as a compact mass that permanently exists.

In this way, the nature of arising and ceasing is concealed by the compactness of mass rather than as sequential discrete phenomena that arise one after another, just as, when observed from a distance, a line of hundreds of working ants could be falsely perceived as a continuous cotton string.

When two different phenomena—one of fading away and another of arising—are mixed up in a series in rapid succession, the untrained mind perceives them as a compact mass that permanently exists.



When observed from a distance, a line of hundreds of working ants could be falsely perceived as a continuous cotton string.

However, when the compactness of mass and the compactness of continuity is disrupted by attending closely to the vanishing of the object, phenomena become disconnected and the

characteristic of impermanence becomes apparent in its true nature. The phenomenon is seen not only as perpetually renewed (dying and reproduced), but as short-lived, as empty and illusionary as dewdrops at sunrise, as bubbles on the water, as a lightning flash, and as a dream.

It is important to direct our attention to the impermanence of whatever arises from mind and body through contact of the object with our six sense faculties.

This is called wise attention
(*yoniso manasikara*).



Hence, it is important to direct our attention to the impermanence of whatever arises from mind and body through contact of the object with our six sense faculties—the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. This is called wise attention (*yoniso manasikara*)—paying attention to the impermanent nature and the cessation of all conditioned phenomena. Wise attention serves as the proximate cause for the arising of wisdom.

Here, contemplating impermanence means repeatedly paying wise attention to see the vanishing, falling away, change, alteration, or disappearance of phenomena. There are three phases in the life span of an object: arising, abiding, and cessation. With mindfulness, a yogi first recognizes the phases of arising and abiding, and then guides the mind to see the cessation. This is contemplation of impermanence.

To repeat, most yogis fail to see impermanence simply because they put emphasis on arising rather than passing away. Or sometimes, before the object vanishes from observation, another thought has crept in, and one is sidetracked by following the thought and therefore fails to see the cessation of the object previously under observation.

Mindfulness recognizes whatever phenomenon arises at this moment; wisdom sees its ceasing. Arising of phenomena is easy to be aware of, but not the ceasing. We are rarely taught to contemplate the cessation of the object. In fact, we habitually dislike the passing away but prefer perpetual existence, especially of that which brings us pleasure. Now it's time to adopt a brand-new

practice in order to uproot the old habits deeply rooted in our mind, like a caterpillar breaking out of the cocoon in order to become a butterfly. It is by directing the mind to see the passing away of the object that one is able to perceive the discrete moments of arising and ceasing. This must be done with ease without pushing oneself too much. It's totally unnecessary to tense up and strive, since momentary arising and cessation will invariably manifest in any existence.

One of my students who finally awakened to this fact sent the following description to me:

I had heard your teaching on noting impermanence more than once over the years. I always agreed that it seemed like a good thing to do, but every time I tried to do it, it not only felt mechanical, but it was uncomfortable. So I would do it for a little while, then it would taper off.

I started thinking about what I was focusing on whenever an object arose. I realized that I was looking at the stable aspects of objects and noting "impermanent"—but because the stable aspect seemed permanent, my noting

and my experience were not matching. That's what was causing the discomfort.

Although I tried very hard looking for the impermanent aspect of objects, still I couldn't see it. I felt frustrated. I asked myself, "Why can't I see the impermanent aspect of these objects?" I looked more closely at the objects—there were so many—one after another, impinging on my senses. Then I discovered that I was seeing the arising of the objects, and the arising was the stable aspect that gives rise to the perception of permanence.

Then I realized I was too tense. I was spending too much energy directing my attention at the objects—grasping at them, trying to see. So I said to myself, "Don't look at the objects, just look at the moments passing by." My mind relaxed and suddenly it was like a rushing river of countless moments passing by. Like a fire hose—uncontrolled, unrecognizable, a whole torrent of moments passing. Everything is passing!

Since then, in daily life and meditation, I can still see the passing away of moments.

Whenever I can see the passing of things instead of the arising, there is a sense of relief. Particularly with unpleasant sensations—I can see them passing and they are not bothersome. When I note “impermanent, impermanent,” it is comfortable now and matches what I am experiencing.

This sharing is very encouraging indeed, and has proven the efficacy of this method.

In the discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness (MN 10), the Buddha repeatedly urged practitioners to contemplate the nature of arising and vanishing, in the body, feelings, mind, and dhammas:

Or else he abides contemplating in dhammas its arising factors, or he abides contemplating in dhammas its vanishing factors, or he abides contemplating in dhammas both its arising and vanishing factors. (MN 10)

Now you may ask, what are the benefits of contemplating impermanence?

1. To resolve the distorted perception of permanence embedded in the mind, which prevents the mind from seeing phenomena as they actually are. During our day-to-day life drama, we experience constant fluctuation in our feelings, thoughts, bodily sensations, and emotions. However, instead of seeing change, we perceive these fluctuations in a distorted manner due to deeply ingrained habits accumulated life after life. We fail to contemplate or note “impermanence” while experiencing whatever change is occurring at the moment, and always allow the truth to escape the mind. Therefore, the perception of impermanence (*anicca sañña*) does not take hold in our minds.



By repeatedly noting the word “vanishing” at the moment of noticing the disappearance of an arisen phenomenon, we leave a mark for future perceptions of impermanence. Knowledge of impermanence extinguishes our false expectations towards permanence, and frees us from the violent rollercoaster ride of emotions.

2. To harmonize the mind with reality. As the Buddha repeatedly pointed out:

Impermanent are all formations, their nature is rising and ceasing.

When we perceive something impermanent as permanent, we betray the reality. How can the true nature of the object be known? As impermanence is the reality, only by noting the impermanent as impermanent can we harmonize our minds with reality, allowing the truth to manifest clearly.

3. To avoid the arising of grasping and craving that leads to suffering. Craving takes root when we regard whatever we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, feel, perceive, think, and fabricate as pleasurable, delightful, and permanent. Based on the doctrine of Dependent Origination, when

craving arises, it conditions clinging; clinging then forces us to take action in order to obtain the desired objects. Taking action to obtain the desired objects is the performance of kamma.

Such actions performed by body, speech and mind are called kammic becoming. Thus, clinging conditions kammic becoming. Whatever kammic action is performed, whether skillful or unskillful, leaves behind kammic energy in one's life stream for the rebirth of future Five Aggregates in due time. Thus, it is said: becoming conditions birth, and birth conditions aging, sickness, sorrow, lamentation, despair, and the entire mass of suffering, rotating the wheel of Dependent Origination. This is the turning of the cycle of rebirth—saṃsāra—by desire and craving.

How can we break the chains and free ourselves from saṃsāra by abandoning craving? The Buddha taught:

Bhikkhus, whatever ascetics and brahmins in the past, present, or future regard that in the world with a pleasant and agreeable nature as impermanent, as suffering, as non-self, as a disease, as fearful: they abandon craving. In

*abandoning craving they abandon acquisition.
In abandoning acquisition they abandon
suffering. (SN 12.66)*

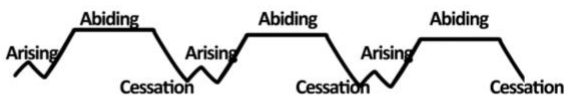
Thus, contemplation of impermanence is a way to abandon craving. Abandoning craving from moment to moment is to abandon suffering gradually.

One day, after the morning sitting, I went out for a walk. I felt my mind full of happiness (mind contact). I was also aware that such a state of happiness came from having a good sitting. It was conditionally produced and soon would disintegrate. As I became aware of the impermanence of this conditionally arisen state of mind, I saw my mind immediately let go of clinging to that happiness, like a drop of dew slipping off from a lotus leaf without any attachment. This is a demonstration of the mind abandoning craving through contemplation of impermanence.

4. To train the mind to let go of clinging to what is passing. As previously mentioned, when abusive words stop impinging the ears, based on the cause-effect principle the unpleasant feeling

(the effect) should cease when sound (the cause) ceases. But why do we remain embroiled in unpleasant feeling even after ear contact has ceased? Because the mind stubbornly grasps what has passed. Contemplation of the past unpleasant feeling as impermanent can train the mind to abandon it. The word “impermanent” teaches the subconscious to let go of the clinging because the mind is not inclined to take hold of things that are arising and disintegrating every moment.

How to Contemplate Impermanence



Hold steadfast to the faith in the doctrine of cessation of all formations, direct your mind toward the fading phase of the object, and stay with it till the moment it disappears.

You must relax your mind.

Relax



Contemplation of impermanence is to note and to label all arisen mental and physical phenomena as

“vanishing, vanishing,” or “impermanent, impermanent,” or “gone, gone.” This technique may initially appear to be just labeling and a mechanical recitation, but in reality, it is wise attention—attending to the phenomena wisely in accordance with the truth that nothing lasts. One tip for you here: Do not put too much effort trying to grasp the object when contemplating impermanence, for this would stabilize the object and make it appear to be permanent. On the contrary, hold steadfast to the faith in the doctrine of cessation of all formations, direct your mind toward the fading phase of the object, and stay with it till the moment it disappears. To do this, you must relax your mind.

During a retreat I conducted in the USA, a student who was a Dhamma teacher relayed an experience to me.

She said that after she initially heard my instruction to pay wise attention or label arisen mental states as “impermanent, impermanent,” she was not convinced. She felt that such recitation was too simplistic to be useful or to actually work.

Then one morning, out of nowhere, she found her mind very disturbed by irritation and anger, and these destructive mental states ruined her peaceful meditation practice. She tried many ways to dispel the anger, but they were all in vain. Finally, she decided she would give my instructions on the contemplation of impermanence a try. Mentally, she noted the angry mind as “impermanent, impermanent.” Immediately, she found that the angry thoughts that had troubled her the whole morning subsided. Her peace of mind was restored.

She was very impressed and rushed to tell me that the contemplation of impermanence was like a “magical mantra,” able to dispel unwholesome thoughts very quickly. Not only had her doubt about the effectiveness of this practice vanished, but she also wanted to put signs up all over her house reminding her to practice this all the time.

Impermanence Implies Suffering

When the mind is accustomed to the contemplation of impermanence, and the insight speeds up, the arising and ceasing of phenomena becomes faster.

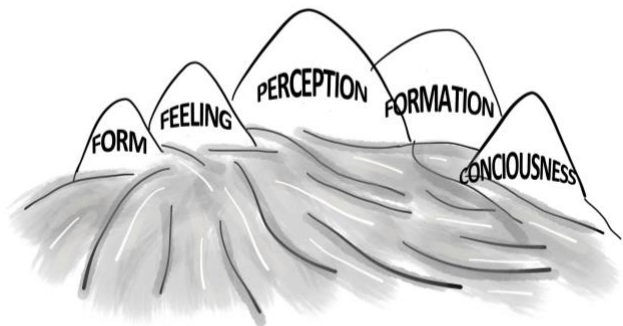


When the mind is accustomed to the contemplation of impermanence, and the insight speeds up, the arising and ceasing of phenomena becomes faster. The object observed is no longer apparent. Instead, what manifests in the mind is the process of arising and ceasing, arising and ceasing, repeatedly occurring in a rapid manner. This state of being continuously oppressed by arising and ceasing—or, in other words, by momentary birth and death—is the characteristic of *dukkha*, or unsatisfactoriness.

Through this direct knowledge, we can infer that all pleasure and joy gained through the Five Aggregates are also in a state of flux and inconstant, but the undeveloped mind may see it differently, as constant.

Because conditioned things are constantly oppressed by their rise and fall, *dukkha* is said to have the nature of danger and dreadfulness (*bhayatthena dukkham*). Seeing this danger inherent in the Five Aggregates, we lose the perception of happiness towards the Five Aggregates, and now see them as a heap of *dukkha*.

Impermanent and Unsatisfactory Phenomena are also Devoid of Self



What is impermanent and suffering cannot be regarded as a permanent self—because there is no way we can exercise power over it.

Having seen phenomena as impermanent and suffering, the practitioner further develops the realization that what is impermanent and suffering cannot be regarded as a permanent self—because there is no way we can exercise power over it. If phenomena were self, they would yield to our wishes. However, we cannot keep the phenomena from ceasing. We cannot keep a pleasant feeling sustained no matter how much pleasure it brings.

In the suttas, the Buddha repeatedly told his disciples to comprehend the nature of non-self:

— *“Bhikkhus, how do you conceive it: is form permanent or impermanent?”*

— *“Impermanent, venerable Sir.”*

— *“Now, is what is impermanent painful or pleasant?”*

— *“Painful, venerable Sir.”*

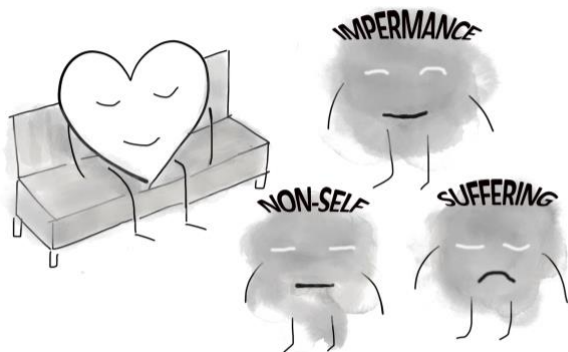
— *“Now, is what is impermanent, painful, subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this is I, this is my self’?”*

— *“No, venerable Sir.”* (SN 22.59)

The Ultimate Goal of Seeing Impermanence

The above discourse by the Buddha tells us to see “impermanence,” followed by clear comprehension of “suffering,” leading to the wisdom to penetrate the nature of “non-self.” Full understanding of the three universal characteristics of existence takes the ardent practitioner to the ultimate goal—Nibbāna, freedom from suffering.

ALLOW.

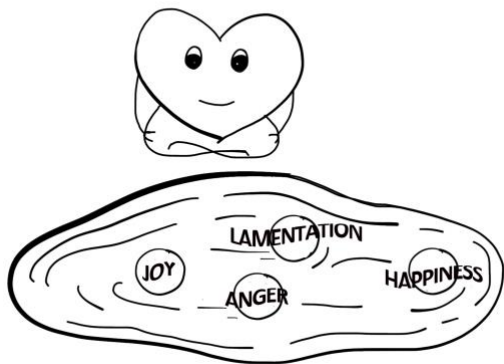


Knowing and seeing with wisdom a phenomenon as it really is, we allow what is just as it is. There is nothing that needs to be fixed except continuous practice for liberation. Now we are ready to let go.

LET IT GO.

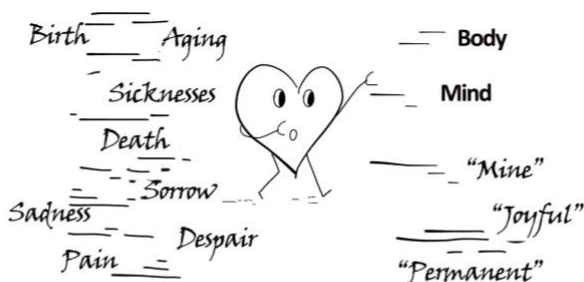
Learn to let go of entanglements in the mind when defilements arise. Try not to cling to anything, whether it is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Train your mind to immediately let go of whatever causes suffering.

Let go of all phenomena as if they were churning waves in a river, observing them with insight, but not clinging to them.



Let go of whatever arises. Let go of whatever changes. Let go of whatever passes. Let go of all phenomena as if they were simply clouds passing in the sky or churning waves in a river, observing them with insight, but not clinging to them. Since

nothing is in our possession and under our control,
why don't you let it go?



Clinging to the Five Aggregates and grasping them as “I,”
as joyful, and as permanent only breeds the formation of
future Five Aggregates and the whole mass of suffering.

Clinging to the Five Aggregates and grasping them
as “I,” as joyful, and as permanent only breeds the
formation of future Five Aggregates and
continuous rebirth, bringing aging, sickness, death,
lamentation, sorrow, pain, and despair—the whole
mass of suffering dreaded by the wise.

Train the mind to make peace with all mental and
physical phenomena. Phenomena are allowed to
come, are accepted with equanimity as they are,

and are allowed to pass away in accordance with their true nature without attachment. Clinging and grasping act like irrigation, consciousness is the seed, and karma is the soil. If the seed is planted in the soil and irrigated with water, it will grow, increase, and expand. Consciousness is grown, increased, and expanded by the nutrient of craving. (SN 22:54)



3.

When Insight Matures

Once we have gained familiarity with this moment-to-moment practice, mindfulness quickly detects the subtle mental hindrances that might block progress if left unnoticed.

Before his awakening, while struggling for arahantship, Venerable Anuruddha failed to detect the subtle hindrances that blocked his progress. He sought help from the Venerable Sāriputta:

Friend Sāriputta, with the divine eye that is purified, transcending human sight, I can see the thousandfold world system. Firm is my energy, unremitting; my mindfulness is alert and unconfused; the body is tranquil and

unperturbed; my mind is concentrated and one-pointed. And yet my mind is not freed from the cankers, not freed from clinging.

Thereupon, Venerable Sāriputta replied:

Friend Anuruddha, that you think thus of your divine eye: this is conceit in you. That you think thus of your firm energy, your alert mindfulness, your unperturbed body, and your concentrated mind: this is restlessness in you. That you think of your mind not being freed from the cankers: this is worrying in you. It would be good, indeed, if you would abandon these three states of mind and, paying no attention to them, direct your mind to the deathless element, Nibbāna.

Having heard Venerable Sāriputta's advice, Venerable Anuruddha again resorted to solitude and earnestly applied himself to the removal of those three obstructions within his mind. (AN 3.128).



Some meditators fail to realize that practicing with strong ego is actually causing subtle agitation in the mind that blocks their progress.

In relating to Venerable Sāriputta the profound event of his cultivation of the divine eye, the relentlessness of his struggle, and his inability to realize Nibbāna, Venerable Anuruddha in fact did not recognize the subtle manifestations of conceit, restlessness, and worry in his effort. Similarly, some meditators fail to realize that practicing with strong ego that is driven toward achieving the desired goal is actually causing subtle agitation in the mind that blocks their progress.

Mindfulness becomes more sustained and alert due to continuous effort to be mindful. Mindfulness sharpens wisdom and wisdom immediately sees the cessation of whatever states have arisen. It is

like how raindrops that fall on a slightly sloping lotus leaf will roll off immediately and will not remain there.

From Impermanence to Revulsion

As phenomena cease and then re-arise incessantly in an unbroken process, the appearance—especially the arising of phenomena—comes to be seen as terrifying, fearful, stressful, and insecure by the yogi. The cessation, on the other hand, comes to be seen as peaceful and secure.

Thus, revulsion towards the Five Aggregates arises and the yogi turns away from grasping. This is the development of the knowledge of disenchantment. The Buddha said:

Whoever dwells contemplating impermanence in the six bases of sensory contact, in him the revulsion towards sensory contact will be firmly established; this is its outcome. (AN 5.30)

Now, the mind inclines and leans towards the state of non-arising and cessation. The non-arising or

cessation is viewed as peace, bliss, relief, security — Nibbāna.

*The formations are indeed impermanent,
their nature is arising and ceasing.
Having arisen, they cease,
their cessation is bliss. (Dhp 277)*

At this time, it is essential, as Venerable Sāriputta instructed Venerable Anuruddha, to “*Direct your mind to the deathless element, Nibbāna.*”

Many discourses taught by the Buddha show that contemplation on impermanence comes first. This is because contemplation on suffering and contemplation on non-self are based on contemplation on impermanence.² As the Buddha stated in the *Meghiya Sutta* (Ud 4.1):

To him, O Meghiya, who comprehends impermanence, the comprehension of no-self manifests itself. And to him who comprehends no-self, the fantasy of an “I” presiding over the Five Aggregates is brought to destruction.

² SN 22.45, SN 22.59, SN 45-46, MN 35, MN 147.

For total detachment, this liberating wisdom must also be noted as impermanent and empty of self. Seeing thus is seeing things rightly. What is the purpose of seeing rightly? The Buddha answered to Bhikkhu Rādhā:

Rādhā, regarding phenomena rightly is for the purpose of revulsion (Nibbidā); the purpose of revulsion is dispassion (virāga); the purpose of dispassion is liberation (vimutti). (SN 23.1)

The Fulfillment of the Noble Eightfold Path

Right view sees the impermanence of the Five Aggregates as impermanent, the suffering as suffering, the conditional as conditional, and the selfless as selfless, which leads to *right thought* on the same common characteristics. *Right effort* is trying to see all phenomena according to their true nature until *right mindfulness* does not forget them. This leads to *right concentration* that fixes well on the impermanent, suffering, conditional, and selfless nature of the Five Aggregates. Along with earlier well-purified *action, speech, and livelihood*, we are developing the Noble Eightfold Path. Seeing rightly, we do not engage with, cling to, or stand upon any of the aggregates as “myself.” (SN 22.85)

Seeing nothing to be taken as I or mine, the mind becomes disenchanted towards all formations. As desire and greed slowly diminish, one lives more happily, with equanimity towards both success and failure.

As we keep on practicing, the five faculties—faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom—

become balanced, and a moment may come when insight knowledge reaches full maturity, we realize Nibbāna, and the mind is liberated from clinging. We then live in bliss with a mind inwardly peaceful.



4.

Conclusion

The RADICAL method can be easily incorporated into our daily life. It is the ups and downs of mundane life that provide an ideal opportunity for us to confront the frequently arising defilements. Make friends with the RADICAL practice and let it help you deal with challenges in life.

Recognize

Accept

Depersonalize

Investigate

Contemplate impermanence

Allow

Let go



Here is a summary of the key implications of RADICAL:

Recognize: to recognize whatever mental and physical phenomena arise with mindfulness;

Accept: to accept whatever arises with equanimity (a dispassionate attitude);

Depersonalize: to dis-identify from all arising phenomena by labeling them as “not mine:”

Investigate: to investigate the causes of arising phenomena, so as not to grasp them as self;

Contemplate impermanence: with a relaxed mind, contemplate the nature of impermanence in all mental and physical phenomena by simply focusing attention on their natural dissolution and noting “cessation, cessation” as they disappear;

Allow: to allow things to exist as they are, without developing aversion or attachment to them;

Let go: to let go of all mental defilements that lead to suffering.

The moment-to-moment practice is a combination of mindfulness, wise attention and insight knowledge. It is a down-to-earth method that can be practiced by anyone who is in pursuit of inner peace and happiness.



Keep your mind alert to strengthen mindfulness.
Contemplate all physical and mental phenomena with wisdom.
You will see more and more vividly the nature of impermanence in them.

Make effort, keep your mind alert to strengthen mindfulness. Contemplate all physical and mental phenomena with wisdom, and you will see more and more vividly the nature of impermanence in them. The more vivid your vision is, the easier you will let go of craving and clinging—the source of suffering. Then life gets happier and happier. Once liberated from the chains of identity-view and truly

realizing non-self, ultimate freedom will be attained.

Just as the great ocean has but one taste, the taste of salt, so this Dharma-and-Discipline has but one taste, the taste of Freedom. (AN 8.19)

Sayalay Susīlā

2021, Malaysia