

AWARENESS OF ANICCA AND THE PRACTICE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Anicca is a Pali word. The Buddha used it in his teaching to refer to one of the fundamental experiences available through vipassana meditation as he practiced and taught it. *Anicca* means the continuous process of transformation that marks existence. Approximate translations would be change, flux, or impermanence.

Vipassana meditation as the Buddha taught it is still being practiced today. An unbroken chain of teachers has transmitted it without addition or deletion. The practice gains textual authority from its correlation with the teaching of the Buddha as preserved in the Pali Cannon, but its essence vibrates in those who live and teach it. Mr. S.N. Goenka, of Igatpuri, India, received vipassana from his teacher, the late Sayagyi U Ba Khin of Burma, and has taught the technique to tens of thousands of students of every age, color, caste, religion, and nationality (Hart, 1987).

I started my practice of vipassana under Mr. Goenka's guidance in India in 1974, and have continued as his student (Fleischman, 1986). Vipassana elicits no conversion, has no reference to rites or rituals, and is practiced by Christians, Hindus, Jews, anyone — without regard for religious preference. The focus of the meditation is to experience reality fully.

The continuous practice of vipassana has heightened my awareness of anicca: the arising and vanishing of apparently solid reality. The specific focus of the meditation is the ephemeral, insubstantial nature of one's own mind and body. Continuous mindfulness of anicca in oneself leads to awareness of *anatta*, the realization that no eternal self, no enduring, personal soul inhabits this ceaselessly transforming flux called mind-and-body. Continuous mindfulness of anatta may lead to awareness of *dukkha*, the knowledge that clinging to what is essentially ephemeral will cause suffering. By anicca, then, I do not mean an idea, a philosophy, or a religious term, but a glimpse into the nature of time, change, and oneself. A vipassana practitioner of any or no religion who has soaked in anicca, anatta, and dukkha may dissolve into *panna*, liberating perspective. This meditation-based perspective on one's own transitory, flickering existence generates wisdom and freedom from attachment to the idea of separate self. In this paper, however, I will limit my discussion to the experience of anicca.

The ideation behind anicca is universal. Everyone has heard it said, for instance, that "All things shall pass." This ideation may be applied as a soothing ointment, for example, by the psychotherapist who reminds his or her patients: "Your depression will pass, just hang in there." Or it may be invoked as a challenge to a fixated state of mind by a therapist who asks: "Where in your body do you experience your anxiety; how long does it last?" in an attempt to break through a false sense of eternal anxiety. Such arguments, based on the logic of impermanence, however, differ from the experience of anicca in that they are circumscribed and discrete, rather than universal.

Anicca cannot be taught by words. The experience of anicca requires a deep and persevering insight, such as derives from a practice of meditation. It is the product of devoted allegiance to a teaching, mode of living, and ascetic discipline. My own effort to maintain continuous awareness of anicca began when

I became a naive practitioner of vipassana meditation. It has since become an ingrained discipline. Many thousands of hours of my life have passed in maintenance of that awareness. After fourteen years of regular morning and evening practice and occasional meditation retreats, the awareness of anicca has become a recurrent accompaniment to my daily life and work.

Does my awareness of anicca have any impact on my work as a psychiatrist? Yes. I see it reflected in both the physical and emotional environment in which I work with patients.

Instead of working in the medical or business environment of an office building, I have spent my professional life on residential streets, in rooms with personal atmosphere and visual reference to the outdoors. Without exception, prospective patients entering this environment notice and comment on it — particularly the view of maple trees, orchards, meadows, and rolling New England hills. The physical surroundings of my work captures the variability of nature; it is anicca-made-conscious.

More important is the emotional environment. A paranoid individual can quickly charge his environment with fear; a skilled dancer or performer can charge the theatre with dramatic intensity. My practice of vipassana meditation naturally extends an atmosphere charged with the awareness of change, loss, sorrow, re-emergence, and transformation.

From its inception, psychotherapy has been understood to be a mood-dependent activity. Freud gave careful consideration to the informal and contemplative atmosphere of his psychoanalytic chambers. He wrote technical papers on the topic (Freud, 1958). He worked in rooms adjoining his apartment that were appointed with good furniture, books, maps, statuary....and his dog (Grinker, 1973). Contemporary psychoanalysts continue to stress the importance of the environment in which their work occurs. In a recent review of the treatment of fragile, borderline patients, Adler echoed Winnicott and others by emphasizing not merely what is done, but the atmosphere

in which it is done. Adler stressed that the proper psychotherapeutic backdrop for work with borderline patients is “a holding environment” (Adler, 1980).

Similarly, Kohut and his followers, who have founded the increasingly influential self-psychology school of psychoanalysis, have emphasized that a central curative element in the psychoanalytic treatment of narcissistic character disorders is the proper ambience: “Ambience refers to how the analysand experiences the analytic situation, it must be described in subjective terms... calm stability... quietly responsive... empathically ready to accept, examine, and appraise from the analysand’s point of view... an empathic, understanding matrix...” (Wolf, 1976).

It is important to emphasize that anicca is the ambience that informs my work, but it is not the work. Psychotherapy is a professional task of great complexity. Many of my views about it have been expressed elsewhere (Fleischman, in press). Psychotherapy of any school or style requires careful listening, a capacity to decipher and describe psychological patterns, their origin in personal history, their contemporary uses, their adaptive and maladaptive trends, and their presence and function in the room. As I do my job, I continue to perform a professionally honed, verbal, interpersonal, healing task that operates within a contractual, economic relationship, with clearly defined and firmly reinforced boundaries.

But I practice psychotherapy in the ambience of anicca, the awareness of the basic truth of impermanence. The Buddha referred to the all-pervasiveness of anicca in this way:

Wherever and whenever one turns awareness within the mind and body, there is only arising and passing away.

(Dhammapada, 1980)

This perspective is a product of an awareness of the nature of one's own experience. It is sorrowful, because all change hints of time and death. It is relieving, because all change is pregnant with possibility. It is receptive and fluid. It diminishes differences and permits universality to prevail, because the ocean of suffering is common to all. The ambience of anicca is furthered by vipassana practice, but its truth is known to everyone who has looked closely at the events of his or her life. Walt Whitman captured it in his poetry:

Here the profound lesson of reception, nor preference,
 nor denial
 They pass, I also pass, any thing passes, none can be
 interdicted,
 None but are accepted, none but shall be dear to me.

(from "Song of the Open Road")

The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself
 disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of
 the scheme. . . .

(From "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry")

Rabindranath Tagore also described this mood in a poem he wrote while sick and old:

I saw . . .
 My body floating down an ink-black stream
 With its mass of feelings, with its varied emotion,
 With its many-colored life-long store of memories,
 . . . as shadow, as particles my body
 Fused with endless night . . .

(Tagore, 1985)

. . . Oh housebuilder! Now you are seen.
You shall not build a house again for me.
All your beams are broken,
the ridgepole is shattered.
The mind has become freed from conditioning. . .

(Dhammapada 153, 154)

When the reality of anicca begins to pervade an individual's perception of the world, the sense of being permanently limited by one's past begins to dissolve. Certainly, cause and effect remain. But every moment, too, is like a synapse. Without a reference to any word, philosophy, or religion, a person soaked in anicca will feel the eternal possibility of rebirth. Jesus spoke from the spirit of anicca when he said: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

Anicca is the vibration of transition. It is the zone of shattering and noble sorrow and loss. Much of psychotherapy deals with grieving, toward a recognition of what is gone forever, what will never be obtained, what cannot continue, what never really was. These psychotherapeutic processes may be facilitated in an atmosphere established by a therapist who has had a deep experience of surrender of mind and body into the truth of anicca.

One patient realizes that her dead parent cannot be born again, no matter how long she remains guiltily loyal to the past, and therefore alone and lonely in the present. The atmosphere of anicca facilitates her mourning and letting go of what is gone forever; there is no need for preachy comments, psychiatric interpretations, or religious truisms. The silent, warm vibration itself breeds hope in the potential of the future.

Another patient faces what can never be obtained. He realizes his hopes for his career are based upon adolescent fantasies, or aspirations that exceed the reach of his talents. The

atmosphere of anicca softens the fall from arrogance, and allows him to pursue a direction natural to him, or the career he really does have — with greater ease, humor, and success.

Another patient faces the realization that life as she knows it cannot continue. Her husband is not depressed; he has Alzheimer's disease. This fact means their life as a mutually loving couple is altered forever. It demands that she become her husband's caretaker, nurse, and guardian. She is furious, terrified; she weeps and weeps, session after session. No words of solace are spoken but the atmosphere of anicca lets her tears flow into the future. She picks up her burden with her characteristic force and faith and resolves to go ahead with her new life.

Still another patient faces what never really was. His psychotherapeutic exploration unearths the fact that the father he so desperately needed to believe was concerned and loving was in fact absent, uninvolved, self-preoccupied. The insight, previously hidden by rationalization, is shattering. It takes months to integrate. Along the way there is anger at the therapist: "You've destroyed my image of my father." The atmosphere of anicca is one element in the constellation of psychotherapeutic techniques that leads to a new position. "I never had the kind of father I yearned for, but he did what he could, and I've been able to find other helpers, like you, in my adult life."

The awareness of anicca, with its dual sense of loss and renewal, is not directed towards happiness and success. As I understand it, it leads one further into a world of discipline and self-examination. Someone who has the tenacity to breathe, listen, and dwell in this atmosphere week after week, year after year, may discover a new capacity in him or herself for both loss and life.

An intensely intellectual, psychoanalytically informed patient who spent six years in weekly therapy, described to me his simultaneous relief and bewilderment at his inability to analyze

all the sources of the change he felt within himself. He felt more self-accepting, less driven towards achievement and acclaim, less self-denigrating regarding his limitations, more lovingly engaged with others, freer of masochistic dependency; all of which we had spent a lot of time consciously discussing. But he also felt a more elusive, subjective shift — a new awareness of sorrow and joy that replaced his previous aggressive drive for personal happiness. He had absorbed some of the atmosphere of anicca.

The vipassana practitioner attempts to live with mindfulness of anicca, the continuous, impersonal unraveling of events, in his own life. As I practice psychotherapy, I imagine that it is not my words, skills, or insights as much as it is their grounding in meditation which may infuse those in treatment with an energetic ability to live in the reality of pain, loss, and death. It is the struggle to avoid this reality which lies at the heart of suffering.

As a vipassana meditator, I must accept, too, my experience of anicca as anicca. It is always transitory, and I am continually called back into illusion by my anger, dismay, boredom, greed, or fear. Whatever appears to be accomplished in my office is also anicca. When one patient leaves, another appears. So I am bound to start over again and again.

Meditation, practiced by the mental health professional, cannot substitute for experiential knowledge and skills in conducting psychotherapy. Attunement to anicca is not the totality of vipassana meditation practice, but as a psychotherapist who meditates, I have found that it illuminates a common ground where my spiritual life facilitates my professional skills and benefits my patients. My profession then feels integral with my personal efforts towards a wisdom of liberating perspective.

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