

Vipassanā: Seeing the Three Marks

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Vipassanā, usually translated as “insight,” is a form of bhāvanā—meditative cultivation—that examines experience closely enough to see how it changes, how the mind reacts to it, and how the sense of a fixed self arises and comes to feel continuous. It doesn’t begin with the claim that life is unsatisfactory. It begins with watching what actually happens in experience, moment to moment, and letting the observation speak for itself. “Dukkha” isn’t a doctrine to accept before you sit down. It’s something you can catch in the act.

Seeing Change Clearly

As attention stabilizes, the first thing that becomes obvious is that nothing holds still.

- **The breath** changes from one moment to the next.
- **Sensations** arise and pass.
- **Thoughts** appear and disappear.
- **Moods** shift continuously if you watch closely enough.

At first, this is simply interesting—a kind of quiet astonishment at how much motion there is in what felt, a moment ago, like a stable self having a stable experience.

The Relationship to Change

The more interesting discovery comes next: it isn’t just that things change, but that the mind has an automatic relationship to that change.

- **Pleasant sensation** is often met with a subtle leaning toward.
- **Unpleasant sensation** is often met with resistance.
- **Neutral sensation**—meaning neither pleasant nor unpleasant—may pass unnoticed or be met with drifting and dullness. Here, “neutral” does not mean peaceful, balanced, or okay. It refers only to a feeling tone that is not experienced as either pleasant or unpleasant.

Much of this is not chosen in any deliberate sense — it’s closer to a reflex than a decision. This is the pivot point of the practice: not just observing impermanence (anicca), but observing how the mind responds to impermanence.

The Pali texts describe this response as a link in a causal chain, not as a personal failing: contact conditions feeling, and feeling conditions craving — phassa paccaya vedanā, vedanā paccaya taṇhā (SN 12.2, Nidāna Saṃyutta). The pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral tone (vedanā) arises first; what follows it—wanting, resisting, or ignoring—is a result of causes and conditions rather than something deliberately chosen. With careful attention, that process can be recognized and sometimes interrupted as it unfolds.

Where the Friction Actually Is

When the mind wants a pleasant experience to stay, wants an unpleasant experience to go, or simply checks out of the experience that is here, there’s a tightening—a contraction, a pressure in the system. That tightening is dukkha. Not dramatic suffering. Friction with what is.

The key shift in practice is seeing this in real time, before it congeals into a story. Instead of “I’m irritated,” insight practice breaks the moment into its actual parts: a sensation in the body, an unpleasant feeling tone, an impulse to resist, a tightening. The sensation may be unpleasant, but resistance adds another layer of tension. Seeing the difference between the two is a central insight of the practice—not because change itself necessarily hurts, but because we habitually relate to changing things as though they shouldn’t change. The texts push this reasoning further still, past dukkha into the other two marks (see Anicca and Anattā below).

This isn't awareness as passive spectating. It's precisely at this link — the feeling tone, before the craving or aversion that would otherwise follow it — that clear attention can interrupt what would normally run automatically. **That's the difference between watching a process happen and being swept away by it.**

Why Even Pleasant Experience Qualifies

This is also why dukkha isn't limited to obviously unpleasant moments. When an experience is pleasant, the mind often tries to prolong it or hold onto it. But the experience is already changing and cannot be kept in place. The effort to hold it creates tension. Pleasant experience therefore has instability built into it—not as a pessimistic belief, but as something observed again and again, sit after sit.

Where This Leads: Anicca and Anattā

Vipassanā doesn't stop at dukkha. Traditionally, the three characteristics (tilakkhaṇa) are seen together, each entailing the next: *yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ, yaṃ dukkhaṃ tad anattā*—what is impermanent is dukkha, and what is dukkha is not-self (SN 22.59). Anicca (impermanence) is the ground we've already been standing on: nothing in experience holds still. Because whatever changes and cannot be held onto is unreliable as a foundation, it cannot rightly be claimed as “mine,” “I,” or “myself.” That is the anattā (not-self) step.

The three marks are best understood as models for examining experience, not as truths that must be accepted in advance. Their value lies in whether they help us see more clearly how experience changes, how tension arises, and how the sense of a fixed self is constructed. The practice is to look and see what these models reveal, without forcing experience to conform to them.

Applied in practice, anattā becomes a further place to look—the same kind of looking you already did with dukkha. After noticing a reaction—a leaning toward, a resistance, a tightening—see if you can also notice the sense of a fixed someone who is having that reaction. Is there a continuous self behind the noticing, or is the sense of “the one watching” itself something that arises within experience—perhaps as a thought, an image, a felt center, or a subtle sense of ownership—appearing for a moment and then giving way to the next?

The same investigation applies to intention and choice, not only to the sense of a watcher. Notice how often a reaction is already underway before there is any experience of deciding to have it: irritation is already rising, a hand is already reaching for the phone, a reply is already forming. There may be no felt moment when a self stepped in first and authorized what happened. The early texts make this argument about each of the five aggregates, including volitional formations: if any of them were a fixed self, they could be commanded completely at will—“Let it be thus; let it not be thus” (SN 22.59). But they cannot. Intention, like sensation, arises through causes and conditions; it is not issued by a controller standing outside them.

Watched closely, both the felt sense of a stable witness and the sense of an inner controller may prove to be intermittent, constructed, and dependent on conditions. This isn't about dissolving the self or proving that it doesn't exist. It's about seeing selfing for what it is—an ongoing construction, assembled moment to moment, not a fixed entity sitting behind and directing experience.

In Simple Terms

- Everything is changing.
- The mind reacts automatically to that change—leaning toward, pulling away, or drifting.
- That reaction creates tension: friction.
- That friction is what we call dukkha.
- Because everything changes (anicca), nothing changing can be held onto as a stable foundation.
- That includes the sense of a fixed “me” watching experience—which may itself prove to be intermittent, constructed, and conditioned.
- Thoughts, intentions, and reactions also arise through causes and conditions; they are not issued by a fixed inner controller standing outside the process (anattā).

Insight meditation doesn't teach that life is unsatisfactory. It shows us, moment by moment, how the mind creates tension by pushing and pulling on experience. When we see that clearly, anicca, dukkha, and anattā begin to become more than ideas—they become patterns we can observe directly.

Vipassanā Practice: A 15-Minute Sit

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Use this as a guide, not something to get perfect.

Timeline	Phase	What to Do
00:00 – 03:00	Settling	Sit comfortably, close your eyes. Feel the weight of the body. Take three deliberate breaths, then let the breath return to normal.
03:00 – 07:00	Breath Anchor	Rest attention at the nostrils or chest. Simply observe the breath as sensation—its rhythm, texture, temperature. When attention wanders, return gently.
07:00 – 12:00	Body Scan	Move attention slowly from the crown of the head downward to the feet, pausing wherever sensation is vivid. Observe without changing anything.
12:00 – 15:00	Open Awareness	Let go of any fixed focus. Let sounds, sensations, and thoughts arise and pass. Continue noticing whatever arises without holding on to any of it. Notice whether the sense of “the one noticing” feels continuously present, or whether it too changes, disappears, and reappears. If an impulse, intention, or reaction arises, notice whether it is already underway before there is any sense of deciding to have it.
Wrap-up	Close	Before opening your eyes, rest for a moment with the whole field of experience. Notice whether the mind and body feel different than when you began.

This practice can be used during the group or repeated at home. For a 30-minute sit, spend about 5 minutes settling, 10 minutes with the breath, 10 minutes scanning the body, and 5 minutes in open awareness.

For Discussion

During the sit, did you notice a moment when the mind was subtly pushing something away, or trying to hold onto something? What did that feel like in the body?

How much of the discomfort seemed to belong to the sensation itself, and how much seemed to arise from the reaction to it?

Did the sense of “the one watching” feel like a constant presence throughout the sit — or did it, too, seem to come and go?

Did you notice an impulse, intention, or reaction already underway before there was any clear sense of deciding to have it? What was it like to see that?

Did looking for the watcher or the controller feel unsettling or bring up resistance? If so, what did that resistance feel like?