Three aspects regarding the Contemplation of Impermanence (Anicca-Nupassana)

Vipassana meditation is an awareness meditation. It teaches to be aware of everything that comes to you and is happening to you. Only the present moment is important. And every thing that comes to you at the present moment through the six sense doors is to be noted, to be watched, to be observed as the object of awareness.

When you practice Vipassana meditation, by making mental notes or just watching the various things that come to you, you will bring awareness to a high level so that you will be able to see things as they truly are. You will come to see the true nature of mind and body. "True nature" means the nature of impermanence, the nature of unsatisfactoriness, and the nature of insubstantiality or the non-self or soul. It is important to see these three characteristics of nature so that you can have a correct view of things, so that you may have less attachment to mind and body, and gradually be able to weaken the hold of mental defilements that prevent enlightenment.

The contemplation of impermanence (anicca-nupassana) refers to seeing conditioned phenomena arising and passing away while observing their individual characteristics. According to the Visuddhimagga, one should understand three aspects of this contemplation: impermanence (anicca), the characteristic of impermanence (anicca-lakkhana), and the contemplation of impermanence (anicca-nupassana). The commentaries say that we should know three things regarding the contemplation of impermanence (anicca-nupassana):

What is impermanence? Or what is it that we say is impermanent (Anicca)? What are the signs or marks of impermanence or what we should know about the characteristics or marks of impermanence (Anicca lakkhanā)? What is repeated seeing of impermanence (Aniccānu passanā)?

**What is it that is impermanent?** When we say impermanent, what do we mean by that? You know the answer. The five aggregates are impermanent. You have yet to see that this is true, but through practice of Vipassana meditation, it will eventually be seen. So what is it that is impermanent? The answer is all five aggregates, not just the five aggregates of clinging.

When we speak of impermanence, we mean that everything in the world is impermanent. But in the Buddhism, we say the five aggregates, instead of everything in the world. Why do we say that the five aggregates are impermanent? What can we
see that causes us to say they are impermanent? There must be signs or characteristics of impermanence.

For the characteristic of impermanence two kinds of definitions are given in the Visuddhimag- ga. The first characteristic of impermanence is the arising, passing away, and change. First there is arising; then there is what is called change, becoming different or aging. Then there is falling, disappearing. In watching the aggregates, we see that they arise and last for a few brief moments, and then disappear. When we see that they constantly arise, change, and disappear. We know from these characteristics or signs that the aggregates are impermanent. We know that the characteristics of impermanence are rise, fall, and change.

You may see the three stages of existence: arising, staying for a time and then disappearing. They are known as the three sub-moments of one thought moment. When we see a state of mind arise, stay for a very short time, and then disappear, we know that this is impermanent. This knowing or seeing that something is impermanent, must come from your own experience. It must not come from a book, it must not come from a teacher. It must come from within yourself. So do not be satisfied with what you read in books or hear in talks. You must see for yourself.

In order to see impermanence, practice is necessary. So what should you do? It is actually very simple. You should watch things, including the mind. Just watch them and you cannot fail to see that they arise and disappear.

The second one of these characteristics, “the non-existence after having arisen”, becomes especially apparent at the higher states of insight knowledge. It says that non-existence, after having been, is the characteristic of impermanence. That means “Disappearing after arising is the characteristic of impermanence. When that characteristic is clearly seen, the insight regarding the contemplation of impermanence becomes sharp and keen. Therefore, the commentary says that disappearance is the outstanding quality of impermanence.

If you want to know whether a certain state is permanent or impermanent, see if it disappears after arising. It is more important to see the disappearing than the arising. Because if you see only the arising, you may have the opposite understanding and think that it is permanent. When you see a state arise and disappear, you know that it is impermanent. So disappearing after arising is the characteristic, mark or sign of impermanence.
What is repeated seeing of impermanence? This is described as contemplation of impermanence, Aniccanupassana in Pali. You know the word Anicca as impermanent. The word anupassana is made up of anu, meaning again and again and passana means seeing. So anupassana means seeing again and again, repeated seeing or repeated observation.

The real impermanence that we need to see in order to gain vipassana knowledge is the moment-to-moment impermanence. The other kind of superficial impermanence can be understood without meditation. For example, you drop a glass and it breaks, and you say it is impermanent. You don’t need meditation to understand that kind of impermanence; you just know it. Or when somebody dies and you say, Oh, he is impermanent, that kind of understanding is not called vipassana knowledge. It cannot lead to dispassion toward the five aggregates.

Without dispassion toward the five aggregates, there can be no fading away of mental defilements and no attainment of enlightenment. Superficial understanding of impermanence cannot help us to be dispassionate toward the aggregates or disenchanted with mind and matter. It will not lead to enlightenment. So it is very important to cultivate and gain the deeper understanding of real impermanence, not the superficial kind.

Aniccanupassana is the repeated seeing of impermanence while observing the rise and fall of the aggregates. If it is real aniccanupassana, it must be the seeing of impermanence while you are in the process of watching the rise and fall of the aggregates during vipassana meditation.

Suppose a monk wishes to buy an alms bowl. He is initially pleased when he sees a bowl-seller bringing him a bowl. However, if he examines the bowl and finds that there are three holes in it, then he loses interest, not in the three holes, but in the bowl itself. In the same way, when one sees the three characteristics, one loses interest in conditioned phenomena. Therefore, when seeing the three characteristics, the desire to get rid of them or become free of attachment is only connected with the conditioned phenomena that are bound up with these characteristics.

In accordance with the text, for a meditator who uninterruptedly observes phenomena at the moment they occur the initial arising and the final passing away of a single phenomenon becomes apparent and so it becomes obvious that the previous phenomenon is one thing and the following phenomenon is another. They are seen as separate things and not as one thing or things joined together. For one who has destroyed this concept of continuity, the characteristic of impermanence in its true
nature arises and becomes obvious on its own accord. When this genuine and real characteristic of impermanence is experienced, the insight that understands phenomena as impermanent is called the contemplation of impermanence. Whenever this genuine insight occurs, the perception of permanence (nicca sañña) and the resulting suffering are abandoned. Thus:

“One who sees impermanence abandons the perception of permanence.”

**Here,** ‘one abandons the perception of permanence,’ refers explicitly to the perversion of perception, and implicitly to the perversion of consciousness and the perversion of view.