

The Gift of Impermanence
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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Meditation

We pause in the midst of this ever-changing world, in the midst of our ever-changing lives...

Pause to re-discover the flow of our lives, to re-discover the peace within the flow of our lives...

Peace in the midst of joy... peace in the midst of sorrow... peace in the midst of the ordinary or the extraordinary...

The peace not of utter stillness; rather, the peace that comes when we allow ourselves to be present to whatever this moment and the next and the next bring...

Peace we can bring to one another... gift to anyone in our lives who is in the midst of a challenge, or grief, or illness...

Peace... with each breath, each beat of our heart, in the midst of this ever-changing world, our ever-changing lives... Peace.

Readings

from *everything arises, everything falls away*, by Ajahn Chah, a beloved Buddhist teacher in Thailand who lived from 1919-1992

...the Buddha taught to look in the present and see the impermanence of body and mind, of all phenomena as they appear and cease without grasping at any of it. If we can do this, we will experience peace. This peace comes because of letting go; letting go comes because of wisdom, the wisdom that comes from contemplation of impermanence, suffering, and not-self, the truth of experience, and witnessing this truth in one's own mind.

Practicing like this, we are continuously seeing clearly within our own minds. Phenomena arise and cease. Ceasing, there is new arising; arising, there is ceasing. If we form attachment to what occurs, suffering comes about right there. If we are letting go, suffering will not come about.

from "Lessons from a Wildfire" by Tibetan Buddhist teacher Anam Thubten

A moment of insecurity is an opportunity, an invitation to let go and take refuge in the truth of impermanence. When we feel insecure, though, we tend to cling even tighter to our desire for permanence. When we do that, we squander the opportunity. By allowing ourselves to withdraw or contract in the face of insecurity, we miss the fullness of life. In our fear, we forget that a lack of security is not always a bad thing. Insecurity has two sides. One side is the truth of inevitable loss. This is the side we resist. But the other side is the truth of freedom and growth. We often overlook or forget this side of impermanence, but if we really think about it, we may see we don't want to be stuck with any condition. We need change.

Sermon

Tibetan Buddhist teacher Anam Thubten and his sangha (community) acquired a new retreat center in Big Sur on the California coast early in 2016 – beautiful natural setting, buildings already there suited to the retreats they imagined hosting for years to come.

Then that summer while he was away in France, Thubten received a call. Wildfires raging in Big Sur had engulfed their land and the center had been destroyed. So much for their dreams.

The rest of the article in which Thubten reported all this (from the journal “Lion’s Roar”), a piece titled “Lessons from a Wildfire,” has nothing more to say specifically about the loss of the retreat center. Instead, Thubten used the fire – which as you may remember from news reports had burned for most of the summer, destroying dozens of homes – as the occasion for a teaching opportunity having to do with Buddhist wisdom concerning impermanence. Impermanence: considered in Buddhism one of the three marks of our existence, along with suffering and the idea of no substantial, separate self.

Now, this said, I imagine that he and other members of his community may have shed some tears along the way. For as Thubten reminds us in the article, *sorrow does exist*. He shared a saying from Taoism that “There are ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows.”

And you now what? It is utterly natural and human to feel elated when joy comes and sad when sorrow comes. But Thubten writes that though yes... “Sorrow is normal and natural... The problem isn’t sorrow...; the problem is we don’t accept sorrow as a natural part of our lives. We try to escape it, to seek its opposite. And our attempts to escape inevitably create suffering.” Suffering beyond simply the sorrow itself.

In effect, he says, we are resisting life as it is, not just resisting sorrow, but resisting change. And change is continual and inevitable in life.

Maybe even a “gift” – as I’m calling it this morning – the *gift* of impermanence.

But whether you are up to considering impermanence a gift or not, the fact is that change and impermanence are not just inevitable but integral, essential, to life – indeed to existence.

Just a moment’s reflection makes the point.

For from the instant of the so-called big bang, nothing has been permanent, everything has been changing – and we wouldn’t be here together in this Meeting House in the year we all 2018 otherwise.

The evolution of the universe from just a few basic elements to the creation of stars and galaxies, themselves always changing, to the creation through supernovae of the elements necessary to life, to the creation of our solar system, formation of the planets including this one, the cooling of the earth, the still not fully understood transition to early life, single cells to multi-cellular organisms... and so on – you know the story. Change not only continual, but essential to the universe story.

Then bring to mind each of our human lives. From two cells joined, mere months later a small human being emerges, most often with the requisite numbers of fingers and toes, ears, nose, eyes, mouth, properly functioning heart and lungs. Then the changes, the development continues from the very first moments and days of that emergence. Again, change not only continual and inevitable, but essential

Think of this child we dedicated today.... or think of the children in your own lives – I think of my grandsons.... I don't know about you, but sometimes I wish I could hold on to each precious moment... *this* amazing age or *that* remarkable new ability. This, too, is understandable... but also of course not only impossible, but with a little thought utterly undesirable. Would we really wish to stop further beautiful changes and the growth that those changes bring?

So, yes, life is in fact dependent on impermanence and change. Life throughout our lives, for even though the changes slow with age, they do not end.

And, really, *would* we want it otherwise? Even though so often we behave – understandably, but not always helpfully for our spiritual well-being – we behave as though we would indeed want it otherwise: grasping at the good stuff, resisting the unpleasant.

Okay then, how might we better learn to live with this obvious reality of impermanence?

Among other suggestions, Thubten, in his article, reminds us of an old Sufi tale: An ancient but unhappy king inquired of his wise advisers how he might attain happiness and be relieved of his misery. “After conferring together, the wise men presented the king with a ring inscribed with the phrase ‘This too shall pass.’”

A reminder in sorrow that the sorrow will pass, or if not pass altogether will soften with time, and a reminder too that pleasure and happiness will also pass, thus helping us to savor the moment and not become overly despondent when the beautiful moment passes – instead to “kiss the joy as it flies,” as the poet William Blake recommended... and thus, as Blake continued, to live in “eternity’s sunrise.” In other words eternity not as somehow everlasting, but experienced in the very moment.

And you know what? We do not have to wait for momentous events, whether joyful or sorrowful, to learn to experience the gift of this teaching of impermanence, to follow the teaching inscribed on the ring that this “too shall pass.”

We can in fact practice when our lives are following what we might call a more ordinary rhythm. In fact, once you start paying a little more attention, opportunities abound!

Because every day brings arising and ceasing, as Ajahn Chah reminded us in the first reading. Further, every day never – that’s right, never – goes precisely as imagined or planned. Impermanence and its companion (in a word that Ajahn Chah favored) uncertainty are the way of the world and of our lives.

This means there are plenty of opportunities to learn or to discover the *gift* of impermanence.

Just the other night, for example, I had a modest opportunity to practice the teaching of “this too shall pass.”

Now, this might never happen to you, but now and then I find myself waking at two or three in the morning with concerns and worries about this and that magnified beyond all proportion. When this happens I know by now in my head two things: First, it is quite likely that I am indeed magnifying whatever worry far beyond the reality of whatever it is; and second, there is absolutely nothing I can do about whatever it is at three in the morning.

That knowing in my head, however, doesn’t help much.

So the other night as my brain circled around over and over again the same territory, I tried “this too shall pass” – because that’s true too. I would indeed most likely

eventually go back to sleep, and whether I slept anymore or not, the morning would come, perspective would return, and I could then make a simple list of what actually needed to be done.

That helped... at least a little. This too did pass! The impermanence of sleeplessness, the impermanence of those circling thoughts, was a gift.

From a slightly different angle, Thubten, as we heard in the reading, framed our coming face to face with impermanence as “a moment of insecurity: ...an opportunity to let go and take refuge in the truth of impermanence.”

That phrase “take refuge in the truth of impermanence” resonates for me. Because our reflexive response might more often be, as I’ve said, to run away from the truth of impermanence, to try to find refuge in the dependably unchanging – which actually does not exist.

But “take refuge in impermanence”? Refuge?!

Yes, refuge. For to the extent we fully and experientially accept this truth of impermanence and change (for in our heads we already know it is true), we will in fact experience more peace, no longer being quite so caught off guard by change. Refuge, which is maybe another word for “gift”.

Now I need to clearly note one thing I am not meaning to imply today. I do not mean to suggest that we ought to experience all change as somehow just fine. Buddhism itself is not unrealistic on this score. Some events in our lives naturally evoke joy and some events in our lives evoke sorrow, as I said earlier; and sometimes the sorrow of terrible loss is long lasting to be sure.

So none of this teaching on impermanence is meant to imply that well, really, it’s okay, just accept this loss as part of life, no big deal.

There is a beautiful story in this regard of a Buddhist teacher whose son had died. One of the teacher’s students finds him crying at the graveside. He asks his teacher why he is crying, since the teacher has been teaching the truth of impermanence and the illusion of permanent existence. The teacher replies, yes that is the teaching – and this is the saddest part.

So it’s not at all that we are meant somehow to cleanse ourselves of all emotion, whether joy or sorrow. Rather, the point is that by accepting the truth of impermanence we might, as Ajahn Chah affirmed, find a greater measure of peace in the midst of this world of impermanence, in the midst of our ever-changing lives.

And we might then understand that it would be better for our spirits if we were able to say to ourselves something like this: Okay, this is what is now going on, how do I respond to this change, to this joyful moment or this moment filled with sorrow.

Not easy, especially the latter. But possible – and not just for those who have achieved something called nirvana or enlightenment.

I once thought of “enlightenment” as some grand achievement, an exalted state transcending human sorrow and cares that only a few would reach. But you know what? We each get tastes of awakening to the nature of life, we each can learn better to navigate life as it is, joy and woe woven fine, sometimes in fact learning and growing from the toughest times (apparently this is now called “post traumatic growth”), learning that even though loss, illness, and death are inevitable... peace in the midst of it all is possible.

Many of you knew Andrea Zucker. Andrea and her husband Rob had been active members for just a few years several years ago, before moving back to the Northampton area. Andrea died a little over a year ago, too young by our usual human measure – a crushing blow of course to Rob and to their children and a great loss to everyone who knew Andrea and were blessed by her exuberant and creative spirit.

Well, on the occasion of the year anniversary of Andrea's passing, Rob and their grown children Sophia and Zack did something that suggests they are finding, however slowly, some peace in the midst of great sorrow. They sent friends a poem, "A gift from Andrea, a year later...". The poem is "Cutting Loose" by William Stafford. Here it is, among other things a reminder of the gift – yes, hard gift sometimes, but gift nevertheless – of impermanence:

Sometimes from sorrow, for no reason,
you sing. For no reason,
you accept
the way of being lost, cutting loose
from all else and electing
a world
where you go where you want to.
Arbitrary, a sound comes, a reminder
that a steady center is holding
all else. If you listen, that
sound
will tell you where it is and you
slide your way past
trouble.
Certain twisted monsters
always bar the path – but that's
when
you get going best, glad to be lost,
learning how real it is
here
on earth, again and again.

I so thoroughly appreciate those last lines:

learning how real it is
here
on earth, again and again.

"Learning how real it is."

That's the gift of impermanence, isn't it? The gift of being thrust into life *as it is*, not how we wish it to be or fear it to be, but as it is... thrown into life and suddenly more completely awake than usual, as if we'd been thrown into the cold water of a mountain lake... and after initial fear and disorientation we let go and discover we can swim – and see that it is a beautiful day.

So may it be.