

Do We Really Believe in Impermanence?

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Two questions come into my mind when thinking about the teaching of impermanence in relation to my life. Do we really believe that things are impermanent, that all experience is impermanent, that all arising phenomena will pass? Do we *really* believe that? The other question that arises from the first reflection is: What is the effect, in our life day to day, of living from that truth? Reflecting upon these questions involves looking through the more refined and subtle levels of meditation to see how we relate to impermanence on different levels.

Let's consider the first question: Do we truly believe that whatever arises will pass, that all arising phenomena are not going to last? Of all the different truths that the Buddha talks about, the truth of the impermanence of existence—how things are—is the easiest to understand intellectually. It's an idea with which an average person on the street who doesn't think much about philosophical issues would agree: "Yes, things change."

So on the conceptual level, it's pretty reachable; we don't have a problem with it. But is that what we live from? Would any of us be here if we were living at ease, dancing with the constant flux of existence? This is really interesting to me.

I know that I have actually experienced that everything is arising and passing and there's nowhere to rest. And yet, using myself as an example—and I am assuming that I'm not alone in this—when something in my life that I value or that's important to me changes, do I say, "Well, the conditions that allowed for that to exist have changed, and it's passing away?" Maybe eventually I get there, but that certainly is not my first, spontaneous reaction to the loss of cherished things.

Do I say, “My father has Parkinson’s disease and can’t really see any more—it’s just because conditions have changed?” No, of course not. I experience the pain of seeing him suffer; that’s normal. And I experience compassion for him. But there is also an edge of panic: What can I do to stop this from happening? What can I do to fix it?

We respond like this to our own bodies, to people we love, to our relationships changing, to losing a job—even down to your knee starting to hurt in the middle of a sitting. Our basic response, even though we know all conditions are subject to change, is: “Something has gone wrong and this is changing. If I can figure it out, I can stop it from happening.” Isn’t that often how we end up responding? And in that response we suffer, sometimes enormously.

And even though I’ve seen it a thousand times, it’s still not so easy for me to get the fact that the suffering is not about the change itself. The suffering, if you get right down to it, is about my reaction to the change; it is in my denial, my lack of acceptance, my basically not wanting to feel pain or loss.

I find this paradox to be fascinating, how I can know something so clearly on one hand, and yet live my life so often as if I didn’t know it at all. Let’s face it, on a very basic level, we want pleasant experiences to linger, to hang around; we don’t really want unpleasant things to happen. We can explore this edge in our meditation practice and it can expand out to our whole life, and still we may find there is a level where we don’t quite get that all pleasant experiences are coming and going, that everything unpleasant is coming and going. It’s really uncontrollable. If we could just flow with the coming and going of both pleasant and unpleasant, our life truly would be no problem.

Why are we conditioned the way we are? It’s a habit of mind—we crave the pleasant and can’t stand to have something we don’t like—and there we’re stuck. It’s not the truth; but it is our habit, and it is a deep habit.

Someone said in the group today, “I do notice that I never strive to be uncomfortable. I’m always striving to be comfortable.” That’s how we move through life. No one tends to grieve too much when the headache goes away or when the really bad weather turns nice, “Oh shucks, the pleasant is back!” Rather, we think: “Now things

are fine. I can flow with that.” So impermanence is a problem only when the pleasant changes, when the place we’re looking for rest goes away. We cling, even though we all know rationally that the problem is not the change. The problem is our clinging. But that doesn’t stop us for one minute.

Our task is to look into this tendency to cling. Why do we keep perpetuating this clinging, doing it over and over? This question takes me into looking deeply at how I live my life. Do I believe the Buddha when he said over and over that whatever is impermanent is inherently unsatisfying? It is said throughout the *suttas* (the early texts): anything impermanent is inherently unsatisfying; it can not be the self.

Yeah, right! We know that we turn around and want that other cup of tea, want that warm weather, don’t want it to be snowing. If we stop and look, we see that underneath that wanting is a sense of clinging to the pleasant. Somewhere underneath the wanting is the unspoken, un-conceptualized belief that there is some way to find a point of rest, of ease, of pleasantness that basically will not go away. That’s really how we move through life—looking over and over to find this place of rest, and clinging to that sense of security.

What’s so unsettling about the inevitability and the absoluteness of impermanence is that it allows no resting place. To us, who want a resting place (and who doesn’t?), that sounds fearful, insecure, unreliable, awful. But it is our very grasping at the passing of any phenomenal experience—the external or the so-called internal—the looking always for a resting place, that actually provokes the suffering in our life. And it’s very hard to see that.

Have you ever been in an earthquake, one with a lot of aftershocks? I was once; the earthquake itself was scary, but it was also kind of neat. There was a “Wow, look at that” kind of feeling. But the aftershocks that went on for the next three days were unsettling; you could never just relax back on the earth, into the bed, at the table. As soon as you relaxed, it would start shaking again—every five minutes. Of course the radio was saying constantly “Twenty five percent possibility of the big one in the next three days.” So you couldn’t even think, “Oh, it’s just an aftershock.” You had to keep thinking, “Is this it? Do I have to run out of the building? Do we have to get away from the glass? No, it’s settling down.” Then you’d let go and relax, but the radiators

would start shaking in the middle of the night and you'd jump up and have to run out, to get the flashlight, and so on. It lasted for three days.

That to me is like the ultimate sense of insecurity. Without ever even thinking about it, I had trusted that the earth is solid, unchanging, and here to support me. Then I found out otherwise, and moreover that there's absolutely nothing anyone can do about it. The aftershocks of the earthquake have been a metaphor for me for years now. The experience revealed the effect that insecurity of constant change can have on the mind and heart that is looking for the happiness of unchanging stability. It is our very grasping at any phenomenal experience as it passes—the external or the so-called internal—our looking always for a resting place, that provokes the suffering in our life. And it can be very hard to recognize. But freedom comes, not from finding somewhere to rest, but from no longer needing to look for someplace to rest.

There's a wonderful quote from the Diamond Sutra which says, "*He abides in peace who does not abide anywhere.*" That's the trick—to give up the search for abiding or resting or stopping the flow somewhere, the search that actually keeps the sense of anguish going. It is the search itself—for somewhere to rest, usually in the pleasant—that is profoundly unsettling.

Even when we train ourselves to be mindful, and see that all observable experience seems to be coming and going, we may not notice that "we" are still watching it all. "We" (or "I") is experienced as some unchanging entity doing the observing, and so we still don't get it. Our anguish then becomes: "I really see, I see everything is changing—so how come I'm not free? Why am I still suffering?" This anguish is very subtle and very deep.

Thinking about it isn't going to take us out of it, but thinking about it can take us into an exploration. We can learn to give mindful attention to all the manifestations of "me, myself, mine." It may seem like there is a stable entity here from which I am observing the whole world change, but it only seems that way through lack of inquiry, lack of attention, lack of investigation. We usually don't think to turn our attention back on *moi*, the point of stability we tend to hold onto.

We can get so wrapped up in our search for a peaceful abiding, in our search for happiness, that we overlook the possibility of just letting go of the search. And we can let go of trying to find the peace of abiding; let go of that constant to-ing and fro-ing between pleasant and unpleasant, liking and disliking; let go of the ongoing effort to manipulate experience. We are so involved in our judgments, our reactions, our assessments, our interpretations, our cogitations about anything that is happening, that we're often not even in touch with what's actually happening. We don't see that the impediment to peace is not the experience, but the fact that we're so involved in our reactions. We don't see that, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Happiness is available. Please help yourself." It just means stop fighting, stop reaching.

Someone once told me that the reality of life is like being in jail—we are so involved in rearranging the furniture to make it as comfortable as possible that we don't notice that the door is wide open and we can just walk out. That's what we're doing in our life—constantly rearranging the furniture. It's amazing that we don't recognize the secret. Perhaps we don't trust it. If we can meet—with total presence, absolute connectedness, alertness, acceptance, and wakefulness—just what's happening in this moment...everything is revealed in that. That is the essence of non-abiding.

But this is not a place we can recognize conceptually. It's really hard to talk about, because it's not a thing. The essence of non-abiding is total immediacy of presence—headache or no headache, traffic jam or no traffic jam. It really doesn't matter what's happening. And I mean that. It's not a metaphor. It really doesn't matter what's happening. And not just on the pillow. This is from an absolute standpoint.

Can you even believe that? And not merely believe it, but trust it enough to look for yourself? The freedom of the heart, of mind, has nothing to do with what phenomenal experience is arising or passing, and whether we like it or not. It has everything to do with immediacy, totality, openness, vivid presence. And that requires, in that moment, total acceptance. Total acceptance doesn't mean resignation. It doesn't mean, "Okay, whenever bad things happen, I'll just sit here and let people walk all over me." It means, "In this moment, this is happening. It cannot be changed. It's already happening. Can I be totally present and alert within it, without resistance, without clinging in that moment?"



This is really the practice of mindful awareness, moment by moment. It's not thinking, "I will be like this for the rest of my life." That's just another thought. The mindful awareness is in this moment, as the breath comes in, as the breath goes out, it's just there; it's a totally accepting alert presence without discriminating, without preference. And yes, I am all too well aware that it's easier said than done.

I find it a huge relief to come back to this awareness in difficult situations, something like getting stuck in the traffic when going to the airport. We all have that experience. We can fret and we can pretend, "Oh, it doesn't matter." You know, you can pretend for a while, but after a few minutes, "Why am I gritting my teeth? How come I'm barking at my friend?" And finally, we give up: "It's out of my control; I missed the plane; something will happen; I don't know what. It was all out of control from the beginning."

In that moment, there is letting go. It doesn't sound great, does it? It doesn't really sound like what you might think of when the Buddha talks about the supreme state of sublime peace being liberation through nonclinging. It may not be our idea of liberation, but that's the start of it—stuck in the traffic jam, missing your plane, things being out of control, and yet really being at peace. We are at peace in that moment because we are simply letting go of all our layers of how we want things to be and wish they were, and we are just opening to things as they are. Non-abiding. Non-abiding, because how things are now changes in the next moment.

So the most we can do is abide in this moment, just as it is, without clinging, without resistance; because in the next moment there is something else. It is all part of the flow.

The Buddha said it over and over again: *“The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata, namely liberation through non-clinging.”* This is another way of saying non-abiding. Just opening into this moment, with full presence, is our way into trusting. Living in the truth of impermanence, opening to it as we experience it—whether on the grand scale of a loved one becoming sick or dying, or on the minute scale of noticing our agitation when what had felt like a pleasant sitting suddenly turns unpleasant. The scale doesn’t matter. Noticing those moments of resistance to change, and opening into it again—that’s what we can do.

The more deeply we really live from this truth of impermanence, the more we open to the non-agitation of heart, of mind. But in order to really get it, we have to see through all the layers of belief, the conceptual workings of the mind. The precision of meditation practice can be very helpful here.

In our practice, in mindful attention, we discover more and more subtle ways in which we manipulate our experience, either toward something pleasant or toward some experience that we’ve had or read about that we somehow think is IT. This is the one that’s going to do it. But we are not looking too carefully, because if we really looked we would find out that conditions are causing even this to arise. We will also find out that we are manipulating conditions like crazy to cause this to arise. So we need to keep investigating, to keep seeing on a more subtle level. It’s nothing to judge ourselves about. Rather, we might think: “Yes, I see this one now. It won’t fool me again. There might be another one, but this one doesn’t fool me.”

Our mindfulness practice, simply being with the breath, being with sensations, being with sounds, and as we expand, with emotions, with feeling tones, with thoughts—just as they are—is a place where we begin to recognize the potential of freedom. It really doesn’t matter what you are attending to; it is the quality of mindful presence itself that allows you to see the truth. No matter what the nature of our experience, it is our willingness to bring this indiscriminating participatory awareness to it, without preference, that opens us again and again and again and again to resonating with this

peace of non-abiding. This moment is like the situation in the traffic jam when we suddenly let go of all desire to control. It's a quick moment of real peace.

And then of course our conceptual minds tries to cognize it and talk about it and say, "This is what it feels like," and "This is what it looks like, and "This is IT." Of course, it's long gone by then. Then we wonder and we doubt, and we don't really trust. Speaking for myself, I start looking so hard for some idea of what the sheer heart's release would look like and feel like, how the mind of non-clinging would manifest, that I overlook the reality, the potential for peace here and now. Because actually it's so obvious; it's always available. It's so normal that we easily get into looking for something more.

There is a story in the Pali *suttas* about the Buddha's teaching to Bahiya of the Bark Cloth. Bahiya came to the Buddha when the Buddha was on his alms-round and insisted that the Buddha address his anguish. Part of what the Buddha said to Bahiya, in regard to the six senses, was,

When in the seen is merely what is seen, in the heard is merely what is heard, in the sensed is merely what is sensed, in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bahiya, you will not be "with that"; when you are not "with that," you will not be "in that"; when you are not "in that" then you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering.

(Udāna 1.10)



This saying of the Buddha points directly to the end of suffering. To me what he is saying is that you're not stuck in this, you're not stuck in that, and you're not stuck somewhere in between the two. As human beings we want to abide in peace, yet the Buddhas do not abide anywhere.

In other words, there's no fixation; there's no landing; there's no yearning. There's no grasping of any experience. When you are not in this, nor in that, then you're not abiding anywhere. There's only the simplicity of experience—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing, feeling the body and mental activity.

That, to me, is the invitation of this practice of mindfulness. It seems deceptively simple. When we talk about bringing bare attention, beginner's mind, to whatever experience is arising in the moment, that's what we're saying. Can we bear it? Can we live in the wisdom that that's all there is? Can we experience life in that way?

What's interesting is how much of the time, with all our best intentions, we're not able to do that. And we don't even have a clue what it is that's arising because so much gets added to it in the realm of perception and thought. At Bahiya's funeral, the Buddha uttered a phrase:

When a sage...has come to know this for himself,

Through his own experience,

Then he is freed from form and formless.

Freed from pleasure and from pain.

Freed from pleasure and from pain? Not too many people come to the teaching because they want to be freed from pleasure. But that's the real freedom the Buddha is pointing to. Freed from all of our attachments. And that's all. That really is all. But it's very, very, difficult to bring that beginner's attention to meet experience with no assumptions, no preconceptions, no preferred opinions. That is what training in mindfulness is all about.

The invitation is to the simplicity. But it's not easy. It's radical. Actually it is the greatest renunciation, because every time you're willing to let go of "me," the whole story collapses. And you can just let it be. You don't have to "end" it; you don't have to talk your way out of it; you can just let it be, and return your attention to the simplicity of hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, sensing, thinking, imagining.

It's that basic. It's the renunciation in a moment—the renunciation of clinging and identification—that allows us to see through this whole round of *saṃsāra*, allows us to stop running in circles forever.

*The **Bhavana Program** at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies is intended as a special way of integrating academic study and meditation practice for the investigation of the Buddha's teachings. The 7-day program is modeled on a traditional vipassanā retreat, with alternating sessions of sitting and walking practice throughout extended periods of silence, including personal interviews and a dharma talk each evening from an experienced meditation teacher. The program also incorporates a daily two-hour study period with a scholar of the Buddhist tradition, wherein the careful reading of selected passages from the classical literature and their detailed discussion, in the light of one's meditative experience, is encouraged.*

These remarks are excerpted from the opening talks of each series of sessions held at the study center in March, 1999.