

Moving from “Auld Lang Syne” to Impermanence

Paula Quenoy

The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden

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I started my exploration of Buddhism a few years ago, quite a few actually, three or four. As with a lot of newcomers to a spiritual practice I dabbled around the edges, did a lot of reading (through the UUA, I think), made some attempts at meditation . . . and then about a year and a half ago I learned I had breast cancer. I quickly began to understand a lot of the principles I had struggled with in my reading. It becomes much easier to understand what it means to live for the now when you begin question how much later there is going to be.

I found that when I focused on living for the now there is very much to learn in the moment . . . in every moment. The teacher Pema Chödrön said that this very moment is the perfect teacher, and luckily for us it is with us wherever we are. There is no need to search for a learning moment or a place to learn. We are often in the situations where we are pushed to our limits. We just need to be aware that we are there and take the opportunity to learn from those teachable moments. Often we find ourselves in a situation that is uncomfortable for one reason or another, when there is no choice but to accept the situation - or maybe to run away from the learning. Often, unfortunately, we take the latter option when the former option is perhaps to meditate or focus on what is really happening and what we may be running from. If we do this we may be able to see how we could open up, relax, learn something, and move on to the next moment. This part of the spiritual journey is difficult, I guess everything worthwhile is, and it involves moving forward past whatever is in our way.

And sometimes it takes a little time.

So, this experience over the past year or so led me to really explore the idea of what is impermanence. In Buddhist teaching it refers to the idea that everything, all existence, is in a constant state of flux. It's not really a metaphysical concept in Buddhist philosophy, it really is more of an empirical investigative observation – everything really is in a state of flux. By observing the world one notices that nothing is the same from one minute to the next – I'm not the same person now as I was two seconds ago – that's pretty obvious. The thing that makes the Buddhist concept of impermanence different or unique is that in addition to things being in flux it's the essence or the self and the idea that consciousness is also included in this idea of impermanence.

So in the words of the Buddha, it would be better for the unlearned worldling (I love to use those terms) to regard this body built up of the four elements as his “self” rather than the mind for it is evident that this body may last for a year or two years or three, or four, or ten, or even a hundred years or more but that which is called thought or mind or consciousness continuously during the day or night arises as one

thing and passes away another. This observation was echoed much later by the philosopher Bertrand Russell when he said,

“In former days, you could believe it on a philosophical ground that the soul is a substance and all substances are indestructible... But the notion of substance, in the sense of a permanent entity with changing states, is no longer applicable to the world.”

“A wave in the sea persists for a longer or shorter time: the waves that I see dashing themselves to pieces on the Cornish coast may have come all the way from Brazil, but that does not mean that a ‘thing’ has traveled across the Atlantic; it means only that a certain process of change has made the journey.”

So I started to realize in doing this reading that nothing is permanent other than change and the process of change, I started to really concentrate on the whole idea of suffering and how we are making that suffering happen, and becoming attached to something will bring the suffering or at least intensify the suffering that is already there . . . and the whole idea that phenomena can be compounded, constructed or fabricated by being connected to it or attached to it, and that is how we create the suffering as we heard from our example in *The Buddha’s Brain*. It’s really just our reaction to what is happening that is creating the suffering not necessarily the thing itself, because everything is in flux – so it doesn’t necessarily exist from one moment to another.

Impermanence and change are thus the undeniable truths of our existence. What is real in this existing moment, the present that is the product of the past or the result of the previous cognizant actions because of ignorance the ordinary mind perceives them all to be one part of continuous reality, but in truth they’re not. The concept of impermanence and continuous becoming is central to Buddhist teachings. It is by becoming aware of it and by observing it and by understanding it one can find a suitable remedy for the sorrow or what we create as sorrow in our lives, and achieve that understanding from the process of impermanence that we are creating.

Pema Chödrön describes this impermanence as the goodness in reality. In the same way that the seasons change and maybe we celebrate our New Year’s tomorrow night, everything evolves, everything changes. That may be uncomfortable to us. We prefer things that our built to last, “built Ford tough”, you know . . . all of those slogans . . . we prefer that. We forget there is a cycle to life. By denying that everything changes all the time we lose our connection to the sacred. We forget that there is a cycle of birth, life, decay, and death and everything follows it. There is a harmony in understanding the impermanence in our lives. There is a pain in life, and it will pass, and there’s joy in life and it will pass too.

The important lessons come from understanding ourselves and moving forward through the joy and through the pain. We will always feel the need to get rid of the pain rather than seeing how it works together with the joy. It’s most important to relate the joy and pain together to where we are in the current moment. Joy connects us to all that is sacred in the world and pain keeps us humble in the process. Most importantly we need to celebrate the impermanence in our lives. So when you leave the drive-through and realize too late that they got your order wrong – you know . . . that’s impermanence .

. . that's just a moment. When a baby is born or somebody passes away again, that is just another impermanent moment. Everything is part of the same cycle.

This time of year we spend a lot of time reading the "best of" lists – you probably read a couple this morning . . . or "who we lost this year" . . . it's not important whether or not we do these things, it's important to understand *why* we do these things. Why we spend time sentimentalizing the year that just past rather than moving forward. For some this year has been amazing and for others it has not. Regardless we have each learned important lessons about our connections to each other and our connections to the sacred. It is time to put those lessons to work in the next moment.