Impermanence

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:31

There's an old Hebrew folktale that probably many of you have heard, but I like the story and I can't resist sharing it again. It is set in the time of King Solomon.

They were about six months away from a festival, and Solomon thought he'd have a little bit of fun with one of his ministers. So he said to him, "There's a magic ring that I really want, and I'd like to have it in time for this festival, which is six months away. Six months should give you plenty of time to find it. The properties of this magic ring are that it will make a happy man sad and it will make a sad man happy. So please go out and find me this ring. I really want to have it."

The minister was very obedient and dutiful to the king. He said, "Yes, I will go and search and find you the magic ring." Solomon knew that such a ring didn't exist, but he was playing with the minister.

So the minister went all around the countryside asking everyone he could find if they knew of such a magic ring, and no one knew of such a thing. Six months passed, and it was time for the festival. The day before the festival was to begin, he was at his wit's end. He didn't want to let down the king, so he kept searching.

He went to the marketplace and the bazaar in the town to a poor looking jeweler. He came up to the jeweler and said, "Sir, I need to find a magic ring that will make a happy man sad and a sad man happy. Can you help me?"

The jeweler said, "Yes, I can." He picked up a simple gold ring and inscribed on it while the minister waited. Then he handed the ring to the minister who looked at it, read the inscription, and his face lit up.

So he went to the king. The celebration was to begin the next day. The king and his retinue were all around, and he thought he'd have a little more fun by embarrassing his minister. He said, "Well, minister, have you found that magic ring for me?"

The minister said, "Yes, your royal highness, I have." The king was shocked—it took the smile right off his face. The minister handed the ring to the king. The king read it, and the inscription said, "This too shall pass"—which makes a happy man sad and a sad man happy.

This story, if it's true, goes back about 3,000 years. Who knows if it's true? Solomon died in about 930 BCE, so it's an old, old story. Abraham Lincoln told the story in a little different form in 1859. It was reported in the newspapers. He was giving a speech in Wisconsin and he told the story this way: "It is said an eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence to be ever in view and which should be true

and appropriate at all times and situations. They presented him the words 'And this too shall pass away.' How much it expresses, how chastening in the hour of pride, how consoling in the depths of affliction." That was Lincoln's comment on this story.

Of course, the message of the story is on impermanence and change. This teaching on impermanence and change is one of the central themes of all the Buddha's teachings—a very powerful teaching that can lead to a fundamental change in how we understand the world and therefore how we relate to it.

It's so interesting. There are so many directions we can come to the Dharma through that make fundamental shifts in us. Just the precepts, for example—really understanding the precepts, we start to understand how being kind to others creates our own happiness. It's such an awakening when we find that out. Working with emotions and learning that what was unacceptable formerly, if we can accept it, starts to weaken the difficult emotion that we had been resisting.

This teaching on impermanence likewise goes against the grain of our conditioning. So tonight I want to explore this theme—how we feel it in our lives, how we can work with it, and ultimately where it takes us in Dharma practice.

We can sum this teaching up: "This too shall pass away" is another way of saying everything changes. We all know this is true. I'm not telling you anything you didn't know before, but we haven't yet fully realized all the implications of this message. How do we know? Because we keep holding on. If we had fully realized this, we would no longer be holding to anything in the world. So we know it intellectually.

We may know it a little bit down here in the heart, but it hasn't gotten completely into our marrow and bones yet. In fact, you could say that the whole of our Dharma practice is about fully understanding the truth of this teaching.

As we look into this more deeply, I want to mention that the Buddha talked about three levels on which wisdom, or insight, comes to us. First, there is wisdom that comes simply from hearing teachings—sutamaya paññā, the wisdom that comes from hearing. As you listen to Dharma talks, read books, and hear words from others, a certain amount of understanding comes through. This is the first level. As Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, it's important to have the right information at this level, and the Buddha's teachings constitute pretty good information at the level of hearing.

The next level takes what we've heard and applies it through reflection. We examine whether these teachings are true in our own lives, seeking to apply them in our experience and life situations. We reflect on them, turn them over in our minds, connect them to other things we know, and see if they still hold up. In this reflective process—using thinking for a Dharma purpose—we learn more deeply. This is the level called wisdom from reflection, or in Pali, cintāmaya paññā. Cintā means thought, maya means "produced from," and paññā means wisdom.

Then there's a third level of understanding that cannot come through hearing or reflection alone—the

level of meditative insight. When we calm and still the mind, it moves into a new way of seeing, a deeper and more penetrating way of understanding the nature of things. This opens the door to meditative insight, or bhāvanāmaya paññā—bhāvanā means meditation, the wisdom produced from meditation.

Tonight I want to focus particularly on the second and third ways we can learn and gain insight. Impermanence lends itself well to all three levels, but especially these latter two. The wisdom from hearing you've already received—everything changes. We're done with that one, right? You know that. But how far did it get you? Not very far, though you do have the right information.

The second level, wisdom from reflection, is particularly valuable because impermanence is one of those themes that's always relevant for contemplation. Just as the sentence "this too shall pass away" is always applicable, so is reflection on impermanence itself.

Let me place this in the context of one of the Buddha's central teachings. Through the practice of vipassana, he encouraged us to understand clearly the nature of this world—the body, mind, and external environment. He described them in terms of what he called the three characteristics of all existing things. I'm sure you've heard these before, but let me remind us all of what he taught.

The first characteristic is that all conditioned things are impermanent—anicca in Pali. This feature of impermanence is one of the fundamental characteristics of existence. The word "conditioned" is important in this formulation. What constitutes a conditioned thing? Something that arises from prior causes and conditions.

Your body, for example, was the product of your father's sperm meeting your mother's egg, nourished by countless conditions—each of our bodies is a conditioned thing. It arose dependent on conditions, and the Buddha said everything that arose from conditions will pass away. So we know that our body will pass away. This building is also a conditioned thing, put together by carpenters, bricklayers, and foundation workers who erected it piece by piece. This building, too, will pass away at some point.

The second characteristic is that all conditioned things are unsatisfactory—dukkha. Everything that comes from prior causes and conditions does not have the power to deeply satisfy us. Why? Because of its nature of impermanence—it will pass. In this context, I prefer "unsatisfactory" as a translation, which is broader than the more common "suffering."

The third characteristic is that all things are not-self—anattā. There's nothing we can really claim in this whole world, inner or outer, as being "I," "me," or "mine." We'll explore this more as the retreat continues. This is one of the more enigmatic parts of the teaching, but absolutely central.

Notice a difference in the formulation between the first two characteristics and the third. The first two say "all conditioned things"—impermanent, unsatisfactory. The third says "all things."

What's the difference between all conditioned things and all things? There's one thing that's not a

conditioned thing, and that is the unconditioned. One thing that's not a conditioned thing, called the unconditioned—also called the deathless or nibbana. So even nibbana is characterized by being not-self, but it is not subject to impermanence or unsatisfactoriness. That means it's not subject to arising and passing. We'll come back to this later.

The Buddha went on to say that whether a Buddha arises to describe them or not, these three characteristics always apply. They're always true—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness. Whether they have been proclaimed or not, they're always true.

The curious thing is how hard they are to see. There is something in the psychological makeup of the self that doesn't want to see it. It's not good news for the self, because what is the self's project? The project of the constructed self in this world is to find permanence, lasting happiness, and something it can call me and mine. That's what selves do. That's basically all that selves do.

Because we have invested so much in the I, me and mine through our psychological creations, we don't want to see these three characteristics. This is the operation of ignorance. There is in each of us at this moment—unless you're really awake right now—a veil which is more active than simply not knowing the truth. There's an obscuring force at work that will make it difficult to see clearly these three truths. It's part of the operation of self. It's part of what we are subject to.

For example, in our human condition, somewhere deeply we kind of know this truth about impermanence. Here we are—twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, or seventy years old. Have any of us found a lasting happiness yet? Does it stop us from looking further? No. But somewhere underneath, we kind of know that impermanence is the name of the game, that it's the way this universe has been put together.

How do we know it? By feeling anxious, by not having found that lasting happiness. We all have—it's part of human nature—a deep longing for some kind of security, a lasting kind of happiness. And so we keep trying to find it through things of the world which don't last. So the happiness doesn't last and it keeps us perpetually unsatisfied, looking, craving, striving, trying to fill this hole of our insecurity.

This is the human existential dilemma. We know on some level the shifting nature of things and yet we can't stop this longing to find a secure base. So even as we try to hold on to one pleasurable thing, lasting happiness, and it passes away as all things do, we move on restlessly to the next. Rather than meet this anxiety, this fundamental insecurity—it's so uncomfortable—we keep reaching out and looking for something else. And nothing ever fills this underlying hole.

This is from the Buddha: "Before my enlightenment, O bhikkhus, when I was still a bodhisatta, this thought occurred to me: What is the gratification of the world? What is the danger in the world? And what is the escape from the world? Then I thought: Whatever joy and happiness there is in the world, that is the gratification in the world. That the world is impermanent, pervaded by suffering and subject to change, that is the danger in the world. The removal and abandoning of desire and lust for the world, that is the

escape from the world. So long, monks, as I did not fully understand as they really are the world's gratification as gratification, its danger as danger, and the escape from the world as escape, for so long I did not claim that I had awakened to the unsurpassed supreme enlightenment. But when I had fully understood all this, then I claimed that I had awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment. The knowledge and vision arose in me; unshakable is my deliverance of mind."

The Buddha is saying that really by looking into this question of the delights of the world and their changing nature and finding a resolution to that—finding a way out of this dilemma—that's where awakening lies. That's where freedom and deliverance lie.

So this is the theme I want to explore this evening. Remember, we're still in the reflective area of insight that comes from reflecting on. These are themes that are useful to reflect on in daily life as well as in retreat. We can look on the very most vast level that we have at our disposal. We can look on a cosmic level, and we can see impermanence on that level too.

The Earth is said to be 4.5 billion years old. The oldest parts of the known universe are something on the order of nine or ten billion years old. And it's assumed by most cosmological theories that these will return to nothing again. At some point, the sun will burn out, the Earth will disappear. Perhaps the universe will coalesce again in that very dense coagulation that preceded the Big Bang, and even on a cosmic level, everything may go away again.

This is echoed in the Buddhist texts where the Buddha talked about eons of world expansion, eons of world contraction, worlds arising, worlds passing away. Even on the greatest level, we can see this truth of impermanence.

Coming down from that level, looking at one lifespan, this is where it gets a little more interesting, a little more gripping to look at the truth of impermanence. What is the case in our own life?

We've all seen through this promise of finding happiness outside—that's the way our culture trains us to look. We've all kind of been over that route and we found it's unsatisfactory. So we've come here looking for happiness from a different direction and we start to see that true spiritual practice, real happiness doesn't come from things outside. It comes from inner qualities. You could say it comes from having an inner purity, a state of heart and mind that is not clogged up with greed, aversion, and delusion.

As you touch this place in your meditation—temporary freedom, relative freedom from these three forces—take a moment to explore the peace that's in that, the quelling of restlessness, the fading away of craving, the satisfaction of that state. And you'll come to trust that this is the direction of our practice. This is the direction for true happiness.

So we start to uncover this possibility, but we notice we tend to have brought our old habits of mind along with us. And what happens when we find it? We tend to hold on.

I remember when I first started to discover this peace through meditation, and it was after some period of having a really restless mind. I thought, wow, now I've got it. I've got this peace. It's going to be like this forever now. I found it. Now I can live my life from this place. I go, wow, what would it be like to live in the world from this place of peace? And I start spinning out on all my fantasies about working at jobs with this place of peace and having relationships from this place of peace and all the great things I could do.

What happened to my place of peace? It's gone. So as we hold on to it, build it up, project into the future, we destroy it.

Well, for me, that loss of that place of peace was devastating the first times it happened. I thought I'd found it and my life was going to be like that for the rest of my years. And then half a day later, it had disappeared. That was devastating. So it was actually much more important to me, that place of peace, than my car or my bank account or things that I had had in the outer world.

So we find this real meaning in spiritual practice, a deep sense of satisfaction. We touch it and then it also goes away. So our spiritual practice also is characterized by this same kind of impermanence.

Often we come into meditation—I can see this habit in myself, I've had it for a long time, it's weakening, still comes in from time to time—we think we're going to find, based on the development of concentration and beautiful factors of mind, this kind of nice plateau through meditation that then we can kind of cruise at. We work, we develop some peace. Oh, this is what I've been looking for. Now I can sort of stop working and I can cruise at this for a long time. It's a search for another kind of security based on factors that will change.

Unless we arrive at that peace through the same deep understanding the Buddha was talking about—gratification, danger, and escape—then we realize, oh, it's only temporary. The peaceful places that we come to in meditation also have the quality of arising and passing, until wisdom, in its fullness of development, can establish them in an unshakable way. So at this point, they are temporary, but we often think they're going to last, so we get disappointed. Again, we miss the truth of impermanence. Or let's put it a different way. We need to learn the truth of impermanence in this dimension also. It applies in spiritual life as well as in our outer life.

In all these research projects that are going on these days, a lot focus on meditation specifically. There seems to be an equal number that focus on the question of happiness. Every week, it seems, you read a new research study on happiness.

An interesting one that was done some years ago was by a team at Harvard, led by a professor named Daniel Gilbert. They basically studied this question of impermanence by looking at what happened to people's level of happiness when they got what they want, and then what happened to the level of happiness when they got something they really didn't want. What they found was we're really bad at predicting how what happens to us is going to affect our happiness or unhappiness.

So people would get a large sum of money from an inheritance or winning a lottery or something like that, and the expectation was that's really going to make me happy. You probably know from reading these studies that lottery money makes you happy for at most a year, and then the crash is really painful because it doesn't continue. Similarly, if people got a big paycheck, a raise, a new car, something like that, it would make them temporarily happy, and then that would fade quickly—much more quickly than people expected.

But the other side was also true. If people broke a leg or lost a job or even lost a loved one, a family member, they found they recovered from that more quickly than they expected to also.

So what does this say about our tendencies of mind? What it says is—and this applies in meditation too—when we get what we want, we tend to overestimate its importance. So we tend to get kind of inflated when we get what we want. And it's true in meditation states as much as in outside. When we lose it or something bad happens, we tend to get more unhappy than is justified. We tend to think it's a bigger deal than it is.

This happened to me when I would reach some peaceful state, happy state, concentrated state in meditation and it went away. Then the crash made me think it's gone forever. I'll never get it back.

This was really strong for me a couple of years ago. I had been a monk kind of early in my practice history, for about a year. Then, once I'd left, I always felt a little unfinished. I wanted to go back and experience that again. I kind of had a longing to be in robes again.

So, a few years ago, I went back to Asia, and I took robes again, just for a short period of six weeks. It was in Burma with a teacher named Paok Sayadaw, who teaches a very strong form of concentration practice. There's only one place you're allowed to put the attention, which is right below your nose. You follow the breath there for every waking hour. Sitting, walking, eating, moving around, the attention should never move from this very small area under the nose. So that was my practice for six weeks. A little demanding.

I'd arrived at the monastery at the start of the rains retreat, which happens to be the start of the rainy season. So I showed up one day in my lay outfit from California. The next day, my head was shaved, and I was wearing the robes, and I was on this practice schedule, which was fairly strenuous. The shortest sitting was an hour and a half. The longest sitting was two hours, and I kept it up throughout the day.

Well, the start of the rainy season means the start of the monsoon. And it was raining about three hours a day there. The first two weeks I was there, I did not see the sun. It was raining all the time. I'd sort of forgotten how to tie my robes on because it had been a few years. So here I am, a fairly new monk, walking back from the dining hall, trying to hold my bowl in one hand, an umbrella in the other, and keep my robe from falling off my shoulder while the Burmese lay people who are visiting the monastery are down on the ground kneeling to me because they so venerate the bhikkhus. I was embarrassed. I thought, you should not be venerating me. I'm not a very good monk at this point.

The practice was difficult. The usual hindrances came up. The rain and the weather were sort of driving me crazy. I wasn't having a huge amount of success with the meditation practice. I felt very awkward being in the robes again. And I got depressed. I thought, this is just awful. And I didn't see any end to the rains. I thought, it's going to be like this for six weeks. What on earth am I going to do?

So one of the characteristics of falling into these states is we forget about impermanence. We think the state we're in is going to last forever. That's why it's so helpful to reflect on these changing conditions when we're in the middle of them.

So I'll tell you what I did. I tried to reflect on impermanence. I didn't have a lot of conviction in it.

But I had a photograph of the Dalai Lama with me that I'd brought from the States. He always has this very equanimous smile on his face. He's such good company if you're ever bummed out. So I asked him a question. I said, "Your Holiness, I'm really going through a hard time. Do you have any advice for me?"

And immediately I heard his voice in my head, and it came in his Indian-accented English. It was very clear. He said, "Yes, stay optimistic, cheerful, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." Okay, I'll try.

So I tried to stay positive, optimistic, and cheerful, and sometimes I could, and sometimes I couldn't. But eventually, what do you think? The weather changed. The mood changed. Things seemed to lighten up. The situation improved. So even then, in the midst of all that difficulty on every level, impermanence came through. It got easier for a while. The rest of it's another story.

But what did come from the reflection and the conversation with the Dalai Lama was a real confidence that whatever happened, I would come out the other side of it. This is something that grows in our practice from going through all these ups and downs, going through the highs that meditation offers and then the lows that we touch. The first times we go through them, we think it's always going to be like this, especially the lows. We become really convinced they're going to last. But all we have to do is keep going. Just keep sitting and walking and don't form conclusions, and they do change. Every time, they will change.

Once we go through this cycle of up and down and up and down enough times, we really start to get that conviction. "Oh, what I'm in now is not going to last." And again this phrase "this too shall pass" starts to ring really true. So don't lose sight of that. Notice in a difficult space if the mind starts to project it into the future, as mine was doing in Burma thinking this is going to be like this the whole rest of the retreat. And then notice when it starts to change, because it always will.

One of the other areas that we notice are subject to impermanence is with emotions. As I mentioned in the talk the other night, every emotion has the nature to arise and pass away. Is there any emotion that stayed the same the whole time you've been here? Probably not. This is actually why it's safe to open to the emotions and really feel them. We don't have to push them away because their very nature is to go away.

The only thing that makes them stay is suppressing them. It's kind of curious. As long as we're open to letting them come, they will also go. So we start to really trust in this. We don't have to worry about any of these emotions if we can let them arise, because their very nature is to pass through just like weather.

Obsessive thoughts are the same. Earlier this year, I was in a period of conflict with somebody, and it was quite painful for both of us at times. We basically had a good relationship, but we got into this little quarrel, and I think we both contributed to it, and we both suffered from it. We were able to talk about it and talk it through, and we've resolved it, but while we were going through it, it was quite painful for both of us.

When it was first up, my thoughts went there a lot. I was kind of obsessing on what am I going to do about this problem and how am I going to fix this in the relationship. So when I had a spare minute, my mind would turn to and kind of obsess about that particular conflict, that particular problem in my life. And that also started to feel like it was always going to be there. I thought I'm never going to solve this problem. I'm always going to have this to deal with.

A few months later, the thought's gone. It doesn't come. Every once in a while, something will remind me of that period, and we can get together and talk about it. It doesn't stir up the obsessive thinking.

So it's sort of like everything that makes up our personality and our struggles at this point in time—it's all a passing show. The things we think about, the ways we feel about it, the situations we create in our imagining, all of that is going to go into the past the same way all the past has gone away now. All the things you were thinking about five years ago—not here now.

So we really start to see all these changes of mood, changes of thought, problems, fixations—they're just all going. And a year from now, there's going to be an entirely new set. So watching that process happen over and over and over, we no longer put so much weight on what's happening now.

They all pass.

This is a poem from Rainer Maria Rilke that I like. It's called "God Speaks to Each of Us." This is from a period when Rilke was in quite a religious mood. He had done a lot of tours of churches, I think in Russia, and then came back and wrote a short book called *The Book of Hours*, all specifically on religious themes.

In this poem, he's imagining that God the Creator fashions each of us and then gives us a little pep talk before launching us into life. This is Rilke's imagining of that conversation:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your memory,
Go to the limits of your longing and embody me.

Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in.
Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror.
Just keep going.
No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.
Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Now, give me your hand.

I especially love this section: "Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final."

There's no final resting place in this journey, in what could be called a state of mind or heart or emotion or feeling. There's only change and a growing equilibrium within the change. No feeling is final.

One of the other areas where it's really helpful to reflect on impermanence is in the way the body changes. Aging is a fact of life. Sometimes it's quite a beautiful fact of life. If you talk to someone who has a small child, it's a delight to watch that child grow and develop and change—how their bodies grow, their capabilities grow, their capacity to express their love grows. It's an amazing thing that the child doesn't will that. It just happens through every child, has happened through each of us.

I have a friend who has a six-year-old daughter. He says the hardest thing about coming away to teach is having to leave his daughter, because at six, she's still changing quite a lot. And in such a beautiful phase of life, he wants to be there for all that change. It was a beautiful aging process at that time.

Just so you know, there's a fire drill tonight, so there may be voices outside. They're all beneficent. There's no fire, but there are firemen and firewomen.

As we get a little older, the aging process doesn't look quite as inviting. We all have to start relating to the change in our appearance. If we were handsome before, we are probably not quite so handsome as the years go by. We start to lose some of our physical capabilities. We can't do all the things that we were able to do, and certainly not as quickly as we could when we were younger.

Our brains start to deteriorate as well. We lose some of our conceptual ability, and there's something else that we lose but I've forgotten. Oh, memory. We lose our memory as we get older. So we have to adapt to all these things.

Ajahn Sumedho, who is going to turn seventy-five this year, said something really interesting. He was talking at Spirit Rock—I think it was last year. He said, "You know, from the ego's point of view, this aging process is really awful. I look in the mirror and I think, where is that handsome young man I used to know? I have more aches and pains throughout my body. It's not pleasant for the ego. But," he said, "for a Dhamma reflection, it's very, very interesting, because we really feel this truth of impermanence. We feel

the fact of change day by day."

In older people who have a spiritual foundation, I've noticed many who open into this very beautiful kind of deep acceptance, surrender, love, and peace. Within the aging process, from a spiritual point of view, there are really great treasures that open up. Nobody told me this when I was young. I didn't think about aging very much anyway—I thought it happened to my parents, but not to me. Now that I'm getting older, I understand. Aging is also accompanied by a beautification of the heart if there's a spiritual foundation. So that's a wonderful thing to see.

Nonetheless, it's hard to lose our physical and mental capabilities. It's hard to see our appearance change the way that it does. This process of aging will test us, and there needs to be a lot of openness to impermanence on that level. And of course, aging only leads in one direction, as probably most of us are aware.

A friend of ours was in the hospital with a parent who had to go because of a critical acute illness, and was there with a family member, a brother. The brother said, "Wow, being here really makes me depressed. Seeing our parent go through this and all the other people here really makes me depressed." Our friend, who's a Dharma enthusiast, said, "Well, you know, your life's only going in one direction—aging, sickness and death." Her brother, who had no spiritual context to hold that observation, was shocked and felt it was quite a rude comment to make. But it is true. This is our direction.

Once we get into the aging process, we become very aware of where it's leading—that death is in our future. Sometimes this change, the extent of change that we encounter on a day-by-day basis when we're really paying attention, can feel like a kind of death. Especially in meditation like this, we get created so new each morning when we wake up that it can really feel like yesterday's over and there's kind of a new being coming alive out of that death.

This is from Krishnamurti: "Death is extraordinarily like life when we know how to live. You cannot live without dying. You cannot live if you do not die psychologically every minute. To live completely, wholly, every day, as if it were a new loveliness, there must be dying to everything of yesterday. To die is to have a mind that is completely empty of itself, empty of its daily longings, pleasures, and agonies. Death is a renewal, a mutation. When there is death, there is something totally new. Freedom from the known is death, and then you are living."

It's not always easy to keep this fact of dying in mind. You may have heard of this story from the Mahabharata, an ancient Indian text, where a wise person is asked, "What is the greatest miracle in existence?" And they answer, "The greatest miracle is that everyone is surrounded by death but believes that they won't die." So interesting.

This reflection on death is a powerful Dharma aid. It's encouraged as a support for our Dharma practice, and there are many stories in the texts of this kind of reflection. Dogen, the great Japanese Zen master

who trained in China for many years and then came back and started Soto Zen in Japan, said that his whole spiritual journey was begun when he was at his mother's funeral. He saw the smoke from the stick of incense wafting up and kind of disappearing into the air. He was just profoundly moved by the truth of his mother's passing and the disappearance of the incense smoke to reflect deeply on impermanence. He felt that's what eventually led him into his awakening.

Of course, one of the experiences that prompted the Buddha to undertake his quest was the seeing of the heavenly messengers—an old person, a sick person, and a corpse. This is what the Buddha said about seeing the corpse: "An uninstructed person seeing a corpse feels repelled and disgusted. But I reflected that I too will die and come to be a corpse someday. So it is not befitting for me to be repelled and disgusted by a corpse. Seeing this, the pride I took in life entirely vanished."

There are within the Buddha's instructions the recommendation to reflect on our nature and the susceptibility to aging, sickness, and death on a daily basis. The Buddha recommended five reflections for laypeople and monastics to undertake every day. I'll read these reflections in case they appeal to you. We just run these thoughts through our minds:

"I am of the nature to grow old. I have not gone beyond aging. I am of the nature to become sick. I have not gone beyond illness."

I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond death. At death I will be separated from all that is dear to me. And last, I am the owner of my actions. All that I do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.

These reflections are recommended so that the truth of impermanence comes through again and again in our understanding of ourselves, of life, of the world. The Buddha said this about seeing impermanence: When the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sense desire. It eliminates all desire for existence. It eliminates all ignorance and it uproots all conceit of "I am." This is equivalent to full awakening—this seeing impermanence again and again.

So how can we come into alignment with what we know to be true? There's a quote from a movie I quite like called *Bedazzled*, which I think has been underappreciated generally. The hero, a celebrated author who uses his role to be a bon vivant and seductive, delivers this charming come-on line: "Why does the existential dilemma have to be so damn bleak? Yes, we're alone in the universe. Yes, life is meaningless. Death is inevitable. But is that necessarily so depressing?"

This is a good meditator question too. The interesting thing is that the teachers who have really understood these truths of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness are some of the happiest people I've ever met on the planet. So there is some way in which seeing these truths is not actually depressing but freeing. How is that?

There's a lovely chant often sung at funerals in Thailand and other Buddhist countries that says in English: "All conditioned things are impermanent. Their nature is to arise and pass away. To live in harmony with

this truth brings the highest happiness."

When we first hear this teaching on impermanence, it may seem like a bitter pill we're asked to swallow. But we find that as we explore it, investigate it, realize it, and bring that realization into the way we live, it has the possibility of opening us up to a very deep happiness—the deepest kind of happiness.

This relies on the third kind of understanding which comes from meditative insight, the *bhavana-maya pañña*. Meditation can reveal these deep truths about impermanence in ways that thinking, hearing, and reflecting cannot.

As the mind quiets through this practice, through the continuity of attention moment by moment, we develop an ability to see more and more clearly the way things are. Out of that still and deep attention, we start to examine every aspect of our experience to see if this feature of impermanence can be seen in it.

What is the experience we investigate? It's these six realms of experience I mentioned in a very early talk: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought, and feeling. We start to bring an interested examination in each moment to every phenomenon that arises at any of these six sense doors to see if every appearance is characterized by arising and passing. To see if this teaching on impermanence applies on this moment-to-moment experiential level.

Usually one of the first doorways that opens up to see this is sensations through the body. When we come in from outside and sit down, the body may feel solid, fixed, lumpy, earth-like, immobile. As we sit for a while and the concentration deepens, as the mindfulness becomes more refined, it starts to seem like waves of energy—just pulsating energy everywhere the attention is turned. If you look even more closely, you can see how that energy is rising and passing, getting bigger, getting smaller, pulsing on, pulsing off, moment by moment, everywhere the attention is turned.

What was solid soon starts to be seen the way it really is, as just these momentary flickers on and off, on and off. We apply the same kind of inquiry to every sense door. Sight is a little more difficult, but sounds, smells, tastes, as well as sensations start to become very clear. This reflection on the rapidity of thoughts and emotions passing through becomes very clear.

All of a sudden, we start to see there is nothing fixed in this whole field of inner experience, whole field of outer experience—only arising passing, arising passing very quickly, moment after moment after moment.

When we start to see this in its full reach, we really understand there isn't anything there to cling to. It's not that we can hold on to something for a while and then it's going to change. We start to see that in the very moment, every part of our experience is arising, passing, arising, passing—or you could say coming into being and dissolving out of being. There's nothing solid there to hold onto even for a few seconds.

When we see in this way, we really know it's futile to cling because there's nothing that can even really be

called an object that we could hold onto. This is getting into the understanding of emptiness—nothing substantial anywhere that can be even made an object for a short time.

The Buddha said that our situation is like someone who's being swept downstream in a fast-moving river. It's the river of our changing experience. But this person who's being swept downstream keeps reaching out for something to hold on to on the banks of the river, but all they can grab hold of are stalks of grass. And because the current is so swift, they're just pulled out as the person is tugged along by the rush of the river. Everything that one tries to hold on to pulls away and becomes part of the moving stream.

This is from Rumi:
Think of how phenomena come trooping out of the desert of non-existence into this materiality. Morning and night, they arrive in a long line and take over from each other. "It's my turn now. Get out." This place of phenomena is a wide exchange of highways with everything going all sorts of different ways. We seem to be sitting still, but we're actually moving, and the fantasies of phenomena are sliding through us like ideas through curtains.

So meditative insight sees this is the reality. There is nothing to hold on to. And seeing at this level really shows us the only thing we can do is to let go. This turns out to be the escape. If pleasure is the gratification, and this dissolving change is the danger, the escape is in letting go, or more precisely, not taking up in the first place. The escape is in not clinging.

We can touch this through our meditation. Just because the world is subject to change and the phenomena of the world are inherently insecure, and as I think Joseph said, anything can happen at any moment, that doesn't mean that we have to respond with fear or wanting. Those are our two conditioned responses: "I want it" to hold on the pleasure; "I don't want it" to come, the pain, because we know how quickly it can change and things come and go.

Through meditation, we discover a different stance, a different relationship. Even though things are coming and going, we find the peace of mind that comes from not holding on—not holding on to keep the pleasant, not holding on to push away the unpleasant. We're in touch with impermanence.

And this is a good criterion to check your meditation. Are you in touch with change? It doesn't take such a deep concentration to realize this. "Yes, I experience change." We're in touch with impermanence. We're fully present. But there's no holding on to any of the passing phenomena. This is the doorway to peace.

This is from the Buddha: "When one establishes the perception of impermanence in all formations without exception, then the mind inclines to nibbana." Nibbana, you remember, is the element within our whole possibility of experience that is not subject to change. By developing the perception of change in every experience, the mind is inclining to this peace that's beyond change, that's not subject to arising and passing.

We could call this by different names. We could call it the unentangled knowing—full awareness, but not

caught up in any of the passing show. We could call it the freedom from greed, aversion, delusion. We could call it right attitude. This is the place we're looking to discover in our meditation. This becomes our refuge. This becomes our safety, again from the Buddha: "Having nothing, clinging to nothing, that is the island. There is no other. That is nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death."

From that place of unentangled knowing, of full presence without clinging, the mind has a possibility of opening to this direct experience of the unconditioned.

And I'll just close with this quotation from Rumi: *Be with those who mix with God as honey blends with milk and say, "Anything that comes and goes, rises and sets is not what I love most." Live in the one who created the prophets. Otherwise, you'll be like a fire left by a caravan burning out alone beside the road.*

Let's just sit for a minute, please. Anything that comes and goes, rises and sets, is not what I love most.

Live in the one who created the prophets. Otherwise, you'll be like a fire left by a caravan, burning out alone beside the road.

Let us rest in this profound teaching. Anything that comes and goes, rises and sets, is not what we love most. In this recognition lies the doorway to the deathless, the unconditioned, the peace that surpasses all understanding.

May this practice of seeing clearly, of releasing our grip on the impermanent, lead us ever closer to that which neither comes nor goes, neither rises nor sets—the timeless awareness that is our deepest nature.

Thank you for your presence and your sincere practice.

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