Impermanence: The Great Teacher

Myoshin Kelley · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:02:31

The world around us and within us is constantly teaching us when we have the eyes to see, the ears to listen, and are able to perceive without distortion—to really allow the mind to relax and receive experience as it is.

The lessons come in all kinds of forms, all kinds of ways. One of the lessons that's so evident as we practice here during this time is that of impermanence. The season, this time of year, it's there right before our eyes when we're outside looking and seeing. Seeing the leaves changing, turning color, falling. Seeing plants decay, wither, and die. It's a great support to our understanding of impermanence, a fact of life.

When we are able to translate that experience, to know that the laws that govern nature are the same laws that govern this mind and body, we see it in the world around us. And yet we may not fully realize that this truth of impermanence is an understanding that can lead us to liberation. The implications of this understanding can transform our lives and the way we live them.

There have been, over time, many great teachers who have hammered on this truth. I know my teachers have done it to me, so I know there's really truth in this. They keep pointing toward it.

Suzuki Roshi, a great Zen master, was once asked to put Buddhism in a nutshell. He responded by saying simply: impermanence. It really is such an important teaching.

One of Ajahn Chah's famous lines—he was a very revered Thai forest monk—was "It's not permanent, it's not certain." He said it so many times that some people would leave because they wanted to find something certain. They were looking for some assurance that things would be a particular way. And as they'd leave, he'd say, "Well, they'll be back." We have to find out for ourselves.

There's another teacher who lived in the nineteenth century, a Tibetan teacher named Patrul Rinpoche. He wrote a wonderful book called *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, and in this book, he too hammered on impermanence. He quoted from Geshe Potowa, who was once asked: if a person could only choose one practice out of the many different practices offered in the various traditions and Buddhist teachings, what would the most important practice be? The answer: contemplation of impermanence.

Geshe Potowa says, "At first, meditation on impermanence makes you develop faith. In the middle, it's conducive to diligence in your practice. And in the end, it helps you give birth to wisdom."

The Buddha was once asked by Ananda, his attendant, "Venerable Sir, it would be good if the Blessed One would teach me the Dharma in brief." Wouldn't you have loved to have asked the Buddha that? You can

imagine just sitting there, waiting for that response, wondering what it would be. The Buddha responded by giving a short discourse on impermanence.

At the time of the Buddha's death, at the end of this life of many years of searching, realizing, and sharing his wisdom, as he lay there about to pass away, he said: "With the light of perfect wisdom, dispel the darkness of ignorance. Subject to decay are all conditioned things. Strive on with diligence."

Subject to decay are all conditioned things—his last words to us. There must be something in it.

And yet, when we look at our lives, in many ways we know it. We see it. You're not surprised when you walk outside and the leaves are falling. You're not surprised when day turns to night, when night turns to day.

We're not surprised at so many things in life. And yet, fully realizing this has the potential to release our hearts from suffering.

I'd like to share an enlightenment song that comes from a nun who lived in the time of the Buddha. Her name was Mitakali. Before she ordained, it was said that she was very angry and difficult, very self-centered. She actually ordained upon hearing the Satipatthana Sutta—the sutta out of which this practice that we're doing here comes. And she was, in many ways, just like us. She was one of the people who didn't get fully enlightened upon hearing the Buddha utter some phrase; she actually had to practice. She spent many years, years of struggle. Probably like some of us.

So this is her poem of enlightenment. I really wanted to share it because it so clearly expresses what was happening in her mind upon realization:

Although I left home for no home and wandered full of faith, I was still greedy for possessions and praise. I lost my way, my passions used me, and I forgot the real point of my wandering life. Then as I sat in my cell there was only terror. I thought this is the wrong way. A fever of longing controls me. Life is short. Age and sickness gnaw away. I have no time for carelessness before this body breaks. And as I watched the elements of mind and body rise and fall away, I saw them as they really are. I stood up. My mind was completely free. The Buddha's teaching has been done.

It sounds so simple. "And as I watched the elements of mind and body rise and fall away, I saw them as they really are. I stood up. My mind was completely free."

We sit here all day and we watch these same elements of mind and body rise and pass away again. Can we stand up and be completely free? Maybe some. I don't know. I'll make no assumptions. But quite likely many of us can't, or aren't in a place of being completely free.

So through this, we can see that to have just a conceptual, ordinary understanding of impermanence isn't enough, even though it's this great truth. We have to be able to live our lives from this place, live with the understanding of this truth. And that understanding comes through our direct experience, an intuitive

understanding of this truth of impermanence.

In our lives, it's quite likely that impermanence is at times a convenient truth. When we have unpleasant experience and it passes away, we're happy for this truth. When it's our knee pain, back pain, when it's thoughts that we don't like and they cease. When it's somebody who's difficult for us—to maybe on retreat even see—and we don't see them, there can be a happiness in the truth of impermanence.

But this being okay with it has its limits. It's not okay when it's a sense of stable, deep concentration, and then, for whatever reasons, it changes, and we keep getting distracted. It's not okay when someone who has been very dear to us in our lives suddenly disappears, is no longer present. It's not okay when it's something in our world that we've been banking on for security, for a sense of happiness, something that keeps us feeling safe. And then it changes.

Speaking about all of the changing colors, which on one level are so beautiful, so touching—one fall I had a real reflection on this, driving along, seeing these colors. And then I looked at my skin, and I saw all these brown spots coming from aging. And it wasn't so beautiful when it was on my skin. There was a contraction that happened.

So we don't always live easefully with this truth of impermanence. There can be the wanting to deny it, avoid it, wanting not to see it. And it can often happen that when experience is pleasant, the way we like it, it's so easy to believe this is how it is, this is how it's going to stay. In our practice, we see it over and over again in those just-how-we-like-it sittings. "Now I've got it. I understand." It's so easeful.

It's like, what was the problem? It's gone. The struggle's gone. And the mind, subtly and sometimes not so subtly, believes, "Oh, yeah, it'll stay this way now. This is the exception." But it's not the exception. It will change.

This not understanding impermanence comes about because we live with the illusion of continuity when we don't have wise attention, when there isn't careful observation of what's unfolding. When we don't look closely, there isn't the recognition of just how quickly things change. And so experience takes on this appearance of being continual, continuous. It gives the illusion of permanence. This is one of the distortions of perception that I spoke about last week.

To really begin to see impermanence, we examine it directly—not as an overlay. We don't need to create impermanence; it's already there. But what happens is that when awareness begins to steady, this is what's revealed. This is what's seen.

It can be as simple as being with our knee pain. At first it seems like something solid, tight. It feels like just one pain. And then when the mind is relaxed and steady with the experience, we begin to see there are all kinds of sensations there. There's nothing stable in it. It's all changing. We do this not just with body sensations but with everything that arises in our experience. And this really helps to inform us, gives us information that's useful, coming directly out of our own experience.

This is really important work. Because when we have lived by trying not to see impermanence, by continually looking for what will give us a sense of safety, what will give us a sense of permanence—one day that will be shattered, that will be broken. Because everything, all conditioned experience, is impermanent.

In our practice, we see both the way experiences arise and disappear. We also come in contact with our reactions to this, because there tends to be a lot of dis-ease with impermanence. On one level it's totally understandable. If we are identifying with experience and it's so unstable, then any sense of happiness, any sense of self that's hanging on that, is going to be rattled in the face of this fact of life.

The mind has all these stories, all these ideas of what would happen if we didn't hold on. What would happen if this seemingly stable ground becomes unstable? But they're just ideas. They're just concepts. It's not the truth of the way things are. And that's something we need to recognize.

In our practice, at times the seeing of impermanence can be so strong that we have a sense of just taking a step and the ground falling away from beneath our feet. There's this real sense that there's nothing stable there. And of course the mind, because in the past it was looking for stability through experience, will have ideas. But they're not true. We need to see the concepts we have about needing security in these experiences—and to know they're just concepts, to know they're just ideas.

There are consequences to not seeing impermanence. One consequence is that we take our lives for granted. Just look at being here on retreat. It's easy to just take for granted that there'll be an end to the retreat. We take for granted that when we get up in the morning, there'll be an end to the day. We take for granted that time will continue in the way that it has.

I've seen when I've been doing long retreats, getting up in the morning, there's a bit of a struggle and just this sense of, "Oh well, I won't really apply myself today. Tomorrow I'll feel better, and then I'll apply." There's this taking for granted that there is a tomorrow. I once had a teacher who said this over and over again.

He said, "Every day I tell you to wake up, and every day you say tomorrow."

When I was with him, I didn't really see that. I listened to it. But very shortly after I left the community where he was, I became very sick. As I was getting sicker and sicker, I kept imagining that I would live—first of all, it was for another month. And then it was for another couple of weeks. And then another week. And then one day, there was just this feeling: today's the day. Today's the day I'm going to die.

At that time, I had just a few friends around me. And so I really noticed—I would say something and their response would be, "Oh, tomorrow." And I could see this way of postponing. I was laying there just feeling like, I don't have tomorrow. This is what I have right now. And it had a very profound effect on me.

Now, obviously, I didn't die. I'm still here. But for a long time, people would, as happens in life, ask me to

make plans. And at first, when people would talk about something in the future, my mind would go into a gap. I didn't know how to do it. How do you make plans? It seemed like writing a novel. And then I realized that I simply had to be ready to abandon whatever plans I made should circumstances change. But it was very profound to taste this.

Probably many of us have had similar experiences where there is some strong striking of impermanence. Sickness, feeling that death is close, is definitely a way that really wakes us up out of complacency. It helps us to arrive in the present moment. There was once a famous sage who was asked where all his wisdom came from. And he responded by saying, "I live as a man who, when he wakes up in the morning, doesn't know if he will be alive in the evening."

Just noticing, in your time here, is there a tendency to take the future for granted, as if there is a tomorrow? This isn't to throw us into fear, anxiety, grasping at this moment. We can really just recognize that that thought of the future is just a thought of the future. But it is in this moment that the potency is.

This is from Nagarjuna, a South Indian monk, philosopher, and mystic. He says, "Life flickers in the flurries of a thousand ills, more fragile than a bubble in a stream. In sleep, each breath departs and is again drawn in. How wondrous that we wake up living still."

It's interesting with impermanence to look and see in our experience where we tend to lapse into a belief of permanence. It may be different for each of us, but there are some common aspects of experience. One is that of relationships. We live in a world of interconnectedness. Our lives are made up of many different relationships. There can be people on the periphery that we come in contact with—they come and they go and this is okay. But then there can also be people who are very dear to us, and it's much more difficult to accept this truth of impermanence.

We find that in the midst of the nourishment of these relationships, we again think this is something reliable, something that we will always be able to turn to, that brings stability to our lives and will continue to be so. But then change happens, and the change comes in many different ways. It could be simply our children growing up and leaving home. It could be through death. It could be through people changing, partners changing, having different needs. If we have been hanging on to that relationship in some way, believing it will always be there for us, we become devastated with this change. It brings great grief, sorrow, and we often tend to take it personally—that something's gone wrong, it's some mistake. And we suffer immensely in the face of it.

One aspect that happens in these relationships is that when someone has been dear to us, has been a central part in our lives—and sometimes that might not even mean the person's around a lot, but just knowing that they're alive in the world can bring great comfort—when they're gone, there's loss. And many times, because we haven't understood impermanence, we haven't practiced, haven't allowed the mind to register this sense of loss, we become broken by it.

This doesn't have to be the case. The loss will be there—it is a change in conditions, an absence. But when we understand impermanence, we know this is the way of things.

I'd like to share something from the life of the Buddha, because he had this wisdom, this understanding. It's said that at the time of the death of his two chief disciples, who were like his left and his right arm, he addressed the Sangha. He said, "Bhikkhus, this assembly appears to me empty now that Sariputta and Moggallana have attained final Nibbana. This assembly was not empty for me earlier."

He also went on to say, "It is amazing on the part of the Tathagata"—that's how he referred to himself—"that when such a pair of disciples has attained final nirvana, there is no sorrow or lamentation in the Tathagata." He experienced this loss, but there was no sorrow or lamentation. His understanding was so deep. He went on to say, "May what is born, come to be, conditioned, and subject to disintegration not disintegrate? That is impossible."

He could live his life from this place of understanding. I put that out just as a potential—to know that it is possible, by understanding impermanence, to face loss without being broken by it, knowing that this is in accordance with natural laws.

But it's also quite likely that we are still in the process of this understanding. And so I'd like to share another piece from the suttas that comes from Ananda, spoken after the Buddha died. This was a really significant year in the Buddhist world. There was the death of Sariputta and Moggallana, the two chief disciples. There was also a beloved king named Pasanadi who died within that year. And the Buddha passed away.

For Ananda, these were the central figures in his life—the people near and dear to him, the ones upon whom there was perhaps a sense of reliability. As I was reading this today, I was looking around at my own world. The image I had was as if suddenly all my teachers died, my fellow teachers. It would be profound. I'd have to do all the work. It would be profound.

And so this is what Ananda said: "My companions have passed away, the master too is gone. There is no friendship now that equals this—mindfulness directed to the body. The old ones now have passed away. The new ones do not please me so much. Today I meditate alone, like a bird gone to its nest."

He turned to his practice, his nest. This is what we can all turn to in moments where loss is strong—coming back to our nest. It's not going to be helpful if we think, "Oh, I shouldn't feel this. I should understand impermanence." We just turn to our practice.

Now, in our practice it may not be that we're facing such a big loss as the death of a loved one. And so it is the time where we can really practice with loss in any way, any way that it occurs during the day. I found it arising in really unexpected ways. I was having a lot of unpleasant experience once, and it disappeared. And there came this huge sense of loss. Surprising, but it can happen.

Who knows what that loss may be for you. It may be loss of a mind state. It may be loss of your favorite walking place. Maybe loss of some article of clothing that you put in the laundry. In any way it comes, when that loss is there, let your heart be vulnerable. Be present. We really need to see in our own experience the constructs we have around experience that keep us from touching into this truth.

This is a teaching from Ajahn Chah: "Conditions all go their own natural way. Whether we laugh or cry over them, they just go their own way. And there is no knowledge or science that can prevent the natural course of things."

You can get a dentist to look at your teeth, but even if he can fix them, they still finally go their natural way. Eventually, even the dentist has the same problem. Everything falls apart in the end.

So relationships, an aspect of experience—can we be conscious in this, entering into relationships not so enchanted by the promise of everlasting happiness, but with the wisdom of knowing that this too is impermanent?

Another aspect of impermanence that we can often struggle with is in relationship to our bodies. These bodies carry a strong sense of self with them—my body, the way it is, an image of this body. And if when we were young we attached to the idea of having a young, beautiful, healthy body, when change happens, it's going to create suffering.

I mentioned my brown aging spots. I also remember being young and finding a stretch mark—my first stretch mark. I was horrified. I went to my mother: "Mom, look at this! What is this?" And there was a sense that this was a tragedy. There are so many ways that our bodies will change. And this, if we have the right attitude, is a teacher. It's here to instruct us.

But of course, our culture doesn't help us with all of the advertisements that surround us. I was reading an advertisement once that said, "You don't have to grow old." And then we have all the anti-aging products—against aging. Sometimes, especially through health foods and the new age culture—not to diminish everything—there can come this belief that if we eat the right foods, if we exercise the right amount, that this body will be preserved in its fullest form. And yet, it's not the truth. There have been great doctors who had amazing diets that they professed and who died of cancer. That's not to say there wasn't something helpful in what they said, but to perpetuate the myth that we can defy this aging process, that we can defy death if we just get all the right ingredients—this isn't helpful and will only set up more struggle in our lives.

This aging process that we go through, if we view it with the right attitude—when you see another wrinkle, when another part begins to sag, whatever it might be—look at the reaction. Is it okay? Is it okay? We got the response: "No, it's not okay." Be with that. This is life speaking to us. Can we listen?

There are wonderful role models in the world who present something different than what the advertising world does. One was Sri Nisargadatta, a sage from India. He was once asked, "What's it like to be an old

yogi?" He replied, "Oh, I just watch the memory decompose on an almost daily basis." And he roared with laughter.

We won't roar with laughter if we only have an intellectual understanding of impermanence. But when we see that this is the nature of this body, this is what bodies do, it's the way things are—it's okay. It doesn't mean we don't take care of this body, but its nature is conditioned.

The natural world has so helped me with this. Even as a young child, when everyone was denying suffering, going out into nature—just seeing how there was decay, there was sickness, death, there was impermanence—and it was the way of things. Nature just holds it with a grace, a grace that is possible for us when we have understanding.

We find that when we contemplate impermanence, when we come close to this, it's natural that we will also contemplate death. They are so linked, birth and death. This is what we see. We see in our practice: birth of a breath, death of a breath. Birth of a thought, death of a thought. And we see it in the greater picture of life—that what we're involved in is a dynamic process. It's not static.

This goes from everything on the largest level in life, just looking at the cosmos itself. I love opening my mind up to the stars, the sky, space. There's something about it that just opens some small perception of this little I, me, mine. Just opens. And there's this whole cosmos that's always changing.

Stars are dying. New galaxies are born. Everything exists in this state of flux. And right down to the microscopic level, things are being born and dying all the time.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama said about the awareness of death: "Awareness of death is the very bedrock of the path. Until you have developed this awareness, all other practices are obstructed."

We can have such deeply seated fear about death that we don't even let the mind come in contact with it. When we touch into it in our lives, we simply move on. We fill up space. We don't let it be touched. Just listening to myself talk tonight, I can see why when we come on retreat, sometimes it just feels enormous—some of the feelings that we're having. These are feelings we have been so skillful at avoiding. But we're allowing them to surface, doing so with awareness.

Getting back to death and how this unfolds: being born means that one day we will die. This is so hard to grasp. We've only known the world with us in it. I remember being a small child and saying to my mom, "Mom, what was the world like before I was born?" The interesting piece was that I then tried to imagine the world without me. But even though we see death around us, it's still really hard to get that this mind-body experience as we know it will cease to be.

I was watching a news program where a soldier was being interviewed. He was part of a division of the army where a lot of his peers, a lot of people he was with, had been killed. He was asked how he was able to cope with this, and he replied by saying that the only way he could continue to go out and fight each

day was to believe that it would never happen to him. It's not unique to him—we often live believing it will never happen to us.

Annie mentioned last night as a reflection that's helpful to bring up energy in our practice: to reflect on death can bring up energy. It also brings us in contact with whatever feelings we may have around that. And I don't know about you, but I certainly would rather face that now than be on my deathbed and suddenly have these fears surface. That's why our practice can be so helpful. It can really help us to have the tools to face death without fear—or if fear arises, to have some sense of how to be with that.

There's another form of death that in my own life I came to see seems even stronger than the fear of my own death: the death of this dearly loved planet. It's hard for me to really be in a place of acceptance of this. When I think of loss of my own life, that's one piece. But this planet, which is home to so many forms of life, that has nourished and sustained—to think that one day this too will be gone. It's been a very powerful reflection.

One time after the events of 9/11, I was sitting, quite in a state of shock. I did something that I often do when there's uncertainty, when I'm looking for something that will help me frame my experience in some way: I opened up the suttas. As I opened them that day, my eyes fell upon this line—it was the Buddha speaking—and he said, "One day, O monks, this world will end." When I read that, I slammed the book shut. It was so close to the bone that day. I wasn't ready to go there. I just kept sitting there in a state of shock, feelings arising.

A little while later, I said, okay, I'll open the book again. Maybe it'll be more encouraging this next time. So I opened the book to a distinctly different spot, and my eyes fell down again. The question was being asked, "What happens when a world system ends?" It was a moment of disbelief right then. And then the response was: "Beings are usually reborn in the deva realm of streaming radiance." It sounded a little more promising.

But what struck me in reading those passages was, again, this sense of matter-of-factness, this mind equanimous in the face of that. And it reminded me of the Zen master with whom I've practiced, Roshi John Daido Loori. One day in speaking with him, he said, "We live on a dying planet." When he said that, he said it with full equanimity.

And he didn't say it by way of a statement of doom and gloom. He didn't say it by way of resignation. He is a man who is fully alive. He expresses compassionate action in the way he lives his life. He has petitioned the Japanese government. He's an activist in his own life. But he could say, "We live on a dying planet," because he has this understanding that all conditioned things are of the nature to decay.

After 9/11, and reading these couple of suttas very soon after, I found myself on intensive retreat. I was in this place of feeling how uncertain life is, how quickly conditions can change in our life. I sat with my own dis-ease, my own distress with that, and I came across another sutta which was so helpful to me. It's called

the Simile of the Mountain. The question was posed: What should one do when from all directions death is approaching? Sometimes in our life, we may have this sense that death is all around us. It's coming. What should we do?

And the answer was: As aging and death are rolling in on you, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma, to live righteously, and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds? We live in accordance with the way things are, honoring this moment, living with a wholeheartedness that tends to this moment, but understands that the experiences, the circumstances are all subject to change.

So our practice helps us to see this truth of impermanence. In any moment, it reveals itself, shows itself. Letting it become a deeply rooted and realized understanding that becomes the basis out of which we live our life. When we deeply understand it, we are not left grasping, trying to make permanent that which by its very nature is impermanent. We're no longer trying to do the impossible. One yogi once said to me, "You know, it's as if I've been betting on the wrong horse all my life." And that's all it is. And we come to know the mind of non-grasping, non-clinging.

This is again from Ajahn Chah: "When the mind starts to realize that all things without exception are by their very nature uncertain, the problem of grasping and attachment start to decrease and wither away. If we understand this, the mind starts to let go and put things down. Not grasping onto things, attachment can come to an end. When it comes to an end, one must reach the Dhamma. There is nothing beyond this."

We come to know the peace of the non-grasping mind. This teaching that comes from many great masters, who have hammered it into us—can we look towards the truth of it in our own experience, moment by moment?

And this is from Patrul Rinpoche again: "Impermanence is everywhere, yet I still think things will last. I have reached the gates of old age, yet still I pretend I am young." I could really relate to that. "Bless me and misguided beings like me that we may truly understand impermanence."

May all beings come to know the truth of impermanence and the liberation that it leads to.

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