Arising and Passing Away

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Earlier in the retreat, we differentiated between three different aspects of the mind: consciousness, mindfulness, and wisdom.

Consciousness is the simple act of knowing—knowing different sense objects, which includes objects of mind. This is just the ordinary knowing as we move throughout the day. It's not particularly reflective. It's often conditioned by many of our reactions. It's what I call black lab or golden retriever consciousness. If you just watch them move through the day, just driven by sense impressions—we have a lot of black lab consciousness going on. And for human beings, it's often characterized by being lost in thought.

So this is ordinary consciousness, simple knowing. Mindfulness is when we become aware that we're knowing. With this mindful awareness, we're no longer so caught up and carried away by the stories of our mind, by that inner narration that's going on so often. We're mindful enough to see and to observe what is going on within us and also in the world around us.

As the momentum of mindfulness increases—and the momentum increases through a steady continuity of awareness, that's what builds it—mindfulness then starts to flow along by itself. At this point, it doesn't really require that much effort. The steadiness and continuity of awareness, of mindfulness, does not come about through forceful efforting. It comes about through a steady but relaxed openness to whatever it is that's arising.

But here I'd like to draw an important distinction between things that sometimes get confused in practice. It's important to understand the difference between a relaxed practice and a casual practice, because these two are really quite different. Casual is the state of mind which I call "more or less mindful." We're kind of mindful. We're kind of there. We're more or less there. But we're not really there in a careful way. So don't confuse this state of casualness with a relaxed but caring attention.

This distinction is very important if we want to deepen our practice, to really build the momentum of mindfulness. We want to do it in a very relaxed way, settled back into the moment. It's not forcing, it's not efforting, but there's a great deal of care and interest and attentiveness involved. So really pay attention as you move through the day. You might find that you have this careful awareness as you sit and maybe in the walking meditation, but then at other times you might find it becoming more casual. Notice that and see if you can bring the relaxed continuity throughout the entire day.

As awareness—and I'm using it here synonymously with mindfulness, although sometimes it has a slightly different meaning—as the awareness or mindfulness gets steadier, gets stronger, it becomes a platform

for wisdom. It's not enough to be mindful. It's not enough to be aware. We want to use the awareness as a platform for learning something about what we're observing. When we're aware of something, what are we learning? Is there an investigation? This is the growth of wisdom.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which is the discourse the Buddha gave on the four foundations of mindfulness, there is a refrain that is repeated after each particular set of instructions. In this refrain, the Buddha is telling us very directly how to investigate. The instruction is very clear. He is pointing in this refrain to the wisdom that liberates the heart and the mind. And in this discourse, in this sutta, which is just not very many pages long, the refrain occurs thirteen different times. So perhaps the Buddha is trying to tell us something that we should pay attention to.

Tonight I want to talk about this particular wisdom aspect of the practice, where the Buddha tells us in this refrain to abide contemplating the arising, the passing away, and both the arising and passing away of each object of awareness. Abide contemplating the arising, the passing away, both the arising and passing away, of whatever it is that arises in our experience.

Ledi Sayadaw, who was one of the very great Burmese masters—a meditation master and a great scholar of Buddhism who lived in the early 1900s—said that not seeing arising and passing away is ignorance, while seeing all phenomena as impermanent is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening. Again, it's a very clear instruction about the direction of our practice.

Not seeing arising and passing away is ignorance. And seeing impermanence is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening.

The Buddha emphasized this understanding in many different ways. In one teaching he talked about different levels of meritorious action. Of course he began with the great benefit of generosity and how meritorious, how purifying that action is. He described how the power of generosity is made more profound by the purity of the giver, the purity of the gift, the purity of the receiver. So, for example, if one gives something to the Buddha or to enlightened beings, it's like planting seeds in a very fertile field. There's tremendous abundance that comes from that gift.

But then he said something quite remarkable. He said that better than giving, more meritorious than giving to the Buddha himself and the whole order of enlightened monks and nuns, would be one moment's absorption in the feeling of loving-kindness. So powerful is one moment of being absorbed in metta.

And then he went on to say that many times more powerful than even being absorbed in the feeling of loving-kindness is the direct, clear seeing of the arising and passing away of phenomena. So you may think as you go through the day, "What is going on here? Is anything being accomplished?" To whatever degree we're seeing the impermanence of phenomena, it's a tremendously powerful, transforming insight, even though we may not be realizing it at the time, because we're learning something very profound

about the nature of the mind and the body and the world.

The Buddha said, "When, bhikkhus, the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust, it eliminates all ignorance, it uproots the conceit 'I am.'" When the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it accomplishes some pretty extraordinary things. This is no small accomplishment—eliminating all sensual lust, all ignorance, and uprooting the conceit "I am," all from watching the arising and passing away of phenomena.

At one time, the Buddha's cousin and attendant, the very beloved monk Ananda, was speaking to the Buddha and recalling all of the marvelous qualities of the Buddha—someone who had brought to perfection all of the qualities, the paramis, of generosity and renunciation and love and kindness and compassion and truthfulness and wisdom, this whole long list of virtues the Buddha had brought to completion. Ananda was going on and on about all the wonderful qualities of the Buddha.

And then the Buddha replied, "That being so, Ananda, remember this too as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Tathagata"—which is how the Buddha referred to himself. "Remember this too as a wonderful and marvelous quality: for the Tathagata, feelings are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear. Perceptions are known as they arise, are present, and disappear. Thoughts are known as they arise, are present, as they disappear. Remember this too, Ananda, as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Tathagata."

Is the message coming through? Seeing the arising and passing away, seeing clearly and repeatedly the impermanence of feelings, the impermanence of perceptions, the impermanence of thoughts. These are not subtle things. These are just the ordinary aspects of our experience. But we want to be paying attention with wisdom as these different aspects of experience arise.

So it's very simple. Understanding this is not complicated. But we might ask, why is this a marvelous quality of the Tathagata? What makes the seeing of impermanence so powerful? How does it eliminate sensual lust and ignorance and uproot conceit?

In many places in the suttas, the Buddha said that when we see that everything that arises also passes away, that whatever is subject to arising is also subject to passing away, in seeing this we become disenchanted and disillusioned. Becoming disenchanted, we become dispassionate, and through dispassion the mind is liberated.

Through seeing impermanence, we become disenchanted, disillusioned, dispassionate. But right here, in these words of liberating wisdom, it's not uncommon for doubts to arise. Because in English, the words disenchanted, disillusioned, dispassionate have quite negative connotations. We think of being disillusioned or disenchanted—these mindstates don't sound all that appealing. Is this what I'm practicing for?

But if we examine their meaning more closely, we can begin to understand their connection to

freedom—not as an abstract ideal, not as something far off in the future, but in our present, moment-to-moment experience.

Becoming disenchanted means breaking the spell of enchantment. It's waking up into a fuller and greater reality. This is precisely the happy ending of so many myths and fairy tales—people waking up from the spell of enchantment. We wake up from a spell of sleep, from the spell of delusion. One way we experience this many times a day is when we wake up from having been lost in a thought or a daydream. When we're lost, it's like being enchanted. And then we wake up. Pay attention to that moment of waking up.

What is it like? That moment is very significant because we're going from delusion to wisdom. We're going from sleep to wakefulness. What is the wakeful mind like? We have a chance to experience it so directly, many times a day. So watch the mind, watch the quality of the mind at that time.

We can also understand the power of enchantment and how often we're in its spell when we see how desire casts its spell on the mind. It might be for some little thing. It might be a full-blown obsession. For the duration of the desire, for however long we're lost in it, we have only one thing on our minds. It's like this great tunnel vision.

A retreat is a wonderful place to begin to observe this because the possibility for fulfilling our desires is somewhat limited. We still find ways, but there's much less possibility here than when we're living our lives in the world. So we have a chance to really look carefully and to see what is going on when the mind is under the spell, in the enchantment of desire.

So we look, we pay attention. When desire or the wanting mind arises, notice the feeling of its compelling nature, just how it grips us. And again, it might be for quite different things. It might be a sexual fantasy that just compels the mind, or a longing to be with somebody, or a desire for a favorite food, or desire in the form of endless planning, desiring to be something in the future.

And then, if you can, notice the very moment when the desire leaves, when it passes away—because it always will. Has anybody had unremitting desire from the beginning of the retreat? You may have had many, but they all arise and are there for some time and pass away. Pay attention just to that moment when the desire passes away. It feels like we've suddenly been let out of the grip of something.

I have this image of a great hawk or some bird with big talons having grabbed something. It's like desire grabs the mind like that. And then when the desire passes, it's like this huge sense of relief and openness back into the present. But this is not something to believe. This is something really to investigate for yourself. See what it's like. Desire is there and it's not there.

There's a simple everyday example of this enchantment of the wanting mind, the spell that it casts on us. It's something I call catalog consciousness. Have you had the experience, not here, but when you're home, of making the mistake of opening a catalog and then turning the pages, waiting for something to want? It's

like, "Oh, nothing on this page, maybe on the next page I'll want something." We're wanting to want. And do you know the sense of relief when you finally get to the last page? We're out of the grip of it. That's the spell. That's the enchantment.

And this is what the Buddha is talking about. Through the seeing of impermanence, we become disenchanted. So this is not some gloomy state. This is a place of freedom. Likewise, disillusioned is not the same as being discouraged or disappointed. Being disillusioned is a reconnection with what is true. Why should we want to live in illusion? Disillusion—that's what our whole practice is about. It's about waking up to what is true.

And dispassion doesn't mean indifference. It doesn't mean apathy. Dispassion really is a mind of great openness and equanimity that is free from the confines of wanting and grasping.

A sustained contemplation of impermanence frees our minds. It leads to a shift in the way we experience reality.

We begin to see through the illusion of some stable, self-centered existence, both in what is perceived and also in what is perceiving. We simply see the constant play of change.

Science has been illuminating this in some very profound ways. In a recent issue of *Inquiring Mind*, the editor Wes Nisker—who is also a teacher and good friend—wrote one of his wonderful columns on science and the dharma. I happened to come across it, and he writes:

"Inside the subatomic world, we find evidence of an impermanence that is so impermanent it makes our ordinary reality seem frozen in time. Way down inside of everything, where the quarks are doing a line dance inside of an electron, events are occurring in increments far shorter than the blink of an eye, considered to be one-tenth of a second. In the subatomic world, time is sometimes measured in what scientists have named attoseconds—a millionth of a trillionth of a second. It takes an electron about one attosecond to travel all the way around a proton. That's a millionth of a trillionth of a second. Meanwhile, inside the proton, perhaps one level deeper into reality, an attosecond would be regarded as a long nap. Down here, time is measured in zeptoseconds, which is a billionth of a trillionth of a second—before you can even blink. Zepto, it's gone."

I think at some point the physicists realized they had entered a Marx Brothers routine, where the jokes are coming so fast you begin to see that it's all a joke. So when they started measuring things changing even faster, in trillionths of a trillionth of a second, they named it a yoctosecond. Atto, zepto, and yocto. The time it takes for a quark to circle around inside a proton is somewhere between a zeptosecond and a yoctosecond. All you can do is smile and let go.

That's a whole other level of seeing impermanence. Now, it's likely we have not quite refined our attention to the level of yoctoseconds, but we can be mindful of impermanence on very many levels, both internally and externally, so that we're no longer so caught in grasping, so that we don't drown so much in the

suffering that comes from it.

Sometimes the truth of change is so ordinary that we have stopped paying attention to it. We simply overlook it. Most obvious—and it's very obvious here—are the changes in nature, the changes of the weather. It's just changing continually. Or on a larger scale, the climate changes occurring across the planet, or the evolution and extinction of species. Every place in nature, when we look, change is so obvious.

We see changes in society on the collective level—the rise and fall of civilizations. As mentioned earlier, the Buddha said that the perception of impermanence uproots the conceit "I am." This insight might help us on the national level as well. As a society, if we believe our ascendance, our wealth, our power will always be there, we really are strengthening the national ego. And so often then we respond to situations in the world in very inappropriate and harmful ways. Just as ego-centeredness on a personal level results in a great deal of harm, on a national level it is the same process. It comes about because we do not acknowledge, on the level of civilization and society, that it's all changing.

Understanding deeply the truth of change—the inevitable rise and fall of our own civilization, our own culture and society—brings a much greater sense of humility and compassion.

On a more personal level, we see impermanence in generations of people being born and dying. One of the beautiful things about these woods in New England is walking through and seeing miles of stone walls and old stone foundations of houses, where now trees are just growing up through them. What histories, what life stories are told by those stones—and what is left? Where are all those stories now? Where are all those people now? Where are all those lives now?

We can see the changing nature of our relationships, our work, and most intimately, our bodies and minds.

It's possible to acknowledge the truth of change but perhaps in a way that is still somewhat abstracted. This is not an obscure truth. We could go out to anybody on the street and say, "Do things change?" and everybody would say yes. But somehow it's abstracted from our lives, almost as if change happens to everyone else. We haven't really internalized the depth of this understanding, the profundity of this wisdom.

I'd like to read something. It's a little long, but it's a beautiful teaching on impermanence from the great Tibetan master Shabkar, one of the great Dzogchen masters from perhaps the eighteenth century, possibly the seventeenth. He wandered in the mountains of Tibet. This is from a book called *The Life of Shabkar*.

One day I went for some fresh air to a meadow covered with flowers. While singing and remaining in a state of awareness, I noticed among the profusion of flowers spread out before me one particular flower waving gently on its long stem and giving out a sweet fragrance. As it swayed from side to side, I heard this song in the rustling of its petals.

This is the flower speaking:

"Listen to me, mountain dweller. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but in fact, you even lack awareness of impermanence and death, let alone any realization of emptiness. For those with such awareness, all phenomena teach impermanence and death. I, the flower, will now give you, the yogi, a bit of helpful advice.

A flower born in a meadow, I enjoy perfect happiness with my brightly colored petals in full bloom. Surrounded by an eager cloud of bees, I dance gaily, swaying gently with the wind. When a fine rain falls, my petals wrap around me. When the sun shines, I open like a smile. Right now I look well enough, but I won't last long—not at all. Unwelcome frost will dull the vivid colors till, turning brown, I wither. Later still, winds violent and merciless will tear me apart until I turn to dust.

You, hermit, are of the same nature. Surrounded by a host of disciples, you enjoy a fine complexion. Your body of flesh and blood is full of life. When others praise you, you dance with joy. Right now you look well enough, but you won't last long—not at all. Unhealthy aging will steal away your healthy vigor. Your hair will whiten and your back will grow bent. When touched by the merciless hands of illness and death, you will leave this world for the next life. Since you, mountain-roaming hermit, and I, a mountain-born flower, are mountain friends, I have offered you these words of good advice."

Then the flower fell silent and remained still.

In reply I sang, "O brilliant, exquisite flower, your discourse on impermanence is wonderful indeed, but what shall the two of us do? Is there nothing that can be done?"

The flower replied, "Among all the activities of samsara, there is not one thing that is lasting. Whatever is born will die. Whatever is joined will come apart. Whatever is gathered will disperse. Whatever is high will fall. Having considered this, I resolve not to be attached to these lush meadows, even now, in the full glory of my display, even as my petals unfold in splendor. You too, while strong and fit, should abandon your clinging, meditate in solitude, seek the pure field of freedom, the great serenity."

Even flowers can teach us. It's all around—the same teaching everywhere. But do we take it in? Do we really reflect on it deeply in our practice? Are we paying attention to this truth which is manifesting every moment: that whatever arises is also passing away? There is no exception.

Sometimes this teaching can be very fierce.

Many of you have heard us speak at different times of our wonderful teacher Dipa Ma, who was this extraordinary woman who had tremendous suffering in her life. She was Bengali, living in Burma as a young woman. She married, didn't have children for a long time—which was a tremendous disappointment—and then had three children, one after the other. In a very short period of time, her husband died and two of her children died. She was devastated by grief. She said that basically she was in

bed for five years, and her family and friends thought she was going to die.

Finally somebody urged her to go to one of the monasteries to meditate. She ended up going, and her paramis suddenly came to full fruition. She was an extraordinary yogi, and in a very short period of time had developed very high stages of enlightenment, all the levels of concentration, all the many psychic powers that come with that. She was an amazing practitioner.

In meeting her after her time in Burma, when she was living in India, she was simply a being completely full of love. It was like love and emptiness as one. A Sufi teacher described being hugged by Dipa Ma "so thoroughly that all my six feet fit into her great, vast, empty heart with room for the whole of creation." And it was like that. Her heart was so full of unconditional love.

When my son died in 1984, Deepa Ma shocked me with her words. It was a hard teaching I have not forgotten. "Today your son has gone from this world. Why are you shocked? Everything is impermanent. Your life is impermanent. Your husband is impermanent. Your son is impermanent. Your money is impermanent. Your building is impermanent. Everything is impermanent. There is nothing that is permanent. When you are alive, you might think, this is my daughter, this is my husband, this is my property, this is my building, this car belongs to me. But when you are dead, nothing is yours. Sudipti, you think you are a serious meditator, but you must really learn that everything is impermanent."

That's an amazing teaching in that situation, and it could only come from somebody like Deepa Ma who had experienced this herself. This was not abstract philosophy. This is somebody who had gone through that suffering and come out to a place of tremendous wisdom and freedom. We need to take it in on all of these levels.

The truth of impermanence is very profound, and our practice is learning to see it and open to it on deeper and deeper levels. What is so surprising, given that impermanence shows itself in so many ways all around us and within us, is that we still find change surprising. That's what's surprising—that somehow in our lives, in our meditation practice, we count on things staying a certain way. Or at least if they're going to change, that they change in the way we want them to change, that they'll change to our liking.

There's a mantra that came to mind in my practice which has really helped me. The little mantra is: anything can happen anytime. When people first hear that, they might think it sounds like such a fearful state. It's exactly the opposite. When that phrase came to mind, it was in a time of change that I was not looking for. When I settled into the understanding of it, it was a huge relief, because it was letting go of the defensiveness against the world, defensiveness against change. Change is what characterizes every aspect of our experience. When we recognize that, when we open to it, it changes our relationship to it. It actually brings us to a place of great peace.

How many times in your meditation—and this has happened to me so many times—we might be having a

really clear, concentrated, calm sitting. The bell rings, we get up, we do the walking, and come back expecting to pick up just where we left off. And then when we don't, when the body hurts and the mind is restless, the mind starts thinking, "Oh, what did I do wrong? How did I mess up?" It's not that anything was wrong. Things change. Conditions change. And much more important than having a calm sitting is understanding that things change. That would be a much more fruitful understanding than simply sitting in a place of calm. We can use everything that happens to deepen this wisdom.

When we pay careful attention, we see that everything is disappearing and new things arising in every single moment. When you walk out of the hall after the talk, try a little experiment as a way of practicing this: notice the rapid flow of changes, the flow of visual forms as you're walking out, the changing sounds of people moving, the changing sensations in the body as you're walking, the fleeting thoughts that may be coming and going. Every moment, a flow of change is happening. And what happens to each of these experiences? Do any of them last at all?

This truth of change is so obvious and so ever-present that most of us have stopped paying attention to it. And yet all the teachings of the Buddha, and Shabkar, and Deepa Ma—they're all reminding us this is what we have to look at, this is what we have to understand, not abstractly. We really have to be living this understanding.

In one discourse, the Buddha makes a distinction between the establishment of mindfulness and the development of mindfulness. This is a very interesting distinction.

As the mindfulness gets stronger, as the momentum of awareness builds, our practice shifts from the establishment of mindfulness to the development of mindfulness. The establishment of mindfulness means paying attention in the moment to what is arising—there's this, there's this, there's this. We're getting very clear, moment after moment, about what it is that's arising.

As our practice deepens, we move into the development of mindfulness, which is the awareness of the process of change itself. This becomes more predominant for us. We begin to pay more attention to the process of things arising and passing than to what it is that's arising. We go from content to process. We see that whatever is arising on any level of perception, whatever arises will pass away, that all experience is just this endless flow, this endless passing show.

It's like the fast-flowing current of a river or water coming down over a waterfall. Do you ever go to a waterfall and just watch the water? It's really interesting. It's such a vivid experience—just ever-flowing change. Moment after moment, there's no let-up.

The Buddha said in the Dhammapada, and this is quite a remarkable statement: "It's better to live a single day seeing the momentary rise and fall of phenomena than to live a hundred years without seeing it." What does this say about everything we value in our lives, what we think is important, where we put our energy? The Buddha is saying that it's better to live a single day seeing this momentariness of phenomena

than a hundred years doing whatever it is we do without seeing it.

Because the more clearly, steadily, consistently, and repeatedly we see the changing nature of phenomena, of experience, it reorients our minds. It reorients our minds towards care and loving-kindness rather than clinging and attachment. It reorients our minds towards letting go rather than grasping. It reorients our minds toward the experience of freedom.

So this is our practice in each moment—seeing the arising and passing over and over again, and then noticing the profound transformation of our hearts and minds from that seeing.

This is not just for people who are monks or nuns or renunciates, people who have renounced the world. On one occasion, a layman came to see the Buddha—somebody living the lay life, as most of us are. This man's name was Mahanama, and he asked the Buddha, "In what way, sir, is a lay follower accomplished in wisdom?" This is a question we might well ask the Buddha if we met him.

The Buddha replied, "Mahanama, a lay follower is wise, possessing wisdom, when the mind is directed to arising and passing away. This is a wisdom that is noble and penetrative, leading to the complete destruction of suffering. In this way is a lay follower accomplished in wisdom."

Such a clear and direct teaching.

I'd like to close with one of the most beautiful expressions of the fruit of this wisdom. We have our ordinary consciousness just rolling along through the day. We practice mindfulness. We practice being aware. We use awareness as the platform for wisdom. Once we're aware, then we can really look and investigate and see, learn from what it is that's arising. We pay attention to the arising and passing of phenomena.

This is from a book called *Women of the Way: 2,500 Years of Buddhist Wisdom*. It's a story of Teijitsu, who was the abbess of a nunnery in Japan:

"She saw the arising. She saw that the arisings of phenomena arose, abided, and fell away. She saw that knowing this arose, abided, and fell away. Then she knew there was nothing more than this, no ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane she held, nothing to lean upon at all, and no one to lean. And she opened the clenched fist in her mind and let go and fell into the midst of everything."

This is our practice. This is the freedom. She opened the clenched fist in her mind and let go and fell into the midst of everything.

Again, see if you can get a feel for settling back, being relaxed, but not casual. Relaxed, settled back, open. The phenomena that arise—they're doing all the work. They're coming and going by themselves. We don't have to do anything except sit and recognize that.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa said, one of the great Thai masters: there's nothing to do, nothing to be, nothing to

have.

All right here in the sound of the bell.

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