

Thoughts on impermanence

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I've been trying in the last couple of weeks to come up with something coherent to say about Sept. 11. Although I feel that what follows is wholly inadequate, I hope it can serve as a beginning for more discussion. I do think that what has happened can be understood in a way that makes sense not only in terms of the human experience, but also for our individual meditation practice.

For me, the only thing in American life that has changed -- at least for the moment -- is that we can no longer deny that our world is shockingly flimsy, and capable of changing in completely unforeseen ways in an instant. The skyline of Manhattan is a powerful metaphor that illustrates what happens all the time anyway: nothing is permanent, everything that appears will in time disappear. This is the fundamental characteristic of all existence, be it mountain ranges, civilizations, individuals, or momentary states of consciousness.

The "unseen enemy" that has now taken hold of the national consciousness is and always has essentially been impermanence. It has always been there, but until this tragedy it has been denied. Whether it manifests in the hands of terrorists, as a result of a natural disaster, or the inevitable loss of what we hold dear, it is always with us. It is our reaction to it that is of the greatest importance. We can deny it, as is our habit, and then be astonished by the inevitable. This is an interesting and truly strange cultural habit of ours. Or we can face it directly, endure the fear and grief, and develop some understanding as a result. This is a moment of national lucidity and, while we shouldn't expect it to last, we can use this clarity to inquire into the meaning and goals of our lives.

Looking at impermanence directly and understanding its significance is like looking at the sun. We avoid it unconsciously, and when we do glance in that direction, we experience real pain. But without that, we can't really understand what Right View means. In this sense, Right View means understanding that life is suffering -- that suffering is woven into the fabric of life itself -- and that suffering is caused by desire. Desire causes suffering because whatever we want will not endure. It does not matter how deeply we want it, how highly we prize it, nor how ferociously we hold onto it. We will lose it.

So this supposed conflict between Islam and the West can be seen as fundamentally the result of people's desperate determination to preserve what they find valuable and what they believe they are entitled to. That may mean a sacred life as defined by Islam, or a free one as defined by consumer capitalism. Everything that grows from the fear of loss -- police, armies, aggression, etc. -- embodies a kind of fear and anger provoked by a refusal to accept the unstable and unpredictable nature of things. And, I suggest, anger arises because anger protects us from grief, and from knowing the powerlessness that is the effect of confusion and ignorance about the nature of things. If we could really get it that we are not entitled to expect anything whatsoever, there would be no cause for anger or disappointment.

This is the reason why we have to allow the awareness of impermanence and to face the unbearable reality of it, which means overcoming our deep denial. Without this understanding, the whole notion of liberation from suffering becomes an intellectual exercise. This may be a particular challenge for us as Americans, because the cultural denial of suffering is so profound. We are told in myriad ways that suffering is mistaken, accidental, or the result of poor control. Even more perverse, we are told that suffering can be avoided through the production and consumption of things: "The person with the most toys at the end wins."

It's important to acknowledge suffering and its cause because without an understanding that meditation is about liberation, as well as a clear understanding and vision of what it is we seek to be liberated from, practice will inevitably become the search for pleasurable states. And this is the essential problem: our pursuit of what gives pleasure and our avoidance of what causes pain. It follows that the way in which we apply ourselves to this end depends on distinguishing what is beneficial from what is not. This is Right Effort.

Right Effort depends upon Right View, and Right View is the understanding of the nature of suffering and its relationship to impermanence. Without this, it can be difficult to distinguish between an obsessive attachment to pleasure and an earnest pursuit of an understanding about the nature of being. In terms of effort, the single most difficult obstacle to meditative practice is our belief in permanence. '

"If it feels so blissful, calm and clear, then it must be the place to stay." Then effort becomes the attempt to learn how to get there again and again, until we have found a 'higher Self' we never have to leave. Then, of course, anything that prevents us from remaining in relationship to this 'higher Self' becomes an enemy, and the whole cycle begins again. What Buddhism proposes is that there is no higher Self, lower self, or any real self at all. Rather than repeating the always mistaken search for an enduring home, we can consider that "the enlightened mind is homeless, like a wandering monk."

Impermanence is the one characteristic of all phenomena. Nothing lasts, everything changes. If this is the case, then what can we say about the nature of phenomena? For one thing, anything that changes and falls apart cannot have any inherent, invariant or autonomous existence. If it did, it would never change. It never could change, it could only be itself. Nor could it cause anything else, nor could it be created. You can see this directly for yourself.

This has direct consequences in our lives. It means that we will get sick, old, and die. It means that the people we love the most will also get sick, old, and die. There's no way out of it, except the short-term expedient of pretending it isn't going to happen. Or adopting some sort of New Age attitude about it ("oh, they're just going on to a new form"), which as far as I can see, has only one purpose-- to shield us from the immediate experience of the inevitability of loss. The other characteristic to think about is that while all the above will happen, we have no certainty about when, where or how it will occur. So we are living in a very precarious position. This is the meaning of the Zen saying, "we are like fish living in a little bit of water: what sort of comfort or tranquillity can there be?" Living with this awareness "concentrates the mind wonderfully."

How different is this from the knowledge that death is among us in the form of terrorists? Enemies who, as Steve Lopez in the LA Times writes, "who may at this moment be sitting in the harbor with a missile"? Maybe not much difference at all, except that with the Enemy, we have an object with which to cultivate anger. And getting angry is a great way of being somebody. At the very least, I can know that I'm not the enemy I'm angry at.

Since we need to see how to include all of this fear, sorrow and anger in our meditation practice, we have to see the relationship between impermanence, the fear and grief that arises with confronting it, and the rage that can appear to cover over the powerlessness that comes with this recognition. Then we can ask who the real "enemy" is. Is it the inevitable, in whatever form it takes? Or is it our denial of the way things are, and our deeply held belief in the illusion of permanence? The more we hold on to our hope for a permanent world or self, the more we are disposed to fear and hate whatever threatens that hope. And with hate comes only more hate.

Fully accepting impermanence leads to love. If we don't hold on to what arises, whatever it is, then the mind is free of obscurations, and its nature comes clear.

In this world
Hate never yet dispelled hate.
Only love dispels hate.
This is the law
Ancient and inexhaustible.
- Buddha Shakyamuni

