

03 Impermanence

Last week I explained that the first characteristic of ordinary experience, or *lakshana*, is impermanence.

Everything in our experience without exception changes. Everything comes into being, exists whilst changing, and dies away or disappears.

This applies to everything even though the time scales may differ. The lifespan of a butterfly is very short compared to the lifespan of a human being, compared to the lifespan of the solar system, but the principle is the same.

I explained that deep reflection or meditation on this fact of impermanence can lead to what's called the signless gateway to liberation. I will talk about the signless gateway next week.

And I explained that there is a particular quality of mind that needs to be cultivated to accept the reality of impermanence and to deepen the insight into signlessness.

That quality of mind is clarity of mind. A clear awareness of what is happening in our experience, free of distractions or hindrances. That quality can be cultivated in meditation and in everyday life. And I asked you to work on developing that quality during this last week.

I also asked you to notice:

How we persist in expecting things not to change

How when changes upset you and when they bring you pleasure.

And to take a note of your observations and bring them with you for next week's session.

Here are some examples from my own recent life:

How, although I have never been a monarchist or supporter on the British royal family, the recent death of Queen Elizabeth, left a hole in my experience of life. Although rationally I knew that a 96-year-old woman could not last forever, emotionally I was not prepared. Although I did not feel an emotional attachment the queen was a part of the fabric of my life.

How over the summer I unexpectedly experienced six weeks of severe pain, an experience that led to moments of near despair, and a fear that it would never go away.

And how I experienced pleasure, even bliss, when, again unexpectedly, when the pain suddenly reduced and went away.

It's interesting how at different times and places in life we can emotionally over-identify with either coming into being or going away.

We need to overcome this tendency with insight, seeing that change just is. We can help this process with insight or vipassana meditation and consistent reflection through mindfulness and clarity of mind in everyday life.

My friend Maitreyabandhu says that insight is in many ways a breadth of perspective. It is seeing the whole in the moment, instead of overly focusing on the good, optimistic, progressive aspect, or on the negative, pessimistic, decaying aspect.

It's about seeing and accepting that change just is.

And ultimately seeing and accepting all this directly without words -the signless.

Having just said that it's about seeing directly without words, I'm going to turn now to words!

I want to turn now to examples from words in poetry that help to see impermanence from different angles, and to go deeper emotionally with impermanence.

First of all an extract from a poem by Tsongkhapa, the great Tibetan teacher of the fifteenth century, followed by some words from the Buddha in the Diamond Sutra.

They speak of the transience of all things including ourselves.

Tsongkhapa

All worldly things are brief,

Like lightning in the sky;

This life you must know

As the tiny splash of a raindrop;

A thing of beauty that disappears

Even as it comes into being.

Extract from Chapter 32 of The Diamond Sutra

Thus should we think of all this fleeting world:
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.

And now a poem by Kay Ryan, an American poet, that shifts the focus more directly and bluntly onto us.

I'm sure you're all familiar with the Niagara River, or more precisely the Niagara Falls, on the border between Canada and the United States.

I once visited the Niagara Falls and even though I was at a perfectly safe vantage point I was overpowered, even scared, by the sheer scale and awesomeness of the Falls. The possibility and fear of death seemed very close!

The Niagara River

Kay Ryan

As though
the river were
a floor, we position
our table and chairs
upon it, eat, and
have conversation.
As it moves along,
we notice – as
calmly as though
dining room paintings
were being replaced –
the changing scenes

along the shore. We
do know, we do
know this is the
Niagara River, but
it is hard to remember
what that means.

If Kay Ryan's poem doesn't wake us up, then here's a poem by Octavio Paz.

A Boy and a Girl

Stretched out on the grass,
a boy and a girl.
Savoring their oranges,
giving their kisses like waves exchanging foam.

Stretched out on the beach,
a boy and a girl.
Savoring their limes,
giving their kisses like clouds exchanging foam.

Stretched out underground,
a boy and a girl.
Saying nothing, never kissing,
giving silence for silence.

Octavio Paz

Last week I was emphasising the importance of developing clarity of mind, of seeing things more mindfully and clearly, without distraction.

The next poem, by Australian writer and poet Clive James, was written as he approached death.

Clive James

Japanese Maple

Your death, near now, is of an easy sort.
So slow a fading out brings no real pain.
Breath growing short
Is just uncomfortable. You feel the drain
Of energy, but thought and sight remain:

Enhanced, in fact. When did you ever see
So much sweet beauty as when fine rain falls
On that small tree
And saturates your brick back garden walls,
So many Amber Rooms and mirror halls?

Ever more lavish as the dusk descends
This glistening illuminates the air.
It never ends.
Whenever the rain comes it will be there,
Beyond my time, but now I take my share.

My daughter's choice, the maple tree is new.
Come autumn and its leaves will turn to flame.
What I must do
Is live to see that. That will end the game
For me, though life continues all the same:

Filling the double doors to bathe my eyes,
A final flood of colors will live on
As my mind dies,
Burned by my vision of a world that shone
So brightly at the last, and then was gone.

Clive James

Sometimes when we are preoccupied with difficulty and with the idea that nothing can change for the better, beneath the surface, unknown to us, something is stirring, change is coming.

Jack Gilbert

Horses at Midnight Without a Moon

Our heart wanders lost in the dark woods.

Our dream wrestles in the castle of doubt.

But there's music in us. Hope is pushed down
but the angel flies up again taking us with her.

The summer mornings begin inch by inch
while we sleep, and walk with us later

as long-legged beauty through

the dirty streets. It is no surprise

that danger and suffering surround us.

What astonishes is the singing.

We know the horses are there in the dark
meadow because we can smell them,

can hear them breathing.

Our spirit persists like a man struggling
through the frozen valley

who suddenly smells flowers

and realizes the snow is melting

out of sight on top of the mountain,

knows that spring has begun.

And now to finish, a poem by Hermann Hesse.

This is a poem that balances the inevitability of change and the opportunities that change offers to us, even in the face of our eventual death.

Hermann Hesse

Stages

As every flower fades and as all youth
departs, so life at every stage,
so every virtue, so our grasp of truth,
blooms in its day and may not last forever.
Since life may summon us at every age
be ready, heart for parting, new endeavour,
be ready bravely and without remorse
to find new light that old ties cannot give.
In all beginnings dwells a magic force
for guarding us and helping us to live.

Serenely let us move to distant places
and let no sentiments of home detain us.
The Cosmic Spirit seeks not to restrain us
but lifts us stage by stage to wider spaces.
If we accept a staying of our own making,
familiar habit makes for indolence.
We must prepare for parting and leave-taking
or else remain slaves to permanence.

Even the hour of my death may send
us speeding on to fresh and newer spaces,
and other life may summon us to newer races.

So be it, heart: bid farewell without end.

Translated from German by Richard and Clara Winston

Next week I will be exploring the signless, the gateway to liberation that can open when we meditate or reflect deeply on impermanence.