

# 2010-02-28 Stillness And Perceiving Impermanence

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

impermanence, arise, retreat, people, permanence, deeper, mind, life, thought, pain, world, attributing, day, orientation, equanimity, deeply, noticing, pass, distortion, depressed

## SPEAKERS

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A beautiful thing to go in a month long retreat. Not very many people have that opportunity. It's a precious opportunity. Some people get once a lifetime a chance to do something like this. And it's very different from how people normally live their lives. There's very little social activity. There's no talking. It's a Silent Retreat. The teachers talk, have interviews, and we give Dharma talks and instructions. But retreatants mostly are spending the day in silence. whole month, not working and not on vacation is kind of unusual.

And so it's very unusual, so very different than how we normally live. And that's part of the value of it, is that it? We live in a way that's so different and how we normally are living, that we get to see ourselves in different ways we see ourselves. See that may perhaps some of the ways in which we live and think can be questioned or looked at in more deeper ways or there's opportunity to look at ourselves unburdened or clouded by the usual concerns that we have going about. It's quite phenomenal.

Now, it's also one of the one of the places in Buddhist practice, where we cultivate deeper insight and the insight that retreats sometimes allow for a kind of deeper insight and understanding of the Dharma or life than we can reading a Dharma book or hearing a Dharma talk or just kind of living a normal life. Both are valuable areas of practice.

But one of one of the key things that retreats allows is a deeper perception of impermanence. And so this is what I want to talk about a little bit today. And it's a little bit of a maybe a paradigm irony or something that the more still people become, the more acutely they can be aware of impermanence. I mean, you go up to spirit rock for a month and you don't do much not much changes in terms of, you know, you don't watch television news and get the new book and find out the latest this and that and you just sit and walk and sit and walk. And once in a while you have a meal and you go to sleep and you get up and you do sitting meditation and walking meditation. You know, it's not a lot, not a lot goes on, supposedly, on the outside.

But as people get more still, there's this wonderful kind of reversal that goes on. The more agitated a mind is, the busier and more active the mind is, the more it tends to succumb to the delusion of permanence. The Still, the mind is. So, the less movement there is in the mind, the less movement there is in the mind, the more the mind can see how much movement there is in this world. So agitated mind tends to err on the side of seeing permanence. A still mind tends to see impermanence because if

your mind is still you see what everything else is always moving. If your mind is moving faster than everything else, everything else can seem pretty still.

So, one of one of the functions of deeper vipassana practice is to help overcome a certain distortion.

The Buddhist terminology for this is a technical word is upside down thinking. But do we can say distortion in English, a distorted way of seeing our life and there are a variety of distortions that the mind tends to create.

And one of them one of them is that distortion of permanence, seeing attributing permanence of things which are not really that permanent. The other is attributing self to those things which are not really ourselves. And the third is attributing happiness to those things which are not really that, you know, ultimately happy. But the primary one is the impermanent one.

Now everyone can see impermanence and most religions emphasize the value of the insight into impermanence. And, in fact, people who really kick in, in some way or other the impermanence of ordinary life, can sometimes be a lot wiser than some Buddhists who haven't. I've met a lot of wonderfully wise people, profound people, for whom the experience of impermanence in life has really opened their hearts has really showed them something very important.

There's a Sufi story of a man who goes to a Sufi teacher and says, I have this ring. And can you inscribe something some great spiritual wisdom on the ring. So whenever I look at my ring I can be reminded this important piece of information. And then Sufi Master says great, takes the ring and gets it inscribed and gives it back to the man the man looks in the ring. And on the ring it says, this too will pass, this too will pass.

And, you know, because of the earthquake in Chile and little while ago in Haiti, you know, reminds me of how fluid our Earth is. We have this distortion we think it's pretty solid. And all you have to do is go down to the beach, in San Mateo and, and see the sandstone layers or not horizontal but vertical to realize that the earth shifts a lot. Often, and there were some people who were on retreat many years ago in yucca Valley, where there was an earthquake down there. And they were quite surprised for doing walking meditation on the desert floor and see the desert floor, you know, buckle and wave, something it's so solid.

But you know, the impermanence you know, we don't know when dramatic impermanence is going to hit us. earthquake, that illness, old age, all kinds of things will come. And sometimes people are taken by surprise for it. In traditional Buddhist countries like Thailand, it seems that people take these kind of surprises much more likely than they do in other cultures I've encountered because they expect them and they often will say, oh, what do you do? Of course, impermanence. Like my tire of my car, but flat

Of course, impermanence is supposed to Oh no, this shouldn't be happening. And so You know, thinking about these recent earthquakes. And you know, what a big impact that has on people's lives, and how hopefully, the world gathers around supports each other supports those people who've been struck by these tragedies. And, and I think it's important, especially for us to think of that way because one of these years, it's going to be us.

One of these years, we're going to be the recipient

of the world's generosity and support.

Those of us who live here on top of the San Andreas Fault.

They'll come, right. What then? So to see this and to see that impermanence and change is part of life, and to learn to be wise about that, to set it up, set it set up our lives so that we kind of expect it we know it's happens.

We try to protect ourselves from the

bad effects of it all.

But we can't do you know, no one, no one can be good. No one can guarantee They can protect themselves from impermanence for change. And so how do we live our lives in a wise way in a way that maybe is free, compassionate in the world of this kind of dramatic change that can happen? I think

that's the task

of Buddhist practice. One of the tasks is how to be free, how to be generous and compassionate. Given the world of sickness, old age, death, impermanence and change. It's not all bad news. Of course, the world of impermanence. Some of us can't wait for things to be changed. You know, just you know, the present moment is the drag.

And, and so it's not,

sometimes you can't wait for things to change because then something better can happen. See it with my kids. You know, they can't wait sometimes more than one of the refrains and my seven year old is I am bored.

I've heard that more times in the last

year then my whole life before it now.

I am bored.

And I tell them well, that's interesting.

All right, tell them you know, well

what do you want me to do about that?

those answers don't get favorable responses

in my own soul

looking for change, something new,

some people are addicted to change.

So as to be seen in our life all over

vipassana practice, mindfulness practice certainly helps us be present for that and be wise about that and see our reactions and responses and so they can be had wiser reactions from responses. But the personal practice as it gets deeper as we get more constant in our meditation, especially on retreat, there's a whole new opportunity that opens up. And that is not to see impermanence at the large scale of our life, but to start seeing it at the small scale, and my new show scale or life. And it isn't that the small scale is insignificant. The small scale is the building blocks for the big scale.

So, just like you know,

cells are the building blocks for a human being. If you understand something about cellular biology, you understand something about human beings if you don't, if you don't understand. So if you can understand something about impermanence in a smaller scale, it becomes a building block for understanding something about the larger world we live in. And so as the as the mind gets stiller on retreat, at some point for some people, the more subtle movements of change did happen all the time become more more evident. In order for that to happen, it requires a change of

orientation.

And,

and hopefully then people go on retreat they're willing to or change the orientation about what they're focusing on. human minds are always, almost always focusing on something. And there's always the particulars of the moment. There's also a background orientation, how we hold everything within the context in which we relate to the world. And so for example, one of the context is, we understand it from the point of view of

self, me myself in mind,

how it is for me, or especially in the individualistic West, we're very deeply acculturated to see the world as individuals individualistically. And, you know, it's so deeply ingrained that we just many of many Westerners just take it for granted that this is how the universe has builds build up of individuals, but it's a particular construct, construct To see the world that way. And other cultures as I think many of you know, maybe some of your come from those cultures, they're not into individualistic cultures but their communal culture, where the we're how people are as a community is much more important than how they are as individuals as individuals. And recently I read a study or a report about it study about how individuals, people, when people from individualistic cultures

look at a picture.

It's different, they see the picture differently than people who come from a communal culture. And apparently the individualistic culture, they look at the picture, same picture, right? They live the picture and they pick out the details. A communal culture tends to pick out the Gestalt or the foreground and background of

what's going on. They see the patterns much more.

So

it has a lot to do with how people are acculturated and acculturation has to do orientation. So I say that because when people go on retreat, it helps if you're willing to suspend the normal orientation that you have, and be willing to kind of try to see something in a new way. And that's not an easy thing to do. But it's part of the challenge of being in retreat. It's wonderful. I think, you know, retreats are quite wonderful because they provide this wonderful balance, hopefully just the right balance of being nurturing and safe and comforting. And being challenging. If your religions not doesn't challenge you

find another religion.

If your religion doesn't nurture you find another religion.

Hopefully that does both.

When I was ordained as a Zen priest, many years ago,

I didn't I wasn't oriented towards rituals and all that but

I was kind of surprised and that ritual, how much it affected me. And the feeling I had was that When I was ordained as a Zen priest, I have now become a child of the Buddha, kind of poetic way of talking,

which meant that all

my shortcomings were more acceptable.

When, but on the other hand,

I became much more acutely aware of my shortcomings.

And that combination, I think, was very meaningful for me, because I didn't get upset or depressed about my shortcomings. So it's kind of like I've been accepted by the Buddha. And

I was more acutely aware of them so I can address them.

Where did you accept them just like continue being grumpy and angry and things like that? Or to say it in different way that it's often said at the San Francisco Zen Center. It said, You're perfect

just the way you are.

And there's room for

improvement.

So the whole both so do you on retreat, and to feel the sense that you're being held By the Dharma by life by the truth, by

sense that you are perfect

as you are really.

And being challenged at the same time being challenged or being willing to suspend the usual orientations we have. And one of the so the orientation of kind of planning the future, trying to fix and manipulate and plan the future of my life, or the orientation of reviewing all the wrongs that happened to me in the past, and kind of reviewing them and being grumpy about them and all that.

So those those might be valid those approaches sometimes, but

on retreat, when we put those aside, certain identities we have we carry with us are very deeply held, we try to put aside on retreat,

roles that we carry as much of our life,

not to orient ourselves towards that

and putting all those things stuffed aside for the time being, in orient, orienting ourselves to being fully here for The direct experience, moment by moment is just as we enter into the correct moment experience.

That's what this world of impermanence begins showing itself.

If you're orienting to things towards roles, roles can give a semblance of permanence. If you're orienting towards the past, it can orient Oh, you know, I'm I was a victim, that back in back 1020 years ago, and so now, it will always relate to myself as a victim. You know, it gives a semblance of permanence. Or if we're always having an image of ourselves in the future, or what I'm going to become, it can also kind of support the idea of permanence. So how to step back out of that, and enter into the direct world as part of the challenge of being on retreat. As people do that, the present moment experience slowly begins to become highlight and see more clearly for what it is. So I'm going to give you some ideas Examples of this. So, you might start noticing something about your thinking

on retreat.

You might might notice, for example, how repetitive it can be. But you also might notice that it's that particular thoughts that you have thought

trains

are not permanent.

They, they get, they get interrupted. Sometimes they're more permanent on retreats and outside because you don't get interrupted by reality enough.

But as you can get stuck on, you know, certain trains of thought for

a while, but you can see, you can see that a thought arises, it's there for a while, and then it goes away. And then it's another thought might arise, and it goes away. Some thoughts concerns, change, change,

associated thinking, continue for a while, but then they change. Sometimes we get stuck in one for many hours,

once a particular chain of thought,

but then it changes. And one of the great lessons on retreat is how much things change. Over the course of the retreat, and I've been on retreat where I've succumbed to the delusion of permanence,

where the first day of the retreat,

I felt

really delighted to be there and relaxing and this is perfect on my way to Buddhahood I'll always be relaxed, I'll never be depressed again. This is great. And that lasted until the second day.

And then I had a splitting

headache I couldn't believe I was on retreat and who are these people around me here bumbling around and this is just you know, the retreats must be awful. And I you know, this is just going to be torture the rest of the time and you know, probably I should leave because it's gonna not, it's not gonna change. And then, but luckily I stay for the third day,

and

it's just blissful. I can't believe the sun came out. It's bright and clear. I feel so relaxed and open.

Isn't this great?

And everyone should go on retreat. I think I'm gonna write a letter to my everyone emails, let them know and because this is this one and then the fourth day comes, and then my great, you know, an unresolved issue pops up. Oh, no, I thought I put that aside.

No, I'll never get over this issue

and always stuck in this issue. It's always there. But then the fifth day happens, right? And so but so this tremendous. I've seen, you know, this kind of attachment or identification with the issue at the moment. And we don't think it's permanent, but we act as if the mind acts or believes or behaves as if it's permanent. If you do enough retreats, or do a long enough retreat, you start noticing the cycles to get if you go on retreats, many times you start seeing, oh, the first day of the retreat, I'm often tired. Oh, it's just the tiredness of the first day. They don't need to make any conclusions about this. Or, you know, the second or third day, it's often I feel very relaxed, no need to make any conclusions or implications just let it be a relaxed day, because that'll change. Something else will happen. And with time, people begin holding all these changes, more likely. And that's a very important understanding, it's not so much about having the right change and organizing the right change to happen. It's learning how to hold the changes that happen, more likely. And that's where a lot of the ease and the freedom occurs, and how we relate to it not you know what's happening. So as we begin kind of allowing, you know, things to happen more and more themselves, you see the thoughts themselves arise. Yes. And so one of the

great questions is mostly to preface it this way. People people's primary way of understanding who they are, their sense of identity

comes from their thinking,

their conceiving their ideas.

And so I might have a thought that arise. I'm a parent

and then

you know, if I'm making the For my kids being a parent role that's appropriate. But then if I'm with my wife, I don't want to be the parent. I'm supposed to be the husband. That's a different role.

But I, you know,

when I come here to IMC, I'm not supposed to be the parent or the husband is supposed to be the teacher. That's the role. But if I go home and try to be the teacher at home,

that's not good.

So, so I have to know understand the role that I'm in. But roles have been very powerful, can be very powerful, where sometimes it's like the actor or actress who eventually believes the role and becomes the role.

So we become sometimes become the role,

but that role because of the role.

Having an identity is only understood by having a thought that tells us we are that way. we tell ourselves to story can be very subtle. It can be below the normal discursive level of thinking. There's still there's a thought, I'm a father, I'm a husband, I'm a teacher, whatever.

What happens

when you see a thought arise?

And you see a pass away?

You see the thought of I'm a roll. I'm this kind of person, and you see a pass away? Who are you in the space of time

where it's passed away,

and no new thought has arisen?

Who are you then?

If you don't have a story to tell you who tell you who you are, who are you?

You're still alive and present feeling vital and clear, perhaps.

But if not telling you some telling yourself who you are, who are you? It's kind of hard to make any conclusions then isn't it? But you're still something, you're alive, and hopefully safe. Because probably if you feel unsafe, you have to, you have to use your thinking to tell yourself you're unsafe. So if you see the arising and passing of these thoughts, it begins shifting our relationship to thinking itself. It's very hard to do that in ordinary life, where thinking happens so quickly and so fast, we don't see the rising and passing. And it happened so fast that it gives the kind of sense of illusion of permanence in the same way that a movie movie film gives a sense of continuity on them on the screen. But what we know is that's really what it is, is a lot of individual distinct pictures being shown on the screen. There's no movement happening at all. It seems continuous, but it's not. So the same thing with the mind. So we start seeing something deeper than we can in ordinary life. Why why Why shift this? The one of the reasons is that we can see more deeply the building blocks of how we build up the more complicated ideas of who we are in our life.

So then we go.

So you know, you see that with, with roles with identities with thoughts that arise and pass, and we don't have to pick them up, we can hold those likely. We don't have to get involved with them at all. They can go more deeply. And we can see the arising and passing emotional states. Sometimes they seem tend to have longer kind of time that they arise in the past. And sometimes, sometimes they can be very fast, they can rise fast very quickly. And in fact, there's a probably if you're very if you're quiet and sensitive, you can get a sense that there's actually maybe a larger mood that's present, but there's also a kaleidoscope of different little moods that pass through all the time.

It's not as solid as it often seems.

In ordinary life, we're living kind of a busy life. For whatever life we're living, there are certain emotional states that can seem kind of permanent or seem kind of like they're really solid. And retreat, when the mindfulness gets strong, the solidity of emotional states begins to break up as well. So like outside of retreat, depression can be it. I was depressed once and I thought, this is it. And I said, Come to the delusion of permanence. I'll always be depressed. Or I remember once, actually, the most depressed time I got, my life was right after a summer, that was the most extended summer of my life.

And then I said to myself, the end the summer, I'll never

be depressed again.

And that I was more depressed than I'd ever been.

So I succumb to the delusion of permanence. But, but when you're very attentive and present, you see that emotional states as well arise and pass and actually rising fast, much faster than you would realize or think if you're thinking about them. Because things is one part of how about how we attribute the permanence of things. So I think a fun place for I've kind of, it's kind of seen the kaleidoscope of changing subtle emotions is in driving. Some of you heard me say this driving or driving along and I try to stay present and relaxed and noticing what's going on. And I tune into my emotional states and I

might have a background kind of larger mood, but then I noticed a police car pulls up behind me in the freeway and I feel some fear

apprehension.

My stomach tightens a little bit and but then police car leaves and then somebody tries to cut me off or does cut me off a little bit and I feel the anger surge up and then that passes. And then I see this really beautiful you know car, huh? And then desire arises for a moment. And then, and then someone's driving really slow in front of me, and the irritation arises, and then you can get the idea, right. And so I find it's kind of fun to watch all this subtle shifting, changing things going on. And I my assumption has been that those shifting, subtle changes are happening all the time. Even we're not paying attention to it. And part of the reason why people get stressed out build up stress, of course of the day, is because all these things linger. They leave traces in us, if we're not wise about how we see them and hold them. So being being mindful and present and watching all the reactions, it's easier, just let them go Hold them likely just kind of not have them linger in some way. So we see the arising of an emotion and the passing away.

Who are you?

After an emotion is passed away, and before the next one has arisen in that space between you you're still alive. You're precious. Is it comfortable, hopefully, won't you and then you can go deeper into the body. And then the most one of the more interesting places is with pain. It's not uncommon for people on retreat to have pain, because their knees hurt or something back hurts. And, and there and again, we're asked to change our orientation of how we look at our experience. If you look at it through the filter of this is my pain. Poor me. It's gonna hurt more. But if you're willing to kind of suspend the, the attributing me, or making an identity around the pain, and just see it as pain, and not be seen as pain, but to actually get interested in what is the direct experience of pain, because the word pain is an abstraction. And if we relate to our world through the ideas of abstractions, we won't see it for what it is and so to drop going very deep into the pain and see Oh, it's made up of intense tightening and pulling and searing and stabbing and twisting and, you know, different particular sensations. And then go deeper into it and see that actually the pain that seems so solid, when I saw it through concepts and ideas, is actually made up of a lot of shifting and changing individual small sensations that arise and pass. And I mean, I've zeroed into pain my knee, for example, and it just really is a little square centimeter is where the pain resides. And then I've really tried to get into the actual sensation that tells me there's pain there. I see that it's momentary little sparks that arise and pass, rise and pass. And then is it kind of different relationship with a pain? Because I'm not seeing it so solid? I see the gaps between it. See, it's not doesn't always stay the same. So who are you The gap between the rising of a pain and the passing of a pain What do you identify with? Now in that gap, the pain arises and it passes it passes before it arises again. Are you lingering in your thoughts about the pain? All this pain is so bad I can't stand it for Gil he's having such a hard time there's pain, I can't stand it. not noticing that there was a gap in the pain. complaining about when the pain wasn't there. What a waste of time making a complaint you complain about things which are present in the pit, you know, and so it's arising but but then if it arises, then you can complain right? But if it rises, it passes so quickly, you can get the complaining out fast enough. What do you do then? Well, you're deeply attached to being a complainer then, you know, you'll figure out some way to keep complaining, but what what you know, it doesn't make sense to complain about something which is arises and passes kind of quickly it's gonna hold to get more likely to remember, the point is to hold things likely don't think likely. So I'm hoping get a sense that that as we as we, as mindfulness can really start getting into the direct experience more and more and questioning or looking at what goes on. We see the subtle kind of micro movements of of our

experience, how it arises and passes and begin shifting our relationship to it. It challenges us also challenges us not to linger and hold on to the old ideas of self and experience of life that interpret our experience in a particular way. And this is very important because it's very hard in the ordinary states of mind, to dislodge or to question, some of the deeper attachments, roles identities that we live by and read often need some strong medicine to do that. And there's many medicines a person can use for that. But one of the medicines we have in Buddhism is this deep, strong insight meditation practice,

we start seeing much more of the details of what goes on here

now.

So as we start seeing things arise in past more, that's the nature of it. It's eventually dawns on the mind that it doesn't make so much sense to cling to

grasp on to or to resist

something which is arising and passing. If something is really going to be permanent, maybe it makes sense. But if you see it arise and pass so if you see a thought arise, and then see a pass, perhaps is less inclination to latch on to that thought. So I might be sitting minding my own business, and the thought arises, I am a really poor meditator Well, I'm a meditation teacher. So that's serious. And all of you kind of probably assume I'm a good meditator. And you know, this is important. I'm a role model and everything. And so you know, to also all this. So as soon as I have that thoughts like, Oh, you know, I latch on to it, this is terrible. How am I going to hide it from everyone? I certainly don't want to announce it to everyone. You know, and I get caught up in this world. You know, I get to that idea. And I kind of spend the next you know, two days depressed around that

thought.

Or

a thought arises, I'm a bad meditator.

I see it arise. And I see it pass. I don't do anything about it. I don't latch on to it. If I see it, Arise and pass quick enough. I know it's if I know it's going to pass in a moment. Why would I even want to pick up pick it up? Ready, go. So as we see things arise and pass more serious. Then his mind tends not to want to latch on. Because it doesn't make sense to latch on. And one of the reasons why this very deep insight practice is so useful is that when the mind clearly sees doesn't make any sense to grasp onto things, it begins to relax. And relax and relax. Until finally the mind is relaxed enough. It can be equanimous about all the comings and goings, this experience in our life. It's not trying to create a self thought of it is not trying to hold on to it in particular way. It's not attributing permanence or impermanence. It's not attributing anything to it's not attributing suffering to it or happiness to it. It's not attributing safety or lack of safety to it. It's just kind of, it's a lot of things just to be allows our experiences to be as it is. That very deep sense of equanimity is kind of the cream of holding things likely. equanimity doesn't mean we're indifferent to things to experience. But it just kind of let it let's kind of kind of almost like think of it as a form of generosity. Where we can be, let's be generous enough to leave things alone so they can be what they are. We're generous, who have to leave ourselves alone so we can be as we are. The thoughts, the feelings, whatever it is, we have the equanimity we just thought, Okay, this way. You're perfect just the way you are. And it's okay. It's okay to improve yourself. It's okay to

let someone know that

you're kind of unusual

and that you're working on it.

It's okay. Yeah, there's acronyms at And, and when they equanimity is strong enough, when they've established enough is still enough that's when the mind has the greatest

opportunity to

let go the best or relax the best or, or kind of, kind of just chill out the best. And, and I say it this way if so you probably notice that I've used these kinds of expressions the mind learns not to cling the mind relaxes in a deep way as opposed to you. You chill out Finally, you let go Finally, because the deeper kind of deeper possibilities of freedom and of compassion is not something that you do. It's not something that you can really doesn't make sense even to identify with it. This is my doing my thing. It's a it's an activity of the mind or the heart, that it naturally will when it's ready and when time is there. It will, when you have enough equanimity, when the equanimity has become

so ordinary,

that it says ordinary brushing your teeth.

And sometimes the mind

gets the lesson, mind hears, and then lets go deeply.

So there's impermanence at the macro level,

is the impermanence of the micro level, which is kind of the specialty of the past in the practice, the practice to see.

And then there's the impermanence

of letting something go.

And when something is let go deeply enough,

and it's no longer there,

that is permanent.

The absence of something

you know, it was an exemption. It's not a

it's not a thing. Only things arise in pass the absence of things, they don't rise and pass because it's the opposite right? And so the absence of clinging in the absence of certain ways of understanding, you know, seeing through or dropped, and that can stay and be there as a as an understanding or as a way of being for

a much longer time.

So,

I hope that the world of impermanence is kind to you, and if it isn't,

I hope you're kind to it.

Thank you very much.