

Impermanence and Uncertainty

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening. Welcome. It's nice to see you all on this holiday, Memorial Day. And I think part of what Memorial Day is about is remembrance. Remembering lives that have ended perhaps abruptly before their fullness could be known and expressed. Remembering families who have been hurt, grief, and maybe remembering the fragility of life.

And so in Buddhist practice, this type of remembering is not meant to make us morbid or sad, but it's meant to help support awakeness and freedom because it points to one of the most central insights, one of the most important teachings and experiences in Buddhist practice, and that is the recognition that things change.

And we all know this. You're not hearing anything new from me here. But this changing, uncertain nature of everything—somehow we often don't quite fully understand this or feel it in our bones in some kind of way. So I'd like to talk a little bit about this.

The Buddha pointed to the importance of seeing this. One little verse in the Dhammapada^[1] says: "Better than 100 years lived without seeing the arising and passing of things is one day lived seeing their arising and passing."

So he's just saying that just one day fully seeing... but maybe it's more than just seeing how everything is coming and going and changing and getting modified and isn't exactly the same. That's more powerful than just living a long life not seeing this, being more distracted, maybe avoidant or something like this.

So in the course of a day, how many mind states do we have? Often in the mornings, I'm a little bit cranky. It's probably better if nobody speaks to me first in the morning. I don't know why it's this way. It just is. And so I love being on retreat when we're just in silence in the morning. But I don't feel that way the whole day. Maybe there's some coffee involved and I start to feel better or something. I don't know. Often I go for a walk early in the morning or something like this. But that just points to this recognition, like, "Oh, okay, here's this thing that arises in the morning and then after just a short duration, it's gone."

But how many mind states do we have? How many energy states do we have? Sometimes we feel like, "Oh, I don't have any energy," and we're just really dragging. And sometimes we feel energetic and excited, doing this and that, talking to whomever, taking care of things. Moods are the same. Sometimes we feel grief, sometimes we don't.

So, I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. But the Buddha is pointing to just how powerful it can be to really tune into this sense that things are changing.

I was thinking about this the other day. If we think about what the visual field sees, like what we see, how many different things or visual frames do we see a day? How many things do we touch a day? It's just constantly changing, changing, changing. And yet there's a way in which we can kind of think, "Yeah, okay, I don't even know what day it is because it's just like the day it was before," or something like this.

And to be sure, sometimes this changing nature is a relief. If we're feeling some discomfort, the body might release that discomfort. Maybe there's some anxiety that then loosens and softens and goes away. Maybe the mind might feel foggy, and then that changes.

But changing nature isn't always a relief. Relationships change. This can be really uncomfortable. This can be terrible. It can be heartbreaking. Bodies age, people we care about and love die or move away.

So there's a part of this spiritual path, we could say, which is the willingness to open to the changing nature of experience. This willingness to open to endings. And it's impossible to move through life without endings. But can that heart be willing to open to these endings, to soften around them and take them in?

I was just teaching a retreat, and you know, when the retreat comes to an end, you can see how people's relationships to endings show up. Some people leave early. They just slip out: "Nope, I don't want to do that." Or some people are really holding on, maybe to the meditation, and they're trying to stay in a meditative state while we're giving announcements about, "Please strip your bed and put the trash over here." We're giving these types of things and they're trying to still be meditating.

Endings happen all the time, and we have different relationships to them. And part of our practice can be just first to recognize: what is our relationship to things ending? Is there a way that we can be open to them instead of trying to distract or avoid?

Some of you know that the Pali word for changing is *anicca*^[2]. No need to memorize this or know this word. But this word can also mean uncertain. Things are changing, which means that they're uncertain.

And so we know things are going to end. Intellectually we understand all of this, but we don't know when. We know things are going to be different, but we don't know when that's going to change. And moreover, not only that, we don't get to control it.

And this is really a deep part of practice. It's one thing to recognize that things are changing. It's one thing to open to them. It doesn't happen on our timelines most often.

A few days ago, I was out for a hike, and I came back from the hike without my phone. I had used it to take photos, to look at the map, and I don't know what happened. I came back and I didn't have a phone. I was kind of tired. It was a long hike. I thought, "Okay, I'll drink some water, have a little snack, and go out again, see if I can find it." But I just got too tired. I couldn't find it. It was an out and back. I thought, "Okay, well, impermanence, things change. The good news is things are backed up." So it's not like I have all the important stuff... it was up in the cloud already. On the face of my phone is my email address. I put this on there just in case this ever happened.

So, I didn't find it. The next day, I went back and I remembered like, "Oh, yeah. I remember now the last place I took a picture." But I had to find that last place again, which I had a hard time finding, but I finally did. I found the place. The phone's not there. I'm like, "Okay, well, that's one ending."

And then just a few hours ago, I got an email: "Found your phone. Where do you want to meet?" So I'm like, "Yay!"

So we don't control these things, right? I had already realized, "Oh, okay, I have to get a new phone now because of this two-factor authentication, right?" Even if I could live without a phone, I can't get into all these other accounts because I need my phone to get into them. We don't control it. We don't know when things are going to happen.

And maybe that's part of our practice: well, how do we meet this? If we can't control the schedule that things change, then maybe the question becomes, when something is ending, how do we meet it? And what would it mean to end well? Because endings are going to happen. They're already happening.

So, if we can't control the timing... I thought I would lose my phone at some time. That's why I put my email address on there years ago. But if we can't control the timing, then maybe this whole notion of ending well is not about control, but it's about opening. It's about our relationship to the endings. Can we open to what's happening even if it's not what we want?

So, here's this poem by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer^[3], and I really appreciate this poem because it doesn't romanticize endings. She's talking about endings. She doesn't romanticize them, but also doesn't give up on them. It has this commentary about: what does it mean to end well?

And this poem is called *End Well* by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer.

End well, says my friend, and I think of Beethoven, how his final symphony was a triumphant masterpiece, a unifying ode to joy. And I think of the time we ran the Grand Canyon for weeks, and on the last night we tied the boats together and floated all night and laughed and laughed

and laughed. There's the Rilke^[4] poem about a marbled torso in which he closes with *you must change your life*, and espresso at the end of a meal. How the dark bitter cup leaves the mouth in a warm O of ecstasy.

But it isn't always easy to end. Saying goodbye to a far-away friend, ending a kiss, leaving the beach, turning the last pages of a book.

So I think of the rabbitbrush that fills the field, how long they hold their gold until it's cold and they fade and it seems like the end. But then if I should shovel across them or walk through them in the early snow, oh the perfume they release then evergreen and earthy, herbaceous and cool.

Sometimes to end well is to offer more when it all seems done. Sometimes to end well is to surprise everyone with one more gift.

So this poem starts with this maybe cultural fantasy of endings. This Beethoven with this triumphant masterpiece and this big unifying close, and then it moves to something more ordinary. The goodbye, ending a kiss, leaving the beach, finishing a book. All these types of endings.

And so ending well is not about getting it perfectly, but instead it's how we relate to it. Some endings are joyful, some are tender, some are aching. And I appreciate this poem holds the whole range.

So equanimity isn't about flattening our experience. Equanimity isn't about meeting endings with some coolness or some coldness in which, like, "Ah, doesn't matter." Instead, equanimity with endings would be to allow joy to be joy, to allow sorrow to be sorrow, and to not make any of that a problem. But just to meet the ending with how the ending is.

And there's this line in the poem she writes, "It isn't always easy to end." And we can point to what makes things not easy when it's ending. And part of it is that we are holding on. We want things to be a certain way. We want particular outcomes. We want things to suit us. We have this certain attachment, you might say, that wants some continuity, just things to continue on. We often want one more page in the book. We often want one more kiss. We often want to stay at the beach or, for me, to stay in the woods hiking with or without my phone.

So endings, they reveal to us what we hold on to. They also reveal to us what matters. Like if things are just ending and they didn't matter, we probably wouldn't even notice. So it can be really powerful and supportive to pay attention to endings and have a relationship with endings that allows us to acknowledge what's ending and maybe feel the feelings that are associated with that.

And in this poem she talks about rabbitbrush. This is a type of plant. That poet Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer lives in Colorado in the mountains somewhere. So, I'm assuming it's a plant up there. I'm not familiar with this plant. But in this poem, she points to how when there's snow on top and it feels like they're gone or dead for the season or something like this, they're kind of fading out at the end. But then when she's scraping it, probably to shovel the sidewalk or something like this, they release this perfume that has a scent that she can smell.

So there's a way in which endings can also reveal maybe something that's more subtle that's underneath, that we don't see while things are there.

I know for me there was a time in my life when I had a lot of anger. Kind of surprising that I had some anger, and it wasn't until I really turned towards the anger because I was angry about being angry. I didn't want to be angry. So, it wasn't until I actually could turn towards it that I realized, "Oh, there was some sadness underneath it."

So it required, we could say, the ending of the anger for the sadness to be revealed. And then when the sadness ended, underneath that was love. So there's this way that these endings also are creating the space or the opportunities for what's underneath to be known, what's maybe even closer to our hearts to be known or to be expressed or to be seen.

So sometimes endings, not only do they reveal what's important to us, reveal our relationship to things changing, reveal our relationship to how we want to control things... they also make it possible for us to come into contact with perhaps something that's a little more intimate or a little bit more tender with our hearts.

So endings are not only about loss, they're also about disclosure. Maybe there's some humility or tenderness or gratitude or something like this that's underneath.

And then this poem ends with "to offer more when it all seems done." This line, it's this movement of generosity. Because there's this way that if we feel like we can't hold on to things because they're ending, they're coming and going... We can't hold on to anything really. Then what would it be like to give things away? Then what would it be to be generous instead of trying to hold on? To have the opposite movement, to be generous?

Generous with sharing what's really happening with us. Generous with our time. Giving people the benefit of the doubt. Being generous in that way. Because sometimes when there's endings, there's this way in which we kind of check out. We disconnect. But what would it be like to turn endings into opportunities to maybe support others in some kind of way? Support ourselves in some kind of way. Not out of obligation, not out of self-sacrifice, but just turning the heart toward giving as opposed to trying to keep. Again, this is not obligation, something that you have to do. It's just what would it be like to be open towards that, to have generosity be a response to impermanence?

Sometimes at the end of retreats also I talk about this practice that I learned a long time ago. Sometimes I share that there's a time when I was on a long retreat and as it happened I needed to go to the doctor's. It turned out to be okay, but I didn't know it at the time, right? So I had to go to the doctor's, and somebody was driving me, and I was a little bit nervous about going to the doctor's. But also I had been sitting by this time maybe months in silence, and so there was so much stillness and equanimity and also so much love.

So, as I was in the car and I was seeing people on the sidewalk, and I had all this peace and ease inside of me, I was just giving it away like, "Here's some peace. Here's some ease. Here's some well-being." And I just got happier and happier as I was going to the doctor's office. Of course, I'm in the waiting room and waiting and all the people there, right? I give like, "Here's some well-being, here's some settledness, here's some peace just in my mind, right?" I'm giving it away to everybody.

And then when I get into the little room where the doctor would come, the nurse first comes in to do what nurses do. And she ended up asking me like, "Oh, so you're not from around here and where are you?" Anyway, I ended up telling her that I was on this meditation retreat. She was so interested and sat down, and we were talking about it. And then pretty soon somebody's knocking on the door. I don't remember what her name was, but we'll just say, "Susan, are you still in there? There's patients waiting." You know, she just wanted to hear about it. She was saying like, "I just love talking with you."

So maybe there's this way, this ending... In this case, it was the ending of that portion of my retreat practice, and just giving it away. What would it be like to give things away when you find that things are ending? This different movement, and again, this is not an obligation. This is not something you have to do. I just want to plant a seed, maybe some curiosity. What would that be like? When we often want to grab and hold on, but we know that's the source of suffering whenever we really want to grab and hold on.

So maybe generosity, because we can't hold life in place. It's not possible. But we can meet it with care. We can meet life maybe with a soft heart.

So I'll read this poem again.

End Well by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer.

End well, says my friend, and I think of Beethoven, how his final symphony was a triumphant masterpiece, a unifying ode to joy. And I think of the time we ran the Grand Canyon for weeks, and on the last night we tied the boats together and floated all night and laughed and laughed and laughed. There's the Rilke poem about a marbled torso in which he closes with *you must change your life*, and espresso at the end of a meal. How the dark bitter cup leaves the mouth in a warm O of ecstasy.

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Sometimes to end well is to offer more when it all seems done. Sometimes to end well is to surprise everyone with one more gift.

So, I'll end there and open it up for questions and comments. Thank you.

Q&A

Does anybody have a question or a comment? Yes.

Questioner 1: Thank you, Jim. Hi. Well, I like when things are resolved. Wouldn't that be great if we could just get everything resolved all neat and tidy? A little bow at the end.

Diana Clark: It doesn't work that way. I mean, sometimes things get resolved. Some things. Yeah. And I would say this is part of the practice. It's fantastic. You recognize, "Yeah, I feel uncomfortable when things are left unresolved and the ending is dubious and unclear or whatever." And then we get to work with that uncertainty or frustration or disappointment or those types of things. Thank you.

Questioner 2: Well, oops. When I was younger, I was open to change, but as I've gotten older, I resist change. Does everybody else feel the same way? I don't know. I think that's not uncommon.

Diana Clark: Yeah, that's it. And do you... so, you want to resist change, but does that feel like... is that making your life more easeful or more difficult?

Questioner 2: More difficult.

Diana Clark: Yeah. Yeah. And so you can just notice like, "Oh yeah, this resistance is uncomfortable." And then you might just have an inquiry: what's underneath this resistance? Is there an emotion there? I don't know what it is. Of course, maybe there's fear. Maybe there's sadness. Maybe there's resentment. Why do things have to be different? Sure. And then as best we can, can we just honor our experience without making it bad or something like this? And that can be a way forward out of this resisting.

Questioner 2: What should I do?

Diana Clark: You don't have to do anything that I'm saying here. But when you notice that there's this resistance to change, you can just have some curiosity like, is there an emotion underneath here that's fueling the resistance? Why is there feeling resistance? You don't have to figure it out. It's just a gentle inquiry. Is there an emotion here? It could be something like fear. It could be something like sadness about things changing, or resentment. "It worked, why are they changing?" And then we can be with that emotion, honoring that emotion, and then that loosens things up. So then we're no longer in this battle with things changing. Is that helpful?

Questioner 2: Yeah, that sounds good. Well, most of my problems are that doggone phone that I have, and Apple keeps changing it. [Laughter]

Diana Clark: Yes, that's it.

Questioner 2: No, I like what you said. Okay.

Diana Clark: Yeah. Great. Thank you. Right. Yeah, right behind. Can we... Yep, there we go.

Questioner 3: Um, I was thinking about how it's related to clinging and aversion fundamentally. Yeah. So if that's true, then is it just not another way to practice that, or is it something about endings that you're saying is different? Do you know what I mean?

Diana Clark: Yeah. Um, there's a few things I could say. So yeah, it's aversion and... I'm sorry, what was that other word that you said?

Questioner 3: Uh, grasping or...

Diana Clark: Yeah, clinging. Grasping. That's right. But there's a way in which just shifting our relationship to changing nature in any way—whether we're looking at it through what we are clinging to, or what we don't want, or just noticing how things change—there's a way in which when this is deeply seen, there's a big letting go that opens the door to more and more freedom. So really engaging with things changing, to have a relationship with things changing like, "Oh wow, look at this," creates the conditions in which there can be letting go, in which there can be more freedom. And it's not an intellectual thing; we all understand letting go. It's more of a visceral, somatic kind of recognition. And I'm just looking at it from this particular way. Is that helpful?

Questioner 3: Yeah, thanks.

Diana Clark: Anybody else have a comment or question? Okay, this evening has ended. So, I'm wishing you a wonderful rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

1. **Dhammapada:** A collection of sayings of the Buddha in verse form and one of the most widely read and best known Buddhist scriptures. [↵](#)
2. **Anicca:** A Pali word that translates to "impermanence" or "inconstancy." It refers to the Buddhist concept that all conditional things are in a constant state of flux. (Original transcript said "ana", corrected to "*anicca*" based on context.) [↵](#)
3. **Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer:** A contemporary poet known for her daily poetry practice and works focusing on themes of connection, nature, and vulnerability. [↵](#)
4. **Rainer Maria Rilke:** A Bohemian-Austrian poet and novelist, widely recognized as one of the most lyrically intense German-language poets. His poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo" famously ends with the line "You must change your life." [↵](#)

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