

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
**“Liberation through Witnessing Impermanence”**

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 13, 2016

**Call to Celebration**

Author and psychotherapist Mark Epstein loves to tell this story of Buddhist monk Ajahn Chah meeting with visitors after lunch. Ajahn Chah motioned to a glass at his side. Mark writes:

“Do you see this glass?” he asked us. “I love this glass. It holds the water admirably. When the sun shines on it, it reflects the light beautifully. When I tap it, it has a lovely ring. Yet for me, this glass is already broken. When the wind knocks it over or my elbow knocks it off the shelf and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, ‘Of course.’ But when I understand that this glass is already broken, every minute with it is precious.”

It is in the spirit of the preciousness of that which is broken that the Japanese have developed the art of “kintsugi.” When the cup falls, the Japanese don’t throw away the broken pieces as if that is the end of the cup’s existence. Instead, by carefully repairing it, they can make it more beautiful with the addition of gold in the compound between the cracks that restores its form. Breaking is just a moment in its timeline, just a moment of its transformation.

Contemplating that which is pristine, broken and repaired is an aesthetically pleasing way to approach the topic of impermanence, the truth of change. Nothing remains the same. The only constant is that things will change. The only variable is the speed of that change.

May we contemplate impermanence today, aware of how it makes everything both precious and beautiful, as we join together in the celebration of life.

**Sermon**

How many people enjoy looking in the mirror and seeing more gray hairs, hairs growing in new places, blotchy patches of brown, or a new wrinkle or sag in the skin? I know it doesn’t fill me with awe and delight. How many of you enjoy your nose getting stuffy, the joints aching, running a fever and feeling weak and tired? I know I don’t like

the feeling of starting to get sick. How many of you enjoy thinking about how you will die and what the last hour of your life will be like?

Such Tenderness by Israeli poet Raquel Chalfi

Such tenderness in our body  
as it abandons us  
slowly  
reluctant to hurt us  
with a sudden jolt.  
Gradually wistfully  
like a half-sleeping beauty  
it weaves for us  
tiny wrinkles of light and wisdom--  
no earthquake cracks  
but an airy network of anxiety lines.  
How kind of our body  
that it doesn't change our face  
all at once  
that it doesn't break our bones  
with one blow.  
Not cautiously  
like a pale moon bathing us with its glow  
it illumines us  
with a network of sad nerves  
folds our skin in the corners  
hardens our spinal cord  
so we can withstand it all  
Such beauty such tenderness  
in our body that gradually betrays us  
politely prepares us  
tells us in whispers  
bit-by-bit hour-by-hour  
that it is leaving

This is the unpleasant aspect of impermanence that most of us strongly dislike and want to avoid thinking about or experiencing. As I know I don't have to tell you, you

can't. Bit-by-bit, hour-by-hour, it is leaving. When we come into this world and experience human consciousness at birth, we've also signed on to having to deal, if we are lucky to live long enough, with sickness, old age and no matter what, death.

What may surprise you is finding out that the Buddha noticed focusing intensely on the experience of impermanence could be beneficial. In fact, it could be a very good thing that could lead one to liberation from mental suffering. And the method he recommended to do this was meditation.

With that in mind, I left here on the last day of January to drive to the Insight Meditation Society Forest Refuge meditation center located just north of the little town of Barre in the middle of Massachusetts. I had arranged to spend two weeks there doing mindfulness meditation from early in the morning till late at night. I would be alternating sitting for thirty minutes to an hour with very slow walking meditation. Breakfast was at 6:30am and lunch at noon. I did an exercise set in the late afternoon. The rest of the time I did as much sitting, walking, standing or lying down meditation as I could.

When I arrived, Kyle, the staff person who welcomed me suggested I listen to a CD in their library on beginning my retreat. I had been there several times before but thought, why not? The talk was by a favorite teacher of mine, Joseph Goldstein, who was the visionary for the creation of the Forest Refuge. The idea behind it was building a space for people to come and stay in silence for long periods of time, much longer than the normal retreats that happen at the main retreat center next door. This beautiful, modern facility has individual rooms for up to 30 retreatants, and a beautiful meditation hall nestled in the woods. It was designed to allow students to structure their own retreat schedule while keeping silence, meeting with a teacher every few days for 15 minutes and hearing two talks to inspire their practice each week.

In the welcoming talk on the CD, Goldstein referred to the benefits of contemplating impermanence. The Buddha taught, "It's better to live a single day seeing the momentary rise and fall of phenomena than to live a hundred years without seeing this." Right then and there, I resolved that my time for the next two weeks would be focused intensely on seeing if I could do that.

The way I vowed to do that was using a particular meditation technique the Buddha taught called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as fully described in the Satipatthana Sutta. The method stresses knowing when the breath is coming in and when it is going out. Most of us don't pay that close attention to our breath (unless we

have breathing difficulties – and then often with aversion). The goal is not to control or modify or improve one's breath, but rather to know and be present with the process of breathing, noticing whether it is coming in or going out and the duration of the breath, whether long or short. The focus of attention, once well-established noticing the process of breathing can then expand to noticing sensations in the body in general as they arise and pass away. To this is then added, noticing how we evaluate those sensations as pleasant, a sensation we welcome and enjoy, unpleasant, a sensation we'd rather not experience and avoid, or maybe neither pleasant or unpleasant, thus a neutral sensation. The lens can be expanded again to notice what thoughts appear and disappear in each moment also noticing how we value them as pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. Finally, the largest lens setting is noticing how what we're experiencing validates (or doesn't validate maybe) the teachings of the Buddha about the nature of reality, also called the dharma.

During the evening of my ninth day, I was delighted to hear a talk by one of the staff meditation teachers, Marcia Rose. My body and mind had quieted down by this point. My ability to stay with present moment phenomena arising and passing away was fairly good – not excellent by any means but I was developing good concentration that allowed me to stay awake to the passing show. I sat very still in the front row on my cushion ready to receive her wisdom.

The title of her talk was, "The Liberating Embrace of Impermanence." I felt like I hit the jackpot. She was going to tell me exactly what I needed to hear to get enlightened! She began her talk with these words from the end of the Diamond Sutra:

"Like a tiny drop of dew, or a bubble floating in a stream  
 Like a flash of lightning in a summer cloud,  
 Or a flickering lamp, an illusion, a phantom, or a dream."  
 "So is all conditioned existence to be seen."

Crowfoot, leader of the Blackfoot tribe in the early 1900's:

What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in night. It's the breath of buffalo in wintertime.  
 It is the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.

Wandering Japanese monk Ryokan:

Our life in this world. To what should I compare it? It is like an echo resounding  
 through the mountain to the empty sky.

Physicist, astronomer and writer Adam Frank:

From birth to the unknown moment of our passing, we ride a river of change. And in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, we exhaust ourselves in an endless search for solidity. We hunger for something that lasts. Some idea or principle that rises above time and change. We hunger for certainty. That's a big problem. It might even be THE problem.

I could relate to these words about THE problem. I had stopped shaving and noticed how white my whiskers had become. As I looked in the mirror, I asked, just when did I get old? I work hard at maintaining my body and my health, but the mirror didn't lie about my age. Having always looked younger than my age, I used to grow a beard to look older. Now having a beard was having the opposite effect.

Marcia anticipated my thoughts sharing this poem titled  
Fugitive by Lisel Mueller

My life is running away with me;  
the two of us are in cahoots.  
I hold still while it paints  
    dark circles under my eyes.  
streaks my hair gray, stuffs pillows  
under my dress. In each new room  
the mirror reassures me  
I'll not be recognized.  
I'm learning to travel light,  
like the juice in the power line.  
My baggage, swallowed by memory,  
weighs almost nothing. No one suspects  
its value. When they knock on my door,  
badges flashing, I open up:  
I don't match their description.  
Wrong room, they say, and apologize.  
My life in the corner winks  
and wipes off my fingerprints.

I know this all sounds like a lot of bad news and no reason to spend any time contemplating impermanence. But the Buddha promised that this is really just an illusion of bad news. The good news is that we have Buddha-nature. We need attain

nothing or achieve anything – we’ve already got what we’re looking for – but we don’t recognize it.

But why is that so? How can we have Buddha-nature and not know it?

This dilemma greatly troubled Japanese Zen teacher Dogen in the thirteenth century. He dedicated himself to intense practice and sought out teachers who could help him solve this riddle, this koan.

It is way beyond my scope this morning and my ability to be able to explain to you how he finally answered that koan. What I want to share with you is one aspect of what he realized that has to do with how we perceive time that might be helpful.

There are two common ways we experience time. One is in a linear direction. Think of a bundle of wooden twigs that are placed in a fire pit then burned. In the past they were wooden branches. In the present they are burning with flames leaping up. When the fire eventually goes out, all that will be left is ash. The process moves in one direction and cannot be reversed.

Another way we experience time is as a cycle. Think of a seed. With water, sun and soil, the seed will grow into a tree. That tree may then bear fruit. If we open up the fruit, inside we’ll find a seed. The cycle continuously repeats, as the days follow the nights. There is the endless cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth.

Dogen saw that both these ways of experiencing time missed something in the framework of past, present and future. Much of our suffering comes from remembering how the present is not like the way it was in the past. As I look at my gray beard in the mirror, I long for the days when it was brown with reddish highlights. I also suffer as I worry about how long I might live, whether Philomena or I will die first, will we have enough to retire comfortably. What might the world be like in a year with a new President? What kind of hurricanes are coming with global climate change? The future is an endless sea of potential suffering.

But if the past and the future aren’t really real, and if this moment right now is the only real moment, that only exists at all because we exist to know it, maybe really knowing this ... is liberating. Buddha taught this by silently holding up an *udumbara* flower. It is the flower of a fig that is rarely seen because it is usually hidden in the fig, thus flower and fruit in one, pollinated by a special wasp.

Don’t feel bad if this doesn’t make a lot of sense to you. Only Mahakasupa, the Buddha’s wisest student, got the message when he silently held up the flower.

When Marcia was eighteen, she spend a lovely weekend at a resort with a girlfriend. On the way back from the very pleasant time together having enjoyed good theater, food and conversation, they were in a very serious automobile accident. Her friend lay dying in the road, her life slipping away quickly, her eyes becoming still, as Marcia with only cuts and bruises watched. In one moment her friend was animated and full of life. In the next moment she was gone. Marcia was deeply affected by this experience of impermanence that eventually brought her to Buddhism and meditation practice.

"Like a tiny drop of dew, or a bubble floating in a stream  
 Like a flash of lightning in a summer cloud,  
 Or a flickering lamp, an illusion, a phantom, or a dream."  
 "So is all conditioned existence to be seen."

The key understanding in Buddhism is recognizing Buddha-nature is not a component of our "self," but something that "is," right now. That "being," or existential moment of time ... is all there is. It is interdependent with youth, middle, and old age. It is one with individual bodies but has no self or essence. It is also one with the rocks, trees, rivers and mountains too. Or, as a wise Buddhist teacher puts it, "no self, no problem."

That wasn't where I was listening to the talk by Marcia. I was aware of my legs going to sleep as she was completing the seventieth minute of her seventy-three minute talk. I was struggling to remain motionless, unfortunately prideful wanting to demonstrate to the slackers sitting in chairs my accomplishment as a meditator. Ah, I thought smiling, how full of self am I in this moment. I'm not there yet ... wherever "there" is.

She closed with these words:

The truth of impermanence is a gateway out of the feeling of separateness. It is a gateway out of the suffering of self-centered existence. We begin to understand that we are intimately woven into this endlessly changing, reflective web of life. We also really, truly begin to understand the suffering in ourselves and in others. The suffering and anguish created by trying to hold on and resist the truth that every facet of life, within us and surrounding us is not fixed, not permanent, not static. We and it are intricately woven together with everything constantly changing and everything reflecting everything, in this many hued and faceted jeweled net of life.

I came home after two weeks, a lot more relaxed, aware and peaceful but without realizing my Buddha-nature. Of course, the Zen folks believe this could happen to me

tomorrow like a flash of lightening. I'm happy right now, though, with just a little more peace and tranquility inside my head.

It's possible, right NOW, for you too!

### **Benediction**

Just in case you missed the point in all that I've said so far, here is the executive summary, in the Buddha's words:

What is born will die. What has been gathered will be dispersed. What has been accumulated will be exhausted. What has been built up will collapse. And what has been high will be brought low.

All conditioned things are transitory. Those who realize this are freed from sorrow.

May we all realize the truth of impermanence and be freed from sorrow.