

San Rafael Sitting Group      Impermanence and Abundant Enough-ness      September 19, 2012

We're spending the evenings Rick is away exploring the three characteristics of existence as the Buddha taught them – dukka -suffering, anicca - impermanence, and anatta - non-self and the Wise Effort it takes to deal skillfully with each of those characteristics. Last week we looked at suffering and one tool – the cultivating of joy or gladness – as a practice to help us alleviate our suffering and move into well-being, or find the joy in the midst of the suffering. Next week we'll look at non-self and tools that help us use experiences of non-self as a gateway to our true nature or Buddha nature. Tonight we explore impermanence, and how a wise comprehension of impermanence can lead to both an experience of the unconditioned or the unchanging awareness or consciousness that all things impermanent arise out of, and how our experience of the arising and passing away and re-arising can open us to an understanding of abundant enoughness.

Impermanence is a true reality of existence. Not just a deep spiritual teaching or important psychological lesson. It is physically, biologically true, it is the nature of everything to change. From our bodies, our moods, our thoughts and belief systems, our relationships, our health, even the existence of the planet, the solar system, everything in the universe we live in. All things come and go.

The Buddha taught about the 8 winds of change – praise and blame, gain and loss, success and failure, pleasure and pain – in terms of dualities. Arising and falling away. That everything in transient existence is always changing implies that there is an unchanging phenomena of existence as well, not so much that something is permanent or eternal, but that there is a something that is unchanging, larger than all the arising and falling away, holding all the arising and falling away.

In the Buddhist tradition that something that doesn't change is called – many things – the unconditioned, meaning not subject to the conditions of arising and falling away. In order to point to the experience of it, it is also called Awareness or Consciousness, the is-ness or such-ness or being-ness that all beings and things arise and fall away from and into. Of course, using any words to describe a phenomenological experience is a hazard. In the Taoist tradition Lao Tzu says the Tao that can be named is not the Tao. But we use words to point to an experience, a subjective experience of something that is beyond all subjects and all objects, it's the is=ness that holds It is what it is.

In a theistic tradition this unconditioned might be called god or the divine or essence or the sacred. In our non-theistic tradition, awareness or consciousness or being-ness is used to point to experiences of awareness or consciousness or beingness where nothing is caught, nothing is fixed, nothing is permanent.

I have my own stories to share about experiencing this unconditioned. Again, experiences that simply point to an experience that is available, if un-nameable.

One day on retreat at Spirit Rock, I got into a very spiritually incorrect snit about the volunteers cooking for retreatants running out of broccoli before I could be served any at lunch Being on

retreat, I noticed my snit, noticed all the feelings coming and going, eventually let them go, and sat down to enjoy a truly delicious meal.

Later, sitting outside in the courtyard, my attention was caught by a ginkgo leaf blowing gently in the breeze. My awareness blew wide open into a blissful state of feeling one with everything, a most pleasurable and enjoyable state. Eventually that state also fell away. Then I realized the blissful state was just as impermanent as the state of irritation earlier. Neither state was a permanent reality; the only thing unchanging was the awareness that could notice both the irritated and the blissful state, that could hold all of existence arising and falling away.

Another story: one morning I woke up and in that half-awake state I had the sense of not yet slipping into the sense of self so familiar to me. There was a spaciousness where I could play around with being this person or that person, before I did “become” who I know myself to be. An insight into how we can have the spaciousness to choose a self, not just respond automatically.

In the garden, I’m actually writing an e-mail to Dan Siegel about this experience, and my mind pops out into an awareness and experience of the inter-connectedness of everything, the allness or oneness of everything, and I sit there, motionless, for more than an hour. Just being, and knowing the being.

Experiences of this spacious awareness - the unconditioned - are available to us, with practice on a regular basis. Steven Cope, scholar in the yogic tradition, calls these experiences grace. Br. David Stendl Rast in the Christian mystical tradition calls it grace. In our tradition, we may call it spacious awareness, and when we access experiences of this spacious awareness, it changes, it informs, how we hold everything else that arises and passes away. We relax into the awareness that is larger than, and more ever-present than any suffering, or any self-ing. And we know it to be the deepest truth.

Exercise: Dropping into the Unconditioned: Dissolving the Self into the Nonself

1. Sit comfortably. Allow your eyes to gently close. Focus your awareness on your breathing, gently in and out. As you follow your breathing, notice your own awareness of your breathing, the awareness that allows you to know that you are breathing.
2. When that awareness of your breathing is steady, begin to notice the breathing of any people around you, or people you imagine being around you. There’s no need to do anything; just notice or imagine other people breathing as you are breathing, and notice your awareness of that. Notice what you are aware of in your own being as you rest in this awareness.
3. Staying anchored in an awareness of your own breathing, expand your awareness of breathing to include the breathing of more people you know, who are not necessarily physically near you. Notice your awareness of your awareness of everyone breathing. Notice your awareness of your own being as you remain aware.

4. Still anchored in an awareness of your own breathing, expand your awareness further to include people you don't know, outside the building you are in, perhaps elsewhere in the neighborhood, throughout the city, across the region. Become aware of all of them breathing together. Notice your awareness of your awareness: you are simply being, being aware.

5. Continue to expand your awareness to include people all over the country, all over the planet, all breathing. Expand your awareness to include all living creatures breathing in the parks, the forests, underground, in the lakes and rivers, in the oceans, the sky, of all sentient beings breathing together. Notice your awareness of your awareness of existence, and your awareness of simply being.

6. Expand your awareness to include all forms of existence, some breathing, some not – the air, the water, the rocks.. And notice your awareness of your awareness of the breathing, and your awareness of simply being.

7. Expand your awareness beyond our planet to other planets, other stars, other galaxies, and the space between the planets and stars and galaxies. Expand your awareness as far as you can possibly imagine; notice your awareness of your awareness expanding. Rest comfortably, safely, in this vast spacious awareness, in this vast simply being, for as long as you choose. Take your time.

8. Gently bring your awareness back to your awareness of sitting in the room you are in, in this moment, breathing. Focus your awareness on simply breathing. Take a moment to shift gears and reflect more fully on your experience of simply being. You may experience a lightness, a spaciousness, or an openness in your being.

In our tradition, in working with suffering and impermanence and self, we are taught to not attach, not cling, not grasp, to mindfully step back, reflect, acknowledge and accept what is happening, inquire into it for lessons in skillful choices, and then let go or non-identify. Act, respond, deal, but not identify with the outcomes of our choices, not remain in reactivity about what's happening or our choices.

Skillful means. Part of wise effort. But I think part of wise effort is also seeing the arising that comes with every passing away. We are aware of the unconditioned awareness that all impermanent things arise from and pass away into, but then things, even impermanent things, arise again. Our existence is also a cycle of arising, passing away, arising again. We find great wisdom in understanding that all things pass away, we practice not clinging, not grasping, but we can also find great wisdom in understanding that life is renewed and arises again. As Pablo Neruda says, you can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring. There is an underlying life force or energy in the universe that keeps embodying itself in the forms and creations we know as form and creation.

*The Life Force experimenting with forms. You for one. Me for another. The Universe has shouted itself alive. We are one of the shouts.*

*- Ray Bradbury*

It is also skillful means, wise effort, to love and embrace all things impermanent, to invest in the human enterprise and a path of awakening. We can know that our breath comes and goes; we can also be profoundly grateful for every breath, and the life force that sustains our existence, moment by moment. We can have our moods, our troubles, our gripes and grumps, and be grateful every moment that we are here, and alive, to deal.

This allows us to shift our perspective from a glass half-empty to a glass half-full, more than half-full, full to overflowing. Once we can comprehend that life is constantly renewing itself, that Consciousness is constantly embodying itself in form, then our awareness can be explored into an awareness of every-thing-ness, what James Baraz's son Adam calls abundant enough-ness. That sense of abundant enough-ness informs our sense of our self in this impermanent world. We are an inextricable part of the Oneness, the such-ness, that is.

*Tagore*

*Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.*

*This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new.*

*At the touch of thy immortal hands, my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable.*

*Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill.*

*Rilke every happiness is the child of a separation it did not think it could survive.*

Exercise: in groups of four, different than last time, two minutes each, when you have had an experience of loss, separation, ending, death, closing of a chapter, what experience came and filled you up again, allowed you to re-affirm your faith in abundant enoughness.