

THE FOUR THOUGHTS – IMPERMANENCE

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Yesterday, we briefly discussed the first thought that turns the mind toward the dharma, the precious human life. In fact, the translation of what I have been reciting in Tibetan all these years for that thought goes like this:

"First,
This precious human birth,
So favorable for the practice of dharma,
Is difficult to obtain and easily lost.
At this time I must make it meaningful."

Now, let's look at the thought of impermanence, so appropriately listed as the second thought, because we all have second (and further) thoughts about death and impermanence.

The Buddhists state that this universe and everything in it is impermanent, and moreover that the lives of beings are fragile like bubbles on water.

Nothing lasts forever. Even the hardest diamond-like substances eventually wear themselves out of time and into essence. Any of us over thirty have at least begun to realize impermanence, and those of us over sixty have probably begun to be humbled by it. And I expect to become increasingly more aware of impermanence to the very end.

The goal of considering our impermanence is not to have us huddle in a corner afraid of our impending death. Rather it is to realize that all that we have, including our entire self, is ephemeral. It will not last.

Instead of being paralyzed in fear and fruitless worry, our time is better spent working on those things we do take with us when we die, like our karma, any merit we may have accumulated, and our potential awareness of the true nature of the mind. These are treasures that survive the death of the body and the inevitable abandonment of the Self.

In my opinion there is no better teacher and constant reminder of our own impermanence than Mother Nature. She treats every sentient being absolutely equally and never blinks when showing us exactly where things are at. For me, even a morning

walk can suffice.

It can be as simple as a country road filled with night-crawlers struggling to get across the tarmac before the rising sun fries them to a crisp... or the huge Luna Moth fluttering to seek refuge in a tree when a passing bird swoops down to make a meal of it. The list of these events is endless.

Most living beings struggle to avoid being eaten, while at the same time struggling to find some other critter to eat. I mean, the writing is on the wall my friends, if we will just read it. Nature is a harsh mistress indeed.

Impermanence informs us that our fear of death is only adding insult to the perceived injury of death itself. I am reminded of that great film by director Arthur Penn "Mickey One," a Kafkaesque study of paranoia, where the protagonist (played by Warren Beatty) has to choose between, as he puts it, the "crush out" or the "fade out." I put it this way: we can masochistically wait until the forces of time drag us to our eventual fate or we can stand up and look fate in the eye. We can choose to go to meet our maker.

I favor the second option over being dragged kicking and screaming to the end of life. I would rather learn to become increasingly aware of the nature of the mind (and thus of the nature of death).

A whiff of impermanence, as I like to say, is the smelling-salts of the dharma. It is one of those four reminders or thoughts capable of waking us from our tendency to snooze our lives. A close brush with death sobers up even the most jaded of us rather quickly.

Here is the translation of the Tibetan text about impermanence that I have followed all these years:

"Second,
This world and all its inhabitants are impermanent,
In particular,
The life of each being is like a water bubble,
It is uncertain when I will die and become a corpse.
As it is only the dharma that can help me at that time,
I must practice now with diligence.

Impermanence is a fact worth our consideration.

[Photo not by me.]

