

THE FLIGHT OF THE PHOENIX

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Everyone, the scientific-minded among us especially, knows the law of impermanence. Just look around you. Nothing is permanent. Even the hardest rock and diamond admits changes and eventually decays.

I love the story where the great Tibetan lama Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (in an opening address to an audience) started out with the words "Some of us will die soon, the rest a little later." That's impermanence.

What then is permanent? That is a question many of us want to know and will eventually have to find out for ourselves. And this is why Buddhists call this cyclic existence we are living "Samsara," because nothing in this world is permanent. Whatever goes up, comes down. Even our moods are not permanent.

I am sure we each must have a friend or two whose moods are like a pendulum, swinging from up to down, and back again, spending much more time either up or down than balanced in the middle. Yet it is that balanced or middle state that we wait for, where we can talk and communicate with one another. If you watch a pendulum, the middle of a pendulum swing is where everything is changing most quickly and the time spent there is the least -- a recipe for non-communication. And life is like that.

Whenever we talk about the ups and downs of our cyclic existence, the Buddhist idea of impermanence is being underlined. If we really look around, impermanence is natural, Nature's law. My first dharma teacher always said "We don't break nature's laws; they break us." There is nothing whatsoever in this world that is permanent other than impermanence itself, thus the old saying "The only thing that doesn't change is change itself." I hear that.

Is it any wonder that we sift through life trying to find something permanent, like a leg to stand on?

Etymologically, one of the roots of the English word "religion" is the Latin word "ligare," which means to bind or to make last. To my understanding religion is nothing more than a study of those things that last, that which is the most permanent. Everybody is searching for something that lasts, that we can depend on, and that will be there tomorrow and the next day. "That which lasts longest" defines religion to a T.

Sadly, we won't find it in cyclic existence, because change and impermanence are the name of the game in Samsara, this day-to-day world we all live in.

The historical Buddha was born into the same world we are. As far as impermanence goes, nothing has changed in 2500 years. He looked deeply into samsara and found that only awareness and its resulting realization was permanent, in some way survived death, and carries over to the next life. Everything else is transitory and impermanent, rising and falling like waves on the ocean of life.

It's just natural for us to want something permanent for ourselves, for those we most love, and for all beings who share our same fate. So how do we get it?

For thousands of years the answer to that question (at least for the Buddhists) has been by examining our mind, the nature of the mind itself. And we begin examining the mind by learning to use it, most often by practicing some form of mind training or meditation. And there are cultural differences too.

The Buddhists have a different take on the Self than we have here in America. Of course they have a self, just as we do, but they tend to recognize it for the bunch of attachments it is, our personal collection of likes and dislikes – nothing impersonal. Further, Buddhists are very clear that we leave the self behind us when we die, while we Americans are confused about that issue. In the Buddhist view, the body (and the self) die, but something remains that moves on. What is that?

The Buddhist teachings state that what remains beyond death is the mind itself and whatever imprint our realization of the mind's true nature has accumulated in this life. So, if we remove all of that which is impermanent, including our body and the collection of attachments we call the self, the mind (our mind) is still there.

How personal is that which goes on beyond our death? It can't be too personal, because we as a person die, but something survives. Of course we can't help but wonder about this. I once asked a very high rinpoche if he could give me any idea of what part of us remains after death and appears in our next life. He said (as an example) that a penchant for hot sauce might appear in the next life.

I don't know if he was kidding me, but I don't think so. Moreover, all of the rinpoches I have studied with work very, very hard to encourage us to thin out our attachments, see beyond our self, and attain realization.

Apparently spiritual realization is portable, something we are each going to find out for ourselves sooner or a little later.

Your thoughts please.

