



Impermanence

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Geshe la: Tonight we will be discussing impermanence. Impermanence is not only a Buddhist concept, it is a universal concept. Impermanence is a universal reality. According to Buddhist understanding, everything in our material and conscious worlds that come into being purely as a result of causes and conditions, are ultimately of an impermanent nature. Nothing is stable and everlasting. But, for our ordinary human minds, many of the things that are around us appear to be stable and everlasting. We directly assume and cling to this view, when in fact, these things are not stable and not in a state of everlastingness. Inevitably, things change. Due to our false assumptions of stability and clinging to everlastingness, it brings psychological and emotional pain: Frustration, disappointment, confusion, mental conflict, and we are totally confused in that darkness.

When we talk about impermanence there are two types: Gross and subtle. One could say, visible and invisible. Gross impermanence refers to things and events that come into being due to causes and conditions, stay for awhile, then disappear, or cease. For example, death or glass that breaks. The occurrence of the gross impermanence is dependent upon secondary causes that destroy the continuity of the life, or the glass. This is called gross impermanence because it is visible to the ordinary human mind and it depends on secondary factors or causes to destroy it. The subtle impermanence refers to anything that comes into being as a result of causes and conditions in a state of momentary changes, including ourselves. The very first moment of our life at birth is not very stable and is moving toward its cessation. This means the process of destruction is already at work, or has begun right from the moment of birth. In other words, one could say the cause of destruction is set in motion by the birth and, therefore, things are already in the process of cessation. This is called the subtle impermanence. When something breaks down or somebody dies due to external causes, it's not a great shock for someone who has a profound understanding of subtle impermanence. Of course, ordinary people like us, who don't have an understanding of subtle impermanence find this shocking.

Everything that exists in the world can be destroyed in four ways. 1) Birth will be destroyed by death. This means that the end of birth is death. 2) Our meeting with people, like friends, relatives, ends in separation. Mainly, we have problems with separation from friends, relatives, loved ones. 3) The accumulation of wealth and material possessions will end with exhaustion of our wealth and material possessions. 4) Everything that is constructed high above us and those in powerful positions will collapse. Also, everything that looks fresh and young will turn stale and old. If we look into our world from these four destructive ways, we can see the impermanent nature of the world, including ourselves.

According to Buddhism, the understanding and realization of impermanence is very useful, helpful and optimistic. 1) Because it allows us to see our whole world as a very temporary state. As a result, we are able to protect our minds from many of the unhealthy emotions that plague us. 2) It is a very necessary factor that is needed to accelerate one's spiritual realization and practice. Now please, questions.

Student: Geshe la, can you recommend a practice for understanding separation, the second aspect of impermanence?

Geshe la: The key practice is to try to gain precise understanding of the subtle impermanence. Once we have gained understanding of subtle impermanence then somehow, we are already prepared to accept that separation is only the quality of someone's mental state. Our main problem is that we lack the understanding of subtle impermanence and we are not prepared enough to accept separation. When the separation comes, we are disturbed and confused.

Student: Would you say that seeing the world in these four ways is seeing through 'detachment' and 'non-attachment'? If so, it seems to me a lonely and detached way of life that may limit life's experiences. How can we do anything to change or lessen the possible sufferings on earth if we see through eyes of knowing that all will be 'destroyed'? Doesn't what I may create in this world have an effect on my karma? Not just to play for the sake of playing but to make a difference to human and the earth and a genuine compassion towards others

Geshe la: Yes, seeing through detachment or non-attachment. An analogy might be: Adults like us see and play with a sand castle without attachment to it. Yet a child sees and plays with the same sand castle with attachment. Because of this attachment, the child cries and is emotionally disturbed when the castle is destroyed by the sea or somebody. The second part of your question is totally wrong. If we have a true sense of detachment it helps to bring us into connection with society, there is no sense of alienation, life is more joyful and more meaningful.

Student: Perhaps if we see change not as an end but as a new beginning then the circle has no end.

Geshe la: The circle has no end.

Student: Geshe la, would it be beneficial to temper the joy of occasions such as births, marriages, the acquisition of new homes, vehicles, all those joy filled beginnings in our lives, by sharing this explanation of subtle impermanence with all those who share in these joys, with the wish to alleviate some small measure of the eventual suffering that separation will evoke, even to those who are not students of the Dharma?

Geshe la: You are right. There is a Tibetan expression: If you are too excited about something, later you will have to cry. So, whether the circumstances or conditions are desirable or undesirable, one must always try to live with a very balanced state of mind so that there is less chance to disturb the emotions.

Student: Is there any dharma or realm that is NOT subject to impermanence?

Geshe la: Good question. Yes, there is permanence that is not subject to impermanence. For example, the Dharmakaya, which means the absolute state of Buddhahood.

Student: Geshe la, would you say that expressing one's emotions fully, whether it be joy, anger, happiness or love for someone is wrong?

Geshe la: I'm not going to say it is wrong. Only that it depends upon how it affects one.

Student: Geshe la, could we have a teaching in the future on the Buddhist idea on projection, as in, 'what we experience in the world is a projection of mind'?

Geshe la: No, we are not going to say things are purely projections of our mind and Buddhism is not saying that things are mentalism. Of course we project or impute some qualities and identities on things and objects. This does not mean that the things are figments of our imagination. If we have a notion that the things are purely one's mental projections, then we are somehow in nihilism. On the other hand, if we have notions that things do possess their intrinsic reality, or are substantially real, then we are in the extremes of eternalism, or absolutism. And so we are left with the question: What is the actual, or true, state of existence of things and events? Answer: Things are nothing more than a mere collection of millions of fast moving atoms, particles, molecules, and on the basis of that collection we impute identity on that object. This is the true way of how things exist and function in our world.