

Resting in Impermanence

by Lisa Hoffman

Lucy is dying.

She is my neighbor's cat, a 14-year-old Abyssinian who looks and acts like a little cougar. At eight weeks old, Lucy found a huge tomcat in the garage and backed him into a corner. They were discovered hours later: Lucy's teeth bared and tiny tail twitching while the big tomcat cowered behind a garbage pail.

Now she spends her days and nights curled up in a tight ball. She stopped eating 11 days ago. As I watch Lucy, I see her as a kitten -- pudgy, playful and fierce. Such a contrast to her skeletal sleeping form, reminding me that life is a series of transitions.

We feel transition more easily when starting a relationship, changing jobs, moving, mourning the death of loved one. During these times, the truth of impermanence is hard to ignore.

Then there are periods of sublime stability. Those times when life is charmed, there is always a parking space, and the IRS owes you money on April 15. Impermanence feels far away because life is working the way we think it should. And most of us secretly hope, even believe, that everything will continue to click. We have finally arrived.

Even when all feels perfect, there is often subtle anxiety because we hope nothing will change. When life shifts in obvious ways, we suffer in direct response to some kinds of changes, and worry about how others will work out. How will I bear the loss of my mother? Have I finally found the love of my life? Is this my dream job?

I find this grasping much more unbearable than the changing nature of life. No matter how things are, I cling -- wanting them to be different or stay the same. Either way the chance to experience the present moment is eclipsed by pushing it away or holding it too close. Then, the moment I get what I want, I am on to the next desire.

What lies beneath this ever-turning wheel of wanting?

"Anguish emerges from craving for life to be other than it is," writes Stephen Batchelor in *Buddhism Without Beliefs*. "In the face of a changing world, such craving seeks consolation in something permanent and reliable, in the self that is in control of things... the irony of this strategy is that it turns out to be the cause of what it seeks to dispel."

Is it possible to escape this cycle of clinging? My experience is sometimes yes and sometimes no, because to be human is to want. I think we all long to feel safe in a secure world.

But everything does change. That's the undercurrent of our lives -- sometimes gentle and other times forceful. It was one of the truths that came to the Buddha when he was enlightened, and is a foundation of Buddhist practice. Impermanence is a scary proposition because we just don't know what will happen next.

How can we rest in impermanence?

Perhaps by feeling the bittersweet truth that everything will end. Everything. By letting that knowledge season every experience with appreciation. From doing the dishes to kissing someone for the first time, a moment unappreciated is lost.

So, will we "get" impermanence and never again cling to a moment we love or push away one that is painful? Probably not. We will always grasp and avoid because that's our nature. A clue is the actual word Buddha, which means "awakened one." We can wake up when stuck on the wheel of wanting and rest in impermanence by returning to the present moment.

Years ago I hoped I would in time rest completely in impermanence and be centered forever more. I am learning that the wheel will always turn from wanting to awareness and back. I can center in this shifting experience, and respond when life calls me to the truth of change.

I look again at the still form of Lucy and see the ferocious kitten with the twitching tail.

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