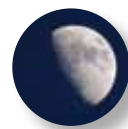


*A YEAR IN A SINGLE IMAGE: Norwegian photographer Eirik Solheim glued a camera to a window shelf in his home and rigged it to take a picture every thirty minutes for a year. From more than 16,000 digital images the camera fed into a computer system, he selected 3,888 daytime photos. By taking one vertical line from each of those images in sequence and compiling them from left to right, he created this single photograph encompassing all four seasons.*





# Embrace Change

When we deny the reality of change, life becomes an endless struggle. When we embrace it, our minds become wise and our hearts tender. Eleven teachers and writers on life's central challenge and the key to the Buddhist path.

# Impermanence Is Buddha Nature

Change isn't just a fact of life we have to accept and work with, says **NORMAN FISCHER**.

**T**HE SCENE OF THE BUDDHA'S PASSING, as told in the Pali canon's *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, is starkly beautiful. The Buddha, having previously "renounced the life force" and announced the time and place of his passing, is surrounded by his disciples. He asks them if they have any last questions or doubts, and through their silence (and his clairvoyance), he realizes that they are all well established in awakening. He then pronounces his final words to them and to all subsequent generations of practitioners: "Now monks, I declare to you: all conditioned things have the nature of vanishing. Keep on diligently with your practice!" Then the Buddha journeys back and forth through the various meditation states, finally passing from this life. Those monks not yet fully awakened "tore their hair, raised their arms, threw themselves down twisting and turning, and cried out in their extreme grief, "Too soon! Too soon!" But the fully awakened monastics remained mindful, saying, "All compound things are impermanent. What's the use of crying?"

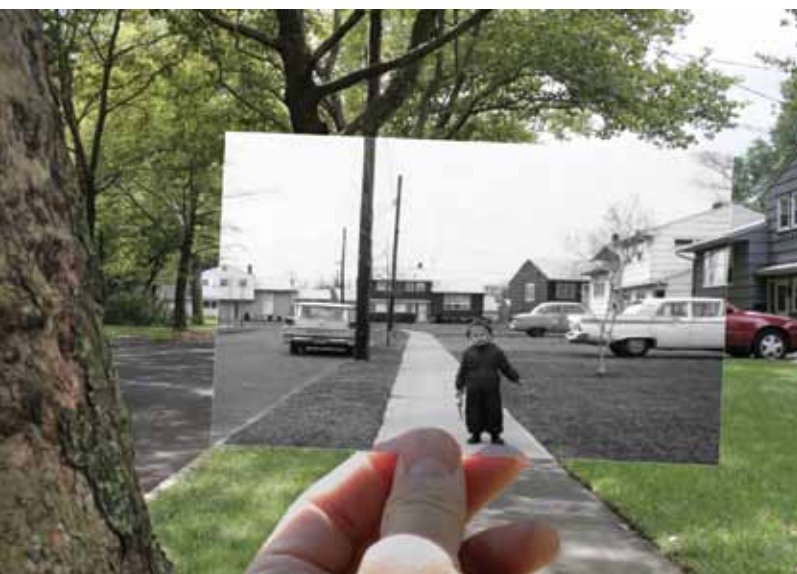
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ZOKETSU NORMAN FISCHER is a Buddhist teacher, writer, and poet. He is the founder of the Everyday Zen Foundation, whose mission is to open and broaden Zen practice through "engaged renunciation."

Practitioners have always understood impermanence as the cornerstone of Buddhist teachings and practice. All that exists is impermanent; nothing lasts. Therefore nothing can be grasped or held onto. When we don't fully appreciate this simple but profound truth we suffer, as did the monks who descended into misery and despair at the Buddha's passing. When we do, we have real peace and understanding, as did the monks who remained fully mindful and calm.

As far as classical Buddhism is concerned, impermanence is the number one inescapable, and essentially painful, fact of life. It is the singular existential problem that the whole edifice of Buddhist practice is meant to address. To understand impermanence at the deepest possible level (we all understand it at superficial levels), and to merge with it fully, is the whole of the Buddhist path. The Buddha's final words express this: Impermanence is inescapable. Everything vanishes. Therefore there is nothing more important than continuing the path with diligence. All other options either deny or short-shrift the problem.

A while ago I had a dream that has stayed with me. In a hazy grotto, my mother-in-law and I, coming from opposite directions, are trying to squeeze through a dim doorway. Both of us



*It's been fifty years since I wore that snowsuit, and so much has changed, yet in many ways it feels like so little has. —Billy*



*Twenty-five years later the house is still blue and my mother is still watching over me. —Alexandra*



## It is enlightenment itself, manifesting moment by moment in time.

are fairly large people and the space is small, so for a moment we are stuck together in the doorway. Finally we press through, she to her side (formerly mine), I to mine (formerly hers).

It's not that surprising to me that I would dream about my mother-in-law. Her situation is often on my mind. My mother-in-law is nearing ninety. She has many health problems. She is usually in pain, can't walk or sleep at night, and is losing the use of her hands to neuropathy. She lives with her husband of more than sixty years, who has advanced Alzheimer's disease, can't speak a coherent sentence, and doesn't know who or where he is. Despite all this, my mother-in-law affirms life 100 percent, as she always has. She never entertains the idea of death, as far as I know. All she wants and hopes for is a good and pleasant life. Since she doesn't have this right now (though she hasn't given up hope for it), she is fairly miserable, as anyone in her situation would be.

I, on the other hand, am fairly healthy, with no expectation of dying anytime soon. Yet from childhood I have been thinking about death, and the fact of death has probably been the main motivator in my life. (Why else would I have devoted myself full time to Buddhist practice from an early age?) Consequently, almost all my talking and writing, and much of my thinking, is



*I wish we could say goodbye to Granddad just one more time.  
—Marsie and Josie*



*We stopped at Blowing Rock but it wasn't our destination. We never got to go where we were headed, and Daddy never traveled that way again. —Larry*



*"DEAR PHOTOGRAPH" is a Web project ([dearphotograph.com](http://dearphotograph.com)) by Taylor Jones that collects images in which old pictures are held up and aligned with the place the original picture was taken.*

*Left: I'll always remember my first fish. —Brian*

in one way or another in reference to death, absence, disappearing.

So this dream intrigues and confuses me. Is my mother-in-law about to pass over from life to death, though temporarily stuck in the crowded doorway? If that's the logic of the dream, then I must be dead, stuck in that same doorway as I try to pass through to life. Of course this makes no sense! But then, the longer I contemplate life and death, the less sense they make. Sometimes I wonder whether life and death isn't merely a conceptual framework we confuse ourselves with. Of course people do seem to disappear, and, this having been the case generally with others, it seems reasonable to assume that it will be the case for us at some point. But how to understand this? And how to account for the many anomalies that appear when you look closely, such as reported appearances of ghosts and other visitations from the dead, reincarnation, and so on.

It is very telling that some religions refer to death as "eternal life," and that in the *Mahāparinibbana Sutta* the Buddha doesn't die. He enters *parinirvana*, full extinction, which is something other than death. In Buddhism generally, death isn't death—it's a staging area for further life. So there are many respectable and less respectable reasons to wonder about the question of death.

There are a lot of older people in the Buddhist communities in which I practice. Some are in their seventies and eighties, others in their sixties, like me. Because of this, the theme of death and impermanence is always on our minds and seems to come up again and again in the teachings we study. All conditioned things pass away. Nothing remains as it was. The body changes and weakens as it ages. In response to this, and to a lifetime's experience, the mind changes as well. The way one thinks of, views, and feels about life and the world is different. Even the same thoughts one had in youth or midlife take on a different flavor when held in older age. The other day a friend about my age, who in her youth studied Zen with the great master Song Sa Nim, told me, "He always said, 'Soon dead!' I understood the words then as being true: very Zen, and almost funny. Now they seem personal and poignant."

"All conditioned things have the nature of vanishing." What is impermanence after all? When we're young we know that death is coming, but it will probably come later, so we don't have to be so concerned with it now. And even if we are concerned with it in youth, as I was, the concern is philosophical. When we are older we know death is coming sooner rather than later, so we take it more personally. But do we really know what we are talking about?

Death may be the ultimate loss, the ultimate impermanence, but even on a lesser, everyday scale, impermanence and the loss it entails still happens more or less "later." Something is here now in a particular way; later it will not be. I am or have something now; later I will not. But "later" is the safest of all time frames. It can be safely ignored because it's not now—it's later, and later never comes. And even if it does, we don't have to worry about it



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now. We can worry about it later. For most of us most of the time, impermanence seems irrelevant.

But in truth, impermanence isn't later; it's now. "All conditioned things have the nature of vanishing." Right now, as they appear before us, they have that nature. It's not that something vanishes later. Right now, everything

is in some way—though we don't understand in what way—vanishing before our very eyes. Squeezing uncomfortably through the narrow doorway of now, we don't know whether we are coming or going. Impermanence may be a deeper thought than we at first appreciate.

Impermanence is not only loss; it is also change, and change can be refreshing, renewing. In fact, change is always both good and bad, because change, even when it is refreshing, always entails loss. Nothing new appears unless something old ceases. As they say on New Year's Eve, "Out with the old, in with the new," a happy and a sad occasion. As with the scene in the *Mahāparinibbana Sutta*, there's despair and equanimity at the same time. Impermanence is both.

In one of his most important essays, the great twelfth-century Japanese Zen master Dogen writes, "Impermanence is itself Buddha Nature." This seems quite different from the classical Buddhist notion of impermanence, which emphasizes the loss side of the loss/change/renewal equation. For Dogen, impermanence isn't a problem to be overcome with diligent effort on the path. Impermanence is the path. Practice isn't the way to cope with or overcome impermanence. It is the way to fully appreciate and live it.

"If you want to understand Buddha Nature," Dogen writes, "you should intimately observe cause and effect over time. When the time is ripe, Buddha Nature manifests." In explaining this teaching, Dogen, in his usual inside-out, upside-down way (Dogen is unique among Zen Masters in his intricately detailed literary style, which usually involves very counterconceptual ways of understanding typical concepts), writes that practice isn't so much a matter of changing or improving the conditions of your inner or outer life, as a way of fully embracing and appreciating those conditions, especially the condition of impermanence and loss. When you practice, "the time becomes ripe." While this phrase naturally implies a "later" (something unripe ripens in time), Dogen understands it is the opposite way: Time is always ripe. Buddha Nature always manifests in time, because time is always impermanence.

Of course time is impermanence and impermanence is time! Time is change, development, loss. Present time is ungraspable: as soon as it occurs it immediately falls into the past. As soon as I am here, I am gone. If this were not so, how could the me of this moment ever give way to the me of the following moment? Unless the first me disappears, clearing the way, the second me cannot appear. So my being here is thanks to my not being here. If I were not not here I couldn't be here!

In words, this becomes very quickly paradoxical and absurd, but in living, it seems to be exactly the case. Logically it must be so, and once in a while (especially in a long meditation retreat)



*Sam Taylor-Wood*  
*STILL LIFE, 2001*  
*35mm film/DVD*  
*Time-lapse video duration:*  
*3 minutes 44 seconds*





you can actually, viscerally, feel it. Nothing appears unless it appears in time. And whatever appears in time appears and vanishes at once, just as the Buddha said on his deathbed. Time is existence, impermanence, change, loss, growth, development—the best and the worst news at once. Dogen calls this strange immense process Buddha Nature. “Buddha Nature is no other than *all are*, because *all are* is Buddha Nature,” he writes. The phrase *all are* is telling. *Are*: existence, being, time, impermanence, change. *All are*: existence, being, time, impermanence, change is never lonely; it is always all-inclusive. We’re all always in this together.

The other day I was talking to an old friend, an experienced Zen practitioner, about her practice. She told me she was beginning to notice that the persistent feeling of dissatisfaction she always felt in relation to others, to the world, and to the circumstances of her inner and outer life, was probably not about others, the world, or inner and outer circumstances, but instead was about her deepest inmost self itself. Dissatisfaction, she said, seems in some way to *be* herself, to be fundamentally engrained in her. Before realizing this, she went on, she’d assumed her dissatisfaction was due in some way to a personal failing on her part—a failing that she had hoped to correct with her Zen practice. But now she could see that it was far worse than that! The dissatisfaction was not *about* her, and therefore correctable; it was built *into* her, it was essential to her self!

This seems to be exactly what the Buddha meant when he spoke of the basic shakiness of our sense of subjectivity in the famous doctrine of *anatta*, or nonself. Though we all need healthy egos to operate normally in the world, the essential grounding of ego is the false notion of permanence, a notion that we unthinkingly subscribe to, even though, deep in our hearts, we know it’s untrue. I am me, I have been me, I will be me. I can change, and I want to change, but I am always here, always me, and have never known any other experience. But this ignores the reality that “all conditioned things have the nature of vanishing,” and are vanishing constantly, as a condition of their existing in time, whose nature is vanishing.

No wonder we feel, as my friend felt, a constant nagging sense of dissatisfaction and disjunction that we might well interpret as coming from a chronic personal failing (that is, once we’d gotten over the even more faulty belief that others were responsible for it). On the other hand, “*all are* is Buddha Nature.” This means that the self is not, as we imagine, an improvable permanent isolated entity we and we alone are responsible for; instead it is impermanence itself, which is never alone, never isolated, con-

stantly flowing, and immense: Buddha Nature itself.

Dogen writes “Impermanence itself is Buddha Nature.” And adds, “Permanence is the mind that discriminates the wholesomeness and unwholesomeness of all things.” Permanence!? Impermanence seems to be (as Dogen himself writes elsewhere) an “unshakable teaching” in buddhadharma. How does “permanence” manage to worm its way into Dogen’s discourse?



I come back to my dream of being stuck in the doorway between life and death with my mother-in-law: which side is which, and who is going where? Impermanence and permanence may simply be balancing concepts—words, feelings, and thoughts that support one another in helping us grope toward an understanding (and a misunderstanding) of our lives. For Dogen, “permanence” is practice: having the wisdom and the commitment to see the difference between what we commit ourselves to pursuing in this human lifetime, and what we commit ourselves to letting go of. The good news in “impermanence is Buddha Nature” is that we can finally let ourselves off the hook: we can let go of the great and endless chore of improving ourselves, of being stellar accomplished people, inwardly or in our external lives. This is no small thing, because we are all subject to this kind of brutal inner pressure to be and do more today than we have been and done yesterday—and more than someone else has been and done today and tomorrow.

On the other hand, the bad news in “impermanence is Buddha Nature” is that it’s so big there isn’t much we can do with it. It can’t be enough simply to repeat the phrase to ourselves. And if we are not striving to accomplish the Great Awakening, the Ultimate Improvement, what would we do, and why would we do it? Dogen asserts a way and a motivation. If impermanence is the worm at the heart of the apple of self, making suffering a built-in factor

“YOUNG ME, NOW ME”  
is a Web project by Ze Frank in  
which childhood photographs  
are recreated with the original  
subjects in the present day. A  
collection of the submitted photo  
pairs was published in Frank’s  
book *Young Me, Now Me: Identical  
Photos, Different Decades*.



of human life, then permanence is the petal emerging from the sepal of the flower of impermanence. It makes happiness possible. Impermanence *is* permanent, the ongoing process of living and dying and time. Permanence is nirvana, bliss, cessation, relief—the never-ending, everchanging, and growing field of practice.

In the Buddha’s final scene as told in the sutra, the contrast between the monastics who tore their hair, raised their arms, and threw themselves down in their grief, and those who received the Buddha’s passing with equanimity couldn’t be greater. The sutra seems to imply disapproval of the former and approval of the latter. Or perhaps the approval and disapproval are in our reading. For if impermanence is permanence is Buddha Nature, then loss is loss is also happiness, and both sets of monastics are to be approved. Impermanence is not only to be overcome and conquered. It is also to be lived and appreciated, because it reflects the *all are* side of our human nature. The weeping and wailing monastics were expressing not only their attachment; they were also expressing their immersion in this human life, and their love for someone they revered.

I have experienced this more than once at times of great loss. While I may not tear my hair and throw myself down in my grieving, I have experienced extreme sadness and loss, feeling the whole world weeping and dark with the fresh absence of someone I love. At the same time I have felt some appreciation and equanimity, because loss, searing as it can be, is also beautiful, sad and beautiful. My tears, my sadness, are beautiful because they are the consequence of love, and my grieving makes me love the world and life all the more. Every loss I have ever experienced, every personal and emotional teaching of impermanence that life has been kind enough to offer me, has deepened my ability to love.

The happiness that spiritual practice promises is not endless bliss, endless joy, and soaring transcendence. Who would want that in a world in which there is so much injustice, so much trag-

edy, so much unhappiness, illness, and death? To feel the scourge of impermanence and loss and to appreciate it at the same time profoundly as the beautiful essence of what it means to be at all—this is the deep truth I hear reverberating in the Buddha’s last words. Everything vanishes. Practice goes on.

\* \* \* \*

## This Morning

JUDY LIEF

I woke up this morning, and my sleeping died. I stood up, and my lying down died. I brushed my teeth, and the toothbrushing came to an end. My coffee was in the mug, and then it wasn’t. I thought about what I had on my schedule, and then I thought about something else, and the first thought was gone. I sat down to meditate, and a feeling of virtue arose. Then that feeling died and changed to a feeling of restlessness. I shifted position and then I was still. There was a gap and I disappeared, but then I noticed my breath. A thought arose—where was I? And then another—what time is it? I thought—what changes and what stays the same? I thought—be present now. But now kept slipping into the past. Then I noticed that the instant it was past, the more solid and gone it felt. Then I felt some kind of force pushing me in the direction of old age and death. A thought occurred—what lies ahead? A flurry of fantasies and possibilities arose as fleeting thoughts. Those thoughts spontaneously dissolved and there was a gap. Something noticed the gap and destroyed it. Then I tried to get it back. A memory arose of my teacher saying, Don’t alter your experience or





Photos from “Young Me, Now Me”

try to make anything happen. Then I tried to not try to make anything happen. A strong feeling arose of—what a joke. It occurred to me that I was fighting something. I felt frustrated and my shoulders got tight. Then I saw an opening and I went for it. It was as if the arising and falling and the noticing what was arising and falling and the struggling with what was arising and falling collapsed under its own complexity. Then there was a feeling of stillness and simplicity. But that changed too.

*JUDY LIEF is a Buddhist teacher and the author of Making Friends With Death: A Buddhist Guide to Encountering Mortality.*

## Seasons of Awakening

JOAN SUTHERLAND

In our yearning for enlightenment, we might hope that it's a state of unfluctuating perfection that solves the problem of the constant change that roils our lives. But if we see what we're doing as awakening, something that unfolds over a lifetime, we understand that each of us is somewhere in the middle of a long walk through varied terrain. Then our task is to stay alive to the changes in that terrain and to trust the path as it appears before us, rather than try to impose our map on it.

There are seasons in awakening. The winter of awakening is crystalline in its purity. The snow, which has been called Guan-yin's cloak, covers all distinctions, differences, and defining characteristics in unbroken white, and the gaze relaxes. This is the wisdom of equality; it's bright, and a little cool.

Then, if we let it, spring comes with its exuberances and profusions, revealing the warm wisdom of differentiation. Now the distinctions between things, and the particular beauty of each thing, are important. If in awakening's winter we love everything equally, in its spring we love each thing for itself.

Both winter and spring are part of what's true, as are summer and autumn in their turn. In welcoming awakening's seasonal transformations, we discover a greater truth that shows us a new

way of trusting the very change we once thought a problem.

Awakening has its ebbs and flows, too. People often get worried or discouraged when nothing seems to be happening in their spiritual life. But because something isn't apparent in our conscious awareness doesn't mean it's not happening at all. When the field appears fallow, we can learn to trust what's going on underground, in the dark, invisible to us. In fact, it's essential that along with the lightning comes the quiet dark, when radiant bursts are taken in and made part of the whole.

We can learn to trust the relentless stripping of winter as much as the bursting buds of spring—as do the plants, taken down to bare root and then blossoming again. To agree to all the seasons and tides of awakening means that we are always walking the Way: while there are times we won't understand, there are no detours, no causes for disappointment. Though sometimes obscured by clouds, there is only the rising dawn, long and slow, that we walk within.

*JOAN SUTHERLAND, ROSHI is a teacher in the Zen koan tradition and the founder of Awakened Life in Santa Fe, New Mexico.*

## Blindsided

ELAINE SMOOKLER

I first realized I was having serious issues with my eyesight when I found myself stranded on stage while performing as a comic M.C., warming up the audience for a local Goth band. At the end of my set I cued the music, the lights went off, and my world went black. Really black.

I had been bumping into things and struggling in the dark for years, but I didn't think much of it. It seemed better not to. That night, as I stood on stage, surrounded by a treacherous tangle of wires and equipment, with the band playing full on, only inches away, I did the only thing I could think of: I got down on my hands and knees and crawled off stage. Fortunately, this audience had seen it all, so for them it was just business as usual.

Not long after, I submitted to having my eyes poked, dyed, dilated, and photographed. I was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, or RP, a progressive eye disease affecting the retina. I had already lost my night and peripheral vision, meaning no more driving or even riding a bike. Now the doctor was telling me I might eventually go blind.

I remember, with humor, the bone the doctor threw me, thinking it would appease my hunger to understand how the hell this happened. “Well,” he said, calmly, “it’s either genetic, or random.”

Say what? You mean there might be no one to blame?

As a longtime meditator, I had embraced the path as a tool to cut self-delusion. So coming to terms with this new diagnosis meant accepting that there really might be no way out. But even if I could learn to live with my situation, I knew I was going to face difficult thoughts, feelings, and sensations. The first was my fear of being “pathetic.”

Up until the diagnosis, I’d vaguely noticed in myself a warm but essentially condescending relationship toward the blind and other “disabled” people. What I hadn’t quite realized was that my friendliness toward the less-abled poor dears was ever so slightly tinged with a hint of superiority. As I came to see the attitudes I had harbored, my nightmare (other than being run over by a Prius—should a car really be that quiet?) was that I would become an object of pity.

Like it or not, I needed to make friends with my anxiety. I began to relax a bit with my oh-so-groundless situation and put the kibosh on the idea that there was anything precious about my disability. Having a sense of humor helped. I started to refer to myself as “El Blindo” and told people I was hard of seeing. To my relief, I noticed that when I was easy with the reality of my newfound difficulties, other people breathed easier around me as well.

I was handling things well, or so I thought. But that was before England. My sister had offered me a week in London. Sounded fun. Until then, humor and staying in my comfort zone had given me the impression that losing my sight was no big deal. But as

I spent a week walking up and down darkened streets with horrifically quaint, uneven, rutted walkways (why is everything there so old?), I felt a whole new universe of terror rise up in me.

I was overwhelmed. I thought I had it all together, and suddenly I was depressed, discouraged, and felt so alone. As I arrived at the dimly lit airport on my way home, I had to ask for special accompaniment to the plane—which I hated. I felt emotionally burned out and grew impatient and irritable as I waited. Can’t you see I’m blind, I thought. Hurry the hell up!

Finally, a stiff-backed, unsmiling blonde in a uniform showed up. I was terse with her. After some minutes of uncomfortable silence I softened slightly. “I’m sorry; I’m having an emotional day,” I offered. “Me too,” she said, in a strikingly unguarded, and very un-English way.

She then explained that her mother had just died and she was now alone. She’d been late picking me up because she was in the back, crying. I had my arm around her shoulders as we walked, shared, and wept all the way to the door of the airplane. Before we parted, we embraced. It felt like a moment of grace.

“Who is not afflicted?” I wondered.

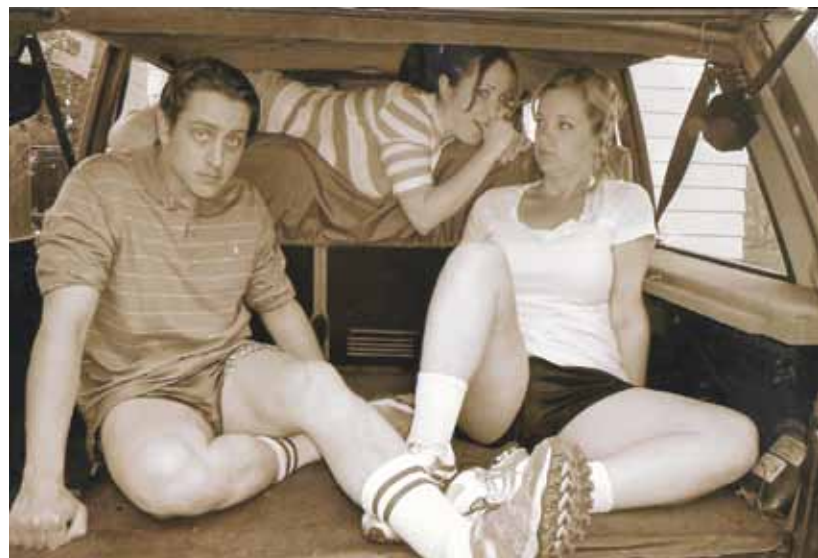
I had felt broken because I could only see myself. I broke open when I saw that this too was part of the human experience. In that tender place of rawness that uninvited change can uncover there is space for something marvelous—a deep and genuine connection with all beings, including ourselves.

I still perform, but now I need a seeing-eye stagehand to lead me to my mark. Sometimes it’s scary, but not as much as it would be if I weren’t doing it at all. But please, if you should happen to see me crawling to the front of a stage, remember, if I ask for a hand, I don’t just mean applause.

*ELAINE SMOOKLER is a comedic performer and playwright, and the director of communications for the Centre for Mindfulness Studies in Toronto.*



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# Never Too Old

CYNDI LEE

It wasn't easy to find the right spot for my Tibetan OM calligraphy tattoo. My first choice was the little space between my inner ankle and heel. But my tattoo artist put the kibosh on that idea, telling me up front that the skin in that area is tough, the tattoo wouldn't heal well, and in the end I'd look like I had a jailhouse tattoo. He suggested going just above the ankle or higher up toward the more fleshy part of the outer calf. Or I could consider such popular sites such as the sacrum or back of the neck.

These last suggestions received an immediate no. Feeling like I was mature enough at fifty-eight to finally get a permanent mark on my body, I wasn't going for a secret tattoo only known to my lover or the other yoginis in my studio changing room. I wanted my tattoo to show!

I put on my glasses to more carefully consider my options. This is the same body that I touch every day in the shower, that I stretch and twist every day on the yoga mat, and that I usually dress in at least three different outfits before settling on the clothes for each day. But with my glasses on—whoa! My hands were looking way too much like my mom's, and she's eighty-five. My upper arms were out of the question, looking strong but squishy, too. And I wasn't crazy about my calves, either.

Using a finger to keep my glasses on as I bent over, I took a closer look at the top of my feet. Even they were getting wrinkled and dry. For a moment I thought maybe I'm just too old for this, my body is just too crinkly and blubbey and flakey and wrong. Then I got a grip. My feet have wrinkles because I've been articulating my phalanges and stretching my metatarsals all day for the last forty years. And it's winter and my feet are dry, and so what?

*HAPPY MEAL PROJECT: Artist Sally Davies left a Happy Meal on a kitchen shelf to disprove a friend's contention that any unrefrigerated burger would get moldy within three days. This photo strip spans 631 days. Davies says her Happy Meal lost its aroma on the second day and was "hard as a rock and had an acrylic sheen" after six months.*



I took off my glasses and told Damian to put the OM on the top of my right arch. It cracked a little bit during the healing process, especially where my foot bends as I stand in a fierce Warrior One Pose. But when I come out of that pose, the top of my foot smoothes out again, clearly exposing the symbol of OM, the union of body, speech, and mind. How perfect that my tattoo flexes, stretches, and changes just like the rest of me.

*CYNDI LEE is founder of OM yoga in New York City and the author of Yoga Body, Buddha Mind.*

# The Joyful Leap

MELISSA MYOZEN BLACKER

In the first episode of the television show *Heroes*, a young man has a recurring dream of leaping off a tall building and flying instead of falling. One day, he decides to jump for real. As he drops through the air like a stone, he is caught in the arms of his older brother, who, it turns out, actually can fly.

When we stop clinging to the known and allow our dreams to become instruments of change, we learn to practice meditation in action at the deepest level. In these moments, we must risk taking a joyful leap with no guarantee of being caught as we fall.

In Zen practice, we call it stepping off of the hundred-foot pole—living fully without clinging to anything, whether it's an idea of enlightenment or something familiar and comforting from our old life that is holding us back. Students often speak to me of the great fear that arises even contemplating taking a leap into not-knowing from the cliff top of their old life.

Recently I left a steady job as a meditation teacher at a medical school to live as a resident teacher at a Zen temple. In the heady airspace of the new life, I find myself moving through states of joy, sorrow, fear, irritation, and exhilaration.

What comforting arms rise to meet me as I fall? The surprise of the continually changing display of meeting each moment: a glimpse of the temple garden, the smell of the incense in the zendo, a smile from a sangha friend.

All we can rely on, after the joyful leap, is the reassuring discovery of what truly sustains us. I am still in freefall but sometimes I feel the comforting arms of “just this.”

MELISSA MYOZEN BLACKER, *ROSHI* is resident teacher at the Boundless Way Temple in Worcester, Massachusetts and coeditor of The Book of Mu.

## Bon Voyage

BARRY BOYCE

As my mother lay quietly on her final day, we carried on the little rituals familiar in her life—afternoon tea, cocktail hour, acerbic wit, storytelling, chatting about family and friends. Mom began to develop a rattle in her breathing around midday, which increased into the evening. She died at 1 a.m., a month shy of ninety-eight years old.

Adam, the funeral home driver, came slightly before eight, in a converted minivan, which is what passes for a hearse these days. There would be a full-blown Catholic funeral later on that the whole family would fly in for, but I told the funeral director that some of her children were Buddhist, and my mother had some appreciation for that, so I would like to wait three days and then perform a Buddhist funeral service as my mother’s body was cremated. He said the crematorium was at the back of the funeral home in an extension that looked like a garage, with a concrete floor. I said that would be okay.

That night I felt very close to my mother and was aware that my anxiously hanging on to her previous form was counterproductive. I needed to forthrightly let go, and as she was leaving this world let her sense a feeling of freedom, rather than anxiety, in my whole being. Holding on to what denies the truth of what is. It’s necessary to embrace uncertainty and possibility, and linger on the brink.

I got up on the day of her cremation with the resolve to give Mom a proper *bon voyage*, including laying out a favorite food and drink, part of the ceremony I’ve conducted many times for

others. My brother Bob still had the glass that Mom always took her wine in, and some wine left that she had not drunk. On the way to the funeral home, we stopped at a country store and I had them prepare a hot dog just the way my mother liked it, with a toasted bun.

The crematorium had a garage door. There was lots of funeral home stuff stored in the room and a gunmetal gray oven about eight feet high and wide and twenty feet deep.

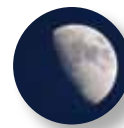
Mom was there in a cardboard box. I asked the funeral director to take the cover off. She was quite cold, but her silver hair was still lovely. Bob gave her a kiss. He and I and the two friends gathered there began the ceremony by saying a few words of appreciation. Everyone was eloquent and heartfelt, succinct, and humorous in places. At one point, Bob thanked Mom for occasionally “keeping your opinion to yourself and for not driving the cart over the green too many times” when he took her out to the golf course in her final year of life, when she was nearly deaf and blind.

A key part of the ceremony was doing the meditation practice called sending and taking. On the in-breath we took in fear and clinging and on the out-breath we sent out letting go, confidence, and peace. I gave the funeral director the signal to light the fire and we chanted a mantra with the same attitude of letting go as my mom was slid into the oven, the door was shut, and the massive roar of the flames began.

There’s a real power to being with death without encasing it in satin-lined mahogany. You appreciate just how natural it is, without denying the loss. Outside, singing an Irish air to cap things off, we noticed in the grass beyond the parking lot the shadow of the chimney, and of the smoke coming out of it. Not so long ago that smoke had been my mother. It was more than a metaphor.

Before I left to make my way back home, I took a statue of a piper in a kilt that I’d bought for Mom the year I lived with her after Dad died. When I got home, I set it next to a little statue of a buddha I have in my office. I look at it often. I always will.

BARRY BOYCE is senior writer at the Shambhala Sun.



EMBRACE  
Change



y 101  
20, 2010  
Happy Meal Project



Day 540  
Davies Happy Meal Project  
October 2, 2011

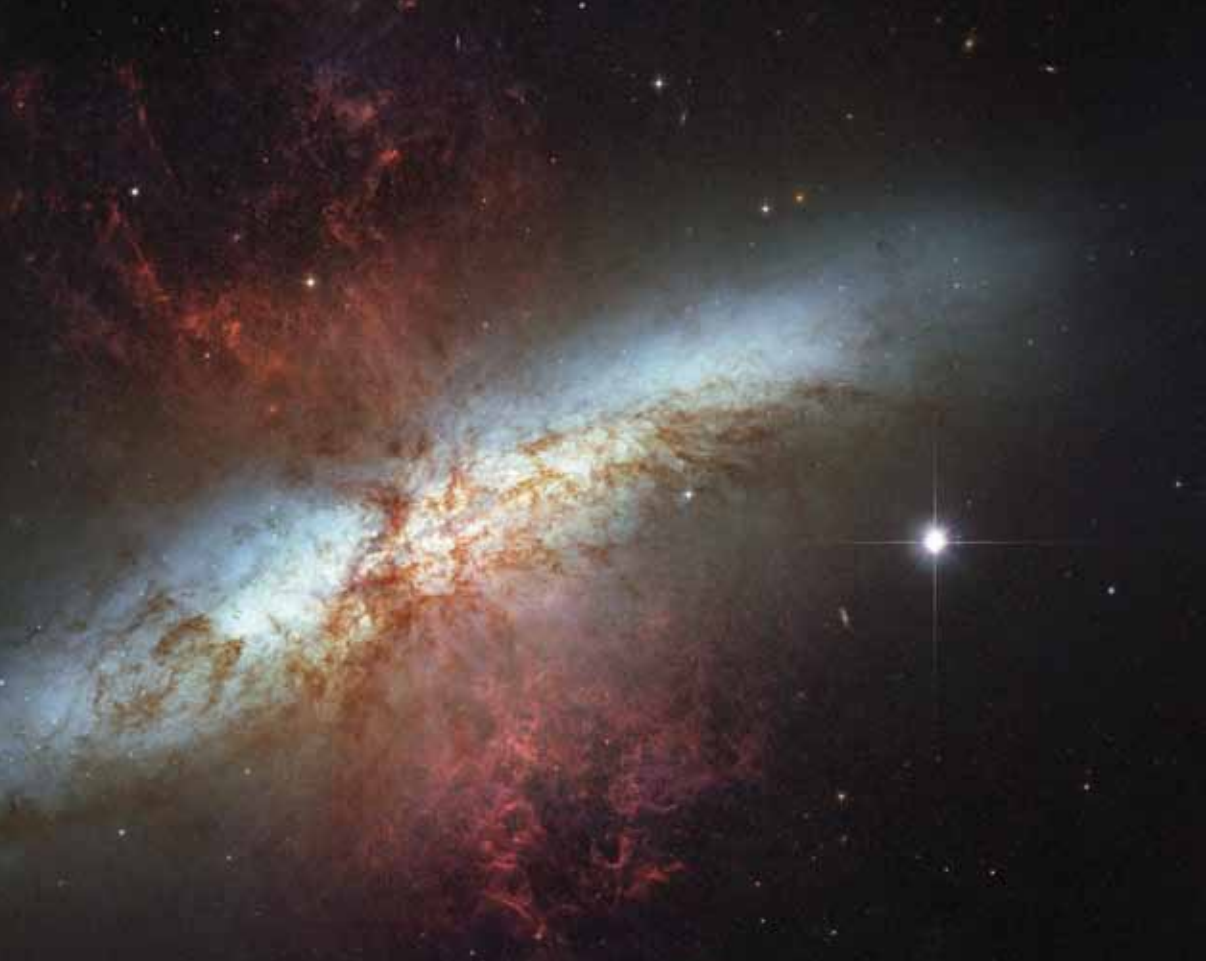


Day 631  
Davies Happy Meal Project  
January 1, 2012



#### STAR BIRTH & DEATH

Together, these images show the cycle of life and death in the heavens. This six-image Hubble mosaic is the sharpest view ever of galaxy M82, where stars are born in the gas and dust of its center ten times faster than anywhere the Milky Way. Opposite: an image from NASA's Chandra X-ray Observatory of the aftermath of one of the brightest recorded supernovas in our galaxy, created by combining nine days of observations of the remnants of the cataclysmic explosion of a dwarf star.



## How Many Copies?

SYLVIA BOORSTEIN

After the birth of our first child, Michael, fifty-five years ago, my husband Seymour and I used a photo of the three of us to make a Rosh Hashanah greeting card. We sent it to all our family—four grandparents and multiple aunts and uncles, whom we'd been close to as we grew up but left behind when we'd married and moved away to California. We continued the yearly tradition of the family photo, over time marking the addition of another son, two daughters, dogs and cats, and, in one of them, a pet rat.

Twenty-five years later, after grandchildren began to appear in the photo, we were still taking the September picture. It had become a bit more difficult to assemble everyone at the same place in time, and one year, feeling I had got it done in the nick of time, I rushed to the photo store to have cards made.

"How many copies do you need?" the shopkeeper asked.

I stopped to think. I was surprised to find, after a moment's reflection, that apart from a few assorted distant cousins, there was no one left. That must have been almost true the year before, too. Apparently I hadn't noticed.

I remember feeling disconcerted. On the one hand, I certainly knew that time had passed and the collection of photos documented that. I just hadn't felt it as it was happening. I didn't have a word, other than odd, to describe that moment of realization.

I felt much the same feeling yesterday, January 21, 2012, at the party celebrating Seymour's eightieth birthday. I have drawers full of photos, albums filling whole shelves, to show that time was passing and things were happening. It just never felt like it.

SYLVIA BOORSTEIN's most recent book is *Happiness Is an Inside Job: Practicing for a Joyful Life*.

## Intentional Change

LODRO RINZLER

I recently read that only eight percent of the millions of Americans who make New Year's resolutions actually stick with them. It's certainly not easy to make positive changes in your life, but there are contemplative tools you can engage that can help.

If you want to create a change in your life, you can begin by clarifying your intention for doing so. Start by sitting up straight, taking a few minutes to check in with your body. Notice where you are tense and allow those muscles to relax. Once you are settled, turn your mind to the physical sensation of your breathing. Tune in to the natural flow of both your in-breath and your out-breath. After three or so minutes of this simple meditation, allow your mind to move on to contemplating "What is my motivation for change?"

You may feel some resistance to the idea of finding one set motivation. Notice that resistance; let it wash over you like a



wave, and come back to the phrase just as you came back to the breath during the previous part of this meditative exercise.

Take a full five minutes to roll this simple question around in your mind. Then drop the phrase itself and just return to your breath, letting your mind ride on that natural reminder of the beauty of this present moment.

Are you surprised by what came up in these few minutes? I always am when I do this work. Sometimes my mind returns to a role model, someone who seems to embody the ideals I hold. Sometimes a certain quality that I have noticed about myself (or one that I wish to develop) comes up and I am left with a profound curiosity about what it would be like to live with that at the core of who I am.

As a result of this contemplation, you can discern what you would like your personal mandala to look like. The Sanskrit word *mandala* refers to concentric circles that form a type of organizational chart. In the center of a Buddhist mandala there is usually a central buddha, lineage figure, or deity, and around it are concentric circles that contain its emanations, its associates, and so on, to the point finally that all sentient beings are represented.

We all create such mandalas for ourselves, without necessarily realizing it. Whatever you take as your chief motivation is at the center. For example, if you put the classic American dream of “getting ahead in life” at the core of your mandala, then your life may revolve around a job you do not find real meaning in, accumulat-



EMBRACING  
Change

ing all sorts of luxury items that eventually break, and finding a stereotypical “perfect” spouse who is, in fact, not perfect for you.

Conversely, if the motivation at the center of your mandala is that you want to be a kinder person, then the circle around it will include expressing kindness to your friends and family. Then it might expand to a wider circle that includes kindness at work, at social gatherings, or while traveling.

If you put kindness at the center of your mandala then you will build a lifestyle based on who you want to be, not what you want to acquire or do at work. Take my friend Taz Tagore, for example. Taz is a naturally generous and aware person. I believe that these qualities are at the core of her mandala, and that’s made her a strong mother, a wise entrepreneur, and cofounder of the Reciprocity Foundation, a foundation helping homeless youth in New York City. She has had a profound effect on hundreds of individuals through discerning the good qualities of generosity and kindness in herself and moving them to the center of her mandala.

What you would like your life to revolve around is up to you. Is it your career? A quality you want to cultivate? Meditation practice itself? For each of us, our core motivation for personal change will look different. That’s why it’s important to figure it out, and then intentionally develop a support structure, our own personal mandala, to make that resolution a success in our lives.

*LODRO RINZLER is a Shambhala Buddhist teacher and the author of The Buddha Walks Into a Bar: A Guide to Life for a New Generation.*

## Already Broken

NOAH LEVINE

There is an often-told story in my tradition about the Thai Forest tradition master Ajahn Chah and his apparent attachment to a certain drinking glass. Sitting around with some other Buddhist monks, nuns, and lay students discussing dharma and enjoying some tea, someone asked Ajahn Chah something like, “You’ve been teaching us about impermanence and how everything is constantly changing. You’ve told us that being attached to anything in this transient world will always cause us to suffer. Yet it appears that even you, who has renounced all worldly possessions, have become attached to that special drinking glass.”

Ajahn Chah replied with something like, “It is true, I do enjoy this drinking glass. I like the way it holds my tea. I admire the way the sun shines off it, at times creating tiny rainbows. This is my favorite glass, but I do not cling to it, because to me this glass is

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The waxing gibbous moon

PHOTO BY TED ROGER KARSON

## Embrace Change continued from page 61

already broken. I know that my time with it is temporary and precious. So I enjoy this glass while it lasts, but I am fully aware that eventually it will fall from the shelf or be knocked over and shatter. And when that happens I will say ‘of course.’”

I heard this teaching early on in my Buddhist practice and it was a very important guide for me on how to relate to change and impermanence. This was tested a few years ago when my 1964 Chevy Impala lowrider was being test driven by my mechanic, who was working on the hydraulic suspension system. The car bottomed out as he drove over a large metal construction plate on the road and the frame was ripped in half. My prized possession was wrecked.

When I got the news, I experienced anger and sadness, but I reflected on Ajahn Chah’s broken glass and said to myself, “Of course, this lowrider too was already broken.”

*NOAH LEVINE’s new book is The Heart of the Revolution: The Buddha’s Radical Teachings on Forgiveness, Compassion, and Kindness.*

## Where Is the True Place?

SHOZAN JACK HAUBNER

I AM ALONE: my monk peers have traveled to northern California for a retreat. I stroll the Zen monastery grounds, touring the arid, stony terrain as though for the first time. Tears arise as I sit atop an enormous boulder I have cursed countless times after smacking into it in the black of night. The sun is setting, and, with the help of a great deal of smog, the sky looks lit as if by cinders from God’s own campfire. Every corner of this property

throbs with meaning for me—as only a place can that you are about to leave for good.

I duck into cabin one, the site of my first night on this mountain. I inhale the rickety shack’s musky aroma. Mouse turds speckle mattress covers. Nonetheless, for me this is a sacred shrine. Memories rush in of that dream, the night of my ordination, the one I’ll never forget, the whole thing but a single image: a skeleton puts his hand on my shoulder as I weep in a corner.

*How can I leave the monastery now? I think. Not now, not when these mountains have finally become my home!*

For some reason, pretty much out of nowhere, my teacher recently set in motion the process of my “promotion.” Surely someone will stop this madness, I’d thought. But no. I have just discovered that our community has agreed that I am to be made a priest, which means I will leave the monastery to teach. In other words, right around the time you stop wanting to desperately escape the monastery, it’s time for you to go share what you’ve learned there with others.

I think of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi’s observation to the effect that living at a monastery is like walking around in a mist. At first, you merely feel dampened by the monastic structure and rhythms. But if you stick with it long enough, eventually you discover that you’re soaked to the bone in formal Zen practice. You have become this new way of life, only it is no longer new. Where before you were full of yourself, now you are full of Zen—which is to say, empty.

Moving off the mountain, and starting a city temple somewhere is not the end of my training, I assure myself, but the beginning of a whole new phase of it. No one stays here forever; it’s a place for people like me to grow up, not grow old.

But I have grown old at the monastery, I sigh. Or at least middle-aged—which is to say: newly old. I am touching the hemline of forty, a gown—more of a mildewed, old bathrobe, actually—which I will slip into next year. Exhibit A: my wee, gray gut, flopping slightly over my belted robes, like the chin of a child peeking over a fence. Plus, my hips have little jowls. When did that happen? Professional athletes and cops are now younger than me. Cops! “The Man” is my junior!

*But I’m still twenty-five, aren’t I? Haven’t I always been twenty-five? Every adult I ever ignored warned me that this day would come. But I didn’t listen.*

There’s only one consolation for getting old, I decide: becoming wise. Am I wise? A wise-ass, yes. But wise-wise? Am I nascently wise, at least? Wise-lite? I realize you can never field this question yourself; the answer has to come from others, and to prove it true, you can never believe them.

So I try for some lower-hanging fruit and conclude that I’m certainly stupider in all the appropriate Zen ways since arriving at the monastery. Wise will come much later, if at all, when I become stupider still, with my stupidity finally, hopefully, ripening into simplicity.

Simple is key. If you lose simplicity as you accumulate years, then you begin to look and feel very old indeed. After my first summer

training season, friends asked what I had learned from my Zen master—himself now a hundred and five years old, though not a day over three years old at heart. During our private meetings, I explained, my teacher shook my hand or hugged me, over and over. It was so basic, but what I learned was how to embrace and how to let go. This is the secret to life, I tried to explain. When to hold on, and when to let things pass. I went on and on, but I didn't actually *hug* anyone. That's where I went wrong. Young men know the answers to everything and the meaning of nothing.

Now, instead of having a staged environment to support my practice, I will actually have to *do* what I had learned at the monastery in the real world. "Just make yourself master of every situation, and wherever you stand is the true place," Zen master Rinzai said. I left the world and made a spiritual home at the monastery. Now it was time to leave the monastery and make a spiritual home in the world.

I stand outside the meditation hall under a light night snowfall and perform some heavy breathing exercises, the kind that help me relax. Which is to say, I have a cigarette. I'm not a smoker, mind you. I quit that habit years ago. Yet here I am again, back where I started, puffing away and staring off into the same set of fabulously snowcapped mountains that greeted me when I first arrived at the monastery eight years and a full head of hair ago.

Just yesterday the stooped septuagenarian at the post office had tilted her head up like a bird and shook her little freckled fist and exclaimed, "This mountain range is one of the fastest growing in the world, you know." She'd told me this seven or eight times by now.

"Amen!" I cry. Yet I never know what she means exactly. How can a mountain grow? If a mountain is growing, what isn't? Is *grow* really the right word? I decide now that it is. It feels right to me. I can relate to these mountains. I feel their seismic shifts within. I know what they're going through. ♦

*SHOZAN JACK HAUBNER is a Zen practitioner and humorist.*