Lesson 5: The Second Mark of Existence - Impermanence

Buddhism is practical, it teaches to observe the reality of human existence. One of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism is the teaching of Impermanence, more precisely, the impermanence nature of all forms.

There are several types of impermanence that we can observe from our own existence which is representative of everything in our life.

1. Our body
2. Our feelings
3. Our mind
4. Our external surrounding

Our body is never the same; it changes a little each day from the time when we were born until we become dust. Scientists have found that within 2 years, all the cells in our bodies are replaced. Some cells dies each day and some are produced each day. What we identify fundamentally to be who we are, in essence changes all the time. We don’t want to accept this. We don’t want to realize this. So much of our energies are vested in the way our body look, trying to stop it from changing or decaying. There is a multi-billion dollar industry build on preserving the way our body looks to how we want it, preventing it from change because we cannot accept it that it changes. So much of our identity is vested in identifying with our bodies that when it changes, we can’t accept the impermanence nature of it, we try to keep it the same, but can never do so. How many of us suffer from being identified with our bodies, with the fleeting nature of it and fail to see that it is inevitable that it changes.

Our feelings are that which changes faster than our bodies. If you feel something, let it be, give it a few minutes and see how it goes. So many emotions, sensations, different feelings passes through, and none of it really stay for very long if we just let it be.

Our mind is intrinsically connected to our feelings and our body, and has the same impermanent nature just the same. Our state of mind changes all the time. Our thinking comes and goes. From one thought to another, it is in a constant state of flux. Yet we fail to see the impermanence nature of it. We hold on to the concepts of our mind, the contents of our minds, perceptions, mental positions and see it as what defines who we are. This is the inherent ignorance of human existence, to hold on to impermanence things and wrongly identifying with it, not allowing its nature to be.

Our external surroundings are always changing. The weather is never the same. It’s never the same place we’ve been to, since something about it always changes. The park we visit each day has grown new trees, have new grass, or harbor more animal inhabitants in it, it is never the same.
It is never the same person we see, their cells have change in their body, their feelings is different from when we saw them before, they are thinking of different things. Others around us are forever changing. The external environment around us is always changing. We are deluded that it is the same. We treat it like it is always the same, but fundamentally it changed every minute. If we truly observe our surroundings and not label it as being what we think it is, we will find that it is no longer the same place, the same person, the same environment that we have experienced before.

The fundamental nature of impermanence is that of all types of forms. If it has forms, it changes. If you can see it, sense it, taste it, touch it, feel it, hear it, and conceptualize it, then it changes. That’s the nature of forms; it changes from one form to another constantly.

So it is craziness to try to hold on to forms, to all that which changes and not accept that it will come to pass.

It is craziness to find who we are in the forms which apparently has no real existence, which is in a constant state of change.

It is craziness to resist change, to try to stop change, since change is the immutable law that governs all forms.

Like holding on to a piece of rag of a shirt in making it precious instead of looking to find the diamond in the ragged shirt which is immensely more precious and not mutable, we forget the unchanging part which exist in all of us and keep identifying with that which changes to be who we are.

The Buddha points out the impermanence nature of all that which surrounds us to make us see the craziness of not accepting change and mistaken who we are as those things which changes.

Our innate Buddha nature within never changes, the Buddha points this out in the Surangama Sutra (or the Fearless Person’s Methods for Progress).

*The Buddha strikes a bell and asked Ananda:*

“Do you hear anything?”

“Yes!” Ananda replied.

*When the sound of the bell stopped, the Buddha asked again.*

“Do you hear anything Anada?”

“No!” Ananda replied.
The Buddha asked Rahula to strike the bell and asked Ananda.

“Do you hear now?”

“Yes!” Ananda said.

The Buddha said: “Ananda, how come you are so contradictory? Do you hear or not hear?”

“Not just me.” Ananda said. “But everyone here would agree that when there is a bell sound, we hear it and when the sound subsides, we no longer hear it.”

The Buddha said:

“You all agree that when there is a sound, you hear, when there is no sound, you don’t hear, then why is it that when the bell is strike the second time, you hear again? I thought your hearing is gone with the first bell? Why did it come back? Ananda, it isn’t the sound that allows you to hear, it is the awareness of hearing that allows you to distinguish between the sound and the silence without the sound. Whether there is a sound or not, the awareness which hears is always there. If the hearing stops after the sound stops, then what knows that there is no sound to hear anymore?”

The Buddha points out the inherent nature of impermanence in all things, so that he could point out our original Buddha Nature which is not of impermanence nature.

Until we accept to let go all that is impermanent in our existence, we cannot find that which is forever permanent and unchanging.

It is through the observation and recognition of all that is impermanent and letting go of it, that we learn to clear our inner space to make room for our permanent precious Buddha Nature to come to the forefront. This clearing can only be done by the practice of meditation and by embodying Zen in every moment of our life.