

All Souls Church, Unitarian

November 2014 Covenant Group Guide

Impermanence

Native American wisdom on impermanence

Everything the Power of the World Does Is Done in a Circle, by Black Elk

Everything the Power of the World does
is done in a circle. The sky is round,
and I have heard that the earth is round
like a ball, and so are all the stars.

The wind, in its greatest power, whirls.

Birds make their nests in circles,
for theirs is the same religion as ours.

The sun comes forth and goes down again
in a circle. The moon does the same,
and both are round. Even the seasons
form a great circle in their changing,
and always come back again to where they were.

The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood,
and so it is in everything where power moves.

From the Sioux, as told through John G. Neihardt

A Poem, by Crowfoot

What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night.
It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime.
It is the little shadow which runs across the grass
and loses itself in the sunset

Buddhist teaching on Impermanence

As a Buddhist the teaching on impermanence isn't about being morbid or about being depressed. It's actually just to waken us to the preciousness of the present moment and the idea that life is only ever in the present moment, and that now is the only time that we ever have.

Melissa Vinney on BBC 4

We're often sad and suffer a lot when things change. But change and impermanence have a positive side. Thanks to impermanence, everything is possible. Life itself is possible. If a grain of corn is not impermanent it can never be transformed into a stalk of corn. If the stalk were not impermanent it could never provide us with the ear of corn we eat. If your daughter is not impermanent she cannot grow up to become a woman. Then your grandchildren would never manifest. So instead of complaining about impermanence we should say "Warm welcome and long live impermanence.

Thich Nhat Hahn

The Message of the Mandala

The creation of a mandala, the representation of the world in divine form, perfectly balanced, precisely designed, is meant to reconsecrate the earth and heal its inhabitants. But it is more than a picture. Sand painting [in the Buddhist tradition] is an intricate process. It requires millions of pieces of sand to make a mandala five by five feet square. It requires a team of monks working anywhere from days to weeks, depending on the size of the mandala, to create this floor plan of the sacred mansion that is life. It requires the interplay of vivid colors and ancient symbols.

The [Buddhist] monks bend over the piece for hours on end, dropping one grain of sand after another into intricate symbolic patterns. The purpose is to call the community to meditation and awareness of something larger than their own small world.

But the process itself, as laborious, as precise, as artistic, as stunningly powerful as it is, is not really the message.

When the mandala is finally finished, however long it takes for the monks to deal in this divine geometry of the heavens, they pray over it -- and then they destroy it. They sweep it up, every last grain of sand and give handfuls of it away to those who participate in the closing ceremony as a final memory of sublime possibility. Then they throw the rest of the

sand into the nearest living stream to be swept into the ocean to bless the whole world. And that's it. It's gone. In an instant, after all that artistry, all that work, it's over.

They destroy it. Why? Because the underlying message of the mandala ceremony is that nothing is permanent. Nothing. All things are in flux, it says, beautiful but ephemeral, moving but temporary, a plateau but not a summit. All things are called to balance and enlightenment and the fulfillment of the Divine image in them, yes, but in flux. Always in flux.

There is nothing in the meaning of the mandala that denies or undermines the Christian story or its message, of course. But there is something shockingly profound to hear it coming from a wisdom written on the other side of the world. It gives a new note to an ancient truth. It strengthens the ties of humanity a world away.

Most of all, perhaps, it makes us all think again about what we think we're going to make permanent. Like our own domination of the world. Our privileged place in the community of nations. Our sense of status. Our surety of specialness among all the peoples of the world. Our place of comfort and security in the face of all the poor on the planet.

This Buddhist . . . message is clear.

Nothing is permanent, neither their state in life -- nor ours. The fact is that the politics of permanence is a sham. It has never lasted, and it never will. We may be seeing the dawn of that reality right now in the stock market, in oil prices, in jobs, in cost of living, in the national infrastructure.

From where I stand, it looks to me as if these monastics from another world may have as much a message for us as we ever did for everyone else. Hopefully we'll be as able to hear their message now as the rest of the world did ours and learn from others as they clearly have from us. Heaven knows, by anyone's geometry and symbols, we have mighty need for the "wisdom and compassion" they're trying to preserve.

Sister Joan Chitester, OSB

Haiku typically celebrate impermanence

Three Haiku, by Richard Wright

(selections from his book *Haiku: This Other World*)

Waking from a nap
and hearing summer rain falling--
What else has happened?

What a huge snowflake
but as I spoke
my breath made it disappear

As a big cloud melts,
smaller and whiter clouds
appear deeper in the sky.

For reflection and discussion

1. Is impermanence an important concept in your spiritual life? If so, how does it help? If not, is there a related concept that you find more helpful?
2. Do you practice mindfulness or meditate? Do you have other practices or rituals that deepen your understanding of impermanence? How does this practice contribute to your understanding of impermanence?
3. How did you first begin to understand impermanence as an important part of your spiritual life? You might choose to answer in terms of (a) direct experience or (b) conceptual understanding. If you find yourself drawn to either a or b, you might find it more useful to especially explore the other aspect in greater detail.
4. How do services at All Souls help us apprehend impermanence as the natural order?