

*What Makes You not a Buddhist* by Jamyang Khyentse

In this book, a Tibetan lama shares how the Buddha discovered that the cure for universal suffering is to recognize that everything we care about is impermanent.

I've been thinking about impermanence a lot in the past year. But, unlike the Buddha who went in search of an understanding that could overcome suffering, my recognition that nothing lasts has been imposed by circumstances and by my helpless inability to do anything about it.

Jon's sudden departure from this world still appears as a unique, external event, which forever changed the reality in which I live. Far less clear to me is that it also revealed the fundamental nature of everything. If I could really understand how impermanence permeates every facet of life, I might have the courage to hold Jon's memory in my heart, and understand that, like me, he was casting pebbles into the stream of time; watching as ripples receded toward the distant shore.

All my life, I've acted as if everything that I have ever lost can be replaced, like a worn-out pair of shoes. But when you lose a child, you realize that there is no replacing that loss—but I didn't notice right away that something deep in my own being also doesn't feel the same.

So, what does it matter whether our losses are interpreted as terrible events with their roots in the world, or as a flowering of a fundamental impermanence that is always present? I am discovering that it does matter, because when loss is viewed as an external event, as something unusual that happened, uniquely, to us alone, we are held captive in the jaws of an unreachable past. When we place an event in a past that cannot be changed, we perpetuate those helpless thoughts that if only we had behaved differently, our loved one would still be here.

Those thoughts ignore what the Buddha discovered: that while the future of everything is destined to end in death, suffering is not necessary, as long as we recognize and accept that impermanence is an inescapable fact of life, and is not within our power to avoid.

I am coming to see that all I was ever empowered to do—then or now—was to care for the beings with whom I share my life. To blame myself for not acting differently in the past, just because the course I was on at that time led to a terrible outcome, is to misunderstand the fundamental nature of the life into which both Jon and I were born.

Would we blame someone else because they didn't understand the ramifications of the path they were on, especially knowing that they have already paid a heavy price for being a bobbing cork in the stream of time?

Perhaps it is time to accept that the past is past, learn from it, and release the regret so many of us feel, allowing it to illuminate our understanding of the unfolding present. It is only when we accept that impermanence is the pulsing heartbeat of the universe that we will be able to notice the unsuspected possibilities that continue to rise across the horizon each new day.