



Ernst Fuchs

## The King's Ring

*Renunciation is not giving up the things of this world, but accepting that they go away.*

Suzuki Roshi

IN AN ANCIENT AND OFT-REPEATED parable—common to many religious traditions including Zen, Sufism, and Jewish folklore—an exasperated king constantly torn between joy and sorrow calls together the three wisest men of his kingdom and implores them to bring him something that will make him “happy when he is sad, and sad when he is happy.”

The wise men reluctantly agree, and after meditating and conferring all night on the matter, return the next morning and hand the king an ornate jewel box, carved in jade.

Upon opening the box, the king is surprised to discover inside only a simple gold ring, inscribed with a cryptic phrase: *This too shall pass.*

Ordered to explain the meaning of the inscription, the wise men instruct the king that whenever he is feeling either unbearably sad or exceptionally happy, vain, or prideful, to meditate on the ring’s inscription as a reminder that no feeling will last forever. In this way he will be assured of lasting peace and equanimity, regardless of the circumstances of the present moment.

The lesson of the parable, of course, is that it’s best not to get too caught up in either happiness or sorrow, but instead to remember that life is constantly in motion and circumstances inevitably change.

We should, of course, enjoy our happiness whenever it is present, but not cling to it in fear of its loss or become despondent when it inevitably passes. And similarly, we can find consolation in knowing that however unpleasant the present situation may be, that it too will pass in time.

Viewed superficially, accepting this fact could lead to depression or pessimism about life—or in the extreme, a nihilistic state of mind—which is why people so often unconsciously seek to deny impermanence and pretend to themselves that happiness can be everlasting, if only they find the right job, partner, or other external condition.

Observing our mind more closely, however, we may find that it is in fact our unwillingness to accept that things change that itself leads to unhappiness. Resisting the natural way of things keeps us on a futile, never-ending search for something permanent that we can cling to for security. It is not impermanence that makes us suffer. What makes us suffer is wanting things to be permanent when clearly, they are not.

In Buddhism, impermanence (*anatta*) is seen as one of the three essential aspects of life—the others being suffering, or more accurately, unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anicca*). Buddhist philosophy teaches that failing to recognize and accept impermanence by clinging to our attachments inevitably leads to suffering.

These three characteristics of Buddhist thought are not meant, however, to merely be philosophical statements or intellectual exercises. They are intended to be practices, for only by looking deeply within our nature and making an effort to awaken them in the present moment can they come alive and transform our everyday experience of life.

There are many ways we can cultivate an appreciation for impermanence: accepting it as the normal state of things, sharing and letting go of our attachments, remembering to feel and express gratitude to people and things we love, accepting the finiteness of our life, and most importantly of all, practicing mindfulness in each moment.

Impermanence can actually be a happy thought to ponder, because plainly, without this constant state of transition, nothing in life could ever come to be. Without night, there could be no day; without sadness, no happiness; without death, no life.

Seen more universally, *it is only through impermanence that everything becomes possible*. (One of the many sources of the ‘King’s Ring’ story is the Old Testament’s King Solomon, who speaks in the *Book of Ecclesiastes* of the seasonality of life: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.”)

Looking a bit deeper into impermanence, however, we may find that there is one element in everything that does not change or fade away, but is eternal, because it is timeless. This is the third aspect of Buddhist philosophy: Non-self (*anicca*)—which represents the ultimate, underlying nature of the Self, often described as Awareness.

Awareness—which is impersonal and absolute—must not be confused with consciousness, which is personal and relative. The individual ‘I’ who we think we are—whose identity is defined by concepts, experience, and memories—is certainly ‘real’ enough in a relative sense, but ultimately only a manifestation of ego-mind.

Our awareness of impermanence must therefore include ourselves, the observer, for it to bring us to a place of real freedom.

We are changing every moment, even on a cellular level. We could say that we actually live and die from moment to moment, as each moment leads to the next. And since nothing manifest is unchanging, how can there ever be a permanent, separate self?

This understanding is the secret gift of impermanence, inviting us to live as kings. For *this*, and this only, shall never pass. ■