

dharma in practice



When making plans, plan for change

To remember in each moment that change is inevitable is also to fully live in each moment.

At Shogoji, the monastery at which I lived in Japan for several years, October first is the traditional date for changing the ren, the curtains that hang at the front and back entrances to the inner sitting area in the sodo. The summer ren, installed on May first, are made of bamboo slats and they let the summer breezes through. The winter ones are made of canvas and they resemble curtains.

October first would see three or four of us taking the two bamboo ren down, carrying them on our shoulders to their storage place and exchanging them for the canvas ones. The day was usually clear and a bit chilly and the songs of the cicadas and summer birds had given way to the calls of the crows over the harvested rice fields below. It was a wistful time of saying goodbye to summer, of getting out the heaters, preparing the fire pit in the abbot's quarters, and preparing to be cold no matter what we did.

May wasn't much better. As we put the bamboo ren back into place we looked forward to the intense work of international angō, rainy season mold and summer heat.

Change is like this, isn't it? We're often not sure we want it, no matter what's coming. It's disturbing, unpredictable. Even the most mundane changes bring new conditions, and that's not comfortable for us. We want what is predictable, certain, what we can control.

We often dislike change because we don't take it into account when planning our lives. We try to pretend that things will stay the same, so when they don't we're not prepared for the time and effort it will take to accommodate new circumstances. We feel overwhelmed, confused and anxious. "What happened to the time I'd planned to spend on the work I'd hoped to be doing?" we ask ourselves. We hadn't left time to accommodate crises, or even the predictable



changes in our lives, so we try to stretch our time to cover both the crisis and the things we'd already committed ourselves to. Life gets intense and crazy and we are fearful and disappointed. Forgetting that change happens, as we human beings are prone to do, can cause big suffering.

Change, however, is one of the basic circumstances of this existence, and we can do nothing about that. True, we can have some influence on some of the changes in our life. However, we cannot stop such things as old age, children getting sick and the turning of the seasons, no matter how hard we try. We also cannot stop many changes that seem stoppable, such as friends leaving, sickness coming, disagreements with family members, auto accidents....

To remember in each moment that change is a normal and undeniable part of things is to stop suffering and begin to live successfully. When we remember, when we are aware we can take the possibility of change into account in our plans and we won't be surprised by it. We include some room to deal with things not turning out as we wish and while we work wholeheartedly to realize our goals, we are ready for anything. If something unexpected happens, we can use it fruitfully.

I had a friend Mark at Minnesota Zen Center. Diabetes had robbed him of his legs and most of his sight by his early forties. Finding himself in a wheelchair, he became an activist for the rights of the disabled. Since he often fell asleep in dharma talks and he spent much time at home alone, he helped transcribe our teacher, Katagiri Roshi's talks. Mark was human and he mourned his losses but he made good use of his circumstances.

To remember in each moment that change is inevitable is also to fully live in each moment. When we are aware of the reality of change, we look carefully at life in this moment, at the blue sky, the pampas grass plumes, spring blooms, other people. They will not be the same when we next see them. We wholeheartedly participate in the present, knowing that we'll be giving it up in the next moment. We give our lives more life by doing this and we become more content and joyful.

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