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# Lasting wisdom for liquid times

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Impermanence is an immutable truth. Paradoxically, it is an immutable and universal law. Everything is in perpetual change. As the Buddha said everything that arises is subject to change, and the cause of death is birth. Impermanence, *mujo*, is realized in all times and places. For all sentient and non-sentient beings. Although chronological time seems always to be always the same, an hour will always be 60 minutes or 3600 seconds, sometimes these times seem to pass more slowly or more quickly.

Transposed to history, some times seem to go faster than others. Thus, when Dōgen wrote: *"How light is existence... To what can this world be compared? To the reflection of the moon in the drop that falls off of the beak of a water bird."* He said this in the middle of the 13th century, when the slowness of life meant that time passed slowly. In the Middle Ages, personal existence was abandoned in an apparently historically stable world.

The concept of history has not always been present in human existence. For example, the ancient Greeks did not have a concept of history as we have it. They perceived changes in the world, but time was perceived in a cyclical way. That is, life was an eternal return. For the Greeks the geometric figure that represented time was the circle. Thus, instead of having a concept of history, they had a cyclical concept of time.

The linear concept of time was born, in a way, with Christianity, which established a sense of history and its linear concept, inherited of course from the Hebrew culture. Nowadays, rather than a concept of history, we have to admit a concept of the speed of history. History does not develop in a linear way, or in a uniform movement of acceleration, but at a speed that grows exponentially. Technological advances make history and progress go faster and faster, transforming human existence faster.

In reality, things don't age, they become obsolete. We throw them out before they get old, filling the planet with rubbish in a terrible fashion. This is the price of our progress. The impermanence of things is consciously accelerating. This is called programmed obsolescence. That is to say, even if the technological means capable of making tools that last longer exist, they are intentionally manufactured by reducing their useful life so that they become damaged or obsolete before their time.

The current capitalist system makes things not last, so intentionally accelerated impermanence is one of the foundations of our economic system. In my opinion, although impermanence is one of the fundamental points of Buddha's teaching, talking about impermanence today requires a lot of caution. Talking about impermanence in Buddha's time was more or less talking about "flowing mountains." Imagine talking about impermanence in a society without social mobility, where people were born into a caste and died in it, a society where there was no concept of history or progress. In that context, impermanence had a different meaning.

Talking about impermanence today is like saying in the middle of a river, or in the middle of a hurricane, that things are moving. A strange feeling of absurdity can invade our mind when we

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talk about impermanence. If in the past the great masters spoke of impermanence it was to awaken "to the evanescence of this floating world. Today, talking about impermanence can be counterproductive. Even more, it can promote greed. The natural reaction of today's human being to impermanence is to run even more. This leads to accelerating our movement in the face of the evanescence of things, running even more to achieve our desires before inevitable death catches up with us.

Now that we seem to see the light at the end of the tunnel, in the West, after all this time of COVID-19, there is a phrase that resonates in the air, with great force "going back to the way things were before the pandemic." I ask myself, "What does 'going back to the way things were' mean? Or to go back to the way things were before "what for"? It is possible that this collective experience has taught us nothing. That it does not serve us to give importance to what is essential and to abandon so many superfluous things. It is possible that returning to the life before means becoming greedier and even more eagerly attached.

In total disagreement with the present time in the midst of this fleeting world, instead of speaking of impermanence, I prefer to direct my gaze towards the lasting. Instead of wanting to recover the life of the past, I will turn my gaze once again towards the wisdom of the past. Instead of launching a discourse on the obsolete, we should launch a discourse on the lasting. We must not forget that the symbol of the Soto School is the pine needle, as a symbol of perennial wisdom.

Neither the past, to be past, is worse, nor the future, to be future, is better. Lasting wisdom is that which continues and resists change. It is that wisdom which transcends what is personal, and ourselves. It is a beacon in the middle of the night. In the midst of so many innovations that promise a better future, sitting in zazen has an even greater meaning, a practice taught by the Buddha 2500 years ago.

Returning with even deeper meaning to something the pandemic couldn't take away from us: the source of enduring wisdom. For any practitioner, this source is found in zazen, but zazen is no more than returning to the lucidity that every human being possesses.

In addition to the *prajna paramita* or intuitive wisdom that perceives emptiness, there are "other wisdoms" that are equally admirable and that reflect the inner life of certain people in particular historical times. All the past is something obsolete. The human beings of the past have thought so, and they have done well.

In order to cope with the "liquid times", as Zygmunt Bauman said, I am reminded of this sentence by Augustine of Hippo: "*The good I was looking for is no longer outside me. Nor did I seek it in the things that can be seen with the eyes of the flesh, in the light of the sun. Those who seek delight in external things remain disappointed, because they pour themselves into visible and fleeting things, and the only thing they get is to lick his images, starving.*" (Confessions, Book IX, 4) A great antidote to greed.

It is not a question of returning to a rigorous asceticism, but without losing sight of the essential, where any reflection on the transience of time leads us to the anxious greed proper to the current times.

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This is why, at present, we must pay close attention to how we understand impermanence, and what is most important, what our attitude is towards it, because greed pursues it "like a traveler pursues his shadow."

What once were occasional pleasures, are imperative today. The present life leaves no room for anything but the pursuit of satisfaction. Satisfaction based on the sensations of the moment. You have not finished doing something, and you are thinking of a new satisfaction. No one should be surprised by this, there is a whole social conditioning behind it and a macroeconomic system that promotes it. We have to admit that not everything good is in the future, even if our mental effort generally projects us into the future. But the mind has other functions and capacities such as memory. Memory is one of the most damaged mental capacities in the present time.

The memory, the pleasure that can be found in the memory, today seems to have no meaning or to be out of fashion. Yet this exercise belongs to the human race. It is an intrinsic capacity of the mind. Thus, I would like to end this narrative by quoting Marcus Aurelius, who reminds us of this pleasure: *"Remember also what roads you have traveled and what fatigues you have been able to endure; that the page of your life is already written and your service record is accomplished; how many beautiful things you have known, how many pleasures and sufferings you have overcome; how many ambitions for glory you have left aside, and with how many fools you have shown yourself wise."* (Meditations, Book V, 31)