

Really Real??!

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Early in my training I was told that if there was teaching that was difficult for me to understand or accept, I should just “put it on the back burner.” I was not expected to believe it, but neither should I reject it out of hand. I should let it “simmer” and with time and training my understanding might clarify.

A teaching that particularly challenged me was that this existence—including myself, others, all beings— was fundamentally “not real.” But all that I saw around me—the people, trees, animals, structures, and so on—seemed *very* real to me. And I would say to myself that my experiences of pain, joy, anger, regret, and so on, sure *felt* real.

Meanwhile, there were teachings that really resonated with me. One of these was the teaching of *Anicca*: “Impermanence, change; all things change, all life grows old, decays, being ever changing.”¹ This really struck a chord with me. I *experienced* this truth, this reality, in my own life. People and animals that I loved grew old, got sick, and died. Old buildings that I lived in had things wearing out, needing constant repair. As I grew older I experienced *myself* changing, having less energy and strength than when I was young.

As I meditated on the teaching of impermanence I began to see its connection with the teaching on the fundamental unreality of material existence. An aspect of the teaching on *Anicca* is that our egocentric self has a primal inclination to hang onto beings and things. This clinging deludes us into believing that they have a solidity, a permanence, a *reality* that is belied by their very impermanence. And this grasping is a primary source of our suffering. It is like trying to grab a fistful of water in a rushing, ever-changing stream: however much we try we come up empty handed.

Paradoxically, the “emptiness” we experience when we open our grip on passing states is, as Rev. Master Jiyu used to say, “the fullest emptiness we can possibly know.” She also described it as the “Immaculacy of Emptiness.”

If you say It is the Immaculacy of Emptiness, That Which is Eternal, you are getting very, very close to the truth, because “the Immaculacy of Emptiness” implies the fullest emptiness possible. It is an incredibly full thing. You “know” It when you “have” It, and “having” enlightenment is to “know” It.²

This is the True Reality, our True Refuge, our solace and our comfort. The *Udana Scripture* describes It as “Unborn, Undying, Unchanging, Uncreated.” It is the compassion, love, and wisdom that is Eternal, nonjudgmental, the essence of all that is, that existed before we were born and will exist after we die. Our training in meditation and the Precepts teaches us that we can turn to this Reality at anytime and let Its pure, unconditional, Love wash through us, opening our heart to the True Reality of compassion, love, and wisdom. Then we truly “live in the world as if in the sky, just as the lotus blossom is not wetted by the water that surrounds it.”³

¹ *Zen is Eternal Life*, p. 13.

² *Roar of the Tigress I*, p. 45.

³ From “The Ceremony of Lay Ordination.”