

OQ episode 404: “When Does Bread Become Toast?”

From time to time I drop back into my grandmother’s kitchen.
I have only to think of
the color and design of her wallpaper,
and - 'open sesame' - her universe shows itself instantly.

In sweeps a soft breeze through open windows,
dispersing the sound of Russian classics throughout the house.
My grandmother prepares food with great purpose.
Her orderly and practical nature creates a secure spacious environment,
for the magical, sensual realm, I, as a child, could so easily access.

Looking back now,
what I think of as “my life”,
seems to arise as disparate events that open into visual landscapes -
like fractals...
transporting me into timeless, non-linear spaces.

Present circumstances jog memories awake:
a disturbing image of the Vietnam war;
clinging to mother’s skirt the first day of school;
a red velvet dress;
lonely eyes look out through the living room window;
goodnight moon;
the birth of a child;
each one yielding stories that become embellished - or grow fainter - over time.
Some memories haunt us
and we find ourselves narrating and reaffirming our truths,
over and over again.
All of these past experiences culminate in ways that shape our worlds, just now.

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The only constant - the presiding 'I' -
the witness who also plays the judge, defendant, prosecutor, and jury -
keeps tabs on it all...
which is funny,
because as consistent as her presence may seem to me,
she is changing and elusive too.

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Welcome to Open Question: a call to inner brilliance

Our theme for this season: The Self: Walking the Middle Way path
I'm Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel
This is OQ 404: When Does Bread ...Become Toast?

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We've done a lot of looking and not finding practice on Open Question podcast this season.
We searched for something independent - something that exists outside the nature of contingent relationships -
only to find that nothing stands on its own - . everything leans!

Next we looked for something singular or whole,
but found that all things were made of parts!
This search brought us beyond the limitations of one or many.

In this episode, let's explore the 3rd in this classical triad of Middle Way inquiries:
Let's try to find something permanent - something that doesn't change.

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Looking for something permanent presents a unique challenge,
partly because we already know nothing is permanent,
Having watched
our children grow,
our parents age,
the seasons turn...
To say everything changes seems a bland cliché.
so why look?

Because our behavior suggests we're not convinced.
We attempt to secure our lives as if permanent,
and that sets the table for a feast of heartbreak and disappointment.

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An authentic commitment to exploring impermanence takes us far beyond clichés.
The Buddha emphasized impermanence as one of the most potent foundational contemplations
on the path:

To contemplate impermanence cuts through our tendencies to brace against a world that is
change.
it inspires us to live with purpose and prepares us for death

Meditation on impermanence teaches us to relax with the realities of constant change, and can bring us to liberation.

So from a practical point of view,

we may want to seriously honor the transformative power of exploring impermanence

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Our exploration begins by examining precisely what we mean when we use the terms permanence and impermanence.

We generally define permanence as an unchanging continuum or state, in which qualities and characteristics remain unaltered.

For something to be permanent it would have to be, by definition: enduring, uniform, inert, and uninterrupted.

Anything permanent would have to be eternal.

Whereas 'impermanence' is defined as a state of change.

If something is impermanent it is subject to transformation, modulation, influence and interaction.

Anything impermanent is therefore momentary.

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Moments are discrete units of time.

What is the duration of a moment?

It depends who you ask.

Throughout history, philosophers, scientists and meditators have varied in the way they've defined moments -

anything from,

what some early Buddhist schools referred to as 'time-less moments'

to

the measured tic of a clock.

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I don't think it would be off-base to describe impermanence as a linear stream of momentary change.

In that context, an impermanent thing could be defined as a succession of discrete moments that are similar in appearance.

For some thing to change,

it would have to break free in the present moment from the previous discrete moment

to emerge again somehow, as something essentially the same in appearance, but slightly different.

It's a bit like a sequence of frames on a film reel,
that create an illusion of fluidity when run at a certain speed.

However, whether life actually happens like that,
in momentary increments,
is up for debate.
...more on that later.

What we can and do observe though, is that
All things have a continuum...
they don't just happen randomly, in any which way.

We observe a certain integrity or lineage to the life of things.
And although much of change is imperceptible to the naked eye in real time,
we can infer that the subtle movement of impermanence we can't see
adds up to the coarser changes we can.

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In order to protect this inquiry from flying fly off into the theoretical,
for the moment,
let's bring these ideas to my grandmother's kitchen.

Permit me to transport you back to the table,
where I - as a child - sit looking at a picture book of animals
- an old one from the 1930's.
I'm eating grapefruit served grandma-style:
which she prepares by carefully peeling off the membrane of every slice.
Grandma did this so we didn't have to chew so hard.
She really went all out when it came to love.

I remember vividly being in grandma's kitchen,
and even have photographic evidence.
But if the "I" that sat at her table, were permanent,
then "I" wouldn't be here now, as an adult, narrating this podcast.
I would still at the table perusing my book of animals...
caught in a state of inertia -
similar to the stuck image we see when our computer seizes up on a video call.

if I did have the choice to seize up and remain forever at any given point in my life,
it would be at my grandmother's kitchen table...
and I hope I would have a nice expression on my face - it being permanent and all.

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But of course, life doesn't work like that.
it's not the nature of things...
the kitchen table moment ended long ago,
and many, many other moments followed,
...because I'm getting older here.

And I'm grateful for that stream of moments.
It allowed me to read my son animal picture books and peel the membranes off individual
grapefruit sections for him.
In this way, many others have been the beneficiary of the kindness I felt from my grandmother.

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According to the Middle Way view,
when left unexamined,
things appear to arise in a linear stream of moments,
but this does not represent a thorough understanding of the nature of reality.
To avoid getting too abstract about it all,
I'm going to let some of the shortcomings of this generalized version of the view,
resolve themselves as we gently meander through this inquiry.

Let's look further into momentariness -
- a fascinating topic -
which will escort us through an exciting new venture into the nature of time.

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We measure the continuum of change through the framework of time.
Like most people, you probably organize your day - and life - around a linear stream of
incremental units: seconds, minutes, hours, days, years.
The measurement of time equips us with an elegant tool for punctuality;
for tracking progress on a project;
and
organizing past events into linear narratives, we call history.

Throughout history humans have found creative ways to mark the passage of time.
Many ancient cultures measured time by tracking the movement of celestial bodies;
They constructed instruments to measure equal increments of time:
sand in an hourglass

an oil lamp with designated reservoirs,
sun dials,
watercocks
and
obelisks -
all technologies for partitioning time into mornings-afternoons-evenings and nights.

The mathematical basis for the 60 second/60 minute clock we use today,
originated in Sumeria, sometime before 2,000 BC.

Pendulum clocks, date back to the 14th or 15th Century,
which were followed by: mechanical quartz and digital clocks.

Atomic clocks, which define for us the duration of a second,
use the vibration of cesium (seize-ium) atoms as a reference.

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Tom O'Brian, once America's official timekeeper at the National Institute of Standards and Technology said: "My own personal opinion is that time is a human construct...a way to put some order in this fascinating and complex universe around us."

Although the science of time-keeping has been refined and standardized throughout history,
time has always been a mere consensual agreement - a highly functional illusion.

But despite time's illusory nature,
the measurement of time brings us together.

We almost always have someplace to be at some point in time each day.

We can be on the clock -

off the clock;

behind the clock;

or

punch the clock.

We are either

chasing time;

passing time;

making time;

out of time...

OR

just waiting...(tic, tic...)...

Regardless,

according to our clocks,
time marches on.

We live by the clock,
which internally regulates our sense of time -
we are attuned to our external clocks,
to such an extent that we often
wake up just moments before the alarm sounds.
The tick of a clock is akin to a heartbeat.

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We know that our time on earth is finite.
We are clocked in at birth and clocked out at death.
Because of this, we have an intimate and emotional relationship with time
Life is directional and we know where it goes.
There are only so many
trips around the sun
so many full moons
so many heartbeats

Even without clocks,
we can distinguish the past from the present, and the present from the future.
The past is a mere memory,
yet determines what we have to work with.
The future is mere anticipation, hope and fear...
The present is the interval 'happening' somewhere in between.

In his book, "The Order of Time",
theoretical physicist, Carlo Rovelli,
refers to St. Augustine's observations about the nature of time through the analogy of music.

"Music, can occur only in time.
Although we hear sound in a linear way - one moment at a time -
each present note carries with it the memory of the previous notes,
and the anticipation of future ones that follow."

In other words, the way we listen
imposes a continuity or flow, to what we hear.

And here we are again: IMPERMANENCE!
the assumption that experiences arises in a linear stream of moments.

Now it the time to ask the question:
"Do experiences actually arise in moments?"

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In the MW we test our assumptions about momentariness.
If experience does arise in linear moments,
we should be able to identify such moments.
And if we do, I assume, it would have to be a present moment,
because the present moment is the only point in time,
that genuine experience could reasonably take place,
as the past would be a mere memory,
and the future a projection.

People often talk about: "Living in the present."
Okay!...but let's first see if we can find such a thing.
Locating a present moment
will be our challenge here.

Let's begin by observing our experience.
Can you find a discrete increment of time you
could identify as a 'present moment?'

When looking for the present...you might ask yourself:
"When did the past become the present and the present the future?"
You may observe that time eludes you.
In the very instant you might conceive of the present,
it has already passed.

The moment you think: "I found it!"
it has already drifted into what was previously the future...
Its as if somehow,
time always keeps a step ahead of you.

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Now let's visualize a hypothetical present moment.
In order to call it a 'present' moment,
we would have to distinguish it from the past or future...
and that present moment would have to have a duration.

Having a duration, means that our present moment
would have a beginning, middle and end...
the beginning, middle and end would themselves be moments
with beginnings middles and ends,
which could be further divided over and over again...

in other words,
like with matter,
as long as we can say there is a 'thing' it will be comprised of components

And you might note
that as we analyze time,
we are also analyzing the thing-ness of experience that arises in moments.
If we can't find a moment, how can we find the "I" or thing abiding in that moment?

I'm beginning to think that the maxim, "live in the present moment," is merely a figure of speech.

Once again,
through contemplation,
we have arrived at a place of looking and not finding...
and yet,
observe that the universe of appearances and possibilities continues to proliferate and dissolve
all the same.

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I find that the most effective way to connect with the nature of reality,
is to simply and quietly observe life,
while poising the mind as an open question.
I want to share some of my experiments with you to enjoy:

Sit outside and look out at the Easter sky just before dawn.
See if you can locate night as it surrenders darkness and becomes dawn.
Can you pinpoint the very moment when the sky leaves its status as 'night'
and assumes its identity as "day"?

If you are a parent you might ask yourself:
"At what point in time did my infant become a toddler;
my toddler a child? my child a teen, or adult?"

Or ask yourself: "When did I get old?"

The stages of life are indeed distinct,
but do we ever actually see a discreet moment of adolescence become a discreet moment of
adulthood?

You can look at your life all day long and marvel
that things are both apparent,
yet
empty of intrinsic thing-ness or momentariness.

For instance,
The next time you make breakfast, challenge yourself by asking: “when does bread becomes toast?”

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In this podcast,
we engaged a classic Middle Way inquiry:
Can we find a permanent thing?
at least that’s where we began.

As the inquiry progressed we observed that all things are subject to change,
and so turned our minds to impermanence,,,,,
which we defined as a linear stream of momentary change.

But we also encountered the limitations of that view.
If things arise in a linear fashion,
they would have to arise in discrete units of time in order to move.
And this presented us with some logical challenges:

First, where is this ‘thing’ that retains its identity as it keeps changing?

AND

if we assume there are moments, couldn’t we continue to divide those moments into smaller and smaller increments? Wouldn’t that eventually bring us to the un-find-ability of moments?

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When we turned our minds to the Middle Way approach of looking and not finding,
we encountered, yet again, the nature of empty appearance.
Once more, we couldn’t hang our hat on anything.
Can we make peace with that?
or even better,
can we marvel at the magical nature of our fathomless universe?

Rest you mind in that state of awe - which is supreme.

Mere appearance - the union of emptiness and appearance -
is only magic in relationship to the assumptions of ordinary mind.
In the end, we are simply talking about recognizing the extraordinary nature of all phenomena.

This might remind us of something our great Middle Way hero, Nagarjuna, said about time and continuum.

“When you draw a line on the surface of a clear lake,
the arising and dissolving of the line seem to happen simultaneously...
yielding a process that is free of even a trace of ‘thing-ness.’
At the same time, the line reveals itself as a distinct, unmistakable experience.
There is nothing ambiguous about it.”

All phenomena have that nature.

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Please join us live on: October 7, from 10am-12pm USA MT
for our next OQ LIVE CONVERSATION with Jakob Leshly: The Two Truths

Jakob is a returning guest on OQ LIVE. He a Tibetan translator and meditator known for his skill in clearly communicating philosophical insights. Jakob has studied with some of the greatest comporary Vajrayajna masters of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, including Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Dudjom Rinpoche, and Kangyur Rinpoche.

The Two Truths is one of the most essential topics of the Middle Way tradition. I have no doubt that Jakob will help illuminate this for us with his characteristic lightness and humor.

For more info visit: <middlewayinitiative.org>

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