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A friend once asked me if there are any scientific words of comfort to give someone experiencing a bereavement. Can a person’s life somehow leave a meaningful imprint on the cosmos long after their corporeal exit? I thought hard and finally said that each time we stand under a clear sky some of the sunlight reflecting from our bodies races up through the Earth’s atmosphere and into the universe. That light, as streams of photons, can even be quantified, totaling oscillations over a human lifetime—billions of little bits of energy that were once uniquely modified by the body in its entirety.

Perhaps a few of these photons will impinge eventually on some other place: a star, a planet, a specs of interstellar dust. Conceivably, one day, another origin, a ferociously hot and dense exhalation of interstellar dust. Conceivably, one day, another species determined to find out if it’s alone in the universe might even register a little of this light in some unimaginably sensitive telescope and puzzle over its meaning. But most photons will just keep going, carrying a lifetime of our images with them. So rather surprisingly, we can indeed leave an imprint on reality that will persist long after our consciousness evaporates.

As uplifting as this thought might be, it hides a deeper, more challenging reality. The phenomena that make all of this happen actually have very little to do with any kind of permanence, personal or cosmic. Quite the contrary.

When you or I move through the world we are dragging around atoms born out of a chain of tumultuous processes that began within a few hundred million years of the start of it all—the Big Bang. That light, a ferociously hot and dense exhalation of energy, matter and space, remains at the hairy apex of our grasp of fundamental physics. But what came after that origin is understood today with an astonishing level of detail. Within moments of the universe’s existence it underwent a sequence of transitions as it expanded and cooled. Matter that was once a soupy mess started to coalesce into the things we call protons and neutrons, the essential ingredients of atomic nuclei. A few hundred million years later some simple nucleus found itself coiling itself up as the beginnings we call stars. So vigorous was the coiling that it started fusing with each other, forging heavier and heavier elements. In the birth of a cosmic eye these stars became supernova, explosively throwing many of their old and new elements out into space. Time and time again gravity gathered up these elements into new stars, even planets, and eventually, in at least one place, a curious animation of matter called life.

A piece of life like a human is endlessly swapping out its complement of these star forgeries. The cells lining your stomach must renew every couple of days. Red blood cells operate for around two weeks before degrading. Fat cells, I’m sorry to say, live for around ten years, a similar timescale to the regeneration period for your bones. Nucleus and tooth enamel may be the most lasting components in our bodies. But in most respects, the you of today is not the you of yesterday. Atoms come and go with scant regard for our sense of unique identity.

The sunlight that bathes your wayward parts on a bright day also exists because of change. Like the generations of stars before it, the center of our Sun is filled with atomic nuclei at a density over ten times that of solid gold. Their fusion releases energy that takes about a hundred thousand years to propagate through these thick solar inwards to finally escape as photons of visible light. The light you felt this morning originated in nuclear events at a time when Neanderthals roamed the world, oblivious to their eventual extinction. That light is also a sign of the Sun’s nonstop evolution toward an end some five billion years in the future. There is no such thing as a permanent star.

Subtle death and rebirth are what produced a planet we call Earth four and a half billion years ago. That world was a chemical incubator, full of unbridged energy and potential. In ways that we still do not understand, Earth’s youth allowed these elements to combine in more complex chemistry. Eager-to-connect molecules began enveloping themselves in proto-cells, propa- gating and exchanging information, and embarking on a cascade of experimentation that is still ongoing, billions of years later.

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If the universe were a place of permanence, all that has occurred to enable our species to briefly emerge from cosmic embers might not have happened.

Central to that experimentation is a precarious balance between order (boring) and chaos (unruly). Natural selection is what increases the odds that a particular biological experiment will be able to keep on grasping at permanence. But without change and variation there is no natural selection. At the same time, the universe throws endless curveballs. Ecosystems collapse by sheer bad luck. Asteroids smash into small blue ocean worlds. That’s left of life refills the gaps, but often with entirely new evolu- tions—fresh, untapped experiments in novelty. Even at the fastest of times the Earth doesn’t still. Its axi- aces wobbles, its orbit shifts back and forth from circle to gentle ellipse, all driving climate cycles and biological change across the cosmos.

Finally, even that hopeful stream of photons, the record of your time on Earth, will not and cannot remain intact. Not just because of interception, or degra- dation, but because the universe itself is evolving. With every passing moment space itself is expanding, and it appears to be expanding at an accelerating rate. Consequently, a mere hundred billion years or so from now this expansion will take place at a rate that effectively scatters entire galaxies from one another.

Not just in the sense of travel distance but in abso- lute causality—there literally will be no way to see the light from other parts of the cosmos. By this time your personal photons, long since departed from our Milky Way, will be lost, not just unseen but unseeable forevermore.

Yet if the universe were a place of permanence, all that has occurred to enable our species to briefly emerge from cosmic embers might not have hap- pened. Impermanence is simply not a despairing fact about the nature of existence. It appears to be an essential part of the reason for existence. In that we may take some solace.
IMPERMANENCE CAN SET US FREE

By John Dunne

MILAREPA, THE GREAT MYSTICAL POET OF TIBET, once found himself with only a single possession of any worth: his cooking pot. To enhance his practice and escape from the distractions of everyday life, he was living and meditating high in the mountains, where the pot served as the means to prepare his meager but welcome meals of boiled nettles. One day, while leaving his meditation cave with the pot on his back, Milarepa slipped—the pot rolled down the mountainside and shattered. Others might have been devastated by the loss of their last possession, but Milarepa was amazed. Filled with inspiration, he sang a song that begins, “I once had a pot, now I do not.” It ends:

This clay pot so important, the whole of my wealth, Becomes my lens in the moment it breaks, Teaching impermanence, how amazing!

Milarepa’s song is an evocative expression of the central role that impermanence plays in Buddhism. From the earliest days of the Buddhist tradition, impermanence figures as a key element in the challenges of the human condition. Yet while we constantly encounter impermanence everywhere, it is also said to be something that we try desperately to ignore. As such impermanence is a frequent obstacle to overcome. Our denial of death is pervasive, and it often involves a blind confidence that today is not the last day of our life. Blindly going through the day in this way, we allow the mind to be captured by the unimportant, the distracting, and the trivial.

Traditionally Tibetan practitioners thus begin each day with a contemplation of death and impermanence (chos ba mi rtag pa in Tibetan) as one of the main methods to redirect the mind (slo ldog) toward what really matters. That contemplation can become remarkably elaborate and challenging, with intense visualizations of oneself on a deathbed, filled with regret for a wasted life, surrounded by relatives who cannot help. Other contemplations compel the practitioner to acknowledge that the fantasy of not dying is—rather obviously—just a fantasy. Can we identify anyone who has lived more than, say, 130 years? Do people often die while thinking that they will surely live a little longer, with plans and projects unfinished? Do sudden, catastrophic events—an earthquake, an accident, a environmental disaster—take life, even of the young, in just an instant? These and other such contemplations are not meant to ruin your day. Rather they are intended to bring you back to what really matters.

Impermanence also manifests on a subtler level, and here the traditional notion of the suffering of change (gyur ba’i sdug bsngal) comes to the fore. This powerful Buddhist insight shows us that our experiences, even of the greatest pleasure, are fundamentally unstable. Living in Wisconsin, where we value all things dairy, I have the luxury of enjoying amazing ice cream produced by my own university at the famed Babcock Hall in Madison. Yet my tremendous pleasure in the anticipation of a few tiny scoops would pale in comparison to my displeasure at the prospect of having ice cream, and only ice cream, at every meal for the next month. The key to the suffering of change is just this: even our usual pleasures can become painful, because pleasure itself is inherently unstable. Even our intimate loves, for example, can somehow become so estranged that we no longer tolerate their presence.

Finally, at the subtlest level, impermanence undercuts even our ordinary perceptions. Choose any visual object in front of you right now (or attend to a physical sensation such as the feeling of your feet on the floor). When you move your attention to another object and then return to the original one, has anything changed? Is the thing you were looking at (or feeling) exactly the same? The Buddhist view, intriguingly confirmed by modern science, is that no thing remains exactly the same even for an instant. Any causally efficacious thing—that is, anything that arises from causes and produces effects—is necessarily changing in each moment, because to be caught up in a causal world requires a state of constant flux.

This applies to our most basic perceptions. In each moment we are coming into relation to a perceptual object, and this requires our minds to be inherently in flux. If consciousness itself were completely unchanging then how would we experience anything new? Even the most basic level of our sensory experience involves an ongoing, subtle degree of impermanence or flux. In short, life is inherently unstable. Even our intimate loves, for example, can sometimes become so estranged that we no longer tolerate their presence.

As Roshi Joan Halifax of Upaya Zen Center recently remarked to me, Buddhism can seem rather dour. We might get the impression that the aim of these contemplations is to make us feel like life is a bummer. Certainly when we ignore the challenges of the human condition, it probably is a good thing to be jolted out of that willful ignorance. But the overall point of contemplating death and impermanence is not about pain and disillusions. It’s about the tremendous opportunities offered by the inevitability of change, the novelty of each moment, and the immediacy of beauty and pleasure. To put it another way, the fantasy of permanence imprisons us, but the reality of impermanence can set us free.

How Buddhism encourages us to embrace the instability of life

The Idea of Resurrection comes up again and again, across time and cultures. It is one of the most persistent ideas to capture our imaginations, popping up in storytelling, traditional opera, and popular television. I am not referring to the risen corpses of the zombie-inspired television series The Walking Dead or other media. I mean fully conscious, fully aware people who come back from the dead as if they did not die.

While researching notions of the afterlife for the cross-cultural exhibition Death Is Not the End, I have encountered surprising parallels between tales from Tibetan Buddhist culture and several contemporary television series. The returned always seem to reappear with sights to describe and lessons to impart.

Tibetan Tales from the Past

Tibetan Buddhist culture features popular narratives and written accounts about people who came back to life after dying. Tibetans call them delok, meaning returned from the dead. (The concept of risen or animated corpses is different and has its own separate term.) The returned-to-life people are usually quite ordinary, but they have extraordinary stories to tell. They describe what they saw and experienced after death. Each story is usually narrated in the first person, making it highly personal and emotionally charged.

One such popular story is about Nangsa Wobum, a woman who may have lived in the late eleventh or twelfth century in south-central Tibet. She wished to devote herself to a spiritual life, but was forced into marriage and died from mistreatment by family. After Nangsa dies she is confused, not realizing that she has passed away until she sees her surroundings. Along with the other dead people, she is taken in front of the Lord of Death, who weighs her positive and negative karmas, counting the good deeds as white pebbles and negative deeds as black pebbles. He proclaims that her karma to live as the woman Nangsa Wobum is not finished and she has to continue her human existence. To the amazement and awe of everyone in her village, she comes back to life and shares her story, finally embarking on a religious life as a nun. She describes her experience in the afterlife, seeing the beings who commit negative karma suffering in hell and witnessing the salvation of others thanks to their good karmas or divine intervention. Through her work she affects the lives of those who wronged her and caused her death, thus helping to alter their karmas and escape the suffering that would have awaited them in the afterlife had they not changed their ways. By returning from death she teaches the living how to live.

Itinerant storytellers recounted the tale of Nangsa, and her story became a popular Tibetan opera. Until the twentieth century public storytelling and opera performances were among the most popular forms of entertainment in pre-modern and modern Tibet.
On TV Today

There is a curious parallel here with television shows about the returned in our own popular culture. The French television series _The Returned_ (Les Revenants, 2012–2015), based on the horror film _They Came Back_ (2004), is about people who die long ago but suddenly reappear alive, unaged, and unaware of their deaths. Their emergence complicates the lives of everyone involved, as the returned, their families, and others must figure out how to solve the ensuing problems. An American version titled _The Returned_ (2015) explores a similar premise.

The Australian show _Glitch_ (2018–2019) is the most recent show on this subject. In _Glitch_ the returned literally dig themselves out of their graves, but they are also unaware that they have died. Their memories gradually return through interactions with people in their new reality. People and plots are intertwined, hinting at evolving karmic connections in the characters’ relationships that need to be resolved and drive the show’s narrative.

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Interestingly, _Glitch_ also contains references to notions from Chinese Buddhist culture. A nineteenth-century Chinese man who came to Australia for work is among the newly returned, and he grapplings with the strangeness of his new surroundings. He mistakenly thinks he has been reborn as a hungry ghost (petai in Sanskrit), a being who wanders in a ghostly existence of suffering. Like the nineteenth-century Chinese man, some of the returned are not from the time in which they have reappeared, adding to the complexity of their stories, their identities, and the consequences of their return. The main underlying fabric of the show’s imagined reality involves karmic connections and the possibility of resolving tangled relationships while questioning what it means to be human.

To behold the global climate crisis in all its enormity—human suffering, mass extinction, the loss of Earth’s precious ecosystems—requires a strong foundation of spiritual practice. When I feel overwhelmed by despair or anxiety, I use the _Anāpānasutta_, a Buddhist meditation exercise that enables me to “zoom out.” By creating a sense of spaciousness in my heart, I can contemplate the inevitability of suffering and honor my grief without crumbling.

I find the fourth tetrad of the sutta to be particularly helpful, because it reminds me that while everything is impermanent, including suffering, time has no beginning or end. Contemplating our current climate crisis on a scale this vast doesn’t deny the problem, but it does expand our range of possible responses. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that a drop of poison in a glass of water could kill someone, but that same drop of poison in a lake is nonlethal. The poison is still there, but with more water—a bigger perspective—we are better able to withstand it.

My spiritual practice saves me from being paralyzed by grief. It helps me stay energized and focused on right action—applying my unique skills with pure intentions, regardless of outcome. This is essential, because taking meaningful action—whether it’s suing fossil fuel companies, protecting rainforests, or working at a community garden to increase local food access—is at once part of the global climate solution and a powerful cure for climate despair.

In summary, _The Returned_ and _Glitch_ serve as a reminder that we are all interconnected. Everything we do as individuals has the potential to impact the larger world, and actions taken individually can be amplified on a global scale.

See representations of the assets in Buddhist and Christian traditions in the exhibition _Death Is Not the End_ at the Rubin Museum from September 18, 2020, to February 8, 2021.

Elsewhere and Here

From classic stories of Tibetan delirium to contemporary television, the idea of the dead returning to life spans centuries and continents. In all these examples, the returned discover their individual purpose and strive to complete the lives that death interrupted. Some remember the terrible, nonlethal sights of what lies beyond and threaten to spill over into this world. They pursue different paths inspired by their experiences, but many eventually change themselves and the people around them.

The idea of a second chance is a well-known concept, often accepted and favored in Western culture. In Buddhist culture it is a bit more complex, as it is presented in the context of karma and rebirth rather than redemption. Regardless of origin, stories of the returned are tantalizing and worthy of serious contemplation, providing us with a deeper understanding of the complexities of our own lives.

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Navigating change in romantic relationships

Most of Us Mortals Say

Just as nature is ever-changing, so are we. Just as organisms, stars, and galaxies are in constant flux, so are we. Our thoughts, our emotions, and even our physical chemistry are in states of constant transformation. Consider the anatomy of our bodies. Every second of every day the cells in our bodies are dividing. Cells are dying and being replaced. We are constantly recreating ourselves, unknowingly, which means we are continuously, effortlessly, and involuntarily changing—whether we want it or not.

In a committed romantic relationship, we seldom discuss the impermanence of who we are, yet it impacts the way we communicate and relate to each other on a profound level. We often carry an unspoken conviction that our beloved is going to remain the same or evolve along the same trajectory and timeline as us. But that rarely happens. People grow at their own pace, and many things can catalyze change in a person. The death of a parent or an illness, for instance, can transform someone or trigger an existential crisis. The resulting grief can be conspicuous or hidden, bubbling up in different guises, perhaps even pushing one deeper onto a spiritual path. There are certain thresholds we cross in life after which we know we can never be the same. Yet it so often we masquerade as though we are the same, unwilling to grapple with inner conflict or the discomfort that can come with change, even if change is integral to our evolution.

We also carry the silent belief that the love we have for each other will remain the same. But love changes, just as we do. The way we feel about a person at the beginning of a relationship is transient, characterized by infatuation and excitement. It’s breathless, all-consuming, and therefore unsustainable, which is why initial love—if the couple remain together for the long-term—ultimately transitions to a different kind of love: a lasting companionship love, often fostered after enduring chaos, conflict, and other challenges together. There are many variations and stages in between, but the point is that our feelings are not static, fixed things. If the relationship is healthy, the love changes and deepens as we grow and evolve.

When I explore the notion of impermanence in relation to my current partner, I am reminded that change is the nature of the universe. The Bhagavad Gītā (or Gita, as it is known for short), the holiest of Hindu scriptures, considered by Eastern and Western scholars alike to be among the greatest spiritual books ever written, alludes to the impermanence of everything except the soul. It teaches us that the only place of unchanging truth is internal, when we come into alignment with the Self.

The soul passes through many incarnations with everything around it in a constant state of change: environments, physical sensations, emotions—even bodies: “The Self discards its used bodies and puts on others that are new.” This is of course the foundation of Hinduism: reincarnation. Whether or not you believe in the rebirth of the soul, I would argue that once we embrace the importance of self-realization, of being connected to our inner source, the divine inside—we however you want to call it—the more likely we are to pick a good partner for ourselves and the better chance we have of forging a strong, lasting bond with that person, especially if they are committed to doing inner work as well. That is the basis of any healthy relationship, allowing us to better withstand any upset caused by undesired change, all of which is inevitable and out of our control.

On the days that I am really “awake,” I accept that my partner and I are changing beings who have chosen to embark on the beautiful, challenging journey of parenthood together. If we were ever in denial that change is a fact of life, now we are reminded of it on a daily basis. Every day we can see our daughter growing and changing before our eyes. As she grows, changes, and learns new things, we do too.

Instead of resisting impermanence, we do our best to surrender to it. Attempting to harmonize with the things that come our way feels like a wiser way to live. When we set aside our fixation on intended outcomes, we step into the flow of life. This way of life is natural and is, and it’s not temporary. It is always there, whether or not we are awake enough to realize it.

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While there are an abundance of sacred and secular rituals for facing what is considered a natural or “good” death, few rituals respond to lives touched by trauma, violence, or stigma. And while most cultures and faith traditions provide meditations and prayers for the loss of human life, a gap exists for rituals and ceremonies that address environmental loss.

Reimagine End of Life—a national nonprofit organization that aims to transform individual and collective experiences around death, dying, and living through community-driven festivals sparking creativity, connection, and conversation—solicited rituals to address some of these gaps. They are inspired by performances and ceremonies by artists and spiritual leaders from Reimagine festivals in New York and San Francisco.

We hope these rituals serve as a tool kit with step-by-step instructions toward healing, resiliency, and action.
A RITUAL TO GRIEVE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

by Aminita Kilawan-Narine

Sadhana: Coalition of Progressive Hindus invites participants to reflect on the water as Goddess and Mother, ever patient with Her nourishment, ever nurturing with Her resources. We call on those who perform this ritual to “make waves” for gender justice, acknowledging the irony that water is worshiped as Supreme Goddess. Hindu worship the water as Mother Ganga, yet we harm Her with pollution. This runs counter to the Hindu principle of ahimsa (nonviolence).

1. Visit a local body of water or a place where you can reflect on the water in nature. You could be a non-traditional place or a stream, river, etc. It is important to find a place where you can reflect on the water as Mother.
2. Light a candle, offer a flower, and sit in silence for a moment. Remember the importance of water in our lives.
3. Reflect on the ways water is important to you and to our world.
4. Express your thoughts and feelings about the importance of water to our world.

A RITUAL TO MOURN MISCARRIAGE AND INFANT DEATH

by Rabbi Sydney Mintz

In Judaism there is no traditional ritual for miscarriage, stillborn, or infant death, despite the fact that one quarter of all pregnancies result in miscarriage and one in three women experience one. It is a profound loss that impacts women, men, and families, yet it is a silent loss for many who must contend with this personal tragedy in isolation.

Judaism has a rich tradition of mourning rituals, but perhaps because miscarriage has remained primarily hidden and is experienced mostly by women in private, the time has come to create a new ritual. A new space for remembering such losses, the Memory Garden, will also soon open in the San Francisco Bay Area.

This ceremony is inspired by the ritual of Sashlich, which occurs on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. We symbolically release bread crumbs into a body of water to let go of any painful emotional burdens and open up a new space for life.
1. Write a personal reflection about the loss and your suffering. Conclude with your hope for the future.
2. Either alone, as a couple, or in a wider circle of family and friends, gather on a beach, creek, or lake.
3. Be silent, share thoughts, and/or read a text with personal meaning. Release the writing into the water. Depending on specific legal issues in each state, you may release cremated remains into the water.
4. Go to the circle and describe what you made and its symbolism. Say a devotional prayer to someone or something we are losing from our climate change.
5. Walk away from the Earth altar and return in later days to witness it changing. Let witness to the impermanence of the altar as a way to strengthen your collective capacity for love, hope, and resilience in the face of change.

A COLLECTIVE RITUAL FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

by Day Sildlbrett and Jessfa Neafig

The world as we have known and loved it is changing fast. Industrialization and overpopulation have contributed to a global climate crisis that renders within our hearts a new kind of anticipatory grief.

To move forward amid growing fear we need new ways to process this grief and trauma as it arises, both privately and collectively. Impermanent Earth alters pregnancy, giving value loss through their ephemeral nature and boldly welcome grief into the public realm. Creating such altars may offer an increased sense of unity in divisive times by reflecting our shared fears and vulnerability.

This Earth altar ritual can be implemented in parks or civic spaces. It enables people to make personal and collective ecological grief visible, tangible, and more deeply felt, so we may move through it with our hearts not paralyzed with fear but rather broken open with love and shared healing.

1. Select an area in a park. Be conscious of the cardinal directions. Place a bouquet on the pavement.
2. Use chalk, write the name or description of a person or people who suffered injustice. Rectify the words, “May your strength guide your family and loved ones.”
3. Encircle the bouquet and writing together with a circle of earth.
4. Choose a direction. Stand firm. Close the ritual with the following possibilities:
   • Pray a written or spoken word.
   • Read a poem or other form of writing.
   • Sing a song.
   • Play a song using an instrument or speaker.
   • Reflect, meditate, be silent.

A RITUAL FOR REMEMBERING THE MARGINALIZED, FORGOTTEN, AND NEGLECTED

by Elizabeth Velazquez

This remembrance ritual addresses injustices and acknowledges the human suffering caused by unjust conditions. At the 2018 Remembrance Ritual, I performed this ritual at Washington Square Park in memory of Rose Butler, an enslaved young black woman. She was accused of stealing and after being resisted, sentenced by firing to her enslavers’ home. In 1819 she was hanged at the gallows that once stood inside Washington Square Park. This site, like other public parks in New York City, served as a potter’s field—a mass grave for the homeless, poor, forgotten, and neglected. To raise property values during the early 1800s, Mayor Philip Home led a successful campaign to turn the site into a public park.

Elizabeth Velazquez was coming to the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, She was selected as a Hartman Rabbinic Fellow in 2017 for her concern for improving the lives of the frozen, forgotten, and neglected. She received a PhD in Jewish sociology from New York University and a certificate in Jewish socially engaged spiritual arts at Jannes Bay School of Jewish Studies in 2015. She is an attorney, spiritual leader, and community organizer, and cofounder of the charity organiza-
The renowned theater and opera director Peter Sellars discusses his passion for bringing a two-thousand-year-old Buddhist sutra to the stage.

Howard Kaplan: Can you give a little background on the sutra that is the basis for The Goddesses Project?

Peter Sellars: The spark was reading Robert Thurman’s incredible translation of the Vimalakirti Sutra, first published in 1976. Reading it you feel a new generation of Buddhism in America. The volume is translated into lucid, colloquial, direct American speech, has three characters in the back, and is super radical and useful and has a sharp sense of humor. There’s also an incredible sense of beauty and amusement and wonder. You just say, “Oh right, these are not the old school sutra translations. This is the beginning of Buddhism having another type of presence in the West and it is just taking but taking up residence here.” You can feel it in this volume as you hold it — the unvarnished intention that things will be different from now on.

Tell me more about the sutra. It’s quite profound. For instance, it says a bodhisattva should regard all living beings “as a wise man views a reflection of the moon in water or as magicians regard men created by magic.”

One of the reasons I’ve been obsessed with Vimalakirti is that it has shocking shifts of tone, unexpected surges of humor, reversal of received wisdom, and a stunning spectacle of astonishing things happening. It has really sharp dialogue, and of course my feeling was that this was meant to be staged.

It was the beginning of the Mahayana series of sutras, which were getting Buddhism out of the monasteries and back into public life. It was designed to be performed in the marketplace for an illiterate population who needed access to Buddhist texts but could not stop their lives and go into a library. So it was meant to have a wide popular appeal and have images, which were memorable and resonant.

Can you address the role of women and gender? The goddess chapter of the sutra is astonishing, because it shows how radical it was for its time. One of the first statements of gender equality in world literature. It’s from the first century, and what’s so beautiful is that the sutra doesn’t announce it but rather demonstrates it, which is why I think it was meant to be performed. Sometimes Buddhism gets cloistered, encounters the goddess in Vimalakirti’s house. They have a philosophical discussion, and the king wins every point. After a while he says, “You’re quite intelligent for a woman.”

That’s the hope. You presented an early iteration of the project at the Rubin Museum in 2011. I think people are searching for genuine refuge now. There are sixty thousand people coming from Honduras and Guatemala on the United States-Mexico border right now. What is the meaning of refuge at this moment? The hunger and need is there. I don’t so much think of this as shoe businesses, I think it as trying to touch something that we all search for. That’s the hope.

How does the theme of impermanence play a role in the sutra? The fluid nature of impermanence is that this will change. Winter is not going to last forever, the ice will melt. One of the most incredible Buddhist images is ice and water as the same thing—the surrounding conditions are what changes. I think of impermanence in the sense of the wisdom that it will not be winter forever, and it won’t be spring forever either. We move through all of these things.

Is there a thread that goes through your work? It’s that every being has a spiritual life, and in what ways can we acknowledge and deepen that. What I’m essentially trying to do is create church outside of organized religion and treat these texts and stories as teaching stories. To lay out the equality of women and the fluidity of gender in the first century in this visionary sutra challenges materialistic and rigid conceptions of gender. The sutra is so radical and at the same time so entertaining.

Are you using the direct text? For me it’s very important that there is a documentary element. I think it’s no accident that half the films people are looking at these days are documentaries. People have a real hunger for something that can be demonstrated and has a ring of truth, so for me it’s important to be very scrupulous with the text. In the performance we project the text behind the performers—huge on the wall so it has the power of the Lincoln Memorial or something grand carved on it.

What is the process of rehearsing like? I’ve been thinking about this sutra for twenty-five years, and when we started rehearsing this (Chapter a few months ago I didn’t anticipate what would happen. I just knew we needed two extraordinary artists. One of them is Michael and Ganavya, the improvisatory dancers, and the other is the extraordinary Ganavya Doraiswamy who comes out of a South Indian vocal tradition.

Michael and Ganavya are truly exploring the male, their assignment is to work through a sentence until they begin to understand it. That’s a genuine meditation and a shared meditation. They meditate in song and in movement, and gradually a text starts to assume dimensionality. You realize that each of these texts has worlds made out of it. You mentioned the sutras were aimed at people who never went to the monastery. Is that why the central figure, Vimalakirti, is a businessman?

It’s a breakthrough sutra because it says a lay person is as holy and evolved as a buddha or monk, and the life choice to be a monk is not superior. The early chapters of the sutra are about socially engaged prac - tise, as Vimalakirti describes his time with prostitutes, drug dealers, and a whole range of things that are on the no-go list for young monks.

In fact, Vimalakirti is there where anybody needs him. He’s very much in this world and doing the work of Buddhism in the world. That’s a very powerful image. In the first century this kind of radicalism was also occurring in the early period of Christianity. The move- ment is away from the centers of the presumed power of organized religion and into direct street action.

Howard Kaplan is an interviewer and writer who helped found Art in America magazine in 1973. He is currently writer in residence at The Rubin Museum and divides his time between Washington, DC, and New York City.

Peter Sellars is an American theater director noted for his groundbreaking, transformative stagings of classical and contemporary works and plays. He has garnered international recognition for his work when also a professor at UNC-Chapel Hill and as an artist-in-residence at The Rubin Museum. His latest work is The Gospel of Brandon.
And this?
Good. This?
Ocean.
Gyatso.
Gyatso.
What?
Home?
But this isn't the shape of America. Where is—
No. This is Sa shing.
Is America. And this—

GYALPO, 8, sits at a small dinner table in front of a globe. CHOEDEN, 45, stands over him.

CHOEDEN
And this?

GYALPO
No. This is not China. We've been over this. What is this? Tell me. What am I pointing at?

CHOEDEN
To cut your teacher. This is absolutely ridiculous.

GYALPO
Why?

CHOEDEN
Because it's wrong. Under no circumstances are you to be called Chinese. Do you understand?

GYALPO
That's my pencil case. It's OK that I lost it.

CHOEDEN
Because you are a growing boy. You'll need it to become strong and tall and smart in the future.

GYALPO
It's not the same as giving up, you know? It's—

CHOEDEN
Silence.

GYALPO
It's OK, Pa. She said it's OK.

CHOEDEN
What do you mean?

GYALPO
I could be impermanent today, I could—

CHOEDEN
Don't talk nonsense. Come on. If you get up to go to bed quicker, I'll sneak you a Coca-Cola in your lunch bag tomorrow before your mother sees.

GYALPO
Pa does that mean I am also Chinese?

CHOEDEN
No, Pa. Does that mean I am also Chinese?

GYALPO
Pa.

CHOEDEN

GYALPO
Psa?

CHOEDEN
Hold on.

GYALPO
Why does it matter?

CHOEDEN
CHOEDEN puts down the phone. No one calls. The phone rings.

CHOEDEN
De mi-tagpa rey.

GYALPO
De mi-tagpa rey.

CHOEDEN
Can I have a Coca-Cola?

GYALPO
It's OK, Pa. She said it's OK.

CHOEDEN
What else did Miss Gyasto say?

GYALPO
She said it is OK that I lost my pencil case, because de mi-tagpa rey.

CHOEDEN
That's what Miss Gyasto said in Tibetan school today. De mi-tagpa rey.

GYALPO
Where are you going?

CHOEDEN
To cut your teacher. This is absolutely ridiculous.

GYALPO
Why?

CHOEDEN
Because it's wrong. Under no circumstances are you to be called Chinese. Do you understand?

GYALPO
But she says everything is impermanent. She says even our bodies are impermanent. She says when we die, we will leave everything behind, including Tibet. Including you.

CHOEDEN
Including me.

GYALPO
It's OK, Pa. She said it's OK.

CHOEDEN
What?

GYALPO
What else did Miss Gyasto say?

CHOEDEN
She said it is OK that I lost my pencil case, because de mi-tagpa rey.

CHOEDEN
That's what Miss Gyasto said in Tibetan school today. De mi-tagpa rey.

CHOEDEN
What do you know about that?

GYALPO
She said nothing matters. It will all just go away.

CHOEDEN
Who does she think she is? His Holiness the Dalai Lama?

GYALPO
She said His Holiness says this too.

CHOEDEN
This is about geopolitics, Gyalpo. Your teacher does not understand the significance of our country and its survival. You cannot listen to her about this. OK? Trust me. Tibet is not impermanent. Tibet is at risk of being impermanent, so we must make sure we keep it alive, that we keep it safe.

GYALPO
Because it's wrong. Under no circumstances are you to be called Chinese. Do you understand?

CHOEDEN
But she says everything is impermanent. She says even our bodies are impermanent. She says when we die, we will leave everything behind, including Tibet. Including you.

GYALPO
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GYALPO
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CHOEDEN
That's what Miss Gyasto said in Tibetan school today. De mi-tagpa rey.

CHOEDEN
But it's OK. Because the world is impermanent.

GYALPO
Impermanence.

CHOEDEN
Impermanence.

GYALPO
Close enough. All right.

CHOEDEN
closes the book on the table.

GYALPO
He cleans up.

CHOEDEN
Time for bed. It’s late.

GYALPO
I don't want to sleep.

CHOEDEN
Come on, Gyalpo.

GYALPO
Why do I have to?

CHOEDEN
Because you are a growing boy. You'll need it to become strong and tall and smart in the future.

GYALPO
But Pa.

CHOEDEN
Yes?

GYALPO
There might not be a future.

CHOEDEN
There is no future.

GYALPO
She said we should practice saying that.

CHOEDEN
Including me.

GYALPO
It’s OK, Pa. She said it’s OK.

CHOEDEN
What do you mean?

GYALPO
I could be impermanent today, I could—

CHOEDEN
Don't talk nonsense. Come on. If you get up to go to bed quicker, I’ll sneak you a Coca-Cola in your lunch bag tomorrow before your mother sees.

GYALPO
Pa.

CHOEDEN
takes up a cup of Coca-Cola. He reaches for Gyalpo's backpack. He changes his mind. Gyalpo cracks the can open and drinks. He looks out the window, pours the liquid out of the can, and crashes it.

The Ocean View is a one-act play about the impermanence of what is and is not and the young boy's desire to keep something that is familiar.

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Why preserve art when nothing lasts forever?

by Ann Shaftel

I work with the preservation of thangka, in which its traditional form is a picture panel surrounded by a textile mounting. Used as meditation guides, thangka depict religious imagery such as buddhas, bodhisattvas, and mandalas, the elaborate palaces where these figures reside. Traditional thangka are complex and three dimensional; the central picture may be painted, woven, or printed, and its textile surroundings can contain textile, wood, leather, and metal. This centuries-old art form has changed over long periods of geographical and cultural migration, and it continues to change rapidly as contemporary artists no longer have access to traditional materials and incorporate digital technology. The discipline of conservation has also changed with the increased use of sophisticated analytical and digital tools. As a conservator, I endeavor to recover and preserve the original form, while also striving to facilitate its evolution to a virtual form that can be accessed by current and future generations.

To have one foot in original tradition and the other in contemporary science, to feel allegiance to the monastery and the museum, poses a challenge, in part because many conservators—myself included—want to do their work perfectly, especially when working with Buddhist treasures.

I asked Mingyur Rinpoche, an eminent teacher with knowledge of both older traditions and newer cultures, for counsel on finding a balance between the conservation of thangka paintings and their impermanence. He said:

“It is good to preserve thangka, and one should try one’s best to do so. However, results will vary, for sometimes things will turn out well and sometimes they will not. Moreover, in the end all things are indeed impermanent. One simply has to accept reality, even as one does something one hopes will be beneficial.

Some people lean toward eternalism, wanting everything to last forever—it may be that many conservators have this intent in mind. The Artist’s Intent

The Artist’s Intent

Conservators must do their best to understand the intent of artists, whether painters and workshops of the past or contemporary artists. Since 1970 I have researched and documented changes in traditional Buddhist art forms. I have interviewed and learned from master painters who are both respected Buddhist teachers and lineage holders. Such artists—a category that includes several of the Karmapa lamas and the Eighth Khamtrul Rinpoche (1931–1980)—create a specific, unusual kind of thangka. They hope their artworks will survive in order to inspire future generations.

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From Yak Glue to Digital Pixels

Traditional artists used methods and materials that served the unstated goal of ensuring the longevity of their creations. The painting and its textile mounting were meant to survive repeated folding and unrolling, regular travel on the backs of livestock, display in stone monasteries that endured annual monsoon rains, earthquakes, fires, floods, and political change. Over the course of a thangka’s life, the mountings would be replaced when the damaged textile could no longer support the painting. In the face of such vicissitudes, the paintings were intended to embody the iconography of a specific sacred principle as well as hold the spiritual influence and power with which they had been imbued.

Today when traditionally trained artists create commercially popular contemporary Buddhist art, they often address impermanence directly or reflecting in their choice of iconography, methods, and materials. As this innovative, personal style has emerged, I have seen such artists how they wrestle with the impermanence of their work. How do they reconcile the creation of new art with the doctrine of impermanence that lies at the core of the Buddha’s teaching?

Some consciously choose to use nontraditional materials with a relatively short lifespan to convey spiritual, artistic, and political statements. Examples include art installations made of earth, mixed media with digital video, melted PVC plastic, burned paper, and more. Yet one artist said that if he could use paint prepared by traditional apprentices using cooked and filtered yak hide glue and mineral pigments, his paintings would last for hundreds of years. The paint available to him now, he suspects, will crak, peel, and fade in sixty years or less. The impermanence of contemporary creations troubles him deeply.

Some traditionally trained thangka painters and Buddhist devotees now use digital media to make purely “digital thangkas” combined with other materials. Looking even in the life of a treasured thangka.

For Buddhists, impermanence is fundamental, and for all of us change is inevitable, art conservation to protect and preserve the original to whatever degree is possible.

Ann Shaftel

Stabilizing Fragility

In the cultures of origin, sacred artifacts have not been restored to the level of cosmetic perfection that we find today in art dealers’ showrooms. As modern and usually Western restorers travel through the Buddhist diaspora teaching nontraditional methods of cleaning and repainting, something old is happening, something at variance with the deep convictions of the older traditions, something that appears to be an attempt to perfect the surface of a work of art.

In nearly fifty years of work and research in the monasteries of Asia, I have occasionally seen a thangka bearing a patch or brocade replacement, but I have never seen severe “cleaning” or painting over the original. From the advice of Buddhist teachers I have interviewed, and from years of hands-on conservation experience, I have learned that stabilizing fragility in a painting or a textile mounting—rather than invasive, irreversible cosmetic extremes—is in accordance with the wishes of most monastic institutions and museums. Otherwise such objects might be too fragile to be used ceremonially or displayed on museum walls.

For monasteries, museums, and collectors, preventing damage every day with better storage, display, and handling, as well as with risk assessment and disaster planning for the future, are crucial. A clear understanding of custodial impermanence is also essential.

This leaves us to ponder the profound impact of the impermanence that Buddhist tradition takes as its point of departure, particularly in light of the prevalent outlook of our age, which seems to move in both the same and a thousand different directions together.

Let us consider rising sea level, fires, extreme heat, devastating storms. Take your pick of all the terrible things that stem from our addiction to fossil fuels. Virtually all of it is coming to pass as part of the disruption of the planet’s climate, all leading to one harsh reality that will test us like nothing else—the mass migration of people.

It is this fear that motivates people to create walls and push out anyone who does not fit into their idea of what community should or should not be. Sadly we fell into Mad Max-style zombie narratives where dog eats dog and strong overpowers weak. This is a bleak vision, one where food, water, and shelter are scarce and people heard and band together to fight under increasingly severe conditions.

But as a Muslim my tradition provides an annual annual pilgrimage for how to manage oneself in the midst of dramatic migration. Islam has the main pillars: profess one’s faith, pray, fast, support those in need, and, if possible, go on the yearly pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca—the Hajj.

In this case, this is the most important gathering of humans on the planet. It is certainly the largest and most diverse. To understand the human condition you must understand Hajj. Imagine packing four million people into a desert city in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula, all speaking different languages, all eating different foods.

It is this fear that will become far more common in the future. I pray that my participation in these rites and traditions will enable me to be one of the people who reject the Mad Max narrative and instead embrace the narrative of Hajj, where millions of people move in both the same and a thousand different directions together.
Lee Mingwei creates experiences grounded in gift giving, trust, and the element of the unknown. In The Letter Writing Project (1998–present), museum visitors are invited to write a letter to a deceased or absent loved one. They can leave the letter behind unsealed for others to read or include an address for the museum to post their message. Stone Journey (2010) comprises two stones: one is a Neolithic stone and the other a bronze copy. The artist instructs the owner to discard one of the stones to complete the project, calling into question issues of ownership and value. Both works are featured in the Rubin Museum’s exhibition Measure Your Existence, curated by Christine Starkman, which explores duration, memory, and disappearance as markers of the fleeting nature of our lives.

Christine Starkman: When I asked you for an image, I was so happy to receive the photograph of you with your mother. Please walk me through the day when the photograph was taken.
Lee Mingwei: I remember that day very vividly. It was the first day of kindergarten. For the longest time, I did not want to go to school. I wanted to spend time with the dogs and cats and kids around the neighborhood. I also cherished the time spent with my mom. I am very close to my mom. My mother is a very clever person. She spent six months making everything I was going to wear that day. Everything you see in the picture, my mother sewed with her own hands: the hat, little jacket, panty—all she made especially for me for that day.
She told me, “I understand if you don’t want to go to school.” I understood that you will be thinking of me, and I will be thinking of you. I will make the clothing you will wear for your first day of school. When you think of me, I am hugging you. I am next to you. So don’t be afraid, and have fun with your classmates. I am with you.” I remember at the time I didn’t want to go to school and I was afraid and I had a lot of anxiety leaving my mom. On the other hand, I was also very curious about the next stage of my life.

Why did you choose this particular picture when I asked you to select an image related to impermanence, change, disappearance, or loss?
I have many pictures, but this is probably the only one of my mother and myself at a young age. It was a very particular day of my life.

Love and gift giving seem to be sources and inspiration for the way you work. Yes, the gift has many layers. For example, the obvious gift is from mother to child.

Yes. My mother’s thoughtfulness. She had just brought me to school without creating this special moment to remember. But she also made elaborate plans and a situation to encourage me to go to school. It is a very beautiful gift, and I have benefitted from it ever since. My mother gave me a beautiful memory of my first day of school. Having both my parents there and wearing the beautiful outfit made me feel so special.

In your projects the museum visitor is often offered a gift. They participate in the gift giving situation, in a way creating another memory for them to remember. Yes. It is almost intuitive. That is where all my work comes from. This wanting to be generous and kind to another person.

Does the encounter you set up in your work always have a sense of uncontrollability? The work always has an element of challenge and fear. I think with all my work there needs to be tension. The tension makes it a much more complex and interesting project than if it is just a beautiful project. For example, in the work The Moving Garden (2009–present), the museum visitor is invited to select one flower and offer it as a gift to a person they encounter on a detour to their next location. If the work is set up to only look at the garden of flowers, the work fails to engage the visitor’s attention. The work would be so boring. There is absolutely no life and tension to it.

What was the first project the public was invited to share or participate in your work? The first one was Money for Art (1994). I folded ten-dollar bills into an abstract form in a cafe and asked people to take the ten-dollar bills home. I called them every six months and asked them what has transpired. Have they used the money, and if they did what did they use it for?

Does it go back to gift giving? It is a gift exchange. Seemingly, superficially, I am giving them something. By having them accept the gift, then also agreeing for me to call them in six months, they are giving me the gift. Not the same gift, but they are returning with their own version of the gift, which is so beautiful for me.
The Letter Writing Project is an exchange of gifts. I set up a situation, a location, a place, and utensils for you to write different types of letters. If you agree in this exchange, by writing your very intimate personal story, you have given me back something that is so precious.

What element or thread continues through your projects?
I think the most important thread within my practice is the idea of trust between strangers. Without this trust we give to each other, my work might not work as well. The line will be broken. People will not trust my integrity and my gesture. Then the exchanges that people are going to place in this project are going to be probably quite volatile, sometimes quite ugly and violent. The content of the work will change. I don’t like that kind of exchange. I like a very calm and equal and balanced exchange.
The element of the unknown is part of your work. Yes, it is like everywhere in life. We plan our life but there are so many unknown elements around our plan. I prefer to have some plan, but then things happen. When things happen, I prefer to change my plan accordingly.


Christine Starkman, 26, Taichung, Taiwan; lives and works in New York City. Starkman received her master’s degree in Art History, curatorial studies, and international relations from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and her MA in Museum Studies, 2009, from DePaul University. Image courtesy of Mori Art Museum, Tokyo.

Lee Mingwei’s work is in the exhibition Measure Your Existence at the Rubin Museum from February 7 to August 16, 2020. How do you think about impermanence? In your work for example—The Letter Writing Project, Money for Art, Stone Journey—there is this element of loss and memory. I think for me it is more about the idea of impermanence and change rather than loss. Because loss has a slightly negative connotation. But in a way, it is also the beginning of a new experience. For example, if I ask people to discard one of the stones of Stone Journey, most will say, “Okay, I will throw one away and that is the end.” But actually, that is the beginning of something, the beginning of that stone that you threw away. For that stone to now experience something different, and it’s also the beginning of your relationship to something that has disappeared—the disappeared stone.

So perhaps it is experiencing change. Go with and accept the fact, the real fact that everything changes. There is nothing permanent. Accept the idea of change. I think the idea of change is quite permanent, ironically. Everything changes.

Attended a Brainwave talk on February 29 between Lee Mingwei and Dr. Lila Dashti. Visit RubinMuseum.org/Brainwave to learn more.
WE ARE ALL STEADILY HEADING TOWARD DEATH:

TARYN SIMON AND PHOTOGRAPHY

by Christine Starkman
A contemporary artist who uses data, documents, and artefacts to explore the nature of humanity and the ways in which it is structured is Taryn Simon. In 2016, she created an extensive collection of images, whose narrative emerges from graphic fragments, printed text, and artifacts. The uniform blank background; a text panel in scroll-like form; and the “continual looping of the past-in-present.”

Simon photographed living ascendants and descendants of a single person or animal. Each portrait of a particular bloodline is presented via three elements: individual portraits set against a uniform black background; a text panel in scroll-like form; and a “footnote panel” presenting fragments of the narrative as well as adjacent stories. Among others, Simon documented living individuals in India who were declared dead to interrupt the hereditary transfer of land; the bloodline of the body double of Uday Hussein; a bloodline interrupted by the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia; and members of a Druze family from Lebanon who allied to members of past lives. Homi Bhabha describes Simon’s process of tracing through the bloodlines circumstances of lies, fate, disappearance, and repetition as occurring in the “continual looping of the past-in-present.”

A Living Man Declared Dead draws from years of research and a large collection of images, whose narrative emerges from graphic design, systematic organization, and text. The uniform non-place directs the viewer’s background of the “continual looping of the past-in-present.”

The artist spent four years traveling around the world and the cosmos. In

“The Rubein Museum of Art

A FRAMED FAMILY PORTRAIT

Walter Benjamin believed everything in the early pictures was made to last: “The groupings in which the subjects came together and the garment folds in these pictures last longer.” This was made to last: “The groupings in which the subjects came together and the garment folds in these pictures last longer.”

A LIVING MAN DECLARED DEAD

 functions as a living memorial. ThePast’s Threshold: Essays on Photography


4 Benjamin, 18.

5 Bhabha, 7.

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Can technology help us on our spiritual quest, or are we just phoning it in?

light from long ago.

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A recent article in the New York Times described the following number of tech professionals looking to therapists for help, often with the aid of apps. As Neelie Bowles wrote, “Silicon Valley is approaching its anxiety the way it knows best. So now there is on-demand therapy. Therapy metrics. Therapy R.O.I. Meditation on the devices with users using the tools of online dating.”

There are now also a slew of Buddhist apps that help you meditate, relax, breathe, inhale and exhale with meaning and purpose. Some have clever names. Some feel more Buddhist than Buddhist. All are trying to meld ancient wisdom with stressed-out lives in a device we carry around all day. But do they work? In a few hours the next massive arrival from WeCroak. It’s from Stephen Hawking and longer than the first one. It begins, “Remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet...” I like closing out the day with Hawking, contemplating other worlds with the famous theoretical physicist and cosmolo-
gist. And who doesn’t ‘like stars?’ They too reflect the light from long ago.

The Light from Long Ago

Eighteenth-century Indian Buddhist master Padmasam-
bhava was known as the Second Buddha. Credited with bringing Buddhism to Tibet from India, he also is believed to have aided in the construction of Samye, the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery. In addition to his human deeds, his other acts have a layer of magic to them, such as his ability to put out fires by shooting ice from his hands. His teachings were secreted away—some in caves, others in mountains, and some even in the minds of his disciples—and only those with a karmic connection could access them. In a way, his teachings were password protected. This brings me to something he prophesied that sounds like he was a futuristic addressing modern-day technologies: “One day the whole world will appear in a mirror.” What could he have meant by that, and isn’t that how we live today: a mirror, a tablet, a screen, the internet—the whole world in our fingertips?

How We Live Today

In 2018 the Rubin Museum dedicated the year to exploring the theme of the future. For Spinal magazine I interviewed award-winning British artist Shazad Dawood, whose virtual reality work, Kalimpong, was featured in the Museum’s exhibition A Lost Future. The work never heard before. Certain quotes resonate more than others.

Some of my friends have an app that tells them when they’ve been sitting too long and need to get up. Others watch by their daily tracking of ten thousand steps. Others are learning to meditate and breathe deeply. Obviously you don’t have to choose one over the other. Technology or mindfulness. Technology is aiding in our desire to better ourselves as long as we realize it’s only one part of our lives.

Community is important too. Dan Harris, the news anchor and author who launched the meditation app Ten Percent Happier, recently told a Rubin Museum audience, “I think it’s a great idea to move to this engine of distraction, FOMO, dislocation, isolation, atomization and turn it into something that is a force for sanity. But I think there is something really powerful in being with other people without your phone.”

WeCroak’s tagline is “Don’t forget that you’re going to die,” but the real message is that life is short and impermanence is long, so wake up and live. And that is everything.
“Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.”

—The Red Queen in Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There (1871)

A later migration of felids—the cat family—from Eurasia intensified the resource competition among Western dogs and decimating its population. Western dogs faced extinction soon after, but bone-crushing dogs kept running. Competition with a third group of canids, Caninae (the subfamily that includes modern-day cats), and the newly arrived cats continued. Bone-crushing dogs could not keep up with the pace of the resource competition, and ten million years later they became extinct.

Enter the Court Jester

Paleontologist Anthony Barnosky developed the Court Jester hypothesis to counterpoint the Red Queen model. In the Red Queen hypothesis, intrinsic traits pertaining to or originating from inside an organism or cell are the major drivers of biodiversity. According to the Court Jester theory, extrinsic abiotic factors—things related to the physical environment, like climate change, tectonics, or extraterrestrial impacts—play a more important role in shaping the diversity of life. Court Jester hypotheses imply that shifts in the physical environment can change the rules imposed by biotic interactions. Thus an important difference between the Red Queen and Court Jester models of evolution is the timescale in which they seem to happen. Court Jester processes are known to prevail at longer timescales than the Red Queen dynamic, at over one hundred thousand years.

Most of the fossil record captures the timescale in which Court Jester processes operate, and it attests that changes in the richness, composition, and re-arrangement of species over time occurred in relative synchrony with tectonic and climatic processes. We can see, for instance, the role of Earth’s geographic and tectonic history in driving patterns of species diversification in the distinctive terrestrial fauna and flora of South America. This continent remained isolated from other land masses for more than fifty million years, then experienced dramatic ecological changes after the uplift of the Isthmus of Panama, which connected North and South America.

The meteorite impact at the end of the Cretaceous period is a classic example of a Court Jester process. It changed the course of life on our planet, causing dinosaur extinction and the start of the mammal era. Climate change can also influence the geographic range of a species by limiting the type of resources available, increasing or reducing the diversity of environments, or causing a restructuring of the ecosystem when certain species disappear.

Zooming Out

Depending on the timescale we use to view history, the evolution of the diversity of life comes down to interactions among living things (Red Queen) or physical factors (Court Jester). As the fossil record shows, the changes governing the evolution of life can accumulate gradually or appear suddenly, in a process characterized by long periods of stasis followed by rapid intervals of transformation. The survival of a species involves adapting to both new environmental conditions and new interactions with other species.

Regardless of how change happens, impermanence is the rule over all timescales. On a universal and evolutionary scale, change is the only constant. It is how the diversity of life is built and the only way for species to survive.
Early onset Alzheimer’s forces an artist and teacher to distinguish between letting go and giving up

I WAS DIAGNOSED with early onset Alzheimer’s disease almost three years ago at age sixty-two. This is considered early or younger onset, and the disease often moves faster the younger one is. It is the most dreaded disease of all, because not only is it terminal, it is progressive, stealing abilities, language, thoughts, and memories. It steals the ability to function. To do. To sequence physical action. It changes one’s personality; you morph into someone you and your family and friends don’t recognize. It changes all the things that make a person human. The adult becomes like a child, regressing through stages, going backwards through time, in a living with impermanence, and while one is aware of the changes, there is a grieving for a self that is fading into oblivion.

A friend once said, “The past is always disappearing.” We hold onto knowledge of the world through history, but even history gets revised and dissected. On a personal level, we hold onto material possessions. But as time marches on we see we have no control over our material existence. Everything is mutable. Our bodies age and wither. The beautiful white wedding gown in which we danced and took our vows turns yellow, the fibers stiffen and crack.

Early onset Alzheimer’s forces an artist and teacher to distinguish between letting go and giving up

Mindful Connections is a free tour program for people with dementia and their caregivers. Visit RubinMuseum.org/access for more information.

Minna Packer has been a filmmaker, producer, director, teacher, fine artist, and writer. Her film credits include the documentary Back to Gombin (www.backtogombin.com), and she was nominated for a Distinguished Fulbright: Scholars for her work on the film narrative The Lilliput (www.thelilliputmovie.com). Packer received the Nancy Malone Directing Award from New York Women in Film & Television. Her writing and illustrations are featured on her blog, Suddenly Mad: My Voyage through Early Onset Alzheimer’s (www.suddenlymad.com).
Balancing love and loss with meditation

When we lose someone we love, we can actually use our own tenderness, rather than shutting down and losing heart, we can become more open and compassionate. Understanding impermanence can help us feel the preciousness of this life more fully. Impermanence, the insubstantiality of self-existence, and the suffering of conditioned existence form what is known as the three marks of existence. Many have contemplated and commented on this classic Buddhist topic, developing insight and perspective. Combined with mindfulness and awareness meditation practices, contemplation can be surprisingly powerful.

Connecting with impermanence can produce profound insight and a shift in perspective. It can put us in touch with the fragile, poignant quality of our own existence and that of our loved ones and friends. It helps us develop sympathy, serenity, and compassion for them, ourselves, and all beings who are subject to the same terms of existence. In contemplation practices we use our mindful attention to focus on a particular train of thought. This kind of practice can help us explore and understand any topic, developing insight and perspective. Combined with mindfulness and awareness meditation practices, contemplation can be surprisingly powerful.

Let’s take five minutes right now to contemplate impermanence. In the instructions that follow, read the section on how to use the contemplation in your life.

VERSUS 1:
In my life, I’ve searched for deeper meaning,
Traveled far and traveled wide.
In my eyes your memory often lingers,
Precious gifts you gave to me.

VERSE 2:
In this world, while breath still fills my body,
Write these words down, sealed and signed:
Time goes by, faster than a freight train,
Lovers come and lovers go.

VERSE 3:
In My Heart and On My Mind

Words and music by David Nichtern

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David Nichtern is a senior teacher in the lineage of renowned Tibetan Buddhist meditation master Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. He has been co-director of the Osel Institute Meditation Center and the Osel College Meditation Center, as well as director of Buddhist practice and study for the Osel Institute for Mind and Brain Research, and director of the Tibetan Buddhist Cultural Society, Inc. He is the author of Modern Brain and Modern Buddha. (www.davidnichtern.com)
The spiritual and secular afterlives of bodies

BY S. Brent Plate

The Florida-based company Eternal Reefs goes one step further by taking the cremains—cremated remains of an individual’s body and incorporating them into a special concrete mixture. The concrete is formed into ball-like structures that are placed in the ocean to aid in coral reef rebuilding projects. Yet cremation itself has come under fire in the new wave of green burials, since cremation relies on natural gas to burn the body and emit pollutants into the atmosphere. A company called Resomation in Glasgow, Scotland, aims to address these issues. It offers a new form of cremation using a water and ashlike solution to dissolve the body. After the solution dries an ash-like residue is all that remains.

A company in Washington state is skipping the cremation step altogether and going straight to what is known as natural organic reduction, informally known as human composting. Based in Seattle, Recompose works on the basis of recompensation, converting human remains into soil. Founder Katrina Spade is working to launch a vertical burial facility that looks like an industrial tower but functions like a high-tech composting unit. It will move bodies through a series of stages until all that is left of the human is humus.

These emerging practices are all in keeping with current environmental concerns, but they are also about a contemporary, secular vision of the afterlife. They rest on a belief in the ongoing material and energetic nature of life here on Earth, with or without heavens and hells. Green burials have become a way of acknowledging that the environment has a sacred value that is to be treated with care and respect. They allow people to create meaningful rituals and invest in a heritage that lasts beyond one’s own lifetime.

On its website, Eternal Reefs states its practices offer families “a permanent environmental living legacy,” while Recompose chose its company name from a Greek/Latin derivative meaning “rebirth of the human body.” In a CityLab interview about Recompose, Spade said she is interested in environmental issues and the ability to “create usable soil” that turns into “something that you can go grow a tree with and have sort of this ritual around that feels meaningful.” None of this is institutionally religious language, but it’s not far from it.

Caitlin Doughty calls herself a “progressive mortician,” and she is probably doing the most to revolutionize American attitudes toward the dead bodies of our loved ones. In books, TED talks, and blogs, she encourages people not to let the professional death industry take care of the deceased. She describes how families can care for the body themselves, in their own way, on their own terms. Ritual is key in the process of death and grieving according to Doughty. It doesn’t matter what beliefs people hold, but it is important to perform symbolic, meaningful gatherings around the dead body.

Secular environmentalists are not the only ones following the green burial path. The Sisters of Loretto, a group of Catholic nuns in Kentucky, used to donate their bodies to science postmortem. Then they created the six-acre Nature Preserve Cemetery, which allows green burials. Because of the land’s changed legal status, it is now harder for companies to build industrial developments through eminent domain. This is a essential, as a few years ago the Bluegrass Pipeline threatened the Kentucky environment, and the Sisters of Loretto joined with environmentalists to protest the invasive work.

Religious traditions themselves have long had what we would describe today as environmentally friendly funeral practices. In the sky burials of Tibet, bodies are left out to decompose and be fed upon by vultures. The simplicity of Muslim funeral services calls for the dead body to be washed, wrapped in a simple cotton or linen shroud, and buried—without coffins or environmentally damaging embalming fluids. Green headstones—trees, shrubs, or natural stones—can replace granite grave markers.

In 2015, for the first time in the United States, there were more cremations than burial. Part of the reason is cost—it is cheaper to cremate than to embalm and bury—but cremations have also gained in popularity because of environmental concerns.

There are biodegradable coffins available for the deceased, or bodies can be buried vertically, thus saving ground space. The deported can be interned in unused or unmarked graves or in a cemetery where bodies are buried without coffins or environmentally damaging embalming fluids. Green headstones—trees, shrubs, or natural stones—can replace granite grave markers. In 2015, for the first time in the United States, there were more cremations than burial. Part of the reason is cost—it is cheaper to cremate than to embalm and bury—but cremations have also gained in popularity because of environmental concerns.

DEAD BODIES CREATE DILEMMAS. Whether or not you believe in a soul and its afterlife, we all—saints, secularists, and spiritual seekers alike—have to cope with the belief in a soul and its afterlife, we all—saints, secularists, and spiritual seekers alike—have to cope with the...
A Year of Impermanence at the Rubin

Impermanence is the idea that everything changes. It’s a fundamental principal that unites us all. When we accept this reality, we can enjoy the freedom and ease that comes from letting go of expectations and consciously living in the present. Join us as we navigate a shifting world and deepen our connection to the present moment and each other.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM

The Rubin Museum of Art

WHERE CONTEMPORARY MINDS MEET THE ART AND WISDOM OF THE HIMALAYA

The Rubin Museum explores and celebrates the diversity of Himalayan art, ideas, and culture across history and into the present. With its globally renowned collection, the Rubin fosters understanding and appreciation of this extraordinary region by connecting its art and ideas to contemporary issues that are relevant to visitors’ lives today. Largely inspired by the philosophical traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism, the Rubin offers innovative exhibitions and programs that examine provocative ideas across the arts and sciences. In doing so, the Museum serves as a space for reflection and personal transformation, opening windows to inner worlds so visitors can consciously living in the present. Join us as we navigate a shifting world and deepen our connection to the present moment and each other.

MUSEUM HOURS

Monday 11:00 AM–5:00 PM
Tuesday CLOSED
Wednesday CLOSED
Thursday 11:00 AM–10:00 PM
Friday 11:00 AM–5:00 PM
Saturday 11:00 AM–5:00 PM
Sunday 11:00 AM–5:00 PM

EXHIBITIONS

Gateway to Himalayan Art

Start here for an introduction to the rich artistic traditions of the region, illuminating the primary figures, symbols, materials, and techniques presented throughout the Museum.

Masterworks of Himalayan Art

Journey across geography and more than a thousand years of history, tracing artistically and historically significant works from the Rubin’s collection, as well as new acquisitions and gifts.

The Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room

Step into the Shrine Room for a moment of contemplation, beauty, or wonder. An ongoing focal point of the Rubin Museum and a visitor favorite, this immersive installation features art from the collection and is inspired by traditional shrines.

Shahidul Alam: Truth to Power

Through May 4, 2020

This nuanced solo exhibition highlights one of the most influential photographers living in South Asia today. More than forty of Shahidul Alam’s photographs, many never before shown in the United States, illuminate his ongoing commitment to empowered self-representation and political activism in Bangladesh.

Charged with Buddha’s Blessings: Relics from an Ancient Stupa

Through June 8, 2020

This installation tells the remarkable story of the discovery of an ancient stupa site in northern India. It contained five intact reliquaries, one of which had an inscription claiming it included the remains of the Buddha. On display are the offerings of gems and gold-foil ornaments that were ensnared with the reliquaries.

Measure Your Existence

February 7, 2020–August 10, 2020

Featuring contemporary artists Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Shilpa Gupta, Tehching Hsieh, Meiro Koizumi, Lee Mingwei, and Taryn Simon, Measure Your Existence addresses the fleeting nature of existence through installation, film, sculpture, and photography. The artists explore duration, memory, fate, history, loss, disappearance, and reappearance, inviting viewers to reflect on the experience of being and sharing in the essence of our ever-changing world.

Death Is Not the End

September 18, 2020–February 8, 2021

This exhibition explores the idea of the afterlife in Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity by bringing together select loans and objects from the Museum’s collection. Featuring prints, oil paintings, illuminated manuscripts, bone ornaments, thangka paintings, sculptures, ritual items and more, Death Is Not the End invites contemplation on the universal human condition of impermanence and the desire to continue to exist.

Join us on Friday, September 18, from 6:00 to 10:00 PM for the free opening night celebration, featuring drink specials, exhibition tours, and a live DJ and dancing in the K2 Lounge.

Public tours are free with admission and occur daily.

CONNECT WITH US

Explore the collection, peak behind the scenes on our blog, and receive the latest updates on our exhibitions and programs!

• Visit us online at RubinMuseum.org
• Join our email list at RubinMuseum.org/enews
• Listen to our Mindfulness Meditation podcast
• Follow us on social media @RubinMuseum

ENGAGEWITHCHANGE

• Download The Rubin app for free to access our audio guides about artworks in the galleries

VISIT

The Rubin Museum of Art | 150 West 17th Street | New York, NY

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As a space for mindful cultural exchange, the Rubin is driven by the desire to challenge, surprise, and provoke. We want to bring you into the fold to expand the limits of what an art museum can be.

The Rubin presents onstage conversations, workshops, experiences, and other innovative public events to expand on the themes in the galleries.

**TALKS**

**Brainwave**

**January-April 2020**

Our longest running series is all about understanding the mind and what makes us who we are. This talk series brings together neuroscientists and notable personalities for engaging conversations with related films and workshops. This year Brainwave focuses on how the plasticity of the brain has shaped us as a human race and how it could reshape our future.

**Tibetan Book of the Dead Club**

**October 5-November 9, 2020**

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is a seminal guide to the afterlife. Every Monday evening for six weeks, a leading bardo scholar and a specialist from a different field will explore a passage that addresses the navigation of death and our future experiences of impermanence.

**Brainwave Talks**

**Tibetan Book of the Dead**

**Sanskrit**

**October 28, 2020**

Join us for an evening of exploring the varied traditions of Indian music, from timeless raga to contemporary fusion.

**ONE-OF-A-KIND EXPERIENCES**

**The Rubin Fete**

Join us for an evening of surprising Rubin Museum-wide experiences, flavors, music, and ideas that will inspire you to see the world in a new way. The Rubin Fete features a range of free programs, including a meditation, tour, and intimate workshops.

**COMMUNITY**

**Senior Day**

**First Thursday of the month**

Seniors (85 and older) receive free admission to the galleries. The day features a range of free programs, including a meditation, tour, and writing workshop.

**Family Sundays**

**Sundays, 1:00–4:00 PM**

The Rubin welcomes visitors of all ages! Families can drop in to the Museum’s theater for casual art making and free family-friendly activities. Designed for children ages three and up with accompanying adults, the art activities change monthly and connect with the art and ideas of the Himalaya.

**Losar Family Day**

**February 16, 2020, 12:00–4:00 PM**

Kicking off the year of the Metal Mouse with your family and friends! Celebrate Losar, the Himalayan New Year, with an afternoon of art. Learn about traditional Losar celebrations, explore the galleries, get lost in a maze of auspicious symbols, make your own Metal Mouse, construct torma butter sculptures, and more.

**Summer Block Party**

Every year, the Museum closes off 17th Street for a community Block Party for kids and adults alike. Thousands of New Yorkers come for art, food, and activities inspired by the collection and the Himalaya region.

**MUSIC**

**Rhythms of India**

Performers explore the varied traditions of Indian music, from timeless raga to contemporary fusion.

**Dream-Over: A Sleeperow for Adults**

Dream under the compassionate, watchful gaze of a hundred buddhas. Come in your slippers and pajamas and sleep over at the Rubin Museum beneath a traditional or contemporary artwork handpicked just for you.

**Impermanence Playlist**

Inspired by this year’s theme, listen to songs selected by Rubin staff at TheRubin.org/playlist.

**Windows on Impermanence**

See a special display in the Rubin Museum window front.

**BREATHE: CONNECT MIND & BODY**

**Mindfulness Meditation**

**Mondays, 1:00 PM**

Free for members

Beginners, dabblers, and skilled meditators join expert teachers weekly to practice the art of attention. Each session is inspired by a different work of art from the Rubin Museum’s collection. A free podcast of each program is also available online.

**Awakening Practice**

**Select Saturdays, 11:30 AM**

Contemplative practice has its roots in the living traditions of the Himalaya. In the Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room, enjoy a morning mindfulness session, which explores the connections between Himalayan culture, art, and practice.

**CAFE SERAI**

**Enjoy the aromas and flavors of the Himalaya at Café Serai,** an inviting spot for your next meal. The café is open to anyone during Museum hours and does not require an admission ticket.

**THE SHOP**

Take a memory of the Museum home with you, or give a gift from the Rubin! The shop’s selection of jewelry, gifts, books, and other treasures features an array of unique items, many unavailable anywhere else. All proceeds from the shop support the Rubin Museum of Art, and items can be purchased in store or online at RubinMuseum.org. Members receive a 10% discount on all purchases.

**SPACE RENTALS AND CORPORATE RETREATS**

If you’re planning an event or need to make a professional conference more inspiring, consider the Rubin for corporate entertaining and private rentals. It’s a memorable place for guests, and we make it easy to plan—with a range of wellness experiences, educational tours, and catering menus available.

**Café Serai**

**October 14, 2020**

Join friends in the café and shop, or make the Rubin the lively venue for your next private event.

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**You Make It Possible**

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**Make a donation**

Your support helps make art and timeless wisdom come alive for thousands of people each year, bringing inspiration and meaning into our visitors’ lives.

**Thank you to our distribution partners!**

Organizations in New York City and beyond help make Spinl possible. Find the full list of our partners and distribution locations at RubinMuseum.org/Spinl.

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A YEARLONG EXPLORATION
AND A MAGAZINE TO GUIDE YOU

Impermanence is the idea that everything changes. It's a fundamental principal that unites us all. When we accept this reality, we can enjoy the freedom and ease that comes from letting go of expectations and consciously living in the present. Join us as we navigate a shifting world and deepen our connection to the present moment and each other.

#ENGAGEWITHCHANGE

RubinMuseum.org
Visit RubinMuseum.org/news to stay up to date with exhibitions and more.