

## BEING MORTAL RETREAT — Essays, Week I

*Pir Elias Amidon © Sufi Way*

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### *Impermanence and Love*

A little child runs across the lawn into her mother's waiting arms. The mother cuddles the child and makes cooing sounds, and then the little one slips off her lap and races around the yard again, tumbling and showing off.

That was many years ago. Now the child no longer exists; a grown-up person has taken her place. The mother is no longer waiting with her arms open. She, too, no longer exists.

This is the hard truth of impermanence, and it's how we usually think of that word — the endings it forces on us, the goodbyes, the losses and poignancy of *never again*.

The old Buddhists tell us the nature of impermanence is ultimately unsatisfactory. I imagine that's doubly true if you believe we've had countless lives before this one, all of them marked by the losses we've endured. We come here, we get attached to these beautiful bodies, to our loved ones, to the places and activities we love, and then they change and disappear. Impermanence tears at our attachments and makes *dukha*, suffering — this is the reason they say impermanence is “unsatisfactory.”

Of course, impermanence doesn't only work at the level of human attachment and suffering. If we look closely at the fine-grain of our experience, we can see impermanence acting in every instant and in every place. Each moment yields to the next and never returns. The events we are experiencing right now — physical, thoughtful, emotional — have already changed. You breathe. Your attention moves. Your body shifts. Appearances arise and vanish. Nothing stays the same.

We might think that “I” stay the same through all this change — but what is this “I” that stays the same? When I look closely at the evidence of the moment, at the point-instant of transience, what kind of “I” is really there?

Looking directly at impermanence like this is not easy. But when we can manage it, when we can look clearly at the transient nature of our experience, that recognition naturally floods back

into us and erases our sense of being something *outside* of transience, something substantial and separate. As an early Buddhist scripture reports the Buddha saying:

*In one who perceives impermanence, the perception of nonself becomes firmly established; and one who perceives nonself achieves the elimination of the conceit "I am" and attains nirvana in this very life.*

And in the words of the Koran: "*Everything is perishing except God's Face.*"

*God's Face, nirvana* — what are these scriptures pointing to? By perceiving the continuous flow of impermanence (the perishing), the conceit of our isolated selfness is washed away. But we don't vanish, just as the universe doesn't vanish because of the impermanent nature of each moment. What's holding everything together? What *isn't* perishing?

This is where the deeper secret of impermanence is revealed. As we come face-to-face with the fact that everything is perishing, that our lives and all appearances are thoroughly ephemeral, the realization of what's called "nonself," or "emptiness," or "openness" is born. In that realization we sense, beyond our senses, something that resists all description, something that we might variously call *God's Face*, or *nirvana*, or *holy intimacy*, or simply, *love*.

Whatever we call it, *this-that-does-not-perish* is what connects us with everything — each other, the trees, the mountains, the sky, the stars, and all beings who have ever appeared. We remain the unique beings we are, but we recognize we're not alone in our beingness, we are *with* the entirety.

I think of this "with-ness" as *love* — love that's both complete in itself and endlessly creative, a *holy intimacy* that is cosmic, inconceivable, awesome, and at the same time ordinary, everyday, and particular. It's the primordial generosity and ecstasy of light flooding the universe, and it's the energy of the little child running to her mother.

Of course, impermanence is painful for us too — there's no way we can escape loss and grief since everything we have ever been given in this life we will lose. But our grief too is love, it's the form love takes when great loss comes to us, the cry of *with-ness* as it breaks free from particular love into universal love.

Knowing this doesn't avoid the sorrow that impermanence visits upon us, but it embraces it in a larger order. People, things, and experiences come and go, but the truth of our connectedness is the reality that doesn't.

## ***The Joy of Pausing***

The American clown, Wavy Gravy, once famously said, “I come from the land of one thing after another.” And so do we all! From getting out of bed in the morning to lying down tired at night, each routine and little task is followed by the next. Even when we take a break, those moments are quickly filled with distractions — chatting, thinking, reading, or watching a screen. One thing after another.

We can’t avoid this — it’s how the melody of life is played. This moment flows into the next, the current never stops. The problem for us comes when we feel pressured by the sense that too many things are demanding to be done next. That pressure is amplified when we worry about negative events we imagine could happen in the future. Then we feel compressed and tense, as if there isn’t enough room for us in our own life. We lose our quiet center; we lose the sense that we are present and whole.

In my own life I’ve found that *pausing* helps when I lose my quiet center. By “pausing” I don’t mean simply stopping what I’m doing and sitting quietly somewhere, although that’s always a good tonic. Pausing, as I experience it, can be done right in the middle of the river, and it can be as brief as a single breath. The length of a pause is not as important as its depth.

There are many styles of pausing — here are a few that work for me:

***Pausing self-talk:*** Much of the pressure we feel in our life comes from the dominance of our mind stream, our self-talk. It’s important to notice that self-talk has two partners: the one who’s talking and the one who’s listening. We explain things to ourselves as if there were two of us. To create a pause in the middle of self-talk, simply say to yourself, “Stop talking for ten seconds.” You might be amazed to find how well it works! It may not last very long, but ten seconds is quite possible. In that pause, relax, take a breath, do nothing.

***Pausing opinions:*** Opinions are points of view. They’re less noticeable than self-talk since they supply the background flavors to our mind stream. Often we don’t even code that we are pressured by our opinions; we simply assume they’re the truth of what’s happening. One way to notice our points of view is to recognize we’re making judgments: “I have no time for myself;” “Nobody else is helping;” “It’s always like this;” “My life is a mess.” Once you spot that you’re making a judgment, invite yourself to pause for a moment from its conclusion, from its certainty about being true. You don’t have to argue with yourself about it, just allow for ten or fifteen seconds that it might not be true. In that pause, relax.

***Pausing before you snap back:*** When we feel pressured by events, or people’s demands on us, or when we feel misunderstood, it’s easy to get irritable. Notice how irritability feels in your

body, and when you feel that rise, pause before you say a word that will hurt, since it's like an arrow you can't call back.

***Pausing when you wake:*** Pausing for a minute when you first open your eyes in the morning is a good and easy habit to cultivate. It's an intimate moment before anything is asked of you, a good time to feel thankful for your life, and to bless everyone and everything you can think of.

***Pausing by asking:*** A humble question creates a pause. What's happening now? What am I doing? What am I feeling? The question doesn't presume an answer. It even lifts up its voice at the end — what's happening now? — and the mind sails off without a clue. There, for a moment, the mind is suspended in a healing pause.

***Pausing in your heart.*** Typically we experience the center of our awareness as residing in our head, behind our eyes. For a minute or two, allow your awareness to drop down to the middle of your chest, to your heart center. Your heart is a wordless place, but it is caring and warm. Rest there. It may help to briefly recall images of people or aspects of life you care deeply about. Let yourself care from your heart and be grateful for what makes your life worth living.

***Pausing in Nature's presence:*** We spend most of our time immersed in the culture and built environment of the human world, and feel we have little contact with free nature. Pausing in Nature's presence can remind us of our first belonging. Look at the sky; breathe in its spaciousness. Sit with your back against a tree and sense the life of its roots below and its branches above. Watch water flowing. Give yourself small moments where you feel how your animal nature is undivided from the living world. Pause there.

***Pausing in timeless awareness:*** The Indian sage Nisargadatta once advised a student who asked for guidance, "Go back! Go back!" Go back to the place where you begin, right now, the place of spacious awareness that hosts all the phenomena you experience. It is a simple move, although nothing really moves. Just open up to the clearing you already are and pause there for a moment or two. When you do that your whole life is refreshed.

## ***The Welcoming Practice***

*The Welcoming Practice* is a fusion of guidance from several mystical traditions: Christianity, Sufism, Zen, Advaita, and Dzogchen in particular. It has its most direct antecedents in the Christian *Centering Prayer* practice as developed by a number of Catholic mystics (Merton, Keating, Menninger, Pennington, Bourgeault, and others) inspired by the 14<sup>th</sup> Century text *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the practices of earlier desert ascetics. However, this *Welcoming Practice* is a distinct variation drawing from the praxis of several traditions, which is one reason I've started calling it *the Welcoming Practice* — it welcomes these various forms of guidance that are united in their devotion to the same mystery.

*The Welcoming Practice* has three aspects which I call: *Bow Inside*; *Consent to Silence*; and *Welcome Love*. Though I'll describe them here in sequence, you may find that when you engage in this practice these three aspects mingle and occur within and through each other, and are not as separate as they might sound in this description.

### ***Bow Inside***

It can happen that when you sit down to begin your meditation practice, a subtle pride sits down with you: *See, now I'm a meditator, now I'm doing my practice. I'm a proper Sufi (or Buddhist or Christian)*. This subtle pride, which may be hard to spot, is a veil of identity that can obstruct one's simple presence. When you sit down with your identity as an adherent of a particular tradition, you can't help but see through its lens. To "bow inside" means to relinquish that identity as best you can, to give everything away that you think you know or have. As an early Sufi advised, "*Put your forehead on the prayer mat and don't presume.*"

The "move" of *bowing inside* isn't a physical movement, although it can have a kinaesthetic feel to it. Like a physical bow, this bow is a move toward self-effacement and unpretentiousness, a giving-over of one's insularity: "*Take me away from myself!*" as Ibn Arabi cries in his beautiful prayer. To *bow inside* means to offer yourself in all humility, in your simple presence, during the sacred moments of this practice. Just your clear presence, nothing more.

In her wonderful descriptions of Centering Prayer, Cynthia Bourgeault points to a single line in *The Cloud of Unknowing* that suggests the essence of what I mean by *bowing inside*: it is to have, as the anonymous author of *The Cloud* writes: "*Naked intent direct to God.*" It is this "nakeding" that is the interior bow, an unclenching of your personhood to its simplicity and readiness, for in this practice you are inviting "God" to be with you, to open yourself to the unspeakable mystery of the numinous. To welcome its presence you cannot come adorned with self-identity; you have to come naked. Here you may wish to replace the word "God" with some other signifier that means the same thing — *Naked intent direct to Pure Awareness*, or *Naked intent direct to Buddha Nature*, or *Naked intent direct to Silence*.

### ***Consent to Silence***

“Consent to silence” is Father Thomas Keating’s concise instruction for this process of “nakeding.” To consent is to allow, to open to the openness that is silent, that is the background of every moment of our lives. One way to *consent* in this way is to recognize that our very capacity to listen is silent. Whatever listening is, it is silent. This is why the Advaita nondual teacher Jean Klein advises, “*Listen to listening.*” We recognize that pure awareness itself is silence. God is silence. Or in Father Keating’s words, “Silence is God’s first language.”

Now to the degree you have managed to *bow inside* and to *consent to silence*, you will soon experience distractions, mostly in the form of thoughts, or perhaps images, emotive currents or bodily sensations that draw your interested attention toward them. This is not a failure. In a way, it’s the heart of this practice, for each thought or sensation that attracts your attention gives you a chance to let it go, to *relax the tension* that your attention fixes upon it. That relaxing is the key. It will present itself as an opportunity again and again. Each time you notice you’ve attached your attention to some property that appears, relax. Consent to silence. As Zen master Dainin Katagiri points out, “... just put aside all kinds of imagination fabricated by your consciousness. Don’t attach to thoughts and emotions; just let them return to emptiness.”

Let the silence swallow them up. Consenting to silence means letting whatever has captured your attention return to emptiness. You don’t have to do anything to make this happen. As it is pointed out in Dzogchen texts: “*All thoughts are self-liberated.*” They vanish by themselves as soon as you relax your interest in them. This is why Sufi Inayat Khan called meditation *mystical relaxation*.

### ***Welcome Love***

At first I hesitated to use the word “love” to describe this aspect of the practice, since love is a word that so easily can seem sentimental or denote personal affection. In saying that, I don’t mean to disparage sentiment or affection — praise them! They are human resonances of the “divine” love that gives us this moment that blossoms everywhere as everything. To *welcome love* in the context of this practice means to welcome in our hearts a glimpse of this divine love — though again, to use the word “divine” may be just as perilous as using the word “love,” for it seems to imply a divinity or entity from which love is dispensed, and then we are caught in thinking dualistically about what is in essence not dualistic. *Divine love is the radiance of Being*, not something that issues forth from a God that is made into something separate in our minds.

But how can we welcome this vast, unspeakable love? Happily, it emerges by itself and welcomes us to the degree that we have consented to silence, which means we can’t make it happen through our insistence. And yet, “we can put ourselves in the way of it,” as Ibn Arabi

tells us. Here we can take to heart an instruction from Plotinus, speaking of the same unspeakable love:

*Let those who are unfamiliar with this state imagine, on the basis of their loves here down below, what it must be like to encounter the being they love most of all.*

“Imagine what it must be like...” — that’s where we can start, in the imagination of the heart, not the mind. By grace such imagination breaks us loose from conceptions of love, and then divine love like an awesome wind takes over. Here we can no longer talk in prose — Sufis are especially enamoured of this kind of love poetry, and the 11<sup>th</sup> Century Persian Sufi, Abdullah Ansari, in his *Book of Love*, goes so far as to say Sufism is simply another word for love:

*Love is the mark of the Tribe, the title of the Tariqah (Way)... It has three degrees:*

*The first degree is a love that cuts off disquieting thoughts, makes service enjoyable, and offers solace in afflictions...*

*The second degree is a love that incites preferring the Real to all else, elicits remembrance on the tongue, and attaches the heart to witnessing it...*

*The third degree is a dazzling love that cuts off expressing, makes allusions subtle, and does not reach description. This love is the pivot of this business...*

I quote these love words to remind us that in this *Welcoming Practice* what we are inviting ourselves to be in the presence of is so awesome, sacred, and of a radiant, loving mystery so unknowable that we can only *bow inside*. To me, this practice has the capacity to take us beyond the quiet composure of recognizing nondual awareness — it passes through that doorway, yes — and then reveals to us a loving sacredness that is at the same time infinitely awesome and purely intimate.