

Place, Property, Person

In the Lankavatara Sutra, place, property, and person are broad categories pertaining to the world of form. From a Buddhist perspective, all three have no absolute reality and are therefore empty and impermanent.

Place

Although mountains seem to belong to the country, they really belong to those who love them.
—Dogen

Marking the entrance to the Waitemata Harbour, the volcanic island of Rangitoto rises gently out of the ocean like an elongated upper lip as it serenely contemplates the ever-changing skyline of Auckland City. Now dormant, Rangitoto is the youngest of Auckland's volcanic cones, having erupted about 500 years ago. In the 1920's and 30's the New Zealand government allowed working-class families to build holiday dwellings – called “baches” (like “bachelor” in pronunciation) – along the shoreline. Without electricity and constructed from the most rudimentary of building materials, these small cottages nestled themselves into a series of bays, their foundations set in fields of lava and their roofs shaded by the greenery of pohutukawa trees.

Whenever I'm back in Auckland, as a sort of pilgrimage, I take the 45-minute ferry trip to Rangitoto and revisit these baches, which are an engaging reminder of a simpler and less sophisticated way of life, a way of life that, for most New Zealanders, is now only a dim memory.

During the week the baches are usually unoccupied, and I am drawn into their domain, perhaps looking through an uncurtained window, a window whose ledge displays a line of shells, or branches of coral, or pieces of driftwood . . . Further down the path, the light falls across a padded armchair and a writing desk on which there rest a pair of glasses and a bottle of ink . . . In another bach a calendar of tides has been pinned to the wall, next to a painting of a steamboat. In fact, apart from several empty wine bottles, everything in the room retains some connection with the sea: a sou'wester hanging from a nail, a storm lantern, a coil of rope . . . In one back garden a wooden safe is suspended from the branch of a tree. Opening its door, I find that the cool air has preserved the husks of several wasps. An old wheel, painted red, lies among the ferns below, recalling the days when families kept a cart for carrying provisions back from the kiosk. The kiosk itself, which stood near the wharf, was pulled down long ago.

And the effects of impermanence continue to be felt. In 1957 the Department of Conservation decided that each bach would be demolished upon the death of its original owner, and that the lease of the site would then be annulled. In unsentimental fashion, kerosene is typically poured around the foundations, the timber is set alight, and a unique structure disappears into a mass of flames. Of the original 120 baches only 37 now remain.

Visiting the island to re-experience a vivid period of our local history, a time unaltered by urban development, I am also reminded that all things are passing. New gaps – bare patches of ground – appear where once there had been familiar dwellings. The Department of Conservation aims to restore Rangitoto to its “natural state,” which is commendable. And each year the island does become a little greener. But something important is also being lost; those who love this place love it not only for its silence, its black scoria, its trees – they love Rangitoto for its human aspect, the collection of hum-

ble cottages that blends in so well with the natural environment. Although nothing is permanent, in our relative world perhaps we need to take special care in deciding what is worthy to be retained. In this regard, Sokei-an, a Zen teacher, relates the following story:

Once there was a monk who lived in a hut on top of a mountain. He had gathered weeds for soft pillows and bamboo for the walls. A layman who happened to visit him one day asked, 'Can you return this mountain to its original state?' The monk replied, 'Can you?' The layman said, 'Yes. If I were to destroy the hut, the mountain would return to its original state.' The monk laughed and said, 'This is the original state of the mountain. Everything that is this hut came from the mountain. I added nothing. So I needn't destroy the hut. Without tearing this hut down, it is the original state of the mountain.'

Property

*But because truly being here is so much; because
apparently needs us, this teeming world, which
keeps calling to us. Us, the most teeming of all . . .*

*everything here
in some strange way*

—Rilke

Certain objects, over time, come to have significance for us. Their commercial value may be negligible, but we keep them in our possession because they connect us with the past, or with a particular person.

I have a framed print of a painting by the Victorian artist Alma Tadema. Not a great work of art, but the painting belonged to my two great aunts, and whenever I look at it I am reminded of them, their eccentricities, and a world that has vanished. In a similar way, I also have four or five mother-of-pearl shells in storage. They were among the few things that my grandfather brought back from Western Australia, where he spent the Depression prospecting for minerals. As a child I often slept at my grandparents' house and became intrigued by the shells, which were arranged along their mantelpiece. At night, by the light of a fire, they would emit a whitish glow, appearing like luminous skulls, lathered and polished by the sea.

It is a paradox that objects acquired for our personal enjoyment often outlast us. Some, already old, will go ahead in time and remain in the world after we have faded away. This may account for the fascination people have with antiques, or for the importance placed on heirlooms.

As far as Buddhism goes, if objects do remind us of our impermanence, then they can be said to be expounding the Dharma. And as form is emptiness, just as emptiness is form, objects themselves are manifestations of our True Nature. When we sweep the floor, or smooth out mats in the zendo, or polish a banister, we are not simply putting things in order; we are giving our full attention to a particular thing and, in some small way, allowing the intrinsic Buddhahood of that thing to shine forth.

The beauty of haiku poetry resides in the attention it pays to the ordinary and often neglected things around us. R.H. Blyth, one of the great commentators on haiku, has this to say about the relationships we form with everyday objects:

We remember things, and they remember us. We wait for the lowers, they await our coming. In other words, things are not merely passive; it is not simply that I sit on the chair, and the chair is sat on by me, but the chair supports me, and I am supported by the chair. There is something active in things that goes beyond the difference of animate and inanimate.

Person

*Touching one another
each becomes
a pebble of the world*

—Soen Nakagawa

On his travels, Soen Nakagawa Roshi liked to pick up pebbles from the different countries he visited and place them in a bag. Swinging the bag around, he would listen to the sound they made.

Dependent co-arising lies at the heart of the Buddha's teaching. By contemplating ourselves in the world, we come to the realization that we are intimately connected with everything around us; we realize that nothing exists in isolation but is dependent upon everything else. For better or for worse, we're all in the same boat (or in the same bag). The Buddha summed up this teaching with a well-known analogy:

Friends, let us say that we have two bundles of reeds. When these two bundles of reeds lean on each other, they can stand up. In the same way, when there is this there is that. However, if one of these two bundles of reeds is taken away, the other bundle will fall to the ground. In the same way, if that is not, then this is not. If this is not, then that is not.

The Dharma of dependent co-arising works with, and can help to balance, the Dharma of impermanence. Yes, it is true that all our relationships will come to an end. We will become separated from our partners, perhaps through divorce, definitely through death. Children will eventually lose their parents, while parents will watch their children grow up and leave home. In time our bodies will break down. We will lose our health, our property, our possessions. Yes, due to impermanence, that beloved person or place or thing will be taken away . . .

But if we put our foot down too hard on the impermanence pedal we can end up in a rather cold and desolate landscape. This is where dependent co-arising comes in and infuses the teaching of impermanence, giving it heart. Not only will everything pass away, but everything *at this very moment* is also sustaining and supporting us.

The vast majority of us have not chosen a monastic path, and we need not forsake those we love – severing all attachments – to realize our True Nature. How could we? The love that we feel towards others and towards the world *is* an expression of our True Nature.

Two years ago my father died suddenly in New Zealand. I was fortunate to have someone who was both a parent and a good friend, and his death gave me a profound experience of impermanence. At the same time, however, with many people coming up after the funeral and telling me how he had touched their lives, there was also a profound experience of a human network, of our fundamental interconnectedness.

Each person is important – that one who has passed away, that one whom we love, or have difficulty with, or even wish to avoid. Each person, consciously or unconsciously, is striving to fulfill his or her potential. In the clearest light, we are simply here as human beings, and our humanity expresses itself through our relationship with people, and places, and the myriad things.

—Richard von Sturmer

Richard continues to co-edit *Zen Bow*. A recent work of his, the "Blue Cliff Verses," is live on the World Wide Web at *Mudlark* (<http://www.unf.edu/mudlark>).