

“Nothing is Constant Except for Change”

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There’s a story in the Buddhist tradition that tells of Kisa Gautami, a young woman who came from a wealthy family and was married to an important merchant in her village. She wanted for nothing. So, when her only son took ill and died suddenly at the age of one, she was heartbroken, perhaps truly suffering for the first time in her life. She refused to accept the death of her son, hoping against hope that there was some way to bring him back still, and clutching to the hope that there was some way to avoid this massive change in her life.

So, weeping and groaning, she gathered her son’s body in her arms and went house to house throughout the village, asking every person she met if they knew of a way to bring her son back. Each place she went, they told Kisa the same thing: they knew of no way to bring the dead back to life. She was persistent, though, and continued her search.

Finally, Kisa came upon a Buddhist, who suggested she take her son and see the Buddha himself.

She took the person’s advice, and was soon at the Buddha’s door, still clutching her dead son’s body. The Buddha listened with patience and compassion as she told him her story, leaving out no detail. Finally, when she finished, the Buddha told her there was a solution to her problem.

"Kisa Gautami," he said at last, "there is only one way to solve your problem. Go and find me four or five mustard seeds from any family in which there has never been a death."

Kisa was suddenly filled with hope, and started revisiting the households of the village at once, desperately seeking for a house death had not touched. She was surprised, though, to find that, at every home she visited, death had preceded her in one form or another. Every house had lost someone. For some, it was a parent. Others a child. Maybe a sibling, or an extended family member. Some probably lost a friend or neighbor as well. No, no matter how many people Kisa visited, she could not find any place that death had not touched.

She suddenly realized what the Buddha had wanted her to find out for herself: that suffering is a part of life, and death comes to us all. Once Kisa was able to accept this, she was able to stop grieving. She took her son's body, buried the little boy. Through this realization, she was awakened, and returned to the Buddha to become one of his followers.

I wonder what it was like to be one of those neighbors. I imagine it was quite a sight, this groaning woman who has everything in the world she could possibly want except for one thing, moving through the streets, seeking answers for why she had to suffer so. I wonder what the neighbors thought of this woman who had never experienced death but was suddenly confronted with its reality. I wonder if they were as patient as the Buddha as she begged them for answers, knowing the inevitability but not really telling her that until she returned on her quest.

So many people, when they read this passage, have focused on the prevalence of suffering within. Indeed, it is a prime example of how Buddhism views suffering, or *dukkha*, in their tradition. Suffering is important in the Buddhist tradition, being one of the three marks of existence, which underlie everything. I think, though, that if we merely look at *dukkha* within the text, we miss a deeper truth to be found, namely, what leads to suffering in the first place?

A deeper look shows that Kisa was suffering because things were changing all around her. She was comfortable in her previous life, being a member of the upper social class, being

married to an important man, and now having a son whom she no doubt loved and cared for, perhaps more so than any other person who had ever been in her life. Yes, things were going well for Kisa, and she no doubt thought they would go on that way for ever. She might have even taken the things she loved for granted as so many of us often do, not really seeing their importance to her until it was too late.

To quote Canadian singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell, “Don't it always seem to go/That you don't know what you've got til its gone.”

This is such a universal human experience. We, as a species, really hate change, and we will fight against it tooth and nail. Like Kisa, we all, at one time or another, go on our quest to seek a way to prevent change from happening. We get into a normal and want things to stay as close to that norm as possible.

Don't believe me? Let someone come into your home, rearrange all your furniture, and throw out things they deem to be non-essential. If you don't feel a bit of violation, you're a better person than I am. I would be upset, to say the least.

And here's the interesting thing: this doesn't only apply to change we deem negative. No, people fight just as hard against positive change as they do negative. Coca-Cola found this out the hard way in 1985 when they launched a new recipe of their classic drink, the first time in a century that the winning formula had been tampered with. In blind taste tests, the company had found that cola drinkers preferred the sweeter taste of rival Pepsi and, given the company had lost a significant amount of market share, they were ready to experiment with a new, sweeter formula, which has since been dubbed “New Coke.”

Although New Coke initially did well, testing well in focus groups and in its initial launch in the Washington, DC area, a large number of people were dissatisfied. They didn't like

the fact they felt like Coca-Cola was forcing this change on them, and they were not shy to give their opinion. In the aftermath of the change, the company received over 40,000 calls and letters. A psychiatrist who was hired by Coca-Cola to listen in on calls even told executives that some people sounded like they were discussing the death of a family member.

The company reversed course and reintroduced the old formula, to nearly universal thanks. “You would have thought we cured cancer,” one executive later commented. The reintroduction of the classic formula restored Coca-Cola to the good graces of the public and still serves today as a cautionary tale in business classes about the hazards of changing a well-accepted and loved product. Some have even suggested that New Coke might have been a success had it been introduced as a new product rather than an update to the soft drink that thousands have known and loved for over a hundred years.

Yes, change is tricky, to say the least.

What Coca-Cola discovered is that human nature is to want things to be the same. Systems theory suggests that, when something changes within a system, like a death or a new soft drink formula, other parts of the system will compensate to try to minimize or even prevent the change. This happens in just about every system, from families, where one member takes on the dysfunctional or functional role of another who is no longer able to fulfill their place in the system; workplaces, when a mob may try to eliminate a newcomer who introduces too much change; the government, when the competing “big two” political parties balance each other out to essentially prevent any radical change from occurring; and, yes, even churches, synagogues, and mosques, when a member or staff are quarantined by the system to prevent them from making too many changes, positive or negative.

Sometimes these changes have to do with theology, others to do with programing, decoration, or some other tradition. The key factor is that they are a change and almost certain to receive backlash of some sort, even if they are in the best interest of the congregation. I can't tell you how many times I have heard stories of churches who successfully grew, both in budget and in numbers, but dismissed the responsible leader or leaders because their growth caused too much change to the system.

There's some truth to the old saying, "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

I think fear has a lot to do with this reaction. We fear that the new normal after the change will not bring us the happiness and contentment we once had. We're scared that, even though grief, sadness, and anger are normal reactions, that we'll never be able to move past them. We wonder whether things will ever be the same again, and it frightens us to no end when we realize that, no, they probably won't. So, this anxiety within us builds us, and leads us to fight against change

But the correction to this that the Buddhist story of Kisa Gautami offers is that nothing is permanent. In fact, this is one of the other of Buddhism's marks of existence: *anicca*, the idea that nothing is permanent, that the universe is always in constant flux and change, and that the way things are now is not the way they will always be. In fact, we can expect that change will always be happening. It is happening right now, even in this room, as cells within your body are constantly dying and being reborn. In some ways, the person you are now is not the person you will be five minutes from now.

Of course, these changes aren't always visible to us until something catastrophic happens, such as the death of a loved one. What I can tell you is that resisting this change leads to

suffering. Dr. Russ Harris, in his book *The Happiness Trap*, call this our struggle switch. We don't like a change that's occurring, so we struggle against it, with the result most of the time being that we only suffer more. Harris says we must accept these changes, or we will continue to suffer the unintended consequences of the struggle switch.

But, Harris says, accepting change does not mean you have to like it. This is a mistake so many people make when it comes to the word acceptance: that, if I accept something, I am indicating that I like it, or that I won't try to make things better in some way. No, Harris says, acceptance merely means we can mentally surrender to the fact that this is the way things are, right now, in this moment. The Buddhist story doesn't say that Kisa learned to like the fact that her son had died, but implies that she was able to accept it and see change as universal. Dislike the way things are all you want, but there is no denying that they are the only present.

What if we could learn to truly embrace the changing nature of our world, to manage our own anxiety around change, to accept change while acknowledging we don't have to like it, or we can just plain hate the entire process? What if we could become living embodiments of Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer:

“God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.”

This isn't to say that we'll always be ready for acceptance right away, but that a good, healthy path towards wholeness will aim us towards the reality that change has come, and we have no control over that. It is only after we have accepted something that we can truly evaluate, with a clear head and an open heart, what is next, how we will choose to respond to the new

normal. For example, once I have accepted that the environment is being polluted, I can then make decisions about how I will respond to such destruction, such as through activism, direct action, and education.

The sad reality is that some people never learn to accept change, and the struggle they engage with prevents them from being able to engage in any action that would make their situation a little more bearable. Old, decades old grudges. Regrets of days gone by. Unresolved grief. A yearning for the good 'ole days. There are so many ways humans find to deny that nothing is constant except for change. The reality is that we need places and people which encourage acceptance and a moving towards action. I think church can be one of these places, somewhere we know we'll be held accountable to the ever-changing flux in the world and encouraged to find ways to act.

May we ever find ways to accept the never ending change in the world.