

2020

# Spiral



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RUBIN**

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Made Up

# Vanishing Acts

Impermanence. You really can't hold on to it or expect it to last for very long. "All things are changeable; they are not lasting," the Buddha said at the end of his life. So where does that leave us? In 2020 the Rubin Museum of Art is taking a closer look at the ideas behind impermanence through innovative exhibitions (temporary, of course), public programs, educational initiatives, community engagement, and something you can hold on to: *Spiral* magazine.

The Japanese term *mono no aware*, the pathos of things, refers to the gentle sadness that comes with understanding impermanence and the ephemeral nature of what surrounds us. There is inherent beauty in transience, and we aim to inspire you with the ways in which contemplating impermanence can shift your perspective on things as they are—or were—just a moment ago. We cannot promise liberation or enlightenment, but there is beautiful truth in Buddha's words that clinging to the things of this world can only bring suffering.

In the pages of *Spiral* we'll explore temporality through the eyes of an astrobiologist, and closer to home, examine the crisis of climate change through the lens of spirituality. Speaking of grave matters, we'll learn DIY rituals for difficult times and how green burials are good for the Earth. We'll hear from theater director Peter Sellars and read about his passion project of bringing a gender-swapping, eye-opening Buddhist sutra to the stage, a journey that has included the Rubin Museum.

Contemporary artists featured in the exhibition *Measure Your Existence* grapple with the philosophies

of time and the human lifespan through different mediums and artistic expressions. Lee Mingwei, who reflects on a childhood photograph and his artistic process in these pages, invites visitors to the Museum to write a letter to somebody who has passed away or is otherwise absent. Taryn Simon's photographic and textual project takes a closer look at bloodlines and their related stories, including a tale of the living dead in India.

Life is impermanent, but what about the afterlife? Chances are there is only one way to find out. Till then, the cross-cultural exhibition *Death Is Not the End* looks at what happens after you pass away, comparing Buddhist and Christian traditions. Here in *Spiral*, curator Elena Pakhoutova riffs on popular culture and the depictions of life after death in recent television series (zombies need not apply), a storyline that itself returns every few years.

In keeping with the spirit of impermanence, our exhibitions and programming only last a year. We look forward to seeing you in our physical and online spaces as we travel the year of impermanence together.

Jorrit Britschgi  
Executive Director  
Rubin Museum of Art

# Spiral

THE IMPERMANENCE ISSUE 2020

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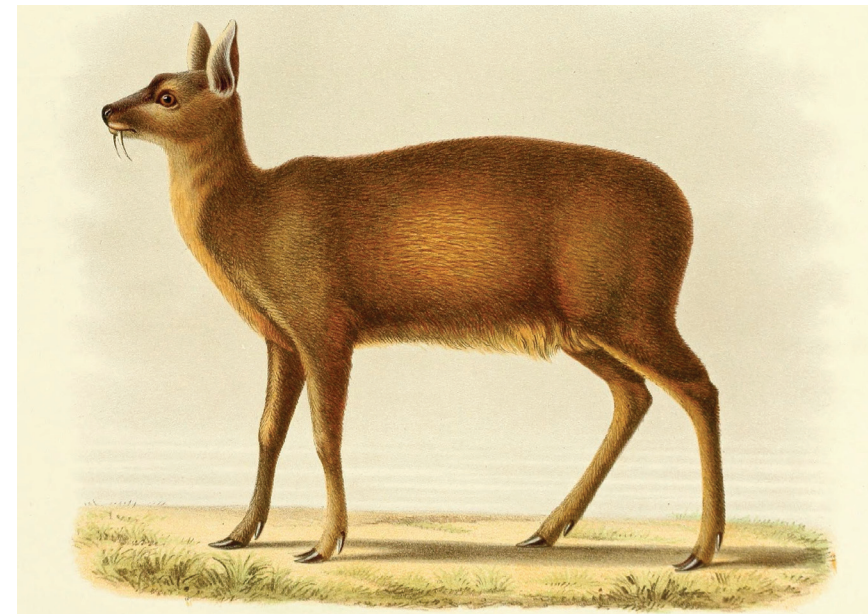
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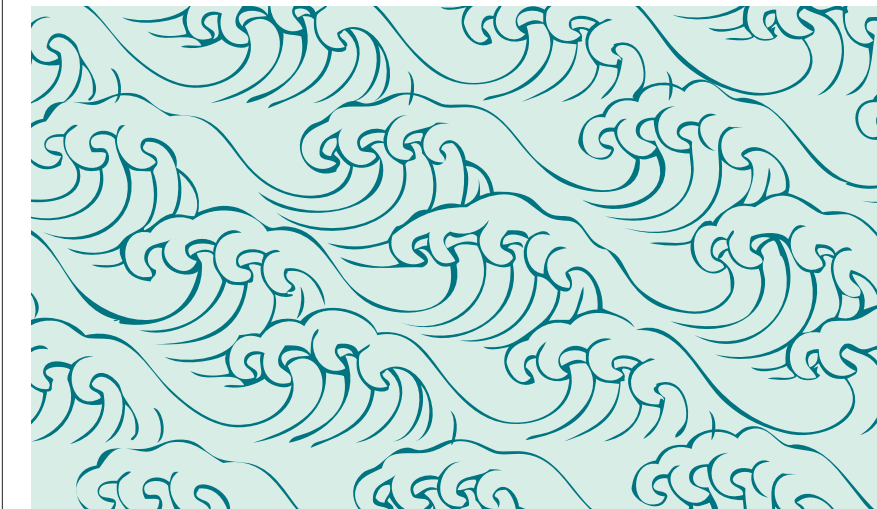
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SPIRAL

BY *Caleb Scharf*

# THE WAY OF THE COSMOS

Finding your place in  
the universe.  
Literally.



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 octillions over a human lifetime—octillions of little bits of energy that were once uniquely modified by kissing our bodies.

Perhaps a few of these photons will impinge eventually on some other place: a star, a planet, a speck 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 origin, a ferociously hot and dense exhalation of energy, matter, and space, remains at the hairy edge 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 condense into the things we call protons and neutrons, the essential ingredients of atomic nuclei. A few hundred million years later some simple nuclei found themselves jostling together inside the agglomerations we call stars. So vigorous was the jostling that they started fusing with each other, forging heavier and heavier elements. In the blink 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-forged elements. 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. Neurons 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 innards 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.

Stellar 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 pent up energy and potential. In ways that we still do not understand, Earth's youthful conditions drove the start of more complex chemistry. Eager-to-connect molecules began enveloping themselves in proto-cells, propagating and exchanging information, and embarking on a cascade of experimentation that is still ongoing, billions of years later.

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. What's left of life refills the gaps, but often with entirely new inventions—fresh, exuberant experiments in novelty. Even at the dullest of times the Earth doesn't sit still. Its axis wobbles, its orbit shifts back and forth from circle to gentle ellipse, all driving climate cycles and biological change across the eons.

Finally, even that hopeful stream of photons, the record of your time on Earth, will not and cannot remain intact. Not because of interception, or degradation, 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 isolates entire galaxies from one another. Not just in the sense of travel distance but in absolute 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 happened. Impermanence is not simply a dispiriting 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. ☺

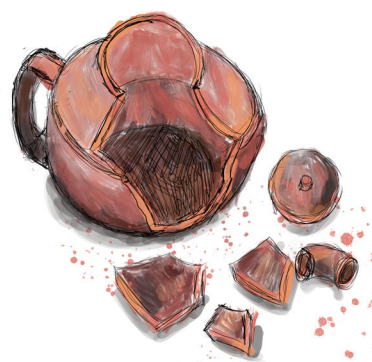
If the universe were a place of permanence, all that has occurred to enable our species to briefly emerge from cosmic embers might not have happened.

Caleb Scharf is director of astrobology at Columbia University, where he leads efforts to study the nature of life and planets across the universe. His books include *Gravity's Engines*, *The Copernicus Complex*, and *The Zoomable Universe*. He writes the blog *Life, Unbounded* at *Scientific American* and is on Twitter @caleb\_scharf.

# IMPERMANENCE CAN SET US FREE

How Buddhism encourages us to embrace the instability of life

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 yogic 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 lama 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 motif in Buddhist practice, and contemplations of impermanence often assume a progression—one we will briefly explore here—from the obvious to the subtle ways that impermanence features in our lives.

On the most obvious level impermanence manifests as death. For the Buddhist practitioner the refusal to acknowledge the inevitability of death is one of the first obstacles to overcome. Our denial of death is pervasive, and it often involves a blind confidence that today is not the last day of my life. Blithely 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 (*‘chi ba mi rtag pa* in Tibetan) as one of the main methods to redirect the mind (*blo 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—aneurisms, accidents, environmental disasters—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 tasty 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 underlies 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, and the more we deny that instability the more we invite the suffering that comes from the moments when we realize that such denials were only wishful thinking.

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 dissatisfaction. 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. ☉

Attend a Brainwave talk on April 11 between John Dunne and Dr. Sheldon Solomon. Visit [RubinMuseum.org/Brainwave](http://RubinMuseum.org/Brainwave) to learn more.

<sup>1</sup> Gtsan-smyon He-ru-ka, *The Life of Milarepa*, trans. Andrew Quintman, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 150.

Lama (Teacher), Milarepa; Tibet; 18th century; ground mineral pigment on cotton; Rubin Museum of Art; gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin; C2006.66.460 (HAR 921)

John Dunne is the distinguished chair in contemplative humanities, an endowed position created through the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He also holds a co-appointment in the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures. Dunne’s work focuses on Buddhist philosophy and contemplative practice, especially in dialog with cognitive science and psychology.



# THE RETURNED: WHEN DEATH IS NOT THE END

In Tibetan tales and popular culture the dead have a way of coming back with a purpose

BY *Elena Pakhoutova*

**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 karma, 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 karma or divine intervention. Through her work she affects the lives of those who wronged her and caused her death, thus helping to alter their karma 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.



Detail of Wheel of Life; Tibet; early 20th century; pigments on cloth; Rubin Museum of Art; C2004.21.1 (HAR 65356)

This detail of the core of the Wheel of Life shows the ultimate conditions of suffering and the afflicting emotions that cause it, symbolized by the pig (ignorance), snake (hatred), and rooster (attachment). The surrounding circle depicts virtuous and non-virtuous actions represented by the figures in upward and downward postures. This part of the Wheel also refers to beings who are in the intermediate state, or bardo, between death and rebirth.



## 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 died long ago but suddenly reappear alive, unaged, and unaware of their deaths. Their reemergence 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 or evoking karmic connections in the characters' relationships that need to be resolved and drive the show's narrative.

## By returning from death she teaches the living how to live.

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 grapples with the strangeness of his new surroundings. He mistakenly thinks he has been reborn as a hungry ghost (*preta* 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.

### Elsewhere and Here

See representations of the afterlife 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.

From classic stories of Tibetan delok 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, horrifying sights of what lies beyond and

threatens 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, for all of us wonder what lies beyond and what we would do if given the chance to know. ©

Elena Pakhoutova is a curator of Himalayan art at the Rubin Museum of Art and holds a PhD in Asian art history from the University of Virginia. She has curated several exhibitions at the Rubin, most recently *The Second Buddha: Master of Time* (2018), *The Power of Intention: Reinventing the (Prayer) Wheel* (2019), and *Death Is Not the End* (2020).



BY Jungwon Kim

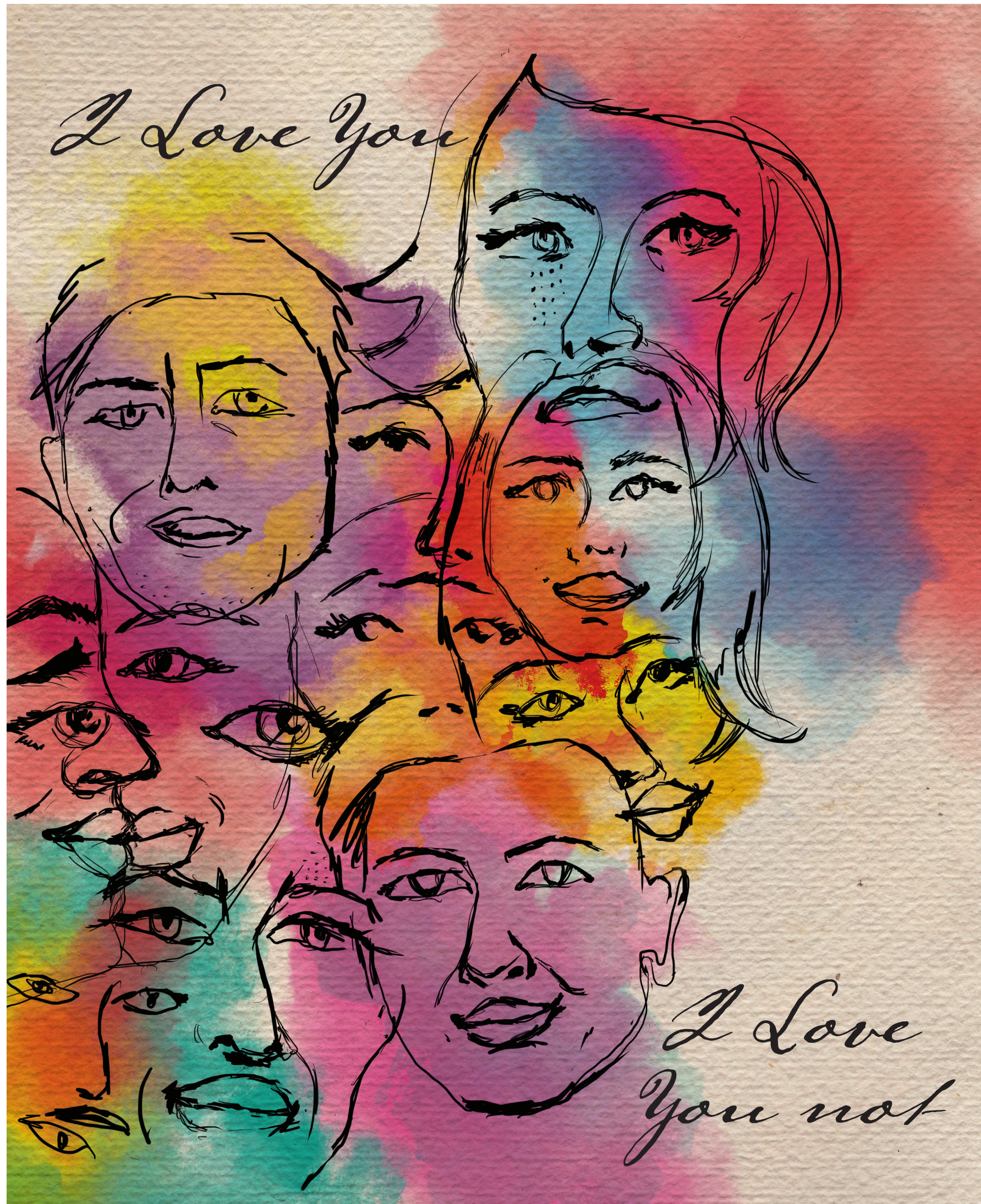
To behold the global climate crisis in all its enormity—human suffering, mass extinction, the loss of Earth's precious ecosystems—requires a strong foundation of spiritual practice. When I feel overwhelmed by despair or anxiety, I use the Ānāpānasati Sutta, a Buddhist meditation exercise that enables 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.

Jungwon Kim is the head of the creative and editorial team at the Rainforest Alliance, an international nonprofit organization working with farmers, forest communities, governments, businesses, and consumers to build a world where people and nature thrive in harmony.





## Navigating change in romantic relationships

BY *Natasha Scripture*

**MOST OF US MORTALS SAY** we are open to change, but we are attached to the comfort of *knowing*. We want to know what comes next, and we want to know what—and who—can be relied on. Navigating this desire is especially hard when it comes to romantic relationships. Being wedded to our expectations of loved ones presents challenges, largely because we are not static beings.

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 like 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 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 that 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 Gita (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—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.

I met my partner in July 2018 after a long bout of soul-searching, a nine-month detox from dating in which I “fasted” from romantic love in order to focus on myself. Exactly a year later we had a baby together. It was an unplanned but welcome pregnancy, which catalyzed many changes in our lives.

There were plenty of ups during that first year: a paradisiac trip to the Caribbean, our engagement, the doubling of our circle of friends and family by merging our lives, the arrival of our beautiful baby girl. But there were also some downs: career stresses, financial pressures, family discord, health complications, and the friction of two virtual strangers set in their ways moving in together and adjusting to a new living arrangement. It has been a roller coaster—we went from instant physical attraction to domestic squabbles over things like dishwasher usage to the otherworldly love that comes with the creation of new life and sharing the humbling responsibility of parenthood.

Just as love changes from relationship to relationship, the love between us has changed, and it continues to

deepen and expand as we learn to accept each other as imperfect, well-intentioned humans navigating life as best we can. Instead of questioning this love or trying to preserve it in a certain way, I try to trust it and allow it to be moody and unfold on its own, without being attached to it being a certain way. To paraphrase a verse from the Gita, he who remains unattached to all things is a man of firm wisdom.

While challenging, it's liberating to accept that change is constant and practicing non-attachment is essential. The Gita says that attachment can lead to desire, anger, confusion, weakness of memory, and then weakness of understanding and intellect, which is akin to ruin. When I am angry at my partner, I express it but then I let it go, not holding on to a grudge as I know it does not serve us. When I accept that the anger is temporary, a passing emotion, it makes it easier. Of course it's difficult to always be mindful, but ultimately, when we surrender our attachments, we experience inner peace.

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, so do we.

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. That is where the real magic is, and it's not temporary. It is always there, whether or not we are awake enough to realize it. ☺

Natasha Scripture is a poet, health coach, and author of *Man Fast: A Memoir*, which was published by Amazon / Little A in June 2019. She has worked for a variety of organizations, including the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera English, TED, National Geographic, and Condé Nast Publications, and been published in the *New York Times*, *The Telegraph*, *Marie Claire*, *Glamour*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Boston Globe*, and *The Atlantic*, among other publications.





# A MANUAL FOR THE MOMENTARY

DIY Rituals  
from  
Reimagine End of Life



Reimagine's next festival takes place in June 2020 across New York City. For more information, visit [www.LetsReimagine.org](http://www.LetsReimagine.org).



**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.

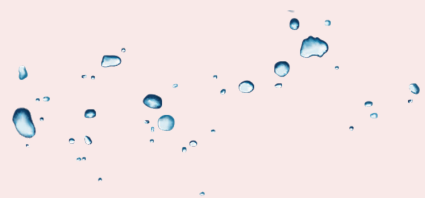


## A RITUAL TO GRIEVE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

BY *Aminta Kilawan-Narine*

Sadhana: Coalition of Progressive Hindus invites participants to reflect on the water as Goddess and Mother, ever-plentiful with Her nourishment, ever nurturing with Her resourcefulness. We call on those who perform this ritual to “make waves” for gender justice, acknowledging the irony that water is worshipped as Supreme Goddess. Hindus 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 such as Jamaica Bay Wildlife Sanctuary in Queens, New York.
2. Walk toward the water, reflecting on those whose lives have been lost at the hands of gender-based violence across the world.
3. Offer a flower of your choice. Observe the ripples you have created.
4. Make an internal commitment to do something to combat gender-based violence. Examples include:
  - Have a conversation over dinner with family members about how gender inequities subtly and overtly play out in daily life.
  - Support a survivor you know—check in regularly, be available for emergency situations, and help strategize a safety plan.
  - Boycott companies that perpetuate a culture of gender-based violence.
  - Donate to a nonprofit organization that works to eradicate gender-based violence.



## 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 *Tashlich*, 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 friends and family, 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 laws in each state, you may release cremated remains into the water.
4. If desired, return each year to remember your loss and consider the time that has passed. Tell stories of the ways in which your life has continued and flourished. Explore how the hope you expressed a year earlier has manifested today.



## A COLLECTIVE RITUAL FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

BY *Day Schildkret and Jessica Neafsey*

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 fears we need new means to process this grief and trauma as it arises, both privately and collectively. Impermanent Earth altars poignantly validate 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 for our world.

1. Explore your environment, be it a city, forest, or beach. Collect fallen material from the Earth.
2. Gather together in a circle. Sit in silence observing how the place smells, moves, looks, sounds, and feels.
3. Take the material you gathered and create an Earth altar in front of you, making a circle within your larger circle. Fill the circle with a symbolic design as an expression of your love for the Earth and grief for what we are losing.
4. Go around the circle and describe what you made and its symbolism. Say a devotional prayer to something or someone we are losing from climate change.
5. Walk away from the Earth altar and return in later days to witness it changing. Bear witness to the impermanence of the altar as a way to strengthen your collective capacity for grief, love, and resilience in the face of change.



## 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 Reimagine festival, I performed this ritual at Washington Square Park in memory of Rose Butler, an enslaved young black woman. She was accused of stealing and afterward resisted injustice by setting fire 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 Hone led a successful campaign to cover the burial grounds without removing the bodies. Such histories are not evident anywhere around the park and stand out as an injustice further emphasized by the monumental Washington Square Arch.

1. Select an area in a public park. Be conscious of the cardinal directions. Place a bouquet on the pavement.
2. Using chalk, write the name or description of a person or people who suffered injustice. Recite the words, “May your strength guide us.”
3. Encircle the bouquet and writing together with chalk.
4. Choose a direction. Stand firm. Close the ritual with the following possibilities:
  - Recite 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.



**Aminta Kilawan-Narine** is an attorney, community organizer, and cofounder of Sadhana: Coalition of Progressive Hindus. In 2019 she facilitated a series of workshops on feminism in the Hindu faith, partnering with Sadhana and fellow community organization Jahajee Sisters. Kilawan-Narine is also a coordinator of Project Prithvi, Sadhana’s green initiative to promote environmentally friendly worship practices at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Sanctuary in Queens. In 2018 she co-organized a Project Prithvi cleanup in conjunction with the Reimagine festival.

**Rabbi Sydney Mintz** was ordained by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. She has served as rabbi at Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco for twenty-two years and is on the board of Bend the Arc: A Jewish Justice Partnership. Rabbi Mintz was selected as a Hartman Rabbinic Fellow in 2003 by the Shalom Hartman Center and has led Team Emanu-El in the AIDS/LifeCycle. She currently serves on the 360° Advisory Council of Reimagine.

**Jessica Neafsey** is a licensed landscape architect and environmental artist in Carmel, California. Her creative work is driven by the simple mission to expand our sense of kinship with nature and all life, and she enjoys rebuilding joyful bridges between nature and culture.

**Day Schildkret** is internationally known for *Morning Altars* and has inspired tens of thousands of people of all ages across the globe to be awed with impermanent Earth art. He is the author of *Morning Altars: A 7-Step Practice to Nourish Your Spirit through Nature, Art, and Ritual* and has been featured in *BuzzFeed*, *Vice*, and *Spirituality & Health Magazine*. During the 2018 Reimagine festival, he led an impermanent Earth art installation at the National September 11 Memorial.

**Elizabeth Velazquez** creates mixed-media sculptural works, installations, and rituals. She is one of the founding members of Southeast Queens Artist Alliance (SEQAA), a grassroots collective of artists creating socially engaged projects in Southeast Queens. In 2019 Velazquez traveled to Jerusalem as part of the apexart Fellowship. This year she is a resident artist at Wave Hill for the Winter Workspace Program. Velazquez lives in Queens, New York.



BY **Kareenna Gore**

**My spiritual practice is both private and ever-changing, so I hesitate to share it in writing. One way in which it matches the climate crisis is that it has intersecting personal and communal aspects.**

**I stay connected to the Baptist tradition I was raised in through contemplation of select scripture. For example, *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God (Romans 12:2)*. This is how I think about another valued practice: meditation, the renewing of the mind.**

**It is also a reminder that the current value system—including the ways we measure worth according to money or determine national success by the stock market or the GDP—are far from the ultimate truth. Changing this destructive system requires a change in consciousness. Sacred texts and teachings can fortify us for that work; meditation can illuminate us; action can transform us.**

**Actions that are grounded in a tangible connection to nature are especially powerful because they facilitate a sense of belonging to the interconnected web of life. In the series I curated at the Rubin Museum in 2018, Native American elder Mona Polacca instructed us on how to greet and acknowledge water as a sacred element, even in simple daily routines. As she explained, this is not only personally soothing but it spiritually prepares us to defend our watersheds—and our climate—against the assaults of pollution.**

**Ritual is also essential, and we can create it together. During Climate Week NYC, I participated in a ceremony in which the Jordanian, Palestinian, and Israeli directors of EcoPeace Middle East brought water from the Jordan River—where Jesus was baptized—to the Hudson River (Muhheakantuck in Lenape). Many of my favorite practices converged in this ritual: sharing sacred texts and songs, taking a moment of silent meditation, carrying water in a ceremonial vessel and collectively pouring it into the river, laying down an intention to protect our sacred Earth.**

**Kareenna Gore** is the founding director of the Center for Earth Ethics (CEE) at Union Theological Seminary. CEE bridges the worlds of religion, academia, politics, and culture to discern and pursue the necessary changes to stop ecological destruction and create a society that values life. As the former director of Union Forum at Union Theological Seminary, she helped organize Religions for the Earth, a conference with the goal to reframe climate change as a moral issue and galvanize faith-based activism to address it.

# A STUNNING SPECTACLE OF ASTONISHING THINGS HAPPENING



The renowned theater and opera director Peter Sellars discusses his passion for bringing a two-thousand-year-old Buddhist sutra to the stage

BY *Howard Kaplan*

# THINGS HAPPENING

**Howard Kaplan: Can you give a little background on the sutra that is the basis for *The Goddess 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 glossaries 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 amazement and wonder. You just say, "Oh right, these are not the old school of sutra translations. This is the beginning of Buddhism having another type of presence in the West and not just visiting but taking up residence here." You can feel it in this volume as you hold it—the announced 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 bursts of humor, reversals 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 resonated.

**Can you address the role of women and gender?**

The goddess chapter of the sutra is astonishing, because it is—as far as I can tell—the first statement 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.

Sariputra, Buddha's lead disciple, encounters the goddess in *Vimalakirti's* house. They have a philosophical discussion, and she wins every point. After a while he says, "You're quite intelligent for a woman."

The goddess laughs and exchanges bodies with Sariputra. Suddenly he finds himself in her body, and she is occupying his body. When you think about it, this is so mind-blowing. Meanwhile it's a delicious assignment for two brilliant actors and a cue for a virtuosic and unforgettable performance.

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 into the wall.

**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 Schumacher, the spectacular improvisatory dancer, and the other is the extraordinary Ganavya Doraiswamy who comes out of a South Indian vocal tradition.

Michael and Ganavya are truly exploring the material. 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 one of these texts has worlds inside it.

**You mentioned the sutras were aimed at people outside 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 practice, 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 Buddha 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 movement is away from the centers of the presumed power of organized religion and into direct street action.

**Peter Sellars** is an American theater director noted for his groundbreaking, transformative stagings of classical and contemporary operas and plays. He has gained international recognition for his work and is also a professor at UCLA where he teaches art as social and moral action.

**You presented an early iteration of the project at the Rubin Museum in 2011.**

I have a feeling that working on the *Vimalakirti Sutra* will be a lifelong project. We will treat different chapters in different episodes as their own experiences. I can imagine gradually accumulating a series of performances that start to make a pathway through the sutra. I'm never in a rush. I just say, "Let's work on this, and when we feel that it's there then we'll offer it to the public." I love performing at the Rubin, and I imagine performing this in museums and in places that already have a context.

**What can a two-thousand-year-old text tell us today? What should the audience pay attention to?**

I think most people are truly looking for some ancient truths that you can hold on to. As the world gets more outrageous and out of control and violence and injustice swirl around us, what is the refuge? I think Buddhism was created as a place of refuge.

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. So I don't really think of this as show business; I think of it as trying to touch something that we're all searching 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 church. I'm trying to get outside of the structures of organized religion and treat these texts and stories as teaching stories.

Inspiration comes from the heartbreaks, disappointments, and cruelties of the world. When you see stuff that needs to be addressed and you see things that are not correct, you realize we've got to go back in and go deeper. Our work has to be better, more amazing, more powerful, and more generous. ☺

**Howard Kaplan** is an editor and writer who helped found *Spiral* magazine in 2017. He currently works at the Smithsonian and divides his time between Washington, DC, and New York City.

# Ocean View

BY Stefani Kuo

## A one-act play maps identity in a changing world

<p><b>GYALPO, 8, sits at a small dinner table in front of a globe. CHOEDEN, 45, stands over him.</b></p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>No. This is not China. We've been over this. What is this? Tell me. What am I pointing at?</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>Where are you going?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>What do you know about that?</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>But it's OK. Because the world is impermed.</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>It was from story time.</p>
<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>And this?</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>Tibet.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>To call your teacher. This is absolutely ridiculous.</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>She said nothing matters. It will all just go away.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Impermanent.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>(reading)</p>
<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>Ocean.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Speak Tibetan.</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>Why?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Who does she think she is? His Holiness the Dalai Lama?</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>Impermament.</p>	<p>"My name is Gyalpo. I love coca cola very much. My Pa does not let me drink coca cola, but I am already coca cola. I am impermmmd. My body is the can and I feel like coca cola inside. But everything goes away. Even my Pa. Even coca cola. One day, a little boy drinks the coca cola inside the can and everything is gone. Everything inside is gone, and then even the can is gone, and everything is goodbye. This is what my life is. I am coca cola. And when everything is gone, the can is gone too. The boy is gone too. My Pa is gone too. And no one tells anyone not to drink coca cola. Because no one remembers."</p>
<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Gyatso.</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p><i>Bod.</i></p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Because it's wrong. Under no circumstances are you to be called Chinese, do you understand?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>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.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Close enough. All right.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN closes the book on the table. He cleans up.</b></p>
<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>Gyatso.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Louder.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN calls. The phone rings.</b></p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>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.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Time for bed. It's late.</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>I don't want to sleep.</p>
<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Good. This?</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p><i>Boepa.</i></p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>Pa?</p>	<p><b>Silence.</b></p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Come on, Gyalpo.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>It's not the same as giving up, you know? It's—</p>
<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p><i>Sa shing.</i></p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Good. Remember that. You are <i>boepa</i>. You eat <i>bopai khalag</i>. You speak <i>boekay</i>. You wear <i>boeche</i>. You are <i>boepa</i>. You belong to <i>borig</i>. Do you understand?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Hold on.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Including me.</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>Why do I have to?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Everything will go away. But we don't give up.</p>
<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>No. This is <i>khang-pa</i>.</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>Yes, Pa.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Why does it matter?</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>It's OK, Pa. She said it's OK.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Because you are a growing boy. You'll need it to become strong and tall and smart in the future.</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>Like Kobi?</p>
<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Home?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Good. Now—</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>What?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN sits down.</b></p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>There might not be a future.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Come on. Time for bed.</p>
<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>But this isn't the shape of America. Where is—</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Pa. Does that mean I am also Chinese?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Why does it matter if I am Chinese or Tibetan?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>What else did Miss Gyatso say?</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>What do you mean?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>But Pa—</p>
<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>No. We've been over this. This—</p> <p>(spinning the globe)</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>No, what did I just say?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Because.</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>She said it is OK that I lost my pencil case, because <i>de mi-tagpa rey</i>.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>I could be impermament today. I could—</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Come on. Go brush your teeth.</p>
<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Is America. And this—</p> <p>(spinning the globe back)</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Today, Polly asked me if I was Chinese, so I asked the teacher and she said yes. So I think I am Chinese.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Why can't I be both?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Because, Gyalpo, you don't understand how the world works. It's important that you know who you are.</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>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.</p>	<p><b>GYALPO sulks his way out of the room. CHOEDEN is left alone in the room. He reads the story again.</b></p>
<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>Is <i>khang-pa</i>. Home. Don't you remember?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Which teacher is this?</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p><i>De mi-tagpa rey.</i></p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Kobi's dad went to Mexico?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>What is this?</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN reaches up to a cupboard. He takes out a can of Coca-Cola. He reaches for GYALPO's backpack. He changes his mind. CHOEDEN cracks the can open and drinks. He looks out the window, pours the liquid out of the can, and crushes it.</b></p>
<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Chee . . . na.</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>Miss Lu.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>What?</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>Yes. Kobi said he went on a long holiday.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Right.</p>	<p><b>GYALPO runs out of the room. He runs back in with a large piece of paper.</b></p>
<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>It says here. Chee . . . na.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>(getting up)</p> <p>Ridiculous. Unacceptable.</p>	<p><b>GYALPO</b></p> <p>That's what Miss Gyatso said in Tibetan school today. <i>De mi-tagpa rey.</i></p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>The author would like to thank Geshe Lobsang Dhargyal for his insightful teachings on impermanence and his help in English-Tibetan translations, as well as Lobsang Nyandak, President of the Tibet Fund, for his guidance on Tibetan culture.</p>	<p><b>CHOEDEN</b></p> <p>Stefani Kuo (郭佳怡) is a native of Hong Kong and received her BA from Yale. She is a playwright and performer currently working on a play about the Hong Kong protests. Kuo is a member of writers groups Interstate 73 with Page 73 and Speaker's Corner with Gingold Theatrical Group. She has been a finalist for the National Playwrights Conference, Jerome Fellowship at Lanesboro Arts, Jerome Fellowship at the Playwrights' Center, Van Lier New Voices Fellowship, and more.</p>	<p><i>End of Play</i></p>

## Why preserve art when nothing lasts forever?

**CONSERVATORS SEEMS TO STRIVE** to make every artwork last forever. Yet the Buddhist tenet of impermanence bears closely and profoundly on our field, as we work to preserve art that is both sacred in character and fundamentally fragile in nature.

BY *Ann ShafteI*

I work with the preservation of thangka, which in its traditional form is a picture panel surrounded by a textile mounting. Used as meditation guides, thangka depict religious imagery such as buddhas, bodhi-sattvas, 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 art 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 land here. Others fall to the opposite extreme: nihilism. The nihilists ask why we preserve anything. After all, impermanence makes a mockery of such efforts. But conservators are not trying to make things last forever for the sake of it. Rather we hope to



Post-capture image enhancement reveals pigments and the condition of paint layers that may not be visible to the eye. This technique works with digital images, so there is no need to expose a thangka to additional light sources. I use an app on my phone to implement a decorrelation stretch.

preserve sacred treasures for future generations. We want them to have the opportunity to encounter and be nourished by these remarkable works of art that convey and perhaps even embody the sacred dimensions of our lives.

### 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 on the path of meditation and compassion.

Keeping this intent in mind, the conservator can then ask: How much treatment would the artist regard as appropriate? This allows the conservator to be guided by the artist rather than imposing technology and priorities alien to the artist's intent. This is particularly important when a Buddhist master creates an image representing a visionary experience with the intent of conveying that experience to contemporary students and those not yet born.



Thangka from the Sven Hedin Silk Road Collection of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Världskulturmuseerna, Stockholm, Sweden, under normal light. I use light of different wavelengths and placements to reveal the condition of a thangka and document its condition with digital images.



Raking light (light beamed at a low angle to the surface of the artwork) reveals the use of hand-ground pigments of different particle sizes, according to color and mineral origin. The cotton cloth support is creased and damaged due to rolling and unrolling and being rolled in storage. The ground and paint layers powder over areas of damage to the support, and losses and insecurity are visible.



# SACRED



Transmitted light (a light source placed behind an artwork, so light shines through it) shows that the cotton cloth support has areas of weakness in the weave, and small splits are forming. The ground and paint layers are damaged in areas where the support is damaged. Many thangka exhibit this fragility due to rolling and unrolling and being rolled in storage.



# THREADS

## 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 rolling 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 referentially in their choice of iconography, methods, and materials. As this innovative, personal style has emerged, I have asked 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 paints available to him now, he suspects, will crack, 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 thangka" combined with other materials. Looking ahead, the challenges in conserving these developing art forms will be formidable.

## 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 odd 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 safer 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 art conservation to protect and preserve the original to whatever degree is possible. For Buddhists, impermanence is fundamental, and for all of us change is inevitable, even in the life of a treasured thangka. ☉

**Ann Shafteel** is at the forefront of thangka conservation worldwide. Since 1970 she has worked in the conservation of Buddhist art for museums, monasteries, universities, dharma centers, and private clients, including the Rubin Museum of Art, American Museum of Natural History, UNESCO, and the governments of India and Bhutan. Shafteel's international work in Treasure Caretaker Training ([www.treasurecaretaker.com](http://www.treasurecaretaker.com)) won the prestigious Digital Empowerment Foundation's Chairman's Choice Award. She has published widely on thangka scientific research and conservation methods.



BY **Ibrahim Abdul-Matin**

**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 fall 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 hoard and band together to fight under increasingly severe conditions.**

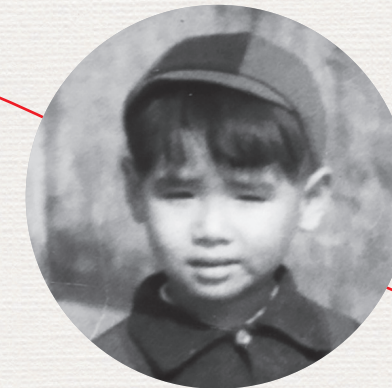
**But as a Muslim my tradition provides an annual quasi-dress rehearsal for how to manage oneself in the midst of dramatic migration. Islam has five main pillars: profess one's faith, pray, fast, support those in need, and, if possible, go on the yearly pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca—the Hajj.**

**Hajj is arguably 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.**

**Situations like this 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.**

**Ibrahim Abdul-Matin** is a bright, playful spirit who authentically reflects and acts on bold questions. His artful blending of idealism and spiritual commitment with pragmatic application has led him into government, public administration, parenthood, and media. His unique voice has helped elevate the environmental vision of Islam, the spiritual opportunity of parenting, and the cultural and political side of sports.

# INTANGIBLE CONNECTIONS



# BETWEEN YOU AND ME

## AN INTERVIEW WITH LEE MINGWEI



The artist reflects on the lasting impact of an early memory and his mother's gift

BY *Christine Starkman*



**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, pants—everything she made especially for me for that day.

She told me, “I understand if you don’t want to go to school. I also understand 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 still didn’t want to go. 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 could have just brought me to school without creating this special moment to remember. But instead she made elaborate plans and a situation to encourage me to go to school. It is a very beautiful gift, and I have benefited 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 very special.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF LEE MINGWEI



Experience Lee Mingwei’s work in the exhibition *Measure Your Existence* at the Rubin Museum from February 7 to August 10, 2020.

Lee Mingwei (b. 1964, Taichung, Taiwan; lives and works in New York City and Paris); *The Letter Writing Project*; 1998–present; mixed-media interactive installation, wooden booth, writing papers, envelopes; installation view at Lee Mingwei and His Relations, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2014; photograph by Yoshitsugu Fuminari; image courtesy of Mori Art Museum, Tokyo

**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 uncomfortableness?**

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 where 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 café 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?

Attend a Brainwave talk on February 29 between Lee Mingwei and Dr. Lila Davachi. Visit [RubinMuseum.org/Brainwave](https://RubinMuseum.org/Brainwave) to learn more.

**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 utensil 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 within this project are going to be probably quite volatile, sometimes maybe quite 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.

**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 of them 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 will 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. ☺

Lee Mingwei was born in Taiwan in 1964 and currently lives in New York and Paris. He creates participatory installations and one-on-one events where strangers explore issues of trust, intimacy, and self-awareness. His projects are often open-ended scenarios for everyday interaction. Lee received an MFA from Yale University in 1997 and has had solo exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, Centre Pompidou, and more.

Christine Starkman is a contemporary art curator interested in the global, transnational, and transcultural histories of modern and contemporary art between Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America. She has been a curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, Cleveland Museum of Art, and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. She has an MA in Japanese art and architecture from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and did PhD coursework in art history at Rice University.



Taryn Simon (b. New York, NY; lives and works in New York City)  
 Chapter I from *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII*; 2011  
 Pigmented inkjet prints; 84 × 118 ¾ in. (213.4 × 301.6 cm)  
 © Taryn Simon; image courtesy of the artist

# WE ARE ALL STEADILY HEADING TOWARD DEATH:



# TARYN SIMON AND PHOTOGRAPHY

BY *Christine Starkman*



“A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.”

—Jorge Luis Borges



Portrait of the Szeiman (Simon) Family in Belarus; 1916; courtesy of Taryn Simon

Simon proposes a new language and system for mapping blood, time, and narrative.

**A FRAMED FAMILY PORTRAIT** from over one hundred years ago hangs in Taryn Simon’s studio. The artist’s paternal grandfather, Albert Szeiman, at seven years old—seated in a wicker chair in the front left—is the youngest of the ten children. The family sat for this photograph in Belarus in 1916. Family stories and official immigration documents reconstruct the history of Simon’s grandfather, whose name was changed at Ellis Island.

The photographic form, the family’s dress, and the studio furniture testify to a time passed without return. Siegfried Kracauer defined photography as a presentation of time: “Photography provides a space-continuum . . . historical reality is grasped when they have completely re-constituted the succession of events in their temporary sequence.”<sup>1</sup>

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.”<sup>2</sup> This was the time of the popular photographic album. The album would be displayed on a pedestal table, leather bound, embossed with metal mounts, and gold-edged, with thick pages featuring well-dressed figures with lace collars.<sup>3</sup> The earlier plates were far less sensitive to light and required long exposure, so the subjects had to remain still. Benjamin wrote, “They had an aura about them, a medium which mingled with their manner of looking and gave them a plenitude and security.”<sup>4</sup>

Simon’s early exposure to data collection and image making came from her grandfather’s and father’s interest in collecting, researching, and consuming scientific and cultural images of the world and the cosmos. In *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* (2011), she produced a catalog of human survival and existence. The artist spent four years traveling around the world researching and recording eighteen bloodlines shaped by geography, power, circumstance, and fate.

**Christine Starkman** is a contemporary art curator interested in the global, transnational, and transcultural histories of modern and contemporary art between Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America. She has been a curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, Cleveland Museum of Art, and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. She has an MA in Japanese art and architecture from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and did PhD coursework in art history at Rice University.

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 blank background; a text panel in scroll-like form documenting the narrative at stake; 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 attest to memories of past lives. Homi Bhabha describes Simon’s process of tracing through the bloodlines circumstances of loss, fate, disappearance, and repetition as occurring in the “continual looping of the past-in-present.”<sup>5</sup>

*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 background of *A Living Man Declared Dead* directs the viewer’s attention to the sitter, who becomes the subject of displacement. In the words of Bhabha, the subjects then “participate in the ambiguity of their photographic representations.”<sup>6</sup>

The Belarus family portrait, in contrast, demonstrates the careful staging of the family hierarchy and studio atmosphere. Whereas this family portrait posits the mimetic image as a straightforward record of the members of the Simon family in 1916, according to Bhabha, *A Living Man Declared Dead* resituates photography in another “representational or narrative medium—be it history, fiction, literary narrative, cinematic form, biography.”<sup>7</sup>

Weaving together portraits, landscapes, texts, and artifacts, *A Living Man Declared Dead* functions as a living memorial. Surpassing the tradition of collecting, mapping, patterning, and archiving images, Simon proposes a new language and system for mapping blood, time, and narrative.🌐

See Taryn Simon’s work in the exhibition *Measure Your Existence* at the Rubin Museum from February 7 to August 10, 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *The Past’s Threshold: Essays on Photography*, eds. Philippe Despoix and Maria Zinfert, trans. Conor Joyce (Zurich-Berlin: Diaphanes, 2014), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography,” *Screen* 13, no. 1 (1972): 17. Originally published in *Literarische Welt*, September 18, September 25, and October 2, 1931.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Beyond Photography,” in *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* (Berlin: Nationalgalerie Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2011–12), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Bhabha, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Bhabha, 7.



BY Bishop Marc Andrus

The climate crisis is first a spiritual crisis. The strongly held worldview in the West since at least the dawn of the Industrial Age is the seed from which springs forth the disastrous distortions we feel as climate chaos: the objectification of life and of the living planet, the prevalence of a “machine model” of the cosmos, the alienation stemming from extreme individualism, the inflation of the ego fed by the accumulation of seemingly limitless power. These inner spiritual beliefs manifest outwardly and drive climate change.

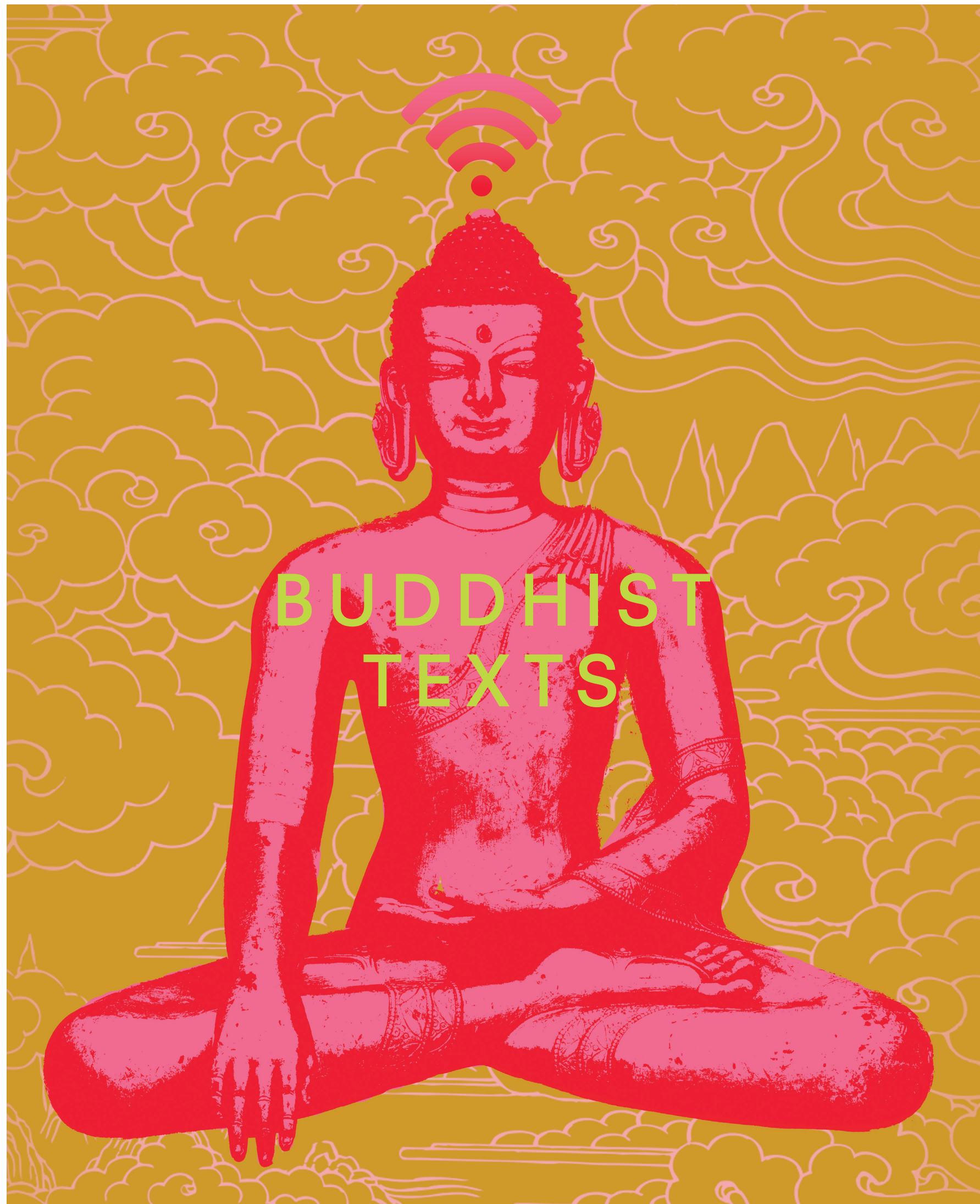
I will offer one spiritual practice that I’ve used, both personally and in gatherings at climate summits in Paris, Marrakech, and Bonn, to help provide a strong, healthy spiritual base for climate action. I believe that there are networks of spiritual values or virtues in our hearts that, if cultivated, can strengthen us and give us the wisdom we need. We might think of a garden of spiritual virtues, growing in the soul, with plants whose leaves and flowers have healing qualities. Based on this belief, I worked with a diverse group of Episcopalians to prepare prayer cards with one spiritual virtue on each card, including Courage, Compassion, Letting Go, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation.

At the summits we read a prayer card along with a relevant passage from sacred scriptures or literature, followed by chanting or sitting in silence. Then we ask this question: How has this spiritual virtue supported your climate action?

The most striking response to this spiritual practice came in Marrakech with a group of young Muslims, mostly women and mostly graduate students in environmental engineering and architecture. One said, “We did not come to the climate summit to find technical answers to climate change; we have those. We are looking for the spiritual dimension of climate change.”

What are the spiritual virtues growing in your internal landscape? How could you nurture them better? How do they support your climate action?

**Bishop Marc Andrus** is the eighth bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of California. He was installed as bishop in 2006, a position of oversight for a diocese comprising twenty-seven thousand communicants. His leadership has focused on key issues related to peace and justice, including immigration reform, climate change, civil rights for LGBTQ+ persons, racial reconciliation, and health care. Bishop Andrus is a member of the We Are Still In Leaders’ Circle, a diverse group of ambassadors for American climate action.



## The Light from Long Ago

Eighth-century Indian Buddhist master Padmasambhava 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 futurist 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 at our fingertips?

## How We Live Today

In 2018 the Rubin Museum dedicated the year to exploring the theme of the future. For *Spiral* magazine I interviewed UK-based artist Shezad Dawood, whose virtual reality work, *Kalimpong*, was featured in the Museum’s exhibition *A Lost Future*. The work

IT’S MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, the first day of fall. Still no chill in the air, but leaves are starting to turn—slightly. In my front yard in Washington DC, the satisfying crunch of walking on fallen leaves has begun. Since we’re in the season of dying—albeit kind of beautifully—I decide today is a good day to download an app that reminds me I’m a part of this too, that I’m dying, that we’re all dying, that everything on this lovely planet of ours is constantly cycling in alternating rhythms of endings and beginnings.

The WeCroak app takes its inspiration from Bhutan, where “contemplating death five times a day brings happiness.” Bhutan is commonly considered the capital of happiness, so there must be something to it.

After downloading the app, I receive my first message, the first of five that will come each day: “Every moment of life is the last, every poem is a death poem”—words by the seventeenth-century Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō. I stare at the screen, just simple white lettering on a black background. I guess a poet known for haiku is the perfect spokesperson to remind me that life too is short, its own equivalent of seventeen syllables. Bashō’s words remain for about ten seconds, then the screen goes black.

I’m looking at online apps and tools as a way to understand not just what impermanence means in the twenty-first century but also how we engage with

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

BY *Howard Kaplan*

ideas that have been contemplated for millennia. Are we turning to technology to make us more human?

A recent article in the *New York Times* described the growing number of tech professionals looking to therapists for help, often with the aid of apps. As Nellie 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. Matching therapists with clients 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 *Buddish* 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 missive arrives 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 cosmologist. And who doesn’t like stars? They too reflect the light from long ago.

blends different events from different times in an immersive storytelling experience inspired by a town at the foothills of the Himalaya.

When we spoke he shared his ideas that “VR is Buddhist” and “time is Vedic.” “Time is circles stacked upon one another,” he told me, “All time is one. We have this Vedic notion in terms of simultaneity that all times coexist. Rather than past, present, and future, they are set one upon the other.” That blew me away and got me thinking about the relationship between Buddhism and technology in the twenty-first century.

The role of technology, from a Buddhist teacher’s perspective, is a kind of Middle Way. According to Khenpo Tenzin Norgay Rinpoche, “Technology is neither good nor bad; it’s how you use it.” That’s about as Buddhist as you can get.

The Rinpoche, who teaches in the New York City area and upstate New York, wears an Apple watch as well as the traditional orange and saffron robes. He uses Facebook to connect with colleagues and family back home in Bhutan, learn about Dharma events and teachings he may want to attend, and keep up with friends. It’s also easier to carry around a device that can hold countless Buddhist texts than walk around with untold volumes. Are we looking at the world through Padmasambhava’s mirror?

But as the Rinpoche tells me, technology becomes outdated. Even the cloud will one day be replaced by something newer and better. And what’s more temporary than a cloud? Impermanence is everything.

## Everything

There were a couple of times when I ignored the messages from WeCroak. The first time I was about to cross a busy intersection near my house. When my phone lit up, I thought, This can wait until I make it to safety. The next time caught me by surprise. I had just scanned my boarding pass and was entering a plane. I laughed, maybe a bit nervously, as I thought I’d rather not think about death while trying to find my seat. That was not the upgrade I was hoping for. But of course, plan all we want, death will come when it comes.

That reminded me of a story about the Buddha and his disciples. When the Buddha was eighty years old and dying, those of his followers who had embraced ideas of impermanence and taken them to heart were able to deal with his death. Those who remained attached and pleaded for him to stay longer were those who could not let go.

It’s November now, several weeks since I downloaded WeCroak and put my faith in an ancient saying from a foreign land. I’ve come to look forward to the next message on my phone, whether it’s from poet Mary Oliver, the Dalai Lama, or a voice I’ve

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 swear 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 jujitsu move to coopt 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.☯

Howard Kaplan is an editor and writer who helped found *Spiral* magazine in 2017. He currently works at the Smithsonian and divides his time between Washington, DC, and New York City.



## When it comes to survival of the fittest, change is the only constant

BY Julia Tejada

"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)

IN 1973 THE EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGIST Leigh Van Valen quoted Lewis Carroll's Red Queen as a metaphor to explain what he viewed as the main driver of the diversification and extinction of species: the struggle of life itself. The Red Queen hypothesis argues that species must constantly adapt—or "run" in the queen's words—as a survival mechanism. The constant competition for resources is what keeps us running. When one species becomes better at acquiring resources, the other species must adapt to keep up—"to keep in the same place." This cancels out the long-term advantage of the adaptation in a single species.

The Red Queen hypothesis relies on the understanding that biotic interactions—those related to living things—underlie the evolution and extinction of species. Although Red Queen dynamics seem to be mostly limited to short timescales (less than one hundred thousand years), there are examples attesting to the role of biotic forces as an evolutionary driver over long timescales.

Take the diversification of canids—the dog family—in North America. The fossil record shows that in more than twenty million years of competitive interactions, dogs of the subfamily Borophaginae (bone-crushing dogs) gradually increased body mass and adopted a more carnivorous diet. This enabled them to compete with the hypercarnivorous, bigger dogs of the subfamily Hesperocyoninae (so-called Western dogs). Eventually bone-crushing dogs reached the same levels of meat eating as Western dogs and surpassed their body masses. The changes in the bone-crushing dogs' feeding strategy and bodies coincided in time with a higher extinction rate in Western dogs. This suggests that the higher ecological similarity between the two groups of dogs created stronger competition.

A later migration of felids—the cat family—from Eurasia intensified the resource competition among the groups of canids, limiting the diversification of 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 dogs), 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 hypotheses 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 at which Court Jester processes operate, and it attests that changes in the richness, composition, and replacement 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 diversity 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. ☉

Julia Tejada is a paleontologist who uses the chemical composition of fossils and modern bones to understand how ecosystems change through time, as well as how animals partition their resources within an ecosystem. Julia is a PhD candidate at Columbia University and the American Museum of Natural History. She has published scientific articles widely and has led expeditions in the Andean Plateau, coastal deserts of Peru, and western Amazonia. She is the first female vertebrate paleontologist in Peru, her country of origin.



# LIFE, INTERRUPTED

BY Minna Packer

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. It is 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.

We try to hold onto relationships, to our loved ones. Then our parents die. We mourn, we remember. We gather in the circle of life and watch growth and decay and the succession of generations. The very nature of life is change.

How does one go on in the face of living with a neurodegenerative disease? How do I live with Alzheimer's knowing what I know now after already experiencing so many changes? How do I live seeing people linger who are more advanced in the disease than me? I position myself between not giving up and simultaneously letting go.

The life I had is gone. I was a teacher, an artist, a filmmaker, a university professor, a Fulbright scholar. I was an active member of my academic, religious, and political community. I mentored students, traveled the world, presented my films to international audiences. I had a large network of support and supported others in their pursuits. My young adult children looked to me for advice and validation as they developed their own careers and entered serious relationships. With the heralding of Alzheimer's all of this has disappeared. My goals and aspirations—gone.

My life has become a matter of balancing not giving up with the knowledge that this disease is unbeatable. This is the paradox of Alzheimer's. That is why it's called "the long goodbye."

My life has been filled with art. I grew up in New York City, earned a master's degree from Pratt Institute, worked at the Brooklyn Museum, owned a

contemporary art gallery in SoHo, introduced my students to the Met, MoMA, Guggenheim, and more. I accompanied my students to Rome and Florence where we saw Michelangelo's *David* and Botticelli's *Primavera*. I traveled with them to Greece where we walked on the Acropolis. Yet I had never been to the Rubin Museum before my Alzheimer's diagnosis.

The Rubin introduced me to Tibetan and Buddhist art, an art that views death as an opportunity for spiritual enlightenment. At the Rubin I've seen images and artifacts that have helped me confront my own mortality, artworks that point to spiritual regeneration.

I know that I am facing the end of my life. I will not have the opportunity to create my masterpiece. My life was a work in progress. Now I have a disease that has taken over and progresses every day. It is telling me to let go. Let go of my life. Let go of my ideas. Let go of my thoughts. Let go of my body. Let go of all attachment. Allow myself to say goodbye. ☹️



Mindful Connections is a free tour program for people with dementia and their caregivers. Visit [RubinMuseum.org/access](http://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](http://www.backtogombin.com)), and she was recognized as a Distinguished Fulbright Scholar for her work on the film narrative *The Lilliput* ([www.thelilliputmovie.com](http://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](http://www.suddenlymad.com)).

# CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

## CONTEMPLATING IMPERMANENCE

Balancing love  
and loss with  
music and  
meditation

BY *David Nichtern*

**MY TEACHER, CHOGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE**, and my father, Sol Nichtern, passed away within a year of each other, inspiring me to write the song "In My Heart and On My Mind." (To hear my friend the wonderful singer Elise Morris sing it, visit [DavidNichtern.com/song](http://DavidNichtern.com/song).)

When we lose someone we love, we can actually feel 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 teaching with great depth, subtlety, and illumination.

A Western student asked His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa, one of the greatest Buddhist masters of the twentieth century, "What does an enlightened being experience?" He answered with a single word, "Impermanence!"

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, empathy, and compassion for them, ourselves, and all beings who are subject to the same terms of existence.

In contemplation practice we use our mindful attention to focus on a particular train of thought. This kind of practice can help us explore and resonate with 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 sidebar to the right are instructions from my recent book, *Creativity, Spirituality & Making a Buck*.

Usually when we contemplate the impermanence of our own body and in fact the bodies of all sentient beings from beginningless time, one of three things

happens: we get sad, we go into denial, we develop wisdom. In Buddhism aligning our minds with how things actually are is considered healthier and ultimately more productive than any fantasy or wishful thinking we could create.

The flip side of impermanence and change is that there is some kind of continuity. When we see an old friend, their hair might have turned grey, they may look more or less healthy, or be more or less happy, but there is still some feeling of a continuity of being—otherwise we would not even recognize them!

Continuity, in Tibetan Buddhist Tantra, is called *gyu*. A thread of continuity connects both confused habitual patterns as well as enlightened possibilities, going from moment to moment and lifetime to lifetime. Understanding this kind of continuity is key to understanding our spiritual journey in this very lifetime.

We can choose how to relate to the patterns of existence that are conditional as well as developing an awareness of dimensions of our existence that are less relative and time-dependent. These practices and understandings can lead us to experiencing our personal karma and journey more clearly as well as connecting with the primordial, unconditional nature of mind itself.

In addition to diminishment and loss, impermanence includes birth, new beginnings, transitions, and growth. If body, emotions, and mind were permanent there would be no opportunity for new life, evolution, and expansion.

Losing my father and my teacher in the same year provided a crash course in impermanence. Out of that loss came my song. They are gone, but as the lyrics say, I continue to hold them in my heart and mind. ☺

### CONTEMPLATE IMPERMANENCE

Take your meditation seat and bring your mind to this topic, exploring it fully and personally for five minutes.

Each time you do so will be different. There are no right or wrong contemplations. Just mix your mind with the topic and keep coming back to it when you wander. Don't settle for formulaic answers.

Each time you contemplate, see how far into the topic you can reach and then keep going further. When your mind wanders, just gently bring your thoughts back to the contemplation.

### In My Heart and On My Mind

Words and music by David Nichtern

#### VERSE 1:

Time goes by, faster than a freight train,  
Lovers come and lovers go.  
In my eyes your memory often lingers,  
I just had to let you know.

#### CHORUS 1:

Write these words down, sealed and signed:  
In this world, while breath still stirs my body,  
You're in my heart and on my mind.

#### VERSE 2:

In my life, I've searched for deeper meaning,  
Traveled far and traveled wide.  
But search the world and wisdom will elude you,  
For in the heart it does abide.

#### CHORUS 2:

Time to travel on, say goodbye.  
But in this world, while breath still fills my body,  
You're in my heart and on my mind.

#### BRIDGE:

Precious gifts you gave to me...  
These I will take with me on my journey.

#### CHORUS 3:

Time to travel on, say goodbye.  
But in this world, while breath still fills my body,  
You're in my heart and on my mind.  
You're in my heart and on my mind.

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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 Dharmadhatu Meditation Center and the Karne Choling Meditation Center, as well as director of Buddhist practice and study for OM Yoga. Nichtern is also a well-known composer, producer, and guitarist. A four-time Emmy winner and a two-time Grammy nominee, he is the founder of Dharma Moon and 5 Points Records. ([www.davidnichtern.com](http://www.davidnichtern.com))



## The spiritual and secular afterlives of bodies

BY *S. Brent Plate*

**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 corpses. The body itself has its own afterlife, its own place in the world, and these days there is a staggering array of ways to take care of the dead body. As climate change has become a greater threat, many new funerary practices have turned to so-called green burials, environmentally sustainable modes of laying the dead to rest. Such burials enable people to have afterlives by returning their bodies into the cycle of nature in a gentler way than most modern methods have allowed.

There are biodegradable coffins available for the deceased, or bodies can be buried vertically, thus saving ground space. The departed can be interred in natural burial grounds, cemeteries where bodies are buried without coffins or environmentally damaging embalming fluids. Green headstones—trees, shrubs, or natural stones—can replace quarried granite grave markers.

In 2015, for the first time in the United States, there were more cremations than burials. 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.

The Florida-based company Eternal Reefs goes one step further by taking the remains—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 emits 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 alkaline 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 recombination, 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 bin. 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 life.

On its website, Eternal Reefs states its practices offer families “a permanent environmental living legacy,” while Resomation 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 to not let the professional death industry take care of the deceased. She describes how families can care for the body themselves, in their own ways, 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 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 funerals calls for the dead body to be washed, wrapped in a simple cotton or linen shroud, and buried—as embalming is forbidden in the Islamic tradition.

How humans take care of their dead, and by extension how they value the body, offers clues as to what they hold sacred at any time, regardless of religious belief and unbelief. The soulless dead body carries power and presence. It commands respect and demands to be treated thoughtfully and carefully.

Burials are linked to hope, whether it is the ancient Egyptians wishing for good journeys through the underworld, Christians seeking a heavenly afterlife, or modern secularists aspiring for a more sustainable future for our environment. ☺

S. Brent Plate is a writer, editor, and professor of religious studies at Hamilton College. His essays have appeared in *Salon*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *America*, *The Christian Century*, and *The Islamic Monthly*, and his books include *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses* and *Blasphemy: Art that Offends*. He is currently writing *The Spiritual Life of Dolls*.



BY **Thanissara**  
**Mary**  
**Weinberg**

**These days the climate crisis is my spiritual practice. Climate change is really an umbrella term for the litany of calamities that now dominate our daily awareness: species extinction, rapid ice melts, devastating fires, biblical floods, migrations, wars, and political dysfunction.**

**I aim to find a balance between cultivating an inner practice and being aware of our fast dismembering world. This awareness isn't an abstract observation—it's deeply felt in the body as a roller coaster of emotions. Dread, panic, outrage, grief, sheer disbelief, and disturbed dreams have become bedfellows.**

**In the face of this, it is important for me to use meditative awareness to regulate my nervous system. I work with the breath and have trained my attention to stay with feeling—to directly feel feeling—and not proliferate mentally around what is felt. Mixing breath and awareness with attention to feeling, the body and mind are able to metabolize disturbing emotions quickly and maintain inner well-being, clarity, stamina, and focus.**

**I also do a deep breath practice that releases any residue of distress and connects me to a profound sense of compassion and lucidity. With deep breath and meditative practices, I sense into the shadow energy that is consuming the world, and then, invoking spirit protectors, suffuse it with the light of consciousness and compassion.**

**I don't think life is going back to some kind of stable norm; these are now the times we live in. While heartbreaking, there is also a collective awakening that is fast evolving. It is like a quantum intelligence moving through us all. There is something breathtaking about this. We feel the urgency and its call to radically reprioritize, to act, and to lovingly treasure each moment.**

Thanissara Mary Weinberg was a Buddhist nun for twelve years and has taught meditation retreats with her partner, Kittisaro, since 1992. Together they founded Dharmagiri Sacred Mountain Retreat in South Africa and co-authored *Listening to the Heart: A Contemplative Guide to Engaged Buddhism*. She is also author of *Time to Stand Up: An Engaged Buddhist Manifesto for Our Earth*. Thanissara and Kittisaro recently launched Sacred Mountain Sangha, a California-based nonprofit ([www.sacredmountainsangha.org](http://www.sacredmountainsangha.org)).

### 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

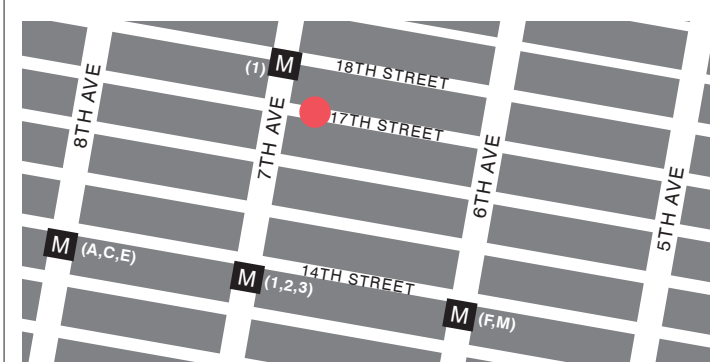
The Rubin Museum explores and celebrates the diversity of Himalayan art, ideas, and culture across history and into the present. With its globally renowned collection, the Rubin fosters understanding and appreciation of this extraordinary region by connecting its art and ideas to contemporary issues 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 better navigate outer ones.

#### MUSEUM HOURS

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

#### VISIT

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



#### CONNECT WITH US

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

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- Join our email list at [RubinMuseum.org/enews](http://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

## Exhibitions

Through the lens of Himalayan art, we journey with all who are curious to explore our shared human experience and consciously and insightfully navigate the complexities of our world today.



Photograph by David De Armas

#### 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.

#### 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 enshrined 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.**

# Programs & Experiences

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 contemporary experience.

### 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.

### Art and Yoga Urban Retreat

Join *NY YOGA + LIFE* magazine and the Rubin for a full day of workshops and classes pairing the art of the Himalaya with teachers, artists, and leaders in the yoga community. Events take place in the Museum's galleries and theater and focus on asana sessions from prominent teachers as well as in-depth, intimate workshops.

## COMMUNITY

### Senior Day

First Thursday of the month

Seniors (65 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

Kick 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 Himalayan region.

## MUSIC

### Rhythms of India

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

### ONE-OF-A-KIND EXPERIENCES

#### The Rubin Fete

October 28, 2020

Join us for an evening of surprising Museum-wide experiences, flavors, and sensations that explore the idea of impermanence. Enjoy delicious food and drinks at this cocktail and performance extravaganza.

### Dream-Over: A Sleepover for Adults

December

Dream under the compassionate, wakeful 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](http://TheRubin.org/playlist).

### Windows on Impermanence

See a special display in the Rubin Museum window front.



Smashana Adipati, Lords of the Charnel Ground; Tibet; 15th century; pigments on cloth; Rubin Museum of Art; gift of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation; F1996.16.5 (HAR 462)

All programs subject to change. For current listings, visit [RubinMuseum.org](http://RubinMuseum.org).

# More Than a Museum

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

## CAFÉ 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.

## K2 FRIDAY NIGHTS

### Free Museum Admission

6:00–10:00 PM

During K2 Friday Nights, Café Serai becomes the K2 Lounge, offering a special pan-Asian tapas menu to accompany the evening's DJ and programs. Happy hour runs from 6:00 to 7:00 PM with a two-for-one special on beer, wine, and well drinks.

## THE SHOP

Take a memory of the Museum home with you, or give a gift from the Rubin! The shop's selection of jewelry, artisan goods, 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](http://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.

# You Make It Possible

Like all nonprofit arts organizations, the Rubin Museum is only as strong as our supporters. You help us create a space for contemplation, learning, inspiration, community, and art. Join us! Visit [RubinMuseum.org/support](http://RubinMuseum.org/support) to learn more.

### Become a member or give the gift of membership

Members get more! Benefits include invitations to exclusive previews and tours, free admission to Mindfulness Meditation, program discounts, unlimited entry to the galleries, and much more. Membership to the Rubin Museum of Art is also a special gift that friends and family of all ages can enjoy throughout the year.

### 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.

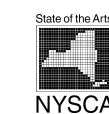
### Thank you to our distribution partners!

Organizations in New York City and beyond help make *Spiral* possible. Find the full list of our partners and distribution locations at [RubinMuseum.org/Spiral](http://RubinMuseum.org/Spiral).



Photograph by Filip Wolak

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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](https://RubinMuseum.org/news) to stay up to date with exhibitions and more.

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