



*An Essay by  
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# **Know The Deal Here**

**CONFRONTING ENTITLEMENT &  
FACING LIFE'S IMPERMANENCE**



**Know the Deal Here:  
Entitlement vs. Impermanence**

*The Dakini Speaks*

*My friends, let's grow up.  
Let's stop pretending we don't know the deal here.  
Or if we truly haven't noticed, let's wake up and notice.  
Look: everything that can be lost, will be lost.  
It's simple--how could we have missed it for so long?  
Let's grieve our losses fully, like ripe human beings,  
But please, let's not be so shocked by them.  
Let's not act so betrayed,  
As though life had broken her secret promise to us.  
Impermanence is life's only promise to us,  
And she keeps it with ruthless impeccability.  
To a child she seems cruel, but she is only wild,  
And her compassion is exquisitely precise:  
Brilliantly penetrating, luminous with truth,  
She strips away the unreal to show us the real.  
This is the true ride -- let's give ourselves to it!  
Let's stop making deals for a safe passage:  
There isn't one anyway, and the cost is too high.  
We are not children any more.  
The true human adult gives everything for what cannot be lost.  
Let's dance the wild dance of no hope!*

*-Jennifer Welwood*



There inevitably comes a time in our lives when we are confronted by life's vicissitudes. Everything turns away from where it once was. What we gain, we lose. What rose up, comes back down. What is new grows old. What is found becomes lost again. Disappointment, failure, injury, loss – these are all inevitable. The longer we live, the more we come to realize the harsh fate of reality. It is simply the fallout of incarnate existence. But somewhere along the way we forget, ignore or endlessly reject the deal.

There also comes a time where we must begin to realize our own childlike insistence that life as it is on earth should *not* be this way. We believe that it should not be filled with difficulty, disease, destructiveness. We think that we should not have to struggle. Life should be better, easier and more enjoyable than it currently is; more satisfying than it actually is.

That life should serve me, instead of me being of service to life itself.



*One unfortunate consequence of living in a Western culture is that it can breed in us a sense of entitlement.*

A privileged, modernized world has ‘convenienced’ us all. It has given us access to an ever-growing plethora of technological advances, designed to bring more comfort and more ease, more efficiency and endless entertainment to our fingertips. We are overloaded by informational minutiae, which helps to erode any authentic connection to the broader and wilder aspects of the natural world.

It seems that the more we fall prey to the entitlements and egocentricities of this privileged way of modern life, the more we also suffer from it.

As a result, we are vulnerable to becoming reduced to what George Bernard Shaw calls “a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making us happy”.



A Jennifer Welwood poem provides the inspirational focus for this essay. Her words come forth through the spirit and essence of the *Dakini*, a fierce and volatile feminine deity from Tibetan Buddhism. She is a wrathful guardian, a keeper of the great mysteries of the deeper self. Welwood offers us a clear and penetrating piece of writing on a matter of great concern: *impermanence*.

At once both sobering and liberating, her way of unveiling illusion cuts through the self-deceptive and self-ingratiating tendencies of our egoic, childish thinking. In a simple and straightforward manner, she splashes cold water on our faces, puts reality right up in front of us, says ‘look closely, look right here’. The first thing she asks us to look right into is the reality of loss.

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Or if we truly haven't noticed, let's wake up and notice.  
Look: everything that can be lost, will be lost.  
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Welwood begins with an imperative right from the start – grow up, and wake up. Drop the sleepy, unconscious child consciousness demands that think life should take care of you. This doesn’t work. See the way the world actually is from your adult eyes. Acknowledge the reality of ‘chronos’ – the factual consequences of the existence of time. This may appear dire and feel harsh to you. But this is just the way it is. Stop taking it so personally.

Of course, we will lose everything. I suppose we have missed this fact for so long due to our tendencies towards child-like, wishful thinking. From the undeveloped perspective of an immature consciousness, losing what we seek to possess is devastating. From a fearful and fragile ego mind, we learn to cling, to grasp; then we lament what eludes our grasping.

*"Why do we have to suffer loss? I hate to lose; it hurts."* Yes, it does. *"I don't want to feel pain."* Right, no one does. *"But I don't want to be the one who is hurting; why does it have to hurt so much?"* That's a good question.

But invariably, pain comes. It gives our lives a certain contrast to joy; otherwise, our senses become dulled. *"I don't care, I refuse to accept the way I hurt."* Understood. But that refusal, unfortunately, is again one of the privileges of our being human. We are free to deny what is inevitable – our fate, as well as our destiny. Suffering is inevitable, it is said, but misery is optional. And the big trouble, the ongoing and pervasive sense of misery in our lives, ultimately stems from this posture of refusal.

So back to the basic fact – *everything that can be lost, will be lost*. If we are truly on a hero's journey, we learn to say YES to that truth. We suffer losses all the time. Sometimes the losses will be big ones; we hope to be given them in doses we can accept. We suffer little losses all the time, in ways that we may not even recognize as loss. Until we learn to pay closer attention to their arrivals.

*Let's grieve our losses fully, like ripe human beings,  
But please, let's not be so shocked by them.  
Let's not act so betrayed,  
As though life had broken her secret promise to us.*

The other day, I find a gaping tear in the stitching in a favorite pair of dress pants – suddenly they are un-wearable. Out they go. Yesterday, as I crouched down to look underneath my sink – I am struck with a sudden awareness of deep aching in my knees. The harsh fact of aging arrives.

Last week, going through a desk drawer, I come across a buried photo of my daughter at age 5 - short blond hair, bangs, and an innocent gaze directly towards the camera. She is being swallowed by a big, flowered sofa chair, clutching her beloved cat, Marshmallow. The sofa chair, like her, is no longer in my house. Nor is her pet for that matter, whose demise had come a half-dozen years ago. The house in which the sofa chair sat is no longer our house. Everyone, everything has moved on. And yet something lingers on...

Melancholy drips in with no advance notice. A feeling of loss comes with the subtle realization of an accumulation of losses. This is especially so with the 'in-the-past-ness' of my daughter's early childhood years. Old photographs will evoke this in me.

Maybe this is what makes the feeling of loss so difficult to bear – sometimes, you just

can't see it coming. One minute you open a drawer looking for the postage stamps, the next minute you close it having found something else altogether. In an instant, a sense of sadness appears right in front of you, as you gaze into a photograph that has captured a time that no longer is. You wake up and take notice, feel the passage of time right then and there.

*Let's grieve our losses fully.* An emotional task that the modern age works against. This is very challenging thing to do in a busy life filled with tasks and distractions. Grief needs time, space, and patience. One has to be able to tolerate a strong sense of absence, in the midst of a presence going on as usual. The sorrow brought on by feeling the loss of someone or something that matters needs to be felt in the body, needs to be reflected upon and then expressed from the heart.

Yes, loss hurts. The empty space created by our losses can feel ominous and frightening. This in turn may be used by our judging minds as an indictment, some sketchy kind of evidence of having failed at living, and not simply the cost of living.

A healthy relationship to grief softens us, helps us to grow tenderness. Welwood's *Dakini* also tells that it ripens us, makes us more palatable as human beings. We fear that we could drown, be pulled under by the waters of grief. Those unable to enter the waters of grief, who refuse to accept its inevitable arrival - become hardened, embittered by it.

I love David Whyte's poem entitled 'The Well of Grief' . It speaks to me like no other poem about loss, and it has a timeless truth that still rings out from the moment I first heard him speak it, some 20 some years ago.

*Those who will not step beneath  
the still surface on the well of grief*

*turning downward through its black water  
to the place we cannot breathe*

*Will never know the source  
From which we drink,  
The secret water, cold and clear.*

*Nor find in the darkness glimmering  
The small round coins  
Thrown by those who wished  
For something else.*

You might want to sit with this poem for a while. Can you have compassion for the place in you that has always wished for anything else but the grief you need to feel and live with?



Now, let's hear more wisdom from the mouth of the *Dakini*, concerning the essential matter of impermanence.

*Impermanence is life's only promise to us,  
And she keeps it with ruthless impeccability.  
To a child she seems cruel, but she is only wild,  
And her compassion is exquisitely precise:*

Impermanence. The evidence of this truth is everywhere. How could any of us have missed it for long? I look outside the house - dead leaves are littered in the yards from a recent storm; now there is a large tree branch down in the driveway across the street. I see a new mailman walking towards the front door. When did the old one stop delivering our mail?

There are other signs of the passage of time, as I walk around the house. The newspaper clipping on the refrigerator, already yellowing. A downspout is discolored and peeling paint - when did that begin to happen? I notice a new crack in the walkway pavement.

If you keep noticing, the stakes get higher. The house next door, always exquisitely kept, now empty. My neighbor is now placed in the assisted care facility half a mile away. A knee replacement needed for my mother, whose hip is also now a problem. My father's passage from this life is now beyond the one-year anniversary point. When I visit his grave at the cemetery, I see my own name on the tombstone. How does the wearing away of life not seem cruel?



I remember Sam Keen once saying that a person who cannot grieve is a person that becomes prone to violence. Conversely, you can't be soured and hardened by an angry posture if you have the capacity to spill hot tears from the core of your being. We are laid open and vulnerable, made tender by allowing a 'letting go' to happen. It is by the gradual arriving at the soft pain underneath it all, that we allow our lives to take a new turn.

I suppose this must be the exquisite nature of compassion. If you ride the waters of grief through to sorrow's very end (especially if you believe there will never be an end), at some point the light begins to peek through yet again, as the sun does at the end of a heavy thunderstorm.

*Brilliantly penetrating, luminous with truth,  
She strips away the unreal to show us the real.  
This is the true ride -- let's give ourselves to it!*

The true ride through life, discerning what is real from what is unreal. How to know the difference? What we experience as real at one point in our lives, seems unreal a little further along on the ride. When we suffer a loss and experience the absence of what once was, don't we look back and ask ourselves "What was all that? Did that really happen? Was it really real? What does what I once lived mean to my present reality, now?"

What we know to be real is what we experience as meaningful, substantive and enduring for our internal lives. It is what remains on the inside, after the experience of 'now' in the outside world moves and turns, and takes its place in the past.

*Let's stop making deals for a safe passage:  
There isn't one anyway, and the cost is too high.  
We are not children any more.*

Making deals for a safe passage through this life. Don't we all have our own particular way of doing this? Doing what we believe we can to insure ourselves against pain and loss. We minimize our risks by opening to them less – yet when we restrict our range of actions, and cordon off vital aspects of living – over-protecting and under-venturing – we create a closed loop that breeds stagnancy, insulating us from life as well as loss. This cost is high, but when we pay it little by little over time, we go to sleep, and hardly notice.

*The true human adult gives everything for what cannot be lost.  
Let's dance the wild dance of no hope!*

What is the primary difference between a child's mind and an adult's perspective? When we are children, we need to be provided for. We naturally look to life to take care of us. When we are deprived of or denied this opportunity in our young life, we become stuck in this unconscious and unmet need as we move into adulthood. Thus, we tend to continue on with an increasingly unrealizable task – still looking for life to serve us. We become dominated by unconscious and infantile child demands on life, which undermine our closest relationships and corrode our attitude and approach to our life's unfolding path.

Here is where we end up confused and hurt – *we act like we don't know the deal* – because we have lost sight of the real deal. In our adult life, our task is to be of service to life, not to simply be served by it. In fact, by being of service to life, by bringing forth our talents, our vitality and our love – *this is* how we are served in return. The psychoanalyst Erich Fromm states that it is the giving of our lives, and giving from what is alive in us, that becomes an exquisite joy in and of itself.

When we give wholeheartedly from this adult place in us, from what is most real and authentic, we have an accompanying feeling that there is really nothing to be lost. We realize that we have nothing to lose because we are wholeheartedly behind what matters most to us.

When we are aligned with our true nature, when we live from our 'wildness' – we in fact do not need to rely on hope, for we are beyond the need for any reassurance or guarantees that could lead to bargaining and a false sense of hope. Our willingness to dance with the vicarious rhythms of life, while in touch with our authentic inner life, is taking the true ride through life. Riding life as it is, not as we wish for it to be.



As I was writing this piece, a poem synchronistically arrived in my email inbox. Today's offering was from Shodo Harada Roshi, a reknowned Japanese Zen Buddhist teacher of traditional Rinzai practices. I embrace his revered manner of teaching about 'knowing the deal here'. Coming from Eastern culture, he speaks the same message with a diametrically opposed style from which Welwood's *Dakini* speaks. He impeccably embodies and transmits the wild dance of no hope, in a most life-giving way.

*In this passing moment karma ripens  
and all things come to be.  
I vow to choose what is:  
If there is cost, I choose to pay.  
If there is need, I choose to give.  
If there is pain, I choose to feel.  
If there is sorrow, I choose to grieve.  
When burning -- I choose heat.  
When calm -- I choose peace.  
When starving -- I choose hunger.  
When happy -- I choose joy.  
Whom I encounter, I choose to meet.  
What I shoulder, I choose to bear.  
When it is my death, I choose to die.  
Where this takes me, I choose to go.  
Being with what is -- I respond to what is.*

*This life is as real as a dream;  
the one who knows it can not be found;  
and, truth is not a thing –  
Therefore I vow to choose  
THIS dharma entrance gate!  
May all Buddhas and Wise Ones  
help me live this vow.*

This takes me back to the very first line of Welwood's poem. *My friends, let's grow up.* Shodo Harada Roshi shows us what it takes to do just that. By saying 'yes' to life, just like this. One encounter, one mindful act at a time, as it arises. The willingness to move beyond our endless list of self-concerns, time and again. Striving to be in



right relationship to life, one moment at a time. How could we have missed it for so long?

I've been doing a good bit of traveling and writing as of late, often doing one as I am doing the other. As I am composing the end of this essay, I am again seated (and have been, for quite some time) on an aircraft runway, hoping to be headed for home. The pilot has just come onto the loudspeaker, announcing a "slight mechanical problem" with one of the indicator lights on the instrument panel. We've taxied back to the gate, and now I sit - writing and waiting for the verdict.

Time to practice Harada Roshi's teaching. For now, I say 'yes' to this circumstance. An old aphorism from the aviation field suddenly comes to my mind: *"It is much better to be on the ground, wishing you could be in the air - than to be in the air, wishing you could be on the ground."* Amen to that.

For this evening, I'll dance the dance of no hope. Life as it is just became more livable.

- Michael Mervosh

