“Living Impermanence”
From Cedar Rapids Zen Center on Facebook:

In “Genjokoan” Dōgen talks about sitting in a boat and watching the shore. If we look only at the shore, it seems that we’re sitting still and the shore is moving. When we look at the boat, however, we see how things really are.

This is a metaphor for our usual view of ourselves. We think we’re substantial and permanent but, if we look closely, we see it’s not the case. This is what Shakyamuni Buddha called “delusion.” It’s also normal. We remember when we were kids, then teens, and so on until the present moment. It feels like there’s something permanent and ongoing here. If we look closely, we see that, while it looks unchanging it’s actually been shifting the whole time. Remembering our ten-year-old self, we realize that we are not that person today, with their child’s body and limited view of the world. We die and are reborn in each moment. We are moving. There is nothing permanent here except our constant change.

When we return to this moment we see that we’re a constantly changing part of a constantly changing world. All parts of reality function together, flowing in interdependence with each other. We’re nothing other than one piece of the universe working together with all the other pieces – earth, trees, cats, automobiles, stars – in an ongoing process of making reality into reality. We are not separate entities with our own personal, eternal, fixed self, but reality constantly expressing itself and constantly flowing.

This doesn’t mean we’re nothing. We’re something, just not what we thought we were. We’re not a fixed thing. We’re a happening, as my friend Tonen O’Connor once expressed it. Or – in today’s terms a flash mob. Out of the general circulation of people, some gather, forming a smaller whole in the context of the larger whole. They dance, play music, or perform a play and then melt back into the general context. While they’re there, they are reality making the reality of that place into reality, and it’s surprising and wonderful. What’s happening is definitely there and tangible, and we may sing or dance along, becoming part of it. But the performers soon disperse back into the flow of people.

This is us. While we’re here, we are definitely here, in need of food and friendship, doing whatever we are doing as part of reality. However, we get in trouble when we begin to take this self too seriously, forgetting that we’re just a flash mob of stuff that’s come together – an expression of reality becoming itself. Later, we’ll disperse, with our elements becoming parts of other flash mobs elsewhere, continuing to make reality into its ever-changing, ever-becoming self.

Excerpt From *Karma: What It Is, What It Isn't, Why It Matters* by Traleg Kyabgon

When the Buddha stated that we could become a noble person or an ignoble person, he was also implying a form of death and rebirth. We can become somebody very different from what we were before. Running counter to this though, we often become completely engrossed in the notion of a fixed, underlying self. Taking this course, the whole notion of self-transformation proves to be untenable, unreal. It would be a superficial change, analogous to an actor's changing costumes, which is exactly the image, as we know, used in the traditional eternalist stance. The Buddha, in rejecting the entire eternalist framework of his day, was saying that actor and costume are the same. One is what one is acting. However we act it out, however we project ourselves —that is what we are. That is all we need too, according to the Buddha; there is no need for something "extra."

The performer of actions is not an agent disassociated from his or her action. Commonly though, it is thought that the acts one performs and the agent responsible for the actions are separate—the actions being one thing and the agent, the actor, something different. It seems plausible in a sense, because a single agent performs a great many different actions while remaining, seemingly, much the same over the course of his or her life. The Buddha disagreed with this entirely, maintaining that the agent and the action are enmeshed, so to speak. Agents are transformed by the actions they perform. The actions engaged in, the karmic activities in other words, produce effects on the agents themselves. There is mutual influence here, and it is not the case that stable agents carry out different forms of action while remaining unchanged themselves. This was a radical idea for the time, as we have discussed, in comparison to prevailing Indian thought, which always positioned the agent as remaining the same, and only the actions as changing.

To reiterate, "karma" basically means action. When we talk about karma, we talk about action, which in Buddhism entails thinking in terms of cause and effect. Actions are performed because there are certain preexisting causes and conditions giving rise to the impulse to engage in particular actions, and from this the karmic effect issues. In the performance of actions, there is usually a propelling factor. We feel compelled by something to do certain things, and when we engage in those actions, based on those impulses, the actions then produce relevant effects. As we have seen though, this does not mean that every action performed has a particular cause and a particular effect. Nevertheless, the Buddhist theory of karma is irrevocably tied to this mechanism, for want of a better word, and hence to the responsibility of the individual, as opposed to a divine governance of sorts. To quote the Buddha himself:

> "Possessed of my own deeds, I am the inheritor of deeds, kin to deeds, one who has deeds as a refuge. Whatever deed I shall do, whether good or evil, I shall become the heir of it—This is to be repeatedly contemplated by woman, and by man; by householder, and by him who has been taken into the order."

The Buddha, radically, interpreted the individual as a compound of many different elements, physical and mental—a psychophysical complex. Therefore our feelings, thoughts, emotions, memories, dispositions; our perceptual capability, our cognitive capacities, and our physical conditions—all are constantly interacting and impacting each other.

And agents themselves are also continually interacting with other agents. Logically, then, we need not feel compelled to identify ourselves with a single thing, a core element to our psyche, as it is really a matter of being in a constant state of flux. In this sense, karma could be said to operate as streams of networking karmic processes, where all kinds of living, breathing individuals are involved. The really important principle to grasp about this approach is to look closely at things, for things in their nature are complex. Acknowledging this will bring us great reward—knowledge in fact. Doing the opposite, looking at things in a very simple way, keeps us trapped in ignorance.

The Buddha believed completely in this, which is why the Dharma, in this context, literally means the teachings that shed light on the dharmas, or on phenomena. Here "dharmas" refers to the elements, the mental and physical factors that constitute our being, and existence generally. Through this interrelationship of dharmas, the agent and action are completely attached to each other in the idea of karma. The Buddha uniquely challenged our "commonsense" feeling of there being an agent existing without reference to actions and disputed the one-way paradigm of action as being subordinate to the agent. According to him, we become what we are as a result of what we are doing, and hence the great emphasis on the importance of karma, of action in the wider sense. It follows from this, too, that if we do not think about karma, then we cannot really be Buddhist, as we will be unable to fully relate to who "The Buddha uniquely challenged our "commonsense" feeling of there being an agent existing without reference to actions and disputed the one-way paradigm of action as being subordinate to the agent. According to him, we become what we are as a result of what we are doing, and hence the great emphasis on the importance of karma, of action in the wider sense. It follows from this, too, that if we do not think about karma, then we cannot really be Buddhist, as we will be unable to fully relate to who we are, or what we are, as an individual.

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This interconnectedness of everything is termed "interdependent arising" in Buddhism. As everything is interdependently arisen, we do not have the perspective of a solitary agent performing a variety of actions but a complex multifaceted individual engaged with many diverse roles, intersecting with a very complex world. This is the real core of it all and is really what is behind the great emphasis on the practice of mindfulness and awareness, for if things were simple in themselves, there would be no real need of paying too much attention to them. If this were in fact the case, we could just keep on digging and digging for this simple kernel of truth, which once found, promises to enfold us in some kind of measureless bliss and perception.

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Because the agent is in a constant state of flux, the Buddha said, we take rebirth, which is again contingent on the idea that even while alive we are not the same person. The person who was born at the time of birth and the person who actually dies at the end of our life are not exactly the same. It is described as “the same, but different.” So to comprehend being reborn in another life form, it might help to think that the reborn “individual,” or whatever we want to call it, is not exactly the same being as the one who lived the previous life. And yet, the reborn being still carries certain dispositional properties, certain mental imprints, or karmic imprints, from the past life into the present—things are carried on. This is true for us even as we live this present life. After all, it is clear that the person born and the person who dies are not the same. A newborn baby and an eighty-year-old person about to die are not the same. So the idea of rebirth is extrapolated from that notion, and if everything about the idea of being is intimately tied up with this notion of becoming, then being this or that kind of individual is no different from becoming this or that kind of person.

We need to clearly distinguish between the notions of rebirth and reincarnation. They refer to different things, though the terms are often used interchangeably. Essentially, reincarnation refers to exactly the same person’s coming back in another life, and this involves the idea of there being an intrinsic self, a soul. The Buddhist theory of rebirth does not posit that exactly the same person subsequently takes on a different life after death. The fact that many Buddhists probably believe in something like reincarnation does not make it the case that this is what the Buddha taught. In thinking of rebirth, we should not think that the same individual, or sentient creature, is being reborn.

Again, as the Buddha himself explained, it is “the same but different.” It is the notion of continuity that is addressed here, rather than a fixed kind of entity persisting and being transferred from one state of existence to another. This idea of continuity goes right through the Buddhist canon, encouraging us to actually reinvent ourselves at different stages of our journey. Thus if we look at all aspects of ourselves, change will be real. We do really change. For the Buddha, we are the same and not the same at different stages of life, and similarly, in respect to rebirth, coming back under karmic compulsion, it is not really “us.” Consciousness is pushed along by certain dispositions that have become transferred to our mental continuum, and these tendencies are brought along to our new birth.

The Buddha called this the “middle way” and described those who believed in a concept of a soul as “eternalists.” Believing that the exact same person or sentient creature is reborn over and over is to be an eternalist in Buddhist terminology. Those who maintain that there is no life after death, with nothing persisting after the final moment ceases, he called “nihilists.” The middle way approach avoids these two extreme views.