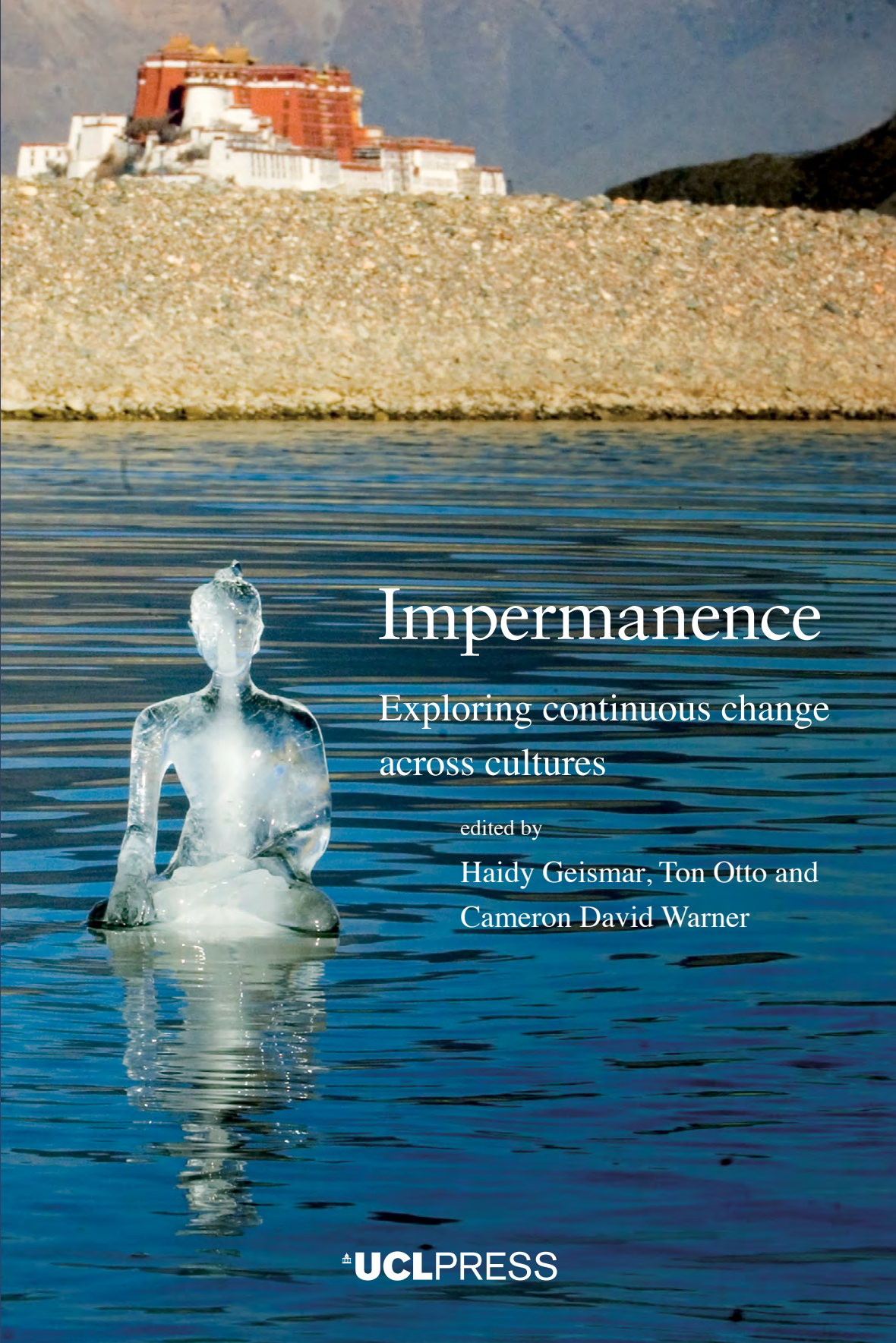

Impermanence

Exploring continuous change across cultures

edited by

Haidy Geismar, Ton Otto and Cameron David Warner

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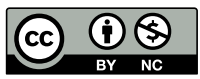

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5

Encountering impermanence, making change: a case study of attachment and alcoholism in Thailand

Julia Cassaniti

'I just want things to *stop*,' my friend Sen said, looking at me blurrily, the whiskey he'd been drinking taking effect. 'I want things to be the way they *were*.' He seemed emphatic when he spoke but also disoriented, as if he knew he couldn't keep changes from happening around him but wasn't able to feel any other way. He excused himself from the desk to go to his room at the back of the house, and when he returned a few minutes later his eyes were even more glazed over than before, his breath smelling even more strongly of the cheap rice whiskey he'd been drinking more and more of lately. 'Before, friends would stop by, we'd travel around – around town, around Chiang Mai, on the empty streets,' he went on, glancing at the mountain by his house in Mae Jaeng, beyond which Northern Thailand's main city of Chiang Mai lay, a few hours away. 'In the red car, with the windows open, smoking cigarettes. I wanted it to just go on and on that way, forever. But now they're busy . . . Look at this road,' he gestured to the small street in front of us, where a steady stream of four-wheel pickups and motorbikes were passing by. 'It's so crowded, you can't even walk across the street without stretching out your neck to see, one way, the other way . . . Everyone's coming and going. I just want to *be* here.' He glowered and reminisced as he told me about life when he was a teenager, as he had often done in the many conversations we had had about his past. I was in town for the year doing anthropological research on conceptions of change in Thailand, and, in between the more formalised ethnographic interviews I was collecting, I would often stop

5.1 'Charming life: The secret of a happy life is to accept change gracefully'. The cover of a notebook at a bookstore in Chiang Mai. In addition to textual Buddhist teachings, an awareness of change permeates popular culture in Thailand, creating a general social orientation toward impermanence. Photo: Julia Cassaniti.

by and chat with him.[1] I would sit with him quietly, both of us thinking about change.

As a Buddhist living in a predominantly Buddhist community, Sen was familiar with the teaching of impermanence: impermanence is understood to be one of the central facts of life, and recognition of its truth is understood to help decrease suffering. Others around Sen were certainly familiar with the teaching, and they grappled with it in their own ways. Most of those around him seemed to be able to handle changes in their stride. Sen seemed unable to do so, and in the end it almost cost him his life. Everyone struggles with change, but most people are able to come to terms with it, more or less. In spending time with Sen, I found myself wondering: how does someone who has a hard time dealing with change manifest that struggle in their body and mind? And how does coming to terms with impermanence stand to help not just one person but all of us? I wondered, in other words, how an acceptance of impermanence doesn't just represent a kind of giving up, a passive helplessness in the face of the inevitable, but instead create change and help – as the bookstore notebook in Figure 5.1 put it – to live 'a happy life'. In sketching Sen's personal struggles with attachment and alcohol, leading up to and following a series of hospitalisations, I address these questions and suggest some of the lessons that impermanence offers for a small community in Northern Thailand, and potentially for us all. His case reveals avenues by which we can apply the lessons of impermanence, which can be read in different ways as a Buddhist concept, a universal concept and a local concept.

The Buddhist teaching of impermanence is well known in Mae Jaeng. It is referred to through the formal Pali term *anicca*, one of the Three Characteristics of life as expressed by the Buddha, along with *dukha* (unsatisfactoriness) and *anatta* (non-self). More colloquially, it is expressed in phrases incorporating ideas of *mai tiang* (instability) and *kwam mai nae non* (uncertainty). '*Anicca* means impermanence, transiency, the state of coming to life and eventually perishing; physically apparent change,' reads the highschool textbook *Religion and Society* in Thai that Sen's brother Noi was learning from at the time, and which Sen most likely learned from too. 'Uncertainty:', it continues, 'That which arises, must pass away. Instability'. When Noi was ordained as a novice monk, he and 99 other novices being ordained with him chanted about impermanence in Pali texts based on the Saṃyutta Nikāya (SN) 22.7–9 sutta, as all do for officially recognised ordinations in Thailand (Vajirañāṇavarorasa 1973). And when the head monk of a nearby monastery passed away, villagers gathered to hear chants about

impermanence from the Mahā Parinibbāṇa Sutta (the last words of the Buddha), which is a common practice at Thai funerals. People chant at night about impermanence before sleeping, reading from chanting books commonly found in monasteries, libraries and convenience stores. They learn about impermanence at the many monasteries that sparkle with gold along the valley floor, where they gather to hear *dhamma* teachings from monks, and outside the monastery in movies, social media, political messages and public service announcements.

Impermanence seemed to be everywhere. Given the many religious teachings about impermanence circulating in Northern Thailand, at first I was surprised that it was not just Sen who didn't talk much about it. When I first started learning about it in Mae Jaeng, I expected that when I asked about it people would talk about it familiarly and emphatically. I thought they would tell me about impermanence in the kinds of abstract terms that I encountered in the chants around them, or from other similar teachings found throughout Theravāda Buddhism's sacred texts. Instead, when I asked about impermanence, few people seemed to have much to say about it at all. They said that they didn't know much about the concept, and that I should go talk to the monks to hear about such a philosophical topic. When I asked the monks, I was told generally the same thing: 'we're just trying to take care of the novice [monk]s here, go talk to the monks in Bangkok.'

After an early generation of Buddhist-studies scholars were intrigued that Buddhists would apparently live by such a difficult set of truths (such as the teaching of *anatta*, that one has no essential self) (Rahula 1974; Almond 1988), a second generation of scholars pushed back against the idea that Buddhists follow Buddhist teachings unproblematically, pointing to the many differences between doctrine and practice (Cassaniti 2006, 2015; Collins 1998; McDaniel 2011). The teaching of impermanence was a prime suspect for this anti-doctrinal move. After all, Buddhist teachings are hard to understand and even harder to live; this is why the monastery was created, as a place for refuge from a chaotic world. For lay followers, impermanence could perhaps be seen as an abstract, rather than a pragmatic, truth.

Yet I came to realise that people in Mae Jaeng had been hesitant to talk about impermanence not because it was irrelevant to their daily lives but because it was both too profound and too obvious to mention. They didn't want to risk saying something incorrect about a formal teaching to a foreign researcher or state something so obvious that it barely needed elaborating at all. The more time I spent in Mae Jaeng, the more I started

to hear about impermanence in everyday settings, not in abstraction but practically, in times of challenge. It was raised especially in terms of helping people feel better about what was happening around them. 'I had a bad crop this year because of the rain,' a farmer named Aeh told me, sitting on her mat on the ground next to fields of rice, 'but I think about how things are *mai nae non*; we can't be sure. Sometimes we'll have a good year, sometimes we'll have a bad year. I think of how everything changes, and I feel better.' My host sister Goy told me about her father, who had been sitting with the family around a campfire just a few months before, when he had a heart attack and died almost immediately. 'It was a lesson for me', Goy said thoughtfully 'that things are *mai tiang* – not stable.' Impermanence was everywhere, and was useful.

An excess of attachment

For my friend Sen, though, change felt insurmountable. He understood the teaching of impermanence in a general sense but he didn't do anything to practice it, as far as I could tell. Though Buddhist like almost all of the others in town, Sen did not chant before sleeping, or meditate, or visit the village monastery, even for his brother's ordination. He himself had never been ordained as a monk, unlike virtually all other Buddhist males in this overwhelmingly Buddhist country. 'I respect the Buddha . . .', he told me, pausing thoughtfully, 'but I don't know about the monks.'

I had got to know Sen when he still seemed fine, before alcohol overtook his life. His welcoming smile and genial attitude readily brought friends to him, and, more often than not, he could be found drinking and relaxing with them in the evenings after running the family store during the day. Sen had gone to highschool in Chiang Mai, and lived there with his grandmother, Yeki. It was during this period, he told me, when he was 15, that he started drinking, and now, at 34 years old, he was living at his parents' home back in Mae Jaeng, along with Yeki, his 12-year-old brother Noi, his 32-year-old sister Gaew, and her new husband, Ton. On the outside, Sen seemed to live a fairly pleasant and unproblematic life: his was one of the richer families in town, and they ran the local convenience store in a casual, familial way, with different members taking over at the main counter when they felt like it, and everyone contributing to the many tasks of the business. Sen would sit at the front of the shophouse for most of the day, greeting friends and watching the world go by, as he sold ice and snacks to people in town. But over the last few years, a series of

problems had begun to crop up, compounding each other to drive his drinking and his feeling of unhappiness.

Following the Northern Thai tradition of new husbands moving into their wife's natal home, the husband of Sen's sister Gaew had come to live with the family, but Sen and his brother-in-law didn't get along. Like the rest of the family, his brother-in-law was concerned about Sen's drinking and was more direct about it than Gaew or others were, or than Sen cared for. 'He told me that, once my parents die, he's going to kick me out of the house!', Sen once told me, indignant, 'and it's my house!' Typically, problems arising from the matrilineal housing pattern work their way out in Mae Jaeng when male members of the natal house themselves marry and move away, but Sen knew that wasn't going to happen. He had recently started a romantic relationship with his male friend Chai, who worked at the local hospital as a pharmacist. Although Thailand has a global reputation as relatively accepting of homosexuality, Sen felt it would be inappropriate to 'come out' to his family. 'Besides', he said, 'Chai's family is Chinese Thai, and he doesn't think they would accept him if he told them.'

Sen took these problems in his stride until the day his grandmother passed away. Yeki had raised Sen and was his closest friend. While I and my host family and the rest of the town were at the funeral with the family, Sen was nowhere to be found. A few days later, he still hadn't returned, and I asked Gaew where he was. After hesitating, she whispered, distraught, 'He's in his room. He hasn't left it for three days.' When he finally appeared, he seemed befuddled, and I found out from him later that he'd been drinking rice whiskey the whole time.

Sen's friends and family were worried about him, but they didn't know what to do. They felt that trying to get him to be a way he wasn't would not be good, because that represented attachments that would bring suffering, but accepting him as he was in his current addicted state also seemed like a bad idea. His mother admonished him and urged him to get help, ordering him to see a doctor for his increasingly jaundiced eyes and skin, but he refused, and she let it be: 'He has to *tham jai*,' she said, shrugging sadly, referring to the practice of 'making the heart' and coming to accept what is. 'He has to come to terms with it himself.' I also suggested he go see a doctor or go to the monastery, but Sen refused to go then, too, as he had done with others. I was worried about my friend, and, as a researcher interested in attitudes toward change, I was intrigued by the explanations that Sen and his family and friends gave for his condition.

They talked about the alcoholism that Sen was developing using the term *ditt lao* – 'to be attached', using the same word that people in interviews had been telling me represented attachments that needed

surmounting through an attention to impermanence. One can become attached to alcohol like one can become attached to anything else, and attachments bring problems. It wasn't just that Sen was stuck on his whiskey, they told me; he was also stuck on a past that was inevitably gone. 'He's always been that way,' his sister Gaew told me, talking about her brother one afternoon while he was passed out on a bench near their house: 'He would have some idea in his head, and you couldn't get him to change it, no matter what.' One night, at a gathering in a restaurant by the river, Sen's friends discussed his situation. One of them, Jiew, explained how, 'a few years ago, it was different . . . we were young then. Now we have families of our own, we have responsibilities, we've grown!' Mae Jaeng had changed, but Sen hadn't changed with it.

A trip to the hospital and a return to impermanence

The situation continued to deteriorate, and I tried to help where I could, but eventually my time in Mae Jaeng was finished and I wished Sen well before returning to the United States. A year later, I visited again, but this time, Sen was nowhere to be found. Gaew hesitated when I asked where he was, and then whispered that he was in his room at the back of the house, motioning for me to go see him. I found Sen behind the house in the shed that served as his room, his skin a sickly yellow from jaundice, his stomach and legs bloated. He hadn't left the space in days, Gaew had told me, and he rarely ate. His family sometimes put food outside the door but he usually ignored it. As I massaged his calves and tried not to cry, Sen smiled weakly and told me he was OK, but it was clear that he wasn't. A hand appeared outside the window, and Sen reached out to take the plastic bag containing rice whiskey and a pack of cigarettes from his brother Noi.

The gradual change that Sen and his family were witnessing day-to-day was very different from the abrupt change I found in him now, after being away for some time. When I returned to the front of the house to tell his sister that Sen needed to get help immediately, she told me that we should wait until Sen was ready to accept that he had a problem – the same thing she and others had told me a year earlier. Her parents were away in Chiang Mai at a *Joh Rey* retreat (a Japanese Thai Buddhist tradition that Sen had told me had helped steer their father away from his own drinking) and Gaew didn't want to do anything drastic without them around. I could tell she knew the situation was very serious, though, and, after she had discussed it with her husband, the three of us agreed that Sen needed to be taken to a doctor immediately, even if he didn't want to

go. We recruited a few of Sen's friends, along with the head of the Mae Jaeng Police, a childhood friend of Sen's, and went back to the house to force Sen to go to the hospital. When we got to the room, the door was locked, and when the police officer broke it down we found Sen sitting on his bed, bleary-eyed, holding a large kitchen knife. 'I'm *not* going to the hospital,' he said, raising the knife at us unsteadily, as his friends and the police officer slowly backed away. 'I'm staying right where I am.'

'Get the knife away and we can get him,' the officer told us as we exited the room, 'but otherwise we don't want anyone to get hurt.' That afternoon, I found Sen passed out on his bed, the knife inches from his hand, and slowly removed it and took it to the police. An hour later, we were in a car on the way to Chiang Mai, following the ambulance that carried Sen, who was now expressionless and disoriented.

A few weeks later, we were back in Mae Jaeng after a series of visits to Chiang Mai's Suan Prung psychiatric hospital, Nakhon Ping public hospital, and the Chiang Mai Ram private clinic. The doctors had told us that Sen had advanced cirrhosis of the liver and that he wasn't expected to live much longer. At the Mae Jaeng Hospital, where Sen was strapped to the hospital bed, mostly unconscious and artificially hydrated and fed, his friends gathered around him. Sometimes he would wake up, and alternately flail around trying to get up or yell '*Mat, Mat!*' ('Tie me down! Tie me down!') His parents visited the monastery to make merit, and a local *mor phi* (spirit doctor) visited his hospital room, waving leaves as he chanted and circled the bed. I was told that this was to cajole the spirits of alcohol away from him and detach them from where they had become 'stuck' or 'attached' to his *khwan*, his spirits of self. I was distraught, and said so to Mor Bom, the head doctor of the Mae Jaeng Hospital, who had previously spent many evenings out drinking with Sen. 'We should have gotten him help earlier!' I said. He looked at me: '*Anicca*, Julia. Have you heard of *anicca*? It means that everything is impermanent.'

Impermanence of, and for, Sen

I heard a lot of talk about impermanence in the days and weeks following Sen's trip to Chiang Mai. As he continued to lie unconscious in the hospital, people made merit to help his karma and talked about the importance of letting go. 'We have to *tham jai*,' his cousin said – in this case, coming to accept Sen's current dire situation rather than focusing on how everyone *wanted* the situation to be. 'We have to *ploy wang*,' his friend Jiew told me, referring to emptying the mind of emotional ties.

5.2 A friend in 'Mae Jaeng' gets ready to send off a paper lantern krathong, in a ritual symbolising the letting go of attachments as they float away in the night sky. 30 December 2007. Photo: Rosalyn Hansrisuk.

Sen's friends and family seemed calm, and this surprised me at first because I knew they cared deeply for him and I thought they would appear more upset. I realised, though, that it wasn't a casual or uncaring nonchalance that they were displaying. They were practising attuning their attention to the situation they found themselves in, and accepting it. A calm acceptance of the situation was understood to help it. I recalled people in Mae Jaeng telling me how doctor Mor Bom would tell them about an accident or a bad outcome of a loved one by asking them first to '*tham jai*', to 'make their heart'. In some ways, it was similar to the idea of mentally preparing to hear bad news, a little like being told, in my own cultural background, to 'have a seat' to prepare oneself before being given difficult news. His talk of impermanence and acceptance had, at first, struck me as a little fatalistic; everybody dies, he seemed to be saying, and the sooner we realise that the better we'll feel about dealing with death and other unwelcome changes around us. This is a similar strategy to the one the Buddha is reported to have told to Kisa Gotami (Thig 10; see also the introduction); in searching for a house free from mortality and drawing attention to the ubiquity of death, one is able to feel more connected to others and decrease the pain felt at one particular loss. But 'making the heart' is more than a coping strategy or a kind of resignation to the possible loss of a loved one. The heightened attention that people

paid to impermanence after Sen's return to Mae Jaeng was meant to help them craft a psychological orientation to the truth of impermanence. This was understood to have the potential to create positive outcomes, to help themselves and to help Sen, too. It was about making change.

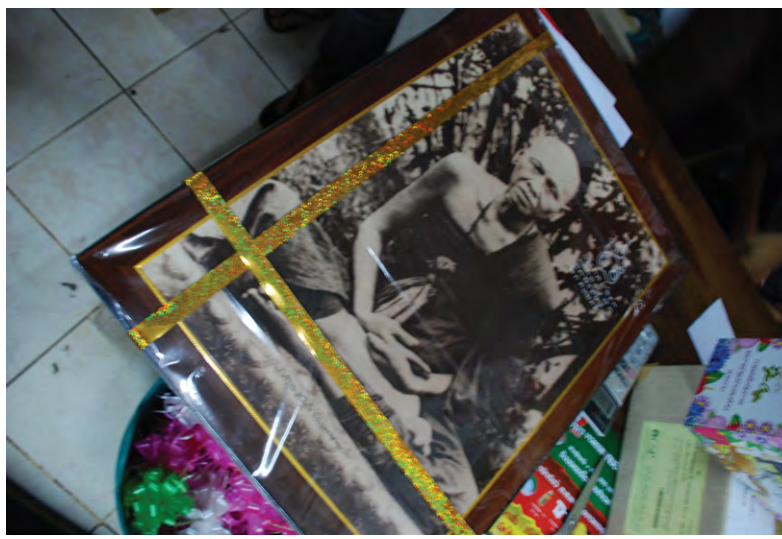
In part, this attention to impermanence was thought to help Sen spiritually if he did pass away then, because ties between people that last after death can be said to be the cause of existence on a spirit realm, where wandering ghosts (*phi*) are doomed to haunt the living. The suffering that can be brought on by the fact of impermanence in Buddhism transcends life and death. Yet in drawing attention to impermanence, Mor Bom and others were also working to create a more positive outcome for Sen's life itself. Sen was suffering from his attachments, whether these were understood to be to the past, to a wished-for way of relating to others, to alcohol or to the spirits of alcohol. Different people took different approaches but, for many, it was some combination of all these, connected through ideas about interpersonal, spiritual energies attuned to an impermanent reality. Sen's friends and family worked to attend to the fact of impermanence to create good effects by making use of Thai Buddhist theories of moral causation (*kamma*), which suggest that, when one does good (such as acting calmly and letting go of attachments), one will receive good effects, as will others. Here, to help Sen let go of his attachments and get better, people practised letting go of their own expectations of themselves and him.

'I wish I had made him go to the hospital sooner,' Gaew told me during a late-night conversation while Sen was in the town hospital, but then quickly changed her tone to talk about the future: 'I'm going to let go, start a new life. The store here hasn't been doing well for a while now. Once we stopped selling alcohol, people stopped coming in as much, and I hear a 7–11 [convenience store] is coming to town. I'm going to close down the store, open a noodle shop and live an easy life.' She knew that she had been carrying too many expectations of Sen, and that her expectations of him bothered her brother. She realised that, like Sen, she had been attached to a particular version of what she felt should happen, and that letting go of her attachment would help her live better. By letting go of her expectations of him, and of herself, she was helping to create an affective orientation to change that could create a positive outcome not only for herself but also, by extension, for Sen and the environment that Sen would be coming home to.

Others told me similar stories; making merit would help Sen, and accepting what had happened would, too. Sen's birthday fell soon after he returned to Mae Jaeng, and his little brother Noi's birthday happened

to fall on the same day. After Sen's friends and family had visited him at the hospital, we went out to dinner to celebrate Noi's twelfth birthday. There, his father talked to Noi in a tone I wasn't used to hearing. Usually, he was either pithily casual or directive around his son, but now he seemed serious: 'Noi,' he said, 'I want you to know that you can do anything you want in your life. If you want to be a doctor, be a doctor. If you want to go study something, or do something else, or whatever you want, you can do it.' Sen's father was, in effect, telling his youngest son that he supported him no matter how he lived – and, in doing so, showed that he, like Gaew, had felt he had been too attached to an expectation of Sen that Sen was clearly unable to follow. In the build-up to the current crisis, they hadn't seemed to me to be too demanding of Sen, and I was surprised to hear these elliptical references at all. But I knew Sen felt they were, and it was clear that being more accepting was seen as the right approach.

I had thought that, when Sen returned to Mae Jaeng, his family would 'realise' that they had been too lax with Sen about his problems with alcohol, that they should have been more direct with him, following my own cultural logic of interventions, responsibilities and the talking out of feelings. Instead, they seemed to move even further away from these



5.3 After Sen's visits to the hospital, his family decided to put up this portrait of the famous Northern Thai monk Khruba Siwichai in the shop, in the spot where they used to sell whiskey. 30 December 2007. Photo: Julia Cassaniti.

ways of relating to someone, ramping up not their direct engagement but their 'letting go' in the face of the inevitable impermanence of Sen's life and their own. Significantly, instead of addressing impermanence as the root cause of stress and seeking to create permanence, they worked to put a wedge between their contact with change and the unsatisfactoriness that arises when one clings to that which will inevitably pass. An attention to impermanence became a catalyst for creating new outcomes.

After a week at the Mae Jaeng hospital, Sen was brought back to the family home, and spent the next year in bed as an invalid. Instead of staying in the back room, he was now placed front and centre in the upstairs of the house, but no one told him what to do, not even his brother-in-law. His old friend Chai rented one of the family's shophouses next door and visited now and then, though he was also busy starting a family of his own. Sen watched the world go by around him and, in his own way, he listened and learned from it.

After a year unable to get out of bed, Sen reached out to turn on a lamp, and, realising it was too far to stretch his arm, crawled over to it. Soon, he was tentatively walking, and a few months later he was able to get on a bicycle and wobble through town. In the face of impermanence, Sen had persevered. I had returned to Mae Jaeng again for my yearly visit, and stayed up late talking with him about his ordeal. He couldn't remember much of it, and he didn't particularly care to, but he did tell me he knew why he had got better.

'My sister thinks she's the reason,' he told me, 'going to the monastery to make merit. You think you're the reason I got better, getting me to the hospital. Everyone thinks they're the reason – people went to the monastery, the Christians down the road came and prayed – and they all helped. But really it's because of what I did.' He paused. 'I *ploy wang*. I let go.'

Over the course of the year, Sen had changed. He realised he had been stuck, wanting his life to be a certain way, and he let go of his attachments. He no longer talked about how he wished the past was still the present as much as he used to, and started talking about 'making the heart' with what is. He was happy when he saw his old friend Chai near the house, but didn't seem upset that his friend had moved on. He was glad when his brother-in-law moved to Chiang Mai to study for an MA degree at the university, but didn't become perturbed when he would come back on the weekends. He still missed his grandmother, but didn't get a dark look on his face when he talked about her. He noticed that others had changed, too, and spoke about it. He talked about his sister Gaew, especially: 'Look, she closed the shop and opened the noodle stand

on the street, and she's happy now.' For her part, Gaew hadn't seemed unhappy before, but I could tell that she was happier now, after she had let go of the expectations she'd carried around of her brother and of herself. He laughed and started singing the chorus line to his favourite song, **ไม่มีใครรู้ว่าพรุ่งนีจะเป็นเช่นไร**, '*mai mii krai ru wa prungnii ja pen chen rai*', by the pop band Peck: 'No one knows how tomorrow will be'.

It wasn't that accepting change meant resignation – not at all. It helped Sen move on from the past and it helped Gaew too: the new 7–11 branch was owned by their aunt, so the money stayed in the family, and they generated more income by renting out the shop than they had earned by running it. Those around Sen had succeeded not in getting him 'back' to some idealised way they wanted him to be, but by accepting him just as he was in the present. There was a kind of success, and liberation, in letting go. The Pali word for impermanence – *anicca* – translates in Thai most often to *kwam mai nae non:* 'uncertainty'; and becoming OK with uncertainty was an important emotional strategy for people in the community. A recognition of impermanence wasn't a giving up, it was the opposite: a way to create positive effects through a recognition of the power and presence of change.

On a recent visit, Sen surprised me by suggesting that we visit the monastery festival in town; it would be his first such visit in as long as any of us could remember. While we were there, he approached a line of small Buddha statues, each representing a day of the week; and, fishing around in his pocket, he quietly dropped a small coin into the pot in front of the statue that represented his birth day. He was making merit at the monastery, with the many ritual and philosophical meanings that come with it. A few days later, I was talking with him about my own worries about changes in my life, and he nodded thoughtfully, and said '*tham jai* . . . you have to make your heart – accept the present and prepare for whatever lies ahead.' In his own ways, Sen was grappling with the impermanence that his religion teaches to be inevitable.

The Buddhist, the global and the local in a Thai case of impermanence

Sen's problems with alcoholism, and his eventual (partial) recovery, highlight some of the lessons that an attention to impermanence can offer us all. For some of his family and friends, the teaching of constant change is a minor, almost taken-for-granted fact that informs daily life: it helps them feel better when something unexpected or unwanted happens, and

it helps them recognise that, by holding onto expectations about the way things *should* be, one will inevitably suffer. Sen struggled with these lessons more than most, but, in the end, he persevered: he got better, and, in his own words, this happened because he learned to 'let go'. Alcoholism can be thought of as an extreme form of psychological and bodily attachment. By giving up on his addiction, Sen was able to give up his sense of wanting things to be a certain way and was able to create real change for himself. His case offers a pointed example of how impermanence doesn't necessarily mean a passive acceptance that one is not in control of one's own life; it suggests the opposite.

More broadly, Sen's case informs a wider scholarly enquiry into the role of impermanence in all our lives. It contributes to our understanding of impermanence as a Buddhist concept, a universal concept and a local one. It informs our understanding of impermanence as a Buddhist concept by showing us that, in Buddhist contexts (at least in Thailand), it is about letting go of attachments, and that doing so can help with psychological wellness and mental health. The sense that his family and friends had of Sen being ill because of being 'stuck' or attached (*dtit*) to alcohol and the past, and the importance of accepting (*tham jai*) and emptying the heart of expectations (*ploy wang*), are all part of interwoven Buddhist logics of meaning and causation. They connect to Buddhist conceptions of suffering (*dukkha*) as tied to this clinging, and to non-self (*anatta*) as a truth that becomes recognisable through an awareness that everything changes. These and other related Buddhist concepts – including moral efficacy (*kamma*), dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and others – create a meaningful spiritual orientation toward impermanence that forms part of Buddhist practices around the world. These Buddhist meanings of impermanence look different from other religious perspectives on change. They most directly oppose ideas of eternalism (*sassatavāda* in Pali) and a belief in an immortal soul (*ātmavāda*).[2] Even in religious and cultural contexts in which impermanence is emphasised and elaborated, the complementary meanings and the extension of impermanence to even the realm of consciousness set apart the Buddhist impermanence I have highlighted here as unique among world religions.

Sen's case also informs our understanding of impermanence as a universal concept because change is omnipresent in all our lives, whether religiously elaborated or not, and Sen's reactions to it represent human responses that are, in part, shared throughout the world.[3] When Sen felt stuck in his focus on the past, while those around him sensed the importance of letting go, they were grappling with a universal human struggle. Even in contexts that don't emphasise impermanence in philosophical and religious

discourses, it can still be found infiltrating much of the social, existential realities with which we all must grapple. A neighbour in the United States recently had an old tree cut down in his property, and, while lamenting its passing, he said philosophically, 'Ah well . . . all things must come to an end.' Around the same time, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I heard on the radio that 'the one thing we can count on for sure is change.' Lessons of impermanence, though often not as elaborated as in Buddhism, may look similar to those I found in Mae Jaeng. Sen's case as an example of human struggles with transience helps us to counter a hegemonic emphasis on stability that dominates much of the discourse in the humanities and social sciences. His story helps to orient our attention more directly and comparatively to how change is dealt with in lives across time and space, and to the therapeutic potential of doing so. By this, we are laying the groundwork for an alternative ontological approach to time and self.

Finally, Sen's experience informs our understanding of impermanence as a localised religio-cultural phenomenon. Rather than seeing it as representing a reified, single *Buddhist* approach to transience, or as reflecting a universal truth experienced similarly everywhere, we can also learn from Sen's ordeal what impermanence looks like as part of particular social worlds.[4] As Cameron Warner, Carole McGranahan and others offering ethnographic accounts of Buddhist impermanence in this book and elsewhere can attest, the attentions to impermanence I have highlighted here are not exactly the same as those drawn on in other Buddhist settings. They are particular to a Northern Thai community at a particular time and place. The interpretation of the Pali term *anicca* as 'uncertainty', for example, may look different than its articulations in Tibetan, Japanese or even other Theravāda Buddhist settings. The 'spirits' that the spirit doctor worked to extract from Sen's body might be seen by some scholars not to relate to doctrinal interpretations of Buddhist teachings at all, but instead to reflect traditional ideas about spirits of the self called *khwan* that circulate in Southeast Asia and pre-date Buddhist influence (Formosa 1998; Cassaniti 2017). Yet they are also part of impermanence in Sen's community, as are the particular local practices of making merit, floating lanterns, articulating power and more. Society in Thailand is structured largely through *boon* (merit) or accumulated *barami* (a kind of charisma) that is thought to be developed by those who are able to demonstrate (or associate with those who demonstrate) a mastery of the Buddhist teachings, including mindfully gathering the mental resources to face impermanence (Cassaniti 2018). Monks in Thailand are sometimes seen to have acquired mystical powers through a mental mastery of the teaching (Puriwanchana 2011; McDaniel 2011), and, even without the mystical part of their powers,

they are understood to have cultivated a powerful mental fortitude that is widely admired (Tiyavanich 1997; Jirattikorn 2016). Through a complex local logic that connects causation, karma and personhood, the 'technologies of the self' surrounding impermanence are understood to decrease personal and social affective stress and create powerful energies that inform the functioning of society across the region.

In the end, it may be the space between the universal and the particular that the Thai Buddhist case of impermanence I have drawn attention to here most helps to illuminate. Impermanence is enmeshed in a set of connected religious and social concepts about causation, personhood and much, much more, some of which translate to other Buddhist and non-Buddhist contexts, and some of which do not so easily connect. The study of impermanence suggests an exciting comparative project that is now being undertaken by ethnographically oriented Buddhist studies scholars (see the introduction; and Cassaniti and Chladek forthcoming). As with other concepts that come to be extracted from embedded cultural and religious meanings and re-articulated as universal ones, the Buddhist associations of impermanence that Sen and his family and friends help illustrate may not easily or unproblematically transfer to other settings – Buddhist or otherwise – where people have different ideologies and life goals.[5] Today, Sen still suffers from the lingering effects of his illness and still mourns the changes in his community from time to time. He still goes through phases of drinking, but less than before, and, with the support of his family, now seeks help for them. Overall, he is doing well, glad to be alive and generally content with his lot. As the head doctor, Mor Bom, said emphatically when I expressed my distress at Sen's illness, 'Impermanence, Julia, have you heard of that?' Sen's situation in a small community in Northern Thailand highlights how particular people deal in particular ways with a universal truth of impermanence.

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Notes

1 Informant names (Sen, Gaew etc.) and place names (Mae Jaeng) have been altered to maintain anonymity. All quotes have been translated from Thai and *kam muang* (Northern Thai), unless noted otherwise. The case described in this chapter is elaborated in *Living Buddhism: Mind, self, and emotion in a Thai community* (Cassaniti 2015).

2 For example, the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (in the *Dīghanikāya*) and the *Saṃyutta Nikāya Sutta* 12.15. The direct oppositional interlocutors that the Buddha is said to be arguing against in these claims about impermanence are the ideas of a universal Soul, popular in contemporaneous Upaniṣadic conceptions of *ātman* (related to today's Hinduism). The idea of the eternal soul that Buddhist perspectives disagree with also pervades much of Western, Judeo-Christian philosophical traditions (Bayes 2010).

3 The Christian phrase 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust' (Genesis 3:19) refers to the uncertainty and impermanence of life, as do the 'vanities' of the biblical Ecclesiastes (translated as *anicca* in Thai, Cassaniti 2015), according to my Christian Thai informants. The common Muslim refrain 'God willing' and the Qur'anic teaching that clinging to worldly permanence is dangerous (Shah-Kazemi 2010) do too. From Heraclitus (Graham 2008) and Marcus Aurelius (Hadot 1998) to Husserl (Hanna 1995) and Heidegger (1962) (as well as Deleuze, Varela and Maturana and many others – see Geismar, Otto and Warner in this volume), impermanence is elaborated in different ways in many different philosophic traditions.

4 Almond (1988), Hallisey (1995) and others have pointed out the constructed nature of a single global representation of Buddhism, and even of a single Theravāda Buddhism (Skilling et al. 2012; Collins 1990). Attempts to unify disparate branches of the religion can tell us as much about the powerful forces doing the constructing as about the religion itself.

5 An attention to impermanence may be helpful in developing alternative therapeutic interventions for addiction (Chen 2010; Marlatt 2002; Cassaniti 2019), but it is also the case that ideas about impermanence helped Sen because of its particular relevance in his community. An attention to it is positively reinforced, helping to create successful outcomes (Cassaniti and Luhrmann 2014) that may be experienced differently in different contexts. The global rise of mindfulness practices can serve as a useful example. While, in some ways, mindfulness highlights a universal capacity for mental development, Willoughby Britton and colleagues have reported psychotic breaks and other problematic psychological 'side effects' from extracting mindfulness meditation from its Buddhist roots (as popularised in twentieth-century Burmese vipassana movements, Braun 2013) and 'decontextualising' it into secular settings (Lindahl et al. 2017). Mindfulness's associations with other Buddhist perspectives are restructured when articulated in social environments with different views of the self and the good life (Cassaniti 2018), to different ends. The same may be true of impermanence.

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