

Wabi Sabi

Carol Valentine, March 2016

The idea for this dharma message was the purple reusable bag with the Wabi Sabi kitty on the front. Someone, who like me, bought the bag because it was pretty, reusable and the kitty was so adorable, asked me "What does Wabi Sabi mean?" That stumped me until I remembered that the bag also said "Purr-fectly Imperfect." That made me start to think about the term Wabi Sabi more and think about how it relates to Buddhism and our lives, since after all, the bag says "Life is Wabi Sabi." I started doing some research, both in books and on-line and decided that it was an appropriate topic for a dharma message. There is so much more to this term than I ever realized. You will understand why this is such an interesting term, in addition to being so fun to say.

While you may already know that Wabi Sabi is a Japanese phrase, what I found out is that the roots of the Wabi Sabi concept actually lie in Buddhism. It is a concept derived from the Buddhist teaching of the three marks of existence, specifically impermanence, suffering and emptiness. According to one source (Richard Powell) wabi sabi acknowledges three simple realities: nothing is permanent, nothing is finished and nothing is perfect.

One definition I found for Wabi Sabi was ". . . . a way of living that focuses on finding beauty within the imperfections of life and accepting peacefully the natural cycle of growth and decay."

Buddhist author Taro Gold describes wabi-sabi as "the wisdom and beauty of imperfection."

The term wabi sabi suggests such qualities as impermanence, humility, asymmetry and imperfection and appreciation of natural objects and natural processes. It means being mindful of simplicity, reflection, acceptance, relaxation, and the enjoyment of the incomplete and imperfect beauty in everyday life.

Wabi-sabi can change our perception of the world so that a chip or crack in a vase makes it more interesting and those materials that age, like bare wood, paper and fabric, become more interesting as they change over time. It celebrates beauty in everything, flaws and all, so we can begin to appreciate those who look or dress differently, allowing us to see the beauty in what might otherwise be considered messy, old or not attractive, even an eye for things mismatched. Life is more interesting if there is variety. Be together, not the same. It's ok. *To see an example of the necessity of variety in our lives, check out this YouTube video:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLhJIFC8xkY>

Think about those things that we do value, even though they are not beautiful in the standard sense of the word. The bombed out building at Hiroshima that has been preserved rather than destroyed, the hands of our grandparents, a statue of Buddha in need of some TLC.

As an amateur photographer, I look for the unusual, for the views that others may not find at all interesting. I have found that the unusual tend to make the most interesting photos. Even when my photo doesn't really turn out the way I planned, I am often still rewarded with a fascinating photo.

Wabi-sabi reminds us that we are all here for a short period of time, that our bodies, as well as the material world around us, are in the process of change. Buddha taught us that. Change is always with us and the more we attempt to fight it, the more unhappy we tend to be. It is simply nature's cycles of growth and decay which we can see in the frayed edges of a favorite sweater, the inevitable rust and mildew spots, fallen leaves and age spots.

You won't find wabi sabi in Botox treatments, so don't go to Hollywood looking for Wabi Sabi. You might find lots of wasabi, but not wabi sabi. You won't find it in big glass-and-steel skyscrapers although they are beautiful, or in smart phones, as much as I really like my phone, or in the drive for constant self-improvement. It doesn't mean that we can't love those new and modern things or take care of ourselves, as long as we remember to cherish what may not be perfect.

Why Perfection?

Why are we so in love with perfection? Why do so many of us set ourselves up with an impossible, unattainable goal, namely the goal of perfection? What good is perfection? Is it really necessary?

Realistically, perfection is probably good when we are filing our taxes and paying our bills. I hope my electrician is a perfectionist when she rewires my house. In case of surgery, I would certainly hope that my surgeon is a perfectionist. I don't want any imperfections happening during my surgery.

Perfection, however, it is not an appropriate goal for most of us, for any part of our lives. A goal of perfection negates any work we do, any progress we make that may fall short of total perfection. A goal of perfection means that we succeed with everything we do with 100% correctness, no mistakes, no errors, no inaccuracies, no room for faults. That doesn't sound like a good way to live or have joy in our lives, does it?

When I taught middle school in Colorado, we had a new principal one year. When she came to the first faculty meeting before school even started, she began the meeting with a simple statement "I expect perfection." Now, she went on to say that she only expected perfection from herself and not others, so we all breathed a small sigh of relief. In getting to know this woman over the course of the school year, I realized she was not a happy person. She was so tense, so driven and seemed like a very sad person. I rarely saw her smile; she was so intent on being perfect that I think she had no time for fun or joy. What did the goal of perfection do for her? Not much, from a life point of view. So much for perfection.

I used to think perfection was important. I lived my life intent on being perfect. My hair had to be perfect . . . a difficult prospect for someone with naturally curly hair. My makeup, my clothes, my school work, all had to be perfect. I had to be the perfect child. As I have grown, I realize that the drive for perfection can be destructive. It can kill joy, pleasure and even choices. Buddhism is about joy, not perfection. It is about appreciation for the imperfections; it is about being who we are, just as we are, right now. Remember, Buddha told us "come as you are"; faults and all.

Please know, this does not mean we can be Wabi Sloppy, letting go of all our expectations, all of our capacity to try hard. We should always make our goal to try our best in whatever we do, whatever our best may be. It does not mean we strive for perfection but we strive for our best. What we learn, we need to learn as well as we can then do the best we are able to do with that learning.

We should appreciate what we can do, flaws and all, and keep on trying. This works for almost everything in our life. . . . at home, when we are shopping, getting coffee at Starbucks, even here at church. When we are stuck in a long line at Starbucks, instead of being upset with all of those people standing in line ahead of us, we can look around and enjoy the scenery . . . see the people, look at the interesting cups, drool over the pastries in the case. The time passes more quickly that way. At church, we can do our best to remember all we need to do in service, but if we forget a part, or we don't do it exactly perfectly; it's ok, we can try again. As I see it, with my limited vision, Amida accepts us just as we are, so Amida accepts all of our imperfections too.

Let me close with this saying I found about Wabi Sabi.

Like Sugar from the Sun (from the book Living Wabi Sabi)

**“The way of Wabi Sabi honors the quirks,
the oddities, the humble,
the unconventional . . .**

**It celebrates the perfectly imperfect
uniqueness of you and me
and everything.**