

Changing Your Mind

April 6, 2018

Sometimes the Buddha is accused of saying that all change is bad. And sometimes he's accused of saying that all change is good. Of course, he said neither. When your mind changes for the better, that's a good thing. When it changes for the worse, that's something to watch out for. As he said, the mind changes so quickly that he couldn't think of a good analogy for how quick it is. There's nothing else in the world that can change and reverse direction as quickly as the mind.

This is why we need a lot of mindfulness. We set ourselves the task of getting the mind to settle down, to be still, but it can flip around very easily. This is why concentration has to depend on mindfulness. And mindfulness has to depend on right effort: learning how to recognize an unskillful state when it comes, and then being able to remind yourself, "What do I do with this so that I don't give in to it?" It's the same with recognizing a skillful state: You have to remember, "What I do with this so that I can maintain it?"

So this kind of change, you have to watch out for—the change that can turn your concentration into something else or that can change your practice into something else. So we have to bolster our mindfulness with some discernment, reminding ourselves of why we want to be on this path.

I was talking with someone this morning who was saying that he tried not to think very much during his meditation. But he came across the Buddhist teachings on analysis of qualities, and that mystified him. And as I said to him, "You really do have to think about what you're doing sometimes as you meditate." After a while, as you get more used to the ins and outs of your mind, and you recognize a particular unskillful state just as it's beginning, it's a lot easier to deal with it without a lot of thinking.

But in the beginning, it's you can easily find yourself in a real funk, a really bad state of mind, and it takes a lot of thinking to get yourself out of it, a lot of negotiation. And that's what you've got to do: get yourself out of it. Don't just sit with it. There can be lots of different negotiating strategies, but you have to be

able to think them up, because sometimes the strategy that worked yesterday—when you were stern with the mind—is not going to work today. Or when you're being kind and gentle with the mind, sometimes the defilements take advantage of that. Right effort in that case is keeping at it, trying to figure out what's going on and what needs to be done.

Sometimes it involves sitting back and saying, "Okay, I'm going to watch this for a while and see where it's coming from and where it's going, this state in the mind." Then, when you can catch something about it—why you fell for it, why you found it attractive—and see that it really isn't worth that, you can let it go. That gives you something you can remember for the next time around—a new technique, a new tool, a new realization that can be a part of your arsenal as you deal with unskillful states whenever they come up.

So when there's a problem in the mind, don't be afraid to think it through. If you simply note it, sometimes it'll go away just through the fact that you're noting: "Oh. There's a hindrance; there's an unskillful state." Other times, though, it's not going to go away. And you want to make sure that you haven't run out of options —i.e., by having only one option.

Other times, you have to sit back and think, "Why would I want to think this thought? Why would I want to go along with this emotion? Why would I want to have this fantasy? What do I think I'm getting out of it?" Sometimes the allure is the immediate visceral pleasure, especially if the mind is feeling starved of pleasure. That's when you can say, "Well, I can offer it something else. I can breathe more comfortably or I can relax different parts of the body." Relax the back of your hands and then think of the sense of ease going up your arms. Tell yourself, "Okay, here's a visceral pleasure. What else do you need?" And the mind will think up something else, and you'll have to be able to be on top of it.

Because it's not the case that a defilement will go away simply because you notice it. It's not like a child with its hand in the cookie jar, who, knowing that it shouldn't be there, as soon as his mother comes in pulls his hand out of the jar. Some defilements are like wild animals. They've got their space and they're going to fight to the death to defend it.

So you need a variety of tricks, a variety of tools, a variety of strategies.

A similar principle applies when you've got something skillful going in the mind and you want to maintain it. How do you not lose interest? How do you not get complacent? Complacency is one of the biggest dangers that can befall you as a meditator. Things are going well and you think, "Well, I don't have to do anything right now." And then you can just watch the state of mind disintegrate in front of your eyes. You have to maintain it. You have to have a sense of heedfulness: "This could be attacked at any time, so I've got to be still and at the same time a little bit wary to protect that state of mind." These are the cases where you want to prevent change. Something good is going on and you have to learn how to maintain it.

When the Buddha defined mindfulness, he didn't define it as simply accepting what arises and passes away. He said that you need to realize that there are skillful qualities of the mind that need to be developed, and you're mindful to develop them. Once they're there, you're mindful to maintain them. So these are the things that you *make* arise and you *prevent* from passing away.

As for the change that the Buddha described when talking about inconstancy, that has more to do with where you're trying to find your happiness. If you've found something that's good but is inconstant, then it's going to lead to disappointment. And that's a case when change is a bad thing. So you contemplate it's inconstancy to help wean yourself off of it.

Here you need some discernment to recognize where you can find something that's at least relatively stable. For instance, as you're trying to get the mind to settle down, where in the body is the best place to focus? What kind of breathing is best? How can you get the mind to be happy to settle down and be still? Because the well-being that comes from a still mind is a lot more rewarding and a lot more blameless than any other pleasure that you could put together.

It's going to require work. And again, you're fighting against inconstancy. But at least this particular activity has a much greater potential for stability and well-being than the ordinary places where the mind tends to look for its pleasures. So even though it requires work and you see all too clearly that your concentration is inconstant, that doesn't mean you just give it up and say, "Well, that's my insight—concentration is inconstant." You've got to fight it.

It's like the student of the Zen master in Minneapolis. The student was going to come out to Hollywood to make a career. The Zen master asked him, "What if they knock you down?" And the student, thinking that he should try to sound very Zen said, "Oh, I'll learn to accept it." And the master said, "No. If they knock you down, you get back up; knock you down again, you get back up again. You don't give up."

So even though the inconstancy of your concentration may knock you down, you don't just accept it. You get back up again and try to figure out what you can do to make it more stable. Even though it seems unstable or inconstant in the beginning, it does have greater potential than the pleasures you can find in thinking about things, imagining things, fantasizing about things. So even though the concentration seems inconstant to begin with, work at it. Because it does lead in the direction of getting greater stability as you get more used to being here. And you realize that it really can be your home—the place where you feel stable, the place where you feel secure.

That way, when other, more changeable things come up, you can see them for what they do. And when the changes happen in the mind, you can see them as well. The changes that happen out in the world are not nearly as damaging as the changes that can happen to the mind. You've got to watch out for those. The more you get the mind still, the more you see: subtle things going on that you would've missed otherwise.

Because it all does come down to the fact that the only true happiness will be found in something that doesn't change, something that doesn't need to be maintained. That's what we're working toward—something that doesn't need to feed off of anything.

The question came up recently: Why would anyone want to go to nirvana? And the answer is because nirvana doesn't need to feed, doesn't need to be maintained. Aside from nirvana, all the good things in the world require that you have to look after them—and even then they start falling apart. So for the sake of your own happiness, you aim in this direction.

One way to get the mind inclined to seeing that nirvana would really be good is to get used to getting the mind really still. Not still in a sluggish way; you want it still and alert—quick to see things. Stillness doesn't mean slowness. You want to

be still so that you can see subtle things in the mind you wouldn't have seen otherwise. You come to appreciate the fact that a mind-state that doesn't change is a really good thing.

We spend so much of our lives jumping around from one thing to the next that we think that's where the pleasure lies: in the jumping around. What's actually happening is that we jump onto something and it gets unpleasant, so we find pleasure by jumping away. That's why this habit of jumping around is many people's idea of happiness. But it's basically like jumping from one hot spot in the frying pan to another hot spot in the frying pan.

Here the Buddha is offering something that's outside of the frying pan, where you don't have to jump. And for many of us, that's a strange thing: sitting down and just being very, very still. But give the mind a chance to get used to it and you'll see that the Buddha is right: that there really is no pleasure other than peace. As he said, the pleasant part of pain is when it changes from pain; the painful part of pleasure is when it changes. And so we're looking for a pleasure that doesn't change and where you don't have to run away from pain. You've found something better—that doesn't change. That's what we are looking for.

This requires that the mind change its habits, so that it gets more and more used to being at home with being still—and not feeling like it's missing out on anything. Working with the breath and your concentration makes you realize that, yes, a great deal of pleasure can be found here. But that's just a tool for luring the mind into the present moment so that it gets more and more used to being still. It's not tensed up, ready to jump, and that way, the sense of stillness in your mind does become your home. And you become a homebody—somebody who really likes to stay here.

That's when the concentration makes a change in the mind. It reaches a point where it's no longer just a technique or a game you play. It's a real reordering of your priorities, a reordering of your values.

So learn to appreciate how good mental stillness can be—and how a stillness that doesn't require conditions would be even better.