

The Primacy of the Mind (1)

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Mano-pubbangama dhamma, the mind is the forerunner of all phenomena, or the heart is the forerunner of all phenomena: the first line in the Dhammapada. It's well known, yet all too often, when we come to meditation, we forget it. We think that meditation is about simply accepting what's coming in the senses, and going with the flow—in other words, putting the mind in a passive position. But for the Buddha, the mind is primarily active. It's one of the principles we have to hold to. That's why it was put at the beginning of the Dhammapada.

Always keep it in mind: We're not just going with the flow, because most of the flows in the Pali Canon go down. They go to whirlpools, to places where there are monsters, rapids, waterfalls—dangerous places. To follow the path is to take a stance *against* that flow so that we can avoid those dangers and get across the flow, to the safety of the other shore.

Look at the Buddha himself: He didn't simply go with the flow. If he had gone with the flow, he would have lived his life as a prince, maybe have become a king—and then been forgotten, like all the other kings, princes, queens, and other quote-unquote "*important*" people in the world. But he took the quotes off: He really did become important by taking a stance. Think of it: someone who wants to find the deathless and will do anything he can to find it. That's the kind of person he was, the kind of teacher we have.

So, when we look at our own practice, we should have a sense of our own willingness to go for something more than the ordinary, instead of simply going with the flow.

You see this from the very beginning. In the practice of generosity, you place yourself in the position of a creator. You create generosity; you create a gift. You can spend your time thinking about what would be a good gift to give to whom, and find some joy in that, and then even more joy in carrying through.

As for the precepts, you're strict about them. They're a promise you make to yourself that no matter what, you're not going to lie, you're not going to steal, you're not going to have illicit sex, you're not going to kill, take intoxicants. You draw that line and then you begin to notice: What are the things that would push you over the line? In noticing those things, you begin to see your own mind. Because those impulses that would push you over the line also create phenomena—they, too, are forerunners of phenomena. What kind of phenomena are they going to create? What kind of phenomena are they going to push you toward?

If you hadn't drawn the line, you wouldn't have noticed. This is why the precepts are *clear-cut*. When this is put in negative terms, they're described as *hard-and-fast*. People are against *hard-and-fast* rules. But look at them from another point of view, and you realize they're *clear-cut*, which makes them easy to follow, easy to remember.

Now, they may create some difficulties as you find yourself wanting to go with contrary impulses. But this is your sorting-out. After all, this is what right mindfulness is all about: noticing what's skillful and what's unskillful, and *remembering* what's skillful and unskillful, so that you can direct your right efforts. You learn how to say No to the voices in the mind that say, "Well, just this once," or "It doesn't matter," or "This should be okay, other people do it." Other people do all kinds of things; even ordinarily good people let themselves get pushed around.

But here again, think about the Buddha: He was not the sort of person to be pushed around. Think of the time when he had to give up his austerities. The five monks who'd been attending to him gave up on him in disgust, but he didn't let that influence him at all. He realized that what he'd been doing was wrong, so he would have to stop. As for their opinion, he decided he couldn't let himself be pushed around by that.

So, always think about the Buddha, what kind of person he was, because he's the person who lies behind the instructions, lies behind the training that's been set out. He was a truthful person, which is why his mind was able to find the truth. He was the sort of person who, once he'd seen something was unskillful, would give it up. As he said, once he'd given something up, he wouldn't take it back. His image was of someone who vomits something out. You don't eat the vomit. You let it go.

As for things that are skillful, the mind had free-range. This is what generosity is all about: There's a lot of freedom in generosity. There's room for creativity, and if you can't be generous with material things, there's always generosity with your time. Other people can give things, but it takes time to keep them in good shape, so see that as a good thing as well.

I noticed when I was in Thailand there were some monasteries that seemed pretty rundown, and they could have been fixed up fairly easily. I asked the local people about that, and they said, "Well, that building was built by so-and-so, and if we fix it up, it becomes their merit. The merit doesn't come to us." I don't know where they got that idea, because the commentary is full of talk about how when you clean up the monastery you gain in wisdom. The place becomes new because of you. That becomes your merit.

So, we look around and see opportunities for giving of ourselves. At the same time, we see opportunities where we have to draw the line, and say “No” to certain unskillful things. It’s in this way that your mind is not just reactive. This is how we know that the mind is not simply a material thing, or the byproduct of material processes, because if it were, we wouldn’t be able to choose what we reacted to and what we didn’t react to. We wouldn’t be able to organize our responses—we wouldn’t have meaning in our lives. But it’s when we take in the various events of the day and organize a response—the more organized, the better: That’s when we assert the primacy of the mind, which is what the Buddha’s teachings are all about.

As the Buddha saw, everybody has to go through aging, illness, and death. Nobody wants to, but most people just put up with it. It takes something more than just a material process to say, “No. There must be something better.” So here’s where you assert the primacy of your mind: by laying down some rules for yourself; by giving yourself some goals. As long as you see that they’re skillful, you stick with them. If you see that you’ve made a mistake, you can make changes. That, too, is part of the primacy of the mind.

We’re not a wind-up toy that has to do whatever the winder tells it to do. We have our sensitivity, so we can *read* our actions. This is why the Buddha said that you need both commitment and reflection to nourish the Dhamma. You commit yourself to something really good, and then you reflect as you follow through. If you begin to see it wasn’t as good as you thought, you can change. If you see there are areas where you can be even stricter with yourself, well, you can change there as well.

This then becomes the mind-state you bring into the meditation—committed to staying with one object. If you have practice in drawing lines for the mind, drawing lines for your behavior, it’s going to be a lot easier. At the same time, you’ve been training the mind to be active in thinking about generosity, thinking about virtue—and as you’re watching the processes of the mind, those are good processes to watch.

So many people go through life just letting their minds wander all over the place, and then when they come to meditation, all they see is that all-over-the-place mind. It’s not very inspiring and it’s not very easy to watch. So, as you practice generosity and are strict in your virtue, you create the external circumstances that are good for meditation. You also create an inner mind-state that conduces to meditation as well—conduces to concentration, conduces to discernment. It’s all of a piece.

This is how you organize your response to the facts of aging, illness, and death —how you organize your response to the realization that you are responsible for the suffering that weighs down the mind, but you *can* make a difference. You can stop causing that suffering. So instead of going with the flow, you go against the flow. You take your stance to resist the flow. That's how you find something really solid, because you've made your mind, from the inside, as solid as you can.