

## *Change Your Mind*

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There's a passage where the Buddha talks about taking mindfulness as a governing principle in your practice. What's interesting about the passage is that he talks about being mindful to give rise to skillful states, and to protect the skillful states that you've already given rise to. Instead of just watching things arise and pass away, you're trying to give rise to skillful things and to prevent skillful things from passing away. This is an important principle, because it's so often misunderstood. We're usually told that mindfulness means simply letting things arise and pass away, whether they're good or bad. But here the Buddha is telling you to do the opposite: You make good things arise and keep them from passing away. You make bad things pass away and keep them from arising.

The purpose of the practice is not just to accept what's happening and to simply let it happen. When you look at the Buddha's teachings on karma, you realize that what we experience in the present moment is not something that's beyond our control. We do have a role in shaping it. That's what allows for a path of practice. If we didn't have that role in shaping it, we'd just have to accept things, like a TV show. Wherever the writers decide the show is going to go, you have to accept that. You can't yell at the screen and tell the characters to do something else, or go back and rewrite it. Actually, experience is more like an interactive game. You have some control over how things are going to go. You have some choices that can steer the action in new directions.

The whole point of the practice is to learn how to make those choices wisely, to make wise changes in your mind. That's what we're doing as we meditate: We're here changing our minds. The karma that's ripening right now actually offers many possibilities. There's not just one thing, or one possibility in the present moment. There are several possibilities. The Buddha's image is of a field with lots of different seeds. Some of the seeds are not going to sprout for a long time. Others are just ready to sprout. All they need is a little water. So you can choose which seeds you're going

to water. Be aware of where you focus your attention, where you focus your desire to develop something. All too often we water the seeds that simply reflect our cravings.

When we come to the practice, we try to use right effort: generating the desire to prevent unskillful states from arising, or if unskillful states already have arisen, to try to put an end to them. Let go of them. As for skillful states, if they haven't arisen yet, you try to give rise to them. Once they're there, you try to develop them.

This is why right effort is very directly connected to right mindfulness, because mindfulness reminds you of what's skillful and what's not, and of what you should do to foster the skillful and weaken the unskillful. So when you find your mind engaged in unskillful thinking, don't be afraid to change it. If you can figure out a skillful way to cut off that thinking, go ahead and do that. Don't be afraid that you're manifesting desire, or engaging in denial. You're here to train the mind.

It's like training a puppy. Suppose the puppy complained that by training it, you're forcing it to deny its desire to pee on your rug. Would you listen to it? No, because allowing the puppy to keep peeing is not an option. It's the same with unskillful thinking in your mind. By undercutting it, you're not denying it. In fact, you're very much aware of the fact that it's there. You're trying to exercise right effort and to find other ways to think, to counteract that unskillful thinking, because otherwise it'll keep peeing on the rug of your life.

If the practice were simply acceptance, there'd be no point to it. We might be less stressed out about trying to make changes, but we'd still be stuck with the mistakes we keep making. To think that we shouldn't have preferences is mixing up the path with the goal.

We know that the enlightened mind is one with no preferences, that it's perfectly okay, regardless of whatever happens. But even the enlightened mind has a sense of what's useful and what's not useful, and, if possible, will try to do what's useful. It prefers that there is less suffering in the world, just that it no longer needs to feed on those preferences.

Now to get to that state doesn't mean that you have to start out with no preferences, or that the path is a path of no preferences. After all, there's right view and wrong view, right resolve and wrong resolve, all the way down to right concentration and wrong concentration. You look at the stages in which the Buddha teaches mindfulness. First there's establishing mindfulness in the body in and of itself, like we're focusing on the breath right now. You try to be ardent, alert, and mindful in putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, you put aside any thoughts that would pull you away from the breath. You keep the breath in mind, you're alert to what the breath is doing, and you're ardent—in other words you're trying with your whole heart to do this skillfully.

As the Buddha describes in the steps of breath meditation, this involves training yourself to breathe in certain ways, to keep certain things in mind as you breathe. It's not just willy-nilly letting the breath come in and go out wherever it wants to, or however it wants to, or letting the mind come and go as it wants. You keep the mind focused on its training. You train it to be aware of the whole body. You train it to be aware of how the breath fashions your sense of the body. And you can breathe in a way that calms that affect.

In other words, the ardency here is using right effort—because as the Buddha defines right mindfulness in one passage, it's keeping in mind the need to give rise to skillful qualities and to abandon unskillful ones. Right effort is a matter of desire. Ardency is also a matter of desire. You realize that if you don't give rise to skillful qualities, you're going to suffer. You don't want to suffer, so you exert the appropriate effort. You generate the desire to do this well. And when you do this, the mind can settle down.

The next stage in developing the establishing of mindfulness is to be aware of the process of what the Buddha calls “origination and passing away.” Origination here is not just arising. It's seeing causality, seeing how cause and effect work in your mind. This requires that you experiment. If you don't experiment, you can't connect the causes with their effects. So you experiment with breathing in ways that give rise to pleasure, breathing ways that

give rise to rapture, being sensitive to how feelings and perceptions have an effect on your mind, and learning how to calm that effect. You also experiment with breathing in ways that have an effect on the mind, or gladdening the mind while you breathe in and breathe out, steadying the mind, releasing the mind, in response to what it needs. These are all things you do. You don't hope that these things will simply happen on their own while you watch the TV show of your meditation. You're playing the interactive game between the breath and the mind.

And as you learn how to do these things, you begin to understand how cause and effect work in the mind.

It's only in the third stage of mindfulness practice, where everything is fully developed, that you can put aside the need to make these choices and just be aware of what's there: to be independent, as the Buddha said, not clinging to anything in the world. That's the last stage.

But to get to that last stage, you first have to develop the first stages. And that means when you see that something unskillful is going on in the mind, you do what you can to change it as skillfully as you can. You learn what works and what doesn't work. This is how you establish your frame of reference to begin with, and how you learn about origination and passing away with regard to the body, or with regard to feelings, or with regard to mind states.

So by changing these things, you're not in denial. You're actively aware of what's going on and what needs to be done—because you see not only that you're experiencing certain things in the present moment, but also that what you do with your mind right now is going to have an impact now and into the future. You want that impact to be as beneficial as possible, so you have to put in an effort now.

That's something you have to accept. In other words, acceptance doesn't mean just passively being okay about whatever comes up. It means accepting responsibility. Your choices right now are going to make a difference. And so trying to change your mind is not a matter of denying what's there. You have to be very much aware of what's there, but also aware of the processes of

cause and effect—and of how what's there doesn't just sit right there. It's going to have an impact.

You want to do your best to train that impact in the right direction. That's what it means to be on the path.