

Unchanged by Loss

September 18, 2018

One of the passages we often chant together is, “I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me.” It’s a reflection on separation, inconstancy, but not just inconstancy outside. It also concerns inconstancy inside. Notice that it starts, “*I will grow different.*” This is something we have to watch out for, the fact that the mind is so changeable. When things that we’ve been dependent on, things that we’re attached to, suddenly stop, when conditions change, how much are *we* going to change? Do we have the stability inside that even when things start falling apart—outside or in—our virtue doesn’t fall apart, our concentration, discernment—the things that are really important—stay solid?

In the beginning, we have to go on conviction that what the Buddha said is true, that if you lose your wealth, you lose your health, even when you lose your relatives, it’s not that serious a loss. The serious loss is when you lose your virtue or your right view.

The things of the world, the people of the world, are all subject to aging, illness, and death. These losses will happen no matter what you do. But you can keep yourself from losing your virtue or right view.

There’s that passage where King Pasenadi has come to see the Buddha. Then, as he’s talking with the Buddha, one of his men comes up and whispers into his ear that Queen Mallika has died. Queen Mallika was his favorite queen. He breaks down and cries. And the Buddha’s first comment is, “When has it ever been the case that something that was born would not age, grow ill, and die?” The fact that these things are universal is actually comforting. It’s not just your individual pain, your individual loss. You’re not being singled out for unfair suffering. Everybody suffers this. Then the Buddha tells the king that we express our grief to whatever extent we find useful but then we realize that we’ve got to get on with life, there’s work to be done both outside and especially inside. Because as long as there’s grief, it can very easily cause you to do things that would go against the precepts, or you might even change your views.

But if you have something solid inside, then you’re more resistant. And that solidity, as I said, starts with conviction that what the Buddha said is true: Our only real possessions are our actions, so we have to be very careful of them. Right view is what reminds us that our actions are important, and virtue is what gives us some guidance as to what is skillful and what’s not.

The precepts are there as shortcut guides, quick notes in the mind: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no intoxicants, ever. Because when the mind is overcome by emotion, it’s very easy to forget. If the precepts were complicated, with lots of exceptions, the mind would certainly find a way to take advantage of those exceptions. It’s when you’re in shock over something that you need something that’s quick and short to remind you that—no matter what—you’re not going to do *x*.

But just having conviction is not enough. You've got to get to work. And it's interesting that those two qualities that the Buddha said are most important to protect—your virtue and your right view—are also the qualities he said form the basis for right mindfulness. Right mindfulness, of course, is a series of instructions on how to get the mind into right concentration. You need something inside that's solid so that you're not tempted to give up on your virtue, give up on your right view when things outside suddenly change and your conditions are a lot less comfortable than they are now. So we work on the concentration, work on getting the mind to settle in.

We've got to be friends with our breath. This friendship is something that can outlast all the other friendships outside. If you have trouble being friends with your breath, you've got to ask why. What is it about the breath that you find so hard to stay with? Sometimes a lot of associations we have inside the body—there's a pain from this and a memory from that—seem to be buried in the energy body that we're working with as we play with the breath.

This is where you have to use some analogies to help. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha gives so many analogies. They're perceptions that he provides so that you can start shaping your mind in a new way. He says to make your mind like earth. People throw nice things on the Earth, people throw disgusting things on the Earth, but the Earth doesn't react. Hold that image in mind, and remind yourself that whatever comes your way, you can stand it.

Aging comes, you can stand it. Illness comes, you can stand it. Even when death comes, the Buddha says you can stand it. You're going to be losing all kinds of things but you can remind yourself there's an awareness in here that's going to keep going. It's not going to be destroyed, and the more solid it is, the more confident it is, the more likely it is to go to a good place.

So that perception helps you stick with that conviction. And that strengthened conviction makes it easier and easier to get the mind into concentration. It helps you develop that earth-like quality of being solid in the mind, that whatever comes up as you work through energy knots in the body, you're not going to be knocked around by it.

So this principle of trying to make sure that you don't change for the worse when outside conditions change for the worse also means that there has to be a part of the mind that doesn't change when inside conditions change or start revealing themselves.

You begin to realize that the changes outside are not nearly as worrisome as the changes inside. This change inside, when the mind suddenly changes direction and gives up on the practice: That's the biggest thing to fear. That's the kind of change you've got to watch out for.

Some people say that the Buddha teaches us to embrace change, but that's not the case. Some changes are good. When you change for the better, that's certainly fine. But you want to have something inside the mind that doesn't change in the face of everything else, and this is what we're working on as we practice. So look for that "something inside." It's going to be very close to the breath, which is one of the reasons why you want to work with the breath as much

as you can. Or, if you have trouble working with the breath, try to develop qualities of the mind through other meditation topics that will give you some of that solidity.

Think of all the topics the Buddha taught to Rahula, one of them being the reflection on keeping your mind like earth. Other topics include the brahmaviharas, spreading goodwill for all the people who've harmed you, spreading goodwill for all the people you've harmed, spreading goodwill for yourself; reflecting on impermanence, the inconstancy of things; reflecting on not-self, all of the things out there that are beyond your control. Then, as the mind begins to accept these truths, it develops a greater solidity inside. At the same time, when other issues come up to distract you, you have these quick ways of dealing with them. The face of someone who's harmed you comes up in the meditation? Spread goodwill. Try to make it quick so that you can get back to the breath quickly. The thought of someone you've lost or some *thing* that you've lost? Reflect on impermanence and inconstancy: These things are all *made* to be lost.

Think of Ajaan Chah's example. He says to think of the cup as already broken. This doesn't mean that you treat it casually. You actually take very good care of it. But part of the mind has to be prepared that someday it's going to be broken. The Buddha compares people to pots. As he says, all pots get broken eventually. Whether it takes a long time or a short time, they're all heading to be broken. In the same way, people all head to being broken. The world is broken. It's never going to be perfect. If you can accept that, then you can live with it, and do what you can to make it a little bit better.

But particularly, do what you can to make yourself better, make yourself more reliable, so that the changes of the world don't lead to changes inside, at least not to the change of anything good inside. When you can maintain this kind of solidity, then change doesn't hold any fear, loss doesn't hold any fear, because you've already gathered your good things inside where they're safe.