

Change

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There's a lot of confusion that people have created around the Buddha's teachings about change. And the confusion tends to fall into two types:

The first is the idea that the Buddha said that all change is bad.

The other is that he said that change is basically good.

He didn't teach either of those things. After all, not all change is bad in his eyes. He says that when pain changes it's actually pleasant in the fact that it's changing from pain. And the fact that our minds can change and be trained is what makes his teaching possible. As he said, "Skillful qualities *can* be developed. Unskillful ones *can* be abandoned." If skillful qualities couldn't be developed, there'd be no point in his teaching. If unskillful qualities couldn't be abandoned, there'd be no point in his teaching. So those kinds of change are actually good.

But then again, he didn't say that all change was good. There's a belief that he said you have to accept the fact that everything is changing and so you have to adjust your aims around happiness to the fact that there will never be a permanent or lasting happiness. Just learn how to accept change and then you won't suffer. But that's another misunderstanding. He said that there is a deathless happiness. There is a dimension that we can touch that doesn't change.

People get the context here mixed up. They think that the Buddha starts with the idea that everything changes and then tells you to try to look for happiness in a world where there's nothing but change. That's putting change before your desire for happiness. Actually, he puts your desire for true happiness first. He's probably the only religious teacher I know of who does. He tells you to honor your desire for true happiness. And then, working from that desire, you look at the facts of change: which changes are good and which changes are bad; which changes will actually help in finding that desired happiness and which ones will get in the way.

Two kinds of change, he said, are particularly dangerous. The first has to do with making the mistake of looking for a lasting happiness in things that are going to change and turn on you. This is an issue of wisdom. It's because of our lack of wisdom, our lack of discernment, that we're looking for happiness in the wrong places.

The other change that's dangerous is the fact that the mind can change so quickly. As he once said, the mind is so quick to change that there's no adequate analogy for how fast it is. Even the twinkling of an eye is too slow. You can work for years and years on something and suddenly your mind

changes and reverses on itself, for no apparent reason at all, and destroys what it has been accomplishing. Or there are times when conditions are good and you behave in a good way, but then when conditions get difficult you're another person.

Those are the two kinds of changes that you have to watch out for. The first one, as I said, is an issue of discernment. The second one is an issue of mindfulness. You have to remember what's worthwhile in the mind so that you can resist the sudden temptation to change directions. This is why mindfulness and discernment are so basic to the Buddha's teaching.

In the beginning, you align your discernment with the conviction that when the Buddha said there was a deathless happiness, it's there. He was telling the truth. And you take that possibility as your measurement for looking at the different kinds of happiness that you're settling for in your life. Are they really good? Are they really reliable?

All too often, we focus our sights on something and then we blind ourselves to everything else, such as the fact that what we want is going to change. Or we tell ourselves that it doesn't matter. Or we tell ourselves, "I'll deal with that when it happens. I'll go for the pleasure I want right now." But the dealing with that change later, especially if you've gotten really addicted to that particular kind of happiness, is going to be very difficult. So you want to bring wisdom to your desire for a happiness that's lasting, and an important part of that wisdom is realizing it has to come from your own actions. This is another area where discernment builds on conviction.

And this is also where all the other factors of the path come in. The path requires not only discernment but also virtue and concentration, because any happiness that's not based on these qualities is sure to fall apart. Even some of the happiness that comes with the path is going to fall apart if you let yourself just stop where you are and say, "Well, this is good enough for me." You get a little bit of concentration, "That's good enough for me." You get a little bit of well-being and you say, "That's good enough for me." That attitude puts a big roadblock in your path.

As the Buddha said, the secret of his awakening was not to rest content with skillful qualities. So you work on what you've got, maintain what you've got, and then—as what you've got gets more and more solid—you look for ways in which you can improve it.

The mindfulness factor of the path is there to make you stick with your roadwork. It's your way of helping to protect the mind from its sudden changes. You learn how to stitch the moments of the mind together so that when you've learned a good lesson, you can remember, you can keep it in mind. You can bring it to bear on whatever comes up.

You may know that something is unskillful but then something inside you

decides that it doesn't matter. That's called a lack of shame and a lack of compunction. These two lacks put blinders around you. They say, "This doesn't matter. That doesn't matter. I'm going to go straight for what I want." And then they actually make the ability to remember something more and more difficult. They're the real enemies of mindfulness.

So when that thought comes up—"It doesn't matter"—ask yourself, "It doesn't matter in what context?" The context of quick hits? The context of apathy? Or the context of your true best interest?

As the Buddha says, it's good to keep in mind that there are beings who have found the way to true happiness, who've attained true happiness. They look back on us and they have pity for us. But they've also learned to have a sense of real disgust toward the types of mental states that would lead to something unskillful. They're able to remember that disgust as the states come up. They don't put up blinders on their eyes; they don't pretend that it's okay. They keep reminding themselves, "Okay, you know the bad results of this particular kind of unskillful state. You've seen it in other people. Well, it looks like just the same sort of thing in you, when other people see it in you."

In this way, mindfulness fosters a healthy sense of shame that helps keep you from making those changes that would destroy the things that you want, the true happiness that you want.

It's interesting that in Thai the words mindfulness and discernment, *sati* and *paññā*, form a compound that means intelligence: *sati-paññā*. Intelligence is not only wisdom but also the ability to keep things in mind. You're both wise enough and mindful enough to remember what is important to keep in mind: the things that will protect you.

This is why it's so important to remember that mindfulness does mean just that: the ability to keep something in mind. It's not simply accepting what's arising and passing away. That's equanimity. Mindfulness is when you keep in mind the fact that there are skillful qualities and unskillful qualities. And that if something unskillful comes up, you've got to get rid of it. If something skillful arises, you've got to encourage it. And if it hasn't arisen, you've got to give rise to it. And you remember how to get rid of the unskillful qualities and encourage the skillful one. That's what you want to remember.

So remembering the right things and bringing them to bear all the time is what makes this kind of mindfulness intelligent. In that way, it protects you from the dangers of change and teaches you how to take advantage of the good side of change, the fact that skillful qualities *can* be developed. Then you use them to work on your unskillful qualities so that you're not overwhelmed by the fact that there's anxiety, fear, complacency, or whatever the unskillful qualities are. They can seem so big when you don't have anything to shore you up, to provide you with a good foundation. But they become more manageable

when you can remember your true aims and the tools to realize them. That's your foundation.

We begin building that foundation when, through conviction, we pick up the discernment from the Buddha and his noble disciples and we try to remember it. Then, as we see that that discernment really does work in our lives, it becomes more and more our own.

So we develop mindfulness and discernment to protect us from the dangers of change. And in developing them, we're taking advantage of the opportunities provided by change: in particular, the fact that the mind can change in the positive direction.

Always hold onto that fact. Because one of the worst things you can do is tell yourself, "Oh well I'm just stuck here, I'm never going to get any better, it's never going to change, so I might as well give in to my old impulses." Skillful qualities can be developed. You can change.

So we have to learn how to be selective in how we approach the issue of change so that it doesn't get in the way of true happiness. In fact, learn how to use it to take you to a true happiness.

That's when you understand what the Buddha meant when he was talking about change.