

The Forerunner of All Things

June 16, 2020

When the Buddha says that the mind is the forerunner of all things, it's both empowering and scary. Empowering in the sense that if we want to change our lives, we can start from within. We don't have to wait for other people outside to change; we don't have to wait for our circumstances outside to be good. We can start where we are and it's entirely up to us.

But that's also the scary part, because as the Buddha also pointed out, we don't really know our minds. We want happiness but we create suffering. That's because of the ignorance inside. And our hearts and minds are capable of all kinds of things. As he said, the mind is more variegated than the animal kingdom. Think of all the different kinds of animals there are—on land, in the ocean, in the air—and the different mindsets that each of those types of animals have. Well, the mind, *your* mind, is capable of greater variety than that, good and bad. And it's very changeable.

So here it is, something that can't be trusted, it's something that's in the dark, and yet it's shaping your life. That's the scary part. The other scary part, of course, is that you look around you, thinking about human society as a whole, and you see that change comes only when everybody changes his or her mind. So the idea of an ideal human society is very far beyond our grasp.

But we shouldn't let that discourage us. We can't wait for other people to be good. After all, you start within. You want to have your goodness be independent of the goodness of others. Your determination to be good has to be independent of the determination of others.

Starting within means getting to know your mind. Now, you don't do that just by sitting around and asking yourself, "What do I really feel? What do I really think?" because the mind can lie to itself. You can say, "Yes, I really do feel this, I really do think this," but are those feelings and thoughts something you want to go with? After all, if the mind is capable of so many things, good *and* bad, you can't trust everything that comes up out of the murk; or that whenever you shine a light down into the murk, whatever animal is down there is the one you're going to be able to trust.

The Buddha's approach to getting to know the mind is to give it a task: This is why we meditate. We focus on the breath because it's close to the mind, and we give it the task of staying with the breath, getting to know the breath, being sensitive to the breath. As we do this, other things will come up in the mind that

will get in the way. There's a standard list of hindrances, and those are just five large categories. Your specific hindrances, your specific issues, will take their own shape. But giving the mind something to focus on right here allows you to sense these things when they come up.

Otherwise, if you're just drifting around, it's like being in a boat on a river. You don't have an anchor to keep you in place, so it's hard to tell when the current is coming from the left, when it's coming from the right, or when you're standing still, because there's no frame of reference. But when you have an anchor, and it's solidly in place in the bed of the river, you know that now you're being pushed *this* way, now you're being pushed *that* way.

So while you're with the breath, it's your anchor. You want to make the breath as interesting and as comfortable as possible so that you can resist any push coming from any side. You don't simply fall head over heels into whatever state of becoming is being pushed on you by your greed, aversion, or delusion. In this way, staying with the breath makes you sensitive, and it also gives you some resistance.

The benefits of having the mind in charge come from directing it in a skillful way. Think of that question the Buddha has you ask, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" That's the question that lies at the beginning of discernment. When you keep that question in mind all the time, you're following what he says is one of the first determinations, which is not to neglect discernment. All too often, we have moments of discernment, moments of clarity, when we can see what would be in our long-term best interest, but then those moments get covered up as something else comes in. We neglect our discernment. We act on other impulses.

So here the practice of concentration gives you something you can rely on. You develop your mindfulness in order to stay here. It gets strengthened as you keep coming back to the breath, coming back to the breath. Your alertness as to what's going on gets strengthened as you notice what you're doing in the present moment that's helping the breath, what's making it comfortable—and what's making it uncomfortable. You also develop ardency, the desire to do this well, to stick with it all the way through. Those are the qualities you need to read your mind, to not neglect discernment as you read the mind.

So when a thought comes up, you get a better and better sense of where it's coming from and whether it can be trusted. You develop your standards. So you're not simply happy that you know what you "really" feel. You're able to judge what you "really" feel. You think of it more as a proposal: This feeling is something that's being proposed in the mind, and you have the right to say yes or no to it.

So it's by getting to know the breath that we get to know the mind. And as we get to know the mind, we get more control over it. Not control-freak control, skillful control. That way, this force that's shaping our lives—*mano-pubbangama dhamma*, the mind is the forerunner of all phenomena—becomes less and less of a scary thought. You're right here at the source and you're learning the skills to direct it in the right direction.

As for whether other people are doing this, the best way to get them to do it is to do it yourself and to be a good example. But you can't wait for others. You have your own issues of birth, aging, illness, and death that you've got to deal with, and those have got to take top priority. If you haven't worked through them, they keep weighing you down, and they make it easier to get diverted away from what is really in your true best interest: diverted through things you like, diverted through things you hate, diverted through things you're deluded about, diverted through things you fear. But the good news is that as you take care of this problem inside, making yourself a more reliable person in directing your own life, you also become a more reliable person to other people. This is how goodness spreads out into the world. It starts with the heart.

So have a strong sense of the importance of what you're doing as you meditate. You're training this source of the world. Ajaan Lee says the mind is the real creator of the world, and you're taking it out of the darkness and into the light—where you can not only read it to understand where it's coming from, but also get more and more in control over where you want it to go, and your ability to get it there.