

The Power of the Mind

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Mano-pubbangama dhamma, mano-settha, mano-maya: Phenomena are preceded by the mind, ruled by the mind, made of the mind. This is the Buddha's assertion of the power of the mind. We're not simply on the receiving end of things. The mind is what shapes our experience.

Sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations do come in through the senses, but we wouldn't experience them if it weren't for the fact that the mind is going out looking for them. In the Buddha's analysis, even prior to sensory contact there are a lot of things going on in the mind: thoughts, intentions, perceptions, fabrications of various kinds. These are the things that shape our experience now and on into the future.

Because the mind has power, we can use it in various ways. We can exercise choice in how to use it. If we didn't have choices, the power would be meaningless. But this is a power for evil or for good—or for very good.

This is why we're meditating. We realize that by training the mind, we make a big difference. If the mind is untrained, it's like an animal that hasn't been trained. If you let it run around in your house, it tears up the curtains, tears up the furniture, leaves messes here and there. But if you train it, you can actually get it to do useful things. It could fetch the newspaper or get your slippers.

I knew of a dog one time in Thailand who lived in a monastery. They were building a Buddha image up the hill, and it would follow the workers up the hill every morning. So they outfitted it with saddlebags and put sand in the bags to mix with the concrete, so that the dog could earn some merit along with the workers. Every morning, it would wait in place to get the saddlebags strapped on and the sand put in them. Then it would carry the sand up the mountain. That's just a trained animal. You can imagine, if your own mind is trained, how much more good it can do.

The Buddha discovered the power of the mind on the night of his awakening. He saw all the various activities in the mind that create suffering. He started with

aging, illness, and death, and worked back down through becoming and craving, sensory contact, the things that come prior to sensory contact, and finally got down to fabrications. When he brought knowledge to the process of fabrications, they ceased, because this was a knowledge that put an end to passion for fabricating. When there's no passion for fabricating, why would you do it?

The fabrications ceased, and then even the fabrications of the knowledge that put an end to them ceased as well. He relinquished those, too. That's how he found the deathless.

So he saw the power of the mind both in the fact that it can make a difference, and in the fact that the mind has a purpose. That's what fabrication is all about. You do fabrications for the sake of something, which implies an action that gives results: cause and effect. And it's a particular kind of cause and effect. It's not mechanical, because in mechanical causation, the cause itself has no intentions with regard to what kind of effects it's going to produce. It just does things willy-nilly.

Like lava: There's a volcano in the Canary Islands erupting right now. It sends streams of lava snaking down the hill. Now, lava has no intention. It's just forced up, and then it follows the power of gravity as it goes down the hillside, destroying houses, destroying villages, like a finger of death and destruction, but with no intention. That's a mechanical cause.

Then there's what we call teleological cause, where the cause actually has a purpose. It wants to try to attain something. In a universe where there's teleology, things are done for a purpose. When the mind does things with a purpose, that shows that the mind is not just the result of physical processes. It's the shaper. It's the one that inspires things, incites things to happen, because it wants a particular result.

So when the Buddha put this together—the principle of cause and effect, and the fact that causes could be either producing desirable things or undesirable things—that yielded the four noble truths. Craving is the cause of something undesirable, which is suffering, whereas the noble path leads to the dispassion that puts an end to suffering.

So the four noble truths are an expression of the power of the mind, and of its

highest power: its power to put an end to suffering.

We have these powerful minds, and what do we do with them? For the most part we fritter that power away. A mood comes in, and we let the mind get pushed around by little tiny things—what other people do, what other people don't do, or just random moods that come in. It's a huge waste of this power, because we end up using the power to make ourselves miserable, and we get in the way of doing things that are really good, where we really could make an important difference in our lives and in the lives of others.

So when you find your mind slipping into a bad mood, remind yourself: You don't have to be there. There is a power someplace in your mind to change things, and change things for the good.

Again, this is why we meditate. If the mind didn't have a power, there would be no purpose in trying to train the mind. But because it does have the power to make the difference between suffering and not suffering, it's very important that it be trained. Then you get it to do what you want it to do.

So tell it to stay with the breath. Tell it to settle in with the breath in a way that feels really good. Tell it to ask questions about how to settle in well: what kind of breathing feels good right now, and when it does feel good, what to do with it.

It's all very simple, but you want the power of your mind to be well founded, so you start with mastering the simple steps and work up. You find that, over time, you can come to trust the mind more and more. As the Buddha said, if you can't trust yourself, who are you going to trust?

Unfortunately, the mind has many voices—although you can say either “unfortunately” or “fortunately.” It's unfortunate that there's so much confusion, but fortunate in that you can use those many voices to your advantage. Some of the voices in the mind are more skillful than others, so try to side with the skillful ones and let them hold the power inside your mind, so that the power of the mind as a whole will be well used.

Think about it. When the Buddha's talking about the four noble truths, he's talking about your mind. All the various powers of your mind fall someplace in the framework of those truths. So which side are you on: the side of the path or the side of craving? Because that's a lot of what our moodiness is about. We crave

things that we don't get, and then we get upset, particularly in the area of the pleasant things we would like to see, hear, smell, taste, or touch. We'd like to see the world a different place, and then when it's not a different place, when it doesn't respond to our desires, we make ourselves miserable. One of the basic principles of the four noble truths, that power of the mind, is that we have the power to make ourselves suffer or we have the power to get out of that suffering. Things may be good or bad outside, but the suffering we feel, the suffering that weighs the mind down, is the suffering that comes from within.

So try to tease things out when you're suffering. Craving, clinging, intention, attention, perception: Which of those are causing the problems? Realize that you can change those actions into something more skillful.

There's a basic duality here. It's very ironic that Buddhism is supposed to be all about oneness and non-duality, but with the four noble truths you've got two dualities. And the message of those dualities is that you can make a difference. If everything were a oneness, there would be no differences. But suffering is different from not suffering, and using the power of the mind well is different from using it poorly. Have a sense of which is better, and always keep that in mind.