The Quick Reversal of the Mind

July 20, 2013

There’s a very short sutta in the Canon where the Buddha says there’s no one thing as quick to reverse itself as the mind. In fact, it’s so quick that there’s no apt analogy. That’s the whole discourse. And you can take it just as an interesting fact. Or you can realize that this is posing a real danger. Your mind can change so quickly that even the idea of the flash of an eye or the twinkling of an eye is too slow. You can change from love to hate, from hate to love. You can dedicate yourself to something and all of a sudden change your mind that you don’t want to do it anymore. You’ve got to see that this is danger. Most people tend to focus too much on the dangers of the world and not enough on the dangers that they pose to themselves. We’re dangerous people. Or it might be better to say that there are dangerous habits in the mind, possibilities in the mind. And here’s our chance to do something about them. The rains retreat is coming up. Many of us have decided to stay here for the rains, or at least a good part of them. And here’s your chance to do something about that changeability of the mind. Each time the rains retreat comes, it seems that the period between the retreats is shorter and the retreats themselves get shorter. As time goes past, it goes faster and faster. You didn’t realize that you were going to be making a sudden, last-minute rush toward death. But that’s what it’s like. The years get shorter, and the time that’s remaining gets shorter and shorter. Each time the rains come, they remind you, “That’s one less year you’ve got left. What did you do with the past year? Did you do something good with it, something valuable, anything that really makes a difference in your mind?” If not, here’s a good chance to look at yourself and figure out what needs to be changed. Where are your weak points? Where are your danger points? Where are the points where you change so quickly that you yourself can be surprised? What can you do to protect yourself? This is where the notion of refuge comes in, as it stands where the Buddha says that there are people who go to mountains and trees and shrines for protection. But that’s not the true protection. It’s when you take the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as your protection, and having done that, see the fornible truths. That’s when you arrive at the ultimate protection, the ultimate refuge. So what does it mean to take the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as refuge? There are actually three levels. On the external level, you’re taking them as your examples. What is it about the Buddha that inspires you? What would you like to have that the Buddha had? Think about that. He offers himself as an admirable friend. He said that without him as an admirable friend, we’d be lost. We wouldn’t be practicing the path. The Dhamma on the external level is all the lessons you hear, all the lessons you read. The Sangha, of course, is two types of Sangha. There’s the monastic Sangha and the noble Sangha. The monastic Sangha has kept the teachings alive. The noble Sangha, whether they’re monastics or not, has kept alive the living example of what’s possible. So it’s good to think about those things, whatever you’ve read about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Reflect on it, whatever you’ve read in terms of the Sangha and individual people. What do they have that inspires you? And what can you do to internalize those qualities? Because that’s the next level of refuge. The Buddha had discernment. What do you do to develop discernment? He had compassion. What do you do to develop compassion? He had purity. What do you do to develop purity? In terms of the Dhamma, it talks about qualities that protect you. Everything from choosing the right people to emulate. That’s the first part. Developing the skills you need to look after yourself with ease and to be helpful to others. It’s not just a matter of being harmless. In terms of laypeople, you look after your family. As for the monks, you want to learn the skills that can help the fellow monks, the activities that monks need to know, the business of the Sangha. What can you do to be of help? This is a protection. It teaches you not to be selfish. And the fact that you’re helping other people means that other people look after you. And, of course, what it really boils down to is trying to make yourself Dhamma. In other words, practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, not in accordance with your preferences, what you like or don’t like. There’s that famous Zen saying that the great way is not difficult for those with no preferences, and all too often it’s interpreted as meaning that you just don’t have to like or dislike anything. But that doesn’t make any sense. What makes sense is the idea that whatever the path requires, whether you like it or not, that’s what you do. You don’t pick or choose. You look at where you’re lacking and you look at the medicine or the antidote for your problem, and then you take it. And don’t make a big fuss about it. As for the Sangha, they’re good examples in practicing the Dhamma. The fact that we’re here to follow the customs of the noble ones—they practice contentment with food, clothing, shelter. That’s what we try to practice, too. They realize that there are drawbacks even to contentment, that you can get proud about it. So what can you do to whittle away your pride? There’s learning how to delight in developing and to delight in abandoning. In other words, learn to take pleasure in developing skillful qualities, and learn to take pleasure in abandoning unskillful ones. This is where a lot of us trip up. We have a lot of unskillful qualities that we really like. There’s a poet once who talked about how when he was writing a poem, he realized that he always had to type it out, because if it was in his handwriting, he liked it automatically. There was something about his own handwriting that said, “It’s like your own farts. You like it no matter what.” We have a lot of those qualities. We know that they’re not good, but we like them. So you have to learn how to step back, type your practice out, look at what you’re doing day after day, and ask yourself, if you were looking at it from the outside, what would your comment be? Or in that statement of the Buddha, “Days and nights fly past, fly past. What are you becoming right now?” And as Jahn Phuong would often add, “If the Buddha asked you this, what would you say? Would you be embarrassed to talk about what you’d been becoming in the course of the day? What would you change?” That’s the example that the Sangha gives us. That’s the people who put aside all their resistance to the path and just go ahead and do it. Those are the ones who benefit most. That’s the second level of refuge. The third, of course, is when you finally reach the deathless. We talk about nirvana as if that were the name for the goal. But the Buddha had lots of names, some of them like security, refuge, harbor, shelter, and indicate that this is a dimension of safety. Others like the undecaying, the deathless, the beyond, the ultimate. These indicate that the safety is special. It’s not a safety you can reach by causing it. You reach it by developing the qualities that allow you to open up to it. This is why it’s special. It’s not dependent on anything. When you look at the other two levels of refuge, the first one, you’re dependent on outside examples, and the second one, you have to learn how to train yourself so you can depend on yourself. When the Buddha talks about taking yourself as your refuge or yourself as your mainstay, it’s always in the context of training yourself. That’s the only point where you can depend on yourself. Otherwise, that mind of yours can reverse itself more quickly than the twinkling of an eye. It’s only when it’s trained that you find something that’s not reversible in the mind. When he talks about making yourself an island, it’s making the Dhamma an island at the same time. You’ve got to make yourself Dhamma. That’s where you learn how to depend on yourself. That’s the second level. The third level is that you don’t have to depend on anything at all. It’s there. Totally unconditioned. No need for any kind of dependency. You can also look at these three levels in terms of what they protect you from. The first one protects you from bad outside examples, the unskillful actions of other people. Why are those dangerous? Because you have qualities in yourself that make yourself dangerous. That’s why you have to go on to the second level, which is where you learn how to protect yourself from your own unskillful actions. In the third level, you’re protected even from skillful actions. In other words, skillful actions can lead to a form of happiness that lasts a long time, but it can get you attached and it’s not going to last forever. So in that last level, you’re protected from actions of every sort. This is why it’s the true refuge. So you find these levels of refuge when you develop the quality that the Buddha said is most essential. It’s heedfulness, realizing that there are dangers, and the big dangers are there in the mind. So what are you going to do about them? That short discourse of the Buddha wasn’t just an idle observation. He meant you to think about it. Your mind can reverse itself so quickly, and there’s so little time. What are you going to do to protect yourself? This is a question each of us has to ask him or herself. And try to give it your best answer.

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