Change from Within

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One of the big ironies of popular Buddhism is the picture of the Dhamma as one of total acceptance, equanimity, passivity even. Whereas when you look at the life of the Buddha, he was anything but passive and accepting. As he said, he wanted a happiness that was free from aging, illness, and death. It’s not a small wish. It’s a huge wish. And he had to abandon a lot of things, had to give up a lot of things in his life in order to find that goal. But he did. And then he was able to teach it to us. This is why conviction in the Buddha’s awakening is such an important part of the practice, that we have power. We don’t place our power in the hands of any gods outside, but we also don’t place it in the hands of materialism. Materialism tells us that what the mind experiences is simply the result of chemical interactions in the body or interactions with the environment, and that the mind is on the tail end of causal processes. The real causes are material ones. And he turns that around. It’s all about the power of the mind. It’s an inside job, and the causes come from inside and go out. As he said at one point, all phenomena that you experience come from desire, are rooted in desire. It’s the mind’s push for happiness that makes us create our experience. Now, the experience isn’t made out of nothing. It’s made with the raw materials from our experience. It’s made out of our past actions, which sometimes place constraints on us. But as he said in the first verse of the Dhammapada, all things are preceded by the mind, made by the mind. The mind is in charge. So if you find yourself meditating with a handicap, a physical handicap or some body chemistry handicap, realize that that’s the result of past karma, but you can work around it. It may create problems, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t change things from within. It’s all about changing from within. The simple fact that sitting down and meditating and making up your mind are going to stay with something, like the breath, can make a change in the mind, make a change in your personality, make a change in your life. The whole point is that change comes from within. There’s good change and there’s bad change. It’s up to you to decide what you want, because your actions are the means by which change happens in your life. So you want to do them well. And again, it may be easier, it may be harder, depending on past actions. But don’t let that be an obstacle. At the same time, if you find that it’s easy, don’t let yourself get complacent. Just because things are easy now doesn’t mean that they always will be. So you have to be prepared. As for times when it’s difficult now, just remind yourself that you’ve got a handicap. But a lot of people with handicaps have been able to excel. So if you have trouble focusing on the breath and you find yourself losing it, just keep coming back, coming back, coming back. It’s like that Zen sutra in Minnesota. He took leave of his Zen master and was going to come to Hollywood to try his hand at the entertainment industry. And the Zen master asked him, “What are you going to do if they knock you down?” And the student said, “Well, I guess I’ll have to accept it.” And the master said, “No. If they knock you down, you get back up again. If they knock you down again, you get back up again.” If you decide that’s something you really want in life, and as you look at it from all angles it seems to be a good thing to want, then go with it. The Buddha talks about hindrances to concentration. Well, those are things that you overcome. Whether it’s a scattered mind or a sleepy mind, there’s a way of overcoming these things. Of course, it’s not simply through force of will. But the force of will has to underlie all your efforts. We’re not here just to watch things coming and going and say, “Oh, the incredible lightness of being,” and see our defilements. They just dissolve away in the air. They’re strong, and they require genuine strength in order to overcome them. So when you find yourself facing any of the hindrances, you have to want to get past them. That’s the first thing. All the various techniques that they tell you about how you deal with distracting thoughts, how you deal with sleepiness. You can’t just use the technique or have the technique do the work for you. You have to want it to work. The path is what’s called a truth of the will. William James made this distinction between what you can call truths of the observer and truths of the will. Truths of the observer are things that are true whether or not you observe them. And if your desire for them to be a certain way gets in the way of you really looking at what they are, you’re going to miss those truths. It’s like the astronomers in the past who wanted to figure out somehow that the orbits of the planets were circular, because circles, they felt, were a perfect sign of God’s perfection. And they kept squeezing the numbers in order to make their observations fit their theory. It’s because their desire got in the way that they couldn’t see that the planets really had ellipses as orbits. That’s when someone was finally willing to put the desire aside and discover that truth of the observer. There’s another kind of truth, though, that happens only when you want it to. You want to be a good cook? You have to want to be a good cook. You want to play the piano? Well, you have to want it. Otherwise it’s not going to be true. And the path we’re following is a truth of the will. Even truths of the will can’t overcome the principles of causality, but you learn how to use the principles of causality as part of a wise desire. So if you find any qualities that come up in the mind that get in the way, that keep you from acting in what you know is really in your own best interest, or keep you from seeing what is in your best interest, you’ve got to put those qualities aside—the four big ones the Buddha talks about that cause us to behave in biased, prejudiced ways. The desire for something to be the way it shouldn’t be, anger, delusion, and fear. All of these are things we have to overcome. Fear here doesn’t mean fear of doing evil. That’s a fear that should actually be encouraged. It’s more fear of other people’s powers, fears of not being liked. In other words, the fear is to get in the way of doing what really is in your own best interest. That’s for the fear that you will cause harm to yourself or other people. That’s a legitimate fear that should actually be encouraged. But as we’re sitting here meditating, as the Buddha said, one of his categorical teachings is that unskillful qualities should be abandoned and skillful ones should be developed. If you want happiness, this is what you’ve got to do. And the Buddha assumes that we all want happiness. It’s simply that we’re misguided. We suffer and we don’t understand our suffering and we look for help for somebody. And because we’re bewildered and confused, we often choose the wrong kind of help. Once you learn that the suffering that weighs down on the mind doesn’t come from outside, it comes from within. It comes from what you’re doing right now. That directs your attention in the right place. And then you do what you can to see clearly what you’re doing right now. If it turns out what you’re doing right now is letting your mind wander around or finding that the mind doesn’t want to settle down, just bite the bullet and say, “This is a skill I’ve got to master.” And just keep coming back, coming back, coming back. For the amount of time that you can be with the breath, try to make it as comfortable as you can. It’ll be something good to come back to. And having that something good to come back to means that you don’t have to depend entirely on willpower. You’re starting to use your discernment. Because discernment makes things a lot easier. As you figure out what the problem is, you can attack it more precisely, more effectively. But a lot of discernment has to come from just doing the hard work, but being observant at the same time. As to what the mind likes, what the mind doesn’t like, and how you can make the concentration, make the breath something the mind does like. So it’s in this way that you use that principle that all phenomena are rooted in desire, to give rise to the phenomenon of concentration, the phenomenon of mindfulness. We’re not here just watching things unfold. We’re applying the causes. If you compare it to a flower blooming, our activity is to loosen up the soil around the roots of the flower, give it fertilizer. It’ll bloom on its own, but not really on its own. In other words, its duty is to respond to the work you do. It’s the same with the mind. It may or may not settle down as quickly as you want. But if you make sure that the causes are good and keep at it, then the results will have to be good at some point, whether they’re good quickly or slowly. It’s not the issue. In the part of the mind that wants things to be quick, you have to learn how to reason with it. But remind yourself, as the Buddha said, you take yourself as a governing principle in the meditation. If you feel like quitting, if you feel like giving up, you remind yourself, “I’m doing this because I want true happiness. Do I not want true happiness anymore? Do I?” That’s what it means to take yourself as a governing principle, your love for yourself, your concern for yourself. This is what keeps you going. So this concern has to come from within. The path comes from within. After all, the problem comes from within, so you have to solve it from within. It comes from a lack of skill, and there’s no way you can overcome it. You can’t overcome it unless you develop the skill, and nobody else can do the skill for you. So whether it takes a long time or a short time, the skill is worthwhile. And whatever work is required to master it, it’s work well done, work that’s worth all the effort. So when things outside are not the way you want them, don’t let that oppress you. And “outside” here means starting from the body on out, starting from the breath on out. It’s your determination to find true happiness that’s what is going to make all the difference. In Jon Munn’s last Dhamma talk, he talked about comparing the path or the practice to going to battle. Concentration is your food, discernment is your weapons, and mindfulness is your stronghold. The soldier is the determination not to come back and suffer again. There it is, rooted in desire. That’s the root for the whole path. So as long as your desires are creating situations, you might as well point them in a good direction, towards something that, when you actually attain it, will more than satisfy the desire. That’s what the path is all about.

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