

Intelligent about Change

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Not all change is good, not all change is bad—and not all change is important.

There are basically two kinds of change that are important. One is the fact that we tend to look for happiness in things that are going to change, hoping that they'll last, hoping that they'll be reliable. And again and again and again, we're disappointed, like the person who kept eating hot peppers hoping to find a sweet one someday. That kind of change is the change you have to accept, so that you can go beyond it. But it's important to understand what "acceptance" means here. You don't just accept the fact that things change and leave it at that. You set your sights higher, looking for a happiness that doesn't change.

The other kind of change that's really important is the fact your mind is so changeable. As the Buddha once said, it's so quick to change that even *he* couldn't think of a good analogy for how quick it was. Here he was, the master of analogies, and even he couldn't find an analogy for how quickly the mind can change. The twinkling of an eye is still slower than the mind when it's ready to change. And that's the kind of change you have to fight. Once the mind is in good shape, you have to resist its tendency to change.

To deal with the first type of change, you have to develop discernment.

To deal with the second type, you have to develop mindfulness.

You hear again and again the ajaans in Thailand talking about how the essential factors of the path are mindfulness and discernment. The two words—*sati* and *paññā*—go together in Thai. In fact, in Thai when you put the two together as a compound—*sati-paññā*, mindfulness and discernment—it means intelligence.

And that's what intelligence is. It's not a matter of trying to see that all change is good or all change is bad, or that all change is something to be accepted. Instead, you're discerning, and you figure out how to deal properly with whatever change comes your way.

With regard to the things that the mind tries to find happiness in: That's when you have to develop discernment around the three perceptions, to see where these things are inconstant, and the fact that they're inconstant means that they're stressful: You can't really find a lasting happiness there. And if something is inconstant and stressful, is it worth calling your self? Is it worth identifying with? These perceptions are tools for peeling away your attachments to things that change in that way.

But what are you going to do, as you keep pulling away your attachments? Where are you left?

That's where mindfulness comes in. As the Buddha says, the duty of mindfulness is not just to watch things arise and pass away. Its actual duty is to actively give rise to things that are skillful and to help unskillful things pass away more quickly. This is what you've got to remember. Right mindfulness deals with the things you need to keep in mind as you try to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. So if something skillful comes up in the mind, you don't just simply watch it come and go and say, "Well, that's change." You remember to do your best to make it arise. When it's there, you remember to do your best to keep it coming, to keep it in place, and to let it grow. As for unskillful things, you remember to do your best to get rid of them. Once you're rid of them, you remember to make sure they don't come back.

It's by overcoming this second kind of change—the changeability of the mind—that you actually give yourself the strength you need in order to deal with the first kind of change, analyzing it with your discernment.

To do this, you've got to develop all the strengths of the mind. There are basically five, and all five are things you want to work at bringing into being so that when you feel weak, you have something to fall back on. When the mind feels very susceptible to change, wanting to give up in its pursuit of what's really good for it and to accept a less-than-ideal happiness, you want to be able to remind yourself you've got strengths that can sustain you through the tough patches along the path.

At the very least, you've got conviction that the Buddha was right: that human beings can do this, can put an end to suffering, and that it's a really worthwhile project. Even if the project goes more slowly than you would hope, you can't say, "Well, I'll just give up on this for the time being and pursue something else," because this thought will then be constantly nagging away at the back of the mind, trying to pull you off the path. You've got to have conviction that the Buddha could do it. He was a human being, he could do it; you're a human being, you can do it, too. That's the attitude he has you take. Even though that's a form of conceit, it's useful conceit.

What you're doing here, as you're developing these strengths, is that you're taking things that are impermanent, but you're turning them into the path. In Ananda's image, when he was talking to the Buddha one time, he praised the Buddha for teaching how to go across a river by going from one dependence to another. In other words, you can't just fly across the river. You've got to step here, step there, on a rock here, a rock there. The rocks may be a little bit wobbly and unstable, but they're stable enough for you to walk across the river on. That's what you've got to depend on to get to firm ground.

From that conviction comes persistence. You stick with the path and you use whatever tool comes to hand. A true warrior is not very picky about his weapons. He tries to have the best weapons possible, of course, but when they're not at hand, he has to use what *is* at hand. That's when unexpected things can show their power.

There was a movie years back called *Willow*. It was a big flop here in the States but a wild success in Asia. It told the story of a cheap village magician who had one little trick, and it was a pretty cheap trick. That's how he made his living. It was good enough to wow his fellow peasants. But then he gets swept up in a big battle between sorcerers and sorceresses, and at the very end, he's facing off against the ultimate enemy. And it turns out that that cheap little trick he played to fool the other peasants actually works against the super sorcerer.

So you have to remember: whatever trick works in keeping the mind here in the present moment, keeping it from slipping into unskillful qualities—whether it's a sophisticated trick or an unsophisticated trick, you don't have to worry. If it works, it works, and sometimes when your defilements get really sophisticated, a blunt instrument is what you need to deal with them.

So you stick with it. You keep at the practice regardless. And having that kind of momentum that “Whatever comes up, I’m going to deal with it the best I can”: It may be kind of scrappy and you may not succeed every time, but at least having that attitude—that if it’s unskillful, fight it; if it’s skillful, encourage it—this is what you’ve got to keep in mind.

This is where mindfulness becomes a strength. You remember what you need to do, and how to get past the tricks of the defilements, and you see the results that come from actually doing what you remember you should do. Seeing those results encourages you to make your mindfulness even stronger. For example, an unskillful voice in the mind may say, “Well, you’re going to give in anyhow, so why don’t you give in now and make it easy for us?” You’ve got to remember that you’ve fallen for that many, many times before, and what you’re responsible right now is right now. As for what you’re going to do five minutes down the line, you say, “We’ll deal with that five minutes down the line, but right now we’re fighting.”

And if you keep on having that attitude right now, right now, right now, it gets you well past the five minutes.

Gradually, as your mindfulness gets stronger and more consistent, you develop the strength of concentration. We were talking today about the strength of the breath. Well, what makes the breath strong is your focus. The focus strengthens the breath, and then as the breath gets more consistently comfortable, you find that it gets easier to stay focused. The two qualities help each other along—strength of focus and strength of body—but the preliminary strength comes from your concentration. So remember that strength of mind is what matters most, much more than the strength of the body.

Because, after all, the body’s going to leave us. It’s something we think we’re going to be able to depend on indefinitely—no matter how much we know that we’re going to die, we have this attitude that *this* body’s going to be different—but it’s not. And it can surprise you how it comes up with diseases you wouldn’t have thought possible. So when it does, you need strength of mind, the attitude that regardless of what the body does, you’re not going to be fazed. You’re going to keep doing your best.

Years back there was a woman suffering from cancer who went to stay with Ajaan Maha Boowa for a couple months, together with her friend who was an old retired doctor. Ajaan Maha Boowa gave a long series of Dhamma talks for her benefit every evening. Finally the woman went back home, and ultimately died.

Her friend the doctor was still around. And she got the tapes that the woman had made of all the talks. So the old doctor, even though her eyesight was going, tried to see, “Can I transcribe all the tapes? And she did.

She said that she took encouragement from Ajaan Maha Boowa’s comment that, as your body gets older, you want to see how much good you can still squeeze out of it. She was past eighty, but she was still able to transcribe two enormous Dhamma books. So even though the process was slower than say getting a professional or someone who was younger, still it meant a lot to her that she could still do it.

We should all have that attitude. Squeeze what you can out of what you’ve got. As you keep working with your tools as they are, you finally do get into good concentration. Again, whether it happens quickly or slowly, and whether it’s how you imagined it might be or not: None of those things matter. What matters is that you ultimately get there.

Of course, in doing this, you develop the strength of discernment as you learn the tricks of the trade: how to get the mind to settle down, how to get the mind to stay there, and how to keep your guard up for whatever is going to come along and destroy your concentration.

And ultimately you even begin to see what in the concentration is still an unnecessary burden, and you can let that go, too.

This is a lot of the strength of discernment: It’s a strength that comes when you see you carry around too many loads, and you begin to realize, “Oh, this a load I can let go of; this is another load I can let go of.” That’s one of the signs of wisdom: your ability to see which things really are your responsibility and which things are not. And as you lighten your load, then even though the strength of the body may be less, still the fact that the load on the mind is lighter means that your mind can manage it.

These are issues all fall under that second kind of change: the change you want to remember to stop, to prevent good but changeable things in the mind from slipping away. You do this by fighting whatever is going to come and try to destroy them. Remembering this is the duty of mindfulness, but it pulls in discernment, it pulls all your other good qualities as well.

So as you look at change in yourself and change around you, remember that certain changes are a lot more important than others, and they have to take priority.

First, the changes where you have to use your discernment to accept the fact that they will change, and to learn to release yourself from any attachment to them; and then, second, the changes where you fight the change so as to maintain the good qualities of the mind. Mindfulness can slip away so easily, concentration can slip away so easily, but you're going to be mindful to fight against that happening. You try to develop and maintain these things—because, after all, that's one of the duties of the four noble truths: to develop and maintain the factors of the path.

All too often, people talk about the three characteristics—or the three perceptions—totally without reference to the four noble truths. The four noble truths carry four different duties, and one of those duties is to develop concentration, to develop mindfulness. You don't just watch these things come and go.

So make sure you keep your duties straight, and use some intelligence around change. Use your discernment, use your mindfulness, so that you can gain the good that comes from managing change the proper way.

Finally, of course, by doing this you get to something that doesn't change. Those good qualities enable the mind to open up to another dimension that's totally free from change. That's why we work on them. Ultimately, they will fall away. After all they're part of the path, and the path is fabricated. But the goal isn't fabricated. Once it's attained, doesn't fall away.

The path doesn't cause the goal. It takes you there. And the goal is something else entirely. So even when the factors of the path fall away, the goal remains. It's like climbing a ladder up to a house. Once you're in the house, it doesn't matter if the ladder falls away, because you have no more need for it. The house is so good that you'll never have to leave, or even want to leave. It's that good.

So we focus on change, learning to be intelligent about change, so that we can find a basis for happiness that really is worthwhile, one that's not going to change on us at all. Once you've found that, you can let the rest of the stuff go because what you've found doesn't need any support or any improvement at all. It's the ultimate happiness, and it won't let you down.