

Dharmette: Nurturing Change

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on July 11, 2012

I think many of you know that Buddhism puts tremendous emphasis on change, impermanence, the transitory nature of things, and on how things are always changing. But change is not just random. We are not meant to be victims of change, or to just float along on top of the sea of change. Buddhist practice also involves changing ourselves. Most people come to Buddhism because they want some change, particularly not to suffer so much. Many people come to practice because they're suffering in some way, and want that to change.

As we get to know ourselves better, sometimes we see aspects of ourselves that we'd rather not live with. When I was at the Zen monastery, I noticed I had anger. The approach of the Zen tradition I was in was to practice radical acceptance of what is, and not try to change anything – to not have a goal. It didn't seem quite right. It felt like I was supposed to accept my anger, and barrel ahead, bulldozing people with my anger.

At that time, I was working as the monastery gardener. Weeding the garden, I thought to myself, "Just as in the garden we weed the plants we don't want, what's wrong with weeding the weeds in my mind? It might be okay to have this anger, but it doesn't do the world a lot of good for me to go around being angry. What if I start working on pulling those weeds, and not being such an angry person?" That's an example of changing oneself – improving oneself in a certain way.

Some people who come to Buddhism have a sense that, not only are there things to weed out, but there are also flowers to grow and nourish. There are beneficial and useful capacities, which are quite wonderful to cultivate and develop: generosity, kindness, compassion, patience. Maybe these qualities are there a little, but you get a sense that it may be possible to have them as a regular part of life – to inform and support your life much more. So there's a desire for change: to become a better person, to become someone with these qualities, to become stronger.

Being involved in a process of personal change is a big part of Buddhist practice. Some people emphasize that if you're too involved in trying to change yourself – especially with a lot of ideas of self-identity – you might be digging your own grave. People can get neurotically involved in progress, comparing themselves to others, needing to be different from who they are. They can feel that they're supposed to change into someone better, and that means who I am now is just horrible. Then they feel bad about themselves. The whole idea of improving or changing has a variety of potential problems or speed bumps to deal with. But just because there are problems does not mean we're supposed to give up and not try to change.

Even in Buddhist traditions that don't mention change, they talk about radical acceptance. Well, if you watch those people who are practicing radical acceptance of themselves, they change. You can't get around change. You're going to change, one way or the other. Even if the last thing you want to do is change, and you're going to try your darnedest to not change whatsoever, you will change anyway. You'll get older, and your mental capacities will change. If you're young, they'll go in one direction; if you're old, your mental capacities will go in another direction. Things will change. Part of Buddhist practice is to be involved in making choices to support and help that change in a way that's beneficial for you and others.

That's a long introduction to what I want to say, which is that, in my years of practice, I've learned that one of the most useful things for instigating positive personal change and healing, is not to address our issues directly, though that may be a useful thing to do. Rather, we try to cultivate healing, beneficial conditions in our psycho-physical being. For example, a great thing to help us deal with anxiety, fear, and anger is having a palpable sense of safety, a sense of reassurance. When that palpable sense of safety is not just an idea, our breathing, physiology, and heart rate change.

There's physiological change when you feel deeply safe, content, and at peace. Having that deep sense of safety creates an optimal condition to let the rest of the system somehow reconfigure. The mind, thoughts, emotions can address and resolve themselves on their own when the right conditions are created.

So, part of Buddhist practice – and this is where meditation comes into play – is not to address our issues

directly, but rather almost put them aside. Recognize that they are present. Don't repress, deny, or dismiss them. Some people neurotically focus on their issues. They bow to them and say, "Thank you, my issue. I appreciate you are here. You remind me that I am human. We all have to have issues. I didn't get to pick, but I got you. We are partners, so thank you." But rather, you can say, "I'm not going to address you directly. What I am going to do now is to cultivate states of calmness, tranquility, patience, loving kindness – states of peace and safety."

Maybe you can cultivate a stronger sense of concentration. Concentration practice changes the physiology of who we are, and as the physiology changes, it becomes easier to address some of the deepest issues in our lives. That's the message I want to get across today. We are a whole psycho-physical system. If we're addressing things only psychologically, intellectually, mentally, or externally in the world, we're actually missing a big part of the conditioning where change can occur. Deeper, transformative change can happen when we somehow are involved in changing ourselves physiologically. Keep that in mind. Part of the task of meditation is to create this physiological change. Then maybe it's easier to – respectfully – not be so fixated on your issues and problems, but realize that you can address them indirectly by creating the right conditions for them to heal.

A number of years ago we had friends who had a son around two or two-and-half, and he was already a thug – a little gangster. It seemed that this guy was not going in a good direction – that he'll be going to jail before you know it. We'd go over for play dates with our kid, and he would slug the other kids and bite them. His parents were concerned, so they went to talk to a child therapist about what to do. The therapist said, "Whenever your son shows this violent tendency, go over to him and shower him with love." They were worried, "Wouldn't that be positive reinforcement for this behavior to be rewarded?" But they listened to the therapist. Very quickly the violent behavior disappeared and stopped. They created the conditions of safety, love, and caring. You're not going to reason with a two-year-old, but you can create the conditions that allow something different to happen – a different context for something else to be evoked and to happen. And they offered love.

As you think about how you want to be changed in this practice, you might also think not about how you do it directly, but how you do it indirectly. How do you create the right container, the right inner psycho-physical environment? It's not just psychological. It is hard to *will* yourself to have a good psychological environment. But perhaps you can create a good physical environment of calm, tranquility, and well-being.

That's part of what meditation does. Taking care with your posture, focusing on your breathing, letting the breathing calm and settle you. This can be paramount in developing those inner qualities that are the soil for so much beneficial change. Whatever sense of safety you can create for yourself in the moment here, let that sense of safety, well-being, or contentment nourish you. Take it in. Be nourished by it. Be fed by it, and see what happens. See what unfolds in the wake of that.