CHANGE:

the centerpiece of practice

In this article, Thanissaro Bhikkhu explains how change can be the means to achieve longterm happiness.

Change is the focal point for Buddhist insight–a fact so well known that it has spawned a familiar sound bite, "Isn't change what Buddhism is all about?" What's less well known is that this focus has a frame, which is that change is neither where insight begins nor where it ends. Insight begins with a question that evaluates change in light of the desire for true happiness. It ends with a happiness that lies beyond change. When this frame is forgotten, people create their own contexts for the teaching and often assume that the Buddha was operating within those same contexts. Two of the contexts commonly attributed to the Buddha at present are these:

1. **Insight into change teaches us to embrace our experiences without clinging to them**—to get the most out of them in the present moment by fully appreciating their intensity, in full knowledge that we will soon have to let them go to embrace whatever comes next.

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2. Insight into change teaches us hope. Because change is built into the nature of things, nothing is inherently fixed, not even our own identity. No matter how bad the situation, anything is possible. We can do whatever we want to do, create whatever world we want to live in, and become whatever we want to be.

The first of these interpretations offers wisdom on how to consume the pleasures of immediate, personal experience when you'd rather they not change; the second, on how to produce change when you want it. Although sometimes presented as complementary insights, these interpretations contain a practical conflict: if experiences are so fleeting and changeable, are they worth the effort needed to produce them? How can we find genuine hope in the prospect of positive change if we can't fully rest in the results when they arrive? Aren't we just setting ourselves up for disappointment?

Or is this just one of the unavoidable paradoxes of life? Ancient folk wisdom from many cultures would suggest so, advising us that we should approach change with cautious joy and stoic equanimity: training ourselves to not to get attached to the results of our actions, and accepting without question the need to keep on producing fleeting pleasures as best we can, for the only alternative would be inaction and despair. This advice, too, is often attributed to the Buddha.

But the Buddha was not the sort of person to accept things without question. His wisdom lay in realizing that the effort which goes into the production of happiness is worthwhile only if the processes of change can be skillfully managed to arrive at a happiness resistant to change. Otherwise, we're lifelong prisoners in a forced labor camp, compelled to keep on producing pleasurable experiences to assuage our hunger, and yet finding them so empty of any real essence that they can never leave us full.

These realizations are implicit in the question that, according to the Buddha, lies at the beginning of insight: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term well-being and happiness?"

This is a heartfelt question, motivated by the desire behind all conscious action: to attain levels of pleasure worthy of the effort that goes into them. It springs from the realization that life requires effort, and that if we aren't careful whole lifetimes can be lived in vain. This question, together with the realizations and desires behind it, provides the context for the Buddha's perspective on change. If we examine it closely, we find the seeds for all his insights into the production and consumption of change.

The first phrase in the question "What, when I do it, will lead to...." focuses on the issues of production, and on the potential effects of human action. Prior to his awakening, the Buddha had left home and gone into the wilderness to explore precisely this issue, to see how far human action could go, and whether it could lead to a dimension beyond the reach of change. His awakening was confirmation that it could, if it were developed to the appropriate level of skillfulness. He thus taught that there are four types of action, corresponding to four levels of skill: three that produce pleasant, unpleasant, and mixed experiences within the cycles of space and time; and a fourth that leads beyond action to a level of happiness transcending the dimensions of space and time, thus eliminating the need to produce any further happiness.

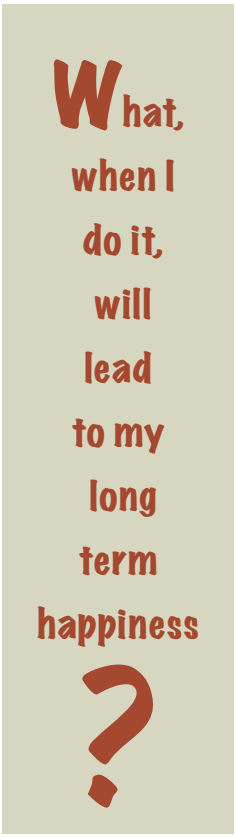
Because the activities of producing and consuming require space and time, a happiness transcending space and time, by its very nature, is neither produced nor consumed. Thus, when the Buddha reached that happiness and stepped outside the modes of producing and consuming, he was able to turn back and see exactly how pervasive a role these activities play in ordinary experience, and how imprisoning they normally are. He saw that our experience of the present is an activity—something fabricated or produced, moment-to-moment, from the raw material provided by past actions. We even fabricate our identity, our sense of who we are. At the same time, we try to consume any pleasure that can be found in what we've produced, although in our desire to consume pleasure we often gobble down pain. With every moment, production and consumption are intertwined: we consume experiences as we produce them, and produce them as we consume. The way we consume our pleasures or pains can produce further pleasures or pains, now and into the future, depending on how skillful we are.

The three parts of the latter phrase in the Buddha's question—"(1) my (2) long-term (3) well-being and happiness"—provide standards for gauging the level of our skill in approaching true pleasure or happiness. We apply these standards to the experiences we consume: if they aren't long-term, then no matter how pleasant they might be, they aren't true happiness. If they're not true happiness, there's no reason to claim them as "mine."

This insight forms the basis for the three characteristics that the Buddha taught for inducing a sense of dispassion for normal time-and-space bound experience. *Anicca*, the first of the three, is pivotal. *Anicca* applies to everything that changes. Often translated as "impermanent," it's actually the negative of *nicca*, which means constant or dependable. Everything that changes is inconstant. Now, the difference between "impermanent" and "inconstant" may seem semantic, but it's crucial to the way *anicca* functions in the Buddha's teachings. As the early texts state repeatedly, if something is *anicca* then the other two characteristics automatically follow: it's *dukkha* (stressful) and *anatta* (not-self), i.e., not worthy to be claimed as me or mine.

If we translate *anicca* as impermanent, the connection among these three characteristics might seem debatable. But if we translate it as inconstant, and consider the three characteristics in light of the Buddha's original question, the connection is clear. If you're seeking a dependable basis for long-term happiness and ease, anything inconstant is obviously a stressful place to pin your hope—like trying to relax in an unstable chair whose legs are liable to break at any time. If you understand that your sense of self is something willed and fabricated, something that you chose to create, then there's no compelling reason to keep creating a "me" or "mine" around any experience that's inconstant and stressful. You want something better. You don't want to make that experience the goal of your practice.

So what do you do with experiences that are inconstant and stressful? You could treat them as



worthless and throw them away, but that would be wasteful. After all, you went to the trouble to fabricate them in the first place; and, as it turns out, the only way you can reach the goal is by utilizing experiences of just this sort. So you can learn how to use them as means to the goal; and the role they can play in serving that purpose is determined by the type of activity that went into producing them, the type that produces a pleasure conducive to the goal, or the type that doesn't. Those that do, the Buddha labeled the "path." These activities include acts of generosity, acts of virtue, and the practice of mental absorption, or concentration. Even though they fall under the three characteristics, these activities produce a sense of pleasure relatively stable and secure, more deeply gratifying and nourishing than the act of producing and consuming ordinary sensual pleasures. So if you're aiming at happiness within the cycles of change, you should look to generosity, virtue, and mental absorption to produce that happiness. But if you'd rather aim for a happiness going beyond change, these same activities can still help you by fostering the clarity of mind needed for awakening. Either way, they're worth mastering as skills. They're your basic set of tools, so you want to keep them in good shape and ready to hand. As for other pleasures and pains—such as those involved in sensual pursuits and in simply having a body and mind—these can serve as the objects you fashion with your tools, as raw materials for the discernment leading to awakening. By carefully examining them in light of their three characteristics—to see exactly how they're inconstant, stressful, and not-self—you become less inclined to keep on producing and consuming them. You see that your addictive compulsion to fabricate them comes entirely from the hunger and ignorance embodied in states of passion, aversion, and delusion. When these realizations give rise to dispassion both for fabricated experiences and for the processes of fabrication, you enter the path of the fourth kind of karma, leading to the deathless.

This path contains two important turns. The first comes when all passion and aversion for sensual pleasures and pains has been abandoned, and your only remaining attachment is to the pleasure of concentration. At this point, you turn and examine the pleasure of concentration in terms of the same three characteristics you used to contemplate sensual experiences. The difficulty here is that you've come to rely so strongly on the solidity of your concentration that you'd rather not look for its drawbacks. At the same time, the inconstancy of a concentrated mind is much more subtle than that of sensual experiences. But once you overcome your unwillingness to look for that inconstancy, the day is sure to come when you detect it. And then the mind can be inclined to the deathless.

So what do you do with experiences that are inconstant and stressful?

That's where the second turn occurs. When the mind encounters the deathless it can treat it as a mind-object, as a dharma, and then produce a feeling of passion and delight for it. The fabricated sense of the self that's producing and consuming this passion and delight thus gets in the way of full awakening. So at this point the logic of the three characteristics has to take a new turn. Their original logic, "Whatever is inconstant is stressful; whatever is stressful is not-self," leaves open the possibility that whatever is constant could be (1) easeful and (2) self. The first possibility is in fact the case: whatever is constant is easeful. The deathless is actually the ultimate ease. But the second possibility isn't a skillful way of regarding what's constant, for if you latch onto what's constant as self, you're stuck on your attachment. To go beyond space and time, you have to go beyond fabricating the producing and consuming self, which is why the concluding insight of the path is that "All dharmas [constant or not] are not-self."

When this insight has done its work in overcoming any passion or delight for the deathless, full awakening occurs. And at that point, even the path is relinquished. The deathless remains, although no longer as an object of the mind. It's simply there, radically prior to and separate from the fabrication of space and time. All consuming and producing for the sake of your own happiness comes to an end, for a timeless well-being has been found. And because all mind-objects are abandoned in this happiness, questions of constant or inconstant, stress or ease, self or not-self are no longer an issue.

This, then, is the context of Buddhist insight into change: an approach that takes seriously both the potential effects