

The Dharma of Life Changes

Does your desire to make New Year's resolutions come from wholesome motivation or unresolved issues in your life?



SITTING AT MY DESK on a late afternoon in September, I watch the sunlight as it bounces off the leaves of the trees in front of my window, cascades down the serpentine steps leading to my office, and merges with the shade on the roof of the house next door against the backdrop of a clear blue sky. This is the first day I can feel the coming fall through the differences in how the light manifests on familiar surroundings, and I am in awe of the beauty of the light's shadings and endless patterns and keenly aware of its fleeting nature. Between now and the end of the year, I will go through a similar experience each day as though the light were somehow part of me, yet outside me, the way a breeze feels on the face or the way water feels against the skin when sinking into a warm bath.

The changing pattern of the light reflects the cycle of

the seasons and reminds us of the preciousness of our own time. You may, as many do, feel a personal response to the fading light, experiencing it as a call for endings and the need for new beginnings. Do you find yourself resolving to make major changes in your work, your home life, or in yourself as the winter solstice approaches? Most people do, although they may not be conscious of doing so. Sometimes these reassessments are merely daydreams or just banal musings, but other times, they are your inner voice speaking and attention should be paid.

If you watch closely, you may discover that your own life is part of this seasonal pattern of endings and beginnings. In early fall, you externally focus on finishing up tasks with a burst of energy, followed by delving into your internal experience as the days get shorter and the darkness lasts longer. This pattern mirrors that of other living creatures on Earth as they prepare for winter and then hibernate until the warmth returns, reflecting the cycle of the Earth itself around the sun. In our cultural preoccupation with New Year's resolutions, we make a cliché out of this profound biorhythmic activity. It is our weak attempt to acknowledge this

seasonal pattern and to consciously participate in its natural rhythm.

So how can you honor and work with this arising desire to make changes in your life that occurs this time of year? To do so you must acknowledge that the call for changes may be larger than your ego identity and therefore may be arising from impulses you don't fully understand. Yet you must find a way to consciously and skillfully participate in allowing the new to emerge. Bookstores are full of books whose authors want to tell you how to do this, from the most sacred aspects of your life to the mundane. These books promise to help you find a spiritual direction, shape up your body, get a new job, and overcome your shortcomings as a lover, parent, and friend.

Some of these books are really quite useful. But there

is another, more fundamental perspective based on the teachings of the Buddha that can help you directly explore the feelings that arise within you and understand why you want to alter some aspect of your life. Think of it as the Dharma of life changes—the practice of bringing mindfulness to the longings and impulses that lead you to make major life changes. Mindfulness provides a method for consciously and skillfully working with the complexity of moving in new directions in your life.

The mindfulness approach to change assumes that your most important work is to move towards freedom from your inner afflictions. You use it to avoid grasping after goals or alternatives that simply substitute one unhealthy situation for another. Bringing mindfulness to the inner calling for life change enables you to stay true to your underlying values in what is almost always a time of chaos and uncertainty. Diligently applying mindfulness allows you to answer three basic questions: What are your real motives? What are the possible effects of any change? Is the manner in which you plan to go about change skillful?

Opening to the possibility of change is healthy, for like plants the old parts of yourself have to fall away, lie fallow, or die so that what wishes to emerge can do so. When an impulse to make a change arises, the first question to ask yourself is always: What is your motive? Is it wholesome? The Buddha taught that many of the impulses you feel to make dramatic or even small changes in your life come from aversion, greed, and particularly delusion. A simple example is weight loss, something a lot of people think about this time of year, yet seldom handle skillfully. For many, losing weight is a worthy goal because it promotes good health and ease of movement. But these health reasons are seldom the motivations behind dieting, which instead tend to be vanity or the desire for social acceptance. Therefore, the effort put into losing weight is actually reinforcing the very longings that are throwing you off balance in the first place. Organizing around unwholesome motives in this manner will not help you move into a healthier relationship with yourself and seldom unifies your efforts

to change, so you fail to sustain your intention and never achieve your goal.

The same perspective applies to major life changes, such as leaving your career or ending a marriage. If you do not like how you are behaving in your work or your marriage, finding a new situation will seldom help if your desire to escape is coming from aversion to your own inner work. On the other hand, if you are in an unhealthy environment or are being subjected to demeaning behavior, feeling an impulse to leave, even if it will mean much disruption, is healthy motivation. So the same desired change or goal can be wholesome or unwholesome, depending on the motive; therefore, spending time honestly exploring your motives is critical before taking action.

After assessing your motivation for change, the next question to ask is: What will be the results if you succeed in achieving the change? How will it affect your life and the lives of those around you? Will it really serve you and, at least, cause no harm to others? Is it a proper priority in your life? It seems so obvious, but applying this simple ethical screen makes a difference in how wholeheartedly one can move to make changes.

The third question relates to your plan of action: What means should you use to end the old and acquire the new? If the means of making change are harmful, then you are working at cross-purposes from the beginning, even if the motive and change are benign. So often people panic around change and act in a manner that is not skillful, hurting themselves and others as a result.

One must approach major life changes with care and respect, for their consequences are far-reaching, and many times they create unforeseen further changes in your life. It is painful if you disrupt your life and the lives of those close to you only to discover that you are in pursuit of the illusionary. The goals may be unattainable for you or simply not hold the desired result you are imagining. Even if you can realistically create a good change, it might not be what should be a priority in your life at this time. It is not that you are supposed to be perfect in

working with life changes, be without mixed motives, or never make poor decisions or be inconsistent in your behavior. Whom do you know who is so perfect? Of course you are going to do all these things. The practice is rather to be mindful of your intentions and actual behavior in order to make adjustments when you realize that you are off track. Change that does not lead to liberation from fear, greed, and delusion is not wholesome. Furthermore, any change that does not yield more compassion and loving-kindness for yourself and others is a waste of precious life energy.

Tools for Change

THE BUDDHA TAUGHT that there are five qualities, or spiritual faculties, that bring balance to your life and can be of great aid in making changes that will bring about inner freedom. The first of these is faith, called *saddha* in Pali, and it involves trust, clarity, and confidence. Faith is essential in making change. If you do not believe in the possibility of a positive outcome, you never begin because doubt overwhelms you.

The second quality is effort, or *virīya*, sometimes described as energy. There are three kinds of effort. It is said that the first effort comes from faith. If you have no faith, you are never able to make the initial movement toward change. There is also effort in the form of perseverance during the hard times that inevitably come with difficult change. Finally, there is effort that arises from the momentum of the effort itself as you engage with something you believe in. It may help to recognize effort in each of these forms and to cultivate them consciously. Often when you are trying to change, nothing appears to be working, and the only positive thing you find to focus on is that you are sincerely making the effort.

You only know that you have sufficient faith and are making the right effort if you are being mindful, which is the third spiritual faculty, called *sati*. So it's critical to be awake. The practice of mindfulness is a specific form of meditation known as vipassana or insight meditation, but you can cultivate it in your daily life by keeping your mind focused on your

experience in the moment before you add your reactions and various associations.

The fourth spiritual faculty, concentration, called *samadhi* in Pali (which has a different meaning than in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*), strengthens the intensity of effort. It provides the continuous connection to your intention that is necessary for perseverance. The metaphor often used to describe concentration is that of rubbing two sticks together to create fire. If you start and stop, you never create fire. Concentration provides the momentum that can carry you through the difficult periods of change.

You can see how these qualities build on one another. Faith allows you to initiate change in your life, the actual moving towards change requires effort, and you need to concentrate on that effort to keep persevering. Then to know if all of that is happening, you need mindfulness.

The fifth of the spiritual faculties is wisdom, or *panna*. It's wisdom that allows you to redirect your movement toward change when you realize that your goal was incorrect or that the way you are going about it is not skillful.

The five faculties come together to allow you to change in wholesome ways. When you are trying to make a difficult life change, cultivating each of these qualities is a wise and proper thing to do. These five qualities are truly spiritual characteristics, so they are not to be treated lightly, but rather evoked in the pursuit of finding your own Buddha nature when coping with change.

Owning Your Intentions

BEFORE COMMITTING to a major life change, you may want to ask yourself if it is truly needed. Is your desire for the new a way to avoid some inner work in the unfolding of your own maturity as a human being? Are you trying to avoid a necessary ego surrender of your wanting mind? Is what you think you need to be happy just an old idea that you've outgrown or was it simply unreal all along? Instead of trying to get more of something—money or attention, for instance—would you better serve yourself by practicing letting loose of your at-

tachment to having life be a certain way? Each person has to go through this agonizing, self-doubting process as part of a major change.

These hard questions are most alive when asked in the context of the spirit and allow a deeper sense of meaning to emerge. For sure, trying to get life arranged just as you want it never works. Looking back on my own life, it sometimes seems that it mattered less whether or not I made a certain change than that I grounded myself in this process of self-examination. Somehow it was coming into my full range of feelings that was the most important step toward continuing vitality in my life. Needless to say, the times I have failed to do this grounding in authenticity I paid the consequences.

Without this deeper sense of meaning, life is dull at best and most often filled with suffering. Usually, it is not life's difficulties that cause the most suffering, but rather the lack of being connected to self, to others, and to life as a whole. Separation from your natural enthusiasm dampens or kills your spirit. Therefore, the question in contemplating change is always: Are you moving more fully into your essence, your most authentic self?

Once you commit to making a major life change, be prepared to embrace darkness as part of that change. Just as the Earth uses the short winter light for renewal, so in moving through change your own psyche may well need to go into an inner darkness. In the darkness that which has been ignored or denied—be it unsettling feelings, difficult events from the past and present, or ambivalence about yourself—will be given time to decay and be renewed. This little death of the psyche mirrors your ultimate physical death. Experiencing this kind of psychic death is a vital part of aliveness. It is scary business surrendering to death before rebirth, which is why tribal cultures have rituals to help them cope with the anxiety of seeing the days become shorter and trusting that another spring will come. This concern was so great in some cultures they performed rituals for the setting sun each day to ensure its return the next morning.

Do not imagine that you are that much different in modern life. Provide yourself with ritual around your change. Make it a sacred act. Create reminders of what you are doing and symbols that are visible to you. Use literature for inspiration. Have friends and professionals as both witnesses and support group. Avoid judging yourself by whether or not you succeed in making a change, and never put yourself in the position of giving others the power to judge you on such a basis. Let the act of changing be the reward, and do not count on the outcome, for it may well be far different than you ever imagined. All these steps represent an honoring of yourself, a surrendering of your ego that thinks it is supposed to be in charge. They also honor the mystery of life, for no one ever knows the full consequences of an action.

One of the beautiful things about the early twilight at this time of year, as it fades into the dark of the long nights, is that you can just surrender yourself to it. Allow the twilight to remind you that it is a time of consideration and renewal. Know full well that in this world the darkness and the light are one. There is no new dawn without the night; their seeming separateness disguises a unity that reflects the unity of life, an unfathomable dance of opposites. This paradox is the very essence of what it is to be alive—joy and pain, sickness and health, light and dark, wonder and fear.

As you reflect and make decisions about your future, never forget that the you who embarks on any life change will not be the person to reap its benefits or woes when the process is complete. Neither are you the person who made decisions in the past.

You are only connected to each by memory, by the consequences of cause and effect, and by the degree to which you embrace your life by owning your intentions. You are only here now, in this moment as the light fades, the night settles. Be alive to this moment. It is all you have, the only time when thought and action can occur for the benefit of yourself and those you love.

May your inner and outer life be of balance and harmony. May the darkness

be your light. May your life be peaceful,
but not to the point of lethargy. May the
season's ending be a new beginning. ■

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