

## *Undefeatism*

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One of the common sound-bite definitions of Buddhism is that it's all about change. On the one hand, you have to accept the fact that changing things just come and go, come and go. On top of that, they're inconstant. You can't really rely on them. And this aspect of the Buddha's teachings actually is there, in the side of the teaching that deals with letting go of unskillful qualities, letting go of attachments.

But remember, there's another side of the practice as well. We don't just let go. We also develop: We develop skillful qualities in the mind. Yet sometimes the teachings on inconstancy seem to undermine the developing side. You think about developing something in the mind, and something inside you says, "Well, it's going to be inconstant anyhow. No matter what you do, the results will be inconstant, so why bother?" That's a wrong use of the teaching.

It's like that time when the young monk was asked, "What are the results of action?" and he said, "Stress. Pain." The person asking him, a wanderer from another sect, said "I've never heard Buddhist monks talk that way. You'd better go check with the Buddha." So he does, via Ānanda. And the Buddha says, when you're asked about action, you don't talk just in terms of stress. You talk about the three kinds of actions: actions that lead to pleasure, that lead to pain, and actions that lead to neither pleasure nor pain. A nearby monk happened to overhear this, and said, "Well, maybe young monk was thinking about the principle that all feelings are stressful." The Buddha said, "This is not the time to use that teaching."

In the same way, the teaching on inconstancy is not for use when you're trying to develop good qualities in the mind. You have to think about what can be accomplished so that you can put forth the right effort. After all, the Buddha used the principle of change in his own life to achieve awakening. So, a willingness to use things that change is not doomed to failure.

Think about how difficult it was for him: someone brought up in a palace, used to eating nothing but palace food all the time. You can imagine what his first alms meal was like for him. He gives an indication of how he overcame whatever disgust he felt for ordinary food. There's a passage where he talks about how, when you're living in a place where the food is not good, and the other requisites of life you get are not good, but your practice is going well: You remind yourself, "Okay, I didn't come here for the food. I didn't leave home for the food, or the shelter, or the medicine, or the clothing. I left for something more important, so I have to see

that these difficulties are unimportant.”

So when you think about the things you need to change in your life, remember that the Buddha did not teach a defeatist attitude. After all, one of his names for the noble eightfold path is “The Unexcelled Victory in Battle.” This is *undefeatism*.

And here you can use the principle of change to your advantage, remembering that you’re not a set quantity. One of the most difficult obstacles we run into as we try to change our habits, is, “Well, it doesn’t feel like me. It doesn’t feel natural to me.” Remember: You’re not a static quality. What you are is made up by your actions. So instead of thinking about what you *are*, think instead of what you can *do*.

This requires some confidence, and some skill. You know that the voice inside that says, “Well yes, I can do this,” often sounds unrealistic. That’s because it has an unrealistic attitude that “Now that I’ve made up my mind to change my habits, there won’t be any problems.” Of course there are going to be problems. There are members of the mind that will try to sabotage what you’re doing. You have to be prepared for that.

But you do change over time, as your habits change, as your actions change. There’s that question the Buddha has you ask yourself: “What have I become as days and nights fly past, fly past?” What you become has to do with your actions. And here you are, living a life that has the opportunity to practice, has the opportunity to make something out of yourself. And what are you doing with that opportunity?

I knew a Chinese astrologer one time who said she didn’t like to deal with people who meditate, because they tend to go against their stars. That’s the whole practice: We’re going against what we feel like doing and what feels natural to us. After all, what’s natural is simply what’s familiar. And we do have this ability to create states of becoming. We do it all the time. We’ve done it who knows how many times, as we go from one lifetime to the next, and then many, many times within each lifetime.

So use that ability to your advantage. It begins with having the imagination, that, yes, it can be done. There are four qualities to imagining something. One is that you generate an image in the mind. And two, you hold it there. Three, you examine it, looking at the details. And then four, you make changes. This is how your imagination helps you to grow. You make changes in the image, and then you evaluate them again. You look at them in detail again.

These four aspects of imagination correspond to the four bases for success. Generating the image comes down to desire. You have to want to change your

habit. Say the problem is that you don't have a regular meditation practice. You meditate some days, but not other days. You can generate the desire to have a daily practice. And then hold it there.

You'll see that other voices will come up and say, "Well, I don't know if I can do this." Ask yourself, who are those voices? What do they want? You've got to maintain the determination to stay, the persistence. Then you examine it: What would be involved in having a daily practice? What would some of the problems be? What arguments would the mind set up? Then use your imagination to figure out ways of arguing against them.

One thing you have to watch out for is once you set up a determination like this, there'll be little blips of thought in the mind that say, "Well, maybe not tomorrow." Or, "Today I'm too tired, let me rest tomorrow morning." They'll blip and then they'll go away, but it's as if they've left little landmines in your mind. When those ideas are not questioned, they stay buried there, and then tomorrow morning you wake up and already in your mind is the thought: "Oh, not today." You've tripped the wire to the landmine.

So this is one reason, when you focus on changing a habit, that you have to keep repeating it to yourself, day after day: "Tomorrow I'm going to stick with my habit." "Tomorrow I'll stick with it." As you keep repeating that to yourself – not all the time, but frequently – you'll run into a little voice that will say, "Well, not tomorrow." You ask, "Why?" See what reason it gives. Usually these little thoughts don't want to reveal their reasons, because they come down to laziness. They come down to defeatism. And you want to take that attitude out. Then there's that attitude that's really destructive, which is, "No matter how much I try to change myself, nothing changes."

You have to tell yourself, "That's not true." You've been many different things throughout your many lifetimes. You've gone way up; you've gone way down. The Buddha says that if you see someone who's very wealthy, remind yourself: You've been there in the past. If you see someone who's really poor, miserable, and sick: You've been there, too. So you do have potential for all kinds of things within you.

So what is this defeatist voice? Well, it's encountered defeat many times in this lifetime. And it's afraid that if you try to raise your hopes by wanting to change, your hopes will be dashed.

This is where you bring out your ingenuity. Remind yourself, "Well, at least tomorrow I'll stick with it." And then the next day. And the next day. Keep it up, day by day by day. That's where habits are changed.

When you have that attitude that "Yes, I can do this," it becomes realistic when you realize there will be obstacles. And one of your main obstacles will be

your sense of who you are, what you are, what you're capable of. As the Buddha said, all senses of self are limiting. Some are more limiting than others. Why choose one that places limitations on you? When that little voice will come up: "Well, if I don't get my hopes up, I won't be disappointed," remember it's an even bigger disappointment that you don't try.

Think of yourself on your death bed, looking back on your life. What will you have wished you had done? Certainly not giving in to those little voices that say "I can't do this. I can't do this." You want to think back on times when you said "Yes, I can."

And you have potentials within you. Once you make up your mind you're going to do something, you find that there are sources of strength that you haven't tapped into before.

I think I've told you about that time when Ajaan Fuang out of nowhere one day said that we were going to sit up all night. I hadn't prepared for that. I'd worked quite hard that day. My first response was, "I don't think I can do that." And he said, "Are you going to die if you do?" Well, no. "Well, then you can do it." So I sat up.

Then as the temptation came to lie down, I kept reminding myself: "There must be some way I can stay with this." And I found that there were resources inside that I'd never tapped into before. We all have these unused potentials. This is one of Ajaan Lee's comments: There are human beings going through life with *lots* of potentials that they hardly even touch, hardly even tap into—potentials in the properties of the body, potentials in the properties of the mind.

So take this fact of change, the fact that the mind can change directions so quickly that there's no adequate analogy for how fast it changes, and use it to your advantage. If your mind can change that quickly, then *you* can change that quickly. When you find that you have a lot of baggage, this is a time to let go of some of that baggage. Learn how to travel light.

In this way, instead of giving in to your defeatist attitude, you have an undefeatist attitude that, even though you encounter setbacks, doesn't get discouraged. It keeps on finding ways to make this change succeed. We're so good at sneaking in and finding ways of making it fail. Learn how to be sneaky in the other direction, quick in the other direction. That's when you can use the principle of change to your advantage.