

Willingness to Change

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When I first started meditating and training I was advised that it would be very helpful to be open-minded about making changes to my attitudes and ways of life. Buddhism speaks of “the habit energy of karma,” and meditation and the Precepts began helping me see the habits of body, speech, and thought that were causing me suffering. And the deepest suffering those unhelpful habits cause is blocking the beautiful flow of the pure love and compassion of the Eternal. I began to realize how deeply ingrained some of these habits were, and that changing them would not happen overnight. I knew that I would have to constantly call upon my *willingness* to change, and grasp my *will* to keep making the effort. I also sensed that this process of conversion was going to be a big project, and that I would need to open my heart to the Eternal and ask for help.

Each of us have our own specific attitudes and habits that are particularly strong for us and that we need especially to work on. For me, the first thing I saw that I had to change was the strength of my *temper*. Although I am not, by nature, an anger-type person, when something did set me off I would really lose it. In fact, it was so bad that, back in New York, I was known as a “flip-out artist”! I would really lose my temper when I thought someone or something was not going right or was trying to cause me harm. This reaction was so deeply habitual that it was really hard to change. But I had faith that my training would make the change possible.

The first thing I learned when given meditation instruction is to let thoughts and emotions, memory and sense perceptions just arise and pass without either grabbing onto the pleasant ones, or running away from the distressing ones. Learning to do this in meditation helped me apply it to my temper in daily life. When I experienced anger starting to erupt, rather than immediately giving voice or action to it, as I usually did, I simply let it be there, observed it, and let it dissipate without acting on it. I could only do this by learning to be really still in the face of rising anger. I am happy to say that, because of this training, I have not lost my temper in a long time.

Anger is not the only aspect of myself that I am working on in the same way. A tendency to complain about different things is one, and to blame others when things do not go the way I think they should. And, at times, I can be overwhelmed by fear. Being mindful when these and other unhelpful reactions of thought and emotion arise, and applying the stillness of meditation to them, has enabled me to lessen my own suffering and the suffering I cause others. This helps me open my heart to the compassion, love, and wisdom that flows constantly from the Eternal. How can I be anything but grateful for this wonderful—if sometimes difficult—practice?

It is not easy to change the harmful habits of lifetimes, but the Buddha assured us that training in meditation and the Precepts makes it possible. At times we will disappoint ourselves in the way we act, but we must have the willingness to pick ourselves up and keep trying.

I am reminded that in Japan there is a popular toy called a “Daruma doll.” It is said to be modeled after Bodhidharma, the Indian monk who brought Zen to China. The dolls often have round bottoms, so that when they are pushed over they pop back up again. This symbolizes the saying, “fall down seven times, stand up eight.” It is meant to represent perseverance and returning to the path of training when we fall, no matter how many times. In the inspiring final words of *The Scripture of Great Wisdom*, there is only the “going, going, going on beyond, always going on beyond, always *becoming* Buddha. Hail! Hail! Hail!”