

Transforming Unwholesome Mind States

Changing Your Mind

Six steps for transforming unwholesome mind states

- Andrew Olendzki Winter 2006

The historical Buddha Shakyamuni made a big deal of the distinction between wholesome and unwholesome states of mind. Most religious and philosophical traditions probably share this point of view to some extent, but the Buddha was unique in offering a detailed way of understanding how and why the mind manifests as it does in any given moment. There are patterns of cause and effect that can be seen in experience and traced over time to explain the dynamics at work shaping each moment of consciousness. The word for this is karma, and it does not mean “fate.”

Moreover, the Buddha offered a simple and universal method for transforming mind states from unwholesome to wholesome. This is important because, as the very first verse of the Dhamma- pada says, we become what we think. Every thought, emotion, intention, attitude, and aspiration shapes how ensuing experience will unfold. This means that every single moment of consciousness is a moment of practice, whether we like it or not. We are practicing to become ourselves. The critical question, really, is just how much we want to participate in the process.

As I understand his teachings, the Buddha was expounding what we might call a post-Copernican revolution. The world really does revolve around us, insofar as our mind is the instrument for the local construction of meaning. Left unattended, the mind will tend to organize around greed, hatred, and delusion, and will create unwholesome states that “obstruct wisdom and lead away from awaken- ing” (Majjhima Nikaya 19). The solution to the problem, at least

according to the earliest strata of Buddhist tradition, is to learn the healthy skill of transforming such mind states. A simple method of doing so is laid out in the Anumana Sutta (MN 15) of the Middle-Length Discourses.

Step One

Notice: “A person [with unwholesome qualities] is displeasing and disagreeable to me.” This is a generic way of stating it. The text actually offers a long list of specific qualities, such as anger, hate, contempt, deceit, and arrogance, within the square brackets. I’m sure we can all come up with our own unique list of unwholesome qualities we find displeasing in others. Notice that the emphasis here is not upon the other person (“He has such unwholesome qualities!”), but upon one’s own response in the moment (“I am experiencing displeasure in the face of this behavior”).

Step Two

Infer: “If I were to have unwholesome qualities, I would be displeasing and disagreeable to others.” This is the pivotal moment of the process, for it turns attention toward oneself rather than placing it upon the other. It is almost automatic in our culture to impugn others for their behavior, and this would normally result in blaming or trying to rectify the other: “If only she would not be like that, I’d be okay.” Here it is rather “If only I would not be like that, she would be okay.” The subtlety of the Buddha’s insight here is not only that transforming one’s own inner states is the most direct path to happiness, but that because of the laws of karmic interdependence, such a change will have the additional effect of transforming others.

Step Three

A person who knows this should arouse his mind thus: “I shall not have unwholesome qualities.” This step involves undertaking the resolve to change the qualities of one’s own mind. What a radical idea in an era that so often takes for granted that the world should be modified to meet our desires long before we should change

ourselves. Opening to things just as they are is a more popular aspect of Buddhist practice than the subsequent step of understanding the nature of what is arising and, if it is unwholesome, letting go of it. Yet this is precisely where, in treading the Buddha's path to awakening, right view, right intention, right mindfulness, and right effort converge.

Step Four

A person should review himself thus: "Do I have unwholesome qualities?" Mindfulness meditation provides access to the landscape of inner experience. Like fondling the beads on a necklace as it slowly slips through the fingers, one learns to savor each moment of consciousness and look closely at its texture and nuance. As insight grows and wisdom deepens, the sense of what is wholesome and unwholesome emerges gradually and intuitively. This is not a discursive or judgmental process, but it does require rigorous honesty.

Step Five

When he reviews himself, if he knows: "I have unwholesome qualities," then he should make an effort to abandon those unwholesome states. It is inevitable that one will discern unwholesome qualities of mind when one looks openly on what is actually occurring in experience. As many people remark, meditation can be a most humbling experience. But there is never any blame for simply noticing what is there. When something unwholesome is seen in oneself, the determination to change it will arise in proportion to one's understanding. How one goes about changing it, however, is a matter of great importance. Accepting what is unwholesome out of attachment, or acting it out in an attempt to purge it, will just strengthen that quality of mind. Similarly, trying to overlook or suppress it will simply postpone and fortify the problem. Abandoning involves seeing it for what it is, recognizing the conditions that contribute to clinging to it, and gently releasing one's hold on the unwholesome quality, one moment at a time.

Step Six

When he reviews himself, if he knows: "I have no unwholesome qualities," then he can abide happy and

glad, training day and night in wholesome states. There will also be times when a review of consciousness reveals no unwholesome qualities of mind. This is good. It is entirely appropriate in such cases to experience happiness and gladness.

The discourse ends with an image suggesting a process of mental purification: "Just as when a woman—or a man—young, youthful, fond of ornaments, on viewing the image of his/her own face in a clear bright mirror or in a basin of clear water, sees a smudge or a blemish on it, he/she makes an effort to remove it, but if he/she sees no smudge or blemish on it, he/she becomes glad."

I suspect both our personal lives and our collective world would be far better off if we cared for our inner states as fastidiously as we do the outer form.

Attention Needs to Evolve Into Mindfulness of Unwholesome States.

- Andrew Olendzki.

One of the many controversies growing up around the notion of mindfulness is whether or not one can be mindful of unwholesome states, such as anger or hatred. On one hand there is the view that one can be mindful of anything, and that it is precisely by becoming mindful of unwholesome states that one is able to abide in such states without having to judge them, suppress them, or act on them. On the other hand there is the view that since mindfulness is a wholesome state and anger and hatred are unwholesome states, and since one cannot experience two such opposite states in the same mind-moment, it follows that what appears to be mindfulness of unwholesome states is actually the rapid modulation between one and the other—moments of mindfulness and moments of anger, for example.

I would like to argue in defense of the second position and offer an effective method of a positive "bait and switch" that allows us to neutralize unwholesome states and steer the mindstream toward the cessation

of suffering. What view we take of the mechanics of liberation is ultimately less important than having the ability to employ it in our own experience to bring about transformation.

There can be little doubt that when one looks very closely, one is not able to hold two things in mind in the very same moment. When it appears that we are doing this, we are using a kind of “peripheral thought” (much like peripheral vision) to hold some information in short-term memory or below the threshold of conscious awareness, but when we drill down into the experience we will find that to know one thing very clearly we need to withdraw attention from other competing data. As the Buddha put it: “If one frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of ill will, one has abandoned the thought of non-ill will and one’s mind inclines to thoughts of ill will.” (Majjhima Nikaya 19)

There can also be little doubt that mindfulness is a wholesome state. It is a sankhara, a volitional response or attitude toward the object of experience cognized by consciousness. Mindfulness is an attitude of confident equanimity, a presence of mind in which the object is neither favored nor opposed. Anger and hatred are also sankharas, as are all the other unwholesome states, but these are responses characterized by aversion—a very different emotional tone than mindfulness. One simply cannot experience aversion and equanimity in the same moment, for they are vastly different qualities of mind. Yet one may be able to cycle quickly between these two states, as the mind so habitually does in many of its processes.

When we say we are mindful of aversion, for example, what we really mean is that we are aware of aversion, or that we are giving our attention to the state of aversion. One of the casualties of the success of mindfulness as a trend in psychotherapy and as an object of scientific study is that it often gets confused with mere attention. According to the models of Buddhist psychology, it is possible to pay attention

to unwholesome states of experience, and even to do so deliberately and in a disciplined manner. But attention is able to mature into mindfulness only in the absence of unwholesome states. When we are angry we can know very well that we are angry. But this kind of knowing is not transformative. We only become mindful of that anger when it becomes an echo or shadow of itself in a subsequent mind-moment, at which point it can be examined as a thought object with an attitude of interest and nonattachment—in other words, with mindfulness.

This is how the bait and switch works: If you are furious, it will not work to simply “be mindful of your anger.” The force of the anger is so strong, and its emotional momentum so compelling, that it is not capable of clearing out of the mind for a moment to allow true mindfulness to emerge. However, you can pay attention to bodily manifestations of the anger—how does your body feel when you are angry? When you are invited to explore these physical symptoms in greater and greater detail, an attitude of careful investigation can gradually develop—for example, you might consider how the nuanced texture of the constriction of your jaw muscles change in subtle ways from one moment to the next.

Using this bait and switch model, you can loosen your hold on the thought or memory that provoked the anger and experience some consecutive moments of mindfulness of the body. With some wholesome momentum thus established, you can gradually steer your attention toward investigating the emotion of anger itself. Now that anger is no longer the burning emotional charge that regards all objects of experience with ferocity but rather has become a thought or memory of the emotion and is thus a mind object rather than a sankhara, it can be examined with equanimity and with mindfulness. The anger no longer holds the mind in its grip, but is regarded at arm’s length, so to speak, as an object of interest.

It is only under such circumstances that mindfulness

becomes transformative. You can pay attention to your anger all day, allowing it to manifest “without judgment” as it burns its way deeper into the heart. But it is not until you are able to abandon that anger, if only for a moment, that the stage becomes available to mindfulness, and it is only when mindfulness is given a chance to settle itself deeply into your habits and character traits that the ground becomes gradually less hospitable for the cultivation of anger and more fertile for the growth of wisdom. You gradually see, with ever-increasing clarity, that anger is just an impermanent and impersonal emotional state, fueled by a selfish and fearful self, and that it only gives rise to suffering. With such insight, unwholesome states gradually arise less often and with less intensity.

Attention needs to evolve into mindfulness, if
mindfulness is to evolve into wisdom.