

the dharma of life changes

Bringing Mindfulness to New Beginnings

by Phillip Moffitt

In considering change, a Buddhist perspective can help to unravel your real motivations so you can make the right changes at the right times in the right ways.

around the New Year, most people find themselves resolving to make some kind of changes in their lives. Sometimes these reassessments are merely daydreams or banal musings, but other times, they are our inner voice speaking and attention should be paid. How can you honor and work with this naturally arising desire to make life changes at this time of year? To do so, you must acknowledge that the call for changes may be larger than your usual sense of yourself 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.

The teachings of the Buddha 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. 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?

motives

Opening up 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 at 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 a 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. One must approach major life changes with care and respect, for their consequences are far-reaching, and many times they create further unforeseen changes in your life.

effects

After assessing your motivation for change, the next questions to ask are: 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? Any change that does not yield more compassion and loving-kindness for yourself and others is a waste of precious life energy. It seems so obvious, but applying this simple ethical screen makes a difference in how wholeheartedly one can move to make changes.

Before committing to a major life change, you also want to ask yourself if it is truly needed. Is your urge 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—maybe you would better serve yourself by practicing letting loose of your attachment to having life be a certain way. Each person has to go through this agonizing, self-doubting process as part of a major change.

action

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.

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.

It is not that we are supposed to be perfect in working with life changes, be without mixed motives, or never make poor decisions or be inconsistent in our behavior. Who is so perfect? Of course we are going to do all of these things. The practice is rather to be mindful of our intentions and actual behavior in order to make adjustments when we realize that we are off track.

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?

making change sacred

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

outcome, for it may well be far different than you ever imagined. All of these steps represent an honoring of yourself, a surrendering of your ego, which 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.

As you reflect and make decisions about your future, never forget that the you

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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 that 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

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. 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. ■

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don't miss Phillip Moffitt will be teaching *Dancing with the Joy and Pain of Life* at Kripalu, April 30–May 2; see page 73.

