

IMPROVING SELF, IMPROVING WORLD



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Never is there a moment in life when it is not possible to practise some form of self-improvement. The difficulty is recognising what can be done and then applying sufficient will and energy to do it. Before we look at this in a little more detail, it might be useful to think about what self-improvement really is.

From a material point of view it is easy to understand that self-improvement might involve altering those circumstance in life that affect material comfort or perhaps status. Certainly the young are conditioned by education and parenting to recognize that work brings material rewards in terms of standards of living. It would be wrong to ignore this area of life but, like many things, if the focus is entirely on one aspect, imbalance occurs. Sadly, the West has been driven very largely by the work ethic and has lost many values in the process. Even the welfare principle behind social security, originally introduced to alleviate poverty, has suffered very much as more and more people seek rewards and rights for themselves that often go beyond needed assistance. By and large, the focus of the majority of individuals is not so much on what improvements they could make to the world around them but what they can draw on to benefit their own personal circumstances.

But if we turn that around just a little and think of how we can improve ourselves so that we react in a way that is beneficial to the wider environment, the focus changes. Instead of thinking of our own comfort and wanting things for ourselves, we begin to see how we affect others by our thinking, by our speech and by our reactions to all events in life. Instead of seeing the world as a resource to draw upon, we see it as both a learning environment and one to which we may contribute. Looking at things from this perspective, it is not so difficult to see that life is an enormous opportunity. We can, if we choose, pass it up or ignore it; alternatively we can grasp it with both hands and improve ourselves and our world simultaneously.

From this point of view, education has a vast role to play and many educationalists are philanthropists also. The problem for us is that once school, college or university is over, education in any formal sense tends to stop. Then we rely on, or are subject to, the media or our own voluntary inquiry for information that can transform the way we think. If we tackle this responsibly, we can make steady and sometimes significant inroads; but if we are to transform ourselves into better and more responsible human beings, there has to be an inner change that does not depend just on intellectual understanding. Intellectual understanding is important but it doesn't necessarily make us into kinder, more compassionate or more selfless human beings. Something in us has to transcend the tendency to want things for ourselves and see very clearly that we are all part of one magnificent whole.

Such changes occur, generally speaking, over a long period of time. Only occasionally do we receive a clear glimpse of things as they really are so that our internal reactions to outer events alter in any significant way. We are, after all, creatures of habit and will only change our habits with focused effort. Fortunately, the habits that are most important are those of the mind – the way we tend to think – and the mind is flexible, albeit it with a tendency to be obstinate.

While it is important to understand the issues affecting the world or our wider environment, the most major contribution we can probably make is through retraining the mind so that our approach to it changes. If the way we react to the world changes from the inside, all the outer responses we make to everything in life through our actions and our words will have an increasing tendency to be life-supporting and so will create an atmosphere of harmlessness around us. All wars and all conflict, which are the cause of so much suffering, are not caused by nature but arise because of the internal reactions of human beings to outer circumstances – nothing else. Peace can only arise inwardly and then it can naturally be manifested outwardly.

How can we create the circumstances or conditions that will enable us to use every moment in life as an opportunity for self-improvement in this way? So many people think that they will only be able to do something of this nature later on when they have more time – when their studies have finished or they have a better job, when the children have left school or home, or when they have retired or no longer have to look after ageing relatives.

The bad news is that the extra time we think will come probably won't because there is always something that needs to be done. As someone once said, even when we die the in-tray is still not empty. However, the much better news is that it is not extra time that is needed for self-improvement but a change in approach to every second of the day. Then we may see that there is no future to wait for; there is only the present and the present moment is in fact a time to be revered and cherished.

The key to improving our internal reactions is to be aware of them rather than responding automatically to them. Suppose, for example, that someone says something that makes us angry. Habitual reactions may normally make us respond in an angry way, either through words spoken angrily or through some physical reaction such as storming out of the room and slamming the door. Feelings of anger are unpleasant enough and if we respond with anger, we only increase our inner discomfort as well as creating unpleasantness in the atmosphere. But if we can maintain sufficient presence of mind to recognise and acknowledge the feelings within us rather than respond emotionally, there is a very good chance of dealing with both the situation and ourselves in a more enlightened fashion.

Our internal reactions are governed by two main things: our emotional make-up and our habitual patterns of thought. These have innumerable causative conditions that are extraordinarily complex and are different for every individual. It would be impossible, and probably not very fruitful, to examine them all. The important point is that self-improvement is about re-educating

oneself in the here-and-now and one of the most effective ways is to bring our full awareness into everything we do. Not only do we bring awareness into *what* we are doing but also into *how* we are doing it.

To be aware of our feelings while we are doing things might seem impractical and also rather self-indulgent. At first, perhaps, it is better just to bring our full awareness into the activity we are doing. If we are washing a mug and plate, for example, we should bring our full awareness into washing them carefully and not think about other things. For most of us, simply acting mindfully will be a major advancement and will significantly help to bring greater clarity of mind. At a slightly deeper level, we can also be aware of our feelings. For life to be enjoyed, our feelings should be positive but sometimes they are negative in nature, sometimes they are overrun by desire and, at other times, they can be completely neutral or flat.

The Buddha taught that by being aware of our breathing we become more aware of our body and, by bringing awareness and therefore greater stillness into our body, we can also be more aware of our feelings, our thought patterns and our perceptions. When feelings arise, rather than suppressing or judging them, going along with them or even fighting them, we simply acknowledge they are there. Very quickly we will find that instead of being a slave to our feelings, we become an observer. We will accumulate less stress, increasing clarity will come and life will become much more comfortable, both for ourselves and those around us.

Gradually we can extend this practice to include our thoughts and, as we do so,

newer and better patterns of thought will emerge. If we can take time out to sit quietly by ourselves and simply observe the mind and our feelings, we will develop increasing calmness and gain some insight into the mind and our true nature. This is a very good meditation we can do, particularly if we are already used to quiet sitting or have attained a little mental quietness. Over time we will become happier, more responsible and more compassionate. In short, we will become better human beings.

Self-improvement is a lifetime's work and there is no better education or way to fulfil one's potential than to truly know oneself. It all occurs in the magic of the present moment and the really wonderful thing is that it is an entirely selfless matter as we are contributing to making a better world. This is environmental friendliness at its best.

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