Mind is Forerunner of All Things

One of the teachings of the Buddha that I quote most often is:

Mind is the forerunner of all things.

If one speaks or acts with an impure mind

Suffering follows, like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox.

Mind is the forerunner of all things.

If one speaks or acts with a pure mind

Happiness follows, like the shadow that never leaves.

I would like to spend our time together this evening looking more closely at this verse. In doing so, I am relying heavily on Andrew Olendzki's teaching in his recent book entitled *"Untangling Self, A Buddhist Investigation of Who We Really Are",* from a chapter called: "Understanding Ourselves."

The passage I just quoted is the first verse found in a collection of Buddha's teaching called the Dhammapada, which means the "Path of Dharma."

The Buddha taught for over forty years, and the collections of his teachings are divided into three pitakas, or "baskets." The largest of the three collections is called the Sutra Pitaka or "basket of discourses," which consist mostly of talks by the Buddha or one of his direct disciples. The Dhammapada is part of this first collection.

The second collection is called the Vinaya Pitaka or “basket of discipline,” and consists of the rules for the monastic order of monks and nuns.

The third collection is called the Abhidharma Pitaka or “basket of metaphysics,” and includes works analyzing the philosophy behind Buddhist teaching.

The teaching I would like to focus on this evening is part of that first basket, the Sutra Pitaka, the discourses of the Buddha. Much of the Buddha’s teachings were intended for the monks and nuns of the Buddhist order. However, the Dhammapada was intended for everyone, lay and ordained practitioner alike. As it has been said that the core of Jesus’s teachings can be found in the Sermon on the Mount, the core of the Buddha’s teachings can be found in the Dhammapada, which consists of 423 verses that relate directly to everyday practice. If you were to own and study one collection of the Buddha’s writings, this would be a good choice.

Chapter one of the collections is called “Twin Verses.” Each of these ten verses consists of a pair of possible choices in human conduct. The first verse examines an unhealthy or unskillful choice which leads to suffering; the second verse examines a wholesome or healthy choice that leads to happiness and freedom from suffering.

The verse I would like to focus on is the first of these “twin verses” in the Dhammapada, and this time I would like to read Andrew Olendzki’s translation of it:

> All experience is preceded by mind,
>
> Led by mind,

Made by mind.

Speak or act with a corrupted mind,

And suffering follows

As the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

All experience is preceded by mind,

Led by mind,

Made by mind.

Speak or act with a peaceful mind,

And happiness follows

Like a never-departing shadow.

The words “mind precedes all things,” or in Pali, *mano pubbangama dhamma,* can be appreciated as a summary of Buddhist psychology, meditation, karma and metaphysics.

Let’s look at each word separately, and then see what they might be pointing to when collected into this phrase. We will begin with the word “mano” or ‘Manas,” one of three terms used for “mind.” The other two terms are “citta” and “vinnana.”

- Mano refers to the instrument of cognition.
- Citta refers to the product or content of a mind-moment. We are familiar with this aspect of mind in the term “Bodhicitta,” or awakened mind in which an individual desires—above all other

things—to be empathetic toward all beings, as well as dedicated to helping others find enlightenment and freedom from suffering.

- Vinnana refers to consciousness as a process or activity.

Mind as “manas” refers in part to the organ of mental experience. Just as visual awareness is made possible with the eye and auditory awareness arises in conjunction with the ear and sounds, mental awareness arises in conjunction with the mind and mental objects. This, however, carries only part of the meaning of manas. Olendzki says:

> The replacing of “mind” with “heart” for manas is also useful in bringing out the sense of volition as a key function of mind, since “heart” in English suggests a deeper seat of decision-making. But it too can have a downside, because its hints at the popular distinction of the heart as the basis of emotions while mind is relegated to rational functions only. This is a feature of Greek philosophy that has no parallel in the east. Emotions are as much mental states as anything in experience, though they are more likely to arise along with a noticeable array of physical sensations.

So we might think of manas as meaning something like mind/heart, so that it includes not only the instrument of cognition, but the disposition or ethical character of cognition as well.

The second word in the phase “Mano pubbangama dhamma” is a compound word consisting of “pubba,” which is translated as “before” and “gama,” which is translated as “to go.” So the first two words of this phrase are typically translated to mean “mind is going before,” or is a “forerunner.” The simplest understanding of this is a temporal one, in which the mind precedes in time what will follow, but a broader view of its meaning is possible. Of this word, Olendzki says:

When we release ourselves from the strict temporal sense of pubbangama, it allows such broader interpretations as “mind conditions mental states” or the quality of mind in one moment will be a leading indicator of how ensuing moments will unfold. The commentary invokes the example of a mob assailing a village. In this case asking who is foremost among the crowd refers not to who struck the first blow but to who played the leading role in inciting the attack. Such a leadership function is preformed not by consciousness itself but by intention.

The Buddha taught that:

Whatever you intend, whatever you plan, and whatever you have a tendency toward, that will become the basis upon which your mind is established. (SN 12.40)

This is the way in which mind is the forerunner of all things. It is the intention we bring to the moment, intention which can be rooted in kindness, compassion and appreciative joy, or intention based on greed, anger and delusion. We set the compass needle of our being and response to the world with our vows and the precepts we share with our sangha.

And finally we come to the word “Dhamma.” We are more familiar with the Sanskrit word “dharma” rather than the Pali word “dhamma.” In its singular form, Dharma or Dhamma refers to the teachings of the Buddha. Here the word appears in its plural form, so it is the technical word for objects of mental cognition or for the whole realm of subjective phenomenological experience.

In bringing these three words, mano pubbangama dhamma together, Olendzki says:

> Our verse is saying that the quality of intention manifesting in any given moment has a direct causal influence on all that will ensue in subsequent mind-moments, which is why so much care needs to be given to how we hold ourselves each and every moment. Learning how to take care of the quality of mind in the moment is where meditation comes into the picture. Notice, in your own everyday experience, how annoyance breeds discontent, how jealousy leads to ill will, or how anger causes suffering for yourself and others. Notice also how kindness will loosen tight emotions, how generosity evokes reciprocity, and how mindfulness improves almost any situation. Seeing this for ourselves, we can gradually learn to guide our actions more skillfully in ever more wholesome directions. With wisdom at the reins rather than heedlessness, we might even entice the ox to lead our cart to freedom.

If we wish to look at our life from the perspective of mind-moments, we might begin with our brain's alpha rhythm, which allows for four to eight mind moment each second. Taking six as the average number of mind moments per second, this would give us 360 mind moments per minute, 21,600 per hour, or 356,400 in a waking day. In an average life span of 77 years, we would have about 10 billion mind-moments. That is it, the sum total our world experience and our life: 10 billion mind-moments. The Buddha took the quality of each of these mind moments very seriously, realizing that the quality of each moment can be characterized as either wholesome or unwholesome, healthy or unhealthy, skillful or unskillful.

Shoken often tells us to take care of what is under our feet, to pay attention to the moment. This means more than just noticing that the dishes need washed and getting to it. We take care of the intention under the ox's foot in order for the wheel that follows to be free from suffering and to bring the blessings of compassion and wisdom to each moment.

To take care of what is under our feet is to take care of our intention each moment. We practice meditation in order to come to know our minds, our mental habits, to take note of our thoughts, to observe their impermanence, to bring awareness to what hooks us. In meditation we strip down our environment, we limit sight, sound or other disturbances so that we are left to observe our thinking. The setting we create for meditation is designed to make watching our thoughts easier by removing distractions. While on the cushion, we can bring awareness to our thoughts as they arise, and acknowledge any emotional quality and the physical response that might co-arise with each thought.

When we leave the cushion, mindfulness is our companion in practice. Taking care of our thoughts, bringing skillful intention to each mind moment is much more difficult in the active, engaged times of our day. Mindfulness is the quality and characteristic of our mind that allows us to bring healthy intention to each moment. To stand upright in any moment, to take care of what is under our feet, is to being awareness of our vows, of the precepts, to each of our mind moments, so that kindness, compassion and wisdom might follow.

With practice, with mindfulness and skillful intention, we can bring our best selves to each moment, we can ensure that the wheel that follows the foot of the ox is indeed a Dharma Wheel.

Resources:

The Dhammapada, introduced and translated by Eknath Easwaran, Nilgiri Press, pgs. 100-101.

Untangling Self, A Buddhist Investigation of Who We Really Are, by Andrew Olendzki, Wisdom Publications, pgs. 51-63.