

Dhammapada: Citta-Vagga (Annotated)

Verses of Truth: Mind Chapter

Translated and Annotated by Suddhāso Bhikkhu

(33)

**Restless and unstable is the mind;
Hard to protect and restrain.
The wise make it straight,
As a fletcher straightens arrows.**

When one begins practicing meditation, one of the qualities of the mind that becomes readily apparent is its restlessness - the mind is constantly trying to chase after every thought and sense-impression that appears, constantly trying to indulge in every impulse that arises. Through the development of concentration and insight, one can stabilize and tame the mind until it is able to remain rock-solid and steady in all circumstances.

(34)

**Like a fish pulled from its watery abode
And cast on dry land,
This mind thrashes about,
Struggling to leave behind the Tempter's domain.**

Anyone who has seen a fish out of water can relate immediately to this powerful metaphor: just as a fish thrashes and flops around in distress when it is cast on dry land, in the same way our mind thrashes about when caught in its cycles of self-torment. The "Tempter's Domain" (Māra-Dheyya) is a term for Saṃsāra: the state of ongoing discontent experienced by the unenlightened mind, brought on by our tendency to pursue our impulses of desire, aversion, and delusion.

(35)

**Hard to hold down, moving swiftly,
Alighting wherever it wishes;
It is excellent to train such a mind:
A trained mind brings happiness.**

The mind changes extremely rapidly; fresh impulses are constantly arising, and we snap at the bait like a ravenous animal. It takes time and effort, patience and perseverance, to train the mind to be steady and calm; but that effort is well worth it, as the reward is unshakable bliss.

(36)

**Very hard to see and extremely subtle,
Alighting wherever it wishes;
The wise guard such a mind:
A guarded mind brings happiness.**

The currents of the mind are subtle and very difficult to observe directly. Usually we don't notice the movements of mind until they have already built up seemingly insurmountable force and dominated our consciousness; however, as we sharpen our mindfulness, we can become aware of these currents as soon as they begin - and cut them off before they gain momentum.

(37)

**Far-ranging and traveling alone,
Bodiless and self-reliant¹;
Those who restrain such a mind
Are freed from the Tempter's bonds.**

The mind is inherently boundless and limitless, capable of instantaneously accessing any abstraction. This is a wonderful characteristic - but if left to its own whims the mind can easily get itself into serious trouble. Learning how to keep the mind from veering down self-destructive paths is a vital skill for those who wish to attain liberation.

(38)

**Unsettled is the mind
Of one who does not understand the true Dhamma.
For one whose confidence² wavers,
Wisdom never becomes complete.**

In order to make progress on the path, we must have confidence that the path is worth practicing: we will not put forth much effort if we do not believe our efforts will produce desirable results. However, true confidence arises only from direct experience: by practicing the path and seeing its results, we gain confidence in the path. This creates a feedback loop: the more we practice, the more benefit we see, and the more confidence we have - and the more confidence we have, the more devoted we are to practicing. So initially it requires a small leap of faith: the willingness to try something out without yet knowing. And even once we've developed some experience-based confidence, we need to keep reminding ourselves of the basis for our confidence so that we stay committed to practice, and continue making forward progress.

(39)

**When one's mind is free of impurity,
When all mental conflict has vanished,
When both good and evil have been abandoned:
There is no fear for one who is awake.**

1 *Guhāsayaṃ*. Lit. "cave-dweller." This is clearly metaphorical. The intended meaning is unclear; the rendering "self-reliant" is conjectural.

2 *Pasāda*. This term carries several denotations: clarity, serenity, and faith. There is no single English word that conveys all three meanings; the translator has here selected the one that seems most suited to the context.

This describes the state of mind of an enlightened being: the mind is completely undisturbed, with no tendencies towards obsessiveness of any kind – both desire and aversion are completely absent. And with the cessation of self-obsession, the stream of karma has ceased to flow: good and evil are no longer relevant to such a being, because that being no longer generates either good or bad karma – there is, in fact, no being to which karma of any kind can “stick.” Without the delusion of independent self-existence, karma has no power. For such a being, there is absolutely nothing to fear, for there is nothing that has the power to break their serenity and bliss.

It must be clarified, however, that this verse does not in any way advocate discarding morality: for an unenlightened being, the distinction between good and evil is extremely relevant, as every choice we make sticks to us and shapes our future. And although an enlightened being is beyond good and evil, all inclination towards unwholesome conduct has already been eliminated from their mind by their previous practice; so the only courses of action that remain are either neutral or wholesome.

(40)

**Having understood that this body is as fragile as a clay pot,
After fortifying this mind like a citadel,
Fight the Tempter using wisdom as one's weapon,
Then one can protect the victory without attachment.**

This powerful simile starts with an important recollection: Death is coming; time is running out. If we wish to win freedom from the tyrannical grip of craving, we must strengthen our minds with concentration and equanimity, and sharpen our insight until it can pierce right through our self-inflicted mental prison. If we wait too long, we might miss our chance, and wander in discontent for uncounted eons. If we act now, however, we might break through, and attain victory over the dominion of our own consciousness. At that point, we can relax, for there is nothing more that needs to be done.

(41)

**Before long this body will lie on the ground,
Discarded and bereft of consciousness,
Like a useless piece of wood.**

Another vivid reminder of the inevitability of death.

(42)

**Compared to what an enemy might do to an enemy,
Or a foe might do to a foe,
What a wrongly directed mind can do
Is far worse.**

This highlights the danger of allowing the mind to wander as it wills: it can do incomparable harm – both to itself and to others.

(43)

**Compared to what a mother or father might do,
Or any other relative,
What a rightly directed mind can do
Is far better.**

And conversely, we see the benefit of training the mind. Remember that ultimately every single thing we experience is experienced through the mind: therefore there is no need to control the world, we need only control our own mind.