

Where the Action Is

There are two aspects to every moment's experience. One is the content, what it is you are aware of; the other is the intention, what your emotional response is toward that object of awareness. In the Buddhist way of looking at things, the first is largely irrelevant, while the second is immensely important.

According to Buddhist psychology, human experience is constructed anew every moment as consciousness of one of the six objects (a form, a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch or a thought) arises and then passes away. An on-going sequence of such moments occurs, yielding for each of us a unique subjective stream of experience. We are always aware of something, since consciousness must always take an object—perhaps it is something we are looking at, or hearing, or touching, or thinking.

It is easy to change the content of experience. Close your eyes, and your visual field alters dramatically. Open them, and it all comes rushing back, in impeccable detail. You can choose to remember what you had for lunch last Tuesday, calculate a complex mathematical sum, or fantasize about what you would do if you won the lottery. Our mind/body apparatus is primed for content, and it lurches from one object to another quite naturally.

The attitude with which all this is done, however, is a different matter. The aggregate called formations (*sankhāra*) is so-called because it is constantly forming a response to what is happening. This too is constructed anew each moment. Whenever we are aware of an object through one of the six sense organs, we are simultaneously forming a response to that object. These responses are also part of our unique stream of consciousness, and constitute our emotional life.

When seeing this particular form, we are amused; when hearing that sound, we are annoyed; when smelling this smell, we are disgusted; when feeling that touch, we are aroused; when thinking one thought we are enraged, while when thinking another we are tranquil. An automaton might merely cognize an object by means of a sense organ; a human being both does this and responds with a rich and nuanced emotional range.

I say the content of experience is largely irrelevant because it is just the data of a perceptual apparatus. Like a camera, the senses—including the mind—can be pointed at just about anything and they will pick up and process information. It does not matter so much what we look at or touch or think, but it matters a lot how we respond to what we are experiencing. This is because all karma

is made and passed on by formations. Every emotional response is a form of action, and every action has a consequence. We are shaped not by what we do, but by how we respond to what we do.

At the heart of the Buddhist path of transformation is the recognition that some responses are healthy, skillful, and propel us a notch closer to being a better person and understanding the nature of things, while others can be quite unhealthy, unskillful, and have the effect of our becoming a slightly more debased person whose delusions only deepen. The emotional responses we enact each moment can be the source of tremendous suffering, both for ourselves and for those around us who are influenced by our actions. The harm comes not from the content, but from the intention accompanying the content of experience. The problem is not that I am thinking about someone from another ethnic or social group than my own, it is that I am thinking about that person with hatred, or jealousy, or fear.

The key is that these intentions we necessarily form in parallel with every moment's awareness of an object are not a mere accompaniment to experience. They go on to condition and determine the actions we will undertake in later experience. One moment's anger becomes the next moment's striking blow, hurtful comment, or nasty thought. We literally build ourselves and our world upon our own emotional responses, and indeed it might not be too much to say that who we are and what world we inhabit actually consists of the series of these emotional responses unfolding within us.

This puts an interesting face on the idea of practice. Everything is practice, because we are always practicing to be the person we will become next. The reason we put so much time and care and effort into learning, through meditation, how to be with whatever is arising in experience without greed, hatred or ignorance, is because by suspending their influence upon us in this moment, we become free of their effects in the next moment. How we hold ourselves right now is the key to everything we will become. It is that important.

So let's focus less upon what we are doing, or saying, or thinking, and place greater emphasis on how we are doing, saying, or thinking it. That is where the action is, on the path of transformation.

—Andrew Olendzki