**THE POWER OF COMMITMENT**

This topic has evolved from the exploration of the Four Noble Truths discourse that I began developing and presenting early this year. We are now at the point where the concepts of Wisdom and Virtue contained in the Noble Eightfold Path are developed, and we’re entering into the topical area of mental training, that is, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

Throughout the exploration, I’ve been experimenting with using different terms to describe this important discourse. For example, I’ve called Right Understanding “Clear Awareness”, Right Intention “Benevolent Intention”, Right Speech “Benevolent Speech, Right Action “Benevolent Behavior”, Right Livelihood “Benevolent Lifestyle”, Right Effort “Benevolent Effort”, Right Mindfulness (tentatively) “Clear Awareness”, and Right Concentration (tentatively) “Stable Awareness”.

This project seems rather audacious to me. Who am I to determine whether the classical terminology is appropriate or inappropriate? However, I’m committed to the endeavor anyway. I believe that it is the responsibility for each generation, and particularly each different cultural context, to find the terms that make the authentic, core teachings of what we call Buddhism most accessible and applicable. I find it ironic that one of the core observations of Buddhist teaching is that of impermanence, and yet, traditional Buddhism strives to maintain the same language, either Sanskrit or Pali, as being what determines the value of the teaching.

Having established this, let me describe why the word “commitment” is important to me. About 30 years ago, I was involved in a self-help group called “reevaluation co-counseling”. I began to work on myself through this system at the same time that I went on my first mindfulness meditation retreat at the Insight Meditation Society. Without commenting further about the self-help group, I learned there the power that emerges from commitment, particularly related to changing my life for the better, that is, reducing my degree of confusion and increasing my capacity to behave decently in relationships.

The way I understood the use of commitment involved combining the setting of a goal (for material gain or to realize a value), and then using the internal awareness and self-discipline of Buddhist training to attain the goal.

I decided back then to make this commitment: “I’m not going to stop until I set my life up to be the way I want it to be, no matter what happens….and this means…..” The first part, involving the way I want my life to be, I imagined to be living and working in the same place, being in a stable and loving relationship, being of service to people through the training and practices of psychotherapy and meditation, and maintaining financial security and good health.

Please understand, that I didn’t quite know what that would look like. It was an orientation that included keeping an internal awareness, initiative, self-discipline, interpersonal sensitivity, prudent use of resources and the ability to be alert to opportunities that would further my commitment.

I used an analogy that I’ve shared with others over the years: Thomas Jefferson didn’t hire Lewis and Clark to go across the continent because they knew the territory. He hired them because they demonstrated the requisite skills to find their way, with the goal of mapping the terrain, assessing the resources, and hopefully finding a route to the Pacific Ocean. Like those explorers, we don’t know what the terrain of life looks like, but we can learn the requisite skills to navigate, problem solve, use resources, and realize opportunities. For me, my “route across the continent of life” is to practice being “a professional human being”, and my goal is to grow into a “Wise Elder” in our culture.

About 15 or so years ago, after the beginning of this new millennium, I achieved my goal, that is, my life is set up the way I want it, and I am achieving the status of “wise elder”. This doesn’t mean that I’ve lost my compass heading, my commitment. It means that I’m pretty steadily on the path that manifests this commitment. This article is one of the ways I can pass on my observations to others, who may find my insights and observations useful.

CONTEMPORARY DEFINITION OF COMMITMENT

The Mirriam-Webster Online dictionary defines it thusly: “A promise to do or give something; a promise to be loyal to someone or something; or the attitude of someone who works very hard to do or support something”. Its origin, from the Online Etymology Dictionary: “late 14c., "to give in charge, entrust," from Latin committere "to unite, connect, combine; to bring together," from com- "together" (see [com-](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=com-&allowed_in_frame=0)) + mittere "to put, send" (see [mission](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=mission&allowed_in_frame=0)). Evolution into modern range of meanings is not entirely clear. Sense of "perpetrating" was ancient in Latin; in English from mid-15c. The intransitive use (in place of commit oneself) first recorded 1982, probably influenced by existentialism use (1948) of commitment to translate Sartre's engagement "emotional and moral engagement."

Honoring the core wisdom of Buddhist teachings, we find certain terms that seem to be related to commitment. The terms I’m referring are called “sankharas”, that is, factors or qualities through which the mind reflects meaning. Here they are:

In the abhidhamma, particularly in the commentary on the sankharas we find several terms: *cetana* (intention, volition), *adhimokkha* (determination, conviction or decision); *viriya* (energy, persistence or effort); piti (enthusiasm, joy, and *chanda* (zeal, wish-to-do).

Here’s the function of cetana, from an article on Abhidhamma by N. K. G. Mendis:

Volition (*cetanaa*), the act of willing. From a psychological standpoint, volition determines the activities of the associated states; from an ethical standpoint it determines its inevitable consequences. Volition leads to action by body, speech and mind and thus becomes the principal factor behind kamma. Therefore the Buddha said: ….”Volition, O monks, is kamma, I declare.” Thus wholesome or unwholesome acts, willfully done, are followed at some time by their appropriate consequences. But if one unintentionally steps on an insect and kills it, such an act has no moral or kammic significance as volition is absent….. (Access to Insight)

Here is the function of adhimokkha found in the Visuddhimagga:

The act of resolving is resolution. It has the characteristic of conviction. Its function is not to grope. It is manifested as decisiveness. Its proximate cause is a thing to be convinced about. It should be regarded as like a boundary-post owing to its immovableness with regard to the object.

Here is the function of viriya, from the same source:

Energy (viriya) is the state of one who is vigorous (vira). Its characteristic is marshalling (driving). Its finction is to consolidate conascent states (the accompanying citta and cetasikas). It is manifested as non-collapse. Because of the words "Bestirred, he strives wisely" (*Gradual Saying* II. I l5), its proximate cause is a sense of urgency; or its proximate cause is grounds for the initiation of energy. When rightly initiated, it should be regarded as the root of all attainments.

Here is the function of piti, from the same source:

. . . It refreshes, thus it is happiness. It has the characteristic of satisfaction. Its function is to refresh the body and the mind; or its function is to pervade. It is manifested as elation. . .

Here is the function of chanda, from the same source:

Zeal (chanda) is a term for desire to act. So, that zeal has the characteristic of desire to act. Its function is scanning for an object. It is manifested as need for an object. That same (object) is its proximate cause. It should be regarded as the extending of the mental hand in the apprehending of an object.

Commitment involves activation, taking initiative and following through on attitudes and behaviors that produce the results that the commitment targets. Many, perhaps most, of the people who admire and study Buddhism are interested in the philosophy, but they don’t take the initiative to commit to meditating on a regular basis and using the insights, discipline and skills acquired, and these are what makes the Buddhist Path to Awakening real. We can talk about ethical behaviors but must have the presence of mind and self-discipline to behave ethically. These ethical considerations are traditionally stated through the precepts, and that serves a purpose. I propose that the precepts be reformed into the language and actions that commitment cultivates.

I hope this is beneficial to your practice and to those who can be beneficially affected by your commitment to Awakening.