

# In the Blink of an Eye

## The transformative power of a single moment of insight.

ANDREW OLENDZKI

**HOW FAR AWAY** from one another are suffering and the end of suffering? The distance can be traversed in the blink of an eye. That is the good news delivered to us by the Buddha in

the *Indriyabbavana Sutta*, the very last text of the Middle-Length Discourses (*Majjhima-nikaya* 152).

In an exchange with a Brahmin student named Uttara, the teaching begins with a description of something universal in human experience:

When a person sees a form with the eye . . . hears a sound with the ear . . . smells an odor with the nose . . . tastes a flavor with the tongue . . . touches a tangible with the body . . . or cognizes a mind-object with the mind, there arises in him what is agreeable, there arises what is disagreeable, there arises what is both agreeable and disagreeable.

Perhaps you have noticed this. It is entirely natural that all sensory experience is accompanied by a feeling tone of pleasure or pain (or in many cases a feeling that is neither pleasant nor painful, but viscerally immediate nonetheless). This is just the way we are hardwired as sentient beings: feeling is an intrinsic component of all experience.

However, in response to this feeling tone, and co-arising with it, we also quite naturally seem to find pleasurable experience agreeable and painful experience disagreeable. In many cases the same object can be both agreeable in some ways and disagreeable in others. As creatures who have evolved from animals, we find ourselves implanted with reflexes to pursue what is pleasant and to avoid what is painful. This is where our troubles begin.

Such primitive programming has no doubt helped us survive long enough to develop the higher brain functions unique to humans, but evidence is mounting that these same instincts are becoming obsolete and counterproductive to our well-being. One of the great insights of the Buddha is that the very mechanism of desire, by means of which we crave some aspects of experience and reject other aspects, is the fundamental cause of suffering.

This, too, is just the way it is: suffering occurs. So what tools do we have at our disposal to cope with the situation? As mammals we are also endowed with innate impulses toward generosity, kindness, compassion, and cooperation, which help counteract and at times override the more primal selfish instincts. More significantly, we also have a protruding prefrontal cortex capable of introspection, self-reflection, and mindfulness. Encouraging us to put this organ to work, the Buddha proceeds in our text to say:

He understands thus: “There has arisen in me what is agreeable, there has arisen what is disagreeable, there has arisen what is both agreeable and disagreeable.”

This observation might not sound like much, but it is a huge step. Bringing awareness to the inner life allows light to shine in the darkness. Seeing what arises and passes away in the mind

and body each moment allows what we experience to become something known and understood, rather than something shaped entirely by invisible, unconscious conditioning. Such mindfulness provides the necessary prerequisite for the next transformative step pointed to by the Buddha: insight into the nature of phenomena.



“But that is conditioned, gross, dependently arisen; this is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, equanimity.” The agreeable that arose, the disagreeable that arose, and the both agreeable and disagreeable that arose cease in him and equanimity is established.

One can discern, with the faculty Buddhists call wisdom, that all experience is shaped within a matrix of cause and effect. The “disagreeableness” that has arisen is merely a mental attitude of aversion, coagulating around a particular feeling of displeasure, which co-arises with the cognizing of a particular sensory object. The attitude is a product of one’s dispositions, which

are themselves nothing more than patterns of learned responses that have built up during a lifetime (or more) of acting and reacting in the world.

Such a breakthrough in understanding allows for a dramatic and immediate liberation of the mind from the coercion of desire—both the desire to hold on to what is deemed agreeable and the desire to push away what is disagreeable. When one realizes that the arising feeling is one thing, while the attitude generated in response to it is something else entirely, the chain of compulsive causation is broken and a moment of freedom is born.

One can now choose to respond differently, and the agreeable/disagreeable attitude that forms the warp and woof of our suffering can be replaced by something capable of embracing both pleasure and pain without reaction. Serene, yet radically intimate with experience, we can, like the Buddha, abide in any moment with the hint of a smile on our lips.

This might sound like a distant ideal, but the Buddha suggests it is accessible here and now:

*Just as a man with good sight, having opened his eyes might shut them or having shut his eyes might open them, so too, concerning anything at all, the agreeable that arose, the disagreeable that arose, and the both agreeable and disagreeable that arose cease just as quickly, just as rapidly, just as easily, and equanimity is established.*

He makes it sound so easy. All it takes is a gentle shift in attitude, a simple letting go of liking and not liking, an opening to the moment as it is rather than as we wish it would be. With sufficient understanding, the journey from suffering to freedom can be made in the blink of an eye. ▼

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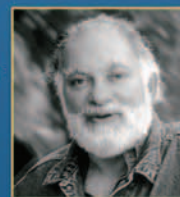


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