

Ready to Change (2 of 5) Softness, Malleable, and Workable

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Hello. Welcome to the second talk on five wholesome states of receptivity, of softness. These are five areas of inspiration that are considered wholesome mental states to develop and evoke. They are self-protecting. This means that as we cultivate these wholesome states, they protect us from the opposite states. For example, yesterday the theme was readiness or receptivity. If we try too hard to be ready or strain to be receptive, we actually diminish our receptivity and readiness. The readiness has to have within it a letting go of straining and tense, unwholesome effort.

Today, the topic is malleability, a wholesome state that is very helpful for practice and for listening to the Dharma.

It prepares us for the deepening of practice. Sometimes the word for malleability is translated as “soft,” just as beeswax becomes soft enough that it can be shaped into something.

Here is a story about this that I have told many times because I love it. When my son was in kindergarten, once a week they would make little animals with beeswax. The beeswax they used was kept on a shelf. When they went to get it, it was always very hard, and you could not really shape it. They were instructed to hold it in the palms of both hands. Then the teacher would proceed to tell a story. By the time the story was finished, the beeswax was soft and malleable enough for them to make into beautiful little animals.

It is the same way with our mind. If we can hold something in the embrace of awareness (mindfulness) without reacting, without forcing, without doing, just staying here, our whole being will begin to relax. The mind will begin to relax. Relaxing the body is a way of softening the mind, so it is very important not to undervalue the relaxed body. In this practice, we want to become acutely sensitive to tension, strain, and any kind of stress involved in how we practice. We can be relaxed and soft, but not so relaxed that we fall asleep or become complacent. There is a wonderful balance between being physically and mentally upright and alert

while allowing that alertness to relax and soften, not collapsing, but settling deeply and staying alert.

One of the qualities of a wholesome mind is malleability or softness. In the Buddha's teachings, this is often paired with a word that means workability, sometimes translated as "wieldiness," meaning the ability to make something with the mind. It comes from the word *kamma* (to make).

There is a time in meditation practice when the mind is ready and peaceful. We are present and here. There is a feeling that now we can start applying our attention with more freedom and ease. Being mindful is no longer a struggle. There is no preoccupation or strong tendency to be caught up in thought. Now we are really here. Because we are here, the mind has a wieldiness – a workability. It can be applied and engaged. The whole mind becomes malleable.

For example, in my early years as a Zen student, we would sit in a very specific posture: very upright, straight, and very balanced – almost a yogic posture. We got up very early in the morning at 4-4:30, and we went to bed around nine o'clock, so people were often tired. There was a custom for teachers to walk around and adjust people's posture during meditation in case they were leaning or slouching. The teachers would come from behind us as we sat, and they would gently put their

hands on the back of one shoulder, just to let us know they were there. Then they would proceed with both hands to adjust the posture. All this was done silently during meditation.

There was an interesting phenomenon: if I was preoccupied with my thoughts and I felt that hand on my shoulder, I would startle, like a startle reflex. But if I was really present and not preoccupied with thoughts, I would be just as surprised to feel the hand on my shoulder. I wasn't expecting it; it just came out of the blue. But when the hand touched my shoulder, my whole body would immediately become softer and more receptive. There would be a kind of softness, as if I was ready to flow and move with whatever movement the teacher wanted from me. I learned from that the impact of being preoccupied: when I am preoccupied in thoughts and concerns, I am less fluid and flexible. I become inflexible, fragile, and easily startled.

Learning to not be preoccupied is a very important part of this process. It helps to take time, and not to dismiss being preoccupied and caught up in thought, but rather, to see this as a valid area to be mindful of. When you feel yourself really caught up in thoughts and ideas, this is the time to start feeling the mind and the body to find out how they might be tight, tense, or assertive, and whether there is pressure or stress. Look for all the things that are not malleable or soft, but are hard. Get to

know them, because knowing them is like taking the beeswax off the shelf and holding it in your hand.

Take the hardness of the mind and the tension and pressure, but don't make them a problem. Be willing to hold them with warmth, kindness, and receptivity. The very thing we're trying to develop – malleability, workability, and receptivity – see if you can bring that to the places in your mind where you are not that way. See if that quality softens those places. If it is easy to relax them, relax. Many meditators learn to let go of thoughts without learning to relax or soften the underlying pressure to think. But you can let go of thoughts all you want, and that pressure will just pump out more thoughts.

Take time to soften and begin to appreciate the softer, more receptive, and malleable mind. When something surprising happens, this mind is not stunned, shocked, or frozen. It can just flow with whatever is happening. I think that with certain activities like sports, playing music, or taking a walk in nature, when new things arise, they can be easily folded into a malleable, wieldy, soft, receptive mind. They can be included as part of the whole.

So we are cultivating, developing, and appreciating a soft mind, a malleable mind, a wieldy mind, a workable mind. There is a radical difference between a hard mind

and a soft mind – between an unreceptive mind and a receptive mind. Be inspired by the possibility of a soft, malleable, workable mind, with awareness that has a quality like soft butter, where whatever happens is just like a knife going through soft butter – no pressure is needed. Or like when your hand moves through water and the water doesn't offer much resistance. The water is just there softly – there is softness in water that allows the hand to move through it. The same way with awareness in the mind: let that be soft, so things can happen. Be ready for anything, surprised by nothing – just available.

Part of the theme for this week is that these are states of inspiration – they are beautiful qualities of mind. Is there some way that you can be inspired by the quality of softness, and some way you can cultivate it and appreciate it?

For homework today, I would like to propose that all of you assume that, to some degree, you can evoke a softer mind than you have at any given moment. You can make it more malleable, softer, more receptive. Take some time throughout the day to make it so. It doesn't need to be dramatic. What it requires is pausing and taking some time to do this. I know that, for some of you, taking the time to do something like this is very expensive. It interrupts the efficiency of doing a lot of things, especially things that you are under pressure to

do. But I think it is well worth the investment to make quality time, even if it's just two minutes, to see if you can soften the mind somewhat. Get a sense of what even small movements in that direction feel like.

Because in the long run, we can live our lives much more effectively with a soft, malleable mind that is receptive. It is a more creative mind.

I hope that you can have some sense of this and some ability to tap into it. This would be a great day to do it. Thank you very much.