

## You've changed!

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One of the most insidious stumbling blocks to awakening, to being happily our true selves, is our **attachment to rituals**. This basically means we are caught up in habitual actions without much or any thinking and feeling (our head and heart are not really in it): we simply go through the motions. This is, in fact, what really happens every workday of urban life in a society where everyone is measurable in their worth. Another way of putting it, but darkly, is that we are **robotizing** ourselves.

It's like we are dead frozen in ancient amber.

### Buddhist robots

Such a robotizing effect often happens in “Buddhist practices,” when we practise without much thinking or feeling, that is, when we lack **mindfulness**. We ritually go, every Sunday, to the Temple or the Centre and ritually listen to Buddhist talks. When others laugh, we laugh; when others clap, we clap. Even after years of such listening, we have not really changed for the better. We feel good not because of the Buddhist rituals but simply because we are not facing any real problems. When that does happen, it is another story (but we will leave that alone for now).

Not only do we listen ritually, but we perform a lot of other Buddhist, non-Buddhist and unbuddhist acts **ritually**, too. We meditate ritually: we have a “good” meditation because we believe our teacher or friends say so. But they don't really know our mind or heart. We perform some rituals for a birthday, or a wedding, or the dead. We say some words or applaud the words. But we do not really know how it works; again, our mind and heart are not in it. The reason is often simple enough: we have not taken the trouble to find out what all this really mean.

### Doing it meaningfully

For greater benefit in our Buddhist practice, we should do it **meaningfully**. In practical terms, this simply means we see something **impermanent** in whatever we are practising, or even in our routine daily life. In fact, this is the underlying **reality** in all our actions—they are all impermanent.

We may not understand the more profound significance of some of the rituals we do, but when we see impermanence in it (we have to look deeply), it becomes **meaningful**. Rituals have no meaning of their own: we put meaning into them: we are **doing** them. Then, it begins to benefit us surely over the long term.

Take the simple act of bowing before a Buddha image. We can feel and reflect how our body moves as we bow. Just be present in that bowing—what do we see? We see **changes** in our bodily movements. This helps us stay focused in our moment of bowing, making it meaningful. That meaning is **impermanence**. We must apply this to every other waking action—then, we will see the wonderful benefit this brings us.

## **Doing it purposefully**

When we see meaning in our ritual actions, we are ready for the next aspect of our practice. We must do it **purposefully**. Simply, this means (again) that our mind and heart are fully (or more fully) in our action. We may start by asking, “**Why** am I doing this?” We keep on asking this question, and the answers only get better over the years. After all, this is a lifelong practice.

We see impermanence in all our actions—it gives meaning to our actions. When we do this properly, we notice that we are not troubled (or less troubled) by negative emotions and bad thoughts: we are happier. This happens because our meaningful focus in impermanence keeps us in the present of true reality: all things are, after all, impermanent.

## **Letting go: meaning?**

This helps us **let go** of negative emotions and bad thoughts. This sounds as if we are “making” them go away but the reality is more profound. By not **ritualizing** our acts (doing them without mind or heart), we see them as they are. All thoughts, words and deeds arise and pass away (they are impermanent).

It is when we try to **hold** them back (we like them) or **hold** them away (we dislike them) or don't know what to do (we have no feeling for them) that we lose the moment of reality. We are left with this failure we have created for ourselves. This is “ritual conduct” and being attached to it only makes it worse. (You may have to read this a few times to see its layers of meaning.)

## **Change and change**

When we see meaning in our **actions**, it is easier to see its **purpose**, too. Then, we see the meaning and purpose of our **life**, too. This brings great happiness because **there is nothing really** that we can hold on to—or need to. All things change.

Change is all around us. Now the secret to turning and heading for the path of awakening is to see change **within** ourselves, too. Such thinking or feeling prevents this inner change:

I like this talk; I don't like this talk; I find it boring.  
I like this teacher; I don't like this teacher; I find him boring.  
I like this person; I don't like this person; I find him boring.  
I like this thing; I don't like this thing; I find it boring.

All such thoughts try to **see** permanence in what is **changing**. We are clinging to the what is gone. We are living the dead; we are the living dead!

## **You have changed!**

The reality is: we, too, are changing. This is the most difficult impermanence to notice. A simple exercise helps. Reflect how we thought about someone or something or even

Buddhism some years back, some decades back. But **now** our ideas are different. By accepting **change**, we have grown, become better, wiser. This is, in fact, the spirit of **renunciation**: letting go of change.

One of the most beautiful compliments someone can give us is to say: **You have changed!** It means that we no more think or feel like them: we have let go of the crowd; we have left the tribe—we have really renounced “the world.” We have become like the lone happy Buddha radiant under the Bodhi tree. We are ready to turn to the path of awakening.

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