



A fallen leaf in a mountain stream
nourishing abundant growth wherever it flows –
one thing gives way so the next can arise!

Letter 20

Appreciating Change

Dear friend,

To put it plainly: having a partial attitude towards change based on attachment and aversion will always lead to tension. Usually we would only like to have the good part of change. When something unpleasant changes into something pleasant, like becoming healthy again after an illness – that’s the kind of change we like, that makes us happy. But obviously there are so many changes for the worse: growing dangers for human life on earth, the occurrence of conflicts in our relations, becoming weak in the body due to illness, old age or approaching death, and so on – and we try to avoid those changes because they make us unhappy. This attitude of attachment and aversion creates constant tension. We are grasping at what we like and fear losing it. We’re afraid of encountering unpleasant changes and we often try to fight them off.

Let’s give some careful thought to this: can we have one without the other? Is it possible to have only good changes, or to have increase without decrease, and birth without death? What would be the consequences if hypothetically we stopped life at a good moment when everything feels just fine? Let’s contemplate this question.

Stopping life would mean the end of change. Everything would stagnate as if in a permanently frozen world. In such a world even the concept of death has no meaning since nothing is ever born. Without change there would be no life or death, no growth or decay, no beginning or end: Death is actually just another name for life, the end of one situation is the beginning of another. What we usually call “death” is the very nature of the process of

change; we could also call it “birth”, if we look at it the other way. Death is always the birth of something new. Let’s try to recognise that.

Obviously, we aren’t wishing to stop life completely; rather we’d like to live in a paradise where all resources regenerate themselves eternally, where we enjoy peaceful conditions, live in love and harmony without ever dying, free from all worries, with plentiful food in continuous happiness... Well, this is possible in a dreamland, but not at all in a world like ours. In our world many causes and conditions determine whether fruits grow, whether babies develop well, whether we can live in peace and whether we stay healthy or not. Some of those conditions we can influence through our actions, but many are beyond our influence.

Change is the source of life. If change means death to us, well, then the source of life will mean the same thing to us as continuous dying. If change means birth to us, well, in that case continuous taking of birth is the source of life. It is only a question of perspective: appearing and disappearing, arising and fading away, coming and going – actually, we can never have one without the other.

Societies, cultures, religions all change under the influence of causes and conditions. About 2.5 million years ago human beings appeared on this planet and although this seems so incredibly long ago they will inevitably disappear one day just as so many other species have already disappeared. By acting wisely we might be able to prolong our time as a species on this planet, but we are too vulnerable to resist major changes. There is no exception to the rule of change: whatever has come together will eventually fall apart. Individuals are born and die; I have been born and so I will surely die. All my friends and family members have been born and will die, some sooner, some later – that’s life.

Does this make you sad? If it does that would be very normal; nobody wants to leave behind the familiar and convenient aspects of his life. It usually makes us sad to leave the people, things or places that we know and like. Having to leave them behind is a source of sadness. But it will inevitably be so. We cannot avoid the loss of anything. In the end we’ll have to leave everything behind, even our lives. So let’s appreciate this changing, unpredictable life for the many opportunities that it offers to us only because of change.

We need to be a little philosophical. We cannot expect from life to only give birth to pleasant situations like bringing us together with our beloved. We will have to accept that the simple fact of being alive will also bring separation and death. So instead of lamenting about change let’s use the present situation wisely and joyfully to its fullest potential.

Exercise: *Let’s take time to contemplate deeply the phases of birth, stability and death in everything.*

(a) Contemplating ‘birth’ means to look into all the factors that lead to the appearance of something new. For example the bread that I am eating was ‘born’ through the coming together of flour, water, salt, yeast, kneading, heat and so many other factors. Look at many examples of this.

(b) The phase of 'birth' might be followed by a period of seeming 'stability' where change is not so apparent. But have a look. If bread is to remain stable it needs again the coming together of many factors, like cool temperature, sterility, protection against insects or blows etc. What we call stability is actually the dynamic interplay of many forces; there is no true, independent stability in anything, not to mention human relationships. If any single factor changes, this will have an immediate impact on the situation. Contemplate this with many different examples.

(c) After seeming stability comes the phase of disintegration. Contemplating 'death' means looking into the factors that lead to the disappearance of something. Due to being eaten up or because of humidity or any other force the bread will disintegrate and change into something else. It might nourish our body or some insects or become a fertile environment for other forms of growth. One thing gives way and the next thing arises...

Take many examples of this kind, until you begin to appreciate that nothing can ever arise or be born, if there is not something else that dies or disappears. The birth of the bread is the disappearance of the flour... Change is simultaneous birth and death.

With the best wishes for appreciating change,

Tilman Lhundrup

PS. We will continue with another contemplation of change in the next letter, but please take your time to first integrate every step.