

Choiceful Awareness

January 23, 2018

There's a passage where the Buddha says that it's possible to abandon unskillful qualities in the mind. If it were not possible, he wouldn't teach it. It also is possible to develop skillful qualities in the mind. And again, if it were not possible to do that, he wouldn't teach it.

The underlying principle here, of course, is that we have choices, and our choices do have an impact on the course of the mind. When you meditate, you're actually practicing "choiceful" awareness. There's a lot said about choiceless awareness, which is one stage of the meditation, but it's very advanced. To get to the point where that's actually a useful practice, you first have to make a lot of choices, and you have to make them well.

So right now, choose to be with the breath. And regardless of all the other voices in the mind, stick with that choice because that's your path. The other voices are other paths. It's not the case that all paths lead to the top of the mountain. Only a person who's never been on mountains would make a statement like that. Some paths lead to cliffs or dead ends.

The Buddha has a passage where he talks about all the different paths that he sees people following. There's a path to a cesspool. There's a path to a burning pit. There's a path to a forest, but it's a very meager forest that doesn't give much shade. There's a path to a forest that does give shade. There's a path to a palace, and there's a path to a lake with pleasant shores and trees giving good shade.

He says he sees people following these paths, and he notices that if they don't turn around and go back, they're going to arrive at these various destinations for sure. And they're all very different destinations. The pit of burning embers is hell. The cesspool is the animal realm. The meager forest is the realm of hungry ghosts. The nicer forest is the human world. The palace is the deva world. And that lake with the wonderful shores and great shade: That's nibbana. It's not the case that every path goes to the same place.

So when a thought comes into the mind, ask yourself, "What kind of path is this? Where is it leading me?" We tend to choose our thoughts because we like them or we find them fun. But the question always should be, where is this taking you? Right now, the thoughts that direct you to the breath are taking you where you want to go if you want to put an end to suffering. If you don't want to put an end to suffering, you can go do something else.

We're here because we see that this is *the* big problem in life: the suffering we're creating for ourselves. As the Buddha said, if you solve this problem, you've solved all the problems in the mind—everything else from that point on. Even though there may be questions that you have to think about and problems that you have to solve, they don't have the same impact on the mind anymore. The big issue is the problem of why it is that when we want happiness, we do things that give rise to suffering. The Buddha said it's because of our ignorance; it's because of our craving.

How do you get to see ignorance? By definition, when you're ignorant, there are things you don't know, and you don't know you don't know them. The problem is you *think* you know. Ignorance is not just a big vacuum. It's filled with all kinds of misinformation. And a lot of the voices in the mind are the voices of ignorance, so you have to be very careful about which voices you listen to and which ones you don't. Make up your mind you're going to stay right here. Stay right here with the breath.

Find a way to settle in. Start out with mindfulness, which leads to concentration. It's not the case that these are two separate practices. Mindfulness gets you focused on body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities, in and of themselves, all of which are the basic components of concentration. "Body," here, of course, is the breath. Feelings: The feeling of ease that you're trying to create with the breath, or the feelings of pain that may distract you. You have to learn how to deal with those feelings and also with the various mind states that come into play.

When the Buddha lists mind states in the context of mindfulness practice, for the most part he lists them in pairs, and they're all related to concentration practice. With only one exception, they're all pairs of skillful and unskillful. The one exception has to do with two extremes: the extremes of too much energy or too little energy. But here again, the whole point is to learn how to develop skillful qualities and to abandon unskillful ones because we can do it. And it gives good results.

As for mental qualities, these are either the qualities you have to get past—to abandon if you're going to get the mind to settle down—or the ones that you have to develop to get it to settle down.

These are all the components of concentration. Mindfulness focuses you on these components and tells you to look at them simply as components. In other words, a feeling comes in and you're not asking yourself, "What is this feeling about?" Or, "What is this thought about?" It's: "What kind of feeling is this? What kind of thought is this? How does this fit into our quest for

concentration?” That’s the framework that’s given in mindfulness. And that leads us to focus precisely on the breath in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves. This is where you get concentrated, trying to develop the mind states that will keep you here with a sense of well-being.

This sense of well-being as you concentrate is very important because it’s the lever you can use to pry yourself away from your other fascinations with sensory pleasures, thinking about sensual thoughts. As the Buddha said, if you don’t have a happiness corresponding to right concentration or a higher happiness, then no matter how much you may know about the drawbacks of sensuality, you just keep going back.

So it’s important that you develop a sense of well-being in the body and well-being in the mind. Whatever the topic is of your concentration that allows you to have a sense of well-being, focus there. And don’t be afraid of getting attached to it. If you don’t have an attachment here, you’re going to go back to your old attachments. Choose to breathe in a way or choose to focus in a way that gives rise to a sense of well-being. Choose to maintain that well-being. Keep your thoughts thinking in the terms of right mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities.

As for the stories that would pull you away, learn to use the Buddha’s teachings on time. When he talks about time, it’s usually in huge timescales or in very minute timescales. Our stories tend to be framed in middling timescales. His have huge timescales, eons and eons: He talks about how we’ve been wandering on through hundreds of thousands of eons.

How long is an eon? He says you take a mountain one league tall, one league wide, one league deep—a league is about 10 to 16 miles—and once every 100 years, someone comes along and brushes it with a cloth, just touches it with a cloth. In the time it would take that one person to wear the mountain down with that touch of the cloth, it’s still shorter than an eon.

And we’ve been through hundreds of thousands of these eons. When you think about it, it blows your mind. And that’s what it’s supposed to do. It’s supposed to blow apart your narratives that are eating away at your mind about who did this and who did that, which politician is doing what to what politician, which member of your family has done something to somebody else?

Those stories have middling kinds of timeframes. So either think in terms of the very large timeframes or of the minute ones. As the Buddha said, focus on the fact that you may only have one more breath left. What would you want to do with this one breath? What’s a good thing to do with this breath, or the next one, or the next one? Because when death comes, it does come suddenly. It doesn’t

come with any warning. There are no signs. Those characters in the cartoons of the hooded figure: They don't come and leave a note to say, "I'm going to come back in a couple of days." They just show up and grab you.

So when you think either in very small timeframes or very large timeframes, it helps to shatter the narratives that would otherwise pull the mind away from the breath. We've been causing ourselves suffering for huge amounts of time, and here's our opportunity right now to learn how to stop. We don't know how much time we have to stop before we die. And then we'll have to go through the process of growing up again and finding the Dhamma all over again. Who knows when your next chance is going to be?

So we don't listen to the neuroscientists who say that people don't really have choices, because we realize that our choices do matter, and they matter right now. That's the basic principle of the four noble truths: Our choices matter. So choose well.