

Worlds to Watch Out For

July 9, 2016

When you meditate, you're making choices. For instance, right now you're choosing to be with the breath. And you want to choose to make that choice stick. In other words, you don't just stay here for a little bit. For the meditation to work, you have to stick with it for a long time.

This is where it's good to know some of the techniques for staying with the breath with a sense of confidence, a sense of ease, so that the breath feels good. Breathing in feels good. Breathing out feels good. If it doesn't feel good, you can change the way you breathe. That's another choice you can make. Try long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow, broad, narrow—because the in-and-out breath is connected with what they call the breath element throughout the body.

There's a sense of energy that fills the whole body. In some cases, it's blatant that there's movement. In other cases, there's simply kind of a buzz. But without the energy, you'd be paralyzed. So think of the whole body as breath and see what that perception does. We're learning about the power of the mind's choices, the perceptions it holds, the things it focuses on, because we want to see the how much our choices actually shape the way we experience things. A lot of things out there we can chalk up to what other people are doing, what other people are thinking. But a lot of it has to do with our interpretive code, the way the mind reads things. And if you find that your code is getting the mind worked up—it's creating unskillful habits, unskillful mind states—you can change.

This power to change is what the meditation's all about. In fact, the Buddha's teachings are all about the power of your choices to change things. As he once said, if people couldn't develop skillful qualities or abandon unskillful ones, there would be no point in teaching them. But it's a fact that we can see: when you develop good qualities of mind—like goodwill, compassion, concentration, mindfulness, discernment—you get good results. When you abandon unskillful ones, you get good results, too. It's because you actually get results that the Buddha finally found it worth teaching. Everything in his teaching revolves around the issue of choice. And, of course, choice comes together with his teachings on kamma.

Now, in our culture, kamma's got a bad rap because it's mainly associated with bad kamma and it sounds deterministic. But the Buddha's whole emphasis is that you can create good kamma. You've got some good kamma in the past. Otherwise,

you wouldn't be a human being. You want to build on that. I remember a member of my family, when she first heard about kamma, saying that all she could think about was, "Oh my gosh, I'm going to get punished for the bad things I did in the past." That's the way a lot of people react to it. But the Buddha never talked about punishment in that way.

Kamma, he said, is what makes generosity a reality. There were people in his time who said that generosity is all sham because they were teaching that people had no choice. Whatever people did, they just did because that was what was written into the world, so you couldn't credit them with anything good or bad. For the people who taught that, it was their way of trying to get themselves off the hook for making good or bad choices. Or they would say there was really no person there anyhow that you could be generous with. It's all just physical elements, so it doesn't really matter if you help other people or not. And to this day, those attitudes are around.

But one of the first things the Buddha said when he was teaching about kamma was that there is generosity. The meaning was that generosity has value. And it has value because we have this power of choice.

The same with gratitude. When people have helped you, you should have gratitude for them because they made the choice. Again, if they didn't have any choice in the matter, if it was just built into the way they were, there'd be no need for gratitude because they would have had no choice in the matter. But when you realize that when people have gone out of their way to help you—they had to choose to make some sacrifices, they had to choose to go out of the way to help you—then it's worthwhile showing them gratitude. That's a sign that you yourself appreciate goodness and you appreciate help.

The fact that we're meditating is directly related to the teaching on kamma, too. Where does kamma come from? It comes from our intentions. And where do our intentions come from? They come from the state of the mind. So we work on the state of the mind to improve our intentions—to make them not just good, but skillful. "Good" is well-meaning. "Skillful" is not only well-meaning, but also involves checking up to see, when you do a well-meaning action, do the results actually come out well? If something you thought was good turns out to get bad results, you go back and you recalibrate.

It's the act of reading the results and then going back and using your experience to inform your intention: That's what turns good intentions into skillful ones. So, when we think about kamma, the kamma of meditation, remember we're focusing on the good side—the fact that we can make a change for the better, particularly in our own minds.

After all, look at the mind: It's a huge mess of all kinds of intentions. If you bring more mindfulness and more alertness and more concentration and discernment to it, you begin to straighten things out. You can see where your inner worlds, the worlds of the ideas that you inhabit, are pulling you off in the wrong direction, and you can replace them with better ones. Which better ones? The world of being a meditator, sitting here being aware of what's going on—being aware of what's going on in your mind, what's going on in the breath, with a sense of well-being based on the breath: That's a good place to step out.

And the mindfulness you bring here: It's important to understand that mindfulness is not just bare awareness. It's the ability to hold something in mind; to keep something in mind. And one of the things you want to keep in mind is that you do have the power of choice. We had these chants just now, reflecting on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Those are things you want to keep in mind as well. The Buddha represents our ability to, with our own efforts, find true happiness. Of course, he's also there, as he said, as our friend: He's shown the way.

There's that famous passage where Ven. Ananda comes to him and says that having admirable friends is half of the life of the practice, or what he called half of the holy life. The Buddha replied, "No, it's the whole of the practice." That doesn't mean that our admirable friends are going to do it all for us. It simply means that they've shown us the way and they've set a good example. Without their example, we wouldn't know how to practice. You want to keep their example in mind, that this is something human beings can do, because you notice that, in the worlds of your mind that tend to be unskillful, the possibility that you could change for the better is just not entertained at all. But if you see who else is inhabiting that particular world and if there's room for the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha—in other words, the example that they set—it's going to be a good world. But if there's no room for them, if you blot them out—in other words, what they represent, which is the possibility of training the mind to a point of total freedom—it's going to be an unskillful world.

All our unskillful states don't like total freedom. They like their slavery to greed or aversion or delusion. So they put on blinders. They pretend that the Buddha never gained awakening. The Dhamma's not there. The Sangha, they pretend, has not been here all along to show us the good example, to show that it's not just somebody 2,500 years ago—but it's a path that is still alive today, is still possible today.

So you look at the mental worlds you're inhabiting. Try to make sure that the world you inhabit has space for the example of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. This is why we have them as recollections. But if you find yourself focused

on a desire, or focused on a particular mental world, and there's no space for the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha there, okay, you're in trouble. That world is going to close in on you.

Other qualities you want to look for in a good mental world include what the Buddha calls shame and compunction. Now, shame doesn't mean you feel that you're a bad person. It simply means when you think about doing something unskillful, you have a sense of shame around it. You tell yourself, "This is beneath me. I'm a better person than that." That's a kind of pride, a pride that's really helpful and really healthy. As for compunction, if you see that an action will have bad consequences, you tell yourself, "Those bad consequences matter. I'm not going to do it." Now, there's a sense of pride that goes with that, too—a healthy sense of pride. It's what protects you and protects your skillful worlds.

Again, if you find yourself in a particular mental world and you don't notice any sense of shame at all, then you can do anything at all. If there's no sense of compunction, you get apathetic and you say, "It doesn't matter what I do, what the consequences are; who gets hurt." In a case like that, know that you're in a bad world. Try to use the breath, use the meditation, to get out. Because again, you can choose the worlds you inhabit. The meditation is here to give you the tools you need in order to make that choice wise and to make it stick.

So as you're mindful of the breath, try to keep the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha there in that world as well, to remind you that you've got lots of potentials. This is what the teaching about kamma is all about: that you've got great potential. This could be the potential for good or potential for harm. They say that Ajaan Sao's main Dhamma talk theme was always that human beings have the highest potential of any being in the world: the highest potential for good; the highest potential for evil. So make your choices wisely.

The instructions, the meditation techniques, and all the other teachings are there to provide you with the tools. This is the Buddha's gift to us. The Sangha has maintained this gift over the centuries. So always make sure that you're inhabiting the world that they're inhabiting as well, because it's there that your potential for good can really grow.