

Choiceful Awareness

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Sometimes our problem as meditators is that we've read too much, listened to too many explanations about meditation. We know what happens at the end and, given our general impatience, we want to rush right there. We've heard about all the wonderful things that happen when you gain discernment and insight arises, and so we want to be right there, right now, without building the foundation, without mastering the skills that are needed for that insight really to have an impact on the mind, to have the really desired effect—which is to train the mind not to create suffering for itself.

So remember that what we're developing here is a skill, and the skill has to go through very basic steps. Don't think that you're too advanced for those basics. They're basic not because they're simple but because they're important, like the basic principle of kamma: that our lives are being shaped by the choices we make. We'd rather go straight to choiceless awareness, where everything is already okay and nothing has to be done. Now, it is true that at the moment of awakening the mind is not making choices; it has finally arrived at a spot where, in not making any choice, it opens to the deathless. But to get to that point you first have to master choiceful awareness—in other words, being very clear about the choices you're making, and trying to do them skillfully.

For instance, right now you could be staying with the breath or you could be focusing on something else. You could be breathing in one way or you could be breathing in another. You could be perceiving the breath simply as the air coming in and out of the nose or you could be perceiving it as a kind of energy. You could perceive that energy as flowing or as still. There are lots of choices, and the fact is we're making a lot of decisions all the time. The problem is that many of those decisions are being made on default mode so that we're hardly aware of them. As a result, when you think you're practicing choiceless awareness, what's actually happening is that you're closing your eyes to the choices you're making.

Years back, there was the story of a monk who had gone to Ajaan Maha Boowa's monastery and declared to some of the junior monks there that he had no doubts about the Buddha's teachings—which in the vocabulary of the monastery was a declaration of stream entry. So someone reported this to Ajaan Maha Boowa, and Ajaan Maha Boowa put his hands over his eyes and said, "I have no doubts. I have no doubts about anything I see." Of course, you don't see anything with your hands over your eyes. The point he was making is that the monk was really not paying much attention. There's a lot to doubt; there's a lot to question yourself about in the practice. And this is not a matter of unskillful doubt. There are lots of things you can have skillful questions about. You want to explore.

This especially applies to your choices. Too often we think we're not making choices and yet it's simply because the choices have gone underground. One of the purposes of meditation is to bring those choices up into the light of day so you can see them and learn how to make them more skillful. In fact, by making them more skillful, you get more and more sensitive to the choices that are being made on even subtler levels.

So for the time being, choose to stay with the breath. If you find the mind wandering off, choose to come back to the breath again. And if it feels like a lot of effort is being put into focusing on the breath, well, choose to make that effort. It's in setting up this sort of intention that you give something for all your other intentions to bounce off of. That's how you become sensitive to them. If the mind seems to be totally placid, accepting everything that comes along, give it this choice to stay with the breath and see how accepting it is. If it's not accepting of this choice, you've got a problem. When you recognize that the problem is something you need to solve, you can begin to dig up some of the issues in the mind that you haven't been sensitive to before.

You can realize how the mind was making all of these other choices and it liked wandering around or allowing thoughts to come in without any resistance. It seemed to be making no choices because none of its choices were being challenged.

So here you're challenging those choices with the breath. Notice how you're breathing. Explore what kind of breathing feels good right now because that's an area where you can exercise some skillful choices. Notice how you think about the breath. Notice how you evaluate the breath. Those are ways in which you make choices as well.

Decide whether you like this kind of breathing or not. If you find something you like, stick with it to test for yourself whether you made a good choice. If it feels good for a while, that's okay. Choose to stick with it. If after a while it doesn't feel good anymore, you can choose to change. It's through exercising your powers of choice that you become more sensitive to how they function and to the impact that they have. That enables you to get better and better at making good choices.

For example, you can focus on the way you perceive the breath. When the breath comes in, where do you think of it coming in? From which directions does it come in? You might want to explore first to see what those directions already are before you decide to make changes. Sometimes, when you breathe in, some parts of the body are getting their breath energy from the front and others are getting breath energy from the back. Some parts have the breath energy coming down from the top of the head; others have breath energy coming up from the soles of the feet. These energies may be harmonious or may be in conflict. This is something you can explore.

Then you try to figure out how to resolve some of those conflicts. How do you breathe and how do you hold a perception of the breath in mind that allows things to work together, so that when the breath energy comes in, the whole body feels like it's being nourished, with no sense of conflict? As you stay with the breath, you begin to notice that the breath energy in some parts of the body is moving, while in other parts of the body it's still. Now, it can be still either because those parts of the body are being depleted or starved of breath energy, or because they're full. They don't need any more energy. Ajaan Fuang's image is of a big jar of water. In Thailand, when they collect rainwater, they use enormous earthenware jars. As long as the jar is empty, you can put more water in, put more in, put more in, but you get to a point where it's full and no matter how much more water you put in, the water in the jar is just going to stay as it was. You can't make it even more full than that. Any excess water just overflows.

The same with the breath: It's usually a good idea to try to breathe in an energetic way as you begin meditating, and to think of the moving breath energy going through all parts of the body, waking up the different elements, waking up the different parts of the body, energizing them until you gain a sense that the breath energy is full and that trying to push more energy into a particular part of the body is actually unpleasant. That's a sign you've got a section of the body that should be left alone and allowed to stay still. The sense of stillness that's full: That's what you allow to spread at the next stage.

There's a Dhamma talk where Ajaan Lee mentions that you don't want to spread the moving energy around. He's talking about this second stage, where there's just a sense of fullness, stillness, lightness, pleasure. Sometimes, paradoxically, the fullness feels empty, but there's a sense that it feels really good. You allow it to spread around. Let it spread through the body and allow all the still-energy areas to connect up. The breath will then get a lot more refined. You can pursue this to the point where everything grows totally still. Your thoughts are still; the breath is still; the body feels filled with still breath energy; the mind feels no need to go thinking about anything else.

Of course, deep down inside, it's still making choices, choosing subtly to stay right here, stay right here, to maintain what you've got. But a lot of other choices just fall away. You're not interested in getting involved with other things, and when other choices or intentions do come up, you see them very clearly: how they form at the frontier area where they're not clearly mental or physical. There's a kind of stirring, and you can just leave it as a stirring in the breath energy, or the mind could slap a perception or label on it and turn it into a

thought and go running with it. But as you're staying right here, you realize that you're right at the point where that kind of decision is being made. For the time being, you can decide: no thoughts, no thoughts.

When little eddies of breath energy threaten to turn into nodules, allow them to dissolve away. You don't want to explore their content because first you want to get really, really skilled at knowing what the mind is like when a very minimal level of fabrication or choice is going on. That's so you get more and more sensitive to choices when they happen.

This is how you approach the advanced level of meditation where the mind is making fewer and fewer choices after first choosing to be very sensitive to *how* you're making the choices and what the results are. You're practicing choiceful awareness: learning how the mind chooses to be still and chooses various ways of breathing and perceiving the breath and perceiving any distractions that may come up in such a way that you can maintain this stillness. If you're going to be thinking about inconstancy, stress, or not-self—*anicca, dukkha, anatta*—focus that analysis on the distractions so that you can quickly let them dissolve. Allow your concentration and awareness of the breath to be as constant and pleasurable and as much under control as possible. It's in exercising these choices that you get really, really sensitive to what's going on.

That way, when the moment arrives where there's a genuine lack of choice, you're poised right at the threshold of something really important. It's because you've developed this sensitivity to choice that you can detect even the slightest glimmerings of choice that may come up in the mind. That's how you let them go. Without having developed this sensitivity, you won't see them. If you don't see them, there's no way you can let them go.

So don't be in too great a hurry to get to the end point. What you should be focusing on right now is making sure you've got the basic choices down pat, over and over and over again. This requires patience. Everybody, of course, would like to go straight to the end but you can't go to the end until you've gotten really sensitive about the basics: the choice to keep coming back to the breath and to choose skillful ways of breathing. Those are the choices that will open things up inside. The path may not progress as quickly as you'd like, but it does progress. It gets you there. Otherwise, if you try to force yourself straight to the end, you end up falling off and going nowhere at all.