

Choices

January 15, 2014

Close your eyes. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing.

And if it feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't feel good, you can change the way you breathe. Make it even deeper if you want. Or more shallow, heavier/lighter, faster/slower: You get to choose.

This is a good lesson in how much your choices are shaping your experience. You could be sitting here breathing in a labored way or a very constricted way. Of course, that would have an impact on your mind and on your mood. And who knows what the mood would do.

But if you breathe in a way that feels spacious and open, that improves your mood. You're more likely to act in ways that are skillful and generous.

This is one of the basic implications of the Buddha's teachings on karma. We tend to think about karma as having to do with what happens after you die. But it's actually how you're shaping your experience right now, realizing that you do have choices and you want to make the most of those choices because they have an impact not only on you but also on the people around you.

The mind just doesn't stop. It just keeps on choosing to focus here or think about that or do this. It's always choosing what to do, what to do. So the Buddha's giving you some instructions on how to do things in a way that's not going to cause any suffering.

As he said, most of us, when we encounter pain in our lives or suffering in our hearts, get bewildered: "Why is this happening?" Then we look for somebody else to help make the pain go away, or at least teach us a way to make the pain go away. So that's what he's here to offer: to teach us how to do it ourselves to end our bewilderment, to realize that it's our actions that can either bring happiness to the mind or pain to the mind.

So this is why you want to develop some skill in how you think, in how you speak, in how you act. It starts with simple things like this: realizing you have the choice of how you breathe. You have the choice of how you going to perceive things. You're going to have the choice of how you're going to think about things. These choices will shape all of your experience.

Of course, there'll be things that happen outside, but how you think about them and how you perceive them, even how you breathe in the face of them is going to have a huge impact on what kind of impact they have on you—and what

kind of impact is going to come out from you into your actions back out into the world outside.

So take some time to develop some basic skills using what's nearby at hand. The breath is right here. You don't have to go buy it, you don't have to go pay for a meditation word from a teacher. The breath is coming in, going out. It's your breath.

Make sure that you relate to the breath in a way that's as skillful as possible. That puts the mind in a good mood, it puts the mind in a much better position, a position of strength, so that when it thinks and speaks and acts, it's coming from a position of strength. It's not feeling threatened; it's not feeling afraid.

In this way, it's a lot more likely to do and say and think the skillful thing.