

Voluntary Practice

November 18, 2016

Find your breath. And stick with it.

Remind yourself of why you want to be doing this. Remember that we're all here, not because anyone forced us to be here, but because we want to be here, we want to be practicing. That's an important element of the path. No one's forcing you. The only thing that's forcing you is the suffering you may be feeling and your desire to get past that suffering. But your choice of the path: That's voluntary. And the amount to which you practice is voluntary as well.

This is a quality the Buddha tries to preserve on all levels of the practice. When he was asked where a gift should be given, he said, "Where you feel inspired." In other words, he was protecting your free choice and your realization that it *is* a free choice. You begin to see that your actions do make a difference. And so the question is, how much difference do you want to make? That's up to you.

The Buddha lays out the path—he lays out many paths, actually. He said, "This is the path to the end of suffering, this is the path to heaven, this is the path to human rebirth, these are the paths to the lower realms." It's up to you to choose. If you want to go for the higher paths, make sure you can foster the desire to keep at it and to see what ways that you can improve your practice, out of your own free will. Look around. See what needs to be done.

We live here in the monastery where there are a lot of chores. It's up to you to decide which chores you want to engage in and what you're going to gain as a benefit from engaging in those chores.

There's not just the meditation. There's generosity, there's virtue, and there's meditation: These are the three things that we work on. But they're all good.

Again, nobody's forcing you to take the precepts, but you begin to see as you follow them that life really does get better. You create fewer problems for yourself, fewer problems for the people around you. So you try to find ways in which your precepts can become more precise. In other words, the precepts as they're stated are basically the lowest common denominator, but you may decide that there are ways you want to up your practice of the precepts.

The same with your generosity: You may not have a lot of money to give, but you've got time, you've got energy. Where do you want to invest it? Look around and see what needs to be done. There are opportunities for doing good all around.

This is one of the lessons I learned from my father. There are a lot of jobs in the world that need to be done and nobody wants to do them. Okay, that's your

opportunity to do some good without any competition.

But again, this is a matter of free will. But learning how to generate the desire, the voluntary spirit in the mind: That's an important element in the practice and is what keeps the practice going.

When I was with Ajaan Fuang, he never praised me to my face, but years later I found out that one of the first things he liked about me when I first went there was that I would clean the spittoons. Nobody asked me to, nobody told me to, I just noticed the spittoons needed cleaning so I cleaned them. That's when he decided he could take me on. That was the kind of person he could live with.

It's little things like that that actually show a lot about the practice, show your level of practice, or your level of commitment to the practice, to other people. What they see may not be all that important, but what you see in yourself, where you can be of a little extra help, where you can find extra ways of doing good: That's to be encouraged.

Because when you meditate, again, nobody's forcing you to go to nibbana. It's when you decide you want something a little bit better. You want to put in some more effort. That's what gets you there: that voluntary spirit.