

Good Habits Now

March 20, 2017

Focus on the breath. Watch it all the way in, all the way out. If any other thoughts come up in the mind, you can choose not to follow them.

This is an important principle: You have the power of choice. You could stay with the breath and develop concentration, or you could wander around and enjoy yourself for a bit but not have much to show for it. So which would you rather do? It's up to you. No one's forcing you.

You have to be responsible for the skillfulness of your actions. You can't blame it on your upbringing, you can't blame it on other things from the past. Now, there are things that you're likely to do or, through the force of habit, you can't think of any other way to do them. But as the Buddha said, if people couldn't develop skillful qualities, then it wouldn't have served any purpose to teach. If they couldn't abandon unskillful ones, there'd be no purpose to teaching. But it's because we have this ability to choose to be more skillful or less skillful: That's why he taught the Dhamma.

So it's up to you to take advantage of that fact: that the Dhamma is available and you can create some good habits now that will help you in the future. After all, we do have both good and bad qualities in the mind, and our habits tend to push us in one way or another. But the more good habits you develop—by making the right choice right now, right now, right now—the easier it'll be to make the right choice in the future.

Sometimes it's difficult, but in the beginning learning any skill is going to be difficult. Getting into the right mindset, getting the sense of how things are working and when they're not working: That takes time. But if you can continue to give rise to this desire to do things in a skillful way, to think in a skillful way, to act, to speak in a skillful way, then you're taking advantage of the fact that you do have some freedom of choice right here. The more you choose the skillful alternative, the wider the range of freedoms you'll have.

So explore this issue right here. Where there are different voices in the mind telling you to do different things, you've got the choice of which voice you're going to follow. Just try to make that choice skillful—and then the next choice, make that skillful; and then the next choice. Build up a momentum, so that there's not so much of a struggle in doing the skillful thing. It becomes more and more second-nature.

That way you benefit, and the people around you benefit as well.