

Choices in the Present

June 2, 2009

As you bring your attention in the present moment, it's important that you understand that the present moment is shaped by two sorts of things: influences coming from your past actions and your present intentions. This means that you're constantly playing a role in shaping your present reality. Now, that role is going to be limited by the range of options coming from your past actions that happen to be blossoming or bearing fruit right now. But you do have a range of options. The Buddha's image is of a field with lots of seeds in the field, and it's up to you to decide which ones you're going to water.

So when something comes up in the mind, that's not the only reality there is. You have the choice to go with it or not. The idea that you simply sit with whatever comes up obscures the fact that lots of different things could be coming up right now, and that you do have the choice as to what's worth focusing on, what's not worth focusing on. Simply the act of focusing on a particular topic encourages it. But then you have to ask yourself: This particular emotion or feeling coming up in the mind right now: Is it something to be encouraged or not?

This is where the Buddha's teachings in the four noble truths come in. The Buddha didn't simply sit around thinking, "Wouldn't it be nice to have four truths to teach to people? How about five or how about three?" He wasn't thinking in grand terms that way. He said, there are four types of things that are really worth focusing on, and each of them entails a different duty or task. There's stress, and the task there is to comprehend it. There's a cause of stress, and the task there is to let it go. There's the cessation of stress, and that's to be realized. Then there's the path to the cessation of stress, and that has to be developed.

So in any given moment, there are four different things you could be doing. This means that if you've been practicing meditation method that tells you do just one thing—i.e., just note whatever's coming up, or just be with whatever's coming up—you're missing at least three duties. And even just being with something is not necessarily anywhere near any of those four duties at all.

So you have range of options. And it's good to take advantage of that range, because as a meditator, another one of the Buddha's images is that you're a true warrior. You have battles to be fought here, in particular battling your greed, anger, and delusion. You're battling your tendency to create unnecessary stress and suffering.

As with any battle or with any warrior, you have to decide which battles should be taken up right now, which ones you're ready for, and which ones you want to put off to the side. Putting things off to the side doesn't mean you're denying that they're there, simply that you realize that you're not ready for that particular battle yet. You've got to find allies. That's the part of developing the path. You need to develop mindfulness, concentration, discernment—all the factors of the path—because they're your allies in trying to comprehend suffering and letting go of its cause. After all, to comprehend it, you have to sit with it, you have to watch to see when it comes, when it goes, what comes along with it, what goes when it goes away, so that you can see that connection of cause and effect.

For most of us, our understanding of things is like connect-the-dots. A few dots here, and a few dots there, you can make any picture from them by connecting them with lines. But the only way to check to see if the picture is accurate is to stick with things over time. Now, to stick with the uncomfortable things coming up in the mind requires that you have strength to withstand them so that you don't just fall in with them, and so that you're not suffering while you're watching the suffering.

That's why you have to develop mindfulness, alertness, and concentration, because as concentration comes, it gives a sense of well-being. We sit here with the breath. The breath feels good coming in, feels good going out. You can make it feel better and better and better coming in, better going out, and you take that sense of well-being and allow it to suffuse the body. The Buddha talks of kneading it through the body the same way that you would knead moisture through a ball of dough, to the point where the whole ball of dough is saturated with moisture. You want to be able to breathe in and out in a way that allows the whole body to feel saturated with a sense of ease, refreshment, well-being, rapture. When you can tap into that and maintain that, then you can carry it into other situations. You've got your reinforcements. You've got your allies.

So as we're meditating here, trying to get the breath comfortable, trying to get the mind at ease in the present moment, it's not just so that we can feel nice right here and now. We're developing important skills: the ability to create a sense of well-being in the present moment in any situation. All you have to do is breathe and learn to be sensitive to the breath. You find that it not only sends a sense of ease through the body, but it also soothes the mind. It helps to heal any wounds in the mind—places where you felt deprived, places where you felt hurt, wounded. This helps to ease a lot of the feeling of rawness that goes along with those wounds.

Then, when you're feeling healed and strengthened, you don't want to just leave that sense of well-being here in the spot where you're meditating. You want to take it with you, to tap into that skill whenever and wherever it's needed, so that you're not facing all the troubles of being a human being alone. You've got your reinforcements, your allies. You're coming from a position of strength. That's when you can start looking at stress, looking at suffering, so that you can see exactly where it comes from.

You see that it's coming from a particular action that you're doing in the mind, a particular movement of craving, clinging. When you can see that act of craving in the mind *in action*, see that it's causing stress, and that you don't have to do it, that's when you can let it go. *Letting go* here means that you learn to stop doing it. You don't feel compelled to keep doing it over and over again.

So it's not an act of indulgence to sit here and concentrate the mind and to put disturbing emotions aside, disturbing situations aside. You're not in denial. You're simply being pragmatic. You're learning an important strategy, because another important skill to learn in the meditation is when to let the mind rest and when to put it to work. If it's working, working, working all the time, it's going to wear out. The sense of well-being is going to go. You have to figure out when to just sit here and be very still, and when to take up issues that have come up in your life. If you find that you're analyzing something, and it's beginning to become clear—you're learning how to let go of things—okay, keep at it. It's a sign that you're up for that particular task, up for understanding that particular problem. But if the more you think about something, the duller the mind seems, then it's time to rest.

This way, you learn how to manage mind and get a sense of which of those duties are appropriate, which you should develop right now. After all, the path does have all those different factors. Sometimes you develop the analyzing side that goes along with wisdom and discernment; at other times, you develop the calmer side that goes along with concentration, equanimity, serenity.

So you to have lots of options here in the present moment. You're not just stuck with whatever comes up. You realize that in this field of seeds here you have lots of different kinds of seeds. There are weeds, but then there's also wheat, rice, and all kinds of good food. You ask yourself: Are you going to sit here feeding on the weeds and the poisonous plants, or are you going to feed on the food? The more you feed on healthy food, then when the poisonous things do come up, you learn, "Oh, I don't need to eat that, because I've got better food than this. I can just look at it. I can uproot it." And that's the end of the problem, so that it doesn't mature and leave behind seeds to create more poisonous plants.

So there are four different potential tasks you have here as a meditator: the comprehending, the letting go, the realizing, and the developing. You want to choose which is the appropriate duty to perform at any one particular time. Sometimes you have to do a little bit of the comprehending first before the mind is ready to develop concentration. In other words, if a particular thought keeps coming back at you again and again and again, think about it in such way that you realize you don't need to go there.

This is where the analysis is helpful. As they say, sometimes discernment fosters concentration. Remind yourself, this is the human condition. Nobody paid you to be born as human being. You wanted to do it. So this is what comes along with the territory. Gain a sense of objectivity about what your problems are.

That contemplation we chant on a regular basis, "I am subject to aging, illness, death, and separation; I am heir to my actions": It's only part of the contemplation the Buddha recommended. He went on to tell us to stop to think about the fact that all beings and all levels of being—from the lowest levels of hell on up to the highest levels of heaven—are all subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. It's not just you.

That gives you a larger perspective on things, so that it's easier to let go of whatever particular sufferings you're feeling right now—or at least to put them aside and give yourself some space to work on the mind so that you have the strength, you have the reinforcements you need in order to dig deeper into this particular tendency you have to create suffering, to figure out why it's happening, what you can do to put an end to it.

Because there is an end to suffering. And it's not just equanimity or acceptance. The end of suffering comes when you dig down and see, "All the things I've been feeding on, I've been looking for happiness in the wrong places. But now I've got something better to feed on. I don't have to go feeding in all those old places anymore."

That way, when you let go, it's not letting go out of disgust, disappointment, or aversion. It's simply that you've matured. Your skill level has taken you to a higher level. Ultimately, it will bring the mind to a point where it doesn't need to feed at all. As they say, the person who's gained awakening is a person totally without hunger, because the mind has found a happiness that doesn't require feeding in any way at all.

That's when dispassion becomes complete. It can actually go even beyond dispassion. That's the goal we have. At that point, all the task of the four noble truths have ended.

But in the meantime, you haven't reached that level yet, so remember that you've got all these different options here in the present moment: the things you can comprehend, the things you let go, the things you develop, the things you realize. As for anything that doesn't fit into those four categories, you don't have to pay much attention to it at all. The real work of the practice is in these four duties. These are the actions that really bring results.