

# *The Power of Choice*

*September 14, 2012*

There are a lot of things you could focus on right now. You could focus on how hot the weather is. You could focus on pains in your body. You could focus on the people who've said nasty things about you. But what would you get out of that? Those things are there, they're true, but what's accomplished by focusing on them?

Focus on something that's good, that brings the mind a sense of peace and well-being. There are lots of those potentials right now, too. There might be one spot in the body that's cooler than others. Allow your attention to settle there. Or when you focus on the breath, notice that the breath is neither cool nor hot, it's just breath. The heat can be allowed to do its own thing. The noise of the crickets: They can do their own thing. Just pay very careful attention to what you're doing right now and to the effect that it's having on your mind.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to train the mind to realize how important it is where it chooses to focus its attention. As for things right now that are not useful to focus your attention on, you can just think of them as not-self. This is where the not-self teaching is very useful, right from the very beginning.

When the Buddha gave breath instructions to Rahula, he prefaced them with a number of meditation exercises, and one of them was the topic of not-self. We tend to think of not-self as a very advanced teaching. But here it is, right at the very beginning, to remind you that your sense of self is something you choose to identify with. It's not that your self is a given, that you've got a conventional self or an ultimate self that's there willy-nilly whether you like it or not. Your sense of self is a jumble of choices you've made. Some of them are coherent; some of them are incoherent. This is why, when you start looking into what-you-are, you get all kinds of different answers. But for right now, use the not-self teaching as an aid in your concentration. Anything that makes it difficult to stay here with the breath, just think of it in those terms —“That's not-self. It's not you, it's not yours”—and just let it be.

There's a lot in the world that you can't control. If you're running around trying to control everything, it's like a mother chick trying to chase down all her little baby chickens. It's not worth it. There are a lot of things you can let go right now, things you would normally identify with, but it's good to realize you don't have to. Nobody's forcing you. You're the one who made the choice to identify. That takes a huge load off the mind.

So pare down your responsibilities. At the moment, you're responsible for where you're focusing your attention. We're here sitting with our eyes closed, so focus on the breath. It's a good place to be. There are lots of things you can do with the breath. Think about the breath in the different parts of the body that you don't normally think about. How about the breath in the bones? Have you been looking at the breath in the bones anytime recently? Give that a try.

How about the breath in your eyes? Think of the pores of your skin being wide open, and the breath comes in and it goes out there. There's a lot of things you can do with the breath.

When we talk about the breath being a source of pleasure for concentration, it's not just that you can give rise to pleasurable sensations. But also, as you get a greater and greater sense of how to play with the breath, how to work with the breath, there's pleasure in exercising that skill. Even before it's really a skill, there's pleasure in exploring. So it's a source both of physical pleasure and mental pleasure, this practice of working with the breath. You can allow that to fill the range of your awareness. If you need to identify with something, identify with that right now: the part of the mind that's working with the breath and is enjoying it. This is called being selective in what's skillful and what's not. It's an exercise in discernment, and you're using your discernment to get the mind to settle down.

This is the ideal way of meditating. If your concentration contains an element of discernment, it's a lot easier to use the concentration as an object of discernment, to understand what's going on in the mind. You can pull out a little bit and you won't destroy the concentration.

People whose concentration is simply a matter of staring on in, staring on in, find that they're either in the concentration or out of the concentration. Even the slightest little bit of thought is going to destroy that kind of concentration. But if an element of exploring and evaluation is part of the concentration itself, you can be in the concentration and pull out a little bit, without destroying your focus. It's like having your hand in a glove: You can have it in all the way, or you can pull it out slightly. It's still in the glove but not all the way in. When it's pulled out a little bit like this, you can use your powers of concentration as a foundation for discernment. In other words, you apply your discernment to the concentration itself. You learn to understand how it is that you make these choices, how you pick up something, how you focus on it, how you let it down. You can watch this right here, right now.

So right here, right now, is good place to be. And you can choose where right here, right now, you want to focus your attention to make it an even nicer place to stay. After all, this sense of well-being is an important part of the concentration. It's why there's no one way of breathing or no one topic of concentration that the Buddha taught. He taught many topics. You choose where you feel comfortable settling down. The breath *is* the topic he taught most often because the breath offers lots of different ways you can settle down, lots of different ways of gaining a sense of well-being and ease, but the Buddha leaves it open as to how many ways you might want to breathe.

So wherever you're focused right now, make sure it's helping the mind to stay in the present. If you find yourself slipping, latching on to something that's going to pull you away from the present moment, you can learn to let go. This may require a little thinking about why you don't want to hang on to that, or it's simply a matter of recognizing, "Oh, this isn't where I want to be," and you get right back to the breath. Either way, you're exercising your power of

choice. And watching yourself exercise that power of choice teaches you a lot of things about the mind.