

Choose Your Cravings Wisely

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Years back, a famous classical pianist came to the States for his farewell tour. During that time he gave an interview where they asked him about what it's like to play the piano. He said that while you're playing the piano you have to be aware of what you've played, what you're playing right now, and where you want it to go. And make adjustments. If you intend a phrase to go in a certain direction but as you're playing it you find it's not going in that direction, you have to decide: Do you want to follow it this new way or do you want to try to rein it in and get it back in line with where you wanted it to go before? In other words, you're aware of the past, you're aware of the present, you're aware of the future, you're shaping the present and heading it into the future, even as you're playing right there in the present moment.

The same approach applies to meditation. You're focusing on the breath in the present moment, but you're also keeping in mind what you want to do right now and where you want to go—because what you're doing right now has a shape. It shapes not only the experience you're having right now, but also where you're going.

Keeping the past in mind, both your ideas about where you want it to go, why you want to go there, what's your motivation, and your ability to remember what you've done in the past to get it in the right direction: All those activities are the role of mindfulness.

Alertness is what's watching what's happening right now. And ardency is what's doing right now, at the same time shaping it for the purpose of the future, trying to shape things as best you can.

So you've got the three qualities of the establishing of mindfulness right here as you're working with the breath, as they relate to all three time frames: present, past, and future.

It is true, as the Buddha said, that there's a certain nourishment that comes from staying right with the present moment. There's a sutta where a deva asks him, "Why is it that the monks in the forest seem so bright and happy?" And he says, "Because they're not worried about the past, not concerned about the future, they're surviving on the present, feeding themselves off the present moment." But that doesn't mean that they don't have any relationship with the past and future at all. After all, to get the mind into the present moment requires some skill, and you have to be able to remember what's involved in the skill. How do you make the most of the breath in the present moment? How do you get to the mind to be willing to settle down? These are things that you remember from what you've learned in the past.

If you're feeling cold, what do you do to warm yourself up with the breath? That requires a memory of what you've heard in the past, or learned in the past from your own experimentation. Then you're alert to what you're doing right now to see if you're actually doing it right. And then you work at it. You keep in mind the idea that this is going to take some time so that you don't get discouraged or disgruntled with the whole thing and just

drop it. You tell yourself, “This is going to take a little while, so even if I’m not seeing immediate results right now, I’m going to work on it, and the results will come down the line.” In this way, you’re referring to the past, present, and future all the time.

So when you’re meditating, it’s an issue of how to do that skillfully, because this move toward the future is what craving is all about. Some forms of craving are the cause of suffering, but the Buddha also recognized that there’s a kind of craving that’s involved in the path: You’ve heard that other people have gained true happiness and you want that happiness. That’s a good craving to nourish.

There’s a sutta where he calls craving your companion. Everywhere you go, you’re talking with your cravings about where you want to go: “What’s next, what’s next, what’s next? Where am I going to go now? Where am I going to feed next?” That last one is usually the big question. When you pare things down in the present moment to see what is this movement that heads toward the future, that’s the big question: Where do I feed next?

The “where” is important because the mind does have a sense of focusing here or there, not only in the sense of a physical location but also in the sense of a kind of mental location: What topic in the mind do you want to focus on now? Do you want to stay here or do you want to move on? That’s all an issue of craving. And that’s your companion. That’s who you’re talking to all the time.

So, as the passage we chanted just now says, you want to choose your friends well. Who are true friends? You have cravings that flatter and cajole, that just want to get a quick hit of pleasure and then run away, leaving you holding the bag. Those are false friends, those kind of cravings. You want a craving that helps you, that’s sympathetic to your well-being. And the desire for true happiness: That’s a true friend among your cravings. So choose your cravings well.

Craving isn’t abandoned totally until the end of the path. There’s a passage where a brahman asks Ven. Ananda, “What’s the purposes of this path?” and Ananda says, “Well, one of the rewards of the path is that you put an end to desire.” The brahman asks “How do you do that?” And Ananda lists the four bases for success. They start with desire, moves on to persistence, intent, and finally your powers of analysis. The brahman says, “Well, in that case, it’s impossible. How do you use the desire to get rid of desire?” And Ananda basically says, “You act on it.” That’s the essential meaning of what he tells the brahman. He gives the example of going to the monastery, “When you wanted to come to the monastery did you have a desire?” “Yes.” “Now that you’re at the monastery, where’s that desire?” “Well it’s gone.”

In the same way, you’re going to be using craving along the way. When you finally get to the goal, the need to feed is gone. The need for the craving is gone. There’s not even any sense that you have to exist anywhere. The texts keep describing the arahant as someone who’s “everywhere released.” That’s because there’s no “there” there in the arahant’s mind. There’s no center of desire around which a becoming would form.

But in the meantime, you’ve got to use this process. You’re going to take on the becoming of concentration. That requires a desire. So choose your desires well, choose

your cravings well, so that they lead you in the direction you want to go. Then, as you settle in, you find that there's less and less analysis involved.

In the beginning, you have to think about these things: "What kind of breathing is good? When the breathing is getting comfortable, what do you do to make sure that you don't just kind of blur out into a state of delusion concentration?"—in other words, concentration without mindfulness, where you're just very still but not really clear about where you are. One of the signs of delusion concentration is that when you come out of it, there's that question, "Was I really awake right now? Was I asleep?" You're not really sure. That's not where you want to go.

So you have to remember that if you have that tendency, you have to prepare for it. As the mind is beginning to settle down and things are comfortable, spread your awareness around. Explore the different parts of the body and the breath energy in the different parts of the body. Give the mind work to do so that it doesn't just blur out.

This is one of the reasons why we don't have long group meditations here at the monastery, because I've noticed that in the monasteries where they do have long sits, one of the ways of "checking out" is to go into this state. But it doesn't lead anywhere. So what you've got to do is prepare yourself. Remember ahead of time that you have this problem and work to counteract it.

As the mind settles in and you're alert and you're clear, then you can start dropping a lot of the analysis because your awareness is strong, your concentration is strong, the center is strong, your awareness fills the body. You don't have to tend to it so much. You simply think of opening things up and connecting things inside. The connections get very subtle.

All of these things are things you remember. And then you apply those lessons to the present moment: Mindfulness is your applied memory, applied to the present moment. You just very carefully nudge things along, nudge them along, keep them in balance.

So even though your sense of past and future gets somewhat attenuated, they're still there a little bit because even in a strong sense of concentration there's still going to be an element of craving that keeps moving on, moving on, moving on. And you want to get very, very, very still so that you can recognize it and so that you're not just blanking out. Our mental faculties are all brought together, gathered right here, but they don't seem to be so many because when they're really balanced there's a sense of smoothness, a sense of flow, in which what you want to do is what you are doing.

Sometimes people think that this is the awakened state. It's not. It's just a very successful desire, a very successful craving. Those are times when your sense of self gets expanded and you're not really conscious of your self that much because everything's going the way you want it.

It's when you're encountering obstacles that you have a very strong sense of "you" as being separate from the obstacle, and that the obstacle's in the way of where "you" want to go. But as the obstacles get smoothed out and your path of being concentrated here through the hour gets smoother, your sense of self will get attenuated. But don't think it's gone away. It's just there in the background. And it keeps asking that little question: "What

next? What next?”

As long as “what’s next” is moving smoothly, you don’t really notice it until you start asking yourself questions about it. But you also have to notice: When you’re asking questions about your concentration, does that destroy it? If it does, your concentration isn’t strong enough for those questions, so you come back and settle in again.

Then you find, as you get this kind of food for the mind, that you can look back on the other things you used to feed on and they don’t look at all that appealing any more. Ajaan Suwat’s quick and ready answer to the question as to what causes suffering was: “your likes”—things that you like to do, things that you like to focus on, that you like to enjoy. And those are very hard to give up because we tend to identify ourselves around them. We often feel that if we aren’t able to pursue our likes, then what’s the purpose of doing anything at all?

One of the purposes of concentration is to give you something better to like. Once you’ve got the sense of well-being that comes with the concentration, you realize that the pleasure that comes from this is the pleasure you’re looking for anyhow in all those other things, and it’s a lot more solid, a lot more reliable, and a lot more blameless. The mind is a lot clearer. This is the kind of pleasure that doesn’t require you to take anything away from anyone else. Then, using this, you can start looking back on those other desires and say, “I don’t really go for those anymore.” Things you used to like a lot: You’ve basically matured, you’ve outgrown them because you have a new range of skills.

So choose your cravings carefully, choose your cravings well. Some kinds of cravings lead to suffering and others lead to the end of suffering, so you want to recognize which is which.