

## *Little Decisions*

*October 12, 2015*

When we decide to practice, it's a big decision. We take into account our values about what's the best use of our time, what's the best use of our life. And we decide that because the mind is so central to our lives we need to train the mind. That's a big decision.

However, it gets carried through with lots of little decisions. Like right now as you meditate: The breath comes in, and you decide to stay with this breath. Then the next breath comes in and you decide to stay with that breath.

A fantasy comes up and you have to decide whether or not to go with the fantasy—a thought about yesterday, a thought about tomorrow. And it's here where the issue of complacency comes in. As the Buddha pointed out, complacency is often our big enemy as meditators. He said that his awakening depended on two attitudes, both of which tackle complacency head-on.

One was to be not content with the skillful qualities he had developed. In other words, he didn't just say, "Well, this is good enough for now, I'll just stop here." He said that if there was something better for the mind to attain, something higher, something more refined, he would keep going for it until there was nothing more to attain. That's when he stopped.

The second quality was relentless effort. This didn't mean pushing himself to the breaking point but it meant taking the attitude of a marathon runner, knowing how to pace himself in such a way as to keep on going continually and complete the course.

So there are little decisions we make all the time. Is the breath good enough? Is your concentration good enough? You want to look around in the mind to see if there's anything at all that needs improvement. If you find something, you work on that.

As the Buddha said, your attitude for the little things in the mind like this should be like that of a person whose head is on fire. It doesn't have to be a big fire. Just say that one square inch of your scalp is on fire, that's plenty enough. You want to do what you can to put the fire out. He says you should bring all your mindfulness, alertness, effort, and dedication to putting out that fire.

Now, some of the problems in the mind are like a slow burn. You can't expect them to be put out immediately. They're like the peat-moss burns they have up in Alaska. They go underground and it looks like they're out for a while, but then, after the winter passes, they come back up to the surface again and continue

burning. In cases like that, you have to do what you can, not only to put out the surface fire but also to dig down inside to see whatever else is burning underground.

This takes time, it takes dedication, and it's a matter of little decisions made again and again and again: "I'm going to stick with this, stick with this, and not let this go."

As when with a mathematical problem you realize the answer isn't coming: You put it aside, but part of your mind is still working on it while you give the rest of the mind a rest.

This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration so much: to get the mind well rested to do its work. You're trying to develop the ability to see that when there's anything impinging on the mind that's causing any stress, anything that's darkening the mind, anything that's less than skillful in the mind, you have to be determined that one way or another you're going to deal with it.

And these little decisions that we keep making, like the decision whether to meditate on your own after you've left here and gone back to your resting spot: You tell yourself, "I can meditate until it's time to go to bed." Then there's the first impulse to go to bed: Are you going to give into that? Or are you going to say, "Let's go a little bit longer, let's go a little bit longer." When you're doing walking meditation and you've set a time for yourself to do it and then you find at the end that the meditation's going well. Should you do it a little bit longer? Give it a try.

It's those little bits that matter. Part of the mind will say they're not important, but it's these little bits add up. Don't listen to the voice that says they won't amount to anything.

Even if you just add five minutes to your meditation, or if you're just a little more strict with yourself about getting engaged in conversations when you could be focusing more on your practice: It's those little decisions that add up, because you're creating habits in the mind.

They're part of an ongoing discussion inside about how serious you are about the practice. We were talking today about how devas get complacent. They can hear the Dhamma, but then there's the attitude, "Well, things are kind of comfortable right now. Let's allow things to be comfortable, there's no need to push." As a result, long periods of time can go by before they actually practice.

So time gets frittered away in little bits, but those little bits, if you didn't fritter them away, would add up to something good. So remember the little decisions that are being made. Try to tackle your complacency with the same two attitudes with which the Buddha tackled his. In other words, remember the principle that no matter how good things are in the mind, you can keep looking for some way to

make them better.

Again, this requires pacing yourself so that your effort, which is the second quality, can push against that attitude that “Well, I can always do it some other time.” You don’t *know* if you’ll have another time.

You do have *this* time, so make use of this time. If the issues in the mind are long-term, deep issues, just keep that attitude in mind: that you’ve to got to chip, chip, chip away at them. Pace yourself so you can keep at it. If you can chip away at your complacency, there comes a point where you hit a seam, like a seam in the rock, and it breaks open. Things can open up in ways that you wouldn’t expect. It’s because you’re focusing on the details of your decisions that you’re going to see this. I’ve mentioned this in the past.

You begin to realize more and more that you have freedom of choice. So take advantage of that freedom, because as you explore freedom of choice, you begin to realize more and more how to expand your range of opportunities, your range of alternatives. And it’s right there that you’re going to find a freedom that goes beyond freedom of choice. Pay attention to the details, and things open up.

So don’t be heedless of your time, and don’t be heedless of your little decisions, because that big decision you made to practice can live on only in the little decisions that you make moment-to-moment. So keep an eye on them. Make sure they’re heading in the direction you really want.