

Choose Your Actions Wisely

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A person from Singapore once wrote a letter to Ajahn Fuang talking about his practice and asking for some advice. He said his practice was to see everything in daily life in terms of the three characteristics. He'd watch TV and see, "Ah, this is inconstant, stressful, not-self." The traffic was inconstant, stressful, not-self. With everything, he'd apply those three labels to it. Ajahn Fuang had me write back to him, saying, "Don't place the blame on things outside. Turn around and look inside your own mind. That's where the real problem is."

This is a perspective we have to keep in mind all the time. We're not just passive recipients of things. The mind is active. It goes out looking for happiness in all kinds of things. Now, the search for happiness is not the problem, it's that we go about it in unskillful ways. The problem is that we act in ignorance.

One of the reasons why we meditate is so that we can end our ignorance and see our choices clearly. Because every time you act, you make a choice. Either you're going to do it or you're not, you're going to do this as opposed to that—and you have to weigh things: what's worth doing, what's not worth doing. It's a value judgment. We're judging what's worth holding on to, what's not worth holding on to; what's worth holding on to for the time being and what's worth letting go right away. Because the Buddha doesn't have you let go of everything all at once.

We've got the path here in the concentration we're doing right now. You've got to hold on to your object. Stay with the breath all the way in, all the way out. And learn how to hold on without squeezing it. The image in the texts is of holding a baby quail in your hand. If you hold it too tightly, it's going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it's going to fly away. You've got to figure out just the right amount of pressure and the right way of sticking with it without messing it all up. If you clamp down too hard on the breath, if you force it too much, it's going to get very uncomfortable, it's not going to be a good place to stay. Just try to keep in contact with it.

As for any thoughts that might come into the mind that don't deal with the breath, just let them go. If they come in again, you let them go again. In the beginning, your first line of defense is just that: Anything that's not related to the breath, you've got to try to let go. If it keeps coming back, coming back, coming back, you have to be really insistent in not paying attention to it. It's like a stray puppy who wants to move into your house, but you don't want the puppy. It's going to make all kinds of sad noises, but you have to be firm. If it gets so that you can't be firm with it that way and you give into thinking about it, then whatever the thought is, you've got to look at the drawbacks.

But when you're looking at the drawbacks of something, you also have to look for the allure. Why does the mind want to go there? Sometimes it has a secret pleasure, sometimes it has a sense of obligation or a sense that you've got to tie up the loose ends of the thought. That's a big temptation right there. Remind yourself that the world is full of loose ends.

We like to think of our lives and our relationships reaching closure of some kind. But look at the way people pass away, look at the way relationships end: There are a lot of loose ends dangling. You have to learn how to live with the loose ends. If the thought that's coming up is dealing with some bad relationship you had in the past, well, have lots of goodwill for yourself and the other person, remembering that karma is really complex and you don't know how far back into the past these things have gone. Rather than keeping tally or keeping score, you just say, "Okay, enough of that." Goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others, and move on.

But to really let go of something you have to see *why* you're holding on, what the allure is. And remember, holding on is not like holding on with your hand. The mind doesn't have a hand with which it can hold things in a fist or a grip. For the mind to hold on means that it keeps coming back to do the same thing again and again and again.

So we're back to that issue of actions, the actions of the mind. You've got to figure out why you keep doing something that's not that skillful. Sometimes it's just a lack of imagination. You can't think of any other way of relating to that particular issue. This is why it's good to read the Dhamma, good to listen to the Dhamma, because the Buddha gives you new ways of taking apart that harassing thought, new ways of perceiving the situation, new ways of perceiving the way you're dealing with it right now.

Remember that his word for clinging can also mean to feed on things. Why are you feeding on this? What nourishment is the mind trying to get out of it? And does the thought really offer that nourishment? You engage in this contemplation to give rise to dispassion, to get to the point where you don't really need that thought anymore. It doesn't hold any allure, and you're ready to let it go. Then you come back to the breath.

So, the Buddha's teachings are all about what we're doing and why we're causing ourselves suffering through what we do—and why we don't have to. He shows us what alternatives we have, alternative ways of acting that actually form a path away from that suffering. There's a value judgment here, too: that suffering is not what you want. This judgment is a choice you make. The Buddha's not forcing it on you. He's simply recommending that you realize how you've created a lot of unnecessary suffering that's weighing the mind down, and when the mind gets weighed down like this, you're less helpful to other people, too. You spend all your time carrying your problem around and you don't have time to shoulder anybody else's loads.

So take some time to look at what you're doing and figure out how you can do things in a different way. But the choice is yours. And realize that it is a choice. We're making these choices all the time, every time we act. The Buddha wants us to put a spotlight on that, because it's right there that the suffering lies, along with the source of the suffering. But the potential

for a way out also lies here in what we're doing. So try to be careful in how you make your choices.

As the Buddha said, heedfulness is the source of what's skillful. In other words, we realize there are dangers in our mind. The dangers outside are nothing compared to the dangers that we can create for ourselves. So there are a lot of things you do have to be wary of. But again, the things you're wary of are qualities in your own mind.

We like to think that we're basically good people, but then we have these other potentials as well. It's not that we're basically good *or* evil, it's just that the mind has both kinds of potentials. If it didn't have potentials for really bad stuff, then no matter how bad your social conditioning outside would be, you'd never be tempted. But it's because we have both kinds of potentials that we have to be careful to see which potentials we're going to choose to develop, choose to nurture through the way we speak and think and act.

So we get the mind still. That's a kind of action, too. And it's a good one, because it puts us in a position where we can see what other things are going on, what other things we're doing, and learn how to sort them out.

This is for our own good and for the people around us.