

Choices

May 18, 2022

Right now you have a choice. You can focus on the breath, or you can focus on some other Dhamma theme: contemplation of the body, goodwill, recollection of the Buddha. Or you can focus on something else entirely. Nobody knows what you're thinking about right now. You're free to think about anything, but which choice would be the wisest? That's a question you always want to ask yourself, because the mind is constantly making choices, so it might as well make them well.

This is why the Buddha said a teacher's first responsibility to his students is to give them a sense that there are some things that should be done, and other things that should not be done.

There were people in his time who taught that everything you experience right now is either the result of past action or the result of the will of a creator God or it's totally random. In each of those cases, he said, you're leaving people defenseless, unprotected, bewildered. He uses that word "bewildered" as our normal reaction to suffering. You're leaving people bewildered because you give them no idea of how to escape from the suffering they're experiencing right now. You give them no basis even for thinking that there is such a thing as what should be done and what should not be done.

After all, if everything you experience is based on past actions, then you could be a killer of living beings, you could be a thief, you could engage in breaking any of the five precepts, and you couldn't do anything about it.

The same if a creator god had created your experience, or if things were totally random. You tried to do something, you'd have no idea that there is such a thing as cause and effect. So you wouldn't know what to do.

In all those cases, the Buddha said, you're left defenseless, because what we need more than anything else is guidance as to what should and shouldn't be done. You want the guidance to come from someone who knows what he or she is talking about. Someone who has more experience than you do. And that's why he taught. That's why all of his teachings are about *what to do*. The noble eightfold path is something to do. The path of craving is something not to do.

In fact, the image of a path is his basic image for the teaching as a whole. It was his very first

teaching, and his very last. His last student came and asked him a question about other teachers at the time, whether they had knowledge and vision, too, or if they didn't. The Buddha said, "Put that question aside."

He ended up answering the question, but he answered it in a way that was more impersonal. He said basically that in any teaching where there is the noble eightfold path, you will find those who are awakened. Any teaching where there is no noble eightfold path, there's going to be nobody awakened.

It's the noble eightfold path that makes all the difference. It's a teaching all about action. It's all about things you can choose to do. Because if your choices in the present moment didn't have an impact in the present moment, then you couldn't choose to follow a path—but the fact is that it's something you can choose to do.

This is why we're focusing on the mind here in the present moment: because of the power of the mind in the present moment to shape both the present moment and the future. So, if you're focused on the breath, really be sincere in sticking with it.

The Buddha says you should be mindful, alert, ardent. In other words, keep the breath in mind: That's mindfulness. Then be alert: Watch what you're doing as you're staying with the breath. This means both watching how you're breathing, and also watching how the mind relates to the breath. If you see anything wrong—in other words, your mindfulness is telling you that you should do x , and you're doing x and it's not working, or you're not even doing x —then the quality of ardency comes in and says, "Let's straighten things out." This ardency, Ajaan Lee says, is the factor of wisdom in the practice of mindfulness and concentration.

Again, it's a matter of realizing that you have choices as to what to do, so you try to do them as skillfully as you can. So experiment with the breathing. See what kind of breathing would be best for you right now.

The Buddha gives the analogy of a cook who tries to notice what his master, the king or the king's minister, likes. Does he reach for salty food, or does he reach for sweet food? Does he reach for bitter? Sour? Bland? Take note of that, and then tomorrow make more of that.

Ajaan Lee works a variation on this. He says that sometimes the master likes one thing today and something else tomorrow. So you can't just keep on fixing the same thing every day. You have to be really observant, and also use your ingenuity. If what worked yesterday is not working today, what can you change?

Ajaan Lee also talks about the image you hold in mind concerning the breath. It can be

either a visual image, or a set of words. I found one that's very helpful is thinking of the breath bathing the body. In other words, you're not here watching the breath, you're here feeling the breath. You try to feel it all around you, because it *is* all around you. When it comes in, think of it coming in from all directions. It goes out, it goes out it goes out from all directions, and it runs around the body in all directions. Or try to see what other image or perception will be really useful in getting the mind to settle down, feeling really at home with the breath, at ease with the breath, comfortable in the breath.

Then look at the mind: What attitude are you bringing to the meditation? One of the lessons I learned very early on was that you come to a meditation—especially if it's one that you do every day, every day, it's part of the schedule—and there are days when you say, “Oh, tonight's meditation is not going to be good because I'm just not in the mood, or my mind is scattered,” or whatever. But you never really know. Sometimes you come with a scattered mind, and it settles down. Other times you think it's going to be really great tonight, and you're all over the place.

Which means you can never know ahead of time. At the same time, if you say “Well, it's going to be a bad meditation I might as well not do it”—don't believe that.

As Ajaan Chah says, it's the kind of thing you do when you're in the mood and when you're not in the mood—the trick being, of course, that if you're not in the mood, what can you do to put yourself in the mood? Because it really helps.

That's why the Buddha said desire is one of the first basis of success. You want to give rise to the desire to be here, to be observing the mind, and to be putting some restraints on it—because that's what we're doing here. We're going to stay with one thing. The mind can seem to be very easygoing, happy, but if you tell it, “Okay, you're going to stay with one thing, you can't think of anything else,” it begins to rebel.

It's been happy because you've been giving it free rein, but it's happy without really observing the results of its actions. If things are not going the way it likes, it tends to blame somebody else. You have to realize that if there's a problem in the mind or a problem in the breath, you've got to look at your own actions. And what better time than right now? Things are quiet, your responsibilities of the day are put aside. You've got this whole hour just to be with the breath, observe the breath, observe the mind.

So do your best to put yourself in the mood.

The Buddha talks about gladdening the mind. There are lots of ways you can gladden it: by

the way you breathe, by the topics you think about, or by reflecting on the fact that you're living a life of virtue, you're living a life of generosity. You're developing the qualities that the Buddha said will make you a deva: whatever theme you find is inspiring so that you're happy to be here, because when you're happy to be here, you notice things.

And particularly, you notice the parts of the mind that are not happy to be here and would rather be someplace else. You can step back from them. You don't have to identify with them. Watch them arise, and when you're not encouraging them, you can see them pass away—but your primary focus is with the breath. These other things just buzz around on the borders of your awareness. If you don't pay them much attention, after a while they go away.

As the breath calms down, it's a lot easier to see subtle things going on in the mind, and that's what we're here for: to see the subtleties. After all, as the Buddha said, it's ignorance that causes us to suffer. And it's not ignorance of things outside or far away—it's ignorance of our own minds, right here, right now.

You get the mind still so that your alertness can see more and more what's actually going on. Your mindfulness can connect things. It's because of mindfulness that you can remember what you did, and then when you see the results coming from what you did, you can make the connection. Then you can decide: Was that a wise choice or not? And from that you learn.

That's how we chip away at our ignorance: by doing the path, and then watching ourselves as we do the path—seeing what the results are, and if the results are not satisfactory, trying to figure out what's going wrong in our own actions. What can we change?

This constant back and forth: As the Buddha says, you commit to the practice, and then you reflect on it, and then you commit some more, based on your reflection. And you reflect some more. That's how this comes together as a skill.

So remember, the mind is constantly making choices. You want to make skillful choices. And you learn about skill partly from hearing what the Buddha had to say, and partly from observing your own actions—in fact, *primarily* from observing your own actions. That's when it really hits home... because you can listen, listen, listen to the Dhamma, but if you don't *see it* in your own actions—what's right, what's wrong, what's skillful, what's not—it just washes over you, and sometimes just washes away, like water off a duck's back.

There was an author one time who said, “One thorn of experience is worth a whole wilderness of warnings.” When you see yourself make a mistake and you realize, “Oh, that is a mistake”—you can see that you actually caused suffering, you caused harm—then you're going

to learn from that much more than by sitting and listening to a lot of Dhamma talks.

The talks are here to encourage you to, as the Buddha says, to instruct, encourage, rouse, and urge you on. But the lessons that really hit home are the ones that are going to come from your own actions, from the choices you made—the ones where you realized, yes, you did make that choice, and these are the results of that choice. Then you can decide whether that action was something to be repeated or not.

So the Buddha's here to encourage you to admit your choices, to give you some idea of the range of choices you have, and to give you a basis for deciding what things should be done, what other things should not be done. When he does that, he's fulfilling his duty as a teacher. Now it's up to you to fulfill your duty as a student. Take the teachings and try to get the best use out of them—making the best choices you can.