

The Power of Choice

October 30, 2004

We make a lot of choices in our lives, often many more choices than we're aware of. When the Buddha's inviting you to practice the Dhamma, he's inviting you to be more conscious of your choices so that you can make more intelligent ones, to stop focusing on things that you can't change and to focus on the things that you can.

Like right now, you have the choice to focus on just about anything at all. No responsibilities, nobody's yelling at you that you've got a deadline, nobody else is demanding attention. Your body's healthy enough for you to practice. So you have the choice: What do you want to do with the next hour? You could spend the next hour thinking about all kinds of things: thinking about the past, thinking about the future. But if you really want to understand the choices of the mind, you've got to focus on the present moment.

So we focus on the breath, because that's one thing that you really do have a lot of leeway in. It may not seem like much, but you can choose to breathe short breaths, long breaths, deep breaths, shallow breaths. You can choose to focus on any part of the body at all to be aware of the breath. Because the breath is like the electrical signals in your brain. They say they can hook up little electrodes anywhere in your body and pick up electrical signals from the brain. Even if they're hooked up to your little toes, the signals may be weaker down there but they can still be picked up. It's the same with the breath. There's breath energy throughout the body. So you can focus anywhere. You have the choice.

And this is important in two ways. One is that you can actually start using your freedom to choose right here to make a comfortable place to stay. Notice which kind of breathing feels good, which kind of breathing doesn't feel good. And keep nudging it toward the more comfortable kind, and then nudging it toward greater and greater, more and more subtle levels of pleasure. The one thing you have to watch out for here is that when it starts getting really comfortable you can tend to drift off. Because oftentimes as meditators we're like peasants who don't understand a monthly wage. They get their first payment and they quit the job, run through all their money, then they go back and try to start up and find another job. You stay with the breath for a while and it gets comfortable and you bliss out on the sense of comfort, which means you lose your bearings. Then when it crashes, you come back looking for the breath. It's better to keep on working and enjoying the wages continually, because they build up, and you have chance for a promotion. That's a choice you have.

So you choose the way you focus, the things you focus on, adjusting the things you focus on to develop greater and greater levels of stillness, serenity, tranquility in the present moment, to give the mind the nourishment it needs.

At the same time, you become more and more sensitive to this quality of choice, what you're doing in the present moment. Because it's not just what you focus on, it's also how you focus, and what you're creating through your focus. There's a lot to be learned there.

We create worlds for ourselves: That's what becoming is. Both mental worlds, the imaginary worlds where you picture things; and also states of mind, the things you picture to yourself. Those can be sensual becomings, where you picture sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations you'd like or don't like. Usually we focus on the things we like, but sometimes we like to focus on things that really get us worked up and upset. That's our choice. And then you have to ask yourself, where does that take you?

If you can drop that, you can work on what's called form-becoming, as you explore the sense of the body in the present moment, how you're experiencing the body from within right now. Sensations of warmth, solidity, coolness, movement: These make up your internal sense of the body. And if you focus exclusively in terms of these things, you create a different kind of world for yourself, the world where your attention fills the present moment.

Or you can go on to the formless states. Sometimes—when the breath gets really, really still, so that it seems like you're not breathing at all, there's just oxygen exchange at the skin—the sense of the body gets so fine that it's almost like little dots. Then you begin to notice the space between the little dots and you can focus on that. You begin to realize that this sense of space is endless, it has no boundaries, it stretches out in all directions. That's called formless becoming.

So right here you see you can create different experiences of the world out of the raw material that you've got, the raw material comes from your past actions. What you're doing with it right now is important. It actually shapes what you're going to experience, and you can see the process as you do it.

We not only create our sense of the world, but we also create our sense of self. If you really want to understand the Buddha's teachings on self and not-self, pay attention to two terms he uses a lot of times: "I-making and my-making." You *make* your sense of yourself, you *make* your sense of what belongs to you. These, again, are choices you make. And you can learn to make a more skillful "I," or you can make all kinds of unskillful ones.

And you find that you're actually changing your sense of self over time. It's not solid; it's not static. It moves around, sometimes quite erratically. You may be sailing along with no clearly-formed sense of self and all of sudden somebody does something really nasty to you that you didn't deserve, and a very strong sense of the injured self arises. Psychologists have noticed that our sense of injured innocence is where our sense of self gets really strongest.

Or you can have a sense of self that doesn't care about the future, that worries only about what gratification you're going to get right now, and doesn't care about how you deal with other people, how you treat other people. You just want what you want right now. That's a very unskillful sense of self. And you may look at it and start getting tired of it, and say, "I'd prefer a

teaching that there is no self.” Well, that’s unskillful too. You first have to learn how to make a skillful sense of self before you can take it apart skillfully and not in a neurotic or aversive way.

You train yourself to look at what true happiness means, what it’s going to require. It may require some sacrifices in the present moment, it may require that you take other people’s desires into account. Because after all, lasting happiness depends on very specific circumstances. They don’t just come floating around and can’t be forced immediately into place. You have to learn how to be generous, you have to learn how to be principled in your actions, you have to learn how to develop good qualities in the mind for the really deep sense of well-being that comes when you’ve mastered these things. That requires a sense of self that’s willing to put an effort into the practice, at the same time taking other people’s wishes into account.

As the Buddha said, when you realize that everybody is working toward happiness, you can’t base your happiness on something that’s going to create suffering for other people, because they’re going to be working against your happiness. You may be able to fend them off a for a while, but eventually that kind of happiness will have to get destroyed. So you want a happiness that doesn’t place burdens on other people.

So you have to look more and more deeply: How can you do that? Because after all, you’ve got this body that needs to be fed, clothed, sheltered, and treated with medicine. That simple fact creates burdens both for yourself and for other people. You look inward, to see if there’s a state of happiness that doesn’t depend on the body. And it’s in this process that you begin to understand the workings of fabrication in the present moment even more deeply.

The Buddha said that there are three kinds of fabrication that come out of ignorance: bodily fabrication, verbal, and mental. Bodily fabrication is the breath. Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation, like we’re doing right now: We’re directing our thoughts to the breath and we’re evaluating the breath. Then there’s mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. As you’re meditating, you’ve got all these forms of fabrication right here. And you’re creating this state of form-becoming, the best becoming for seeing the process of fabrication, because everything you need to see is present right here.

As you’re doing this, you begin to see that even creating a very nice, stable form of happiness like this—which doesn’t ask anything more than that you sit here and you’ve got a body and you’re breathing—even that can be stressful. That’s where the teaching on not-self comes in. You learn how to let go even of *this* form of becoming, *this* form of I-making and my-making. And see that the raw materials from which you’re creating this sense of self—form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness—are all inconstant. It’s like sand sifting through your fingers: You try to grab on to a fistful of sand, and even before you’ve fully closed your fist, the sand is already running out through your fingers.

So at this point your strategy of creating a skillful self becomes counterproductive. And the next strategy is to take that sense of self apart. Again, it’s an activity. Remember, as the

Buddha points out, so many of the things we experience in life are things we *do*, things we create. They're strategies for happiness. The self can be a strategy for happiness up to a point. And then the teaching on not-self is a strategy that teaches you to look for something even more solid, that doesn't create a burden for anybody at all.

And it's in the process of *that* strategy that you discover a totally radically different kind of happiness, a happiness that's not conditioned. Now, you can find that only by exercising your power of choice, beginning simply from this simple desire to find a happiness that won't turn on you, a happiness that doesn't create burdens for other people. Then you pursue that one particular choice and you don't give up on it. See how far it takes you. It'll require different strategies along the way, but they're simply strategies in pursuing that particular choice with greater finesse, with greater skill, until finally you get to that point where there is no fabrication, and you step beyond choices. It's a freedom not of simply surrendering yourself to causal processes; instead, it's a freedom that comes when you escape from causal processes, and choice is no longer an issue.

So try to sensitize yourself throughout your life to the choices you're making. And realize that your happiness depends on making skillful choices, a process that you can learn. If your life has been unskillful up to this point, and you've got lots of burdens and issues in your life, you can make choices to deal with those burdens skillfully. You can make a choice, change your habits.

That's the good part of this process of fabrication: Nothing is ever permanently engraved in stone. After all, even stone washes away and disintegrates. But in the meantime, because there is this constant process of fabrication, you can focus on the present moment. You don't have to worry about first causes or what happened way back in the past. Just notice what you're doing right now, how you're reacting to and shaping the raw material of life right now. Learn to do it more and more skillfully. And you find that it can take you a lot further than you might imagine.