

Wise Choices

April 1, 2009

As you sit here, there are a lot of different things you could be focusing on. But the wise choice is to focus on things that have a good potential, things that are conducive to long-term happiness. As the Buddha once said, wisdom begins by asking that question: “What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” It’s wise because you realize that the question of happiness and suffering is the big issue in life, that happiness depends on your actions, and that you have the choice to cultivate happiness or not. Not only that, there are many different kinds of happiness, many different kinds of pleasure you could cultivate as well. So you want something long-term that repays your efforts, rather than just short-term that squanders your time and energy.

Focusing on the object, focusing on the sensations that can give rise to concentration: That’s a wise choice, because the pleasure of concentration goes a lot deeper than the pleasure that comes from sights and smells and sounds and tastes and tactile sensations, things outside, and people outside.

So look at what you’ve got here. You’ve got the body sitting here breathing. You’ve got the mind thinking and aware. Those are your raw materials. If you find it difficult to settle down with the breath, you can focus on other ideas that you find inspiring, things that encourage you to do what’s good, encourage you to do what’s wise. Then, when the mind is ready to settle down, it can stay with the breath. It’s important to learn how to settle yourself in the present moment, because even inspiring ideas have their limitations. But as long as you’re alive, the breath is here—and you can cultivate it.

Look at the Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation. They’re not just about being aware of what the breath is doing. There was one time when a monk said to the Buddha, “I do breath meditation.” The Buddha asked him, “What kind of breath meditation do you do?” The monk said, “I put aside thoughts of past and thoughts of the future, and I learn to develop equanimity around the present as I breathe in and breathe out.” As the Buddha said, there *is* that kind of breath meditation, but that’s not the breath meditation that gives the best results.

He then taught the sixteen steps. These start out simply by observing what’s short or long in the breath, but then from that point on, you train yourself: “I will breathe this way. I will breathe that way.” There’s an intentional element there, to remind you that you have the choice. Breathe in and out aware of the whole body. Breathe in and out in a way that the sensation of the breathing has a good effect

on the body. It calms it down, nourishes it, gives it a sense of fullness, a sense of ease. These are things you can choose to do.

This teaches an important lesson right there: that the present moment is not just a given. It's more of a potential. You have lots of different potentials you could focus on here right now, so you want to do your best with the potentials that are here. It's like being an artist. Say you've got a stone that you want to make a sculpture out of. Some stones are good. Some stones are not that good. And you have to know the level of your skill. Ajaan Lee makes the point that when you're really wise, you can make something good out of whatever comes. In other words, you can take something negative or deficient and use it to train your mind in discernment. After all, that's the first noble truth is about. Where there's suffering, you can learn from it. But you're not just thrown into the deep end of the swimming pool before you can swim. The Buddha has you work on developing a sense of ease, a sense of well-being in the present moment so that you feel at home here, you feel at ease. That way, when pain comes up, you don't feel threatened by it.

So you start working with good stones first, good hunks of marble.

My mother was an author, and in one of her books she had a character with a donkey named Donatello. Apparently the story goes that the slab of marble that Michelangelo used to carve the statue of David, Donatello actually worked on first and then decided he couldn't make anything out of it. It didn't have the right proportions. Cracks were in the wrong places. So he threw it away. Michelangelo then took that slab of marble and made a very famous statue out of it. So the character said that Donatello was an ass. That's why she named her donkey Donatello.

It's a little bit harsh on Donatello, but it shows the importance of developing skills: You can make something good out of almost anything if you have enough skill. If you realize that you're not skillful at taking a particular situation and making something wise, something good out of it, just put it aside, because there are lots of other potentials where you can develop a sense of well-being, the sense of good solid happiness here in the present moment. It's an important skill to have.

And it's not just a skill to practice only here where you're sitting with your eyes closed. You want to be able to carry it around with you. As we were saying earlier today, while you're engaged in other activities, take that part of the mind that would normally wander aimlessly around, thinking about the past, thinking about the future, generally dealing with aimless thought: Take that part of the mind and give it over to the breath. This may mean simply being aware of the general quality

of the energy of the body without being specifically focused on whether the breath is coming in or going out. Just try to inhabit the body in a way that feels at ease. Relax the wrists. Relax the ankles. Relax the muscles around the neck. Try to notice where tension builds up, where it catches hold, and more tension and stress begin to accumulate around those little nodes. Try to keep those nodes as all open and as stress-free as possible.

That much grounding in the breath can put you in a much better position, not only to do your activities with more skill, but also to have a greater sense of well-being as you go through the day. When you talk with other people, try to maintain that sense of your hands, your feet, your wrist, your ankles, and how the breath energy is going there from the center of the heart. Keep that protected—open inside, but protected from outside energy. You've got that potential there all the time. The breath energy of the body can be very refreshing; you can have a sense of fullness and ease regardless of the situation.

So when all else seems to be pretty miserable, at least you've got something inside that you can cultivate, something inside that you can develop. This is your raw material for making a piece of art inside.

Remember that you do have choices in the present moment. You may not be able to create the happiness, create the life that you want, because a lot of that depends on people outside—and the extent to which it does depend on people outside means that you're subject to their whims—but you can create a state of mind that doesn't have to depend on people outside, doesn't have to depend on outside situations, outside events. It depends on knowing which potentials in the present moment are wise to choose, which ones you can develop into something really good and solid, so that you can work from your strengths. That's really important.

As you get skilled in taking these inner potentials and making something good out of them, you find that your skill begins to grow, begins to extend, so that situations outside that used to be pieces of rock that you would just throw away because you couldn't use them, you begin to realize they have the potential, too. That way, your skill grows. Your artistry grows and develops until you reach the point where, as Ajaan Lee says, you're a person of wisdom, a person of discernment. who can take anything and make something good out of it.

So start out with a sense of where you're skillful, where you're not, and then build on your strengths, because otherwise they get wasted. And it's a shame. There are lots of potentials for happiness right here in the present moment wherever you are. Sometimes they lie totally inside, while the world outside is pretty miserable. But focus on where you can make a difference, where you can

develop a sense of strength and well-being inside. That's how we manifest wisdom wherever we are.