

Right & Wrong Decisions

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Each time you meditate, start with thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill is a wish for happiness, a happiness that doesn't change, a happiness that doesn't turn on you, a happiness that causes no pain or suffering or harm to anybody at all. You wish it for yourself. You wish it for all living beings. We do this to remind ourselves, deep down inside, that this is what we really want—and also to remind ourselves this is why we're sitting here meditating: to develop the skills we need to find that happiness. Because it is a question of skill.

We work on the mind so that it can develop those skills. When we work with the breath, it may seem like a detour but it's not. When you're with the breath, you're in the present moment. As you work with the breath to make it comfortable, to make it energizing, whatever the body needs right now, you're making it easier and easier for the mind stay in the present moment.

Why is the present moment so important? Because this is where you're making all the decisions in your life, the things you're going to say, you're going to do, you're going to think. It's important you try to do these things skillfully. Now, you can get yourself worked up and tied up in knots about making mistakes, so to prevent that, that's another reason why we work with the breath: so that you're coming from a state of ease and well-being. The more ease and well-being you can feel in this way, the easier it is to make the right choices, the easier it is to admit your mistakes when you see them, so that you can respond to the mistakes in the right way—"right way" here being in the way that's most effective in putting an end to suffering.

The mind does have a tendency to create a lot of suffering for itself. We all want happiness. Everything we do and say and think, every intention we have, is an attempt at finding happiness or finding at least some pleasure, and yet it often turns around and creates a lot of suffering. This is why you have to bring a lot of alertness, a lot of mindfulness, bring your full attention to what you're doing, the choices you're making, so that you begin to understand why it is that even though we aim at happiness, at pleasure and ease, we create suffering, misery, dis-ease. We'll see it's largely because we're not paying attention to what we're doing and we're not paying attention to the results of what we're doing.

This is another good lesson you learn from paying attention to the breath, because you can see immediately that the way you focus on the breath will have an immediate effect on how you sense the body, and on the mind's ability to stay in

the sense of well-being. It happens right away. If you clamp down too hard on the breath or you force the breath in a mechanical way, it's going to get harder and harder to stay with a sense of ease in the present moment. The dis-ease will appear immediately. So you try to notice: What kind of breathing would feel good right now?

This is an area where you can experiment: longer breathing, shorter breathing, deeper breathing, more shallow breathing, heavier or lighter. As you experiment, you begin to see that your actions, your decisions, your choices really do make a difference. You also gain a sense of competence that you can do this. You can learn. There's that old saying, you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but it doesn't really matter what age you are. You can watch your breath and you learn from it no matter what your age.

One of Ajaan Fuang's students, a woman who had really strong powers of concentration, didn't start meditating till she was 70. She was suffering various illnesses. She knew she needed something beyond just the medicine the doctors were giving her. So she threw herself into the meditation and learned an awful lot. She didn't have much of an education but she learned an awful lot from the practice, just learning how to observe what she was doing and the results of what she was doing. In that way, you can develop a lot of skill. And the skills you learn around the breath begin to get translated into the skills with which you deal with other things in life as well.

You come to the breath looking for pleasure, you come to the breath looking for ease and well-being. Wherever there's any sense of discomfort or dis-ease, you do your best to work with it. Where you find things are going well, you try to maintain it. When you see things that are beyond your control, you let them go so that you can focus on the things that you *can* control.

These attitudes correspond to what you might call the social attitudes that the Buddha teaches: goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. Goodwill is a wish for happiness. Compassion is when you see suffering and you want to learn how to put an end to that suffering. Empathetic joy is when you see there already is happiness and you don't resent other people's happiness, and you value your own happiness, you try to keep it going. Equanimity is the attitude you develop when you realize there are some things you simply cannot change. You don't waste your time over them.

So as you work with the breath, you're developing these attitudes that you can then apply to situations in life. You want to approach every encounter with other people—people you're close to and people you're not so close to—with the attitude: May all beings be happy. This doesn't mean you have to like people. And

your wish for their happiness doesn't mean you have a magic wand in your hand that can just go *bing* on their heads and make them happy. You realize that happiness has to come from causes. So your wishes are, "May these people understand the causes for happiness. May they do not do anything that's going to cause unhappiness for themselves or for other people." When you see that they aren't acting in skillful ways, is there anything you can do to help them stop doing those unskillful things? When you see that they're acting on the causes for happiness, you appreciate that fact. You're happy for them. You don't resent their happiness. And if you see there's nothing you can do, that's when you develop equanimity.

In other words, when you come from a good place with your breath, when you come with the right attitude toward your breath, it helps develop attitudes that are useful in life around you—in particular, this desire to be skillful in your choices, because our choices really do make a difference.

I heard today someone saying that there's no such thing as a right or wrong decision. Well, look all around you. Of course there are right decisions and wrong decisions being made all the time. The important thing is learning how to evaluate your decisions well, so that you're not deluded, so that you're not acting under the power of unskillful desire, unskillful aversion, delusion, unskillful fear.

Notice: Desire and fear can actually be skillful or unskillful. There's the desire to do something well. That's a skillful desire. Your actions are all motivated by desires, so you have to learn how to read your desires to see where they aim, what their consequences will be.

The same with fear: Fear of the consequences of doing something unskillful is a skillful fear to encourage. Unskillful fear is when you're afraid to do something skillful because someone else might not like it, or someone else might disapprove. That's where courage comes in. But the fear of causing dissension, the fear of creating trouble: That's a fear that should be encouraged. As for aversion, aversion is never skillful, but recognizing when something is wrong is a useful skill to develop. When you see people acting in unskillful ways, is there a skillful way that you can get them to change their ways? You can't use force in most cases. Nine times out of ten, you can't use force. But there are other ways: your powers of persuasion.

So you want to look at your motivation to make sure it's coming from a skillful place. The problem, of course, is delusion. Delusion is never skillful. And it's the hardest one of these qualities to see. No matter how much you read in the texts or hear the Dhamma, you can still be deluded in your interpretation of the text, you can be deluded in how you hear the Dhamma. The only way you can test for

delusion is, if there's something you're not sure about, act on it. See what happens. Talk it over with other people first to get their perspective, and if nobody has any better ideas, at least try acting on it and see what happens—and then learn. This requires a lot of truthfulness, the willingness to see: “Okay, that was a mistake.”

This requires a lot of maturity. And the maturity comes from mature concentration, a mature way of looking after your mind, so that you don't feel invested in your decisions after you've made them, insisting that they always have to be right. At the same time, you're not tied up in knots over mistakes you've made in the past. You recognize you've made a mistake, you learn from it. Then you resolve not to repeat that mistake in the future.

So there are a lot of qualities that are important in making decisions in life: mindfulness, alertness, discernment, truthfulness. Meditation helps develop many of those qualities as you develop skill in dealing with the breath, develop skill in learning how to keep the mind here in the present moment with the breath. Even when other things in life are uncertain, you can know for sure where the breath feels good, where it doesn't feel good. That's something you can learn to read and sense regardless of the situation.

It's always good to keep in touch with this process, regardless of how many other activities you may be responsible for, how much is going on around you. It's always possible to at least keep some tabs on how the breath is going. And the effort put into learning how to keep the breath comfortable—energizing when you need energy, relaxing when you need to relax: That effort is always a good investment. It's a good background skill to bring into all situations.

So here we have an hour to work on that skill. Try to make the most of it.