

## *Choosing Freedom*

*February 18, 2012*

One of the important lessons in meditation is that the choices you make right now have a huge impact right now. You don't have to wait until tomorrow, next month, or next year, or your next life. We're going to sit here for an hour, and the way we sit—that means both physically and mentally—is really going to determine whether this is going to be an hour of pleasure or an hour of suffering.

There are some things we can't change. Our bodies have their ailments. Pains in the knees, allergies, pains in the back: All of that is past karma. But you do have several choices. There's the choice of where you're going to focus your attention and what you're going to do with where your attention is focused. And that can make all the difference.

It may seem like a big responsibility, but it's also good news. What this means is that as the body inevitably gets older—and there's going to be illness and ultimately death—the suffering of aging, illness, and death is not automatic. It depends on the mind and the choices you're making as you go through those experiences. You don't have to suffer.

You look at the example of the Buddha. As he said when he was old, the only time he found any comfort from his body was when his mind was totally in very deep concentration. Whenever he was ill—when he was attacked by Devadatta or when he had his last major illness—he stayed mindful and alert. His mind didn't get fogged or confused. Even when he died, right up to the moment of his death, he was practicing jhana, which means that even though he was experiencing aging, illness, and death, the mind was not suffering.

That's the skill he perfected, and that's the skill he's passed on to us. So it's a good skill to practice. The skill comes down to knowing where to focus your attention and knowing what to do, and reminding yourself why you're doing it. We're doing this for the end of suffering. We're doing it to find a happiness that's blameless. It turns out it's also a happiness that has no limitations once it's found.

So where do you focus your attention? Right now, try it with the breath. When you breathe in, where do you feel the movement of the body as you breathe in? When you breathe out, is there any movement? Often, the out-breath is more subtle than the in-breath. And you don't have to create sensations of movement. Just notice when you breathe in, where does it feel most obvious? Then notice if it feels comfortable. This is something that you *do* with what you've got right here, right now.

When the Buddha taught breath meditation, he didn't have you just sit there and watch things and not do anything about them. There was one time when he recommended that the monks practice breath meditation, and one of the monks said, "Oh, I already practice breath meditation."

The Buddha said, "What kind of breath meditation do you do?"

And the monk said, "Well, I put aside any concerns about the past, I put aside concerns about the future, and I just stay with the breath coming in and going out in the present moment." Sounds like the instructions you often get about breath meditation.

But the Buddha said, "Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but it's not the kind that gives the best results."

Then he gave his 16 steps for breath meditation, which start by simply watching the breath to see when it's long and when it's short. But then the Buddha said, "Be aware of the whole body as you breathe in. Be aware of the whole body as you breathe out." Train yourself to have that kind of awareness each time: "I will be aware of the whole body," as you breathe in and, "I will be aware of the whole body," as you breathe out. Try to maintain that full body awareness.

It helps if you can visualize the body as a large sponge with lots of holes all over the place. In other words, all the pores of your skin are open for breath energy to come in and go out. It may be very subtle, and you may not feel anything for a while. But try to hold that picture in mind because you probably, some place deep down in your brain, have another picture of what's happening when you breathe, and that picture may not be all that helpful.

So bring a new perception in. When you breathe in, it's not just a little pair of holes here in your nose that the breath can come in. It can come in anywhere in the body. In fact, if you have the perception that it *is* coming in everywhere, see what happens. It's not a question of whether it's true that there is breath energy there or not—or exactly what's happening. But holding that perception allows you to work with the energy in the body in ways you might not have been able to do if you had other perceptions.

You can think of the breath energy coming in. Ajaan Fuang would often talk about there being kind of a line running down through the body, from the middle of the head, down through the middle of the torso, and then down both legs. When the breath energy comes in, it comes into that line. So it's not just coming into your lungs, but it's coming into the whole body. Then when it goes out, it goes out from that line.

Or instead of the question of whether the breath energy is coming in or not, just think of the fact that your chest is rising, your chest is falling; the abdomen is rising, the abdomen is falling; your shoulders may be moving; your rib cage may be moving. When these parts of the body move, they have an influence on other parts of the body that's going to be more subtle, but it's still there. Just maintaining your balance, as these parts of the body move, changes the balance in the rest of the body, too.

So there's a slight sense of movement, or the possibility of a slight sense of movement, everywhere in the body. Just hold that in mind. You don't have to create a sensation of movement, but just think of allowing it to happen. If the energy is too subtle, just think of surveying the body, going through the body section by section, and noticing where there's tension, where there seems to be a blockage. Think of it dissolving away. If you can sense it dissolving, then try to keep it dissolved all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-.

In this way, you see that the change in perception opens up new possibilities. This is why we choose these perceptions. This is why we follow the path as a whole. It's not simply that this is *the* one truth about the body or *the* one truth about the mind. But this is the most useful set of truths to hold to if you're trying to put an end to suffering—if you're trying to explore the choices you have here in the present moment of how you can relate to the body and also, how you can relate to the mind in a way that ends suffering and stress.

First, as you're looking at the mind, you try to create the sense of well-being inside. Sometimes you can do it with the breath. Other times, it requires other topics. The Buddha said if you have trouble settling down with the breath in the present—in his terms, if you have a fever that you feel in the body and feel irritable or ill at ease, focusing on the body—he says to find a theme that you find inspiring and think about that for a while.

You can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. You can think about your own generosity. You can think about your own virtue. Maybe your virtue isn't perfect, but there have been times when you've been good. You've done the honorable thing; you've acted on your principles. You could think thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. Extend those to everybody you can think of—whatever you find calms the mind, gives a sense of well-being inside.

Once there's that sense of well-being, then turn and look. See how your breath is at that point. Has the breath changed? If it has, see if you can then focus back on that comfortable sensation of breathing and maintain it. Allow it to stay. If you can, it gives you a really good foundation for looking at what's going on in the

mind. It puts you in a better mood to see where there's greed or aversion or delusion, and not feel threatened by these things, not feeling that you have to stamp them out or deny them. They're there, but you don't have to get involved. This is a really important skill. This is the first step in how we learn how to be with unpleasant things and yet not suffer from them.

One of our problems is that we try to make the world perfect before we're going to be happy. And how many people do you know who've been able to make the world perfect? It doesn't happen. Even the Buddha couldn't make it perfect. He wanted to teach Devadatta, but Devadatta didn't want to be taught. There are lots of things the Buddha couldn't do, yet he didn't suffer because he realized there are so many things out there that you simply cannot change. So you can't wait for them to be perfect before you take care of the problems in your own mind. You've got to focus here first.

In that description of establishing mindfulness where the Buddha says that you "subdue greed and distress with reference to the world," or that you "put away greed and distress with reference to the world," the "world" here means all your six senses. So whatever issues you have with the world out there, or the issues you have with anything that's happening in the senses, you have to put that aside for the time being. That's not the issue; the issue is the way the mind creates suffering for itself. You want to look at that directly and take care of that issue first. As for the rest of the world, you have to let it go for the time being.

There's going to be a lot of unfinished business. In fact, living with unfinished business is an important skill in the meditation, knowing that you've got this business that you've got to finish first: the question of why the mind is suffering. And as for other things, you put them aside and let them stay unfinished for the time being.

Ajaan Suwat's image was of that mountain over there on the eastern horizon. He would ask, "Is that mountain heavy?" The first time I heard that, I knew, being with an ajaan, that you didn't give just a quick answer. You'd have to stop and think about it for a while. Then he gave the answer himself, "Well, it may be heavy in and of itself, but as long as we don't try to lift it up, it's not heavy on us. And that's what matters."

So we're learning how not to go around trying to lift mountains. We focus on *the* important issue in life, which is that we're causing unnecessary suffering to ourselves. Even around pleasures, we can create suffering. You want to learn the skills that, no matter what happens—good, bad, indifferent—you don't have to suffer from it. You know where to focus your attention. You know what to do.

If you want to put an end to suffering, you keep the four noble truths in mind and then ask yourself, “Okay, given the four noble truths, what do I have to do right now? Is this stress? I’ve got to comprehend it then.” How about this movement of the mind? Is that the cause of stress? In that case, you abandon it. As for the things that help put an end to stress, the path: You try to develop it.

It’s not the case that when mindfulness comes or concentration comes, you just watch it come and go, and think you’ve had some great insight. Concentration comes? Okay, you try to maintain it. Learn how to maintain it and not crush it or squeeze it. Allow it to stay. Allow it to grow. And learn what needs to be done for it to stay and to grow. Sometimes it’s just that, *allowing* it. Other times, you have to work on other factors as well. There are certain things you have to let go. It’s easy, once concentration does become stable, to get complacent. You start wandering around thinking about other things that come back and eat up your concentration. So you have to be careful. There are qualities you have to develop, qualities that you have to abandon.

So you watch to see what needs to be done. That’s how the discernment gets developed. Ultimately, you get to the point where the path gets fully developed, and then you taste the end of suffering. Just realize that. That’s really there. What the Buddha taught is true: There is a dimension that’s free of space, free of time, totally unlimited. He was right. You know that that dimension also doesn’t have any suffering at all—no stress, not even the slightest bit of suffering.

There really is an end to suffering. And when you know that, when you’ve directly experienced it, it takes a lot of the weight off the other things that you’ve been trying to lean on, the things you’ve been trying to feed on, to find happiness from, and end up creating suffering. You don’t have to create that suffering anymore.

That’s the skill we’re trying to learn, that regardless of how good or bad things may be, you want the skill that allows you not to suffer in any situation. It comes from the fact that we have this choice. Even though there are things in the world that are beyond our control, we can control where we’re focusing our attention and how we move the mind around, what we can adjust, what we have to accept. Knowing those things can take a huge burden off the mind right there.

The meditation is largely an exercise in using your freedom of choice. The more you use it skillfully, the more freedom you get. Always keep these points in mind.