

What You're Choosing to Do Right Now

June 1, 2013

We're all here because we chose to be here, and we're continuing to choose to stay here. Anyone here is free to get up at any time during the hour. Or you're free to choose to stay through the hour and beyond if you want. This is an important principle in the practice: We're exploring our choices in the present moment. That's why we're here, trying to focus on the breath to stay in the present moment, so that we can see what our choices are.

One of the purposes of the practice is to alert you to how much you are actually choosing to do things, think things, and say things here in the present moment. You have the power to use that for good or for not so good—for your happiness or for your suffering. Years back, a woman basically dragged one of her friends here to meditate. At the end of the hour, the friend said she'd never suffered so much in her life, sitting out under the trees—this was at the outdoor classroom—sitting out under the trees with the wind blowing through the leaves. It was a lovely afternoon, but she chose to make it an hour of suffering.

In terms of developing generosity, virtue, and meditation, these are all exercises in learning about your freedom of choice. Generosity is probably one of the first ways, as children, that we realize our freedom of choice. We can choose to give something or not give something. The Buddha's teachings on generosity deal not with gifts that we give because we have to, but gifts we give because we want to—regardless of the motivation. That's when you realize you have some choice. The same with virtue: You realize that you could sometimes get away with behavior that's less than honorable, but you decide that it's beneath you, something you don't want to do. Again, you're free to choose that.

When the Buddha sets out the precepts, they're not commandments. They're a promise you make to yourself. It's important that we keep this in mind: that all aspects of the practice are aimed at sensitizing us to the choices we're making in the present moment so that we can make them more skillfully.

What the Buddha does is to point this out as *the* big issue you've got to focus on, and then he gives you some vocabulary. This is what the five aggregates, the discussion of the six sense spheres, the six properties, dependent co-arising—all these teachings—are meant to alert you to: the fact that there are these various things going on here in the present moment, things you often just accept as a given. But as you get the mind more and more quiet, you begin to realize you're making choices.

It's like that book *Blink* that came out several years back. It was billed as a book saying not to let too much data get in the way of your gut reaction, your gut decision on things. But when you actually read the book, it was a different book entirely. It talked about how some people have an instinctive ability to focus in on what is *the* big issue, and they're sensitive to the way they can read a particular situation by focusing on the right things. The rest of the book had to do with the fact that this is a skill that can be taught, primarily by giving people an enlarged vocabulary to describe what they're sensing.

For example, when you train people to be taste-testers, you give them a large vocabulary: These are the different kinds of tastes there are in the world. They start out with a certain sensitivity, but that sensitivity gets sharpened by having a larger vocabulary. Like the Calvin and Hobbes cartoon, where Calvin is talking about the smell of the autumn air and says, "It's really indescribable." And Hobbes, of course, being a tiger, says, "No, it's a kind of snorfy, bramblish smell." He makes up words, or what sounds like made-up words, to describe subtle distinctions in the smells.

That's what the Buddha's descriptions of the aggregates are: They're things you're deciding to do right now. There's some fabrication going on simply in the way you sit here: what you're doing with the breath, what you're telling yourself about the breath, how you're evaluating it, and how you want to change it. Even with the feelings in the body: There are some feelings that you focus on and other feelings you ignore. Then there's the whole idea of breath energy going through the body—one of the properties that make up the way you sense your body from within. There's the water property—Ajān Fuang would identify that as coolness. Earth is the sense of solidity or heaviness in the body. Breath is the sense of energy, which can either be moving or still. Fire is the warmth.

It may take a while to get used to those ideas because, automatically, we think, "That's the way they used to describe things in the past, but now we know about the chemical elements." Well, you don't directly experience chemical elements; you experience these properties. And it's good to sensitize yourself to them so that you can make use of them. When you learn to perceive the energy field of the body, you get more and more sensitive to when the energy is flowing well, when it's not flowing well, and how you can use this sensitivity to help you get the mind to settle down.

That's the Buddha's physical vocabulary. Then there's the mental vocabulary: feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. The fact that you are fabricating these things.... The way the Buddha explains it is that there's a potential for all of these things coming in from the past, and you decide that you want a feeling, or

you want a perception, so you fabricate those potentials into something you actually experience right now.

What this means is that you have choice. That's what we're really focusing on here: What are the choices you're making? How can you make them more skillfully? How can you make those choices so that you're creating a happiness that lasts and is harmless? How you can make those choices so that you open up to something that's beyond choice, something totally unfabricated? That possibility is here as well.

As the Buddha said, there's discernment that comes from listening, and there's discernment that comes from thinking. Listening gives you the new vocabulary; listening points out what the big issues are. Thinking about it requires appropriate attention—in other words, making sure that you take these teachings and apply them to the real issue, which is why is it that you're causing suffering all the time, even when you're hoping—in fact, we're always hoping through our actions—to bring about well-being. But why is it we create suffering? What's going on? Where is the ignorance that we need to overcome?

When you listen and think in these ways, this really does develop your discernment. Then as you practice, your discernment grows even more. As you sensitize yourself to the choices you have to make in order to get the mind to settle down, this is where you learn the wisdom or the discernment required for finding the point of moderation. How much food is too much food to eat if you're practicing meditation? How much is too little? *All* the physical requisites: How much is too much and how much is too little? You have to find your own point of balance. When you're meditating, how much desire is too much? How much is too little? How much effort is too much; how much is too little? When you're trying to balance the different skillful qualities in the mind, when do you need more effort? When do you need more stillness? When do you need to be more active?

As you're trying to find this point of balance, you really are exercising your discernment much more subtly than if you simply pushed things to an extreme. When you're pushing things to an extreme, you don't have to worry about reading the results. You just push, push, push, push, push. But when you're trying to find a point of balance, you have to keep reading the connection between what you're doing and what the results are. And because that point of balance will shift, you have to be quick.

This, of course, sensitizes you to all the things that go into a simple, still state of mind here in the present moment. You realize how fabricated it is. That's what

sensitizes you to the fact that there must be something better—or you want something better—and fortunately, the Buddha said there is.

So these are the issues: the choices you're making right now. This is why we're here in the present moment, to get more and more sensitive to how we make these choices. Even in simple and subtle things like just looking at something, or listening to something, or focusing on one feeling as opposed to another feeling: These choices make a difference. We're here to see them. We're not here just to hide out.

I was looking a while back at a video of a Dhamma teacher saying that she had avoided the problems of aging by just staying with the breath in the present moment. And that was it. That solved the problem. Well, it doesn't solve the problem; you're just hiding out. That's the wisdom of an ostrich. As long as your head is in the sand, you don't see the problem coming at you. But what if the problem comes at you and hits you while you have your head in the sand? Of course, you can't stay with your head in the sand all the time.

So we're not here just to hide out. We're here to look at the fact that choices are being made in the present moment—often on levels that we're barely aware of. But as we get the mind more calm, get the mind to settle down, we can begin to sense these movements in the mind. We use the Buddha's vocabulary to sort out what's what. What's going on in there?

The fact that we're making choices right now is what allows us to practice. It's what allows us to find an end to suffering, to bring about the end of suffering through our own actions, to follow the path. So always remember, this is the issue: the choices you're making right now. Focus as much attention on that issue as you can.