

Choosing to Believe in Your Choices

August 16, 2018

As you sit here focused on the breath, you'll sometimes find that the mind is not with the breath. It's someplace else. And when you notice that, you have a choice. You can either stay with that someplace else and follow whatever the thought is or you can come back to the breath. They're both here: the thought and the breath. And you can tell yourself, if you follow the thought, it's nothing different from what happens when you sit around thinking anyhow. Try seeing what happens if you come back to the breath each time you notice that you've wandered off. And try to get quicker at noticing these things.

These are all choices you make. And the fact of choice is really central to why we're meditating.

The Pali word for meditation, *bhavana*, means to develop. Here we're choosing to develop concentration, to develop mindfulness, alertness, and a quality called ardency. We try to do this well. If you couldn't choose to do these things, there'd be little purpose in meditating. The fact of choice is central to the Buddha's teaching. The very first two verses of the Dhammapada say that the mind is the forerunner of all things—all the phenomena that you're going to experience of the senses. It's an interesting statement. It's basically saying the mind is not on the tail end of things. It's at their beginning point. Their source.

In the Buddha's analysis of the causes for suffering, there's a place where he talks about how what you experience of the senses is the result of old karma, your old actions coming back at you: what you see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and the ideas that pop into the mind. But what you choose to do in the present moment is your present karma. In the steps of his analysis, your present intentions actually come first. They're shaped by your thoughts, shaped by your feelings. But each present moment is something you approach with an intention. And your experience of the intention actually comes prior to your experience of the senses.

So your new karma in the present moment is something that you experience prior to your experience of the results of old karma, which means that you're not totally shaped by what was done in the past. This was a point that the Buddha was so particular about and that he saw as so important that there were times he'd actually go out and argue with other people on the issue. Generally, he was not the type of person to go and pick arguments with people. But there was one issue that he would go out and ask other teachers about: why they would teach that people don't have a choice in the present moment.

Some people taught that you do have choice, but it has no meaning because there is no principle of cause and effect. Everything in the world is random, in which case, if an opportunity for pleasure comes, you should grab it. There's no sense of anything being skillful or unskillful. Other people taught that what you experience is determined by what was done in the past, either on your own, through an impersonal process of fate, or by a creator god ordaining things had to be a certain way. In all of these cases, the Buddha said, "That would mean that you have no choice in the present moment." Everything that you do, good or bad, would be pre-determined. You'd have no choice to improve yourself to make yourself skillful. The idea of a path of practice that would lead to the end of suffering would be meaningless. Life would be hopeless.

But from his own experience as a meditator, the Buddha realized that there is a way out. Of course, he couldn't take his experience of freedom and show it to us. The principle that we have freedom of choice is something no one can prove or disprove. But the Buddha did give a pragmatic proof. He said that if you believe that you have choices and that your choices matter, you'd be more likely to act in a skillful way. And you'd have an assurance that even if it turned out that this was not true, at least you gave it a try. You didn't give up, because if you simply say, "Well, everything I experience is the result of something in the past, so I've just got to learn how to accept that," that's defeatist. And it's a dishonorable way to think.

So you've got the choice. What kind of life do you want to live? One where you pursue the hope of putting an end to suffering, which is an honorable thing to do, or one where you give up? The Buddha's offering us an opportunity. We have his word. And we have the word of his noble disciples, the ones who followed his teachings and found that, yes, it does work.

But for us, there's no proof of that yet. The proof has to come from our own actions. Still, you have to look at the alternatives. What kind of life do you want to live? What kind of person do you want to be? Here the Buddha's saying it is possible. Other people are saying that he's right. There are people out there who say he's wrong, but what do they have to offer in terms of proof? They can say, well, we look at everything in the physical world and see that everything in the physical world is determined by physical laws, so your consciousness is just an after-effect of those physical laws. And you're better off just accepting the fact that you have no choice.

But then you have the choice to accept or not accept what they're saying. Even there, there's a choice, and people are making their choices. If you think that there's no choice at all, then you can't say that anybody is guilty of doing anything

unskillful, because whatever they do is the result of something that was beyond their control. It would be an impossible society to live in.

When you're thinking about what kind of ideas you want to adopt about whether you have choice or not, ask yourself: If you had a child, what would you teach the child? You'd teach the child: "Be careful about what you do. Look both ways before you cross the street. And don't hurt other people. If you make a mistake, come and talk to me about it so that we can talk about how you might not make that mistake the next time around." Now, all of this assumes that the child does have choices and that children can change their ways if they see that their actions were a mistake. So given that that's how you'd teach a child, look at how you teach yourself. You have choices. Look left and right before you cross the street. It can make a difference. Look left and right when you choose what to think and what to say and do.

In a world where what you do does make a difference, there's hope. It is possible to put an end to suffering or, at the very least, to alleviate a lot of the unnecessary suffering you cause yourself. And look at the voices inside that say No. What's their motivation? Why are they believable? Why would you want to believe them? Look into that as well. When the path to the end of suffering is something that's available, it'd be a shame not to give it a try. At the very least, it gives some meaning to your life.

A life in which there is no choice is meaningless. And even though some things are inevitable—as we said in the chant, aging is unavoidable, illness, death, the fact that you're born means these things are going to have to come—still, we don't know when. There are some cases where the process of aging can be delayed. Some illnesses can be avoided. Death can be delayed if you're more careful about how you act. So even though these things are inevitable, it doesn't mean you just give in.

And as for the things that are not inevitable: As the Buddha said, suffering is not inevitable. Even though there is aging, he said there is a skill to learn how not to suffer from aging. There's a skill to learn how not to suffer from illness. There's a skill to learn how not to suffer from dying. And as with any other good skill out there in the world, when you learn the skill, you avoid a lot of dangers. The skill can bring a lot of benefits. So try to avail yourself of this skill while it's available. It is your choice. But try to make this choice well.