

A Taste of Freedom

September 22, 2019

When you meditate, you're taking advantage of the fact that the mind can choose its objects, choose its preoccupations. It's not the case that you have to go running with whatever comes floating up into the mind in the present moment, because a lot of thoughts come in from the past—your past kamma, your old habits. And the reason we're meditating is because we realize we don't want to stick with our old habits.

There's that saying: Don't believe everything you hear. Well, don't believe everything you think, and don't follow everything you think, because when something like that shows up in the present moment, your choice in the present moment is to run with it or not, to resist it, or just to ignore it. This choice is available to you, and the fact that you have this choice means that you can change the course of your life. You can find some freedom here in the present moment, the beginnings of freedom, when you say No to a thought and steer the mind in a different direction.

But to see the workings of your mind clearly and to have a position of strength from which you can make the wisest choice, you've got to get the mind quiet and still here in the present moment. This is why we focus on the breath. It's your anchor in the present moment. There's no past breath you can watch. There's no future breath you can watch. When you're with the sensation of the breathing, you know you're in the present. And when you've made up your mind to stay here, then with anything else that comes up that's not related to the breath or the mind as it's related to the breath, you can say, "Okay, that's past kamma. I don't need that. Let it go. Let it go." This way, you're expanding your freedom of choice.

Some people, when they come to meditate and they find out they have to stick with one object, feel like they're being confined. They can't think about this; they can't think about that. Usually, when they've got a free hour like this, they can think about all kinds of things. And for most people, that's their idea of freedom. But actually what it is, is the freedom of your defilements to pull you in whichever direction they want, because they don't care about your long-term happiness. They care only about what's pleasant in the immediate present or what holds some allure in the immediate present. You want to be able to free yourself from that. So as you keep choosing to stay with the breath, stay with the breath, it's not as if you're tying yourself down. You're actually freeing yourself from old habits.

You can think of the mind as being like a committee. Your old habits are the members of the committee who have held power for a long time over you. Whereas the members who want to meditate may not be quite so strong, but you can strengthen them. You can side with them. The more you develop your mindfulness, your alertness, your concentration, and your discernment, the more you're able to exercise your freedom right here, the freedom to choose your preoccupations.

And then you have to choose them wisely. Wisdom comes from trying to get an answer to the question, "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" The wisdom there lies, one, in the fact that you ask the question to begin with. Some people go through life without asking any questions at all. They accept that this is the way things are, so that's the way they have to be. It's when you ask, "Do they really have to be that way?": That's when you begin to get free.

Think about the scientist who discovered the laws of gravity. The story goes that he was sitting under a tree and saw an apple fall, and he asked the question, "Why is it that the apple falls? Why doesn't it just stay where it was?" The science of that time said that apples fall because it's their nature to fall, but his question was, "Well, apples are made out of physical matter, and the Earth is made out of physical matter. So why doesn't the Earth fall, too? Or when the apple falls, does the Earth rise a little bit?" It was by asking those questions that he discovered the laws of gravity. If he hadn't asked the questions, the apple would have fallen, he might have eaten it, and that would have been that.

So the beginning of wisdom is when you begin to ask: "The things that are the way they are: Do they have to be that way? What makes them be that way?" And here, of course, we're looking at something more important than apples. We're looking at our minds. We want happiness in life. We speak, we act, we think for the sake of happiness, and yet all too often the results come out the other way around, bringing suffering and stress. It's when you want to know why that you're going to begin to be wise.

And then there's asking the right question: "What when I do it will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?" It's wise because you realize happiness doesn't come just floating by. The happiness that does come floating by is not going to last. It's a result of your past actions, and as soon as those individual actions stop giving their results, then the happiness is gone. But you realize that there is a course of action that can make happiness long-term. That's the second thing, or third thing, which is that long-term happiness is possible. And the fourth is that

long-term is better than short-term. Basic discernment. Basic common sense. It sounds really simple, but then why don't we apply it more to our lives?

When you realize you have choices, you can get the mind in a position where it can look at what's going on and make the wisest choices. This is why we meditate. Once you've set up this one intention—that you're going to stay with the breath for the hour—anything else that comes in, you have to treat as suspect. At the very least, you have to say, "If it's not related to the breath, I don't have to follow it." Then, as your concentration gets more and more solid, you're in a better position to ask, "Some things I know are not right for me—when I get angry, when I get upset, when I get unreasonably fearful: I know these things are wrong for me, but I go for them anyhow, so what's the appeal? What do I like about them?" Then you can start probing in.

In the beginning you'll find that, especially if it's something you know is unskillful but you still like it, the real reason is going to be hidden behind many layers of curtains. You pull back one layer. You think you've found the answer. Well, no it's not. You pull back the next layer. You think you've found the answer. Well, no it's not yet. Some people would give up at that point. But the Buddha was the kind of person who said, "There must be an answer in here someplace." So he was able to pull back all the curtains, to find what it was that attracted the mind to things that are unskillful. When he could see that it wasn't worth it, then he let it go, and at that point the mind had no more arguments to go with the unskillful thing, and the Buddha was totally free.

That's where total freedom is, when no more unskillful thoughts come in to bother the mind. They have no sticking power at all. And we get there by exercising our freedom of choice right now. So every time you think, "I'm sitting to meditate," remind yourself, "Okay, this is an opportunity for freedom." You can be sitting at home, sitting at work. You have some free time. Here's your time to be really free inside, and as you exercise this level of freedom, then the deeper levels of freedom will begin to show themselves.

The important thing is you not be afraid of being free. All too often, we feel like we're in strange territory when we're not following our old thoughts. We like our old habits because they're familiar. They're like old friends, but they're the kind of friends that really haven't been good for us—the kind that try to get us to do unskillful things, and then when the police come to catch us, they go running away. They leave us with the punishment.

It's time to remind yourself that you're better off alone and free. So learn to content yourself with being on the path, realizing that this leads to some freedom right now and even greater freedom down the line. And there's a happiness that

comes from being in solitude, free from all the oppression of your unskillful thoughts, so learn how to appreciate that freedom, too, because it'll lead you to levels of freedom that are even more and more impressive, more and more expansive. The ways of the world don't offer any way out, but this path of developing the mind does offer a way out. As the Buddha said, it's good in the beginning, good in the middle. It's even better in the end. So look at each opportunity to meditate as just that—an opportunity, and not a task, not a chore. A little taste of freedom that you can take advantage of right now.