

Choosing Not to Suffer

February 13, 2009

You've got a whole hour to sit here quietly. So what are you going to do with it? You could think about tomorrow, next week, yesterday, last week, about issues at home, issues at work, but where would that get you? Even here in the present moment, you can focus on the sound of the generator, the sound of the rain. You could focus on pains in your body, or get carried away with comments about what you like and what you don't like, but again, where would it get you?

In other words, there are lots of potentials right here in the present moment, and it's up to you to choose which potentials you're going to focus on, which potentials you're going to cultivate, which potentials, when you cultivate, will give the best results, putting the mind in the best position, teaching you useful skills.

And that question, of course, relates to what you think is really important in life.

There's one big issue that faces all of us, and that's that we're creating a lot of unnecessary stress and suffering for ourselves by the way we cultivate the potentials in the present. It is possible to stop creating that suffering, to stop creating that stress, by cultivating skillful potentials in the mind and cultivating useful potentials in your body. You've got the breath coming in and going out. Left to its own devices, all it does is to keep you alive. But if you pay attention to it, you begin to see that it can give rise to feelings of comfort, and you can tap into what the Buddha calls the potential for rapture. There is a potential for rapture and refreshment right here in the body. How do you breathe in such way that you can tap into that? How do you breathe in such way that you can tap into the potential for ease?

You can spend the hour exploring that question, and it would be an hour well spent, because you're using the hour to develop a skill, and to gain a sense of the power of choice here in the present moment. That's a useful skill to have, a useful sense to have, because life throws a lot of curveballs at us. There's aging. When we signed up, we didn't look at the fine print, didn't realize that life would not go from one high point to another, to another, to a higher, higher point. It starts falling apart. You're faced more and more with the indignities of old age, the inconveniences of old age.

Then there's illness. And there's death, the death of the body. Fortunately, the death of the body is not the death of the mind. When a mind is well trained, even going through the experience of aging, illness, and death, it doesn't have to suffer.

There will be the stress and suffering of the physical elements, but the mind, if it learns how to let go of any attachment to those things, doesn't have to suffer along with them. That's a potential here in the present too. You can learn how to let go.

So take this time to focus on the potentials of the breath and see what good qualities you can develop in the mind. There's the potential for mindfulness, which is the ability to keep something useful in mind. In this case, keep in mind just the breath in and of itself. You don't have to relate the breath to anything else outside, just focus on how the breath feels in the present moment, noticing which ways of breathing feel good in the body, which ways of breathing don't feel good, and how you can change them. You change them simply by thinking. Don't try to put force or pressure on the breath. If the breath seems too short, simply think: "longer." If it's too shallow, think: "deeper." And the body will respond.

As you watch it responding, you can decide what feels good and what doesn't feel good. That's developing qualities of alertness and evaluation, your ability to understand what's going on in the present moment, how the breath can affect the mind and body, how the mind can affect the breath, all of which are really useful lessons to learn. You begin to notice habitual ways you have of breathing that are really not helpful, habitual ways of thinking that have an adverse impact on the breath. And as you sense that, you can change the way you think, change the way you breathe. You find that you can develop a lot more of the useful potentials in the present moment. This gives you a sense of your own role in shaping your present experience. That lesson can then carry over to the rest of your life.

You realize you're not a victim of circumstances. Even when things outside are not going well, there's no need for you to suffer from them. You can change the way you think; you can change way you breathe. This, at the very least, puts you in a better position to deal with those adverse conditions, because learning how to stop stockpiling stress and suffering on yourself is not a selfish skill. You're not the only one who benefits. You can think of the stresses and sufferings that we pile on ourselves as huge loads that we carry on our shoulders. Suppose you've got this enormous load on your shoulders, your hands are full, you're weighed down, and someone else comes along. That person has an enormous load as well, so enormous that they can't stand up. Well, you can barely stand up yourself. How are you going to help that person? The only way is by learning how to put down your burdens.

There's a phrase they have in Thai: *yai hawb fang*. The story goes that there's an old grandmother who sees a big pile of straw. She thinks, "Maybe someday that straw will be useful." So she bundles it all up and carries it on her shoulders everywhere she goes. It's the image for people who carry around a lot troubles, a

lot of stress, a lot of issues that are really useless. It's an image for a lot of us, if not everybody. We have to learn to look at our burdens and see which things are totally unnecessary, so that we can put them down. And you'll find that once you put down the unnecessary burdens, there's nothing to burden the mind. All the things that cause suffering to the mind are unnecessary. There may be pains in the body, there will be aging, illness, and death, but the mind doesn't have to create suffering out of them.

The first lesson in how not to create suffering out of them is to realize that you have the choice not to focus on them. When there's a pain in the body, you can first focus on how to make the breath comfortable in other parts of the body, to give the mind a sense of ease, a sense of stability, that it has its own place where it's not threatened by the pain. Once you establish that, then you can take that ease and well-being you feel in that part of the body and think of it radiating out to the rest of the body, so that it goes streaming right through the pain. That can help loosen up a lot of the tension or tightness that you habitually build up around the pain. In some cases, it makes the pain go away entirely. But even when the pain doesn't go away, you don't feel nearly as threatened by it, because you realize you have your choice. You can focus on someplace else.

A woman I knew, one of Ajaan Fuang's students, had cancer for 20 years. Most people would have died by then. But she used her meditation to help keep her mind in good shape. I visited her one day after she had had a kidney removed. She was sitting up in bed, looking perfectly normal. I asked her if there was any pain, and she said, "Oh, yes, there is." But she wasn't focusing on it. She focused on a meditation word, *buddho*; she focused on her breath. That made the pain a lot more bearable, and she was suffering a lot less. When she was suffering a lot less, the people around her were suffering a lot less, too.

The ajaans in Thailand talk about how even when you're dying, you can choose what to focus on. You could, if you wanted to, focus on all your worries about your family, how much you're going to miss the people you've loved, that you've devoted your life to, but that would put the mind in a huge turmoil. You could focus on the pain in the body, but again, you'd put the mind in a huge turmoil. Or you could focus on the fact that even in that moment, you have a choice. One of the ajaans recommended, say, noticing that there's a pain and there's your awareness of the pain, and seeing the two as distinct, so that the awareness doesn't feel overcome by the pain. As for whatever other thoughts come up, you can just let them go, let them go, realizing that the time has come to let go, totally, and nothing is served by holding on. Then you can ask yourself: Which will end first, the awareness or the pain? The awareness will outlast the pain in every case.

There's a story in the Canon of a man who was sick, and his wife was concerned that he was going to die. So she went to him and said, "Please don't worry about me. Don't worry about the children. I have enough household skills that I can look after myself, all of us, take care of us. I'll continue to practice the Dhamma. Don't worry about that. It's bad to die when you're worried, because that becomes the dominant mindset that you go with." She was able to put him at ease. And it so happened that he didn't die. He recovered. At one point, when he was just barely strong enough to walk, he went to see the Buddha. He told him about what his wife had said, and the Buddha said, "You're really lucky to have a wife like that."

As for us, we may not have someone like that when we're going. But we can teach ourselves the same lessons. Being worried about other people doesn't help anybody at all. It certainly doesn't help them. It doesn't help us. It's time to let go.

Now, these are not skills you can develop at that last moment. This is why we meditate. Ajaan Fuang once said that meditation is actually practice for death, so that you can die well. You learn to focus on your immediate awareness in the present moment. You learn to focus on which potentials in the present moment will help keep you from suffering. You learn to put aside all other thoughts. You learn how to let go. Ultimately, you get a sense of your awareness in the present being separate from the objects that it's aware of.

This is one of the paradoxes in meditation, because one of the main steps in concentration is developing a sense that you really are unified with the breath. It's one of the ways of settling down and being totally absorbed in the present moment with a sense of oneness. But after a while in that sense of oneness, things begin to separate out, the way unhomogenized milk does when it's sitting in a bottle. You have the cream separate out, forming a band on the top, right at the neck of the bottle. The cream and milk are in the same bottle. They touch but they're separate. In the same way, you gain the sense of your awareness separating out from the breath, so that it's independent.

All of these things are useful skills as you face the prospect of aging, illness, and death.

So realize that even in circumstances like that, not everything is aging, not everything is ill, not everything is dying. There are other potentials you can tap into at that time. And it's in your interest and the interest of those around you for you to be able to do that.

These are some of the skills we can develop as we're sitting here, quietly, with no other responsibilities and no other duties right now, no other concerns, just focusing on the good potentials that are right here right now, the good potentials

in the breath, the good potentials in the mind. See what you can do to make the most of them.