

## *Choices*

*September 30, 2012*

When you meditate, you're making a series of choices. You've chosen to sit right here. You're choosing to stay with the breath. That's a choice you're going to have to make again and again and again for the rest of the session, because there are lots of other things you could be focusing on: the sound of the crickets, pains here and there in the body, the fact that it's so warm.

But you're choosing to stay with something that's going to be really helpful for the mind. A lot of those other sensations are not going to really take you anywhere in particular. But if you stay with the breath, you're going to be developing some important mental qualities. You're going to feed on those. Feed on the conviction that your choices really do make a difference. Feed on the fact that you can put effort into this, and that it's effort well spent. It's effort that gives rise to energy rather than wasting energy.

So choose to stay with the breath and keep that choice in mind. Try not to forget. Be alert to what the breath is doing and try to make it easier to stay here. This is one of the advantages of being able to choose your focus. You don't have to focus on the pains, you don't have to focus on the things that get you upset. Focus on something that has some good potential. And you're not just sitting with a given sensation. You begin to realize that you can change the sensation.

There are lots of different ways you can breathe, and lots of different intentions can take with regard to the breath and your perceptions of what's happening as you breathe in. Where is the breath coming in? We've all learned that it comes through the nose. But when you *feel* the breathing energy, where does it feel like when it's coming in? Look for that. Open up and air out your mind for a while.

Breathe in: Where does the energy flow? Where do you feel it? Does it feel good? If it does, keep it up. If it doesn't, you can change. Think of the breath coming in and out of the body in different places—because it *is* an energy. The air comes in and out through the nose, but the energy moves around the body in all kinds of areas: the rise and fall of the shoulders, the rise and fall of the chest, the abdomen, more subtle energies in the arms and the legs, the movement of energy down the back, around the head. You can choose to focus on these things and you can choose to shape them in a way that's more comfortable, more refreshing. It can take your mind off all kinds of things that would otherwise weigh it down.

This is why it's possible to practice in a way that puts an end to suffering:

because we have choices. You can choose to go with your ignorance and craving or you can choose to go with the factors of the path. Just because you have some old habits that have stuck with you for a long time doesn't mean you have to continue sticking with them. You can change your ways. xx

So keep choosing to come back to the breath. Keep choosing to focus on its potential to be really satisfying, really refreshing. After all, it's what's keeping you alive. But if you learn to watch it carefully, experiment with it, you begin to see that it's more than just keeping you alive: It can provide a sense of well-being, a place where the mind can settle down and gain some concentration.

That concentration can be your food. So breathe in a way that feels refreshing, that creates a sense of fullness in the body. That is possible. Then when the mind settles down, you can start seeing things in the mind more clearly. The little movements that you may have missed before become a lot more apparent as you get more and more still. And there's a sense of freedom that comes when you see the movements but you don't move with them. A thought may move but you can see it simply as an event. You don't get into the thought-world. That's a choice you can make, too.

Realize that the mind is making choices all the time, so make them as skillful as possible. At the very least, tell yourself that you're going to sit here and watch the breath, and you're going to stick with that choice. Any other choices that would pull you away, say, "No, no, no, I'm choosing to stay here. I'm going to stick with that original intention."

And you can choose to not suffer around that fact that you're sticking with that original intention. How easy it is to say "Oh, I can't move. There's a pain here, it feels awkward there, this isn't right, that's not right." Don't focus on those perceptions. Focus on the things that are going well.

Because this is one of the central parts of the Buddha's teachings: that we weigh ourselves down with unnecessary stress through our choices. We can learn to put an end to that stress by making wiser choices, more skillful choices. If it weren't for that fact, there'd be nothing you could do about suffering, nothing you could do about stress. You'd just have to sit there and endure it. But it's through our ignorance that we're choosing to make ourselves suffer. When we gain knowledge, we can choose to make ourselves suffer less. So choose knowledge

Try to be aware of what's going on and don't just go running with everything that comes into the mind. Step back a bit. Stay with the breath, and everything else you can look at as something external to what you're doing, something separate from what you're doing. You don't have to weigh yourself down with all the other concerns you may have. Your one concern is the breath, right here, right

now, breathing in, breathing out.

How well the hour will go depends on your choices. Make them well.