Wise Choices

April 1, 2009

As you sit here, there are a lot of different things you could be focusing on. But the wise choice is to focus on things that have a good potential, things that are conducive to long-term happiness. As the Buddha once said, wisdom begins by asking that question, “What will I do that will bring me long-term welfare and happiness?” That’s wise because you realize that the question of happiness and suffering is the big issue in life, and that happiness depends on your actions and that you have the choice to cultivate happiness or not. Not only that, there are many different kinds of happiness. There are many different kinds of pleasure that you could cultivate as well. So you want something that’s long-term, that repays your efforts. So focusing on the objects, focusing on the sensations that can give rise to concentration, that’s a wise choice. Because the pleasure of concentration goes a lot deeper than the pleasures that come from sights and smells and sounds and tastes and tactile sensations and things outside, people outside. So look at what you’ve got here. You’ve got the body sitting here breathing. You’ve got the mind thinking and aware. Those are your raw materials. If you find it difficult to settle down with the breath, you can focus on ideas that you find inspiring. Ideas that encourage you to do what’s good, that encourage you to do what’s wise. And when the mind is ready to settle down, then it can stay with the breath. It’s important that you learn how to settle yourself in the present moment, because even inspiring ideas have their limitations. But as long as you’re alive, the breath is here, and you can cultivate it. Look at the Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation. It’s not just being aware of what the breath is doing. One time a monk came to the Buddha and said, “I do breath meditation.” And the Buddha said, “Well, what kind of breath meditation do you do?” He said, “Well, I put aside thoughts of the past and thoughts of the future, and I learn to have some equanimity around the present.” And the Buddha said, “Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but that’s not the breath meditation that gives the best results.” You can train yourself to breathe in certain ways. The sixteen steps start out simply by observing what’s short and what’s long, the breath. And then from that point on, you train yourself, “I will breathe this way. I will breathe that way.” There’s an intentional element there to remind you that you have the choice. Breathe in and out, aware of the whole body. Breathe in and out, in a way that the sensation of the breathing has a good effect on the body, calms it down, nourishes it, gives it a sense of fullness, a sense of ease. These are things you can choose to do. And there’s an important lesson right there that the present moment is not just a given. It’s more of a potential. You have lots of different potentials that you could focus on right now. And so you want to do your best with the potentials that are here. It’s like being an artist. Say that you’ve got a stone that you want to make a sculpture out of. Some stones are good, some stones are not that good. And you have to know the level of your skill. And John Lee makes the point that when you’re really wise, you can make something good out of whatever comes. In other words, you can take something negative and use it to train the mind in discernment. After all, that’s what the First Noble Truth is about. Where there’s suffering, you can learn from it. So you’re not just thrown into the deep end of the swimming pool before you can swim. He has you work on developing a sense of ease, a sense of well-being in the present moment, so you feel at home here. You feel at ease here. And so when pain comes up, you don’t feel threatened by it. So you start working with good stone first, a good hunk of marble. My mother was an author. In one of her books, she had a character who had a donkey named Donatello. Apparently, the story goes that a slab of marble that Michelangelo used to carve the statue of David, Donatello actually had worked on it first, and then decided that he couldn’t make anything out of it. It wasn’t the right proportions. Cracks were all in the wrong place. So he threw it away. Michelangelo then took that slab of marble and made a very famous statue out of it. So the character said, “Well, Donatello was an ass, so that’s why he named his donkey Donatello.” That’s a little bit harsh on Donatello. But it shows that he was given different levels of skill. We can make something good out of almost anything if you have enough skill. If you realize that you’re not skillful at taking a particular situation and making something wise, something good out of it, just put it aside. There are lots of other potentials where you can develop that sense of well-being, a sense of good, solid happiness here in the present moment. That’s an important skill to have. And it’s not just a skill that you’d want to do right here where you’re sitting with your eyes closed. You want to be able to carry it around with you. As we were saying earlier today, while you’re engaged in other activities, take that part of the mind which would normally just wander around and think about the past, think about the future, and generally deal in aimless thought. Take that part of the mind and give it over to the breath. This may mean simply being aware of the breath energy in the body, the general quality of the energy in the body, without being specifically focused on whether the breath is coming in or going out. Just try to inhabit the body in a way that feels at ease. Relax the wrists, relax your ankles, relax the muscles around the neck. Try to notice where tension builds up, where it catches hold, and more tension and stress begin to accumulate around those little nodes. Try to keep those nodes as open and as stress-free as possible. And that much grounding in the breath. It can put you in a much better position, not only to do your activities with more skill, but also have a greater sense of well-being as you go through the day. When you’re talking with other people, try to maintain that sense of your hands, your feet, your wrists, your ankles. Now the breath energy is going there, to the center of the heart. Keep that protected, open inside, but protected from outside energy. You’ve got that potential there all the time. The breath energy in the body can be very refreshing, have a sense of fullness and ease, regardless of the situation. And so when all else seems to be pretty miserable, at least you’ve got something inside that you can cultivate, something inside that you can develop. This is your raw material for making a piece of art inside. So remember that you do have choices in the present moment. You may not be able to create the happiness, create the life that you’d want, because a lot of that depends on people outside. And the extent to which it does depend on people outside means that you’re subject to their whims. But you can create a state of mind, and that’s really important. That doesn’t have to depend on people outside. It doesn’t have to depend on outside situations, outside events. It depends on knowing which potentials in the present moment are wise to choose, which ones you can develop into something really good and solid, so that you can work from your strengths. And as you continue to develop that skill in taking these inner potentials and making something good out of them, then you find that your skill begins to grow, it begins to extend. So that situations outside that used to be pieces of rock that you would just throw away because you couldn’t use them, you begin to realize they have a potential, too. So your skill grows, your artistry grows and develops, until you reach that point where, as Ajahn Lee says, a person of wisdom, a person of discernment, can take anything and make something good out of it. So start out with a sense of where you’re skillful and where you’re not. Build on your strengths, because otherwise they get wasted and it’s a shame. There are lots of potentials for happiness right here in the present moment, wherever you are. Sometimes, they lie totally inside when the world outside is pretty miserable. But focus on where you can make a difference, where you can develop a sense of strength and well-being inside. That’s how we manifest wisdom wherever we are.

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