Choose the Honorable Choice

March 10, 2015

One of the reasons we come to meditate is because life places a lot of burdens on us. We have a lot of responsibilities, and we need some help in order to carry those burdens and meet our responsibilities. Otherwise, the mind gets worn down, worn down, and finally crushed by these things. So we need a place to rest. We need a place to gather our strength. This is why you focus on the breath. Try to breathe in a way that’s nourishing for the body and the mind. After all, the breath is the force of life. And if the force of life is stunted or restricted, the body’s going to wear down a lot faster, too. So try to breathe in a way that’s nourishing, that gives you energy, heals the worn-out parts of the body, soothes the rough edges in the mind, and allows the mind to gather in. If you find that you’re trying to tap into an energy that’s more than you want, allow it to spread out, allow it to dissipate. Try to find a sense of what’s just right, what’s nourishing for the body, uplifting without being too restless or wired. Give the mind time to stay right in this space. Don’t be in too great a hurry to move on. Remember the story of the foolish, inexperienced cow. It’s in a meadow on the hillside. It’s got water, it’s got nice green grass, but it sees a meadow on another hillside over across the ravine and wonders, “What’s the grass like over there? What’s the water like over there?” And because she’s inexperienced and foolish, she heads down into the ravine and gets stuck there. She can’t get to the other side and can’t get back to the nice meadow she had. This is the Buddha’s image for meditators who are in too great a hurry to move on. When you find a sense of balance, it takes a while to have that balance really have a good effect on the mind. The nourishment we’re trying to gain here is something that gently seeps into the mind, seeps into the body. And although short meditation breaks can be helpful, when you’ve got an hour, take advantage of it. Get the mind into balance and then just try to keep it in balance without thinking that you have to push it any further. Then as you get more and more sensitive to the balance, your discernment grows. It’s just not like nothing is happening while you maintain this balance. This is part of the Middle Way. Some parts of the Middle Way have to do with finding just the right balance between too much food, too little food. Too much pressure in your meditation, not enough pressure. The question of whether you want to focus on the effort of your meditation or the concentration or the equanimity. It’s interesting that the Buddha separates those three things out as things you have to watch for. If you put too much emphasis on the effort, the mind doesn’t settle down. If you put too much emphasis on the concentration, the mind gets dull. If you put too much emphasis on the equanimity and you don’t use the meditation for anything further. Because even though it is important to let the mind stay and rest, you do have to come out of concentration at some point. And you want to be able to come out in a way where you don’t totally leave, that you have a sense of being centered right here and there’s a sense that you have at least one part of the body that’s nourished and that maintains its nourishment as you go through the day. And then as you return to your responsibilities, you want to be able to ask yourself, “Is this all I want out of life is just looking after my body and looking after the responsibilities I’ve taken on from other people? Or is there something more?” This is the question that motivated the Buddha, “Is there something more?” He had an awful lot, as it was. All the pleasures of the palace, a wife, a child. But what gnawed at him was the question, “What more is there to life? What meaning is there to this? Where does it all go? What’s in an honorable life?” It’s a question we don’t hear too much nowadays. What’s an honorable way to use your life? What’s an honorable way to use this extra energy, this extra strength you gain from getting the mind to settle down? And he decided that the best thing would be to find something that’s not subject to aging, illness, or death. He wasn’t sure that it was possible. There was nobody in his time that had found that. So there are no guarantees. Can human action find something like that? Would it be worth it to try? He decided to give it a try. He decided that the only way life could be honorable is if you looked for something that was beyond life. Because otherwise all you’ve got is your desires pushing you for this, and then what you gain is going to leave you. As they say in Thailand, time eats up everything, including itself. Your body wears down, your mind wears down, after a while. And the times when the body was strong, when the mind was good, those have disappeared, back in the past. Maybe there’s something better than this. That was the question that motivated the Buddha to look for something better, for something honorable. He used the word “noble.” It’s good to think of it in different terms as well, “honorable.” This is a good question we can ask ourselves. Do we want our lives to be taken up totally by the responsibilities that other people place on us, or the needs of the body? The need for food, clothing, shelter, medicine? Or do we want to try for something more honorable than that? What would that mean in our lives? This is something each of us has to decide for him or herself alone. But it’s a good question to ask. What are you going to do with this extra strength? You can start with the precepts, and then you can work on refinements of the precepts. And John Lee likes to talk about how each of the five precepts is a symbol for qualities of the mind you want to develop. No killing, he says. Well, don’t kill your goodness. The opportunity to do something good comes. Go for it. Don’t be discouraging to yourself about those opportunities. Don’t steal the bad points of other people. In other words, don’t spend all your time complaining about this person or that person. This doesn’t mean only just complaining out loud, but also sitting there and just complaining to yourself. It’s a waste of your energy, a waste of your time. Don’t get intoxicated with sensual pleasures. Don’t lie to yourself when you realize you’re going to do more and part of you says, “Well, that’s too much for today.” All those defilements that try to keep you from going any further in the practice, there are lots of them. And again, don’t be intoxicated. Don’t be intoxicated with your youth, your health, your life. Life is short. Our opportunities to do good are short. They’re not going to be there all the time. The strength we need to do the meditation begins to wear down if we haven’t really strengthened the mind and found something that is beyond aging, illness, and death. If you don’t find that dimension in your practice yet, or if you haven’t found it yet, there’s work to be done. You’re not really safe until you’ve found that. And it’s not just a matter of safety. It’s also a matter of honor. You want to do something good and honorable with your life, so that even if you don’t make it all the way, at least you’ve put the effort in the right direction. So when you’re meditating on your own, you have some time. When you come out of meditation, think about these things. Charge the batteries of your mind. How do you want to use it? What’s the best use? Don’t let the requirements of your daily duties make all the decisions for you. Just because something is pressing doesn’t mean that it’s important. Try to exercise as much of your own choice in the matter as you can. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2015/150310_Choose_the_Honorable_Choice.mp3>