

Right Now

November 19, 2003

What you're doing right now is very important.

Actually, this principle applies to what you're doing at any time, any right now. Because what you're doing right now is always shaping right now as well as the future.

This is one of the basic messages of the Buddha's teachings.

The world has many messages that try to pull us away from that. You watch TV and they tell you that what's really important in your life is what someone else is doing: maybe some time in the past or what they're planning to do in the future. But it's not what you're doing right now. But when you think about it: What else shapes your life as consistently as your actions?

When you're asked to believe in karma, this is what you're asked to believe: that what you're doing is important. In fact, everything you experience in this space-time continuum in which you live is shaped by what you do. Even when you choose to either listen to this, or look at that, or smell this, or taste that, or touch that, or think this, or think that, it's a choice you make in the present moment. How you process things in the present moment always has an element of choice.

There's so much sensory input coming in all the time. You've got all these nerve endings throughout the body. They're all sending messages up, and there are points in your nervous system that are like telephone exchanges. They decide which messages to send on and which ones not to pay attention to, which ones to cut off. Some of that's involuntary, but there's a lot more that actually contains an element of choice—more than you realize.

What we're doing as we're meditating is learning to see those choices as they're made, and not just let everything go on automatic pilot.

This is why the qualities we develop as we meditate are so important: qualities like mindfulness and alertness. If you're not mindful, you keep forgetting that your actions are important. If you're not alert, you're not really paying attention to the choices that are being made.

All too often, we're like a busy boss who just has too much work. His underlings come in and say, "Boss, this has to be decided on. Boss, that has to be decided on." You say, "Well, just go ahead and decide whatever you think." Or just a flippant, "Oh, do this, do that" without really looking into the matter.

Admittedly, a lot of the decisions we're making in the present moment don't require all that much attention. But there are a lot that do, a lot where you have to

be circumspect—particularly about what you let the mind focus on.

This is very important, because you can focus on all kinds of wrong things. Even though they may be true, they're the wrong things for your life in terms of how you will use them to shape your life.

Some topics keep running through the mind so many times it's like a truck running through mud. It creates big ruts. Then it's more and more difficult to get out of the ruts, to the point where we think that we don't have any choice. Everything has to go through those ruts.

But that's not the case. With enough effort, with enough mindfulness and alertness, we can make changes in the mind. We can open up new channels, direct the mind in ways that are actually helpful for it rather than harmful.

This is what the principle of karma teaches us. A lot of people say they have problems with karma, but that's because they think of the larger cosmological questions, "Is there really rebirth or is there not rebirth?" But the main point you're asked to believe is that what you're doing right now is important, and that the results of your actions as they come back to you are shaped by your intentions, which are—or can be—under your control. This is a good thing to believe.

If you don't believe this, so much of your life gets thrown away. Opportunities get thrown away, and you end up making choices without being clear about what you're doing, about what the results are going to be. Your life becomes a mess.

So when we develop conviction in the principle of karma, we take responsibility for our actions. We look carefully at what we're doing and at what the results are. That's why it's such a good teaching to adopt.

One of the very first lessons the Buddha gave to his son after his son was ordained as a young novice was to reflect on his actions. He said, "Use your actions like a mirror." The mirror's for reflecting on yourself. Well, your actions are reflecting on yourself, too. You get to see your mind through your actions: what you're doing, what you're saying, what you're thinking about.

You have to realize you have choices. Your mind is chattering away? Well, you have the choice to listen or not. You have the choice to participate in the conversation or to steer it in a better direction. Then, after you've made your choice, you have the chance to look at the results. Were they the kind of things that you like? If they're not, you can change.

Of course, there's a lot in the mind that resists that change. But you want to ask yourself: Do you want to side with that resistance or do you want to side with the conviction that you can overcome it and make a difference? The choice again is yours.

So, even though what we're doing right here may seem very simple, it is very

important. Just keep bringing the mind back to the breath. If you can't stay with the breath, look at what thoughts are pulling you away.

The Buddha talks about the three characteristics. As I mentioned the other night, they're the terms in which he discusses discernment. All I emphasized the other night was that discernment plays after you've developed concentration. But it can also be your preparation for concentration on a certain level—at least enough to clear away a lot of the distractions that would pull you out of concentration. Try to notice: What are the topics you're thinking about? Which direction does your mind tend to flow? Look at it to see that whatever it is you're thinking about is something that's very unstable, impermanent, inconstant; that it's stressful; and that it's not really you or yours.

A lot of the narratives that tend to pull us in over and over again are the ones of our own injured innocence: times when we did nothing at all wrong yet somebody mistreated us. Those seem to be the hardest things to let go of because our sense of who we are is often built up around these things.

But if you learn to look at those thoughts, you'll see that it's stressful and painful to keep focusing on them. Then look at the gratification of thinking about those things: Exactly what gratification do you get out of it? Then you compare the gratification with the stress that's caused, and you see that it's not worth it.

Even though this line of thinking may not be enough to uproot those thoughts, at least it's enough to help put them aside for the time being.

This is where the three characteristics act as a preparation for concentration practice. Then, once you get the mind to settle down, they help develop your concentration. As you get with the breath and start getting absorbed, you look at where the breath is still uncomfortable, where it can be worked with. You also begin to see what activities in the mind are burdensome.

In the beginning, it's simply the things that would distract you from the concentration. But as the mind gets settled down, the breath gets more and more comfortable, you finally get to the point where you don't have to keep on evaluating the breath. The breath is good: feels good coming in, feels good going out. You're pretty well established in it.

The act of evaluating the breath then becomes a burden. You see that that's inconstant, stressful, relatively stressful, too. And you don't have to hold onto it. You let it go.

This allows the mind to get firmly planted in its object, firmly planted in the breath. The breath may come in and go out, but the mind doesn't go in, go out. It bores into the present moment, like a drill boring down into something that's keeps going and going and going.

And so on through the different stages of concentration. You get to a point where you see that a particular factor of that concentration itself is burdensome, unnecessary, and you let it go.

In this way, the three characteristics translate into ways of developing concentration. Once you get to fixed penetration, when the mind is totally planted in the object, very solidly, there's a big sense of oneness throughout the body and mind. You sit with that for a long period of time but then you begin to see that even there, there are subtle things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self.

This is where you begin to develop the discernment that's *based* on concentration: the discernment that goes more deeply into the subtler things in the mind that we tend to identify with. The way we perceive things. Subtle thought-constructs we have about things. Subtle feelings that we tend to identify with. You see how even those are constructed, and how, if you identify with them, it's burdensome to the mind.

Ultimately, you even get to the point where you see that your intentions are burdensome to the mind. When things come together just right, you can drop that intention even without intending to. That's when things open up to another dimension entirely.

This is why the Buddha said that the ultimate kind of action is the action that leads to the end of action, that takes the mind to an area where there is no action. He called it non-fashioning. Ajaan Mun used the word "actionlessness." That's the ultimate skill: to bring the mind to the point where it doesn't need to be skillful anymore. It goes beyond skillfulness, beyond action entirely.

But to get there, you have to have a strong sense of the importance of what you're doing right now. That means letting go of what other people did in the past, letting go of what other people are doing to you right now, focusing on what you're doing right now to see its importance.

Even though it may seem simple-minded—just keep with the breath, keep with the breath—it's an important habit to develop because it makes you more and more sensitive to the present moment, makes you more sensitive to what you're doing in the present moment.

And when that sensitivity is fully developed, it can take you all the way to the end of suffering.

So what you're doing right now is very important.