

Trustworthy Intentions

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We don't come to the present moment with a clean slate. We have our intentions, we have our wants and desires, and it's not wise to try to deny them. If you deny them, they go underground. When they go underground, you can't see them. That means they'll have an influence on your life that you don't understand.

What you want to do is bring them out into the open. Look at your intentions, look at your understandings of things, look at your desires, and try to get a sense of whether they're skillful or not.

In other words, instead of thinking that there's a blank slate or just a state of bare awareness or bare attention that you can bring to the present, realize that your attention is shaped by your intentions, and your intentions are shaped by your understandings. Then look for them.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate. We're given a good intention, we're given a good understanding, and we try to apply it to see what other intentions come up, what other understandings come up as we meditate. It's like putting a dam across a river. If you don't try to build a dam across the river, you never know how strong the current at the bottom of the river is, but if you put an obstacle in its path, it'll start coming to the surface and you'll see all these things that were under the surface and very strong. When you see them, you can do something about them.

So when you're meditating here and you notice the mind slipping off to other things, the first step is just not to follow it. Make it a rule that wherever the mind goes in the course of the hour, you're going to bring it back to the breath. Immediately. As for the other currents in the mind, you just let them be. A story will come up and there's no need to finish the story. A question will come up and there's no need to answer it. Just come back to the breath, back to the breath.

Once you get better at this, then you can start looking at those questions, looking at the stories, to see what they show you about underlying impulses, desires, intentions, ways you understand things, because sometimes you have to argue with them in order to pull the mind back. They may tell you that you've got to think about this, that this or that is important. Well, learn to question them. Why is it important? The more you're able to question these things, the more you understand them. And you should get to the point where you realize you don't really believe them. You don't really agree with them. You've let these things that

you don't agree with shape your life, but now that you see them in action and you've got an alternative, you can shape your life in another direction.

In other words, you're reconditioning yourself.

As the Buddha said, the path is one of the abandoning and developing. It's not that we're getting back to our true nature. If it were our true nature, you wouldn't have to develop it. You'd just be there, clear away all these bad conditionings from your past, and bingo, there you are: awakening. But that's not how it works. You've got to develop good qualities to replace the ones you want to let go.

The Buddha never assumed that we're basically good; he never assumed we're basically bad. The only thing he assumes when he teaches people is that they desire happiness. But for the most part, we don't understand that desire. We don't know how to act on it in a wise way. What he's giving us are wise strategies, wise tactics, that lead to a happiness that's solid, lasting, sure, something we can trust. Otherwise, the fact that the mind can go both for skillful and for unskillful things means that you can't really trust it. It's scary to think about it, but it's good to know so that you can prepare for it.

Just look at the issues in the body. As long as the body is well fed, we tend to be good citizens, friendly, amiable, wouldn't think up stealing anything from anybody. But suppose you're really, really hungry and you've got a family to feed. What would you do in a case like that? You've got this body that eats food, and it's not the case that once you've eaten that piece of food, then you can give it to somebody else and let them eat it too. They wouldn't want it, no matter it how it works. If you spit it out and gave it to them, they wouldn't want it. If you waited till it went through your system, they certainly wouldn't want it. So it's an either/or situation. As long as there's plenty of food, there's no problem. Look at the hummingbirds. When there's lots of nectar for everybody, there's not too much squabbling. But when the bottles run out of nectar, they come unglued. They attack one another even more than normal.

That's the way human beings are, too. We've got this body we're attached to. This is why we took birth in this body: We identified with it. It's us. It's ours. This is a really deep identification that precedes almost all the other identification you can think of. It's one of the reasons why that chant we did just now is one that people complain about most. Nobody likes the chant, how this body is full of unclean things. The purpose of the chant is to call that attachment into question. Do you really want to be attached to this dirty bundle of needs?

This point is related to another chant we do every night, on the four requisites, to remind ourselves of why we have food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. It's because we've got this body that needs these things. Can you imagine where we'd

be tonight without the shelter of this sala or any place for shelter? A cold wind is blowing off the ocean, coming down from Alaska. If we didn't have any clothing, if we didn't have any food, didn't have any medicine to care for illnesses that would be sure to come, we'd be in miserable straits, all because of this body, because it needs these things.

We also chant those chants to remind ourselves of how much is enough, enough to cover the body to keep it warm when it's cold, to keep it sheltered from the sun when it's hot; enough food to keep the body going so that you can practice; enough shelter to protect from the elements; enough medicine for the diseases you actually have or could easily have. If you learn to have a strong sense of enough in these things, it makes it easier to get along with other people.

But even then there come times when there's not enough. Can you trust yourself not to behave in unseemly ways? Your ability to trust yourself in that way requires that you really have to let go of this attachment to the body. You have to learn how not to identify with it.

So the chant on the 32 parts is a very useful tool for learning to trust yourself, teaching you to get some distance from the body and its needs.

This is why we train the mind, so that we can have inner resources to draw on when external resources get slim, run low. This is why training in attention and intention is so important, realizing that true happiness doesn't have to depend on the body, it depends on the mind's understanding of what it's doing, learning to notice when it acts in a skillful way, when it acts in an unskillful way. You can bring that kind of attention and intention to any moment, whether it's when you're by yourself or when you're with other people. Look for your intentions, then look for your understanding of what's going on, then ask yourself, "Is this in line with the Buddha's understanding that suffering comes from our own ignorance and craving, and not from what other people do or what happens to the body?" If you find that your understanding of things deviates from that, then you've got to question it.

This is why, when the Buddha gave instructions to his son when his son was seven years old and just getting started in the practice, he said to focus on your intentions. Before you do anything, before you say anything, before you think anything, ask yourself, "Why am I doing this? What is this going to lead to?" He didn't say just to bring an open mind to every situation. He said, realize you're bringing an intention to the situation, so learn by watching your intentions and see what actually happens when you follow through with them. That way, you learn from experience which kinds of intentions are harmful and which ones are not. If you find yourself making a mistake—in other words, something didn't

seem to be harmful but when you actually followed through with it, it did cause harm—then talk it over with someone else who's also practicing. Then make up your mind that you're not going to repeat that mistake.

It's a learning process we're involved here, learning what we're bringing to the present moment that's shaping it, and what we're doing in ignorance that's causing suffering, what we're bringing in ignorance that turns the present moment into a moment of suffering.

This way, as you get clearer and clearer on what you bring, learning how to develop good habits, good ways of understanding things, and good intentions, you find you can trust yourself more and more. Ultimately, what you want is to get to where the mind doesn't even need those good qualities. When you find something that's unconditioned, that's the point where you can really trust yourself. Up to that point, the good things you develop could slip away. You get tired, you get lazy, you get forgetful, and the progress you made just slides back down the mountains, like mountains of little bits of lava gravel. When you walk up a mountain like that, you tend to be sliding down into it. If you stand still, you slide down. You've got to keep walking, walking, walking, even just to stay at the same level.

A fair amount of the practice seems like that, but you have to realize it's not always going to be that way. There will come a point when the practice opens up to something unconditioned. The nature of that unconditioned is that it's not good, it's not bad, it's just there. But it puts you in a much better position where you're not totally dependent on the body for your identity. Even after your first taste of the deathless, there'll still be a hovering sense of identity, but it's not so firmly latched on to the body. That way, when things happen in the body, you don't have to get all worked up about it. You don't have to start doing things that you know are shameful or harmful. You can begin to trust yourself. And the people around you can begin to trust you, too.

So try to be very clear on what you're bringing to present moment, and a good way of doing that is, as I said, to practice meditating and set a very specific intention in your mind as you meditate. You want to stay with the breath and try to develop the quality of breathing that allows you to stay there for long periods of time. Notice what other intentions come up in the mind that try to divert your attention, and learn how to sidestep them, how to get around them, so that they don't have power over the mind.

Then bring the same sensitivity to whatever you do. When you're conversing with other people, when you're working outside, always try to be clear about your intention. If you don't have a clear intention, try to establish one. Tell yourself,

you're talking with somebody, so what would be a good intention to have for this conversation? Keep that intention in mind and see where the conversation goes. Whatever you do, always try to be very clear about your intention. Try to give rise to a skillful intention and see what that stirs up in the mind. Sometimes you'll find some alternative intentions, not so skillful, that were hiding out under the surface. It's good to know that they are there. Even though they complicate things, at least you know they're there, so that you can deal with them. Other times, you won't find anything like that. The good intention will come easily, and the clearer it is, the more powerful it'll be. It's in this way that your training of the mind develops in all areas, and becomes a training of the mind as a whole.