

The Power of Intention

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A couple of months ago I was giving a Dhamma talk on kamma up in the Bay Area. After the talk, a woman came up and said, “You know, this made me think, ‘Maybe my life isn’t determined by my DNA after all.’” I was surprised. She’d been going to Dhamma talks for a fair while and yet was still able to maintain the idea that somehow DNA determined everything that was going to happen in her life, everything she was going to do.

But then, it is easy to have that view in conjunction with a lot of stuff that’s taught as Dhamma these days: the idea that there’s really no self there, that things are just happening on their own, and the only way to find happiness is to get out of the way. Don’t have any desires for anything to happen differently from the way it is. Just accept things as they are and be done with it.

That’s what they say, but that’s not what the Buddha taught. His teachings all start with the power of intention. Your mind is what shapes your experience. You’re not just passive recipients. If we act as passive recipients, our lives would be like the motion of dust motes in the air, what they call Brownian motion, where things just bump up against each other. And if you were to draw a map of the motions of one dust mote through the air, it’d be a lot of random zigzags.

But as the Buddha said, our identity as a being centers around the fact that we have a need to feed. It’s a reciprocal relationship: You need to be a being in order to find food, but because you’re a being you need food. Our intentions shape what we experience, and for most of us, that’s the intention: to feed either physically or emotionally. We’re constantly on the lookout for some sort of sustenance.

But, as the Buddha said, that’s why we suffer. This doesn’t mean that intention is bad. It simply means that we have to redirect it. This is why we meditate. We’re learning how to shape our intentions, to get more control over them, so that our random moods don’t take over, and we can actually decide what we want to do with our lives.

Look at the Buddha. He was hardly a passive recipient of events around him. He decided he wouldn’t rest until he’d found the ultimate happiness. He would do whatever it took. His quest took him down some blind alleys and through a lot of hardship, but he stuck with it. He was determined that he wasn’t going to give up until he’d found the best thing that human effort could find. And as he found, it was the way to end suffering. Then he spent all the rest of his life teaching that way to other people as the most valuable thing that he could teach.

His main message was that the suffering is not due to unpleasant things outside—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. The suffering comes from our craving. It comes from within. It’s what we do with those sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations that makes us

suffer. It's because we're doing those things in ignorance. We all want happiness, and you would think that everything we'd do would be for the sake of happiness. There are a lot of pains we put up with because we think they will lead to something good down the line. But all too often it's the other way around. We get a pleasure and we discover that it's going to create suffering down the line.

And again, the cause is not outside. The cause is inside. It's our own ignorance. You can't blame the social media, you can't blame any kind of media, you can't blame people outside for giving you the wrong ideas. Your mind picked up its ideas. If it didn't have the germ of its own ignorance inside, it wouldn't pick up ignorant ideas. So you have to keep looking back into the mind: your mind as you experience it from within, your body as you experience it from within. That's where the suffering is felt, but that's where it's going to be cured.

So, instead of being just on the receiving end of things, we're very much on the generating end. The Thai ajans talk about this a lot. They talk about the currents that come flowing out of the mind. These, they say, are the effluents, and they run our lives. So we have to watch them carefully to see if they're going to move us in the right or the wrong direction.

Suffering is an inside job, but the cure is an inside job as well. You have it within you to develop the qualities you need in order to bring knowledge to these processes so that they can lead to the happiness you want.

If we were simply recipients of things, meditation wouldn't mean anything at all. It wouldn't accomplish anything, aside from maybe providing a place to rest. But it's a lot more than that. We rest so that we can then do the work that needs to be done right here, to see our intentions in action.

Because there's that great irony: Our intentions shape our lives, but we're often ignorant of those intentions. All too often, you do something and people ask you why you did it, and you have to stop to think up an answer. It's not as if the answer was ready-made or that it was very clear why you did it. That's a sign of ignorance, and it's a dangerous thing to have going on in your mind. You want to learn how to be aware of what's going on in your mind so that you can point it in the right direction.

This is why we meditate, to get still right here and to then watch what's going on right here: to see the processes by which a desire moves in and then creates a little world around itself and a sense of who-you-are around itself. Then you stick with that desire, that world, that you, as long as they seem to be worthwhile. But then maybe another desire comes up and it'd be another you in another world. You have to decide which ones to go with and which ones to let go of. If you're not doing this with a clear sense of awareness and a clear sense of priorities, you can create all kinds of trouble.

So, be very clear about why we're here. We're already shaping things with our fabrications: the way we breathe, the way we talk to ourselves, the perceptions and feelings we have. So let's do that well. As the Buddha said, create a path. The central factor in the path is right

concentration, so work on this, because it's right here where things will become apparent. You use your intentions to create the concentration, and then once the concentration is there, it allows you to see the power of intention even more clearly.

The more clarity you bring to this, the more your actions do become a part of the path. All those little zigzags of the dust motes in the air suddenly straighten out and start going someplace. They don't go anyplace outside. They just go deeper inside, but they take the mind to a higher and higher level of happiness, a higher level of awareness, a more refined sense of what true happiness is.

So the power for all this comes from within. The problem comes from within, but the desire to solve the problem also comes from within. Nobody's making you sit here and meditate. You've chosen to meditate because you realize there's something wrong. There's an area of ignorance in your mind that you want to cure. And that's a good intention to start out with.