

Attention & Intention

October 31, 2023

On the night of his awakening, the Buddha discovered that people's lives, and particularly their experiences of pleasure and pain, were influenced by their acts of intention and acts of attention. The intentions, of course, were the intentions that drove their actions. These intentions, in turn, were influenced by what they paid attention to, and who they paid attention to. The *what* was a matter of right views and wrong views. The *who* concerned the issue of whether, in forming their views, they paid attention to the teachings of the noble ones or not.

This pairing of attention and intention runs very deep throughout the whole teaching. Attention basically comes down not only to what you believe is true, but also to what you believe is important to know about, what's important to have views about. This is why the Buddha described attention as an issue of which questions you pay attention to and which questions you put aside. A lot of questions, he said, are totally useless when it comes to putting an end to suffering. You want to focus your attention on questions that, when you answer them, help in that direction.

This is why he defined appropriate attention as focusing on two issues. One is what is skillful or unskillful to do with your thoughts, words, and deeds. The other issue is the four noble truths. These two issues are connected in that the four noble truths take the principle of skillful and unskillful action and apply it specifically to the question of why there's suffering and how you put an end to it. Unskillful actions in this context would equal the second noble truth, the cause of suffering. Skillful actions would equal the fourth noble truth, the truth of the path. That's attention. Then your intentions are to act on those truths.

The interaction of attention and intention basically defines what the Buddha calls the strength of conviction. Conviction is defined in terms of who you believe, what you believe, and what you do as a result of those beliefs. You believe people who are people of integrity. What you believe is that your actions can, if they're skillful enough, put an end to suffering. And that has a lot of implications. The fact that you can choose skillful actions over unskillful actions means that you have the power of choice. The fact that you can see the results of your actions means that you can recognize mistakes and learn from them. That means that you can begin to anticipate that a particular action will lead in a particular direction. So you're responsible for what you do. You're responsible for the results.

But most importantly, you're free to choose. You do have that freedom. We're

not here just to accept causes and conditions as they play themselves out, or as someone once said, to simply witness “empty phenomena rolling on.” We play a role in their rolling. We roll some things up the hill and roll some things down the hill. All this is part of what you do, based on who you believe and what you believe—and in particular, what your beliefs tell you to pay attention to.

This means that, after paying attention to the noble ones who teach you these things, you have to pay attention to your actions, to see if they’re skillful. That the Buddha describes as an act of judgment. You weigh what’s right and wrong. Then your intention is to carry through with what you’ve observed to be skillful, to abandon anything you judge to be unskillful, and to do what you judge to be skillful in all situations.

This grows from conviction into the two discernment factors in the noble eightfold path, right view and right resolve. Conviction is essentially mundane right view. Noble right view pays attention to the questions of what suffering is, what’s causing suffering, and what you can do to put an end to that suffering. Right view is not just a collection of some interesting facts about suffering. It’s also stating that this is *the* big issue you should pay attention to.

Right resolve starts on the mundane level by applying the insights of right view to your actions. It consists of three intentions: the intention to renounce sensuality, your fascination with thinking thoughts about sensual pleasures; the intention to renounce ill will, the desire to see other people suffer or “get theirs”; and the intention to renounce harmfulness. The noble level of right resolve carries all three of these intentions to a higher level in focusing on the intentions that put the mind into the first jhana, the first stage of right concentration.

It’s in this way that these two mental functions, attention and intention, work together in guiding the path. Then, based on the acts of attention and intention in right view and right resolve, you develop the rest of the path factors.

These, of course, include right concentration, which is what we’re trying to do right now. Its connection with right resolve shows that it very definitely is composed of acts of intention. You intend to stay with one object and you’re going to fight off all the other intentions that would pull you away from that first intention. The reason you do that, of course, is because you realize that this is part of the path to the end of suffering. It’s something to be developed as part of the path.

It’s important that you remember that we’re on a path here. There’s sometimes a temptation, when the concentration is good, to just lie down in the middle of the road. It feels good to be here. Everything is settled, balanced inside. You just want to stay. And it *is* good to stay up to a certain extent, because the mind does

need to rest. It's like being outside on a cold night like this and lying down on an asphalt road that was warmed by the Sun during the day.

It's certainly better than lying down on patch of brambles, i.e., the pleasures and pains of the senses. The Buddha's image of going through the world of our senses is like being a flayed cow standing next to a bush that harbors lots of biting insects. The insects come to bite, bite, bite, and chew, chew, chew away at the cow's wounds. They keep coming and coming, coming, these sensory contacts. Some of them have only a little impact on the mind. Some of them have a huge impact on the mind. But they all bite, bite, bite away.

Ajaan Fuang once described an experience he had in his meditation. Looking back on it, I'd say that he was probably talking about his experience of stream-entry. He said he came out of it and realized that as soon as you open your eyes, there's pain. As soon as you engage in the senses, there's pain. That's the meaning of the word *dukkha*. Some people translate that as "unsatisfactoriness," but that's a very unsatisfactory translation. You don't say, "I have an unsatisfactoriness in my hip." You have pain in your hip. And it's important that you realize that, in comparison to what the mind could be experiencing right now, even the most pleasant experiences in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations are painful compared to the deathless.

It's because of the third noble truth that we have the motivation to stick with the path, to keep on paying attention to the things the Buddha tells us to pay attention to and to maintain our intention to keep developing the path. So we do that as part of our work of right view and right resolve. We know that the duty with regard to the suffering and pain of clinging is to comprehend it; our duty with regard to the cause of suffering, craving, is to abandon it. So to get to work on our duties, we start looking at the things we hold on to, the things we cling to, the things we crave, in light of the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. It's a choice we make.

Here again, there's an intention involved. As the Buddha said, fabricated things do offer their pleasures. Sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas; form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness all have their pleasures. He doesn't deny it. But he says that if you focus on their pleasures, it just gives rise to more passion. And it's because of our passion that we keep getting involved in these things, craving them and clinging to them. And from his point of view, that's how we make ourselves suffer.

So we take his teachings seriously. He's one of the people we pay attention to. We focus on the drawbacks of fabrications, that they are inconstant, i.e., that the pleasure they do offer is undependable. And because it's undependable, it's painful.

Because it's undependable and painful, the question is, is it worth laying claim to as your self when you go around engaging in I-making and my-making? Is it really worthwhile? With some things, at some stages in the path, the answer is actually Yes, because we use some of the aggregates to make the path. So you hold on there. But with other things, the things that would pull you off the path, you learn to say, "No, I'm going to pay attention to the fact that they're inconstant, stressful, and not-self so as to induce a sense of dispassion for them." Anything that would pull you off the path, away from your precepts, away from your concentration, away from the exercise of your discernment, you've got to view in such a way as to see that it's not really worth it. Pay attention to its drawbacks.

Ultimately, you get to the point where you can turn around and pay attention to the drawbacks of the path itself. You realize that although the road is nice and warm to lie down on, it's ultimately unsafe, because it, too, is composed of aggregates of form, feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness. Someone could come along in a car and run you over. So when you've rested enough, you have to get up and move further along.

The Buddha's image is that we're on a raft crossing a river. When you're still in the middle of the river, don't be too quick to let go of the raft or you'll drown. Wait until you've gotten to the shore. Then you let go.

But all the way across the river, from this shore to the far shore, it's a matter of developing attention and intention. You let go of these things only when you've perfected them. You've paid attention to things that really are important to pay attention to. You've acted on skillful intentions in light of what you've seen. You keep doing this on higher and more refined levels.

In this way, these two themes, attention and intention, play a role all the way throughout the path, just that they get more and more subtle as you go along. They get closer and closer to each other, as you pay more careful attention to your intentions, and you intend to pay attention more and more precisely to the things the Buddha said you really should pay attention to. Your focus narrows down, but not in a way that's confining. Instead, it's getting more and more *to* the point, the whole point of what the Buddha taught.

That's why the Buddha said that the path is nourished by commitment and reflection. You commit yourself to doing it. You focus your intentions on really following the path, and then you reflect: You pay attention to what the results are.

And then, based on what you've seen, you try to fine-tune your intentions again. And again and again. As you work on developing these two qualities together, they can take you far.