

Past Intentions, Present Intentions

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When you meditate, you have to be in the right mood to meditate.

This is one of the reasons we have chanting as a way of calming the mind before each meditation session. Sometimes you need more than the chanting. So reflect on the fact that you've got a good opportunity here, you've got the good karma from the past that gives you the opportunity to be here meditating. Think of all the people in the world right now who don't even have this opportunity. You've got the opportunity to work directly on the mind without any other interference.

There may be thoughts coming in from the past, but they're a relatively minor interference if you treat them with the right attitude. Remember: That's past karma. At the moment, you're not responsible for past karma, you're responsible for your present karma. That means you're totally free to do as you like with those thoughts as they come up. You can ignore them if you like. You can counteract them with thoughts that run in the opposite direction. In other words, if a thought of greed comes up, think about the disadvantages of struggling to find the object you're greedy for. If lust comes up, think of the disadvantages both of the object of the lust and of the actual lust itself. It's an unpleasant state in the mind. If anger or fear, any of these things come up, think in other ways to counteract them. You can do that, too.

So you've got lots of tools for dealing with the thoughts that pop up into the mind. Remember that the things coming into the mind are here either because of past intentions or present intentions. You can't do anything about the past intentions but you *can* make a difference with your present intentions. So focus on that, focus on what you *can* do rather than on the things you can't do.

This is where equanimity is important in the meditation. Whatever's going to come up from past intentions, you've got to have a lot of equanimity toward it. You don't get excited about it, you don't get depressed about it, you just note that it's there and work on what you can do right now.

All of this is part of getting the mind to have the right attitude, getting it into the right frame of mind to be meditating.

Then make a survey of your body: What have you got here? You've got comfortable parts and uncomfortable parts. Here, too, you've got your choice. You can wallow around in the uncomfortable parts and complain and be miserable, or you can stay with the comfortable parts. The problem is that when you stay with the comfortable parts, all too often you start getting lazy and careless. You've got to figure out a way of staying with the comfortable parts and yet keeping alert at the same time. Notice the breath energy in those comfortable parts and think about spreading it. This gives you something to do. The comfortable parts don't have

to be very comfortable, and they don't have to be very large, but you take advantage of what you've got.

If you've had really great meditation experiences in the past, your memory of those experiences can often get in the way. After all, here you have just a few little comfortable spots in the body and they don't seem like much. They certainly can't compare with your memory of the past. But if that stuff in the past was really all that good, where is it now? If it was really something you should hold on to, it should be sticking with you. But it's not.

So you want something better than that. That often means not just waiting for things to come floating through in the meditation but actually working on what you've got. You've got a few comfortable sensations here and a few comfortable sensations there. Well, allow them to spread and connect. And be patient about this. If you're in a real hurry, it's like trying to grab peace of mind: the act of trying to grab it actually destroys it right there. So very patiently put together all the little pieces—where it's comfortable here, where it's comfortable there—allowing them to connect and flow together. And bit by bit by bit, you'll develop your foundation.

Remember: You can't develop patience by being impatient. You can't develop calm by being upset. You've simply got to stop and get your bearings, get the right frame of mind. That's a lot of the work right there. Once you've got the right frame of mind, then it's simply a matter of learning how to maintain it.

Ajaan Fuang used to say there are three steps in developing good states of the mind. One is basically learning how to do them to begin with. Then the second one is learning how to maintain them. It's pretty easy to create good states in the mind, just as it's pretty easy to create unskillful states of the mind. All you have to do is think of them and they're there. The hard part is maintaining them, and that requires patience, it requires application. Just stick with it. Whether the good states of mind seem very good, or only just okay, focus on what you've got. Make the most of what you've got, because only what you've got can grow.

Ajaan Lee gives the analogy of someone planting an orchard. They take all their money and buy up new trees and plant them in the orchard all at once. But it turns out they don't have enough water for all the trees or a drought comes or a disease comes and wipes out the whole crop. Then they don't have anything left at all, because they spent all their money on the trees. He says the wise way to start an orchard is to start out with just enough trees to get things going, and then when they start producing fruit, you save some of the seeds and you plant new trees with the seeds. Then bit by bit by bit, what you've got grows into something much bigger. It requires patience but it's solid. It's reliable. It's the safe way to start a new orchard.

And the same with your meditation: You focus on the good things you've got. Whether they're as good as you want or not, focus on what you've got and develop that. Because if you don't develop what you've got, what are you going to develop? You're going to develop your memories? You're going to develop your disappointments? Your anticipations? That's not

what you want to develop in the meditation. You develop mindfulness, you develop alertness. So you take the mindfulness and alertness you've got—everybody has some to some extent—and you work with it. Then the mindfulness and alertness begin to bear fruit, and you take that fruit and you invest it in more meditation time.

After a while, the good states of mind begin to crowd the bad ones out. Even if the bad states of mind aren't totally crowded out, at least they don't have total possession of the property. Your good states of mind are like the trees in your orchard: bit by bit they crowd the weeds out.

This is one of the aspects of meditation people don't like to hear about—the steady work, the plodding work. It doesn't sound all that exciting. Well, you can make it interesting by playing with the breath. But remember, a lot of times it's a gradual process. As you get more and more familiar with that gradual process, you begin to learn the shortcuts.

Everybody wants to go to the shortcuts first, but it doesn't work that way. Sometimes other people can give you tips on the shortcuts that have worked for them, but you've got to find out what works for you. Because it's in the finding out that you develop your own discernment. Again, if you have everything handed to you on a platter, what kind of discernment are you going to develop?

It's like kids born into a rich family. They very rarely have any skills because they're not required to. I learned recently of a couple where the woman was raised in a very wealthy family, and she and her husband built a new house. She had to have a separate bathroom for herself, simply because she had never learned how to pick up after herself and she was not about to now. That's the danger that can come when things go too easily. So we don't want to be people like that. Learn how to pick up after yourself, learn to deal with some difficulties in your meditation, because that's how discernment is developed.

As Ajaan Maha Boowa says, it's when you're cornered that you've got to find some way out. Here we're not really cornered, we're just facing some difficulties in the meditation. Well, sit down and try to figure out what the problem is. Are you trying to learn patience in an impatient way? Are you trying to calm the mind down in a frantic way? Stop and take stock of what you're doing.

Because it's not the random thoughts that come into the mind that matter, it's how you handle things, the decisions you're making right now about where you're going to direct your mind, what you're going to focus on, what you're going to do with it. That's what counts in the meditation.

When you focus on that, then the mind begins to settle down and feel at ease in the way you want it to. But whether it happens quickly or slowly is not the issue. The issue is simply that you focus at the right point and you ask yourself the right questions. Why is the mind upset right now? Is it past stuff coming in? Well, don't get upset over the past stuff. Is it because you're not paying careful attention right now? That's something you can work on. In other

words, you have to learn which things you should just let be and which things you really have to focus on, where you can't rest content. You have to make the distinction.

When the Buddha described the insights of his awakening, the part that he said was useful for telling other people was this principle of how cause and effect work in the mind. Some causes come from the past and some from the present moment. It doesn't sound all that exciting. It's certainly not something you could put on a movie screen. But it's one of the most useful lessons the Buddha taught. You look at your mind: If things are not going well, there are two possible sources—past and present; past intentions and present intentions. Once you know that, then you can focus on the right spot, the present intentions.

You take what good qualities you have right here and make them your allies, make them your friends in establishing the state of mind you want right here and then learning how to maintain it. Sometimes it starts out really good and it's just a question of maintaining what you've already got that's good. Other times, it starts out okay, and then the maintaining is a process of learning how to make it gradually more and more reliable, more and more strong, more and more satisfying.

Once you've learned how to maintain it, *then* you go for the Ajaan Fuang's third step: You can put it to use. You put it to use to gain even deeper insights. But again, you can't just jump to the deeper insights. You have to work on the little ones that come along the way. Because that's the exercise for your discernment.

So take stock of what you've got. Each time you sit down and meditate, how are things going in the body? How are things going in the mind? Take stock of which things you simply have to let be and which things you can work on. Once you can make this distinction, things go a lot more smoothly. It clears up a lot of the issues in the meditation.