

## *The Power of Intention*

*November 15, 2022*

We begin our meditation with thoughts of goodwill because we want to be clear about our intention in being here. We want to find a happiness that's harmless, that takes into account the fact that other beings want to be happy, too, and that it is possible to find happiness in a way that doesn't cause any harm to anyone at all.

As the Buddha said, our intentions—if they're informed by right view—can do a lot of good. There's an interesting passage where the Buddha says that ill will is directly related to wrong view: the idea that someone else's misery would actually be helpful, would actually accomplish something good.

Right view includes the desire that we want all beings to be happy, to understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. Notice, we're not saying, "May you be happy doing whatever you're doing." We want all beings to be skillful, because that's the true cause for their happiness, and we're willing to do whatever we can to help in that direction. With that thought as the background, then we focus our intention on being with the breath.

The question came up yesterday, How is it possible that people can have evil intentions and still get the mind into concentration? Well, it's possible with all kinds of intentions to get the mind focused, but if you want your concentration to lead to awakening—in other words, you want it to be honest and really conducive to true happiness, i.e., right concentration—it has to be based on good intentions, skillful intentions, beginning with the precepts, beginning with goodwill, even with generosity.

So you want to make sure that your intention is right in line with the Dhamma as you bring the mind to the breath, and then you intend to stay here. It's because our intentions make a difference that we can actually train the mind.

As the Buddha said, our past karma gives us the potential for different experiences of form, feeling, perception, thought fabrications, and consciousness. Then with our present fabrications—our present intentions—we turn these potentials into something actual for the sake of having an actual experience, and

then, of course, for the sake of whatever activities we want to do with those forms and feelings and perceptions and all.

This is something we don't notice. We don't realize how deep a role our intentions play in the simple fact that we're experiencing things right here, right now. Sometimes we think, "I should just allow whatever is going to come to come, and be okay with that and abandon responsibility. That way I can burn off old karma and not do any new karma." But that intention is a kind of karma, too.

Now, there are times when things coming in from the past are so strong that you can't do anything about them, aside from maintaining a separate awareness that doesn't run along with their currents. It's like someone standing at the side of a stream. You may be in the water, but you're off enough to the side that the main current doesn't pull you along.

There are other times, though, when you can actually divert the current, and that's what we're doing right here. The mind has a tendency to want to wander around, which is what samsara is all about. Samsara is not a place, by the way. It's a process. It's our process of wandering from one thing to the next to the next. And here we're trying to divert that wandering into one direction and keep it in that one direction: We're going to stay with the breath, stay with the present moment, for the sake of true happiness. Any other intentions that come up, we're going to put them aside.

Now, there will come a stage in the practice where you do want to investigate those other intentions. But right now, all you need to understand about them is that they're not what you want. You want to maintain your original intention to stay here, and then you strengthen that intention by doing what you can to make it interesting and pleasant to stay. Our ordinary, everyday concentration—what they call momentary concentration—tends to be repelled by boredom, anything the least bit unpleasant. We jump away, jump away, jump away to something else, and then we focus there for a bit, then jump away from that when it gets unpleasant as it changes. So here you have to take that level of concentration and retrain it, as you keep directing it back. Bring it back, bring it back to the breath.

If the breath is interesting, if the breath is comfortable, the mind will be more inclined to want to stay. You can begin to change its allegiance. Its old allegiance was to running around. Even before they had the word *multitasking*, our minds

liked to multitask. Here, we're going to do some mono-tasking, trying to stitch together moments of momentary concentrations so that they get a little bit deeper. One of the ways of doing this is to learn how to work with whatever is unpleasant in the body to see what extent you can use the breath to disperse patterns of tension, to soothe raw feelings, to bring warmth where you need warmth, to bring coolness when you need coolness.

In other words, you're using all the aggregates for this one purpose. You're bringing your consciousness to the breath, part of your experience of the body, as your object. You're trying to create a feeling of ease and well-being so that you'll want to stay here longer. You hold onto whatever perceptions help as you work through the discomfort or distractions you may encounter. This is what directed thought and evaluation are about.

Those two activities are very directly a kind of fabrication, a kind of intention. You're taking the mind's habit of talking to itself, and you align it with this intention to stay right here—or to bring the mind back if it's not right here—and then to try and make it as comfortable as possible, to make it as interesting as possible to be right here.

What's interesting about the breath? Well, you can breathe in all kinds of ways. You have all kinds of ways of visualizing the breath to yourself, experiencing the flow of energy through the body. It can actually deal with physical pains and help with some illnesses.

As I mentioned the other night, Ajaan Lee's method of dealing with the breath—thinking of the breath energy as flowing down the spine, out the legs, down the shoulders, out the arms; then starting at the middle of the chest, going down through the intestines—were developed when he was off in the forest and had had a heart attack. He had to pull himself together because he had no medicine. So he experimented: To what extent can the breath be used to mend the body, heal the body? Then, of course, to what extent can it help in healing the mind?

When different defilements come into the mind, you find that they have a physical correlate. There's a pattern of tension here, a pattern of tension there that appears in the body along with the thought, and if you can notice that, you can breathe through it. That's symptom management. As you're going through the day, you want to be able to access that ability to help disperse any tension that

comes up, as when you have to say No to some anger that's welling up, or No to some jealousy, and you don't have time to investigate these things deeply. If you simply suppress these things without releasing the tension, it's going to build. So you notice where the tension is and you disperse it by the way you breathe.

These are some of the ways the breath can be made interesting, because it really is helpful as you get to know it.

So as you bring in these different modes of perception and thought fabrication, they really do help to maintain that original intention to stay right here, to develop a state of concentration that's not waylaid by any pains and is not blurred out by pleasure.

That's the problem—once you've got past the pains, then you run into pleasure, and then you tend to lose your concentration because you jump onto the pleasure. It's as if you're on a mountain, and a cloud comes past. It looks really comfortable, really inviting, very soft. So you jump into the cloud. Of course, you jump through the cloud—you lose your concentration. So make up your mind: The clouds can come, but you stay on the mountain.

Focus on the breath. Maintain that intention. One of the things you can do as the sense of comfort gets stronger is to ask, "What work can the mind do with this sense of comfort?" You might want to send it to parts of the body that you tend not to focus on. See if you can breathe through them. Extend the comfortable breath energy so that it's totally suffusing the body, and then try to maintain that sense of centered but broad awareness. It's all around, the awareness that's wearing the breath, bathed in the breath.

So you can see, you start out with some ordinary aggregates, or potentials for aggregates, and you can turn them into a state of concentration through the power of your intention.

Now, the point will come when you begin to realize that, okay, the intention to maintain the concentration is good, but it still has its drawbacks. It requires constant nourishment, requires constant feeding. That's when the mind gets more inclined to want to find something that's not fabricated.

That's when the intention turns more to understanding—trying to get past your defilements in a deeper way—when you can look into their allure and find out, "Why is it that the mind wants to go for these things anyhow?" If you don't

understand the allure, you're going to keep coming back, no matter how much you say No to the defilements, no matter how much you try to kill them. If you don't understand why you like them, why there's this fifth column in the mind, you won't be able to get past them. It's when you can admit to yourself, "This is why I like greed, this is why I like anger, this is why I like delusion," at the same time that you see that these things have definite drawbacks: That's when you get past them.

And notice the word the Buddha uses there. It's not so much that you *kill* them—you *escape* from them. Up to now, you've been complicit in them. The best way to gain escape is to realize, "Okay, I don't want to play along with these things anymore." That's how you get out.

But here again, there's the intention to find that escape. So all the way through, it's a matter of maintaining the proper intention, realizing the power of your intentions, because they do shape the present moment, and in shaping your own present moment, they're going to have an impact on other people, too.

The Thai ajaans talk about the currents of the mind. The word *current* in Thai has two meanings. One is like the current of a river that flows along. And here you're trying to channel that current so that it stays on one object. But they also use the word *current* to describe the waves that come out of a broadcasting station—a TV or a radio station. Those, too, are currents, and our minds are sending off currents in all directions all the time.

As the mind gets more focused, and its intentions get more trained so that they're skillful, you're sending out a better current, you're sending out better waves—waves that are more consistently healthy for the world around you.

So you're not the only one who's going to benefit from your practice, to benefit from the way you use the power of intention to shape the potentials of the past karma. It's something that's really good all around.

That's because we make the best use of this freedom in the present moment to make these choices, not just to put up with seeing things arising or passing away, but actually trying to give rise to good things, making sure that good things don't pass away.

That, by the way, the Buddha said, is the duty of mindfulness: to make it more and more sensitive to how we're involved in the real basics of having an experience

of the present moment at all. We're not just passive observers. It's not a TV show that we're watching. It's more like an interactive game, and we've been playing it in such a way that we've caused a lot of trouble, because we've been ignorant of what we're doing. But as you meditate, you become more conscious of how you're shaping your present experience, and how your intentions really do make a difference. When you bring knowledge to these processes, they can form the path—the path to the end of suffering; the path to the deathless; the path to things that lie beyond intention. By training your intentions, you can take yourself there.

Remember that the Buddha said that intention is basically karma, and karma is basically intention. Ultimately, we're trying to master the karma that puts an end to karma, the intentions that put an end to intention, that take us to something that doesn't require any intentions to be shaped. It's there unconditionally, but to get there, we have to get really good at seeing our intentions, directing them in the right direction through this process of committing ourselves to the path and reflecting on how well we're doing. And this starts from the very beginning.

As the Buddha said, the skill of generosity is shaped by your attitude in giving your gift. The precepts about right action or right speech: They come down to your intentions. You have to get more sensitive about why you do things, why you say things, and reflect on the results of why you do and say things in that way. Then you bring that same sensitivity to the meditation. And as long as you keep your intentions based on goodwill—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for all other beings—you're headed in the right direction.