Know Your Intentions

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Before we meditate we have to chant on karma, the power of our actions, and particularly the power of our intentions. What we mean to do has a huge impact on our lives. Then we have to chant on goodwill to remind ourselves that we want our intentions to be based on goodwill for ourselves, and for all beings. Because if we have ill will for anybody, if we want them to suffer, that’s going to be bad karma for us. So we want to have goodwill in every case, even people who’ve been bad to us, people who’ve been mean to us, or to the people we love, or just people behaving badly in general. It’s not an excuse for us to behave badly toward them. Because after all then that becomes our karma. We have this chance to remind ourselves why we meditate. We’re trying to get some control over our intentions. You focus on the breath and you make up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath, all the way in, all the way out. Then you have to figure out how you’re going to do that. Because if you don’t have a strategy it gets very dull. Very boring after a while. But if you explore the fact that you’ve got this breath energy in the body, and it’s not just the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the flow of energy in the body that allows the air to come in, allows it to go out. And that goes through the whole body, through your whole nervous system. So you can ask yourself, how does your body feel right now? What’s the quality? Of the body as you sense it from inside? What way of breathing would make that quality better? Find a spot in the body where it’s very obvious that you can see, now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Focus your attention there. And then do an experiment. Try it a little. Long breathing there for a while, and then shorter breathing. Which feels better? Deep breathing, shallow breathing. Which feels better? Fast, slow, heavy, light. Try to create a feeling of pleasure right there, a feeling of ease. You’re not pinching off the breath at the end. You allow the in-breath to flow into the out-breath, and the out-breath to flow into the in-breath. So it feels smooth all the way in, all the way out, and all the way in between. Then allow that smooth feeling to go through the body. Think about going down the spine, out the legs, down the shoulders, out the arms, around in the head. You want to create a sense of well-being here, because it makes it more interesting to stay here. And also it creates a better place to be here in the present moment. And as you set up this one intention to stay, you’re going to find there are other intentions that come in. Well, this is the whole purpose. You want to observe your mind. You want to observe your intention in particular. So right now you want to maintain the intention to stay. Stay with the breath. But as you go through the day, you want to be very clear about what your intentions are. The Buddha said that before you do anything, you want to ask yourself, “This action I want to do, what do I hope to get out of it? What kind of effect is it going to have?” It’s when you start thinking in this way that you begin to grow up. Babies just act on their impulses. A feeling comes in and they act on it right away without thinking. They have no sense of consequences of what the results are going to be. But as you begin to grow up, you realize your actions do have power. And often that power will come back at you. So what do you want to have come back at you? You want an intention that is harmless, that doesn’t cause anybody any pain, any suffering. So you create a good place to be right here. And it’s a lot easier to act on good intentions when you feel a sense of ease and well-being right here. And it often happens that when you act on something that you thought was a good intention, you realize it was not so good after all. This is why it’s important to act only on good intentions. Because you act on bad intentions if you know your actions are going to harm somebody. Then when the actual harm comes, you don’t want to look at it. You don’t want to think about what you did, why you did it. And that creates a lot of ignorance in the mind. And it’s because of ignorance that we start doing really stupid things. We want happiness, but we keep doing things that are going to cause suffering. Because we don’t study our actions. That’s why the Buddha said, “Think about what you’re going to do before you do it. Watch what you’re doing while you act.” After you’ve decided that the original intention was good, you act on it. If it wasn’t good, you don’t. While you’re acting on what you thought was a good intention, if you see that bad results are coming out, either harming you or harming others, you stop. If you don’t see any harm, you continue. When you’re done, you reflect, “What were the results?” “Did I cause any harm? Did I not cause any harm?” If you find that you did cause harm, go and talk it over with someone else who’s wiser than you are, so you can get their perspective on what you did wrong. Don’t be embarrassed to admit a mistake, because you can’t admit a mistake to others. After all, you can’t admit mistakes to yourself, and then you’ll never learn. Once you’ve learned the lesson, then you resolve not to make that mistake again. If you don’t see that you caused any harm, then take joy in that fact. You’re gaining more knowledge. Because you’re trying to figure out what kind of good intentions are actually skillful. Because sometimes there is some delusion in even our best intentions. And if you know that you acted on a good intention, it’s a lot easier to look back on it. Say, “Oh, it was good, but it wasn’t good enough. It wasn’t skillful enough.” So this is what we’re here for. We’re learning about our intentions and their power. And learning about which ones will lead to happiness and which ones will not. It all sounds very simple. But all too often, when we act on intentions that we know are not really all that good, we start hiding things from ourselves. And then we can’t learn. If you hide a mistake, how are you going to learn from it? So here we’re getting practice of maintaining a good intention, which is to get the mind to be still. Get the mind a sense of well-being in the breath, in the body. So that it’s easier to say no to unskillful intentions than to say yes to skillful ones. Because sometimes a skillful intention will require that you do something that you don’t like doing. Even though it’s going to give good results in the long run, sometimes all you can think about is, “Well, right now. I want some pleasure right now.” That’s when people start forgetting about the long term. “I want some pleasure here in the breath. It feels good to breathe in. It feels good to breathe out.” That sense of good feeling spreads through the body. Then it’s a lot easier to think about the long term. Because that’s what discernment, that’s what wisdom is all about. But I said, it starts with that question, “What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?” “What, when I do it, will lead to long-term harm and pain?” We’re not just here to be in the present moment for the sake of the present moment. We’re in the present moment because this is where intentions get started and where we decide whether or not to act on them. Thinking about the long term. Because it is possible to find long-term happiness. It’s going to depend on your actions. That’s what’s wise about that question. Realizing that your actions do have that power. As the chant said, our bodies are subject to aging, illness, death. We live in this world where we’re going to be separated from a lot of things that we love. But we do have our actions. Our actions are our own possession. And the results of our actions will stick with us. They act in ways that are skillful. They act in ways that will lead to long-term welfare and happiness. And as you meditate and develop stronger powers of mindfulness, concentration, in other words, the ability to keep the breath in mind, and to stay focused, centered on the breath, with a sense of well-being, you’re going to learn a lot about the mind. And it gives you the good foundation you need to work for happiness that lasts for a long, long time.

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