

## *Being Somebody, Going Somewhere*

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One of the most important definitions in the Canon is where the Buddha defines karma as intention. It's one of the most basic concepts in his teaching, and yet he doesn't explain it much there. To see intention explained, you have to look into the Vinaya, the monk's rules. There you see intention defined basically as meaning to do something.

An unintentional act is when you didn't mean to do it, or you meant to do it but you didn't mean to have certain results come about. For instance, if somebody is choking on some food and you hit him on the back to dislodge the food. You intentionally hit him on the back, but if it turns out you killed him, that wasn't your intention. You wanted to help him. In other cases, you might step on a bug without even meaning to step on it. Both those acts would be called unintentional. Karmically, they don't matter.

This points to the fact that the actions that do matter, matter because they have meaning. We want to accomplish something with them, so the skillfulness of the karma is based on what we want to accomplish. We want our actions to go someplace because *we're* going someplace.

As the Buddha pointed out, people are on different paths. They may consciously be on a particular path or not. There are paths going to hell, there are paths going to an animal rebirth, or to rebirth as a hungry ghost. Most of the people on those paths don't realize that those are the paths they're on. But their actions are taking them someplace. There are also paths to the human realm, paths to the heavens, and there's a path to nibbana. The Buddha himself chose that last path. All during his quest for awakening he was very much *somebody, going someplace*. "Bodhisatta," a being aiming at awakening: That's what he was. And he did everything in his power to get to awakening, to make sure that his actions led in that direction and yielded that result.

So it's strange that sometimes you hear people saying that Buddhist practice is all about being nobody and going nowhere. I've been receiving a few letters from people who've been taking advantage of the quiet time during the pandemic. At least they've been quiet at home, practicing meditation and talking about how nice it is to *be nobody, going nowhere*. Well, that's the prerogative of arahants. Arahants don't need a sense of self because they've already arrived at happiness. They don't need to be going anywhere because they've already arrived at true happiness. For those of us who haven't arrived, though, we've got to *be somebody, going somewhere*.

The path does have a fruit, and the Dhamma does have an *attha*, a goal. In fact, *attha* means both meaning and goal. So you have to look carefully: Where are your actions taking

you? Where are your thoughts taking you? After all, your thoughts don't just sit there. They take you in a certain direction, they "bend the mind" in a certain direction.

That was one of the realizations that got the bodhisatta on the correct path to begin with: realizing that his thoughts led either to happiness or to suffering and affliction. He saw that if a thought was imbued with sensuality, or ill will, or harmfulness, it would be afflictive, so he made up his mind to "beat it back," just as a cowherd would beat back the cows he's responsible for if they start getting into the rice fields. As for thoughts that were imbued with renunciation, non-ill will, i.e., goodwill, and harmlessness, he'd allow them to roam free, like the cows in the dry season when there's no rice to wander into and they don't get into trouble. But even then he'd have to be mindful about where they were.

He had to develop three qualities to keep him on the path. One was heedfulness: the realization that your actions really do make a difference—and that includes your thoughts—so you've got to be really careful about what you do. Another one is *ottappa*, or compunction: These are the qualms you feel when you realize you've got an intention that's going to be unskillful. You feel that it's wrong, and you don't want those results. And there's *atappa*: ardency, when you do your best to develop what's skillful and let go of what's unskillful.

These qualities work together. We need them in order to practice the precepts, to develop the mind in concentration, to develop our discernment, because we have to be conscious that everything we do—even just being in the present moment, keeping our thoughts focused on the present moment—is going to take us someplace. Thoughts don't just sit there. They move, they have an arrow, they have a direction. After all, they are fabrications, and fabrications, the Buddha said, are done for the sake of something. It's good to be clear about that.

When I was in France last time, someone on the retreat complained about practicing the path for the sake of something. He thought we should just be in the present moment for the sake of the present moment. But the present moment doesn't stay still. If you engage in an action without thinking about its consequences, the Buddha defines that as heedlessness, lack of compunction, lack of ardency. It's definitely not the path.

So as you're here, focusing on the present, ask yourself: What is the best use of the present right now? You've got the breath, so you can use it to develop a sense of well-being. What's the purpose of the well-being? It allows the mind to settle down so that it can see itself. What's the purpose of seeing itself? You can detect any unskillful movements of the mind and hold them in check. As for skillful things, you can give rise to them and maintain them.

So, there's work to be done, good work, work with a purpose, a meaning. And the more you're clear about the fact that you *mean* certain things in your practice, you *intend* certain things, then it's easier to judge: Are your actions actually in line with what you intend?

Again, think about the Buddha and his quest for awakening. His teachers taught him the dimension of nothingness and the dimension of neither perception or non-perception—very

refined attainments. But he had a clear idea of where he wanted to go. He wanted the deathless, and he could see that neither of these were deathless. When he saw that these weren't what he wanted, he moved on. If he hadn't been clear about his goal, he might have been waylaid. After all, they offered him the position of teacher, but he didn't want to teach unless he had something that was really of value to teach, something outside of the ordinary. So he was clear about his intention, and as a result he was able to succeed in the path.

That's how he got to the point where he didn't have to be anybody and didn't have to go anywhere. But you get to that point by being somebody and going someplace. So as long as you're on the path, remember that this is a path, it's not a place to lie down. If you lie down on the path, it's like lying down on a road. Who knows what's going to come along and run over you? But you keep walking and, as long as you're confident that this is the right path and you're heading in the right direction, you keep focused on each step to make sure that it stays in the right direction. You've got the breath right here. This is your path. Keep on the path, and it'll take you where you want to go.