

The Power of Intention

October 10, 2020

It's good to think about all the time the Buddha spent searching for the Dhamma, all the energy that went into that, and then all the time and energy that went into spreading the Dhamma—people remembering it and practicing it over the generations and passing it on. Now it's been passed on to you. They passed it on so you would have a good idea of what a skillful intention is, what an unskillful intention is, and the importance of the difference.

So are you going to let them down? Make up your mind you're going to be intent on developing concentration, which means being intent on the breath, staying with the breath, and trying to maintain that intention as consistently as you can, because all the Buddha's teachings are on intentions.

There was one time when a member of another sect was accusing one of the Buddha's lay students, saying, "How can you follow this teacher? He teaches nothing. He doesn't answer any of the big questions"—what they considered big questions at the time: whether the world was eternal or not eternal, finite or infinite, that kind of thing. And the student said, "No, it's not the case that he doesn't teach anything at all. He teaches the difference between skillful intentions and unskillful intentions."

That's what it all comes down to. All the Buddha's teachings on causality, all the discernment teachings have to do with intentions. He taught causality not in general. He wasn't concerned about the causality that operates, say, making the orbit of the moon so erratic, or it determining the motions of the moons of Jupiter. He was concerned with causality as it relates to your intentions, starting with ignorance of the fabrications in your mind.

What are fabrications? They're intentional actions. If we do them with ignorance, they create suffering. But if we bring knowledge to those fabrications, we can come to the end of suffering. So your intentions are powerful. They make the difference between whether you're going to suffer or not. We work on concentration so that we can see the mind more clearly. Why do we want to see the mind? We want to see what it's doing as it forms an intention.

All the qualities that are to be brought to bear on getting the mind into concentration—mindfulness, alertness, ardency—are focused on your actions, your intentional actions. Mindfulness keeps things in mind so that you can recognize when something comes up: Is this something to be developed, or something to be abandoned? Alertness watches what's actually coming up—again

not just what's coming up in general, but in terms of what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. Then ardency tries to do all of this well. It's what pulls mindfulness and alertness into the right orbit focused on your skillful and unskillful intentions. What should be done about them? You try your best to develop the skillful ones and abandon the unskillful ones. And in so doing, you bring the mind into concentration.

Here, too, you're paying attention to your intentions. How is the breath going? How do you stay with the breath? It requires fabrication. The breath itself is a kind of fabrication. You can breathe in all kinds of ways. You're not stuck with any one way of breathing. And there's nothing in the Buddha's teachings to say that you just let the breath do what it's going to do on its own without interfering. He tells you to train yourself to breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture. You train yourself to breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure. You train yourself to breathe in a way that steadies the mind when it needs to be steadied and lifts the mind up when it needs to be energized. So you take advantage of the fact that you do have some intentional input into how you breathe so that you can breathe in a way that helps the mind to settle down.

Then there's verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation. In meditation, you direct your thoughts to the breath and evaluate the breath: How's it going right now? Does it feel comfortable? Do you have a sense of the breath in different parts of the body and how all those breaths can all be connected? When there's a sense of comfort, how do you maintain it? How do you let it spread? And once it's spread, how do you keep it enlarged?

You find, as you're evaluating, that you have to picture the breath to yourself. This is where we get into mental fabrication—the images you hold in mind. These, too, you can choose. You choose them in such a way that gives rise to a feeling of pleasure that saturates the body and can maintain that sense of full-body awareness, full-body pleasure, full-body breath.

See how long you can maintain that intention.

There will be other thoughts coming in. There may be a voice in the mind that says, "Look, I've done okay so far. I can take a little time off." Well, those little times off can turn into big times off. So instead, you want to watch what's happening. What does the mind want when it goes off like that?

That's the whole point of an intention. You act because you want something out of the action. We're not machines that simply obey some sort of impulse without knowing why and without having a purpose. Our minds calculate: What kind of actions will lead to pleasure? What kinds of actions will lead to well-being? That's what we want.

When the Buddha teaches us right view, he's advising us to think about the long term. As Ajaan Lee would say, anybody can find pleasure in one way or another. Even common animals have their ways of finding pleasure. But it takes discernment to realize that there are long-term consequences to our actions. You have to take into consideration that your actions depend on your motivation. And your actions can have consequences that last for a long, long time, which means you have to check your motivation for why you're acting and try to motivate yourself to act in a way that will lead to long-term well-being. This is what makes human beings different from animals. We can take a longer view.

Yet there are a lot of people who refuse to take that longer view. That's precisely why the Buddha made the topic of rebirth part of mundane right view. You've got to take this into consideration. Your actions really do have consequences. There is continuation beyond death, and your actions play a huge role in shaping what's going to continue and how it's going to continue.

So his teachings are all about the power of intention, and his purpose in teaching about intentions is to help you realize that you've got plenty of power right here—or the potential for power. If you use it well, it can take you all the way to the total end of suffering. That's the basic message of the four noble truths.

The role of intention in that is so important that, even though the Buddha didn't make a habit of going around and arguing with people, he would go out of his way to argue with people who taught teachings that would deny the power of your intentions. Those who said that there really were no actions—action was illusory—or there were actions but you weren't free to choose, or your actions couldn't make a difference here in the present moment: Those were forms of wrong view that he had to clear away.

All this points to what you're doing right now—and what you hope to get out of what you're doing right now. So examine those things. That's one of the reasons why we try to maintain a single intention as we meditate. You get to look at it from many angles as you try to preserve it. It *is* going to be challenged. Other thoughts will come in; other intentions will come in. And you have to have good reasons for saying No to those others.

So look at the reasons you give. Try to give good reasons. The Buddha gives you lots of ideas for what a good reason would be. But see what works in your own mind to ride with this intention to stay with the breath as continually, as smoothly, and as solidly as you can.