

# *The Karma that Ends Karma*

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This practice we're doing here is called the karma that puts an end to karma. And because karma is intention, this means that the practice is the intention to put an end to intention. That's why it's tricky. If you intend to put a stop to intention, that's an intention right there, but that doesn't mean it's impossible. It simply means there are going to be some unexpected twists and turns along the path.

As the Buddha said, the central part of his path is Right Concentration. Concentration basically means a firm intention, sticking with one object. You focus your intention on staying with the breath, staying with goodwill, whatever the object of your meditation, and then you try to maintain that intention. Then you see what you can learn about intention in the course of trying to maintain it, what other things you can learn about the mind as you try to maintain that intention.

The usual culprits to begin with are distractions, either internal or external. The internal ones are other thoughts, other intentions. At first you hardly realize that they're intentions. You're focusing on the breath, everything seems fine and then suddenly you're someplace else, half a world away. It's as if someone snuck up behind you, threw a sack over your head, dragged you off, and then dumped you on another continent. You don't know what happened in the meantime. You don't catch sight of the fact that an intention triggered the slipping away. There was one brief moment when you decided, "I'm out of here." Something else popped up in the mind and you went for it. There was a choice.

This is why meditation requires so much mindfulness and alertness. As we practice, mindfulness means the ability to keep your original intention in mind. Alertness means the ability to keep watch over things around that intention. On the one hand, you focus on what's going on with the object of your concentration. On the other, you keep track of how the mind is relating to it. Learn how to catch any warning signals that the mind is about to go. It may take a while for you to catch them because they're subtle and quick. The only way to see them is to stick with your original intention and keep yourself warned: "Okay, the mind is going to leave, so keep watch for how it does it."

At the same time, work on ways to make the original intention a good one to stay with. Otherwise the mind is going to resist. Staying with the breath, if it's not comfortable, is going to be like trying to keep a balloon under water. It'll stay there only as long as your grip is really secure. As soon as there's the slightest slip, there it goes, popping up out of the water.

This is where you have to get your defilements on your side. They want comfort, so give them comfort. Try to make the breath as comfortable as possible.

The breath here is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, it's your whole sense of energy flow in the body. As the image for the first jhana says, it's like working moisture through a ball of bath powder. Or you can think of making bread. You put water in with the flour and then knead it through the flour until every part of that ball of flour is moistened. You take whatever ease and sense of refreshment that comes from the breath and try to knead it through the body, all the way out to the tips of the toes, all the way out to the tips of the fingers, all over the front and back of the body. That makes the body a good place to stay.

Or you can think of systematically going through the body. Relax the fingers, relax the palms of your hands, the backs of your hands, your wrists, your arms, anywhere you can detect tension that pulls you out of a nice, comfortable straight-up-and-down posture. Start with the tips of your fingers and go up your palms, the backs of your hands, up your arms to the shoulders. Then start with your toes, go up your feet, your legs, pelvis, up the back, to the neck, and then all the muscles around the head. Then try to develop an all-around awareness that can keep the whole body relaxed all the time. This makes the body a much nicer place to stay.

As you work on this, it engages several parts of the mind, such as the desire for pleasure and the desire to explore as you begin to see connections throughout the body. This means you've got allies inside. As Ajaan Lee said, it's like taking Mara and putting him on your side.

So that's one strategy for staying with your original intention.

Another strategy is to learn to be very quick in dealing with your distractions. It's so easy to get entangled in the story line wherever your thoughts lead you. If the distractions come from within, a little thought bubble comes up in the mind and says, "Let's explore this and see where it goes." And you end up finding yourself in the Andromeda galaxy. In other words, these things can take you far, far away, into whole other worlds, whole other stories. Sometimes it's hard to pull yourself out of those stories because you want to see how they end. It's almost as if you're committed to it. This happens all the time. You walk past a TV and suddenly find yourself in some stupid story. You know the stories on TV are stupid, but you still get sucked in. That's because you're already a sucker for getting sucked in to these stupid stories in your mind.

So you have to learn to develop a certain amount of skepticism for these stories. Do you really need to know the end? Learn how to cut things off in the middle of a story. The characters won't mind.

In other cases, the story lines don't start out with internal distractions. They start out with external irritants that pull you away. Other people say or do things that irritate you, and all of a sudden you're focused on how much you don't like what they said or did. Then you get upset because they've destroyed your concentration. You can build up huge narratives about how they shouldn't have done that, shouldn't have destroyed your concentration. Actually, they weren't the ones who destroyed your concentration. *You* dropped it, ran after them, and

then found some satisfaction in blaming them. Again, you've got to learn how to pull yourself out of that mindset as well. No matter what anybody else says or does, the breath is still there. You made the choice to leave. That's what you've got to watch out for.

So the whole purpose of concentration practice is to get to know the process of intention. The best way of doing that is to stick with this one intention as much as you can, because it gives you something to measure your other intentions against, so you can notice how they move.

Then, after the distractions get less and less compelling, you can begin to look into this intention you're trying to maintain. What is it made out of? Mostly verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. The verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation, two of the factors of jhana. Directed thought is when you focus your intention on an object; evaluation is when you examine the object, seeing whether you like it, don't like it, what comments you have to make on it. These two processes lie at the basis of every sentence in the mind, every sentence you speak. That's why they're called verbal fabrication.

Then there's mental fabrication: feeling and perception. These things have their intentional element, too. Even when you drop directed thought and evaluation to go from the first jhana to the second, there's still feeling and perception. In fact the perception – the perception of breath – is what keeps you there all the way up through the fourth jhana. Try to hold onto that perception until the breath energy in the body grows still. Then you stay with still breath as your perception. After a while the border between your body and what's outside your body begins to dissolve. You begin to realize that the border was a perception reinforced by the movement of the breath. When the breath gets still, there's nothing to reinforce it. So you can adjust your perception to space or consciousness, and there's no border to these things.

In other words, after dealing with distractions, you're able to focus on the one intention that forms your concentration and you begin to understand it. What's the process of fabrication going on in here? If it weren't consistent enough, you wouldn't understand it, for you'd get nothing but fleeting glimpses. A lot of your insights are just that – little fleeting glimpses – and then you try to connect them. It's like playing connect-the-dots. And the problem with connect-the-dots is that the dots can be anything, like the constellations in the sky. We look up at Orion in the winter and we see his belt and his knife hanging from his belt. People in Thailand, though, look up at the same stars and see a plow. The belt is the actual plow and the knife is the part that pulls the plough. And who's to say that we're right and they're wrong?

The same holds true for our connect-the-dot insights. If awareness isn't continuous enough, all we see are the lines we've drawn. We don't see the actual dots. But when you can stick consistently with your original intention, you begin to see the actual dots and the actual lines: what actually connects to what, what

causes what, and what actually makes up this intention we've been working so hard to maintain.

The other insight that comes is that, as you're maintaining an intention, it's like maintaining a yoga posture. Just as you relax into the yoga posture over time, in the same way you're relaxing into the concentration. You begin to realize that certain activities in your original intention are not necessary to keep it going. After the mind begins to settle down, you have less and less need for directed thought and evaluation. The breath gets more comfortable, you get more settled in, and there comes a point where you can drop the directed thought and evaluation. You can just be one with the breath—in the same way that when you're in a yoga posture you begin to realize that you've been tensing certain muscles that you don't have to tense. In fact, you'd be more comfortable in the posture if you relaxed those muscles. But those insights into which parts are going to have to be relaxed—you can't *will* those beforehand, but you can pose the question in your mind: What would be more comfortable here? That's how you can develop insight.

When the Buddha talks about developing insight, he focuses on posing certain questions in your mind: "How should fabrications be regarded? How should they be investigated?" You can't put the mind through a vipassana mill and guarantee that it is going to come out with insight. But if you learn to pose the right questions—and these are basically questions that come from the four noble truths—"Where is the stress? What are you doing that's causing the stress?": Insight starts with simple things like this. What's tense in the breath? What's tense in the body? Where is there any blockage in the body that's really unnecessary? When you see, you learn to relax it. Then you focus on the mental factors maintaining your state of concentration: Which ones are an unnecessary burden that makes it hard to maintain the concentration? Once you've settled in, you learn how to relax those mental activities.

That's the pattern for insight, and you follow that pattern all the way through as it takes you from one level of concentration to another. It takes concentration as far as it can go. Try to maintain your concentration as much as you can, because the more consistently you can maintain it, the more you're likely to catch sight of those unnecessary actions. They're activities; they're inconstant. If they were totally constant, you'd never catch sight of their existence. It's because they come and go that you realize: Now it's here, now it's not. There's something going on here. The stress comes, the stress goes. The cause comes, the cause goes. And insight is a matter of learning how to catch sight of these things as they happen. You pare down the intention to stay still until there's nothing left to pare down without totally dropping intention.

Again, that's something unexpected. You can't intend to see it at a particular moment, but you can pose the question. The posing of the question is what's called appropriate attention. That's what opens things up, makes it possible to

see things that you didn't intend to see, or to see them where you didn't intend to see them. This is how things finally open to the Deathless.

The Deathless is unintended. It's something that, when you hit it, you realize was always there, and that nothing you can do will change it. The reason you didn't notice it before was because you were entangled in your intentions and the results of your intentions. But you can't get there simply by saying, "Okay, I'm not going to intend anything anymore." That doesn't do it. You have to intend Right Concentration: That's the doing. That allows you to understand what it means to "do" well enough so that you can actually stop doing. That's the karma that puts an end to karma, the intention that allows you to understand intention until you finally get to the point where you can stop intending.

And it really is a stopping of intention. It's not a hall of mirrors where you say, "Okay, I'm going to stop intending to stop intending, -tending, -tending" which is an intention to stop the intention which is an intention and just goes on and on and on like that. You can't reason yourself into this, but it's something that can be induced. You can bring yourself to the brink where it can happen.

So work at this intention, the intention to stay focused on one preoccupation. Get to know it. Get to be on good terms with it. Get as much of the mind on your side as you can through making the breath comfortable, through making the process interesting. And then learn to be resolute at cutting away things that aren't really helpful, things that pull you off in other directions. This is going to require all your ingenuity, all your attention, but it's one of the few skills in life that's really worth all the effort it requires, that more than repays all the effort put into it. It'll see you all the way through every possible type of suffering, because its rewards are more than you can intend. You can think about the goal, you can have a picture of what it's like, but the picture in your preconceived notion has an intentional element. It's part of the path because it helps you along, gives you encouragement, but the actual rewards when they come are much greater.

So keep reminding yourself of the Buddha's instructions on tranquility and insight. For the tranquility, it's a question of how to settle in, how to really steady the mind in its intention, how to indulge in it, which means to learn how to enjoy it. The insight then comes in learning how to question the intention – not in the sense of doubting it, but in the sense of learning how to investigate what's going on here. When you learn how to bring the activities for tranquility and insight together in the right balance, then you really come to know what the Buddha was talking about.