

## *Sticking with an Intention*

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It can be very chastening to see how changeable your mind is. You make up your mind to do something and then find yourself just a few minutes later heading off in another direction. Sometimes it's because you saw that your original intention was not as wise as you thought it was, but often it has nothing to do with that at all. The original intention was perfectly fine, but you're off headed at right angles to that intention. And you wonder why.

One of the purposes of meditation is to see exactly what's happening, why you can suddenly veer off at right angles, exactly what the mind does to itself in order to drop a perfectly good intention and go someplace totally different. In this way the meditation is like an experiment. You set up some conditions and then watch how they play out. In other words, you start by focusing on something you know is good: the breath. After all, the breath is the force of life and it's very immediate. It's not far off or dubious. It's right here, right now. You can see that sticking with the breath and allowing it to be comfortable is bound to have a good effect on the body and the mind. So there's no doubt there.

After setting up the breath as the object of your intention, the next step is to be aware of any other vagrant intentions that will pull you off in other directions. For the time being, the rule in your mind is: If a thought doesn't have anything to do with the breath, you don't want to get involved. So as soon as you find yourself veering off, you don't have to ask a lot of questions. If you're getting pulled away from the breath, just drop that thought formation and come back to the breath, no matter how interesting, intriguing, or important that thought may be. Just let it go. Leave it in mid-sentence. You don't have to tie up any loose ends. You don't have to make a little note to come back there and check it out later. Just totally drop it and come back.

Now, the after-echo of that thought formation may continue for a while. That's okay; you don't have to listen to it. Your job right now is to train the mind to be more and more consistent in sticking with an intention. And — sure enough — a second thought will come up, or a third, or a fourth, a tenth, or a hundredth, but no matter how many, you're not going to follow them. That's the promise you make yourself when you sit down. And the important thing is not to get discouraged when you find yourself breaking that promise. Just pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get back to the breath. Remember: This is a deeply ingrained habit we're fighting here, so it's going to take effort and time. If you think training a dog is difficult, the human mind is even more devious, even more resistant to new tricks. It's difficult to train the human mind in this way, but it can be done.

And the time spent in training yourself in new habits like this is time well spent. After all, the force of intention is what shapes your life. We don't often think of the teachings on karma as having much relevance to the meditation. Sometimes we're even taught that karma was one of those weird pieces of cultural baggage that somehow got smuggled into Buddhism from its cultural background. But that's not the case at all. The Buddha had some very specific teachings on karma that had nothing to do with what anybody else was teaching at the time, and they're immediately relevant to why and how we're meditating.

The "why" has to do with the point I just raised. Given that karma is intention, and intention is the huge shaping force in your life, you want some control over it. If you make up your mind to do something that you know is good, you want to be able to stick with that intention. And where does intention happen? Right in the present moment. Where does it get changed? In the present moment. This is why we focus on the present moment, so that we can see the process of intention in action as it happens and can have a say in where that intention is going to go. The more solidly you can stay in the present moment — the more steadily you can maintain your balance here — the more you'll be able to see, and the more conscious say you'll have in the direction those intentions are going to take you. That's the "why."

As for the "how," you'll notice as things come up in the meditation that the vagrant intentions have very little to do with anything you were consciously thinking about as you sat down to meditate, when you made your intention to stay with the breath. And yet suddenly they appear. This relates to the Buddha's teachings on how your present experience is made up of three things: the results of past intentions, the actual process of intention in the present moment, and immediate results of that present intention. Certain thoughts are going to come up as a result of past intentions, and they don't necessarily have much meaning. They just happen to pop up and they can be pretty random.

Sometimes we look for inspiration or signs of some special knowledge as we meditate. That can happen, but it's also mixed up with a lot of really random stuff. It's like looking for meaning in your dreams: Some dreams are portentous, some are pretentious, and most are totally random. You can't take them as a dependable guide. In the same way, you can't necessarily take what pops into your mind in the present moment as a guide either, no matter how still or luminous your mind may be, for a lot of what pops up is simply the result of random past intentions. But what you can do — by staying solidly in the present moment and solidly with your intention to stay with the breath — is, over time, to put yourself in a better position to evaluate what comes into the mind. If a thought of greed, anger, or delusion comes in, you'll be able to sense it and to see what it does because you're more sensitive to what's going on here.

Insights may come up, but you don't have to memorize them. Ajaan Fuang once said that if an insight is really valuable you don't have to take note of it for future reference. Instead, see if you can apply it to what's actually happening to

your mind in the present moment. If it gives good results, stick with it. If it doesn't, drop it. If it's a really valuable insight, it'll stay with you because you got good results from it. You won't have to tag it, put it on a leash, and lead it back home with you.

The insights are not nearly as important as the ability to put the mind in a position where it can produce insights and evaluate them in terms of what they do in the present. That's why we're trying to get the mind in concentration. Try to be very, very alert to cause and effect here in the present moment. When you can see the connection between cause and effect, *that's* when you're in a position to evaluate your thoughts, because the worth of a thought lies in its effect. It's like having a goose that lays golden eggs: You focus on taking good care of the goose, rather than the eggs, because these golden eggs are like the gold in fairy tales. If you don't use them or give them away right away, they turn into feathers, they turn into charcoal. Remember fairy tales? The more you try to hold onto things, the more they turn into straw. If you get something good, you put it to use. You give it away. That's when you gain something more valuable in return.

It's the same with insights. If the insight is appropriate for the time and place, fine, use it. If not, just put it aside. It probably wasn't an insight anyhow, because, as I said, all kinds of things from your past karma can come popping up into a still mind. But the value of a still mind doesn't lie so much in what pops up as in your ability to evaluate what pops up. You can see cause and effect in action. When the mind is really still and very refined, it can sense the presence of greed, anger, and delusion even in minute quantities. It can sense what they do. Your powers of sensitivity are raised; your ability to see cause and effect is sharpened. You can tell genuine gold from fools' gold a lot better when the mind is still.

So you don't have to trust whatever comes up in the still mind. In fact, you're not *supposed* to trust anything. You're supposed to put everything to the test. The value of a still mind is not that it sees things but that it sees things in action. You can gauge your intentions a lot better when the basic underlying intention in the mind is reliable, solid, and sure. Here the basic underlying intention is this: Always to do what's most skillful. Always choose what's going to be the least harmful, the most beneficial course of action. And one of the most beneficial things you can do for yourself is to learn how to stick with a very simple, good intention like this, like staying with the breath.

As you get more and more reliable in staying here, you provide the foundation for all the other insights and all the other good things that come from training the mind. So make sure the foundation is strong, make sure the foundation is solid, and the good things you develop to build on top of that are less likely to topple over.