

Intent

December 20, 2018

One of the phrases we chanted just now, “keeping focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world”: This is part of the formula for right mindfulness, but it’s also a formula for how you get into right concentration. And underlying it is a very important quality for succeeding in concentration, which is intent. You want to be totally intent on what you’re doing right now. Let the past and the future fall away. They don’t have to get involved right now. This means you can unburden yourself of a lot of thoughts, a lot of concerns. At this moment, the only thing that matters is the awareness right here in the present moment and your breath, and whatever thoughts help you stay with the breath.

Thinking *is* a part of concentration, but it has to be focused thinking. We’re not just randomly wandering around surveying things. We’re thinking about what we’re doing. That’s a part of intentness as well, because if you don’t think about what you’re doing, your concentration is hit or miss. Sometimes the mind settles down; sometimes it doesn’t. You have to learn how to observe it in action if you really want to develop concentration into a skill that you can tap into whenever you need it.

The Buddha didn’t teach hothouse meditation, in other words the kind of meditation that survives only in intensive retreats. There’s a passage where Mahanama comes to see him and asks, “What should I do to keep my mind in shape? I’m surrounded by my family, my children. I’ve got my work that I have to attend to.” And the Buddha said, “You can still meditate.” In Mahanama’s case, he recommended some of the recollections, such as recollection of the Buddha or Dhamma. You can get the mind into good concentration that way, but the same principle also applies to the breath. It’s something you can meditate on all the time.

After all, the breath is always there. It requires that you be very observant and very sensitive to what’s going on and how you’re relating to it, but otherwise, it’s with you all the time. So you want to think about the breath and your relationship to the breath.

In the beginning, it’s pretty simple. The only thing you’ve got to do is to get the mind to settle down and put aside all your greed and distress with reference to the world, all your concerns about where things are going in your life, where things are going with the world as a whole.

You've got to take care of your mind because nobody else can take care of it for you. And if you really want to understand it, you have to watch it very carefully, because it has its tricks. There are large parts of the mind that don't want you to see them. There are areas we've all blocked off. If we're really going to understand the mind, we have to see through those blockades. And to do that requires that you have a sense, one, of a place where you can settle down and not feel threatened by what's behind the blockage; and two, you have to be non-threatening to what's behind the blockage. In other words, you have to show some sensitivity, some gentleness as you start poking around in the body and mind.

But you also have to be determined. You realize that it may take time and you're willing to back off when you have to, but your backing-off is strategic. You're waiting for a time when things will be ready to open up. And part of the skill in inducing that opening up comes from your being very consistent and very gentle with the parts of the body and mind that you *are* aware of. That's how the other parts of the mind begin to sense that, hey, maybe they can trust you. And the areas that have been kept locked off begin to open up.

That's when you can really settle into the present moment with a sense of spreading out. This is your territory: your sense of the body as you feel it from within, your sense of your mind as you feel it from within. Nobody else can move in here. They can do things to your body. They can show you things to get your mind upset. But you experience these things from within. The area within is your territory, and you want to arrange it so that it's a good place to stay.

Now, you can't be responsible right now for things that are going to come in from your past kamma. But you can be responsible for what you're doing right here. This is why, when the Buddha teaches about kamma, he talks about world systems evolving and devolving, and spreads his net really wide, but then he pulls it back in. The course of the universe, the course of life can go over long periods of time, but it all comes down to actions. Where are actions happening? They're happening right here. What do they come from? They come from your intentions. So you're working at the source right here.

And the best way to get to know your intentions is to give yourself a firm intention to stay in one place. Be intent on keeping that in mind. When you do, you'll notice when the other intentions come in that would move you away. Otherwise, you're like a boat floating down the river. A little current picks it up and moves it in one direction. Another current comes and picks it up and moves it in another direction. And if you don't have anything firm to stay with, you have no idea of how the movements are pushing you or where they're pushing you. But if you've got something firm like a post, you can tie the boat up to a post, and with

the slightest little change in the current, you'll see—if you're intent on looking—how the boat relates to the post. You'll notice, "Okay, something's happened."

And as you give the mind this place to stay, not only do you begin to see other intentions, but you also begin to see the extent to which your experience of the present moment is put together out of intentions.

Even though we talk about concentration as being a place where you can settle in, it's a house that you're constantly repairing, maintaining. It's a construction site. You want to be intent on making it good enough to provide some shelter from the elements, but you have to keep realizing that you're constantly putting it together, because things are constantly falling apart. Each present moment passes, passes, passes, and so you've got to prepare for the next moment and then the next. And where does the next moment come from? Well, part of it comes from your past kamma, but an important part comes from what you're doing right now. This is why you want to focus intently right here. In fact, according to dependent co-arising, what you're doing right now, your intentions right now, are something you sense prior to the input from the senses. That means you're priming yourself. So you want to look into the mind to see the nature of its priming, where its pushing you.

And the good news here, of course, is that if you prime yourself in the right way or nudge yourself in the right direction in the present moment, then when things come in from the past, you don't have to suffer from them. You can develop the skills to handle them. The Buddha compares this to being a wealthy person. If a wealthy person steals a goat, the wealthy person may be fined, but the fine isn't much. It's only a minor part of the wealthy person's general store of wealth. But if you're poor and penniless, they'll fine you heavily for stealing a goat or throw you in prison if you can't pay the fine, and you're going to suffer a lot.

So the skills you develop here in the present moment are a form of wealth. This is why you have to be intent on mastering them well. The Buddha mentions skills five altogether that, when you apply them in the present moment, can keep you from suffering from the results of past kamma. The first is training the mind so that it's not overcome by pain. We do this by getting the mind into concentration. We work with the breath, noticing the areas of the body that are in pain or tense and tight. We can work with those. And as we work with the more minor pains in the body, we begin to gain a sense that we've got some skills we can use to work on the major pains. This gives us a sense of confidence as we approach pain. That way, we can develop the right attitude toward it.

As the Buddha said, pain is something you want to comprehend. Particularly, here, he's talking about pain in the mind. But one of the ways you comprehend

pain in the mind is see how it relates to pain in the body. When you work with the breath and have at least a part of the body that feels really good, it gives you the confidence you need in order to look at pain, to not get so worked up about it, to realize that pain is something normal. We have these bodies and they're subject to pain. It's normal. That realization is one level of protection. It cuts through a lot of the whining the mind does around pain, whining that only adds to the suffering.

At the same time, when you're probing and analyzing the pain, you're no longer the victim of the pain. In fact, as you're moving around, looking at the pain from different angles, asking different questions, you're more of a moving target. The pain can't hit you. Finally, you get to the point where the pain is not overwhelming. That's a good skill to have.

The second skill the Buddha lists is learning how not to be overcome by pleasure. Now, a lot of us think that would be really cool: to have enough pleasure to be overwhelmed by it. But it's dangerous. If you allow yourself to be overwhelmed by pleasure, you're setting yourself to be overwhelmed by pain because the same attitude applies in both cases. You're surrendering to your feelings, whatever they are.

Here again, the concentration helps you gain the skill not to be overcome by pleasure. If you're going to stay focused on the breath, you have to learn how to stay firmly with the breath even though pleasure's coming up in different parts of the body. A sense of ease comes into the mind as you realize that you can stay here and don't have to keep moving around. And there'll be a part of the mind that says, "If I don't wallow in the pleasure or gobble it down, then it's going to leave me and I won't get the benefits I otherwise could have gained from it."

One of the first lessons you've got to learn is not to listen to that voice. You can't just gobble down the good feelings that come with meditation. And you don't need to. They're there, and they'll do their work without your gobbling them down. You don't have to gather them up. In fact, if you gobble them down, you use them up. If you allow them to be there without gobbling them down while you stay with the breath, you're creating the causes for continued pleasure. This way you can be with pleasure and yet not be overwhelmed by it.

The next two skills the Buddha says are necessary in the present moment are, virtue and discernment. Virtue is a matter of restraint. You know there are certain things you could do but they're going to be harmful, and you can say No, you're not going to do them. This element of restraint moves from external things into how you approach your senses from within. There are certain ways you could look at things or listen to things that would give rise to lust or greed or anger. You can

ask yourself, “Why bother?” And the ability to look in alternative ways, as Ajaan Lee says, allows you to be a person with two eyes. This relates to another base of success, which is circumspection. If you look with only one eye, you see only one side of things. As he said, look at both sides. If there’s something you like, look at the side that’s not so good. If there’s something you don’t like, look at the side that is good.

This relates to the other quality you’re trying to develop, which is discernment. You use your discernment to say No to the unskillful impulses in the mind, and you do it in a way that’s effective. You’re not driving these things underground. You say No because you understand them. And the No that comes from discernment is the most effective of all.

Then, in addition to these four skills, the Buddha says to develop an unlimited mind. This has to do with your practice of the brahmaviharas, and these start with the breath. As Ajaan Lee says, if you don’t have a sense of well-being inside when you spread goodwill, it’s like opening a water faucet where there’s no water. Just air comes out. And even though the flow of air may be cool in some ways, it’s certainly not as cooling as water. It’s not as nourishing and refreshing. So your working with the breath here gives you a source of cool water inside, a sense of well-being. When you have that, it’s a lot easier then to wish well for others.

Then ask yourself, “Is there anybody out there that it would be worthwhile having ill will for?” Ill will certainly doesn’t do anything good for you. It just aggravates the desire to do something unskillful. You have to realize that goodwill doesn’t mean, “Hey, may everybody be happy just as they are.” The right attitude is to understand that for other people to be happy, they’re going to have to become skillful in their behavior. And that’s something you can wish for anybody, no matter how bad or cruel they’ve been in the past. This means that goodwill can be universal. It can be unlimited. The same with compassion, the same with empathetic joy.

As for equanimity, that’s something slightly different. But again, it’s something you want to develop so that you can tap into it when you need it to protect you from past bad kamma—and from creating more bad kamma right now. Equanimity is not in and of itself a good thing. As the Buddha said, there are cases when it can be unskillful. You get lazy and say, “Well, this doesn’t matter. That doesn’t matter. Why bother?” That’s not the kind of equanimity the Buddha was recommending. He’s recommending the equanimity that comes when you realize that there are things that need to be done and you have only so much energy and only so much ability, so you have to determine what is the best place to invest that energy and ability. As for other things that would pull you away from

that, you've got to be equanimous about them. You're learning to be a good investor, a good investor of your time.

You also realize there are some things you simply can't do anything about, no matter how much you'd like to. This sometimes has to do with things coming in from past kamma that just barge right in. If you learn how to be equanimous about them, you suffer a lot less.

So these are some of the skills the Buddha recommends for mastering kamma in the present moment. This means that as you're intent on getting the mind to settle down here, your concentration is not just a matter of being still and senseless—what in Thai they call *log* or *stump* concentration. When you're settling down, you want to see and understand clearly what's happening. You want to see and understand clearly what you're doing so that you can develop some skills here in the present moment: this construction site we have here. You learn how to build things well so that even when the raw materials are kind of crooked, you learn how to make compensations so that you don't have to suffer from the crookedness of the materials, and you can keep building and maintaining a good house for the mind. It requires that you pay a lot of attention and that you're really intent on what you're doing.

This is what the quality of intentness is for, because it's one thing to hear about these different ideas, but it's something else entirely to actually see how they can best be applied right here, right now. That requires that you look carefully. You keep them in mind. But you've got to do your own looking. The more intent you are, the more consistent you are in being intent, the more you're going to see. And the more you see, the more you can accomplish.