

The Purity of Your Intentions

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The practice of concentration is an exercise in staying with one intention, sticking with it regardless. You make up your mind that you're going to stay with the breath, and you immediately find there will be other intentions coming up in the mind to pull you away from your original intention. You have to say No to them. And you have to learn the skills of saying No, so that it sticks.

It's not one of those cases where you just say No and that's going to take care of everything. You need to give the mind good reasons to stay. Some of the reasons come from your discernment, such as thinking in the long term, that this will be good for you in the long term. Others are more immediate. If you can learn how to breathe in a way that meets the needs of the body, the needs of the mind, it's going to be a lot easier to stay, to hold on to your original intention.

The needs of the body have to do with the energy level and the flow of energy through the body, so that the breath flows well, the blood flows well. Your legs don't fall asleep. All the different organs in the body feel nourished.

The needs of the mind have to do with having something that's interesting to observe.

Here again, your intention is important. When you think about how the breath fabricates feeling, and feeling fabricates the mind, you realize how important it is to get to know the breath. Then you think about all the important things you're going to learn about the mind as it stays here, the things that'll be revealed as you set this one intention in place. That way, you're able to deal effectively with any other intention. You see how intentions are formed, the stages by which a little inkling comes into the mind, turns into something bigger, and then seems to be something real. It can pull you away if you're not careful. The inkling develops hooks if you're not careful.

So you have to be quick. You're learning about the body; you're learning about the mind as you sit here with the breath. You see the areas where the mind tends to lie to itself, and even the areas where it tends to be self-destructive. In seeing these things more clearly, you can have some control over them, some freedom from them. You're gaining strength—the strength of your intention—and that's something you need to rely on, because there are so many areas in life where you have to go by your intentions because there's not much else to give you guidance.

Ever since I started teaching in France, people been giving me books on French history. Reading them, I've noticed that in times of unrest, in times of famine, some of the worst atrocities were committed by people who were totally

misinformed. Rumors spread. Villagers in some part of the country hear that a particular person is bad, someone comes along, they think it's that person, and they'll string him up, all because of the misinformation. It's at times like this when society is in crisis, information and misinformation come flying about, and old resentments come up. Old agendas come up. Everything gets called into question.

No matter how true some information may be, there'll be somebody who insists that it's false. No matter how false it may be, there'll be people who insist that it's true, all based on one of four things, the Buddha said, the four things that lead people astray. Either the things they like—in other words, a piece of news that fits in with something they've already believed—or their hatreds: Something fits in with some resentments they've been carrying all along. Or delusion. Or fear. That's it: likes, dislikes, delusions, fear. These four things lead people to do all kinds of horrible things.

So when information is hard to come by, you have to fall back on your intention not to fall for these four, what the Buddha calls wrong courses, and you fall back on the purity of your own intentions instead.

This is why it's important to have a solid intention, this is why we have the precepts. You make up your mind, you set up the intention that you're not going to kill, steal, have illicit sex, you're not going to lie, you're not going to take intoxicants, and you hold to that intention. That way, you get used to holding to an intention, regardless of what other people do. Your goodness then becomes independent.

There may be times when, by holding the precepts, you're going to suffer a loss of some kind, but as the Buddha said, that kind of loss is nothing compared to the loss of your virtue. So when information is hard to come by, all you have is your intentions, the purity of your intentions, to fall back on.

This is why we meditate: to get to know your intentions. You can stay with a good intention, you develop the skills for staying with a good intention, and you have the ability to recognize intentions that are not quite honest, that are devious, that are destructive, even though they may look good at first appearance. Over time, you learn how to recognize them, that these are the voices in the mind that you can't trust.

So when there seems to be very little clear guidance coming from outside as to what's the proper way to act, fall back on the Buddha's observation that your goodness has to be independent. You notice that the precepts don't make exceptions. In other words, there's no time when you can kill if somebody does something horrible. There's no time when you can lie if somebody says something

you don't like. In other words, you can't take other people's behavior as an excuse for dropping the precepts.

You should have the same attitude toward the firmness of your intention as you meditate. As you stay here with the breath, as you go through the day, nothing becomes an excuse to drop the breath. No matter what anybody does, you want to stay grounded. At the very least, maintain the intention that underlies the practice as a whole, which is goodwill for all. No matter what people do: goodwill.

After all, you're not extending the goodwill because they deserve it. That's one of the big misunderstandings out there: that we have to figure out why people deserve our goodwill, and only then will we be happy to give it. Actually, we develop goodwill for all because it's our protection. There's a passage where the Buddha said it's our wealth. The nature of wealth is that you have something good to fall back on in times of hardship, something you can depend on. Well, this is it: Goodwill is what you can fall back on.

Now, we do know that to purify our intentions, we can't simply go by the goodness of the initial intention. We also have to look at the results of our actions if we want our intentions to become skillful intentions. But sometimes the results are hard to see. Like the infection going around right now: It's invisible. People may have it and not know it. So in cases like that, when you're not getting enough feedback, all you have to fall back on is the purity of your intentions.

So learn how to recognize a pure intention inside yourself, inside others. When you see someone else acting on an impure intention, immediately take it as a lesson: "Maybe I have that myself," you can tell yourself. Look around inside. Because if you really want security, really want dependable wealth, you want to make sure that the gold that you're hoarding up is genuine gold, not fool's gold.

Look carefully at your intentions and learn how to hold to a good intention when you've found one. As long as it's good, keep holding on. That way, it'll always be there to fall back on when you need it—which is the nature of dependable wealth.