

## *Faith in Present Intentions*

*November 30, 2020*

There are times when things of the world respond to our desires. You can push them this way, push them that way, and they *allow* themselves to be pushed. But there are also times when they don't respond at all. We push, and they push back. You begin to realize the extent to which they really are not under our control. We have some control over them, but there's an awful lot that we can't control. When the world is out of control this way, you begin to wonder how you can live here. You wonder if the idea of control has any validity at all, if it's entirely illusory.

When you start thinking in that way, your heedfulness dies, and when your heedfulness dies all hope of developing any kind of skill, developing skillful qualities of the mind, will die as well. As the Buddha said, "The path to the deathless is heedfulness. When you're heedless, it's as if you're already dead."

This is why we have to have conviction in the Buddha's awakening, that he showed that it is possible through human action to find a true happiness. There are parts of your experience where you really can push and push all the way to a true happiness, a happiness that doesn't change, a happiness that causes no harm to anybody. It's good to hold that in mind. That's the strength of conviction.

It allows the principle of heedfulness to make sense, because heedfulness comes down to the realization there are dangers in the world, but you can make a difference through your actions, and by making a difference you can avoid or escape those dangers. If you couldn't make a difference, there'd be no reason to be heedful at all. You'd just have to go along with the flow, allowing the machine to chew you up and spit you out, and content yourself with not fighting against the machine. But the simple fact that we have the ability to content ourselves or not content ourselves shows that there's something we have some control over.

And conviction in the Buddha's awakening gives some very precise ideas of where that control is. After all, one of the principles he awakened to was the principle of karma—the power of action. And he located action in our intentions.

When he gave his shortest analysis of his awakening, it was a causal principle: When this is that is. When this isn't that isn't. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that. Those are actually *two* principles: The first one is causality in the moment. In other words, the cause arises, and the effect arises at the same time. When the cause goes away, the effect goes away at the same time. The second principle is causality over time.

An example of the first would be putting your finger in the fire. You're not going to wait until your next lifetime for it to hurt—it's going to hurt right now. You take it out—it

immediately feels a lot better. There are still going to be some long-term consequences from having put your finger in the fire—that's causality over time. One action can operate under both principles.

So when we can push the world around, who's doing the pushing? Our intentions. But they're pushing against the results of past intentions: If the past intentions were good, things will go in line with the way we want them to. If they were not, they put up resistance.

We have very little control over what's coming in from the past. We can develop states of mind that minimize the effect of past bad actions. It's one of the reasons why we develop limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity—to make our minds enlarged. We develop virtue, concentration, discernment so the mind is not overcome by pain or by pleasure.

When you've developed those qualities of mind, it actually can have an effect on past bad actions. They can't turn the results of bad actions into something good, but they can minimize the bad.

The important thing is what we do with our minds right now—our intentions right now. We have to have faith in our present intentions, because there are times when the world outside just doesn't respond to our desires at all. You look around: There's the pandemic; there's the mess in politics. You realize that people are going to make decisions, and you have no control over them. But you do have control over your own intentions—and they can make a difference.

Just because bad influences are coming in from outside doesn't mean you have to respond in a bad way, or that they have to push you around. We do have this element of free choice here in the present moment. How much free choice? There's no number by which you can measure it, to say you have  $x$  percentage of free choice at any one time. But you always do have the choice to do something skillful, even if it's simply refraining from something unskillful—holding yourself back. But that ability to refrain yourself—that is skillful.

Now, there may be unpleasant consequences. You can think of situations in which people are trying to force you to do something that's unskillful, and they're going to punish you if you don't. If you refuse, you have to put up with the punishment. But at least you've preserved the quality of your intention, and you have to believe in that. You have to have *faith* in that. In the long term, it's going to be for the good.

Because what you do now, of course, is what'll create influences now and on into the future. Sometimes the influences are not immediately all that visible, but they will have influence in the future. It's because of this principle that we're training the mind. This is why we meditate.

We may be coming to meditation for other reasons, but when you meditate for the long term, though, this is why you stay: You realize that the quality of your intentions shapes your life, so you have to look into the quality of your mind in the present moment. We're trying to

bring the mind to the breath to give it an anchor in the present moment, both so that it can see the present moment clearly and so that it has strength to do what's right.

When you get the mind still, you can see things moving in the mind that you wouldn't otherwise. Areas of the mind that were blurry, foggy, or muddy get clear. And if the mind can stay still with the breath and feel at home with the breath, that gives it strength.

There's a sense of well-being, but the well-being is not an end in and of itself. As the Buddha said, one of the results of concentration is "a pleasant abiding in the here and now." You can breathe in ways that feel really good, deep down into the body. But that sense of pleasure can also be a source for strength. It's food for the mind.

It's when we're feeling frazzled, tired, that it's hard to do the things that we know would be the right thing to do. We feel we just don't have the strength. But when the mind is well fed like this, then it does have the strength to figure out what the skillful thing would be in any situation, and to carry it through.

So in training the mind, we're keeping ourselves alive, because this is where our life is—in the quality of our present intentions—and having *faith* in the quality of our present intentions, because the world can look pretty bleak at times. But if you look inside yourself, you realize: You have a power here inside. And although there may be constraints outside, still you've got this potential here—so you want to keep it alive.

You do that by regarding the practice as something to do not only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, but also when you're moving around outside, engaged in the world, always looking for, "What is the skillful thing to do right now?"

It may be little things, but if you develop the habit of looking for what's skillful and carrying it through, you find that the habit grows, and you're capable of things that are more and more skillful things all the time.

This is one of those truths that *becomes* true because you believe in it and act on that belief.

There was an American philosopher, William James, who said that there are basically two kinds of truths. There are *truths of the observer*, say, where you're trying to watch the movement of the planets: Wanting them to be a certain way actually gets in the way of seeing what they actually do. For centuries, astronomers wanted the orbits of the planets to be circles, and they tried their darnedest to make them fit into their idea of what the planet's orbit should be. It wasn't until Kepler came along and said, "No, they're not circles, they're ellipses," that they finally realized what was actually going on. That was a case where desires got in the way of seeing what's really true.

But there are other truths that become true only because you believe in them and want them to be true. Your freedom to do what is skillful, and to explore how far skillfulness can go—that's a truth you have to believe in for it to happen. It's like being an athlete: If you believe

that you can be a good runner, you've got hope. If you don't believe you can, then no matter how strong you are, there's no hope at all.

So our hope for safety, our hope for well-being lies in having faith in the quality of our current intentions and keeping that faith alive by trying to act on our most skillful intentions—whatever seems to be most skillful at any time—and then checking on the results. If it turns out, “I was wrong,” well, you've learned, and you can apply that knowledge the next time around. But you're taking your intentions seriously.

There's that old Peanuts cartoon where Lucy is complaining: She says, “If you have to go around watching everything you say all the time, you never get much said.” And the Buddha would have responded, “Well, that's the whole point.” You don't have to get a lot said. You want to get *skillful* things said, and that means you have to watch everything you say. You have to watch everything you do.

Now, this may sound onerous, and it would be if it weren't for the fact that we can base it on our practice of concentration—which is food for the mind. That, too, is a form of skill we can develop. So it's not just work. It's learning how to feed the mind in a way that gives it a long-term strength, deep strength, *enlarged* strength.

This is why the Buddha uses the image of a large river, of the Earth, of space, to describe the quality of mind he wants us to develop. People can dig in the Earth, but they can't make it be without earth, because it's just too big. People can try to set fire to the water of the river, but it won't set fire. They can try to write things all over space, but nothing stays in space. Those are the qualities you want to keep in mind as you stay focused. Those are skillful images to keep in mind.

So learning this principle of being skillful in the present moment is not just work. It's not a chore. It's also a matter of learning how to nourish the mind, feed the mind, so that it finds true happiness in doing so. The rewards are not all at the end of the path. They're all along the way.