

Admirable Intentions

November 1, 2022

We've come here with a good intention—which is to train our minds—to help one another in training our minds, so try to maintain that good intention. All of the Buddha's teachings are a *training of intentions*. Intentions are food for the mind. Just as the body has good food and bad food, the mind has good food and bad food as well.

If you want the mind to be strong, you have to feed it good food. It starts with generosity, virtue, and developing good qualities in the mind. Of course, with generosity and virtue, you're already developing good qualities. You're thinking of other people: You realize that your happiness is not the sort of thing that you can develop just on your own without thinking about other people's happiness. The same goes with virtue: If your happiness depends on harming other people, it's not going to last. They'll do what they can to destroy your happiness.

So, you abstain from things that would cause harm. You develop mindfulness, alertness, and a quality called ardency, *ātappa* in Pali. In the practice of virtue, you keep your precepts in mind, and then you're alert to watch your behavior—to make sure that what you do and say falls in line with those precepts. If you find that you have any habits that go against the precepts, you're earnest in trying to change those habits.

All of this is good preparation for the meditation. You become more and more sensitive to your intentions, and you learn how to articulate them to yourself. All too many people go through life not really knowing why they're doing things. It's all too common when you ask someone, "Why did you do that?" and they have to stop and think for a bit. But in the practice of generosity and virtue, you're trained in looking at your intentions and articulating them clearly.

That way, when the time comes to meditate, you'll be clear about the intention to stay, clear about the intention to get the mind into concentration. That's what mindfulness practice is for. Sometimes you hear that mindfulness practice is one thing, concentration is something else, but the Buddha never taught it that way. The formula for mindfulness is keeping track of "the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world." That's a formula for getting the mind into concentration.

There are two activities there that you're focused on. The first is keeping track of the body *in & of itself*. In this case, it's the breath. You stay with the breath

coming in, the breath going out. You don't think of the body in terms of the world, whether it's strong enough to do the work of the world, whether it's good-looking in the eyes of other people. You put those kinds of issues aside. Just: What is it like to have a body, right here, right now? You realize that the breath is probably the most prominent of the different properties of the body, so you focus simply on the sensation of breathing.

As the breath comes in, the breath goes out, realize that *breath* here isn't so much the air coming in and out through the nose. The Buddha classifies it as a property of the body of itself—the energy flow in the body that allows the air to come in and go out. As you breathe in, breathe out, become aware of the fact that energy flows everywhere in the body. In some places it's more prominent than in others, but that's where you want to focus.

That's one of the activities in establishing mindfulness. The other is, if the mind goes wandering out to thoughts of the world—which the Buddha classifies either as greed or distress—you put those thoughts aside.

That's a formula for concentration: focused on one thing, not paying attention to other things.

Here again, we have the qualities of being ardent, alert, and mindful. In this case, mindfulness means keeping in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath. Alert means being alert to how the breath feels in the different parts of the body. Ardent means trying to do this well. If you find the mind wandering off into thoughts of greed and distress, you just bring it right back. Actually, you don't have to *bring* it back. Just drop those thoughts, and you find that the mind tends to gravitate back to the breath.

When you're with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how it feels. The more sensitive you can be to the breathing process, the more comfortable it will become, and the more the mind can settle down.

So, as you're being mindful, you're steering the mind into concentration and finding a sense of well-being right here. You've learned from your practice of generosity and virtue that those activities in and of themselves are happy activities. We read about the rewards that come over the long term: the rewards of being generous, the rewards of being virtuous, but as you practice them, you begin to realize that, in and of themselves, there's a sense of well-being. The Buddha himself said that *acts of merit* is another word for happiness. The actual doing—in and of itself—is a happy doing.

So, you're focusing your quest for well-being more and more into the right here, right now. And you find it as the mind begins to settle down. You put aside thoughts of the outside world, and the Buddha says you develop a sense of

seclusion. You withdraw from the world—and you're *right here*. That in and of itself creates a sense of well-being.

That's because, as the mind wanders out into the world, it gets shattered. Your thoughts scattered all around. But as you drop all of that and settle in, there's a sense of the mind becoming a whole. It gets its entirety back. All the different pieces come back together. It's like a flock of birds flying through the air and then suddenly settling down neatly on a telephone line.

When there's a sense of well-being, allow it to spread. Ajaan Lee talks about getting the breath comfortable by experimenting with different rhythms of breathing. That's part of the well-being of concentration, but it's not simply that you've got a comfortable sensation in the body. The fact that the mind is more centered, concentrated, less distracted, and it's with something it can take an interest in: That creates a mental sense of well-being. You put those two together, allow them to stay together, and they nurture each other. Allow that sense of well-being to spread.

The word *concentration* is a little bit unfortunate. It gives a sense that you're focused simply on one spot. While there is a sense of being centered, you also want your range of awareness to fill the whole body. You're aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. There's a sense of ease that fills the body as well. This centered but broad awareness is a good state of mind to try to maintain. It's part of our duty with regard to the noble path.

All of the four noble truths have their duties: *Dukkha*—suffering, stress, pain—is to be *comprehended*. Its cause is to be *abandoned*. Its cessation is to be *realized*. And the path to that cessation is something you *develop*.

You don't simply watch the mind as it gathers and then falls apart, and say, "Oh, I've learned something about inconstancy." If the concentration starts falling apart, you try to put it back together again. You develop it; you nurture it.

As the Buddha said with any skillful quality, if it's not there, you're mindful to try to give rise to it; when it's there, you're mindful to get it to develop and come to the culmination of its development. So, whatever you need to do once the mind does settle down to keep it settled down, to deepen that sense of being established right here, being where you want to be—try to nurture those activities.

As you get more sensitive to the breath here in the present moment, more sensitive to that sense of well-being that comes as the mind is centered, you also become more sensitive to areas of stress, both physical and mental, that you didn't notice before. You simply took them for granted.

This is why the practice of concentration is such an important part of gaining insight. Otherwise, without concentration, you miss levels of stress that you wouldn't see. And if you're missing those levels, then you don't really comprehend stress.

So, in the course of developing the path, you're also working on the duties with regard to the other noble truths. As you develop this sense of well-being which is called *pleasure of form*—your sense of the body as you feel it from within—it helps you to step back from your sensual cravings.

Sensuality is not so much indulging in sensual pleasures, it's indulging in your thoughts and plans *about* sensual pleasures. We can think about food, for instance: how you'd like this, No, you want it like that. How about trying this, how about trying that? You can think about that for long periods of time, and that of course would lead you to want to find those pleasures.

Whereas if you have the sense of well-being of simply inhabiting your body, thoughts of sensuality begin to hold less appeal. You're less drawn to them.

As the Buddha said, for the most part we see sensuality as our only escape from pain. One of the things the practice of the path does is that it gives you an alternative. As he also said, no matter how much you may see the drawbacks of sensuality—and they're many—if you don't have this alternative pleasure, you're going to go back to sensuality. So the practice of concentration is a very direct way of dealing with that kind of craving in helping you to abandon it.

As for your ability to observe the mind as it settles down, you begin to see individual events: You see feelings. You see the way the mind fabricates things. You see perceptions simply as events in and of themselves, part of a causal chain, before they coalesce into a state of becoming—in other words, the act of taking on an identity in a world of experience. If you can see things in this way, you begin to gain some distance from your other cravings.

This is how the path helps you abandon craving—which is the cause of suffering—and it helps you to comprehend suffering itself, realizing that suffering is not so much pains caused by people or things outside, it's the mind's own clinging. You see how it clings. You see that there's stress in the clinging, and that helps you to comprehend it.

So, concentration is a necessary part of getting all of the duties of the four noble truths complete.

Now, as the mind settles down, there may come times when you wonder what's happening in the mind. Nothing's happening, it's just very still, very quiet—so when are the insights going to come? This is where the Thai ajaans like to say, "Think like a hunter." A hunter goes out and he doesn't know when the

animals he's looking for are going to come. He knows where they tend to be, but he can't say, "Well, they're going to come by at 2:00, so I can get the food back home at 4:00, and we can have dinner by 6:00."

He has to be very patient, but at the same time very alert. If he's not alert, the animals can come right under his nose and he won't know they're there. If he's not patient and still, he'll make noises, and the animals will know that he's there and they'll run away.

So, you want to combine these qualities of being quiet but very alert, sensitive to slight changes in your concentration, because those are the things that will indicate that something's going on in the mind. It's in those slight changes that you begin to see how the process of fabrication—*saṅkhāra* in Pali—puts things together in the mind. You're in a better position to see: This is how intentions form. As the Buddha saw, intentions are not only food for the mind, but they also drive our lives. When we die, they drive our rebirth.

And they tend to drive us toward suffering. Think of those instructions Ven. Raṭṭhapāla gave to the king who asked him, "Why did you ordain?" As Raṭṭhapāla said, "The world is swept away, it does not endure," a teaching on inconstancy. "It offers no shelter, there's no one in charge," a teaching on pain. The illustration he gave was the fact that the king had a recurring disease. Even though his courtiers were standing around, basically waiting for him to die, even though he was king he couldn't say, "Well, take some of this pain, so I don't have to feel so much." Even as king, he wasn't in charge of his pains. "The world has nothing of its own, one has to pass-on leaving everything behind," a teaching on *anatta*, or not-self.

The king reflected on these things, and then Raṭṭhapāla asked him, "Suppose someone were to come from the east and say, 'There's a kingdom to the east full of treasures, but with a very weak army. You could conquer it.'" Here the king is eighty years old, and he's been reflecting on aging, illness, and death, but when Raṭṭhapāla asks the king, "Would you go for it?" the king says, "Yes." "How about a kingdom to the west?" "Yes." "To the north, south?" Yes, yes." "A kingdom on the other side of the ocean?" He'd go for that, too.

That was Raṭṭhapāla's conclusion: The world is a slave to craving. And what does it crave? These things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self.

We don't observe ourselves. We go for these things. We think about their drawbacks, but then we can't resist them. One of the reasons why we meditate is to put the mind into a position where it can learn how to resist those cravings, and find a happiness that doesn't harm anybody at all.

Here the king was willing to kill in order to get what he wanted. That's what craving can lead you to do. So we foster these other desires. It's not the case that all desires are bad. The desire to be skillful, the desire to abandon unskillful behavior—that's part of the path. It comes under right effort. It's what motivates us to practice concentration to begin with. It's why we practice generosity, why we practice virtue. That intention to find a happiness that's harmless: That's something that should be nurtured because it's good food for the mind, and it leads us to a good place.

Whatever work is involved, we're pursuing this path, and helping one another pursue this path. It's all good work. After all, the path is something we put together through our intentions. So, we learn how to recognize good intentions so that we can nurture them well.

Those good intentions not only lead to the end of the path, but they also provide us food for the journey. So, learn to appreciate these activities as food in and of themselves, nourishment in and of themselves. They're good now as you do them and they lead to a good place.

How many other things are there in the world for which you can say the same thing? You look at the world outside: Sometimes it seems to be totally insane. But you look at the world of the path and you realize, as they say, "It's admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end." Good all the way through.