Skillful Intentions

September 28, 2003

Got an opportunity for the next hour to give yourself totally to the meditation, which means that you don’t have to carry around any worries about the future, any thoughts about the past, any desires for the future. any regrets about the past. Those can be put aside. Set up the intention that you want to stay right here for the hour, and then try to maintain that intention, because intention is what lies at the heart of the practice. Our intentions are the problem, and our intentions can also be the solution, depending on the other factors we bring together with our intentions. As the Buddha once said, “Intention lies at the essence of karma.” Or, to put that in plainer English, it lies at the essence of our actions. And our actions really do shape our lives. Sometimes we don’t like the idea of karma. It sounds kind of onerous. We’re responsible for everything that happens to us. Many times it sounds like a fatalistic doctrine that what we meet up with in life is due to some unknowable action in the past. But that’s a misuse of the teaching. The Buddha’s whole purpose, in fact, in focusing on action and then focusing on the intention that lies at the heart of the action, is because he saw that this is a place where change can be made in our lives. We can change the things that we intend to do. If we pay careful attention to our intentions, things open up inside. We see how we’re creating unnecessary suffering for ourselves and others, and if we work on making our intentions more skillful, we can put an end to that suffering. Our intentions are that powerful. So as we’re meditating, we’re focusing on establishing a skillful intention in the mind, which is to stay centered with the breath, be mindful of the breath, be alert to the breath, and then try to maintain that as much as we can. It’s called right effort. If something skillful arises in the mind, you do your best to maintain it and make it stronger. Don’t let other intentions come and get in the way. The intention to dawdle over the past, the intention to ruminate about the future, they can come in and do sneak attacks on you if you’re not careful, if you’re not watchful, which is why mindfulness and alertness are so important. Otherwise, you’re like a person who’s sitting perfectly still, and someone sneaks up behind him and pulls a big burlap sack over his head, carries him off someplace he knows not where, and when he comes out of the burlap sack, he’s someplace else entirely. In the meantime, he’s like those mice that we had to trap earlier in the summer. You spin them around in the cage, and when they get out, they’re totally disoriented. That’s the way most of us are. We leave one train of thought and go to another one, and afterwards we ask ourselves, “What happened in the middle?” It’s very rare that we can trace the connection. The mind has these blackout spells. That’s what you’ve got to watch for, because all kinds of things can happen during the blackout. So in order to protect your intention, in order to help that skillful intention grow, you’ve got to be very mindful, you’ve got to be very alert. Remind yourself of the importance of what you’re doing. It may seem a minor thing, just being here with your breath, coming in and going out for an hour, a strange interlude in your life. But it can have important ramifications, because as you develop more and more mindfulness, more and more alertness, those blank spaces in the mind, those blackout periods in the mind, get shorter and shorter, and you become more and more clear about what you’re doing. And you see that the Buddha was right, that what you do really does shape your experience. You’re not a passive recipient of things coming at you. You take an active role in creating and shaping your experience as well. And the Buddha’s teachings on karma, his teachings on action, are meant to give you the right attitude towards that fact. As I said earlier, we often think of karma as a fatalistic doctrine, but the Buddha wasn’t fatalistic at all. Remember his principle of causality. What you experience now can be influenced by past actions, but it’s also influenced by present actions. And it really does work either to your happiness or to your total lack of happiness. That phrase that we chant, “Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall.” It’s meant to be empowering, but it’s also meant to be sobering. Empowering, giving you the sense of confidence that what you do in your life really does make a difference. Even though the sun may go nova someday, that doesn’t really matter as much as what you’re doing right now. It doesn’t wipe out the goodness that you’ve done. And even though there are times in the meditation when it seems pretty hopeless and the mind keeps wandering off, wandering off, you can just keep bringing it back, bringing it back. And after a while, the bringing it back begins to become more powerful. It becomes your habit. It starts this habit of coming back, coming back, more and more quickly. That becomes more dominant in your mind. So this is one of the purposes of the teaching on karma is to give you a sense of confidence, in Thai it’s called basada. Actually, in Pali it’s called basada. In Thai it’s called basathat. The confidence that what you do really does matter. And if you do it well, it does make a difference. If you do it poorly, it makes a difference of a different sort. But confidence is especially helpful when doing things well takes extra effort, takes extra care. But the effort is worth it. The care is worth it. That’s the first purpose of the teachings on karma, to give you a sense of confidence, that you’re not a tiny cog in a big machine that doesn’t have any say in what the machine is going to do. Remember, you’re the shaper of your world of experience, even though we’re all sitting here in the same room. Each of us has his or her own world of experience. And it’s what you’re shaping. So if you learn to be more skillful at the shaping, your experience will change. And even though past karma may bring in things that are not so desirable, if you get more and more skillful in dealing with the present moment as it comes, as it comes, you don’t have to add extra pain onto the pain from the past. In fact, you can learn to sidestep it, create a state of mind in which that pain becomes less and less imposing, less and less oppressive. That’s the encouraging or the empowering side of the teaching on karma. Of course, there’s also the sobering side. If you are responsible, you’ve got to be careful. Because if you’re unskillful in your actions, if your habits are such that you keep creating suffering for yourself and others, that really does make a difference as well. So you have to choose carefully what you do. Focus your attention right here on your choices. In other words, this aspect of the teaching on karma is meant to give you a sense of heedfulness, that it really is important. You really do want to be careful about what you do. The third use of the teaching on karma is to develop a sense of equanimity. Equanimity towards the past, equanimity towards the actions of other people, realizing that you can’t control other people. You can influence them to some extent, but ultimately what they do is entirely up to them. You have your freedom as an actor, they have their freedom as an actor. So when you get in a situation where you’re frustrated with other people’s actions, the teaching on karma allows you to step back a bit to ask that question, “Exactly what are you responsible for? Where can you make a difference?” Focus your attention on the areas where you can make a difference, and leave alone the areas where you can’t. In other words, the teaching on equanimity is not so much a teaching on indifference, it’s a teaching on giving you perspective, so you have a proper sense of priorities in your life. Learn to look at things in more impersonal terms. That helps get a lot of the drama out of the way, and gives you a clear sense of what really should be done, if something can be done. If nothing can be done, will you accept that fact as well? With a sense that there’s an underlying logic to things. The world isn’t entirely arbitrary. So you focus your attention on the areas where you can make a difference. The areas that you’ve learned from experience really do make a difference. This is where you find that you get more and more skillful at shaping your life. You don’t waste a lot of energy in areas where you can’t make a difference, and you are a lot clearer about where the line lies between the areas where you can change and the areas where you can’t. And you can give more and more attention, more and more energy, more and more thought to the areas where you really can make a difference. This puts the mind in a much better place. It all comes from developing these very basic habits, being mindful, being alert, being careful about your intentions, not to will anything that’s going to be for your own harm or for the people around you. When you live in the present moment, by this principle, you find it really does make a difference. You take it as a working hypothesis and see what happens in your life. And you find bit by bit all the unnecessary issues that tend to weigh the mind down begin to fall away, fall away, because you see they really aren’t all that important. They don’t matter nearly as much as your ability to be very clear about your intentions, to be skillful with your intentions. And to work at developing that skillfulness to higher and higher levels, being more and more precise. Many times we associate meditating with simply being in the present moment, and in the back of our minds is the idea that we can just be in the present moment and have no sense of duties, no sense of future at all. There’s one passage in the Canon where the Buddhist seems to say something like that, “Chasing after the past, not placing big expectations on the future, but just being clearly aware of what’s happening right now, right now.” But in that passage, he then goes on to say, “Doing whatever your duty is right now.” So it’s not just observing or being in the present, but it’s seeing clearly what needs to be done in the present. Because as the next line says, “For who knows, tomorrow death may come.” You can’t put things off. It’s not that you forget about the present. It’s just you’re very heedful about the opportunities that are here right now, to do what’s best, as best you can figure it out. And if you have the opportunity to learn, if there’s more time to your life, you use that time to learn from your mistakes and get more and more skillful. It’s a rigorous discipline, but it’s underlying, and it’s a sense of nourishment that comes from the well-being that grows and grows and grows in the mind as you train it in this direction. Because after all, it’s the worst suffering in life, it’s the suffering we inflict on ourselves. And as the Buddha pointed out, it’s totally needless. And when you learn how to stop inflicting that suffering on yourself, you find that other sufferings, other pains, other discomforts really can’t penetrate into the mind. Because your mindfulness and alertness develop to the point where you can catch yourself before you start playing along with those things and using them to stab your mind. And so when you’re not inflicting pain on yourself, you’re not weighing yourself down unnecessarily. If the people around you have some burdens, well, you can help shoulder them because you have the extra strength that comes when you’re not weighing yourself down. In this way, your practice becomes of use not only to yourself, but also to the people around you. It teaches you how to come from a position of strength and well-being instead of the usual position of hunger and weakness in which most people find themselves. So try to maintain this intention for the rest of the hour, that you’re going to be right here developing your skills in mindfulness and alertness, really getting to know the breath. As your anchor in the present moment. It’s like the target of your mind. You focus on the target and the skills you learn are becoming sharper and sharper at shooting the bullseye. Those skills don’t go away when the bullseye gets taken down. You learn to be steadier, you learn to be more precise, you learn to be more sensitive. And then you take those skills and use them in the whole rest of your life. They’re there to be used. In the meantime, you’re supported by the sense of well-being that comes from the mind, that has a good solid foundation right here. The images they often use in the texts are of nourishment. There’s one passage where the Buddha talks about the practice as being like living in a frontier fortress. In the sense of well-being that comes from a concentrated mind, he says, that’s like the stores of food that keep the soldiers in the fortress well-fed and nourished. So even though the discipline is rigorous, you’re well-fed, you’re well-cared for. So it becomes the absolute opposite of being a burden. You find it makes life a lot lighter. You’re not taking on unnecessary burdens. You’re focusing on things that really do make a difference. There’s less and less waste in your life. The effort that gets put into living becomes more effective, more beneficial. So even though while you’re on the path you may not have yet reached the goal, it’s a good path to be on. It’s a good place to be. It’s a good direction to be walking.

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