Developing Intentness

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Every night we come here to practice developing the mind. That’s a literal translation of the Pali term citta-bhavana, which is the Pali term for meditation. We’re developing the mind, we’re also developing intentness. That’s another meaning of the word citta. In other words, we don’t just let things pass by. We watch them, pay careful attention. Because a lot of the suffering that we have in our lives, a lot of the problems we have in our lives, come from paying not very careful attention at all. Assuming we know this, assuming we know that, assuming that this isn’t important, that’s not important, we can slough over this, slough over that. That kind of attitude gets you in a lot of trouble. So we’re trying to overcome that habit as we meditate, being really intent on what we’re doing. Because there’s no one other factor in our lives that shapes things as much as our own actions. And again, that’s one of those areas where we tend to slough over things. This’ll be okay, that’ll be okay, this doesn’t matter. We have to be really intent. We have to be one to see what we’re doing, see the effects of what we’re doing, and to see how we can change it for the better. We pick up all kinds of careless habits throughout life. And so the meditation is bound to be difficult, bound to take effort, asking us to look at precisely the things we don’t want to look at many times. Our intentions, why we do certain things. Because the motivation behind our actions can be on many different levels, one level hiding another. So we have to look carefully. This is why the meditation focuses on our intent, looking inside, because inside is where the intentions come. We’ve got to keep looking back at ourselves, at ourselves, at ourselves. Not because we’re coming down hard on ourselves, but simply because we’re realistic. It’s like going out in the woods. You realize that some of the dangers are totally beyond your control. Like the fire out there. We have no control over how the fire’s going to go. We may feel relatively secure that it’s going away from us, but the wind could change. All kinds of strange things can happen. We sit around worrying about that. That doesn’t help at all. But we can ask ourselves, “Well, what can we do?” And then we focus on doing just that, and being very responsible, very clear about what you’re doing. So that if danger does come to you, it doesn’t come from your own stupidity, your own carelessness, your own complacency. Years back, when I was electrocuted, as soon as I realized I was being electrocuted, the first thought that went through my head, and the first thought that hurt a lot, was that I was going to die from my own stupidity. I should have checked the plug that I had plugged in. You don’t want to come across danger with that thought, “It was because of my own stupidity that this happened.” It’s a lot better when aging, illness, and death come, that they come through forces that are beyond your control, but in the meantime you’ve done everything you could to prepare for it. So that’s why the emphasis is on what we do, because what we do can make a difference. And in the areas where it can’t make a difference, it’s totally beyond your control anyhow. It’s not worth your while to worry about it. So it focuses your efforts, focuses your attention on the effort, and in the areas where your actions can make a difference, in terms of what you do, what you say, what you think. So it all lies right inside here. There’s a common statement in Thailand, that all 84,000 divisions of the canon come down to just three things, your body, your speech, and your mind. And those are things that are right here. They’re things that are in your control. The whole purpose of the Dhamma is to focus your attention on areas you might have overlooked, to be heedful, to realize that it is important, because the quality of your intentions can really make a big difference. And if shoddy intentions work their way in, or harmful intentions work their way in, they really can do a lot of damage, so you can’t be careless. Discernment is all about seeing very clearly, as clearly as you can, the distinction between a skillful intention and an unskillful intention, and seeing the connections between your intentions and the results that you get. It’s one of the reasons why I like the breath meditation technique that Ajaan Lee formulated. Make sure that you’re very clear about what you’re doing with the breath and the results that come. It’s sort of like a laboratory for the principle of karma, right here, right before your very eyes, right in your nose, and in your lungs, and in your whole body. You can see the results that one decision can have when you decide to breathe in a particular way, what’s going to happen. It gets you in touch with the decisions that are being made down in your body. Of course, it’s the mind that’s making the decisions, but with reference to what’s going on in your body, how you hold your body, how you breathe. A lot of subtle decisions are being made down there, and this is a good way of exploring that, because this is where a lot of the subconscious decisions are being made as well. So you want to uncover as much as you can. Pay very careful attention to this area that for most of us we tend to slough over. When you work, you get totally into your head. If you read a book, you’re totally into the book. Our minds have a way of flowing in and occupying whatever it is that they’re concerned with for the time being. That process is called becoming. What normally happens is the mind goes flowing out to other little worlds that it creates for itself, and its awareness of the body gets stunted, gets squeezed out. So a lot of the decisions that are being made down in this part of your awareness get squeezed out, or at least your awareness of them gets squeezed out as well. So we try to come back and re-inhabit the body. So it’s subtle things in the breath and the body that indicate subtle movements in the mind that become more and more clear. This is a type of becoming and birth as well, filling up the body and dwelling inside the body. But it’s the kind of becoming and birth that the Buddha recommended, and it’s part of the right path, the right concentration. As Jhana Lee once said, “If you’re trying to get past becoming and birth, you’re not going to be able to do it unless you really understand the process and can do it very skillfully.” So inhabit your body. See what that shows you about what’s going on in your mind. You’ll find that lots of things that get squeezed down into the subconscious suddenly come into the light of day. You get to know your intentions a lot better, and you can be a lot more intent on watching them, seeing them carefully, getting a sense of what motivations lie behind your actions. And as you can discern these various layers, that’s how you can begin to let go of the unskillful layers, develop the more skillful ones, because you’re more fully aware of the whole range of your awareness. So wherever in this field of awareness the decisions are being made, you know them, and you don’t let anything important slip past you. You don’t let things get covered up by a flog of unknowing or a smoke of unknowing. A lot of the mind is smoke and mirrors. So what we’re trying to do as meditators is cast a lot of light into those areas. The more fully aware you are, the more skillfully you can deal with the problems that arise in your mind, if you watch carefully. So that quality of watching carefully, that’s another meaning for citta-bhavana, developing this quality of intentness. And Jnana Mahaprabhu once remarked that if you’re intent on all your proper duties in the course of the day, it becomes a habit that gets developed in your meditation as well. You don’t let things slide, you don’t let things slip past you. You don’t immediately assume that because you’re lazy that whatever’s happening is unimportant, doesn’t make a difference, doesn’t matter. A lot of important decisions tend to get made in the fog of that attitude. So you want to be very clear about them. And the development of concentration is what gives you the energy to keep up this level of intentness, so it doesn’t wear you out. It actually becomes energizing when the clear seeing and the stillness of the mind go together. They reinforce one another. So as we meditate, we’re not just letting go, letting go. There is a fair amount of letting go in the meditation, but there’s also a lot of developing as well. In one of the suttas on the customs of the noble ones and the traditions of the noble ones, the Buddha said this was the fourth tradition, to delight in developing and to delight in letting go. The first three deal with the requisites, being content with whatever food, clothing, shelter you get. And not exalting yourself or disparaging others for the fact that you’re more content than they are with what you get. From that logic, you’d think that the fourth of the traditions would deal with medicine, but it doesn’t. It goes off into the development of the mind directly. You delight in developing all the good qualities of the mind, and you delight in letting go of all the unskillful ones. And again, you don’t disparage others and you don’t exalt yourself, because that’s the way you are. You just are that way. And that’s okay, because that’s a good way to be. It gets results.

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