Misguided Intentions

March 7, 2004

Get the body into position, your back straight, hands in your lap, face forward, close your eyes. Then get the mind into position. Let it settle on the breath. When the breath comes in, know it’s coming in. When it goes out, know that it’s going out. Realize you have lots of choices. You can try long breathing, short breathing, deep, shallow. Experiment to see what kind of breathing feels best. This is an important principle in the practice, to look at what you’re doing and then monitor the results. After all, you’ve got the opportunity to sit here for a whole hour. It doesn’t make sense to breathe in a way that feels constricted or feels uncomfortable. You’ve got the ability to breathe in a comfortable way. So take advantage of it. Push the envelope. See how comfortable the breath can get. The in-out breath is actually part of a whole body process, the energy flow in the body. Get in touch with that fact. See how the world and the way you breathe affects the different parts of the body. Think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, and see what that does to your sense of the body, especially your sense of the body as a place to stay. If it feels good breathing in, feels good breathing out, it’s a lot easier to stay here in the present moment than it would be if the breath were constricted or tight or tense, uncomfortable. So make use of that comfortable breath. The opportunity is there. Make use of it. It’s right here where the Buddha’s teachings on karma and his teachings on meditation all come together. What is karma? It’s the intentions of the mind. We know we have intentions, and we have some sense of how they shape our lives. The Buddha asks us to look into that in all levels of the practice. This is why we practice generosity, why we observe the precepts as a foundation for the meditation. If we look carefully at the act of being generous, the act of following a precept, we see that there are ways of giving rise to happiness that may not have automatically occurred to us. It may seem counterintuitive. You gain happiness by giving things away. You gain happiness by showing restraint. Those ideas are counterintuitive, but if you actually put them into practice in an intelligent way, you find that they’re true. The sense of happiness that comes from clutching things to you, being unwilling to share, just gets squeezed out by the clutching, gets squeezed out by the stinginess. The pleasure that comes from doing things you know are harmful gets squeezed out by that knowledge. But if you’re generous, you find that there’s a lightness, there’s a sense of well-being, there’s a sense of inner worth that comes from being able to give things away, being intelligent how you give things away. It’s the same with the precepts. You see you have the opportunity to break the precept or to follow it. But if you follow it, if you exercise restraint, there’s a sense of self-worth that comes along with that as well. And that goes a lot deeper than the pleasure that might come from saying those things you’d like to say you know you shouldn’t say, but you want to go ahead and say them anyhow. What these practices ask you to do is to take your desire for happiness seriously and realize how much of that really is in your power. Because we’re constantly doing things, we’re constantly having intentions, and where do they aim? They all aim at happiness. The problem is, a lot of them are misguided, and they actually end up causing the exact opposite of what we want. But this desire for happiness underlies everything we experience. The Buddha once said, “All phenomena are rooted in desire.” It’s one of his more radical teachings. Everything we experience comes from desires in the mind. We didn’t have a desire for happiness. We wouldn’t experience them. It’s the desire that underlies our intentions, the intentions that shape the present moment, the intentions that shape things on into the future. Part of the present is shaped by the past. Part of it is being shaped by what we do right now. This past desire can combine with present desire. The good news of the Buddhist teachings is that our desire for happiness is something that can be realized. If we follow the Buddhist teachings, we can train our desires to take us to a point where we can go beyond desire. The happiness is totally free from the disturbance of desire. But to get there, you have to train your desire first, train your intentions. This is why the practice is a seamless one. It involves your thoughts, your words, your deeds, what you do as you interact with other people, as well as what you do when you’re sitting here meditating. After all, meditating is a doing. Sometimes we hear it’s simply being in the present moment. But that ignores the fact that a lot of what we experience in the present moment comes from things that we’re doing, choices that we’re making. That’s a doing right here. Even to decide that you want to be with the knowing, that’s a decision, that’s an intention, that’s a doing of a very subtle sort. So how do you decide what to do? You monitor what you’re doing and you monitor the results. The Buddhist teachings to a seven-year-old son started with this principle. Before you act, look at your intention. If it seems to be a skillful intention, go ahead with it. If it’s not, then don’t do it. While you’re acting, look for the immediate results. If they turn out the things you thought were going to be okay turn out not to be okay, you stop what you’re doing. When the action is done, look at the long-term results. If you see that you actually did cause harm, resolve not to do that again. Get the advice of other people on the path and stick to your resolve. If you see that it caused no harm at all, take joy in the fact that you’re continuing with your training, that the training is showing results. This applies to your thoughts as well as to your words and your deeds. We may think of this simply as the Buddha’s instructions to his son. He just stops right there, “How to be a good son.” That’s not where the instructions stop. He says purity is attained by taking this attitude. It applies not only to what you’re doing with regard to other people, but when you’re sitting here and meditating, the same principle applies. Look at what you’re doing. What is your intention right now? Your intention is to stay with the breath. Any other intention that comes and interferes with that is, at this moment, an unskillful intention. You want to let go of it and then see what you’re doing based on that intention. Are you getting the results you want? Can you stay with the breath? Does it feel good? Does it feel absorbing? If not, you can change. If you can’t think of ways to change, get advice from someone else who’s meditating. But you keep experimenting. You’re monitoring the results of your actions, being willing to admit when things aren’t working, trying something new. At the same time, having a sense of how long you have to try something to be able to pass judgment on whether it’s working or not. But all of this comes down to skill in knowing what you’re doing and knowing the results of what you’re doing. Monitoring what you’re doing and the results. It’s understanding this process right here. As the Buddha said, if you really get into this, if you take it deeper and deeper and deeper into the mind, it can finally take you all the way to awakening, which is good news. The things we need to know for the sake of awakening, for the sake of true happiness, are all right here, showing themselves all the time. It’s simply that we’re not looking. Or we don’t have a sense of the choices that are available to us. It’s like someone who’s grown up in an abusive household. When they start dealing with people outside the household, all they know are the abusive patterns they’ve been learning, they’ve been observing. To get them out of those patterns, they have to be taught that there are other alternative ways of interacting with other people. When they see that there are those other opportunities and they cause less stress, they’re more inclined to follow them. Sometimes the force of habit makes it hard, but after a while, the new path and possibilities really show that they really are much better. The same principle applies in our mind. The same principle applies in how we relate to the breath. We may have a few limited ideas of what the breath can be like, how the breath comes in, what you have to do to bring the breath in, what you have to do to let the breath go out. Our experience of the breath is limited to that. But when we learn that there are other possibilities, it’s worth our while to explore them. As Ajahn Ali says, “Think of the breath coming in from the back of the neck, right at the base of the skull there.” What does that do to your sensation of the breathing? You can think of it coming in the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet, any place in the body. Open your mind to these different possibilities and you realize you have more choices than you might have imagined. In different ways of conceiving the breath, there are good for different states in the body and good for different states in the mind. Because most of the knowledge that comes our way is subverbal, it means it’s something we have to explore on our own. There are the words to point our attention in certain directions, but what we see is something we have to see for ourselves and gain our own internal, intuitive sense of what works and what doesn’t work, and what it means to be able to judge when something is working and when it’s not working. All of this takes time and requires your powers of observation. This, too, is a principle that applies in all levels of our lives. As the Buddha once said, if you want to know someone’s character, you have to stay with them for a long period of time. And not just that, you have to be observant. If you want to know someone’s purity, you have to have dealings with them in terms of buying and selling. Even then, you have to do it over a long period of time and you have to be observant. If you want to know someone’s wisdom and discernment, you notice how they approach a question, the things they observe, the things they have to say they feel are worth saying. Again, you have to hang around the person for a long period of time and really be observant to be able to judge these things. It means a willingness to take time and to be very careful in how you look at things. That same principle applies in your mind. Getting to know the breath is like getting to know another person. You have to ask questions of it. What does long breathing do? What does short breathing do? Exactly what are the mechanics of the breathing as you feel them from inside the body? When you’re tired, what kind of breathing is good? When you’re tense, what kind of breathing is good? And then you watch, and then you watch again. Be observant. Take time to watch these things, to learn these things. You realize there’s a lot more going on here and you have a lot wider range of choices than you would have imagined otherwise. Then you begin to see how much the elements of intention and attention, the way you look at things, shape. Watch and see how the phenomena of your experience really are based on desire. Sometimes it’s misguided desire, sometimes it’s intelligent desire. The more you observe things, the more you can ferret out which is which. The more you’re clear about this element of intention in all your experiences, the more likely you are to see it, to see what role it plays in leading to more skillful approaches to happiness, so that your desire for happiness actually does get rewarded, so that your actions don’t go against your deep-down desire for a happiness that’s really true, really solid, a happiness that doesn’t turn on you. The Buddhist discovery was that such a happiness is possible through human effort. The really highest level of happiness is something you can’t do, but there’s a path of practice that takes you there. The reason it is the highest level of happiness is that ultimately there is no doing in there. But to get there, there’s a lot of doing. If you want to go down to the ocean, you take the road. The road doesn’t cause the ocean. In fact, the ocean was there a long time before the road ever got there. The fact that you’re walking down the road doesn’t cause the ocean to be there, but it does cause you to experience the ocean, to get there. So you take this habit the mind has of doing things for the sake of happiness and training that desire. So it really does take you where you want to go. It involves being persistent, it involves being very observant, and everything you do on all levels. As we’re saying today, the practice is something that really should permeate your life. It’s not just a technique you apply while you’re sitting with your eyes closed. It has to be relevant to this big issue of what are you doing in your search for happiness and is it actually helping or not. Real insight is when you see that the things you’ve been doing are actually getting in the way of your happiness, and you learn how to stop doing those things. Insight into impermanence, suffering, stress, and not-self really has meaning only when it applies directly to your desire for happiness and you see that the things that you’ve been doing in hopes of happiness are actually getting in the way. You’re looking in the wrong place. You’re doing the wrong things. That’s the kind of insight you want. That’s the one that really can make a change. Seeing the impermanence of trees and seeing the impermanence of the breath and the impermanence of whatever, that’s not going to make any difference in the mind, unless you were looking for happiness in the trees, in the breath. So it’s right here where the Buddha wants us to focus our attention, the acts, the intentions we have in the present moment, the desire that underlies those intentions, and the question of whether what we’re doing actually does satisfy that desire for happiness that doesn’t turn into something else. This is the pattern that applies throughout the practice.

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