Heightened Intent

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When Ajahn Suwat was giving meditation instructions, he’d often say, “Put your heart into it. Don’t just go through the motions. Really pay attention to what you’re doing. Full attention. Be observant.” This is a principle that applies to any kind of practice. If you’re practicing the piano, if you’re practicing a sport, you can practice for hours and hours and hours. But if you’re not really paying attention to what you’re doing, you’re not getting the most out of the practice. You want to see what you’re doing, the results, and then adjust what you’re doing so the results get better. The word “jitta” here in Pali is interesting because it means both mind and intent. As in the phrases on Right Effort, you uphold your intent, or you uphold your mind. And there’s a sense both of making the meditation more intense, making your awareness more intense, and also lifting it above your ordinary concerns. When you’re sitting here meditating, you don’t want the affairs of the day, the affairs of all your relationships, to come in and pile on the mind. You want to lift the mind up above them. There’s an interesting passage where the Buddha’s been injured by Devadatta. Devadatta tried to roll a stone down a hill. He tried to crush the Buddha. And it so happened that the stone hit an obstacle and only a sliver of the stone actually got into the Buddha’s foot. But it was painful. He had a really bad wound. So he went to lie down and rest. And Mara came up to him and taunted him and said, “You sleepy-faced person. Can’t think of anything better to do than just lie around?” And the Buddha says, “I’m not sleepy-faced. I’m not depressed. I’m not moping. I’m lying here with goodwill for all beings.” That’s one of the ways you deal with pain, is developing goodwill for all beings, lifting your mind above whatever thoughts you may have. “Why is this happening to me? Why am I the victim? Why did that person have such a horrible intent toward me?” Lift your mind above that. Have goodwill for all. This connects with another teaching where the Buddha said, “For most of us, when physical pain comes up, it’s like we’re shot with an arrow. But we don’t leave it that way. We shoot ourselves with another arrow.” Or you might think of a whole quiver of arrows coming in. This doesn’t apply just to physical pain, but also to emotional pain. The scars we bear from our dealings with other people. We tend to keep shooting ourselves again and again and again over these things. So you want to lift your mind above that and give some intensity to that lifted mind as well. Think of that term aticitta, the heightened mind. You’re heightening your mind, you’re also heightening your intent, or the intentness with which you’re doing this. Really throw yourself into it. Don’t hold anything back. You want to be totally in the body or totally with the breath, totally with your thoughts of goodwill, whatever it is you’re focusing on. And for the time being, forget about who you are, anything that gives any indication of who you are or what century you’re in or where you are. Just put that aside. You want to be just with the breath. Fully with the breath. Give some intensity to your attention so that you can really notice the little things. You can notice the all-around things. For example, you may notice, if you really pay attention fully to the body, that when a thought comes into the mind, it’s going to be associated with a little bit of tension. Tension in your arms, tension in your legs, in your hands, in your feet, in the middle of the chest. There are different spots for different thoughts. If you notice that, you can bring more attention to that spot and think of it getting untangled, dissolving away. And whatever the thought is will just go away. It doesn’t have any place to stand, it doesn’t have a foothold. And by looking all around, you can begin to see which part of the body or parts of the mind are not contributing, which parts of the mind are holding back. There’s an image the Buddha uses of an elephant that goes into battle. He’s using the image for something else, but we can use it for this. Some elephants, when they go into battle, will fight with every part of the body, but they’ll hold back the trunk because the trunk is very sensitive. If you really want to give yourself to the battle, you have to get your trunk in there as well. Don’t worry about it getting hurt. In the same way, you don’t want to hold anything back in the meditation. Give it some intensity. Now the intensity doesn’t have to be hot. As I was saying earlier today, the images the Buddha gives of mind and concentration are all cool. Water, a cool spring of water coming up into the lake, keeping it thoroughly cool throughout the entire lake. Lotuses, thoroughly saturated with the water of a cool lake. You want this coolness to be intense so that whatever else comes in, anything hot that comes in from outside, any hot thoughts that come up within the mind, they immediately cool off through the intensity and the fullness of your concentration, your stillness, the coolness that you’re trying to develop here. The coolness of goodwill, the coolness of a mind that’s well-established in the breath. And it’s coming from a higher place. This pleasure we’re developing here in concentration is higher than your normal pleasures. And when you’re in a higher position, you can act with nobility. Those words we hardly hear anymore, but the whole idea of nobility is that if you have a higher position than other people, you want to be gracious about it. Use your position. The fact that you have a sense of ease, a sense of stability that other people don’t have, use that and act in a noble way. Any thoughts of being a victim, any thoughts of being oppressed, lift yourself above them. You don’t have to play the victim. And when you find that you can actually lift yourself above that, there’s a lot more well-being that comes into the mind. And when you’re operating from a position of strength, a position of well-being, it’s a lot easier to think of the noble thing and to speak the noble thing and to say the noble thing, do the noble thing. So you’re uplifting your mind, you’re uplifting your intent. You’re keeping it held up high. And John Lee uses this image often. A person up at the top of a tree, a person on top of a mountain, a person up in an airplane. The Buddha uses the image of a person up in a tower looking down on people below, a person on a mountaintop looking down on the people in the valley. Not looking down in the sense of despising them, but realizing that you have an aspect of the mind that cannot be touched by anybody else, and you want to develop that insight. And the image of being high like this, or up high, means also that you’re in a better position to see things for what they are. It’s not like you’re running away and hiding out in a little hole someplace. The mind is uplifted. Its range of view is broader. Its sense of well-being is more steady and expansive. So keep your mind upheld. Keep your intentness upheld, because that’s one of the ways you can keep them upheld. Keep your mind from causing itself unnecessary suffering and stress.

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