Understanding Intention

November 22, 2011

Meditation is all about intention, because intention is what shapes your life. We’re here in the present moment, not because it’s a wonderful moment. Often it can be a miserable moment. We’re here because we can learn about intention right here. We’re here watching our intentions in action. We start with the intentions of goodwill. That’s why we have that chant on goodwill for yourself, goodwill for all beings. Not because we think that simply wishing good for other beings is going to make them happy, but to remind ourselves that this is a skillful intention, one we want to maintain. It’s the motivation behind our intention, focusing on the breath, focusing on the parts of the body, focusing on butto, whatever the topic is. We’re doing this for genuine well-being, our well-being, the well-being of all those whose lives we touch. We want to maintain that intention. You focus on the breath because you know the mind can find true happiness only when it is still, only when it has a sense of solidity, of not feeling threatened by the changes in the world around it. You do this as a gift to the mind. When those changes come up that interfere with that sense of stillness, we have to learn how to let them go. Again, that’s a way of showing goodwill for ourselves. And, of course, when the mind is solid and secure like this, you’re a lot less likely to do harmful things to other people. And you’re a good example of them, too. So this is how looking after your truest, best interest is also helpful to others. It’s an expression of goodwill. At the same time, while you’re here in the present moment and as the mind gets more and more still, you can begin to see the operations of intention. There’s a passage where the Buddha talks about the role of intention even in your experience of the aggregates, your experience of form, feeling, perception, fabrication itself, which is an intentional activity. And then there’s consciousness. We take the potential for each of these things and we turn them into actual aggregates. In other words, there’s a potential for form that comes from your past actions, your past intentions. And there’s a way the mind shapes it right now, which yields the actual experience you have. The same with feelings. There are different potential feelings right now. There’s not just one feeling in your body or one feeling in the mind. There are pleasant feelings here, unpleasant feelings there, rather neutral feelings in lots of places. And there’s an element of intention that goes into how you experience these different things. The same with perception, fabrication. Even consciousness itself has an intentional element. It’s a combination of past intentions and your present intentions. You see this most clearly with disturbances that come up in the mind. Sometimes it seems that a part of the mind is on automatic pilot. That’s simply something from the past that’s coming up, an old pattern that gets repeated and repeated and repeated. And as long as you don’t get involved with it, that’s okay. That’s all it is, just kind of background chatter, background noise. But it’s very easy to start wondering, “What’s this thought about? How’s that conversation going? What can I learn from this?” And you start getting involved. That’s the present intention. And in the first stage of the meditation, you just have to learn to let those things go. In other words, leave the background in the background, and you focus on what’s in the foreground, the breath. And you want to keep that in the foreground regardless, no matter how amazing or interesting or seemingly important those other thoughts may be. They’re not what you want right now. You really do want to work on getting the mind settled in with the breath. So every thought that is helpful in keeping you with the breath, and this includes thoughts of goodwill, reminding yourself that this is your best way of showing goodwill for yourself, is developing the qualities of alertness and mindfulness and ardency around the breath. When there are worries about the future, you can remind yourself that you have no idea what’s actually going to happen. But you do know that when things get bad, you’re going to need alertness, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. All these are the good qualities that you can develop only through meditation. So your best way of preparing for the future is by getting back to the present. The best way to do this is, as soon as you’re aware of a thought that’s pulling you away, just zap it with the breath. It’s a little bundle of tied-up energy that’s developed somehow, and you want to zap it and clear it out. Comb out all the tangles in your energy field. And as you do this, you’ll find yourself resisting other tendencies in the mind, old habits. And that’s when you see very clearly, “Oh, this is why I go after those things.” There’s a certain sense of curiosity somewhere. Sometimes it’s curiosity, and other times it’s a sense of obligation. And you can ask yourself why. It’s just a tangle of energy. So it’s not the case that you’re going to be doing concentration practice and then say, “Okay, I have enough concentration now. Now we can do insight.” You’re going to gain more and more insight into this process of intention as you deepen your concentration, as you get quicker and quicker in catching the mind as it goes off into these other directions. Why do you want to do that? Because you’ve got goodwill for yourself. That’s the underlying intention. There’s a passage in the Ajaan Mun biography, or in Ajaan Mun’s last sermon, where he says there’s one thing you want to hold on to all the way through the practice, and that’s the determination not to come back and be a laughingstock of the defilements ever again. Why is that? Because you have goodwill for yourself. And that kind of goodwill spreads around to others. So that’s the underlying motivation. It’s goodwill combined with heedfulness, realizing that the mind does have these tendencies to cause suffering for itself, suffering for other people. And the best thing you can do for yourself and for other people is to learn how not to be so heedless. So goodwill is not just a sort of pink glowing cloud that you spread out in all directions. It’s a clear-eyed realization that if you’re going to be happy, if you’re going to be truly happy, you’ve got to work. You’ve got to understand this process of intention. And the more you understand this process of intention, understand how intentions gather together and build things in the mind, the more skillful you’re going to be in how you develop skillful intentions, abandon unskillful ones, shaping your life and the life of everyone around you in a much better way. When they talk about interconnectedness, this is the inner connection that matters. The fact that your actions have an impact not only on you, but also on the people around you. So you want to be responsible. Because the interconnections of our karma can be so destructive, so harmful to one another. Of course, the best gift of all is to train the mind to the point where it doesn’t need to come back and keep on intending. It finds a happiness that doesn’t depend on intention. Because that’s the kind of happiness that doesn’t need to feed on anyone else. As long as you take on the identity of being a being, then you have all the qualities of the mind that keep handing you in that direction. There’s going to be feeding. There’s going to be some harm. And when you don’t see that, your intentions get covered up. This is why the teaching of interconnectedness is such a wonderful thing. Understanding is a really harmful teaching, because it’s simply a way of painting over a lot of the less attractive parts of our inner connections with one another. And goodwill requires seeing that in a very clear-eyed way, that as we live, as beings, we need to feed. There’s going to be some harm. We try to minimize that harm. And the more sensitive we are to the fact that harm is being done, the more skillful our intentions are going to be. Until someday we reach that point where we understand intentions so thoroughly that we can free ourselves from them and find a dimension that doesn’t depend on anything at all—doesn’t require any feeding, doesn’t require any intending. That’s the best thing there is.

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