Firmly Intent

November 6, 2024

The Pali word that we translate as concentration, samadhi, the Thais translate as being firmly intent. You start with an intention and you keep it there. The Thai phrase for “to be firmly intent” literally means to set up the mind firmly. You don’t want it to fall down. So set your mind on the breath. Set your mind on getting the mind to stay here. Because we want more than just concentration. We want discernment that comes from concentration and the release that comes from discernment. But you have to work on the causes. And that’s where your intention has to be aimed. We can set goals for ourselves. They have to be goals that are in the area of causes. Because the results when they come may not be what you expected. The causes are something you can do. The results are things that come from what you do. But you can’t do the results. So focus on what you’re doing. The Buddha explains right mindfulness as the techniques for getting the mind into concentration. Right mindfulness has its foundations. One is having your virtue purified, and the other is having your view straightened out. So your virtue, of course, has to do with what you’ve been doing in the course of the day. And right now, as you’re sitting here, you’re not breaking any of the precepts. You want to check and make sure that your views are straight. In other words, whatever’s going to happen is going to come from your actions. Things that come in from the past, they come in from past actions. Things that you didn’t intend right now. But at some point you did intend them. You did something intentional. Now the results that come out may be different from what you intended. It’s not that causality worked in one way and it was working in another way. So straightening out your views basically means straightening out your understanding of causality. That the quality of your intentions is going to make a difference. It’s going to be the factor that makes a difference in what you experience. And your intentions may be good, but not necessarily skillful. Because good intentions, well-meaning intentions, can be pretty deluded sometimes. You mean well. You think that something is going to help somebody or help yourself, but it doesn’t. That’s something you have to learn how to overcome. You do it through those instructions that the Buddha gave to Rahula. You act on your best intentions. And then when you see the results coming out were not quite what you thought they’d be, you learn from that. And over time you get more and more informed. You get less and less deluded about cause and effect. When you have those attitudes in mind, then you can settle down and work on the concentration, work on the mindfulness. Mindfulness basically means keeping something in mind. How do you keep something in mind? There’s a tendency the mind has to send messages to itself. A message from the present moment going into the future. Usually it has to do with “watch out for this, watch out for that, worry about this, pay attention to that.” And this is a habit we developed way, way back. A lot of it came from our experience with pain. And we experience pain well before we have a new language. That’s one of the reasons why the Buddha has us look at pain. Because a lot of the messages that the mind sends itself tend to center on a pain that’s here, a pain that’s there, “watch out for this pain.” And it will send either a picture or a word. It’s kind of like our phones nowadays. You can send pictures, you can send words. Well, the mind does that to itself. There’s an image you hold in mind about the pain. Or there’s a word that goes with the pain. Or there may be something more elaborate, full sentences or phrases. We’re going to be focusing on that issue. What are the messages that the mind sends to itself? One way of learning about that is to intentionally send different messages and see where they run into your old messages. So the Buddha is basically saying, “Be with the body in and of itself.” The other way of doing that is being with the breath. So you’re telling yourself, “I’m going to breathe in long, breathe out long. I’m going to discern the long breathing. I’m going to discern the short breathing. I’m going to breathe in a way that I can be aware of the whole body as I breathe in, the whole body as I breathe out. I’ll try to calm the fabrication of the body, which is basically the breath, the impact that the breath has on your experience of the body. Calm that down. Those are the messages you’re going to send to yourself. And try to be as consistent and as thorough and as persistent as possible in those messages. Now those messages, of course, will raise some questions. How do you be aware of the whole body as you breathe in? Go even further back. What is this breath? Where does it start? Where does it end? You may have some preconceived notions, but you can question those notions. See what happens. Does the breath begin outside? Does the breath begin inside? If it does begin inside, where does it begin? And if it begins outside, do you have to pull it in or is it just waiting to come in? See what perceptions you have. Sometimes you’re going to sit here breathing very laboriously, having a sense that you have to squeeze the breath in through those two tiny little nostrils you’ve got at the base of your nose. If you’re going to get it to go through the whole body, it takes a lot of pressure. So that perception doesn’t work. Try a different one. Try a different message. Think of the body as being like a big sponge, with holes all around. And as you breathe in, the breath can come in from all the pores. And just hold that perception in mind. See what happens. Keep on sending that message. You get the idea. Part of it is just what you make up your mind you’re going to do, and then part of it is learning that you have to figure things out in the course of doing. It’s like working on the buildings. Up at the top of the hill, we had the plans, and they seemed awfully thorough, page after page after page of plans. And even then, though, questions came up. How do you deal with this detail? How do you deal with that one? And so you had to learn by keeping something in mind, i.e., the plan. But then you also learn. The plan is not totally telling you what you need to know. You have to learn from your actions right here, right now. That’s why alertness is part of this practice. When something new comes up, you have to be alert to it. And then you use your ardency. Try to figure out things. John Lee’s explanation of ardency, Atthapa, is interesting in his book on the frames of reference, Satipatthana, in Thai. Atthapa basically means that you burn into something. It starts out with one meaning of Atthapa, and it gets more and more into the area of discernment. As you really try to peer into what’s going on right now, what are you doing, that could be improved. Because that’s a lot of what the discernment is going to tell you. You’re trying to get the mind to settle down, and it’s not settling down as you want it to. So you’ve got to figure out what’s going on. And as you get more used to what’s going on, more sensitive to what you’re doing, you begin to see that as you try to get the mind to settle down here, you try to answer the questions of how to get it to settle down. You also get involved in the questions of what the Buddha said, the questions of insight. How am I supposed to understand this process of fabrication, putting together the state of concentration? How do I see it with wisdom? In other words, how do I do this in a way that eliminates as much stress and strain as possible, but at the same time is really consistent? We’re not here just to relax to the max. There’s work to be done. What’s the most efficient way of settling down? What’s the most efficient way of breathing? These are questions that will come up as you’re working on the causes, and they’re an important part of the practice. This is where you use your ingenuity. Remember in Chan Fung’s Instructions in Meditation, the two words he used were most often, one, be observant, and two, use your ingenuity. Be observant to see where a problem is. Use your ingenuity to figure it out, to figure out the solution. I read one time the distinction between an intelligent person and a genius. An intelligent person is someone who sees a problem that other people have seen and haven’t been able to solve, and he solves it. A genius is someone who sees a problem that nobody else saw before, recognizes it as a problem, and can solve it. You can be your own genius. There are problems in the mind that you’re going to find, and they’re not in the texts, or if they are in the texts, you’re not going to recognize them until after you’ve solved the problem yourself. So you’ve got to look for where the problems are. Is the problem with the breath? Is the problem with the mind? What can I do to get things to settle down? So this way you’re working on the causes, and you’re judging them. You’re judging your actions by the results you’re getting. So you have to be very careful to be really intent on what you’re doing. The more you can maintain that intent, the more you can set the mind in place, set that intention, and keep it standing. Don’t let it fall down. The more you’re going to benefit from the practice. So be firmly intent. Focus on the causes. And as you get a better and better sense of what you’re doing, you’ll also get a better sense of exactly what the results can be. You can have a preconceived notion of what the results are going to be. But you’re going to find that that preconceived notion will often have to be thrown out. As you get more and more sensitive to what’s actually happening, what you’re actually doing, and how cause and effect actually work right here, right now. It’s in this way that the meditation is going to reveal things to you that you didn’t expect. When awakening comes, it’s a surprise. And that’s how you know that it’s genuine. If you can create it ahead of time. It’s like that old story of painting the mango. You’ve got an upright mango. It’s green. It’s hard. People tell you that a ripe mango is yellow and soft. So you squeeze it to make it soft, and you paint it yellow. But it’s not a ripe mango. You work on the causes. In other words, you water the tree, keep away the bugs. And the mango will ripen on its own. Then you may be surprised by how it tastes. you

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