Responsible for Your Intentions

September 25, 2019

Someone once asked me to boil the message of Buddhism down to one or two sentences. And the response I gave was, “You’re responsible for your intentions, so choose your intentions carefully because they make a big difference.” I don’t know any other religion that places so much importance on your responsibility as In the power of your intentions. In that chant we had just now, “Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.” The intentions you act on determine the extent of well-being or lack of well-being that you’re going to experience now and into the future. This is one of the reasons why we meditate. One is to gain a sense of how true this is. When the Buddha was teaching karma, that’s what we’re talking about here. Intentional actions, karma. He never said he could prove it. The only proof he would have was when you gained awakening, you realized that it was true. But up to that point, you have to take it as a working hypothesis. And so he offered a pragmatic proof. He said, “If you believe in the power of your intentions, you will be more careful in how you choose them. If you don’t believe in their power, you’ll get careless. You’ll get apathetic.” But as you meditate, you begin to see more and more how you can shape the present moment by your intentions. Like right now, you’re focusing on the breath. That’s going to make a difference in the breath. And if you make up your mind you want to breathe comfortably, that too will make a difference in the breath. The breath will have an influence on the state of the body, how you experience it from within. And the state of the body will have an influence on your mind, an influence on your moods, an influence on your sense of well-being or lack of well-being. So you begin to see the impact of your actions right here, right now. The Buddha taught at the time of the Buddha, who also taught a teaching on karma. But in their version, everything you have experienced in the present moment was determined by things you did in the past. There was no room for present actions to have an impact on the present moment. And their belief was that if you tortured yourself, you could burn off your old karma. And so they went through extreme tortures. They noticed that when you torture yourself, you have a lot of pain. But when you don’t torture yourself, there’s not a lot of pain. In other words, what you’re choosing to do right now will make a difference in what you experience right now. Choose your focus right. And learn how to play with the breath. Get a sense of the breath. This is something that comes over time as to what kind of breathing feels good for the body. And what the needs of the body are. They will sometimes change. Sometimes you need long breathing. Sometimes you need short. Sometimes fast. Sometimes slower. Sometimes deeper. Sometimes more shallow. Sometimes the needs of the body will change very quickly in one session of meditation. So you want to stay on top of what the body needs right now. This way you find yourself more in control of the moods of the mind. That’s why we meditate on the love of karma, which is that we’re going to make good decisions. The mind needs to be trained. The mind needs to have a sense of well-being so that it can make its choices more deliberately and less on the spur-of-the-moment mood. When you’re coming from a position of strength, a position of well-being, you’re more likely to choose the skillful action. An action that doesn’t harm you and that doesn’t harm other people. When you’re feeling irritated, when you’re feeling weak, when you’re feeling threatened, you tend to grab at whatever intention comes by. And often you end up doing all kinds of unskillful things. So you get the mind more under control. So you can learn how to trust it more. Be confident that your decisions will shape your life in a good direction. This is also why we develop thoughts of good will. Every day we have that chant, “May I be happy. May all beings be happy.” You want to make your good will universal. As the Buddha said, you have to determine this. Because it doesn’t come naturally for us to feel good will for everybody. We can think of people who have wronged us or people who have wronged people we love. Or people we care about. And sometimes it’s very easy to think, “Well, may that person suffer some to get a taste of what they’ve given to other people.” But if we allow ourselves to have ill will for other people, then it’s very likely that we will do unskillful things related to them. So to protect ourselves, we make this a determination that we want to develop good will. And then we try to keep it in mind. As the Buddha said, it is both a determination and a practice of mindfulness. You keep in mind that you want to have good will for yourself and other beings, to remind yourself of your motivation, to remind yourself to be heedful, which is that you don’t want to harm anybody. The Buddha’s teachings on the power of intention are meant to call forth this attitude of heedfulness, where you really are careful about what your motives are, what your intentions are, what you choose to do, because you realize it makes a big difference. Heedfulness implies there are dangers. In other words, greed, aversion, and delusion can come in at any time. So you have to be careful. You have to watch out for them. But it also implies that it is possible to avoid those dangers, that we can train the mind to act with not acting on greed, not acting on aversion, not acting on delusion. So although the concept of heedfulness implies danger, it also implies hope, that we can train ourselves. As the Buddha said, if we couldn’t train ourselves to develop skillful qualities in the mind, he wouldn’t have bothered to teach. If we couldn’t train ourselves to abandon unskillful qualities, he wouldn’t have bothered to teach. We have the choice. We have this ability to change. Our choices are not totally free, in the sense that the range of choices available to us at any one time may be limited by our past actions. But given whatever the range is, we can always make a skillful choice. There are times when we feel cornered. We feel that we’re offered two unskillful alternatives. That’s why we have to learn how to think outside the box. The reason we feel we have only two unskillful alternatives is that we don’t allow ourselves to think about what would be implied by the skillful choice. It might require a sacrifice. But if you take your intention seriously enough, you say, “Okay, I’m willing to make the sacrifice.” Certain forms of comfort you have to give up. Certain forms of convenience you may have to give up. But the skillful choice is always possible. You always have to keep that point in mind. So it’s good to think about that. We sometimes think of meditation as simply a matter of focusing on the present moment. But as part of right effort, the Buddha says, there are things you want to give rise to in the mind that are not there—skillful qualities. Once they’re there, you want to develop them. As for unskillful qualities, if they’re already there, you want to abandon them. But if they’re not there, you want to think about how to prevent them from arising. This is why it’s good at the end of the meditation to think about situations that you’re faced with and what some of the possible problems might be and how you might avoid making an unskillful choice. It’s good to do this at the end of a meditation because you tend to think more clearly then. But it’s important to realize that as we’re meditating and developing a skill, we have to believe in the power of our intentions. After all, how could we develop a skill if we didn’t believe that intentions made a difference? But the Buddha is asking us to take on as a working hypothesis that our intentions shape our lives more than we might imagine. So you have to be very careful about them. So right now, take advantage of the time you have to focus on the breath to get to know the mind and to get to know your intentions as well. One of the best ways of knowing what intentions are sloshing around in your mind is to set up one intention and say, “I’m going to stick with this,” and see how well you can do. It’s then when you begin to see other intentions sloshing up around them or pushing you in different directions. It’s like the currents of a river. You can look at the surface of a river and it may seem placid and still, but there may be currents deeper down that you don’t see. You see them, though, if you try to build a dam across the river. That’s when you begin to realize that these currents can be very strong. It’s only then when you can do something about them. It’s the same with the mind. There are currents running under the surface. We don’t see them unless we put up an intention as a kind of a barrier. Any thoughts that do not relate to the breath, we’re not going to go follow them and see how well you can stick by it. You’d be amazed to see how many other thoughts come in then. But with time, you learn how not to follow them, not to be influenced by them. As you get more and more firmly established with the breath and a greater sense of well-being, being still with the breath, you put yourself in a better and better position to choose your intentions well and take responsibility for your actions. In a way that you benefit and the people around you benefit as well.

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