Intention & Attention

May 20, 2022

Every evening before we meditate, we have that chant, spreading thoughts of goodwill. “May all beings be happy, free from animosity, free from oppression. May they look after themselves with ease.” That last one reminds you that living beings have to depend on themselves for their happiness. You’re basically saying, “May they understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them.” You call to mind the happiness of all beings. Because as you meditate, you’re looking for happiness that harms no one. You’re reminding yourself of your motivation for being here. But then you also think, “People’s choices. May they understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them.” That’s going to be up to them. You can do what you can sometimes to help them in that direction, but ultimately it’s their choice. And that’s totally beyond your powers to control. Which is why we also have the chants for equanimity, “All beings are the owners of their actions,” to remind us that we’re the owners of our actions, too. We may not be able to get other people to act in skillful ways, but it is something we can do for ourselves. That’s why we’re meditating. We’re looking into the source of our actions, which is the mind. The Buddha defined action as intention. If you want to see those actions, see those intentions, you have to set up a firm intention that you want to try to stick with. You’ve got to write it down. Be intent on focusing on your breath. Take some good long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. Because when we’re talking about breath here, it’s not so much the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the movement of energy through the body. And different people will feel it in different places, most prominently. To make a survey of your body right now, where do you feel the breathing? Focus your attention there. Then ask yourself if it’s comfortable. You can breathe in any rhythm you like. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. Make it shorter or try in short, out long. In long, out short. Deep, shallow, heavy, light, fast, slow. Or just pose the question in the mind each time you breathe in, “What kind of breathing would feel good now?” See how the body responds. Try to give it its freedom. So it feels good just to sit here and breathe. Of course, as you set up an intention like this, other intentions will come along. The intention to think about something else, to remember something from the past, to anticipate plans for the future. This is one of the purposes of setting up your original intention, anyhow, is to see these other intentions as they come. But for the time being, you don’t want to get involved with them. An image to hold in mind is that you’re holding the breath in your hands. And other things come along and brush the backs of your hands, but you’re not going to pay attention to them. You’re not going to let go of the breath. You know those other things are there, but you’re not going to hang on to them. You’re trying to protect the breath right now as your object that you’re going to stay focused on. And as you evaluate the breath, you’re beginning to apply what the Buddha calls “appropriate attention.” He never talks about bare attention. For him, attention is either appropriate or inappropriate. It’s largely a matter of what questions you’re asking. In this case, what’s skillful? What’s conducive to pleasure right now? If you see that you’re causing pain in any way, by the way you breathe, by the way you focus, what can you do to alleviate that pain, to alleviate that stress? If you pay attention to those questions, the meditation is going to progress. So it’s a question of having the right intention and the right attention. The intention to stay here, the intention to develop this concentration, is part of the path. When the Buddha set out, the duties with regard to the Four Noble Truths, the duty with regard to the path, is to develop it. You see a skillful mental state coming up, and you try to protect it. If the breath feels good, try to protect that, maintain that breath that feels good. You may notice that as you try to consciously stay with the breath, you have some ways of marking for yourself that now the in-breath has started and now the out-breath has started. Tense up a little bit. If you tense up like that, even though it makes a clear mark, it gets in the way of a sense of ease developing in the body. So allow the in-breath to flow into the out-breath, the out-breath to flow into the in-breath. It doesn’t have to be a clear mark between them, but allow things to flow smoothly. There’s a sense of smoothness in the breath, a sense of ease in the body, lightness in the body. The mind will want to settle down. Think of yourself as being bathed in the breath. We sometimes talk about “watching the breath.” You’re not really watching it. That’s an unfortunate image to have in mind, because you tend to think then that your eyes have to get involved. That’s nothing to do with your eyes at all. It’s a visceral feeling through the skin, through the muscles, through the bones, all through the body. Think of the breath as a whole body process, and you’re bathed in it. It’s all around you. You’re just maintaining your focus in one spot, but you’re aware of the rest of the body around that spot. It’s like looking at a painting. There may be one spot in the painting that draws your attention, but when you’re looking at it, you’re also looking at it in relationship to the rest of the painting as well. So let there be one spot where your primary focus is in the body. And again, it can be any place you want, any place that’s especially sensitive to the breath. But then be aware of how it connects up with the rest of the body. Because if your concentration is too one-pointed, then if something distracts you from the rest of the body, you’ve lost the point, you’ve lost the concentration, and you fall over. But if your concentration is grounded with a large sense of the body, then other things can come into the range of your awareness, but they don’t knock it over. This kind of concentration is solid. It’s the kind of concentration that allows you to see things clearly. The more still and solid the mind is, the more you’ll be able to see subtle things. But in terms of being solid, it doesn’t have to be heavy. It’s good to think about the sensations in the body as being light. We have a way of taking the few sensations that we feel prominently in the present moment and then filling in all the rest of what we think of where the body should be. But right now, just be with the sensations that are clear, that are obvious. And don’t try to recreate what you’ve learned from how the body looks from the outside. You want to be closer and closer to the breath in and of itself, just how you experience it right now, with as few preconceived notions as possible. When you can strip things down like this, there’s a sense of lightness. And you find that the mind is less and less inclined to get knocked over when another intention comes in. You’re able to maintain full attention on the breath and how it relates to the body right now. Because once there’s a sense of ease, the Buddha says to allow that sense of ease to saturate the whole body. And if you think of the breath as kind of like a solvent for the ease, wherever the breath goes, the ease can go along with it. That helps move things around. It helps to dissolve that sense you have that the body is this big solid block, this big lump of flesh. Think of it more as the energy body. And how do you experience your energy body? Where is the stagnant energy? Where is the moving energy? Where are the comfortable and uncomfortable parts of the energy? Can you sort through those things and make everything easeful, pleasant, refreshing? This is how you put your intentions and your acts of attention together. It helps to move you forward on the path. The concentration is an act of intention. The way you analyze it, judge it, make adjustments—well, the analyzing is more attention than the adjustments are more intention. These two qualities work together. You begin to see how much they depend on each other. Often we like to think that there’s the acting part of the mind and the passive watching part of the mind, and they seem to be two totally different things. But they’re actually connected. To watch something, you have to have the intention to watch. And, of course, your intentions are going to be based on what you pay attention to. So get used to these factors of the mind. The more clearly you see them through creating the state of concentration and trying to refine it, the more things will open up in the mind so you really understand what’s going on. In particular, you’ll be able to see more clearly what you’re doing that’s causing suffering and what you can do to stop. That’s what all this is for.

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