Always Start with Good Intentions

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You start the meditation with a good intention, the intention to stay right here with the breath. Sometimes to reinforce that intention, we begin with thoughts of goodwill, desire for our own true happiness, and the true happiness of others, all the people we can think of, all the beings we can think of. May they all be happy. May they find true happiness. That’s a good intention to maintain. It’s one of the reasons why we’re meditating. Because we want to find a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. A happiness that’s in harmony with everybody else’s desire for happiness. Which means we can’t take anything away from them. We have to look for our own resources. Now fortunately we do have good resources inside. They may not look like much to begin with. You’ve got the body sitting here breathing. You’ve got the mind thinking and aware. Things we have all the time. But you want to put them together in a special way. It’s like having a seed. You’re going to have a seed here and a little bag of dirt over there, and the sunlight someplace else, and the water someplace else. And you can put the soil in the water and you can put the soil and water into the sunlight, but the seed’s not going to grow unless the seed is there. So what you do to take your raw materials here and make them better is to start with that good intention. Here we’re going to stay with the breath. And to stay with the breath you have to make the breath comfortable. So experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels good. You can try longer breathing, shorter breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light. See what kind of breathing feels good for you right now to maintain that intention. I guess the more you can find things to make yourself interested in the breath, the easier it will be to stay here. So here you’re going to explore how the breath has an impact on the body, how the breath has an impact on the mind. What kind of breathing helps the mind to settle down? What kind of breathing gets in the way? What kind of breathing helps to breathe through the different patterns of tension or tightness you may feel? As you breathe in and out, think of your wrists relaxing. Think of your ankles relaxing, the muscles in your fingers and toes. And then spreading in from there to relax further into the body. So you’re creating a pleasant place to stay here. And as you reflect on what you’re doing, you can get better and better at finding ways of breathing that feel really refreshing. As the Buddha said, you can have a sense of rapture even sometimes when the breath gets really good, as you allow it to nurture parts of the body that ordinarily don’t get much breath energy, areas that get blocked off for one reason or another. You may find that there are tight spots in the body, and you’ve simply accepted that that tight spot may be a bone. It’s got to be solid. It may not be a bone at all. It’s just tension. So wherever there’s tension, tightness, think of it simply as being a knot in the breath energy, a knot that you can comb out, like a knot in your hair. That way the breath gets more and more gratifying, and it gets easier and easier to stay here. This is a lot of what the Buddhist teachings are all about, setting up a good intention and then observing the results of following through with it, so it becomes more and more a skillful intention. You’ll be making mistakes, but if you make mistakes after a good intention, it’s a lot easier to admit them and to learn from them than it is if you start with a bad intention. Something you know is going to be harmful, and then the harm actually happens. And you don’t like to admit to yourself that you would have intended something like that. And so you learn to lie to yourself. And when you start lying to yourself, then the mind gets more and more mysterious to itself. So to be open and above board about your mistakes, to admit your mistakes, and to be willing to learn from them. That’s the basic principle. After all, that’s how the Buddha gained awakening himself. He didn’t have anyone to teach him the path. He tried whatever paths were being taught back in his time, and found they didn’t lead to the deathless happiness that he wanted. So he realized he was going to have to experiment on his own. And some of the experiments didn’t work out. He tried different ways of tormenting himself, going without food, blocking his breath. He had to endure a lot of pain, but he didn’t let the pain get overwhelming until he realized he was about to die from eating so little. He said, “This can’t be the way. There must be a better way.” But he maintained that good intention all the way through. He never let it get changed. On the night of his awakening, after he got the mind to settle down in concentration, he had visions of his previous lifetimes. And some people would have stopped there. There have been people in the past who learned about their previous lifetimes, so they set themselves up as teachers. But he said, “Well no, this still doesn’t solve the problem, why they’re suffering and how we can put an end to suffering.” Then he gained a vision of all the beings of the universe, dying and being reborn in line with their actions. And again, there have been people who’ve had that kind of vision before and set themselves up as teachers. But the Buddha said, “No, that’s not what he was after.” But he did learn some lessons from those visions, that your actions are important. They make the difference between happiness and suffering. So what kind of actions could get out of the cycle entirely? Because you saw the cycle was pretty meaningless. Beings go up and down and then up and down again and up and down again. Mainly down, down, down. But there’s no point of arrival in the cycle of rebirth. What happens though if you get out? He discovered that there were actions that you could do that would lead you out. He realized the universe was like a complex system where you play with the rules of, play with the rules that put the system together and you can actually get yourself out of the system. That’s when he found the deathless happiness he was looking for. And that’s when he realized that he was awakened and could teach. So this is the path he followed. Making sure that he set up a really good intention to begin with and then followed through with that intention as best he could. This is the principle we apply in our meditation and it’s the principle we should apply in our daily lives. You see so much conflict nowadays. And in some cases it’s because people are well-meaning but don’t really understand what they’re doing. But in other cases people really mean to harm other people. They’ve decided other people are worthless. They’re talking now about redundant people that we’re better off without them. What’s going to happen to a world like that where people are suddenly said to be redundant just because somebody else doesn’t have a plan for them? So you have an assumption like that. Your intention is to other people can’t be trusted. Can we really act on unskillful intentions? It’s hard to be reconciled with others. Other people may harm us and we can forgive them even if their intentions are bad. But in time of reconciliation it’s good to trust that the person had good intentions but was mistaken. Or had good intentions but had a lapse. And once you can get together and decide, okay, this was the mistake and we have certain shared values that we wouldn’t harm each other, then you can actually have a reconciliation. So one way of providing harmony in the world is to act only on skillful intentions. When you find a skillful intention arising in the mind, you nurture it. If it’s not there, you learn how to see that having skillful intentions will be for your own good. It’s for the good of others around you. And if you make mistakes, as the Buddha said, you start out with good intentions and you act on good intentions but you realize that you were mistaken, well, you either stop what you’re doing or if it’s already done, you make up your mind not to repeat that mistake and talk it over with someone who’s more experienced on the path than you are to get some pointers on how not to make that mistake again. It’s in that way that we learn. And it’s in that way that if we have problems with other people, it’s a lot easier to have a reconciliation. Because you know, if you look into your mind, look into your motivations for why there was the problem to begin with, if you were acting on good intentions and they were simply mistaken, there’s room for reconciliation. So in this way you can learn to train your mind to become more skillful as it deals with itself. And you become more skillful in your dealings with other people as well, starting with good intentions, realizing how important they are. As the Buddha said, simply the fact that a good intention arises in the mind, that’s meritorious right there. Even more so when you nurture it, when you follow through with it. So if you see any intentions that would lead you to do harm, you’ve got to say no. As you learn how to filter your intentions like this, then you find it a lot easier to live with yourself and a lot easier to live with the people around you. And they find it easier to live with you. Because it’s because of good intentions that we can live in harmony, regardless of our background, regardless of our race, our gender, nationality, as long as our intentions are good, there’s a basis for real friendship, real harmony. When there’s harmony outside, it’s a lot easier to get the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being. And so maintaining and nurturing your good intentions give results that are good all around. As you’re meditating, it’s simply a matter of learning how to maintain that intention to get the mind to settle down, to see itself clearly. There are the minor issues of what happens when the breath is not comfortable, what happens when there are other issues that come in and interfere. That’s a lot of what meditation instructions are about. But they work best as long as you maintain that original instruction, which is give rise to a good intention and then maintain it. Then it’s simply a matter of learning the ins and outs of the mind. Because a good intention will bear fruit.

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