

## *Developing Intentness*

October 29, 2003

Every night we come here to practice, developing the mind. That is a literal translation of *citta-bhavana*, which is the Pali term for meditation. We're developing the mind. We're also developing intentness. That's another meaning of the word *citta*. In other words, we don't just let things pass by. We watch them. We pay careful attention, because a lot of the suffering, a lot of the problems we have in our lives, come from paying not very careful attention at all: assuming we know this, assuming we know that, assuming that this isn't important, that that's not important, we can slough over this, slough over that. That kind of attitude gets you in a lot of trouble. So we're trying to overcome that habit as we meditate by being really intent on what we're doing, because there's no one other factor in our lives that shapes things as much as our own actions. Yet again, that's one of the areas where we tend to slough over things: "This will be okay," we tell ourselves, "that will be okay, this doesn't matter." We have to be really intent, to see what we're doing, to see the effects of what we're doing, and to see how we can change it for the better.

We pick up all kinds of careless habits throughout life. So the meditation is bound to be difficult, bound to take effort, asking us to look at precisely the areas we don't want to look at: our intentions, why we do things. The motivations behind our actions can occur on many different levels, one level hiding another. So, we have to look carefully.

This is why meditation focuses our intent on looking inside, because inside is where the intentions are doing their work. We have got to keep looking back at ourselves, at ourselves, at ourselves, not because we're coming down hard on ourselves, but simply because we're realistic. It's like going out in the woods. You realize that some of the dangers are totally beyond your control. Like the fire out there: We have no control over how the fire is going to go. We may feel relatively secure that it's going away from us, but the wind could change. All kinds of strange things can happen. But if we sit around worrying about that, it doesn't help at all. So we focus on what *we* can do. We focus on doing just that, and being very responsible, very clear about what we're doing, so that if danger does come, it doesn't come from our own stupidity, our own carelessness, our own complacency.

Years back when I was electrocuted, as I soon as I realized I was being electrocuted, the first thought that went through my head—and the idea hurt a

lot—was that I was going to die from my own stupidity. I should have checked the plug. You don't want to come across danger with that thought, the thought that this happened because of your own stupidity. It's a lot better when aging, illness, and death come through forces that are beyond your control, but in the meantime, you've done everything you could to prepare for them.

So that's why the emphasis is on what we *do*, because what we do can make a difference. In the areas where it can't make a difference, where things are totally beyond your control, it's not worth your while to worry about them. So this understanding focuses your efforts, focuses your attention on the areas where your actions can make a difference, in terms of what you do, what you say, what you think. And the basis for these actions lies right here inside.

There's a common statement in Thailand that all 84,000 divisions of the Canon come down to just three things: your body, your speech, and your mind. Those are things right here, and they're things that are under our control, but we tend to overlook them. The whole purpose of the Dharma is to focus your attention on areas you might have overlooked. This applies especially to your intentions. To be heedful is to realize that your intentions are important, because the quality of your intentions can really make a big difference. If shoddy or harmful intentions work their way in to your actions, they can do a lot of damage. So you can't be careless. This is what discernment is all about. It means seeing very clearly, as clearly as you can, the distinction between a skillful intention and an unskillful intention—seeing the connections between your intentions and the results they bring.

This is one of the reasons I like the breath meditation technique that Ajaan Lee formulated. Make sure that you're very clear about what you're doing to the breath and the results that come. We treat the breath as a laboratory for the principle of karma right here, right before your very eyes, right in your nose, and in your lungs, and in your whole body. You can see the results that one decision can have. When you decide to breathe in a particular way, what happens as a result? This exercise gets you in touch with the decisions that are being made down in your body, because the mind that is making the decisions, but with reference to what's going on in your body: how you hold your body, how you breathe. A lot of subtle decisions are being made down there, and this is a good way of exploring that, because this is where a lot of your subconscious decisions are being made as well.

So you try to uncover as much as you can. Pay very careful attention to this area that, for most of us, we tend to slough over. When you work, you get totally into your head. If you read a book, you're totally into the book. When you're on the computer, you're totally in the computer screen. Our minds have a way of flowing in and occupying whatever it is they're concerned with for the time

being. This process is called becoming and birth. What normally happens is that when the mind goes flowing out to one of the little worlds it creates for itself, its awareness of the body gets stunted, squeezed out. That means that a lot of the decisions that are being made down in this part of your awareness get squeezed out—or at least your awareness of them gets squeezed out—as well.

To counteract this tendency, we try to come back and re-inhabit the body. In this way the subtle things—the breath and the other aspects of the body that indicate subtle movements in the mind—become more and more clear. This is a type of becoming and birth as well, filling up the body and dwelling inside the body, but it's a kind of becoming and birth that the Buddha recommended as part of the path: right concentration. As Ajaan Lee once said, if you try to get past becoming and birth, you're not going to be able to do it unless you really understand the process of becoming and birth, and can do it very skillfully.

So, inhabit your body, see what your full presence in the body shows you about what's going on in your mind. You'll find that lots of things that have been squeezed down in the subconscious suddenly come into the light of day. You get to know your intentions a lot better, you can be a lot more intent on watching them, observing them carefully, gaining a sense of what motivations lie behind your actions. As you can discern these various layers, this is how you can begin to let go of unskillful intentions and develop more skillful ones, because you're more fully aware of the whole range of your awareness. Wherever in this field of awareness the decisions are being made, you know them. You don't let anything important slip past you. You don't let things get covered up by a fog of unknowing or a smoke of unknowing. A lot of the mind is smoke and mirrors.

What we're trying to do as we meditate is to cast a lot of light into those areas. The more fully aware you are, the more skillfully you can deal with the problems that arise in your mind, if you watch carefully. That quality of watching carefully is another meaning for *citta-bhavana*: developing this quality of intentness.

Ajaan Maha Boowa once remarked that if you're intent on all of your proper duties in the course of the day, it becomes a habit that gets developed in your meditation as well. You don't let things slide. You don't let things slip past you. You don't immediately assume that whatever is happening is unimportant, doesn't make a difference, doesn't matter. A lot of important decisions tend to get made in the fog of that apathetic attitude, so you want to be very clear about them. The development of concentration gives you the energy to keep up this level of intentness, so it doesn't wear you out. It actually becomes energizing when the clear seeing and the stillness of the mind go together. They reinforce each other.

So as we meditate, we're not just letting go, letting go. There *is* a fair amount of letting go in the meditation, but there's also a lot of developing as well. In one of the suttas on the customs of noble ones, or the traditions of the noble ones, the Buddha said that this is the fourth tradition: to delight in developing, to delight in letting go. The first three customs deal with the requisites: being content with whatever food, clothing, shelter you get, and not exalting yourself or disparaging others over the fact that you're more content than they are. From that logic, you'd think that the fourth custom would deal with medicine, but it doesn't. It goes off directly into the development of the mind. You delight in developing all of the skillful qualities of the mind, and you delight in letting go of all of the unskillful ones. Again, you don't disparage others and don't exalt yourself because that's the way you are. You just *are* that way because it's a good way to be. It gets results.