

## *Your Intentions Come First*

*June 12, 2015*

The passages we chant before we begin to meditate are for the purpose of firming up your intention to sit here and meditate, to be with the breath for the whole hour. On the one hand, we think about principles of karma: that the body is not going to stay with us – it's going to get old, grow sick, die; we'll leave our friends; all we've got is our karma. And that comes from the mind. So the mind needs to be trained, to make sure that its karma is good.

Then we have the reflections on goodwill, empathetic joy, compassion, and equanimity, to remind us that we want a happiness that's true, something that really lasts and doesn't harm anyone. The equanimity also reminds us that there is only so much we can do in the world, and that if we want true happiness, we need to go beyond karma.

So these are some of the reflections that help us to get our motivations straight and get our intentions strong—because our intentions make a huge difference in how we're going to experience the next hour.

You've got the body here; you've got the breath. And a lot of that comes from old karma. As the Buddha said, all of our six senses should be experienced as old karma. But we're not just stuck with old karma; in fact, our present karma is something we experience prior to sensory contact. It's a peculiar point in the Buddha's description of causality: that intentions come prior to our experience of the six senses. In one way it's not peculiar, in fact we can often see this for ourselves how the way we have an intention in the mind is going to shape the way we experience things. If we're hungry right now, we're going to experience the world in one way. If we've had more than enough food, we're going to experience the world in another way. It all comes down to our intentions. What's strange about this is that your present intention, your present karma, is actually something that you experience prior to the results of your past

karma. The contact at the six senses, which the Buddha identifies with old karma, comes further down the line. Yet all too often we go running to the contact and build on that, getting upset when the contact is unpleasant, forgetting that we have an opportunity here to shape things well from the very beginning.

So take advantage of the fact that your intentions come first. As the Buddha said, the mind is in the forefront of all things. Remember the very first verses in the Dhammapada: The mind is the forerunner of all dhammas; it's in charge. So don't abdicate the fact that you're in charge. Take advantage of it. You make up your mind that you're going to stay here, and you *keep* that in mind. That's what mindfulness is for. It's to remind you that how you experience the next hour will depend on your intentions. So keep your intention really, really solid. You want to stay with the breath, and you want to do it well. That means you want to stay here continually.

Now, it's not simply through willpower that that's going to happen. You need some help. Help comes in learning how to play with the breath, having a strategy for staying here. That's part of your intention as well. You can breathe in any kind of way, so how about breathing in a way that feels really, really good?—a way that feels nourishing for the body, feels soothing for the mind, energizing when you're feeling tired, grounding when you're feeling scattered. There's lots to explore right here. So make that your intention. You want to explore what the breath can do for you here in the present moment.

And try not to get waylaid. Something may come up—a pain may come up or a particularly interesting thought may come up. You have to keep reminding yourself: You're here for the skill of dealing with the breath. You're not here for those other things. You've had thoughts before; you've had pains before. You don't have to get all excited about them. Even if it's an amazing and original thought: If it's really that good, it'll be there when you come out of meditation. For the time being, though, you want to stick with your original intention no matter what.

It's like those scenes in the movies where a person is given permission to go into a hall of treasures and then take one treasure out. The catch is that there are a lot of other treasures in the hall as well, and the people who get distracted by the other treasures end up not getting anything at all. So keep your mind on the one treasure: You want to learn how to get the mind under your control; you want to learn to get mind to be still and solid and clear, here in the present moment, with an awareness that's centered but broad—not broad in the sense of running after things in all directions, but broad in the sense of having a wide range of awareness throughout the body.

Make the body one sensation, i.e. the sensation of breath. Make that the one topic of your mind. As you experience the hands and feet, try to experience them as an aspect of breath. Every part of the body: Experience it as an aspect of breath. There will be still breath energy in some parts of the body, and moving breath energy in other parts. Ajaan Lee has a long list of the different kind of energies: the ones that go back and forth; the ones that spin around in place. Also different levels of breath energy: energy moving through the blood vessels; energy moving through the nerves; still breath energy that can be detected in some parts of the body. There's lots to explore. Make that your range. That's where you're going to wander. It's a limited range, going as far as the skin or a little bit beyond the skin. Sometimes you can sense an energy flowing just around outside the body, like a cocoon. But make that the limit of your wanderings, and try to experience all as aspects of breath. This is what makes it into *one* object – your sense of the body right here, right now.

As for any pleasures that may come up, any sense of fullness or unusual energies, learn how to deal with them in relationship to the breath. Some people sometimes find a tightness developing in the chest or an energy that seems to come out of left field. Well, think of the tightness coursing out from the chest, going out the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet, so that it doesn't get stuck. Think of everything in terms of breath energy in the body, and that the breath energy is wide open and connected. The more connected everything is, the less

need you'll feel for in-and-out breathing, and the stronger that sense of being One in the present moment becomes. The body is one large field of breath. That's one meaning of "singleness of preoccupation." And it's what fills the mind. One of the terms for this is mindfulness immersed in the body. You're in the body, thoroughly, totally, with it all around you. As if you're sitting in a tub of water, and the water surrounds you.

Make that your intention; hold to that intention. And you begin to see that intentions really do have a prior power over the results of your past karma. There may be little pains here and there, noises outside, whatever. But if you hold tight to your intention, those things are not going to lead you astray. You want to have *that* kind of determination. Because it's only through that kind of determination that the mind really gets solidly established: still, clear, and in a really good position to gain insight. Insights are not things that you can intend ahead of time, but you can intend to get the conditions right. So always hold that in mind as you meditate, that your intention comes first.