

Gentle Intentions

The limb of the Buddha's eightfold path that deals with intentions expressly states that two types of intention to develop in one's practice are those of nonharming and not killing. These are intentions to be gentle and kind.

We are not used to things changing through being gentle and kind, thinking that we must take decisive action or discipline ourselves with harsh methods (which include punishment and/or shame). There has to be some kind of faith or trust in the efficacy of gentle intentions to produce changes, for it doesn't make rational sense that by being kind and patient, and by essentially doing less, we will transform in significant ways. We tend to prefer direct approaches to change, such as working hard on one thing or taking a prescribed course of training. Something indirect, such as being gentle and allowing with one's inner experience, doesn't meet the rational requirements, doesn't suit the belief that change comes about by doing something that aims directly at what needs to be changed.

The third kind of intention the Buddha speaks of is the intention to renounce. It too is a soft intention, but it is often

practiced in a strong, determined way that is not soft at all. What you renounce while unlearning meditation is not any previously learned meditation technique but, rather, any strong intentions that may have been attached to the technique. It becomes possible to do the meditation practices with gentle intentions. If you've learned, for example, to follow the breath as a meditation practice, this approach isn't about abandoning that practice; rather, it's about doing it without a strong intention. An example would be if you find yourself noticing the breath and you are able to gently focus your attention for a short while, seeing if it will stay there naturally or not. If your attention doesn't stay with the breath, then let it move to where it will. But if it does, you will be with the breath and experience the benefits of that practice, even though your attention may only stay there for a minute or so.

Loosening around the Instructions

The tension between *the meditation instructions you use* and *your mind as it is* in meditation leads to tightening or loosening around the instructions. When we tighten around meditation instructions, we try to do them exclusively, rigidly, "correctly." When we loosen around meditation instructions, we do them loosely, partially, or not at all.

There can often be a tightening around an instruction when you first learn it. It can't be helped. That is what we do when we receive instructions and try to do them correctly. We don't follow an instruction with the intent to be loose with it, for that would open the door for failure, for forgetting the instruction, for doing something other than the prescribed practice. No, we tend to want to do the instruction well, even perfectly, and get all the promised benefits from it.

The problem here is the type of intention that is required to do the instruction. To pursue this with you, I would have to propose that you consider that there are two types of intention to be found in the meditation instructions themselves:

- Strong, harsh, rigid intentions
- Gentle, light, flexible intentions

What tends to happen to you when you hear a meditation instruction such as "Be aware of your breath; when your mind wanders, bring it back to the breath" is that you have a strong, harsh, rigid intention to do just that. There is no room for doing anything else. The sole purpose of meditation becomes keeping your attention on the breath at all times.

What happens when that instruction becomes gentler, friendlier, more allowing? Say the teacher phrases it as, "Be aware of your breath. When your mind wanders, gently lead it back to the breath." Is that going to create a gentle intention instead of a harsh one? In my experience, it does not. In fact, it tends to set up a bind. You are still being told to disregard thoughts and to concentrate on the breath. Paradoxically, until there is a true allowing and acceptance of thoughts in meditation, it is unlikely you will learn how to gently disengage from thinking. The imperative to pull yourself out of each mind-wandering goes against the conditions that would lead to gentleness.

If you have been following the grand theme of the tension between *the meditation instructions you use* and *your mind as it is*, you will see that any instruction that asks you to concentrate on one part of your experience (the breath) and exclude other parts of your experience (thoughts) will set up an internal struggle when the two are in conflict (such as fighting off thoughts to stay with the breath). You could say that the purpose of learning the practice to be aware of the breath is to conquer the mind's own natural wildness and bring it in line with the breath. A struggle with *your mind as it is* occurs from the very outset by disallowing mind-wandering.

Long ago, having realized this and other problems with the instruction of following the breath, I decided not to teach meditation using it. Awareness of the breath is something I see people come to some time down the road on their own, when a good deal of harshness and rigidity has been weeded out of their

meditation practice. Then it can be accomplished gently and effortlessly.

What I teach people new to meditation is to start with an awareness of the body sitting still. But it is hard to begin with an awareness of your whole body. So I ask them to start with bringing their attention to the touch of their hands on top of each other in their lap. The idea is not to hold your attention there all the time but to allow thoughts and feelings into the sitting also.

During the meditation sitting, anything that happens is okay. Falling asleep, planning a trip, worrying about a relationship, fantasizing, daydreaming, problem solving, anything. Wherever your mind goes, whatever comes up, however you feel, it is all okay. If you forget to notice your hands touching for a long period of time, that is fine too. All that is required of you is to sit still, but if you need to move, do so, and then resume a still posture. Your eyes can be closed or open, though I often find that this practice is more effective with eyes closed.

This may sound too loose to be a legitimate form of meditation. If your idea of meditation is staying with a particular object of meditation throughout the sitting, then this certainly doesn't count as meditation. And that is part of what can keep people from embarking on the path of unlearning meditation: it does not meet the commonly held views about what meditation is. The practice of unlearning meditation is, very simply, being with your experience of meditating. It is not about the meditation instructions, but about what you experience in meditation. The chart below can be used to compare instruction-centered meditation practices and this approach of unlearning meditation.

TRADITIONAL MEDITATION

Strong intentions
Focused on a prescribed object (e.g. the breath)
Constant reminding oneself to return to the breath

UNLEARNING MEDITATION

Gentle intentions
Grounded on the body sitting still while allowing anything to come up
Periodic remembering to return one's attention to the body or just finding

Judging oneself for doing the meditation practice wrong and trying to find the correct way of doing it

Discipline in terms of staying with the task is important

one's attention on the body of its own accord

Being okay with how one is meditating much of the time, except for periods of doubt and confusion as to this being an acceptable way to meditate

Developing tolerance for difficult feelings, thoughts, and memories coming up is important

Not only is the orientation different, so is the way it is taught.

In my workshops I ask people to take a few moments after each sitting and try to call back to mind what they can remember from it. Often they can remember only a few things. So I suggest that you start with what you remember most easily and then try to recall things that are less clear. You can write down your recollections in a notebook or journal. Recollective Awareness Meditation gets its name from this feature of recalling and journaling sittings. The purpose of the recollection is to become familiar with your experiences in meditation. I will go into this in more depth later on, but for now what you need to know is that we can use our memory to cultivate present-moment awareness. It is generally believed by those who teach and practice mindfulness meditation that present-moment awareness (mindfulness) is developed by using techniques that bring one into the present moment. That is a direct approach to achieving the aim of being in the present.

Recollective Awareness is an indirect approach that accomplishes the same thing, but instead of only learning how to be present with the breath and bodily/sense experience as in the mindfulness techniques, one learns to be present with emotional and mental states, for that is what is often recalled. By recalling what you were experiencing emotionally in the meditation sitting afterward, you become more able to stay with similar emotional experiences when they arise again. And not only that, but

you also become more interested in them and skilled in exploring them.

An important part of Recollective Awareness Meditation for many people has been talking about their meditation experiences with a teacher. Since some readers of this book may not have access to a teacher, I am including stories from individuals who have been meditating in this way, along with some actual journal entries from their sittings, including my observations and comments. I hope that you will be able to relate to some of what people have gone through and use that to further support your meditation practice. And you could always decide to attend one of my workshops or retreats, or those held by teachers I have trained.

Listed below are the basic meditation instructions for Recollective Awareness Meditation.

- Find a quiet spot to meditate where you most likely won't be disturbed by others or by the phone. Decide how long you are going to sit (anywhere from ten to forty minutes) and either set an alarm or have a clock nearby to peek at on occasion.
- Sit in a comfortable posture, one that you feel you will not need to change for the duration of the sitting, either on a chair, on a couch, or on a meditation mat or cushion. But if you do need to move during the meditation sitting, try to move slowly and quietly into a more comfortable posture.
- Close your eyes and bring your attention to the touch of your hands resting one on top of the other in your lap. But don't hold your attention there. Instead, allow your mind to go where it will. If you are drawn into thoughts, feelings, memories, or fantasies, let your attention go there. Your attention may at times also be drawn to sounds, bodily sensations, fragrances or odors, or your breath.
- When you feel that you have been away from the contact of your hands for several minutes, you can remind yourself to come back to the hands and stay there for a few seconds before allowing your mind to wander again.

- If you feel restless, bored, confused, discouraged, elated, sleepy, upset, anything, it is okay. You don't have to do anything about it, or you can bring your attention back to the touch of your hands. But if you do, just stay with your hands for a little while, and then if your mind wants to go back into the feelings or thoughts that you left, you can let it go there. If something else draws your attention, you can let it.
- When the meditation sitting is over, take a couple of minutes to mentally recall what you can of the sitting. You may also decide to journal your meditation sitting.
- And, you don't have to meditate every day.

Instructions for Journaling

- Before writing down the sitting, write down the date and time that the sitting took place. This is helpful when referring back to the journal entry.
- There are two basic ways to begin writing it down: to make a list or to write a narrative. If you decide to make a list of the events you recall from the sitting, I suggest that you use longer descriptions than single words. You don't need to write down the sitting in chronological order. You can start with what you remember most easily, and once you have that on paper, you can write down the other things that start to come to mind from the meditation. For those who like to have journal entries in chronological order, you can always rewrite the journal entry afterward, putting it in order, or mark entries in some way to give a picture of when they occurred.
- Your descriptions do not have to be exact. They just need to be truthful. If a description doesn't feel accurate, that is fine, as long as you are being honest. We can't hold ourselves to a high standard of precision and accuracy in this endeavor.
- Try to keep your journal entries focused on what went on during the meditation sitting. In the course of writing things down, you might have some thoughts about an experience.

- You may write down your afterthoughts, but mark them in a way that shows they did not occur in the sitting (such as by putting them in parentheses).
- You will remember only a fraction of what goes on in many of your sittings. That is perfectly normal. Just write down what you can recollect. That is enough. Some journal entries may be many paragraphs long, while others may just have a couple of sentences.

Below are examples of narrative and list forms of meditation journaling.

Sunday, August 6, 2006

8 A.M. to 9 A.M.

Many thoughts about office space, buildings, leases, etc. Not really lost in the thoughts, or only for brief moments. Started to think that I wanted to know what to do about all of these things in a different way—not necessarily via thinking and weighing options. This thought led to a further distance from the thoughts, a closer, more dispassionate viewing. This was accompanied by a slowing down in thoughts, and then I noticed the orange-yellow light glowing behind my eyelids, and the tracking of my thoughts slowed to one at a time rather than in overlapping multiples. My awareness also began moving to my breathing at regular intervals. Started to think about how I'm growing very comfortable with my thoughts/thinking, not as frantically paced as they have been in the past, more floating, sometimes dancing lightly from one to the next—I felt at ease and peace with the thoughts and the process—same thoughts as in the beginning of the sit, all the practical day-to-day stuff—smiling

1. Thinking about leasing office space, only lost in the thoughts briefly
2. Wanting some other way to handle these things, not by thinking about them

- 3 Felt more distant from the thoughts, more dispassionate
- 4 Saw an orange-yellow light
- 5 My thoughts slowed down to one at a time
- 6 Became aware of breathing at regular intervals
- 7 Felt at ease with the thoughts and the process
- 8 Ended the sit smiling

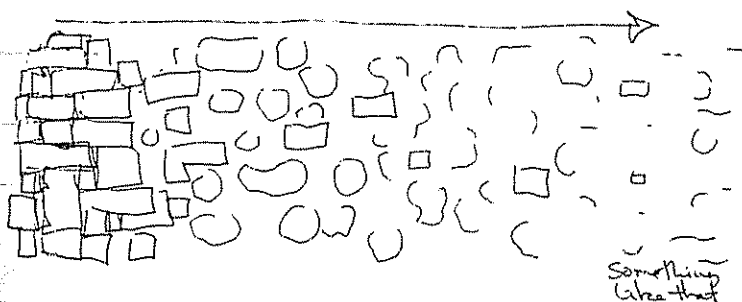
More Creative Ways of Journaling

For some people, writing a narrative or making a list of experiences just doesn't do justice to their meditation sittings. Also, sometimes writing about experiences in linear fashion presents problems, and a more creative approach is needed. Below are examples from two sittings by a student who is a graphic artist.

I suggest that you journal at least five meditation sittings. They do not need to be consecutive.

Wednesday night sangha sit

Had a new sensation of body & thought
experienced as the surface of water
A dappled surface
moving & broken
I was observing
but also part of this pattern
which was both internal
& external



Instructions as Rules

Meditation instructions are, in many instances, a set of rules. At least that is how we tend to take them. We experience them more like orders to "meditate this way" than as directions on how to meditate skillfully.

Sometimes meditation instructions come to us with the rule explicitly stated: "Don't let your back slump. You must always sit with a straight back." How does this instruction feel to you? For some it might feel easy and effortless, making meditation much more accessible. But I fear that for many it will feel like a difficult task, one that requires great willpower and effort. Regardless of how it feels initially, in the meditation sitting itself, following this instruction will populate the sitting with reminders to keep the back straight, and you will continually correct your posture whenever you slump. And these reminders, intentions, and corrections will be a prominent feature of your experience of meditating; your feelings of success and failure may depend on how straight your back is throughout the sitting.

Other instructions have the rule implied in them, and whether you get the rule or not may depend upon how the instructions

are initially delivered and reinforced over time. "Be aware of the breath" is a good example of this. Much of the time it is presented with the rule explicitly stated alongside it: "When your mind wanders, return to the breath." But sometimes it is delivered without the rule: "As you sit, you will notice your breath moving in and out at the nostrils. Try to stay with it." Here there isn't the rule to return to your breath when your mind wanders, but then again, you could interpret "Try to stay with it" as implying "Don't let your mind wander."

A rule forms whenever an instruction is stated as "You should do this, not that" or "When this happens, always do that." Rules function as preselected choices. When operating with a rule in mind, you don't have to consider the various other choices, for you tend to make your choice in accordance with the rule. Many meditation practices actually teach people not to make any other choice with certain experiences than the choice that is found in the instruction. In that way, meditation instructions limit our choices, though we may agree to that limiting quality because we often believe that the choice the instruction gives us is the best possible choice.

Sometimes teachers develop their own meditation instructions in response to the rigid, rule-based form of the instructions they were taught. So you might receive a meditation instruction to focus your attention on the breath and to accept other aspects of your experience at the same time. The instruction might read something like, "As you attend to the breath, you can also be aware of sounds, your body posture, bodily sensations, and your thoughts. Just note your thoughts as past, present, or future, letting them come and go." Now, on the surface this seems to resolve the problem of being aversive toward one's thinking in meditation, providing harmony between observing the breath and the other aspects of your experience. You are instructed to have a broader, more accepting stance toward your experience while, at the same time, you are training your attention to stay with the breath. Sounds perfect.

Then you try it out. First off, you will probably find that you

can do only one instruction at a time. You pick the clearest, most definite one first. You observe the breath. How do you do that? By holding your attention on the breath and disallowing your thoughts, for thinking is usually a distraction from paying attention to your breath. Then, at some point, you may recall that you were going to be more accepting of your thoughts, sounds, bodily sensations, and so forth, and you let your attention leave your breath. All is well and good if you are calm and settled and able to do this. But if you're not able to do it, you find yourself going back to the breath and once again disallowing thoughts. The principle I would like to illustrate here is that the instruction to observe the breath will generally trump all other instructions given along with it, especially those instructions that contradict the instruction to stay with the breath. Such contradictory instructions often leave us either in a bind as to which one to follow or put us in a situation where we have to choose one over the other.

It may not always be the words we hear in the meditation instructions we receive but the tone of voice or feeling behind them that convey how the instruction is to be done. Certainly if you hear the instructions in a gentle, soothing, slightly hypnotic voice, you most likely won't notice if there is any harshness or contradiction in them—that is, until you do them without being under the influence of that soothing tone of voice. Some people get comforted and inspired by the voice in the instructions they receive and feel they must listen to recordings of instructions in order to do them. This is one way that the rule-based rigidity of many instructions gets past us.

The instructions for unlearning meditation are neither rigid nor contradictory. Like any instructions, they can be interpreted as rigid and used in a strict, inflexible manner, but that is definitely not the idea. I convey to students from the beginning that any experience they have in meditation is fine. There are no exceptions. Thus there are no contradictions. I do not say "Accept everything" and also "Focus on the breath" or anything of the sort. In fact, I would not say "Accept everything," for I believe that is unrealistic and impossible to do much of the time. Neither would

I instruct anyone to practice "choiceless awareness," because our experience is punctuated with necessary choices, and so to imagine functioning without choices seems incomprehensible.

Behind the Instructions

Now we are moving away from the subject of experiencing the instructions as rules to what is operating almost invisibly behind most of the instructions we receive. Meditation instructions also contain beliefs on the true nature of experience, the ways things truly are. I could state this as another proposition: embedded in the meditation instructions are concepts that are believed to be true and valid by the person giving the instructions (and, subsequently, by those who practice those instructions ardently). Most of the time we welcome this integration of practice and theory, primarily doing a particular meditation practice to arrive at the realization or a deep understanding of the concept(s) embedded in it.

So it may be difficult to see this as a problem or as something to be unlearned. If you are practicing meditation to be in the present moment, then why would you want to unlearn the concept of being in the present moment? Besides, if you have a belief that enlightenment is just being in the here and now, and you have no desire to question that belief, then it will feel perfectly correct and sensible to have that concept embedded in your meditation practice. You would never question its validity, its usefulness, or any of its qualities. You would just meditate in the appropriate ways to realize it.

It is not my wish to convince you otherwise. But it is my responsibility to help you see how concepts function in your meditation practice. I will be doing this at points throughout the book, so don't worry about my getting too involved in something that at the moment may sound abstract and metaphysical. It is really quite practical.

The way I see it, when looking at how concepts function in meditation, the issue of whether the idea is true or not doesn't matter. So it doesn't really matter whether being in the present

moment is true enlightenment; we can still use it as an example of how concepts function in meditation instructions and our application of them.

A person sits down to meditate and brings her attention to the in-breath and the out-breath at her nostrils. She has been told that when she is exclusively with each in-breath and out-breath, she is in the present moment. Air enters her nostrils; she feels it pass into her head but does not follow it down to her lungs; a moment passes, then air moves up from her lungs and into her head, and after it passes through her nostrils she feels it brush against her upper lip. Each discrete part of this process is experienced as it is happening, which must be the case for it to fit into the concept of the present moment. Otherwise, parts of her experience would not be in the present, but in the past or the future. What parts of her experience would that be? Anticipating the breath making contact somewhere as it goes in and out, that would be looking toward the future, while recalling the touch of the breath once it is gone would be in the past. There is no leeway here; the present moment cannot be the past nor the future—it is strictly those times when one is with the touch of the breath.

Now let's step back a little and get a broader picture as to how this concept is functioning in relation to the instruction the meditator is following. As per the nature of concepts, it gives order and reason to the instruction. She is not just being aware of her breath without rhyme or reason—her awareness of her breath brings her into contact with the present moment, which is something much greater and more significant than just sitting and knowing that you are breathing. The concept creates a bridge from the mundane to the sublime.

But wait, that is only part of the story. The concept also divides her experience according to its logic. It agrees with the touch of the breath but not with her anticipation or recollection of the breath, so it must relegate those moments of memory and expectation to its opposite, the concept of not being in the present moment. How can you have being in the present without its opposite of not being in the present? Such concepts only come in pairs.

Then in meditation, it becomes customary to see one's experience in terms of mindful and unmindful, present and not present, self and no-self, to name but a few of the common concepts we learn when we take up a meditation practice. Under the surface of our experience, we are using these concepts to sort our experiences into acceptable and unacceptable, right and wrong, real and illusory.

And this brings us back to meditation instructions as rules. When the concept we have of meditation is to always be in the present moment, then it is quite natural to give birth to a rule that prohibits us from not being in the present moment. What is then prohibited or frowned upon in our meditation sittings happens to be our thoughts, feelings, memories, plans, and the like, all of which are subsumed under the category of not being present.

Now, if you have meditated without the concept of being in the present moment, then the concept of not being in the present probably wouldn't have appeared either. Your meditation sittings would not have that concept (and its opposite) embedded in it, so you probably wouldn't even be thinking about it. You wouldn't be judging yourself for not being present. You wouldn't feel you had to do things to yourself, change things about yourself, learn new meditation techniques in order to be present. You would be meditating for other reasons.

Are there any ways of meditating that do not have such concepts? I would have to say, all meditation practices, including what I teach, will have concepts embedded in them, and those concepts will be used as supports for the creation of rules on how one should be meditating. The only way to address this area of concepts in one's meditation practice is to go through a process of unlearning meditation. By looking into the concepts supporting your meditation practice, you may begin to disentangle yourself from ones that no longer work for you.

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