Morning Instructions - Intention or Cetanā in Pali

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 44:23

We're going to introduce one more meditation focus this morning, and we've waited until this point because it's one of the more subtle things that we can pay attention to—the factor in the mind called intention. The Pali word is cetanā.

This is an incredibly important mental factor. I'll talk at the end about why it's so important. But being able to recognize it in simple situations first, as we'll do in this meditation, will be really useful for carrying it through the rest of our days and also out in the world. Intention has a tremendous amount of power in our life.

We're going to look at it very simply in this meditation and through the rest of the day as the connection between mind and body. Generally, body doesn't move unless mind tells it to. There are a few exceptions to that—like when you're sitting in the doctor's office and she taps the mallet on your knee and your leg goes up in a reflex reaction. There's no intention or mental urge behind that. But otherwise, everything we do—when we sit down, when we stand up, when we move our arms, when we speak, when we make physical movements with our body—happens because the mind is telling the body to do that.

What we want to look at and discover in the meditation is that moment when the mind instructs the body to move. We'll keep it simple since you're not speaking. We're going to focus on movements of the body during this sitting period.

Here are a couple of examples. Anytime you notice you've slumped and you want to straighten your posture, notice that before you straighten, there's an intention to do that. The mind directs the body to do that. Notice each time you swallow. The mind usually says, before it happens, "It's okay to swallow, go ahead and swallow." Then the swallowing takes place. Not in so many words, but there's a signal from the mind to swallow.

You might also notice if you're feeling some discomfort in your bodily posture and you want to move—you want to unfold the legs or stretch forward with the back—the mind has to give the signal for the body to do that. And that signal is what we call the intention. It's a mental factor; it arises, it acts, the body responds, and then it fades away.

The intention is a very subtle movement of mind. Sometimes things happen so quickly in the body that we can't quite catch that little burst of intention that precedes it. So don't be frustrated if you find this hard to

discover. It's subtle, it can happen quickly, and that's okay.

We're going to start paying attention to the moment before the bodily movement takes place and see what we can notice in the mind happening at that point. We're going to call this the "about-to" moment—when the body is about to move, about to do something. See what you notice happening in the mind.

We're calling it intention in this setting, which is how we usually describe it as a meditation subject. If you read the translations of the suttas, it's more often described as volition. Bhikkhu Bodhi uses the term volition to translate cetanā. So intention, volition, urge, motivation, motive power—all these words describe what's happening in the mind before the body responds.

What you want to try to do is pay attention and see if you can find the mental signal that precedes a bodily movement during this meditation. The body's not moving a lot, so this intention to move won't be there all the time. But notice—you may move your neck, you may move your arm, you may straighten your posture, you may move for discomfort, you may swallow. Just see if you can find the mental signal that tells the body to do one of those actions.

Once the act has happened, you can let go of looking for intention until the next time the body is about to move. We're going to focus on this "about-to" moment and just see what you find there—that moment of intention.

Please begin as you always do. Sit or stand in a comfortable and relaxed way, feeling the uprightness of the spine and relaxing through the eyes, jaw, belly, and shoulders.

I find it really helpful to have the conscious moment of relaxing at the beginning of a sit. Anytime you feel you've gotten a little tense through the sit, restore the sense of relaxation. It can be helpful to take two or three deep breaths and think that relaxation is happening on the out-breath.

This movement to relaxation reminds us we're not trying to get somewhere else. You're not trying to make anything special happen. All we're trying to do is to know what is happening.

in the mind, the body, the environment. Really our faith is in the mindfulness being enough. We don't have to control the experience because the mindfulness is enough. It will learn.

Coming into the body, just feeling the body as one integrated unit in sitting. For some, the body posture itself is a good anchor in meditation. The mind learns from the body's stability, from its stillness. As you connect with the body, let the attention open wide and take in all the sounds that appear and disappear. Have the sense that hearing is very receptive—not sending the mind out towards sounds, but simply resting and letting sounds come to you.

Settling again in the body and feeling the impact of breathing. How does the in-breath feel throughout the body? How does the out-breath feel? Just sitting, and the breath happens by itself.

As you're attending to the body, breath, and sounds, from time to time other sensations will draw your attention. A mood or emotion may call you. You may notice a feeling tone of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. In a very natural way, let the attention go where it's drawn—to what we call the predominant experience in that moment. See thoughts as a present moment arising in just the same way.

In this way, nothing that arises in your sitting is a distraction. Everything is more food for mindfulness. Mindfulness can grow moment after moment, no matter where the attention is drawn, no matter what the experience is.

And then in this sitting, begin to investigate the mental factor called intention—just related simply to movements of the body. Anytime you notice that you're about to make a movement with the body, see if you can pay attention to the moment before the movement happens and catch the signal from the mind that is directing the body to move. Every voluntary movement is preceded by a moment of intention. You could call it an urge, a volition, a motive, or just that "about to" moment.

See what you notice in the mind in that moment when the body is about to move—from straightening the posture, swallowing, shifting. The intention may be accompanied with thought, or it may not.

Just keep an eye out for the action of intention, the "about to" moment just before the body makes a voluntary movement—adjusting the posture, shifting, swallowing.

There's a little bit more to say about intention, but before I do, I'll just see: are there any questions about working with it or what it is?

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.