Right Intention

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 24:30

Right Intention is the second step on the Noble Eightfold Path and it is the crucial link between Right Understanding and the translation of that Right Understanding into the virtuous conduct of Right Action, Speech and Livelihood and the development of the meditative life through Right Effort, Awareness and Concentration.

What the Buddha has shown is that by developing right intention we can spiral away from the crippling and anguishing syndromes of pleasure, pain and guilt. Right understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the Law of *Kamma* clears the mind of ignorance. Ignorance is the base root cause of all our unskillful actions. But if we stop there, we shall all too easily forget what we have come to know, for understanding as a mental activity must be reinforced by actual experience. That actual experience will never come if we don't do something, and we never do anything unless we intend to do it, unless we make an act of will.

Making an act of will on the Noble Eightfold Path means to go against any manifestation of ignorance, of delusion. Ignorance manifests itself in action as greed and hatred, the other two unwholesome roots. If right understanding dispels ignorance, then right intention dispels greed and hatred. Once these roots are undermined, we begin to move out of those syndromes of pleasure-pain and guilt.

This is no easy task, as anyone who has tried to get rid of an unwanted habit will testify. For all the understanding that tobacco and alcohol do to the body, does it stop people smoking and drinking? Does the knowledge of the ill health caused by the two drugs cause a sudden change in behaviour? Not at all. No matter how deep their understanding is, the smoker and the drinker will keep on smoking and drinking until they make the intention to stop. Is just making the one intention enough? Not at all. The intention must be repeated again and again until the old habit has been loosened. Anyone who's tried to give up a strong habit, no matter what it is, knows full well what the training is and how arduous it is. But the prize, the liberation from such habits, is sweet victory indeed.

The Buddha gave a very clear discourse as to what right intention was. At the time he was at one of his main monasteries. It had been built by one of the foremost lay people, a millionaire called Anathapindika. It was situated in a reportedly beautiful place called the Jeta Grove near the capital city of Kosala, Sarvati. The Buddha starts by telling his listeners, "Before my enlightenment, while I was still a bodhisattva, one intent on becoming truly enlightened, these thoughts occurred to me. Whatever are thoughts of sense pleasure, whatever our thoughts of ill-will and aversion, whatever our thoughts of harming, these thoughts I consider one type. And whatever our thoughts of renunciation, whatever our thoughts of non-ill-will and non-aversion, and whatever our thoughts of non-harming, harmlessness, these I consider

another type."

Here, the Buddha is defining wrong intention as comprising three types of thoughts: those to do with sense pleasure, those to do with ill will, and those to do with harming. Out of these three types of wrong intentional thinking, the states of mind associated with pleasure, pain, and guilt, comes all our suffering.

The Buddha then goes on to make explicit what the unwholesome results of such thinking are. "I understood it in this way. Thoughts of sense pleasure arise in me but they lead to hurting myself, they lead to hurting others, they lead to hurting myself and others, they obstruct intuitive wisdom, they are associated with distress and they do not lead to *nibbana*." He says exactly the same thing about ill will and harming. So here we have clear reasons why we need to abandon and certainly not indulge in these three types of thinking.

Firstly, they are unwholesome and bring present and future unwholesome results both to ourselves and others. Secondly, they are hindrances to the faculty of wisdom that intuits *nibbana*, which means that our meditation practice will be undermined by such states of mind that arise from such intentions. And thirdly, they lead to distress, to the rounds of rebirth, *samsara*, and away from liberation, *nibbana*.

What is also important to note here is that these understandings came to the Buddha before he was enlightened. I think there is a mistaken understanding that the Buddha practised only meditational techniques before his enlightenment, but he obviously spent a considerable time in reflection, in thinking about what he was doing and what was happening to him. In our daily lives as meditators, we also need to regularly think about what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. Right understanding tops the list of the Eightfold Noble Path.

Now, the next step the Bodhisatta made was to counteract such thought. He made a statement as to the importance of a type of thinking we would call these days self-suggestion and positive thinking. And throughout the discourse, he reminds us of the labour involved in this, referring to himself as faring on diligently, ardently and resolutely.

The Buddha goes on to say, "According to whatever a meditator continually ponders and reflects on, so his mind, as a result, develops a leaning in that direction." In other words, the more I think about sense pleasure, the more I'll crave for it. Thoughts build up their own energy, their own momentum, and finally demand expression in some form of speech or action. If someone keeps passing a bank and entertains thoughts of robbing it, it won't be long before he puts pen to paper.

The next step, the Buddha says, is this: "If a meditator ponders and reflects a lot on thoughts of sense pleasure, they bring up thoughts of renunciation." The Buddha here is not saying that we should conjure up thoughts of delightful sense pleasure and then renounce them. No, he goes on: "If meditators make much of the thought of sense pleasure, the mind inclines to thoughts of sense pleasure." What the Buddha wants us to do is to bring to mind those thoughts about how sense pleasure leads to suffering and away

from liberation. When we counter our desire for sense pleasure with contemplation of their dangers, then it is that the feeling to rid ourselves of them, to renounce them, arises.

This renunciation arises out of wisdom. It isn't a practice of sacrifice if by sacrifice we mean to give something up in order to get something else, such as, I give up my desire for a holiday to get a new car. A meditator renounces indulging in sense pleasures not because he wants to gain favours or advantages, but because of the realisation that such self-indulgence brings harmful results. The results of such an action are the opposite of indulgence. It does not lead to hurting others and oneself. It allows intuitive wisdom to flourish. It leads away from suffering and towards liberation, *nirvana*.

But the Buddha adds, "If during the night and the day I should ponder and reflect on this, then from that source I do not behold fear." Fear underlies all our sense desire. It is to do with that essential self-definition, self-attachment. Who am I if I can't indulge in pleasures of sex, wine and song? Our attachment to pleasure, when undermined, causes us to feel anxious and fearful. What the Buddha is telling us is that renouncing our attachment to sense desire, the compulsions, the obsessions, the way we define ourselves by what we enjoy, we shall also free ourselves from anxiety and fear.

We left poor Billy stealing comics and sweets. His desire for these things had become so great that he couldn't resist the temptation of an easy self-satisfaction. His obsession possessed his mind. It stopped him thinking clearly about what he was doing. He may have acted on sheer impulse and just took the comics and bag of sweets. Or he may have reflected upon it and simply pushed away any notion of being caught.

Billy has now totally reformed, I'm happy to report. But that doesn't mean he no longer reads comics or eats sweets. Not at all. What he's got rid of is the compulsion. If the money's there, or somebody buys him a comic, he reads it. He enjoys it. If someone offers him a sweet, he eats it. He enjoys the taste. There's no more sorrow and frustration if he doesn't get sweets and comics. He hasn't built up a collection of comics that he puts under lock and key for fear, for anxiety, that they will be stolen. Billy's learnt to renounce sweets and comics. Mind you, Billy's 40 years old now. Well, as I said, it takes time to overcome these things.

This is a very important point to grasp. People often interpret this teaching of the Buddha to renounce pleasure as meaning to live grey lives, a lacklustre bread-and-water existence. But many is the time in the scripture when the Buddha delights in the world, and he seems to have particular delight in shrines. During the last year of his life, after collecting alms food, he asks Ananda to accompany him to the Capala shrine. "How delightful a spot Ananda is Vesali, and how charming the Udana shrine, and the Gautamaka shrine, and the shrine of the seven mangoes, and the shrine of the many suns, and the Sarandada shrine, and the Capala shrine."

It is not that the Buddha is asking us to be blind to the beauty of the world, but to see it from a particular angle. It's all passing, all transient. And when it comes to our pleasure, it's not me, not mine, not a permanent self. Renouncing all this, our attachment to the world as a place of pleasure-seeking, leads to

liberation from that snare. It leads to peace of mind, fearlessness, and total release, *nibbana*. The Zen master says it in a characteristically direct way: "When I'm hungry, I eat. When I'm tired, I sleep."

This sublime equanimity and joy is something we must work towards, and not simply by renouncing sense desire, pleasure-seeking, but also by undermining our ill-will and harmfulness. It is pondering the effects of aversion that brings about a disengagement, a non-aversion, a non-ill-will. It is by pondering the effects of harmfulness that brings about a refusal to act in a way that causes suffering to others or ourselves, a harmlessness.

Perhaps we should spend some time every day sitting alone, going over what it means to hate, to actually cause harm. When we experience both of these in our daily lives, not simply as doers but as victims, when we meditate and experience what such thoughts are doing to us internally, when we see how they cloud the little wisdom we have, when we see how easily we seem to be absorbed into negativity and lose all balance and tranquillity, when we see how it causes all this suffering and how it leads to more and more suffering, thoughts of escape naturally arise. Attitudes of non-aversion, non-harmfulness naturally develop.

In the meditation especially, we come to know the power of our minds to reinforce their own conditioning. This very inbuilt mechanism of the mind to recondition existing states of mind is going to be the hardest task for us to use in our favour. Whenever we allow the mind to fantasise, be it on the bus, while driving, while having a cup of tea, whatever, every time it happens, it is reinforcing that respective habit, developing that negative conditioning, increasing our *sankhara*. In this discourse, the Buddha makes this plain: "Whatever a meditator ponders and reflects upon, his mind, as a result, develops a bias in that way."

Our efforts, therefore, in daily life and in meditation, must be to raise the energy to remain vigilant and alert. And as soon as such thoughts and fantasies come, we have to zap them. Aha, greed! Aha, the old grudge! Aha, my good friend's sweet revenge! Then to reflect, to ponder, how if we had developed such thinking, what suffering it would have led to. The Buddha is so clear on this teaching, and these thoughts came to him before his enlightenment.

At this point, something very wonderful happens, and I've tried to put it in diagrammatic form. We have now reached a stage of renouncing pleasure-seeking. The more we renounce, the more possessions cease to possess us. They simply become objects in our care for our use. We see them no longer as mine, but simply as objects that help us do things. We stop defining them as belonging to me. When I see another needs the use of that object, I let her or him use it. I don't need it. I might even let her have it. Renunciation naturally leads to generosity.

Just think of your most precious object. Maybe it's a ring, a jewel, a video, a record, a car, whatever. You can test your renunciation, your non-attachment to it. You can test your generosity by allowing another to use it, even own it. Then observe closely the agitation of the mind. Someone happens to say, "My video's

broken." Do we immediately say, "Use mine"? Or do we go very quiet and look aimlessly out of the window? Someone happens to say they'd love to make a trip, perhaps to see someone, but it's very difficult without a car. Do we say, "Use mine. I insist." Or do we shrivel up in a paroxysm of fear in case they ask us?

Do we check our monthly bank account and delight at the extra ten pounds? Does the thought arise, "What cause can I support? Who might need this money more than me?" Or do we fantasise on updating yet another possession? When we observe our minds like this, it comes as no surprise to see how closed in, how isolated, how small-minded some people can be. Selfishness diminishes us. Generosity is infinite expansion.

Is it that impossible to have societies in which personally owned property, apart from personal effects, exist? The Buddha wanted his monks and nuns to come as close as possible to that ideal. A monk owns eight objects which he can justly call mine, and even here there are warnings not to take pride in such things. They have three robes, the begging bowl, thread to mend, a water strainer, a razor and a sitting mat. Apart from a few other things that can be owned on occasion, all the property in the monastery is owned by the establishment, the *Sangha*.

It would be possible for lay communities to have a high degree of shared property, but it will never come by enforcement. Enforced collectives or cooperatives are undermined by the greed and jealousy of the members. Where there is greed and selfishness, how can there be non-attachment, sharing and generosity? The Buddha's understandings do not arise from a materialistic ideology. The Buddha's path has as its ideal, its goal, something beyond sense pleasure. It is only when the search for happiness in sense pleasure ceases, the great renunciation, that a sharing society will arise. It is possible.

Now, a similar experience is found with ill-will. Reflecting on all our dislikes and feelings of aversion, we move to the middle ground of not entertaining such thoughts, not giving them any importance. This is a very important position to be able to take if we really want to undermine our hatreds, angers and frustrations. If, for instance, we dislike someone, we need to ponder the consequences of such an action. We need to realise it is only an attitude, and we don't have to obey it, say it's right, it's me, identify with it.

Within ourselves, we need to take up a position of, "All right, I don't like that person, but I'm not going to do anything about it. No one's perfect, and what's the point of being angry over another's faults? How does it help? In fact, I'm going to try and see her or him in a more positive light." One begins to see the positive attributes of the person, and this is where non-ill will becomes good will, loving kindness.

So with harmfulness, actually translating thoughts of ill will into action is harmfulness. There's a lot of pleasure in it. Sweet revenge. Watching one's enemy, one's rival squirm. The feelings of victory with the cutting word. Why else do it but for the pleasure? It's hard for ordinary people to understand, but torturers get job satisfaction.

Pondering on the karmic consequences of harming others is often enough to reach a position of no harm, harmlessness. When we actually do harm in our thoughts to ourselves, in speech or actions to ourselves and others, it is transgressing the moral law and starting up the reactions associated with guilt. When we undermine this tendency within us, there arises in us an abhorrence of cruelty and a desire to help others. In this way, harmlessness transforms into compassion.

So now we have completed our spiral out of suffering. The more we are ensnared in the syndromes of pleasure, pain and guilt, the more we are being overcome with delusion. The more our ignorance is growing. The greatest delusion lies in the fact that as the selfishness increases, so does our idea of self-importance increase. Our ego gets bigger all the time. As we spend more and more time feeding this pride, this ego-centredness, the more we are cutting off the world as people are turned away by our lack of generosity, sympathy, care for others and so on. How can the enlarged ego give to others when it is so involved in giving to itself?

As selfish persons think they are growing more important, the less important do other people think they are. Life moves towards isolation, loneliness, mental sickness, to hell. What is hell but a state of mind? As my favourite poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins says, "I see the lost are like this, and their scourge to be as I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse."

To escape this downward spiral, this disappearance into the world of the little mind, demands hard training. It's arduous work and full of pain. There are many setbacks and times when advance seems to elude the meditator. Sometimes we even think we're getting worse for all the meditation and attempts at awareness. Letting go of our desires and obsessions fills us with acute discomfort. We so much want, desire, crave. Letting go of aversions makes us feel them even more keenly within ourselves, since now we are no longer displacing these feelings onto others by angry attacks and so on. We feel them burning inside us. Our actions of harmfulness in thought, speech and action scorch us with shame or freeze us with fear as we face up to the consequences we now no longer shrug off.

But just as a rocket escapes the gravitational pull of the earth through the tremendous power of its own boosters, so we can pull ourselves free of the gravitational pull of our negative conditionings by our own power of resolute determination. No easy task. And the Buddha is the first to tell us it was no easy task for him either. Diligent, ardent and self-resolute—that's how he describes himself.

Now as we do begin to pull further and further away, the more we begin to experience moments of light-heartedness, of mental poise, tranquillity. How easy it is to be generous, loving and compassionate when we're like that. Slowly the training becomes more and more joyous. When we are truly generous and we give, joy arises. When we truly love, we love with joy. When compassion arises and we help, joy is the fruit of our labour.

Throughout our whole training lives we shall move in and out of these states—one time generous, sometimes stingy, sometimes loving, other times not caring, and so on. But if our training is ardent and

resolute and diligent, the movement will be upward and outward, spiralling even to the point where generosity, love and compassion are habitual, to the point of wholesome, spontaneous action.

This is one of the attributes of the Buddha: *vijjācaraṇasampanno*, endowed with knowledge and virtue. There was no separation between what he knew to be right and how he behaved. What he said, he did.

The role of meditation here is twofold. It puts us directly in touch with our states of mind and it allows the negative states to die out. Throughout our daily life we maintain a bright alertness with intentions switched to generosity, loving-kindness and compassion so that all day our actions are motivated from that base.

When the mind is in any of these three modes, the root of wrong action is destroyed. Where there was ignorance, there is now its opposite: wisdom. When wisdom is put into action, the other two roots of greed and hatred are destroyed. Where there was greed and hatred, there is now generosity, love and compassion. That's wisdom in action.

When we are moving from the base of wisdom, the intuitive faculty is empowered, it is free. That's why it is in ordinary daily life that so many of the enlightening and spiritual experiences are had. You can experience *nibbāna* while peeling a banana.

Most of the discourses end with a simile. In this discourse of the two types of thinking, the Buddha likens himself to a man who leads a herd of deer out of the marshy ground of sense pleasure, along a secure road of the Eightfold Noble Path, past the male decoy of passion and the female lure of delusion, finally leading to the open space of liberation.

At the end of the discourse on the twofold types of thinking, the Buddha encourages us: "Meditate. Do not be lazy and feel sorry later on. This is my instruction to you." Thus spoke the Lord. Delighted, the monks and lay people rejoiced in what had been said.

Well, I hope this talk has been interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain *nibbānic* peace within.

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