



Chapter 2

Gentle Intentions

The limb of the Buddha's eightfold path that deals with intentions expressly states that two types of intentions to develop in one's practice are those of non-harming 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 the aggressive or rationally regimented 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 but 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 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 not in harmony (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 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 laps. 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 (or trying to stay 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 as to 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 traditional meditation practices centered on the instructions and this approach of unlearning meditation:

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

In my workshops I ask people to take a few minutes after each sitting 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 the 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.

In summary, listed below are the basic meditation instructions I give to beginning meditators. If you already have a meditation practice, you can try these instructions, or you can meditate in the ways you are accustomed to.

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. If you would like to journal your meditation sitting, just try to write a description of what you remember.

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 afterwards, 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 is an examples from someone's meditation journal.

Sunday, August 6, 2006

8 am to 9 am

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.

You can also list your experiences, as below.

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