

Developing Skillful Intention

In preparing for breath meditation, we set an intention that includes two components:

- 1- What we're going to do – we're going to practice mindfulness of breathing, following the steps the Buddha laid out.
- 2- How we're going to do it – we're going to practice with compassion and lovingkindness.

A skillful intention is an intention informed by skillful mental qualities, the qualities of the heart, the sublime attitudes of compassion and lovingkindness. How do we establish this kind of wholehearted intention? The answer is remarkably simple. We fabricate the intention. We tell ourselves that we're going to practice with compassion and lovingkindness. We say the words. The technical term is "internal verbal fabrication." We articulate, in our minds, our intention. For instance, we might say something as simple as: "I'm going to practice mindfulness of breathing. I'm going to practice with compassion. I'm going to practice with lovingkindness." In fact, it might seem too simple. We might think there has to be more to it. But what we're doing, in fabricating skillful intention, is extremely powerful. We're changing our thinking. It's through changing our thinking, the Buddha teaches, that transformation begins.

As we develop skillful intention, using internal verbal fabrication, it's important to understand what we mean when we use the words we're using. What does it mean when we say we're going to practice breath meditation with compassion? What do we mean by compassion?

Compassion is the heart's response to suffering. It's expressed in the wish we have, inside, in the heart, to be free from suffering – although we may be cut off from it, it's a wish that we all have (in having compassion for others, we connect to our wish for them, that they have freedom from their suffering).

When we take action informed by the skillful intention of compassion, we take action in support of our wish to be free from suffering.

We practice meditation so that we can find freedom from suffering. We develop the skill of mindfulness of breathing – and, in doing so, cultivate skillful internal pleasure – because it's a skill that will enable us to move toward an alleviation of our suffering.

In connecting to the heart quality of compassion, the dharma student acknowledges that there is suffering in her life. The truth is, we've all experienced, and continue to experience, suffering; we're all part of this human existence, woven through with its countless forms of pain and suffering.

As we set out to meditate, we remember that we're doing what we're doing because we have a wish to be free from suffering. And as we practice, we reinforce our intention. We continue, throughout the meditation, to remember to practice with compassion.

The other sublime attitude that informs skillful intention is lovingkindness. Lovingkindness is expressed in our wish to be happy, to have happiness of heart (and the wish we have for others that they have true happiness in their lives). In developing skillful intention, when we assert, "I'm going to practice with lovingkindness," we align ourselves with our wish to be happy.

The cultivation of skillful internal pleasure, as the Buddha realized, leads us to true happiness. As such, it's an act of love. It's an act of self-love. And it's an act of love for others.

As we make an effort to develop inner pleasure, we remember that what we're doing is an act of love; we're taking action in support of our wish to have a greater happiness in this life.

In developing skillful intention, the dharma student fabricates her intention. And, if possible, she touches in to a felt sense of her heart, the qualities of compassion and lovingkindness. Compassion

and lovingkindness can be felt. As a general rule, we feel these qualities in the heart center – not the physical beating heart, but an area usually somewhere in the middle of the chest. Some people are able to connect quite readily to the felt sense of compassion and lovingkindness. For others, it takes time. But gradually, as we develop skillful intention, we learn to connect to a felt sense of compassion and lovingkindness. Gradually, we practice straight from the heart.

-from *Skillful Pleasure*.....

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