Working With Intentions and Karma

Understanding and working with intentions is one of the most crucial goals on the Path towards Awakening. The Pali word for *intention* is *cetana* (chey-tah-nah). Another translation is *volition*. Here is what Bhikkhu Bodhi writes about cetana:

“Cetana...is the mental factor that is concerned with the actualization of a goal, that is, the conative or volitional aspect of cognition. Thus it is rendered volition. The Commentaries explain that cetana organizes its associated mental factors in acting upon the object. Its characteristic is the state of willing, its function is to accumulate (kamma), and its manifestation is coordination. Its proximate cause is the associated states. Just as a chief pupil recites his own lesson and also makes the other pupils recite their own lessons, so when volition starts to work on its object, it sets the associated states to do their tasks as well. Volition is the most significant mental factor in generating kamma, since it is volition that determines the ethical quality of the action.” A comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, p. 80

Cetana is one of the Universal Cetasikas (chey-tah-see-kahs), because it functions in every moment of self-experience in the manner described by Bodhi above. Understanding this conceptually is important, but, even more importantly, we must be persistent in directly and immediately noting how intentions guide the process of attention, identification and action.

Synonymous with cetana is another important Buddhist concept, Samma Sankappa (sah-mah sahn-kah-pah), Right Intention, which is found in the Wisdom Aggregate of the Noble Eightfold Path. The function of Right Intention is coordinated with Samma Ditthi (sah-mah dee-tee), Right Understanding. The Wisdom aggregate’s two functions operate in every moment of subjective experience, like the two sides of a coin—if one is present, so is the other—and their coordinated action is wholesome.

Intentions coordinate perception, identification, feeling tone and actions according to the ethical influences of the other cetasikas (mind conditioning functions) in the process, and the karmic result can be either wholesome or unwholesome—*this is why cetana is considered to be universal and ethically malleable.* Intention is instinctual and wholesome ethical considerations are essential to support progress on the path toward Awakening

Cetana plays a key role in the dynamic interactions described in another core concept, *paticca samuppada* (pah-tee-chah sah-moo-pah-dah), traditionally interpreted as *dependent origination*; my preference is to interpret the concept as *contingent provisional emergence* (Google this terminology to find the article I wrote and published on this topic). Intentions coordinate and motivate how the cetasikas (cheh-tah-see-kahs), fundamental self-creating function of consciousness, “work” on feelings, vedana (vey-dah-nah) in Pali, which is also a universal cetasika, whether those feelings are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Intentions coordinate and activate memories that are latent in consciousness, either wholesome or unwholesome in feeling tone, to create a sense of self-identification and action (karma). The ability to note this emergent process of feeling and the intention associated with it is developed through mindful investigation and renunciation of unwholesome conditioning factors to regulate our minds and behaviors just prior to the onset of craving and clinging, the primary causes of dukkha (doo-kah), which is the subjective experience of distress and confusion. This creates new, wholesome karma (kahr-mah), as mentioned in the above quote.

The most effective ways to note and manage intentions include several attentional tactics, the most primary of which involves repeated, mindful recollection of the intention to clearly notice the beginning, middle and end of the in-breath and then the totality of the out-breath. This persistent application of aware attention is emphasized in the Satipatthana Sutta (sah-tee-pah-tah-nah soo-tah) in the often-repeated refrain *atapi sati sampajanna* (ah-tah-pee sah-tee sahm-pah-jahn-yah), translated as *diligent, mindful, clear comprehension*. This is a primary training tactic, and the goal of the formal sitting practice is to be able to persistently and mindfully monitor and manage the relentless stream of intentions that occur during one’s daily routine, associating wholesome mind conditioning functions that promote the process of Awakening.

Typically, a persistent and alert routine nurturing awareness of intentions would be more fully developed during a residential retreat, which is organized to provide opportunities for intentionally integrating formal and beneficial mindfulness practices with every other activity during the day.

Formal walking meditation practices also foster this integrative process—meditators are encouraged to note every possible intention associated with lifting, moving and placing the foot, shifting weight from one foot to the other, and so on. There is also encouragement to notice how distractions are initiated by intentions generated outside of one’s conscious awareness and to then to mindfully investigate how the streaming of intentions operates and then activate Right Effort to refocus attention back on mindfulness of breathing, walking, or other neutral body awareness.

Here is how Joseph Goldstein writes about intention in the book “Mindfulness—A Practical Guide to Awakening” on page 187-188:

How can we begin seeing directly this crucial factor of volition? Although it is a common factor, arising in each moment, it is not always the predominant one. So it is best to begin noticing it before obvious physical movements. The body doesn’t move by itself; it moves because of a volition in the mind. We can see this every time we change posture or reach for something or turn as we’re moving about. These are movements that are not happening on their own. There is some energetic factor in the mind that wills the action.

We can notice this in various ways. We might get a forewarning of intention in the mind through being aware of a thought to do something. The thought, itself, is not the intention, but it can alert us that an intentional action may follow. As we observe this process carefully, we sometimes feel a certain gathering of energy in the mind—the impulse or command moment—that results in the hand reaching or the body turning. Sometimes we might not feel anything so tangible; rather we simply know, in the moment before acting, that we’re about to move—I call this the “about-to-moment.” All of these processes connect us with the factor of volition….

Although intentions are very quick and small, each one contains a huge power—that is, the power to bring about results, the power bears fruit.

Goldstein makes an important point—an intention forms almost instantaneously, with potentially significant karmic consequences. It might seem impossible to adequately track and manage this sort of dynamic process, but it is doable, which I know from personal experience. Because our normal experiential mode is so locked into the fluidity of craving and clinging regarding what is arising and passing away as “myself”, we don’t have much practice in “chunking” each subjective second into smaller “bits”, but it can be done, with sufficient atapi sati sampajanna—it is simply cultivating the intention to notice how often a thought “chunk” occurs in the context of what humanity has arbitrarily set as a second of time. For this example, consider that an average in-breath lasts perhaps a little more than a second, and there are multiple intentions to maintain conscious awareness during the period of time during the in-breath. Carefully tracking that process can create direct awareness of intentions in such a way that, by comparison, it is possible to realize mindfully just how quickly moments of self-commentary occur in the context of that in-breath. Each of those moments of mindful investigation of the commentary includes an intention, and that can be noted. This leads to a deeper understanding of the transitory arising and disappearing of elements of the commentary.

I personally set an intention to notice the very beginning of the in-breath and then the out-breath before each sitting practice, as a way to establish a routine that makes noting intentions more frequently more likely for moments of self-experience not directly associated with the sensations of breathing. I also cultivate awareness of intentions through the practice of systematically scanning the sensations that are noticeable everywhere in the body. This also creates the circumstances that make it more possible to note with detached, investigative awareness the arising and passing away of thoughts.