

BBMI Monday Meditations with Dr. Winston McCullough
Part 4: “Intention”

Continuing in week 4 with our BBMI (Body → Breath → Mind → Intention) meditation practice, today we’ll take a special focus on the “Intention” element of our practice.

A brief summary from the past 3 weeks:

1. **Body.** It can help to do some stretching/yoga prior to a seated meditation, and then take a nice seated pose: gently engage your core, lengthen your spine, shoulders up then back down, heart lifted, relaxing muscles in face, etc.
2. **Breath.** Next warm up with a focus on your breath: extending your exhale (deep, long, full exhale, without forcing anything), perhaps silently counting 10 inhale/exhale rounds, noting the sensation of the breath entering and exiting; importantly, using the ever-present breath to center our attention and let go of distracting thoughts. (This takes lots of practice, like building strength in a muscle over time.) And if it’s available and appealing to you, the centered breathing we did together in week 2 is an option.
3. **Mind.** Last week we talked about three different methods to enter a space of inner stillness or inner silence. No need to repeat that here.
4. **Intention.** Today’s topic, as the 4th and final step of a meditation in the BBMI system...

But first, one quick note. Look at those four BBMI steps and **consider how much time and emphasis you want to devote to each of those 4 steps.** Depending on any practitioner’s needs on a given day, week, year, etc. we can choose how much we want to emphasize any one of those 4 steps. Some examples:

- When we attend a live yoga class there’s a main focus on the Body postures/movement, usually accompanied by encouragements for focused Breathing throughout the entire yoga class. Sometimes there’s also explicit instruction on what we’re thinking/feeling (but it’s not typically the main emphasis of a yoga class), and usually it ends with some sort of positive Intention and a related “namaste” bow to each other at the end. So big focus on Body and Breath in a typical yoga class.
- On a day when I’m home alone and well-prepared for a deep meditation session (ample time, good night’s sleep, no huge distracting/worrisome thoughts, etc.), I might do a quick stretching session, take 1-2 minutes to center my attention with a Breathing practice, and then spend 90% of the session engaging a deep state of inner stillness for as long as it’s available, then wrap it up with a 1 minute positive intention. So big focus in this case on the main Mind portion of a BBMI sequence.
- Then on other days, or for different practitioners, the Intention step of BBMI might take on much more significance, and in some cases might actually become the primary focus of a meditation session. For example, see Intention practice #3 below.

Okay, so here are 3 examples of how we can include the Intention step in a BBMI meditation. They progress from a lesser emphasis (or total % of time spent in your session) to a greater emphasis (in method #3 Intention is the main part of the BBMI meditation).

- 1. Intention as a Closing Dedication.** At the end and to wrap up a BBMI session, we can silently state a positive intention, which is typically a wish or prayer that the session we just completed will in some way benefit someone whose wellbeing we are hoping for. Like, “I dedicate this meditation to Jane Doe’s finding peace and healing during the hard week she’s experiencing.” Some of the traditions say to wish for the ultimate wellbeing of all sentient beings. In my self-centered state I find it easier to focus on one specific person who I care about – it could be a beloved family member or friend, and later on a “neutral” person like “the cashier at the grocery store”, and eventually when we’re ready it could even be a person we have a conflict with; and it could also be ourselves at a future point in time – and we simply wish for their wellbeing. There are practice tips like “picture light rays coming out from your heart and entering their heart and filling their body with light” (this works well when done literally as child’s play, using our imagination rather than intellect), or “sending out peace, health and joy with each exhale”. But the real action here is *feeling it*, actually connecting with deep feelings of love and compassion for this other person. And you might feel it physically, like pleasant chills running up and down your spine, etc. And healthy subtle neurobiological changes might be occurring in your body, e.g., Oxytocin flowing. It’s about cultivating a positive emotional habit that gets stronger with practice, just like building a muscle or practicing the piano.
- 2. Intention as Transformed Distractions.** Okay, agreed, that’s an odd phrase. The meaning: I started a pretty rigorous daily meditation practice in the early 1990s before Mindfulness became all the rage in mainstream society; and it’s now a central component of corporate Wellness programs. For years I was taught and practiced how to build a clear consistent focus of attention on the chosen object, without letting the mind wander to other distracting thoughts, emotions and sensations. Focused concentration was “good” and distracting thoughts were “bad”, something to be eliminated. A few years ago I discovered something that’s been extremely helpful ever since: Distracting thoughts aren’t actually “bad”. Although they can work against the goal of developing deep focused concentration (“shamatha” in Sanskrit), in a different sense we are distracted often by things we care about: things like relationships with people we love or people we have to live or work with; issues related to our health, our interests, our social events or connections, etc.; our financial situation; and so on. It’s the normal concerns that most people have throughout their day. There’s nothing wrong with these concerns but they can interrupt our concentration when meditating. So rather than try to banish them from our meditation, we can Transform them into expressions of our noble positive Intentions. Examples:
 - You get distracted by a conflict you’re having with someone. Maybe it’s really about a desire to “Love” others.
 - You’re worried about a minor or major physical ailment you have or might get. It’s about “Health”.
 - You’re distracted by a financial concern, debts, budget, bills, etc. It’s about a desire for “Abundance” or at least have enough to be relatively worry-free.

- You feel distracting self-criticisms, like “Why am I so ___?” (fill in the blank). Maybe that’s just a wish for “Freedom” from mental afflictions and unhelpful troubling thoughts.

Love, Health, Abundance, Freedom. (And they are just examples. Forgiveness. Gratitude. Hope. There’s no perfect generic list. Explore what’s best for you personally.) These are very good Intentions for yourself and for others! No reason to think of them as “bad” distractions that need to be eliminated. Just turn them into part of your spiritual practice. We can Transform those distracting thoughts into a meditation practice of positive Intention: **As you’re coming out of the state of Inner Stillness/Inner Silence, silently speak one of those Intentions at 10 or 15 second intervals.** Repeat that Intention silently just when you start to lose your focus. Don’t think about it, what it means, why you’re doing it, etc. Just let that Intention ring out from a deep place in your psyche, from a state of relative Inner Silence. Maybe you’ll just have one word/Intention, like “Love” or maybe you’ll have several different Intentions. Make it personal. It’s worth taking some time (while we’re all doing some type of pandemic shut-in retreat at this time) to consider what your most fundamental/core Intentions are for your life. There can be power in activating these positive mental constructs (as we psychologists might say) repeatedly.

I believe that practicing daily deep Intentions in this way “primes” my sub-conscious such that repeating for example “Health” in this way actually causes me to be more likely to put on my sneakers and go get some exercise days/weeks/months later, when it’s raining outside and I don’t really feel like it. Or it increases the likelihood of expressing more “Loving” behaviors with my family, neighbors, etc.

And as a final benefit, I’ve found that this practice actually reduces the “distracting” experience of these personal concerns. It’s like my mind is sub-consciously telling itself, “Don’t worry Winston, you’re going to get to those concerns at the end of your BBMI session when you close it out with the Intention step, so you can let go of those distractions now when practicing the Breath or Mind part of your BBMI session.” And it actually works.

3. **Intention as a Main Practice of Loving Kindness.** You can make the Intention of loving kindness the main event. After a quick stretch, a minute or two a breathing, and into settling into Inner Stillness briefly, spend the remaining 90% of your session focusing on Loving Kindness (“metta” in Sanskrit). Buddhist traditions focus on two parts here:
 - **Compassion** as the Intention for someone to be free from **suffering** and its causes, and
 - **Love** as the Intention of wishing for someone to have **happiness** and its causes.

One ancient practice is to silently repeat the following two sets of four phrases, focusing on one specific person for whom you’re cultivating loving kindness.

Compassion:

1. Wouldn’t it be great if Jane could be free of this specific source of suffering.
2. I wish that she’d be free from this suffering. I pray that it be so.

3. Indeed, I'm going to do something to help her be free (either commit to something specific to actually do later, or imagine doing it now).
4. It's beyond my capacity to help her fully, so with the help or blessings of a higher power, may she be free. (The meaning of this 4th statement likely depends on your personal theology or philosophy.)

Using your imagination (this isn't "magical thinking"), picture her being relieved from that challenge and it's causes, and feel joy for that result. Now that she's free of suffering, she's ready for...

Love:

1. Wouldn't it be great if Jane could have this specific form of happiness and it's causes (a positive emotion, a gift, an experience that you know would personally be joyful for her).
2. I wish that she has that specific happiness and its causes. I pray that it be so.
3. Indeed, I'm going to do something to help her reach this happiness (either commit to something specific to actually do later, or imagine doing it now).
4. It's beyond my capacity to fully make her happy, so with the help or blessings of a higher power, may she be free. (Again, depending on your personal theology or philosophy.)

There are some other really cool practices that combine visualizations with calibrated breathing. One of them is called tong-len in Tibetan, which means "giving [happiness] and taking [away suffering]". Maybe we'll get to them in future weeks.

Thanks for reading/listening, and please remember that while this stuff may be interesting to learn about, it only transforms us if we practice it regularly on a daily basis. Be gentle with yourself as you consider cultivating some of the daily practices we're sharing together in this BBMI meditation series.