

## Sacramento Insight Meditation

### The Toxic Combination of Reactive Intention and Dualistic or Oppositional Thinking

#### The Four Unskillful Concerns

“*The Compass Always Points Inward*” is a foundational idea with respect to integrating meditative awareness into daily life. It points to a simple experiential truth. It means that in any moment, *regardless* of the circumstances, our sense of well-being, satisfaction, and happiness depend upon, and are the result of, the relationship we choose to have with experience. In the midst of turbulence, confusion, and difficulty in the physical world, we can remain balanced, stable, and calm if we look inward, rather than outward, for guidance and support.

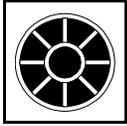
This idea seems counter-intuitive and runs directly against our usual habit of mind of believing that our well-being, satisfaction, and happiness are dependent on the external circumstances and details of our experience. The mind tells us that we’re happy because we’ve obtained something we want. Or we are unhappy because someone has done something unpleasant to us.

This way of viewing the world allows us to blame others, and the circumstances of our lives, for how we feel. It allows us to escape the responsibility of investigating how patterns of our Intentions and Thinking color our perception, influence our emotional life, and shape our relationships.

One way of investigating the impact of Intention and Thinking in our lives is through the four sets of “concerns” that are recognized as universal and unskillful traits of mind. The Four Concerns combine Reactive, or Unconscious, Intention with a particular type of thinking, Dualistic or Oppositional Thinking, to wield a pervasive influence in our lives. Their influence is pervasive because they tend, over time, to become deeply ingrained, habitual, and conditioned ways of the mind responding to experience.

The Four Unskillful Concerns arise from the tendency of the mind to compare and judge. *By comparing and judging*, the mind sets up a *presumption*, and an *expectation*, that certain experiences are desirable and to be sought after, and others are undesirable, and to be avoided. This prevents the mind from simply being with what is present, with the way things are in any moment.

Instead, the mind is continuously *attempting to control* experience to fit within a pre-existing standard. When this doesn’t happen, dissatisfaction arises and the mind seeks to change or escape from the situation. The mind points outward, to the circumstances of experience, rather than inward, towards the relationship we are choosing to have with experience. *Our peace of mind becomes dependent, contingent upon things being a certain way*. This habit of mind is so powerful that we seldom see, understand, or believe that we have a choice in the matter.



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As a result, we are perpetually vulnerable to being thrown emotionally off balance because things are seldom the way the mind wants them to be. And in the rare instances where things are the way we want them to be, they usually don't last very long because all the circumstances of our lives are constantly in process and in change.

The judging, comparing mind is to be distinguished from *wise discernment*, where the mind is seeing circumstances clearly and making choices based on that clarity, rather than on the push and pull of attachment and identification.

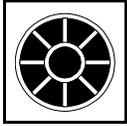
### The Four Unskillful Concerns

Focusing our attention on the Four Unskillful Concerns can help us see into the reality of these counterproductive tendencies of mind. Here they are:

1. *Liking and Disliking*. The mind tends to move towards, and want more of, what is pleasant, and to push away, and resist, what is unpleasant. But this basic tendency of mind – the reaction of pleasant or unpleasant, and the fact that we have a preference for one thing over another – is not the problem. The difficulty begins when we become attached to, and then identify with, our unconscious reactions and preferences. When things *need* to be a certain way *in order to* feel okay, when our preferences *need* to be met *in order to* be okay, we're in trouble. We are constantly frustrated, disappointed, or angry. The cycle of Liking and Disliking leads inevitably to the second set of concerns.

2. *Gaining and Losing*. This may be the easiest of the Four Unskillful Concerns to see as a product of a mind unwilling to be with things as they are. A sense of gain, and a *resulting* experience of pleasure, and a sense of loss, and a *resulting* experience of unpleasant, are based on the dualistic choice of Liking or Disliking. And Gaining and Losing, in turn, fuel Liking and Disliking because they are based on the assumption that the craving of the comparing, judging, Liking, and Disliking mind can be satisfied by changing what is present, by either adding to or diminishing some element of experience. This leads inevitably to the third and fourth set of concerns.

3. *Praise and Blame* and 4. *Favorable and Unfavorable Reputation*. These two sets of oppositional concerns are closely linked, and revolve around the need to be seen and to be treated in a particular way. Most of us hope to be deserving of, and to obtain, favorable recognition. This makes us feel worthy and as though our position with others or in the community are solidified or enhanced. Most of us, on the other hand, hope to avoid conduct that will be faulted and potentially undermine our relationships with others and our role or position in the community. This tends to make us feel unworthy and threatened.



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### Temporary vs. Lasting Well-Being

The meditative perspective doesn't deny the potential and actual importance of Gain and Loss, Praise and Blame, and Reputation in the day-to-day worlds of relationships, finance, community, business, and politics. It honors the need for responsibly and realistically dealing with these realities of life.

More importantly, it acknowledges that these oppositional ways of viewing experience are *fear based*. It recognizes that any sense of well-being and peace that can be achieved at this level of experience is unstable and transitory. It seeks to point the mind and heart towards a *lasting* sense of deep satisfaction.

The hopes of Praise and Blame, and of favorable and unfavorable Reputation, are driven by the desire for acceptance (a form of gaining) and the fear of rejection (a form of loss.) They are based on an element of experience that is completely beyond our control – the judgments, assessments, and opinions of others about us and our conduct. *In any moment, when what others think of us becomes more important than what we think of ourselves, we have become lost and any form of stable happiness is impossible.*

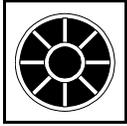
The real problem with the Four Concerns is that the mind tends to relate to them as a legitimate standard for guiding our sense of worth and emotional well-being. We like or dislike, we gain or lose, we are praised or blamed, we are the recipient of a good or bad reputation. In each case, our sense of worth and well-being bounce back and forth between one of two alternatives.

Meditative awareness, on the other hand, asks us to step back from being caught in the reactive drama of alternatives. It asks us to see beyond this limiting way of holding our experience dominated by either/or. It encourage us to engage our experience from the larger, more spacious understanding that *the dualistic nature of the Four Concerns is the cause of our suffering itself*; and that a lasting sense of well-being, satisfaction, and happiness can only come from experiencing the Four Concerns as preferences, but needs.

### The Four Concerns Homework

The homework during the next two weeks is designed to build on, and expand, our scope of inquiry relating to the lawful unfolding of experience through Reactive Intention and Dualistic or Oppositional Thinking in daily life. The practices recommended below will act as a valuable investigation even if you have not participated in the several weeks preceding our discussion of tonight's topic. Here are the suggested homework practices:

*Practice One:* Set a conscious intention to become more mindful of, to become wakeful to, the process of Liking and Disliking in both daily life and during formal meditation. Watch for the appearance of Liking – the tendency of mind to move toward, and want more of, what is pleasant



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– and Disliking – the tendency of mind to push away and resist what is unpleasant. To the degree possible, identify the experience of Liking and Disliking without getting caught in attachment and identification. When either of these mind states is present, what happens?

With respect to Liking: Does Liking a particular experience result in a sense of satisfaction? Are Liking and satisfaction the same thing? Does it tend to make the mind want to hold onto, or want more of, the experience? Does Liking turn into Disliking when we are unable to hold onto or get more of the experience? Does the process of Liking apply to both the external circumstances of our life, as well as our internal life?

With respect to Disliking: Does Disliking an experience result in a sense of dissatisfaction? Are Disliking and dissatisfaction the same thing? Does it tend to make the mind want to push away and resist the experience? Does Disliking ever turn into Liking? Does the process of Disliking apply to both the external circumstances of our life, as well as our internal life?

Take one week to work with Liking, and another week to work with Disliking.

*Practice Two:* Select one of the remaining Four Concerns and make it an object of meditative awareness. Does attaining (gaining) a certain pleasurable state of mind during sitting meditation turn into a sense of unpleasantness or unhappiness when that state of mind dissipates (losing)? How do the concerns of Praise and Blame and favorable and unfavorable Reputation apply on a day-to-day basis to your state of mind and relationships at home, at work, or in an organization in which you are involved?

As best you can, engage in these practices without judgment, without an agenda other than investigation and discovery, and without trying to change, fix, or solve whatever is present and experienced.

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