

Dharmette: Your Beautiful Intentions

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 2, 2011

As many of you are aware, Buddhism is reluctant to make any claim as to what is the self. However, you have to make something the self, and I think that the best candidate is your intention. It's not really your 'self,' but if you absolutely need to have a self, let it be your intention, because your intention is such a powerfully conditioning aspect of your life. If you really care for your intention well, it will bring you down into the depths of your heart – into the essence of your life in some very important way.

An key part of Buddhist spirituality is to pay attention to intention, to notice what we're intending as we go through our lives. It involves our intention in the very mundane activities of life, which could be as simple as the intention you have when you open a door, or when you put your shoes in a shoe rack. What's the intention there? You can do these things mindlessly, without really taking in what the intention is.

There are also levels of intention. You have to get through the door – that seems obvious. But are we intending to get through the door as quickly as we can,

before everyone else, and maybe cutting someone off, or are we intending to open the door so that other people can get through first? How can we open the door so that it expresses an intention that we want to base our lives on? If we're just mindlessly going through the door, it's probably fine, and perhaps it's not going to cause any harm. But what if we open the door with the intention to do so in a way that conveys peace or generosity? There's a huge difference between just opening the door casually, and opening the door in a way that's generous to the other people who are trying to get through.

There are the intentions that we have for our ordinary activities. We sit down to eat, drive our car. What are the intentions when you drive your car? Many people don't think about it, but there are all kinds of motivations behind how we drive, where we drive, and how we ride the foot on the gas pedal. Many people don't reflect on them.

Then there are bigger intentions that are, in a sense, in the background of our lives. What do we really want our lives to be about? Do we have a larger intention, a sense of purpose or motivation for our lives? Part of Buddhist spirituality is to be mindful of intention – to look at it, to be interested in it, and to look at all the different levels of it. The intentions of daily activities are one thing. But then there is also looking, taking reflective

time to go off and have a cup of tea, or go for a walk, and reflecting on what are the deepest, most important intentions around which we want to organize our lives. If you're a young person and you're starting a career, what is the intention that goes behind the career that you want to do?

When I was 50 years old, I spent five days backpacking alone in the Sierras. One of the things I did was to review my life, and really reflect deeply on the intention that I wanted to live my life with at this juncture. It felt like an opportune time to reflect, and to spend some careful time thinking about the orientation of I wanted to do, and what was important for me to follow through on.

It's easy to live a life with superficial or unknown intentions, or intentions that are not really the ones we would choose if we really spent time deeply considering them. Or it's easy to have powerful intentions that we want to base our life on, but then other intentions take over, and we don't really follow through on what is most important for us. Sometimes this happens because of fear. We're afraid of following through on our deepest intention, because maybe it's not going to work out, or our parents are going to disapprove of it, or there's no financial support for that kind of life. Perhaps we're not afraid, but we're distracted from our deepest intention by being so busy – we get caught up in all kinds of things.

A very useful aspect of Buddhist practice is to spend time looking at what motivates us, at all the different levels of motivation that exist, and then sustain the attention and reflection on this. It involves sometimes actually thinking about what really are the intentions, motivations, and purposes, both in the small details, and in the big picture of my life. Is this really what I want to be behind, and how I want to live my life? Is there some other intention that is more meaningful or valuable for me?

If you get quiet, and listen to your heart in some deep way, what do you really want to do? What's really important for you that you want to follow through on, and organize your life around? One of the reasons why this is important is that the intentions that you live by and act on shape, color and condition who you are and what unfolds for your life. That's why intention is the best candidate for who you really are. It's what shapes who you are and what you become. It's what shapes the joys, happiness, and sorrows that you experience in life.

To have really beautiful intentions and to take refuge in them, or to have really beautiful intentions and to act on them reconditions us, and gives us something that we can be glad about. To find happiness, satisfaction or peace in knowing about the purity of your intentions is a

beautiful thing. It is so beautiful that sometimes it doesn't matter whether you succeed in your intentions.

A beautiful aspect of the Buddhist teachings on intention is that the intention is what counts, and whether you succeed or not, that is a different issue. Sometimes it's unfortunate if you don't succeed. But even if you don't succeed, you can take refuge in your intention. That is so beautiful. Acting on your intention, and the way that conditions and shapes your heart, might actually be more important than how the success shapes your heart and mind. The success of your intentions actually might not help you, and could even be detrimental to yourself. You have this really great intention to be of service; you do it; and then you latch onto it, and it becomes another source of conceit. In the big picture, the success of being a service person wasn't so good, because of the conceit that latched on. But if you didn't succeed, then there would be no conceit, and you would just be left with all the good intentions that somehow were there in the background, knowing, and taking refuge in that.

Motivation, intention, and sense of purpose is a huge, beautiful topic. Sometimes Buddhist teachings, especially in our tradition – the mindfulness tradition – where they emphasize just being in the present moment, seeing and being mindful, and not thinking about things too much – sometimes this shortchanges the practitioner. This is because when you really reflect

and get into the heart of your intention and purpose, you benefit from reflection and thinking – maybe not on the cushion, but when you're having a cup of tea, or talking with a friend.

For some people, it's very hard to find a deep intention for their life. Some people never find it. Their life is not about having a deep intention, but about the small intentions they live with throughout the day. It might be the intention to live in this moment, in this activity in a way that brings more peace, happiness, or compassion to the situation, or the intention to avoid living in the small ways and details of their life that cause harm to them or to other people. That's a powerful life. You're not Mother Teresa; you're not doing this big, beautiful thing. But in the moment-to-moment details of your life, as you go shopping for groceries, clean your house, walk down the street, and say hello to your neighbors – in all the little things, your intention is to live your life in a way that alleviates suffering, or doesn't add more suffering to the world. Your intention to be of great kindness or happiness in the small, ordinary things of life. I've known people who have done nothing spectacular with their lives whatsoever, but were peacemakers in the world – dramatic, inspiring people just in the ordinariness of their lives. I've also known people who have had huge, beautiful, majestic intentions, and they just made a mess of things [laughs].

What is your intention? Sometimes I think that the emphasis on coming back to the present moment can shortchange us, because we don't look at and reflect on the bigger picture. But one of the benefits of coming back to the present moment is that it encourages us to let the building blocks of our life start with the small things. Don't overlook the importance of the intention that you bring in how you open a door, how you eat your food, how you go shopping, or how you drive your car. You don't want to bypass those things and be blinded to the small details by the big, beautiful goals that you can have. Rather, let the engagement with the details, the presence and connection to yourself that that can come with that – let that help you find the deeper and deeper intentions that can motivate your life.

Your intention, motivations, and sense of purpose are among the most precious resources you have. They are worth tending to and reflecting on. Once you have some sense of what it might be – whether it's the small things or the big things of life – then act on it, and remember to act on it the best you can. It's not good enough just to have it. You have to start living from there. As you act on it, then you'll be surprised at how it supports and benefits you, as you continue through your life and your practice.