

# The Dharmic Life (4 of 5) Intention and Commitment

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

daily life, purpose, dedication, heart, wish, reflect, vow, faith, conviction

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The topic this week is living a dharmic life. The emphasis is on what we can bring into daily life that will enhance our dedication to practice. These bring us some of the benefits of full-time religious life in a monastery or retreat center.

The difference between lay life and being a monastic in a monastery or living at a retreat center is more a matter of degree. Monastics living in a monastery get reminders to practice. Associations and schedules support their thinking about the practice and remembering to do it. It is harder for people who are not living in a monastery or retreat center. Sometimes family or work responsibilities pull us so strongly into their orbit that we do not think about practice, mindfulness, being present, or the values of the Dharma.

It is not a matter of all or nothing but a matter of degree. Overall, I think most people in monasteries are not necessarily stellar monastics who do the practice every waking moment. They are doing all kinds of things. Some monastics may not even be as dedicated to the practice as some lay people living in the world.

For all of you living an ordinary lay life, it is possible to increase the degree to which you are dedicated and get a lot of the benefits of a full-time, dedicated Dharma life. The teachings this week are about that. On Monday, the focus was about being embodied and present – mindful of the body. It is tremendously beneficial to practice with that throughout the day, letting the body be your monastery.

On Tuesday, the focus was mindfulness of speech – to care for your speech, notice why you are speaking and the tone of voice you are using. The whole world of your inner life gets revealed by paying attention to your speech. Rather than listening to the abbot of a monastery give a Dharma talk, listen to yourself speak. That may not be a Dharma talk – but you may become conscious enough of what you are saying that your speech starts changing. When you really listen to yourself, you will naturally want your speech to be more dharmic.

Yesterday, the focus was the dedication to being harmless. The essence of the whole buddhadharma is to live a life that is harmless to self and others.

Today, the topic is about commitment – living with a sense of purpose and dedication to that purpose. Sometimes when teaching mindfulness, we emphasize the side of mindfulness that has to do with not wanting, not reacting – just being in the experience and then coming back to being still.

That is all well and good, but our psyche – our mind – has different layers for how we engage in the world. For example, when we sit down to meditate, we might be dedicated to being present – just being and not trying to do so much. We let go of the doing mind. Just being – feeling still, quiet, and peaceful. That can be so nourishing to do.

But something brought us to the meditation cushion. Dedication, commitment, and a sense of purpose brought us to do the practice. So, before meditating, we have a sense of purpose – and then we put that away to sit and meditate. In different areas of life, it is appropriate to look at these qualities. Today, I am encouraging us to look at our intentions.

Why do we do things? What is the real intention, the sense of purpose underneath them? Not the surface

intention – but rather, what is the heart's intention in doing whatever we are doing? What is the inner life's deeper intention for what we are trying to do? Looking at and being mindful of that is a whole valuable practice in itself.

To take it a step further, spend some time reflecting on your deepest intention. What is your heart's deepest wish? If a genie could come along and say, "I can provide you anything at all" – what would be your heart's deepest wish? Not what your desires are or what your ego wants. If you really get quiet and listen – what does your heart most want? What is its deepest intention?

I find this so valuable that I sometimes tell people it is more important to reflect on your deepest intention every day than to meditate every day. Clearly, I value meditation a lot. So for me to say that reflecting on your deepest intention is more important indicates how important I think it is.

Reflect on your deepest intention over time – not just for one day. Keep coming back and looking at it. Look at it every day because it morphs and changes. You will see different angles or layers of your intention as you go deeper and deeper over time.

If you answer the question, “What is my deepest intention?” with a negative statement – “My deepest intention is not to be afraid” – that is fine. But you might want to ask, “If that negative statement was accomplished, then what would my deepest intention be?” If you could feel safe, then what would be available for you?

With this reflection on a purposeful, intentional life – what are you living for? Not ideas of shoulds and shouldn’ts – but rather, what is the heart’s wish? What is the heart’s deepest intention? I emphasize the heart because it is an expression of inner depth, where your deepest wish or intention seems to arise naturally. It comes with no effort. Your intention feels integral to who you are in a deeply intimate way.

Then you make a commitment to that. If your purpose or intention is wholesome and valuable, then it is wholesome and valuable to commit to it. A person can do many wise things in life. Some people have too many choices. It is like going into a supermarket – there are all these choices to make. There were not so many brands and choices in the old days. You took what was there.

For some people in the modern world, there are many choices and ideas about what we should be doing.

We can get so busy doing all the different things that we do. A wise life is one where we can even let go of doing wholesome things so that we can focus on doing a few things well. Sometimes if we do many different things, we do not go very deep into any of them. Some things are so valuable and useful to give ourselves over to in a fuller, deeper way. To see them all the way through to the other side – to the depth or heart of them.

If you are interested in this Dharma life, it is worth spending time on your sense of purpose, intentions, and commitment to it. There may be a way of being more committed so that you say, “This is what I am doing.” You have clarity and purpose. You put aside some of the things you do that do not fit that purpose – that dilute your possibility of engagement and involvement – so you can fully let your purpose grow and develop.

If you are watching movies every day by a factor of two, three, or four times longer than you meditate, that says something about what you are committed to – what is important to you. Maybe it is okay. Maybe there is a higher purpose that comes from watching TV programs.

What do you most want your life to be? When you are old, do you want to look back at all the TV programs and movies you watched and say, “Ah, that was a life well spent”? Or do you want to look back at your practice life, your dharmic life, your life supporting other

people – and realizing how much you have changed and grown, say, “Oh, *that* was a life well spent.”

So, a committed life, having a commitment. There are plenty of times in Buddhist history and traditions where a sense of commitment takes the form of a vow. It is like what happens when we take refuge – we hold on to the refuge. We have deep faith, commitment, and conviction. We hold on in a wholesome way. We dedicate ourselves. We limit ourselves to some degree. “This is what I want to do.”

As you go through daily life, maybe your life does not change. But your commitment is to bring the practice to everything you do – to embodiment, speech, everything. You do whatever you do in a committed way. You are committed to the practice as you do it. That is more important than what you are doing. For example, practicing as you work is more important than getting a raise.

Intention, commitment, dedication, and devotion can be some of the great supports and nourishments for a dharmic life. You might want to consider, at least for the next 24 hours – what are you committed to? If you reflect deeply – what intentions do you want to have for your life? At the end of your life, what would you like to look back and see? How did you live your life? Does

this reflection give you something to be committed to in a devoted and relaxed way – but still committed?

Thank you very much. We will continue tomorrow on this topic.