

The Heart's Intention

By Phillip Moffitt

Once a month, an hour before the Sunday-evening meditation class I teach, I offer a group interview for students who attend regularly. These interviews give them the opportunity to ask questions about their meditation practice or about applying the dharma to daily life. In a recent session, a yogi who dutifully meditates every morning admitted, "I must be confused about the Buddha's teaching on right intention. I'm very good about setting intentions and then reminding myself of them. But things don't ever seem to turn out according to those intentions, and I fall into disappointment. What's wrong with my practice?"

At first, I could only smile in response. What a good question! When I asked her to explain these intentions, she proceeded to describe a number of *goals* for her future—to become less tense at work, to spend more time with her family, to stabilize her finances, and more. She was suffering from a kind of confusion that seems to afflict many bright, hardworking people: mixing up two different life functions that are easily mistaken for each other. All of her goals were laudable, but none would fit within the Buddha's teachings on right intention.

Goals vs. Intentions

Goal making is a valuable skill; it involves envisioning a future outcome in the world or in your behavior, then planning, applying discipline, and working hard to achieve it. You organize your time and energy based on your goals; they help provide direction for your life. Committing to and visualizing those goals may assist you in your efforts, but neither of these activities is what I call setting intention. They both involve living in an imagined future and are not concerned with what is happening to you in the present moment. With goals, the future is always the focus: Are you going to reach the goal? Will you be happy when you do? What's next?

Setting intention, at least according to Buddhist teachings, is quite different than goal making. It is not oriented toward a future outcome. Instead, it is a path or practice that is focused on how you are "*being*" in the present moment. Your attention is on the ever-present "*now*" in the constantly changing flow of life. You set your intentions based on understanding what matters most to you and make a commitment to align your worldly actions with your inner values.

As you gain insight through meditation, wise reflection, and moral living, your ability to act from your intentions blossoms. It is called a practice because it is an ever-renewing process. You don't just set your intentions and then forget about them; you live them every day.

Although the student thought she was focusing on her inner experience of the present moment, she was actually focusing on a future outcome; even though she had healthy goals that pointed in a wholesome direction, she was not *being* her values. Thus, when her efforts did not go well, she got lost in disappointment and confusion. When this happened, she had no "ground of intention" to help her regain her mental footing—no way to establish herself in a context that was larger and more meaningful than her goal-oriented activity.

Goals help you make your place in the world and be an effective person. But being grounded in intention is what provides integrity and unity in your life. Through the skillful cultivation of intention, you learn to make wise goals and then to work hard toward achieving them without getting caught in attachment to outcome. As I suggested to the yogi, only by remembering your intentions can you reconnect with yourself during those emotional storms that cause you to lose touch with yourself. This remembering is a blessing, because it provides a sense of meaning in your life that is independent of whether you achieve certain goals or not.

Ironically, by being in touch with and acting from your true intentions, you become more effective in reaching your goals than when you act from wants and insecurities. Once the yogi understood this, she started to work with goals and intentions as separate functions. She later reported that continually coming back to her intentions in the course of her day was actually helping her with her goals.

Doing the Groundwork

What would it be like if you didn't measure the success of your life just by what you get and don't get, but gave equal or greater priority to how aligned you are with your deepest values? Goals are rooted in *maya* (illusion)—the illusionary world where what you want seems fixed and unchanging but in truth is forever changing. It is in this world that *mara*, the inner voice of temptation and discouragement, flourishes. Goals never fulfill you in an ongoing way; they either beget another goal or else collapse. They provide excitement—the ups and downs of life—but intention is what provides you with self-respect and peace of mind.

Cultivating right intention does not mean you abandon goals. You continue to use them, but they exist within a larger context of meaning that offers the possibility of peace beyond the fluctuations caused by pain and pleasure, gain and loss.

The Buddha's Fourth Noble Truth teaches right intention as the second step in the eightfold path: Cause no harm, and treat yourself and others with loving-kindness and compassion while seeking true happiness, that which comes from being free from grasping and clinging. Such a statement may sound naive or idealistic—a way for nuns and monks to live but not suitable for those of us who must make our way in this tough, competitive world. But to think this is to make the same error as the woman in my group interview.

In choosing to live with right intention, you are not giving up your desire for achievement or a better life, or binding yourself to being morally perfect. But you are committing to living each moment with the intention of not causing harm with your actions and words, and not violating others through your livelihood or sexuality. You are connecting to your own sense of kindness and innate dignity. Standing on this ground of intention, you are then able to participate as you choose in life's contests, until you outgrow them.

Naturally, sometimes things go well for you and other times not, but you do not live and die by these endless fluctuations. Your happiness comes from the strength of your internal experience of intention. You become one of those fortunate human beings who know who they are and are independent of our culture's obsession with winning. You still feel sadness, loss, lust, and fear, but you have a means for directly relating to all of these difficult emotions. Therefore, you are not a victim, nor are your happiness and peace of mind dependent on how things are right now.

Misusing Good Intentions

When I offer teachings on right intention, students often ask two things: "Isn't this like signing up for the Ten Commandments in another form?" and "What about the old saying 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions'?" First, the Ten Commandments are excellent moral guidelines for us all, but right intention is not moral law; it is an attitude or state of mind, which you develop gradually. As such, the longer you work with right intention, the subtler and more interesting it becomes as a practice.

In Buddhist psychology, intention manifests itself as "volition," which is the mental factor that most determines your consciousness in each moment. **Literally, it is your intention that affects how you interpret what comes into your mind.**

Take, for example, someone who is being rude and domineering during a meeting at work. He is unpleasant, or at least your experience of him is unpleasant. What do you notice? Do you see his insecurity and how desperately hungry he is for control and attention? Or do you notice only your own needs and dislike, and take his behavior personally, even though it really has little to do with you? If you are grounded in your intention, then your response will be to notice his discomfort and your own suffering and feel compassion toward both of you. This doesn't mean that you don't feel irritation or that you allow him to push you around, but you avoid getting lost in judgment or personal reaction. Can you feel the extra emotional space such an orientation to life provides? Do you see the greater range of options for interpreting the difficulties in your life?

As for those good intentions that lead to hell in the old adage, they almost always involve having an agenda for someone else. They are goals disguised as intentions, and you abandon your inner intentions in pursuit of them. Moreover, those goals are often only your view of how things are supposed to be, and you become caught in your own reactive mind.

Mixing Motives

One issue around cultivating intention that trips up many yogis is mixed motives. During individual interviews with me, people will sometimes confess their anguish at discovering during meditating how mixed their motives were in past situations involving a friend or a family member. They feel as though they're not a good person and they aren't trustworthy. Sometimes my response is to paraphrase the old blues refrain "If it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all." It is the same with motives; in most situations, if you didn't go with your mixed motives, you wouldn't have any motivation at all. You would just be stuck.

The Buddha knew all about mixed motives. In the Majjhima Nikaya sutta "The Dog-Duty Ascetic," he describes how "dark intentions lead to dark results" and "bright intentions lead to bright results." Then he says, "Bright and dark intentions lead to bright and dark results." Life is like this, which is why we practice. You are not a fully enlightened being; therefore, expecting yourself to be perfect is a form of delusion.

Forget judging yourself, and just work with the arising moment. Right intention is a continual aspiration. Seeing your mixed motives is one step toward liberation from ignorance and from being blinded by either desire or aversion. So welcome such a realization, even though it is painful. The less judgment you have toward yourself about your own mixed motives, the more clearly you can see how they cause suffering. This insight is what releases the dark motives and allows room for bright ones.

Sowing Karmic Seeds

For some people, the most difficult aspect of right intention has to do with the role it plays in the formation of karma. The Buddha classified karma as one of the "imponderables," meaning we can never fully understand it; attempting to do so is not fruitful. Yet we are challenged to work with the truth that every action has both a cause and a consequence.

The primary factor that determines karma is intention; therefore, practicing right intention is crucial to gaining peace and happiness. In Buddhist teachings, karma refers to "the seed from action." This means that any word or action is either wholesome or unwholesome and automatically plants a seed of future occurrence that will blossom on its own accord when the conditions are correct, just as a plant grows when there is the right balance of sunshine, water, and nutrients.

Whether an action is wholesome or unwholesome is determined by the intention that originated it. On reflection, this is common sense. The example often given is that of a knife in the hands of a surgeon versus those of an assailant. Each might use a knife to cut you, but one has the intention to help you heal, while the other has the intention to harm you. Yet you could die from the actions of either. Intention is the decisive factor that differentiates the two. In this view, you are well served by cultivating right intention. When I'm teaching right intention, I like to refer to it as the *heart's intention*. Life is so confusing and emotionally confounding that the rational mind is unable to provide an absolutely clear intention. What we have to rely on is our intuitive knowing, or "felt wisdom." In the Buddha's time, this was referred to as *bodhichitta*, "the awakened mind-heart."

It is said that a karmic seed may bloom at one of three times: immediately, later in this lifetime, or in a *future* life. Conversely, what is happening to you at each moment is the result of seeds planted in a past life, earlier in this life, or in the previous moment. Whatever your feelings about past lives, the latter two are cause-and-effect phenomena that you recognize as true. But here is a thought to reflect on that is seldom mentioned: Whatever is manifesting itself in your life right now is affected by how you receive it, and how you receive it is largely determined by your intention in this moment.

Imagine that you will have a difficult interaction later today. If you are not mindful of your intention, you might respond to the situation with a harmful physical action—maybe because you got caught in your fear, panic, greed, or ill will. But with awareness of your intention, you would refrain from responding physically. Instead, you might only say something unskillful, causing much less harm. Or if you have a habit of speaking harshly, with right intention you might only have a negative thought but find the ability to refrain from uttering words you would later regret. **When you're grounded in your intention, you are never helpless in how you react to any event in your life. While it is true that you often cannot control what happens to you, with mindfulness of intention you can mitigate the effects of what occurs in terms of both the moment itself and what kind of karmic seed you plant for the future.**

Developing Resolve

Buddhist teachings suggest that there are certain characteristics called *paramis*, or perfections, you must develop before you can ever achieve liberation. One of these qualities, right resolve, has to do with developing the will to live by your intentions. Through practicing right resolve, you learn to set your mind to maintaining your values

and priorities, and to resist the temptation to sacrifice your values for material or ego gain. You gain the ability to consistently hold your intentions, no matter what arises. Right intention is like muscle—you develop it over time by exercising it. When you lose it, you just start over again. There's no need to judge yourself or quit when you fail to live by your intentions. You are developing the habit of right intention so that it becomes an unconscious way of living—an automatic response to all situations. Right intention is organic; it thrives when cultivated and wilts when neglected.

Not long ago, the yogi gave me an update on her efforts to practice right intention. She said that for several years, she had pushed and pulled in her relationship, getting irritated with her partner for not spending more time with the family and demanding that he change. One day in meditation, she realized that this was just another example of her getting caught in wanting more. In truth, there was nothing intrinsically wrong with his behavior. It was just that she wanted to spend more time together than he did. She immediately stopped making demands and was much happier.

Soon after this first realization, she found herself in a situation at work where all of her insecurities were ignited. She was in a meeting during which an action was being proposed that she felt was unfair, and she sensed anger rising in her. But before speaking, she left the room to reflect.

When she returned, she was grounded in her intentions to be nonreactive, to seek out clear understanding, and to not be attached to the outcome. This allowed her to participate in the meeting in a calm, effective manner, saying her truth. Surprisingly, the group came to a conclusion that, although it was not what she thought should happen, was at least something she could live with. "Sometimes I remember to work with my intentions," she told me, "but then at other times, I just seem to develop amnesia and completely forget the whole idea for weeks at a time. It's like I had never been exposed to the teaching. I mean, there is nothing in my mind but my goals. I don't even consider my intention." I assured her that it is like this for almost everyone. It takes a long time to make right intention a regular part of your life

At times, the benefits of acting from your intentions can seem so clear and obvious that you vow, "I'm going to live this way from now on." Then you get lost or overwhelmed and conclude that it is more than you can do. Such emotional reactions, while understandable, miss the point. If you make right intention a goal, you are grasping at spiritual materialism. Right intention is simply about coming home to yourself. It is a practice of aligning with the deepest part of yourself while surrendering to the reality that you often get lost in your wanting mind.

There are only two things you are responsible for in this practice: Throughout each day, ask yourself if you are being true to your deepest intentions. If you're not, start doing so immediately, as best as you're able. The outcome of your inquiry and effort may seem modest at first. But be assured, each time you start over by reconnecting to your intention, you are taking one more step toward finding your own authenticity and freedom. In that moment, you are remembering yourself and grounding your life in your heart's intention. You are living the noble life of the Buddha's teachings.