

*Beings are
owners of their karma,
heirs of their karma,
born of their karma,
related to their karma,
supported by their karma.
Whatever karma they do, for good or for ill,
Of that they are the heirs.*

—*Anguttara Nikaya V.57*

MINDFULNESS OF INTENTIONS



Buddhism offers us a challenge: is it possible to live a life with no suffering? One of the most direct ways to bring ease and happiness into our mindfulness practice and into our lives is by investigating our intentions. While our activities have consequences in both the external world and the internal world, the happiness and freedom to which the Buddha pointed belong to the inner world of our intentions and dispositions. This is one of the prime reasons why the Buddha placed such emphasis on attending to our intentions.

Buddhist practice encourages a deep appreciation of the present moment, which strengthens our ability to respond creatively in the present rather than acting according to our habits and dispositions. Mindfulness places us where choice is possible. The greater our awareness of our intentions, the greater our freedom to choose. People who do not see their choices do not believe they have choices. They tend to respond automatically, blindly influ-

enced by their circumstances and conditioning. Mindfulness, by helping us notice our impulses before we act, gives us the opportunity to decide whether to act and how to act.

According to traditional Buddhist teaching, every mind-moment involves an intention. This suggests the phenomenal subtlety with which choices operate in our lives. Few of us keep our bodies still, except perhaps in meditation or in sleep. Each of the constant movements in our arms, hands and legs is preceded by a volitional impulse, usually unnoticed. Intentions are present even in such seemingly minute and usually unnoticed decisions as where to direct our attention or which thoughts to pursue. Just as drops of water will eventually fill a bathtub, so the accumulation of these small choices shapes who we are.

Our intentions—noticed or unnoticed, gross or subtle—contribute either to our suffering or to our happiness. Intentions are sometimes called seeds. The garden you grow depends on the seeds you plant and water. Long after a deed is done, the trace or momentum of the intention behind it remains as a seed, conditioning our future happiness or unhappiness. If we water intentions of greed or hate, their inherent suffering will sprout, both while we act on them and in the future in the form of reinforced habits, tensions and painful memories. If we nourish intentions of love or generosity, the inherent happiness and openness of those states will become a more frequent part of our life.

Some volitional acts actually hamper the awakening of awareness. One example of this is intentional lying. The fear of discovery, the continued need for deceit that often follows, and the avoidance of the truth tend to reinforce the mind's tendency to preoccupation, which is the opposite of wakefulness.

An important function of mindfulness practice is to help us understand the immediate and longer-term consequences of our intended actions. This understanding helps ensure that our choices are wiser than those based only on our likes and preferences. Having a realistic and informed sense of consequences keeps our “good” intentions from being naive intentions. It can also guide us in knowing which choices support our spiritual practice and which detract from it.

We can bring awareness of intention into mindfulness practice in a number of ways.

Perhaps the most significant is to reflect carefully on your deepest intention. What is your heart’s deepest wish? What is of greatest value or priority for you? Mindfulness practice connected to your deepest intention will bear a different result than practice connected to more superficial concerns. The business-person who undertakes mindfulness practice as a means of stress reduction in order to gain an edge over the competition will sow the seeds for very different results than the one who undertakes mindfulness to strengthen his or her compassionate service to others. When the effort to be mindful is fueled by greed, that very effort also fortifies the tension and insensitivity of greed. When the effort is fueled by loving-kindness, it energizes the inner openness and sensitivity of loving-kindness.

I believe that a daily sitting practice is extremely beneficial. But I believe there is even more benefit in spending a few minutes each day reflecting on our deepest intentions. In a busy life, we can easily forget our fundamental values and motivations. To remind ourselves of them allows our choices to be informed by them. Furthermore, when we drop below the surface cravings and

aversions of the mind to discover our deeper stirrings, we tap a tremendous power of inspiration and motivation. For example, at one point, I took on the practice of consciously reflecting on my intention for each task of the day, allowing my deeper sense of intention to inform each one. Even the seemingly mundane activity of going to the grocery store became an opportunity to strengthen my intention to connect with people with care and compassion. This simple practice brought me a great deal of joy.

Another way of including intention in our practice is to pause briefly before initiating any new activity, which allows us to discern our motivation. Being aware of an intention after an action is started is useful but it can be like trying to stop a ball after you have thrown it. The momentum has been set in motion.

We can investigate the intentions behind major activities and decisions such as work, relationships, or what we do during our free time. What is the motivation and how does it relate to our deepest intentions? Similarly we can investigate the intentions that shape our decisions around such minor matters as what and when to eat, how we drive, what we read or watch on television. Is the choice based on fear, aversion, loneliness, or addiction, or on generosity or caring for ourselves wisely? Different motivations are not necessarily good or bad. They may, however, create very different consequences even when the external actions that they generate look the same.

Trying to bring attention to all our motivations may be overwhelming. It can be useful to choose one activity at a time to look at more carefully. For example, spend a week becoming a connoisseur of your many intentions around eating, shopping, or cleaning house.

Perhaps one of the more significant applications of mindfulness of intention concerns speech. We often speak without reflection. Attention to the multiple reasons underlying what we say is one of the most powerful windows into our hearts. Speech is seldom a simple offering of information or expression of caring. It is closely tied to how we see ourselves, how we want others to see us, and our hopes and fears. Distinguishing wholesome intentions from unwholesome intentions can serve as a useful criterion for when to speak and when to take refuge in wise silence. Speech can powerfully support or undermine a spiritual practice.

Attention and intention are two cornerstones of Buddhist practice. Bringing attention to intention does not, as some fear, lead to a life of endless effort at monitoring ourselves. Self-consciousness and self-preoccupation may be exhausting, but not awareness. As we become clearer and wiser about our intentions, we find greater ease. We begin to act with less and less self-centered concern.

To follow the Buddhist path of mindfulness to its end—to the cessation of suffering, to the Deathless—takes great dedication. The wiser we are about our intentions in practice, the greater the usefulness of that effort.

May you wisely notice your intentions and may doing so help to alleviate suffering everywhere.