

WHOLESOME INTENTIONS, PART 3

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IS THE INTENTION A GOAL OR ALREADY REALIZED?

This last point brings us to the third question: Do you express the intention as a goal or as something already realized?

This gets at a recurring question, even a debate, in Buddhism (and also in psychology and in some religions): Is it about progressing toward an enlightened state, or is it about uncovering the enlightened condition that has always been present? I can't do justice here to the nuances of that consideration, but I can say what many wise people think is at the marrow of the matter: *both* are true. (Darn that middle way.)

In other words, it is powerful to focus on intention both as an aim toward a target, and as something that is already the case. The phrasing, “May _____” is a nice way to accomplish this, since “May I be happy” or “May the world be at peace” both embody an aim and an actuality.

And of these two, aim and actuality, it's usually best to emphasize the latter, the sense of the intention as already realized. For example, one thing that makes the affirmation form of verbalized intentions powerful (whether written, spoken, or thought), is that they are expressed in the present.

We are such a goal-directed culture, and there are so many associations of striving, frustration, and disappointment related to pursuing goals in the minds of so many of us, that there is often greater openness inside to intentions expressed as already true. We are already that way. Our circumstances are already that way.

This also points us to a greater recognition of, and gratitude and appreciation for, what is already good and working and wholesome and wonderful inside ourselves and outside, in our world. This feels good in its own right, which is very good for your brain! And you! And others!

And it directs us toward resources we may have missed, both inside and outside. There really is a profound wisdom and peacefulness already within us – in Buddhism, sometimes called Buddha mind, or bodhichitta. And a beautiful, wonderful harmony latent in the world.

For example, the “resting state” of the brain has a neurological coherence, a quiet hum of relaxed readiness, and a saturation with mildly positive emotion. That is what you return to when something is resolved, and that is what you return to if you start with a positive state and then jiggle it, such as with EMDR or other psychological techniques.

All this means that the universe and mother nature and spirit are all on your side. So, in a sense, a lot of what anyone of us is really trying to do is to re-access a sense of the innate nature of the brain – of our own nature as beings – and settle ever more deeply into that always already true and present condition. Kind of like settling into a cozy comforter in our bed that is home base.

Perhaps take a moment to see if you can sense into your preexisting Buddha nature, inner goodness, spark of the Divine within – in whatever way you experience or name that.

HOW FIRMLY SHOULD YOU PURSUE YOUR INTENTIONS?

Then, last, how firmly do you pursue your intentions? Again, neither too tight nor too loose a rein.

As with the balance of the capital city and the provinces, it's worth considering what your tendencies are and if there is an imbalance. For example, some of us hold on to our goals to a fault (myself, ahem) going down with the ship – pull up! It's a trap!! –while others give up way too soon or don't take their own needs and wants seriously enough.

From the Buddhist perspective, the path that leads to the greatest well-being and goodness for oneself and others steers clear of over-striving on the one hand –clinging is, after all, the primary engine of suffering – yet is also guided by Right Intention and other wholesome aims.

The importance of this side of the balance – of perseverance guided by goodness – is seen in one of my favorite phrases of the Buddha. Appearing in many places in the Pali Canon, indicating its importance, it describes worthy practitioners as “ardent, resolute, diligent, and mindful.” All these speak to a real dedication.

In my experience, more people err on the side of being flabby or fearful in their resolutions, and not enough of an ally to themselves, than err on the side of being obsessively driven toward important goals. And of course, within the same person, there may be goals that he or she is too lax about as well as goals that he or she is too obsessive about.

You could reflect on how you might come to better balance for yourself with regard to your strength of resolution. Consider both the goals you could be too driven about and the goals you could be too lax about.

CONCLUSION

As we consider the fruits of our intentions – Are they bitter or sweet? – it is easy to veer into the pitfalls of guilt and shame on the one side, and self-congratulation and conceit on the other. Instead, the wise course is to be clear-eyed, even-keeled, and encouraging with yourself, continually focused on your learning and growth, on how you can become a little better person every day.

For yourself. For everyone around you. And for the whole wide world.