

WHOLESOME INTENTIONS, PART 1

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INTRODUCTION

These statements about reality, about the way things really are, are central to Buddhism, and you can test them for yourself:

- Everything happens because of preceding causes. *Everything*, both inside our minds and outside in the world.
- Those causes lead to results that are either beneficial or harmful, for ourselves and others.
- Causes originate within yourself and outside yourself.
- The primary source of the causes that originate inside you are your own intentions. As Joseph Goldstein puts it, “Everything rests on the tip of motivation.”
- Some of our intentions are very deliberate and conscious, while others are shadowy or altogether hidden. Multiple intentions dance, join with, and oppose each other in the mind, some have more power than others do, and our actions are the result of the net sum of all of them at any one time. Our actions reveal our true intentions.
- The sphere of intention is vast, ranging from the items listed on a shopping list to our loftiest aspirations. It encompasses our goals, aims, values, drives, purposes, wants, and ideals. The influence of our intentions pervades our entire life.
- This means that through establishing our intentions, we have tremendous influence over our life. Therefore, our intentions bring us both great responsibility and great opportunity.

In sum, becoming more aware of our intentions, observing their effects – for better or worse – and becoming more skillful with them is an absolutely fundamental and powerful source of benefit for ourselves and others.

THE NEUROLOGY OF INTENTION

Our intentions arise in the brain, are represented in the brain, and are pursued in the brain. Where else?

Therefore, a basic understanding of how intentions work in the brain – and thus in your mind – is a very useful thing to have.

The Executive Functions

The brain is like a committee, with many parts or “members” working together – or at cross purposes! – and the frontal lobes are like the chair of that committee. Or, to use a different metaphor, if the psyche altogether is a vast land, with a capital and many provinces, the frontal lobes are like the city manager of the capital. But of course that does not mean that they are the owner of the country! An error the frontal lobes, and the self structures that identify with them, tend to make. To the loss and often the rebellion of the provinces . . .

As you can observe in your own experience, it is possible to have effective “executive functions” in the mind – those capacities that plan, organize, monitor, and direct --without much if any sense of personal self in the mix.

A Proper Balance

To be sure, those executive functions are very important. A healthy nation needs both its capital and its provinces. Balance is everything, in the brain as in life. “The middle way . . .”

You might ask yourself, are you tilted either way:

· Toward an excess of executive functions, too much top-down control, not enough life breathing in the provinces, too much “head” and not enough “body” or “heart,” too much regulation, suppression and scorn directed at parts of the self, too many high judges and critics in the mind scolding the inner children and the passions, too much superego and not enough id, living too much behind city gates and not enjoying and exploring enough the rich and fertile lands outside those walls.

• Toward an excess of unruly provinces, too much influence bubbling up from the bottom, not enough self-control, flooded with affect, impulsive and inattentive, a mental popcorn machine.

Most of us are, indeed, tilted too much one way or another not just as a temporary imbalance but as a longstanding tendency. Certain moments call for more from the “capital” and others for more from the “provinces,” and being able to move nimbly in one direction or another without limitation or creakiness is very helpful in navigating the twists and turns of life.

So, when you see which way you are tilted, then restoring greater balance – and becoming stronger and more able with the other aspect of the psyche – can become a strategic goal for growth.

The primary way to develop your “weak suit,” in terms of optimal balance for yourself, is simply to identify the elements of it that you want to strengthen, and keep them in mind. That will mobilize resources for yourself over time that will gradually build up those capacities. Truly, 50% of personal growth is identifying the issue – whatever it is – and committing to work on it. Just that! Which is really very good news.

Held in a proper balance, establishing clear intentions – which are a way the frontal lobes call the other members of the committee to order and establish what the agenda is – is a powerful, skillful means to getting anything good done either inside your own head and heart or in the outer world.

RIGHT INTENTION

Of course, the first question regarding intention is, for what?

All the great wisdom traditions of the world, and all the great moral philosophers, have grappled with this question. What should we want?

There are many ways to approach this question. Some try to answer it in terms of discerning the will or desires of their sense of a Divine influence, of God. Others through resort to certain ideals or abstractions. And others through reliance on some kind of authority, such as a priestly class or a scripture.

In the case of the Buddha – and also some moral philosophers – he approached this question pragmatically, in terms of what leads to more or less suffering, to more or less benefit or harm to oneself and others. Intentions are good if they lead to good results, and bad if they lead to bad results.

This approach has numerous advantages. It is down to earth. It draws upon our own observation of what happens, rather than relying upon the viewpoints of others. It provides a ready test for the worth of an intention: what did it lead to, what actually happened? And it keeps turning us back to ourselves, toward how we can be ever more skillful.

The best available record of the actual teachings of the Buddha – what is called the Pali Canon after the language in which they were first written – is chock full of encouragement and practical guidance for many kinds of intentions leading to good results.

For example, in one sutta – a talk or discourse of the Buddha – he is offering a merchant guidelines for an ethical business, and in another he is advising a monk on the subtlest imaginable inclinations of mind in profoundly realized states of consciousness. In one of my favorite suttas, the Buddha tells his seven-year-old son, Rahula, that knowing how to act in life is actually very simple: before you do something, consider if it will lead to benefit or harm, and if it will be beneficial, go ahead; then, while you are doing things, keep considering if they are beneficial or not, and if they are, it's alright to continue them.

In this context of diversity and individuality of wholesome intentions, the Buddha singled out three in particular. They are contained in what is called Right Intention, which is one of the parts of the Eightfold Path; that Path is the last of the Four Noble Truths, and it describes the way leading to the end of suffering.

By the way, Right (or Wise) Intention is sometimes translated as "Right Resolve," which conveys the determination, firmness of aim, heartfelt conviction, and persistence that are central to right intention. Let's see what those three intentions were, that the Buddha thought were so important that they deserved such emphasis.