

Wise Intention
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Last month we looked at the assumptions, attitudes, values and other mind states that constitute our world views. In doing this, many of us saw what the Buddha meant in this first passage of the Dhamapada:

We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.
Speak or act with an impure mind
And trouble will follow you
As the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart.
...
Speak or act with a *pure* mind
And *happiness* will follow you
As your shadow, *unshakable*.

The link between what our minds generate and the negative feelings we suffer – or *dukkha* – is very direct, and pretty easy to see once we learn *how* to *look* for it. That’s what we did last month in exploring Wise Understanding. We watched to see if we could spot and identify our views, and those of others, and looked to see if those views led to happiness or unhappiness. Sometimes we could even see the views that underlay the views we’d spotted.

When we look at our mind states from the perspective of Wise Understanding – the law of causation and the 4 Noble Truths – we can *recognize* whether the way we view things is wise or unwise. This is like what the Buddha did on the night of his enlightenment. Mara, personifying all delusions and unwise impulses, tormented the Buddha with horrifying visions and seductive pleasures. Buddha sat tight through Mara’s show and said, simply, “I see you, Mara.” By understanding which ways of seeing things lead to suffering, we move into a position to end their power over us.

Moving ahead on this Path, we can go forth with our new, Wise Understanding about *dukkha* and it causes, and confront our ways of being in the world, starting with our intentions. Views influence our intentions. If we “understand” that an attitude or value leads to unhappiness, that will determine how we intend to act about it. But if we misjudge it, when it actually makes us and others **unhappy**, our resulting intentions and behavior will be unwise.

Maybe the worst consequence of these compounded mistakes is the effect this has on our character. Our thoughts come and go, but the effects of our harmful intentional behavior stay with us. They determine who we become on a moment to moment basis. Our intentions also have an impact on the world. When we look at the major problems confronting the human world now, we see the results of our culture’s rampant consumerism, willful ignorance, conflict and oppression. To paraphrase Bikkhu Bodhi, what’s wrong with the world comes from our collective greed, hatred and delusion.

Intention is key to the quality of human life, whether it becomes rife with suffering, or kind and peaceful. The exercise you did over the last few days in looking at your intentions probably revealed very quickly that our intentional conduct plays out in a swirl of various motivations. I vividly remember the first time I tried this practice, on a retreat. I could barely get out of the meditation hall. The possibilities were few and simple. Go

right upstairs for walking meditation, or first use the restroom and get a drink of water. And as soon as I looked at this choice, the complexities overwhelmed me. It was raining, so I'd have to put on my shoes and jacket to go out to the restrooms. I had an advanced case of "yogi mind" from weeks of nonstop practice, so it wasn't easy for me to organize all the motives involved, even in such a simple choice.

So in the rush of daily life, isolating your intention while, for example, you were grocery shopping, probably revealed the rich mixture of motives we usually juggle. Food shopping can involve intentions to spend wisely, have a healthy diet, delight friends coming for dinner, have pleasure and comfort in our food, and give money to causes we support... all at once.

In addition to being mixed, our intentions are usually layered, with the deeper ones giving rise to those that are easiest for us to see. As we practice cultivating our awareness of our intentions, we come to see deeper and deeper ones, until we glimpse our really core intentions. I once asked someone in here what the heart's deepest desire was, and I could see that my meaning escaped her. The suttas say that all sentient beings have the basic desire to be happy. This core intention often gets lost, though, as its offshoots grow nearer to the surface.

Wise Understanding simplifies our task of telling whether it's wise to hold, and act on, a particular intention. We just have to ask, will it lead to suffering for us or others? As we keep paying attention to the intentions prompting us to act and applying this litmus test to them, we become ever more skillful in our way of engaging with the world, and more in tune with the deepest yearning we share with all other beings: to be happy. Peaceful, at ease and spontaneously loving.

And in the meantime... we have lots of help from the Eightfold Path. In the parts covering Wise Speech, Action and Livelihood we're given readily accessible guidelines for our conduct, which lead us to act in ways that cause greater happiness for all, until the intention is so deeply grounded in us that we make these choices automatically.

The core intentions of Buddhism are letting go, goodwill and compassion. In Pali, words for the key intentions have the same root in their negative and positive forms. While we have different words for clinging and letting go, in Pali it's *kama* for craving and *nekkhama* – or non-craving – for renunciation, a topic I covered in a recent dharma talk. This is the first intention the Buddha said was Wise Intention: it's the opposite of unfettered desire, whether we call it greed, lust or craving. This is the Wise Intention of **Renunciation**, letting go of what we're so fiercely wanting. Letting go is usually a process, but if we have the intention, we *have begun* that process.

The opposite of the Pali words that mean wishing ill and intending harm are **Goodwill** and **Compassion** or, to simplify both, *kindness*. To simplify even further, let me just say: I have a picture of the Dalai Lama by the door leaving my bedroom with the caption: "My religion is simple. My religion is kindness." -- Just to remind me what the core intention is as I step forward to start my day.

The image that comes to mind for me is of birds, arranging their feathers so their wings are in good shape to take them flying. That's what I'm doing with my intentions by glancing at that picture, lining them up with being **kind**. This is how we can best take care of ourselves and those around us, by remembering it's about protecting all beings from suffering. The intention to be kind, to have lovingkindness and compassion for all, protects us from acting out of desires that don't serve us well, and harms us and others, leaving us even more prone to intentional unwise conduct in the future.

There are ways to *cultivate* wise intentions, in addition to the practice of spotting the unwise ones. With cravings, for example, we can cultivate generosity, because it focuses on our having enough to share with others rather than on what we're lacking, and we actually do let go when we give dana. One way to 'look' at burning desires is to *feel the burn*. Let me be clear that renunciation is not denial or repression of our desires. It's the natural dropping of a state of mind that happens when we understand that clinging to a desire is like clutching a coal sort of covered with ash so we don't feel it until we've held it a long time, or we clutch it tightly. Then we recognize that we're clinging to something that's actually burning us, and our whole being just drops it. So instead of denying or repressing our desires, we let ourselves feel directly the dukkha of wanting something that powerfully. Some people shy away from this exercise, but it's far less unpleasant than the consequences of letting those desires rule our lives.

To cultivate lovingkindness and compassion, there are phrases to either generate these feelings or at least incline the mind toward them during meditation. When ill will arises, either in meditation or during the day, we can remember to counter that ill will with goodwill. Instead of telling ourselves the story repeatedly of how someone has harmed us, we can summon metta or compassion. Maybe in the heat of anger we can't feel lovingkindness toward the one we feel has harmed us, but we can probably think of some *other being* to summon that feeling for, just to bring in good will to switch off the bad will. And at the least, in the heat of negative passion we can remember to practice *restraint*: holding our tongues or not hitting the "send" button on an email, and taking no violent physical action. That spares our minds from an increased tendency to yield to aversion.

So if you can't *have* kind intentions, at least contemplate them. There is great power in "setting an intention," whether it's before settling in to meditate, or entering a meeting room. Or leaving your bedroom. We can always tend our feathers so we're safe to fly.