

2011-11-06 Intention And Karma

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SPEAKERS

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This morning I wanted to spend some time talking about intention, intent. And in Buddhist teachings of the Buddha, intention is extremely important. It's kind of like at the heart in many ways of the practice of Buddhism. To understand intention is to instead understand something about how practice unfolds and opens up and develops, to rely on intention is, is to hopefully find something that's reliable that we can rely on. intention is a interesting thing that they detention meaning to be motivated the motivation, the aspiration, desire that's behind our desires. You know, you could want to do something but then you can ask, what's your intent for wanting to do that? And thinking about it today, there is a divide that exists in religious circles, spiritual traditions, between some traditions that focus on works Some that focus on grace and Christianity, it's a big thing, right? And so in Buddhism as well, sometimes you have people who say that it's who you are is what you do. And some people who say who you are as what is, who you are is what you are. And so some people who like the what you are pointed out that somehow in essence, our true nature is good or wonderful. And people want to celebrate that, as opposed to people say are true, and that two essence is somehow bad or sinful or something. And then there are people who say couldn't care less who you are, in terms of your essence, what's important is what you do, how you live your life. And that's what's really important. There was a now it's been a long time ago, but in the 90s, there was this wonderful article, I thought, by this guy from young man that was like 14 or 15. someplace like Nebraska, he lived and he had a father who was Nebraskan and a mother who was Tibetan and he had been identified as a young boy, as a reincarnate Tibetan teacher. But he was just a kid growing up in Nebraska. And, but he got in some religious training, and people came to him for spiritual advice. And, and he wrote this, it was interviewed some magazine, people said, unique, said, you know, it's kind of strange people come to me and they ask me for all kinds of marital advice, and you know, what am I supposed to know? I'm 14. And my father gave me the card of a local therapist, I'll just give them the card. But the interesting thing he said was, he said, The, a lot of the kind of previous generation of Western nice Buddhists here in this country said, they really focus a lot on, on taking refuge in the idea that they're inherently good, that somehow we're good, and maybe that's inspiring. It's meaningful. It's relaxing. It's an antidote. It's medicine, for all the sense of humor failures and inadequate and bad or something. And he said, but that's the old school more or less. With the new generation, he claimed something like that he said, We're interested is not who we are, but what you do. That's what's important. And I thought that was really refreshing get a sense that how some religious teachings belong to particular generations, for particular generations, they work they their antidotes their medicine for the conditions of our time, they're influenced by the conditions of our time. And that as conditions change, generations change, perhaps the teachings that are useful or needed or inspiring also change. And so and so this divide between who you are versus what you do, and it plays out and perhaps in this idea of, of, what is a religious practice something where you do or is it something that you rest back in and relax into who you essentially are. And that divide that has been sometimes with tension and struggle. And you find people you know, arguing back and forth which is a

true thing, which is a true religion. Some people prefer one over the other. But in looking at this divide, perhaps intention is what heals the two or what's at the middle of them. because on one hand, intention has a lot to do with what we do. In the end, what we intend what we hope, what we what inspires us, what moves us and it also but also where does intention come from? And his intentions, you know, we manufacturer intention, do we make it happen or is intention something that bubbles up from some place that feels more intrinsic to who we are? And maybe intention kind of spans the divide in both sides. And so but when you look at that in our intention, many people have mixed intentions, where does our intentions to be Angry come from

to, you know, to yell at someone or speak unkind to them? Where does the intention come from, to be generous to someone, and be kind to someone. And I think most of us have both capacities within us. And depending on conditions, the worst of us can come forward. Depending on conditions, the best of us can come forward. And it just kind of may be intrinsic to the human being that we're a mixed bag. People would prefer to I think more usefully functionally or pragmatically, to see it that way. You can have a philosophy that says that inherently most basic most at the route where one way or the other, but functionally if you pay attention, notice how you live. I think it's most people fair to say that we're a mixed bag. And so many different intentions can come forth. And so the question is, as these things come forth, from who we are, which one do we choose to act on? Is that one of the really big questions Do we choose? Which ones do we give voice to? Which of them do we live our life on? And which, which which of them? Do we say No, thank you. I don't think I need to pick that one up. Or say those things. That's not useful. We might not have a lot of choice sometimes about what intentions desires, impulses bubble up. But hopefully we always have a choice but whether or not we express them or live by them. And part of the function of mindfulness is to be able to see where we have the veto power where we have a choice about what we come forth with. But paying attention to our impulses, paying attention to our intentions, our aspiration desire is a very important part of Buddhist spirituality. It's such an important part that I would venture to say that for a religion that prefers not to say not to point to anything as being our true self. Probably intentions are the closest thing to it. To the intentions we live on, its closest to kind of what forms who we are, defines who we are. There's a famous Zen story, I say this first. So when the Buddha talked about karma, he defined karma has intention. And this is a very important thing to understand. Karma is usually often defined as causality. It literally means action. And but it has a kind of connotation, apparently in ancient times in ancient India, that it wasn't just any old action, but back back in the Vedic times, people this time, it had an association with ritual action. So there was those actions, which ritual actions, which would appease the gods would please the gods, because the Vedic religion had a lot to do about making sacrifices to the gods who can get a better crop, better life, better health, all kinds of things. And doing those actions, those rituals in the exact way, exact formulaic way, was very important. And so karma had this association as ritual action. And perhaps when the Buddha chose the word karma is one of the central words for his religion. It was echoing the idea that it's sacred action, that action which is valuable for the path of liberation, that that has to do with something very deep and profound in who we are. And then he defined it as action as intention. So karma is the word karma, elicits, for many people, variety of associations. One of those associations is the idea that theories of past and future lives. Another association that people have with it is the idea of system of justice. You know, you know, some people like this AI system because you see someone who's does terrible things in the world. But it looks like you know, they got through their life wealthy and happy and, you know, and then they die and, you know, where's the? Where's justice? Well, then simple answer is, well, it's, they're gonna get it the next lifetime. Just and some people find it very reassuring to have that kind of theory of justice that comes along because it'd be nice if the world was adjusted place. Another kind of association with karma is it a little bit to do with determinism, that, that what has happened to you today today is determined it's black and white or gray clearly set in

motion in the past, and you have to somehow live out the predetermined course of things based on what happened in the past. These three theories of karma are not

the Buddhist ideas of karma so when you hear the word karma Buddhism, you have to put aside that. In fact, the Buddha clearly spoke, as explained if there is an alternative to some of the existing Indian ideas of causality of what cause and effect how that happens. He didn't believe that what happens to us as a result of the gods. He didn't believe that what happened to us was pre determined. And he didn't believe that what happens to us is indeterminate, that there's no determination, it's random or casual, but rather that what happens to us follows follows in the wake of causes and conditions. But those causes and conditions are not set and pre determined. Those causes and conditions are something that we can participate in and change the direction of effect them. And what what are the what is it that we can have most agency over? What can we have the most impact over? And I think the answer As we can have the most agency over our intention, the intentions we act on live with. There's many things that happen to human beings. And you know, we can't control all that happens to us. I'd like to distinguish between kind of physical causality and psychological causality. Physical causality, I like into the idea of, if you take one rock and throw it into a big lake, you get a ring of waves ripples flow outwards. If you take a fistful or two fit handfuls of pebbles, and you throw them all the same time into the water, you get many concentric ripples waves going out, and they start bumping into each other, and you get an amazingly complex pattern of waves. Now if you put a little rubber duck In the middle of that time, if you only throw one rock in, you can see, you know, which waves how it works that bobbing up and down to the duck. But if you have, you know, 10s of thousands of these pebbles going in which pebble is responsible for the particular bounce that the duck gets, you know, it gets pretty complicated all the way the waves kind of bump into each other. So the physical world is like that. It all kinds of things are set in motion. And it's very complicated to understand all the different things, why anything happens to us. And to attribute you know, that we can give a simple answer. This is why some things happen, sometimes doesn't kind of do justice to how complex it is, and sometimes quite unknown why things happen. But then there's also psychological causality. And this is the causality that's set in motion, by what we do in our minds, the actions, the intentions that we live on. The thought that feelings and thoughts that we live within, we get involved in we interact with. And anyway, the Buddha emphasis was a psychological causality has a lot to do with the intentions that you're acting on. And it's here where this old cliché that you reap what you sow, comes into play. We don't know what happens externally. But what we what our actions do has a big, big effect. What our intentions are, has a big effect on our minds and in our minds are conditioned. So if I am kind or gem generous, attention to be generous. That tends, and only tends to have some impact on the physical world outside of me. It tends to mean that people relax around me they feel comfortable around me. Perhaps they feel kindly just To me, they treat me nicely. They tend, but there's no guarantee in this complex external world. If I tend to be snarly and mean, the world tends to respond in a certain way to that. But there's no guarantee I might run into someone who just overlooks my meanness, you know, and it's willing to relax and smile and, and soften me a little bit. But you know, there's no no guarantee what happens externally, we don't know for sure. But the effect of my generosity or my kindness on myself, is something that we is much clearer in Buddhism. The effect of my meanness affects me. And part of the function of mindfulness practice is to help us to understand the impact that our intentions have the intention that we act on. So one, one intention. So one impact that we can feel is what's called by

John Lennon. I think in In karma, so we can we can feel in the present moment, the effect that acting on certain intentions have acting on it either physically mean actions or speech, but also acting on intentions with our thoughts. Just because you're thinking something doesn't get you off the hook. And so if you get involved actively with thinking certain kind of mean thoughts, you can bring your

mindfulness in and you can feel doesn't make you feel good, maybe feels tense or contracted in some way. If you feel the intention to be generously generous, then you can feel the that effect differently or warm, they kind you can feel here now the impact that has on you here now. So Instant Karma, you can feel the effect on Wow. But also there's the there's the effect that happens over time. And just because and Part of Buddhist spirituality is to take into account that how you act now will affect you in the future. That you have a choice you have an ability, your responsibility or responsibility to respond in the present moment that affects the future for yourself. So if you act on intentions that make you feel stressed all the time, that are stressful or tension producing, that tension will linger in your system for a while. Tension, physical tension holding grasping doesn't usually kind of vanish just like that, but lingers for a while. And sometimes people who meditate can feel that they can feel the sometimes you don't even notice how tense we are until we sit down to meditate, and we feel a shoulders or a belly or face or someplace. And then perhaps if you're lucky, some of that begins to relax and settle and of course of the meditation period, but it takes me To be the period that would like to the time for some of the coarser tension to unfold and dissolve. And behind the tension that we carry in our body is an intention or intentions. I would venture to say no one gets tense, unless it's the chalkboard on the chalk on the chalkboard kind of thing. Most attention that we carry is a consequence of intentions that we're acting on. So, if we can turn back and see what is my intention, we can we can somehow, you know, take some responsibility for the tension that might or might not build up. So I was in a trying situation recently, a group of people and I could feel myself getting tense. And so what I did was I turned and looked at myself more carefully, and I saw that what was what was Waiting for me as I had that building up my attention was I had a version to what's happening the intention was to push it away or to get away, I had thoughts escape and that that was the intention that was operating. And when I saw that, I said, you know, this is not really that useful. Let me see if I can find a different intention of how to be here. And so I thought, well, let me try to be here in a way where I try to relax, try not to do anything at all and try to be calm, receptive presence in the middle of this trying situation. That was my intention to be helpful in the situation. And part of that willingness to be helpful, that was the intention came along with also a willingness to be uncomfortable. So it was an uncomfortable situation. So the intention was, let me see if I can be, let me see I can be okay or willing or open to being uncomfortable, as opposed to reacting to it. The result of changing my intention was the tension that I was carrying, went away. And that was no longer tense actually got pretty relaxed. And it's kind of nice to sit there with all this difficult stuff happening around me. So I offer this as a chat as a challenge to you, because some of you do get tense from time to time. That's the idea that if you if you are tense, behind that tension is some intention. So what I'm talking about right now is that your intentions have consequences in the future, in the present and the future. They have consequences and attention that we carry. And some of that tension can be carried for a lifetime. I've known people who've carried it on retreat, they discover they're carrying tension for 50 years. And only then after 50 years, do they somehow address it and work with it.

Another place that intention Consequences into the future is that it stays with us as memories. What we act on how we live based on certain attentions, what we do affects our memory. What we remember when we record and memories will come back. And if we've done some things a tendency after we done something that we feel bad about some transgression hurt people, there seems to be a phenomenon, that if we've hurt people, if we've transgressed if we've done something that's been morally inappropriate, there seems to be a phenomena as you meditate as people meditate and get deeper and deeper meditation, that that gets that pops up. And that people have to deal with it. It can be 2030 years ago, but you have to kind deal with it. And so sooner or later, your karma will catch up to you. They say sometimes, and one of the ways that catches up to us is because Because this repository this of memories that we carry with us, that don't just disappear. It's like if things are unresolved, so sooner or later they have to kind of find some way to resolution. My teacher in Burma

when I was meditating there, he loved telling stories of people who had been soldiers or butchers or guerrilla fighters in Burma, who would come to meditate. And they would sit there quietly, and sooner or later, they had to confront their actions as soldiers or spiders or as switchers. And he said it was often quite difficult for them until they somehow was able to work through it. The other place that we're intention carries into the future is that it conditions us creates habits. It's a conditioning factor. And so the intentions that we live on tends to build up you know habit in the mind if we repetitively act in a particular way or follow up on certain intentions, it kind of smoothes the grooves in the mind for those intentions. It strengthens those neurons, neural connections. And so the mind is more likely to go in those directions again. So if it's, if we're choosing, if our intentions are often mean spirited, or adverse, or ambitious or desirous or lustful, then we're strengthening those tendencies. If it's to be kind and generous, or to be free, or to let go or be relaxed, we're strengthening those tendencies. And who knows when that conditioning will pop itself up will show itself. So this idea that you know that karma sometimes will take a long time to show itself karmic consequences, sometimes to do with we don't know when our conditioning will kick in. And sometimes that can be machines will kick in in such a way that it's not so pretty. Some people find that it kicks in or times of stress. Certain kinds of things kick in there. So when there's when it's stressful, does your hostility kick in? Does your despair kick in? Or does your generosity Kiki and your your sense of let's look at this in practice with this, like the example I gave you, that kicked in for me, like I felt my tension. And then I looked at it more carefully and looked at my intention, and saw if I could change myself in the situation. That's what kicked in hopefully, because of my, you know, conditioning, a little bit of practice. So what condition so in Buddhism, then we say what conditioning is going to come into play as you're dying? Do you ever think about that? If you're gonna be lucky enough or unlucky enough, depending on your belief, to die slowly and consciously? Are you prepared for that? You know if once your faculties are going, sometimes what's left is your conditioning. And if your conditioning is affected your particular way, perhaps it won't be so good. Or maybe it'd be fantastic. I love this story that Sylvia Borstein tells of. So Silvia is a meditation teacher, but her and her husband are also psychologists and psychiatrists. And they were invited over for dinner at the former president or head of the American Psychological Association, something like that. They known him for many years. And so but he was beginning to have Alzheimers, still living at home. So they went over to have dinner with him and they knocked on the door. He opened the door. And he looked at them, and he said, I have no idea who you are. But you're very welcome in my house.

Isn't that you? Nice story. So what conditioning was set in motion for him? What How did he live his life in such a way that that was his response as opposed to, I don't know who you are and I'm afraid of you, you know you close the door. So, intention is in Buddhist teachings is at the heart of this conditioning heart of creating the conditions. And Buddhist practice involves appreciating that we have some responsibility for what intentions we live on. And that it makes a difference. The intentions that we act on make a difference are consequential. And probably the core teachings on karma in Buddhism, is that your actions or your intentions are consequential. Watch them, pay attention to them. The Dalai Lama has said and other Buddhist teachers have said that more Important than some of the deep sublime teachings of emptiness that Buddhism has to teach is the teachings on karma. The teachings on causalities very teachings I'm giving you today. And so I've started earlier because I forgot I was gonna tell you a story from China Zen story. There was a Chinese Zen master who was at a monastery with monks. He would periodically give these Dharma talks. And in the back of the room every every time he gave a talk, there came a layperson, an old man who came not part of the monastery, he would sit to sit or stand in the back, very quiet and listen, and then he'd go go at the end of the talk. No one knew who he was. And then after a long time, the old man came, and at the end of the talk came up to the habit. And the habit said, Who are you? And the man said, Well, I'm not really a human being Yeah, I'm really I'm really a fox. And this is this is my, this is my story. Long, long, long ago, I was the abbot of this

monastery. And a monk asked me is an enlightened person free of karma? And I said yes. And the karmic consequences of saying yes is I've been reborn for 500 lives as a fox. Now I've come to ask you the question,

is an enlightened person free of karma? And, and the abbot said, In reply, an enlightened person does not ignore karma. And with that the man old man was released from whatever his delusion and he bowed, and he said to the abbot, thank you. Tomorrow morning, send a group of monks back behind the mountain to this behind this folder that's there. And there, you'll find the top you'll find me or something. So they did and they found a dead Fox there. And so they brought the fox back and gave him a burial fit for a month. Free the fox. So, to not ignore karma, even someone who's enlightened doesn't ignore it. You might be free from being impacted by what happens to you, you don't get so pushed around by life, or somehow free in the middle of it. But karma is still important to pay attention to the cause and effect to pay attention to what your intentions are. So Buddhist spirituality has a lot to do with taking the time to getting to know our intention, both on the micro scale and then macro scale, as you have the interest for it and, and the ability for it. So on the macro scale would be to spend some time, go for a walk, have some tea, talk with some friends journal, spend some regular time reflecting on what is the deepest detention that you want to live your life with? What is the thing that's most important for you? I've known people who maybe started their adult life with some beautiful intention. But with the complexities and challenges of school and education and work and family, they've long long lost touch with that and they're just trying to cope the best they can and is coping just the best thing that we want to do with our lives. Is there a time in place is meaningful, I think it's very meaningful to spend time asking yourself What is the fundamental intention or the deepest intention that you want your life to be based on? Or intentions? Maybe there's more than one? Or maybe to say that weighs too heavy, your deepest. But what is it? If you look, you know, what are the important intentions or important values that you would like your life to be about? If you can step away from the daily grind and struggle of life for a little while, maybe relax and ask yourself, you know, what do I really what's most important for me? I think it's one of the most important things a person can do is to ask that question often. I think it's actually more important than meditating every day. And I'm a meditation teacher. I've spent long many times doing this and there was a long period of time I asked myself this every day, and it was really fascinating to watch how it changed and morphed over time. And if you ask yourself every day, it kind of builds over the days and kind of get stretched yourself and open yourself in new ways. So to ask us on a macro level, what is intention I want to live on and then you follow That intention what that intention might be? And then you maybe spend some time seeing how can you live that intention? How can you follow through on that? Does it take courage? Does it take foolishness? Does it What does it take to do that? And then also on the micro level, something as simple and this is where I think is fascinating. We all have things to do in daily life. And perhaps the week and there's a way of infused, there's an opportunity in many of the daily activities we do, have infusing it with greater meaning and value. So give you an example. I could go shopping at the supermarket. And someone says, you know, why are you shopping? My wife sent me to the store

and that's the extent My understanding you know, yes, you sent me the store, but I'm still operating on it and intention, intention to to avoid the wrath and fury at home. No, no, that doesn't happen in my house. But But you know, the intention to you know, you know, what's the intention that which I go? So I could I so I might have I might not think about it I might be somewhat just do it as a matter of course, or I could spend a little bit of time looking at seeing what intention do I want to add to this particular activity. And it can be the intention, let me do something because shopping for my family, for their welfare and well being as opposed to because I've been ordered to do it. And I think it has a different effect psychologically, we've been shifting our mind to see it. In addition, or separate from that it could be let me go shopping in such a way that perhaps I can make a little beneficial difference in the lives of

the other people in the store. I know what it's like I've been gone to the market grumpy. And I've done that. And I've also gone into the market with the idea Let me see if I could kind of be a friendly person in the market. And so maybe beards just smile to people say hello to the people who are not frightened by that.

Let me you know, let me try to connect with a clerk in such a way that maybe there's a friendly exchange so it makes it a little difference, you know, a little warmth, human warmth there, because I know I have the capacity to go go through the checkout counter, and not even make eye contact. You know, like this person, you know, she was so slow with the other people in front of me and let's get to important things to do and I think at home and whatever and, you know, just I'm focused on my Hurry, as opposed to kind of standing there in a clear way and mending really taking in the person being Therefore the person not just being there for my food so that was supposed to be an example of a micro thing that we you know, shopping is something many of you do. And so to spend a little bit of time reflecting what's the intention or intentions that you would like to do this and not just kind of, you know, check off a checklist of good intentions, but to think about it and see can you live that way? Can you add that to it and thereby knowing enrich your daily life, but also create better karma for yourself, create create better conditions, better momentum into the future? I think it's a beautiful thing to do. This way. There was a time when I used to have a date book you know, with calendar written down and there was a time I had to practice I would look at my calendar of appointments and excited to do I would sit down quietly on the couch and look at it was set for the day. And then I tried to Consider what my intention was going to be for all the different things I was going to do that day. And I found when I did that, and my days became richer, they became you know, more was more beautiful things were going on because I brought that intention with me. And if I just got out of bed and kind of looked at my date book and rushed out to do those things, that kind of reflection beforehand, didn't add greater richness. So, intention, intention lies at the heart of Buddhist Buddhist practice. It's well worth considering looking at. And one of the benefits of that comes from calm the mindfulness of meditation practice is it gives us a good platform from which to look more carefully at what our intentions are in the macro level and the micro level. So I hope that this talk I gave this talk today with the internet to challenge you a little bit, hope in a good way, I hope generously, wisely I hope for the challenge you to spend this next week, reflecting and thinking about intention to be challenged, maybe maybe there's much more for you to discover in the world of your intentions than you have so far discovered. And to explore to think, talk to friends about this issue of intention, massage the whole theme and idea and see what you can learn about yourself, and how you could create a much better world to live in. All beginning with what your intentions are. Thank you.