

Dharmette: Intention and Ease

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 13, 2013

Intention is the topic for today. I think there are layers and layers of exploration around this topic. If you have a desire for something, ask yourself, “Why you want that? What is the motivation or the intention behind the desire?”

For example, you could say that you have a desire to buy a nice shirt. What is the intention of buying a nice shirt? The intention is to impress everyone. Why? Because I want to show how great I am, and the shirt is how to do it. But then you could ask further what the intention is behind that desire to impress everyone. You go deeper. Maybe you see that you feel insecure, and you want to assuage your insecurity. What is behind the insecurity? Maybe it's anxiety.

There are layers behind the desires. If you ask about the intention of why you do something, don't settle for the first answer. Keep dropping down. What's going on underneath that? Why am I doing this? In vipassana practice, asking these questions is good. But the way to look for the answers is not intellectually or cognitively. Instead, *feel* your way into the answers. What is the intention? What does it feel like to want to impress people with your clothes? What parts of your body get activated? Where is the energy in your body? What's going on for you?

If the intention is to impress people, what does it feel like to try to settle the insecurity? Where in the body does it feel insecure? Refer back to the body. When you feel it in your body, you have access to two general areas of information: what it feels like physically and emotionally. A really good way to know what is going on emotionally is to feel it in your body – not to think about what we're emoting, but to actually feel it. So the question of “What's the intention of why you're doing something?” is a very useful question to ask, but don't settle for the first answer. Keep asking. And when you have an answer, then ask again: “Why am I doing that?”

The Buddhist tradition divides intention into those that are skillful and those that are unskillful. In common English we might say intentions that are helpful or unhelpful, intentions that are healthy or unhealthy. You can look at an intention and see whether it is accompanied by tension, or rather by a sense of aspiration, open-heartedness, open-mindedness, or “open-bodiedness.” How do you feel when you have that intention?

Chances are that, if it is an unskillful intention and you are sensitive to your body, you will feel that something is off in the body. If the intention is skillful, then you will feel in your body that it is right. It will feel good or appropriate. The body can be a reference point for whether something is skillful or not. Any intention that feels yucky is probably not good to have.

It could be that my intention is to save the world. That is a good intention, right? You should be inspired that I have this intention. But when I feel into that intention to save the world, I might feel there's tension around it. There might be fear, anxiety, ambition, or some kind of self-concept involved. Maybe I want to save the world to impress all of you, so you will like me. That's where I'll get behind this messianic theme. But if I feel into it, it feels tense, tight, heavy, and off.

At other times, wanting to do something generous for the world, you can feel into it, and you feel that the intention doesn't feel bad. Actually you feel lighter because of it. Internally, there's a “Yes! This is right.” You can feel your way into that, and feel the difference. The evaluation of whether something is skillful or unskillful for you doesn't have to be about cost-benefit calculations. But rather, “How does it feel to have this desire, to be motivated in this way?” Some of the best motivations you can have may look good on the surface, but deeper down are not healthy because they don't really speak for who you are or for what is right for you. Maybe something unhealthy or unskillful is prompting the motivation. Keep asking about the motivation and what the

body sensations and emotions underneath reveal. And this helps us to understand whether it makes sense to follow through or not.

A number of people feel they live with an obligation to do things right, or in a certain way. We are obligated to want to save the world, aren't we? Are there obligations behind the desires? Sometimes, because of our training, obligation seems like second nature. But I would suggest that Buddhist spirituality comes from a different point of view. It doesn't come from any kind of obligation at all. Rather, our healthy responses to the world can come in a relaxed, easy way. If they do not come in this way, maybe we have to look more carefully.

Some people may say that if they are just relaxed and easy, they won't do anything because of laziness. But if you look more carefully at the laziness, chances are that laziness is an activity with its own ecology. If you see it more deeply, you may see tension there. And if you look at that, you may find it releases. It is possible to respond to the world and take care of yourself in a very effective way while staying relaxed. In Buddhism, skillful motivation has a quality of ease, relaxation, non-tension, or non-clinging.

Again, the evaluation of whether an intention is skillful or unskillful doesn't have to come from some moral standard against which you measure yourself. There is no moral Buddhist book that tells you how to be. The book is in your heart. It isn't a complicated evaluation, but rather it has a lot to do with the ease we feel. If there is no ease in the motivation, then you need to take a second look, and a third look. Maybe you are acting on assumptions that are not useful for you. Those assumptions perpetuate suffering in some way. The challenge Buddhism offers you is trusting a heart that is at ease. See what comes from that.

So, why do you do what you do? Why do you have the desires you do? What are the motivations and intentions? What are the feelings and the emotions? Are the choices you make skillful or unskillful? The way to evaluate is to refer back to the body. What happens there in the present moment? Does it feel good? Or do you feel tense or off in some way? Let that be a guide for finding your way.