

2015-05-24 Intention

Thu, 9/17 10:30PM • 33:42

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

intention, life, people, moment, buddhism, clear, monastery, zen, motivates, compassion, deeper, motivation, boombox, important, thinking, reflecting, intentionality, spent, practice, medical intervention

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdaal

So, I'd like to talk a little bit this morning about the intention. And one way of understanding or one of the functions of something like meditation practice is to clarify and purify our intentions. Many people associate meditation, especially mindfulness with getting insight, or getting calm and getting some level of peace in one's life. Maybe finding answers to one's life. And, but one of the very important things is to clarify or discover what our intentions are, what motivates us in our lives. And then to purify that, to refine it, to work on it, to study it, and kind of, kind of get down to the essence of it or what's most important for us. And our intentions can be multiple. In fact, there can be multiple layers of intentions operating the same time. And so I want to kind of tell you a story that adapts or kind of a famous Zen story. In ancient China, there was a monk, sincere, dedicated monk, who decided to travel around China to visit great Zen monasteries, great teachers, in order to try to really get to the heart of the matter really understand Buddhism and himself and, and he had a great Bodhisattva vow, he had a great intention to do it because he wanted to not only discover the truth and maybe get enlightened, but what we really wanted to do was to do so in order to help others to Save other beings. And this really kind of became the organizing principle for his life what his life was about. And he's spent years wandering around practicing and, and one day he was wandering around going to the next monastery for his great quest. Out in the countryside and in wilderness, and an alliance, a tiger saw him, and the tiger gave chase. So he ran and he ran and he came to an edge of a cliff. And behind him was a tiger brought to you know, tigers do whatever Tigers do. And the only option was to climb down the cliff as he started climbing down the cliff. And then you look down to the bottom of the cliff, and there was a second Tiger waiting for him. So above there was a tiger over the edge, big teeth, snarling Down below probably also with a mouth wide open and so he was holding on to a branch of a little tree or buying that was on the edge of the cliff holding on for dear life can't go up can't go down. And then he noticed that the mine was starting to break. And it's just a few seconds before a break off and so at that moment, he looked into the clip side on the cliff wall, and there was a wild strawberries growing there. And he reached out and freehand plucked one of the strawberries and put in his mouth. That's the end of the story.

Leaving you to imagine what happened next. The so here you know there's this here this this monk had this great intention to practice Buddhism to practice the truth. Great intention Not only to do that but to do it for him a deeper purpose which was to benefit other people. And then here it was clearly for him the end of his life there was no way no no way out from apparently to die. And what does he do? He just takes the moment and enjoys this moment fully what happens to it what happened to his kind of grand intention to save all beings at that moment? If you need held on to that wasn't it kind of selfish at that last moment to just enjoy a strawberry when people around you are suffering and I think you wouldn't blame him for taking a strawberry at that moment and to like go Alpha's people suffering and you know, actually seems like a some way so inspired, brilliant thing to do and just that moment why

get caught up in fear? You're last moments, and that's the choice right to be caught up in fear and regrets and desperation and kind of have the last moments be somehow terrific. And so he was he chose to kind of let go of the future the next few seconds and just for this moment and enjoy this moment in some pristine way. So these these intentions, he had intentions to save all beings and attention to just enjoy this moment here are not necessarily in conflict with each other. They're just different contexts, different situations. Each one is appropriate for its time. The I was thinking about this story because I went to visit a very old Zen teacher recently who is coming probably to the end of her life and needing to kind of address some of the some medical issues about what to do with her self. You know why the tick perpetuate her life under a care medicine and a lot of you know, medical equipment or not to use medical intervention, this juncture of her life and maybe by doing that maybe die earlier. And she was wondering about the ethics of this. Because for her, she, she asked me, What What about my buddy sattva bow, she was a, you know, Zen priest, who dedicated her life to practice for the welfare of all beings. And to overcome delusion and overcome attachments to desire and, and, and so what what about this if she kind of doesn't do all the heavy medical interventions? Would she somehow violate her great intention that you'd oriented her life to? And I thought it was quite beautiful that they know to get this law window into wonderful Zen teachers, Buddhist teachers life and kind of the underlying foundation that kind of was behind her intentionality what she was about what she was doing what her life was about. And, and, and someone who I've known for many years who had a wonderful capacity for just being really present for things I was around her and saw her cute they were cute but the very beautiful care and attention to details of certain things and she was right there for I didn't inspired many people because of how she just did her thing is just this one thing and putting her heart and attention and love into the things that she did. And so this you know, both things are operating, that she had this ability to enter into the moment and be present, but in the bigger picture her whole life was based on This great intention wish to be a benefit to others. So they can be multiple with multiple layers of intentions at the same time going on in their lives. And this is important to understand because sometimes when we discuss intentionality in Buddhism, people sometimes think I'm only allowed to have one intention. And some people think like, and in Buddhism is the only thing you're really allowed to do, because at some schools of Buddhism, it's like you're not supposed to have any goal.

In practice, you know, it's not a goal, it's a little bit diluted, especially in zen, sometimes they say, no goal, practice with no goal. But to have an intention is to have a kind of goal. And so but when you sit down to meditate, and just really there with your breath, really with your body, you have to kind of put aside for that moment, the intention to save all beings. Because if you start planning how to save all beings, when you're sitting, meditating, you're not really meditating. And so you Don't get the benefits of that deep. You know, intimacy and connection to life that can happen in meditation. So in different contexts, there are different intentions that are operating. There's the larger intentions that we kind of organize our life around. And then there's the more particular intentions of the particular activities that we're doing in the moment. It has its own intention, its own context for doing something. So we explore intention, what's the right intention for the activity we're doing? And what's the what's the right intention for the activity we're doing? That's right for us who we are. And what's the what's the intention, the motivation that we want our life to be based on? And to spend time thinking about these things and reflecting on them? To have a clear sense of intentionality. What motivates us is a source of energy is a source of engagement that kind of gives us fuel That gives us a sense of purpose while we're doing. It also becomes a kind of a ballast and ballast kind of a boat is what keeps the boats the sailboat stable in the water, it doesn't kind of flip flop too much. So to have a clear intention, you know what you're doing your purpose of what you're doing. And next a lot easier to go through life because everything, a lot of things that have to orient around that. And if it's a fundamental life intention, then, you know, this is what I'm about. And there are people who make that decision and they let a lot of things have a clear intention. And there's a lot of conventional things that we think are important to do that they're willing to

drop away, drop away and not be involved in. You know, the maybe it's a little bit of a stereotype but you know, sometimes the starving artists, for example, or musician, you know, the intention is to express themselves in art and really do that. And they're willing to starve. They're willing to kind of sacrifice and put aside all kinds of welfare and other things that they want to do. You know, you know, getting a good job and good homes or whatever, because they have this clear intention what they want. But as practitioners I've known I've also been that way I know people who said, This is what my life is going to be about. I'm going to dedicate myself to practice. And I'm not going to do some of the conventional things that's expected of people and, and some people realize that there's some risk involved, you know, and maybe you won't have a, you know, some of the security that many people expect or want in life, but you know, this is what I'm doing, I'm going to do and so, some of you, this is not good advertisement, maybe, but for, for Buddhism, but a and I know a lot of Buddhists who have been people in getting interested in Buddhist practice and they become downwardly mobile. And so, you know, so it's, you know, it's a little bit subversive, this Buddhism, which, which I'm kind of happy for the downwardly mobile people. And, or people who feel like they could be content with very little, because their intention, they've been clear, this is what my life is about. And I'm going to follow this through and at the expense of many things that maybe sometimes are good to do. And then there's, it also makes a lot of clarity sometimes about when you go through your life, how you're going to go through your life. So you might not still make the same big decisions what to do in terms of, I don't know, career, all kinds of activities you do. But there's a very clear so that how I do it maybe is more important than what I do. And that I how I do it is I want my life and how I do things to be a benefit to others. So I want to do in such a way that it connects me to what's truth or connects me to compassion or care for the world. And that becomes an organizing principle for how we live our life. And that can give a lot of clarity and direction and, and a lot of confidence like this is what I'm about. boy am I gonna do this, I'm getting behind this.

And this is one of the functions of ritual and Buddhism. There are some rituals that people do in Buddhism, that are rituals of kind of intention where we kind of get behind our intention, we acknowledge it fully, we kind of empower ourselves in it, we make it public or something that this is what I'm going to do. And I think it has a kind of a big impact on the psyche, on our psychology, that one thing is to kind of go around and skip around, you're like, Oh, yeah, you know, I want to say people, I want to help people out. That's a good idea. Versus kind of, you know, with your community or other people have a ritual say that kind of clear way. This is what I'm about. And then there's a kind of empowerment or strength around that. And it gives a directionality it gives a to people I was so one of the great things to do, I believe, is to reflect on what is your intention there? What's your intention and the particular things that you do? Many times we do things out of habit, many times we're not clear about our intention of what we're doing. And sometimes if we become clear about our intentions, maybe we don't want to really do that. So one of the interesting reflections is, when you're aware of why you're gonna do something, but the motivation is for it. If you're really clear to yourself, How happy are you to admit that to others? He says, so, you know, you know, yeah, this is great. I'm happy to admit it. As you spend more hours surfing the web, doing whatever it is you do. Yeah, you know, this is a great thing. I'm so happy and my attention is, whatever it might be. Sometimes the public kind of opening it up and considering how, how public Your life is or how happy you are for other people to know what you're doing is a powerful And to ourselves kind of a truth teller. If you're not really if you're uncomfortable, other people know what you're doing. You really want to do it, does it really serve you, it was a really kind of help you to kind of lighten up and free up and I spent that part of my life. I miss that saying to grandiosely I spent that period of little sub months a year or something. When I was living at the San Francisco Zen Center of making it a point that making it a practice that if anyone asked me anything about myself, that I would be an open book. I mean, I wasn't going around confessing everything. But if someone asked me I would tell them and then I got to see what I didn't want to Oh, I don't know about

that. And that was a great kind of to see you know, this, you know, my resistance and when I kind of learned to kind of live in a way that I could be an open book. It felt so clean and felt so nice. It felt kind of very helpful for me to do this. So why do you do You know why you do it? And how much of an open book are you willing to be? Sometimes it's not appropriate to be an open book. depending on the context. I'm not saying you should always do that, but but you still think it's an interesting reflection about yourself to kind of use that as a litmus test. I spent a year of my life at least when I was living in the monastery, reflecting regularly about what did what did I want my life to be about what was the intention for my life, and I had a number of different options. One of them was to go back to great good to go to graduate school and get a career in something. And the other option was main option was to kind of go off and dedicate myself to Buddhist practice. And I didn't know which one was the appropriate one. And not only that, I didn't, but both of them involved wanting to help other people. But I didn't trust that wish. I thought, you know, people who want to help others, you know, it's probably not so sincere. You know, it's probably You know, they're kind of self serving or who knows, I didn't really trust the kind of that. So I had that wish but so I was one What should I do? And what do I want my life to be about? And can I trust myself in the intention that I have? And is it okay to have some of those intentions to say, Oh, boy, you know, where's that going to take me in my life? And finally, I decided or how I would say, it was decided for me. But what it wasn't someone else decided, something inside of me decided.

And there was a moment where I became completely clear that I knew the answer. It was like a, like a turn, the moments may flipped inside. And now I knew and what I knew was I was going to be ordained as a Zen monk. And for me, that meant dedicating my life to Buddhist practice, and to use Buddhist practice as a vehicle to support and help other people. And an image of back then, you know, I was gonna be a monk and they were at the surface Instead of there were a lot of monks. So I calculated how many years if I stayed there would take before I even attained the first level of kind of being a beginning teacher, and it was going to be 25 years because of the sequence how it all worked out. But that was okay, because I didn't really want to be a teacher wasn't that wasn't my motivation. My idea, my idea was that I would somehow have this little urban Zen center. And I would have the key. And I would open it up and make sure that it was open so people can meditate and meditate with them. And that was my ambition. So it's kind of what happened here, but it's a little bit more complicated. And I'm talking to you, I didn't think I was going to talk to people. I thought it was who's gonna meditate I hope it's okay. The so anyway, this idea of spending a long period of time really examining yourself and reflecting and thinking about One of the things that I learned is that by sustained attention on intention is that you can go through layers, some of the first answers that you come to, not necessarily ones that you know, the deepest ones, but we've come to the one, and then you look more deeply and, you know, think about it more and reflecting, or you ask the question, well, that's my motivation. Why do I want to do that? You know, what's the intention? What's the motivation behind that? And you get an answer, maybe, and then behind gask. Again, what's the motivation behind that? And keep asking that question going deeper and deeper. And then also to look at the nature of the answers you come up with? Are some of the answers compensation Tori, where you're compensating for some challenges you have in your life. So like, if you say my intention is to live without fear. Well, that's a great intention. I like it that people want to do that. But then you could also ask question, if I had no fear, what would be my life intention then and then you I get a very different answer. I did that to someone once they said that they wanted to live without fear. I asked them to, what if they had no fear? But then and then they said, Oh, then I would like to live with love. And then that kind of opened their eyes. Oh, why wait? And so, you know, what's the nature of your answer to that? You know, your deepest intention? Is it a compensatory? Or is it stated in negative terms? Sometimes that can be split, but or, in positive terms, you get a different interesting answer. Sometimes you've stated in positive terms, like I want to live with love or care for the world. But then you flip it and make a negative statement for from it, you know, what

has to be what has to change in order for that to happen, that can also reveal something important. Oh, I guess I have a fair amount of fear. So I better work on the fear. The intention is to work on the fear and understand that. So to kind of keep massaging and looking at it, and many people like that They are impatient. And many people kind of expect answers right away or solve their problems right away or, or something. But I think that when you're involved in something like Buddhist practice, spiritual practice, sometimes you want to, you need a lot of time to sort through these things. And example, my example of spending a year just in the monastery reflecting and thinking on this, I really needed that year, kind of going over and over and over again, and some of that time was not comfortable. comfortable doing it, and we had once every five days we had day off at the monastery. This was back at this the Tassajara, which is down in the Los Padres national wilderness, that's beautiful place. So in the days off, I'd go hiking, often in the mountains there, and the beautiful place. But those are those days alone in the mountains. Were also the times I was most troubled. It was most difficult to be with myself. Because in the monastery I was meditating and Doing things and working and I was distracted by the monastery activity. But when I had day off, I wasn't distracted anymore. I was just kind of just with myself. So odd, right? You think meditation is supposed to do that. But, but the days off did that for me. And so the year was, was kind of difficult those hikes and walks sort of thinking about myself and reflecting what to do, until they became clear, this is what I was going to do.

So a great question to ask yourself when you're wanting to do something, or say something is to ask for what purpose? What purpose are you doing this? And that can you know, just ask that? Or if you have a good friend or someone and say, can you please ask me this question periodically, when you think about be useful for me. For what purpose? Are you doing this? And because sometimes I can kind of open in a new vista, a new understanding of what's happening in the moment. And then you see yourself in a deeper way. Part of my faith from my years of practice and working with people, is that that the process of clarifying and purifying your intention is such a beautiful thing to do. Was it a worthwhile thing to do? That it's good to respect every intention we have. And what I mean by respect means, don't worry, if your intention is you think a little bit off. My intention is to get back on my neighbor's dogs always barking I'm gonna really I'm gonna, you know, I'm gonna get a boombox and you know, you know, and show them what sounds can be like. So, that's, you know, sounds like not a very good intention to have. And so I'm not encouraging you to do that. But, but if you turn around your attention and respect that intention, really respect it, meaning, respect means literally to look again, look more deeply at it, make space for it, don't condemn yourself for it. And look, what's that about? For what purpose? Are you doing this? what's motivating you to want to do that. And if you kind of keep looking, looking and looking behind your intentions behind your motivations, there's other motivations. There's other motivations. If you keep looking and looking, I think most often you'll come to something beautiful, something important. It might be that behind the intention to get a boombox to blast your neighbor is a wish to somehow assert your autonomy and dignity and you feel like you're being so kind of You know, you're kind of a bit self righteous and a little bit this person's disrespecting you. So you want to assert yourself, your dignity. And so well, that's maybe an interesting thing to feel that. And then you could ask yourself, you know, well, is this the best way to do that? Or you really is the result, you're going to get the result that you want? Is this going to lead you at the end of the day to feel greater sense of dignity in yourself, like, boy, I got the biggest boombox in my pocket. And I really kind of blast it out on my immediate neighbor, but the whole block and Boy, am I great. I don't think so. Right. And so you can't say, Oh, my, I'm looking for a kind of certain kind of personal dignity. Is there a different way of doing this? So that was that example was a two step example. But sometimes you keep going and going deeper and deeper. A common one that I've seen in people is sometimes people are very critical of others, very judgmental of other people. And if you look at what motivates that, sometimes it's security to make Make yourself kind of safe in the context of you criticize someone else and you're okay. And what's motivating that? Well, there's a kind of insecurity, what's behind your insecurity, a feeling of care

for yourself, you want to take care of yourself and so the motivation of love and care, but the idea of you know, judging someone else negatively, you know, it's kind of a miss doesn't really work as a way of really caring for yourself. But it's kind of gone into kind of dysfunctional way, right? Where if you keep looking back and back, so it's part of my faith that if you keep plunging into your intentions and exploring it, respecting them all, don't, don't condemn anything like this, if you keep looking and keep investigating going deeper and deeper into it. There's a saying and Buddhism that goes, it all rests on the tip of your intention. So you kind of the whole practice your whole life rests or depends on your intention.

It's also saying that if you want to see the future, what the future is coming, look at your intention now. Because in Buddhism, the intentions you're live in are the ones that really shape the future of your life in important ways, in the psychological ways of our life, the kind of what shapes our conditioning, which shapes our mind, are the intentions that we act on. And if we act on intentions of, of hostility or greed, if we act on, on constant self protection or self aggrandizement, or all kinds of things, that shapes us in one way, if we act in generosity, if we act with love and compassion, generally, that that shapes us in a different way. And so, Buddhism says, Don't underestimate how powerfully you are shaped by the intentions that you live by. That is that this is the central message of the Buddhist teachings on karma. And so your intention are maybe the most important resource you have. It's a moat, maybe the kind of like a Buddhist point of view is like the core, most important aspect of your life, more important than your bank account or you know who your friends are all kinds of things. But your intention is as much as most intimate and makes the biggest difference. And if you want to care for yourself into the future, watch your intention. Dalai Lama, as many of you are familiar with his somewhat famous for saying, if you want to be happy, have compassion for others. And so here we have to two intentions operating hand in hand, the intention to care for oneself to be happy, and the intention to care for others to have compassion. And maybe the two can't be separated so much. Maybe there can go hand in hand. And you know, you can't have complete real compassion for others. If you don't really care, take care of yourself as well. If you don't care for yourself, some people you know Want to operate out of compassion, benefit other people, but then they're very critical of themselves. There's no compassion for themselves. So how do you how do you cultivate both care for self care for other hand in hand? So what I'd like to end with is a is a another question that you might carry with you, and exploring intentionality, motivation. And that is kind of a thought exercise. Imagine yourself on your deathbed and you're clear enough to think and be cognizant. And you look back over the Reese over the past, back to today, May 24, 2015.

So what if you look back over that period What do you wish your life was about? What do you wish the motivation that drove your life that informed your life? What would be most important look back and appreciate about yourself? Is it that it would it be that you regret not seeing more TV? You know, there were so there were more websites to visit. If only I don't think so. What do you want to do? So why don't you look back at yourself in that period, like from today into your deathbed? What do you want me know? What would make you feel good for you, with motivation, what intention what sense of purpose that you really want your life to be about? And I hope that this kind of reflection doesn't weigh you down. That's not the intent. With duty and obligation, you have to now get serious but rather that it helps lighten you and free you and not take things personally and but really to realize that there is a great beautiful thing inside that you can choose carefully so that it does lighten you it does for you. It does kind of make you sit up taller and stronger and be more inspired and happy with your life. intention you can do all those things. If you're careful with your intention. I hope you're here your intention enhances your life and brings much joy to you and many people. So in about we have about 10 minutes left before we end.

And I think rather than taking some questions, I think it might be interesting for you To kind of turn to maybe have little groups of four turned to people next to you. And, and, and share with people in your group, whatever you'd like to you don't have to say things you don't want to say. But what kind of response you had to this talk? What what are the most useful way I think you can say anything you want. But in what way were you usefully challenged by this talk? Or what kind of useful reflections came out of this exploration of intentionality? So, thank you. I didn't want to interrupt you. There was so much, much energy and engagement. So you're welcome to stay and continue for a long time. But so I'd like to offer one last word around this idea of intention. There is a another word that's related to the words of intention. That I think is kind of a synonym but also I think points are something maybe even more profound than the word intention points to maybe something of the heart or something. And that is the word dedication. So rather than asking, What is your life intention? What is your life dedication? What are you dedicated to? And then if you know what your life is dedicated to, can you let go into that dedication? Like go into it, so that you can live from that sense of dedication. So, thank you all. And now please continue talking if you'd like