Intention, Motivation and Purpose

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We are familiar with just how much the mind and body influence each other. We certainly see this when we start to meditate. But I think many of us, even before we meditated, were aware that when a strong emotion arose, like anger, it impacts the body. And when calm or happiness comes up, it also gives us a different sense in the body. So there's a connection between the mind and the body. We're very familiar with the way our emotions impact our body.

But our body also impacts our mind. When we stub our toe, for instance—which I did just yesterday—that painful sensation can create stuff in the mind. It can create reactivity, frustration, or self-criticism. So this is a two-way street: the mind influences the body, and the body influences the mind.

And it's not just emotions that influence the body. Even thoughts, even the simplicity of a thought, can impact the body. Think about this as an example: maybe in your meditation, a thought came up about something you were doing last week. All that was, was an arising of a thought about something you remembered. But sometimes—and I'm sure you're familiar with this experience—when thoughts come up in the mind, they come along with the emotional terrain or content that was present when that experience happened. So the memory arose just as a thought in the mind, and that memory brings with it a whole emotional and bodily interaction. There is so much connection between the two.

In the teachings of the Buddha, he particularly highlighted a quality of mind at which this point of connection between body and mind happens. It's a factor in the mind that he called intention or volition. Volition, intention, is just a little urge, a mental urge. It's a mental urge that impels us to act. Every single action that we do of body, of speech, even of our minds, has this impulse that precedes it.

In the guided meditation, I suggested at the end that you see if you could just be still, remain still—not with the sense of holding yourself still, but just having that sense of relaxing into stillness—and then to see if you might notice an urge to move. You might have felt an itch or just a little bit of discomfort in the body and a little bit of an urge to move. Did any of you notice that urge before you moved? A couple of you. So this urge that happens, it's possible to see it, and this kind of exercise can highlight it.

If you're interested in playing with this at home, you could explore in your sitting meditation sometime—when you don't have a particular constraint on the end of the sitting—to sit until there's a strong impulse to get up. Don't set a timer for the sitting. Sit until the strong impulse to get up, to finish the sitting, comes up. But then don't get up. Sit through it. Watch the urge. Feel what it feels like to have that urge to move. And it will pass. It actually won't take very long—probably within a minute, less than a minute even. It might take fifteen seconds. Watch that urge pass.

Then the second time it happens, do it again. Watch that urge arise and pass. The third time it happens, get up.

This gives you a little bit of a flavor of this impulse. It might give you a taste of what I'm talking about—this impulse to move before we move. It's possible to see this impulse. It's possible to recognize it. It's possible to know we're going to move our body before we move it. It's possible to know we're going to speak before we speak. It's possible even to know we're going to think before we think.

That one is more subtle, not so easy to see, but it is possible to see. It's possible to see the mind kind of headed towards an emotion before that emotion comes up.

So this place of intention—intention itself is just a little like impulse, a sense of "about to." Maybe you have a sense of what that is: just about to get up, about to move, about to speak. This little urge in the mind, pointing us to or having us recognize that something is about to happen, can be seen, can be known. And in and of itself, it's a neutral thing. It's just an urge—just an urge to act.

The Pali for this (I know that Shiloh likes to keep you up with the Pali on these terms) is *cetanā.* And it's just this impulse that arises right before something's going to happen.

I would say the urge itself isn't the crucial part of what this exploration is about around intention. But with an intention to move, with an intention to speak, comes what we can call a motivation—a reason why we are going to say something or do something. Now this is a place that the Buddha said is really interesting to pay attention to: why we do something, what our motivation is. The Buddha actually pointed to this as a key place in our experience.

When we are not aware of our intentions, our habits of mind—the ways that we've been conditioned, the familiar habits and patterns that we all live with—when we're not present and aware for these moments of intention (which we're not present for a lot of them), then basically our habits are deciding, choosing our motivations for us. And so when we're not aware of this moment of intention, this moment of motivation associated with an intention, then essentially we're kind of at the mercy of our habits. And often those habits are not so helpful.

Aversion has been one of my really strong habits of mind. I would walk into a room and notice everything I didn't like about the room—that would be my orientation because of that aversive habit in the mind. And so if I wasn't aware of it, if I wasn't aware of that aversive tendency, then walking into a room, the intentions around what I paid attention to were motivated by that aversion.

We have these habits of our mind, and the Buddha said, if we're not aware of the habits of our mind, and we're not aware of what's motivating our actions, we're probably doing things, acting on intentions, acting on motivations, that are probably not so helpful.

Let's say the whole of what the Buddha pointed us to was a movement towards peace, towards freedom,

towards ease. And the exploration around that was to see what's in the way. What is it that makes us struggle? What is it that makes us suffer? How is it that we get caught? He pointed to three particular motivations in our mind—motivations of greed, motivations of aversion, motivations of delusion—as being the motivations that tend to lead us down the path of struggle.

When we act out of aversion, we tend to be strengthening that quality of aversion in our minds. When we act out of greed, we tend to be strengthening the quality of greed in our minds. When we act out of confusion, we tend to be strengthening the quality of confusion in our minds. And so this moment of choice, when we have this intention to act, this intention to speak, the motivation that accompanies that intention is what will either lead us down the path towards more struggle in our lives, or lead us down the path of more happiness in our lives.

The Buddha pointed to those motivations that take us more towards happiness, towards letting go of struggle, as being non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. To put it more positively: motivations of kindness, of generosity, and of wisdom.

We may have a sense sometimes that if I'm not acting based on what I want and what I don't want, what would be the motivation for doing anything? There actually are some wholesome motivations, these beautiful motivations of love, of kindness, of compassion, of generosity, of wisdom. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, says that when wisdom is present in the mind—which is non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—when wisdom is present in the mind, wisdom also wants to act. It wants to act to alleviate suffering. It wants to act to move towards ease and peace. And so there is this possibility of wholesome motivation, the possibility of action from skillful motivations.

The word "intention" in English, at least, carries the connotation of being aware of our intentions. We use the word intention when we say, "I intend to do something," in the sense of "I know that I'm going to do something." The word *cetanā*, the Pali word, is sometimes called a universal factor of mind. It arises in every single moment of experience.

Just that movement that I made, that movement of my hands—there were hundreds if not thousands of intentions happening in my mind to make that movement happen. Every single moment there's a little tiny intention happening, just to create that movement of my hand or the movement of my head. There's an intention arising that I'm not aware of. Teaching in this form right now, I can sometimes see that level of intention when I'm on retreat.

So there are many intentions that we don't see. This factor of intention is not just about the times when we can see it. Every single action of body, speech, or mind is accompanied by an intention, and that intention has a motivation connected to it.

Just this movement of my hands—I can see that in my mind. I don't see the individual intentions, but I can see that the intention is to support what I'm saying, to offer a little bit of visuals, I suppose. So the

intention is to help, to clarify. That's the intention in the mind as this movement happens.

The Buddha pointed to this: in the moment, being aware of our intention to act, to speak. Just in this moment. This is the only moment we can be aware of our intentions. We cannot redo our intentions from the past—our intentions and motivations from the past. We cannot act on intentions in the future. The only place we can act on intentions is right now.

In exploring intention in our practice—and I'll give you some ways to explore this in your daily lives in just a few minutes—we start to see that actually this moment, the choices made in this moment, are the only thing we have. That's it. That's all there is: this moment and the unfolding that happens as a result of choices right now. And so the Buddha really pointed to this very split second and the choices that we make, inclining our minds towards wholesome choices, skillful motivations with respect to our actions.

When we're not conscious, not aware, when we're in a kind of mindless state or lost in thought, then our habits are choosing for us. And sometimes these habits know what to do. When we're driving down the freeway and we're lost in thought, our habits know how to drive the car. Who's doing the driving anyway? The mind is completely on another planet, and yet the signal's going on, lanes are being changed, you're looking over to see if someone's coming up. The habits of mind know how to do that activity.

So there are some intentions that are very neutral. They just know how to take care of us. And then there are other intentions around speech, for instance, where we may bring in our habits of reactivity. When we're not aware—for instance, when we speak—and this is actually a really great place to practice in daily life, with our speech—when we're not aware of the intention to speak, not aware of speaking while we're speaking, usually we are speaking out of habit and often speaking from reactive habit.

I think I can probably safely say that everyone in this room has at one time or another said something they wish they hadn't said. That habit of mind of aversion or frustration or impatience burst out of the mouth. So if we could be present for that moment of knowing when we're going to speak, before we speak.

It actually takes just a moment. One great practice around this is simply to see if you can pause for a split second before you say something. If you can do that, you have caught the intention to speak before you speak. If you can, in that moment, wait for just a moment, you may not see the impulse itself, but there's something in us that knows it. That pause is a kind of manifestation of seeing that urge to speak.

If you can pause before you speak, in that moment you will probably already know what is going to come out of your mouth. So you have that opportunity to see that. You may also know why you're going to say what you're going to say—the motivation that's associated with that thing you're about to say. Frustration might be the motivation. Wanting to impress might be the motivation. Wanting to convey information. There are many different reasons why we speak.

But in that moment of pausing, we have the opportunity to catch that intention to speak and notice the motivation. And if you see a motivation of frustration or impatience, there's the opportunity to refrain—to

recognize the language of harshness or divisiveness that may be about to burst out of your mouth.

And maybe you might be able to say something with a gentler tone, with more compassionate language. So that moment of catching the intention, that moment of seeing that impulse, is very powerful. Just simply noticing it and seeing what the motivation is.

Now, doing this as a practice, there's probably going to be a lot of times when you forget entirely. Part of our practice is being very compassionate with ourselves, really forgiving toward ourselves for the ways our mind just goes into mindlessness. We have to be compassionate with ourselves. And when we recognize that we've forgotten, we simply recommit to keep trying. That intention, that motivation to just keep trying, is where the whole practice unfolds from.

I think it's Bhikkhu Bodhi who says that really there are only two things we have to do in practice: we have to start, and we have to continue. And it will unfold from there.

We'll forget. We'll forget. But this happened to me when I very first started, when I was first introduced to mindfulness practice. I was reading Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Miracle of Mindfulness*. I was in my twenties, and I'd read the book at night and think, "Wow, this is really cool. I want to try this tomorrow." And I'd go to my job, and I'd forget. I would forget until I picked up the book on the nightstand the next night. After several days of that, I gave up. What I basically said to myself was, "Obviously this doesn't work for me." And I didn't meet mindfulness again for another fifteen years.

At that point, I didn't give up. At that point, I began watching what was happening in my mind, seeing, "Wow, I'm forgetting mindfulness a lot." And when I noticed that I had forgotten, I simply recommitted. I'm going to keep trying. That brought an intention into the mind of *continue, continue*. That motivation to continue, to keep trying.

So when you notice that you've forgotten for a day to remember to pause before speaking, just recommit. Keep trying. That commitment, that motivation to keep trying, will bear fruit. It takes time. It may be that the way it bears fruit is by remembering three or four times during the day that you've forgotten, instead of only once every two days. And then maybe five or six times during the day, remembering you've forgotten to be aware while speaking, to be aware of that moment before speaking. At some point, if you keep recommitting every time you remember you've forgotten, it will start to happen. So you really have to be compassionate in that moment, bringing in the intention of compassion when you remember. It's like, "Yeah, I forgot, but just keep trying."

So likely you'll forget a lot. You may notice that moment of intention, you may notice that pause, and the momentum of the mind just wanting to blurt it out is so strong that even seeing the intention didn't matter. Again, compassion. Don't beat yourself up about it. Really, don't beat yourself up about it. But notice what happens. There may be in that moment a sense—a wholesome sense—of, "Wow, I wish I hadn't said that." Not in a self-hatred kind of way, but a sense of, "That wasn't a skillful thing to say."

Recognizing the twist that came out in your language. Recognizing that, you may in that moment be able to stop and say, "I apologize. I'm sorry. I didn't—"

I didn't want it to come out that way." In the moment, you may be able to change course.

It does take a lot of compassion to watch our motivations. When we start to watch our minds for our motivations, it's very humbling. We get to see in spades just how powerful those habits of mind are. So it takes a lot of honesty and commitment and open-heartedness for our own foibles, for our own habits and patterns of mind. And again, that motivation to just keep trying will bear fruit. I'm proof of this. It's amazing how much transformation can happen through simply continuing—just continuing.

We can also start to explore larger kinds of motivations. The motivations I'm talking about right now are the momentary ones. And yet, we all have a sense of our ideals or aspirations. It can be helpful to reflect on those larger motivations, those larger intentions, the sense of purpose in our lives. Right now, what is your aspiration for your life? What is meaningful for you?

Sometimes we have larger motivations in our lives, larger purposes, that we're kind of unaware of—having a good job, earning a lot of money, looking good to other people. Sometimes we're living our lives with purposes that we're not really conscious of. And sometimes we can reflect on what our deeper purpose is and begin to see if we might be able to connect our moment-to-moment motivations with that deeper purpose.

Our deeper purpose might be something like: I'd like to not cause harm in the world. I'd like to have an open heart. I'd like to be kind. I'd like to let go of the way my mind ties me into knots. I'd like to experience ease and peace. I'd like peacefulness to be the frame for my life.

Spending some time reflecting on what a deeper motivation is, what an orienting purpose of your life might be—if you connect with that deeper purpose, then even the simple activities of your life, it can be interesting to explore: How can I tie a thread from that deeper purpose to the simple activities of my life?

If the intention is opening the heart, kindness, how might going to the grocery store connect to that intention? We go to the grocery store with the intention to buy our food, and that's a perfectly valid intention. We buy our food to support our families. Right there, there's that intention to support our own bodies, to support our friends and family. Right there, there's that connection with caring. Purchasing food is an act of caring. Can you be aware of that?

When we just go through the motions, our motivations for getting stuff off the shelves might be impatience and frustration. Whereas if we can connect to the recognition that this activity is actually a kind thing to do for myself—as opposed to something I have to do, to get it over with so I can get home to make the food so I can do these other things I haven't done today—can we actually connect with how our simple activities support our deeper purpose? The simple activity of caring for ourselves, right there in buying food.

And then there are the people we interact with in the store. The cashier. A friendly smile. I'm not talking about a deep, soulful gaze—just a simple "How are you today?" Really simply. Kindness in interactions. Smiling at people.

The practice of smiling at strangers is one of my favorite things. At one point, I was doing my exercise in my neighborhood, walking in the streets. I'd do it at roughly the same time of day, and I started to get familiar with the various people. We would exchange smiles. When I was really present, it was such a beautiful feeling to smile at someone and have a smile back. At one point I wondered: How long does that good feeling last? It was amazing.

I timed it. There was one person in particular, an older man who tended to look down as he walked. When he looked up and saw me, this amazing smile came over his face. Waves of joy washed through me. It lasted forty seconds. A smile gave me forty seconds of waves of happiness.

Be there for it. Connect to those deeper intentions and be present. We can orient so much of our lives with these wholesome motivations just through conscious reflection, consciously inclining our minds in that direction.

A question arose about being in a restaurant in Half Moon Bay and trying to make a connection with the waitress but not being able to. She tried a number of times and was met with what she called a vacuousness. She experienced disappointment in not being able to make that connection and wondered how to work with that.

That kind of experience, I think, calls for equanimity practice—the practice of recognizing that we can't make other people do what we want them to do, and that we may not be able to control the outcome of our intentions. You don't know what was going on for her. Compassion is another doorway sometimes for that. When you see somebody who seems distant, disconnected, there could be something going on. We don't know. You don't want to make something up, but just recognize that we don't know the causes and conditions that are unfolding for somebody else. And often behavior that is disconnected has suffering underneath it, has pain underneath it—which may or may not even be conscious pain.

The reflection on equanimity is basically the reflection that we each have to make our own choices and that we cannot make choices for other people. No matter what we wish—if we wish for a connection, wish for some kind of spark of friendliness or kindness—we can't make the choices for the other person. We can wish them well, but we cannot make them well.

So that's one part of it: reflection on the suffering that might be occurring, reflection on equanimity. And then also look at whether there's a sense of expectation. When we have expectations—that's probably where the disappointment comes from. There was some kind of expectation, even an unarticulated or unaware expectation, that if I behave in this way, I'll receive something in return. Maybe you've done this

with other people in the past and there has been that spark of joy. It's like if you get that kind of hit that I got with that man smiling—if another day he doesn't look up, it's like, I can't make that connection. I'm looking at him, trying to get him to smile, and he doesn't. And there's that feeling: I'm not going to get that hit. This is not going to feel good.

So watch for expecting some kind of particular result from your own actions. Our work in this world really is, in some ways, to put goodness into the world. And that goodness is amazing. It really does impact the world. And yet we have to put that goodness into the world without expectation of any particular result. It's hard. And so sometimes we have to just watch the contraction, the disappointment—and recognize, okay, there was some expectation there. We see it after the fact because we feel that contraction happening.

Thank you for your attention.

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