

2022March8 The Heart's Intention

2022March8 -- The Heart's Intention by Teresa Miller

[The Buddha said to his son:] "What do you think, Rahula: What is a mirror for?"

[Rahula answered:] "For reflection, sir."

[The Buddha responded:] "In the same way, Rahula, bodily acts, verbal acts, and mental acts are to be done with repeated reflection."

"And what is wise intention? Being resolved on freedom from ill-will, on harmlessness: This is called wise intention."

Tonight's talk is titled The Heart's Intention, and it's inspired by so many of you.

When I consider this sangha, I see the beauty of what you aspire to, the many ways in which you honor intention in your lives. Your commitments to ethical living, to practicing kindness, to caring for the planet and each other... countless examples of wisdom shining forth.

And yes, at times it's hard, it's muddled, disheveled, it's knotty and chaotic.

But still - there it is - your intention, effort, your persistence and patience, in your individual lives, in your communal living.

Personal and local matters of the heart are always at play; you can no doubt name some of your own thorny matters -

Now in the past 2 weeks we add another global concern, that of the war in Ukraine.

From one of you this week came an intention, a prayer for the blessing bowl: a prayer for peace in Ukraine and in Russia.

The prayer -

May all have what is needed for security and care.

May we realize that we are all connected.

That prayer is not unlike an intention that was spoken last spring at the gathering of 47 Buddhist leaders to honor the memory of the Asian women killed in Atlanta.

You might remember the televised service that many of us watched last May. This was their intention:

“May we gather to remember, may we gather the pieces, may we gather to repair, and may we gather to liberate together.”

The heart’s wise intention comes up in such moments of quiet, in sitting, or on retreat, or hearing or reading inspiring words; we see it, recognize wise intention, and resolve to embody it.

And then, when we actually engage with another person or group of people in conversation or in heated discussion, it’s so difficult to remember wise intention!

Gil Fronsdal, a teacher on the West coast, tells a story of when he was a monk in a monastery how easy and straightforward it was to meditate, to embody the precepts - lots of silent time alone, to reflect, to let go.

Then he became a parent; just letting go and being present was not going to be enough. Lying in bed at two o’clock in the morning when the kid has an earache, or during the day when the kids are fighting.

Just let go — this is not enough.

It seems so simple in quiet reverie; in a family, with a group, it can go quickly from clear to muddled to disarray.

You have to make a choice about how to act. You have to be creative and think ahead. A lot of thought has to go into how to respond to this situation.

You cannot just sit there and be present to this situation. Being present and letting go are important, but there is more to it. Something is required of us.

What do we do about that part of life when something is required of us?

In the middle of a conversation or a meeting, can we see the places where we have choice?

Can we be present for “what is” - with “what is” actually an ongoing process of change and movement, which is part of a causal chain and effect?

Any effect being a cause for the next thing, and it just rolls on and on.

We see ourselves in the great stream of cause and effect,

and we find ourselves in a sea of constant change and impermanence.

The question is: how do we relate to this sea of change and impermanence?

Tonight I'd like to offer a few thoughts about intention in real life - how we might understand ourselves with regard to intention.

As always, see how they land for you. If it's a novel idea, just noting that; if resistance arises, noting that as well...

Here are four possibilities about intention:

- 1. Everyone is doing the best they can.**
- 2. The heart takes longer to change than the head.**
- 3. Timeliness is a critical factor.**
- 4. Our intention sets the tone of whatever we are about to do.**

Let's look at the first idea:

Everyone is doing the best they can.

Everyone is doing the best they can.

If they could do better, they would.

Maya Angelou says, *“Do the best you can until you know better, then do better.”*

Everything is occurring because of everything that came before - the cause and effect that Gil Fronsdal referenced in his reflection on intention.

At that gathering last spring of the 47 Buddhist leaders - each one spoke briefly - here are two of the dharma teachings from that gathering:

“Each person has her own mind, and each mind has its own way.
What another thinks to be right, I think to be wrong;
what I think to be right, another thinks to be wrong.
But I am no saint; she is no fool. We are both of us human...”

And a second teaching....“It is not out of fear or weakness that I am patient with others...Of goals that culminate in my own good, none is better than patience.”

Everyone is doing the best they can in that moment.

(Compassion - by Miller Williams)

*Have compassion for everyone you meet,
even if they don't want it. What seems conceit,
bad manners, or cynicism is always a sign
of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen.
You do not know what wars are going on
down there where the spirit meets the bone.*

**The second idea about intention is this:
The heart takes longer to change, or to heal, than the head.**

You may have noticed that when there's conflict or disarray within your family, words may be spoken that sound rational, make sense, offer some closure.

But sometimes the heart is still saying, it's not ok.

Years ago when I worked as a mediator for the Cville Mediation Center, this was a profound learning - that though parties in dispute might reach consensus on paper, if matters of the heart were not addressed, the agreement was not complete.

The heart lags, takes longer, sometimes requires something else, for change, for healing.

We look to see what's needed now.

Could be a variety of possibilities - maybe a sense of safety is missing, maybe a deeper misunderstanding needs light shed on it.

Maybe we need to practice walking in the other's shoes.

Or maybe the heart just needs time, not unlike a bruise that goes through multiple stages and colors of healing before it disappears.

Which brings us to a third idea about intention....

Timeliness is a critical factor.

A couple of facets of timeliness - one is that timelines and expectations will impact us.

When expectations are upended, when we're going through unpredicted hard times - we've lost a job or a loved one, we feel betrayed, or we're in the midst of illness, when conflict or war arises, we need a reliable compass to set our direction, to steer through the life that's here right now.

What's difficult of course is that the storm seems, at least momentarily, enormous; emotions are overwhelming waves; thoughts are directed to creating stories, figuring it out; **it's hard to remember what we've learned, what we know in our hearts.**

Timeliness might mean we give the limbic system time to calm,

With space for breathing,
a space where we can reset the compass of our hearts -
in the direction of wise intention.

Here's another facet: the timeline of impact and recovery from challenging change is unique for each of us.

What is happening to you at each moment is the result of seeds planted in a past life -

your ancestors lives, your experiences earlier in this life,

or something from the previous moment (a spoken sentence, a thought)...

AND whatever is manifesting itself in your life right now is also affected by how you're receiving it, by your intention in this moment...

Because of our distinctive conditioning, idiosyncratic perceptions, individual experiences, we are each moving through any sea of change at our own pace.

A question we might ask ourselves - Am I allowing space and time for myself to move through this sea of change?

Am I allowing space and time for others to move through this sea of change at their own pace?

Which brings us to the fourth idea about intention...

Our intention sets the "tone" of whatever we are about to do.

Intention is like music - it can influence our mood, our thoughts, and feelings.

Like music, words have tone - we know that tone of voice, like the body itself, speaks volumes, conveys the real intention beyond words.

Jack Kornfield says that "Our hearts are like seismographs, picking up the tremors of intent."

For example, the phrase "What do you mean?" can sound accusing and judgmental or considerate and humble.

Intention, born of conscious awareness, changes the shape of our body, our face, our voice.

One more note on intention and tone and the power of words -

Like any ecosystem, language has its edges, its boundary zones where energy is exchanged, where continuity is broken, and contrasts are most vivid.

Poetry operates at this wild edge of language, evoking possibilities of direct experience that lie beyond the limit of words.

Here's a poetic expression of intention - for being in relationship with one another...

*If I had my way, I'd scatter stars over your breakfast cereal so that
you'd consume the crunchy vastness of the universe,
sense the warm points twinkling in inky darkness,
see the light dancing with the radiance inside you.*

*If I had my way, I'd hand you an open heart every time we meet
no attachments no conditions no expectations,
just a batch of foibles and feasts, yours and mine,
the blood love flowing in and out and on.*

and an excerpt from poet Marge Piercy...

“What can I hold in my hands this morning

that will not flow through my fingers?

...If my touch could heal, I would lay my hands

on your bent head and bellow prayers...”

Our intention sets the tone of whatever we are about to do.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher wrote

By the way we live our daily life we contribute to peace or to war.

It is mindfulness that can tell me I am going in the direction of war,

*and it is the energy of mindfulness that can help me make a turn
and go in the direction of peace.*

Going in the direction of peace...to see with eyes of compassion...

“May I treat all those at work with kindness.”

“May I remember my breath each time I encounter conflict today.”

“May I take time to let my family know I love them.”

These words from the Buddha:

*"The thought manifests as the word;
The word manifests as the deed;
The deed develops into habit;
And habit hardens into character.
So watch the thought and its ways with care,
And let it spring from love,
Born out of compassion for all human beings.
As the shadow follows the body,
As we think, so we become."*

(from Emptiness by Guy Armstrong):

*“the winds of circumstance blow around us, bringing alternating conditions of
pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and dishonor.*

*We are all afloat on a sea of changing conditions that are mostly beyond our
control. What is different now is that we have a boat and a rudder, and we have
learned something about how to steer.*

The boat is the Buddhist path; the rudder in intention, reliable guide in the vast ocean of uncontrollable events that we call life.

When we follow the intentions of awareness, investigation, concentration, loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom, we are heading for a (safe) harbor....

We do not need to claim purity or wisdom, just that we feel the strength of the wholesome qualities of mind.

In the moment that we're free from the preoccupations of self-centeredness, the mind is rich with wisdom and loving-kindness."

Perhaps tonight or the next clear night, invite the body mind heart outdoors; take a pair of binoculars if you have them, look at the night sky.

Take your time so that the eyes have a chance to adjust- their timeline of seeing :)

Look directly at the stars, then look just beside a cluster of stars such as the Pleiades, and see what's here in the vast spaciousness of sky.

*sense the warm points twinkling in inky darkness,
see the light dancing with the radiance inside you.*

Thank you for listening, for your presence.

(with gratitude to the Buddha, Marge Piercy, Anna Vanhoy, Bill Detmer, Sylvia Boorstein, Jack Kornfield, Miller Williams, Phillip Moffitt, Maya Angelou, Nelson Mandela, Bev Wann, Guy Armstrong, Latifa, Thich Nhat Hanh, Gil Fronsdal, and countless others)