

Practising with great intention

When I do an introduction to zazen, I often tell people that everything we do in the dojo is done with full attention and intention. That means we pay close heed to WHAT we do – and we do it ON PURPOSE – intentionally ... not haphazardly, or messily, or reflexively

I've heard it said that intention IS practice - well we say that about everything in zen. (practice /enlightenment, mind/body) Is intention practice?

The dictionary defines "intention" as "an aim or a plan" - .. This sounds like it could be problematic because in zen we enjoy lauding the notion that "zazen is good for nothing!" - MUSHOTOKU – NO GOAL or profit seeking. So if we have no goal.. how can we have an aim? But this is a misunderstanding of mushotoku .

Master Deshimaru was always talking about "mushotoku" – he said "Mushotoku is the attitude of non-profit, of not wanting to gain anything for yourself". In some ways it's a warning about coming to the cushion to try to become a better person, lover, ninja, gamer, to become calmer, more focused in our lives, to overcome an illness, or gain recognition. We don't practice FOR these shallow reasons. If we did, it would be spiritual materialism or greed. It reduces practice to a commodity. This what the emperor Wu was demanding of Bodhidharma. 'I've done all these great things for Buddhism, what is my reward?'

Chasing after stuff, power, prestige, credit, merit, money etc is how our consumerist society works – and when we apply that mind frame to practice it can be problematic for us. Consumer Zen – just trying to get more stuff. Spending our precious cushion time grasping, when we could be letting go.

Mushotoku is an expression of the buddhist doctrine of emptiness, which we chant about in the Hannya Shingyo every day - "with nothing to attain the bodhisattva relies on prajna paramita and thus relieves all suffering" . Our practice is not devoid of meaning, value or purpose. We just rely on buddha, dharma, sangha, practice, paramitas, precepts – rather than on grasping or rejecting based on our estimation of measurable value. Not having these shallow desires, we allow ourselves to focus here and now and be present to what arises, without clinging to some *idea* of what "should" be happening, or if we've accomplished some spiritual goals.

Where do we find intentions in Zen?

We could start from the very first intention that each of us have had – that is the intention to come here - to start practising zazen – This intention is usually called "way seeking mind" or Bodhicitta – it's the aspiration for awakening, that nudge that sends us in the direction of the dojo for reasons we may not be able to fully articulate. Our Way seeking mind, is the part of us that recognises and seeks truth and goodness – and it inspires and motivates us towards practice. It's our awakened mind, trying to break free from greed, hate and delusion and point us down its own path, the path of awakening.

Of course we find intentions in all sorts of other places too, one translation of the fueko is "may our intentions equally extend to every being and place. With the true merit of Buddha's way"

Vowing - the bodhisattva vows that we chant every evening, the bodhisattva precepts, are about driving our intentions in a specific direction – a direction away from suffering . In fact, our bodhisattva way includes a LOT of vowing – vowing is a way that we verbalise our intentions. And when we make our vows in front of others (like in a precepts ceremony), we engage others to help us hold ourselves accountable to our intentions and the resulting actions. Intentions SHOULD lead to actions

This is not really so different from New Year's resolutions.. or similar vows we take when we see a shortcoming in our own behaviour. And... have you noticed that you're more likely to follow through with those kinds of vows when you engage others in assisting you with them – like getting a gym buddy or joining slimming world?

As soon as you make a vow, sometimes, there's a part of our behaviour that immediately rebels – like a force in our brain that tries to find ways to sabotage our aspirations asap so we can get on with our seemingly easy chaos.

Chaos is something which can take over our lives when we don't have a clear direction that we are pointing in. In spiritual practice, our vows aren't about getting something or somewhere, or even about avoiding

inevitable entropy, our vows are about living intentionally, on purpose, instead of letting our decisions be determined simply by habit, inertia, fear, selfishness, lack of imagination, greed, hate or delusion.

We are 100% responsible for our actions and their consequences, so if we're going to be responsible for our actions, wouldn't be great if we acted on purpose instead of carelessly?

In the west we have a saying "the road to hell is paved with good intentions". This idiom admonishes against 'intention' as a mere idea of doing something good without any active follow through. Another meaning is to warn against unintended consequences of poorly thought-out action. We can translate this idiom into Buddhist language by saying "Suffering can be caused if our intentions are not acted upon with wisdom and compassion" <story about Buddhist group in UK that released the crabs and lobsters – great intention, high score for compassion - very poor score for wisdom>

Whatever actions we take in our lives, we own the consequences. Our intentions, our motives, as Bodhisattvas, will be to strive for actions which are more likely to have wholesome consequences, and lead away from suffering. When we act from Buddha mind, which we are – this is more likely to happen. When we act from greed, hate and delusion - the results can be painful and result in more suffering

Intention is closely connected to vow, to commitment, and to paying attention to the details of our lives. Our intentions point us in the direction we wish to follow, our commitment or vow confirms and acknowledges these thoughts and directions and engages sangha to help us hold ourselves accountable for how we act on those intentions. Here, the buddha, or teacher and the Sangha is our gym-buddy.

The vows we take in zen, are founded in wisdom and compassion, and are designed to aim away from suffering, from chaos – but our actions are always our own, so we must pay attention to ensure that we're not on a road to hell. We can never use our zen vows, precepts, whatever to try to excuse ourselves from the consequences of our actions.

Looking at the 4 vows of the bodhisattva, or even the bodhisattva precepts or paramitas, some of these things are not seemingly attainable. The 4 vows of the bodhisattva are the classics when it comes to this. How can I hold myself accountable to an action that is not attainable. If the sentient beings are numberless, I can't possibly save them all.

But our vows in Buddhism are not so short and limited. They extend forever. These are not like our new year's resolutions where you either succeed or not and then forget it. Our practice of zazen, our vows, our actions, and their consequences, our coming back to the present and starting again, our going forward from HERE in each instant – these are not things that have an end. Dogen Zenji wrote a whole 2 volumes on Gyoji – continuous practice. Practice is always continuous.

Dogen Zenji wrote:

"On the great road of buddha ancestors there is always unsurpassable practice, continuous and sustained. It forms the circle of the way and is never cut off. Between aspiration, practice, enlightenment, and nirvana, there is not a moment's gap (...) Continuous practice is undivided not forced by you or others. ... your practice affects the entire earth and sky in the ten directions"

The great thing about our practice, our vow, our way, our intentions, is that we can never run out of stuff to do. There's no end, there's always more to learn, to do, another period of zazen to attend, another chance to let go, another chance to see our own greed, hate and delusion for what it is. Another chance to start again.

What direction do you want to go in? what is your intention? What are your motives? How can you fulfil these aspirations? Are they wise? Are they compassionate?

Please pay attention to these questions. Intention is the key to whether our actions are thumbs up, or thumbs down - paying attention – looking deeply at yourself – you can be aware of your motives and what motivates your actions. As we practice zazen, we can nourish and support these skills of awareness, self-awareness, attention and intention.

Zenki Hartman Roshi wrote "Be sure your motivation is altruistic. The more of us who conduct ourselves in such a way, the more we'll enjoy this life."