Cultivating An Intentional Life

The title of this talk is ironic—from one perspective there is an emphasis on being intentionally thoughtful, disciplined and productive in creating a better life—from another perspective, our lives are already intentional, but in this case the intentions are driven by the three poisons, the Buddhist concept of greed, hatred and ignorance.

The last talk, on December 5, 2021, found in the OIMG website archive, is titled “Working With Intentions”, providing a review of the Universal Mind Conditioning function *cetana* (chey-tah-nah), translated as *intention* or *volition*. To briefly review the concept, cetana coordinates the functions and actions manifested in every moment of self-experience. We practice mindfulness of breathing meditation to nurture present-moment awareness and self-discipline through Right Effort to progress towards manifesting intentional Awakening experiences.

The focus of this talk is how we can intentionally extend the moment-by-moment awareness and self-discipline to cultivating ways of living that are not only effective ways of coping with the increasingly stressful circumstances or life—the pandemic, climate change instigated weather and ecologically threatening events, societal conflicts and the way the social media is threatening cultural norms—but also ways that enhance the inherent joys and benefits of being alive. Increasing one’s ability to cope and create a wholesome and integrated way of life sets the conditions appropriate for realizing the joy and benefits.

This season is a culturally appropriate time to consider these issues, which includes major religious events, as well as the age-old reality of December 21, the Winter Solstice. We’ve all been exposed to the tradition of the New Year’s Resolution, which is aligned with the reality that a new orbit around the sun is beginning. One of the useful benefits of Buddhism in this regard is understanding that we can intentionally resolve to recreate ourselves, both in personality as well as lifestyle. These changes are especially warranted given the current circumstances of life on this planet.

I’ve discussed the issues of lifestyle before, and I hope your reaction is not aversive to the repetitive aspects of these talks, but current events are disruptive of life as we have known it in multiple ways, and I believe that the insights and self-discipline that mindfulness practices develop towards maturing are important enough to warrant such emphasis. How can we sort out a workable view of a good life in the context of rampant consumerist and sociopolitical conditioning? Even if we can develop a plan of action that is appropriate to our personal talents and available ways and means for realizing a new way of life, how can we actually manage to maintain an effective plan of action that is not too rigid or too lax to make our plans realizable?

I have mentioned numerous times a formulaic concept found in Buddhist commentaries, known as the Four Clear Comprehensions:

1: Determine a goal that imagines a valued realization.

2: Determine the most suitable means for realizing this valued goal.

3: Monitor the plans and actions associated with realizing the goal to determine if it is still valued in the context of the current circumstances and be willing to make appropriate changes regarding steps 1 and 2 if the actions aren’t effective in moving towards realizing the goal.

4: The goals and behaviors must have ethical integrity—not deceptive, harmful, or contradictory regarding to one’s values. Additionally, it is important to realize the spiritual potential inherent in one’s personality structure and the kind of lifestyle that supports that goal.

Now I want to expand on these four steps in the context of current challenges as described above:

1: The goals we set are formed by our values, and our values are conditioned by the culture we live in. There are different areas of culture to consider—values that are shaped by the family systems we have been and currently are immersed in and those shaped by larger cultural norms. The family systems are subsumed within the culture, and the culture of this generation has been greatly impacted by commercial exploitation of the earth’s resources, so progress in realizing a goal requires persistent introspective investigation to be aware of it and the ways and means for achieving it. This investigation is also supported by external research which includes a cost/benefit analysis regarding the various influences and sources of information—or often misinformation, particularly misinformation in the form of commercial advertising and the social media. We must question the values and identities that we take for granted to clearly comprehend the consequences of the choices made for a better life. What impact do these choices have on our health, financial security, interpersonal relations, and the environment?

A core value of Buddhism, as well as all the other main religious systems, is to manifest kindness and generosity. An important area of introspection involves investigating whether consumerist self-indulgence is truly kind or generous; this would be followed by actions that are intentional, either to act in ways that are harmfully self-indulgent or not. There are multiple considerations regarding values and goals—a few might include include driving a car, automatic lawn sprinklers, getting sufficient exercise, rest and good nutrition. What makes a goal worthy? What value system creates worth? At what cost to others and to ecological issues?

2: How we determine the suitable means to achieve a goal involves two considerations, *ethical* and *procedural*, and they should be mutually supportive. The *ethical* considerations are reflected in the concepts found in the Virtue aggregate of the Noble Eightfold Path--Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood (I prefer Right Lifestyle). The *procedural* considerations involve availability of resources and requisite skills. This also involves the best use of resources, with an emphasis on those resources that do minimal damage personally, socially and environmentally, instead providing the most benefit in those areas of life.

3: Monitoring our introspective investigation and applied efforts to realize the worthy goals is solidly within the realm of the practice of mindfulness, based on diligent mindfulness meditation practices that are intentionally integrated into daily lifestyle choices. This also includes the ability to maintain behavioral discipline in order to not be distracted and to avoid harming others or the environment.

4: The first three of the Four Clear Comprehensions are intended to be guided by Buddhist principles and practices, as noted above. This involves application of the Noble Eightfold Path. I mentioned the Virtue aggregate in step 2, and the training aggregate is what makes this endeavor productive of Awakening—Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. Right Effort mirrors the Four Clear Comprehensions in this manner: The effort to notice the presence of an unwholesome self-state organization and then going back to the breath to starve it; going back to the breath initiates the arising of an unarisen wholesome self-state organization; maintaining it builds the strength of wholesomeness as a condition of the mind and then remaining alert to the potential arising of and unarisen unwholesome self-state organization and denying it.

The goals that are to be addressed include those that are personally effective:

* Adequate exercise and rest, healthy, nutritious food in moderation, proper use of physical and mental health resources as necessary, and, considering the pandemic, being responsible for appropriate hygienic behaviors to protect self and others.
* Consideration regarding how decisions and actions affect the environment, both in the immediate context as well as the larger biosphere. What kind of foods are bought and eaten? What about pesticide and herbicide use? Eating domestic farm animals puts a very significant strain on the earth, sky and waters. What about the clothing we buy and wear? These are among many interacting factors of our lifestyle choices that are having immediate and long-term effects on the environment, and we barely give those consequences a thought, much less be committed to different choices.
* Consideration regarding financial security. As a culture, we have been conditioned from early life experience to spend impulsively and not build financial reserves and resources for the future. Mindful awareness and self-discipline provide the resource for us to not be controlled by consumerism without having to go live in a cave.
* Consideration regarding social harmony. We are exposed to sociocultural manipulation at an unprecedented scale by contemporary social media, both in terms of our own beliefs and actions, but also through our interactions with others at work, in our neighborhoods and in our families. The social disruption caused by the pandemic began in the midst of great sociopolitical propaganda that fosters distrust and alienation, which is a significant threat to our way of life. The application of lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, monitored by mindfulness, is becoming increasingly important for cultivating a wholesome lifestyle.

These comments are intended to provide an organizing function in the process of recreating a sense of what constitutes a good life. We are involved in what is arguably the most significant sociocultural change in human history. I hope the benefits of using the principles and practices of Buddhism can provide a way to more skillfully and intentionally create a more adaptive and peaceful sense of self going forward.