

# “Living with Intention Now, and Now...”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on January 30, 2022

Throughout the month of January, we have been focusing on the theme of living with intention. Today, I invite us to consider living with intention through the perspective of Buddhist teachings and understandings. It is quite likely that some of you might not be all that familiar with Buddhist teachings or perspectives. Throughout this sermon then, I will share information that hopefully will provide all of us with a basic foundation to build upon.

First, it would be beneficial for us to consider the place, and the importance, that intention holds in Buddhism. According to Buddhist sacred texts and teachings, intention is essential on the path to ending suffering. I think all of us would agree that ending suffering would be beneficial. In Buddhist teachings, however, ending suffering is considered to be much more than beneficial. Ending suffering is at the very core of, and is the essence of, Buddhist thought. That core, that essence, is found in the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are what allowed Siddhartha Gautama, who is known as the Buddha, to gain enlightenment. The Four Noble Truths can be stated simply as follows; 1. The truth of suffering, 2. The truth of the origin of suffering, 3. The truth of the cessation of suffering, and 4. The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering. Since intention is essential to ending suffering, you can get a sense of how important intention is in the Buddhist perspective about life and life’s purpose.

As we just heard in our reading by Phillip Moffitt, “You set your intentions based on understanding what matters most to you and make a commitment to align your worldly actions with your inner values.” In the Buddhist tradition, what matters most is ending suffering. As the Fourth Noble Truth indicates, there is a path to the cessation of suffering. That path is expressed in what is known as the Noble Eightfold Path. The components of the Noble Eightfold Path include the following; 1. Right understanding, 2. Right thought, 3. Right speech, 4. Right action, 5. Right livelihood, 6. Right effort, 7. Right mindfulness, and 8. Right concentration. Just as intention is both essential and directly connected to the Four Noble Truths, it is also directly connected to the Noble Eightfold Path.

As I was doing my research in preparation for this sermon, I found a verse from a Buddhist sacred text I own that speaks to intention and its connection to three components of the Noble Eightfold Path. The verse I am about to share comes from *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*. (Show book) This sacred text is over 1400 pages in length with more than 1100 pages dedicated to the 152 discourses, which are referred to as “Suttas,” that it contains. This is not a book I would recommend for leisure time or casual reading. But if your interest in Buddhist teachings is serious, this sacred text will offer a life-time of study and contemplation. Here is one small example of what it contains.

One makes an effort to abandon wrong intention and to enter upon right intention: this is one’s right effort. Mindfully one abandons wrong intention, mindfully one enters upon and abides in right intention: this is one’s right mindfulness. These three states run and circle around right intention, that is right view, right effort, and right mindfulness.

So far I have covered, in a very, very basic way, a few key elements of Buddhism. Those elements include the following—life involves suffering, suffering can cease, and the idea that certain things are required for suffering to cease. As the verse from the Buddhist sacred text I just shared indicates, intention, and specifically right intention, is one such required element on the path to the cessation of suffering.

Now I want to focus attention on another component that is important as one seeks to follow the path to the cessation of suffering. The component was addressed in this morning’s reading by Phillip Moffitt. The component I am referring to is time, more specifically, one’s orientation to time. In our culture, goals are valued quite highly. According to many people who make their living writing books and doing presentations

focused on motivation and achievement, goals are essential to being successful in life. Goals involve a focus on the future. Goals can certainly be beneficial. And yet, focusing continually or excessively on the future, or any time other than the present moment, can become detrimental. As Moffitt points out in the reading we heard, intention, and here I quote: “is focused on how you are “being” in the present moment. Your attention is on the ever-present “now” in the constantly changing flow of life.”

Let’s take some time now to consider how the time orientation we hold can make a difference in our lives. All of us have had the experience of being excited about some event that we thought was going to occur in the future. We automatically set a goal in our minds about attending and experiencing the event. And all of us have had an event that we were looking forward to not come to pass. We are then left with feelings such as disappointment, frustration or sadness. From the Buddhist perspective, this kind of situation both fits into, and confirms, the first of the Four Noble Truths, the truth of suffering.

The suffering which is experienced increases when the goals we set, which then fail to materialize, include others. Maybe you have planned to do something with or for a friend or loved one—something that friend or loved one thought of as special. You share the plan with your friend or loved one and it becomes a goal for them as well as you. When, as is sometimes the case, what was planned doesn’t occur, you have unpleasant feelings such as those I mentioned previously. This time your friend or loved one also has unpleasant feelings. In such a situation our planning for the future, our goal setting ends up producing suffering that is shared. The suffering that occurs isn’t limited just to ourselves. The suffering now extends to another person, someone we care about. Our intention in making the initial plan, setting the future goal, was positive. Our plan, our goal, had it come to pass, would have been beneficial. But as sometimes occurs, our best laid plans, our well-meaning goals, just don’t work out as we would have wanted them to. I offer these scenarios to highlight what Phillip Moffitt was getting at, that goals and intentions are very different, and that an orientation toward a time other than the ever-present “now” may not always achieve the highest benefit, for us or for others.

Just as goals and intentions are different from one another, so too are intentions and outcomes. Many of you likely heard Rev. David Miller’s January 2nd sermon titled “Intent vs. Impact: Resolutions for a New Year.” If you haven’t heard his sermon yet, I encourage you to go the UUFB website and watch the video of it. In his sermon, Rev. Miller points out that the impacts of our words and actions matter more than the intention behind our words and actions. He tells us that when something we have done or said causes pain, sadness or fear for another, whether we intended to do so or not, we need to attend, in the moment, to the impact our words or actions had on the other person. He also speaks of how, instead of attending to our impact, we may assert that our intention wasn’t to cause pain, sadness, or fear. The examples he offered provided another opportunity to consider the issue of our time orientation, and how that time orientation may be problematic. When we cause suffering for another, and then respond to the person’s suffering by talking about our intention, our focus is on the past, not the present. Focusing on the past, on our intention at the time we spoke or acted in a way that led to suffering, often causes more suffering. When we have unintentionally caused suffering, I am reasonably confident that the last thing we want to do is cause even more suffering. And yet, that is what occurs when we are not attending to the here and now. When we are not attending to the here and now, we can easily become distracted from, as Moffitt states, “what matters most to you.” When, on the other hand, we are able to attend to the here and now, Moffitt tells us that it is possible to “align your worldly actions with your inner values.”

The first step in aligning our worldly actions with our inner values is to bring our attention to the ever-present moment. One way of doing that is by taking a deep breath before we do or say anything to respond to the suffering that we become aware of, whether we caused that suffering or not. The idea of taking a deep breath to focus one’s attention is something the Buddhists have been teaching for centuries. But this practice isn’t just limited to Buddhism. The practice of taking a deep breath is a common practice in many cultures and religious traditions around the world. I don’t know how many times, in all kinds of situations, I have heard someone say, “take a deep breath before you respond,” or something very similar to that. Taking a deep breath— consciously and intentionally taking a deep breath—shifts our attention from the past or the future

to the present moment. By taking a deep breath—a conscious and intentional deep breath—we are much more able to recognize what matters most, and to get in touch with our core values. And when we connect with our core values, we are much more likely to engage in one or more of the steps in the Noble Eightfold Path. In case you don't remember all eight of the steps I will repeat them. They are: 1. Right understanding, 2. Right thought, 3. Right speech, 4. Right action, 5. Right livelihood, 6. Right effort, 7. Right mindfulness, and 8. Right concentration.

And being in the present moment can offer us an opportunity to enter into what are referred to as the Four Immeasurables, the Four Divine Abodes or the Four Sublime Attitudes. These are: Loving-kindness, Compassion, Sympathetic joy, and Equanimity. As we contemplate living with intention, I would invite you to imagine how much different life would be if you were able, in every moment or at least in many more moments, to have your mind focused on loving-kindness or compassion. Imagine how much less suffering you would experience, how much less suffering would be caused, if loving-kindness or compassion was at the forefront of peoples' minds. If more of us were able to focus our attention on these two sublime attitudes, I am certain the world would be a far better place than it is today. And I am just as certain that the level of suffering would be dramatically reduced as a result.

I have attempted this morning to share a very small amount of basic Buddhist teachings and understandings. My hope is that what I have shared has inspired you to explore and learn more about the Buddhist tradition and its teachings. I believe that we all have the desire and the ability to live with intention. Buddhism has so much to teach us about how to live with intention to the fullest level we are capable of. May we discover how to live with intention in this moment of now and in each moment of now as we seek to prevent, alleviate or even end suffering.

So may it be.