

INTENTION

THE DECISIVE FACTOR ANIMATING CHOICE AND KARMA

Choice plays a pivotal role in the architecture of Buddhist practice. For example, it surfaces in the four types of Right Effort, the five strategies for dealing with distracting thoughts, and the five ways of letting go or abandoning unskillful states of mind. Each set of options asks that we weight the circumstances and select a course of action.

And yet, curiously, the Pali Canon — that vast record of the Historical Buddha's psychology, teachings and methods — contains no word or phrase equivalent to our conventional sense of "choice."

This reflects the Historical Buddha's tendency to redirect attention from the surface of a question towards its roots — the causes and conditions giving rise to suffering or its ending. If choice, as commonly understood, is not the true axis of decision-making, then what is?

A Fundamental Shift in Attention

Attention shifts from the moment of choice itself to what happens just before, and leads to, choice. Intention is the single most important thing that happens before choice. Intention animates, leads to, and guides our choices and subsequent action.

For example, if our intention is to do no harm and act with kindness, this intention immediately shapes the available options and excludes others. It establishes the standard for making decisions. It inclines the mind toward acting upon and embodying the intention.

Seen from this perspective, the choice in every moment is not really about "what to do." It's about the intention that will guide our thinking, decision making and choice. In every moment, an intention points the mind and heart towards or away from suffering; towards or away from craving, attachment and identification; towards or away from acceptance, balance and equanimity. If our intention is not conscious and purposeful, by default it is usually driven by craving, attachment and identification — the key ingredients of suffering.

Intention Carries Consequences (Karma)

Our intentions carry consequences. In every moment of awareness, we are either re-enforcing skillful or unskillful intentions and resulting habits of mind. This is what Buddhist practice calls Karma or Kamma.

When our choices are anchored in wholesome intentions, the mind and heart will be settled even if the outcome falls short of what was hoped for. The mind and heart will be "clear, unblemished, blameless, guiltless and without remorse." We can rest in the ethical and moral clarity of being well-intentioned. The Historical Buddha considered this one of the greatest gifts of practice.

The reverse holds equally true: An act that is meritorious, but motivated by craving, attachment or identification, will re-enforce and strengthen those negative qualities -- regardless of how favorable its outcome.

Building Intention into Routine Decision Making

As a matter of practice, this approach invites us to pause, then clarify and anchor ourselves in a skillful intention before evaluating options, making choices or initiating action. Wisdom advises patience: hold off on choosing or acting until we are clear about, and genuinely connected with, a skillful intention. So, in the pause before choice, several questions can be helpful:

What intention is animating and shaping my thoughts and outlook?

Which way is it pointing my mind and heart?

Toward or away from craving, attachment or identification?

Into arousal, agitation and confusion or clarity, acceptance and balance?

Re-enforcing pre-existing skillful or unskillful habits?

Is there an alternative intention that would better service my practice & life?

Once we begin to act upon an Intention, the Historical Buddha urged us to stay mindful and periodically check whether we are still connected with our intention, and embodying it.