

Set Your Heart On It

How do we motivate ourselves to live true to our hearts?

-Thupten Jinpa

Framing our days between intention setting and joyful dedication, even once a week, can change how we live. It's a purposeful approach of self-awareness, conscious intention, and focused effort—three precious gifts of contemplative practice—by which we take responsibility for our thoughts and actions and take charge of our selves and our lives. As the Buddha put it, "You are your own enemy / and you are your own savior."

The Buddha saw: our thoughts, emotions, and actions are the primary sources of our suffering. Equally, our thoughts, emotions, and actions can be the source of our joy and freedom. Living, as much as possible, with conscious intention is the first step of this transformation. So, the following two exercises in intention and dedication are the first step to greater clarity and cohesion in our life, our work, and our relationship with others.

Not only that, when our aspirations include the welfare and happiness of others, our deeds and our life as a whole acquire a purpose that is greater than our individual existence.

In everyday English, we often use the words intention and motivation interchangeably as if they mean the same thing, but there's an important difference: deliberateness. Our motivation to do something is the reason or reasons behind that behavior, the source of our desire and the drive to do it. We may be more or less aware of our motivations. Psychologists define motivation as the process that "arouses, sustains, and regulates human and animal behavior." Simply put, motivation is what turns us on. For some it might be fame; for others, it might be money, excitement or thrill, sex, recognition, loyalty, service, a sense of belonging, safety, justice, and so on. The force of motivation develops through a mutually

reinforcing cycle of desire and reward—when something we do is rewarding, we want to do it again; if we do it again, we are rewarded again, and want to do it more...

Intention, on the other hand, is always deliberate, an articulation of a conscious goal. Intention is necessarily conscious; motivation, as Freud pointed out, need not be conscious even to the person himself. We need intentions for the long view. We set and reaffirm our best intentions to keep us inclining in the directions we truly mean to go. But, we need motivations to keep us going over the long haul. If our intention is to run a marathon, there will be times, when the alarm clock goes off for a ten-mile run before work, or in the middle of running, when we'll ask ourselves, quite reasonably, "Why am I doing this?" We need good, inspired answers to get us over such humps. Conscious or unconscious, motivation is the why, and the spark, behind intention.

You could do this intention-setting exercise at home, first thing in the morning if that is convenient. You could also do it on a bus or a subway on your commute. If you work in an office, you could do it sitting at your desk before you get into the day. You only need two to five uninterrupted minutes. The Tibetan tradition recommends setting our intention and checking with our motivations, in this manner, at the beginning of the day, at the start of a meditation sitting, and before any important activity. Our intention sets the tone of whatever we are about to do. Like music, intention can influence our mood, thoughts, and feelings—setting an intention in the morning we set the tone for the day.

Setting an Intention Exercise:

Settle yourself into meditation with a soft and gentle focus on the inhaation and exhalation. Once you feel settled, contemplate the following questions:

“What is it that I value deeply?

What, in the depth of my heart, do I wish for myself, for my loved ones, and for the world?”

Stay on these questions a little and see if any answers come up. If no specific answers surface, don't worry, simply stay with the open questions. This may take some getting used to, since when we ask questions we usually expect to answer them. Trust that the questions themselves are working even—or especially—when we don't have ready answers. If and when answers do come up, acknowledge them as they arise and stay with whatever thoughts and feelings they may bring.

Finally, develop a specific thought as your conscious intention, for this day, for instance. You could think, “Today, may I be more mindful of my body, mind, and speech in my interaction with others. Or...May I, as far as I can, avoid deliberately hurting others. Or...May I relate to myself, to others, and to the events around me with kindness, understanding, and less judgment. In this way, set the tone for the day.

Once we become more familiar with intention setting, we can do this practice in a minute or less. That means we can find opportunities during the day to check in with our intentions.

The intention-setting practice is paired, in Tibetan tradition, with another contemplative exercise called dedication. The role of this exercise is to complete the circle, as it were. At the end of a day, or a meditation, or any other effort we have made, we reconnect with the intentions we set at the beginning, reflecting on our experience in light of our intentions and rejoicing in what we have achieved. This is like taking stock at the end of the day. It gives us another opportunity to connect with our deeper heart aspirations.

Making a Dedication Exercise:

At the end of day, for instance, before you go to bed or as you lie in bed before sleeping, reflect on your day.

Briefly review the events of the day (including significant conversations, moods and other mental activity) and touch back on the spirit of the morning intention setting. See how much alignment there is between the two.

It's important not to get caught up in the details of what you did and did not do. The idea is not to keep exhaustive scores, but to broadly survey the of synergy between your intentions and your life that day.

Whatever thoughts and feelings this reviewing might bring, just stay with it. There's no need to push them away if they have a negative quality; or grasp at them if they seem positive. Simply stay with it for a while in silence.

Finally, think of something from the day that you feel good about—a helping hand you gave your neighbor, an empathetic ear you lent a colleague in distress, not losing your cool in the drugstore when someone cut the line. Then take joy in the thought of this deed. If nothing else, take joy in the fact that you began your day by setting a conscious intention.

Keep this exercise short; three to five minutes is a good length. Taking joy in the day, at the end of the day, even in the simple fact of the effort we have made, is important. It gives us something positive to carry into the next day and helps us harness motivation in the service of our intentions.

We will see the gaps between our intentions and our behavior, between our aspirations and our actual life. When this happens, it's important not to beat ourselves with negative judgment and self-criticism. We simply acknowledge the difference and resolve to try again the next day. This awareness itself will help us be more attentive the next day, opening opportunities to bring our everyday thoughts and actions into closer alignment with our goals.

Intentions Becomes Motivation

The Dalai Lama once suggested a simple way of checking our motivations, by posing these questions to ourselves:

Is it just for me or for others?

For the benefit of the few or for the many?

For now or for the future?
